



VILLAIN AND THE GEEK

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VILLAIN AND THE GEEK

THE WOLF'S MATE



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For nerdy bookworm Devon, agreeing to become the villainous werewolf warlord's mate isn't just a matter of self-sacrifice—it's living the dream.

Unfortunately, his new life in Grayridge isn't quite like his fantasies. Constantine is so much colder than he was in the dreams that summoned Devon to him, and his ruthless, militant packmates aren't exactly accepting of the outsider.

Especially when Devon himself suspects he might be a defective omega. But after spending most of his life in his brother's shadow, Devon isn't about to let his Main Character Moment [™] pass him by without a fight.

CHAPTER 1



DEVON

The limo's tires crunch on gravel as we pull up to the looming gray stone mansion. It's nestled amongst the mountains like a giant's castle, all sharp peaks and jutting towers.

I can't believe this place is so close to Stone Hollow. Luna didn't even bother looking at maps online when she wrote these books, did she?

Constantine sits stiffly beside me, golden eyes boring into mine. He hasn't said a word the whole drive.

He just *stares*.

I'm torn between fanboying over those sculpted muscles and chiseled jaw—and the fact that he looks like the sexy villain from a video game you're not supposed to want but totally do because he's way hotter than the hero—and cringing away from the power radiating off him. He's an alpha through and through.

And apparently, I'm an omega.

I haven't gone into heat yet or anything, but the others say they can smell it on me. And if Brad of all people is an omega, I guess it makes sense that I would be, too. We're twins, after all, even if we don't look the part.

Or act it.

I have to admit, a part of me was worried about what was going to happen when Constantine and I were alone. I only know of him from the books,

and his brief appearances in my dreams. I don't really *know* him.

Or what he's capable of.

What if he was just faking good behavior in front of Raul and the others until he got me alone?

After hours alone with him in the back of a limo, though, all he's really done is stare at me. It's intense and uncomfortable, yes, but not exactly frightening. He was so menacing and seductive in my dreams, I guess I just thought...

Wait, am I upset he's *not* hitting on me?

God, that's pathetic. Even for me.

"Is something the matter?" Constantine asks, his deep, silken voice jolting me out of my self-loathing.

I look up, feeling warmth creep across my cheeks when I realize he's still staring at me, just with a vague look of concern in his eyes now. Like he thinks the omega he's bringing home is defective.

And he's probably not wrong.

"Nothing. Just tired," I answer, since that's not exactly a lie.

That answer seems to satisfy him, and he finally turns his attention out the window as a massive stone structure comes into view. I realize I haven't breathed easily in hours, but the sight of the foreboding property takes my breath away the very next instant.

The limo stops. Constantine shoves open the door and steps out, then turns and waits, unmoving.

I slide across the leather seat, acutely aware of his eyes tracking my every movement. Fortunately, in this world, leather doesn't seem to make any incriminating noises you have to try to recreate to prove it wasn't your stomach.

That's one point Romancelandia has over the real world, I guess.

My feet crunch onto the gravel drive as I stare up at the mansion, a monolith of cold gray stone that seems to blend seamlessly into the surrounding forest. It's timeless and elegant, with massive arched windows adorned with ornate ironwork and sprawling ivy.

I still can't help but feel it looks a bit like Dracula's castle.

"Come," Constantine orders, putting a hand on my shoulder. His hand is so fucking huge, I feel like a Pomeranian in the grip of a wolf.

And I guess that analogy isn't too far off from reality.

With my luck, I won't get an actual wolf form and I'll probably be a literal lap dog, if I ever end up shifting at all. Or maybe I'm just a late bloomer.

Again.

"What about my bag?" I ask, glancing back at the limousine as the driver gets out and goes around to the trunk.

"Leave it," Constantine says without halting in his stride as he briskly walks us up to the towering double doors. He pushes them open to reveal the grand entryway and my senses are immediately assaulted with the burst of activity inside. Servants in crisp black-and-white uniforms scurry about, heads bowed. When they see us, they freeze and dip into deep bows, eyes averted.

Constantine strides past them without a glance.

I hurry to keep up, nerves ragged. The huge double doors boom shut behind us, sealing us into the gloomy manor. Sconces flicker along the walls, doing little to dispel the shadows.

God, this place is atmospheric. I'm starting to feel like I got sucked into a gothic horror rather than a shifter romance.

That thought makes me gulp, and all the confidence I felt at the council meeting seems to abandon me now that I don't have Brad and Raul backing me up.

Constantine's boots ring on the stone floors. He doesn't speak. He doesn't even look at me. He just leads the way deeper into the mansion.

I can't help but feel like I'm walking into the cold jaws of a steel trap. I'm just not sure what he plans on doing with me now that he's caught me.

As I follow him up a grand stairway that puts the one back at the pack house to shame, studying the various hunting trophies that line the walls, I find myself wondering if he plans on turning me into another trinket to decorate the halls of his mansion.

Not that I'd be a very flashy one.

"My father was quite the collector," Constantine remarks, pausing briefly on the landing halfway up the stairs. I realize he caught me staring at a snarling boar's head, its bared tusks and lifeless glass eyes gleaming in the light. "And my grandfather before him."

"They're, uh... very rustic," I say awkwardly.

That earns a curt snort from him before he keeps walking, clearing three stairs at a time in an easy stride that leaves me struggling to keep up. "I prefer more challenging game myself. But there's no sense in remodeling unnecessarily."

That's not menacing at all.

"No, of course not," I murmur.

We reach the top of the stairs and Constantine strides down a long hallway, not checking if I'm still behind him. I have to jog to keep up, passing door after imposing door until he finally stops and throws one open.

My eyes widen as I take in the massive bedroom beyond. It's easily twice the size of the apartment I used to share with Brad back in the city. Thick rugs cover gleaming hardwood floors, and a huge four poster bed dominates the space, draped in luxurious furs and silks. Heavy velvet curtains block out the sunlight glowing through the vast windows behind them.

Fortunately, there are no mounted trophy heads to be seen here.

"This will be your room," Constantine says stiffly, gesturing inside.

I blink in surprise. "Oh. I'm not staying in your room?"

Constantine's golden eyes flash with something unreadable. "No. That is not part of our arrangement." His tone brooks no argument. Before I can say anything else, he turns on his heel. "A servant will bring up your things. I'll expect you at dinner. Seven o'clock sharp."

And with that, he stalks away, leaving me standing alone in the towering doorway.

"Okay then," I mutter under my breath. I step inside the lavish room, the door slamming shut behind me.

I take a few minutes to explore the room and go over to the window, pushing aside the thick curtains that are so heavy, they're hard to part. It doesn't look like there's been anyone staying in this room for ages, but there's not a speck of dust to be found. Constantine really runs a tight ship.

I study the gardens stretching out below. While they're perfectly manicured, just like the rest of this place, they have a cold, empty feel. For a space that's supposed to be so full of life, there's so little of it here—and hardly any color to speak of, either.

As I flop down on my bed, staring up at the chandelier dangling precariously over my head, even its barbed spikes and spindly bulbs seem aggressive.

What the hell have you gotten yourself into, Devon?

Brad may have gotten his happily ever after with Raul, but Constantine...

Constantine is another beast entirely.

Literally.

CHAPTER 2



DEVON

*J*erk awake, heart pounding. It takes me a few seconds to remember I'm in a different world, and a few more to remember I'm not back at the pack house anymore.

When did I fall asleep? Did I even dream?

Fuck, I must've been wiped to not even *dream*.

I'm in Constantine's ominous, pointy mansion of doom. But at least I'm in my own bed... and I have to admit, it's comfortable as fuck. Probably why I zonked out the second my head hit the pillow, when I promised myself I would only lie down and close my eyes for a few minutes.

I glance over at the retro alarm clock on the bedside table. I haven't seen one like it since I was a kid, and it's kind of out of place among all the gothic architecture and decor. Just like me.

Wait. 7:08 PM?

Shit. Shit shit shit.

I leap out of bed, nearly tripping as I yank on my jeans. I'd hoped to get dressed in something a little nicer, but there's no time for that. Now I'm late for dinner. Not a great first impression to make with my new pack.

I thunder down the grand staircase, focused only on making up lost time. A human brick wall appears in my path and I crash into the unyielding muscle.

Hands clamp my shoulders, steadying me. I look up—and up—into the scowling face of a mountain.

"Eyes open, pup. Keep running like that and you'll split your head open," the guy says dryly.

I'm really not sure if that's a threat or a warning.

I shrink back. "I'm so sorry! I didn't see you there."

That statement alone feels kind of absurd, considering how big this guy is. He's about as tall as Constantine, who's plenty wall-like himself, but this man is built more like a bear than a wolf. He's got huge, broad shoulders and a toned chest with a big, squishy belly that's slightly straining the buttons on his shirt. His sleeves are rolled up to reveal big, beefy forearms and he has a full beard that would make a yeti weep with envy.

His eyes are gentle, though. They're the same harsh gold as Constantine's, but there's a warmth behind them where Constantine's are only full of ice. That combined with his handsome features makes him a little less intimidating, but not by much.

The man huffs and amusement flickers in his eyes. "Clearly." He releases me. "I'm Dan."

"Dan?" I echo. "Constantine's little brother?"

"Can't say I've ever been called little," he muses, scratching his beard. "But that's me. Constantine told you about me?"

He sounds surprised his brother would talk about him at all, but I can't exactly admit that I know about him because he was mentioned in passing in my favorite book series. "Uh, yeah. He must have. It's nice to meet you. I'm Devon."

"Oh, I know who you are," Dan says in a matter-of-fact tone, folding his arms over his chest. I spot the inky tentacles, waves, and shipwreck part of the bottom half of a kraken tattoo peeking out from under the edge of his rolled-up left sleeve. "Constantine sent me to wrangle you. You're late for dinner."

I groan, running a hand through my hair. "He's going to kill me, isn't he?"

Dan chuckles, a rumbling sound like distant thunder. "Probably. But it's better not to keep him waiting."

I follow Dan's towering form through cavernous halls, the steady tick of his boots counting down to my doom. When we reach the dining room, the candles on the table and walls are flickering ominously, casting dancing shadows on the faces of Constantine's family. The dramatic atmosphere is on point.

I take a second to take in everyone seated around the table. I realize only now that I was expecting Constantine's family to consist mostly of clones of him. Hardened soldiers with steel gazes. Instead, I find a relatively normal-looking family gathered for dinner.

Constantine is seated at the head of the table, as imposing and regal as ever. To his left sits an elegant older woman who can only be his mother, Elaine. Her silver hair is swept up in an elegant twist and her dress probably costs more than my entire wardrobe.

Across from Elaine are a boy and girl who look to be teenagers. Twins, if their matching features and golden-blond hair are any indication. The girl has a sly glint in her eyes while the boy seems to be suppressing a smirk. They're both looking at me like fresh meat walked into the room.

Great. Juvenile delinquents. Just what I need.

A uniformed butler and maid linger along the walls, awaiting orders. The table itself looks like it was carved from a single massive tree. An iron chandelier hangs overhead, casting flickering shadows.

Constantine's gaze pins me in place. "You're late."

His tone is flat and unamused, leaving no room for excuses.

I gulp, feeling my face heat. "Sorry. I accidentally fell asleep."

Constantine says nothing. He simply stands and pulls out the chair to his right in a clear command for me to sit. I drop into it just as Dan takes his

own seat across from me, giving me a sympathetic glance from across the table.

I can't believe he's the *least* intimidating member of this family.

Constantine leans in, his hair brushing my shoulder as he whispers in my ear. "When I tell you to be somewhere at a specific time, I expect you to be there at that time."

I shudder at the warning in his tone and the whisper of his breath against my neck, for both the normal reasons and all the wrong ones. This is not going to be easy.

Constantine straightens and gestures to the rest of the table. "Devon, meet my family. My mother, Elaine, and my younger siblings, Vivienne and Peter. And you've already met my other brother, Daniel."

Vivienne gives me a clearly disapproving once over and reaches for an overfilled glass of wine. "Charmed."

Peter echoes the sentiment, although his gaze lingers a bit longer than his sister's, cold as ice. Like my presence here offends him.

I force a smile, trying not to fidget under their combined stares.

"Lovely to meet you all." The platitude sounds weak even to my own ears. I doubt they believe it any more than I do.

Elaine's gaze sweeps over me once more, cold and judging. "Hmph," is her only comment before she takes a long gulp of wine.

I'm guessing she doesn't approve of her son's choice in mates. Off to a great start already.

Constantine cuts into his steak first, and everyone else starts eating as if on cue. And I guess that *is* the cue. There's no mistaking the fact that he's not only the head of the table, but the head of the whole household, and the commanding energy coming off him in waves would probably be enough to put down any dissent that might arise.

Then again, if this version of the Grayridge pack is as ruthless as the one in the books, he has to be. There's no shortage of other alpha males who would

jump at his throat the moment he shows any weakness. And I'd be shocked if he's ever been weak a moment in his life.

We eat in tense silence, but I'm not sure if it's on my account, or if that's just how the family is. No one seems to think anything is particularly amiss.

Suddenly, Elaine turns on the maid. "Janice! This steak is so overcooked I could sprinkle its ashes over the damn sea. How many times must I tell you?"

The maid bows immediately. "My apologies, madam. I'll have the cook prepare you another right away."

She hurries off and silence descends over the table once again. No one seems inclined to make small talk. The tension in the room is palpable, all eyes on me like I'm some exotic creature in a zoo exhibit.

I venture a glance at Constantine, but his face is unreadable. My stomach twists into knots, a thousand questions racing through my mind, but I can't seem to get any of them out of my throat, which is bone dry no matter how many sips of water I take.

