



# Wine Tasting with a Sea Turtle

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** World of Aquatica: While enjoying a wine tasting with his friends, a shifter notices unruly behavior that puts his future in his path.

Geoff Ignatius knows his irritable behavior is caused by jealousy, but he can't seem to help himself. Watching friend after friend find their mate—the other half of their soul—while he still hasn't found his is driving him nuts. At over three hundred years old, Geoff desperately wants that peace in his own life.

Trying to help Geoff keep busy when he's not working, his friends take him to a nearby winery. While he's enjoying a tasting, his attention is drawn to an altercation across the patio. One of the patrons is chastising a server. Unable to ignore it, his annoyance spiking, Geoff stalks toward the altercation. As he approaches, he scents the most hypnotic aroma, and realization strikes him—the human waiter is his mate.

Unfortunately, the aggressive behavior Geoff uses against the belligerent patron also scares his mate. Can he prove to his human that he's not a danger and win his heart?

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

## Page 1

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Turning off the water, Warner O'Brian stepped out of the shower. He grabbed a towel from the rack and quickly dried himself. Warner rubbed over his hair as he peered into the mirror.

Seeing the bruise fading on his right cheek, Warner sighed and shook his head. The proof of his father—Walter O'Brian—backhanding him was nearly gone. At least it wasn't tender anymore.

Warner slung the towel around his waist, then stood still for a moment... listening. When he didn't hear anything, he eased the door open as quietly as possible. He'd remembered to oil the hinges the past weekend so they no longer squeaked.

Which is why dear ol' Dad hit me, or so he claimed.

After all these years living with the man, Warner knew he didn't actually need a reason to hit him. If it hadn't been the squeaking hinges, he would've made something up. When Walter was awake, Warner tried to be out of the house.

Crossing to his room, Warner hurried inside, closing and locking the door. He tossed the towel into his laundry basket, then chose a pair of navy-blue slacks and a light blue button-down. After laying his work outfit on the bed, Warner went to his dresser and pulled out a pair of white briefs.

Warner dressed quickly.

After slipping his black-sock-clad feet into his black trainers, Warner placed his wallet in his back pocket. He returned to his dresser and once again opened his

underwear drawer. Digging in the back, Warner retrieved his small tube of concealer, his lip gloss, and his eyeliner. Once he'd done up his face, hiding the fading bruise, he put his lip gloss in his pocket and the other items away.

Grabbing his keys, Warner crossed to his bedroom door. He paused again and listened, hesitating. After a hard swallow, he eased out of his room, closing the door silently behind him.

Then Warner hurried from the house and into the morning sunlight. Getting into his car, he quickly locked the door before blowing out a relieved breath, allowing the tension to drain from his shoulders. Warner started the car, put it into gear, and headed off to work.

“Two more weeks,” Warner whispered, anticipation filling him. “Two more weeks and I’ll have enough for first and last months’ rent, as well as a little extra. I can hardly wait.”

With those thoughts running through his head, Warner tuned the radio to his favorite soft rock station and started singing along. He knew he couldn’t sing for shit, but that didn’t stop him. He loved singing. Well, Warner loved music in general, even if he had no talent for singing, dancing, or playing an instrument.

Warner would be the first to admit he wasn’t the most coordinated person. That had been the first of many issues that started his father having problems with him. The man who’d donated half his genes to create him had wanted a big brawny son who could follow in his athletic footsteps—football specifically.

The fact that Walter had ended up with a slightly plump, uncoordinated son pissed him off. Add in that Warner was gay—there was just no hiding it after his mother had introduced him to make-up at the age of thirteen—and Walter washed his hands of him. That had been fine when Warner’s mother had been alive.

“I miss you, Mom,” Warner whispered, feeling the pinpricks of tears behind his eyes.  
“Shit.”

Blinking quickly, Warner returned to singing as he finished his drive to work. He’d been working at Rosewood Estate Winery for nearly three months. His father insisted on taking half his pay for rent, which made saving up to move difficult, but he was almost there.

Finally.

“Can’t wait until I don’t have to walk on pins and needles every day.”

Seeing the sign for the winery ahead, Warner found himself looking forward to his shift. He worked as a server on their covered patio restaurant. Their menu was limited, but what food they offered was excellent. That was a good thing since Warner had never had a waiter job before, but he was forever grateful that Marion Cooper had taken a chance on him, and he worked extremely hard for her.

Warner parked his sedan in the employee lot and hopped out. Eager to start his shift, he hurried inside. After greeting Kelly, who stood behind the tasting counter, Warner went into the back.

“Morning, Warner,” Marion greeted when she spotted him. A smile curved her full pink lips as she watched him clock in. “Can I talk to you for a minute, honey?”

“Good morning, Marion,” Warner replied. He still felt a little funny calling his middle-aged boss by her first name, but she’d insisted. “Sure.” Stopping beside her, Warner cocked his head. “What can I help you with?”

“Oh, I just wanted to talk to you about your position.”

Warner couldn't help the way his eyes widened as he felt a gasp escape him. "Did I do something wrong?"

Oh, god. No. I need this job.

Marion eyed him for a second. Then it was her turn for her eyes to widen. "Oh, goodness, no." She rested her hand on Warner's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "I'm so sorry, honey. That was a horrible way to begin. You've certainly done nothing wrong." Smiling again, Marion told him, "You've done everything right. I just wanted to know if you'd be interested in expanding your abilities?"

A relieved breath left him in a whoosh. "Oh." His unexpected heartrate spike slowly began to settle. "What do you mean?"

Indicating the main floor, Marion told him, "Did you know that Kelly's moving?"

Warner shook his head. "No. I hadn't heard that." Unable to keep his curiosity to himself, he asked, "Where's she going?"

"Her husband received a promotion, but it requires them to move to Texas to accept it," Marion explained. She never seemed to mind anyone asking questions. "She'll be gone at the end of the month."

Considering it was the first week of July, Warner nodded. "So you have time to train someone new to do tastings."

"Right." Marion smiled widely. "I was wondering if you wanted to be that someone?"

Warner gaped, surprise filling him anew. "Me?"

Marion laughed, the pleasant sound bouncing off the walls. “If you want. The position would come with a raise.”

Even without the raise, Warner would’ve been happy to learn. “Yeah. Thanks.” He grinned at his boss. “I’d love that.”

“Great.” Marion patted him on the shoulder and headed out of the break room. “I know you always appreciate extra hours, so stay after work this evening, and we’ll start talking specifics.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Warner quickly replied. “Thank you.”

With a bounce in his step, Warner started his shift.

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With his hands fisted, Geoff slammed them over and over into the hanging heavy bag. His breath came in heaving gasps, and he felt sweat rolling down his temples and back. With focused intensity, Geoff flexed his arm muscles and took out his frustration on the inanimate object.

Better than getting into bar fights.

Geoff recalled his Alpha Kaiser’s dry comment last month when he’d shown him the newly set up workout room. Considering the complex where he resided was the home of a shifter-run marine park, a gym had never before been needed. It wasn’t as if a shifter needed to run on a treadmill to stay in shape.

His alpha setting up the room with a few pieces of equipment that Geoff could take his aggression out on had nothing to do with exercise. Instead, he was using it to assuage his frustration, to exorcise his anger. His jealousy upon watching so many

friends at the park find their fated mates had been eating him alive for years.

Finally, Geoff had gone to a bar and gotten into a fight. It had felt good to have a focus for his anger. That had led to him doing it again... and again... until one bar fight had landed him in jail. Their shifter pod's lawyer had easily sprung him, but that had drawn the notice of Alpha Kaiser and Beta William, forcing them to step in and find another way to help him process his frustrations.

“Hey, Geoff.”

Pausing in his beating of the bag, Geoff grabbed it to stop it swinging. He turned to find Dare standing just inside the doorway. The giant octopus shifter grinned upon seeing that he had Geoff's attention and strode toward him.

“Thought I'd find you in here,” Dare stated. “Did you want to spar?” He indicated the roped-off ring that stood on the other side of the room.

That was another new feature. The large square had been set up along the lines of a boxing ring, only larger. At first, Geoff had wondered who would even be willing to use it with him, but he'd been surprised by the number of friends willing to face off against him.

Hell, even Alpha Kaiser had sparred with him once—and that had been enough to remind Geoff why he was their alpha. Even slightly shorter and quite a bit slenderer, the muscular colossal squid shifter had wiped the floor with him. His alpha's movements were fast, fluid, and precise.

Geoff had sort of felt like a lumbering oaf compared to him.

“Sure,” Geoff agreed, moving in that direction. “I'd appreciate that.”

“Under one condition,” Dare told him as he kicked off his sandals and reached for the hem of his polo shirt.

Pausing outside the ring, Geoff arched one brow. “What’s that?”

Smirking, Dare draped his shirt over a rack of weights and sauntered toward him. “After I kick your ass, you join me and Price and a few of the other guys.” The other shifter grinned, pausing beside Geoff next to the ring. “We’re going out to hit a few wineries this afternoon.”

Geoff hesitated. Going out with a bunch of mated couples didn’t really sound like a good time to him. Price was Dare’s vampire mate, and watching them make goo-goo eyes at each other certainly wouldn’t help him keep his cool.

Gods, I hate this jealousy bullshit.

While Geoff wished he didn’t feel the way he did, he couldn’t seem to shake it loose, either. Other than doing something physical, the only time he received any relief was when he was in animal form. His leatherback sea turtle didn’t share his angst in regards to finding his mate.

Unfortunately, seeing as Geoff worked as one of the head engineers at World of Aquatica —their shifter-run marine park—he couldn’t stay in animal form all the time.

Plus, I can’t very well find my mate like that, either.

“It won’t be all mated couples, Geoff,” Dare told him as if reading his mind. “Craeg and Kayson are coming, too.”

Nodding slowly, Geoff appreciated the news. Craeg shared his psyche with a minke

whale and was another of their pod's enforcers. The fun-loving Kayson enjoyed swimming in the marine park's aquariums in his large manta ray form, and Geoff had heard many a patron oooh and aaah over his animal half.

"Okay, yeah. I'll go," Geoff agreed. Easing between the soft ropes that made up the ring's outer edge. "But first, I'm gonna kick your ass."

Dare laughed and followed him into the ring. "You can try, man."

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After swinging off his motorcycle, Geoff rubbed the back of his right shoulder. While he had indeed tried to kick Dare's ass, the slightly larger shifter had come out on top. Geoff hadn't really been surprised, considering Dare was one of their pod's top enforcers for a reason.

Still, Geoff had come close. He was definitely getting better at fighting. In truth, Geoff didn't really know if that was a good thing, all things considered.

"Heard really good things about the food at this winery," Kayson shared as he fell into step with Geoff. The muscular blond had also chosen to ride his motorcycle, and he threaded his fingers through his thick locks to remove the helmet hair look. "And I'm definitely ready for an afternoon snack."

"I could eat," Geoff acknowledged, rubbing a hand over his trim waist. "Why does lunch feel like it was more than three hours ago?"

Craeg slung his arm over Geoff's shoulder and laughed. "Because ya let Dare kick yer arse before joinin' us," he teased, his Scottish brogue drawing attention from a trio of women to their left who were also heading toward the winery's front door.

Geoff noticed their appreciative looks as they eyed them, but none of the women pinged any interest for him. While Craeg appeared oblivious, Kayson noticed. The flirty blond even quickened his steps enough to open the door for them, earning thanks and a coy look from the brunette.

Good grief. Is he going to get laid in a winery bathroom?

He wouldn't put it past his flirty, good-looking rogue of a friend.

Mentally rolling his eyes, Geoff slipped out from under Craeg's arm as they followed Kayson inside. He paused in the foyer, taking in the tasteful ambiance of the winery. There were several tables off to the left, a sitting area to the right, along with display cases and shelves full of bottles, clothes, and other knick-knacks for sale. Twenty feet ahead was a bar area, probably for wine tastings. Beyond that was a wall of glass windows broken up by a couple of glass doors, revealing a massive stone patio with tables.

That must be the main eating area.

After having seated the three women, the hostess returned and greeted them. "Good afternoon, gentlemen." She smiled and glanced over their group. "Seven of you?"

While she'd been gone, Dare and Price had joined them, as well as Cuzco and Grisham. After Cuzco had mated with his human detective, Grisham had worked hard to get the slightly reclusive coconut octopus shifter to get out more. The small shifter was blossoming under Grisham's care, and it was truly a lovely thing to see.

"Yes, that's right," Dare replied with a smile and nod at the hostess. "Out on the patio would be wonderful. We plan to order a couple of flights, as well as a meal."

"Of course," the hostess replied with a return smile. "This way, please."

Allowing the mated couples to lead the way, Geoff fell into step behind Craeg with Kayson behind him. He followed along as they exited the building for the patio and veered to the right. Stopping at a large round table set up for eight, the hostess began laying out menus.

“We don’t do daily specials, but we do make some wonderful brick oven pizzas on the weekends,” the woman told them. “I especially enjoy the taco pizza, but the spinach artichoke dip is also to die for.” Touching a smaller menu, she added, “The wine flights are listed on this menu. There’s one that’s all white, one all red, or there’s a third that’s a mix of the two.”

