



Wilds

Author: *Rose Carver*

Category: Historical

Description: Willow—the golden omega of Pack Shire.

Her whole life, shes been raised to please alphas. To be beautiful. Obedient. Her family claims its her destiny.

Until a violent encounter with the village sentinels makes her realize that destiny is just a smokescreen for control.

She escapes to the wilds, terrified every day that shell be returned to the sentinels clutches. But its not the sentinels who find her.

Kane—the barbarian alpha whos made the wilds his home. He insists Willow is his responsibility. As long as shes on his territory, he is instinct-bound to keep her fed, and warm, and safe, through the winter.

And Silas—the sentinels chief of recruitment, tasked with bringing Willow home. Except, Willow isnt the only one whos running from something. And there is only so long he can suppress his demons before the truth comes to light.

The three of them have to survive the wilds, as well as each other.

And everything that stands to tear them apart.

WILDS is the first in a two-part, why-choose omegaverse romance. Includes 18+ steamy content and omegaverse themes (scenting, nesting, heats, bonding, etc.). Trigger warnings for sexual trauma and violence.

Total Pages (Source): 50

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

I wake up cold, my heart pounding. Remembering.

They're laughing at me. It hurts, and somehow they're still laughing. I don't even know if I'm screaming anymore. All I can hear is ... is ...

“You're ours now, princess.”

Dawn purples over the horizon like an old bruise. I pull up my socks, cringing at the coarse floorboards beneath my feet. The entire cabin seems to groan as I make my way into the kitchen, every step a reminder that I'm not welcome here.

Or anywhere.

I put a cauldron over the fireplace, only to remember I'm out of wood. I was supposed to chop some more last night, but it got so cold I could barely grip the axe.

Well, there's my first task for the day.

It takes me a few minutes to get dressed—layers are key if I want to survive the oncoming winter—in a thick blouse, corset, and dress. I'd kill for a pair of pants, especially while I'm out foraging, but omegas aren't normally given that luxury.

Especially fugitive omegas.

My hair is still braided from the night before—long auburn curls that are best kept off

my face. When I look at myself in the rusted mirror above the basin, I hardly recognize the omega staring back at me. Her green eyes are bright, but tired. Her lips are hard and pale. Even in all my winter clothes, I can tell I've lost weight.

I lace up my boots and take to the outdoors. It's not snowing, not yet, but the frost isn't far off. The forest is quiet apart from the brittle rustling of leaves.

About a mile through the trees, I find my established log pile. I've been carving it out for months, chopping down the younger pines, hauling back an armful at a time.

If only my mother and fathers could see me now, I think with a bitter pride. Their youngest daughter—trained in every manner of omega refinement—lugging firewood.

My running away will be an inconvenience at best, and at worst, a scandal. The almighty Pack Shire in disgrace. A part of me revels at the thought.

The other, weaker, part fantasizes about begging their forgiveness.

Finally, I get a fire started. For a few minutes I just sit there, willing the warmth to seep into my blood, before I make myself some tea. The leaves taste muddy with the faintest hint of bitterness.

I'm starting to lose count of the number of mornings I've sat in front of this fireplace, drinking this muddy, bitter tea. If we're going into winter ... I'd guess two months. No. Three.

It's not a life I ever imagined for myself. Crazy enough, I used to pity my older brothers and sisters—three alphas inducted to the council, the church, and the sentinels. Our firstborn omega assuming his place as council attendant.

Then there was me.

“ You’re so beautiful, Willow ,” my mother used to preen. “ An omega made to be loved.”

She said I’d be a dam of the highest order—cherry-picked by the first-class sentinels. They’d take care of me, and in return, I’d bless them with pups. Bolster their forces with the strongest possible generation of alphas.

It sounded so simple. So righteous. Almost like ... destiny.

“You’re ours now, princess.”

I grip my mug with trembling hands. These days, as far as I’m concerned, destiny can go fuck itself.

The fire is still burning as I gather my things. I can feel the tea, hot and bitter in my chest, as I walk out the door.

There’s a lot of work to do if I want to stay alive this winter.

Guess I’d better get started.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Nothing red is good for eating. I learned that lesson the hard way.

Instead, I gather everything in shades of black and brown. Prunes. Berries. Mushrooms, if I'm feeling adventurous. Thankfully, one of my fathers gave me a crash course in foraging when I was young.

Well, he gave my alpha siblings a crash course.

“ See? ” Randall pinches a berry between his fingers. “It’s too firm. You’re better off leaving it on the branch and waiting for spring .”

Jarred, Titus, and Lara nod attentively.

I peek my head around the bush. Randall stops.

“Willow,” he says, sternly, “aren’t you meant to be in a lesson?”

Today’s ‘lesson’ is on nesting. I’m too young to care about that—my omega instincts only just presenting—whereas my brother, Alfie, is enraptured. So enraptured he and Mother didn’t notice me slip away.

Randall kneels down, handing me a berry. “Try this.”

Tentatively, I put the berry in my mouth, only to grimace at its tart flavor.

“Just as I thought.” He laughs, tucking back one of my curls. “You’re meant for sweeter things.”

I glare down at the small, pebbly berries in my palm. My stomach grumbles. I grit my teeth, plucking the stem off the bush.

I check my traps on the way to the river, hoping some creature has been stupid enough to get caught. So far, I haven’t had much luck. Or any luck, actually.

My fishnets tend to fare a bit better. I’m not sure I’ll see anything now it’s so cold, and all the schools are migrating south, but it doesn’t hurt to check.

The river is graciously slow-moving today. There’s only a little resistance as I grab the net.

Not one, but two fish flop about helplessly in the line. Already I’m imagining how best to cook them. It’s been so long since I’ve had a proper meal that even the limited options are dizzying. I wait for my catch to stop flopping around before readying the knife.

That’s when I sense it. Movement—across the river.

My head snaps up

A glimpse of white-blond hair. A tattered, bloodied cloak.

Crimson eyes lock onto mine.

His expression narrows, sizing me up, as I do the same. He’s tall. Lean, but broad, with muscles carved out across his half-exposed chest.

An alpha.

Adrenaline shoots through my veins. I'm suddenly grateful for the rushing water, drowning out my pounding heart.

The alpha tilts his head at me. His posture, predatory and poised, makes me worry he's about to leap across the river's width. I know it's ridiculous—nothing could make that jump—but it doesn't mean he can't catch me.

He just has to find the nearest crossing.

I'm too scared to even snarl, or ward him off. All I can do is fumble to my feet.

And run.

Forgetting the fish, forgetting my basket, I take off into the forest. The pine trees loom above me, bearing down. I pick up speed, only to trip on my hem. The heels of my palms graze rock. I'm not aware of the blood, or the pain.

I just keep running.

This is bad. This is worse than bad. The whole point of running away from Southside was making sure no-one could ever find me. If even one blond-haired, crimson-eyed alpha brings word back to the village ... I'm as good as dead.

They won't kill you, my inner omega reminds me. They'd never kill you.

She's right.

What they'll do is worse than death.

I will never be a dam for those monsters. No—not a dam. Breeding stock . My mother and fathers and brothers and sister can put as pretty a spin on it as they like. I know what I am now.

And what I refuse to be.

I burst into the cabin. All that adrenaline must've burned up the last of my energy reserves, as I sink to my hands and knees and try to stop my vision swimming.

You can't stay here, my omega says. He might track you down. Judging on that old cloak, and those sharp eyes, he's been out here a long time. Probably knows his way around the wilds a lot better than me.

He's a hunter. A rogue.

I'm just a runaway omega foraging unripe fruit.

With all the strength I can muster, I get to work barricading the cabin. I even set a couple traps—broken glass, mostly—so I can hear if anyone approaches the perimeter. If that alpha wants to get into my cabin, he's going to have to work for it.

And then what ? my omega demands. He drags you back home ?

Maybe. Or, maybe, he claims me for himself.

I sit upright on the bed, knife clutched in both hands, as daylight leaves the sky and the cabin fills with dark.

Waiting, not for the first time, for an alpha to ruin my life.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Two days pass inside the cabin. I know it's two days, because that's exactly how long my emergency water supply lasts.

In that time, the broken glass is never disturbed. Maybe the rogue alpha couldn't lock onto my scent. Or maybe he simply wasn't bothered to chase after me.

On the third morning, I dare to poke my head outside.

What are the odds I'll see him again? After all, we went several months without running into each other, and if he really wanted to track me down ... he would've done it by now.

Treading lightly on wobbly legs, I make my way through the forest, scanning my surroundings with each step. My whole body is cloudy with hunger, my vision pulsing, but I don't drop my guard for a second.

Am I being watched? Or am I being paranoid?

Finally, I reach the curtain of trees between me and the riverbank, glancing from side to side. Once I've grabbed my net, and my basket, I'll go searching for another fishing spot. In and out.

Cautiously, I approach the river. The fishing net is just where I left it—minus the fish.

Did that bastard seriously steal my catch ?

Huffing, I check my basket. At least the fruits and mushrooms are intact.

My fingers stiff with cold, I can barely get a grip on the net before my joints lock. Just as I think I've finally got it untangled, a twig snaps behind me.

I shoot up, checking the trees. No movement. No alphas. After a moment, I release my breath.

Calm down, Willow. It was probably just a bird.

Returning to the net, I manage to find the corners, folding it in two. If I sling it over my shoulder, it shouldn't get too knotted.

"You're awful at this."

His voice cuts through the air like a blunt knife—deep, rough, male.

The net slips as I spring to my feet. I almost want to grab the basket, so at least he won't get his hands that , but I can't take my eyes off of him.

The tall, familiar alpha emerging from the trees.

His crimson eyes find mine. Eyes I recognize from my fleeting dreams over the last couple days. He scans me with predatory intensity.

"You followed me," I choke out.

He shrugs. "You made it easy."

Only then do I notice his scent, both sharp and sweet, like burnt cinnamon. Pure alpha

.

I take a step back. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Trouble?” He scoffs. “You don’t need my help with that, omega.”

For a minute he just watches me, like he wants to see whether I’ll run. His entire physique radiates power, wearing nothing but loose pants and that tattered cloak.

He can’t be much older than me, but I’m guessing he’s lived in the wilds since long before I showed up. Or maybe it just looks that way, considering he’s covered in dirt.

And blood.

“You must be hungry,” he says.

“I’m fine,” I snap.

Of course, at that very moment, my stomach rumbles, clenching painfully.

The alpha reaches behind his back and presents a dead rabbit. It’s still dripping blood—fresh from the hunt. I can’t help but flinch at the soft, wet thud as he throws it at my feet.

“Here,” he grunts.

I grit my teeth. “I don’t want this.”

My stomach rumbles again, and I wish I could rip it out.

“Consider it a trade for the fish. Besides.” His glare darkens. “Winter’s coming, and you look like you’re about to keel over.”

That only makes me bristle more. “I said I don’t want it.”

He strides forward. “Don’t be stu—” Instantly, I step back. The alpha stops. Huffs. “Listen, omega. If you go bolting off like last time, and waste more good meat, you and me are gonna have a problem.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“What? For the love of— no. I’m just saying, you don’t have to be so damn jumpy.”

“‘Jumpy’ tends to happen when rogue alphas sneak up on me.”

His eyes flash with irritation. “Not my fault you’re a flight risk.”

No. I guess it isn’t. But then ... why bother with the rabbit? It feels more like a peace offering than a trade. And I refuse to accept charity from someone who has every power to turn it against me.

Finally, I tell him, “I don’t need your help.” Even as the words come out, my insides twist into cold, demanding knots.

He says, “You’re never gonna make it through the winter. Hell, I don’t know if you’re gonna survive the day.”

Like my body is responding to his words, a wave of dizziness washes over me. I shuffle my feet, determined to stay standing.

“Just take the damn rabbit,” he growls. “The sooner you get your strength back, the sooner you can stay out of my way.”

My inner omega whines, wishing I could trust him, wishing I could eat . But for all I

know, he sees this as some warped attempt at courtship. If I accept, his alpha will take over.

I grab my basket. “How about this? You stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours.”

He rumbles, “My territory. My rules.”

His territory? Until a couple days ago, I didn’t even know he existed!

Reading the confusion on my face, the alpha huffs. “Well, it’s mine now.” Those crimson eyes sharpen. “Don’t forget it.”

Dread sinks through me. Rabbit forgotten, I take a step back. Then another.

“Hey,” he growls, “you even listening, omega?”

With a couple more tentative paces, I turn on my heel and bolt into the trees. The alpha’s snarl follows me, the wind spiked with his pheromones.

My heart pounds, each beat echoing through my cavernous insides. He knows what I am now. Who’s to say he doesn’t also know where I live?

I’m wheezing by the time I make it back to the cabin. Broken glass crunches under my boots. I glance over my shoulder, checking I’m still alone, before letting myself inside.

Only then does the reality of the situation come crashing down. A rogue alpha has just moved into my neck of the woods, literally, and staked his claim. Where does that leave me, tucked away in a cabin at the top of the mountain? It was miracle enough that I found this place—decrepit and uninviting though it may be. If I have to

go looking for somewhere new, I'll likely to freeze to death.

No . Rage fires up inside of me. This is my cabin. That stupid rogue can say what he wants— I got here first.

Forcing myself to my feet, I stumble about the kitchen. The previous owner didn't leave much behind. Some soggy furniture. A few rusted utensils. The old fishing net.

Plus ... I rummage through the drawers until my hand clutches something narrow and pointed.

An arrow.

Two arrows to be exact, plus a brittle bow. When I first found them, I figured it would be no use—only my oldest siblings were trained in archery. But I guess expertise is a luxury I can't afford.

After all, a weapon is a weapon.

I sprawl the bow and arrows out on the bench. My dread morphs into determination.

That rogue was wrong. This isn't his territory.

It's mine.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Anyone who says an omega can't survive on berries, mushrooms, and lots and lots of tea, is, well, probably right.

But I'm giving it my best shot.

I try not to use the fireplace too much, afraid I'll run out of wood and waste my strength gathering more. Instead, I'm spending my energy training. I carved an X into one of the trees around back for target practice, though so far my aim has been ... lacking.

Lift bow. Squint to aim. And ...

Fire.

Thwack ! The arrow hits about a foot below its target.

It'll have to do. Now that I've given up on fishing—visiting the river only long enough to replenish my water supply—I need another source of protein. If some disheveled rogue can kill rabbits, why can't I?

After several possible leads, and two very frightened turkeys, I start to give up hope. I gather all the shrubs I can find, returning with a less-than-impressive haul. I should really save some for breakfast, but by the time it gets dark, I'm hungry, and exhausted, and don't have the energy to worry about tomorrow's problems.

Sunrise. More target practice. More 'hunting'. More measly pickings.

And repeat.

One evening, I don't make it back until it's so dark I can barely see where I'm going. That night, I wrap myself up in my flimsy sheets. Quaking with cold. Seeing swirling, murky colors in the dark. Am I sick? Everything is already so uncomfortable, I'm not sure I could tell the difference.

Tomorrow , I promise myself. I'll kill something big . Strip enough meat to last myself days.

Maybe that's why, when I dream, I dream of blood.

They're laughing at me. No matter how much it hurts, or how loudly I cry, they're still laughing.

Rough hands pin me down.

Hungry eyes glare straight through me.

"You're ours now, princess."

I jolt upright with a cough. Gritting my teeth, I sit over the edge of the bed.

Sunrise. That means ... target practice. Right?

I force myself to drink some water—there's not enough firewood left to waste on tea—before heading outside. The cold hits me at once, more startling than normal.

Winter is coming, I remind myself matter-of-factly.

Even so, I can't shake the feeling that I'm forgetting something. I scan the outside of the cabin, then survey the trees, searching for answers. Colors and scents blur together, making a pretty, messy picture.

I take my bow and arrows and head into the forest. There's big prey for me somewhere between these trees. I just know it.

Treading, occasionally tumbling, I stick my nose into the air. There's a dewy, coppery scent luring me north. It means deviating from my usual path, which makes my stomach grumble uncertainty, but I push past it.

Maybe these are my survival instincts finally rising to the occasion. Showing me what needs to be done.

I follow my nose deeper into the forest. The pine trees, normally so strong and still, seem to sway.

Crack !

My head snaps to the sound—a dead branch splitting on the forest floor. I duck behind a tree, glaring into the nearby clearing.

There, her head bowed in graceful hunger, a young deer grazes the foliage.

Heart pounding, I pull the bow out from around my shoulder. The arrow feels familiar in my hand, the inside of my fingers calloused with practice.

She's, what—twenty yards away? Poor thing must be hungry, or she would've noticed me. My inner omega snarls ecstatically . Maybe I won't starve this winter,

after all.

Breathing deeply, silently, I stare down the arrow's tip.

And I fire.

The deer staggers, and for a magical moment I wonder if I've actually hit her, when suddenly she bolts.

"Shit," I hiss.

I aim again, missing by a mile. She disappears deeper and deeper into the trees, those narrow legs carrying her faster than I can follow. No ! I want to scream. Please, come back! Only as I sink to my knees, my throat raw, do I realize I have been screaming.

"Fuck!" I choke out, slamming my fist against the tree.

You're wasting your strength, a harsh voice says in my head, reminding me of Byron—the strictest of all my fathers. Get up. Get home. Regroup.

He was only ever soft with me. All my fathers were. Not that long ago, their special treatment made me feel, well ... special. Like I was something worth cherishing. Only now do I see what they were really doing.

Keeping me weak. Ripe for the sentinels' picking.

Running away isn't enough to prove them wrong. I sniffle, struggling to my feet.

I have to survive.

Stumbling, I venture into the clearing to collect my arrows. The first is lodged into an

exposed root. The second ... damn, where did it go?

Suddenly another branch snaps. I jump, excitedly preparing my single arrow. Is it the same deer? Surely she wouldn't be that stupid. Maybe it's another from her herd, or even her fawn.

As I twist my bow around, I discover I'm wrong on both accounts.

On the edge of the trees, glaring out at me through the canopy's shadow, is not a deer at all.

It's a growling, hulking, five-hundred-pound grizzly.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Omega is acting different today. She stumbles through the forest, barely looking behind her.

I almost revealed myself the second I saw her this morning. She's not even clothed properly—wearing only her underdress, her bow, and her half-laced boots.

Is omega trying to get sick ? my inner alpha rumbles.

Prowling silently, I keep a close eye. She veered off her usual path almost an hour ago, but I can't tell if it's on purpose. She seems to be acting purely by instinct, which—stupid as it is—makes my inner alpha curious.

What trouble are you getting yourself into now ?

The further she walks, the closer I dare to get. That fruity, honeyish scent I've grown to know so well trickles behind her. It's also different from normal.

My nose wrinkles.

Not just different. Wrong.

Suddenly she stops, so I stop, watching intently as she pulls out her bow and arrow.

Mm, my inner alpha growls, clever omega.

Somehow she spotted it before I did—a doe grazing up ahead. Omega braces her bow, the arrow quivering between her fingers. I've watched her shoot the damn thing a hundred times since we met. At first I thought she was arming herself in case our paths crossed again, but now I understand.

Omega's life doesn't revolve around me. I'm the pathetic one, stalking her day in and out like I have nothing better to do.

She shoots. Misses. Shoots again—even worse.

Her hoarse cry shocks me, as she drops to her knees. Omega hurt? my alpha demands, but I force myself to hang back.

What am I even doing here? Omega has already run away from me twice. Barricaded her den to keep me out. The longer I hang around, scaring her, protecting her—what's the difference?—the more she'll hide.

I take a step back, careful not to make any noise.

That's when her head snaps up.

She's standing, having already prepared one of her arrows. Instantly my senses are on high alert. What can she see? I know it isn't me, or she'd be looking my way.

Instead, she's glaring straight ahead. A burst of panic springs from her scent.

Oh, fuck.

I see the bear a second before it strikes. Omega only manages half a scream before lunging out of the way. The bear turns, preparing its second attack.

Snarling, I tear through the trees, knowing a single moment's hesitation could cost this foolish little omega her life. She must know it, too, as she pulls back her arrow and fires.

The bear roars, struck, but it seems more annoyed than anything.

She takes the opportunity to run, leaping aimlessly into the forest.

I'm not going to catch up in time. The bear charges, and omega loses her footing, hitting the ground. The bear rears back—

“Hey!” I shout.

I'm not sure it even notices me until I ram its flank. Damn thing is huge . Ten times stronger than me, easy, not to mention hungry. Probably looking for a good meal before it goes into hibernation.

I whip out my dagger, tearing into its back leg. The bear growls, showing no pain, but at least it's attention has shifted to me.

Omega rolls over. “Y—you!” she gasps.

I spin my dagger. The bear comes at me, fangs flashing, and I dodge just in time. Under no circumstances can I let it pin me.

It's sluggish on the turn, and I see my opening: Right before its massive head snaps my way again, I jab its jugular, the blade striking soft, vulnerable tissue.

The bear stumbles. I don't know if that'll be enough to keep it down. Beasts like this have so much blood, it's hard to tell what'll actually land the killing blow.

Sure enough, the bear remains standing, eyeing me and omega with a newfound caution. I twirl my blade again. Come at her—I dare you.

At last, the bear begins to retreat. It limps back a few more messy paces before turning and galloping away, favoring its right side. The scent of blood fills the forest. Tart. Earthy. Familiar.

I glare after it for several hard moments before finally shifting my focus. Behind me, omega has struggled to her feet. She grips a tree for balance, shuddering through every breath.

“You ...” she whispers. Swallows. “How are you here?”

I sheath my dagger. “You’re welcome.”

“I—” she shakes her head, like she’s trying to remember something important. “I need to find ... my ... arrows.”

Omega smells sickly, like wilted flowers . I should’ve guessed it when I saw her leave the cabin in only her underdress. When she veered off-course.

Cautiously, I place my hand on her forehead.

Fuck. She’s burning up.

Ignoring her protests, I loop an arm around her stomach and lift her up in one harsh swoop. She coughs, pounding my chest, but I barely feel it. Either she’s always this puny, or she’s even sicker than she looks.

Suddenly she goes slack, her head dropping against my shoulder.

“Hey,” I bark. “Hey!”

Her breaths are thin. Her under-dressed body gleams with sweat. She feels impossibly light, like she’s hollow on the inside.

“Dammit, omega,” I growl, holding her close as I charge through the forest. “Stay with me.”

There’s no response. Her pale, dainty features look more at peace than I’ve ever seen them.

“Dammit,” I say again, under my breath.

You should’ve taken the fucking rabbit .

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Nothing tries to ambush us on our way back to omega's den. Thank fuck. It's hard enough protecting her when she isn't out cold in my arms.

Sunlight dwindles behind us as we reach the front door. Shielding omega's head, I shoulder my way inside. The dead wooden frame splinters, dust exploding over my cloak.

Christ, this place is a shithole.

The floorboards groan, sinking against my every step. I consider putting her in front of the fireplace, then—noting the distinct lack of fire wood—redirect to the bedroom. She barely stirs as I lie her down.

“Stupid omega,” I mutter. Her kind aren't built for the wilds—definitely not in winter, and definitely not alone.

Omega scowls, curling into herself. My heart skips a beat.

Can she hear me?

She fists the sheets, clenching and unclenching, like she can't quite find what she's looking for. Cautiously, I offer my hand.

Her fingers latch around mine in an instant. It's weird—for all her feverishness, her hands are cool, and dry.

That dread in the pit of my stomach, wondering if she's actually on death's door, eases up as she tugs me in closer. And closer. Like she's confused how I can still be so far away.

She's not the only one, my inner alpha grumbles.

Before I know it, this sleeping, delirious omega is dragging me into bed. I manage to unfasten my cloak just in time to hit the mattress, my bare chest pressing up against her. She murmurs incoherently, her weak breath tingling my sternum.

My thoughts go blank. She's so soft, and small, and melts everything she touches. Is that the fever, I wonder, or is that just what it's like to be this close to an omega?

Either way, I know what I have to do.

I pull her closer. When she whimpers, the sound travels halfway to my cock before I restrain myself.

All I can do is hold her, make her sweat, and sweat, and sweat, until all the sickness leaves her body.

Eventually her breaths even, and her muscles go slack, and she returns to deep sleep. I feel myself drifting off, too—dragged under by a tidal wave of calm.

As if, for the first time in my life, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Thunk !

My eyes snap open. The room is so dark it takes me a couple seconds to adjust.

“What the hell are you doing!”

Ah . Guess omega’s awake.

She must’ve leapt out of bed—still picking herself off the floor—when she saw me. How stupid can one omega be? If I was going to hurt her, or worse, she’d be hurt or worse by now.

“Helping,” I answer at last. Then, pointedly, add, “ Again .”

“Get out,” she snaps.

Rage fires through my blood. “That really the thanks I get?”

“I didn’t ask for your help.” She grips the bed frame. “This is my cabin. Touch me again and I’ll—I’ll—!”

“You’ll what?”

To my surprise—and, fine, horror —her big green eyes fill up with tears. Instinctively, I stand, not sure if I want to hold her or shake her. Omega. Crying. Fucking fix it ! my alpha snaps.

Only as she takes a step back, terror spiking from her scent, do I realize what’s happened. Or, what she thinks has happened.

I freeze. Ah, hell.

“Omega,” I growl, “I didn’t touch you.”

She snuffles. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Debatable.”

Her eyes glisten. I bite my tongue. C'mon, Kane. Don't be a jackass .

Tautly, I explain, “I was trying to sweat your damn fever out. That's it.”

She gestures down her body, scantily clad in that flimsy white underdress. “And you had to take my clothes off to do that?”

I might actually laugh if it weren't for those damn pheromones—so bitter, so gut-wrenchingly genuine.

With all the patience I can muster, I tell her, “This is all you had on.” I point down, where her boots are still sloppily laced. “I didn't take off shit.”

Omega shuffles her feet. She doesn't break my gaze for several agonizing moments until, finally, her scent mellows.

“Okay. Good.” She folds her arms. “For you, I mean. 'Cause, you know, if you had ...” she swallows. “I—I'd kill you.”

I return to the edge of the bed, leaving a wide berth in case she decides to join me.

“The bear,” she says suddenly, quieter. “That was real.”

I grunt in affirmation.

“Okay.” I sense her frustration, her stubbornness, finally quashed by a muted, “Thank you.”

“Uh-huh.”

She scowls at me, taking me in with skin-prickling interest. I guess she's never seen me so up close before. Or so ... bare.

Finally, she asks, "How did you know where my cabin was?"

"Didn't realize it was a secret." I decide not to mention how many hours I've spent in her trees, watching the windows flicker with candlelight, tracing her silhouette as it moved from room to room.

More sourness in omega's scent. "Great. That's just great. If you knew where I was this whole time, why'd you always wait to ambush me?"

Ambush ? My inner alpha cringes at the word.

"Dunno." I avert my gaze. "Figured you wouldn't like it."

"So you were being polite?"

I roll my eyes.

Finally—fucking finally—omega sits down next to me. She puts a pillow between us, like that tiny barrier makes a difference. Her scent courses through my veins. Her fevered heat is still a part of me.

Softly, she says, "You can't stay here. Even if you did ..."

"Save your life?"

"Don't flatter yourself. You also stole my fish, stalked me, and, for some reason, took your cloak off in my bed."

“Got your fever down, didn’t it?”

She gives the cutest little omega growl, making my cock twitch.

“Tomorrow morning,” she says, “I need you gone. Understand?”

Instantly my inner alpha rages. The last time I left you alone, you almost got eaten by a bear. I don’t even know this omega—don’t know her name, or what she’s doing here, or why someone hasn’t bonded her yet. And yet ...

“I meant what I said,” she mutters, like she senses me withdrawing. “The thank you part.”

She’s staring into me, her cheeks flushed, green eyes focused, long auburn hair half-spilled out of its braid.

Beautiful, my inner alpha purrs.

“You’re welcome,” I bite out.

We sit in silence. I keep waiting for my eyes to get heavy, counting down the seconds until I can convince her to return to my arms, so we can share the mattress once more. Instead, the night churns on, and neither one of us speaks.

Finally, I declare, “Name’s Kane. Since you didn’t ask.”

She hesitates. “I’m ... Will.”

“Will?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.”

I give her a couple seconds, and sure enough, she adds, “Short for Willow . Like the tree.”

I look at her again, realizing it fits. Strong, but crooked. Graceful, even when she’s standing still.

Will. Willow .

Like the tree.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Neither of us get much sleep that night. I tell myself it's because I can't relax, knowing there's a rogue alpha in my cabin, but it's more than that.

Kane is better company than he lets on.

"I went rogue about five years ago. Parents kicked it, not many siblings—at least, none who wanted jack shit to do with me. So, I took myself out of the picture."

Judging on his hard monotone, I'm guessing no-one even cared enough to look for him. Meanwhile, there are probably whole search parties out for me. When my fathers realize I haven't been kidnapped, I'm not sure what they'll do.

"If you've been rogue for five years, what're you suddenly doing on my side of the mountain?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Can't always stay in one place for long. Whole packs move in, take up resources, and, eventually, drive you out."

"Join a pack, then," I say, exasperatedly.

"Look who's talking."

I want to snarl at him. Hell, I want to smack him. But—maybe as belated thanks for saving my life—I restrain myself.

“Can’t say I ever saw a rogue omega,” he tells me. “Doubt they survive long on their own.”

Yes, yes, message received . Kane is big strong alpha, Willow is small idiot omega. If he insults me one more time, I really will have to smack him.

“So,” I say, turning the conversation back around, “who drove you out this time? Any other packs I need to be worried about?”

To this he bristles. “Wasn’t a pack . Just an alpha.”

“Seriously? You let one alpha drive you out?”

“I didn’t let him do shit.” Kane’s scent is charred, his shoulders stiffening. “Fucker was big. Strong. Never fought anyone like him.”

“What were you doing fighting in the first place?”

“He was on my territory,” he says, like it should be obvious.

And I’m the stupid one.

“Okay.” I sigh. “Here’s hoping neither of us have another run-in with that guy.”

For some reason, Kane’s scent gets even thicker, his anger filling the room. “You see another alpha out here,” he growls, “you run the fuck away, and you call for me .”

“Why? So you two can fight over my territory?”

“Like it or not, omega, you need me. The next time someone comes knocking, they’re gonna take a hell of a lot more than your fish.” His expression darkens. “So you run ,

and you call me .”

A shiver runs down my spine. Slowly, I nod.

“Good.” He relaxes ever-so-slightly, gesturing to the top of the bed. “Enough questions. You need to sleep.”

As soon as he says it, the exhaustion creeps in, curling me up in its clutches. Not to mention hunger. Definitely some thirst mixed in there, too.

“I’m not a pup,” I assert, “I’ll sleep when I want to.”

He gives me a hard look. “You want that fever to come back?”

A compelling argument. If fever means another sweaty night curled up to this guy, I need to snap out of it right the hell now.

Begrudgingly, I crawl into bed. Kane snags the pillow that was sitting between us but, rather than returning it to me, drops it on the floor. He lays out his cloak.

I frown. “You can sleep like that?”

“You giving me another choice?”

My inner omega whines pityingly. Alpha was nice, she insists. He saved me. Then, a little more sheepishly, And he has nice abs.

No. No abs. No alphas. He can sleep out in the open for all I care.

“Tomorrow,” I remind him, “you’re leaving.”

He punches his pillow, evening out the lumps. “Uh-huh. Heard you the first time.”

Maybe it’s because I’m drifting to sleep, but I can’t help but notice his shift in tone. The first time we met, and the time after that, he sounded so harsh. Almost animal. Yet, now, he’s lying on my rotten floorboards, grumbling quietly.

He didn’t ask about me , I realize. For all the poking and prodding I did at him, all he seemed to care about was my name. Was that a deliberate effort to respect my privacy? Or does he just not give a damn?

I try to remember what it was like when he was holding me. It must’ve been warm—the only real warmth I’ve had in weeks.

I curl into myself, allowing the fuzzy memory to seep through me.

Carrying me into dreams.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

When I wake up, Kane is gone.

I'm still groggy, coming out of my fever, wondering if the whole thing was a dream. Did I really have a rogue alpha in my bed last night?

If not for his scent, I might not believe it.

I roll over, wrinkling my nose at the pungent, earthy aroma in my sheets. Those sweeter hints of cinnamon are still there, making my inner omega purr, but everything else reeks. When's the last time he bathed ?

Suddenly I sneeze, the force of it making my head spin.

Guess I'm not quite recovered yet.

Wrapping the sheet around my shoulders, I get up to search the kitchen. I'm surprised to find the fireplace burning. A substantial pile of wood has been stacked next to the furnace.

Did Kane do this ?

I already know the answer, but I can't quite bring myself to accept it. Kane's a rogue. And, ninety-five per cent of the time, an asshole. Why would he go out of his way to help me, again ?

I brew some flavorless tea, letting its warmth fill my insides. First order of business: food.

Rugging up extra tight, I take to the forest, never straying from my path. It's going to take a lot more for a bear, or a rogue, to get the drop on me next time.

I'm pretty fortunate with my pickings, putting together a nice array of shrubs. Then I check my small animal traps, wondering if I'll get lucky, only to walk away disappointed.

Exhausted, carrying a basket of shrubs in one hand and a bucket of water in the other, I trudge home. It's almost dark—I must've slept half the day away. The extra hours of rest did me good, I'm sure, but already I'm feeling run-down again.

I shoulder into the cabin, my muscles screaming. At least, with these ingredients, I can make enough soup to last me a couple days.

Once again, it's the scent that hits me first—grime and spice and sweetness—before I actually see the rogue alpha standing in the kitchen.

“Where the hell have you been?”

I drop my basket. “Kane?”

He storms up to me, snatching the bucket of water. “Are you out of your mind?”

His anger is like a slap across the face. I blink, suddenly alert. “What are you doing here? You can't just come and go as you please!”

“I came to give you this.” He gestures to a limp rabbit on the kitchen bench. “Figured it'd hold you over until you're on your feet.”

First the firewood, and now a meal? Maybe I should be grateful—god knows my inner omega wants to purr with thanks—but, somehow, that just makes me even angrier. The more he gives me, the more he saves me, the more danger I’m in. I can’t owe this alpha any more than I already do.

I dread to imagine what he expects in return.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” I practically growl. “I don’t want your charity.”

He looms in even closer. “You think I pity you? You really that stubborn?”

“I’m the stubborn one? I’m not the one who keeps showing up at your doorstep, uninvited .”

His crimson eyes burn with something I can’t quite pick—rage, probably, except he’s too focused. Like he can’t bear to let me out of his sights.

In a deep, skin-tingling voice, he rumbles, “I told you. This is my territory now.”

I scoff. “Yeah, sure.”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” He puts his hands on my arms, his grip so firm, so secure, that my whole body locks in place. “As long as you’re here, unbonded, without a pack, you’re my responsibility.” His lip curls. “Whether I like it or not.”

I stop. Blink. Blink again. “You’re not serious.”

His grip tightens.

“Okay.” I swallow. “Fine. You’re serious.”

Reluctantly, Kane loosens up. “I don’t know how they did shit where you come from, but out here, an omega needs protection.”

“I don’t want a pack,” I blurt out, nervous what he’s implying. “O—or a bond.”

“Good. ’Cause I’m not offering.”

Finally, his hands drop. I feel instantly unsteady, realizing how much weight he was taking. He stares me up and down, checking I’m not about to keel over, before sighing.

“Here’s the deal, omega. I keep you alive through the winter, and you don’t throw yourself to the bears every time I’m not looking.”

I quirk a brow. “Which is when, exactly?”

“Just don’t do anything stupid.” His face reddens. “That so damn hard?”

I fold my arms. “What are you getting out of this, exactly? Apart from your big alpha pride?”

He snarls exasperatedly, running a hand through his hair. “I dunno. What’re you offering?”

I have a couple ideas, my inner omega purrs, so easily lured by his potent scent and shuddering muscles.

Aloud, I say, “Do you eat?”

The look he gives me, like I really am stupid, makes my cheeks flush.

“I mean—” I gesture to the fresh kill in my kitchen, “do you eat anything apart from raw bunnies and fish?”

Kane seems to consider this. He looks at the rabbit, then at the basket I dropped near the door, and chuffs.

Guess I’ll take that as a yes.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Omega— Willow —makes good soup. When I ask her for seconds, she says yes, then turns me away for thirds.

It's the first hot meal I've eaten in years. Sure, there's the fresh, hot- blooded meals I've had in the interim, but nothing that compares to the aromatic flavors she seems to conjure out of her pot. I'm so damn satisfied that I barely bat an eye when she asks for help cleaning up.

It's good to use my hands. Easier than talking. Plus, it gives me plenty of opportunities to check omega—I grit my teeth— Willow for signs of fever. Those bright green eyes are focused, making sure her dish is thoroughly rinsed.

Suddenly I huff, snatching the bowl from her hands. "Give me that."

Willow starts. "What? Why?"

I nod down to her near-translucent fingers, tinged blue at the tips.

"Oh." She dries off. "Didn't notice."

"More like didn't feel it," I mutter. "What are you, numb?"

"A little."

Grumbling under my breath, I start rinsing. The wash bucket is ice-cold. Guess she

only boiled enough water for food and drink.

She looks at me, then looks at the bucket. “This is a probably a stupid question, considering your ... attire. But don’t you get cold?”

My inner alpha perks up. Omega notices what I’m wearing ? She’s watching me, watching my body, the same way I watch her.

“Not really,” I answer at last. It’s mostly true—I’m thick-skinned and hot-blooded, even by alpha standards.

“Right.” She considers. “So you’ve got no excuse.”

“Huh?”

She gives me a meaningful look, and the attention sends a jolt straight to my cock. “You reek.”

I rear back. “So what if I do?”

She sighs. “New rule. If you’re determined to hang around my cabin, help me with meals here and there, I’ll allow it. But — ” she almost smiles, “you have to wash up.”

“I am washing up!”

“Not the dishes, genius. A bath .”

I try not to laugh in her face. Sure, during the rest of the year, I make a habit of scrubbing down in the river. But right now, when the water’s close to freezing? Forget it.

I glare at Willow incredulously. “Don’t tell me you’ve been washing up in this weather?”

She raises her eyebrows like the answer should be obvious.

“Dammit, omega. No wonder you got sick.”

“Cleanliness is important. And, in fact, essential, if you want to keep visiting my cabin.”

This damn omega. She won’t tell me where she came from, and I’m not stupid enough to ask, but already I can tell she’s no wilds girl. She was raised in a village, where walls were sturdy, and beds were warm, and ‘cleanliness’ was a given. All credit to her, she’s done well to survive this long. But if I hadn’t found her when I did ...

“Fine,” I grunt. “But I’m only doing it for the food.”

Willow smiles. Her pale lips turn pink with satisfaction.

Protect her, my alpha growls, not for the first time. Keep omega safe. That’s my job now. It didn’t make sense to me at first—why I followed her, watched her. But I get it now.

Until the winter’s over, until she gets tired of this cabin and runs off to another alpha’s territory, Willow is mine .

My inner alpha gives a low purr of agreement. I realize the sound must’ve slipped out when Willow cocks her head.

“What?” she teases. “Are you looking forward to not smelling like dead rodents?”

I flick her with water. She gives a cute little yelp.

Fucking hell. 'Cute'? Really?

“Just for that,” she announces, “you have to go first.” She gestures. “Tub’s out back.”

“What for? I already ate.”

She stops, her honeyish pheromones turning hot. Embarrassed? “I assumed you were staying the night. It’s dark out.”

“I have to bathe just to sleep?”

She puts her hands on her hips.

Groaning, I untie my cloak, letting it puddle behind me as I trudge to the door. I swear I can feel Willow’s eyes on me, mapping out the ridges in my arms, chest, and back—so I walk a little slower, giving her a nice, good view. Those honey-scented pheromones follow after me, making my blood roar.

It’s just as well I’m facing for the door, or she might notice the bulge in my pants.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

I don't normally see Kane during the day. He hangs around until I'm more or less recovered, but then he slinks off—returning only when he gets hungry.

I try to tailor my meals around the meat he delivers. Roasted fish with greens. Slow-cooked rabbit and mushrooms. Crispy squirrel and berries (okay, fine, I was running out of ideas). Every time, I'm surprised to find him eat his entire serving, then some. Kane doesn't strike me as the eat-your-greens kind of alpha, though, maybe that's been more out of convenience.

