



# The Feisty Omega (Leongatha Pack Origins)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I heard the sound of my heart breaking and pretended I didn't.

Im 19 and on the cusp of maturing into an adult alpha, when I make a friend I know is going to mean something special in my life.

Although we only see each other at Christmas, with every passing year our bond gets stronger. Before long, I can see where this is leading.

Have I found my fated mate? If fated mates are real, then I think so, but regardless, I want this omega to be mine if hell have me.

The only problem is my Pack Alphas son has his sights set on my future mate, and the two sets of parents might be organizing an arranged mating.

With all the obstacles placed in our way, will I be able to protect my omega and claim him for myself? Or will I lose the one that fate has chosen for me?

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

Irian sat at his desk, chin resting in his palm as he stared out the window.

The world outside glowed unearthly pale under the steady gaze of the full moon. The tips of the trees glistened silvery grey as the faint breeze disturbed the topmost leaves, lower down shadows stirred, rustling mysteriously beneath the canopy.

The night was anything but silent. A thousand creatures rustled and scurried and scratched their way across the forest floor. High above the treetops, the occasional winged creature was silhouetted by the moon's brazen glow. All of nature's denizens were afoot tonight.

Irian sighed. What was the point of being a shifter if there was no pack? If you never ran with the full moon?

He could run by himself, he supposed. But the whole point of the full moon run was to find connection – connection with your wolf, connection with your pack.

But there was no pack. He might as well do as he sometimes did – shift in his bedroom, and spend a few hours curled up as his wolf on the bed. Perhaps he'd do that later. Maybe. It seemed pointless.

The lonely cry of a mopeke rang through the forest.

With another sigh, Irian turned away from the subtle siren call of the moon, picked up his pen and returned his attention to his books.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

TAL

The wooden step creaked under my foot, splitting the silence of the midnight house. It was after midnight really, closer to 1am. Santa, if they truly existed, would have been and gone. Of course, I was old enough to know the truth about that, though possibly there was a part of me still lingering in childhood, that thought maybe such things could be true.

Another board groaned with my next step.

I froze, three creaky steps before getting far enough downstairs to see around the wall into the living room. A living room which I knew would be warm and glowing, complete with a Christmas tree covered in hundreds of tiny, cheerful lights, the presents underneath with their colorful paper wrapping and elaborate bows. I hadn't seen it yet – disdaining to waste my time on such childish stuff during the day – but I could smell it from here... the fresh scent of pine, and the distinctive smell of new paper. I heard the soft hum of the electric candle as it changed colors in the empty room. Christmas was waiting for me down there.

There'd be stockings hanging from the mantelpiece, the names of their owners embroidered on them in red thread. I wasn't interested in those. They were for the young pups and were sure to be stuffed full of little toys and treats that would have them running around in the morning, screaming in a sugar-haze for hours.

No, I was here for the magic of the tree, for the mystical ambience that embodied all the fairytales of my childhood, and all the dreams and unrealistic, idealist hopes of my innocent pre-teen years. Though they were well buried underneath adolescent

cynicism, I'd never lost those dreams, never lost the kernel of a belief that at Christmas anything was possible.

There was a hiss, like a sigh, and I startled when I realized it came from me. When had I gotten so maudlin? I was too old for this silliness... which was precisely why I was creeping down the stairs alone after midnight, long after everyone else had gone to bed. Even the young ones had given up waiting to catch out Santa Wolf and were now tucked up in their beds, oblivious to everything, including their nineteen-year-old cousin slinking about the house to snatch a look at the Christmas tree in all its magic. I'd outgrown all the Christmas hoo-ha, well I should have, if the other shifters my age were to be believed. They scoffed at the tinsel, the carols, the excitement. I hadn't joined in, hadn't said a word, but I'd pulled faces at the appropriate times, so no-one would doubt I was just as cynical as they.

But perhaps they too were secretly like me. One foot already in the practical world of adulthood, one foot trailing behind in childhood. Maybe they too were sneaking through their sleeping households to catch a glimpse of the twinkling lights to feel once more the intangible magic of this special night.

I released the breath I'd been holding with a soft sigh. The board squeaked again as I shifted my weight. But no-one stirred. There was no-one awake. Just me.

I kept going. Just one look to satisfy myself, and then I'd go to bed.

The glow from the lights spilled onto the last couple of steps, urging me on. As I stepped past the wall, everything came into view. It was as magnificent as I'd expected. Fairy lights twinkling in many colors were looped across the windows, tinsel and ornaments hung everywhere, hooked onto every possible ledge and crevice, and hanging from tiny nails hammered into the picture rail. Shiny, glittering bells and balls were scattered along the mantelpiece.

A white wolf with giant wings forever frozen in place stood in the middle of the mantelpiece, its muzzle reaching for the moon. When switched on, its eyes would glow gold and its mechanical head would sing a Christmas carol that always sounded suspiciously like a howl. It towered over the Christmas stockings pegged hopefully to a cord that ran from one corner of the mantel to the other. Maybe it was praying to the Goddess to fill the stockings. It was silly and obviously fake, but it was comfortingly familiar.

The tree itself had pride of place, standing tall and green, and yes, a little lopsided, in the corner, adorned in a million ( no exaggeration) shiny glittery ornaments, dressed in a spiral of golden tinsel and sparkling with red, green, blue, purple and yellow lights. A silver star sat at the peak, crowning the tree, like royalty.

And underneath the tree, a myriad of parcels wrapped in papers of green and red and white...

I startled. Gasp.

Oh, my Goddess!

Lying under the tree amidst the jumble of red, green and white parcels, was something - a golden-brown wolf pup. He was sleeping, curled head to tail, oblivious to my presence. But one look at that sweet shape, one waft of that delicate omega scent, and I knew, I knew that wolf was destined for me. Santa had brought me a Christmas present. A real present. A playmate. Santa Wolf was real!

I whistled in appreciation, a long low whistle that actually was more a growl than anything human.

The little nostrils flared, scenting the air, scenting me I guessed. I should have been quieter.

My heart leapt into my throat and I swallowed excitedly. This was the best present ever. Did it know it was my present?

Two luminous golden eyes sprang open, watching me. I stood a little taller, puffed out my chest a bit. I wasn't very built yet, having only just started my twentieth year and still in the throes of adolescence, but I couldn't help but try to impress a little. There was a funny kind of snort from the young wolf.

His eyes were unblinking as they tracked my progress across the room. He didn't move as much as a whisker as I approached him, just watched me with those bright golden eyes until I slid down onto the floor beside him, my legs crossed.

He had the soft shiny fur of a young teen, golden around his shoulders, tan colored over his back and haunches. Tiny white hairs sprinkled through his coat, and on the insides of his ears. I was overcome by an almost irresistible urge to touch the beautiful pelt to see if it was as soft as it looked.

I lifted my hand to touch the fur, then I hesitated. That was kind of personal, wasn't it? For the first time in my life, I found the dichotomy of being a shifter confusing. Could I touch him while he was in wolf form or was that akin to unsolicited groping?

While I struggled with the question, hand hovering in mid-air, the wolf watched me with his golden eyes. A pink tongue slid out and swiped along his muzzle and he flicked one golden-brown ear at me. His head lowered and he turned away, tilting the back of his head towards me. It looked like an invitation. I held my breath and hoped I wasn't committing some cardinal shifter sin as my hand drifted onto his fur.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

IRIAN

I know he's there. I can hear him. He thinks I'm asleep, but I'm not. I'm lying here so still and quiet, listening. My wolf's hearing is so good, I don't even need to twitch my ears to hear him. I can make out his breathing, how slowly he's moving. And I can't miss the loud squeak of the wooden stairs as he steps on them. Oh, my Goddess! He's so noisy! It's a wonder the whole household hasn't woken. Aha! He's stopped again. It's gorgeous the way he thinks no-one has heard him. He really does. This is fun. I'm glad I snuck in here to hide under the Christmas tree, though I wasn't expecting anyone to be here.

Ooh! He's seen me. I can tell because he growls and there's a change in the ambience. What's he going to do? Is he going to run away? I'll be sad if he does. In truth, it's a little bit lonely down here by myself, but I wanted to spend the night surrounded by all the lovely Christmas-y stuff, not tucked away in a bedroom with a bunch of other young wolves I don't even know yet. I'll know them by the end of the holidays, for sure, but not tonight as we arrived too late to meet everyone.

Next stage of this little game: I flare my nostrils.

He's still there. I don't actually need to make a show of scenting the air, I've been smelling his scent without even trying, before he was halfway down the stairs. But I do it because I want him to know I know he's there. There's something about him... I'm too young... but I undeniably feel a pull towards him. I don't know what it is, but it feels important. I don't know how I know this, but I'm certain we're going to be something to each other. Maybe we'll just be friends. I hope we don't end up being enemies. That would suck. So far, this is the best Christmas ever, I don't want to spoil

it.

I open my eyes.

And from the way he's looking at me – like it's Christmas, which it is by the way – and the way he's licking his lips (I bet he doesn't even know he's doing that) – I think he's at the very least intrigued. Maybe interested.

And ooh, now I draw my eyes away from his – and believe me that's no small feat because they are stunning - I can see how gorgeous he is. He's young, not that much older than me I'd guess. Maybe a few years? I can see why I noticed his eyes first – they're the most intense piercing eyes I've ever seen, a brilliant deep blue color. They're mesmerizing. If it wasn't for them, I'd have seen straight away how handsome he is, even though he's clearly still developing – he hasn't reached full shifter majority yet. His hair is dark, almost black, straight and wild, parted on the right and with a long mop of fringe curving down half-hiding his left eye, all mysterious-like. Haha! Short sides, and to the base of his neck at the back. All that flyaway hair makes him look fierce and wild.

My heart thuds in my chest in a crazy way.

The young alpha's eyes are deep-set, and he has thick bushy brows, a symmetrical face (apart from the asymmetry of his hair) and oh my, perfect lips, the lower one particularly full and juicy. I want to nip it! Oops, where did that thought come from? There's a crease below them, above a triangular shaped jaw. A few wisps of hair show me he's trying to grow a beard and a mo, and although there's not much there yet, I can't help thinking it looks amazing on him. It'll be even better when it's fully grown in. He's truly the best thing I've ever seen.

I don't know him. I don't know his name, I've never seen him before. But I'm pretty sure I won't be able to stay away from him. The blessed Goddess looks after all her



creatures. I thought these holidays might suck, but she's brought me just where I need to be. I needed a shifter friend and I'm sure he's going to be it. Alpha, though.

He's walking over to me.

He doesn't speak. Sits down beside me, legs crossed. He raises his hand, tilts his head. The question is clear.

I flick my ear in response, offer the back of my neck, and as his hand tentatively strokes my pelt, I drape my neck over his thigh. It's warm and firm, the perfect pillow. The hairs tingle as they bend and spring back, and I twitch at the slide of fingers against my skin. I huff involuntarily, but I can't help it. It feels so good, and he smells so amazing... like the scent of the earth on a hot summer day, and sweat and musk, and wolf all rolled into one.

I feel peaceful, like I belong, like I've come home. My neck softens, my head droops over his leg, the hardwood floor cool and slippery against the tip of my muzzle, contrasting with the warmth of the thigh beneath me, and the fading heat of the early summer's day. The room is quiet except for the occasional crick -ing of a cricket lost inside, the rhythmic petting of his big, strong hand, and the pounding of my heart.

???

Squeals and shrieks dragged me into consciousness, along with the clip-clip-clip of light footsteps across floorboards, as a half dozen children of varying size and age came charging into the room heading straight for the stockings hanging by the hearth. Nothing could distract them from their mission, not even the sight of two wolves curled up against each other under the Christmas tree. Sometime in the night, he'd shifted, and our wolves had nestled close together for warmth.

Other footsteps clacked across the room in their heavy shoes and the clatter of curtain

rings was the only warning we had before the day burst into the room in a blaze of light. Outside the paned wall-to-ceiling windows, the sun was already high enough to send shafts of golden light lancing through the treetops. I blinked my eyes at the sudden sensory bombardment.

The children were sprawled on the floor, tipping their stockings upside down. Sweets and chocolates and tiny toys and glittery stars tumbled to the floor and grabby hands chased after them, accompanied by squeals of delight and excitement. Children crawled across each other to get the sweets that rolled away before someone else could snatch them up. There was squabbling and the adults intervened.

A heavy weight pressed against my shoulder giving me a nudge. I understood implicitly and rose, the chaos of the morning allowing us to slip away unnoticed.

I followed him up the staircase that had squeaked so loudly last night. It was silent now, of course, since we weighed comparatively little like this, and we padded upstairs without anyone noticing. He trotted down a long corridor towards the end. His scent grew stronger as we approached an open doorway, and I guessed even before we entered that this must be his room.

Curiously, I followed him in. Once inside, he shifted back to his human form and shoved the door closed. Then he was yanking open the drawers of a large chest-of-drawers against the side wall, rummaging through the contents until he apparently found what he was looking for – blue denim jeans.

“Here, you can put these on. They’re probably too big but I think they’ll do. I’ve outgrown them. I hope you don’t mind going commando.”

His rumble voice distracted me, all deep and alpha-y but breaking from time to time.

He held up a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and dropped them on the bed before going

back to scratch around again. When he turned around, triumphantly holding up a beautiful purple sweater, I'd shifted and already had one leg in the jeans.

He blushed (Oh my Goddess, he's an alpha, and he blushes, that's so sweet! It's not like nudity is a big deal amongst shifters, after all). And it wasn't as if he was worried about being nude himself.

"Oops, sorry," he said, turning away and giving me privacy. A red stain crept up his neck.

"That's okay," I told him, nearly falling over as I hopped around on one leg until I got the other one into the jeans and pulled the zip up. "I'm decent. And anyway, you know it doesn't really matter. I'm Irian, by the way."

"Um, I know, but I'm a bit older than you and we hadn't met, so I didn't want to assume."

As he turned back to me, I was struck again by the intensity of those blue eyes. He could be the devil with eyes like that. A large mass of crazy fringe flopped over one eye, partly concealing it. His hair was wild, like he had permanent bed-hair, and it just made him look so freaking amazing. And he was tall. I'd thought it was just because I was a wolf when I saw him first, and omegas were smaller, but now we were both human, I saw he was quite a bit taller than me, and lean, like, not stick-thin, and everything he had was all muscle.

"I'm Tal." He chuckled, a low rumble that seemed to start deep within then bubble over. "We kind of did that back to front, didn't we? Slept together then introduced ourselves!"

My cheeks warmed uncomfortably. I hadn't thought about things that way.

“Well, we didn’t... I didn’t...” I stammered, flustered. This was awkward. Tal was a handsome alpha, and though he clearly hadn’t passed fully into his majority - which I could tell from the puppy fat still in his cheeks and the fact he didn’t take the alpha honorific – he would have had to be every omega’s wet dream. He was certainly going to be this omega’s wet dream. It kinda left me speechless, which totally sucked. I wanted to make a good impression but instead I was behaving like an impressionable kid.

“I’m kidding!” he said, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder, and strangely I felt the brush of alpha pheromones reassuring me. They really shouldn’t have affected me at all at this stage of my development, and yet...

“Let me toss some clothes on. The bathroom’s in there if you want to use it.” He pointed to a small doorway beside the bed, oblivious to my very omega-like reaction to his touch.

I nearly tripped over my feet getting there. I needed some time to calm down. I didn’t normally get so flustered; I was a friendly chilled sort of guy. It didn’t phase me whether I was talking to guys my own age, or adults, even hot young alphas, so I didn’t know what had come over me. Maybe it was being in a new house on what was normally a quiet family holiday. I’d snuck off to lay under the tree last night because I wanted to immerse myself in the peace and magic of Christmas, only now I’d met the most interesting guy of my life. I didn’t know why I was so fascinated, but I couldn’t help hoping he’d keep letting me hang around with him. Older – adolescent - guys didn’t usually let us younger ones tag along. Ugh, I hoped he didn’t look on me like a younger brother. Tolerate me. That would totally suck. I wanted to be an equal.

The bathroom was calming. The air was cool on my face, the tiles were cold underfoot. I splashed my face with icy water and looked at myself in the mirror hanging over the basin. I was scruffy this morning, my hair - short strands of blonde

hair that would darken to brown as I aged, just like my alpha dad - sticking up all over the place, cheeks flushed, pupils large. I shook my head, splashed my face again and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to settle it.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Tal was fully clothed, wearing dark distressed jeans and a t-shirt. He was sitting on his bed, legs crossed beneath him, obviously in no great hurry to go downstairs and join the family.

“Hi,” I said nervously. I was excited and flustered again and I didn’t understand it. I was really hoping he wasn’t about to send me away.

Tal patted the mattress next to him.

“We don’t have to go downstairs yet. The kids will be going crazy down there for a while. Unless you want to get caught up in that...”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not sure it’s safe out there.”

Tal chuckled. “They’re okay. They’ll just be a little wild until the sugar wears off.”

“Are they all your family?”

“They’re all part of the pack, but we have four families living in the house. My omega dad’s sister’s family lives here too, and my alpha dad’s sister and brother and their families. There’s probably about thirty of us all up. It’s going to be crazy here today with all the Christmas stuff going on.”

I dug my teeth into my lower lip while I thought about this. I wasn’t used to so many people all at once, but I liked making new friends. It was a change from the rather quiet existence I had at home. I didn’t have any siblings, my parents having stopped at one when my birth proved dangerous to my alpha mother. Both my parents came

from small families themselves, so they were perfectly content to have a small nuclear family, and once the decision was taken, they'd immersed themselves in other pursuits. That meant they were often out of the house and I was left to my own devices. I was studying, so it suited me, but I couldn't say it didn't leave me feeling a little lonely sometimes. My basic nature was quite gregarious, and I was a wolf – a pack creature – at heart, so I often sought out companionship, wandering around our district, talking to anyone I could find.

“What were you doing there last night...curled up under the tree with the Christmas presents?” Tal's deep voice scattered my errant thoughts.

“Santa left me there,” I joked. Then I began to elaborate, “We arrived last night...”

Tal held up a hand and I stopped mid-sentence. I felt compelled – no, that's not what it was, he wasn't using his alpha tone to compel me – I wanted to obey him.

“Don't say anymore. I like it. Santa left you there. You're a Christmas present. It's perfect.”

A huge grin split his gorgeous face and he looked as though all his Christmases had come at once. That was fine by me. I wasn't sure what crazy ideas he had running through his brain, but while they were, he wasn't shoo-ing me away like most guys his age would.

Tal sprawled out on his bed, head supported on his forearms as he peered at me from under his floppy fringe. His bare feet clacked softly as they restlessly tapped together in the air behind him.

He patted the mattress again.

“Sit down,” he grinned, blue eyes twinkling, “and tell me about yourself. I haven't

seen you around here before. Have you just joined the pack or something?"

"Or something," I said, sitting cautiously on the edge of the mattress. Tal was friendly but he was an alpha. I wasn't sure how familiar I could get without overstepping. Alphas could be unpredictable, especially with the hormone fluctuations that hit them as they transitioned into their majority.

"You look nervous. Seriously, I don't bite. Not yet, anyway. I'm too young for that," Tal chuckled at his own joke. "C'mon, make yourself comfortable. If we're going to be friends, you need to relax around me."

Friends? I could do that. I wanted to do that.

His dark hair flicked, motioning towards the headboard, and I climbed onto the bed and shuffled up until I was leaning up against it.

"Better?"

"Sure."

"Now tell me why you're here." It wasn't exactly a command, and he definitely didn't use his alpha voice, but the urge to comply was irresistible.

"We're just visiting for the holidays," I told him. "My parents know your Alpha and his family and they invited us to stay for a few weeks."

"Your parents must be important people then. Our Alpha doesn't invite many people here."

I shrugged. "I guess, in their circles. My mum is on the Council and my dad's in the diplomatic corps. They do their own stuff, and I do mine. They don't really talk about

their work with me.”

This was usually the point at which new acquaintances started to ask all sorts of questions about my parents and have all sorts of opinions on all the ‘privileges’ I must have on account of them. I’d even been accused of being born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Nobody ever thought to consider me as a separate person, a whole person with my own wants and desires. With a little internal sigh, I looked away, waiting for it to start. I studied a small tear in the wallpaper as I steeled myself. This is where my fun little Christmas fantasy would turn to shit. Oh well, it had been fun while it lasted.

“So, what’s your stuff?” Tal’s deep voice cut through my internal struggle.

“Huh?”

“You said you do your stuff,” he explained patiently, completely ignoring what I’d said about my parents. I totally gave him 100 points and a mental high five for that on my internal scale of character assessment. “So, tell me about it... what sort of stuff do you do?”

“Oh,” I blushed. As much as I was sociable and loved talking to people, because everyone was always so much more interested in hearing about my parents, I wasn’t used to talking about myself. “I, er, well I’m still at school. I’m taking electives in advanced maths and science,” I hesitated. My family was academic, and in our circles it was expected that I would follow through on my education, but not everybody agreed omegas should be allowed to obtain tertiary qualifications. I didn’t know anything about Tal or his family, and I wasn’t sure if he was the kind of alpha that thought omegas should know their place. Somehow, I didn’t think so, given how he’d behaved with me so far, so I continued. “I hope to do a science degree later on.”

I lifted my head, straightening my back and eyeing him challengingly, daring him to



say something disparaging.

Tal's eyes widened, and the corners of his lips curled upwards revealing perfect white teeth.

"That's so cool!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically. "Science is fun."

I wasn't sure I'd ever heard anyone else describe science as fun before, so I hoped he wasn't mocking me, but hey, he hadn't said anything against omegas studying, so this was still going great. He didn't give the impression that he was humoring me either. Maybe he did genuinely have an interest in science?

"That's not the typical reaction I get when I tell people what I plan on doing. Nobody tells me it's fun or cool or anything like that."

"But it is!" Tal's eyebrows had climbed almost off the top of his head in surprise at this revelation.

"Yeah, I know that. But not everyone thinks that way. Why are you interested in it?"

"I'm going to be studying agriculture when I go to uni in a year's time, so yeah, I'll be studying science." Tal's voice was enthusiastic.

"...and business," he added, the smile vanishing and a grimace replacing it. "I'm not a fan of rules and regulations and paperwork, but I need to do the double degree if I want to be successful with my own farm one day."

He looked at me, a strange tension evident in the way he was carrying himself, his shoulders rigid and posture stiff. "Do you think that's a weird thing for an alpha to do? Run a farm, I mean? Most alphas want to be lawyers or doctors or run large corporations, but I've never been interested in any of that. I love the country and I

want to stay living like that... with a slower pace of life, fresh air, friendly people..."

"Why would that be weird?" I asked. "You like what you like. I like the country too, though I live in the city."

And then because he looked so uncertain, and I didn't like seeing that on his gorgeous face, I added, "I think it's very alpha-y to do what you want to do rather than what other people say you have to, or what society expects from you."

Tal looked relieved. He rolled over onto his back, reshuffling the pillows until just one was under his head. I noted how long his arms were as he stretched them up around his head.

I plopped down beside him, staring up at the ceiling. We were lying side by side and it felt like the easiest thing ever. I couldn't really feel our age difference when we were talking companionably like this, we just seemed... natural together. Except for the fact we knew next to nothing about each other, it was almost like we'd been friends for years.

"Yeah... not everyone thinks that way. Some people think it's not challenging enough. Not enough to aspire to."

"Well, I do. If no-one was farming, we'd all have to do our own hunting, and nothing else would get done. Besides, I don't know a lot about agriculture, but from what I've learnt in school, it's not easy, is it? Like, you have to worry about weather conditions and market prices and everything's affected by global events, and stuff like that, right?"

"And government regulations... and stupid laws that get passed by people who have no idea what they're talking about, or that live in the city and don't understand what it's like in the country," he added. "Yeah... it's not gonna be easy, but it's what I've

always wanted to do. I want the lifestyle, even if the work is hard and it's even harder to make a living."

"I think it's great that you're pursuing your dream," I said softly, my hand bravely bumping the back of his in what I hoped was a supportive manner. "I hope you make it."

"I will," he said fiercely, sitting up on one elbow, and his entire body language just screamed alpha . It was way more attractive than it ought to be and I felt like screaming alpha myself but with a whole other meaning. I blinked and tried to shake the thought from my head. It was bizarre and inappropriate. WTF was wrong with me?

"What about you?" he asked, "what do you want to do once you have your degree?"

"I- I don't know yet," I was still a bit dazed. "M-maybe work in a lab? Or a university? I haven't got that part figured out yet but a science degree opens up a lot of opportunities, so I figure I can decide later."

"You've got plenty of time to decide," Tal agreed.

"Thanks for taking me seriously," I said softly. Tal inclined his head sideways, a frown piercing his brow.

"A lot of people don't," I told him in reply to the unasked question. "They tell me I should be concentrating on traditional omega skills... you know, cooking, keeping house, all that stuff."

Tal's eyebrows rose. "Rude! But I know what you mean. Our pack is really into traditional roles here too. But our omegas only seem to want that anyway. They seem happy with the way things are."

“But would they speak up if they wanted something different?” I pressed on. “Or are they too afraid to?”

Tal frowned again. “I don’t honestly know. Most of the omegas I know are very submissive. I’m not sure if they would speak up. But I do have a few friends who are omegas and they’ve never said they’re unhappy with the way things are.”

“But if they’ve been conditioned from an early age to not fight the system, they won’t, will they?” I couldn’t help a testy tone from creeping into my voice. Maybe because I had been brought up with the parents I had, I had different expectations, my world was less confined than other omegas’. That liberal attitude didn’t apply to all aspects of life – my parents still had some pretty conservative views on how omegas could be used for cementing family alliances and were staunch supporters of arranged marriages or shifter unions for omegas as well, but I was too young to have brushed up against any of those barriers yet. When the time came, I’d do whatever I wanted. I was not the sort of omega who accepted being told what to do.

“I guess not.” And then to prove he’d been genuinely considering my point of view, this guy who was clearly more than just his good looks, added thoughtfully, “And specifically not to an alpha who represents the very thing they disagree with.”

“Right!” I exclaimed. “You see my point.”

“Yeah, I do,” Tal looked a bit crestfallen. Like being an alpha was somehow distasteful all of a sudden. “There are still some things that are good about being an omega, aren’t there?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course! I mean, who doesn’t love a dominant sexy guy? Or someone who makes you feel safe? And cooking – I love cooking, and no-one ever makes stupid comments because I enjoy that, because it’s in line with expectations. And I love caring for people and looking after them. So, yeah, still plenty of good things about

being an omega. But I also want to be myself, y’know. I’m not just gonna lie down and let the world dictate to me...”

Tal laughed, a deep throaty laugh that shook the mattress, and cut me off before I really got started on my tirade. “No, I can absolutely say I cannot see you doing that.”

I pouted, but mostly in jest. He got me. It was a first.

The bed finally stopped shaking, as Tal’s whole-body laughter gradually eased. He turned to me.

“Don’t ever change. Feisty as you are, you’re just the sort of omega the world needs.” I wasn’t sure, but I thought I caught the whisper of something else said beneath his breath. It sounded like you’re just what I need.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

TAL

My wolf's hearing detected the change in background noise long before my conscious brain.

“Oh.”

We were lying on the bed beside each other, looking at the ceiling and talking like best mates who hadn't seen each other for a while and had a lot to catch up on. Of course, that wasn't what this was, because we were learning about each other for the first time, but it seemed that was the way we rolled. Like two pieces of a puzzle. It was strange to have this easy connection with a total stranger, and an omega at that (no offence to omegas anywhere but while I did have a couple of omega friends, I didn't habitually hang out with any of them. Alphas tended to hang out together, and after our recent conversation, I wondered if maybe that was because the omegas didn't want to hang out with us). I didn't really want to move yet, so I just lay there a little longer, pretending we didn't have to go. But something must have shown on my face.

“So... What's up?” Irian broke the silence. Damn it! It had been a companionable silence and I didn't want it to end.

“We need to go downstairs.” I reluctantly pushed myself upright with a grunt. “They're about to give out the presents. Family tradition, they won't start until everyone's there.”

“Oh, okay. I should probably get going then.” The mattress shook as Irian wriggled to

the edge and he was standing before I could say “No! You don’t need to go. No-one will mind if you join us.”

As he slowly turned to face me, a couple of small snowy white teeth worried at his lower lip. Fine lines appeared around his eyes and across his brow. It looked cute on his youthful face. He reminded me of a worried pup.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Unless your family expects you. What do you usually do on Christmas morning?”

“Nothing really. There’s only the three of us and we don’t make a big deal out of Christmas. We usually have a special meal, and each person gives and receives a gift, and that’s all we do. Not even sure what’s happening this year since we’re guests here.”

“Oh, well that’s easy. We always have a massive pack lunch for Christmas. Alpha and his family will be there. Everyone goes to it. There’s a large shed that we turn into a huge dining hall for celebrations. That won’t be for a few hours though. Everyone does their Christmas morning rituals in their own houses and we come together for lunch.”

Irian shivered. Maybe he found the prospect of all those unknown shifters a bit intimidating.

“You can sit with me at lunch if you like, I can introduce you to a few people.”

Irian’s smile was sweet and gentle like the early dawn on a cloudless day. It slid slowly across his face, and two dimples rose with it. It was very distracting.

“I’d like that,” he admitted, softly. “You’re the only person I know here. I was supposed to sleep in one of the dorms with the young wolves last night, but I skipped out...” he shrugged.

“So I saw... and your parents won’t be looking for you?”

“Nah. They’ll expect me to hang out with all the young ones.”

“Then you can stay!” I said, unable to keep the excitement from my voice.

“If you’re sure it’s gonna be okay...?”

“It’s fine. Honestly, there’ll be so much going on, no-one’s going to have time to worry about one extra person. It’ll be fun to have a friend of my own there for a change.”

Silence hung heavy in the room. Irian was gnawing on that bottom lip again and I decided it was up to me to save it, so I made the decision for him.

“You coming?” I got up from the bed and headed towards the door. It wasn’t really a question. Once again, I’d stopped short of using compulsion on him, but there was an implied command. I wasn’t sure if he’d go along with it, seeing as, despite being clearly submissive, he had a definite spark of feisty independence, which honestly, I found quite appealing.

Irian nodded his head and followed me to the door. I felt a kind of pride and no small amount of satisfaction that he was following my lead.

Voices excitedly talking over each other and the thud of bodies moving around on the wooden floor grew louder as we approached the stairs. I was acutely conscious of Irian following me half a pace behind and beside me. It felt right. Not because he



needed to walk behind because he was an omega or because he was weak, but because I felt a strong impulse to walk in front, to be between him and any potential danger. Not that there was any danger here, of course, not in my home. It was simply instinct.

We arrived at the bottom of the steps and the true chaos of Christmas morning was unveiled before us. I shook my head and glanced at Irian, but he just smiled sweetly as he watched the kids scrambling and jockeying for position around the tree, climbing over each other and nudging in between others that had taken their places. Already there were furrowed brows and flushed, tense faces as the adults fussed over the kids, trying to get them settled in one place for five minutes.

As soon as we stepped into the room, one of the kids spotted me.

“Hi Uncle Tal,” he shrieked, and a bundle of wriggling squirming excitement wrapped itself around my legs.

“Heya, Squeak. Happy Christmas!” I swung him around, holding him under the armpits, and he squealed loudly. All of a sudden, I was surrounded by a bunch of sugar-fueled kids jumping up and down wanting their turn. I had to keep my place as favorite uncle, so I made sure they all got their turn.

Ouch! Something – no, someone – pulled on my leg hairs. It might have been the only successful way to get my attention right at that moment, but really? Before I swung anyone else, I looked down to see the hair-pulling culprit. Wide brown eyes way too big for the little elfin face peered up at me, a floppy brown fringe and neat wavy hair curling protectively around a pair of tiny ears.

“Who’s that?” she whispered, pulling a wet finger out of her mouth and pointing it accusingly at Irian, who was standing, back to the wall, watching my cousins attack me.

“That’s my new friend,” I told her, crouching down to her level. “Would you like to meet him?”

The finger went back in her mouth and there were a few slurping noises while she considered her answer. “Did Santa Wolf bring him?” she asked, finally. “I’ve never seen him before.”

I couldn’t help grinning. This small child was smarter than everyone else. I nodded.

“Yes. Yes, he did.”

“Then I’d like to meet him,” she announced, slipping her tiny hand in mine and looking up at me, eyes shining, as though meeting Irian was second best only to meeting Santa Wolf himself. I’d have had it the other way around, but I didn’t need to tell her that.

When Irian’s soft brown eyes found mine, they crinkled around the edges, and a faint smile tweaked the corners of his lips. I crooked a finger at him, and he immediately pushed off from the wall he’d been leaning against, and I led her towards him.

