



Unruly Omega (One Wild Alpha #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: We are wild. All shifters are. But what they do to some of us...sometimes, there's no coming back from the torture. The imprisonment. The horrors. All in the name of government and science. I made it out. The one I thought was my mate did not.

After escaping the program, I take in others who escape or manage to evade the scientists and their sterile white coats. Some rehabilitations are easy, but other shifters will never be who they were before.

My work leaves me no time for relationships or anything else. But I crave an omega who is truly mine. In the middle of the night, an omega bear stumbles onto the sanctuary. He's been shifted for a long time. He's more animal than human.

And he's mine.

Unruly Omega is the first book in the highly anticipated M/M Mpreg shifter series One Wild Alpha by USA Today Bestselling Author Lorelei M. Hart. Unruly Omega features an alpha whose own past damaged him nearly beyond healing but left him desperate to help others, an omega who may not be salvageable, compassion, sizzling heat, new beginnings, finding oneself, true love, fated mates, an adorable baby (or two) and a guaranteed HEA.

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Locke

I didn't have any cubs of my own, but watching Benson pack his things up to move on and move out was about the closest thing to watching one of my kids striking out on their own. Benson was a grown man, close to my age, but he and I had become close since he came to the sanctuary years ago.

He'd become a friend somewhere along his healing journey and had now found his mate. That mate belonged to another pack who he claimed had accepted him with open arms.

"Don't forget your closet," I said as he stuffed things into a huge duffle.

"I got everything from the closet already, alpha."

"I'm not the alpha, Benson. You did that on purpose."

Benson was a button-pusher. Always with a smile on his face, of course.

"Sure, boss."

I didn't know which one was worse, boss or alpha. Neither fit my station. We were a team. I didn't dare call us a pack or a den. We came from all walks of life and had gone through things that would make most people faint...or die.

"Speaking of alphas, are you sure Reggie is willing to take you into the pack? He's a tough one."

Benson turned around and sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m sure. You talked to him on the phone the other day. And then you grilled my mate.”

“I didn’t grill him. I asked intuitive and well-thought-out questions.”

“You asked him if he loved me.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “You’re my friend.”

“Am I?” He resumed the packing, making my heart sink a bit lower. I had to remind myself that Benson was doing what we intended when we opened this place. We took shifters in who needed care for one reason or another and attempted to rehabilitate them.

Help them return to a normal life, if possible.

Most of the shifters who came here were from the government facilities. They called themselves shifter researchers, but they were torture experts. Chemical, physical, emotional, mental. They used every instrument in their evil tool box, some of which we hadn’t even pinpointed.

They said the program was voluntary, but I hadn’t met one shifter who walked into a research facility of their own volition.

Not one.

“Stop giving me shit. Yes, you’re my friend. I’m...I’m gonna miss you. A little.”

“I’m gonna miss you too. But this is good. I think one day, you’re gonna meet your mate too, Locke.”

“I’m gonna leave you to it.”

Benson stood. “Locke, come on. I know you want a mate. You’re an alpha and a good man. You’ll find your omega.”

“Maybe. Do you need anything before you leave?”

“No. I’m good. I’ll keep in touch.”

I nodded but turned before he became aware of the pain I was sure was written all over my face. “Good luck to you, Benson. I hope the Goddess smiles on your and your omega’s life.”

Before I said anything else cheesy and dramatic, I walked down the hall that connected the dormitory building to the main house. My bear smelled the fresh pot of coffee first. The general consensus was that bears loved honey. Mine did as well, but he liked his with a little coffee.

Didn’t hurt that it kept this bear awake.

While I stirred in creamer and grabbed leftover banana-cinnamon bread from breakfast, I checked the schedule. We had a group session in a few minutes.

Today hadn’t been the best, so far. My hip was giving me the most trouble and, though it was only physical discomfort, it triggered my memories. How I got the scarring. How it happened. When it happened.

My screams.

That plus Benson leaving equaled a day where my mental health might be shaky. Not the way I lived my life anymore.

Everyone in the sanctuary needed me to be my best.

They counted on me and the team for healing and stability. I couldn't help them stabilize if I wasn't rock solid myself.

While I made my way to the group session, I thought about Benson. He'd not only come out on the other side of violent trauma, but he'd thrived in his recovery.

And found a mate.

I was a bit jealous of that part.

There was a good chance that I'd missed out on that aspect of life, but my bear would never understand why Fate had overlooked us. We'd been to hell and back. I'd been stupid thinking that the flip side of pain held rainbows and sunshine. Some days weren't, and even though our trauma was not one ounce our fault, we still endured life afterward which sometimes was an extension of the pain.

Perhaps my omega was out there and he deserved better than a broken, battered alpha.

That was the most probable scenario in my head.

"Locke, good to see you. Should we get started, everyone?" I took my seat as Markus called us to attention. He was the one person in this place who hadn't been experimented on, but he didn't feel sorry for us.

He taught us to fight in the war inside us instead of being a bystander to the battle. A warrior for ourselves instead of a slave to the past. A survivor instead of a victim.

Some days those were just words.

The hard part was living them out.

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Kellan

I shivered, unable to get warm in the cold night. It had been a long time since I was outside the warren of buildings where we were held by the humans in the white coats with their instruments of torture and devices of bondage.

“A long time” was the closest I could come to expressing the length of my imprisonment. Years for sure. Just not a clue how many. And every day of that time, I’d sought a way out. Watched for any opportunity to free myself from torment.

I didn’t know why I was here, what the white coats were trying to do or if they thought I had done something wrong that led me to this place.

As I scooted under a section of steel fencing that didn’t quite meet the ground, I wondered if I’d been set up. Why would I suddenly have been left unattended, unbound, and with the door to the hallway ajar?

But no matter why, I had to get out of there as soon as possible. If they came after me, I’d deal with that when the time came. My back burned where the wires had dug in, but that would heal with a shift. As I belly crawled over the parking lot and onto the highway verge, there was still no one on my trail. At least, I saw no signs of it. In the past, when an omega made a break for it, there were sirens that I could even hear in my small cell as well as sweeping lights that made my tiny, high window glow. They did not take an omega’s escape lightly. I didn’t know for sure, but I overheard the security team talking about catching one and the punishment he would endure as a result.

They probably caught them all.

Until tonight, I'd never been able to figure out how anyone was able to get outside the labs or their cell, much less the building. But, as I hid in brush beside the highway, I wondered if they had all done it the same way I did—and if there had been more to it than a simple mistake.

Sitting in my cell, boredom was almost worse than the alternative here. Or so I told myself when several days passed without any activity at all. Food trays were shoved through the slot in the door, my water needs met by the sink, and the auto shower that turned on once a day for—if my one-Mississippi-style counting was correct, exactly two minutes. I'd learned to strip and rush over to stand under it the moment it began because if I didn't, I'd miss the part of the tepid flow that had liquid soap or something like it sending lather over my body. That took thirty seconds. Then one-and-a-half minutes of rinse. Any mistake in this process, or glitch on the part of the system would leave me dirty or, worse, sticky with unrinsed soap in my hair and on my skin. It also burned as it dried, especially in the wounds that littered my body and never seemed to heal.

It wasn't a great system, but it did make it possible for me to be reasonably clean most of the time.

On the day I escaped, there had been a shower glitch, as in it never came on, and one of my two meals didn't show up. Not the first time either of these things happened, but I wondered if they were connected to the other elements that contributed to my current position. The parking lot was not empty, but there weren't many cars there. I didn't have any way to know if that was normal or not, just more data to absorb in case I did make it away from here. Or even if I didn't. I was hungry for information, and since the "scientists" didn't talk to me beyond instructions they might have given a dog and spoke to one another only rarely in my presence, I didn't get much.

As I sat on the floor, wearing only the boxer shorts they provided me with, hungry and dirty, the door clanged open and the intercom in the wall barked at me to get to the lab in the next hallway over immediately.

It never ceased to anger me that those orders came as if they'd been waiting for me to do something and I was late. Once, I'd ignored them, but the scar still ridging my buttocks taught me not to do that again.

I pushed off the floor and trudged down the cold tiles of the hallway to my destination. They hadn't had anyone escort me after the first couple of days. It wasn't as if I could just continue on out and leave or anything. Every door was sealed, barring the ones they intended me to use. I'd been shown that by my guards and confirmed in those first few weeks that it never changed. In fact, they were electrified. Painfully so.

Probably I'd never know what made me try the one on the left, opposite the lab entrance on this day, but I did, and instead of sending me to the floor twitching from the electrical shock, the door opened. And I went through the doorway and on down a hall I had never visited before. After a few twists and turns, I came to another door, this one with a green lighted sign over it.

"Exit?" I mumbled. It had to be a trick. Those who had charge of me enjoyed playing them from time to time. I should go back. In fact, I did, but the door I'd left open behind me was closed. And when I reached for it, in the silence of this enclosed space, I could hear the electrical hum.

So, rather than courage, what sent me out the exit was lack of options. That exit door led to the parking lot.

But now that I'd found myself here, what should I do? I climbed up into a squat and ran along the road, flattening myself when any cars passed. I could have tried to

hitchhike, but even I knew a guy in his underwear would be a suspicious sight to the average driver. Plus, I saw no other building in any direction. Meaning, the vehicle that stopped might well be one of my tormentors.

I hadn't shifted in a very long time, and only then because it had been induced by some sort of injection in the port they'd implanted in my shoulder. But if I ever could, now was the time.

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Locke

Over the years, we'd built a network of communication with our fellow shifters and groups of trusted humans. The humans kept their ears to the ground about things going on and news we didn't hear on the television, and packs shared information across the board.

Not that we were a pack.

We weren't.

Community was the word I would use.

"Hello." I answered my cell while helping restock the pantry after a run to one of the big-box stores. The caller ID said the number was unknown, so I took care not to say my name.

"Locke, this is Reggie. I have information."

"Is it Benson? Is he okay?" It had only been a few days since my friend had left but, if he was in trouble, there would be hell to pay.

"What? No. Benson is fine. I've heard something about a local lab. One of our human contacts called me this morning."

"What is it?" I felt my way to the seat behind me and sat down, bracing myself for the bad tidings. Unless they were shutting down all the facilities, there was no good

news. I doubted he was calling to tell me that. There would be more zeal and relief in his voice.

“There was an escape from one of the labs. The one that’s closest to you.”

That wasn’t saying much. The closest lab to us was over fifty miles away.

“Are they reporting how many are missing? Is it only shifters?”

We shifters weren’t special. They wanted to research monsters and other supernatural creatures. We were the first, but we weren’t the last. We have heard they might even focus on their own species in some labs. Their torture.

“I don’t know. That place was only for shifters as of our last intel.”

“Okay. If you see anyone, send them my way. We have room.”

“Of course. Benson said you always stay prepped. I just...” He paused and cleared his throat. “We want you to know that you have the support and respect of our pack. If you need anything or find yourself in trouble, don’t hesitate to call. We know what you do for shifters like Benson, and we’re grateful.”

Huh. I didn’t know Reggie very well. A few phone calls here and there. He wasn’t my bestie by a long shot.

Until his last statement, I would barely have called him a friend.

