This Time Next Year

by Oplopanax

Summary

Tyson woke very early the next morning conscious firstly of having slept in Mrs. MacKinnon’s bed, which meant he had put she and Mr. MacKinnon out, and secondly, that Nate was kneeling beside the bed looking at him. “Shhh,” Nate said. “Everyone’s still asleep. I just came in to see how you were. Ma wouldn’t tell me nothing last night - are you sick?”

He looked so kind and concerned, the early light limning his face, that Tyson felt tears threatening again. “I’m going to have a baby,” he whispered. For a brief moment Nate’s face lit up and Tyson had a sudden urge to touch him, to feel that happiness against the palm of his hand. Then Nate’s face fell again.

“You’re going to have to get married,” he whispered back, and Tyson nodded, throat tight.

Tyson Barrie, one of the very rare Omegas born only into ultra observant religious communities, finds himself pregnant after the death of his husband Gabriel Landeskog and to survive in 1870s Denver, must marry Nathan MacKinnon.
This is an @450,000-200,000 word novel. The whole thing is written but not edited - I will be posting one long chapter per month, one 5000 word chapter per week.

Just FYI Gabe dies right up front and is constrained by the culture he lives in - he does a lot of terrible things that are culturally accepted by he and Tyson.

There's an awful lot of religion in here. The community Tyson comes from is close in structure (though not belief), to some North American Mennonite colonies. The language Tyson speaks is Plautdietsch. (Low German, kinda). The quotes are all from the King James Bible.
Chapter 1

Tyson bent over and picked up a clod of turf and at the pastor’s nod, threw it in atop the coffin holding his husband’s body. The pastor began to speak again and Tyson looked over at the crowd facing him across the grave. Everything had a hazy, dreamlike quality, although that might have been partially because it was the first time he had stood for more than a few minutes since the fever from the ague cleared. His eyes wandered over the men in the crowd, many of them staring back at him avidly. Only a few had the decency to look away when he caught them staring, and none could muster a convincing facade of sorrow. Why should they feel sorry? They had hardly known Alpha Landeskog, and none of them had ever spoken to Tyson. Most of them, he assumed, had come out to catch their first glimpse of the widowed Omega, untouchable and alone, his crown of braids marking him as separate and pristine.

Mrs. MacKinnon had come and brought her two oldest, her daughter Sarah and her son Nathan to the funeral, which was a kind thought. Mrs. MacKinnon, the local midwife who also tended the sick for a bit of pay in the absence of a doctor in Denver City, had been the one to find him insensible on the floor of their small farmhouse, and Alpha Landeskog dead in the backroom. She had nursed him back to life, organized the funeral, stripped the house bare of material that could carry disease, and then sat beside his bed for the last two days, alternately feeding him up and trying to convince him to return home. When that didn’t work, exasperated she switched to plain talk, laying out the new circumstances of his life as an Omega alone on the frontier - she had explained in some detail that he would not make it through the winter alone, that no one, man, woman or Omega could survive a Colorado winter alone and unprepared, and that he would have to marry if he was set on persisting in his folly of staying on the homestead claim his husband had made. He believed her, he just couldn’t work up the energy to care.

He remembered her talking about her children, and looked over at her son. Nathan was seventeen, newly returned from an apprenticeship, rawboned and spotty, but grown now to a man’s size. Grown larger than most men’s size, really, but he still had the awkwardness of the boy. Dully, Tyson turned his gaze away from them and stared at the earth covering the casket in front of him as the pastor droned on. There was nothing the pastor could say that was of use to Tyson now - had the Lord addressed navigating a second rushed marriage while violently unwilling?

He was going to have to marry one of them, though the very thought turned his stomach, and the pickings were mighty slim. How many, he wondered, knew about his father’s very recent reversal of fortune that had driven him and his husband out of the comfort and safety of their Observant religious community in Victoria and landed them here in this one horse town of a few thousand adventurers? How many cared? A young single Omega with no get, widowed or no, was a vanishingly rare thing out here where every man was an Alpha but Omegas occurred only once in a hundred thousand births. He didn’t necessarily need to be wealthy to be a prize anymore. Still, no matter how highly he was sought after, that didn’t alter the fact that he was currently gazing over the sum total of the marriageable men of Denver, and there weren’t enough of them to put on a respectable square dance.