A surge of satisfaction shot through me, seeing him wearing my clothes. They looked good on him. The jeans were a surprisingly tight fit, a-n-d I probably shouldn’t be looking at that, and the oversized t-shirt slid over his hips as he crouched down beside me. The soft gentle scent of an omega washed over me, and I blinked in surprise. I looked around, but he was the only omega nearby that was old enough to scent. I noted with surprise how receptive I was to it, but maybe it was because we’d spent the last few hours together, or maybe it was because I’d recently begun the transition to majority and just hadn’t noticed the changes yet.

“Shanna, this is my friend, Irian,” I said to the little girl, inclining my head towards the omega at my side. Her little hand let go of mine. She glared at me, little eyes

narrowed and hands on hips.

“Are you sure Santa brought him?” She asked suspiciously.

“He did,” I assured her. “He brought him to be my friend.”

And because I truly believed that myself, that’s all it took to convince her. Irian smiled shyly at the little four-year old dynamo that was my sister’s daughter and held out a hand.

“Hey, Shanna, it’s nice to meet you. I don’t know anyone here except Tal, would you be my friend too?”

Shanna’s rosy cheeks grew plump as apples, as she grasped Irian’s hand. His eyes widened in surprise when instead of shaking it as he must have expected, she took it firmly in her own, and determinedly dragged him away. He gave me a frantic glance over his shoulder as he was led off. I guess it wasn’t very helpful that I laughed when I saw he was about to be subjected to a tour of the room and a bunch of introductions to people whose names he’d probably forget straight away.

Fifteen minutes later, I was very much the chastened alpha. I’d vastly underestimated my new friend’s abilities. Irian had managed to organize all twenty odd kids, including my younger sister and brother, into their positions around the tree and was talking with my aunt and her partner while we waited for the present giving to start. Leaning against the wall as he conversed, he looked relaxed and very much like he belonged.

Clap-clap-clap .

All the voices fell silent.

Clap-clap-clap .

The children clapped back: clap-clap-clap

Now that he had everyone's attention, my Alpha dad's loud, gruff voice rumbled around the room.

"Happy Christmas, everyone. It's good to see you all gathered here again for this special celebration. I'm glad you could make it. Now before we all break for lunch, is there anything we need to do?"

High pitched voices tumbled over each other as all the children anxiously rushed to correct his apparent oversight.

"Presents! Presents!" High voices chimed.

"Presents!" Slightly lower voices added to the cacophony.

"Oh, my! I nearly forgot, didn't I? And it looks like we have a lot of presents to distribute. So... who are my little helpers today?" Of course, my dad hadn't forgotten, this was simply part of the yearly ritual. Although somewhat tiresome to the teenagers lurking sullenly in the corners of the room, the younger kids would be disappointed if he didn't put on this little charade.

Three little kids jumped up. "We are!" "It's us!" "Me!"

"Come over here," he softened his voice as he addressed them directly. Even so, he still sounded very alpha-y and the youngest one looked a bit scared.

"Here, come with Uncle Tal," I said, taking the little omega's hand in mine and leading them across to my dad. "There's no need to be scared. He's just gonna

remind you of the rules. You'll be fine."

The little omega clung to my hand.

"Okay," said my dad. "Who remembers what the rules are?"

"I remember!" chirped the little alpha at my dad's knee. "Only one present at one time for anyone. Make sure everyone has one, before taking one for ourselves."

"Very good," he nodded in agreement.

"And keep going until there are none left," added the little omega on the end of my hand, finding her courage at the thought of a present being left out.

"Very good," my dad smiled approvingly. "So... what are you all waiting for?"

All three darted away, my hand left hanging, no longer required, as they scurried to begin. It was almost a sacred task, and the youngest of the tribe always felt immensely important as they carried out this responsibility. I knew because I'd been that kid entrusted with the sacred task a few times, though it was many seasons ago now.

As the kids grabbed presents from under the tree, peering intently at the labels trying to decipher the handwriting, and handing the present to its intended recipient before rushing back to the tree to pick up another, I stepped around the increasing chaos of torn paper and excited children, to find Irian.

His eyes met mine, brown depths flashing with amusement, the sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows catching the golden highlights of his hair. His cheeks were plump with smiles, and his perfect white teeth flashed as he grinned.

“This is amazing,” he murmured. “I can’t believe how much fun those kids are having.”

“It’s pretty good, I guess.”

Irian’s eyebrows arched.

“I mean, we do this every year, so the novelty wears off,” I said, then shamefacedly I backtracked. “Between you and me? I still like it, it’s just not cool to admit it once you get to a certain age, okay?”

Irian’s laugh was like having a bucket of sunbeams emptied over me. His Adam’s apple bobbed and he wrapped his arms around himself, rocking back and forth as if desperately trying to hold his mirth in.

I shot him a reproachful look, but couldn’t help joining in. Before long the two of us were giggling and sniffling so hard, we were attracting strange looks from the adults around us, but as everyone was busy receiving and unwrapping presents, nobody questioned us.

“Here, Uncle Tal,” the little beta shoved a parcel in my hands and raced off back to the tree.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

IRIAN

Tal's extended family was huge. There may have been only eight adults, but there were at least twenty younger kids and a handful of teens, mostly older than me. I knew that most shifter families were large, but it really highlighted how unusual my family was and correspondingly, how different my upbringing. Still, I wasn't going to worry about that. Tal had said it was okay for me to be here, and that was all that mattered.

I could see the little ones needed a little encouragement to get settled in their places. I wasn't an adult and I was an omega, so I knew how to get them to calm down. I felt pretty pleased with myself when I transformed the chaos into a semicircle of children all sitting eagerly under the tree. The appreciative smile I got from Tal from across the room made it more than worthwhile.

It seemed I had gotten the attention from some of the adults too, because an alpha who turned out to be Tal's sister began talking to me. Tal kept glancing over at me. I guessed he was checking I was okay, but so far his family had been super-nice, if a little chaotic and nobody seemed to mind, or even find it unusual, that I was there.

After an older Alpha made a short speech, three of the littlest kids, an alpha, a beta and an omega, started giving out the presents. It was so much fun to watch because it got crazy really quickly, with the kids pouncing on their gifts as they received them. Shredded paper was flying in all directions. Haha! So much fun!

There were a few kids around my age standing back and lurking in the corners and accepting their gifts looking for all the world as if they didn't care. They were

unmistakably alphas and I noticed with surprise how few omegas were in the room. It seemed that Tal's family was heavy with alphas and I was surprised the atmosphere in the room wasn't more intense.

The teens might have been bored, but the kids and adults were obviously having a fantastic time. It was quite a sight; seeing them totally absorbed in the ritual of family presents, new parcels being ripped open, adding to the toys and books and colored pens already scattered around the floor. Someone brought out a tray piled high with slices of Christmas cake and hands were grabbing for them so fast I thought for sure some folks were going to miss out. There was pushing and squealing and crumbs going everywhere. Oh Goddess, it was mayhem, so delightful. And so unlike Christmas in my tiny family.

The lights continued to twinkle in the tree, which looked strangely bare now that the brightly colored presents had deserted it.

It was obvious to me that Tal was everybody's favorite uncle and I could see why. He was unfailingly patient with the little ones, even though every time he tried to return to me, he was waylaid by one or other of them. I didn't mind. My cheeks hurt from smiling as I watched him and as I could see he was trying to come back, I was happy.

The shouts and squeals died down to a moderate hum as the kids played with their new toys and stuffed their faces grubby with cake, and eventually even that low hum subsided as they ran outside to play, the adults following soon after. The teens had taken advantage of the mayhem and were nowhere to be seen.

A wonderful peace descended on the room, broken only by the hum of the electronic candle, the faint buzz of the Christmas lights and the sound of Tal, the only one left, sorting through scraps of discarded wrapping paper. The distant sound of the young ones playing outside was a pleasant background to my thoughts. It was fun being there for Tal's family celebration, but it was exhausting too, and I was even happier



now it was just the two of us alone. It was peaceful again, like it had been last night with only the two of us under the tree.

Maybe I could get to know him some more.

“Should we clean up this mess?” I suggested, trying to get his attention.

“Nope,” mumbled Tal. “We’ll all pitch in for it later. Hold on a minute. I’m looking for something.”

“Can I help?” I asked, moving towards him.

“No! Don’t come over here!” Tal’s voice was muffled from behind the tree, but even so it felt like a slap. Had I done something wrong? I bit down on my bottom lip until it pained me more than the little ball of hurt that had lodged suddenly in my chest. That was the first harsh tone he’d used with me and I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t like it, not one bit.

Maybe he was tired of me hanging around. Tal was almost an adult, unlike me, who was clearly still a kid. Quite possibly he wished I’d go outside with the younger kids. I glanced towards the doorway. I wasn’t quite young enough for that though, and besides, I wanted to hang with him.

I suppressed the sigh hovering behind my pursed lips, uncharacteristically indecisive. I didn’t want to make a bigger nuisance of myself...

Maybe I should go outside...

“There!” Tal emerged from behind the Christmas tree. Voice high-pitched and cracking slightly, it was like he’d had a major success.

“Wait!” He sounded shocked when he saw where I’d paused half-way to the door.  
“Where are you going?”

“I... I wasn’t sure you wanted me to stay,” I stammered. “I didn’t want to overstay...”

Tal frowned. “Of course, I want you to stay. I was just... you know, I’m sorry. I’m really happy you’re here.”

He looked sheepish. “I guess I can be a bit abrupt when I’m focussed. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I tried for an upbeat voice, keeping the tremble out of my voice. I wasn’t sure why I was so sensitive, but for some reason it was really important to me that we got along well. “I probably over-reacted. I just thought... well, maybe you were getting tired of me, seeing as I’m... younger.”

“No! You’re perfect... I mean, you’re...” his cheeks flamed pink and it was unbelievable how attractive that was on an alpha, “...fine. You’re fine. We’re fine,” he finished awkwardly.

He thrust out his hand towards me, a crumpled bundle of Christmas paper in his palm.

“Happy Christmas!”

My eyes flicked from his hand to his face and back again. Was he making fun of me? Handing me a scrunched-up bundle of paper? I didn’t know enough about his sense of humor to understand if this was some kind of joke or not.

I hesitated, frowning and tilting my head while I tried to figure it out. He looked serious, even anxious. Okay, I decided, I’m gonna roll with this. If it was a joke, I

trusted him enough that it wouldn't be a mean one.

I reached over and took the crumpled-up bundle, surprised when the weight of it was heavier than I expected. Was there something inside? I turned it over. I frowned, staring at it, wondering what it could be.

“Go on, open it,” Tal urged.

I looked up at him, startling at the intensity of those blue eyes. His crazy fringe had fallen across his face and one eye was half hidden. His hair was all messed up and I was starting to realize that was a permanent look for him. It suited him. But it was the intense focus that got me. I shivered. He was so very alpha. And so very, very hot.

With an effort, I returned my attention to the strange, crumpled object in my hand. It was wrapped but not sealed, and the paper was wrinkled and scrunched. There were suspiciously similar pieces of paper lying discarded on the floor. But Tal was watching intently. Okay, so I should probably open it then. Carefully peeling back the layers, I discovered... a Christmas ornament! It was a silvery ball covered in snowflakes and wolf prints, and it had a little string to hang it with. When I turned it over, I saw the letters T-A-L written in wonky gold ink. It was beautiful and I had to blink the blurriness from my eyes before I looked up at him.

He was very still, waiting for my reaction, and the only thing that let me know he was unsure was the small tic above his eye. Fuck, he was gorgeous.

“Did... did you make this?” I'm not sure how I even found the words. I didn't have to be a genius to know this gift was special. “It's beautiful!”

I cradled it in my hands like the most precious treasure, which for me, it was.

“Yeah,” Tal rumbled, a touch of pink highlighting his cheeks. “All the kids make one

when they start school and we hang them all in the tree every Christmas. I know it's not much, but I wanted to give you a present and that's all I had." He shrugged. "Didn't know you would be coming, so..."

"Thank you! I love it!"

I was so overcome with emotion that I didn't stop to think before launching myself at him, wrapping my arms around him and hugging him. There was no time to be embarrassed about my spontaneous display of emotion, because he squeezed me right back.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

TAL

If he was my Christmas present from the Goddess – and I was convinced he was – then I could hang on to him as long as I liked, right?

Maybe.

Or maybe I should let go now. I didn't know why I wanted to hold on to him so much, but I did. It was weird, a strange compulsion almost. I wasn't even the clingy type. Perhaps this was proof that the Goddess or Santa Wolf (okay, we knew the truth there, definitely had to be the Goddess) had sent him my way.

He hadn't actually said he was mine. And just because he was an omega didn't mean I could demand he be mine. And I couldn't claim him anyway, we were still both too young. Shifter convention meant he had to be nineteen before any alpha could make a claim for him. And formal unions (the shifter equivalent to a human marriage) weren't permitted until the age of 22. I knew I was jumping ahead in my mind – way past where we were right now – but the Goddess does things for a reason. I trusted she knew what she was doing. I barely knew him, but this felt right.

I pulled away and swiped the hair back from my face.

"I know it's not much, but I wanted you to have something to remember this Christmas."

"I'll treasure it!" Irian looked up at me, a soft rose color flushing his cheeks. "I'll think of you when I see it."

A sudden noise in the doorway interrupted us, and I looked across to see my friend Luke standing there, hanging from the lintel by one hand, flexing his muscles as per usual.

“C’mon, man,” he said, addressing me, while his narrowed eyes swept up and down Irian critically. Apparently dismissing him as irrelevant, he turned his eyes back to me. “The guys are waiting for you.”

In the excitement, I’d forgotten that my friends and I usually hung out before Christmas lunch was served. This was fine, though, it was my chance to introduce Irian to them, and gave me an excuse to keep him by my side for a little longer.

“We’ll be right there.” I indicated the doorway with my head. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you to my friends.”

I headed for the door, the soft scrape of footsteps on the floorboards following behind me.

“Luke, this is Irian. He’s visiting for the holidays.”

With a thud, Luke let his full weight hit the floor. He looked at Irian with disinterested eyes. “Hey,” he said grudgingly, and the dismissal was clear. My brows furrowed.

“Hey,” Irian responded in a friendly voice, though he couldn’t have missed Luke’s unfriendly tone. I glared at Luke as we passed, but I kept going. If the others were going to be like this too, I was not going to be happy.

“Over here.” I touched Irian on the shoulder and led him towards where the guys were waiting in the shade of the huge tree which was the focal point of our compound. Everyone in our group was eighteen or nineteen, the oldest adolescents in

the pack at the moment – except for Alpha’s son, but he was another story - and we hung out here, doing very little I had to admit – surveilling the rest of the compound as if we were in charge. Occasionally we might intervene if the younger kids got in a fight or something, but mostly we just lounged around, feeling bored, rebellious and way too mature for our surroundings. My friends were all deliberately scruffy, with untamed hair, several days growth on their faces, unkempt clothes and sullen scowls. We were that age, you know? I didn’t go in for it as much as the others, but I could raise a good scowl myself. Right then, though, I was upbeat. I didn’t have time or cause for scowling.

I looked down at the blonde head of the omega beside me. His head barely rose above my shoulder, and the blonde strands had a silky sheen in the sunlight. At some point he must have used his fingers to rake his short hair into a semblance of neatness, and when he turned to look at me, he had the clean, fresh face of youth. Not a whisker in sight.

He looked... good... in those well-fitting jeans and he wore the oversized t-shirt with gentle grace. Though he was obviously several years younger than the rest of us and an omega, he walked confidently beside me. Maybe he knew I’d protect him if any of these alphas turned mean – and I absolutely would – or maybe he just trusted himself to manage any social situation. It was intimidating for an omega to be confronted by a pack of alphas, even if we hadn’t reached full majority yet.

“Hey.” I greeted the guys. “Happy Christmas!”

There were grunts and grudging murmurs of ‘Happy Christmas’.

“This is my friend who’s come to stay for Christmas at least, maybe even the whole holidays?” I raised my brows as I looked to Irian for confirmation.

He nodded. “The holidays. Hey, guys.”

“This is Derek, Yuri, Dar... And Kal, Lin, Brand... I bet you’re not gonna remember all these... Sami, Max, and you already met Luke.”

The guys all grunted a ‘hello’ or a ‘hey’ or a ‘hi’. Irian smiled shyly and gave a little wave. The boys weren’t exactly welcoming, but they also weren’t hostile. I could imagine what they were thinking, half of them anyway. They’d be annoyed, or at the least surprised, that I’d thought it was a good idea to bring such a young guy to come hang with us. I could appreciate that. If the situation were reversed, I’d have probably been thinking the same thing. And I could probably have told them that he was Alpha’s guest, but no... fuck that, he was my friend, he had a right to be here.

For a moment there was awkward silence, then the boys resumed whatever convos they were having before we turned up. There wasn’t enough time to do anything much before lunch, so we strolled around the compound, various conversations taking place at once.

Luke came up on the other side of me. He nudged me.

“Ditch the kid.” He barely dropped his voice as he flicked a glance towards Irian.

“What the fuck? No!” I snapped, outraged he was acting like this. He didn’t know it, of course, but this was my Christmas present he was talking about, and I had no intention of giving him up. Still, he didn’t need to be a dick about it.

Luke’s eyebrows silently asked the question, why?

“He’s my friend,” I protested.

“C’mon, he’s a baby,” he murmured. “And anyway, how can he be your friend? You only just met him.”



“Rude,” I snapped. “He’s my friend. He stays.”

Luke scowled. “He’s too young to be hanging around with us. Don’t want some kid getting in the way.”

“Leave it,” Dar warned Luke, coming up behind him. Apparently, he’d been listening to our exchange and decided to intervene before it got out of hand.

Luke growled and glared at Irian, who moved a little closer to me.

“Just don’t get in the way,” Luke snarled, maneuvering in front of Irian, all hostile alpha vibes and intimidation. “We don’t like babies slowing us down.”

I did not like the way he was behaving. I’d said Irian was my friend, so the least Luke could do was be civil, and if he couldn’t do that, he could shut the fuck up.

I stepped directly in between them, drawing myself up, chest out, glaring directly into Luke’s ugly face. I was gonna punch the living daylights out of this aggressive shithead. My hands clenched at my sides. I’d beaten the crap out of Luke before, though it was a long time prior and we’d become friends since, but I was gonna do it again right here, right now. My lip curled. A formidable rage swept through me and Luke must have sensed it from the way his eyes widened. His nostrils flared.

He was seconds from wearing my fist when a gentle touch on my arm snagged my attention. The soft warmth of Irian’s palm slithered over my forearm, subtle and calming. His fingers skated over the coarse hairs. I felt his body heat, smelled his sweet omega scent, as he leaned towards me and murmured in a voice so low that I should have had to strain to hear, yet didn’t.

“It’s okay. Let it go.”

I drew in a deep breath. Irian was all sweetness and light. It was hard to be angry around him, especially when he exuded such a calming energy. I let out the breath I'd been holding and some of the tension eased from my muscles. I was still alert and ready to get into it, but I was no longer on the point of slugging my obnoxious friend in the face anymore. But it was puzzling. Once my temper started to blow, usually nothing stopped it. Except for this surprise omega, apparently.

Luke stepped back. He was staring at me, frowning. He knew me well enough to know this wasn't normal behavior for me. Yeah, right at you buddy, I don't know what's happening either.

Whether it was because seconds ago I'd been about to fight him, or because suddenly I wasn't, I didn't know, but Luke gave me a curious, wary look, and moved away. I didn't think Irian would have any more trouble with him, but I'd be keeping a close eye on things just in case.

Dar moved in closer and began an interrogation of Irian, but his demeanor was relaxed and he was smiling, and he was asking questions I hadn't thought to ask yet.

"Where are you from?"

"Um, the city," replied Irian. "We live in a high-rise not far from the centre of town."

Dar frowned. "What about your pack?"

The sunlight glinted on Irian's short hair, causing golden waves to wash over the sides as he shook his head, and scrunched his button nose. "We don't have one. Not one that we live with anyway. My parents both work and their jobs are in the city, so it's easier not to have to commute."

The smile vanished from Dar's face as he took this in. "That's really tough," he said

at last. “I can’t imagine living without all these guys around.” He made a gesture that included our gang of alphas but somehow also included the whole pack.

Irian shrugged. “I don’t really know any different. We’ve lived this way for as long as I can remember. And I have friends from school that I hang out with when I’m not studying. So, it’s not like I’m alone or anything.”

“But are they shifters or humans?”

“Humans. I only have contact with shifters when we visit my grandparents in the country.”

Dar nodded to himself. Then he brightened, put his arm around Irian and pulled him in for a sideways hug. “Good thing you’ve got us then,” he grinned.

I wasn’t sure I liked Dar touching my Christmas present, but I was pleased that he seemed to have accepted Irian as one of us. Irian didn’t seem to mind, and I wasn’t the sort of alpha to tell an omega what they should do. There were enough alphas doing that already.

We walked around aimlessly, talking and laughing. Irian seemed to have a way with people and before long he’d made friends with the guys. He was still a little quiet around Luke, and I saw Luke giving him the side-eye, but he didn’t actually say anything. Irian might have been several years younger in actual age, but he was mature for his years. Maybe that was a result of the kind of life he’d led. I’d have hated to be without my pack. In a pack there were always so many people to share responsibilities that you never had to do things alone. Irian sounded like he’d probably learned to be independent quite young.

Eventually, the loud clanging of a bell rang out across the courtyard, calling us to lunch. As we approached the dining hall, Irian slid into place beside me. The aroma

of roasted meats teased our nostrils as we approached, and the saliva started accumulating in my mouth. I noticed a couple of the others licking their lips, flashes of canines showing, and I grinned. We were never closer to our wolves than at mealtimes.

My friends and I entered the hall after everyone else, trying to maintain the appearance of vague disinterest and superiority that we had trained the rest of the pack to expect from us. But Irian was way too excited. He was bouncing around on the balls of his feet, eyes wide and sparkling and a big grin plumping his face, his cheeks all round and rosy with excitement. I couldn't hold out against his enthusiasm and allowed a small grin to slide across my face.

The hall was decorated with an abundance of shiny ornaments strung around the room. There was tinsel looped between the girders and multi-colored fairy lights twinkling everywhere. Someone had brought the white wolf statue from our house and turned it on as a joke, and the howling carols created a jarring background to the actual Christmas carols playing through the sound system. All that and the ceaseless excited chatter of the kids was too much for my ears. Fortunately, someone else must have been suffering too because suddenly, thankfully, the mechanical wolf fell silent.

As was customary, a long table had been put together extending the length of the hall. It was covered in a brilliant red tablecloth and green napkins. Shining silver flatware marked out the seating. There were jugs of what looked like lemonade, juice and water distributed along the table, along with platters of steaming barbecued meats: mountains of beef, lamb, chicken and best of all, venison, sending out all sorts of happy aromas that had our nostrils quivering in anticipation. I was pleased to see potatoes, lots of potatoes, which were the only vegetable I was ever happy to see. Shifters were serious meat-eaters obviously and no-one here had a human mate, so we didn't have to cater for vegetarians.

The young kids were running around a bit crazy, but as soon as Alpha let out a deep

growl, they quickly settled into their seats. The Pack Alpha was never to be disrespected. Even us adolescents fell into line when he insisted, though there might have been a lot of concealed eye-rolling that went on. I figured he probably knew we did it, since he had been our age once, but as long as he didn't see it... we could get away with it.

Once the room quietened, Alpha and his family seated themselves at the head of the table. There was Alpha, the Alpha Mate, his alpha daughter and his alpha son, Mar. Although Mar was around the same age as us – he was less than a year older than I was – he didn't hang out with us. Or should I say, we didn't hang out with him. He'd always been a bit of a bully, and lately he'd added to his list of personal characteristics an extra one, that of entitled asshole. The thing was, he'd become Pack Alpha when his dad eventually stepped down, and didn't he let us know it! He always behaved so superior and entitled when he was around us, though I'd noticed how he kowtowed to his dad.

I guessed that's where bullies came from – it couldn't be easy growing up with a dad like his. We'd grown up together and over the years I'd seen him sporting a few bruises that weren't caused by the inevitable fights we young alphas typically had. I'd have felt sorry for him if he weren't such a dick to the rest of us.

A lady I'd never seen before sat next to Alpha, and beside her sat another stranger. I guessed they must be Irian's parents. As the other adults seated themselves on each side of the table and we adolescents piled into seats a bit further down, I moved down an extra space, so there was a seat for Irian beside me.

But as he pulled out his chair to sit down, someone cleared their throat, and a female voice wound its way through the general commotion, "Irian."

When I looked up to see who was speaking – although I could already guess – the lady I assumed was his mother motioned towards the empty seat beside Mar. I hadn't

noticed it before.

Irian flicked a glance at the empty chair, and then up at me. He looked conflicted.

“ Irian .” This time the voice had dropped deeper and the unmistakable weight of a compulsion sat in the air.

His mother was an alpha.

But... so was his father. This was hard to fathom, but I was distracted from this puzzle by the sight of Irian, shifting from foot to foot, blinking hard, cheeks flushed. A couple of lines furrowed his brow. He was fighting the compulsion.

It was always uncomfortable to resist a compulsion. Most of us found that out early on in life. Obviously, Irian didn't want to comply, but resisting was hurting him. I saw a bead of sweat run down the side of his face. I didn't like that he was being forced to leave my side where I could make sure he was enjoying the proceedings, but I didn't want him to hurt himself either.

“It's okay. Don't fight it,” I leaned down, my voice the softest rumble in his ear, so faint even the shifter ears around us wouldn't be able to hear. “You can come with us after lunch.”

His shoulders slumped as he gave up the struggle and turned away. Despite the disappointment of not having him sit next to me, I puffed out my chest. I really didn't want him sad, but I felt strangely warm inside that he wanted to stay near me, and proud that he listened to my advice.

“I'll be here.” I knew he heard me because his head came up and he gave a little huff, whether because I was sending him away or because he was annoyed at being compelled, I wasn't sure.

My skin prickled as the searing gaze of Irian's mother raked over me as he seated himself next to Mar, but I didn't look up at her. It wouldn't be acceptable to scowl at our Alpha's guest. Still, if I could have, I'd have fucking compelled her in front of her friends and seen how she liked it.

The tight skin across my forehead warned me I was scowling, and I made a conscious effort to relax. I didn't want to make Irian feel any more uncomfortable than he already did. A large presence slid into the seat beside me – it was Dar. He gave me a worried frown and the very faintest shake of his head.

When everyone was seated, Alpha gave the signal and we began to help ourselves to food. We didn't need to be told twice. The plate in front of me was quickly heaped high with carnivorous delights, the aroma rising with the steam, filling my nostrils. Saliva pooled in my mouth in anticipation. I glanced towards the head of the table to see if Irian was as delighted with the feast as I was, and a low growl rumbled from my throat.

Mar was placing food on Irian's plate!

Fortunately, no-one at the top end of the table heard my protest above the noise of everyone eating and talking at the same time. Dar, sitting next to me, did hear.

“Easy, Tal.”

I dragged my eyes away from the offensive sight of Mar placing another strip of venison on Irian's plate.

“He's fucking feeding him!”

Dar nodded. “I see it.”

“That’s a bit fucking much! He’s 16!”

Dar was watching me intently. His eyes narrowed, then he nodded slowly, as if confirming something to himself. A half smile danced across his lips.

“Stay calm,” he murmured. His eyes flicked back down the length of the table. “I don’t think you need to worry about this.”

I follow his gaze in time to see Irian leaning over the table and helping himself to a liberal serving of chicken and some potatoes.

“Thanks,” he was saying, smiling brightly at the young alpha beside him, “But I don’t eat venison.” My eyes widened as he slid the offending strips back onto Mar’s plate as if he were oblivious to the meaning of the food offering.

A public offering of food from an alpha was only made to a prospective mate. To refuse it was unheard of.

A shocked silence momentarily ceased all conversation at that end of the table. Forks froze in between mouths and plates, but Irian just continued smiling amiably as if nothing had happened. After a beat, almost everyone resumed eating their meals and took up conversations again. Mar looked peeved, more than a little shocked, probably, that the omega had stood up to him and rejected his offering. But he deserved it, the fucker, the omega hadn’t even reached the age of consent.

Irian sat down, ignoring a glare from his mother, and devoted himself to his chicken as if it were the tastiest thing he’d ever consumed. I was still staring at him, my food untouched on my plate. Did he feel the weight of my gaze? I wondered if he had, because a moment later he lifted his head, looked me straight in the eyes, and the corner of his mouth curved in a cheeky half-grin. It suddenly faded and he bit his lip, going from cocky to uncertain in the briefest of moments.



Feisty omega.

I winked my approval. Irian lowered his eyes, smiled a small, conspiratorial smile and tucked into his meal.

I should have been enjoying my meal. It was Christmas lunch, after all, and the most elaborate spread we'd have all year. The betas and omegas had worked hard to prepare a feast for the entire pack.

But instead, I spent a lot of the meal watching Irian dodge Mar's clumsy attempts at courting him. Yes, I knew exactly what was going on. I grew more and more furious as the meal progressed.

"Are you okay?" Dar asked quietly, as he passed me a platter of steaming potatoes.

"Can't you see what's happening?" I hissed.

He nodded. "I see it."

"He's too young! He hasn't even started the transition yet!"

"They're simply making their intentions clear. They won't make a move yet," he assured me.

"Better fucking not!"

"They can't. You know that. You've got until he's 19 to figure this out with minimum fallout."

"Fallout?"

“You don’t really think they’re just gonna roll over and let you have him?”

I didn’t speak for a moment. Dar’s words had shocked me. Was Dar right? Is that where I was heading with this? I didn’t know. We were friends. All I knew was that I had this overwhelming sense that I should be looking out for him. Protecting him from predatory alphas was one of those things. He should have a right to choose.

“It’s his life,” I gritted my teeth. “Shouldn’t he get to choose?”

Dar sighed. “He’s an omega. You know not everyone thinks the way you do. Especially that generation. Anyway, maybe he has chosen, maybe he knew this was gonna happen all along.”

“Fuck.” But I really didn’t think so. Irian was smoothly handling the situation at the top end of the table – I forgot that as the only child of two influential parents he’d probably had a lot of experience at handling social situations - but every now and then he shot me a glance. When he turned them on me, his big brown eyes shone, the look he gave me a little soft and a little hopeful, the corners of his lips curling ever so slightly. At the same time, he was still a little shy it seemed, because he didn’t hold my gaze for long before he dropped his eyes back to his plate.

I didn’t know what this was, or what it might become. But I did know the Goddess wouldn’t have placed him directly in my path if he wasn’t meant to be there.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

IRIAN

I was getting fed up with this guy continually putting food on my plate.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Couldn't he take a hint? If I'd wanted something, I would've served myself. Honestly! I really wanted to tell him to mind his own fucking business, but I couldn't. We were the guests of the Pack Alpha, who just happened to be this guy's dad, so I had to make nice. I knew how to do it, it wasn't the first time I'd been out with my parents and had to pretend to be interested in the people around me. I could make conversation and smile pleasantly through my gritted teeth, when really all I wanted was to be sitting in that vacant seat next to Tal.

Tal, who was gonna include me in his friendship group, and had made me feel like I belonged.

Tal, who kept glaring at this guy sitting next to me. What was his name? Mark? Mel? Something like that. I hadn't paid attention when we were introduced, firstly because I was unhappy about being forced to change seats, and secondly, what the hell?

Though I refused to show it, I was annoyed and humiliated. How dare my mother compel me in public like that? It was embarrassing, especially in front of Tal's friends who were all older than me. Made me look weak. I was already at a disadvantage being an omega, I didn't need anything more added to that.

Lunch dragged on. Eventually Marvin, or Mel, or whoever he was, gave up putting food on my plate (thank the Goddess!) which I was grateful for as it was getting hard to come up with polite or semi-polite reasons to refuse it. At the rate I'd been going,

there would have been nothing I liked eating.

And the truth was, I loved venison, of course I did, so I was not happy at all that I didn't get to eat any. Still, I was not having some guy feed me – what the almighty fuck? Who did he think he was – my mother?

I glanced across at Tal and caught his intense gaze. For some reason that I wouldn't investigate now, knowing he was keeping a watchful eye over me made me feel better, calmer somehow. I gave a little twitch of my lips which I hoped Tal recognized as a smile, then dropped my eyes to my plate again as the warmth rushed into my cheeks.

I felt my mother's sharp eyes resting on me and reluctantly I turned and made conversation with Mal to avoid a confrontation with her.

We'd barely finished Christmas pudding, when the screeching of chairs dragging over the concrete floor alerted me to Tal and his friends getting up from the table. My heart sank, thinking I was about to be left behind, but Tal strode over, his footsteps ringing confidently on the hard floor.

“Hey, Irian. Are you done? The guys and I are gonna head outside. Wanna come with?” he asked in a loud voice.

Thank fuck, I was outta there!

I got to my feet before anyone could say anything to stop me.