“I appreciate that. And while we’re on the subject, I’m grateful for your acceptance of Benson. For his sake and his mate’s as well. He’s a good man.”

“He is. We’re grateful to have him here. I’m actually thinking about making him a

beta.”

My chest warmed. This was the end game for everyone we took into sanctuary here. Benson was a success story but not all were. “I think he would be a great beta. Thanks for the information. We’re going to be ready. And if you speak to any other alphas, please let them know we will take in anyone they encounter. Shifter. Monster. Whatever.”

“Will do. Talk to you later, Locke.” He hung up the phone before I could respond.

I went directly to Markus. I tended to bark out orders, but he had a way of gathering everyone without them getting pissed off in the process. I knocked on his open door. “Are you busy?”

“Not too much. How can I help?”

“I received a phone call from Reggie in the other pack and he says there was an escape from the nearest lab. He thinks we might have escapees headed our way. Can you rally the troops and let’s go clean up the bunkhouse? Get the beds made?”

“It’s strange how you can speak to me so kindly but not to the group.”

I cocked my head, thinking about it. He wasn’t wrong. Not at all. “I don’t know why.”

Markus nodded but got up from his desk, shutting his laptop. “Might want to work on finding out why. You’re the alpha, after all.”

“I’m not...”

He held up his hand. “I know. I know. You’re not the alpha. Meet us there.”

I stopped by the storage area and picked up ten sets of sheets. Many were flowery or had wild prints. Some had cartoons on them. But they were clean and were more comfortable than anything they had slept in at the lab.

We relied on donations from the shifter community, both monetary and material. We would randomly receive orders for food or other supplies and we were grateful. We had no jobs outside of this place. I'd used my entire inheritance to pay for it.

That didn't make me the alpha.

Everyone gathered in the bunkhouse, and we went to work like a well-oiled machine. Some swept and mopped. Others made beds like I was. We opened the windows and let the fresh air in since shifters, especially ones who had recently emerged from imprisonment, were especially sensitive to smell. We chalked it up to smelling the death and sickness smells from the labs, but we tried to help as much as we could until their senses got readjusted.

"When are we expecting people?" one of our other guests asked. He had come to us about three months before. He didn't remember his name but we called him Butch. He seemed to like it.

"Not sure. In the next day or two, I suspect. A shifter should be able to run the distance in that time if they are physically able. If not, a week or so. Keep your eyes and ears open and on alert when you run. The other packs are listening as well."

"Yes, alpha."

Fuck.

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Kellan

I had shifted, somehow.

As I huddled in that patch of brush beside the highway, I struggled, shivering in the cold, trying to find my bear deep inside me. Was he even still there? I hadn't heard him in so long, I wasn't sure. And if he wasn't willing or absent or wasn't even there...what would I do?

I dug down deep, searching for the bear, hunting, begging, the old familiar voice, the warm rumble in my chest. None of that was there.

Two cars went by, and one turned into the parking lot while I flattened myself on the hard, cold ground, praying the twigs and leaves were concealing me. Headlights flashed in my eyes then darkness again. I couldn't stay here much longer. Someone was going to notice my absence. Probably the person who activated the intercom. Sometimes I was summoned then left to sit for hours in the lab until they bothered to come in to torture me. Please let this be one of those times.

I strained and struggled, but no sense of my bear emerged. Nothing. More cars passed. Two more entered the lot. If nothing happened, I was going to have to run down the road in my boxers and hope someone not related to the lab picked me up. Someone not criminal. Omegas were often targeted by other kinds of evildoers.

How had I made it this far and ended up in a position not much better than where I started? Darkness overtook me, despair I'd always thought part of my captivity. In the ever-fading dreams of freedom, my emotions were that of joy and other positive

things. Sinking into the grief and hopelessness, I prayed for death. At least if the goddess took me now, I'd die free. Right?

And then, from that blackness, the bear roared free. Unlike what I remembered of ordinary shifts, this one ripped into me, breaking bones and tearing skin as the larger animal replaced my two-legged form. And then we were racing across the highway, headed for a patch of woods a mile or two away. Not because I wanted to but because the bear was 100 percent in charge. He'd been suppressed for so long, not only couldn't I blame him, but I welcomed his help in getting us as far away from the lab complex as possible.

The woods went on for a lot farther than I had anticipated, providing us not only shelter from the eyes of those who might be watching but also a source of food. I'd been hungry to a greater or lesser extent my entire imprisonment, and while there were no cheeseburgers to be found here, there were roots and grubs and the remains of last year's berries. It wasn't enough, but a stream provided fish, and as we gained strength, his ravenous appetite drove us to hunting deer. As if he'd been hibernating, he crossed the lands devouring anything he could, seeking to regain weight and reach his full strength.

As I'd grown thinner, it seemed he had as well, but while we'd hunted before, it had never been with such vicious precision. I tried to slow him down, fearing it might be too much, but if he heard my pleas, he did not respond to them.

Finally, we emerged from the forest into an area of open fields, and a farmhouse appeared on the horizon. A line of clothing hung near the back door, and I had long enough to wonder why they hadn't been brought in before dark before lapsing into gratitude that they had not. Nearing the house, I attempted once again to shift.

It's time. I can dress and approach the people at the house.

Why wasn't he answering me? Was the bear so angry at me? Did he blame me for everything we'd gone through?

Was it my fault?

Considering how we'd been taken, it very well could be.

Please. You can do whatever you want, but we need to make contact with people. Farmers will not be associated with the lab.

Then, just as I thought he'd agreed, as we came within a dozen yards or so of the home, he veered off, crashing through the hedges and onward.

Where are you going? As if I expected an answer at this point. I had to let him go and trust he had our best interests at heart. For the first time in years, I wasn't hungry, and apparently the lack of exercise my human form experienced did not affect his animal athleticism.

We ran on until even he slowed, lifting his nose and sniffing the air then making a turn and following his nose. Shifters. Other shifters. The bear knew his business. I could only hope he'd relinquish the body to me when we got wherever it was he was going.

If not, maybe someone there could help.

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Locke

“What is it?” I flailed my arms and legs to untangle them from the covers when someone knocked and then entered my room in the dead of the night. When that person didn’t immediately answer, I growled. “Who is it?”

“It’s just me,” Zeph answered, chuckling.

“What are you laughing at?” I stepped into a pair of pants and tried to collect my thoughts. Goddess, he’d woken me out of one of those dead sleeps. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m sorry. I did knock several times.”

“Shut up.” I flicked the lamp next to my bed on and took in his blue-light-blocking glasses and oversized hoodie. A sure sign he had been pulling an all-nighter in the security room. We’d set up cameras at strategic locations around the property in case someone decided to breach our borders or came by looking for shelter. Not all of the people who came to us knocked on the front door. Some got here by the skin of their teeth or, worse, with soldiers on their tails. “Wait, why are you here?”

“I came to report activity on the border. It’s a bear, but he’s not moving like one.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just come. You have to witness it for yourself.”

We went to the security room, and I plopped down in a chair next to Zeph. He used the mouse to turn back time on the camera feeds, and I watched closely. It was probably just a regular bear, though Zeph didn't have a reputation for jumping at spiders.

"There." He pointed to the screen. The screen was darker since it was the middle of the night but, sure enough, a form came onto the screen, its movements hurried but defensive in nature. Checking all around him. Raising his muzzle to sniff the air. Usually bears displayed lazy movements almost on the verge of clumsy. Zeph was a panther, and he said we moved like bowls of Jello but somehow got to our destination.

"What makes you think..." I leaned forward to get a better look. The bear was missing some hair. And this bear had blue eyes.

Bears didn't have blue eyes.

But shifter bears did.

"How long ago was this?"

"Fifteen minutes or so, but he's still there. He dropped to the ground the second he crossed our borders. He's fast asleep, I think."

I grabbed my cell, thankful I'd brought it with me, and called the others. "Let's go."

We sprinted through the house toward the area where the bear was, and everyone shifted at once. We ran toward our target under the light of the full moon, but, once we got there, the bear woke up.

I shifted back to two legs and put my palms out. The bear let out an ear-splitting

growl, rising up on his hind back legs to show me how big and bad he was.

Scars marred his belly, and there was more than one tuft of hair missing. Bears weren't a species that tore their hair out, even when feral. His nails were sharp, and his teeth didn't appear in the best shape.

This bear was a survivor.

"My name is Locke. You've entered our sanctuary."

"It's pack, Locke. Just admit it. We're a pack." Zeph's outburst caused the bear in front of me to huff out a warm breath and growl again, this time more menacing.

"Knock it off, Zeph. Hey," I called out. "You're safe here. Let us help you."

Another growl but this time guttural, right from the center of his chest. A warning for me to stay back. In my experience, when these fugitives appeared, backing down was the last thing we needed to do.

"Locke, try your alpha power." Markus walked up. He hadn't shifted with us, so it took him a few minutes longer to get here. When I didn't respond, he continued, "No one's talking about your role in this community, but you are an alpha, and you have the power to command him. We need him to shift so we know what's going on."

I let my bear come forward, only in my consciousness. "Shift. Now."

Nothing.

"I command you to shift." I pushed more power into my voice.

"He's not responding, man. We don't know how long he's been like this. He's got

crazy eyes.”

“Funny,” I snapped. Rob didn’t say much but when he did, it usually was snarky. Some would say rude. It was me. I said rude. “That’s what we said about you when you barreled in, trying to kill all of us.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “All right. What do you suggest, alpha?”

Rude.

I stepped toward the bear with no fear in my heart. There was something about him. I wanted to care for him. Keep him. Interesting. I hated the words that were about to come out of my mouth. “We need to dart him. As much as we hate it. It’s the only way to save him.”

“I’m on it.”

The bear crumpled to the ground, one of our darts in his neck. His blue eyes lulled back in his head and his breaths slowed.

“All right, everyone. Let’s get him to the holding cell.”

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Kellan

I lay with my eyes squeezed closed, determined not to wake up and confirm that everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours or so was a dream or that I'd somehow been caught again. I'd dreamed a lot, at first, after they took me. Still an adolescent, I'd been separated from my den and everyone I knew with no explanation.

Having been warned not to go anywhere off our lands by myself, I didn't listen at all to those older and wiser than me. The elders said we'd be snapped up and hauled away by some sort of bogeymen. Taken to a place where we'd wish we were never even born. No details beyond that, which made my friends and I believe it was just a scare tactic to keep us in line. To be fair to my youthful self, I had not actually planned to be alone that day. Two of my pals and I had planned to hike to town for an afternoon spent eating junk food and maybe bowling. We'd never tried that before, but it sounded vaguely interesting. Or we might have done something entirely different. At that age, we were nothing if not flexible about our free time.

But Abe and Joe were both wrangled into extra Saturday chores. They sassed their alpha dad once too often, apparently. And since I hadn't sassed anyone, that day at least, I was left with nothing to do and a plan in place. One I never should have attempted on my own.

But I didn't know that then. Just thought my overprotective parents and the others were bossy and treating us like babies. Besides, what could happen in broad daylight? Our lands were only a couple of miles from town, and the humans there knew us all and had never been rude or anything. Did they know we were shifters? No. To our

knowledge, they were all under the impression we were some kind of farming commune. And we let them think that.