He wondered how long it would be before the first offers would be made; it was Midsummers Day exactly, early in the season for deaths from the ague, although perhaps their shallow well had been contaminated, and everyone present knew Tyson could not make it through the winter alone. No single man could. Those who did not come with a spouse came with a brother or two to share the load. To leave the farm and winter with a family would be to lose the farm by the terms of the grant of sale from the state, even if Tyson had the coin to pay for it. It was distasteful to remarry so quickly, but the rules out here were different - all niceties flew by the side in the effort to survive.
The pastor finished droning on and reached for Tyson’s arm to lead him away - Tyson skittered sideways to avoid his contaminating touch. “Omegas don’t touch, pastor,” he said politely, but internally he added *you idiot* to the sentence. Did no one out here have any religious understanding? Tyson thought darkly. They were all uncouth unbelievers, the people he had known as the English his whole life, others the Observant community kept physical and socially separate from to preserve their traditional ways, and Tyson, as a cherished Omega in the Community, kept the most separate of all. Until Mrs. MacKinnon cared for him in his illness, he had never been touched by one of the English before - and it was only with the death of his husband that he was forced to first speak to a non Observant Alpha. Not a one of them understood Bodily Integrity and the absolute prohibition against physical contact with an Alpha other than his husband or how completely unimaginable remarrying was to an Omega. Religious concerns aside, how could he undertake to choose one of them without an Alpha to guide his decision? Still, decency meant he would have a little breathing room, a few months at least before he had to parlay with these strange, rough outsiders.

He watched numbly as they departed, and then let Mrs. MacKinnon usher him back into the cabin, her children waiting politely outside on the porch. “You sure you’re well enough to be left alone?” she asked, and he nodded. He wasn’t sure at all but he *was* certain he had no more coin to pay her with for her attendance, and no more reserves to tolerate outsiders. Looking doubtful, she left and Tyson sank to the floor where he stood, finally able to cry unobserved. He had no plan for the future, no knowledge of how to run a farm, no idea of what to do next; he had never spent a night alone in his life. He cried himself to sleep and spent the night on the floor, hoping the Lord would provide.

The next morning, Tyson stepped out onto the porch and there was Nathan MacKinnon.

“Oh, hello,” said Nathan, shifting from foot to foot at the bottom of the steps, as if he’d been hoping to get away unseen. “My Ma sent me with some eggs and milk - I put them in the dairy. And here” - he held out a small paper sack and Tyson took it automatically. “It’s sugar buns.”

Tyson looked down into the sack. It was indeed sugar buns, and a good weight of them too, a baker’s dozen, made with the finest milled flour he had seen out here, and lavishly sprinkled with sugar on top. “Thank you,” he said. “Why have you brought me sugar buns?”

“Oh, well,” Nathan said. “My Ma sent me, she said she knew your chickens wouldn’t be laying now, and your cow would be dry, so she thought the eggs and milk might be handy while you’re convalescent. And she mentioned what a fancy you have for desserts and such, and said I was to take a batch along to you.”

Nathan was right about both the animals and the sweet tooth, but Tyson didn’t know anyone had noticed. Alpha Landeskog had managed to feed the animals the first two days of the fever but then both he and Tyson had been first unable to leave the house, and then unable to walk at all. When Tyson rose from the day long faint on the kitchen floor where he had fallen trying to get water for both of them, the cow was dry, several chickens dead, and Alpha. Alpha Landeskog was also dead. Tyson could feel the tears coming, and he sat down abruptly on the top step.

