



# Sizzling for His Omega (Omegas of Oliver Creek #12)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I moved to the up-and-coming town of Oliver Creek to make my father's dream of opening a Greek restaurant a reality. Instantly, I was attracted to the reviews and photos of the town online. Oliver Creek was the place to be. I hadn't been in the business before, but I'd done my research and had my father's recipes to back my business knowledge.

When one of my delivery employees doesn't show up for work, I decide to make the delivery myself. The alpha jackal opens the door, and I proceed to trip over a board on his porch and spill the food all over him.

Covered in chicken and hummus, he chuckles and smiles and invites me out to dinner. Dinner? After what I just did?

He's the sexiest jackal I've ever met and fifteen years is not that big a difference. But how can an omega who's been hurt before take a chance again?

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

My place was smaller than I'd dreamed of, but that just meant it came together more quickly and used less of my funds to get going. When I signed the contract for the building, I told myself I would move to a larger location later, but as I looked around the Greek cafe I'd always wanted to own, I wasn't so sure that was true.

Occupying the ground floor of the two-story building, my new business had a compact, efficient kitchen, a pickup window, and tables both inside and out on a small patio. It was getting late in the year, and we had already set the heat lamps out there, but it was still cool enough we'd probably have to close outside dining at least at night soon.

Our blue-and-white color scheme with some authentic Greek art pieces I'd picked up on my one trip to the country marked the place as mine. My family emigrated from there a few generations back, but we had always felt a strong connection to the land of our ancestors.

Fridays were one of our busiest days, and although I employed a few local teens with bikes to handle the weekend and after-school hours for delivery, tonight was homecoming, and that left me with limited options for delivery. As in none.

So far, that had gone okay, and I had managed to avoid delivery by offering a free dessert for anyone who would come in and pick up their order. A few more hours and the evening would be over, with no harm no foul. I needed to figure out an alternative delivery system for when the bike team was not available. So far, I'd managed to avoid signing up for any of the delivery services because they truly cut into a

restaurant's bottom line, and I still needed to be careful of extra expenses. So far, doing so had served me well.

My dream was the continuation of my father's. He'd always wanted to open a restaurant and serve my great-grandfather's recipes that he'd brought with him across the ocean. Dad always had something that kept him from doing this, mostly raising a houseful of kids, but listening to him talk about all the foods he wanted to make and how he'd decorate the place and make everyone happy serving things he'd only had time to make for us on Saturday nights; well, he'd made an impression on one of his kids anyway.

"Boss, we've got a guy who wants a delivery." One of the servers held up the phone. "What do I tell him?"

"Offer him a free dessert if he'll come in and get it."

"But what if he says no?"

"Oh, give me the phone, hello? You'd like an order to pick up?"

The minute he began to speak, I didn't want to tell him he had to come in. Not that I wouldn't have wanted him here, but he sounded so tired. Tired yet...something more. Mature, smooth, deep toned. "No, don't you deliver? It says on your website that you do."

"Of course we do, but, we, but...of course we do." I couldn't afford to lose a customer this early in my tenure in Oliver Creek. I was trying to build relationships, gain a reputation as a reliable choice as well as one with delicious food. "What can I bring you?"

I took his order down and passed it to the kitchen where, fortunately, I had full

staffing this evening. “And your address?” He wasn’t far away, luckily, so I could get there and back in a short time. The only reason it would take me a half hour was because everything was made fresh to order. “About thirty minutes, okay?”

“Sure. That would be fine.” That voice! I couldn’t wait to see the face that came with it. And the body. He’d have to have a great one, right? “Do you need a credit card now?”

“I can take the number.” After I input it in the machine, I said goodbye and disconnected, taking the order to the kitchen. The waitstaff took orders on a phone app, but I didn’t usually need it, and my cell phone was in the kitchen anyway.

While waiting, I made the rounds of the tables and chatted with the customers who were enjoying our food, refilled a few water glasses, and kept an eye on the clock. I didn’t want to take any longer than I’d quoted, but the food-insulated bag was on the front counter for me with time to spare.

Setting out, I wondered if the man would match the voice. Not that I’d do anything about it, but it would be interesting to see. It had been a while since anyone had caught my attention, especially since I’d been so busy setting up the restaurant.

Maybe he’d been in before and I hadn’t spoken with him. I did make a point of talking to as many customers as possible, ensuring they had a good experience, but if I’d heard him speak, I’d remember.

I’d never forget that voice.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

When my fingers cramped, it was time to call it a day. I was almost done with the jacket. I draped it over the hanger and took a look. No one expected or wanted perfect symmetry or no flaws, which was good for me. Leatherwork was never perfect. That was the beauty of it. Every piece was one of a kind. Not replicable like the ones hanging in retail stores.

The customer had no requests. He simply wanted a one-of-a-kind Leon Lincoln jacket. Ever since social media marketing came on the scene, my business had blown up. I had orders, with no time constraints, that would take me years to complete and more coming in every day.

I reached for my phone on the tripod and turned off the live stream. For some reason, my customers liked to see my process as much as they liked the finished project.

And the paycheck that came in from TikTok and YouTube ? Well, I wasn't offended by it at all.

I rubbed my hands before turning off the lights and locking up my shop for the evening. I had a long commute home and by that, I meant, a walk between the shop and my back door.

I bought this land years ago and built this house with my own hands. I'd intended this place to one day be a home for myself and my omega and, if I had my way, a half dozen children.

But Fate had other plans.

I turned on the twinkly lights and observed my yard at night. I'd had a local landscaper in and when he promised me he would make me a relaxing oasis, he hadn't lied. If I hadn't worked so late into the night, I would take a long nap in my hammock while I gazed at the stars and inhaled the fragrance of the lavender beds. Chuckling, I crouched down to check on the lone pumpkin growing in a patch off to the side. I always grew one this time of year and then carved it into a jack-o'-lantern for the front porch.

Eventually its carcass would go to the next-door neighbor's chickens. He claimed they loved my pumpkin remains every year and would give me eggs in return. I loved the cycle of giving and receiving and especially in Oliver Creek.

We were more than just a destination for tourists coming to enjoy our growing food experiences. We were a community.

My stomach rumbled and I went inside, determined to make some dinner, but hunching over my work had given me aches that put a halt to my cooking plans.

So...what to eat? Cold cereal held no appeal.

Oh, there was that new Greek place in town. I'd gotten a flier in the mail, and there was another one posted on the community board at the coffeehouse.

I found the mini poster stuck to my fridge with a magnet and called in an order for a chicken souvlaki plate, along with extra pita and hummus for the next day. I was tempted to order a triangle of baklava, but something sweet this late at night would only make me have bad dreams.

Yeah, I was at that age where I had to watch those things.

While I waited, I showered and got dressed in a black T-shirt and gray pajama pants. It was cool enough for a hoodie, but my jackal would rev my body temperature up to comfort level.

I was about to go to the fridge and grab a cheese stick to tide me over when a car pulled up the driveway, its headlights shining in the front window. The doorbell was on my list to fix or replace, so I tried to get to the door before the delivery driver pushed the button.

When I opened the door, my heart stopped in my chest.

Walking up the stairs was quite possible the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He was dressed in a T-shirt that read All Taste, No Togas . He had short brown hair and big brown eyes. My jackal stirred inside me.

He wanted him. Instantly.

That had never happened before.

“Leon, correct?” His eyes widened. I looked down to see another thing on my list, a warped porch board, catch the man's foot and, before I could stop it, the man was flying toward me.

The fear in his eyes made me reach out, but his trajectory couldn't be stopped. I managed to get in front of him and keep him from hitting the hard porch boards, but in the meantime, my food went flying, painting me with hummus and salad and chicken in the process.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

How could this possibly happen? Upon examination, I noticed what I should have before leaving the restaurant. The thermal bag had not been zipped. Of course. The delivery person usually checked the order against the food inside to make sure they had everything. It was a rule I put in place after a couple of goofs. Not that the cooks erred, but the delivery riders grabbed the wrong bags and took them to the wrong people.

So, I had no one to blame but myself for having not checked and then closed the bag. I'd been in too much of a hurry to meet this man to follow procedures. What a great example I'd been for my staff. And as to gaining a new customer—or not losing one if he had enjoyed our food before?

Incredible job, Tobias.

As my brain stopped yelling at me, I became aware of the fact that his hand was firmly in the middle of my chest, keeping me upright despite the mess I'd made of him from the top of his head to the tips of his bare feet. His black T-shirt was coated with hummus and chicken grease along with colorful spices on his gray pajama pants. His feet might have been sexy if they weren't coated with lettuce and feta dressing.

I wanted to die.

Or at the very least crawl into the darkness under the porch and hide until he went back inside. His hand burned into my chest as if there was no fabric between his skin and mine, and I felt the loss when he removed it to brush at the food clinging to his



clothes. “That’s personal service,” he rumbled in that voice...who knew jackals could sound like that? “You okay now?”

Not really. “I-I’m not going to fall over, and have no more food to throw at you. I’m so incredibly sorry. This is not how we do business.”

He chuckled. “Somehow I didn’t think so. Everything smells good. Next time, just leave it in the containers, okay?”

My cheeks flamed with embarrassment. How could he stand there looking so completely in control when I’d been so incredibly unprofessional. “It was totally my fault.” As if it was possibly anyone else’s. “I forgot to close the bag. It has this zipper, you see?” I held up the empty thermal, showing him. “And if I had closed it, then when I tripped like a total klutz, you wouldn’t have been all covered with food.” He knows that! Or at least he could figure it out. “I’ll get your clothes cleaned if you want to take them off, I can take them with me...oh goddess! I didn’t mean it that way.”

The man, Leon, stayed calm even through that insane tirade, but his eyes widened slightly, and he probably wanted to step back inside his house and lock the door.

But my mouth was running miles ahead of my brain. “You know I didn’t mean that, right? About taking off your clothes. Not about cleaning them. I’d be happy to pay for the cleaning and I seem to have damaged your porch, somehow.” I had no idea how, but one of the boards was out of place or broken. “I don’t have a lot of money, but can I offer you free food for life? Or as long as the restaurant is open. If I keep throwing food on people, it may not be long. I’ll write you a check. Wait...” I didn’t have any checks on me. I didn’t even have a personal checkbook, just the big one for the occasional company expense that couldn’t be paid any other way.

He smiled at me and a dimple bit into his cheek. Leon was older than me, but I’d

always found that to be a good quality. Just not...this much.

My bear was awake inside me, had been since the phone call, and he was growling at me. That was new. Maybe he was unhappy I'd made the mess, but he didn't usually have any interest in business sorts of things. No, what he was interested in was the man in front of us. And in a big way.

I rambled on for a while longer, making a bigger fool of myself by the moment until finally the man pulled his shirt over his head and set it inside the door. "Okay? Better?"

I know he meant about the mess, but when I said, "So much better," that wasn't what meant. His light dusting of chest hair was mostly dark but with a few strands of white, emphasizing the muscles and flat belly underneath. He did not have a young body but one of a mature shifter whose trim waist had suffered little over the decades.

His smile showed that he didn't miss my ogling, but all he said was, "You can make it up to me by having dinner together one night."

And did I say yes, as my bear insisted? As I really wanted to?

No...I turned and ran.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

“I...I have to get back to work. It’s my restaurant. No one else is going to...oh, you don’t care. Thank you. Bye.”

What in the world was he thanking me for?

And I did care.

For the first time in a long time.

I called out for him but found I didn’t know his name. For all his apologizing and over-the-top groveling, a hey you was the only thing I could call out, but he didn’t stop, sprinting to his car and then zipping out of the driveway as though the devil were on his heels. Me being the devil.