It made for a decent relationship. Our products were featured at the local farmer's market. Our craftspeople sold their items online and via some of the stores in town. We patronized them as well. All good.

So, when a car pulled over to the side of the highway and offered me a ride to town, I got in. The driver was someone I knew, at least on sight. He'd bought tomatoes from me at our stand just the week before.

"I need to make a quick stop on the way," he told me. "Just take a minute."

A minute of his time to deliver me into the hands of evil and imprisonment. Years of mine to get out. If I had...

Okay, I'd lay here long enough, wondering if I was still in that cell or if I truly had escaped. My bear led with his nose, though, sniffing the air before opening our eyes. If there was any sign we were not at the lab, it was the fact I was in bear form. They could have done something to get me to shift, but they hadn't done that in years.

And even though my bear was doing the sniffing, through his snout, I could smell the cleanliness of the room, the lack of fear lying heavy in the air. No medicinal odor to speak of. And another odor, sandalwood and lime was the closest I could come to it, a scent that relaxed some of the tension at my core.

Eyes open, I took in my surroundings. The room was not much bigger than the cell we'd occupied at the lab, but my initial fears of having either been recaptured or never left at all did not return. There was no furniture, just a padded floor and walls, like I'd seen once in a movie about an old-time asylum. The labs had no padding. If you went crazy and wanted to bang your head or any part of your body into the solid

steel walls, floor, and ceiling, nobody stopped you. Here, although it wasn't a bed, I lay on the first comfortable surface I'd had the pleasure to feel in years. The outline of a door and the window it held took up part of one wall, also padded, and I wondered who had taken me now and what they wanted with me.

Not the lab...but who?

And what was that delicious smell?

We paced back and forth. Four steps one way, six the other, a very small, very secure room. A water fountain bubbled in the corner, next to a shiny tin pail of fresh fruit and nuts. The bear was working his way through the snacks when the door slid to the side and a man came in. The scent of sandalwood and lime preceded him. He'd been there when I was captured by these people. Or not captured.

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Locke

Against my better judgment and the opinions of my friends, I was sitting next to the bear who only hours ago had positioned himself in front of us as though he might go in for the kill.

I shouldn't be here, but I had to be.

I hadn't told my friends that he wasn't an average feral bear.

This growly, snarly bear who happened upon our lands was my omega.

My fated mate was in front of me. Couldn't or wouldn't shift back to human. I didn't know his name or where he came from—nothing about his human side other than the blue eyes that had taken my breath away.

There was no way I could tell him, of course. He was under duress. There was no telling what they'd done to him. His scent told me he'd come from a research facility. The smell of disinfectants and chemicals laced his natural pheromones. Still, underneath it all was the scent of my mate. Musky, rich, decadent, almost chocolate that made me want to crawl up next to him and let our bond heal him. If it could.

My if-only list was a mile long.

Still, I really shouldn't be in here. He might rush me before I could shift and I'd end up ground meat.

Not the encounter I wanted to have with my mate.

“I hope you’re okay,” I whispered with my back to the wall. “I can feel your heartbeat. It’s strong and steady. Sometimes when shifters come here, they aren’t so strong. You’re probably hungry and tired and scared, but we would never hurt you.”

The bear across from me huffed out a breath through his nose.

“I would never hurt you. Damn it. I wish I at least knew your name.”

Nothing was happening. I wished my words stirred something inside him like his presence did in me.

My omega was probably too overrun with fear and pain to even register that I was his mate.

Because if he was my omega, then I was his alpha. No question about it.

“I’m sorry we had to dart you,” I said, scooting a bit closer.

The bear tucked his paw underneath him.

“I can’t even remember the last shifter we had to dart. We don’t make a practice of it. I wanted you to know that. We take care of people here, or we try to. Maybe that’s the reason you came here. Did your bear feel like you could come here?”

Of course, he didn’t answer.

My bear felt the shifting of the night. It would be dawn soon. I should get some sleep. I got up and stretched out my back. The bear’s eyes zoned in on my every move. His lids drooped, but I believed he was fighting the aftereffects of the tranquilizer.

“I don’t really want to leave you in here alone. I’m sure you don’t understand that and want me gone, but I can’t leave. But I need some sleep—at least a few hours. I wish you could ask me to stay.”

I let out a long sigh while I debated my options.

Stay and get some sleep and risk my life.

Go and not get any sleep and risk my omega thinking I’d abandoned him.

Somehow I settled on the previous idea. No sense of self-preservation over here.

I crept closer to the large black bear housing my mate and slid down the wall once again. Five seconds ago, I’d decided to leave, and now I was making myself at home.

Mated life, I supposed.

“I have to get some sleep. I could ask you to promise not to slice my throat with those claws of yours, but I don’t know if you’d agree to that.”

The bear rumbled a low growl. It didn’t feel threatening. More an acknowledgement. Yes, he heard me. No, he wouldn’t promise anything.

“Okay, but at least give me a head start.”

I pushed my head back against the wall, and my eyes closed in seconds.

My omega had barged into my life today, and I chose to hold on to that thought as sleep took me.

Because who knew what the future would hold.

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Kellan

The alpha fell asleep. Right there in the secure room, the almost cell, he rested his back against the wall and dozed off. My bear returned to pacing, huge paws padding over the cushioned floor. When he didn't move, the bear growled and made threatening rumbles; why, I wasn't sure. But the alpha simply dropped his head to the side in slumber, his vulnerable throat exposed to anything we might choose to do. How could he have so much trust in us? In a bear who was doing everything in his power to be threatening and the shifter within. Presuming he was aware of my even being one?

Of course he was. I had a vague memory of him ordering me to shift. Of the other guy saying he should use his alpha powers or something like that. But if he did have such gifts, they didn't work on me. Unfortunately. While I had no interest in being bossed around ever again in life, neither did I want to be a bear for the rest of it.

Despite everything we'd gobbled as we made our way here, the bear finished everything in the pail and drank gallons of water from the self-refilling fountain. I hadn't been dehydrated in the labs, since not only did I have the sink for water but was hooked up to IV fluids on a fairly regular basis. But all those miles I'd logged had left me dry. The water tasted so much better here, as well. In the cell, it had always tasted chlorinated as well as having an underlying bitterness. I'd long suspected there was some kind of drug in there, maybe to keep me compliant. This was sweet and clean and tasted only of water.

But I'd give a lot to capture some in a glass and drink it in my two-legged state. Even from where I lurked in the background, I knew it was critical that I make the shift

back in order to be able to communicate with the alpha and let him know where I had come from and what went on there. At least as much as I was able to convey because I wasn't entirely sure I even knew enough to be useful. Or exactly how to get back there if they did want to go try to save the other omegas who were still there.

I hadn't seen many others in my time there, but I had heard cries and sobs and smelled fear and sometimes urine when someone was tormented beyond the ability to hold their water. In keeping us separate, they had kept us from plotting together, I supposed. Or maybe it was just easiest for them in the course of their work. They certainly never treated us as equals, barely as sentient creatures.

I finally lay down, head on my paws, resting until the alpha awoke. Now that I had stopped moving, the aches and pains that had carried over through the shift came to the fore, reminding me of how I felt most of the time over the past years. Would I ever feel better? Probably too soon to hope for that.

Still unsure whether I was a welcomed guest or just a prisoner of a different kind in better lodgings, I settled in to wait for the alpha to wake up. He smelled incredible, and my bear was not trying to eat him, but all the rest confused the heck out of me.

Finally, sometime later, the alpha woke and sat up straight. "Omega, have you been watching me the whole time?"

I couldn't answer, but I thought my posture probably did that for me.

"It's time to shift," he ordered.

The bear snarled and lunged at him, but he never moved, just stood his ground. We lunged again, but some force kept us from reaching him. Those alpha powers. I'd seen them in action in my old den, but never with a member attacking one of them.

And I didn't want to attack him. He needed to know that somehow. But I couldn't tell him any more than I could stop the bear from behaving so irrationally. Our old alpha always said if you couldn't control your animal, you didn't deserve to have one. He was probably right. Look at the situation I'd put the bear in when I caused us to get captured to start with.

The alpha asked me again and again to shift, and I tried, I really did, with everything I had in me, but with no success. Frustrated, I joined the bear in his next growl, making it loud enough to rattle my fangs.

The alpha kept demanding, I kept trying, and, finally, the window in the door opened and a beta told the alpha his meeting was about to start. He strolled toward the door as if there wasn't a giant ragged bear snarling at him. The door slid open, and he stepped outside.

Leaving me alone again. And unable to harm the alpha. He'd managed to keep us at bay for a long time, but eventually I feared the bear would break through and really hurt him. I didn't want that to happen.

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Locke

Zeph didn't ask why I suddenly wanted the security camera app on my phone, and I didn't offer any information. There were enough whispers about me and the new bear already. No need to fuel their fire. But now that I had access to the camera in my mate's room, I obsessed over it. Not because I was a stalker but because I didn't want him to escape or hurt himself. Not that he could escape. Those walls were four feet thick with a steel grid inside.

No one could get out of there, not even one of the humans they pumped full of our DNA.

From what I'd heard, even humans had died in their so-called research. Anything for the advancement of the human race. Right?

I had a meeting in a few minutes and it was the first time I'd left my omega alone for more than an hour. He hadn't eaten much or drunk a lot of water, but I had hopes that any minute, he would be able to shift and do...something other than lay there.

My poor omega. There was no telling what he'd been through.

I'd never sought revenge for the things the humans had done to us, only a shutdown of all their facilities. An end to the tragedies and experimentation.

That was, until my mate showed up with signs of abuse.

Now, I wanted to go after them all.

But fighting wasn't how I was winning my side of the war. Instead, we'd chosen this way. Rehabilitation. Healing. Growth. Repair.

Sometimes, I questioned that decision.

My bear wanted the fight.

"I'm here." I gripped my phone, my only connection to my omega, as I walked into the meeting of alphas who hadn't been bribed by the powers that be to stay quiet and complacent.

When did we shifters ever get complacent?

"I'm getting all the alphas on the video call. One minute." Thank goodness for Zeph. He handled all the tech stuff. I wasn't a complete dumbass in that department, but it was second nature to him. Third nature, actually. First was human. Second was wolf. Third was tech.

In seconds, the other alphas were on a huge TV screen on the wall—all of them with fancy desks and button-down shirts. And here I was, more interested in seeing to my mate, and they were lucky I had a sweatshirt on. The others and I usually went around shirtless as shifters often did.

"Who called this meeting?" I asked when no one spoke.

"It was me." Reggie, the alpha who warned me about the escape, spoke up.

Reggie updated us. Said his lands were flooded with humans searching for something or someone, but they didn't ask or demand entry to our buildings. "They had some kind of scanner, so if anyone...not naming places on here...but if anyone picks up or finds an escapee, you might want to check them for a chip."

Fuck. I hadn't thought of that yet. Once the omega was shifted, I would ask him, of course, that among other things, but I couldn't get close enough to him right now to even check.

That would be priority number one once I got him to shift.

The rest of the alphas chimed in on ideas and updates, all of them using careful verbiage and phrases in case our communication was hacked.