That's what I am to him, I decide. Convenient.

He keeps to his word, barely grunting out a 'hello' before he walks himself to the tub. Soon after he returns, cursing, to dry off in front of the fire.

"Happy?" he asks, his naked chest still dripping. I can't stop myself from studying his scars, or the taut, shuddering muscles they adorn.

'Happy' is one word for it, my omega preens.

Suddenly he stiffens, craning his head to look at me. "Sure smell happy."

I hastily look away.

We're eating in silence, like normal. I glare into the fire while Kane wolfs back his second serving. The cabin feels ten times warmer with him here, and not just because

he stokes the flames better than I can. It's him. Pure, hot-blooded alpha, his pheromones filling out the room like cinnamon-scented steam.

My nose wrinkles. Cinnamon plus grime.

"Your cloak," I blurt out. "Give it to me."

He tips his bowl back, getting the last of the broth, then scowls. "You can't still be cold."

"Just hand it over."

Begrudgingly, he fists the tattered fabric, hauling it at me. Pungent earth smells waft up nose.

Bingo.

Standing, clutching the cloak to my chest, I don't think before I speak. "Your pants, too."

Kane's eyes widen with a rare glimpse of shock. "My what?"

Well, it's too late to back out now. The longer I stand here, blushing like a pup, the more he'll scent my nerves.

"Don't get the wrong idea," I huff. "I'm just washing them. You know, the thing you're supposed to do when they're all covered in blood."

He stares at me like I've sprouted a second head. "You really want me sitting buck-naked in your cabin, omega?"

Granted—I did not think this all the way through.

“Obviously not,” I snap. “I’ll give you a blanket.”

I can hardly bear the way he just keeps staring . Goosebumps flood my skin, like I’m not sure whether I want him to keep looking, or please, god, look away.

Finally, he rises, and—without averting his gaze—undoes the top button on his pants.

I spin around. “Kane!”

“What?” I hear fabric rustle and drop. “ Now you’re shy?”

He’s right. I am the one who just invited a rogue alpha to undress right in front of me.

Kane tosses his pants—the soiled, rumpled fabric landing right by my feet. Swallowing, I crouch down, suddenly aware that he could very well take this as an opportunity to mount me, right here and now. I wouldn’t be able to stop him.

They’re laughing. I’m crying, screaming, and they’re still laughing.

But the room is quiet. No sound but the crackling fire and the blood roaring in my ears. I feel a chirp rise in the back of my throat—my inner omega desperate for this rogue, naked alpha’s protection. I manage to swallow it back just in time.

Then, snatching Kane’s pants, I hurry out the door.

To my relief, and my omega’s disappointment, he does not follow.

There are some things I try not to admit to myself, as the week comes and goes, and winter hits us in full force.

First, Kane was right: I would not survive this without him.

And second, I have less nightmares when he's here.

He normally finds an excuse to slip out before it gets too dark. I suspect he's got a chip on his shoulder; trying to prove he's tough enough to brave these winter nights out in a cave somewhere.

When he does stay, the whole cabin is warm. He must change the logs overnight, because when I wake up, he's gone, and the fire is still burning.

And when he doesn't stay ...

I lurch up, drenched in icy sweat. My throat is raw and my temples throb, though whether that's from the cold or the crying, I'm not sure.

Crying and crying, my whole body like an open wound, not sure if I'm bleeding or sweating or both—

“You're ours now, princess.”

That's why their laughter is so terrifying. I'm not the joke, like I thought. There is no joke.

Only truth.

I put my hand on my chest, waiting for my heartbeat to slow. Despite myself, I listen out for the adjoining room, wondering if I'll hear Kane's steady breaths amidst the

dying flames.

The cabin is cold. I am alone.

As it should be.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

A bath before every dinner. Clothes washed every week. Hell if this pretty little omega isn't demanding.

By the second laundry run, Willow knows to have a blanket ready for me. By the third, she nearly manages to conceal her blush. That part, I quit complaining about.

The baths, on the other hand, are getting harder to brave.

One particularly brisk night, Willow barely lets me through the door—like she knows I'm going to give her a hard time. I hold up my latest kill, a couple squirrels, hoping it'll distract her.

She folds her arms. Something about it makes my inner alpha hungry for the challenge.

"You know, bunny ..." I lean against the doorframe. "I think I finally got you figured out."

She quirks an eyebrow. "Bunny?"

Shit, did I say that aloud? A dead rabbit was the first gift I ever brought her. Even though she didn't accept, I think back on that day all the time. Maybe more than I should.

I clear my throat. "You're so damn hung up on making sure I'm clean. Hell, you're

even taking my clothes.” My lips part with a grin. “Your omega like my scent that much?”

Willow’s eyes burst—green blown with black. She’s mad, alright. Mad, but not scared.

Well, there’s a nice change.

Growling, she slams her hands against my chest, shoving me out the door.

“What?” I goad. “I strike a nerve?”

She snatches the squirrels straight from my hand. “Don’t flatter yourself!”

And slams the door behind me.

Maybe, to a more civilized alpha, this would be the cue to fuck off. Me? I take my wild ass around back, strip down, and dunk myself in the tub. The water hits me like a goddamn glacier.

Nothing quite so humbling as remembering Willow does this shit every single day.

She’s an idiot, I remind myself, teeth chattering, as I dry off with my cloak. It’s a miracle she’s only gotten sick once so far.

Tonight’s dinner is skewered squirrel. I don’t know what else she’s put on it—some green stuff, some brown stuff—but I’ve polished mine off long before I think to ask. She’s still eating as I poke around the scarce leftovers.

“Here,” she sighs, handing me the rest of her skewer.

I stop. Frown.

“Have it,” she says. “I’m full, anyway.”

My mouth waters, but I pull back. “That’s not enough,” I grunt. “Eat more.”

“You’re twice my size. ‘Enough’ is relative.”

My inner alpha won’t hear it. I hunted for omega. Provided for her. She’s going to eat it, all of it, if I have to feed her myself.

Growling, I grab the skewer and tear a chunk off the tip.

“Eat ,” I say.

Her features, normally so striking, turn all soft when she’s caught off guard. Slowly, tentatively, her lips close around my fingers.

At once, my cock thickens, blood racing downwards.

She chews. “How many times do I have to tell you?” Swallows. “I’m not a pup.”

I rip off another chunk. This time, she plucks it from my fingers, our hands brushing. Her scent swirls out, fruity undertones mixing in with the smoked meat. If I’m not careful, she's going to catch on to the rising tent in my lap.

“Must be hard,” she says.

Shit . She saw. “Huh?”

“Having a big appetite isn’t very convenient out in the wilds.”

Oh. I loose a breath. “Depends on the season.”

“Winter, then.”

My chest puffs up. “So far I’ve done alright.”

Three weeks ago, it was like pulling teeth to get her to accept anything from me. Now we’re eating meals together, sitting by the fire so close our shoulders are nearly touching. Maybe now would be a good time to ask.

“Not that I care—” strong start, jackass , “but what’s a scrawny little thing like you doing out here, picking mushrooms? I thought packs were meant to look after their omegas. And, y’know, feed them.”

Willow bristles. She turns her glare to the fireplace and doesn’t answer for several long moments.

“Maybe I don’t want to be looked after,” she says at last.

I scoff. “Yeah. No shit.”

“You have a problem with my hospitality? Door’s right over there.”

“Easy, bunny. I get it, alright? Family’s not a barrel of laughs for me, either.”

She hesitates, like she wants to ask, but is afraid where the conversation might lead.

“You said ... your parents died.”

“Not a real tragedy.”

“Brothers and sisters?”

“Two of each. All alphas.”

“That’s a big pack.”

“Yeah, well.” I twirl the empty skewer. “We weren’t much of a pack.”

Willow casts me a sideways glance. Fire twinkles on her lenses. “Is that why you left?”

I’m not sure how to answer. My reasons for leaving home seem so far away now. Maybe, if I wanted to go back, it’d feel different. But I’ve always belonged out in the wilds—even before I knew what that meant.

“I made life harder for them,” I say at last. “And we weren’t exactly well-off, so harder was, well, pretty damn hard.”

She tilts her head. “Harder how?”

I shrug. “Got into fights. Wouldn’t court anyone, no matter how much my parents wanted me to.”

“What? Why not?”

Really? She’s asking me that question—an omega in her prime, without a bond mark of her own?

Teeth clenched, I answer, “No-one interested me. All the omegas in my village were ... insipid.”

Willow laughs. “Wow.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

She stares at me, waiting, so I sigh.

“They didn’t want me any more than I wanted them. It was all a ploy to make their parents happy.” My lip curls. “I don’t want an omega who chooses me ’cause they’ve got no other choice.”

Willow seems taken aback, though I can’t pick why. She’s got to know what it’s like when alphas and omegas come of age—the lengths their families will go to court them off. Or maybe it’s that she knows this all-too-well.

She says, “I think I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“You could’ve claimed me. Could’ve done just about anything you wanted.” She looks up. “But you didn’t.”

Christ, is that what she’s been so worried about? I knew she was twitchy—what omega wouldn’t be, alone, way out here?—but those are some next-level trust issues.

Who hurt you? I want to snarl, probably for the hundredth time.

This omega wasn’t chased out of her village. That much is obvious. She chose this path, which means, somehow, the risk of being alone in the wilds was preferable to whatever’s waiting for her back home.

“No matter what I look like,” I rumble, “or how I smell, I’m not some damn animal.” My eyes flash. “So quit treating me like one.”

I half-expect her to snap at me. Maybe I want her to. Instead, she sits back, like she's taking me in with fresh eyes.

“Yeah,” she concludes, “okay.”

“ Okay ?”

She quirks a brow. “You want a trophy for not mounting me?”

You would, too, if you knew the restraint it takes.

I shove my inner alpha down, turning away so she doesn't see my blush.

That night, for the first time, Willow brings a pillow out to the fireplace.

Inviting me to stay.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

One of these days, something is going to fall into my hunting traps.

I've tried leaving out bait, but I guess not even the local rabbits are interested in soggy mushrooms.

Thankfully, Kane eats just about anything.

I walk along the river. My eyes aren't peeled quite so much these days. Kane is confident the bear that attacked me should be well and truly into hibernation by now. Apart from that, my biggest threat is—was—him.

The rogue alpha who, startlingly, is feeling less and less like a threat at all.

It's cold on the riverbank. I wrap my cloak tighter around myself, gripping my basket. The faster I walk, the warmer I'll get, but I can't afford to overlook anything. Not when food is so scarce.

I kneel down, examining a few brittle shoots. All of a sudden, I hear Randall's voice in my head—

“Not those, sweetheart.”

My hand stops. I take a breath, letting the memory back in.

My brothers and sisters run about, leaping over the stepping stones. I hang back with

my father on the bank.

“These old stems ...” Randall sighs. “Well, I suppose you could dry them. Thatch together a little basket.” He smiles at me. “But what good’s a basket in your nice, soft nest?”

Across the water, my second-oldest brother, Titus, calls, “You said the stems are good! Let’s bring some home. Mother can cook them for lunch.”

I look at my father with big, hopeful eyes.

Randall clucks his tongue. “That’s just the young shoots. You don’t want to eat them like this.” He plucks one out of the water to show me its hard, colorless root. “Now do you?”

In the end, I think I harvested a few reeds anyway. Nest or no nest, meal or no meal, the idea of taking something just for myself was enticing.

I add a few old reeds to my basket, my heart giving a bittersweet twinge.

I know I’ve been out too long when the sky deepens overhead.

My neck cranes, watching as sunlight melts through the trees. Damn. Kane will not be pleased.

Grunting, I pick up my bucket of water. Kane took the water-loading job on himself when we started sharing meals, but he never collects quite enough—on purpose, I suspect. Anything to weasel his way out of a bath.

Trudging through the forest, my breath comes out in short white puffs. For a moment, the world seems oddly soft. I'm exerting enough that the cold becomes sweet. I'm carrying enough shrubs to supplement a hearty dinner. The sky is clear, even as it falls.

Three weeks ago, I wasn't sure I'd survive the winter. And now, not only am I surviving, but I'm not alone.

Naturally, it is with this thought that I sense a change in the air.

It's subtle—a faint, leathery scent. Pulsing. Breathing. As if someone, not too long before me, walked through these very trees.

An alpha.

My stomach roils. That is not Kane's scent. It's too clean. Did this alpha want me to know they're here? Are they close by?

Run, my inner omega chirps.

I abandon the bucket, racing through the trees as fast as my legs will take me. When I trip and graze my palms, I don't even feel it. I just keep running.

Did my fathers send someone to find me ? Has the village expanded their search?

If I do get caught, I won't be returned to welcoming arms. I'll be punished. Scorned. Tossed to the shark-toothed sentries with their laughter and their laughter and their laughter and—

I burst out of the trees. It's hard to see through my tears. Hard to breathe past the rising bile in my throat.

The door flings open, a hulking Kane greeting me. “Where the hell—?” he starts, catching me as I crash into him.

“Someone—” I choke. “T—there’s someone—”

Kane snatches my wrists, examining my bloody palms. His crimson eyes flash murder. “Where?”

Shakily, I point back into the trees.

He growls. “Get inside. Block the door.”

Alpha, my inner omega cries.

“Now, omega,” he barks.

Just like that, I’m floating into the cabin, barely aware of my hands, legs, and shoulders as I shove the dresser in front of the door.

When I come to, I’m crouched in front of a bucket, throwing up. I feel dizzy with effort, though whether that’s from the puking, the redecorating, or all the running, I’m not sure.

Another alpha ... my stomach twists at the words. Does this mean they found me?

Somehow, I manage to stand long enough to find the knife on the kitchen bench. If it’s sharp enough to gut rodents, it’s sharp enough to gut an alpha.

I’m not going back, I tell myself, over and over. I’d sooner die.

And if dying means taking out a leather-scented alpha with me ... then so be it.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

My head lolls against my shoulder. I snap upright.

Thank god the fire is still burning—Kane must've set it up right before I arrived. Without, I'd be in complete, icy darkness. It's been over an hour since the sun went down. Maybe two.

Did Kane find something ? my inner omega frets. Is he gonna be okay?

A part of me entertains the idea of going after him. But then I remember his last command, his bark , and it retains enough power to keep me planted.

Still ... if he is hurt, or if that leather-scented alpha got the best of him ...

Stand up, Willow, I order myself. But not even my angriest inner voice can override Kane's command.

Movement outside tears me from my thoughts. I grip the knife impossibly tighter, backing up against the wall.

Knock! Knock!

I can't help the chirp that escapes my throat.

“ Omega! It's me.”

Relief crashes over me. Kane. I go to stand, to unblock the door, only for my knees to cave in. The door groans, the dresser in front of it scraping against the floorboards, as Kane shoulders his way in.

“Christ, bunny.” He grunts. “You look like death.”

My inner omega lights up, overjoyed to see he’s okay. She tells me to reach out, let him hold me, scent me. Maybe Kane can hear her, as he stalks toward me, his pheromones sweetening, comforting—

“You’re ours now, princess.”

I freeze. Kane stops.

He looks down, marking the knife still clutched in my hands. There’s a beat of silence between us.

“That for me?” he monotones.

His face ... those sharp, concerned eyes ... it keeps blurring out of focus. Replaced by something, someone, I can’t ever un-see.

Slowly, he approaches, crouching in front of me. He gently pries the knife from my fingers and casts it aside. My whole body slackens, like I’ve just shrugged off a massive weight.

“The alpha,” I whisper hoarsely. “Were they ...?”

“Gone.” He rises to grab a bit of cloth, dunking it in the water over the fire, before returning to me. “Lost him over the river.”

“Him?”

He cleans off my bloody palms, checking my face when I hiss. “Yeah. Recognized the scent.”

How is that possible? Kane’s been alone out here for years, and he hasn’t exactly made friends in that time. The odds of him identifying a familiar scent has to be pretty damn low. Unless ...

“The other alpha,” I realize. “The one who chased you off your territory.”

His expression darkens. “He didn’t chase . We fought for it.”

“And you lost.” I feel sick again. “So why is he here?”

Kane shakes his head, cleaning me up some more. “I don’t know.” His pheromones thicken. “But I don’t like it.”

Not sure I can contain myself much longer, I glance at the bucket.

Kane follows my look. “You sick?”

I might blush, if I weren’t so queasy.

Finally, satisfied by the state of my hands, he lets me go. “You did the right thing, coming to get me.” For a second, his face softens. “I know I didn’t catch the bastard, but I swear, I’m not gonna let him near you.”

A part of me must believe him, my omega swept under his alpha’s spell, because I start to relax. Except ...

“You said he was strong,” I recall. “Stronger than you.”

Kane growls. “You doubting me, omega?”

I bite my cheek. Harsh as he is, the confidence is oddly reassuring.

This time, he doesn’t hesitate before helping me stand. I lean on him all the way to bed, where he peels back the covers and pointedly averts his gaze as I strip down to my underdress.

“You gotta eat something,” he grumbles.

I shake my head. “Not hungry.”

“Not an option, bunny.”

I wish I had the energy to roll my eyes.

Unfortunately, the charred fish he brings me twenty minutes later doesn’t work wonders on my appetite. He forces me to choke back a couple bites, then leaves me to my tea.

My inner omega panics. Don’t go, alpha.

He says, “I’ll be at the fire. And, uh ...” he scratches the back of his head. “I’m gonna stick around.”

I try not to show my relief, nodding blankly.

After he’s gone, I breathe deeply, drinking in his scent as it floats through the cabin. Sweet. Smoky. Like spice and embers.

I'm not safe. I know that.

But I'll take what I can get.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

So it's not just me she's scared of. I shouldn't take comfort in that, but fuck it, I do.

There's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight. Not with another alpha on my territory. An alpha who threatened my omega. Got her hurt.

I should've come back to the cabin sooner. I knew damn well the other rogue wasn't going to show himself. And yet, I tore up half the damn mountain.

Leaving Willow all alone.

The way I found her, curled up, with that knife in her hands ... I almost wanted to let her slash me. I'd have let her do damn near anything to feel safe again.

Realizing I'm sweating, I untie my cloak. I'd have doused the fire by now if not for Willow, shivering in the other room. Where did she come from to have such thin skin—frozen to the bone the second winter kicks in? Maybe she was some kind of a princess. She's sure pretty enough.

For hours, the cabin is still. I keep my senses peeled, scanning the windows at every gust of wind.

Noise from the bedroom draws my attention. I glare into the doorway, trying to catch a glimpse of the sleeping omega, but her blankets are pulled all the way up to her face. She twists around so frantically I almost think she's awake, whimpering quietly.

I charge into the room without thinking. “Hey. Omega.”

Willow’s breathing shortens. “Stop,” she chokes. “P—please.”

It’s only as she starts to cry, sobs wracking her pale, shuddering body, that I realize she’s not talking to me.

I lower myself to the mattress. “ Willow .”

Her breath catches, and I think she’s about to startle upright, when instead she loses a short, hoarse scream. My heart jolts.

“Omega!” I seize her shoulders. “Hey—I’m here. I’m right here.”

Gasping, she jerks awake. I help her sit up, willing to do anything if it means keeping my hands on her body.

“Breathe,” I order, rubbing between her shoulder blades.

Tears course down her cheeks. I use my free hand to brush them away, unable to resist how perfectly her jaw fits my palm. Her lips are soft and drained of color. She stares into me like she can’t believe I’m here.

Then her face softens.

With a muffled chirp, she throws herself into my chest.

I’ve never given my inner alpha the reins so fast. That deep, animal part of me takes charge, drawing her into me as naturally as breath. I wrap my arms around her waist. Tuck my chin over her head. The more covered she is, the safer she’ll be.

“That’s it,” I rumble, “you’re okay now.”

A note of honey twirls through the fog. She’s coming back to me. Slowly.

I run my hand down her spine, fingers catching in her tussled curls. Even stiff and shivering, she’s so ... soft .

“Shh,” I murmur. “I’ve got you.”

To my surprise, her head grazes my throat, nodding. My pulse jumps, realizing how easy it would be to scent her right now.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers.

I start. “What the hell are you sorry for?”

She bristles slightly, so I pump out more soothing pheromones. Don’t snap, jackass. She’s scared enough as it is.

“You ...” she croaks. “You weren’t meant to see me like this.”

What’s that got to do with anything? Does she think I’m going to use this against her somehow?

“I knew you had nightmares,” I choose my words more carefully. “Just didn’t think they got this bad.”

She cranes her neck. “You knew?”

God, those eyes. Still all puffy and raw with tears—they shouldn’t be so damn pretty.

I clear my throat. “Heard you sleep-talk a couple times. Didn’t sound very peaceful.”

She blushes faintly. “Oh.”

We sit together in silence once more. Every now and again, Willow snuffles, but she’s calmer than she was. No more tears.

And she has to be crying before you give a damn? my inner alpha demands.

The question burns in the back of my throat, urging me to fucking ask already. But I also know the risk. She could send me out. Force me to let go of her, maybe for good. I’m not sure my inner alpha can handle that right now.

Cautiously, I prompt, “Is it ... ’cause of the other alpha?”

Willow shudders. I don’t dare move a muscle.

Quietly, she answers, “Probably.”

I have to suppress a growl. Every time I pry, even a little, she shuts down. I’m not sure why I expected anything different. Maybe because I’m in her bed, my inner alpha snarling at me to hold her tighter.

Then, to my surprise, she goes on, “I really thought he was here for me. I know that must sound stupid.”

“It doesn’t,” I blurt out. “We get plenty of alphas poking around, looking for a mate. Normally means they’re in rut.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

I go quiet again, giving her a chance to explain. Willow takes a breath.

“There are people—” she swallows, “looking for me.”

I scowl, my protective instincts flaring. “What people?”

“My pack. My fathers.”

Her fathers. My heart pounds, already hungry to know more. “Hang on.” I recall my earlier idea. “Don’t tell me you’re actually royalty or something?”

Her laugh is as sweet as it is shocking. “Royalty?”

“Just answer the damn question.”

“No. Not royalty.”

“Alright.” I try not to blush. “The fuck do they want you for, then?”

She hesitates, her scent souring. “That’s a long story.”

“Yeah, well ...” I tighten my hold around her waist. “Night’s still young.”

Not exactly subtle. Then, I never was the subtle type.

I lengthen my breaths. The slightest hitch, and she’ll feel it. She deserves calm right now. Someone who’ll hear her, and protect her, no matter what she says.

“Okay,” she whispers.

I stop breathing altogether. “Okay, what?”

There's something certain about her pheromones—like honey left out in the cold, drying, hardening.

“Okay,” she says, “I’ll tell you about my pack.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

“Pack Shire isn’t royalty, though I guess we’re not too far off.” I consider. “Byron has a seat on the council, which technically makes us nobility.”

Already I sense Kane wanting to interrupt—probably to ask who the hell Byron is—but to his credit, he stays quiet.

I sit up straighter, my back pressed to his chest. When I tried to push him away, he growled, and my inner omega whined, so we settled on this: me, propped between his legs.

“My older siblings—three alphas, one omega—all received their posts when they came of age. That’s what happens when you’re born into a high-ranking pack. Your whole life is planned out before you can even walk.”

Kane’s chest rumbles. “And you? Guessing your big life plan wasn’t to live alone in the wilds.”

I laugh once, humorlessly. “You’d be guessing correctly.”

Once again, he goes quiet, giving me a chance to back out.

Tempting ... but no. I’ve made up my mind. Kane has been respectful of me, in his own way. And he has kept me alive, like he promised. He deserves to know who he’s protecting.

“Council, church, and sentinels. That’s how we were all assigned.” My throat turns dry. “My fathers said, once I turned twenty-three, I’d be expected to join the latter.”

“Hang on.” I sense Kane’s frown. “Omegas get to be sentries where you come from?”

“No.” For some reason my face turns hot. “They don’t.”

Get it together, Willow. What is there to be embarrassed about? That I didn’t realize how fucked up this ‘assignment’ was from the beginning? That I was willing to let them lock me up in the barracks, playing brood mother? It’s no accident I was so naïve.

“Mother made it out like some fantasy,” I mutter. “ You’ll never want for a pack, she told me. You’ll have all the doting alphas you could ask for .”

My stomach roils. I suddenly wonder about my sick bucket, left near the fireplace.

Kane shifts behind me. “I don’t get it.”

Of course you don’t. You’re an alpha.

Squashing down my bitterness, I explain, “The official position was ‘sentinel dam’. Basically a surrogate mother, meant to raise the next generation of warriors.” I shrug. “Some big initiative the council cooked up.”

Kane freezes. “The same council your dad is on?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Christ.” Disgust curdles his scent. “That’s ... Christ.”

“The premise was solid. I mean, an elite, well-bred squadron, literally born into the ranks? I’m not surprised it passed.”

“Are you defending him?”

“Of course not.” I have to stop myself, realizing how quickly I’ve fallen into old habits. The number of times Byron vouched for this, convincing me to lend my body to a noble cause ... what else could I do but believe him?

They’re laughing. And laughing. And laughing, and laughing, and laughing, and—

“Willow?”

Blinking, I find my fists clenched painfully in my lap. Kane must notice it too, as he gently unfurls my fingers, flattening my nail-printed palms against his.

“Next time you gotta grip something,” he growls, weaving his fingers through mine, “grip me.”

My heart skips a beat. Is this big mean alpha really holding my hand right now?

“Mother said they’d be kind,” I get out, “and strong. It was years before the penny dropped.” I hesitate. “Actually, it was three months ago.”

Kane is quiet. His hands are big and rough and warm.

“My fathers wouldn’t let me tour the barracks. Not even once.” I shake my head. “Looking back, I’m sure they guessed what would happen. A bunch of pent-up alphas in close quarters isn’t the safest place for a young omega.”

Already, I can feel Kane’s chest rumbling, his growl deepening.

“But I had to see it. Wanted to know where I’d be spending the next twenty, thirty years of my life. So I snuck in.” I squeeze his hands a little tighter. “I want to say it was the worst mistake I’ve ever made. But if I hadn’t ... that’s where I’d be now. Trapped. With them .”

“What happened?” Kane demands. “They hurt you?”

I glare into my lap, eyes burning. “ Hurt doesn’t come close to what they did to me.”

Pure, alpha fury erupts through the cabin—noxious and choking. For someone who is at least a little bit angry all of the time, I didn’t know Kane had this side to him.

A side that screams murder.

“Tell me,” he snarls.

Cautiously, I answer, “There’s not much more to tell. I went home, I grabbed a bag ... and I left.”

I hold my breath, expecting him to ask me why I didn’t confide in my family. Surely someone would’ve protected you ?

But instead, he asks, “Where’d those assholes touch you?” He turns me around, glaring my body up and down. “ Where ?”

“W—what? Why does that matter?”

“‘Cause I need to know how many pieces to rip ’em into.”

My blood runs cold. “Kane.”

“Did they—” he stops himself. “Was it ...?”

I understand then what he’s asking. Those piercing crimson eyes aren’t just looking for scars. They’re searching my essence. Figuring out exactly what the sentries took from me that day.

I don’t have the strength to speak, so I just nod. Once. Painfully.

Kane’s expression blackens. “ Fuck .”

Suddenly my head feels like an impossible weight. I look down, aching, remembering, trying not to cry.

Kane’s anger. His disgust. I’m drowning in it, dragged under a sea of potent alpha pheromones. I should’ve guessed he’d react this way. An unbonded omega without their ‘virtue’ is of no value to anyone. Until a few months ago, I was Pack Shire’s prime asset.

Now I’m just a whore.

“Shit,” Kane mutters. “Hey. Look at me.”

He takes my face in his hands, but I don’t lift my gaze.

“I’m ... sorry,” he bites out. “Not trying to scare you.”

I sniffle. “M not scared.”

“You think they’re gonna find you. Drag you back.”

“ I’m not going back .”

“Damn straight.” His lip curls. “This is my territory. As long as you’re here, no one fucking looks at you without going through me.”

Normally this is the part where I roll my eyes and remind him it was my territory first. But tonight ... I let my inner omega take the reins.

Slowly, I lean into his chest, relaxing as his scent starts to even out. He’s still pissed—that’s not going away—but his entire body pulses with warmth and spice and sweetness as soon as I get in close.

“I’m staying here,” he growls, pulling me closer. “Right fucking here.”

It’s not a request, but it’s not an order, either. I decide not to complicate things more than I have to, lying on top of him with the blanket pulled over us.

Sleeping soundly, safely, in my rogue alpha’s arms.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

By morning, the cabin is cold. The fire must've gone out while we were sleeping.

And yet, Willow is warm against me.

She sighs gently I pull her in closer. What I really want to do is scent her—make sure that bastard out in the forest, and everyone else, knows she's mine— but that'll have to wait.

No-one touches this omega without her permission.

My inner alpha seethes.

Never fucking again .

Willow spoke so softly last night, like she had something to be ashamed of. No matter how pissed off I get, I have to make sure I don't suffocate her with rage.

Which means all I can do is fantasize.

Imagining all the ways I'm gonna kill those piece-of-shit sentries.

No wonder she was scared of me. I knew omegas had it rough, but to come from—what— gang rape ? And then to run into me, a total stranger, alone in the wilds? Anyone else would've cut and run. Instead, she tested me. Then, slowly ... let me in.

Omega's strong, my inner alpha rumbles.

I wish to hell she didn't have to be.

I brush her hair off her shoulder. Honeyed, fruity goodness wafts up at me, making my inner alpha purr. I don't think I've purred for anyone before, but for her, I almost can't resist.

Suddenly Willow stirs. I tighten my arms around her. "Will? You up?"

She murmurs incoherently, turning her face into my chest.

Just as I think she's about to settle, she groans, drawing her legs up. Her body feels like a glowing, pulsing little furnace in my lap.

Ah shit. Not now.

The blood starts pumping through my veins, hotter and harder by the second. I try to shift, but it only lies her flatter. She groans again. Stretches.

Please tell me my rock-hard dick is not about to wake her up .

Sure enough, she stirs, breathing me in as her eyes flutter open. "Kane?"

Her voice is quiet and bleary and goddamn fucking adorable. Definitely not doing my restraint any favors.

"Yeah, bunny." I rub her back. "I'm here."

She hums. "Smell good."

“I do?” I didn’t even have one of her freezing baths last night.

She lifts her face, angling up at my neck. “Like ... cinnamon.”

Thank god she’s still so out of it, or she’d probably feel my heart flutter.

I don’t move, anticipating at any moment she’ll realize this isn’t a dream and tell me to get lost. Then again, after the moment we shared last night, with everything finally out in the open, maybe she won’t. She nuzzles me with hazy interest, almost like she’s trying to—

Holy shit.

Is she scenting me?

“Uh ...” heat explodes in my cheeks. “You good?”

I’m not even sure she hears me, rubbing her cheek across my collarbones. Her lips brush the exposed flesh, leaving goosebumps for every almost-kiss. My hard-on throbs painfully against her stomach.

What’re you waiting for? my inner alpha snaps. Scent her back!

Instincts blazing, I turn the flat of my wrist between her shoulder blades. She shudders as I pump out my scent, covering her up and down.

Fucking hell. Is this really happening?

Willow doesn’t let up. When I prop myself up for better leverage, she gives a low, broken whine.

I freeze. “Omega?”

Her breath hitches. “Where are you going?”

I growl, hoisting her in closer. Fucking nowhere.

My inner alpha preens. Omega’s scent is all over me. Now all I need is her bite to seal the deal. She chuffs, and I tense up, worried I’ve spoken aloud.

“What?” I ask. “Not enough?”

It’s only when I get a good look at her face that my curiosity peaks. Her glossy eyes, rosy cheeks, flushed lips ... fuck, I want to claim those lips. Kiss her so hard she’ll have no doubt who she belongs to.

“You’re sweating,” I realize, feeling her forehead.

She grumbles. “ You’re ... sweating.”

My eyes narrow. “And slurring your damn words.”

To this she has no comeback, blinking heavily.

Slowly, like rising out of a dream, the situation begins to dawn on me. I, an alpha, spent the night in an omega’s nest. She wakes up hot and fuzzy and fixated on my scent. No matter how much my inner alpha wants to roll with the punches, I can’t just ignore what’s happening.

Willow swivels around, yanking at the sheets, grumbling when she finds them stuck beneath our combined weight.

I draw her back to me, my cock twitching when she lands in my lap. “Hey—omega.”
I clear my throat. “I, uh, need you to focus.”

She glowers as if to say, I am focused.

My balls tighten. Is that the same glower she’d give me if I was buried deep inside of her—all fucked-out, determined to get her way?

“Can’t believe I’m saying this,” I mutter, “but something’s wrong. You’re not yourself.”

“Why? ’Cause I’m being nice?” She snorts. “You’ve gotta weird complex.”

You should put her over your knee, my alpha suggests. See how bratty she can be when she’s presenting for you.

“You’re hot,” I insist.

She snorts a second time.

“Dammit, omega. Feverish. ”

She squirms back around, giving me a perfect view of her ass in that thin, skimpy underdress. I bite back a groan, turning my hands into fists.

“What’re you doing?” I demand.

She leans forward, gathering more of the blankets. “Fixing it.”

“Fixing it—?” I freeze, heart thudding. “You mean nesting?”

Finally, she stills. Those mouth-watering pheromones soften.

“Alright.” I swallow. “You listening, now?”

Willow sits, retreating from her hands and knees, but doesn’t look at me when she nods.

“Good girl.” She shudders, making my cock lurch. “Listen, I don’t know if you’re keeping track of this shit, but looks to me like you’re going into—”

Suddenly she snaps around, daring me to finish my sentence.

“Don’t shoot the messenger, bunny. I’m just callin’ it like I see it.” Could’ve warned me your cycle was due, I almost add.

“You don’t know—the first thing—” she grits out, “about omegas.”

I pull back, stung. “I know a heat when I see one.”

I guess this was the wrong thing to say, as Willow hisses and untangles herself from the sheets. She stands over the side of the bed, glaring at me with those glassy, blown-out eyes, as she thrusts an arm at the door.

“Out,” she says, “n–now.”

My heart jolts. Not a fucking chance.

Slowly, I move to the edge of the bed, forcing my voice to soften. “Take it easy.”

“You take it easy!” she snaps. “Y–you lie with me for o–one night, and you think you know everything?”

“Yes,” I say before I can help it. “That’s exactly what I fucking think.” I stand, looming over her. “But it’s got nothing to do with last night.”

Her bottom lip quivers. She bites down to stop it. “I need to be alone.”

I knew this was coming. All morning, I’ve been bracing myself for it. But now I’ve realized what we’re up against, I can’t just leave. An omega going into heat is no small matter. She’ll be defenseless. Nest-ridden.

Not to mention in a whole lot of pain.

I don’t hear myself growling until Willow bristles. She backs up.

“Willow,” I say, pained, “c’mon. Don’t do this.”

I notice then how badly she’s shaking. My inner alpha screams at me to steady her, almost forgetting that I’m the one making her unsteady right now.

Swallowing back the rising tide of primal instinct, I say, “I’m not gonna hurt you. Just let me help.”

I step closer, putting a hand on her trembling waist. Then another. Her breaths tighten, and the next time she looks at me ... it’s like she has no goddamn idea who I am.

I try to purr—too late. She thrashes out of my arms and stumbles around to the other side of the bed, using it as a barrier between us.

“Out,” she half-demands, half-begs.

Fuck, I can really smell it now. She’s cock-stirringly sweet, getting sweeter by the

second, so much that it overrides the bitter notes of fear. It's not pure heat, but it's not too far off.

Do not fucking leave her , my inner alpha seethes.

Then I remember everything she told me last night. Her fathers. The sentinels . If I stay ... I know what will happen. I won't be able to control my alpha.

Fighting against every impulse in my body, screaming at me to hold omega, put her back in her nest, take care of her and, sure, fuck a couple pups into her—I back away towards the door

“I won't be far,” I bite out. “You just chirp, and I'll be here.”

She's already turned away. I don't even know if she heard me.

So I step out, step after agonizing step, giving her the space she needs.

And I plant myself outside her front door, snarling, as I palm at the excruciating bulge in my pants.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

No matter how far Kane goes, I can smell him. Every breath is like a hot wave rolling over me. Every reminder of him is agony.

I'm too early.

My last heat, in the village—it happened right before the attack. I know this because those monsters swore they could still smell it on me.

And it only turned them more feral.

My heats have always been intense. Mother insisted this was a badge of honor, proving my fertility. Her pride was almost enough to take away from the excruciating, cramping pain, as slick drenched my inner thighs and my body caught fire.

For the first time since I left, I'm stuck by her absence. And Alfie's. Without them to help me through this, I ... I ...

My stomach lurches.

I might actually die.

At first, I can tell when Kane is nearby—normally to leave food and water outside my

door. I never find the strength to take it, so maybe he gives up.

Or, more likely, I'm not lucid enough to tell the difference.

I don't even care if he hears me anymore, groaning and whining as I twist in the sheets. Where the hell is Kane's cloak ? my hazy brain asks, close followed by my inner omega's demand— Where is Kane ?

I'm lucky when sleep takes me, then exceptionally unlucky when it wakes me back up. Every time I open my eyes, it somehow hurts a little more.

Maybe it's hours, maybe it's days, before I'm aware of Kane again. Someone knocks at the door—the noise a hundred rooms away—until I hear his voice, and it's like he's standing right in front of me.

“ Omega!” he calls. “ You've gotta let me in. ”

I try to whine, but my throat is too hoarse.

“ You need to eat. Or at least drink.”

Eat ... drink. That's right. He's been leaving offerings at my door. Back when I was still aware of hunger and thirst as separate entities from the pain, I considered getting up to grab them. Now I can't fathom it.

“ Let me help you,” he says—no, begs. “I'll close my eyes and block my fucking nose if that's what it takes.” He takes a breath. “ I won't touch you.”

My inner omega is almost outraged. Alpha would dare come in here, during my heat, and not devour me?

I'm not sure what convinces me more: that I really truly might die if I don't let him in, or that when I see him ... this pain might end. Maybe he'll claim me. Make me whole. No matter how much my brain screams at me not to give up, my body knows what it'll take to survive this.

Aren't I a survivor?

Finally, I chirp. It's enough for Kane, who barges in, his scent billowing forth. Fire ignites in my stomach. Slick pours out of me like molten lava.

Alpha smells so good ...

I hear him rummaging around the fireplace, muttering under his breath. When he finally peers his head into the bedroom, he's got his cloak pulled up to his nose.

I feel his eyes first. Searing. Hungry. He prowls closer, arousal thick in his pheromones.

"Here." He holds up a mug, waiting for me to accept.

Just like that, I'm aware of my body again. I tore my dress off—I don't even know how long ago. My hair feels tangled. The sheets are drenched.

I can't see much of Kane's face above the cloak, but those crimson eyes are pained as he offers the mug again. "Omega," he grits out, "drink. "

I try to sit up, feeling even weaker now he's here—my inner omega giving me every reason she can think of to submit. I make it to my elbows before something gives out. Suddenly I'm staring up at the crooked ceiling, breathing hard.

"Shit," Kane mutters.

Want him, my omega sobs. Want him want him want him.

“Alright,” he exhales. “Bear with me.”

Before I can wonder what he’s talking about, I feel hands on me, sitting me up. My blood sings. He’s so strong. So steady. I want him to touch me more—harder, lower .

He brings the mug to my lips. I take a couple sips, then cough. Cursing, he pats between my shoulder blades. “Too fast?”

Oh god, his hands. More. More. More!

“No,” I whisper—not sure if I’m talking to him or myself.

We go again, between sips of water and small bites of fish. My body groans at me to just accept him . He’s already feeding me, literally, out of the palm of his hand. Would it really be such a leap to have him fuck me, too?

“Fucking hell,” Kane rumbles, adjusting himself.

I’m past the point of being embarrassed. I know he can smell me—my slick, my desire, my every blood cell screaming out for him to please, god, slam his knot all the way inside.

Unable to take another bite, I turn away. The sheets are a disheveled mess, making it impossible to settle.

“Omega,” Kane says. His voice, the vibrations—I swear I can feel it all the way down to my clit. “Tell me what you need.”