It occurs to me then that I'm the only one besides the twins who doesn't have a glass of wine. At first, I think it's an oversight, but Constantine catches my eye and smirks. "Omegas of breeding age don't drink."

"Oh," I say awkwardly. "Right..."

Breeding age? What the hell am I, a prize Shih-Tzu?

"Do they allow you to drink in Blue Fang?" Elaine asks, sounding horrified.

"I—" The words die out in my mouth and I look at Constantine, realizing I have no idea what the others know about where I really came from. The more I think about it, the more doubtful it seems that he would tell them the truth.

"Blue Fang has far more lax standards than our kind," Constantine answers before I have the chance. "Devon will require guidance in order to become a proper Grayridge alpha. I trust you and Melody will be able to provide it."

Elaine squares her shoulders and takes a bite of the steak Janice places in front of her. She frowns a little, but she seems less offended by the new steak than she is by my existence. "I suppose it can't be helped."

"Who is Melody?" I ask, earning another frigid stare from Elaine.

Guess omegas of "breeding age" aren't supposed to speak unless spoken to, either.

"My cousin," Constantine answers. "She's away with her mate at the moment, but they live here as well and will be returning next week."

"Oh," I say, inwardly hoping there might be two members of this family who don't think I'm some kind of caveman. But judging from how meeting the rest of Constantine's family members is going, I'm not sure that hope is founded.

I notice Elaine is staring more intently at me than usual, and judging from the way her painted lips twist into a frown, she doesn't seem to approve of what she sees.

"You don't look very feminine," she comments. "Most omegas your age have begun to develop more delicate features by now."

I bristle. My whole life, I've been picked on for being a scrawny nerd with "girly" interests, and now I'm not feminine *enough*?

Tell that to all the jocks who stuffed me into a locker when Brad wasn't watching, lady.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," I say, barely keeping the sarcasm from my tone.

"We'll have to work on that," Elaine replies. "An omega of Grayridge should be the picture of grace and beauty. But I suppose you're better than that oaf Constantine was originally promised, at least."

Rage bubbles up inside me, hot and uncontrollable.

"Brad is not an oaf!" The words burst from my lips before I can stop them.

And, okay, so that's a complete lie and Brad's picture is what you'd find if you looked up oaf in the dictionary. But he's *my* oaf. Who the hell does she think she is?

Elaine's eyes widen, and for a moment there's stunned silence around the table. Even Dan seems shocked by my outburst, but his lip twitches in the beginning of a smile he quickly masks.

I immediately glance at Constantine out of the corner of my eye, convinced he's about to scold me, or worse. Instead, he keeps his expression completely neutral and continues eating his steak.

"Do you hear how he speaks to me?" Elaine shrieks, her voice rising an octave with indignation. "Are you going to allow that?"

"If you're so particular about the way you're spoken to, perhaps you should consider being more particular about the words you choose, Mother," Constantine replies without looking up from his plate.

The twins burst into laughter they quickly stifle behind their hands. At least until Elaine gives them a silencing death glare.

Elaine falls silent, but if looks could kill, I'd be a dead man. She doesn't challenge her son, though. I risk another glance at Constantine, but his expression remains inscrutable.

My heart pounds against my ribs. Half of me wants to bolt from the table, the other is frozen in place. I've never been one for confrontation. Reading about it in books is one thing, but facing the wrath of an angry alpha—even if he is technically my mate—is entirely another.

Still, Constantine defended me. Against his own mother, no less.

Maybe he's not the tyrant Brad made him out to be.

The thought is small comfort in the face of Elaine's hostility, but it's enough to give me a glimmer of hope that this mating between us might not be a complete disaster.

The rest of the meal passes in tense silence. By the time Constantine stands, signaling the end of dinner, my nerves are frayed. No one says a word as the

family goes their separate ways, but I find myself following Constantine down the hall, feeling like I should at least say something about what happened at dinner.

"Constantine?" I call, my voice cracking with apprehension. I clear it so it'll be stronger by the time he turns around and faces me expectantly. "About what happened earlier, with your mother..."

"What about it?" he asks.

I swallow hard, but it feels like there's a lump in my throat that won't budge. "I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn. I didn't mean to start any bad blood between us. I'm just... protective, I guess."

It sounds strange even to me, considering Brad is easily twice my size and he's always been the one looking out for me, but it's the truth. He's the only family I really have. The only one who's ever stood up for me, at any rate, and I feel compelled to do the same, even when he's not here.

Especially because he's not here.

"If I wished for you to apologize, I would have asked you to do so at the dinner table," Constantine says in his usual cold tone. Before I can respond, he turns around and walks toward the stairs.

I find myself staring after him until his footfalls disappear and I hear a door shut somewhere further down the upstairs hallway.

Well... that's that, I guess.

It certainly could have gone better, but at least I survived my first dinner with Constantine's family. The question is, what the hell am I supposed to do with myself now?

Something tells me the life of a Grayridge omega isn't exactly thrilling.

CHAPTER 3



CONSTANTINE

The scent of pine and sawdust tickles my nose even before I hear the heavy-handed knocking on my office door.

Dan.

He always has a habit of showing up when he's least wanted, and I have a mountain of paperwork to sign.

Being pack alpha isn't all about signing treaties and waging war. It's the day-to-day drudgery I loathe—the kind that takes your life force one drop at a time rather than all at once—but it has to be done. It's certain that no one else is going to do it.

"Come in," I mutter without looking up from my desk as heavy footsteps thump across the room.

"Don't touch that," I snap as a meaty hand reaches for the antique globe in the corner. Dan yanks his fingers back, raising both hands in mock surrender.

"Easy, brother. I come in peace."

"Then state your business and leave me in it." I drag a ledger closer, feigning interest in rows of numbers that blur together.

Dan's shadow falls over my desk. "When's the last time you saw him?"

I bare my teeth. He doesn't need to clarify for me to know exactly who he's talking about. "What concern is that of yours?"

"He's been here nearly a week, and I can't help but notice he's not staying in your room," Dan says pointedly.

As if he *has* a point.

I slam my pen down, nearly snapping it in two. "And again, what business is it of yours where my mate lays his head?"

Dan holds up his hands again. "No business. I just find it strange is all. After the lengths you went to bringing him here, now you seem content to pretend he doesn't exist."

My jaw clenches, teeth grinding. I understand Dan's soft heart leads him to foolish notions, but this is going too far. "He's here. He's safe. What more could he possibly need?"

"What all omegas need," he answers without missing a beat. "Kindness. Patience. Understanding."

I snort. As if we live in a world where kindness has any value. As if I have time for understanding. "And you're the expert? An alpha who shuns omegas to bed his own kind?"

The first hint of anger I've seen in months flashes across Dan's face, but he isn't quite as easy to rile up as he was when we were children. "At least I know my limits. And I don't play with other people as pawns. I'm not the one who took on an omega just to leave him on a shelf like a fucking trophy."

"Dramatic as always," I say, turning back to my papers.

Dan slams his hands down on them, and when I look up, he's looming over the desk, that annoying look of determination shining in his eyes. I don't know where he gets the pluck from. We come from a long line of assholes and psychopaths, surely, but pluck?

Maybe he's adopted.

"I'm serious, Con," he growls. "You took this poor kid out of his home pack—out of his own world, if all that nonsense is true—and now you've thrown him to the wolves. Literally."

"Keep your voice down," I hiss, glancing at the door. Fortunately, I don't hear or smell anyone else in this wing of the mansion. "Don't make me regret telling you more than I already do."

"Oh, please." Dan scoffs. "Even *you've* gotta have someone to confide in and you're a paranoid son of a bitch, so I know for a fact you don't trust anyone else."

He has a point, as much as I hate to concede it.

The rest of my family doesn't know Devon is from another world, and if I have my way, they'll never find out. Things are already tense enough with the peace treaty between Grayridge and Stone Hollow, and there are plenty of old-schoolers—my own mother being one of them—who resent me for making peace with our bitter enemies.

Sometimes I wonder if they're right. Grayridge isn't like other packs. We don't fear war, we thrive on it. But this endless conflict is going nowhere. Am I really to send more soldiers into the meat grinder just because it gives those beneath me a target more convenient than my own throat?

It was enough for my father, and his father before him, but I told myself when I took over I would do better. That I would take our pack to heights neither of them were capable of reaching.

"Why did you want him, anyway?" Dan asks, finally stepping away from my desk.

I can tell from the look in his eyes that he finds me as perplexing as I find him. Usually, it's that difference in perspective that makes him a valuable ally. A devil's advocate to point out the shortcomings of my own perspective, which is an unpleasant necessity for any alpha who wishes to be an effective leader and not merely to have his ego stroked like a kitten.

Today, it's just annoying.

"He's my mate," I say. "Shouldn't it be obvious? As long as he's out there, unprotected, he's my greatest weakness."

"Is that really how you see it?" Dan asks, his brows knitting together in frustration. "He's just a weak spot you have to protect and compensate for?"

"You may have the luxury of being a romantic, brother," I say, staring him down. "I do not."

"There's a difference between being a romantic and a... a... whatever you are," he says, waving his hand in the air at me.

I roll my eyes, leaning back in my chair as I realize I'm not going to get any more work done until he's off his little tirade. "What would you have me do, exactly? Coddle him? Put him on my lap while I work and tell him he's a good boy?"

"Hey, I don't care what freaky shit you get up to. That's between the two of you," Dan says with a grimace. "But it wouldn't kill you to, I don't know, talk to him. Show him around the grounds. Do something besides leave him at the mercy of Elaine Grayridge."

"If he can't handle our mother, he isn't going to survive Grayridge anyway," I tell him.

"You know what? Forget it," Dan says, throwing his hands up as he backs away from my desk. "Ignore your destined mate. Waste your whole life holed up in this office when you're not risking it on the battlefield. I tried."

With that, he storms out of my office in a few long strides and slams the door hard enough the globe on my desk spins a little.

I pick up my pen and try to get back to work, but Dan's words linger long after he's gone, like the buzzing of an annoying little insect.

Maybe he does have a point. Maybe I shouldn't be leaving Devon entirely to his own devices, but I know what I felt the moment I first laid eyes on him through that portal. The moment I stood in a corridor, with windows into a thousand different universes splayed out before me—the possibilities endless—and all I could see was him.

He may only be an omega—and a human one, at that—but I knew at that moment that he was dangerous.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing in this universe, or in any other.

CHAPTER 4



DEVON

*I*t's been another shitty day at Grayridge Manor, and while I started out being terrified of Constantine, I learned pretty quickly it's Elaine I *really* need to fear.

When the Grayridge matriarch isn't rapping my knuckles with a fucking salad spoon for getting her random pop quizzes on table settings wrong, she's ripping apart my choice in clothing with that serrated tongue of hers.

And when my "omega lessons" with Elaine aren't driving me nuts, the twins are always skulking around, being creepy little weirdos and snickering about me behind my back.

Sometimes to my face, too. I think I actually prefer the sneakiness to that.

Over a month has gone by since I came to Grayridge, and while I've settled in physically, I still feel like my home is somewhere else entirely.

The question is, where?

Stone Hollow is home in a sense because Brad is there. And now, Raul and my niece and nephew. During the time I spent there, I got attached to the rest of the pack, too, but something always felt... off.

Like I was housesitting and waiting for the real owners to come back. Like it was never really my home, and never could be.

Then there's the apartment Brad and I used to share back in our old world. I guess that was home even longer, but it never felt like it.

Our childhood home definitely isn't it. That huge house haunted by the ghosts of our parents' disappointment, and the person they always wished I would be.

Sometimes I wonder if they've even noticed we're gone.

I wonder if they'd care.

Deep down, I think I know the answer to that question, and it's enough to make me spiral into another depression if I let it, so I flop down on my bed and grab the corded phone on the table next to the bed like the lifeline it is.

I stopped calling Brad as often after those first few tumultuous days. It's not really that my homesickness has lessened, but there's nothing new to update him on and it was starting to feel pathetic.

Here he is with a mate who worships him, a pack who adores him, and a family of his own now. He needs to focus on them. He doesn't need a giant baby added to his list of responsibilities.

But today, I really just need to hear his voice.

The phone rings once before Brad's voice comes through, rough and familiar. "Hey, bro. What's up?"

My shoulders sag in relief. Just hearing him makes me feel a little better. "Not much. How are the twins?" I ask, not wanting him to worry.

"Loud," he answers without missing a beat. "And sharp."

"Sharp?" I echo.

"Yeah, I've been reading this book about omega chestfeeding," he grunts. "Figured I'd try it out. Turns out it works, but they conveniently leave out the part where shifter babies have mega chompers when they're still fresh outta the womb."

I grimace, and my nipples prickle like they're trying to retreat in on themselves. "Ouch."

"TMI?" he asks.

"A little," I laugh. "Thanks for unlocking a new fear, though."

"Sorry. I joined an omega parenting group where everyone talks about this shit, so my filter's kind of off."

"Like you had one to begin with," I say dryly. "Sounds like you're making some new friends."

"Yeah, not many other omegas in Stone Hollow, but it's a meetup from a few different packs," he explains. "They're surprisingly chill. Kind of a stuffy crew at first, but after a few rounds of virgin margaritas everyone loosens up."

"Yeah, you have that effect on people," I say, unable to help the grin on my face as I lean back against my headboard. I'm pretty sure I've been sulking around this place like Wednesday Addams this past month, but Brad's good mood is contagious.

So is his legendary grumpiness, but that seems to be rare these days.

