



AN MM MPREG SHIFTER
ROMANCE



AN OMEGA
COUNCIL OF THE SNOW LEOPARDS TWO
FOR JONAH

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AN OMEGA FOR JONAH

AN M/M SHIFTER MPREG ROMANCE

COUNCIL OF THE SNOW LEOPARDS

BOOK 2

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SURRENDERED PRESS

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An Omega For Jonah

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KYLE

My stomach dropped at the subject line on the newest email in the inbox.

Anytime my boss had “immediate action needed” it was bad news. But when he sent it five minutes before closing time, it inevitably indicated my ass was going to be stuck in my chair long into the night.

As much as I wanted to ignore it, to pretend that I hadn’t seen it, I couldn’t. Sam was an asshole, and without a doubt he was going to DM in a minute, followed by a text, and if that didn’t work, he would call first my office phone and then my personal one. That was the way he was and one of the many reasons I was looking for a way out of this hellhole... cubicle... same difference.

I clicked the email and sure enough, there was a tech fail and all the work we’d done on the most recent sales reports were gone. Management needed new reports by the end of the day. How badly I wanted to tell them that their emergency wasn’t my problem, but I had to suck it up and reply that I was on it.

It wasn’t as though I enjoyed being treated like shit. It was just that the other options sucked. I applied for job after job, and for most of them I either got no response or a polite thanks, but no thanks. And the few interviews I did get were marathons of meeting after meeting with a side of “do free work for us to prove you fit in” thrown in the mix. It was beyond frustrating.

And honestly, I couldn't remember why I got into this field to begin with. Sure, I loved playing with numbers, but this wasn't the fun stuff. I spent my days helping people I never met make even more money than they already had and far more than anyone needed. I had to get off this merry-go-round and now.

It was near midnight when I finally walked into my apartment. I was beyond exhausted. But as was the way of things, I overcaffeinated to stay focused when the numbers started to get blurry. It was not a good mix. I went to the fridge and grabbed the milk. It was a cereal for dinner kind of night. Or at least I thought it was before I opened the cap.

"Of course it's spoiled." I poured it down the sink, grabbed a banana, and called it good.

What I needed was to go to sleep, but my mind was wandering all over the place. If I took a shower and climbed into bed now, I was going to be awake for hours.

I grabbed my phone and typed a quick message to my sister.

If you're awake, can you give me a call?

The phone rang a handful of seconds later.

"I'm awake, but barely," she spoke before I managed to say hello. "Perfect timing."

"I'll let you go. It was no big deal. I just wanted to bitch about my day. I can do that tomorrow and who knows, maybe I'll even have some extra shittiness to add to it." I plopped into my recliner and pulled off my socks.

"Perfect timing is a phrase people use to say that the timing was perfect," she sassed. "Spill. I'm bored."

"I thought you were going to bed."

"I was because I was bored."

"I'm going to pretend you aren't lying to be a good sister and fill your ears with all my woes." She already knew I hated my job and that I'd been applying to anything and everything in my field. That wasn't new. But somehow she missed the memo where my boss was making me fix his problems as he went home to do whatever he did there. She wasn't impressed.

“Fuck that. Just put in your notice next time he pulls that crap.”

“I can’t. Finding a job that makes this much money isn’t easy. Trust me. I’ve tried. Shit, I’ve tried jobs that pay less.” It was embarrassing the sheer volume of jobs I’d applied to.

“But that’s it... you aren’t making good money. Not when you figure out your hourly wage. You’re basically working two full-time jobs, and before you argue, do the math. That’s your forte, right?”

“I hate you,” I grumbled as I did the quick calculation in my head. Why did she always have to be right?

“That’s a weird thing to say considering I’m your favorite person,” she sing-songed. “What you need is a career shift.”

“I should probably wait until my student loans are paid before going back to school, don’t ya think?”

“I never said a single word about school, did I?” I could practically see her smirk. Gods, I missed her. It had been far too long since we’d seen each other and having her give me the what for only reminded me of that.

“No. But it’s not like I have any other marketable skills.” As my job search had done an amazing job of reminding me at every junction.

“You used to work at Al’s.”

“Working at a pizza place isn’t the pinnacle of experience, especially when it was during high school.”

It had been a great job. I’d give her that. The owner had inherited it from his dad and didn’t want anything to do with it, giving us free reign. We got paid to hang with our friends, throw some pizzas together, and basically anything else we wanted to do as long as we didn’t bother him.

“That was exactly the experience I was thinking you should tap into. You kept that place going for two years with no training and no actual supervision. After you left, it crumbled.”

I didn’t see it that way.

“Or the new crew just took advantage of my boss’s lack of leadership, which my friends and I didn’t do.”

“Your friends stayed. You were the only one who left. Have you considered getting into restaurant management?” She sounded dead serious.

“No. And I don’t think anyone hiring someone to manage their business would look to me and think I was the best option. I’m a numbers and spreadsheets kind of guy and there’s so much more to running a place than math.”

“Okay. It was just a thought. My chinchilla’s being a shit. I think I’m gonna shift before bed. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, sis. Love you.”

After we hung up I decided that maybe a shift would do me well, and I stripped and took my fur. That was one thing I had on the larger shifters. If I were a lion, I’d have to travel someplace I wouldn’t be seen to shift. But I was an animal people kept as house pets. I could shift in my apartment with ease. It wasn’t quite as nice as being out in the fresh air, but it was a thousand times closer and safer.

I even had a set up for my chinchilla. My sister laughed at me, but my beast loved dirt baths. He thought they were the bees’ knees and I didn’t see any reason not to give him a place to take one while he was bouncing around. I bought a little covered pan designed just for that and left it out most of the time. Even I had to admit it was a bit weird going to a pet store to buy yourself something, but I never once regretted it.

My chinchilla went inside and did his thing, loving the way it felt to get the dust through his fur. He was very prideful about his coat, and well he should be. Chinchillas had some of the softest hair there was. There was a reason our wild brothers and sisters were bred for their skins.

I felt much better after my dust bath and shifted, going directly to bed and falling asleep almost instantly.

The next morning I went into work expecting it to be a bit calmer after the storm that was the day before. How wrong I was. Emergency email after emergency email later, I had a

week's worth of work on my plate by lunchtime. Not that I was going to get to take lunch, given my new work load. And as I did task after task, I kept thinking about the conversation I'd had with my sister. Something about it didn't sit quite right with me... like I was missing a piece of the puzzle.

I pushed that aside and got back to work. It kept nagging at me, and as soon as I got in my car when I was finally able to go home after ten pm, I called her.

"Yesterday wasn't just about you trying to help me, was it?"

"It was. I love you and I want what's best for you."

"But?"

"But also my boss is amazing and he's expanding. He needs a manager for his new restaurant and everyone who's applying is either used to running franchises or doesn't know spit about the business. I really want this to work out well for him and I want things to work out well for you. I was attempting an employer employee match making." My phone notified me that she was attempting to turn our call into a video chat and I accepted. "Shit, are you not home yet?"

"I'm not and I don't need you setting me up with anyone for work or otherwise." I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes. "But also I can't keep going on like this. It's killing me slowly."

"Not slowly. I worry about you. Consider coming to Oakheart, even if it's just for a visit. I have a guest room."

"You know how difficult it is for me to be able to get off of work." The last time I had a vacation scheduled, they took back the leave request the day before. "But I'll try, Kim. I miss you too."

JONAH

Bodhi, Alpha Waylon's son, giggled as he waddled over the grass with his omega dad, Daxon, holding his hands.

The little boy's laughter reminded me of a mountain stream and the water tinkling over the rocks. I envied Waylon in that he had a mate and child, and *most* of the snow leopard sizzle looked up to him. There would always be some among the group who clung to old-fashioned customs and refused to embrace change.

Previously, we snow leopards didn't traditionally have what other shifters did, as in we didn't belong to a pack, a den, or a herd. We were individuals who came together for our annual conference and had little if any contact for the rest of the year.

I was pleased at taking an active role in transforming us into a cohesive group. Not everyone lived in the development, as some of our snow leopards were spread around the world and we connected digitally rather than in person. But now we were a community.

Snowford, my beast reminded me.

We'd finally voted on our village name, with Snowford being the eventual winner. There had been four choices and much discussion before the final decision. Bodhi's birth interrupted the first vote, and while Snowford wasn't my choice, I was getting used to it. The entrance to the village now boasted a huge mural of frosty mountain tops and the name that lit up and twinkled at night.

Our village resembled more of a plain than mountains, but peaks and their slopes were the traditional home of our wild cousins. Like the new name, I became fond of the mural and made sure there were snow leopards on rotation to touch up the paint every month.

“Let me guess, Jonah.” Daxon must have crept up behind me as I stood in front of his restaurant. “You’ll be sitting at that table outside.” He hefted Bodhi onto his other hip and pointed to one at the end of the terrace. “And you’ll be wanting the duck breast.”

Damn. I should order something else, but the duck was so good.

“You know me so well, Alpha Omega.”

Daxon was the restaurant owner, and he was there most nights after putting Bodhi to bed. But during the lunch hour rush, his temporary manager, Hayden, was in charge, having transferred from Daxon’s coffee shop in Rockhill until the Alpha Omega found a suitable candidate to fill the position.

“Enjoy.”

I nodded and sat myself down at my usual table. A soda appeared at my elbow without me ordering it. I was a creature of habit and the staff were aware of what I drank. I didn’t eat a lot of meat, but looked forward to my once a week treat of duck breast.

“Hi, Jonah.” Kim, the manager of Daxon’s original coffee shop here in Oakheart, staggered over the terrace with a pile of boxes.

“Let me help you.”

“Thanks.” Kim led the way though the restaurant and out back, indicating where to put the boxes. She thanked me again and I returned to my table.

Doing nothing but observing my fellow diners and people passing by the restaurant took up a minute. After that, I read messages regarding snow leopard council business and then dealt with my own work-related emails.

Juggling the two wasn't a burden because I was firstly a workaholic, and secondly, I had no family—or no family close by. It was kind of ironic that I owned a company that sold children's toys and furniture considering I had no kids, wasn't mated, and there were no prospective mates in Snowford. I'd not sussed out anyone in the village—or sniffed or scented—who I could mate.

I kept myself busy, rarely taking a day off. If I was up to date with work, I pottered around the home I'd bought here. It still needed a lot of work but I preferred to do the interior painting and decorating myself.

“Thank you.” Darcy, one of the waiters, placed my meal on the table. My mouth watered at the succulent duck breast, chutney, sweet potato fries, and a salad. Rumor was this was the meal the Alpha Omega had served his former wolf Alpha when said Alpha told Daxon and Waylon their child would be part of his pack. But Daxon called the guy on his BS.

Growing up, everyone assumed Daxon was a wolf shifter, as were his parents. But our sneaky snow leopard recessive gene turned that idea on its head.

“I'll let Kyle know.” Kim was talking to Hayden as she strode to her car.

Having no idea who Kyle was, I attacked my meal. Mmmm, it was cooked to perfection. The staff, including Daxon, were aware of how finicky I was about my food. Their word, not mine. I didn't see a problem in my exacting standards but I was a source of exasperation whenever I dined at a restaurant. One of the reasons I frequented this one was because the food and service were to my liking.

“May I join you, Jonah?” Isadora didn't wait for my answer and sat opposite.

I finished chewing a mouthful of duck. “Is this council business?”

She nodded and thrust a tablet at me. “It's the sizzle website. I can't figure out how to set up payments for the annual membership.” She stabbed a finger at the screen.

I sighed. Isadora wanted everything done yesterday, but there were so many tasks when setting up a new community. And while we were working on streamlining payment processing online, we'd made do for years with direct debit into our bank account.

“Can it wait until I finish my meal?”

Her eyes snapped to my food, and her lips parted as if she was about to respond. But she closed them and shrugged. “Sure.”

I liked Isadora and we worked well together on the council, but I'd swear she wasn't aware I'd been eating until I pointed it out. Maybe that was why we got along. We were both single-minded when presented with a task, striving to complete it in the most efficient way possible.

“It does look good.” She peered at me as I took another bite.

“It's duck. You should try it.”

Isadora picked up a fork and stabbed not the meat, but one of my sweet potato fries. For a woman of means who'd lived a life outside of our snow leopard sizzle, she'd missed lessons on manners and table etiquette.

Darcy appeared at her elbow, asking if she'd like to order. She ordered her duck to go, saying we had important business to attend to and she'd eat it for dinner. I refused to hurry my lunch and continued to chew even after Darcy brought my companion's take out and she tapped her long nails on the tabletop.

When I was finally done and I paid, we went to Isadora's home, as it was closer than mine and she was allergic to the smell of paint. We avoided the community center as all the rooms were booked by craft groups and a book club this afternoon.

Isadora made tea and we sat in her home office as I attempted to sort out the problem with the website. Not that I was a tech expert, though she assumed I was because of my company's website. But I'd paid a guy to set that up.

“Are you ever lonely?” she asked.

Whoa! Where did that come from? I wasn't one for allowing people a peek into my private life, and Isadora herself kept most of the snow leopards at arm's length. My hands hovered over the keyboard, frozen, as I processed what she'd said.

"Sometimes, but living here in the community is the perfect antidote for that."

"Mmmm, but I'm talking about a mate."

Ouch! She'd zoomed past polite conversation and gone straight for the heart. As far as I was aware, she had never mated, though she and Waylon's dad, Andrew, the former Alpha, spent a lot of time together.

"I've thought about it. Having a mate would make my life complete, maybe add in a couple of kids." I'd love to be a dad, but had never confessed to wanting them to anyone, until now.

She sipped her tea, and I went back to working on the website. But as she had brought up the subject, I ventured to find out *her* opinion.

"And you? Do you long for a mate?"

"I never thought I did, but Andrew and I are considering making it official."

"That's amazing." I went to hug her, not that I was a hugger, but it was a spur of the moment decision. But Isadora didn't put her emotions on display either and she reared back, indicating the tea she was holding.

She put a finger to her lips. "It's not official and we haven't informed Alpha and the Alpha Omega." She fiddled with a button on her cuff. "We're not fated mates, obviously, or we would have marked one another years ago and been fucking non stop. Not that the sex isn't good," she mused.

"Stop!" Putting my hands over my ears, I tried to drown out the images of a naked Isadora straddling our former Alpha. Ugh, I needed brain bleach. How I wished there was such a thing that would wipe out the memories of the last few minutes.

“What? Surely you’re not weirded out by sex between consenting adults?”

“Not at all.” I threw back my tea, hoping it’d burn my throat so badly, I’d need medical attention and I could escape hearing about Isadora’s sex life. But the tepid liquid slid down easily, thwarting my plans.

“My advice would be to tell Waylon and Daxon, because if word got out about you and Andrew, Waylon in particular would be hurt if you hadn’t confided in him.”

“You’re not going to tell him, are you?”

“No.” It wasn’t my story to tell. “Are you worried Waylon won’t approve?”

“Not really, but adjusting to another person in your parent’s life can be difficult. Andrew says his son will be happy for us, but I’m the one dragging my feet. He’s not just my mate-to-be’s son, he’s Alpha.”

I told her to forget about Waylon’s role in our sizzle and think of him as Andrew’s son. “He’ll be pleased his dad has a mate to share his life with.”

After finding the problem with the site, I tested it to make sure it was working and said my goodbyes. Wandering home, I ran my mind over what Isadora had said. I filled my life with work and community service, but I longed for a mate. There were shifter dating sites, but as there were fewer snow leopards than other shifters, I’d be unlikely to find one.

Kids playing football in the community park kicked a ball across the sidewalk, and I tossed it back to them. I’d never played a sport as a kid. How could I be a good dad if I wouldn’t kick a ball around the back yard with a son or daughter?

The phone beeped, reminding me of an online meeting with a supplier, and I walked into my house, prepped and ready for a long afternoon and evening of work.

KYLE

I hadn't gone into work planning to quit. If anything, I'd been more resolved to keep my job after yet another long interview process with nothing to show for it at the end. It was one thing to be under appreciated at your current job, but another to be told repeatedly you weren't good enough to bring on board. And the worst part about that particular job I applied for was they upped the listing and were now offering five thousand more, meaning they didn't find someone better than me. I just wasn't good enough.

It sucked.

But as much as it sucked, my day at work sucked more. It began with an email announcing an all-call meeting at nine am. We had department meetings all the time. That wasn't new. But all-call? They hadn't had one of those since I'd started there.

"What do you think it is?" I asked Lynn, my cubicle mate.

"Nothing good. They gave us less than half an hour's notice and that's never a good sign. Plus calling the entire staff together. I have no idea, but it's going to be bad. I feel it in my bones."

They held it in the "event room" of the building. I'd never been inside before, and based on the name I'd expected more than a room full of folding chairs. We piled in and took our seats, waiting for the meeting to begin. It wasn't even the big boss who came out. It was HR, and they were there to tell us there was a change in insurance... that change being that our

rates were going to double and our coverage cut in half. They were also cutting our contributions to our 401k, freezing raises, and my personal favorite, not allowing us to carry over unused leave. The reason why? A slow in profit growth. Not that they were in the red or that profits had fallen, they simply weren't growing fast enough.

Fuck that noise. I packed up my desk at five that night, leaving any unfinished work just as it was, and when I got home, submitted my resignation. It wasn't the best way to leave a job, but I couldn't take it another day.

I sent my sister a quick message.

Hey, sis. How about a roommate?

Seriously?

Yeah. I'm leaving Saturday.

My phone rang, and I put her on speaker. "I really am almost packed."

"I believe you, which was why I called. What happened? Layoffs?"

I told her the entire story and how I was done with city life and cubicle work. I needed to be around family and regroup. To her credit, she didn't push me too hard about details, not even that job she'd mentioned previously. She simply listened, which was exactly what I needed.

My lease had expired after the first year and I was doing it month to month. I'd lose some money, but not a ton by leaving when I did. On Saturday, I packed my car and waited for the charity to whom I was donating my furniture to pick it up. I didn't have anything that I hadn't built from a kit. It would cost far more to move it than it would to buy new.

It took three days to get to my sister's. I could have made better time if I didn't stop at random places along the way, but for the first time in my life I had the time to wander aimlessly, and stopping at tourist traps felt like a fun way to take advantage of said time. I was going to need a job, any job, soon enough. And besides, as much as I felt I was making the right decision heading to my sister's, part of me was dragging

my feet and stopping at all the touristy places along the way to avoid thinking about it.

I called Kim when I reached Oakheart and she was outside when I pulled up to her place, ready to give me a bear hug.

“I missed you so much.” She held me tightly.

“I missed you too, sis.”

After getting most of my belongings inside and stacked in her guest room, she made me a cup of tea and we sat chatting at her small kitchen table.

“I don’t want you to feel rushed to get a job, Kyle. But if you want one, the restaurant management one is still open, or you could work at the coffee shop I manage.” She took a sip of her drink. “Or if you want, I can set up an office space and you can do remote work—whatever that is—from here.”

“I really haven’t decided anything yet, but I promise to figure it out soon. Honestly, the entire situation has me in a tailspin, but now that I’m here... things are looking up. It’s been too long since I’ve been around other chinchillas. My beast needs this.”

“Wanna shift?” she offered. I appreciated it, and on any other day I’d have jumped at the opportunity, but seeing all of the boxes that needed to be unpacked had me declining.

“Maybe after I’m done with this all.” I indicated the pile of boxes. “I don’t have that much, but I’ll feel better when it’s accessible.”

“I understand. Tell me what to do, and I’ll help you make quick work of this.”

Between the two of us, we managed to get everything unpacked and put in its temporary home. Although, I wasn’t treating it as such, taking care to give everything a proper place and rearranging things to make the guest room feel more like mine. If I sensed for even a nanosecond that my sister minded, I’d have stopped. But she seemed as happy to have me here as I was beginning to realize I was about being here.

If only it hadn't taken shit to really hit the fan at work for me to finally pull the plug. I could've been here sooner.

"Hungry?" Kim held a box of flattened boxes to be recycled. "I could make us some dinner."

"Or... I could make us some dinner. I do know how to cook, you know." I might not be a great chef, or even a good one. But I could make some of my sister's favorites.

"Sausage cheese casserole?" Her eyes lit up.

"Absolutely. Let me run to the store and get what I need."

She smiled and ran out of the room with the boxes, coming back in with the three main ingredients for the casserole in her hands. "These ingredients?"

"I see how it is."

She smirked with a half shrug.

"Let me pop in the shower real quick and get this cooking."

It didn't take long to whip up the casserole and put it in the oven. I never understood why Kim never made it, always leaving it for me. It was by far one of the simplest recipes of our childhood.

"It's going to take a half an hour to finish baking. Wanna get some fur on?" I set the timer on the stove.

"Yeah. I have an area set up out back."

And she did. To a random person, the backyard was nice enough. Nothing fancy, but well kept and spacious. But to a chinchilla shifter, you could see how one garden was designed just for us to play in. Or at least this chinchilla could. I loved it.

We shifted and tore around the garden until the timer in the kitchen went off. I raced back in, happy that I hadn't left it in there too long, resulting in the potato chip crust being too dark. There was a fine line between toasted goodness and burnt.

"This smells just like our childhood." Kim scooped up two huge plates and brought them to the table while I grabbed some water for us.

I sat down, the cool draft from the vent sending shivers through me.

“You’re cold.” Kim got up and went into her room, coming back with a hoodie. “Here, put this on.”

I did, and the scent of it had my chinchilla paying attention. The mint mixed with berry undertones was freaking delicious, but it was more than that. This scent shouted mate. The owner of the sweatshirt was my mate. Or possibly not the owner, but the last person my sister let use it. Crap. Please don’t let this be one of her beaus. It was one thing for me to come here and take over half her place. It would be quite another if she was dating someone, fated or not, and they spent a lot of time here.

“Is this yours?” I wanted to tighten the string on the hood until I was completely wrapped inside of it.

“Naw. It’s Jonah’s. I told him if he kept leaving his shit around, I was going to keep it. So actually, yeah, I suppose it is.” She shoved another fork full of casserole into her mouth. “You can keep it if you want.”

“Who is Jonah?” Because I needed to meet him like yesterday. “Does he work at the coffee shop?”

“No. He’s a snow leopard shifter. Eats at Daxon’s restaurant a lot. He reminds me of that friend of yours from school, the one who insisted on tidying the classroom after everyone left because he hated mess. I could never work out how you two were friends because you were and are the exact opposite.”

Nothing shouted the true love of a sister quite like dredging up the past.

“You might like the guy, become besties.”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t sure we’d be friends, but was hoping for something more. “Now tell me about Jonah and some more about this sizzle. I’m not gonna lie, I know you keep mentioning it, but I haven’t been the best of listeners.”

She went on to tell me all about Jonah from his hair color to his job, to his community work with the sizzle. But mostly she focused on how he kept leaving things at the restaurant, the one she kept pestering me to apply for a job at.

“Does he work at the restaurant at all? Like part time even?”
Because getting a job there sounded far better than it did even a half an hour ago.

“Not really, but as part of the sizzle, he helps with our billing system sometimes. The sizzle might be new, but they are working hard at making it feel very teamwork oriented.” Kim stood up, her plate empty. “I’m getting more. Want any?”

I looked down at my plate, which was still half full. I’d somehow managed to only eat half of it.

“I’ll grab some in a minute.”

I wrapped my arms around myself clad in the hoodie as she got her food, wishing it was Jonah giving me the hug instead. All I did was get a second-hand whiff of his scent. I couldn’t wait until I was able to scent him for real... taste him for real... learn about him from the source.

“Why are you so curious about Jonah? It feels like more than just you being nosey.”

“If the scent on this sweatshirt is his, that means he’s the one my chinchilla has decided is our mate.”

I’d never seen Kim move as quickly as she did to come and give me a hug.

JONAH

Maybe I should get a dog.

Why?

My beast wasn't the jealous type, but he didn't understand the need for companionship. Snow leopards had never lived together in groups, not our wild kin nor shifters, until we created the sizzle. He had plenty of solitude when I had my skin as he could sleep all day, annoy me about shifting, or make observations about the people we met. This question was a genuine inquiry and not loaded with hidden meanings.

It might be fun. I'd take him for walks and we could play ball.

My snow leopard shrugged, telling me the time I spent with a canine could be used for shifting in the woods.

Cecily, another member of the snow leopard council, wandered into the small room tucked away at the back of the community center which I'd claimed as my own. She wanted to print off a document and put extra paper in the printer feed.

"What do you think about me getting a dog?"

She glanced up and tilted her head to one side. "I think you're more of a cat person, Jonah. They're less work than a dog."

Waylon had cats and they were cuties. It made sense as our beasts were big cats and that we'd gravitate to a member of our own species. But an image of kitty poop popped into my head.

"Ewww, but they need a litter tray if they're indoor cats."

Gross, my beast agreed.

“Pfft, you need to keep up with technology. There are self-cleaning ones now.”

But I couldn’t stomach the idea of poop, mixed in with kitty litter and whatever else was in the self-cleaning device, sitting in my laundry.

“I’ll think about it,” I fibbed, having no intention of getting a cat.

I studied the computer screen, trying to sort out the booking schedule for the various rooms. The baby and toddler group, Family Ties, needed one of the larger rooms as mated couples in the sizzle were having lots of kids, something that hadn’t happened in decades.

I was trying to convince the book group, *As The Pages Turn*, who met weekly, to take a smaller room. They didn’t need equipment or a lot of space. But they were resisting, insisting they were adding new members daily. It was a headache and I wished I could give the job to Isadora. She’d sort them out soon enough. While I was known for speaking my mind, the leaders of both groups were feisty and they scared me a little.

