



*Hunted
Bride*

VIOLA GRACE

♡ Betas In Waiting

The claw marks on her back came out of nowhere. Being tackled in a hot spring by a businessman, who is a real ogre when the occasion calls, leads her down a path she didn't expect.

Polly had claw marks appear on her back after a business meeting. She didn't tell anyone, but in hot spring culture, it became harder to conceal. She made the mistake of turning her back on the alpha with her boss, and the rest was history. She broke his nose, and he proposed. That stunned her enough to consider it, and the courtship began.

Her boss kept an eye on her, and Minoru eased her into the idea of marriage. In the process of wedding prep, Polly met a bunch of women who each had a different mark on their back, and they bonded under the weight of being marked for alphas they hadn't even met by a hand they hadn't seen.

In addition to that, Polly was dealing with threats from her sister's pack, and after a few kidnapping attempts, her alpha stepped in. Who knew that wedding prep was so complicated.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Hunted Bride

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ISBN: 978-1-990635-23-6

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Published by Viola Grace

Smashwords Edition

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Hunted Bride
Betas in Waiting Book 9

By

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Chapter One

Polly checked Loki's schedule and then left her phone with her folded robe as she wrapped a piece of white muslin around her and headed to the onsen. Loki and Minoru were both leaning back in a grotto, talking about business.

Polly's hair was up, her skin was clean, and she removed the wrap as she stepped into the water. The bath attendant took it as Polly floated deeper into the pool. Attending the hot spring had been an order by Loki's business partner, so she was visible but not close enough to interfere with their discussions.

The attendant brought a floating tray with sake, tea, and water. It was set for three, and Polly took the hint. She floated the tray over to Loki and Minoru. The hotelier gave her a dismissive glance, so she poured him a cup of sake and handed it to him. He took it, and she did the same for Loki but with chilled green tea.

She floated up against the wall of the grotto and only came out when it was necessary for the next pour.

After half an hour, she swayed a little. Loki said, "Polly, we are good. Go lie down. We have more meetings tomorrow."

She nodded, checked the tray, bowed slightly to Minoru, and he gave her a tense nod. "Miss Polly."

She turned and moved through the warm water, stepping out of the spring. When she was still waist-deep in the water, there was a low growl, and she was wrapped in the arms of an alpha who had his nose buried in her hair. The attendant was shocked. Polly gave her a calm look and shook her head.

The other woman backed away with her head down.

"Mr. Minoru, while I can appreciate the hug, it is a little startling."

His rumbled words were so low, she could feel them more than hear them when he murmured, "You are marked for me."

“The claw marks? They are kinda big. They showed up on our last business trip.”

He sniffed along her neck and behind her ears. “I can smell you now. You block your scent?”

“Yeah. Safer when travelling.”

“You are sweating.”

“The pool is a little warm for me.” She swallowed and then took in the fact that he was pressed against her from neck to knees, erect, but obviously felt chatty. “So, your... other half makes those marks?”

“He does. He is very pleased that you have come to us.”

“Um, Loki came to you. I just travel with him. This isn’t going to get weird, is it?”

He dragged his tongue up her neck. “Define weird.”

“One of the richest hoteliers on two continents is licking my neck. I am not going to make any sudden movements.”

He chuckled and sighed. “Your skin is so soft.”

“It’s wet. I am turning into soup. I am dry and scaly when I am running around normally.”

“Are you trying to dissuade me?”

“Oh, I would never try to get between an alpha and his prey. I am just hoping to find someone to shove between me and him.” She murmured, “I don’t have to outrun him, just them.”

He chuckled and licked her neck again. “Oh, my kind will track a little treasure like you down. We will tear right through the bait to our prey. And such lovely prey you are.”

She muttered as astonishingly long nails lifted her head. “I went from annoying servant to lovely prey?”

He drew a deadly nail down her neck and licked the mark. She whimpered, and he paused, lifting his head. “I am so sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to scratch you. Are you all right?”

She tensed and slammed her head back into his nose as she jerked her heel up between his thighs, and he splashed back.

She grabbed a robe and pulled it around her shoulders, looking back at him to see the blood coursing from his nose and into the pool. She wasn't even to the door before she knew that that move would cost her.

Polly sat in her room and finished confirming the payment and arrangements. Loki came in and sighed. "You know that it is going to hit the fan."

She nodded. "I know. I am making an appointment with him in two hours. I am going to grovel."

Loki paused. "Are you sure you want to do that? He might take advantage."

"He won't. I am doing this formally as fuck. The kimono is coming with the dressers, and I will be on my knees in front of him if he accepts the request for an audience."

Loki nodded. "Right. Well, I will go and tell him that if he accepts, he will receive a formal apology."

She nodded. "Thanks. The concierge has been astonishingly helpful."

"How is your Japanese coming?"

"I can giggle along with the tiny girls on anime so far." She wrinkled her nose.

He snorted. "You aren't trying."

"You are correct." She nodded and fidgeted as he left.

Half an hour later, she got an acceptance of her request and the notice of the arrival of her request from the concierge. She pinned her hair up and headed to the lobby, a conference room had been set aside for her, and she went in with the dressers, and they showed her how to get dressed while the concierge translated. When they finished, she was swathed in a kimono, but something had gone awry in translation. Her face had been painted in geisha makeup. She guessed this was a common fetish for wealthy folks visiting Japan, and she was fine with it.

The concierge looked at her. “Do you need help returning to your quarters, miss?”

“No. I have an appointment with Minoru-San.”

The concierge realized that he had made a very big error in assumption. “I will help you remove the makeup, miss.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. I find it funny, and I will make sure that he does as well.”

She bowed to the dressers, and the concierge confirmed that he would have the kimono returned to them the following morning. She lifted the front of the silk carefully and walked to Minoru’s room. She scratched gently at the door and heard, “Come.”

She slid the door open, crept through, turned around, and closed the door, then she got up and looked for Minoru. She saw him sitting next to his desk, and she walked to him, lowered herself to her knees, and bowed with her hands together in front of her. “Minoru, I am very sorry that I injured you. The pain was unexpected.”

His fingers caressed her hair. “That is a very striking image. I will have to bring the photo up when I need to remember this moment.”

She sighed. “Glad I am wearing the makeup.”

“Will you ever do that again?”

“I will not headbutt you again, alpha.” She kept her posture in the supplicant bow.

“Will you fight me?”

“If you do something that makes me fear for my safety, yes, alpha.”

Her hair unravelled and covered her arms on both sides.

“I will pay for the hair tie.” His hand stroked through her hair.

“Do you accept my apology, alpha?”

He stroked his hand through her hair again. “I am thinking about it.”

She kept her head down and waited.

He stroked her hair calmly, and she got sleepy and tilted to one side.

She caught herself and resumed her formal position.

He leaned down and murmured, “It’s okay, Polly. I accept your apology.”

She tried to push herself back to sitting, but he helped her.

His lips quirked. “What is the makeup about?”

“The concierge didn’t understand what I was doing, and he thought that Loki was a North American business man with a geisha fetish.”

He looked at her from the left side and the right before he leaned in and kissed her softly. She stared and blinked slowly as his breath trickled into her lungs. He backed away, and she blinked, giggling. “You are wearing my lipstick.”

He smiled. “I don’t care.”

He pulled her against him and kissed her again. She felt his face moving, and she made fists inside of her sleeves, gripping the edges of his yukata as she held on as he kissed her again. She leaned back and blinked. He was a monster.

Red skin, long black hair, curving silvery horns, red eyes, and a fascinated expression. “Oh, hey.”

He grinned, showing way too much teeth. “Hello, Polly.”

“So, you got bigger.”

“Kimono and yukata are very forgiving.” He chuckled.

The creature would have been terrifying, but he wore lipstick and white makeup. It softened the expression.

She stroked his cheek, and he leaned into it. The marks on her back were tingling in an unfamiliar way. The tingling went everywhere.

Polly licked her lips. “So, if you have forgiven my act of self-defense, I should probably be going.”

He held her with arms above and below the stiff obi. “I think you should apologize once more, so you realize how close you came to triggering my taking you with that little action. It is hard to control the kijin when he rises. He likes you though. He likes you very much and wants to keep you happy and willing.”

He changed back into the handsome, graceful features she had been staring at for days during negotiations. She touched his face again and rubbed her thumb across his lips. “Happy is easy for me. Willing is more difficult. Surrendering is the hardest thing of all. But I need to get out of the kimono before I stain it.” She blushed. “I put the deposit on Loki’s account. He might notice and freak out.”

He chuckled. “I will tell the concierge to move the deposit, but if you could remove the makeup, that would be helpful.”

She nodded and had no means of purchase where she was lying. “Could you help me up, please?”

“Of course, my bride.” He lifted her until she was standing.

She bobbed a quick bow and found his bathroom. The makeup didn’t come off as easily as she would have liked, but it did come off.

Polly returned to the outer room, where Minoru’s face showed no signs of makeup, and the concierge was speaking rapidly. Minoru was rubbing something between his fingers, and she swallowed as she recognized the hair tie he had snipped off her head with his claws.

Polly walked up to them and bowed to Minoru. “I think I should stop playing dress-up and get back into my standard clothing.”

He chuckled. “Not just yet. Do you have any zori?”

She blinked and shook her head.

The concierge nodded. “Yes, of course. I will be right back.”

He let himself out.

Minoru turned to her and lifted her chin on his fingers. “Lovely. You scrubbed hard, though. I like your skin intact.”

Loki was muttering, and he walked by the open door. He paused. “Polly, what the hell is this fifteen thousand dollar charge on my account?”

“The security deposit for this kimono and the cost to have dressers put it on.”

Loki paused and cocked his head. “You are stunning, Polly. But, what the hell?”

“Formal apology, remember? You can’t get much more formal than this unless I cut off my pinkie.”

She was immediately hauled back and held against Minoru. “No cutting anything.”

She glanced down, and the hand holding her was red. She stroked his warm fingers and said, “You are freaking out the fox, husband.”

He must have liked the sound of that because she was held draped over one arm as he kissed her until her lips throbbed. When he set her on her feet, the concierge was standing there with boxes of zori, and she quickly got a pair that matched her kimono.

Minoru smiled. “I wish to know more about my bride, and the walls have ears here. Shall we walk?”

“Small steps. These shoes feel a little odd.”

Loki grinned. “You are going to go for a walk?”

Minoru shrugged an open jacket on over his kimono. “We are going for a walk on the grounds. I need to know as much as I can about my bride.”

Polly blinked. “Right. That would be helpful. Can I learn about you as well?”

“Of course. For you, I am an open book.” He offered her his arm.

She wrapped her hand around his forearm, and she nodded. Loki took a few pictures of them, and Minoru’s phone chirped.

He checked the phone and smiled. “Thank you. My family is getting the images now.”

Polly blushed and walked with him as he headed toward the door, onto the deck, and then the crushed gravel path that led through the formal gardens.

They were a few minutes from the inn when Polly said, “I think I need to explain a few things about my family.”

“Please do. I look forward to meeting them.”

“Oh, that isn’t going to happen. First, I will tell you about my twin sister Molly. She is an omega who took a placement with a pack, but she didn’t actually tell them that she didn’t want kids and had taken steps to ensure that when she was a teen.”

“That isn’t good. If she was an omega, how did they do the procedure?”

“Oh, she said she was me. On paper, I am sterile, but based on my last exam, I am perfectly fine.” She sighed. “That brings us to the problem. Molly’s pack wants children, and while we aren’t identical, we are still twins, so they have decided that I will make a suitable breeder. Loki is helping me hide from them in public spaces.”

“How?”

“Foxes stink. He rubs his neck along mine and his hands down my arms every morning.”

He tensed but then nodded. “It is sensible that he makes sure you are safe, but I don’t suppose you would have the name of her pack?”

“I do, but all they have done is tried to abduct me once. Now that I am living with Loki, things are a lot easier. With him next to me, they haven’t made a move.”

“So, you are depending on him as a repellent for your sister’s pack?”

“Yeah. I have friends in other mated pairs and quartets that let me hide with them as well.” She sighed. “There is also the book club if the pack gets too close. Those betas are ladies you

don't want to cross. I have a friend who is an excellent bodyguard, and she makes amazing cupcakes.”

He nodded. “So, if your sister's pack disappeared, you would be upset?”

“Yes. They are bastards, but they love her and just want her to be their omega as well as their matriarch. If they wanted to, they could have rejected her and returned her to the omega centre, but they looked for a breeder instead. It is kind of sweet, but from my view, also horrible.”

“You could remain with me. I would keep you safe.”

“Um, no. My visa is for work only. I have to leave in the next week, or I can be deported and banned from returning.” She chuckled.

“You are remarkably calm for a tempting beta walking at my side.”

She chuckled. “You won't harm me. You need me in one rather large piece.”

“You are disregarding the self-control I have been exerting not to flip you to your back and drive into you.”

She patted his arm. “If you did that, you would find out how good I am at hiding firsthand.”

Minoru stroked her cheek. “You would find out how good I am at hunting. I have tasted you, and there is nowhere you can hide from me. Now, what do you have in mind for your wedding?”

“I have never really given a wedding any thought. What is traditional for you?”

“Me in a black kimono, you in a red one. White is becoming more traditional, but I like the red. Flower petals falling, you looking at me like I am the only male in the world. Friends and family there to witness and celebrate with us. Of course, we will need new kimonos, which will take months. This is going to be torture, but it will let me court you as you deserve.”

“Court me? As if there is an option in this?” She chuckled.

“No, court you, as in make you used to me, and perhaps, you will look forward to seeing me when I return to our home.”

She ducked her head. “So, how many months will the courtship be?”

“It depends on the artisans, but four to six months. We have wedding planners who work with our hotels, but if you have a preference for someone you think you would enjoy working with. We can have a conversation about this when I return home in a week. Make any notes for what you would like, and we will try and fuse the two paths together.”

They walked slowly past small rivers and surprising waterfalls, and he covered her hand resting on his sleeve as they paced slowly down the path. They reached a path that led out onto a calm lake, and he turned to hold her hands.

She smiled shyly. “You are taking things really slowly.”

He nodded. “Once I get inside you, I will remain as long as I can. So, several days. But now is not the time for that. My parents are across the ocean, so we can have our meeting with them when I return.”

“Oh, fuck.” She blinked.

“And the cursing might need to be taken down a notch.” He stroked her cheek with his finger.

“It is how I blow off stress. That was the tip of the four-letter iceberg in my mind.”

“Well, what else do you need to say?” He tilted his head.

She looked into his red eyes, opened her mouth, and let loose a cascade of cursing that made his eyes open wide and his horns flick in and out of vision.

When she finished, he stared for a moment, and she began to think she owed him another apology.

He leaned down and stroked her hair before pressing his mouth to hers in a devastating kiss. When she was swaying in his arms, he lifted his head. “I had to find a better use for that charming mouth of yours.”

She blinked. “Am I supposed to apologize for that? I still have the outfit on.”

He grinned. “Next time you irritate me, and I am sure you will, you can wear one and make the formal apology.”

Polly winced. “That is going to get pricey.”

He smiled. “Mine is the requirement; I shall bear the cost.”

She blushed. “I think that one kimono would be fine.”

He turned, and they headed back to the inn. “Let me tell you about my family and how long they have waited for me to choose a partner. There have been trans-pacific introductions. Lines of omegas who all run for it when they see the red eyes, not to mention the horns. They didn’t remember what they had seen, but it was disheartening to my family when they realized I would never find someone. They will be delighted with you. You have experience with an ayakashi alpha. You didn’t run screaming when you saw my full form. Loki wishes to do business with us, so my family will consider themselves to have the upper hand.”

She paused. “I am not a member of Loki’s family.”

“I know. He is a second son but a high-ranking alpha. That you manage to work with him indicates your patience and capabilities. He is clever, so you obviously have intelligence.”

She walked carefully and swallowed. “How are you sure your family will not object?”

“Oh, pretty sure. They have been blowing up my phone since Loki shared the images of us together.” There was a smile curving the edges of his mouth.

“I haven’t heard anything.”

“You will pick up on energy signatures over time. It comes with the hunting abilities.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “They will show up soon.”

“Why?”

He turned her palm and licked it. “Because I marked you. It was gentle but will grow over time.”

She remained quiet until they got back to the inn. “Right, well, I have to get this kimono off and get back into clothing that doesn’t make me worry about trading in my car.”

He sighed. “Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

She blinked. “Um... I thought Loki was having dinner with you tonight.”

“What were you going to do?”

“Sprint down to the convenience store to the left of the temple. I am a big fan of ramen.” She smiled. “Um, thank you for the walk. It was nice.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear so that the line of his scratch was visible. He stroked the thin line and smiled. “I will ask Loki to invite you to dinner. Will you wear an inn yukata?”

She blinked. “Uh, I have work to do. I am not sure that I will finish by dinner.”

He smiled, his fangs showing. “I am sure that Loki will assist in anything you need to complete.”

“Him fussing will be the opposite of helpful.”

“I will see you for dinner.”

He walked her to her room, and the room attendant got there before her and helped her step out of the zori before she walked in. She was surprised when Minoru came in behind her.

He chuckled. “Did you get in on your own?”

“Oh. My. Right. Fuck.”

He tapped her nose. “You are cruising for another apology.”

She swallowed and let him untie the cords and cables of the outer layers before tapping her on the nose again and leaving her with the slowly sliding silk layers exposing her shoulders. He took a quick photo, winked, and left her.

Polly waited until the door slid closed, then untied the last few ties and slid out of the entire mass. She darted to her drawer and put on a change of clothes—a business dress and

some slippers. Now she had to fold up the kimono and get it ready to return.

Chapter Two

She knelt next to an amused Loki when Minoru came in. They bowed politely, and Minoru frowned. Polly wasn't sure about what the problem was, but he picked her up and carried her to the other side of a table. "You were supposed to wear a yukata."

"She wore one earlier and changed out of it when she put on the kimono. The staff did not replace it." Loki frowned. "And who are you to define her clothing choices?"

Minoru frowned. "Her fiancé."

"Where is the token?"

Minoru blinked. "The what?"

"The token. European descent requires a token to be given to the bride as a placeholder. It is a financial representation of the value put on the bride, holding her for them, and after the wedding, it proves she has completed the contract."

Minoru nodded. "I will be back in a moment."

He got up and growled his way out of the room while Loki grinned.

Polly hissed. "What the fuck did you just do?"

"Getting you an engagement gift. It probably won't be a ring, but it should be worth a bit. Did you get the kimono back to the rental agency?"

"I did. It folds up neatly. Surprising, but yeah."

She shook her head, and one of the room attendants came in with a hotel yukata and sash. "Shit, he was serious."

Polly took the yukata and went to the restroom. She slipped the dress off and put the robe on, winding the sash into place. She tied it and twisted her hair so the thin line on her neck could be visible to him.

She stepped back into the room, and the room attendant took her dress over her arms and left with it.

Minoru was back and had a wide flat box sitting next to him. She knelt next to him and inclined her head to him and Loki.

Loki snickered. "It's a good thing that you have to dress like that at home. You were quick."

Minoru blinked. "Dress like that at home?"

Loki nodded. "Sure. We use yukata at home, so there is a line between work and home."

Polly nodded. "At my place, I wear sweatshirts and footy pyjamas."

Minoru looked at her. "What do you find more comfortable?"

She twisted her lips. "Frankly, it would depend on which bra I wore that day."

Loki snickered, and the food started coming in.

They washed their hands, and the grilled fish was served on a bed of rice. A bowl of ramen was on the table, and Loki was laughing as Minoru handed her the bowl filled with noodles, slices of pork, and small vegetables, and she giggled as she took the bowl from him. She dove into the noodles as they worked on the fish, and by the time she had finished her bowl, she was left with the head. She picked at the head and got the cheeks, settled them on rice, and added some of the seared vegetables. She nibbled and ate until her bowl was empty, and then the next course arrived.

They went through three courses and a mochi dessert, and Polly was stuffed.

She looked at the pretty items left on the plate and couldn't make herself eat anymore.

Minoru sighed. "Polly, you eat like a bird."

"If there is a bird that eats like me, it must be huge." She put her chopsticks on the tiny rest.

Minoru laughed, and Loki continued to eat the mochi.

Minoru picked up a cute mochi mouse with a strawberry inside and held it to her lips. “Just one more. You can take it.”

She glared at him, and his expression changed to that of the ogre. “Open, Polly.” The mochi was held between his razor claws.

She muttered, “The next time I hear that, there had better be snacks involved.”

“There are snacks involved now. Open.”

She rolled her eyes and flipped off Loki as he silently laughed. She opened her mouth, fully aware of the training that her alpha was starting. He was trying to develop a trust response, and she let the terrifying ogre feed her a mochi that looked like a tiny mouse but had a strawberry and red bean paste inside.

She brought her hand up to catch the strawberry juice, but he pulled her close and caught it on his tongue. Clever bastard. His teeth pressed against her lips, his tongue licked at the juice, and she finished swallowing the remains of the mochi.

He held her head and kissed her softly until she was relaxed and limp in his hands. He raised his head, and his public face was back with a satisfied smirk. He rubbed his thumb across her lower lip.

“I have something for you.”

“I can’t say anything that won’t make Loki die of laughter.” Polly smiled and looked at Minoru.

Loki chuckled. “I am waiting for something. I know your wit.”

Minoru smiled. “Perhaps I should have done it privately.”

Loki snorted. “Too late.”

He handed her the box that had been at his side during dinner, and he opened it, lifting the necklace and putting it around her neck. He even arranged her hair over the chain and smiled. “It looks pretty.”

She looked down and blinked at the huge emerald that actually seemed to be swirling inside the confines of its structure. There was fire inside.

“It has ogre fire, and it will summon me if you ever have need of me. It will also let me feel you.”

She looked up at him and then lifted the gem in her hand. It was warm and felt alive. It was also the size of the first segment of her thumb. She swallowed. “Is there anything smaller that could do the same thing?”

