



Rejected Bullied Mate (Crystal Creek Wolves #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The Alpha bullied me horribly. Now he's hunting me and his secret baby...

I'm abused and taunted by the pack. I'm a lowly Omega who can barely shift and has magic.

He took my virginity during my first heat and rejected me afterward.

But now he's found out that I gave him a secret baby...and forces me to be his mate.

He rules his pack with an iron fist. He's cruel and ruthless.

I ran from our small town to protect myself and our baby from him.

But when he finds out, he hunts me down relentlessly.

And when he tracks me down, he drags me back and forces me into marriage.

I'm just a pawn in his power games, a toy he breaks with his rough hands.

He dominates me and rules my body, crushing it as he pleases.

My heat is starting, and I desperately try to resist him. But I don't stand a chance.

One gentle touch, and he's got me begging for more and humiliating myself.

Will the Alpha break me open again?

The Wolves of Crystal Creek live in a strict hierarchy, where Alphas determine the rules. They play with their Omegas, and they hurt them, but in the end, they will heal and protect the one they love

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It was warm for April. Balmy, even, but by the time I clocked out and headed home, most of the warmth from the sun was starting to fade. I could have spent the day outside with Kit, walking the shores looking for sea glass or preparing the meager garden for the summer, but instead, I'd been trapped inside the warehouse all day. It was hard not to be resentful, but I had to keep reminding myself that I do this all for my boy. It was a blessing to work and earn money on my own, not a curse, even if it sometimes felt that way.

No. Portsmouth, New Jersey, my tiny two-bedroom cottage, and my shipping warehouse job were symbols of my freedom. The only curse in my life was the one waiting back in Crystal Creek, Maine. The suffocating Saltfang pack, a million reminders of my weaknesses, and worst of all, my old Alpha, Samson Jones. Compared to everything I left behind, the few, small things I could call my own in Portsmouth were invaluable.

And most of all, they allowed me to keep my most precious possession safe—my little Kit.

The drive home wasn't too far, which I was grateful for, but it was just long enough to admire the scenery as I found myself lost in my thoughts. The trees were starting to get some green on them, and when I could see the ocean, it was an endless, dark blue. It was a clear day, but a line of clouds was far away on the horizon. I didn't mind the idea of rain, but the thunder kept Kit awake. Maybe we'd get lucky, and it'd just be a drizzle.

Normal, everyday worries like those were comforting. Back in Crystal Creek, I'd been an outcast. Weak, unwanted, and when I wasn't being messed with by stronger

pack members, I was being ignored. Even now, I didn't know which was worse—the crushing loneliness or having to fight. I'd never meant to get pregnant during my first heat, let alone by my asshole Alpha, but as devastating as the news was originally, the pregnancy was the catalyst I needed to leave my old pack and start a new life.

Kit was a joy, a treasure, and best of all, he was still blissfully unaware of who his father was, the danger we were in, and the fact that I would do anything to keep him safe.

Anything.

The sight of our house, with its tiny front porch and neatly kept garden, usually comforted me. Today, though, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. I'd first picked up a strange energy about two miles from home, but it was so faint that there wasn't much I could do except to put it out of my mind. Relief hit me when I could finally see the cottage—from the outside, everything looked fine. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

As soon as my tires hit the gravel, the front door was flung open, and a small, quick figure came barreling out. "Mama," Kit screeched, his huge grin displaying his missing front tooth.

"Careful," I cautioned, even as he flung himself into my arms, wrapping his arms and legs around me like a baby monkey. I thought he was getting too big for me to pick him up, and a pang went through my heart. Luckily, my shifter blood makes me stronger than normal, even if I'm a terrible shifter all around. I still had a few more years of picking my boy up to look forward to.

I squeezed him, closing my eyes for a moment. Deidre, my coworker and babysitter, followed behind Kit with an amused look on her face. She had her own daughter in a sling on her chest, the much younger child kicking happily. We had a good system,

working opposite schedules and babysitting for one another when the other was at the warehouse. It made homeschooling Kit a lot easier, even if he didn't quite understand why he couldn't join the other kids at normal school.

So far, Kit hadn't displayed any signs of shifting, but the last thing I needed was for that part of him to make itself known when he was in the middle of multiplication tables with fifteen other kids. The idea made me shiver, and I hugged my boy even tighter.

"He was perfect today as always," Deidre told me, coming down the porch steps to greet me. "Same can't be said for my little miss here, but what else is new."

Deidre's daughter gurgled her agreement, and I smiled.

The sun was nearly set by the time Deidre had packed up and left, and I was exhausted enough to acquiesce to Kit's request for a pancake dinner. He'd spent the whole afternoon making them with Deidre, and the fridge was full of failed attempts, the stove covered in a thin film of flour and batter. I wasn't about to complain, though. At least I didn't have to cook.

After a bath, I tucked Kit into bed and pulled out a book, trying to ignore the slight twinge in my gut. It was the same feeling that had started on the way home, and now it was growing worse, a slow, deep ache that was making me feel sick. It couldn't have been my food; we'd shared the same dinner, and Kit was fine.

Maybe I was coming down with something. It was the middle of flu season, and even though shifters usually had an innate resistance to the germs that plagued humans, I was sort of an outlier as far as shifters were concerned. I tried not to let the unease worry me and instead drank in the sight of my son as he drifted off to sleep.

"You okay, Mama?"

I swallowed down the uncomfortable feelings and smiled softly, “Yes, my love, just tired from work, is all.”

“I wish you didn’t work so much,” Kit told me with a yawn. “I miss you when you aren’t here.”

Ouch. Leave it to my sweet little boy to break my heart into a million pieces with just a few words. “I know, buddy, but I’m working a little extra so we can take a trip this summer, remember?”

“I know,” Kit sighed, his eyes growing heavy, “You said I can ride a rollercoaster, Mama?”

“As many times as you want,” I promised, picking the book back up off my lap. “But let’s finish the story right now, okay?”

Kit was small for his age, but after growing two inches over the past six months, I knew for sure that a growth spurt was on the horizon. He had been born with feather-light, blond hair that had gotten darker as he aged, but not nearly as dark as my own, and his eyes were the deep, familiar blue of his father's. I didn't see Samson when I looked at Kit, though, only my sweet little man. Still, the echoes of his father’s face were in his features, and I knew they’d only become more prominent as he aged.

As much of an asshole as Samson was, I couldn’t even begin to deny that he was attractive. But if I had my way, looks were the only thing about the Saltfang Alpha that Kit would inherit. All the toxic, misogynistic trappings of pack life weren’t ever going to find a way into my home if I had anything to say about it.

As Kit finally gave in to sleep, I brushed the hair back from his forehead and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek, my heart full of love. I'd given up everything to protect Kit, and I'd do it a million times over if I had to.

When I finally stepped out of the room and shut the door, leaving a crack so the hallway light would illuminate the inside, the pain in my abdomen intensified. It was a dull ache combined with that unsettling feeling like I was being watched. As much as I longed for a slow, uninterrupted shower followed by a cup of hot cocoa in front of the television, I hadn't quite lost all of my instincts after leaving the Saltfang pack, and they were screaming at me to investigate. I'd been willing to let the worries go when they were vague, but now that they were getting stronger by the minute, I knew I couldn't ignore them much longer.

I took one step, and then another down the hallway, before the feeling intensified again. It was so strong, so unmistakable, that it took my breath away.

There, on the very edge of my senses, I swore I could sense Samson Jones. But no, there was no way in hell it could be him. It'd been over seven years since I'd fled, so surely he must have lost interest in me by now.

As soon as the sensation swept in, it was gone again, but there was no way I was going to be able to rest until I was sure I'd been mistaken. I glanced behind me at the empty house, small enough to see everything with a single sweep of my eyes, and carefully opened the front door. It had grown cold, but my adrenaline was making me sweat as I carefully scanned the area, trying to sense if anyone was lurking nearby.

It was a quiet night, the air cool and heavy with moisture from the nearby ocean and the oncoming rain. My senses picked up the sounds of the night, the chirping crickets, and the soft sound of the wind rustling through the trees. I couldn't hear or smell anyone, but it wasn't my wolf senses alone that were bothering me.

With a shaky hand, I flicked on the porch light and stepped out, shutting the door behind me. A quick look revealed nothing, but the feeling wouldn't leave me, a slow, pulsating throb in the base of my stomach. I reached out with the once-strange, now familiar magic that had bloomed in me after my single night with Samson, using it to

examine the land around my cottage. Learning that I had been a witch hadn't been a shock—it ran in the family—but after I'd sat with the magic for seven years, it responded to me like an old friend.

I could sense some residue of magic on the edge of my property and nothing more. It was so faint I couldn't even tell if it was a shifter or a witch.

Probably someone just passing through. A neighbor that you didn't know wasn't human, is all, I tried to tell myself...But I wasn't very convincing.

After a second sweep around my home, I still couldn't find a thing, even if the pain in my belly hadn't let up. Exhaling, I decided the best thing to do would be to lock all the doors and try to get some sleep.

"I must be going crazy," I murmured. "Or maybe it's just stress."

But as I headed back to the door, I suddenly sensed the magic again, this time even closer. It was so powerful that I had no doubt what the source was. It hit me over the head like a hammer, and it was all I could do not to fall to my knees and cower.

It was my Alpha.

No, no, no, no. He couldn't possibly be here, could he?

Oh shit. He'd come for me, just as I'd feared. I had gotten so good at hiding, and we'd been so careful to cover our tracks. How could he have found us now, after all these years? I'd known it was a possibility that Samson would come for me, but not so soon. Not before my little Kit was grown, safe from the harsh realities of the pack hierarchy and his father's cruelty.

Worst of all, the center of that magic wasn't coming from outside. It radiated from

inside my house, where I'd left my son sleeping alone.

My hand was shaking on the doorknob, and it took me two tries to twist the knob. I couldn't let him near my son, not when Kit was so young. I had to get to him, to protect him, but if Samson was already inside, what could I possibly do? I'd grown stronger being on my own, but nowhere near strong enough to take on an Alpha.

I was nearly hyperventilating as I finally turned the knob, and the front door slowly creaked open. I'd held on to a tiny sliver of hope that I was just losing my mind, but as soon as I could see into my home, the truth was undeniable.

There, sitting at my dining room table, was Samson Jones, my former Alpha, the father of my son, and the only man I'd ever slept with. Every bit of Omega instincts inside of me was screaming to either submit to him right then or beg for his favor.

Screw that. I hadn't separated myself from my pack for this long to just roll over and let Samson be the boss of me again, Omega or not. The fear was white hot, but there was one thing stronger—the drive to protect my son.

He stood and stepped forward, and I took an involuntary step back. My legs shook, and my knees nearly gave out, but I stood firm, raising my chin in a futile attempt to appear more confident than I felt.

Samson was still the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Time hadn't done anything to ease the almost painful attraction I felt towards him. His blonde hair, usually a few shades darker than Kit's, had been cut since I'd last seen him, and now it was a shorter, more severe style. His jaw was just as strong, and his lips were full and inviting as always against his tanned skin.

The one thing that hadn't changed, though, was his eyes. They were a bright, clear blue, and I knew the exact shade—the color of a summer sky.

His gaze raked over me, and for a moment, I was taken back to a simpler, sweeter time when we'd spent one beautiful night together before he'd ditched me and ignored me just like everyone else.

But this wasn't a memory. This was real.

"Kiera," he rumbled, "It's been a long time." Samson stepped forward again, and this time, I stood my ground. "Now, where the fuck is my son?"

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"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me, Kiera," I managed to get the words out, but it was a near thing. Seeing her again after all these years had left me close to speechless.

I guess I'd forgotten she was beautiful. I guess I'd forgotten that my wolf was desperate to protect her, to keep her safe like any good Alpha should for his Omega.

Somehow...I'd forgotten that Kiera Langley was the only woman on the planet who ever affected me, and now I had to pretend that the only thing I was feeling at the moment was anger, not a frustrating blend of anger and lust.

Usually fair-skinned, Kiera was flushed with anger and fear, the color sitting high on her cheeks. Her dark chocolate hair was coiled on top of her head, but strands of it had worked their way free, framing her face and tempting neck. Her eyes, midnight black sometimes cut through with moonlight silver, were wide and frantic. Kiera had been pretty to me before, but the past seven years had hammered out any lingering timidity, leaving behind only the best parts of her.

It would have been harder if I wasn't honestly angry as fuck with her, even as her delicious scent overwhelmed my senses. She'd been in hiding for seven fucking years at this point, and it'd taken a monumental effort to be able to finally find her. When I'd been told she'd only been four hours away the entire time, I'd been ready to tear the nearest person to shreds. I'd been so pissed.

Kiera had used a different last name and stayed under the radar for years, and had she been any other random pack member, I'd have ignored her disappearance and gone on

with my life. If a wolf didn't like how I led the pack, so be it. But Kiera wasn't any other wolf.

Despite being from shifter parents, Kiera appeared to have been human without magic. So when I smelled her heat on her and discovered that she was an Omega, it was a shock. Omegas were rare, and they often went undiscovered until their first heat manifested.

Like most of the other pack members, I'd written her off as worthless and boring, but everything had changed that day. She wasn't worthless anymore; she was an Omega, and she belonged to me.

I was a new Alpha at the time, and her surprise and appreciation at my attention had broken me down. I'd been soft with Kiera, taken her to bed, and mated her like she wasn't the lowest member in the pack hierarchy. I'd shown her affection, and she'd returned it tenfold. It made me feel powerful and possessive, like I couldn't get enough of the little Omega.

I'd knotted her, multiple times, throughout that night.

But once her heat had passed, my rational side returned, and I realized that mating Kiera had been a huge mistake.

Omegas were supposed to be weak, and humans were supposed to be weaker than Omegas. Kiera had been an unfortunate combination of both—or so I thought. I needed a powerful, dominant mate, not a submissive little human.

I'd spent the next two days avoiding her and trying to put her out of my mind. My wolf hadn't wanted her to leave, but it had been easy to push his voice to the back of my mind and ignore his howls. Kiera tried to be close to me for a little while afterward, but I was dismissive, and when she didn't get the picture, I was cruel.

Eventually, she caught on and left me alone, and I tried to put the Omega out of my mind.

That would have been the end of our association, had she not given birth to a son nine months later. She'd hidden herself away for all that time, unwilling to let others see her condition, and by the time she had the baby, I'd almost been able to forget her.

Almost.

I'd been furious. Whether I interacted with Kiera or not, she was a member of my pack, and therefore, she belonged to me. That also meant her son, our son, was mine. Knowing that she'd hidden her pregnancy from me made me see red. I meant to confront her, to force her and the child to live in my home where I could see my boy raised the way I wanted him to be, but when I went to retrieve her, she was gone.

Kiera gave birth and was so desperate to get away from me and the Saltfang pack that she fled the city the very next day. Had I been a better man, I might have felt guilty that she had been driven to such a decision, but I wasn't. I'm still not a better man; I'm an Alpha, and the sting of knowing she thought she could escape me has never faded.

I'd searched for her for seven long years, and now I'd found her. She stood before me, staring me down with fire in her eyes and a set to her jaw that told me she wasn't going to go quietly. I was prepared for a lot of changes with Kiera Langley, but I never expected bravery to be one of them. Not from the timid woman I had known before.

And she had a right to be afraid. I wasn't the same man she'd left, the one who'd been too wrapped up in his own self-interest to keep her close like I should have. My wolf was snarling inside me, urging me to pull her close and claim her, but I'd learned a lot over the past few years, and I knew that wouldn't be welcome.

She wasn't going to have a choice about coming back with me, but it'd be better if she came willingly. Or semi-willingly, at least.

"I'm going to ask you again—where is my son?"

She flinched slightly, as if my voice was a blade, and her face paled, making her dark eyes even darker. They were wide, too, and fixed on me as if she was afraid to look away.

Good. At least the Omega understood who was in charge here.

"I'm alone," she was afraid, but she was stubborn, too. She stared me down, her face flushed and her shoulders tense. "Why don't you get the hell out of my house?"

"Is that any way to talk to your Alpha?" I demanded. She wasn't my mate, but she was still mine, and if I wanted her respect, I'd take it. "Where is the child, Kiera?"

"I said he's not here," she snapped, taking a step towards me. Her small fists were clenched, and the flush had spread across her chest, creeping up her neck. I wanted to put my lips on her collarbone and taste that heat.

Kiera swallowed and softened her stance, lowering her voice, "He's having a sleepover with a friend. A human friend. So don't think you're going to roll up and pull all this Alpha nonsense on them."

She was lying, and that infuriated me. But I could also see how hard she was working to play it cool, hoping to put me off the scent of my own son. It would have fooled a less experienced Alpha, but I'd had years to mull over the too-few memories I had of Kiera, and I could see the subtle ways she was moving herself between me and the hallway, clenching her fists and rising onto her toes. She was ready to fight for the kid, I realized, and a sick sense of pride flooded my chest.

The pride didn't stick around long, though, burned away by how pissed off she was making me. So what if I had denied her after the night we spent together? That was my decision, and it was completely unacceptable that she fled after that, taking my son from me. Kiera and her child were part of my birthright as an Alpha, and the disrespect of her fleeing had been humiliating.

I nearly lost hope after looking for her year after year, but when I finally found her again, I thought it would be a cause for celebration. I should have known that Kiera would have changed after all that time, but this much of a change was unbelievable.

Where was the sweet, soft woman who was nearly in tears from happiness to receive even a small measure of my attention? Where was the Kiera who had clearly expected me to take her as my mate?

The woman in front of me, ready for battle, lying through her teeth, seemed like a stranger.

I could give her a fight if she wanted one, but the idea of my son's first impression of me being pissed off at his mother wasn't something I wanted.

"Okay, you win," I said, taking a step back. "I won't go near your friend's house."

Kiera looked suspicious, but she nodded once and crossed her arms, her full lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't believe me, and that was fair. I didn't trust myself right now, either.

"So you just came here to say hello?" she asked, and I could tell she was trying to make her voice sound light and casual. It was the tone of someone trying desperately to hide their fear.

And she had every right to be scared. I had a temper, and my wolf wasn't known for

being particularly gentle. If she gave me even half a reason to unleash it on her...well, it wouldn't be pretty.

I had never hurt Kiera before, and I wasn't about to start now, but that didn't mean I was above scaring her to get what I wanted, and I wanted my son. I wanted to know how Kiera could possibly think that she had any right to keep him from me after seven years of silence.

"I was just checking up on you," I lied, "and it seems like you're doing well."

She nodded once, a jerky, uncertain movement, and took a step forward. I saw her nostrils flare as she tried to scent me, but I knew she wouldn't find anything. There was no trace of Kit's scent on me, and I had taken special care not to carry any of the Saltfang smells in me either. If Kiera couldn't smell me, she couldn't track me.

"I'm fine," she said, "now, if you don't mind, I have a few errands to run." She moved past me and opened the front door, gesturing for me to leave. "I appreciate you coming to check on me, but I don't need your help."

I stared at her in disbelief for a moment before giving her my best, most wolfish smile. "Of course not. You're doing so well all by yourself." I let my gaze linger on the house, and Kiera went still. We both know it wasn't her home. It was just a place for her to hide. "Don't worry, though. Your secret is safe with me," Kiera opened to protest, but I held up a hand to stop her. "I'm not here to fight you."

It looked like she was going to fight me anyway, and I could see the refusal building up in her throat. But instead, she sighed, and the tension drained out of her body. "Please just go, then."

I was almost disappointed that she was going to let me go that easily, but I didn't want to push my luck. She looked like she was ready to explode, and I didn't feel like

being caught in the crossfire.

So I gave her a mock salute, turned, and left.

I didn't miss the look of relief on her face when she shut the door behind me.

The thing I wanted to do the most right then was turn back around and demand to know why she'd left. I wanted to take her to my home and make her live there with me, where I could keep an eye on her.

She'd lied to my face, and that had pissed me off, but I could see the fear in her eyes, and I knew that she was expecting me to take what I wanted. That's how it usually went with an Alpha and his Omega. And even though she'd left the Saltfang pack without permission, she was still mine.

But I wasn't about to force her. She was going to be my mate, and that meant I respected her. Even if she didn't realize that yet. If she needed time, I could give her that. If she needed to feel like she had a choice in the matter, then that's what I'd give her. I wouldn't be happy about it, but I'd do it.

Because at the end of the day, I would always get what I wanted.

It was just past nine when I left Kiera alone, but I found myself unable to really leave the area. Something about Kiera and how badly she wanted to get me out of her house raised alarm bells in my head. I knew she was lying about our son being in the house, but there was something else going on, too. I was sure of it.

So, instead of leaving and trying my luck with her again tomorrow, I went to hide in the treeline behind Kiera's small home. The house was dark and quiet, with only a

single light on in the kitchen. I watched the house for nearly half an hour before I realized that I had no idea what I was waiting for. What was I going to do, hide in the trees all night and try to catch her in a lie?

I needed a plan. My wolf wasn't happy with how I'd left things with Kiera, but we couldn't exactly march back up to her front door and demand she tell me where our son was. She hadn't been shy about her anger at me, and I knew that if I pushed too hard, she'd bolt again, this time for good.

And then I would never see Kit.

I sighed and let my head fall back against the tree trunk. There was no way I could stay in the forest all night. While the day had been warm, it was cold out after sunset, and I could feel the temperature dropping as the minutes ticked by. It was April and I was wearing a light jacket, so it wasn't like I was going to freeze, but I also wasn't thrilled by the prospect of shivering like an idiot watching a dark house for hours on end.

Just as I convinced myself that getting a hotel room for the night was better, a light flicked on inside. Then another. I tensed, leaning forward, barely breathing as I kept as still as possible, watching.

Before I could move closer to try and see through the windows, all the lights went out again. Slowly, and as silently as she possibly could, Kiera opened the front door. She'd changed into a black pullover and leggings, an overstuffed backpack on her back and a huge, blanket-covered bundle in her arms. She adjusted the bundle enough to get out of the door, quietly shutting it once more with her foot before moving towards the single car in the driveway.

My mind raced with what she could possibly be doing, but the only explanation that made any sense was that she was sneaking away in the night to hide my son from me.

I should have just stayed put or tried to go around and wait by her car. There was no need to try and approach her, but the wolf was insisting on it, so I got to my feet, wincing as the leaves crunched under my shoes. In the dead silence of the night, it may as well have been an explosion.

Kiera stopped in her tracks, her entire body going tense. She turned slowly and locked her eyes onto me. Her dark hair was up in a ponytail, and her eyes were bright with anger. The bundle in her arms wiggled a little bit, and I was able to truly smell my son for the first time in seven years.

It wasn't the greatest way to make his acquaintance, but at least he hadn't woken up.

I had only portions of a second to decide what to do, but all the clues were right in front of the dark clothes, the full backpack, and the attempts at silence—Kiera was trying to flee with my son.

Again.

Anger welled in me from the never-emptying spring of it in my chest, and without a second thought, I ran. Kiera did the same, springing into motion like a gazelle, but I was taller and unencumbered, so I reached the driver's side door first. She let out a quiet cry of frustration and tried to yank me away from the car, overbalanced by holding our son. It was so ineffectual I laughed, which made her even angrier. She wasn't going anywhere.

I'd won.

"Liar," I told her, more amused than accusatory now that I'd gotten the upper hand. "Now that I know I can't trust you, I'm not giving you any choice, Kiera. Get in the fucking car, or I'll take that pup from your arms and leave you behind while I take him back to Saltfang territory, where he belongs."

For the first time since I'd seen her again, Kiera's expression shifted from anger to true, bone-chilling fear. Her mouth dropped open, and she tightened her hold on our son, her eyes flicking between me and the bundle in her arms. I didn't think she was going to listen, and for a second, I thought about going through with it. But when I moved to pull him into my own arms, Kiera started backing away, a low growl emanating from her chest.

It wasn't the warning sound of a shifter, but the universal sound of a mother protecting her young. It was almost mind-boggling how much she'd changed.

"Get in the passenger seat," I told her once more, "Don't make this more difficult than it has to be."

"I can't," she whispered. Her eyes were huge in her face, and her voice trembled, "You have no right to him, and I will not allow you to take him."

Her words enraged me. No right to my son? Did she seriously think that a child belonged to a single parent? It had never occurred to her that Kit's fate was interwoven with mine? She was my Omega, and this was our son. I didn't care how angry she was at me. It didn't matter that we had parted under the worst terms possible. We were bonded by the pack, and we'd made a child together.

I'd tried to give her a choice, and she'd chosen badly. Now she had to live with the consequences.

"Get. In. The. Fucking. Car."

She took another step back. Kit let out a quiet snort and rolled over in her arms. She looked down at him, her mouth pressed into a thin line of resolve. "Fine."

She moved past me, holding Kit so tight I worried he couldn't breathe, and went to

the other side of the car, opening the back passenger side door. As carefully as possible, she got Kit into the back seat, still wrapped up and snoozing. When she shut the door again, she wouldn't meet my eyes, her face flushed in the pale moonlight.

I walked past her without a word and got into the car, waiting to start the engine until she got into her seat as well. I waited in tense silence as she pulled on her seatbelt, the car so quiet I could hear the way she was chewing on her lower lip.

Well, if she was pissed now, I was about to make it ten times worse.

I found the silver cuffs in my pocket, holding them tightly so they didn't rattle as I took Kiera's hand with my free one. She tried to pull away, but I didn't let her, bringing her hand to my face as if I wanted to scent her, and to my surprise, she gave up the fight. Her eyes were confused as she watched me, and it was her confusion that gave me enough time to strike.

I had the cuff around her wrist so swiftly that she didn't even have time to register what was happening, lunging forward to secure the other cuff to the passenger door handle. She was lucky I'd managed to grab her left hand, or it would have been an uncomfortable four-hour drive back to Saltfang territory.

Her mouth fell open, and she pulled on her wrist, but I knew she wouldn't be able to escape. My Omega was speechless, her expression shifting from panic to rage over and over again.

"You're lucky I don't put one around your neck," I said with a growl. I looked back at the boy in the back seat. He hadn't stirred the whole time, and it made me wonder just how heavy of a sleeper he was. Better for him to be out of it while I make Kiera realize just what she was in for, anyway.

I couldn't help myself, reaching back and pulling the blanket to finally see my son's

face. He was indeed still sleeping, but the sight of him was like a punch to the gut. I'd seen that face before, reflected back in me in the mirror when I was so much younger, and in the photographs of me as a child. He looked so damn much like me, with shades of Kiera in the shape of his eyes and the set of his mouth.

My son. I was taking him home at last.

I could almost feel the fear rolling off Kiera as I looked at Kit, and she didn't relax until I let the blanket drop and settled back into the driver's seat. "Get comfortable," I tell her, shifting the unfamiliar car into gear. "We've got a long drive, Omega."

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All I could do as we drove away from the cottage that I had worked so hard to acquire, that I had spent years making into a home, was look back and watch it fade into the distance. It was dark, and I was only able to get a few precious seconds before my home was gone.

I wanted to rage. If my hands were free, I thought I might try to strangle Samson, Alpha bullshit be damned. He might be able to break me like a twig, but at the moment, I didn't give a damn. In one fell swoop, he had taken nearly everything from me, except for the little boy sleeping in the back seat.

The grief of losing it all threatened to choke me, but knowing I still had Kit and was still in a position to keep him safe was enough for the moment. It had to be.

"Don't do anything stupid," Samson warned, almost as if he could read my mind as we finally left the town limits and drove out into the darkness. The streetlamps faded out of the car as we sped along the narrow highway. There was only a sliver of the moon in the sky, but we both knew that we'd have no problem seeing as we drove back to his home.

My home, too, if I didn't manage to escape.

The idea of going back to Crystal Creek, right in the epicenter of so many shifter packs, made me feel sick. I'd wanted more than anything to raise Kit away from pack toxicity and politics, and I'd achieved that for seven wonderful years. Now Samson had found us, and it was time to face the reality of it all—my little Kit was the son of an Alpha, and that Alpha had come to take what he believed was his.

My witch magic churned inside me like a hurricane, so intense that I rubbed my chest to try to alleviate the feeling. I reached for it tentatively, but no matter how powerfully it reacted to me, there was something in the way of me truly reaching it like I could any other day.

From the moment I'd laid eyes on Samson again, it was like the utter shock of seeing him had knocked something off balance inside of me. My best weapon against the Alpha was gone, at least for the time being, and it made me feel like the same sad, weak Kiera who had run away from Samson before.

Yet...she was still inside me. My life in Crystal Creek was impossible to forget, the trauma of it having shaped so much of who I had managed to become.

My childhood had been average enough, but as I grew into a teenager, none of my shifting capabilities manifested, and my peers took notice. My parents' constant disappointment in me made things even harder, as they never missed an opportunity to point out my shortcomings to me. But what made it worse was the way my packmates responded. I'd always been an outsider among them, an awkward girl who didn't belong anywhere.

I had thought I had been content, even happy with that reality. But as the years passed, the heaviness of the constant isolation began to sink in, and with it, the misery.

I thought things would change once I came of age, once my first heat finally took hold.

I was wrong.

Samson had only been Alpha for a few months by the time it came around, and even on a good day, I tried to avoid him like the plague. Like his father before him,

Samson ruled the Saltfang pack with cold efficiency. He was ruthless, devoid of any emotion, and the exact type of Alpha that I hated to be around. He wasn't outwardly cruel to me, but all of his displeasure came through in the way he would look at me as if I was worth less than the dirt on his shoes.

That had all changed, at least temporarily, when my first heat came. I was twenty at the time, and my parents were out of town, so it was just me in the house, which was a blessing. The pain was almost blinding, but the loneliness made it even worse. I needed an Alpha, as if my life depended on it, but no Alpha would stoop so low as to be with me. I didn't want any of them, anyway. I'd rather be in pain than have an Alpha with me during my heat because of pity alone.

I was at the peak of my heat cycle when I heard a knock at my door. I'd missed work at the pack-owned grocery store for four days straight, too embarrassed to call in because of my heat, and apparently, my absence had finally been noticed.

I expected my manager, or another coworker, but never in a million years did I expect to pull open my front door and see Samson Jones on the other side.

I remembered the shock I felt, and the frustration that my heat had distracted me too much to sense Samson before I opened the door. He stood there for a few seconds, and for a brief moment, I was struck by the way his eyes trailed over me from head to toe. Then his expression was like steel, and the moment passed. I remember him saying that he needed to speak to me about my absence and that I was in danger of being fired, but he didn't leave, and we both knew it was a lie.

The next thing I knew, I'd let him in, and we were kissing. The way his hands felt as they dug into my hips, his fingers pushing up under my shirt and touching my skin...

Samson had been my first, and he'd been surprisingly kind and gentle with me. Gone was the pushy, cold Alpha I knew, replaced by someone who seemed to generally

care about me and wanted to make sure I found as much pleasure as possible.

He'd made sure I was comfortable, he'd helped me prepare for him, and as we lay together after he knotted me, he held me so closely, so tightly, that I had felt safe in the circle of his arms.

Then everything went wrong.

My heat ended abruptly, and the next morning, he was back to being his normal, cold, cruel self. The memory of how he had taken me aside the morning after my heat ended, the way he had looked me in the eyes and told me he wanted nothing to do with me, that it was a mistake, was as sharp now as it was the day it happened.

Samson had told me in no uncertain terms that he would never take an Omega like me as his mate, and I wasn't the one he had any plans to have his pups with. It didn't matter if I had been; if we had had a passionate night together, I had been nothing but a fling, a dirty secret. I had been lucky enough that he'd taken care of me in my time of need, and it was stupid of me to expect more.

I'd retreated into myself, heartbroken and humiliated. I stopped going to work, stopped answering the few calls I'd get, and tried my best to accept my life of loneliness. I had been a fool to think an Alpha like Samson might have cared for me.

It hurt more than anything ever had before, but at least I knew I'd survive.

I was never given a chance to find how everything might have played out, because a few weeks later, I was slapped in the face with a staggering realization—my period was two weeks late. I'd been too depressed to really care, but now...

My body was a mess, and the idea of a pregnancy scared the hell out of me. The idea of me being a mother seemed impossible, even more so when I imagined who the

father was.

But it didn't matter who the father was.

All I could think about was my own parents and how they had raised me with cold distance, like they couldn't stand being near me. I'd gotten the impression they'd never wanted kids, and I was more of an inconvenient accident than anything else. When I thought about my own baby, I knew I wanted so much more.

More than distant parents, and definitely more than an asshole Alpha for a father. Alphas like Samson viewed mates and children as property and exerted absolute control over them. Thinking of the sweet baby I had been carrying controlled like that, and by a father who saw him as a way to increase his own power? It was horrifying, and the idea that it would happen to my baby was unbearable.

It had to be enough to spur me into action.

I knew I needed to leave the Saltfang territory, and needed to do it right away. There had been a nearby human city, Portland, and if I were careful, I'd be able to find a job and a place to stay. If I were lucky, maybe I could even find someone willing to help me and my unborn child. It wouldn't be easy to leave my entire world behind me and start a life on my own, but the thought of staying where I was only brought up a bone-deep sense of panic and fear.

I had made a promise to myself, after Samson rejected me, to leave town and make a better life for myself, for both of us. I'd spent years working to achieve that, and in the process, I had done my best to bury all the anger and hurt that Samson had left me with. It hadn't always worked, but it had been enough.

But now that was over. The threat was real and right next to me. I could try to resist Samson's advances and protect my child as much as I could, but I knew what he was

capable of. As far as Samson was concerned, the fact that I carried his child made me his, and by extension, my child would belong to him, too. He'd probably use his power to take control over the child as a means of exerting control over me as well.

Damn him. As the miles passed, it became harder and harder to hold in my tears. The unfairness of it all was so heavy it was blinding. I'd had it all, the freedom that I'd worked my ass off for, and Samson was able to take it away in an instant.

I hated Alphas, every single one of them...the one in the car with me, worst of all.

When I looked at Samson's face again, I realized that he was occasionally looking at me out of the corner of his eye. There was a scowl on his handsome face, and he didn't even have the good grace to pretend he wasn't staring at me like I was some kind of specimen under a microscope.

We didn't stop, Samson happily piling miles upon miles between us and my home, and the tension inside of me coiled tighter and tighter with each one. He didn't try to make conversation with me, or even ask if I needed to stop as the first hour rolled into the second, and then the third. I was starving, and I needed to pee something fierce, but Samson unsurprisingly only cared for his own needs. Now that he had me in his clutches, he didn't bother to speak to me at all.

Well, tough shit. If he's going to trap me here, handcuffed to my own damn car, then we're going to talk.

"So....care to explain why you came all this way to kidnap me like some low-life criminal?"

Samson sneered, shaking his head like he couldn't believe how idiotic I was being, which, of course, only made my temper burn brighter. "Don't be a child. I am bringing you back home where you belong, where your family and pack is."

I scoffed. "I haven't had a pack in a long time."

Samson frowned. "I thought after the initial shock that you'd be happy. Isn't that what you begged me for all those years ago? To make you mine?"

The heat in my body spiked even higher, my skin practically burning from his proximity. "I was young and stupid."