“Sure. Thanks for lunch,” I added, bowing my head respectfully to Alpha and the Alpha Mate. I even gave Mack a smile, though it was kind of through gritted teeth.

I was beside Tal so fast, his eyes flared wide and the eyebrows came up.

“Hey, I’m sorry about that. I hope it wasn’t too tiresome,” he murmured as we walked outside together.

“Nah. It was okay. What’s with that guy though? He kept putting food on my plate. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah,” Tal said gruffly. He looked like he was going to say something more, but we’d caught up with his buddies by then, and it seemed the moment had passed.

“Hey, Irian,” Dar stepped up to us, “Gonna hang with us this arvo?”

My eyes darted quickly to Tal, but he looked relaxed now, so I replied, “Yeah, sounds good. What do you guys do after Christmas lunch?”

Dar shrugged. “Just walk round. Keep an eye on the pups. Nothing special.”

“Ah, okay. Sure. Thanks.”

Dar huffed softly but smiled.

“Tal, when are you going on camp?” Tal turned to the tall blond guy who’d called out to him from across the group. I thought his name was Yuri, though I wasn’t entirely sure.

“Haven’t booked it yet,” Tal admitted. He glanced at me, then said, “Probably after the holidays.”

“Cool. I might go with you. My parents are hassling me to go but I’d rather go with someone I know.”

“What camp are you going on?” I was genuinely curious. I never went on camps,

even school camps. But this couldn't be a school camp if they had a choice of when they went.

"Ah... it's alpha camp." Tal's cheeks turned a cute pink as he admitted, "It's to teach us to be good alphas and all the shit that's specific to being an alpha. Physiology, psychology, all that crap."

"Mmm. I didn't know you guys had to actually learn all that. Omegas don't go on camp."

"That's because omegas just need to do what they're fucking told!" Ooh, that voice was familiar. Luke . Luke had already made it clear he didn't want me hanging around, but I wasn't the sort of omega to just take his bullshit attitude.

My chest expanded with a mighty breath, but before I could start my tirade, Tal deftly interceded. "You've got some very outdated opinions, Luke. Maybe you need to go to camp sooner rather than later. Things aren't like that anymore."

"Oh yeah, says who?"

"Goddess, Luke," another one of the guys chimed in, "Everyone knows omegas have rights these days. Just 'cause your family lives in the dark ages."

Luke pushed him backwards. "Shut the fuck up, Kal. What would you know about it? Your parents are always away."

"Guys, calm down," Tal intervened, one hand pressing on each guy's chest, keeping them apart even as they strained to get to each other. "It's Christmas. Let's not fight. And," he added, "Alpha has guests, we don't want to embarrass him."

That last seemed to do the trick. Kal and Luke pulled away from each other,

glowering, and moved back into their respective subgroups. An uneasy peace was restored by the time we reached the big tree in the center of the yard, and the guys stood or lounged around at the base of the tree, talking. Phew, adolescent alphas entering majority were unstable as hell. I knew I was safe with Tal there, but even so I watched the group warily.

They did a lot of talking.

For a long time.

I got restless.

I got bored.

Across the courtyard, I saw the younger pups running around. They seemed to be having a lot more fun than these adolescents who were lounging around acting disinterested. Guess they were too cool to have fun. I didn't really want to leave Tal, but he was deep in a conversation with one of his mates about... something. I had tuned out a while ago.

I hesitated.

Fuck it. I was an independent omega. I was gonna do what I wanted.

And I wanted to join that game the young ones were playing. They were having so much fun. I slipped away from the guys and wheedled my way into the game. It was easy to do. The young pups were pretty happy to have one of the older guys paying them some attention. Even if I was only a few years older, it still counted. Very soon, I was laughing and running and throwing badly aimed balls at fleeing pups as we played this crazy game of hide-and-squeak... a variation on the old hide-and-seek but involving throwing a ball to hit your target.

A pup darted out of his hiding place and scampered across the playing field. I threw the ball and missed him (might have been on purpose, might not, I'm not saying), and as the ball hit the ground and rolled to a stop, Tal came charging across the yard, picked it up and launched it at the pup.

“OW!” yelled the pup, who copped it fair in the ass cheek.

I blinked in surprise. What I saw – what I didn't expect – was Tal and his friends had joined the game. Suddenly everyone was playing together, there was no more of the divide by age or attitude. Everyone was laughing and shouting and having fun. The young ones were thrilled to have the older boys, who they admired so much, joining in their game, and the adolescents – the ‘too cool to have fun’ gang – were having the time of their lives.

We were running around, noisy and wild, when I saw a sedate group walking past us. It was my parents, accompanied by the Alpha and his family, including Mer, Mar, whatever his name was. From the sour look on his face, Mer/Mar didn't look to be having the best time, and I wasn't the sort to hold a grudge, so I ran up to him.

“Wanna join us?” I asked, my face prickly with heat, sweat dimpled on my forehead. I probably didn't look the best with my hair plastered flat to my head and the patches of sweat staining my t-shirt, but I could feel the wide grin splitting my face.

He looked me up and down, and just about then I heard someone – Tal, from the scent of him – come to a sliding halt right behind me.

Yes, it was Tal. The warm, husky, musky scent of him flooded my nostrils and I unconsciously leaned back into him.

“Nah, running around is for kids,” Mer/Mar said, and walked away.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

TAL

While we were running around, Alpha and his guests emerged from the dining shed, slowly walking up in the direction of Alpha's house. Mar was with them, looking sulky. He could've joined us, but we didn't call him over. We weren't friends. He looked bored too, trailing along after his parents, while we were all tearing around having fun. That was what you got for being the Alpha's son... and an asshole.

The group had already passed us when I saw Alpha turn back and cuff Mar around the ears, saying something. Mar dipped his head and even from here I could see the pink stain of embarrassment on his cheeks, as his dad went off about something. I strained my ears to hear what was being said, but I only caught snippets ... idiot... too young for... what were you thinking ... I kinda felt sorry for Mar. He was an asshole and a bully, but maybe that wasn't surprising given how his parents treated him... and especially doing that in front of visiting alphas.

There was a dull thud in the middle of my back, and Irian ran past laughing as the small rubber ball bounced off me and rolled underfoot.

He looked like he was going to chase down another victim – one of the cheeky pups darting out from between two obstacles, but he checked his stride and then headed off in the opposite direction – to Mar. Uh-oh, looked like he might be going to invite Mar to join in the game.

I headed over that way too. I might have felt sorry for Mar, but I didn't trust him either. Some irrational primitive part of me thought he might try and snatch Irian away.

I arrived in time to hear Nah, running around is for kids!

...what the ever-loving fuck?

Mar was a prick, but I supposed I didn't really care. He was just making it easier for me to keep my Christmas present close.

I conveniently ignored the fact that until Irian had joined the game, none of us adolescents were doing anything more exciting than standing around and talking. Figure it took a sassy 16-year-old omega to show us what's what.

I quickly forgot about Mar. I wrapped an arm around Irian's slumped shoulders, the firm curve of his shoulder fitting snugly in the hollow of mine, and murmured "Forget him, he's an asshole", as we turned away.

I had to admire his spirit. For an omega, he was bold, seemingly unafraid to go for what he wanted. Maybe that was the result of having two alpha parents, or perhaps because he was an only child and he'd had to stand up for himself and be independent. It was unusual for an omega, but it made me warm inside... I was proud of him.

As the day drew to a close, the sun set and darkness crept in. The yard grew quieter as the younger ones became tired and one by one disappeared inside their packhouses for the evening. We adolescents withdrew to the tree again, but it wasn't long before people began leaving the group and headed to their respective homes for dinner. Lunch did seem a long time ago, and gurgles rumbled through my gut. It reminded me I had spent most of my lunch watching Mar try and stake a claim on Irian, instead of filling my belly with roast venison, roast beef and chicken. I scowled.

Another growl from my belly, and Irian's hand flew over his mouth as he tried vainly to contain his laughter.

“Didn’t you eat lunch, Tal?”

“Actually, no. I was too busy watching that idiot Mar trying to seduce you.”

“What? No!” he protested, looking shocked. “He wasn’t... Oh!”

His voice trailed away as the realization finally hit home. I stayed quiet, giving him time to process it. Clearly it hadn’t occurred to him, though he would have known about mating behaviors. Everyone did. From the moment shifters could talk, they were talking and thinking about these things. “Surely not. Surely , surely not. They wouldn’t... would they?” he muttered to himself.

His brow scrunched as he looked up at me, a pained expression on his face. He looked devastated.

“But I’m underage. By years!”

“I know.” I cocked my head. “So, you didn’t know about it?”

“No! I swear. You... you think my parents have made an arrangement for me? Behind my back?”

I let my shoulders lift and fall, in a gesture of uncertainty. “I don’t know. Unless Mar came up with the idea himself, but he was definitely trying to stake a claim on you. I’m not the only one that thought so.”

“F-u-c-k.”

“C’mon, don’t worry about it. Let’s go back to my house and eat. We don’t have to worry about it now.”

Irian was uncharacteristically quiet as we walked to my packhouse. I wanted to put my arm around him and console him, but given how he was reacting to hearing Mar was trying to claim him, I worried that he might not take the gesture well. He was a very independent omega.

Maybe it had never occurred to him that as an omega, he was political currency. A mating could be used to bind two families together to gain influence, social or political standing, even to acquire property. I didn't know enough about his family to say what they would bring to such an arrangement, but our pack leader came from an established family that had been on the Council for generations and was highly influential. Their alpha children could probably have their pick of available omegas.

Irian had previously told me that his mother was a member of the Paranormal Council. A politically favorable alliance with a wealthy and influential Pack Alpha like ours would be something that would solidify her position on the Council. Depending on how traditional they were, as alphas, his parents might not think to ask their omega son what he thought of such an arrangement.

I had met Irian less than 24 hours ago, so in truth I didn't really know him that well, but from what he'd shown of himself so far, I doubted he'd be thrilled with a forced union. He was an omega that seemed to know what he wanted. I couldn't imagine him being a pawn in anyone's game.

The low hum of murmuring voices interspersed with a child's high-pitched giggle and some grumbling greeted us as we entered the packhouse.

My omega dad and younger brother and sister were seated at the table, a board game with tokens in various places around the board in front of them. The dirty dishes stacked on the table beside them were clearly less important than the game.

If he was surprised to see me bring Irian home, Pa didn't show it.

“The food’s laid out in the kitchen. Help yourselves, boys.”

“Thanks, Pa. Where’s everyone?”

“Your sister and her family have already gone to bed... the little kids were tired after staying up late last night and all the excitement today. Dad and your uncle are over at Cousin Patty’s house, with the teens. Not sure where the others are... there was a rush on food a while back, but everyone’s gone now, except us, as you can see.”

I turned to Irian.

“Wanna grab plates and watch movies in my room while we eat?” I hesitated, “or are you expected to join your parents tonight?”

“Nah, they won’t care. They’ll be with their friends, so they won’t be paying attention to me anyway. And I’d rather stay away from Mel.”

“Mar,” I corrected him.

He shrugged.

The air hissed out of me in a long, slow hiss. I wasn’t going to argue. It looked to me as if his parents brought him here so he could get acquainted with Mar, but the facts were, he’d been under my Christmas tree when I’d found him.

He was my Christmas present.

He was mine.

I just hoped he agreed with me on that.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

IRIAN

I was in shock.

A thousand questions ran through my head. But the one that worried me most was this: would Tal walk away from me, now that he believed his Alpha and my parents had made plans for me?

My gut clenched, squeezing painfully. My heart rate spiked, literally jumping into my mouth.

Oh Goddess, don't take him away from me!

We'd been getting along so well... he was... he was... well, a friend, but... something told me.... It felt like it would be wrong for him not to be in my life.

But... I didn't want him in trouble with his Alpha.

Maybe I should walk away.

I didn't want to.

In the end, I followed him back to his house, unsure what to do. Had his dad drawn the same conclusion about what was going on at lunch? If so, he was probably not gonna welcome me into the house this time. He wouldn't want Tal to risk angering their Alpha by disrupting the Alpha's plans.

Maybe I needed to say something.

Maybe I'd do it later.

We were back at his house before I could decide what to do. I held my breath as we entered the room, my pulse throbbing in my wrist, a nervous tic twitching above one eye. A high-pitched noise sung in my inner ear, and yet... Tal's dad seemed welcoming and even pointed us towards food in the kitchen.

I hoped Tal didn't hear the whoosh of air escaping as I relaxed slightly behind him.

"Wanna grab plates and eat watching movies in my room? Or are you expected to join your parents tonight?" Tal seemed to expect me to stay. He wasn't sending me away, not yet.

I told him I wasn't expected at home. Truth is, my presence or absence probably wouldn't normally be noted.

If I hadn't been watching so intently, I would have missed the way Tal's body relaxed with my words. Maybe he was afraid I'd be the one to leave.

The scent of roasted meats smacked me right in the nostrils as we entered the kitchen, and instantly saliva began pooling in my mouth. Dinner was leftovers from our Christmas lunch.

"Help yourself," said Tal, passing me a plate.

"Mmm, thanks. I'm starving."

The residue of heat from the oven suggested the food had been reheated, though the platter itself was cool to touch as I helped myself to a pile of venison (yippee!) and

some of everything else. Mainly venison, though.

Tal's intense blue eyes pinned me.

"I thought you didn't like venison," he said, eyebrows drawing down in a puzzled 'V'.

"Pfft!" I retorted. "Of course, I like venison. I love venison. I just wasn't having that guy telling me what I was gonna eat."

Tal huffed but the corner of his mouth was twitching. Those mesmerizing blue eyes dazzled me. I couldn't help my lips curving at the corners too. I sidled up to him.

"You're not gonna tell me what I can and can't eat, are you?"

"I would not even think about it."

Tal laughed.

He understood me. I didn't think he even really saw me as an omega. He just saw me as me. I liked that.



TAL

That year the Christmas holidays were way more fun than usual. Irian continued to hang out with me and my friends, most of whom quickly came to accept him as one of us. It helped that he was mature for his age, and that he had a generally friendly and fun nature. Somehow, he'd broken the ice and most days all the young shifters were now hanging out together or playing games, regardless of age.

Some nights we all bunked down in the dormitories with the younger shifters. My friends and I took the top bunks, talking well past the time the younger ones had dropped off to sleep.

Other nights, though, Irian had the mattress on the floor of my room. We'd talk until late, laughing and bantering until one of my parents asked us to quieten down. When that happened, I slid off my bed onto the mattress next to him and we continued our conversation in whispers until one or both of us drifted off to sleep.

But inevitably, the holidays had to end.

On Irian's last night, we sat up against the headboard on my bed, fully clothed, not touching. Not talking.

The silence was heavy. There was too much to say, and no way to say it. I still didn't understand our connection, but all my instincts demanded I not let him go away, away from where I could protect him. The feeling settled uneasily in my gut and spread into the very marrow of my bones. It was so integral that the sensation felt like a part of me.

“I think we’ll be coming back next year. I heard my parents talking.” Irian's halting voice interrupted the silence. My eyes sneaked a glance at him from under my hair.

“I’m gonna miss having you around,” I admitted.

Our eyes met. His were a little bit shiny. He was blurry. I blinked a few times, cleared my vision.

“Yeah?” he asked. My eyes flicked to his poor lower lip, all red and sore, before meeting his soft brown eyes. The whites were streaked with red, and he blinked rapidly while he continued macerating his lip.

“Yeah. I will. It’s weird, but I feel like you’re one of my closest friends.”

“Same.”

That poor lip was not going to survive the night if I didn’t do something. I leaned across, placed my thumb on his lip and gently eased it free of those teeth.

“I’m glad you’ll be coming back. But if you don’t, I’ll come and find you.”

His brow creased.

“You’d do that?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t think it was an accident that we met. I... I think we were meant to find each other. If something happens and you don’t come back, I’ll find you.” I hesitated. “I haven’t reached full majority yet, so... it might take a while, but I will come.”

“Oh... okay.” Irian drew in a deep breath then let it go with a whoosh .

“Better?” I asked. As he nodded, the short strands of his blonde hair shimmered gold under the light, striking me a painful blow as I realized it was a sight I wouldn’t see again for many months. I was going to miss him.

"Let’s plan all the things we’re gonna do next Christmas,” I told him.

The mattress shook as I slid down until I was lying on my back, staring at the ceiling. I almost laughed to myself as Irian followed, his lesser weight barely moving the mattress at all; in some ways we were opposites. We lay side by side, staring up at the slight imperfections in the ceiling, the bumps, a couple of tiny cracks, a small, squashed bug. And we talked. We talked until the pale glow of morning began its slow creep into the room and we finally drifted off to sleep.

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It was the clatter of people moving around the kitchen that woke me, metal clanging, things thumping, voices. My eyes blinked blearily open, sticky with sleep, and it took my sleep-deprived brain a few moments of lying there with such a feeling of wrongness, before I registered where I was and what was disturbing me.

I’d fallen asleep on my bed, fully dressed.

And I was alone. Irian had gone.

The clattering in the kitchen died down, replaced by the soft murmur of voices, the occasion crunch of cutlery scraping on plates.

It was still early, the light barely spilling into the room, dull and hazy. I must only have slept a couple of hours. Outside a lone bird called. It cried out again, but there was no answering call. I felt a lonely kinship with that solitary bird. It was a strange sensation for a shifter.

When I strained, I heard past the noises in my own house, directing my shifter hearing out into the compound and the sounds of people moving, the faint clatter of breakfast being made in the various houses, my ears occasionally picking up the shuffling of feet across hardwood floors, as the pack members stirred and began their day.

In my room, there was no gentle, rippling laughter, no soft regular huffs, no little half-snores. It was so still in here, while the world went on oblivious outside. I felt like an observer. Was this what it was going to be like for the next 12 months?

Fuck! I'd grown more used to his company - that cheerful presence at my shoulder - than I'd realized.

A harsh mechanical sound interrupted the gentle cadence of the pack's morning ritual. Irian had told me they'd be leaving early. I imagined him standing at the side of the car, maybe hoping I'd come to say goodbye. His parents taking leave of Alpha and his family. Mar, fucking Mar, probably doing or saying something inappropriate. I felt a little ashamed. I should be there to stop that. Yet what would I do? They were the guests of Alpha and the Alpha Mate...

I wriggled, restlessly rubbing my back on the mattress, the fabric of the sheets scratching against my shirt. This pack was starting to grate on me. I could feel its structure closing in, suffocating me, though in truth, it wasn't a terrible pack to live in. Alpha was fair and took good care of the pack, and he wasn't ultra-traditionalist like some pack leaders. But... I knew I'd never be anything here, I'd just be a follower, abiding by the pack rules. The frustration would kill me. I felt I was meant for more than that.

When the time comes, I told myself, I'll leave and start my own pack.

Suddenly, I bolted upright.

Rushing out of my room, I made it to the front door in seconds, and threw it open. A white vehicle was parked beside Alpha's house, engine running. Several people were standing around it, their backs to me as luggage was stowed in the boot, and hands shaken in farewell.

A lone figure with blonde hair stood quietly beside the vehicle, his shoulders slumped. His hand reached for the doorhandle, when he stopped still. Almost as if he felt the weight of my gaze on him, he raised his head... and for a brief moment, our eyes locked on each other. I nodded. He dipped his head, and angled his head away slightly, exposing his neck. It was the faintest of movements, a very subtle gesture, but I recognized it for what it was.

An admission. An acknowledgement. A promise.

IRIAN

The year passed fast enough, I guess.

I was absorbed in my studies, occasionally helping out my mother with Council projects - fund-raisers and the like. I saw my school friends, ran a few cross-countries, and also spent a lot of my time alone. As usual.

My parents were always so busy with their careers, they weren't around a lot. We didn't speak about what had happened at Christmas, maybe because of my age, which kind of made it irrelevant for now, and maybe because they just assumed because I was an omega I'd meekly go along with their plans.

I'd never really stood up to them, but then again, I'd never had a reason to. Until now.

The reality was, they didn't actually spend enough time with me to know the kind of omega I was. My parents might be liberal in some respects but they were quite traditional in others – easy enough to be that way if you're an alpha - but traditional I certainly was not.

And I refused to be anyone's strategic chess piece.

But I was prepared to bide my time. There was no need to rock the boat yet. Ultimately, though, I would do exactly what I wanted, whether my parents approved or not.

Lying in my bed at night, I wrapped myself in the comforting warmth of certainty. I knew what I wanted, though I didn't quite understand it. But that was okay. I was where I was meant to be right now. I also knew where I was supposed to be in the future and had absolute faith that things would all fall out as they were supposed to. I didn't need to worry about a thing. The Goddess had everything in hand, and if not, well, I was perfectly capable of organizing my own future.

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As the months passed, and the Christmas holidays grew closer, a sense of anticipation started to rule my days. I was waiting.

School finished for the year, and my parents still hadn't mentioned holiday plans. I grew impatient. Finally, I took matters into my own hands. I couldn't wait any more.

"What are we doing for the holidays?" I asked over dinner one night.

"We'll be staying with Alpha Moray again," replied my mother, helping herself to more steak. "Same as last year."

"Good. That was fun. I liked having all those shifters around."

"Thought you might," inserted my dad, gruffly. "Seeing as you go to that human school. It's good to spend time with our own kind."

I shrugged. I had human friends, and for sure it wasn't the same thing. For one thing, they'd think it was really weird if I sniffed them, right? But we could still hang out, still have fun.

"I like my friends."

“You’ll like the shifters more. You just need to spend more time with them.”

To tell the truth, I was a little shocked at my dad’s attitude. Had something changed, or was it just that I hadn’t spent enough time around him to catch on to some of his prejudices? The Goddess knew, he didn’t spend a lot of time getting to know me.

Or maybe it was about knowing and appreciating where I’d come from. Or maybe it was about knowing what – in their minds – I was supposed to do.

Hmm.

“You’ll be staying in the main house with us this year,” my mother announced.

“What? No!” I exclaimed, rising from my seat, already seeing the problems this would cause.

“Don’t argue with me!” snapped my mother. “It’s not up for discussion. It’s already been arranged.”

“But I...”

“Know your place, omega!”

I slumped into my seat, stunned. My mother was an alpha, and I still hadn’t forgiven her for embarrassing me with a compulsion in front of Tal and his friends last Christmas, but she’d never verbally acknowledged the alpha/omega hierarchy with me before. As an omega, I was expected to be submissive. For all the fact I’d had unusual independence for an omega, I realized now that was simply because it had suited my parents to leave me to my own devices. It had meant they could follow their own interests. But now that they had an interest in my future benefit to them – presumably through a union with Alpha Moray’s son – they wanted me to behave like



a traditional omega.

This was so unlikely to happen, that I didn't even bother correcting them. I glowered silently through the entire meal, and as soon as dessert was over, retreated to my room.

I was an omega, but I was no pushover. If they didn't know their own son better, that was on them, not me.

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Finally, finally, we got to the day before Christmas. At last!

It seemed like I'd been waiting forever and as the kilometers passed beneath our wheels, and the sprawling estates gave way to tall eucalypts blurring past the windscreen, tension filled my gut. I couldn't wait to see my friend, Tal, again and yet, I was having mixed feelings. A year was a long time. Would he even remember me? He was several years older... maybe this year, he'd see me as the kid I actually still was.

Fuck . Anticipation warred with trepidation. Now I wasn't so eager to go and find him... what if he brushed me off? What if we had been friends, but we weren't anymore? That would be worse than never having been friends at all.

By the time the car pulled into the driveway at the Moray compound, my gut had tied itself in knots. I cast an uncertain look towards Tal's house at the far end of the yard, my incisors abrading the soft tissue of my bottom lip, then I began hauling bags out of the trunk.

The Alpha and his mate were greeting my parents enthusiastically. Mar was nowhere in sight, thank the Goddess.

“Irian,” Alpha Moray nodded at me.

“Alpha.”

“Hello Irian, it’s good to see you again,” the Alpha Mate’s smile was gentle and kind. “Just put those inside the door and Mar will take everything to the bedrooms later.”

I stepped over the threshold, subtly sniffing. Each family had its own distinct scent. Their house always had a strong alpha aspect to it. The Alpha Mate was speaking again, “I’m sorry but my daughter, Elicia, has a friend staying these holidays. She’s an alpha too, so we’ve given her our extra guest room. I’m afraid that means you’ll either have to sleep out here on the couch, or share Mar’s room, Irian.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’ll sleep in the dorm with the young wolves like I did last year,” I could barely believe my good luck. Staying in the Morays’ house would be as restrictive as fuck. I’d be under the watchful eye of my parents the whole time, and I didn’t think I could stand being under the same roof as Mar for very long either.

The Alpha Mate patted the couch. The fabric was plush and the cushions appeared plump and firm.

“You’re welcome to sleep on the couch, I’m told it’s very comfortable to sleep on.”

“No, it’s fine, really. Sometimes I sleep at odd times during the day,” I lied, “and I won’t want to be in the way. The dorm was fine last year. Thanks anyway.”

Mar entered the room scowling, “You could sleep in my room, y’know, instead. Hanging out with all the pups is hardly appropriate. And boring.”

This guy! I wanted to roll my eyes, but I couldn’t with the Alpha and Alpha Mate standing nearby. Instead, I forced a smile and said, “I had a lot of fun with them last

year. They seemed to appreciate having one of the older guys hanging out with them.” And no, that was totally not a dig at Mar, Mr. Future Alpha of the pack. Not much, anyway.

“I don’t know why you’d want to do that,” he scoffed, a disapproving expression on his face. I fumed silently. Like I don’t know my own mind.

I shrugged. “I guess I’m closer in age to them.” Delivered with a smile and deliberately looking oblivious, I got away with it. Then before anyone could try to dissuade me further, I turned back to the Alpha Mate.

“Do I need to take blankets down there or are there already some on the beds?”

“Mar will help you take some down,” the Alpha Mate replied, leveling a stern look towards her disgruntled son. Mar’s scowl deepened but he didn’t say anything. It was only later, as we were carrying the blankets down to the dormitory that he started on the topic again.

“I don’t see why you want to do this. You could sleep in my room. On a spare mattress. On the floor,” he was practically whining. His voice was really starting to grate on my nerves. I had the feeling he was used to getting his own way. Maybe that was the privilege of being the Pack Alpha’s son.

Or maybe he meant well, but I had a feeling I’d be relegated to the floor because I was an omega, while he enjoyed the comfort of the bed. Unlike when I stayed overnight at Tal’s house, where we had always ended up falling asleep on the same mattress – either his or mine - after hours of talking. But then again, I was also quite certain I wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing a bed with Mar, even lying on top of the covers like I did with Tal.

We hadn’t made it to the dorm, when one of the young shifters spotted me.

“Hey! Guys! Irian’s back,” she shouted as she rushed up to us. Next thing I knew, a pair of surprisingly strong arms wrapped around my middle. The stack of blankets I was carrying wobbled alarmingly, and despite my best efforts to prevent it, toppled.

Whoomp! But they didn’t fall to the floor, landing instead in a squirming, wriggling pile. A tiny hand flailed from beneath the pile of moving blankets, and I grasped it and pulled the tiny pup out. This time the blankets hit the ground, but a pair of pretty green eyes shone up at me, a beaming smile across the young face. It didn’t seem to matter that I hadn’t seen them for nearly a year, these guys were really pleased to see me!

What had I been missing living without a pack all these years?

A low growl beside me reminded me Mar was waiting. He glared at the little shifter getting up from the ground, as if it was his fault the blankets had fallen. The pup totally ignored him. A few other young shifters had gathered by now, all chattering and excited.

I blinked away the blurriness in my vision. They remembered me. And they were happy to see me. It was like... like we were pack. This pack, these shifters, had claimed me as one of their own.

“Hey,” I said. “Let me get myself settled and I’ll come out and play with you guys, okay?”

Excited chattering bombarded us as more shifters gathered, and someone ran off, either to tell the others or maybe to fetch a ball or something. I stepped inside the cool, dark building and tossed the blankets onto the closest free bunk. Mar was a dour presence at my side and I couldn’t help but notice none of the shifters paid him any notice. As Alpha’s son, he would be expected to take over leadership of the pack, when the time came, but if he couldn’t command respect now...

That just made me think of Tal, and I bit my lip uncertainly.

Would he be pleased to see me? I didn't think I could bear it if he wasn't, though if he wasn't, I told myself, I'd just use all my tricks to get him to like me. That was one advantage of the life I'd led so far... I was adaptable and I knew how to get along with people.

Despite my little mental pep talk, however, I was nervous. What if he'd outgrown me? Last Christmas when we'd met, he'd still had one foot half in childhood... this year would be different.

"Are you really going to play with the kids?" Mar grumbled, his voice low and sulky.

"Um...yeah? We had a lot of fun last year."

"Yeah, but you're older now... surely, you don't want to run around playing kids' games," he scoffed, derisively. "Why don't you come back up to the house with me?"

"Well, I promised them. I don't want to disappoint them," I pointed out, diplomatically. I briefly considered Tal's suspicion about Mar's interest in me, and I shuddered. He didn't seem to love his pack the way a future Pack Alpha should. I was pretty sure I would hate to be partnered with him.

I reminded myself I was nobody's pawn. This undesired mating wasn't going to happen.

"Well, I'll see you at dinner, I guess," Mar said grudgingly as we walked out together.

"Sure. Thanks for the help."

“Welcome.” As he walked off, I noticed how the young shifters scattered around him, trying to get out of his way. I couldn’t help feeling a slither of sympathy. Maybe it was just lonely being the future leader, maybe people treated you differently. I didn’t know him well enough to know.

I didn’t have time to think about it because a moment later a searing pain exploded in my thigh with a loud thwack!

“Yeow!” I yelled, as a grinning youngster raced away, then stooped to scoop up the ball spinning at my feet.

I spent the next hour playing with the young ones, chasing, hiding, pelting balls at each other, though I was careful not to throw them too hard. I might have missed accidentally-on-purpose more times than I actually made contact. And I might have sometimes ‘not seen’ the little shifter creeping up on me out of the corner of my eye. But that was all fine. I was there to have fun, not to win.

The game I wanted to win was an entirely different one.

Excitement levels were high and it wasn’t just my arrival; there was a definite electricity in the air, a sharpness, a sort of magic. It was, after all, Christmas Eve.

As we played, I cast furtive glances down towards Tal’s house. The door was shut, and I hadn’t seen anyone come in or out. Maybe he wasn’t home, but he would be home for Christmas, right?

After an hour or so, I was exhausted, and it was dinner time anyway. The younger shifters I’d been playing with were called in one by one, until it was just me and a couple of the older young ones hanging around under the big tree. None of the older adolescents were out here. In fact, I hadn’t seen any of them since we’d arrived.

Tal's door still hadn't opened, or if it had, I'd missed seeing it.

With a sigh, and a leaden feeling in my chest, I got to my feet, brushing off the dirt and leaves. A couple of pairs of eyes tracked mine.

"I guess I better go in for dinner."

The two shifters looked at each other.

"Are you staying with Alpha and his family?"

They mustn't have seen me move my things into the dormitory.

I screwed up my nose. "Sort of? My family is, but I'm sleeping in the dorm." Well, hopefully not all the time, but I didn't tell them that.

The two shifters exchanged glances again.

"What?" I said.

One of them, the younger one, a shifter with red hair and freckles scattered across his nose, repositioned himself, his shorts scratching noisily on the tree roots.

Finally, he blurted out, "Um... we heard some of the guys talking last year about... something happened at the Christmas lunch you came to... and, you're back again this year, and um, we were wondering if, um, maybe Mar was, ah, sort of planning ahead..." he finished in a rush. His freckles all but disappeared under the wash of pink that rushed across his face.

Wow! It didn't take much to start rumors circulating in a wolf-pack. Just a strip of venison.

I needed to shut this down, and fast.

“Nothing’s happening,” I told them, a smile on my face though inside I was raging. “There might have been a bit of a misunderstanding, but there’s definitely nothing...” my hand flapped around in a weird vague sort of gesture, “like that going on.”

“Oh, cool,” the ginger-haired guy nodded, looking relieved. “Pity though. You’re fun. Might liven things up a bit around here.”

“Oh? What? It’s boring here? I can’t imagine that.” I hoped I kept the wistfulness out of my voice. I kind of wished I lived in a pack, now that I’d experienced some time in one. Besides, Tal was in this pack.

“But hey, don’t the ados hang out with you guys sometimes? When I left, you were all playing together.”

“Yeah, sometimes,” the other shifter, a skinny guy with blond hair, joined the conversation. “But Mar keeps telling them not to, and it just gets awkward.” He shrugged.

“Tal got into a fight with Mar over it,” added the ginger guy.

“Yeah, like a real one. Fists and all. Thought they were gonna shift and take it to the next level, but then Alpha came and shut it down. But now, they only play with us when Alpha’s not here to back Mar up.”