“No. Reconcile yourself to wearing a necklace worth as much as a house in the suburbs.” Minoru laughed.

She carefully set the necklace down, and it nestled into her robe, working under the layers until it touched her skin. She blinked. “Holy crap.”

Minoru laughed. “I will charge it up for you before you leave.”

“Charge it how?”

He purred. “I am very glad you asked.” She was gathered onto his lap, and he kissed her senseless. The pendant spread warmth through all of her limbs, and she was dangling in his arms in under two minutes.

It took her three tries to grab his jaw and push him back. “Enough. Any more and I am gonna pass out.”

He chuckled. “My blessed bride, we are going to have to work on your stamina. It’s a good thing that we have months to do it.”

She shivered. “Oh. Yay.”

He laughed, and Loki lost it. He hooted with laughter as he rolled around on the mats.

Polly sighed, and the throbbing of the fire between her breasts was hard to ignore.

A few more days and she would be on her way home. Sixteen hours after that, she would be back in her bed and pondering what the hell had just happened. If she drank, this

would all make more sense. As it was, she needed to get off Minoru's lap and get back to her room. Something told her that it would be easier to sculpt Minoru out of mochi than to get her out of his grasp. She was well and truly caught.

Loki looked at her as they went over the contracts and the dimensions of the space the hotels were offering. "Are you cool with Minoru?"

She met his gaze. "What do you mean?"

"With becoming his wife. It feels like a strange arrangement."

"Dude, I have the claw marks of an eight-foot-tall mythical monster on my back. Actually, meeting one was rather comforting. At least there is a reason for it. A giant fucking signpost for the guys to follow."

He smiled. "So, somewhere out there is a woman with nine tails coming out of her back?"

"Or a cute little fox with charm in her eyes." She laughed as he blinked

He paused and then smiled slowly. "I think that would be a wonderful discovery. Minoru is talking about stealing you, presenting you at his side, and starting a family, and those words got into my brain."

She chuckled. "Uh-huh. I am still shocked that I got that writ from Minoru that let me bring the necklace through customs without penalty. Was that really the minister of trade's signature?"

"Of course. Minoru's mother's family has been well respected, and it is her jewel that you wear."

"I liked meeting his grandfather and grandmother, but they were awfully pinchy." She smiled and rubbed her cheeks. "I don't know if they were testing for youth or trying to tenderize me."

"You really need to learn Japanese."

“I know. I can normally pick up the nouns, but there was something about the way they spoke that was formal. I couldn’t catch on.”

Loki chuckled. “I know Minoru faked the translation, but they basically said that you would make a good wife, and if not, a good meal.”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s what it felt like. So, for them, it is breed or bread.”

He snorted, and they laughed as their plane made its way over the open ocean. Home was on the other end of the voyage, plus or minus some domestic flights.

Five days after returning home, Polly had her schedule back in place and Loki’s as well. When her phone rang, she answered, “Hello? Polly speaking.”

The low growl made her knees go weak. “*Hello, Polly. I have touched down and gotten a good night’s sleep. Would you be interested in coming over for dinner?*”

“Uh, hey, Minoru. Um, yes?”

He chuckled. “*I will send my address to you. Bring a change of clothes and some things to wear while you are here. I intend for this to be our marital home, so it is best if you get used to it as soon as possible.*”

She swallowed. “Um, I will come for dinner. I don’t think that I will stay over.”

“*Of course, my bride, but you are leaving it up to my housekeeper’s discretion. She is appalled at the idea of my bride not having a change of clothing here. She will build you a traditional wardrobe if you don’t bring representations of your wardrobe style, she would guess, and she’s sixty-three years old.*”

She paused. “Fine. I will bring a change of clothes. Bully.”

“*Alpha. I do what I do to make your life easier eventually. Bullies do it for their own entertainment.*” He growled into the phone in a manner that held her captivated.

When she could speak without her voice being all husky, she said, “Fine. What time did you want me over?”

“*Forever.*”

She smiled. “Can you narrow it down for a starting point?”

“*Six.*”

“All right, I will be there for six.”

“*I will ask Loki to send his car with you. Mine will take you back to him in the morning.*”

“We already gave the driver the day off. Me. I am the driver.”

He sighed. “*I will still speak with Loki.*”

The tea-slinging fox walked in, gnawing on an apple.

“Okay, I will tell him to expect your call.”

Loki smiled at her. “Who is it?”

“Minoru.”

“Oh. Goody. Hand him over.” Loki took her phone with a smirk and switched to rapid Japanese.

Loki winced, glanced at her, pulled her phone aside, and said, “Go pack. I will bring your phone and a charger when I am done.”

She was dismissed and went to pack. Pushing back against alphas was never a game she could win. They pushed back harder.

Loki got onto the lane that led to the interstate, and she smiled. “This is a new one.”

“I know how to drive. I just rarely have to.”

She snorted. “I imagined you did. You have a car collection.”

He kept her phone, but it was plugged into the charger. He hummed as he drove along the lane and missed the turn to the

interstate. He drove past woods and trees and then turned into a drive.

“You are kidding me.”

Loki laughed. “You are just lucky that he didn’t build a monorail between our places.”

The drive was long and winding, leading to a large home that was reminiscent of the inn they had stayed at most recently. Minoru came out wearing hakama and a kimono shirt. She reached for the door, and Loki made a rumbling sound, so she pulled her hand back. Minoru opened the door, and Loki got out to get her bags from the trunk and hand them to Minoru. He slung them over his shoulder then opened the door and smiled at Polly. “Welcome to our home, my bride.”

She sighed and said, “You think I want to live close to this asshole for the rest of my life?” She jerked her thumb at Loki.

Her boss snorted and said, “Stop hanging onto the car. I need to leave you to your fate.”

Minoru wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her away from the vehicle. Loki used that opportunity to fuck off.

Minoru held her hand and led her inside.

“So, why the traditional clothing for you? I know why Loki does it.”

“It’s comfortable.” He smiled.

“Oh. Right.” They entered the building, and she and he kicked their shoes off before bending and turning them into the exit position.

A smiling woman with soft grey eyes came in and nodded. “Welcome, Miss Polly.”

“Hello.”

“This is Nari; she keeps me in line.” Minoru stepped inside with the bags. “Her family has kept a tight rein on my mother’s family for centuries.”

“Pleased to meet you, Nari. Does he need much management?”

She stepped into the house and bowed to the older woman. Nari blinked, and she repeated with a lower bow. Polly stood straight, and the older woman smiled. "Please, miss. I have prepared something for before dinner. Come and relax while Minoru puts your clothing away."

Minoru cleared his throat. "Perhaps she should get changed into *house clothes*, I believe, is the term Loki uses."

She looked at him and then at Nari. "Right. Of course. Please, lead the way."

He nodded and put a hand on her back. "This way."

They walked through the house, and she smiled. "How much would this square footage cost in Japan?"

"Well, easily five figures. I have also registered mineral rights on the property for the hot springs. Call me greedy."

"You have hot springs attached to your house?"

"Of course. There is a reason to have this house in this position. As much as I would build you a palace if you wanted, this house was almost completely built when I met you. I will change things to suit your preferences, but the structure is what I have had in mind all along."

"Oh. Okay." She looked left and right, and it had the same polite cleanliness as the structure at the inn, but everything had thicker wood and frosted glass instead of paper. "Um, don't get the wrong idea, but how soundproof are these doors?"

He paused. "I suppose we will find out, but they are supposed to be very well insulated."

She nodded. "Okay. I would just hate to disturb Nari."

He nodded and slid a door to one side. He walked to a dresser and emptied her bags onto the surface. He tucked her underwear into a drawer of the dresser, hung up dresses in the nearby wardrobe, then looked at the silk nighty she brought along, rubbed it against his cheek, and hung it up next to the dresses.

"Did you have something for me to put on?"

He smiled. "It is in the bathroom."

She nodded and went to the bathroom, finding a red and black yukata and an underrobe as well. She got dressed and hung her dress up on the hook on the back of the door. There were a set of crocks in her size, and she put them on. She came out of the bathroom, and Minoru was standing on the other side.

He smiled, stroked a finger down her neck, then pulled out the pendant. "It needs a charge."

"Oh. Now?"

He grinned. "It isn't immediate, but perhaps after dinner."

"What are we having for dinner?"

He chuckled. "Pot roast. It's my favourite, and Nari spoils me."

"Well, she made us something as an appetizer, so we should get back to the kitchen."

"A kiss for your husband?" His red eyes were begging.

"Get down here then, or get me a step stool."

He lifted her, and the kiss was toe-curling. Her mouth fitted to his, and her tongue moved along his teeth. He was covered with sharp edges, and she didn't feel any of them. He didn't let her feel any of them.

When she heard Nari say, "Well, it seems that you have already whetted your appetites, but here are some snacks," Polly knew that Minoru had walked into the dining area with her.

She jerked her head back, but he was holding her, and his ogre seeming was out. "Twit."

"Oh, my bride, that is an insult. I believe that another apology is required." He chuckled.

She stared. "What?"

"Once our meal is concluded, I will show you the gift that has been sent to my bride." He chuckled. "Loki has spoken to

several of my relatives and explained about the likelihood of your needing to make a formal apology again. You are about to have quite the kimono collection.”

She groaned. “Oh, balls.”

He sat down and held her close while grinning like a fool. She tried to think of something witty but could only sigh and lean against him. If you pushed alphas, they pushed back. She was going to be on the receiving end. Part of Polly told her that it was going to be a lot of fun, and the other part was waiting to judge.

Chapter Three

Nari kept laughing at them as Minoru fed her the pastry puffs she had prepared. He stroked her cheek, tapped her chin, and asked her to open.

“Minoru, this is embarrassing.” She cleared the fourth savoury puff and reached for the glass of water waiting for her.

“Nari will witness many moments of affection between us.”

Nari smiled. “Don’t worry, Polly. I have been around alphas all my life. I know that their definition of socially appropriate depends on who they are holding.”

Polly sipped at her water, and then when he tried to give her another puff, she shook her head. “No, please. Dinner smells great, and I don’t want to miss trying some because you are having fun playing.”

Nari chuckled and checked on dinner. “It will be about twenty minutes. Sir, why don’t you show her the house?”

He chuckled. “Because I like feeling her against me.”

“Then carry her.”

He shot up and held her against him as he walked through the house. “I will show you my favourite thing.”

She muttered, “I thought we were saving that for the wedding night.”

He whispered in her ear, “It won’t be inside you until the wedding night, but it would be nice for you to be familiar with me before then.”

Her face was on fire. “So, that is why you wanted the sleepover?”

“Yes.” He whispered it again. “When I travel for business during the time before the wedding, I would like for you to come here at least once a week and sleep in my bed so that

you are the first thing I am wrapped in when I come home until you are with me when I travel.”

“I work for Loki. I like it. The travel isn’t extreme, and the people are nice.”

He sighed. “I am going to be making the local branch my office, and travel will be minimal. It will be non-existent once we start a family. Aside from family trips, there won’t be any travel. I will be at your beck and call.”

She looked up at him. “Really?”

“Of course. My father did something similar when I was born. He kept close to home for me and my mother while I was growing, and when I was an adult, they moved to Japan for a time, and I made the crossing frequently while going to university.” He chuckled. “More frequently than immigration knew, but that is a demonstration for another day.”

Polly frowned as he carried her through the house, giving her a tour she only partially took in. “What if I am not fertile? What if we don’t have children?”

He whispered against her head, “We keep trying.”

She swallowed. “Um, okay. Let’s see if I can manage you first.”

“I have confidence in you. I have spoken with a small wave of alphas who have found special betas. Betas that changed for them. They went from being normal women to ones who could take an alpha with extras.” He chuckled. “I believe you are one of those.”

She twisted her lips. “Ah. I am glad to know I am not the only one.”

He chuckled. “I have an associate or two who has found a special beta mate, and they are exceedingly pleased with finding a partner and not just a wife.”

She paused. “Do you think I could talk to their betas?”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I believe we can arrange it.”

“Good. I have been wondering about others.”

He settled on a couch in front of a television. It was the most socially standard room they had been in. His hand wrapped around her thigh. “Now, let’s begin charging that pendant.”

She looked up at him, and he was smiling down at her. “Um, do we have time?”

“It’s pot roast, not a soufflé.” He chuckled.

His free hand slid along her neck and pulled the chain free. Her pendant was still green and flaring but was apparently not enough for his purposes.

Polly blinked as he tucked the pendant into his mouth and slurped softly. “Dude, are you tasting me?”

He nodded with a smile. “I am taking moments like this to keep me satisfied. Ah, I found a wedding planner.”

She blinked. “You did?”

“I did. There is a woman who works with our local hotel, and I chatted with her while I flew home. She is willing to meet with us this week if you can get some time free.”

Polly frowned. “I will have to check with Loki. He has a photoshoot planned for a new ad campaign.” She cleared her throat. “I need to be there for it.”

He nuzzled her ear. “Why must you be there?”

“Oh, I am better at dealing with the models for the campaign. They don’t try to seduce me as they do the alphas that are on the shoot.” She smiled. “It makes the shoot go faster.”

“I can’t believe Loki is hiring models when he has you.”

“He doesn’t have me. I work for him. That’s all. Even the living arrangements are just to make the early mornings go faster as I don’t have to commute. He has the space and an excellent housekeeping staff.”

He licked her jaw softly. “So, you will stay here more often?”

“Where is the limit to what will have me pinned under you versus what will let me get to work the next day?”

He froze in place and growled. “Don’t tease.”

“You keep saying that, but it isn’t a tease; it is a question.” She caressed his head, and when he turned his head, she kissed him.

He slowly increased his level of participation until he held her tight against him, one hand behind her neck and the other kneading her butt.

A deep purr was rumbling through him, and she was feeling the effects. Her thighs slid together, and she could smell the heat coming from her sex. She let out a small sound and cuddled closer to him.

“Oh, dear one. You will drive me mad.”

She panted as she lay in his arms. “Stop sharing the crazy.”

Minoru smiled and brushed tiny kisses over her forehead and cheeks.

“Sir, dinner is ready.”

Polly blushed. She murmured, “We’ll be right there.”

Nari laughed. “If you think so, Polly.”

Minoru hefted Polly up until she was kneeling on him and facing him. He smiled. “Oh, dear one, I forgot to charge the pendant.”

She looked down, and the pendant was outside her robe. “Forgot?”

“I was distracted by the delightful sounds you have started making.” His clawed fingertip tapped her lips.

She frowned. “I was?”

“Yes. I look forward to hearing the entire symphony.” He leaned in and licked at her lips before he went in for a kiss that warmed her from the inside out.

Her toes curled in her slippers, and she held onto the front of his shirt. He switched between the ogre and his normal

form, and she kept her eyes closed and determined the form by the size of the teeth. Well, also, his ogre's mouth enveloped hers completely.

When she was swaying, he lifted his head, and she slowly opened her eyes. His eyes glowed like illuminated rubies. She blushed at the heat in his eyes and swallowed. "I think you are going to have a rough time until the wedding."

He smiled slowly. "But by the wedding night, I will be familiar with you and you with me. We will be able to enjoy ourselves without pausing for mortification."

"Mortification?"

"Embarrassment, virginal hesitation, alpha-avoidance. Whatever you want to call it."

"Knot nervousness."

He laughed. "That you will have to deal with, but I will help you through it. How did I luck into such a beautiful mate?"

"Fate put claw marks into my back so you wouldn't miss me."

"I must thank fate or, at least, help out when I can."

Her stomach growled. She blushed. "Sorry."

"I have delayed dinner too long. I will be more careful in the future."

He helped her to her feet and took her hand as he walked back through the house, following the scent of dinner.

Nari smiled and set the meal on the table. "He never was one to arrive on time."

"I will remember that."

He helped her to kneel next to the table. "Remember what?"

She flicked him a teasing glance. "That you don't come on time."

He thudded to his knees, and a low growl rumbled out of him as he stared at her.

Nari laughed, and dinner was served.

“Are you sure that this is okay?” She approached his bed with a sleeping robe on.

He nodded. “It will be fine, but both parts of me need you in my arms for a night.”

He was wearing a matching sleeping robe and had the spot next to him ready with the bedding turned down. Polly settled and lay on her side, looking at Minoru.

“Um, good night.”

He leaned in and kissed her quickly. “Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around. Getting used to sleeping in contact with another person does not come easily to many people, so we will practice.”

She turned her back to him, and he caught her around the waist and pulled her into the curve of his body. His erection was obvious, but he didn't do more than settle his hips against her.

“Thank you for coming over. Will you sleep in my bed when I am away on business?”

“Once a week?”

“Yes, I will tell Nari not to change the sheets. You smell like mine.”

“Is there anything else that leaves kijin claw marks?”

He chuckled. “No.”

“Then, I look like yours as well.”

“Yes, but I can't see it right now. I didn't dare bathe with you.”

She chuckled.

“I am going to charge the stone while you sleep.”

“Wait, don't you need to sleep?”

“I will, but only after I make sure you are protected.”

She tried to relax, but it was only after an hour that she accepted the strange feeling of a large man in the bed she was sleeping in. His heavy purr lulled her into sleep.

She checked her phone over breakfast and lined up her day. Polly tried to ignore the devastation that hit her staring at Minoru in a western suit. He was... exceptionally pretty.

Nari smiled. "More coffee, Polly?"

"Yes, please."

Polly looked around. "Nari, do you like cats?"

The housekeeper filled her cup. "Yes, Polly. I do."

"Good to know."

Minoru flicked her a dark gaze. "What are you planning?"

"This house is very quiet when you aren't home. It would be nice for Nari to have a weird fuzzy friend. You already have robot vacuums, so it isn't that much extra work."

He looked at her with a direct gaze. "Are you asking if you can have a kitten?"

"Absolutely not." She smiled. "I am not asking."

Nari laughed, and Minoru raised his brows.

She finished her breakfast and sipped at her coffee.

"Aren't we bold this morning, Polly?"

"Well, you have enthusiastically laid claim to me, so this will be me marking my own territory, so to speak. It will also ensure that I have a reason to visit your home while you are both here and gone."

He looked at her and cocked his head. "I am not enough of an inducement?"

"We are waiting on the inducement, right?"

Nari laughed, and Minoru nodded ruefully. "Your point is accepted."

She smiled and continued flicking through pet rescues until she saw a little guy that suited her. Once she had her target, she looked around for the necessities and had everything in her cart for the minute she got the cat. She always loved a new project.

Polly and Minoru walked outside as his driver pulled up. He tucked her carefully into the car and walked around to his side. He slid in next to her, and they were off to Loki's place.

She tried to keep her focus on her phone, but a hand covered her phone, and the other turned her head to his.

She whispered, "Lipstick."

He smiled. "I don't care."

It was a short ride, but it felt like a dozen heartbeats. Loki saw her when Minoru exited the car, wiping her lipstick off. He started laughing.

The two alphas chatted, but as she checked a compact, Loki said, "Don't worry, I think he got it all."

She blushed. "Loki, we need to get going if we are going to make it to the shoot on time."

Loki chuckled. "She's a bit of a bully. Just warning you."

Minoru smiled. "We will get along fine, but it will take time. Three months. I have found a planner who can do it as long as I offer up the venue, which I have done."

"When can I meet her?" Polly was nervous.

"When do you and Loki finish today?"

Polly checked her schedule and said, "If it is successful, the shoot will be over at four, and we leave at five."

Loki nodded. "We also don't have to be there the whole time."

Polly blinked. "Right. So, what is the outside time to notify you of our timing and if something has gone wrong?"

Minoru smiled. "Does that happen often?"

“We are dealing with models; it happens more often than not.”

“What kinds of advertisements are you going to be doing?”

Loki smiled. “Seasonal green teas with subtle differences are being released quarterly, so we are doing one model per season.”

Minoru nodded. “You are going to put that campaign in the hotels?”

“Yes, in the shops. As per our agreement, nothing in the hotel itself.”

Minoru nodded. “Good. Get approval from the advertising manager.”

Polly nodded. “Of course. It was in the contract.”

Loki chuckled. “Polly, we need to head out.”

She bowed slightly to Minoru and then headed to the car she drove Loki around in.

Hands turned her and pulled her up the side of the SUV. “A proper kiss, please.” Minoru’s lips were an inch from hers.

“Your kisses are not proper.”

He grinned and pressed their lips together. Time spun away from her again. When he lifted his head, her hands clutched his shirt, and her left leg wrapped around his thigh.

She panted and sighed. “You have to stop doing that.”

He chuckled. “No. You are an agreeable woman, and I could have seduced you, but I want you to want to be with me by your choice, so I will earn it.”

Loki grinned. “Now that I have that photo, we should get going.”

Minoru let her slide back onto her heels. He patted her backside. “Have a fun day at work. I will.”

She blinked and got into the car, slowly exhaling before she buckled up and started the vehicle. Loki got into the back,

laughing his ass off. “So, that’s fun. How are you doing, Polly?”

“Why are alphas such assholes?” When he buckled up, she started driving.

“Well, we are smart, strong, and capable. Oh, and we need hobbies.” Loki was having fun at her expense. Nothing new there.

“Excellent. That doesn’t make me grit my teeth at all.”

“Well, you are both lucky and tortured to be suited for Minoru. He has patience.”

She remembered the hands holding her in the night and the soft purr that lulled her to sleep. “Remind me why that is a good thing?”

He laughed again, and they were on their way to the shoot.

Alexi was always busy, but he loved taking pictures of women. He was more of an art photographer than commercial, but this project was more art than advertising.

The kimonos that were being used were from a collector’s private collection. The models were dressed, and makeup was done. Polly made notes on the most successful models, and Loki was really pleased.

They had all four seasons done, each with several different kimonos.

Loki looked at Polly. “Now you.”

“What?”

“We need one for the new year.”

She checked her schedule. “No, we don’t. Not on the schedule. I am sure Alexi wants to get home to his mate.”

Alexi glanced at her. “I can take a short break if you can get into the robe. Seriously, Polly. You have a great face, and your body is excellent.”