"But forget about me, what's going on there?" Brad asks, concern etching into his tone. "How's that asshole treating you?"

I hesitate, torn between wanting to vent and give an honest answer to the question he asks every time we talk and not wanting to start Werewolf World War III. "It's fine. Constantine is... fine."

"Cut the bullshit, Dev," Brad growls. "I can hear it in your voice. Something's off. Do I need to come down there and rearrange that asshole's scrotum?"

Despite everything, Brad's absurd threat startles a laugh from me. That's such a Brad thing to say. "I don't even know what that means, and I don't want to picture it, but no." I sigh, giving in. "It's okay, he's not being mean or anything. He's just... notably absent most of the time."

"Is that a bad thing?" he asks doubtfully.

"No, not really." I rub my forehead, feeling the beginning of a headache coming on. "It's his family that's the nightmare. Especially Elaine."

Brad makes a sympathetic noise. "Yeah, I heard she's a real peach. She made my friend Darcy from omega group cry once over a canapé, whatever

the hell that even is, so do me a favor and kick the rickety bitch down the stairs, will ya?"

"That sounds on-brand for Elaine," I mumble, raking a hand through my hair. "But I'm not going to kick my mother-in-law down the stairs, Brad."

"Technically, you haven't had a mating ceremony, so she's not your mother-in-law yet," he reasons.

"The answer is still no."

He heaves a dramatic sigh, and I hear him flop onto something. "Fiiine. You never wanna do anything fun."

I roll my eyes, but I can't help smiling. "You're such a dork."

"Says the guy who owns every Star Trek boxed set ever made."

"Only the special editions," I counter.

I hear someone's voice in the background, and judging from the deep tone, it's Raul.

"Yeah, just Dev," Brad calls. "I'll be down in a minute."

"Hi, Raul," I say, knowing he can hear me through the phone. Unfortunately, not only is there no sign of my wolf form—or my omega nature, for that matter—but I don't have any enhanced shifter senses, either.

Leave it to me to finally get to live out my fantasy and do it in the most boring way possible.

No wonder my own mate doesn't want anything to do with me.

"Raul says hi," Brad says. "And we're both still up for coming down there and turning Constantine inside out. Anytime, day or night. Just say the word."

"Please don't do that," I groan. "The whole point of a peace treaty is, you know, peace."

Maybe things have been a bit too peaceful for my liking, but that's another matter entirely.

"Yeah, yeah," says Brad. "Offer's still on the table, though. So, when are we coming for a visit?"

"After what you just said, never," I answer.

"Oh, come on. If Constantine is as busy as you say he is, he probably won't even notice."

"Trust me, he'll notice if Raul is on his territory," I tell him. "Besides, you've got enough to worry about right now."

"I'm never too busy for you," Brad says firmly.

Those words are more comforting than I want to admit. Especially when I know he means them. "I appreciate that," I say. "But honestly, I've got a lot on my plate right now with Elaine's omega lessons. I probably wouldn't be very good company."

The truth is, I know seeing him and Raul would just make me more homesick than I already am. And I don't want them to see just how alien I feel in the pack I chose to come to. It's not like anyone forced me to be here.

"Omega lessons," Brad scoffs. "What's there to learn? Pretty sure you've read enough smut you know how to lay on your back and stick your legs up."

"Brad!" I screech loud enough that the phone crackles.

He just dissolves into uproarious laughter, and I can practically hear Raul rolling his eyes. "I'm kiddin'... sorta. But all that snooty dinner party stuff doesn't matter. You are an omega. It's not something you learn, or a specific way you've gotta be, it's just something you are."

"Yeah," I murmur. "I guess so."

The problem is, that's exactly what I'm afraid of. That I'm not an omega, no matter what the others think, and once they realize it—once *Constantine* realizes it—I'm going to end up rejected and unwanted.

Just like in my old world.

"Listen, I should go," I say, "but thanks for the talk. I feel a lot better now."

"Anytime," Brad says with a warmth in his voice that staves off the Grayridge chill that's already starting to seep into me. "Love you, bro. Oh, and may the force be with you."

"That's not Star Trek, but love you, too," I say with a little laugh, setting the phone back in its cradle.

The truth is, I really don't have much of anything else to do tonight.

Not until six sharp tomorrow morning when Elaine owns my soul.

I get out of bed and walk over to the window to pop the twin panels open. I grab one of the books I brought with me—even though I've already read it through twice since I've been here—then climb out onto the narrow ledge beneath my window that overlooks the garden. It's nightfall, so only the odd member of patrol will be prowling the grounds below, and if they've noticed me so far, they haven't said anything, so I figure this is one of the few activities that's allowed for a Grayridge omega.

The moon is getting close to full, which means the pack will be descending on the woods in a few days' time, the alphas in their huge bipedal monster forms. Even the omegas will be running with them.

Just another reminder that I'm not like the others.

Another reminder that I don't really belong.

CHAPTER 5



DEVON

The clatter of silverware on marble makes me flinch. Elaine's critical eye scans the table, lips pursed so tight they nearly disappear.

"It's adequate," she sniffs, "though it lacks elegance."

I bristle. "I got all the place settings right."

"Hospitality is more than checking boxes, young man. It's about *ambiance*."

Ambiance?

I bite my tongue. What a load of pretentious crap. But I don't dare argue with Constantine's mother. Her word is law here in the manor, second only to the Alpha himself.

She gestures to the table with a sharp wave of her hand. "Again. And do try to imbue it with a feeling this time."

As she sweeps from the room, I resist the urge to sweep the fine china onto the floor. Breathing deep, I remind myself of why I'm here. I can't do much back in Stone Hollow, but as long as I'm here in Grayridge, I can keep the peace between the two packs.

Even if it means tolerating Elaine.

So I swallow my pride and set the table again, hyper aware of each meticulous placement of fork and knife. Of the elegant folds in the napkins.

The sparkling crystal stemware.

It's perfect. But perfection means nothing to Elaine.

To her, I'll always be the stray marring her refined sensibilities.

When she comes back in, I stand aside and await her assessment, even though I'm sure it's going to be as lackluster as the last seven times.

Elaine circles the table, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She pauses, tilting her head. For a moment I dare to hope she'll acknowledge my effort.

"Better," she says briskly. That one word is by far the nicest thing she's said to me. "We're finished for today. I'll not need you further."

I blink in surprise. She's never dismissed me this early before. "But why?"

"The full moon rises tonight," she says, tilting her head up proudly. Sometimes it's easy to forget this prim and proper woman in front of me has a beastly side. "The pack will run."

My eyes widen. I've heard the howls, but I've never seen the wolves of Grayridge in their true forms. Excitement leaps in me at the thought of watching their transformation beneath the moon's glow.

"Can I come?" I blurt out. "To watch?"

Elaine scoffs, the look on her face suggesting I proposed something indecent. "Certainly not. You've no wolf form yet, and it would be... *unseemly* for an unmated omega to witness the pack unclothed."

Of course. Just because Stone Hollow isn't weird about that doesn't mean Grayridge isn't.

"You'll remain inside tonight." Her tone gives no room to argument. "And stay away from the windows."

With that, she struts out of the room, leaving me staring after her in disappointment.

Sometimes I feel like I got transported into Cinderella rather than a shifter romance. So where the fuck is my magic pumpkin?

I mutter to myself under my breath as I stomp up to my room, determined to at least catch a glimpse of the pack's run despite Elaine's orders. She said to stay away from the windows, but she didn't say anything about watching from outside them.

As the sun sinks below the horizon, I settle onto the ledge outside my window, peering out into the growing darkness. In the distance, I can just make out figures gathering atop the tallest hill.

The pack, preparing to shift beneath the rising moon.

Anticipation thrums through me as I watch. Any moment now, their human forms will melt away to be replaced by fur and fangs. I saw a few of the others shift back in Stone Hollow, but it wasn't under such formal circumstances. Everything the Grayridge pack does has an air of gravitas to it.

I guess that's the "ambiance" Elaine is always on about.

It's easy enough to pick Dan out of the crowd. He's the one to shift first as the moon finally peeks above the horizon.

Dan's transformation is really something to behold. One moment he's a burly, bearded man, and the next he's an enormous bipedal beast that looks more like a brown bear than a wolf, rearing up on his hind legs with a roar.

Elaine shifts next, her lithe figure giving way to a slender, elegant wolf with silvery fur. She holds her head high, movements graceful even in her lupine form.

The twins are next, their matching coats making them nearly indistinguishable from one another. They look wiry and sly, more like foxes than wolves.

I crane my neck, searching for any sign of Constantine, but he's nowhere to be seen.

Where is he? As the lead alpha, shouldn't he be leading the pack's run tonight?

A sudden snarl from below makes me jump. There, prowling out of the shadows, is an enormous white, monstrous wolf with a jagged scar cutting across his left eye.

Constantine.

I'd know that arrogant gait anywhere, even if I've only ever seen his monstrous form in my dreams.

He's even more breathtaking in person.

The pack bows their heads reverently as Constantine joins them, acknowledging his status as their leader. But when his frigid eyes fix on me, I freeze. In that piercing golden gaze, I know he sees me watching from my perch.

I brace myself for a reprimand, or for him to order me inside. Instead, Constantine throws back his head and unleashes an ear-splitting howl at the glowing moon above. One by one, the others join in, their voices blending together in a haunting chorus.

It's one of the most incredible things I've ever witnessed. Enthralled, I watch Constantine lead his pack into the woods, their forms blurring together into a surging tide of fur and fangs.

Then, between one blink and the next, they're gone, melting into the shadows beneath the trees. The moonlit hill lies empty and silent once more.

The pack's eerie howls still echo in my ears as I peer out into the darkness, searching for any sign of their passing. But it's as if they were never there at all.

A shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the chill night air. I should head back inside and count myself lucky that I didn't get in trouble—at least, not yet. But the thrill of what I've witnessed still sings in my blood. I can't resist craning my neck, trying to catch one last glimpse of that hypnotic white pelt or the glint of moonlight in those cold golden eyes.

Somewhere out in those woods, Constantine leads the wild run beneath the full moon. And for the first time, I understand the magnetic pull he exerts

over his pack. The sheer power and savage grace he wields as their alpha.

I wonder what it must feel like to run at his side, to feel that commanding presence urging me on. Would I still find him so intimidating if I could match his lupine form with one of my own?

The thought seems absurd as soon as it occurs to me.

With a sigh, I retreat back inside, closing the window firmly against the night's temptations. But I suspect my dreams tonight will be haunted by moonlight and wolves.

And one white wolf most of all.

CHAPTER 6



CONSTANTINE

The bright fluorescent lights of the airport terminal stab into my eyes and the sound of humans chattering away becomes almost unbearable to my sensitive ears. I've only been here for thirty minutes and already I'm reminded of why I send my underlings to deal with this sort of thing.

I blink against the glare, scanning the stream of travelers pouring from the gate. There, a flash of blonde hair.

Melody.

The small woman barrels towards me, a runaway train in a flowy floral maternity dress. I brace myself as she crashes into my chest, her swollen belly pressed between us. She was barely visibly pregnant when she and her mate left a couple of months ago.

"Constantine!" she squeals directly into my ear. "You didn't have to come all this way!"

I gently extricate myself from her vice grip. "It was no trouble at all. I was already in the city for business." The lie slides easily off my tongue.

Melody's nose crinkles. "Bullshit. But that's very sweet. I know how busy you are."

I open my mouth to protest but she steamrolls onward, squeezing my arm as she turns us around to face the beleaguered looking alpha who's hauling a cart overfilled with luggage behind him.

"Oh, be careful with that one!" Melody cries as a hot pink duffel bag topples off the pile and Tom barely catches it with his foot. "That's got all my hair products."

I reach out to take the bag from him, surprised at how much it weighs. "Are you sure you didn't get it mixed up with someone's bowling balls?"

"Oh, please," she says, giving my arm a playful swat as we walk toward the exit, Tom struggling along behind us. "Don't tell me yours comes out of your head like that."

I take a strand of long white hair behind my fingers, scowling. "What about it? It's just hair."

She snickers and shakes her head. "C'mon, let's get home. I'm starving!"

She continues her cheerful babbling as we step out into the late afternoon sun. I help Tom load the rest of their bags into the back of my SUV and before long, we're back on the road. Not soon enough, though. I've never been a homebody, but being away from the pack is more uncomfortable as of late, and I know it has something to do with the fact that my mate is at home.

Just because I keep my distance doesn't mean there's a moment that goes by when I'm not acutely aware of where he is. I have the same primal instincts as any alpha. The ones that make me want him safe at home, as close as possible.

Just... not close enough to cause any problems.

At least, that's what I tell myself. Lately, the pull that called me into his dreams has been growing stronger than ever, and I find myself lurking outside his window while he sleeps—the one he thinks I don't notice him watching from—just to be near him.

"You have to tell me everything about this new omega of yours!" Melody cries, and I realize I've tuned out her one-sided conversation. Not that she seems to have noticed. Tom is already half-asleep in the backseat, surrounded by luggage on all sides. "What's his name? What's he like? Have you set a mating ceremony date yet?"

"His name is Devon," I answer, ashamed that I don't really know much more than that. Even though I've made it a point not to. "And the ceremony will be soon enough, now that everyone is back."

"You were waiting for us?" Tom asks, even though I wish he would have just stayed asleep.

He gulps audibly when I shoot him a glare in the rearview mirror. "It's a family occasion, isn't it? It doesn't make much sense to have it until the whole family is present."

"Constantine," Melody says, giving me a starry-eyed look. "You shouldn't have... but now that we're back, I'm so excited to help with the planning! Assuming your mother hasn't gotten to it already."

