



The Centaur's Spell: A Waiting Hearts World Romance (Waiting Hearts: Centaur's Book 3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Apollo has been waiting for his mate for longer than anyone but his brothers have been on this planet. His brothers might think he doesn't care about such things, but the truth is he longs for a mate so deeply that it sometimes aches. Now that his brothers are both happily mated with a growing family, it should be his turn... right?

When Walker discovers that his boss was planning to uncover magics long hidden and for a reason, he does the only thing he can think of—he reports him. With Steelwick involved, he has no choice but to follow their lead, even if it means going to live with the people he nearly betrayed.

Apollo is on edge, knowing that their new guest was connected to one of the many people wanting to uncover that which must be hidden, but then he hears his heartsong and everything changes.

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All these dinners with my brothers and their mates were getting lonely and a touch boring, but they were necessary. At least according to them they were. And I suppose to me too, but I was feeling particularly grumpy about them today and didn't want to admit that, even to myself.

And really, I didn't mind going months and months, or even years, without seeing or speaking to my brothers, but it seemed that I was alone in that feeling. When you'd lived as long as we had, a month was a blip in time, but I found that my brothers, and now their mates, weren't on the same page as I was when it came to that. They wanted to see me, be around me, see how I was doing frequently. If I stayed away for weeks at a time, they began to get worried. When they were worried, they searched the forest. Sooner or later, they would stumble upon my hidden dwelling. And well, I wasn't prepared to share it with them.

I wasn't a complete hermit. I was absolutely prepared to share it, but only with my mate, which was why these dinners were lonely. I was the only one that fate hadn't seen worthy of a lifelong companion yet. I tried to brush it off at first. I'd been alone for longer than any human or shifter on this planet had been alive, and it hadn't bothered me once. Not really.

Until recently.

And it wasn't that I wished my brothers didn't have their happiness. I wanted them to have all they had and more. It was difficult to see them all blissed out and then going home to be utterly alone, that was all.

My brothers sat with their mates next to them, sometimes in their laps, their

children—the oldest crawling around now and the littlest one sitting in a little highchair that Terran had built. They had something I didn't, and if it had been a car or a house or anything materialistic, I wouldn't come close to caring. But this was different—they had become truly alive in a way we had never been all this time.

For hundreds of years, I had lived like this, and there had never been a problem. But now that the forest was open and visitors came here, I hoped that my mate was out there and that he would soon visit so that we could finally be together. It was a lonely existence. Just waiting.

“So, what have you been working on recently, Apollo?” Maddox asked.

I knew that Maddox was trying to make small talk. I had learned about small talk thanks to the little instrument that had the internet on it. I simply typed in something and answers came at me, rapid fire. Only sometimes, those answers weren't correct or there were conflicting answers. Phrases could mean two different things, which was incredibly confusing. I both loved and hated the blasted thing.

“Nothing really,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes. There was a question on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't blurt it out. Though my brothers accepted me just as I was, their mates had a harder time with it, which was understandable.

“Ariondas is looking well,” I said. I found that the new fathers were easily distracted by talk of their children.

“He is, and well, now is as good a time as any...” Terran smiled down at his mate, and they touched hands.

I knew what was coming even before he said the words.

“We’re going to have another one,” Terran announced. “Maddox is expecting.”

“Congratulations, Brother,” I said.

Marcus squealed and wrapped his arms around Maddox. “That’s so exciting. Did you have a heat like the first time?”

He nodded. “Yes. A lot shorter this time, though, which I suppose is a good thing, considering that it was a miracle that Ariondas slept through all ten hours.”

“Ten hours, that’s it?” Marcus snorted. “I could go for ten hours of sleep.”

It was at moments like this that I felt the most alone, on the outside looking in as they shared their good news with one another, compared stories, talked about the best way to raise their children within this forest. I had no idea that ten hours was a lot, and had Marcus not rolled his eyes, I’d have assumed that it was the way of things. None of this conversation flowed easy for me, making “small talk” anything but in my world.

Marcus must have sensed my awkwardness because he switched the topic.

“So, we have a visitor coming,” he said.

I perked up at that. I knew they all assumed I didn’t enjoy when visitors came, but visitors were my only chance at potentially meeting my mate. Each time one came it was a shot at happiness. And no, one shouldn’t pin their joy on having a partner, but I’d seen firsthand with my brothers that a mate completed you, and I wanted that.

And it wasn’t as if I could exactly go out into the world and track my mate down—even if they were currently on this earth. I’d be thrown in some sort of lab to be researched on by scientists or worse. And it wasn’t as if I could suggest that we invite a bunch of unmated omegas here. That would be weird, though the thought had

crossed my mind.

“This is a bit different than our other visitors,” Marcus continued.

I raised a brow.

“Walker got into some trouble... well, really, he did the right thing. He reported a crime to Steelwick.” He sucked in a deep breath. “I don’t know the details, but his family... his pack is now looking for him, and they don’t intend to be kind when they find him.”

“He’s in hiding?” Terran asked.

“Yes, and this is a good place for that.”

At one time it was the best place, no humans ever stumbling in. But that had all changed in the past handful of years. I’d still considered it a good option for hiding, though. I’d managed to keep my home hidden all this time, even from my brothers.

I had seen a show about this once on my phone. They called it witness something or other. Although, that was probably not the same since he wasn’t human if he was working with Steelwick. Had it been anyone else asking us to hide someone, I’d have put my foot down, but I trusted Steelwick as much as I trusted my own herd.

“So now we are witness protection?” I asked when the name finally came to me.

Marcus and Maddox exchanged a look. “Where did you learn about that?”

I shrugged. “Television, that website has all those videos on it.”

“YouTube,” Maddox said.

“Yes, that one.” It might’ve been filled with all kinds of garbage, but it also had some treasures. Truth be told, I often preferred the garbage.

“Well, this is just temporary until they find the alpha responsible and have him put on trial.” Marcus continued his explanation, “Then Walker can go back to... well, wherever he wants to go. I suppose he doesn’t really have a pack to return to.”

Now that I had a herd, I couldn’t imagine how horrible it would be to lose them. It sounded like they deserved to be lost, but still... it would suck.

“This is all fine,” I said. I was used to these visitors. “Walker is welcome.” The name Walker... I liked the way that rolled off my tongue. I knew better than to get my hopes up; that would only lead to heartache.

I assumed that once my brothers found their mates, mine would follow soon after. Maybe assumption was less accurate than hoped. But in any case, I was prepared for him. So prepared. I had built a new dwelling fit for a king. Any mate of mine deserved that and more.

My brothers had opted for one-story houses with just enough bedrooms for what they needed. Did I? No, I built a monstrosity. Two stories, because I wanted a window to look out and see the morning sun come above the horizon. I hoped my mate liked it, too. If he didn’t, I’d start again.

Once our food was eaten, I helped to clean up the meal and put everything away. The two children were on the ground playing, their fathers sitting around them. Once again it was me on the outside looking in. I didn’t bother to interrupt their fun with a lengthy goodbye.

If I told Maddox and Marcus that I was leaving, they would no doubt stop what they were doing and insist on hugs for everyone. I didn’t mind hugging my nephews as

long as they wanted it. But for this moment, I thought it best to just simply walk away, and so I disappeared into the forest, heading in the direction of my home.

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I looked around the room I was in to make sure I had gathered up the last of my belongings. Not that I was traveling much these days. Ever since reporting the Alpha of my pack for a crime, I had been on the run. At least I wasn't alone.

Me being me, I had gone straight to the authorities without thinking it through. I'd still have done it, but I'd have prepared a bit more for what was to follow. At least I was under the protection of the Steelwick Enforcer Pack. If it weren't for them, my lack of planning would probably have already led me to the goddess.

Steelwick was great.

Everything was great.

Except my former Alpha kept finding me.

That was the only bummer in this whole crazy situation.

I had been at the headquarters of the Steelwick Pack for two days now, and they were insistent that I move to my next location. They weren't even telling me what that location was. And I understood why. The fewer people who knew, the better. I didn't know how my former Alpha kept evading capture and locating me, but no pack needed him on their doorstep. I hated that I seemed to bring danger wherever I went. The whole point in reporting his crimes was so that he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else.

"Everything all right?" Matty asked. He carried his youngest in his arms. Matty was the omega of the Alpha-elect, and one of the nicest people I'd ever met. I was sad that

we couldn't spend more time together. It was selfish to stay, though, and I'd never push.

I pasted on a smile. "Doing great," I said. "I'm very excited to see where I'm going next."

He smiled and shook his head. "I appreciate your endless optimism. Anybody else in your shoes would be tearing their hair out."

Matty had no idea how close I was to doing exactly that. But what were my other choices? Mope, grumble, and be an ass? Pretending to be happy and excited until I actually was felt like a much better plan than that.

I shrugged. "It's not useful to get all worked up over things we can't control. Besides, you all are doing your best, and I'm not dead yet, so that's a plus." It was a freaking miracle that I was still this side of the grass. These shifters slayed their position, that was for sure.

"Yes, I suppose it is." He smiled like I was hilarious.

I got that sort of reaction a lot. I might as well carry a sign that said "Walker: too talkative, too sunshiny, too much for too many people."

A lot of my life had been about toning down that "too much" personality of mine. It was only recently that I'd had to amp it up and that was more for me than it was for them.

"Nervous?"

I shook my head. I wasn't lying. Staying put was far more nerve-wrecking than being on the move.

“Well, your ride is here. Let’s go over to the bakery and we’ll meet them, and you can get some treats to go.” That was one thing I didn’t go without while here—baked goods. They had the best bakers—two of them.

“That would be great,” I said, and there was not an ounce of faking. I couldn’t wait to see what they had made today. One thing was for sure; it was going to be delicious.

The air was nice and warm, and the sun high in the sky. I wasn’t sure how long my drive was, but I hoped it wasn’t too terrible. It was no surprise that I hadn’t been able to sleep well, with the threat of my old Alpha finding me.

I should’ve been exhausted and falling asleep easily considering how much running around I’d been doing. But there was something about having a threat to your life hanging over your head that made sleep hard to come by.

If this was any other situation, I’d have created something beautiful to get my mind cleared before bed. But I couldn’t ask them to get me my sculpting supplies, not for a short stint here and there. I just needed to suck it up and plan pieces in my head until I could get settled in. Gods, I missed working with my hands.

Opening the door and stepping inside the bakery was a treat in and of itself. Between the scent of the bread baking and the chocolate melting on the stove, my stomach was more than ready to be filled. A man, a prey shifter of some sort, a rabbit if I wasn’t mistaken, and another man, whose scent I couldn’t place, sat at a table. Both of them had a cup of coffee and a muffin.

I gasped when I realized what the unknown man was. “You’re one of the centaurs,” I said. No wonder I couldn’t scent his beast. I’d never met one before. Heck, most of my life I thought they were nothing but a fairytale and here one sat right in front of me.

The man had long, silvery hair, and in the center of his forehead was a mark, as if there was something there usually, perhaps a horn in his centaur form? I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Was I not supposed to say anything? I heard you all live in secret.”

“It’s fine. You must be Walker,” the prey shifter said. He had that same friendly, amused smile I was used to seeing when I met new people.

“I am. Am I coming to stay with you guys in the forest?” They said it was a special place, but I assumed they meant it was fancy, so secluded and protected that most people would never be allowed to find it, much less step foot in it.

“You are.” He smiled. “I’m Marcus. This is Luan.”

“Oh, wow. That’s kind of brilliant. Hide in the exact place that my former Alpha had been looking to get information on.” If he could’ve found it, he already would have. “That’s putting a lot of trust in me. Will it be safe—for you, I mean? You all have families now, right?” I’d heard through rumors that the centaurs were all settled now.

“It will be perfectly safe,” Marcus assured me. “We’re prepared to have you housed in one of the cabins located near our home. Steelwick will be sending a guard as well. And just for full disclosure, I was with Steelwick before being pulled to find my mate.” He reached over and took his mate’s hand. “You will be in good hands.”

Of that I had no doubt.

“Oh, wow. So I get to go to the centaurs’ forest. Is it amazing? I heard that the waters glitter and that gold comes out of the earth and that you have a diamond mines.” And I was babbling. Oops.

The centaur, Luan, snorted. “You outsiders and your stories. I assure you there is no

such thing. Our water is very clean. I suppose it sparkles because of that. There is no diamond mine. The only things we have pulled from the earth are things that are useful to us. Terran did find that ruby one time, and he made a very nice ring for his mate out of it.”

“Well, that is a little bit of a bummer—the no diamonds, not the thoughtful gift. I’m sure it’s beautiful no matter what.”

“I suppose, if my brother Terran focused hard enough, he might be able to mine some things from the earth. But I can’t say that he has actively tried.” The centaur pondered that for a moment like he might actually consider trying it.

“So each of you have powers from the elements? The earth, the moon, the sun.”

“I don’t know that I would call them powers,” Luan answered.

Marcus shrugged. “They’re kind of like powers.”

“Can I see? No, that’s rude. I can’t ask that. But like, is it rude? I don’t want to offend you all, being that I am going to be your guest and you’re doing me a tremendous favor by keeping me safe.”

Marcus laughed and shook his head. “We’ll see. How’s that? Let’s take it one day at a time.”

“Oh, absolutely. I don’t mean to impose. I am very grateful to have this opportunity. And any chores you need help with, I can help. I used to cook and do laundry for my pack. Do you have laundry machines, or do you wash them in the crystal-shiny river? Either one is fine with me. I am more than happy to help. Oh, this is going to be delightful.”

“You’re going to shake this forest up.” Marcus beamed at me.

I smiled. Finally, someone who appreciated my bubbly-ness.

“We’ll keep you away from Apollo, though. He’s a bit of a grump, but you get used to it.”

“Oh, I don’t wish to impose on anyone... I mean, what I mean to say is, I can turn this down. I don’t need to be bubbly. I can even stay quiet and not talk at all if you want. I had to do that in my old pack all the time. Just say the word and I’ll stop. I promise.”

“You should be yourself, Walker,” Marcus said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Now, it’s a long drive, and we’re already going to get there pretty late. We have some goodies packed for us thanks to the twins.”

“Oh, fantastic. I didn’t get to try their scones yet.”

Marcus smiled. “We have some of those. We should be on our way.”

“I’m ready. I have everything I need.”

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I knew the moment the barrier was crossed. I felt deep within my soul that something was different. A hum started in my chest, a simple melody that went in tune with the rhythm of my beating heart. But there was another feeling, another thump, another rhythm—my mate. My mate's heart.

He was here, he was close. All the waiting was over. Almost.

It was different than when I had felt my brother's mates come across the border. This one was mine. All that remained to be seen was who was it? Where did they come from?

It was dark when the hum began out of nowhere. I'd been awake working on the decorative spindles for the porch steps. I was just about to hang up my tools and go to bed when the hum began. I had no choice but to follow it. There was no way I was going to wait until my mate found me. He had to feel it too. But depending on who he was and how much he knew about our kind, the odds were great that he wouldn't understand what was happening. Not enough to come looking for me, anyway.

I raced through the forest, following where my mate's call beckoned to me, my hooves flying quickly through the trails. It didn't take long for me to realize I was heading to Luan's home. He and Marcus had left to bring back Walker, the omega who was in trouble. That realization had me running even faster. If trouble was looking for my mate, I needed to protect him with everything I had.

If Walker even was my mate. They might have brought someone else back with them too. Possibly another Steelwick member. There was only one way to find out.

And really, it didn't matter who it was, only that they were here. Whoever it was, I knew that they would be perfect for me. My match. My mate.

They were walking up to the house as I approached.

Luan waved. "Hey, Brother, I didn't expect to see you here. Did you come to greet Walker in person?"

My breath came in heavy pants; I had run the entire way. I couldn't remember a time when I'd run so fast for so long. There was no need. With endless time on your hands, why rush?

"Mine," I growled. It sounded more like a wolf than a centaur. Luan exchanged a worried glance with Marcus.

"Your what?" Walker asked, not scared exactly, but worried, possibly.

"My mate," I said, gesturing to where Walker stood so he didn't question to whom I was referring.

He was breathtaking, albeit a little tired looking. His eyes had dark circles around them.

It had to be him. He was looking at me in much the same way as I looked at him now that I had called him mine. All hints of concern completely gone.

"Apollo," Walker said, a hand clutching his chest. He wore a pair of simple blue jeans and a sweater that was a little too big for him. His hair was long enough that I would be able to thread my fingers through it. His eyes sparkled in the moonlight. There was a kindness to his features.