I need him . Need him to stay. Or to get away, quickly.

Our eyes meet. His tortured expression softens. Rising, he says, “You can, uh, kill me for this later.”

With that, he gathers my body like it weighs nothing, sweeping me into a princess carry.

“Easy, bunny. It’ll be over in a second.”

I don’t see what he’s doing, too busy shoving my face into his half-cloaked chest. How far would my hand need to wander before it found his cock? How tight would I need to hold on before he thrust it inside me?

He puts me down too soon. I almost claw at him to keep me longer when I realize ... the sheets are fixed.

“Better?”

Hazily, I look up. Kane is flushed and breathing hard. No longer covering his nose. Hands fisted at his sides. Tent bulging out of his pants.

My core clenches painfully.

I open my mouth to say something— yes, alpha , or please fuck me, alpha— when it happens. Kane standing there, above me ... and his face isn’t what it should be. He’s staring down, overpowering in every sense of the word, and all I can think is—

“ You’re ours now, princess.”

Fuck.

I shrink, sharply aware of my nakedness. He could claim me right now and take all

the pain away. But what would be left?

An empty vessel. Only good for fucking.

I curl into the sheets. I didn't run away from my fate just to find it again. I refuse.

“Omega ...” Kane's voice is both too close and too far away. “Shit, I can't—”

His broken snarl sends a shiver down my spine. I feel him closing in, and in, until I'm certain he's about to pounce on me. I know he wants to—those pheromones never lie. My muscles tense with dread. My pussy throbs with excitement.

And then I hear a door slam.

My head shoots up. My heart drops.

Kane is gone.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Mount omega. Fuck her. Breed her. Show the whole mountain she's yours.

My inner alpha has been reciting the same shit for days. Just when I think I've got my control back, I catch another whiff of Willow's syrupy heat pheromones.

I've been hard for three fucking days.

Leaving her nest was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But if I had stayed even a second longer, I know what would've happened. I saw the way she looked at me before I tore myself away, her eyes blown wide with terror. She knew it, too.

How can I expect her to trust me if I'm no better than the animals she's running from?

I tear through the forest, hunting for our next meal. Maybe if I can cook something that doesn't taste of dirt, she'll be more inclined to eat.

Assuming I can get through that door without instantly breeding her full of my pups.

I shake the thought out of my head. After everything she's been through, breeding is the last fucking thing I should be thinking of.

No it's not, my alpha retorts. She's an omega. You're an alpha. This is what you're made for.

Right now, what I'm made for is making sure my omega doesn't starve.

I slaughter the first thing I can find. How long have I been gone? Too long, probably. Not that I'm eager to go back to being tortured by Willow's scent, but I also can't stand being this far away.

I haul my kill—a rabbit—back the way I came. It's getting dark, marking the end of Willow's third day in heat. Gritting my teeth, I'm so focused trying not to breathe through my nose that I don't notice it until too late.

A growl escapes me.

Standing not ten yards outside the cabin, an enormous, breast-plated alpha with a sword at his hilt glares at the door. He stalks forward, slowly, before his amber eyes snap on to me.

I know those eyes.

It's him—the mountain of an alpha who ran me off my territory only weeks ago. I wasn't strong enough to take him then, or fast enough to track him down the other night.

But right now, I'm pissed enough to wring his fucking neck.

I drop the rabbit and tear my cloak off right before I charge. I aim low, tacking his waist.

He must be thrown off guard by Willow's scent, because he stumbles, almost losing his footing.

Almost.

“It’s you,” he remarks, his voice as deep and aggravating as I remember. “I should’ve guessed.”

Growling, I come at him again. He’s ready this time, swatting me with ease.

“Don’t tell me—” he swerves to avoid my fist, “—you’ve turned feral?”

I growl louder, throwing all my bloodlust into another blow. My knuckles clip his waist, finding that perfect spot where armor betrays flesh.

Harder, my inner alpha roars. Bastard’s good as dead for getting this close to my omega.

“No,” he muses, “not feral—or you’d already be inside.”

“You stay the fuck away from her,” I snarl.

He tilts his head. “So it’s a her.”

My vision turns a hot, dark red. I launch at him again, whipping out my dagger.

The alpha’s hand goes to his sword. “I thought you preferred a fair fight.”

It takes me a moment to register his meaning. Territory disputes are a part of the rogue’s natural order. Courting disputes, too. No weapons but our bodies. I insisted on it, once upon a time. But now I’ve got an omega on the line?

I’ll fight as dirty as it takes.

He whacks the dagger from my grip and grabs me by the throat. I claw at him, and he chokes me tighter. His nose crinkles. Something like surprise flashes across those

amber eyes.

“You haven’t knotted her.” His gaze darkens. “Are you completely insane?”

I don’t want to hear this fucker talk about Willow and knotting in the same sentence ever again. The extra rage gives me strength, launching a foot directly into his sternum. Even through the breastplate, he’s winded—letting me go.

Coughing for air, I follow up with a low sweep, trying to get him on his knees.

“Stand down,” he orders.

I grin. “Now you’re scared?”

“You and me need to talk.”

Fuck that . I charge, edging for a right hook. He grabs the scruff of my neck and throws me aside. This time I can’t catch myself, tumbling into the dirt. I raise my head, braced to spring back up, when a cold metal tip catches my chin.

Ah, shit.

The alpha stares me down, his sword pointed at my throat.

My adrenaline surges. Think, Kane. How bad can I hurt him before he kills me? Enough to make sure he doesn’t have enough blood left in his body to go after my omega?

Omega, my inner alpha groans. Protect ... omega ...

“Good.” The alpha smiles. “Now I have your attention.”

I bare my teeth. “I’ll die before I let you touch her.”

“Some one has to.”

No. The whole point of this is that no-one gets to have her—not even me. She’s been hurt too badly. If I’m the one who hurts her again, I’ll never forgive myself. And if he does ... I’ll have no choice but to hack his arrogant dick off.

“Tell me, rogue.” The alpha examines me. “Are you impotent, or just stupid? Your answer will determine how quickly I kill you.”

Instinctively, I start to rise. His blade kisses my neck.

“You don’t know shit,” I bite out, “about me.”

“You haven’t knotted her,” he says again, slower. “Which makes you either exceptionally naive, or exceptionally cruel.”

The way this alpha speaks, his voice rich with command, reminds me how out of place he is. The wilds don’t suit him. Not his fancy gear, or his fancy words.

“This is my territory,” I snap. “As long as she’s here, she’s under my protection.”

He sighs. “Stupid, then.”

“The fuck did you—?”

He points the blade in deeper, drawing blood. “An omega in heat faces three possible outcomes. One, they rely on other omegas—family, normally—while they wait it out. Two, and far preferable, they find a suitable mate.” He shrugs. “Judging on your erection, you already know how that goes.”

I fight the urge to adjust my cock, which is, somehow, still hard.

“And the third?” I demand.

He waits another beat. Eyes me closely. “They die.”

No. He’s bluffing. Trying to throw me off guard. But then, why would he bother? I’m already on my knees.

“As I thought,” the alpha mutters, withdrawing his sword.

This is your chance , my inner alpha calls, urging me to my feet. But the other alpha only watches, disinterested, as I rise, like I’m nothing more than a nuisance.

“You’re saying ...” I swallow, my throat raw, “she’s dying?”

“Slowly. Painfully.”

“I’ve been feeding her, you jackass. Making sure she drinks.”

“Starvation, dehydration—those are just side-effects.” He glowers. “What she needs is a cure.”

“So you’re gonna cure her with your magic knot?” I scoff. “You’re lucky I don’t rip your throat out.”

“You’re lucky I don’t let you try. Without a knot, that omega in there is going to die. And you’re skulking around out here, letting it happen.”

I go quiet, studying him up and down. What do I actually know about this guy? He’s strong, sure. Well-equipped, and clearly capable. There’s a refinement about him that

almost reminds me of Willow. Smart. Sharp. Composed.

On her, it's a turn-on. On him ...

"You think you're better than me," I growl.

"I am better than you," he returns, simply.

"Why? 'Cause you're gonna force yourself on some omega you've never met?"

"Because I'd save her, no matter the cost." He glares. "Can you say the same?"

Big words from someone who doesn't know jack shit about the cost . He didn't see her the other night, crying in her sleep, pale and shivering as she explained to me what she's running from. Everything she left behind, everything she's risked—all so she could be free.

"You said she's under your protection," the alpha continues. "That means nothing if you can't even keep her alive."

That parting image of Willow still haunts me. The way she looked up from her nest, her eyes wide, like I was going to rip her apart. If she looks at me that way again while I'm knotted deep inside of her ... whatever we have now, whatever we could have, will shatter.

I can't lose her. Not like this.

But I also can't let her die.

Fuck, my inner alpha rumbles, sensing where this is going. Don't do it. Don't you fucking dare!

Slowly, my shoulders slacken.

I don't have another choice.

I stare at the alpha, who is now watching my every move, and will the blood rushing in my ears to drown out what I say to him next.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Pain— twisting, tying me up inside, the cramping tension only growing tighter.

I've prayed for death, almost as much as I've prayed for a knot. Anything to make it stop.

At some point I must've thrown the sheets clean off the bed. It's impossible to tell if I'm hot or cold. My body screams like an open blister—every wave of sweat just adding salt to the wound.

How does this torture compare to what the sentinels did to me? They beat me. Defiled me. I was still limping when I ran away—convinced my very insides had shifted irreparably.

I'd let them do it again. I'd let them do it ten more times, if it meant this would end.

I don't even have the energy left to hate myself.

Another cramp tightens around my stomach. Another wave of slick trickles between my thighs. I scream into the pillow.

I want to smack myself for sending Kane away. He could've saved me, if I wasn't such a fucking coward. It would've cost me my hard-fought freedom, but what good is freedom if I'm not alive to see it?

Another cramp, tighter still. Agony sets my muscles alight, my lungs clenching

aimlessly, and my vision starts to—

“Willow. Willow!”

Tears stream down my cheeks. “I can’t, Alfie. Please. M—make it stop.”

My brother smooths back my sweat-soaked hair. “Just breathe. Mother’s on her way.”

He helps me upstairs, draping my arm over his shoulders. I knew my heat was coming, but I was sure it’d be another year—maybe even two. My nest isn’t ready. Mother isn’t here. And there aren’t enough ice baths in the world to distract from my new instincts.

“Alpha,” I whine, “I ... need an alpha.”

Alfie huffs. “You know we can’t do that, Will.”

Why not ? my inner omega cries.

Though, of course, I already know the answer: I’m not old enough to take a mate. My integrity is too precious to even be alone with an alpha outside my immediate pack. But now that I’m here, writhing, aching ... I don’t know how I’ll cope.

Alfie sets me up in my unsatisfactory nest and darts about, returning with a cool flannel and pitcher of water.

“I know it hurts,” he soothes, “my first time was the same. But I promise, everything’s going to be okay.” He takes my hand. “You’ll never be alone.”

My eyes are watering when another cramp forces me awake. My brother’s words

echo in my head.

You promised, I want to cry.

I wonder where he is right now. Is he worried about me? Does he know I ran away?
Does he ... hate me for it?

Even if I tried to go back now, there's no guarantee Pack Shire would accept me. I doubt even the sentinels would take me in. No matter where I go, or what I do now ... I'm stranded.

Kane , my inner omega tries to remind me. He's still ... out there .

Maybe he'll come back. Maybe, this time, I'll be too broken to refuse him.

But maybe, if he claims me now, I'll be broken forever.

It feels like I'm drowning. I don't know what to do, or how to do it—if I even have that power. The only thing I still know for sure is this.

I don't want to die.

Suddenly, I sense a shift in the cabin. My inner omega registers the flood of pheromones. A chirp bursts free my hoarse throat.

Alpha .

His scent washes over me like a balm, or like a chill—leather, and sweat.

I try to sit up, my heart pounding out of my chest, and that's when I see him standing there.

Black, cropped hair. Amber eyes. A body so enormous he barely fits in the door.

“Omega,” he rumbles, sending a shiver up my spine. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Silas.”

He smiles, and I forget how to breathe.

“I’m here to take care of you.”

Silas

Three months ago

“Chief. There’s been an ... incident.”

I turn, brow quirked. “One of the newborns?” It’s not uncommon for ‘incidents’ in the first couple weeks after birth. We help the mothers adjust as best we can, but without a traditional pack, their instincts can get scrambled.

My assistant, Friedan, struggles to hold my gaze. “Yes. And her mother.”

“Leave the nest ID and I’ll see to them shortly.”

“I—I’m afraid there’s not much to see.” Friedan swallows. “The sires checked in this morning. It was ... they were ...”

I know then what he’s trying to tell me. At least, my stomach does, as it sinks all the way down to my toes.

“They were what?” I demand.

Friedan’s expression is pained. “I don’t know how it happened. The sires were supposed to check in every morning—that’s part of the contract. We made sure of it.”

“I’m well aware of the sires’ contracts,” I growl. “Tell me what happened .”

My assistant suddenly seems so small. It's one of the reasons I hired him—for an alpha, he's relatively unassuming. Helps put the nervous omegas at ease.

But not this omega. Or her pup.

“Who were her sires?” I ask, my voice low.

“As far as we can tell, the cause of d—” he stops, looking sick. “It was neglect.”

Rage surges through my blood. “You say that as though no-one was responsible.”

“Well ... no-one touched her, or the pup.”

“Yes.” I stand. “Which is precisely what killed them. Isn't that what you're saying?”

New mothers, and their pups, need a pack. That's what makes life in the barracks so delicate, and why we insist the sires check in every morning—to scent them, nourish them, make sure they have everything they need.

Any sire who fails those duties has to be unimaginably cruel. Or, worse, murderous .

“I need names and ranks,” I snarl. “I'll see them exiled for this.”

Friedan nods, though I catch the flicker of doubt in his eyes.

Like already, he knows it's not going to be that simple.

“Come now, Silas. It's time to get back on the horse.”

I knew, when my commanding officer called me into his study, I wouldn't appreciate anything he had to say. And yet ... here I am. Here I've stayed , after months of disgust and disappointment.

My faith is the only thing that's kept me going. Faith that those monsters who called themselves sentinels would be punished for their crimes.

"Silas," my commander says, firmer now. "What did you expect? Sires are always less attentive with their omega pups."

Two people are dead . We're supposed to be protecting these omegas. Whatever the mother's condition, and whatever her pup's designation, we are responsible. And what do those murderers get for their attentiveness ?

A mere slap on the wrist and a month's suspension.

"I have an assignment for you," the commander announces. "Off-site. Thought it'd give you a chance to clear your head."

Once upon a time, I admired this alpha's cut-throat direction. Told myself it's what made him a strong leader. But now I see him for what he is.

A goddamn coward.

If word gets out, how many families do you think will entrust us with their omegas? We need sentinels—strong, hot-blooded alphas bred to fight—which means we need mothers. That's the bottom line.

These days, that line is looking more like a steep ledge and a long fall.

"New mother." The commander slaps down a file. "She was meant to join the west

barracks two months ago, but she disappeared. Family's beside themselves—insist she's been kidnapped. They think it's got something to do with Northside."

A bit of a stretch. Why would an enemy village go to such obscure lengths just to provoke us? Surely there are simpler ways to undermine Southside's council.

I scowl. "They get a ransom letter?"

"They did not."

I rub my forehead. "Have her sires been assigned?"

"Not as yet."

"Then she's not our problem."

The commander bristles. "Perhaps I should've mentioned—her family is Pack Shire."

"Never heard of them."

A bad lie. Even low-ranking sentinels know of the illustrious Pack Shire. Their head alpha, Byron, is a key player on the council. He also happens to be one of the sentinels' primary benefactors.

"Well," the commander goes on, annoyed, "trust me when I say, she is a very valuable asset. In more ways than one."

I try not to sigh. "So you want me to find her."

"Who better for the job?"

“Commander.” I fold my arms. “If there’s no ransom letter, she hasn’t been kidnapped.” I hold his gaze. “She’s a runaway.”

“You try telling that to Byron Shire. Though, unless you want to be out of a job, I suggest you do it after you’ve caught her.”

The moment my hand takes her file, I know the conversation is over. Whether this mission is as important as he says it is, or if he just wants me out of his hair, I’m not sure. Nor am I sure I care.

The air is thin and crisp as I walk back to my quarters. Every step feels a little lighter, like I’m sloughing off parts of myself—hard-fought, deeply embodied principles—with every step. Everything I am, or thought I was, just falls away, replaced by one fundamental truth:

I refuse to serve among murderers.

A line of sentinels march past me, nodding in deference. I nod back, hardly seeing them.

Yes, Silas . Play the part. Take my orders, and give them, as if I’ve come to accept my place in all this. And then, as soon as I see my opening—

“Chief!” a familiar voice calls.

Friedan jogs across the training grounds. I say nothing, letting him catch his breath.

“Your meeting with the commander,” he pants, “how’d it go?”

Suddenly remembering the file in my hands, I glance down. “I have a new assignment.”

Friedan peers over the page. “Is that Pack Shire’s omega? The one who’s missing?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I—I thought everyone knew. The search parties are still making their rounds.”

I rifle through the omega’s records. For all her listed qualifiers—regular heats, five-foot-five, docile—I struggle to pick out a name. Finally, on the very last page, I find a copy of her birth certificate.

“Willow,” I murmur.

“That’s right,” Friedan nods. “Willow Shire.”

I close the file. “I’ll leave first thing tomorrow.” The sooner the better.

“Of course. Do you need back-up?”

As things stand, I’ll have at least a couple days before anyone suspects foul play. Another day after that before the commander sends someone to come find me, assuming he sends anyone at all. My desertion may be one embarrassment too many. Certainly harder to cover up.

“No,” I say at last, suppressing a smirk. “I’ll handle this one on my own.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

Now

It's everywhere. In every single breath I take.

An omega in heat.

During my five years as chief of recruitment, I've supervised a lot of heat cycles. Adopting fertile omegas into our ranks was only one part of the job. The second part was making sure they had all the nourishment, nests, and knots they needed.

I venture into the cabin. White-hot instinct pumps through me.

I can hear her .

I stare at the single bed, my cock throbbing. Long auburn hair splays out across the pillow. Soft pink flesh gleams with sweat. She smells of berries and honey.

She manages to prop herself up, her glazed green eyes locking on to me.

Fuck, my inner alpha grunts, she's gorgeous.

"Omega," I announce myself. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Silas."

Formalities can wait, my inner alpha rages. Omega needs to be knotted. Right. Fucking. Now.

I go on, “I’m here to take care of you.”

Her features pinch together, like she’s not quite sure if I’m real.

“I know you’re confused,” I tell her, “but I assure you, this is for your own safety.”

Still she says nothing. I fight the urge to slip into her nest—slip into her —before I’ve even undressed. For all my experience with heats, I can barely control myself. My pheromones surge toward her, determined to mark her as her mine as I wrap her around my knot.

“Sweet omega,” I purr. “May I enter your nest?”

Her scent bitters. She grips the sheets.

“Apologies.” I hang back—best she doesn’t see my raging erection until after we’re on a first-name basis. “What should I call you, little one?”

“K–Kane.”

I frown. Kane ?

“Where’s ...” she swallows, “ Kane ?”

She must mean the rogue I dealt with outside. I could retrieve him for her, though the idea makes my inner alpha grumble.

“He’s nearby,” I answer at last.

Her glare sharpens. I don’t need to be an expert in omegas to know what it means.

“Alright.” I grit my teeth. “Listen to me closely, omega. I can’t leave you while you’re in this state—” unlike certain others, “— so if you want Kane, you’ll need to chirp for him. Do you understand?”

I’m surprised how quickly she answers—a short, desperate noise in the back of her throat.

“Good girl.” I stroke her hair. “So brave.”

Her eyes water. “Brave?”

That’s my opening . I inch closer, cupping her cheek in my hand. “Very brave.”

I mean it. To be out here, with no-one but that barbarian thug to rely on, for days of agonizing heat ... this omega is a survivor.

It makes me want to mount her all the more.

Just as I unhook my belt, there’s a loud bang at the front door. I barely look up as the rogue— Kane— storms in.

“Alpha,” the omega breathes. “Alpha?”

He growls. “I’m here, omega.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobs. “I–I don’t want to die.”

Kane casts me a look. The told-you-so in my glare must be sufficiently convincing.

“You’re not gonna die,” he asserts, crawling over her. “I’m gonna take care of you.”

At that, the omega's eyes flick to mine, no doubt reminded of my own words. Kane captures her attention with a devouring kiss. She gasps, arches, pushing her breasts against his chest. He snarls approvingly.

While I stand at the edge of the bed, so hard I can barely move.

I can't deny the fire between them as their bodies writhe and overlap. Nor can I deny my irritation. This idiot's been sitting on his ass for days, letting her suffer, and now he wants to take charge?

He's doing it all wrong. Getting her worked up when she's already at a breaking point.

I grab the back of his neck. "If you don't put your knot in her," I warn, "I will."

The omega's breath hitches. I can scent the delicious wave of slick that pours out of her, and yet ... she's trembling.

Just like that, Kane stops snarling at me. He makes a throaty noise that could be a purr.

"Omega," he gets out. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

There's something I'm missing. For all the care he's shown this omega, he must have had a reason for refusing her heat. He can't afford to break her trust. I see that now.

Luckily I have no such allegiance.

Kneeling into the mattress, I nudge Kane aside. The omega's body draws me in—clenched thighs softening instinctively. "Is this your first time, omega?" I ask softly.

She shrinks. Kane's scent turns bloodthirsty.

"That's none of your fucking business," he snaps.

Maybe not. But it would sure be helpful to know if I'm about to make this poor, sweet omega bleed.

She doesn't resist as I run my hands up her calves, gently prying her knees apart. Arousal floods the room, making Kane groan.

"Your pants," I order him, "take them off."

For the first time since we've met, he doesn't argue. I hastily unbutton myself. The omega's eyes trail down, widening as I take my cock in my hand and give it a couple readying pumps.

My free hand finds hers. "Squeeze if you want me to stop."

All she can do is blink. Her pink lips part with anticipation.

"Wait—" Kane growls, but I'm already nudging in. "Fuck."

The tip of my cock sings. Her pussy sucks me in, demanding more, but I take it slow. Watching as her sweet features melt with relief.

"There you go," I purr. "Taking me so, so well."

Her walls flutter. I catch a groan in the back of my throat. Beside us, Kane is oddly quiet, mesmerized. He strokes himself to match my pace.

"Feel good?" he grunts. I know he's talking to the omega when she tilts her head

back. He kisses her, and it's like her whole body opens, letting me in the rest of the way.

Holy ... god .

Her pussy grips my cock in a velvety chokehold. I can't hold back anymore.

I rock my hips, drawing in and out with long, even strokes. She looks shocked every time I hit home. Shocked, but not in pain, so I do it harder—cramming every last inch into her hot, tight hole.

“Take it easy,” Kane grumbles. “You’re fuckin’ huge.”

The omega moans in agreement. She pulls her hand out of mine, and I halt, only to watch as she reaches for Kane instead.

I'll choose not to take offence to that, omega.

He squeezes in next to her while I resume my long, deep thrusts. God, she's soft—her walls molding around me, learning my shape.

I keep drilling. Harder. Faster. She squeals into another of Kane's bruising kisses. I want to yank him off her—those sweet sounds belong to me— but I can't deny she's more relaxed with him around.

“Ah,” she gasps. “A ... alpha!” She digs her nails into my bicep.

“Feeling good, little one?” I slow my thrusts, emphasizing each word. “Your hot ... tight ... pussy is all for me.”

She whines, and Kane darkens. “Hey.”

“That’s my good omega,” I purr, ignoring him.

“She’s not your anything,” Kane snarls.

I slide one hand beneath the omega’s waist, pulling her up my cock. Her eyes roll back with a strangled cry.

Goddamn. If she makes another noise like that, I won’t be able to hold back.

Kane fists his leaking cock like he’s trying not to burst. “Fucking hell.”

The omega claws at me some more. “Knot. N—need it.”

She could ask for the moon and sun and stars and I wouldn’t bat an eye. As long as I’m buried this deep inside her, she is mine .

And I take care of what’s mine.

“Rogue,” I bite out, “you just gonna sit there, or are you gonna help me make her come?”

Kane follows my gaze, grinning wolfishly. Credit where it’s due—he’s an apt multi-tasker: kissing and sucking at her neck, jerking himself off, and, finally, working his other hand down her stomach.

“Fuck yes.” He strums her clit. “Come on, bunny. Let me have it.”

She lets out a choked sound like she’s trying to warn me. Her orgasm is coming, hard, and she’s dragging me along with her.

“Take a breath, sweet girl,” I grunt, “I’ll give it to you ... that’s it ... that’s ... oh, god

.”

Kane growls as the omega breaks apart, his fingers never slowing, extending her pleasure. My knot swells, and I thrust it in, coming with a groan.

“Alpha!” the omega squeals.

Pleasure roars down my legs, surging up my knot—wave after wave of white-hot climax, my inner alpha doing everything in his power to make sure she’s filled to the brim. I sink down to my forearms, caging her in.

Faintly I hear Kane snarl, his hand trapped between us, but I don’t give a damn. I need to be closer to her.

“Woah. Hey, hey, hey.” Kane sits up. “What is it?”

Only then do I hear the omega’s sniffles. I pull back just enough to check her face—her puffy, glittery eyes.

“Get out,” Kane snaps, at me now. “Right fucking now.”

I don’t even look at him. “Can’t.”

“Like hell!”

“Do I really need to explain to you how knots work?”

We’re both surprised when the omega speaks up. “It’s okay,” she whispers.

Kane leans in, squeezing her hand. “You hurtin’, bunny?”

She shakes her head, the tiniest ghost of a smile gracing her lips. “No,” she answers.
“Doesn’t hurt anymore.”

She dares to meet my eye.

And in that moment, I swear I’ve seen a miracle.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

I was scared until the very last moment. Scared this strange, massive alpha would flip me over and tear me apart.

But when his knot locks in place, I don't think I've ever felt more at peace.

"No damn way you're still hard," Kane rumbles, glaring daggers at the alpha whose cock is still buried between my thighs. He's right—the knot went down a while ago, but it still feels hot and vital inside of me.

The alpha quirks his brow. "Care to bet?"

Kane grunts. The alpha sneaks me a mischievous smile. It shouldn't make me blush—he's inside of me, for Christ's sake—but it does.

"She's gotta eat," Kane says.

To this the alpha sighs. "Do you keep anything in the cabin?"

I don't know if he's talking to me or Kane, so I'm relieved when Kane answers, "Why don't you pull out and go check?"

"Why bother, when we have a preferably capable brute at our disposal?"

"The fuck did you call me?"

My inner omega grumbles. Alphas shouldn't be fighting. I must be grumbling aloud, too, because both of them stiffen.

"Alright," the other alpha sighs. "I suppose I can be the bigger alpha." He casts Kane a look, up ... and down. "No pun intended."

Kane adjusts, his stiff cock still on full display. "You want to talk big, you damn freak of nature?"

The alpha nuzzles the top of my head. "You ready for me to pull out, little one?"

Reluctantly, I give a muffled affirmation, and he kisses my hair.

"There's our brave girl."

Even as he pulls out, those words make my pussy sing. Our girl. He stands, walking naked out of the room, and my heart thuds. How is it that I feel this empty the second he's not holding me—this stranger whose name I can't even recall?

"Willow."

Kane puts a hand on the side of my jaw. Only then do I realize I'm crying, as he swipes a tear away with his thumb.

"You're killing me, bunny."

I let my eyes wander, marveling at his long, firm body—muscles bulging and twitching in all the right places.

"Kiss me," I whisper.

I expect him to smother me like he did before, but instead, his lips flutter against my jaw, finding another stray tear. I don't notice his hands wandering, lining me up against his cock, until a fresh wave of slick rolls out.

"I don't know if I can stop," he confesses.

I smile. "I don't want you to stop."

There's a beat of hesitation, like he's about to ask if I'm sure, but I guess he can't hold out anymore. He grips my waist with both hands, plunging me down in one full stroke. My stomach twinges, but the pain is nothing compared to the rush of pleasure.

"Fuck, omega," he groans. "How are you still so damn tight?"

"Move," I beg, "p-please."

He withdraws a couple inches, then surges back in, hips flush against mine. Whereas the other alpha fucked me in long, full strokes, Kane's thrusts are short and quick, like he can't bear to pull out for that long.

He grips my waist harder. "You have no idea how bad I've wanted this."

I need to be closer. Need to feel his chest against mine. His breath down my neck. His lips. His everything.

"Don't stop," I choke out.

I bury my face in his neck as he picks up speed. His cinnamon scent makes my mouth water, pressing my tongue flat against his pulse.

"Omega," he splutters. "Are you—?"

He's not sweet, like I expected, but hot, and potent, and everything my inner omega craves.

"My, my," a rumbling voice returns to the room. "I leave for two minutes, and you're already marking him?"

I pull back. Kane takes the opportunity to kiss me again, making sure the other alpha sees. He resumes his brutal pace. "Bite me hard as you want. I'll keep fucking you 'til you're full of my knot."

"Yes," I gasp, "knot, alpha!"

He groans. "You gotta come f'me first."

I'm barreling toward climax so fast it could break me. My breathing quickens as I cling to Kane for dear life.

Suddenly there are another set of hands on me—the other alpha placing his palm at the small of my back. He kisses his way up to my neck, his presence a solid, comforting force behind me.

Kane growls. "You had your turn."

The other alpha chuckles. "I thought you wanted her to come?"

Just like that, he lies in closer, sandwiching me between them. His teeth graze my neck ever-so-slightly.

It's like a bolt of lightning spears through me. My inner omega howls with ecstasy. I buck uncontrollably, but I'm pinned between two impenetrable bodies, squirming helplessly on Kane's cock.

Then I'm coming, and coming, and coming, and coming harder still as I feel his knot at my entrance.

“Fuck !” Kane roars.

He slams home, locking me in place as wave after wave of come erupts inside. My pussy grips onto him, squeezing out every last drop.

“Fuck,” Kane says again, “holy fucking hell, omega. Keep doing that. Ah, fuck . Take it all.”

Behind me, the other alpha purrs. “Look at you, little one. Coming so beautifully for your alphas.”

It doesn't matter that, realistically, these alphas aren't mine. All that matters is that they've chosen to help me ... and that I've found the courage to let them.

Kane's cock is still twitching as I start to come down. My eyes are heavy, and my throat feels dry, but for the second time today, my heat simmers down.

“That's it,” Kane breathes, “I've got you.”

Someone helps me drink. Someone else smooths my hair. Low, rumbling praises and soothing scents swirl around me. They're oddly compatible—cinnamon and leather. One, earthy, the other, fresh.

“Find any food?” I hear Kane ask.

I crack an eye open. The other alpha hovers behind me, wiping me down with a cool rag. “Nothing substantial. You'll have to go hunt.”

“Me?”

“Aren’t you her protector?”

Kane sighs. “No fucking while I’m out.”

“She might need another knot,” the alpha reminds him.

“She can wait for mine.”

“I think she’s waited for you long enough.”

To this Kane chuffs, but doesn’t argue. My mind churns as I try to follow the conversation. Is there something I’m missing? Or am I just heat-drunk?

“Shh,” the alpha behind me kisses my shoulder. “Rest now, little one. We’re not going anywhere.”

That’s a lie, I want to grumble, already despising the thought of Kane leaving my nest. Like he can sense my disapproval, Kane squeezes my hips, bringing my attention back to the knot lodged inside of me.

“You heard the bastard,” he mutters, “rest. We’ll keep you safe.”

That much—squashed between two massive alphas, smothered in their combined scent—I can believe. So I start to relax, my eyes falling closed once more.

“Good girl,” Kane murmurs, or the other alpha murmurs.

Either way, these are the last words I hear before I am, dreamlessly, asleep.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

The cabin reeks of sex when I return, my kill in tow. I trudge through to the kitchen, not sure I'm ready to find Willow splayed out on another alpha's knot. He's purring for her, making her gasp and whine.

In the end, it's those sweet little noises that draw me back in.

He's got her lying flat on her front, claiming her with deep, languid thrusts. She chokes into the pillow every time he bottoms out.

Suddenly all my anger is forgotten, leaving nothing but my raging hard-on.

"Kane." She smiles deliriously.

I kneel at her bedside, smoothing her hair back. "Easy, bunny. You're drooling."

She laughs, then groans, as the other alpha rolls in deeper.

I cut him a glare. "You did that on purpose."

Willow claws at the sheets, prompting me to take her hand. If I'm not holding her, there's nothing to stop me fisting my cock—and now I've knotted her, I don't want to come another other way.

"Fuck," the other alpha mutters. "I'm going to fill you up nice and deep, little one. Gonna ... fuck ... knot this gorgeous pussy."

He coaxes her up to climax, waiting until she's screaming before he finally seals them together. His eyes flutter, groaning, as he bucks against his knot. Finally, he slumps over Willow's back, careful not to crush her.

"Atta girl." I kiss her knuckles. "He filled you up good, huh?"

Her smile melts into the bedsheets. "Uh ... huh."

"He fuck you good and stupid, too?"

She giggles, and I want to freeze time, to live in a constant goddamn loop of that sound. "Yes, alpha."

The other alpha nuzzles the nape of her neck. This time I'm not even mad. Well, that's a lie. I'm pissed. But maybe I don't care that I'm pissed. Willow's happy, and right now ... that's good enough for me.

"Alpha. Alpha. Alpha! "

"That the spot, bunny?" I grin, picking up the pace. "Fuck yeah. That the fuckin' spot."

"Come on, omega," the other alpha purrs, "come for your alpha."

The words send both me and Willow half crazy. I grip her ass, loving the way it glows pink at my touch. Nothing beats mounting her—my sweet bunny on all fours, face pressed into another alpha's chest, the two of us propping her up so she doesn't fall flat.

She screams again, her pussy clamping down. I curse.

“Omega—!”

She’s coming. I’m coming. I thrust my knot in, making sure she doesn’t spill a drop.

The other alpha smooths her tangled curls off to one side, murmuring too low for me to hear.

For the first time in over a day, I find myself grateful. He sure knows how to calm my girl down, after I’ve gotten her all riled up.

I don’t pull out until she’s fast asleep on his chest. She grumbles faintly at the emptiness, or maybe it’s at the come dribbling between her thighs ... and pooling on the other alpha’s stomach.

He eyes me meaningfully. “Little help, rogue?”

I smirk. “With what?”

He growls.

Taking my time, I pick up the damp cloth, rinsing and wringing it out. Willow doesn’t wake as I wipe her thighs, gently padding her pink, come-filled center.

Ah, shit . Now I’m hard again.

“For god’s sake ...” the alpha mutters. “It’s drying .”

“Quit whining.” I slap the cloth down on his stomach. “You’ll wake her up.”

“I doubt it. For a barbarian, you sure have a soothing knot.”

“For a bastard , you’ve sure got a big mouth.”

He smiles, then hisses, as I wring cold water out on his stomach. “How’s this? I cut back on the insults, and you cut back on ... uh ...” he gestures vaguely. “Whatever this is.”

“Do you want me to punch you?”

Neither of us speak for several moments, basking in the sweet rhythm of Willow’s breathing. I keep washing her down, paying extra care to the places she’s still pink and tender.

Quieter, the alpha says, “Alright. I cut back on the insults, and you start calling me by my name.”

I scowl. “Huh?”

“Actually, it’s Silas.”

I put the cloth down. Silas . About as dickish as I expected.

“No more bastard , no more asshole .” He stares at Willow. “Especially not in front of her.”

That much, it pains me to agree with. Her inner omega seems to like it when we’re not biting each other’s heads off.

“Fine,” I grunt. “But I want something else in return.”

“Name it.”

I stand, hovering over the bed. “You can call me whatever you want. Rogue, barbarian, I don’t give a shit. But her—” I grit my teeth. “You call her Willow .”

I’m so ready for him to make fun of me that his blank expression comes as a surprise. Does he not understand?

“Enough pet names,” I insist. “That’s all I’m asking.” If I have to hear him purr one more ‘sweet girl’, I really am going to bite his head off.

“Willow?” he says at last.

“Yeah.” I cross my arms. “That gonna be a problem?”

His jaw flexes. He watches Willow, still asleep, his hand no longer moving through her hair.

“Let me get back to you on that,” he mutters.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

Willow. Willow.

How could I have been so stupid?

Here I thought one runaway omega was the least of my concerns. She was nothing more than a cover—a reason to walk away from my old life, and pretend I was coming back.

The commander will know something is wrong by now. If he, if anyone, finds me knot-deep in a fugitive omega ... I can only imagine how they'll conspire.

He was in on this from the start.

It's all an elaborate attack on the good name of Pack Shire.

I assumed she was somehow connected with Kane—maybe they'd fled their own village so they could be together. It would certainly explain why he's so possessive. But I didn't scent any omega on him when first we met.

And then we met again, and all I could scent was heat.

Fact is, I haven't been thinking straight since I first laid eyes on her. Alphas aren't meant to think when heats are involved. They're meant to fuck, and knot, and breed.

Shit . What if she's pregnant?

I can practically hear the gossip now. The sentinel's chief of recruitment runs away with Pack Shire's youngest, and he fucks his pups into her? Forget dishonorable discharge. I'll be executed.

No you won't, I remind myself, because none of that matters. I'm not going back to Southside, and, clearly ... neither is she.

Willow stirs. She feels my chest, checking I'm still there, as her eyes struggle open. "Alpha?"

"Silas." Kane interjects. "Call him Silas."

There's that possessive streak.

Willow lifts her head. "Silas?"

"I guess you don't remember," I smile, pinching her chin. "I did try to introduce myself."

She blushes. "Sorry."

"What're you apologizing for?" Kane snaps. "He's the one who barged in."

"I'm sorry for that, too," she says. "I should've—"

"Not gone into heat?" Kane challenges. I shoot him a look.

Shame twists Willow's scent. "It—it was early. I didn't think ..."

I try to recall her recruitment papers, running the math in my head. Normally, we bring in new mothers an entire cycle out from their heat. Considering Willow

disappeared right around the time she was meant to be assigned, it does seem she's a little ahead of schedule.

Kane must read the concern on our faces. "That bad?"

"No," I answer. "Not necessarily."

"It's not normal," Willow whispers. "Not for me."

I try to consider what else I know about her. Noble family, plus a father like Byron, plus a contract to the sentinels ... it's highly likely this is her first heat with an alpha.

Though that doesn't explain how she's not a virgin.

Pushing my curiosity aside, I start, "Omega—" then, at Kane's death glare, "Willow. How long have you been with Kane?"

She looks at him uncertainly.

"Nearly a month," he supplies.

"In close quarters?"

Willow blushes deeper, and Kane folds his arms. "That a problem?"

"No." My shoulders relax. "It explains a lot. Sustained proximity to a potential mate, only a few weeks out from your heat—it makes sense your omega got a little eager."

The news doesn't put her at ease like I hoped. "Eager is one word for it," she mutters. "It felt more like she was trying to kill me."

Kane's glare flicks to mine, almost like he's seeking guidance, before he loops an arm around Willow's waist. When she doesn't resist, he draws her into his lap—her still-naked body straddling him as she tucks her face in his neck.

"I'm tired," she breathes out.

I stroke her back. "Then rest."

"No. Tired ... of fighting."

That's when I see her hips squirming, and scent the honeyish slick dripping into Kane's lap.

Moving without thinking, I lift her weary thighs so she can seat herself Kane's cock. If he wasn't hard before, he sure is now, groaning lowly as she sinks all the way down.

"Good girl." He kisses her temple. "Don't gotta fight it."

Her glassy eyes flutter closed. She swivels her hips a little more before going slack.

Kane starts. "Omega?"

Her breathing is even, face at peace in the crook of Kane's neck. I smirk. "Think she wore herself out."

"Yeah, but ..." his grip tightens, like he's fighting the urge to buck. "Right now?"

"You are the one who told her not to fight it."

Willow sighs, and Kane throws his head back, looking pained. "Fuck," he grunts.

“How’s she milking me this damn hard in her sleep?”

“Probably needs a knot.”

He takes a tight, restraining breath. “Trust me—she’s about to get one.”