She laughs, a high tinkling sound that makes me smile in spite of myself. She's always been able to charm a smile out of me, even when we were kids.

"You know how she is," I tell her. "She's been planning this day since before I was born, but there's still plenty left to do. I'm sure Devon would appreciate having someone to talk to who isn't..."

I trail off, because there's really nothing I can say to finish that sentence that's appropriate in front of omega company.

She gives a snicker that suggests she knows damn well how to fill in that gap. "Well, I can't wait to meet him!"

I know she means it, too. Melody is the kind of person who would take a stranger under her wing and treat him like family, so I know she'll be good for my mate. As necessary as the distance between us is, I feel more guilt than Dan thinks for the fact that he only has my mother and siblings as companions. She's nothing like the rest of us, and she'll know how to relate to him in a way the rest of us can't.

Certainly not me.

As we get out of the car, the front door flies open and Vivienne and Peter step out first, acting aloof even though they're the first to greet her. They roll their eyes and pretend to be off-put when Melody greets them with

excited squeals and crushing hugs. Even they can't resist her sunny demeanor.

I grab a few suitcases out of the back and head inside, leaving Tom to deal with the rest.

In the foyer, my mother appears with Devon at her side. He's wearing a button-down shirt and slacks, his hair neatly combed. Nervousness wafts off him in waves as his eyes flick between me and Melody.

I fight back the urge to run to him, to comfort him and assure him he has nothing to fear from my family. It's a foreign impulse to a man who's hardly used to feeling any strong instincts toward another that don't stem from violence.

"Melody," Mom says in a tone that's relatively pleasant, at least for her, as she leans in to embrace the younger omega. "You're looking well."

Coming from her, that's effusive praise.

"Melody, Tom," I say, "Meet my intended, Devon."

"Hi," Devon says with an awkward little wave. "It's nice to meet you."

Melody rushes forward to envelope him in a crushing hug, leaving every bit of etiquette in her wake. "Oh, you're absolutely precious!" she gushes, pulling away to hold him at arm's length as she studies him. She pauses to sniff the air and looks at me over her shoulder. "He really does smell human!"

Devon's face turns that appealing shade of pink once again and he looks like he wants to fade into the wallpaper.

"He is, for the time being," I answer, deciding not to bring up the fact that he might always be. Brad could well be an anomaly in more ways than one.

"Why don't you let the boy breathe, Melody?" Tom asks dryly. "He looks like he's going to pass out."

"Nonsense," she says, wrapping her arms around Devon once more with their cheeks squished together. "Devon and I are going to be best friends in no time, you'll see."

As loathe as I am to admit it, Tom has a point. My mate looks a bit blue around the edges, so I clear my throat. "Why don't you two get settled in? I'm sure we're interrupting Devon's lessons."

"We do have plenty to do before dinner," my mother chimes in. "The staff aren't going to order themselves around."

That's exactly what I pay them to do, but I suppose she needs something to keep her busy.

Devon shoots me a grateful look.

Melody reluctantly releases him with a pout. "I remember those awful, stuffy lessons," she says. "Here I am at thirty-one and I've never had to set a table in my life."

"That's because you married well. Thanks to your lessons," my mother says firmly, putting her hands on Devon's shoulders to shuffle him into the kitchen. "Come along, Devon."

Melody sticks her tongue out at the back of the older omega's head and makes a silly gesture, putting her thumb on the tip of her nose and wiggling her fingers, just like she always did when we were children.

The twins cackle before running off to do whatever the hell it is they waste their days doing while everyone else is hard at work.

Once they're gone and Tom is hauling their bags up the stairs, Melody turns to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "He's a cutie. A bit shy, though."

"So I've noticed," I say.

"You're going to have to be gentle with him, mister," she says, wagging her finger at me. "You'll scare him off."

"Believe it or not, he's the one who chose to come here," I inform her, although the Devon who sat face-to-face with me at the council table, negotiating the terms of his surrender, seems a far cry from the timid boy who haunts these halls. It's only those little flashes of defiance, like him standing up to my mother at the dinner table, that give me hope he might be able to hold his own here.

"Still," she says, planting her hands on her hips. "I can tell from the way he acts around you he sees you as a stranger. Have you even tried to make him feel welcome?"

I sigh. "You've barely been home all of five minutes and you're already reading me the riot act?"

"Yep," she says in an unapologetic tone. "I'm not one of your generals who's just going to tell you what you want to hear. You've got your work cut out for you with that boy and however he came to be here, you're the one who's responsible for him now that he is."

"Point taken," I mutter. Her words echo Dan's too closely for me to dismiss them outright.

She seems satisfied with that, at least, because she turns and marches up the stairs to direct her mate with putting away their belongings.

I suppose if nothing else, between my mother and now Melody, I won't have to worry about caving to the temptation to be near my mate when I can hardly get a moment alone with him.

CHAPTER 7



DEVON

Torment.

That's the only word to describe sitting across from Elaine as she grills me about the upper crust of the Grayridge pack and its surrounding allies and enemies. Her sharp gaze pierces me like a dagger, eager to expose the slightest crack in my knowledge.

And there are fucking *plenty* to be found.

I'd hoped that Melody and Tom's return would at least distract her for a little while, but nope. They've barely been here a day and she's already back at my interrogation—I mean lessons.

"Who is the alpha of the Riverbend pack?" Elaine's voice slices through the air.

I wrack my brain, scrambling for the answer. "Uh... Lucas Edwards?"

Elaine's ruby lips curl in disdain. "Wrong. Do try harder, won't you?"

I suppress a groan, bracing for the next question. But before Elaine can pounce again, a melodic voice interjects.

"There you are!"

We both turn to see Melody breezing into the room, sunlight woven into her golden hair.

"Melody," Elaine says in the most pleasant tone I've heard from her yet. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

Melody comes over to put a hand on my shoulder, giving Elaine a dazzling smile. "I'm so sorry, but I simply *must* steal Devon. We have important business to discuss."

"Business?" Elaine huffs. "He's in the middle of a lesson. A lesson he's struggling through, at that," she adds pointedly.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

"I'm sure that's very important," Melody answers, already pulling me out of my chair. "But it won't take very long, I promise."

Elaine scowls, but even she doesn't seem to be able to fully resist Melody's charms. "Very well. We'll continue this later, Devon."

"Looking forward to it," I lie through my teeth.

As we leave the room, relief washes over me. The moment Melody and I are alone in the hall and hopefully out of Elaine's earshot, I turn to her. "You said we have business to discuss?"

Hopefully I'm not just out of the frying pan and into the fire. I don't think I've interacted enough with her in the brief time she's been back to piss her off, but who knows when it comes to a Grayridge wolf?

"Oh, that," Melody says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I was just saying that to get you out. I know how those awful lessons are. I became tile counting champion just to keep my sanity."

I can't help but chuckle. "Yeah, I've pretty much memorized how many are on the dining room ceiling."

We stare at each other for a moment before blurting out, "Two eighty-seven!"

Melody dissolves in laughter and I follow suit. It's one of the only times I can remember genuinely laughing in this place.

"Come on," she says, linking my arm in hers and leading me toward the back garden entrance. "Let's get you out of this stuffy old house. It's beautiful out."

"I wouldn't mind some fresh air," I agree, following her outside. I've been inside for so long I squint at the sunlight like Nosferatu emerging from his coffin, but it feels good to have some UV light on my skin.

Melody guides me along a stone path winding through vibrant flower beds and towering oak trees, their leaves just starting to turn brilliant shades of red and gold. It's peaceful out here, with birds chirping and a light breeze rustling through the branches overhead. Hard to believe we're still on Grayridge territory.

"This was one of my favorite places to play as a kid," Melody says, pausing by a massive oak. "Constantine and I used to have competitions to see who could climb the highest. I always won... until this one time I went too far." She points up toward the top branches. "I was determined to touch the very top, but I got stuck up there. Constantine had to climb up and get me down."

I try to picture a younger Constantine rescuing his cousin, but it's hard to overlay that image onto the stern alpha I know. "He doesn't seem like the rescuing type these days," I mutter.

More like kidnapping.

But I decide not to bring that up.

"Oh, he's always been overprotective of the people he cares about," Melody says. "He just doesn't show that side of himself very often. Not since..."

She trails off, glancing over at me. "Well, never mind ancient history. What about you, Devon? Any tree climbing exploits from your childhood?"

I shake my head with a rueful smile. "Not exactly. I was more of an indoor kid. Preferred books to bark. That was really more my brother's kind of thing."

Melody nods knowingly. "Nothing wrong with that. We can't all be daredevils."

"Yeah," I murmur, continuing to follow her down the winding path. I hadn't even noticed it before, since I usually stick close to the gardens, and the woods are usually off limits, but I assume it's okay since I have a "chaperone."

As we walk under the sunlight-dappled canopy of trees, I find myself getting lost in thought.

Climbing trees was really just the beginning. If I could have been more like Brad, my life would have been a hell of a lot easier.

I can still hear our dad griping at me for not going outside to play with Brad and the neighborhood kids who only would've tolerated me because my brother would've kicked their asses otherwise. You can only tag along with your "big" brother so long before it just feels pathetic, especially if you prefer the company of a book. At least I could pretend the people inside those pages liked me.

Then there was college. I'd thought getting away from home would be a chance to carve out my own space. A chance to find something I was good at instead of just living in Brad's shadow.

But that hadn't turned out the way I planned.

I don't know why I thought Grayridge would be any different, especially considering the fact that Constantine wanted Brad first.

I'm just the consolation prize, as usual.

Maybe that's why Constantine has barely spoken to me since I arrived.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Melody asks.

I shrug, scuffing my shoe against a tree root. "That'd be overcharging."

Melody nudges me gently. "Oh, come on. Don't be so down on yourself. Has it really been that bad here?"

"No, it's not Grayridge," I murmur. "I just... I don't fit in here. Never have anywhere, really."

Melody makes a sympathetic noise. "I know it's an adjustment, but give it some time. Constantine will come around eventually." She grins. "He's stubborn as hell, but underneath it all, he's one of the best people I know."

I just nod, because people always say stuff like that about their friends and family. Even the ones who turn out to have a bunch of body parts in their freezer.

Melody seems to sense my doubts. "It's true. I know how he comes off, trust me," she says with a weary sigh. "He's got a wall around him a mile thick, but it's only because he's afraid of being hurt."

"Afraid?" I echo, unable to hide my incredulity. "It's hard to imagine someone like Constantine being afraid of anything."

"You'd be surprised," she says in a cryptic way that leaves me wanting to ask more, but something stops me. As friendly as she is, I don't really know Melody any more than I know the others.

Hell, the one I've spent more time around than anyone is Elaine. But at least there's no doubting where she stands.

"I guess I know what that's like," I say after a moment. "Putting up walls, keeping people at a distance... It's easier."

"It is," she agrees. "But it has to be lonely, too."

I shrug. "Sometimes that's better than the alternative."

Melody stops walking, so I turn to face her, not expecting the look of concern on her face. "Look, Devon, I... I know what this place is like. What the *pack* is like," she adds. "And I know what it's like to feel like an outsider."

That's hard to believe, coming from someone who looks and acts the way she does, but I decide to take her word for it. "How did you get over it?" I ask.

She pauses a moment as if she's thinking about it. "I guess I just stopped caring so much about the people who didn't accept me," she says. "And I started focusing on the ones who did. Most of all, I just stopped trying to be

anything other than myself, and it made it a lot easier to tell the difference between the two.”

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I guess that would make things easier."

She smiles and grabs my arm again, continuing down the path. "For the record, I'm glad you're here, Devon. I think you're exactly what this pack needs. Especially Constantine."

My face grows warm in response to those words, and how utterly absurd they seem, especially considering the fact that I've barely even seen him if it's not at the dinner table. "I don't know about that, but... thanks."

As we resume our walk, Melody points out the various landmarks around the property from her shared childhood with Constantine, Dan and the others, and I feel a little lighter than I did before. If nothing else, at least I know there's someone who doesn't hate the fact that I'm here.

And that makes me feel a little less alone.

CHAPTER 8



CONSTANTINE

I've been watching Devon as he sits across the dining room table from my mother, who's standing and pacing in front of some sort of white board presentation she's giving him that appears to be about the proper protocol and etiquette of throwing a tea party.

Judging from the pointer she's waving around that makes him wince every so often when it comes close to flying out of her hand, and how animatedly she's speaking, you'd think it was military strategy.

Then again, Elaine Grayridge takes fine dining more seriously than any of my generals take the battlefield.

I freeze as Dan and Melody's footsteps echo down the hall behind me.

Shit.

Melody's sugary voice cuts through the tense air. "Spying on your mate again?"

I grit my teeth. "I'm not spying."

"Oh yeah?" Dan's gruff baritone rumbles as he comes up on my other side. Of course they're in cahoots. "Then what do you call it?"

My hands curl into fists. I force myself to relax before answering. "I just don't want to interrupt his lesson."

Melody snickers. "How very considerate of you."

I roll my eyes.

"Well?" Dan prods. "You ask him yet?"

Melody's eyes light up. She leans toward me eagerly before I can even answer. "Ooh, ask who what?"

Dan smirks like the bastard he is. "Told him he should take Devon into town to pick up some supplies to make him comfortable."

Melody squeals. "That's a wonderful idea! He's going to need new clothes for events. Everything he has is so... *Stone Hollow*," she says, wrinkling her nose as she steeples her fingers together. "Oh, and he'll need nesting materials, too! We can't forget that."

"No, of course not," Dan says, giving me an ear-to-ear grin that makes me want to deck him all the way across the house.