Maybe the devil was his embarrassment.

I shrugged it off and walked through the house to shower. While I didn’t want to wash away the faint yet lingering scent of the omega who’d just burst into my life, I was covered in hummus. Lemon, pepper, and succulent chicken essence as well, but none of that compared to the scent of the sweet bear who was on my porch.

I wished I’d gotten his name, but I had one consolation: He’d told me he owned the Greek restaurant.

I saw my future self making a lot of to-go orders for the pleasure of seeking out his

company.

When I exited the shower, no longer smelling like dinner, the pressure of my lonely house caved in on me. Didn't happen often but when it did, the anvil sat on my chest and barely allowed me to breathe.

I'd bedded omegas over the years, of course, but never found the one who made my heart beat in my ears so loudly I could almost fail to think.

Peace had settled in my heart a few years ago. I would live and die in this house alone but with the time I had, I would make the most of it.

Fate surely hated me or, at least, had turned her back on me.

That wasn't true anymore. I went outside and swept the large pieces of food away and then grabbed the garden hose from the side of the house and sprayed the whole thing down. I really needed to fix that board but, then again, it brought my omega tumbling into my life.

Once that was done, I went back inside and sat at the dining room table, intending to decide on something for dinner but instead, my thoughts drifted back to the events of the night.

The omega apologized entirely too much. We were all human, or, our brains and bodies were part human and thus, susceptible to accidents. Hell, accidents and mistakes happened all the time. Even the worst of them could be worked through, and to me, food spilling everywhere was miniscule in the scheme of life.

He didn't even answer me when I asked him out to dinner.

I set about getting eggs and vegetables from the fridge and heating up a pan. A simple

meal would have to do since my energy waned the longer I sat here.

The flame on the gas stove clicked to life when a knock sounded at the front door.

Gods, he'd come back.

On fast feet, I sprinted to the front door and threw it open only to find a teenage boy on my porch with two large bags in his hands. "Leon?" he asked. "I hope I got the right address."

"I am Leon. What is this?"

"Delivery. From the restaurant?"

"Oh." I took the bags from him. "Thank you. Wait right here."

I ducked inside and pulled some cash from my wallet and handed it to him. Tipping was mandatory.

A smile was his thank-you as he bounced down the stairs. I went inside, carrying more food than I'd ordered before.

Once I set the bags on the table, I unpacked a feast fit for a Greek king. My jackal snarled at the spread, wishing my omega was here to share it with.

At the bottom of one of the bags, one carton of food had a note taped to the top.

I opened it with hope in my chest and once I was, I was gifted with a sweet note from...oh, his name was Tobias. A sweet name, fitting for a sweet omega.

Leon, I apologize for spilling food all over you. I'm so embarrassed, I might not ever

get over it. I realized I never answered your question.

I would love to have dinner with you.

Tobias.

The food was incredible. I hadn't ordered half of it but tasted every dish anyway. The quality was impeccable. Everything fresh. My jackal could always taste the difference between fresh and frozen food, and there was no hint of anything frozen on my taste buds.

Tobias was talented, or his chef was, something I intended to get to the bottom of when we had our date.

At the bottom of the note, along with his name was his phone number and I added the contact to my phone.

In the morning, I would be messaging my omega.

My omega.

Huh. There was a first time for everything.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

I had a mate once, or at least a significant other. He was also older, and I was very inexperienced and fell for a facade. He asked me out and treated me very well until things got serious, at which point he showed his true colors. Constant criticism wore me down until I finally realized that it was not my faults he pointed out but a reflection of his own.

I walked out the door and never looked back.

Since then, I'd been cautious and put romance on the back burner. That got easier once the plans for my restaurant began to roll out. And once I picked Oliver Creek as the location. The small town had become a mecca for foodies with new restaurants opening and food trucks setting up shop on a regular basis.

I'd heard that jackals were mean but didn't see anything like that with Leon. He'd been so understanding after I did something that could have, heck probably should have earned me a one-star Yelp review. Instead, he invited me to dinner, and I ran off without answering. But everything about him was a green light, not a red flag anywhere. A bit of a mixed metaphor maybe, but it was how I rated people, at least in terms of romantic relationships.

Dinner would have to wait until my night off, the schedule too tight to squeeze in another earlier evening, which was fine, or should have been. We were busy all week, anyway, the weather still holding nice enough for the tourists who came to town to enjoy all the foodie experiences we offered.

As the weather cooled, we expected things to quiet down, but with the rapid growth of the town, nobody knew precisely what would happen. Every night, as I moved from the front to the back of the house, facilitating all the facets of the restaurant, instead of thinking about what I was doing, my mind was focused on the fact I had this date coming up. What would I wear? Did I even have date clothes?

My phone buzzed with my sous chef telling me he wouldn't be in the next day because his little daughter was sick again. She had spent months in the NICU and still remained very vulnerable. The time he needed to take off to take care of her had cost him his last job, and he'd been very frank and open about this when he applied.

Who could tell an alpha dad that he was not allowed to stay home when his family needed him? I appreciated how he put them first, and my hiring decision put that in the plus column along with seven years cooking in a Greek restaurant in the city nearby. He prepared a sample meal for me, and I was sure I had the right man for the job.

Unfortunately, the owner of the place had either been angered by his need for time off or maybe he just wasn't set up for it, but to let him go after all those years? If he'd been bad at his job...anyway, that was not how we did it here. I hoped to have a staff that stayed with me for decades, if I could keep the restaurant going that long. And that meant, if Nick needed a night off or a few nights to take care of his baby daughter, I needed to man the stove in his place. So far, I'd managed to work with him so he rarely actually lost hours, making them up later for the most part.

But this latest setback with little Felicia meant I couldn't count on being off on the night we'd planned for our date. I would have to cancel. My bear was having fits, demanding we see our "mate," but it just wasn't possible. In a way, it was a relief because it made the decision for me. I'd spent way too much mind time trying to decide whether or not I should go.



Memories of that last relationship were so close to the surface that whenever I tried to imagine what it would be like to go out with Leon, all I could think of was what it had been like to be with my ex. And there was nothing pleasant about those memories at all. Sure, he'd been nice at first, but I knew now that was totally fake, just a way of getting me to let him in so he could mistreat me.

Why?

If I didn't know that, how could I make sure it never happened again?

No. The risk was too great. I'd take advantage of Nick's need for time and forget romance.

Picking up my phone, I texted Nick. Give Felicia a kiss from Uncle Toby and tell her to get well right away so she can come to visit at the restaurant. And, Nick, just take the time you need. Your job is here waiting.

After I got his grateful message in return, it was time to cancel.

No. Mate.

He's not our mate. Or if he is, the timing is all off.

Mate.

There was no point in arguing with the bear. Eventually he'd see the rightness in what we were doing, or at least he'd get tired of bugging me.

Stuffing him down deeper, I sent a note to Leon, canceling, and then put my phone in sleep mode and went to bed.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

I fastened the top button on my new black button-down shirt and rolled up the sleeves in the mirror. My tattoos showed but, from what I'd seen on my videos, that was a good thing. Some called me a silver fox, but none of the compliments meant a damned thing unless they were from Tobias.

Tonight, I wanted to look good for him.

I grabbed my wallet and keys and threw a scarf around my neck, not for me but to share with him, and opened the door.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I reached for it with anticipation. Perhaps it was Tobias telling me he was excited for our date.

My mood tanked.

Tobias canceled the date. No reasons. No excuses. No rain check or promise for another day.

Just canceled, like an order of food or a TV show.

My chest constricted with disappointment. I had been more excited for this date than I had been for anything in a long time, and now it was over before it began.

I wasn't an alpha to give up that easily though. I shut the door behind me and walked down the sidewalk and toward the center of town. I knew where the new restaurant

was and made a beeline, reassuring myself that maybe Tobias was simply busy that night or some of his staff hadn't shown up.

The other reasons were shushed, along with the howls from my jackal. He'd only howled in the past few days. Had never heard him make the sound before Tobias stumbled into our life.

A howling jackal was one who was in mating season.

My feet moved fast toward the restaurant but when I turned the corner, I saw Tobias' place dark and empty. A closed sign on the door.

I walked up to the door and sniffed deeply. Tobias hadn't been there that day or if he had, it hadn't been through this door.

Fuck me.

I knew it was too good to be true.

I turned around and gave fake smiles to a couple passing through. The alpha had his hand on his mate's pregnant belly in pride.

That would never be me. The fact pushed down on me, that damned anvil back in my life again.

Stepping away from the building, I tugged on that gratuitous scarf around my neck with a bit too much force.

Too good to be true.

It had to be my age. His mating instinct must've gotten the best of him, making him

say yes in the first place. But once he got home, he thought of all the things that could go wrong. I was older. That meant his kids would have an older father. I would in all probability die before him.

Or maybe an older alpha simply wasn't what he needed.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and decided to take the long way home, meandering around town for a while. My jackal wanted to break from me and scent the omega down, submit to him and make him want us again, but he had no manners or dignity when it came to Tobias, apparently.

I nodded and waved to some couples as I passed them and even stopped at the coffee shop for a late-night latte. Yeah, it was late but with the events of the night, there would be no sleep for me anyway, so I might as well get my treat beverage. Getting canceled had earned me a treat.

While I sipped my latte, I strolled the streets of Oliver Creek. My jackal's senses were on high alert. He was still hoping our omega would come around a corner and tell us he was sorry. That he'd changed his mind and wanted us to go out together—or even better, stay in together. I passed the bustling new restaurants and food trucks. The smells on a night like tonight made my mouth water, but my appetite had disappeared completely.

I took long, deep drags of cool, fall air through my nose and let it calm me a bit.

Then the thought hit me.

What if he was hurt? What if something had gone wrong at the restaurant and he'd hurt himself, burned himself, or had to go to the healer?

Perhaps something caused him to shut down the restaurant.

Gods, I'd been selfish all this time, thinking like the victim when maybe my omega was in danger or wounded or emotionally hurting.

I would reach out to him the next morning. I would bring him flowers or breakfast, something to show him that I still wanted to pursue him.

If he said no again, I would have to accept it.

There would be no choice.

I'd stopped on a corner, intending to go home when I noticed a home at the far end of the street. The front lights were on, and something on the porch swayed back and forth.

My jackal all but pushed my feet forward, toward the movement. The house was small, a cottage. Yellow paint. White shutters, and the closer I got, the faster my heart beat. My feet moved of their own accord now, drawn, pulled in, tethered to the person on the swing out front.

Tobias. My omega. My bear.

Swinging, looking up at the moon, appearing like a dream—a fantasy.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

I beat myself up after canceling the date. My bear was in an uproar, literally roaring inside me every moment I was awake. But once burned...I just now had my life together, and the idea of letting it collapse again because of a relationship was not good. Not the direction I wanted my life to take.

Business offered an outlet for my creativity and success. Mating? Probably not just for me. And that would have to be all right. Few people got all their wishes, and I was just too rattled at the idea of attempting to date someone else. No matter how much I liked him and thought he was the right person for me.

I'd thought that before and look what happened. No, I needed to keep my head about me and not do anything that could go wrong and distract me from running my business. It was going well, but I had a long way to go before I could rest on my laurels. Sitting on my porch swing, moving slowly back and forth, I continued to make excuses for why I couldn't go out for a simple dinner with an attractive, mature jackal shifter.