As she spoke and most of the guys were choosing seats, Geoff became distracted by a loud, angry-sounding voice on the other side of the patio. He peered that way and spotted a red-faced patron glaring up at a slightly overweight server. The server’s cute freckled face appeared pale, and his eyes were wide. As the server lifted his hands in placation and took a step backward, the patron lunged to his feet. The woman at the table with the man said something, but he ignored her in favor of lifting his hand and pointing a finger at the server.

“Don’t give me that shit,” the man roared. “I know you gave it away on purpose.”

“Please, sir. I’m sorry,” the server replied, his voice carrying just enough for Geoff’s sensitive shifter hearing to catch it. “There really was a mix-up in the kitchen. It’ll just be five minutes or so.”

“If you don’t get me my dip right now, I’m gonna report you,” the patron threatened. “You’re gonna be fired.”

“Fuck that,” Geoff grumbled under his breath, his ire rising. He hated bullies. “Not on my watch.”

Without much thought as to what he could actually do, Geoff began stalking across the patio. He ignored Craeg calling his name in favor of quickening his stride. As he drew nearer to the table where the server was still trying to soothe the upset patron, Geoff inhaled deeply to gather a little control.

The scent that hit him had the opposite effect. The slightly sweet masculine aroma teased his senses and caused his mouth to water. His prick thickened even as his turtle perked up in his mind.

It hit him like a blow to the solar plexus.

The cute human who looked to be two seconds away from being shoved by the patron was his mate.

Oh, hell, no!

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

If there had been any way to head right back into the kitchen and bring out the artichoke dip the customer had ordered, Warner would have done it in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, there'd been a mix-up, and Paula had thought the appetizer had been for her table. Warner understood that things happened, so when he'd brought the customers the bottle of wine and poured it for them, he'd said it would be just a few minutes.

Too bad the customer had noticed that Paula's table had ordered after him but had already received their appetizer. He'd been livid.

Warner had apologized and told him it wouldn't be long, but the man didn't want to hear it. The guy raising his voice and jumping from his chair caused alarm bells to go off in Warner's mind. He didn't know what to do, having never been in such a situation before.

If I get Marion, will she consider it my fault? Will I miss out on the chance to learn about wine tasting from Kelly?

Before Warner could decide what to do, he caught sight of a huge mocha-skinned man stalking toward them. He would've thought the guy absolutely gorgeous in a bad boy sort of way if it wasn't for the anger clouding his medium-brown features. How the man fisted his huge hands didn't do anything to assuage Warner's already jangled nerves, either.

"Hey," the big man barked, his voice deep and commanding. "Sit back down and leave the server alone."

The customer turned and glared at the interloper. “Are you talkin’ to me?” he demanded.

“‘Course I’m talkin’ to you,” the large guy replied derisively. “Do ya see any other assholes around here threatening cute innocent servers?”

As the guy spoke, he waved one massive brown paw of a hand in Warner’s direction. Warner barely managed to stay his instinct to cringe, although he did take a step backward. The guy towered over him by half a foot, after all, and had to have at least seventy pounds on him... and all of it appeared to be muscle.

Wait. What did he just call me?

Issuing a dark snort, Warner’s customer scowled as he swept his gaze over the stranger. “You a big ol’ homo?” Even though the brown-skinned interloper had several inches and broader shoulders than his customer, he cupped one fist with the other threateningly. “Get lost, pussy. Those gym muscles ain’t scarin’ no one.”

With a growl, the newcomer took a step toward Warner’s customer. “Watch your mouth, asshole,” he ordered gruffly. He narrowed his deep brown eyes, and his arm muscles appeared to flex. “Or this pussy’ll be happy to make you.”

Warner backed up another step as a fresh wave of uncertainty and fear washed through him. As he lifted his hands, palms out in placation, he opened his mouth. Except, Warner had no idea what to say to defuse the situation.

To Warner’s relief, an auburn-haired stranger slipped up behind the brown man. “That be enough, Geoff,” he growled in a Scottish brogue. Gripping the other man’s left bicep with one hand, he wrapped his right arm around his torso. “Ye’re gonna get us kicked out before I get to try that taco pizza.” A hint of humor filled his tone as the

guy added, “And ya be scarin’ that waiter ya called cute.”

For some reason, that caught the big man’s attention—Geoff. His shoulders immediately relaxed, and he snapped his attention to Warner. Geoff’s expression softened, and a smile began to curve his full lips.

Warner felt the urge to smile back.

Until his customer opened his mouth again. “God, are you seein’ this shit, Cheryl?”

He indicated the three of them while glancing at his red-faced dining companion. The woman looked for all the world as if she wished a hole would open up and swallow her. Warner understood that feeling completely.

Geoff turned his attention back to the customer and jerked in his buddy’s hold.

As if he didn’t have any brains in his head, the customer snarked, “Now there’s two fags.” With a sneer, he taunted, “Let’s take a step outside, yous and me. I’ll show ya both what real men are.”

Warner had to admit, the auburn-haired friend had to be pretty strong to hold Geoff back. Even though he was a couple of inches shorter, he kept Geoff from taking more than half a step. As he held him tight, he whispered something into Geoff’s ear that seemed to get his attention.

To Warner’s relief, Marion came striding onto the patio. Fortunately, her stern expression was focused on his customer as opposed to him. She had to look up several inches, but she still managed to pull off the in-charge look.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Marion began, and Warner automatically feared she was going to apologize for Warner letting Paula take his dip. Relief flooded him anew as Marion

continued, “This is a family-friendly place, and that type of language will not be tolerated.” Marion placed a cloth wine bag on the table and placed a plastic cork replacement in the bottle Warner had opened for them. “I’ll not charge you for the wine, but I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

“What the hell?” the customer snapped, glaring at Marion. “You’re tryin’ to kick us out because your server screwed up, and these fags interrupted?”

“No, sir,” Marion replied calmly, sliding the bag toward the slowly rising woman, who immediately took it while continuing to keep her eyes downcast. Focusing back on the man, Marion told him, “I’m asking you to leave due to your continued hostile attitude and your language.” As if dismissing him, Marion turned and smiled at Warner. “You can go head back and enjoy your break, Warner.” Indicating the table, she added, “Katie will keep your tables updated while you’re gone.”

Knowing a dismissal when he heard one—and feeling oh-so-grateful for it—Warner dipped his head in a nod. “Yes, ma’am,” he murmured before turning and starting away.

“Wait,” Geoff called from behind him, but Warner didn’t stop. He heard the man growl, “Let go, Craeg. He’s—”

Whatever else the big, intimidating man would have said was lost to Warner as the glass door closed behind him. He hoped Marion could get the belligerent customer to leave without further incident, but he had no desire to be part of it. Once Warner reached the break room, he grabbed a complimentary bottle of water from the fridge and plopped down on the sofa. Letting out a deep breath, he tried to open the cap, but his hands were shaking too badly.

Warner focused on the back of a chair ten feet in front of him and took one slow breath after another. After what was probably several minutes, he began to feel

calmer. He finally opened his water and took a sip.

As Warner relaxed, his thoughts turned to the guy who'd intervened on his behalf.

He called me cute.

Even as Warner felt a bit of warmth from that thought, he recalled the man's big fists and quick temper.

No way I want to get involved with a guy like that. Dealing with Dad's temper is enough, thanks.

Dismissing those thoughts, Warner rose from the sofa and crossed to where he'd hung his jacket. From inside the pocket, he withdrew a small baggie full of salted almonds. Returning to the sofa, Warner focused on enjoying his tasty snack.

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When Geoff saw that Warner had returned from his break, it took every bit of self-control he could muster to resist walking across the patio and engaging the cute human. In truth, the intense warning looks from his pod enforcers had something to do with it, too. Both Dare and Craeg reminded Geoff of the fear they'd scented on him as he'd fled the patio earlier.

Gods. Finally. I've finally met my mate!

Geoff couldn't have been more thrilled with the pretty human Fate had provided him. The man stood just shy of six feet, making him the perfect size to tuck against Geoff's taller body. His waist had a bit of padding around the middle, which thrilled Geoff. Perfect for holding onto while I pound his ass. With how large Geoff was, he didn't want to have to worry about hurting his pretty mate with his exuberance.

Fate knows her stuff.

Geoff didn't know for certain what had caused Warner's fear. The scent had already been hanging in the air when he'd approached the table. It could have been caused by the situation, the angry customer's actions, or even himself.

Gods, I hope not.

Except, Geoff recalled seeing Warner flinch just a little when he'd waved his hand to indicate him.

He didn't really think I'd hit him, did he?

Without getting close and talking to Warner again, Geoff had no way of knowing. As he sat there, trying to finish the pizza he'd ordered and drink the wine samplings, he could barely stand the wait to find out. Every once in a while, Geoff would catch a hint of Warner's scent on the breeze, and he would practically tremble with his need to go to the human.

"Time to go, Geoff," Dare encouraged, drawing his attention. Geoff didn't know when the big enforcer had risen and moved to his side, but he was placing the second half of Geoff's pizza in a to go box. "Stand up and follow Craeg out of here."

Geoff stared at Dare askance. "You can't be serious," he hissed. Keeping his voice low, he muttered, "You really think I'm going to walk away from my Fate-given mate with nothing? No phone number? No last name? No address? No confirmation of when I'll see him again?"

Not a snowball's chance in hell.

Dare scoffed as he shook his head. "Of course not." Resting his hand on Geoff's

shoulder, he squeezed lightly. “Trust me, Geoff. Let cooler heads prevail in this.”

Meeting Dare’s dark eyed-gaze, Geoff stared at the other shifter for several heartbeats. He saw understanding within their dark-gray depths. Geoff also noticed a wealth of concern within them, too.

Geoff nodded once. “Okay.”

Then Geoff rose and did as he’d been ordered, picking up the pizza box and following Craeg down a side path that led away from the patio and around the building. Instead of taking the path that went to the parking area, Craeg took a different one. This one headed down some stone stairs that led to a park-like area. There were covered picnic tables, a cornhole set, and a horseshoe pit.

Several of the others were already relaxing at one of the tables nearest the cornhole game. They were all grinning at him. As soon as Geoff neared them, he was grabbed and given back-slapping hugs while everyone offered hearty congratulations.

Kayson laughed at Geoff’s surprised expression. “Come on, man.” He punched him good-naturedly in the upper arm. “Not like we can express how happy we are for you in front of a bunch of strangers.”

Geoff had sort of wondered why everyone had been acting so subdued once he’d shared that Warner was his mate. Seeing the response from his friends, he understood. They couldn’t cause a second scene without risking alienating his mate.

“Okay, guys,” Dare called, announcing his presence by setting two bottles of champagne on the table as well as a platter of flutes. “Here’s to Geoff.”

As Dare grabbed one bottle to open, Price set down two large charcuterie boards.

Looking at the offerings of meat, cheese, crackers, and olives, Geoff felt his mouth watering.

Price grinned at him. “We knew, considering how you couldn’t eat your pizza, that you’d still be hungry.” With a shake of his head and a knowing look, he added, “Sitting there with your mate’s scent teasing your senses, but not being able to do anything, must have been rough.” The vampire patted him on the shoulder. “We had to take into account that this is your mate’s place of employment. We don’t want to cause him problems.”

Geoff understood the wisdom in that. “Thanks, guys.” Taking the glass of champagne from Dare, he glanced around the area. “So, uh, what are we doing here?”

Craeg tipped his own glass toward a small parking area with several cars fifty yards away. “That’s the employee parking area,” he told him with a grin. “We’re gonna eat, drink, play games, and lounge around until your human gets off shift.” With a wink, Craeg added, “Then we’re gonna help ya secure a date.”

Grinning, Geoff raised his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

Listening to a round of laughter, Geoff sipped his champagne.

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“Hey, there’s your boy.”

Kayson tapped Geoff’s arm with the back of his fingers and pointed behind him. Turning away from the cornhole game, he looked in that direction. Immediately, Geoff felt his breath catch in his throat as he watched his mate stride toward an older gray sedan. His human’s head was bowed, and his shoulders were hunched, as if he had the weight of the world on them.

A driving need to alleviate whatever plagued his mate surged through Geoff. He tossed the bean bags to the ground and started toward the human. Geoff knew Craeg and Dare followed, sensing them a ways behind him, and he appreciated their silent support.

“Warner,” Geoff called, jogging a few steps to close the distance between them.

His mate’s head came up, and he spun to face him. Even as Geoff relished being the focus of Warner’s attention, he didn’t like the rounding of his eyes and the step backward he took.

Geoff slowed his stride and lifted his hands in placation. “Hey, sorry to startle you.” Smiling at Warner, Geoff swept his gaze over him appreciatively before meeting his mate’s hazel eyes. He really didn’t like the wariness he saw within their pretty depths. “Are you okay?” Geoff asked, lowering his voice to a soft rumble, hoping to soothe that look from him. “You didn’t get into trouble from that asshole, did you?” Grimacing, Geoff added, “Or my interference?”

Warner slowly shook his head. “N-No. I’m good.”

Okay. So that wasn’t what made him appear so troubled.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Geoff told him, lowering his hands. When he was within ten feet of Warner, he saw the much smaller man step backward once more, and Geoff stopped. “Easy, Warner.”

Shit. Is he scared of me?

Hoping to set his mate’s mind at ease, Geoff crooned, “I would never hurt you, sweetheart.”

Warner's wariness didn't abate. "Um, okay." Narrowing his eyes, he glanced behind Geoff, perhaps taking in his friends, before refocusing on him. "Um, i-is there s-something I can help you with, sir?"