The phone rang, and I picked it up without looking at the caller.

“Jonah.”

“Alpha.”

“I need you to go to Daxon’s restaurant. The Health and Safety people are making an inspection in thirty minutes.”

“Alpha?” Neither my own job nor my sizzle responsibilities included dealing with health and safety, especially as the Alpha Omega’s restaurant was a private business and didn’t come under the auspices of the committee, though sizzle members helped out when needed.

“I know it’s not your job but Daxon is at the coffee shop today, catering to a school group, and Hayden’s in Rockhill as his mate is due to give birth any day.”

“But I don’t know anything about health and safety requirements in restaurants, other than dining out there.”

“I don’t either. But my mate says it’s routine.”

I had no idea what to say if the person or people asked a question about how the restaurant was run. Perhaps I could launch into detail about how delicious the duck breast was. But Waylon assured me the staff were there. If that was so, why was I needed? But he insisted.

“Okay. I’ll go over now.”

While I was relieved to not have to face Clarence or Timmy from the baby and toddler group or the book lovers respectively, I wasn’t thrilled at my task. Unless I could stay after the inspectors had gone and eat my favorite meal. The thought cheered me up and I had a bounce in my step as I headed toward the restaurant.

I met Kim at the curb. Her lips were set in a straight line and she was tugging at her hair, suggesting she was frazzled. She almost tripped as she headed to her car, and she muttered something under her breath.

We rarely bumped into one another, as Daxon’s Coffee, the shop she managed, was on the other side of town and not part of the sizzle. Not that I didn’t venture outside of our community, but the Alpha Omega’s restaurant and coffee shop were here so there was no need. Besides, after living by myself since I left home at sixteen, I was enjoying being surrounded by my kind.

She liked reminding me I’d left a hoodie at the restaurant, more than one actually. I rarely wore one, and if I had one with me when I went out, I invariably left it slung over the back of a chair. That was odd, and I couldn’t fathom why I did that.

But seeing Kim gave me hope she was here for the inspection.

“I’m so pleased you came. I was worried I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Her brow furrowed. “Usually when you order food, you wait, and when it comes, you eat it.”

Snarky! My beast took note of her tone.

“Ummm, I’m not here to eat but for the health and safety inspection.”

Kim opened her car door and tossed in a container. “That’s not on me. The boss and I have a function at Daxon’s Coffee.” She pointed to the box. “We ran out of low-calorie sugar substitutes.”

“But I—”

“Sorry. Gotta run. You’ll be fine.”

Damn! Thought I’d gotten out of it. I paused on the restaurant terrace. The coffee shop side was bustling, but the restaurant closed after lunch and opened again for dinner. How I wished I was coming here to eat. Not that I could, as the place wouldn’t open again for a few hours. Damn! No duck for me.

But as I pushed open the door, a scent wafted around, teased me, and finally slapped me in the face, almost knocking me over. Whoa! That was better than the aroma of duck breast. Whatever it was, I had to have it.

No!

Yes. Why was my snow leopard reacting negatively? It was succulent, delectable, and I was craving it. I flung myself into the empty restaurant, but the staff must have been out back. Alpha insisted they’d be here, but why would they when the place was closed for a few hours?

Mate!

Huh? Whose mate?

Darcy appeared with a pile of clean napkins. “We’re closed, Jonah. Come back at six. I’ll make sure to save you a portion of duck breast.”

“What’s cooking?”

She side eyed me. “That’s such an old fashioned expression but it suits you. Not much. I’ve got the day off tomorrow and I’m going to the movies. How about you? What’s cooking?”

My glazed eyes and slack-jawed expression must have hinted that wasn't the answer I was expecting.

"Or you were asking what's cooking as in food? Right, gotcha. Nothing."

"But that enticing scent. It's almost addictive."

She sniffed. "I don't smell anything."

I made no move to leave.

"Was there something you wanted?"

My brain processed her question, but it was as though her voice came from a distance. "Health and Safety inspection."

"That's been rescheduled until tomorrow. Didn't Daxon tell you?" She answered her own question. "Obviously not, or you wouldn't be here."

"Great." That was me speaking, but I was going through the motions, barely registering Darcy's presence.

"Did you want to meet Kyle? He's thinking of accepting the manager's position here. And he's taking a look around."

The name was familiar, but he wasn't part of the sizzle. That wasn't unusual as we often had snow leopards traveling to Oakheart to check out the community and see if they wanted to uproot their lives and move here.

But it was inappropriate for a newcomer to be snooping around the Alpha Omega's restaurant kitchen. While health and safety wasn't my thing, correct snow leopard etiquette and good manners was, and I had to talk to this Kyle person about overstepping boundaries.

That didn't solve the dilemma regarding the scent.

Mate!

Yes, you told me. Whose mate and where was this mate? Was Kyle looking for his mate? A kitchen was an odd place to be searching, but people could encounter their mates anywhere.

My beast huffed, apparently irritated I didn't understand him.

“Kyle, there’s someone here who’d like to meet you.” Darcy pushed upon the door leading out the back.

Like the heat from a thousand suns, the scent battered me and I grabbed a chair for support. An omega stood just inside the kitchen, his brow furrowed, just as Kim’s had been earlier.

Mate!

Gods, he’s our mate.

“Jonah, you’re pale. Do you want to sit down?” Darcy took hold of my arm.

“I’m fine. You go back to what you were doing.”

But my phone rang and I fumbled with it, while keeping my gaze fixed on Kyle, my mate.

“Hello? Hello?” No one answered.

Darcy giggled. “It’s not your phone, Jonah. It’s his.”

I’d been staring at the guy the whole time and had been oblivious that he’d tucked his phone under his ear and words were coming out of his mouth.

“I’ll wait outside.” The call might have been personal, though Kyle didn’t move away from us or lower his voice. I caught the word, “Kim.”

“Okay.” Darcy lowered her voice. “He’s talking to his sister.”

Kim. Sister. Not a snow leopard. She was a chinchilla, and if she was, so was her brother, though sometimes if siblings had parents who were of different species, some of the kids might take after one parent, while the others were the same as the other parent.

My mate wasn’t a snow leopard. I sank onto the chair I usually sat in when I ate here. Not only had I met my fated mate but he wasn’t like me.

So?

I always assumed if I mated, it would be with a snow leopard. Before we started the community here in Oakheart, I didn’t expect to find a snow leopard mate and accepted I might stay

single. And even though none of the sizzle residents were my one and only, I'd had a smidgen of hope that he was out there, somewhere.

But that certainty had been upended.

Kyle's voice drifted out the door and I strained to hear. He didn't mention me and he wasn't freaking out. His even, matter of fact tone suggested he was talking about something completely different.

Against my better judgement, I snuck up to the door and crouched down so he couldn't see me from the window. I flattened myself on the tiles, hoping he wouldn't wander this way.

He was talking to his sister. Called her sis more than once. And they were discussing the possibility of a job here. If we were going to mate, we'd be in the same place. Not having a community on my doorstep impacted the choices I made in the past, along with my mental health. A long distance-relationship wasn't an option, at least for me.

Mate!

Maybe. We'll have to see how he feels about it.

I struggled to get my phone out of my pocket and did a search for chinchilla. But that distracted me and I didn't hear Kyle coming toward me until a pair of boots appeared in front of me.

Awkward. I glanced up and waved. "Hi!"

KYLE

I wore the hoodie that Kim gave me nonstop, needing to be surrounded by the scent... his scent. It had been days now and the thing was so ripe, my nose twitched at the smell. But taking it off wasn't an option. Having it wrapped around me gave me the opportunity to figure out the best way to introduce myself to the alpha.

I wasn't well-versed in the ways of the snow leopard, but I knew enough about them to be aware they didn't mate outside their species. They were one of the more old fashioned animals like that. Though Kim had hinted it might be different now, centuries-old traditions didn't change overnight.

Not that fate paid any attention. They sent him to me and me to him. But would that be enough? Of course it would. Fate didn't set people up for lives of misery after taunting them with their mate and then taking them away. Did it?

And that was why I needed to make our first meeting perfect or at the very least not horrible. Snuggling into his scent kept my chinchilla calm enough. Without it my beast would be insisting we find him immediately, whereas now he was just begging me in the background, enough to be annoying and frustrating, but not enough to make it impossible to ignore.

And then I opted to take a shower, and my lovely sister decided she would do me a favor and throw all of the dirty clothes into the washing machine.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I may have snapped at her, but in the moment I couldn't think of anything other than

losing the scent of my mate. It was what kept me together while I tried to figure out my best move.

“You’re welcome, Kye-guy.” Kim put her hands on her hips. “I responded to the question you should’ve asked, not the one you did.” She stuck her tongue out in the way only a sibling would.

“I didn’t want that hoodie washed.”

“That’s not in the wash, asshat. I’m not cruel. I put it on your bed.” She rolled her eyes. “You really need to do something about that. Staying here and wearing a sweatshirt nonstop isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

She was right. Of course she was, and the only reason I was dragging my feet was out of fear. Fear of rejection due to my animal, but also fear that maybe I wouldn’t like the guy. I ran so many scenarios through my head and always found the left turn into Doomsville when I did.

“I know.” I walked away from her, needing the sweatshirt, and pulled it up and over my damp skin.

“Take that off and put on some semblance of interview clothes.” Kim stood in my doorway. “I have an idea that could kill two birds with one stone.”

“But I want to wear it.” I hugged it close.

“And if you wear it to the restaurant, you might not get to keep it.”

That was how I discovered that we were heading to the restaurant and I was going to “check it out” to see if it was someplace I might be interested in working in. That didn’t sound like a stellar idea. I mean who lets people randomly explore a place to see if they maybe wanted a job? No one. And the alpha in question? He didn’t technically work there. He just had ties to the place. Who was to say he would be there during my visit. My sister swore she would handle the details and I trusted her. It still felt like a half cocked idea at best.

She drove me there, explaining the different places we passed from the oldest building in the area, to the new sizzle entrance

with a huge mural, to the best place to get my tires changed. If we passed it, she described it in detail. I wasn't sure if she just loved the area and wanted me to love it too or if she was trying not to talk about the reason we were going. In either case, it was nice to learn about Oakheart now that I was here.

We pulled into the parking lot and she brought me inside and introduced me to Darcy, asking her to show me around and explain the managerial position.

Darcy was nice and I wanted to focus on what she said. And had it been any other place, I would have, but there was just enough of my mate here to have my chinchilla on high alert.

We walked through the dining room and I'd catch a whiff of him. Strolling into the back room—there it was, his scent just chilling there and begging me to stand there and savor it. And the office? It was the worst offender, and when I saw a hoodie hanging up on the hook, I found myself making a beeline to it. Sure enough, it was his. Not taking it off the hook and pulling it on took every bit of strength that I had.

My sister's idea hadn't been the best one ever as I had initially thought. No. It was pure torture. My mate was like a ghost here, showing up in random places for only a fleeting moment with the exception of the hoodie, which I couldn't figure out a way to get my hands on without getting in trouble for stealing. Fuck.

“Thank you for showing me around. I'll give this some serious consideration.” Which was so pretentious given I hadn't yet been offered a job. Shit, I hadn't even applied yet.

“Please do. I don't mind helping out, but I would rather be... not.” Darcy half shrugged. “Any questions about the job or the area?”

Before I could answer, the back door opened and my sister came in with a grin and told me to have fun, and that she was a phone call away.

I asked Darcy a random question about looking at the menu and she handed me one and said she'd be back to answer more questions. I sat at the desk in the office and absentmindedly

studied it. Absentmindedly turned to intentional as I saw how it was laid out. There was no way someone thought it was a good idea to mash it all into the few pages it was, not when the print was so small. And the organization—it wasn't great.

I sensed a change in the atmosphere, the scent of my mate getting stronger, and I walked over to the hoodie. Maybe I could put it on under my clothing and sneak out. Had my sister not worked for the owner, I one thousand percent would've already been out the door with it. But she did, and Kim adored her job and her boss. It needed to stay on the hook.

"Kyle, there's someone here who'd like to meet you," Darcy called, and I strode toward her, my mate's scent slamming into me. It hadn't been the sweatshirt that called to me, it had been him... my mate.

"Jonah, you're pale. Do you want to sit down?" Darcy grabbed a sexy alpha's arm. No, not just a sexy alpha. My sexy alpha... my mate.

"I'm fine. You go back to what you were doing." He shooed her away.

My phone rang and I ignored it, watching my mate. He kept his eyes fixed on mine and then answered his phone.

Darcy giggled. "It's not your phone, Jonah. It's his." She pointed to me.

Now I had no choice but to answer mine, as much as I just wanted to stare at Jonah.

"I'm busy, Kim."

"You're welcome." I could see her smile in my head. She was proud of herself, and fair enough. She had managed to do what I had failed to do—get my mate and me in the same room.

"Ha. Ha. Is that why you called?"

I didn't hear her answer, my mate saying he would wait outside stealing every bit of attention that I had.

"Okay. He's talking to his sister."

After my mate went outside, my ability to focus was completely nonexistent and when my sister mentioned the job, I said I was definitely interested. Making decisions while in the midst of meeting your mate for the first time wasn't ideal.

I ended the call and went to let Jonah know it was safe to come in. I appreciated the privacy in theory, but having him come and go like that sucked. I found him crouched on the terrace. Was he listening? Did I care?

"Hi," he said.

"Hi." I held out my hand to help him up. Fine, it was so that I could touch him. "I'm Kyle and I'm here about a job."

"Oh." He took my hand and stood up, not letting go. "So you're just here looking for work?"

"No, I was mostly here looking for you. You seem to have a habit of losing hoodies." I stepped in a tad close, scenting him deeply and not even pretending to be doing anything else.

"You're my mate and you want me to hire you." It wasn't a question.

"Yeppers. And after seeing the layout of the menu, you need me." *And I need you, but not for this stupid job.* "I might not have experience with this particular position, but I can do this. I can organize people, train others like a boss, I understand all the modern tech that can make working here better for both the front and back of the house, and I'm looking for a change of careers. I'm perfect for this job." Heck, I even had myself convinced.

"Yeah. It's yours." He gave my hand a slight tug, and I ended up mere inches from him.

"Umm, I know this is really human of me, but would you like to go out... on a date... with me?" Why was I such an awkward mess? He agreed we were mates.

"Yeah. Yeah, we can do that."

This time, it was his phone ringing, and when he answered it, I found Darcy and told her about accepting the job. She looked at me like I had five heads, but whatever. I also asked her if I

could bring the menu home. She told me it was fine and went back to work just as Jonah appeared.

“What time do you want...” The alpha looked nervous. But then again, I was nervous too. This entire situation was not only new territory to us both, but doubly so between work and our different beasts and having an audience thanks to being at a restaurant that was preparing to open for dinner.

“Give me your phone.” I held out my hand, and he did. I shot myself a quick text saying it was me and handed it back to him. “You can message me with details.”

“Yeah. Okay.” And before he could say anything else, his phone rang again.

This time I gave him a half wave and wandered away. I called my sister and told her that I was both done and employed and on my way. But when I ended the call, I returned to Jonah’s side, not wanting to stay farther from my mate than necessary.

He was sliding his phone in his pocket, and because I was so good at being all things sexy and confident, I said, “Hey.” That was it, nothing more.

He looked at me, expectantly.

“Thanks for the job.” It wasn’t any better than my “hey”, but at least it had more than one word.

“I gotta go.”

JONAH

What the ever-loving fuck did I just do?

Mate!

Yeah, yeah. He's our mate. Our status wasn't in question. No, maybe it was. Yes, we were fated mates, but we weren't mated. But my big boo boo was telling him he had a job. I didn't own or even run the restaurant. I had no right or power to offer him a damned job.

My beast sighed, never understanding human emotions and frailties. *Mate, no mate.* Those were the choices, according to him. And he was in favor of the former. Me getting riled up was a waste of time.

Daxon would be furious with me, not to mention Waylon. I'd overstepped and I had to either rescind the job offer to Kyle or fess up to Daxon. Standing before Alpha's mate and revealing what I'd done was a terrifying thought. Daxon was the proud owner of three coffee shops and a restaurant. From what I'd observed, he was a fair boss, but I guessed none of his employees gave someone a job when it wasn't within their power.

I considered speaking to Waylon first, maybe have him smooth things over. But that would be undermining his mate. He wasn't responsible for Daxon's businesses.

"I gotta go."

I swiveled away from Kyle, but not before I saw the confusion and pain in his eyes. While I was tempted to explain, I wasn't

sure I could express myself coherently. I'd spew words and they'd get tangled like clothes in an old fashioned washing machine.

"Wait."

Without turning around, I told him, "We can talk later." But I had to impress upon him not to speak to Daxon or his sister. If he called them and thanked Daxon for giving him a chance, the Alpha Omega would work out I'd fucked up somehow. He had to hear it from me.

"Best to keep all the news about your job and... ummm, other things to yourself. Wait until you can do a big announcement with, ahhhh... balloons and cake and maybe glitter. Yeah, glitter."

"Glitter?" Kyle repeated in a monotone.

"Love me some of that shiny metal stuff that gets in every nook and cranny. I'm off to look for some now." Hurling myself off the curb, I took off for home. I'd need my car, as it would take more than a while to reach the coffee shop, Daxon's original business.

Once in the driver's seat, I took a deep breath, and another and a third, trying to calm my jangled nerves. Leaning on the steering wheel, I pummeled my fists, demanding of the universe why my mate couldn't have been the guy next door. He was pleasant enough, uncomplicated, the community was his forever home, and he was a snow leopard.

When I eventually started the car, I drove out of my garage and almost knocked over a pedestrian.

Slowly!

My beast was right, but I probably shouldn't be behind the wheel in my condition, and after puttering along for a minute and covering perhaps a hundred yards, I took a right turn, and another, and a third, finding myself in front of my house. I drove into the garage, and after turning off the ignition, I sat there, wondering what had become of my life.

Anxiety paralyzed me and held me in its grip. It stripped away the urgency that had me tearing off to see Daxon and left me

shuddering and wondering if I could sleep in the car. People did that.

This morning when I was chatting with Cecily, everything had been in its right place. My business was doing well, and apart from the warring snow leopards from the book group and the baby and toddler group, the future was bright.

Now an omega shifter from another species had upended everything, just like that party trick where one person pulls out a tablecloth from a full place table setting, and the cups, plates, and cutlery go flying.

Damn him. And what was a chinchilla? I'd met Kim in the village when she and Daxon catered functions for the sizzle, but I'd never seen her beast. Racing into the house, I got the laptop, not trusting the phone to show me the animal in all its glory.

The wifi was predictably slow just when I needed it at top speed. I glanced out the window, hoping the teen who lived on the other side of my house hadn't hacked my password again. But as the page loaded, it revealed the cutest animal. "Gods, that's adorable." Did my mate's beast look similar, or did he have scars or a patch of hair missing? Not that it mattered.

A man walking on the sidewalk pushing a toddler in a stroller caught my eye. Waylon! Please let him not run into Kyle, not that I was aware of where the chinchilla shifter was. But I had to head him off.

"Alpha!" I launched myself at him.

"Jonah, what happened at the restaurant?"

Gods, he found out. Shoot, and I was supposed to tell his mate. Now I was in double doo doo.

"Nothing," I fibbed. "Why do you ask?"

"You were supposed to meet with the Health and Safety inspectors."

Oh, that! "It was postponed. So yeah, nothing happened. I didn't meet anyone, except for Darcy, there were no shenanigans, definitely no sex. It was all fine and dandy."

He raised a brow. “Definitely?”

“Oh yes, and I didn’t see your dad or Isadora. Nope.”

His slack-jawed expression had me wanting to lean over and close his mouth.

“Is there something I should know about my father and Isadora?”

“What?” I squeaked. “No. One is an upright former Alpha and the other is a pillar of the sizzle. They have nothing in common.”

“I don’t understand how your mind works, Jonah.” He walked off muttering, “No sex. There was no sex at the restaurant.”

Gods, I had to speak to Daxon. I’d wasted fifteen minutes and Kyle might be at the coffee shop by now with balloons and a big sign that read, “Congratulations to me.”

But that required driving, and my head was still spinning. “Alpha, Alpha.” I raced after Waylon. “Have you spoken to the Alpha Omega this afternoon?”

“Not since he asked me to have someone be at the restaurant when the Health and Safety people arrived.”

“Oh good.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s it. Thanks.” Not wanting to face Daxon and explain my very big fuck up, I decided to put on my big boy pants and tell Kyle the truth. It was what I should have done the instant I blurted out he had the job.

Why didn’t you make me do that?

My beast harrumphed and spat out that he wasn’t my parent and I was a grown man. He added I should never have met our mate at the restaurant alone. I pointed out Darcy was with him, but my snow leopard said she didn’t count.

Pounding over the sidewalk, I almost side-swiped Isadora. She glowered at me and folded her arms. “Did you tell Alpha about me and Andrew?”

“I would never.”

“So why did he confront me and ask if his dad and I were cooking up a scheme? He said you mentioned it.”

I did?

Yes.

I rewound my conversation with Waylon but didn't recall any mention of his father and the woman glaring at me.

“Whatever I said wasn't of any consequence. I was babbling to him about sex.”

“Jonah!”

“Not you having sex. Ewww, no. Someone and their mate to be weren't going at it.”

“You use the oddest expressions sometimes,” she noted.

“I watch a lot of TV from around the world.”

“Hmmm.”

I swerved around her, looking one way as I crossed the street. There were two people crossing in the opposite direction and they leaped in front of me.

“Jonah!”

Gods, I was going to change my name so when people yelled, “Jonah,” I could glance around and shrug, pretending I had no idea who they were talking to. Shoot, it was Clarence and Timmy, who'd been arguing about the rooms in the community center.

“We've been looking for you.”

“Me? Really?”

My beast rolled his eyes.

“Have you sorted out the schedule? Our groups meet again in two days and the baby and toddler group needs more space.” Clarence's fierce expression would have had me trembling, but I had a more important task on my agenda.

“And I say the book group needs that large room because we’ve added ten new members in the last week. Babies don’t need a lot of space,” Timmy huffed.

“And how would you know?” Clarence asked. “When we mated, you said you weren’t ready for kids.”

“Maybe I’ve changed my mind. I’m allowed to do that,” Timmy snapped.

“You’re mated?” I was incredulous.

“Yes,” they yelled in unison.

“I’ll let you reach a conclusion. You don’t need me. Bye.”

Gods, Kyle could be anywhere by now. “Darcy, where’s the guy who was here?”

She was out the back, tapping on her phone. “You mean Kyle, the guy you dubbed the new manager?”

“Did I say that? Were those my actual words?”

“Yes.” She slipped the phone in her back pocket.

“Oh, it must have slipped my mind. Funny that.”

“You won’t be laughing when the Alpha Omega arrives and finds out you’ve taken over hiring and firing the staff.”

Gods, why was she reminding me? “Ummm, but where’s Kyle? Is he using the bathroom by any chance?”

“He left.”

“Left for where?” I gripped my shirt and undid the top button as I gasped for air.

“I’m not his social secretary, Jonah.” She giggled. “But as you’ve taken on the HR position, shouldn’t you have taken his contact details?”

“Ha ha ha. Did he say where he was going?”

“No, but as his sister is the only person he knows in town, I suspect he’s gone to tell her the good news.”

“And that would be?” I held out the tiniest hope that he’d won the lottery, and he was telling Kim the pair of them never had

to work again. That would solve all my problems.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe that some fool waltzed in here and told him he could be the manager. They’re probably having a right old laugh as we speak.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“How could you tell?” she sassed.

Damn! What to do? Darcy’s phone beeped. “It’s Daxon. Did you want to speak to him?”

“Later.” I got out of the restaurant, needing to put space between me and the Alpha Omega, even though he was on the phone and not in person.

“Jonah!”

Isadora waved at me. “You were right. We’ve decided to tell Alpha.”

“Great.”

“Jonah.”

Dear gods, people had to stop using my name.

Timmy scooted over the sidewalk. “The baby and toddler group can have the larger room. And we’re going home to make a baby.”

Yay, everyone’s problems were solved except mine.

KYLE

He left, despite me asking him to wait. Did I say it out loud? My memories were unclear. Shit, I didn't know if we still had a date. Everything started to blur, my beast pushing at me to chase after him, the human in me just wanting to see my sister, to process all the shit that just went down with her. She'd understand. I was glad she'd agreed to pick me up. She couldn't get there soon enough.

When she arrived, I hopped in the car, neither of us speaking. I had a feeling she was waiting for me to begin. The problem? I wasn't sure what even happened, much less where to begin.

We got to the coffee shop, and I helped her wrestle boxes inside, boxes she may or may not have carried from the restaurant. Me and my beast were both on edge.

Gods, I wished we were home and not in public so that I could freely spill my guts to her and then shift out and forget everything for a little while. But she had to get ready for some event and I was a freaking big boy. I should be able to handle this on my own. Being with her should be enough.

“Where do the yellow ones go?” I looked down at the box I'd just opened. It was filled with tiny paper packets of some kind of fake sugar for the coffees.

“That's the only one I wasn't fully out of. Stupid truck missed them all, but people don't seem to order that one as much. You can put it in the back.” She pointed to the section where the dry goods were stored, and I did as she asked.