It was a beautiful evening with a light breeze that carried a scent to me. One that had me tipping my head back and inhaling deeply. Even though I'd only been in front of Leon for a fraction of a second before spilling all that food all over him, I knew it was him. I scooted off the swing and made a move toward the house. If he was passing by, I did not want him to see me and ask me for an explanation as to why I canceled our date. What was he doing in this neighborhood anyway? I had one hand on the door, almost home free, when Leon called out my name and the gate creaked. I peeked over my shoulder.

“Tobias? Wait.” He double-timed up the walk and the porch steps. “Where are you going?”

“I-I was. Umm...when did you get here?”

He stopped and tilted his head, eyeing me up and down. “Just now. I think you saw me on the sidewalk?”

There was absolutely no way I could run into the house now, and not just because it would make me look like a coward. It would be rude and probably make my bear mad enough to bite. It was more metaphorical, as in no actual blood would spill, but the couple of times I’d upset him enough, it hurt just the same.

I turned the rest of the way around. “Hi.”

Leon came even with me on the porch. “So, what’s with pretending not to see me? Or...for that matter, canceling our date. I know it’s not my breath because I brush my teeth twice a day and even more often if I eat garlic or onions.”

A chuckle escaped me. “No, you smell amazing.” I closed my eyes in humiliation. “Oh my god. I didn’t mean that.”

“You didn’t?” He cupped his hand over his mouth and sniffed. “No...minty fresh.”

I sucked in a breath and let it out. “Okay, yes, your breath is fine, and you do smell good in general, but what I meant was...well, I have no idea what I meant. Maybe I should go back in the house before I lose what little self-respect I have left.”

Leon reached for my hand, and I let him take it. “Tobias, what’s going on? If you don’t like me, say so, but I didn’t get that impression. Did something happen to make you cancel our date? Did you meet another jackal?”

Another jackal? They were pretty rare among shifters. “I’m pretty new in town, but so far, you’re the first jackal I’ve met. I just...I get nervous at the thought of dating again. And when I get nervous, I shut down.”

“You’ve had a bad experience?” He stroked my palm with his thumb, sending shivers up to my shoulder. “Is that it?”

I nodded.

“Do you want to go out with me?”

I nodded again.

“Can I kiss you and see if we can’t settle those nerves?”

I tipped my face up, unable to say no. It was just one kiss, right? A friendly one to help me calm down. But the second his lips touched mine, calm was the furthest thing from my current state.

Warm, minty breath, a tongue that stroked mine, awakening feelings and desires I’d shut down a long time ago. My knees went weak, and I stumbled over the threshold. He followed me, backing me into the foyer. I heard the door click closed behind him as he steadied me.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

“Bedroom,” I growled into his ear as my teeth scraped his earlobe. Frantically, he moaned, fingers grappling with my belt.

“Down the hall,” Tobias said. He turned his head to the side, giving me greater access to his neck. Gods, his scent was concentrated right there. I ran my tongue up the column of his neck from shoulder to ear, tasting him, taking my time.

“If you keep that up, I’m going to come before we even get your pants off.” Tobias giggled. “Take me to bed, alpha.”

He took my hand and led me down the hallway. I didn’t have a chance to see his bedroom because there was nothing but him. We found the bed, and I pulled back, taking a chance to really see him.

“What are you waiting for?”

I let a growl exit my mouth. “Patience, omega. Patience. No reason to rush.”

He whimpered in response and reached for his shirt, pulling it off in one graceful move. My turn to whimper. I kicked off my shoes while licking my lips at the sight of him. His abs were taut and firm, flexing as he breathed. He had a slight olive tone and a freckle right in the middle of his chest.

“The first time you touch me, I swear I’m going to come. Touch me, alpha. Don’t make me beg.”

“Mmm, I might make you beg one day but not tonight.”

I took off all my clothes and then closed the distance between us and reached for the button on his pants. He wore no boxers underneath. I growled at the sight of his thickened cock bobbing in anticipation.

“Get on the bed,” I commanded. He did so without hesitation.

Spreading his legs, I stood between them and then lowered my mouth to his swollen cock. He cried out, threading his fingers through my hair and tugged. “That’s right, alpha. Gods, that feels amazing.”

The head of his cock pressing against the back of my throat, I sucked him off, my lips against the base. His smell drove me to madness. He bucked his hips, fucking my mouth, his breaths growing shallower.

I pulled away as his balls tightened. Tobias was on the verge of coming, but I wanted him to work for it, just a bit.

“Alpha?” He flopped on the bed and pouted.

“Not yet. I want to be inside you when you come. You want that, too, don’t you?”

He leaned forward and fisted my dick. “I want that. I want you deep inside me.”

“Needy little omega. Move up to the headboard and show me you’re ready. Show me.”

Tobias scooted up until his back was against the headboard. He spread his legs once again, and this time tilted his ass up, the sheen of his slick dripping from his channel. As I got onto the bed and saw how much he needed me, my hips thrust forward

almost on their own. “How long are you going to make me wait?”

“Not long at all now.”

I crawled toward him and took his mouth once again. Our cocks rubbed together as I moved my lips to his neck and then to each pec, sucking his hardened nipples into my mouth until his movements became more frantic. That’s how I wanted him. Desperate for me. Hungry for my cock driving inside him.

Positioning myself between his legs, I tested his entrance, pushing only the tip into him. He was so slick, I slid right in as his tight channel gripped my cock. The feel of him around me broke all my resolve.

“I changed my mind,” I said, ramming into him all at once.

“Yes. Finally.”

I grabbed onto his shoulders and fucked my omega with every bit of strength I had. He skidded his hands down my abs then gripped my hips, determining the rhythm of my strokes as I filled him over and over, edging on orgasm.

“Grab your cock, Tobias. We will come at the same time.”

“Oh, alpha. Fuck me harder,” he yelled, gripping his cock while I drove into him harder than before. He worked his shaft up and down, our eyes locked on each other.

I looked down to see his balls tighten. His moans and breaths became louder. “Fill me up, Leon. I’m about to...” Before the word could emerge from his mouth, he cried out my name and spurted white ribbons of cum over his stomach. His channel tightened and I found my own release took over with a power and mind-numbing strength I’d never experienced before.

I'd come so hard my ears rang. I called his name as I filled him up.

"Gods, that was..." Tobias closed his eyes, a soft smile on his lips.

"It sure as hell was."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

Making love to my alpha was a game changer, and I knew what I wanted, but he did not mark or even knot. With the emotional connection already there, those things came so naturally, but the time was not right. We had not even gone on a date yet. And I wasn't sure how we'd gone from my calling off our dinner plans to waking up snuggled in his arms.

I didn't usually wake this early, since we did not serve breakfast at the restaurant and I often worked late. But I had been sleeping alone for a while now, and my first reaction to a hard body behind me and an arm over my chest was panic.

Not proud of that, but I was grateful that before I leapt out of bed or flung him away from me, or worse, my bear stepped in to remind me of what was really going on.

In one word.

Mate.

I still wasn't ready to fully accept that, believing I had a choice in the matter, but the pronouncement was enough to settle me back into my skin. Yes, I'd been very close to shifting, one of the reasons my bear was able to take control as much as he did. Many people were afraid of shifters, especially large predators because they thought when we took our fur, we'd harm people. Behaved like the basic versions of those animals. The meanest of those. Werewolf stories really affected people's perceptions of us.

Not everyone knew we existed, of course, but over the years, it seemed that more and more did. Even then, some chose to pretend they did not. And that was fine, so long as no harm was done on either side.

But, in any case, shifting to my bear in bed when I was freaking out would not be optimal.

Instead, I lay there until my heartbeat slowed to normal before donning pajama pants and slipping away to the kitchen. Not that I didn't want to be with Leon, because I totally did, but parts of me were a little sore and achy after a night where we were very "active" together. If I stayed here, my morning wood was going to lead me down a path of more than a little sore.

Besides, I wanted to make breakfast for the alpha. He had quite a workout the night before. I chuckled, remembering his expression when he came. Yes—a workout. Flushed, sexy, panting. Way to make an omega feel like a superstar.

"What's so funny?" Strong arms came around me from behind, pulling me back against a firm chest. "Is there a joke?"

My face heated, surely equaling the redness of his at that moment of ecstasy. I ducked my head, hoping to hide it, but he turned me in his grip and eyed me with one dark brow lifted.

"No, no. I was just remembering something. Want breakfast?" I moved to step back, but he pulled me in tight again. "Aren't you hungry?"

He nuzzled my neck, his scruff scraping in such a pleasant way against my skin. "I'm hungry."

No question he was hungry, but I didn't think frozen waffles were what were on his

mind. “For food?” His cock was fully erect, and I wanted it in me so badly, I didn’t care if I walked funny later. Not at all.

Fortunately or unfortunately, he seemed to read my mind. Grasping my hips, he set me away from him and shook his head. “As much as I’d rather take you back to bed, I have a feeling your body needs a break. So...food? Sure. What shall we make?”

“I was going to cook for you.” I swayed toward him before tightening my leg muscles because he was right, and too much closeness was going to have my kitchen staff asking questions.

“I’m not a chef, but I like dabbling in the kitchen. I manage to feed myself decently.”

“Oh, of course.” I hoped I hadn’t hurt his feelings! “But you’re my guest.”

“Omega?” His stern alpha tone rippled over me. “Eggs?”

“I was going to make waffles. I have some in the freezer. And maybe fruit? Coffee?”

“Great!” He grabbed an apron from the collection on a hook beside the fridge. “If you’ll tell me what to cut up, I’ll be in charge of fruit.”

I piled an orange, apple, and a few strawberries and grapes on the counter before fetching the zip-top bag of plastic-wrapped pumpkin waffles from the freezer.

“Where’s the box?” he asked, looking in drawers for a knife. “Do you repackage them when you put them away?”

“Box?” Puzzled, I looked at the bag and then back at him. “Oh, like from the store?”

“Yeah, waffles...did you make those?”

I shrugged. “I figured out when I was a teenager that they are much cheaper and taste better if I do. Then I figured if they could make them and freeze them for later, so could I. And as an adult, I appreciate the lack of things I can’t pronounce in my food.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to try them. What do you have to do? Put them in the oven?”

Feeling particularly proud of myself, I shook my head and pointed toward the toaster. “Just like the ones at the store.”

He was particularly impressed by the spice and pumpkin flavor, and we ate our breakfast together as if we were a long-time couple, lingering over coffee until I had to get ready for work and he had to leave as well. I walked Leon to the door and kissed him goodbye.

He started down the steps then stopped and looked back. “Did you cancel our date because of the age difference? Because if you think I’m too old for you...”

I trotted to stand on the step next to him and grabbed his hand. “Believe it or not, it’s not you it’s me. But I would love to get together again soon, if you want to.”

He did.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

He hadn't quite answered the age question.

I'd never been one for happy, positive thinking and affirmations but, this morning, a few days after my night with my omega, I found myself chanting them over and over.

We are fated.

It has to work out.

We are fated.

Age doesn't matter.

Then again, I had to know if that second-guessing in his eyes was real or not. If it was me that made him rethink what we had.

I had made the argument in my head, practicing the damned thing over and over in case he decided our age gap was a problem.

I got up with the sun, restless. One night with the omega of my dreams and, all of a sudden, I couldn't catch a wink of sleep without him.

If he didn't want to spend the rest of his life with me, I was in serious trouble.

As noon rolled around, I made a decision. I would go to the restaurant and try to

sneak him away for lunch. Hopefully, he had enough staff for that. It was worth a try anyway.

Better than standing here in my workshop, pretending to work when really, I was driving myself nuts over whether or not my mate wanted me.