Damn. Yes, he is.

Geoff mentally winced, scenting his mate's nerves. "A date," he blurted out, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I'd like to take you on a date."

Staring up at Geoff as if he had two heads, Warner gaped for one second, two, before blurting, "Why?"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

How the hell did I let him convince me to go on a date, Warner wondered while glancing in his rearview mirror. He spotted Geoff about fifty feet behind him, following on his motorcycle.

Oh, right. He's sexy as hell, seemed so very sweet, and he offered for us to meet in a public place.

The guy who'd held Geoff back from the jerk customer had even agreed to accompany them. Although he would be sitting at another table nearby with a couple of other friends.

So, safe and open, not alone, and the fact that the sound of his deep voice makes my prick stand up and take notice has nothing to do with it.

Yeah, right.

Warner made it a habit never to lie to himself. The big bruiser of a guy pushed all his buttons. Maybe that was why his mother had loved his father so much when they got together. They both had a similar type.

When Warner had been younger, he'd seen his parents dancing in the kitchen together. He knew that, at one time, his father had had a softer, kinder side. That had just slipped away after Warner failed to become anything like the son his father had wanted. Then, when his mother had died, his father must've decided Warner was everything he hated.

Pushing those thoughts from his mind, Warner focused on reaching the destination

for his soon-to-be date— World of Aquatica . He'd never been to the place, although he'd read some fantastic reviews about it. They even had a show with a tiger shark... which Warner thought was cool and scary all at the same time.

Why would a person willingly go swimming with a shark?

Warner avoided the ocean at all costs. After all, there were so many animals within it that could eat him... or just kill him by accident. Still, he thought the creatures within their depths were beautiful. Unfortunately, due to saving money over the last couple of years to get out of his father's house, Warner hadn't felt the need to splurge in that area at any point.

Maybe that's why I decided to accept his dinner date and exploration of the marine park. I've never gotten the chance to go.

Plus, I love seafood... which I also can't afford.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Warner turned into the park's parking lot. He made his way toward the nearest space. Just as he chose one—the place was busy, so it was some distance from the entrance—Geoff, on his motorcycle, pulled up next to him and tapped the glass of his window.

With his foot on the brake, Warner rolled his window halfway down. "Um, yeah?"

Geoff smiled at him and pointed. "Follow me. I'll show you to the VIP lot."

"Oh, uh..." Warner's mind blanked for a second, even as he realized he should decline. Feeling his cheeks begin to heat, he admitted, "Um, I really can't pay for that right now."

"You won't have to pay." Geoff offered a roguish grin and wink. "Trust me,

sweetheart. Follow me.”

With a beckoning wave, Geoff started forward, passing Warner’s car. For a few seconds, Warner froze. Indecision warred within him.

The honk of a car behind him jolted Warner. He saw Geoff look back at him and beckon again. Blowing out a breath, Warner released the brake and started forward, following the big man on the bike.

Warner parked where Geoff indicated, and the area was definitely a lot closer to the gates. The vehicles near him all had a placard hanging from their rearview mirrors, obviously a VIP parking pass. Worrying that they would tow his car because he didn’t have one, Warner hesitated to get out.

Once again, Geoff appeared at his window, on foot. Smiling at him, he held up a pass.

Opening his door, Warner tentatively reached out and took it. “Th-Thank you.” After hanging it, he began sliding out of his car. “You had an extra?”

Geoff shook his head. “Naw.” Gently, he slid his big hand under Warner’s upper arm and helped him to his feet, not that he needed it. “I carry one in my motorcycle, just in case.”

“Just in case?” Warner glanced at Geoff’s hand on him for a second, the skin of his arm warming from the contact as the hairs there stood on end. “Um.” Locking and closing his car door, he asked, “Do you come here often then?” Another thought struck him, and he peered up at the larger man in concern. “Won’t your motorcycle get towed or you get a ticket or something?”

“No, I won’t get towed or anything,” Geoff claimed. Instead of releasing Warner, he

skimmed his hand down his arm and gently gripped his hand, threading their fingers together. “I work here. They know my bike.” With a gentle tug to start them moving, Geoff added, “Plus, I texted our tech guy, Ovrarm, letting him know my bike’s here without a tag.”

Warner glanced down at where Geoff held him, surprised that the big guy would be so open about them being together.

Geoff squeezed his hand lightly, redrawing Warner’s attention. “This okay?” He lifted their hands a little, obviously meaning the hand-holding.

“I-I guess.” Warner had never held anyone’s hand before. Well, outside of his mother when he was little. “Just, um, never, uh—” Warner snapped his mouth shut, feeling his cheeks heat once more.

Furrowing his black brows a little, Geoff peered at him with concern. “Are you not out?”

“Oh, I am,” Warner assured, then shrugged. “I guess.” Seeing Geoff’s arched brow, he scoffed. “I mean, look at me.” He indicated his face, referring to the eyeliner and lip gloss he wore. “No one’s going to mistake me for being straight.” When Geoff roved his gaze over his face and smiled, Warner wondered if he was imagining the heat that suddenly filled his eyes. Clearing his throat, Warner quickly muttered, “Just surprised you’re so open, is all. No one would guess about you.”

“No, they probably wouldn’t,” Geoff agreed affably, still smiling at him. “But I’m proud to be the guy at your side, and I don’t give a shit who knows it.”

“Proud?” Warner repeated softly, shock filling him. “Why?”

Why on earth would this mountain of sexy muscle be proud to be with an overweight

nothing like me?

“Oh, sweetheart.” Geoff used the hold on his hand to stop him and turn him to face him. Resting his other hand on Warner’s shoulder, he rumbled, “Because it’s true.”

Then, to Warner’s shock, Geoff bent and pressed his lips lightly to his. The warmth and softness took his breath away, and he gasped. Feeling Geoff’s tongue slide between his lips, Warner felt as if his body heated from the inside out, and only one thought reverberated through his brain.

Oh my god! My first kiss!

\* \* \* \*

Geoff knew it wasn’t the time or the place—and he really didn’t yet have the right—but he couldn’t resist the allure of Warner’s lip-gloss gleaming lips. Plus, his lust-addled brain could think of only one way to wipe the confusion and disbelief off his mate’s face. To that end, Geoff kissed him.

When Warner gasped, Geoff took advantage and dipped his tongue in for a deeper taste. His mate’s delicious masculine flavor burst across his tastebuds. Warner tasted delicious with a hint of saltiness that Geoff knew he could easily become addicted to.

Only registering the gentle, inexperienced pets of Warner’s tongue against Geoff’s own kept him from deepening the kiss. As he eased the kiss to an end, he realized his sweetheart didn’t seem to have much practice.

That’s okay. I’m happy to help fix that.

Geoff lifted his head and peered into Warner’s eyes, seeing the slightly glazed look. The flush of his cheeks made him seem to glow, and his faintly swollen lips bespoke

of Geoff's kiss. In his mind, his mate couldn't look sexier.

I plan to put that look on my mate often.

Sliding his hand up from his shoulder, Geoff teased his thumb along the corner of Warner's mouth. "You're stunning," he uttered, unable to help himself.

Warner blinked once, twice, then ducked his head.

With his shyness evident, Geoff searched for a way to ease the situation. The answer came when he licked his lips and tasted the gloss left behind from kissing his human. Geoff hummed, getting Warner's attention, before licking his lips again, a little more exaggeratedly.

"Oh!" Warner's eyes widened, and the smell of embarrassment began creeping into his normally delicious scent. "I'm so sorry."

Warner even began to lift his free hand as if to wipe off his mouth and the gloss remaining there.

"Don't," Geoff urged, catching his hand. He winked. "Tastes good." It did, too. "Strawberry?"

Warner's cheeks continued to darken, but at least he nodded. "Yeah."

After squeezing Warner's hand again, Geoff released him. "Feel free to use that anytime." Then he slipped his arm around his mate and started them walking again. "Come on." He pointed toward the gate, indicating Craeg, Kayson, Dare, and Price. "The guys are waiting."

The group was loitering off to the side of the gates, talking amongst themselves.

Even as Warner began moving again, he gasped. “D-Did they see us, um... kiss ?” He whispered the last word.

So cute.

“Most likely.” Squeezing Warner’s hip, Geoff winked at him. “Don’t worry. They’ll get used to it.”

“They will?” Warner still sounded confused as hell. “Why?”

“Well, we’re a demonstrative group,” Geoff began slowly, knowing he couldn’t explain how a shifter loved to touch his mate. Considering how possessive they were, they liked everyone to know their mate belonged to them. “We’re not shy when we’re with someone we’re attracted to.”

Considering they were reaching Geoff’s friends, Warner just nodded.

“Glad you could join us,” Kayson teased with a chuckle. He smiled widely at Warner. “I’m Kayson, by the way.” After the other shifter introduced the others, he asked, “Have you been here before?”

When Warner shook his head, Dare grinned broadly. “Well, you’re in for a treat. Our Mini Barrier Reef Cantina serves the best seafood around,” he claimed. Turning, he slung his arm around Price’s waist and began leading the way into the park. “Come on.”

“Um, don’t we need passes or something?” Warner asked, glancing furtively at another line where someone was punching passes that a couple were presenting.

“No,” Geoff told him, focusing a warm smile on him. “Several of us work here, so no need.” He pointed where Dare tapped a card against a reader, and the gate buzzed and

opened, allowing them entrance.

“Oh, right,” Warner murmured. “You said that already.”

Geoff figured his poor mate was getting a little overwhelmed, and he hoped the relaxing dinner atmosphere of the restaurant would help.

“Um, so what do you do here?” Warner peeked at him through his lashes before offering, “Security?”

Chuckling, Geoff winked. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

Geoff lifted his free arm and flexed his muscles, appreciating the way Warner’s eyes widened at the sight of his big guns.

Wait a sec. Is that a hint of fear I suddenly detect?

Shit!

Quickly, Geoff lowered his arm and pointed. “Dare and Price are in security,” he told him. Tapping his chest, he explained, “I’m one of the park’s engineers. I help keep the aquarium’s pumps and things running.”

“An engineer?” Warner repeated in obvious surprise. “Wow.” His voice turned quiet as he mused, “That must have required a lot of schooling. Where did you go to college?”

Geoff hesitated, not wanting to outright lie to his mate. “Uh, I didn’t, actually.” Spotting Warner’s confused expression, he explained, “I took online courses directly related to my field, so technically, I don’t have an actual degree.” With a self-deprecating smile, Geoff admitted, “No way would I have had the patience to sit

through tons of classes that weren't geared toward my interest." He offered an exaggerated shudder as he muttered, "Like history or literature."

To Geoff's pleasure, Warner barked a laugh, and his beautiful hazel eyes lit up.

"Gods, you're sexy," Geoff whispered, unable to keep back the words.

Immediately, Warner flushed and ducked his head. He didn't do it quite swiftly enough to hide the fact that he nibbled his bottom lip. Warner even used his free hand to rub his neck.

Geoff used a pair of crooked fingers under Warner's chin to urge his mate's head back up. "No need to hide, sweetheart," he purred. His mate continued to nibble his bottom lip even as he peered at him from beneath his lashes. Unable to help himself, Geoff used his thumb to tug that bit of flesh free while whispering, "I hope I'll get to suck on this later, so don't damage it on me."

Once again scenting embarrassment, Geoff dipped his head, pecked a kiss to the corner of his mate's mouth, and straightened. Then he released the man's jaw and urged him to start walking again. As they moved, Geoff noticed a displeased expression on a couple of guys' faces, but a glare from him had the pair turning away quickly enough.

Homophobes. Too bad we can't bar them entrance to our park.

Even with that thought, Geoff knew that was just his overprotective nature talking.

It didn't take long for them to catch up with Geoff's friends, considering they'd stopped to chat with William at the stingray petting pool. Their pod beta had probably chosen to take a shift as a monitor there to get a glimpse of Geoff's mate. Plus, the guy enjoyed being part of just about every aspect of the marine park, from top to

bottom.

Well, everything but the mechanic's bay.

Their pod mechanic—Colton, a seahorse shifter—didn't allow anyone to work in there with him except his mate, Waylon. As it'd turned out, the big human was a pretty good mechanic in his own right, but he only worked in there every once in a while. Waylon's presence was more of a distraction to Colton than a help. Instead, Waylon preferred to work behind the bar at the Cantina.

After greeting and introducing Warner to William, they continued on their way.

Geoff glanced over his shoulder at the pod beta, earning a wink, a thumbs up, and even an approving smile from the male. Warm satisfaction filled him upon getting the man's approval. With a bit more strut in his step, Geoff led Warner to the restaurant.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Warner was feeling a little overwhelmed as Geoff helped him into his seat. He couldn't remember the last time he'd met so many people, but Geoff must have worked at the park for years because he seemed to know every worker they passed. On top of that, everyone seemed so welcoming and friendly, greeting him and welcoming him as if him being with Geoff was the best thing ever.

It was confusing as all get out.

"So, I know you work at a winery, but do you want wine or something else?" Geoff asked, relaxing in the chair to Warner's right as opposed to being across from him. "This place offers a great array of cocktails if you're interested in something lighter."

"Um, I don't think I've ever tried any," Warner admitted, peering at the menu. "Until I started working at the winery, I hadn't even tried wine."

"Really?"

Once again, Warner felt his cheeks heat. He pressed his lips together as he jerked a nod. Hoping that focusing on the menu would help keep him from blurting out something else that would betray his inexperience, Warner began reading about the appetizers.