“Where’s Tal now?” I asked, bending down and flicking some imaginary dirt off my shorts. I held my breath, pulse thrumming in my neck. My hair, longer this year, brushed over my face.

“He and his friends have been out all day,” one of the boys said.



“They went shopping.”

“No, they didn’t. Alpha sent them off to do something this morning. I think they had to go into the next town.”

“All of them?” My eyebrows displayed my surprise. It would be odd to send all the older boys on an errand the day before Christmas, but it would explain why I hadn’t seen any of Tal’s friends hanging about. They used to spend an awful lot of time loitering under this very tree, but not one of them had been around since I arrived.

“Yeah, think so. Except for Mar. He was the one that came and told them to go.”

Interesting.

“Okay guys, well I’m supposed to be at dinner right now, so I’m outta here.”

“ ‘Kay, Irian. Catch you later, maybe?”

“For sure,” I threw the words over my shoulder as I headed up to the main pack house, dragging my toes as I went.

TAL

I didn't know why we'd been sent on this stupid errand. On Christmas Eve, of all times. What was so important it couldn't wait until after Christmas? Nothing. I wanted to be at home, watching in case we had, um, any visitors for the holidays. Like we did last year. Okay, I finally admitted to myself, I was hoping Irian would turn up again, but it'd been so long since we'd seen each other, or spoken, that I didn't really know whether the tether that had seemed to bind us last year would be enough to bring him back.

It was in the Goddess' hands.

Darkness had already wrapped itself around the compound by the time the boys and I got back. A few doorways and windows cast a golden glow outside. Colored lights twinkled in the windows of all the houses, and someone had even put tiny colored sparkle lights around the trunk of our tree in the center of the yard.

Luke went off to tell Alpha the result of our trip, and the rest of us scattered towards the comfort of our respective homes.

As I approached my front door, I heard the hum of voices getting children ready for bed, murmuring between my sister and her husband, soft snores from my parents' room.

Yellow light spilled out from the little window beside the front door, the glint of red, blue, green and yellow visible through the filmy curtains.

Inside, silence greeted me except for the mechanical candle rasping away on the mantelpiece next to the winged wolf, and faint buzz of the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree. The occasional murmur from distant parts of the house died away as the last of the household settled down for sleep.

I couldn't believe we had to stay out so late on Christmas Eve, though in a way it was justice for the way our crowd liked to pretend we despised the celebration.

In the kitchen, I found some leftover food, which I quickly heated up and devoured. When I'd cleaned up, I wandered back out to the living room, and standing in the middle of the room cast my eyes around, taking in the familiar decorations that were brought out year after year. All the years felt rolled into one. It was like looking down a tunnel into the nostalgic past, one I would leave behind very soon. This would be my last Christmas before completing my majority. Next year I'd be considered a shifter adult. I supposed many things would change for me then.

I looked around some more. The brightly wrapped packages took up most of the room under the tree, and there was no special present from the Goddess waiting for me this year.

With a sigh, I turned off the main lights, leaving only the fairy lights in the tree and those strung around the room. The room itself was in partial darkness, though the fairy lights cast a magical glow.

I settled on the hard floor behind the tree and waited to see if he would come. I told myself, if he didn't come, then it was a sign. It wasn't meant to be. I felt a little foolish, sitting there under the tree, old enough to not believe in fairy tales and Santa Wolf, but also not prepared to give it all up yet. This would be my last Christmas as a non-adult, I crossed my fingers and prayed it would be a good one.

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At 11.45pm, something disturbed me. I must have dozed off, despite it being uncomfortable under the tree, and the searing pain in my leg made me grunt. I supposed I could have shifted to sleep more comfortably, but I'd wanted my human eyes, so I'd simply lain down on the cold hard floor. I was rethinking that decision now as I stretched out the cramping leg.

The room was silent. My senses on alert, I waited. A faint squeak from the hinges of the front door warned me someone was on the threshold. It was an odd time to arrive. My heart leaped into my throat and for a minute, no, only a second, I believed I was going to see Santa Wolf... but no, of course not. I exhaled, a huff that fell softly between the blinking of the twinkle lights. I knew the truth of that.

Another, less fantastical, but even more pleasing thought sent a thrill up my spine. Careful not to make any noise, I got to my feet. My ears strained for sounds.

Fabric rustled followed by the faint click of a latch falling into place; the soft tread of bare feet across hardwood floor came towards where I was hidden behind the tree. I inhaled a deep breath and the strong omega scent hit me hard. I blinked, dazed by the dopamine rush. Swaying slightly, I stepped out from behind the tree.

Startled brown omega eyes met mine. A couple of snowy white teeth nervously worried the plump lower lip, drawing a flick of my eyes. My tongue swiped a wet trail across my lips. And when I realized what I'd done, I hoped the glow cast by the Christmas lights was too dim for the heat in my cheeks to be visible.

"Hey," his soft greeting tumbled breathlessly into the space between us. "Wha- what were you doing there?" He seemed a little dazed too. "I- I mean... I know it's your house and all..." his voice trailed off.

"Waiting to see if you turned up."

“You were?” His cheeks plumped up and the poor abused lip was set free, thank the Goddess. The lights of the Christmas tree were reflected as blue, green and red sparkles in his eyes.

“Yeah.”

A moment later, two slender arms wrapped me in a hug and his face was smooshed against my chest. It would have been rude to extricate myself too soon, right? That’s what I told myself as I let my arms wind around him too, and for the briefest of moments, I felt our hearts thump in time.

When I felt my cock stir, I hurriedly pulled away, hoping he hadn't noticed. I looked at him. His hair was a mess. It was longer than it had been last year, and he was a little taller, but I’d grown a lot, and he only came part-way up my chest.

“So,” I said, my face stretched wide with my grin. “Are you here for the holidays again?”

“Sure am.”

“Gonna stay here with us?”

“Um. Well I’m sort of supposed to be staying in Alpha’s house...”

A low growl vibrated its way out of my throat.

“...but they didn’t have enough bedrooms, so I’m sleeping in the dorm again. Mar tried to convince me to sleep on a mattress in his room, but I got out of that. Supposed to have my meals with them though.”

I scowled. At least he was sleeping in the dorm. But I had a better idea.

“So... it’s late... do you want to stay here?”

“Sure.”

“Want to sleep under the tree like last year or on the mattress in my room?”

He wrinkled his cute nose. I bet he hated that people described it that way, but it really was.

“Um, are we gonna get woken up early if we stay out here?”

“Probably,” I said cheerfully. I really didn’t care right now, I was just so happy and relieved that he was there. We were gonna pick up our friendship right where it left off.

“Then is it okay if we sleep in your room? We’re probably gonna talk for a while, right? And I don’t wanna be totally destroyed on Christmas Day, so I’m gonna need some sleep.”

“That’s perfect,” I told him. “We won’t have to get up ‘til mid-morning that way. No-one will bother us until then.”

I led the way, and he fell into step beside and a little behind me. Huh. I was fairly certain he didn’t even realize he did that.

There was no spare mattress of course, so we piled onto my bed, which was plenty big enough even with me being larger this year, and we talked.

There was a lot to catch up on. I’d been to my first Alpha Camp and Irian peppered me with questions about that. He seemed genuinely interested and his questions were intelligent. Honestly, it was hard to see the age gap between us at this point.

For his part, he'd been at school of course, but he'd been traveling around the country with his parents as they attended conferences and Council meetings and the like. The world he inhabited was so different to mine. Out here in the country, pack life was relaxed, but in the city, he was leading a much more sophisticated life with his family.

"Are you sure your family won't mind me staying over?" Irian broke the comfortable silence that had eventually fallen between us.

"No, they'll be happy to see you. It'll be fine. Although," I frowned as a thought occurs to me, "You said Mar tried to get you to stay in his room, right?"

"Yeah, but I told them I was happy in the dorm."

"When was this?"

"We got here just after lunch. It was right after that."

"And Mar was there when you arrived?"

"Um, yeah. His whole family was there when we arrived."

"When did they find out you were arriving today?"

"I don't know. I think it's been planned for a while. Why? What's up?"

"Fuck that," I snarled. Internally, my wolf bristled, and the hairs on the back of my neck and arms and feet stood on end.

Irian's eyes grew enormous, the irises small brown circles in a sea of white.

“What? What is it?” he whispered.

“Every one of us older shifters was sent on a useless, fucking errand for Alpha today. It took all fucking day and it was totally pointless - you can't get anything done on Christmas Eve, but no, we had to go. That's why I didn't get back until after everyone was in bed tonight. Every fucking one of us went. Everyone... except Mar.” I was furious. Blood rushed into my face. My ears burned, and my eyes prickled hot.

Irian's sharp inhale, as his eyes fixed on me, told me something was wrong. My shirt felt tight and rubbed uncomfortably against my back. My back was itchy as fuck.

“Your eyes are red,” the furrow in Irian's brow deepened. “And your ears...” His eyes went even wider and he stepped back.

Suddenly, I knew what was happening. I was doing an involuntary shift! And I must have been blasting him with a whole lot of alpha aggression. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. My wolf was going absolutely nuts. He wanted to break out of this body, and race up to Mar's house and rip his throat out of his neck. How dare he try to take what was ours?

My head started to buzz, my vision narrowing, and I began to panic, knowing I couldn't control the shift.

A gentle hand slid up my arm, soothing the bristling hairs. The hand was cool against my fevered skin. Although I must have been very frightening in that moment, as my canines had started to descend, Irian leaned in close and the next inhale hit my nostrils laced with his sweet fresh omega scent. It sent a soothing ripple through me. I dragged in another lungful of his scent. The buzzing subsided. I became more aware... of my labored breathing, of my pounding heart, and my racing pulse, which, thankfully, seemed to be slowing.



My wolf was completely distracted by Irian's omega scent. The rage subsided. Embarrassingly, because I was still part-wolf I want to nuzzle up against him, but I had enough presence of mind not to. We were too young for any of that sort of shit, and I didn't understand why I reacted so strongly to him. Although he hadn't reached majority yet, when the scent glands would really kick in, I was very reactive to this omega. Even last year I had been able to scent him at a distance. And he'd always been able to calm me. I wondered if we were fated. It'd be a few years yet before we'd find out, but it seemed a possibility.

I took a few more breaths, until I was feeling more myself. I touched my ears, but they felt normal.

"Shame," smirked Irian. "They were cute."

"Fuck off," I told him, but there was no heat in it and he knew it.

"Are you okay now?"

I still felt jittery. My legs were shaky and I was glad we were on the mattress, otherwise I didn't think they'd be able to hold me up right now. I'd never experienced such a lack of control before, and it was terrifying.

"Yeah. Thanks... for what you did. I..." I choked on the words, almost in tears. "I was out of control. I couldn't stop the shift," I explained. I was mortified. What sort of alpha lost control like that?

Irian shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "You haven't passed majority yet, you can't expect to have full control."

"I've never heard of anyone losing it like that," I whispered, "none of the others have ever had that happen to them."

He cocked his head. “Would they have told you if they had? Are you going to tell them ?”

I thought about it for a moment. He had a point. They probably wouldn’t want to talk about it either. But it occurred to me that maybe I had a responsibility to warn them it could happen. If Irian hadn’t been with me, I might not have been able to stop. The consequences could have been dire.

“Besides,” Irian continued in his soft voice, “I think I know what caused that.”

I squinted at him, brows scrunching.

“It seemed to start when you were thinking about Mar. Do you want to know what I think?” and he giggled softly, though an involuntary shift was no laughing matter. “I think your wolf got jealous.”

Oh fuck! Now I had a jealous wolf to deal with.

???

Christmas lunch was similar to last year. There was the empty seat beside Mar again as we all went to seat ourselves, and with a sigh, I escorted Irian to it. I hated it, from the look on his face I was certain he hated it, but it was better than allowing his mother to compel him again.

Irian refused all venison again and helped himself to chicken, beef and potatoes, with an unobtrusive eye-roll to me where I was watching with narrowed eyes from further down the table. Yes, I felt possessive. Yes, I felt protective. I wasn't sure why, but it felt right.

I piled the venison high on my plate, not caring that I looked like a glutton, and I put

it aside for when Irian came over that evening.

Christmas – Year 3

IRIAN

Another year passed, pretty much the same as before, and before I knew it, we were in the lead up to Christmas again.

This year, as soon as we got to the Moray compound I was eager to run off to find Tal. I was more confident this time, after how things had gone last holidays. Besides, he'd called me a couple of times during the year. It had only ever been at night and I wondered about that. But I knew he didn't have a cellphone, no-one in his pack did - apparently Alpha Moray thought cellphones would spell the end of pack culture or something. Anyway, Tal had to be using a landline of some sort and there was no privacy in that, so our conversations weren't deep and meaningful. Still, it had been something.

I knew he would have passed his majority this year, and I was keen to see what changes it had brought.

We arrived at the Moray pack compound a week earlier than usual.

“Where do you think you’re going?” my mother scowled as she caught me sneaking away from the car even though it was still laden with our stuff.

“Um... I was going to find my friends...” I trailed off, hesitating.

She humphed. “Not until you’ve helped with the unpacking.”

“Eh, let him go,” advised my dad. “He needs to get used to being around shifters. He’s got too many human friends. It’s not natural. He needs to learn his place by being around them. You know we discussed this.”

My mum just rolled her eyes at him. Respectfully, of course. “Just bring the luggage in and then you can go,” she said, grudgingly.

I was pleased that she wasn’t trying to force me to stay around Mar this year, so I counted that as a win. I hurried to get the car emptied so I could disappear before something else came up.

It was true Tal and his friends were still the only shifter friends I had. All the others were human, except for one guy, a mage, who I often saw at the same functions I attended with my parents. (Xeres always looked about as happy as I was to be at these events). And I really did need to spend more time around them learning what it was like to be a shifter and part of a pack.

So naturally that was the reason I was so keen to catch up with Tal as soon as I arrived.

It had nothing to do with that weird connection we had but didn’t quite understand. Or the hormones that were starting to make themselves known racing around in my body.

As soon as I could, I raced down to the big house, feet pounding over the bare ground. This year I was confident that I would be welcome here. I burst through the open door, eager for the pre-Christmas mayhem.

And it was there. Chaos reigned in the living area, where the Christmas tree was propped up in its pot of sand. All the kids were dancing around the tree, digging baubles out of the boxes of decorations and finding places to hang them, voices

chattering in excitement. Papers rustled, boxes scraped across floorboards, voices protested as kids argued over favorite decorations.

One of the little ones rushed up to me with a shiny blue ball in his hand. I recognized him, though he'd grown a lot since last year.

"Hey Irian, hang this for me!" he ordered, pointing to a branch high up in the tree that he couldn't possibly reach.

"That's your job," I told him, lifting him up in my arms so he was tall enough to hang the bauble in the tree himself. He grinned happily, then wriggled free to run off and find another decoration that desperately needed to find its special place.

"Hey," I addressed my greeting to the adults hovering over the kids' chaos.

"Oh, my Goddess, you're here already!" exclaimed Tal's sister, rushing over. She smacked a wet kiss on my cheeks and nearly squashed me in a crushing hug.

I smiled at her, "Hey Jana! Yeah, we came early this year. Where's Tal?"

"Oh, honey, he's not..." the crash! of shattering glass and the anguished cry of one of the kids had her dashing off before she could finish. The bloodied finger and prolonged wail meant she wasn't coming back any time soon, so as Tal obviously wasn't in here, I wandered off to look for him.

Where was Tal? Probably in his bedroom avoiding the mayhem, although I kind of expected him to be helping the kids hang their decorations. He was the favorite uncle, after all.

The stairs creaked under me, and I smiled as I remembered how unsuccessfully Tal had tried to creep silently down them that first Christmas Eve. By the time I'd

finished my musings, I'd reached his closed door.

Knock! Knock!

No response.

If he was sleeping, I'd surprise him! This would be good.

The handle rattled despite my careful turning, the door creaking startlingly as it opened into a room shrouded in darkness. The blinds had been pulled, although it was light outside. My eyes flicked to the bed, but there was no Tal-shaped lump under the covers.

In addition, the room was extraordinarily tidy – no clothes on the floor, nothing out of place... I took a step inside, brows scrunching. Why was the room so neat? Tal wasn't particularly messy but there should have been some signs of his presence.

But the bed was made up neatly and the room had an unoccupied feeling - as though no-one had been here for some time. That sent slivers of unease sliding through me. My nose flared, scenting the air... it could detect his scent here of course, but he hadn't been here recently. Where was Tal?

I wandered back down to the living room, but the kids were still decorating and the chaos was continuing, so I didn't stay.

Stepping outside, I drew a breath. Where could he be? Surely, he knew I'd be arriving today?

Perhaps he was with his friends. Swallowing down my disappointment that he hadn't been waiting for me, I lifted my chin and went looking for the boys. There were shocks waiting for me there too.

Dar, Zern and Luke had matured greatly since last year. Their faces had thinned out, and their chins were covered in significant amounts of neatly groomed hair. And all the group had developed muscles - hair and muscles were literally climbing out of their shirts. Some of the group must surely have completed their transition to majority, with the others very close behind. There was a distinct alpha vibe about the group, but they didn't intimidate me.

"Hey!" I called as I got up close. I wasn't certain what to call them now.

"Heya, Irian!"

"Hoo-hoo, Irian!"

"G'day."

The guys all greeted me enthusiastically. A lot of solid thumps to the back later, we lounged back under the tree.

"You've..." I trailed off, suddenly uncertain of what was acceptable conversation here. I shouldn't have worried.

"Yep," Luke smiled, a smug grin plastered across his handsome face. "Darius, Kalius and I have all reached majority. "You have to obey our commands now."

"Pfft, like that's gonna happen," I retorted with the amount of sass they'd come to expect from me. We were friends now, and they knew I had a particular connection with Tal (I guess he's Talius now). There was no way they would dream of using their alpha compulsion on me or even order me around.

"We didn't know if you'd come this year," Darius told me, and I frowned, but he didn't elaborate.



I was afraid to ask. But I had to.

“Oh, why was that?”

“Talius isn’t here. He went to Alpha Camp. You didn’t know?”

“Uh, no. I just assumed he’d be here.”

“I was surprised he went now, with Christmas coming up and all, but, yeah...” Darius shrugged.

“Maybe he’ll be back for Christmas...” I offered, hopefully.

“Nah, the final camp always goes for four weeks.”

“Talius told me this one was different, it’s concentrated into two weeks. He said he’d be back for Christmas Eve,” Kalius said. “We were talking about it before he left.”

“I’ve never heard of final camp being less than a month,” insisted Luke, now Lucius.

“Neither,” agreed Darius. “You must have heard wrong. It’s always four weeks. I’m sorry, Irian, but there’s no way he’ll be back. I don’t know why he went on this one. There’s another one at the end of January.”

“Oh well, that’s okay, you guys are here.” I tried for an upbeat tone, but my cheeriness felt as fake as my smile. Of course, I loved spending time with the guys – they were part of my unofficial pack and they always looked after me like brothers – but none of them was Tal... Talius.

Why had he chosen to go away now? He knew I’d be here. We hadn’t really talked about it when we’d spoken during the year but it was kind of understood that I’d be

here at Christmas... but maybe this year he had grown tired of me. He'd passed into his full majority and was a full alpha now. Maybe he was moving on.

Maybe this was the easy way to let me down. I tried not to think about it.

I hung on to my hope that he'd be back in time, but by Christmas Eve, Talius still hadn't shown up. There remained one last hope. At 11.45pm, I shifted into my wolf and slipped out of the dormitory. The shadows were stark, cast by a three-quarter moon. Its unworldly light bathed the yard, the buildings and the tree in the center of the yard standing out in sharp relief. A few puffs of fluffy whiteness skipped across the sky, mostly unobserved. I slunk towards Tal's house, keeping to the shadows. I felt foolish, but I had to do this, it was my last hope.

The house was bathed in moonlight, rendering it with an eerie glow, but behind the windows it was dark except for the twinkling of the fairy lights in the Christmas tree. It was a comfortingly familiar sight, which eased the ache I felt inside.

Maybe I'd get inside, and Talius would be waiting for me, just like he had been last year.

With that hopeful thought, I squeezed through the wolf-door, the acrylic flap pressing uncomfortably on my back. Clearly my wolf had grown since last year.

Inside, all was quiet, apart from the faint buzz of the lights, and the mechanical candle cycling through its rainbow colors like it did every year. I shouldered my way between the presents, making a space for myself, and curled up on the floor, eyes facing the door.

Midnight came and went. In the early hours, as the dark in the room was starting to fade, I accepted my friend was not coming. I was grateful to be in my wolf form right then. It was my most healing form, and the way my chest felt cracked and empty, that

was what I needed. I dragged myself up onto my paws. The children would be coming soon and I needed to be gone when they arrived. I couldn't fake a happy face for them and I didn't want to spoil their fun.

The acrylic flap refused to budge, and for a horrible moment I thought I was going to be stuck inside. But then it jerked open with a slap , and I slunk through. I made my way to the dormitory, tail drooping and dragging in the dirt, head down. I had never felt so low.

I shifted, climbed into my bunk, and pulled the covers over my head. Thank the Goddess there was no-one on the lower bunk to feel the shaking of the bedframe.

### TALIUS

I was frantic.

I'd been at this fucking alpha camp for two weeks, and I'd just learned they were running it for another two weeks. What the almighty fuck?

It was supposed to be a concentrated curriculum, doing the four weeks in two, and finishing up in time for Christmas. At least, that's what Alpha told me when he insisted I attend this one because there were no places available for the February camp. I'd figured I'd be home in time for Christmas, and it'd give me the weeks after Christmas free... the weeks my friend Irian would be there. We only saw each other once a year around Christmas time, so this was really important to me.

"Do you know when they decided to run this camp for the full four weeks?" I asked one of the other alphas in the classroom, just after the lecturer set out the schedule for the next two weeks. A horrible chill had run down my spine at the announcement. Irian was going to be expecting me. What would he think when I didn't show?

The alpha looked at me, a faint frown across his brows. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't it?" he sounded puzzled.

"Well, the content was supposed to be concentrated into two weeks," I reminded him.

The alpha pulled a face. "Nah, man, never was. Don't know where you got that idea. It was always four weeks."

“What? What about Christmas?”

“What about it?”

“Why would they run a camp over Christmas? Doesn’t everyone want to go home for Christmas?”

He looked at me, a bleak expression skating across his face. Then he shook his head slowly, “Not everyone has a home to go to, or that they want to go home to. That’s why they do run this camp over Christmas.”

He turned away, shuffling together his notes into a scruffy pile.

“Wanna come for a beer?” he asked, after a moment.

I paused. I couldn’t believe this. If this was true, it was highly unlikely they’d make an exception and let me leave, or even believe me when I told them my Alpha sold it to me as a two-week course.

Dammit, he’d insisted I take this course.

“Sure,” I said. “But I need to drop by admin first. If there’s any chance they’ll let me go home for Christmas, I need to do it. I... I’ve got someone waiting on me.”

One black eyebrow arced up. “Really? But you’re only 21, right? You can’t be...”

I shook my head, interrupting, “No, not mated. Of course not. But I... already know who my mate will be, if he accepts me. I know it’s early... but I just know , y’know... I don’t know if we’re fated, or if that’s even a thing, but there’s something...”

My new friend hummed, nodding appreciatively. “That’s real nice, man. Happy for you. But... Christmas – they know you’re here, right?”

“No. Not unless my friends have told him. I was supposed to be back by the time he arrived.” I hesitated. “My Alpha told me this was a two-week program.”

He cocked his head. “A mistake? Alphas don’t usually make that sort of mistake.”

The grinding of my teeth should have been answer enough. “Alpha’s son is interested in my... guy. Or at least, the parents seem to have plans for an arranged marriage, and Alpha’s son is going along with it. Irian only visits our pack once a year, at Christmas.”

“Fuck. You think you’ve been set up?”

I scowled. “Looks that way. Fuck! What a load of bullshit!”

I’d been played. And it wasn’t as if I could defy Alpha anyway. As long as I was part of his pack, I had to defer to him. He couldn’t force Irian to accept Marius, but he could make things difficult for me. Fuck that! I was gonna leave that pack as soon as I practically could.

A low, furious growl voiced my frustration. I was stuck in this place, and Marius was at home with Irian. No doubt trying to win him over.

But then I snickered to myself. Irian was more than capable of keeping Marius in his place, especially since Irian was now aware of his interest. I liked that my omega – I mean, my future omega – had sass.

The thought brightened me and for a moment I smiled, forgetting how upset Irian would be when I wasn’t there. I hoped the guys told him where I was... but even

then, he was still going to expect me home on Christmas Eve. Goddess! When I thought of us missing our customary encounter under the tree, my eyes got a little misty. I hurriedly blinked them clear.

I didn't see I had much choice but to make the best of my situation, just like these other guys did with theirs, but I was going to try to get out of it.

"I'm Talius," I said, holding out my hand. Although I'd seen him around, I'd never spoken to this guy until today. He tended to keep to himself, not interacting with the other alphas much, but now we were talking he seemed friendly enough.

"Nerius," he shook my hand. "Let's go down to admin now, I'll come with you and then we can have that beer."

I gathered my things, and with Nerius at my side, headed towards the admin block. It was quiet in the corridors. Lectures were over for the day and I hoped there'd still be someone around I could speak to.

As we approached, I let slip a hiss of relief to see a dark shadow moving around behind the blinds in the office window. But just as soon, my heart began thudding anxiously behind my ribs.

Nerius nodded towards the bench outside the administrative building. "I'll wait for you here. Good luck."

I acknowledged him with a nod, then swallowing hard and drawing myself up to my full height, walked up to the door. My chest expanded with a deep breath and...

Knock. Knock. I rapped my knuckles on the door.

"Door's open. Come on in." The voice, rough but cheerful, was welcoming.

The doorknob was slippery in my clammy hand and I had to make two attempts before it would turn.

A large man with hair beginning to grey sat behind the desk. He was a beta, possibly somewhere in his late 30s or early 40s. I hadn't seen him on any of my previous visits to admin. Not that there had been that many. He sized me up with sharp brown eyes and waved me in.

"Come on in and sit down. Tell me what's got you looking so concerned."

He stood up and leaned across the desk, hand extended. "Name's Johnson."

"Oh, er. Hey. I'm Talius Braden. I'm in the graduating Alpha program that's running now." I replied as we shook hands.

"Hey, Talius. Pleased to meet you. Now sit down and tell me what's on your mind."

I shifted nervously in my seat.

"Well, sir, I..."

He cut me off. "Relax, Talius. No need to be formal with me. Just call me Johnson."

"Cool, um, thanks. See the thing is, when I signed up for this, I was told the course was an accelerated course. That it would finish in two weeks..."

The grey-flecked head was already shaking, as he interrupted, bushy eyebrows drawn. "That was never going to happen, Talius. I don't know where you got that idea from."

I hesitated. Would he believe me? Was he going to laugh in my face?



“My Alpha told me.”

Johnson cocked his head, brows meeting across his forehead. His dark brown eyes pierced me.

“Every Alpha knows it’s a four-week program. Always. Are you sure you didn’t mishear him?” The tone of his voice had dropped, more serious now. Did he think I was lying?

My head fell forward, the unruly hair flopping across my face. It hid the tears of frustration and rage pricking at my eyes.

“There are... reasons... Alpha might not want me around the pack at Christmas,” I admitted softly.

The silence was a vacuum between us. He was waiting for me to fill it, so with a sigh, I did.

“There’s an omega who visits our pack every Christmas,” I explained. “I mean, he’s too young to be making any plans, but he and I, we have some kind of bond, and, ah, we kind of suspect we’re fated somehow,” I looked up when I said this, trying to gauge his reaction.

He looked at me, eyes thoughtful and sympathetic. He wasn’t looking like he thought me an idiot or anything, which was encouraging.

I continued, “But Alpha’s son has shown an interest in him.” I bit my lip. What I was about to say, could be out of line. It depended on how traditional Johnson was. “We think maybe an arrangement has been made between his parents and Alpha, for a union between their sons.”

Johnson's jaw firmed. He looked pensive, then he said, "And you think it would be convenient if you were out of the way so his son can make a move?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"How old is this person you think is your potential mate?"

"He's 18."

Johnson leaned forward in his chair, looking alarmed.

"Whoa, that's young! You know you can't be..."

I put my hand up to stop him, I didn't want him thinking I was taking advantage.

"No, I know. We haven't... we aren't... we're just friends for now, but we know it's gonna be more later on," I stammered.

Johnson sighed, blinked a few times. His chair squeaked loudly as he settled back into the vinyl upholstery. My eyes were drawn to where his thumb and middle finger were rubbing his temples.

"Okay," he said at last, "keep going."

"I was wondering if I could go home for Christmas," I asked, hating the way my voice cracked.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the whirring of the ceiling fan above us. I heard voices somewhere outside, a few birds chattering. I wondered if Johnson could hear my heart pounding through my chest wall. He took so long to say something, that for a moment I thought maybe...

Finally, he sighed. “I’m sorry, son. You can’t do that. Leaving the premises would break the contract with the Camp Administration, and you’d be thrown out of the program. The Council is very strict about alphas following procedure. Alphas need to learn self-discipline young or there’d be a whole bunch of them running around just doing whatever they wanted, consequences be damned.

I’m not saying that’s you, son, but that’s the reason the rules are there.

You go home now and they won’t let you back in for another twelve months, and they’ll make graduating the program even harder for you.

I’m sorry for your situation, but there’s nothing I can do. Hopefully your young man is understanding about it.”

“If he’s still there when I get back,” I spat out angrily. It wasn’t as if I could even call my parents’ house and ask them to pass a message to him - Alpha Camp was entirely isolated and self-contained, with no communications in or out for the duration of the program. The No Distraction Policy had been clearly explained on Day 1, as it was with every camp.

There was a procedure for emergencies, but apparently this didn’t qualify, because Johnson ignored my outburst and asked, “Anyone looking out for him while you’re away?”

“He knows my friends. They’ll probably keep a watch over him, once they realize I’m not gonna be back in time.”

“In time? In time for what?”

“Before he goes home. We only see each other once a year during these holidays.”

“Uh-huh. Has he got a name, this young man of yours?”

“Irian. Irian Mensen. Are you sure there’s nothing you can do?”

Johnson grunted.

“I wish there was, but the rules are clear.”

The chair scraped on the hard floor as I rose abruptly. “Thanks anyway. I thought it was worth a try.” I couldn’t keep the bitterness from my voice.

Before I reached the door, Johnson’s calm voice drifted through my morose thoughts.

“You know, if you’re fated, it’ll work out. Might not be an easy path to get there but you have time.”

His words didn’t comfort me the way he wanted them to, but they had told me one thing. Fated mates were real .

???

“How did it go?” Nerijs got to his feet as I exited the office.

Although I was exceedingly depressed and angry, I nevertheless registered that he hadn’t been eavesdropping, which he could easily have done with his shifter hearing. I appreciated that. He was a decent guy – not all alphas were, precisely why we had this program. I shook my head.

“Nothing doing. If I leave campus, I’ll get thrown out of the course. They won’t let me in again for another year.”

“That sucks, man. C’mon. If there’s nothing you can do about it, might as well go get that beer.”

I nodded and we walked off together. I was glad Nerius wasn’t one of the chatty guys that couldn’t shut up. He walked in silence, letting me brood.

I was going to hate everything about this Christmas.

???

In the library next to the lecture rooms, an artificial Christmas tree had been set up. It was decorated, not as nicely as the one at home would be, but it was obvious someone had gone to quite a bit of trouble with it, and when I walked into the room late on Christmas Eve, I was grateful for it. This part of the camp was quiet, most of the alphas having gone to sleep already, though a few were still up partying in someone’s room at the end of the dormitory block. I looked on them a little differently now I knew why they were all here. Let them party. I hoped they were enjoying themselves.

I didn’t feel like partying, and I didn’t feel like celebrating.

As I entered the darkened room, the soft twinkle of the colored lights in the tree brought a blurriness to my vision. This was not how things were supposed to be. Tossing my clothes aside, I shifted and settled myself under the tree. Lying there with my wolf, head resting on our paws, we thought about our omega. Where was he now? What was he doing? Was he sad? Or was he angry at us? Perhaps he thought we didn’t try hard enough to be there. Perhaps he thought we didn’t care.

My wolf gave a low, sad whine and I felt the rumble in my chest, and the involuntary sigh that escaped my throat.

It was a long time before we drifted off to sleep.

Christmas totally sucked.

IRIAN

In the early hours of Christmas Day, after the disappointment of Christmas Eve, I had dragged myself back to the dormitory where I stayed mainly to avoid Marius, but also so I could move freely around the compound. Usually that meant slipping across to Tal's house and hanging out there...