I cleaned up from my work and dressed quickly in a pair of jeans and a simple T-shirt. I stopped at the flower shop for some roses, lamenting the fact that I didn't know what kind of flowers my omega preferred or if he was allergic to a specific kind.

There were so many things I had to learn about him, and I looked forward to all of them, if he would let me.

When I arrived at the restaurant, I took a seat and waited for a server.

“Welcome. Can I get you started with an appetizer?”

“No. I actually came to speak to the owner, Tobias.”

The waiter eyed my flowers and smiled. “Two seconds, please.”

He rushed to the back and while I waited, I took in the place. It was tastefully decorated in a casual blue-and-white theme that made me think of pictures of Mediterranean seaside resorts. There was a hush in the place. People weren't talking because they were busy devouring the delicious food.

Tobias had created something amazing.

“Sir?” Another man approached the table and took the seat across from me. “You were asking about the owner, but he's not available. Is there something I can help you

with?”

I pulled the flowers from the chair next to me and put them on the table. “Tobias and I are seeing each other.” I didn’t want to go into details about being his alpha and mating or anything else.

The bear could probably still scent Tobias on me.

“I see. Well, I’m hoping I don’t get in trouble for this but this morning, Toby burned himself on the oven. He was in a rush. I’ve never seen him do that before.”

“Is he okay?” My chest constricted.

My omega was hurt and it was killing me not to be with him. “We rushed him to the healer. They sent him home with some salve and orders to rest for the remainder of the day.”

“Thank you.” I rose from the table, grabbed the bouquet, and sprinted out the door. My jackal wanted to shift and get to him faster, but that would probably be frowned upon with so many humans who visited Oliver Creek.

I walked as fast as my legs would take me, which was not nearly fast enough. By the time I arrived, I was sweating and my heart beat so fast, I was sure it was going to jump ship and force itself out of my chest.

I debated whether or not to knock and then walked right in.

“What the...Leon?” Tobias rose from the couch. His eyes were wide. Maybe walking through instead of knocking was a mistake.

“I...you were hurt. They told me burned yourself and...”

“I burned myself so you brought flowers?”

After being gripped all the way here, they were mangled and devoid of most of the petals, but they probably looked better than me at this point.

“I...no. I had the flowers anyway.”

His head cocked to the side. “You were bringing flowers to someone else?” Tobias’ scent kicked up. Jealousy. He was jealous of the thought of me bringing someone else flowers?

“I was in my shop working and missing you, so I decided to buy you some flowers and show up at your restaurant. I wanted to take you out for lunch but the guy who seemed to be in charge told me you were hurt.”

“Freakin’ Amos,” he grumbled under his breath. “My sous chef just came back today, or I would have stayed no matter what.”

“What can I do?” I asked. “Do you have painkillers? Anything other than the salve?”

He sighed and gave me a hint of a smile. “You’re here and I’m resting. And I have these beautiful flowers. That should be enough, right?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Leon

I've had many good ideas in my lifetime but this, by far, was the best one. And I wondered why the healer had not suggested he do this. His burns were painful but not dangerous, certainly something a shift would handle.

Running with my omega.

"Where are we going?" he asked, putting the window down. His dark-brown hair blew in the breeze, and it was the first time that night where his face hadn't been pinched in pain.

"There are places outside the town limits. Others run here all the time. I even saw a lion once."

My omega shuddered. "There's not going to be a lion out here tonight, is there?"

I laughed. "Not tonight, I hope. But don't worry. I won't let any lions get you, little bear."

We arrived at the field where shifters ran free to the east of town and shut off his car. "Promise?"

"I promise. Now come on. I'm ready to get you naked again."

We got out and stood under the sky. The stars were so bright, and the moon was almost full. Still, even with the sky and the stars and the blessed moon, Tobias was

the most beautiful of all, by far.

“Before we shift, there’s something I need to tell you, Leon.” My name on his lips was music to my ears.

“Go on. You can tell me anything.”

He nodded, and a light blush dusted his cheeks. “You asked me a question the other day. Do I mind the age gap?”

My breath whooshed from my lungs. This was it. The make-it-or-break-it time. “If you’re undecided, omega...” I started.

“I’m not undecided, alpha. I’m 100 percent decided. My mind is made up, in fact.” He gave me a small smile.

“Stop teasing me, Tobias. If you’ve decided I’m too...that we are too far apart in age, then...” I prepped myself mentally for heartbreak. A nearly impossible task, but I tried nonetheless.

“Leon, please listen to me.” He walked over to me and looked into my eyes. “It’s not an issue. You’re my alpha. Period. Besides, the silver hair coming in on the sides of your hair is hot.”

“Is that right?” I asked.

He reached out and stroked my face. I leaned my head into his hand, so hungry for his touch. A soft whimper left my mouth. “That’s right. I belong to you.”

Leaning down, I grabbed him up and kissed him deeply. This was the only obstacle between us, and Tobias had dissolved that notion with only a few words.

“Let’s shift and get you healed.”

We took our clothes off and while I’d seen my mate naked before, I found myself almost drooling at the sight of him.

We shifted at the same time and for a few minutes, my jackal simply checked out his new bear mate. He sniffed his body as did Tobias as we got to know each other.

His bear was truly beautiful.

We ran that night for hours. I chased him. He chased me. We played, and through that play and running, built a bond. Our human sides already shared a bond through mating and that translated to our animals, but the bond didn’t fully secure until tonight.

Shifting together solidified the bond.

There was no way I could ever let him go.

After running, we lay together under the stars as our animals and then in our human forms. There was no one around, so why not?

I turned, looking at Tobias’ arm. He was laying on his back with one arm under his head and the other one, the one that had been burned at his side. “Sweetheart, how is your arm?”

He lifted the arm on the ground into the air and showed me. “All better. I should’ve shifted earlier. Didn’t even think about it for some reason.”

“I’m glad we thought of it. No residual pain?”

Shaking his head, he looked at me. “No. No pain.”

Nodding, I laid my head on his stomach, content to be here with him and listen to his heartbeat forever. “That makes me happy. I almost lost my mind when I heard you had injured yourself.”

“Want to know something?” he asked.

“I want to know everything about you.”

“Earlier, when I had to go to the healer and then home, throughout that fiasco...I wished you were there the whole time.”

I turned on my side to face him. “I would’ve come to you right away. No matter what, you can call me day or night. You can count on me, Tobias.” My jackal insisted I make that point clear. Perhaps he’d picked up something about Tobias through the bond that told him our mate would need reassurance.

“I’m here for you as well,” he whispered.

“I know you are.”

For a long time, we lay like that until he suggested we get dressed and head back. What a shame. If I had my way, the omega would never put clothes on again.

“I’m hungry,” he said as I opened the passenger door for him.

“I am too. Should we stop and pick up some sandwiches, or I could make you something.”

I rounded the truck and got in. “Leon, I wasn’t talking about sandwiches.”



“What did you want, then?”

He snickered. “Alpha, I’m not talking about food at all.” He reached over and ran his hand up my thigh.

“Oh,” I whispered. “That hunger I am happy to take care of.”

Tobias

We came back from running refreshed and relaxed. And, in my case, healed. I couldn't remember a time I felt better and was just glad Leon thought of the whole idea. Why hadn't the healer? I remembered when we were talking and he had said something about running, but I thought it was just conversation and told him I didn't have anywhere to really do that. Maybe he had planned to recommend a shift...and I'd somehow thrown him off and made him suggest something else? Either way, I felt so good, and it didn't hurt that my mate was at my side and the heat between us after the shift was hotter than the oven that burned me.

He drove us home at a speed just a bit over the limit because, as he said, "It takes longer to get a ticket than to go at a reasonable pace." But his fingers tapped the steering wheel, and his tented trousers told more of the tale. It seemed to take hours instead of minutes before we pulled up in front of his house and spilled out of the truck. This time, I did not wait for him to let me out, just met him at the front of the truck, linked hands, and together, we ran for the front door and exploded into the house. We were stripping ourselves and one another as we moved through the living room and hallway on the way to the bedroom. In the doorway, he pulled me close to him and kissed me, our breathing loud in the quiet room. He backed me toward the bed then lifted me, my legs going around his hips, our rigid cocks pinned between us.

Parting my lips, I allowed his tongue admittance, shifting higher until the tip of his cock was poised at my slick opening. Everything about this moment was out of time and magic, but I needed him in me, needed him to knot me, and I wanted to wear his mark.

He hadn't done it last time...

When he broke our kiss for breath, I whispered, "I want all of you, alpha. Please don't hold back tonight."

He was panting, but his eyes bored into me. "Are you sure? Once we're mated, there's no going back."

"If you are my mate, there's no going back anyway." I unwound my legs and let my feet fall to the floor. "It's a matter of Fate."

"But there's always free will, omega. So, I ask again; do you want everything?"

I kissed him, showing with my lips and teeth and tongue that I did, but then I said, "Everything, alpha."

Because sometimes you have to use your words.

From there, he asked no more questions, just eased me onto the edge of the mattress with my ass hanging off, knees pressed to my chest, and my ass cheeks spread wide. He wasted no time, my slick easing his thrust. When he was balls deep, he reached for my cock and jerked it several times before replacing his hand with mine. I was so deep into the moment I barely noticed the change until he urged me to stroke myself.

"I won't take long, omega."

He clearly wanted me to come before he did, but as the speed of his thrusts increased, my strokes lost rhythm. Instead, I clung to him, my cock only receiving friction from the movement of our bodies, but to my shock, that was all it took, and I was spurting my cum onto both of us seconds before I felt the heat of his cum filling me and then, as he sagged over me, braced on his arms, his knot swelled, and his teeth pierced my

shoulder.

And seconds after that, my teeth sunk into his shoulder in turn.

It was too much...everything went dark, and I blacked out for a moment, awaking to find him rolling us to the side, still connected in the most intimate clasp of alpha and omega. We were fated mates, but this act had left a visible mark. Anyone who saw it, at least any shifter, would know I belonged to someone. And anyone who saw us together would know that someone was Leon. My alpha. My fated. My true mate.

And yet, a panic lay under the joy and pleasure. Mates usually jumped right in with both feet, literally. But I wasn't ready for that. But then I let it all go. For now. For tonight. The future would have to take care of itself.

Leon

There was nothing in the world as good or as beautiful as waking up with your mate in your arms. Or, in this case, draped over your body. Tobias' head lay on my chest. One of his legs hooked over mine, and his arms held me tight even in sleep.

Like he was afraid I would leave if he let go—not that I was complaining.

I moved my arms a bit and felt the twinge of the mating mark on my shoulder. It would take a while to heal unless we shifted, but I didn't mind. The tiny amount of pain reminded me that I was marked by my mate.

As if I needed reminding.

"Mmm," Tobias made a noise in his sleep. He also snored, but the soft sound actually calmed me and my jackal.

"I'm going to shower and make us some breakfast," I whispered to him.

His eyes flew open. "You're leaving?"

I moved and covered him up with my comforter, placing a kiss on his temple. "I'm going to shower and make us breakfast. Not leaving. We're at my house. I can't really leave even if I wanted to, which I don't. Sleep some more. It's okay. I'm here."

As soon as I wrapped the comforter around his shoulders, his breathing slowed once again.

Last night had been incredible. Different than the first time we'd mated. The first time was fueled by lust and attraction but last night, while there was plenty of lust and attraction, was born out of our new bond. Stroke for stroke, our tether thickened. And once he bit down on my shoulder, my world tilted in the best way possible.

Showered, I set about making my mate breakfast. I wanted to go out and buy us both some breakfast, so I could get back into bed with him, but my jackal insisted his breakfast the day after mating be made by my hands.