“Oh, I did not see that coming,” Marcus said. “Walker?”

“Walker, do you feel like your heart is singing? Like your wolf wants to howl out into the world and let everyone know that your mate is right here?” I asked. I stepped toward him slowly. I didn’t wish to come on too strong or scare him away. We would go at his pace, and if he asked me to back away, I would.

“Yes, I feel it,” Walker said, taking my hand. Walker grasped it, and I pulled him close to me. “I felt it as soon as we crossed into this land. I didn’t know what it was. It all makes sense now. I thought I was just excited to see the centaurs’ forest. But it was you. I was calling out to you.”

He looked at me with wonder, and it was as if my entire world finally made sense for the very first time.

“Hello, mate. I’m so happy to see you,” I said, still not letting my gaze waver from his. Happy didn’t begin to cover how I was feeling. I wasn’t sure that there was any word in any language that did. It would have to do.

He giggled. “I didn’t expect to find my mate here.”

“Are you pleased?” He had come here for a purpose. I’d understand if this was secondary for him. I wouldn’t like it, but I’d understand it.

He nodded vigorously. “So pleased.”

“Come, I will take you to my home,” I said, turning to leave, tugging my mate along with me.

I heard my brother’s gasp. I’d never taken anyone to my home—ever. Only now I saw for the first time that it wasn’t home. It was a house. Walker was my home.

Walker followed as if he would follow me anywhere. The level of trust he had for me was precious, and I would not break it. Ever.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Luan said. “You can’t just take him into the forest in the middle of the night. We don’t know where you are. We don’t know where you live.”

I saw no problem with that, but perhaps Walker would not be comfortable with that idea. If it was only my brother’s discomfort I needed to worry about, he could deal.

“So?” I said. I saw zero issue with it.

“We need to stay with Walker. We need to keep him safe,” Luan said. “We’re meant to protect him. That is why Tomas is here with us.”

“My home is only known to me and soon to be known to Walker. There is no safer place for him to exist in the world.” How could he not see that? How could any of them try to keep him from me?

“He has a point,” Marcus said. “If we can’t find him, how could anyone else?”

“Can we talk about this in the morning? It is awfully late, Apollo, and Walker is quite tired.” My brother had to be kidding. Luan would never have let me suggest such a thing to him in relation to his mate. Of that I was sure.

“Walker can speak for himself,” my mate said, and I appreciated his boldness mixed with sass. He was running for his life and he still didn’t let anyone treat him as less than the capable shifter he was.

I nuzzled my face into his neck. The scent of him washed over me, my heart song humming louder, somehow more beautiful than it had been even a second ago.

“Tell me what you need, mate. I will make it happen.” Even if it was staying here in the place we originally had set up for him.

“I’m quite tired, mate. Is it far to your home?” He rubbed his cheek against mine.

“It is.” I hated that in this moment. Most of the time it would be ideal, but right now it meant my mate wouldn’t be in my dwelling, at least not yet.

“Then we shall rest here for the night,” I said, not wanting him to feel any pressure. “Tell me where you want me. I can sleep outside and beneath the stars, you in the house where you’re safe. I can crawl into bed with you, though it is not easy sleeping with a person in centaur form.”

He giggled at that and ran a hand over my shoulder where my human torso gave way to my horse legs. “I can’t imagine it would be easy. I could shift to my wolf form and stay out under the stars with you.”

Nothing sounded more beautiful than that. Still, it was his decision, not mine.

“Wherever you’re most comfortable, mate.”

“Oh for goodness’ sakes. This is probably the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. But I’m exhausted.” Marcus threw his hands in the air. “We’re going inside.”

I glared at Marcus. I loved the man dearly, but this was my moment, my time with my mate.

“We can all talk in the morning. Go to sleep, you two. Don’t consummate anything out in the open for everyone to see.” Marcus thought he was so funny. And maybe he was because everyone but my mate and I chuckled.

It might have been dark, but I saw my mate blush. “It is kind of dark out,” he said. “Would we be safer inside?”

“You are safe wherever I am. But if you need to have the light to feel better, I can provide it.” I snapped my fingers and my flame hovered over my palm. “We can keep a fire going all night. I can light a torch, whatever you wish.”

“You’ll have to stoke the fire all night?” It was more of a question than anything else.

I shook my head. “No, the fire will burn for as long as I need it to.”

Walkers’s eyes widened. “That’s your power. So cool.”

“I can’t tell if this is going to be amazing or a disaster,” Marcus said, but I ignored him. This was going to be amazing.

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Last night had been magical. When I arrived, the last thing I expected to find here was my mate. And having a centaur be that mate? That almost felt like a dream. Sure, I'd heard about them growing up, but it had always been in the context of being a story. And then when rumors that they were real recently emerged, I interpreted those stories a bit differently. When Armand said that I'd be coming here and staying with them—I was right back to being a kid. It was as if he had promised to open one of my old story books and told me to walk inside.

My heart song was humming, like a beautiful score to my love story. I wondered idly if Apollo heard the same melody as I did. Maybe he heard mine and I heard his? I wasn't sure how that worked... how any of this worked. And I didn't need to. Not really. It was my gift from fate to enjoy, and I planned to do exactly that.

Sleeping in my wolf form with my mate had been the perfect cure for the insomnia I had been experiencing lately. No one could blame me for having trouble sleeping lately. I had excellent trackers on my heels with one goal; seeing me dead. Anyone who could have a good night's sleep with that either had a death wish or was oblivious. I was neither.

I'd always felt safer in my fur than my skin. Many a night I slept that way even before everything had gone down. But nothing in my life had ever felt as safe as I did being nestled next to my mate. Between his warmth and our heart song, it was a peace I'd never felt before. Falling asleep had happened so easily.

The sun was already fairly high in the sky when I woke up. It had been eons since I was this incredibly refreshed in the morning. Being curled against my mate's side was so natural for my wolf. If he had his way, we'd stay like that all day.

I soaked in his warmth and comfort knowing our time was coming to an end. Soon the others would rise, and we wouldn't be able to just be, not here and not like this. I inhaled deeply, savoring my mate's scent. It was glorious.

As much as I loved being here like this with him, I couldn't wait to experience all of this in my human form. And I would, but not until I had to. I didn't want to get up just yet. It meant this time with him would be over, and I loved it too much. There would only be one first morning like this, and I wanted to cherish it.

Marcus had other plans. I couldn't even be mad at him, though. He was doing it out of kindness. Still... I wanted five more minutes. Maybe we should have gone back to Apollo's place and had some privacy after all.

At the time, everything was overwhelming, I was extremely exhausted, and it felt like the others might get pushy about me staying here. But all of that aside, my real concern was that I might have been followed, and if that were the case, the more people around us, the safer my mate would be.

I had no idea how they were tracking me so successfully. I'd been beyond cautious, and I wasn't in it alone. Steelwick knew what they were doing. They were in their position for a reason; they were the best.

"Good, you're up," Marcus said. He came out of his home with his baby on his hip. I'd thought if I stayed still he might ignore us, thinking we were sleeping. I was wrong. "You guys want breakfast? We weren't sure what your plan was for today, and we might have to reevaluate where your guard friend is going to stay."

I stood up, hating the loss of my mate's touch, and took my skin. I loved being in my animal form, but it wasn't ideal for this kind of communication.

Apollo hadn't yet said anything, not about plans, not even a good morning. We had

both been there soaking in each other, words unneeded. Now that Marcus had questions, that time was over. I caught my mate's eye and smiled. He smiled right back.

"I wouldn't mind having some time with just my mate." I wasn't going to be "opinion-less" when given the opportunity to share. If Marcus had opened with the herd needing to have a meeting, I wouldn't have rocked the boat. But they asked, and I was going to tell them. "If that's possible? I understand that I am in danger, and I should be careful. But if no one knows where Apollo lives, then surely I am safe where Apollo is."

I would never knowingly put my mate at risk.

"I agree," Tomas said. He sipped his coffee as he sat next to the fire. "Eventually I may need to see these accommodations, but given their secrecy, there should be no risk in the two of you going there on your own. Plus, there is no better person to protect someone than their mate."

Apollo let out a rumble which told me he didn't really want anyone to know where he lived, or perhaps he didn't like the idea of me being in danger. I couldn't wait to learn how to decipher all of his sounds, especially the pleasure ones. Gods, I couldn't wait to explore those.

"Have you really lived here in this forest for a thousand years and your brothers have no idea where you live? That's amazing. Do you just like secrecy?" I had so many questions. I needed to reel them in before he thought I should begin a new career as a journalist because I peppered him with them non-stop.

"Sometimes I like to be left alone," Apollo admitted. "But socializing is also really important to me. I have visited my brothers often over the years."

Visited often wasn't the same thing as seeing them daily, but I supposed that when you are alive for thousands of years, a day was but a blip. Would I one day be a blip? Was that how this was going to work? I probably needed to talk to Marcus. He could help guide me on what it meant to be mated to a centaur.

"Back in my pack, there were a lot of us omegas. The year I was born was like one of the biggest booms for omegas that ever happened, so I had a lot of friends. Most of them are mated now. They've moved on to their own new packs. One of them even went to Northbay, which you may have heard of. You met the healers from there. They're pretty cool." I was babbling. I couldn't help it. I had so much to tell him, and while I'd enjoyed our quiet time together, now that words were flowing...were they ever.

Apollo kept his gaze on me, not really following along with me. Meanwhile, Marcus looked at me wide-eyed.

"I'm sorry, I'm rambling," I stammered. I grabbed the plate that Marcus had handed to me, full of scrambled eggs. "Do you guys have chickens? Is that how you get eggs? I think chickens are adorable. Do you have chickens, Apollo? Do you think that we could get some to keep at your house? Our house?" I questioned. "Is that presumptuous of me?"

I'd never even thought about wanting chickens before. I guess I assumed I would finally get mated and then my life would begin. Which wasn't the best way to live, but neither was getting an Alpha asshole wanting to kill you and I did that as well. So there was that.

Apollo shook his head. "Not at all, mate. What is mine is yours. I will build you a chicken coop. You can have as many as you like." He stood up. "I can make you one that looks like a little cottage. I saw that on the communication box I have. It's a popular design."

“That would be cool,” I said. I didn’t care if it was fancy or not. Just that my mate wanted to make it for me was everything. He didn’t need to. There were many much easier options out there. “If you want, we can get those pre-built ones from the store. They’re not half bad. I mean, really, chickens just need a little place to have some shelter, and after that they can free-range. And before anyone says anything, I know... I’m a wolf.”

Marcus giggled, probably sensing where I was going with all this.

“I promise not to eat them. They would be safe in our yard, wouldn’t they?”

Apollo nodded.

“I guess what I am saying is I don’t need fancy.”

“But I would like to provide fancy.” My mate tilted his head to the side slightly. “We can discuss how fancy later.”

“Oh, cool,” I said excitedly. “I can’t wait to get chickens!”

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We were just about to my home when my mate stopped talking for a brief moment. Normally, I didn't enjoy chatter. I would listen because it was the polite thing to do, but my mind would quickly wander. Either that or I would excuse myself. My brothers understood my need to be alone sometimes and were decent about not making me feel like a jerk about it.

With my mate, though? Everything looked and felt different. My mind wasn't wandering. It was hyper-focused on every single thing he had said today. I still wasn't the most talkative of creatures in the world, not even with Walker, but I could listen to him forever. I wanted to hear everything he had to say and more. My mate didn't seem to mind that I listened more than I spoke.

When we woke up and the two of us just snuggled in silence, that had been amazing and wonderful and perfect. But so was this. I loved learning every little thing about my mate.

I treasured every word that fell from his lips. His sunshiny personality shone through with each sentence. His stories were funny and full of detail. Sure, he tended to ramble, and there were times I had a hard time keeping track of what was happening to whom, but that only made it more interesting.

I envisioned his face all animated as he spoke. I couldn't see him since he was astride my back, but I could feel his movements. He was animated and spoke a lot with his hands as well as his words. Walker bounced around topics, like he was taking me on a journey of how his brain worked, how ideas flowed through him. There was an intimacy to that.

“Are we almost there?” he asked. “Can you tell me about your home? I bet it’s exquisite.”

I smiled to myself. He had a tendency to ask several questions rapid fire and then pause to wait for a response. At first, he would get embarrassed. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the way he blushed. I loved this more, though—the way he was so free around me—the way he was just himself.

“It’s not too far,” I said. “I am sorry that we are a long way from my brothers’ homes.” I hoped he wouldn’t mind the isolation, and it wasn’t as if I could get up and move my home. Then again, I supposed if Terran focused, perhaps he could ask the earth to move my home from one location to another. He’d probably try too.

“I don’t mind the travel,” Walker said. “It’s a nice walk... ride... journey. In my wolf form, I bet I could make it rather quickly. Tell me about your house.”

This was what I wasn’t used to: having to talk about things, explaining myself. But my mate did deserve to know. We weren’t far from the clearing where I had made my home. I should at least give him some background.

“I picked this location over a hundred years ago,” I began. “I liked how close it was to the river and how far it was from anyone else.”

Walker laughed and his hand petted my coat.

“All of the trees that I cleared out from this area were used to build the house. I believe it’s called a ‘log-cabin style’ home. Unlike my brothers’ homes, I have a second level and loft area with one large room and a small one.”

That small room was meant to be a nursery, but I didn’t add that point. We hadn’t yet talked about children. We hadn’t even talked about what it meant for us to be mates.

Heck, we hadn't even kissed yet. This was all new to both of us, and we might have been sure we had an always and forever in store for us, but taking it slow and not rushing to lay it all out felt right.

"Oh, wow. I guess I thought it would be like the ones near your brother's place."

"I liked the second story because I wanted to be able to see the sunrise better," I explained.

One of these days I would take him to my favorite place in the forest, the tallest hill that we had where I could sit and watch the sun, rise or set or both. If we were to wait there the entire day, which I sometimes did, we could watch a new day arrive and leave. There was something powerful about that.

"If your brothers don't know where your house is, did they not help to build it?"

"They did not," I said. "They offered, of course. But, well, when you're secluded in a forest with just your brothers for company and you have nothing but time, you might as well just make things on your own." Besides, it wasn't like I had anything better to do. Not that he needed to know that.

"I don't think I could do something like that. I mean alone. I'm not one to give up on projects because they are hard or anything." He leaned forward and hugged me. "I don't even know what I'm trying to say other than I'm impressed, and I can't wait to see the home you built for us."

Us. He spoke up the two of us together with such ease. I loved it.

Finally, we approached my home. I'd cleared out a circular area as a yard. It an unusual shape for one, I'd come to learn. I didn't care. I liked it... a lot. It felt more natural than the cookie-cutter rectangles humans seemed to prefer. But then again,

they were also all about grass that was grass and nothing else, not even wildflowers. I couldn't imagine wanting to be around nature, but only nature that had everything natural removed from it. Humans were weird.

I'd used broken-down branches to weave a deadfall fence and had even built a gate. From a distance it looked like it had been there for eons. And I supposed compared to the age of my mate, it probably was considered old by many. But to me, it was a newer feature and one I was extremely proud of.

I stopped just before the gate, ready to open it. My mate swung off my back without hesitation. He wasn't at all trepid about riding on my back. I asked him if he was a horse rider and he'd said no, but you wouldn't have been able to tell by the ease in which he settled on my back and enjoyed the ride.

"Oh my goodness," he said as he took in the sight of my home. The dark red wood almost gave off a fiery air to the house.

The door was large enough to accommodate my centaur frame, and the porch was a wraparound style that went from both sides of the house all the way to the back. I had two chairs, neither one of which I could actually use, but I assumed that my human mate would enjoy them. I would enjoy them in my human form when I got it.

There was also the table built into the corner of the porch where I sometimes liked to enjoy my breakfast and tea. I didn't quite have the taste for coffee like my brothers did.

"You built all this on your own?"

I had looked at it for so long, it was hard to take it in with new eyes, but I supposed it was impressive.

“This is amazing,” he said and grasped my hand, tugging me forward. “Show me the inside. I want to see all of it, and then I want to look at it all again slowly. And then you can tell me about each and every part. Like why the wraparound porch? Did you just like the style? How did you know to do these things? If you guys didn’t have the internet before?”

“Trial and error,” I said honestly. “I started with small models, building homes out of twigs and whatnot, before moving on to the actual implementation.”

“Oh, wow. That’s incredible.”