"Can't argue there. It was stupid to disappear with my son. Beyond stupid. Do you know how long I looked for you, Kiera?"

"You...what?"

"After I found out you'd left, I tried to find you." His knuckles were white where his fingers dug into the steering wheel, his jaw ticking from the force of his teeth clenching. "You hid well. And I shouldn't have let you run. You should have been with me, you and the pup."

"He doesn't even know you. You just uprooted our entire lives on a whim."

"I'll admit that I may have made mistakes, but you ran, Kiera. I might not have taken you as my mate after one single night, but the pregnancy would have changed things."

An old sadness was creeping up my throat. "I didn't want to be just some Omega that you kept as a side piece because I had your son. And I sure as hell didn't want my son being used as part of your Alpha pack political bullshit."

Samson laughed cruelly, "I'm the Alpha, Kiera, and I will use my son however I see fit."

My response came like the crack of a whip, "Like hell you will."

The scent of his rage spiked the air, a hint of ozone in it. "You don't get to speak to me like that. Not if you don't want me to punish you right here, right now."

The memory of that night seven years ago flickered through my head like a ghost, a ghost that was as horrifying as it was arousing. He could hurt me in all the ways he wanted. My body craved him still, and I hated it.

"Punish me however you like, Samson, I don't care."

He inhaled deeply, and almost as if he could tell all the ways he was affecting me, some of his rage bled away into something more...intimate. The corner of his mouth pulled up, just slightly. "If I remember correctly, you like taking orders."

I quickly looked into the back seat, where Kit was still sleeping, before responding. "We both know that, however, I acted during the heat doesn't count—"

"But it does."

I huffed, fighting against the instinct that urged me to just agree with him, that insisted on his dominance over me.

I could tell my hesitation, however small, pleased him, because his lips quirked into a real smirk. "You still have some fight left in you, Kiera. That's good." His tone turned low. "I love it when my prey fights back."

I glared at him. "You're going to find that this prey will be much more trouble than you bargained for."

"You know what? I like the sound of that. You're already taking your first

punishment so well, anyway."

I froze. "The kidnapping?"

He chuckled, and this time, he really was amused. "No, little Omega. That's just part of it. You committed the crime of running away from your pack and taking my heir with you. To make sure it never happens again, I'm bringing you back to Saltfang, where you will marry me and serve me like the good Omega I know you can be."

I balked. "W-What? I'm not going to marry you, Samson! You can't force me to!"

"Actually, I can," he corrected, "The Alpha can claim his right to marry whomever he chooses. And you know why that is, don't you, Kiera?"

I had to bite back a sob, my body too hot, too overwhelmed by his presence. I could smell him all around me in the little car, feel his body heat, his dominance, the hint of arousal when he talked about the night of my heat.

"Because an Alpha has the power to claim a mate. Any Omega he chooses, no matter who they are. If he decides he wants them, he takes them. And you are no different, little Omega." He leaned in closer, his voice dropping down until it was little more than a deep rumble. "You are my mate now, and you always will be."

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"You're delusional!"

I expected her to be angry, but I didn't expect her to explode so loudly that the windows nearly shook.

"Do you really think that you can force me into marrying you and living under your thumb like the rest of your pack?" Kiera's eyes blazed. "You're more insane than I thought."

"Kiera—"

"You have no right to tell me what to do!" Kiera leaned forward in the passenger's seat. "And I won't allow you to punish me by forcing me into this!"

I flexed my jaw. "You need to understand that I am your Alpha now, and as such, I am responsible for you—"

She jerked her cuffed wrist over and over, so hard that I cringed from the driver's seat. "Let me out of here, you maniac. I am not marrying you!"

"Stop! You're going to hurt yourself."

"Like I give a damn!"

Kit stirred behind us. "Mama?"

I swore under my breath. Kiera quickly leaned around the seat, "Go back to sleep,

baby. Mommy's fine. Go to sleep, sweetie."

"No," Kit said stubbornly, rubbing his eyes, "Where are we going?"

"You know," I said quietly, "You shouldn't lie to children like that."

Kiera whirled in her seat to look at me. "Shut your mouth!"

"Mommy, you're not supposed to tell people to shut their mouths! It's rude."

I laughed, shaking my head. My son had my back, and he didn't even know it. Hearing him talk made my heart start to race, and it was an odd thing to realize that I was...nervous? Alphas didn't get nervous, as a rule, but meeting your estranged son after seven years was probably an extenuating circumstance.

Kiera attempted to console her... our ...sleepy, confused boy while I took the nearest exit and pulled into a 24-hour gas station. I heard her telling him that they were going to be away from home for some time, but that it would be sort of an adventure. I liked hearing her speak to him, the gentle way she reassured him, and told him as close to the truth as she possibly could without getting too into detail. I had never doubted that Kiera was a good mom, even though she had stolen my heir away from me, but it was good to see it in person.

At least Kit had experienced a full, love-filled life when he was away from his pack.

I parked the car, undoing my seatbelt, and turned around to look at the child in the back seat. He looked different now that he was awake, his expression mirroring his mother's so much that it was almost comical. His focus shifted from Kiera to me, and I hated that I could see a thread of fear in his eyes.

It's nothing, I told myself. He has no idea who you are. It's normal for him to be

afraid of a stranger.

And yet it wasn't, was it? If I'd accepted Kiera as my mate when she first came to me, he'd have known me as his father from the day he was born, and he wouldn't have feared me in the slightest. Kiera and I had both stolen that from him in different ways, and now I'd never be able to make up for that.

Still, I offered my hand to him. "Hi, Kit," I said. "My name is Samson."

"S...Samson?" His little fingers brushed mine. His touch was warm and innocent. I don't think he was aware that his scent was swirling in my head, and that his touch felt like it had shocked my body awake after seven years of sleep. "Why are you driving Mama's car?"

"That's for your mother to answer. I'm going to go in and get some snacks and give you guys a minute to talk, okay?" I said as gently as I could, but even that made his eyes grow wider. "It'll be alright," I assured him. "I won't be gone long, I promise."

Kit nodded, though I could still see his hesitation, but Kiera turned in her seat and drew our son close to her in an attempt to soothe him. She didn't even look at me when she spoke to him, but the tension in her voice made my teeth clench.

"I know this is going to be confusing, my love, but please just listen, and I'll explain everything..."

I exited the car like I said I would, despite wanting to hang back and listen to the conversation. I didn't trust Kiera at all, but if there was one area I'd give her an ounce of it in, it would be her parenting of Kit. I pushed down the pissed-off, bitter voice telling me that if she'd given me a chance, I'd know how to parent him too, but there was no going back in time.

Inside the gas station, I went to the restroom before filling my arms with whatever I thought a seven-year-old might like—gummies, granola bars, candy, soda, and a few bottles of water. The guy at the register looked me up and down when he noticed how much food I was carrying and raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. "Long road trip."

The man behind the counter smiled, "Yeah. Your kid is gonna be bouncing off the roof of that car, family man."

I ignored him, paying and carrying my overly heavy bag back to the car. I hoped I'd given the two of them enough time to talk, but if not, Kiera was just going to have to deal with it. Letting her explain alone was the only kindness I was ready to give her right now.

I was pleased to see Kit staring out of the car window with a big, goofy grin on his face. Something in my chest seized when he opened the back door and popped out of the car, offering me his hand like I had done for him earlier.

My son was taller than I expected, and that made the tug in my chest even worse. Still, I shook his hand, man to man, somehow holding my composure when the handshake turned into a quick, shy hug from the boy before he jumped back.

"It's nice to meet you, Papa."

The tug in my chest got harder, and my composure cracked, but only for a moment. I felt my lips stretch into a genuine smile as Kit jumped into his seat again. "You too, kid."

Kiera was silent in the front seat, but her silence was far less friendly.

I handed the bags to the two of them before taking a moment to call ahead and have them start preparing everything for our arrival. When I returned to the driver's side, I found Kit watching me, a smile on his face and a chocolate bar in his hands.

"Only one," Kiera told him, harsher than I think she intended, "Or you won't sleep for the rest of the ride."

I doubted it—Kit was happily eating his candy between yawns, and looked more than ready to return to slumber now that the mystery of the trip and my identity had been solved. He seemed happy and well cared for. His smile made the bitter, resentful feeling in my chest even worse, so I focused on Kiera and the cold distance in her eyes.

"How did it go?"

"Well, enough. We don't need to talk about it." She kept her attention focused on Kit, avoiding me. "He has a million questions, but I told him to hold onto them until we were settled in wherever you're taking us."

Pulling back out onto the road, I could already see Kit snuggling back down into his blanket cocoon to sleep. Whatever we needed to discuss could wait until he was out again.

The car ride back was mostly quiet. Kit fell back asleep quickly, and the only sound was the rumble of the car engine and the wind. Kiera was so quiet that I thought she might be asleep at times, but then she would move ever so slightly, or her scent would shift. Then I could feel her eyes on me, and I knew that she was watching.

"What?" I said, without taking my eyes off the road, "You want to yell at me again?"

Her silence stretched, and for a moment, I thought that was it, but then her voice

came, soft and cautious, "How did you find me, Samson?"

The question caught me off guard. It had never occurred to me that she would even ask, much less sound so nervous. "What does it matter how I found you?" I snapped, my rage returning with a vengeance, "The point is I did, and you can't run anymore."

She seethed in her seat, and when she didn't respond, I continued, glancing at my sleeping son in the rearview mirror. "Should I be worried that he sleeps so much?"

Kiera seemed surprised, but relaxed a few degrees. "He's always been a deep sleeper, and he's going through a growth spurt, which makes it even worse. Some days, I feel like he's endlessly hungry and endlessly tired." She smiled at the thought, her expression softening. "Don't worry. It's normal."

It should have comforted me, but instead, it just made the bitter anger flood back. I wanted to keep quiet, to at least wait until we were back in Crystal Creek before getting into a full-on fight again, but my mouth had other ideas. "Ah, well, good to fucking know. If I had known my son in the last seven damn years, maybe I'd know more about him.'

Kiera bristled and leaned back against her seat, crossing her arms as best she could with one cuffed. "What's your problem with me?" she asked in a tone so cold I half expected the windows to frost over.

"What's my problem? You're my problem. You left, and you didn't have the fucking guts to tell me about my kid, and now you're here, and you're refusing to take your rightful place in my pack as my wife."

Kiera made a strangled noise. "Rightful place?"

"Yeah, you heard me," I growled. "It's your duty, Kiera, your destiny, to be at my

side as my wife. My mate.”

Kiera stared at me like she thought I had lost my mind.

"I can't fucking believe this. I knew you were stubborn, Samson, but I never knew you were so arrogant and stupid, too." She scoffed. "You have no claim on me! I'm not one of your pack. I don't bow and scrape to your will just because you say so! I don't give a damn what the hierarchy says about our status!"

"Our status is Alpha and his mate! Don't you get it? There is no other status for an Omega other than the one who's tied to her Alpha!" My voice rose, and my eyes burned in a way they hadn't since I was a teenager. Fuck, she made me so angry.

She turned back to her window. "You don't get to tell me what to do," Kiera said, and it almost sounded like she was in pain, "Not after what you did."

"What I did?" I growled.

Kiera was silent. I wanted to reach out to her and grab her, pull her around to look at me, and demand that she speak, but I kept my hands on the wheel, my gaze ahead. I knew what she was talking about, and it infuriated me that she had the gall to even bring it up. Rejecting her when I had no idea she was pregnant was nothing compared to her running away and hiding Kit from me. Nothing.

"Don't," she said quietly, "I'm not talking about it, Samson. Don't push it."

It wasn't just anger I was feeling now, but the cold bite of loss and regret, and I didn't want to deal with that. It felt too close to admitting that I'd been wrong, and I would have rather eaten dirt than admit that to her. "Fine," I bit the word out. "But this conversation isn't done, mate . That I can promise you."

Dawn was touching the horizon when we pulled into Crystal Creek, and while Kiera had made it clear she had no interest in coming home, she still sat forward excitedly as the city came into view. She looked good like that, her body tense and her face excited, her dark eyes looking out over the familiar landscape. She'd changed over the past seven years, and so had the city.

Two packs inhabited the coastal town—my pack, the Saltfangs, and the Brokenclaw pack led by Joe Longwood. Joe had made an alliance with my father and kept it strong and steady when I took over. While I didn't love sharing space with another dominant Alpha like Joe, the town was large enough that it wasn't a problem.

No one except my Beta, Waylon Brown, my council, and a few higher-ranking pack members even knew I was bringing Kiera and Kit home. The honorable thing would have been to tell her parents, but they'd moved four years ago. I didn't want any interference for what was about to come next.

Crystal Creek was beautiful—even I wasn't jaded enough to deny that. The rising sun shone on the sea, glinting and glittering as if it were trying to show off for the small town it bordered. The scent of saltwater was in the air, along with the smells of people and breakfast food from nearby diners. It was still early enough that there weren't that many cars on the road, but we were on the way to my house and out of the main part of town in minutes.

"Home sweet home," I said dryly.

Kiera didn't look at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on," I said as I pulled the car into my garage, "You know it feels good to be back in pack territory."

"Like hell it does," Kiera strained to look out the window, absentmindedly rubbing at her cuffed wrist. "Where are we going anyway?"

"My place." I grinned at her. "Where else would we be going? I don't exactly have time to wine and dine you, mate."

"I'm not your mate!" She snarled, turning toward me, but her gaze shifted from my eyes to my mouth, and a pink blush crept into her cheeks. She wasn't lying when she said it, but her body certainly had other ideas. I could smell her interest in the small car, and it made me grin despite myself.

"Just relax, firecracker. I've got a little 'welcome home' event for you at my house."

She was clearly suspicious, but didn't press, because Kit was waking up in the back once more. Kiera gave him a bottle of water and a granola bar, choosing the same for herself and absentmindedly chewing on it as we turned onto my street. Her suspicion grew when she spotted the group of cars outside of my family home, her head jerking over to me.

"Why are so many people here?"

I didn't answer. There was no going back now, and Kiera was just going to have to swallow down the bitter pill of her punishment—being locked to me for life, as my mate, whether she wanted to or not.

The family home was on the edge of town near the pine forest line, huge and old, built by my great-grandfather when he first settled his small pack in Crystal Creek as the first Saltfang Alpha. It wasn't a perfect home by any stretch of the imagination. It was way too big for just me; it needed repairs and upkeep constantly, the furniture was older than the town itself, and there were rooms that I didn't use at all. It was still home. The place where I grew up and where I hoped Kit would grow up, too.

I parked and looked at Kiera, but her attention was on the house. I didn't have to look at it from her perspective; it was rustically beautiful and probably looked strange and empty, especially at this time of morning. It looked like a huge, lonely cabin that had been untouched for years.

Without a word, I reached over and undid her cuffs with the key I had kept in my pocket, watching as she massaged her sore wrist while glaring at me. Part of me wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her inside the house, but I knew that there was a much simpler way to get her to go where I wanted.

"Kit," I turned to look at the boy, "You want to take a tour and pick out your new room?"

The kid was practically vibrating with excitement. He didn't seem worried that the man driving the car was his long-lost father and that his mother had been forced to return here. In fact, Kit seemed to like me a great deal already.

The kid nodded, and I hopped out of the car, opening his door and taking his hand to lead him inside. When I looked over my shoulder at Kiera, I was sure her eyes could shoot daggers, but just like I suspected, she was never going to let me take Kit out of her sight. In seconds, she was out of the car and following behind us.

The front door was unlocked, and there was an air of seriousness in the house as soon as we stepped inside. I led the two of them through the first floor, not stopping even when Kit tried to pull at my arm to look at something, and didn't pause until we were exiting out of the back of the house into the yard.

There, gathered on the wooden porch my father had built, was my entire council, waiting in a semicircle in complete silence. Waylon, my Beta, was in the center. The rest of the pack's dominant wolves were on either side of him, and on any other occasion, that much dominance in one place would undoubtedly start a fight.

Not with me there, though. The pack's Alpha is what held it together, and they all bowed their heads to me in respect. Behind me, Kiera sucked in a breath, and I knew she was about to flee. I dropped Kit's hand and grabbed Kiera's, pulling her forward as I approached my pack.

"Kiera Langley," Waylon rumbled, thick arms crossed over his chest. "Welcome home, and welcome to your mating ceremony."

"Ceremony?" Kiera looked like she'd been slapped. "No way in hell!" She tried to jerk free from my hand, but I kept hold of her, leaning close so when I spoke, she was the only one that could hear me.

"You're worrying the boy," I growled, "Look at him."

Her gaze fell on Kit, who was shifting from side to side, watching his mother with his eyes wide and fearful. He was starting to sense that something was wrong and that Kiera was unhappy. The urge to protect and keep him calm came out of nowhere, but I wasn't about to let go of that instinct now.

"Smile, Kiera. This isn't going to end anytime soon. Once you're mated to me, you and the boy will be under the protection of the entire pack. Do you really want the son of an Alpha out here unprotected?"

Kiera froze, but slowly forced herself to smile at him and let her hand relax in mine. She even went so far as to squeeze my fingers back, a little pressure to tell me that she would go along with what I wanted, but when she looked up at me, there was something dark and angry in her gaze. She didn't have to tell me. I already knew. This was not how she thought her homecoming would go; I could tell she wasn't happy about it.

Not that I could blame her, but I didn't really give a shit what she thought. The

important thing was that she was my mate, my Omega, and I would be damned before I let her get away again.

Waylon spoke up, "Samson, are you ready for me to perform the ceremony?"

"Yes. Let's get on with it." I didn't like standing out here on the grass any longer than necessary. There was still the chance of one of the other nearby packs taking a run at Kiera or Kit while they were unbonded to me.

Kiera was breathing harder by the second, and while she didn't try to pull away again, I could feel that she was shaking through her hand in mine. I couldn't care less about her feelings in the matter right now. There was a child involved. Kit needed to be safe, and as much as she wanted to run away, I was sure that Kiera was smart enough to realize the benefits of this arrangement.

Waylon went back and forth, speaking about duty and honor, and all of that nonsense that the old generations liked to throw around, but the one part that made Kiera jump was when he told her, "You will now take your true place at your Alpha's side, as his Omega, his mate, and his wife. For life."

She had known what the ceremony entailed, but now, it was hitting home just how final all of this was.

Kiera glanced at me, then her gaze shifted down to Kit, who was looking up at us, trying to figure out what was going on. She must have been able to tell that I wasn't budging, because she swallowed hard and nodded her head. I looked up at my Beta, who seemed satisfied, "It's your time now, Alpha. You may seal the bond."

I took Kiera's beautiful, defiant face in my hands and felt pack magic swirl around us like a gentle storm. It lifted her hair, surrounding me with her scent as her lips parted. Centuries ago, an Alpha would seal his Omega to him with a mating bite, but the

practice had fallen out of favor long ago. Still, the urge to sink my teeth into her skin right above her scent gland had my mouth watering.

Instead, I controlled myself, tilting her head to the side and slanting my mouth over hers. It was supposed to be a quick kiss, uneventful and chaste, but as soon as our lips touched, that idea went out the window. The pack magic surged as I sealed my Omega to me, Kiera's hands grabbing my shoulders as she held on for dear life while I kissed her.

It was supposed to be quick, dammit. I told myself that I didn't feel that little spark that ran over my tongue when our lips first touched. The way she gasped as our mouths molded together didn't matter, nor did the way my hands ran up into her hair, and I angled her head to get even more of her. She let out a breathy sigh that made my blood pump hard when my tongue flicked out to lick her lower lip. None of it should have fucking mattered, but my God, it rocked me to my core.

I broke the kiss with a curse. Kiera looked at me like she was in a daze, but when her eyes focused on my face and her brain caught up, her cheeks turned pink, and she turned her back on me. I was right, and the bond had never faded at all. It had just been hidden under the surface of her skin all this time, waiting to rise.

It should have been a triumphant moment for me, feeling our bond coming to life, knowing that Kiera could never escape me again. Instead, I was furious—not because it was clear that she still wanted me after all this time...

No, I was furious with myself because I thought any traces of feelings I had for Kiera were long gone. Instead, my entire being had lit up at the contact of our lips, and I was standing there, in front of my entire council and my son, wondering how long it would take me to get her alone.

I'd never wanted anything more in my entire life than I wanted Kiera Langley, and

something told me that I wouldn't be able to have her anytime soon.

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After the forced mating ceremony, I'd been ready to crawl out of my skin.

The Alpha's kiss had felt like it burned my mouth, but in the most delicious way, like warm cinnamon. His touch was wonderfully addictive and made me forget to breathe. I'd told myself it was just the bond between us, that it was just instinct, but something dark and treacherous whispered to me that maybe it was more than just my biology.

After all, Samson hadn't been wrong. The night we'd spent together in my room had been one of the most beautiful, perfect things I'd ever experienced. There were parts of my memory that were blurred from the heat of the moment, but the one thing I would always remember clearly was the way his blue eyes had looked in the darkness of my bedroom that night. They had burned hot, but there had been a softness there as well, as if he had looked at me and seen me as someone he had known forever and never wanted to look away from again.

He was different now, of course. When Alpha Zeke had fallen unexpectedly ill, and Samson had to take his place sooner than planned, he had overcorrected with how harsh and borderline cruel he was with his pack. The dynamics in all packs were similar—the men ruled with one Alpha at the head of the pack, and the women were beneath them in the hierarchy unless they were married, in which case they'd rank the same as their husbands. Omegas like me could manifest at any time, and they could be mated to Alphas, but it was ultimately the Alpha's choice.

For his part, Kit didn't seem to mind much of anything. The boy was oblivious to how much of my freedom I was losing, or how dangerous pack dynamics could be, and I would do everything I could to protect him. Even if I was mated to a man that I both feared and felt an unwanted pull toward, the fact still remained that Kit and I would

always be a team.

There had been a small celebration after the mating ceremony, mostly just grilled meats and beer, but I had little stomach for it. Samson showed me my room, which was directly across from Kit's, and as soon as the Alpha and his council had started their little get-together, I'd fled there to be alone.

Kit had wanted to stay with his newly-found father, mesmerized by all the new things happening, and as much as I wanted to tell him no, I couldn't exactly force him to sit in his room all day. I could see the backyard from my window to keep an eye on him, and that was enough.

My sweet son brought me a burger as the sun set, and I forced it down while Kit showered for bed. He'd had a million things to say about his new room, but once he finally wound down and climbed under the covers, my son became more solemn.

I tucked the blankets around his small frame, smoothing his hair back from his face. His eyes, so much like his father's, were thoughtful and sleepy as they looked up at me. He was exhausted from the strange day, spending time with Samson and the other pack members, but it was clear to me that he still had a lot of questions about what was going on.

"Mama?" he murmured, voice slurred from sleepiness, "Are we gonna stay here forever?"

My heart clenched even as I forced a smile, "For now, sweetheart. We'll see how things go."

Kit yawned, face scrunching up before he nestled deeper into the pillows. The bed was bigger than the one at home, made of heavy wood that had been carved ages ago. The rest of the room reflected the rustic tone of Samson's home—lots of deer antler

decor, woodland art, and warm green colors.

"I like this house, but I liked our old house, too. Will we ever go back?"

The lump immediately appeared in my throat, and it was a struggle to swallow it. "Maybe one day," I lied, unsure if Samson would ever let us go. "For now, this is our home."

He hummed softly in response, already slipping into sleep. It was a blessing because I didn't think I could answer any more heartbreaking questions. It'd only been a day, and I missed my little cottage so much. I stayed beside him for some time, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest, reassuring myself that he was safe. As long as I drew breath, he'd always be safe.

Finally, I stood, steeling myself for spending my first night in Saltfang territory after so long. I crept towards the door, hoping to make it to my room in silence, leaving Kit's door cracked like he preferred. Taking one last look at my boy, I turned into the hallway—

And ran straight into a wall of muscle.

I gasped, hands shooting out to steady myself, finding nothing but warm, bare skin under my palms. Without even looking up, I knew it was Samson. Our bond thrummed, and my scent gland ached.

I jerked my hands back like I'd been burned, but there was nowhere to run. Slowly, I looked up to see his face. Samson's arms were crossed, his expression unreadable. The light overhead casts shadows across his sculpted torso, the ridges of his abs, and the sharp cut of his shoulders. He has always been strong, but time has hardened him, refined him into something even more intimidating. More intensely attractive.

Before I could stop myself, I inhaled deeply, savoring his scent of black pepper and cedar as it filled my lungs. Inside of me, two things stirred—my wolf, restless and yearning, and my witch magic, angry and volatile. The dichotomy was staggering, and I pressed a hand to my chest to try and stop the chaos. It was, of course, a futile gesture.

"You're a good liar," Samson mused, looking down at me. Had he always been so stupidly tall?

Then, his words hit me. "Liar? Excuse me?"

He nodded towards Kit's room. "Making all of this sound normal. Making him feel safe when we both know you'd rather be anywhere in the world but here."

I bristled, crossing my arms and mimicking his gesture. "You're not wrong about that. But I'm only lying because you're forcing me to. Everything I do is for Kit."

"Everything, huh? Does that include running, hiding, and keeping him from his father?"

His words stung, but again, he wasn't wrong, "I did what I had to."

"Did you? Or were you just upset that I wouldn't accept you as a mate back then?"

"You're a bully, Samson. You always have been." I knew I should be treading lightly, that the Alpha of an entire wolf pack wasn't the best person to have on your shitlist, but I couldn't help it.

My emotions had been bottled up for far too long, and the urge to tell Samson off for the things that he had done to me was too strong. The bond that was pulling us together didn't make any of this easier, because I was angry at myself for still being

attracted to him after all these years.

His lips pressed into a hard line, and he looked at me from beneath heavy lashes. "Is that so?" he asked, voice deceptively quiet.

I nodded. "It's no wonder that I never shifted. Your bullying and the bullying of your pack drove my wolf into submission. The only thing that ever kept me strong was my son and the hope of a future somewhere outside this God-forsaken pack."

He leaned down, bringing our faces even closer together, reminding me at the worst possible time of how good it had felt to kiss him earlier. "If that's the case, why don't you run again, Kiera? It's what you're good at."

I scoffed, trying to step back but only finding the wall behind me. "I'm not stupid, Samson, I know you have your wolves watching every exit."

His smirk was slow, predatory, and his hands came up on either side of my head against the wall, fingers splayed out, trapping me. "Good. Although I wouldn't hate the idea of hunting you through the forest, mate . Maybe we'd get to see once and for all if there's a wolf in there or not."

I swallowed hard, heat blooming low in my stomach, even as anger filled me, "That's never happening. And I'm not your mate, not by my choice."

"The pack ceremony says you are. What we both felt says that you are. Mate, wife, whatever you want me to call you...you belong to me."

My hands curled at my sides, magic prickling and whirling beneath my skin, eager to lash out. But as soon as I reached for it, the power slipped through my fingers like sand. I couldn't hold on to it no matter how hard I tried.

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut—my magic, my only real defense against Samson, was useless around him because of him. Somehow, it knew that he was my mate and refused to answer me when I wanted to strike out against him.

I was helpless, pinned there while his scent curled around me, the closeness of his body igniting something deep in my core. I felt a surge of warmth as he moved closer, eyes on my face, drinking in every flicker of emotion like I was his prey.

My magic crackled once inside my chest, like a firework going off before fizzling out.

His grin was wicked, and I was fascinated as his tongue darted out to wet his lower lip.

I'd been cornered, trapped by his sheer size and proximity, and all I could do was breathe. I couldn't stop looking at his face, those eyes, and the lips that had pressed against mine. Samson was like the moon, and I was caught in his gravity. Part of me would do anything to get closer to him.

But that didn't mean that I wanted to.

I swallowed hard and pushed down the bond. It was all biology. That was all. He made a noise in the back of his throat, and I was sure he would devour me.

"Say the word, and I'll back off."

"The word," I hissed.

He smirked, but for a brief second, I thought I saw disappointment on his face, too. His scent was making me crawl out of my skin, an unwelcome throb coming to life between my legs. Finally, just as I was sure my will wouldn't hold much longer,

Samson stepped back. I was grateful to have the space to breathe and to push the bond down again.

There were a million things I wanted to say, but with Samson so close, I knew that I needed to be alone. He only watched me as I bolted across the hall to my room, slamming the door behind me before sliding down it till I was on the floor with my head in my hands.

How in the world was I supposed to get out of this situation? Even more important, how the hell was I supposed to get out of this situation without ending up in my worst enemy's bed?

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It had been three days since I brought Kiera and Kit home, and it was going as well as could be expected with a new wife who longed to rip out my throat.

After the initial celebration, which I'd done my best to make welcoming for my mate and son, everyone was going about their usual routine. My pack members were, in general, accepting of Kiera. Of course, I expected nothing less as their leader, but I wasn't blind to how Kiera had been treated before she left town.

Her parents were average shifters, neither of them very dominant, but Kiera showed absolutely no shifting ability during her entire time with the Saltfangs. There had been talk that the Langley's only daughter had been born human, and it had been a source of ridicule towards her.

For my own part, I didn't go out of my way to treat her poorly, but I also wasn't interested in wasting my time at all with a weak, no-name pack member. Was I cold to her? Sure. But it was the same with everyone who didn't benefit me either personally or as a pack leader.

It was a shock when she presented as an Omega and went into heat, and even more of a shock when I found myself unable to stay away from her. Even now, when she isn't in heat, her scent is driving me up and down the walls of my own home. My mate smelled like sweet lemon candy, and my mouth literally watered for her.

As soon as I woke up, I searched for any excuse to get some fresh air, which was how I'd ended up outside on a warm spring morning washing my Jeep.

The sun was warm on my bare shoulders, and for the moment, everything felt calm.

The pack was safe, and my Omega and son were under my roof. For the first time since I discovered that Kiera had fled with my heir, I felt a measure of peace.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the change in Kiera, and her newfound stubbornness pissed me off at times, but it was also good to see her not cowering or afraid.

And then there was Kit. The boy was interested in everything I did, and took all sorts of chances to escape from Kiera to act as my shadow no matter what I was doing. He asked a ton of questions about being a shifter, the pack, Crystal Creek, and anything else that came to his mind. He was so innocent and curious that it shook something loose inside of me. I should still be furious that Kiera kept him from me—hell, a large part of me still was—but the primal, possessive, Alpha part was simply glad I had them both now. Right where they belonged.

"Still brooding, boss?"

I didn't flinch when Nayeli's voice rang out behind me, but it was a close thing. My cousin was impossible to miss on that bright morning—short and softly built, dressed in a neon blue hoodie sporting some anime character on the front, with her blond curls piled in a messy bun on top of her head, Nayeli was the most unwerewolf-looking wolf I'd ever met. She came bearing gifts to make up for scaring the shit out of me—a stack of papers and a drink carrier with two cups of coffee.

Taking the coffee first, I took a long swig before speaking, "You're supposed to call before coming over."

"And you're supposed to answer when I do," she countered, shoving the stack of papers into my hands, not even waiting for me to dry them off. "Pack finances, border patrols, and an update on those rogue shifter sightings. Besides forgetting your phone, you're doing a decent job, big guy."

"I don't pay you to sass me, Naye."

"Yeah, yeah," she waved a hand at me dismissively and picked up a car wash wand, getting to work on my jeep. I shook my head but couldn't stop a small grin from forming.

Nayeli might have been weird and mouthy, but she was one hell of an assistant, and there was nobody I trusted more with my money. When my great-grandfather had founded the pack in Crystal Creek, he'd bought a ton of land. The houses that he built on those pieces of land brought in enough rent money to keep my family comfortable for generations. It was still pouring in at a steady pace, but I was the only member of my family left, and I definitely needed help organizing it all. Combined with the pack politics, an assistant like Nayeli was a lifesaver.

"So," she started, scrubbing vigorously at a stubborn spot on my Jeep's hood. "What's the plan for the Ome——Kiera? How do we know we can trust her?"

"She was a pack member for two decades before she ran," I reminded her, "She has no reason to betray us."

"I suppose not," Nayeli pushed up her sleeves and kept washing. "Good to see that she's putting roots down in town. I guess that means she knows you aren't going to let her leave anything soon."

I froze. "What do you mean by putting down roots?"

Nayeli shrugged. "I stopped into that new coffee shop downtown, and she was working. Kit was tucked into a corner booth, reading. Don't worry. Both of them looked pretty content."

She continued to ramble on, but I stopped listening. Instead, I could only hear a low

buzz in my ears. Kiera had a job. My mate was out in town working at some little café I had never seen in my whole life. It was all fine and well that she was taking care of our son and helping around the house, but the idea that she would think about going into town and finding some job like I would allow her to have a life outside the pack, let alone one without me, filled me with fury.

How dare she? I wasn't about to be humiliated by my own mate and be the laughingstock of my pack because I couldn't keep her in line. That kind of disobedience would not be tolerated. She had already gotten away from me once, and that wouldn't happen again.

Nayeli finally shut up as she noticed the expression on my face. "Uhhh, what did I say?"

"Stay here. Don't move."

Did Kiera really think I wouldn't care about her being away from home with our son? What if there had been threats against them in town? Did she care about anything beyond her own selfish desires?

No, clearly not. That would explain why she felt that she could work in a fucking cafe without talking to me about it first. I grabbed my t-shirt from where I'd thrown it over a lawn chair, climbing into the Jeep without even putting the bucket and brushes away.

Nayeli scrambled to get in the other side, despite me telling her to stay put. She had never been good at taking orders, which was both frustrating and convenient.

"It's really no big deal," Nayeli spoke quickly, sounding anxious. "It's probably good for her to have a part-time job and for both of them to get out of the house, you know, and—"

"Enough," I growled, but my cousin wasn't intimidated. Instead, it was clear she was more worried that she'd potentially started something between me and my mate. "She shouldn't have just left without asking."

Nayeli wrinkled her nose. "You know how I feel about all that macho man pack bullshit."

"And you also know that's just how packs work, so knock it off."

"You don't treat me like an object, though. Why her?"

"Because you're family. She's....she's...." I dragged a hand down my face, trying to come up with the right explanation. "Kiera is a flight risk. A liability. And she's been away from pack life too long to understand her place in this world."

"Wow, that sounds really convincing and totally not like an asshole at all," she said, sarcasm dripping from her words.

"She needs a firm hand. That's all."

Nayeli shrugged one shoulder. "Whatever you say. I don't see why it matters to you either way. The point is, Kiera is working and seems pretty content at the coffee shop. Kit was playing and reading, so no harm done, and now you're driving out to the shop to... Alpha out on everyone. Just turn around and go home, Sam, please."

"No. Hell no."

She huffed. "Then what exactly is the point?"

I gritted my teeth. "Kiera cannot just run off with our son and not talk to me about anything that involves my heir. If she had asked me, it would be different, but..."

"Why don't you tell her that and just not come down to the cafe and act like a maniac?"

I didn't answer her. She wouldn't understand, and I didn't have to defend myself or my decisions as an Alpha to anyone, even my cousin. I drove a bit faster, and before long, we pulled up to a little parking lot across the street from a cafe I had never noticed before. The entire storefront was glass, and from inside the Jeep, I could see my Omega working, her dark hair reflecting the overhead lights like a raven's wing.