I quirk a brow. “That’s got to be a record.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m just saying. Pretty quick on the uptake for someone who, two days ago, wouldn’t even touch her. Guess she got you nice and pent up.”

“Shut up,” he growls, then, at another little sigh from Willow, groans. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what’s it like?”

I’m playing dirty. Pressing him for information when all he can reasonably think about is the hot, tight pussy wrapped around his cock—not to mention while Willow is still out cold. But if I want answers, this might be my only chance.

Kane nuzzles Willow’s hair. “Complicated,” he says at last.

“Because she’s a stranger?”

“No.”

“Because she’s spoken for?”

“No.”

I hesitate, waiting until another minuscule gesture from Willow makes his breath hitch. “So she rejected you.”

Kane starts to snarl when Willow tenses, no doubt giving his cock a good tight squeeze. “Shit,” he hisses. “Gonna—” His face falls over her shoulder, canines primed against the soft pink flesh.

I straighten. “Hey.”

Growling, he softens his jaw, sucking instead of biting down.

I sit back. “Good boy.”

He wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her flush against him. Willow murmurs contentedly, but otherwise doesn’t stir, snuggling in deeper.

“Christ,” he says at last. “That was close.”

I grunt. “You’re telling me.”

He kisses her shoulder, smoothing over the love-bruised flesh. “Don’t think she’d ever forgive me if I ...” he huffs, “you know.”

I watch him—his hands, uncharacteristically soft, like they’ve only learned to be soft for her sake. Even those violent ruby eyes have lost their fire, staring down as if the mere sight of her is precious.

Finally, I dare to prod, “How long?”

“I already told you. Got here a month ago.”

“I meant, how long have you been in love with her?”

Kane doesn't balk like I expect. “What's that gotta do with anything?”

“Because you'd do whatever it takes to guarantee her trust.” I shrug. “Most rogues, in my experience, wouldn't.”

“And what does a stuck-up village alpha know about rogues?”

“Enough to know that when they scent an omega in heat, they don't hesitate.” My gaze narrows. “Nor do they ask permission.”

Something in my words makes Kane bristle. He cradles the length of Willow's spine, almost like he's shielding her from me.

“She got hurt.” I grit my teeth. “Didn't she?”

For some reason my heart is pounding. Am I really afraid of what will happen if I push Kane's buttons? No. This isn't about him. It's about her.

And what I'll do if I find out who hurt her.

“Was it you?” I ask, my voice low. Kane's eyes flash, and I go on, “Maybe you were in rut, or just staking your territory. Maybe ... things got out of hand.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Maybe you regretted it. Promised her it wouldn't happen again.”

“I said watch your fuckin' mouth .” His scent turns coppery, hungry for blood.

I force myself to pull back. The last thing Willow needs at the end of an arduous heat is two alphas at each other's throats.

Kane glares a moment longer. Finally, he mutters, "You're an idiot."

I quirk a brow. "I thought we were done with name-calling."

"She asked for me. You really think she would've done that if I'd—?" he cuts himself off, like the very words are toxic.

But he's got a point. Even with a strong, hot-blooded alpha sitting right in front of her, all Willow could think of was Kane. It's easy to judge him—rogue alpha, quick to bare his teeth—yet of the two of us, I'm the only one who wouldn't take no for an answer.

My heart is pounding again. "But someone did hurt her."

"Fucking hell." He sighs. "Yes . Happy?"

Of course I'm not fucking happy. Someone dared to put their hands on this sweet omega. Hurt her so badly that, even on death's door, she was too scared to ask for help. If not Kane, then maybe it was another rogue.

Or maybe ... it was someone from Southside.

"If you ask her about it," Kane growls, "I'll kill you."

I blink. It's hardly the first time he's threatened me, but somehow, it is the first time I've believed him.

There's no fighting this. I don't know why I'm even trying. As soon as Willow's heat

is over, I'll be on my way—far away—and all of us can enjoy our self-imposed exile in peace.

“Understood,” I say plainly.

Kane's lingering stare makes my skin crawl. As if he's looking right through me.

Whatever he finds, I can tell he's unconvinced.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

I know it's ending when the stickiness sets in.

I groan, looking down at my stiff, come-stained thighs. "How long have I been like this?" I croak.

The massive alpha, Silas, smiles apologetically. "We've been trying to keep you clean between rounds."

"Dunno what for," Kane grunts. "Like you better covered in come."

At this, my stomach twinges, remnants of heat reluctant to leave my system. "Kane," I whine.

His gaze flicks down to my hands, clutching my lower stomach, and darkens with concern. He slides his hands beneath mine. At first I cringe, but then his warmth seeps in, and I let out a tiny, appreciative purr.

Silas stands at the end of the bed. "You must be all kinds of sore."

You'd know, I almost answer. Thanks to his enormous cock, my cervix feels like one big bruise.

"I'd like a bath," I say instead. "Do you think you could get some water?"

Kane's chest rumbles. "You're joking."

“No, I’m filthy.”

He kisses my neck, his tongue pressing flat against my pulse, turning the pain in my stomach to butterflies. “Taste clean to me.”

Silas clears his throat. “If all you need is water, I’m happy to oblige.”

Kane’s head snaps up. “No-one’s asking you.”

“I am,” I cut in. “I—I mean, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Silas smiles. It’s a practiced, perfect expression, almost completely symmetrical. How many other omegas has he smiled at like that? How many of their heats has he ... serviced?

There are so many things I don’t know about him. Neither of these questions should even make my list. And yet, my inner omega aches at the thought of him being with someone else.

Silas moves for the door, and Kane snaps, “I’m not putting her in a damn bath.”

“Relax,” Silas rolls his eyes, “you can scent her again when she’s done.”

“That’s not the issue!”

“Then enlighten me. Because your omega needs to relax, and the two of us have a duty to see that she does.”

“Relax ?” Kane scoffs. “That’s gotta be the stupidest—” Suddenly he stops. “Hang on. What kind of bath are we talking about?”

“The kind where you’re not slamming your knot into her.”

This time it’s not just me who blushes.

“I—” I avert my gaze. “I just want to be clean.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then, slowly, Kane loosens. “What, exactly,” he asks the other alpha, “do you think she means by ‘bath’?” Silas frowns like he doesn’t understand the question, so Kane goes on, “Maybe you didn’t see it—big old tub ‘round back?”

Silas double takes. “You mean outside ?”

Only now do I see where Kane is going with this. Any excuse to criticize my mandatory baths, and this grimy rogue will take it.

I huff. “A bath is a bath, isn’t it?”

Silas looks at me incredulously. “You’ll catch your death.”

“Then I’ll die clean .”

Kane and Silas give matching, chiding growls. The air grows thick with pheromones which, for the first time, aren’t in competition, but in agreement.

Despite everything, my inner omega preens.

“I’m getting the water,” Silas says at last, “and then I’m fixing you a real bath.” Before I can ask what he means, he turns his glare to Kane. “Keep her safe until I’m back.”

Maybe it's Kane's possessive inner alpha sweeping in, or maybe it's because he's taking Silas's command to heart—but the second the other alpha is gone, he wraps me up tight, like he'll never let me go.

Like he knows I don't want him to.

Faint, floral notes linger in the air, peaking my omega's interest.

Silas finds me sitting up in bed, rubbing sleep from my eyes. "Morning, little one." He looks at the dark window. "Not that it's morning. But you have been asleep for a few hours."

"Oh." I frown. "Really?" Somehow I'm still bone tired.

"Feeling up to that bath?"

As soon as he says the words, I'm reminded of the sticky, chafing feeling between my thighs. Not to mention my hair.

"Yes please," I say.

He doesn't ask before scooping me up beneath my legs, taking the bedsheet with us so I'm not exposed. We find Kane hunched over the fireplace, hauling a steaming bucket above the pot. My eyes widen as he pours it into the bathtub plonked in the center of the room.

"Is this ..." I blink. "How did you even get this in here?"

Silas shrugs. "It's only wood."

Granted, it's not that big—more of a barrel than a tub. But I've tried to lug the damn thing inside a couple times myself, and can say for certain that it's a lot heavier than it looks.

Silas tests the water. "It's too hot."

Kane scoffs. "Not for Will."

Slowly, Silas lowers me into the tub. The water is hot, but not quite scalding—the perfect sweet spot for an omega in the middle of winter. My muscles sting and promptly unwind as I sink down deeper. I can't hold back a low moan of appreciation.

Kane grins. "That good, omega?"

I moan again, nodding.

He starts to say something else—words I'm barely conscious of over my own pleasure—about flower petals. The unmistakable pride in his voice makes my inner omega preen.

Alphas did all this ... for me .

"Tip your head back, little one," Silas says. Kane snarls, and he sighs. " Willow ."

Eyes closed, I do as I'm told. Warm water trickles over my roots.

"What're you doing?" Kane demands. Silas hushes him, his fingers gathering my hair, gently untangling as he works his way down.

Suddenly all I can think of is my mother. She used to wash my hair just like this.

Wouldn't let any of the maids touch it. She said my beauty was something precious.

"How are you so good at this?" I find myself asking, my voice barely above a whisper.

Silas pauses. "This?"

Washing me. Caring for me. Making me feel safe.

I sink deeper into the tub. "Never mind."

It's not until the water has well and truly cooled that I ask to be lifted out. Someone dries me off—Kane's and Silas's scents keep mixing together, soothing my inner omega further—before taking me back to bed. The sheets are cool, but dry. Maybe Kane shook them down while I was bathing.

Already I'm exhausted again, barely able to keep my eyes open. I hear the alphas bickering. Something about hunting.

"Don't go," I whimper.

Someone rests their hand on my forehead. "It's alright," Silas purrs. "He won't be long."

My heart clenches. "Kane?"

Kane elbows past Silas. "Right here."

"You're leaving?"

"You need to eat." He scoffs. "You really think this village prick can hunt worth a

damn?”

In truth, I don't think it registered with me that Silas was a village any thing until this very moment. His clothes should've been the first giveaway, but then, he hasn't been wearing those much since he got here.

“Sleep,” Kane says. “I'll be back when you wake up.”

For some reason, my omega takes his trust to heart. However much he dislikes this other alpha, he must at least feel I'm in good hands.

“Yes, alpha,” I whisper.

Halfway standing, he growls hotly, his ruby eyes flickering. Silas ushers him out. My stomach twinges, remembering when Kane's hands were there. Remembering when his knot was—

“Willow,” Silas chastises. “Give your body a few hours to recover.”

I smile tiredly. “And then ...?”

He rubs my back, paying extra attention to the base of my spine, where all the tension seems to have settled. “And then we'll take you, however your sweet pussy desires.”

Once again, I find myself wondering what kind of life Silas has lived to get here. Looking after an omega, a stranger, out in the middle of the wilds, with the uncanny timing and confidence to meet my every need. Do I even want to know?

Or will he be gone, as quickly as he appeared, before I even get a chance to ask?

I'm not sure which possibility frightens me more.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

How are you so good at this?

As things stand, I know almost all there is to know about the sweet, red-headed omega asleep in my arms. I know all I need to know about Kane.

But neither of them have learned the first thing about me.

I've never been one for lying. My career with the sentinels didn't require it. If either Willow or Kane ask me where I came from, I'll have no choice but to give them a straight answer.

Willow's back arches against my chest. "Silas," she hums.

"Shh." I kiss her head. "Just sleep."

"Where's Kane?"

My inner alpha gives a pang of jealousy. "Back soon."

She huffs, wriggling her hips. How easy would it be to lift her underdress and slip my cock between those plush thighs? I'm sure she'd slick up again in no time. God knows I'm already raring to go.

"You need him?" I ask, lowly.

“He said he’d be here when I woke up.”

“Mm.” I palm her lower stomach, remembering how much she liked it when Kane did the same. “Well, I’m not Kane. But between the two of us, I do have one particular advantage.”

Her eyes glisten with question.

I smile. “I’m here .”

Tenderly, I lift her dress, just high enough to give myself access. I leave butterfly kisses along her temple, breathing her in.

“You’re wet,” I murmur, fingers ghosting over her hot center. “Did you know that?”

Her breath catches.

“Use your words, little one.”

She shudders. “Yes alpha.”

“Breathe in,” I purr, angling myself just right. “Nice ... and deep.”

I wait until her chest expands before pushing forward, just a couple inches. She’s bound to be tender. Slowly, she shifts her hips back, taking me bit by bit.

“So big,” she whispers. “Has it always been this big?”

I thrust in a little deeper. “We both know you can take it.”

“ Oh— ” Her walls suction around me. “It’s good. Alpha, it’s so good.”

No wonder Kane never lasted very long—if she calls me ‘alpha’ one more time, I might just lose it.

“I’m going to move,” I tell her, withdrawing my hips, “and I’m not gonna stop,” I rock back in, “until you come.”

Gorgeous, garbled nonsense leaves her lips. I continue my deep thrusts, keeping my hands on her body, reading her sweet inner omega like a book.

“Oh my god,” she whimpers.

I don’t stop. Not going harder, or faster, or even dragging it out. I simply pin her against me, putting extra pressure on her lower stomach so I can feel myself getting nice and deep.

She comes with a cry. “Alpha—alpha!”

Goddammit.

My knot plunges home. “Omega,” I gasp, rope after rope of my come flooding her walls. Her body accepts my seed like it’s what she was born to do.

She twitches, coming down, as my knot unloads the last of its pleasure. Vaguely, I remind myself to forage for some contraceptive plants after Kane returns. I’m not sure how many will be in bloom this time of year, but I’d be remiss not to try.

“I needed that,” she sighs. “I don’t know how, after ... everything. But I really, really did.”

“I’m glad I could oblige.”

She shakes her head. “Why do I feel like you understand my body better than I do?”

The question catches me off-guard. I hesitate, unable to think of a convincing response.

Willow must sense my tension. “Silas?”

“Sorry. I’m not quite sure how to answer that, is all.”

She bristles. “I think I can guess.”

That’s not good . Or maybe it is—if she’s figured me out, it could save me the trouble of explaining myself.

“I’m not the first omega you’ve been with,” she declares. “Not by a long shot. Isn’t that right?”

“Willow,” I sigh, “I—”

“All I want to know,” she says, “is if you’re spoken for.”

I stop. “Spoken for?”

“I didn’t see any bond marks, but, y’know ... you never know.” When I say nothing, dumbfounded, she rushes on, “I understand if you are. And why you stopped to help me anyway. But that being the case, you really shouldn’t stick around. A—and you should tell your mate about what’s happened right away.”

“ That being the case ?” I can’t help but recoil, tugging the knot so hard we both grimace. “Sorry. Christ, I’m sorry.” I force myself to relax. “Are you alright?”

Her shoulders are stiff. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“No. The answer is no . There’s no-one else.”

A small voice in the back of my head tells me this was the wrong thing to say. Willow offered me a near-perfect cover—a philandering alpha, roaming the wilds between villages. But something about her pussy, clenching possessively, makes lying impossible.

“Oh.” At last she relaxes, my heart relaxing with her. “Alright.”

Once again the question hangs in the air, driving both of us mad. Just tell her, Silas. What better opportunity will I get than this, knot-deep inside of her, Kane mercifully out of earshot?

“My position,” I explain, weighing every word, “demanded certain proficiencies. It just so happened that I spent a lot of time with omegas—especially omegas in heat.”

She pauses. “So, you’re a sire?”

“More like I coordinated sires. Made sure they took proper care of their wards.” Not that I was any good at it, or I wouldn’t be in this position.

Willow pales. “Wards?”

“Well, normally, we called them ‘mothers’.”

The air changes so sharply, I almost can’t register what’s wrong. Panic, bitter as unripe lemon. Fear, cold as ice. And something woven through it all—thick and choking as smoke.

“You’re a sentinel,” she accuses.

I knew this was coming. Decided I was ready for it. No—that she was ready for it.

I answer, “I have been.” Not letting my pheromones react to hers, no matter how much I want to calm her down.

“No-one stops being a sentinel,” she says. “Do you have any idea how bad you have to fuck up to be stripped of your rank?”

You’d be surprised. I bite my tongue.

Willow squirms, like she’s only now remembering we’re still sealed together. “Who are you ?” she demands. “W-where are you from?”

I need to play my cards carefully. She’s probably expecting me to lie, and I won’t do that. Until my knot deflates, I have all the time in the world to plead my case.

“Willow,” I say, my voice a rumbling alpha purr, “I need you to take a deep breath for me.”

She snarls, her voice cracking.

“I’m not going to hurt you. All I want is to keep you safe.”

“Why are you here?” she rasps. “Did they send you?”

“Hey. Listen.” My tone hardens. “I’m a runaway, just like you.”

“How the fuck do you know who I am ?”

If she keeps thrashing around like that, things are going to get ugly. I have no choice but to push courtesy aside, harnessing my inner alpha for guidance. Omega is resisting. She's going to hurt herself.

"Omega," I bark, "enough."

At once, she stills, her back taut against my chest. I can hear the tears in her breath, wet and shuddering, and it breaks my heart. I had a plan — I trust her, and in return, she trusts me. But I just barked at her. And now she's shaking like a leaf. That's not trust. It's ... it's ...

"What the hell?" Kane groans, sauntering into the room. "I was gone less than an hour."

Fuck. I didn't hear the front door open.

He reaches the bed, blood-speckled from the hunt, and freezes. His eyes lock onto Willow.

Murder floods his expression.

Growling so deeply it practically rattles the windows, he turns his gaze to me.

"What. The fuck. Did you do?"

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Blood . It's all I can taste. Maybe I've bitten my tongue. Maybe I'm already fang-deep in Silas's throat. Or maybe it's Willow's.

It's with that thought I snap back to reality.

"Enough!" Silas roars. "Kane, you're hurting her!"

My grip loosens from his shoulders. I must've been trying to toss him off the bed. It's only now I realize why he and Willow aren't coming apart.

He's knotted her.

My mind races. Willow was still out cold when I left. Does that mean ... did he force himself on her?

This time it's Willow's whimpers that keep me grounded. I see her lips move, trying to speak, but the words don't come.

"You barked at her," I realize. "You piece of shit. You barked at her!"

"Just give me a minute," he says through gritted teeth. "The knot's going down."

Don't waste this chance, my inner alpha snarls. He's trapped. Defenseless.

I swallow back the urge. Yeah, but so is she.

Finally, Silas pulls out. It's like a spell breaks—him, collapsing onto his back, Willow, gasping and scrambling. She stands, her knees buckling on impact. I catch her and wrap her up in my cloak.

“Get out,” she cries. “Out !”

I can't help but recognize the heartbreak on Silas's face. If I wasn't so close to turning feral, I might even feel sorry for him.

He finds his pants, hastily dressing. “Give me a minute to explain.”

“I don't want you to explain.” Willow is trembling so hard I'm worried she'll slip right out of my arms. “I—I don't want anything from you. Ever.”

“I'm not here to hurt you,” he insists.

“I know why you're here,” Willow says. “They sent you. The sentinels. Pack Shire. Some one.”

Fuck . You've gotta be fuckin' kidding me. I glower at Silas. “That true?”

He starts to argue, then stops himself. “It's—complicated.”

If this piece of shit has any thing to do with the alphas who hurt my omega, I'll drag him out of here by his fucking teeth.

“Willow—” Silas starts.

Her face is pale. I shield her in my cloak, wrapping it around tighter.

“Willow,” Silas says again. “You should know, I won't be the only one.”

She bristles, and my lip curls. “You have five seconds to get lost.”

“They’re not going to stop,” he urges. “But I can help you, if you’d just—”

“Three .”

“Willow, look at me.”

“Two .”

Suddenly Willow growls—a hoarse, pained omega warning—as her face peers out from my shoulder. “I said,” she whispers, “get out .”

Silas stares at Willow, his lips parted like there’s more he wants to say. She stares back—shivering, cold as ice, reeking of panic, but not letting up.

Finally, he steps back. “It’s your decision. I hope, for both your sakes, it’s the right one.”

Neither me or Willow move. We stand there, bundled together, as Silas rummages through the living room, finding his remaining armor and sword.

How could I have been so stupid? A massive alpha turns up on my mountain, dressed fancy, talking even fancier, carrying a sword , and it doesn’t occur to me to ask why he’s here? Willow warned me her village would be looking for her.

“ You can call me whatever you want. But her—you call her Willow . And nothing else.”

Silas’s face changed when I said those words. He knew . Maybe not from the very start, but at least from that moment ... he knew.

The front door slams. Willow turns slack. I don't let her fall, sitting on the edge of the bed as I gather her in my lap. My inner alpha wants to charge after Silas, make him pay for whatever he's done, but Willow is sobbing—breaking apart—and all I can do is hold her.

I tuck her face into my neck, pumping out my scent. Soon, I'll be the only alpha she thinks of.

And Silas will be nothing more than a ghost.

A couple hours later, there's a knock at the door. Willow's eyes widen. I growl.

"Stay here, bunny."

"Wait," she blurts out. "M—my knife. Where is it?"

"Don't need it."

"Kane!"

"I'll be right back."

She's still scrambling, like the blade will somehow materialize in her bedsheets, as I charge to the front door. I yank my dagger off the counter.

"Hey!" I throw the door open. The wintry night air hits me all at once, sharpening my senses. "You gotta death wish?" I swing my weapon. "Coward! Show yourself!"

Only the wind answers, whistling coolly. I circle the cabin twice, glaring into the

surrounding trees, searching for Silas's glowing amber eyes glaring back at me. Nothing. Not even a scent.

Maybe he really is a ghost.

It's only when I return to the front door that I see it—a small, leaf-wrapped parcel balanced on the windowsill. Hesitantly, I pick it up.

“What is it?”

I start. Willow is standing in the cabin, my cloak wrapped around her. Begrudgingly, I show her the parcel. “No idea.”

She takes it from my hands, testing its weight, then brings it up to her nose. Her features darken. Calculating.

“What?” I demand.

Unwrapping the leaves, she examines as bits of dried petals scatter in her palm. “Oh.” She swallows. “I see.”

“See what?”

I don't like this look on her face, like she's either about to throw up or burst into tears. It's doubly confusing when she does neither. Instead, her jaw sets, her pheromones withdrawing.

“I need you to boil some water,” she says.

I want to argue, but I guess I don't have the heart for it. Not tonight.

I do as I'm told, stoking the fireplace and preparing some water. Willow retrieves her mug from the makeshift sink.

"Will—" I start.

She thrusts her mug at me. Stares.

Biting back my frustration, I fill it up and pass it back. "You gonna tell me what that shit is?"

"Medicine," she says simply.

"Medicine. From Silas." My lip curls. "And what, suddenly you trust him? He didn't even have the balls to give it to you himself."

"Would you have let him, if he tried?"

Point taken. Even so ...

She steepes the ingredients, staring into the water as it darkens. Steam is still rising off its surface as she brings the mug to her lips, drinking deeply.

It's all I can do not to smack the damn thing out of her hands. What the fuck is she thinking! Two hours ago, she didn't trust this alpha enough to keep him in her sights. Now, she's drinking down some mysterious petals he leaves outside her door in the dead of night?

"Slow down!" I snap. "What if it's poison?"

She swallows. "It's not. I checked."

“You sniffed it. Sorry if that doesn’t exactly give me peace of mind.”

“I know these ingredients. And what they’re used for.”

“Oh yeah? What does a pampered village omega know about plants?”

At that she finally stops, her gaze lifted above the mug’s rim. “Enough to know which ones prevent pregnancy.”

Is she ... is that ... I glare at the mug again, like I can somehow drain its contents. A contraceptive? Seriously? That shit was all but banned in my home village. The omegas I knew said it was unreliable at best. And at worst ...

“For fuck’s sake, Willow.” I groan. “Don’t drink that.”

She clutches the mug tighter.

“You’re not pregnant,” I tell her. “It was just one heat!” I’ve known packs who spent three, even five cycles before it took.

Willow doesn’t budge.

I huff. “Fine. Even if, by some chance, you are, I’ll take care of it.” I’ll take care of you, my inner alpha adds. If only you’d let me.

Willow’s emerald eyes darken. She lowers the mug ever-so-slightly.

“All due respect, Kane,” she says, her voice almost a growl, “go fuck yourself.”

With that, she takes a long, final swig. And then she rises, dropping her mug in the sink, not so much as glancing back at me over her shoulder as she returns to the

bedroom.

Willow

I can't stay here. I know that.

But I also can't leave until I'm finished throwing up all the fluids in my body.

It's the same as last time, if not a little worse for lack of replenishing tonics. Nausea. Shakes. Bleeding. All promising signs.

Whatever blend Silas gave me, it's doing the trick.

Kane rubs my back. He gathers my hair off my face as I retch. "That's it," he rumbles. "Breathe."

I close my eyes, waiting for the wave to pass. Kane's body is solid behind me, like no matter what happens, he'll still be there. Nothing can hurt me. Not a bear, not Silas, and certainly not a contraceptive tea.

Finally I have nothing left to throw up. I lean back, letting him catch me.

He lifts a cup to my lips. "Small sips."

The water is tepid, soothing my raw throat. With each tiny gulp, I feel a little steadier. "Thanks," I say.

"Mm." He puts the cup down. "Think that's all of it?"

I nod. For now.

Gently, he helps me into bed. A part of me wants to resist—I should be packing, hastily gathering everything I might need to survive out in the wilds—but I can barely move without feeling dizzy.

Kane clears his throat. “Is this, uh, normal?”

I follow his gaze to the bucket, left on the floorboards, and realize what he’s asking. “Yeah. Same thing happened last time.”

He grimaces, clearly unhappy that what just happened to me is anything akin to ‘last time’, but he just grits his teeth. “So, you’re gonna be fine.”

Despite everything, I smile. “Yeah.”

The two of us sit in silence. Kane’s breathing is deep, almost like he wants to purr, but isn’t sure how I’ll react. I’m not sure, either. Now my heat has passed, I definitely don’t want any alpha telling me what to do or how to feel—that much I made perfectly clear last night. But he’s just ... been here. Taking care of me.

Like he’s done from the start.

“You know,” I whisper, “you don’t have to stick around.”

He stiffens. “We had a deal.”

“Things have changed. For all I know, Silas is already on his way back to Southside. Once the other sentinels figure out where I am, they’ll come for me. Which means ... I can’t stay here.”

He doesn't fly into a rage like I expect. Instead, his body taut, he growls, "Thought you might say that."

I frown. "You're not angry?"

"Angry doesn't touch it." His eyes flash. "But it's got nothing to do with you. Silas—" his lip curls, "—that piece of shit lied to me. Said he was gonna help you. And, like an idiot, I believed him." He grits his teeth. "If you don't feel safe here, I'm not gonna force it."

"Oh ..." I turn away. "Good."

Good? My inner omega is incredulous. After everything me and Kane have been through, am I really content for him to let me go?

"Just so you know," he grunts, nodding to the bucket, "you're not goin' anywhere until you've got this shit out of your system."

I laugh, though the sound is bitter. "Don't worry. You're free to keep tabs on me until then."

"Until then?"

I want to face him, but his pheromones—potent, pissed off—keep me cautious. "Think of it this way. Once I'm gone, you'll have what you always wanted: the entire territory all to yourself."

Kane grabs me by the hips, swiveling me around so I'm straddling him.

"If you think," he snarls, "you're going anywhere without me—think the fuck again."

Just looking into his eyes casts my whole body in a harsh ruby glow. I blush, my nerves set alight. I thought these feelings would go away after my heat, but now here he is, and here I am ... sitting in his lap. And despite everything that's happened, I know what I want.

“Alpha,” I whisper.

With that single word, Kane's lips crash into mine, claiming me in a long, bruising kiss. My inner omega sings. My senses flood with cinnamon.

He pulls away, his gaze flicking to my neck.

“You're mine,” he growls.

A chill runs down my spine. It's not the first time I've heard those words.

Kane kisses me again. “And I'm yours,” he breathes.

Mine. Yours. With him, they're one and the same.

And suddenly, I know why I'm not afraid anymore.

By dusk, I can keep down a meal. By dawn, Kane and I are leaving the cabin for the last time.

He walks in front, checking on me over his shoulder every ten seconds. I assured him I was perfectly capable of travelling, but either he doesn't believe me, or he's more worried about the wilds than he let on.

We've been walking long enough that the sun is high in the sky, though I don't know how much progress we've made.

Suddenly Kane stops. "You're shivering."

Of course I'm shivering. Out here, 'freezing my ass off' is kind of the default.

He unties his cloak, draping it over my shoulders before I can protest. Pure alpha warmth seeps into me.

"Kane," I huff, "come on. You'll freeze."

Now shirtless, he picks up the pack—complete with bedsheets, crockery, and sparse rations. "I'll live."

I want to fight him, noting the goosebumps on his tough flesh, but for the first time all morning, my blood is pumping through my veins, and I feel like I can actually move .

When asked where we're headed, Kane simply says 'north'. It'll be colder. I'm sure he knows that. But he also must know that further north is directly further away from my village.

Further away from Silas.

The thought pierces me like a dagger. I double over, breath hitching.

Instantly Kane turns. "Will?"

"I'm—" what? What am I?

Kane puts his hands on my shoulders. “Hey. Look at me. What is it?”

I remember Silas’s hands. Did he ever hold me like this? Dammit . Why can’t I remember?

“I’m fine,” I finally get out. “Sorry. Just felt a little nauseous.”

I’m not sure he believes me— I sure don’t believe me—but he reluctantly lets go. “Alright. Let’s break here.”

We find a half-dry log and sit, sharing sips from the water canister. Kane gives me a handful of dried fruits and watches to make sure I eat. For what might be the first time, I’m barely aware of his eyes on me.

Instead, I sneak glances into the trees, my inner omega searching.

Twisting the dagger a little deeper.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

The air is thin as I climb higher north, carving my way to the top of the mountain. Two weeks of living off the wilds' not-so-bountiful resources has started to take its toll.

Kane was right. Us village alphas can't hunt for shit.

I lunge, missing my prey by a full second. I could chase after it, but better to conserve my energy.

For what? my inner alpha challenges. Reminding me of the only reason I'm up here at all.

Willow .

She must be tired. Kane's her on her feet for two days. God knows where he's taking her.

Or why I'm trailing after them.

All I wanted to know was if she'd drunk the tea—and if she'd survived it. But I haven't been able to get safely into earshot. Haven't even been able to scent her at all over Kane's dominating pheromones.

I'll wait until they're sleeping. And then, assuming the medicinal scent is still in her bloodstream, I'll have my answer.

Night falls. I follow Kane and Willow's trail until it disappears into a rocky alcove. From this distance, I can just see the glow of a fire.

He'd better be keeping omega warm.

I wait another hour, giving them time to get settled, before creeping closer. Two figures huddle before the fire—Willow lying with her head in Kane's lap, draped in his cloak. He strokes her hair, though his eyes are on the trees.

Searching, no doubt, for me.

Like it or not, I'm outmatched. Kane knows these wilds. Knows what belongs, and what doesn't. If he catches so much as a whiff of my scent ...

Well, he won't kill me. But he'll try.

And terrify our poor omega in the process.

I kneel down, my knees suddenly feeling weak. My heart thuds like it's trying to tell me something.

Our omega.

I put a hand on my chest. Keep it together, Silas. It's only sensible I'd want to ensure Willow isn't left stranded. If she is, well ... pregnant with my pups, I'm entitled to a certain degree of responsibility.

And if she isn't, we can always try again.

I shove my inner alpha back down. Willow's not in heat anymore. For all intents and purposes, I don't need him.

Yet, for some reason, he's never been louder.

Kane doesn't sleep. Not a fucking wink. I want to snarl at him—how does he expect to keep Willow safe, going two nights without rest?

More importantly, how am I expected to get close to her?

The next couple days are hell. Willow must catch on to Kane's sleeplessness, because they start to take it in shifts. Maybe this is my opportunity to approach—Kane out cold, Willow glaring over the fire. Late the third night, her eyes start to droop.

I stand, shifting one tree closer. A twig snaps beneath me.

Willow's head jerks up.

It's no use. Neither of them are dropping their guard. I'd be better off rushing the campfire, getting a good breath of Willow's scent—her pregnant, or, hopefully, not - pregnant pheromones—and disappearing into the night.

I slump against the tree, my own eyes heavy.

"I said," she whispers, "get out . "

Those words—Willow's white, hard face—startle me awake. I swear, every time I close my eyes, she's there. Crying at me. Coming for me.

What the hell is wrong with me ?

When I abandoned the sentinels, I had a plan to disappear deep into the wilds and,

ultimately, cross the border. Enemy territory, technically. I figured, really, what can they be doing that's so much worse than us? Murder any newborn pups lately?

That's when it hits me.

My last conversation with Willow. She was furious. Terrified. But it all started when ...

When she realized I was a sentinel.

I knew someone must've hurt her, or she wouldn't have taken such drastic measures to escape. It couldn't have been one of the sentinels, I reasoned. Not before she'd even been assigned.

“Do you have any idea how bad you have to fuck up to be stripped of your rank?”

It's like a brick wall slams down before my thoughts can continue. Protecting myself from everything they might've done to her.

And all the reasons she pushed me away.

She doesn't want me anywhere near her, and likely for good reason.

So why can't I just let her go ?

“Chief! Come quick.”

I stand from my desk, not missing the urgency in Friedan's voice. As soon as he flung the door open, I could hear it—over in the courtyard.

Sounds of a fight.

I follow Friedan outside, where a group of sentinels have crowded around two brawling alphas I recognize instantly as Pierson and Frederik. The pair of them were recently assigned as sires. I can't imagine what they're so furious about—the midwife just confirmed their omega is expecting.

I shove the other sentinels aside, grabbing Pierson and Frederik by the scruffs of their tunics. Instantly the shouting dies down.

“Someone want to explain to me what's going on?” I growl.

Their eyes widen. The bystanders shuffle their feet like they're waiting for an opportunity to bolt.

“Now!” I snap.

Frederik gulps. “I was just playing around, Chief. Didn't think I was gonna get my head knocked in.”

I look at Pierson. His expression darkens. “He was being vulgar.”

“She's our ward, Pier!” Frederik argues. “You're not the only one who gets to be ‘vulgar’.”

I shoot Frederik a silencing glare, then return to Pierson. “Vulgar how?”

“Y'know ... touching her. Talking about her.”

Behind me, someone snickers. Someone else hisses at him to shut up.

I study Pierson more closely. “Anything else?”

“I don’t need anything else.” His eyes flash. “She’s mine.”

More snickering from the crowd. I bark at them to return to their quarters. As they hastily disperse, my gaze returns to Pierson. Then Frederik, who puts his hands up in mock innocence.

“Pierson,” I say, lowly, “I trust I don’t need to remind you how the mother program works.”

He grits his teeth. “Things are different now.”

“Here we go,” Frederik drawls.

“Explain to me,” I demand. “What’s different?”

Pierson goes quiet. I cling to hope that this is only a temporary lapse of sanity—his inner alpha becoming extra possessive now his ward is pregnant. But there’s something resolute in his presence.

Finally, in a choked voice, he says, “She’s my mate.”

I sigh. “You know the rules, sentinel. Mothers can’t be bonded.”

“No, I mean—” color rises to his ears. “My mate.”

Frederik groans, and at last I realize what he’s telling me. He’s not just talking about a bond mark, or pack certificate.

He’s talking about imprinting.

It's a one in a hundred—no, one in a thousand —phenomena. Five times that for an omega randomly assigned to be his ward.

“Frederik,” I grunt, “wait for me in my office.”

Frederik stiffens. “Chief?”

“Now.”

He bristles, but doesn't dare argue, still sneering at his fellow sire as he walks away.

“Alright,” I say, focusing on Pierson. “Let me make something very clear to you.”

He stares at me, hanging onto every word.

“What you're feeling is completely natural. Your ward is pregnant, and, if these new instincts are any indication, the pup is probably yours.”

I swear, the poor alpha's eyes sparkle.

“But that's all this is,” I press on. “If you had imprinted on her ... you would've known it instantly.”

He seems unconvinced. “How can you be sure?”

I can't. But that's not the point. Our newest mother needs all three of her sires, and she needs them to cooperate.

“Listen,” I level with him. “If I think you're going to snap at the other sires, or do anything to put stress on your ward, I'll have no choice but to remove you.”

His pheromones sour.

“No-one wants that,” I assure him. “So let’s keep things civil from now on. Looking after a pregnant omega is a group effort. You want her and the pup healthy, don’t you?”

This much, we agree on. He nods vehemently.

“Good.” I clap his shoulder. “Now go take a cold shower. You have the rest of the afternoon off to tend to your ward.”

His remaining anger transforms into delight. Dismissed, he darts across the courtyard. I watch him go.

Imprinting . I suppress a scoff. Really . What’re the odds?

I wake with a start. My heart hammering. My mind reeling.

Well ...

Fuck.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Willow is a quick study. I teach her how to tread lightly, how to keep her eyes peeled, and she doesn't need to be told again. It makes hunting easier, but slower.

She asks where we're going, and every time, I give her the same answer:

"Over the mountain."

If Willow came from the big village back south, I'm taking her as close as we can get to the bigger village up north. I'm no expert in politics, but I'm not a total moron: the feud between territories is legendary.

Pack Shire will find no allies where we're going.

Willow pinches my shoulder. I stop, following her gaze.

There, at the base of a tree, two squirrels assess the fallen acorns. I retrieve my dagger, wondering how best to nab them both. Slowly, Willow passes me her own blade—a blunt cooking knife.

Yeah. I can make this work.

A weapon in either hand, I creep toward the squirrels. It's as if the entire forest holds its breath.

And I throw, hitting both marks in an instant.

Willow cheers. My alpha puffs up with pride.

We stop for lunch, Willow warming herself by the fire while we prepare the meat for roasting. I try not to stare at her too closely, transfixed by the adorable crease in her brow as she concentrates.

“So,” she says as we eat, “we’re almost there, aren’t we?”

I swallow. “Almost where?”

“You know. Over the mountain .”

I go back to eating. “Another day or so.”

“And then ...?”

I eye her cautiously. “We stay there.”

Willow sighs. “I’m not stupid, Kane. I know you’re taking me to Northside.” She shrugs. “It’s smart—the sentinels won’t come charging in to enemy territory. When I left my village, I considered doing the same thing, except it was too far to travel alone.”

“And now you’ve got me.” I nod at her skewer. “Keep eating.”

“Kane.” Her voice softens. “We don’t have to go through with this.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Don’t get me wrong.” She gestures around. “I appreciate all you’re doing for me. But I also don’t expect you to give up your way of life.” Her gaze deepens. “You left

your own village for a reason.”

Is she really worried about me right now? That I might not be cut out for, what? Civilization?

“We’re not going to Northside,” I tell her at last. “We’re going near Northside.”

She tilts her head.

I huff. “If anyone comes looking for you, we’ll disappear into the village. Until then, we’re still just a couple of rogues.” I smirk. “You got a problem with that?”

“My problem is you giving up your freedom.”

I growl, “Freedom is a small price to pay for keeping you safe.”

To this Willow goes quiet. She holds my look until colour pricks her cheeks, then stares down at her half-eaten skewer.

Scent her, my inner alpha demands. Now.

I pull her hand into my lap, rubbing myself up and down her wrist. She smells off—sick, or stressed, or tired, or something else I don’t fucking like.

She breathes deeply. “That’s nice.”

I keep nuzzling until she’s drenched in my pheromones. “Here.” I rip off a chunk of meat. “Eat.”

“Alpha ...”

“Uh-uh,” I grunt. “No getting out of this.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t care.”

“No, I—” she hangs her head. “I mean, I feel sick. Do we have any water?”

Frowning, I rummage around, pulling out the half-empty canister. She takes a couple sips, looking paler by the second. When did this happen ? my alpha demands. Omega was fine this morning!

“Sorry.” She swallows. “Maybe it was the meat.”

I lift her skewer. “Smells fine to me.”

“Keep mine in here.” She passes me a clean cloth. “I’ll try again later.”

Reluctantly, I do as she asks. My alpha is not happy about how little she’s eaten—she’ll need her strength. But worse than that would be her getting sick.

The fire dies out, and Willow assures me her stomach has settled. I give her a final, determined scenting before we take off again, working our way down from the mountain’s peak.