“Gee. Thanks. You have a nice ass. Can I go now?”

Alexi snorted. “Nope. I need one more.”

Polly looked at Loki, and he put his hands together and said, “Please?”

“Is there a bonus in it for me?”

Loki winced. “Yes.”

“Will you not show this to Minoru?” She ignored the flinch that Alexi gave when she glared at Loki.

He grumbled. “Yes.”

“Good. I get the feeling I am going to have to pay for a lot of therapy in the coming months.” She stalked into the dressing area and put through makeup before the kimono slid onto her shoulders.

Ninety minutes later and she was really nervous about the photos. She got back into her office clothes and was queasy when Loki refused to show her the pictures.

They helped Alexi clear any of his equipment. She made sure that the kimonos were all intact and that the makeup artists had all their supplies and tools. Loki was talking with Alexi when she got back. Alexi was going over the shoot on his screen, and when he saw her, he grinned. “You turned out really well. Would you like to see?”

“Only if you want to see my lunch.”

Loki laughed. “You didn’t have lunch.”

“Oh. Shoot.”

Alexi leaned toward her and showed her the demure but sexy shots he had taken.

“Oh geez.”

“I think it looks great and will be wonderful to kick off the campaign.”

She looked at the shot that Alexi had paused on. “Minoru can’t see this. Ever.”

She was sitting, kneeling, looking over one shoulder, her neck arched, the kimono dipped low, and the claw marks were

all that could be seen above the obi. The chain of her necklace was visible. Thankfully, Alexi hadn't asked her to remove it.

Loki grinned. "I won't send them to him. I promise."

Alexi nodded and said, "So, what are you having for dinner?"

Loki shrugged. "Not a clue. Whatever the cook prepares."

Polly checked her phone and sighed when she saw that her kitten had been removed from the site.

Loki frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I wanted to get a kitten for Minoru's house. I already got the okay from his housekeeper."

He snickered. "So?"

"The kitten is off the website."

"Call them."

She hesitated, and he flapped his hand. "Call them."

She called and spoke to the organizers. She left her information and hung up. "He is being placed with a family, but they have other pets, so it might not be a permanent fit. If he comes back, they will call."

Loki patted her on her shoulder, and she went in for a hug. She did not deal well with disappointment.

He patted her back and rubbed his head along hers. "It will be fine. Fate is working in your favour."

Alexi chuckled. "I can give you a hug if it will help."

"Oh, I am sure he would love that." Loki chuckled. "Polly smelling like horny beta."

Alexi grinned. "Niko doesn't mind, nor does Alita."

"Minoru would. Pretty sure." Loki smoothed his hand down her back, and she dragged in a deep breath.

"Well, Loki, I will get you home. I am sure that your dinner awaits."

He looked at her. "You are okay?"

“No, but I will get over it.” She smiled. “I just knew that kitten was for me the moment I saw him.”

“If he is meant for you, he’s meant for you. You already caught Minoru, so maybe pace yourself.”

She snorted. “I am just going to drive your sad ass home. You need to find a nice girl with a high tolerance for bullshit or someone who will keep you in order.”

He offered his arm. “Fine. Tell me what I need all the way home.”

Alexi laughed and carried his equipment out while they exited the area where they had done the shoot.

When they left the building, Polly paused and locked up before hearing Loki snickering. The pendant warmed between her breasts, and she slowly turned to see Minoru leaning against Loki’s car.

Alexi looked from Minoru to Polly and whistled. “Oh. That’s what you were talking about.”

“You have your own alpha, Alexi. And your own omega for that matter.” Loki chuckled.

Minoru pushed away from the car and walked toward her. She saw the dark smile on his lips as he approached her. By the time he hugged her, she knew it. She was doomed.

Chapter Four

She couldn't stop staring at Minoru. She had never imagined him eating pizza. She ate the pepperoni slice on her plate and watched him go through piece after piece.

Loki laughed and said, "You are going to have to get used to his appetites." He blinked as her pizza slapped him in the face.

Minoru smiled and simply handed her a slice of pizza off his plate. "There you go, precious. Now, what made you sad earlier?"

She paused with her mouth around the pizza. She carefully extracted it and said, "The kitten was adopted."

Minoru frowned. "The one you wanted?"

"Yeah." She put the pizza down.

Loki wiped his face with a napkin. "She was so upset and let me hug her."

"I know. Your scent is all over her." He moved and pulled her up against him. "It will be fine. There will be other kittens."

She blinked and inhaled, stepped away from him, and walked away.

* * * *

Minoru frowned. "She really wanted that kitten?"

"She is wondering how easy she is to replace, Minoru."

Minoru stood up. "Fuck."

He followed her scent through the house and found her watching the start of an anime on the couch in the TV room. She was curled up in her cotton kimono, her arms wrapped around a pillow.

He winced and sat next to her. “So, you really wanted that kitten?”

“I wanted it for you. He was perfect for you.” She rubbed her face into the pillow. “I wanted to give something to you.”

He sighed. She looked so young, but he knew she was in her late twenties. She pressed her face into the pillow but watched the screen with one eye.

He put his hand out, and she slipped her fingers into his. He sat with her through the movie, and gradually, she crawled onto his lap.

He tucked the pillow under her head, and she curled up as she watched the cartoon. Polly frowned as if she was trying to understand something.

Minoru ran his hand over her back, feeling the bright tingle of his mark. “Are you trying to learn a language from cartoons?”

“Yes and no. I have been too busy for the other online lessons, so I try and pick out the nouns and grammar patterns.”

“Is it working?”

“Absolutely not, but I am more relaxed.” She smiled and patted his knee.

He fought the electric zing that the contact sent through him. If she knew how close to losing control he was with the lightest of touches, she would have made a run for it.

Her body was large by beta standards, but she was delicately made. She was also stunning. Her features were finely sculpted, her hair was thick silk, and every part of her was perfectly proportioned. His mother and father had seen the pictures of her and contacted him with excited texts and emails. His family on the other side of the pacific was just as excited. They had been dreading the end of the family and were excited about the possibilities that Polly created. The entire family would be watching her, which was the main reason for treating her carefully and making sure that she wasn't pregnant at the wedding. Perception was everything. He smiled. The guest list for the wedding reception was up to

three hundred, and he hadn't even asked Polly about her side. He didn't think it would be large, but he didn't want to presume.

“Polly?”

“Hmm?”

“Who do you want to have at our wedding?”

She turned her head. “You. Maybe Loki.”

He chuckled. “I have to involve a lot of work contacts. Accountants, lawyers, and general managers of the hotels. Family. Distant family. That sort of thing.”

She sighed. “I don't have family to invite. They all came out on Molly's side of things. My friends are all work-related.”

“I will be there for you.”

She smiled and stroked his knee. “Good. You are the one that should be there.”

He ran his hand through her hair and found something strange near her temple. “What is this?”

She turned and looked at the pale coating on his fingertips. “Oh, makeup. The makeup artists had some spare time, so they tried a few designs on me.”

“Did anyone get photos?”

She paused and nodded. “I did.”

He stroked her cheek. She laughed and said, “Really, the thought of me in makeup gets you turned on?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Your hands. Your nails elongate when you start having frisky thoughts.” She sat up and got her phone from the arm of the couch. “So, you want to see these?”

He nodded. She thumbed her phone open and brought up her gallery. She handed him the phone with the finished look on it. He thumbed through the preceding photos, then blinked. “What's this?”

“Oh, one of the kimonos being used for the shoot. I thought it was pretty, so I took a picture.”

“You like this style?”

“It was very striking, on loan from someone’s private collection.”

“It is a charming piece. I am glad it is being seen. Art like that deserves to be seen.” He smiled.

“I agree. All of the kimonos on display today were lovely, and it’s good that they are being included in the campaign. The artists who make them need recognition, and it needs to be revived as a viable art form.”

He was surprised. “You are interested in the methods and artisans?”

“Absolutely. If you want any kind of custom work for me, you will have to order it soon.”

He chuckled. “Already done. I made the arrangements before I flew back.” He sighed. “But I have to go back and finalize some family business.”

She blinked. “Oh, right.”

He was particularly delighted when he saw the disappointment in her expression. “I will be back in two weeks.”

She sighed. “Right.”

“Will you come to my place tonight?”

She looked at him and shook her head. “I have an early start tomorrow.”

“How early?”

“I have to make calls at six in the morning.”

He looked at her. “We should meet with the wedding planner tomorrow. When will you have time?”

“Um, between ten and noon?”

Minoru pulled out his phone and sent a text to Agnes. Four minutes later, she sent *Just tell me where.*

“Let us know where you will be at ten, and she will meet us there.”

Polly smiled and told him where they were going to be.

He passed the information along and then looked at Polly. “If you won’t come to my place, may I stay with you?”

She paused, and her eyes went wide. “My bed is smaller.”

He chuckled. “I will make do.”

“Maybe we want to hang out with Loki? He was heading to the hot spring.”

“You didn’t get much sleep last night.” He stroked her neck. “You should probably turn in early.”

“Fine, but you go hang out with Loki for a bit. I need to do some stuff before I go to bed. I just thought of a friend to invite.” She perked up.

He chuckled. “Fine. Your alone time is respected. I will go torment Loki.”

She beamed and turned off the show.

He set her on her feet, and when he stood up, she jumped on the couch and wrapped her arms around his neck to kiss him. The press of her lips against his wasn’t practiced, but it was spontaneous. He remained still while she moved her lips against his, nibbling gently.

His groin throbbed, and she flicked her tongue against the seam of his lips. He inhaled and gently pried her hands away from him. “If you keep it up, I am going to lose it.”

She smiled brightly. “Neat.”

Minoru laughed and shook his head. “Right. I am going to remove myself from temptation.”

She hopped back to the floor and bowed formally. He laughed. The delayed mention of respect was amusing. He wanted her naked with her legs around his hips. He hoped that Loki had a cold pool.

* * * *

Polly stretched after a full night's sleep. A low rumble sounded, and she was pulled against a very warm alpha. A hand swept down to her thigh, and he murmured, "What are you wearing?"

"Uh, a t-shirt with a cartoon kitten on it?"

He turned her toward him and pushed the bedding down. "You have described it accurately. Is this what you always wear to bed?"

"Um, usually. If my legs get hot, I can't sleep."

He nodded and kissed her neck. She covered her mouth to stop the squeak as his tongue teased her and sent shivers through her. He slid his thigh between hers and continued teasing her neck as he rocked his thigh against her. She felt a shivering tension and clenched her jaw to keep herself quiet. She made small sounds, and he pressed harder, moving his thigh against her clit, and then a fiery release burned through, and she moaned through her teeth. Minoru moved up her neck and kissed her, massaging her jaw with his thumbs. He chuckled and whispered, "Poor precious one. Trying to keep Loki from hearing?"

She nodded. "I don't think it is a good idea for you to stay over again."

He laughed and pulled her hips against him. She felt the column of his erection, and she started to rock her hips against him.

He growled and kissed her, gripping her hips. He rolled to his back, and she straddled him, rocking against him as their kisses picked up in ferocity. She rocked slowly and luxuriously against him, and he groaned into her mouth, holding her hips and helping her rhythm.

When she added a swivel to her hips, he growled, hissed, and bucked upward, lifting her. His robe got hot and wet. Polly gasped and froze on him but kept kissing him slowly as he came down.

His eyes glowed red, and his horns were visible when he sat up. “Damn. That was too close. Don’t do that again.”

Her happy triumph of mastering something faded as he denied the chance to try it again.

She nodded and scooted off him, dodging his hands and going to get him a wet cloth to tidy up. “Excuse me.” She headed back to the bathroom and took a shower. He was gone when she came out.

It was still only five in the morning, so she put on a heavy robe while she went to look through her clothes and got a dress, underwear, and heels that would keep her focused during the day.

She got her calls done between six and six thirty and had her coffee and toast before Loki showed up.

Loki stretched. “Where’s Minoru?”

“He left early.” She said it without letting the emotional wobble enter her throat.

“Why? Something happen?”

She tried to think of a way to describe it, and instead, she just burst into tears. Loki sat crouched next to her while she bawled, and when she was hiccupping softly, he said, “I am guessing that things didn’t go well last night.”

Polly shrugged. “I thought it did, but he said it can’t happen again, so I am guessing I did something wrong.”

Loki frowned. “What happened? What did he say after that?”

“Nothing. I got him a cloth to clean up and went into the bathroom. When I came out, he was gone.”

“Clean... he...” Loki chuckled. “He nearly lost his self-control with you. He’s a bit of a control freak if you hadn’t noticed. He has to be, or he wouldn’t be the kijin. It takes a certain mindset to survive being the great ogre.”

“Survive?”

“All of us freaky alphas have to balance two beings in one body. When you are around, he slips back and forth pretty easily. That is unusual.”

“It is?”

“There is usually a strain on the body to move in between, but he can go back and forth with ease when you are around.”

She sniffled. “I had the meetings with the coast this morning. The new sales figures are solid. The pumpkin spice tea is selling well, though it hurts part of my soul.”

He laughed. “And work is safe?”

“Yes. We are at the office today.”

He patted her head. “Good beta. Back at it.”

She nodded. “Work is steady.”

He nodded and leaned forward to rub his cheek along hers, hiding her scent under his. It was time to get things back to normal.

Ten o'clock came and passed. No one arrived. She bit her nail and blinked rapidly. She checked her phone, and there was a message from Loki. *Boardroom on eight.* Polly got up and grabbed her purse, walking to the elevator and heading down to eight.

Loki was there with a woman who had silvery hair up in a graceful twist. She was very curvy and the same height as Polly, but she was broader in the shoulder and hip.

Polly stepped into the room and closed the door. “Um, hello?”

Loki smiled. “Minoru is running late, so he asked me to help Agnes set up in the conference room.”

Agnes was a young woman. Younger than her hair would indicate. “Hello, Agnes.”

The woman stepped forward and carefully gripped Polly's hand. “Hello, Polly. I am the wedding planner that Minoru

hired, but if you don't feel comfortable with me, I can recommend someone else. Not every planner is a fit for every union."

"Um, I will need to learn about what you have planned so that I can make an honest assessment."

Agnes nodded. "First, I will walk you through what I planned for Minoru, and then you can add your own choices, and I will then create a plan that incorporates both personalities."

Polly sat down in the room full of swatches and said, "Please, show me what is planned."

Agnes smiled, and the room polarized while the movie began to play on the screen. The gardens at the hotel were perfect. The ballroom was huge, the small room for the private ceremony was lovely, and the floral choices were beautiful.

When the display was over, Polly had to admit it was amazing and would look spectacular with Minoru as the groom. She just couldn't picture herself as the bride.

Agnes smiled. "Now close your eyes, and what would make it yours?"

"Laughter, dancing, roses, fun music. It looks very pretty but not fun." She whispered softly, "I always thought it should be fun."

She caught the scent of roses and turned her head. An armload of roses was in front of her face, and Minoru kissed her before he offered her the flowers. "Sorry I was late. I had to raid a florist."

She looked at him and blinked. The flowers were beautiful, and there wasn't a speck of brown in the bunch. "This..." She started crying again. No one had given her flowers before. They had always gone to Molly.

Minoru picked her up and sat on the boardroom table, rubbing her back. He asked her what was wrong, and she tried to explain with her voice just making squeaks.

Agnes smiled. “No one has given her flowers before. They always went to her sister.”

Polly nodded.

Loki muttered, “You are good.”

Agnes grinned.

Polly stood and listened to Minoru apologize for leaving without speaking to her, but his self-control was hanging on by a thread. He wanted to keep things going on schedule so that the community held her in high esteem.

She blinked. “Wait, so if you put out the effort, I am worth more?”

Loki shrugged. “Pretty much. If he wants you formally presented and is willing not to be a demanding alpha, it will raise your value to the community. Our community is dangerous, so it is giving you a protection you wouldn’t normally have. Our other halves are assholes.”

Minoru smiled. “He’s not wrong.”

“I don’t know. The kijin seems nice.”

Loki stared with his mouth open. “Wow. Okay. He isn’t to anyone else.”

She looked at Minoru over the armload of flowers under her nose. His red eyes were glowing.

“So, fun, laughter, dancing, and music. These are easy things to add.” Agnes smiled.

Minoru raised his brows. “They are?”

“They are. I just need to get music preferences. In the smaller hours, you could even do karaoke.”

Polly smiled. “I like that idea. Though I think it is hard to dance in a formal kimono.”

“We will remove the outer jacket, and you will be able to do a lot of the slower stuff. No jiving.” Agnes grinned.

They got down to it, and every possible issue that anyone had Agnes calmly answered, who preferred to be called Aggie.

They spent two hours on it, and then Aggie got Polly's information and said she would take her to register her measurements for any kimonos purchased for her in the future. Minoru smiled at that.

Once things were hashed out for the first meetings, Polly watched the planner gather her swatch books and tablets with ease of practice. Loki looked at her. "Do you need a hand?"

"No, thank you. I am fine. Polly, Minoru, contact me with anything. The date has been confirmed with the hotel and their event planners to make sure that nothing is crossed and passwords have been added to all major supplies, so nothing accidentally happens. The cake tasting will be after Minoru gets back from his next business trip, and the flowers were already settled today. So I have work to do. I will get to it." Aggie grinned and opened the door with her butt. She walked as if the pounds of books didn't matter to her, and Polly suspected she wasn't the grey dove she presented.

She rubbed her cheeks against the roses and smiled. "I like her."

Minoru nodded. "She came highly recommended. She has organized a few pack ceremonies and is renowned for her being able to handle anything that comes at her."

Loki smiled. "It looks like you feel better about this."

"I have someone to talk things out with. That is huge." Polly smiled. "Plus, I think it would be fun to have another beta like me to compare notes with."

Loki blinked. "What?"

"Dude, she carried about sixty pounds on one arm while digging for her keys with the other. That isn't something that most betas can do. Also, her silvery hair isn't something she was born with."

Minoru nodded. "She has an earthy scent, but the wind as well."

Loki snorted. "Well, not mine then."

Minoru smiled. “Not mine either. I have my bride and am very pleased with her.”

She grinned and kicked her feet. “You are going to have to put me down now so I can head out to get Loki’s lunch.”

Minoru chuckled. “Why don’t we go to lunch at the hotel? You can see the venue and meet the managers that Aggie was speaking with.”

She looked at her floral collection. “What do I do with these?”

Loki frowned. “Put them in a vase.”

“I don’t have a vase. I have never had flowers before, dumbass.”

Minoru chuckled and set her on her feet. “We will get you vases. For now, put them in the sink of Loki’s private bathroom.”

She grinned and took her collection upstairs before filling the sink with tepid water, making sure the hole was plugged and the flower stems all settled.

She finished fussing and then met the guys for the trip to the hotel. Her phone chirped, but she didn’t recognize the number. There was a text, but she would check on it later. She headed out, determined to enjoy the rest of her day.

Chapter Five

Polly staggered into Loki's with her arms loaded with long, flat boxes. "Help!"

There was a series of thumping footfalls, and then Loki said, "What the hell, Polly?"

"Uh. I had dinner with more of Minoru's relatives. Are you spreading the rumour that I curse a lot?" She grunted as he lifted the boxes from her and carried them to her room.

"It isn't a rumour if it's true." He chuckled. "Come on. It's hilarious."

"Minoru is trying to depict me as... I dunno... demure or some shit."

Loki cackled. "He can force folks to respect you if he wants to, but they are all trying to buy your safety against him."

"What?"

"Minoru has been... firm when he deals with community and family issues. He's famous for it. They see you as a cute little beta who has fallen into his clutches and is in danger from the big bad ogre. Giving you value through these gifts is their way of making sure he knows your worth to his community."

"So, like a dowry?"

"Correct."

"Aw, that's sweet."

"Are you going to Jiji's place tonight?"

"Of course. I just had to grab my stuff for the meeting tomorrow." She grinned.

"Minoru loves that cat."

Polly smiled. "I am glad."

“He keeps sending me selfies of the cat on his shoulder or hiding in his sleeve.”

Polly chuckled.

“So, why are you storing these here?”

“Because my security system sucks, and I am running out of space at Minoru’s.”

“How many do you have so far?”

She paused and counted, “This set makes eighteen.”

He chuckled. “So, you are nearing two hundred thousand dollars then. Possibly more depending on the craftsmanship of the silk.”

She paused as he slotted the boxes into the frame. “You are joking.”

“Nope. Each one of these is worth between ten and sixty thousand dollars.”

“Holy fuck. Why would they give them to me?” She shrieked.

“Because you are Minoru’s bride. I think the kimono makers are going insane with glee. You are probably supporting entire villages right now.”

She blushed and stared at the stack of polished boxes that contained half of her collection. “Uh, what is the return policy on this stuff?”

“Non-existent. Just enjoy them.” Loki laughed.

“That is going to take a lot of personal focus.”

He ruffled her hair and sat on her bed. “So, when does Minoru come home?”

“Uh, a few more days.”

“How soon is the wedding?”

“About a month away.” She bit her lip.

“Getting excited?”

“Nervous. Really nervous.”

Her boss smirked. “Well, your work doesn’t show it. So, when are you having the bachelorette?”

“Ah. Not.”

“What? I thought it was a beta right of passage.”

“Not for me. I am not into that kind of thing. The thought of strippers leaves me cold.”

“Well, that isn’t the desired result.” He narrowed his eyes. “Leave this with me.”

She packed her overnight bag and got her computer. “Right, well, I am going to go cuddle with my favourite guy.”

Loki chuckled. “I am telling Minoru.”

“Go ahead. Jiji is his favourite anyway.” She laughed and slid her computer into her bag.

She headed out, got in her crappy car, and headed over to Minoru’s.

Polly opened the door, and the tiny creature lunged at her, meowing frantically. “Oh, hello, little man. Did you keep Nari up?”

Nari’s light flicked off. Polly chuckled, carried her bags to Minoru’s room, showered, changed, and crawled into his bed. She put her head on the spot where Minoru laid his head, and Jiji curled into the front of her body.