This year... I squeezed my eyes tight to stop the tears trickling out, and I buried my face in my pillow. There was a pain in my chest, a hard block of concrete that threatened to crush me. I could barely breathe and my throat was constricted from trying to hold in my feelings. And yet, I felt empty. It was a strange kind of dissonance, feeling so full of emotion and yet so empty at the same time.

After a long, sad time, I drifted off into a half-sleep. I heard the sounds of excited pups in the distance and pulled the thick fabric of the coverlet over my ears.

I heard the squeals and laughter of the young shifters as they played their games in the courtyard and huddled further under the covers.

I heard the sound of my heart breaking and pretended I didn't.

???

A hand shook me roughly awake. I grumbled.

"Leave me alone. I'm sleeping."

“Not anymore, you’re not.”

“I should be,” I muttered, squirreling my way deeper under the covers.

A blast of cool air hit me. This annoying person had tossed the covers off me! I shivered. It wasn’t really cold, it was summer after all, but I felt exposed.

I felt the weight of Darius’ hand on my shoulder again. “Come on,” he said, more gently. “It’s time for lunch.”

“I don’t want any,” I sulked, smothering myself with my pillow.

“You have to. Everyone has to go to Christmas lunch. Alpha expects it.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say Well, he’s not my Alpha when I realized this was just plain childish and wasn’t going to get me anywhere.

Reluctantly, I sat up. Darius’ green eyes watched me, looking compassionate and concerned. I hated it. I hated that he could see straight through me. He knew why I was hurting.

Softly, he said, “I don’t know why he’s not here, Irian. I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know, if he’s not here, it’s not by his choice.”

I hid my sniff with a fake cough but said nothing. Then surprisingly, Darius’ lips twitched and one side of his mouth quirked up. He tried to stop the snigger coming out, but I heard it anyway.

“What?” I glared at him.

Now his smile stretched across his whole face. He raised a finger to the side of his



mouth in a rubbing motion and nodded towards me. Cautiously I raised my hand and rubbed my index finger along the corners of my mouth, and to my absolute disgust and embarrassment, found a line of dried spittle there.

I pointed my finger at him and glared. “Don’t say anything!”

He shrugged, still smirking. “I’ll wait for you outside. If you’re not out in five minutes, I’m coming in to get you.”

With that, he was gone, and I was left alone in the dorm. Everyone else was long gone from there, and the silence was a cocoon, a shelter I’d have to leave any minute. A slow stream of air passed my lips in a resigned hiss as I sat up. Hurriedly throwing on some fresh clothes, I dashed to the bathroom to wipe the drool from my face and fix my bedhair, then rushed outside before Darius embarrassed me further by dragging me out.

The young alpha was leaning casually against the wall and pushed himself off when he saw me. The bastard was smirking.

“C’mon,” he put an arm around my shoulders, and gave me a little shake. “Me ‘n the boys’ll look after you.”

It was kind of him, but it wasn’t going to make up for Talius not being there. I’d been eager to see where we stood now that he’d passed his majority and I was starting mine. Would our relationship have changed too?

People swarmed around the food hall. Several of the younger kids were running around the room, plastic airplanes in their outstretched hands, mock battles taking place in the air. Others were jumping up and down, pestering the adults. Betas and older omegas moved around bringing out steaming plates of festive food as everyone gathered. Alpha, the Alpha Mate and my parents were already seated at the table.

Marius and his sister were too, but suddenly I was surrounded by a rambunctious bunch of newly majored alphas – Talius’ friends – who literally swallowed me up into their vociferous group. No-one else could get near me or was able to speak to me, and before I knew it, they’d carried me along with them and I was seated in the middle of their group, actively engaged in their talk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mar – now Marius – scowling, an empty seat beside him. I shuddered, feeling frighteningly vulnerable without Talius there to support me, then my eyes fell on his friends gathered around me, and I realized they had taken on his role in his absence. A lump formed in my throat, and I blinked a few times. This was what it was like to be pack.

At least I got my venison this year, though I didn’t miss Marius’ eyes shooting daggers at me as I helped myself to the steaming meat.

Christmas came and went. Worst Christmas ever.

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The following week passed. The alphas rallied around me, so it was next to impossible for Marius to get time alone with me. Since he wasn’t friends with the group, he didn’t join us for any hanging out time. He often prowled past us scowling, but the boys swallowed me up into their group and he never got the chance to speak to me.

When the boys were summoned and given tasks to perform as part of their new status in the pack, I made myself scarce, hiding out in the woods behind the pack compound, or playing hide-and-squeak with the younger pups. But my heart wasn’t in it. I went through the motions of engaging with the others, but there was a quiet dead place inside me that felt like it would always be empty.

I had to get through another week without letting Marius corner me and I'd be free. Not fine, just free. I tried not to think about Talius not being here to see me. I thought of Darius' words, and I wished they were true, but I didn't want to delude myself. Pretty sure he knew I'd be here, and his absence sent a clear message. It felt like a kick in the gut, but I was determined not to show it.

I couldn't wait to go home and lick my wounds in private.

I thought about next year and wondered how many of the alphas would still be here... they were at an age where they could leave and start their own packs if they were brave enough, though they were still too young to take mates. But there were always packs that had lost their Alpha that would happily accept a new young Alpha as their leader, and plenty of unattached betas that would jump at the chance to be part of the formation of a new pack, even with an untried, untested Alpha.

Maybe Talius had already left to join or form his own pack. Maybe that was why he wasn't here. He was supposed to be here now, but he hadn't come back after camp. Would he really just leave without saying goodbye to everyone?

It wounded me to think he'd left without me. It hurt to breathe.

Goddess, I just wanted to get out of here, go home, be alone.

But there was one more obligation I hadn't considered. Under other circumstances I would have welcomed it. I should have guessed it was coming, but I was so caught up being miserable that I'd failed to notice the way my blood was starting to stir. The full moon was calling to the wolves.

"We'll be attending the pack run tomorrow night," my dad informed me, one evening sticking his head into the dormitory. "The whole pack is running. That includes you," he added, in case there was any doubt. "It'll be good for you to experience one."

"Sure," I muttered listlessly from my bunk, pulling the covers over my head. I'd always wanted to go on a pack run, but tonight I couldn't bring myself to care.

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The excitement was palpable.

Wolves and people had gathered in the courtyard, where the atmosphere was one of barely contained anticipation. Because the entire compound was surrounded by trees and was isolated, there was no need to wait to get into the forest to shift. I'd always assumed these events would be chaotic, but it was all very organized, notwithstanding the pent-up energy everywhere around me. No clothes scattered on the ground, nor shoes left lying around. Everyone undressed in their homes and entered the compound either naked or already shifted.

When everyone had assembled, Alpha Moray addressed the restless pack.

"We have guests running with us tonight, Alphas Mensen and their son, so I expect a respectful run from everyone. As I always do. There will be refreshments served in the hall afterwards as usual. We are expecting some cloud cover tonight, so keep your little ones close. Now, let's go!"

One moment it was an older, slightly portly man standing on his porch in front of the crowd, and the next a mighty timber wolf stood before us. His coat was a blend of grey and brown, and the fur under his chin was beige, with tufts of the same color peeking out from under his belly. A large bushy tail swept the ground behind him, its black tip blending with the dark of the forest behind making it appear strangely stumpy.

A deep howl reverberated around the compound as the Alpha signaled the start of the run. The enormous wolf leaped down, and raced away into the forest, his mate at his

shoulder, my parents' wolves following close behind.

Those who hadn't yet shifted, did so, and howls of different tones and timbres broke out around the compound as the rest of the pack followed their leaders like a stream of fur in shades of brown, black, and grey slipping between the trees. There seemed no particular order in which to run - some family groups with small pups followed close after the leaders, others seemed to be waiting for the main group to leave.

The adolescents were still playing and leaping around each other in the compound, clearly in no hurry to join the pack.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump.

"Ready to go?" asked Darius, as he began his shift.

Mutely, I nodded. And shifted. Moments later, paws thudding over the dry ground, I headed off with the last of the pack into the shadowy depths of the forest.

Once among the trees, the silvery light of the moon landed on our coats in dappled patches that seemed to seethe and writhe as our muscles flexed beneath our coats. It was magical and despite myself, I began to enjoy this new experience.

Clearly, the young adults had purposely chosen to start late. Now, in the thrill of catching up, they streaked through the forest, gait smooth and even, nose to tail, noses extended, tails flat out behind them. I tried to keep up, the speed and night air making my eyes water, the forest blurring as we raced past. I concentrated on the tail immediately in front of me, disregarding the others, forcing my legs to move faster.

My paws and heart beat in a steady tattoo, the cool of the forest floor on my pads contrasting with the heat of my blood. The drumming of paws over the ground repeated in my head, over and over and over, as we relentlessly raced on. Breaths

becoming more labored, sides beginning to heave, we caught up to the stragglers of the main pack, and the group began to disperse as we wove our way amongst the other wolves.

On and on we went, some of the wolves falling behind, the younger pups yipping as they were turned back by their parents, only the older and stronger ones continuing on. I lost sight of my friends, strange wolves I didn't recognize running with me now. On and on we went.

Dark shadows interspersed with patches of light as the moonlight trickled through the canopy. The occasional twig snapped underfoot. My tongue lolled, saliva dripping, and my sides heaved as I ran on, keeping pace with the wolves around me.

The group spread out more as we went deeper into the forest, until I was running on my own track, the shapes of other

wolves running parallel, disappearing and reappearing behind the tree trunks as they ran alongside but further away.

The night dulled as a wisp of cloud drifted across the moon, and for a moment it was as if I were alone, then my eyes adjusted and I saw the dark shapes of wolves moving though the forest around me.

We kept going; deeper, further, higher. The moon sailed free of the cloud and the leaves were silver and black again. Step after step after step, paws light over the ground. The moment I noticed the trees grew sparser at this elevation, was the instant when I realized there were scarcely any wolves around me. Then another cloud blanketed the moon and the forest fell into profound darkness.

My muzzle felt hot. The harsh raspy breaths pounded in my ears, blending with the thrumming of my blood in a confusing jumble. But it wasn't my breath. It was the

exhale of a large alpha wolf which had appeared at my shoulder. Without slowing, I glanced sideways and... shock! Feral, bloodshot eyes glared back at me, and a hard bump on my shoulder nudged me off track, pushing me in a different direction.

Marius! I recognized him by his scent. But it was not the Marius I knew... he was different. His wolf had possession of him, and I sensed there was more beast than man.

I tried to swing back on track, but his musclebound shoulder blocked me, forcing me further and further upwards. He was separating me from the pack! A small frisson of fear ran through me, the hairs on my neck and back rising.

He bumped me again, and I had no choice but to go, looking around for help, but he'd already separated us from the group. I spun and tried to double back, but with a snarl, the alpha lunged in front of me, cutting off my escape.

We faced off. The snarling alpha prowled forward menacingly. The scent of his arousal was heavy. I edged backwards. Fear skittered along my veins. He was so much larger than I, and feral with his lust. This wasn't Marius anymore, his wolf had full control of him, and it seemed the adrenaline and excitement of the run had pushed him into a rut. He couldn't make a permanent union with me, because of my age, but... he could do other things.

I snarled, lips curling. I wasn't going to let him. He'd have to kill me first.

I backed up until I felt the cold, rough bark of a tree behind me. I hunched in on myself, apparently giving up. The alpha advanced on me, nostrils flaring, mucosae red. His cock had emerged from its sheath.

I pressed my hind paws into the trunk, and exploded into his neck, grabbing for his throat. I got a mouthful of fur instead, and he barely staggered, but his eyes went

wide with surprise. I could run... or I could... I launched myself at him again, driving him backwards more from confusion than anything else. I didn't have enough body weight for a real chance of beating him. But he hadn't expected me to fight back. I was an omega. But I wasn't just any omega. I wasn't going to lay down and give up. I threw myself at him again, snapping and snarling.

He shook his head and I saw the moment the ripple went through his hind quarters. I tensed, readying myself to withstand the attack...

...he staggered sideways as a black wolf barreled into his flank, knocking him off his feet. It was Darius. He pressed his attack and ground Marius' wolf into the dirt, standing menacingly over him, jaws near his throat but not biting. A low growl rumbled from his throat.

The other wolf didn't move. He lay there snarling softly. Then he quietened. He seemed to shrink a little, and I realized the moment had passed. Marius was back in control of his wolf.

Darius seemed to recognize this too. He let go and backed away cautiously, eyes steady on the other wolf, muscles quivering, ready to explode if necessary.

Marius' wolf stood up and shook himself, tale slapping against his flanks. He looked embarrassed, if a wolf could look that way, bowed his head, and turning, disappeared amongst the trees.

Darius' wolf watched him go, and then with a flick of his muzzle indicated we should rejoin the pack. We stayed close together as he threaded his way through the trees. The scent of the pack was enough to guide us and when we found them, they were milling around in an open area high up on the mountain. The run had finished. As the last stragglers arrived, we lifted our muzzles to the moon, the howls echoing eerily around the mountains.



A few couples slunk off into the night, but the remainder of the pack headed back down the mountain together. When we'd shifted and dressed, and I was enjoying the feast along with my friends, I stepped up close to Darius. "Thanks, Darius."

He nodded. "You're welcome. These things happen. Runs sometimes get out of hand. You shouldn't have been left on your own."

I thought about the time Talius had inadvertently shifted, and realized it was true. Sometimes the wolf biology took over. Adolescent alphas could be dangerous, but my brother from the pack had taken care of things. Another reason to appreciate a pack - you were never truly alone.

"What happened?" asked Lucius, eyebrows raised.

"Nothing," I replied. It wasn't really Marius' fault, and I didn't want him to be blamed. He already had enough trouble getting respect from his future pack.

The guys let it go when they saw I didn't want to talk about it. Darius might have filled them in later, but I wasn't going to be the one to do it.

I didn't really feel safe sleeping in the dorm any more though. Talius wasn't around, and who knew if Marius might become a little more predatory.

I spent the night in the forest as my wolf, pacing through the wilderness until I found a cave. It was small and protected. I made it into a den and I curled up tight inside. The longer hairs of my bushy tail rose with each breath, falling back softly onto my nose. The rhythm was gently soothing. I focused on it, ignoring the uncomfortable feelings in my heart, and the lingering fear from the run. Eventually it lulled me to sleep.

I spent all the remaining nights of the holidays there, slinking back to my bunk only as dawn lightened the sky.

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“Pack your bags, Irian, we’ll be heading home this afternoon,” my mother’s head appeared in the doorway of the dormitory. From where I lay under the covers of my top bunk, her voice was muffled. Surely, I’d misheard?

The sheets fell away as I sat up in bed, blinking the sleep from my eyes.

“We don’t usually go home before the last weekend of holidays!” I observed, groggily. “Did something happen?”

“No. Just leaving today, is all. Pack your own things and leave the rest. The pack will clean up.” And then she was gone.

I wasn’t going to be difficult. Goddess knew I just wanted to get out of here. It was going to be a relief to leave. As much as I appreciated the way the alphas had kept me company and tried to include me in their activities, it was an effort to keep up the facade and pretend I wasn’t breaking inside. I really, really, just wanted to be alone, where I could collapse in private, and afterwards maybe scrape myself together.

Dispiritedly, I shoved my few belongings into my bag. The zip rasped home with finality and I sucked in a deep breath as I straightened up.

How best to spend my last few hours here? I didn’t feel like playing. I might as well go and say my farewells to the alphas before they got sent on some errand or something. I didn’t doubt when it came to leave there’d only be Marius and his family around to bid us farewell.

“We’re leaving today,” I told them as I joined them under the old tree. A few pairs of eyebrows raised.

“That’s early isn’t it? Don’t you normally stay to the end of the holidays?”

A firm hand grasped my shoulder and squeezed it.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out this year,” Darius whispered in my ear. “But he’ll be sorry he missed you.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t in the mood to argue with an alpha, but I thought it seemed fairly clear to me. Talius wasn’t here because he didn’t want to be.

“Guys, move in,” Lin growled warningly. Marius was making his way over the dusty ground towards where we were standing under the tree. The alphas pretended not to see him, but they clustered around me, making sure I was at the center of the group. Since I was an omega, I was a lot shorter than they were, and this tactic virtually ensured I was out of sight.

But not necessarily out of scent... unless the adolescent pheromones all around me were enough to cover my omega scent. I held my breathe, waiting.

The sound of a very obvious sniff suggested Marius was checking to see if I was there.

Concentrating on remaining inconspicuous, it was hard to know what caused the disruption that had started over near the packhouses. The alphas were shielding me from Marius, but that also meant I couldn’t see and the distant exclamations and shouts were muffled. I wanted to know what was going on.

One by one, the guys, who had been chatting animatedly as they pretended not to notice Marius, ceased their conversations, turning to look in the direction of the commotion. The alphas obstructed my view of... whatever. Didn’t they know I’d want to see? I jumped up and down a couple of times but still couldn’t see over their

bulk and height. It was frustrating as hell. Something was happening.

A hush had fallen across the entire courtyard. The sounds of play had ceased. No more murmured conversations. Nor running feet. Magpies called to each other in the trees, oblivious to whatever was happening below, but then they fell silent too.

Feet shuffled, dust stirring, as the alphas stepped back, leaving a space around me.

My breath caught.

The scent of wolf caught my nostrils. But not just any wolf.

And there he was: a lone creature limping his way across the dirt towards us. His grey fur was scruffy, clumps had been torn out of it, and a large gash glared ugly and red across the top of one shoulder. Nevertheless, the wolf was unmistakable.

It was Talus.

He paused, scented the air. His head turned slowly and his eyes latched onto mine. In his wolf form, they were as dazzlingly blue as when he was human but the rest of him looked exhausted.

I stumbled forward, falling to my knees in front of him, little clouds of dry dust puffing out from underneath me. The shaggy head lowered, resting against my forehead, and we breathed together. I winced, hearing the way the air gurgled wetly as it made its way through his air passages. He swayed slightly, breaking contact, then turned towards his house and moved towards it, his steps slow and deliberate. I didn't need him to look back, to know to follow him.

He walked so slowly and looked so unsteady on his feet, I feared he wouldn't make the distance. And though I wanted to help him, I just followed after him. There was a

proud alpha underneath that gentle exterior. He wouldn't want to display weakness in front of his friends. Not that it was a weakness to accept help when it was needed. But I knew him well enough to guess at his preferences and honor them.

At his front door, I hurried ahead to open it rather than have him squeeze his wounded body through the hard vinyl of the wolf-door. Once inside, he turned to the right and padded slowly up the corridor to his bedroom. His paws made barely any sound on the timber floor, except for the scraping of one hindleg that he seemed to be dragging.

"Wait!" I told him. Hurrying past him into the room, I dragged the mattress to the floor, the covers mostly coming with it, trailing off the bed and half onto the ground.

A deep weariness dulled the blue eyes, and the sclera was bloodshot. I didn't have much experience reading wolf's eyes, but I knew my alpha, and the expression in those depths was a blend of exhaustion, relief and gratitude.

His foreleg half-collapsed but he straightened it and staggered onto the mattress as the weak hindleg also began to buckle. He stood there swaying precariously, then half-lowered half-collapsed in a heap. A soft sigh eased into the stillness of the room, as he curled up nose to tail, eyes closed.

Since it appeared he was going to stay in wolf form, I ripped off my clothes, tossing them haphazardly on the floor, and shifted.

My wolf, unable to take up its traditional submissive position against his belly, pressed itself against his back, and laid its head over his haunches. Golden brown fur interlaced with the various shades of grey of the larger wolf. My wolf, unsure of what had happened but comforted to be back with his alpha, snuggled in closer. Before long, deep gurgling snores reverberated around the room. I huffed in relief. Whatever had happened, he'd made it home and he would heal while he slept. Moments later, I

drifted off myself.

It wasn't until sometime in the night, that Talius stirred. I'd been awake for a while. I'd moved during the night, and now my head was resting over his lower ribs. But even half-asleep I'd been aware enough to keep away from his wound. It had mostly healed now anyway, just a pale pink line running down the grey skin. By morning the fur would have grown back and it wouldn't even be noticeable. Such was the magic of shifter physiology. I wondered what had happened to him.

When I realized the lack of light trickling into the room meant the day was over, it puzzled me that no-one had come to haul me out of here for the trip home. I vaguely remembered raised voices from elsewhere in the house, but with the warmth of Talius' wolf against mine, and his pheromones wrapping around me like a snug blanket, I'd drifted straight back off again into the most comfortable sleep I'd had in weeks.

Beside me, a sharp expulsion of air told me Talius was awake. He slowly and stiffly rose onto four legs and shook himself, tail slapping, the long hairs of his coat whipping through the air. When he leaned over, pressing his muzzle against the soft place behind my ear where the hairs were sparse, I shivered. Warm air heated my skin as he huffed against the fine hairs and when he drew in a deep breath, scenting me, I was relieved to not hear the awful gurgling noises that I'd heard last night.

Silently he padded away, heading for the ensuite. Moments later he returned in human form, a towel around his waist, as he rummaged through the chest of drawers, pulling out sweatpants and a t-shirt which he took back with him, closing the bathroom door behind him.

As much as I loved the sight of the big strong alpha blushing, I took advantage of his absence to shift back and hurriedly pulled on yesterday's clothes. Although I didn't grow up amongst shifters, it didn't bother me being naked around them. Unless we

wanted to destroy our clothes each time we shifted, nakedness had to be accepted as part of life. But Talus was terribly discomfited anytime one of us was naked in front of the other. So for now I humored him. He'd be my alpha someday, and it would no longer matter.

TALIUS

Will he forgive me?

This was the question that plagued me as I pulled on my sweats and t-shirt. The mirror in the bathroom showed a tired and scruffy-looking man, who appeared older than his 21 years. I combed my fingers through my unruly hair, splashed water on my face to get rid of the dark stain of dried blood and contemplated two days' growth of bristles. I needed to shave, but I needed to talk to Irian even more urgently.

Still, I dallied in the bathroom, because I was... worried. My absence over Christmas was a huge betrayal. What would he have thought? How badly had I hurt him?

I was overthinking and I knew it. I was just... reluctant, I guess, to see how much damage might have been done. To find out whether it was irretrievable. Others might not understand the depth of this, but there was an unspoken contract between us. And I broke it. All I could hope was that the explanation I offered him now, was sufficient.

Re-entering the bedroom, I was relieved to see Irian already in his clothes and seated cross-legged on the bed. When he saw me, he uncurled himself and glided to his feet, padding across the plush carpet until he was standing in front of me.

His youthful face was as fresh and open as it ever was, his cheeks plumper and his face a little longer than when I last saw it. His golden lashes framed soft brown eyes that gazed up at me worriedly, a small crease between his brows. A couple of perfect white teeth gnawed at his bottom lip.



His hair was also longer and stragglier than it had been last year.

“Alpha?” he whispered, a catch in his voice.

And with that one word, I knew he’d forgiven me. The rush of relief was almost overwhelming.

Gently I rested my index finger under his chin. He let me take some of the weight, his eyelids brushing together briefly. The soft warmth of his exhale across my thumb was like a sigh. Without words, we felt very connected, frighteningly, tantalizingly close.

“Irian.” I broke the moment, stepping back. His head swung up. The frown was back.

“I’m sorry,” I began, and the frown turned into a look of alarm, his eyes going wide and startled. Before he could think more of whatever it was that had him so anxious, I said, “I need to tell you what happened.”

“Okay.” He backed away, onto the mattress, his arms wound protectively around himself. There was no need for that, so I rushed to finish.

“I was at my final Alpha camp, but I expected to be here when you arrived. Alpha told me the camp was only for two weeks, so I’d be home for Christmas. Otherwise, I never would have agreed.”

The big brown eyes watched me intently.

“When I was there, I found out the camp was never intended to finish before Christmas, it was always going to be four weeks.”

Irian cocked his head, his features forming into a pensive expression. His eyes narrowed, his eyebrows turned down, and the furrow on his forehead deepened.

“Wh-what?”

“Yeah. I was never going to be home by Christmas. Alpha would have known. And he was most persuasive about me going. Well, actually, he insisted I go.”

“F-u-c-k.” Irian’s soft growl was oddly cute, despite the seriousness of the conversation. He’d reached the same conclusion I had.

“Has Marius been bothering you?”

“No. He’s been hanging around, but your friends made sure he couldn’t get near me.”

Of course they did. I huffed in appreciation. I must remember to thank the boys for taking care of him.

“Good. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here. I didn’t stop thinking about you.”

“So... we’re good then?” Irian asked, still seeming that little bit unsure.

“Yes, of course .” I approached the edge of the bed where he was still sitting, though he’d stopped hugging himself so tightly. I grabbed him and pulled him up into a hug. He buried his face in my shirt and gulped.

“I thought... I thought... you know, that... you’d gone... that maybe you’d left to start your own pack...”

“Sssh,” I soothed. “Why would you think that? You have to trust me... I’m not gonna start my own pack until you can come with me...”

The fingers that had been clutching my shirt gradually unwound themselves. His body shuddered against mine as he took a couple of steady breaths. He sighed and

stepped away.

“That was the shittiest Christmas ever,” he said emphatically, and I had to laugh.

“It was, wasn’t it? Mine totally sucked too. I kept thinking about you and wondering what you were thinking about me not being here, and whether I’d get back in time to see you.”

Irian shrugged. “We were supposed to leave today...” he cocked his head, “...yesterday. Actually, I don’t know how come I’m still here. I don’t know why no-one’s come to get me.”

I let out a long, low whistle, “I barely made it... I wasn’t supposed to get back until Saturday.”

“What do you mean?” Irian’s big questioning eyes peered up at me.

“Well, when I realized the camp was gonna last ‘til the end of the holidays, I went and spoke to the admin officer about it. I explained the situation, but he just confirmed the camp had always been scheduled as a four-week camp, and that I couldn’t leave or my majority would be canceled for at least a year. But then a few days before the end, he suddenly told me I’d completed the compulsory requirements and I could leave if I could get myself home. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to do that, but he said he’d fix the paperwork for me. There was no transport, so I shifted and ran all the way here. Ran into a little trouble on the way, but... I made it.”

Irian stared at me, eyes wide.

“If you’d stayed the full time, you would never have made it,” he murmured, almost to himself. Then he scowled, “I wondered why we were heading home earlier than usual. That must have been so we wouldn’t run into each other.”

“Your family really don’t want us to hang out with each other. I’m almost certain they hope you’ll come around to accepting Marius when he - or they - suggest a union.

Irian gagged. “Like that’s gonna happen.”

I shrugged. “They’re gonna try. Why else would your parents keep bringing you back here every year and then try to make opportunities for you to be with Marius? And why all the stupid plans to keep us separated? Remember, last year I got sent out with my mates on a stupid fucking waste of time errand that didn’t need to be done, and the only alpha that stayed home and was conveniently here when you arrived, was Marius. And now the bullshit this year!”

“I wouldn’t accept Marius if he was the last alpha on the planet,” Irian snapped. “And no-one tells me who I get to mate.”

My lips twisted into a fond half-smile. Irian sure was a feisty omega. Whoever formed a union with him was in for a wild time.

Of course, I was almost certain that someone would be me, but there were procedures to follow. The timing wasn’t right yet.

Knock! Knock!

The harsh rap of knuckles against the door startled me out of my musings.

“Come in,” I called out. “Door’s open.”

The door cracked open and my dad came inside. He nodded at Irian, “ ‘Morning Irian.” Then he addressed me, “Good to see you home, son, and looking a lot better than when you came in last night. I’m sure you’ve got a story to tell, but for now...”

and here he looked across at Irian again “your folks are downstairs wanting you to go home with them. We held ‘em off overnight so you two could have some time together, but I don’t think we can keep them away much longer.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I told him. I looked at Irian. “There’s nothing much we can do about this year. Ready to go?”

Irian nodded. He turned his soft brown eyes towards my dad. “Thank you for holding them off, Alpha.”

“You’re very welcome, Irian. I’m not sure what went on this year, but it’s fairly clear some people have their own agendas around here. Just be careful, boys.” And with that, he was gone, pulling the door closed behind him.

We got to our feet.

“Ready?”

Irian shrugged. “As I’ll ever be. There’ll probably be a fuss in the car going home, but whatever.”

I hesitated. “One more year.”

He nodded, and as he went out to meet his parents, I’m not sure if he understood what I was trying to say, or if he just thought I meant another year until we get to hang out...

In a few months, he would reach shifter claiming age.

### TALIUS

Irian was turning 19 soon. In the shifter world, this meant anyone could then lay claim to him. They couldn't mate him in a binding union, until the mating age of 22, of course, but if a claim was made in the absence of other offers, the claim could be processed and formally accepted by the Council. It was then a binding agreement, along the lines of a legal contract.

After the debacle that was Christmas, I was convinced Alpha definitely had plans for a union between Marius and Irian, and although we hadn't managed to confirm whether an unofficial arrangement had already been entered into between the two families, I knew that Irian's parents supported the concept of arranged unions. They were political animals, after all.

Irian could refuse any arrangement made on his behalf, despite being an omega, since the rules on that changed some time ago. But there would likely be a lot of pressure applied by his parents. They might even disown him. He was a very stubborn, independent-minded guy for an omega, but I wasn't sure if even he could stand up to his parents. I remembered the compulsion incident the first year we met. In a moment of horrified clarity, I realized it could happen again.

And while I hadn't spoken to Irian about this yet because by tradition I was supposed to speak to his Alpha dad or mum first, with the connection we had, surely he knew this is where we were heading.

I didn't want to wait any longer. I couldn't wait for Christmas to come, because it could all be settled by then. Irian might get mad at me for not speaking to him first,

but I decided I'd rather risk that, than risk losing him altogether.

I waited impatiently for a day when it was crazy busy around the pack compound and I slipped unobtrusively out the side gate. I had my key in the ignition of my battered old car and the engine humming before anyone could accidentally stumble upon me in the carpark and I left a trail of dust behind as I took off down the driveway.

No-one could find an excuse to stop me now.

Over time, I had obtained enough information from Irian to locate the Mensen's excessively large home. It dominated the local surrounds from where it sat atop a hill, surrounded by an unreasonable amount of land for this close to the city, and a formidable-looking security wall. The houses outside the wall seemed to cower in its shadow, clearly not up to standard.

Fuck.

After some argument, I convinced the security guard to allow me to pass. My old vehicle felt conspicuous and out of place as it made its way along the embarrassingly long driveway. The driveway seemed designed to give visitors enough time to rethink their decision to come here and turn around before bothering anyone.

I pulled to a stop – eventually – on a large gravel turnaround in front of the house. The house – mansion, really - was imposing. Two stories high, white-washed walls, floor to ceiling windows, balconies off all the upper levels, and oh my Goddess, fucking marble steps. I sighed, took a deep breath, and after undoing the seatbelt, got out of the car. The gravel crunched loudly under my feet, the house looming cold and indifferent, as I make my way to the ridiculous steps and up to the front door.

Even the doors were imposing, made of beautiful cedar and glistening in the sunlight, the varnish perfect.

Zzzzt, Zzzzt. The electronic bell sounded oddly cheap, a sharp contrast with the rest of the house. I snickered to myself, then slowly and steadily inhaled a lungful of air deep into my chest, reminding myself I was an alpha and had every right to come here to claim my omega.

Unsurprisingly, given the opulence of the premises, Alpha Mensen did not answer the door himself. An older wizened beta dressed in formal attire, opened the door, and I was immediately extremely grateful I'd decided to wear my only suit despite the heat.

"Good morning, I've come to visit Alpha Mensen. Is he at home?" According to Irian, he spent every morning in his office and was out on official business in the afternoons and evenings, so he should be there.

"Alpha is in residence," the beta said tonelessly. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't."

The corner of the man's lips twitched, a slight furrow appearing across his brow.

"I see. Well, come in," he ushered me through, closing the door behind me. "I'll see if Alpha will see you without an appointment. Who shall I say would like to see him?"

I wasn't sure Irian's father would give me the time of day if he knew who was here to see him, but he was unlikely to know my last name.

"Alpha Braden."

The beta nodded. "Wait here, please Alpha," he said before disappearing down a dim hallway off to our right.



Within minutes he returned, but not before my palms had begun to grow damp and clammy. Unobtrusively, I ran them down the fabric of my trousers.

“Alpha will see you, Alpha Braden,” the beta said graciously, indicating the way. “This way please.”

When we stopped outside a pair of ornate gold-filigreed double doors, I pursed my lips together tightly to trap the hiss of absolute disgust at the pompous display.

Rap! Rap! The golden doorknocker was just another piece of ostentatiousness in a place – could you really call it a home? – that was already way over the top.

In the face of this obvious and excessive wealth, I tried not to feel inadequate, but the truth was, it was difficult. I didn’t know how Irian had turned out so down to earth when this was what he’d come from.

“Come,” a sonorous voice intoned.

The beta opened the door, and I stepped through.

“Your guest, Alpha,” he said, before retreating and closing the door behind him with a faint click.