"Would you both keep it down?" I hiss.

Sure enough, my mother's eyes dart over to us, narrowing sharply. "Well, well," she says, folding her arms. "If you're going to stand out there chattering, you might as well come in. We're trying to have a lesson, in case you hadn't noticed."

Shit. No choice now.

I straighten my shoulders and stride into the dining room, Dan and Melody on my heels snickering like a couple of schoolchildren caught gossiping. Mom taps her foot impatiently. Devon just looks confused, eyes darting between us.

I clear my throat, acutely aware of how close Devon is as I stop in front of the table. "I was heading into town," I lie. "I thought you'd like to come with me and get some supplies."

Devon glances at the door longingly. "Oh, um. I don't really need anything..."

"Nonsense." My voice comes out too forceful. I try again, softer. "With the mating ceremony coming up, you'll need new clothes, and other things."

"Well, he certainly does need new clothes," Mom chimes in, casting a judgmental glance over the plain blue polo and khakis my mate is wearing. They're a bit too baggy for his slender frame, but I don't really think they warrant the ire she's throwing at them. "We can throw the rest in a bonfire."

Devon looks down at the offending polo and frowns.

"Come along," I tell him before he can protest any further. "You can finish your lessons another time."

It's necessary, if he's going to fit into life in my pack, but there's only so much one-on-one time a person can take with my mother without going insane, so this is as much a mental health trip as anything.

Devon reluctantly gets up and follows me over to the door. Dan and Melody are both grinning at him like complete psychopaths. I shoot them both a glare, because the last thing I need is them scaring him off.

He's skittish enough.

Once we're outside, I see an SUV has already been pulled up at the curb to wait for us. It's not my favorite, but I doubt he'd feel secure in the sporty two-seater, and we need room to bring home the things he picks out. When I open the passenger-side door and see how tense Devon is as he mumbles his thanks and gets in, I'm not sure if Melody and Dan are the ones he was nervous around, after all.

Is he scared of being alone with me?

I suppose I can understand, considering the circumstances surrounding how he ended up here.

And my dealings with his brother.

I get into the car and pull out onto the road, finding it hard to find words. The silence stretches between us, thick and awkward. Normally, I don't feel inclined to fill it, but this omega is the catalyst for all sorts of foreign impulses. I glance over at him a few times, but he's staring out the window, his face a porcelain mask I can't read.

Finally, I clear my throat. "So, how are the lessons going?"

His eyes flicker over to me for a second before going back to the window. "They're fine."

"Good. That's... good." I grip the steering wheel tighter, cursing myself. I'm usually much smoother than this. But something about Devon throws me off, leaves me fumbling. Usually, I can read a man from a mile away, but him... "We're heading to the tailor first. For some new clothes."

At that, he does look at me fully. His eyes are wary, like he expects there to be some ulterior motive. "I have clothes."

"Yes, but as I'm sure my mother has explained, there's a dress code for most pack events," I tell him.

Not that I'd blame him for tuning her out. She's probably told him a lot of things.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, but nods.

We pull up in front of the tailor shop, and I hurry around to open Devon's door for him before he can do it himself. He climbs out, watching me warily, like he's waiting for the other shoe to drop. I clench my jaw, trying to mask my frustration.

Does he really think I'm going to pounce on him in broad daylight?

"This is our family tailor," I say, gesturing to the shop. "He'll take your measurements and have a whole new wardrobe made for you."

Devon's eyes widen. "Usually, I just... buy things off the rack."

"Nonsense." I place a hand on his back, guiding him toward the door. He tenses at my touch, and I drop my hand quickly to open the door. "You'll need well-made clothes that fit properly. Expense isn't an issue," I add, in case that's his concern.

The tailor, a young omega named Edmund, greets us warmly. "Alpha Constantine, so good to see you. And this must be your new mate!" His eyes light up as he looks Devon over. "My, aren't you a pretty thing. It'll be a treat to dress you up."

"This is Devon," I say, placing a hand on his shoulder. I'm relieved when he doesn't flinch away, but I can't be sure if that's just because we're in front of the tailor. "Devon, this is Edmund, the finest tailor in the region. He'll take good care of you."

Devon shifts, his cheeks reddening. "Nice to meet you."

"Aren't you precious," Edmund coos, taking Devon's arm and leading him toward a screen in the back of the large showroom, adorned with mannequins wearing the various items of clothing he's designed over the years. "Sasha!" he calls into the back. "Make sure our favorite client has some champagne while he waits."

"That isn't necessary," I sigh, sinking into an empty armchair.

Edmund's rather harried-looking assistant brings me a glass anyway, and I find myself wishing I had brought some documents to look over while I wait since I'd forgotten just how involved this process can be. My measurements haven't changed much lately, so I just send in an order whenever I need new clothes.

Dan is right, though. I need to spend more time around Devon, and this is a relatively safe way to do it. It's not an especially intimate occasion, but so far, all keeping a distance has done is make me obsess about him every waking moment.

And most of my sleeping ones.

I haven't ventured into his dreams since he arrived in Grayridge, but sometimes I'm tempted. It was so much easier to interact with him then. He was, strangely enough, less guarded—and I felt less pressure to keep him at arm's length.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when Edmund's assistant returns. "He's ready for you now," she says.

I nod and follow her to the back fitting room. Devon stands on the small platform, wearing an exquisite set of formal robes that Edmund must have pulled from the racks. They're a deep emerald green, embroidered with golden thread in an intricate pattern at the sleeves and hem. The cut is

perfect for Devon's slender frame, accentuating his trim waist before flaring at the hips into a dramatic sweep of fabric.

"What do you think?" Edmund asks eagerly.

I realize I'm staring, and force myself to close my mouth. "It's... very nice," I manage.

Devon fidgets under my intense gaze. "Is something wrong?" he asks warily.

"No, not at all," I say quickly. "This style suits you perfectly."

Devon looks down at the fabric draped as elegantly as water. "They're very... um... formal."

"It's what Grayridge omegas wear during formal occasions," I inform him. "Regardless of gender." I turn to Edmund. "We'll take several of them in different colors, plus a full wardrobe of standard clothing. Suits, casual wear, the works. And, of course, the robe for the mating ceremony."

I can practically see the dollar signs in Edmund's eyes. Devon's cheeks flush at the mention of our future mating.

"Of course, of course!" Edmund says, clasping his hands together as Sasha scribbles something down on a notepad. "I'll have most of it delivered to the house by the end of the week, but the robes will take some extra time." He pauses, glancing between us. "When is this ceremony?"

I realize I haven't actually told Devon that when he looks at me as if he's even more curious than Edmund is. "In two weeks."

Devon's eyes grow wide. I immediately regret not having this conversation in the car. I should have predicted it would come up. I've really not been on my A-game lately, and I can only assume that has something to do with the restless beast that's always longing to be closer to our mate.

At this point, I'm honestly not sure how much more damage he could do if I did give in.

We leave the shop, and Devon is silent on our way to the housewares shop. It's a store that caters to human clientele as well, but the owner is a shifter

who belongs to the pack, and all the staff members are shifters as well, so it's a popular destination for nesting omegas.

The silence is deafening as we walk through the automatic doors into the brightly lit interior filled with soft fabrics and cozy furnishings. I hover near Devon as he slowly moves through the aisles, glancing uncertainly at the array of options.

"See anything you like?" I prompt.

He shrugs, not meeting my eyes. "It all looks nice. What exactly am I supposed to be getting...?"

I blink, because I'm not quite sure of the answer myself. I just assumed he would know. "Anything you might find suitable for nesting. Blankets, pillows, lights... whatever you like."

"Right," he says, his eyes darting away. He ventures over to an aisle close by and starts examining the comforters, but I can tell he's still not certain.

As I watch him browse the store, I feel like I'm an observer in a nature documentary watching some rare creature to study its habits. In so many ways, Devon is an outlier, but in others, he's the most omega-like omega I know. My mother and Melody are such forceful personalities who've never asked for or required guidance on anything. As unusual as Brad was, at least I knew what to make of him.

Devon is different. He seems so... fragile.

Lost.

And I feel like a gorilla trying to care for a wounded baby bird, all the while knowing that one wrong move is all it's going to take to crush him.

Not that it's stopped my wolf from wanting to try.

A sales associate wanders over and asks if we need anything, but since Devon has been browsing for twenty minutes and only has a comforter and a stray throw pillow to show for it, I tell her to pack up some essentials for a nest—blankets, pillows, lamps, whatever she thinks an omega settling into a new home might like.

Devon shoots me a look, cheeks pink again, but doesn't argue.

When everything has been rung up and paid for, he mumbles a “thank you” as we head out to the car.

I shrug, opening his door for him. "You don't need to thank me. It's my pleasure to provide for you."

He ducks into the seat, avoiding my gaze, and I'm left wondering again what's going on in that head of his.

I'd hoped today would be an opportunity to get to know him a bit better, as ill-advised as that probably is, but as we head home, I feel like I understand him even less than I already did.

What does he want from me?

And how am I supposed to figure out what he needs if I can't even get him to talk to me?

CHAPTER 9



DEVON

As I stand in my room, staring at the pile of packages from the housewares store that are now at war with the pile of packages covering my bed, I feel like I'm in a monster movie.

Attack of the Compulsive Shopper's Seventy-Foot-Tall Hoard.

I pick up a fluffy pillow and turn it over in my hands. It's soft and cushy, perfect for nesting, or so the books tell me. But it feels lifeless in my hands, just a pillow.

I try to imagine building some kind of pillow fort, a cozy nest to curl up in, but the thought doesn't stir anything. It feels blank.

Just like my lack of omega instincts.

Sighing, I toss the pillow onto the bed.

I should be excited, thrilled like anyone in my situation would be. I'm getting new clothes, new linens, new everything. It's scenes like this one that made me squeal with excitement when I was reading *The Wolf's Mate*, but now that I'm actually living it, I just feel like a fraud.

I don't have the same nesting drive, the same visceral need to prepare a den. And I can't shake the sinking feeling that Constantine will see right through me if I even try.

A knock at the door makes me jump.

I need to calm the fuck down.

When I open the door, Melody is standing there with a bright smile. "I saw the delivery guys bringing up all those packages and thought you might need some help organizing," she says, peering past me into the room. Her eyes go wide when she sees the explosion of shopping bags and boxes covering every surface. "Or a lot of help."

I step aside to let her in, feeling a flush of embarrassment creep up my neck. "I'm not really sure what to do with any of it, to be honest," I admit. "Constantine kind of went overboard."

Melody steps further into the room, surveying the chaos. "He has a habit of doing that," she says dryly, picking up a throw pillow and fluffing it.

I hover near the door, watching her move through the space with easy confidence.

Melody turns back to me, head tilted. "Did you at least get to pick some things out yourself?"

My face burns hotter. "I did, but..." I trail off, unsure how to explain that none of this comes naturally to me without exposing the truth. I have to constantly be on my toes to remember who does and doesn't know what.

Melody frowns. She sets the pillow down and comes over to me, gently grasping my arm. "What's wrong, Devon? You can tell me."

Her voice is soft and concerned. I search her face and see nothing but openness and care. I make a decision that I have to confess to someone or I'll go crazy.

"Can you keep a secret?" I ask warily.

Melody's eyes light up. "Oh honey, I've kept secrets for years. Like that time Dan told me he collects—" She stops herself short, eyes widening, and mimes zipping her lips. "Not a peep, I promise."

Despite the anxiety churning in my gut, I let out a small laugh. Melody smiles back encouragingly.

I take a deep breath. "The truth is, I don't have any nesting instincts. I've never even gone into heat. And I can't shift." The words rush out in a tumble. "I'm just... a defective omega."

I can tell from the shock on her face that's not something Elaine or Constantine told her, which means they're probably ashamed.

And so am I.

"Devon," Melody breathes, taking a step closer. She pulls me into a tight hug all of a sudden and she's a hell of a lot stronger than she looks. Then again, Brad's even stronger now that he can shift. "You listen to me. You are *not* defective." She pulls back to look me in the eye, hands firm on my shoulders. "No two omegas are the same. We're all unique, like flowers."

I give a watery chuckle. "I'm pretty sure a rose without petals that smells like coffee would be considered defective."

Melody laughs. "I don't know, I think there could be a market for coffee-scented roses." Her expression grows serious again. "Maybe you just haven't blossomed yet. These things happen in their own time. You can't force it."

I want to believe her comforting words, but the mating ceremony is looming over my head, so it's hard to feel like time isn't of the essence. "We're going to be mated a week from now and I still have no idea what's expected of me. Not just as an omega, but in general."

Melody takes that in, tilting her head. "Devon... are you a virgin?"

I feel my cheeks flush red at her blunt question. "I, uh... yes. Is that bad?"

"Of course not!" she answers. "There's nothing wrong with waiting until it feels right."

I sigh, flopping down on the edge of the bed. "Maybe, but it feels like just another way I could end up being a disappointment."

Melody's eyes flash at that. "Did Constantine say that?" she demands, planting her hands on her hips. "That you were disappointing him?"

"No!" I say quickly. "No, he's never said anything like that. It's just... I can tell."

She frowns. "I'm sure that's not true at all. In fact, I know it. But if you feel that way, you should talk to him and give him the chance to prove otherwise."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say, starting to panic at the thought.

Since that day he took me out shopping, Constantine has gone back to pretending like I don't exist, and considering how I clam up when he's around, that's probably for the best.

He's always so... *intense*.

And I have no idea what I'm supposed to do or say around him.

My lessons with Elaine have made it abundantly clear there's a right and wrong answer for every interaction, and my interactions with Constantine feel like they're more high stakes than any other.