There was a pile of dirty dishes in the large sink, and since I had nowhere to go and my brain was swirling around, I figured it was best to keep my hands busy and be productive. I rinsed out the sink, then filled it with hot soapy water, filled the next with rinse water, and the final with sanitizer water. I wasn't sure if the dishwashing rules were still the same as when I worked at the pizza shop, but clean was clean.

I had already started on the pile when my sister walked in carrying a few empty trays.

“Hey, you don't need to do that.” She set the dirty trays on the pile of things to be washed. “I got it. This is my job, after all. If you can wait until the next person comes in, I can even take a break and drive you home. I didn't think my plan through.”

I continued to scrub away. There was no reason for me not to finish up, even if she could drive me home. I wasn't sure I'd be much better off there, anyway.

“I'm ignoring you on the dishes, but taking the bait on the 'my plan' garbage. What was your plan exactly?”

Her eyes dropped to the floor. “I might have possibly pretended I needed help. I didn't need to get Jonah to the restaurant. The health department doesn't announce visits, and if they did, Darcy would've been fine handling it.”

“My sister, the meddling... I mean the matchmaker.”

“To be fair, I thought you two would drive off into the sunset and all that romantic bullshit, and instead I see you looking like someone kicked your puppy voluntarily doing dishes. I'm sorry. I meant well.”

I pulled my sudsy hands out of the water so I could face her. “I'm glad you pulled a Kim. And since you are my sister, is it really butting into my business or is it just a non-physical hug?”

That got her to smile a bit.

“Jonah did come in. He scents me as his mate, just as I scented him. On that, we're both in agreement. And I think... had I been a snow leopard, that would've been the end of that, and we'd have gone off and had all the romantic bullshit as you

said, but we aren't. I'm a chinchilla. And he didn't say that my beast was the issue, but you and I both know it is. Even the shifters who inter-mate look down on our kind."

We were cute, sure. But there was nothing predatory about us. We weren't exceptionally tall, and we were fragile. It just was what it was. You'd think the being adorable factor would get us more respect than it did, but alas, even bunnies were tiers above us because they could jump high, run fast, and bite through anything. In theory, my teeth were kick ass too, but they weren't close to the same.

"They don't look down on us. Not exactly. We just... fine. A lot of people do, but Jonah isn't like that. None of those in power now do. Jonah treats me well and even lets me steal his hoodie."

"He still... things were awkward. But I do have a date with him."

Kim hugged me. "That's great. Very human, but great. When is it?"

"We didn't get that far." I turned back to the dishes and told her the entire story, taking breaks as she was called up front. I had all of the dishes done and put away by the time I regaled her with the super romantic gesture that was being told "gotta go" on his way out.

"That sounds like he had sizzle business." Kim handed me a muffin with a chunk of the top missing. "It broke coming out of the pan. I didn't bite it or anything."

"I wouldn't have thought that."

She gave me some serious side eye.

"Fine, I wouldn't have cared if you had done that." I took a bite. "Wow. I know you said the baked goods here were yummy, but I didn't think they were full-on bakery delicious. I can see most of my new paycheck coming right back to this place for muffins."

"About that." Kim made the face she always did when she was about to tell me something she didn't want to. As a kid, it was usually about our parents going back on a promise to do

something fun or that we were having something horrible for dinner. As we grew up, it morphed into me thinking there'd been an accident. But the face itself was the same, with her nose all mushed up, her eyes looking just to the side of mine, and her mouth in a forced smile that was barely there.

My stomach started to churn, the muffin no longer seeming like the best idea.

"About what?" I forced the words.

"I don't think you have a job." She wrinkled her nose even more.

Of all the possibilities that had been swirling in my head, my not getting a job I hadn't fully applied for wasn't one of them. My entire being had been so focused on my mate that I had simply assumed it was something about that.

"Because?"

"Because Jonah doesn't have that authority. It's not his business, it's Daxon's. I mean I'm sure you can still get the position, just maybe don't count on it to fill your muffin hoard just yet."

"I'm keeping this one." I held the small remaining bits of my muffin. "It can be my muffin hoard."

"Wait." A man stood in the doorway from the front of the house. "Is there a muffin hoard back here, is that why the front case is so empty?"

"Sadly, this is my entire hoard." I held up the tiny bit of goodness. "I plan to grow it, though."

"I'm Daxon, the owner."

"So I shouldn't talk about collecting all your muffins as if I were a dragon, huh?" They were the ones who hoarded, right?

"Given it's my new recipe, the conversation seemed like the ideal one to be having. You must be Kyle. I can see it in your eyes."

"I am, indeed. I hope you don't mind me hanging out here. I'm waiting for my ride home."

At that my sister giggled, and I couldn't figure out what was so funny.

"Share with the class?" Daxon looked between the two of us.

"So ummm, you know how sometimes Jonah thinks his job is more encompassing than it is?"

"Yeah?"

"Well he may have hired my brother as the new restaurant manager today." She then turned to me. "Can I share with the class?"

I appreciated her asking me. Back when we were in high school, she wouldn't have, which was probably why it was so easy to tell her to spill the details. It was easier than me having to convey them.

She told him everything from why I was here, how she gave me the sort of stolen sweatshirt, how I worked at the pizza place, and how I ended up getting hired by someone who didn't have the authority to do so.

"I reserve the right to give Jonah a ton of shit about this." Daxon burst out into a full on giggle. "I can't believe he just offered you a job."

"To be fair, I can be very persuasive." I didn't want the guy getting into trouble. Between what my sister had told me about her boss and the way he laughed at the alpha's antics, I didn't think Jonah would be getting more than teased about it, but still...the desire to protect him was strong.

"And how did you persuade him? Besides being the scent that calls to his beast." If my sister thought she was helping, she was mistaken. "Tell Daxon about your skills."

"I used to work at a pizza place and I helped run it, and I've had managerial experience at the corporate level, and I'm willing to work hard and I already have ideas about the menu layout." So much for being prepared for a job interview. "And I have a pretty great sister." Because at that point it wasn't like I had anything to lose by calling in nepotism.

It wasn't like I was working for my mate like I sort of kind of originally thought. But there I was, convincing the owner and sizzle's Alpha Omega to give me a job. Maybe I could figure out a way to get a do-over. Start fresh and do things right the first time instead of fumbling my way through the way that I was.

"Do you really want the job or was it the mating call that had you interested?" Daxon asked, zero judgement in his voice.

"I'll be honest with you, when my sister first told me about the job, before I'd quit my previous one, I didn't think I was qualified and maybe I'm not. But I did love running that pizza place and I was good at it. I want this to be my home. And the menu, aside from layout issues, looks magnificent."

"It is and I think you'd be a good fit. Do you want the job... for real? I promise you I'm the one who can hire you." I loved the amusement in both his tone and face.

"I do. I really do."

"Please let me be there when you tell Jonah you hired a new guy? And maybe don't tell him the name... watch him squirm for a bit." My sister was liking this too much.

Daxon ignored her and brought me to the office to fill out some legal paperwork for my new job.

"Jonah's a good guy. Be patient with him, though. He's kind of set in some of the old ways. Not all of them, but enough that... just don't judge him by them."

"I'll try." It was the best I could do.

JONAH

I stood in the middle of the sidewalk outside the community center, waiting for someone else to waylay me, and tell me their good news. Cecily strolled out the center entrance, possibly heading home, but instead, she hurried over, saying she'd heard there was big news coming, something that might give rise to a lot of sizzle gossip, but she was in favor of the decision.

Her stance had the self doubt I'd been trying to banish flooding back. "It's not that unusual. And I'd hardly call it a decision. Fate is fate."

"Not fated mates, though." She sighed, and I sensed her mind was far away. "I had that once with my late mate. It supposedly happens once in a lifetime, if at all."

"Yes, fate stepped in, and I should know." There was no doubt I was irritated because of my tone, and my friend and co-committee member narrowed her gaze.

"What? You were there when it happened? Please don't say you were peeking in the window 'cause if you were, I'd have to lie down."

"He was right in front of me, at Daxon's restaurant, and my beast sensed it too." I stamped my foot, reminding me of the toddlers in Clarence's group.

"The former Alpha, Waylon's father?" Cecily had both hands on her hips as she stared at me.

"No, my mate." Damn, the whole sizzle probably heard that.

Passersby congratulated me, and Hank, another committee member, leaned out his window and whistled. I steered Cecily around the corner as she protested, asking what my mating had to do with Andrew and Isadora.

“Nothing. We were talking at cross-purposes.” I needed to go home and crawl into bed.

“I’d like to meet him.”

After explaining we’d only just met and hadn’t marked one another, she agreed to keep quiet.

“Though I think you already kinda announced it.” She held up her phone and showed the stream of messages that read, *Jonah’s mated!*

My phone rang and my stomach roiled at the name on the display: *Alpha Omega*. Gods, Kyle told Kim the good news, and if Daxon was present, he might have said, “It’s news to me.” I studied the display as if there were options other than answering or ignoring, but gathered my courage.

“I’m sorry, Daxon. I don’t know why I did that.”

But the Alpha Omega brushed off my apology. “Forget it. There’s someone here who wants to speak to you.”

I expected Kim to call me out on giving her brother false hope, but it was Kyle who said, “Hi. I’m moving to the parking lot so no one can overhear.”

I almost said, “Don’t bother, because half the sizzle already knows you’re my mate and the other half will find out by this evening.” Instead I nodded, which was silly because he couldn’t see me.

“Okay, we can talk now.”

Daxon had ignored me when I said sorry but it was Kyle who I should grovel to. But he interrupted my thoughts. “I got the job.”

“Hold on.” Scrunching my eyes closed, I screamed, “Yes,” in my head before putting the phone to my ear again. “I’m an excellent judge of character.”

Kyle snorted. “You overstepped, but I’ll forgive you on one condition.”

My heart sped up, the pitter patter reminding me of raindrops on a window pane. “Okay.” Now he was staying in town, I was cautiously optimistic that we’d get along and eventually mate.

Mate! My beast was in no doubt, nudging me to mark the chinchilla shifter.

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

Yes! If my snow leopard could speak, he’d have been yelling down the phone.

“I can do that. I know the perfect place. Their duck breast is to die for.”

“Wait, are you talking about—”

I cut him off. “You didn’t stipulate where. You just said dinner. I’m a creature of habit, I’m afraid.” Please let him say yes. I liked my routine, and if Kyle couldn’t cope with me and my idiosyncrasies, we’d spend our lives arguing.

“Okay.”

“See you at seven. Table on the far right.” I was almost giddy, an emotion I hadn’t experienced since I was a kid, as I mentally created a list of tasks to complete before our dinner date.

“Is that facing the restaurant or looking at the terrace from inside?”

“Darcy’ll tell you. Don’t be late.” I waltzed around until Waylon walked out of the community center and gave me a look that said, “Where’s the real Jonah? What have you done with him?” as I skipped toward home.

It took an age to choose a shirt, pants, and shoes, and afterward, I stood under the shower using one body wash and then another because I wasn’t sure Kyle liked the scent of coconut so I went with apple.

Even though my home was a five minute walk from the restaurant, I left the house early. But rather than sitting awkwardly at my usual table, folding and unfolding the napkin, I dashed into the community center, and pretended to be checking the noticeboard. The minutes ticked by so slowly, each one a decade or an eon. But at five before the hour, I wandered out.

When I reached the table, *my* table, there was a reserved sign on top. I stood helplessly, wanting to toss the sign away as sweat trickled down my spine, until a gravelly voice at my shoulder said, “I made sure no one else sat here.”

He pulled out my chair and I plonked myself in it.

“I hear the duck breast is *magnifique*.” He kissed his finger tips.

“Mmmm, I hope the new manager doesn’t fuck it up.” I blurted that out, just as I had with the job offer.

“Or what?” He leaned over the table. “You’ll what? Spank me?” Kyle wriggled his ass and the table jiggled, but his smirk held my attention.

The unmistakable scent of slick washed over me. Gods, he was aroused, and if I peeked under the table, his cock might be pressing against his pants. I fanned myself with the napkin as my cheeks burned.

Darcy bustled over to us. “Fancy meeting you here.” She cocked her head. “Let me guess. Duck breast?”

“Yes, please.”

“And for you, boss?”

“You can call me Kyle, Darcy.” He scanned the menu, his brow furrowing. “Fettuccine alfredo, please.”

I wasn’t a fan of cheesy sauces, as it didn’t agree with my stomach, but it was one of Daxon’s most popular dishes. “Good choice.”

“That’s what I said to the universe when your scent announced you as my mate.”

I blushed again and studied the tablecloth, wondering where Daxon had bought it.

“So you’re staying in the sizzle, or should I say you’re working here.” He might be living with his sister or in another part of town.

Not that non snow leopards couldn’t live here. They did, and there were a handful of humans dotted around the community, though most were mated to shifters. It wasn’t as though we lived in a den, similar to Bruin Ridge, and could safely shift anywhere. Outwardly, we were human when on Snowford streets.

But what I said wiped the smile from Kyle’s face, and I wished I could turn back time.

“Are only snow leopards allowed to live here?”

“No, sorry if I gave you that impression. Everyone’s welcome in Snowford.”

His eyes lit up. “Glad to hear it. Chinchillas are sometimes shunned among the big cats and hunters such as wolves and you know, snow leopards.”

“Oh no. Alpha would never allow any discrimination.” I filled him in on our history of how in the past, snow leopard babies couldn’t be brought up in a den or a pack, even if one parent was a snow leopard. “Alpha is forward thinking and inclusive.”

“Excellent. Perhaps I’ll look for an apartment in the sizzle.”

The way he pronounced sizzle, long and slow, and how he hissed the S almost had me coming in my pants.

“It’s mostly houses, some of which are still shells from when the original developer filed for bankruptcy. But my friend, Isadora, has a second house she rents out.” I didn’t add that I’d contact her, not wanting to push Kyle into a corner.

Darcy brought the food, and as I took my first mouthful and the rich flavor flooded my mouth, I closed my eyes and moaned. I forgot where I was and when I opened my eyes, Kyle was frozen, his lips parted, a fork half way to his mouth.

“Wow! If that’s how the duck affects you, I’ll have that next time.” He lifted the fork to his mouth, the fettuccine curled neatly around it. But the creamy sauce smothered his lips and I longed to lick it off, even though it was cheese, which I hated.

I gulped and he wound more pasta around his fork. This time one strand uncoiled and dangled in midair. I pleaded with the universe to have him suck it up rather than put it on the plate.

The universe was listening because with his gaze fixed on me rather than the fettuccine, Kyle held it above his head and sucked the strand. As it disappeared between his lips, glistening in sauce, my cock almost exploded out of my pants.

One more favor, I begged the universe. Don’t make me come here.

“So good.” Kyle dabbed his lips with the napkin.

“I agree. The best.” I was almost swooning.

“Try some.”

Ewww, he ruined the mood, not that it was intentional. “Can’t. Cheese doesn’t agree with me.”

“Oh no! What about a buttery, garlicky sauce?”

“Yum.”

“I’ll make sure that’s added to the menu.”

“Great.” He must have picked up on my unenthusiastic tone.

“Be honest, Jonah. This won’t work unless we’re upfront with one another.”

“I love garlic, but when I come here...”

“You always order the duck. So I’ve heard.” He reached for my hand. “When you find something you love, you stay with it.”

Was he talking about the duck breast? I nodded and chewed the meat so I didn’t have to answer.

The rest of the meal we chatted about movies, books, and vacations, steering away from life-changing events such as

mating. And when we asked for the check, Darcy said it was on the house, courtesy of Daxon.

Now what? This was the awkward part of the evening. We hadn't discussed the future and while my cock was still semi-hard, I wasn't ready for sex. My hand would suffice this evening while I fantasized about plowing into Kyle.

“Did you drive here?”

“I did.”

We walked side by side to his vehicle, our shoulders occasionally brushing against one another.

He stopped beside a gray car. “This is me.”

“Funny, I could have sworn it was a car.”

He chortled and nudged me. “I had a great time, and I'd love to end the night with a kiss.”

“As long as there's no cheese on your lips.”

“It's long gone. I made sure of it.” He put a hand on my hip and pulled me to him and placed his lips on mine, while his arousal pressed on my swollen cock.

“Mmmm.”

KYLE

“I have an idea,” I blurted out, not ready for our date to be over and for the two of us to part ways.

We’d gone for a walk as a way to get to know each other better. It was pleasant wandering through Snowford’s park chatting about everything and nothing. But now I wanted more. My chinchilla was in agreement.

“Oh yeah?” His eyes sparkled in the light, his smile soft and begging for a kiss. “Is it a hot one?”

“That depends,” I nipped his bottom lip, “On where we go.”

The way his brow furrowed in confusion was a-freaking-dorable. Not that I was going to tell the sexy alpha how cute he was. Or maybe I would... just not now. Now I wanted to get out of these clothes and into something more comfortable.

“Are you thinking my place?” He pulled me in a bit closer by my belt loop. “Because...” His lips hovered over mine, and it would’ve been so easy to close the distance and get lost in them... in him.

At least it would’ve been, had my chinchilla been behaving.

Shift.

Mate.

Ours.

Now.

Ignoring him wasn't possible, and really? I didn't want to. I longed to shift with our mate as well. I just should've kept it to myself and not let my beast in on my desire because now there was an urgency to it.

"Yeah... maybe. It depends. I was thinking... what if... would you like..." Why was I so nervous? We were mates. His beast and mine would get along and have fun. Right? At least that was what my chinchilla wanted. "I want to shift... together... with you."

He reached up and cupped my cheek, "My snow leopard is on my ass too." He let out a soft chuckle. "What is your terrain of choice?"

Normally it was a place to have a nice dust bath, but not today. Today he wanted to go someplace to watch our mate run and jump and climb trees. They did that, right? I had so much to learn.

"Is there someplace with trees and grass and shade?" Because I wanted it all.

"There's one down by the river."

My body froze.

"Are you okay?" His face went straight to full on worry mode, and I hated that I'd done that to him, especially over something so silly as chinchillas don't get wet.

"Sorry. Yeah. So my animal... he doesn't swim or play in the rain or jump in mud puddles. And I over reacted." I leaned into his touch "We can go by the river. It's not like swimming is necessary."

"He doesn't or shouldn't or can't." My mate listened to me. I was so used to being around humans who simply caught the important words and reacted from there.

"Wild chinchillas can get pretty shitty infections from being wet because our fur is so thick and soft, and honestly, you're going to have to feel it to know what I mean." Was I prideful about my fur? Yes. Yes I was, but also it was by far my best feature.

“No river it is. I know a place.”

We ended up taking Jonah’s car as I was almost out of gas. He raced home to get it and picked me up near my vehicle. The drive was short, the sexual tension in the car palpable. Being in an enclosed space had my body wanting to do far more than just heading out for a shift. I caught myself more than once reaching out to touch him, to run my fingers up his thighs or to grab his hand and bring his fingers into my mouth. It was safe to say that attraction wasn’t going to be an issue for us.

He pulled down a small overgrown dirt road. It wasn’t an official road, but it was worn enough to see that this place wasn’t a secret. We wove through the trees and parked in a small clearing.

“This is one of my favorite places to shift. It’s marked enough by the scent of our kind that most wild animals stay away, but I’ll make sure that you are safe.” He took my hand. “I promise.”

That hadn’t been a worry of mine, though it should’ve been. My beast could hardly protect himself without going into a full shift and allowing me to take over.

“I know you will.” I leaned my head against his arm. “Doesn’t marking it make it harder to hunt?”

“Naw. We don’t mark very far out. One thing it does do is make it less likely I’ll be woken up from a nap when a bunny wanders in.” He cracked his door open. “Let’s go. My snow leopard is going to shift with or without my permission soon. I prefer to now, so I don’t end up going home naked with a pile of shredded fabric in tow.”

I got out of the vehicle and put my shoes in the car, quickly undressing. It took every single stitch of willpower I had not to watch my mate undress. He had to be as hard as I was after that drive, and while we were mates, this was new territory for us. It was best to wait a hot minute before ogling him.

Once all of my clothes were off, I took my fur. I was short enough that I could peer beneath the undercarriage and see that he was still in his skin. I made sure he could see me and

stopped, my heart pounding in my tiny chest. My chinchilla wanted full rein, to be able to rub over our mate, to have our scent on him while picking up his scent on our fur.

But Jonah was large, and nobody liked to be stepped on. Especially not when you're tiny.

"There you are." Jonah came over and knelt down, his body naked, and as I had suspected, his cock hard. And yeah I looked. It was impossible not to with it so close to me, not that proximity would've stopped me at this point. Willpower can only hold out for so long. "Is it okay if I touch your fur?"

My beast did the best attempt at a nod and he worked his way toward Jonah's hand. He reached out and tentatively brushed his fingers along my coat. I wanted more, leaning into his touch, and when his fingers brushed over my fur, it felt like heaven. I wiggled, loving how he instinctively knew the perfect amount of pressure to give.

"You're so soft. Soft in a way I've never experienced, and I can see how water might be a problem. Your coat is so thick and lush." He smiled. "I'm usually the one with the soft fur," he teased... or maybe he was. I planned to find out.

He gave my beast a bit more affection, running his fingers through my fur and a bunch more praise before shifting into his snow leopard. My chinchilla wanted to play, but after Jonah petted me, I longed to do the same to him and I pushed my chinchilla back, taking over with a shift.

"I needed to see this soft snow leopard with my human eyes." I crossed over to him and he used his head to get me to pet him. I couldn't help but giggle at the move. "I think you want me to pet you."

I lowered my forehead to his, running my hands down his neck. "Your fur is soft."

Run.

Shift.

Mate.

“My chinchilla is done with being patient.” I took a few steps backwards and shifted again. I was going to be exhausted from all this shifting. But it’d be worth it.

Jonah’s beast walked slowly, allowing me to keep up, as his beast showed me around the area, focusing on where it was marked. His snow leopard was assuring me we were safe here and we played a little, me running between his legs and him tagging me with his nose. I was so at ease, soaking in the sun, when a vehicle rumbled in the distance.

Jonah shifted. “There’s another place we can go to be alone.”

I shifted too, sad we had to move.

As we were driving out of the clearing, someone was pulling in. Jonah drove us back to an area I half recognized. It was near Kim’s, possibly a five minute walk.

“This is a bit closer to where you’re living.” He parked the car. “Or I can drive you home. My beast didn’t want to share you with any other shifters nearby.”

“He didn’t mind my size?”

“He adored everything about you. Let’s go. We have to keep our clothes on until we get there,” he tacked on when I started to pull my shirt off.

The two of us walked hand in hand. The area wasn’t quite as perfect as the original spot, but it was nice enough. If I were shifting alone, this was where I’d do it. I could shift and run home if I felt unsafe. Jonah was so considerate of me and my beast and my eyes welled with tears.

We undressed and shifted; this time the two of us cuddled and I fell asleep against his fur. When I woke, Jonah was standing beside me in human form.

“You looked so sweet. I couldn’t wake you.”

I shifted. “You were just looking out for me?”

“Yeah. I guess that’s a way of looking at it. More than that, I was mesmerized by you.”

I leaned in and kissed him, not thinking twice about it. One kiss turned into two turned into his mouth opening up for me and me sinking into his body. Slow and leisurely at first, things got heated fast, hands wandering, my hole slick, my cock hard, my desire for him impossible to ignore.

A truck horn blared, startling us. It wasn't close by, but close enough, and my mate got up, grabbed his clothing, and said he had to go and apologized, leaving me there, unsure what to do next.

I wasn't sure what he expected from me. Did he want me to follow him? To give him space? Had it simply been a matter of being late and him having sizzle responsibilities? Each question I thought of brought new ones.

Grabbing my clothes, I yelled, "Why did you leave?" knowing full well he couldn't hear me. "Might as well go home."

It was quicker to cut out the other side. At least I thought it was until I came upon mud. Not just a little mud either. The elevation was just low enough that there was no walking around it.

Not wanting to ruin my shoes, I went back the way we came. His vehicle was gone. In my gut, I'd known it would be. But in my heart? I wanted him to still be there, for him to have some kind of an excuse that made sense and didn't hurt my feelings.

He was attracted to me, he liked my beast, and our animals got along... none of that was in question. Only, something was, and he was dealing with it by running away. I wanted him to come to me, to let me help him through. Wasn't that what mates did?

I pushed all of that negativity down. Jonah was my mate. The rest of this was all details. They could be dealt with later. Right now I just needed to be patient... and eat.

Bring home some muffins.

Will do in exchange for hearing everything.

They better be whole and not broken bits like earlier.

Kim replied with a laughing emoji, and somehow that had me already feeling better.

JONAH

Grabbing my clothes, I jogged out of Kyle's sight. Being a snow leopard shifter, I could cover a greater distance than a chinchilla, but in our human forms, I suspected he could outrun me. But after five minutes racing at breakneck speed, I stopped, my chest heaving as I panted, trying to get air into my lungs.

Kyle hadn't appeared, so I slipped on my clothes, got in the car, and headed home.

My beast wasn't impressed that I'd freaked. His constant, *Why? Why? Why?* in my head was pissing me off as I didn't have an answer. Or if I did, I was afraid to admit it, to say it out loud.

Again he repeated, *Why?*

I don't know how it would work between us. We're so different.

Different?

Fine. Brand me a speciesist—I'm not, but I understand how it would appear that way—but I've seen mixed species relationships end in a world of trouble.

My snow leopard didn't respond. Either he was disgusted, or he understood my point of view. Both were problematic. The first because he and I would be at loggerheads for the first time, and the second... well, perhaps we were both asshats.