“Oh, geez,” said Nathan. “Oh, geez. I didn’t mean to make you cry, Mr. Landeskog, I’m sorry, can I get you something, a cup of water, or a hankie, or a bit of chicken, or oh! I know the very thing!” He ran off, leaving Tyson to sit on the step, unable to stop crying. Nathan came racing back, clutching a tin cup of tepid water, and a shrivelled apple from last year’s store which he had pulled from his own saddlebags. “Alright now,” said Nathan, bustling around. He had clearly inherited his mother’s organizing ways. “You sit there, and you drink this up,” - he put the cup in Tyson’s right hand - “and you eat that apple, and you’ll soon be better.”
“Thank you,” said Tyson, still snivelling and feeling a fool, but the water did help, a little. He felt such an idiot, but he was still pathetically weak from the ague, and it kept taking him like this when he didn’t expect it. They hadn’t lived in this house long, but the few months had been enough that everywhere he looked he was reminded of Alpha Landeskog. Shamefully, it wasn’t that he was wracked with despair for a lost love but Gabe had been his Alpha and husband, and the only familiar thing in this vast new territory, and then, suddenly, he was gone. Tyson suspected that a large part of his sorrow was terror. He was all alone now, and his position was unsustainable, and there was no hope of going back, and he still felt so endlessly weak, and tired, and sick.

Nathan was hovering anxiously above him, tentatively reaching out to pat his shoulder but then withdrawing before contact as was right. Tyson assumed Nathan had never met an Orthodox Omega before and knew only he couldn’t touch him without grave offense. "There, there,” Nathan said, patting the air directly above Tyson’s shoulder. “There now. Are you any better? Has it passed?”

Nathan was not yet an Alpha, still shy of his eighteenth birthday that would mark him officially an adult able to claim the title, and it showed Tyson thought. Still, he was a sweet boy and he was trying. “Yes, thank you,” Tyson said, drinking some water. “That was very kind. I’m sorry to be so silly.”

“Oh no, Mr. Landeskog, I’m sorry to upset you,” Nathan said. “My mother sent me with some provisions for the week, just to set you up while you’re convalescent, and she’ll be sorry to hear I distressed you in any way.”

“Oh God,” Tyson said, jolted out of politeness by shame. “Don’t tell her, for Chrissakes. It’s bad enough having one person see me flopping about boo-hooing like a baby, I don’t need the tale spread further.”

“Oh,” Nathan said, sounding uncertain. “Well, of course I won’t if you don’t want me to, but I am sorry, all the same, to have upset you. I’m very sorry for your loss, Mr. Landeskog.”

“Thank you,” Tyson said roughly. “He was... he was a good man, and very far from home. I’m sorry he was alone at the end.” And to his shame, Tyson burst into tears again.

“Oh geez,” said Nathan.

“I’m sorry,” said Tyson. “Sorry, sorry, I’m just going to go inside to get settled.“ Still crying, he rose to escape from this awful, embarrassing situation, made it to his feet, and felt a rushing sensation as his vision tunneled. He paused, swaying.

“Mr. Landeskog?” Nathan said. “Are you alright?” He was standing in front of Tyson, hands outstretched, but unable to actually touch him. A stray big hands passed through Tyson’s mind, he drew breath to reply and the black covered his vision completely.

He woke in bed with Nathan MacKinnon peering anxiously at him from a kitchen chair by his side. “Hello Mr. Landeskog. Are you feeling any better?” he asked. Tyson tried to sit up, but felt queasy and flopped back down. “Can I help?” said Nathan, reaching for him but not making contact. Tyson waved him away, and Nathan watched anxiously as Tyson heaved himself up into a sitting position. “D’you need a bucket?” Nathan asked. “No? Alright - let’s try a bit of water. Hold on, I’ll just get it.” There was a lot of banging outside the room, and then Nathan called out “One minute,” and finally reappeared at the doorway with the tin teapot and a mug. “I got tea,” he said unnecessarily. “My Ma thought you were well enough to be left alone, but I guess not. How you feeling?”
“Like an idiot.” Tyson said. “Like the heroine of a particularly florid novel.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” said Nathan. “Never read them. But have some tea, I thought it would be better than water, and I’ve put quite a lot of sugar in for shock. That’s what my mother does, anyway, and it seems to help.”