“Thank you, mate.” I walked side by side with him up the stairs and into the front door. The main level had an open-style layout. There were two bedrooms, or an office and a bedroom, or two offices, or they could be whatever my mate wanted them to be. In addition to the living area there was a large stone fireplace. The kitchen was pretty basic since a lot of my cooking was done outdoors. The dining table was large enough for many people, though I had been the only one to sit there.

“Just you live here?” he said. “You have quite a few spaces where multiple people could sit. Are you hoping for a large family?”

My cheeks heated. “Perhaps, if that is something that you want. But I also assumed that once I met my mate that his family might like to visit or my brothers and their children.”

He smiled up at me and cupped my cheek. “You built such a beautiful, welcoming space yet haven’t shared it with anyone.”

“I wanted to share it with you first,” I said.

He went up on his tiptoes and kissed me. “Thank you, mate. I do love it.”

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As much as I loved my new home—and I truly did—what I really wanted to see was what the bedroom looked like and what my mate might look like there.

Naked.

On the bed.

My wolf had been howling inside of me throughout the night and most of the day. We wanted our mate. Now.

But also, rushing into things the second we met had felt off. Not that we had a choice in waiting, not really. There were other people there and this ride home would've been too much for us.

And yes, I had wanted to jump in with both feet, but not while he was still a stranger. Our night together followed by our walk here had alleviated that aspect of things. Sure, he knew a lot more about me than I about him in the sense that I couldn't stop talking around him. But also, the way he listened and the follow-up questions he asked had me knowing him too. It just worked.

Not once had he rolled his eyes or asked me to calm down or be quiet. He just let me be me.

Apollo showed me his beautiful home, but the moment he gripped my hand and we walked up the stairs, my heart began to race. This was different; different than when we were alone together outside under the stars and different than when we were walking here together.

The thrumming inside my heart that had begun when I entered Apollo's territory increased in tempo. It was as if we were serenaded by our own personal symphony. Our heart song. Like the song knew that we were finally alone together in the space he created for us.

Apollo hadn't said it in that way, but he'd let me know in his own way that this home had always been for me, long before he even knew I existed. He'd always trusted I would come. It had me cherishing the home even more.

We stepped into the bedroom. It was not a large room, but it held the most gorgeous bed I'd ever seen. It was for sure not there for him, not in his centaur form.

I gasped when I saw it. The four-posted oak frame dominated the space. There were roses hand-carved into the headboard, with ornate details of the vines sprawling across the dark wood. It was covered in exquisite furs.

"I made it," he said.

"It's beautiful." That was the understatement of the year. I'd never seen anything quite as beautiful in my life.

I turned to face my mate and found that he gazed at me with the same desire burning in his eyes that flared within my belly. I pulled him closer to me and pressed my lips to his. It was a slow, ghost of a kiss, and it only fanned the flames of our desire for each other.

"Make me yours, Apollo," I asked.

He lifted me into his arms. I squealed in surprise and wrapped my arms around his waist to steady myself. That was when I realized my mate was no longer in his centaur form. Our kiss—it called forth his human self.

My eyes widened. “You shifted.”

“I did,” he said.

I knew it was his very first time. Centaurs didn’t get their human forms until they met their mate. But it didn’t seem to faze him a bit. All of his focus was on me.

The hunger in his gaze was unmistakable. If I doubted how much he wanted me, the thick cock that was poking me in the ass would’ve been a good indication. And by thick I meant it was huge. Hung like a horse was a saying for a reason.

“I need to get undressed,” I said. But first I lost myself in his kiss. I pressed my lips to his and closed my eyes. My arms locked around his neck. The broad muscles in his back flexed as he moved us across the room.

Then I was on the bed. The soft furs enveloped me in his thick scent. He tugged off my jeans while I removed my shirt. I needed my skin to touch his, needed his body to cover me, claim me.

My mate knelt between my spread legs. “You are gorgeous, my little wolf.”

“So are you,” I said. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the thick cock that jutted out from the V of his pelvis. I wanted to lick every inch of it. My hole leaked slick, and my wolf whined inside of me. That whine came out of my very human throat. “Need you. Please.”

“I would never deny you anything, mate.” Apollo cupped the back of my neck and pulled my head to his so he could capture my lips. I could drown in his kisses. While he distracted me with his lips, his fingers circled my hole. One, or maybe it was two, breached my hole, and I bucked my hips at the intrusion.

Apollo trailed kisses down my neck. His teeth nipped at my skin, and all I could do was thrash against his ministrations. My skin heated with each brush of his lips. It was a delicious torture.

He went on like that for a long while. Dropping kisses and bites along my skin. Focusing on one nipple, then the next, all the while he was stretching my hole for his monster cock. His finger stretched my rim, then teased around the edge, only to plunge back inside again.

“Give me your cock,” I whined.

“Soon,” he promised.

My hips jerked and cum leaked from the tip of my cock. My release was so close. “Now, please. I cannot take anymore.”

His hand stilled. His lips stopped and my skin went cool. My orgasm retreated. Apollo’s eyes locked on mine. “If I make love to you, as I wish to do, we’ll be bound together. Mates in all ways. That is what you wish?”

“More than anything,” I said. There was not a single doubt in my mind. Apollo was my always and forever, and I was ready to forge that bond.

He kissed me again. This time slow and steady. Then the head of his cock pressed against my entrance. My slick eased the way, and his cock slid inside. The stretch burned, despite his thorough preparation. Apollo went slow, allowing my body to adjust. My hands trailed down his back and then reached the muscular globes of his ass. I squeezed as he buried himself deeper.

“Feels so good,” I said. My arms went around his neck, and I hugged him to me. “Keep going, mate.”

He did, until he was fully buried within me. He kissed my neck, right over the area where a mate bite would go.

I ached to bury my teeth in him, to mark his as mine. It was what wolves did.

“So close, sweetheart.” Apollo began to move, his cock sliding in and out of me, stretching my channel. “You’re so fucking tight, mate.”

My fangs elongated, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. The minute I felt my mate stiffen above me and the heat of his cum filling my channel, I bit down. My teeth sank into his flesh, and Apollo’s hips jerked.

He let out a moan of pleasure that matched mine.

My eyes rolled back as pleasure radiated through me. Like little sparks of electricity traveling down to my toes. My cock jerked and cum splashed between us.

“Mine,” Apollo growled.

“Yours,” I agreed.

Once the two of us came down from our orgasmic high, I licked the wound where my mate mark was placed. Apollo shuddered.

“I’m proud to wear your mark, mate,” he said.

I kissed the spot, and his hips jerked, sending a jolt of pleasure through my body. “I’m proud to be yours too, Apollo.”

Pride didn’t even begin to describe the feelings flowing through me. It was as if my life split into two in that very moment. I had my life before mating Apollo and after.

The bond between us was more than just love and attraction. It was palpable. Our heart song had been there from the beginning, but it was different now, somehow sweeter. Like the two of us composed a new piece that was just for us.

“Do you hear it too?” I asked, snuggling into him. “It’s... I don’t want to say better, but it’s...”

“Better.” He kissed my shoulder. “It expresses the two of us woven together as one. That makes it better.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way, but he was right. And it also explained how definitive the before and after felt to me. We weren’t just mates, as if there could be just anything when it came to mates, but we were bonded mates—two become one and all that poetic crap humans spouted, but for real.

“I’m so glad I finally found you.” I might not have understood that I had been searching, but I was.

“I’m so glad you finally came.” He kissed me breathless. “I’d been waiting for you for lifetimes, and now that you’re here, my heart is full.”

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I awoke in my human form, a new concept to me. I was still getting used to my human legs. One should think it would be easier to walk with two legs instead of four. There was less to coordinate, but I still managed to trip over myself as I got out of bed and ran toward the ringing phone that had interrupted my sleep.

Still, it was easier than I thought it would be. I remembered seeing my brothers when they first took human form and wondering what it would be like. It didn't live up to my expectations as far as the whole walking thing went, but being able to snuggle up with my mate all night long with our legs intertwined? Yeah, that had been everything.

"What's going on?" Walker asked, sitting up from the bed we had spent the last several days in. Furs surrounded him. I couldn't help but simply stare at his gorgeousness. His heat had been intense and had lasted several days. I thought we were on the fourth day. We both were in dire need of a shower and some rest, but it had been the most glorious few days of my life.

"Are you going to answer that?" he asked. He rubbed the heels of his palms over his eyes.

"Yes, yes." I looked down at the phone. I poked my finger at the green button.
"What?" I said.

"We've gone over this, Apollo. The proper way to answer a phone is to say hello."

"Is there something you need, Marcus?" I wasn't in the mood for human niceties. They were lucky I was willing to use their stupid contraption in the first place. And

had my mate come here for any other reason than his safety, I'd have ignored this call.

"We were just checking in to make sure that you and Walker were doing fine." Nosy much? "He had messaged saying that he went into heat, and we just... well, we're curious."

"The sex was fantastic. Thank you for asking," I said.

Walker let out a giggle. "Sweetheart, I do not think that was what he wanted to know."

"Certainly not. Although if I do need to have a dish session, I will be sure to talk with Walker rather than you," Marcus assured me.

"What is a dish session? I do not understand." Was it the lack of sleep or nutrients that made my brain so foggy or were these two speaking another language?

"Nothing. Are you two quite well?"

"Yes, Walker's heat is over." I appreciated that my brothers and their mates considered Walker part of the family already and cared enough to call. But also, there was a lack of privacy I wouldn't have minded having.

"Unfortunately," Walker said, and I smiled at that.

"We do not need the influence of a heat to enjoy each other's company." It was his turn to blush, the red sweeping down his cheeks and over his neck like the sun rising, spreading its warmth across the sky.

"All right, that's enough, you two." Marcus was still on the line, something I'd

momentarily forgotten. Oops. “I can practically feel the sexual tension through the phone, and it’s making me sick. We would like for you guys to visit, or maybe we can visit you? If that is allowed.”

“Visit so soon? I just saw you the other day,” I said.

“You have more to think about than just you, Apollo.” Marcus tsked. And while he was right, finding my mate didn’t have me suddenly wanting to be all social all the time. I was still me, but blissfully happy.

“It would be nice to visit your brothers,” Walker said, getting up from the bed. He took one of the lighter furs and wrapped it around his waist. At that moment, I would have agreed to just about anything. My mate seemed to have a hold over me, a power that I was wholly unfamiliar with.

“Let us get a chance to clean up,” I said, “and we will come over for dinner.”

Marcus winced. “Can you make it lunch? We’re trying to get little Jesse on a nap schedule, and if we do dinner, then I’m going to have to worry about timing.”

Had he given me any other reason, I’d have been grumpy about it. But my nibbling was a joy in my life, and if hurrying up and visiting sooner made their life better, then I was there for it.

“Lunch will be fine, Brother. We will see you soon.” I hung up the phone. “I think they are concerned that I’m not taking care of you,” I said.

Walker snorted. “I think they are your brothers and your brothers-in-law, and they are happy for you and what you wish to celebrate. Also, I think they are nosy.”

He was right about that. They had always been worried about me, it was their way.

But this was different. It wasn't worry, not in the same way, anyway.

"I left them alone for weeks after they were mated." And I had assumed they would do the same for me. Or maybe they hadn't wanted me to leave them alone? I hadn't considered that before.

"Did you leave them alone or did you simply avoid them? Like you usually do?"
Ouch. But also accurate.

"That is a valid point. I suppose my behavior didn't change, although shortly after Luan and Marcus mated, we had visitors that I had to entertain."

"You were in charge of entertaining visitors?" He could barely contain his giggle. And rightfully so. I was hardly the most social in this group—or even the semi-social one.

"No, but I mean I had to meet them, spend time with them." Which according to my brothers was the same thing.

Walker's eyebrows lifted. He saw through my bullshit.

"Okay, I think I had to have dinner with them. They were most annoying."

He put a hand to my chest. "You are most wonderful, my mate, and just a little bit funny."

"Only a little bit? I'm not even attempting jokes. I should assume that if I put effort toward it, I would be hilarious."

He laughed outright at that, inadvertently proving my point.

“Perhaps. Come show me where you bathe. Is this a hot spring situation or...?”

Heat was weird in that not once had I thought about bathing, but now that it was over, it took priority. I might’ve loved the scent of my mate on me, but we had gone way beyond that.

“Let me show you,” I said.

One of the most wonderful additions to my house had been the bathroom. Though the indoor plumbing left much to be desired, I did have a large basin tub that I had crafted. The water pumped in from the earth, and with my power from the sun, I was able to heat it quickly. I went into the room, lifted the tap, and the water began filling the tub.

I’d show him the hot springs, but we didn’t need to travel like that to get into some hot water and soak. And here? Here we were not going to be disturbed. At least not yet. It was inevitable that my brothers would know my locations sooner rather than later, and knowing them, they would “just pop over to say hello” or some other human-type social norm.

“This is amazing,” he said, and he picked up a bit of the jasmine flower I had there. “It’s like a regular spa; maybe not that quite as exquisite, but it is nice for a soak. You could not fit your centaur form in here, so is this the first time you are using it? How does the water get warm? Is it coming from the hot springs?”

“There’s no need for that,” I said, and I dipped my hand into the water. Steam began to rise from the surface.

“Oh, wow. So, if I’m ever cold in the middle of the night, I don’t actually need a blanket. I just need you.” Walker smiled.

“I would be happy to provide you with whatever you need, especially warmth. There is nothing quite like the sun’s rays to warm a body.”

My cock was already stirring just thinking about him asking me to warm him up. How impossible it should be after all the times we’d been joined over the past few days. And yet... there I was, ready for more. I had a feeling that was going to be how our life together would be—always wanting each other both physical and emotionally.

It was interesting how much I already cherished the time we were together, including the time talking about random things. I’d spent so much of my life cherishing being by myself, and now? Now I wanted to be with my mate all the time.

“Well, nothing left to do now then except join me.” He grinned and dropped the fur to the floor. “Get in the tub with me, mate. I need you to wash my back.”

I did much more than wash his back.

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I could already tell that I was going to enjoy living in this forest full-time. There was something magical about not having to worry about everyone around you, not having to be cautious about when you could or couldn't shift, not needing to fear human traps. It was a freedom I'd never experienced before, not even before all the crap with being on the run. I was home.

Instead of me riding astride Apollo's back for the trip to his brother's house, he walked in his centaur form while I raced around in my fur. I enjoyed having him transport me the way he had. It was what I needed at the time. But this? Taking in all the scents of my surroundings while playfully engaging with my mate—it was freaking perfect, and I loved it. He smiled and laughed alongside me as I leapt around, wagging my tail, as if I was more dog than wolf.

Over his shoulder, he carried a satchel with my clothes. We might all be in shifter company, but the air was chilled just enough that it was less about being “human” and clothed and more about keeping comfortable. Before we reached Luan's home, he stopped and squatted down, rubbing his cheek against my furry one.

“Shift back so you can get dressed, please, mate.” I was taken aback at first.

Nakedness didn't bother me. I wouldn't mind if I shifted in the middle of everyone, but it seemed that my mate didn't wish for me to be exposed. I supposed I could understand that. I didn't want my brothers-in-laws ogling my mate either. It wasn't their fault I got the most attractive centaur. It was interesting how perspectives changed once mates were factored into the equation.

Once I was fully dressed, we walked toward the house. It was going to be the first

time they saw Apollo in this form.

Outside Luan's home, Marcus and Maddox sat around the fire, both of them holding their children in their arms. Luan and Terran were in their centaur form, standing around the grill or whatever oven-type thing was there. I was looking forward to learning how it worked—how so much of the things around here worked.

The alpha from Steelwick, Tomas, meant to protect me was also there. I appreciated him being there. And before I'd met Apollo I'd have been sticking to his side like glue. But now? Now I wasn't so sure he was necessary. Not that it was my decision to make.

"Walker, we're so glad to see that you are well," Marcus said. He gestured for me to sit down next to him while Apollo went to speak with his brothers.

"Quite well," I said. My cheeks heated. I wasn't ashamed of what had transpired between Apollo and me, but well... we weren't about to dive into the specifics of my heat either.

"And look at you, Apollo. Walking on two legs." Marcus smiled. He wasn't mocking him, it was more an acknowledgement that we were fated mates.

"They are suitable." My mate cracked me up. Life with him was going to be fabulous.

"How are you feeling? And how are you liking your home?" Marcus asked. He leaned forward.

"It's great. I love it." When I first was told I'd be coming here, it was a safe place to be. I hadn't considered what it would be like. I assumed that it would be like all the other places I had gone to for my protection where I'd had to hide. But here I could be myself.