No. I refused to believe that. My confusion wasn't because I might balk at the customs and routines of a chinchilla. I was

worried that Kyle's beast would find it difficult to be with a huge, carnivorous mammal, while his diet mainly consisted of hay, vegetables, and seeds, though they did eat meat.

And chinchillas had been and still were hunted for their fur. When shifting, Kyle's beast was more cautious than mine, and I'd done my best to accommodate him.

Just because his beast didn't eat much meat didn't imply Kyle, in his human form, was a vegetarian or restricted his meat intake. I thought back to our dinner, but he'd eaten pasta with a cheesy sauce. That didn't help, though cheese came from milk. Did that count? And it didn't matter either way. My head was cluttered with garbage, thinking of food where there were bigger things to deal with.

My snow leopard didn't see a problem, and while I was regretting running away from Kyle, my concerns were valid, and I needed someone to talk to so I could hash out my issues.

As I drove into Snowford, I spied Alpha on his afternoon walk pushing Bodhi. Poor Waylon, he was supposed to be enjoying this one-on-one time with his son, pointing out the birds and butterflies, but I was about to interrupt him, and not for the first time.

“Alpha!”

He didn't pause or glance over at me as I got out of the car, but continued to stroll. “If you want to chat, Jonah, keep up. I'm not stopping.”

“You're a man of the world.” That earned me side-eye, but I pushed on. “My Kyle... my mate... Kim's brother... well...”

He interrupted. “You're worried that a snow leopard and a chinchilla don't have much in common, and you're wondering whether the differences between the two are too wide to breach.”

“Wow! That was uncanny. You read my mind.”

“Nope. But I've had similar conversations with other snow leopards when their fated mate is a different species.”

“And what was your advice?”

Now he stopped and placed a hand on my shoulder. “I tell them that fate put them together. That’s the easy part. But the rest is up to them. Even if you were both snow leopards, a relationship takes work.”

He wasn’t helping.

“You were hoping I had a solution, huh? Do X and Y and your life will be hunky-dory.”

“Mmmm.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. There’s no detour. You just go straight ahead, side by side.”

I was disappointed, and yes, I wanted specifics. Do A, and B will happen.

“Remember that even though Daxon is a snow leopard, he was brought up with wolves, thinking he was a wolf.”

I hadn’t forgotten about the Alpha Omega’s background. Some in the sizzle didn’t trust him, and saw him as an interloper. That Waylon and Daxon had braved the discrimination together, become fathers, and were as much in love as when they met was a testament to the strength of their relationship.

Alpha sat on a park bench and put Bodhi on his lap. “What are you so afraid of, Jonah? And don’t say it’s because your beast might eat Kyle’s. That’s garbage, and you know it.”

Ouch! He was calling me out.

I sat beside him and examined my feelings. Not that I wanted to. That shit was painful. I dug deep, wanting to be honest with Waylon, but also myself. It felt as though someone was shoving a knife between my ribs and turning it one way and the other, making it as painful as possible.

“What if Kyle sees the real me? The guy who likes order, eats the same food over and over, and hates mess. The person who irons his sheets?”

I gave Alpha credit for not yelling, “You iron your sheets? Who has time for that?”

“I heard you had dinner together, and you sat at your favorite table and ate your usual meal. I’m guessing he knows some of what you just said.” He chuckled. “You might have to warn him about the sheets, though.”

I joined in and we shared a laugh. He was teasing me, a sign of our friendship.

“We all have our quirks. But if Kyle is the omega I consider him to be, he’ll love you even if you eat duck breast at every meal.”

“Oh no. I’d never do that. It would no longer be special.”

He got up and placed Bodhi in the stroller. “Think about what we’ve discussed. You must believe you’re worthy of being loved.” Daxon was coming this way, and they left me on the bench, examining what Waylon had said.

Was that it, the hurdle to our happiness? It wasn’t that Kyle and I couldn’t overcome our differences. It was thinking I didn’t deserve to be loved.

“What’s up?” Isadora sat on the bench.

“I’m a good person, right?”

“Absolutely.” She studied a group of kids playing football. “If anyone says something different, I’ll kick their ass.” She fisted both hands and sported a fierce expression.

I pushed her hands onto her lap. “There’ll be no fighting.”

“I’ve been where you are.”

“Sitting in the park contemplating your life and wondering how to move forward?”

“Ummm, yes. Didn’t we discuss Andrew last week?” That was different. But just as Waylon had, she sussed out what I was thinking. “I had doubts of whether I was good enough for a former Alpha, and because of his history with alcohol, he thought he had nothing to offer me.”

“Are you mated yet?”

Isadora blushed. “No. We haven’t found the right time to sit down with Waylon.”

“Hmmm. Sounds as though you’re avoiding him.”

She laughed. “You’re right.” She got up. “We should rectify that.”

I stayed on the park bench a while longer, watching the kids kicking the ball around.

I deserve to be happy, don't I?

Yes.

You're my beast. You have to say that.

As I wandered toward my car, hands in my pocket, a yelp and a cry of, “Congratulations,” had my head snap up. Daxon was kissing Isadora while Waylon was hugging his dad. Sizzle members gathered around them, patting them on the back. Cecily asked if they would celebrate with a big party and said they should book the community center.

Isadora was radiant, as though the early morning sun was shining on her face. Andrew’s smile and easy manner suggested he’d tossed off his burdens. I was happy for them and wished them all the best.

I got in the car and got out just as quickly. My pace quickened as I raced toward Daxon’s restaurant. So what if I got up at the same time every day, even on my day off. And I exercised for exactly one hour. No harm in looking after my body. I ate healthy, and while I didn’t eat duck breast every day—I preferred to eat as little meat as possible—that was my special treat once a week. Except this week it’d be twice.

But I was celebrating too—not mating, because we hadn’t marked one another. I was cheering for myself, because sure, I was quirky, but I liked that about myself. Also I was a good friend, a hard worker, and an honest man. I told fibs, yes, but not huge whopping lies.

Darcy must have seen me coming because she pulled out my chair. “Table for one?”

“Yeah.”

“The usual?”

I'd have loved to have tried another item on the menu. But not today. After my meal, I was going to call Kyle and apologize for running off.

Now? My beast was eager to see our mate.

Okay.

I wasn't ready for a phone call. Not yet. I texted instead.

Hi. I'm sorry for leaving you so abruptly. Had a lot on my mind. But I've worked through my issues, and if you forgive me, perhaps we can meet up tomorrow. xxx

I almost put the phone on mute. Former Jonah would have done it.

"Why wait until tomorrow?"

I shrieked and put the napkin over my mouth, using it as a defense mechanism, similar to when people crossed their arms. But his voice and presence had the same effect they always did. My heart sped up and my cock swelled.

"What are you doing here? Have you started work already?" I gripped my soda.

"Not officially."

"Oh." I gulped my drink, and it dribbled over the edge of the glass and onto my shirt.

"If you'd prefer to be alone, I'll give you your privacy."

"No. Yes. No. I don't know."

He pushed his chair back, but I grabbed his hand. "Sit, please. I've never been mated before."

"Me neither."

"I can't change who I am." I twisted my napkin into a tight ball.

"If I gave you the impression I expected you to, I'm sorry. I don't. I love that you know what you want."

That didn't sound like me. I'd been wavering over our possible mating since we met.

“Duck breast, for example. You don’t peruse the menu, telling the waiter to come back again because you can’t decide.”

“That’s true.”

“I’m going out on a limb here. If I peeked in your underwear drawer, your briefs would be folded vertically like a filing cabinet.”

“What makes you think I wear briefs?”

He smirked. “We shifted together. I caught a glimpse of them and your cock.” He lowered his voice. “Impressive.”

“Fine. You’re right. I wouldn’t be caught out with my underwear tossed in, unfolded.”

“Confession time. Perhaps you can teach me, because that’s what my drawer looks like.”

There was a sharp intake of breath—from me—and Kyle pursed his lips. He didn’t appear horrified at my reaction. If I had to guess, he was stifling a giggle.

“Is that right, or are you just winding me up to get a reaction?”

He shrugged. “You’ll never know unless you look.”

“But you’re staying with Kim. Do you have a drawer, or are you living out of your suitcase?”

He told me his clothes were put away and I was impressed. “But perhaps I can check your underwear drawer?”

KYLE

When I was a kid, there was a show my grandfather used to watch on rerun about two men who were opposites and shared the same apartment. It was supposed to be funny and probably was if I had been its demographic. But that wasn't what I remembered most. Every time my grandfather watched it, he made a comment about how they should be mated already.

As a kid that sounded ridiculous. They were bugging the daylights out of each other in every single episode. But now that I had met my mate, I got it. Being the same... boring. But being different, that had potential. It amused me that Jonah stacked his underwear just so, just as it would amuse him when he saw my drawer of socks and not a single one matched. Or maybe it would upset him, and I could learn the wonders of being organized.

I stood outside waiting for Jonah to pick me up. We were going on a date. I wasn't sure where we were off to, but it didn't matter. I was going to spend the evening with my mate, which was a thousand times better than how I'd spent my day. My sister's washing machine broke, and I decided that internet videos were enough to make me an appliance tech. Spoiler alert: they weren't. I did manage to get the machine working, but the supposed half hour job took me eight.

In a way, that was good. It meant that I wasn't hyper focused on my mate for hours. Now that would've been a long ass day.

My phone buzzed, and I took it out of my pocket, assuming it was Jonah saying he was on the way. Instead it was a spam

text. After checking my inbox, I had to chuckle. “There’s no way Jonah would have one-hundred-forty-three notifications on his phone.”

I shook my head in amusement and cleared them one by one. I was just about done when Jonah pulled up, so I ignored the remaining messages. I ran to his vehicle. I didn’t bother pretending to play it cool. Not for a single second. He was mine, and hiding how excited I was to see him accomplished nothing.

“What were you doing so intently?” Jonah kissed my cheek as I buckled in.

“This.” I took out my phone and showed him the remaining notifications.

His eyes went wide. “You have twenty-six notifications?”

“I know, right? I slayed it. I should be able to get them all the way down today.” I tapped on the screen and pulled up my email. “I might even work on these this week.” Unlike my text messages, my emails were in the thousands... the hundreds of thousands.

“It’s official. We will always have two computers. I can’t live that close to the edge.” He said it with humor, but there was truth to it.

“Deal.” I shut my phone off and shoved it in my back pocket. “Now tell me, alpha, where are we going?”

“That depends. What are you in the mood for?”

“Honestly? Cock and cuddles.”

My mate nearly choked. Gods, he was fun.

“We could order in pizza first,” I suggested. “We could even pretend to put on a movie too.”

“You’re going to keep me on my toes, aren’t you?” He put the vehicle in reverse.

“Toes... knees... same difference.”

I hadn’t planned to be so flirty and sexual, but once I was in the car and his scent flooded the interior, lust took over,

especially with him being so playful. It was as if our conversation about his need for order broke down barriers between us. And I loved it.

“We’re stopping to get the pizza along the way. I can’t risk the poor delivery guy seeing you when you’re so frisky.” His hand settled on my knee. “I’ll keep that side of you to myself.”

“Appreciate it.” My hand found his, and our fingers intertwined. “What are your pizza topping preferences?”

“What are you in the mood for?” He tossed the question back. “Without cheese, of course.”

“I already told you. The pizza decision is yours.”

We ended up walking into his place with a pizza marinara with extra veggies. Was it what most people pictured when they thought about pizza? Absolutely not. But there was a reason pizza marinara was becoming so popular, and it was going to be delicious when we got around to eating it.

“Tour time.” Jonah flicked on the light.

“Kitchen first, please.”

He took me to the kitchen, and I grabbed the pizza from him and set it on the stove top. “I like my pizza tepid and my alphas hot.” I reached for his waist band and yanked him towards me. “Hi.”

“I’ve never had tepid pizza.” He kissed me. “Time to discover new things, I suppose.”

“And if it stinks, we can order in. Life is too short for bad pizza.” I leaned into the spot where his throat met his shoulder and inhaled deeply. “Here or the bedroom?”

He didn’t reply, but scooped me up and carried me to his room. Just as I suspected, it was picture perfect. Even the bed was made well enough to be in one of those home magazines, as opposed to mine, which was rumpled with a pillow that had been pummeled more than once.

“I guess the bedroom wins.”

He set me gently on the mattress and I pulled him to me, sealing my mouth to his for a searing kiss. He melted into me, his weight on me delicious, his hard cock pressed against mine. We kissed, neither of us pushing for more, just loving the feel of connecting.

“I could kiss you all night.” He pulled my bottom lip with his teeth. “You taste better than you scent, and gods, I would pay money to be surrounded by your scent forever.”

“How much?” I asked.

He tilted his head slightly.

“How much would you pay?” I clarified.

“All of it. Everything I have.”

“Awww.” Gods I loved this man.

He kissed me. “Am I smooshing you?”

“Nope. But you are too dressed.”

“I could say the same about you.” His gaze raked my body, pausing at the large bulge in my pants long enough to lick his lips.

“Okay, say the same about me.”

He removed his clothing, one piece at a time, letting each puddle in a pile on the floor, which surprised me, ‘cause I half expected him to put them in the hamper.

He pulled me to a sitting position and started to undress me, beginning with my shirt, before kissing a path over my newly exposed skin.

“You missed a spot,” I teased as his breath hit my cock, but he ignored my arousal and peppered kisses on my thighs. “A fairly large spot if I do say so myself.”

“I agree with the word large.” He looked up at me. “But I didn’t miss it. I’m saving the best for last.”

“Gods, you’re fun. I think I’ll keep...” But before I could complete the sentence, he had the tip of my dick in his mouth. His tongue swirled around the head as he sucked. Even if I had

wanted to finish my thought, it was impossible, as it had evaporated.

Jonah knew how to work a cock with his mouth and tongue. He licked, kissed, sucked, and swallowed, bringing me to the brink of orgasm. And he continued to taunt me, letting his fingers walk across my chest or thighs until the danger of me exploding too soon was over, and he'd return to my dick.

"If you kill me, please let the obituary say I'm in heaven."

Jonah gagged on my cock, which was hitting the back of his throat. I giggled, unable to help myself.

"Sorry?"

He responded to my apology by swallowing around my length and then releasing me from his mouth. He crawled up between my legs and kissed me hard and slow. "Next time, I want you to explode down my throat as you cry out my name."

"I like that plan. I like it so much we can move it forward to now."

Next time. He was already planning next time. Fate deserved a fruit basket, that was for sure.

"Or I could fill you with my knot."

Slick was trickling down my ass crack, and now that my cock was lonely, it was all I could focus on. "That. I vote for that."

I pulled him closer, needing his mouth on mine for a few more seconds, and then I rolled over and gave him access to my needy hole.

"Not tonight, omega. I want to see your face when you come." He reached behind me and grabbed a pillow, settling it under my hips and pushing my thighs up against my chest as he settled between my legs, aligning his dick up with my entrance.

"Don't tease me. We had our fun, now I... I need..."

"Shhh, omega mine. I got you." He slid into me slowly. "Gods, you feel amazing wrapped around me. Let me know when I can move."

I bucked my hips. “Now. Please, for the love of all that is... now.”

He took my plea for what it was and began thrusting in and out, each one harder and faster until he found the perfect rhythm, the one that had me needing to hold back my orgasm in an attempt to keep this moment going longer.

I let my head fall back, not caring about the noises and mumbled words that fell from my lips. There was nothing to be embarrassed about. He was my mate and I was his. We were who we were and would continue to make us work.

I started to meet him move for move, no longer caring whether I came too soon; it felt too good like this, and I refused to deny my impending orgasm any longer.

“I’m close. So close,” I cried, begging and pleading for I didn’t even know what.

But my alpha knew. He reached down and wrapped his hand around my cock, the feel of his warmth almost enough to push me over the edge. He jerked me once, twice, not able to complete the third time before I was crying out his name, my body quaking under him.

My chinchilla pushed me to mark Jonah, make him ours. But I held back. Marking was forever, and while I knew we would work out, I didn’t want to cross that boundary until we had both agreed to it. I had a feeling my entire body would be sore in the morning. And I’d enjoy every moment of the aftermath.

His body stilled as cum streamed into me. His knot grew, filling me. Jonah collapsed onto me, our sweat mingling. I hugged him close. “So much better than going out.” I nibbled on his earlobe. “Alpha, mine.”

“Agreed.” He kissed my shoulder where I someday hoped to wear his mark.

“I think we’ll have to change the sheets in the morning.” I wiggled us over and out of the wettest of spots. “But you know, your knot is so good, I think I’ll wash them for you.”

“Will you hang them on the line to dry?” he asked, dead serious.

“Sure.” He was going to have to show me, though. I couldn’t remember a time I even lived someplace that had a clothes line, much less when I used one. “But you’ll need to make me breakfast.”

“I thought we were having tepid pizza.” He kissed the spot below my ear. “Because I have a feeling we aren’t going to be leaving this room until morning.”

“I concede. Your plan is the best.”

JONAH

The bedclothes were over my face, but my eyes were open.

There was a warm body beside me and he was naked, lying on his back, his morning wood on full display. I longed to shimmy over the mattress and put my mouth on him, but needed his permission. Perhaps if we mated and established boundaries, for example, we could give our mate a blow job if that person was asleep.

Even trailing my fingertips over his chest might not be appropriate. Kyle could be a grumpy morning person and bark at me for waking him so early.

Thank gods it was Sunday. As a sole-proprietor, there was work I could do, but I was taking the day off. Ummm, make that the morning. I doubted I could go an entire twenty-four hours without doing anything work-related.

Instead of cuddling with Kyle, I slid off the mattress, hoping not to disturb his sleep, and made coffee. No matter how early or late it was, or how much was on my to-do list, I couldn't start the day without caffeine.

After I had my first cup, I poked my head in the bedroom door, but Kyle was snoring softly. I paused and took in the nasal vibrations that sounded like whistling, but wished he was awake, not because his snoring was bugging me, but because I wanted to spend time with him.

My gaze left the man in my bed and roamed over the navy walls. I'd agonized for weeks over what to paint the bedroom. I'd slapped different blue paints on one wall, studying it in the

morning and evening light, standing close, observing it from the doorway. The guy at the paint shop must have been fed up with me, going back and forth and asking for small samples of every blue in the range.

Even when I'd made the decision and was in the middle of painting, I'd take in the section I'd completed and be filled with self-doubt, thinking I should have gone with a boring neutral. But when it was done and the bed was made with new bedding, the lamps and night stands I'd inherited from my grandparents put in place, and art hung on the walls, it looked as good as any room I'd seen in those arty magazines and websites.

But after leaving the bedroom door ajar, I wandered into the living slash dining room. The original walls had an undercoat of white paint and I was still puzzling over what to paint them. I'd prepped them and filled in holes, but hadn't decided on the shade. I'd decided on a light gray, and I'd add pops of color in the room with cushions, rugs, and artwork.

But who knew there were so many grays to choose from? There were eight samples on a wall closest to the window, and as I stared at them, hoping one would say, "Choose me," a voice over my shoulder had me jump as it announced, "If it were me, I'd choose this one." Kyle pointed to a subtle light gray. "But this is your place, you have to make the final decision."

"You're right. I love it. Coffee? Do you eat breakfast?" I was more of a bite of toast and out the door guy, but perhaps Kyle liked a full breakfast.

"Coffee, yes, but perhaps after I've showered, I could help you paint."

While I showered twice a day and hated being dirty, there wasn't much point getting clean when we'd be splattered with paint. As I handed Kyle his coffee, I said, "You can shower after we've painted the walls."

He gulped the hot liquid and smirked as he eyed my ass. "A missed opportunity."

“Huh?” I grabbed the keys and headed for the door. “Bring your coffee with you.” Once I made a decision, I liked to act on it. In the car, I asked, “What missed opportunity?”

“We could have showered together.” He winked, and I slammed on the brakes.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Damn, we could have soaped one another, put fingers in holes and hands on cocks. My length reacted and engorged.

“You wanted to paint, so that’s what we’ll do.” He put a hand on my thigh and slid it further to cup my bulge. I gasped and wondered if I should pull over, but Kyle added we could get frisky while the paint was drying.

I calculated how long it’d take to buy the paint, get home, and finish the job so that we could finish one another off in the shower. “Hurry,” I yelled as we put the tins of paint in the trunk.

With the furniture in the middle of the room and drop cloths covering them and the floor, I handed Kyle a pair of brand new painting overalls while mine were spotted with navy paint.

“Nice.” He wriggled into them and caught me admiring his ass. “A little wriggle here and a little wriggle there.” He bopped around the room, his hips swaying to the right and left. “Jonah, grab me, we can have a mini conga line.”

I hesitated. I’d danced in my home with the curtains drawn, imagining I was holding a mate in my arms. The community center had occasional discos—we snow leopards loved our ‘70s music—and I’d sort of sway at the back while everyone did the hustle.

Yes. Dance. My beast loved music.

We’d removed the curtains before we started painting, and passersby could look right into my living room. But as I took in Kyle zigzagging around the furniture and enjoying life, I said, “Fuck it,” and put my hands on him. I didn’t have a sense of rhythm, not that it mattered.

Kyle was singing about me and him, my hoodie, and my beloved duck breast at the top of his voice. While I couldn't sing with him, I shuffled after him, swiveling my hips and yelling, "Hey!" After each circle of the room, my voice grew louder.

Kyle pointed outside as we did another round of the room. People weren't staring in. Instead, Andrew, Waylon's dad, was leading a spontaneous conga line on the sidewalk. Isadora was behind him, and many of the committee members had joined in, along with other snow leopards. Unlike us, they weren't going around and around but disappeared along the street.

Eventually, I collapsed onto the floor and Kyle joined me. We lay in one another's arms as we caught our breath. The word delirious popped into my head. Was it possible to be delirious with pleasure? With love? Maybe it was a first, and I should be in the record books.

"I've never done anything like that. It was amazing."

Kyle kissed my sweaty brow and hauled me up. "Come, Mr. Dancer Extraordinaire, let's get this room painted."

"Yes!" I clapped and we high-fived, the noise scaring my neighbor's cat.

We made a great team. After discovering Kyle was better with a roller, while I paid more attention to detail, I got myself a brush and him a roller. Even if he'd been a better painter than me, no way would I have let him do the edges near the trim. I was a perfectionist and maybe he was too, but it was my home, my living room.

With one wall done, we stood back and admired our handiwork.

"Can't stop now." I swatted his butt.

"You're a hard taskmaster, but I'm up for it."

My gaze went to his crotch. "Very hard."

"Hurry up if you want to see my cock."

"Much as I want to, we can't hurry. If we knock over the paint or we splatter the floor, I'll ban you from the room."

“Really?” His crestfallen expression had me regretting my words. My heart constricted, and I vowed to think before I spoke in future.

Really?

You don't believe me? I can try.

“No. I mean yes, but only until I'd cleaned up and finished the painting. Your job would be coffee maker and cheering squad.”

“A cheering squad of one? Okay, but I'm not going to be banished. Come on, mate.”

Mate! My snow leopard liked the sound of that. And I did too. But neither Kyle nor I had gone into the subject in depth. We'd fucked. That was a huge step. But putting my cock in his hole didn't magically make all my insecurities vanish.

If I'd been doing the paint job myself, the time would have dragged. But with Kyle at my side, joking and sharing kisses and the occasional grope of our cocks, the time flew by, and by midafternoon, we were cleaning the brushes and calculating how long it would be before the paint dried.

“Pretty good for amateurs.” Kyle draped an arm over my shoulder.

“Who are you calling an amateur?”

“Sor-ry. But as a professional, will you deign to share a shower with me?”

“I might. Just let me check my emails.” I'd gone all day and not thought of work or read messages or emails. It was good to take a break from my job, but there was no one else to take up the slack when I was messing around with my mate. I removed my overalls and took them and Kyle's and dumped them out the back. I'd deal with them later.

“What is it you do exactly?”

I peered at him over the top of the computer. “Didn't Kim tell you?”

He shrugged. “Does she know?”

“No idea.” I led him into the third bedroom where I kept my samples. “These are the products I sell.” It was set up as a kids’ playroom with soft toys, a slide, a reading nook, beanbags, a daybed, a tumbling mat, a play house complete with furniture, a rocking horse, and a craft area.

“Oh my gods, if we have kids, we won’t have to buy anything.” Kyle charged into the room and zoomed down the slide. I stayed in the doorway, not seeing the chinchilla shifter but picturing him in here with a baby. Considering we weren’t mated and we’d only been intimate once, Kyle talking about a possible family was a lot.

I’d been close to panicking when contemplating us being mates. But I’d never thought beyond that. Not that I could blame him. Once mated, becoming dads was a natural progression—assuming we both wanted to have children and there were no infertility issues.

But as I watched Kyle cuddle a stuffed rabbit, pretend to cook in the house, dress a doll, and kick a ball into goal, yelling, “Score!” his childlike enjoyment was infectious.

“Aren’t you going to join me? Or are you jaded after seeing these toys day in and day out?”

I’d never played with anything in the room. Not really. I’d tested them, but that wasn’t for fun. It was work.

“That slide does look kinda fun,” I agreed.

“Come on, and then I’ll cook you a pretend meal. I make a mean duck breast.”

KYLE

Doing the restaurant schedule was like solving a jigsaw puzzle. I needed to figure out how many people we would need, who was available, when the rushes would be, and everyone's roles. There was a computer program for it, but the few times I used it I found more mistakes than if I sat down and did it the old fashioned way.

The restaurant was too new to have enough historical data to make adequate projections. I started a log of the number of tables, number of people, and weather to keep better track for when I was doing this in years to come. Because as much as I wasn't sure about the job when Kim initially suggested it, I was now confident that I was in this for the long haul.