They all sounded delicious—calamari, crab cakes, fried clam strips, shrimp scampi, and more.

Warner's stomach growled.

“Sounds like coming here was a good idea,” Geoff rumbled in a deep soft voice that caused butterflies to bump in Warner’s belly. When the big man reached over and gripped Warner’s wrist in a light hold, rubbing gently at his pulse point, it caused the hairs on Warner’s arm to stand on end. The way Geoff leaned toward him and practically purred his next question made Warner’s heartrate speed up.

“Did you want to try a cocktail? We have several refreshing varieties in a myriad of flavors.” Geoff’s smile looked hungry for a reason other than the prospect of food when Warner met his gaze, causing his heart to skip a beat as arousal flushed through his body. Geoff smiled as if he knew exactly how he was making Warner’s body react as he continued, “Mojitos, daquiris, and margaritas in strawberry, blackberry, raspberry, peach, and more.”

To Warner’s relief, the waiter arrived, interrupting them. “Hi, Geoff.” He smiled widely at Warner while placing a pair of water-filled glasses on the table, surprising him when he added, “I’m Thane, and I’ll be your server this evening. Happy to meet you, Warner.”

“N-Nice to meet you, too,” Warner stuttered, still confused by how pleased everyone seemed to be to meet him.

Thane glanced between them, continuing to smile. His dark eyes even appeared to dance with his pleasure, betraying just how true his words were. He glanced at where Geoff gripped Warner, and his smile widened to a grin.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Thane focused on Geoff and offered, “A bottle of champagne, perhaps?”

Geoff chuckled softly as he rubbed over Warner’s pulse point in a rather soothing way. “Not quite, yet, Thane, but thanks.” Then he focused on Warner. “Something more than water, sweetheart?”

Feeling his cheeks begin to heat upon hearing the endearment from Geoff's lips, Warner opened his mouth, then closed it again. He really had no idea how to respond. His mouth felt dry, and he grabbed the closest glass and took a sip of the chilly liquid, the ice clinking against the sides.

"How about a pitcher of the strawberry margarita," Geoff stated, obviously seeing Warner's dilemma.

"Sure thing," Thane replied with a nod.

Before Thane could walk away, Warner came to a snap decision. "Wait." He glanced from Thane, who paused, to Geoff and back again. "The blackberry margarita instead, please." Warner cut a side-eyed look Geoff's way, wanting to see his reaction to having his orders countered. "I like blackberry better."

Warner spotted Thane nodding in his peripheral vision even as he stated, "Got it. Blackberry instead."

Geoff smiled at Warner, his expression appearing relaxed as Thane disappeared from view. "That sounds delicious, too." He squeezed Warner's wrist lightly while once again massaging his pulse point. "Glad we could get something you preferred." Warner wasn't too certain if he could trust that comment, but before he could come up with a way to verify, Geoff turned his attention to the menu and asked, "See anything on there you like? Did you want to start with an appetizer?"

Nibbling his bottom lip, Warner switched his gaze to the menu once more. Hearing Geoff's soft growl caused him to snap his attention back to his companion's mocha features. Warner gasped upon seeing the way Geoff stared at his mouth, heat filling his expression.

With a cough, Geoff cleared his expression. He met Warner's gaze and offered a half-

shrug. “Told you I wanted to do that to your lips, too.” His deep brown eyes narrowed as he asked huskily, “You doing that on purpose, sweetheart?”

“Doing what?” Warner asked, unable to get his brain to truly process the question.

“Teasing me,” Geoff replied. Then he must have realized that Warner wasn’t really following, for his features relaxed into a warm smile. “No, of course not.” He lifted Warner’s arm and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “You’re not the type. I know that.” Returning their hands to the table, Geoff glanced pointedly at the menu. “Let’s try this again. What food are you hungry for? Remember, get whatever you want. My treat since I asked you on this date.”

“So if I ask you on the next date, will it be my treat?” Warner blurted the comment without thought. Snapping his focus back to Geoff, he blanched. “Um, I mean—”

Geoff grinned and winked. “I know what you meant.” Then his brows furrowed. “Although, I really like the idea of taking care of you, so I’m not sure I could.” Pausing, Geoff rubbed the back of his neck with his big free palm.

Understanding, Warner offered, “Maybe just the tips?” He smiled shyly as he peered at him through his lashes. “That way, I could feel like I’m contributing?”

Heck fire, it’s not as if I have the money to splurge on these sorts of places anyway.

To Warner’s relief, Geoff nodded. “I think I would be amenable to that.”

Just then, Thane returned and placed a pitcher, as well as a pair of frosted glasses, on the table. “Here we go, gentlemen.” He placed the tray under his arm and pulled his order tablet from his apron pocket. “Have you decided or do you need a few more minutes?”

After Geoff glanced Warner's way, he must have suspected his continued indecision. "I think we'll need a few more minutes. Sorry, Thane." As he spoke, he picked up the pitcher and began filling glasses.

"That's no trouble at all." Thane winked, saying, "First dates can be like that."

As Thane turned away, Geoff called, "How about we get an appetizer started."

Thane turned back to them, smiling expectantly.

Geoff cast a warm look on Warner. "I noticed you checking them out. Did one call to you?"

"Well," Warner hedged slowly, glancing over them again, trying to decide. He didn't want Geoff to think he couldn't make a decision even as simple as that. "They all sound so good," he murmured. Reading through the descriptions caused his mouth to water, but it didn't help him narrow down his options. "Uh, I haven't had calamari or clam strips in ages"—try years, since before his mother became sick—"or crab cakes or—" Snapping his mouth shut, Warner almost started nibbling his bottom lip again.

When Geoff chuckled, Warner lifted his gaze to focus on him. He feared he would see the handsome man looking at him with derision. Instead, the mirth in his eyes appeared to be full of... fondness.

Am I imagining that?

"I got an idea," Geoff claimed. Turning his attention back to Thane, he told him, "We'll take one each of every appetizer." After a second of hesitation, Geoff smirked and added, "And two lobster tail sides."

Thane grinned broadly as he stated, "You got it."

At the same time, Warner gasped, “You can’t.”

With a laugh, Geoff waved Thane away, and the waiter scooted with a grin. “Sure, I can,” he countered, moving his hands to cradle one of Warner’s. “The way your eyes gleamed with want when you started talking about the appetizers... well.” Geoff hummed as he massaged his fingers, causing the hairs on Warner’s arm to stand on end pleasantly. “I could see how much you wanted to try it all, and I can give that to you.”

Warner realized Geoff wouldn’t allow him to change his mind, and in truth, he truly had wanted to try it all. Still, he didn’t want to feel greedy and demanded, “Then we’ll definitely be letting me leave the tip.”

Geoff narrowed his eyes at him before clicking his tongue. “Okay.” He dipped his chin in a nod. “Fair enough.” He released him with one hand and grabbed his drink. “So, when was the last time you went to a seafood restaurant?”

“Years,” Warner replied, grabbing his own drink. Before taking a sip, he murmured, “Before my mom got sick.”

“Sick?” Geoff’s concern came through clearly in that one word. “I’m sorry. Is she, uh—” He hesitated, probably picking up on Warner’s sudden sadness. “Is she okay?”

Shaking his head, Warner murmured, “Died last year. Cancer.” He swallowed a gulp of the drink. Even tasting the tequila, he enjoyed the notes of blackberry, too. “It’s good.”

“Glad to hear you like it,” Geoff replied softly. After a second of hesitation, he asked, “Do you have other family around?”

“My father’s alive,” Warner replied flatly. Then, having no desire to discuss his

screwed-up relationship with his father, he forced a smile, focused on Geoff, and asked, “So, you said you’re an engineer here. What does that entail?”

Geoff stared at him for a few seconds before smiling and accepting Warner’s blatant subject change. “Well—” He launched into his position at the park, explaining about the intricate machines he monitored that controlled waterflow, salt content, and other things that Warner couldn’t hope to follow, but he sure didn’t mind listening to the deep soothing tones of Geoff’s voice.

\* \* \* \*

Sunning on a rock on the beach, Geoff allowed himself to relax in his animal form to keep calm. He wanted to see his mate so damn badly, but he knew his mate was human. He couldn’t smother him.

As it was, following Warner home from World of Aquatica after their date the prior evening had been pushing it. Fortunately, when he’d pointed out that Warner had drank two glasses of margaritas, it had convinced him.

Geoff lifted his head, taking in the rolling waves. He thought about going for a swim. Perhaps he could find a school of jellyfish to feed on. As a shifter, Geoff didn’t need to eat in animal form, but it sure made his turtle half happy. He liked keeping his other half happy.

Mmmm... jellyfish.

As Geoff used his large flippers to ease him off the flat rock and onto the sand, he wondered what Saul would say if he ever heard him say that out loud. The fellow shifter shared his psyche with a Lion’s Mane jellyfish, the largest of the species. As a fellow pod-member, Geoff would never go after him. After all, even when an animal, they were sentient beings.

Just as the first bit of wet surf hit Geoff's fins, he heard a male voice call his name. Pausing, he turned his long neck to face his head backward. Geoff spotted not only Beta William, but Head Enforcer Eban, Detective Grisham, and Doc Anthony. Concern filling him, Geoff swept his attention over the area to check for spectators. While their beach situated north of World of Aquatica's housing development was private, that didn't stop unknowing humans from occasionally stumbling across it, no matter how hard they tried.

Safety first and all that.

Geoff saw no one, so he started his shift. As a result of his training to keep his jealousy in check, his ability to change form had swiftened. Within a matter of ten-plus seconds, Geoff pushed from his knees and rose to his feet.

"Beta William. Enforcer Eban." Geoff dipped his head in a nod, acknowledging their pod status. As he took the sarong the doc held out to him, he continued, "What can I help you with?"

"You followed Warner home last night, right?" William asked.

The fact that the usually relaxed and fun-loving beta didn't even bother with a greeting sent alarm bells going off in Geoff's head. "Of course," he quickly confirmed. "He waved and entered the dwelling safely."

Geoff didn't want to admit that Warner hadn't waited for him to get off his motorcycle to walk him to the door. His mate's wave had been discreet as he'd hustled up the walk. Even Warner's glance back at him as he'd disappeared inside had been furtive.

The moves had reminded Geoff of how Warner had seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders while leaving the winery after his shift.

What the hell is going on there?

“You know that as soon as we knew your mate’s identity, Ovrarn began researching him, right?”

Hearing Beta William’s question, Geoff nodded. “Of course.” It was standard procedure.

“Not a whole lot came up,” William told him. Before Geoff could ask what could be wrong, his beta continued, “Until recently.”

Geoff kept silent. Waiting.

“Medical records.” William glanced at Anthony for a second before returning his attention to Geoff. Finding medical records definitely made the doc’s presence make sense, Geoff decided, right before William added, “Of abuse.”

“What?” Geoff snarled, rage surging through him. “Who? When?”

Who the fuck dares to hurt my sweet mate?

William rested his left hand on Geoff’s right shoulder, holding him in place. “We don’t know anything for sure, but that’s not all.”

“There’s more?” Geoff ground his teeth. “What?”

Eban rested his right hand on Geoff’s left shoulder, mirroring William, and Geoff felt his pulse spike as bile rose in his throat.

Somehow, he knew whatever it was, it was bad.

“Your mate was checked into an emergency room a couple of towns over this morning,” William told him, digging his fingers into Geoff’s shoulder to keep him focused. “That’s why I wanted to know if you’d seen him go into his home last night.”

“The home is owned by Walter O’Brian, his father,” William told him. He stared intently at Geoff as he asked, “Did your mate say anything about his family life while on your date?”

“His mother’s dead,” Geoff murmured, and he saw William nod once. His scent didn’t give off surprise, which meant his beta already knew that. Then Geoff recalled the sound of Warner’s voice when he’d spoken of his father. “I don’t think he gets on with his father.”

“He lives with a father that he doesn’t get along with.” Grisham shoved his hands into his pockets. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“Me, neither,” William grumbled. Pinning Geoff with a narrow-eyed stare, he beckoned. “Let’s go see your mate.”

Geoff was all for that.

It took everything in him to keep from running up the steep, sandy trail that led back to Aquatic’s condominium complex.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Warner slowly breathed through the pain, wondering how he'd gotten himself stuck in this mess... again.

Right. I forgot to tell Marion to stop the emergency room people from calling my emergency contact.

After pulling up his records—Warner had been there within the last year, after all—he guessed it was their standard procedure. Warner had been meaning to change his emergency contact from his father to someone else. He'd just needed to figure out who that someone else should be.

Without someone to change it to, Warner had put it off. That meant, when he'd shown up at work that morning and Marion had seen the way he'd been moving, she'd been worried. Warner had tried to play off the pain in his shoulder and side as sleeping funny. When someone had bumped his hip, making him hiss, flinch, and spill a platter of dishes, that had flown right out the window. Especially when Marion had urged him to ease up his shirt, and she'd spotted the myriad of bruising forming on the back of his left ribcage and disappearing under the fabric... in each direction, up and down.

Marion had asked Warner what had happened, but even though he hadn't wanted to discuss it, she'd insisted on taking him to the emergency room herself.