Once settled, she called Minoru. He answered and frowned. “*Why are you home so late?*”

She chuckled. “Mama Tsubaki made me come over for dinner, and some of your other relatives brought me another kimono. I am out of storage here, so I had to bring it to Loki’s.”

He growled. “*Let Nari know, and she will have more storage installed.*”

“Dude, I don’t want you to fill your house with my stuff.”

“*We are getting married. That is the idea.*” He smiled. “*I will send Nari a note. How many is Loki storing for you?*”

“Uh, seven? Maybe eight.”

“*Well, that is impressive.*” He looked surprised. “*Is my little guy there?*”

She angled the camera down to show Jiji curled up against her chest. The kitten mewed and batted at the phone.

Minoru grinned. “*Did you have a good day?*”

“Asking me or the cat?”

“*The cat.*”

She chuckled while Jiji rubbed up against her phone and purred. Minoru purred back.

They chatted for a bit and then switched to a voice call. Polly put him on speaker, and he purred her to sleep. It was a weird ritual, but it was theirs.

She woke up when her phone alarm went off, and she stretched. Jiji attacked her fingers but was careful to bite with delicacy.

She got up and cuddled her little buddy as she headed for breakfast, and Nari handed over Jiji’s breakfast, so Polly set him on the floor with his snack. “How has he been with Minoru gone?”

“A little moody. He wants a lot of attention.” Nari nodded. “It is a good thing that sir is going to be back in a few days.”

Polly looked at her. “Is he?”

“He doesn’t tell you?”

“I don’t ask.”

Nari blinked. “Really?”

“I don’t want to turn into a nervous wreck.”

“He makes you nervous?”

“He reminds me that the wedding is coming up, and I only have a few moments to finish finding people to invite. I have Maura, Aggie—who is going to be there anyway—Liirel and Kell.”

“What about Sura?”

“Oh, right. Sura.” She smiled. “Right. So, a handful of people compared to Minoru’s hundreds. Including you.”

“It doesn’t matter. After the ceremony, his people become your people.” Nari smiled. “Sit and eat.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She sat at the island and ate the breakfast that Nari had prepared. She checked her schedule, ruffled Jiji for a moment, kissed her boy on the forehead, and then he walked her to the door.

Having him returned to the shelter had been a suspicious stroke of luck, but the look on the face of Minoru as his present hissed and growled at him had been priceless. She had giggled for ten minutes before Minoru had taken them both into the bedroom and stroked them until they calmed down.

She grinned and got into her crappy car, heading back to Loki’s. She was there for a few minutes when he got a call and went into his office. He came out a few minutes later with excitement in his body. “Ulric is on the way. I also need a pickup later.”

She nodded. “So, what is the deal?”

He grinned. “My custom beta just showed up, and I am going to have to set my claim on her sooner rather than later. There is another alpha and an omega involved. Can you get blank pack registration documents? Just in case?”

She smiled. “Of course. I am rather relieved that you will have a new person to fuss over.”

He grinned, and his teeth were longer and pointier than normal. “Her name is Bella. Ulric invited me because he recognized her mark. She has a nine-tailed fox etched on her back, the same way yours is. She’s just coming off a heat.”

“Wow. Okay, your phone charged?”

“Yup.”

“Good. Call me if you need anything for you or her.”

“I will. Ulric mentioned a few concerning things, so stay close to your phone.” Loki nodded. “You can take care of the conferences I had today?”

“Yes. No one will know you are trying to weave a web of seduction around your mate.” She grinned and chuckled. “Or, depending on how smitten you are, you might jump her in the hallway.”

He snorted.

“Just remember how bitchy I am when I am going through my cycle. Be gentle. Be considerate, but beat the other guys to the first mark.”

He laughed. “Thanks, coach.”

They chatted, and when Ulric’s car pulled up, he headed to the passenger door and got in.

She smiled and watched the car pull away and snorted. They grew up so fast.

Six hours later, she was eating a slice of toast when the call came through. Meetings were over, but it was time to head to Ulric’s. She got the list of snacks and laughed. *I have shit to do. See you in two hours.*

She finished the customs paperwork for some shipments and authorized the import. She did the shopping and headed to the omega’s home. Polly pulled up and could tell the day was going to get more complicated. She walked around, took the bags out of the SUV, and closed the hatch before exhaling and walking toward the door.

There were two men who looked at her with contempt while she struggled with the bags of ice cream, snacks, and the small bag over her shoulder. They moved to block her.

She straightened her shoulders and pulled on some of the energy Minoru had left in the pendant, “I am bringing supplies and a change of clothing for Loki.” They didn’t move, so she sighed. “Get out of my way, or I will drop you to the ground.”

They lunged for her, so she dropped the bags and pulled one man's head down as she brought her knee up. There was a crunch, and she kicked the other man in the midsection, sending him stumbling back to sit down hard. She collected the bags and walked into the house.

"Hey, Loki. Here is the change of clothes. I got the other stuff you wanted as well. It's rolling around with your boxers." She held up the grocery bag. "This has the panorama of ice cream you were after. I included your favourite cookies."

She set the bag down on the coffee table. "Now, Loki, do you need anything else?"

He grinned. "No. Thank you. Oh, Polly, this is Bella. Bella, this is Polly."

Polly smiled at the woman with brown hair and soft brown eyes. She looked curvy and adorable. "Bella, can you text me your sizes? If I need to pick up clothing for you, it will speed things up considerably."

Bella looked confused. "Um, all right."

Polly turned to Loki. "Take her phone and put my number in, Loki."

Bella smiled. "Wow. I never thought to see a woman bossing Loki around."

Polly snickered. "He isn't trying to fuck me, so as long as the work is done, he doesn't need to control me. I get things done."

Ulric cleared his throat. "Miss, I am Ulric."

"Yes, omega, I know who you are." She stifled a smirk at his need for attention.

"You are in my house."

"Not for long. Your security guards are wusses." Polly stared at him with her brows raised in challenge.

Bella was laughing silently. Ulric was on her left, Loki on her right, and they were all mashed together on the couch.

Loki smirked. "Have you heard from Minoru today?"

Polly flushed. “No. He hasn’t been in contact, but another kimono showed up. This one has the word *wedding* on the wrapper. I am terrified to open it.”

Loki laughed. “Well, he has been specific about getting you in a formal capacity so that you can be at his side for all events.”

She groaned. “Yeah, but I didn’t realize it would involve so much trans-pacific travel. Learning a language at my age is particularly tricky. Japanese is trickier.”

“Are you still learning from anime?”

She snickered. “I use it to check my comprehension. If I speak using the voices, Minoru develops a tick.”

Loki laughed.

Polly nodded to Bella. “Pleased to meet you. Ulric, nice to put a face to the name. Loki, behave. Call me when you are done with your grandmother tomorrow. Ask her if she needs another kimono. I have a few to spare.”

He chuckled, and she left, growling at the security guards as she stalked past.

She was in the car and calling a security company a moment later. Loki’s mate would need protection, and those idiots outside were aggressive without common sense.

She got a call a few minutes later. “*Polly, this is Rick. Are you talking about Ulric’s place?*”

“Yes.”

“*I am in. Can you swing by? I will gather a few others.*”

“You have a reason for it?”

“*I just got Bella through her heat. I am not going to let those idiots that Ulric surrounds himself with mess with her.*”

Polly was already on the way to Ford’s place. Rick had an overnight bag, and Ford was seeing him off. Polly parked and got out.

“Sorry, Ford. I think that he’s joining a pack.” Polly smiled and walked toward him. Olivia stepped out, and their pride stepped out behind her. “Hello, Olivia.”

Olivia smiled and walked up to her for a hug. Polly hugged her as the omega snuggled in. “Hello, short stuff.”

Ford grinned. “You are one of the few people that she snuggles with like that. Well, when Olly is done, it’s my turn.”

Rick fidgeted. “Really? I am in a hurry.”

Polly smiled. “Don’t worry. I haven’t gotten the call yet.” She kissed Olivia on top of her head.

Olly smiled and stepped back. “You have the best hugs. You have this warm hum going through you.”

Ford came in and hugged her. “Huh, there it is. It’s like you are a generator.”

Polly snorted. “That is probably the fire in the necklace that my fiancé gave me.”

He nodded and smiled. “I haven’t cuddled up with Minoru before.”

“And you won’t now. He’s mine.” Polly looked up and saw his surprised face.

Her phone rang, and she answered the call. It was Loki asking for security assistance, and he said that staff were the issue.

Polly smiled. “Got it. Will have a locksmith on the way within the hour. Already have security lined up. Rick is on the way back with me.”

She hung up and looked at Rick. “Well? Are you going to make a liar out of me? Into the car.”

Ford grinned. “I never tire of watching you bully alphas.”

“It started as a hobby, but now it’s a calling.” She smiled and inclined her head. “And thank you for RSVPing to the wedding.”

Olivia smiled. “It’s a month away. Are you excited?”

“Nervous. Terrified. Queasy. I am sure that excited is in there somewhere.”

Olivia hugged her quickly. “It will be okay. Oh, are you having a bachelorette?”

“Uh, I don’t know.”

“What about your bridal party?”

Polly blinked. “We just needed witnesses, so Loki’s grandma is signing for me. I am kind of clueless about this. My sister was an omega, so only the rituals regarding finding her a pack were ever a concern in our household.”

Olivia blinked. “Oh. Damn. Right. I am going to do some research. I *know* that some of the folks on the row know where to find strippers.”

Polly’s eyes widened. “No. Please. No strippers. Just something lowkey like karaoke or something?”

Olivia smiled slowly. “Why no strippers?”

“Uh, I see a *lot* of naked guys at the onsen while Loki is doing business. The allure of random naked alphas has passed.” Polly smiled.

Olivia grinned. “I can’t understand that.”

“It’s a beta thing.” Polly smoothed her hand over Olivia’s hair and grinned. “See you in a month.”

Olivia called out, “Or sooner.”

Polly got behind the wheel and drove the growling alpha to his beta, omega, and other alpha. Loki was going to come out as head of the pack. He was too sneaky not to.

Polly liked Bella. She was still in the heat-haze and exhausted, but there was intelligence in her eyes. That was a bonus. Minoru was making space for Polly as his assistant, so that meant Loki was going to need one. Polly knew she would be a cross between corporate assistant and sugar baby, but she was good with it. Knowing Loki, Bella would be spoiled, and

Loki would show Ulric how to do it. Rick had moves. He didn't need to spoil her. His body did.

Polly did her job. She got the locksmith to change all the locks on the large home, talked to the security guards, and let in the piercer. Her stomach rumbled, and she checked the darkness outside the window.

Polly snorted. "So, you two just need a direct DNA exchange, and the marks are set. Does anyone need a more substantial dinner?"

Rick smiled and raised his hand.

Polly nodded, and she ordered on her phone. "I need someone to come with me to pick it up."

Rick blinked. "Why?"

"Minoru's orders. He's getting back into town in a few days, and he would be pissed to have me snatched. I am pretty sure that this time they would come with appropriate numbers."

Loki nodded. "Right. Come here, Polly."

She walked up to him and sniffed, then she laughed. "Sorry, boss. Won't work now."

Loki paused. "What?"

"You smell like Bella. It's coming through your link. When you add the omega to the mix, you will positively be pretty scent-wise. Useless for my purposes. Hey, Rick, do any of your guys smell nasty? Like... old socks or lower?"

Rick blinked. "Toby has a definite locker room undertone to him. I will just go and get the food with you."

"Fair enough. I am going to have to arrange some kind of bodyguard for myself. That sucks."

Loki looked at her and then hung his head. "I wasn't thinking."

"Dude, I should not have been in your thoughts when you were planning to get laid." Polly snorted. It was actually a relief. He was a bit of a mother hen.

Her phone rang, and she looked at it and froze. “I will be right back.”

She went into the other room and smiled. “Hey, Minoru!”

He looked at her. “*You are stressed.*”

“Yeah. Exciting times. Loki has a mate and a pack. Neat, huh?”

“*It is very exciting. Are you okay? You feel very nervous. And you just spent six hundred dollars at Mama Tsubaki’s.*” He smiled.

“I am feeding twelve people. Ulric’s place had an uproar, so we had to secure it. I have to go and drive to Mama’s place.”

“*Fine, but I have transferred the bill.*”

“Loki always pays me back, especially since Mama doesn’t do takeout for anybody else.” She chuckled. “Fine. Anyway, I have to get going. Isn’t it in the really early morning for you?”

“*It is noon.*”

“Darn. I am not going to get the hang of this.”

“*Will you be home tonight?*”

“I don’t know. It depends on how tight we get the house and how comfortable we are. I am thinking we might head to Loki’s. It is nice and secure.”

He frowned. “*Is there something else?*”

“Yeah. My sister’s pack has my phone number. They have started texting me polite queries.”

He blinked. “*Don’t go anywhere unaccompanied. They won’t want witnesses. I will call for a bodyguard. You are not to travel alone. Are we clear?*”

“Yes, we are clear.” She smiled brightly. “Kisses!”

He snorted. “*Take care of yourself until I am there to do it. I will talk to you before you go to sleep. Right?*”

“Yes, alpha.”

His red eyes glowed. “*One month, pretty one. Then, you are mine.*”

“Pooky, I am already yours. Now good day. Enjoy the sunshine.”

He chuckled, and they stopped the call.

She walked in to hear Loki talking about her. “I am sure that Minoru wants some couple photos as well. Of course, what he wants may need to be captured by a programmed camera. I don’t know if Alexi wants to take pictures of Polly blowing her husband when he is alpha’d out.”

Polly’s voice was clipped. “I am not going to be going down on him for photographic purposes. Loki, are you showing those pictures again?”

He chuckled. “But you look so *pretty*.”

She blushed and muttered, “Bite me. Minoru is going to freak out when the campaign hits the internet.”

Bella blinked. “Campaign?”

She explained. “Oh, yeah. It is a line of limited edition teas imported from Japan based around seasonal festivals. That kimono, underdress, and the marks on me are all for the new year. Not traditionally, but the past is behind you, kind of thing.” She snorted. “I bet he didn’t show you the image when I was fully dressed. No, of course not. Pervert.”

She checked her watch. “Well, I have to get dinner. Rick?”

“Yup. My car or yours?”

“Mine. Mama Tsubaki’s is hard to find.”

Loki got excited. “Seriously?”

She grinned. “See you in forty-five minutes.”

Polly left, and Rick went with her.

They were quiet until she got to the shop, and then she walked up and bowed to the counter person saying, “Pickup for Polly?”

The young woman stared at her and looked her up and down. “Just a moment, miss.”

She disappeared to the back, and Mama Tsubaki flew out, hugging Polly and squeezing her face. “You are still too skinny. He will break you.”

Polly smiled. “He won’t break me. He’s very careful.”

“Well, I have a separate bag for you. It will help you put on some more flesh. I made your favourite.” She smiled and patted her cheek.

Rick was laughing. He took the bags and nodded. “Thank you, madam.”

Mama nodded to him stiffly. She asked Polly, “Is this one yours?”

“No, Mama. He’s one of Loki’s. Loki has started a new pack today. One other alpha, a beta, and omega.”

“Oh, do you want Minoru to provide for you in such a way?”

“No, Mama. He is plenty.” She bowed. “Thank you very much for taking my call, Mama. I have to go.”

“I am looking forward to your wedding, child. You will glow with happiness.”

Polly smiled. “I will just enjoy an end to the restraint between us. Maybe I am too skinny, which is why he isn’t driven to me?”

Mama Tsubaki put a hand over her mouth. She nodded slightly, and Polly headed to the car.

She grinned when she started the car with Rick next to her.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“Because Minoru is about to get a phone call for not bedding his mate. I am imagining his face.”

Rick laughed, and she drove them back to Ulric’s with a king’s ransom in sushi and soba.

When they arrived back, it was about dinner, and then Bella and her pack were separated for the night, and Polly cleaned up and made a list of employment agencies to call in the morning. Loki's house was better and more spacious, not to mention more centrally located. They were going to move the pack to a better house.

Chapter Six

After going through the checklist, including taking Bella and the others to get kimonos designed, Polly was ready for a day off. She was happy that Loki and his pack had come together, but it left her on the outside... waiting.

She made an appointment to see Aggie for coffee. Maura was acting as her bodyguard, so Polly insisted they all sit together.

Aggie smiled. "So, how are things at home?"

"I am heading back to spend a day with Jiji when I leave here." Polly smiled.

"Uh, I meant Loki's place."

"Oh, I have moved out. It's just where I work now. The regular cook-housekeeper is settled in."

Maura frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They are a new pack. They need privacy. They *really* need privacy. I am stuck with an involuntary vow of celibacy, so it has begun to hurt physically." She smiled. "I love Bella, but the guys are crazy."

Aggie winced. "I can imagine. I have planned for a few couples who go cold turkey before the wedding, but I don't think they had to put up with a mating pack when they went home."

Polly rubbed her temples. "It's a lot. You can nearly see the air."

Maura frowned. "So you are staying at Minoru's?"

"Mostly. I spend a few nights at home, packing stuff for storage."

Maura winced. "Please, tell me that you have guards on you at all times."

"Uh... yes?" Polly muttered.

“Oh, fuck. Do you know how badly your sister’s pack is looking for you? They have a bounty on your head. Well, your body. Untouched.” Maura frowned. “Fuck.”

Polly sipped at her coffee. “Well, that explains the escalation in texts.”

Aggie blinked. “Wait, you genuinely have someone after you?”

“Yeah. I think I told you about my sister’s pack.”

Aggie blinked and started to send out a blanket email. “I need to notify the vendors that no one is to answer any questions regarding the bride and groom. Public notices of the wedding are going to be listed in the paper soon.”

“Oh. I am sorry to make extra work for you.” Polly sighed.

“It’s fine. When does Minoru get back?”

“Uh, he got back last night.”

Maura looked at her. “He knows you were not at Loki’s, right?”

“Um, no.”

“Fuck. Polly!” Maura scowled. “Phone. Now!”

She pulled out her phone and sent a text to Minoru. *Moved out of Loki’s. Too many people fucking. Staying at my apartment and packing things in the evenings.*

She showed Maura, and her friend and hired guard nodded. “Good. Now we wait to find out what his response is.”

Polly watched her phone like it was about to turn into a snake.

When it rang, there was a request for a phone call. Polly whimpered and pressed the answer button.

“*Jiji is pissed, Polly.*” Minoru’s growl came through the phone.

“Is that a way to deflect how much you want to strangle me right now?”

He growled low and then quietly said, *“Yes, and Jiji is upset. Now, does Loki know?”*

“Oh, god, no. I didn’t want to mess with their pack bonding.”

“So, you have just been sneaking there in the mornings?”

“Yes, I got him a full-time cook-housekeeper. Devi is great and can keep on top of the laundry and meal times.”

“What about you?”

“I can order takeout and work from home. Everything is getting done. I am even going over any last-minute wedding stuff. Maura’s here, and so is Aggie.”

“I am on speaker?”

“Yes.”

“Ladies, thank you for meeting with her today. Maura, please, remain at her side until I come and paddle her backside.” He paused. *“Where are you?”*

Aggie said, “The coffee shop half a block from your corporate headquarters.”

“Thank you, Aggie. I will be there shortly.” He chuckled. *“Polly, how is your packing coming?”*

“It’s done.”

“Excellent. In that case, there is no reason for you to return there.”

She listened and heard the slight road noise of his car. “Oh, shoot. How far are you?”

“You look lovely in blue, but I prefer red.”

She paused as she heard a vehicle slow behind her.

She stabbed the disconnect.

Aggie chuckled. “He’s quick. Oh, before you go, are you having a bachelorette?”

“Oh. No. I don’t want to inconvenience anyone. We don’t have a bridal party, so no party is necessary.”

Aggie frowned. “What about a tea?”

“No. My best friend was my boss, and he’s currently balls-deep in his new mate. He also has consumed all the tea he needs for a lifetime.”

Aggie was frustrated.

Maura said, “I wouldn’t mind going out.”

Aggie paused. “Do you enjoy karaoke?”

Maura laughed. “I do.”

“Polly?”

“Uh, I am not very good, but I think it’s fun.”

Aggie grinned. “I have a few more ladies to invite, including your friend Bella. We should make a pretty cute party. I think we can even get matching outfits.”

Hands gripped Polly’s shoulders and stroked downward. A kiss was pressed to the top of her head. “Hello, precious one. Having a nice conversation?”

“Um, yes.”

Maura moved over, and Minoru sat down in the newly emptied chair. He took Polly’s hand and looked at her. “So, have we been being stupid this week?”

She looked at him and said, “Stupid? Yes, but I was exhausted and not making the best choices.”

“Aw, were they keeping you awake?”

“No. I was keeping myself awake, but we only have three weeks to go.” She looked at him and put some of her fatigue into her expression.

“It is that bad?”

“Every time I go over, it is like getting hit in the face with arousal, and it isn’t mine to start with. I know it is new for them, and that’s great, but one of us has to work, and I can’t do it in that pheromone cloud.”

He frowned. “I didn’t know it was so bad.”

“Ulric is getting kicked into premature heat because Bella just finished hers, and their alphas are very attentive.”

He sighed. “And yours is not.”

“No. I had to go on suppressors because of this.”

He looked stricken. “Why?”

Aggie and Maura moved to another table.

“Because going into heat and having to work isn’t something I can do.” She shrugged. “I am now stuck on them until after the wedding, or I will be out of commission for a week or longer.” She flexed her fingers. “They make me feel weird though. Kinda numb.”

He checked the chair he was seated on and slowly pulled her onto his lap. His kiss was deliberate and careful, and when he lifted his head, he searched her features. “What dose are you taking?”

“I dunno. Whatever I bought. Black market. They don’t tailor them for you. It’s kind of *an at your own risk* issue.”

His mouth twitched, and he asked, “Were you in heat?”

“I was getting there. Hot skin, super sensitive, hypersensitive to scent.”