When I could sit here playing *who should go where and when during the next week* with a smile on my face, it meant that I'd found my calling. Sure, I still had a ton to learn, but so far it was a thousand times better than my last job.

"Darcy," I called as she walked by my open doorway. "You have a sec?"

"Sure, boss man." Initially it bugged me when she called me that, it coming across almost like a taunt, but now I saw it for what it was, her way of showing me respect. "Whatcha got?"

"I'm trying to figure out staffing for the next schedule cycle and wanted to know if you think that the Jazz Festival will impact our numbers." I didn't know a lot about it, but had seen a few signs.

“It won’t. They’re having a food truck alley. My guess is those at the festival will stay there to eat.”

“And will that lower the number here?”

“Doubt it.” She started to leave and added, “I like that you are thinking about the forest and not just the trees. I think we’ll keep you.”

“Who’s we, and please tell me it won’t be in the basement.”

“No basement here, boss man. But we do have a walk-in.”

I went back to work, first finishing up the schedule and then doing inventory and making calls to a few local vendors to set up meetings. Local produce sold well, and I was hoping we could get exclusive contracts with a delicious merlot or ice cream flavor. Anything we could do to separate ourselves from the other restaurants in the county was worth investigating.

My alarm went off, telling me that it was tasting time, and I went to join the staff in the kitchen. Each day the chef would tell the servers about the specials for the night. This week we added a tasting. What better way to sell a special than to have experienced it?

The chef had prepared a scallop special with a light cream sauce and handmade noodles. It might possibly be the second best thing I’d ever put in my mouth. The first best being Jonah.

“I hope we have a lot of scallops. This is going to be popular.” The chef beamed at my praise.

The evening went off well. “Hey Chef, any chance I could get a duck to go?”

I’d half expected to have Jonah stop by and order some himself, but he’d had a meeting and it probably went over time. It gave me an excuse to both stop by and see him and spoil him. I considered it a win-win.

“Sure thing.”

I finished up a few last minute tasks while waiting for the food, then went to my mate’s place. I had to chuckle knowing that if he simply stopped by, he would be absolutely appalled.

I hadn't vacuumed my room since yesterday, I was pretty sure my towel was tossed over a chair, and nothing about my bed resembled any amount of order.

Hey! I have something for you, are you still up? I shot him a quick text when I saw how late it had gotten.

Just got home.

I'm five minutes from you.

I'll leave the light on. I couldn't tell if he was being serious or making a pop culture joke. Either way it made me smile.

Sure enough, when I reached his doorstep, the light was on. He opened the door and I held out the food awkwardly. "I brought you duck."

"Thank you." He took it from me with one hand, using his other to yank me closer by the belt loop and greet me with a searing kiss. "You just caught me. I was about to head into the shower."

"I can go." I didn't want to, but interrupting his routine wasn't the way to win hearts. And I wanted to win his. Of that I was sure.

"Or you can join me."

"That. I choose that."

He put the duck in the fridge before heading into the bathroom, where he turned on the water and we got undressed. There was no denying that fate had me mating up because this guy, this alpha turned me on. And not just my dick, but my heart.

"You should turn around really slowly." I was only half joking.

"Why's that?" He tested the water.

"So I can see your biteable ass, of course." It begged to be grabbed, nibbled, worshipped.

"If that's the reason, then sure."

I needed to be more careful about how I asked for things. He was going at a snail's pace. "I changed my mind," I said.

"You don't want to see my biteable ass?" He tilted his head.

"No. I do. I just think you need to do it quickly. Your pace is killing me."

He twirled around.

"You, Jonah, are not playing fair." I brushed past him and straight into the shower, reaching around and smacking him playfully on the butt. "If you asked to see my ass, I'd offer it up like dessert."

He came in behind me. "Did you say dessert?"

"I did." I stuck my head under the water, getting my hair nice and wet. The major downside of working in a restaurant was coming home smelling like the food. I wanted to get the scent off me, but I also wanted to make my mate come down my throat, screaming out my name. "But first, let me get the yuck off from work."

I reached for the shampoo, but Jonah stopped me, letting me know he wanted to take care of me. He had me turn around and massaged the shampoo into my hair, guiding me under the water to rinse it. Just that was enough to make me feel like a spoiled omega, but he wasn't done. He took his time, gently washing me from head to toe, paying extra close attention to my full cock and needy hole. It was a miracle that I didn't come.

"Your turn," I insisted.

"It categorically is not my turn. You mentioned dessert and I'm hungry. It was difficult enough to wait this long." He got on his knees—that had to hurt on the tiles—and looked up at me, his face splattered with water. Sexy as fuck. "Tell me omega mine, how long have you been ready for my mouth?"

"I always am." I pushed his wet hair off his brow. "I live in a constant state of need when I am around you. At first I wondered when it would lessen. Now, I hope that it never does."

He didn't answer with words, instead reaching behind me and finding my slick entrance with one hand and licking me from root to tip as he held my hip with the other.

I let my head rest on the shower wall, closing my eyes and allowing myself to feel. There was something heady and raw about letting my sense of touch take over. He licked and nibbled and sucked me down, his finger fucking my achy hole. I couldn't anticipate what was coming next and that only heightened the sensations.

When my mate mumbled, "Come for me," and then took me in fully, swallowing me down as I reached the back of his throat, I had no choice but to comply. My cum shot into his mouth and he swallowed it, making yummy sounds around my cock. He helped me ride out my orgasm, and then licked me clean. It was hot as the equator and my mouth was already drooling, aching to return the favor.

"Mate, come here." I opened my eyes, straightening myself up, and when he stood, I pulled him in for a deep kiss, one that left us both breathless, Jonah's erection pressed against my middle, reminding me of the scrumptious treat that still awaited me.

"Thank you for the dessert," he spoke against my lips.

"Now it's time for mine." I pulled his bottom lip in with my teeth. "Switch places with me." I wanted to be able to look up at him, to watch as he came undone, and that was much easier to do when he was the one directly under the water.

Once he was settled, I got on the tiles—yep, they were hard, but I didn't care, my mate was harder—more than ready for my treat.

"I've been waiting for this for too long. I'll wash afterward. I don't have your willpower. I can't wait for your hair to be squeaky clean." I looked up at him, wanting him to see the lighthearted humor in my words, and then watched him as I circled his tip with my tongue. "Unless you want me to wash your hair first."

His head fell back the way mine had, but with it was his rich laughter. I loved that sound more than pretty much any other on this planet. It wrapped me like a hug.

“My hair can wait.”

“Good. Because I can’t.” I didn’t waste time teasing him. I had a goal, I wanted him to explode so hard and so quickly that he wouldn’t remember his name.

I brought him into my mouth as far as I could, sucking deeply as I pulled off. Again and again, I made the trip, each time bringing him in deeper, my hands grabbing his ass. When I managed to get him fully inside, I swallowed, and the moan he rewarded me with was everything I ever wanted and more.

He took over from there, fucking my mouth. It was the hottest experience I’d had to date, and I had a feeling that Jonah was going to make sure that it lost that title quickly. Each time he cupped my cheek it was better than the time before. I didn’t know if it was a goal with him or if he had a magical touch. I didn’t care which, I just planned to treasure it.

He fucked me hard and fast, my own cock already hard and needy again. When he came, I swallowed up the delicious offering, wondering what I’d done that had fate deciding I was worthy of this alpha.

He helped me to my feet and I kissed him, hugging him close. “We have a problem, mate.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” He rubbed his cheek against my own.

“I’m hard again.” I stuck out my bottom lip playfully.

“Oh no!” He rubbed his nose against mine. “I get a second helping of dessert. Whatever shall I do?”

JONAH

I was sitting in the room I used at the community center when Isadora tore in. Unlike the Isadora of old who never had a hair out of place, this Isadora clutched a tablet while tucking hair behind her ear.

“Tell me why Andrew and I decided to plan a huge get together to celebrate our mating?” She collapsed into a chair.

“Wasn’t it because everyone was pressuring you and you agreed, despite not wanting to?”

“Was that it? Sounds about right. I can’t recall.” She glanced at the device as it beeped. “If you and Kyle finally get around to mating, just celebrate with family.”

That would be Kim, and I was fine with that. Not that Kyle and I had done the deed. Both of us were avoiding the conversation, using work as an excuse. We were both busy but we weren’t so preoccupied that we couldn’t have a discussion about our future.

“Jonah, what happened to that changing table you ordered?” Clarence barged in, ignoring Isadora, who was bent over the tablet.

“The one for Family Ties arrived yesterday and it’s in the room.” There was no need to check the computer because I’d put it in the room myself.

“No, the one for Timmy and me.”

Isadora’s head shot up. “Timmy’s pregnant?”

“Not yet, but we’re trying.” Clarence fixed his gaze on me.

“You ordered it less than twenty-four hours ago. It’ll be here in the morning.” I didn’t say that they’d changed their minds three times. They were excited about the possibility of becoming dads.

“Timmy’s got the nesting bug and we’re not even pregnant.” He grinned. “Me too, and I’m loving it.” He waltzed out the door, saying, “Call us as soon as the changing table arrives.”

“I’ll bring it to you personally.”

“You are coming to our celebration, aren’t you? You didn’t RSVP?”

That was unlike me. I usually responded as soon as I received an invitation. But it had said I could bring a guest, and I was dithering about asking Kyle.

“Of course I’m coming. I should have replied.”

“Alone?” Isadora’s raised brow was a signal she was asking specifically about Kyle and not a friend who might accompany me.

No. My beast was beyond frustrated that Kyle and I hadn’t marked one another. This was the first time he’d spoken to me in days, saying to wake him up when we were finally mate and mate.

“Let me find out. Give me a minute.”

“Don’t have a minute. Text me.” And she was gone.

I scurried across the road to the restaurant. It was mid-afternoon, and the restaurant was closed, but Kyle would be there. He was making his mark on the business by making changes, one of which was the menu. It was ironic that he was marking something, not someone, and that someone was me.

“Hello, hello.”

“I’ve missed you,” Darcy greeted me.

“We saw one another this morning as you walked to work.”

“Here. At your favorite table, eating the meal you order once a week.” She lowered her voice and glanced at the closed office door. “Is everything okay?” she mouthed.

“We’re taking our time.”

Darcy closed one eye as if she was trying to process how that could be. Even to my ears, it sounded unconvincing.

“You’re fated. That’s usually a hello, wham, bam, we’re mated situation. There is no easy breezy, we’ll see where this takes us deal.”

I opened my mouth to fib about Kyle and me being unique because we were two different species, when he flung open the door. His scent curled around me, clinging to my skin and clothes.

“Hi.”

“Hi, yourself.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and left us alone, mumbling about us being a slow-moving car wreck. Kyle steered me into his office and shut the door. Rather than wait for him to ask me why I was there, I jumped in first.

“Andrew, the former sizzle Alpha and Waylon’s dad, and his new mate Isadora are celebrating their mating and they’ve invited you.”

“Interesting. They asked me, a guy they don’t know?”

“Well, you’re the new manager of Daxon’s restaurant here in Snowford, and he’s our Alpha Omega so...” I lost my train of thought, or I couldn’t keep my fibs straight.

“Kim got an invite too, and hers said she could bring a plus one. She asked me if I’d go with her.” Well, damn. He was going with his sister and would sit at her table, and I’d probably be at the kids’ table. “But if I’ve been invited with you as your... partner, I accept. Strange you didn’t mention it earlier.”

This was getting messy, and I couldn’t keep my fibs in order. “Fine. It didn’t say you exactly, just that I could bring someone, and I put off asking you because everyone knows

we're fated mates, and instead of celebrating Andrew and Isadora, they'll be gossiping about us."

He sat behind the desk, swiveling his chair one way and then the other. "And you worry about being the target of gossip?"

I sighed and slumped into the other chair, but damn, it didn't swivel. "Usually it's inconsequential garbage, though poor Andrew was the target of malicious rumors and had to resign as Alpha."

Even though I'd given Kyle a brief rundown about our snow leopard history, particularly when it came to mating non-snow leopards and any children they might have, I filled him in on the animosity some in the sizzle still harbored about snow leopard children being raised outside our community.

"Who gives a shit about them? Are any of them your friends or people you care about?"

"Nope." I studied the whiteboard above Kyle's head while being plagued by guilt. I'd allowed other people's opinions to sway me, to put a pause on our mating, and left the most important person in my life dangling, refusing to commit.

I stood and kneeled in front of him, clasping his hands. "Do you, Kyle, want to spend the rest of your life with me, Jonah?"

"That sounds official."

"Do you?" I wasn't about to let anything waylay me. I'd wasted enough time.

"I do."

"Good, can Darcy spare you?" I refused to mate in this dingy office.

"For?"

"Us marking one another."

"Sure." He checked his phone. "I have to be back in thirty minutes."

"Perfect." I gazed around the office. "On your next day off, we have to paint this room. How can you work here?"

“Jonah, forget the damned office.” He waved his phone at me.
“Tick tock.”

Taking his hand, I dragged him out of the restaurant and across the road toward my house. “Do you like the color of my bedroom walls?”

“What?”

“You’ll be looking at them as we mate, and once we’re mates, we’ll be having a lot of sex and that sex will happen in my bedroom.”

We were both panting as we flung ourselves into my house. “Who says we have to fuck in the bedroom? There’s the sofa, over the back of said sofa, on the kitchen countertop.”

Gods, no. Or if we did, I’d have to disinfect it afterward. “You didn’t answer my question.” We were in the bedroom, tossing off our clothes, and I pushed a naked Kyle onto the mattress.

“I love your navy walls. How’s that? Is that the answer you were looking for?”

Spreading his legs, I fingerfucked him as slick coated his thighs. “Perfect.”

Kyle propped himself up on both elbows and licked around his mouth. “Give me the dick.”

I was more than ready to do just that and I gripped my cock, my fingers sticky with slick, and slid my palm up and down the shaft.

“Not fair,” Kyle panted before claspings his length and tugging. My chest heaved as my lungs worked hard at getting enough oxygen while little moans erupted from Kyle’s lips. While jerking off would have been pleasurable, I wanted to be inside him, my cum in his channel, us splattered with his as we yelled one another’s names.

I guided my cock to his hole and he stiffened, the grip on his length loosening.

“Do it,” he begged as he grabbed my dick and eased the tip into his hole. He panted, “No matter how many times we fuck, when you enter me, it’s always more exquisite than before.”

“What about this? I shoved my cock all the way in, filling him, while desire rippled over me, and I resisted the urge to pound into him.

Kyle was silent, wriggling his ass before he told me, “I want to feel every inch of you.” He lifted his legs and put both of them on my left shoulder, ankles neatly crossed. Already the altered position had my cock at a different angle, and goosebumps spiraled over my skin as my body tingled. “Grab me.”

I did as he asked, holding his legs against me, but before fucking him hard, I kissed his ankle and licked and nibbled his calf. His breathing sped up and goosebumps also marched over his skin as he murmured, “Your cock feels so damned huge.”

“Don’t you always tell me it’s enormous.” I loved when he stroked my ego.

“Keep doing that and I’ll cum before we have any fun.” He swayed his hips from side to side, his smirk leaving no doubt what he was doing to me.

With my free hand, I took hold of his dick and pumped as I thrust into him. He grunted and arched his back, and I admired the beads of sweat trickling over his chest. Kyle fisted the bedding as I impaled him. I was loving doing everything, all he had to do was receive.

I slowed my pace, inching in and out of his channel. Kyle tangled his fingers in his hair and tugged as he moaned and pleaded with me to speed up. But I was in the mood for teasing as I leaned back, my cock sliding out of his hole so only the tip remained. Wrapping my arm tightly around his legs, I pulled him toward me, my cock lunging inside him, filling him.

“Do it again,” he purred.

But I eased his legs back so they were pressed onto his chest and slammed into him. There was no more begging, just grunts and mewls. Sweat and slick mingled as Kyle tossed his head from side to side, mumbling that he was close.

Desire forced my eyes shut as I quickened my thrusts and tugged at his cock. Kyle trembled and his body stiffened as he came, and within seconds, my cum surged into him.

I went limp and collapsed onto top of Kyle, my knot swelling, leaving us unable to separate. “I, Jonah, a snow leopard shifter, take you, Kyle, and your chinchilla, to be my forever mate.” My beast extended his claws. I raked them over his shoulder and chest, leaving him forever marked. But I needed to sink my teeth into his flesh, and I allowed my snow leopard his canines. Leaving another mark on his other shoulder, there was no doubt he was mine.

My mate’s chinchilla’s sharp teeth appeared, and he sunk them into my neck. Blood trickled over my chest, mingling with Kyle’s blood.

“Mate.” I kissed the tip of his nose.

“Mate.”

KYLE

“I have a surprise for you.” I rolled my eyes at me practicing telling my mate the good news. Every phrasing I’d tried so far sounded as though I was giving him something tangible or telling him our family was growing, neither of which were true.

“Something interesting happened at work today.”

That stinks and isn’t much better.

My beast nodded but stayed silent.

There was no reason for this to be so difficult. He was going to love it whether I said it in a chocolate and roses romantic way or if I just blurted it out. I wanted to make it special, though. We’d been mated for over a month, and each day our bond was stronger and somehow he got sexier. Things were going so well between us and I was putting too much pressure on myself to make this memorable.

“I’m home.” The door clicked shut, Kim dropping her keys on the side table with a clank. “I thought you’d be with Jonah. I was surprised to see your car.”

“He has a meeting with Waylon about sizzle business.”

“Good. Then you can help me make dinner.”

“You mean you want me to clean up your messes,” I corrected.

“You know me so well.” Kim stuck out her tongue. “You in?”

“What are you cooking? I need to know what I’m getting into.” The time she made enchiladas she managed to dirty almost every pan and knife in the kitchen. They were good, but no dinner was worth all those dirty dishes.

“Just a casserole.”

The second the word “just” left her lips, I should’ve known it was going to be a kitchen disaster. She used the skillet to brown the meat, another to saute the mushrooms and onions, even though they were getting mixed in with the meat anyway, two pans for the sauce when she realized the first was too small, the baking dish, and nearly every knife and cutting board in the place.

“Next time I’m cooking and you’re cleaning.” I was teasing. I didn’t mind cleaning up the mess as she cooked. It was us time, and between our jobs and me being mated, these moments were far and few between.

“Let me guess, you’re going to find the most complicated recipe there is, one that even requires the mixer.”

“Honestly, it will probably be baked chicken and potatoes.” They were her favorite and easy to make.

“You really do love me.” Kim grinned and tickled me under the chin, something she used to do as a kid.

“It’s sibling law or something. Not like I have a choice.” I grabbed a bottle of apple juice from the fridge and handed it to her, grabbing a cola for myself.

“It’ll be another forty-five minutes until it’s done. I’m going to grab a shower.”

With Kim in the bathroom, I grabbed my phone and checked on messages from Jonah. There weren’t any, but I did have one from Daxon letting me know that he found a wallet, contacted the owner, and left it in the safe until they could fetch it.

When I first started working at the restaurant, Daxon showed me the ropes, but backed off, letting me take the leadership role without any interference. Best of all, because of how he treated me, the rest of the staff followed suit. I owed him a

great deal for all he did to help me slide so seamlessly into my new career.

I sent him back a quick thank you when my phone rang.

“Alpha, mine, are you out of your meeting already?” There was no need to say hello as Jonah’s name was on the display.

“I am. Want to come over?” Most of our free time was spent at his place. There was nothing but love between my sister and mate, but I tended to be loud during sexy times, and no sibling wanted to hear that.

“I just made dinner with my sister. Join us?”

Kim was happy to share her “world famous” casserole, a description that amused me given I actively watched her make the recipe up earlier.

Thirty minutes later, the three of us were sitting at Kim’s table. “This is absolutely delicious.” Jonah took another bite.

“I’m in agreement.” I spooned another helping, earning me a beaming smile from my sister.

It was hard to believe that a short time ago, I was living away from all connection to family, surrounded by humans. Now that I was here, I couldn’t imagine ever choosing a life like that again. Being with people like me, including my sister, coupled with finding my mate, was more than I’d ever wished for. And somehow managing to get a job that fulfilled me was the icing on the cake of life.

“Something cool happened at work today. I don’t know if either of you know Mrs. Plum, an older wolf shifter...” I said.

I was sure she had a first name, but she introduced herself as Mrs. Plum and that’s what we all called her. It wasn’t common for wolves to get married, but her wife was a human and my guess was it was her way of making the woman she loved happy.

“Everyone knows Mrs. Plum,” my sister said, and Jonah nodded.

“Well, she hosted a series of lunches over the past month, and today was the last one. Some kind of committee or something.

But anyway, she tipped everyone generously,” I said.

She was officially a super star at the restaurant now. We all loved her before, but a couple of the servers actually teared up at the contents of their envelopes. Mrs. Plum wasn’t someone who came across as snobby or even well off, but she had money... lots of it.

She tried to tip me and I reminded her that I was salary and not a tipped staff member. She assured me the envelope wasn’t money and insisted I take it.

“And she gave me a weekend at a bed and breakfast about an hour north of here.” So much for a romantic reveal. But in a way, this was better. I was sharing something good that happened with the two most important people in my life.

“That’s wonderful. Is it a specific weekend or can you pick one that works for your schedule?”

“I can pick, I think. I didn’t look that closely.” I reached for my mate’s hand. “What do you think? Should we look more closely?”

As luck would have it, not only did I have a weekend off coming up, but it blended well with Jonah’s schedule and was a weekend the B&B had a vacancy. It was as if the stars had aligned, or I was managing to find a romantic moment where there was none.

“Did you really just throw your clothes into a duffle bag without folding them?” Jonah looked at the clothing in my hand.

We had just checked into our room at the B&B. The building had always been some sort of lodging, beginning as a boarding house. This newest iteration was new. The owners were city folks who saw one too many Hallmark movies and thought this would be their dream life. And from what I could see it worked out for them.

“They are not just thrown into my duffle, Mr. I Brought a Garment Bag for a Weekend of Sexcapades and Mediocre Food. I rolled them. I saw it on a video reel. It saves space.” I tossed them into the open drawer haphazardly, enjoying the way my mate’s jaw nearly hit the floor a little bit too much.

“You do know that rolling a piece of clothing and mushing them into a ball are two different things, right?”

“You’re going to wait until I need to use the bathroom and then you’re going to refold these, aren’t you?”

“I may iron them as well.”

I pulled them out of the drawer and the two of us refolded them. It was so domestic. Maybe that was why I loved it so much.

“Why did you bring so many clothes?” He looked at the two full drawers. It’s only for a weekend.”

“I might, possibly, have just emptied the dryer into my bag at the last minute. I did roll them, but... are you second guessing mating me yet?”

He pulled me in for a hug. “Never. Not for one single second.” He scented me deeply, sending shivers down my spine. “But maybe I should be in charge of packing next time.” He ran his teeth along my neck.

“What was the question again?”

“There was none.” He did it again. “Glad I can still make you forget everything but me.”

I pulled back enough to press my lips to his, kissing him deeply and sinking into his arms. We might not be the same or even close, but we fit.

The phone in the room rang, startling us both.

“Who has a landline anymore?” I jogged over to it, assuming if a call was coming through a phone connected to a wall it had to be a life or death emergency. It wasn’t, unless joining the owners for their wine and cheese social counted.

“I think we have to go.” I wrinkled my nose. I’d much rather have stayed here and gotten naked with my mate. If they were calling, it wasn’t a stretch to assume that a knock on the door would be next.

“Agreed.” He held his hand out for mine and we went down to join the owners and other guests.

Shockingly, it wasn’t dreadful. In fact, we had a decent time. We had a much better time when we went back to our room, but still, it was nice. And there was something about delayed gratification that made his knot filling me that much better.

We spent the rest of the weekend either in bed or discovering hidden treasures in the small town. It was nice to get away from the stressors of our jobs. We might both love what we did for a living, but sometimes you just needed to take a break and enjoy the quiet moments with the person you loved.

“Do you think anyone would notice if we hid out here a few more days?”

“Yeah. I think so. And besides, the iron here is wretched.” He looked at the clothing I was shoving into my duffle bag. “And it’s safe to say we need one.”

“You love my chaos.” I reached for another handful of clothes. “You know you do.”

“I do. And you love my order.”

“I really do.” I dropped the clothing in my bag and crossed over to him. “And I love you.” I ran my thumb along his cheek bone. “Even if you think sheets need to be ironed.”

“You can’t tell me there is anything better after a long night at the restaurant than a long hot shower followed by sliding between two perfectly ironed sheets.”

He was right. They did feel different when ironed. It made no sense, but there it was.

“I can think of a lot of things better than that. Want a list?”

He nodded.

“Waking up in your arms, your knot connecting us so completely, the way you smile when you catch me checking you out, falling asleep in your arms, the way you remember my schedule even when I don’t, the way your snow leopard pretends he’s cuddling my chinchilla when he’s really protecting me, the way your hand feels holding mine, your ass in those jeans—you know the ones I’m talking about—”

He put a finger to my lips. “I have a question.”

“Make it fast because I have more to add.” I winked.

“I was going to ask if you were almost done because I was wanting to use that sexy mouth of yours for a while, but do carry on.”

“And the way you kiss me. The end.” I threw my arms around him. “My mouth is all yours.”

“And my everything is all yours.”

Before I could think of a witty rebuttal, he kissed me until the world fell away.

JONAH

“You do like them, right?”