“It’s not too simple?” Maddox asked. They both seemed to be all ears now, waiting for me to tell them more about Apollo’s accommodations.

“Simple? Quite the opposite, actually.” It might not be the technology-based living that Marcus and Maddox and I, for that matter, had been used to. But that wasn’t the same as being simple. Not by a long shot.

“Oh.” They both snuck a glance at Apollo.

“I need to see my brothers.” Apollo kissed my cheek and went on his way. It was the first time I’d been away from him since we met, and it pulled on our heart song. It wasn’t uncomfortable, per se, but it was noticeable. I had a feeling if he went too far from me, it would become painful, though. Good thing I had no plans to do that any time soon.

“You guys haven’t seen his home before, right?” If they had they would see there was nothing “simple” to it.

“No, I kind of assumed he lived in like a little one-room shack. I wasn’t even sure if he had a roof over his head or if he simply slept outside.” Marcus shrugged.

I laughed. “Hardly.” They were in for a shock when Apollo was ready to share it with them. “Well, it would be more exciting if I could show it to you.”

“He’ll never allow that,” Maddox said. “I’ve been asking since the day I arrived. Apollo’s pretty gruff, but he’s always been very kind to me. And Marcus as well, and he adores the kids.”

I could see that about my mate. But also, he hadn’t shown them because it had been built for me. He might not have known I was coming, but he was preparing for me nonetheless. I was treasured long before the first note on our heart song played.

“He’s going to be a great father,” I said, and mate and friend and companion and everything. Apollo was Apollo, and I was beyond lucky to have him in my life.

“We were a little nervous about having him find his mate.” Maddox spoke in hushed tones. “It takes a special kind of person to deal with that level of solitude.”

“Yes, perhaps, but I am more than happy with Apollo. And he has said that he would like for you all to visit one day soon.” We hadn’t picked a time, but he’d been amenable to it.

“Today?” Maddox’s eyes lit up.

“We haven’t determined when, but maybe soon. Why not in the next few days?” The more I thought about it, the more excited I became. “Oh, it would be so fun if you could bring the kids and we could play in the yard.”

“A yard?” Marcus asked. My mate sure kept things on the down low.

“Yes. There’s so much space, and he has a swing set base set up. We would simply need to tie up a swing. And there’s a lovely tree that is great for climbing.” I mean, I hadn’t tried yet, but the thought did cross my mind.

“It’s nothing like what I imagined.” Marcus was in for a shock when he saw it, if my words were getting him this excited.

“Apollo thought perhaps it would be fun to build a treehouse there.” The drawing he had with his idea was absolutely perfect. “And we’ve talked about where to place my kiln and my pottery wheel. The backyard has a beautiful setup. We simply need to gather stones to make it work. Perhaps Terran can help with that when you visit.”

I was getting myself more and more excited about the place than I already had been.

Who knew that was possible?

They stared at me wide-eyed and slack-jawed. “Or you don’t have to visit?” I’d never push them. If this was too much, that was fine.

Finally, it was Marcus who spoke. “No, we would love to. It’s just... this is great. We’re very happy to have you in the family. And with your heat over, it’s very likely that you are expecting.”

“Oh,” I said. I hadn’t been thinking about that part of my heat, not wanting to get too excited. “Well, we’ll know in a few days, of course. Apollo will be able to sense it before me, won’t he?”

They both nodded.

“That’s very exciting, right?” Maddox said cautiously.

“It is.” Beyond my wildest imaginations actually.

Apollo came out and over to my side. “Are they interrogating you, mate?”

“Just a little.” I held up two fingers close together. “I invited them over for dinner in the next couple of days. I hope that’s all right.” His hand touched the back of my neck, rubbing lightly where my hairline met. I leaned into his touch.

“That sounds perfect,” he said. “The more the merrier.”

“The more the merrier?” Terran said. He must’ve come out with Apollo. “Who the hell are you, and what have you done with my brother?”

“We get to see your hovel?” Luan asked, flanking his brother’s side. “Marcus was

betting that you have a simple lean-to. I hope your mate found your accommodations okay.”

“They are exquisite,” I said again, this time to Terran and Luan. They looked at me like I was crazy. At least I knew they hadn’t been eavesdropping on us.

Apollo stood up straighter, his smile turning smug. “You’ll just have to wait and see, Brothers. But yes, now that my mate has seen my home, you are all invited to see it as well.”

“Wow. Mating life looks good on you, Apollo,” Terran said.

“It does indeed.” He looked down at me and smiled, then leaned forward and kissed my lips.

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It was with great reluctance, but also anticipation, that the two of us left my brother's home. It was different being there now that I was mated. I'd always felt like I hadn't quite fit in with my brothers and that became more pronounced when they got mated. But now that I was too, I found myself understanding them better.

The sun was lowering in the sky, I loved the way the late afternoon sun shone through the trees. People often talked about sunrise and sunset as being their favorite sky, but this was mine.

Walker opted to walk rather than shift to his wolf form or even ride astride my back. He was experiencing the journey in all the ways. It was for sure different on two feet, which I had discovered earlier in the day.

His hand held mine as the two of us strolled through the forest, our fingers intertwined. It was a leisurely pace, and we spent a good portion of it enjoying the nature around us and our heart songs. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to the beauty that was our song.

"How come there's not a worn path to your house?" he asked as I pointed in the direction we were to be turning. "There's a path to Terran's home from Luan's, and from both their homes to the river and the hot springs, but there is no path that leads to our home from any of those places. I guess because it was hidden, right? But also, wouldn't your hooves make a path?"

I loved the way he never hid his thought process. He opened up to me and let everything out. It showed such trust, trust I vowed to be worthy of.

“I never take the same route twice,” I said. “But now that everyone is going to know that we’re here, we can clear a path. In fact, Terran, while he’s on his way over, will probably clear it for us.”

“Let me guess, he doesn’t need to walk through the forest with a machete wearing down the earth, he can simply ask.” Walker was spot-on.

“Exactly. And if we want the path illuminated, then Luan can do that for us as well.” Our abilities had always just been there for us. It was easy to forget that to others it was unheard of. My mate seemed to pick up on it quickly.

Walker squeezed my hand, our heart songs humming in sync. “You three are amazing.”

“Thank you, mate. We have been able to accomplish a lot with our gifts. All without the help of the internet.” Although I had to admit, I was starting to take a liking to the internet. Not that I would admit that to my brothers.

“That’s pretty fantastic.” He leaned into my side as we walked.

I chuckled. “Well, since we got the internet, I have learned a whole lot more. In fact, I spent this morning doing some searching that I want to talk to you about.”

“What? Did you come across some sex positions you want to try? Because if so, I am game.” Walker’s eyes sparkled with mischief, and I nearly forgot what I even wanted to talk to him about.

I couldn’t stop myself from pressing a kiss to his lips.

“No, but we can look into that if you would like.” I winked, loving the way his cheeks pinked.

“I wish to build you a kiln so that you may do your pottery.” Which I had mentioned to him before in passing. “Normally, I would build it trial-and-error style, however, there seem to be craftsmen in the world that have perfected this already.”

He looked up at me, wide-eyed.

“I wish for you to be able to work on your pottery as soon as possible. I’ve read through several of these tutorials that provide step-by-step instructions on how to create one for you. I may need to order some human-made things or perhaps reach out to other packs to see if they have what I need. Would you like that?”

As much as I would’ve liked it to be a surprise for him, it was important that it was exactly what he needed. The only way to accomplish that was to let him in on the process. But looking at his face, I wasn’t sure if it was even something he wanted.

“The funds—”

Money. Humans and their money woes. I understood it, but also knew it was something he no longer had to concern himself with. At least not for this.

“Funds are not an issue,” I said. “We can let you in on a little secret about our forest.”

He cocked his head.

“There are rumors, of course, about the potions and plants and whatnot that exist here. Some of those rumors are somewhat true. We have found gold and silver.”

He didn’t say anything, his eyes glued to mine.

“We have not extracted it to the lengths that humankind might, but we’ve taken enough. We wanted a fair amount to be used for purchasing of things so we didn’t

have to rely on the Steelwick pack's money.”

Once my brothers and I feared of its value to those outside our forest. We had the minerals that we'd found over the years evaluated for their worth to humans. We hadn't converted all of it to actual funds, but we did sell some so that we could purchase some of man's more modern conveniences.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I don't want to...”

“What is mine is yours. And we have far more than we can ever use, most of it still in the land. Let me do this for you—let me offer you the gift of your joy, your passion, your art.”

He wrapped his arms around me and held me close, scenting me deeply and sinking into my embrace when our heart song hummed louder.

“I'd love to have a kiln. I'd love to be able to do my pottery.” Walker's voice took on a wistful tone. “It is my passion. And that doesn't mean you aren't—but there's something special about making something with my hands.”

“I can help provide for all of you.” I nibbled on his ear lobe. “Whenever you wish, dear, I will make it happen.”

“You're too perfect, mate,” he said.

“I disagree. But I will strive every day to be the man that you deserve.”

“Let's leave our clothes here and run home together.” Walker stepped back and began to take off his clothing, not waiting for a reply.

“Or I can put it in the bag and carry it,” I reminded him.

Unlike my sexy mate, I had two arms when I was in my beast's form. Not that our animal shapes were the same. I didn't have two beings inside of me, just two shapes. My mate had a wolf. Maddox teased that mating a shifter was a two-for-one deal. I wouldn't call it that, but it was magnificent.

"I forgot about that. You don't mind?"

"I would do anything for you." I took his clothing and shoved them in the bag. When Steelwick went to get things for the kiln, maybe they could get me some clothing that actually fit, too. "Besides, I will still outrun you."

I wasn't sure how true that was, but my little wolf liked the idea of racing. I'd discover soon enough who was faster.

"Wanna bet?" He was now completely nude, and I was fully dressed.

I worked on my clothing as I answered, "And what are the terms of this bet?"

I didn't fully grasp the joy of betting, but the twinkle in his eyes told me that he did. Heck, I wasn't sure exactly what my question meant, but I heard it on YouTube, so I knew it was a thing.

"If I get there first, I get to decide what we do the rest of the day?" He raked his eyes up and down my body. "I was thinking we might not need the items in that bag of yours."

He locked eyes onto my naked chest and licked his lips.

"And if I win?" Because I was pretty sure at this point, I was going to make sure I lost. Being at my mate's whim sounded absolutely delightful.

“If you win,” he ran a finger down my chest, “you get to decide.”

“So, basically you are saying we both win no matter the outcome?” I teased.

“Yep.” He licked his lips again.

Before I could reply, his wolf was standing in front of me.

“I’m coming.” I jumped back and took my hooves, throwing the bag over my shoulder. “Or at least we will both be as soon as we get home.”

My little wolf licked my leg and took off, with me hot on his tail the entire way home.

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I loved being with my mate. I didn't think there would ever come a time where I was bored of his company. We didn't even need to speak, although I was usually chattering away. Just being close by each other was enough. Mating was nothing like I expected it to be—it was a bazillion times better.

And to have our family coming for a visit made me love my life here even more. I couldn't wait to show off all of Apollo's hard work that he'd put into our home. Nothing was done without thought. He was so careful with every little detail. It was a masterpiece that rivaled my best work. He didn't see it as I did. He had brushed off my praise.

To think that his family had never seen this amazing paradise he had put together, that he saved it for me. That was something I would always treasure.

They arrived as a group, since Apollo had only given directions to Terran, and I was pretty sure that the directions were a bit convoluted and may have taken them on a less-than-direct route based on how long it took them to arrive. My mate was Apollo, after all, and he enjoyed his seclusion, so it made sense.

Of course, once his brothers learned of his location, they would be able to map out paths for themselves and make their way back here anytime. But first, Apollo was going to make them work for it. And really, with all the secrecy, they probably wanted it to be a bit out of the way.

I stood at the gate, Apollo with me in his centaur form. His long black hair whipped in the wind. I'd never been a long hair kind of person, but with Apollo, I couldn't imagine him in anything else. And there was no denying that he was sexy as heck. I

leaned up and kissed him on the cheek and stroked a hand over one of his horns. He shivered.

“You know what that does to me, mate?”

“Oh, I know,” I said and gave him a wink. I couldn’t resist the temptation.

Ever since I had learned what a sensitive spot his horns were, I had a hard time keeping my hands off them. I loved the way he responded to my touch. The only reason I didn’t do it once more was the rustling of leaves in the distance. They were almost here, and if I kept giving my mate the attention we both adored, we were going to be too busy to entertain our first guests.

“Welcome, everyone,” I said when the group stepped into view. The whole family was there, and Tomas, of course. He was quickly becoming family to us all. It was going to be difficult when he had to leave.

They looked at my home, eyes wide. Yeah, even with me telling them about the place, they were in shock. They truly believed he was living in a hovel. Silly family.

“Come on inside.” I indicated the gate they could walk through.

None of them moved, all of them looking around in wonder at our home. They were still taking it all in, and I found myself puffing out in pride. I wasn’t someone who wanted fancy and expensive things. Money didn’t impress me. This wasn’t about that. It was about the thought and care my mate put into preparing my home. That was priceless.

“Your house is massive, Brother. How did you manage a second story all on your own?” Terran asked. He held his child in his arms. The boy was more interested in reaching for his father’s hair than looking at his uncle’s impressive home.

“It took many years,” Apollo said as if it were the complete answer.

“We could have helped.” Luan’s jaw tensed and there was hurt in his eyes.

“Of course,” Apollo said, looking at his brother. “Not wanting to ask for help was never the concern. You know that, right?”

The brothers nodded in understanding. I loved how close he was to his family.

I looked at my two brothers-in-law and their children. Whatever child I had would also grow up close to their family like this in our forest. The children would romp and play in whatever form they could take. If I understood correctly, the children shifted to their centaur form quite quickly after being born. It was hard to imagine such a thing, though I supposed it wouldn’t be imagination much longer. Soon enough I would witness it.

“Tell us everything,” Marcus said, looping his arm through mine. His baby was strapped on his back with some sort of contraption. I would have to get me one of those handy things when the time came.

“Well, this is the house,” I said, and I took them up to the porch. “It took Apollo almost a decade to carve all of those spindles. He would work on them in his free time. There are over three hundred of them throughout the whole house.” I pointed to the spindles that were on the railing that wrapped around the porch. That was just one of the many impressive, intricate designs my mate had created.

“Holy shit. That’s dedication. I can’t even stick to doing the daily crossword,” Marcus exclaimed, and I was pretty sure he wasn’t kidding. The man was always busy, hopping from one thing to the next.

“He has a huge basin upstairs for a bath, and he can heat the water with his hand,” I

said.

“Wait. He can heat things with his own body? He should teach that trick to Terran. My back got so sore while I was pregnant. I just wanted a heating pad for my lower back.”

“Can the brothers share their powers between them?” I still didn’t understand how their magic worked. Perhaps I never would. It was old magic, designed by a corrupt witch. Their “mother’s” plan backfired when her creation—the three centaurs—turned out to be good men with high morals. They refused to do her evil work.

They were better than her. Full stop.

The two nodded, sort of taken aback. “Apollo’s power to move the earth will never be as strong as Terran’s, though. In turn, Terran’s power to heat things would never be as strong as Apollo’s, but they can share,” Marcus said.

“Wow.” That wasn’t something I had considered.

“Right? There’s so much to learn about them,” Maddox said.

Everybody came inside. We all stood in the foyer area. The layout of the ground floor was quite open, the ceiling high.

I laced my fingers into Apollo’s. “You’re quite amazing, mate.”

“The house is something I am proud of. There is no doubt about that. But I did spend over a hundred years building it, and perhaps closer to three hundred planning it. When you put it in that scope of time, I don’t think it’s overly impressive.” Just the fact that he was so intentional about every tiny detail was impressive, and here he was

being Mr. Humble.

I smacked his chest playfully. “Please, you are one man. One centaur. I think it’s amazing. And really, the only opinion that matters is mine, right?”

He grinned at me. “That is true.”

My brothers-in-law shifted to their human form and grabbed some sweats we had left out for them, and we all sat down at the table. Yesterday, Apollo had gone out and hunted a wild boar, and that was what we were having for our feast. My beast had never been able to down a boar, and I was excited to try out a new recipe with the meat it provided us.

Terran and Maddox had brought fresh greens from their garden for the salad. I had whipped up a vinegar dressing, and since I knew the three of us non-forest dwellers were missing a bit of the “real” world, I’d made cream cookies with pudding for dessert. Simple, delicious, and the kids would love it.