The whole time everyone was talking, I was only half listening. I'd set my phone on the table and watched my omega. He moved this way and that, pacing the room we'd put him in but, in general, he slept.

There was a chance he would never shift. We had no idea what he'd endured. There were some cases where the pain to the human side of us was so bad that the animal took over and wouldn't let go.

Maybe not ever.

The meeting ended, and everyone filed out—everyone except Dean. He was the oldest member of our community, and those bastard scientists had taken him in at almost fifty years old. He'd thought he would retire and stay with his mate for the rest of his life. They killed his mate as he fought against the soldiers, and some days Dean wished he had fought too—that way, he would have joined his mate in death.

“Something on your mind?” I asked him. He wasn't one to stick around for a yapping session.

“I have an idea. How to get your mate to shift back to human.”

“My mate?” I asked.

“Yes. Don’t try to tell me otherwise. It’s written all over your face while you’re watching him on that screen.”

I snorted. “Didn’t know I was so obvious.”

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“What’s the idea, Dean?”

“If you go in there and shift, and your bears make the tiniest bit of a bond, then there’s a chance you can communicate telepathically through the bond. If nothing else, your bear can command he shift back. It’s worth a shot, I thought.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“I think you’re right. Thanks for letting me know.”

He got up with a nod but paused before leaving the room. He didn’t turn around but I knew he was talking to me. “Don’t waste a second with your mate. Fate can be cruel sometimes.”

Speaking of wasting time. I got up and rushed to the room where my mate was being held. I would take Dean’s advice to heart.

Please, Goddess, if you have any love left for me, please let this work.

Kellan

I had been so afraid of harming the alpha, so I was relieved when he left unhurt, but the minute he was gone, I wanted him back. What a conundrum to face. Perhaps the meeting was about me, and when the alpha reported in that I would not shift, they would release me back into the wild.

It would be the best decision, really, because this alpha deserved better than me. My own den wouldn't take me back, I was certain. I'd been taken by the humans when I completely ignored the instructions I was given. My own fault. The longer I was away from the lab, the surer of that I was. I didn't deserve freedom, and I was beginning to recognize that the damage done to me was more extensive than I ever dreamed.

Not only could I not shift back, but looking at my paws, I didn't even recognize the bear I'd become. My fur was patchy, the color wrong, and my claws were chipped and broken. I could feel my fangs were damaged as well. I'd always been so vain about my gorgeous bear. And now look at him . Not that I'd say a word about it because while I'd been vain, he was oversensitive and proud. At least to my memory.

Resuming pacing, I tried to put together everything that had happened in my mind. Clearly, none of it was a dream, but I couldn't understand how I'd been let go. Or why? My body was in all likelihood the evidence any law enforcement might need to know what the humans in that lab were up to. But would human officials care what their own species did to other ones? So, having me or any of their captives, their specimens escape could only cause harm to the institution if we were believed.

If I, for example, showed up in the local sheriff's office—assuming I could manage to shift back to two-legged—and tried to explain, would they just hand me over for more experimentation? That was the sort of thing that happened in movies, after all. Humans always wanted to take apart anything different from them and see how it worked.

Huddled way back inside my bear's body, my mind worked furiously. Searching for a way to get out, to regain control of my shift. I'd never had a problem shifting until I was taken, never had to consider how it worked from the first time at puberty.

Which, when I considered it, had not been so very long in between.

While I was struggling, the bear was getting more and more agitated. He flung himself at the wall again and again, tearing at the padding. I didn't know what they made it from, but even his damaged and dulled claws should have been able to tear through any kind of fabric.

When that didn't work, he went right back to crashing against the walls.

He wanted the alpha back.

I wanted the alpha back.

If I never had to be alone again in a room like this, it would be too soon. But I knew that the people here, the shifters I could sense, had reason not to want a wild bear wreaking havoc in the lands. In their buildings. They needed to protect themselves from people like me.

Dammit! The day I was taken, I was a kid, a little naughty, but good at school, good at chores, and generally heading for a life of usefulness in the den. Now, I didn't even know what I was beyond one kind of captive then another. Even if they did open the

door, what would they be letting out? Someone imprisoned in their animals.

And what made them have a space like this at all? Did they use it for rule breakers or, more likely, was I not the first of my kind to wander onto their lands?

Hell. Where was that alpha anyway?

I finished off the last of the food and drank from the refilling fountain. Maybe they'd leave me here until I was able to shift back? If so, it seemed I might be here for the rest of my life.

Then, the door slid open to reveal a bear that put mine to shame in terms of size and fierceness. He rose on his hind legs and roared.

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Locke

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” I asked Markus. If I was a real alpha, I would’ve named him as my beta. His main responsibility was our mental health and healing, but he served as my confidante and I deferred to him on opinions of the community on a regular basis.

“We don’t use the word crazy. But a little reckless, yes.”

I laughed. “That’s fair.”

“What do you need from me? Do I need backup? Have the dart gun ready?”

It broke my heart to say it. “Dart gun, yes. Backup, no.”

“I heard what Dean said about him being your mate. Was he right?”

“I think so.”

“Fate is tricky for sure. Never know what she’s going to do.”

“I’m gonna shift first. You’ll have to open the door for my bear. Close me in. Unless I’m on the verge of death, don’t make a move.”

“Of course. I’ll be out here if you need me. Do we need a safe word or something? A sign from you that you’ve had enough?”

Before I could dress him down for making that comment, I turned to see him laughing. “No one knows you can secretly be an asshole.”

“That’s the point of a secret. Now come on. Let’s go. Go get your omega.”

I stripped my clothes off and shifted right there before Markus could spew any more nonsense. My bear came out more forcefully than usual. He was eager to be around our mate and convince him to shift, to get to know him better.

To tell him that he was safe with us.

I let out a low chuff to let my omega know I was coming in. As soon as the door opened, the bear opposite me got to his feet and roared as loudly as he could.

“Yep. That’s my cue.” Markus shoved my bear farther inside the room with the closing door, and I cringed at the slam. He would have my back, but in the meantime, it was me and my omega.

A battle I never thought I’d have to fight.

I reached into my mind to commune with my bear. He, in turn, pushed for a connection with our mate. It pained him to strain his mind so much. A connection with his mate should be easy. As simple as gazing upon his mate for the first time.

This was anything but easy.

And then it became harder.

Our omega had two bears inside him. They were fighting for dominance over him. Clearly his natural bear was losing. What I saw in front of me wasn’t the bear the goddess gave him but a lab-forced animal that was neither from this world nor

anything near tame.

He was wild and triggered by any motion or sound.

Never a calm moment in his existence.

His pure dominance was born from fear. He feared that the abyss he'd come from was the same darkness he would return to.

He didn't know that taking a step back for his human side to prevail wouldn't be the end of him, only a shift in power.

No wonder he couldn't or wouldn't shift back.

No one wanted to die.

You are safe here. We are here to help you. Shift back. Let your human side free. You will not die. You can rest if you'll only let him out. Let my mate free.

The bear backed up so quickly, he hit his hindquarters on the back wall, cornered by me and my alpha command.

Even an unnatural bear should be subject to the chain of command.

He roared at me again, this time louder, but I could feel his hold on the other two entities inside him waning. He was losing control and my omega was fighting to take over. All three of them were mine. I would take care of all parts of him until he could take care of himself.

But two bears? This was getting harder by the second.

Didn't mean I was going to quit. Not by a long shot.

Shift, bear. Let your human side out. I command you. This is an order from your alpha.

That last part seemed to do it. I shifted back to my human side once I was sure the change was taking place.

It wasn't pretty.

Most shifts were a blur of magical movement, but my mate's was nothing close to magical or beautiful. It was violent as his bones cracked, muscles shifted. Skin tore and bled. Hair changed form and colors. His blue eyes went to black and then blue and black again. This war inside him was a dangerous one. I had to make sure he emerged the victor.

After what felt like an hour later, my mate, in human form, lay on the floor. He shivered and shook, and I had a blanket handed in to me through the window to cover him up.

"Where am I? Are you...is this?" His voice enfolded me in warmth.

"You're safe here. Do you know what your name is?"

Selfish of me, but knowing that part of him, well, I was starved for it.

"Of course. It's Kellan. Where in the hell am I?"

"This is a sanctuary for shifters who have gone through trauma." I left it generic. He would tell us what happened to him eventually. "No one here will ever hurt you."

“Humans?” he asked, scanning the room.

“No humans here. Only shifters.”

And then my mate with two bears inside him laid his head down and passed out cold.

Kellan

“Before we do anything else, we need to check you for a chip.” The alpha was waiting when I woke again. After breakfast, that is.”

I opened my eyes, taking in the sun-bathed room around me. I lay in the center of a soft bed, between silky soft sheets, comforters piled over me. Pillows cradled my head. And the alpha sat on a chair a few feet away, wearing a camel-colored hoodie over a white T-shirt and jeans. He looked rested and composed, as if I was just any guest who stopped by to spend the night.

Instead of a bear who had menaced him for hours while he tried to command my shift.

“Where am I?” It seemed like the logical first question. “This is not where I last remember being.”

“No.” He stayed where he sat, giving me space, but he was such a tall, broad-shouldered alpha, he seemed to take up most of the smallish room. “You’re at Markus the healer’s place, and you slept the clock around.”

“How did I get here? I was in some kind of holding cell or maybe one for shifters who lose their sanity.” Those padded walls...

“That was in the basement of the alpha house. But once you shifted, we decided to trust that you would hold in two-legged form and I carried you over here.”

“Why did you feel safe enough to do that?” If my bear took over again, it could have run amok.

“Because I established contact with the bear, at least enough to make you shift, and we needed to talk to you about how we can help you from this point forward. Now, get dressed and I’ll meet you in the hallway.”

After he stepped out and closed the door, I got up and realized I was naked. That meant, he’d carried me here from that other building nude in front of whoever was out and about on the grounds. Although shifters weren’t too wound up about nakedness, being hauled around like that stung a bit.

But I couldn’t fail to feel a little better at my improved circumstances. Now that I was able to shift again and was free of the labs, it was time to look forward. A stack of clothing was laid out on the dresser, and while the shirt was kind of big, the jeans fit well. I dressed and moved toward the door, only half surprised to find it unlocked. After all, the alpha had told me to come out into the hallway, but other than my escape route the other night, it had been a long time since I’d opened a door under my own power.

“Right this way.” The alpha waved me down the hall, and we emerged into a living/dining room just as another male came in carrying a platter of breakfast foods. The scents had my mouth watering. Eggs, bacon, pancakes... He set it on the table next to a bowl of fruit and other good things. “I don’t suppose you like coffee?”

“I don’t know.” I’d smelled it lots, both before I was taken and after, but no one had ever offered me any.

He stared at me. “How can you not know whether you like coffee?”

“I was fourteen when they took me, and in the labs, we were not given anything like

that.”

“Fourteen.” Markus shook his head. “They must have had you nearly twenty years.”

“I don’t know. It was a long time.” I was trying to pay attention but the food was drawing me in. The only real quantity I’d eaten in years was what the bear had hunted and foraged on the way. Oh, and the pail in the cell.

“We have questions for you,” the alpha said. “We need to know everything about those who had you so we can help others.”