Warner would've appreciated her concern if it hadn't ended up with his father standing beside his bed in the emergency room. After all, his father had been the one to smack him with his belt more than a few times. The second Warner had told his father that he didn't have any tip money to give him—he'd used all his cash at the

restaurant with Geoff—his father had started in on how worthless he was.

The speed at which the man could strip off the piece of leather and slam it over his back and side would have been impressive... if he hadn't used the skill against Warner.

"You don't say shit." Walter growled the words softly, pinning Warner with his cold, brown-eyed gaze. "Or you'll get even worse when you get home."

It was on the tip of Warner's tongue to say that he never said anything... to anyone... when a man he vaguely recognized walked into the room.

"Hi, Mister O'Brian," he greeted, a tight smile on his features. "I'm Detective Canton." Moving toward the bed, the guy flickered his attention from Warner's father and back to Warner's face. "I'm here to take your statement about your mugging," he told him, confusing Warner. "Are you up to talking about it now?" He even pulled a paper pad and pen from within his jacket's pocket.

"No, Warner's not up to talking right now," Walter snapped with narrowed eyes. "Who the hell called the police?" He scowled at Warner. "Did you?"

"I'm sorry," Detective Canton cut in, peering at Walter with a narrow-eyed look. "You are, sir?"

"I'm Mister O'Brian," Walter claimed, crossing his arms over his chest. Sporting an imperious expression, he scowled down the several-inch height distance as he added, "This is my son, Warner. I'll let you know when or if he's available for comment."

"I was under the impression that there was no head injury involved in the attack, so Warner can speak for himself," Detective Canton countered, not appearing impressed by his father's posturing. He smiled at Warner and dipped his chin in an encouraging

nod. “If you’d prefer, I can send your father out if you want to keep your statement private.”

For an instant, Warner froze, feeling stuck in an awkward position.

“No, of course, he doesn’t—”

As Walter once again butted in, Detective Canton gave Warner another almost imperceptible nod of encouragement... and it hit Warner where he’d seen the man before. He was one of the friends who’d visited the winery with Geoff’s group just the day before. He’d been with a guy who was obviously a date or partner.

Is he really a detective?

Can he help me?

Glancing at the badge attached to Canton’s waist, Warner thought it looked real enough.

“I’d like that,” Warner cut into his father’s demand that the detective leave. When Walter turned his angry expression on Warner, his face darkening even further in a way that spiked fear through Warner, he still managed to squeak fairly levelly, “I’d prefer alone.”

“Of course, sir,” Detective Canton replied with a nod before turning toward Walter. “If you could, please, step out—”

“Hell, no,” Walter snarled, his lip curving into a sneer. “I’m not leaving.” Fisting his hands and resting them on his hips, his father declared, “This is my son.” Then Walter’s eyes narrowed as he cut a derisive expression his way. His tone lowered with distaste as he grumbled, “Even if he is a faggot ass.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” The detective lifted his hands in placation. “That’s got nothing to do with this.” He waved his pen toward Warner. “My witness is an adult. He has his rights, and he’s made his desire clear.” Pointing toward the door, the detective added, “If you don’t go willingly, I can have the hospital security escort you out.”

A tick formed at the corner of Walter’s left eye, and his nostrils flared. His jaw clenched, and he fisted his hands. He even opened and closed his mouth, twice.

Except, Detective Canton’s expression didn’t change, and he must have decided not to cause a scene. He stalked toward the door, flashing a look of warning at Warner. Walter even tried to slam the door behind him, but the detective was following, and he caught it and closed it softly.

Watching his father disappear, a wave of trepidation flooded Warner. A tremble shook him. Beads of sweat broke out on his flesh, and he wrapped his arms around himself.

Oh, shit. What did I just do?

“Easy, Warner,” Detective Canton soothed, gripping his hands. “Take a few deep breaths for me, huh?” Moving one hand to the back of Warner’s neck, he massaged rhythmically. “You’ll be okay. You’re safe now. He can’t hurt you ever again.”

Hearing those words, Warner sucked in a harsh gasp. The spots cleared, telling him that he had indeed been forgetting to breathe. Meeting the detective’s brown eyes, he took in his understanding gaze.

“H-How—” Warner paused and swallowed hard before trying again. “H-How did you know?”

Giving him a small smile, Detective Canton softly stated, “In my line of work, I’ve

seen a thing or two.” He grimaced as he glanced toward the bandages peeking around the left side of his torso. “Including many cases of abuse.” Shaking his head even as he forced a smile, the detective told him, “Geoff is here. He’d love to come comfort you if you’ll let him.”

“Why would he be here?” Thinking that was an odd offer, Warner blurted, “Are you really a detective?”

Canton barked a laugh, his smile turning genuine. “Yep, I really am.” Releasing him, he straightened. “Just one of those things I mentioned about seein’ a thing or two.” He shrugged as he added, “With the connection between you two, I know his touch will help calm and soothe you. Whadda ya say?”

Warner wanted to nod acceptance so badly. Except, then another thought hit him. “Oh, shit. I have nowhere else to go.” Fear surged through him anew. “What happens when I have to go home?”

“We won’t let that happen,” Detective Canton declared. After a squeeze to his forearm, he stated, “I’m getting Geoff. Trust us.”

Considering he didn’t have any other choices, Warner just nodded as he tried not to let trepidation cause a fresh wave of shivers to rush through his body.

After all, shivering hurt.

\* \* \* \*

When the older-looking man stalked into the waiting room, Geoff tracked the human’s movements. Even while taller and broader, he could see the male’s resemblance to Warner. While his eyes were brown and hair a tawny color, the cheekbones and bone structure were similar enough.

This man is my mate's father.

Geoff noticed the cruel glint in the man's dark eyes as he peered back in the direction of the rooms down the hall, as if he promised retribution. Considering the list of injuries he'd heard Warner had suffered—via eavesdropping on Grisham's conversation with a nurse—he could only imagine what the man was planning. Geoff lifted his hands and cracked his knuckles, wondering how he could get him into a supply closet, unused room, or bathroom so he could issue a little payback.

A large hand clamped onto Geoff's shoulder.

Snapping his attention to the left, Geoff peered into William's deep green eyes. "Whatever you're thinking about," the beta whispered harshly. "Knock it off." He narrowed his eyes as he hissed, "You can't help your mate from behind bars."

As much as it galled Geoff to stand by while the asshole who'd most likely hurt his mate—after all, his scent screamed malevolence—stood in the waiting room as if he had any say in what happened to Geoff's mate, he heeded his beta's warning.

William was right, after all.

I can't help my mate from behind bars.

Plus, being bailed out of jail more than once by Saul, their pod's attorney, would just be embarrassing.

Still, even that knowledge couldn't keep Geoff from curling his lip in disgust when Walter peered in his direction and met his gaze. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at the man. The guy narrowed his eyes before sweeping his gaze over Geoff's massive frame and turning away.

With his lip curled, Walter began to pace, glancing toward the doors Grisham had disappeared behind ten minutes before.

Geoff was still battling with his desire to find a way to corner Walter when a man in nurse-style scrubs cracked the doors and called, “Geoff Ignatius?” He glanced around the waiting room, betraying that he didn’t actually know who he was looking for.

“Here,” Geoff rumbled, striding toward the stranger, wondering why he was being called.

The guy looked him up and down, and his eyes widened for a second. “You’re Geoff Ignatius?”

“I am,” Geoff confirmed.

“You’re Warner’s boyfriend?” The nurse shook his head, clearly disbelieving for he asked, “Can I see some ID, please?”

While Geoff didn’t know what was going on, he wouldn’t deny Warner. Instead, he pulled out his ID and held it out to the nurse. After the man looked it over, he nodded.

“Well, uh, come this way, please, Mister Ignatius.” The nurse beckoned, holding the swinging door open to him. “Warner’s asking for you.”

“Wait a minute,” Walter barked, grabbing the nurse’s forearm where he held the door. “Are you talking about my Warner? Warner O’Brian?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, sir.” The nurse looked between them, confused. “Who are you?”

“Walter O’Brian,” the man declared, confirming Geoff’s suspicions. “Warner’s my son. No one sees him without my permission.” Crossing his arms over his chest,

Walter sneered at them both. “ I’m his emergency contact. Nothing happens without my say-so.”

The nurse looked confused even as he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Mister O’Brian, but that’s only in a case when a patient is unable to make decisions on his own.” He glanced between the pair as he began holding the door open once more. “With your son awake and coherent, he can choose who he sees.”

“Then I should be there, too,” Walter declared, starting to shove past them. “I’m his—”

“Yes, you’re his father.” William grabbed hold of Walter’s opposite arm and tugged him backward. “So we’ve heard.” His tone turned dry. “And, yet, you’ve been relegated here with us until Warner gets his bearings.” It didn’t take much for William to use his shifter strength, coupled with Walter’s momentum, to send the big human into a waiting room chair. “Just sit and relax, man. I’m sure your son’ll ask for you in no time.”

Geoff was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one that heard the sarcasm in William’s tone.

With the way Walter glared daggers while his cheeks darkened to a red hue, Geoff knew he was right. He couldn’t help casting a smirk back at the man as he followed the nurse through the doors. When the guy glanced back at him, Geoff quickly morphed the look into one of concern.

When Geoff entered Warner’s room, he didn’t need to feign that look at all. He sucked back a cry of anguish as he took in the paleness of his mate... not to mention the bandages that covered the left side of his slightly chubby torso. When Warner brought an arm up to cover his soft belly, Geoff snapped his attention up to his mate’s face and spotted the embarrassed flush heating his pretty cheeks.

That'll never do.

"Oh, my sweetheart," Geoff crooned, rounding the bed so he was on the other side of where Grisham stood. Gently, he took hold of the wrist that was across his mate's belly and drew his arm away from there. "Never again, love," he vowed. "Never again." Disregarding the chair behind him, Geoff eased onto the bed beside his surprised-looking Warner. While threading their fingers together, he slid his other arm around his human's shoulders. He dipped his head, nuzzling behind his ear, as he cuddled him close. "I'll never let your father hurt you again, Warner."

Geoff barely kept his anger out of his voice. Instead, he did his best to instill his tone with a reassuring croon. Rubbing his lips against the soft skin behind Warner's ear, he used his lips to tease the sensitive skin there, enjoying the pleasant smell and scent that began to come from his mate.

"That's the way," Geoff whispered, liking those responses oh-so-much better. "You're okay."

"N-Not that I don't, uh, like that y-you're here." Warner peered up at him through his lashes, even as he continued to cuddle into his hold. "Why, um, why are you here?" His brows furrowed as confusion filled his scent. "How'd you even know I was here?" Then his gaze cut to Grisham. "How did either of you know I was here?" Shaking his head, Warner mumbled, "I didn't actually say anything about a mugging. Are you sure you're really a detective?"

Grisham chuckled low in his throat as he nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure I'm a detective. You can even call my precinct to confirm if you want." He used a foot to hook the chair on his side of the bed and pulled it close. As he eased onto it, he grinned at him. "And as soon as we realized you were someone special to Goeff here"—he used a finger to point across the bed toward him—"then our mutual tech buddy started checking into you." Resting his forearms on his thighs, Grisham leveled a serious

look at him. “Don’t worry. That’s normal for him.” With his gaze roving over Warner’s torso, Grisham told him, “And it’s a damn good thing he did because we’re here to help you.” The detective’s eyes narrowed as he let out an annoyed breath. “No way should anyone be treated the way you were, and if you give us a chance, we’ll stop him.”

“But I don’t have anywhere to go,” Warner whispered, looking between them uncertainly. Shaking his head, he sounded tired as he repeated, “I have nowhere to go.”

Gently, Geoff cradled his mate’s jaw and told him, “Yes, you do, sweetheart.” Unable to help himself, he dipped his head and pressed his lips to Warner’s. “Yes, you do.”

“Where?”

Geoff held Warner’s gaze as he murmured, “With me, Warner.” When he saw his mate’s eyes widen and his lips part, he couldn’t help but dip his head and whisper, “With me,” before taking those lips for his own.

When Warner’s taste exploded across his taste buds, Geoff moaned with bliss.

Heaven.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

It had to be how wonderful Geoff's kisses were. That was the only explanation as to why Warner decided to agree to go with him to his place. Except, at times, there were certain ways Geoff said things that reverberated within Warner... and made him think he was missing something... something that he should understand or remember.

Or maybe it's his gentle touches, kind words, and sweet affection.

Geoff said all the right things and behaved as if he was sincere. Of course, Warner didn't really have any past relationships to use as a frame of reference. Even in high school, he'd been a momma's boy, happy to hurry home to spend time with her.

Warner appreciated that he'd spent so much time with her. He would always have his memories.

"Come on, sweetheart," Geoff urged, opening the passenger side door for him. Reaching into the cab, he gently gripped his right hand and hip. "Lean on me, and I'll help you out."

Warner hadn't even realized they'd arrived, having been too lost in his head. Focusing on Geoff, he tightened his hold on the other man and did as he ordered. As soon as Warner slid halfway out, Geoff immediately slipped his arm around him, offering him support.

"Thank you," Warner murmured, feeling a mixture of appreciation and uncertainty. He'd just met the man, after all. Peering around, Warner took in the several large apartment-style buildings. "Um, so... this is where most of the people who work at World of Aquatica live?"

“That’s right,” Geoff confirmed. Releasing his right hand, while keeping his left arm around him, he pointed toward a walkway. “There are several cottages that a few families use in that direction.” Pointing at another path toward the north, Geoff told him, “That leads to a number of hiking trails and eventually to a private beach.” He smiled warmly at him as he stated, “When you’re feeling better, I’ll show it to you.”