He sighed and kissed her again. She waited it out but didn’t climb him like she normally did. “Stop the suppressors.”

“What? We still have three weeks to go.”

“We are close enough. Please, stop taking them.”

“I can’t. Work still has to happen.”

“Fuck that. This shouldn’t be this stressful. He’s had a week, and he’s engaged. Their pack can go on honeymoon.”

He picked up his phone and dialled. “Loki. What the fuck are you doing?”

There was mumbling.

“Where is Polly?”

Silence.

“You know what happens when you put a sensitive beta around omegas and alphas rutting? She put herself on suppressors so that she could keep your business running smoothly.”

There was a shocked exclamation from Loki and then a mumble.

“It ends today. Get back to work. She’s taking time off. She’s fucking numb right now.”

She frowned, and her phone alarm started beeping. “I should get that.”

He grabbed it for her and slid his thumb across it. “It says *pills*. I am guessing you are due right now?”

She nodded.

“Where are they?”

She patted her purse.

“Will you stop taking them? Please?”

She took her phone and sent a text to Loki. *Can I have some time off? I am not good.*

She put her head down on Minoru’s chest and shuddered. Aggie brought her a cup of water with a straw and another cup of coffee.

The text arrived and said, *I am so sorry, Polly. Take all the time you need.*

“I will stop taking them.”

“Can I see the schedule?”

She handed him the phone, and he checked the schedule and hissed. “Damn. Even with a prescription, you shouldn’t have taken it like this.”

“Is it going to damage me?”

“No, but you are going to have an uncomfortable few days. How long have you been taking them?”

“Five days.”

“It will take two or three just to purge it from your system, and from then, you will have to deal with the snap back of the paused hormones kicking in. I will stay home with you until it’s over and you are back to your normal self.”

She swallowed. “And then what?”

“And then we get married.”

She sighed. “So, because I did something stupid, I lose a week.”

“The drugs can cause seizures and heart issues. You are getting away lightly and will go for a full exam after your detox.”

She sighed and reached for the cup of water. Flushing out her system would have to start now. She got the coffee next, and Minoru rubbed her shoulder.

Maura and Aggie came back to the table, and while she hydrated, they chatted about wedding details, and Aggie mentioned a girls’ night.

“I am all for it. I know what you two can do, and Polly is gaining some of my strengths, and she can do some damage, but she needs backup.”

Polly blinked. She smiled slightly. He trusted her skills. It was good to know.

She made her way through the drinks, and Maura asked, “Polly, give me your keys. I will park your car somewhere safe.”

“Okay, you have to turn the key two-thirds of the way, turn it back to *accessory*, and then fully to start.” She sighed and then explained the other tricks to making her car progress.

Maura grinned. “I used to have a car like that. I shot it.”

Minoru looked down at Polly. He just narrowed his eyes and then said their goodbyes and walked to his car. He tucked her inside and followed her. He stated, “Home, please.”

The vehicle started moving, and he kept her against him as they headed home.

Nari had a tray with water and sports drinks and set it next to the bed so she could turn down the bed. Jiji supervised the whole procedure. Minoru carried Polly into the bathroom to help her get naked and take a shower before drying her and wrapping her in a sleeping robe.

She took a few steps toward the bedroom and jerked toward the doorframe as her muscles spasmed.

He caught her and lifted her. “You are starting quickly. I am going to have to get that dose analyzed.”

She swallowed. “Sorry for the fuss.”

“You did what you had to do to keep things going when Loki needed his assistant to take over. The suppressors were not the most clever move, but I understand that the pheromones clogged your senses.”

He knelt and set her down on the bed. “Do you need something to drink?”

“Probably.” She reached for the sports drink and fought to open the cap. He popped the cap for her, and Jiji climbed on her lap, meowing.

She slugged back half the bottle and set it back on the tray.

He smiled. “Your tongue is blue.”

She shrugged and rubbed her head along Jiji’s. “I don’t doubt it. I feel jittery and don’t know if I am going to be able to rest.”

“Jiji will come to get me if you need help, or you can call out. Watch cartoons on your phone. You will be asleep in no time.”

She nodded. “Right. I will try to get some rest.”

He smiled and caressed her hair. “Relax and get better. I am just a call away.”

She nodded and settled on the bed, pulling the covers up and over her shoulder with Jiji curling up next to her shoulder.

She watched Minoru take the packet of pills out of her purse, and then he stood straight and left her alone. She pretended that she was at her house and everything was familiar. At that point, she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Her hands started shaking, and she tucked them under the blanket. She had tried to use her phone, but she couldn't work the buttons and open apps with the shakes. She got to her knees and started crawling to the bathroom. Before she had made it, an arm came around her ribs and lifted her high.

He carried her to the restroom, and she waved him off. She attended to things, washed up, washed her hands, and patted her face.

He picked her up and settled her back on the bed. "Why didn't you call out?"

She opened her mouth, and a squeak came out.

"Send a text?" He frowned.

She held up shaking hands. With focus, she grabbed a water bottle and drank half a litre in one go.

He set the bottle down and smoothed her hair as he eased her down. "I will move in here to work until you are better. Oh, you managed to get actual prescription suppressors, but they were calibrated for an omega who had been on suppressors for at least five years. You hit your system with a hammer."

She nodded and pulled the bedding over her face. He left the room. She silently cried because she was confused and felt like an idiot. The simple solution that would let her pretend nothing had changed might actually have made her useless to Minoru. That level of suppressor in a beta could have burned her biology out. It was like pouring acid on her ovaries. All she could do was hope that she hadn't done any permanent damage. She felt like an idiot.

She got up every two hours and continued to flush the chemicals from her system. Minoru watched from the workstation he had set up, and she waved at him to sit down and staggered over to the bathroom. When she got back, she could turn her consumption up and take down a full litre of water.

Her shakes had eased over eight hours, and when Nari came in with a tray, Polly suffered a wave of dark emotion. She cried, and her croaking voice spilled apology after apology.

Nari set the tray down, wrapped her arms around her, and rubbed her back and shoulders. “It is fine, Polly. You will be fine. I know you feel like hell right now, but you have a wave of hormones ripping through you. You can be emotional. It’s fine. Now, I made you some dinner, and I would like you to try and eat it.”

Polly nodded and looked toward Minoru.

“I will bring his tray right away. The moment that you start eating.”

She blinked and picked up a spoon, dipping it into the bowl of soup before lifting them both to her mouth. She sipped three spoonfuls, and Nari smiled and left to get Minoru’s tray.

She finished her soup quickly and then picked up her chopsticks to lift the rice to her lips. She lost a lot, but then she could move on to the grilled fish. Swallowing was tricky, but she managed.

She gave Jiji some shreds of fish, and he nommed his way through it.

Minoru sat next to her, and Nari set up his tray. When she saw what Polly had consumed, she smiled and nodded. “I will be back to get your tray in thirty minutes.”

Polly squeaked, “Okay.”

Minoru smiled. “I have an herbalist coming by tomorrow. She is a specialist and will help you clear your system.”

She nodded and kept eating, but less and less rice made it to her mouth.

“Turn to me.” He used his chopsticks and fed her the rice. She could taste him on the polished wood, and it started her heartbeat thumping. She quickly chewed and swallowed so he could finish his own food.

She finished a bottle of water and looked at the tray of drinkables next to her bed. Polly scooted back toward the bed, and Minoru smiled. “Let’s take a walk.”

She squeaked. “Walk. Hard.”

“I’ve got you. You need some fresh air, and Nari wants to change the sheets. You are running a fever.”

She nodded but was mortified. He stood up and picked her up to standing, one arm around her waist.

She slowly stepped into her slippers, and he slowly guided her out of his bedroom to the wide deck surrounding his home. “Where going?”

He smiled. “I have a path into the hills. There is a small lake and a view of the moon.”

She looked up and could only see slivers of light through the canopy of trees.

He walked with her and held her securely as they walked the path. The wooden pathway made soft thuds as they walked, and Polly swayed as she ran out of energy.

He picked her up and carried her to a bench that was in the centre of a gazebo on a lake with the moon reflected in the still water. He sat down and held her, cuddling her close. “You scared me.”

She squeaked. “What?”

“You heard me, and don’t talk. You went very pale, and Jiji had to bite your ear to wake you up.”

She fidgeted.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the problem that you were having?”

She looked at him and tapped her temple.

“Ah, you couldn’t think. Well, you were in a pheromone heat, and no one noticed. Taking action was more than most would do.” He sighed. “I just wish I had been here.”

She patted his chest and leaned her head against his shoulder. She then pulled out the green pendant that was lacking the fire inside.

He stared at it. “Oh, you used the ogre fire to burn out the heat.”

She nodded.

He held the pendant and tilted her head back to kiss her. Warmth started to spill slowly through her, and it pooled in her back. He spread his hand across her mark and held the pendant in the other hand. The next kiss increased the burn, and her mouth moved under his, her tongue sliding against his, causing her toes to curl.

Minoru lifted his head. “So, you are returning to normal. Two more days, and you will have gotten it out of your system.”

She croaked. “What then?”

“Tomorrow, we will have a medical examination for you, and the hormone levels will tell us what is happening.”

“What if I broke me?”

He somehow managed to translate her squeaks. “We fix what we can and adapt to what your condition is. It was only a few days, so reversing the effects is likely. If not, we adopt.”

She chuckled hoarsely. “You accept that easily.”

“Of course. I was adopted.”

She jerked her head up to face him. She blinked, and he smiled.

“You think that I am descended from my tiny grandma? No. My parents had a union of convenience, and one of my mother’s friend’s from school had a North American alpha’s child, but she died in childbirth. Since my parents had

affection but not the kind of burn required for children, they adopted me.”

“Birth father?”

“Also a businessman, married to my birth mother. It was a very legal adoption.” He smiled. “I will also introduce you at the wedding. He is now remarried but has no children.”

She frowned. She pointed at her chest and raised her brows.

“He knows about you.”

They sat there as the moon was bright and the air was still. He kissed her a few more times. When they got up to return to the house, the pendant was warm and glowing once again. She felt a little bit stronger, and the ache in her throat was easing.

There was a tea tray ready for her, and she sat and automatically prepared the matcha.

“That looks very pretty.”

She casually extended a middle finger while she worked.

He chuckled.

She handed him the bowl, and it looked tiny in his grip. She made herself a bowl and sipped it as well.

“You are good at making tea. You do need to slow it down, though, to make it more of a dance.”

She croaked. “Fancy.”

He smiled.

She finished her tea and piled everything neatly on the tea tray. She got up and went to brush her teeth. When she returned, the lights were dimmed, and the bedding was folded back. She got into bed, and Jiji scampered in with fish breath. She drank some more and lay down, dozing. When Minoru slid into bed next to her and pulled her in against him, tears pricked her eyes.

Adopted. She had met his parents over a lunch, and his mother had treated him like her baby boy. His father had

spoken to him like an equal, and it seemed that they were a really solid family. Better than hers anyway.

Explaining her situation to his family was awkward, but once she explained that she had been the extra baby, they seemed to understand. Minoru had simply told them that her family was not invited. His mother was a little concerned, but she had switched to a detailed explanation that horrified them.

Polly was really hoping that they left it alone.

“You are tense, precious.”

“Just hoping that no one invites my family to the wedding if there still is a wedding.” Her voice was croaking less.

“There is a wedding.” He hugged her. “I don’t care if you have turned inside out and purple. You and I are going to get married, and we will work out any residual effects after that.”

She sighed because she needed to hear it. She would probably need to hear it again.

Polly sat through the exam. Her bloodwork was already whirring away in the lab somewhere. Minoru held her hand while the wand was removed, and more conductive gel was squirted on her belly.

The flat scanner pressed, there were clicks, and the printer whirred. The tech gave her a cautious look and left the room after she was cleaned up.

Polly whispered, “That isn’t a good thing.”

“I am sure it is fine, precious.”

There was a soft knock, and Minoru looked up. The doctor beckoned him outside, leaving Polly wondering what was going on. She cleaned up a bit more and got dressed before the door opened again.

She smoothed her jacket and grabbed her purse. The doctor reached for her, and she flinched back, thudding into the wall.

“Polly. You need to take some deep breaths.”

She was constantly whimpering and trying to get away from him. She was cornered, and he crouched low. “Okay, Polly. Minoru is going to get the car.”

“Why?”

“Because you are ovulating right now, and there are at least five eggs. If you do get pregnant, we will remove some of the embryos right away and freeze them. It is lucky that you came in today.”

She saw a grey aura around him, and when he reached out, it tried to touch her. She made a noise of protest and flinched back until she was debating punching through the wall between exam rooms.

Minoru’s voice sounded above the doctor’s. “Polly, come.”

She stood up, the doctor stood, and she eased past him and into the hallway. She took her alpha’s hand, and he tucked her against him and walked her out of the medical centre.

He rubbed her back, and she frowned. She sniffed and scowled as they descended in the elevator. Her pendant wasn’t responding to him either. She muttered, “I hate those exams,” in her broken voice. He looked surprised. The moment that they made it outside, she screamed and used her black claws to open his forearms. “You are not Minoru.”

He chuckled, and his face shifted. “Now, Polly. My omega has been sad without a baby. You can give that to us.”

A familiar black vehicle stopped near her, and Minoru exited. He saw the man, and he roared with fury. He caught the man across the neck with his claws, and the spray of blood covered the sidewalk.

Medical staff from the centre came out while Minoru checked on Polly. He patted her and asked, “Are you all right?”

“He’s one of Molly’s. One of the Silar pack. He’s a shapeshifter named Dennis.”

He held her tight against him, and she buried her face against his chest. They had to wait for law enforcement. The

cut across Dennis's neck could be fatal.

They had to wait.

Minoru tucked her into the car and hovered over her protectively while the officers and his lawyer spoke to each other. Minoru's lawyer was fast. He had arrived before the emergency responders and had spoken to her softly. She had told him about what had happened with the fake being in the medical offices. He nodded and smiled at her then went to search for the man's phone.

"Gerald is very good at what he does."

"Where's he going?"

"Someone sent the alpha a message when we entered the centre. It will be on his phone, and we can find out who was bribed to send the message."

She mumbled, "I just want to go home."

"It will take time. I am glad you used your claws."

She smiled. "Me, too."

He played with her fingers and looked at the black nails. He kissed the back of both her hands.

An officer came by and smiled at her. "How did you know he wasn't your alpha?"

"He was surprised by my voice, didn't smell right, was rubbing my back wrong, and was holding me to him on the wrong side." She didn't mention the pendant. She had given them enough.

"What did you cut him with?"

She had been sitting with her fingers curled up after the kisses, then she rolled her fingers straight. "The claws are new."

The officer took photos of her hands.

Minoru showed his nails, and the photo was taken. "I used it on his throat."

She edged closer to Minoru, and the officer frowned. “Is she all right?”

“She’s going into heat. That is why they tried to snatch her. They want my fiancée as a breeder for their pack. She does not wish to do so.”

Polly shook her head violently. “I don’t want to stop being a person.”

The officer taking notes flexed his neck, and she saw a column of grey move across his skin. She chuckled.

He looked at her with soft grey eyes. “Was there something funny?”

“I have a friend who does that with her neck, and there is a grey flash, too.”

He fixed her with a piercing gaze. “A male friend?”

She shook her head.

“Tell me more.”

“Nope.” She hid her face in Minoru’s arm.

“She’s a beta, right?”

Minoru said, “Yes.”

“Wait. Is she one of *those*?”

Minoru chuckled. “Yes. The Silar pack isn’t aware of it, but she isn’t for them. She would probably kill them if they succeeded in capturing her.”

Gerald returned, and building security of the med centre delivered one of the lab techs to the officers. Apparently, she had been paid two thousand dollars to make a call and check on the test results. She is a confessor.” He shook his head and gave the officer a look. “You have her statement?”

“Yes. It all matches the security camera footage.”

The other investigating officers got together, and Gerald spoke with them, and then he nodded and returned to them. “They have all the information and contact details. If they need anything, I will let you know.”

Minoru nodded. “Thanks, Gerry.”

Gerald met her gaze. “May you have a successful heat.”

She blinked at him, and she saw another familiar trait. She laughed and scooted into the car. Minoru shook his lawyer’s hand and sat in the back with her.

“Home.”

She curled up against Minoru’s side, and she felt herself nodding off. When she woke up, they were home, and he was carrying her inside. She exhaled slowly as the meeps of Jiji made her smile. She was safe.

Chapter Seven

She woke up in bed with Jiji curled up against her chest. The blood had been cleaned off her hands, and her claws were back to her normal short nails. She sat up and petted the kitten. Polly stretched and tickled his belly, then she got up, slid on slippers, and went in search of some coffee.

The kitchen was silent with the exception of the meowing adolescent kitten. Polly made some coffee and picked up Jiji, settling him on her shoulder.

“So, little dude. It almost feels like the place just has us.”

She reached for the cup, and a rumbling voice said, “You would be incorrect, bride.”

She set the cup down before it could take flight. She exhaled and picked it up again, sipping before she turned around.

“Oh. Wow. You are not the starter kit.” She was looking up at him, red skin and horns, but still his pretty face. She slurped her coffee.

He grinned. “Your voice is better.”

“It is.” She slurped the coffee again. It made an excellent prop to keep her from drooling. He didn’t usually go around without a shirt. Her fingers itched to touch him, and she sipped at the coffee again while she took in the taut muscles and wide shoulders.

“You aren’t wearing a shirt. That’s new.”

He grinned. “You are over dressed.”

She set her cup down, set Jiji down, and pulled the sleeves of her robe off to bare her to the waist. “Better?”

He stared at her, and his eyes went black. There was a low growl coming from his throat that made Jiji run for it.

She put her hands on her hips and walked up to him until there was only half an inch between them. The heat coming off

him echoed the core of warmth in her torso.

He reached behind her and stroked the marks on her back. Polly gasped. She hadn't had anyone touching the mark skin-to-skin since he was on her back in Japan. This feeling was different.

She leaned forward, her breasts made contact with his skin, and a low whine came from her throat. She looked up and met his gaze. He smiled his scary smile and said, "Hello, my bride."

"Hello, my alpha."

He swung her into his arms and carried her back to a room she hadn't been in before. It was always locked. He opened the door, stepped inside, and slid it closed.

"What is this place?"

"This is a nest, pet." He knelt and settled her on a silky soft cushion with a soft throw nearby.

"Oh, like omegas have."

"Yes. They are cozy, confined, and easy to clean." He grinned. "And refreshments and other supplies are stocked."

He tugged the bow of her robe, and it slithered apart.

She squeaked. "Other supplies?"

"Toys. Lube. It will be difficult for me to keep the claws retracted, so using different toys to widen you will help to keep you from injury."

He reached past her and took a box and a squirt bottle. She sat up and looked at the contents of the box as he opened it, and she saw the different tapered cylinders ranked by thinnest to thickest, and the thickest was larger than her wrist.

"Do we have to go through all of them?"

He laughed. "No, but it is your first time, and your heat is only beginning. It won't subside until you are pregnant or the heat runs its course."

She blushed, but it was because her body hummed in interest. He lifted his head and turned toward her, and she saw his nostrils flare.

“Oh, no. I smell?” Her brain was getting foggy, and she was concerned.

He blinked and laughed. “Oh, no, precious one. Your scent is like a fresh strawberry dipped in honey.”

She frowned and sat up. “It is?”

“Loki didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“Well, the hotter you get, the stronger the rich honey scent gets.” He glanced at her thighs.

She pressed her legs together, and the small bit of slick she had started leaking made a soft smacking sound. Polly’s cheeks heated, and she locked her legs in place.

He grinned and moved over to her, sniffing at her thighs. “Another thing about the nest is that nothing is off limits. You can scream and moan as much as you like. Nari will be back in two days and won’t hear anything.”

“Nari’s gone?”

“Nari’s away from home in a hotel room getting a spa package. The auto feeders are going for Jiji, and robot vacuums are set to do their thing.”

She tried to listen to him, but he started trailing his fingers over her hips, and the earthy scent of him was making her dizzy. The gist of what he was saying sank in, but when he kissed her, she clung to him and moaned against his lips. Blazes of heat were flicking through her body, and they weren’t fading. *Oh, my.*

She whined and grabbed the back of his head. Her thighs parted, and as they started to slide in a cricket-like behaviour, she felt the slick that was making its appearance.

He cupped her neck and hip and pulled her against him. Minoru pressed his head to hers, and their breath met and

mingled as they panted with the effort to keep control.

She looked at him. “So, how many eggs did they see on the scans?”

He chuckled. “Seven follicles.”

She blinked.

“It is unlikely that they all will start, but just in case, after this, we will go back to get any visible blastocysts extracted. It is a new technique and only works before they have attached. The doctor hasn’t done it before, but they have the cryo-tech to freeze the next generation for when you are up to them.”

She frowned and stroked his cheek. “I don’t want them getting cold.”

He smiled. “You are pretty sure that there will be little ones.”

She flushed.

“Nothing in the nest will be spoken of outside the nest.”

She ducked her head. Minoru started to wake her, starting at her neck and the fourth smallest toy. She resisted, and then it slid inside. He moved it with his fingertips, and she moaned as he worked it to move freely. A larger size was selected, and the same procedure was carried out. While he was kissing her and working the toy, a bright, burning splash ran through her body. The toy shot out, and he caught it with a laugh.

She blinked. “Was that a...”

He grinned. He looked so proud of himself. The ogre had faded, and he was back to his normal and gorgeous self.

She was just relaxing when another toy slid in. This one stretched and made her ache. She heard his growl as she arched and twisted, gripping his shoulders as he slowly moved the toy in and out of her. Polly glanced toward the box, and she was startled when the empty space was the third from the largest.

It took two minutes, and she finally relaxed into the slow thrusts. When her fingers and toes started tingling again, he

left the toy in her, moved back, untied his clothes, and stood up to get free of them.

She blinked as the sun went out. He wasn't ridiculously sized by the toybox standards, but the knot at his base was.