The jackal got his way most of the time, and this was no exception.

I gathered the ingredients for all different kinds of pancakes and hoped I got one combination right. My personal favorite was blueberry pecan, but I also intended to make banana chocolate chip and sweet potato cinnamon ones as well. I had some leftover sweet potatoes in the fridge and, while I was out of bananas, the dried ones would have to do.

I put on a pot of coffee and pulled out the creamer, sugar, and some alternatives like brown sugar and honey. One day, these things would be second nature and I would know exactly what my mate wanted for breakfast and every other meal.

While the coffee percolated, I heard the water in the shower turn on. I whistled a bit, picturing my mate under the spray, and I swore that if I wasn't prioritizing feeding him after a long night of shifting and lovemaking, I would be in the shower with him, seeing all of it in person. Would this be a problem every day we were together? I hoped so.

Once the shower ended and I heard him bustling about in the bedroom, I rushed to finish up and have everything ready once he emerged.

"Good morning," he said, coming down the hallway as I placed the platter of

pancakes on the table.

“Good morning it is,” I replied and opened my arms. He smelled more delicious than all the pancakes in the world, but now his scent was mixed with mine, along with my soap and shampoo he’d used. “I hope you’re hungry,” I said. “I didn’t know what you’d like so I made a bit of every kind of pancake.”

He rested his head on my chest as I rubbed his back. “I’m starving and...I smell coffee?”

I chuckled at his raspy morning voice. “Yes. Coffee. Sit down and I’ll get you a cup.”

When I set it down in front of him, he blushed. “You don’t have to serve me, Leon.”

“I know I don’t but I like to. It’s my pleasure. You’re my mate.”

“I am,” he said. His tone was thoughtful as though he were still getting used to the idea. We both slathered our pancakes with butter and syrup and dug in. He added enough cream to make his coffee a caramel color but no sugar. I supposed there was enough sugar in our breakfast to make up the difference.

“What’s the verdict?” I asked once we were done and he sat back, patting his belly.

“They were delicious, of course.”

I chuckled. “I meant, which was your favorite. I’m making mental lists here.”

“Oh!” His eyebrows rose. “They were all incredible. But...I have a confession.”

“What is it?”

“Chocolate is not my favorite. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t eat it. It was delicious with the banana but, in general, I’m not a chocolate guy.”

I’d never heard of someone not liking chocolate. I leaned forward and touched his thigh. “Tell me all the things you like and dislike. I want to know everything.”

A scarlet hue rushed to his cheeks as he pursed his lips, trying and failing not to smile. “I hate eggs in the morning. I like them for lunch or dinner. I never use my top sheet. And lately, I really, really like jackals.”

“Jackals?” I asked, inching my fingers higher on his thigh. “Plural?”

He chuckled deeply and moved my hand to cover his groin. “No. Singular. One jackal named Leon. Do you know him?”

Gods, how I loved his playfulness. “I do. He has a beautiful mate. A bear.”



Tobias

We were together more nights than not, now that we were mated, although we both had our own homes. But I was never happy when we were apart. I did all right while I was at the restaurant, but if he stopped by for a minute, a quick kiss, a piece of baklava...my whole day brightened. Breakfast together had become our thing, and I worked hard to come up with new ideas to wow my alpha.

Not that he asked me to or ever implied I should do more than I already was. In fact, one morning he asked if cereal was an option. I now had six unopened boxes of cereal on my pantry shelf. I just liked cooking for and with my alpha too much.

Until one day when I woke from yet another vivid dream. I never, on the average, remembered anything about my dreams, but lately that had changed. Color...did everyone dream in color? Had I before? I honestly had no idea. And they weren't nightmares or about any particular topic. Just...bright. Flowers and plants and animals and people. Going about their ordinary lives but as if someone amped up the hues by about 50 percent, so it kind of hurt my dreaming eyes.

I wasn't too worried about it, though, not enough to mention it. Maybe it was something that happened to the newly mated? I climbed out of bed and stretched. I'd have to ask Leon if he also was dreaming like this. Could also be omegas. I didn't know. Everything was kind of crazy at work—the cooler weather had not lessened our customers, my sous chef was still missing work because of his little girl, and I was just feeling overtired and hassled in general. Wasn't busy good for a restaurant? I should be happy, right? Instead, I complained. I stepped into my boxers and padded into the kitchen, ready to clear my head by making my alpha eggs and bacon. He

planned to relax today, so he got up a little later than usual and came into the kitchen to find the cereal lined up on the counter, along with milk, bowls, and spoons.

“Finally. I was wondering when you’d let me have at all these,” he said, and I froze.

“You don’t like the breakfasts I’ve been cooking?” Sweating over, trying to make better, seeking to chef while half awake...

“I love what you make.” He held out his arms and pulled me into them. “You make the best food all the time. I just don’t want you to have to work so hard all the time for me.”

I sniffed. “Well, I guess...okay.” I would have cooked a full breakfast if the bacon hadn’t smelled off to me. It currently resided in the kitchen wastebasket. Something I’d explain except I was too cranky. “I’m going to go to work.”

“Isn’t it early for that?”

“Shorthanded again. But don’t hurry. Enjoy your cereal. I’m just going to have coffee.”

“I’ll see you tonight though?” He picked up a box of oat clusters. “I’m making dinner.”

I mustered a smile for him, reaching for the milk. Pouring it in my coffee, I wrinkled my nose. “I think this is off. Smell it?”

Leon sniffed the milk. “I think it’s fine.” He filled his bowl with cereal and poured on the milk, took a bite. “Perfect.”

“Must be me. I’m gonna get a shower.”

“About dinner? Would you rather I cooked over here instead of my place?”

“I think here is good.” I stretched my back. “I am going to try to come home early and get a nap. I don’t know why I’m so tired.”

“Good. You’ve been so busy at work.”

“My sous chef is supposed to be back today. If he is, naptime for Toby.”

When I got to work, I learned little Felicia was doing much better, so I stayed through the lunch rush and then packed up and went home. Everything smelled wrong or off, and I was worried about poisoning the whole town. But nobody else seemed to find any problems, so it had to be me, but why? I’d been mildly nauseated for weeks and tired. But the smell thing was new. I had been working too hard, obviously, but a niggling doubt at the back of my mind had me stopping by the pharmacy on the way home. I couldn’t be, could I? I hadn’t thrown up at all and my chest didn’t feel swollen.

But better safe than sorry.

Leon

“I don’t know what to say.” Not what I expected to hear from my mate but if there was a time for surprise, this was one of the big ones.

“Come here. Let me hold you.” I opened my arms, but this time, Tobias didn’t come and lay his head against my chest. He stood there, frozen, staring at the white stick with two blue lines. Two blue lines that changed the course of our lives in two minutes. “Tobias. Talk to me, omega. You’re scaring me.”

His gaze flicked up to meet mine. “Maybe I’m scaring you because I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of? Talk to me.”

We sat on the couch. Tobias wrapped his arms around his middle. “I don’t know what kind of dad I will be. I’ve never babysat children or had any siblings. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Sweet omega. His feelings were completely normal, and I told him so. “We will learn together. I have some younger siblings and nieces and nephews. Plus, there is so much information out there now. Online. Books.”

“Are you happy?” He nailed me with those deep-brown eyes.

“I’m very happy. I had given up on finding my mate, and with that came giving up on having any children. I had made peace with it about the time you walked into my life. But, right now, I’m more worried about you.”

“I didn’t walk into your life. I tripped and plastered you with food.” He let out a long breath, relaxing his shoulders. “You really think this is going to be okay? What if he hates me?”

It took everything in me not to laugh. “Tobias, you are going to be an amazing papa to our little pup.”

“Pup? What makes you think it’s not going to be a cub?”

“I don’t. Whatever they are, as long as they’re happy, it doesn’t matter to me.”

Once he’d calmed down, he let me hold him for a while, but now was the time to talk about something I’d had on my mind way before finding out he was pregnant.

“Omega, would you consider moving in with me?” I blurted the question out before I lost my nerve.

Tobias froze in my arms. His body got stiff and his scent took a turn. “I...I don’t know. Is this just because I’m pregnant now?”

“No. I’ve been thinking about asking you for weeks. I hate waking up without you next to me. I miss you. I want you around as much as possible.”

“I don’t want to lose my independence, Leon.”

I shook my head. “Why in the world would you think being with me would mean losing you? It doesn’t have to be that way, Tobias. I would never take anything from you, including your independence.”

“I’ve done this before. I moved in with someone who I thought was my mate and...” He stared at the floor. “I didn’t even see it coming. It started small. ‘Oh, why don’t

you do this. Don't do that.' Next thing I knew, I was in a cage and asking for permission to do things I loved. I won't do that again."

I immediately paused and put away the defenses I'd so easily thrown up in my mind. Never would I even try to tell my omega what to do or try to run his life. If he was independent, then I knew that every day he chose to be with me was because he wanted to, not because he felt obligated or I had mentally beat the choices out of him.

He didn't need to hear those defenses in the moment. He needed my reassurance.

"Omega, I know there's nothing I can do to convince you other than prove myself to you over time. So that's what I'm going to do. Please know that the discussion and the option is always open. If you ever want to discuss living with me, then we'll talk about it. No pressure from me."

"You aren't angry?" he asked, taking my hand in his.

"Of course not. You'll learn I'm nothing like whoever did that to you before, and I never will be. Now, are you hungry? How about we get you something to eat, and we can maybe talk about names."

He laughed and shook his head. "It's a little early for that, don't you think?"

"No. Come on, omega. I'm sure you have some names in mind. But first, food?"

"Nothing with chicken, please. I don't know what it is lately but I've got the chicken ick, badly."

Snorting, I wrapped him up in my embrace. "It's called morning sickness. And how about that smokehouse truck? We can get pulled pork sandwiches or we can find a steak somewhere."

His stomach growled. “Pulled pork sounds amazing. They also sell some of that candied bacon.”

“I’ll get you two all the bacon you want. Come on.”

I’d successfully changed the subject, but now it was my stomach that was sick. Would Tobias never trust me? Would Tobias ever realize that I had no intentions of hurting him or controlling even the slightest thing about him?

Maybe one day.

I only hoped he gave me the chance to find out.

“Can we stop by the restaurant and check things out? Make sure everything is okay?” he asked.

“Of course.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am*

Tobias

My alpha really was into the moment, was making it clear that he wanted us to move forward, to do what came naturally to mates, but I was still hesitant. My bear was in full agreement with our mate and even more was demanding that we move in together and make a life.

But I was not at all sure of what to do. I had done that once, thought the person in my life cared about me until they showed their true character. How could I trust that I wouldn't make the same mistake again?

Leon had been nothing but a gentleman and kind, and he'd not done a thing to make me feel otherwise. It wasn't his fault if I didn't know how to trust myself enough to just go for it. But if I moved to his house and things didn't go well...if I threw my lot in with him entirely and it didn't work?

I'd have no one to blame but myself.

Would I?

No.

And I had more than myself to consider now. Before, when things went sideways, I packed up and left. But now, I would be responsible for making a baby homeless. Why hadn't I suggested we use protection at least until we knew one another better? Wouldn't that have been the logical choice?



But no, just like last time, I jumped in but at least I hadn't gotten pregnant before. The very idea of my ex having impregnated me, of having a connection like that to him forever gave me chills. But as far as protection, that ship had sailed and I was carrying a baby who belonged to Leon just as much as me.