Melody watches me in concern, and I can tell she wants to press further, but she doesn't. Instead, she glances over at the pile across the room and says, "Well, why don't I help you get all these new things organized? We'll make this place feel like home in no time."

"Yeah," I say, forcing a smile. "I'd appreciate that."

CHAPTER 10



DEVON

I'm not sure what I expected I would spend the night before my own mating ceremony doing, but being quizzed on the ceremony by my mother-in-law isn't it.

This woman is *relentless*. It's almost impressive.

Annoying and borderline concerning, but impressive.

At least I won't have to worry about not knowing what to do during the ceremony itself. Now after is another matter entirely, and that certainly hasn't come up in any of Elaine's lesson plans.

The doorbell rings, shattering my focus. I bolt from my seat before Elaine can object and run out into the hallway, nearly tripping on the runner. My heart pounds against my ribs as I wrench open the heavy oak door before any of the staff can get to it.

"Brad!" I cry as I crash into my brother's muscular chest, his familiar scent washing over me. I don't need to have heightened senses for it to be comforting. I cling to him tightly, overwhelmed by the reality of having my family here after what feels like forever.

Brad's big arms crush me against him. "Hey, bro," he says with a laugh. "Glad to see you, too."

I pull back to beam up at him, then eagerly hug Raul. "I'm so glad you guys could come. But you're early," I say, ushering them inside. "I wasn't expecting you until later on tonight."

Brad shrugs, glancing around the grand foyer. "Wanted to keep Constantine on his toes. Where is the asshole, anyway?"

I sigh, grateful no one heard that. "He's around. Where are the twins?"

"Hannah is bringing them up with the others shortly before the ceremony tomorrow," Raul answers.

I nod, able to guess why. They probably want to be able to suss out my new pack without having to worry about the babies.

Especially in the event that Brad tries to pile drive Constantine, which is a possibility no matter how much I want to avoid it.

"You won't believe how much bigger they've gotten," Brad says, beaming as he takes out a stack of Polaroids from his pocket and starts sifting through them.

I glance through the photographs of my niece and nephew with their happy parents and can't help but laugh at the old-school format. "You've really adapted to '80s life, I see."

"Yeah, and I've even got one of those retro camcorders Kevin was always geekin' out about," he says proudly. "Makes everything look like Paranormal Activity, but it's kinda fun. I barely even miss my phone."

"I wish I could say the same," I say dryly. "I miss being able to download as many books as I want and take them anywhere."

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," said Brad. "I brought the stuff you asked for in my luggage."

"Really?" I ask hopefully. I was sure he would have forgotten. "Oh my gosh, thank you! I've been jonesing."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't easy considering I actually had to go in person," Brad grunts. "They can't invent online shopping soon enough."

"They're books," Raul says in a flat tone. "You two are talking like it's a black market deal or something."

"Hey, considering how that one lady looked at me when I checked out with a bunch of those man-tiddy covers, they might as well be," says Brad.

I blush. The last thing I need is Constantine—or Elaine, for that matter—finding out about those.

As if on cue, Elaine struts into the room, her gaze sharpening as it travels over Brad and Raul. "Well, you two are early. I'm Elaine, Constantine's mother," she says, extending her hand.

Raul kisses it, ever the gentleman. But when she leans in to give Brad a polite peck on the cheek, he pulls her in for a bear hug that momentarily seems to short-circuit her brain.

"Bring 'er in there," he says, clapping the older omega on her back before setting her back on her feet. "We're family now."

A silver hair pops out of her bun and she just stares in shock before she manages to collect herself and smooths down her skirt suit with a huff. "Yes, well... I'm afraid the refreshments haven't been fully prepared yet, but you might as well come. I've already told the others you're here, and Constantine will be home soon."

"You really run a tight ship, huh, Mary Poppins?" Brad asks as we all follow Elaine down the hall.

I find myself wanting to sink into the wallpaper again. Elaine looks at Brad, then at me. I'm pretty sure she's thinking, "What has my son brought home?" Or maybe "I suppose it could be worse."

Maybe both.

I just give her an apologetic smile and shrug.

"Grayridge Manor has been in my family for generations," she says, keeping her head high. "I take pride in making sure that it runs smoothly."

"Yeah, the place is real swanky," Brad says, looking up at one of the many chandeliers in the house as we walk underneath it. "Is that plastic?"

"Certainly not!" Elaine cries sharply, stopping in front of the gathering room where a butler is waiting to open the doors.

I groan inwardly, thinking this night isn't off to a great start.

Elaine shoots Brad one more stern look before gesturing for the butler to open the doors.

We file into the grand yet cozy gathering room, with its plush sofas and chairs, roaring fireplace, and sprawling antique rug. I immediately spot Dan sitting on one of the sofas, his massive frame making it look comically small. He's smiling and affable as usual, but I can tell he's a bit on edge tonight—which is no surprise given the bad blood between his pack and Raul's.

Next to him is Melody, who smiles and waves when she sees us like she's never met a stranger, even if they happen to be from the Stone Hollow pack. Tom is on her other side, looking a little uncomfortable.

And then there are the twins. Vivienne and Peter sit ramrod straight in matching wingback chairs, their eyes following our every move.

I suppress a shudder.

Elaine clears her throat. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet Brad and Raul." She gestures at them. "Brad, Raul, these are my sons, Dan and Peter, my daughter, Vivienne, my niece, Melody, and her mate, Tom."

"On behalf of the entire Stone Hollow pack, it's a pleasure to meet all of you," Raul says, nodding respectfully to them. At least I can count on *him* to show some tact. Unless—and until—someone crosses Brad. Then all bets are off. "We hope this can be the beginning of positive relations between our packs."

Brad leans in close as we walk further into the room as Raul shakes hands with the alphas. "Hey, what's with the Bobbsey twins over there?" he whispers.

I glance over at the twins, who are still staring. "Yeah, they take some getting used to," I mutter back. "Just don't make direct eye contact. They can smell fear."

Brad grimaces a little, looking at Vivienne like he can't actually help it. "It's like she's staring into my soul."

I pat his arm sympathetically. So far, he's been on relatively good behavior. For him.

Let's just hope it can last once Constantine gets here.

"It's so nice to finally meet Devon's brother," Melody says, wandering over to us. "He's told me so much about you!"

"Yeah, likewise," Brad tells her, glancing over at me. "She really is like sunshine and coffee had a baby."

I run a hand down my face, groaning, but Melody just gives a musical laugh. "Oh, I can tell we'll get along just fine."

She's probably right about that. Brad and Melody are both forces of nature, but sometimes a tornado and sunshine are capable of coexisting. I'm more worried about when Constantine comes into the mix.

We're barely into the smalltalk when I notice Raul tense up and grow silent. When I follow his gaze to the door and see Constantine there, I realize the moment of truth has arrived.

CHAPTER 11



CONSTANTINE

I walk into the den after rushing home the moment my guards alerted me to the fact that Raul and Brad had arrived early.

Because of course they did.

As soon as I see Devon relaxing on the couch next to Brad, laughing at something he said, it's like looking at another person. The one he was before I brought him to Grayridge, before fear and uncertainty dulled his eyes.

That light dies the moment he notices me. His shoulders tense and his smile fades.

At that moment, I know I'm wrong. It isn't that Devon isn't the person he was before—the headstrong young man I met in those dreams—it's that *I* make him a different person.

Frustration licks at me, but I swallow it down.

Tonight is crucial to continued peace between our packs, and as foreign as that goal is for me, it's necessary. I can't very well be at war with my own mate's pack.

Well, I *can*.

But that would pose more problems than just swallowing my distaste for Raul for an evening or two.

"Brad, Raul," I greet them cordially with a nod.

"Constantine," Raul rumbles back, arms crossed over his broad chest.

Brad just glares, jaw tight, but I don't expect him to pretend he likes me now just because I'm his brother's mate.

I walk over and take the empty seat next to Devon. I resist the urge to pull him closer and settle for draping my arm over the back of the sofa behind him.

Brad rolls his eyes, which I choose to ignore. For Devon's sake.

"I appreciate you both coming to discuss the ceremony," I begin evenly. "I trust my family has made you feel welcome."

"Very," Raul answers. "We appreciate your hospitality."

As if on cue, several servants enter the room, bringing with them plates of canapes and champagne. I could certainly use a drink if I am going to be expected to tolerate the Stone Hollow alpha in my den for any length of time.

I thought this would be easy, but as the small talk progresses, I find myself far more on edge than I was during any of our other negotiations. The only possible explanation is that Devon is here, and my wolf is fiercely protective of our omega—even if these two aren't a threat to him.

If anything, they see *me* as a threat.

As if I'd be capable of harming the man my entire world has revolved around from the moment I laid eyes on him through that portal.

I take a deep breath and try to relax, focusing on the feeling of Devon next to me rather than the others. His slender frame is tense, but he doesn't shy away from my touch. That small acceptance soothes my wolf even as it stokes the fire in my blood.

I want nothing more than to lay claim to what is mine, to mark that pale skin and hear my name cried out in ecstasy. But I refrain. I have to, for both our sakes.

Tomorrow night will be different, though. The night of our mating ceremony.

I'm still not sure what I'm going to do.

Will I continue to resist the siren's call of his scent and his gentle voice? Or will I cave in to the temptation, at the risk of losing what little I have left of my own autonomy over this creature who's a fraction of my size, yet seems to be the only thing in this universe capable of defeating me?

It's the first time I've allowed myself to be so close to him physically. So close I can feel his warmth at my side. My hand itches to rest on his shoulder. To stroke the tendril of hair teasing the nape of his neck.

This is already torture. A confirmation of every fear I have that's kept me at a distance. If I can barely handle sitting with him for an hour through small talk while our relatives become acquainted, how the hell am I supposed to get through a lifetime of this? With him always just out of reach, close enough to torment me but too far away to find any satisfaction.

I find myself drifting in and out of the conversation that Brad and Melody are more than happy to monopolize while their mates look on in adoration. Devon is even quieter than usual now, even though he didn't seem to have any trouble talking before I came into the room.

Of course.

I can't help but wonder what he's thinking. I've been dreading tomorrow night for my own reasons, but he certainly seems to be dreading it in his own way. The thought that he fears me touching him unsettles me on more than one level.

Does he really find me so off-putting?

The night at once seems to drag on forever and fly by much too quickly. Smalltalk is something I loathe under the best of circumstances, let alone when it involves my enemies, but it's an opportunity to be close to Devon.

An excuse.

And even though there will be no social barriers stopping me from being as close to him as the beast within me desires tomorrow night, there is the very real possibility that mating with him would be an irrevocable mistake. That it would accelerate the process that began when I imprinted on him and leave me as the one thing I swore to myself I would never be again—vulnerable.

There's also the possibility that he'll want nothing to do with me.

And somehow, that feels so much worse.

CHAPTER 12



DEVON

The pristine white fabric of the ceremonial robes feels stiff and scratchy against my skin. I fidget in front of the mirror, tugging at the high collar. The reflection staring back at me looks like a stranger playing dress-up.

"Hold still, would you?" Elaine snaps as she fusses with the robes, straightening them and smoothing out every wrinkle. "Honestly, Devon, you look as nervous as a deer caught in headlights."

"Lay off him, lady." Brad steps up beside me, glaring at her. "'Course he's nervous with you fussing over him like that."

Elaine's lip curls. "I don't believe I was speaking to you."

"Here," Melody interrupts, reaching past Elaine to finish straightening out my collar. "These can be tricky, but there. They look perfect. You did a marvelous job, Elaine."

Elaine preens under the praise, successfully redirected. "Well, there is an art to these things, after all," she says, bringing a hand to her collarbone.

I catch Brad's eye in the mirror and we both have to stifle laughter. Melody winks at me.

Elaine circles me once more, scrutinizing every detail. "You're ready," she finally declares.

For once, I'm tempted to question her judgment. As picky as she's been about every other detail, I'm convinced there's no way she actually finds me a satisfactory offering to her son.

Then again, there's nothing I can pinpoint about my hair or outfit as being wrong—except that I'm the one wearing this getup.

And there's nothing that can really be done about that.

"They're right," Brad says, his eyes a little mistier than they were a minute ago as he looks over me. "You look amazing. Kinda hard to believe this day is finally here."

Melody clears her throat, touching Elaine's shoulder. "Why don't we give these two a moment to talk?"

"Oh, all right," Elaine says grudgingly, glancing at the clock on the dressing room wall. "But keep it short. We're on a tight schedule and the ceremony starts soon."

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Brad says, shooing her out into the hall and closing the door. The moment he turns around, he mutters, "Wonder what it's like being a human shish kabob?"

I stifle a laugh and choke in the process. "You can't say things like that."

"You kiddin'? I'm the alpha's mate, I get away with way worse shit than that," Brad says in a matter-of-fact tone. "You'll see soon enough."

I doubt being Constantine's mate gives me any real authority, but I decide not to get into that.

Brad clears his throat, glancing away. "So uh, I have something for you. Consider it a mating gift."

"A gift?" I ask, tilting my head. When he pulls out a box from the drawer in the dressing table, I realize he must have left it there earlier, but while my first reaction is to be touched, it soon gives way to suspicion. "That'd better not be a jewel-encrusted butt plug or anything."

"Jewel-encrusted?" he says with a snort. "What do you think I am, an oil baron? Just open the damn box."

I roll my eyes, but I take the box and unwrap the paper that's so neat I'm sure either Raul or Hannah wrapped it for him. Inside is a pink leather-bound journal.

I stare at the journal, confused. "It's... nice, but pink?"