“Thank you,” said Tyson, taking the mug. The tea was hideously sweet, but he sipped at it.

“Oh, wait,” Nathan said, getting up again. “I forgot.” More banging ensued, (it sounded like he was belabouring the biscuit tin) and he returned with a plate holding several dry white crackers and a roughly cut up apple. “Can I get you anything else to eat?” he said. “You need building up. I carried you to bed and I think you must weigh closer to half what I do than not, even though you’re only half a head shorter than me.”

“You picked me up?” Tyson said, appalled. What a liberty. No man’s hands had been on him since he was thirteen but his husband’s.

“Well, of course I did Mr. Landeskog,” Nathan said. “What was I supposed to do, let you fall down the stairs? I know you’ve got some funny ideas up North, but here we’re a deal more free and easy, especially as it regards preventing Omegas from tumbling down the steps. I hope you won’t take it amiss.”

Tyson didn’t know what to say. He did take it amiss, seriously amiss. Shamefully, this boy had had his hands all over Tyson, touching presumably much of his legs and upper body if Nathan had had to pick him up and carry him into the house. But even from the little contact he had had with the townspeople, he could tell Nathan was right, they did not follow the rigid conventions of his very traditional upbringing among the wealthy. And Alpha Landeskog, of course, had been rather more than traditional, Alpha was fully Orthodox and had expected Tyson to adhere to his beliefs. They had lived out here in this little house, observing the rules Alpha Landeskog had grown up with, an Orthodox community of two, never allowing any of the unclean English to enter the house or even see Tyson. Alpha Landeskog would have been horrified and enraged to discover Tyson had been sullied by the touch of a non believer; there would have been an extensive period of penance required and Tyson couldn’t say he was sorry there was no one remaining to force him through it. Still, Tyson thought. The rules were different here, although he wasn’t so clear on exactly what they were, and this baby Alpha obviously hadn’t meant any harm. Rather the opposite, thought Tyson, looking down at the tin plate with the rapidly yellowing apple on it. He couldn’t think of a time an Alpha had served him food, no matter how clumsily prepared. It was an Omega’s duty to serve, not be served.

“What would the other Mr. Landeskog have done if an Omega fainted in front of him?” asked Nathan.

“Let them fall then rolled them in a blanket and pulled the blanket into the house.” said Tyson absently. “Or called me. Why?”

“Oh,” said Nathan. “I never thought of that.”

“It’s alright,” said Tyson, picking up the plate and presenting it to Nathan on two flat hands with a slightly lowered head. Better safe than sorry, he thought. This boy wasn’t technically an Alpha yet but he was very close to it and very large. Best to treat him formally until he knew what the expectations were. “Alpha, will you eat?”

“What?” said Nathan. “No, it’s for you.”
“You’re supposed to say ‘Omega, eat,’” Tyson explained, and Nathan made a face.

“I don’t know those fancy rules, Mr. Landeskog, and I don’t think I care to learn them. There hasn’t been an Omega in Denver since I’ve been born, and I reckon we’re all just in the way of treating each other the same out here.”

Tyson considered the plate, and shrugged. There didn’t seem to be any point in arguing and he hadn’t had an apple since last year. He picked up a piece and bit in, and even though it was shriveled from the store room, it was still sweet and delicious. He looked over and Nathan was watching him.

“What?” Tyson mumbled through a full mouth.

“You’re the first person to call me Alpha,” Nathan said. “I like it.”

“Don’t get too het up,” said Tyson. “You’re not very good at it.” He would never have spoken to an Alpha older than him, or his Alpha like that, but, Tyson considered, this boy had no authority over him, in addition to having just explicitly rejected formal service. Being several years older than him, Tyson stood as an older brother to him.

Nathan just smirked. “I’m plenty good at it,” he said. “I kept you from getting hurt, and I can mow an acre faster than any man in Denver, set a bone, break trail better than most, and last winter I took down an elk alone. What more is there?”

“That’s quite a resume,” said Tyson. “But that’s not what an Alpha is. An Alpha is the head of the household, and his authority rests in his wisdom. An Omega shelters beneath him and follows.”