Before we dug into the food, Apollo stood up. “Thank you all for coming. Welcome to my home. Now that you have all been here—”

“You’re going to abandon the house and move to another location,” Luan joked.

We all laughed.

“No, in fact, you all have a standing invitation to return. After a thousand years, I suppose it’s time that my family be allowed to visit. However, this does not change who I am. Please call first. Don’t visit more than two days in a row. Unless there’s a dire emergency.”

I was sure there were a lot more rules he had in mind, but we cut him off with a toast,

raising our glasses.

“To Apollo and Walker!” Maddox, said and the others joined in.

Lunch was delicious, everyone eating their fill. But the meal wasn't what made today special. Having my family here in my home, laughing, eating, sharing our lives together—this was better than anything.

I'd thought leaving my pack was going to be harshest on my beast. Human me understood we were in danger and it was our only choice. But my animal, he missed being part of a pack. Little did I realize that my pack had never been one. Not in the way I needed them to be. But here in this forest, with these people? This was what pack life was meant to be, and somehow it was mine now.

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In the morning after my family visited, I felt light, happy, content, perhaps for the first time in all my one thousand years. Though we had never known that we were going to get mates someday, that didn't change the fact that we were all just a little restless to be by ourselves in this forest for that amount of time. We had made the best of it, but it had been lonely. And in the back of our minds, we had always hoped for something more—something better.

And something better came. For the first time in my life, I had everything I could ever want wrapped up in my arms. My life was complete—I was whole.

It was just before sunrise, and we needed to get moving if I was going to show Walker one of my favorite parts of the forest on time.

“Walker,” I whispered.

He mumbled in his sleep, his eyes not opening.

“Did you still want to go see the sunrise with me this morning? We can try it another day if you wish to rest,” I said. I snuggled closer. I assumed my mate wished to sleep longer.

“No, no, I'm awake.” He sat right up as if he hadn't just been fighting to stay asleep. “I want to go. I do. I'm just not a morning person.” That's when I noticed his eyes still hadn't opened, even though he was sitting.

“Your personality is sunshine personified. It makes sense that you would do your best in the middle of the day when the sun is high in the sky and you can soak up its rays

and energy and turn them into your own brilliant light.” I kissed his cheeks one by one as I spoke the words.

His eyes flew open. “That’s the most beautiful thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“It is the truth,” I said.

He grinned. “Let’s go.”

We made quick work of getting dressed and brushing our teeth. Walker was a bit tired, so he hopped on my back when we began our trek. I liked having my mate close, so it did not bother me to have him astride my back.

I walked through the forest to the spot I knew would have the best view. It had been my favorite since the first time I witnessed the sun rising in the horizon there. Climbing the hill didn’t take long. Unlike when I walked from my home to those of my brothers all those years, I had worn down quite the path that the steep hill practically had steps for me to follow.

I would have to tell my brothers about this place. I couldn’t keep everything to myself anymore, and I didn’t want to. I doubted they knew about it, and it was time to remedy that. Perhaps they had their own special locations in the forest that only they knew about, and they had shared those with their mates. Probably not. Unlike me, they tended to be far less private about... everything.

Once we reached the top, the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. Walker laid the blanket we’d brought down on the ground while I shifted to my human form. I settled onto the soft fabric and my mate snuggled in, sitting between my legs. I wrapped him in my arms, and he covered our laps with an additional blanket, making us a snuggly cocoon.

“This is really nice,” he said, and he leaned his head on my shoulder. “I’m glad I got out of bed.”

“I am too. This is one of my favorite places,” I said. “For years I’ve wanted to share a sunrise with someone, and I couldn’t think of another person I’d rather spend it with than you.”

Walker let out a contented sigh and a feeling of such happiness radiated through me I was sure tears were going to fall at any moment. The world felt brighter, happier with my mate by my side. No longer did I dread the long, lonely days. With Walker, I’d never be lonely.

I’d always thought I was content before, but now that I knew what was missing and I knew what true happiness was? I never wanted to go back. While this used to be one of, if not my favorite place, I had a new one now... being by my mate’s side. Having both at once... it was more magical than anything my mother could’ve conjured up back in her day.

I tried not to think about her too much. It was difficult to know that you were created out of such evil. But also... she was my mother, and without her, I wouldn’t be here enjoying this special moment with my mate.

It wasn’t possible to be any happier than this.

As the full sun came into view, the sky lit up with an array of purple and pink hues, and the morning dew that caked the ground evaporated in the morning heat. I wasn’t an artist, like my mate, but if I were, I’d try to capture this beauty on a canvas.

Walker took a deep breath and let the heat of the sun wash over his face. I kissed his cheek.

That was when I sensed it.

A light shift in his scent. A hint of an additional heartbeat. It wasn't the two of us alone on this mountaintop. There was a third.

My eyes flew open. "Walker?"

"Yes?" He was still soaking in the sun's rays. His skin was warming with the sun, and I felt the power of it soaking into me as well.

I laid a hand over his stomach. "Are you feeling all right? Any... nausea? Fatigue?"

His brow furrowed. "I'm fine. Why do you—" He whirled around so that we were facing one another. His gaze searched my face. "Am I... Do you sense something?"

I nodded. "You are with my child. Our child."

Recognition hit, and his face transformed from confusion to absolute joy. He wrapped his arms around my neck, and the two of us tumbled to the ground with him landing on top of me.

"We're going to have a baby! That's so amazing!" he shouted. "A baby!"

I held him tight. This time I let the tears come. "It is, mate. It truly is." I kissed him.

He was at the advantage, since he was fully clothed while I had been in my centaur form, so I was naked after shifting. I was still growing used to having a second form. Kissing my mate, being near him in any capacity had caused my cock to harden, and I knew he could feel it pressing against his middle.

Our kiss deepened, and my mate's hand trailed down my torso until he met the head

of my cock. His fingers danced around the head, lightly touching, teasing. I hissed in surprise.

Walker smiled against my lips. "Let me take care of you, Apollo."

"Anything you want, mate." I nuzzled into his neck, kissing the soft skin there. The taste of him was on my lips, and I never wanted it to wash away.

Walker sat up so that he was straddling my upper thighs. My cock stood long and proud. He undid his pants and pulled his own hard cock out and began to stroke. I reached out a hand to touch him, but he shot me a look that told me to stop.

"Mine," he said, and he positioned himself so that he could grip both of us in one hand. Then he began to move his hand, up and down our lengths. Our two cocks sliding together in a delicious friction that drew a moan from my chest.

His hand worked us in unison, our precum combining to form a slick that eased the way. The heady scent of our arousal filled the air while the early-morning sun shone down on our bodies. The rays of sunshine illuminated him as he hovered over me. He was the sunlight of my world.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, Walker. Your hands are perfection." It was true. There was a strength in his grip that surprised me, the way his hands could move us together in such a way.

"Tricks of the trade, my love." He laughed and closed his mouth over mine for a kiss.

It didn't take long for his ministrations to draw my release from my body. My hips bucked, and he met my thrust with a grind of his own. Our bodies come together in an explosive orgasm, our cum mixing between us as we kissed.

Finally, he fell against me, his body covering mine, and the rise and fall of our breaths fell into sync.

“There’s a river around here, right? We may need to wash off.”

I kissed his temple. “We’ll find one, mate.” After I held him tightly just a little bit longer.

“Thank you for waking me up. This was the perfect place.”

“For sex?”

“That too.” He blushed. “But I meant to find out that we were going to be dads.”

Dads. Gods, I loved the sound of that.

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I sat outside with my mate at the picnic table. I lived for being outdoors these days. I wasn't sure if it was feeling so at peace and comfortable here or if being pregnant with a centaur's baby was at play. The centaurs were tied to the land in a way others, not even shifters, were. It would make sense that their children would be too, even at such an early stage in life.

Since things weren't ready for me to sculpt quite yet, I spent a lot of time sketching or reading, almost exclusively outdoors. Most of the time it was with my mate by my side. We were pretty much on an extended honeymoon phase, and I couldn't be happier about it.

I wasn't sure how things would be when we started to spend time away from each other. Would the heart song hurt? Would it make concentrating on the tasks at hand difficult? Would it comfort me? There were so many possibilities, and I'd discover it soon enough. As much as I loved Apollo, there would come a day when I'd want some omega time with the others.

We spent a lot of time making love anywhere and everywhere that we could. If we were anywhere but our forest, we would have been arrested or part of a viral video by now. But we weren't. This was our space, and we had complete freedom to do as we wished here, even if it was sometimes enough to make even the squirrels blush.

Apollo sat across from me, sketching on a piece of parchment. He claimed he was no artist, but everything he did in the house proved otherwise. It was its own masterpiece.

I tried to explain to him about notebooks or even using a computer to sketch out his

designs, but he felt that he worked best with a piece of charcoal and a piece of personally made parchment paper. Whatever made him happy. I snuck a peek at the paper he was drawing on. There were several designs on it already. He wasn't wasting a smidgeon of the parchment he'd made.

"What exactly are you working on?" I leaned in a little closer. "How many toys do you think our children need?"

One of the drawings I could make out was definitely a duck that had wheels for feet and a rope to pull it with. It was adorable and unlike anything I'd ever seen before. But also, paired with all the other similar items he had on the page, it was a bit much.

"I'm not going to make all of these." He rolled his eyes, a habit he learned from me. "At least not yet. And besides, they have cousins that I can make things for as well."

"Maybe we should stick with the essentials first?" Because at this point, we had nothing for our little one. Sure, they weren't going to be here today or anything, but my pregnancy was going to go by in a flash. At least that was what both Marcus and Maddox said. "Or I suppose we could buy a crib from the store if you would rather work on the toys."

Apollo scowled. "I will make our child's crib just as I made our bed."

I grinned. "Of course. But hey, maybe I could take you to a store so that you could get an idea of what's out there?"

His scowl deepened. "It is not safe for you to go out to a store. Not yet."

I hated that he was right. Gods did I hate it.

As much as I loved the forest and my family here, I couldn't be imprisoned by it. It

would slowly deteriorate my feelings until I no longer saw it as the beautiful place that it was.

And as much as I wished it didn't, the outside world had been calling to me. It had Cheetos, and I was craving Cheetos or maybe one of those super-salty pretzels they sold inside the mall. My mouth watered just thinking about it. Then again, hadn't I read that salt was bad for me while I was pregnant? Would my ankles swell?

"I really would like to take you to town sometime. If nothing else, you could get ideas from the outside world and things you could build or things we could add to our family." I wasn't trying to be a dick, but it'd been simmering in the back of my mind all day and talking it out was probably for the best—for both of us.

"If you wish to do this, we can make it happen."

That was easy.

"But only once your old Alpha is caught."

Or not. I couldn't understand how my former Alpha had been able to evade everyone for this long. But then again, I hadn't considered him particularly adept at hunting, and he kept finding me every "safe" place that I went until here. So maybe I was underestimating him all the way around.

I nodded. "Yes, I understand." I really needed Steelwick to work faster or better or for the asshole to mess up and get caught already.

"What is it about these stores that you like so much?" He set his parchment down. He wasn't being argumentative. He truly wanted to know.

"Aside from junk food?" Which was currently on my mind far more than it should be.

I blamed the pregnancy hormones.

“We’ll get back to the junk food.” He wasn’t a fan of the chips that Tomas brought, but I was sure I could win him over with Cheetos.

“I don’t know, I just like window shopping... I guess. Sometimes I’ll see designs at stores that have been mass-produced, and I’ll realize just how cool it is that I can make individual one-of-a-kind pieces.” Only with better quality and a bit of my own personal flair. “Even if they can mass-produce them way faster than I can make my own pottery, sometimes I get ideas, improvements that can be made. You could do the same with some of your woodworking.”

I loved to sculpt, but also, throwing pottery was a passion as well, and seeing the crappy cups they sold for big dollars had me wanting to make good ones for all the people. I’d been playing around with a handleless mug design when everything went to shit. Maybe I would start with that when my supplies were here.

“Can’t we watch television for these same ideas? Or browse the internet?” He was trying to be helpful, and I loved him for it. But also, it amused me to no end, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

Apollo had taken to watching TV with me. We were working our way through a couple seasons of shows that I enjoyed and had now shared with him. “It’s different when you can see it in person,” I said, a smile spreading over my face. “Each piece has a personality that no screen can adequately capture.”

“I will take your word for it, mate,” Apollo replied. His phone buzzed.

He frowned at it, and I was afraid it was going to start on fire. I was beginning to love that scowl.

“Would you like me to answer it? I can tell them that you are busy and see what they want, and if it’s important enough for you to call them back,” I suggested, with a smile.

His frown bloomed into a smile. “That would be lovely, mate. Thank you.” He returned to his drawing.

“Hello,” I answered.

“You are not Apollo.” Terran’s voice echoed over the speaker.

“No, I’m not Apollo. He’s busy at the moment. But did you need to run something by him?” I had no issue playing secretary for my mate. Whatever made him happy.

“Franklin is coming here. He’s the healer from Fractured Fang, and he’s bringing some herbs and exchanging them with Luan. But, being that you are expecting, he can also do a quick ultrasound for you.”

“Really? That’s exciting. That’s worth calling for.” I had assumed I wouldn’t be able to get one being out here in the middle of nowhere. I was over-the-moon excited to catch a glimpse of our little one.

“My brother is not busy, is he?”

I bit back a chuckle. I didn’t think this ruse would last long. Apollo’s brothers knew him well enough to know the real reason he wasn’t answering the phone.

“He just wanted someone else to have to do the talking. Didn’t he?” Terran continued.

“Sorry, that’s a secret between me and him. I can’t reveal that kind of information.”

My mate grinned at me, his eyes sparkling. I blew him a kiss. “Thank you, Terran. Do you know when we can meet with Franklin, or should we just come over whenever?”

“He will be arriving when the sun is highest in the sky tomorrow. Any time after that should be fine.”

His words amused me. Even with a cell phone in his hand, Terran wasn’t using actual clock times. It wasn’t just him. All three of the centaurs had an aversion to keeping time like normal. I knew it drove Marcus insane. I kind of liked it. I wasn’t late for anything ever because there was no exact time that I needed to be someplace.

“That’ll be perfect. We’ll be there. Thank you, Terran.”

“Take care, Walker.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:58 pm

I awoke to the sound of my mate running through our home. At first, I did not understand what was happening. Then I realized, as he burst out the front door, letting in a blast of the cold morning air. I followed after him and came to his side just as he released the contents of his stomach into the yard.

“Walker, are you all right?” I rubbed his back, offering him my comfort. Of course he wasn’t all right, but out those words came. He shuddered beneath my hand. “Do I need to call for the doctor?”

“No,” he said between gasps. “I’m pretty sure it’s just the baby. Morning sickness. It’s normal. Some people say it’s a good sign that the pregnancy is healthy.”

I wasn’t sure how violently expelling food from your body was ever “good.”

“Are you certain? I do not like to see you this way.” My own stomach twisted in agony. Perhaps it was a combination of feeling what he felt throughout bond and seeing him sick. Or maybe it was just that I did not like to see him in pain. I wanted to fix it as quickly as I could and find a way to prevent it from ever happening again. If only there was a way for me to take it all from him.

“I’m fine. The nausea has passed.” He pushed himself up to a standing position. “Really. I promise you. Once it came out, things instantly started to feel better.”

I wouldn’t have believed it was possible if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, but his skin turned even more pale, and he folded over again, emptying his stomach. His relief was over as quickly as it came.

There couldn't be much left in there. The night before we had enjoyed a dinner of stew and fresh bread, but he had not eaten much of it. He had barely kept his eyes open at the dinner table. This pregnancy was taking a toll on my mate's body.

"Oh, my love. I do not like to see you this way. Is there something I can do?" There had to be.

"Water," he said weakly. "Maybe some tea."

I rushed inside and filled him a glass of water and brought it back to him. He was sitting on the picnic table now, breathing slowly. I had grabbed a blanket on my way out, and I wrapped it around his shoulders.

"Can you take me back inside? My legs are shaking."

There was no way this was how it should be. My brothers would have mentioned it if it were. Something was wrong, but also, I didn't want to alarm my mate.

"Of course," I said, and I lifted him into my arms. "This doesn't feel normal, mate. I worry."

I felt more than saw his smile. He had his face resting against my shoulder and he clung to me tightly.

"It is, I promise it is. I'm very tired. But we can ask Franklin later when we go see him."