“Locke, let the omega eat his breakfast, okay?” The healer pushed the platter toward me. “But go a little slow. Your stomach is probably pretty shrunken, and it needs time to adjust. I promise you’ll never be hungry in the sanctuary.”

So this was the sanctuary. I wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but from what the alpha, from what Locke said, they were here to help people like me, and that would have to be good enough for now.

I didn’t do a great job of restraining my eating, and with my sunken stomach bulging, I leaned back and took my first taste of coffee.

“People like this?” I wrinkled my nose and sipped again. “It’s bitter.”

“Add sugar and cream,” Locke said. “At least, until you get used to it.”

A liberal dose of both was a big help. I thought I might learn to like the beverage, but for now, I poured a big glass of orange juice. That had always been a favorite of mine.

“Now that you’re done eating, I need to go over some things with you,” the healer

said. “Our alpha...I mean, Locke will need to interview you regarding your captivity, but that can wait until we take care of business.”

“All right.” I didn’t like his tone. It sounded like someone about to deliver bad news. “Go ahead.”

“We need to discuss one of your bears and how we can keep it from taking over again.”

“One of my...I only have one bear. Is it possible to have two? Because I’ve never heard of that.”

“The alpha, I mean, Locke was able to make contact with both. One is the bear you were born with, but the other is not natural at all. It doesn’t have the characteristics of one of our animals, and that’s why you were unable to control it.”

“But it’s still there?”

He nodded.

“I can’t believe...two bears? How did they do that?”

“We haven’t seen it before, so we just don’t know.” Locke patted my shoulder. “But you can imagine it’s critical to make sure that it doesn’t take over again until it’s either eliminated or you can learn how to control it.”

“Absolutely.” My poor bear. Even now, it hadn’t been out to play. “But what about my real one?”

“The only way to protect you, and us, is to treat you with a shift suppressor. It will keep you in two-legged form.” Markus offered me a smile, but it did not reach his

eyes. “If we don’t do it, you’ll have to stay in the room where you were before until the situation resolves.”

“It will wear off in a few days if we don’t retreat you,” Locke assured me. “It’s up to you, but I would really prefer you wander free than be locked up.”

“Me too.” I chewed on my lower lip, thinking. “I was given a lot of drugs while I was at the labs. And I never knew what they were. What if they mix badly with yours?”

He shrugged. “That’s a chance you’ll have to take if you want to have freedom.”

I was still shocked at having two bears. But I’d do anything to avoid being locked up again. “I’ll do it.”

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Locke

I stood at the sink, draining the last of my second coffee of the morning when I saw movement in the area between the main house and the healer's house.

Kellan. Out and walking and still human.

My heart had never beat faster. I dropped the coffee mug into the sink a little too loudly and headed out that way. He was dressed in a T-shirt that was too big for him and some jeans that fit him just right. The T-shirt was tucked in but it swallowed him all the same.

I couldn't believe the turn of events. When he was in that feral bear's form, I thought he might never emerge as a human again. It would've been tough on the both of us, but I would've loved him as he was, the best I could. He was my fated mate, no matter if that was in good times or bad.

"Kellan," I called out, stopping him in his tracks. I closed the distance between us and he wrapped his arms around himself.

Sure, he knew who I was, but it was a far stretch to think he would suddenly throw himself into my arms immediately. He had been through hell and back. Been forced to use his body to house another, unnatural shifter bear inside him.

There was no telling how many fails it took, how many tests, before that bear stuck.

For all I knew, they could've detained him for decades, though he only looked to be

in his early thirties at the most, even with the dark circles under his eyes and the malnourishment. Then again, I could be wrong.

“Hello, Locke.”

“You’re okay,” I said, breathless as I reached him. Somewhere along the way, I’d broken into a sprint, eager to be near him.

“I am. Markus said I’m well enough to go for a walk. I don’t have to be in his house anymore. He thinks the IV did its job.”

“And the long-term effects?” I asked, wanting to push the errant hair from his face.

“We don’t know yet. He wants me to wait a while before I try and shift again. So you can get the dart guns ready.”

My heart stopped and my face burned with the heat of shame. Of all the things I’d told him, he remembered us tranqing him. “I’m so sorry. We didn’t know what to do and you were roaring and growling. We...”

“I’m kidding, Locke. He didn’t say that.”

We both snorted. I shook my head with a chuckle. Thank the goddess he had a sense of humor.

I couldn’t believe he was in front of me, smiling. The omega I’d dreamed of all my life. Even when the times were horrible, I kept hope in my heart that one day my fated would drop into my life.

I’d hoped for a not-so-violent way, but I would take him however he came.

My omega had to be handled with care. It would take him a while to trust his surroundings and us, and that had nothing to do with me being his mate. I would wait for him no matter how long it took.

“Have you seen the grounds of the sanctuary? I’d love to show you around.”

“That would be great. I was going to do some exploring of my own, but that’s probably frowned upon. You don’t know me.”

Yes, I did. In ways that required no words. Only heart.

“We know you well enough. Besides, there are cameras and security measures in place. They are to protect all of us, and that includes you now. I hope that one day you come to think of this place as home.”

He smiled and thoroughly ended me. “Then I’d love a tour of my new home. Thank you.”

We made the rounds. I showed him the barn and the bunkhouse where we usually kept new people who came here for help. There was no way in hell that he would stay there though. I’d already called dibs on an unused guest room that was right down the hall from mine. The others raised eyebrows at my insistence but gave in. No matter what he’d been through or was capable of, he was my mate.

And we kept a dart gun in the house too. Just in case. Not because my mate was a bad person, per se, but because when that other bear was in charge, he was not, and their natures were night and day.

Once we got to the kitchen, I made him a sandwich and enjoyed every second of watching him eat it. He sheepishly asked for a glass of milk and I added a brownie for good measure. “You have to make sure you’re eating enough. Healing and shifting

will expend calories that you can't afford to waste."

He looked down at himself. "I don't even know how I got so thin. I didn't used to be this way. I wasn't one to turn down a second breakfast, ever."

"There will be plenty of time to visit the past. Best thing you can do is focus on your future." Aw, man, I was quoting Markus now.

"That's easier said than done," Kellan answered.

"I know." I couldn't help myself. I covered his hand with mine to comfort him, and he turned his hand around, his palm touching mine. We talked a lot more about the sanctuary and the people we helped. Some of the others came through and introduced themselves, and others kept to themselves.

"You're the alpha here, right?" Kellan asked as the conversation lulled.

"Kind of. The others look to me for leadership, but there's no hard lines of hierarchy."

"Oh. They treat you like you are."

I nodded. "They do."

"Can I ask you something else?" He blushed, and I wondered what was on his mind. Did he feel the same things I was? Was his stomach full of butterflies and his thoughts flurrying with dreams?

"Of course. You can ask me anything."

"You said you're only kind of the alpha here but...but you're my alpha, right?"

Kellan

You're my alpha, right?

I could barely believe it was me speaking those words. Daring to say something so bold. Last time I felt so free to speak, I had been far from an adult, and I was rapidly becoming aware of the cost of all those years of growing up. Locke was my fated, but was it even fair for me to accept Fate's gift?

Even if he wanted me to be his, he would be getting a damaged mate, and I didn't want to do that to someone I had so much respect for. And gratitude. He and his team had saved my life because if I had stayed in that bear much longer, I'd for sure have done something that got me put down. I recalled the single time I'd shifted in my years at the lab. Bad things had happened, things I'd never have credited my bear with doing, but now I knew the truth. My bear had not ripped the face off that white coat. It had been an attempt to implant a bear in someone—an attempt that had not had the result they sought. Somehow they'd managed to get me shifted back, but never had I been able to shift again.

I didn't know how they did that, either, but Markus had explained that the IV shifter suppressor they were giving me could only be administered for a short time, or it could cause damage to my ability to ever shift again. And I was willing to try it because I had no other choice.

Markus also said he was researching and would see if he couldn't find something less harmful going forward.

Whatever it took, I would do it. I couldn't take the chance that the bear would do to any one of these kind people what he had to his creators. I still had nightmares about the bloodbath. Why hadn't they just killed me then and saved themselves a lot of worry? They had no doubt been concerned that I might act out again. But perhaps they had the keys to the bear, so to speak? A way to call him and make him go away, and stay away.

Maybe something related to the location? Since he'd come on pretty fast when I left the parking lot. I'd have to remember to share that thought with Locke. It was clear they hadn't had one of these inserted bears to deal with before, but another could come along or even be in captivity in the labs now.

But the alpha had not answered me.

"Alpha? You don't have to accept me even if you're my fated. I wouldn't blame you at all if you chose not to. I am damaged goods."

"It's not that, omega. I'm damaged, too. I was a captive myself at one time."

I sucked in a breath, the very thought of him having been in a situation like mine, enraging me. I wanted to find whoever did this to the alpha and let my evil bear rip their faces off. "Then do you not want me as your omega? I can't blame you."

"Omega, you are my fated mate, but it's not the time for you to make decisions about your life going forward or to take big actions. You're not only just out of a very long captivity but on a drug that can affect your emotions, according to Markus."

I wanted him so much. To have him mate and mark me. "I've been through so much, I can't give up one moment of life."

"And you don't have to. Come with me now to my home, and I'll get you settled. I'm

not rejecting you. I just need you to be clearheaded when you take me on. I'm far from perfect, omega, and my life is risky on its best days. We're forever putting ourselves in danger to try to help those who, like you, need rescuing." He chuckled. "Although you did a pretty good job of rescuing yourself."

I accompanied him to his home and upstairs to a nicely appointed room. It was bigger than the one at the healer's place, although not huge. The lack of clothing in the closet and personal belongings in the bathroom told me that this was not the alpha's room, just guest quarters. But at least he did enter with me.

"You should have everything you need." Locke showed me around, pointing out the cabinet in the bathroom that held a set of toiletries, the stacks of towels, and the bed. "I expect you to get a shower and climb right into bed, omega. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, alpha." I studied his expression. "Thank you for everything."

He hesitated and then leaned in and kissed me, holding his forehead against mine. "Good night, omega. We have tomorrow to look forward to."

After he left, I hugged myself. Tomorrow to look forward to. Wow. The first time in so many years I could dream of the pleasures of the next day instead of the horrors to come.

The shower had great water pressure, and I stood under it for long minutes, scrubbing myself clean of the past. I didn't want even a hint of the smells of that place clinging to my skin. Dried off, I padded into the bedroom and pulled back the top covers. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open long enough to cuddle down into the downy warmth.

But instead of dreams of tomorrow with my alpha, my subconscious took me right

back into the nightmare of the lab, the bear they'd forced into me, and what he did to that white coat. It never got any less terrifying, and I always woke screaming.

Locke

My omega hollered, dragging me from a fitful sleep and charging me into action. Usually I was a deep sleeper, but not tonight.

I threw on pajama pants and ran from my room down the hallway to his. Instead of knocking, I barged in to find Kellan kicking and screaming, and punching the air.

“Kellan,” I called out loudly, trying to pull him from the depths of whatever nightmare held him in its grip. “Kellan, it’s me. It’s your mate.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he turned, scooting across the bed as if the devil himself were reaching for him. Goddess, he must’ve been tormented for years and within inches of his life to be so terrified.