Unhurried after speeding to get there, I stepped out of the Jeep and crossed the street to get a closer look without entering the building, Nayeli hot on my heels.

My Omega was busy helping a few customers, but there were other employees, too. The other female, a pack member, seemed to be in charge, directing Kiera and a waitress on the other end of the counter. Nayeli leaned on my arm, her gaze sweeping the scene and the shop beyond it. I glanced over towards the back of the shop and saw my son reading in the booth Nayeli had mentioned, a small stack of books and a cardboard package of crayons next to him.

It looked like any other cafe in a small town. It smelled of coffee and the food in the display case, the soft sound of indie rock coming from speakers that hung overhead. It was innocent, quiet, and friendly, and the longer I stared through the windows at Kiera working behind the counter, the less angry I became.

Kiera was integrating herself into the town, which was a good sign that she understood what she meant to me and the pack. Maybe Nayeli had been right, and I was overreacting, seeing some ulterior motive where there wasn't one.

Kiera looked so beautiful standing there. It had only been a few days, and she was already looking less chronically angry. Her dark hair looked thick and healthy, and her eyes were bright, even from a distance. She was in the flow, serving drinks to the

customers with ease, her lips curled into a friendly smile.

With a jolt, I realized how badly I wanted her. I wanted to bury my face in her neck and drink in her scent. I wanted to mark her so no other wolf would ever dream of touching what belonged to me. The memory of the single night we shared, how delicious she'd smelled and tasted, and the soft sounds she made came back to me in a flash. I had to force the images away before they could really take hold.

Nayeli was busy typing on her phone, but after a few minutes, she looked up at me. "I don't know if this will help with your Alpha-related stupidity, but from my quick bit of research, it looks like this place is legit and is in good standing with the community. It's safe, and people like it."

I gave her a long look, and she sighed, looking annoyed. "It doesn't matter how many times you try to scare me into being silent. I'll always be me, and I'll always do whatever the hell I want, even if you disapprove."

I huffed. "I'd never hurt you."

She gave a short bark of laughter. "Of course you wouldn't. You're not a psychopath or an idiot, Sam. But that doesn't mean I don't think your decisions suck sometimes. Let's go home before you get busted stalking your Omega."

"I don't give a damn if they see me," I growled, but caught myself. It was embarrassing enough, having Nayeli see how easily I could lose my cool when it came to Kiera. "All that matters is that she's still in pack territory with my son. Come on, I've got shit to do."

We turned away from the window, and Nayeli and I walked back to my car, both of us silent. When I'd buckled in and was turning out of the parking lot, I caught a glimpse of Kit waving at me, his little hand pressed up against the window of the

shop. I froze for a moment before raising my hand in a brief wave.

Well, if I had to be caught, I'd rather it had been Kit than Kiera. At least he was happy to see me.

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The night air smelled of salt, and the scent of dozens of wolves all in the same place, and it made my nose itch. I had zero reason to want to be at the red moon ceremony tonight, but Samson wasn't taking no for an answer regarding my attendance. Hoping to go unnoticed, I pulled my cardigan tighter around me and hung towards the back of the crowd.

Everyone was centered around the bonfire, mingling and eating as they prepared for their moonlight run.

This was always one of the biggest pack traditions, but it wasn't one I cared much for. When the moon turned red, the shift would be stronger, but since I was an Omega and weak in my shift, there wasn't any bonus for me. All the moon did was emphasize the fact that I was different from everyone else and that my place in the pack was right down at the very bottom.

Bonfire notwithstanding, I'd almost been convinced that maybe, just maybe, the arrangement I'd been forced into would be bearable. Samson seemed both drawn to me and repelled all at the same time, but he always made time to have breakfast with Kit and me before leaving for pack business. He hadn't said a single word to me about the job that I'd picked up, and I liked it better that way. I enjoyed work, even if it was mundane. It helped me feel like I had a purpose.

Of course, Kit adored having his father around. The two of them almost always played outside before Samson left for the day and seemed to have found their rhythm together. I enjoyed watching them, but at the same time, it made me feel hollow. I still didn't want Kit in the pack, but Samson treated him kindly at least.

On the other hand, I saw a million reasons every day to make me want to leave again. The misogynistic, heavy-handed way the men of the pack treated the women was just as bad as ever. And Samson might not have been outright cruel to me, but he hadn't shown any warmth since our mating. It was almost worse. It made me wish that things could have been different. It made me think of that night I'd spent in his arms all the more often.

If Samson were different, I could imagine enjoying living with him. But he was the way he was, and that wouldn't change. And that made it impossible to forget why I'd run from the pack in the first place.

Samson and I weren't going to fall in love or get along. The only thing that would make him happy would be me bearing his children to increase his status within the pack as a whole. I refused to give him that power over me. I would never let myself be used. I'd already given him that once before, and while I'd gotten my wonderful Kit out of the deal, Samson hadn't proven to be a good partner in any way, shape, or form.

It was easier not to think of Samson that way, no matter how much my body seemed to think I was denying it the prize of the delicious Alpha.

The pack continued to gather as the red moon rose above the trees, keeping together with the friends and family groups, which meant I was ignored, as usual. Tonight, that was just fine for me. The less attention I drew, the quicker I could leave. I hated ceremonies like this, and I also hated doing nothing. If I were back at Samson's home, at least there would be tasks to keep me occupied.

It was beautiful, if nothing else. All the dark silhouettes of the pack roamed around the fire while the towering pines swayed in the cool night air. The bonfire had reached gigantic proportions, crackling while sparks shot up into the air like tiny stars. Meat was being cooked over the flames, smelling of rendered fat and smoke,

but I ignored my growling stomach. There was no way in hell I was wading into the group to get a bite to eat.

The energy in the air was changing, becoming charged with a feeling as primal and ancient as the world itself. Change was near.

I didn't belong here. I never did.

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, the warmth of the high-rising fire unable to penetrate the cold that was building in my stomach. The memories of what these ceremonies used to be like for me fought their way to the surface of my thoughts. Taunts from my peers, looks of pity from the older wolves, and disdain from the highest members of the pack. I was sure that everyone was only being more cautious with me because of the claim that Samson had put on me, but I still imagined I could feel their eyes on me as they thought. What is she even doing here?

Actually....yeah, what the hell was I doing here? I hadn't seen Samson all night, and not a single other person had made an effort to talk to me. I didn't have to stand around and feel like shit. I could leave if I wanted.

I turned on my heel to leave. I didn't need to stand there and let the past dig its claws into me. I couldn't shift like the rest of them, even if my wolf felt closer than ever being back around the pack, and because of that, I couldn't run wild under the blood moon with the rest of the Saltfangs. What was the point of pretending?

I took one step, and then another, slipping away from the warm glow of the fire and into the darkness. I didn't have far to go before the darkness would swallow me entirely, and I'd be free, just a few more feet...

Two heavy hands landed on my shoulders, pulling me backward against a hard, muscled frame. My eyes flew wide. I didn't have to wonder who it was. I would know

his touch anywhere, especially with the way my entire body went hot in an instant.

Samson's lips grazed my ear. "Leaving without your mate?" he rumbled in that voice that seemed to be all growl and all heat.

My core tightened with a desire that I wanted nothing to do with. The mating bond between us, even dormant, wanted him. "You aren't my mate."

Samson's hands slid from my shoulders to my waist, and it was all I could do to keep breathing. I spun in his grasp, not quite shaking off his hands, but at least I could see him. No more surprises.

"We both know that's not true," Samson was in good humor tonight, the red moon bringing out something new in him, "And I need my mate here for the ceremony. Your place is at my side."

I raised my chin, my voice dripping with sarcasm, "For the sake of appearances. Of course, you'd want to parade me around your little pack so everyone knows I belong to you."

"You have a smart mouth," he snapped, his grin tight. "I didn't expect it out of you, Omega. Don't worry. I like a little fight in my women."

What the hell had gotten into him? It had to be the red moon, the pack magic almost glowing with how powerful it was tonight. "Whatever. Can I go now? You can't force me to enjoy this."

His grip on my waist tightened, fingers flexing before they fell away. Samson crossed his arms and looked down at me. "No, but I can make you stay."

"I managed to forget a lot about you over the years, Samson Jones," I took my

chance, stepping back a foot, "But I never forgot how bossy you were. You still think ordering people around is going to make them listen all the time?"

His lips twitched. "It worked on you."

"Only because you kidnapped me!" The audacity of this Alpha was going to drive me up the wall.

"I like to call it a strategic acquisition."

"Of course you do," I groaned, rubbing the heels of my hands over my eyes, "Fucking Alphas."

"Believe it or not, my making you stay isn't about my ego. It's about tradition."

I stared up at Samson's stupid, handsome face and scowled. I was starting to wonder if there was anything he looked bad at doing, including smirking. He was still acting weird, his tone more playful and the tension between us lighter.

I made an exasperated noise in the back of my throat, "A tradition where everyone but me gets to go feral under a creepy red moon and eat a bunch of forest creatures, right?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders, and the action rippled under his tight t-shirt, making my mouth go dry. "If you want to make the attempt to shift, I won't stop you."

"Yeah, that's never gonna happen. My wolf is basically non-existent. Besides, if I tried that now, I'd end up on my ass. My powers are barely functional." I sighed and glanced up at the sky.

The full moon was blood red, tinting the clouds around it and bathing the sky in its warm, rusty light. It hadn't hit its peak in the sky, but there wasn't much time left. As much as I wanted to deny it, the odd light favored Samson. It made him look so strong and so intimidating. The contrast of his powerful frame against the delicate trees behind him made the space feel smaller, as if it was only big enough for him, and like everything else was just here for his amusement.

Samson cocked his head, "When was the last time you even tried?"

"Years," I admitted. "Sometimes I feel the shifter part of me pacing inside, but it's never powerful or demanding enough to really bother me. I figured that I could ignore it until..."

I trailed off, but Samson seemed to be able to read my mind. "Until Kit started showing signs of the shift. It's good that I brought you home. It's much safer for him to go through that here instead of being separated from his pack with a shifter that can't shift."

I didn't argue or tell him I still had no plans to stay in Crystal Creek. With each passing day, it seemed like I was more and more stuck. Hell, we planned for Kit to start normal school with the rest of the pack kids, which he'd wanted to do forever. I didn't want to be here, but little by little, this was becoming Kit's home. "Yeah, I guess..."

"You know I'm right." I didn't see him move, but suddenly Samson was all I could see, all I could feel. All I would have to do was raise my hand, and I'd be touching him. "You and Kit belong here, with the pack, with me."

"Are we talking about my favorite new little cousin?" A feminine voice came from behind Samson, and when he turned to look, I could see Nayeli heading towards us. She looked more put together than usual in a pair of dark jeans and a crop top, but she

still wore the same smile she had every time I'd seen her. She was one of the few people that I had a good time talking to since coming home to Crystal Creek, but we hadn't spoken for more than a few minutes. I tried to keep it at the forefront of my mind that she was in Samson's corner, but she was so friendly, and I was so starved for friendship that it was hard.

"We are," Samson confirmed, stepping to the side and allowing me a view of his cousin. Having some space from him made me feel like I could breathe again. "But I don't remember inviting you to the conversation."

"I have an open invitation," Nayeli quipped, coming to stand beside us. To my surprise, she linked her arm with mine. "Plus, it seemed like you were harassing my new friend Kiera here. I thought she might want some company."

My fondness for Nayeli grew tenfold in an instant. I had never thought that she and I would ever be friends. The most I'd expected was an ally, but this felt so much more real.

Samson didn't look angry or upset about our closeness, but the expression on his face did darken, "I'm not harassing her. She's my mate."

Nayeli's perfectly manicured brows arched up, "No? You sure?" When Samson didn't answer, only scowled, she started to pull me away. "Come on, Kiera. Let's go get some snacks before everyone turns into a wild beast."

I almost laughed when Samson let us go, not bothering to follow as Nayeli led me towards the fire. "I can't believe that worked."

"I don't buy into the men-rule-all bullshit the rest of the pack seems to love, and Sam knows better than to try and force it on me. Besides, I wanted to ask how you and Kit are doing without listening ears."

"Oh," I bit my lip and shrugged. "It's not horrible? Samson has been busy, which I like, so Kit and I get to just...be. He's kind of an asshole, but something tells me that's normal for him."

"That sounds about right, yeah. I wouldn't expect Sam to change his whole personality for you. At least he's giving you some space to adjust."

That was about as much as I was willing to hope for from the Alpha.

We joined the rest of the crowd that had formed near the fire. They all stood in small groups; some were dancing, but most were chatting with drinks in their hands. Nayeli asked about Kit, wanting to know if he was excited about his first day at school. Kit was with my coworker and Nayeli's friend, Gwen, a part-time waitress at the cafe that I got along with well. Knowing that Nayeli trusted her helped convince me to leave my boy behind, even if I didn't want to be at the cookout anyway.

Samson's cousin introduced me to a few members of the pack, and while they respected her for being Samson's cousin, it was clear a number of them found the quirky, non-submissive she-wolf strange. To Nayeli's credit, she didn't seem to mind anyone's opinion, and I found myself having a good time with her despite myself. She was a nice change from my normal social interactions in the pack, and being around her made it way easier to snag a few chicken kabobs, which were delicious.

As the evening grew darker and the moon higher, people began to drift away. Some of the pack left, going somewhere private to shift and celebrate in their own way, while others moved toward the edge of the trees. Nayeli had left to get us drinks a few moments ago, but she was taking longer than usual to return, and I was getting antsy. Samson was nowhere in sight; if I wanted to disappear, it would be the best time to do so.

Before I could make a move, the moon overhead hit its peak, and the shift began.

A pulse of something hit me, almost making me fall over from the impact of it. I gasped, bracing myself on the back of one of the empty chairs nearby to steady myself as a ripple of energy went through the pack. I didn't need to have a connection to the pack like they did to feel the change. All I needed to do was open my eyes, and I would see it for myself.

One by one, the Saltfang pack began to shift into their wolf forms. Some changed immediately while others waited, enjoying the wild moment in the human form as long as they could. There was an ache in my stomach, my weak, rarely-heard-from wolf whining and pacing as if I could possibly join in with the rest of them. It was a lie. I'd never managed a full shift in my entire life, and I knew deep down that tonight would be no different.

As the energy of the night became more chaotic, more barbaric, I wanted to slip away and go home. I'd made my appearance, and I should be free to go now, since I couldn't participate anyway. Slowly, I edged towards the back of the gathering, hoping to make my escape without being noticed. I was sure Samson was too busy enjoying himself with the pack or maybe even preparing himself for a night of hunting in the woods to bother with me. No one would care that I left.

Or so I thought.

Before I could escape, someone grabbed my hand and spun me around. My body went cold, like ice had been poured into my bloodstream. The touch was not the warm, familiar sensation of Samson's hand. Instead, the grasp was tight and cruel.

I looked up, and was thrown back in time when I saw who it was. Pete, Curt, and Curt's long-time girlfriend, Francine. Three of the shifters that had made my life a living hell when I was part of the pack so many years ago. They'd always enjoyed harassing me, pushing me around, and mocking me when I couldn't even change forms like them.

"Where are you going in such a rush, human?" Curt drawled. He still had a shaved head and was even more muscle-bound than I remembered. His girlfriend stood behind him with her hands on her hips. Her eyes glittered with amusement, and it wasn't because of anything funny. She was getting a sick pleasure out of watching me suffer, the way she always had.

I forced my expression to stay even and blank, "None of your business. Just let me leave."

Pete laughed, a cold, barking sound that grated on my ears. He had been Curt's partner in crime during their youth, and he'd been even crueler than the rest of the pack when I was the center of their torment. "No one's letting you do anything." His smile was like a shark. "You think you're special because you gave the Alpha a pup? No way. You're still a pathetic human who is doing nothing but taking up space. It's no wonder your parents stopped participating in the pack after they had you—they were embarrassed."

A laugh slipped from my lips. I wasn't surprised at their words. I'd known that this part of the Saltfang pack had been waiting for an opportunity to strike back at me, and while they wouldn't try anything while Samson was around, that didn't mean they would tolerate my presence any longer. They hated the idea of a weak, non-shifting shifter among their numbers. If the Alpha wasn't watching, then there was nothing stopping them from being themselves.

But I also wasn't the cowardly Kiera they had known before.

"I don't know why you're bothering. You have better things to do, I'm sure. Shoplifting, huffing paint in a cornfield, maybe?"

Pete and Curt shared a glance, then they laughed. It wasn't a friendly sound. They were cruel, mocking laughs that made the back of my neck prickle with heat. The

sound made a tremor of unease slip through me, and for a moment, I felt like that stupid, naive girl I'd once been. But then I remembered what I had survived, and it burned away the fear. I had every reason to be scared of Samson, but them? Not a chance in hell.

Pete tried to pull me forward by the wrist again, but I jerked my hand away. Overtaking any feeling from the shifter part of me, my witch magic was rising like a storm, crackling like lightning, and electrifying every atom of my being. I held it back, knowing that if I made a scene, Samson would know my secret, that I was more than just a weak shifter, but I wanted to strike my old bullies down so badly it almost hurt.

"Listen, I don't care if you believe me or not, but Samson is protective of me. You're saving yourself a lot of grief if you just go."

Francine snorted. "Yeah, right. Everyone knows he only brought you here because he wanted his kid back. You're just extra baggage."

"Yeah, sure," I didn't even know what I was saying at this point. My body was starting to ache, the shift in magic and energy around the pack starting to drive me insane. My skin felt like it was crawling, like ants were trying to crawl inside of it and nest there. I wanted to get as far away from these jerks as I could, and soon. I'd had a good day so far. I'd even enjoyed myself at the bonfire a little, but it was getting hard to concentrate on anything but my growing agitation. "Look, I've gotta go. You've all given me enough of a headache tonight. You really think the Alpha of this pack is going to appreciate you bothering me?"

I took a step forward, hoping I could get around them without an issue. Curt, however, shoved his large frame in my face and shook his head. "Nope. We want you to go back to wherever the fuck you came from, and we're not gonna stop until we get our way."

I could feel Pete at my back and Francine at my side, and it was making it hard to breathe. Panic was filtering in, and my leash on my magic started slipping. All around me, I could hear the grunts and howls of the rest of the pack finishing their shifts, and it was making me unsettled. Impulsive. "Please just let me go."

Curt smirked, the expression cold. "Make me."

I lost my hold. I snapped. The world was turning red, and my hands were on fire, heat scorching me from the inside out as I shoved as hard as I could, the energy inside me begging to be released. Curt didn't get the chance to do anything. He flew back like he weighed nothing, slamming into Pete and Francine, the three of them hitting the ground so hard they nearly bounced. The whole crowd around me had frozen, and the pack was silent. Dozens of pairs of eyes, both wolf and human, stared back at me, my fingers sparking with scarlet fire.

And then the crowd parted, and a tall figure pushed through, his blue eyes fixed directly on me.

Oh, shit. Samson had found me.

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The shift was pulling at me, and I was more than ready to give in to it. There were few pleasures equal to running through the forest with the pack at my pack, wild and alive. Nothing could have stopped me or shaken me from the oncoming frenzy...

Except for my Omega.

A surge of magic cracked through the air like lightning, and every bit of my focus shifted toward it. It felt strange, but at the same time, familiar. Terrifying, but something told me there was no reason to fear it. This magic could never hurt me. It felt like the zing of fear rushing up my spine, or a rush of adrenaline, but most of all, it felt like my mate.

My Kiera.

I didn't think. I just moved. My wolf was howling, the red moon fueling my rage as I tracked Kiera's power through the chaotic, shifting pack. So many had already given in to instinct, running into the forest, but I was an Alpha. Even against the moon itself, I was in control.

When I spotted her, she was nearly glowing, her hands like two small stars, burning with power. On the ground in front of her were three of my shifters, still in human form, looking up at Kiera like they'd seen a ghost. Other pack members have stopped to look, but they may as well have been invisible to me. All I could see, all I could comprehend, was my Omega with magic sparking at her fingertips.

Kiera Langley had magic. Holy shit.

My pulse thundered in my ears as I ran to her. How? How was this possible? I knew her, I'd known her forever, and she'd never had this kind of power. If there had been a magic user—a witch, if my nose was correct—among my pack, I should have been able to sense it a long time ago.

Yet there she stood, panting, her eyes wide. Kiera looked like she couldn't believe what she had just done, either. Pride and fury warred in me. She'd hidden something monumental from me, but at the same time, my mate was stronger than I'd ever dared to hope.

Before the three downed shifters could rise, I skidded to a stop between them and Kiera, a growl ripping through me loud enough that nearly everyone left at the bonfire stopped cold.

"She's mine," I snarled, "Touch her, and you answer to me ."

They shrank back, bowing their heads as they tried to figure out what to say to their Alpha. Kiera was right—I was an asshole, but it came with the territory. Kiera might have been bullied by some of the pack before, but if anyone thought the pack would continue to do so now, I'd have to set the record straight.

While Kiera's victims, who I recognized as Curt, Francine, and Pete, three lower-level pack members who always seemed to hold a grudge because of their inability to rise in the ranks, scrambled away, I grabbed Kiera's wrist in my hand hard enough that she had no choice but to look at me. The second I touched her, the magic snuffed out, like water thrown on a flame.

"You're coming home. Now."

She was still breathing hard, but she looked conflicted, "But the ceremony—"

"Fuck the ceremony. Let's go."

Kiera hesitated before nodding, and I could feel her racing pulse under my palm. When I looked at her face, I didn't see fear of the three people on the ground. Instead, I saw fear of herself, of what she'd done.

And when her eyes met mine, there was fear of me, too.

Without another word, I pulled her away from the bonfire, the overwhelming urge to shift clawing under my skin. I'd been so close, and I wanted to take my wolf form so fucking badly, but nothing was more important than getting Kiera out of there and finding out just what in the hell was going on.

I threw open the door of the Jeep, and Kiera climbed in, wrapping her arms around herself. As I drove, her eyes were distant, and the silence between us stretched to the limit. I didn't know how in the hell to approach what had just happened, and it didn't look like Kiera was desperate to bring it up either. My hands tightened on the steering wheel, annoyed at how I struggled to find the right thing to say around her. Kiera owed me one hell of an explanation, but I wasn't going to get one if I pissed her off too much.

Finally, I decided to keep it simple: "You have magic."

Kiera flinched. "I don't want to talk about it."

It was hard not to yell, and I had to unclench my jaw before I continued, "You never told me."

"I never wanted you to know. I never wanted anyone here to know."

Of course, she brought it back around to how much she hated being back in Crystal

Creek as part of my pack. I ignored it and settled on the second most important question I had for her. "What about Kit?"

Her head jerked up, "No," she told me quickly, "He doesn't have magic. That's not how it works. If he's anything besides human, then he's a shifter just like you."

I noticed she didn't refer to herself as a shifter, and it disappointed me. Kiera might have been a weak shifter, but it felt like she'd abandoned that part of herself altogether.

"Fine. Tell me about it. Explain how the hell it is you can do something no other shifter is capable of."

I was already pulling the car into the driveway, my blood pumping so fast I couldn't wait another minute for answers. Kiera's eyes were glued on the house, her face a blank mask.

"Kiera," I repeated, my tone harder this time. I didn't have patience for bullshit, and I wouldn't take anything less than the truth.

"Please just wait until we get inside," her voice was small. Inwardly, I cringed. Fuck. I wasn't trying to scare her. She was obviously shaken by what had happened, and I needed to back the fuck off and take care of her like any Alpha worth his salt would do. Not to interrogate her when she was still nearly shaking from the experience.

I climbed out of the Jeep and walked around to open her door. Kiera seemed surprised when I offered her my arm to lean on, but she accepted it. I could still smell her usual sweet scent, sugared lemon, but layered on top of it was the smell of ozone from her magic. It made my skin prickle.

What in the hell had she been thinking? A part of me wanted to tell her how foolish it

had been to try and hide that from me. What would have happened if someone else had found her like that, and she couldn't fight them off? For a smart woman, she could be so careless with her safety.

Once inside, I walked her directly to the kitchen table and had her sit, guiding her with my hand at the small of her back. She glared up at me when I didn't let her rush to her room but sat with a huff, folding her hands in her lap to hide how much they were trembling.

It was a struggle not to pelt her with a thousand questions, but I was trying like hell to figure out how to deal with my Omega without making her hate me more than she already did. I knew she needed time to process, even if I didn't want to give it to her, so instead of sitting down to interrogate her, I headed towards the kitchen.

Having her and Kit in the house had been the first time the place hadn't seemed so empty since my parents died. I wished my mother were here to guide me on how to deal with someone like Kiera, but she'd been gone a long time. When I thought about her and what she would do when things got tough, I remembered my mom making tea and drinking it while she worked through her problems. It settled her nerves, so maybe it would do the same for Kiera.

The tea tin was far back in the cabinet, and I had to push everything else aside to get it, but I grabbed the damn thing and put it on the counter. It smelled like home, like my dad's secret hidden cigarettes and the lingering scent of my mother's perfume. The tea itself smelled like camomile and vanilla, the kind that you made with hot milk and honey. I was more of a coffee kind of guy, but this was important. If there was anyone who needed the calm it would bring her, it was Kiera. I had no idea what to say or how to say it, so hopefully, my actions would work in my favor.

I got out a mug from the cabinet and set it on the counter before turning around to grab the kettle. I was about to fill it with water when Kiera spoke again, her voice

quiet but still filling the empty space. "Do you have cocoa instead?"

My hand froze on the faucet. When I turned to her, she wasn't even looking at me, but down at her folded hands instead. Vulnerable. Fragile. How could I possibly deny her anything? This woman had just unleashed powerful magic against my wolves to protect herself, and now she was asking me for something as simple as cocoa. Something inside me softened, and I nodded.

"Yeah," I said, much gentler than before, "I do."

"Thank you," Kiera mumbled. The last traces of the magic had finally vanished from her skin, leaving her pale and exhausted. I knew I should keep pressing and get her talking again about the power she had used to fight against my pack, but something inside of me had quieted.

This was Kiera, my mate and the mother of my child. I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to treat her better than the other pack members and wanted to earn her trust. The magic she'd displayed was still terrifying, and I wasn't sure how she'd ended up with that much power, but Kiera didn't look dangerous. She looked scared and overwhelmed, and my wolf didn't want me to keep pressing. I'd made a promise to my father that I'd be the best Alpha I could be for this pack, but part of that promise included my Omega, too. She was mine to care for.

I finished heating up the milk and poured the hot chocolate into a wide mug. Kiera's eyes didn't move from the table while I brought it to her, and I set the cup down gently in front of her, hoping she'd be able to feel that I didn't want to argue.

Her fingers wrapped around the mug tightly, no doubt warming them. I waited for the tension to drain from her shoulders, but it didn't. Her muscles locked so tightly that it was a shock she could even breathe.

"I'm not going to force any answers out of you tonight," I told her, "So relax."

She did, marginally. "You aren't going to tell me what a stupid mistake I made?"

"Would you like me to?" I raised an eyebrow. She'd just thrown three of my shifters to the ground without even blinking. Kiera might have been the pack's outcast, but I'd be stupid to not be aware of what she was capable of now. She was still weak as an Omega, but this power that had awoken inside her was anything but.

"Not particularly." She still sounded on edge, and her fingers tightened around her mug, but she wasn't shaking anymore.

I waited until she let out a long breath and finally took a drink before speaking again, "How long did those three assholes mess with you before you left the pack?"

She sighed and set her mug down. "Since I was a kid. They always called me human, weak, worthless...you know, all the classics." She traced her finger around the edge of the mug. "I thought they'd have grown out of it by now. Apparently not."

Anger rose in me even though I had no excuse to feel it. I hadn't exactly been kind to her back then either, but I hadn't known just how rough she had it. "If I'd been aware, Kiera..." I clenched and unclenched my fists, the red moon making it difficult for me to keep my temper in check. "I know I was a jerk back then, but I would have stopped it had I known."

She didn't look like she was convinced. "Even if I really was human?"

I didn't argue the point. I knew she wasn't human. Both her parents were shifters. She might have been a weak shifter, but she wasn't human. "You were part of my pack, human or not, and my job was to keep you safe. Even before you became my Omega...you still mattered."

For a long moment, Kiera just stared, steam from her cocoa curling up and bracketing her face. It was like she wasn't sure if she believed me or not, but her face softened. Just slightly, but it was better than nothing. Had anyone told her that she mattered before?

"I feel short. I fucked up." I admitted. "But I have no intention of letting anything like that happen ever again. I'm a better Alpha than I was back then. And I can be a better man, Kiera, even if you don't like the way I go about it."

She inhaled sharply, her throat bobbing as she swallowed. When her tongue came out to wet her lower lip, I couldn't take my eyes off it. Her mouth was slightly parted, as if she wanted to say something, but she wasn't sure what. Kiera needed space, she needed time, but before I could stop myself, I was leaning forward, a hand on her knee, determined to coax whatever unsaid words she had in her mouth out with a kiss. I was denied my shift beneath the red moon, but I could accept that if I could just kiss her—

Then, before I reached her, a small voice called out from down the hallway, "Mama?"

Kiera jerked back, almost yelping in surprise at what she was about to do. "Coming, my love," hurrying down the hallway without sparing me a second glance. I followed, annoyed but understanding her priorities, and stayed far enough behind her that she wouldn't feel crowded.

When we reached his room, Kit was sitting up in bed, his face creased from his pillow. His blanket tangled around his legs as he reached out blindly in the dark for the comfort of his mother. "I had a bad dream."

"I'm here, baby," Kiera murmured, sitting on the bed with him and holding him close, her voice low. She smoothed his hair down and repeated, "I'm right here."

Her voice was steady, with no trace of the fear or anxiety she must have felt from the confrontation back at the bonfire. There was no trembling in her hands as she rubbed Kit's back, and no hesitation when she pressed a kiss to his temple. She was calm, solid, and strong. Everything a mother should be.

And then it hit me. The woman who had been obviously scared, even a little skittish, back in the kitchen moments ago had disappeared. Whatever she'd been feeling—about me, her power, or the whole damn situation—it had all been pushed away for her son.

For Kit, Kiera was fearless.

I leaned against the doorframe, content to just watch as she tucked the blanket back around the boy, whispering soft reassurances until his breathing evened out and his eyes closed one more. With his mother beside him, Kit could quickly conquer the fear of his nightmare and relax back into the mattress, comforted and safe.

She stayed a moment longer, making sure that he was truly asleep, before she rose and stepped back towards me.

I pushed off the doorframe and motioned for her to follow me. When she didn't move, I frowned. "I'm not going to bite you," I said, trying to make a joke, but Kiera's face only darkened.

She shook her head, stepping past me and into the hall. I followed her back to the kitchen table and watched as she picked up her hot chocolate again, though she didn't drink any. Instead, she looked down into the cup as if she was trying to make a decision, and it took long minutes until she was able to look back up at me.

"I...don't want to lie to you about what happened. They were your wolves, and I used my power in your territory, so it's your right to know. But I didn't mean for it to

happen, okay? I just felt like I had no other choice."

I nodded, on high alert now that she was ready to talk, but not wanting to interrupt her out of worry, she might clam up again.

"My mother wasn't just a shifter," she finally admitted. "There is witch blood on that side of my family, but the power skips generations, which is why you never knew about my mother. She appears to be just a normal shifter."

I leaned against the counter, arms crossed, grappling with this new information. I had slept with Kiera, been closer to her than anyone else, and I hadn't known she had magic. "You've been able to use it this entire time?"

"Well..." she sighed, "When my witch magic didn't manifest, and neither did my ability to shift, my parents just thought I was a failure all around. It wasn't until I presented as an Omega that we realized it might have something to do with my magic being stunted, but it didn't truly manifest until that night we slept together..." Kiera gulped, looking away, "When we knotted."

I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. All I could do was stare at her as she revealed her secrets and try to comprehend them.

She bit her lip and continued. "That's part of why I left. That's why I took Kit and ran away. I knew that if you found out about my magic, you wouldn't hesitate to use me for your own purposes, and I didn't want that. I didn't want my power to be used by the same man who had so carelessly cast me aside..." She trailed off, shaking her head, "I wanted to protect myself, and I wanted to protect my son from the same fate. Being used."

Was that really what she thought of me? That I would use her for her power?

Kiera let out a long breath, "So there you go. You've got all the answers you need now."

I stared at her, the reality of her words sinking in slowly.

She'd run away because she thought I'd hurt her. She'd run away because she thought I would use her. She'd run away because she wanted to protect herself.

And the worst part of it was that I couldn't blame her. Most Alphas would do anything for power, and an Omega with witch blood would be more valuable than gold. Kiera had no idea if I would have used her or not. My fists clenched, anger welling up inside of me. Not at her, though. At how this all had played out.

"Kiera. Fuck. This is a lot."

"Imagine how I feel," she snapped, before softening again. "If it makes you feel any better, it refuses to let me use it against you. The magic, I mean. It's so entangled with our mating bond that even when I wanted to defend myself against you bringing me back here, I couldn't call it up."

I didn't tell her so, but it did make me feel a little better. It was more proof that I was right to claim my mate, and that she was meant to be mine. "You did the right thing fighting back, Kiera. They won't see you as just my Omega now. You've proven you're strong in your own right. This is still a lot to take in, but at least it keeps you safer."

Kiera leaned back in her chair and blinked a few times as I continued.

"You're with me now. We're a pack. And my pack will respect you. If they don't, they'll have to answer to me. You don't have to hide anymore."

Her posture shifted slightly, the defensiveness melting away, replaced by a flicker of something like hope. She opened her mouth to say something, but I placed a finger to her lips, silencing her before she could speak. "Enough for tonight," I told her, brushing my fingers across her cheek before letting my hand fall away, even if I was dying to touch her more. "I think I've heard enough world-shaking revelations for a while. Drink your cocoa, mate."

Kiera looked like she wanted to argue—when didn't she? But slowly, she lifted her mug to her lips and drank. I grinned, satisfied. Above us, the red moon started its descent, and while I hadn't gotten to run beneath it like I planned, it was possible that what I gained tonight was more valuable by far.

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Monday morning was shockingly quiet, considering everything that had happened over the last few days. Saturday had been the disastrous red moon ceremony, and I'd spent Sunday recuperating and getting Kit ready for his big day—attending school with all the other shifter kids.

He'd gotten on the bus a few hours ago, and I'd managed to wait until the bus was out of sight before bursting into tears. Samson, who had apparently maxed out his capacity for emotion, had awkwardly left, telling me he had pack business to attend to.

Now that I had collected myself from Kit leaving, I was enjoying a rare moment of solitude. The usual chaos was missing—the shuffling of toys, the constant hum of the TV, Kit's loud and ever-enthusiastic chatter. I wasn't used to the silence, but if I didn't keep busy, I would start to feel suffocated by it. My son was smart and strong, and I knew he would make a lot of new friends today. Friends just like him...even if some of them had already had their first shift.

I put that thought quickly out of my mind. Kit had plenty of time to figure the shift out. Just because it never happened for me didn't mean it wouldn't happen for him.