Kyle took me in his arms. “Yes, but even if they were baby shit yellow, I’d love them because you chose the color and I know how you agonize over decisions, and also you painted them yourself.”

We were in my bedroom, which was now *our* bedroom. Today was moving in day, and my mate didn’t have a lot of stuff.

“I bought new sheets to celebrate. Ta da.”

Kyle rubbed a sheet between his fingers. “Egyptian cotton? And the thread count?”

I was impressed. No one in Snowford appreciated my good quality, expensive sheets. Not that I’d slept with anyone since I’d moved into this house. But I’d dragged Isadora and Cecily over one day to admire the set I’d bought for the first night I slept here after the sale was complete, and while they admired them, they weren’t overly enthusiastic.

“600. Wow, I’ve never met anyone who could talk thread count.”

While Kyle was a one sheet guy, I preferred to have a second one on top, so the duvet didn’t get as dirty. We did hospital corners, and I admired his before we added the duvet and I tossed throw cushions on top.

With my mate’s clothes put away, the bedroom felt like the haven it was intended to be. I almost hated to mess it up later when we got in bed, and perhaps Kyle felt the same, as he

worried his bottom lip with his teeth. He'd never given any indication he got pleasure from a well made bed. "I have a tiny confession." He whipped out his phone and I squinted at the message, which was from Isadora.

Heads up. Jonah will probably have you admire his sheets. They're Egyptian cotton and you should ask about the thread count. Jonah is a dear friend and I couldn't be happier about you mating. Have fun.

"I had no idea what a thread count was, but I looked online and now I'm a semi-expert."

"Only a semi?"

He whacked my butt as I headed to the kitchen. "If you do that again, I might make you iron the sheets."

"I'll admit that I've never done it, and Isadora didn't warn me." He checked his phone. "Nope, nothing about me ironing sheets. I'm aware of you ironing them, but me?"

"She wanted me to surprise you."

"Consider me surprised." Kyle told me he hadn't used an iron since college, which I could believe because his pants and shirt were wrinkled. Yet at work, his clothes were pristine. He explained he hung them in the bathroom and turned on the hot water in the shower, allowing the steam to get rid of the creases.

"Nifty." Not that I'd trust steam instead of my trusty iron.

"What do you want for dinner?" The fridge and freezer were groaning with food, but I needed inspiration for our first meal as a mated couple in our own home.

"How about," he took me in his arms and waltzed me around the kitchen island, "we go out for a meal to celebrate?"

"Okay, but I've already eaten duck breast once this week." I'd eaten it a lot more than usual since I met Kyle, and I had to cut down.

"Bear with me. What if we went somewhere new? A place where I haven't redesigned the menu and you don't have your own table?" He tilted his head as he waited for my answer.

“It’s not as though I’ve never eaten elsewhere. I’m just a creature of habit and when I find something I like, I eat it over and over.”

My mate scrolled through restaurants on his phone. “Thai?”

“Sure.” I’d never eaten Thai, but it was one of Kyle’s favorite foods. I wanted to experience something he adored and that made him happy. “It’s not going to blow my mind.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll order the mild version and when we get home, I’ll blow your mind when I suck you off.”

I almost suggested we skip dinner and order takeout but wanted to be in public with my mate, showing everyone we were a couple and very much in love.

When we were seated in the restaurant, I glanced at the menu and told Kyle to order, which apparently included drinks, because a coconut was put in front of me with a straw. I waited until he took a sip of his, before trying mine.

“This is amazing. It’s sweet but not overly so.” The coconut had been refrigerated so the liquid was cool and refreshing. “I thought coconut milk was cloudy.”

“It is, but this is the water. The white flesh is what’s used to make coconut milk.”

I finished my drink and Kyle got me another. I’d have been happy to drink coconut water all evening and not bother with food.

When the meal arrived, the many dishes covered the table top, and there wasn’t an inch of space remaining. My mate pointed out a salad made with green papaya which I didn’t think I’d like. Unripe fruit didn’t sound appetizing.

I’d had papaya on a beach vacation and it was sweet, succulent, and juicy. And I was wary of the tiny red chili. They looked mean and dangerous. But like the coconut water, I couldn’t get enough of the sweet and sour flavors.

My mate wasn’t eating, but staring intently at me, gauging my reaction after each bite. “Have I got food on my face?”

“Nope. But I love when you experience joy.” He spooned a shrimp soup into my bowl and I happily slurped it, asking for seconds. There was a curry that wasn’t overly hot, noodles, fried rice, and one dish with basil and pork.

When I couldn’t eat another bite, I leaned back and undid my pants button. “Thank you for suggesting this place. I’d forgotten what it was like doing something for the first time.”

“Shall we go somewhere else next week?”

Former Jonah might have retreated, saying he’d be more comfortable eating at a familiar restaurant, but after tonight’s meal, experimenting with different foods was something to look forward to.

“Shall we get the check?” I wasn’t sure about a blow job, but I did want to lie spread-eagled on our bed and moan until I digested what we’d eaten.

“We haven’t had dessert.”

“I can’t. I’m so full.”

But the mango and sticky rice looked too good to pass up. As I took my first bite, my eyes rolled back in my head. “This must be what the goddess eats because it doesn’t seem real.”

If the restaurant had had a wheelbarrow, I’d have asked my mate to wheel me out. Instead, he drove home, while I groaned and complained about the seat belt being too tight.

I collapsed on the bed and Kyle had to undress me, and instead of enjoying a blow job, I fell asleep, waking up at the time I usually went to bed, without my mate beside me. Shuffling into the kitchen for a glass of water, the door to the spare room—the one I’d set up as a playroom to display my products—was closed, but there was a sliver of light underneath.

I blinked at the bright light that hurt my eyes when I opened the door. “Whatcha doing?” It was a silly question because it was obvious. He was playing with a train set.

“I wasn’t tired and you were sound asleep, so I came in here. I had a train set as a kid that my grandparents gave me. I

treasured it but when I went away to college, my parents gave it away.”

“If you want one to call your own, I can order a set.”

“No, as long as you don’t mind me playing in here occasionally.”

I made us both tea and I sat in a bean bag while Kyle put on a train driver’s hat and sent his train chugging around the track. While I didn’t get the appeal as an adult, if we ever had kids, I pictured my mate on the floor with a son or daughter, adding tiny figures on the platform, and buildings for the surrounding towns and farms.

It almost made me wish I had a hobby. My life consisted of work, both helping out the sizzle community and my own company. There was little time for anything else. But now Kyle and I were mated, I had to make time for him that didn’t only include going out for dinner and me collapsing in a food coma.

Outstretching my arm, I grabbed a kids’ picture book and flicked through the pages. I paused at one image of a child riding a tricycle and it sparked an idea.

“If you’re going to bed, I’ll come too.” Kyle began to pack away the train set.

“No, I’m going to get something.” I rummaged in the store room and found what I was looking for. “Wanna race?” I held a child’s tricycle in either hand.

His eyes lit up. “In the house?”

Tire tracks on the carpet and scratches on the wooden floor? Nah. “I was thinking the driveway or on the road.” Snow leopard shifters went to bed early, so the street outside would be deserted. I had the keys to the community center so we could also ride in there.

“Let’s be daredevils.” He leaped up and chose the green tricycle while I kept the yellow.

The driveway was sloping so my mate got on his cycle and pushed off, and with his legs raised, rode onto the road,

squeeing. I was no daredevil but I did the same and almost collided with him.

The streets were eerily quiet and even though Snowford was well lit, I wouldn't have been out here by myself.

"I'll race you to the restaurant. The loser gives the winner a blow job."

With our knees poking outward, we bent over the handlebars as Kyle yelled, "Ready, steady, go."

I pedaled frantically, not wanting my mate to win, and flew over the asphalt. But I misjudged the corner, and as I careened around, I toppled over. "Owww." I landed on my side and the tricycle landed on top of me.

But if I expected my mate to abandon the race and help me up, I was mistaken. A shouted, "I win," had me cursing him and my inability to understand physics. Picking up my cycle, I pouted as I spied Kyle's huge grin.

"I'm getting a blow job. I'm getting a blow job."

"Don't I get any sympathy?" I stuck out my bottom lip.

"Do you have an owie? I can kiss it better." Kyle smirked.

"Good idea. In bed. I think I hurt my cock and you definitely need to kiss it better."

Kyle carried both tricycles as we wandered home. "I see what you did there."

"What? Me? Don't know what you're talking about." I plastered an innocent expression on my face.

"Hurry up because if you fall asleep again, there'll be no kissing of any dicks."

"I don't know who Dick is but you'd better not be kissing him or I'll have something to say about it."

KYLE

“You still have a key, you know.” My sister stood in her now open doorway.

“Can I come in?” I didn’t mean to be a grumpy ass, but I was a thousand percent freaked out, three hundred percent nauseous, and one hundred percent needing a hug from my sister.

“Yeah, sure.” Kim stepped aside to allow me through. “Everything okay?”

“No.” I hugged her tight and she wrapped her arms around me, making small shhh sounds. “No, I’m not.”

She didn’t push me, instead giving me exactly what I needed most... her love. We stayed there for a few minutes before I felt strong enough to tell her what was happening. I hadn’t even told my mate.

“Tea? Cola? Water?” she offered.

None of it sounded good to me, and I shook my head.

“What I need is to shift.” It had been three days... three of the longest days of my life since I’d been able to take my fur. Possibly more.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d shifted. Work had gotten really busy and the weather hadn’t been ideal. One excuse after another kept me in my skin, my poor chinchilla shoved way down deep. Only now I wanted him out and he refused to even acknowledge me.

“Did you want me to set up a dust bath?” She looked at me, confusion etched on her face, and fair enough, I hadn’t given her any real information and my clinginess was not my norm with her. At least not in this way.

“No.” I fell back onto the couch, my heart pounding in my chest, “I mean yes, I want a dust bath, but don’t bother setting it up. My chinchilla is broken. It’s like he can’t hear me.”

She sat down beside me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Maybe you’re just working too hard. How about I shift? That might bring him out.”

I agreed, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to try.

She got undressed and took her fur. She came over to me and rubbed against my ankle.

“You look great, sis. But I still don’t feel him. I can tell he’s not totally gone, but he’s nowhere near the surface.”

She shifted back again. “I couldn’t feel him either. I’m taking you to a healer.”

The closest healer to us that specialized in chinchillas was over an hour away. If this was a case of needing to be treated for strep throat or pink eye, any local doctor would do. But this wasn’t a common ailment. I was full-on broken.

“Call your mate and let him know where we’re going.” She pulled my phone out of my back pocket and handed it to me. “Well, go on now.”

I hit send and when he didn’t answer, I shot him a quick text letting him know I was seeing a doctor. It wasn’t the same as telling him what was going on, but it was the best I could do in a few letters and emojis.

“Okay, let’s go.”

She drove me, the healer kind enough to let us walk in without an appointment. We still had to have a lot of people ahead of us, but at least we could be seen by someone who understood the differences in our bodies compared to other shifters. Heck, I had a bear shifter once tell me I needed to give my chinchilla

a place to bathe. I never did, knowing much better than him how my body worked.

I filled out buckets of paperwork and handed the clipboard to the receptionist, along with my insurance card and driver's license. He might be a chinchilla healer, but he was also a doctor, and that meant paperwork. Gobs and gobs of paperwork.

"Have a seat in the waiting room and Dr. Gus will be with you shortly."

I sat beside my sister, watching my phone and hating that my mate hadn't seen the message yet. Either his phone was dead or he was in a meeting, because he never ignored my calls or texts, but he would sometimes not see them right away.

"Come inside with me?" I reached for her hand.

"Sure."

The door to the main entrance opened, and his scent announced my mate before I caught sight of him. My heart swelled with love that he'd come all this way to be with me.

"Did I miss it?" He kissed my cheek.

"The appointment? Almost." The nurse called my name again.

"I'll wait here." Kim gave me a little push.

"Let's go." I gave my mate's hand a squeeze and we followed the nurse.

"I'm going to take some vitals and do a couple of quick tests," she explained, typing into the computer on the cart. I wasn't sure what she could've inputted at that point, but she was doing it like a boss.

A few minutes later she took my temperature, weight, and blood pressure before asking me to pee in a little cup. I wasn't sure what she could possibly want with that, but when I stepped into the bathroom, I understood. There were all kinds of instructions on the wall, including a tiny door you had to open and slide your sample into before you flushed. They were testing me for drugs.

It upset me more than it should have, and it felt like I was being judged. I came out and straight into my mate's arms, half wanting to leave and not come back. It was such an over reaction and I saw it as such at the time, but I was unable to pull myself out of it. It was simply a standard medical procedure.

Back in the exam room, the doctor knocked and introduced himself, asking what my symptoms were.

“My chinchilla is hanging out really deep and won't let me force a shift.”

Jonah held my hand tighter, letting me know he was there for me.

“Anything else?”

“That's it. Oh wait... I got really pissed at the nurse for making me take a drug test even.”

“How is that a symptom exactly?” The doctor looked up from his tablet.

“Because there was no reason to be upset and I could see this but at the same time I couldn't stop myself.”

“I see. Any tummy upset?” He skipped right to the next question.

“Just a nervous belly.” Who wouldn't have one when they couldn't shift? No one I could think of.

“Let me go see if the nurse is done with your test,” he said with a smile.

“You don't need it. I don't do drugs.”

“It wasn't a drug test, Kyle. It was a pregnancy test. I'll be right back.”

He left, closing the door with a click.

“He should've told me it wasn't a drug test right away. I was upset for nothing.” I climbed off the exam table and hugged my mate. “How embarrassing.”

“That’s it. You’re just going to worry about misunderstanding? You’re going to skip right over the pregnancy test bit?” He kissed the top of my head. “You could be pregnant.”

I looked up at him. “If I’m pregnant and something is wrong with me... it could hurt the... I don’t want to get my hopes up and...” I buried my head in his chest, unable to complete a thought.

The doctor came back in. “Congratulations, dads.”

I whipped around to look at the guy. “Is the baby going to be okay?”

“It’s too soon to know for sure, but I don’t see any reason for concern.”

“But my chinchilla...” I held my hands on my belly. I had a baby in there, one that I made with my mate. I already loved them so completely.

“Is doing exactly what they should be doing.”

“I don’t understand.” I leaned back into my mate.

“Did you get sex ed growing up? Not human sex ed, but chinchilla sex ed.” The doctor set down his tablet.

“I got the talk.” It was awkward, my father not a fan of discussing that kind of thing. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“When a chinchilla shifter gets pregnant, their animal goes into a mini-hibernation, lending their strength to their human side. It’s the reason why you didn’t come here complaining that you can’t stay awake and are perpetually tired. For most people, that is the very first sign of pregnancy even if they don’t realize it yet.”

“Are you saying I won’t be able to shift for the rest of this pregnancy?”

Jonah’s arms tightened around me.

“That depends on your chinchilla. Some only hibernate for the first trimester and others for the entire pregnancy.”

He went on to tell us that it was perfectly safe to shift as long as my animal wanted to but never to push him, along with information about how to eat, when to come in to see him, and how to have the healthiest pregnancy I could. Thankfully he gave me a huge packet of information to take home, because I hadn't been able to focus on anything other than I had another being growing inside of me.

"Let's wait to tell her until we are outside." Sharing news this big with my sister in the waiting room felt far too personal for that.

My mate agreed and we barely made it out of the door when I blurted out, "We're having a baby! You're going to be an aunt."

She was going to be the best aunt for our little one, and Jonah was going to be the most amazing father on the planet.

"I'm so ridiculously happy." I snuggled into my mate's side when we climbed into bed later that night. "I was so scared about my chinchilla that I didn't stop to consider that our family was growing. Let's promise each other that we will be open and honest with our kids when it comes to sex. There was so much unnecessary stress today."

"Agreed." Jonah lowered his hand to my stomach. "You have our baby growing in here."

"I do." I placed my hand on his.

"Your sister seems almost as excited as we are," he chuckled, his assessment absolutely correct. She was, and it was the sweetest thing ever.

"Our baby is going to grow up surrounded by so much love. When do you want to tell the sizzle?" Back home, omegas were pretty superstitious about not telling until the second trimester. Only maybe it wasn't being over protective. Maybe they just didn't want to admit they couldn't shift.

"It's taken all my willpower not to have already texted Waylon."

"You don't have to wait." I pushed myself up on my elbow and reached across him to grab his phone from its docking

station on the nightstand. “Here.”

He hesitated for a second and then took it from me, tapping away on his phone.

“Want to see what I wrote?” He gave me back the phone.

Guess who’s going to be a dad.

“He might think it’s someone you both know,” I pointed out. “Add a selfie and erase any doubt, maybe?”

Instead of a selfie, he put his hand on my belly and snapped a picture.

“Did you just send a half naked picture of me to your Alpha?” I chuckled as his jaw dropped in realization.

“I didn’t thi—” His phone buzzed. It was Waylon.

Congratulations! Welcome to the fathers’ club.

I wasn’t a joiner, but being part of this club officially made me the happiest omega on the continent.

“Best. Club. Ever,” I said.

“It really is, my love. It really is.”

JONAH

“Cheers.”

Everyone in the community center raised their glasses to Andrew and Isadora. And someone—I had a sneaking suspicion it was the kid who lived next door to us—shot off silly string. The happy couple were coated in it and while Andrew was all smiles, his mate was glaring at a nearby table of teens with guilty expressions.

Kyle and I were at a table with Kim, a friend of hers from work, as well as Cecily and Hank.

“Are you sad we didn’t have a formal celebration when we mated?” Kyle sipped his plain soda.

“Not at all.” I’d been a witness to Isadora’s exhaustion during the planning and I didn’t need a public display to show the world Kyle and I were each other’s one and only. Besides, Andrew was the former Alpha and his son the current head of our sizzle. They felt pressured, not by Waylon but the majority of snow leopards, to have a big party.

The happy couple were doing the rounds of the room, chatting to guests at each table. Just prior to reaching us, Andrew was waylaid by Waylon, and Isadora grabbed a chair and sat between me and my mate.

Kim and her friend, Isaac, hugged Isadora, and apologized for leaving early, but they were working the early shift at Daxon’s coffee shop tomorrow. Cecily and Hank each kissed their fellow committee member and raced off to help a couple with toddler twins who had just thrown up.

“I’m glad I’ve got you alone,” Isadora whispered.

Oh no, sizzle gossip didn’t pause, even on a special evening.

“I’m so happy you’re pregnant, Kyle. This is going to be so much fun.” Isadora giggled.

My mate and I shared a glance and I pictured Isadora barging into wherever Kyle was giving birth and issuing instructions. But my friend did what I called the shoulder shimmy and I couldn’t ignore her satisfied grin.

“You’ve got a secret.” I’d been around Isadora long enough to recognize she had something big to tell us.

“I do.”

Oh, she was loving this, drawing it out, building our anticipation until we were about ready to yell, “Just tell us.”

“I’m pregnant too.”

“That’s amazing,” Kyle and I said in unison. My mate hugged her, and then it was my turn.

“I assume Waylon knows.” I glanced at our Alpha as he followed Bodhi, who was toddling around the tables, attempting to pick up food that’d been dropped on the floor.

“Yes. Just like when we wanted to mate, I was wary of telling him he was going to be a big brother because he’s a grown man with a family of his own.”

I couldn’t imagine Waylon being anything but ecstatic about the news.

“But I needn’t have worried.”

My mate and Isadora chatted about her morning sickness and how exhausted she was, and she was envious Kyle didn’t share her symptoms. My mind wandered to the possibility of our little one being best buddies with Isadora’s child.

“That upset me.” Isadora’s voice, no longer joyful but laced with sadness, drew me back into the conversation.

“Sorry, I missed that. What happened?”

Isadora's eyes were awash with tears and Kyle filled me in, saying when she was at a restaurant outside the sizzle and told the human waiter why she couldn't drink wine, the guy gave her an odd look. As he left the table, her and Andrew's shifter hearing picked up him mumbling, "She's way too old to get pregnant."

"It ruined our evening and we came straight home."

Unlike humans, shifter omegas could bear children well into middle age.

"You have a zest for life and people much younger than you often can't keep up." I gave my friend another hug. "I hope our babies will be besties."

"Me too." Her gaze was on Andrew, who was standing in the middle of the room surrounded by guests and looking a little lost. "Must go." She blew us kisses and bustled off.

"Poor Isadora. People can be so mean." Kyle cupped his almost non-existent bump.

I agreed. Even though that human had a hard time understanding how my friend could be carrying a child, why would he say that, even though he didn't expect to be overheard. Isadora didn't deserve to have anyone burst her happiness bubble and I had to restrain the urge to find the guy and tell him to say sorry.

It was such a nice night, we'd walked to the function, and Kyle tucked his arm in mine as people streamed out of the center. We wove around elderly shifters using canes and kids holding their parents' hands.

As we walked, Kyle talked about going to an exercise class with Isadora the following day, but my attention was on a group of snow leopards loitering on the sidewalk ahead of us. We'd have to walk on the road if they didn't let us through, and I couldn't help noticing they were part of the cohort who were aghast at Daxon becoming the Alpha Omega when he'd been brought up by wolves.

And when Emery, a snow leopard shifter, mated to two bears, was given permission to live in his mate's den with their

children, they protested, saying our snow leopard identity was being muddied and all descendants of our kind should not live surrounded by other shifters.

I didn't need my shifter eyesight to know they were staring at us, with what could be described as hatred. Kyle was still talking about him and Isadora, and for that I was thankful. I cursed my decision to not bring the car, though the distance to the house was short.

If we crossed to the other side of the road, they'd know I was avoiding them, and I refused to award them any victory, no matter how small. Instead, I responded to Kyle's chatter with monosyllabic answers, while flashing glances at the group.

We kept walking and as we reached them, I said, "Lovely night to be outside," and continued on as they parted, allowing us through.

"Are you pregnant?" One of the snow leopards named Eric directed the question to my mate. There was no mistaking the venom in the guy's voice, and Kyle's head shot up. He gripped my arm and his body tensed.

"I am, and we're so looking forward to being parents."

"And what are you?" Eric jerked his head at my mate. "A rat?" His friends tittered.

Kyle stuck out his chin as I attempted to get in front of him, but he pulled me back. "Chinchilla, and a very proud one."

Eric turned his attention to me and sneered as he said, "Now we live in a sizzle, you could have mated with any of the omega snow leopard shifters. But you had to mate with a freaking rat." He spat out the last word.

Fight. My beast was enraged and wanted me to smash the guy's face in. I did too, but that would only escalate the situation, and I'd be in trouble because I threw the first punch.

I allowed Eric to see my snow leopard, and being taller and younger than the guy gave me an advantage. "I don't give a shit what you believe, but if you're aggressive around my mate again, I'll see to it you're brought before the council and I'll file a motion to expel you from the sizzle."

My face was less than an inch from his, and he would be scenting the hostility oozing from my pores. I fisted my hands, telling my beast we weren't going to fight as humans or as snow leopards. "You won't be welcome around any snow leopard, and it'll be my life's mission to make your pathetic life as miserable as possible."

Eric blanched and looked to his buddies for support, but they were cowering and huddled together, as far from me as possible. Aggression wasn't my thing and I didn't know what to do with it as it surged through my veins. I tried to keep my breathing even, not wanting Eric to witness my vulnerability, what I really wanted was to fall to my knees and gulp mouthfuls of oxygen.

Kyle stood next to me. "My mate went easy on you." Eric stepped back and stumbled, and my mate gripped his arm and righted him. "And if you ever say anything to me, my mate, or our child, you'll answer to me. And I don't have to follow snow leopard law."

"I-I w-was just s-saying..."

"You were being speciesist." Kyle's loud voice had snow leopards leaving the celebration milling about, some chatting on the phone, others filming. "Go home."

Eric grabbed his mate's arm and they scurried off, followed by their friends.

Kyle made a face. "With apologies to my rat friends, they remind me of rats fleeing a sinking ship."

"Let's go, Kyle."

We didn't speak until we were inside the house with the door locked and the curtains drawn.

"That was the ugly side of the sizzle." I was seething that my pregnant mate was subjected to such bitterness. My tough talk about kicking the guy out of the sizzle was a sham. Waylon himself, when confronted by negativity regarding snow leopards mating with outsiders, maintained he couldn't police their opinions and wasn't going to try.

“I’m proud of you.” Kyle wrapped his arms around me and we hugged, not moving while I lost track of time.

“He threatened you and by extension, me.”

My mate shrugged. “He’s a talker, not a fighter.”

“You’re describing me, but I wanted to smash his face in.”

Kyle pulled me onto the couch. “But you didn’t. That’s the distinction between you and someone who throws a punch. You were able to reign it in.” He jumped up. “Tea?”

“Please.” My mate pottered around the kitchen. “Why aren’t you more upset by this?”

He patted his still flat belly. “Didn’t want the baby to feed on my anger.” He poured hot water in the pot. “But I’ve seen assholes like him before. Me losing my temper wouldn’t accomplish anything, just get me upset.”

When we first discovered Kyle was pregnant, we’d discussed whether our little one was a snow leopard or a chinchilla. But that was new parent talk like, “Would they have my nose or your eyes?” Part of me hoped our child would be a snow leopard, but even if they were, we couldn’t protect them from people who disliked them because of who they were.

All we could do was instill in them that everyone, no matter their species, should be treated equally, and from the time they were very young, to build their self-esteem.

Kyle pushed a mug of steaming tea over the kitchen island. “But I’m sure dear old Eric will be keeping far away from you in future. You were so fierce.”