“What’s that?” Warner asked, pointing toward an arched plateau with a stone fence with benches carved into it. He was sure he could hear the surf in the distance.

“A viewing area. Some people enjoy sitting there and reading or just staring out at the crashing waves,” Geoff told him. “Would you like to see?”

Warner nodded. “Yes, please.” As Geoff began guiding him in that direction, he admitted, “I love the sound of the ocean.”

“Every place here has a balcony,” Geoff claimed, waving toward the buildings. “I enjoy drinking my morning cup of coffee on it when days are nice.”

“I bet that’s amazing,” Warner mused, thinking about how wonderful that must be. “Mister Roush must be an awesome boss to provide this for his employees.” Worri niggled at him, and Warner peered up at Geoff. “Are you sure that he won’t mind me using your spare room?”

Geoff winced, increasing Warner’s worry. “Uh, I have a confession to make.” Rubbing his hand back and forth over Warner’s shoulder blades lightly, he admitted, “I don’t actually have a spare bedroom.”

“Oh,” Warner whispered, freezing. At least they’d reached the viewing area. As he stared out over the ocean, taking in the white caps of the waves, Warner’s brain whirled. “Um, y-your sofa is fine.”

“I know we just met,” Geoff began speaking slowly. “But I was sort of, uh, hoping you’d be willing to share my bed with me.”

Snapping his attention to Geoff’s face, Warner gaped at the man.

Surely, he couldn’t be serious.

Geoff’s smile appeared tentative. “If you’re not ready for that, my mate”—he lifted his free hand and gently traced his forefingers along Warner’s jaw—“then I’ll take the sofa until you are.”

“You... I... why—”

Warner snapped his mouth shut, knowing he wasn’t making any sense. Tingles trickled down his neck from where Geoff touched him lightly, and it was making it difficult to gather his scattered thoughts. Unable to help himself, Warner tipped his head and pressed into Geoff’s hold when he opened his palm and cradled his jaw.

Goose bumps broke out on his arms, and the hairs at his nape stood on end. His blood heated in his veins, and his pulse skyrocketed. Butterflies bounced in his belly, and he felt his dick plump within his slacks.

“Oh, Warner, my mate,” Geoff rumbled, dipping his head. He nuzzled his cheek against Warner’s temple, his goatee hairs sending delicious tingles down his nape. “The way you respond to me.” His voice came out a rumbling purr. “So open, so honest, so perfect.”

Gasping softly, Warner fought back a whimper. He knew he was supposed to be answering a question, but he couldn’t seem to remember what that was. The feel of Geoff’s arms around Warner made him want to snuggle close to the other man and let all the troubles of the world fall away.

Wait. Troubles.

Right.

Tensing, Warner lifted his head and peered up at Geoff. At some point, he'd given in to the instinct to cuddle against the man's big, broad chest, and he had to tip his chin way up to peer at him. Warner nibbled his lip as he took in the warmth within Geoff's dark eyes.

"Oh, sweet mate," Geoff growled, his eyes narrowing in an almost feral-looking expression. Before Warner could figure out how to respond, Geoff swooped down and growled, "Mine," and pressed his lips to Warner's.

Geoff slipped out his tongue and swiped along Warner's bottom lip. The move dislodged Warner's teeth, allowing the other man to suckle his bottom lip into his own mouth. Teasing at Warner's flesh sensually, Geoff lifted his hand from his jaw and threaded it into his hair.

Warner moaned at the assault, his body flashing hot. A tremble worked through him as his prick grew so hard so fast that he nearly swooned. Swaying closer to Geoff, Warner felt the pressure of the big man's thigh against his suddenly throbbing shaft.

"Warner," Geoff growled, releasing his lip while sliding his thigh between his legs, giving him something to rut against. "You respond so beautifully," he murmured before sealing his mouth over Warner's fully.

As Geoff plundered Warner's mouth, he tightened his arm around his shoulders. He slid it down his back, tugging his body closer. Geoff flushed their torsos, squeezing them together.

Pain shafted through Warner's back. Turning his head, he let out a cry. He dug his

fingers into Geoff's shirt for a new reason as fiery shards of agony spread through him.

"Shit," Geoff cursed, instantly loosening his hold. He moved his left hand to Warner's right hip and rubbed, massaging lightly. "I'm so sorry, my mate." Geoff's expression held self-recrimination. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Shit." At the same time, he scraped his fingers through Warner's hair, teasing his nerve endings.

Warner relaxed, the dual sensations beating out the pain. Letting out a deep breath, he rested his forehead against the big man's firm chest. He inhaled Geoff's clean, fresh scent and wondered how the man could smell so amazing.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," Geoff repeated. "So sorry." He bussed a kiss to Warner's forehead before saying, "I'd never purposefully hurt you. Please, forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," Warner countered, rubbing his palms up and down Geoff's massive chest, trying to do a little soothing of his own. He didn't like seeing the man so upset over a simple accident. Deciding to tell him so, Warner lifted his gaze and slid a hand up to touch his jaw. "I know you didn't mean to." Smiling at Geoff's concern, he admitted, "I liked how you made me forget the pain in my back and ribs."

Geoff's expression eased. He turned his head and pressed a kiss to Warner's lips. "I'd be happy to help you forget anytime you want, my mate," he told him. His brows furrowed as he sobered. "Although I hope it's never from being hurt again."

Warner smiled back at Geoff. "Me, too." The reminder of his pain helped him recall what they'd been speaking of, and he sobered. "Um, I don't know if I'd feel comfortable sleeping with you or not," he admitted. Knowing he had to share the truth, Warner admitted, "I've never done anything with anyone before." Before he could lose his courage, he blurted, "I'm a virgin." Even feeling his cheeks heat with

his embarrassment, Warner forged ahead. “You gave me my first kiss yesterday.”

Groaning softly, Geoff bowed his head and closed his eyes. His arms tightened just a little before he seemed to catch himself, and he relaxed his hold again. Geoff’s nostrils flared as he blew out a harsh breath.

Tensing in Geoff’s hold, Warner couldn’t bear to see the look of disappointment he figured Geoff would display any second. He turned his attention back to the beautiful vista and stared out at the ocean. Unable to help himself, Warner whispered, “Sorry. I’ll understand if you want me to go.”

Where I’d go, I’m not sure, but I’ll think of something.

With sadness, Warner waited for Geoff to release him and send him on his way.

\* \* \* \*

Geoff knew he needed to get his act together. His sweet mate was waiting, and he was obviously getting the wrong idea. The fact that his mate was wholly untouched... by anyone but him and always would be... had completely taken his breath away.

Just day-am!

Feeling Warner tense and look away, Geoff gave himself a mental smack upside the head.

Use your words, asshole!

After a sharp shake of his head, Geoff slid his hand into Warner’s hair. His hand was so big that he could cradle his sexy mate’s head while still being able to slip his thumb under his chin. Geoff used the hold to urge his human’s attention back to him.

“Warner,” Geoff stated gruffly. With the way Warner’s eyes widened, he knew he must be sporting a hell of a feral expression, but he just couldn’t help himself. “That’s the fucking sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

With his brows furrowing, Warner squeaked, “It is?”

Geoff chuckled roughly. “Oh, yeah, my mate. It is.” Unable to help himself, he dipped his head and bussed his lips over Warner’s. He kept it chaste, lifting his head so he didn’t get carried away again. No way did he want a repeat of hurting his mate. “Yes.” After scoffing, Geoff purred, “Do you have any idea how turned on I am by the knowledge that I will be the only one to ever experience the pleasure of sinking into your body, to hear the delectable sounds you make in passion.” Teasing his thumb along his surprised-scenting mate’s jawline, Geoff continued, “To enjoy the delicious flavor of your mouth and body?” Groaning under his breath, Geoff felt his cock throb behind the fly of his jeans, and he instinctively bucked his hips, searching for friction. “Heady stuff, right there, my mate.”

Having obviously felt the swollen length of his arousal, Warner sucked in a shocked gasp. His eyes widened, and he gaped for several seconds before snapping his mouth shut. Warner even shook his head once, as if trying to clear it or in disbelief.

Not sure which I want it to be.

“Yes,” Geoff decided to assume it was the latter. “That knowledge and more makes my blood burn for you, Warner.”

Cocking his head, Warner drew his brows down even as he licked his bottom lip. “A-Are you, uh...” Warner glanced away, then leaned close and whispered, “Are you a paranormal?”

The gleam made it damn difficult for Geoff to focus on his mate’s words. Except,

hearing the question caused shock to flood Geoff's body, and it was his turn to gape.

"Uhhh..." Geoff snapped his mouth shut, ceasing his inane response. "You believe in paranormals?"

Warner shifted his weight from foot to foot, a look of uncertainty flitting across his features. His scent screamed unease. Wincing, Warner stared once more at the vista before them, but after a few seconds, he jerked his chin in a sharp nod.

"Truly?" Geoff could hardly believe it.

The disbelief filling his tone obviously got to Warner, for he scowled as he snapped his focus back to him. "Yeah. Even sick and dying, my mother would never lie to me." Warner even removed his hands from Geoff, which he really didn't like, in order to cross them over his chest. "Think me crazy if you want, but yes, I believe in paranormals." Warner flicked his gaze at him for a second before turning his mutinous attention to the crashing waves. "There's more than just humans on our planet, and I'm not talking about aliens." Then his mate's expression turned contemplative. "Although, I suppose those stories have to come from somewhere, too."

"Yes," Geoff barked quickly. To his pleasure, that earned him Warner's focus once more. "Yes, I'm a paranormal. A shifter." Seeing his mate's eyes widen even as a smile curved his lips, Geoff had to ask, "How do you"—recalling his comment about his mother never lying to him, he amended—"how did your mother know about us?" Then he figured he better get a little more information, too. "And why did she tell you?"

"My mom didn't want her secret taken to the grave, so she told me while on her deathbed," Warner replied. "She said her best friend growing up could turn into a fox." Cocking his head, he narrowed his eyes as he peered up at him. "Are you really

a shifter? Or are you just saying that to mess with me?”

Geoff smelled the disbelief rolling off of Warner. Realizing he needed to take a little leap of faith of his own, he smiled and urged his mate toward the central condominium building. It was the largest and had an elevator that led to an underground lake that everyone called The Grotto.

“I’ll prove it to you,” Geoff claimed as they strolled along the path. “If you’re willing to come with me and watch me shift.”

While Warner didn’t seem completely sure, he still nodded. “Okay.” Obviously understanding his meaning, he added, “So, shifter... as in you shift into an animal?” When Geoff nodded, Warner continued, “You don’t need the full moon, and you’re completely cognizant in that form?”

“Yes, and yes,” Geoff assured. He squeezed his mate’s good hip while pulling out his phone. “I’ll answer any questions you have, and I’ll prove it all.” Grinning, Geoff offered, “What do you say?”

Warner’s curiosity flooded his scent, and it beat out any trepidation he had. “Okay.”

Grinning broadly, feeling like the luckiest damn shifter on the planet, Geoff hit two on his speed dial.

“Geoff?” Beta William didn’t bother with a greeting. “Is everything okay? How’s your mate?”

“Great,” Geoff replied, hearing the pleasure in his own voice. After a wink at his mate, he told his beta, “Warner already knows something about paranormals and believes in us. I’m going to The Grotto to shift and explain everything to him.”

William barked a laugh before saying, “Damn, Geoff. Fate knew what she was doing with your little cutie.” His laughter softening, he added, “Because we both know that, with how you’ve been recently, your patience is a little on the thin side.” Even as Geoff mentally winced and nodded at the truth in William’s words, his beta added, “Congratulations, and give a holler if you need help.”

“Thank you, Beta William,” Geoff replied. A second later, he realized the male had cut the connection. As Geoff shoved the phone into his pocket, he grabbed the building door and held it open for his mate. “Come on, my mate. Let me show you your new world.”

To Geoff’s pleasure, although Warner scented of amusement, his mate allowed him to guide him into the building.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Warner could hardly believe what he'd witnessed, but he was literally riding the proof. The tales his mother had told him while dying of cancer had all been true. Well, Warner assumed they were all true, but either way, he knew at least one of them was—shifters were real.

Sprawling on Geoff's back while the huge man was in animal form—a massive nine-foot-plus long and probably fifteen-hundred-pound leatherback sea turtle, just wow—Warner enjoyed coasting through the cool waters of the underground lake. He'd been impressed with the huge space even before Geoff had confirmed his mother's stories of men and women who could turn into animals whenever they wanted. The elevator opened to a platform overlooking a large body of water in a huge cavern lit up by recessed lighting high overhead.

Sliding his palms over Geoff's huge leather-like carapace, Warner reveled in the ability to do so. The turtle's flesh lived up to its name. Geoff's turtle was the only non-crocodilian reptile that didn't have a shell. Instead, a thick, oily, leather-like substance covered its body.

Truly stunning!

Geoff had explained that, as a shifter, he was larger than those of the natural variety. He'd assured him that he would know exactly who Warner was and what he meant to him, even while in animal form. Then Geoff had explained who exactly that was to him. Warner was his mate, the other half of his soul, the one person alive on the planet that Geoff could mate with, twining their life-threads.