I was sipping my coffee, flipping through a paperback, when I heard the doorbell ring. I froze at first—back in Portsmouth, every visitor made me panic, thinking it was someone just like Samson there to drag me back to the pack. But there wasn't much reason to worry since that had already happened, and this was Samson's house. Few people could threaten an Alpha.

I cautiously opened the door, but relaxed immediately when I saw it was Nayeli and

Gwen on the other side.

"Sorry to bother you, Kiera," Gwen said quickly, "But we wanted to check in on you. See how you're adjusting."

"Adjusting..." I sighed, running a hand through my hair, "Well, I'm still alive. So that's good."

"Just alive?" Nayeli grinned, pushing past me into the house. "Come on, we all saw your little show at the bonfire. You can take care of yourself." Samson's cousin was loud and unapologetically upbeat. She'd only just lost her parents a few years ago, but she seemed to see the brighter side of the world still. I let the two girls make themselves comfortable in the living room before joining them.

"How was it?" Gwen asked. "Was it scary?"

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I would have been fine if those three hadn't cornered me."

Nayeli's grin widened. "You didn't have any trouble fighting back, though, huh?"

"I can't believe you're a witch," Gwen murmured, looking slightly starstruck, "That's so cool."

I winced. "It's not something I talk about a lot, okay? But you're right, Nayeli. I can handle myself."

Gwen shook her head. "I don't care how you did it, Kiera. Those three are jerks. They deserved it."

I shifted on the couch, remembering how terrified I had been at first. And then,

remembering how Samson had calmed me with just a touch. "I just hope they're done trying to mess with me now. I don't want any of that nonsense getting through to Kit, especially rumors from the other kids."

"Speaking of our favorite little pup, he started school today, right?" Nayeli leaned forward excitedly. "Was he pumped?"

I laughed, my eyes stinging with tears at the memory of this morning. "He was so excited. He was up by six. But I made sure he ate first."

"Good," Nayeli said with a nod, "I remember that kid is always hungry. I'll bet he already has all the teachers wrapped around his little finger."

I nodded, remembering how much Kit loved to chat and make friends. It was the main reason why I hadn't put up much of a fight when Samson said that he wanted him to go to the local school with the other shifter kids.

"But I wouldn't worry about any rumors getting to Kit from the other kids there," Gwen chimed in, checking her nails as she spoke, "Samson made it pretty clear Sunday morning that you weren't at fault for the fight, and explained exactly what happened. He told everyone that he didn't want to hear a single negative word about you."

I was stunned, "He did that?"

Nayeli nodded sagely, "Yeah, he definitely did. He even had me call up all the parents in Kit's class to let them know, and he said if he heard anything different from what he told them, then there would be consequences."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. The Alpha of our pack, Samson Jones, had gone out of his way to defend me? That didn't seem like him. "There's no way he did that."

"Why would we lie?" Gwen frowned, leaning forward. "We're telling you this so you know Samson isn't just trying to control you. He's actually making it better for you. And for Kit, too."

I opened my mouth to argue, but I couldn't think of why they would lie to me. "I guess I'm just used to seeing a different side of Samson than the one you two have known your whole lives," I said finally. "I don't know why he would suddenly start defending me, and I don't want to get my hopes up that he's actually being kind."

"He's an Alpha," Nayeli says it in a poisonous tone, as if it explained everything negative about her cousin, "And we all know that he made a lot of fuck ups when he first took over from his dad. He was hell-bent on measuring up to old Zeke, and Zeke was one of the most controlling Alphas around. Samson, being his son, should have been doomed from the start, but I'm telling you, he's changed." Nayeli reached over and took my hands in hers, her touch comforting, helping to ground me. "When my parents died in that car crash two years ago, I was absolutely lost. Samson immediately moved me in here with him and made sure I had everything I could possibly want and all the space I needed to grieve. Now I work for him, I have my own apartment...he saved me, you know?"

My heart clenched. I had known Nayeli's parents had died, but it was heartbreaking to hear the grief still so fresh in her voice.

Gwen nodded along with Nayeli's story, her face full of sympathy. "It's true. It's an open secret that you didn't exactly want to come back with him, but again, he's an Alpha. We're saying it could be a lot worse, and he's trying."

"Trying in the only ways he knows how," Nayeli clarified, "It might not make sense to us, but it's better than nothing."

I looked down at my coffee cup as I tried to process what they were saying. Samson

was...trying? That wasn't what I expected. It didn't add up to the picture I'd been painting of him since he'd taken me back to his territory.

But then, he hadn't been around much. And the times he had been, I'd been so focused on myself that I hadn't really paid attention to him. Had I judged him too harshly?

No, I decided firmly. He had hurt me. He had slept with me, and when I'd finally gotten up the nerve to tell him I wanted to be together, he'd cast me aside like trash. He kidnapped me, handcuffed me to a car door...the fact that he was defending me now didn't change what he had done to me.

But it was...something. Nayeli was right about that. He'd accepted me when I explained about my magic and my mother's bloodline, and had allowed me a certain amount of freedom to work and parent Kit the way I saw fit. Maybe he really was changing.

The thought was almost too good to be true, but it warmed me nonetheless.

"Now," Nayeli dropped the seriousness, and her mischievous grin returned, "Did anything else exciting happen once you two got home on Saturday?" She made kissing noises, and I couldn't help but laugh.

It was a real, genuine laugh, and Gwen quickly joined in. The entire pack might still be unsure of me, but these two women were doing a hell of a job making me feel welcome. I still resented being forced back into the Saltfangs, but it was easier with friends.

After taking Monday off to properly deal with the emotions of Kit going to school, I was back to work on Tuesday morning. I'd taken the early shift so I would be around

to get Kit off the bus, but the business of the early hours had died down by 10 am.

The cafe, Crescent Moon Coffee, kept me busy, which was important. When I spent too much time thinking about myself, things started to get mixed up in my head. Samson, the Saltfangs, my son...

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I blinked and looked up to find a man leaning across the counter toward me, grinning. He was handsome, with jet-black hair that fell into his eyes and a boyish charm that he used to his advantage.

"Just zoned out for a second," I replied, trying to smile back, "What can I get you?"

"You know what I like." His grin widened, and he winked at me.

"Sure do." I grabbed a cup and scribbled his name on it. Scott. He'd been coming in ever since I started, being overly friendly, bordering on flirtatious, but he was nice enough and tipped well. I didn't want to talk to him for long periods of time, but I didn't mind him too much, either.

"It's pretty quiet in here today," he observed as he looked around. "I guess I just missed the rush."

"You've got perfect timing, then," I said as I started pouring his coffee. "We've had a bit of a slow morning today, so you won't have to wait long."

"I'm not just here for the coffee," he said, and I had to suppress a groan. Ugh. Shifters. Always so confident. And so persistent.

I'd been getting that vibe from Scott since the first day he'd come in about a week

ago, and he didn't seem to be deterred by my lack of interest. The truth was, I was tired of shifters trying to get close to me. Not in a romantic way—word had gotten out that Samson had performed a mating ceremony with his Omega, and that we were basically married in the eyes of the pack—but other pack members tried their damndest to befriend me to be on Samson's good side.

Even after I struck Pete, Curt, and Francine, other pack members didn't seem to be overly deterred from talking to me. It annoyed the hell out of me. I didn't want anyone to treat me kindly because they wanted something from me. It all felt so fake.

Scott didn't give off that same sucking-up vibe, though. He was full of himself, no matter how early in the morning.

I kept up a running conversation with him as I made his coffee, and he flirted with me the entire time. By the time I handed him his cup, I was already over him.

"Well, Scott," I said, hoping he would take the hint, "It was nice seeing you this morning."

"It's always nice to see you," he replied smoothly, "Maybe tomorrow I can convince you to have lunch with me?"

"Uhh..." I hedged, wondering what sort of maniac would try to hit on Samson's Omega, but before he could push the subject, the door of the cafe slammed open, and a tall, blond, pissed-off figure stomped in.

Samson, as if he'd been able to sense that I'd been thinking about him.

Scott's eyes flickered to Samson, and then back to me. "Well," he said, stepping away from the counter, "It looks like I've overstayed my welcome." He winked at me again, but I barely noticed, because Samson was practically steaming as he approached me.

"What in the hell is going on here?" Samson demanded, his voice low and dangerous. His blue eyes were locked onto Scott, who had moved to a table in the corner and was sipping his coffee without a care in the world.

"Nothing," I replied shortly. "What are you doing here?"

"I just stopped by to check on you." He leaned forward, and his voice dropped, "You know, since you've barely spoken a word to me since Saturday."

"You could, you know, call instead of barging in here."

"It looks like my instincts were right on the money." his words were a growl, and before I knew it, he was grabbing me by the arm so he could pull me against him, eyes fixed on Scott. "If this fucker is going to be sniffing around all the time, then I think it's time for you to find another job, mate."

"I'm not your mate," I said angrily, but I let him pull me closer.

He looked down at me, his eyes blazing, "Fine. Wife."

I glared back at him, but he didn't flinch away from the challenge in my gaze.

"You can't run away forever, Kiera," he said quietly. "You're mine."

"Maybe by shifter rules," I shot back, "But that doesn't mean you get to tell me what to do."

"You know, this whole attitude of yours is getting very old."

"As is you being an asshole!"

"You might as well get used to that," Scott unexpectedly laughed from the booth where he'd been watching us. "Samson has always, and will always, be an asshole. Takes after his dad that way."

Confused, I looked between Scott and Samson. "Now, wait a damn second..."

Samson grinned at Scott, but it was a dangerous smile, all teeth and threats of violence. "You're one to talk. Kiera, do you know who this man is?"

I shook my head. "He just said his name is Scott."

"At least he didn't lie about that part. Kiera, this is Scott Nevada, Alpha of the Shadowbay pack. And what I want to know," Samson was already stalking towards Scott while everyone else in the store rushed to leave before all hell broke loose, "Is why the Alpha of a neighboring pack is sniffing around my Omega."

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"I'm not sniffing around anything," Scott growled, his charming facade dropping and revealing the capable, annoyed Alpha underneath. Good. That was who I wanted to deal with, not the stupid act that he put on for Kiera and everyone else in this damn shop.

"Bullshit. Pack members have told me you've been in here every shift that Kiera works." We were almost chest to chest now, Alpha to Alpha, violence tainting the air around us. "You can't tell me that's a fucking coincidence."

"Wait, you've had a pack checking up on me while I'm at work?" I could see Kiera out of the corner of my eye, hands on her hips, annoyed. "And here I thought you trusted me enough to let me have one thing to myself. I guess not."

"Later, Kiera," I snapped, hating how she flinched at my voice's harshness. Dammit. Being this close to fighting another Alpha had my self-control fraying at the edges. I turned my ire back to Scott, the one who really deserved it.

Scott, the slimy fucker, was grinning again. "Actually, my being here had nothing to do with your mate."

"Then what in the fuck is the reason?"

Scott grinned even wider, taking too much enjoyment from his stupid little secret. "Because this is my shop. I bought Crescent Moon Coffee two weeks ago, and I come in daily to check on how things are going. The store manager, Kate, hired Kiera on her own. I didn't even know she was working here until I came in for my daily check." He crossed his arms and looked over my shoulder at Kiera, which made me

want to knock his teeth out. "Imagine my surprise to see the Saltfang Alpha's little Omega working in my shop. It was a really fun coincidence. I'm disappointed you figured out my game so quickly."

As much as I wanted to strangle him, knowing he had nothing to do with hiring Kiera helped my rage somewhat. He'd still kept his identity from her, and the fact that he owned the shop my mate worked at from me, but it didn't appear that he was lying. Kiera's working here really was just a coincidence that he had taken advantage of.

"You should have told me." I took a step back, but didn't get out of his face entirely. "I would have considered you an ally until you pulled this shit."

"Oh, grow up, Samson," Scott laughed, "You'd throw away an alliance because your mate is working at my shop, and I didn't scramble to tell you? You might want to reconsider." He held up a hand to shield his mouth, as if he was telling me a secret, "It makes you look spectacularly insecure."

"We both know why you didn't tell me," I growled, ignoring his jab. "It's not because you were trying to keep an ally. It's because you wanted to get under my skin."

"I didn't lie," Scott shot back, "And I'm not going to apologize for enjoying seeing the look on your face when you walked in here. Still living in Zeke's shadow, pup?"

I was going to kill him. I was going to rip his throat out right there in his own place of business, and let him bleed all over the copper tile floor. Scott had ten years on me, which meant a decade more experience as an Alpha, but there was no way in hell I was going to let him talk about my mate and my father like that. I'd taste his blood before—

"I hate to break up this little reunion," Kiera interrupted, stepping between us and pushing us apart, "But it's almost time for me to get off work, so if you're going to

fight, please take it outside."

Scott laughed and backed away, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not looking to get into a fight with you, Samson."

I stepped forward, but Kiera shoved me back, her magic already thrumming through the air around us. "Out," she hissed at me. "We're done here."

As much as I wanted to challenge Scott's threat, I could feel my mate's magic coursing through me. It would have been so easy to shift and attack, to show Scott who was really in charge here, but Kiera's power wouldn't allow it.

God, despite how angry I was, her power sliding over my skin and across my nerves felt like silk. It was like she was touching me all over, making my skin raise in goosebumps. Just like she told me the other night, I couldn't feel an ounce of actual violence in her magic's touch, just a wall keeping me away from Scott. Kiera couldn't do me harm with her magic, but apparently, she'd found a loophole to make it work against me at least a little.

"No need for your beloved to leave," Scott sighed dramatically, waving his hand in the air, "I'm going in the back to count the drawers from this morning anyway. You two take a moment." He walked to the door, flipping the sign to 'CLOSED'. "Just switch this back when you're done fighting. No fucking, though. That's against the health code."

Kiera spun around once Scott was out of sight, her face red. "What the fuck, Samson?"

"Scott isn't exactly the best company for someone like you to keep, Kiera." I crossed my arms over my chest and glared down at her. "I'm not sorry for getting angry."

"Someone like me?" She took a step closer, her hands on her hips. "You mean an Omega?"

"He's a lot older than you," I countered. "I'd be uncomfortable with any of my pack women being alone with him every single day."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "It's nice to know that you don't trust me enough to be alone with another man."

"It's not about trust, and you know it."

"Oh, that's right. It's about stupid Alpha posturing. I forgot."

I didn't know which of us had moved first, but before I knew it, Kiera was close enough to touch, and I didn't let the opportunity slide by. I was bursting at the seams with the need to put my hands on her skin, to claim her or mark her in any way she'd allow. Or a thousand ways she wouldn't allow, but I wasn't that much of an out-of-control prick.

Something about the way she argued, the way she fought, just did it for me. When Kiera showed her vulnerable side, like she'd done the night of her first heat, opening her door with so much need in her eyes, it had knocked the breath out of me. It made me want to protect and guard her with my life. But this Kiera, this ferocious, wildcat Kiera who wasn't afraid to call me out on my bullshit, was the one who really made my blood boil.

I was half-hard right there in the middle of a public coffee shop. Thank God it had emptied out. My reaction didn't make any damn sense. Shouldn't I want my Omega to be meek and submissive?

She was fighting me every step of the way, and I couldn't even pretend like I didn't

love every second of it.

I took her by the waist and pulled her close, our bodies meeting so suddenly that she gasped and looked up at me. Her lips were parted, and I was so fucking tempted to kiss her again, to taste the anger in her mouth and see how far she would let me push things. Knowing Scott, my rival if not my enemy, was in the office right there in the same building increased my desire for her tenfold.

I wanted to have her, right there where he could hear us, scent us, and know that Kiera was mine. My mate, my wife, my Omega, mine .

"Let me go," she huffed, doing very little to fight me off despite her complaints.

"No," I growled. "I'm going to show you just how good it'll feel to belong to me."

I bent my head and drug my nose over the scent gland in her neck, making her shudder, her knees nearly buckling. Nothing had ever, ever smelled as good as she did right then. It was supposed to be a tease to make her putty in my hands, and it might have been working, but I hadn't expected my own self-control to be hanging on by a thread. I repeated the action, grinding my hips against her when I did so, letting her feel how hard she made me. Kiera didn't push me back, and I was overcome with the need to pull her to the floor and scent every inch of her skin, everyone else nearby be damned.

She moaned, and I moved to kiss her, unable to bear it for a second longer, but when I lifted my head from her gorgeous neck, I caught sight of us in the mirror behind the counter. Fuck, what was I doing? I looked like a goddamned animal about to rip into her.

And somehow, I'd forgotten about Scott altogether. The thing driving me insane wasn't being able to stake my claim on Kiera while he was near. No. It was Kiera,

Kiera, and nothing else, making me lose my damned mind.

I stepped back immediately, breaking contact with her completely. Her scent was still surrounding me, making me want to pull her close again, but I kept myself at bay.

Kiera's eyes were closed, her hands reaching up as if trying to touch me again. When she realized I'd pulled back, she opened them and looked around in confusion. "Samson?" She asked, her voice cracking, "What are you-"

"We're done," I said coldly. I didn't know why I was talking to her like that, but it was better than jumping on her. "If you think you can work here without getting taken advantage of, then be my guest."

Her mouth dropped open in shock and confusion. "But...what...?"

I pushed past her and marched to the door, flipping the sign back around and throwing open the door. I knew I was acting like a fucking lunatic, but I didn't care. I just needed to get out of there before I did something I would regret.

Before I let my Omega see how goddamned obsessed with her I was becoming.

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Well, I fucking quit, just like Samson wanted.

Scott was none too happy to hear it, but it just wasn't going to work out now that the cat was out of the bag regarding his true identity. Dammit, I wished I'd never known. Working at the coffee shop wasn't fun, but it made me feel productive and kept me out of Samson's house.

I didn't regret quitting, but I did regret leaving the job without a reference. That was my own fault, though, for getting all up in arms about what Samson thought was best for me.

The job hunt was the least of my problems, though. I hadn't told anyone, but I could feel the tell-tale signs of my heat coming on. I could have sworn it was supposed to be another month before I had to go through the whole process again, but my body was already reacting, the temperature of my skin rising, and my body craving things that I didn't want to think about.

I hadn't felt this way since the first time Samson touched me, the night my heat had hit unexpectedly. Of course, I'd had heats in the seven years we'd been apart, but having no Alphas around made it easier to bear. I stayed in bed most of the day, having Deidre keep Kit while I called off work and suffered through it. But those heats had been nothing like the first one that Samson had helped me through, and now that another one was coming on and my Alpha was sleeping under the same roof as me, it felt like it was happening all over again, and I was desperate for release.

It was my last day at Crescent Moon, and I was more than ready to go back home and hide away from the world. But of course, it was one of the rare jam-packed days, and

I was swamped until the late afternoon lull. I was wiping down tables when Gwen approached me, her hands clasped behind her back as if she was nervous.

"Kiera, do you think you're gonna need to leave early today?" Gwen asked me, raising her eyebrows. "You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," I snapped, then immediately felt bad. I shook my head and sighed. "No, I'm sorry, Gwen. I shouldn't be taking this out on you."

"You're going to have to leave before too long," Gwen said gently. "You're looking really flushed, and I know what that means."

I quickly looked around, relieved to see that we were alone. "Gwen, please. I really don't need that to be common knowledge."

"Sorry," she cringed, looking embarrassed, "My aunt is an Omega, so I just know the signs, that's all. I'm sure it isn't obvious to anyone else. But just in case...why don't you head out early before Scott makes his random daily appearance? After all, it's your last day, so you won't have to worry about him after this."

"I can't go home early," I said, shaking my head. "It'll make Samson think he won."

"He doesn't even know that you left Crescent Moon?"

"He doesn't know because I didn't tell him."

Gwen sighed. "You're both idiots."

"I'm not an idiot," I grumbled, wiping down the counter angrily.

"Yeah, Kiera, you kind of are." She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me around to

the back side of the counter. "Listen, I get why you're angry with Samson, I do. And I'm not saying that what he did was right. But you're acting like an idiot about this."

"What else am I supposed to do?" I asked her, exasperated. "If I go home early, then he wins, and I don't want him to think he has that sort of control over me."

Gwen sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. "Okay, I get it. This argument is going nowhere. Look, I know one of the pack kids got an internship out of state, and she just quit Emerald Blooms right down the street, which means there's an opening."

I paused, interested. "The garden shop?"

"Yes, the garden shop. They're hiring right now."

"How do you know about this?"

"I have my sources," Gwen lowered her voice conspiratorily, "But Kiera—"

Just then, the door above the shop door rang, and I could immediately sense that it was Scott. I ducked behind the counter, not wanting to talk with him, especially if Gwen could tell my heat was on the horizon. "I'm leaving out the back door," I hissed up at her, "Distract him, please."

Gwen looked like she'd been thrown through a loop. "I will, but Kiera, about the garden shop—"

"Thanks. I owe you one." I didn't wait for her to finish, scurrying through the back door and into the kitchen. I felt bad for leaving Gwen to deal with Scott, but he would force me to speak to him if he caught me leaving.

I made my way out of the shop's back door and onto the street, trying to be as

inconspicuous as possible. There wasn't much foot traffic this time of day, so it was easy to get around without being noticed, especially with the way my mind was spinning.

I just wanted to go home and curl up in bed until my heat went away. But Samson would want to talk to me, and I wasn't ready for that either. He'd ask me why I'd quit, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of telling him he was right.

Even if he had been.

I sighed in relief once I was out of sight of the coffee shop, taking off my apron and folding it under my arm. I still had a few days until my heat was in full swing, and now that I was away from the stress of Crescent Moon, I felt a lot more in control.

Emerald Blooms, huh? I had figured I'd have to hunt for another part-time job that would work around Kit's school schedule, but if there was only one opening there, I'd better strike while the iron was hot. It was only one street over, less than a ten-minute walk, so I decided to try my luck.

A little bell rang over the door when I walked into the shop. An older woman at the counter looked up and smiled. "Welcome to Emerald Blooms! Can I help you find something?"

"Oh, no, thank you," I said, trying to be polite, "I actually heard from someone at the coffee shop down the street that you were hiring, and I wanted to see if I could apply."

The shop was adorable. It smelled of freshly tilled soil and humidity, and it felt like a miniature green oasis right in the middle of downtown Crystal Creek. Plants and flowers lined the shelves and counters, and the walls were painted a warm, inviting turquoise. The woman behind the counter wore a long dress and loosely braided hair,

giving off hippie vibes.

"Oh, that's great," she said, "My name is Debbie, and I'm the manager of the shop. I'm sure I could use the help."

"Kiera Langley," I said, holding out my hand. She took it and shook it, her grip warm and firm. "Thank you for being so kind. Is there a form I need to fill out?"

She laughed. "No, not unless you're looking for a permanent position. We'll just get to know each other for a bit, and then I can see about getting you a part-time schedule, if that works for you."

"That would be perfect," I said, "I have a son, so I don't have a lot of spare time."

"That's alright. We aren't open late anyway. Say, why don't you come in tomorrow when the owner is here after you fill out that application, and if he's satisfied with it, you can start right then?"

"Wow, really? That sounds amazing." I was overjoyed. Maybe quitting my job at Crescent Moon wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"Just so you know, Mr. Longwood is a bit of a flirt, but he's harmless," she said slyly.

I nodded, but groaned internally. Were all the men around here flirts? At least there was no way he could be worse than Scott. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you so much for giving me a chance, Debbie."

She waved a hand, dismissing my thanks. "Not a problem. I'll see you tomorrow."

I left the store feeling hopeful. Maybe my luck was finally starting to turn around.

The next day came quickly, even if I spent most of the previous evening hiding from Samson and stuffing my face, hoping beyond hope that I might be able to briefly satisfy the heat with calories instead of sex.

Of course, it didn't work. I still felt miserable, hot, bothered, and cranky, but at least I had the interview today to keep me busy. I didn't want to tell Samson that I was going to work somewhere else, but I knew he'd be apoplectic if he went to find me at the coffee shop and I wasn't there. That went beyond keeping my personal life to myself, and teetered on the edge of lying to him just to be hurtful.

Still, there was no way in hell I was about to have a full-blown conversation about how he'd won, and I'd quit the coffee shop. So, instead, I sent him a text right before I walked into Emerald Blooms, letting him know that I'd hopefully secured employment elsewhere.

It would be easier to swallow his gloating over text messages, at least.

Debbie was there at the counter waiting on me, with a tall man beside her. He was older than Samson, but I was only able to guess that from the few streaks of silver in his short, rusty brown hair right at the temples. The man looked like he worked out every bit of his free time, with huge arms and deeply tanned skin. Despite how much I wanted to deny it, Samson was still the hottest man I'd ever met, but I could see why Debbie had warned me about this guy.

Then his scent drifted over to me, and I wanted to bash my head into the wall of the shop. I'd missed it with Scott because I hadn't been looking for it—as far as I'd known, Samson was the only local Alpha—but now that my guard was up, I immediately sensed that the man behind the counter wasn't just another big flirt.

He was another fucking Alpha.

Before I could commence with my head bashing, he came out from behind the counter and offered me his hand, "You must be Kiera. My name is Joe Longwood, and this is my store. Debbie said you were interested in working here."

Reluctantly, I took his hand, but kept the handshake as brief as possible. Samson might burn the entire city down if I came home smelling like another Alpha had touched me.

"I am," I said, hoping that my voice didn't sound as shaky as I felt. I glanced back at Debbie, who smiled encouragingly. "I think it would be a great fit."

"Wonderful," Joe said, smiling. His smile was bright and charismatic, but I wasn't about to let my guard down, not when he was an Alpha wolf, just like the others. "I'll just ask you a few questions, and then we'll see how we can work around your schedule."

I nodded, "Yes, but I understand my schedule is a little restrictive."

"So, you have a son?" Joe asked, taking my application from Debbie and looking it over. "Deb mentioned it, don't worry. I wasn't stalking your social media or anything. You're a single parent, huh?"

The question threw me off. "Uh...no."

When Joe looked up from the paper, he had that stupid, sharp Alpha smile on his face that made me want to run for the hills. "Who's the lucky man, then?"

I looked over at Debbie, who looked just as flummoxed as I felt. "What exactly does this have to do with working here?"

"Nothing at all. I just wanted to know why exactly Samson Jones' Omega was in my shop looking for work. Isn't he taking good care of you, darlin'?"

All sorts of warning bells were going off in my head, but before I could make an excuse to leave the shop and say to hell with the possible job, the door opened. I groaned, burying my face in my hands as soon as his scent and his power rolled over me—black pepper, cedar, and trouble.

"Why," I whined into my own palms. "Why in the hell does this keep happening to me? Was being kidnapped not enough? Am I cursed to be in the middle of Alpha pissing contest for the rest of my life?"

Joe and Debbie were both silent, but I wasn't looking at them. I didn't need to see their faces to know that Joe probably had that cocky Alpha smile still on his face while Debbie looked like she was trying to figure out a way to escape through the back door.

I could smell Samson coming up behind me, and I felt the heat of his body as he stepped in front of me, putting himself between me and Joe. "You quit the coffee shop."

It wasn't what I expected, so I lowered my hands and looked up at him. "I did. Look, I know this looks crazy, but I swear I didn't know another Alpha owned this place. I just figured plants don't flirt, so it seemed like a safe bet. But why are you here?"

"I came to see what kind of mess you'd gotten yourself into this time."

I bristled, trying not to get lost in the ocean of his blue eyes. It was a constant effort to remind myself that I hated him when his presence and scent made every cell in my body sing. "I planned on working, not getting into trouble."

Joe snorted. "That's debatable."

After the confrontation with Scott, I fully expected Samson to shift on the spot and attack Joe, but the energy between them was...different.

"Is that right?"

"Yup. Your Omega here has an interesting habit of walking into other Alphas' stores. Aren't you keeping her occupied enough at home?"

The innuendo made me wrinkle my nose, but Samson didn't give me time to speak.

"That's debatable," Samson copied Joe from earlier, and my confusion only deepened until Joe laughed and strode forward.

The two Alphas shook hands like they knew each other, and everything suddenly made sense.

"You son of a bitch," Joe said with a grin, pulling Samson in for a brotherly hug. "I was gonna tell you that your lady here applied, but I wanted to see for myself the woman that had Samson Jones all tied up in knots first."

Samson huffed, but there was no animosity between them. I stared at the two men, trying to process the information, before I finally found my words. "You...you're allies?"

Joe grinned. "Sure am. My pack moved here when Zeke was still the boss with the understanding that we'd help hold the territory. We're buddies. Right, Samson?"

"Right," Samson agreed, though there was some hesitation in his voice. "So I would appreciate it if you didn't flirt with my wife, Joe."

"Oh, come on," Joe said, "it's not like I'm actually going to steal your Omega away. I know better than to fuck up a functional alliance."

Satisfied, at least for the moment, Samson turned back to me. "So, do you want to tell me why you quit Scott's place?"

I could tell he was going to be a smug asshole about it, but I just wished it wasn't in front of my potential new boss and coworker. "It didn't have anything to do with you, so don't start."

Samson was trying to keep his serious expression in place, but there was a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You sure about that?"

He was driving me wild, and he wasn't doing a single thing except for standing there. I didn't know how much longer I could keep my heat in check. I was hyper-aware of how close he was, of the way his fingers tapped lazily on the counter next to us, of the steady rise and fall of his chest. The smile playing at his lips was what nearly pushed me over. The Alpha swagger had never done it for me before, but Samson was seriously getting under my skin.

"Kiera?" he asked again. "Why'd you quit the coffee shop?"

"I didn't like the uniform."

His laugh was quiet but genuine. "Try again."

I shrugged, feigning indifference, "I just didn't want to get caught up in pack politics. There. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Samson made a noise, half irritation, and half amusement. "So you...took a job with another Alpha instead?"

"It's not my fault this town is crawling with them."

"I'm just saying," Samson had come even closer, reaching up to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear before I could stop him. "If you want to avoid Alphas, maybe you should have picked a shop not run by one."

I swallowed once and then again when it didn't relieve the dryness of my mouth. "Not everything is about you, Samson."

"I never said it was," he was so close now that I swore I could feel the heat rolling off his body. Any awareness of the two people in the room had faded. "But something makes me think that this really is about me."

My eyes shot up to his, wondering how he had figured me out so easily, but the heat in them threatened to burn me alive. He hadn't raised his hand, but I was positive he was about to touch me, and I was so hungry for him to do so...

"I knew it," Joe scoffed loudly enough to ruin the moment. "You two are about to get handsy in my shop. Knock it off."

I nearly fell backward, my face heating. Crap. How am I supposed to hate Samson when the need I felt for him eclipsed everything else, including social awareness?

Samson exhaled sharply, his jaw tightening before he turned to glare at Joe. "We were not."

Joe smirked. "Sure, sure. And I'm a celibate monk." Debbie giggled from behind the counter while Joe waved a hand at me. "You're hired, by the way."

I blinked. "Just like that?"

He grinned. "Unless you'd rather go back to working for Scott. I'm sure he misses you terribly."

I frowned, "Ugh. No thanks. When do I start?"

Joe nodded. "Knew you'd see it my way. You can start today if you're able to keep your hands off your Alpha long enough to let him leave."

Samson straightened, rolling his shoulders like he was shaking something off. "Won't be a problem. I'll go. Appreciate it, Joe."

Joe raised a brow. "For what? Hiring your wife, or interrupting before you could ravish her on my counter?"

Samson ignored him and turned to me instead. "I'll see you at home."

My stomach flipped at the way he said it, full of dark promises that I had no intention of letting him fill until he managed to touch me again and make me lose all my senses, at least.

I nodded, forcing myself to be casual. "Yeah. See you."

Then he left, and I hated the way I felt disappointed. Like I'd wanted him to do something. Like I was waiting for it. Joe had put the image of Samson ravaging me into my mind, and it was stuck like glue.

I swallowed hard, brushing my hands over my apron after tying it on, suddenly too warm. It's nothing. Just lingering tension. Just hormones. Just—

Crap. My heat could really kill me this time, because every time I told myself that Samson wasn't ever going to touch me, I knew that it was a lie deep down. And I

wasn't sure I'd survive being broken and abandoned by Samson Jones a second time, even if the sex was mind-blowing.

This time, I was terrified that my heart was involved, whether I wanted it to be or not.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

Kit was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the living room, his tongue poking out slightly as he concentrated on his sketchpad. There was a small pile of colored pencils next to him, and he was surprisingly quiet and focused as he drew. I'd grown used to my son being talkative, so watching him sketch silently was a novel experience.

Kiera was at work, and it was a Saturday, so it was just Kit and me for the afternoon. I'd expected we'd spend some time together, playing catch or fishing in the creek behind the house, but Kit had settled down with his sketch pad over an hour ago and was still plenty occupied.

"What are you working on?" I finally asked.

His head popped up, blue eyes bright, glancing at me before flipping his book totally open and handing it to me without even a pause. "Wolves!" He said proudly.

I took the sketchpad, my heart lurching when he told me what I'd find inside. Every single page was filled with wolves, some quick doodles that looked like they'd been drawn in a rush, as if he needed to get the image out of his mind and onto the paper as fast as possible. Other pictures were more detailed than I would have expected—powerful, sharp-eyed, alive in a way that made my chest tight.

I glanced down at Kit, handing him the sketchpad, "You like wolves, huh?"

Kit nodded, but looked a little shy, "Yeah. I dream about them a lot."

I swallowed, flipping back to a page where he'd drawn a wolf mid-howl, its fur thick,

its eyes fierce.

Most shifter kids had already experienced at least one shift by Kit's age. The first shift was unpredictable, often clumsy, and exhausting, but it was normal. But Kit hadn't shifted.

I'd assumed it was because of Kiera's weak shift, but looking at his drawings and how his little hands had poured so much into capturing something that felt innate, I had to wonder. Was he ready, and he just didn't know it? Was the instinctual, canine part of him trying to shift and failing simply because Kit knew nothing about the process?

"Come on," I said, setting the sketchpad aside and standing. "Let's go outside for a bit."

Kit blinked up at me, surprised, but scrambled to his feet without question. I led him out onto the porch, the afternoon sun warm against our skin as we sat on the steps.

I didn't speak at first, watching as Kit picked at a loose thread on his sleeve, making sure that I had the right words for what I wanted my son to understand. Then I said, "Kit, do you remember the red moon?"

He looked surprised, but his shoulders tensed before he nodded.

"How did you feel that night?" I kept my voice calm, easy. If his shift was as close as I thought it was, the red moon would have called to him powerfully.

Kit fidgeted, then finally spoke. "Restless," he admitted. "Like... like I was supposed to be doing something, but I didn't know what." He looked down at his hands, his fingers twitching like he was remembering it all over again. "I didn't feel right. It was like...there was something under my skin, but I couldn't get to it."

My stomach tightened, and my heart started to pound. Shit. That was exactly how a young shifter should feel before their first shift...how I had felt before mine.

I didn't want to freak him out, so I kept as calm as I possibly could. "Do you still feel like that? Restless?"

Kit nodded slowly. "Sometimes." He curled his hands into tiny fists. "I keep having these dreams. About running. About being fast." He looked up at me, his expression wary, like he wasn't sure if he should say what he was thinking.