It’s late when we finally settle. I wanted to find some shelter, but I remember there used to be a rogue camp in this region, and I can’t risk trespassing.

“I’ll take first watch,” Willow declares.

Like hell . I lie her flat in my lap. “Sleep,” I command.

“You need to sleep, too.”

“I’ll wake you up.”

I cover her in my cloak, plus a couple bedsheets, willing warmth into her bones. No matter how much I stroke her back, trying to keep her blood pumping, she won’t stop shivering.

“Omega,” I say at last, “you feel sick again?”

She doesn’t answer, already out cold. I shouldn’t be surprised. It’s a big ask, making an omega trek through the wintry wilds right after her heat.

Just one more day. I can protect her one more day. Then we’ll be setting up a proper den. Warm walls. Fresh water. Everything she could ever want—I’ll give it to her.

Even if it means living in a village.

Not once do I start to doze off, busy scenting her, trying to keep those sickly pheromones at bay. She twitches. Whimpers softly.

I freeze. “Omega?”

She’s still asleep. Dreaming, somewhere far away.

Where my voice can’t reach her.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

It's hard to believe we've been travelling for days. The forest looks the same out here than it did back at the cabin. Tall. Tangled.

Frozen.

Every shiver seems more violent than the last, wracking through me like I'm about to keel over. I need to eat, to keep my calories up, but I've been sick twice already. I can't afford to lose any more fluids.

Something is wrong , my inner omega urges. And I think you know what .

“Hey—Will!”

I come to just as Kane grabs my shoulder, saving me from walking face-first into a branch.

He feels down my arms. “You hurt?”

I shake my head. “Sorry. Must've spaced out.”

“Fuckin' understatement, omega.”

“I'm fine .”

“You can't even walk straight!”

I bristle. Alpha ... angry with me ? No. He's probably just grumpy because he didn't get any sleep last night.

"We're not stopping," I say at last. When I sense he's about to protest, I add, "By all means, you stay, start a fire. But I want to get to the bottom of this mountain."

Kane's jaw flexes. Suddenly he swings the pack around, hanging it off his chest. Then, before I even realize what's happening, he hoists me onto his back, hooking his arms under my thighs.

I start. "Kane!"

"Enough," he growls. "Not another word."

He starts walking, pumping out his scent with every step. I let myself sink into his warmth, but somehow, it feels more like a distraction than a cure. Whatever's wrong—my head spinning, my stomach twinging—isn't going away.

Snap !

I gasp, turning.

"What is it?" Kane demands.

My inner omega screams wordlessly. What is she trying to tell me? What can she sense that I can't?

"There's something out there," I whisper.

Instantly Kane bristles. He presses against a tree, scanning our surroundings. I look. I listen. Finally I shake my head, feeling like I've swallowed a lump of clay. "I'm

sorry. You must think I'm losing it."

He relaxes slightly. "No, bunny. This is rogue territory—or it was, last I checked. Guess you sense it, too."

He's wrong. What I'm sensing is too close. Too familiar.

Silas.

Finally my omega finds her voice. Every other thought comes to a stand-still. Silas. Silas. Is he here? Is that why she's so upset? Or she upset because ... he's not?

Kane keeps walking. I don't know how far he takes me, or which direction we're travelling. Not even his scent is enough to soothe me now.

Snap! I jump again.

"Omega—" Kane starts.

Omega. I hallucinate the same word, the same summons, in a deeper, measured voice. His voice.

Without warning, a sob wrenches out of me, my heart pounding hard against Kane's back.

He hastily puts me down, catching me as I crumple. The both of us kneel into the frosted forest floor. I wrap my arms around my stomach, desperate to hold myself together.

"Willow. Willow, look at me," Kane urges.

This is wrong , my omega moans. It's all wrong .

He curses. "You gotta talk to me, bunny. Where's it hurt?"

It doesn't hurt. I ... I don't know what it feels like. Just wrong.

"Dammit," he snaps. "I knew you shouldn't have drunk that fucking tea."

"It's not the tea," I rasp out.

He feels my forehead. "No fever." Checks my fingers. "Not frostbite. There's gotta be a reason you're like this, and it all started with the tea." His lip curls. "With him ."

I double over, the mere mention of Silas like a blow. Kane grasps my shoulders.

"Just breathe. I'm gonna figure this out." He glances around, like a cure will magically appear. "Gotta get you to shelter."

Murmuring soothing words I don't understand, Kane carries me on and on and on. His breathing is sharp. I cling to the sound, letting it ground me. Alpha's here. He's going to keep me safe.

But what about the other one?

It feels like an eternity before Kane stops. I lift my head, examining the rocky formations wrapped around us. The air feels different. Warmer. Smokier.

"I'll start a fire," Kane announces. He goes to lie me down, when suddenly we hear it.

Kane springs up. I cling to his chest, feeling the harsh vibration when he snarls.

“Well, well.” Three males in fur cloaks venture out from around the boulders—two on the left, the one speaking to us on the right. He’s stocky, face weathered, with a dark, thick beard. “We weren’t expecting visitors so late in the year.”

Kane snarls again. “Don’t get any closer.”

The male—an alpha, without doubt—growls. “This is claimed territory.”

“Which makes you a trespasser,” another one adds.

“You and your omega,” from the third.

This is my fault. Kane tried to tell me we were in rogue lands, and I barely heard him. All I could think about was ... was ...

My stomach twists. I smother a cry.

I can feel every muscle in Kane’s body tensing. Preparing to run. Or fight. I want to use my voice, or, god, my legs, and actually be of some help to him. He can’t take three alphas alone. I know that.

If Silas were here ...

This time I can’t swallow back my whimper. All four alphas tense, their attention fixed on me.

“She’s sick,” one of them accuses.

“Get her out of here,” the first demands. “Want you off my territory, now.”

He’s letting us go—that’s good, right? The way Kane is still growling, his body

coiled, makes me unsure.

“Now, now, alphas,” a new voice pipes up. Female. Gentle.

Omega .

I watch as a tanned omega with long brown hair peers around the boulders. Then I notice her stomach—the delicate bump beneath her dress. Pregnant. No wonder her alphas are so wary.

“Omega,” the first alpha, probably their pack leader, rumbles. “Go back inside.”

She smiles. “I will. Once I’ve welcomed our guests.”

Kane adjusts his arms around me, like he’s not sure what to make of this. Neither am I. But seeing another omega instinctively puts me at ease. She reminds me of a deer, with round eyes and tentative motions. I feel I can trust her.

Though I can’t say the same for her mates.

“Kane,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “Put me down.”

He growls warningly.

“Kane.” I look up at him. “Please.”

Still growling, deliberating, he reluctantly lowers me to my feet, keeping one arm around my waist so I don’t topple.

The omega approaches, taking her head alpha’s arm. “Hello, dear. You look like you could use a hot drink.”

Her grumbling alphas sure don't seem to agree, nor does mine, but there's something comforting about her soft voice. I'd forgotten how easy it is to be around omegas. How safe.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "I ..."

My knees buckle. I try to turn to Kane, to warn him, but it's too late.

As my vision goes dark, the last thing I see is that omega's face. Her big doe eyes. And for some reason the only thing I can think of is a name, haunting me to the very edge of unconsciousness.

Silas.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Laughter. Hands where they're not supposed to be. No matter how much I fight it, the alpha's knot won't come out.

"You're ours now, princess."

My own screams sound unfamiliar. I keep trying. Keep searching for myself.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Amber eyes find mine. The alpha places his hand on the small of my spine. I can still feel his knot inside me, trapping me, but somehow, it doesn't hurt anymore.

"All I want ... is to keep you safe."

I don't believe him. Can't believe him. And yet, he's here, and for the first time, I'm not afraid to keep dreaming.

"Will. You awake?"

I start, convinced I'm about to find Silas lying next to me, when Kane's cinnamon-scented pheromones surge into my lungs. He's kneeling above me, his eyes bloodshot.

"Alpha," I gasp.

He drops whatever he was holding to take me in his arms. “Thank fuck.” He breathes in my hair. “You’re awake.”

I don’t realize I’m holding back tears until I hear his voice, and it’s like a dam breaks. What the hell is wrong with me ? Even back in the village, I hardly ever cried—especially not in front of alphas. But lately I can’t go an hour without breaking apart.

“I’m here,” Kane purrs. “Right here.”

Once I’ve calmed down, he explains what happened after I collapsed. Those alphas from the surrounding cave system invited us in. Their omega, Mindy, convinced them she should treat me. They set us up in one of the neighbouring alcoves, where Kane has been monitoring my condition ever since.

“Wow.” I exhale. “You’ve been busy.”

He passes me a bowl of herbs soaked in water. “I’ve had time.”

I frown, sipping. “How much time?”

“Two days.”

I choke.

Glowing, Kane pats me hard between the shoulder blades. “You tryin’ to give me a heart attack, omega?”

I splutter, “Just keeping you on your toes.”

“Been keeping me on my damn toes since the day we met.”

His tone is grumpy, but I see the colour in his cheeks. It must've given him a real scare when I collapsed. I wish I could apologize, but I know he wouldn't hear it. Instead, I take his hand.

His face is stern. "Don't ever do that again."

"I won't," I promise.

He squeezes my hand like he wants to believe it, though I'm not sure either of us do. After all, we still don't know what's wrong with me.

Kane sighs. "I should get Mindy."

But he doesn't move. My hand stays in his, and the way he looks at me—like I'm the only thing tethering him to earth—tweaks my omega's interest.

Gently, I prod, "Alpha?"

Kane hesitates. Finally, gravelly, he explains, "When you fell ... everything went dark. I forgot what we were doing here. Hell, I forgot my own damn name. You were gone, and I was nothin'." He grits his teeth. "I had nothing."

My inner omega is furious. Snarling at me for leaving alpha all alone. For letting him feel like, after all he's done, I would suddenly abandon him. I want to scent him, to make him feel safe, if only he'd—

"I hope I'm not interrupting?"

We both turn at the female voice by the alcove's entrance. A pregnant omega I recognize from the other night peers around, smiling. She's flanked by two alphas.

Kane growls. "I told you," he says, "no alphas."

One of them, lean and scowling, folds his arms. "And we told you, Mindy stays with us."

"Alphas," Mindy huffs. "If you don't mind, I'd like to tend to my patient."

Judging by their grumbling, they do mind. Quite a bit.

"She's sick," the other alpha, a stocky red-head, argues. "Can't let you get too close."

He has a point. Though, whatever's wrong with me, I doubt it's contagious. This omega hasn't even met Silas. I doubt she'll suddenly feel faint and disoriented when she so much as thinks his name.

Those amber eyes from my dream surge into focus, making my insides ache. I double over.

The two alphas bristle. "See?" the lean one says.

"Bunny," Kane murmurs, holding my face, examining me.

"I'm okay," I whisper. "It's not that bad."

Mindy ventures close, ignoring her alphas' protests. "May I?"

If she weren't looking directly into my eye, I might've thought she was asking Kane. But I nod, so he softens, and she kneels down in front of me.

"Alright," the red-head grunts. "That's close enough."

Mindy pauses, her hand stretching toward me. Our eyes meet again, a keen tenderness in her gaze.

“All alphas out,” she announces.

Kane’s chest rumbles with a growl he’s smart enough not to let free. Mindy’s alphas start to argue, but she snaps around, glaring, and they pause.

With a short, unhappy look between them, they finally grumble for her to be quick. The lean one tells Kane to scram. He, too, hesitates, but I give him my best reassuring smile. Finally, he rises.

“I’ll be right outside,” he grunts.

And suddenly, it’s just me and Mindy. She sighs dramatically.

“I hope you can forgive my alphas.” She rubs her stomach. “They’ve all been a little on edge.”

“I understand,” I say softly. “Are you—”

I stop, surprised by how quickly my instincts kick in. Where I come from, a pregnant omega is cause for celebration. It’s all us unbonded omegas aspire to. A part of me wants to pry for every detail—how did she and her alphas meet, how many heat cycles did it take for her to get pregnant, how far along is she? It takes all my restraint to keep my mouth shut.

Mindy just smiles. “He’ll be born in the spring.”

God, she read me like a book. “He?”

“I think so.” She rubs her stomach again. “But it’s anyone’s guess.”

She asks to take my hand, so I give it to her, letting her check my pulse. She frowns.

“Mm. That alpha of yours must’ve been scenting you constantly. I can barely make you out.”

My inner omega preens.

“How long have you been feeling unwell?” she asks.

“Uh ...” I consider. “A few days, I guess.” Ever since I left the cabin, but it’s been getting steadily worse.

“And your last heat?”

I bristle. “Maybe a week ago.”

She looks like she wants to prod deeper, but holds back, instead asking about my other symptoms. My history. I’m careful how much I divulge—habit, really—and can’t help but note her deepening frown.

“What?” I ask. “You think something’s wrong?”

“You said you drunk a contraceptive tea,” she recalls.

My stomach sinks. Was Kane right? Is that tea really the cause of all this? It could make sense. Psychologically speaking, thinking of Silas makes me think of the tea. Reminds me of the havoc both it, and he, wreaked on my system.

“Can you remember what was in it?” she asks.

“I—I didn’t make it. I recognized some of the ingredients, but I couldn’t say for sure.”

“Your alpha,” she says hopefully. “He’d know?”

If it’s possible, my stomach sinks even deeper, squirming between my toes. “No. He ... he didn’t make it, either.”

Mindy regards me for a moment. I’m blushing so hard I can’t imagine what she’ll find, nor do I have the courage to speak the words. Not when the mere thought of Silas sends me spiraling.

Finally, gently, she realizes, “You had another alpha.”

I stiffen. Mindy sighs.

“Are you bonded?” she asks. “I didn’t notice any marks, but—”

“What? No. I—I’m not.”

“Therein lies your problem, dear. When you imprint on an alpha and don’t get the chance to bond, it causes all kinds of trouble. Your omega is at a loss, and she’ll probably keep getting worse, until you’ve reinforced that connection.”

It takes me a moment to process what she’s saying. Everything fizzles into white noise the second I hear that word.

Imprint.

“No,” I blurt out, not sure if I’m interrupting her or not. “That’s not happening.”

Her eyes widen. “Did he ... reject you?”

“No! I already have a mate.”

Mindy shrugs. “I have three mates. And only one of them imprinted.”

I blink. “You have an imprint mate?”

“It’s not as uncommon as you might think. Well—” she considers. “It is in the sense that most omegas don’t even meet alphas outside their station. Hoffran and I got lucky. I was serving tables when he walked in.” She smiles. “By the end of the night, we knew.”

“This was ... in a village?”

“That’s right. His family was outraged. A high-ranking church official like himself had no place beside a barmaid. So, we left.”

I shouldn’t be so surprised. Even in Southside, all sorts of people deserted to the wilds. I wouldn’t have considered the possibility if they hadn’t. Still, you don’t hear of many success stories once they’re gone. Let alone stories of forbidden lovers starting anew.

“Like I said,” I grit out at last, “I already have Kane, and, imprinted or not, I love him too much to worry about bonding anyone else.”

Mindy sits back, her eyes bright. Only then do I realize what I’ve said.

I ... love him?

How she understood the nature of our relationship, so new, so tender, I have no idea. I’m blushing too deeply to question it.

“Listen.” She takes my hands. “Everything you feel for Kane is real. And wonderful. If you want to bond with him, that’s precisely what you should do.” Her look deepens. “But it won’t fix what’s happening in here.” She gestures to my chest—my thudding heart. “Only your imprint mate can take care of that.”

Silas’s words ring in my head. “I’m here to take care of you.” Did he know, back on that very first night? If he did, why would he ever let me go?

Oh yeah . My inner omega cringes. Because I told him to .

Mindy rises. Instinctively, I move to help her, but she brushes me aside. “Sit,” she says. “Rest. I’ll brew you something for the symptoms.”

“Wait.” I stand anyway, leaning against the wall. “Are you ... going to tell Kane?”

Her face softens. “No, dear. My lips are sealed.” There’s a deeper layer to her words, one she doesn’t need to speak. He’s going to find out, one way or another. Better he learns it from me.

I call out a shaky thanks as she waddles off, and barely a second later, Kane rushes into the alcove. He takes my arms, holding me up, his glare demanding.

“So? What’d she say?”

I can’t do this to him. Not after the grueling lengths he’s taken to protect me from Silas—the very alpha whose bite, apparently, I can’t live without. I owe him too much to break his heart now.

“Will,” Kane urges. “Hey. Don’t shut me out.”

“Never,” I whisper.

I stand on my toes to kiss him, willing him to soften, to kiss me back, and love me even half as much as I love him.

Willing him to forgive me.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

A bit of wood catches my thumb. I grit my teeth and hold on tighter, determined to finish building.

New sentinels are required to undergo extensive wilderness survival training. I remember I passed the course with flying colors, but don't remember using those skills much since.

This small animal trap, my fifth attempt, will have to suffice. I position it just right and throw some leaves around, dispelling my scent.

Now, back to what really matters.

The rocky mound I've claimed for shelter is a couple hundred yards away from the cave system where Willow and Kane disappeared three days ago.

I haven't heard, seen, or scented them in days.

My inner alpha is like a beast in a cage. What are they still doing here? he demands. They can't be planning to settle. This territory is already claimed—and judging by the grumbling alphas I've seen coming in and out to hunt, they're not too happy about the intrusion.

At first, I wondered if they'd decided to join ranks with this rogue pack. But no. Kane has too much pride for that. Then it occurred to me.

Willow is my imprint mate. There's no other explanation for the way I'm feeling—weak, disoriented, overwhelmed by my alpha. And if that's how I'm feeling ...

What's it doing to her?

She needs you, my alpha groans. Go to her.

Getting past Kane is one thing. Doable, though not without upsetting our omega. But getting past two others? Maybe more? We're entering risky territory, and possibly endangering Willow in the process.

They can't hide forever. The next time they come out, I'll be ready.

I'm finally going to claim what's mine.

I must have fallen asleep watching the caves, because when I wake up, my chin is hanging against my chest.

Morning dawns over the trees. I rub my arms until the blood starts circulating, half-frozen from sleeping out in the open. Then I look down, noticing one area where my blood has been working just fine.

Christ . I must've dreamt about her. Again.

Sighing, I palm myself down. I don't sense any movement in the caves, and besides, I have an animal trap to check. I follow my tracks, feeling even groggier than I did yesterday.

Thank god.

I don't know what I've caught, exactly—maybe an opossum?—but I'll take it. I need all the strength I can get.

As I'm carrying the dead creature back to camp, something catches my eye. I frown, moving closer, until I'm standing over an odd, leathery lump buried in the frost.

Is that ... a water canister?

I crouch down, excavating it from the brittle soil. It has a soft, brown-leather body, like a deflated carcass. Screw cap. I don't just recognize the object. I recognize the design .

It's the exact same as mine.

My heart pounding, I carry the canister back to my campsite to compare the two. Just as I thought—a perfect match. Except, my canister came with the rest of my pack. Just like everything else I'm carrying, it's standard issue.

For a sentinel.

What the hell is another Southside sentinel doing this far north? Or, what were they doing? Judging by the state of this thing, it's been sitting on the forest floor for weeks. Maybe months.

I think back on my last conversation with the commander. I wasn't especially invested at the time, so it's hard to pick out details.

“ New mother ... disappeared. Family's beside themselves. Insist she's been kidnapped. ”

It strikes me then—where we are. This might be rogue territory, but it's right near the outskirts of, well ...

Northside.

It was a ridiculous theory. Why would Northsiders kidnap one noble-born omega from Southside? But if Pack Shire insisted, there's no telling what the commander might've done to appease them.

Like sending a squadron up north to investigate.

That must be why he sought me out two whole months after her disappearance. Pack Shire breathing down his neck. His other options exhausted.

All signs suggest the sentinels are long gone. That should come as a comfort, and yet, my alpha remains unsettled.

I start a fire, hoping to cook my kill before anyone notices the smoke. The meat tastes bland and bloody, even with a dash of salt from my dwindling supplies, but it steadies me enough to stay on high alert.

What're you doing in there ? I beam a psychic message to Willow. Are you safe?

I'm still clearing up when there's movement from the caves. Two alphas I recognize—Skinny and Red-Head—stand outside the main entrance, glaring out.

That's when I hear it. Rustling leaves. Something sharp slicing through the air.

I jump to my feet, coming face-to-face with the pointy end of a wooden spear. The alpha holding it is tall, hulking, with a thick, dark beard. Maybe ten years my senior. He smells of earth and pine.

His lips quirk. “Morning, son.”

Slowly, I put my hands up. “Back at you.”

His gaze flicks to my campsite. “What are you, then? A thief, or a pervert?”

“Just passing through.”

There’s something like amusement in his eyes, but those stark, warning pheromones are no joke.

Finally, he lowers his spear. “Whatever you’re after, you won’t find it here. We live off the wilds. And my mate—” his lip curls, “is off limits.”

“Can I assume you’re referring to one of those lovely gentlemen?” I risk a smile, gesturing toward Skinny and Red-Head, who are still posted outside the cave.

The alpha grunts. “Should’ve guessed you were a villager.”

Villager. Like it’s an accusation.

I shrug. “Your pack, your business.” Though I don’t like the idea of Willow being outnumbered by four alphas.

“My pack’s business is our omega,” he rumbles, “and our territory. Find somewhere else to play rogue.”

I relax, if only slightly. “I don’t mean any trouble.” I indicate to the water canisters at my feet. “Though I am curious. I’m not the first visitor you’ve had this season, am I?”

His weathered face is blank, betraying nothing.

“I have no interest in your pack,” I assure him. “I’m simply curious as to what business a Southside sentinel had on your lands.”

The alpha quirks a brow. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He’s astute. I’ll give him that.

I deliberate whether I should ask about Willow and Kane. My inner alpha snaps at me to pin him down and wrestle the information out, but he doesn’t strike me as the kind of alpha who responds well to violence.

To my surprise, he confesses, “Sentinels came. Whole squadron of ’em.”

I frown. “You don’t say.”

“Mm-hm. Then they left.”

“Did they say what they wanted?”

“You really think I gave a shit what they wanted?”

No, I highly doubt he did. But I don’t like that he’s not giving me a straight answer.

Suddenly he chuffs, like he senses my unease. “You got a name, sentinel?”

If I tell him my name, he may very well share that information with his pack, who may very well share it with Kane and Willow. I’m not ready to sacrifice my position just yet.

“Pierson,” I say at last. “And yours?”

He rolls his shoulders. “Hoffran.”

“Well, despite what you think, Hoffran, I’m not a sentinel.”

He grunts. “Could’ve fooled me.”

With that, and a final warning to be off his territory by nightfall, he takes off. I watch him as far as I can, mapping out the route he must’ve taken to sneak up on me.

Wondering, if I followed him back, whether Willow would be pleased to see me.

Kane

Pack Hoffran takes every chance they get to put me to work.

“If you’re not gonna hunt, you can at least make yourself useful.”

Like I give a shit. They can have me chop up every goddamn log in this forest if it means I can keep an eye on my omega.

It’s been four days, and she can still hardly stand. Mindy and her alphas come by during mealtimes, bearing tea and winter berries—so far the only thing that doesn’t make Willow’s stomach turn.

“I was the same, early on.” Mindy pats her pup bump.

My alpha regards her with idle interest. Then I realize what she’s saying.

“Wait.” I jolt up. “You mean—?”

At once, Braze and Lachlan—the red-head and the beanpole—growl in warning. Mindy just laughs.

“Sorry,” she says, “I see how that might’ve been misleading.”

“You mean ...” Slowly, I relax. “She’s not ...?”

“Definitely not,” Willow asserts, then smirks. “I didn’t think you could get that pale,

Kane.”

“White as a sheet,” Mindy giggles.

Even her alphas smile at that, though whether it’s at their mate’s happiness or my embarrassment, I’m not sure.

Truthfully, I would’ve liked to have jumped ship by now. Willow’s clearly not making any progress, no matter how much Mindy dotes on her. We’re no closer to figuring out what the hell is wrong.

“ That’s it, ” I said last night as I tucked her under my cloak. “ I’m taking you to Northside. ”

To my surprise, she recoiled. “ What? Why ?”

“ Why do you think? You need a healer, bunny. ”

“ But Mindy is —”

“ Desperate for the company, ” I grunted. “ I’m not gonna keep you here for her sake .”

“ What about mine ?”

To that I stopped, frowning in question. It hadn’t occurred to me until that very moment, but suddenly I couldn’t help but ask. “ Will ... is there something you’re not telling me ?”

She went quiet. Hidden under my cloak.

When I asked again, she was already asleep.

I keep my hands busy, skinning the fresh meat Hoffran brought in. The blood doesn't bother me, but I try to shield the omegas, blocking the gory view with my shoulders.

Mindy's mates have to practically peel her off Willow when it's our turn to bathe. Braze leaves us a half-boiled cauldron and a couple sponges. I wait until he and Lachlan are well out of view before helping Willow undress.

She shudders. "Thanks."

I say nothing. If I don't focus, I'm going to get hard.

Ugh. Too late.

I scrub her down, watching her pale skin turn ever-so-slightly pink. She's so damn soft. So ... delicate. I rub her neck, massaging the sensitive scent glands.

Imagining how perfect she'd look with my bite.

"Alpha," Willow sighs. "I can feel that."

I pause. Then, at her shimmying hips, I realize. I'm still hard. Scratch that—I'm harder than ever.

"What'd you expect?" I mutter.

"More like what I didn't expect. Who knew you'd be such an exhibitionist?"

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

She laughs, the sound making my inner alpha preen.

Begrudgingly, I let her take over, turning my back so she can sponge me clean. We're sitting in front of an open fire, soaking up the warm water, and yet, somehow, her hands are like ice.

She focuses the sponge around my wrists. My pulse throbs, wishing I could scent her, when suddenly—

My eyes widen, feeling a sharp, distinct pressure.

“Omega!”

I snap sideways, finding Willow with her jaw wrapped around my inner wrist.

She pulls away. “Sorry.”

Sorry? She's sorry? My inner alpha is ecstatic. Omega wants to bond !

My voice comes out low and gravelly. “Want to tell me what's going on, bunny?”

“I—” She blushes. “I wasn't going to bite you. Honest.”

A part of me believes her—her teeth barely pricked the flesh—but the other, bigger part doesn't want to.

She explains, “I was just curious. Wanted to know what it might feel like.”

“Yeah?” I swallow. “And, uh ... what'd you feel?”

Every second she doesn't answer, I feel my heart beating louder. I've known since

before Willow's heat that I wanted to sink my teeth into her. I figured I'd hold out, not push it, hoping she'd come to me when she was ready.

Is that what this is? Ready ?

As I'm stewing, Willow's eyes glisten. "I don't know what's gotten into me."

I turn the rest of the way around. "Your omega," I declare, "she wants me." That's gotta be it .

"I—I don't know. Mindy suggested—well, she thought, maybe, bonding would be a good idea."

"For what? Gettin' you better?"

Willow bites her lip. There's something she's not telling me. I felt it last night, and I feel it again now, twice as strong. What could she possibly have left to hide?

"Alpha?" Finally, she meets my gaze. "Will you bite me?"

Yes. Yes. Fucking yes! my alpha roars.

But something's off. Those watery eyes. The way she's chewing her bottom lip to stop it shaking. If I'm going to bond my omega, my mate ... it's not gonna be like this.

Reading my face, Willow shrinks. "You don't want to."

I growl. "Omega."

"I'm being selfish," she rambles. "I mean, we've only had one heat together! Which,

in fairness, is when most mates bond, but those are village rules, and neither of us live in a village anymore, and of course that's for good reason, so I can't expect you to just—"

"Omega," I growl again, deeper. " Breathe ." She sucks in a breath, and I take her face in my hands. "Who says I don't wanna bite you?"

Her eyes widen. "So ... you do?"

I'd be biting you right now, if I wasn't such an asshole, my inner alpha snarks. I sigh.

"Did Mindy give you a reason this could work?" I ask.

"It's a long shot," she confesses. "But apparently it couldn't hurt." She eyes me sheepishly. "Like I said. Selfish."

"You're not the selfish one here." I kiss her, tasting her distress. "I am."

She scowls like she's about to protest. I kiss her again.

"Listen close, bunny. The only reason—and I mean only reason—I'm not bitin' you right this second is because I want it to be more than that." I look around. "More than a damp cave and shitty fire, where those numskull alphas could walk in on us any damn second."

She cocks her head. "You're not biting me because ... you want it to be romantic?"

"Basically."

Her lips stretch into a small smile. "So full of surprises."

“You making fun of me?”

“No, alpha. It’s one of the things I love about you.”

Every muscle stiffens. I stare, waiting for her to realize what she’s said. Maybe for her to realize she’s made a mistake. My alpha claws at my chest, but the barrier remains, not letting him hear the words until she gives me some kind of signal.

This time it’s Willow who kisses me. She taste sweet now. No trace of fear.

My body opens, then closes around her, crushing her against me. I love you, I try to tell her through each stolen breath. More than anything, I love you.

The kind of love where nothing else matters.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Kane's been chomping at the bit to get back to the forest. As soon as he finds us our own territory, he claims, I'll get better.

I don't have the heart to lie to him. Instead, I find a piece of truth.

"I like it here. I like being with Mindy." I smile. "It's nice having another omega around."

Kane scowls. "What about the alphas?"

Granted, they're a little less fun to deal with.

"I dunno." I choose my words carefully. "I think I'd forgotten what it's like to be around a pack." At his look, I hastily add, "Even if we're not a part of it."

That only prompts him to remind me we can have all the pack we want, once we have our own territory. He'll give me 'as many pups as it takes' until I'm satisfied.

I really should whack him over the head for that, but my stupid omega preens.

Kane is stoking the fire when Mindy makes her second visit of the day. Her alphas, and mine, know the drill by now—grumpily filing out to give us some space.

"Here," she passes me a steaming mug. "This one's for the nausea."

Thank god. I drink eagerly. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“No,” she smiles, “I’m just an expert.” She pats her stomach, and I can’t help but notice her movements are a little more sluggish than they were this morning. Instantly I put the cup down.

“Please.” I hand it to her. “If you need this more than I do—”

“No, no.” She waves me off. “Thankfully the throwing-up-every-hour phase has passed.”

“You seem pale. Maybe you should lie down.”

“If I lie down now, my alphas won’t let me up again until tomorrow. Trust me. I’d rather be here, getting in my omega time.”

So I push aside my reservations, letting myself enjoy Mindy’s stories. She finishes telling me about how Lachlan joined their pack—an exile, basically the runt of an already-starving family, who happened upon some poisonous berries on Hoffran’s territory.

“Poor thing was groaning so much, I finally begged Hoffran to take pity. And then, well, I couldn’t bear to part with him.”

I smile. “You all seem to work well together.”

She shrugs. “We get by.”

I frown, waiting for her to elaborate, when she leans against the cave’s interior, pressing her face into the cool rock.

“Mindy?” I ask, concerned.

Her eyes flutter. “It’s ... hot. Don’t you think?”

Uh, no. I think it’s the middle of winter and we’re sitting in an open cave .

Before I get a chance to answer, she slumps to the side.

I quickly prop her upright. “Mindy!” God, she’s definitely burning up. “ Help ! Kane!”

Within seconds, Kane bursts in. He’s followed closely by Lachlan and Braze, who snarl at the sight of their crumpled omega. Thankfully Kane gets to me first, scooping me out of the way.

“What happened?” Braze demands, patting Mindy’s cheeks. “What the hell did you do?”

I swallow back my terror. “I—I think she has a fever. She said she was feeling hot, and—”

“Get Hoffran,” Braze barks at his packmate. “Now!” He sweeps Mindy up and starts to carry her out.

I should follow them. I’m no medical expert, but Mindy is my friend. I’m sure I could be of some use.

“Willow,” Kane warns, quietly, “no.”

“I want to help,” I plead.

Hearing this, Braze snaps around. “You’ve helped enough.”

I’m too stunned to argue. Even if I could ... what if he’s right? I know I’m not contagious, but maybe just having me around has sapped all Mindy’s energy. Energy that should’ve been spent growing her pup.

“It’s okay,” Kane purrs, responding to my distress. “You’re okay, omega.”

Doesn’t he get it?

It’s not me I’m worried about.

Getting updates from Mindy’s alphas is like pulling teeth. If I weren’t so unsteady, I’d be pacing, waiting for the next scrap of information.

“Will,” Kane rumbles, “c’mon, you gotta eat.”

It’s hard enough mustering an appetite on a good day, let alone when I’m sick with worry. I take a bite to placate him, and instantly want to throw up.

I put my plate down. “What did Hoffran say, exactly?”

Kane huffs. “I already told you.”

“Tell me again.”

He tosses a scrap of fatty meat into the fire. That’s how I know he’s worried, too—normally, with Kane, it’s waste not, want not.

“Lachlan’s headed to the village. He’s gonna buy some supplies. Maybe talk to a healer.”

Sounds expensive. “Did he take anything with him?” My gaze flicks to our pack, wondering if I have anything of value.

“Don’t know,” Kane says. “Didn’t ask.”

“Kane. This is important.”

“Never said it wasn’t. But you got to face facts here, bunny. They don’t want our help. We’re better staying out of it—takin’ off at first light.”

He wants to leave , after our being here might’ve caused this? I owe Mindy better than that.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Both Kane and I start, turning to the mouth of the cave. Pack Hoffran’s elusive head alpha folds his arms.

Kane rises. “That a threat?”

Hoffran barely regards him before shifting his gaze to me. His expression is impenetrable.

“You leave when Mindy’s fever breaks.” He pauses. “She’d never forgive me if I let you go before then.”

“Can I see her?” I beg.

“She’s sleeping.”

“Oh.” I shrink. “Of course.” He keeps eyeing me, making Kane’s chest rumble, until I add, “I—if you need to buy medicine, I might have something worth trading. Just let me check my bag.”

For a second, Hoffran’s voice tightens. “That won’t be necessary.”

He leaves before I can ask any follow-up questions. I wish I could go after him, and that he’d let me check in on Mindy—asleep or not. But I’m too scared to ask.

Kane smooths my hair and tells me I should try to sleep. To my surprise, the words hit me like a ton of bricks, exhaustion descending upon my body. I barely have my head in his lap before my eyes droop closed.

Crying. Laughing. Taking turns. One knot goes down, another one comes. For a minute I think I’ve died, and this is what hell must be.

“You’re ours now, princess.”

“I’m here to take care of you.”

I wish I knew who to believe.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

When my eyes snap open. I'm surrounded by fire warmth, and alpha warmth, and comforting cinnamon.

Above me, Kane is slumped against the cave wall. His head lolls, asleep.

Delicately, I sit up, draping his cloak where my body used to be. I crawl towards the mouth of the cave, my inner omega pining, like something's drawing her out.

Mindy.

I feel my way outside the caves, shivering in the open night air, following the sound of another crackling fire.

“—sometime tomorrow morning.”

I stop in my tracks. That's Hoffran's voice.

Of course it's Hoffran's voice. What's he going to do—leave his sick, pregnant omega unattended?

Braze answers, “Assuming Lachie gets them to take the bait.”

“It's not bait. It's an offer.”

“Alright, then assuming their offer still stands.”

“If it didn’t, do you really think she’d be here?”

My heart is pounding. I pray they can’t hear it, or scent my mounting apprehension. This is the first time I’ve heard any of the Pack Hoffran alphas speak freely. Their voice are low, almost whispering. Are they afraid of waking Mindy?

“She won’t like this,” Braze sighs.

“She’ll understand,” Hoffran returns.

“I don’t know, Hoffran. Throwing another omega under the cart—”

“Is a sacrifice she’d be willing to make,” Hoffran insists. “If not for her own sake, then for the pup’s.”

To this, Braze has no argument. Or maybe he does. My ears are ringing too loudly to tell. Last I checked, I’m the only other omega here. Which means Lachlan’s bait, or offer, or whatever the hell, has something to do ... with me .

My omega screeches at me to run and wake Kane. Before I can muster the strength, Hoffran goes on.

“What I need from you now is to keep your mouth shut. No-one but the three of us can know about this.” His voice darkens. “Which means it’s up to us to make sure the outsiders don’t leave.”

Braze grunts. “For how long?”

“I don’t know. However long it takes Southside’s squadron to double back.”

Air escapes my lungs. I press my hand against the rock, doing everything in my

power not to collapse in a puddle.

Southside?

What the hell does Pack Hoffran have to do with my home village? Or any village at all, for that matter? They're rogues! Worse, what allegiance could they possibly have to the sentinels?

It doesn't matter. For all I know, Lachlan has already sent that message to Southside, telling them where to find me. I need to put as much distance between me and Pack Hoffran as possible.

I need to get to Kane.

By some miracle, I stumble back the way I came, bursting into the alcove and catching myself on my hands and knees.

Kane jerks awake. "Will?"

I don't know what alerts him first—my wide eyes or my panicked pheromones—but already, he's got his hands on me.

"The hell?" he mutters. "Where've you—"

"Listen to me," I whisper urgently, "we have to get out of here."

Kane reels. "Can't this wait 'til morning?"

"No. It can't." I scramble to gather our things. I barely have a chance to scrunch up the bedsheet before Kane grabs me again.

“Willow,” he murmurs. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Somehow, even in the thick of panic, those ruby eyes keep me sane. Hints of cinnamon seep into me. Reminding me, as long as he’s here, I’m safe.

“It’s Hoffran,” I explain. “He’s sending word to Southside ... about me.”

Kane’s face darkens, blacker than night. His every breath is a growl.

“How,” is all he gets out.

“I—I’m not sure. But I heard them. Somehow, they know.” Maybe they’ve known since our very first night here. The thought gives me chills.

“Give me the pack,” Kane orders.

I hand it over, glad to let him do the heavy lifting. He’s faster than I could hope to be, sweeping up the last of our possessions. He’s even quiet about it. I guess all these years living out in the wilds has made him light on his feet.

Though, as it turns out, he’s not the only one.

A long, ominous shadow looms over the alcove. Then another. I gasp, gripping Kane to alert him.

Hoffran stands at the entrance, arms folded. Braze hovers at his side. They both have brown eyes—Hoffran’s, sharp, Braze’s, deep. Both equally unyielding.

“Going somewhere?” Hoffran asks.

Kane stands in front of me, poised to fight.

He can take them, my omega asserts. But I'm not so sure. Kane is strong, and bigger than either of them, but two versus one is never great odds.

My inner omega screams out for someone to save us, to save my mate, knowing damn well there's only one other person she wants to see.

Hoffran sighs. "Stand down, kid."

"Sit down, old man." Kane's scent is practically venomous. "Before I put you down."

Braze gives a warning snarl. Panic springs to the back of my throat, my omega clambering to get free.

"I already told you," Hoffran says, "I can't let you leave. My omega—"

"Mindy has nothing to do with this," I pipe up, hating the tremor in my voice. "Y—you just want to sell me to Southside!"

Only Braze reacts, reeling back, whereas Hoffran just stares.

"There's a lofty price on your head, omega," he informs me. "If you really want to help Mindy, this is how."

I was right—Pack Hoffran doesn't have the resources for medicine, or healers, or anything else Mindy might need. That wasn't a problem when she and the pup were both healthy. But now?

"Watch your fuckin' mouth," Kane snaps. "Willow doesn't owe you shit."

Braze snarls, stepping forward. Kane pushes me further behind him. I can see the

gears in motion. Pack Hoffran won't let me leave. Kane won't back down. One way or another, this is going to end in a fight.

Panic rising. This time I'm not fast enough to catch it. I chirp, so loud it echoes off the rocky walls, ringing out into the night.

Kane snaps around. "Omega—"

Hoffran sees his chance to strike.

Kane reacts at lightning speed, but Hoffran has the advantage—whacking him with all his might. As Kane steadies himself, Braze takes his turn to throw a punch. Kane narrowly avoids the blow, shouldering me in the process.

"Get back!" he orders.

I do as I'm told, watching as Hoffran and Braze team up on my mate. Me, they need alive. But him ...

I chirp again. Again. Alpha, my inner omega cries. Save him. Please, god, save him.

I'm delusional. I know that. But I can't just stand here in silence as my mate gets the life beaten out of him. He's holding his own, weaving and countering all their moves. But how long before Pack Hoffran's advantage wins out?