"I will bring him here," I said. "You are not traveling anywhere."

It was far easier for me to decide to bring the healer here than it had been to bring my brothers. There was nothing I would not do for my mate. And if that meant I had to

put street signs up directing people to our home, I would gladly do it.

I settled him onto the couch and helped him to get pillows and blankets settled around him. I knelt on the floor, searching his face for any indication that he might need something else.

“Thank you. I can’t argue with that plan,” he said, and he closed his eyes. I sat with him for quite a while, listening to his heartbeat, letting the heart song between us hum its natural melody. Nothing between our bond indicated that there was anything wrong. His wolf was quiet, content and happy as always. Perhaps the vomiting and fatigue was normal after all. That didn’t mean I had to like it.

With reluctance, I left my mate’s side. I couldn’t go all the way to get Franklin. Standing up and walking across the room had been hard enough. I went in search of my phone and found it in the kitchen of all places. I dialed my brother. He answered on the second ring.

“I need you to escort this Franklin to my home. Walker is not feeling up to travel,” I said. “Did your mate have such difficulties early in their pregnancy? Walker cannot keep food down and he is very tired.”

“Well, good morning to you too, Apollo. I can absolutely bring Franklin there. I take it Walker woke up feeling sick?” Terran’s jovial voice did not have near the urgency to it that this situation called for. Why was he not fetching this Franklin immediately?

“Yes. And he is back asleep now. I do not like seeing him suffer so.”

“Of course not. He is your mate. I can call Franklin to see if he can arrive a little earlier. And we will bring him straight to you. Morning sickness is pretty normal for a pregnancy, Apollo. Maddox was nauseous a bit but not terribly so. I am not sure about Marcus.”

“So I am to just sit and watch him suffer this way? That is insanity, and I will not allow it.”

My brother had the audacity to chuckle. “It is the way of things, Apollo. It is not fair that we, as alphas, don’t have to suffer as they do during the pregnancy, but we can’t change nature. Just be there for him and support him in whatever way he needs. Draw him a bath in that large tub of yours. Read to him. Hold him. All of that will help to ease his suffering.”

“Thank you, Brother. I will call you.” I didn’t wait for a formal goodbye. I hung up and dialed Luan, asking him similar questions. He was not of much help either, though he did have some herbs that could be soothing for an upset stomach.

I searched the internet, hoping that humans may have found some remedy to this age-old problem. Of course, it didn’t have any information about centaur pregnancies or centaur/wolf pregnancies, but this morning sickness thing, this nausea, that was normal. Most places recommended calm things for the stomach: crackers, tea. No resource had a cure. It was cruel.

Deciding I had all the information needed, I set to work on gathering the items that would help, and while my mate was sleeping, I took snacks to the table near the couch. He could reach for them if he needed them. I brewed the tea and left it there for him as well. With a bit of my magic, it would remain at the perfect temperature until my mate was ready for it.

Several hours later, Franklin arrived, and my mate finally roused from his rest. He nibbled on the crackers. “I’m just so tired,” he said. I held him in my arms.

“That is normal,” Franklin said. “I was quite tired with the triplets.”

Walker’s eyes widened. “Could it be triplets? It can’t be triplets, right? There’s no

way. It can't be triplets."

"Easy there," Franklin said. "I am not suggesting that it is triplets. I'm simply saying that pregnancies are tough. I can give you a recipe for a tea that can help, though the one that your mate prepared seems to be doing its job. You have all the things that you need here to make any variation of tea you can imagine."

"That would be most wonderful," I said. "Thank you."

"The twins from Steelwick, you know them, they have some cookies they swear by," Franklin said. "I never got a chance to try it for my own pregnancy, but others have."

"I will get those for my mate," I said. I had no way to travel there, nor did I know exactly where it was, but I could make it happen.

Walker patted my arm. "Sweetheart, I don't need everything. I promise I'll be fine." He smiled at me, and it was almost like there was laughter in his eyes.

"How about we take a look at your child, shall we?" Franklin said.

"Of course. How does this work?" Walker asked.

"Stay exactly where you are," Franklin said, pulling out a bottle. "I will need Walker to drink this. It allows me to have a connection with you, to see, and then I will simply draw."

"That's amazing. You're really a witch," I said.

"I am," Franklin said with a wink. Walker drank down the concoction that Franklin had given him, and then Franklin began his work. His eyes closed, his free hand hovering over my mate's stomach, while his other hand drew furiously. How he

could draw without looking at the paper, I did not know.

Within a few minutes, he opened his eyes. “Yes. Baby is growing right on track and looking fantastic.” He turned around the image, and there on the page, looking like he was sleeping, all nestled and safe inside my mate’s womb, was our child.

It was the most perfect image.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:58 pm

The nursery was really turning out gorgeous. We wanted a space that was as comforting as our forest and as safe feeling as our arms. It wasn't done yet, but when it was, I was confident we'd achieve our goals. My mate was beyond gifted when it came to woodworking, and his pieces turned the room into one giant hug.

We had purchased a rug from Northbay that had been handwoven by one of their artisans. It was not only wonderful to support a local shifter, but it was the perfect complement to the home my mate built for us. I sat cross-legged on it now, looking around at the shelves and little toys and knickknacks we had already procured for our little one. Sitting here somehow made everything more real. I was growing a baby, and they would soon be here to enjoy this space.

The empty space where the crib would go was ready for when Apollo finished it. He was close. He seemed to work on it day and night. His dedication to his craft was admirable. Every curve of the wood was carved with love.

There was so much to do, and Apollo was going at it full blast. I, on the other hand, couldn't seem to stay awake for more than five minutes. I understood that growing another being took a lot out of my body and it was par for the course. I still felt bad about not "doing my share." Apollo reassured me that "my share" included keeping our baby safe and well-nourished and that was beyond anything he could do. He was right, but also, daddy guilt was real.

My stomach was queasy beyond belief and holding down any sort of food was a challenge. I lived for the tea that I drank. Some days it was the only thing I got in me. It sucked, but Franklin assured me that it was normal and gave me the signs to look for that would indicate I needed to visit him, and we would. Or he would come here.

Whatever my mate felt was safest because he was currently in protective mode. Not going to lie, it was sexy as fuck.

“Let’s take a walk and get some fresh air,” Apollo said from the doorway.

I grinned and held my hands out like a child needing to be picked up. I didn’t really want to go anywhere, but sleeping or waiting to puke hadn’t been doing me any good. Might as well get a change of scenery.

He chuckled, but he bent over and wrapped his arms around me, picking me up into his arms. I was perfectly capable of walking; it was good for me, in fact, but I did so love being in Apollo’s arms. I drew the line at him carrying me down the stairs, though. As soon as we were out of the room, I got to my own feet. An omega had to draw a line somewhere.

“It’s a nice day,” I said.

Not that we had many bad ones inside our forest. Even the rainy days were beautiful. I never thought I would be a fan of storms, but here they were different. Sure, there was wind and lightning and all the normal stuff that went along with them, but it was almost as if the sky was communicating with the earth. I could watch it for hours and sometimes I did.

“It is. How are you feeling today?”

The worry in his eyes had me wishing for a much better answer than I had. But I refused to lie to my mate, even if the answer was going to make him worry.

“About the same as yesterday,” I said, which basically was the same as the day before and the day before that. For two weeks now this nausea had been plaguing me. At least I didn’t have to tell him I was worse. The look on his face the days I did... I

didn't want to be the source of that look ever again.

"I'm looking forward to the day you tell me you are feeling better than the one before." He kissed my cheek.

How I longed for that, too. And it would come. Probably soon. But until then, this was my norm, and I needed to suck it up.

Once we were off the porch, Apollo tugged me toward the back of the house. Had I not been so queasy, I'd have considered it leading me. But with my stomach, any motion felt far stronger than it was.

"Oh, are we taking the walk to the river?" We had various trails around the place that we regularly enjoyed walks on. Already I had many of them memorized. I knew my way around the forest quite well now, but I still found myself surprised daily. I had a feeling that would always be the case.

"Nope, not going quite that far. I have a surprise for you."

A surprise? That made me a bit lighter. Perhaps it would be a good distraction for me.

He led me over to where he had set up a makeshift kiln for me. Most people needed a cast-iron stove or propane source of heat in order to have a kiln like this. I just needed my mate. He put his hands to the brick, and it simply warmed to the exact temperature that I needed and stayed that warm for the exact amount of time. He tried to explain to me how he managed to do so, but it only made it more confusing. I'd started calling it "Apollo power."

The only thing missing was a pottery wheel. I hadn't asked him for one. He'd done so much for me forever, and really, I could do a lot without it. But after the baby was born and I sold some pieces, I'd buy one. Assuming that going out into the human

world was the norm then.

“What did you need to show me?” I asked.

Apollo gestured to where a dark cloth was draped over something. He grabbed the cloth and pulled it away, revealing a chair and pottery wheel, complete with a ball of clay ready to mold. How did he know?

“I looked up how to set it up. I hope it is exactly what you need for your craft. If not, I can find a different one.”

“How did you... I thought it was too risky for me to get pottery things,” I said.

“You mentioned using one once, and I thought you’d enjoy it. And when I found out Asilo had an extra one from when they did their artisan series, I saw it as a sign. We’re simply borrowing it. We’ll have to return it once we can get you your own.”

“You called the Asilo pride for me? You talked to people?” Who was this sexy alpha and what had he done to my mate?

Apollo cupped my face, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I did. I didn’t even ask Maddox or Marcus to do it.”

“Oh, mate. That is amazing.” I hugged him tight. “You do so much for me, and I...”

“You fill my days with joy, gave me two legs, and are growing my child. I’d say you do so much for me as well.”

“Thank you.” I have him one final squeeze and a kiss before sitting down at the chair and noticed he had an electrical cord. It was going to make it so much easier for me to use, especially as my pregnancy progressed. “You don’t mind me using the

electricity?”

“Not at all, love. Do whatever you need.”

I readied the clay, dipping my hands in water. “Do you want to try?” I asked after I had been molding the clay for a little while. Apollo stood by watching. I had grown used to the way in which he observed me.

Often when I sat down to work, I had a vision for what was to come. Today, I didn’t have a shape in mind. I was simply playing, loving the feel of the clay beneath my fingers.

“I wouldn’t know how,” he said.

“That’s not important. Come on.” I scooched forward. “Sit behind me.”

He did, and I grabbed his hands and placed them around me so that his hands covered mine on the clay. Then we set to work. Having him close to me, his skin touching mine, immediately calmed any nausea I had felt.

I twisted my head just so to get a better view of the clay. Perhaps I’d make a vase for our home or maybe a few things for the baby’s room. Then again, putting a clay piece—material easily breakable—into a baby’s room was probably a terrible idea.

Then Apollo’s lips were on my neck, and whatever designs I had in mind went to the wayside. His hands were still covering mine. But we let the clay spin out of control, suddenly having far more important things to worry about.

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Since Walker was beginning to feel slightly better, we ventured over to Terran's home. I'd prefer he was feeling all the way better, but after days and days of him feeling the same amount of awful, I was going to rejoice in the upswing. Who knew? Maybe tomorrow he would be at 100%.

Now that I was mated, it seemed that my brothers and their mates did not like to go too long without seeing us. Something about family being an important part of each other's lives and all our children growing up together. I didn't hate it. And really, I half wondered if it was an excuse for them to get me to show up. Looking back, they always wanted me to be with them more than I had.

Much to my surprise, Walker swung down off my back as soon as we arrived and went into the house with Marcus and Maddox to play with the children. His tummy was slightly rounded now, and it pressed against his T-shirt, a sight I loved far more than he did. I thought it was sexy, something I vowed to show him was true.

He seemed to be keeping food down today, which I was happy about. That and his boost of energy, enough to practically run inside... I had a feeling he was turning the corner.

Terran and Luan, plus Tomas, were sitting near the fire drinking coffee. Tomas was big into coffee and had been showing them different ways to prepare it. My brothers weren't huge fans of fancy coffee drinks, but they were enjoying the tasting adventure and were building a nice friendship with the enforcer.

"Was there something you needed help with, Brother?" I asked.

Terran raised an eyebrow. “Can’t I simply invite you over without needing your help for some project?”

“I suppose, but what would be the purpose then?” This was a common conversation, one I’d had for centuries. Today, for the first time, I saw exactly the purpose of it for possibly the first time.

Terran laughed. “I do hope you never change, Apollo.”

I had no intention to, even though if I were being honest with myself, I already had. Not in the things that made me uniquely me, but still. I’d started to see things in a different way.

“I’d like to talk about next steps for this investigation,” Tomas said. “Steelwick hasn’t had any luck flushing out the alpha that we’re after. The longer he goes free, the more risk there is to others out there.”

I ground my teeth until my jaw ached. I hated that he was still out there. It was never far from my mind, and hearing that they were actively trying to get him and failing only made matters worse.

“I would like nothing more than to tear that alpha limb from limb.” He had not physically hurt my mate, but he had threatened him, and that was enough for me. I wasn’t a violent person by nature, though my mother would have liked it if I had been. That had been the whole purpose of mine and my brothers’ creation. But knowing there was someone out there whose sole goal was to destroy my mate? That had me turning lethal.

“What did you all have in mind?” Luan asked Tomas.

“If we dropped some hints that Walker has been let free from Steelwick’s protection

and put in some formal-looking paperwork saying the investigation has gone cold, perhaps that would cause the alpha to let his guard down. We could use Walker—”

I growled. “You are not using my mate as bait. No way in hell.” My voice rose, and it echoed in the forest. I hadn’t meant to shout. But also, they were not going to dangle my mate out there as a way to catch a bad guy. That was a hard pass for me. He was pregnant for goddess’s sake.

“We wouldn’t, we would simply-”

“That’s perfect,” Walker said. When had he come out?

I whipped around. He was there, holding a cup of coffee out to me. There was no way he knew what he was saying. Maybe he misheard or possibly he was guessing. Actively agreeing to get the alpha to try and find him? He was pregnant, surely he misunderstood.

Only the look on his face said he very much didn’t. My mate knew exactly what he was saying.

“No,” I said.

How could he even consider this, especially with him being pregnant? Ever, really. He did what was right and reported his former Alpha to the right people. His duty to shifter kind was complete. His job now was to live happily ever after here in the forest with me.

“Apollo, I don’t want this baby born with us living in secret.” His voice was low, as if he was only speaking to me. “I want to be able to take him out of the forest and to the parks if we wanted to. I want to visit other packs, other places. I want to shop again someday.”

“I will build you a park.” How difficult could it be? “I will bring shops to you.” I would move the stars in the sky for him. But this? Letting him be out there for his old Alpha to find? This was asking too much.

“I want pizza or fast food. Our child needs to meet other people. Other wolves.”

I hadn’t realized all of this was hanging heavy on him. And part of me felt the weight of what living here with me was making him give up. Only, if it kept him safe, I could not be mad at it.

“I will bring the wolves to you.” I wasn’t sure what wolves, but possibly some from Northbay Pack?

“Apollo.” Walker put his hands on his hips, his voice stern and his eyes rolling. As if being adorably mad could make me change my mind. Not when his life was at risk. No. He could go on being mad. Mad and alive were a thousand times better than the alternative.

“You’re not doing it and that’s final,” I was not going to change my mind.

Marcus and Maddox had come outside, and the two of them hissed out a breath. They winced. I assumed at my mate’s foolishness, but then when I caught their glance in my direction, I realized how wrong I was.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s going to have the effect you think it’s going to have, Brother,” Luan said.

Walker crossed his arms over his chest. “Apollo, I made it through twenty-five years without you protecting me.”

It took everything within me not to remind him that he was here because he was not

so great at the being-safe part of life. I might've been new at this mate thing, but even I saw how horribly wrong that could go.

"I grew up in a pack that was not a nice one. You don't know what it's like to live in the outside world." And his words were not making me want to. "I'm perfectly capable."

"You are not laying a trap for a dangerous alpha to find you." Why couldn't he see what a horrible idea that was, and moreover, why weren't the others coming to my side of this?

"You would be there," which I had to admit gave me a little comfort, "And your brothers, if they wanted to be. Plus Steelwick. I wouldn't be alone."

"No," I said.

Walker narrowed his eyes, and something about the look sent a shiver down my spine. It was in that moment that I understood for the first time that I wasn't going to win this one. My omega, my stubborn, stubborn omega, was going to do this with or without me.

"That's not the way this is going to work," he said. "You are my mate and I love you. But what you are not is my father. The longer that alpha is out there, the more other shifters and humans are at risk. If I can help shorten that time, I'm going to. That is final."