I already knew what was coming, though, and my heart was singing. My son. He was more like me than he could ever know.

"Am I..." His voice wavered, but he straightened his spine, looking me in the eye. Brave when it really mattered, just like his mother. "Am I a shifter? Like you?"

I wasn't going to sugarcoat it or bury the lead. Kit asked, and I was going to give him full honesty. "Yes. You are"

Kit sucked in a quick breath, eyes going wide. Then, like he didn't remember how to form real words, he simply said, "Oh."

"It's something to be proud of, kid. Something to be happy about. It's what you are now, like me. Like everyone else that came before us both."

"Even Mama?"

I should have expected the question, but it didn't make it any easier to answer. "Ah, well. Yes and no. Your mother is a shifter, but...she has trouble with her shift. Have you ever seen her change shape, Kit?"

He blinked, his excitement dimming just slightly. Then, shaking his head, he said, "No."

I stared at him. "Not even once?" It was almost impossible to believe. The urge to shift became impossible to ignore during parts of the moon cycle, and imagining ignoring that for my entire life was painful.

Another shake of his head. "She never really mentions it."

I exhaled sharply. Kiera still hadn't shifted. After all this time? I thought she was just ignoring the instinct.

An Omega's shift wasn't like an Alpha's. It was more instinctual, tied deeply to their emotions and their bond to their mates. But Kiera had been hiding for years, suppressing that part of herself. And now, it had trickled down to Kit.

That wasn't going to happen. Not to my son. Kiera might be content pretending that the shifter part of herself didn't exist, but Kit was itching to shift. To embrace his wild side.

I made a split-second decision and jumped into it before I could second-guess myself. "Do you want to learn?" I asked, watching him closely. "Do you want to shift?"

Kit's entire body went still, like he was afraid if he moved, I'd take the offer back. "Really?!"

I couldn't stop my smile. "Yeah, really."

Kit's grin was so huge, his eyes so wide and eager that I was almost able to ignore how much this was going to piss Kiera off. She could be mad, or yell, or whatever she needed to do. But she wasn't going to let her rejection of her shift affect Kit any

longer. I'd be damned if I let him spend another day confused about the shifter side of himself.

I walked Kit out into the middle of the backyard, crouching down in front of him and resting my hands on his little shoulders. His face was suffused with happiness and an unshakeable trust that threatened to crack my heart in half. Damn. Even after being separated for seven years, a son's trust in his father was still absolute.

"Alright," I said, keeping my voice calm, steady. "Close your eyes."

Kit obeyed immediately, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Take a deep breath," I instructed, and he did, inhaling slowly and deeply. "Now another."

I watched as he followed my lead, his small shoulders rising and falling as he breathed in the crisp afternoon air. I breathed in time with him unconsciously, my need to guide him through his shift instinctual.

"Good," I told him quietly. "Now, I want you to listen to your body. There's a part of you that isn't just you, Kit. A part of you that's waiting. Have you felt it before?"

Kit nodded, eyes still closed. "In my dreams."

A sharp pang struck me deep in my gut. He'd felt it. He'd known it was there, the same way all shifters did. But he hadn't been able to reach it. Was it the same for Kiera? Had she spent all those years of her life with that part of her straining for release? It must have made her miserable at times, caused her so much pain.

I pushed the thought away, focusing on my son. Kiera was an adult, but Kit was a child, and he needed my help.

“Good,” I said again. “That part of you—your wolf—it’s not separate from you. It is you. But you have to trust it. You have to let it come.”

Kit furrowed his brow, concentrating so hard I almost smiled. Almost, because as I watched him, patient and unrushed, the guilt started creeping in. I should have been patient back then, too. With another pack member who could have used this help, even if we had been nearly the same age at the time.

I should have helped Kiera the way I was helping Kit now. Instead, I’d done nothing. I let her struggle. I let everyone think she was weak, let her bear the weight of their judgment alone. She’d been a girl, an Omega, shouldering something I maybe could have eased. But I hadn’t even tried.

I clenched my jaw, forcing the guilt down once more. Now wasn’t the time for regrets.

“Kit,” I said, my voice softer now. “Don’t fight it. Just let it happen.”

He was trembling slightly, his breathing uneven, but then—then I felt it.

A shift in the air. The barest flicker of his energy surging toward something just beneath the surface. The feeling of a new pack member, right there on the precipice of joining the rest of us. I was almost choking with pride.

I pressed a hand to his shoulder, grounding him. “You’re right there, son. Just a little more.”

Kit let out a sharp exhale, his tiny body shuddering. For a second, I thought—damn.

Just as quickly as it had come, the energy slipped away. His eyes snapped open, wide and confused. “It’s stuck,” he blurted. “I can’t—” His little face crumpled in

frustration.

I exhaled, keeping my grip on his shoulders so he didn't feel alone. "It's okay. You're doing good."

Kit frowned, looking shockingly like his mother when she was annoyed. "I don't feel good at it."

I pulled Kit against me, pressing a steady hand to the back of his head. "You are good at it," I told him. "And we'll keep trying until it's easy. I promise."

His hands curled into my shirt, his body warm and trusting against mine when he leaned in for a hug. I couldn't change the past; I couldn't go back in time and lead Kiera through her change, but I sure as hell could do better now.

There was another way, but it didn't give the pup a chance to slowly experience the first change, mitigating the pain of it. It was more forceful and usually reserved for when an Alpha needed to force a grown wolf into their other form for whatever reason, but I'd heard about it being used with stubborn pups, too.

It wasn't out of the question for Kit to need a few days to really find his change, but he sounded so heartbroken that I didn't want to make him wait. And if Kiera was going to find out that I was helping Kit with his shift, I needed to have something to show her. Otherwise, she'd be up my ass, demanding to be part of all of this that I wanted to keep between father and son.

So I did the only thing I could do to get Kit to relax—I squeezed him tight in a bear hug and held him. The weight of my son in my arms was more than enough to ease my tension, my thoughts, my aching chest.

"I have another idea," I told him as I slowly released him, "But it will hurt. The first

few times always do, but this method can be rougher than normal."

Kit looked hopeful. "I don't care. I can take it."

I sighed. Fearless and stubborn. He was obviously Kiera's son.

"You'll be exhausted down to the bone afterward," I added. "Shifting takes a lot out of you even as an adult, but it shocks a lot of pups when they can barely keep their eyes open when they're back in human form."

"I wanna try. I can do it, Papa. I can. I swear. Show me!"

I exhaled and closed my eyes, reaching deep inside myself into the place where my pack bonds lived. Some burned bright, others were faded at the edges, and Kiera's glowed so beautifully that it was almost painful to look at, but I ignored them all. Instead, I searched for a single thread, new and pale.

Then I saw it, soft and fragile, like a string of a spider's web. New, but still connected to me, to the pack. Kit's thread.

I latched onto it, pouring my power into it to strengthen it and solidify the connection between us. I should have done this a long time ago, when I first learned of his existence, but better late than never.

Kit sucked in a sharp breath, his fingers gripping my wrists as he felt it too.

"There you go," I praised, "Hold onto that, Kit, and don't let go."

Then, with the full force of my power as an Alpha, I started my shift—

And pulled Kit through it alongside me.

Bones cracked and stretched. My muscles tore and rebuilt, my body reshaping itself in the way it had done a thousand times before. It was as natural as easy as breathing for me.

But Kit—his body fought it. He gasped, his little frame trembling as the change tried to take hold. I felt his hesitation through our bond, the instinctual fear of something unnatural taking over.

It's okay, I told him silently, pouring reassurance into the connection. I've got you.

Kit clenched his teeth, his tiny hands fisting in the fabric of my shirt as his own shift finally started. His cry of pain nearly shattered me. But I held firm, my wolf rumbling in approval as my son—my pup—began his first shift at last.

Kit collapsed onto all fours, his body shaking like a branch in the wind, his breath coming in sharp, shallow pants. His bones had finally stopped shifting, his tiny form settling into something new.

My heart thundered in my chest as I stepped closer, lowering my head to get a better look. While he favored me in human form, I could clearly see his mother in his wolf form.

His fur was rich, chocolatey brown, darkening along his back and around his muzzle. But his eyes... his eyes. Silvery black, deep and endless, holding a quiet strength that took my breath away.

He looked just like her.

A wave of emotion hit me, so sudden and fierce that I had to dig my claws into the earth to keep myself steady. Kit—my son—stood before me on four legs for the first time. Small but strong. Shaken but whole.

He let out a surprised huff, lifting one paw off the ground and wobbling unsteadily. I chuffed in amusement, stepping forward so I could press my nose against his side, grounding him. Kit stilled, then hesitantly pushed his snout against mine, his instincts telling him just what to do.

Good boy, I thought, pride swelling in my chest.

I stepped back, allowing him to take me in fully. He blinked up at me, his silver-black eyes wide with awe. I knew what he saw. My wolf was impressive, the largest in the pack, and would scare the shit out of any other pup during their first shift. But not my son.

My pelt was a gray so pale it was almost white, and my eyes were even more intensely blue in wolf form. Kit's wolf instincts immediately recognized me as his Alpha. But Kit, my son, fought through those instincts to cower and came forward to bump against me, yipping.

I let out a deep, approving huff. Welcome to the pack, son .

I took Kit on his first run through the forest, slow and easy. I made sure he was calm and focused, keeping him on task. I wasn't a mind reader, so I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but I did feel his excitement, and I reveled in it.

It was strange, feeling so connected to another wolf. But I'd always known it would be like this. Kit was my blood, after all.

Once we returned to the house, I should have made him shift back, but we both could sense that Kiera had returned home. I didn't need words to know that he was dying to show his mother his new form when he lay his head on his paws, whining and

wagging his tail.

Kiera was going to lose it, and I knew I'd take the brunt of her anger, too, but what point was there in waiting? I huffed, shifting back and pulling on my discarded jeans before looking back down at my pup.

"Fine. But she's going to be shocked, kid. Don't take it personally if she isn't as excited as you want her to be."

He wagged his tail even harder, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

We walked around to the back porch, where I could see Kiera sitting with Nayeli and Gwen. I groaned internally—I hadn't expected an audience—but maybe the two more experienced she-wolves there would help temper Kiera's reaction.

The moment Kiera noticed me, she smiled in an easy greeting...until the pup walked out from behind my legs. Her entire body went stiff, the color draining from her face, and she blinked once. Twice. I watched her try to speak for nearly a solid minute before she finally managed words.

"Who...who is that, Samson?"

Nayeli and Gwen had already figured it out. My cousin squealed, covering her mouth with her hands, eyes shimmering with emotion. But both women gave Kiera space.

I let my hand drift down to ruffle Kit's fur, "Our son."

Kiera sounded like she was choking. I saw the war happen in real time—the unfiltered joy fighting tooth and nail with the fury rising behind her wide, silver-black eyes. I expected all of it, of course.

What I didn't expect was for her to rush forward, shoving me in the chest hard. "You—" her voice cracked, her eyes darting back to Kit. "You didn't even ask me? You couldn't have waited so I could be here for this?"

Tears were making her eyes glisten, bottomless pools of midnight, and damn, it actually hurt me. I was more fond of her than I wanted to admit, but I also wasn't going to back down from this. Helping Kit shift for the first time was owed to me. It was my right.

I set my jaw, holding my ground. "You were there for his first steps. His first words. His first everything. I wanted this."

Kiera's lips parted like she wanted to argue—but then her eyes flicked back to Kit, who was unsure about the argument, his tail between his legs. Like it always did when it came to Kit, all of the negativity Kiera was clinging to fell away when she saw how badly her son needed her.

She dropped to her knees, hands shaking as she reached for him. "Oh, baby," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "Look at you."

Kit pressed his little wolf body against her, tail wagging so fast it blurred. Kiera let out a watery laugh, running her hands through his fur, tracing over his face like she still couldn't believe it.

And just like that, it was all okay. She didn't care that I hadn't asked. Didn't care that she was furious with me. Right now, nothing mattered but Kit, and this incredible thing he had accomplished.

And as Nayeli and Gwen joined my mate to fawn over my son, Kiera forced her way even deeper into my heart.

Hours later, I carried Kit inside, his small body slack with exhaustion, his soft brown fur still warm against my arms. He'd been so damn happy about shifting that I hadn't had the heart to force him to change back. But now, with the sun set and his energy drained to nothing, it was time.

Holding him close, I reached for the delicate bond between us, pushing my Alpha power into it, pulling him back through the shift. His small body trembled, and with a final shudder, the fur melted away, his frame rearranging itself until he was back to the boy I'd only just gotten to know.

Kit groaned unhappily as I set him on his feet, steadying him when his legs wobbled. "Shower," I ordered. "The hot water will help settle your mind, then straight to bed."

He gave a slow, tired nod, yawning hugely before shuffling off without an argument. Once I was sure he wasn't going to collapse, I chuckled to myself, heading to the kitchen. I grabbed a bottle of water, twisting the cap off just as I felt Kiera step into the room behind me. I didn't need to turn to confirm my guess; I'd recognize her energy anywhere.

Kiera didn't speak at first, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of breaking the awkward silence. After drinking half of the water, still in silence, I decided it wasn't worth winning the battle. I needed to know where she and I stood after tonight.

"Kiera..." I started turning, but she held up a hand.

"Don't. You were right. I had everything else from Kit's childhood. His first shift belonged to you."

I smirked, "Wait, you thought I was going to apologize? I don't do that."

She laughed, and I could tell she hadn't planned to be amused. I was getting under her skin as much as she was mine. And she smelled suspiciously delicious, more so than usual, but I chalked it up to the excitement of the day.

"You can't fool me, Alpha. I know you have a soft side for our boy."

"He's a good pup. Stubborn, like you, but good."

Her eyes rolled toward the sky, and I couldn't stop my grin. She was a pain in my ass, but at least she was entertaining. Nothing like the Omega I expected her to be, but I liked it.

I thought about how she'd looked earlier with Nayeli and Gwen, sitting on the porch laughing, looking settled. Like she belonged. Like she could be truly happy with the pack.

That was all I wanted for her. For Kit. The realization shook me. An Alpha couldn't afford to be soft, even towards his mate and pups, but I was falling into the trap of affection anyway. Then, the memory of the guilt I'd felt about not being there to help her shift years ago came crawling back, and I knew one thing as sure as I knew my own name.

I should treat Kiera better.

Setting my water down with a thunk on the counter, I turned fully toward her. "We're going out tomorrow evening."

Kiera blinked, startled. "What?"

"You heard me." I stepped closer, watching the way her eyes went wide when I got close. Damn, she really did smell downright edible. "Be ready by six."

Her lips parted, caught between an argument and curiosity, but I didn't wait for either. I brushed past her, heading for the stairs. She could fight me all she wanted—hell, I expected it, but she was going out with me tomorrow, one way or another.

And I'd prove to her that she wasn't just stuck here. The Saltfang pack wasn't her prison. Instead, she was home.

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For the fifth time that hour, I read Samson's text and wondered if I was making a mistake.

'We'll be outside. Dress accordingly.'

Blunt. Bossy. Annoying. And worst of all, an Alpha. Why in the hell was I going on a date with Samson again?

Oh yeah. Because I was stuck here, and he was my husband, and apparently, we needed to 'get to know each other.'

I'd told him no this morning after failing to do so the night before. But then he'd gone and mentioned Kit. Said it was good for our son to see us getting along, and that he expected me to show up tonight.

As much as I hated to admit it, I knew he was right. Kit was so happy now that we were living under one roof that I couldn't bear to make him sad again by refusing to cooperate. So, here I was. Sitting in my room, staring at my closet, and trying to figure out what the hell you wore when your husband took you out on a date. An outdoor date.

Shaking my head, I dressed, hoping like hell I had the right impression. Leggings, hiking boots, and a fitted long-sleeved shirt wouldn't be fitting for a candlelight dinner, but this was Samson we were talking about. I'd be lucky if he used utensils during dinner. I wasn't about to get caught in the woods unprepared, and I had a distinct feeling that Samson had something adventurous in mind for us.

By the time I'd finished lacing my boots, I heard Samson's Jeep outside. I stood, smoothing my shirt, then gave myself a little nod in the mirror. "This is okay," I told myself. "Just two people who are trying to get along, going on a date together. You still hate him."

I didn't.

He sucked. He kidnapped me. He thought that he owned me. And I was only feeling so into him because my heat was almost on me. But it was too late to back out now. Dammit.

I hugged Kit goodbye, telling Gwen to make sure he didn't stay up too late, and headed out to meet my date, bitter and excited all at once.

Samson looked...incredible. He always did, but tonight, he looked specifically sculpted to break down all my walls. The muscles in his arms strained the sleeves of his simple black t-shirt, his hiking pants perfectly fitted around his thick thighs. His hands were in his pockets, his stance easy and relaxed.

"Ready?"

No, but I wasn't going to say that. I'd already told him I was coming, and any more argument was just another chance for him to get me worked up. I swallowed, forcing a small smile. "Yeah, I'm ready."

His eyes flicked over me, a look of approval in his eyes, before he turned and headed for the forest. "You'll want to leave your jacket in the car. It's a hot night."

I frowned. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He didn't look back at me as he spoke, which just frustrated me even more, but I did as he asked, tossing my jacket back into the Jeep. We drove in silence, the road winding through dense trees, the scent of salt and pine filling the air. When he finally pulled off at the entrance of a narrow trail, I hesitated.

“You’re not taking me into the woods to murder me, are you?”

His lips quirked. “Not tonight.”

I snorted but climbed out, following him up the trail. It wasn’t long—just a short incline that opened up to a rocky overlook. The sea stretched wide before us, the sky painted in warm streaks of orange and pink as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

I turned to Samson, who had removed his backpack. I was expecting him to pull out some kind of gear—maybe a thermos of coffee or some bottled water for us to share while we watched the sunset. I was already surprised by how genuinely sweet the entire thing was, but when he took everything he'd packed out of his bag, I almost gasped out loud.

No freaking way was Samson Jones actually this romantic.

He spread a thick blanket on the ground, setting out pillows and blankets to make a comfortable spot. A bottle of wine sat in an ice bucket, two glasses waiting beside it. He even had a basket of fresh fruit and cheese set aside.

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face. "Samson, this is amazing."

He grunted. "I'm not doing this to impress you."

"You could have fooled me."

He gave me a look that was just shy of a glare, but didn't say anything else. We settled onto the blanket, sipping our wine and watching as the sky turned deep purple.

The silence between us was surprisingly comfortable, the tension from before melting away the longer we sat together. After a while, Samson cleared his throat, his eyes on the sunset.

"So...why do you stay?"

I swallowed the bite of cheese I had in my mouth. "What?"

"Here," he clarified, gesturing around us. "You told me at least a dozen times a day in the beginning that you were going to run the second I turned my back."

I hesitated, unsure how much of the truth I wanted to reveal. "I...well, I know it'd be impossible to escape you, first off. I couldn't leave Kit, and this place is...surprisingly good for him. I don't know why I didn't consider it, but he's a boy, and pack life is always easier for boys. Don't get me wrong, I still want to go back to Portsmouth, but I'm trying to balance what is right for my son. You're his father. If he's going to be here, I should be too."

Samson considered that. "You are a good mother."

"I try to be." I glanced down at my wine, swirling honey-colored liquid in the glass. "But there's also...you."

His eyebrows lifted. "Me?"

"Yeah. You are surprisingly a good father for Kit. And you're not the same man that I thought you were."

Samson leaned closer, his hand covering mine where it rested on the blanket. I sucked in a breath. The touch was unexpected, and so was the way his eyes softened when they met mine. "You're not the same girl you were either."

I swallowed, fighting back the fluttering in my stomach. "You're not wrong."

Samson came closer, "You were such a skittish little thing back then. But now you're a firecracker, full of magic, a power in your own right."

I couldn't breathe, his hand still warm on mine, his scent all around me. I was burning alive inside, and I grasped for any subject that would give me a second to catch my breath before I jumped him. "Still a pathetic shifter, though."

"I don't know. If Kit can do it, so can you." He leaned back on his palms, stretching his legs out in front of him, and I almost cried from relief at the tiny bit of distance between us. "I'm glad I got to be there when Kit shifted. I wanted to make sure it was a good memory for him."

I nodded, keeping my gaze on the horizon. "You did. He was so happy."

Samson exhaled, "My father wasn't like that. He was cruel about it. Tried to force it out of me too soon." He shook his head. "Took me out into the woods when I was eight, told me I couldn't come back until I figured it out."

I turned to him, startled. "What?"

"Yeah. Left me out there all night. I was scared as hell, but I wasn't about to let him see that." He let out a humorless chuckle. "Took me two days to finally shift. By the time I made it back, I was half-starved and so exhausted I passed out the second I got inside."

My stomach twisted. I'd never liked Samson's father, but this? This was worse than I'd ever imagined. "That's... that's awful."

He shrugged, like it didn't matter anymore. Maybe it didn't to him. But I felt a surge of protectiveness for the boy he used to be, just like I had for Kit.

I hesitated, then forced myself to speak. If he was going to open up, maybe I could give a little, too. "It wasn't easy for me either."

Samson turned his head toward me, waiting.

I took a slow breath, keeping my voice even. I never spoke about my shift, or lack thereof, and it felt unnatural to do so. "My shifting has always been tied to my magic. I could never separate them enough to make the change happen properly, and my magic never properly manifested until...until we knotted that first time...so every time I tried to shift before that it felt impossible. Unreachable. When I was fourteen, I pushed myself too hard during a harvest moon, trying to force it." I hesitated, my fingers curling into the blanket. "I got three-quarters of the way through before I had to stop."

Samson went still. "You got stuck?"

I nodded, the memory pressing against me like an old bruise. "It was... unbearable. I made it back to human, but I passed out from the pain. I don't remember much after that."

He stared at me, something unreadable in his expression. "That kind of pain—" He broke off, exhaling sharply. "And you still tried?"

I let out a dry laugh. "I was a stupid kid."

“No.” His voice was firm. “You were strong.”

That wasn't what I expected him to say. No one ever called me strong. Always weak, weak, weak. The way he looked at me made my heart pound—like he saw me, really saw me, in a way no one else ever had.

I tore my gaze away, swallowing down the sudden rush of feeling. I wasn't sure I could handle whatever was happening between us. But I couldn't deny that it was happening. Fire skated across my nerves, my core pulsing with how badly I wanted him. God, to feel his knot again, to belong to Samson fully, this time as his mate...

“You should use your magic to shift,” Samson said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. Like I hadn't spent my entire life struggling with exactly that. It shocked me out of my horny thoughts like a bucket of ice water over my head.

“You think I haven't tried?” My voice came out sharp, but I didn't care. Anger was welcome after the confusion of lust. More familiar. Easier to control.

Samson didn't seem fazed. “Not like this.” He turned to me, his expression intent. “You've always fought against it, but what if you worked with it? Your wolf is there, Kiera. You just have to stop holding back.”

I pushed to my feet, my pulse hammering in my ears. “You think I don't want that?” My voice rose, my emotions bubbling too close to the surface. “You think I haven't spent years trying? Do you have any idea what it's like to feel like you're not enough for either half of yourself? That no matter how hard you try, you'll never be good enough?”

He stood too, towering over me, his presence like a force of nature. “That's not what I meant.”

“No?” I let out a sharp laugh, shaking my head. “Then what did you mean? That you need your mate to be powerful so I can be useful to you? So I can be an asset instead of a burden? That you're embarrassed your Omega can't shift?”

His face darkened, and I could see the anger flare in his blue eyes. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Isn’t it?” I snapped. “You’re an Alpha, Samson. You only see strength. Power. I will never be the kind of mate you want.”

The truth of my words burned in my throat, and I hated how raw I felt. How exposed.

Samson paused, and I saw it—the moment the argument shifted, the moment he caught something in my scent, something I’d been desperately trying to hide.

Shit.

The heat was worse now. So much worse. I’d kept it at bay for years, suffering through it alone, forcing myself to endure it without relief. But now, standing here with him, his scent wrapping around me like a damn vice, it was unbearable.

I had to have him, or I was going to die. I couldn't let myself have him, because that might kill me, too.

His nostrils flared, his entire body going tense.

“Kiera,” he said slowly, his voice dropping into something low and dangerous.

I turned away from him, forcing myself to breathe through the crushing need clawing at my insides. This couldn’t be happening. I would not let this happen.

“I want to go back to my cottage,” I blurted out, my hands shaking with the effort it took to keep my distance. “Away from the pack. Away from you.” It was only a half-truth, but I was fumbling around for any subject that would piss him off enough that he would forget whatever trace of my heat he could smell on the wind.

Samson’s brows furrowed, his confusion cutting through the sharp edges of his irritation. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, needing some kind of barrier between us. “I never asked for any of this. I was fine on my own before you dragged me back here.”

“Fine? You call barely surviving, hiding all the different parts of yourself, fine?”

"Yes!" My scream was too loud, too raw, and I hated it. "Because at least I was free! I didn't have to justify myself to you or anyone else."

"You're not a prisoner, Kiera." Samson stalked a circle around me, nostrils flaring, "But I think you're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

A lie formed at my lips, but I found I couldn't do it. I couldn't outright deny my heat right to his face. Instead, I went with, "Fuck you."

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe I should fuck you, Kiera. Is that what you want? Are you hungry for my knot, Omega?"

His words broke me down, and I could already feel the slickness forming between my legs at the thought of his knot. "Samson, I—"

He stepped closer, so close I could smell the spice of his scent. He lifted a hand, brushing the backs of his knuckles against my cheek. I tried to jerk away, but his other hand wrapped around my waist, holding me in place.

"You're burning up for me, aren't you?" he asked, his voice low and rough. "That's what this is all about."

"Please—"

I might have let him fuck me right there on the picnic blanket. Hell, I might have begged for it. But I would never know, because the wind shifted, and instead of the cloying scent of my heat in the air, we both scented something much more ominous.

Fear skittered down my spine. We weren't alone.

Figures burst from the treeline, dark and swift. I barely had time to react before Samson was in front of me. His body tensed like a shield, a deep growl rumbling from his chest.

"Stay behind me," he ordered, his voice deadly calm.

But the fight had already begun.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

I could barely register the movement before the first figure lunged, a black blur, two more close behind it. I'd already positioned myself between them and Kiera, and I struck out, sending the first attacker stumbling back into the other two. I tried to grab him, to expose his face, but he rolled away. No identifying marks. No scents that made sense. Just... shadows.

The urge to shift pulled at me, but I didn't want to lose the ability to speak to my mate as the fight raged on. Three against one would be impossible for most men, but I wasn't most men. I was an Alpha.

I dodged another lunge from one of them, then ducked beneath a blow from the second. Kiera was still behind me, her fear a potent scent in the air, and it was all I could do not to spin around and check on her. I had to trust that she was okay, because I had to focus.

My wolf pushed at my skin, trying to break free. We could fight better if we shifted, but I couldn't risk letting myself get distracted by the pain of the change. Not until I knew what these assholes wanted.

"You're going to have to do better than that," I taunted, my voice low and deadly. "Come on, is this all you've got?"

The figures snarled and lunged again, one leaping at my face, while the other two went for my legs. I twisted, barely avoiding getting knocked off balance. They moved so fast that it was hard to keep track of them.

I caught one of them by the throat as he tried to dart past me, slamming him into the

ground. He let out a sharp grunt, then rolled away before I could pin him down. The others had regrouped, and they circled us slowly, looking for an opening. I tensed, waiting, letting them make the first move. I might be big, but I wasn't stupid enough to waste energy on a pointless attack. They were trying to distract me, but why?

Then, the time to think was gone. They came at me like a choreographed dance, striking fast, hard, and I felt my arm go numb under a blow that would have felled most men. I didn't feel pain, only rage.

Fuck it. If they wanted to fight an Alpha shifter, I was going to give them what they wanted. Kiera could protect herself if she had to, but I was going to end this before that even became a possibility. My wolf surged to the surface, my bones snapping and reforming as I shifted in one brutal instant. I snarled, lunging at the nearest attacker, and caught him by the arm. He yelped, tearing himself free, but not before I tasted blood in my mouth.

One down. Two to go.

I turned toward the next attacker, my wolf howling to finish this once and for all. I was so fucking angry. How dare they come here and attack us? They wanted to kill me? They were going to pay dearly for the attempt.

The second attacker was bigger than the other two. He ducked low, swiping at my front legs. I dodged back, then lunged again, teeth snapping. He twisted to the side, but I was too fast, my jaws closing around his throat. He let out a choked cry, but his thick clothing saved him. Grabbing the first injured man by the arm, the two hurt attackers fled.

The third paused, glancing between me and his fleeing friends. I growled, showing him my teeth. He gave me one last look before turning tail and running after the others. I considered going after them, but I couldn't leave Kiera alone. We didn't

know if they might be lurking around somewhere.

It stung to shift again so quickly, but I was back on two feet in seconds, panting as I tugged my pants on and grabbed Kiera's hand. "We've got to go. Now."

Wide-eyed and possibly in shock, Kiera nodded.

We made it back to the Jeep in record time, and as soon as I had the doors locked and sped towards the road, I pulled my phone out to call my Beta.

"Waylon," I didn't even give him the chance to say hello. "Kiera and I were attacked at the lookout. Three of them, all in black. Handle it, but keep one alive if you can. I have some questions to ask."

He didn't question me. "On it."

I hung up and shoved the phone in my pocket. "We'll get to the bottom of this," I told Kiera, who was staring at me. "Whoever sent those men is going to regret it."

I didn't miss the way she flinched when I said that. "Are you hurt?" I demanded.

She shook her head, but she was lying. I knew what I smelled up there on the lookout before we were attacked, but I wanted her to say it.

"Dammit, Kiera, tell me the truth," I snapped. I was trying not to lose my shit, but it was hard.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "They never touched me."

I took a deep breath, trying to get a hold of myself. I knew good and goddamned well that she was in heat, but I didn't know how far into it she was. It'd shocked me back

on the lookout, before the knowledge had made me so hard it had been hard to walk. I'd wanted her so fucking badly that I'd almost lost control, but the attack had startled us both back into reality.

Now, she thought she could backtrack and pretend she wasn't aching for me. No. It wasn't going to happen. But if she needed a minute to breathe, I could give her that.

I reached for my phone, calling Nayeli. Gwen had taken Kit to my cousin's house so they could all have a movie night, but now I was kicking myself for letting her take my son out of the house. "I need you to stay on high alert. I'm sending extra security to your place. Keep Kit with you for the night. Just in case," I said, my voice low and urgent.

Nayeli sounded frightened and so young that it made my heart ache. "Samson, what's happening?"

"I can't explain it," I said as gently as I could manage in the moment. "Call Waylon. He'll tell you. If something happens and you can't reach either of us, call Joe Longwood.

"Okay," she whispered.

"You're going to be fine, Nayeli. I promise."

She didn't respond to that, but just hung up. I dropped my phone into my lap and reached for Kiera's hand, squeezing it gently. "We'll get through this," I promised her. "Whatever this is."

I wasn't sure she believed me.

When we reached the house, I grabbed Kiera's hand again, intending to rush her

inside. But the second she tried to slide out of the Jeep, she doubled over in pain.

"Kiera!" I pulled her close, searching for a wound. She didn't smell like blood, but that didn't mean much. "Tell me where it hurts."

She shook her head, and I heard something that sounded like a moan. "It's not an injury," she whispered.

Her scent changed again, the faint sweetness of her heat returning. Fuck. We couldn't do this here. I needed to get her inside before the entire pack came running to find out what was going on.

I scooped her into my arms and carried her inside, ignoring her protests. The house was dark and quiet, the windows and doors still locked up tight. I let out a sigh of relief and headed for the stairs, but Kiera was struggling so much I made a beeline for the couch instead. I sat down on it, holding her in my lap, trying to keep from losing control.

She'd admitted to being in heat. There was no way she could hide that fact from me now, and the scent of her desire filled the air between us. My cock pressed hard against my jeans, and I groaned as she wiggled in my lap, her soft ass brushing against the bulge.

"Kiera," I growled, warning her to stay still.

"Samson." She said my name on a breathy sigh, turning to face me. "Please. It hurts."

"Tell me what you need."

Kiera hesitated, biting her bottom lip between her teeth. "Just touch me anywhere, as long as it's skin on skin. It's the only thing that helps."

"Where?" I asked, my voice rough with need.

"Everywhere," she said softly. "Just... everywhere."

I nodded, reaching for her. "Lie back," I ordered.

She obeyed, letting out a low moan as I dragged my hands along her arms and up to her shoulders. Her skin was so fucking soft, and I wanted to touch every inch of it. But right now, she needed me to get her through this heat, so that was exactly what I was going to do.

I moved down, unbuttoning the front of her shirt. She let out another sound as I pushed it open, exposing the white bra underneath. I wanted to rip and tear at the fabric, but I forced myself to keep moving slowly, not wanting to spook her. She was so damn beautiful it hurt. I wasn't sure if she knew how gorgeous she was, but I intended to show her.

"You're so beautiful, Kiera," I whispered, leaning down to kiss her bare stomach. "My beautiful little witch."

She gasped, her back arching off the couch. "Samson," she whispered.

"Mine," I growled, cupping her face in my hand. "You are mine, Kiera."

She was in pain, but this wasn't Kiera from seven years ago, terrified of her own heat and desperate for my help. No, this Kiera might have been hurting, but she was also full of fire as she pushed herself up on her knees, so we were eye to eye. My Omega might not have shifted yet, but I saw the wolf in her when the moonlight turned her eyes silver as it crept in through the window.

Neither of us moved for a long moment, and I was more than ready to hold myself

back and keep touching her softly to give her what relief I could without pushing her. But Kiera, my new, ferocious Kiera, was apparently done being treated like a doll.

She was in heat, she was hungry, and the only thing that could satisfy her was her Alpha.

Then she was on me, and there was nothing soft and sweet about it. Her kiss was fierce and demanding, her hands grabbing at my clothes, trying to get them off. Her scent filled the room and was so powerful I couldn't think about anything except her.

I tore my shirt off and then hers. Bit by bit, we shredded our clothes, barely taking the time to breathe between kisses. When we were finally both naked, Kiera straddled my hips, her heat radiating from her like the sun. I reached up to cup her face, to pull her down to me, but she was having none of it.

"Kiera," I growled.

She didn't say a word, but she gave me a look that made me go still. It was a look of challenge. A look of pure need. She wanted me, and she was done waiting. She wanted me to fuck her.

When I didn't move right away, she leaned forward, dragging her hot, wet pussy along the length of my cock. I groaned, and my hips bucked up, trying to get closer. My wolf was in control now, and it was desperate to claim her.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Omega?" I asked. My voice was little more than a growl now, and my wolf was so close to the surface that my vision had gone blurry around the edges.

"Yes," she moaned. "Fuck me, Alpha."

I'd wanted her for so long. Years. Since the moment I saw her. And I knew there would be hell to pay for this, but I couldn't stop myself. I didn't even try. I pulled her down against me, sinking inside of her in one smooth thrust. She cried out, and I stilled, letting her adjust to the feeling of my cock.