I rushed over to the side of the bed where he’d retreated from the invisible enemy and reached for his shoulders.

“Kellan. Mate. It’s just a dream. Wake up, sweetheart. Wake up. I’m here.”

I pushed some calm into our bond, hoping it would reach him or one of his bears. Something had to work. Sweat dappled his skin, and tears made tiny rivers down his beautiful face. His body was hot to the touch as he continued to twitch and jerk, but the yelling subsided.

Goddess, I would’ve given anything to change places with him. To take on his pain. To erase the memories.

Maybe that was why Fate paired me with him. To help him and love him as he deserved to be.

There was a chance our love could heal him.

“Kellan,” I called out again. Seeing him like this broke my heart.

“Locke?” he questioned. His icy eyes scanned the room, trying to get himself grounded.

“You’re in our house, in the sanctuary. You’re safe. I’m here. Nothing is coming to get you. There’s no one here who can hurt you.”

He blew out a long breath and then turned, burying his face in my chest. “This is so embarrassing.”

“It’s not. You had a bad dream. It happens to us all.”

Kellan’s breaths slowed to normal as I ran my hands over his body.

I moved to the side so he wouldn’t feel my hard-on, but it was there. Rigid. Needy. I was the one who told him we should take things slow, but I had forgotten to remind my hormones. My body responded to his. Couldn’t be helped. He was made for me.

“Are you okay now?” I asked, leaning down to see his face.

Eyes still closed, he nodded. “I think so. Maybe I need to leave a light on or something.”

“That’s a good idea. We can leave the bathroom light on for you.”

He nodded. "That would help."

"I'm going back to my bedroom, but I'm close if you need me."

I moved to get up, but he gripped my biceps and tugged me back down. "Please, Locke. Please don't leave me."

I sighed. This taking things slow was harder than I thought, quite literally. "You need sleep to heal, omega mine. I won't be far."

"Stay with me," he whispered. "You keep the shadows away."

Those two sentences made all my walls crumble in an instant. My omega needed me. I could do this. I could stay here with him and keep my cock to myself. For him. For him, I would do anything.

"Okay. I'll stay. Do you want me to hold you?" Please say yes.

"Yes. Your touch calms me."

I pulled back the covers to get into the bed next to him as he scooted over. As he did, I noticed he had nothing on. Nothing. Maybe he was more comfortable that way. He did mention that wearing clothes made him feel uncomfortable.

He tempted me so much. Every cell in my body lit up in flames at the sight of him.

"Alpha?" I turned my head and tried to have some decency.

"I'm coming," I said, cringing at the double entendre.

"Why are you trying not to look at me? I know I'm thin and..."

“You are fucking gorgeous, omega. The most beautiful man I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Do you know how much that makes me want you? To hear sweet words come from your mouth? I know you wanted to take it slow but there’s nothing I want more than your body on top of mine, making love to me. Do you want me like I want you?”

“Look at me, Kellan. Look and see what you do to me. How could you ever think I don’t want you?” My pajama pants were tented with my aching need for my mate.

“Please, Locke.”

And just like that, my resolve was broken. I shoved my pajama pants and boxer briefs down and kicked them off before getting into bed.

Kellan

“Please, alpha!” The moment he slid under the covers next to me, there was no going back and I’d have no shame in my attempt to seduce him. Or be seduced by him. Even someone as young as I’d been when I was ripped from my young life recognized that when you met your mate, you leapt into their arms immediately. “I know what I want, and I need you to take me and make me yours.”

“Omega,” he groaned. “I couldn’t agree more. Also, my bear is sure that the bond between us will give you more protection, and I can’t say no to that any more than I can say no to you.”

I pressed tight against him, his jutting cock in full agreement with what he had said. “Good. I hope that bodes well for all the requests I plan to make of you in all our years of mated life.”

His lips crashed down on mine, then, making it clear that talking was no longer necessary. Something else we could agree on. Locke took possession of my lips with a mastery that my omega friends and I had never dreamed possible when we were talking about our someday mates. And while his tongue twined with mine, his hands were finding all the sensitive spots on my body and awakening me to arousal. I’d never been with anyone before, and I was glad because it would have been a waste of my time.

This alpha who kissed down my body and took my cock in his mouth was mine. I couldn’t believe it and had to keep telling myself that as his head bobbed up and down, the tip of my cock grazing the back of his throat. I closed my eyes, all my

attention focused on his teeth grazing my skin, his tongue rubbing the underside of my cock, his lips closed tight around my shaft, and his fingers exploring my slick until, with a shriek, I came, my cum pouring into his throat where he swallowed it down. Then I peeked to see him rising up to finally fit his cock into my needy hole.

I clung to the sheets on either side of me, breathing hard while he worked his way in, stretching my virgin asshole to accommodate his girth. Finally, he was all the way in, and he paused to let me adjust, whispering sexy things, loving things, sweet words that enhanced the sensuality of this moment between us.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and rocked my hips, hoping he'd get the signal, and move.

"Be patient, omega." My alpha smiled down at me. "I've waited a lifetime for you, and I want to enjoy it."

I shuddered, impatient, and he finally began to stroke in and out, slowly at first, each drive finding new places inside me to arouse. He grasped my cock and stroked it along with his movements. Deeper, faster, I lost all control and came again just as he pumped his cum into my body and his knot swelled.

Reaching out with grabby hands, I tipped my head to the side to expose my throat to his bite. "Mark me, alpha."

"Pushy omega." He toyed with me at first, sucking on my skin, scraping it with his teeth before the sting of his bite crashed through me. Lifting his head, he smiled, his teeth stained with my blood. "And all mine." He held me close while his knot bound us together, and finally it shrank, but we continued to lie in our tangle of arms and legs, a sweaty, panting pair.

So this was what happiness was like.

The next morning, we were awakened by the door opening.

“Ever heard of knocking, Markus,” Locke growled.

“I would have, but you said you were going to your own room for the night, Locke.” The healer frowned. “Your omega has a lot to go through before he’s free to live here. As you know, that suppressor he’s on is only temporary. He can’t take it for long. I’ve been up all night reading and researching and calling other healers, and I think I’ve come up with a solution to our problem.”

“Yeah?” Locke pushed himself up to sit. “How about you give us long enough to get up and ready for the day, and we’ll meet you at your place in a little while.”

“Don’t take long.” His disapproval shone through but I couldn’t bring myself to care. I would do whatever it took to stay here, but right now, my alpha was running his foot up my leg.

I didn’t get to the healer’s house for quite a while, and Locke didn’t get there at all. He was called away by one of his betas, and I assured him I’d be fine.

Once again, I joined him at his breakfast table, although this time, there was not quite the variety of food. I was treated to oatmeal with all sorts of toppings. I’d never realized how much I’d missed this simple, delicious food. I gleefully piled on toasted almonds, blueberries, sliced bananas, brown sugar, and strawberries then tipped a pitcher of milk over the whole thing. It was so good. Hard to believe it was also healthful food.

I had only had three bites when Markus, no longer all about letting me eat, said, “The suppressor I gave you was at half strength as recommended, but according to some sources, if I do not dilute it, it may solve our problem. It will suppress at least one of those bears, likely permanently. But there is no guarantee which one it will be or if

you will ever be able to shift again.”

“Do it.”

“Are you sure?”

The first time it had been painful, but not something I couldn’t handle, but after I followed Markus down the hallway to his exam room and lay on the table, I was more scared than I was willing to admit.

A faint doubt fluttered in my mind as I was bound in place. “This is going to hurt, and if you move, bad things could happen.”

I didn’t ask what bad things. Just gripped the rubber ball he gave me as the healer inserted the needle in my hand and hung the bag of acid-green liquid on the stand. I was determined to be brave, but when the fluid entered my veins, it burned like fire, and I screamed and passed out.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:57 am

Locke

“What did you do?” I barged into Markus’ office, not pleased at all. Sure, he was one of our best men, and his counseling sessions saved lives, but I’d end him if he’d hurt my mate. Period.

“He consented to blocker. It was a huge dose. I made sure he knew the dangers.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked, darting to Kellan’s bedside.

“Because he wants to be whole again. Just like all of you.”

“That scream. It sounded like you were killing him.”

Markus nodded. I knew he took no pleasure in the pain of others. In fact, sometimes, he seemed to absorb it into himself. He felt things others did and sometimes he would take a day or two to himself to process things. I was sure that with the people that came to the sanctuary, there were things Markus heard about that he wished he never had.

“It’s a tough treatment, Locke. I swear to you that I got consent. You know that I would never do something to inflict pain on another person unless it was for their ultimate good.”

I took a step back as my mate jerked a few times on the table. He inhaled a great breath and then all the twitching movements stopped in an instant. “Is it done?”

Markus went over and checked Kellan's heartbeat. Most newly mated couples wouldn't dare let another person touch their mate, but Markus meant no harm. He had a mate of his own out there somewhere. "He's calming. I think he should..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Kellan sucked in a breath and opened his eyes. "Did it work?" he asked, patting his chest. Like he could feel the difference already. I hoped to the goddess he could, not because of me but because his life would be difficult with two bears fighting for control over him all the time.

"There's only one way to tell."

We knew what that meant. He had to shift for us to know if the more fearsome bear was still alive and kicking.

"Alpha," Kellan addressed me as his mate, not the leader of this community.

"Are you up for it? Maybe you need to rest."

Kellan sat up and I rushed to help him. "I don't want to rest. I want to know that the other bear isn't going to hurt you or me or anyone else here. I have to know what my future holds. Please, Locke."

No way I could say no to my omega's pleadings. Ever.

"Let's go, then. We'll go far away from everyone else."

"Do you need backup?" Markus asked but put his hand on Kellan's shoulder. "No offense."

He shook his head. "None taken. I think you need it. In case I need to be put down. I'd never forgive myself if I attacked you or anyone else."

“Only you, Markus.”

We walked out to the farthest place from the main house and took off our clothes. Markus stood a good distance away with the dart gun at the ready.

All the way here, I begged the goddess to take his bear from him. Let him live the rest of his life through as little post-traumatic stress as possible.

“All right. I’m going to shift first and try to command your natural bear to come out. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Kellan nodded. “I’m sure.”

I didn’t ask again. I let my bear out and in seconds, I was shifted before him.

Now for the hard part.

Omega mine. Shift. Show me your bear. Show me the bear that was meant to be mine.

Kellan trembled with the oncoming shift. He cried out in pain as he began his transition, and I held my breath, wondering which bear would come out.

And then it happened. Standing before me was a gorgeous black bear. Shiny hair. Kellan’s blue eyes.

My beautiful mate.

Kellan knew what bear he was in. He pounced and romped around in joy.

Minutes later, we shifted back and he ran into my arms with a broad smile on his

face. “I did it. That was my real bear.”

“I know it was. I’m so proud of you.” I hugged him tightly while looking over his shoulder for Markus. He was gone. I hadn’t even heard him walk away.

“Do you think the other bear was gone?” Kellan whispered.

“I don’t know, but my bear didn’t sense another. If he’s in there, he’s gone dormant, I think but only time will tell.” I turned to bury my nose in his neck. “You smell so good. Your bear is beautiful, mate.”