He looked at me as if begging me to say a word edgewise. As much as I wanted to, I didn't. He was going to do this with or without my approval. I'd much rather know what was happening.

At least with it, I had a say in how everything was going to happen and I could

protect him. My brothers too. They might not have been planning to join us, but I needed them by my side. I refused to let anything or anyone harm Walker.

After waiting a solid minute with his eyes glued to mine, daring me to open my mouth, he looked to Tomas. “Let me know when and where. I’ll be ready.”

I hated this—all of it. But there was nothing I could do to change that it was happening. All that was left was helping to plan, being there with him, and begging the goddess to help us.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:58 pm

We were quiet on our walk home. It was eerie, and I didn't like the silence between us, but also, I refused to change my mind. It wasn't just me I needed to think of. The longer my former Alpha stayed out there, the more people that could be harmed. If there was anything I could do to stop that, I was going to.

Once we arrived home, we went our separate ways. We both needed the time to just be. As much as I loved spending time with my new pack, the entire situation was stressful right now, especially with Apollo and I at such odds on something so very important.

We'd finished our meal with his family, enjoying our time together talking about anything other than the investigation. There was tension between us, but I wasn't mad at Apollo and he wasn't mad at me. At least I didn't think he was. We simply had conflicting viewpoints and we needed to work through it.

I just wanted this whole thing to be over. And not over as in I stayed here and pretended it didn't exist. I wanted it full-on over. No more making decisions based on that asshole. He'd already taken up too much of my life, and now that I was going to be a father, I needed him fully gone. My family should be the only worry I had.

More than anything I wanted to race back to Apollo, hug him, and absorb all of his warmth and affection. I would've too, except my heart song was humming, and I sensed that my mate needed some time to himself. I wasn't going to deny him that for my own selfish needs. Not when I was the reason he was feeling that way in the first place.

Instead, I went straight to my pottery wheel and got to work while he went to his

shop, probably to work on the crib. I let myself get lost in the clay. Working with my hands always gave me a means of escaping whatever was clogging up my headspace, and today was no different. An hour later, I felt a tug on my heart song. I cleaned up and made my way to the shop.

He stood with his hands resting over the crib rail, admiring his work. And as well he should. The crib was nearly complete, and it was absolutely gorgeous. He'd carved it out of a walnut tree that had fallen last year. Apollo had milled the wood himself. From beginning to end, this crib was made 100% by his own hands and infused with his love.

"It's beautiful," I said. Beautiful didn't begin to describe how stunning it was. I walked over and ran my hands over it. Never in my life had I seen such a work of art, and I had to blink back tears of emotion it brought forth.

"Thank you," he said, not taking his eyes off the nearly completed crib.

The wood gleamed in the sunlight from its freshly stained surface. I almost didn't want to take it in the house and use it for fear that it'd get scuffed or scratched or marred in some way. But also, those marks would each tell a tale, wouldn't they?

"I don't know that I've ever had a project turn out so perfectly." He wasn't bragging. He was in awe of all that he'd accomplished. "I can't wait to see our child rest their beautiful head in this crib. I'm afraid I don't want anything to happen to this piece."

I came to his side, resting my cheek against his arm. "It is beautiful. But you cannot put it in a glass case, Apollo. The crib was meant to be used. Ask me about the teeth marks in my crib from when I was little. It won't come out unscathed, but each mark will hold a memory and make it even more special."

Now he put his arm around me and held me close. "I could not bear if anything

happened to you. I just found you. Any time I think about letting you be used as bait, it drives me insane.”

“You are not going to let me do anything, Apollo. It is my decision to make. Please trust that I’m making it with the best interest of our family in mind.” I clenched my jaw and steeled myself for the discussion we were about to have.

Apollo and I had never argued about anything before. We barely disagreed on anything. I was spoiled in that Apollo seemed to give in to any whim that I had. Only now, when I needed his support, I didn’t have it.

“I know you would never do anything to put our child in harm’s way. There has to be another way to do this.”

“Perhaps there is, if we wanted to take all the time in the world to let the investigation run its course. But we’re running out of time, and it’s not only us we need to think about. He’s dangerous.”

“You are not proving your point well, my love.”

He might’ve been correct, but I wasn’t going to lie my way to having him agree. “I want our child to grow up in a world where they are free to go anywhere. To be born into a world where they are safe and no one is after their father.”

“I know that, my love.” He kissed my brow.

I couldn’t even be upset with him. He was not trying to boss me around or tell me what I could and could not do. No, my mate was scared. Fear was something that I understood.

“You’ll be with me the whole time. They’ll have a dozen Steelwick investigators

there.”

Tomas had said it was an all-men-on-deck kind of scenario. That alone gave me a boost in confidence that this would work.

“I don’t wish for this alpha to remain free any longer. He’s threatened your home once and broken countless other laws. He’s hurt countless people. I want—no, I need him brought to justice.” My argument didn’t go unheard. I knew the moment my mate conceded, it was like there was a shift in our heart song. I was still learning how to decipher all of the nuances, but each day they became clearer.

Apollo closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “Okay, mate, let’s talk with Steelwick and see what their plans are. Maybe one of them can train me on how to protect you.”

“By fighting?” I wasn’t so sure how I felt about that. Sure, my mate was strong and powerful, but the thought of him actively being in harm’s way because of me? That was a bit too much.

And suddenly I fully understood how Apollo felt about this for the first time.

“Marcus carries a sword. Perhaps I can carry a sword?”

According to Luan, Marcus used to be all but attached to his sword. It was like an extension of his arm. That kind of skill wasn’t something that could be taught in one single lesson or even a year of them. It was impractical at best.

“You’re going to stick out enough out there in the wild. I think a sword would really draw attention to you.”

“All the quicker that you will be found by this asshole alpha then.”

I hadn't considered that. In a way it would make him the bait, which had my stomach roiling. But also? He was right. It would make this end earlier, and the earlier the better.

I laughed, imagining him trying to blend in while yielding a sword. "Not sure it's going to work out that way." Although it could.

"Let me call Tomas and see what he thinks." I loved that my mate was now reaching out to others more. I never wanted him to change who he was. It wasn't about that. It was about him being happy and connected in the way he wanted to be.

I went up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, mate. You're not going to regret this." Please let that be the truth. "I'm scared too. But once it's over, we can move on with our lives and truly prepare for our child's arrival."

It would be nice to be able to run out to the farmer's market without having to weigh the pros and cons of going, without looking at the safety risks and ultimately deciding it could wait until another week. To be able to run out for ice cream or visit a friend. Heck, just going to Steelwick to get cinnamon rolls would be fabulous. And we would have all of that and more once we got this over with.

Did I wish we'd done it before I was pregnant? Of course I did. But that didn't happen, and waiting was no longer an option.

He nodded. "You're right, of course."

I winked at him. "Don't you forget it."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:58 pm

“Why are all these people in line at the coffee shop?” I wondered in a hushed tone to my mate, scanning the crowded space. “Do they not have coffee machines or a way to build a fire at their own homes?”

I glanced around, not enjoying the proximity of so many people—some of them shifters—to my pregnant mate. The idea of standing in line waiting for someone to prepare food for me was such a foreign concept. Why not make it at home, the way you are guaranteed to like it, instead of having a stranger attempt their best for large sums of money. And in this case to drink it in a paper cup? Thanks, but no thanks.

Two of the customers definitely hailed from Steelwick. They had been tailing us all day as we moved from place to place. Their presence gave me some comfort. The rest of the people came from places unknown. They were the ones who made me nervous.

Walker squeezed my hand. “This is not quite the same as coffee you can make at home. There are special syrups and recipes, and just extra cool things. It tastes delicious, trust me.”

I didn’t quite understand it, but I supposed if it was anything like the other things Walker had me try today, I would probably enjoy it—or at least enjoy his reaction to it. I wouldn’t say any of the items would be a worth a trip into the human world, but they would be worth recreating, and that was something.

This morning, we had enjoyed a bagel that was supposed to be all encompassing, but really it just had a lot of herbs and flavors on it. Hardly what I would call “everything.” It was good, though, and I already wanted to find a way to replicate the recipe at home. I suspected it wouldn’t be too hard since I could create the same heat

levels as their ovens.

The whole day had been about being out and away from our forest. We had stopped at several different stores, trying to make it obvious that we were in public, hoping that his old Alpha would see him. A week prior his case had been marked as “cold” or some such thing.

My mate loved stores and shopping and even he was over it. Maybe if we weren’t here trying to catch a bad guy it would be different, but I suspected it had more to do with being used to our home in seclusion than anything else.

I kept an eye on everyone around us the entire time. I did not wish to let anyone get close to my mate, not even a salesperson. It would help if I had a scent of the man we were looking for. I had no clue what he might smell like, except that he was a wolf. I had a picture, but all these people looked the same to me.

Within twenty minutes of standing at the coffee shop, Walker pushed a large cup into my hands. The sickly-sweet smell of sugar and syrupy sweetness filled my nostrils. I wasn’t sure I wanted to taste it, but if it was something my mate thought I might enjoy, then I supposed I would try it. At the very least it would help me recreate it for him later.

I waited until we were outside before taking a sip. I didn’t look to see if the Steelwick guards were following us, they would be. But I caught sight of Terran across the street. My brother had been trailing us all day as well. My mate was the most protected omega in history—or at least as far as I knew. Still, I didn’t feel it was enough.

We had several Steelwick guards, plus Terran prepared to apprehend the alpha when we found him. It should be easy once he showed his face. In theory, anyway. I might not have been of this world, but I knew enough of its history to know that what

should be and what transpired were seldom the same.

Walker and I made our way toward the lot where we had parked the car. The coffee shop had been our last stop, our last attempt at drawing out his former Alpha. My mate called it “saving the best for last,” but from the small sip I’d had, I had to disagree with him on that.

We carried a few bags with our purchases from the day. We didn’t get much, but I had to admit, I saw the appeal of shopping. There were many items I could forge with my hands, but adorable onesies were not among them.

“We can try again next weekend,” Walker suggested.

I hated the idea of having to do this over and over again. Each time were tried, by nature, we’d be less attentive. It was how beings worked. And less attentive meant more danger to my mate. I wanted this over and done with.

“Maybe,” I replied. The more I thought about it, the less I was okay with it. I tried not to be what my mate referred to as an alphahole. Really I did. But on this I might need to be. I didn’t like the idea of doing this a second time.

It had been enjoyable to see my mate shop, but not with this kind of stress and pressure on it. Next time I wanted it to be the two of us simply out and about, not for the well-being of shifter kind.

I’d never been outside the forest, and I would have liked to have my first time be more enjoyable, rather than stressful. Walker said this was more memorable, and true, I was not likely to forget it. If only it were the type of memory I wanted.

“How are you feeling, mate?”

“Just fine,” he said. Now that the morning sickness had passed, he was looking better than ever. He was glowing with his pregnancy.

When we got back to the car, I opened the door for him, and he got inside. He took the bags from my hand and tossed them over his shoulder and into the back seat.

Driving a car had been a new experience for me, but I found that it wasn't too difficult. Walker had mentioned that I had a lead foot. I didn't know what that meant. I didn't hit anything, and I followed all the signs. But neither of those had to do with feet.

As I walked around the front of the car, my phone rang. I stopped to answer it, assuming that it was Steelwick. I never regretted having a piece of technology on my person like I did that stupid phone.

The ring was the only reason I was caught so off guard when a large creature launched in my direction and knocked me to the ground. The wolf's jaws closed over my shoulder, and I cried out in pain. I didn't need to guess who it was. I knew instantly, and he needed to die.

This wolf was an alpha. He was bigger than Walker, but he scented enough like him that I could assume they came from the same pack, telling me instantly that this was the asshole who threatened my mate.

He would not walk away from this fight. I wasn't sure he planned to. Exposing yourself in a bunch of humans was a death sentence, especially in this violent of a way. He wasn't going to play by any sort of rules. He was out for death and blood, and I was going to give it to him, only in my version it would be his own.

I wanted to shift and stomp on him, give him the pain and torment he deserved, but I couldn't. Doing so would put Walker at risk, as well as my entire family. I had to do

this in my broken human form.

Rolling over I attempted to get on top of him. That only resulted in him biting me again.

“You’re hot!” Walker yelled to me.

At first I thought he was complimenting me in the strange way humans did. But then it clicked, the pain making my brain not quite as quick to catch up as normal.

I called forth my heat. If this wolf was going to attack me, I was going to take him to task. It wasn’t easy. My natural form was more in tune with my connection to the sun, and the pain was making focus difficult.

Crying out in pain, hoping it would distract the alpha, I felt the heat beginning to flow, and as it did, the wolf’s bite lessening just enough that I could pull myself from his clutches. That didn’t stop me from keeping contact with him. He needed to die. That was all there was to it. Anything less would have him attacking me again, and the next time he might win, my injuries already great.

Hotter and hotter, the heat flowing from me got until I reached well past the heat I used for the kiln. He yelped one final time, his body going limp, and then the smell of flesh cooking filled the air briefly before he burst into flames, and I fell back.

A human screamed something about the wolf getting flared. At least we wouldn’t need to come up with a story.

My mind was slipping, my body giving up. I didn’t care. My mate and child were safe. That was all that mattered.

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When Tomas had proposed this whole idea, I never imagined it going down this way. I had thought we would simply spot the jerk in town and he would be arrested. That would be the end of the whole ordeal. I did not anticipate that he would attack my mate and so savagely rip him to shreds.

Taking him in by surprise was hardly fair fighting. Yet again, why should I expect anything less from him. He'd always been a piece of shit, and to disregard the safety of all shifters in an act of revenge? He completely deserved everything he got. It was a crappy way to die, fitting the crappy way he chose to live the last days of his life.

I'd known my mate had abilities beyond my understanding, but I still stood there watching the wolf burst into flames, unsure if I'd fallen asleep and it was a dream or not. It wasn't, and seeing the way the humans gathered around the spot where the wolf's remains were, talking about flare guns and how lucky everyone was that none of the cars exploded, it was not only very real, but it could've gone very differently.

As strong and victorious as Apollo had been, my mate had been hurt, and it was all my fault. Nothing was going to change that.

Apollo lay on the ground, his injuries severe but healing. Had we been home, he'd have shifted to assist in his healing, but we were in the human world. That wasn't possible. People could explain away a wolf, but a centaur? Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

Tomas and the other members of Steelwick's team arrested a beta who had aided my former Alpha. I hadn't even realized he was even there with all the chaos. I recognized him, though. The humans would assume they were undercover cops, not

because they worked that way, but because humans watched too much television and the shows tended to get everything horribly wrong, so wrong that I even knew they were.

I rushed to Apollo's side. "Are you okay?"

Terran was with the humans, distracting them from noticing Apollo. If they did, they would want to rush him to the hospital. As it was, that was going to be the case very quickly. At best we had a minute before the authorities arrived. There was no way that none of the humans had made a 911 call.

He wasn't okay, obviously, the question coming out automatically. Anyone with eyes could see how not okay he was. There was blood everywhere, mostly coming from his neck and shoulder where Alpha had sunk his teeth into Apollo's flesh.

"I'm fine, mate. I'm fine. Are you okay?" He was lying. We'd have words about that later, once I knew for sure he was healed.

"I'm fine. No one touched me." It had taken a lot of effort for me not to jump into the fight, to shift to my wolf form and at least assist, but I was not a fighter. And I most certainly wasn't a pregnant fighter. Suggesting my mate burn the wolf's ass to a crisp without saying those exact words was the best I could come up with at the time. Thank goddess it worked.

I pulled off my shirt and used it to staunch the blood. Tears came to my eyes. "I didn't want it to be like this," I said.

"Better me than you, mate. I'm glad I was the one out of the car. I'm sure he thought he could take me out and get to you."

He probably didn't realize he was fucking with a centaur. My mate smelled other, but

not necessarily shifter. It gave him an element of surprise, that was for sure.

“You are safe, and that is all that matters. I would give my life to see you safe.”

I’d do the same for him, for our baby. That didn’t mean I had to like it.

“I hate seeing you hurt. What can I do?”

Apollo held my hand. “I will heal. I will be just fine. I hadn’t intended to kill him. I’m not an executioner... a judge. But it was that or...”

“You did the only thing you could. His beta will go through his fair trial. And not only will he be convicted of his part in the previous crimes, but also in the assault and attempted murder now. He won’t be running free anytime soon.” Tomas reached out a hand and helped Apollo to his feet. “You did good.”