Nothing had ever felt as good as Kiera's pussy. Nothing. Her pussy was slick, taking me easily despite how fucking tight she was. My wolf wanted to take control and fuck her hard and fast until I came deep inside her, but I fought the urge. As soon as I came, I would knot her, and I didn't want this to end so quickly. I could feel her trembling above me, and I forced myself to take it slow.

"Is that what you need, little witch?" I growled, pushing up into her. "You need your Alpha to fuck you?"

She let out another moan, and I moved my hand between us, rubbing circles over her clit as I thrust up again. She clenched around me, and I groaned.

"Answer me," I demanded, forcing myself to stop moving. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to fuck me," she said, her voice a breathless whisper.

"Good girl," I growled. I grabbed her hips, holding her tight as I pushed up. She gasped, her head falling back as I slammed into her. Her scent filled my nose, making me even harder, and I couldn't hold myself back anymore.

She cried out, her nails digging into my shoulders as she came around me. Her pussy tightened around my cock, and I growled, grinding into her. I was so fucking close, but before I could give in, I pulled out, even as Kiera cried out in disappointment.

"Easy, Omega," I rumbled, giving myself a second to come back from the precipice. "Grab the back of the couch, knees on the cushions."

Kiera looked like she might argue, but she must have realized how close I was because she didn't say a word. She did as she was told, and I watched as her ass swayed in front of me. Fuck, I wanted to take her there, too, but that would have to wait. We needed to get through the heat first.

I stepped up behind her and drove my cock into her again. This time, there was no slow build-up, and I pounded into her hard and fast. She moaned, and I reached forward to grab a fistful of her hair, pulling her head back.

"Come for me again," I growled in her ear. "I want to feel your pussy squeeze my cock as you come."

She was nearly sobbing, and I could tell she was close. Her inner walls fluttered around my cock, her ability to hold herself upright fading. I was close, too, but I wanted to make sure she came first. I hungered for her orgasm as much as I did for air. I fucked her from behind until her legs were shaking, pulling her back against my chest so I could squeeze and flick at her hard nipples while I filled her over and over.

She moaned, "Knot me. Fuck, Samson, I'm burning alive. Please."

I exhaled harshly, driving into her. "Is that what you need?"

"Yes, please," she begged, rocking her hips to meet my thrusts.

I leaned forward, pressing my mouth to the back of her neck. I kissed the soft skin there, then ran my tongue along her spine. She shivered, letting out a low sound of pleasure.

"You want my knot?" I asked. "Because you're about to get it."

"Fuck. Yes."

"Good girl," I praised. I grabbed her hips, holding her in place as I pistoned into her wet heat. She keened, her head falling forward, and it was all over when I nipped the skin over her sensitive scent gland, right where her neck met her shoulder.

She screamed, her pussy spasming around my cock as she came. I fucked her hard through her orgasm, and I didn't let myself go until I was sure I'd wrung every ounce of pleasure possible out of her.

I couldn't hold back anymore. I came with a roar, my cock pulsing, coating her insides. She shivered, aftershocks of her own climax milking my cock as my knot swelled, locking us together.

My arms shook, and it took an incredible amount of concentration to lower us both to the floor while still tied together. I reached up and dragged the throw blanket from the couch to cover us, and Kiera shifted, tucking her ass against my hips as snugly as she could, both of us hyper-sensitive.

"Are you alright?" I whispered, brushing her hair aside to kiss her neck.

"Yes," she murmured, letting out a contented sigh. "I feel...good."

I chuckled, nipping at her ear. "Good," I murmured. "I want you to feel good. I want you to feel amazing."

She hummed again, and I wrapped my arm around her waist, holding her close. There were a hundred things I needed to do—check in with Waylon and with Nayeli, call a pack meeting about the attack, let Joe know about the danger...but all of it would have to wait. Kiera was still in heat, and the only thing that mattered right now was taking care of my Omega.

My Omega.

That thought brought a smile to my lips, and I kissed Kiera's neck again, letting my hand roam along her stomach. I slid my hand lower, between her thighs. "You're going to need this again tonight, aren't you?" I asked, slipping my finger over her clit.

Kiera blew out a breath, her hips jerking as she rubbed herself against my palm. "Yes," she whispered. "I need you, Alpha."

"I'm here," I told her, nuzzling against her neck. "I've got you, little witch."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

There were a million times that would have been better suited to me trying to figure out my shift, but with Kit still at Nayeli's and Samson out on pack business, I was gifted a rare day alone.

After the attack, Samson had put an enormous amount of security on Nayeli's house, and we agreed to let Kit stay there until we had a better idea of what the attackers wanted. The plan was for me to go to Nayeli's as well, but after last night...well, it was safe to say I needed some time to clear my head.

I needed some time to process everything that happened. I'd been in heat last night, and Samson had...well, we'd...

Fuck.

I groaned, letting my head fall into my hands as I remembered the feel of Samson's hands on my body. I couldn't stop thinking about it. And the worst part? I wanted him again. Even though we'd spent most of the night fucking, I still felt empty.

Instead of laying in bed and dwelling on it, I showered after Samson left and decided to do something I'd sworn to never attempt again—shift. I hated to admit that Samson was right, but I was older and way more in control of my magic. I needed to try and use it to shift, especially if we were going to be in danger. I could defend my son a thousand times better with teeth and claws than I could with two fists.

I let out a long breath and closed my eyes.

"You can do this, Kiera," I murmured to myself.

I focused on my magic, letting it spread through my body. I'd partially shifted before, and it was an awful experience. Every inch of my body hurt, and I'd had to stop more than halfway through because I couldn't bear it. I knew if I shifted, I'd have to keep going until my wolf was fully formed, or I risked not being able to shift back.

And I didn't want to be stuck as a half-wolf for the rest of my life.

The only time I'd ever shifted, I'd been so distraught and overwhelmed by the pain that I blocked most of it from my mind. This time, I would go slower. There was no rush.

The quiet of the forest was comforting, grounding. I reached inside, searching for the well of magic I knew was there. I had used it for years, harnessed it, molded it to do what I wanted. But I hadn't tried to shift in so long. Not since I was fourteen, not since the harvest moon when everything had gone so wrong.

But that was the past. Now, I needed to do this. For me. For Kit.

I reached deeper, calling for that magic, and felt it, flickering at the edge of my senses like a distant flame. When I called it forward, it came willingly, filling me with the warmth of its power. This was the easy part. It was the deeper, wilder part of me that would be difficult.

The part that terrified me.

I took another breath, trying to keep calm as I pushed myself to reach deeper. There, hidden away and curled up in sleep, was my wolf. She wasn't as close to the surface as I had been expecting, but I knew she was there. I could feel her presence, strong and steady.

With my magic, I reached out for her, coiling the strands of my power around her to

pull her forward. There was a faint shift in the air, a cool breeze that passed over me, but nothing else.

Frustration bubbled up in my chest. Why couldn't I do this? Why was it so damn hard?

More and more, I wrapped her in my magic, until she was almost cocooned in it, and I pulled. My wolf stirred, coming forward, guided by the power I had fed into her. Hope flared, but just when I thought I'd succeeded, the magic flickered out.

I was so close—but it wasn't enough. I couldn't pull it together. The power was there, I knew it, but it felt too scattered, too tangled. My mind raced, trying to sort through the mess of emotions, the memories, the fear that had held me back for so long.

But as the frustration mounted, a knot in my chest loosened slightly. I was doing this for a reason. I wasn't just doing this to prove something to Samson. Or even to myself. I was doing it because Kit needed me.

With a sharp exhale, I reached out again, my fingers twitching. The magic responded, just a little this time. It felt like it was finally starting to unfurl, like a flower blooming in the dark. My body started to tingle, and I swore I could almost feel the shape of the wolf inside me stretching, clawing, pushing against the cage of my skin. I felt the beginnings of the change, the first flickers of something that could break free.

The searing, horrifying memory of my first botched change tried to surface, but I pushed it back with all my strength. The energy in my body felt like a wild, burning thing—like it could rip me apart if I wasn't careful. The strain of trying to hold it all in, the way it pulsed inside me like it wanted to get out, was too much. I gasped, my hands shaking. This isn't how it was supposed to feel, I thought, panicked. But I couldn't stop now.

I stumbled forward, bracing myself against the nearest tree, my breath ragged in my chest. I could feel the magic—my magic—slipping out of my control, its wildness suffocating me. The sensation was painful, but not in the way I had expected. This wasn't the shifting pain I remembered. This was the weight of not being able to connect with it, not being able to make it happen.

With a groan, I let the magic fade, pulling back with every ounce of willpower I had left. It wasn't the shift I needed, but it was something. A reminder that I still had a piece of it left. That I wasn't as broken as I thought.

Still, I'd failed. I didn't want a damn piece of my wolf, I wanted all of her. I wanted to shift, like my son, like the mate I should abhor, but I wanted to impress anyway.

Frustration and exhaustion settled heavily in my chest as I sank to the ground, my knees giving way. I didn't cry. I didn't scream. I just sat there, letting the silence of the forest drown out the noise in my head.

Dammit. I'd been so damned close.

As the sweat on the back of my neck dried and I caught my breath, I thought about how Samson had explained helping Kit through the change. He tapped into the power of the pack to do it, so maybe that would be the key for me, too.

My wolf wasn't the problem. I was. I couldn't untangle my witch magic from my wolf, and it was keeping me trapped.

But what else was there to do but try again?

I took a deep breath, ignoring the ache in my bones, preparing to try to shift once more. Before I could begin, though, the sound of crunching leaves interrupted my concentration. At first, it panicked me—was it the attackers again? But it only took a

second for me to pick up their low voices and identify them.

It wasn't the attackers, but it was the second worst option—Pete, Curt, and Francine. What in the hell were they doing out in the forest behind Samson's house? I quickly ran through the mental list of my choices: I could run back to the house, stay put, and hope they passed me by, or confront them and just hope for the best.

Of course, I thought bitterly. What perfect timing. Just when I thought I might have a breakthrough.

After the attack yesterday, I didn't have it in me to get into another altercation, so I stood as quietly as possible, hoping that they would move on.

"Do you think it's this way?" Francine asked, but there was something different about her tone. Instead of snide mockery, she sounded...scared?

It was enough to make me pause. Maybe they weren't out here looking for trouble.

Curt spoke next, and his voice was also tight. "I don't know. It's been a while since we've been here."

I narrowed my eyes, studying the three of them closely as they came into view. Francine was limping, tears streaking down her cheeks. Curt held her steady as they walked, and Pete lagged behind them, his shoulders hunched. They hadn't noticed me yet, but they were definitely in trouble. I considered the scene, wondering what exactly I should do.

I stood, fingers twitching as I called my magic, ready to strike if they thought about messing with me again. But I knew that something was wrong, and their anxiety was rolling off. Either I could let them continue to wander, or I could speak up and make the first move.

Maybe my heat and connection to Samson made me too brash, but I chose the second option.

"Hey!" I called, stepping out from behind the tree. "What's going on?"

All three of them froze, their heads whipping around to stare at me. Pete snarled, but the sound died in his chest when he recognized me. There was a long stretch of quiet as we stared at each other, but finally, Curt spoke up.

"Don't freak out," He said, lowering Francine to the forest floor. "I know you don't owe us any kindness, but we were out hunting when Francine got bit by a rattlesnake. The Alpha's house was the closest, and we obviously know about your magic now..."

Curt trailed off, letting his words sink in. I glanced down at Francine, who looked even paler than usual. Her leg was swollen, the skin an angry red with the distinctive black striping of a rattlesnake bite.

"Shit," I whispered.

Francine sniffed, wiping tears from her face. "Can you help me?" She asked, her voice frail.

"Of course," I told her, my instincts kicking in. I knew what had to be done, but I still hesitated, looking at the three of them warily. I may have been willing to help them, but they weren't exactly my favorite people.

The memory of the last time we'd spoken came back to me, and I narrowed my eyes, glaring at them.

"I'm not going to help you if you're just going to be dicks again," I said firmly.

"We won't," Pete promised, his voice quiet. "We were assholes, and we know it."

I stared at him for a long moment, letting him squirm under my gaze, before I let out a long sigh. "Okay, fine." I crouched next to Francine and began working on the bite, using my magic to draw the poison from her system. She yelped, her body jerking as the magic rushed through her. I pushed deeper, focusing on the dark tendrils of poison inside her.

"It burns," Francine whimpered, but I ignored her, drawing the poison into my palm. My fingers glowed with silver light, and I let out a breath as the poison gathered in my hand.

"Got it," I muttered, pushing the ball of magic into the air and sending it deep into the forest.

Francine sagged back onto the ground, breathing hard. Her leg still looked bad, but it wasn't as swollen as it had been, and the redness was slowly fading. She reached out and gripped my arm.

"Thank you," she whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I don't know what we would have done..."

I glanced at Curt, who nodded in agreement. Pete didn't meet my gaze, but he, too, nodded. A pang of sympathy hit me, and I reached out to squeeze Francine's hand. "You're welcome."

I stood, dusting myself off and ignoring the ache in my bones. I'd used a lot of magic to pull the poison out of Francine, and I needed a moment to gather myself.

Curt watched me closely, his brows furrowing. "Why did you help us?" He asked, sounding genuinely confused.

I hesitated, thinking about how to respond. "Because you needed it," I finally said, shrugging. "It was the right thing to do. You're part of Samson's pack. My pack, too, I guess."

Curt didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded slowly. "Still, we haven't exactly been kind to you."

I let out a long sigh. "Yeah, you haven't. Ever."

Francine's cheeks reddened, but Curt just shrugged. "We know. And we're sorry. Samson told us everything that happened between you two, and he was right. You didn't deserve to be treated that way."

Surprise rippled through me, and I gaped at Curt. I didn't expect Samson to tell them anything, let alone stick up for me. He hated these guys.

Pete finally spoke up, his voice low. "You didn't deserve it. And we're sorry."

I studied Pete for a long moment, watching as he clenched his jaw, waiting for me to either accept or reject his apology. I remembered the last time I'd spoken to him, when he'd been cruel, so much like the others, but there was something different in his eyes now.

He looked ashamed.

"It's okay," I finally said, shaking my head. "Just get the hell out of here before I have to explain to Samson why I'm hanging out in the woods with my former bullies. Please."

Pete nodded quickly, helping Francine to her feet. Curt took her other side, and they continued on down the path, heading toward town. I watched them go, frowning

slightly.

I didn't want to admit it, but Samson's talk with them had clearly worked. My Alpha wasn't just talking about change. He was working towards it. It was something I never thought I'd live to see.

Maybe there was hope for the Saltfangs after all.

Healing Francine had given me a second wind, and it wasn't until two hours later that Samson found me. I was hyper-aware of him, and even with my eyes closed, I could sense that he was near. We had barely spoken since we slept together, and having him so close was wildly distracting. When I felt him and smelled his scent, my mind immediately went back to the feeling of him inside me, and how uncontrollable my need had been for him.

It was embarrassing, but even worse was that I wanted more.

"Hey, what are you doing?" He asked, stopping short when he saw me.

I didn't answer for a moment, focusing on my task. I'd finally managed to tap into the pack bond, and I was holding it steady. It was a small thing, but it felt like a victory. "I'm practicing. Like you wanted me to."

Samson frowned. "You should take a break."

"I'm fine," I told him, closing my eyes. The bond was strong now, and I could feel all of my packmates, like we were all connected by an invisible thread.

I expected him to argue like usual and try to force me to stop for the time being, but

instead, he settled on the ground next to me, close enough that our knees were touching. "Alright, if you're going to be stubborn, let me help you at least."

Flustered, the hold I had on the pack bonds slipped through my fingers, and I felt the urge to scream. I held it back, though, and gritted out the words, "How can you help me? You've never helped me before. Why now?"

He didn't answer right away, and I opened my eyes to look at him. he was watching me. "I want to do things differently now," he said finally, reaching out to take my hands. "I want to be a better leader to our pack and a better mate to you."

I snorted, trying to pull my hands away, but he held fast. "I mean it, Kiera. I know that I haven't always been a good Alpha to you, but I want to change that. Look...I helped pull Kit through the change. I could do the same for you."

The idea of being forced through the shift made me shudder with revulsion. I remembered the pain of it and the feeling of being trapped inside my own body. I couldn't do that again. "No," I said sharply, pulling away. "I'll figure this out on my own."

Samson frowned, "I wouldn't drag you through it like I did with him. It would be more like me holding your hand as we walked through it together, you know what I mean?"

I was still suspicious, but having a guiding hand didn't sound so bad. "And you could really help me? You wouldn't just make it worse?"

"I helped Kit, didn't I?" He pointed out, "Look, Kiera, I know I've been a dick, but the connection between us, especially after last night, is powerful." He held out his large hand, palm up, "If it becomes too much, you can always let go."

To say I was taken off guard was an understatement. If Samson wanted to, he could hold me down and force me through the shift, and I wouldn't have a bit of say in it. But here he was, offering a helping hand and promising we could stop if I wanted to. He was like a stranger wearing the skin of the Alpha that had broken my heart so long ago. Except that pushy, dominant Samson was still there, he was just willing to compromise, at least a little bit, for me.

I eyed his hand, and then his face. His eyes pleading with me to let him in, to trust him. "Alright," I said softly. "Let's try it."

A smile broke out on his face, and he took my hands. "Good, now take a deep breath and close your eyes."

I did as he instructed, shutting my eyes tight. It was quiet. The only sounds around us were the birds and the gentle breeze rustling the leaves.

"Focus on your breathing," Samson murmured, squeezing my hands. "Feel the air enter your lungs, and then let it out slowly."

I let out a shaky breath, focusing on the pack bonds. They were strong, pulsing with power, like a steady heartbeat.

I could feel all of my packmates, their emotions clear and sharp. There was Samson, right in front of me, a powerful presence, steady and sure. There was Nayeli, a bright spot of light, and Kit, who radiated happiness and innocence. And then there were the others, each with their own unique signature.

As I focused on the bonds, I could feel Samson's presence grow stronger, wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

"That's it," he said, his voice low and soothing. "Keep breathing and focus on the

pack bonds."

I took a deep breath, letting myself relax into the bonds. It was strange, but I could almost see the pack bonds now, like a web of silver threads, stretching out into the forest. I felt Samson's bond ghosting over mine—not tangling with it, but simply touching. A guiding hand, just like he'd said.

"Ready?" I heard him say back in the real world, "I'm going to start shifting. Just follow my lead. We'll go at your pace. I won't leave you behind."

I nodded, keeping my eyes closed. I felt Samson's power surging, and then there was a shift in the bonds. His wolf form pressed against mine, not forcing me to change, but pushing me forward.

I felt the familiar itching under my skin, and I let the change take over. The process was agonizingly slow, and I fought against the pain, trying to stay in control. Samson was there with me, a solid presence in the bond. He kept pushing me forward, and I let out a cry as my body finally started to shift.

The world around me grew smaller, and I felt my bones break and rearrange themselves. My muscles stretched and tore, and the pain was unbearable. Then I remembered...I wasn't powerless. I'd healed Francine earlier with my magic, so why couldn't I take the pain away from myself the same way?

I called to my magic, letting it wrap around me like a shield. The pain dulled, and I felt myself slip deeper into the shift. The change was smooth this time, and I could feel my wolf form taking shape. My senses were heightened, and I could smell everything around me—the trees, the grass, Samson's spicy scent. It was incredible.

Triumph rang through me like a bell.

I opened my eyes and saw the world through new eyes. Everything was sharper and clearer. I took a deep breath and let out a howl. It echoed through the forest, and I felt Samson's pleasure at my success through our bond. I turned to look at him and saw his wolf form standing next to me. He was massive, his fur silver-white, his eyes oddly human in his canine face. I nuzzled against him, feeling a wave of affection.

I'd done it. I'd finally done it, after all this time.

Samson nudged me with his nose, and I felt a tugging in my chest, urging me to follow him. I did, and we began running through the forest together, our paws flying over the ground. The wind rushed past my ears, and I felt truly free for the first time since I'd returned to Saltfang territory. Even my heat was taking a backseat to the new sensations, and I was content to simply run with Samson. There would be time for me to slake my hunger for him later.

I had no idea where we were going, but I instinctively trusted my Alpha, my mate, as we flew over the ground.

Eventually, we came to a stop near a small pond. The water was clear and cool, and I could see my reflection—dark fur and darker eyes—before thirst took over, and I lapped at it, grateful for the chance to rest. Samson did the same, and then flopped down next to me, his warm body pressed against mine. It was strange, but I was comfortable with him like this. He wasn't the domineering Alpha anymore. He was just Samson, my mate. I rested my head on his shoulder and sighed happily.

I'd done it. I'd shifted, and it hadn't been bad at all. In fact, it had been fun, running through the forest with Samson by my side. My wolf form wasn't as weak as I thought. I looked up at the sky, watching the clouds drift by, and let out a long sigh. It was nice, but I should have known that peace never came easily to packs like ours.

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It felt good. God, it felt good. Little by little, my Omega was giving in to me, letting me knot her, allowing me to help her shift, and now sleeping happily next to me in the dappled sunlight around the small pool.

We couldn't rest forever, though; it was getting late, and I didn't want to have her out in the woods after dark because of the attack yesterday. I licked her face, nudging her with my snout until her impossibly black eyes opened sleepily.

She yawned, revealing a row of sharp teeth, and looked around with a sigh. We didn't need words for her to understand what I wanted. It was time to go, but we could revisit this again when things had calmed down.

Where the run out had been as fast as possible, taking turns nipping at each other's heels and trying to outpace the other, heading back was slower. We walked side by side, our tails occasionally brushing together. I was in no hurry, until a sharp, discordant feeling ran through the pack bonds, cutting through the rush of the forest. It was trouble. Kiera whined—now that she was fully connected with the Saltfang pack, she'd feel everything even more intensely than I did. The curse of being an Omega.

We ran then, and once we were back near the house, I wrapped my body around Kiera and tried to help her through the change once more. Kiera, though, had discovered something about herself. I felt the swell of her magic, and she used that to absorb the pain of the shift. Before I knew it, she was human again, pulling on her clothes.

As much as I would have liked to keep her naked, I had Alpha business to attend to.

"Stay here," I told her, yanking my shirt back over my head, "I'll handle this."

But Kiera gave me a look, "It's my pack, too, now. Let me help."

I knew better than to argue with her, and if I was being honest, she was right. An Alpha's Omega wasn't just a prized possession for him. An Omega was also meant to act as a mediator for pack issues, and her innate gentleness was a counterbalance to the violence of an Alpha.

"I dealt with a problem earlier, and you didn't even notice," she argued, taking my silence for dismissal. "Francine and company came here looking for me specifically. She'd been bitten by a snake, and they trusted me to extract the venom with my magic. If I can handle that, I can handle this."

Considering that the trouble I could sense had the distinct scent of Francine and her two followers, the timing was almost humorous. If what she said was true, then Kiera would be a better asset than she knew. "Impressive. Alright, let's go. I think we're about to discover that those three are up to some more bullshit anyway."

Tensions were rising in the pack, and I could feel that a fair amount of them had gathered outside of Waylon's property to see what was going on, but I still forced a protein bar into Kiera's hands before we climbed into the Jeep. The first shift was hard on anyone, but even more so for an adult, and she needed her strength. Plus, I got a secret thrill out of taking care of her in any way possible.

My Omega was licking the chocolate crumbs off her fingers when we skidded to a stop outside of Waylon's property, and my Beta's anger hit me like a brick wall. I trusted Waylon to deal with petty pack bullshit, but whatever was going on must have been important enough to wait for me to defuse it.

"What's going on?" I called out as I got closer. There was a small crowd surrounding

my Beta and a few of the other pack members. I caught a glimpse of Francine's fiery red hair before Waylon stepped in front of me.

"Mason challenged one of the others for dominance," he said grimly, jerking his head towards the crowd. "And it's turned into a shit show. The three stooges over there won't separate for it to be a fair fight, but..." he dropped his voice so only I could hear, "If you want my opinion, boss, it'd be a good idea to keep Mason as low in the hierarchy as possible. He's dominant as hell, but something is off in the kid's head."

I pushed through the group, not bothering to answer, seeing Pete, Curt, and Francine on one side, and another young wolf, Mason, on the other. Francine looked like shit, which corroborated Kiera's snake bite story from earlier, and she was clinging to Curt like her life depended on it. Still, she was clearly furious, and when she bared her teeth, I could see her canines were longer than normal—her wolf was skating close to the surface.

I'd often thought that if a woman could claim rank in the pack on their own, Francine would be above both her boyfriend and Pete, but as it stood, the four wolves in front of me were ranked with Curt at the top, followed by Pete, Mason, and then, of course, Francine. Her rank would rise when she and Curt married.

"Explain!" I yelled, making nearly everyone jump. Kiera, next to me, was one of the few who didn't.

"This fucking prick waited until we were at a disadvantage to challenge Curt," Francine answered while her boys stayed silent. "We've been hunting all day, and I'm injured. Curt had to carry me out of the forest. It's shameful to try and challenge him right now."

I looked at Curt, who shrugged, "It's true. Francine got bitten by a snake, so after Kiera helped us, we headed back. He was waiting for us."

"Excuses," Mason snapped, his stance aggressive, his body radiating a kind of dominance that immediately put me on edge. He was dominant, that was clear, but he was also low in the pack hierarchy—too low, in fact, to be acting with such aggression without cause. With a shaved head tattoos crawling up his forearms, he might have looked intimidating to a human, but none of that shit mattered in the pack. "He's using his bitch to get out of it."

I'd heard enough. I strode forward and shoved Mason back, making him stumble. "That's enough. You want to challenge for the rank? Fine, you can challenge me if you're so fucking stupid."

Mason's eyes widened, and he shrank back from me, shaking his head. "No, Alpha, I wasn't challenging you. I just wanted—"

"You wanted to challenge Curt, but Curt has a higher rank than you," I said coldly, baring my teeth. "You don't like it? Then, take your challenge up with me. Or would you like to challenge Joe Longwood or Scott Nevada for their packs next?"

I could hear a few people in the crowd snickering, but I ignored them. Mason was getting desperate, looking for any way out.

"I...I was just trying to protect the pack," he said weakly, knowing how lame that sounded. He was starting to sweat now, and I could smell the fear rolling off of him in waves.

"By challenging a higher-ranked member of your own pack when he was weak?" I sneered, and Mason looked away. He had no answer to that, and we both knew it. "You're lucky that I haven't kicked your ass out of my territory yet."

The crowd erupted into surprised murmurs, and I knew exactly why. Even just a few years ago, I would have thrown Curt into the ring myself. I would have welcomed

any and all challenges for dominance, believing that a pack with more violent, more dominant wolves was stronger than others. I'd fed into this mindset, and now that I'd matured, I was left to clean up the mess that young, rage-fueled Samson had fostered.

It wasn't just Mason's challenge, either. As I stepped back and watched the dynamics of my pack, I saw the undercurrent of violence between its members. Curt, Francine, and Pete were only middle-of-the-pack wolves, but they'd spent years fucking around with anyone lower than them. Waylon was a rare calm but dominant wolf, making him perfect as my second, but the five or so wolves right below him were constantly sniffing around for blood in the water.

All the bullshit aside, I'd been running my pack like a dictator for far too long. I'd thought that the harsh rules and punishment I'd doled out made me a strong leader, but it had just made my pack weak. Wolves that feared me more than respected me.

But fear was a tool, and it was the one I was most comfortable with. "If this is the way things are going to be, then I don't see any other choice but to banish all four of you for six months." I kept my voice low, but the crowd went silent at my words.

"That's not fair," Curt protested, glaring at me. "Mason is the one who—"

"Shut the fuck up," I growled, making him shrink back. I turned to Pete and Francine, "If you don't want to be exiled permanently, I suggest you get your asses off my territory by nightfall. And if I ever hear of any more bullshit from you, I'll make it a year—"

A small hand landed on my forearm, and it stopped me in my tracks. I looked down at Kiera, so absorbed by her that I barely noticed that Mason was stalking towards Curt again, taking any opportunity to continue what he had started.

"Samson, please. Just let this one go. Francine was bitten by a snake, and Mason is

tired. Just...just give them a break."

Her touch was gentle but insistent, and I looked down into her eyes, black pools that seemed to be able to see through my very soul. At that moment, I realized that the old ways wouldn't work anymore. I couldn't just exile people anymore and expect that to fix things. I had to change.

My chance to do better, at least with this challenge, was nearly gone. Mason was inches from Curt's face, and I knew I was too late to stop this fight.

But Kiera wasn't.

She drew a pattern in the air with a flick of her wrist. It glowed green before flashing bright white, making everyone flinch and cover their eyes. When we opened them again, Mason was flat on his back, trapped by an invisible barrier, and Curt was looking at my Omega in awe.

"I could have handled that," Curt said, almost petulantly, and Kiera sighed.

"I'm sure you could have," she answered, "but if you had, then Samson would have had to exile you."

"Kiera," I rumbled, looking down at her, "If you don't want exile, how should we proceed with these four?"

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"Wait..." I finally managed. "You want me to decide?"

Samson nodded, giving me a slight smile. He didn't even look nervous, damn him. "Yes, I want you to decide what to do about these four. If you don't want to, though, I'll—"

I shook my head, "No, I want to..." I searched his face, so sure that I would find some sort of animosity there. Like he was waiting for me to mess up, so he could put me back in my place.

Instead, Samson's expression was entirely genuine. He really did want me to make the call, right there in front of a good portion of his pack. I swallowed, nerves tangling with the restless heat simmering beneath my skin. This was terrible timing—I was already feeling unstable, my emotions unpredictable. But I couldn't back down now. When would this opportunity come up again?

Okay. I could do this. Omegas helped their Alphas all the time, just usually more behind the scenes. Or quietly, standing behind them. Not at their sides, like Samson did now. I thought about Nayeli and how she yearned for equality in the pack. Then I thought about Kit and how I didn't want him raised in a pack where women were only as important as their partners were.

I could do this.

I looked at the two parties over—Mason, who was spilling over with dark, dominant energy, desperate to be in charge. Then, the bully trio, hurt and tired, who had put their pride aside to ask me for help, but who still had a long way to go if they wanted

to ditch their abysmal reputation. I needed to be fair but not violent in my judgment. Samson was my brawn, and he needed me to be the brains.

The answer came easily once I thought about it that way. Taking a breath, I squared my shoulders. "Mason needs an outlet for all that dominance. Instead of letting him take it out on others, he should be responsible for training younger wolves. Teach them discipline, control. If he wants respect, he should earn it by helping the pack, not by pushing others down."

A murmur rippled through the gathered wolves. Mason stiffened, glaring at me, but I pushed forward. "And Pete, Curt, and Francine—they're always looking for an easy target. They need to learn what it's like to care for someone other than themselves. They can help the elders with daily tasks for the next few weeks. Maybe then they'll understand what real strength looks like."

Silence. Heavy, choking silence. Had I messed up? Been too soft? Gone too far? Egged on by my rising emotions, heat pumped through me, making me dizzy and hot all over. It was the worst possible time. I should have just let Samson handle it—

Then, my mate stepped forward, his hand coming to rest on the back of my neck, a warm lifeline. "You heard her." His voice was unshakeable. "What Kiera says goes."

I looked up at him in shock, but Samson just smirked at me before turning his gaze towards his pack, "And that's final. If you don't like it, you can leave."

With that, he started walking away, not waiting for them to follow. I scrambled after him, not sure what had just happened, but also too tired to question it. My whole body felt heavy from the magic I'd used, and I was desperate for someplace dark and cool to hide in. Preferably curled up against Samson, the only person on the planet who could calm my heat.

"Are you alright?" Samson asked, pulling me closer. I hadn't realized how hard I was panting until he put his arm around me, his big body shading me from the sun. "You look pale."

"I'm...fine," I managed. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the truth either.

The truth was that I needed a knot, and I needed one now. But I couldn't tell Samson that. Even though I knew he wanted me, it wouldn't be right to just use him. Especially since he had no idea why I was so needy, and I refused to tell him.

"Well, we'll get you home, and then you can rest," Samson said. He looked concerned, his eyes searching mine for something I couldn't place. I knew my eyes were getting brighter by the second, though, and I ducked my head in embarrassment.

"Yeah, that sounds good," I mumbled, and Samson tightened his arm around my shoulders. It felt like he was trying to give me a comforting hug, which I appreciated, but it also made my insides clench. I leaned into him, trying to take deep, calming breaths as we drove home, barely believing what had just happened.

He supported me and told the pack that my opinion mattered. Not just a woman, but an Omega. It was unheard of, but for me, Samson had broken the mold.

Back at the house, I could barely walk the short distance from the driveway to the front door. I was already slick, and while Samson's hand around my waist kept the pain at bay, the lust was a different story. Once we were inside, he turned to me and dragged his knuckles over my cheekbone.

"I'm proud of you, you know. You did a damn good job back there, Kiera."

I swallowed, my throat dry, face flushed. "You've got to stop being so sweet to me, or I'm going to lose it."

When he smiled, it was wicked, and I knew that Samson must have been able to scent the intensifying of my heat long before we got inside. "Maybe that's my plan."

I couldn't help but smile back, and the tension in my stomach unraveled a little bit. I'd never known a side of Samson like this, and it made my insides warm in a way that had nothing to do with my heat. I could feel myself leaning into his touch, wanting more of it.

And that's when it hit me. The full force of my heat slammed into me, and I staggered back, falling into the wall with a groan.

Samson was there in a second, his body pressing me up against the cool surface of the wall. "I've got you, Kiera," he murmured, and his voice was so deep and soothing that my eyes rolled back in my head. His hand slid down to my waist, pulling me closer, and I could feel his cock pressing into my stomach. It was big, and I wanted it inside of me so bad that I almost begged for it.

"You're so good to me," I whispered, my hands coming up to wrap around his neck. Samson's lips curved in a smile, and I was just about to pull him down to kiss me when he bent his head and sucked my earlobe into his mouth, making me shiver. He chuckled, low and deep, his hands sliding under my ass and lifting me up so that our faces were level.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling the thick length of his cock against my core. I hummed with need, grinding against him. "Samson...please."

"Hold onto me," he rumbled, "I'm taking you to the bed this time. We've got all night."

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Kiera weighed nothing to me as I carried her to my bedroom, but I'd never had anything more important in my arms. She smelled like heat and sun-warmed lemons, and I wanted to bury myself in her, taste every inch of her skin.

She was already whimpering with need when I laid her down on the bed, her fingers digging into my shoulders. "Samson," she gasped, and just the sound of my name on her lips made my cock swell even more. "I can't...I need..."

"I've got you," I promised, trailing my hands up the soft skin of her thighs. I knew she was begging me to fuck her, to bury myself in her as soon as possible, but I hadn't lied when I told her I wanted to take my time.

I had waited too long to touch her to rush this, no matter how badly my body demanded it.

My mouth found hers, and I kissed her hard. She moaned, arching up into me, her breasts pressed against my chest. I broke away from her mouth to kiss her neck, loving how she trembled at my touch.

"I want you," she gasped, "I want you so bad, Samson."

"And I'm going to give you everything you want," I rumbled, dragging my tongue over her collarbone. "Everything you deserve."