“You think?” I sipped my drink. Peppermint, a perfect choice to settle my stomach.

“Oh yeah. And people filmed you. Your put down will be talked about in the sizzle for years. You’ll be a legend.”

I snorted and tea spilled on the island. “You’re yanking my chain, but it’s okay. Tell me more about me becoming a legend.”

KYLE

“Why are we going to learn about diapers?” Jonah asked.

I’d signed us up for a class all about cloth diapering. It was in Elderville, some distance from Oakheart, and I’d never have heard of it if it weren’t for an online daddy-to-be group I joined. From what everyone in the group said, it was life changing. I wasn’t quite sure how anything related to diapers could fall into that category, but it was enough to have me intrigued.

And besides, it was next door to the bakery known statewide for having the best lemon tarts. If the class stunk, at least we had sweets.

“Because it’s better for the environment?”

“I know that, but why do we need a class? It’s diapers. How hard can they be?”

“Maybe we’ll get a coupon?” I leaned into his side. “And if nothing else, we’ll be able to spend time together.”

“I do like that.” He kissed the top of my head.

We took the country roads instead of the highway, enjoying the scenery, but we still managed to arrive early, finding a parking spot with ease.

“We have nearly an hour. Want to walk Main Street and check out the shops?” I asked. The downtown wasn’t large, but they had quite a few stores that had the potential to be interesting.

Jonah took my hand and we wandered along the street. I'd not been to Elderville previously and I enjoyed the quiet of it. The storefronts were pretty evenly divided between small service businesses such as real estate and law offices, food places, and retail shops, including an antique store.

"Jesse's Junk Emporium," I read out loud. "Want to check out the antiques?"

"You mean junk?" Jonah asked.

"I was thinking more like buried treasure." I pulled him to the door.

Inside it was exactly as the sign described it, full of junk. We wove through the aisles, checking out the books, knick knacks, and lamps... so many lamps. As much as I loved finding an elephant table and three dimensional fruit plaques, it wasn't exactly Jonah's jam. And still, he humored me, ignoring the lack of order and cleanliness of the place.

"This clock will look great in the kitchen." I loved it. It was shaped like a teapot and reminded me of one my great aunt had when I was small. It didn't really fit our decor, but it brought me happy memories and I was excited to see it hung up.

"I think so too." My mate took out his watch, "We have five minutes, let's put this in the car and get to class."

Even though it had been a highly recommended class, I hadn't considered that it would be crowded, and when we walked in, all of the chairs they had set out by the diaper display were already full. We ended up standing in the back with another couple.

"Welcome to Diaper Days Done Right," an omega wearing a doll in a baby wrap against his chest said.

"Is that a doll," Jonah whispered low and close to my ear.

I nodded. "Trust the process."

The process was absolutely ridiculous. They treated the doll, named Hue, like they were a real baby and took us step by step

through how to use the different kinds of diapers from snaps to velcro to one piece. And then it was our turn to participate.

Unlike with the instructor wearing the doll as if it were a real baby, cooing and swaying as he did the demonstration, they brought out a laundry basket full of dolls for us. The poor baby doll that my mate and I got was missing a toe and a chunk of hair on the head, and wore a onesie two sizes too big. That's what we got for being the last people to arrive.

"I grabbed one of each type." I plopped them on the small table they had set up as a "changing" table.

"Which do you like?" He held up the one with velcro.

"I don't know. But I feel like the velcro will get things caught in it." I pulled out a loose string that proved my point.

"Agreed." He put it to the side. "Let's try this one."

He put the doll on the table and unsnapped the onesie. It took the two of us three tries to get the diaper the right way, and then when we did, we got it all snapped up only to have it fall off when we picked up the doll.

"Maybe we should forgo the diapers altogether." I was still laughing from the diaper landing on the table before we even had the onesie in place.

"And how would that work?"

"You read the baby's facial and physical cues and hold them over the toilet when they need to go." I wasn't sure I believed the bloggers who said they did that and it worked as beautifully as they said... or at all. But it was a thing.

"Or we could buy the kind from the grocery store." He was right. This wasn't a necessity. It was an option.

And that was what made this time a bit overwhelming. There were so many choices regarding our new baby. How did we want their birth to be? Did we want them to co-sleep or sleep in the same room with us? Were we going to directly chest feed or would pumping be involved? Did we want to put them on a schedule or let them show us what they needed? And of course, the diapers, which ended up being a ton more

complicated than I'd have ever guessed if anyone mentioned it last year.

We were going to be dads and that was a lot of responsibility. A little shifter, one we made, would count on us for everything. I already loved them so completely and just below the surface was fear that I would do something wrong. Which I would—we both would. That was how life worked.

“Let's try again. It's not like we need to make a decision today, anyway.” I picked up the diaper and unsnapped it.

Jonah set the doll down and tried again. This time it went the right way the first time and it didn't even fall off.

“You did it.” I twirled around with the baby to show it was staying put.

The two of us were smart enough to know that a real baby wouldn't be this easy to diaper. They didn't stay still while you fumbled with snaps. But there was still some confidence instilled in us after each of us successfully put it on.

“What do you think?” I put the baby back in the laundry basket when we were done. “Is this something we want to do?”

We ended up picking out some adorable snap diapers, the stupid expensive laundry soap they insisted was superior to any we could buy in the grocery store, a few onesies, a diaper pail, and other baby paraphernalia.

“That wasn't what I thought it would be like.” Jonah put the shopping bag in the back seat and shut the door. “I guess... there really was a lot to learn.”

When the instructor spent fifteen minutes discussing how to strip the diapers, I half suspected that would be the end of our lesson. Instead, it helped alleviate a few of Jonah's sanitary concerns. My concerns over leaks and rashes were covered in another segment they did. And of course, there was the cuteness overload of having a cloud or a turtle embroidered on the back of the diapers.

“So much. But now we get our sweet reward.”

Jonah pulled me to him, his lips only a fraction of an inch from mine. “I do love sweet kisses from my omega.” He brushed his lips to mine. “Definitely worth the wait.”

Before I could respond, he kissed me again, this time only deeper, the kind of kiss that made your heart beat a little bit faster and your stomach fill with butterflies. I loved how he could still make me feel like this, so loved and cherished. Especially now that my body was so much different than when we met.

“You just saved us a trip.” I kissed his cheek.

“A trip to where?”

“To the bakery.” I pointed to the small shop next to where we just had our class. “But since my kisses are sweet enough...”

“You do realize that if we don’t go, then you don’t get pie, right?” He held his arm out and I scooped mine through his. It was old fashioned and gentlemanly. I loved it.

“I suppose we could go and just look around.” I leaned into his side. “Just in case we spot something we might enjoy.”

We discovered so much more than just something. We left with lemon tarts for us, my sister, and everyone in Waylon’s family. It was an over the top amount of sweets and yet, we didn’t stop there. We also grabbed a caramel pie, a box of assorted cookies, and a chocolate cake. There was zero chance of us eating it all before it got stale, but there was no stopping us once we saw how delicious it all looked. It didn’t help that I was both hungry and hormonal.

“We can probably freeze some of this.” Jonah settled the items behind my seat so that they wouldn’t move around too much during our trip.

“Or we could eat them all.”

He turned to look at me.

“What? I didn’t say we should—just that we could,” I clarified. “But I’m not a quitter if you want to give it a go.”

“Pretty sure you have been full halfway through dinner lately.”

“That’s because your baby is pushing on my stomach.”

“Don’t think I don’t notice that they’re our baby during all of the positive comments and as soon as they are kicking your bladder or giving you heartburn then they’re suddenly mine.” He settled his hand on my belly.

“Oh I know you noticed. I’m just playing the pregnancy card.” I put my hand on his, still resting on my stomach.

“You have fully earned the pregnancy card.” He took his hand away and started the ignition. “Let’s take the highway home and see if we can put all of these in our bellies.”

Once home, I put on a kettle for tea, my body no longer loving coffee—or even liking it, for that matter. Jonah dished up the lemon tarts, leaving the other sweets for later. And while the water heated, we pulled out the diapers, noting how stinking adorable they were.

“Is it weird that I’m so excited about the place our baby is going to poop?” I ran my finger over the embroidered turtle.

“A little bit, I suppose. But I’m not unexcited about it.”

“This dad thing... it’s got so many facets. I just want to be sure we do it all right.” I went over to turn off the kettle that was starting to whistle.

“We won’t get it all right.” Jonah came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. “No parent does. But what we can do is love them with our whole hearts and do the best we can.” He kissed my throat. “And the first part is easy. I already love them so much it aches.”

“I do too.” I turned in his arms. “They say our capacity to love multiplies, and I never understood that, not until I found out about our little one.” I kissed Jonah.

“I love you, omega mine.”

“As I love you, alpha mine. As I love you.”

JONAH

“Are you nervous?”

Kyle and I were heading to Waylon’s house. We’d been summoned, and I was alternatively fiddling with my collar and nibbling my nails, something I rarely did.

“Not nervous, more worried.” Waylon had probably heard through the snow leopard grapevine about the altercation between us and Eric. While neither of us had touched the guy, he would be left in no doubt that I wanted to.

It’d taken all of my strength to keep both hands at my side. And besides, starting a fist fight would have left my pregnant mate vulnerable, even though pre-pregnant Kyle could more than take care of himself. Going forward, I had to think not only as a mate but as a dad.

We were almost at the house and I wiped my sweaty palm on my pants before grabbing Kyle’s fingers and squeezing. I would have preferred leaving him at home, but Waylon specifically asked for both of us.

Daxon opened the door and Bodhi charged out, wrapping his arms around my legs. He glanced up at me, his innocent little face making me forget the reason we were here. Not that Waylon had spelled it out, but it couldn’t be anything good.

After Bodhi hugged Kyle, Daxon showed us into Waylon’s home office and closed the door. I studied Alpha’s expression, but he wasn’t giving anything away. He wasn’t fuming, which I took to be a good sign.

“Thanks for coming.” We sat, my leg brushing against Kyle’s. “You’re probably thinking I called you here because of the bust up with Eric and his buddies.” There was a sharp intake of breath from me, and I raked my nails over my thigh. “Surely you’re not surprised I heard about what happened?”

I shook my head. “No, Alpha. It’s hard to keep a secret in the sizzle.” As my friend, he was always Waylon, but when discussing important sizzle issues, I addressed him as Alpha.

“That isn’t why I invited you today.”

This was an invite? Felt more like a command.

“At least not directly.” Waylon explained that he’d spoken to Eric and his buddies and while he wouldn’t expel them from the sizzle, he suggested Snowford wasn’t the community for them. But he left them in no doubt that if they continued living in the sizzle, they had to adhere to our rules, and if they continued causing trouble, he’d call the Oakheart police.

If they got arrested, they’d have to come up with a believable story as to why they were harassing the residents.

“Have they made a decision?” Kyle asked Waylon as he looked at me.

“I don’t know and I’m not following it up. But as I said, if there’s another incident, I’ll have the Oakheart police deal with them and it’s out of my hands.”

Waylon clapped, and both my mate and I jumped. “Sorry. But let’s move on and not talk about them. Kyle, this especially concerns you.” Waylon turned his attention to me. “The snow leopard council met yesterday as you know, Jonah.”

Kyle and I’d had a midwife appointment that clashed with it, and as it was a routine monthly meeting, I’d skipped it. I’d read the agenda and there weren’t any items I absolutely had to be there for. For decisions that needed my vote, I’d done it by proxy and nominated Isadora to do it in my place.

“When I asked if there was any other business, Isadora called for a vote on officially making snow leopard mates, who were not of our kind, members of the sizzle.”

“What?” I gripped the arms of the chair. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?” I’d been a member of the council for years, long before we formed the sizzle, and I’d sat through one boring meeting after another. There’d been nothing about this the previous month.

“It wasn’t on the agenda. I’m sorry, Jonah.” Waylon’s face was an open book, and I suspected he wasn’t lying. Besides, he’d been my friend for years, though for most of that time we lived in different parts of the country. He was a straight up guy and he wouldn’t fib about this.

“But I thought Emery’s mates and his kids had already been welcomed as unofficial snow leopards,” Kyle said.

Waylon nodded. “True, though some of his children are snow leopards and some are bears, and he’s just delivered another litter.” He shuffled papers and waved a bunch. “But now we’re going to make the mates and any non-snow leopard kids official members with a ceremony.”

Fear gnawed in my belly. “But Alpha, that will rile up Eric and the snow leopards who think like him even more.” I imagined families being split down the middle. Our community could be at war, not literally, but some of our members might barricade themselves in their homes, fearing for their safety.

“Jonah, you’ve been busy the past few months, meeting Kyle, mating, moving in together, and now you have a baby on the way. I’ve been canvassing snow leopards both in the sizzle and the ones that are spread across the country and the rest of the world. Our kind are overwhelmingly in favor of this.”

“But but but...” Everyone had to vote, not just the council. While we snow leopards were and had seen ourselves as individuals, like our wild cousins, major decisions had always been put to a vote. And since forming the sizzle, we’d become more community-minded and were learning to consider everyone, not just ourselves.

Waylon put up his hand. “I know what you’re going to say and I hear you.” He flipped his laptop around to show the email that he was about to send to everyone regarding the issue and

the vote that would be conducted a week from today. “I wanted to give you a heads up.”

I reached out and placed a hand on Kyle’s shoulder. “May I be honest, Alpha?”

“Always.”

“I worry this will make my mate and me a target, and we’ll be subjected to more hatred.”

Waylon rubbed his forehead as if he was trying to rid himself of his problems. But before he could respond, Kyle said, “May I say something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Putting something to a vote is never wrong. You’re allowing everyone to have a voice. By not doing it, the sizzle would be hiding the issue, hoping if you didn’t talk about it, it’d go away. Trust me, it won’t.”

Kyle’s declaration had me sniffing and blinking away tears. I was so proud of the omega he was.

“What do you think, Jonah?” Waylon clarified he was sending the email no matter what I thought, but was giving me a chance to air more of my fears.

“I say hit that send button and expect to see us in the front row of the meeting next week.”

My mate and I held hands as we walked out, waving goodbye to Daxon and Bodhi. Kyle had to go to work and I had toy orders to process, so we parted ways and I told him I’d see him at lunch time.

Part of me wanted to go with him to the restaurant in case he met Eric or one of his like-minded buddies. But he sensed my unease and assured me he’d be fine, and added he refused to live in fear whenever he left the house.

I contemplated jogging home, but made a conscious decision to wander and enjoy the beautiful day and chat with sizzle members. It was obvious Alpha had sent the email because everyone, from people in the front garden, to those enjoying a

take out coffee, to parents in the park with their kids, was studying their phones.

Some glanced up at me and waved, others smiled, and some rushed over saying how happy they were for me and Kyle and other non snow leopards in the community. Their support put a bounce in my step, and even catching a sight of Cedric, one of the intolerant hold-outs, grumbling about Snowford being overrun with outsiders, didn't dampen my mood.

The day of the vote was raining and cold, but as people could vote online, and many had already, I didn't expect it to affect the referendum.

Isadora and Hank were at the door, welcoming everyone. When we sat down, Kyle grumbled that while he and Isadora were both pregnant, he looked like a beached whale and she reminded him of a graceful gazelle.

"It's so not fair."

My poor mate didn't see himself as I did. A gorgeous, sexy omega who'd blossomed as his belly expanded with our child. I was more in love with him than when we mated, and if he wasn't so tired at night, we'd be having sex every day.

"You are beautiful," I assured him.

"Pfft, you have to say that."

Waylon called the meeting to order, and it reminded me of the night Bodhi was born when we were supposed to vote on the name of the community. I'd been streaming the meeting for those not physically present, but that was Hank's job today. I wanted to be with Kyle, and as we'd promised Waylon, we were in the front row.

In the end, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the issue. A week ago, I'd been fearful, but people's reactions since then had convinced me the community was behind the decision.

What I hadn't expected was for Waylon to conduct a small ceremony for the non-snow leopard mates. He awarded each one a certificate and shook their hands, telling the ones not present they'd received theirs in the mail.

“I’m so happy for you.” Kim had snuck in at the last minute and cheered Kyle as he stood on the stage with Waylon. “What are you doing to mark the occasion?” A flush crept over my throat and cheeks. “Oh, don’t go into detail. I don’t want to know.”

“Perhaps we can go to dinner first. I’m starving.” Kyle nudged me as he cradled the bump.

“Let me guess.” Kim tapped her lips. “Jonah will vote for duck breast.”

“Actually, I’d love Thai food,” I admitted. Kyle couldn’t get enough of it lately. “I’ve become adept at avoiding the hottest of the hot chilis and I’m now a fan of all or most things spicy.”

My mate lowered his voice. “We’ve spiced things up in the bedroom too.”

Kim covered her ears. “Could you wait until I’m out of earshot before you start the sex talk?”

Kyle and I giggled as I took his hand and we strolled to the car. “We should get Thai take out and eat a spicy meal before spiced up sex. That dildo arrived yesterday.”

A cock in my ass was a first for me. There had been so many firsts since I met my mate and I was looking forward to many more.

“I can’t wait.”

KYLE

“Are you going to be here soon?” Kim didn’t wait for me to say hello.

“I’d be there sooner if you didn’t call and pester me.” I stuck out my tongue at her, though she couldn’t see it. It made me feel better. That made it worth it.

“I called once. Once. That’s hardly what I’d call pestering.”

“You called me once, but you messaged me three times since I woke up and called my mate,” I reminded her. “When have I ever stood you up for lunch?”

“That time we were supposed to go to Gus’s to get milkshakes,” she countered.

“When I was twenty and my car broke down?”

“Yes, that time.” And now I envisioned her sticking her tongue out too.

“Now hang up so I can finish getting ready.”

I jumped in the shower and got dressed. Less jumping than meandering, really, my body was not quite as quick and agile as it had been even a month ago. I didn’t mind. Every single change in my body meant that I was giving our baby what they needed to thrive.

I had my shoes on and was attempting to tie them when Jonah came home to pick me up.

“Need some help?” He looked down at my feet.

“I think I need slip on shoes for the rest of this pregnancy. It’s hard to bend over enough to tie them already, and there’s still a way to go.”

Jonah bent down and fixed my shoe for me and then stood up and kissed my cheek. “There you go. We can stop by the shoe store on the way home and pick up a pair for you, but for the record, I would happily tie your shoes every day.”

“If I can get you to do something for me daily, I’d prefer something a little less embarrassing than fixing my shoes because I can’t reach them.” I rubbed noses with him. “I bet you can too.”

He playfully smacked my ass. “Many things, but we need to get to your sister’s before she texts me again.”

“How many times has she already?”

“You don’t want to know.” He reached for the keys. “I don’t know why she’s so invested in us having lunch there. I thought it might be a shower, but the other people she’d invite are either working or away.”

I’d thought that as well when she first asked. But she was up to something, either which way. I was looking forward to seeing what.

We drove the short distance to my sister’s and she swung the door open before we managed to knock.

“You’re here!” She hugged me tight.

“I told you we would be.” I squeezed her back. “Now can you tell me what you’re up to?”

“Lunch,” she insisted, and we all went inside.

She had set the table with her “fancy” dishes, and in the center was a little balloon centerpiece.

“Centerpieces are not the norm for lunch.” I hip checked her. “But okay. This is just lunch.” I rolled my eyes.

“This is me celebrating you about to have a baby.” She ruffled my hair the way she did when we were kids. “Think of it as a

shower, but more like a drip—like when you turn the water off, but a tiny bit keeps plopping down.”

“I’m pretty sure that the shower in question in the expression baby shower refers to rain, not the bathroom faucet,” I said.

“I know, but if I used weather as the reference the other option is sprinkle, and that is already the name for a baby shower for a second or third baby,” she explained. I’d never heard the term but I was going to take her word for it. “And it’s my own creation so it can be what I want it to be.”

“Thank you.” I gave her shoulder a squeeze. “You didn’t have to do this, but I’m glad you did. Now tell me how to help.”

“Sit at the table and try not to be too lovey dovey with your mate while I bring the food. I don’t want to walk in and feel like I’m intruding,” she teased.

“Define ‘too.’”

She stuck out her tongue and went to the stove.

“Did you know about this?” I asked Jonah, who shook his head.

“Not a thing. Shall we sit down and be careful of our lovey dovey meter?” He grabbed my hand and we did as Kim asked.

My sister had made a lunch filled with baby themed food. Nothing really fit together, but having baby corn and baby carrots, and baby potatoes, and meatloaf made in mini muffin tins was fun. I had to give her credit for creativity, and it was delicious.

“You outdid yourself.” I had eaten four of the meatloaf muffins and was contemplating a fourth. “This is officially the best drip I’ve ever been to.”

“It truly was delightful, Kim.” Jonah stood up and grabbed his plate, reaching for mine.

“I can clear the table.” Kim gave Jonah ‘the eye’, the one she used to give me when I was a kid and she wanted me to know that she meant business. Jonah sat right back down.

She cleared everything and asked us to sit on the couch for “tea and festivities.” There we enjoyed our tea and “baby pies”, which were actually tartlets and delicious.

“Baby showers always have games, but they are sooooo awful. In one of them you have to drink quickly from a baby bottle.” Kim rolled her eyes. “So in lieu of the game portion this afternoon, I got you tickets to a movie about a hockey player.” She picked up an envelope on the table and handed it to us.

“Thanks.” It was a cute idea even if my ass wasn’t going to be able to fit in a movie theater any time soon.

“The lead actor was in that movie you used to make me watch all the time when we were kids, the one about the prince who was saved by the ogre king.” “All the time” wasn’t an exaggeration. I had that thing on all of the time. I even owned the soundtrack.

“You’re such a thoughtful sister.” Jonah smiled at her softly. She truly was. We had always looked out for each other, but she was by far a better sister than I was a brother over the years. It was a high bar to reach.

“I try.” She leaned back in her chair and took a long sip of her tea. “Showers also have gifts,” she noted, not moving from her seat.

“You already did so much.” She was going to be the world’s best aunt and I was thrilled for our baby to have her in their life.

“I know. I’m the best.” She pulled off her sweatshirt and underneath was a chinchilla shirt labeled, “Only the best kids get to call me Auntie.”

“Auntie?” Jonah chuckled. “Not Aunt?”

“It’s embarrassing enough that I had to get this at the pet store.” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s not read too much into it. My official name will be Cool Aunt Kim the Amazing.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Is it now?” I shook my head. “I guess we better start practicing that.”

“Maybe not yet. I’m working on how to add fabulous and stunning to it while still having the name sound like a term of endearment and not something forced.”

I couldn’t tell if she was serious or not until she smirked. Gods, I was lucky to have her in my life. I wasn’t sure where I’d be without her, but it wouldn’t be living the life I never dared dream of doing a job I’d never considered, that was for sure.

“Thank you for everything, Kim. This was... is... It means a lot, and I’m pregnant and am about to cry. I blame you.” I was choking up.

This town, the sizzle, my mate, my job... all of it filled my days with love and acceptance. This was where I belonged. But this was my sister, who had always been there for me, long before even she came here, and it was making me sentimental.

“You can cry after presents.” She set her tea down and got up from her seat.

“You gave us movie tickets,” I countered.

“That was the game portion of today,” she dismissed. “Keep up.”

She went to the closet and came out with a gift bag. It was covered in zoo animals. “This is for my spectacular nibbling.” She handed it to Jonah and I. “They’re going to love it.”

“So wait to open it?” I asked.

“No. I’m just telling you that it’s for them and not you.”

It was an odd thing to say, but when I pulled the paper out of the bag, I understood why. Inside was a book, but not just any book. It was a copy of *Super Chinchilla*, a book the two of us read forty-three thousand times as children. I pulled it out and recognized the black electric tape on the spine.

“This is the one... from way back when.” I placed it on the coffee table and traced the *Super Chinchilla*’s cape with my fingers.

“It’s out of print and every chinchilla needs one. Even if my nibling is a snow leopard, they will be a chinchilla at heart.”

Jonah reached over and traced the cape the way I did. “I don’t know this story.”

“It tells the story of a chinchilla everyone thought was weak and nerdy, but when he had to step up, he sported a cape and saved the day. Not with brute force, but with his brain. We loved it so much.” I handed it to him.

“Once upon a time in a land not far away lived Charlie the Chinchilla with his mother, father, and baby brother, Chester. Charlie was brave and smart, but the kids at school didn’t see that side of him. They saw…” My sister started to recite the book by heart as my mate flipped through it.

I joined her in reciting the words when he first put on his magical cape. It had been many years since the two of us did this, yet we still knew it verbatim.

“The end,” we both said, and my mate continued to look at the last page.

“I can see why this book is so important to you both.” He traced the C on Charlie’s cape. “Maybe we should read it to them every day starting now? That one book said that we should be speaking to them already. Why not this?”

“I like that idea.” I leaned into my mate. “And maybe there is a book like this about snow leopards.”

“There might be, but this is special because it’s a part of you, both of you.” He kissed the side of my head. “I know some snow leopards are weird about wanting snow leopard babies. But whether or not our child is a chinchilla or a snow leopard, I want them to love both sides of their being, and right now, I’m a bit jealous that I’ll never be a Super Chinchilla like his dad.” Jonah shut the book and slid it back into the bag.

“I think we can safely deem you a Super Chinchilla,” Kim said. “Super Chinchilla Snow Leopard Extraordinaire.”

JONAH

I was usually the first one awake, but since Kyle entered the third trimester, he was up often before dawn. So when I opened my eyes and his side of the bed was empty, I knew where he'd be.