“And so is yours. Thank you for all you’ve done to help me.”

“I would do anything for you, Kellan. I love you.”

He pulled back. “And I love you, alpha.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:57 am

Kellan

I'd only been in the sanctuary a short time, was still settling in when I rushed to the healer's office in a panic. "I have been sick to my stomach for the past few days, low energy and I'm afraid the blocker/suppressor might be at fault."

Markus looked up from the thick medical book he was studying. "Have a seat and I will be with you in a moment." With what the omegas in the labs were subjected to, he was constantly trying to learn more, even delving into human sources because of course, that's who was doing these things to us.

"But what if I'm dying?" The way my stomach felt, I might well be. "Can you read later?"

"Sit." He continued to peruse the volume for at least ten more minutes while I shifted in my chair and tried not to gag. Finally, he closed the book and looked at me. "Nauseated? Food aversions, too?"

"I cannot stand the sight or smell of broccoli, beans, and butter, if that's what you mean. Is that a symptom of poisoning?"

"Butter, really?" He tsked. "That's a new one for me. Yes, that's what I meant, but it is not symptomatic of poison. Remember when I was pushing for you and a certain alpha not to rush things when you had all those meds in your system?"

"Vaguely. So you think our making love is making the meds affect me badly?" Shoot, and I was the pushy one, too. The alpha had been pretty honorable until I threw

myself at him.

“No, I think that your making love is why you’re pregnant.”

Lucky I was sitting down. “Don’t you need to do a test to confirm that? It’s way too fast. I’ve only been here a few weeks and we didn’t even do the nasty until like the third day.”

“Oh, that’s right. Great restraint.”

“Sarcasm? Really?” I thought I’d get sympathy from the healer when I was feeling so awful.

“Sorry.” He didn’t sound it in the least. “Yes, we’ll do a test, but I can tell by looking at you that you’ve got a pregnancy happening.” He handed me a box. “Go pee on the stick.”

“I thought you’d do blood or urine or something.”

“Let’s start with this.” He showed me the way to the bathroom off the exam area and closed the door behind me.

“Least he could do was pretend to do a real medical test,” I grumbled as I opened the box and withdrew the stick. “Or be a little sympathetic to how sick I am.” I still didn’t believe I was pregnant, not really. Sure, we’d been in bed together every night and most afternoons if Locke could get away from his duties, but didn’t it take longer than this to get pregnant?

Maybe if I’d found something to do around the place, keeping me out of bed more, I wouldn’t be in this situation. Locke and I hadn’t even discussed children. Did he want any?

Oh gods, what if he didn't.

I peed on the stick and left it on the sink because it was the only thing I could think to do with it. I wanted the results desperately, but I couldn't think of a good reason to hold on to a stick I'd peed on.

Markus knocked on the door. "Kellan? Are you okay in there? Did you read the instructions?"

"Uh, yeah. They weren't too complicated. Now I'm waiting for the results."

"Open the door, and we can wait together."

I did and came out to sit in a chair while the seconds counted down. "You really don't think the suppressor could have made me sick?"

"It might have, but that would have been right after you got it. Not weeks later."

"I see." I looked up at the wall, watching the clock, the second hand ticking slowly around. "That's good anyway."

"But, what I'm concerned about is all the things you were injected with or given in your water or all the other things they might have done to you at the labs." I'd sat with both Markus and my alpha for hours on end, telling them anything I could remember and disappointing them because I didn't have nearly enough information.

"You don't think that's all out of my system?" If I'd been upset about what I suffered, the idea that their testing might affect my future children made me want to go back there and blow the damn place up. Of course, there were other omegas in there, and I wouldn't want to hurt them.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to do tests for things we don’t have names for. Or information about. So, I’d say we watch this pregnancy closely.” He stood up and pointed at the clock. “If indeed there is one. Want to go check?”

I dragged my feet on the way into the bathroom, unsure what I wanted the results to be. I absolutely wanted children, but if there was something wrong with me that could affect the baby? Then I’d rather wait at least for a while. How long was the curse of these humans going to hang over my life?

Lifting the stick, I held it up to the healer who clapped his hands. “Positive. Now, go along and give the good news to your alpha. We’ll monitor you and do some tests later on, but for now, be happy and don’t borrow trouble. You are fine and fit, considering.”

“Thank you, Markus. I just hope the baby is okay.”

As I was leaving the healer’s place, I ran into my alpha coming in. He grabbed my shoulders and looked me up and down. “What’s wrong, omega? Were you just visiting our healer?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are you sick?” He towed me back inside. “Markus, what is wrong with my omega?”

The healer emerged from the back, wiping his hands on a towel. “Wrong? Nothing at all.”

“Then why is he here?” Locke’s voice climbed with each word, and I only wanted to ease his worries. “He needs the best treatment. One of the betas heard him getting sick earlier today.”

“Alpha, I’m pregnant.”

“No. Whatever is wrong with...did you say pregnant?”

“Yes.” I studied my shoes. “Are you okay with that?”

“Okay?” He lifted me in the air and spun around in a circle. “I’m over the moon. What a great idea!”

“Another one is stop spinning before I lose what’s left of my breakfast on your shoes.”

He stopped and planted a big kiss on me. “And I wouldn’t mind at all.”

I thought he probably would, but wasn’t it sweet of him to say he wouldn’t.

Locke

“Kellan, what are you doing, mate?” I woke up and patted the side of the bed only to find him perched on the edge, elbows resting on his knees. The buzzing of anxiety reached me through the ever-thickening bond we shared.

“I couldn’t sleep any more. I kept dreaming about the baby and what might happen. I dreamed that I had the baby and Markus scowled at it and wouldn’t show her to me.”

“Her?” I asked.

“I don’t know why but I think of this baby as a her now. I might be wrong; it’s just a hunch.”

“We’ll love them either way,” I said, scooting over to put my legs on either side of him and wrap my arms around his middle, laying my hands under his belly.

“Yes. We will. But what if...”

Turning my head to press my face against his back, I shushed him. We’d both been overthinking lately. The what-ifs and maybes had plagued us ever since we found out Kellan was expecting. The things the humans had done to me plus the things they did to him, well, we didn’t know if our offspring would inherit some of that damage. There could be splices or damage to our DNA that would only show up in the baby.

The scientists hadn’t exactly been forthcoming about everything they did to us.

“Let’s take this step by step, mate. We go in a few minutes to see Markus, and he will ease our minds a bit. You and I both know we’ll love this child no matter what. Right?”

“Of course.” His hands joined mine and then rubbed his belly in circles. Sometimes I thought he was trying to infuse the baby with good luck with all the rubbing he did. “I love them already. I can’t wait to be their daddy.”

“You’ll be fantastic. You already love me more than I deserve.”

He stood up and turned to face me. “Don’t say that. Markus says not to say bad things about ourselves or let others do it. You deserve all the love I have to give and more.”

“Okay. I’ll work on that.” I chuckled and gripped his hips. “Let’s get dressed. We have a baby to see.”

When the sanctuary first opened, we had an ultrasound machine donated to us. We thought we’d only use it for broken bones. None of us were mated then and the chances of that happening seemed like a dream. We were all messed up and scarred in ways not visible to the eye.

I knew that finding Kellan would give hope to the others, and everyone here could use a dose of that.

“That sounds good. But I’m still nervous.”

We got dressed and skipped breakfast. One thing I’d learned about my omega was that when he was upset, eating was the last thing he wanted to do. He’d passed the point where morning sickness was an issue—thank goodness. Seeing him be so sick was saddening.

Markus had a big grin on his face when we arrived. He was the healer and therapist, but he'd always wanted to practice his skills at birthing and ultrasounding something other than our broken bones and organs. "I'm glad you're early. How are things going, Kellan?"

"They are going fine. I'm eating more and I can feel the baby move around now."

"That's fantastic. How are your energy levels?"

"Better," I answered for my omega. "Much better than before."

"Good. I know the two of you, or the three of us, are concerned about the baby and the possible trickle of trauma that might affect them. We're going to monitor you very closely once we get close to the birth, okay?"

Kellan nodded and eyed the ultrasound machine. He got twitchy around all machines and who the hell could blame him.

Not me.

"It turns on and makes a humming sound," Markus said, reading the room. "I'll explain everything. Each step."

"Thank you," Kellan whispered. His hands were pressed against his belly, protecting our child from whatever may come.

Markus had him get onto the exam table, and spoke to Kellan gently. "We're going to put this blue gel on your belly. It helps the ultrasound glide along and the sound waves transmit through your skin. None of it does any harm to you or the baby but it's going to be cold."

Kellan nodded and reached out to hold my hand while pulling up his shirt with the other one.

Markus applied the blue gel and then rolled the wand over Kellan's belly. In seconds, we saw some blobs on the screen. "This is your baby. We're about six weeks along but bears gestate a lot faster. So you'll have a five- to six-month time period before birth. Oh, they're a big one."

He showed us everything he could. Developing heart. The beginning of arms and legs.

But he danced around the main issue. "Can you tell if anything's wrong, Markus?" I asked, not able to take the suspense anymore.

"There's nothing physical that I can see. I'd like to take some blood and some other samples to give us a better idea, but what happens after birth and as the child grows will tell us more. There's only so much I can foretell. We hope for the best, right?"

"We do." Kellan answered the way we did in group sessions.

"Is there anything you want to talk about? Any other concerns?"

Kellan's stomach rumbled, but he had no questions, so Markus cleaned him up, and we got ready to go.

"Thank you, Markus. For everything."

"You're welcome. Now go feed your omega. My goodness."

Kellan

I couldn't sit around forever taking up space and using resources without trying to do something to help out. Locke had encouraged me to take it easy while I was pregnant, insisting he only wanted me to take care of myself and the baby.

But after a while, my worries about what might happen to the baby if there was anything wrong in me became overwhelming. Locke had also been a captive at one time, and he didn't know what he'd been injected with either. Anyone who could manage to add a semi-psycho bear to an omega was capable of almost anything. There was so much we didn't know, including who had let me escape and why. Had it been an accident?

The sanctuary was gearing up for more omegas to be freed in one way or another, and that kept Locke and the others busy, but all I was doing was wandering around and trying to find ways to be helpful.

I needed a job that was mine and mine alone. Something where people would rely on me. Both because it was unfair to the others not to do this but also because it would be good for my self-esteem. I was starting to look like I was smuggling a basketball under my shirt. I was not vain, but I did miss being able to see my own cock. And my feet.

At this size, and as the proud owner of a pair of sore feet and swollen ankles, there were a limited number of things I could probably do. In this quest, I sat down with a piece of paper and a pen and made a list of possible jobs for a pregnant omega who might have damaged DNA or blood cells or just about anything.

Cooking was not an option because it involved a lot of standing and I was terrible at it. Ditto for baking. Gardening—the belly would prevent me not only from bending but seeing anything right in front of me. I didn't have the education to do anything too complex, but then I thought, all those cameras watching the perimeters? Valuable security people were watching the feed. If I did that, they would be freed up to go out and do more important things.

“So, I thought I could do this,” I told my alpha. “Instead of just waddling around here doing nothing but eating everything in sight. It's not even good for me to do that.”