She couldn't stay still, her restless hands stripping her clothes off before I even had the chance to. I laughed low in my throat, unbuttoning my jeans and following her example.

When we were both naked, I looked at Kiera's beautiful body and had to swallow hard to keep myself from swearing. She was so damn gorgeous, and I was starving for a taste. I started at her scent gland, dragging my teeth over it just the way she liked, and then continued down her neck. She pushed herself against me, and I felt her nipples pressing against my chest.

I kissed between her breasts, sucking one nipple into my mouth, my hands gripping her waist and hips as she writhed beneath me. When her first nipple was hard and wet from my ministrations, I switched to the second, giving it the same attention. Her hands tangled in my hair, and she whimpered, her thighs squeezing my hips. My sweet Omega was beyond words, but her desperation was clear.

I grinned against her breast, pulling away with a pop and trailing my tongue down her stomach. "Patience, Kiera," I said, dipping my tongue into her navel. She shivered when I nipped her hip bone. I kept going, spreading her thighs and burying my face in her pussy.

I was sure she was about to jump out of her skin when my tongue made contact, but damn, was it worth it. She was slick, nearly dripping for me, and the taste of her on my tongue made my head spin.

"Samson..." she cried. I knew exactly how she was feeling. The mate bond was like a rope wrapped around my chest, tightening with every second that I wasn't buried inside her. I lapped at her clit, sliding a finger into her heat, and her whole body clenched.

She chanted my name, like it was the only thing she could remember in the haze of her heat, and I had never heard a sweeter sound. My cock was so hard I could fuck through solid steel, but I wasn't coming up for air until she came all over my face.

Kiera's muscles locked up as if electrified when I slid one, and then two fingers inside

her, curling them and stroking that secret spot against her inner walls. She pushed my face against her pussy, all but riding me as she chased her pleasure. I laughed, the rumble of it making her tremble, and kept sucking her clit until her whole body spasmed.

"Samson," she gasped, "Oh god, don't stop..."

"Never," I growled, fucking her with my fingers and my tongue.

She moaned, her thighs shaking, and I knew she was close. "You're going to cum for me, Kiera," I commanded, and she shattered. Her pussy tightened around my fingers as she came, and I didn't let up, savoring every little twitch and cry she wanted to give me.

When it was over, I pulled my fingers out of her, sucking them into my mouth to clean off every last drop of her taste. Kiera watched me, her eyes wide and glazed with lust. "That was...you are..."

"I know," I chuckled as I kissed a path up her body.

A bit of normal, not heat-addled Kiera rose to the surface, unable to let me gloat without biting back. "It figures you'd turn even this into a chance to stroke your ego."

I couldn't resist. "Baby, I've got something a lot bigger than my ego you can stroke."

She screeched, but I stopped her retort dead in its tracks by slanting my mouth over hers. I laughed against her sweet mouth, dipping my tongue and letting her taste herself as the heat daze rolled over her once more. Her body softened, legs still trembling from the first orgasm, as she spread them to welcome me into her body. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I bit the inside of my cheek to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Nope. Kiera, my Omega, was still spread out before me, waiting for me to fuck her, knot her, and make her come. It was enough to drive a man mad, and I didn't hesitate another second. I gripped her waist, lining up my cock with her pussy and sliding into her tight heat in one stroke. She hissed, nails digging into my shoulders, eyes rolling back. This was what she needed.

"You feel so fucking good," I gritted out, grinding my hips against hers. "Such a good girl for me, aren't you, Omega?"

She hummed in agreement, rocking her hips to meet mine as I started fucking her. I didn't even know if she heard me, the haze of her heat overwhelming everything else. But that was okay—I could read her body well enough to know that she was right there with me. Her legs were wrapped around my waist, her hands gripping my shoulders as I slammed into her. It felt so good that I couldn't stop myself from sinking my teeth into the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Not hard enough to break skin, but enough to leave a mark.

"Fuck," she gasped, "Samson, please...please..."

I didn't know what she was begging for, but I knew what she needed. I moved faster, harder, until the headboard was slamming against the wall. She screamed, nails digging into my back, and I felt the exact moment that her pussy started milking my cock as she came. The mate bond snapped tight, wrapping around my chest like a steel band and making my cock swell.

Kiera made a high, desperate noise as my knot stretched her open, and I nipped at her scent gland again before capturing her mouth to drink down her cries. My vision blurred, my whole body lighting up with pleasure as my knot locked into place inside of her. I came so hard that it felt like my entire being was pouring out of me and into her, but it was more than just that. She was mine, my Omega, a part of me as vital as my own heart. I tried to tell myself it was just the knotting that was making me feel

this way, but with each passing second, it became harder and harder to believe.

We were both panting as we came down from our highs, her eyes wide and glazed. She looked stunned, her lips swollen from our kisses, and I couldn't resist leaning down to press my forehead against hers. It was too much—too intimate, too personal—but I couldn't pull away. Not yet.

I rolled us onto our sides, my arms tightening around her as we settled in to wait out the knot.

"Are you alright?" I asked. She was so quiet that I was starting to worry I'd hurt her.

"Yeah," she said softly, "I'm just...processing."

"I can't say I blame you. That was intense." Kiera was my weakness, but the connection had been so intense this time that I was still seeing stars. "How's the heat pain?"

"Gone," she said with an enormous yawn, "But it will be back once we're no longer tied."

It was all the excuse I needed. "Stay with me tonight, Kiera. I'll get you through it. You won't have to hurt."

She hesitated, and I couldn't tell what was going through her mind. Finally, she nodded. "Okay. You're...I..." Finally, she sighed, "Thank you, Samson."

My heart lurched. She shouldn't be thanking me. Although spending the time together would help her, I was still a selfish man, and I wanted to have her as many times as possible before the sun rose. Her heat was just a clear-cut reason that didn't make me have to examine why she affected me so powerfully.

"You're welcome, Kiera."

After spending an entire night with Kiera in my bed, I should have been satisfied enough to let her slip my mind. But after taking Kit to school and returning home to see that she had left for work without saying goodbye, it seemed impossible to focus on anything else.

It didn't help that she'd left a note thanking me for the night together. It was so damn formal that it set my teeth on edge, and I wanted nothing more than to go into town and find her. I could have gone back to sleep—I didn't get enough rest, especially after the last few nights—but I knew there was no chance of that. Not with Kiera's scent still lingering on my sheets.

My wolf was restless, pacing through my mind, demanding that I go find our mate. My wolf had never been wrong about anything before, which made the fact that it was so insistent all the more irritating.

She was my mate, but my obsession was bordering on dangerous. No matter how much I wanted her, I couldn't afford to let her consume my every waking thought. Not with the pack and work to take care of, and not with the attack that had nearly taken me out. Someone was gunning for me, and if I let myself be distracted, they would win.

I wasn't going to be able to shake the urge. I needed to see her, just to know that she was safe, and that things weren't irreparably changed between us.

I stopped at Kiera's old job, grabbing two coffees to have an excuse to see her, and I'd almost made it to Emerald Blooms when a familiar figure waved me down from the other side of the sidewalk.

"Samson," Scott called, jogging over, "Didn't think I'd run into you here."

"Scott," I said, bristling. With so few possible identities for the attackers from the other night, Scott had risen pretty far on my list. I couldn't pinpoint what exactly he would get out of such an attack, but he'd shown interest in Kiera when she worked for him. "What are you doing here?"

Scott raised an eyebrow. "Just taking a stroll. What about you?"

"Bringing coffee to my mate," I said, trying not to snap at him. It was harder than I expected. Even though I couldn't tell what he wanted, the fact that he was standing between me and Kiera was setting off every protective instinct I had. "Why in the hell am I finding you here in my territory again?"

Scott didn't rise to the bait. "Come on, Sam. Because of the coffee shop. We've been over this."

"You're not at the coffee shop now, asshole," I pointed out, wishing like hell my hands weren't full of cardboard cups. "In fact, you're a hell of a lot closer to where Kiera is working now than you are to Crescent Moon."

He cocked his head. "Don't tell me you're still stuck on the idea that I'm sniffing around your mate."

"I don't need to tell you anything," I snapped. "I'm telling you now to get off my territory before I make you."

"Up until right now, I was under the impression I had free travel privileges here from you and Joe. Hell, Samson, my territory is just a few miles away. You can't be serious about this."

"Do I look like I'm joking?" I growled. I was about to throw the coffees to the pavement and show Scott just how serious I was, but before I made the decision, I heard the shop door of Emerald Blooms open and a gust of magic-tinted wind push Scott and me both a few feet away from one another.

My eyes darted to Kiera, who was standing in the doorway of her shop with a murderous expression on her face. "You're upsetting my customers."

I blinked, my rage evaporating at the sight of her. She looked gorgeous, even dressed in a ridiculous apron with dirt all over her hands.

"I wasn't harassing anyone," I said defensively. "Scott and I were just having a conversation."

Scott snorted. "A conversation about your territory."

Kiera's gaze landed on Scott and narrowed. "There are way better places for a talk like that. Scott, please go. Samson, come in."

I did as I was told, feeling like I was a teenager being sent to my room. Not that it was a bad thing to be near Kiera. If anything, she was the only thing in the world that could get me to stop fighting with Scott.

The second we were inside, Kiera closed the door behind us, turned on her heel, and glared at me. "What the hell?"

I held up my coffee-filled hands in surrender. "Kiera, I swear I'm not trying to fight with Scott, I just—"

"No," she interrupted, "I don't give a shit if you want to fight Scott. What the hell are you doing here?" She was annoyed, but the twitching of her lips told me she was also

fighting a smile. "Didn't you get enough of me last night?"

"Not even close." The words were out before I could think about it, and I almost winced. There was no need to be so blunt. "I just wanted to make sure you were alright."

Her face softened. "Oh, Samson..."

"And to bring you coffee," I added hastily. I didn't want her pity, even though I knew she didn't mean it that way. "I wasn't sure if you'd gotten enough sleep last night."

She raised an eyebrow. "Was that your plan? Wear me out until I can't move and hope I stay home from work?" She plucked the cup from my hand and took a sip. "Good try. Too bad I'm a professional."

I grinned. "Can't blame me for trying."

Kiera sighed, but her eyes were sparkling. "You're so lucky you're cute. Come on, I'll show you around."

Just like that, Scott was out of my mind, and every ounce of me was laser-focused on the woman next to me.

"Where do you want to start?" she asked as we walked into the main part of the shop.

"How about right here?" I asked, grabbing her around the waist and running my thumb over her lower lip. The few people in the shop turned around and pretended like we were invisible, but Kiera flushed bright red anyway.

"One quick kiss," she hissed, "Before you get me fired."

"No promises," I murmured, but I did as I was told and kissed her. I wanted nothing more than to lay her out on one of the tables and fuck her until she was screaming my name, but I couldn't do that here. It would be hard enough for her to work after last night.

Instead, I reluctantly released her. "Now, how about that tour?"

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

The museum was bustling with people, a weird but oddly fitting birthday venue for Nayeli, who was turning 2. Glass artifact cases lined the walls, but in the center of the main hall, a small dancefloor was laid down, surrounded by tables and buffets of finger foods. The crowd was a mixed bag—pack members, Nayeli's nerdy human friends, and a few academics who probably hadn't expected a shifter gathering in their quiet institution.

I watched as Nayeli flitted from one exhibit to another, talking to her guests, totally in her element. She was dressed like a curvy, gorgeous disco ball, her dress covered in silver sequins, and was the true life of the party. I was happy for her. Exhausted after the week I'd just had, but happy.

I sipped at my flute of punch, adjusted my own much more subtle, deep green sundress, and waited for the party girl to make her way over to me. I'd already congratulated her on the evening, and she was too busy being social to pay me much attention. That was okay. I'd never been as social as Nayeli, and even though we'd become real friends, I was content to watch her and enjoy the atmosphere.

When she finally made it over, I hugged her, handing her the rest of my punch when I saw her fanning herself from all the rushing around she'd been doing. "Having a good time?" I asked, grinning. "It's a pretty awesome party."

"Thanks," she said, beaming at me. "Samson really outdid himself this time."

"Samson?" I repeated. "Samson planned this party?"

"Yep." She fanned herself some more. "He asked me what I wanted to do for my

birthday, and I told him to surprise me. It's been a long time since I've gone out, you know, and it was so sweet of him." She leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "You'll never believe what else he did."

"What?" I asked, even though I had a feeling I already knew what she was going to say.

"He's been helping all the pack members. Bringing together different people, making sure packmates of all ranks interact. He's been working to unite everyone, no matter their hierarchy. And it's working."

"Really?" I asked. Nayeli nodded excitedly. "Wow. That's...wow." I didn't know what to say. My mind was still spinning from the fact that Samson had put all this together for Nayeli. As if it weren't enough that he'd stood up for me in front of his entire pack, now he was doing this?

I needed to talk to him. I'd thought that our night together was just a one-time thing, a way to satisfy my heat and get it over with, but if he was continuing to be sweet to me, and continuing to make real changes with the Saltfangs that just so happened to line up with what I wanted from the pack...maybe there was more going on between Samson and I than I thought.

"Hey, I'll see you later," I said, squeezing Nayeli's shoulder, "I need to go find Samson."

She grinned. "Good luck. I think I saw him going outside."

I weaved through the crowd, waving at some familiar faces, but not stopping for any chit-chat. The door was at the far end of the building, but I couldn't help but stop short when I caught sight of Samson.

He was standing under the towering T-rex skeleton, a much shorter figure standing next to him and reading the informational plaque out loud. I thought Kit was going to explode with excitement when I told him his big cousin Nayeli was having her birthday at the museum, and I'd breathed a huge sigh of relief when he decided it was Samson he wanted to show around, not me.

As I watched them together, I wasn't sure I could blame Kit for being so excited. Samson looked downright dashing in his black suit, with Kit looking like his little clone in his own tiny tuxedo. They made quite the pair, and the sight of them together sent my heart into overdrive.

Was this really the man who had been so cold to me just weeks before? Was this the same wolf who had rejected me seven years ago after our night together?

There was no question about it—my feelings for Samson were anything but platonic. I cared for him, I wanted him, and now I was sure that I didn't want to be anywhere else except by his side. I pushed aside the guilt I felt at the realization. I should have been trying to leave again—for my own safety, and for Kit's. Instead, I'd given in to my weakness and stayed. And now that I was here, I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else.

Samson must have heard my heartbeat or my breathing from across the room, because he turned around, meeting my eyes with a knowing grin. "Kiera," he said, his voice husky. "Come here."

I walked towards him, ignoring the eyes on me as I crossed the dance floor. All I could focus on was the wolf in front of me, looking at me like I was the only person in the world. He tapped Kit on the shoulder, "Go find your big cousin. I need to talk to your mother alone."

Kit grinned and took off without another word, and before I could say anything,

Samson took my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor as the music shifted to something slow and sultry, the sound of it curling around the edges of the main hall.

"Samson—" I started, but he cut me off.

"Just dance with me," he murmured, pulling me against his chest. "I know you want to."

He was right, damn him. I sighed, pretending to be more annoyed than I really was, but settled into the dance with him easily. After all, we'd had quite a few opportunities to learn how each other's bodies moved. I knew what Samson wanted, and I knew how he liked it. He'd been demanding, insatiable, and just rough enough when I needed him to be.

As a dancer, he was still domineering and possessive, his hands holding me as close as was appropriate at a party filled with our peers. "Nayeli told me you planned all of this," I started, looking up at him from under my lashes. "She told me about what you've been doing with the pack, too. Helping them."

I expected him to be smug or dismiss my words like usual, but instead, he nodded, "I guess you could say that."

"Samson—"

"Kiera," he cut me off again, "I don't want to talk about pack business right now. Can't I just enjoy dancing with my wife for one evening?"

It was the first time he'd said it so bluntly, and I swallowed hard against the sudden lump in my throat. "We can dance," I said finally, trying not to let my voice waver. "I'll be quiet."

"That's a first."

I laughed, but lay my head on his chest nonetheless. For a few songs, we could just be a normal couple before the real world came barging back in.

When the music kicked back into high gear, Samson kissed me quickly and went to hunt for Kit. I was burning up—from exertion this time, not my heat, which Samson had worked out of me last night, thank goodness—and I made a beeline for the punch table. It had been refilled while I was dancing, and I downed a glass before pouring myself another one.

"Enjoying yourself?"

I jumped at the sound of Mason's voice, but I immediately decided that was all the reaction he was going to get out of me. I casually sipped my punch, not even looking in his direction.

"Oh, that's how it's going to be, huh? The Alpha lets you play peacekeeper for a bunch of worthless wolves, and now you think you're above all of us, right?"

"Not all," I corrected, still looking out over the dance floor. "Just you."

He snarled, but it was low enough that no one else heard. "You're so damned naive, Kiera. You think sending me to work with a bunch of fucking brats was going to reform me? Do you really think any of the pack respects you as anything else besides Samson's Omega?"

I whirled to face him, fury burning in my chest. "Watch your tongue, Mason."

His eyes flashed, but he didn't look scared. "Or what? You'll go crying to Samson? Because of you, I missed my chance to rise in the fucking ranks. Why in the hell would you defend those three idiots when they hate you just as much as I do?"

"They asked for my help," I spat. "Is that what you want to hear? They came to me hours before the challenge. I helped them, and they apologized. They're making an effort, and you aren't."

He let out a harsh laugh, shaking his head. "Oh, Kiera. You really are stupid. It's pathetic. You're a sad, weak little Omega that the Alpha got saddled with because you were dumb enough to get knocked up—"

"Enough."

The crowd closest to Mason and me had already started to go silent while they watched us, but when Samson spoke, his rumble seemed to echo in the large hall.

He walked between the tables and made his way over to us, his eyes glinting in the low light. His gaze was fixed on Mason, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. When he finally stopped, he crossed his arms and looked from me to him. "Is there a problem here?"

Mason opened his mouth, but Samson stopped him, "Don't bother lying, Mason. I heard it all."

My face flamed red, and I wanted to crawl under the nearest table. The last thing I needed was the entire pack to know about my problems.

Mason's face was flushed, too, but there was a stubborn set to his jaw. He wasn't going to apologize in front of everyone.

Samson had the entire party crowd in the palm of his hand as he approached Mason, getting close enough that Mason had no choice but to cower under the dominance of his Alpha.

"I warned you, Mason," Samson said, his voice low. "And you disobeyed me. Again."

I could practically feel the tension rolling off of Mason in waves. He was angry, and I knew he was desperate for a fight, but he wasn't going to get one here. He was being humiliated in front of the entire pack, and he knew it. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he clamped his mouth shut instead.

"Mason, as Alpha of this pack, I hereby exile you from these lands. You are banished, and if you set foot in this town again, you will be killed."

My blood ran cold. "Samson," I whispered.

He ignored me. "Go," he growled at Mason, baring his teeth. "Before I change my mind."

I looked at Mason. For a second, I thought I saw something in his eyes—fear maybe, or even regret, but it was gone as soon as it had come. "I'm glad to be leaving," he snapped. "I'd rather be an outcast than be stuck in this shithole with you assholes."

Samson snarled. "Go. Now."

Mason glared at me one more time before storming out. The crowd parted for him, watching in silence until he slammed the doors behind him and left. When he was gone, Samson spoke again, this time speaking to everyone.

"Let Mason's fate be a lesson to you. From here on out, I will be working to purge the poison from the Saltfang pack. We are done with the old ways, where the weakest of

us are treated the worst. I don't want to see any of you following in Mason's footsteps. You have the potential to rise in the ranks if you work for it—I believe that. But when we treat our own pack members like they're lesser, the pack becomes weaker as a whole. Understand?"

No one said anything for a long moment, but then a single voice called out, "Yes, Alpha."

The words echoed around the hall, and Samson looked up, his eyes shining. "Good." Samson exhaled sharply, his shoulders tense as he turned toward Nayeli, his gaze regretful. "I'm sorry, Nayeli. I didn't mean for your birthday party to turn into a scene like that."

Nayeli blinked at him, her expression unreadable at first, then her lips curled into a sly grin. "Did you mean what you said? About not tolerating hatred toward weaker pack members?"

Samson didn't hesitate, his voice firm and sure. "Yes. I meant every word of it."

I watched Nayeli's eyes light up, her smile widening to a grin that nearly split her face. There was a certain spark in her that I admired—a fire that had always burned within her, but now it looked like Samson had just fed it a bit more fuel.

"Well, in that case," she said, tears of happiness gathering in the corners of her eyes, "Kicking that asshole Mason out of the pack? That's the best birthday gift I've ever gotten."

A laugh bubbled up from her, and soon enough, the tension in the room seemed to ease. The pack was still processing what had happened, but if Nayeli was happy about it, then the rest of the party knew that they could be happy about it, too.

I didn't blame them. Even I was surprised at Samson's actions. He was ruthless, yes, but I'd never expected him to stand up for me in front of the whole pack. His words from earlier rang in my head: "As Alpha of this pack, I hereby exile you from these lands."

He'd removed one of his own wolves from the pack just to protect me. The idea of it made my heart race and my stomach feel funny, and I wasn't sure I wanted to examine exactly why that was.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

I could feel the weight of the day on my shoulders as I left Waylon's house. The meeting had gone on longer than expected as I talked about strategy, extra protection for the more vulnerable pack members, and organizing the guard shifts. There were still zero clues about who had attacked Kiera and me, and each day that passed without an answer made me more and more stressed. It wasn't good for the pack's morale either.

Scott was still at the top of my suspect list, but it seemed that I was more suspicious of him than anyone else. Maybe he was innocent, but I wasn't going to let my guard down with the other Alpha until I knew for sure.

It was late when I finally got home, and the house was dark and quiet. I sighed with relief, kicking my shoes off and shrugging my jacket onto the floor. I didn't care where it landed. I was just grateful to be home. I hadn't realized how exhausted I was until I'd been able to relax.

The lights were dim, and I was fully expecting everyone else to be sleeping, but as I walked into the kitchen, I was surprised to find that Kiera was still awake. She was sitting on the couch, her hair wet from the shower, a cup of steaming cocoa in her hands. It was her favorite, I'd learned, and the more anxious she was, the more she drank.

"You're still up?"

She gave a tired, knowing smile. "I was waiting for you."

Damn, this woman had me all tangled up in knots. With five words, I was overcome

with the need to hold her. To touch her and feel her heartbeat against my skin. The bond between us was growing stronger every day, and sometimes, I could feel her emotions through it. There was a warm tingle in the back of my mind, her worry for me clear as day.

I sighed heavily, feeling my shoulders droop. "I'm sorry I didn't come home earlier," I said. "The meeting ran late."

"It's fine," she said softly. "I just wanted to make sure you ate." She nodded toward the kitchen counter, where a plate sat covered by a glass lid. "I made you dinner."

The words sounded foreign to me. It had been a long time since I'd had someone take care of me like that. Not since I'd taken over the pack, at least. It was a simple meal—a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup, but it made my throat tight just to look at it. I'd been so preoccupied with finding out who had attacked us that I'd hardly been able to think about anything else, including food. I'd barely eaten anything today, and I suddenly felt ravenous.

I ate like an animal, only stopping when Kiera joined me at the table, sliding a second cup of cocoa over to me. I finished off my soup, and she sat with me while I ate. She didn't say anything, and I was grateful for that. It was nice to just be silent with her.

After I ate, she took my plate away and washed it, putting the leftover soup back in the fridge before joining me at the table. She sat close enough that our knees bumped together, but she still didn't say anything, just linked our hands together. The silence was comfortable, though, and I was glad I wasn't alone. It felt right. Like some time over the past few weeks, the Omega sitting across from me had turned my old, empty house into a home.

Kiera left for bed a few minutes before I finished my cocoa, and I was halfway down the hallway when a soft snore stopped me. As quietly as I could, I stepped into my son's room, watching the peaceful rise and fall of his little chest. I reached out, brushing a piece of dark blond hair off of his forehead, and pressed a kiss to his temple. His nose wrinkled as he scrunched up his face, but he didn't wake up.

God, I'd missed so much of his life. I'd spend the rest of my own life making up for it if I had to.

I watched him sleep for a few minutes longer before I slipped out of the room and made my way back to mine. Kiera was still awake, lying in bed with a book open on her lap. She glanced up as I closed the door behind me, closing her book and setting it on the nightstand.

Wait. She was in my bed? We'd slept apart since the last night of her heat, and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her there until now.

"Is Kit okay?" She asked, her eyes wide.

"He's fine," I said, smiling despite myself. "He was just snoring."

"Oh," she let out a soft laugh, her shoulders relaxing as she smiled back. "He always did that when he was little. It was cute when he was a baby, but then he got older and started sounding like a chainsaw."

I laughed, and she looked surprised by the sound of it. My chest squeezed, and I knew I wanted to tell her. I had to tell her. I'd already kept so much from her, and it wasn't right. She looked at me, a soft frown tugging at the corner of her lips. "What's going on, Samson?"

I didn't know where to start. The guilt and the shame in the way I treated not only her,

but the rest of the pack, was gnawing on me relentlessly. I had been proud to be an Alpha, to take my father's place, but I wasn't proud of the things I'd done to cement my authority. It took the woman lying in my bed to open my eyes, and for that alone, I owed it to her to be honest.

"When we first met," I began slowly, sitting down next to her. "I was a fucking asshole. Then you presented as an Omega and went into heat, and you were the first Omega in heat I'd ever encountered. I told myself over and over again that I was doing the right thing by knotting you when you needed it, but you got under my skin even then, Kiera. You brought out every protective instinct in me."

Kiera was watching me, stunned, her eyes wide and owlsh.

"Part of me rejected you because I wanted to shield you from all this—the pack, my responsibilities, everything that came with it." I continued, "I thought I was doing the right thing then, too, that I was protecting you from something ugly. But, like I said, that was just part of me. The other was just an unredeemable asshole who had convinced himself that it was beneath him to make the first Omega he ran into his mate."

She opened her mouth to say something, but I kept going, feeling the words tumble out of me. It was like a floodgate had been opened, and I couldn't stop now that I'd started. "I was just a selfish bastard who only cared about power. I wanted to impress my father, to prove I could be the strongest, the best. I didn't care who I hurt in the process. And I hurt you. I hurt you so much, Kiera."

I looked down at my hands, unable to meet her eyes. They were shaking, and I clenched them into fists. "I'm sorry," I said, my voice hoarse. "I'm so fucking sorry."

She stared at me, her lips parted in shock. She looked like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. The room was silent, save for the sound of our breathing. Finally,

after what seemed like an eternity, she spoke. Her voice was soft, but there was a steely resolve behind her words.

"You're right. You were a selfish bastard. We missed out on a lot of time together. But I forgive you."

I looked up at her, my heart pounding. I couldn't believe what she was saying. "You do?"

"Yes. Because you're not the same person anymore. You've changed, Samson. And I can feel it. I can feel you." She leaned forward, resting her hand on my knee. "I feel our connection in my heart, and I know you feel it too."

I nodded slowly. I did feel it. I couldn't deny that. It had been there ever since the night we'd first slept together, and it had only grown stronger since then. "I'm a better Alpha with you around, you know? You balance me. You keep me calm when calm was a totally foreign concept for me before."

A small, watery laugh bubbled out of her. "Come here. Please?"

I didn't hesitate. I slid onto the bed next to her, pulling her into my arms. I rested my chin on top of her head as she curled against my chest, tucking her face into the crook of my neck.

"I missed you," she said, her voice muffled. She didn't clarify if she meant she'd missed me today, or if she meant the entire time we'd been separated. I didn't have the heart to dig into the question.

I knew what she really meant.

I'd missed her too. I'd missed her for years. But I couldn't tell her that. Not now. Not

when there were still so many things between us that we hadn't addressed yet. So, instead, I just held her tight and breathed in her scent.

"You're here now," I murmured. "That's all that matters."

"Mhm," she hummed, nuzzling closer. "Stay with me tonight?"

"Of course," I whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple. I didn't bother to point out that she was in my bed. "Whatever you want."

"Anything?" She pulled back to look at me, a teasing glint in her eyes.

I chuckled, pressing a kiss to her sweet mouth. "Within reason, mate. Within reason."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

The bell above the door chimed, and I looked up from the succulent I was potting, expecting to see a customer. It was a Tuesday afternoon, which meant it was slow as hell, so I was about to jump at the opportunity to help someone.

Instead, I saw Samson, and my stomach did a little flip-flop.

Joe wasn't in the store often, so the place didn't reek of Alpha energy, but Samson's presence was quick to change that. I was surprised to find that I didn't consider his specific brand of Alphaness to be entirely unpleasant anymore. In fact, I loved it.

"Hey, handsome," I said, stepping out from behind the counter. "What are you doing here?"

Samson stepped around a shelf of air plants, his hands in his pockets. He was dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a gray henley shirt that hugged his muscles perfectly. Lucky shirt. "I just came to check on you," he said, his voice low. "Make sure you are safe."

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't I have a protection detail for that?" Ever since the attack, Samson had wolves patrolling the street outside the shop almost constantly. It was annoying, but I understood. What we'd experienced was terrifying.

Samson smirked, leaning against the counter. His eyes darted toward the front door, and he lowered his voice. "You deserve the best."

"And I suppose that's you?"

He nodded, a playful gleam in his eye. "Of course. No one else is good enough."

I couldn't help the smile he pulled out of me. It was strange, flirting with Samson. I'd been attracted to him from the moment I laid eyes on him, but we'd always had such bad blood between us that I'd never thought I'd get to have a chance at being with him. Now, I belonged to him, and the ties that bound us together weren't chafing at all anymore.

Samson reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered on my cheek, his thumb tracing along the line of my jaw. I shivered at the contact, eyes fluttering closed.

"So, you're off work now, right?" he asked.

I huffed. "You know good, and well, I'm not. I hung my schedule on the fridge. I'd like to believe that you can read."

Samson grinned, taking a step closer to me. He smelled like the forest cut through with a peppery note, his scent filling my lungs with every breath. "I can. I was just hoping to steal you away sooner."

It was tempting. Damn, it was really tempting. The store was empty, and I'd been a model employee. I wouldn't get in too much trouble...but no. My Alpha would have to be patient.

"You'll have to wait a few hours," I said, taking a step back. "I've got a few more things to do around here."

His arms wrapped around me, and he slid his nose over my scent gland, making my knees weak. "I could kill Joe. Would that change anything?"

I laughed, squirming out of his grip. "Joe's your friend. Don't ruin that for a few hours alone with me."

"You're right, even if I don't want you to be."

"I know," I teased, patting his cheek. "Why did you want me home so early anyway?"

Samson shrugged, finally giving up on his make-me-abandon-my-job seduction. "I thought we'd go on another date."

"Really?" I asked, fingers twirling the strings of my apron absently. "Just...out of nowhere?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

I snorted, amused. "Typical man. We should choose the date together. Or better yet, let me plan it so we don't end up hiking or just running in wolf form again."

Samson gave a wry smile, and I grinned back. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and I felt my cheeks grow warm.

"Fair enough." He finally agreed. "Anything you want to do, we can do when you're off work, of course. But I have a price for being so understanding."

"...yeah?"

He paused, leaning forward so that his lips brushed my ear. "You have to let me kiss you right here, in front of God and everyone who comes into this shop."

I pulled back to look at him, shocked. "You'd really do that?"

"Why not? You're mine, aren't you?"

I bit my lip, trying to suppress the grin that was spreading across my face. "Yes," I said, nodding slowly. "Yes, I am."

"Good," he murmured, pulling me against his chest. His hands slid around my waist, drawing me closer until our bodies were pressed against one another.

Samson dipped his head, brushing his lips against mine. They were soft and warm, and I sighed into the kiss. His fingers tangled in my hair as he tilted my head back, his tongue delving into the cavern of my mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him back hungrily.

Samson let out a low growl, his grip tightening around my waist. He lifted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his hips. My back hit the wall of the shop, and he pinned me there. He broke the kiss, his breath coming out in ragged pants as he nuzzled my throat.

He kissed me again, slow and languid, like we had all the time in the world. I clung to him, lost in the feeling of his mouth on mine. I could feel his cock hardening against my thigh, and when he pulled back to look at me, his pupils were blown wide with lust.

"I want you," he said darkly, his hands sliding up my thighs. "Right here, right now."

Work, work, you're at work, my mind chanted, and it took every bit of my willpower to unwrap my legs from around Samson and stand again. "Later," I promised. He groaned in disapproval when I stepped away, fixing my now chaotic hair and clothes. "Stop trying to get me fired."

He huffed, but there was a smirk on his lips. "It wouldn't be the worst thing to

happen."

"It would be to me," I said, pointing a finger at him. "Now behave, and let me finish up. I'll see you at home."

He narrowed his eyes, but he gave in, "Fine. But we're revisiting this tonight. After our date."

I smiled at him, and he leaned in to kiss my cheek. "Looking forward to it."

"I'll see you later," he said, heading toward the door. "Don't keep me waiting too long."

I clocked out at 2:30, handing over the door keys to Debbie and throwing my apron in the dirty linen bin. It was warm, only a slight breeze rustling the trees, which was exactly why I'd walked to work that morning. Samson hated it, but it was good exercise.

It was only a few miles back to Samson's house—well, our house now, I guess—and I enjoyed the walk, especially with the sun on my skin.

I pulled my hair into a high ponytail, sighing as the wind cooled the sweat on my neck. Business had picked up in the afternoon, and I couldn't wait to get out of my jeans and t-shirt and take a shower. Maybe even soak in the tub for a bit. I hummed, turning onto the sidewalk that led to the house. I wasn't quite sure how my night was going to go. I had a few date ideas, but I'd decided to try and convince him to give me a few days to plan. There wasn't much interesting going on in town on a Tuesday night, anyway.

I was lost in thought, flipping through date ideas, when something changed.

A smell, maybe. Or a sound. I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but I knew something wasn't right. It was almost like a sixth sense, a shift in the air around me. I stopped, looking around. The forest was quiet, too quiet. There were no birds chirping, no squirrels skittering through the brush. I couldn't even hear the wind through the trees.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I started walking again, a little faster this time. Whatever it was, it didn't feel like it was a good thing. I wished I'd brought one of Samson's bodyguards with me, but I thought I'd be safe on such a short walk home. I was beginning to regret that decision.

Then I caught the scent on the wind—Nayeli, and blood, just inside the forest that ran along the sidewalk. Instantly, I followed the scent, and the closer I got, the more I could feel her distressed energy. I should have called Samson, Waylon, or anyone else, but Nayeli needed help immediately, and I wasn't thinking straight.

The trees thinned ahead, and then I saw her, horror washing over me. Nayeli, her face contorted in pain, was caught in an old bear trap. I sprinted to her side, kneeling down next to her, panic making it hard to breathe.

"It hurts," she cried, tears streaming down her face. "I-I tried to get out, but..." She sobbed, trying to twist her foot away from the metal teeth clamped around her ankle. Blood dripped onto the forest floor, staining the leaves beneath her.

"It's okay," I said, reaching for the trap. "I'll get you out. It's going to be okay."

The metal was rusted, and it took a few minutes of struggling, but I finally managed to pry the trap open. Nayeli screamed, and I winced. My hands were scraped raw from the rust and the force of trying to get the trap open. Once it was loose, she pulled her foot free, clutching her ankle to her chest.