Irian’s father was seated at an old-fashioned desk on the far side of the room. Beyond him, a window looked out onto hectares of rolling hills. I wondered vaguely how much of the land was his. I shuddered. There was no doubt I was in the presence of a powerful man, and with his wife on the Council, he was doubly so. And doubly dangerous if he chose to be.

He remained silent, waiting for me to approach the desk. The plush carpet silently absorbed each footfall, and I felt my heart thudding in my chest. I hoped he couldn’t

hear how nervous I was. A trickle of perspiration slid down my sides.

It struck me that the desk was intentionally placed, designed to discomfort and disadvantage anyone who came petitioning the alpha, because by the time I stood in front of it, it felt like a lifetime had passed.

He still hadn't said a word.

"Alpha." I inclined my head. My stupid fringe fell across my eye as I submissively lowered my eyes. At moments like these I wished I were more sophisticated. I hadn't realized Irian's family were as well off, both financially and socially, as they clearly were. It was likely they would have high expectations of anyone who wanted to mate their son.

The silence drew out. I could hear my heart beating, fluttering like a trapped bird desperate to free itself. Moisture gathered under my fringe. A drop rolled down the side of my face, my skin itched and I wanted to rub it, but I dared not move. I had to be strong in front of my future father-in-law. The urge to rock from foot to foot was hard to resist, but I did. I stood perfectly still, waiting for the man to tell me I might speak.

As an alpha, this submission annoyed me, making me restless, but I bit down on my lip until it hurt, trying not to show my irritation.

ou"Who are you? You look familiar but I can't place you, and I don't believe we had an appointment?" He glared at me as he spoke. Clearly, I had been too inconsequential for him to have paid me any mind.

I straightened, pushed my shoulders back and lifted my head. It wouldn't do to show fear now.

“My name is Talius, sir, and no, we don’t have an appointment. I’m a friend of your son, Irian.”

“Irian,” he drawled the name slowly and pensively, as though he were scrolling through his memories to check if he had a son of that name, or perhaps he was trying decipher a motive for my presence in front of him. That was easy, I’d tell him as soon as he gave me permission to state my purpose.

There was another long silence.

“I remember you now,” he said, a note of condescension in his voice. “You’re from Alpha Moray’s pack, aren’t you? One of the youngsters.”

“Yes, Alpha. Although I’ve passed my majority now.”

“And why are you here now, Talius, friend of Irian?” he mocked me. “I don’t suppose my son has come to visit me too?”

“No, sir, he’s not here. I wanted to speak to you privately.”

“Well, you’re here. And I’m already interrupted,” he said, not very encouragingly. “So go on and be quick about it. I don’t have all day.”

I swallowed. The pounding in my chest was unbearable, so loud I wondered if he might be able to hear it. I hoped not. That would do nothing for my image as a strong, fearless protector for his son. I inhaled deeply, standing as tall as I could stretch myself.

“I’m aware that Irian is shortly to turn 19. I wanted to inform you that I will be making a claim for him.”

Mocking laughter rang out across the distance between us. My ears burned, and my cheeks flamed. Why was he laughing? I was doing this the way it was supposed to be done.

“You do know that we are one of the forming families, don’t you, young man?” Alpha Mensen said. The note of condescension in his voice was irksome.

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“What could you possibly have to offer our son?”

That was easy.

“Myself.” I had to force myself not to cringe. Even to my ears, that didn’t sound very persuasive. Maybe I hadn’t thought this through far enough. I had prepared a whole speech but for the life of me I couldn’t remember it.

“And how do you propose to provide for my son? Are you a pack Alpha?”

No, obviously I was not. I was too young to have attained that status. And he knew it.

“No, I...”

He cut me off.

“Are you perhaps a CEO?”

“No, sir, I...”

“A lawyer or a surgeon, perhaps?”

I shook my head, frustrated. Why wasn't he letting me explain? I had the feeling he was pushing me into a corner and then he'd attack.

"Then what qualification do you have?"

This was a game. There was no way I was old enough to have my qualification yet, and he knew it. He was playing with me. But I kept my cool. He was just making me more determined to stay in control of myself.

This time he let me answer.

"I'm in my third year of a double degree in Business and Sustainable Agriculture."

His brows raised. A scowl crossed his face, pinching his cheeks and creating dark hollows under his eyes. Beady black eyes speared me through narrowed eyelids.

"A farmer," he sighed, shaking his head. "That's not very encouraging... Well come back to see me when you've got your degree," he continued. "Not before. As I see it, you don't have anything to offer right now. And I'm not sure you will after either," he finished disdainfully.

I lifted my head up, pushed out my chest and stood tall. I was done with submission. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I love your son," I told him coldly. "I just wanted you to know."

"We'll talk about it when you've got something to offer him," the Alpha returned calmly, beady eyes narrowed, "in the meantime, I forbid you to mention it to him, do you hear?"

"I hear you," I replied through gritted teeth. I hear you, but I'm sure as hell not going

to comply.

“Then I think we’re done here.” He picked up an old-fashioned brass bell from his desk. It made a dreadful clanging sound, and seconds later the beta who had shown me in, opened the door. He stood stiffly, awaiting the Alpha’s instructions.

“Our meeting has concluded. Show the boy out.”

Alpha Mensen picked up a document from his desk and began perusing it, humming to himself. He picked up a pen and made a few notes on the paper. He didn’t look up. I was dismissed. Clearly, he didn’t take me seriously. And he didn’t intend to.

Seething, I turned on my heel and without another word, stalked out.

???

As humiliatingly badly as my first semi-official act as a fully mature alpha had gone, it was tempting to say nothing about it. But I didn’t feel right keeping my visit a secret, despite Alpha Mensen’s clear warning not to talk to Irian about it. His instruction to return when I ‘had something to offer’ his son, suggested that maybe there was no plan to make arrangements for him, that perhaps there was more time than we thought. Yet still I felt uneasy.

Regardless, if I wanted Irian as my mate, then my first loyalty was to him, and secrets could bring us undone. I would have preferred to talk to him in person, but as that opportunity might not arise until Christmas, I waited until the household was asleep and crept down to the living room where our wallphone was located.

"Hey," Irian answered the call, not sounding in the least bit sleepy despite the late hour.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm studying... we've got exams coming up soon. There are expectations, y'know, got to keep the folks happy."

I snorted. I think I could say for a fact that Irian was not doing it for his parents' sake. He was so competitive and driven, something which had revealed itself over time, despite being quite submissive with me... well, sometimes anyway. He was not afraid to voice his opinion to me or any of the other alphas either.

"Oh hey!" Irian chimed in excitedly, "I'm glad you rang, I've got news... I'm coming for the holidays - the next holidays! We don't have to wait for Christmas this year."

"Wow! That's unusual. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love that we'll be able to see each other sooner, but what brought this on?"

"Dunno. The folks just mentioned it at dinner tonight."

"When do the holidays start for you?" I asked, re-thinking my plan to tell him tonight about my meeting with his father. If I was going to be seeing him soon, it could wait.

"Next week," Irian told me. I could literally hear his grin in his voice.

"Perfect," I said, "I've got something I wanted to tell you but it's best done in person. It's all good, don't worry, well, mostly good, you'll see," I amended, suddenly realizing how that might sound.

"Ooh, I'm intrigued," Irian said, coaxingly.

"Yeah, well that was why I rang, but now I know you're coming to visit, it can wait until then."

"I could call off the visit," Irian suggested.

"Nah, you won't," I replied, and I couldn't help the smile that teased my lips. "You're a ballsy omega, but you're not crazy. I'll see you in a week, okay? I'll tell you everything then."

We talked some more until finally I heard a heavy yawn on the other end of the call.

"I gotta get some sleep," mumbled Irian. "I've got classes tomorrow."

We said our good nights. Irian had one more attempt at getting me to tell him why I'd called, and then we ended the call.

I stood in the darkness beside the phone for some time. Although I was looking forward to seeing Irian sooner than I'd anticipated, it worried me that the pattern was changing... I was suspicious that his parents might be getting ready for Marius to make a claim. There was nothing I could do, however, other than be alert. And make my claim on the day of his birthday.

One week later, as he'd told me, Irian arrived at the pack.

He'd arrived in the morning, and although officially he was supposed to stay at Alpha's house, he'd moved his things into the dormitory again and headed straight down to my house for lunch. Strangely Marius hadn't objected. In practice, he wouldn't be staying in the dormitory. My family had grown used to him being present for breakfasts and seemed to expect it now. I wondered if our friendship caused my family problems within the pack, but no-one ever said anything.

I chose a moment when we were alone. Everyone else had wandered off and Irian and I were cleaning up in the kitchen. The noise from the TV in the next room provided the perfect cover for a private conversation.



“Hey.”

“Hey,” Irian flashed me a smile, his cheeks rosy and plump from the heat of the washing up water, his brown eyes twinkling. His soft pink lower lip was folded under a row of snowy white teeth.

I lean against the kitchen bench, admiring him, tea-towel in hand. For a moment I was distracted, but I came out of it when he cocked his head at me inquiringly.

“Oh, I have something I need to tell you.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I went to see your dad.”

Irian’s eyes flared in surprise. “You did? Why?”

My lower lip stung, the metallic taste bitter on my tongue. Suddenly I wasn’t feeling as cocky as I had been. After all, I hadn’t asked him. Maybe I should have asked him first.

“I went to see him to tell him I would be making a claim for you once you turned 19. I’m sorry, I know I should have spoken to you first, but I wanted to make sure they couldn’t force you into something you didn’t want... I hope that’s...” I didn’t finish before the dishmop splashed into the sink, water and suds flying into the air.

Irian stood stock still, a speckle of soapy bubble on his nose, hands gripping the edge of the sink, eyes locked on mine. He opened his mouth, closed it again. When he opened it again, a strangled sound came out. He swallowed hard, my eyes fixating on the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as I wondered if I’d overstepped.

“Really?” he squeaked, when he finally found his voice. “Are you seriously claiming me?”

“Y-yes. If you want it. Is that okay?”

“Of course it is!” My arms were suddenly full of excited wriggling omega as he threw himself at me, thrusting his face up against my chest and wrapping his arms around me. In his excitement, he was squeezing the air out of me, and I had to gently loosen his grip. He was surprisingly strong. I tentatively dropped a soft kiss on the top of his silky head, not sure if that was okay or not.

“Alpha!” he wailed, bursting into loud hiccup-y sobs.

I tightened my arms around him, confused by his outburst. I thought he was happy, but he was crying. I tried to push reassurance his way. I’d never sought to actively use my pheromones before, but I knew we reacted strongly to each other, so I concentrated on sending him reassurance, mentally straining to push it out through my very pores.

He shuddered in my arms, drawing in a ragged breath. One of his small hands came up and rested on my chest, over my heart, as he sucked in a deep breath and then another... and went quiet against me. It was our first real moment as omega and protective alpha, and it demonstrated the way in which our relationship was changing. I was surprised by the tender feelings I had for this feisty but gentle omega.

Now that he was calm, I continued.

“I know you’re still too young, but I got worried,” I said, “because if they lodged a claim with no others in sight, they could force it through, make it official. I had to tell your dad I was making a claim. They can’t finalize anything if there are more than one claiming you. Even if you don’t choose me, it gives you options. It means you

don't have to decide now, you can wait until you're ready to mate."

"Thank you, Talius," the words were a warm whisper across my tear-damp T-shirt.

"How did he take it?"

I huffed. "Not well. He told me to come back when I had something to offer. I think he's hoping I don't tell you I've made a claim, then he can push through with whatever plans he and Alpha have made together. He told me not to say anything to you."

Irian sniffed. "Thank you, for doing this. And for telling me."

I bit my lip again. He hadn't said he'd accept my claim but I thought he would. He was mine, always had been since I found him under the tree that Christmas Eve. Of course, maybe I was just another arrogant alpha. I sighed.

"Of course I'd tell you. I'm not going to take your agency away from you. I'm not that sort of alpha. At least, I'm trying not to be."

My chest vibrated, setting up a strange sensation through my body, then I realized he was humming. I thought it meant he was happy.

IRIAN

I was so fucking excited to know that Talius had spoken to my father. I hadn't been mistaken after all. Everything had pointed to Talius and I being destined to be together when we were older, though it had never been certain in what capacity. But he'd just confirmed that he intended to take me as his mate.

"Mate," I said the word to myself when I was alone later. It sounded right to me. We weren't going to break any rules and get off to the wrong start together, but he'd made his intention clear. There was even that moment when he'd looked unsure... as if anyone would be reluctant to partner with such a fine handsome alpha, and one with modern views as well. I chuckled. The thought was absurd.

But apart from all his attributes, there'd been something calling from his wolf to mine for a very long time. We'd just been friends, but wolves knew these things. Their instincts were keen.

There was no doubt at all that this was what I wanted too. I wondered how I was going to broach the subject with my parents - that I wanted to choose my mate, not have them do it for me. Talius was right, once I'd turned 19 they could well register a claim if they really were planning an arranged union. I was going to tell them I knew about Talius' intention to claim me and that I was accepting him. My birthday was coming up in a couple of weeks. I would need to talk to my parents very soon.

But maybe we were worrying unnecessarily. For a change, Marius hadn't been bothering me at all these holidays, and strangely my mother hadn't made any comment on how little time I spent around Alpha Moray and his family. Maybe she'd

given up her plans after all, especially since Talius had notified my dad of his intentions. Regardless, I wasn't going to take any chances. My birthday was coming up in a couple of weeks. I was going to talk to my parents very soon.

In July, the holidays were shorter than at Christmas, and before long I was back to my normal school routine, and with each passing day as my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday approached, I grew more and more excited. I knew Talius would make a formal claim as soon as he was able. I was both excited and proud to be claimed by such an amazing alpha. There would still be years before we could formalize a union, but I had no doubt we'd still want to do it when the time came.

The day of my birthday fell on a Friday, and as I was exiting the campus with a group of classmates after finishing classes for the week, my mother's imperious voice rang out.

"Irian!" she called; her strident tones easily heard over the conversation around me.

"Oh, there's my mum," I said, when I saw her white sportscar pulled up curbside. "Guess I'd better go. See you guys next week."

The guys hurried to say farewell and gave the car a wide berth as they crossed the road and continued down towards the bus-stop. It was true my mum gave off a weird aggressive vibe. I bit my lip. I kinda wanted to go with my friends, but my mother never turned up at the school, so I knew I'd have to go with her. Maybe she was planning something for my birthday?

The driver's window slid down as I approached. "Hey! What's going on?"

"Get in."

I sighed. She was dressed in the clothes she usually wore for council meetings. The

red power suit inside the sleek white sportscar made for quite a statement. No wonder my friends took off. I wasn't intimidated but I knew better than to push her. I went around to the passenger's side and got in.

With a roar! of the engine, she pulled out and accelerated down the road.

When we came to the fork in the road where we usually turned right to head home, we turned left instead.

I cocked my head at my mother, curious. Her eyes were fixed on the road ahead. I tried again.

"So... what's going on? Where are we going?"

"To the estate. I thought we'd spend the weekend there. For your birthday." She took her eyes off the road long enough to flash me a terse smile that didn't even reach her eyes.

The estate was like our country house, but we rarely went there. It was an older style mansion, three stories high, with extensive grounds, set in the middle of a forest. On those occasions where my parents entertained, this was where they did it, hosting weekend parties or get-togethers with important members of various committees. At those times, the house and grounds would be bustling with people, and I either had to play the role of host's son or wander around the forest for hours to get some peace. It was a strange place to come for my birthday. I had no particular attachment to it.

"Oh, how come? Do you have a party planned or something?"

"No. Nothing like that," she replied, but didn't offer anything more.

I shrugged. My parents often did things for reasons I couldn't figure out, but it

usually had something to do with their all-important careers. I was a little annoyed that I couldn't have maybe gone out with my friends to celebrate, but decided that was poor-spirited of me, and said nothing. She obviously had something planned.

When we pulled into the familiar driveway that curved a long winding trail up to the house, it was uncharacteristically deserted. Usually there would be a flurry of staff preparing the grounds for an influx of visitors, but today all was quiet. If there was to be no party, I couldn't help wondering why we were really here. My alpha mother wasn't one to seek the peace and solitude of the countryside.

An unfamiliar car was parked at the rear of the building, but I didn't think too much about it, since there were often tradesmen working here. An historic building, it took a lot of resources to maintain it in elegant condition and there was always something that needed doing.

"Go to your room and I'll be up in a minute. I need to talk to you," said my mother, finally revealing that there was some purpose to our visit here. It didn't seem like we were actually going to be celebrating my birthday, but I figured I was about to find out what was going on. When I went to get my suitcase from the trunk, she waved me away.

"James will bring that up for you," she said, referring to our longtime house manager.

My curiosity was piqued. She was clearly in a hurry of some sort. Entering by the back door, I stopped to pull off my shoes. I loved the feel of the plush carpet slipping between my toes as I made my way up to the third floor. I padded along the hallway, my footsteps deadened by the thick fibers.

I paused at my bedroom door, my hand on the cold metal of the old-fashioned knob. The quiet was unsettling. It was strange not to have seen a single staff member. Why weren't they here? Or if they were here, why were they staying out of sight? A

prickling sense of unease crept its way up my spine.

When I entered the room, all was as it should be. The four-poster bed was in its usual place, the bed made up and the filmy curtains pulled halfway along the sides. The wooden desk in the corner was as I had last left it... neat and tidy, pens standing upright in the penholder carved into the wood. The ornate legs were shiny and dust-free... so the staff had to be around somewhere.

But the silence... the silence was oppressive, weighing on me like a living thing. It draped itself over me, pulling my spirits down, down...

I jumped at a noise from the doorway, my gut churning, but it was only my mother. My shoulders relaxed again. Why was I so jumpy?

“Where is everyone?” I asked, unable to stand it any longer.

My mother shrugged as if it was of no consequence.

She waved away my query with an airy hand. “That’s of no importance. What I’ve come to speak to you about, however, is.”

“O-k-ay,” I drew the word out, wondering where this was going. I wasn’t exactly worried – yet – but a coil of anxiety was starting to form low in my gut. Something did not feel right.

It made no sense because this was my home, or at least one of them, but my instincts were screaming run! run!

“Sit down.” It was a definite command, and I felt the slight tug of a compulsion. I stiffened.



“What is it?” I demanded, covering my sudden foreboding with anger.

“Sit.” My mother’s features had sharpened, her eyes hardening with fine lines appearing at the corners. Her lips had thinned. This was how she looked when she was doing business. She was a formidable force and I knew not to obstruct her. I’d seen how she tore her opponents to shreds in Council meetings.

If she was prepared to use her compulsion on me, it was pointless to resist, so I spared myself the unpleasantness of trying and sat. As the silky plushness of the upholstery gripped my thighs, I felt trapped. My instincts were still yelling run! run! but there was nowhere to run. And anyway, how could I?

I brushed away my unease. Really, what could happen to me here? This was my family, after all.

Silence dominated the room. My eyes tracked my mother as she took a few paces towards me. She was standing tall and confident, a self-satisfied look on her face. Her sharp, knowing gaze pierced me, and I felt a sudden chill. She knew about Talius and I, of course. My father would have told her. Was she planning some sort of retaliation?

I shouldn’t have had anything to worry about, and yet she looked so confident...

“You are 19 now,” she began, “Arrangements have been made between ourselves and Alpha Moray’s family. Arrangements that we believe will be beneficial to both families.”

“I...”

She silenced me with an upheld palm, even as I opened my mouth to speak.

“You and Marius are to be formally mated, thus joining our two families. It’s an arrangement that will be highly beneficial, since the Morays, like ourselves, are also one of the founding families. In addition, as you know, Alpha Moray presides over the Council. It’s a good match. You should be very grateful for the opportunity.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I exploded, the thud of my feet as I leapt to my feet deadened by the plush carpet, the sound as small and inconsequential as any consideration my parents might have had for my feelings on this matter.

“Not at all,” she snapped back. “It’s highly beneficial to both families, and it’s your duty to comply. That’s what you were bred for, after all.”

If she’d slapped me across the face, I couldn’t have been more shocked. I was... a commodity, a pawn to be played when it suited my parent’s political objectives.

But... I wasn’t a pushover, even if I was an omega. She hardly knew me if she thought I would agree to this.

“I won’t do it,” I told her, barely keeping the quiver of fury out of my voice, “I don’t even like Marius.”

“That’s hardly relevant. He’s here now with his father and the mating will take place shortly.”

I frowned. It wasn’t possible, and she must know that. Perhaps she’d forgotten the rules in her enthusiasm to make this match and secure political gain. Goddess knew, politics blinded people.

“I’m not having anything to do with this,” I insisted. “This is ridiculous. I’m obviously not mating now, and when I do it will be to an alpha of my choosing.”

I could feel the heat in my cheeks. I was angry and outraged, but there was a little frisson of fear underlaying it all, which I was careful not to acknowledge, lest my mother caught the scent of it. Standing up to an alpha was always dangerous.

“How dare you! Such insolence! You are an omega, and if your Alphas tell you to do something, that’s precisely what you will do!”

“I’ve already promised myself to an alpha,” I told her, crossing my arms defiantly over my chest.

“If you mean that boy you’ve been hanging around at the Morays’ pack,” she began, eyes glittering dangerously, “I don’t care what you’ve said to him. We’ve tolerated your friendship with him long enough. His family aren’t even on the Council! It’s now time to fulfil your obligations to this family.”

I bristled at her dismissive tone. Talius was a very fine alpha, the perfect blend of fierce and gentle, with modern attitudes

regarding omegas as well. As far as I was concerned, he was the only alpha I was interested in.

But in any case, I was still too young for a formal mating, although apparently my mother had forgotten this.

“You’ll do what you’re told.” Her tone was final.

IRIAN

“You can’t force me,” I said, playing my trump card. “I’m under-age. It’s illegal.”

Her lips curved smugly. It was the smile of someone who thought they were exceptionally clever and had just been gifted an excuse to show it.

“And that’s where you’re wrong. We have a special permit from the Council.”

“I- I don’t believe you,” I stammered. My heart pounded against my ribcage, so hard it almost hurt. Surely this wasn’t possible. I’d never heard of such a thing.

I stared, open-mouthed, as she took the couple of steps towards the desk and pulled out a sheet of parchment from the drawer, laying it on the desktop with a triumphant flourish.

I edged closer, peering at the document from a distance, as if that would make it less likely to be real. It didn’t help. There was no mistaking the official seal of the Council at the top of the white parchment. It took just a minute to read the contents. I blinked, unable to speak. I felt a constriction in my chest, like a fist slowly tightening. They were squeezing the life out of me. How could they do this to me?

The document read:

### SHIFTER REGULATION EXEMPTION

Exemption Category : Unions

Regulation : XA.2

Recipient : Irian Mensen

Designation : Omega

Details: permission is hereby given for the above mentioned omega to be mated in a permanent shifter union once he enters the start of majority at age 19

And the document was signed by six members of the council, including Alpha Moray himself. The air hissed between my lips. How had they managed to get agreement for this?

The older legal age for shifter unions had a specific purpose... or so we'd been led to believe.

Something to do with allowing the alphas and the omegas to fully mature physically and emotionally before entering into a union that was binding. Unlike human marriages, once the shifter bite had been exchanged and the appropriate words said, shifter matings were unbreakable. If you'd made a mistake, weren't compatible, or found your fated mate later, it was too bad.

Then it hit me. My mother was a member of the Council. They were all in each other's pockets or had knowledge of each other's secrets. It wouldn't have been hard to get the required number of signatures.

"I won't do it!" I insisted, although inside I was trembling. "I already have an alpha! I've promised myself to Talius."

"He'll manage without you," she said, completely unflustered while I was losing my mind. "There's no advantage in a union with him. I won't permit it. You'll mate with

the one we've chosen for you."

"I won't!" I hated the way fear made my voice waver.

"There's no more discussion about it. It's already been decided."

"And you will," she said emphatically, walking to the door, and turning back at the last. "After all, you don't have to do anything. Omega."

She stepped through the door, and I heard the clunk as the lock turned behind her.

I stood there alone, trembling in the middle of the room, hating the truth of what she'd said. Biologically, as an omega, I didn't have to actively accept or participate in the mating ritual for it to be valid. I just had to be fucked and bitten. The rest was just for decoration.

If I couldn't get out of here, I was totally screwed. I'd be mated and bonded forever to a different alpha, when I already had the alpha of my heart.

I rushed to the door, and tried to open it even though I knew it was locked. But just in case.

The knob began to turn and my heart gave a wild flutter of hope, but sank just as fast when the knob stopped mid-turn. A cold sweat broke out over my body, giving me the chills. My legs felt weak.

I hurried to the windows, tried to slide the heavy wooden frames upward, but they didn't budge. I shook the frames in frustration, hit the glass with my fist. For an instant, I rested my forehead against the glass, sucking gasps of air into my lungs.

I would not give up! The windows rattled violently in their frames as I shook them

again... until the light glinting off one of the nails nestled in the wood caught my eye. I was caught in a trap.

A blanket of calm descended on me. I had to use my brain if I was to get out of this. I looked through the glass.

There was no-one in sight. No-one on the premises would be willing to help me anyway, but there was also no-one to stop me. The ground was a long way down. But maybe, if I shifted, I might make it down without injuring a paw.

I looked around for something solid enough to break the glass.

But before I could find anything, I heard the turning of the key in the lock and the door creaked slightly as it opened... I expected my mother, and I drew in a deep breath ready to argue with her again. Instead, two large and familiar alphas entered the room - Marius and his alpha dad. Both of them wore severe expressions: Alpha Moray's face was determined, Marius' face was... well, blank. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

I peeked behind them, wondering if I was fast enough to get around them. I shivered, my shoulders sagging as four large betas followed them into the room. The show of force was designed to intimidate me, and it did. How would I elude this many shifters to make my escape?

In the end, it didn't matter. There wasn't time to try anything. A nod from the head alpha in the room, and the betas marched up to me, grabbing my arms roughly. I had no hope, but I struggled on principle. Thumbs and fingers pressed cruelly into the muscles of my arms in an unnecessary display of force. I whimpered and watched horrified as ugly purple marks formed on my upper arms.

"Don't damage my mate," snarled Marius.

The betas eased their grip but kept their meaty hands around my arms. Still struggling futilely, I managed to cast a scornful look at Marius as the betas pushed me towards the door. I continued fighting as they marched me along the corridor and down the stairs to the first floor.

“Fuck off! Get your hands off me.” I wriggled and squirmed, my skin burning where I tried to twist out of their grip, but they just grabbed me harder.

The two alphas followed along behind in silence.

“Help! Help!” I screamed frantically.

No-one came.

Despite the risk of injury, I kept up my resistance every step of the way. The guest rooms were located on the first floor and if we made it there, I was doomed. Undeterred, the massive betas simply dragged me along. As I kicked and squealed, they simply tightened their grip on my arms, knowing the alphas following behind couldn't see what they were doing. Claws erupted from fingertips and stung my skin, and red pinpricks bubbled to the surface.

With growing alarm I saw the upper levels fall away behind us, and the landing of the first floor appear. I continued to struggle, half-sobbing in desperation, until I was thrust roughly inside the first open doorway we came to. As I staggered, struggling to stay on my feet, I heard the alphas talking but couldn't hear what they said over the panicked surging of blood in my head.

Talius! I wailed in my head, as I rushed to try the window, but we'd stuck to the rules, never consummated our natural bond, and he couldn't hear me. An unwanted tear trickled out the side of my eye and wandered down the side of my face as the window rattled futilely in its frame. I pressed myself up against the window ledge.



Throwing back my head, I howled in despair.

There was no answering howl. I was alone, except for the alpha who'd come to claim me against my wishes.

I closed my eyes. I heard the door slam shut and the latch click over. Not that I stood a chance of getting past Marius. He was twice my size in both height and width. Young and muscular, many omegas would have been thrilled to partner with him. But my heart already had an alpha.

"Shut the fuck up," Marius said.

Opening my eyes, I took a deep breath, wiped my cheek, folded my arms across my chest (though I really wanted to wrap them around myself) and glared at him.

"I don't want to mate with you," I snarled defiantly, despite the trickle of moisture on my face. "You can't make me."

He snorted, and my legs trembled. I felt sick. We both knew he could totally make me. And as an alpha, no-one would fault him. It was completely unfair. And it was frightening. I'd never given much thought to the place of omegas in society, but this situation was a stark reminder of how unequal we actually were.

"I don't want to mate you," he said.

Wait! What?

"Ww-well, that's good... to know," I stuttered, flustered.

What did this mean? I mustered my courage and decided to go on the offensive. After all, it wasn't as if I didn't know him from Christmases with Talius' pack. "Why the

fuck are you here then?" I demanded aggressively.

Marius's dark brown eyes simply stared at me for a minute.

"You're a foul-mouthed omega, Irian," he observed. Then he sighed, "I didn't have much choice about coming here...our families think they've got this all sewn up. But I don't want to mate you, and I know you and Talius are a thing, so... I thought if I helped you get out of here, you could find him."

"What's in it for you?" I asked suspiciously, wondering if this was a trap. I hardly dared trust him.

"I told you, I don't want to mate you. And if you're gone, then they can't make me."

I watched him for the briefest of moments as my brain tried to process everything. Suddenly I thought I knew. I felt a twinge of sympathy for him.

"There's someone, isn't there?" I asked, my voice softening from challenging to a more thoughtful tone.

"Yes," a sad look of longing crossed his face for the briefest of moments, then he schooled his features, "but I can't... it's complicated."

"It's always fucking complicated," I swore under my breath. He heard me anyway. His eyes went wide with surprise. Then he laughed.

"You're a feisty guy."

I glared at him, but he just kept rocking back and forth on the spot, holding his sides, cheeks puffed and red as he failed to contain his amusement.

“Talius is welcome to you. He’s going to have his hands full.”

“Rude,” I observed, lifting my nose in the air huffily, but I allowed myself the faintest curve of the lips, relief flooding through me like liquid gold in my veins. Marius was going to help me get out of this room and I’d go find my alpha.

### TALIUS

I arrived at Irian's house early in the afternoon. The driveway gates were closed, but after I pressed the buzzer several times, the intercom crackled to life. At first, the distorted voice on the other end denied me entry, but I made it clear I wouldn't take no for an answer, and finally they told me to wait.

A couple of tense minutes later, during which I occupied myself tapping the cracked leather of the steering wheel and going over in my mind what I planned to say to Irian's parents, the staticky voice of the beta informed me I'd been granted permission to enter.

With a reluctant groan, the gates eased apart and I passed through. Moments later I found myself waiting in the foyer as the beta strode off to announce my arrival.

This time, however, I wasn't summoned to the office. Instead, a haughty-looking woman who I hardly recognized as Irian's mother accompanied the beta as he returned to the foyer. Without the social veneer she wore while visiting at our pack, a baser, harder side of her nature was reflected in her face. A brief memory of the cruel way she compelled Irian in public skittered across my mind, but I brushed it away. I needed to be fully alert to deal with this woman.

She scowled.

"What are you doing here?"

"Alpha Mensen," I inclined my head, respectfully. I could remember my manners,

even if she couldn't.

Her gaze was impatient, so I got to the point.

"I'm here to inform you that Irian has accepted my offer of union. Although of course that can't take place until he is 22, we intend to lodge a formal statement of contract with the Council."

Her dark eyes regarded me coolly, then the corners of her mouth twisted into a cruel smile. She looked like a self-satisfied feline, and it made my skin crawl to think we would eventually be family. She was as untrustworthy as a snake one couldn't afford to take one's eyes off. Fortunately, we would never be pack, since she and her husband had eschewed that lifestyle.

"Well," she drawled, "I'm afraid you're a little too late for that." She made a great show of checking the old-fashioned clock on the wall, before continuing, "I personally delivered Irian to his new mate earlier this afternoon. By now, he would be formally mated."

"What the actual fuck?" Shock stirred me of any politeness. "He's not 22 yet, he can't be mated."

"We arranged special dispensation from the Council," she informed me, eyes glittering maliciously. "You might as well go home now. It's done."

"How...?" but I stopped. It didn't matter how, she was on the Council and so was Marius' dad... I mean, it had to be him, right? And between them, they'd have little trouble getting a few of their buddies to agree.

"Where is he? I want to see him."

“He’s not here. And there’s nothing you can do. I think you should go home now, little alpha. You’re not welcome or needed here.”

I was stunned, almost speechless, chilled to the very core. The blood drained from my head and I felt light-headed. It was surreal. I didn’t give a fuck that she was rude to me. But my world was crumbling. If he’d been mated, it would have been against his will... my whole body trembled, revolting against that possibility. Nausea roiled in my belly. I was very close to spilling my guts right there on the Mensen’s precious carpet. I felt momentarily dizzy, panic sending my brain into a kind of static. I blinked, trying to drag myself together. Wherever he was, whatever they’d done to him, he needed me more than ever now. I needed to pull myself together and be the alpha he needed.