The fact that Geoff claimed he was over three hundred years old had nearly blown

Warner's mind. His mother hadn't told him about the longevity of shifters. She'd only said that they existed, hiding in plain sight, and had explained a little about their abilities and characteristics—stronger, faster, and hardier than humans, with the ability to turn into their animal at will while being completely cognizant in that form.

Geoff had proved that by using his large turtle head and neck to urge Warner to ride him.

Warner could imagine himself whiling away many a lazy evening swimming with the massive turtle.

Except now, I have some other things I want to do.

Having never had sex and hearing how devoted Geoff claimed he would be, Warner wondered how to ask for that from the man. He rubbed his palms over Geoff's back while calling, "Um, you said you control your shift, right?"

Warner tried to squelch his feeling of unease at talking to an animal. To his pleasure, the turtle curved his neck and peered at him. The beast even tipped and bobbed its head in a nod.

Wow! So cool!

Smiling at the turtle, Warner told him, "So, uh, I have some more questions. Do you think we can, um..." He paused and pointed at the shore. "Uh, can we talk some more?"

Immediately, the turtle used its huge flippers and tail to turn them and head toward shore.

As soon as they were close, Warner slid off the side of the turtle's back. His feet

dipped into the several feet of water, hitting the sand beneath it. The cool saltwater splashed up his body, soaking his bandages.

Hissing, Warner began hurrying through the water. The salt in the water caused stings to flood through his backside. “God, so stupid,” he muttered. When they’d entered the water, Warner had already been on the turtle’s back, and he’d barely gotten wet. Straddling Geoff’s turtle, only his lower legs had hit the water while his mate swam him around the lake.

The fact that Geoff had been caring for him, even in animal form, hit him, and even while hurting, he felt a kernel of warmth fill his belly.

Okay. Maybe I only have one question.

Warner spotted the bubbling churn of water as he hurried to the beach. Before he’d even gotten out of the water, he felt himself being swept into Geoff’s arms. The large male peered at him with concern as they exited the lake.

“Are you okay, Warner?” Geoff’s features were pinched as he took in his wet clothes. “You should have stayed on my back, my mate. I would have cleared us of the water.”

“I know, Geoff.” Warner reached up and cradled the big man’s goateed jaw, hoping to soothe the concern from his features. “So, I’m your mate, huh?”

Geoff froze, standing on the beach, peering down at him with a mixture of need and uncertainty.

Warner smiled as he petted his jaw again. “I’m your mate? The other half of your soul? The one meant to be with you and bond with you?”

Nodding slowly, Geoff confirmed, “Yes. You’re my mate.” His large torso expanded and contracted as he took in a deep breath and let it out just as slowly. “Yes, to all that.” As if Geoff was worried that Warner was about to reject him, he hurriedly added, “And I’ve been searching for you and looking forward to meeting your needs for centuries.” Geoff stared at him beseechingly as he practically begged, “Please give me a chance. Please let me prove that I can be the man for you.”

Wrapping his arms around Geoff’s neck, Warner smiled up at him. “Got a question.”

Geoff nodded. “I’ll answer anything.”

“How do we bond?”

After a gasp, his brows shooting up to his forehead, Geoff stared at him in shock. That had obviously not been what the man had been expecting. Warner would have felt embarrassed by his forwardness, but then a hungry smile curved Geoff’s features.

“Sex and blood,” Geoff told him huskily. “I’ll give you as much pleasure as I can before filling you with my seed.” His gaze strayed to Warner’s neck. “Then I’ll bite your neck, claiming you, leaving my mark on the outside, too.” Snapping his focus back to Warner’s eyes, Geoff claimed, “You’ll come from it, my mate. Spill from the pleasure of it.”

Deciding his mother must have told him about paranormals for a reason, Warner took a leap of faith. He smiled up at Geoff as he teased his fingers over his neck.

“Yes, please.”

Upon hearing those simple words, Geoff sprinted up the stairs, still naked as the day he was born, causing Warner to laugh with delight.

\* \* \* \*

Geoff couldn't believe his good fortune. His mate had not only known about shifters, but after a short conversation, he'd accepted them, accepted him . Plus, swimming with his mate had been amazing.

Note to self, talk to Warner about our need for secrecy.

Reaching the elevator, Geoff pushed that thought out of his mind as he hit the button and the doors opened with a ding. He carried his human inside and hit the three button. His thoughts were consumed with taking Warner to his place on the third floor so he could claim his amazing mate.

When they stopped and the door opened, Kayson stood there. His green eyes widened as he took them in. Then he burst out laughing while taking a step back and sweeping his hand in a go ahead motion.

Geoff curled his lip and snarled even as he fled past the laughing fellow shifter. As he hurried to his place, he heard the manta ray shifter holler, "Congratulations!"

After gaining entry to his place, Geoff rushed to his bedroom... after being sure to lock his door behind him. He reverently settled his mate on the bed. Staring down at Warner, Geoff felt his breath catch in his chest as the enormity of the moment hit him.

My mate. My virgin mate. Mine and only ever mine for all time.

Geoff's heartrate spiked. Arousal surged through his veins. His cock twitched from where it jutted from his groin, thick and heavy. He even felt beads of sweat break out on his temples.

“I-Is everything o-okay?” Warner asked, sounding uncertain. He even crossed one arm over his chest to grip his opposite forearm as if shielding himself. Looking away, Warner mumbled, “Did you, um, change your mind?”

“Hell, no,” Geoff growled, reaching for Warner’s feet. “I’ll never change my mind about claiming you.” While working off Warner’s shoes and socks, Geoff smiled heatedly at his mate. “Just reveling in the knowledge that you’re here, with me, in my bed. Accepting me.” As he skimmed his palms up Warner’s jeans-clad legs, massaging lightly, he admitted, “Want to make this so good for you, sweetheart. Want to make you fly.”

Warner blushed, peering at him from beneath his lashes even as he lifted his arms when Geoff gripped the hem of his polo shirt. “What, um—” He paused as Geoff carefully eased the fabric up his body and over his head, being careful of the bandages covering his back and left side. “What do I need to do?”

“Just lie there and enjoy,” Geoff told him, tossing the shirt aside. He lowered his head and pressed a light peck to Warner’s lips. Smiling down at his mate, Geoff urged, “Let me take care of everything.”

After licking his lips, Warner replied with a nod and, “O-Okay.”

Geoff’s need soared as he reached under the pillow to Warner’s left. He grabbed the lube from beneath it—he’d used it to jack off the evening before, twice—and placed it beside his mate’s hip. Teasing his fingers along the little bit of extra padding Warner had around his middle, Geoff nuzzled his goatee hairs against his mate’s left nipple before sucking the bud into his mouth, offering light pressure.

Warner moaned and arched, pushing into Geoff’s ministrations. His mate let out the most erotic noises as he licked and nipped his way to his opposite nipple. At the same time, Geoff made quick work of his new and forever lover’s fly, unbuttoning and

unzipping it.

Lifting his head, Geoff took a moment to strip Warner of his jeans, leaving him only in his underwear. Never had he seen a more provocative sight than his mate in just his tighty-whities. Warner lay sprawled before him, his face and chest flushed, his nipples swollen from his sucking, and his erection tenting the fabric, betraying his blatant arousal.

Moaning softly, Geoff gripped the base of his dick in a tight hold, stemming the way his balls threatened to lift. “Fuck,” he hissed, reveling in the view. “You’re gorgeous, sweetheart. Absolutely gorgeous.”

Even the bandages peeking along his left side couldn’t detract from the heady sight. Although it did remind Geoff that his mate needed a little extra gentleness.

“Y-You really think so?” Warner asked, his voice husky and low.

Chuckling roughly, Geoff jacked his impressive length, drawing attention to it. “Oh, yeah, Warner,” he confirmed as he felt himself leak a bead of pre-cum. “Look at what you do to me, baby. Got me so hard with my need for you.”

“Then take me,” Warner whispered. His sexy mate even spread his legs. “I love the feel of your hands on me.” As Warner spoke his admission, the slightest hint of embarrassment filled the room. Still, he continued gamely, “I want more. I want you.”

“You’ll have me, my mate,” Geoff assured, gripping the waistband of Warner’s briefs. “Forever and ever.”

Then Geoff slid the last of Warner’s clothing from him, baring his beautiful prick to his gaze. The pretty length stood proudly from his groin, jutting from a nest of

strawberry blond curls. As Geoff tossed the underwear off the side of the bed, his mouth watered for a taste of the seven-plus-inch dick before him.

Seeing no need to deny himself, Geoff bent close. He opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue, and swiped up Warner's length. Geoff relished the sound of his mate's sharp cry of pleasure almost as much as the masculine flavor of his smooth flesh. When he reached the cap, he wrapped his lips around it and swiped his tongue across the circumcised head.

Warner groaned with obvious delight, and his hips bucked.

Geoff easily took Warner's length, welcoming his mate's prick into the back of his throat. As his lover relaxed back onto the bed, he grabbed the lube and poured a healthy dollop onto his fingers. When Geoff swallowed his human's dick to the root once more, swallowing around the head to massage the sensitive flesh, Geoff utilized centuries of experience and touched his fingertip to his human's muscled opening.

Sucking strongly, Geoff began to blow Warner in earnest. He reveled in his mate's whimpers, cries, and moans. At the same time, Geoff eased his forefinger into his mate's body. With unerring accuracy, he easily found Warner's prostate and rubbed over the bundle of nerves.

Gasping, Warner moaned, crying Geoff's name.

Smiling around Warner's piece of meat, loving the sound of his name on his mate's lips, Geoff sped up his ministrations as Warner began fucking his mouth in earnest. He took advantage of his pretty human's clear distraction and slid a second finger in beside the first. Working Warner's pleasure nub, Geoff eased his fingers in and out, over and over, and two fingers quickly became three.

Hearing Warner cry out, the noise one of clear ecstasy, Geoff felt his mate's prick

jerk and swell in his mouth. That was the only warning he had before his mouth was filled with the tasty goodness of Warner's release. Geoff eased up a little, still sucking strongly, and enjoyed the next pulse on his tongue.

Geoff let out a groan of his own as he processed the delicious, slightly salty and tangy taste of his mate's seed. As he drank another mouthful, he knew that he would soon come to crave the flavor. His mate tasted beyond amazing.

Mmmm, ambrosia.

His prick twitching at his groin reminded Geoff of another need. He throbbed with his desire to sink into his mate's body. Geoff's mouth watered anew as his teeth tingled with the instinct to bite and claim his mate.

Soon. So very soon.

Easing off Warner's dick, Geoff rubbed over his hip when he heard his mate's quiet moan. "Relax, my mate," he crooned while slipping his fingers from his lover's channel. "Gonna turn you over now." Geoff smiled upon taking in Warner's blissed-out expression. Still, he recognized the questioning look in his pretty mate's hazel eyes. With a smile, Geoff told him, "First time is easiest on your knees." He winced, adding, "And I don't want to hurt your back by having it rub on the comforter."

Warner nibbled his bottom lip even as he nodded and began to move.

Geoff bit back a smile when he saw his mate's uncoordinated movements, knowing he'd put that lethargy in his lover's limbs. Figuring his human wouldn't understand, he instead focused on helping his mate. He gripped Warner's good hip and left thigh, helping him roll and get to his knees.

Taking in the sight of Warner presented before him—legs spread and ass in the

air—Geoff let out his own throaty moan.

“Gorgeous,” Geoff rumbled as he levered over his willing mate. Mindful of his human’s bandaged back, he began peppering kisses along his neck and collarbone as he whispered, “You’re so sexy, my mate. Love how you look beneath me. So needy and ready for my cock.”

“Yessss,” Warner hissed. “Ready. In me. Now. Please.”

More than willing to give Warner everything he needed and more, Geoff used a hand to position his cock head to his mate’s prepped hole.

Feeling Warner arch beneath him and press against his dick, Geoff felt a shudder of anticipation thrum through him. With a hard thrust, he slipped his swollen knob into his mate’s body. Geoff groaned upon feeling the hot tight muscles grip him, and in one long, smooth glide, he slipped deep, deep into the other half of his soul.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Warner felt his chute stretch... and stretch... as Geoff slid his huge dark erection into his body. Recalling the advice about pushing out, he did just that. His lover's hot flesh filled him, and he wondered at the lack of pain.

He must be an expert at prep.

For an instant, Warner felt a niggle of jealousy at all the others that Geoff must've been with to learn such skill. Then the thought disappeared as Geoff's thick crown slid across his prostate, and a wash of hot tingles erupted through his groin. A hard shudder worked through Warner, and to his surprise, he felt his still-hard prick jerk and twitch at his groin.

"Geoff," Warner whined, jolting in the big man's hold. He had a strong arm around his chest as he draped over his back, his dick in his ass holding him in place. "Please," Warner whined. "N-Need."

"Fuck, my mate," Geoff responded in a rough, gruff voice. "You're a natural."

Geoff nipped at Warner's neck as he began easing his prick slowly out of his channel, lighting up nerves he didn't even know existed. When his lover's bulbous crown teased at his muscled rim, Warner whimpered and tried to rock backward to get his lover's meat back into his body. Already, Warner craved the stretch, the feeling of being filled.

"Please," Warner whined when Geoff used his hold to keep him in place. "Need you in me."

“Natural fucking bottom, baby,” Geoff stated, soft and low in his ear. “You’re perfect.”