As if in answer, Kane grunts, blocking his head against another nasty blow from Hoffran.

Braze raises his fist. He goes to slam it down, ignoring my screams—my muscles tightening, bracing, as if I'm the one who's about to break into pieces—

“Excuse me.”

Braze stops. Hoffran stops. My heart stops. Kane slips away, standing in front of me once more.

That voice.

Standing at the mouth of the alcove, Silas’s shadow spills forth. He looks almost exactly as I remember him. Huge. Muscular. Short black hair pushed back. Glowing amber eyes focused.

My inner omega squeals for joy. The rest of me reels. How can he be here?

“You,” Hoffran growls, confusing me further. “I told you to get off my territory .”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will.” Silas’s gaze slides to mine, and my whole body throbs, instinctively aching for his bite.

He smirks.

“Once you hand over my imprint mate.”

Page 37

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

I knew something was wrong the moment I saw Skinny leave the caves. Alone.

Since Hoffran's visit, I've had to relocate deeper into the forest. Technically, I'm still on his territory. But if Skinny's expedition is anything to judge by, I'm the least of their problems.

No-one has been in or out of the caves since Skinny left. It gets so dark that I doubt there will be any more action, and yet, my alpha is on guard. Imagining all the reasons Hoffran might send his packmate north.

The moon is nearly full in the sky, and everything is quiet. Too cold for the local critters. Or maybe, like me, they're just holding their breath, waiting for something to happen.

That's when I hear it. Faraway, but somehow crisp, sending a bolt of lightning straight to my alpha.

Willow's chirp .

I'm already moving, tearing through the trees, as though I've been saving my strength for this very moment.

The second I hit the caves, I can smell her. She's mixed in with the scent of several alphas. Flowers. Honey. In this icy winter, she is a fresh breath of spring.

She chirps again, and again, each time like a punch to the heart.

I round the rocky walls into a shallow alcove. Three alphas are locked in a brawl. I could pick them out, if I tried. But in truth none of them matter.

Not when Willow, my omega, my imprint mate, is huddled just a few feet away.

I must say something to make myself known, because everyone stops. Hoffran demands to know what I'm doing here. I must say something to that, too.

Enough talking, my inner alpha roars. Omega's in danger.

He makes a compelling argument.

I take Hoffran first, leaving the brawny red-head to Kane. Our bodies collide with surprising force. He's strong, for an older alpha. I force him to move, testing his agility. He blocks the obvious blows with ease, his own attacks few but precise.

I duck and ram his stomach with an upper cut. Hoffran chokes, doubling over.

There's my opening.

I clock him across the side of his head. The impact should've been hard enough to knock him out, but instead he staggers, steadying himself against the wall. At the same time, his packmate goes flying. The two of them collide and drop in a heap.

My eyes snap up, locking with Kane's. He glowers as if to say, You're next .

I'll deal with him later. First, these Pack Hoffran alphas need to die for whatever they did to my mate.

“Wait!”

Willow’s shriek makes me realize I’ve got my fist in Hoffran’s collar. He stares up at me groggily. His packmate is out cold.

“Don’t kill him,” Willow gasps. “His omega—”

I snarl. What the fuck do I care about his omega?

“Silas!”

Willow is breathing hard. Standing tall, and yet, her body sways, like she could topple at the slightest breeze.

Lower, she commands, “Don’t. ”

A feeble remnant of myself tells me I don’t take orders from anyone. My inner alpha must disagree.

I release Hoffran, letting him pass out in peace. Willow doesn’t take her eyes off me, like she knows the second she blinks, I could turn feral again. Finally I stand, stepping away.

She turns to Kane. “Mindy,” she says. “I need to see her.”

What the fuck is a Mindy? my alpha grumbles.

To my surprise, Kane doesn’t fight her, following close behind as she blusters right past me. In the two seconds she’s within arm’s reach, I swear I can hear her pulse throbbing, begging for my bite.

Mate. Mate. MATE.

She leaves the alcove without so much as a second glance. Kane sneaks me a glare, like he's warning me to get lost while I still have a chance.

The two of them slip into one of the bigger caves, with a tighter opening. I smell a dwindling fire, smoke mixed in with the scent of another omega. She smells tart. Sick? No ... pregnant.

Suddenly my heart thuds. Here I thought Hoffran was simply posturing. It didn't occur to me what he might be protecting.

Soft voices drift out of the cave. Willow apologizing. Trying to explain. She snaps something at Kane, and he grumbles, shouldering past me on his way out. He returns a few seconds later carrying a pack.

More low voices. Scattering. Rustling.

"Please," Willow insists. "I want you to have it."

I hang back, the minutes dragging like hours, keeping an ear out in case Hoffran and his packmate come to. Wherever the third one's gotten to, I doubt he's going to make it back tonight, but I can't be too vigilant.

"Willow," I hear Kane mutter, "time to go."

There are tears in her voice. "Not now—"

"Yes now. Don't know how much time we've got."

I scowl. What is he talking about ?

Finally, ignoring her hissing and sniffing, he drags her out. I feel that urge again as soon as she's in my reach—to grab her, plunge my teeth in deep.

“You're in the way,” Kane grunts.

I bite back a snarl.

“Yes, well.” I glare. “You're in front of my mate.”

He steps closer, teeth bared like he's about to take my throat out. “You think I won't kill you, just 'cause she's here?”

Willow nudges past him. Past both of us. “That's exactly what I think,” she mutters.

I catch her wrist. “You could at least admit you're pleased to see me.”

“Who says I'm pleased to see you?”

“You're not surprised.” I smile. “Which means you knew I'd come. And that I'm right.” I stare at her a little deeper, trusting she understands.

There's a painful beat of hesitation before she yanks away. Kane takes the opportunity to growl, “She told you the first time. Leave her the fuck alone.”

He puts a hand on the small of her back and walks them out. Willow is unsteady, struggling to match his pace. I follow them all the way to the trees before I can't take it anymore.

“Slow down,” I snap. “She's not fit to—”

“You don't know what she's fit for!” Kane snaps, turning. “She's not yours, and

she's definitely not your fucking imprint mate .”

Willow swallows. “Kane ...”

“She's been weak, hasn't she?” I shoot back. “Alphas, they have the constitution to withstand imprint sickness. Omegas don't . Without a bond, she's only going to get worse.”

“Oh, don't worry,” Kane rumbles, “she's getting a bond.”

“ My bond.”

“Kane,” Willow says again, swaying.

My inner alpha locks in. I shove Kane aside so I can catch her, swinging her up into my arms where she belongs. Her omega must sense it, too, because she doesn't struggle, staring up at me with big glassy eyes.

“Hey!” Kane snaps.

She turns rigid. “Put me down, Silas.”

I hold her tighter. “You don't want that.”

She looks at me again, darkening. Regardless of how hard her heart is beating, her neck calling for my bite, there's no tenderness in those eyes. Only pain.

Reluctantly, I set her down. Kane's scent floods out, reclaiming her in an instant. He runs his hands down her shoulders, examining her for injury.

“I'm fine,” she says, refusing to meet his eye.

He chuffs angrily. Turns to me. In that instant, I can guess what's going to happen, but my limbs are too heavy to stop it.

Kane rears back and slams his fist into my jaw, the sheer force of it sending me sideways. I taste blood, and then dirt, as my body hits a nearby tree.

Now I see why I never let him get a good hit on me. Rogue bastard has a mean punch.

“For god’s sake!” Willow snaps. “If all you’re gonna do is stand around, beating each other up, I’ll go alone.” She storms ahead, her pissed-off pheromones clouding those sickly undertones.

My poor omega is hanging on by a thread. She knows why I followed her out here. She knows what she needs from me. She’s just too damn stubborn to admit it.

I start to follow when Kane grabs my shoulder. “Haven’t you stalked us enough?” he snarls.

“No offence, rogue, but you’re hardly the one I’m stalking. Besides.” My gaze trails Willow. “I’m not going anywhere until she says so.”

Willow halts.

Kane huffs. “Will. Tell him.”

She doesn’t speak. Doesn’t even turn.

“ Willow ,” he urges.

She balls her fists. “I can’t.”

My alpha is on pins and needles. I'm aware of every breath she takes. Every tiny tremor. She's fighting her inner omega—fighting me .

And she's not going to win.

“You can.” Kane's voice wavers. “Dammit, omega. Tell him .” I've never heard him beg before. I should've guessed it would sound like this—hoarse, stubborn, like the only person he's really fighting is himself.

Finally she turns. A single tear rolls down her cheek.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “But it's true.”

The truest thing in the world. The first truth I've ever had the privilege of calling mine. Every inch, every glance, every breath. All of it, all of her , is mine.

I wonder who she's speaking for now—Kane, me, or maybe herself.

“Silas is my imprint mate.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

She still smells like me. Not that it's much consolation.

We walk through the night, Willow stiff in my arms. Neither of us dare to acknowledge each other apart from the way our bodies interlock.

By dawn, we've reached the river. It's cold as fuck, the wind rising off a thin sheen of ice, but at least it'll be harder for anyone to catch our scent.

"We can't stay," Silas says as I rest Willow down. "The sentinels will follow the river north."

Telling him about Pack Hoffran—how Lachlan is probably in Northside right now, selling us out—was Willow's idea. Another stupid one.

"Makes things easier for you, doesn't it?" I return. "You and your squadmates will be reunited in no time."

"How many times do I have to explain this? I'm not a sentinel." At mine and Willow's sharp look, he huffs. "Not anymore."

I turn my gaze to Willow. You're not seriously buying this crap, are you?

Sighing, she says, "Sentinels don't desert, and they definitely don't desert during an assignment." Her brow quirks. "That assignment being me . Correct?"

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then I can’t trust a single word you say. Imprinted or not.” Her voice wavers, and I wonder if the word causes her half as much pain as it causes me.

“Glad that’s cleared up,” I butt in. “You don’t trust him, I sure as hell don’t trust him, so why is he still here?”

“Because I can’t defend myself while fighting off imprinting sickness. The cure for which, regrettably ...” her face darkens, “is him.”

“What do you think I’m here for, omega?”

Her returning glare is like a stab in the heart. “I’ll be sick. In pain.”

“And I’ll take care of you. ”

Silas folds his arms. “She’ll die.”

“Yeah.” I bristle. “Heard that one before.”

“You really think I was bluffing?”

“I think you saw a chance to invade my territory, fuck my omega, and you fucking took it!”

Maybe Willow thinks I’m about to start swinging, and maybe I am, because she puts herself between us. Those bright green eyes flash with fury.

“I’m not yours,” she snarls. “Not if it’s going to be like this. That’s the whole point.” Her pheromones sour. “Or maybe you’d forgotten.”

With those words, the last month comes flooding back. Willow crying out in her sleep. Shaking so hard I was sure she'd break apart. Choosing to trust me, despite that. Despite everything.

"Willow," Silas speaks up, his voice so soft it makes me want to hurl, "I can't imagine what you've been through, or why you ran away, but I promise you, I would never—"

"Stop it," she cuts him off. "Just ... stop."

She steps away, raking her hands through her hair. Neither me or Silas say anything. Not because we're smart enough to bite our tongues, but because right now, we're equally fucking clueless.

Finally, she says, "If you two are gonna fight, go ahead and fight. We're heading out first thing tomorrow."

It takes every fiber of my being not to snatch her wrist and stop her from stalking away from me. Fighting Silas is no use if she's not here to see how much stronger I am. How much better I can be.

I growl, "Where're you going?"

She keeps walking. "Not far."

Now it's Silas's turn to panic. I grab his cloak before he can follow, making him snap around. "It's not safe!"

"Safe enough. For now."

He falters. "It's ... cold."

Now there's a compelling argument. Willow is near freezing even when she's with me, never mind when she's on her own.

I chuff, dispelling my own alpha's paranoia. "She's not a pup. And I'm willing to bet she knows these wilds better than you."

A couple seconds later, Willow disappears up ahead, slipping behind an old, broad oak. She's too far to overhear us, but close enough that we'd hear if she called. Clever bunny . Knows her own limits, and how far she can push them.

"This is ridiculous," Silas mutters. "She needs me."

"Really? You never mentioned."

He glowers. "Don't make light of this, rogue."

I roll my eyes, crouching by the riverbank to punch a hole in the ice. The water is bitterly cold, turning my throat numb as I drink. I can feel Silas's judgement, his disdain, like he's watching a wild animal.

"Twenty-four hours is pushing it," he mutters. "Even if the sentinels don't catch up to us, they'll catch our scent."

"Let's say they do." I stand. "What are you gonna do about it?"

He must sense the challenge, his chest puffing up. "I'll take care of my omega."

"The same omega you were gonna drag back to Southside?"

He pinches his brow. "I'm not explaining this again."

“You didn’t explain it the first time,” I scoff. “You say you’re a deserter. Will says the sentinels don’t have deserters.” I shrug. “She doesn’t trust you, and I’m not gonna be the idiot who tells her otherwise.”

“She trusts me enough to let me stick around.”

My blood boils. If this asshole’s not careful, he’s going to get that fistfight after all. “For now.”

I have to keep my hands busy. If I’m not gathering wood, or clearing the campsite, or whittling down a fishing spear, I won’t be able to keep my alpha’s impulses at bay. He grumbles at me to toss Silas into the river— See how easy it is for him to bite my omega with his teeth chattering.

Over several hours, I only see Willow move once, probably to relieve herself. Otherwise, she doesn’t acknowledge we’re still there and, as much as it kills me, we do the same.

I’m not yours. Not like this.

I knew what she meant, and I hated myself for it. But much more than that ... I hated the idea that maybe, just maybe, she’s wasn’t mine at all.

And that maybe she never was.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

The symptoms are better. This should make me happy, but how can I be, when it confirms what I wish to god wasn't true?

That my imprint mate is also my greatest enemy.

Every time he looks at me—and I can feel him looking, no matter how tightly I tuck myself away—I can sense it. He knows all that I am. My name, my body, my destiny. Not just because we're imprinted.

How many times did my file cross his desk? How many times did he have the power to turn me away, and spare me from my fate?

Instead, I had to spare myself. I left. And he followed.

And now I don't know if I ever actually escaped.

“Hungry?”

I start. Kane is standing above me, holding a leafy parcel with a distinct fishy aroma.

He clears his throat. “Would've put it in a bowl, but, uh, you gave those away.” He pauses. “Plus everything else.”

I lean against the tree. “Mindy needed it more.”

He must hear the bitterness in my voice. “She’s gonna be fine, Will.” Under his breath, he adds, “Would’ve been fine without all our stuff.”

“So why’d you let me give it to her?” I snap. “I’m your omega, aren’t you? You could’ve stopped me.”

Maybe he didn’t deserve that. But the way he snarled at Silas this morning, talking about me like I was nothing more than an alpha’s possession, plays on a loop in my head.

Kane stands there, at a loss. Finally he answers, “I knew you wouldn’t leave. Even with her fever broken.”

I cock my head.

He shrugs. “I would’ve let you do anything if it meant getting you to safety.”

For some reason, the words leave me stunned. Kane’s tone of voice is always so harsh, it’s hard to imagine him wearing his heart on his sleeve, and yet ... that’s who he is. Brutal. But pure.

I don’t realize I’ve accepted the fish until he wipes off his hands. “Eat,” he says. “I’ll come back with water.”

He’s gone before I can beg him to stay. For a few blissful seconds, my inner omega is quiet, basking in the earthy cinnamon pheromones he leaves behind.

I don’t have to overhear the alphas’ discussions to know they’re bickering about me.

Silas, I don't have the stomach to feel guilty for. But Kane deserves better. I invited another alpha into our group, and, cruel or not, he was right: that is a choice . One I didn't have to make. The only question now is what to do about it.

If I let Silas bond me, that's it. He's a part of me forever.

If I don't, he'll be just as much with me—his absence a wound, a sickness, I have to live with my entire life.

Kane visits me a couple more times during the day. I'm sure he knows as well as I do, we're on a clock. The sentinels are coming. If we want to steer clear, we'll need to cover a lot more ground.

"He wants to talk to you," Kane says.

"Does he have a plan for avoiding the sentinels?"

"I ... don't think that's what he wants to talk to you about."

My inner omega wants to push the topic, but I force myself to focus. "If we go to Northside, we might stand out. The sentinels got all the way to Pack Hoffran—who's to say they didn't set a bounty in the village itself?"

He frowns. "Doubt it."

"Why?"

"What Northsider in their right mind is gonna rat someone out to the enemy?"

"You assume their loyalty."

He tilts his head. “Isn’t that what villages are for?”

I try not to sneer. Yeah, right. Not exactly the words I’d use to describe my experience in Southside.

Finally, I say, “It’s probably our safest bet. But I’ll need a new cloak.”

Kane gives me another odd look.

“Mine doesn’t have a hood.” I lift the collar, showing him. “Can’t hide my face, or my hair.”

Kane starts to take off his. I put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” I force a smile. “Not to deprive you the chance to undress.”

“You making fun of me again, omega?”

You denying how much you like it? I want to play along. Instead, I poke at the food he brought me—another tasteless fish. My appetite isn’t quite back, but the nausea is gone, so I keep eating. I sense Kane watching, his inner alpha probably preening, except ... he knows as well as I do what it means.

He picks up a dead leaf. “How long have you known?”

My inner omega pangs. Feeling sorry for Kane. Yearning for the imprint mate hovering by the river.

“I’m not picking a fight.” Kane twirls the brittle stem. “Just want to know.”

Guilt eats into me. It'll only get worse, the longer I let it. Mindy tried to warn me, but I told myself I was protecting Kane. Suppressing the truth.

Maybe the only person I was really protecting was myself.

Slowly, I look up. "You mean, did I know when I asked you to bite me?"

Kane's jaw tightens. I sit still, waiting until he's ready to meet my gaze. I feel his alpha calling me, wanting to hold me, but neither of us are brave enough to ask.

Finally, those ruby reds flick up. I don't let them go, no matter how much it hurts. I need to see how soft he can be. How trusting. That way, maybe, I won't have the heart to lie to him ever again.

"Yes," I confess at last. "I knew. But asking you to bite me—it's not for the reason you're thinking."

His eyes flash. "You don't want to know what I'm thinking, omega."

Okay, maybe I deserved that.

Seeing my reaction, he grits his teeth. "I don't know what I am to you. You just keeping me around for warmth? Fine. You love me?" He swallows. "Doesn't matter."

My eyes widen, afraid of what I'm about to hear. "Kane—"

"One way or another," he cuts me off, "I'm yours ." His eyes flare. "And I'm gonna bond you to prove it."

He ... still wants to bond me ? I stare at him, speechless.

“Don’t get it twisted.” He scoffs. “My teeth aren’t comin’ anywhere near that pretty little neck of yours until I know you want it.”

“I want it.”

We both stop, the shock on Kane’s face perfectly mirroring my own. I had no intention of speaking the words. No idea they’d come so freely.

Kane sighs, his shoulders sinking. “No, you don’t. You want him.” He indicates toward the river, where Silas is still pacing. Before I can protest, he goes on, “Fine, not you. But your omega? Come on, bunny.” He shrugs. “That’s what an imprint mate’s for .”

He’s not wrong. But he’s also missing an important detail.

Silas isn’t the only alpha my omega wants.

I press off the tree, crawling toward him.

Kane stiffens as I tilt my face up to kiss him. For a second, he melts, the tiniest groan humming on his lips.

“Will,” he growls. “I’m not gonna bond with you just to fuck with him.” At this he considers, tempted, then shakes his head. “No matter what you tell yourself, I can’t replace your imprint mate.”

“Good,” I huff.

He quirks a brow. “ Good ?”

“If anyone has earned the right to be my first ...” I sit in his lap, his chest to mine.

“It’s you.”

He lets me kiss him again, melting for a few seconds longer, before pulling away.

“Does that mean you’ve made up your mind?”

The real question is in his eyes, glistening possessively. Are you going to let Silas bond you?

I sigh. “I don’t think I have another choice.” His face darkens, so I explain, “ I want you. That’s one choice I do get to make.”

I kiss him, breathing him in until I’m floating on cinnamon.

“Please,” I whisper. “Let me make it.”

I understand then, suddenly, deeply, that Kane is all out of power. Maybe his following me over the mountain, sacrificing his life in the wilds, promising himself to me, should’ve given it away ... but he really is what he says.

All mine.

With a surrendering snarl, he grips my waist, dragging me closer. My omega sings at the hot bliss of his tongue against mine. Slick gathers between my eager thighs, feeling his member harden for me.

Here, my omega begs. In the trees. In the earth. I’m ready to take my rogue alpha’s lips, his knot, his bond.

Maybe then, at last, he’ll understand. My alpha is not a placeholder for anyone.

He’s mine.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

The hot fog of pheromones should've been my first clue. Honey and cinnamon melted together, so rich it makes my lungs feel sticky just breathing it in. Willow's arousal smells different when she's not in heat. Less floral.

But no less sweet.

I growl, floating toward Willow's hiding place. Kane went to see her maybe twenty minutes ago. I thought it was a good sign she hadn't sent him away like the other times, but now?

I shift from tree to tree, peering around until I can see them. My heart clenches.

Willow, my omega, straddling another alpha. Kissing him.

The other alpha, undressing her—another layer for every ravenous kiss.

Somehow, in the chill of winter, her skin is pink to his touch. She moans under as his hands travel, tracing the curve of her spine until he's hoisting her onto his shaft.

Christ. If I don't stop this now, they're going to—

That's when I hear it. Willow's voice. Like an arrow straight to the heart.

"Yours, alpha," she whispers.

As she tilts her neck to the side.

I wish I could fight. I wish I could roar at her to stop and think about what she's doing. But it feels like I'm moving through water, unable to catch a breath without suffocating. There's nothing I can do but watch, my head spinning, blood racing, cock, helplessly, hardening, as Willow sinks into Kane's lap.

And Kane sinks his teeth into her neck.

Even ten feet away, I can feel the surge of pheromones. It's like lightning in the air, charging every tiny movement. The way Willow clenches, then softens. The way Kane closes his arms around her. Her whimpers. His muffled groans. She grinds on his cock, making sure he's as deep as possible, until finally he retracts his bite, gently licking away the blood.

Their bodies rock together. I recognize the gasping cries on Willow's lips—she's already close.

Before I know what I'm doing, my hand is pressed against my crotch. Arousal courses through me like poison. I want to explode, just to get it all out of my system, but I know it won't make a difference.

The poison runs too deep.

She arches, and Kane lifts her hips for extra leverage. "Need you to come for me," he growls.

The second she hits that peak, I don't know how I'll stop myself from coming with her. I'll ruin my pants. Sacrifice my pride. Anything to fall apart to the sound of those sweet, precious moans.

She lowers her forehead against Kane's. I palm myself harder.

"Mate," she whispers, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Good omega," Kane grunts in response. "Good mate. Give me everything." He works her hips faster. "Gonna make you nice ... and full."

Her orgasm turns the air to honey. Pheromones flood the trees, so hot and sweet I think it'll kill me. My balls draw up, ready to burst.

"Fuck," I hiss.

Right before I topple over, Willow turns her face into Kane's neck. She bites down. Deep .

At once, I'm struck by Kane's expression. His eyes wide. His jaw slack. Ferocious as he is, his lips still red with blood, he's also, undeniably, soft.

Vulnerable , my alpha realizes.

The poison in my veins turns bittersweet. Kane holds nothing back. Hides ... nothing. Is that just what it means to be bonded? To even be worthy of it?

He's still coming, stuffing her full of her knot, as she bears deeper into his neck. He whines and grunts, and when he tips his head back, I swear I see a glimmer of a tear.

My own pleasure escapes me. I grip my cock, throbbing, but with nothing to give. What was my grand plan? To rip them apart, stop them before Kane's teeth found purchase? Willow hates me enough as it is.

That's not true , my alpha declares. She invited me to join her. She knows I'm the

only one who can fulfil her needs.

If that were true, she wouldn't be coming apart on her new bond mate's knot.

I have to face facts. Kane might not be her imprint mate. He might be nothing more than a lowly rogue. But all his shame, all his secrets, all his heart ... is hers.

I grit my teeth.

Which is more than I can say for myself.

“ Chief. There's been ... an incident. ”

I toss another rock across the river, watching it skid the thin layers of ice. The repetitive motions are soothing. Distracts me from the bonded couple's murmurs, and Freidan's voice in my head.

“ There's been ... an incident.”

I throw another rock, harder. The ice fractures.

If I were a better alpha, I'd be hunting right about now. Kane left his fishing spear on the riverbank. But I'm not going to catch anything—not in this state.

Not after the omega I was born to love has given herself to someone else.

I hear her laughter between the trees like precious, twinkling bells. Kane must've said something amusing, though it's hard to fathom.

I could make her laugh , my alpha seethes. But what good is laughter, or hunting, or anything else if I can't even tell my imprint mate the truth?

"Chief. There's been ... an incident."

Willow was right. Sentinels don't just leave their post. But if she knew the reason ... well, it's hard enough for her to accept a sentinel. Let alone a sentinel who's accountable for murder.

The sun is halfway set before the bonded couple detach. I hear footsteps behind me and don't dare turn around, worried I'll lose control if I see Willow's bite on Kane's neck.

"Silas?"

My head skips. I swivel around to find Willow standing in front of me, messily clothed, Kane's cloak bunched high around her shoulders. She's hiding the bite , my alpha grumbles. Smart .

"You're up," I say, my voice hoarse.

She nods. "I feel good. Strong."

I give her an uncertain look. Is she trying to upset me, or reassure me?

"I know it's temporary." She averts her gaze. "Probably the endorphins, right?"

Yes. Temporary. Some barbarian rogue can't replace your imprint mate , my alpha snarls. I sigh.

"Not entirely." At her surprised expression, I add, "You share Kane's strength now."

Some of it, anyway.”

The information seems to please her, her pheromones lightening. “I guess he’s got plenty to go around.”

Not as much as me , my alpha snarks.

I turn my glare across the river. I don’t want her to see me like this. Broken. Petty.

She stares out with me in silence. Finally, deciding I have to say some thing, I ask, “Where is Kane?”

She adjusts the cloak. “Hunting.”

I frown. “He left you here?”

“It’s ... different now.” Her hand rises to her neck, still covered, feeling the wound beneath. “He can still feel me.”

My heart aches. And you, him.

Her hand drops as if she heard me. “It wasn’t planned.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, omega.”

“Really?” She quirks a brow. “Your scent suggests otherwise.”

I grit my teeth. Dammit, Silas. Keep it together.

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” I say again, tautly. “Nor should I have to explain why hearing”— watching— “my imprint mate bond with someone else might

put me on edge.”

Willow bristles. “I’m not going to apologize.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“Good.”

Her scent mellows the longer we stand there, not speaking. No matter how much she wants to hate me—how much she deserves to hate me—her inner omega won’t let her.

It’s not her omega you need to win over , my alpha reminds me.

My blood fills with led. It’s a cold, sinking feeling. One I can’t escape until I fight to the surface of my own guilt, and find the courage to tell her the truth.

“Willow,” I force out, “I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

She blinks. “It’s fine. You were right. We could’ve been, uh, quieter.”

“Not that. Something else.”

Her eyes flicker, cautious.

“It’s not about you,” I assure her. “It’s about how I ... ended up here.”

“Pretty sure I’ve heard this one before.”

“Not all of it.” My fists bunch up. “Not the truth.”

Finally she softens. Omega wants to hear it , my alpha tells me. Heart on my sleeve—just like Kane. Except Kane only looks like a monster.

“Silas,” Willow murmurs.

She wouldn't be so tender if she knew what I was about to say. Everything she hates about the sentinels—corruption, brainwashing, cult-like status—I have perpetrated. I don't know what they did to her, but I know what they've done to others. What I let them do. So if they hurt her, somehow, some way ...

Maybe I'm culpable for that, too.

“ Silas .” Willow puts her hand on my arm. “You're trembling.”

I shake my head. “I'm sorry.”

“I still don't understand what you're sorry for .”

Now, Silas. It has to be now, or I'll never tell her, or another soul, ever again. She's my imprint mate. She deserves to know.

“I didn't run away from the sentinels,” I tell her at last. “I ran away from what I'd done.”

She stills. “What did you do?”

I take a breath, grounded only by Willow's cool hand, wrapped gently around my arm.

And I tell my imprint mate the truth.

Willow

Silas talks. And talks. And talks. There are parts I understand, and parts I wish to god I didn't.

A neglected mother. Her poor, newborn pup.

And three sires who escaped punishment for their crimes.

I believe Silas when he says he trusted the system, and the alphas at its charge. Why else would he have waited several months to see justice served? Why else would he have left everything—his pride, his title, his legacy—behind?

“Callous as it sounds, I didn't give a damn about your disappearance, let alone dragging you home.” He shrugs. “You were just a name in a file.”

“How convenient,” I mutter.

The fresh bite on my neck throbs, a vague sense of concern trickling through me. Kane . He must feel me. My horror. My outrage.

Silas eyes me apologetically. “I did say it was callous.”

“No.” I take a deep breath, hoping my calm travels across the bond. “I'm glad. My name in that file gave you a reason to get out of there.”

He smiles wryly. “It certainly gave me a head start.”

“You think they’ll follow you?”

“I doubt it. But they’ve marked my disappearance—of that I’m sure. If they find me out here, well, my fate won’t be much better than yours.”

I bristle. What would an untouchable alpha like Silas know about my fate?

He must read my reaction. “Sorry,” he says, softly. “I didn’t think—”

“It’s fine.”

It’s not, but I can hardly blame him. The only consequences his alpha brain can fathom are formal exile. Maybe a public beating. He doesn’t know the things they’ll do to me.

The things they’ve already done.

Once again, a twinge of concern strikes the bond. If I’m not careful, Kane will give up on hunting altogether to come check on me.

I’m okay, I try to convey, then hesitate. I think.

“What happened to that omega,” I tell Silas, “and her pup ... that wasn’t your fault. It was the sires who killed them.”

He grimaces. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pardon me.”

“I’m not pardoning you,” I return, a little sharper than intended. “The sires were in your charge. They never should’ve had access to the mother program to begin with. Whatever you taught them, or didn’t teach them, got two people killed.”

Silas swallows, but doesn’t recoil.

I go on, “But you have something they don’t.”

He cocks his head, a glint of hope in those despairing amber eyes.

I say, “Remorse.”

His shoulders sink. “Remorse doesn’t change what happened.”

“No, but it sure as hell changed you . Opened your eyes.” I shrug. “The sentinels who killed her, stayed. The commander who let them get away with it, is still their commander. You’re the only one holding himself accountable.”

“By running.”

“By leaving .”

Finally he stops. I don’t recognize the look on his face, oddly subservient, like he’s hanging onto my every word for dear life. “Don’t you hate me?”

“I hate the sentinels. You’ve ... chosen not to be one.” It seemed so arbitrary when he first said it. Felt like an affront when he claimed he was a runaway, just like me. Why didn’t he tell me all this sooner?

Why didn’t you listen ? my omega grumbles.

“They hurt you,” Silas grits out. “Didn’t they.”

My heart clutches to a stop. My blood turns cold.

They’re laughing. It hurts, and I’m screaming, and they’re all still laughing.

The bond rumbles, as if Kane is growling in response to my distress. I force myself to take another, deeper breath.

“They didn’t kill me,” I answer hoarsely. “Guess I should consider myself lucky.”

“Don’t say that,” Silas snaps.

I turn to face him again. “What difference does it make what they did to me? I’m here now. That’s what counts.”

His eyes search my face, picking me apart. My omega screams at me to just tell him, but something holds me back. Kane’s fury, I can live with. But Silas would only pity me. And likely blame himself. I’m not sure if I can handle that.

“It won’t change anything,” Silas says at last. “Not what they did, or why you left. But I’ve lived with my head under a rock for long enough. If you want to tell me, I’m here to listen.”

If you want to tell me. It’s not a phrase I expected to hear from Silas, or any alpha. Alphas make demands. They take what they want. Especially alphas who used to be sentinel chiefs.

And maybe it’s because of Kane’s bond, imbuing me with a sense of safety, or maybe it’s because of those unusual words— if you want— that I finally let my omega take over.

“I was raped,” I tell Silas, without emotion. “Brutally. Repeatedly.” I stare out at the river. “Three sentinels.”

I can hear the growl in Silas’s breath. Taste the acid in his pheromones. He says nothing.

I explain, “I knew, even if my family believed me, the sentinels would find a way to cover their asses. I couldn’t have been the first.” I shudder. “I doubt I’ll be the last.”

Silas’s fists tighten. I hold my shoulders as tall as I can, pushing myself to go on.

“Byron, my father, was pivotal to the mother program. Basically hinged his career on it. Which meant ... hinging his career on me.” I smile grimly. “If a high-ranking councilor was willing to bet his own daughter on the program, it would legitimize everything he worked for.”

“And legitimize the rape,” Silas grunts.

I flinch. Silas takes a breath like he’s about to apologize, but stops himself, clearly not trusting his voice.

“I love my family.” I swallow thickly. “Even my fathers. But my staying would only hurt them in the long run.”

“You’re the one who was hurting,” Silas says.

“You don’t know my mother. She spent my entire life protecting me.”

“Protecting you?”

“Keeping me pure. If she found out what they did, it would destroy her.”

His lip curls. “If she really wanted to protect you, she’d make sure the sentinels never laid eyes on you again.”

I give him a dark look. “My mother might be Pack Shire’s omega, but she’s still an omega. Her power has limits.”

At this he pauses, no doubt reminded of his own power, or lack thereof. If he had things his way, the sires responsible for those two deaths would’ve been executed.

“I considered my older brothers and sister—all alphas.” I sigh. “But they’d already been assigned their posts. Too much to lose to risk defending me.”

“Does that include Alfie?”

I start. “How do you know about Alfie?”

He frowns, as if he’s not quite sure himself, then recalls, “You said his name in your sleep, back at the cabin. At first I thought it was another alpha, but it didn’t add up.” His eyes flick to my neck. “The only alpha you wanted was Kane.”

I adjust Kane’s cloak, making sure the bite is hidden. I wasn’t sure how Silas would react if he saw it. He’s been remarkably contained so far, but when it comes to alphas—especially imprint mates—one can’t be too careful.

“I didn’t bond with him to hurt you,” I find myself saying. “I bonded with him because I love him.”

Silas doesn’t flinch, though I can sense that he’s in pain.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, “about the mother and pup. They deserved justice.”

His jaw clenches. I swear I catch a glimmer in his eye before he swallows, hard. “I’m sorry for what happened to you. And I’m so, so sorry ...” he waits until I meet my gaze. “For making you think I would ever take you back.”

Now I wish he would cry, just so I’d have an excuse to do the same.

The bond throbs sympathetically. I don’t have to tune into it to know what it means.

“Kane will be here soon,” I murmur.

Silas raises his eyebrows. “I suspect he’s not very pleased with me.” Gently, he reaches out, catching a fallen tear off my cheek. “Can he feel this?”

I consider. “The tears, or your hand?”

He doesn’t answer, weighing my jaw in his palm. Helpless, my breath shudders, my omega all-too eager to remind me that there’s one bond I’m still missing.

It didn’t make sense to me at first—why the universe would pair me up with the sentinels’ chief of recruitment, of all alphas. It seemed like a sick cosmic joke. But I think I’m beginning to get it.

We understand each other. Not just who we are now, but who we were.

And what we gave up.

My face feels heavy in Silas’s hand. He caresses my cheek with his thumb. Something vital, primal, stirs within me.

“I’m glad you bonded with Kane,” he says quietly.

My eyes shoot open.

Silas gives that tender smile once more. “You deserve to be loved.”

Meaning what, exactly? That now I have all the love I can handle? That he doesn’t love me the same way?

Even without a bond mark, Silas seems to read my thoughts, the way he always does. “Kane’s strength is yours. And, when you’re ready ...” he drops his forehead to mine. “I’d like to give you the same.”

I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Alpha still wants me, my omega hums. Forgive him, and he’s yours.

That’s when it strikes me. Even knowing what Silas has gone through, what he’s sacrificed just to be here—he was still a sentinel. What if, the next time he’s inside of me, I flash back to that day, with those monsters laughing as they tore me apart?

“When you’re ready,” Silas reinforces, feeling me stiffen. “And not a minute sooner.”

I relax, both relieved and pained as he pulls away. As I go to respond, something stops me—a shrill, warning jolt down the bond.

I look around frantically. Silas marks my reaction.

“What is it?” he demands. “Kane?”

I grip the cloak. “Something’s wrong.”

Silas guides me into the trees. He hastily stomps out the fire.

I keep scanning, waiting for my bond mate to appear. Where is he? my omega demands. What happened? If he was hurt, surely I'd feel it, though the thought provides little solace.

"Is he close?" Silas asks.

"I—I don't know."

"Think. Feel. "

Heart pounding, I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to project my awareness into the bond. My mate is nearby. I can practically hear his breath in my ear, short and sharp, like he's running.

My eye snap open. I turn, and sure enough—

Kane bursts between the trees, his naked chest gleaming, his red eyes sharp. He finds me in an instant, my inner omega melting with relief as he wraps me up in his arms.

"What is it?" Silas demands. "What happened?"

Kane tucks me in closer, glaring at Silas over my shoulder. "Sentinels. Six of 'em."

I'm not sure if I'm about to throw up or chirp. Silas curses, then says, "How far?"

"Maybe a thousand yards. Maybe less."

"They spot you?"

Kane growls. "You think I'm an idiot?"

I push out of Kane's chest, scanning the clearing for unpacked supplies. "We have to move. If they're headed north, it's only a matter of time before they catch my scent." I glance at Silas. "Or yours."

"They'll catch our scent regardless," Silas informs me.

"Hold up," Kane cuts in. "They're not headed north."

We both turn to him, perplexed. "Aren't they coming from Southside?"

He shakes his head. "From the north."

That's when it dawns on me. The squadron Silas told us about—sentinels sent up north, putting my bounty out to anyone who'd listen—never left. They've been waiting, lurking, inside Northside's walls.

"Pack Hoffran assumed they'd gone back to Southside," I whisper.

"I assumed the same," Silas confesses. "We were both wrong."

"Bold move, bunking with the enemy," Kane grunts.

"It saved them a lot a time." Silas scans the clearing. "No wonder they caught up so fast."

Hastily, I start to collect our things. Well, technically, Silas's things—I gave all my supplies to Mindy. Silas sweeps in as I snatch his water canister. Our hands brush, and my eyes flick up to his.

Something flashes across his expression, calculating. "Kane," he says suddenly.

My bond mate perks up, eyeing the two of us suspiciously.

Silas shoves the canister into his pack and thrusts it at Kane's chest. "Take this. Don't let the Northside guards see it." He gestures to the sentinels' insignia on the side. "They'll cast you out on sight."

"Northside?" Kane and I ask at the same time.

"Cut around the east," Silas goes on, like he hasn't heard us. "Away from the river. That way, you won't run into each other."

"We're not going to Northside," Kane snaps. "They sentinels have been there fuck knows how long, pushing their goddamn bounty. Everyone's gonna have it out for her."

"I have a plan," Silas insists. "Trust me."

"Trust you?" Kane seethes. I put a hand on his arm, sending reassurance down the bond.

"What about you?" I ask Silas. "We can't just leave you here."

Kane chuffs as if to say, Like hell we can't.

"I'll hold them off," Silas says. He smiles at me in a way that's almost reassuring, but my anxiety churns, amplified by Kane's distrust. "And meet you there before dawn."

The way he says it, before dawn, like it's only a short time, makes my chest ache. I'm not ready to be apart again—not for an hour, and certainly not for a night.

Sensing my distress, Silas takes both my hands, making Kane growl.

“Find somewhere to hide,” Silas murmurs, “near the village center. I promise, I will find you .”

The bond pulses, Kane’s feelings twisting through mine. Anger. Desperation. But finally, begrudgingly, acceptance.

“Be safe,” I bite out.

He smiles that smile I both love and hate—perfectly symmetrical, expertly designed to make my omega feel safe. “Stay close to Kane. He’ll protect you.”

Kane steps forward. “She doesn’t need you to tell her that.”

Everything packed up, the campsite sufficiently disheveled, we prepare to part ways. I fight the urge to scent-mark Silas before we go. He’s facing enough danger as it is without Willow Shire all over him, incriminating him further.