A decision that should have been made when I knew my own mind better. Why...why didn't I think before acting? And why did that jackal have to be so damned sexy? And kind. And warm. And caring...

But was it real?

It didn't help that the food issues had moved into nausea for weeks, making it hard to get the nutrition my body was demanding. I trudged into the kitchen and opened my refrigerator, looking for something appealing. Although I had not worshiped the porcelain god for a few days now, I was still being oh-so careful. Eggs. No. Bread. No. Cheese... Nah. Bacon? The one thing that had set me off at the beginning was now the only thing I wanted to eat. I pulled the pound out and got a half dozen strips sizzling in a skillet. As I hovered over it with a fork in hand, my phone rang.

"Hi, Tobias. What are you up to?"

"Just making something to eat." I turned a couple of strips, inhaling the delicious aroma. "You?"

"I was just checking to see if you wanted company this evening." His voice held such hesitance, my bear growled. "What was that?"

"My beast says hello," I muttered, feeling like a real ass for making him sound that way. For making him feel unwelcome when I really wanted him here with me. I knew if I let him stay over, I'd get some sleep, which wasn't happening much right now.

But wasn't that using him?

"Why don't I bring some dinner?" he asked. "I promise not to overstay my welcome."

Ouch.

"Please come over. Just bring yourself and stay for a while?"

"All right. I'll see you in a half hour."

We hung up, and I finished cooking the bacon and ate it while I waited. Then I went in the bathroom and looked in the mirror, horrified by the mess that looked back at me. The very least I could do was clean up before he got there. I'd had the day off and hadn't even showered yet.

With not a lot of time, I stripped down and took one more glance at myself before climbing under the spray. My belly protruded out, but not too far yet. Still, I felt like everything about my body was puffy and unhealthy looking. Ugh.

The shower helped a little. At least my swollen form was clean, and I brushed my teeth and combed my hair then dressed in the one pair of jeans that would still zip up...most of the way. My formerly baggy jeans were now the ones I couldn't sit comfortably in. I stripped them off and replaced them with my flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt I'd picked up the day before in a size larger than usual. My mate deserved better, but all I had to offer was me.

The bell rang and I headed for the door, my steps speeding up as I got closer. I wanted him so much, and I wished I was sure enough to take everything he had to offer. Like the night we mated when for just an hour or so I was. Why couldn't I be that now?

He'd been asking me to go to the healer for some time. Could he be right? No. I'd know when it was right.

I opened the door, saw his face, and burst into tears. Leon led me inside, sat on the couch, and pulled me onto his lap. He would stay as long as I let him and then go home. Again. Why did he tolerate me at all?

Leon

I would never try to control Tobias, but what I did do was insist that we visit Quinn the healer. Books had been delivered to my door as I preferred the physical copies over the eBooks and from what I'd read, my mate would need prenatal vitamins and there were certain foods he had to avoid and some foods he needed to have more of.

All the information we needed was in those books, plus the online information, but call me old-fashioned—I wanted him to see someone in person. Have Quinn look at his body and test his vitals. Make sure everything was okay.

Surprisingly, Tobias didn't protest this time. Not one bit.

I got some breakfast ready to go, along with an orange juice. I missed our breakfasts together. Pausing with my hands braced on the edge of the counter, I let a breath of frustration out. Tobias told me every night that he was tired and needed his rest. So, each night, I would come back to this house alone and sleep in my bed. My bed had never been cold before Tobias left his scent on the sheets and the comforter but never returned. We had always stayed at his house after that. Until he didn't want company.

I was a patient man but these weeks of sleeping without him. Waking up without him.

They were slowly driving me to madness.

My jackal was pissed off all the time. No matter how much I ran the son of a bitch, there was only one person who would make him calm again. That person who kept us at arm's length.

I drove over to Tobias' house and knocked on the door. It felt stupid, knocking on his door. We should share the same door, and I shouldn't have to announce my arrival at our home.

Silliness, if you asked me, but my mate had some trust issues.

Hopefully, we wouldn't spend a lifetime with this wall between us.

"Good morning," he said and shut the door behind him. He was paler than usual.

"Omega, are you okay?"

"I didn't get much sleep last night. Kept tossing and turning."

"I'm sorry. Maybe you'll have a chance to catch a nap today."

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Naps are the best."

We walked to the truck and, of course, I opened his door for him. All of this felt like we were still in the dating phase sometimes, but I swore I would wait for him. As long as it took.

"I made you breakfast, if you want to eat. Are you still throwing up in the mornings?"

"No. I'm not. Sometimes, I get a bit nauseated, but it's easing up. Thank you. I think I will eat."

I nodded and got into the truck, driving us the short distance to the healer's office. We were welcomed right in. Quinn recognized my omega immediately and asked if he was all healed from the burn. While I hadn't personally been to the office, I'd heard around town that he was the best in the state. Shifters and even some humans

came from all around to be under his care. His mate helped him run the office.

“Right this way.” He led us to a room down the hall. Healer offices felt more like home than the sterile, antiseptic-smelling hospitals humans used. I’d been in a few but never wanted to go back.

“What brings you in today?” Quinn asked, sitting in a chair opposite us.

Tobias looked at me and then back to the healer. “I’m pregnant. I took a test.”

Quinn smiled. “Congratulations, you two. Is something going on that concerns you?”

“I’m really tired all the time but at night, I have trouble sleeping. Some foods make me sick, just by the smell of them but that’s normal, right?”

Quinn nodded. “Most omegas get food aversions but I’m concerned about the lack of sleep. Does he toss and turn?” The healer asked me the question. He asked me because he assumed we slept next to each other, as we should.

“Not that I know of. But I’m a heavy sleeper.”

Quinn wrote down some things before putting the clipboard away. “As far as sleep is concerned, let’s stay away from the electronic devices after sundown. Try a warm bath with some lavender Epsom salts. Maybe a cup of lemon balm tea before bed? Chamomile isn’t recommended for pregnancy so stay away from that. Those things should help you. Alpha, maybe give him a foot massage at night, things to help him rest and relax.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

Tobias looked at me. He and I both knew some of these things would be possible, but

most I was not there for. I would try my damndest to help him as much as I could before he asked me to go home.

The healer said it was too early to listen to the heartbeat, and we could come back at another time. He gave us advice on caffeine intake. Rest. Light exercise. He advised Tobias to rest as much as possible since he worked a hectic job. He joked about me doing the housework and laundry. Of course, I would try, but since I didn't live with my omega, some would be tough.

Still, I promised myself I would do everything I could.

We received a package as we left the office. Prenatal vitamins. Some books. Websites containing good information instead of having us search online and find bogus advice.

Quinn was a good healer, and I was glad my Tobias was under his care. Before we left the building, Tobias stopped to use the restroom, and while I was waiting outside the door, Quinn came out of his office. I took the opportunity to ask a question that had been in the back of my mind for some time.

“Quinn do you have just a second?”

“Yes, of course.” He paused next to me.

“I have a kind of odd question. When Tobias got burned, why didn't you tell him to shift and heal?”

He blinked at me. “He said he didn't have anywhere to shift, and he seemed pretty stubborn on the topic, so I suggested rest.”

Stubborn. Sounded like my omega. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

“I’m sorry,” Tobias whispered as we got back into the truck. I knew what he was apologizing for, but I also knew he wasn’t budging on his stance of me not living with him and him not living with me.

“Don’t be,” I whispered and put my hand on his cheek. “We’ll figure it out. I’ll help you as best I can.”

“Leon,” he said, “did you want to go get some lunch? Maybe I could cook you something?”

Sweet mate was trying to apologize in a way other than words, but I was frustrated. Something could happen to Tobias, and I wouldn’t be there to help him. He would even sleep better with his alpha by his side, holding him, but he refused to let me. There was nothing I could do to convince him of that though.

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure you have work to do, and I don’t want to add to it.”

His eyebrows bunched. “Making a meal for you isn’t work, Leon.”

I nodded. “I know. I’m just...I’m not hungry anymore.”



Tobias

Thundering footsteps followed me as I raced from shadow to shadow, one hand cupping my swollen belly to keep it from swinging from side to side. My legs were sticks, my arms twigs, my chest concave, and I was barefoot on broken glass. The monster wanted the baby, and I didn't know where to go for shelter. There was no shelter. And then the hand came around my throat and I woke myself screaming.

The dreams of early pregnancy had evolved from vivid and colorful into terrifying nightmares that woke me several times a night. It didn't help that I was uncomfortable due to the changes in my body, and that my bear and I both wanted our alpha.

I was determined to stay independent, not to ever have to rely on someone for our living or comfort or sense of self, but we were truly not doing well without him. Whenever he came over and sat down with me on the sofa, I immediately fell asleep on his shoulder. Lying here on this night alone in my bed with images of my latest nightmare in my head, I knew it was time to change. Every night, the dreams got worse, and they were creatively horrible. Trolls, dinosaurs, demons...once, a giant clown made entirely out of cotton candy.

I couldn't go on like this, and I knew why I was spinning out. When I fell asleep on Leon's shoulder, it was in peace. My bear, my baby, and I all wanted to be with Leon. Full-time. I knew that in fighting being with my mate, I was bucking the plan of Fate, and if I didn't want to be with him, that would be worth continuing this ridiculous battle.

But I did want to be with him. So much, my bones ached with the yearning. I reached for my phone and checked the time. When he asked me if I knew what time it was, I wanted to be able to say that I did. It was two thirty in the morning.

Leon came over every day to spend time with me. As I'd gotten deeper into the pregnancy, I didn't feel much like cooking beyond what I did at work, and he brought me food. Anything he thought I might like. Then he sat with me and let me nap on him and went home when I said I was going to bed.

He asked nothing more than my company. He made sure I got the health care I'd been too stubborn to admit I needed. He fed me, refilled my water glass, and watched the reality shows I liked on TV, not even changing the channel when I was asleep and probably drooling on him.

I hadn't really believed my ex was my fated mate. And I knew Leon was. First thing in the morning, I was going to call him and tell him I wanted to move in with him. Or he could move in with me. I couldn't call now because how rude would it be to interrupt his sleep just to inform him that I'd been a stubborn ass who was finally seeing the light of day?

Pulling the blankets higher over my shoulders, I settled into the pillows to nap until a decent hour to call my mate. I closed my eyes but immediately opened them again. I didn't want any more nightmares. What if my mate being here didn't stop them? But it would because if I napped on my own even during the day, the dreams came, but if he was there, nothing. I knew I'd had some of those vivid dreams with him around, but they were actually very cool and not scary at all. Just a little psychedelic, and I could live with that. I reached for my phone again, but only ten minutes had passed.

And, suddenly, I realized something.

My mate would not want me to wait to let him know I wanted him here with me.

Every night, when he went home, I saw the pain in his eyes. Why would I think he was sleeping any better than I was? If it was mate separation—which was a real thing—causing my sleeping problems, he might be in the same position.

At the very least, I could tell him to come for breakfast so we could talk. And gods help me, I couldn't wait another minute. I hit his name on the screen and waited while it rang three times before he answered, "What's wrong? Is the baby okay? Are you?"

"I miss you." I was crying now, something I hadn't seen coming, but it was hard enough that my shoulders shook and my voice was shaking. "Can you come over in the morning?"

"I'm on my way." No questions, no Do you know what time it is? Just, he was on his way. Now. In the middle of the night. I tried to think if he'd sounded asleep, but it was hard to tell. And there was no turning back now.

I got out of bed and shoved my feet into slippers, pulled on a robe, and went to the living room to wait for my mate. I hoped I hadn't waited too long.