Brad shrugs. "I know that old saying. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something pink. Figured that'd cover a couple of 'em."

I burst out laughing. "It's something blue, you dingbat!"

Brad's face turns crimson as he rubs the back of his head. "Oh. Well, uh, guess it's just something new, then." He shrugs again, glancing away. "I know it's old-school to say this, but... I'm proud of you. For writing your own story, y'know? Figured it would be a good way to start."

My laughter fades, replaced by a surge of warmth in my chest. Brad usually isn't the sentimental type, so the gift means a lot. Even if he did put his own wacky spin on it.

I pull him into a hug, the journal pressed between us. "I love it. Really."

He laughs, patting my back as he returns the hug. "Good. Hey, maybe you can use it to write your own smut. All those books shoulda given you enough ideas for tonight."

"Brad!" I cry, giving him a half-hearted swat on the arm as I pull away, blushing.

He just gives me a shit-eating grin before growing more serious. "You know, we still haven't had the talk."

"The talk?" I echo in disbelief.

"Yeah. I know it's a little late, but it's kinda my duty, seeing as how I'm the expert in gay sex and all," he says, scratching the stubble on his jaw. "Never thought I'd say that."

"I really wish you hadn't," I groan.

He snorts. "Before we go down that road, though, you know it's not too late to back out of all this, right?" he asks. "I can have Raul ready with the

getaway car in like ten minutes. You just say the word."

I sigh, staring at the floor. As much as the idea of running away with Brad appeals to me, I can't do that. I have a duty to my new pack—and to Constantine.

No matter how nervous the thought of mating with him makes me.

"No, I want to go through with it. I'm just a little nervous, that's all." My cheeks burn with embarrassment at the admission. Brad is the only one I can be truly honest with, though.

"Well, that's where my next best man gift comes in," he says, reaching into his pocket for what looks like a black bottle wrapped in thick black industrial fabric.

I blink. "Is that pepper spray?" I ask in disbelief.

"Bear spray, but yeah, same diff," he says. "Raul says it works better on wolves. Now, he starts getting fresh and you just open this here, flip off the safety, and—"

"Brad!" I screech. "I'm not pepper-spraying Constantine on our mating night!"

"*Bear* spraying," he corrects, clearly not seeing the problem.

I sigh, resisting the urge to sit down since I know I'm not getting these robes back on if I mess them up. "I'm not afraid of mating, Brad. I mean... I kind of am, but I'm more afraid of him not wanting to."

He frowns in confusion. "Why the hell wouldn't he? He's an alpha, you're his omega... it's pretty simple."

"Yeah, well, he's barely even acknowledged my existence the entire time I've been here, so I don't have high hopes that's going to change tonight," I mumble. I'm humiliated just having to say those words out loud, but it's the first time I've seen Brad face-to-face since I left, and I feel like I'm going to go nuts if I don't talk to someone.

"What?" he asks, searching my face. "Why didn't you tell me any of this on the phone?"

"Because I didn't want you to worry about me," I admit. "And because it's embarrassing. Like you said, he's an alpha and I'm his mate. It's supposed to be straightforward. And maybe it is, and he's just straightforwardly not into me."

Brad listens in silence, which is never really a good sign. "You're my brother. Worrying about you is a given," he says after a long few seconds. "As for Constantine not wanting you, that's bullshit. I've seen the way he looks at you, and you know I'm the guy's biggest hater, so there's no bias there."

"I don't know, Brad," I say, picking at the hem of my robes before I can stop myself.

Brad puts his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Listen to me, Dev. Constantine is lucky to have you, whether he knows it or not. And if he doesn't treat you right, you tell me and I'll kick his alpha ass from here to the moon and back. Got it?"

I can't help but smile despite the nerves twisting my stomach into knots. "Yeah, I got it."

"Good. Now let's get out there before Elaine sends out a search party," Brad says, steering me toward the door.

Outside, Elaine waits, resplendent in a deep purple gown and enough diamonds to blind a small country. "About time," she huffs.

"Ready?" Melody asks, brimming with even more excitement than usual. I just hope my mate is half as eager for this as everyone else, but somehow, I doubt it.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I say with a weak smile.

Raul is waiting by the doors to the gathering hall to give me away as my former alpha. He smiles when he sees us. "You look nice," he says, glancing down at my robes. "Very... Grayridge."

"Thanks," I say with a small laugh as Elaine seems to be trying to decide whether she should be insulted or not.

Brad leans in to hug me and I can't breathe for a second, but it's too comforting to care. "You got this, and remember. Getaway car."

"I know, I know," I tell him, pulling away to take the arm Raul offers me as two guards open the twin doors leading into the ceremony hall.

Inside, the lights from two enormous crystal chandeliers reflect off the polished marble floors, making everything sparkle. I have to squint for a moment as my eyes adjust. The hall is packed with wolves from both Stone Hollow and Grayridge, all dressed in their finest clothes.

I spot familiar faces as we make our slow way down the aisle. Kevin, Nathan, and Steven are chatting together near the front, while Lenore and the other pack originals look appropriately wary for wolves who've found themselves in the heart of enemy territory.

Lenore catches my eye from her spot next to Trent, who's wearing a tux that matches her dress, and gives me an encouraging nod. I manage a smile in return, hoping I don't trip over my robes or do something else horribly embarrassing.

Up ahead, at the end of the lavish white runner laid over the marble, waits Constantine. He's resplendent in dark formal robes that bring out the coldness of his golden eyes. Those eyes widen slightly as I approach, and I want to believe it's appreciation in his gaze rather than disdain. I force myself to look away before I read too much into it.

When we reach the front, Raul leans in and whispers, "Are you sure about this?"

I nod, even though I'm anything but. Raul gives my arm a supportive pat before going to take his seat next to Brad at the front of the temple.

Then it's just me and Constantine standing before the priestess. His huge hand engulfs mine, warm and steady. For a moment, I let myself pretend this union between us could actually work. That this mating might bring us closer instead of drive us further apart.

The priestess begins the ceremony, her voice ringing out over the silent crowd. "Welcome, friends and family, as we gather here today to celebrate the joining of Devon of the Stone Hollow pack and Constantine of

Grayridge. Through this union, we unite not just two souls, but two packs—bringing an end to years of conflict and ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity for us all."

Her words wash over me as I try to remember the steps Elaine drilled into me. Bow here, speak there, drink this. I'm afraid it'll all flee me now and that I'll trip over my own feet or spill the ceremonial wine or do something else mortifying in front of the entire pack.

The priestess reaches for a silver goblet sitting on the table behind her and holds it carefully in both hands. I know it's just wine in the cup—the first and only time I'll probably be allowed to drink it here—but the blood-red tint still makes me nervous. "Drink now from the cup of the moon, and be blessed," the priestess continues, handing the goblet first to Constantine. "It represents the sacred oath you both take tonight, to each other and to your packs. The bittersweet nectar of love, commitment, and responsibility."

Constantine takes it smoothly, the silver glinting against his white hair as he raises it to his lips. I watch his throat work as he swallows, transfixed for a moment before he lowers the cup and passes it to me. One look into his eyes, only for a second, is enough to bring back all those feelings his first visitations in my dreams stirred within me.

Back then, he seemed so certain of what he wanted. So certain of *me*.

My hands shake slightly as I accept the goblet from him, our fingers brushing. That slight touch sends a shiver down my spine, but I manage not to let the cup shake. The metal feels cool and heavy in my grip. I raise it, trying to mimic Constantine's sure movements. The wine is cloyingly sweet on my tongue, with an earthy undertone. I swallow quickly and lower the goblet, relieved I didn't spill a single drop.

That's one small victory, at least.

Now for the hard part.

Constantine and I turn to face each other, joining hands. I meet his golden gaze steadily, refusing to be the one who looks away first.

"I vow to cherish and protect you, keeping you safe from all harm," Constantine recites solemnly. His voice rings clear in the hushed hall. "To

care for you in all ways."

It's my turn now. I wet my lips, hoping my voice won't shake. "I vow to stand beside you faithfully, and offer you counsel for your harrowed mind and sanctuary for your weary spirit in times of need." The words come out steady, just like Elaine taught me.

"So may it be," the priestess says with surprising warmth, looking between us. Her gaze lands on me, a few more wrinkles appearing around her eyes even though she doesn't wear a smile on her lips. "I believe you will be exactly what this pack—and our alpha—needs, young Devon. We welcome you into the fold, and we celebrate the union of our pack alpha and omega."

A cheer rises up from around the room, the first sign of life I've seen from this usually stuffy and reserved pack as the voices of the Grayridge pack join with Stone Hollow.

Relief washes over me.

Somehow, I actually made it through the ceremony without humiliating myself or the pack.

But there's still tonight to get through. The marking and mating that will bind Constantine and I together fully.

I'm not sure if it will actually bring us any closer. But looking into Constantine's golden eyes now, I allow myself to hope that it just might.

CHAPTER 13



CONSTANTINE

Devon's scent is all I can think about.

It's been all I can think about ever since he walked into the ceremony hall. Despite the fact that we were surrounded by a sea of people, there was only him. And since the mating ceremony, this craving has only grown stronger.

I have to get him alone. Now.

If I finally mate with him, maybe this obsession will fade. I've never been at risk of losing myself to another the way I am with him, but denying myself is tearing me apart.

As I lead Devon toward the exit of the gathering hall while the others go in the opposite direction, he looks up at me in confusion. "We're not going to the reception?"

"No," I say, opening the door in the back of the building. "I'm taking you to my cabin."

Devon's eyes go wide and I can sense his anxiety spiking.

The heat between us is so intense, it's impossible to think he doesn't feel it, too. But does he not want me?

Devon's scent hums with nervous energy as we step outside into the cool night air. "Are we driving there?" he asks.

"No," I say. "You can ride me."

Devon's cheeks flush an even deeper red.

I chuckle. "That sounded odd, didn't it?"

He gives an awkward laugh. "Yeah, it kinda did."

I snort, then shift into my wolf form. Towering over Devon, I wonder if my size will frighten him since he hasn't actually seen me in this form up close. At least not in the waking realm.

He gasps softly, but instead of shrinking away, his eyes widen with fascination. He reaches out to touch my muzzle. His lack of fear emboldens me. Perhaps he is not as fragile as he appears.

I push my snout into his hand and blow a puff of air through my nostrils. His fingers slide into the short fur along my muzzle as he strokes upward and over my forehead.

"You're so... *big*," he murmurs, his voice low in reverence and fascination. The very same things I feel when I look at him, along with a healthy dose of confusion—because this little omega never ceases to surprise me.

I lower myself down onto my knees, but I still tower over him. I nod for him to climb onto my back and he seems to understand. He walks around behind my shoulder and hesitantly reaches to put a hand on my fur. I reach back and hoist him up onto my back.

He gasps again and digs his hands into my fur as he steadies himself. Once I can tell he's secure, I take off into the woods, going slow on all fours at first, then rising up to lope on two legs. Devon's hands twist into my fur and his scent spikes with exhilaration rather than fear.

As I pick up my pace, I keep my senses alert for anything that might startle or upset him, but he seems thrilled by the ride. His heartbeat pounds against my back, but it sounds steady, without the erratic rhythm of fear.

I slow as the cabin comes into view between the trees. This place is my sanctuary, a much-needed refuge when the pressures of leading my pack become too much. No one else is allowed to venture anywhere close, aside

from the staff I've instructed to keep it in good condition—which makes it a fitting place for the night I claim my mate. I don't have the patience to deal with any interluders right now, and my possessive instincts have only gone into overdrive.

I come to a stop and kneel down again so he can slide off. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright and his soft hair tousled from the ride. "That was amazing," he says, a bit breathless.

I huff out a wolfish laugh and stand, shifting back to my human form. Devon's eyes widen and his cheeks flush darker as he quickly looks away from my naked body. But not before I catch a hint of desire within them.

Devon follows me up the steps to the cabin door, and I sweep him into my arms to carry him past the threshold. He gasps in surprise, wrapping his arms around my neck. Inside, the cabin is full of warmth from the fire roaring in the hearth across the room. It's already been prepared for the time we'll be spending here by my servants, stocked with everything we could need to make sure there are no interruptions.

I set Devon on his feet but keep my hands on his waist. "Make yourself at home," I tell him.

His eyes flicker around the cabin, taking in the large bed, the comfortable sitting area in front of the fireplace, and the shelves of books and trinkets I've collected over the years. It still won't be a proper nest until he's put his touch on it, but that can come in time.

When his gaze returns to me, the desire is unmistakable. It sparks something feral and possessive in my chest, and I draw closer to him, sliding my hands up to cup his face.

"This place is amazing," he says.

There it is again. The hesitation is back in his eyes, replacing the carefree demeanor he had while we were running through the woods—even though that was something that would terrify most humans.

"I'm glad you like it," I say quietly, stroking my thumbs over his cheekbones. "You look beautiful."

Beautiful is a poor description of the perfection before me, but it will have to do until I can show him my feelings in a more hands on manner. As much as I want to tear those robes off him and claim what's mine, a voice in the back of my mind tells me I have to go slow. I have to be gentle.

He swallows hard, eyes going wide. "Th—thank you."

I can't wait any longer. I crush my mouth to his, kissing him with all the hunger and passion I've felt for him since this began. He gasps into the kiss, hands coming up to clutch at my arms, but then he's kissing me back just as fiercely.

So much for going slow. But at least he doesn't seem to mind.

Our tongues tangle as I walk him backwards toward the bed. My hands work at the sash of his robe, shoving the material off his shoulders so I can run my hands over his soft skin. He moans, arching into my touch, and the sound nearly undoes me.