“Alright.” Silas locks eyes with Kane, tapping his jaw. “Lay it on me.”

I start. Kane hesitates, but I can sense his excitement. “You sure about that?”

“I’ll say I’ve been tracking Willow. Tell them a rogue fought me off.”

“They won’t believe you!” I argue.

“Maybe not, but it’ll buy you some time.” He looks at Kane again. “Go ahead.”

I’m powerless to do anything but stand by as Kane and Silas face off, my bond mate readying a fist, my imprint mate standing openly.

“Make it believable,” Silas says.

Kane smirks. “Won’t be a problem.”

He swings, sending Silas reeling. Already, I can see the rosy point of impact, Silas’s lip split and bleeding. My inner omega cringes.

“Go,” he breathes. His eyes barely skim mine, knowing we’re about to be torn apart.

Kane grabs my waist. He adjusts the pack. And we run.

Leaving Silas to face the sentinels alone.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

There's only so far my mate can run, even on borrowed strength. The second I hear her wheezing, I scoop her up in my arms, barely skipping a beat before we're running again. I can feel her fear course through me, her distress like a toxin. Like something eating me from the inside out.

Is this how she feels all the time? Knowing her imprint mate is out there, so close, yet always out of reach?

It's dark when we reach the village. Hovering among the trees, I scan the gates for those guards Silas warned us about.

Sure enough, right by the main entrance, two alphas stand watch, illuminated by standing torchlights. Both armed with short swords.

"Put me down," Willow whispers.

I clutch her tighter.

"Kane," she says, "it's okay."

Slowly, I do as she says. She grips my arm to steady herself, but seems otherwise stable.

"You need a shirt," she says. "I'd offer to give your cloak back, but ..." she lifts the hood, hiding her hair.

I scoff. “You really think they’re gonna give a damn if I’m wearing shirt?”

She considers. “You’re right. They’ll already guess you’re a rogue. But that doesn’t mean they’ll want you around.”

“Rogues are neutral. I can go where I please.”

“Just ... let me think.”

I stay quiet, trying not to let my frustration cloud the bond. Mate is smart, my alpha reminds me. If she has a plan in mind, I’d be wise to listen.

“Okay,” she says at last. Her emerald eyes flicker against the torchlight, setting the bond alight. “Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

Willow’s heart is beating so hard, I’m not sure I can distinguish it from mine. She’s pressed against me, cradled tight in my arms, as we venture toward the village gates.

The guards bristle—one male, one female. “State your name,” the female says.

“Be polite,” Willow’s voice rings in my head. “But genuine.”

I halt. “Kane.”

The male guard scowls. “And purpose?”

I look down at Willow, who stares up at me from under the hood, her eyes wide. “Shelter,” I grit out.

The guards' attention flicks to Willow. The female inches closer, making me bristle. "Your mate?" she asks.

I nod.

They share a look. The male notes, "You're rogues."

I clench my jaw. "Yes."

"Then what do you need us for?" The female sneers. "Plenty of wilds out there."

This is exactly what Willow warned me about. What she prepared me for. I take a breath, holding her closer.

"She's pregnant," I say. "Just want to keep her warm."

At once, the guards stop, their pheromones lifting. They regard Willow with renewed interest. She tucks her face into my neck, her nose brushing the bite, making my whole body tingle.

"She's freezing," I growl, only half-acting now. "Another night out in the wilds, she'll catch her death." I straighten. "Her and the pup."

The guards share another look. But I already know, the hard part is over.

They let us pass, grunting something about cheap taverns in the village center. I remember my manners at the last minute, nodding in thanks as I carry Willow inside.

She waits until we're out of the guards' earshot before smirking up at me. "Well done."

“How’d you know?” I grunt. “The whole pup thing—they folded instantly.”

“An omega’s whole purpose is to birth pups. Preferably, alpha pups.” She shrugs. “I just made myself as valuable as possible.”

I should be happy—she was right, after all—but the idea that my mate’s entire worth hinges on whether or not she can feed pups into some shitty village system makes me sick to the fucking stomach.

Willow frowns. “Alpha,” she says, softly. “It’s okay. We’re in.”

“We’re not staying,” I growl.

“Yes we are. At least, until Silas shows up.”

Biting back my anger, I carry her deeper through Northside’s gates. More torches are scattered around, lighting up the night. It’s warmer than I expected; stout, clustered buildings insulating the main strip. I hate how the cobblestones feel beneath my boots. I can’t remember how long it’s been since I walked anything that wasn’t pure earth.

A couple dozen people roam the street, stumbling in and out of taverns. Their laughter carries up to the thatched roofs. They reek of smoke and sulfur, polluting the crisp night air.

“You’re scowling,” Willow notes.

I just grunt.

She sighs. “I don’t need the bond to know you hate it here.”

“Am I supposed to like it?”

“Of course not.” She scans the crowd. The glowing street. “Just try not to draw attention. Drunk alphas love to pick a fight.”

That much, I remember from my own village experience. Picking fights with drunk alphas was a good way to earn coin, assuming they were stupid enough to place bets.

Speaking of ...

“We gotta sell some of Silas’s shit,” I mutter, indicating to his bag, tucked under the cloak. “Get some coin together.”

“We’re not selling anything from that bag,” Willow returns. “Don’t you remember? If any of the guards catch us with Southside’s insignia—”

“What’s the alternative?”

Further down the street, a glass bottle smashes, eliciting a chorus of slurred cheers. I growl, pressing Willow as close to me as possible.

“We go a little further,” Willow says at last. “Get to the village center, and find an alleyway to lay low until dawn.”

I chuff. “You really think Silas is gonna find us that fast?”

“He promised.” Her voice hardens, the bond taut with meaning. “I promised.”

A part of me thought it’d be easier to argue with Willow once we were bonded—no more guessing what she’s feeling. But if anything, it’s harder. I can’t say no to her.

We walk on until, thankfully, the crowd thins out. Most of the buildings down here are closed for business, plus an assortment of empty stalls. This must be where the merchants and farmers set up shop.

Willow looks around. “Okay. I think we’re in the clear.”

I double-check there are no eyes on us before slipping between two boarded-up shopfronts. It’s narrow as hell, with big, bolted crates clogging the path, but at least it’s covered.

“Wait.” Willow pushes herself out of my arms. Before I realize what she’s doing, she produces a blade from her dress and draws a straight line down her palm.

“Will!” I hiss.

She puts her hand flat against the left shopfront, blood seeping into the bricks.

“Are you crazy?” I snap. “Your scent—”

“Will lead Silas straight to us.” She wipes the blade clean.

I snatch her wrist, growling when I see the blood still flowing.

“It’s okay,” she says. “Doesn’t hurt.”

Snarling, I rip open Silas’s bag. Proper sentinels—ex-sentinels, whatever—must carry some thing for first aid.

“It’s just a cut,” Willow keeps assuring me. Not even her soft pulses down the bond calm me down.

Finally, I find the water canister, plus some clean cloth. I wash her down and wrap her palm up tight.

“You pull anything like that again,” I warn, “and I won’t be so nice.”

“Nice.” She quirks a brow. “All you’ve done is curse and glare.”

“Exactly.”

To my surprise, she smiles. “Duly noted, alpha.”

We don’t have any sleeping mats or blankets, which wasn’t a problem when we were living off the land. But now we’re in a hard, cramped, stinking alley, I need to get creative if I want to make my mate comfortable. She insists she’s going to stay awake with me, or at the very least take turns—neither of us have slept in nearly thirty-six hours.

“Need you to rest.” I tuck a hand under her hood, ghosting over my bite. “Want this healed by morning.”

She scowls. “What about yours?”

I tilt my neck, revealing the rapidly scarring wound.

Finally, I convince her to remove the cloak—draping it over the cobblestones so she has a place to lie down. She hesitates, twirling her hair.

“Trust me,” I murmur. “No-one’s gonna see you. Not while I’m here.”

She nods, gently, her trust both a given and a privilege.

Despite where we are, and the fact I have no idea where we're going next, my inner alpha preens as Willow's eyes flutter closed. No matter what, there is one thing I do know. Omega is mine.

And I will protect her to my dying breath.

Silas

A branch snaps. The ground thunders.

Sentinels. Six of them, like Kane said.

I steady myself against a tree, only half-acting. Kane hit me so hard my brain still feels loose in my skull. My mouth tastes metallic, my jaw puffy.

Convincing, indeed.

The sentinels find me like that, leaning over, spitting blood. I glance up, scanning their faces.

They're almost identical. All with cropped hair, similar to mine. All lean, but defined, their bodies honed for long expeditions. They're not in uniform, missing Southside's burgundy colors and insignia, which makes sense, considering where they came from.

Four males. Two females. All armed, of course.

"Chief," one of the males, already at the front, steps forward. Must be the squadron leader.

The title pierces me like a dagger. "Sentinel," I return. Do we know each other ? I don't recognize him, though I suppose it shouldn't come as a surprise that he recognizes me.

“I’m glad we found you,” he says. His eyes flick to the female who I assume is his second lieutenant. “We received word of your disappearance weeks ago.”

“Word?” I feign confusion.

The sentinels exchange cautious looks. Finally, their leader announces, “We’ve been stationed in Northside.”

“Undercover,” someone adds, proudly.

I pretend to look impressed. Without any way of knowing what they’ve been told—that I was dead, or missing, or a filthy, cowardly deserter—I have to play my cards very, very carefully.

“I imagine we’ve been tasked with the same assignment.” I smile wryly, pinching my busted jaw. “Though I hope you have more success than me.”

“Willow Shire?” the squadron leader asks, somewhat dubiously.

I hate the way her name sounds in his mouth, as if he has any right to it. I squash my inner alpha down before answering.

“I’ve been tracking her for nearly two months. Something—some one— keeps getting in my way.”

The second lieutenant indicates to my face. “They give you that?”

I shrug. “What can I say? These rogues are a different breed.”

“Rogue?” Another alpha, the second female, ventures forward. Her eyes flick to the leader, who nods, letting her approach. She scans me up and down, her sharp nose

wrinkling. “That explains the stench.”

Should’ve guessed they’d pick up on Kane’s scent. As long as it’s strong enough to overpower Willow, I’ll consider myself lucky.

“We received a tip,” the leader says. “Rogue pack claimed they’d spotted a red-headed omega in the local cave system.”

“And that she had an alpha with her,” the second puts in.

I rub the back of my head. “Your tip was right. I chased them out. Tried to fight the alpha off.” I sigh. “Unsuccessfully.”

Already I can scent their suspicion. Either I’m a worse liar than I thought, or my reputation precedes me: one of the strongest sentinels to come through Southside’s barracks, both hand-to-hand and melee ability second to none. Even now, I can see some eyes flicking to the blade at my hilt—still sheathed.

I press on, “Pretty sure I saw the two of them heading west. We might catch them, if we hurry.” I smirk. “A single rogue is child’s play to an entire Southside squadron.”

No-one moves, apart from their sideways glances and twitching fingers, waiting for orders. The second female stares daggers into me.

“Leader,” she says, “if I may.”

The squadron leader frowns. “What is it, Vera?”

“Chief Silas’s scent.” She tilts her head at me. “It’s not just the rogue. It’s the omega, too.” She sneers. “She’s all over you. Sir.”

I freeze. So much for Kane's noxious stench .

Vera's words seem to confirm what the others already suspect. It takes more than a random, untrained rogue to disarm the sentinels' chief of recruitment. I didn't even think to bloody my knuckles or dirty my sword. My cover is unravelling by the second.

"Of course she is," I argue. "I've been tracking her for months. Getting close."

Vera scoffs. "Close enough to knot?"

"Vera," the leader warns.

"She already dirtied herself with a rogue," she drawls, her glare tightening, testing me. "What's another knot to a whore?"

"Vera," the leader snaps.

A growl escapes me, possessive rage leaking from my pheromones. Before I can stop myself, my hand goes to my sword, devising the quickest way to shut this wretched alpha up.

Quick cut to the throat ought to do it.

"Chief!" the squadron leader says, grabbing his own sword. His sentinels follow suit, moving into formation.

"He's not our chief." Vera's lip curls. "Any more than that red-headed bitch is a noble."

"You watch your tongue," I snarl, flashing my blade.

Vera's eyes flicker. She feigns a smile.

"It's just like the commander said," she announces. "He's a deserter."

The entire squadron holds their breath like they're expecting me to strike her down. Defend my honor.

"Call me what you like," I answer, loud enough for all of them to hear. I point my sword, barely a hair's width from Vera's neck. "I will cut you down all the same."

Terror spikes in the sentinels' collective scent. "Chief," the leader starts, then corrects himself, "Silas. What is this madness? You would relinquish your rank for a runaway?"

"Where is your honor?" his second lieutenant snarls.

"My honor—" I gesture my blade across the entire squadron, "is far safer in that runaway's hands than it ever was with the sentinels."

"Traitor," Vera spits.

"Precisely." I turn to her once more, allowing myself a grim smile. "Because I will see Southside burn before I see Willow returned."

Maybe I could've salvaged this. Begged for mercy, for freedom. But now? With my sword threatening those who were once my comrades, and my words threatening all they stand to protect, I've basically signed my own death sentence.

The leader gives me one final warning. Either I come quietly, and face my crimes before a proper tribunal, or I die where I stand.

I grip my sword.

The leader darkens. “Death it is.”

Vera flings a dagger. I swat it away, giving two more alphas an opening. They charge, swords first. With a single swipe, I brush them aside, their blades clanging against one another.

Vera comes at me again, quicker than her comrades. Her sword slams into mine, locked vertically.

I cluck my tongue. “Sloppy.”

With a short kick, I knock her off balance, disarming her as she attempts to steady herself. Her weapon feels light in my spare hand, fashioned for a smaller alpha.

At last, the squadron leader sends his second lieutenant into battle. She’s got to be the strongest of the bunch, throwing her impressive bulk into every swing. I deflect using both swords, my teeth rattling upon impact.

Suddenly I’m being attacked on all sides. I cast off the weaker attempts, not bothering to retaliate, focusing my energy on one key player.

Their leader.

He’s a balanced fighter, I’ll give him that much. Pulling back and thrusting in like the ocean’s tide, and similarly unpredictable. I study his blocks. His jabs. His timing. It takes a few turns, and a few painful blows from his sentinels, before I figure him out.

Left foot shifts. Eyes flick behind my head. In that split second before he strikes, I have my opening.

I don't swipe, but pierce—slamming my blade straight through his shoulder.

Everyone stops. Someone cries out.

Finally, agonizingly, I draw the blade out. "It's just a flesh wound." I wipe the blood off on my arm. "He'll live, if you get him back to Southside."

The squadron shoots me hateful looks. Vera stands, recovering her fallen dagger.

"Stop," their second lieutenant barks. She watches me closely. After a pained, furious beat, she says, "Retreat."

"Lieutenant!" one of the males argues.

"If he kills us," she snaps, "who will tell the commander what we've learned today?"

I sheath my sword. "You mean, who will sign my death warrant?"

Someone chuffs defiantly. I'll take that as a yes .

Still standing over the fallen leader, I nod to his bleeding shoulder. "Keep pressure on that. Can't have you bleeding out on the way home."

The leader glowers. "All this for what?" he rasps. "Five more minutes with a runaway? It's only a matter of time before we find you. Again. "

"I didn't do it for her." Only as I'm speaking the words do I realize they're true. Defending Willow's honor, cutting the sentinels down to size—yes, that was all her. But relinquishing my title, and everything I stood for?

"I did it for Delphine," I tell them. "And her pup."

The name sinks through me. I've barely let myself think it, let alone say it aloud, since she died. Convinced myself her name, her legacy, was a privilege. One I couldn't earn until her killers were brought to justice.

The truth is ... I ran from it, from her, just like I ran from everything else.

And I'm not running anymore.

I toss Vera's sword across the clearing. "If you try to follow me, or my mate—" A growl enters my voice. "I won't be so lenient."

I've already turned my back when one of the male alphas dares to ask, "Mate?"

Damn . Not sure I meant to say that part aloud.

I shoot them a final glare over my shoulder. "You've been warned."

A couple of the alphas hiss in protest, trying to rally their second lieutenant's bloodlust. But even with my back turned, there's nothing they can do to surprise me. No attack I can't predict. No taunt I can't quash.

I know the sentinels, more than they know themselves.

No-one charges me as I disappear further into the trees, moving west—throwing them off Kane and Willow's path. Once I'm well and truly out of view, I'll circle around to the north.

It won't be easy, crossing into enemy territory. If my run-in with the sentinels has taught me anything, it's that I can't lie to save myself. Any similar attempts with the Northside guard is going to get me locked up, or killed.

Where does that leave me?

It's my alpha who answers, like it should be obvious. Where else ?

I pick up the pace. If I want to make it to my omega by dawn, I'll need to move quickly. There's a lot to get done, and only a few hours of night left to do it. Assuming Northside's guards are as efficient as I hope they are, and half as logical ... we might actually stand a chance.

I'm coming for you, omega, my alpha sings out to her. I know what I have to do.

Willow

Morning comes.

Silas doesn't.

"Bunny," Kane tries to sooth me, brushing away my hair. "You have to rest."

"I've been resting," I snap.

"In what? Half-hour intervals?" He growls. "That's not enough."

"What's the point now?" I turn away, standing, so I can peer around the alleyway. The scent of blood is still potent, but it'll only get weaker, especially when all the merchants arrive with their produce. I hastily reach for my blade.

Kane snatches it out of my hand. "Try that shit again," he warns, "and I'm keepin' it."

"I'm not a pup!"

"Course not. Pups know better than to slash themselves."

Now I'm growling. He is not impressed, let alone intimidated, glaring me down without blinking. As I'm strategizing how best to disarm him of my weapon, a sharp, demanding noise rips from my stomach. Hunger—the first real hunger I've felt in days.

“Shit,” Kane mutters.

“It’s fine,” I say quickly. “I’m not—”

“Yes you fucking are.” He sighs. “Could’ve sworn I felt it in the bond, but I figured it was just me.” He glances around, like a wild deer will suddenly appear. “I need to hunt.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Villagers don’t hunt. If you try to leave now—” and come back with a big chunk of bloody meat—“ it’ll draw all kinds of attention.”

Before he can answer, a loud rattling sound takes our attention. We peer around the alleyway once more, watching as local merchants roll in their produce to set up for another day of trade. They don’t speak much, likely saving their energy for the work ahead.

Kane curses. “We have to move.”

Panic strikes my heart. “But Silas—”

“Is gonna have to sort his own shit out.” Kane’s impatience makes the bond twinge, like it does every other time I mention Silas. I haven’t told him what I learned last night in front of the river, but he must sense how my feelings have shifted.

He adjusts his cloak around my shoulders, pulling the hood up. “C’mon. Before they see us.”

Sure enough, a couple merchants are headed for the alley, probably to collect their crates. I stop arguing as Kane leads me down the other end, the two of us slipping into a cold, quiet morning in Northside’s village center.

Kane's number two priority, after keeping me hidden, is getting me fed. A simple enough feat, out in the wilds. But here, without any coin? Not so much.

"I'm strong," he practically barks at a poor street vendor. "You want your wood chopped? I'll do it—three coin."

The older female alpha looks at him like he's a wild animal. She glances at her assistant, likely an omega, with concern. "Uh ..."

"I'm bonded," Kane growls, showing off his neck with a mixture of frustration and pride. "I don't want your damn omega. Just your coin."

I put my hand on Kane's arm, voicing a quiet apology to the vendors before guiding him away.

We weave through the growing crowd, Kane's hand slipped beneath my—technically, his—cloak, keeping hold of my waist. Alphas and omegas alike cast him curious looks. Whether it's in fear or enticement, my omega doesn't care. No-one but me should be eyeballing this rugged, sexy, shirtless alpha by my side.

It's weird being in a village again. Among people—alphas, omegas, some rich, some poor, all marching about with purpose. They have packs to feed, I suppose. Deadlines to meet. Clients to satisfy.

At first I think it's thanks to Kane's strength, coursing through my veins, before I realize. I'm ... confident here. This is the world I was raised for.

It's with this thought a wave of nausea rolls over me.

“Will—” Kane stops himself. “Omega?”

It’s only natural Northside reminds me of home. But no matter how confident I feel, it’s not home. I have to remember that.

Kane dips his head, checking my face under the hood. “You’re pale.” He grits his teeth, fumbling to take the pack off me. “I knew you shouldn’t be carryin’ this.”

I clutch the pack before he can take it. “It’s not heavy. Besides, of the two of us, I’m the only own who can conceal it.” I smirk. “Unless you’d prefer I go shirtless, and you take the cloaks?”

Kane growls, scanning the passer-bys like he needs to check no-one else is close enough to even imagine that.

“Over there.” I gesture to a water pump on the side of the path.

He follows my lead, pumping the spout so I can gather enough water in my palms to drink. I do the same for him. Kane downs a few mouthfuls, rivulets of water trickling down his naked collarbones, then coughs.

Before I can ask what’s wrong, he lunges forward, fixing my cloak.

Shit.

“Was it showing?” I ask under my breath, tucking my hair behind my ears.

“Just for a second.”

“I’m such an idiot. Should’ve braided it.”

“Let’s worry about that after you’re fed,” Kane grumbles.

His words float into me, twirling around my thoughts until I gather enough focus to make sense of them. My auburn hair—a dead giveaway to all the potential bounty hunters in Northside. Trying to sleep, eat, survive in a village without any coin to our names. There’s a simple solution here.

If not an obscenely risky one.

Kane watches me, probably feeling me, as my idea takes root. His expression darkens. “I’m not gonna like this, am I?”

It takes a couple hours of searching, and a few very suspicion questions to the Northside locals, before I find what I’m looking for.

I stand in front of a weary, two-story shopfront, breathing a sigh of relief. At least it’s not out in the open.

Kane stands next to me, scowling as he reads the sign. “Mal’s ... wigs.” He scowls. “You want to buy hair ? We don’t even have coin for food.”

“Just trust me.”

I shoulder through the door before he can argue further. The bottom floor is dim, windows cloaked by moth-eaten curtains. The overwhelming aroma of burning incense floods my senses as I examine the various wigs on display. Short hair. Long. Dark. Blond. It’s almost eerie, surrounded by dismembered mannequins on all sides.

Kane shudders. “Fuckin’ reeks in here.”

I peer around the staircase. “Hello?”

Carefully navigating the rotten floorboards, I make my way to the top floor, which looks more like a salon. Well, maybe a salon after a bull ran through it. Chipped mirrors. Wonky stools. The windows are so grimy it’s a wonder any daylight comes through at all.

“What are you doing up here?”

I start as a tall, lanky male seemingly manifests from the shadows. Instantly Kane is behind me, growling warningly.

“No-one was down there,” I answer.

The male—Mal, I suppose—tilts his head. “You could’ve rung the bell.”

Kane and I exchange a look. “There wasn’t a bell,” I tell him.

“Oh.” He frowns. “I should really get a bell.”

He turns away to rummage through one of his many boxes. Kane keeps a hand on the small of my back, though he’s notably less tense. This guy might be weird, but he doesn’t have the wits, or probably the strength, to be a real threat.

“Ah.” Suddenly Mal straightens, flashing a pair of scissors. “Here we are.”

Just like that, Kane’s back on high alert. “What the hell?”

“Don’t worry,” Mal smiles vapidly. “They’re not for you.” His murky eyes find mine. “Isn’t that right?”

Maybe the weirdo is sharper than he looks. I sigh, casting my mate a reassuring look, before slowly removing my hood.

“Hey!” Kane shields me.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, my eyes returning to Mal. “It’s what we’re here for.”

Kane’s outrage sears through the bond. He remains planted in front of me, growling low in his chest.

Mal tilts his long body, trying to get a good look at me. “Haven’t had a red-head in a while.” His eyes glint. “Always sell fast, when I got ’em”

“You’re not having jack shit!” Kane snarls.

“How much?” I ask, ignoring him.

Mal considers. “Fifteen.”

“Twenty.”

He smirks. “Seventeen.”

I pretend to mull it over. It’s more coin than I expected, even for hair as unusual as mine. Enough to keep us fed, and even buy myself a new cloak.

“Deal,” I confirm.

“Omega.” Kane turns his back on Mal completely, staring down at me. “I can get us coin. Just give me some more time.”

I smile warily. "It's better this way." I twirl my hair, cascading down to the base of my ribs. "Easier to hide."

"You're not hiding from this freak," Kane mutters. "What if he gives us away?"

He makes a good point. But I wouldn't have removed my hood if my inner omega didn't allow it. She knows as well as I do, sacrifices have to be made. Not just for my sake, but for my mate's.

"It'll grow back, you know," Mal drawls. "She'll be pretty again in no time."

Kane flashes him a snarl. "You think I give a shit about that?"

Mal raises his hands in mock surrender.

I hold Kane's arm. "It's okay, alpha."

"I don't trust this guy." He wrinkles his nose. "Can't even catch his scent."

Mal and I lock eyes once more. That knowing smirk of his returns. My inner omega perks her head once more.

"That's because he's an omega," I realize. "And trying to hide it."

Mal just shrugs. "Poorly, as it happens."

Kane's pheromones remain tart with suspicion. "Pretty tall for an omega."

That threw me off, too. But there's no denying it. Mal's not even trying.

"I trust him," I announce, as much for Mal's benefit as for Kane's. I give Mal a hard,

warning glare, reminding him my trust comes as a price. Break it, and he won't just have my alpha to answer to.

“Truly, an honor.” Mal twirls his scissors. “Ready when you are, sweetheart.”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Willow adjusts her brand-new cloak as she weaves around some oily cobblestones. Her face is barely a shadow. Her hair—or rather, lack of hair—is easily concealed.

“It was only a matter of time before I cut it,” she tells me. “At least, this way, we turn a profit.”

A profit, sure, but at what cost? Literally sacrificing a part of herself? She was supposed to be done with that shit the second she left Southside.

This is why all villages can go to hell, my inner alpha growls.

Even with both of us properly fed and clothed, Silas’s pack secure beneath my cloak, I feel more exposed than I did when we got here.

Willow had no problem putting her trust in that lanky omega back at the shop. Me? I’m less easily convinced.

“We can’t stay here,” Willow mutters. “Silas could be searching for us in the village center.”

“We’re not far off,” I remind her. “If he were nearby, I’d scent him.”

She bristles. I don’t need a bond to tell me how anxious those words make her feel.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I say, despite myself. “Probably just fucking around

somewhere.”

“Yeah.” She scoffs. “Silas is really the ‘fuck around’ type.”

What does she want me to say? That, actually, he probably got taken down by the Southside squadron? That they’re interrogating him, torturing him, as we speak?

“I’m sorry,” she sighs. “It’s just, if something’s happened to him—”

“I get it. No magic imprint bond for you.”

“No.” She scowls. “He could die.”

I roll my eyes. “Southside isn’t gonna kill him on the spot.”

“They could. Southside’s sentinels, even the Northside guard. To one, he’s a deserter. To the other, an enemy.”

That much is true. For the first time, I wonder what happens to Willow’s omega if her imprint mate dies. Would she feel it? Would it ... hurt her?

Christ. I need to start taking this seriously.

“Let’s go back to the alley,” I grunt. “Your blood should be more than enough for him to track us down.”

“It’ll be faded,” she argues.

“If he can’t pick out his imprint mate’s scent,” I snarl, “he doesn’t fucking deserve you.”

With that, and with dusk on the horizon, we return to the merchants' stalls. The air is rank with food, coin, and dissent. I don't know how any of these people even have their scent receptors anymore, with all this constant overload.

"In there," Willow suggests suddenly, indicating a tilted building up ahead.

"A bar," I grunt. "You're joking."

"We have coin," she reminds me, "and time to kill."

"Aren't you gonna draw attention, wearing your hood inside?"

She smiles bitterly. "I'm an omega in my alpha's company. You tell me to keep my hood up, no-one will bat an eye."

I almost growl. And rogues are the barbarians?

Somehow we end up inside, my inner alpha seething at the cramped space. Way too easy for another alpha to bump shoulders with my mate. The noise is equally unbearable—a lone musician trying to get out his tune as patrons cackle and clink glasses. Shouldn't it at least be dark before they start getting wasted?

"Two ginger beers," Willow advises me under her breath. "And two shepherds pies."

I recite the order to the barmaid. She notes Willow's hooded appearance with mild suspicion, then looks at me again, and nods.

We barely speak through our meal. Willow is too busy hanging her head. I'm too busy scanning the other patrons, daring them to even breathe in my mate's direction.

"What do you think?" Willow asks, nodding to my plate.

I scoop another mouthful. The meat tastes off, and the potatoes are so salty I have to take a drink for every other bite.

“It’s fine,” I mutter.

Those green eyes peer out from under the hood, flickering knowingly.

By the time we’re done, the bar is crawling with alphas—most at least half-drunk. I try not to sneer at the shame of it all.

“I take it you’re not much of a drinker,” Willow notes my disdain.

I grunt. “In the wilds, getting drunk makes it harder to stay sharp.”

“You mean, it’s harder to come by.”

“No. I mean rogues, as a general rule, try not to die.” At her curious silence, I probe, “What about you?”

She shrugs. “Sometimes. Dinner parties. Social events. Always under supervision, of course.”

“Right. So the precious little omegas don’t get wasted.”

“Oh, no. We got plenty wasted.”

I raise my eyebrows. “No shit.”

“We were noble, unbonded, omega villagers. Hardly surprising we needed to blow off steam.”

Who's 'we' ? I want to ask. For someone I've plunged my teeth into, she's told me jack shit about her life. I know the worst thing that ever happened to her. I know she loves me, for some reason I'm too grateful to question. But what about everything that came before?

"Huh." I sit back. "I would've liked to have seen that."

She scoffs. "You'd probably have taken one look before carting me off to my nest."

"You think I'm a killjoy?"

"I think you hate drunk alphas," she returns, "especially when they're staring at me ."

I can't control my inner alpha, who is all-too eager to prove her point, as I angrily scan the room once more.

I bristle. "Who the fuck is that?"

I didn't notice her come in—her, or her mate. Her eyes are blue as ice, staring at me unblinkingly. Her mate is tall, but slouched. Dark, oily hair falls across his jaw, hiding his features.

"We need to leave," I announce, dragging Willow toward the door.

She starts. "Why?"

"Because." I glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, now they're both staring. "I think Mal figured out who you are."

Behind us, Mal and his mate don't get up to follow. The image of them just sitting there fills my inner alpha with dread.

“This is insane,” Willow asserts. “I told Mal, if he tried to mess with—”

“I don’t think he’s the one we’ve gotta worry about, bunny.” I scan the dark street, searching for the nearest escape route.

“Are you sure he was there for us?” she demands, struggling to keep up as I haul her into an alleyway.

“I know a trap when I see it,” I snarl back.

I drag her deeper, constantly checking to make sure we’re not being followed.

“Kane—” Willow gasps.

“Not now, bunny.”

“Kane!”

Finally, I turn. Two figures are tailing us, cloaked in black.

Willow’s eyes widen. “Shit,” she hisses.

I follow her gaze to the two new figures swaggering in from the other end. There’s no moving forward without going through them. No moving backward without going through the others. We’re trapped.

Without thinking, I pin Willow to the wall. If only it, or the adjacent building, were one-story, I might be able to hoist her up. Give her a running chance.

Instead, all I can do is stand my ground.

“Evening, lovebirds,” the nearest alpha leers.

“Heard a rumor that one of you’s got pretty red hair,” another adds. His beady eyes glint hungrily as he examines me. “Guessin’ that’s not you.”

“You get one warning,” I growl. “Back. The fuck. Off .”

“Is that any way to speak to your betters, rogue ?” a third chimes in. His lip curls. “At least your whore knows to keep her mouth shut.”

Behind me, Willow growls.

Well, there goes their warning .

I whip out my dagger, flinging it at lightning-speed. The blade finds its mark in the third alpha’s throat. He gurgles on his own blood, eyes rolling back as he sinks to his knees. Before I can retrieve the weapon, two more alphas charge.

“Kane!” Willow tries to break free. “Let me help!”

Fuck no. If she joins the fight—god forbid, gets hurt—I’ll lose what’s left of my self-control. Get us both killed.

I counter the alphas’ onslaught, refusing to dodge or weave. If I move even an inch from where I stand, my mate will be in the line of fire.

“We don’t need him,” one of them snarls, lurking away from the main fight. “Strike to kill!”

Two machetes come flashing out. I could almost laugh. What the fuck do villagers need with machetes?

Then someone actually swings it.

Pain slices hotly across my cheekbone. I growl, shoving him back, only for the second machete to slash up my jaw.

“Alpha!” Willow cries.

“Give me your blade,” I order.

She doesn’t answer. One minute, her body is warm and secure against my back. The next, she’s gone.

My heart stops. I glance down in time to watch her squirm out from under me, brandishing her goddamn cooking knife.

She slashes one of our attackers behind his knees. He barely gets out a pained roar before I punch him clean out.

“Little bitch!” the lurker barks.

A big angry boot flies into Willow’s stomach. I see the attack coming, the world turning thick and sluggish, and yet I can’t do a damn thing to stop it.

She slams into the bricks. Her head makes a sickening crunch .

The bond splinters, her omega’s agony and my alpha’s outrage merging into one ravenous beast. I don’t give a fuck about weapons anymore—theirs, or mine.

I’ll finish these fuckers off with my teeth.

I lunge at the closest alpha, gripping his skull hard enough to pop his brains clean out.

He tries to scream, but the sound gets lost as I bite deep into his jugular, tearing through flesh, muscles, and tendons.

“Holy fuck ...” the fourth, final, alpha wavers. “What are you?”

I can see my reflection in his trembling eyes. My jaw stained with blood. My pupils dilated to flat, black discs. Pure, feral rage rolls off my pheromones like acid.

He screams as I knock him face-first into the cobblestones. Probably begs for his life. Truthfully, I can’t discern words anymore. All I can hear is his filthy heart, still beating .

“Halt!”

That’s not my mate’s voice. Which means it’s just another asshole who needs to die.

Something pinches the hollow flesh behind my ear. And then ... I’m seeing stars, my stomach turning over itself, as I slump over the alpha I was about to kill.

“Kane,” a familiar voice demands. I can’t do jack shit to steady myself as Silas props me up against a wall, my limbs heavy and foreign as led. Standing around him are three alphas in uniform. Dark blue tunics. Black boots.

Northside guards.

Silas says, “Willow’s non-responsive. I need to know where she got hit.”

Where were you ? I try to roar. We were waiting. My mate was waiting.

“Bastard,” is all I manage to bite out.

One of the guards laughs. “It’s thanks to this bastard,” he declares, “the three of you are under Northside’s protection.”

What the fuck is he talking about? My ears ring loudly, painfully.

“Be more specific, cadet.” Another guard crouches down. She tilts her head at me like I’m a caged beast, her lips curving into a smile. “Technically speaking ... they’re prisoners of war.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

No amount of pacing seems to make a difference. If anything, the rhythmic thud of my boots on the floorboards just draws me back to that gut-wrenching scene.

My imprint mate. Blood-splattered. Unconscious.

I took some solace in learning it wasn't her blood. Not enough to forgive the rest.

“Two broken ribs,” the healer determined. “And severe head trauma.”

If Kane hadn't all but slaughtered their attackers, I'm not sure how I would've stopped myself from doing the same.

She looks eerily peaceful, lying flat in bed. The room suits her. Solid walls. Clean drapes and cozy bedlinen. Something resembling the life I want to provide for her, when all of this is finally over.

When . My jaw tightens . If.

I turn on my heel to start another lap when I hear it.

“Si ... las?”

I throw myself at Willow's bedside. She looks even smaller with her hair cut short—her face a soft, delicate pearl in my palm. When she hacked it off, or why, I still don't know.

“Omega,” I breathe, relief cascading over me. “I’m here. You’re safe.”

Her brow furrows. “Am I ... dead?”

“What? No, little one, of course not.”

“But you’re so clean,” she whispers, lifting a shaky hand to my face. She sees her own hand—her pink, pale fingers, and her eyes widen. “I’m so clean.”

“We’re somewhere safe.” I look around the room, certainly more polished than anywhere she’s lived in the last four months. “Safe, and clean.”

“I see.” Suddenly, she feels her neck, checking her bond mark is intact. “Where’s Kane?”

Damn . I should’ve seen this coming. “Willow ...”

“He got hurt,” she recalls. “H—he was bleeding.”

“He’s fine. It was just a scratch.”

Her eyes flash. “If he’s fine , why isn’t he here?”

Now there’s a question I did see coming, and yet, I haven’t had the sense to think of an answer.

She notes her bandaged midsection, but struggles to sit up anyway.

“Omega.” I stop her. “You need your rest.”

“I need my mate,” she snarls.

“He’s close by,” I assure her.

“Doing what?”

“ Resting . Just like you should be.” When she tries to force her way up again, I growl, “Willow. You have a lot of healing left to do. Do you really think Kane would want to see you hurt even worse than you already are?”

“No, I don’t,” she returns, “which is how I know he wouldn’t leave my bedside unless someone forced him.” She scans the room with a sharper eye. “Where is he? Where are we ?”

I take a deep breath. “That’s a long story, little one.”

“Either you tell it to me, right this instant, or you take me to my mate!”

The more she raises her voice, the more my alpha is on edge. I reach for her hand, pressing the inside of my wrist to hers. My scent rolls over her. She bristles, resists, before the pheromones gradually take effect.

“I’ll tell you everything,” I promise, gently.

Her bottom lip quivers. “Then you’ll take me to Kane?”

I sigh. “Yes, little one. Whatever you want.”

She’s still fighting me. Still aching for her mate. But she must realize the best way to get to him is by going through me, and so, finally, she nods.

“I’m listening.”

We make it halfway down the hall before Kelina stops us. As per my request, she's dressed casually—opting for tan trousers and a loose tunic. I was worried being surrounded by a bunch of alphas in uniform would make Willow nervous.

Kelina glares at me, then at Willow, scooped up in my arms. “So, the omega's awake,” she notes.

Willow bristles. “One of Northside's guards, I presume?”

I nod. “This is Kelina. She's been assigned to our watch.”

Kelina quirks an eyebrow. “Giving the girl a tour?”

“Something like that.”

She hesitates. “You tell her what's going on here?”

“I've been filled in,” Willow answers for herself.

“Mm.” Kelina stares at Willow another moment, making my chest rumble possessively, then looks up at me. “You know I can't let her go any further.”

“What?” Willow snaps. “Why not?”

“First off,” Kelina nearly barks back, “if Silas told you everything, you'd know that you're not just a guest here. You're a prisoner. Our prisoner.” She sneers. “What we say, goes.”

My alpha roars defiantly. How dare she speak that way to my mate ?

“Secondly,” she goes on, “letting you anywhere near that rogue downstairs is only going to lead to more bloodshed.”

“Downstairs?” Willow notes the solid wooden floorboards, then the ground-level windows. “What downstairs?”

Kelina’s cool eyes glint. “So, he didn’t tell you everything.”

As much as I’d love to shove my fist in her mouth, the words are already spoken, and Willow is already growling.

“Silas,” she seethes, “where is Kane?”

“Where do you think?” Kelina sighs. “We had to lock him in the cellar.”

“The cellar?” My omega’s pheromones burst with outrage. “He’s not an animal!”

“He slaughtered two of our villagers. Maimed two others.”

“He was protecting me.” Suddenly, like she’s only now realizing she’s still in my arms, Willow tries to force her way out. I let her stand, if only to stop from jostling her ribcage.

“Easy, omega,” I purr. “Take a breath, and we can talk about this.”

“Talk? All day, we waited for you, and you were here.” She shoots me an accusatory snarl. “Talking.”

Palming the wall for balance, she tries to storm past Kelina. The other alpha blocks her with ease.

“Don’t touch her,” I warn.

Kelina smirks. “Don’t worry. Red-heads aren’t my type.”

Enraged as I am, it doesn’t come close to the fury emanating from Willow’s scent. Even Kelina seems taken aback. It’s not every day us alphas see an omega turn feral. I wonder if it’s her mate’s bloodlust travelling through the bond. Tainting her.

“Let. Kane. Go,” she demands. “Now .”