“I presume you mated him to Marius?”

“Of course, as was intended from the start. It’s a mutually favorable pairing. His social standing will be elevated, and I don’t think he’ll lack for anything, if you’re worried about that,” With that last comment, she looked down her nose at me, and I knew precisely what she wasn’t saying.

Without another word, I turned on my heel and stalked out of the house.

I was losing my mind, but by the time my car had exited the driveway, I had the start of a plan. If he wasn’t here – and I was fairly certain I would have been able to scent him if he was, because his fear would have been overwhelming – and he wasn’t at Alpha’s packhouse – and I knew he wasn’t, because I’d just come from there - then he must be in the Mensen’s country retreat. It was isolated enough that Irian wouldn’t be able to find anyone to help him there, unless the staff were willing. I didn’t know if they were loyal to his parents or not, but I knew who paid the wages.

I couldn’t think of anywhere else they’d try to pull off an illicit ceremony like that.

Maybe the Council had authorized it, but the average shifter would be horrified if they knew.

I tried to calm my racing heart. I had several hours drive ahead of me to get to the retreat, and I didn't know what I'd find when I got there. I couldn't afford to have used up all my adrenaline before I arrived.

My wolf whined softly. I felt the rumble in my chest. I shivered, cold goosebumps running down my spine. Oh, my goddess, if Marius had so much as laid a hand on Irian, I didn't think I was going to be able to stop my wolf from ripping his throat out.

I was afraid. Afraid of what I'd find, afraid of what I'd do.

Several long painful hours later, I turned off the main road onto a narrow dirt lane lined on each side with tall, dense eucalypts. It was right on the border of the state forest and very deserted. I drove more cautiously now, certain I didn't want to be discovered before I knew what the situation was. The road curved ahead and through the trees I caught glimpses of a large, three-story house. The building was old but had clearly been restored. Narrow windows looked out over the grounds, the late afternoon sunlight catching the glass and glinting ominously through the trees, like eyes watching. I shuddered.

I pulled over, parking the car deep into a small clearing at the roadside, where the tall gums weren't crowding the track so closely. A stack of timber piled high with the sawn branches of a fallen giant, would serve to hide the car from casual glances, though if someone looked from the wrong direction, they'd see it. Hopefully, I wouldn't be there long enough for that to become a problem.

Getting out of the car, I closed the door as quietly as I could. Keeping alert for any sign of life, I hurried towards the trees lining the road and I paused amongst the dappled trunks, observing. I tried to calm the racing of my heart by taking some deep

steady breaths. My body was urging me to hurry, but I needed to be cautious.

The lights on the second and third floors were already lit. Though the day was yet to end, the gloom was beginning to assemble. It was winter and soon darkness would fully capture the day. A wide swathe of perfect green lawn stretched from the boundary, up to the house, and some sort of path or driveway wound around from the right, terminating at a door more or less in line with me. The dark stain of the wood concealed details at this distance, but I guessed it was the front door.

It wasn't going to be possible to sneak unobserved up to the house before dark, but equally, I couldn't wait. Every minute I delayed, was a minute that Irian remained at risk. I did the only thing I could think of. Jogging quickly to my car, I ripped my clothes off, shoving them haphazardly onto the backseat. Then with a sharp warning to my wolf to behave, I shifted.

Instantly I was in motion, slipping between the trunks like a will-o'-the-wisp, heading around the property towards the back of the house where the trees crowded up much closer to the building. It was the safest place to approach.

As I skirted around the house, a small wooden door came into view. Before I ventured out from the protection of the trees, something caught my eye and I froze, deathly still.

I thought I'd seen movement, no more than a shifting of the shadows around the back of the house. My ears strained, catching the faint whine of poorly oiled hinges. A shadow moved around the doorway. No, two. Two shadows, one much shorter than the other.

I stiffened as my inhale caught the co-mingled scents of Irian and Marius. An angry growl erupted from my throat and the human part of me was helpless to intervene as blind fury consumed me and the red haze shrouded my vision. Without hesitation, I



left the trees, my paws thudding over the ground, my eyes laser-focused on the man whose throat I was about to rip out.

My fury was pinned so fiercely on the human who must not be allowed to retreat into the sanctuary of the house, that I didn't see the golden wolf separate itself from the dark shadows and streak towards me until it was too late. The first I knew was when a bundle of fur barreled into me, knocking me sideways. If the bundle had been bigger, the momentum would have knocked me from my feet, instead I just stumbled. I snarled... and inhaled the sweet fresh uncontaminated scent of my future mate.

And it was pure and unsullied.

No trace of Marius' scent on him, except for the faintest suggestion, indicating nothing more than having been in close proximity.

I didn't understand.

Irian thrust his muzzle into the fur of my neck and leaned into me, his wolf rumbling softly, contentedly, calling to mine.

I didn't move, reveling in the gentle relief of my future mate's presence, but my eyes sought out the house. Marius was standing in front of the open door. Our eyes met. He raised his hand in acknowledgement and the door scraped closed behind him, leaving Irian and I alone on the lawn. Exposed and in wolf form, we didn't linger. Explanations could wait.

It was only when we'd arrived at the car, that we shifted back. The expression on my face must have said volumes, because Irian put a hand on my arm, "Marius let me go. Don't be mad at him. He had nothing to do with this."

Even in the gloomy light, I could see the flush on Irian's cheeks, the brightness of his

gaze... and the dark bruises on his upper arms. He didn't seem to have noticed the goosebumps on his skin yet, but I thrust a t-shirt, jeans, and a jacket, into his hands from the stash of spare clothes I kept in my car for these sorts of occasions.

"What happened?" I asked, as we hurriedly pulled on our clothes.

Irian stayed quiet for a moment, and I thought it was because he was dressing himself. But then a fragment of light caught in a droplet as it rolled down his face.

"It was my mother," he says quietly, turning red-rimmed eyes towards me. "Somehow, she obtained a permit for an under-age union and had me locked up in the house to make sure it happened. Marius was supposed to mate me, but he let me go instead."

The sharp hiss that split the darkness came from me, I realized, as a cold trickle ran down my back. It wasn't sweat. It was the awful realization of how close to disaster we had come. And at the same time as I understood the depth of the treachery and betrayal by Irian's parents, I also knew that we owed Marius a debt of gratitude, that for whatever reason, he didn't go through with their sordid plans.

"Did he lay a hand on you? Mistreat you at all?"

The untidy strings of hair flicked about in vehement denial. "No, no! He didn't touch me." He held his arms out to me, showing me the bruises and the congealed blood.

"It was Alpha Moray's betas who did this. Marius... Marius..." A visible shudder ran through him, and it made my heart ache. "He didn't touch me. I thought... I thought he was going to... he was supposed to. That's why they had me locked in there." Irian's voice broke on the last words.

I stepped towards the shattered omega. He was always so strong, so independent.

Coming face-to-face with his vulnerability like that, must have been devastating. I reached for him and he fell into my arms willingly. He rested his face against my chest, and though he made no sound, I felt the wetness on my shirt, and the shaking of his body.

My hand rubbed up and down his back, soothing.

“And all I could think of was what it would mean for us,” he whimpered into my shirt.

The words pricked at my skin like shards of glass. The thought was devastating, but what hurt the most was how hurt and afraid he must have felt, thinking our future had been lost.

I breathed a gentle kiss into the mussed-up hair. “I would have come for you regardless,” I assured him. “I would have taken back what was mine.”

I gently encouraged him to lift his head and look at me.

“I’m your alpha. I will always come for you, no matter what,” I promised. “I’m glad Marius did the right thing by you, but I would have come for you regardless.”

IRIAN

We found our way to a motel, several hours from my parents' country estate, a place I was sure I'd never want to return to again. I stayed in the car, as Talius went inside to see about getting a room.

I shivered. Even in the car, it was cold. My reaction to the events of the day had passed, but I'd be glad when we were locked away inside the room with the world kept at bay. If I was lucky, there might even be a tub.

When Talius returned, he was swinging a couple of keys around his finger.

"We can leave the car here," he told me, opening the back door and lifting out the bag of essentials we'd picked up at the store down the road.

When I got out of the car, the icy mountain air stung my throat, burning its way down to my lungs. I hugged my jacket tighter around me. Talius came around the front of the car and pulled me against him. As he wrapped his own jacket around me, I shivered again but the body warmth radiating from him felt good. I was cold and shifters naturally ran hot, so maybe I needed to rethink whether I had actually recovered from my day.

"W-hat r-oom n-umber is it?" I asked, trying to contain my shivering.

"Twenty-five. Should be down the end there."

Moments later, the door creaked open and we were inside. When I stepped across the

threshold, I found myself in a very basic room. The main room had a kitchenette, table and a double bed crammed into it. A narrow doorway on the left led to the tiniest bunk room, with three bunks stacked on top of each other and barely room to stand. There was another door off to the left. It was closed, but it had to be the bathroom – there was nowhere else. It was nothing like the fancy rooms we stayed in when my parents traveled for conferences or council meetings... and I loved it. It was basic and practical and... real. When I looked around us, I felt alive: raw and vulnerable, but excited for my future. I felt like I was living my life for the very first time.

When the door was locked behind us, I finally began to feel safe.

A beep and a gurgling sound above the door indicated the reverse cycle air conditioner was now functioning, and the remote control bounced on the bed as Talius tossed it away. A blast of warm air rushed over me.

I sighed a deep weary sound of relief. Safe, warm, and even warmer as Talius stepped closer and his strong arms encircled me again. I rested my head against his chest. The steady thud-thud-thud soothed me; the alpha pheromones did their job. I already knew I was highly sensitive to those. I allowed the tension to drain from my muscles. It had been a long and terrifying day, but I was safe now with my alpha.

But wait! What was he doing?

I wanted to protest when he pulled back, creating space between us – I wasn't normally a needy omega, but damn it, I really needed my alpha's comfort right now – until... suddenly firm lips captured mine, gentle yet possessive, a calloused hand holding my chin steady. The hard warmth of his lips burned against mine. Trembling, I followed his lead, my lips moving with his, my mouth opening to the gentle urging of his tongue.

This was new to us, this tender dance, his tongue tangling with mine, teasing and taking, exploring and claiming. It marked a new stage in our relationship, one that was inevitable, as we transitioned from friends to mates. I lost myself in the kiss, coherent thought annihilated by the dizzying thrill racing through me. The tingling excitement. I noticed my body's response to the strong, powerful maleness of him, and I wondered at it, but I wasn't ashamed. It felt right.

"Is that okay?" Talius' stunning blue eyes mesmerized me, as he broke the kiss.

"Mmmf." I made some nonsensical reply, rendered speechless by the jumble of thoughts and feelings racing inside me.

Talius stepped away and his large hands wrapped around mine. The rough callouses scratched lightly over my skin, pinpricks of awareness in a world that was tilting off its axis. We'd been strangers, and we'd been friends, we were about to be so much more.

"Come," he said, tugging me towards the bed. My legs wobbled beneath me but I went with him, eager and terrified in equal amounts.

When we got to the bed, he climbed on and encouraged me to join him. Which I did, of course, because we'd always known it would come to this. He was always going to be my alpha, I was always to be his omega, just not this soon. I wasn't hesitating, not really. I was willing... but inexperienced.

I was nervous but we also couldn't wait any longer. As my mother had obtained a permit for an under-age mating there was nothing to say she wouldn't try again. I might not be as lucky to escape next time. An unconscious frisson ran down my spine at the thought.

So yeah, nervous or not, I was ready for us to take our relationship one step further.

“Come, lie with me,” Talius instructed, settling down on the pillows and patting the mattress beside him.

Surely, he could hear my heart pounding, trying to vibrate its way right through my chest? But when I lay down beside him, he simply smiled, and ran his hand through my hair, cupping my head as he leaned forward for another slow, sensual kiss, before pulling back and letting his hand trail over my shoulders, the muscles of my upper arm, and down my sides until it rested on my hip. I quivered under his touch. My body yearned for him.

Suddenly, a strange humming vibrated in the air around us. My forehead tensed as I scanned the room, but there was no-one else there. We were alone.

It was then that I realized the sound was coming from me, but it also wasn't me – it was my wolf voicing his absolute satisfaction at this situation. My wolf recognized his alpha and wanted to submit! OMG, how archaic! The modern omega in me protested at the idea while the primitive wolf simultaneously delighted in the prospect. The dissonance was unsettling.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I hardly knew what to do with myself, but when I glanced at Talius, he was smiling. A growl rumbled from his throat, as his wolf answered mine.

“They're impatient,” he said, rare dimples appearing in his cheeks, as he chuckled at the impertinence of our wolves trying to take over this moment. “But we're not going to rush this. Only as far as you're comfortable, and no further.”

“But... the exemption... they might use it again,” I whispered.

“I can keep you safe for a while. We've got time.” Talius sounded calm, confident. There was no doubting how deadly serious he was. “You're mine, Irian, and I'm not letting them take you from me. But I'm also not going to let them set the timeline for

us.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, relieved that Talius was handling the problem. For once, I could lean on someone else. He was my protector, my alpha, and... my heart thumped painfully, he was my love. Well, fuck. When did that happen?

My brows clenched. What if he didn’t feel the same? I was the omega to his alpha, and we were clearly meant to be together, but love? That wasn’t a necessity for this kind of union. But now that I felt it, I didn’t think I could bear it if he didn’t feel the same.

“What’s wrong?” Talius’ deep voice rumbled around the room.

“N-nothing.”

He cocked his head at me and raised an eyebrow. I bit my lip and didn’t make eye contact.

“Hey,” he slid closer and pulled me to him. “We don’t have to do anything tonight. We’ve got time, okay?”

I nodded into his shoulder. It was clear he thought I was worried about starting the physical side of our relationship, and though there was an element of that, it wasn’t reluctance on my part, just inexperience. But he couldn’t possibly guess I’d developed these feelings for him. Just the thought that he might not feel the same made my heart flutter like a panicked bird and my stomach drop.

Soothing hands ran down my back, and I realized that while I’d been freaking out, Talius had flipped us so I was now lying on top of him. I was awash in reassurance, so I was sure he must be deliberately pushing pheromones at me. In this instance, I didn’t mind nature’s little quirk.



I pressed my nose up against the hollow of his collarbone and inhaled deeply. I did it again. The tension in my shoulders eased, slipping away like butter. Talius slipped his hand between us, and fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, pulling the sides away exposing bare skin and a few dark curly hairs. I took another deep sniff.

“Take your shirt off,” he murmured.

I sat up and pulled it over my head, tossing it on the bed beside us, where it landed with a soft whump . I looked at the handsome man beneath me. He’d removed his shirt entirely by now. Saliva pooled in my mouth at the sight of his muscular pecs, dark nipples, and broad shoulders. It was enough to make any man drool, especially this one, who knew the true nature of the man that resided within this magnificent body. The combination of sexy male and gentle alpha was irresistible. My tongue traced over my lips, the saliva slippery and sensual. I wanted... all sorts of things. Need pooled low in my gut... and in my groin.

Talius’ eyes were dark pools. Only a thin ring of brilliant blue circled the pupils in this moment, his intense gaze focused entirely on me. He pulled me back down and the heat of his body seeped into mine, sending delicious shivers through me. Warm skin burned against warm skin, our skins tingling where they touched, the coarse hairs sliding and gliding over each other as though the mere touch brought them to life.

I whimpered at the uncomfortable pressure from my zipper. The sound seemed to stir Talius and his denim-clothed cock hardened against my thigh.

“Let’s get out of these,” he said, rolling me off him and reaching for his button. I gave a sharp inhale as he released himself, totally unable to tear my eyes away as he kicked his jeans off. I hadn’t realized he went commando, and now I was looking at his very solid member jutting out from a thatch of dark hair.

And literally salivating. Fuck, what a cliché of an omega I was.

I swallowed hard.

Talius' dark orbs lasered in on mine.

“Okay?”

I nodded mutely, my throat feeling dry despite the saliva pooling in my mouth.

His eyes dropped to my jeans which were tight enough to burst. I hadn't made a move to ease my situation at all.

“Wanna keep them on?” Talius asked, gently.

I shook my head.

“Let me?”

Omg. I was mute. All I could do was nod. For once in my life, I was speechless.

Slowly, carefully, so deliberate that I had plenty of time to stop him if I changed my mind, he reached for me, popped the button through the buttonhole, then slid the zipper down. A moan tumbled from my lips, which would have been embarrassing, except the release of pressure was such a relief, and I was kinda looking forward to a different kind of pressure release soon. I hurried to push the jeans down and off.

Talius' calloused finger ran pensively around the waistband of my underwear, scalding my skin everywhere he touched.

“On or off?”

I swallowed hard, considering. A shaky breath. A pause. My lower lip stung as my incisors cut into it. Finally, “Off.” And in a rush I tugged the underwear down and tossed them aside.

The pounding in my chest bordered on painful, and my cheeks flamed. I didn’t know what to do and I felt awkward naked in front of him, where I never had before. This change in the nature of our relationship, had thrown me off balance. As shifters it was normal to be naked around each other, but a sexual relationship was uncharted territory for me and I didn’t know how to behave.

Talius’ eyes flicked over me. The heat in them made me shiver and more blood rushed to my groin. Fuck, I ached. And if any more blood went down there, I was gonna pass out for sure.

He pulled me down on top of him, and I whimpered as our swollen cocks rubbed against each other. His warm breath washed over my lips and he claimed them in a bruising kiss. It was possessive and rough and made the omega wolf in me howl in delight. My ribcage vibrated with its silent cry. Talius’ tongue pressed its way into my mouth, my lips opening to his demand. His tongue filling me, plundering and demanding. My wolf gave itself over completely to the Alpha, surrendering to our natures. I couldn’t fight it, didn’t want to fight it.

Talius’ hand slipped between us. I gasped into his mouth as his fingers slid over the silky skin of my shaft, his large hand wrapping around the two of us together.

His hand stroked upwards, palm running over the heads, catching the precum already gathering there and sliding it back down over our shafts. He repeated the motion and I groaned, involuntarily thrusting into his hand.

Talius growled, a deep throaty sound, and began jacking us off in earnest, even as his tongue continued its possession of my mouth. He swallowed down my sounds,

relentlessly drawing me towards the edge, until with a cry, my back arched and I spilled into the space between us. Talius continued stroking and moments later his cum mixed with mine.

I whimpered into his mouth as his palm rubbed over my sensitive head, and he pulled his hand away.

“Okay?” he asked drawing away from our kiss.

“Uh-huh,” I gasped, chest still heaving.

He leaned down and played with my lips again before planting a soft kiss and then sitting up.

“Wait here. I’ll clean us up.” Talius headed into the bathroom.

The scent of our combined emissions fascinated me. It was sharp and tangy, filling my nostrils with every breath. Before Talius came back, I ran my finger through the jizz and slipped it in my mouth, enjoying the raw earthiness.

Talius returned with a wet washcloth, but before he could wipe me clean, I brazenly smeared a finger through the mess and offered my finger to him. He smiled, eyebrows rising, but he slipped my finger into his mouth and hummed softly as he sucked on it.

I couldn’t keep my lips straight while he wiped me down. There was no need to speak. He looked deeply into my eyes, the corners of his eyes crinkled, their blue depths twinkling, and the dimples in his cheeks again. And when afterwards he lay down close to me and pulled the covers up over us, I was still smiling.

???

Much later, I woke to the steady drumming of rain as it hit the roofs of the cars parked outside and splattered on the concrete. It was still dark. The bedcovers rose and fell with Talius' steady breathing. A kind of wonder washed over me, and my lips curved, remembering. I felt alive from the tips of my ears to the ends of my toes, a bright thrumming sense of vibrancy that made me want to shout to the skies.

A large hand splayed across my abdomen and pulled me closer. Talius wasn't asleep, after all.

"Can you hear the rain?" he said in a low voice, his breath tickling the hairs around my ear, his tone deep and gentle like the alpha he was.

"Yeah."

"They won't search for us in this," he went on. "If it keeps up like this, we can stay here a couple of nights and then move on."

"Okay."

"I'm glad we're together finally," Talius' admission flowed easily in the darkness. "I feel I've been waiting a long time for you to grow up. I'm glad that's over now. And despite everything, your mother's done us a favor... waiting until you turned 22 was going to be hell. Now we don't have to."

I hummed happily, only I never hum so it had to be my wolf expressing its contentment.

"Are you still okay with what we did last night?" he asked me.

"Hell, yeah," I replied, maybe a bit too enthusiastically. I felt the heat rise in my cheeks.

A calloused hand traced the contours of my biceps, then across my chest. The pad of one finger ran over a nipple and I shivered, goosebumps breaking out all over me. He rubbed circles over it with his palm and it pebbled up for him. My sudden inhale sounded loud, even with the backdrop of the rain.

The bedcovers rustled and cool air rushed over me as his tongue took over from his finger, laving the hardened nub, before turning attention to the other.

“Fuck!” I gritted out through clenched teeth, straining to keep myself on the bed. Talius chuckled, then moved lower, fingers tracing and exploring, lips and tongue following.

“Mmmmfph!” Talius reached the V of my groin, right where I was ticklish, although I hadn’t known it until now. From the noises he was making, he was enjoying making me squirm. I panted shallow gasps of air, as I tried to stay still, but I wanted to watch him.

When his tongue curled around my cock, I cried out in surprise, and when he took me completely into his mouth, I couldn’t help the guttural moan that tumbled from my lips. My eyes rolled back in my head at the wet warmth on my most intimate part. The sounds of his sucking and slurping were almost obscene, as he made it virtually impossible for me to stay on the bed. The bedsheets dragged into clumps as I writhed beneath him.

Impossibly, my cock grew harder. I started to whine. Talius let my dick slip out of his lips with a loud pop! leaving me hard and dripping and desperate as he continued his journey of exploration, rolling my balls with his fingers, tugging lightly on the furry sacs. Next thing I knew, the pressure of his fingers disappeared and my balls were encased in wet warmth, his tongue gently rolling them around.

When he let them slip from the warmth of his mouth, his fingers returned, and he

cupped my sac in his hand as if weighing it. The gesture felt incredibly intimate.

He rolled my balls in his palm, then his fingers slid down onto my perineum and I swear my skin quivered as he ran his finger along it.

The questing finger stopped and I froze, heart pounding, wondering what would happen next. A heartbeat later, I had the answer. His finger strayed lower. Then he touched me. There. On my hole. Oh, fuck. A groan spilled out of me.

I was grateful for the darkness that concealed the self-conscious flush which was surely coloring my face - something had to be causing the burning sensation in my cheeks, after all. I was unsure how I should feel about this. This was... incredibly intimate and a little embarrassing. It was perhaps more intimate than I was ready for. I felt conflicted. It felt nice and I felt kind of ashamed that I even thought that. I swallowed, uncertain. What should I do? What if he did more?

The finger stopped its exploration and dropped away. Oh! Disappointment lanced through me.

“I’m sorry,” his deep voice vibrated against my ear. “I shouldn’t have done that. You’re not ready for that.”

I traced the curve of his shoulder and ran my hand down onto the firm swell of his pecs.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, hesitantly. “I... I liked it. It’s just I’ve never...”

“I know. It’s okay. But I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. We don’t need to rush.”

“It’s just, you know... a little embarrassing?” my voice finished on an upswing, like

it was a question not a statement.

Warm lips feathered over mine in the softest of kisses. His breath ghosted across my moist lips.

“You don’t need to be shy with me,” Talius murmured. “Not ever. You’re everything to me. There’s no part of your body I don’t want to love and there’s no desire you could have that would be too dirty for me. By the Moon, I’m your alpha. And I never want you to feel ashamed or embarrassed of what you like or what I do with you.”

He hummed reassuringly as I stroked his chest. It was a diversion, and I kept my eyes firmly fixed on those luscious pecs.

“Thanks. For understanding. You know I’ve never done anything with anyone.”

He brushed the hair from my face with a gentle stroke.

“I know that. We’ll take things slowly.”

I nuzzled into his neck, inhaling his wonderful scent. He was all reassurance and love and safety, and strong, exciting alpha. I shivered. How lucky was I to have this beautiful dominant man want me? And he definitely wanted me. I could feel his erection against my thigh. My own hard dick, which had wilted slightly with my awkwardness, had filled again and was trapped between us. I wasn’t ready for more just yet, but I would be. And I had a feeling it would be very soon.



### TALIUS

I was conscious that I had a very inexperienced omega in my care. I wanted to treat him with all the tender care and devotion I could, because he was my omega, he was going to be my mate. And I wanted him to have the best possible experience when we finally did mate. I wanted him to know that this wasn't transactional, that he was loved, and yeah, I hadn't said anything since I didn't want to overwhelm him, but I had developed feelings . They'd been growing for a while now.

I wanted to start this off properly, but until I'd formally mated him, he was at risk of his meddling parents trying to separate us, and I didn't like knowing they had some influence over us. I resented that they were forcing us to move faster than we otherwise would have, though paradoxically, I was glad we didn't have to wait until Irian turned 22 to finalize our bond.

He was mine to protect, mated or not. Whatever I have to do, I'll do it, I swore savagely to myself as the rain continued to drum down outside, sealing my promise.

I lay awake for the remaining hours, listening to the rain, shadows dancing across the ceiling from the headlights as cars occasionally passed, the swish of water under the tires... until a faint pallor sneaking its way around the blind signaled the arrival of the new day. The pattering of rain on hard surfaces outside hadn't diminished in the slightest. A brilliant flash illuminated the room followed swiftly by a deep rumbling. At least the weather was on our side. While the storms continued to rage, no-one would search for us. We'd have a little time to adjust to our new relationship before we had to move on.

Under the covers, warmth wrapped itself around my body. I had a sleeping omega snuggling on me. When I looked down, the brown lashes were resting softly against his pale faintly tanned cheeks, his pink lips, plump and pouty, were slightly parted. His chest rose and fell steadily. However unsure of our relationship Irian might be when awake, in sleep his wolf knew where it wanted to be, seeking out its alpha. My lips kicked up, affection suffusing me. We were going to be more than fine. Satisfied, I drifted back to sleep.

Sometime later, we roused. The mattress jiggled beside me as Irian unwrapped himself and sat up. His cheeks were flushed – again! I had never seen him so self-conscious before – and he wouldn't meet my eyes.

“Hey,” I tugged him back down onto my chest, which felt exactly where he belonged. “We’re mates, or we will be. Don’t be shy.”

His eyelashes tickled the hairs on my chest, his weight a comfortable pressure on my abdomen and chest. I ran the fingers of one hand through his hair, the silky strands gliding between my fingers. My other hand wrapped around his back and held him to me.

I dropped a kiss onto the top of his head.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

A deep sigh punctuated the silence and he seemed to melt on top of me.

“Yeah, I’m good. This is all just a little new.”

I ran my hands down his back, the fine downy hairs made it feel so soft on top, but underneath his muscles were firm, with just the slight roundedness typical of most omegas.

“I want you to feel comfortable with me,” I told him. “As your alpha, everything I have is yours... my land, my protection, my body, even...,” I hesitated, wondering if it would be too much, too soon, ‘...my heart,” I finished.

Irian’s head popped up off my chest, and a pair of bright eyes shone directly into mine, his face radiating delight.

“Really?” he squeaked, excitedly. When I nodded, he slid his arms around my neck. The relief was evident in his voice as he blurted out, “Thank the Goddess, because I love you!”

My wolf rumbled. My omega loved me. My mate. What more could an Alpha want?

“I love you,” I told him, before cupping the back of his head in my hand, the fine strands of his hair silky against my skin, and taking his mouth in a dirty, filthy kiss. When he pulled away, lips puffy and slightly bruised, his breathing was ragged. I could see the pulse thundering at the base of his neck. A bright stripe colored the length of that slender structure.

Our hard dicks rubbed against each other. A pungent scent hit the air. At first I didn’t recognize what it was. But then I smirked in satisfaction.

“Eew!” Irian exclaimed. He squirmed uneasily on top of me and looked like he was about to move away. But I held him there with one hand, my other one trailing lower until it located the wetness between his ass cheeks. It was copious. Irian tried to wriggle away.

“Slick,” I told him, bringing my glistening finger to my mouth, wondering if this was too much. But I wanted to taste my omega. When I licked the sweet slickness from my finger, humming at how perfect he tasted, the burst of pungent slick that hit the air told me Irian liked what he saw. He was highly responsive, literally bathing us in

his hot, horny, omega slick.

My cock stiffened further, stretching the silky skin taut to the point of discomfort. I knew what I needed, but it was still too soon.

The grumbles coming from on top of me, drew my attention away from my own desires. My omega was clearly not happy. “What the fuck?” he demanded.

He looked so indignant at his omega biology, with his plump cheeks and disheveled golden brown hair sticking up at all angles, that I chuckled.

“That’s your slick, it’s normal. It means your body is responding to having an alpha nearby. It’s getting ready to receive me.”

Irian glared at me. “Never happened before,” he snapped, chin jutting out stubbornly.

I simply shrugged. Shifter biology took care of itself, with no intervention from our human selves. “Maybe because our relationship has changed,” I suggested. Most likely that was the truth of it too. After what we did last night, and then sleeping the night together, it was probably enough to cause this change despite his young age, and one more reason to suspect we were fated.

“So what are we supposed to do about it?” Irian wailed.

“We enjoy it,” I suggested.

Irian was much lighter than me, so it was easy to flip him onto his stomach and cover him with my body. My erection glided along his ass crack, coating itself in slick.

“Keep your legs together,” I whispered in his ear, as I nibbled on the lobe. I felt his muscles flex beneath me. Reaching down, with one hand I guided my slippery cock

between his thighs. The space was narrow and made tighter as he squeezed his legs. I grunted, pressing into the tight space, and as the crown popped through, I couldn't suppress my groan.

I withdrew, leaving just the head of my dick caught between his thighs, and Irian whined dramatically.

“Again!” he demanded. Oh Goddess, he was getting pushy! If I wasn't clenching my jaw and concentrating on the pressure of his thighs squeezing my cock, I would have laughed aloud. Instead, I merely managed a strangled “hmmf” as I pushed again into the space between his thighs.

Irian's slick gushed and the extra wetness squelched as I continued to drive my cock into the tight space time and again. He grunted and moaned as my hips slammed into him. Skin slapped wetly against skin, the sound primal and harsh.

I needed more leverage, so I slid us off the end of the mattress until we were standing with Irian bent over the bed, supported by his arms. I steadied him with my hands gripping his hipbones as I thrust repeatedly.

Slap! Slap! My balls slapped against his thighs.

“Umphf,” nonsense came from Irian, as I pounded into him. “More!” he gasped.

His thighs began to tremble. Holding him with one hand, the other reached around and grasped his dripping cock and I began to jack him off in time with my own thrusts.

“Please,” Irian begged, desperately clawing at the bedcovers, alternating pushing back into my groin with thrusting forward into my hand. The smell of slick and arousal was intoxicating. I began to lose myself to my wolf, my brain fading out, and

the biological imperative to fuck taking over. I struggled to retain my sense of self over the roaring in my ears, but I wasn't letting go yet. My omega hadn't come, and there was no way I was coming before he did.

I focused my efforts on stroking his dick faster, squeezing harder as I relentlessly slid the precum up and down over the shaft, twisting my palm over the head on the upstroke.

Irian moaned, then whimpered, then tensed beneath me as he threw his head back and shuddered.

"T-a-l-i-u-s!" he howled, strings of cum spurting across the sheets.

I slammed my hips into him a few more times, hard and fast, rocking him forward onto the edge of the bed. A sense of inevitability rolled through me as my orgasm began to take over, and I drew back, shouting, cum erupting from my cock, decorating Irian's back. Marking him, I thought.

For a minute there was nothing but heaving chests, heavy panting, and trembling, shaky legs. My hair had fallen across my face in a curtain, limp and damp with sweat, and I couldn't see. But a deep sense of peace pervaded me.

After a while, a grunt from below me, made me realize I was clutching Irian to me so tightly he must be uncomfortable. I willed myself to relax my grip a little. A little, but not too much. I didn't want space between us just yet.

I flicked my hair back.

My eyes fixed on the damp patch of hair at Irian's nape, the strands darkened with sweat, and felt the trickle as a couple of drops of sweat rolled off me and landed in the cum on his back. My hips bucked gently a couple more times, my cock sliding along

his crack, and I savored those last moments of warmth and closeness, before my cock softened.

“Ah,” I sighed as my cock slipped free.

Irian whirled around, and throwing his arms round my neck, surprised me with a set of hot, pouty lips pressed hard to mine in a bruising kiss. When he pulled back, gasping for air, he beamed at me. “Alpha, that was... that was...” He gave up. “Wow!”

My chest puffed out and I swear I grew a few centimeters taller. I couldn’t help it. My wolf rumbled his satisfaction, he’d pleased his mate.