I tear away from the kiss to look down at him, panting. His eyes are wide with hunger, his lips kiss-swollen, his robes hanging open. I want to touch and kiss and gaze at every part of him at once, and I'm not used to having to hold back.

I guide him back onto the bed, somehow managing to be gentle, and he flushes as I finish tearing off his open robes, partially shifting my claws to be rid of the more stubborn bits that cling to his delicate body.

He gasps as my claws brush his skin, eyes widening for a moment before he seems to relax again. His heart is pattering away so much faster than before, like a little mouse's, but it's not fear I smell on him this time. It's arousal.

"You're exquisite," I murmur, trailing a claw down his chest.

He shivers and his gaze flicks away, suddenly shy. I take his chin in hand, forcing him to meet my eyes.

"Don't hide from me, little mouse," I growl. His breath hitches, pupils dilating, and I feel a surge of possessiveness. I want to see every expression that crosses his face. "You're mine now—and I want all of you."

He swallows hard, but nods. "Yes, I... I'm yours."

The words send a bolt of heat through me and I crush my mouth to his again, kissing him fiercely as I settle my body over his. He moans into the kiss, arching up against me, and the feel of his naked body pressed to mine is almost too much. He's so much smaller, softer, smoother. Every brush of him against my body is like the sweep of silk against stone, and it would be so easy to tear him.

To break him.

But I've waited so long for this.

For *him*.

I trail my lips down his neck, nipping and sucking at the delicate skin. His breath comes in gasps, hands clutching at my back. I can feel his erection pressed against mine now that we're both fully exposed, hard and already leaking precome, and the scent of his arousal is intoxicating.

I must touch him. The overwhelming urge to sheath myself inside his tight ass is momentarily overpowered by a different kind of hunger. I lower myself to my knees before the bed and push his thighs apart, exposing him fully. He whimpers, half in anticipation and half in embarrassment, but I silence him with a sharp look. I run my hands up the inside of his thighs, feeling the soft down of hair there, and he shivers.

"Relax," I murmur, leaning in to press a kiss to his hip. "I won't hurt you. Not yet."

He lets out a shaky breath as I take his cock in my hand. It's perfect, like the rest of him, pink and flushed and already leaking. I tease the slit with my fingers, spreading the moisture there before taking him fully into my mouth.

The strangled cry he gives is pure music. His hands fly to my hair, tangling in the long strands, and his whole body arches off the bed as I begin to move. I lavish his cock with my tongue, relishing in the taste of him, the scent, the weight of him against my palate. He's trembling all over now, panting and moaning with every stroke of my lips and swirl of my tongue.

I shift my claws back to nails and reach down to tease his hole, but he's not wet yet. His omega nature will awaken soon enough, but for now I take pleasure in undoing him like this. In giving him a pleasure he's never known, binding him to me in a way that can never be undone.

He's close already, I can feel it. His whole body is taut as a bowstring, fingers twisting in my hair and hips jerking uncontrollably. But I won't be letting him off that easily. No, he's going to at least take a finger before I allow him to have his release. The first of many.

I pull off his cock with an obscene pop, ignoring his whine of protest. "Shh, little mouse, I've got you."

I shift lower, nudging his thighs further apart. His hole is pink and quivering, the sight of it alone enough to make my cock ache where it hangs heavy between my legs. But this is about Devon right now. About claiming him in every way possible.

I lean in close, breathing in his scent, and swipe my tongue over the furled little ring of muscle.

Devon cries out, hands flying down to clutch at my head again. I spear my tongue into him, reveling in the helpless, broken sounds spilling from his lips. His sounds are as intoxicating as his taste. I could spend hours exploring every inch of him with every sense.

By the time I pull back, his hole is glistening wet and fluttering. He is trembling again, sweat beading his brow, looking utterly wrecked.

I slide a finger into him up to the second knuckle. My tongue has left him just wet and relaxed enough to make it possible. So hot and tight, clenching around me. I stroke and tease, searching for that spot inside him to light him up like the sun.

When I brush over his prostate, he screams. His back bows, cock jerking against his belly. I take his cock back into my mouth, not about to let him escape every bit of pleasure I can wring from his tense body. He makes it a few more crooks of my finger before he spirals over the edge, and this time, I let him, eager to taste the sweet nectar of his arousal on my tongue. I work

my finger deeper, rubbing firmly over that spot to milk every last drop from him until he's whimpering with oversensitivity.

Only then do I let his softening cock slip out of my mouth, cleaning him with broad strokes of my tongue. Devon's limbs are floppy as he lays limp against the sheets, chest heaving as he struggles to catch his breath.

He's mine now.

I crawl up his body and take his mouth in a searing kiss, knowing he can taste himself on my lips—the reminder of what I've done to him, of what's still to come.

When I pull back, Devon's eyes are hazy with lust and something more. Something I decide I'll never get tired of seeing on that beautiful face of his.

"Are you ready to take me, omega?" I ask, my voice sounding gruffer than I intended. When I see my reflection in those eyes, I realize I look at least as feral.

He nods shakily, his breath faltering on his full, pink lips. I growl low, leaning in to kiss him once more and push my tongue past his lips, wanting to taste him further. He moans into the kiss, opening wider to allow my tongue to plunder the hollow of his mouth.

I run my hand down his body, savoring the feel of those smooth, silken planes until I reach the patch of curls between his legs and glide down over his oversensitive cock. He's still slightly wet from my tongue and his own come dripping down between his cheeks, but not nearly enough for what I'm going to do to him, so I reach into the bedside drawer for a glass bottle of lubricant and spread a generous amount over my fingers.

I slide two fingers into his only slightly loosened hole now, stretching him for what's to come. Devon whimpers at the intrusion, hands fisting in the sheets. I bend to kiss along his jaw, down his throat.

"You're doing so well," I murmur against his skin. My free hand finds his, twining our fingers together and pinning his hand above his head. I squeeze gently, a reminder that he's mine to do with as I please.

Devon shudders, caught between arousal and apprehension. I nuzzle against his cheek, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Relax, omega. I won't harm you."

It's a promise I'm determined to keep, even as I spread my fingers inside him, testing his limits. He's so small and fragile beneath me, it would be all too easy to break him if I lost control. But Devon is mine now, and I'll be damned if I don't keep him safe.

By the time I work a third finger into his hole, he's writhing against the sheets, torn between pain and pleasure. I crook my fingers, searching for that spot inside him, and when I brush over it, his back bows off the bed with a hoarse cry.

My cock jerks at the sound, swollen and aching with the need to bury itself in Devon's tight heat. I grit my teeth against the urge to slam into him, to rut like the beast I am until I've filled him with my seed.

No. I will go slow. I will be gentle.

For him, I will be everything I'm not.

"You're so tight," I growl. "This isn't going to be easy. For either of us. Not until your omega nature awakens."

A fresh flush spreads across his cheeks and he looks away from me. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

"For what?" I ask, unable to hide my confusion.

"For not being ready for you," he says softly. "For not being a proper omega."

I frown, letting the insecurity behind his words sink in. Comfort is not something that comes easily to me, and yet, I find myself wanting to try. For him.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him, because I need him to understand that first and foremost. "It'll happen in time, and in the meantime, I'll just have to be gentle."

I mean to reassure him, but even though he nods in response, I can tell from the look in his eyes my words have fallen short of that. Failure is not something I'm accustomed to, but it seems when it comes to my omega, there is a first time for everything.

I suppress my frustration and focus on the task at hand and continue to prepare him until I decide it's time to try entering him. As I pull my fingers out and replace them with the head of my cock, pushing his legs open wider, he brings a hand to his lips as if he's trying to cover as much of his face as possible.

I press forward slowly, gritting my teeth against the vice-like grip of his body. So tight. Too tight. "This isn't going to work," I announce after a few minutes of trying to breach his tightly clenched hole.

"I'm sorry," Devon mumbles shakily.

I shake my head. "Don't be. Roll onto your front. On your hands and knees."

He does as told, flipping onto his hands and knees, presenting himself to me even though he's trembling. I run a hand down the length of his spine, feeling the knobs of bone beneath warm skin. "Relax," I murmur, leaning in to press a kiss to the base of his neck as I fold myself over him from behind. I kiss my way down his spine, and while the tender touch seems to be helping him relax at first, he grows tense again as I spread the perfect globes of his ass apart with my hands.

My tongue finds the tight pucker of his hole, laving over it in broad strokes since that seemed to help before, and I'm eager for another chance to taste him anyway. He gasps, tensing for a moment before relaxing into the sensation. I work the muscle looser and looser, rewarded by the sounds spilling from his lips and the way his hips rock back into my face as if he can't help the slight movements.

By the time I pull away, he's dripping wet and open. I replace my tongue with two fingers, scissoring them to stretch him further. "You're doing well," I praise, and that seems to relax him even more than my tongue did.

Interesting.

He shudders, inner walls trembling around my fingers. I withdraw my hand and grip his hips, guiding my cock to his entrance once more. He tenses in anticipation, but I go slow, breaching him inch by inch. A strangled cry escapes him when I finally breach him, even if it's just the very tip, and I freeze.

"Do you want me to stop?"

He shakes his head, panting. "No, just... just give me a minute. Please."

I nod, leaning over him and wrapping my arms around his chest, nuzzling the side of his neck. I can feel his heart racing, can smell the heady scent of arousal and fear mingling together.

At this rate, I won't even be able to knot him, but I decide it doesn't matter. This feels more important.

Making him safe.

Comfortable.

Pleasuring him.

After a few moments, he shifts experimentally, rocking back onto my cock. I groan, fighting the urge to thrust as he continues undulating against me, taking me deeper. I manage to resist, letting him move at his pace. By the time he stills, his smaller body flush against me, I'm nearly halfway sheathed inside his tight heat.

"You're doing good," I praise again, trailing kisses along his shoulder. He whimpers in response, trembling in my arms. I give another gentle thrust, sliding in a bit further.

So tight. So perfect.

Mine.

I begin to rock my hips into him, but it soon becomes clear his ass won't take me an inch deeper. Not tonight. I settle for pulling out a bit, then driving back into my former position, and that finally gives some relief to my tortured cock. Even if I could sheath myself inside him fully, though, he'd never be able to take my knot. There's a good chance that's going to

have to wait until he goes into heat for the first time, but I decide to just focus on the time at hand at the risk of losing my damn mind.

I reach around, grasping his cock and stroking in time with my thrusts. He whimpers, squirming in my arms, clearly overwhelmed by the sensations. I nuzzle into his neck, licking and nipping at his scent gland to help relax him. He's an omega in that regard, at least, and he responds in kind, his body quaking with trembles and moans as my tongue teases that sensitive spot.

The spot I had every intention of marking tonight.

But if just touching him and pleasuring him has unleashed this foreign side of my nature, what will that awaken in us both?

I decide he's not ready for it. And neither am I, no matter how much my inner beast rages in protest.

"Shh, it's all right," I soothe. "Just relax for me. I'm not going any deeper."

He nods, melting back against me, and I reward him with a sharp nip to his neck. He cries out, tightening around my cock, and I groan. Fuck, he feels incredible. I stroke him faster, my thrusts becoming more urgent, more possessive. I'm nearly mindless with the need to claim him, to mark him irrevocably as mine.

"Constantine," he pants, his voice soft and intimate with a neediness that makes me want to possess him even more selfishly. To give him all he can take and then some, because it still won't be enough for me. "I..."

I feel his cock twitch in my grasp, and his hips push against me, begging for more even though I can tell it aches when he moves like that. Knowing he's so desperate for pleasure that he doesn't care if it hurts him is enough to drive me mad with desire.

"Good boy," I snarl, sounding far more animal than man. To my relief, he doesn't panic and try to escape. If anything, the movements of his body beneath mine become even more desperate in response.

"You like that?" I realize aloud, driving into him a little harder. "You like being told you're a good boy?"

I can feel the embarrassment radiating off him, but it's nothing compared to his arousal. "I... yes," he grits out, his nails digging into the sheets.

A smirk tugs at my lips.

The knowledge is heady, intoxicating. I stroke him faster, my hips pistoning into his at a more punishing pace now. "Then be a good boy. Come for your alpha," I growl. "Show me how much you want my seed inside you, little omega."

He cries out again, wordless and desperate, writhing beneath me. I can feel his pleasure building. I can scent it on the air between us. His cock pulses in my grip and then he's coming, shaking apart beneath me, his come spilling over my fingers in thick, milky spurts.

The sight and scent of his release is enough to tip me over the edge. I drive into him as deep as I dare, spilling inside him with a snarl. The pleasure is blinding, nearly painful in its intensity. For a long moment I can do nothing but remain still inside him, my heart pounding, senses overwhelmed by the feel and scent of him.

When at last I find the presence of mind to move, I ease out of him carefully. He whimpers at the loss and I bend to kiss him, a gesture so tender it surprises even me.

"Shh," I soothe again, gathering him close against me. "I have you. You're safe."

And I know at that moment, I will do anything to make those words true. I will fight and kill and destroy anything and anyone in my path who threatens that. And I will do things that frighten me so much more. Things that make me vulnerable in ways I had promised myself I never would be again. In ways I've never been before.

He relaxes into my embrace with a soft, contented sigh, already drifting off to sleep.

I hold him through the night, torn between satisfaction at having claimed him so thoroughly and fear over how deeply I'm coming to care for this fragile human omega who was meant to be nothing more than a conquest.

This omega who is not only every bit as dangerous as I feared, but far more than I could have imagined.

As I lay awake, a single question haunts me.

What have I done?



To be continued...

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