Shuffling into the kitchen, I boiled water for tea before heading to the third bedroom where I displayed my products.

“What if we put the train set on a floating shelf?” Kyle could no longer sit on the floor, so he was in an armchair, his feet on a footstool, taking pics and adding them to a digital version of the nursery next door.

Ignoring the electric kettle that had just boiled, I kissed his forehead and pointed out it would be easier if the train and tracks were closer to the floor. “When the baby is old enough to play with it, they won't be able to reach that high shelf.” Unless they climbed on the bookcase, which was possible based on all the parenting sites I'd visited.

He sighed. “There's just too much stuff in the baby's room.” He wasn't wrong. The crib, changing table, toys, rocking chair, chest of drawers, and a closet plus all the additional baby paraphernalia took up a lot of space. Like many first-time parents, including me, Kyle wanted all the things. He was worried we'd fail as dads if our child didn't have every piece of equipment, clothing, and toys. Toys weren't an issue, considering my business, but finding room for everything was.

“You know how much I love toy trains.”

“I might have a solution. But first, tea? And toast?”

“Yes to both.” His eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Hurry,” He sniffed. “I want to know how we’re going to sort this out other than buying a bigger house.”

We couldn’t afford a new home, just because we were becoming a family of three, but I’d been pondering this for a while and had come up with an idea. I hadn’t wanted to tell my mate until I finished the budget, time constraints, and availability.

With a hot mug of tea for each of us, I sat on a beanbag and showed Kyle a proposal, along with a diagram and a digital image of our back garden.

“What’s this?” His voice was decibels higher than usual. “Please tell me you’re not putting a playroom in the backyard.”

“No.”

He gasped. “You’re not relegating the nursery there, are you?” My mate had latched on to the prefab room I’d purchased but taken a leap in the wrong direction.

“Of course not. I wouldn’t put our little one in the back garden.” Even if we had a dog, it would live with us in the house. “I’ve been thinking of how to expand our square footage, and as I’m not a builder or designer like those people on TV, I bought a prefab building.” Using two fingers, I expanded the image on the phone. “It’ll be my office.”

I’d considered renting a space but didn’t want to fork out money. It would have been cheeky to spend all day in the room at the community center I used for council business because other council members used it too, it was communal space.

Not wanting to be away from home all day, the best solution was for me to be at home, but not in the house, where space was at a premium. Kyle and I could juggle looking after the baby, especially when he returned to work.

“Help me, love.”

“Need to pee?” Kyle spent more time in the bathroom than he did anywhere else. If we went out, we made pit stops every ten

minutes. We'd learned which shopping centers, coffee shops, and gas stations had clean toilets and which were to be avoided.

"No, I want to move some things from the nursery in here so we can use it as a playroom." He glanced around. "But first we have to get your stuff out of here."

In the later stages of pregnancy, my mate wanted everything done yesterday. He was in a constant panic, worried the baby would arrive early and we wouldn't be ready.

"I thought you wanted to use some of the samples for the baby."

"I do, but first let's clear the room. When is your prefab arriving?"

This was why I didn't involve Kyle earlier. He would have been waiting at the door, expecting it to arrive when I was ordering it.

"First thing tomorrow."

"Oh." His disappointment was obvious from his tone and slouching shoulders. "But we can organize this playroom now."

"Not we, babe. Me. You stay where you are and tell me what to do." It was funny because pre-pregnancy, I was the organized one, always wanting a project completed early, hating the in between starting and finishing stage. But my mate's brain was working overtime, and neither I nor any delivery guys could keep up.

I called a time out for breakfast.

"How can we have a break when we haven't started yet?" he grumbled.

"You and the baby need more than a piece of toast." We both studied his toast, untouched beside him.

"Fine," he huffed.

It was mid-morning before Kyle was satisfied with the arrangement of the nursery and the playroom.

“The baby’s room is so much nicer now it’s not so crowded.” Kyle waddled to the playroom. “Our little one is going to spend so much time here. I can see this becoming the center of the home.” He frowned at the files and folders blocking the hallway. “I need a path to the toilet, love.”

“Okay.” I bent down to move the files to the side when Kyle yelped, “Now, please!”

When he returned, he was ready for a nap, and I caught up on paperwork, but moving into a new space gave me the opportunity to get rid of stuff I no longer needed.

My mate lounged on the couch watching TV for the rest of the day, while I moved potted plants out back, making sure the workers could get the prefab office in without destroying my garden.

“What time are they arriving tomorrow?” Kyle asked as we tucked into burgers and fries Darcy had delivered from the restaurant.

“Is this the pregnant equivalent of ‘Are we there yet?’”

My mate snorted his soda and tossed a cushion at me. “You’re so mean.” He chuckled as he popped a french fry in his mouth. “But you’re probably right. I’ve got the organizing bug.”

“Nesting,” I reminded him. We’d had this conversation before. I was fascinated by the changes brought on by pregnancy, other than the baby. He was hyper organized and yet forgetful, repeating questions or tidbits of gossip multiple times and having no memory he’d mentioned them earlier.

“Now you’re the one with memory loss,” he lobbed at me.

“How so?”

“I asked what time they were bringing your new office.”

I made a mock bow from my sitting position. “Nine.” Anticipating his next question, I added, “And it’ll take a few hours to set it up.”

I didn’t need office furniture as I already had a desk, chair, and filing cabinet, though they’d been relegated to a corner of the living room since we’d set up the nursery.

“I can’t wait.” Kyle was so giddy my snow leopard asked if he was okay, and I assured him he was. “I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

He promised me he’d watch the process from the living room, and he assured me he was too tired and too pregnant and needed to be close to the bathroom, so he wouldn’t be interfering with the setup.

My mate’s eagerness heightened my own anticipation, and I tossed and turned during the night, checking the time every thirty minutes. I recalled what Waylon had told me about a parent’s lack of sleeping during the baby’s first few months—or longer—and regretted getting up early as I waited for the delivery guys.

Kyle reminded me of a puppy waiting for his owner to return as he sat facing the driveway. “They’re here.” He couldn’t leap up, but he used the phone to snap a pic. That was another habit he’d cultivated during pregnancy. His reasoning was he’d show the baby not only the changes in his body during the nine months but also everything else that had happened. He has photos of the garden, the nursery, and the neighborhood, even the Thai meals we’d enjoyed.

I’d had no experience with prefab buildings, though I’d watched videos of construction, but seeing it in real time, I was pleased I’d gone that route and not had an office tailor-made, though that wouldn’t have been in my budget.

“They kinda ruined the grass,” Kyle noted after the workers had departed.

That was to be expected, and I’d ordered some turf for the day after tomorrow. I figured that’d give me enough time to go back and forth, putting the furniture and everything else in the new space.

“You need curtains and a big rug.” Kyle stood in the middle of my new office. “What about a lamp?”

“Hmmm. You’re right. Should we go to the store now and buy them or order online?”

Rest. My beast was worried our mate wasn't getting enough sleep.

Let him decide. He knows his body.

"I'd love to go, but I'm tired, though if we order, it won't be here until tomorrow at the earliest."

"What if we choose items online from one of the local stores, I make sure they have them in stock, and I'll pick them up."

"I like the way you think."

I left him on the sofa nibbling cheese and crackers, but when I returned with one lamp, a huge rug, and curtains, he was asleep. When he woke up, it was dusk. I had the office organized and the lamp on.

"I love it. If we have more than two kids, maybe this can be a playroom, especially when they get a little older." Kyle sat in my office chair and swiveled it.

"Babe, we haven't had our first, aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" It was hard to imagine our lives with one child, let alone three or more.

Both our phones beeped. The name popped up on the display. "Isadora."

"She's in labor." Kyle read his message before me. "I was hoping we'd be in labor together even though I'm further along than she is."

Our friend was having twins, so it wasn't surprising she'd give birth before my mate. She'd been on bedrest for the last few weeks and Andrew was worried the babies would come much too early.

Kyle tapped his phone.

"You're not messaging her, are you?"

"Nope." He held up the phone. "I'm buying her something for the babies."

My phone dinged, the sound it made when someone ordered in my store. It was Kyle's order.

“I really hope whoever runs that shop can get the gifts delivered tomorrow.”

“Luckily he has a brand new office so he’s super organized.”

“Good to know.” He grinned.

KYLE

I was D. O. N. E. Put a fork in me done.

I was ready to be done with this whole pregnancy. I absolutely adored that my body was able to provide everything our baby needed and that it kept our little one safe while they grew. But it was time for them to come and join us on this side of my belly.

I was mammoth, and I wasn't exaggerating. I'd outgrown my first set of paternity items already, something the store had assured me never would happen when I asked the day I picked them all out. "Get your non-pregnancy size," they'd said with such confidence that I believed them.

Consequently, I now had two outfits, both of which were sweatpants and tshirts that would look like tents at any other point in my life. There was nothing elegant about them, but they worked, and I considered that good enough.

"Are you ready?" I slid on my sandals, the only footwear I could currently get on my feet. They too were far too big for my pre-pregnancy size, but then again so were my ankles and the tops of my feet. I had no idea my feet could swell like that, but when I asked the doctor he assured me that it was normal for most chinchilla shifters, and I took him at his word.

It wasn't as if I could ask my dad group on the internet. They were all human and based on posts I saw other people make about "Is this symptom normal?" a bunch of people would say that it was exactly what they faced, some adding the group wasn't for medical advice and to see their doctor, and there

would be a handful who would paint a picture of doom. It was always the same.

“I’ve been ready.” Kim had her purse on her shoulder.

The two of us were going to the garden center. We didn’t need any plants, but I was on operation “walk out this baby” and it was one of the places we hadn’t been this week. There were only so many times I could walk the same stores and not have people start to wonder what I was up to. No one had said anything, but my anxiety was real, and picking new places felt like the best option.

Kim had to help me into her car. I hated that. Who wanted to need assistance with the most basic of things? No one, but it was either that or not going, so help it was.

“What’s your plan if all this walking doesn’t work?” Kim asked as she pulled out of our driveway.

“It will.” I refused to accept that it might not. “I’m just a slow cooker.” I said it with confidence I didn’t have.

The truth was that I was scared. Scared that my body didn’t know what to do, scared that I was going to need to skip my birth plan to have our baby at home and end up at the human hospital, scared that maybe my body wasn’t going to do its job and that my baby would pay the price.

“Yeah, you are. My nibbling might be coming out a toddler.” She meant it to be funny and objectively it was, but I couldn’t find the humor in it at the time.

The garden center lot was full, and even though my sister offered to drop me off at the door, I refused. What was the point of coming here to walk and then avoiding the walking part of it? We ended up in a spot in the very back corner.

“They must be having a sale,” Kim noted. “If it’s too crowded, we can find someplace else.”

Little did I know that we weren’t going to need to worry about that. After helping me from the car, we started towards the entrance only to have my water break. At first I thought maybe our baby kicked my bladder a little bit too hard, but I quickly put two and two together. It was baby time.

I stopped dead in my tracks and called Jonah, leaving a message when it went straight to voicemail. “When you get this, come home. Operation Super Chinchilla is here.”

I waddled back to the car, this time gratefully accepting my sister’s help and her disregard for the speed limit as she tore through the streets. There was no slow going for her.

Jonah left me a message only about thirty seconds later and I put it on speaker.

“Omega mine, I got a feeling you needed me. I’m heading home. If you get this and you need me to be someplace else, call. Love you.” He’d been phoning me when I called him. His daddy senses were already on full alert.

“You’ve got a keeper,” my sister said, rolling through a stop sign.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I was going to be much happier if I didn’t see what laws my sister was breaking. I trusted that she would keep my baby and I safe, and that was enough.

“I know I do. And do you know what else I know? You have a keeper out there waiting for you too.” She was too amazing for fate to ignore her. Kim simply hadn’t met her mate yet. She would, though. I could feel it in my gut.

Oh shit. That wasn’t my sister’s fate I felt. It was a contraction. This baby was coming, and I couldn’t wait to meet them.

Jonah was already getting out of his vehicle when we pulled up. He raced to the car and helped me out, hugging me as close as he could with my belly in the way. “I’m sorry I wasn’t with you.”

His voice nearly broke me. He had absolutely nothing to be sorry for.

“You’re here now, when I need you.”

We went inside, and Jonah helped me take a shower while Kim got the bedroom ready. We had a birth plan in place, and at the time I thought it was overkill, but now that the time had come I was grateful for it. There was no need for me to make

decisions, at least not yet. All I needed to do was follow the plan.

The midwife was there when I came out of the bathroom. She worked in tandem with my doctor and I loved it. It was the best of both worlds. If there was even a hint of concern, she had a direct line to the help that we needed. We lucked out that she lived so close by. I loved how so many pieces fell into place the way they had.

The contractions were happening, but not to the point of being debilitating yet. And between the bouncy ball and my mate and sister helping to distract me, it wasn't nearly as scary as I feared it would be, at least not at the beginning.

"You should probably have a bite to eat," the midwife insisted. "You're about to start feeling your contractions more intensely and you'll want your energy. Not a lot, though. You definitely don't want your belly full."

I went to argue with her that all the websites said not to eat while in labor, at least the ones I had looked at before my mate told me to cut it out. He insisted that the internet MD wasn't going to do me any good, especially with being a shifter. I hadn't been happy at the time, but he'd been right. My life was a lot less stressful when I cut internet searches out.

Jonah gave me a bit of soup, and as much as I hadn't thought I was hungry, I was. It felt great going down, and it took willpower not to consume much more than the nibble she suggested.

Hours went by as the contractions deepened. This was no speedy delivery like they always had on the sitcoms. I was in this for the long haul. As they got stronger, I changed my tactics, no longer using the ball, instead pacing, Jonah by my side holding me.

But there came a point when I could no longer stay upright, when I felt a burning down below and a sudden need to push. I'd wanted to be on my bed, holding my mate's hand as our little one joined the world. I had it all planned out. But when the time came, it no longer felt right.

“Fuck the birthing plan,” I snapped at the poor midwife when she offered to get me on the bed.

“It’s probably better if we just work on getting this baby out instead,” the midwife said, and it took me far too long to figure out that she was attempting a joke. I was not in the mood for jokes or anything other than bringing my baby into this world.

“Hands and knees.” It was all I managed to get out, but it was enough. My mate and sister helped me get into position on the bed, Jonah making sure that I had pillows in place in case I felt the need to put my shoulders down to the bed.

I was barely there when the next contraction started to build, the midwife encouraging me to push, my sister stepping back and giving me privacy, and my mate assuring me, praising me for being brave and strong, and telling me how much he loved both me and our baby.

It hurt, the pain unlike anything I’d ever felt before. If it hadn’t been for the support of the people surrounding me, I wasn’t sure I’d have been able to manage. But they were there, their love for me shining though.

I pushed and pushed and pushed, until the midwife had me stop, letting me know that it sometimes took a couple of contractions and that it was normal. I wasn’t sure I believed her, but the next contraction rolled in quickly, and this time when I pushed, our baby joined this world, making his presence known with a booming cry.

Jonah helped me get off of my knees and under the blankets as the midwife and my sister cleaned up our son a bit, placing him in my arms once I was settled.

“What’s his name?” my sister asked, tears in her eyes.

“Barnes.” I looked down at his sweet face, “Welcome to this world, Barnes. Your father and I have been waiting to meet you.”

Jonah settled on the bed beside me, his eyes not leaving our son’s precious face. “He looks just like you, omega mine.”

“Nope. He looks just like me,” Kim said. “You should name him Kim the Super Chinchilla.”

“Or Barnes,” I said.

“Or Barnes.”

She and the midwife left the room, giving my mate and I time to bond with our son.

“We made this.” I rested my head on my mate’s shoulder. “How is it possible that the two of us created something so beautiful?”

“Love. It’s called love.”

I brought our son up to my chest, where he latched on for his first meal.

“So much love.” I looked at my mate. “I love you, Jonah. Thank you for being the alpha I need.”

“Thank you for being the omega I need.” He kissed me sweetly. “And thank you for giving me the most wonderful gift of all... fatherhood.”

JONAH

“Daddy, hurry. We’re waiting for you.”

Barnes, our five-year-old, and Hima, who was almost four, stood at the door leading into the back garden. I was hiding in my mate’s and my bathroom, but the constant banging of the back door indicated where our kids were.

Today was a first. One of many, but one I wasn’t looking forward to. Yes, I wanted to be with my family and share new experiences with them, and as my mate was a chinchilla, some of those were going to be chinchilla-related, especially what he had planned for this morning.

Kyle wanted the kids to take part in a dust bath as it was so beloved by his beast. I shuddered at the thought of getting dust everywhere, including my ass crack, but kept that to myself. While the kids wouldn’t have their first shift for years, and we couldn’t determine if they were snow leopards or chinchillas until then, my mate had a huge dust pit or bowl built next to my office. I thought of it as a dust *bowel* but didn’t tell Kyle that.

“Great,” was my response as I tried to appear enthusiastic when he first suggested it, thinking I’d have to keep the office windows shut 24/7.

Now the pit was complete, we as a family were going to roll around in it. Oh joy! Our neighbor, Dylan, peeked over the fence a few times, muttering about the dust. He and I had the same opinion.

One of the many reasons I'd been reluctant for the kids to do the dust bath was dust was gross and contained bits of skin and pollen and who knew what else. But Kyle had sourced a company that made fake dust for chinchillas, especially ones with allergies.

I wasn't convinced it was better than the real thing, but he said they also used it on movie sets. "It's made of talc and that's no better for kids than dust."

Being used to dust when he had his fur, my mate wasn't as concerned as I was, saying the kids could wear a mask. Without telling him, I ordered helmets with a small oxygen tank for me and the kids.

My beast shrugged, saying he was going to sleep and he was sorry he'd miss the dusty bath.

Walking into the bedroom, I studied myself in the mirror. Was my outfit over the top? A tad, but it was the best option for keeping the dust at bay.

A movement to my left had me at the window as Kyle and the kids surveyed the large dust pit. "Why is it so big?" I'd queried when it was being built. Chinchillas were tiny, but as my mate pointed out, it had to be large enough for a family of four to roll around in.

That reminded me of him saying if our family expanded, the kids might take over my office as a playroom. But we'd been naïve back then, before Barnes was born, thinking kids could be left to their own devices in space away from the house without adult supervision. Ha! We'd been so green!

My family were dressed in shorts and tees, old ones that we'd kept just for the dust bath. Not me. I'd ordered my outfit specifically for today. It was a little snug but I'd bought a smaller size on purpose, figuring the tighter it was, the less dust could creep in.

I made my way to the back door, which wasn't as easy as I imagined, and stood surveying the back garden, trying to ignore the dust whipped up and scattered by the wind.

“What in the—” Kyle stopped himself before he cursed in front of the kids.

“Daddy, what is that? I can hardly see you.” Barnes’s mouth gaped more than Kyle’s.

“Daddy!” Hima giggled and ran up to me, sliding a hand over my leg.

“You did get the message we were staying on land and covering ourselves with dust, right? Or did you think we were going on an underwater adventure? Or maybe an expedition?” My mate scrutinized the garden, checking under bushes and behind flower posts. “Did you bring a month’s worth of supplies? I don’t see any.”

“Daddy, you didn’t answer me.”

“You’re right and I’m sorry. You know I’m not a fan of dust, but I wanted to do this with you so I’m wearing a wetsuit, water shoes, and gloves.” I did a 360 turn. “What do you think?”

“I defy any dust getting into your nooks and crannies.” Kyle smirked as Barnes asked what nooks and crannies were.

“I’ll let you handle that one,” I told him.

“But what’s that in the bag?” Barnes wasn’t letting this go. I’d envisioned getting into the pit, flinging dust on my body once or twice, and getting out. I should have known our inquisitive kids would ask a ton of questions. Most of the time I loved how their minds worked and the queries they came up with such as “Do cats dream?” and “How do I feed the people in the TV?”

But like many parents, I sometimes gave myself a time out where I locked myself in the bathroom and counted to a hundred after an afternoon of “Why?” “Why?” and more whys.

I’d hoped the dust bowl session would just be a shrug and let it go day.

“They’re to help us breathe, so we don’t get dust in our mouths and nose.” Originally I’d thought of goggles and a

snorkel, but Kyle pointed out we'd inhale dust into the snorkel. "Put these on." I popped the helmets over the kids' heads and made sure they could breathe before doing my own.

"Okay, family, who wants to go first?" Kyle yelled.

Barnes jumped in, rolled around a few times, and flung dust over the helmet. Ewww. The helmet hid my reaction, I hoped. Thank gods I hadn't gone with the snorkel and goggles. I clapped as our son jumped up, and tapped his helmet. I removed it, and he declared he preferred it to a bath with soap and water.

I'd have to deal with that later. For now, I ignored it.

I held out my hand to Hima and she took it, saying what sounded like, "Do it with me, Daddy." Next time I'd get a helmet with a microphone.

Kyle grinned. "Yeah, do it with her, Daddy." He folded his arms. "I see it written hundreds of years from now. 'He bravely marched forward, dismissing the danger...'"

"Ha ha. You're hilarious."

"You're hilarious," Barnes chanted as he did cartwheels. "You're hilarious."

My mate observed, "Maybe, just maybe, you should get a plug, you know, for another orifice. Wouldn't want that dust to sneak in anywhere."

"What's an orifice?" Barnes yelled. "It is like Daddy's office?"

"Okay, Hima. We're going in." I forgot she might not understand my mumbling, and we strode into the dust bowl. It was a warm and sunny day but I couldn't tell if the dust was hot through the water shoes.

My daughter leaned close, screwing up her little face, and I tossed off my helmet and hers so we could talk. "It's okay, my darling. No one says you have to like it, but we're doing this so we can understand what Papa's beast enjoys."

With her free hand, she picked up a handful of dust and let it filter through her fingers. The wind blew it toward us, and we ducked, avoiding getting it in our faces.

“I did it, Papa.”

“You did. Give me a high five.” My mate hugged our little girl and wiped the dust from her hand. “I’m so proud of you and Daddy.”

“Five, Daddy.”

After we high fived, I picked her up. “Papa’s turn in the dust.”

“Me too, Papa.” Barnes headed for the pit, but I yanked him back and put his helmet back on. He jumped in, covered himself with dust, including the helmet, leaving only his face exposed. “I love it.”

My mate joined our son, pooh-poohing the suggestion he needed a helmet, not that I’d bought him one, and they rolled around until they were both gray with fake dust. The air smelled... actually it wasn’t musty or dusty; it didn’t smell of anything at all.

“Okay, time for a bath. But first a shower outside.” As well as the dust bath, Kyle had installed an outdoor shower so we could all get clean before heading into the house. I planned on letting the kids soak in the tub, and later when they were eating lunch, to stand under the shower, removing all traces of dust.

But first I had to get out of the wetsuit. I unzipped it and tried to wriggle my arms out, ending by doing a little dance as I twisted my body. I sort of got one arm out, but it got stuck at an awkward angle.

The kids mimicked my wriggling and they danced around me singing, “Daddy’s funny.”

It took forever to get the damned suit off, and by the time the kids were clean and had their lunch and I was in the shower, I was so over the dust bath.

But my mate must have sensed my discomfort. Ha. An alien could have picked up on that, along with Hima’s. She wasn’t a fan either.

“Thank you for doing that with us.” Kyle stood in the bathroom doorway. “You hated it just as much as I imagined.”

His disappointment was so obvious, and I refused to be the one to ruin what was supposed to be a fun family experience. “I have an idea.”

“Don’t. Once was enough for both you and Hima.”

“Hear me out. We can all do the dust bowl and get as filthy as we want, dust in our ears and asses, but we remain clean, there’s no dust, fake or otherwise, in our lungs, and there’s no need for a shower.”

“Yeah? How do you do that? Magic?” Kyle’s dejected expression showed how important this was.

“Virtual reality. We get those little VR headsets, get a program or have an IT person create one for us.” I had no knowledge on VR specifics. “And the four of us sit on the sofa or stand up, I don’t know, and we can get as dusty as we want.”

“No wetsuits and no helmets with oxygen tanks?” He handed me a towel, and raked his eyes over my cock.

“Exactly.” I didn’t fancy putting on and getting out of that one size too small wetsuit again.

“You could take up surfing or scuba diving so you’d get your money’s worth out of the suit.” He yanked the wet towel out of my hands and did the towel whip, hitting my butt.

“Ouch!

“Or if you want to use the helmet again, you could apply to go on one of those trips to Mars.” He tapped his lips. “But I hear there’s a long waiting list and it’s a little expensive. The kids and I could buy a telescope and study the sky each night, imagining what you’re doing.” He pressed himself against me, running his arousal against my semi hard cock.

“I’m only going to another planet if you and the kids are with me.”

“Damn, and here I thought we could get rid of you.” He rubbed his scruff over my chin.

“No freaking way.” I nudged the bathroom door closed. “Where are the kids?”

“Isadora and the twins stopped by and took them to the park.”

“So we have an hour?” There was so much we could do in an hour.

“Did I forget to mention she was taking them out to eat afterward? We have all afternoon.” He stroked my length. “And don’t say you want to rearrange the linen closet.”

“Pfft. Wouldn’t dream of it. Get your gear off.” I paused. “Though the spices need new labels.”

“Jonah,” he growled.

“Catch me if you can?” I raced past him and onto the bed, legs splayed. “Where’s the dildo? I’m in the mood for a cock in my ass.”

“No need for a dildo.” He took hold of his cock and nestled between my legs. “Ready?”

“Always.”

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