Ten minutes later, I heard him pull up out front, and I opened the door and stepped onto the porch. By now, I was feeling foolish and probably looked worse with tear tracks down my cheeks and my hair all mussed and sweaty. But the man who hurried up the steps and swept me into his arms showed no signs of that bothering him. He guided me into the house and sat me on the couch then went into the kitchen and made a cup of herbal tea and set it in front of me then sat down. "Now, what's this all about? You sure you're okay?"

I sniffled. "I am now that you're here."

"Aww, mate, I'd be with you all the time if you let me."

“Can I move in with you but still keep my house?” I rubbed at my swollen eyes. “Is that okay?”

He stared at me as if he’d never seen me before then hugged me so hard I squeaked. “Of course you can. Whatever you want. Now, what brought this on?”

I spilled what it was like without him. Not good. And how I was only happy when we were together. I told him all the details of that old relationship that made me so afraid of future ones. I had told him a little, but it was so embarrassing to relate and then it wasn’t anymore, and Leon was saying all the right things and making me feel comfortable in my own skin for the first time in a long time.

I eventually wound down and fell asleep, but when I woke up, I was snuggled against him in bed. He’d carried me there and I knew I’d made the right decision.

Leon

Tobias had eight boxes labeled kitchen but only two labeled bedroom. That was my mate, all right. He was a fantastic chef, and even though his restaurant boasted Greek food, the man could cook anything, I was sure of it.

“Is this it?” I asked, pointing at the stack of boxes even though I asked him not to move them. Sometimes he let me take care of him, and sometimes he insisted on doing things himself. I had learned to roll with the punches and let go of any expectations.

“This is it. I’m leaving all my furniture in case I decide to rent the place out and I don’t have a ton of belongings, other than my kitchen equipment.”

He was right. While there were eight boxes stacked up, I’d already brought over the heavy things to our house. The mixers. The cast-iron pots and pans and bakeware. The bread crocks. Some other appliances he said he couldn’t live without.

“I’ll load these into the back of the truck.”

It took me no time to get all the boxes loaded, and we were on our way. Tobias’ condition on moving in with me was that he would keep his house, in his name, and wouldn’t sell it. That way, if something went south with us, which it wouldn’t if you asked me, he would have some security. A place to live. I also added a stipulation. He would have open access to my bank account, and I got him a debit card, but he would keep his own accounts so that he felt safe and secure.

If I ever intended on taking advantage of my omega and hurt him the way his ex had, I would've had a real problem with him having his own accounts and keeping the house, but it was because I had no ill intentions that these things didn't bother me at all. What was mine was his, and what was his was his. As long as he felt safe, then it wasn't an issue.

I would've done anything to have him with me, in our bed, at my side.

That was my safety.

We walked into the bedroom. I had one of his boxes in my hands. "I cleared out half of the closet. Honestly, it was full of things I hadn't worn in years. And I bought another dresser over there for your things. Your nightstand is clear. If you want the other side, I don't care."

"Leon"—he put his hand on my chest as I dropped the box on the bed—"thank you. You went to so much trouble."

"Nothing I do for you is trouble, omega. I'd gut this house down to the studs and concrete and start all the building again if that's what you wanted. Moving some clothes and other things around is nothing."

"I'm sorry to make you go through all of this. I should've moved in weeks ago. When I first knew we were mates. Hell, I should have followed you home after the night you marked me. What a fool."

"Hey now," I said, pulling him in for a kiss. "No talking about my mate like that. Do you have to work today?" I asked. He had a schedule, but sometimes he liked to pop in and see how things were going. He trusted his staff, and they worked hard, so lately he had been checking in less and less, especially now that his belly was getting bigger and his energy waned.

“I hear you, alpha. And no, I’m not going in today. Want to help me unpack?”

I chuckled. “Absolutely.”

For the rest of the day, we unpacked his things, taking a break at noon to have lunch outside at the picnic table in the backyard. I gave him a tour of my workshop, and we talked about some changes he wanted to make. He said the bedroom was too dark. He wanted to paint it a soft gray.

Hearing him talk about my house as our home made me smile.

“What is that smile about?” he asked, kissing each side of my mouth as we lay in the hammock bathed in sunshine.

“You are calling it our house. I like it. My jackal loves it. It is our home now.”

“Even though I still own my other house?” He laid his head on my chest. He always found a way to do that.

“Doesn’t matter. You could own a million houses and, as long as you’re with me, then that place is home.”

“That was so cheesy. I love it.”

“I love you,” I said, kissing the top of his head. I was well aware that this was the first time I’d said it out loud but I wanted to. I wanted him to hear the words and feel they were true.

He moved a little and looked up at me. The hammock swayed but I tried to keep us steady. “I love you, Leon. You and love and mating scared the crap out of me at first and, while I’m still scared, I do love you.”

“I love you, too, omega. And don’t forget our little one.” I reached down and rubbed my hand across his belly, the size of a basketball now. Pregnant certainly suited my omega. He looked adorable when he showed me his profile. I’d convinced him to let me take some pictures of him both with clothes on and without. I wanted him to see how beautiful he was in my eyes. Plus, the pictures would freeze these moments in time. I wanted to remember every second of his pregnancy.

“Oh, he is already loved more than I could’ve imagined.”

I chuckled as he spoke to his belly. “He is. You are both well loved.”

Tobias moved a bit. His hand slid from his belly to my groin. “I could think of a way to show me exactly how well loved I am, Leon.”

“So can I.”



Tobias

I wasn't allowed to paint our room. Quinn said that even the zero-VOC paints weren't a good idea for a pregnant omega to spend a lot of time in close proximity with, so my alpha did the job. I was beyond frustrated, not just because of that one limitation but because it seemed that there were more all the time. Minimal caffeine. Not lunch meat. No sushi—not that I really like it, but I hated being told no. Always a trigger for me. And then he did the work while I was at work because obviously, I wasn't supposed to be around it; but it meant I didn't even see how it looked on the walls, and it made me nervous all day, leading to me spilling a whole vat of hummus right on my new sneakers.

If I wore Crocs, they'd have been a whole lot easier to clean, but they just weren't my thing. No wonder so many restaurant workers did like them though. When I got home, my alpha was so proud to show me what he'd done that I didn't even have the heart to be anything but grateful. We slept in the guest room that night, and that was kind of fun. Something about being in a different bed just got me going, and my alpha, though he had to be tired from all the painting, was very willing to accommodate my amorous leanings.

In other words, he fucked my brains out in the one position we could still manage, on our sides with him behind me.

I felt very proud of myself for having been such a good sport about his painting without me and went off to work the next day, pregnant belly leading the way. It was very busy at the restaurant, and I stayed longer than usual, coming home well after dark. I'd been trying to be home for dinner as often as possible, even if we did eat a

little later than most people. We did what worked for us. But that night, I stayed all the way to closing, so I'd texted Leon to let him know to eat without me.

The house was dark except for a lamp in the living room when I made my way inside. Halfway up the stairs, the scent of paint tickled my nose. The zero-VOC type we'd chosen was supposed to have no scent, but my shifter senses were too strong for this and I had been smelling paint for a couple of days.

It was nice of my mate to paint our bedroom. I'd been able to go in and check it out this morning and it looked fantastic. At least I'd been able to pick out the color. I did enjoy those kinds of tasks, though, and it was disappointing not to be able to help. But it hadn't smelled this strong then, and as I passed our bedroom door, it didn't seem to be coming from there. Heading toward the guest room, I found myself pausing in front of the nursery.

The room we still had a lot of work to do in...and the scent of paint grew stronger. Along with a rumble of outrage from deep inside me. No. He couldn't have. He wouldn't have bought paint and painted the room. Not without me. Or at least without talking to me.

I pushed the door open and growled. This room was for our baby. We hadn't even decided on a color and here it was not only painted, but someone had put together the crib. What the hell?

I turned on a heel, intent on going to find my alpha, but he'd already found me.

"You're home and you found my surprise." He pecked me on the lips and patted my arms. "I wanted to be here when you saw it. Well?"

Did he have no idea what he'd done? I struggled to come up with an explanation for why I wanted to bite his head off, one that would sound logical and not like a

ridiculous pregnant hormonal display. “Um, it is a surprise.”

“I think it came out nice. I finished it and then thought, I bet the best thing to do would be to put the crib together. You know how complicated it was with all those parts and I thought...omega, is something wrong?”

“How did you even know what color paint to get?”

Without me.

“I bought the one you pointed out in the paint store that day.” He moved past me into the room. “I think it was a good choice, don’t you?”

And all the wind went out of my sails. I had indeed pointed out a color, and he’d not only been paying attention but remembered what it was and then, after a long day of painting, he’d done the one task in the nursery I had been dreading.

“It’s great, Leon. Thank you for doing all this for me.” I waited for him to come out of the room where I wasn’t supposed to go until the paint was absolutely dry then wrapped my arms around him in the best hug I could manage with a belly the size of a basketball. “You’re the most wonderful alpha ever.”

He patted my back awkwardly. “It looked like you were upset though.”

“Just moved. I love you, alpha.”

His arms came around me. “And I love you.”

Leon

Tobias came into the workshop with a sheen of sweat along his brow. His T-shirt showed the lower part of his belly, not because it rose up during his shift but because he was now almost eight months pregnant and ten times more gorgeous as the days went on. “I have a problem.”

I set my tools down and wiped off my hands. “Let’s solve it.”

He snorted. “I love that. Okay. Here it is. I’m getting bigger by the minute, and now I’m having trouble maneuvering around the kitchen and look at this situation.” He pointed to his belly. “I’m not a crop-top kind of omega. And yet, here we are crop-topping the fuck out of today.”

I covered my mouth to quell my smile. “I’ve never heard you curse that way before.”

“Yeah, well, feeling like a whale put me in a mood. I still have another month or so, Leon. I mean, I can still get around the kitchen with some strategic moves and yelling out when I’m behind someone, but this clothes situation...honestly, I don’t know how you can stand to look at me like this.”

“First of all, let’s kick that notion to the curb. No matter what shape you are, you will always be the most beautiful man in the world to me. And second, your clothes are no problem. Let’s go and get some new ones. Longer shirts. Maybe you relent and let me buy you some actual paternity clothes.”

He stomped his foot. Oh, it was really bad if he was doing that. “I hate those clothes.

They are frumpy and...I hate them.”

“Good reasons. But the newest clothes are anything but frumpy. Anything is better than the crop tops, unless you are into them now. No judgment from me. I don’t mind seeing your belly peeking out.”

“Ugh, it’s the worst. Plus, it’s a hazard at work.”

“That’s true. Come on. Let’s go do some shopping.”

We spent only a few hours getting some basics for him. Shirts that were longer and pants he didn’t have to wrangle on. He kicked up a fuss about the amount I spent on him, but I was secretly hoping that one day he would need those paternity clothes again. A big family was everything I’d ever wanted, but the choice would be up to him. He was the one who had to carry the babies in his belly.

“I only have one month or so left, alpha. It’s too much.”

“Come on,” I said, kissing his temple as we left the mall. “It’s my treat for you. Speaking of treats, there’s a frozen yogurt place over there. I think I know a bear who loves frozen yogurt. Do you?”

“Gods, the cheesecake flavor owns my heart,” he moaned and got into the truck.

“Really?” I asked. “Never thought I’d be jealous of a flavor of yogurt.”

Tobias turned in the seat before I could shut the door. “Oh, you know what I mean. You are the one who has my heart. And while we’re talking about things...” He grabbed the collar of my shirt and pulled me toward him. “Thank you for my clothes.” He captured my lips in a long, searing kiss that had some ladies whistling as they passed the truck.