When he knelt at her side, her body was throbbing around the toy. He kissed her, drew the toy out, and then fitted himself to her, easing inward.

Polly closed her eyes as he slid in. There was heat to the cool of the toys. She clenched frantically around him, and he paused until she relaxed before surging inward again. His hips slowly rocked him into her by millimetres.

Polly was pinned, and she knew that this wasn't the best position for this manoeuvre, but seeing his face was comforting, the kisses were reassuring, and being able to touch him was wonderful.

He continued to ease into her until she felt the pressure all around her opening. She had no idea how knots got into betas, but she was going to bet it wasn't comfortable. Bella enjoyed it, but she had had sex with alphas before.

Minoru crooned to her before he kissed her softly. "You are doing well, precious one."

She swallowed. "I am glad. I would hate to come all this way and do the wrong thing."

"Are you comfortable?"

"Oh, hell no, but I am not in pain."

He blinked. "How does it feel?"

"It feels good. Hot is better than cold."

He chuckled and started to move. Polly was still hanging onto her self-control, but every slow thrust and kiss made the world blur around her a little, but she wanted to remember her first time.

They cuddled together as he moved inside her, and she lifted her hips to his. They moved together, and she felt the pressure of his knot. The knot tugging the hood around her clit made

her scream, and the growing tension in her snapped, sending flames along her nerve endings.

She came out of the blaze slowly, her body pulsing around his and her opening tense around his knot. She felt soft pulses inside her, and they weren't her. That was so odd.

His fingers eased her head up. "How are you doing, Polly?"

"I am a little achy and losing the fight to stay in control."

He whispered against her neck, "Give up the fight. I will take care of you, precious."

She looked at him, and the ogre was the one balls deep inside her. That explained her stretched ache. "You slipped?"

He smiled and ducked his head bashfully. "I slipped."

He kissed her and cradled her head. She ran her hand down his chest and between them, stroking the edge of the slippery knot before she brought her hand to her lips. Salty, sweet, musky, and tangy coated her fingers. Minoru's eyes widened.

Polly slowly licked at her digits as the heat started in her middle and spread through her entire body. She held Minoru's head and kissed him as she gave in to her heat. The world spun around, and pleasure took over.

She was wrapped in Minoru's arms, and Jiji was sitting nearby. He looked happy when she opened her eyes and hopped in delight, making happy sounds. She sat up and groaned as a thousand aches and pains rippled through her. "Ow."

Minoru rubbed her back. "Sore?"

"Doesn't even describe it." She awkwardly pushed herself to a full sitting position. He moved to support her and kissed her temple.

"Stay relaxed. I have already bathed us, but your heat was long, and you were determined."

She choked and leaned against his shoulder as he got up, and they left the nest. He walked through the house and to the

hot springs. He carefully bathed her again before scrubbing himself down roughly, and then he walked to the gentle pool and settled in it with her.

It was like being wrapped in a warm blanket. Polly groaned as he rubbed her down with long strokes against her arms and legs. Small circles at the base of her hips helped relax her, and she mumbled, “Am I supposed to be rubbing any part of you?”

He laughed. “You already did that, precious Polly.”

“So, when do we head to the med centre?”

“As soon as you are fed and dressed.”

She sighed. “You are going to have to carry me.”

“I know. It’s going to be another highlight of the day.”

He chuckled. “Are you more relaxed now?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“Then, out of the water and into the house.” He surged up and stepped out of the water. Warm air moved around them to dry them off. He set her on her feet and put one of her robes on her before he put on his own.

Dressed again, he picked her up and carried her to the kitchen, where Nari was waiting for them with a platter of food.

Nari looked at Polly, “Oh, little one. You look exhausted.”

She felt like she was pouting when she said, “I am not little.”

Minoru fed her and himself until she was stuffed and sleeping on his shoulder. She woke up in the car dressed in a sundress and no underwear. They pulled into the medical centre lot, and she saw familiar faces when she arrived. “Why are they here?”

“Backup.”

“Oh. Good.”

She was carried out with Maura nodding and Aggie grinning. Polly knew that no one was getting past them. They

were sitting at one of the nearby tables patients and staff used for breaks, but Polly knew their eyes were focused on the door and parking lot.

Polly slowly exhaled as she walked off the cramping and headed down to the ground level. Minoru kept an arm around her waist. When they came out, there was a commotion.

Maura was saying she didn't know what happened, and Aggie was staring at the investigating officer, asking her how the vehicle had ended up on its side. Aggie stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders, and the officer froze. She stated that she must have been worried about her friend when they saw the two armed men heading toward the clinic, and they tried to stop them.

Two men were near Maura, their eyes rolling in panic and limbs twitching. She smiled, talked to the officers, and explained that the paralysis would end in an hour or so. Both of the men were carrying guns and long knives.

They weren't pack members, but it looked like they charged by the hour or the body.

Liirel walked out arm-in-arm with another woman, and she sang out sweetly, "Officers, this lady would like to speak to you."

The man speaking to Aggie waved to one of the other officers, but they cleared their throats, and he growled and stalked over to the woman, composing himself when he asked, "Do you have something to tell me?"

The woman blurted that she had gotten a ten thousand dollar wire transfer to call in when Polly arrived for an appointment.

Polly looked up at Minoru. "I am going to need a new doctor."

He grimaced. "Agreed."

Liirel spoke to another woman with a cascade of dark purple hair, and to Polly's surprise, it was Kell. Her hair had not been

that colour when Polly had seen her during the planning stages a few months ago.

Polly tried to walk toward her, but Minoru gestured to Liirel, and she and Kell came over.

Kell smiled and waved. “Hey, Polly.”

Polly smiled weakly. “What are you guys doing here?”

Liirel chuckled. “Coincidence. Kell had an appointment here, so I came to keep her company.”

Kell was moving carefully, and a port was visible at her neckline.

Polly blinked. “Oh.”

Kell calmly moved her shirt back over the port. “One more treatment and it comes out.”

Polly frowned, and before she could stop herself, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Not anymore. I had a benign tumour in my midsection. Tumour is out, and this is follow-up treatment to make sure that all cells with nefarious plans are purged.” Kell smiled.

Polly was suddenly distressed. Kell’s face contorted, and the distress faded.

Kell was embarrassed. “Sorry about that. I leaked.”

Polly nodded. “It’s fine. That is a reason to leak emotion.”

Polly moved to hug her, but Liirel stepped between them as Kell stepped back. “She isn’t safe to hug right now. Especially if there is a chance you are pregnant.”

Kell shrugged. “Sorry.”

Minoru frowned. “But you will be all right?”

Kell nodded. “By your wedding so everything can be set up, and all exterior events will come off without a hitch. You will have a very memorable photo environment.”

Maura smiled. “And I will make sure that the skies are clear.”

Polly looked at the women surrounding her, and it dawned on her. “You all have a mark.”

Aggie smiled. “Yes.”

Minoru jolted. “All of you?”

Liirel smiled. “Yes.”

Kell shrugged. “Yes.”

Maura looked at the men still twitching on the ground. “No shit.”

Minoru chuckled. “Are any of you willing to tell me what your marks are?”

Kell shrugged. “Feathers.”

Liirel shrugged. “Vines.”

Maura chuckled. “Sword in a cloud.”

Aggie rolled her eyes. “Bridge.”

An officer was pacing as they waited for medics for the guys twitching on the ground. No one was in a hurry to help them, but they had been disarmed.

The officer who was pacing kept his gaze on Aggie.

Polly smiled.

Aggie looked at her. “What?”

“I think I found the match to your bridge.”

Aggie whirled, and the officer kept pacing but was definitely making eye contact. “A cop? Really?”

The ladies all giggled, and Minoru smiled. “Don’t do anything you are not comfortable doing, Aggie.”

Aggie nodded. “Right. He definitely qualifies as something I would not be *comfortable* doing.”

Kell snickered but suggested a compromise. “Tell him about your mark and ask him if it means anything. If it does, you can connect later. Then, you know for sure.” She smiled. “Get his card.”

Aggie pulled together her wedding planner spine, turned, and walked toward the man staring at her like a feral animal.

He straightened, and Aggie looked petite next to him, which was funny as she wasn't petite. Aggie remained calm and kept her arms at her sides, but then she asked for his card, and he lit up with glee. He must have asked her for her number because she shook her head, and he scowled.

She held up the card, and his expression smoothed. She reached to pat his hand, and he caught her fingers in his. They both froze. Aggie's phone buzzed, and she excused herself. He had to let go.

She answered her phone on the way back, and her customer service face was in place. She waved and bowed farewell to Polly and Minoru, then headed to her car. Maura bowed. "She's my ride."

Kell swayed, and Liirel said, "We had better get going. Barfing can come next, and I think she had a blue freezy, so it will be festive."

Kell sighed. "I paid for those pants."

Liirel laughed. "I know. Still a funny story."

They walked slowly toward the car park, and Kell was moving really slowly.

Polly frowned. "She looks like she hurts."

Minoru rubbed her arms. "Yes, she does. Shall we go?"

The guys on the ground were being loaded onto gurneys as their limbs twitched with increasing violence.

The officer who had spoken to Aggie walked toward them, and Minoru casually picked Polly up.

She winced and leaned against him.

The officer looked at Polly. "You know her."

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

“A friend.” She looked at him and expressed the pain in her body through her gaze. That needle had not been friendly.

“So, you know her fairly well?”

Minoru broke up the dance. “She’s our wedding planner. If you give me your card, I can get you an invitation.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Polly snorted. “Most of the attendees are social or business acquaintances. The friends and family divide is fairly small. No one will notice you. Well, except Aggie because she will have to process your invitation.”

Minoru chuckled. “There is that. We will give you a code name. William Officer.”

He shrugged. “My name is Bill, so it isn’t too far off.”

Polly had to ask. “What are you, Bill?”

Minoru whispered in her ear. “Inhale his scent, and you will know.”

She inhaled and got the scent of earth, lichen, damp stone, and male pheromones. “I know that Aggie set him off. And he’s something stone and earth.”

“He’s a troll.”

“A bridge.” She giggled. “A troll bridge.”

Minoru felt her flinch. “And that is enough excitement for you, young lady. You are going to rest for the rest of the day.”

She sighed. “Great idea. Your fault I have been up for a week.”

He started to walk to their car. “No, your fault *I* was up for a week. I am chapped.”

Bill barked a laugh behind them, and they continued to their patient driver, with five out of eight embryos waiting in storage. They didn’t know if they would survive the thawing process, as this was experimental, but they did know they were moving their cell clusters. This place was a giant juicy target.

Chapter Eight

Polly was relieved that the chemical heat was over, her body was back under her control, and the fertilized eggs were safe and sound at a facility that specialized in secure containment.

She sat working on a template for the thank you cards she had to send out after the wedding. There were a lot of blended traditions in the wedding, and thank you cards were some of them.

Nari came in and said, “Miss Polly, you have guests.”

Polly looked up from her desk. “Guests? Plural?”

“Plural.”

“Okay. Where did you put them?”

“The common area.”

“Great. Who is it?” She got to her feet, smoothing the snugly wrapped cotton kimono around her.

“Bella, Loki, Ulric, and Rick. I will bring tea in a moment.”

Polly hugged her and walked quickly to the common area. She opened the door and walked into the room where they were all waiting for her. “Hiya, guys.”

Bella jumped up and babbled apologies.

“Whoa. No. It was my lapse in judgment that contributed to the end result. Basically, ya’ll got me drunk, but I got behind the wheel.”

Minoru came in at that moment. “I was also not there to notice the signs. But, Loki, you should have fucking known better.”

Loki bowed deep. “I know. I was just so used to Polly being there that I didn’t think of what would happen if she was.”

Rick nodded. “I know what effect an omega out of heat has, and I know that their alphas are careful to keep them

segregated. It didn't occur to me that a beta would have the same effect."

Ulric sighed. "I knew and didn't care. I am very sorry, Polly."

Polly inclined her head. "I accept you are all idiots."

Minoru chuckled.

Bella asked quietly, "Was it a hard heat?"

"It was my first. Seven days. The first day I remember... mostly."

Minoru walked behind her and wrapped his arms around her. "This is her last day of recovery."

Bella blinked. "What happens after recovery?"

"First, a pregnancy test to see if I am still carrying, and then, we can have sex, and I can remember it."

The alphas and Ulric got excited. Bella blinked. "You are pregnant?"

"Likely. The chemical cocktail I gave myself was designed for omegas who had been suppressing for several years. It kicked my ovaries into overdrive the moment that I stopped."

Minoru held her close. "She had eight blastocysts, and we had five removed, so she might be carrying triplets."

Loki blinked. "No way."

Polly chuckled. "Way. I get the test later this week. Hooray. Another vaginal probe."

Minoru murmured, "I will have you used to it by Friday."

She elbowed him sharply, and he chuckled and hugged her tight.

She looked at her grinning friends. "Yes, I am sure you all wanted to discuss your first time in a group of mixed genders."

Their laughter calmed, and they remembered her circumstances.

Nari came in and said, “Enough. Leave her alone and tell her why you have come.”

She set the tea tray down, and Polly knelt next to the tray. She started to prepare the tea. She moved her hands gracefully, and Loki moved closer. “Polly, will you return as my assistant?”

She kept going through the steps and asked, “Isn’t Bella going to take over?”

Bella sighed. “She would like to, but her knowledge of tea import is seriously lacking.”

Polly nodded. “That can be learned.”

Bella agreed. “But Ulric is also a needy bastard, and between his perfume and his modelling, I am constantly running around.”

Loki said, “Until it is a strain on you, Polly, I would deeply appreciate your help.”

“I can do most of the actual work from home. If you can do the face-to-face stuff, I can do the paperwork here if Minoru doesn’t mind.”

She handed Minoru the first cup of tea, then Loki, Bella, Ulric, and Rick. Bella blinked. “This is really good.”

Polly chuckled.

“You aren’t having any?”

“On the off chance, I am limiting my caffeine to one cup, and I need that to get moving in the morning.”

Minoru sipped his tea and snorted. “Off chance. You got some of my best work.”

She grinned. “Says you. Mind you, if they look like you, I might have to agree.”

He smirked. “Flattery won’t save you from my clutches.”

“No, but morning sickness might.” She smirked back.

The group chuckled and finished their tea.

Loki cleared his throat. “Also, we have an issue with the new teasops and their opening ceremonies. They want to use the new year photos.”

Minoru asked, “The hotel marketing teams are in agreement?”

“Yes.”

“Then, use the authorized images.”

Polly flushed. “Uh, I think one of the other seasons would be best.”

“They all agreed that the symbolism in the new year’s photos is good for the start of the new businesses. If we use those images, they are going to use them in the hotel pamphlets at no extra cost.”

Polly paled. “Oh, god.”

Minoru caught on. “Can I see the images we are referring to?”

Polly gripped the tea tray and was on her way to standing when Minoru glared at her. She sighed and sat back down.

Loki was fighting a grin and handed his phone to Minoru. Polly watched him flip through the images, and then he tapped, and she knew what he was doing. He was sending the images to his own phone.

Once he had them, he handed Loki’s phone back and opened the email on his phone. “Hm. Well, I can see why they would want to use these images. Tasteful, no lewd skin, lovely, and elegant. Now, why didn’t you tell me about them?” He looked at Polly.

“I didn’t think it would be an issue.” She swallowed.

“Bullshit. You are lucky I can still speak in full sentences. The blood is not in my brain.”

Polly looked at him and shrugged. “That was the concern. I didn’t want to rush things.”

“You didn’t want to be rushed.”

“That, too.” She nodded. “How do you think your family will feel about it?”

He shrugged. “My mother will want to know who made that kimono, and my father will just look at me and shake his head at my luck. My grandmother will beam and pat your cheeks while talking about pretty grandbabies.”

She blushed. “So, you aren’t freaking out?”

“Oh, I am, but you are new to playing, and we are getting married in a few weeks. I want to stay on your good side until you are legally mine. After that, I will let you know what I think about you concealing this from me.”

Loki grinned. “So we can use the campaign?”

“You can. I signed the release.” She nodded.

He chortled and sent an email. “The printers have been notified. And the confirmation has been sent to the hotel.”

“Wow. You work quickly.”

He grinned. “Back to business. So, when can you come back?”

Minoru looked at him. “Two weeks after the wedding.”

Loki looked disappointed.

“If you four hadn’t hotboxed her with pheromones, you could have kept her until the wedding, but now, she is mine, and she needs to rest and recover, and then be a lovely bride and then rest and recover.”

Polly and Bella laughed, but all four males just looked at them. Bella cleared her throat. “Polly, I would like to talk to you. Is there somewhere we can go and not be glared at?”

Polly nodded. “Sure.” She rose to her feet, and Minoru looked smug. Loki looked shocked. Bella just blinked. “How did you get up like that?”

Polly shrugged and headed for the door. “Practice.”

Bella walked behind her. “Can you teach me?”

“Sure. Kimono boot camp.”

Polly walked down the path and toward the lake. Bella caught up with her, and she smiled. “So, what are you doing on Saturday evening?”

“I don’t know. My life is rather unplanned lately.”

“Well, Aggie wanted to organize a ladies’ night.”

“I can’t drink.”

Bella grinned. “Congratulations, but we have an option that can still be fun for you. How are you at karaoke?”

“I sound like I am gargling gravel, but I like it.”

“Excellent. We have proper hen night outfits arranged. We’ll pick you up here, and you don’t have to do anything.” Bella smiled. “Loki is paying for the limo and our evening as part of his gift to you. Our pack is going to provide you with payment for our thoughtlessness.”

Polly shrugged. “It worked out.”

“It shouldn’t have been necessary. I didn’t realize I could have that effect on you.”

“Neither did I until the brain fog kicked in. At that point, I acted on instinct. I had to be able to work at any cost.”

Bella chuckled. “I am the same, usually.”

“Alphas are distracting. You have alphas and an omega. It must be confusing at times.”

“It can be, but I feel wanted for the first time in my life. Bed is hot, but it isn’t a lonely place.”

Polly hugged Bella. “I am so glad for you.”

Bella asked her honestly, “Is one alpha enough for you?”

“Yes. Minoru is all I need. It will be lonely when he isn’t here, but I am sure I can adapt to being alone when he travels.”

“Because of your job?”

“Because of the pregnancy. I can’t fly once I get to my seventh month.”

Bella blinked. “Oh, right.”

Polly sighed and looked at the night sky. By Saturday she would know if she was pregnant and how many of the little blobs had survived.

“I really hate these damn exams.” She turned her head against Minoru’s side as the probe slid in.

The new facility was pretty and high security. They would take her from pregnancy to old age at this facility. All of the staff was bonded, and cameras were everywhere there were communication terminals or phones. The only private places were the exam rooms.

Polly closed her eyes until Minoru whispered, “Polly, look.”

She opened her eyes, and while the tech was digging around in her, she was showing the three little orbs that had attached. “Three?”

The tech nodded. “Three. The doctor will be with you in a moment.”

He got up and handed them the small square of paper with the image of the three little blobs. Minoru held the picture where she could see it.

Polly got her legs together and pulled her kimono back into place. She looked at the picture and smiled. “Look what you did.”

He grinned and kissed her.

The doctor came in and chuckled. “So, you have already interpreted the results. Congratulations.”

Dr. Oriel was an alpha who had seen a lot, and nothing fazed her, but she still looked at Polly. “Are you... is that a kimono?”

Minoru chuckled. “She forgot we had an appointment, and this is what she wears at home.”

“Oh, right. Well, you are in remarkably good health. I will give you a prescription for prenatal vitamins. We have three obstetricians on staff, including myself.”

Minoru nodded. “Who would you recommend for a beta pregnancy with multiples?”

“I am the best with high risk, but would your beta be comfortable with an alpha as an obstetrician?” She gave Polly a kind look as if calming a skittish animal.

Polly snorted. “Please, get over yourself. I boss alphas around for a living.”

Minoru laughed. “She actually does.”

The doctor smiled. “Not you?”

He chortled. “Of course, she does. She is the most precious person on the planet.”

Polly rolled her eyes. “I do not boss my alpha around. I just get a look on my face when he hasn’t figured out what I need. It’s a lot of pressure. If you have time, I will accept you as my OB.”

The doctor chuckled. “Then I will take you on as my patient.”

Minoru smiled. “The next time you see her, she will be a married woman.”

Polly looked at the pride in his expression. He was excited.

Dr. Oriel made a visit schedule, marking benchmark scans for each one.

They got a list of supplements for her and a discussion of the risks of the multiples. To Polly’s amusement, she was also given a schedule for massages to keep fluid from building up in her lymph system.

Minoru smiled. “I will help.”

The doctor smiled. “I have no doubt. You seem attentive, and your beta has spirit. It’s a good combination, but Polly, you have to keep on top of any and all changes that leave you unwell. I want you to call the office if you feel anything is wrong. Better bill your alpha than leave things to chance.”

Polly nodded. “Yes, doc. And we have a robotic litter box for the cat, so I won’t be handling anything.”

The alpha smiled and patted her head. “Good girl. What kind of cat?”

“Black domestic short hair.” Minoru smiled. “He was my engagement gift. He’s my little buddy and keeps an eye on her while I travel.”

The doctor frowned. “Do you travel a lot?”

“Not anymore.”

“She will need to be attended to at all times. Do you have a pack?”

Minoru shook his head, and Polly shook her head. “I don’t want any more.”

The doctor smiled. “You don’t have to be intimate with all pack members. They can just be part of your grouping.”

Polly blinked. “Oh.”

Minoru rubbed her back slowly. “I will see who I can find. There are a few possibilities that spring to mind, but the protective instinct is what I will seek out.”

“Wait, you are going to interview for a beta-sitter?”

“Absolutely. As you get larger, you will need someone to help, and with the best of intentions, I am sure there will be moments when I can’t be with you, and you won’t be able to travel with me.”

She huffed. “Fine. I would suggest tucking me in with Loki and his lot, but... yeah.”

“That’s how you got here, sweet.”

She made a face while he explained, and the doctor’s eyes widened and went to Polly’s bloodwork. “Huh. You got it all out.”