The mattress sagged beneath our combined weights as I pulled Irian down, dragging the coverlet over us. We fell asleep curled up against each other, filthy, covered in sweat and cum, while the rain continued drumming down outside.

???

Something startled me awake. At first, I couldn’t figure out what had disturbed me. The light in the room had barely changed with the advancing day - it was still gloomy, the light diffused and dull. Rain still pattered onto the cars outside, but it was a gentle rain now, droplets landing on metal with soft spitting sounds in a sibilant hiss.

Irian was curled up close to my side, our bare skins hot where they were in contact. He was a soft armful of omega to my hard alpha frame. His quiet huffs were regular and light. He was sleeping, and I marveled at it. That he was here, that he was in my arms, in my bed... that we could finally be who we were meant to be. An alpha and his mate.

A loud gurgling came from under the covers, and I realized what had woken me. We hadn't eaten in 24 hours, and my high-metabolism body was demanding it be fed.

I waited one more minute, enjoying everything about this morning, then I nudged Irian awake.

He lifted his head off my chest, hair askew, eyes blinking blearily. For an instant I worried that he might have second thoughts, but no, his rosy cheeks were plumped and he couldn't keep his lips straight. The twinkle in his eyes as the sleep cleared away was unmistakable.

"Hey, Irian," I whispered.

"Hey, Talius."

"Here we are."

"Yeah, here we are."

"Are you... okay with this?"

"Oh, yeah," Irian replied dreamily, and the weight of his head settled comfortably onto my chest again. A strange surge of emotion ran through me but...

"I'm glad. But now I need to eat. I'm fucking starving!"

At that moment, my stomach decided to speak again, another long gurgle filling the silence.

Irian sprang up, his pale body almost ephemeral in the dim light, his dusky nipples shaking as he laughed. The movement caught my body's attention and I went straight



to half-mast, but we were not stopping for that now.

“C’mon,” I said, getting up off the bed and offering Irian my hand. His fingers were strong in mine, grasping my hand with a firm grip as he allowed me to pull him up. He seemed more confident again this morning, back to his old self as he grinned at me.

“Let’s clean up first, then go get something to eat.” I smiled back at him.

The shower recess was small, but not so cramped that we couldn’t have some fun in there. I stored that information away for later. Right now, food was the priority. I cleaned both of us up with a washcloth, and we pulled on our dirty clothes and made our way to the motel’s restaurant.

In the restaurant, large windows overlooked an amazing vista of wintry trees and distant snow-clad mountains, but we scarcely noticed.

Later, we returned to our room and I showed Irian some of the fun that could be had in a cramped hotel shower.

Two days later, the weather broke and we continued our journey.

IRIAN

“Where are we going?”

For kilometer after kilometer, leafless trees scattered sparsely across the landscape stretched lifeless branches to the sky. In over an hour, the only signs of life we'd seen were a couple of demoralized-looking birds huddling on the smooth white branches of a dead snow gum, and one rabbit bobbing its way across the short, tufted grass, its white tail invisible against a terrain speckled with freshly fallen flakes of white.

This was a wasteland of dead and dying trees. Which didn't seem right. Something unnatural was happening here. These trees were meant for the icy, alpine climate, so why were they all dying? A few trees still stood resolutely brandishing their glossy green leaves, despite the slow death taking some of the boughs, leaching them white instead of the pretty stripes of cream, grey and green.

“I have a small block of land,” Talius turned his sparkling blue eyes on me briefly, before returning them to the road. His eyes seemed full of anticipation. “It was left to me by my great grandparents. I've never been there, but I think I can find it. No-one will find us there.”

I turned this over in my mind as I watched the stark landscape pass by.

“Up here?”

“No, it's lower down. It's farmland. It's still some distance away. We...” he hesitated, seemed to mull something over in his mind, then continued, “we can start a

pack there.”

I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I supposed it was logical. I mean, I knew we were destined to be together but I hadn’t thought about what that would mean. And Talius had never shared his plans for the future; apart from the time I thought he’d left without me, I’d assumed he’d stay in his birth pack forever. But it made sense. He was too independent to live his life out under someone else’s command. He was always going to be a Pack Alpha. That meant he was offering the position not just of mate, but of Alpha Mate. For a moment I stared at him mutely, my mouth open until a little sliver of drool spilled out, at which point I hastily snapped my jaw shut.

“Only if you want to,” he added, staring at the road ahead. Good, he’d missed the drool. I blinked. Sucked on my bottom lip. Noticed the whites of his knuckles on the steering wheel. Noticed the tension lines at the corners of his eye. He was starting his own pack and he was asking me to be a part of that. Did he think I was gonna refuse? Did he think I was mad, or what?

“Hell, yeah,” I grinned at him. “Let’s do it.”

The wrinkles disappeared from Talius’ face as the corners of his mouth curved and his eyes twinkled as they met mine. He lifted a hand off the steering wheel and we fist bumped. It might not be the most romantic declaration, but it was perfect for us. We were going to be pack. Even if it was just the two of us, we’d be Alpha and Alpha Mate. I shivered at the thought. He’d claim me and no-one would dare separate us after that.

???

The following hours saw us travel through a landscape increasingly covered in snow. The little car battled bravely over the asphalt which was disappearing beneath the soft

white flakes. At some point, Talius decided the snow was deep enough, and stopped the car, deftly applying snow chains to the wheels before we continued on more slowly.

As we drove through the slippery conditions, I sat stiff and tense in the passenger seat. The general low visibility, and difficulty seeing where the road ended and the unsealed shoulder started - because everything was white - was unnerving. I'd lived all my life in or near the big city and I found these conditions unnerving. Put me in a room with a hundred strangers and I could function perfectly, but out here in the wilderness I felt useless and vulnerable.

Talius took his eyes off the road for a moment, flicked me a glance, then adjusted a dial on the center console. A blast of heat blew into the cabin of the little car. Talius resumed staring intently through the windshield.

"It's okay," he said. "I've driven in these conditions before. I know what I'm doing."

I trusted him, I did, but it was hard to relax. I inhaled deeply, breathing in the combination of alpha confidence and pheromones. My shoulders relaxed – a bit. I sat back in my seat and wriggled my feet under the hot air vent. Maybe it was the effect of the chemicals in the air, or maybe it was his words, but it suddenly occurred to me with blinding clarity that this was something I didn't have to worry about. I had a partner who was well-equipped to take care of the situation. This was what it would be like going forward. Sometimes I would be the one who had the skills we needed, other times it would be Talius. But we were a team now. I didn't have to do everything on my own.

Sometime later, the road began its descent out of the mountains, and the snow thinned out with the black of the asphalt reappearing in patches on the road ahead. The eucalypts were healthier here, the grey-green leaves shiny and abundant, small clumps of snow cradled in the crooks of the branches still, but only small drifts lying

on the ground.

Talius removed the chains and we continued at a faster pace down the mountain. Although it was daytime, it was much darker down here. The eucalypts were densely packed, tall and straight, towering over the tiny vehicle winding its way along the forest road.

With the relief at safely leaving the snowy conditions behind, my spirits bounced back to normal energy levels.

This was an adventure! I had no idea where we were and OMG I was so out of my comfort zone but... road trip! I was there with my alpha and that's all it took for me to burst into song. It was one of the funkier human songs that was popular at the present time, and Talius' baritone joined me in the chorus. We smiled at each other as we sang the words.

The next couple of hours passed in a happy blur of badly sung songs until the trees thinned out and it was mostly farmland, and before I realized it, we were bumping our way along a narrow dirt road, Talius swinging the car this way and that to avoid the dirty great potholes that threatened to consume his tiny vehicle.

"Almost there," Talius grunted, the back of the car sliding out as we negotiated a corner and bounced our way towards a metal gate blocking the entrance to an overgrown plot of land. The road ended here.

Talius stopped the car. The sudden absence of noise was in its own way overwhelming. Exiting the car, the freshness of the air was striking. Unlike in the mountains where it had been crisp and fresh, here the air was dusted with the sweet aromas of the different grasses. A rusty padlock hung from a chain around the gate. Behind the gate an overgrown driveway wound its way into the distance, disappearing in a curve beyond a clump of trees. Talius and I exchanged a look. Then

we dissolved into laughter.

This was ridiculous! We were in the middle of nowhere. Neither of us had any idea what we were actually going to find here. And the most hilarious part was that we just didn't care. Several minutes passed as we doubled over, the bushland ringing with our laughter, startling some birds into flight, their great wings flapping noisily through the air.

Eventually, Talius stood upright, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes with his sleeve. The gesture left dark marks on the pale sleeves.

"Do you have a key?" I gasped, struggling to speak through the final hiccoughs of laughter.

"No. I mean, I have one, but I didn't bring it. I didn't expect we'd be running away like this."

"So I guess we just climb over then?" I suggested.

Talius' hair flicked crazily as he shook his head. He looked wilder than usual, with the untamed locks flying everywhere, several days growth on his face, his eyes reddened and moist from the intensity of our mirth. But he looked happy.

"Nah, I've got another idea."

His lips thinned and his expression intensified as he directed his focus to the trunk of the car, rummaging around and returning with a triumphant grin, one eye covered by his unruly hair... and a set of bolt cutters in his hand.

My teeth pressed sharply into my lower lip as I watched, frowning, "You are sure this is your place, aren't you?"

Talius shrugged. “Pretty sure,” he said as the bolt cutters bit down on the chain. It clinked jauntily as the loose end fell against the wooden fence post.

With a grunt, Talius lifted the metal gate up a couple of centimeters and pulled it over the overgrown grass blocking it. The sight of his muscles straining against the fabric of his shirt was... distracting. My tongue slid over my lips. My breaths grew shorter.

When he held out his hand, I slipped my fingers into his, the skin rough but warm. As he led me up the unkempt driveway, I was conscious of the significance of the moment. We were coming home.

The silence was companionable, but it wasn't really silence either – the air was alive: the swish of the wind over the knee-high grass, the rustling of the leaves in the trees, the piping call of a magpie and the distant cackle of kookaburras. Far off, a bovine bellowed its message to the unfeeling sky.

“Here we go.” We'd rounded the curve of the driveway, and the compound was laid out before us.

A number of run-down buildings were scattered around a long, elliptical courtyard. The closest one, and facing us, was a large two-story house. A few steps led up to a porch and a weathered front door, the timber bleached and splitting in places. A plank was broken, the splintered ends protruding up dulled by time and weather. Something had been stuck to the inside of the ground floor windows, the yellowing edges obscuring all but the edges of the panes. The upstairs windows appeared to be shuttered with a haphazard array of curtains and blinds. One window had a blind half drawn, giving the house the appearance of peering sleepily down at us, half-awake and with only a modicum of interest.

The paint was peeling on the outside walls, the grass reaching as high as the porch, and some kind of ivy had wound itself around the balustrade, the shiny green leaves

contrasting with the faded wooden handrail.

The place was a picture of many years of neglect.

Next to the main house, a long two-story building stretched along the length of the central space. It was a typical dormitory style building, with two rows of identical windows, lining its face. The green paint was peeling on many of the weatherboards there too. A couple of windowpanes were broken, a dark gloom lurking behind the jagged edges.

Several other houses were scattered around the further edges of the open space. They didn't appear to be in any better condition than the two buildings close to us.

The layout was typical. A pack must have lived here once. It would have been a large one and I wondered what had happened to it, why everyone had left and the place allowed to fall into disrepair.

"We've got our work cut out here," Talius turned to me, his face hardened by the appearance of fine lines around the corners of his narrowed eyes, thinned lips, and the sharp downward angle of his brows.

"You might have to teach me a few skills," I told him, "but I'm game, if you are."

His expression softened.

"Thank the Goddess," he pulled me in, the warmth of his lips on my forehead leaving a lasting impression.

"What?"

"You're amazing. And I'm relieved I won't have to do it all on my own." He ran his



fingers through his hair distractedly. Up close his eyes had flecks of different shades of blue that shifted and changed, like a kaleidoscope entirely in blue, or a restless ocean. I'd never noticed this before. I felt myself falling into their bluey depths.

I gulped, blinked, and tried to steady myself with an attempt at humor, "What? Did you think I was going to let you have all the fun?"

Talius scoffed. "I'm not sure you'll be calling it fun after a few days."

I shrugged. I was young and strong. Probably stronger than I looked. I'd surprise him.

"We'll see. I'm sure I can find ways to liven up the work hours." I smirked as a few dirty images passed through my head. I might be new to this, but I'd had a couple of days of intimacy with the Alpha of my dreams and I was already horny as hell.

The minuscule twitch at the corner of Talius' mouth told me he hadn't missed my innuendo. He put an arm around my shoulders.

"Come on, let's go in and check out our fancy new digs."

I rested my head against the solid warmth of his shoulder for a moment, breathing in his alpha-ness. The scent of alpha and male and mate felt like home and I wondered how I got this lucky. The Goddess watched over me, that was for sure.

"Yeah, let's do it!" I grinned, casting sentimentality aside and springing up again.

Last summer's leftover grass crunched under our feet, as we made our way towards the main house, the gravel of the driveway hidden under years of steady neglect. The steps up to the porch groaned disturbingly under our weight, but with the exception of the one broken plank, the wood felt solid and reliable still.

The doorknob squeaked a protest as Talius attempted to turn it.

“Locked.” He assessed the door with a small frown, then shrugged, leaned a shoulder into it and gave a hard shove.

Crack! The wood around the lock splintered as the door staggered inwards, leaving the mechanism persistently clinging to the doorframe. The faint musty smell of a disused building pervaded our nostrils, and something skittered away into one of the dark corners. There was a click as Talius flicked the light switch, but nothing happened.

“We’ll have to get the power put on,” he observed.

I went to the nearest window and ripped away the paper covering the panes. It disintegrated in my hands, brittle with age. Light flooded in revealing a kitchen off to the right of the entrance, extending to the far wall. We were standing in a semi-open living area which flowed into the kitchen, and a few meters in on our left, a few stairs led up to a hallway and more doorways. Talius wandered across to the kitchen and gave it a cursory glance before slowly walking around inspecting the living space.

“This will be perfect for an office,” Talius announced, completing the round and discovering a small room adjacent to the stairs.

I looked across from where I was conducting a much more detailed inspection of the kitchen. I was fond of baking and this kitchen – once the layer of dust had been cleaned up – would be a fabulous workspace. I could imagine preparing meals for our growing pack here. Later, as the pack expanded, we’d have to re-think this, but it would suffice for a time.

“Huh?” I roused myself from my contemplation of future brownies and elaborate desserts. “What did you say?”

“I said I’ve found the perfect workspace,” Talius said coming up behind me.

“Mmm, me too.”

Strong arms surrounded me. I leaned back into his solid frame, my eyes closing as I relished the feeling of belonging, of home.

Almost as if reading my thoughts, a hot breath on my ear whispered, “Welcome home, Omega.”

The deep alpha rumble made me shiver. A trickle of slick slid down between my ass cheeks. I wasn’t as offended this time. Did I hear or feel the flare of Talius’ nostrils against my ear?

“Come on,” he rumbled, “let’s find the bedroom. Make this house our own.”

With a sound embarrassingly like a whimper, I nodded and turned around, but before he released me, Talius’ hot lips found mine, his tongue demanding entry in a deliciously dominating way that sent more slick running down my inner thighs. The denim of my jeans was rapidly growing wet. Fortunately, there was no-one but Talius here to see the dark patches, the embarrassing evidence of my body’s enthusiastic response to my Alpha’s dominance, and my singular lack of control. I might be an independent omega, but fuck it, my body knew how to submit.

When Talius pulled away from the kiss, looking a little dazed and drunk, although my head was giddy, I pulled myself together enough to slip under his arm, and laughing at his stupefied expression, took off up the stairs.

“You’ll have to catch me first,” I taunted.

I scrambled up on to the landing with Talius in hot pursuit, but I hadn’t gotten far

before a body slammed into me from behind and with a pair of strong arms wrapping around me, we tumbled to the floor, Talius rolling onto his back and pulling me protectively onto his stomach before even a hair of my head touched the carpet.

Mesmerizing shades of blue swirled in the depths of eyes that burned with a desire that looked hot enough to consume me. But he stopped, waiting.

I was of legal human age, and unusual as it was, the Council had granted me mating authority from the age of 19, and we'd known this was coming for a long time. There was nothing to stop us. I was ready.

"Green... I'm green for you, Talius," I said, the words barely a whisper.

One strong hand pulled me in for another kiss, the other found its way to the wet patch of jeans between my legs and gave a squeeze. We both groaned. I thrust into him. I wanted to meld with this man, my Alpha. I ached with the need to have him inside me. It was a primal need, the primal need of the wolf to mate.

I slipped my hand between us, fumbling with the button as Talius possessed every millimeter of my mouth. Warm fingers took over, deftly flicking the button free and sliding the zip down. His warm palm cupped my stiff cock which was trying its hardest to burst free from the confines of my underwear. Talius' thumb found my cockhead peeking over the waistband. The rough texture of his skin contrasted with the slippery precum.

"Fuck," I groaned into Talius' mouth. More slick gushed from my hole, soaking my underwear, the scent filling my nostrils.

"Talius!" I whined, feeling increasingly desperate. I rocked back and forth on him, my cock thrusting into his palm, the underwear pushed down as far as my jeans allowed.

I gasped as suddenly his hand left me and cold air hit my hot dick. Then his hands were pulling my jeans down over my ass, and I hurried to help him, pulling down my underwear and hastily kicking the lot off.

Talius flipped us over and slid down. Wet warmth surrounded my cock making me cry out, the sound echoing in the empty house. The carpet scratched my back as I squirmed against the coarse threads. Talius swallowed me to the root, then slid back up to the head and sucked on it until I felt the first drops of semen threaten to spill, before he pulled off and gently squeezed the base.

“Ahh,” I dragged in a lungful of the musty air.

“Not yet,” he growled, then proceeded to lick my shaft all over, up to the frenulum which he flicked repeatedly with his tongue, my huffs and low groans highlighting each touch in that sensitive spot.

I so desperately, desperately, wanted to come.

“Need to... need to...,” I moaned, thrashing my head from side to side, trying to hold on until he gave me permission. I didn’t know why I was waiting, only something about our roles here and the fact that it was our first time made me want to wait for his approval.

Talius gave my cock a final suck and pulled off. I lay there panting, as the overwhelming urge to come eased slightly. He released his grip of my cock, and a finger slid into the wet space between my legs, teasing my taint, sending shivers through me. He pushed my legs up, slinging one over his shoulder. The rough pad of a finger circled my hole. I whimpered and clenched my butt.

Talius grunted, shifting his weight and adjusting himself in his pants. When his finger returned to its circling, I felt my anus clench in response. Pressure built against my

hole. It didn't hurt, it just felt weird. The pressure increased and then a finger eased its way inside me, gliding in on a sea of slick.

The moan that rumbled through my chest and out of my throat was long and low.

“Is that okay, my Omega?”

I was struggling for words. Unable to find them, I let out another drawn-out moan whilst nodding my head furiously, my hair rustling awkwardly along the carpet.

Talius slid his finger part way out, then eased it back in again. A fresh burst of scent hit the air. He pulled right out, but before I could protest, there was pressure and then my hole was being stretched wider. I inhaled a gasp at the sharp sting, and he stopped pushing. When I exhaled, his fingers eased inside. I panted, short, rapid breaths as my body accepted and adjusted to the intrusion. The sting faded away, replaced with feeling of fullness as he began to fuck me with his fingers. It felt amazing, but I wanted more. I pressed back down, feeling an urgent need to fuck myself on those magic fingers. My eyes fluttered closed as I strained to bring myself to completion like this.

Suddenly my legs slipped down, my hole cold and empty as the fingers disappeared and Talius stood up. My eyes flew open and I began to protest until I realized he was stripping off. His magnificent cock bounced free, standing proud, head plum-colored and weeping. Saliva flooded my mouth and for a moment I forgot about my empty soaked tunnel. The flash of desire was a burning fire igniting my entire being.

“W-want you,” I stammered, forcing the words out past lips that could barely form them.

Talius lips curved up wickedly and his eyes twinkled. He got down on his knees. I gasped as something enormous attempted to breach my hole, but when I looked down

it was still just fingers. He must have been using three now. I took a few deep breaths. I could do this. I reminded myself that he was preparing me to take him. As soon as I showed him I could handle three fingers, he'd give me his cock. I forced myself to relax.

Three fingers stretched me to the point where I felt I'd burst, but there was no pain, the slick and hormones were doing their job – they were preparing me to take my Alpha's magnificent cock.

“Ready, Irian?” Talius' voice had softened and he was gazing at me with a very gentle expression on his face, although tension strained his face.

“Y-yes, Alpha. Take me.” I couldn't have been more ready. I wanted to join with this man, my Alpha. We'd waited long enough.

I watched as Talius looked down, took himself in his large hand and pressed his cockhead against my hole. There was intense pressure, and for a moment I thought it was going to be too much, but suddenly he just seemed to pop inside. He paused.

Breathing was hard, but although I felt really full, it was actually easier than taking his fingers. His cock was hard yet soft, rounded and smooth and glided easily into me once the head cleared the tight ring of muscle.

Talius began moving his hips, slow and gentle at first, sliding in until he was pressed up against my balls, and withdrawing almost to my entrance.

“Mmmmm...agh,” I moaned, enjoying the unusual sensations. We were joined so closely, so intimately. “Ah...”

Then his thrusts picked up in strength and speed and he drove himself into me over and over as I writhed on the dusty carpet. I gave myself over completely to instinct,

bucking and thrusting and shouting for “More! More!” as he rocked me into oblivion.

He changed his angle, and I cried out in ecstasy as he hit someplace amazing, and when his next thrust hit it again, I spilled all over my chest.

Talius’ breathing was harsh and ragged as he plowed into me, sweat running down his face, eyes fixed on the place we were joined. He grunted as he thrust particularly hard and I groaned as his cock seemed to swell alarmingly inside me.

“Oh!” I gasped, as his enormous cock pressed further and further into the sides of my already stretched tunnel. My eyes widened in alarm... the pulse fluttering erratically in my neck.

“It.. it’s my knot,” grunted Talius, his eyes half-lidded and with a roar he unleashed inside me. I felt the hot spurts of cum filling and filling me. It went on and on, until at last he slumped on top of me. Sweat from his temples smeared the side of my face, and harsh rasps filled my ears as he dragged air into his heaving lungs.

As he lay slumped half on, half off me, our sweat and body warmth mingling, my cum sticky between us, I felt the most exquisite sensation in the area where we were locked together. Talius’ knot was pressing on the most amazing places and I wanted to weep with joy.

“Oh, my Goddess, oh, my Goddess, Talius, that’s so...” I broke off with a sob, unable to find the words I needed. Talius’ head was up immediately, intense blue eyes peering at me anxiously, but my lips were curving upwards even as the silent tears started to fall. “It’s amazing,” I whispered.

His gaze sharpened and I noticed his canines had descended. This was it. This was the moment.



“Yes,” I whispered, inclining my head and exposing my neck. A moment later sharp pain lanced through me from the hollow at the base of my neck. There was a strange flow of energy. My head buzzed and spun, and I felt energized and spacey all at once. I felt I was flying above the clouds.

I didn’t even feel him withdraw his teeth, only coming back to earth as he licked over the wound.

“Now you,” he said, rolling over so I was on top again. We were still connected. I didn’t know how long we’d be locked together like this, but I liked it. I leaned down, my tongue sliding over the ridges of his collarbone and into the hollow above the mating gland. The salt tingled on my tongue, as I tasted his sweat. I inhaled deeply, drawing in essence of alpha and Talius’ own unique scent. My canines were already descended, and I pressed them into the spongy softness of his skin, piercing the surface, and penetrating the mating gland below. Then I sucked.

It was a rush. It felt like a freight train dashing past dragging me along with it. My mind spun, a whirl of blue, blue, blue, and the buzzing in my head started up again. I had a strange sensation as if Talius’ essence was combining with mine and we really were becoming one entity. It was wild and amazing and beyond anything I could have expected. I felt so light-headed and free, it was hard to concentrate on the deep rumble of Talius’ voice.

Of course! We had to complete the ritual with the words of commitment.

The familiar voice reached me through the haze of euphoria.

“Omega, I am your Alpha, your bonded mate. I bind myself to you and will protect, defend and honor you. Until the end of days.”

My Alpha. My mate.

I smiled dreamily. Our combined essences were making me feel the way I imagined it might feel to be drunk. Random thoughts flashed through my mind but it was hard to grasp any of them. The buzzing was distracting.

A gentle bump on my shoulder drew my attention to Talius. My mind cleared. Was it some kind of Alpha magic or the result of the mating bond we were forming? At any rate, I was now sufficiently clear-headed to complete the commitment, though the omega's part was not required. But it was important to me that Talius knew I was committed to him with my whole heart and shifter soul. And I knew he needed to hear it too.

As I lost myself in the swirling ponds of his mesmerizing eyes, the formal words, learned by rote in childhood, poured from my heart.

“Alpha, you are my bonded mate. I will come to you for protection. I am honored to be your omega. Until the end of days.”

The expression on Talius' face transformed from intensity to one of pure joy. He may have been an alpha, may even become a Pack Alpha, but he wasn't the sort of alpha that just took what he wanted. He wanted me, but he wanted me freely given. And now he knew he had that.

Talius' fingers slid tenderly through my hair, gently rubbing tiny circles on my scalp. A little pressure on the back of my head and I moulded my lips to his... soft warmth to hard possessive heat. We were bound together at our lips, with his knot, and by our hearts.

We were Alpha and Mate.

TALIUS

“I’m sorry.”

I looked at our surroundings; the dilapidated house, old crumbling paper disintegrating in the windows, dust on all the surfaces. The faint but unmistakable smell of mildew. And I noticed the small brown elliptical balls scattered under the lowest shelves and in the dark corners. Something much smaller than us had made its home here.

The kitchen cupboards were in poor condition, the melamine chipped and two doors swollen and stained from a leak we were going to have to locate and fix. I could see all this from the carpet, and I had plenty of time to take stock of things, because my knot was taking an age to go down.

And the carpet! Oh, my Goddess...I’d taken my mate on the stained and dusty carpet, the same carpet the damn rodents had destroyed with their filth, and I’d probably given him carpet burn at the same time.

It was not a worthy start for an Alpha Mate.

“What for?” Curious brown eyes blinked up at me. The house was already dim, but the light was fading outside now, and without my shifter sight I wouldn’t have seen the flecks of gold in those beautiful eyes, the slightly dreamy expression. My omega. He was still a little turned on if I read them right.

He didn’t look unhappy; a bright pink flush covered his face and body, his hair

stained dark with sweat and stuck to his forehead, the longer strands splayed out on the carpet like a halo. A shit-eating grin split his face from ear to ear. No, he didn't look unhappy. But still. He deserved so much better.

"I'm sorry I didn't give you a better experience for our union," I apologized again. "I know the house is a wreck. I should have booked a hotel or something. You're used to so much better than this and I..."

"No. Talius," there was a note of urgency in his voice as he shook his head vigorously, interrupting my stream of excuses. "This is real." He propped himself up on his elbows (because I still had him pinned to the floor) and surveyed the run-down house. "Yes, there's a shit-ton of work to be done, but that doesn't matter, it's ours. It's more real than any of the life I led before. All the fancy crap my parents are into, with the parties and hotels and Council functions... it's all just posturing. It's fake."

"I shouldn't have taken you on the carpet though," I muttered, still ashamed of my lack of finesse.

"Why not?" demanded Irian.

"Well, carpet burn for one thing," I said, twisting him half-around and grimacing at the patch of reddened and abraded skin on his shoulders. The more I thought about it, I hadn't looked after my omega very well at all. And it had been our first time.

"Pfft," scoffed Irian. "I'm not one of those soft omegas who can't handle a little rough treatment. And besides, it's memorable. Who else would have an origin story like this?"

He chuckled happily and his chin jutted out as he spoke, as if defying me to contradict him. I studied him for a moment. He was an unusual omega, so it should come as no surprise that he didn't want a traditional mating.

Groooowwwwl

A low growl rumbled through the stillness around us. Then a gurgle. I frowned. My mate was hungry. I was too. But there would be nothing edible in the cupboards after all this time, and we hadn't brought supplies. Sigh . It seemed I still had a bit to learn about leading a pack, even a pack of two.

But I could still provide. When my knot eventually subsided, I gently pulled out.

“Are you okay?”

He blinked at me, and huffed, a soft smile gracing his face before his mischievous eyes met mine.

“Oh, ow, I'm so sore,” he whimpered, still smiling. “I can't do any work...”

“Of course you can't. Wait here, I'm going to hunt for you,” I told him, jumping up.

Irian looked at me incredulously, eyes wide and indignant.

“What? Wait! I'm coming with you! I'll help,” he said, miraculously recovered.

I laughed as I helped him to his feet.

So this was how it was going to be. I saw it now. Irian was going to be pushing all the boundaries. I really was going to have my hands full. He was cheeky and funny, and feisty as hell. I decided I liked that. A half smile curled one side of my mouth. Technically as the alpha, it was my job to hunt, but if he wanted to hunt, he could hunt.

As the alpha, I was bigger and stronger. It was always going to be my job to be the

protector, but part of my role as alpha was to satisfy my mate... in Irian's case, that meant giving him as much independence as he wanted. Although he was well versed in them, my omega did not play by society's rules. We were in for a hell of a ride... and I looked forward to it.

Smirking, I fixed my gaze on my new mate. Although his words were bold, I could see the uncertainty lurking just beneath the surface.

"Let's go," was all I said.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:13 am*

Two wolves emerged from the old house. One large wolf, dark grey, solid and muscular, with a thick ruff and long bushy tail. Black tipped ears and muzzle accentuated his proud bearing. By size, posture and manner, he was clearly an Alpha.

The alpha was accompanied by a smaller wolf, golden-brown, with smaller ears. Despite the extra volume of its very thick coat, the wolf barely reached the shoulder of his companion.

If anyone had been watching, they would have seen the two wolves gently touch noses before slinking into the forest together.

They were a mated pair.

???

The tall and silent tree trunks were dark shadows flying past as the two wolves dashed across the uneven terrain. Their grace, even as they chased down their quarry, was evident in the silence with which they hunted. Barely a twig snapped beneath their feet as they flew across the ground, just the stirring of leaves in the wake of their passage told the tale to the darkness.

Ahead, a sixth sense sent rabbits scattering, their white tails glowing like bouncing balls away from the predators. On any other night, they would have been the prey, but not tonight. Tonight, a special feast was required - it wasn't every day that a Pack Alpha took a mate.

Dappled shadows cast by the half-moon danced across the coats of the two wild

creatures. At first, their hunt was half-hearted, more joyful than serious, the wolves stopping from time to time to play, the smaller one dancing behind trunks and branches and rock formations, then springing away as the bigger wolf stalked him. The younger wolf taunted and teased, lithely jumping up and running away each time the other surprised him by getting too close. The alpha seemed content to stalk his mate, never using his weight or speed to bring the exchange to a conclusion.

Finally, as the sparkling pinpricks in the night sky faded into the background, and the shadows shortened down below, the two wolves suddenly froze.

The large grey beast lifted his nuzzle, subtly scenting the air. Then with a chilling deep challenge uttered into the night, he bounded away, closely followed by his companion. They trekked downhill and up the other side, on and on, paw after paw hitting the dirt and the leaves and the damp, decaying leaf litter, until finally, tongues lolling and sides heaving, they slowed, circling around a dense thicket of thorny bushes.

The honey-brown wolf positioned himself behind the clump, while the larger wolf pushed his muzzle deep into the congested mass, startling a red fox - whites of eyes showing, and hairs erect - out the far side. The young wolf took off after it, the larger wolf heading around and coming in at an angle. The fox managed to stay ahead of the young wolves, but was relentlessly driven always in the same direction, despite increasingly desperate attempts to dodge and track away. Each time the fox attempted to break away, one of the wolves would herd it back, uncompromisingly urging it back along the original path.

When they reached a small flat grassy space, bordered by a semi-circular sheer rock face, the fox realized it was doomed. Turning its back on the sheer rocks, it made a frantic dash between the two wolves.

The crunch of shattering bone and a few last pitiful yelps marked the end of its life.



Later, the dark grey wolf carried the limp corpse, limbs dangling uselessly from his jaw, and laid it at the feet of its mate.

It was a fat red fox, plump and juicy, a fitting mating gift for an Alpha Mate. The Alpha lay on the thick grass and watched as his mate fed. He was hungry himself, but he could wait. The wolf was well-pleased.

His mate had participated in the chase and his belly was now distended and full.

When the Alpha had finished the remnants of the fox, the two wolves ran their tongues over each other's muzzles, licking up any lingering red droplets, before disappearing together amongst the trees, to re-enact somewhere on that dark and lonely mountain, their union as Alpha and Alpha Mate.