Even with disbelief swimming through his mind—Warner had certainly never been called perfect before—he let out a breathy moan as Geoff pushed back into him once more. He sighed deeply, relishing the sensation. Warner shivered as he felt his lover once again slide his crown over his sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Geoff!”

“That’s right,” Geoff rumbled into his ear. “Call out my name.”

Then Geoff sped up his strokes. He began pushing in and pulling out faster and faster. With every move, he teased and tormented Warner’s prostate, lighting up his nerve endings and setting him on fire from the inside out.

His cock throbbed, his arms trembled, and his balls began to pull up.

With shock, Warner realized he was about to come a second time within just a few minutes. “Geoff,” he whined, shivering in Geoff’s hold. “I-I-I—Ooooooh!”

Unable to hold it back, Warner’s release crashed through him. He groaned as bliss-inducing tingles rocked his senses once again, sending him soaring. Warner cried his lover’s name—or slurred it—as he spurted burst after burst of seed into the comforter beneath him.

“Warner, yes!” Geoff roared in his ear as he slammed deep.

Warner hummed with pleasure as he felt Geoff’s thick cock twitch in his chute once, twice. Then the exquisite sensation of hot seed flooding his channel sent a wash of satisfaction through Warner. Smiling vacantly at the knowledge that he’d pleased his lover, Warner clenched his chute muscles once, twice.

“Minx,” Geoff whispered into his ear before mouthing kisses along his neck toward his shoulder.

Humming at the pleasant sensations, Warner tipped his head to the side. As soon as Geoff reached the point of his shoulder, he felt the sharp prick of teeth scraping across his skin. Warner gasped as his lover bit him, sliding his teeth into his flesh.

In the next instant, the pain morphed into the most delicious tingles. They spread down his neck and across his body. His blood flamed in his veins as his dick went ramrod straight once more.

A third orgasm slammed into Warner, causing his senses to sing. He shouted Geoff’s name as he bucked and shuddered in his hold. Floating in bliss, Warner moaned as his arms gave out.

Black spots danced across Warner’s vision, and he hummed in ecstasy. Vaguely, he registered the feel of Geoff easing his dick from his channel, and he moaned in dismay, instantly missing the stretch. Geoff kissed his neck, whispering assurances as he helped Warner ease to his right side and relax on the comforter.

“Just rest, my mate,” Geoff crooned into his ear. “Gonna get a cloth to clean you up.” He pecked another kiss to the sensitive skin behind Warner’s ear. “Be right back.”

“M’kay,” Warner mumbled. After all, he didn’t think he would be able to move even if he wanted to.

Warner heard the water run in a nearby bathroom, then shut off. A moment later, he heard Geoff return. When his lover rested a hand on his upper thigh and rubbed lightly, Warner smiled.

“Love your touch,” Warner murmured.

“Love touching you,” Geoff countered before cleaning him up.

Warner felt his cheeks heat in a blush as he felt Geoff slide the cloth down his crack and over his hole. For some reason, having his lover clean him seemed almost more intimate than having him suck and prep him. Maybe it was because he was no longer out of his mind with lust.

When Geoff climbed back into bed and tugged Warner close, he dismissed the whole issue. He cuddled close to his lover, enjoying how the large dark-skinned male half-draped him over his body. With a sigh, Warner nuzzled his cheek against his lover’s broad pectoral.

I have a lover. And not just any lover. A shifter lover. Wow!

Wish Mom could have met him.

Feeling a kiss to his forehead, Warner smiled.

“You okay, my mate?” Geoff asked softly, rubbing over his upper back, avoiding where his father had whipped him with his belt. “I wasn’t too rough, was I?”

Wanting to dispel Geoff’s concern, Warner smiled up at him. “You were perfect. Thank you.”

After Geoff lifted his head and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, he relaxed on the bed with a smile.

Resting comfortably in Geoff’s hold, an errant thought pushed into Warner’s blissed-out mind. Tipping his head up again, he peered at Geoff’s relaxed features. When his lover caught his eye and smiled, Warner smiled back.

“Did you really just carry me up here while naked?”

Geoff grinned broadly. “Yeah. I did.” Shrugging, his expression completely unabashed, he claimed, “You said you were willing to bond with me, and I couldn’t wait long enough to bother putting on my clothes.”

Unable to help himself, Warner dissolved into giggles.

To his pleasure, Geoff chuckled, too, while pressing a kiss to his forehead.

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“Hey, Warner,” Kelly greeted, a wide smile on her pretty blonde features. “How are you feeling?”

Warner returned Kelly’s smile. “Much better, thanks.”

In truth, Warner was far more than better. After bonding with Geoff three days before, his increased healing had kicked in super fast. His bruised ribs—damaged by his father kicking his back several times—as well as his black and blue and cut skin on the left side of his back and side—pummeled and broken by his father’s belt—were well on their way to healing. Warner barely even felt it when he lifted trays or poured wine into glasses.

Kelly cocked her head as she asked, “So, um, is it okay to ask what happened?” As she picked up a wine bottle and placed it on a tray, she admitted, “I heard gossip about a detective asking about a mugging, but rumor says it could be your father or even your boyfriend.” With a pensive look, Kelly offered, “If you need a place to crash for a few days, we have a spare bedroom.” She shrugged just as quickly as she reached out and touched his shoulder while saying, “It’s a little crazy right now, what with us prepping for our move, but you’re my friend, so I’ll help if I can.”

Warner smiled and patted her hand. His stomach warmed pleasantly, as he’d had no idea she felt that way. After all, he’d only been working there a few months, and she

was getting ready to move to Texas.

“Thanks so much for the offer, Kelly,” Warner told her honestly. “But I’m okay. I’m staying with Geoff, my boyfriend.” Recalling the rumors, Warner scowled. “And tell whoever you heard that it was him that hurt me that they’re way off. Geoff’s big and rough, but he’d never harm me.” Upon seeing Kelly’s blonde brows lift, Warner quickly added, “And it was my father. It’s... complicated.”

While Warner appreciated Kelly’s concern and support, he really didn’t want to air his personal problems at work.

After patting Kelly’s hand again, Warner changed the subject. “So, Miss Cooper sent me over here to learn about giving the tastings spiel since we have a lull.”

Kelly instantly brightened. “Of course.” Evidently, she’d been ready for a subject change, too. “Let me pull out a few wines, and we can get started.”

They were halfway through Kelly walking Warner through the process when the front door opened. He instantly tensed when he saw who it was. His father strode several feet into the winery, pausing to sweep his gaze over the area.

When Walter spotted Warner behind the bar, his brown eyes narrowed, and his face began to darken. To Warner, his father’s rage was obvious. As the man began stalking across the floor toward him, a shiver of fear worked through his body, and he sure appreciated the thick wooden bar between them.

“Oh, shit,” Warner whispered, spotting the impending train wreck a mile away. “Kelly, please go get Miss Marion.”

As Kelly scurried to do just that, Warner slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He typed a quick message to Geoff and just managed to slip it back into his pocket before his father reached the bar.

“Where have you been, boy?” Walter snarled, slamming his fists onto the bar. “What have you been sayin’ to people?”

While Warner wasn’t certain what his father was talking about—after all, he’d been holed up with Geoff for the last couple of days—he knew that answer wouldn’t appease his father. Walter never wanted to listen to any of his explanations. Hell, his father’s questions were rhetorical, and he just wanted his pound of flesh... or money.

With that thought in mind, Warner stayed silent, eyeing his father warily.

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Feeling his phone vibrate at his hip, Geoff pulled it from his belt clip and checked the text. A flash of anger surged through him. He ground his teeth as he slipped the device back in place.

Then Geoff slammed on his motorcycle’s brakes, shifted his weight, and turned his handlebars. With a squeal of his tires, he did a one-eighty. Once he’d righted his bike, he gunned the engine and started back in the opposite direction.

“What the hell, Geoff?” Kayson cried, his voice coming through the comms in his motorcycle helmet.

The sound of several other motorcycles making a fast one-eighty filled the air—tires squealing, gravel spraying, and engines whining. His fellow motorcyclists caught up to him even though he was speeding... a lot. He spotted their concerned looks but kept his focus on the road.

A second later, Craeg snapped, “What be the problem, Goeff? Where ya goin’?”

“Walter just showed up at my mate’s work,” Geoff snarled, answering the enforcer. “I’m goin’ to kick his ass.”

“The beta ordered us to let the human law handle this,” Craeg responded, his displeasure filling his tone. “You can’t kick his ass without causing everyone problems.” A second later, Craeg added, “Kayson, call Grisham. Find out if Walter’s been served with the restraining order yet.”

“On it,” Kayson replied.

Then Geoff realized Kayson must’ve switched helmet channels, for he didn’t hear more over the whine of his engine even though his fellow shifter’s lips were moving.

“Try to take a few deep breaths and slow down a smidge,” Craeg counseled. “Ya canna help yer mate if ya splatter yer insides all over the road.”

Even hearing the wisdom in Craeg’s words, Geoff had a hard time managing it. He did it, though. The fellow shifter’s words were true after all.

Can’t keep my mate safe if I wreck my bike.

Geoff managed to slow down to just about fifteen over the speed limit. He’d been out on a motorcycle ride with his friends to keep busy while Warner was back at work for the first time since they’d bonded. With their bond so new, Geoff had already intended to stop in at the winery for lunch, so they weren’t that far away, but he knew it would still take them a good twenty minutes to get there.

Country roads were windy, after all.

Taking deep breaths, Geoff focused on the fresh country air. He kept how protective Marion seemed to be to her employees in the forefront of his mind. Not only had the woman insisted on taking Warner to the doctor several days before, but she’d sent that other asshole patron packing.

She’s a good boss. She’ll keep an eye on Warner until I can get there.

“Grisham’s meeting us there.” Kayson’s words cut into Geoff’s thoughts. “He hasn’t been able to catch Walter at home, yet, to serve him, so if we can keep him there, it sure would help him out.”

Detective Grisham Canton had taken Warner’s statement the morning after they’d bonded. He had the hospital records, as well as pictures of Walter’s abuse. The detective used his pull to push through a restraining order on Walter, but he evidently hadn’t been able to serve it.

“Keep Walter there?” Geoff smirked. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Without getting yourself tossed in jail, Geoff,” Craeg reminded him with a scoff. “Keep your temper in check, man. Ya don’t wanta cause problems with yer mate’s case by bein’ an arse.”

“Right,” Geoff muttered.

As much as Geoff wished he could utilize shifter justice—an attack on a mate often cost the attacker his life—Geoff had to follow his alpha and beta’s orders.

Human justice first.

Reaching the winery, Geoff turned into the parking lot. He’d barely pushed his kickstand down and tugged his helmet off when he spotted Grisham’s cruiser arriving. Hanging his helmet on his handlebar, Geoff hurried toward the winery.

Geoff noticed Craeg and Kayson falling into step at his sides even as he practically jogged to the front door. Kayson reached past him and opened it. He hurried through, and recalling the layout, he immediately spotted the heated altercation at the bar.

Seeing Warner’s pale features and the way he hunched his shoulders nearly caused Geoff to see red. Fortunately, he also noticed Marion standing at the bar at his side.

The older woman had her hands on her hips, and she scowled at Walter, who stood on Geoff's side of the bar.

Deciding to feign ignorance, Geoff strolled toward the bar. He even managed a smile. Although he knew it was strained and didn't reach his eyes.

When Warner spotted him, his mate's eyes widened, and his look of relief and pleasure caused a rush of pleasure and satisfaction to flow through Geoff.

Seeing that, his smile became more than genuine.

"Hi, sweetheart," Geoff greeted, ignoring the others. "How's training going?" Keeping his focus on his lover, he indicated his buddies and stated, "We thought we'd drop by for lunch. Still a few things on the winery's menu that we want to try." Geoff even winked and added, "And if you have a break coming up, I hope you can sit with us for a minute or two."

"Oh, um—" Warner obviously had no idea how to respond.

"That sounds like a lovely idea," Marion stated with a smile. While she scented of surprise, the woman was damn perceptive. Touching Warner's upper arm, she ordered, "Show your friends to the patio. After taking their orders, you can join them for your break."

Obviously, Marion wanted to get Warner away from his father, too.

Warner began obeying, heading toward the end of the bar that was closer to Geoff.

"Wait just a damn minute, boy," Walter barked. He even tried to push past Geoff, but Kayson stepped in his way. After curling his lip and glaring at Kayson, Walter refocused on Warner. "I wanna—"

“Excuse me, Mister Walter O’Brian?” Grisham’s voice rang out through the room. “I’m going to need a few minutes of your time.”

Walter spun around and scowled at the detective. “What the hell do you want?”

Taking the opportunity—otherwise, Geoff feared he would be tempted to beat Walter’s ass, and he didn’t want Warner to think he was that kind of guy—Geoff followed his mate out the door to the patio. He rested his hand on his mate’s back and pecked a kiss to the side of his neck. Immediately, Geoff noticed the acrid scent of fear ease from Warner’s scent, and the tension in his mate’s body lessened. His sweet human even flashed a smile over his shoulder at him.

Geoff smiled back. Tension he hadn’t even realized he’d been carrying oozed out of him. With his mate within touching distance, safe and sound, Geoff felt a rush of something he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

With his pod-members with him, having his back, and his mate at his side, Geoff realized exactly what that was.

Contentment.

Grinning, Geoff looked forward to enjoying that feeling for many, many years to come.