“Oh, yeah. It was flushed out in two days.” Polly grimaced.

“Our housekeeper did her research.” Minoru smiled.

Polly hopped off the exam table. “Anything else that’s immediate?”

“Well, aren’t you just the tall one?” The doctor offered her a lollipop.

“You know that is patronizing, right?” She took the lolly and unwrapped it, popping it into her mouth.

“Absolutely. I will see you at the next scheduled appointment, Polly.” She patted Polly’s cheek. “So cute!”

Minoru laughed and took Polly’s hand as they left the exam room.

He had the schedule in his suit pocket, and she was slurping on her lollipop. When he paid for the visit, he kept her between him and the counter. The last two attempts to snag her had been at this exact moment.

She let him protect her. It relaxed both of them.

They walked out and were both tense. He waited for thugs to show up, but nothing happened. Leo pulled the car up, and they were on the way to the pharmacy in a few minutes. Because he didn’t want her driving, they now had a permanent driver. Leo Yannik. Beta.

He had no problem with the situational needs and took the prescription in while they waited.

“So, do you like Dr. Oriel?”

“Yes. She treats me the same way all alpha women treat betas who are nearly their size but a few inches shorter.”

He laughed. “She was treating you like an omega.”

“What?”

He pulled her sucker from her lips. “Omegas like sweet treats, bright colours, and stickers. Be prepared.”

She wrinkled her nose and put her candy back in her mouth. She had a thought and growled in disappointment.

“What crossed your mind?”

“No sushi. That’s gonna hurt.”

“It doesn’t all have to be fish.”

She blinked. “Oh. Right.”

Leo came back and handed the pile of supplements to Minoru with a grin before he got back into the driver's seat, and they were on their way.

Minoru read the directions, and some of the meds were in case of nausea.

Polly finished her candy. "What, alphas don't want pregnant betas puking on them?"

He snorted. "That is a fetish I have yet to acquire."

Polly sighed and lifted her phone, answering some questions that Bella and Loki had.

By the time she finished sending and answering emails, they were home again.

She was frowning at her phone and texting with both thumbs when she felt a soft seat behind her and heard Jiji greeting her. "Dude, you carried me inside?"

"I did. Time for lunch."

The phone was plucked from her hands, and she looked up to see Nari grinning with a burger and fries on a tray.

"Holy..." she blinked. "I don't need actually to eat for four."

Nari grinned. "I know. This is just a celebration burger. It's official."

"Yeah, but now there is the wait to make sure I keep them."

Nari nodded. "Early days, but still a reason for a celebration."

Polly started eating, and Minoru was given his own food a moment later.

"So, how much weight did I lose during my heat?"

"About seven or eight pounds." He mentioned it casually.

"Ah. I did wonder. Everything was looser."

"I tried to remember to feed you, but I was distracted." It was a wicked chuckle.

“Well, thankfully, I don’t think I will be in heat for a few years if the implantation for the other cells is carried out.” She smirked into her burger.

“How many years?”

“Estimating that all five are viable? Do the math. One year between pregnancies.” She chortled. She saw his red eyes glowing out of the corner of her eye.

“We do not need to use all of them.”

She laughed, and to her surprise, her meal was done. She stretched, kissed him on the cheek, and carried her tray into the kitchen, where Nari took it from her. Nari smiled and said, “Oh, your sister called. She and your parents would like to see you.”

Polly caught herself on the counter and rushed for the sink as she lost her celebration burger.

There was roaring in her ears as Minoru caught Nari up on the entire situation. He washed her face and lifted her to carry her to the study. “I am going to put an end to this today, precious. You rest.”

She was dizzy, frightened, and furious. He reached through their link, soothing her. The fury was a shared emotion.

He eased her to sleep, and Jiji curled up next to her. His little purr rumbled her into darkness.

She woke to the smell of blood in the room and the splashing of the shower. She got up and crept to peek at Minoru, and the water in the base of the shower was pale pink and turning clear.

“So, did they get the point?”

He turned toward her and smiled. “They did. No one died, and even your parents were witnesses, along with your sister. They now understand that they have no claim over you. There should be a voicemail from them and your sibling congratulating you on your most fortunate marriage and blessed pregnancy.”

She slipped her sleeping robe off and joined him in the shower. Polly wrapped her arms around him and pressed her face to his chest. “Will you stay with me while I listen to the messages?”

“Of course.” He smoothed his hands over her back and hips. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I was just taken by surprise. I should apologize to Nari. I feel bad.”

“It is fine. I didn’t tell her enough about your family. She knows now and is more than willing to stand in as your auntie at a moment’s notice.”

She sighed as he continued massaging her back. Polly slid her hands up his back and slowly drew her nails down the planes of muscle. He shuddered. “Polly, don’t tease.”

“Who’s teasing?” She continued to drag her nails over his butt.

He looked down at her and tutted. “You are incorrigible. We are getting married in just over a week.”

“Well then, why not practice a bit until the wedding night?”

“Because you are exhausted and upset.”

“It’s true. I was so worried when you left. Please, tell me you didn’t go alone.”

“I didn’t. I called a number of alphas of my acquaintance, and we descended on the pack house. We made it very clear that the Silar pack has no claim on any unwilling beta, and if we hear of them trying to force a surrogacy, we will return, and this time, we won’t just mark them up. We will simply make them disappear. All of them.”

She shivered. “Ah. How many alphas did you bring?”

“Well, there were four that sprang to mind, so I gave them a call. After a short conversation with the men, they were eager to help in exchange for an invitation to the wedding.”

“Which four?”

“Well, the officer focused on Aggie was one, and the others were males with characteristics to match that of your friends. There was a final alpha with us, and that was Loki. They are not your lovers, but they were acting as your pack.”

She looked up at him. “The ladies are going to be pissed.”

He shrugged. “They may not be solid matches, but it is a chance.” He turned off the water and grabbed a towel to wrap her in before he dried his hair and then the rest of him.

She stepped out of the shower and sighed. “Thank you for doing that. It’s... a relief.”

“I know. I would have ripped their throats out for you, but it is nice to simply intimidate someone by showing off.”

She smiled. “Ah, if you weren’t expecting it, that would be intimidating.”

He dropped the towel and pulled her against him. “And yet, you were expecting it.”

“Oh, when the marks appeared, I knew I wasn’t getting a bunny rabbit.” She reached up and patted his chest. “Though you do have some cuddly qualities.”

He lifted her and pulled her high. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and they moved to the bedroom.

He held her as he eased to the bed. “How are you feeling, Polly?”

“Slightly compressed.” She smiled.

He put more weight on her. “Only slightly?”

Polly giggled and leaned up to bite his collarbone.

He growled, and she felt his erection twitch between them.

She rocked against him and gripped his thighs with the soles of her feet.

Minoru eased a hand between them before getting off her and grinning, flipping her to her belly. He propped her up on their low pillow with her hips lifted in the air.

When he licked down her spine, the building protest faded. As his tongue skated across her marks, she moaned and swivelled her hips against him. He chuckled. "I love that sound, Polly." He dragged his tongue along her spine. "Do it again."

He licked at her marks until she was clutching the bed beneath her. He widened her thighs and slid his hand between them. The slipping of his fingers was embarrassing, but the heavy purr from him showed that he was a fan.

He moved over her, and she felt him easing inside.

"Oh, god," she muttered and clutched at the bedding.

"Ah, Polly, just call me alpha." His laugh was in her ear.

"Asshole."

"Now, now, we want to save something for after the little ones are here."

She huffed in indignation and then shrieked when he surged to the knot.

He let her adjust and then started to move.

Polly pushed back at him, rocking together until she arched up and tried to throw him off as she came. He simply flattened her to the bed again and chuckled when she squeaked. She panted as his thrusts took on a focus she was bracing for. He nipped her shoulder and thrust deep as he groaned, and his knot held him inside.

She whined, and he nuzzled and nipped at her neck and ear and turned her head to kiss her. Minoru licked at her lips until she participated in the kiss, and then he eased in a few more millimetres. She gasped and growled. He growled in return, and she slicked up to let him in deeper. It turned back to a purr, and he slid his hand under her to caress her belly before he moved down to her clit and circled it carefully. There was mewling and begging, and finally, she moaned into his mouth as her body shook.

He groaned, followed by a sigh, and she felt more heat spilling into her.

She murmured against his lips. “You trying to keep them warm?”

“It works for chickens.”

She laughed and shook her head. “You are going to pay for that.”

“I look forward to the bill.”

She grumbled, “Here, I thought you were so polite and formal when we met.”

“I was until I realized what I was looking at. At that point, I just wanted to be inside you.” He sighed happily. “And now I am.”

Polly sighed and relaxed. He moved her hair from her neck and licked at his mark. The thin line of the scar was tingling and warm under his mouth.

When his knot let her go, she relaxed and felt the rush and trickle between her thighs.

He continued nuzzling at her neck. When he moved away from her, he rolled her to one side and gathered the cloth that Polly hadn't seen.

“When did you put that down?”

He chuckled. “When you were distracted.”

She snorted, and when he settled in bed and opened his arms, she went into them.

Chapter Nine

The karaoke bar was sparsely populated, and Aggie was grinning. Polly looked at her and the other ladies Aggie had invited to the party. The women participating in the wedding in some way were all wearing gauzy blue kimono mini dresses with fluttering sleeves. Polly was wearing red with a white lining. The clothing was courtesy of Rick's boss, Ford, who got them from his pride mate, Yemeen.

Bella had met Yemeen, and she and Ulric had discussed the gowns that Bella needed to accompany him to the formal events.

Polly watched Aggie singing and wished that her voice was half as good.

When Aggie finished, Polly applauded and cheered with the others.

The bartender had been surprised that none of their party were drinking, but she had gone all out with the mocktails.

The bar had a gold club, and they were the only members aside from the hen party allowed into the club. Polly was enjoying her party no matter who was watching. The fact that they looked like a J-pop group added to her amusement.

Bella came up to her and nudged her. "So, when will it be your turn?"

"My turn?"

"Karaoke."

"Oh, my singing is bad. Really bad."

"So is Liirel's, but she's on her third."

Polly smiled.

"So, Polly. I am really sorry for what happened. Loki told me about the suppressors, but I didn't understand until I looked it up on the internet."

“It’s... well, it wasn’t fine, but I blame Loki more than you.”

“Not Ulric?”

“Omegas are not known for their anticipation of consequences.” Polly smiled. “But Ulric seems good-natured.”

“He is. I was surprised that he thought that way about me.” Bella chuckled.

Polly smiled and hugged her with one arm.

Maura got up and started her song, and as she sang, Bella stared. “Who is Maura? Like her last name.”

Polly sighed. “I think you know.”

“She’s...”

“Yeah. She had as much choice as you did and left the house at seventeen to get away from her parents.”

Bella slugged down her drink and said, “I wish this were booze right now. What do I say to her?”

“How about, hello, I am your sister. Can we talk?”

Bella nodded. “How long have you known?”

“I knew about her half-sister months before I met you. When I saw you, I knew who you were. You and she have similar energy.”

“Wait. She told you about me? Was she bragging?”

“No, she left her parents to seek you out. Whether she knows it or not, she found you.”

Bella blinked. “She doesn’t know who I am?”

“She might suspect but isn’t sure. It wasn’t my place to confirm if she didn’t ask directly.”

Maura continued singing. Maura finished and bowed as her friends screamed in support. Bella was still and staring. Polly absently flicked through the songs and found one she wanted. Maura and Aggie high-fived, and Kell walked onto the stage, keyed in the number of the song, and picked up a microphone with a little shower hat on it.

She started singing something sweet and meaningful, and Polly smiled.

Maura came over and nudged Polly. “So, when will it be your turn?”

Bella’s jaw dropped.

“My turn?” Polly smiled.

“Karaoke.” Maura chuckled. “The reason we are all here.”

“Ah. Right.” She tapped the song she wanted. “I think I will try this.”

She walked away from the half-siblings, stepped onto the stage after cheering for Kell, keyed in the code for her song, took the fresh microphone, and started to sing.

* * * *

Bella looked at Maura. Finally, she blurted out, “Hey, Maura, I am your half-sister.”

Maura looked at her and started to tremble. “I thought you might be.”

“What’s wrong? Why are you shaking?”

“Uh, I really want to hug you, but you have a lot of reasons to hate me.”

Bella looked at the tears tracking Maura’s cheeks, and she hugged her. She hugged her with the strength of someone who had been looking for actual family all her life.

Maura started laughing and said, “I am so sorry for what he did.”

Bella sobbed and hiccupped. “It wasn’t you. It was him. I can still despise him and love you.” She gasped. “I am getting married to Loki; will you be my maid of honour?”

Maura smiled. “You might want to get to know me better.”

“I suppose. So, are you allergic to eggplant?”

Maura laughed. “Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“One thing in common aside from our appearances.” She smiled. “So, you have three mates?”

“Yeah, one particular alpha, one normal alpha, and an omega, but the omega would want to be mentioned first.”

“Of course.” Maura smiled. “So, have you noticed that the gold club members seem to resemble Polly’s mate, yours, and some of the other guys we have bumped into in the last few years?”

“To use a stereotype, drunk Japanese businessmen at a karaoke bar?”

“They look slightly more local than that.” Maura cocked her head. “Slightly.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Oh lord. Ulric wants a turn.”

Polly finished and grinned at Ulric as he stepped up to the stage. The ladies laughed and applauded at the omega in the business suit as he took the microphone.

He called out, “Hey, Bella, it’s a duet.”

Bella smiled. “I think that is an invitation. Do you mind?”

“I will see you at the wedding. Don’t worry.” Maura smiled. “I am around. My day job is with Loki’s grandmother, so I usually am where you can find me.”

Bella hugged her and then sprinted to the stage. She had mates to rely on, and she was learning about her half-sister. It was a pretty good day.

* * * *

Hours passed, and more of the guys came up to sing. Even Minoru’s lawyer was up there, and he had a pretty good singing voice.

An arm snaked around her waist, and a voice murmured, “I like the outfit.”

“It beats a tee that says *Suck for a Buck* covered in hard candy.” She lifted her head to him. “You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“I am a gold club member of this fine establishment.”

“Of course you are.” She leaned back against him, and he lowered a hand to her belly. “Thanks, Captain Obvious. Now all of the guys are staring.”

The women were looking and glancing away. The alphas were staring and then searching the crowd of ladies for signs of their mate. Polly looked up at her mate again. “You totally squealed on the ladies.”

“Yes, but there are more here than I was aware of.”

“Aggie found them. She asked the book club as the patterns on our backs are fairly distinctive and don’t match the physical changes some of the other betas have gone through. We look totally normal until we climb out of a hot tub.”

“I sense onsen parties in our future.”

“What, just so you can see their patterns? You can just ask. Alexi can take photos.”

“The ladies would just show the patterns?”

“This isn’t something they inherited. It showed up when they bumped into an alpha, and two days later, their back itched.”

“Is that what happened to you?”

“Sure. I bumped into you outside one of the board meetings. Two days later, I was itchy, and then I freaked out because it looked like someone had clawed my back. I got used to it.”

He nodded. “And you forgot it was there. Lucky for me.”

She smirked. “If you say so. Once I get stabilized, I am going to make your life an endless torment.”

“Oh, talk dirty. I like it.”

She burst out laughing, turned, and pulled him down to her by his tie. Their kiss started slow and then built into ferocity until there was a sharp whistle nearby. Liirel was standing there and shaking her finger. “These few hours are her last without a firm tie to you.”

Polly shrugged. “I am stuck with him. My ties locked in two weeks ago.”

The ladies grinned, and Liirel shrugged. “Well, in that case, enjoy the party in whatever way you like. It’s your party, after all.”

Polly grinned and pushed Minoru into a comfortable seat before she settled on his lap. She tapped her lips. “Kiss.”

He grinned and threaded his fingers in her hair, his red eyes glowing. It continued a very fun evening.

* * * *

Aggie watched as Loki spoke to the troll alpha. He was out of uniform in slacks and a white dress shirt. She walked forward, looking at the black hair and slate-grey eyes. When she got within a few feet, Loki turned and said, “Aggie, this is Bill Granite.”

She covered her lips. “Are you kidding?”

The alpha in question smiled slightly. “I don’t believe in your mark, Aggie, is it?”

She blinked. “That’s fine. You don’t need to believe in it. Not my problem.” She turned and walked away. He moved around her and stopped her.

“You could show me.”

“As I am not being interrogated, I am not under any obligation to show you.”

He sighed and gritted out. “Please.”

“It’s a stupid design.”

“Fate put it on you. May I see if it is for me?”

“How many other troll alphas are out there?”

He grimaced. “I am the only one I know of.”

“Maybe there is a bridge architect alpha that no one knows about.” She crossed her arms.

He sighed. “Please.”

She twisted her lips. “No charges for indecent exposure?”

“No. I have a private office.” He held out his hand.

She uncrossed her arms and grimaced. “Where?”

He led her in a courtly manner around the edge of the club and up some concealed stairs. He walked her to the office and turned on the light inside.

He walked inside and let her be near the door. “I would just like to see it. No touching, no contact.”

She nodded and turned her back to him. She untied the belt and set it aside. When the robes loosened, she slid them down her back to mid-way. “I am leaving the bra. It just obscures a bit.”

She didn’t hear anything, and then there was heat at her back. “No touching, no contact?”

He growled, and she pulled the robes up before she saw Bill’s other form. Massive shoulders, thick arms, barrel chest, and a grey face with jutting lower tusks. His ears stuck out and were pointed.

“Oh. Hello. I am guessing the good officer is skeptical.”

He snorted through his long nose. He shuffled closer to her. “Beta?” His voice was that of a rumbling rockslide.

“Yes.”

“My beta?”

She was feeling the push like a hand on her back. “Maybe.”

He held out a hand and beckoned her. “Come.”

She dressed and put the belt on the robe. “No. I don’t know you. I am not going to jump into your arms.”

He sniffed at her, nostrils flaring. “Heat soon.”

“I have work to do next weekend, and it is due after that. Thank you for pointing it out.”

He looked at her with big, sad eyes. “Come to me for heat?”

Aggie wrinkled her nose. “Do those eyes work with other women?”

“No other. Just you. My beta.” He rumbled.

“Uh, I have to rejoin the party. I organized it, after all. No idea that you owned this place.”

He grunted. “Fox knew.”

Aggie nodded and slipped out of the office with a quick, “Bye!”

She headed down the steps and went straight to the ladies’ room to fix her clothing. He had rejected her in human form. She hoped it didn’t give her issues during her heat. Well, it was a problem to solve later.

She had an enormous wedding to pull off. No time to play with trolls.

* * * *

She hadn’t screamed. Bill went to his desk and got a new shirt when he was back to himself. Also, the troll knew what she was without hesitation. It was a surprise. He had been unsure of the rumours of special betas, but that was in the past. He was now a believer. They were real. The bridge had glowed the moment he got close.

He put the shirt on and checked the security cameras. Aggie had emerged from the ladies’ room looking pristine, and then she had gone to make sure that the ladies all had some of the mocktails she had requested. She cocked her head and smiled

politely. He thudded to his chair. He remembered those gestures. She had looked different then, but it was definitely her.

“Holy shit.”

He remembered the other bridal party screeching the house down, the young woman had been attending to the bride, and the bride slipping something into her drink a moment before they left. She had been left leaning against the front window while the rest of the bridal party cackled as they drove off.

A group of alphas had converged on her, and he had given his assistance and called in medical help. One of the alphas mentioned that they had paid for her, and he had ended up in a separate ambulance.

The woman had been so cold and shocky. He held her and talked to her until the ambulance arrived. She was unconscious, and her vitals were dropping quickly. She had opened her eyes once, and the dark brown had faded to pewter while he watched.

The EMTs got her stabilized and headed to the hospital with her. It was the last time he had seen her. There was no whisper of a rumour about her after that. He had forgotten about her. Now, she was all he could think about.

* * * *

Polly watched Aggie switch into hostess mode and knew that she was upset. Polly just sighed and cuddled with Minoru.

Loki came by and grinned. “So, she and the troll are a match.”

“She doesn’t look happy about it.”

“She has work to do.” Loki shrugged. “She’s a work-first kind of girl.”

Aggie walked past the conversation. “She is an adult, furball. Not a girl.”

Loki blinked and grinned.

The rest of the night went by quickly, and when Minoru led Polly to his car, he turned to Loki. “Thanks for helping with the arrangements. She had fun.”

Polly waved at Bill. “Thanks for bringing out the special collection. It was hilarious.”

Bill nodded. “You ladies did it justice, even if it was too cute for words.”

She beamed and headed into the car. Minoru followed and sighed as they drove off toward home.

“Well, I am glad that you enjoyed yourself.”

She laughed. “It was appalling, wasn’t it? I couldn’t resist. All those anime theme songs and we were dressed for it, after all.”

He chuckled, and they held hands as they headed home.

Jiji greeted them and placed on Minoru’s shoulder. He rode proudly through the house as they tiptoed so they wouldn’t wake Nari.

He helped her get her gauzy robes off, and then he knelt and rolled down the thigh-high stockings, kissing the inside of her thigh until she was pushing his head away from the shine around her sex. He swept her off her feet and applied his mouth to her, and a good night became a great night.

Chapter Ten

The day of the wedding, Polly was stunned. They were taking early morning photos in the different outfits that Minoru insisted she wear. The first kimono was white; there was a white silk hat over her hairpiece. The stack of boxes in the bridal suite made her nervous. There was even the box marked *Wedding* that she still hadn't opened. It was at the bottom of the pile.

Minoru took her hand and led her through the gardens that Liirel and Kell had prepared. A pathway lined with cherry trees in full blossom was set up for them, including an archway. Alexi was grinning, and his mates were nearby holding equipment as he gave them concise orders on how to pose.

There were the formal pictures, then the more relaxed poses, and finally, Minoru picked her up and held her even with his face while they kissed.