"We've got to get you out of here," I said as I fumbled through my pockets to find my phone. "I'm going to call—"

"Kiera," Nayeli screamed, "Behind you."

I whipped around, magic gathering in my palms, but just as I focused my power, a sharp pain exploded in the back of my head. Staggering forward, my vision blurred. Everything was spinning, and before I could make the call that would have saved our lives, the world went dark.

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I checked my watch again, my stomach tightening with each passing minute. Kiera was late. More than late, actually, and she was never late. I'd tried calling her, but she hadn't picked up, and the sinking feeling in my stomach only intensified. We had plans. A date. Kiera was never this bad about keeping in touch.

For a horrible moment, I wondered if she had finally run away, back to Portsmouth, but one glance at the little boy coloring in the living room told me that was an impossibility. She would never leave Kit behind.

So, where in the hell was she?

Something wasn't right, and my instincts were already screaming at me to move. Do something. Find my Omega.

I headed to the living room, where Gwen was sitting with Kit. The plan was for her to take him to Nayeli's so the three of them could watch a movie...

Except Nayeli was late, too.

"Everything okay, Sam?"

"Kiera's late. I can't reach her. And Nayeli should have been here by now, too."

Gwen's brow furrowed. "Do you think something is wrong?"

"...I don't know." I gestured for her to come to the other room with me, away from Kit, "Look, can you stay here with the boy? I need to find the two of them before I

lose my cool, and I don't want to upset Kit. He'll worry himself sick if he knows both of them could be missing."

She gave me a tight smile. "You've got it, boss. I'll make sure he's distracted."

"Distracted from what?"

I groaned, dragging a hand through my hair. Kit apparently hadn't been content to wait by himself.

"Nothing, kiddo," I said, shooting Gwen a warning look. She nodded, her expression sympathetic. "I'm just going to head out for a bit, okay?"

He looked between us, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You're gonna go find Mama, aren't you? Can I come with you?"

Gwen shot me a pleading look, and I sighed, stepping toward him.

"It's a little grown-up stuff, buddy," I said, ruffling his hair. "You don't need to worry. I won't let anything happen to her, okay?"

Kit's expression fell. "You promise?"

I hesitated. I wanted to assure him, but didn't want to lie to my son either. If there was something wrong with Kiera and Nayeli, then I would need to take action, and there was no guarantee I could make any promises.

"I'll do my best," I said finally, crouching down so we were eye-to-eye. "I swear it."

That seemed to appease him, and he nodded slowly. "Okay." Then, swiftly, as if he wasn't sure how I'd react, Kit threw his arms around my neck. "Be careful."

"I will," I lied, swallowing down the lump in my throat. "I promise."

Minutes later, I turned the key in the ignition. There was still no word from my cousin or my mate, and I was certain it wasn't a coincidence. I could feel it deep in my bones. I took a deep breath, forcing myself to stay calm. There was no point in panicking. I dialed Waylon as I turned onto the road, and he picked up on the second ring.

"Waylon, I need you to meet me at Joe's shop. Kiera was supposed to be home from work an hour ago, and I can't find her anywhere. I'm going to check with Joe, see if he knows anything."

"Got it. I'll be there in five minutes."

He hung up, and I pressed down on the accelerator. Joe's shop was only a few miles away, but it took me half the usual time to get there. I had to find her.

The bell over the door rang as I rushed into the shop, and Joe looked up from behind the counter. He frowned, leaning forward to get a better look at me.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked, his brows furrowing. "You look like shit."

I felt Waylon come in behind me, and seeing the two of us together instantly made Joe realize how serious this was. He stepped out from behind the counter, coming to stand in front of me.

"What's going on?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

"Kiera's missing," I said, forcing myself to stay calm. "And we've got to fucking find her. Now."

We filled Joe in as he checked the clock-out logs, showing me that Kiera had left right on time. She'd walked to work that day, so we piled into Joe's truck to retrace her steps, hoping like hell to pick up any sort of clue that might help us. Kiera was alive, I knew that much from our bond, but she was too far away for me to pick up anything else from her.

It was the right move. As Joe drove slowly down the route Kiera would have taken home, the bond grew stronger, and I could feel her panic. It wasn't overwhelming, which meant she wasn't in immediate danger, but it was enough to make my stomach twist in knots. I reached out, letting her know I was coming for her, but the panic didn't dissipate.

"She's afraid," I said, and Joe's eyes narrowed. My wolf was pushing to the surface, the Alpha rage I'd been working so hard to control filtering in. "We have to hurry the fuck—"

"Wait." Waylon held up a hand, and Joe hit the brakes. My Beta leaned his head out the window and inhaled deeply, his face immediately twisting in a snarl. "It's Nayeli."

I jumped out of the truck, breathing in as deeply as I could, and there it was—not the scent of my mate, but Nayeli, instead.

I also smelled a fuck ton of blood, but I couldn't dwell on that. Not if I wanted to keep my sanity intact.

"Follow it," I said, nodding down the road. "She's here somewhere."

The scent trail was thick and fresh, and we followed it through the woods on the fringes of my territory. Her bright pink hoodie stood out like a beacon where she was

lying on the ground, limp, blood darkening her jeans near her right ankle as well as the earth around her.

There was a bear trap on the ground beside her, and it, too, was bloodied. Seeing her was like a punch to the chest, but I forced myself to kneel and check her pulse. It was there, thank God, faint but steady.

"Nayeli," I said, my voice rough as I carefully lifted her into my arms. "I need you to wake up. Please."

Her eyelids fluttered, a weak groan escaping her lips as she stirred. For a moment, I wasn't sure if she was really awake, but then her eyes focused and met mine, clouded with pain and exhaustion.

"Kiera..." she rasped, her voice barely audible. "She saved me. But... someone knocked us out. I... I couldn't... I couldn't stop them."

The world went red, rage rushing through my veins. Someone had taken her. Kiera was gone. My Omega. My mate. Who would fucking dare?

Waylon was already on his phone, calling for backup. I tried to stand with Nayeli, but she shook her head, "No," she rasped. "You need to find her, Samson. Kiera..." She swallowed hard, her eyes closing for a brief second before she met my gaze again. "She's the one you need to focus on."

It was what I wanted to do. Every fiber of my being was fixated on finding my mate. But I couldn't leave my cousin bleeding in the damned forest...

Joe appeared beside me, kneeling down with a grim expression. "I'll take her back to my pack," he said, his voice calm, but there was an underlying tension in his words. "We've got a medic. She'll be taken care of. You need to go. Kiera's still out there."

I hesitated, conflicted, but it was Nayeli's grim, quiet resolve that solidified my decision. My wolf wanted to rip the world apart to find Kiera, and I needed to trust my oldest ally to take care of Nayeli.

"Go," she said again. "Bring her home."

There was nothing more to say. I pressed my forehead against hers for a moment, and then I stood, handing Nayeli over to Joe. "I'll kill you if something happens to her."

Joe adjusted my cousin in his arms. "I wouldn't blame you. But she's safe with me. Go."

"I'm coming with you," Waylon declared. "We'll cover more ground on four legs. Can you at least get a rough direction through your bond?"

I closed my eyes and felt her, afraid but alive. "Barely, but yeah."

"Then let's move."

We shifted quickly, running as soon as our bones had snapped into place. Waylon's form was close behind me, russet fur blending in almost perfectly with the forest around us. As the wind rushed past us, I desperately searched for any hint of my mate, but there was nothing. We were running nearly blind, pulled along only by the mate bond. My singular lifeline.

But it was working. With each step, each mile we ran, I could feel the distance closing between us. Our connection solidified, and I knew exactly where I needed to go. A straight shot, veering east...keep running. Keep running.

In wolf form, I didn't realize where we were until we crossed the territory line, and then it was like being struck over the head. We exited Saltfang territory and ran

straight into Scott Nevada's pack territory, which meant that somewhere on his land, my mate was being held, injured, and afraid. I snarled, running faster. I'd kill whoever had hurt her. Scott's entire fucking town if I had to.

There was a warehouse off the highway that used to be a factory for one of the old steel companies. Now, it stood abandoned and empty, a looming reminder of the way this town used to be. We had driven by it before, but I hadn't paid any attention to it. Hadn't thought about it in years.

Until now.

As soon as we got close enough, I could smell her. The scent was thick with blood. It almost choked me, but it wasn't enough to mask her own scent underneath. My wolf wanted to tear the entire building down and rip Scott to shreds. He'd pay for hurting her.

"Get Kiera," Waylon said, his voice rough as we shifted back into human form. "I'll deal with the others."

"Be careful," I warned.

He flashed me a quick smile. "Always am."

We split up, and I crept inside the warehouse. It was almost pitch black, but my eyes adjusted quickly. Then, up ahead, I heard a muffled groan, followed by a quiet curse. I rushed forward, following the sound.

A tall, lean man stood over an unconscious woman, his back to me. I moved closer, my rage and desperation threatening to overwhelm me. My Kiera was tied to a chair, lank strands of dark hair falling on her face. She was awake, but when she turned her head, I could see the blood matting her hair in the back.

I'd eat Scott alive. He'd fucking die for this.

I was done waiting. No one could keep me from her. I rushed forward, and the man whirled around. I'd expected a goon and some bit of bullet fodder while the real villain was hidden somewhere else.

But no. The man who had taken my mate was too young, brash, dominant, and untested to do that. He wanted to see Kiera suffer with his own eyes. He wanted her to know that he'd won.

His arrogance would get him killed.

I slammed into Mason—not Scott—full force. His back hit a concrete pillar hard, but he didn't stay down for long. The blow staggered him, but he pushed me off and leaped to his feet, circling me.

"You idiot," I spat, "Touching her is a death sentence. Why in the hell would you do this?"

"Because she deserves it. And so do you."

He launched himself at me again, and we tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. We wrestled, each one trying to get the upper hand, and he threw a punch at me. I blocked it easily, and his fist connected with the ground instead. I used the momentum to push him away from me and jump to my feet.

In the depths of the warehouse, screams could be heard, followed by a familiar howl. Waylon, on the hunt for whoever Mason had hired as backup. It was time to end this.

Mason was slower to get to his feet this time, his lip bloody and a cut over his left eyebrow. "Give up," I said, taking a step toward him. "And I'll make it quick,"

"Fuck you." He spat blood on the ground. "I'd rather die than surrender to you."

He threw himself at me again, but this time, I was ready. I ducked under his wild punch and swept my leg around, knocking him to the floor. He grunted, but before he could stand again, I put a knee against his back. I wrapped an arm around his neck, but a small piece of me considered letting him live. My father's rule had made him this way, a monster in human skin. If I killed him, would it really change anything?

Then I heard Kiera groan and remembered what he'd done to her.

"She screamed for you," Mason wheezed, "When I tied her up, she screamed for you."

All rationality fled. With a single, brutal jerk, I snapped his neck.

There was silence in the warehouse, and then Kiera whimpered. I untied her as fast as I possibly could, gingerly removing the tape from her mouth and pulling her into my arms as she sobbed.

"I've got you," I murmured. "You're safe now. I'm here."

I was vaguely aware of Waylon's approach, but I didn't take my eyes off my mate. She was clinging to me, shaking, but whole. Alive.

Waylon cleared his throat. "I've taken care of the others," he said. "Joe's waiting for us at the territory line. Let's go home. I'll inform Scott that he has a warehouse full of corpses tomorrow."

"Home," Kiera sighed, "Please, Samson."

It was a blur, the next few minutes. I carried my mate to Joe's truck, refusing to let

anyone else touch her, and Waylon followed behind us. Once we crossed back into my territory, I let out a long sigh, feeling the tension drain from my body. Kiera was safe, and I could finally breathe again.

She needed a doctor, food, water, and rest, and she would get it. I'd make sure of it. I'd fucking kill anyone who tried to take her from me again.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:11 am

It had been three days since the rescue, but the pain still lingered—both physical and emotional.

Mason had knocked me unconscious and drugged me so I couldn't reach my magic. The pain when I had tried to reach for it was enough to make me vomit, but once I had been patched up and loaded with painkillers, the pathway had been reopened. Thank goodness. I'd just made myself whole, and it would have been a kick in the teeth to lose a piece of myself so soon.

At first, we all thought the kidnapping and the trap set for Nayeli was just revenge for the banishment, but as we put the pieces together, the true breadth of what Mason had been planning came into view. His choice of the abandoned warehouse in Scott's territory was no mistake. He was trying to start a war.

Samson's alliance with Scott was shaky to begin with, and their natural animosity of each other had made Samson suspicious of him from the start. Mason had hoped that Samson would go straight to Scott once I was taken and that at least one of them would die in the skirmish, leaving an open Alpha position that Mason could challenge for. It didn't matter which one of them died, as long as they were out of the picture.

But he'd underestimated our mate bond. It led Samson right to me, and Mason was killed instead.

I wasn't the only one to carry injuries, though. Samson had gained a few of his own—bruises on his ribs, a cut on his eyebrow, a split lip, and a deep bruise on his right cheek. The worst injuries were already scabbed over, but I knew how much pain they had caused him when I first saw them. I could feel it through the bond, too, like

a dull ache in my own body.

Joe had taken Nayeli back to his territory so his pack's doctor could look her over. Nayeli had a concussion, and she needed a tetanus shot and a few stitches in her leg, but other than that, she was okay. A little shaken, but okay.

It had been the most traumatic thing to ever happen to me. But slowly, with my mate, my son, and my new friends around me, I healed.

Over the next few days, Samson and I nursed each other back to health, with Kit trying his best to assist. Samson had a hard time letting me take care of him, his Alpha tendencies pushing him to coddle me, but I was persistent. We lay in bed, watched hours of television, took a hospital's worth of ibuprofen, and put our lives back together.

That was how we spent our days: quiet moments where we'd check on each other's injuries, make sure nothing got worse. And then, the evenings, when the exhaustion of the day would catch up with us, and we'd lean against each other, comfort in knowing the worst was behind us.

We didn't mention Mason much, at least between Samson and me. Instead, we focused on the present. On our family. On Kit. Samson, despite his own pain, spent time with Kit, playing games, leading, and keeping our pup distracted and happy. He'd been thoroughly shaken by both of his parents being hurt, but he was brave.

Tonight, we were having our first official family movie night. It was Samson's idea. We snuggled together on the couch in the living room, and Samson wrapped me in his arms. I leaned into him as we watched the opening credits of *The Princess Bride*. Samson had tried to get us to watch a superhero movie, but Kit wanted to watch something "fun," and that meant comedy.

I liked it. I liked the humor, the romance, and the way the two lovers kept finding their way back to each other. I'd read the book years ago but hadn't thought about it until now.

It wasn't just about the movie, though. Samson and I had made a decision, one that would change Kit's life permanently, and we wanted to tell him as soon as possible. When the credits started to roll, I turned to my son, digging through the pile of blankets until I found one of his small hands.

"Kit," I started. "I know this move was sudden, and I haven't given you a clear answer on what's going to happen now, but...we're going to stay. Here. With the pack."

"With Papa?" His eyes went wide. "Really?"

I smiled at his eagerness. He'd always wanted a family, but he never said anything. "Yes," I said. "We're staying here with Papa. You get to be a part of the pack, and we'll all live together from now on."

He jumped up, throwing himself into Samson's arms. My mate held him tight, grinning as our pup gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"This is going to be great!" Kit exclaimed. "I can't wait! We get to stay with Papa, Gwen, Nayeli, and Uncle Joe!"

I laughed. "Yes. This is where we belong. Your father and I are bonded."

Kit, with his sharp little nose, looked back and forth between the two of us. He tilted his head, looking utterly serious for a moment. Then, after a pause, his lips curled into a knowing grin.

“I already knew,” he said, surprising us both.

I blinked, confused for a moment. “What do you mean?”

Kit puffed out his chest, proud like he’d just solved the greatest mystery. “I could smell it. I knew you two were...really together. The bond.”

Samson and I exchanged a look, both of us stunned.

“You could smell it?” Samson asked, tapping Kit on the nose.

“Yup!” Kit nodded enthusiastically. “I knew he was your mate, Mama. I could smell it from the first time he came over. He was a little mean then, but he smelled like... like home.”

It turned out that Kit was smarter than I was, at least when it came to Samson. I'd fought the draw I felt for weeks, just to discover that my true happiness only came when I surrendered.

In the mornings, I'd wake up to find him still beside me, his arms around me, his breath warm against the back of my neck. Sometimes, I'd wake him up, and we'd greet the morning, making love, our bodies moving together until we both found release.

Other times, I'd simply put my ear to his chest and listen to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

We'd get up, dress, and have breakfast, and then he'd go off to do Alpha things, and I'd get ready for work. Samson made his money off of pieces of property his great-

grandfather had bought when the pack first came to town, and there was no real reason for me to continue working, but I was being honest when I told him I liked to keep busy. Emerald Blooms was my little piece of independence.

It also allowed me to socialize with the pack, too. I'd seen Samson stick up for me, but I didn't realize how powerful his words were until the visitors started filtering in after our injuries. Pack members who wanted to check in on their Alpha, or so I thought.

Nayeli, still recovering herself, was the first to visit, Gwen trailing behind her with a plate of cookies. Nayeli had been cleared by Joe's doctor to return to work, but she wasn't ready yet, and Samson had ordered her to stay home. We spent the morning together, just the girls, gossiping and eating cookies, and it had all just felt so right.

The day after that, Waylon came. I expected him to focus on checking in with Samson, but instead, his attention turned to me, and his gaze was relieved when he saw how much I was recovering.

"You're one of us now," he said simply, but it meant the world to me. "The pack protects its Omegas, not just the Alphas."

That afternoon, we sat on the porch swing, and he told me stories about Samson, the trouble he used to get into as a kid, and how he'd stepped up to be Samson's second-in-command, no questions asked, when the time came.

"He needed me," he explained, "And I never thought twice about it. Pack is family, and family means everything to us."

The most shocking visitors were Curt and Francine. They came bearing homemade beef jerky from Pete and an almost submissive attitude that was totally out of character.

"I feel a little responsible," Curt explained. "If I had taken Mason's challenge and won, none of this would have happened. Hell, even if I lost, it probably could have been avoided."

"You couldn't have known what Mason was planning," Samson told him, "It's not your fault."

"Still. We, ah, have a lot to make up for. With Kiera, I mean."

"You do." Samson was serious but not unkind. "And I have faith you'll figure out how to do it."

Francine sniffed, turning away from us and back to her car. She looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm sorry. For everything."

With that, they got into their car and drove away. I leaned back against Samson, taking comfort in his touch. "Am I a fool for being so soft with them, even after they messed with me so much as a kid?"

"No." He kissed the top of my head, "It makes you my Omega."

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It felt wrong to walk into Scott's coffee shop after I'd spent so long convinced he was the one who attacked Kiera, but it wasn't for a social visit. It was business, and pack business was always uncomfortable.

At least it was pleasant inside, smelling of cinnamon and roasted coffee beans. I plucked an enormous cinnamon roll from the display case, telling the confused barista to put it on Scott's tab.

I found the other two Alphas at a corner table, Scott wearing his usual shit-eating grin and Joe appearing almost completely bored. None of us wanted to be there, but pack alliances had to be maintained to work.

"Look who finally decided to show up," Scott drawled, making a face at my newly acquired cinnamon roll. "Did you pay for that?"

I just smirked at him and took a big bite.

Joe sighed.

"Whatever. Maybe we can talk about what's really important," Scott sighed. "And that's the apology that you owe me, Saltfang."

I scowled at the nickname. "Why do you even care? It was only a matter of time before I figured out it wasn't you."

Scott huffed, looking almost offended. "I care because I actually give a damn about this alliance, and I don't enjoy knowing that you think of me so poorly that you'd

believe I'd take your Omega."

"You were just the obvious choice at the time."

Scott laughed. "Do you really believe that I have time to go kidnapping other Alphas' mates? I have enough to do with my own pack, and you should know better than anyone that a pack doesn't just run itself."

Joe grunted, apparently bored with this conversation. "Can we just move on already? We're all tired of this."

I sighed. Joe was right. "I just don't trust him. It's that simple."

"Well, would it strengthen your trust to know that I did a little digging, and I have concrete proof for you that it was Mason's hired hands that attacked you and Kiera that night at the lookout?"

I looked at Scott, startled. "Proof?"

Scott pulled a ziploc bag containing a blood-covered, cracked phone from his pocket and tossed it across the table. "Since you oh so kindly left my pack to deal with the warehouse cleanup after your daring rescue, I took the opportunity to swipe any valuables they were carrying. All the information is there, in the texts."

"Shit," I said simply, all of the fighting going out of me. "Can I give this to Nayeli? She's my tech guru."

"Have at it. But just know—I have nothing to do with anything negative that happened to Kiera. Full stop. And I want you to drop it."

I nodded. "It's dropped. But...that doesn't mean we're friends."

Joe snorted. "You two are impossible."

"Yeah, but that's what keeps this interesting." Scott quipped. "What's next on the agenda? Oh, that's right. I have more news to share with you two."

Joe sighed, long and hard. "Scott, what have you gotten tangled up in?"

"It's not what I've gotten myself into," Scott said, "It's what our new neighbors have gotten themselves into. There's a new pack in town, and they don't seem very friendly. They're taking over the area to the north, bordering my territory and Samson's, but it doesn't touch yours, Joe."

"Do you know who they are yet?" Joe asked, all business.

Scott shook his head. "No. They're a little more...secretive than the packs we're used to dealing with. Very closed lips. I don't like it, and I want to know if the three of us are on the same page."

I nodded. "We are. Do you know anything else about them?"

"Just that their Alpha is a strong one. I've never seen him myself, but I hear things." Scott looked thoughtful for a moment. "It's probably a good idea for us to approach him together when we finally meet."

Joe and I both nodded in agreement. It was a hard pill to swallow, especially for me. I liked to think of myself as a strong wolf and a stronger Alpha. I didn't need help or protection. I didn't want it. But Scott had a point.

"They're not exactly threatening us," Joe pointed out, "So we could probably go on with life as usual."

"But we shouldn't let our guards down." Scott leaned forward in his chair, looking between us both. "I mean, we shouldn't just sit around, waiting for an attack. I have a lot of unattached women in my pack, and I don't need strange wolves encroaching on my territory and trying to steal them away."

Last year, I would have nodded right along with Scott, but things had changed. "So train them to protect themselves."

Scott rolled his eyes. "Oh, great idea, Saltfang. I'll just go train them right now."

"I'm serious," I snapped. "Why not train them? Why should we be the only ones allowed to defend ourselves?"

Joe frowned at me. "We've never done it before, Samson. That's...not how things are done."

"Yeah, well, maybe things need to change." I glared at both of them. "Look. I'm not saying we change all at once. But if these strange wolves are going to be a threat, why not prepare? Why not help our women and our Omegas learn how to defend themselves, too?"

The other Alphas looked at each other, clearly unsure.

"Unity is going to be important going forward, and unity is about how we lead. We only grow stronger if our women are just as capable as our men." I sighed, leaning forward in my chair. "You still run your packs like they're old-school. Hierarchy, dominance, always looking down on the weaker wolves, the women. That's what I'm seeing. That's how we've all been taught to lead. And yeah, maybe it worked in the past. Maybe it got us by. But it doesn't work anymore. Not for me."

Joe hummed thoughtfully. "I agree with you, Samson, but it's not that simple."

Scott leaned back in his chair, giving me a look. "You've changed, Sam. What happened to you?"

I looked between the two of them, shrugging. "Maybe I grew up. Maybe I got tired of being a jerk. But I know what I want for my pack, and I don't see the harm in trying to improve things."

They exchanged a look. "I'll consider it," Joe said finally, and Scott nodded.

"Yeah, let me mull it over."

"For the time being," Joe crossed his arms, looking us over. "Let's focus on what we can do right now. We'll keep an eye on the new pack and keep our alliances strong. We can observe how Samson changes his pack, and decide from there what is right for ours."

It was a small victory. I hadn't really started to change until I'd claimed my Omega, and maybe it wouldn't be clear to them until they did the same. But I would prove myself. My pack would grow strong and happy; the other Alphas would see it. They'd see that things could not only change but also change for the better.

That evening, Kiera finally made good on her demand to plan a date for us. Honestly, it sounded...boring as hell, but she was excited, and I was happy to humor her.

It turned out to be better than I had anticipated. Her hand was warm in mine as we strolled through the farmer's market, and her joy was infectious. She took me to every booth, pointing out her favorite produce, cheese, wine, and everything else under the sun.

She got giddy over a booth that sold homemade goat milk soaps and lotions, picking up bar after bar and smelling them.

"Do you smell that? It smells like vanilla!" She held up a small brown bar of soap to my nose. "I love vanilla."

I sniffed it dutifully, but it just smelled like soap to me. But I saw the way her face lit up when she smelled it, and I knew I'd buy it for her if it made her happy.

Once we'd acquired the bag of vanilla goat soap, she moved on to another booth, this one filled with handmade jewelry. The woman running it smiled warmly at Kiera. "Welcome, welcome. Looking for anything in particular?"

"Oh, no. Just browsing." Kiera picked up a silver pendant with a blue crystal set in the middle. "This is beautiful."

"You should get it." I put my hands on her hips, pulling her back against my chest. "It would look good on you."

Kiera leaned into me, letting me hold her. "It's pretty, but I don't really need it."

"Doesn't matter. I want you to have it." I took it from her hand, walking over to the merchant. "We'll take it."

The merchant smiled. "Excellent choice. Do you want a bag, sir?"

I nodded, handing the woman a few bills and taking the small brown paper bag from her. I turned back to Kiera, handing it to her. "It's yours."

Kiera looked at me with wonder in her eyes, and I had the briefest urge to just buy her the whole damned market, if it would make her keep looking at me like that.

We bought food for dinner, grass-fed steaks, a wooden puzzle for Kit, and two bottles of blackberry wine. Afterward, we walked along the beach, taking the long way back to the parking lot. The sun was setting, painting the world in burnt oranges, pinks, and reds.

"You know, this was perfect." Kiera squeezed my hand, smiling up at me. "Thank you for letting me take the wheel."

"You're welcome." I put my arm around her shoulders, holding her close to me. "I've enjoyed it, too."

"I really love the necklace." She fingered the pendant, smiling. "You're so sweet for buying it for me."

I kissed the top of her head, grinning. "It's nothing."

She stopped suddenly, putting her hands on my chest. "It's not nothing. You're...so different from how I always thought you were. You're so kind to me, and I've never been treated like this before."

I leaned down to kiss her lips, loving the way she swayed into me. "I'm always going to take such good care of you, Kiera."

She shivered, a small smile curling her lips. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Good. But you have to be patient with me." I swept a thumb over her cheekbone. "I'm trying, but...you have to know that I don't usually do this. I don't let people in. I don't show weakness."

"I know. I'm just...really glad you're here. You're...I...." Kiera sucked in a breath, turning to me fully, "I love you, Samson."

The words sent a jolt through me, like electricity. I swept her into my arms, kissed her hard—I couldn't help it; the animal inside me needed to be close to her, to claim her. To claim her words and the love she'd given me.

"I love you too," I whispered against her lips, pressing my forehead against hers, "I love you so damn much, Kiera."

She laughed, her eyes alight with happiness. "I'm so glad to hear that."

"You're mine," I said, holding her tight, "You're my mate, and I'm never letting you go again."

She grinned. "I hope not. Kit would be pissed." Then, softer, she repeated, "I love you, Samson."

Her words, her touch, her mere presence...was as close to heaven as an asshole like me would ever get.

Three months later

The forest was alive under my paws, leaves crunching, sticks cracking, the scent of pine and damp earth surrounding me. Kit dodged and weaved through the trees ahead of me, his form lithe, dark, and full of the boundless energy that could only come with youth.

Samson probably could have kept pace with his longer stride, but he stuck close to me. When we ran, we were a pack of three, and our Alpha would never leave us behind.

We bounded across a stream, splashing water everywhere, and I reveled in the feel of the chill droplets against my nose. Samson howled, and Kit followed suit. I didn't howl, but I laughed inside, feeling happy. Content. Complete.

Kit had come a long way, and his wolf was strong and steady. I didn't classify myself as strong, but my shift was easier and easier, and Samson assured me that strength would come with time.

While Kit chased sparkling fish through the water, Samson slowed to a trot, and I did the same. We followed our son at a more comfortable pace, walking so closely together that we were touching, white-gray fur melding with dark. In wolf form, we had a different language, but it was no less meaningful.

Samson bumped his muzzle against mine, and I looked up at him. My mate, husband, and Alpha. It was like the world around us faded, leaving just us and our little family during moments like these.

I loved him. Desperately. And I knew he felt the same.

After a few hours of playing and running, we headed home. Nayeli was taking Kit to the new exhibit at the museum, and I didn't want to make her run late. Kit shifted back and ran upstairs to shower and change. Nayeli pulled into the driveway just as Kit emerged, squeaky clean and ready for his second adventure of the day.

"Nayeli! Are you ready to go?"

Nayeli grinned and opened the passenger door. "I was born ready."

"Me too!" Kit laughed and climbed into the car.

I walked up to Nayeli's window. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I'm positive," Nayeli said, smiling warmly. "We're going to have fun."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll be fine." Kit was grinning from ear to ear. "I love going to the museum. Nayeli said they have REAL mummies this time."

"Alright, alright. Have fun." I waved at them as they took off, feeling a pang of sadness. I still wasn't totally comfortable letting him out of my sight, but after Samson, Nayeli was the person I trusted most in the pack.

Samson came and stood next to me, his hand on my lower back. "How does he have the energy? I swear I wasn't that bad as a pup."

I snorted. "Are you kidding? I've seen you run around with him. You're just as bad NOW."

Samson chuckled, pulling me close. "That's true. I'm a bad influence."

"The worst," I agreed. "I'm not sure how I got stuck with both of you."

He kissed me gently, unhurried. "It's fate."

I kissed him back, smiling against his mouth. We had been together for months now, and he still gave me butterflies. I wondered if that would ever go away.

"I have a lot to do today. I promised Gwen I'd help her finish unpacking at her new apartment, and Nayeli found me a few spell books to look over—"

"Later," Samson kissed me again, this time deeper, hungrier. "We're alone, my sweet Omega. Let's take advantage."

I shivered, smiling as I looked up at him. "Well, when you put it like that...."

"That's what I thought." He swept me into his arms, "I could use a shower. How about you?"

I nodded, burying my face in his neck as he carried me up the stairs and into the bathroom. I loved being carried. It made me feel special, cherished. Cared for.

He set me down and turned to start the water running, and I looked at him, anticipation flooding my veins. We stripped quickly, leaving our clothes in a pile on the floor.

I stepped into the shower, letting the warm water run over my body, washing the dirt away. Samson joined me a second later, lathering my lemon body wash between his palms, and began to wash me oh so slowly.

My body responded instantly, arousal blooming between my thighs as he ran his hands across my breasts, down my stomach, across my ass. Everywhere he touched, fire sparked under my skin. I bit my lip, trying to hold back a moan.

"Let me hear you, Kiera," Samson growled, cupping my breasts. "Let me know how good I make you feel."

"You're always so damn bossy," I sighed, "Are you ever not demanding?"

"Not when it comes to you, Omega." He responded, his eyes dark with desire. "You're mine to command."

I bit my lip as he trailed a hand between my thighs, his touch feather-light. I shuddered, arching my hips against his hand. "You're making me crazy."

"Good." He pressed his lips to my neck, his teeth scraping against my skin.

I turned, one arm going around his neck, the other traveling down his sculpted chest and abs until I could take his cock in my hand. He hissed through his teeth, body going taut. "Careful. This is supposed to be foreplay, little witch, but if you keep touching me like that, I'm going to have to just bend you over and have you right here."

"I don't mind," I whispered, stroking his cock from base to tip, my fingers barely closing around the thick shaft. "We'll have a lifetime for foreplay."

Samson made a deep sound of approval, the look on his face feral. "You're damn right we will."

He turned me around and bent me over the wall, my hands slapping against the cool tile. I shivered, excitement coursing through me at the dominant display. Samson wasn't always dominant with me, but he loved to show his Alpha side during sex, and I loved it, too.

He pulled one of my legs up, hooked it behind his own, and pushed into me in one long, hard thrust. He filled me so completely, the stretch of his cock almost painful as

he claimed me. I adored it, though, and I pushed back against him, trying to take him deeper.

He gripped my hips tight, nails digging into my soft flesh as he fucked me. I couldn't believe how good it felt, how right it felt to be with him like this. Being with him made me feel powerful and weak all at the same time.

Powerful, because I could bring an Alpha like Samson to his knees. Weak, because he could do the same to me.

He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my head back, growling in my ear as he fucked me. I keened, pleasure pulsing through me with each thrust, but just when I started to climb the hill to my climax, he stopped and pulled out of me with a curse.

"Enough. Get to bed. I want to see your pretty face when you come for me, Omega."

I did as he said, not even carrying, that we were both still soaked from the shower. Samson followed me, pushing me down onto the bed and crawling over me, his cock hard and thick as he positioned it outside my entrance, his fist locked around it. I spread my legs for him, showing him everything that was his.

"Such a good girl," he purred, "You're so slick for me, Kiera."

"Yes, Alpha," I whispered, "Only for you."

He grinned and pressed into me again, filling me slowly. "Damn right."

I gasped as he bottomed out inside of me, my nails digging into his hard biceps as he took hold of my legs and put them over his shoulders, angling himself even deeper. I was stretched around him so tight I could feel every inch of his cock as he fucked me, each thrust filling me so completely it felt like I'd die if he stopped.

He held me down, his weight pushing my legs open as he moved inside me, his strokes getting faster and harder. "You feel so good," I gasped, "You're going to make me come."

"Yes," he snarled, his eyes locked on mine, one hand drifting between so he could stroke his thumb over my clit, "I'm going to make you come, Kiera. I'm going to knot you. Is that what you need, baby?"

I cried out, arching beneath him, pleasure building between my legs until I thought I'd lose my mind. "Please, please!"

He groaned, fucking me harder. "Please, what? What do you want?"

I whimpered, arching against him. "Your knot," I panted, "Give me your knot, Alpha."

He rewarded me, circling his thumb faster against my clit as he pistoned his cock deep inside me. I cried out, my body bucking and writhing as I came, my pussy clenching around him. He cursed and pressed himself as deep inside me as he could go, and I felt the base of his cock start to swell. I shuddered as his knot locked us together, and he filled me with his cum.

He leaned down and kissed me, his teeth nipping at my lower lip. "My sweet little witch...you're perfect."

"I love you," I whispered, still panting slightly. "So much."

He grinned. "I know."

I laughed and smacked his chest playfully, earning me another growl.

"Careful, Omega." He held me down, grinning as he nipped at my neck. "You might

get spanked for that."

I shivered, arching under him. "Maybe I want to be spanked."

Samson aligned our bodies together so we could rest while his knot went down.
"How long do we have till Nayeli is back?"

"At least an hour."

"Well," He slapped my thigh playfully before kissing me with such tenderness that it stole my breath. "That might be just enough time for you to get your wish."

THE END