I hover, not touching her. One wrong move is sure to set her off. If she doesn’t hurt herself, restraining her will.

“Kelina,” I say, keeping my voice level. “They’re bonded. Keeping them apart will only make them both more volatile.”

The smug Northside guard swaps her gaze between us. I can see the cogs turning. Calculating. Finally, she huffs, telling us to wait here. As she turns into the adjoining room, a quaint little kitchen with a hatch in the floor, Willow moves to follow.

I catch her wrist. “She’ll be back, little one.”

The sight of her contempt makes my jaw clench, my inner alpha aching to bite her. Remind her that she’s mine, as much as she is his. I’m not going to let her hurt herself just to get to him.

Not after everything I’ve done to keep her safe.

“I’m sorry,” I say at last. “I shouldn’t have kept you waiting.”

She scowls at me, like she’s trying to figure out my angle.

“I wanted to reach you sooner,” I explain. “But I didn’t. Because of that, you got hurt, and Kane ...” turned into a feral killing machine . I sigh. “It was my fault.”

Finally she softens, if only slightly. “You were trying to save us.”

Trying . Is she not convinced I succeeded?

Finally, Kelina resurfaces. She regards my omega. “He’s ready for you.”

We follow Kelina through the kitchen and down the cellar stairs. Shards of daylight slice through the barred window. The room reeks of oil, dirt, and sweat.

Guilt churns in my stomach. This shouldn’t be my first time venturing down here. I know I couldn’t bring myself to leave Willow’s bedside, but even still ... Kane deserved better.

Two male guards, Tristan and Aster, straighten as we approach.

Kane is pressed against the wall, hunched in shadows. He’s shirtless. Barefoot. There are shackles attached to his ankles and wrists. He breathes hoarsely, like he’s not quite awake, but not quite asleep.

“Alpha,” Willow gushes.

Red eyes cut through the dark, tainted with feral sickness, as she throws herself into his arms.

“Hey!” Tristan protests.

The second he moves closer, Kane flashes his teeth. He pulls Willow in, scenting her as best he can over the shackles.

“Get these off of him,” Willow demands.

Aster balks. “Are you crazy?”

“Hey,” I bark. “Speak to her that way again, and you’ll be the one in shackles.”

Aster shrinks. Kane meets my eye over Willow’s head. Something like approval flickers there.

Next to me, Kelina folds her arm. “Really? You thought this would make him less feral?”

I watch my imprint mate frantically scent the feral alpha lucky enough to wear her bite. “Give it a minute.”

The four of us hang back, shifting uncomfortably, until Kane and Willow are all over each other. He holds her face, growling into every breath as he maps her injuries.

“Alright, reunion’s over,” Tristan says at last. “You two planning to behave now?”

He’s met by matching glares—one crimson, one emerald (and only the latter making my cock stir in my trousers). But neither of them snarl, which has got to be a good sign.

“If you behave,” Kelina drawls, “we’ll let you upstairs. Otherwise—” she knocks the wall. “It’ll be another night in the cellar.”

To this, Kane does growl.

“It’s okay,” Willow sweeps in. “We’ll behave.” She squeezes Kane’s arm. “Right?”

He grumbles, resentment clouding his pheromones as he surveys the Northside guards, before begrudgingly nodding.

“Oh, yeah,” Tristan mutters, “real convincing.”

“Aster.” Kelina nods to Kane’s shackles.

The third, and likely youngest, guard swallows. He produces a key and wades up to Kane, undoing his locks. The second the shackles drop, he backs off. Not that it matters. All Kane cares about is holding Willow properly, turning her around so he can properly examine her wounds.

“I’m okay, alpha,” she says. “Really.”

His nose wrinkles. He stares at the Northside guards accusingly. “They touched you.”

“We bandaged her up,” Kelina returns. “You’re welcome.”

“Stop talking like you’re doing us a favor,” Willow says bitterly. “Silas is the one who cut a deal. You’re benefitting from our being here, alive, as much as we’re benefitting from you.”

Once again, Kane’s eyes find mine. This time it’s confusion I see there.

I might’ve explained myself to Willow. But her mate is still in the dark. I told myself it didn’t matter if I tried to spell it all out for him while he was still feral. He could barely speak in full sentences, let alone process them.

Now, the beast has his sanity back. And somehow I doubt he wants to hear jack shit from the likes of me.

“Alpha,” Willow murmurs, her thinking in sync with mine, “let’s get you upstairs.”
Her jaw sets. “We need to talk.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

Selling village secrets. Relinquishing our status to prisoners of war. Trading our freedom for refuge.

I wish I could be angry with him. My mate certainly is.

Kane chokes on a mouthful of bread. “He what ?”

Watching from the corner of the kitchen, Tristan—a thirty-something alpha with dirty blond hair and a perpetually exasperated expression—groans. “Here I thought even rogues had basic table manners.”

“It’s okay, Kane,” I sooth him before he can throw his plate into Tristan’s face. “If anything, it proves Silas was telling the truth.” Anyone willing to betray their post so severely is more than a deserter.

They’re a traitor.

“You don’t know that,” Kane says.

Kelina, roughly the same age, with cunning blue eyes and dark hair she wears pulled back, scoffs. “Trust me—if he was yanking our chain, you’d all be executed by now.”

Silas growls. “Not helping.”

“Who’s to say he’s not, huh?” Kane stands making all three guards feel for their

swords. “Besides, what do you assholes care about shitty intel from Southside?”

Defiance thickens in the room. Plus more than a little pride.

“That shitty intel comes straight from the mouth of Southside’s chief of recruitment,” Tristan reminds him. Then, at Silas’s warning look, he rolls his eyes. “ Ex- chief of recruitment. And as long as he keeps giving it to us, the three of you are under our protection.”

“As your prisoners,” I mutter.

Kelina leans over the kitchen table to cock her head at me. “I’m sorry, princess. Is that gonna be a problem with you?”

Princess. My stomach turns. My ears blare white noise.

“You’re ours now, princess .”

When I’m aware of my body again, I realize I’m in Kane’s lap. His furious, animal growl thrums through me.

“Don’t call her that,” Silas orders. His voice is deep and taut. “ Ever.”

Kelina hesitates, debating whether to provoke us further, but wisely restrains herself.

The truth is, the more they talk over my head—Silas re-spilling his secrets from behind enemy lines—the less I care. Taking down the Southside sentinels was never going to be in my power. Why should I start pretending now?

I’m pissed with Silas, but I’m also grateful to him. Without his foresight, and his damning history, we wouldn’t have this safe den. Do I like the idea of being pupsit by

three Northside guards? Of course not. But Silas found a way to keep me, him, and Kane safe.

What gives me the right to demand any more than that?

“How long?” Kane suddenly asks, bringing my attention back.

The Northside guards look at each other uncertainly. “Until your chief over there runs out of gossip,” Tristan says at last.

“Then what?”

“Then we leave.” Silas stares at the guards meaningfully. “Isn’t that right?”

I can tell by their gloating pheromones that no, that isn’t fucking right. But suddenly my ribs hurt, and my heart hurts, and I’m way too tired to question it.

“Bunny,” Kane murmurs, propping me up as I slump forward.

Silas starts. “She needs to get back to bed.”

I don’t have the energy to fight them, not that Kane gives me the chance. He scoops me up under my knees, letting Silas guide us back to my room at the end of the hall.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, noting Kane’s displeasure as he lies me in bed. “I know you’d rather be in the wilds.”

His gaze lowers, those harsh eyes soft only for me. “You’re not the one who got us stuck here.”

“Here is warm,” Silas says, leaning in the doorway, “and protected from Southside

sentinels.”

“Wouldn’t need protection if you’d done your job,” Kane grunts.

Silas sighs. “I fought them off as best I could.”

“Best you could would be a pile of sentinel corpses.”

“I don’t make a habit of murder.” Silas darkens. “Unlike another alpha I know.”

“That’s enough,” I snap. “Kane only did what he had to do. If he hadn’t ... I wouldn’t be here.” The same applies to me. I can still remember the knife’s weight in my hands, slashing out that alpha’s knees.

“Damn straight,” Kane mutters.

“That’s enough from you, too,” I shoot at him. “If Silas hadn’t put his ass on the line, we’d be all kinds of screwed.”

Kane bristles. “What about your ass?”

Fire burns in my cheeks. Even Silas clears his throat.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Come on ,” Kane groans. “He keeps talking like he did something noble, selling off his precious secrets. But what about yours?” He glares at Silas, hatred black in his eyes. “You told them what they did to her. Didn’t you?”

My gut twinges. I’d be lying if I said the same thought hadn’t crossed my mind, though I haven’t let myself dwell on it.

Silas is quiet. My inner omega aches for a bond—something that'll let me read his mind, his feelings.

Finally, he bites out, "It wasn't mine to tell."

"Bullshit," Kane grunts.

"As far as Northside's guards know, Willow left to escape the mother program. Not exactly a lie, but not the whole truth."

That's the thing I love about Silas. Sure, he'll omit the facts, bide his time, but he's not a liar. Back when we first met, I figured it was a manipulation tactic, but now I see it—him—for what he is.

You love him? my inner omega is all-too eager to point out.

The realization doesn't startle me like it did with Kane. If anything, it settles over me like a relief. At least I don't have to fight it anymore.

"Thank you," I whisper. At both alphas' looks, I add, "Not just for that. For everything. Fighting off the sentinels. Finding a way to protect us." I glance at Kane. "I don't know how long we could've gotten by if the Northside guard hadn't intervened."

He bristles. "I had it under control, omega."

"I know. And I know it was my fault we got found out." I take a breath. "I'm talking about the long term. That bounty isn't going anywhere, and it's not like we have anywhere else to run."

"We can still try," Kane insists. "The second it gets dark, I can get you out of here."

Make our own den, deep in the wilds—like we talked about.”

The earnestness in his voice makes me want to agree, more than anything. But I know, even without Silas’s growling breaths, that it’s not that simple.

“The sentinels aren’t going to stop looking,” I say softly.

“And Northside’s not about to let us go,” Silas puts in.

Kane snarls. “Who’s fault is that?”

“When Southside comes for me,” I press, “we can’t guarantee we’ll be able to fight them off. Not out in the wilds, where anything goes. Northside is still our best option.” I look at Silas. “Doubly so, now Silas has bought our protection.”

Kane’s snarl deepens, but the sound lacks bite. It’s like he’s trying to muster up his usual hatred, the bond taut with effort, but he can’t quite reach it.

I reach for his hand. To my surprise, he stiffens at the touch.

“What the hell, omega,” he grumbles, clutching me tight. “How are you still cold?”

Silas straightens. “Wait here. I’ll get her something hot to drink.”

Kane gives a deep alpha chuff in agreement. I roll my eyes.

Turning, Silas suddenly stops, his shoulders tense. “Kane. Do you, uh ... want anything?”

Kane scowls. “Huh?”

“You’ve been locked in a cellar for two days. Seems only fair I get you a drink.”
Silas’s ears turn pink. “If you’re thirsty.”

I swallow my laughter, Kane’s expression almost pup-like with shock. “Yeah,” he grunts, “whatever.”

I wait until Silas’s footsteps disappear down the hall before returning my focus to Kane. My omega senses him searching through the bond, probing me.

Finally he says, “So, you love him, huh?”

I start. “How did you—”

“I felt it, when you talked by the river. Felt it again just now. I dunno what he said to you to earn your trust ...” His jaw feathers. “But I’m guessing that’s not all he earned.”

The hurt in his voice makes me want to deny it, but what would be the point? Whatever I feel, like it or not, Kane feels it too.

“I also love you ,” I remind him.

His hums in acknowledgment, fingering his mating scar. The raised flesh has already transformed into a soft, pinkish silver. “It’s not gonna stop you from loving him.”

Right again. Loving Kane doesn’t replace my love for Silas. Nor, for the first time, am I sure I want it to.

“You’re upset,” I murmur.

Kane huffs. “Not at you.”

“At Silas?”

He grumbles like he wants to say yes , but instead answers, “Things made more sense when he was an asshole.”

I quirk a brow. “When did he stop being an asshole?”

He hesitates, his jaw tight. “I guess ... whenever you started trusting him.”

Something inside of me preens, honored by my mate’s words. I’ve let him down before, putting my faith in the wrong people, yet he still respects my omega’s intuition.

“You took a risk on me,” he explains. “Let me in your den. In your body. In ... here.” He feels my scar, his calloused palm making my omega purr. “Makes me the luckiest alpha alive.” Then he grimaces, like he resents what he has to say next. “I’d have to be a real arrogant prick to deprive someone else the same chance.”

I smile. “You’re a lot more noble than you give yourself credit for, alpha.”

“I said a chance ,” he mutters. “He fucks it up, I’ll knock his teeth out.”

“Always such a romantic.”

I sense him about to kiss me, and know I’m not going to do a damn thing to stop it, when Silas comes back into the room.

He thrusts a mug in Kale’s face. “Here.” He nods at me. “For your mate.”

My heart sings at the words. Even Kane seems pleased, glowing with poorly suppressed pride.

We drink, not speaking, until the hot liquid permeates my very bones. I can't remember the last time I drank something so sweet. Honey is a luxury I didn't realize I was missing, rolling smoothly down my throat.

Kane grips his mug like he's drawing strength from its contents. I can already picture the ceramic shattering between his fingers, but before I can purr at him to take it easy, he locks eyes with Silas.

"Fine," he declares, "we're staying."

Silas quirks a brow. "I wasn't aware that was up for debate."

"Don't be an ass," Kane growls. "If you think Will's better protected here—" he side-eyes me, "and she agrees, then that's that. Two against one."

Now Silas looks genuinely confused. Probably wondering when his vote starting to count for anything in Kane's eyes.

Before I know it, the tea is making me sleepy. The pain in my ribs and head is persistent, but easier to manage now Kane is here. I sense him in the bond, trying to take as much into himself as he can.

You'd heal a lot faster with a second bond mate. Especially an imprint mate.

My inner omega isn't snarky like I expect. Instead, she's gentle, reminding me of a truth I've been denying far too long. There's one alpha's bite I'm still missing.

Kane's jaw sets. He must feel it, too.

Silas takes the empty mug from my hands. Kane squeezes into the bed, angling his arms around me with all the gentleness he can manage. I melt into his strong, solid

heat while Silas watches over us.

He's still watching as eyes finally, mercifully, flutter closed.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Kane

Will is in and out of sleep for two whole days. No matter how much strength I try to give her, she's exhausted, and still in pain.

The Northside pricks are all kinds of worked up. Their inner alphas must not like having an injured omega in the den—barging in at all hours of the day to offer fresh bandages and healing herbs.

“Here,” the pup-faced one, Aster, offers me a jar of oil. “For her next bath. Meant to reduce swelling.”

What the fuck does he care about my mate's baths ? my alpha snarls.

I snatch the jar from his hands and slam the door.

Willow stirs. “Alpha ...?”

“Sorry, bunny,” I mutter, returning to her bedside. I smooth her hair back—admittedly, an easier feat, now the curls loop neatly around her ears. I show her the jar. “Another courting gift.”

She smirks. “Jealous?”

“Of that pipsqueak? Not a chance.”

“His name is Aster,” she reminds me, trying to sit up. “Try not to scare him so much.

He has a nice scent.”

I pause. “Alright. Jealous now.”

She rolls her eyes.

I try not to growl as she pops open the lid, smelling its contents. A satisfied purr escapes her. She offers me the jar and I shake my head, standing, to glare out the window. We’re near the barracks, right on the edge of the village. A line of frost-tipped trees faces the rear wall.

Under other circumstances, this spot would suit me fine. But with three nosy alphas in the mix, all of whom happen to be unmarked? My possessive urges are getting harder to control.

“Where’s Silas?” Willow asks, putting the jar down.

“Kitchen,” I answer. I’ve been catching snippets of his and Tristan’s lowered voices for over an hour.

“Another interrogation?”

I shrug.

She sighs. “How much more could they possibly need?”

“Beats me.” How anyone could even listen to Silas talk that long is a mystery.

Willow must detect the snarky tone through the bond, because she reaches her hand out, drawing me closer. I slide behind her in bed, propping her back against my chest.

“How’s the pain?” I ask, softer now.

She considers, like she wants to lie, but knows she won’t get away with it. “It could be worse.”

“So, bad.”

She just chuffs. I brush my nose against the top of her head, breathing her in. Her fruity scent has taken on a coppery twinge. It’s different from the last time she was sick. Almost ... earthy .

Gently, I palm her chest, ignoring the surge of blood down my stomach when I feel her breasts.

She sucks in a breath. “Kane?”

“Where’s it hurt?” I demand. “Here?” I cup the side of her breast. “Or ...” I feel my way down her waist. “Lower?”

She swallows, blushing. “I don’t know. A bit of both.”

I grunt unhappily. “My alpha’s on edge.”

She tips her head back to look at me. “Is that a recent development, or ...?”

“Don’t be cute,” I mutter. I feel around, my hands on her body setting the bond alight. I love how much I affect her.

I’d probably love it a lot more if I could figure out what the hell is wrong.

“It’s okay, alpha,” Willow tries to calm me. “My wounds are healing. And the

imprint sickness is, well, you know—”

“No. This is new.”

All I can see is the top of her head, yet I sense her biting her lip. “Well, there is one other thing it could be. Maybe.”

Thank god. Finally, she can put me out of my misery. “Tell me,” I demand. Let me make it better. That animal part of me is already jumping at the chance to take care of her, without any of the other alphas’ help.

That’s when I scent it. Or, rather, I scent more of it. Copper.

My alpha roars to attention.

“Omega,” I growl, “you’re bleeding.”

Christ, I’m an idiot. A big, male, alpha, idiot.

I pace up and down the frosty dirt path. I wanted to tell Silas to go fuck himself when he suggested I wait outside. Has he already forgotten that Willow and I are bonded? All the fresh air in the world isn’t going to stop me from feeling it.

Though I never thought I’d see the day where I’m sharing my mate’s menstrual pain.

Baby-face stands beside the front door, eyeing me anxiously. “You okay?”

I flash my teeth. He turns white.

Try not to scare him so much, Willow's voice echoes in my ears. He has a nice scent.

Despite myself, I take a breath through my nose, trying to focus on something other than the blood inside. Willow was right. Baby-face does have a nice scent, like fresh fruit. I breathe in again. Sweet and tart.

He says, "Your mate is going to be okay. Kelina knows what to do. Even Silas seemed to—"

I shoot him another glare.

His eyes are still on me as I pace. Hazel, almost green. Hair like bronze, with golden strands woven through. I keep thinking he's just a pup, but when I let myself look a little closer, he can't be any younger than Willow.

"You're small for an alpha," I remark. At least a head shorter than me.

He perks up. "You think?"

Yes. No. Maybe not. My point of reference is, well, me . And Silas. Not exactly fair comparisons.

"I wanted to say ..." he shuffles his feet. "I'm sorry. About the cellar. We shouldn't have chained you up so long, or kept you away from your mate."

Is he really feeling guilty, now? It's not like I give a damn about an apology.

Yet for some reason, I find myself answering, "I would've taken your throat out if you cut me loose."

"Oh." He gulps. "Well, I'm sorry anyway."

The front door opens. Kelina scans me up and down, checking I've got a hold on myself. Finally, she says, "Your mate's asking for you."

I shoulder past her without hesitation. Behind me, I hear Baby-face—fine, Aster—ask how Willow's doing. I don't catch the response before I barge into the room at the end of the hall.

"Omega," I blurt out.

She's not in bed. In fact, the bed's been stripped bare. Instead, I find her sitting by the window. The bond throbs when our eyes meet, embarrassment trickling through. I can't tell which side it's coming from.

"Hey," she says.

Biting back a growl, I kneel by my knees before her, resting my hands on her thighs. "Who undressed you?"

She fists her white underdress, trying to hide the bloodstains.

"Silas—" she starts, then clears her throat. "He's filling the bath."

Dammit. That should've been my job, as her alpha. My goddamn right.

"Kane," Willow presses. "Will you help me?"

At once, my anger melts away. I scoop her up without a word, carrying her into the washroom. I can feel eyes on us down the hall and twist my shoulders to shield her.

Silas is crouched over the long wooden tub, pouring in another bucket of water. Steam rises into the air, bubbles peppered around the tub's surface. I recognize the

scent from that jar Aster gave us earlier—orange mixed with ginger.

Silas looks up. “Good timing.” He looks between me and Willow expectantly. “What are you waiting for?”

I hold my mate closer. “Waiting for you to piss off.”

“Alpha,” she chastises.

“I’ll go,” Silas says, with difficulty, “if that’s what she wants.” He eyes Willow more closely. “But I seem to recall she enjoyed the last time we shared a bath together.”

Willow turns red. “I don’t know if I’d call last time ‘sharing’.”

“Maybe not.” He smiles. “All the same, I’m happy to help.”

“I’ll bet,” I bite out.

Silas doesn’t retaliate. He knows as well as I do that it’s not up to me, or him. My bond mate—his imprint mate—is in pain. Whatever she says, wants, even indicates , goes.

Finally, she gives a tiny nod. I have no choice but to let her out of my arms, smothering my raging alpha as she strips down.

Silas’s jaw is clenched so tight, I’m impressed it doesn’t shatter. Even more impressed that he just stands there, dead still, until I lift her naked body into the water.

“Wait,” he says. “Her bandages. They need to come off.”

My hand ghosts the off-white fabric beneath her breasts, searching for an opening. It's hard to focus with my mate's soft, milky body on gorgeous display before me.

"I've got it," Silas murmurs. He unfurls her bandages with ease, looping it around his palm as he goes.

I hold Willow steady. "Eyes on me, bunny."

She's turned rosy all over. Whether that's from the hot water, or from the two alphas eyeing her hungrily, it's hard to say.

Though, judging from my rock-hard cock, I'm guessing the latter.

She sinks into the water, humming contentedly. I crouch down beside her. God knows, if I stay standing, it's going to be that much harder to resist shoving my cock in her pretty pink mouth.

"Close your eyes, little one," Silas says hoarsely.

He fills the water bucket. Willow tips her head back, sighing as he wets her hair. There's a lot less of it compared to last time, but that doesn't stop Silas from showing that same tenderness.

His hands massage the base of her skull, working his way down her neck. The second he touches her bonding scar, it's like a bolt of lightning into the bond.

Willow gasps. I groan.

Did I seriously just get turned on by another alpha touching my mate ?

Willow eyes me apologetically, and suddenly it all makes sense. It's not my own

arousal I'm feeling.

Only then do I realize the position I'm in. The last time Silas bathed my omega, they were in the early stages of imprinting. They didn't know it back then. Now they do. Which makes me ...

In the way.

I savor the sight of my mate. Her sweet face. Her sparkling eyes. The way her breasts sit just above the water's surface, and her neck is still raw with my bite. No matter what state she's in—bleeding, bruised, broken—she shines brighter than the sun.

And no matter what happens, she will always be mine .

I lean forward, kissing her forehead. "Love you."

The last thing I see before I get up to leave are her shoulders softening. I know, in that single, minute gesture, that she loves me too.

I put my hand on the doorknob. To my surprise, it's not Willow, but Silas, who speaks.

"Don't," he says.

I refuse to turn, knowing another glance at my mate could make me lose my nerve.

"I can't," he insists. "Not like this."

At that, sensing my mate's distress, I lock eyes with Silas. "I'm finally giving you what you want," I growl. "What she needs."

Silas shakes his head. “I’m not all she needs.”

There’s a moment of eerie stillness in the bond, both Willow and I trying to process what he’s saying.

Silas removes his tunic. Then his pants. He tosses both aside, standing naked and hard across from me. At my blank look, he nods for me to do the same.

My mate’s quiet purr fills the room. She leans against the wall of the tub like she’s trying to make room. Finally, spurred on by the honeyed wildfire in her pheromones, I unclasp my cloak.

Silas slowly sinks into the tub. Water sloshes over the top.

I stand over them, freeing my erection from my pants as Willow slides into Silas’s arms. The bond glows with belonging. With trust.

“Together,” Silas says, to both of us now. “As a pack.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Silas

I've imagined this moment a hundred times. My imprint mate, opening her heart, mind, and body to me. Deciding that I am worthy. Welcoming me home.

It's taken me until now to realize—home with Willow, means home with Kane.

I decided he was an obstacle. Something my alpha would just have to overcome if I wanted to claim Willow as my own. But as he strokes the top of her head, gently easing his cock into her mouth, I finally understand.

He's a part of her.

Which makes him a part of me.

“Good omega,” he rumbles, groaning, as her lips close around his shaft.

“That's our girl,” I purr. “Just a little deeper. You can do it.”

She squirms in my lap, her arousal turning the tub into a thick sea of pheromones.

“Oh, fuck.” Kane's breath trembles. “That's it. Just like that.”

Our perfect girl does exactly as she's told, hollowing her cheeks as she sucks him down. She moans like his cock is the best thing she's ever tasted.

Kane's knees lock. “Christ.”

A shiver rolls down Willow's spine. I stroke her, peppering kisses over her gleaming shoulders. "Take a breath, little one."

At last, she slides off Kane's cock. I help wipe the drool off her chin.

"You good?" he grunts, kneeling down to cup her jaw. "Not too much?"

She smiles sweetly, shaking her head.

"Use your words, little one," I growl.

She shudders. "I'm good." Bites her lip. "Want more."

Whatever you want, my alpha preens. Anything. Everything.

I grip her waist under the water, sliding in closer so can feel her core pulse against my cock. She's so damn slick. Hotter than the bathwater, then some.

"What's wrong?" Kane demands.

He must've sensed it before I did—tension in their bond—before she stiffens against me.

"Alpha," she whimpers, craning her head. "I'm ... not clean."

Another growl thrums through me, my alpha outraged by the insinuation.

"The blood—" she argues.

"Is just blood." I stroke her hair back, admiring the wavy, swirling way it dries. "It doesn't make you any less perfect."

Still squirming, at a loss, Willow returns her gaze to Kane. He smirks.

“Don’t look at me, bunny. If a little blood was enough to scare him off, I wouldn’t be letting him knot you.” He kisses her, then adds, more seriously, “Let alone bite you.”

Fierce as she is, I can feel how her alpha’s words seep into her, giving her the permission she needs to let go.

Kane draws her arms out of the water, resting them over the lip of the tub, so she has better leverage. Her hips shimmy back on me, hot pussy searching for my cock.

With that, she lowers her hips, sliding onto my cock in a long, fluid motion. Every velvety inch turns my insides to goo. Every precious twitch and flutter makes me question my sanity.

“Good girl,” Kane purrs. “So fucking pretty.”

Her spine arches forward, giving me the perfect view of pleasure.

My omega, kissing her mate, as she impales herself on my cock.

“C’mon, bunny.” Kane finally breaks the kiss. “Show him how good you can take it.”

Breathing heavily, she lifts her hips, then plunges back down—slowly, agonizingly, like every movement is more pleasure than her little body can handle. I guide her hips, biting the inside of my mouth to keep from going all out.

Kane stands, fisting his cock.

“Go on, little one.” I kiss Willow’s temple. “He’s aching for you.”

She moans, making my cock jolt inside of her, as her lips close around Kane's shaft once more.

Me, Willow, and Kane—together again, the way it should've been from the very start. No secrets between us. Pleasure on all sides. Acceptance for all we are, and all we need. Kane isn't fighting me. I'm not fighting him.

And Willow, at long last, has stopped fighting herself.

Her pussy clamps down as she comes apart. She can't hold back a cry, spit gleaming on Kane's cock as she's forced to release him.

"That's our girl," I groan.

Kane can't stop himself. He strokes his cock, hard and fast, his breath coming in short pants. "Need you to swallow me down one more time, omega."

She doesn't need to be asked twice. Her pink, puffy lips close around the base of his shaft.

"Coming—!" Kane rasps.

Willow swallows him down, moaning long and low in the back of her throat. As soon as he's done, Kane pulls out, crouching to take her face in his hands.

"Fuck, omega," he growls, "you're so good. Too damn good. Y'know that?"

She preens, still gasping for air.

I didn't think it would get to me so much—another alpha soothing my imprint mate, praising her, pushing her body to its limits. But before I know it, I'm jerking up to

meet Willow's thrusts, not sure how much longer I can hold out.

My knot swells, pushing at Willow's walls.

"Yes," she gushes, "please, alpha. I'm ready."

My head falls over her shoulder, my teeth aching as I taste her sweet flesh.

Willow grabs my wrist, turning it up so my pulse is mere inches from her lips. She licks, preparing her mark.

My knot pushes in, locking us together as I fill her with come. She smothers her cry by biting that sacred spot on my wrist, making pleasure and pain fire up my veins. I can't tell which is hers and which is mine.

"Omega," I gasp.

My teeth sink home. She tastes exactly as I expected—flowers and honey and all the light in the world. My mind turns to white. Then green. Then ... then

Willow bites down harder. Already, I can feel our bond, and I know it is eternal, and yet, I'm scared of ever letting go.

It's Willow who finally has to come up for air. She twists her head around, smashing her lips to mine. She tastes of me. Of her. Of all that we are, and all we're going to be.

"Shh ..." I hear a new voice murmur. Kane strokes Willow's hair, and I swear I can feel it, comfort and warmth rolling down my spine. "We got you."

"You're ours." I lick the blood off Willow's shoulder. "Always."

Kane meets my gaze. It occurs to me the two of us have never been this close, not even during Willow's heat. His eyes bore into mine—for once, not glaring.

Only seeing.

Kane makes up the bed while we wait for my knot to deflate. As soon as the washroom door opens, I can sense the guards' probing pheromones. Their disapproval. Curiosity. Even arousal.

None of it means a damn. Not with a sleeping, bonded imprint mate falling asleep on my cock.

"Come on, little one." I kiss her head, lifting her out of the bath.

She only purrs in response, already asleep again as I lay her down in bed. I note the clean cloth on the bedsheets and flick Kane an appreciative glance.

I adjust the towel around my waist. Kane clears his throat.

"You should, uh, get in with her." At my bewildered look, he adds, "Keep her warm."

I don't need to remind him that he could be the one keeping her warm if he so chose. Willow's contentment is like a lullaby in both our bonds, soothing our inner alphas.

Until there's a knock at the door.

At once, Kane and I straighten. A growl escapes him.

"Stay with her," he warns.

I remain on Willow's bedside as he opens the door a fraction. "What?" he snarls.

I hear, rather than see, Tristan. "Are you two out of your mind?"

Beside me, Willow mumbles in her sleep, probably sensing her alphas' fury.

"Keep your voice down," Kane warns.

"This isn't a brothel," Tristan hisses. "It's a safe den. You —you damned rogue—are lucky to be here at all, rather than locked back up in that cellar."

Before I know it, I'm on my feet, joining Kane in the doorway. "Threaten my packmate one more time," I say to Tristan, "and see what happens."

Tristan recoils like he's been slapped. "Packmate?" he demands.

The truth was bound to come out sooner or later. And my alpha isn't exactly in a withholding mood.

His gaze lowers, like he's suddenly realizing I'm half-naked. He notes the fresh bite mark on my wrist.

"Is that—" his head snaps up to Kane. "Christ, is that yours?"

"No," I answer firmly at the same time as Kane says, "Fuck off."

"Willow and I bonded," I explain simply.

Kane grunts. "Got a problem with that?"

Tristan must realize he's outmatched. Two alphas of mine and Kane's size are

already a force to be reckoned with. Two recently bonded alphas, with a naked omega asleep in the room behind them? Dangerous fucking territory.

“Gotta hand it to you,” he says at last, tautly, “you’ve got impeccable timing.”

I scowl. “What are you talking about?”

He gestures down the hall. “We need to talk.”

Both me and Kane bristle at the thought. I can’t leave—not less than an hour after bonding. What if Willow wakes up, and I’m not there?

“It can wait,” I growl.

“No,” Tristan says, darkly, “it can’t.”

My inner alpha seethes. He doesn’t care how serious this is. The den could be on fire and he’d barely bat an eye. Our imprint mate needs us close, which means I can’t leave her.

“I’ll go,” Kane bites out, surprising me. “Anything you gotta say to him, you can say to me.”

“It’s about Southside,” Tristan insists, not even looking at my packmate. “There’s news you’ll want to hear.”

I try not to roll my eyes. “Great. It’ll still be news in a couple hours.”

“Silas.”

Even on a good afternoon, it’s rare to hear Tristan speak so earnestly. He normally

covers his insecurity with a thick veneer of arrogance. But right now, there's something deeper. Almost ... apologetic.

"The sentinels," he says, "they've sent word."

"Regarding?" I demand.

Tristan sighs. His eyes flick to Kane, then back to me.

"Regarding Willow."

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:06 am

Willow

My dreams are a long, empty glow. Even my injuries seem fuzzy, pain graciously distributed between me and my alphas.

Am I still bleeding? Who cares.

My eyes creak open, finding Kane hunched over a chair, staring right through me. Only then do I realize—we're alone.

And both the bonds are clouded with doubt.

A chirp escapes me before I can help it. Alphas unhappy ? my omega panics.

Kane starts. He drops to his knees by my bedside. "Omega," he rumbles, "what is it? You hurting?"

I try to pull him in. The bed feels hard and vast without my alphas' warmth.

He slides in beside me, kissing the top of my head. "I'm here, bunny. Just breathe." Reassurance tumbles down the bond. But it's incomplete.

"Where's Silas?" I demand.

As if on cue, the door opens, and Silas bursts through. I make a clutching motion. He doesn't hesitate, squeezing in behind me, sandwiching me between both mates.

“Did you get it?” Kane asks.

Silas doesn't answer, trying to replace the bloody cloth under my thighs with a fresh one. I blush, shimmying.

“You're fine,” Kane grunts, sensing my embarrassment. “It's just blood.”

He says that, but my omega's not convinced. Some thing is upsetting both her new mates. Either it's the blood, or I'm missing something entirely.

Oh, my omega delights, I know just the thing.

I nudge my hips back before Silas can lay down another sheet. His body is like a boulder behind me. I barely have to breathe before he's getting hard, his cock perfectly designed to stuff me full. My pussy perfectly designed to take it.

“Omega,” he warns.

“You're upset,” I huff, kissing Kane's chest, “both of you.”

“How could any one be upset,” Silas grits out, “with a view like this?” He squeezes my ass, making me gasp.

“Silas,” Kane mutters. “Now? Really?”

Yes, now, my omega snarls. Let me take care of my mates like I'm supposed to.

Frustrated, I shift my hips, grumbling when Silas refuses to line himself up with my pussy.

“You need a knot, don't you, little one?” he rumbles.

I nod. Alphas upset. Need to fix it.

He smirks, his breath hot on my temple. “How about two?”

All of Kane’s resistance flickers away, the bond lighting up like the first rays of dawn. Warmth, awe, and possibility hang on the horizon.

“Me first,” Silas says, his voice full of control.

Kane’s hands slide down my front, drawing circles around my aching core. I jerk into him, pleasure rising in my stomach, as Silas’s cock nudges my ass.

“You tell me if this is too much,” he orders.

I nod stupidly. Too much, too little, I don’t care. I just need him. No. Both of them.

“She’s a good girl,” Kane growls, “she can take it.”

My pussy flutters, then clenches, as he slips two fingers inside. I don’t even care about the blood anymore. All I care is that my mates are giving me what I need, and that I can give them the same.

Silas presses forward, just the tip of his cock splitting me painfully open. “Alpha,” I whimper.

“Take a breath, sweetheart,” he purrs. “Give it a minute. If it still hurts, I’ll pull out.”

I do as he says, the three of us breathing heavily, waiting for me to adjust. Kane keeps plunging his fingers in and out, dragging against my walls in broad, hungry strokes.

“Holy fuck ...” he breathes. “This how you’re gonna milk my cock, bunny? Squeezing down on me so good.”

The praise makes me shudder, my walls relaxing to let Silas further in. He tests the next couple inches, then a couple more, until I cry out.

“Easy,” Kane says—to me or Silas, I’m not sure.

“Yeah,” Silas groans, “doing my best.”

“Alpha,” I whisper, locking eyes with Kane. “Need you.”

He hesitates. “Don’t wanna hurt you, bunny.”

I shake my head vehemently. “Not gonna hurt me. Not if it’s you.”

His gaze flicks behind my head, checking in with Silas. The air fills with thick, pleased alpha pheromones.

Finally, Kane angles his cock, lifting his hips into mine. He moves slowly but doesn’t stop—not until I’m all the way full.

“Christ,” Silas moans at the same time as Kane blurts, “Fuck.”

It’s too much for my poor, overstimulated omega. The moment Kane bottoms out, his cock grinding against Silas’s inside of me, I break apart. Both bonds twirl and fizzle with ecstasy.

Distantly, I’m aware I should be trying to keep my voice down, but I don’t have the sense to even try. All I can do is come, and come, and come, milking my poor alphas for all their worth.

I know Kane is coming with me when another blast of pleasure rockets through the bond. He hisses, locking in place. Silas gives us a couple seconds’ warning before doing the same, practically splitting me open on his engorged knot.

“ Ah ,” I whimper.

Their rumbling purrs rain down on me, seeping into every stretched, cramping muscle. I hide my face in Kane’s chest. Silas massages his thumbs around the base of my spine. Normally, this is the kind of explosive moment where I’d be passing out.

Instead, somehow, I’ve never felt more alive.

“Love you,” I murmur, speaking to Kane, or Silas, or both.

Kane places his palm on my lower stomach, feeling himself. “More than anything,” he murmurs.

Silas tucks my hair back, stroking Kane’s scar on my neck, then, more gently, his own scar on my collar.

“We’re going to keep you safe,” he vows. “You know that, don’t you, omega?”

A purr rises in my chest, then stops. Something still isn’t right. Even with two thick knots inside me, my mates properly tended to, the underlying tension remains. Silas’s voice is deeper than it should be. Kane’s eyes are too sharp.

“Safe from what, alpha?” I dare to ask, twisting my face to him.

Silas caresses my cheek, scrutinizing every shade of colour in my probing eyes.

It’s Kane who answers, “You’re ours. No-one’s ever gonna touch you.”

Panic rises in my chest as the bonds tighten. It’s not just possessiveness I’m sensing. It’s dread.

“Alphas,” I say, suddenly glad they’re so close to me—as close as the three of us can

possibly get. “What is it? Tell me.”

They share another look over my head, this one less pleased. The room is still warm and sweet with sex, but something sour is quickly taking over.

“Southside,” Silas says at last. “We received word from them a few hours ago.”

My stomach plummets. We knew this was coming, but I suppose a part of me was foolish enough to hold out hope. “What word?” I demand.

Both alphas hold me tighter, like they’re willing me to remember their promise. We’re going to keep you safe. No-one’s gonna touch you.

“ Alphas ,” I say again. “What. Word?”

Silas sighs. Kane clenches his jaw.

“They know I’m a traitor,” Silas explains. “Tristan won’t give us details, but I suspect Northside’s delegate leaked it on purpose. Probably trying to humiliate the sentinels, or strike some kind of deal.”

My very bones twinge with sympathy. It’s hard enough that Silas had to leave behind his whole life, but now for all his friends, colleagues, and maybe even family to know him as a traitor ... that can’t be easy. “I’m sorry,” I murmur.

Kane growls. “That’s not all.”

Silas takes a breath. “No. It backfired. Because it’s not just me who’s been outed.”

It takes a second for the words to sink in. Silas, the sentinel’s chief of recruitment, a traitor.

And me, Pack Shire's golden omega, a whore.

"Southside has classified both my desertion, and your—" Silas grimaces, "—kidnapping as acts of aggression from Northside. As far as they're concerned, you've been their prisoner from the start."

"That's ridiculous," I snap, not thinking. "I wasn't kidnapped! What evidence do they—?"

"They don't need evidence," Kane says. "Turns out they don't need jack shit."

Blood roars in my ears, ferocious, like it's trying to distract me from what's really happening. "For what?" I demand.

Silas's pheromones hang heavy in the air. Any second now, they'll come crashing down, and none of us will be able to hide from the truth.

He says, "For war, omega."

My heart thuds to a stop. Not even my alphas' bodies contain enough warmth to permeate the chill in my bones.

Silas takes another sober, steadying breath.

"Southside has officially declared war."

TO BE CONTINUED