He ended up wearing some of her lip colour, and she rubbed it away with her thumb. She smiled at the flashback, and he grinned. After that, the rituals began.

Her makeup was fixed, and she and Minoru knelt and sipped sake from the same spot on three different cups. They were then given a blessing by his parents, and Nari stood in for Polly.

There was a wardrobe change, and she put on the ogre kimono while she and Minoru sat in the receiving hall and greeted their guests. Photos were taken, and Minoru fed her.

At the two-hour mark, the business associates took their leave. When someone named Jack came up, he nodded, and his mate bowed.

Polly looked at Luna. "You are part of the book club."

Luna smiled. "I am. I see you didn't need our assistance."

“No, but I would like to keep you in mind if I run into anyone who needs it.”

Luna grinned and handed her a business card.

When Polly stuck her hand out of her sleeve, her long and deadly black nails were obvious. She took the card between her fingers and smiled at Luna’s grin. “I have a giant snowflake embossed on my back.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, I just wish I remember putting it there.”

Polly blinked. “You don’t remember?”

Luna nodded. “One of his other forms did it. We have worked things out.”

Jack shuddered in relief. “Never be too proud to grovel when you have messed up. I have learned that, but I have an adult son and another child on the way. I am glad that I figured out how to grovel.”

Polly cocked her head. “When he’s on his knees, grovelling isn’t usually what happens.”

Luna grinned. “Keep the card, and Minoru can always contact us through Rickart. We are here on his behalf today.”

“Ah. Thank you for coming.” Minoru smiled. “The party will resume at five, so feel free to return and bring your son.”

Luna nodded. “I would, but he is the stable hand at Alita and Niko’s.”

Polly smiled. Alita had looked horsey.

They spoke softly for a few more minutes, and then it was time for another costume change.

When they returned, Alexi bullied them outside, where they were photographed yet again with more flower petals flying through the air around them.

Another hour and a fourth change, and then the box with the word *Wedding* was sitting in her changing area. The dressers grinned and opened the box for her, and she flapped her hands to stop herself from crying. A wedding gown made of silk and

beadwork with a transparent back was inside the polished wooden box. It was one that could be moved in and danced in.

She was stripped down, and the lined dress slipped over her head. The heavy arrangement of hair was taken down into thick coils by Kell, who whispered into the hair until it came apart clean. The pins and decorations were put back into her hair, and when Polly looked in the mirror, Kell had made her a crown.

“Everyone should feel like a princess on their day, and now, you look it.” Kell stepped back. “One last round of photos, and you will have memories for generations.”

Polly smiled. “I have memories of those here today. Memories of those I wished could be here.”

Kell smiled and leaned in to whisper to her.

Polly froze. “Say that again.”

“In the back.”

Polly made sure her shoes were on, and she sprinted past Minoru to the reception hall, where things were being moved for an evening of dancing. A figure with a silk hood was in the corner, her face lit by her phone screen. Polly rocked to a halt in front of her. “Olly!”

The woman lifted her face, and she got to her feet. Polly stared into her own features, and then she hugged her twin to her and sobbed.

Minoru trailed. “I thought your twin was an omega.”

Olly spoke, “We were triplets, but Molly sold me to some of her suitors when I was sixteen. After I got out of the hospital, I ran like hell.”

Polly sniffled. “Any time she contacted me, Molly had her alphas track her.”

“So, I had to stop contacting her, but I wouldn’t miss her wedding.” Olly held her tight.

Minoru frowned. “You never mentioned her. Not once.”

“Well, until it was safe, it wasn’t safe.” She smiled and wiped happy tears.

Olly sighed. “Polly, you are wrecking your makeup.”

Polly laughed. “Can you fix it?”

“Of course. Take me to the prep area.” She turned to Minoru and extended her hand. “Pleased to meet you, big brother.”

He looked at her and frowned. “What colour is your hair?”

“Oh, that is the big difference between us.” She flicked her hood back. The deep cowl cut to mid-back, but her dark blue hair spilled in a wave down her back.

“Your eyes...” He blinked.

“Oh, they aren’t as flashy as Polly’s red, but I like the jade green. It freaks people out.”

Polly gasped. “You have an alpha.”

“I fucking do not. Insufferable jerks. Well, not you, bro.” Olly grinned. “Come on, Polly, let’s fix your face.”

They headed to the room set aside. Olly got the makeup and expertly fixed Polly’s face. “There, now go and take pictures with that charming husband of yours.”

“Olly, I wish you were here for the drinking ceremony.”

“I was, scooter. Now, go and get your picture taken. It’s gorgeous here.”

“I know. Don’t go anywhere.” Polly ordered.

“I won’t. I am staying until the dancing.” Olly laughed.

Polly looked at her and then grabbed her hand. “I am going to keep you where I can see you.”

She hauled her sister along and out to where they were getting what she hoped were the last photos.

When they got outside, Alexi paused. “Holy shit. There are two of you?”

Olly tilted her head. “Have you been drinking?”

He paused and chuckled at her joke. “This is unexpected. Ford is going to be gnashing his teeth.”

Polly caught on. “Oh, because he wanted me in a video.”

“Correct.”

“He would have to ask her.”

Alita looked at Olly and said, “There is something familiar about her.”

Polly looked at Minoru, and he opened his arms to her. She let go of Olly and walked to him.

They got the last of the photos done, and Minoru kissed her as he bent her back. Alexi took several shots of the kiss and laughed. “Now we party.” He paused. “Can I get a shot of the two of you ladies?”

Polly gestured to Olly, and they stood together, smiling with their foreheads together. They turned and faced the camera, and Polly fought crying. It was the first time in over ten years that they were in the same photograph.

Olly smiled. “Right. You have captured my image and stolen my soul. Now get some of that food into you and prepare to dance with your husband.”

“One more.” Polly turned and hugged the stuffing out of Olly.

Alexi laughed. “Olly’s the oldest?”

“How did you know?” Olly muttered.

“Your face. It’s like you are just waiting until she lets you go.”

Polly sighed. “She’s always like that.” She let her stoic sister go and touched her cheek. “You have no idea how happy I am that you are here.”

Olly smiled. “Yes, I am. You and your mate started making so much racket, I had no choice.”

Polly blushed. “Oh, right. I didn’t think about that.”

“You shouldn’t. I shouldn’t be in your thoughts while you are with him. Heck, I shouldn’t be in them at all.”

Polly leaned forward and told her about the triplets. Olly grinned. “Do you need a nanny?”

Polly laughed. “Not quite yet, but I will keep you in mind.”

“I guess I have to hang around.”

Polly squealed and hugged Olly again. It was the best day ever.

The rest of the night was like any other wedding, with alphas circling betas, trying to figure out which one had their mark. The betas just ignored them, which the alphas were also not used to.

Polly sat with Minoru and couldn’t stop smiling. “Thank you for today. It was strangely fun.”

He kissed her cheek. “Did it help you feel settled?”

“I think so. I am a little worried about Gerald sniffing Maura though.” She watched from across the room.

Minoru chuckled. “He finally figured it out. I didn’t tell them which woman had which mark. I am interested in what happens next.”

Olly’s hood left a portion of her back exposed, and when the alphas looked at the bit of pattern, they recoiled.

“What’s wrong with Olly?” She was getting offended by the rejection.

“Her alpha isn’t here. I didn’t invite him.”

She frowned. “But you know who he is.”

“Oh, yes.” He held a canapé to her lips. “Eat up. You are too thin.”

She opened her mouth and watched her sister and her new friends ignoring the alphas and getting up to go for a walk in the garden. Liirel was very proud of the cherry trees that she

had been encouraging over the last month. She got the plants to bloom in the last few days.

The buffet had been set up, and many folks who had attended the early ceremonies came back for the party.

Staff brought food to the couple, and they ate, feeding each other. Polly looked around at the folks laughing and having a good time.

There were a few omegas and their packs holding court at their tables, including Olivia and Ford. Rick was sitting with them and cuddling Bella on his lap.

Ulric was talking with a blonde woman with a giant blond alpha and two more that were all built like bears.

Polly smiled as folks were laughing and having a nice time. Olly had said something that stunned Maura and then laughed. Olly got up from the ladies' table and was still grinning as Maura checked her phone, looked at Olly, and then went to show the others what she had found.

Olly went to sit near the happy couple.

“Olly, what is Maura freaking out about?”

“Oh, she asked what I did for a living.” Olly took the green beans from Polly's plate one by one and ate them.

Polly blushed when Minoru looked at the small gesture. “So, this is why you have been trying to coax Jiji into eating green beans.”

Olly chuckled and kept snitching the green beans. “She never liked them.”

Minoru snickered and asked, “What did you do as an occupation?”

“MMA fighter.”

Polly's jaw dropped. “How?”

“The bell rings, you start swinging, and you get paid. Rinse and repeat.”

Minoru was staring at her, and Olly grinned back. Polly was still blinking in surprise, imagining her sister in a sports bra and shorts, boxing and kicking her way to a payday. Her husband got up and headed to the door, where new arrivals had just caught his eye. A large alpha with what seemed to be a large beta were walking toward the table where Ulric and the female omega were chatting.

Polly asked, "Olly, do you get hurt?"

"Oh, sure. All the time. It comes with the gig." Olly looked at her. "Is the bitch and her pack bugging you?"

"No, Minoru and some other alphas took care of it."

"He takes care of you?"

"Yeah. Even when I shoot myself in the foot." Polly explained about the heat, the suppressors, and then the blastocyst count.

"So, you are pregnant?"

"Yeah, a few weeks." Polly grinned. "Triplets."

"Wow. I was thinking of taking a year off. Did you need any more of them incubated?"

Polly shook her head. "No. I am good to take them on two at a time. Olly, where are you staying?"

Olly chuckled. "Here, at the hotel. I drove up, parked, checked in, got changed, and watched the ceremony. You looked beautiful in everything."

"Thank you. I felt beautiful, but that might have been the way Minoru was looking at me."

Olly smiled. "Do you think you are in love?"

"I think I am. He cares for me, and his family is happy that he has found someone. He also rushes back to me. Oh, and he gave me this." She fished out her pendant and showed it to Olly.

Olly touched it, and fire flared green. "Oh. Geez. Sorry."

Polly blinked. "It never did that before."

Minoru sauntered back with the new alpha and his beta behind him. “It reacted to your mark. You aren’t mine, so it sparked off.”

Polly tucked the pendant back under her dress.

“Gentlemen, this is my bride, Polly, and her sister Olly. Olly, this is Feng and his beta Taio. Feng is the match for the mark you wear.”

Olly got up, nodded, and glared at the men. “We have met. Please, excuse me.”

Polly blinked as her sister walked away. She glared at the newcomers. “What did you do to my sister?”

Taio opened and closed his mouth. Feng pinched the bridge of his nose. “She tried to talk to me after a bout, and I told her to get in line behind the other betas who wanted a taste.”

Taio grimaced. “And I grabbed her by her arm and shoved her past the giggling betas in line to get an autograph.”

Polly nodded, got to her feet, and slapped Feng so hard that he stumbled to the side, and before Taio realized what was happening, she punched him in the gut and kneed him in the jaw.

Minoru stepped between the men and his furious bride. Polly clenched her fists and waited for the fury to fade.

Olly rushed over to Polly’s side. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. I leaked the anger. Are you okay?”

Polly blinked and stumbled. “Wow. You really hate them.”

Olly muttered, “Thanks to them, the rumour that I was looking for hookups spread, and I had to watch my back all day, every day.”

Polly moved further from them and asked, “Why did you try and talk to them?”

“I was going into heat. After they were done humiliating me, I never wanted to see them again. That was over a year ago.” She growled. “Why are they here?”

“Uh, Minoru has this idea that the betas and matching alphas need to be introduced to each other. Strong matchmaking urge.” Polly hugged her sister. “I am sorry.”

“It’s okay. I got to be here on your big day. That means the world. Just remind your alpha that not all of his kind have been nice to their betas.”

Polly smiled. “I will. How long are you staying in town?”

“I don’t know. This changes things. You can call me any time. I will wait for the first dance and then make myself scarce. I don’t want to bring down the mood.”

Polly was going to speak, but the DJ started to speak and asked everyone to greet the bride and groom. She sighed and said, “Don’t leave without talking to me.”

Olly nodded.

* * * *

Olly smiled as Polly and Minoru moved gracefully around the dance floor.

“So, you are mad because of rejection?” Taio murmured it.

“You did it in public. The rumour mill started, and other fighters thought I was desperate, and they began to ambush me. When I rejected them, the rumours got worse.”

“Ambush?”

“None managed penetration, but they did try.” Olly stepped away from the beta.

“Wait, were you approaching other fighters on the tour?” Taio followed her.

“I *was* one of the other fighters on the tour. Now walk away, or I will give *she hits like a girl* a whole new meaning.”

He left, and she smiled as she watched her sister dip and spin with Minoru. When the song was over, Olly applauded and walked up to Polly. “You are a beautiful bride. You will

make a lovely wife and a great mom. Call me if you need anything at all. I am usually less than ten hours away.”

Minoru said, “You can stay with us.”

“No. Thank you. I will stay in an environment I can control.”

Polly hugged her one more time. “Get some sleep. I look tired.”

Olly grinned at their old joke and brought her forehead to Polly’s. “Enjoy your party.”

“Enjoy your rest.”

Olly glanced to make sure that the idiots were occupied, and she headed out of the banquet hall to the elevator. She remained tense until she got into her hotel room and flipped all the locks on the door.

She sighed and sat on the bed. Her body was humming again. Damn. Every time she bumped into Feng Zhang, she went into heat.

Olly called downstairs and asked if she could extend her stay for five more days. She breathed easier when they processed the payment and got her toys and lube. She always started by meditating, trying to keep things in control.

She took a break and sent a note to her manager, indicating that no booked bouts were to be engaged in until they were notified.

She returned to her focus and tried to keep herself calm. She would lose control soon enough.

* * * *

Feng looked around, and his dragon was restless. “Where did she go?”

“Who?” Taio was making his way through a meal.

“Olly Thorn. My female beta.”

“I guess she left. She doesn’t really like you.” Taio chuckled.

“What did she say?”

“Just some bullshit about the public moment made the other males think she was up for it because she was.”

Feng turned and looked at Taio. “Did you say anything about her?”

He watched his friend and companion darken in embarrassment. “Just locker room stuff. I didn’t realize she was another fighter.”

“Did they hurt her?”

“They didn’t rape her if that is what you mean.” He groaned. “But apparently, they tried. She just looked so desperate. I thought it was just standard lust.”

Feng scanned the entire ballroom, and she was gone.

The bride and Minoru were dancing slowly, and when the song was over, Feng walked up and looked at the bride, “Where did she go?”

The woman with his mate’s face said, “Off to sleep. Nothing to keep her here. She came for me. The formalities are over, and now, she went wherever she is staying and is crashing.”

“Crashing? Why not sleeping?”

The bride frowned.

Minoru said softly, “She is here in the hotel. Loki booked in a friend, and it must be her.”

Feng looked at the red-eyed alpha. “Which room?”

Polly growled. “None of your fucking business.”

Feng wrinkled his nose. “Kijin, you had best attend to your mate. She’s going into heat.”

Minoru flared his nostrils. “That isn’t her scent. Also, Polly is pregnant. No heat.”

Polly covered her mouth and hid behind her mate.

Feng blinked. “She’s in heat? Here?”

Polly said, “She will manage it herself. She doesn’t need you and your devoted and helpful beta. Jealous bastard.”

Taio blushed. “I am just guarding his flank.”

Feng frowned. “Taio, what did you do?”

“I am just trying to make sure she stays in her own lane. She isn’t even Chinese.”

Feng blinked. “The family accepted Delun’s omega. She is definitely not Chinese. His sloth is accepted as well. Not Chinese.”

“But... you are the dragon. You deserve a better mate.”

“Fate has marked this one for me. Her body and blood called to me, and I didn’t know what it was. I know now.” He looked at his beta.

Polly spoke up. “Great. Good for you. She’s got this handled. She’s had enough practice.”

Feng winced. “Minoru, may I have permission to seek her out?”

The ogre glared at him. “If one guest complains, you are out of here. That includes her.”

Feng nodded, and he took off for the lobby with long strides.

Taio was behind him as Feng knelt and sniffed for a trace of her. Middle elevator. He sniffed the buttons and found the hot sweetness of her scent on the eighth floor.

From there, they walked through the hall, and Taio inhaled. “Holy shit. It is coming from there.”

“You can catch her scent?”

Taio nodded. “She smells like honey and allspice with a wave of spearmint.”

Feng nodded. “That is her heat scent. It’s calling to me. In case I am blind to her beauty, it is trying to make sure that I pay attention.”

Feng stood outside her door, but instead of a rise in her scent, it was fading. The dragon thrashed around inside him, and it wanted to see her.

Feng watched as his hand started to glow blue, and there was the sound of a door lock swinging out of the way. The door lock flared green, and there was a click.

Taio muttered, "How did you do that?"

"I didn't. *He* did."

"So, this isn't a joke. She's really your mate."

"And breeding partner. Won't that be cute?"

He opened the door, and the room was silent. He moved into the room, and there was Olly, kneeling on the bed, eyes closed and a soft pale blue light shimmering around her.

Taio gasped.

Olly's soft voice said, "Please leave. I have a grip on it."

Feng walked toward her. "I don't want to leave."

She looked at him with glowing jade green eyes. "No means no, and I am saying no." A tear welled up and moved down her cheek. "My turn to tell you to leave. I don't want you here."

"You need me."

"Not this time. Not the night of my sister's wedding. I will not blur any events. Get out. And don't bring the gossip bitch back with you."

Taio stepped back.

Feng frowned. "He is one of mine."

She looked at him. "With his mindset, if he hates me, I will never be yours. Get. Out."

Feng knew pain and distrust, and she had both in her eyes. He needed to retrace his steps and find out what had happened.

He took one of the hotel keys and gave it to Taio. "You get her whatever she needs until I return. Are we clear?"

“Yes.”

“Now, who did you speak to?” He grabbed the back of Taio’s neck, and images of the conversations spilled into his thoughts. “Idiot.”

“How will I know what she needs?”

“Ask her. And when she tells you to screw off? Come back in two hours and ask her again,” Feng ordered.

They left the hotel room and made sure the door was secure. Feng went downstairs and asked for the connecting room next to Olly’s. He rented it for a week and gave one key to Taio. “You are not leaving this hotel unless you are getting something for Olly. Are we clear?”

“Yes.”

Feng went up to unlock the adjoining doors, and they latched them open. Taio could sleep in a separate space but still be close to Olly. He was going to have to get used to her. She was going to be theirs sooner rather than later.

* * * *

Polly leaned against Minoru. “She’s calm now.”

“Have you always felt her?”

“She has come to me when I needed her more than I have ever helped her.” She smiled as they slowly moved on the dance floor. “It was her reflexes that broke your nose.”

“I must thank her one day. It was that action that let me see you in a kimono for the first time.”

“Was that when you decided on the wedding instead of just pouncing on me?”

He smiled. “It was.”

She looked around at a few of the alphas and betas tentatively dancing. “Your matchmaking streak needs some work.”

“I will practice. I should have actually spoken to Olly before I summoned Feng.”

“You think? The fact that she already expressed her distaste for alphas should have been a clue.”

“I will speak with her when I next see her.”

“Do you think Feng will just leave her alone?” She looked at him hopefully.

“Oh, absolutely not, but he will change the manner of his seduction.” He cleared his throat. “Was Olly ever assaulted?”

“Sexually? No. Molly sold Olly to some upperclassmen, and they tried to attack her. She fought them off but was badly beaten in the process. When she left the hospital, she just disappeared.”

“Your sister sold her? For what?”

“A designer purse. Nothing too good for the household omega.” Polly grimaced.

“Well, I am planning on spoiling my beloved beta and our children. As is my family.”

She smiled. “I know. I have been kissed and patted all day. It was a very good day and nice to see other women in kimonos.”

“But your dress is gorgeous. I am also looking forward to the pictures. My family in Japan is eager for the emails.”

She smiled. “The gardens were beautiful. I hope Liirel charged you through the nose.”

“If we decide to keep it, she will. If not, Aggie got a hefty chunk for the landscaping.”

“Good.” She sighed. “I hope Olly is okay.”

“She will be fine. Feng might fumble a little, but he means well.”

“What about his beta?”

“Taio is devoted to Feng. He will come around if Feng orders him to, and as Olly is Feng’s mate, Taio will learn to

take care of her as well.”

“Olly being taken care of. That is something I am looking forward to seeing. She is always the one fussing over others.”

“I thought that was what you were doing.”

“Fussing over you?”

He grinned. “I like it when you fuss over me.”

“Well, husband, it will last until the babies are here.” She chuckled. “You had better soak it all in while you can.”

He laughed. “In that case, I will start right now.” He lifted her high in the air, and she squealed as he tossed her and caught her in his arms in a bridal carry. “I now have my bride, and my hunt is over. I am going to enjoy it.”

They left their party with well wishes tossed their way.

It really had been a very good day, and many more days, months, and years loomed in their future together.

Author's Note

Well, the title changed from *Ogre Bride* to *Hunted Bride*. I liked it. Olly came out of nowhere, but she's fun. So, I am continuing with this weird selection of marked betas.

As for any cultural references, this is a fantasy universe loosely based on ours. Nothing is quite right, but it is close and done with respect to the original culture. Just in case.

Thanks for reading,

Viola Grace

About the Author

Viola Grace (aka Zenina Masters) is a Canadian sci-fi/paranormal romance writer with ambitions to keep writing for the rest of her life. She specializes in short stories because the thrill of discovery, of all those firsts, is what keeps her writing.

An artist who enjoys a story that catches you up, whirls you around, and sets you down with a smile on your face is all she endeavours to be. She prefers to leave the drama to those who are better suited to it, she always goes for the cheap laugh.

In real life, she is now engaged in beekeeping, and her adventures can be found on the YouTube channel, Mystery Bees Apiary. Just look for the cartoon kittens.