Apollo laughed. “Happy to be a pin cushion for you.”

“The operation worked. Now let’s get you in the car and out of here before we need to fill out police reports.”

I had a feeling someone still was, but better them than us.

“I would’ve liked to have drawn him out and not had any injuries, to avoid anyone being hurt.” Tomas wasn’t alone in this, but what was done was done. There was no way around it. “You two will be free to live your lives. Although, you’ll have to testify in the trial and complete some interviews for the report. Once you are healed, obviously.”

Apollo wrapped his arm around my shoulder, and I hugged him around his middle. I didn’t care that blood got on me. If it was up to me, I’d shift to my wolf form and

clean his wounds. Although I didn't think anyone around us would appreciate that, especially the humans.

"Do you think that you need a healer for that cut?" Tomas asked.

Apollo shook his head. "Take me back to Luan. I'm sure he has something I can put on it. If it doesn't heal between now and then. All I care about is that we can go home."

Tomas held out a hand. "You can."

Apollo shook it. "Thank you."

"That's it?" I asked. "We're just going to go?"

"If you wish, mate, I will take you home. All of this is behind us now."

Already the blood had stopped flowing. Apollo's wounds were healing themselves very quickly. If he hadn't been a centaur or other shifter, he'd have been long dead.

"I'd like a shower. Perhaps a long soak in the tub with you." He took his thumb and wiped the tears from my eyes. "How does that sound, mate?"

I grinned up at him. "Wonderful."

The babe inside my belly let out a soft thump. Apollo jumped and looked down.

"Was that...?" His eyes went wide.

"You felt that?" I said. "Felt our baby?"

“I did. He is strong. Like his father.” He kissed my cheek.

The sounds of sirens in the far distance filled the air.

“Like his alpha father,” I said. “Now let’s go home.”

The Steelwick pack was left to deal with the clean-up as I drove Apollo home. Halfway there, he insisted that he take over, my driving less than ideal. And fair enough. My nerves had me distracted from everything, not that I was a good driver to begin with.

“You need to develop your lead foot. Practice will get you there.”

I bit back my laughter. I sometimes forgot how little my mate knew of the modern ways. He might’ve been on this earth for generations upon generations, but he lived them with his brothers and little phrases like this were not ones he knew.

“I’m sure it will.” I kissed him soundly before switching seats with him.

His body was pretty much fully healed already, and based on the rate of healing, it would be back to normal before we reached home. And it was.

We parked and walked straight to Luan’s. He would want to know how we were and would want to hear all that happened.

The kiddos were down for a nap when we arrived, and he took one look at Apollo and rushed over to inspect the wounds.

“So much for the ‘we are going to lure him out and arrest him before anything bad can happen’ plan,” he tsked. “Better get cleaned up before the kids see you.”

“We wanted to wait until Terran and Marcus came home,” Apollo said.

“Then off to the hot springs you go.” Luan pointed in the direction of the spring. “Go. Get clean and do whatever it is you need to do as mates to reassure each other. Scram. They will be back before you know it.”

Neither of us argued, walking hand and hand to the hot water, stopping only long enough for Luan to give me towels for me to dry off with.

“We haven’t been in here before,” I said as we arrived.

I’d seen it, of course. But we always bathed in the privacy of our own home. This was perfect, though. It allowed us to be close to the family and still manage to get my mate cleaned up. I helped him rid his body of his clothing and he took his centaur form and climbed inside the hot water.

“Is now a good time to tell you how terrified I was when I saw him attack you?”

“No, Walker. Now is a good time for you to kiss me.”

“I can do that.” And I did, the two of us stopping only when Luan called to let us know the others had arrived.

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I swiped my paintbrush over the top of the project that I had been working on for the past week. Once I had the vision in my head, the piece came together rather quickly. Normally I took my time, but I needed it finished. It was as if I couldn't settle until it was.

Much like I had needed the crib finished. That had been done for a few days now and was nestled snug inside the nursery, just waiting for our baby to arrive. We still had several weeks before that happened. Thank goodness, because we had a lot left to do.

This particular project would be for my mate and my mate alone. Once I was finished putting the last coat of stain on it, I stood back and looked at my masterpiece. I smiled. Walker was going to love it.

I liked to work in my centaur form. It was easier for me. On two legs, I still found that I sometimes had to think about basic things, like how not to lose my balance. And then there were the differences in my arms. You would think they were the exact same, but they weren't, and my human arms weren't quite as coordinated as my centaur ones.

The muscle memory was all there for me, since that was how I had learned the woodworking craft in the first place. I was also stronger in my centaur form, which allowed me to maneuver this massive piece on my own rather than relying on others. This form was better for most all things I did, save one—enjoying my mate. Not that I should be thinking about that now. I had things to do.

I made my way toward the house hoping to find my mate. He was in the backyard, pulling pieces out of the kiln. He was acquiring quite the collection. He had already

gifted several pieces to my brothers and their families. Soon he would replace my whole kitchenware set with his own creations.

He talked about selling some at the market now that it was safe to venture out. Things still weren't fully settled in the legal matter, but they would be soon enough. The evidence was far too strong to have even the most corrupt members of the council deny.

"Hello," he said as I came up.

"These look very nice," I said. "I like the greens."

"Thanks, I tried a new technique, and I think it turned out beautifully." I adored how at peace he was when he was doing his work.

He'd taken more to the pottery wheel than just sculpting and had figured out some rather fascinating ways to use it. Not everything was a bowl or a mug, which I had thought would be the case. I love them all, but what I treasured were the intriguing shapes he created when his imagination took hold and he allowed himself to fully immerse in his craft.

"I have a surprise for you. Would you like to come see?" My mate loved surprises, and I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he finally saw this one.

"A surprise?" He practically jumped with excitement. He would have too if it weren't for his now quite round belly.

It was not often that I could keep things from my mate; we were close, after all. Being that just the two of us lived in our home, we were hardly ever away from each other. Days like today where he worked on his pottery and I worked on my woodworking separately weren't the norm. We were always close to one another.

“Yes, would you like to come see?”

“I suppose... I mean, if you went to all that trouble just for me, it would be rude not to.” He grinned.

I kissed his cheek and then grabbed the sash that I had been holding and wrapped it around his eyes.

“Wait a minute, I have to be blindfolded?” he asked, his heart racing a bit faster. I went to take it off, but his words stopped me. “Is this going to be some kinky preggo sex?” He wasn’t scared. He was turned on, and I suddenly wished that my surprise had been that.

“I want it to be a surprise.” I brought my lips to his ear. “But we can discuss the kinky preggo sex afterward, if you’d like.” Much afterward. There was a second surprise waiting for him, this one not from me.

He swallowed hard. “Okay.”

I continued working on tying the sash, trying to get it tight enough it wouldn’t fall off but not too tight so he had any discomfort.

“I suppose that you’re going to carry me as well?” he sassed.

“That’s a fantastic idea,” I said. I hadn’t planned on it, but I wasn’t turning down an opportunity to hold my mate.

Once the knot was secured, I lifted him into my arms. He laughed and put his arms around my neck. He pulled my head closer to his and found my lips. It only took two tries. It was sweet and funny and so very much Walker.

I took the long way to my workshop, not wanting him to guess the secret. Once we were there, I sat him down on his feet. He puckered his lips, and I obliged, kissing him until he was breathless.

“Any guesses?”

“Okay, we’re not outside anymore. We’re in your shop. It smells like stain. Did you finish something?” It always smelled like that in here, but it was a good guess.

“Yes,” I said. “This is for you.”

“And the baby?” His hands were settled on his growing belly.

“No, mate,” I said. “This surprise is just you. Would you like to see it?”

“I love all of your creations. Especially this one.” He gently patted his tummy. He laughed. “But yes, I do want to see it.”

I untied the knot and let the sash slip from his eyes. He gasped when he took in the sight of the hutch that I had built. It was tall, taller than me and just as long as I was in my centaur form. The piece was made of solid oak. It had three shelves and four cabinets beneath it.

“For your creations,” I said. “I thought it might look nice in the kitchen.”

“It’s so beautiful,” he said. “It’s so big.”

“I thought we might affix some lights to it, so that all your work would be on display.” They were far too stunning to be in the dark.

“I love it, mate.” He threw his arms around me. “But not as much as I love you.”

“And I you, Walker.” I scooped him back up in my arms. “I love you.”

“Wait. Where are we going? Is this the kinky preggo sex time?” He snuggled into me.

“Soon, my love. Soon. But first, part two of your surprise.”

“Part two? This was huge.” His eyes darted around my workshop. He wouldn’t find it in there. That was for sure.

“It was. Now let’s head to my brothers’. Do you want to walk?”

“You are not carrying me all the way to your brothers’ homes.” He rubbed my horn as I let him down, a smirk on his face. “I guess I’ll walk.”

My brothers had set up a baby shower for us. Marcus said that after all my mate had been through, we needed to make time to celebrate our growing family and herd. He said a lot more than that, but I hadn’t fully been listening until he mentioned Walker. I’d been too worried about all that had just transpired.

As we broke through the clearing, my mate squeed and waddled/ran over to the fire. Not only was our entire herd here, as well as Tomas who felt like herd, so were his friends from Steelwick, including the twins who had brought the largest cake I’d ever seen. I later found out that humans often had wedding cakes that made it look small, but to me it was excessive—excessive while at the same time being perfect.

“Surprise!” they yelled a tad too late.

We ate copious amounts of food, including cake, played silly games I didn’t understand but was assured were both hilarious and fun, and talked and talked and talked. And just when I thought it was wrapping up, out came the presents.

The twins gave us a recipe book they swore would come in handy, along with enough sweets for an entire city. My brothers gave him a baby carrier and a beautiful blanket, both made by one of the local packs, and then Steelwick pitched in to buy us cloth diapers.

Our baby was the most spoiled person on the planet, and I'd have it no other way.

"Ready to go home?" My mate was falling asleep against my side. He'd been fighting it for an hour but didn't want to leave his friends.

"Five more minutes?" he said sleepily, and I leaned in close to his ear.

"I thought we had plans?"

He popped out of his seat so fast.

"Bye, guys. I need to get home and get to bed."

And to be fair, he did.

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My baby was officially overstaying their welcome. I loved that they were staying inside me all nice and protected from the world. There was something reassuring about that. But also, they needed to come out before they were a toddler, and from the size of my belly, they were getting close.

I stood behind my kiln, tapping away on my phone. I needed Franklin. He's said to call at any time, and he probably meant it. At least I was hoping he did, because even as I dialed, I knew the answer to my question: No.

"Franklin here." He answered the phone on the first ring, and if he looked to see who was calling him, he hadn't acknowledged it.

"Hey, Franklin. It's Walker, and I have a quick question for you."

"I was just thinking about you."

I didn't stop to ask him in what capacity, instead blurting out my question, "Is your ultrasound drawing thingy accurate? Could I have twins or triplets taking up real estate here?"

"How many heartbeats do you hear?" he asked, because of course he had logic on his side... that and not carrying a two-ton baby. Sure, he had carried triplets and probably knew better than I ever would, but I was hormonally irrational and in my mind that didn't count. "Two total, or two plus your own?"

"Two total." I let out a sigh because I'd just answered my own question. "Why am I so huge?" I asked, all whiny and annoying like.

I knew I was grumpy about being pregnant for what felt like forever. I was ready to meet my baby and not be waddling around like some big duck shifter. Still, Franklin didn't deserve my whine.

"Aside from your stomach being large, how are your feet?" To his credit, he ignored my piss-poor attitude. I owed him a mug or a complete set of dishes. Maybe a nice vase or a sculpture. Something.

"Oh, I don't know, I haven't seen them in weeks."

"Ask your mate. He can see them for you." Which was true, but it also meant admitting to both him and Apollo that I'd called Franklin about my worry before discussing it with my mate.

"Okay."

As a surprise to no one, I found him in his workshop. He was working on a small rocking chair for one of our herd's kiddos. He planned to make one for every nibbling born. If there was an uncle-of-the-year award, he'd deserve it for sure.

"Hey, I have a question for you, Apollo," I called out, hand grasping my phone at my side.

"What do you need, mate?" He wiped his hands off and stood up, crossing over to me, kissing my cheek.

"I need to know how my feet look."

"Wait, is this some new thing... like feet stuff?" I didn't want to process what "feet stuff" might look like, especially not while I was so huge I couldn't see them.

"No, not feet stuff." I held up the phone. "Franklin asked if I was only ginormous in

my belly or if my feet were huge, too.”

“Oh.” He squatted down. “Franklin, I’m looking now... just a minute... interference.”

It took me far too long to figure out he was referring to my shoes.

“Two seconds, Franklin, I need to get barefoot first.”

I walked over to the bench, plopped myself down, and was all too happy when my mate said, “I’ll take your shoes off.”

He carefully did and then looked up at me. “Oh, they’re really puffy. Like really puffy.”

“They fit into my shoes.”

“You are wearing my shoes.”

Which I hadn’t realized until he said it, and they should’ve been huge on me, not snug. Crap.

“Didn’t your feet hurt?” He looked up at me, not even pretending to mask his concern.

“Of course they did, but everything was aching. Everything hurts.” I’d teased numerous times over the past couple of weeks that even my hair hurt, but since my scalp really did, it might not’ve been teasing as much as trying to lighten the mood.

I spoke into the phone. “Did you hear that?” I asked Franklin, who immediately asked me to put my mate on the phone.

I didn't catch all they said, my mind reeling at how messed up my feet were. The next thing I knew, I was being whisked into the house, and Franklin was on his way to our land.

"He said just rest until he gets here," Apollo said. As much as I loved the idea of that, resting when you were the size of Nebraska wasn't easy. I lay on the bed, shoes off, much to my relief. I spent the next fifteen minutes playing the game of rolling over from one side to the other and back again in the hopes of finding a comfortable position and finding none.

Giving up, I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on a new design I was trying out. It was difficult to say focused, but if I let my mind wander at all, I was going to end up hyper-fixated on my feet and what about them had Franklin so concerned.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, Franklin was there, sitting on the edge of my bed offering me some weird little shot glass of I didn't even know what. Frankly, I didn't care, because if Franklin was giving it to me, it was going to do something good for my baby and me. I drank it down, instantly regretting it due to the taste. It was a cross between mud and grass, maybe leaves—I don't know exactly what, but it wasn't good.

"Is everything okay?" Obviously not if I was getting treated, but ask I did.

"For now it looks like everything's fine, but it's time to get this baby out. You're starting to get some inflammation I'm not pleased with, and for humans, that means one thing, but for wolves, it means it's time." I was missing some sort of subtext here, but I heard it was time and was pleased.

"And so how do we do this?" I knew from looking online that humans had to go to the hospital if they needed the baby out sooner than their bodies did. But I wasn't human, and we weren't playing the hospital game. I was in unfamiliar territory. All I knew for sure was that my delivery was going to look very different from any

information that I found on the internet and from my delivery plan.

“I already started the tincture; you should have you in full contractions within half an hour and ready to push a couple of minutes after that.”

He said it like it was no big deal, and I originally thought he was exaggerating about the timing. He wasn't. Almost to the minute, I found myself screaming out in pain. It came on so hard and fast, which was for the best because the worry had been building each minute that ticked by. I hadn't heard of any shifters needing to be induced, and that had my fear ratcheted up.

“You're doing great,” he said.

That was not something I was firmly believing. I felt like I was failing at all things. I couldn't even go into labor on my own. But the next wave came through, and I wasn't able to persevere on that very long because it was time to push, again. My body demanded it. I pushed and pushed until out came our beautiful baby.

“Beautiful.” I held them in my arm after a quick cleanup.

Apollo sat on the bed next to me, his eyes filled with tears as he looked down at our precious baby.

“Thank you, love,” he said. “She is beautiful.”

“What should we name them?” I asked.

We had talked about so much, but not names other than we'd know their name as soon as we saw them.

“What about Jasmine?”

“Jasmine,” I tried it out. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

Franklin excused himself, promising he’d be in the other room as Apollo and I watched our baby have their first meal, both of us in awe.

It wasn’t long ago that I made the decision that had my life in danger and my wolf on the run. Little did I know at the time that I was being led exactly where I needed to be; here in the forest with my mate, the one who’d spent centuries waiting for me.

And here we were, building our family in the only place that ever felt like home. I wouldn’t change a single step in my journey; each and every one of them led me here to Apollo... to my home.

“I love you, alpha mine.”

“As I love you.”