A long silence followed my proposition, and I began to shift in my seat, expecting him to point out that there were others more qualified to do it. But then, to my pleasure and pride, he smiled. “That's a great idea. Do you know how to operate the equipment?”

“Not yet.” And that would be the deal-breaker. I tensed, waiting to be told to just go sit down and take it easy.

“Then, let's go and get one of the security people to show you. I'm so proud of you, omega.”

I trailed after him down the hallway, amazed that this had been so easy. I'd expected an argument or discussion. My education had ended at fourteen.

“Enjoy, my omega is here to take a turn watching the feeds. Would you give him a lesson on how we do that? Then, you'll be able to start on the project you've been interested in.”

“That's amazing. Thanks, Locke.”

“Don't thank me. Thank Kellan. Now, you sit right down here in the chair, and Enjoy

will get you started.” Locke settled against the wall, watching as the security guy showed me the various controls to adjust what the cameras showed us. How to record things of interest. What to watch for because we’d already learned that the humans had some control over animals and they might just send another bear.

Had they sent me as the bear to tear up the sanctuary?

If so, they were sadly disappointed.

After my shift, Locke, who’d left for his own work, returned to take me to dinner. And this time, instead of sitting like a rock while my alpha told me about his interesting life, I had stuff to talk about too.

“I saw a deer and thought maybe it was a shifter, so I called Enjoy and he went out and checked.”

“Was it a shifter?” Locke asked.

“No, but he thanked me for my alertness. Did you know a deer shifter is approximately 15 percent larger than the normal kind?” I went on for so long, I ran out of breath before my alpha gave me a big smile and a pat on the hand. “What?”

“You’re adorable when you are doing a good job.”

“Am I interrupting something?” Markus rapped on the doorframe. “I have your test results.”

Suddenly, my enthusiasm for my new job as security-camera-watching omega waned. I pushed my plate away and folded my hands in my lap. If the healer came to us...it had to be bad news. “Go ahead and say it. There’s something wrong with me that is hurting the baby.”

“I didn’t say that.” He came in and handed a sheaf of papers to my alpha. “I know you both were worried that your exposure might be a problem, and I can’t guarantee everything for life, but I can tell you that all your values are in normal range. So far as I can tell, you’ve got one healthy little baby in there.” He smiled fondly at my bump. “Aren’t you, little person?”

“They kicked me. They like you,” I said, patting my tummy. “And that’s the best news ever in life.”

“Want to go upstairs and celebrate?” My alpha was on his feet. “If we are still cleared for celebratory activities, Healer?”

Markus gave us a benevolent wave. “Absolutely. Whatever your omega feels up to. Mind if I finish your dinners?”

We left him to it.

Locke

No matter how reassured we'd been by the blood tests and such, the fact that Markus couldn't guarantee us the baby would not be harmed by the things those white coats did to us kept me on edge. I tried to hide it from my omega, but we had such a strong connection there was no chance he wouldn't know.

"I feel the same, alpha." He cuddled closer to me on the sofa as we shared a bowl of popcorn. Kellan was responding to words I hadn't even said. "But the baby feels so good in there. I've been eating well and staying hydrated. Getting exercise. Following all the healer's orders. And I know that can't fix anything that might have been done to me on a cellular level or whatever, but we have to stay positive."

"Right." I couldn't argue. "It's hard sometimes. I've been fighting to help others who have gone through what I did, and I'd have sworn I could not have been angrier than I was at how you were treated. But when I think of the possibility that those white coats are responsible for even one hair on our baby's head being damaged, much less anything worse. It's all I can do not to just go into those labs, guns blazing."

"And just get captured again or even killed and leave our child without an alpha father? Over my dead body," he said. "Now, I...oh, ouch."

"Another one of those pains?"

"Yeah, the healer said to expect them." He rubbed at his bump as if easing a cramp. "But they've been getting worse."

“How can you tell the difference?” I tucked him closer into me. The last few weeks had been rough on my omega. He was bloated and achy and had all sorts of pains.

“I don’t know, exactly. I think if they come regularly and get closer together, we need to call Markus. Oh. There’s another one.”

“Those are awfully close together. I think maybe we should call Markus just in case.”

“Maybe so.” He struggled to rise and I stood up and helped him. “Because we’re going to need to have the couch cleaned or maybe throw it away.”

“Did you have an accident?” I looked at the dark circle marring the fabric. “Or...your water broke. Get to bed right now. Hell. Here.” I handed him my cell phone. “You call Markus while I carry you upstairs.”

“Alpha, I can walk.”

“Not on my watch. I’m not having you give birth on the stairs.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think it’s going to happen that fast. If it did, they wouldn’t call it labor.”

But I would not be dissuaded, lifting him gently into my arms and carrying him up to our bedroom. I settled him in the armchair, not listening he fussed about that needing to be cleaned now. But we had special sheets we’d bought for the labor and delivery, and I wanted to get the bed made up and ready for him. Also, I had the inflatable tub to inflate because he wasn’t sure if he wanted a water birth. In fact, there was a whole checklist of things to do, and by the time one of my betas tracked Marcus down just finishing up with another birth at the far side of the lands, I finished the last item on the list.

“Okay, omega, I want to get you right in bed.”

“No.” He struggled in the deep chair like a turtle on its back. “Help me up. I need to walk.”

“Take my hand.” I tugged him to his feet and paced back and forth with him. “I wish Marcus would get here.”

“Me too.” Kellan pressed a hand into his lower back. “Oh, this sucks. Why did we decide to do this again?”

I chuckled. “We didn’t. We just decided to make like bunny shifters day and night, and it happened.”

He tipped his face up to mine. “And then we were very very happy.”

“We sure are, omega mine. Don’t you want to lie down now?”

“Not yet.” He continued walking back and forth. “I read that walking helps speed up labor for some omegas.”

“I’m all for that.”

“But I’ll need you to lie down so we can see how far along you are, Kellan,” Markus said, joining us in the room. “Then you can walk all you want.”

Kellan’s hope for a speedy delivery was not to be. The pains got closer together then stopped then started again, and it wasn’t until twelve hours later that he was in the tub and ready to push.

“On three, Kellan.” Markus counted down, “One, two, three. Push, push, push. Don’t

stop. I see the head.”

I was holding my mate’s hand, but I could still see our daughter slide into the healer’s hands underwater.

He lifted her out and handed her to Kellan. “Say hello to your little girl and then I’ll get her all cleaned up.”

Kellan cuddled her close then held her out to me. “Look, Papa. She’s perfect.”

No matter what warning we’d had, I knew he was right. My bear was also sure, and he was far smarter than me.

“What are you two going to call her?” Markus asked.

“Elise,” Kellan said. “Right?”

We had picked a few names and decided to choose from them when we got to meet her. “Yes. That’s a perfect name for our perfect girl.”

Kellan

Our little family was growing, but the big world outside was impinging on our peace. The humans still had so many omegas as well as others, even a few of their own, in their clutches, and it seemed that I wasn't the only one who escaped. But how and why?

We might never know that. As our little girl grew, I knew one thing. I'd lay down my life for my family. Finishing the breakfast dishes, I tried to push the negative thoughts out of my mind. Heaven knew I had plenty of good things to consider, and unless I was part of one of the teams, my job was to provide support. In that spirit, I was not only watching the screens but learning to bake. I never thought it would happen, had warned everyone how bad my results were likely to be, but with some practice, I had begun to turn out some downright edible items. When I was captive, I'd have sold my left foot for a cookie, and any omegas who came to us were likely to have a similar experience.

The timer went off, and I hurried to grab an oven mitt to retrieve my latest experiment. When I opened the oven, the fragrance of warm, melted chocolate filled the kitchen. This was one of my favorite moments in baking. Not that every time was a success, but I was getting there.

“Is that your dad's caramel brownie recipe?”

I froze, oven door open and pan in my mitted hand. Across the kitchen, my daughter lay in her bouncy seat, and it was all I could do not to race over and grab her, hold her to me before we were both caught up in my hallucination.

“Son?” Hurt colored my alpha father’s tone. “Please don’t be angry with us. We’ve been hunting for you every day since you disappeared.”

I turned, shaking, afraid of what I would not see. “Pops. How are you here? Where...why? I don’t understand.”

My alpha came in through the other door and scooped up our daughter. “I did it. I hope you’re not angry that I found your den and went to visit the other day. Omega, I know you were sure they wouldn’t want you back, but I thought that on the off chance you were mistaken, they deserved to know you were alive.”

Pops entered the kitchen, Dad right behind him, and they met me halfway across the kitchen. “Son, if you’ll set those down, we’d sure love a hug.”

Tears were streaming down my face, and I allowed Dad to take the mitt and pan from me and place the dessert on the table. “But I disobeyed you, and I deserved what I got.”

“Who would ever say that?” Dad’s bear was visible in his eyes and audible in his growl. “You deserved a safe home and protection. We should have stopped you from going out on your own. When we realized, we went after you, but we were too late. He held out his arms. “If you don’t want to hug us, we will understand and leave you alone.”

My mind was doing gyrations as I let them both envelop me in one of their warm hugs. These fathers would never have abandoned me. If they had the slightest idea where I was, they’d have moved heaven and earth to find me there. Why had I believed differently?

“They told me you didn’t want me back,” I sobbed. “That after everything that happened, after I disobeyed you, you’ve written me off.” All that brainwashing had happened shortly after my capture, done under sleep and food deprivation. “I feel

horrible that I believed it.”

“I’m going to kill every one of them if it’s the last thing I do,” Pops said. “How dare they harm you?”

“Maybe don’t set out to do that on your own.” Locke came to join us. “But if you want to help, we can share with you how to become part of our coalition.”

They agreed they would but then they let go of me in favor of their granddaughter. “Her name is Elise,” I told them.

“Give me that little girl,” Dad crooned, taking her from Locke. “She looks just like Kellan when he was little, doesn’t she, Ed?”

“Same eyes, same button nose.” The two of them carried her off to the living room and plopped down on the couch to cuddle and tickle our little girl.

“I think they forgot me already,” I sniffled.

“No way. They cried their eyes out when I told them you were alive, and as soon as the little one goes for her nap, they’re going to have a lot of questions for you, so use the time to decide what you want them to know. I told them only in broadest terms about your experience.”

“They have enough guilt,” I sighed. “I think it’s time to move forward without adding to it. Besides, look at them? Don’t they deserve to be happy?”

“You’re a better man than me, omega. Because if anyone tried to harm Elise, I would never eat or drink or rest until she was home safe.”

“Knowing they tried their best, makes it better. Not okay, but I they were good fathers and if all that cooing and babytalk are any indication, they are going to be

rockstar grandfathers. Thank you for giving them the chance I didn't."

"Then why don't we cut some of those brownies. Are they your dad's recipe?"

"No. I never had time to learn it from him, but don't tell them. His were kind of dry, anyway."

Locke helped me plate up the brownies with the caramel sauce drizzled over them and we took a tray of dessert into the living room to share with my fathers who were showing no signs of letting go of Elise.

Sitting here in our living room with our daughter and my dads, and, of course, my fated mate, I couldn't help but reflect on how things had changed for me. I was surrounded by love, but there were still so many omegas in pain.

My alpha and the team would save them all eventually.

With the Goddess' blessings.