“You can thank me for the clothes and the yogurt once we get home. Naughty mate. A few more minutes of that and I’d be taking you right here in the parking lot.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “With this belly? Please.”

“Oh, I could make it work. Trust me.”

We got yogurt and, true to his word, Tobias got the cheesecake and covered it with strawberry syrup. He promised me, as he poured the sugar over his sugar, that he would have a healthy dinner.

He would. He had taken great care to eat well during his pregnancy.

When we got home, I watched him finish his yogurt. Painfully slowly.

“What are you looking at?” he said, laughing.

“I’m looking at my glowing, gorgeous mate and wondering exactly how long you’re going to draw out this yogurt eating.”

“Why?” he asked, blushing as he glanced down at my groin. “Did you have some other activity in mind?”

“I do. But you know what? I don’t have to wait until you’re done.”

“What do you...oh my gods, Leon. I...”

I had his pants off and his cock in my mouth before he could take another bite. I grabbed his hips and pulled them toward me, making the bulbous tip of his erection hit the back of my throat. He pushed aside his unfinished treat, threading his fingers in my hair while I finished off mine.

As he came, he called out my name over and over. “Mmm, that was amazing,” he said. “You’re really not bothered by the belly?”

“I’m not. But...it looks like I still have to prove that to you.”

I took off my clothes and then his and sat on the couch. My cum dripped from his channel and I could see it on his thighs. “Take a seat. Ride your alpha.”

He sat facing away from me, spearing himself on my dick. Bouncing up and down on my cock. I reached around his chest and pinched his sensitive nipples as he came over and over.

“See?” I said after I’d come inside him but wouldn’t let him up yet. “Every part of you turns me on. Believe it.”

He chuckled and leaned back.

I kissed the skin between his shoulders, giving him all the worship he deserved.

“I do, alpha. After that, I totally do.”

Tobias

Shifters rarely did a lot of medical testing, mostly because we were very healthy but also because most human medical stuff just didn't work for us. Also, since we were not completely accepted or understood, going to a human hospital or testing center could lead to all sorts of problems. But more and more, there were facilities that dealt entirely with shifters, and Quinn had an ultrasound machine.

He wanted me to come in for a scan, and I didn't see any reason for it. But since I'd moved in with Leon, I discussed things more with him and let him have more input into the decisions I made. Especially where the baby was concerned.

"Ready to go?" Leon came into the kitchen jingling his keys. "Our appointment is in a half hour."

"As ready as I ever will be." I wasn't thrilled with the whole machine idea. My family had been on the low-tech side of things, and my omega father never even saw a healer, much less had an ultrasound or anything. We had heard the heartbeat at other appointments, and it was cool, but somehow that ultrasound machine scared me. "Am I supposed to do anything to get ready?"

"You should be drinking." Leon headed for the refrigerator and opened it.

"What?" The doctor recommended a pregnant omega should drink alcohol? "I don't think that's a good idea."

Leon turned toward me, holding a large bottle of water in his hand. "Why not?"



I clapped my hand on my forehead. “When you said drink, I thought...”

“You thought what? Ohhh.” He held up the water. “Absolutely not. You need to have enough liquid in your abdomen for the device to give us an image of the baby. Sorry. Did you want to drink? I have heard for pregnant omegas an occasional glass of wine or beer isn’t a problem. We can ask Quinn when we get there.”

I laughed at that. “No. I just misunderstood. I don’t have any experience with these things. And I’m going to be a father.”

“It’s just tech. And it will give Quinn more information about how the baby is doing and if there are any concerns he hasn’t spotted.” Leon led me out into the garage and opened the door of the new SUV he bought as our family vehicle. “And we get a good look at the baby, too.”

“I’m nervous.”

Leon closed the door and went around to get in. The remote activated the outside door and as it rolled up, he patted my hand. “I understand. And as your alpha, I try not to push you into things, so if you really don’t want to do it, we’ll tell Quinn that we prefer not to have the scan.”

And this was the difference, one anyway, between my fated mate and my ex. He would have demanded I do it his way, and Leon always wanted me to feel that I was doing things in a way that made me comfortable. And happy. And that in turn made me feel safe trusting him to help me do the right thing.

It was an incredibly comforting feeling. Much better than I felt after downing that giant bottle of water, along the road.

When we got to Quinn’s office, he took us right back. “We don’t like to keep

pregnant omegas who have a full bladder waiting.”

“Thank you so much.” I hoped the scan didn’t take long or I’d be in trouble.

“We were just saying we’re not sure we want to do the ultrasound today.” Leon’s words had me spinning to look at him. “We’re sorry to have cost you time.”

“Oh, really? Did you forget to drink the water, Tobias?” Quinn looked surprised.

“No, I drank it all,” I told him. “My bladder is about to explode.”

“Then why are you saying you don’t want the scan?”

Technically I hadn’t, but Leon had. “No, we do want it.” I focused on the healer to avoid my mate’s accusing glance—should there be one.

“I see.” Quinn looked back and forth between us. “Your mate sounds like he doesn’t want you to have one. What are your concerns, Leon?”

And then we were both looking at my mate, whose frustration was evident in his expression, and I felt it necessary to clear up the misunderstanding before he exploded. Not in rage or anything but literally. His face was so red...

“It’s not Leon. He’s fine with it, but I wasn’t sure I was. I am now though. Let’s get started before my bladder bursts or I lose control of it entirely.”

After all that, it didn’t take long, and seeing the baby was priceless. It didn’t hurt, wasn’t even really uncomfortable, and I got to take a scan home with me to frame. They were adorable. It even took some of the sting out when Quinn suggested, firmly, that it was time for me to start my paternity leave.

Leon

One of the managers from Tobias' restaurant came over and delivered some lunch for us. I'd plated it up for him when I heard a moan come from the bedroom, put down the tray I'd prepared, and rushed in. My mate was stubborn and, even though he was put on bed rest, wanted to get up and do things himself. Of course, he chose the moments I wasn't in the room to attempt such feats.

I called out his name as I approached.

"I'm here," he answered. "I'm not out of bed, I swear."

"Then what's going on, omega?" I asked, my heart beating hard. That moan wasn't one of passion; it was one of pain.

"I don't know. My back is hurting again. I think I just need to get up and stretch a bit." We'd attributed that off-again, on-again ache to sitting too long.

"I've got you." I helped him out of bed and onto his feet. But as soon as he was upright, I heard a squeak followed by a splash. "Tobias?" I asked, thinking he'd had some kind of accident, but then I realized as he had—this wasn't urine. Our eyes met, his wide with knowing. "Your water broke."

"My water broke. Oh, oh, Leon, the pains I've been having. Call Quinn. Please. Please, call him."

"I will. Let's get you in the shower."

We'd gone over this. He would shower. I would call Quinn. We would get ready and, if at all possible, he would have a home birth. No hospitals, and he wanted to be at home. It was the most important thing to him.

Tobias had a few of the pains in his back while he was in there. Quinn said he was on his way but, in the meantime, he wanted me to spread some blankets on the floor and follow my omega's lead. His bear would know exactly what to do in order to deliver our young.

When he got out of the shower, I layered soft blankets on the floor until Tobias was happy and approved of the nest I'd made. He dropped the towel from around his waist and got down on his hands and knees.

"Tobias, talk to me," I pleaded as he lowered his head fell into another round of pain.

"I can't. He's...my bear is in charge. Let him. Let him do this."

"I'm not standing in your way, omega. My little bear, do your thing. Show him how to birth our babe."

Quinn arrived a few minutes later, but my omega was already pushing. His bear growled through him. I felt helpless in that moment. There wasn't a damned thing I could do to ease his pain except to rub his lower back, which somehow soothed his bear.

"There we are, Tobias. Just a few pushes. You're fully dilated, and we're almost there. Almost time to meet your babe. Come on. You can do this. Big push."

Tobias let out a loud growl and bore down on his hips, tucking his ass toward the floor. His channel opened wider and then, before I could take my next breath, our baby crowned. Quinn encouraged him.

“There’s the head, Tobias. One or two more pushes and you’ve got your baby. You can do this.”

I whispered in his ear how strong he was. How much I loved him. How much I believed in him. All the things I would want to hear if I was in his place, which I very much wanted to be. To take the pain away from him.

“Go back there,” he whispered. “Catch our babe as he comes out of me, alpha.”

I did as he told me and when the time came, it was my hands who caught our son. He cried a bit as Quinn wrapped him up while I helped Tobias onto the bed. Then I placed our baby on Tobias’ chest. My omega had collapsed from the expended energy, but he held our babe with strong arms.

“You did it,” I said, in awe of my mate. “You did it.”

“No,” he said, looking down at our new baby. “ We did it.”

Tobias

Our baby was the cutest one ever, even when he was wailing away to let us know he needed food or a clean diaper or a cuddle. As soon as I felt a little stronger, I planned to make sure he had contact with me as much as his little heart desired.

I had been given the most beautiful wrap that came with a video on baby wearing, and it made it possible for me to have him on my front or back or even side. I was so excited to try it out, with Leon there to spot me, of course, until I got very good at it. A living baby was quite different from the doll I'd used for practice.

"Is he asleep?" Leon leaned over the bed and brushed a kiss on the baby's forehead.

"Yes, he just had a good feed but we need to talk about something."

"We do?" He rubbed his eyes. After all the excitement, I'd sent him down the hall for a nap. I had a feeling we'd be missing some sleep now that the baby was here. At least my nightmares were a thing of the past.

"He doesn't have a name." Although my bear had known he was a boy for a long time, and we'd referred to the baby as such, we hadn't settled on a name. "And I want you to choose it."

"Omega, no, don't you want to do it?" He stroked the soft baby arm. "I'm sure I'd like any name you pick."

"And I feel the same, but it's important to me for you to be the one."

“Why?”

How could I explain without making a beautiful day weird. “You have given me everything I could ever dream of, including the baby, and made sure I feel safe and comfortable in this relationship. I want to give you this.”

“Tobias, I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say the name.

“Michael.” He spoke without hesitation. “I’ve always liked that name.”

“Then sit down here and I will hand our little Michael over.” I kissed the baby and then my mate. “It suits him.”

“I think so too.” He kissed the baby and then me. “Thank you for this gift.” It wasn’t just the name, it was trust, and he knew what I was doing. Luckily, I loved the name too.

Leon

Michael was a dream baby if there ever was one. He slept through the night at only a week old. He fed from Tobias like a champ and gained weight easily.

And Tobias. He was the best father despite his hesitancy. He took care of the babe with such care and patience, it was like watching a skilled nanny.

“He needs changing again,” he said as I took a sleeping Michael from Tobias’ chest. A little dribble of milk slipped from the corner of his mouth.

“Again?” I crooned to our son. “Shame on you, pup.”

“Pup? We don’t know what he will be yet, Leon.”

I laughed. “Cub or pup or maybe the gods have made you both. How would that be?” I changed him and put him in the cradle next to our bed. Tobias was already drifting off to sleep.

“Can I get you anything? I know you get thirsty when you chest feed,” I said, pulling the covers over him. The days and nights were getting colder, and I had to keep my little family warm.

“Just come hold me. That’s all I need right now.”

I got onto the bed and wrapped him up in my arms. Michael went to sleep while Tobias’ eyes closed as well. Being a baby and having a baby sucked the energy from



them both. It would be a while before Tobias recovered but, he'd already talked about wanting another once he did.

“Will you be here when I wake up?” He snuggled in closer.

“I will. Always.”

Our relationship had started with a mess, but our happily ever after was anything but.