Nathan looked unconvinced and Tyson added, “Wives, submit yourself unto your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. That’s Ephesians 22, you know. Can’t argue with that.”

Nathan pulled a disbelieving face. “You’re not a girl,” he said, although he didn’t sound entirely certain.

Tyson assumed the only other thing Nathan knew about him, aside from the prohibition against touch, was that Omegas could have babies. “Wives in the Bible means Omegas too,” he said, letting a little condescension creep in. “Everyone knows that.”

“Right, sure,” said Nathan in tones that suggested he was humouring an invalid. “Anyway, bossing their wives around is not what Alphas are for. Don’t the wives object none?”

Had this boy never heard of scripture, Tyson wondered. “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection,” he quoted. “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” Nathan looked at him blankly.

“Around here,” he said, “Alphas are for doing the heavy lifting and working in harness with their wives to care for the family. You got to pull together if you want to get anywhere out here. I don’t think just submitting silently is going to do the job; that seems like a very bad idea.”

“An Omega obeys sweetly and is decorative,” said Tyson, parroting his parents.

“Well, begging your pardon, Mr. Landeskog,” Nathan said, “but you don’t seem like you’re very good at being an Omega. You’re kind of argumentative.”

“No,” Tyson said, suddenly conscious of how he was talking to an Alpha and ashamed at his behaviour. “I’m not, that’s true. Sorry Alpha.” Even this raw boy could see he was useless at the gentle submission that befitted an Omega, although he didn’t know how Nathan could tell as Tyson hadn’t even got started up chatting, which was his besetting sin against keeping sweet.
“I like it,” said Nathan, surprising Tyson. “I like you just fine.”

He stood up to leave the room and Tyson was gripped with the fear that he was leaving and he would be all alone again. “Alpha, you going?” he asked, and Nate turned to him and smiled.

“I’m going to get you something more to eat,” he said, “and then I’m going to go fetch my Ma out here again, because you clearly aren’t well yet if you’re still fainting all over the place. That alright with you?”

Tyson was hardly going to argue with this Alpha who unexpectedly had not yet grown fed up with his contrary nature, so he just nodded and bowed his head submissively. “Thank you Alpha,” he said, looking at his hands. “Thank you for your guidance.” Nathan made a snorting noise but said no more and left the room. Tyson leaned back against the wall behind the bed, exhausted by navigating a conversation with an unfamiliar Alpha.

Nathan popped back in the room and handed off a plate. “Bread and cheese alright with you?” he asked. “That’s all I got in my bags right now that’s quick, since you don’t have the stove going.” Tyson nodded again, still uncertain about an Alpha waiting on him. Back home if you could stand you were expected to serve, not be served.

“Though you’re plenty decorative “ Nathan went on, continuing his earlier train of thought before heading back out. “Don’t know how much you care for my opinion, but there it is anyway.” He tapped the door frame with a large hand. “If you’re in an obeying frame of mind, I’d suggest you stay in bed til I’m back with my Ma in a couple hours.”

“Yes, Alpha,” said Tyson, relieved to have someone else making the decisions if only for a moment.

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“Well,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, leaning back from where she had been poking and prodding at Tyson, “as far as I can tell you’re just starved and worn down and weak, but no worse than that. You look like you been hungry all winter, not just when you were sick. That right?”

“Guess so,” Tyson mumbled. He wasn’t going to tell this stranger that Alpha Landeskog had known nothing about farming or what provisions to bring for the first year on their homestead, and that they had barely scraped through the winter, but there was no point in lying either since she had made him take his shirt off and seen his ribs. She’d seen some of the old bruises on his back, too, and her hand had passed over them gently but mercifully she had said nothing.

“Alright, Mr. Landeskog, sit down and we’ll have a talk about what you’re going to do,” she said. “You need to listen to me this time. I don’t give you good odds lasting through the winter alone. Having been here the last few days, it’s plain to see you can’t manage at all. There’s no one in Denver can afford to take you on as a charity - we’d have you, but we’re full up and I mean that, no exaggeration. Since the fire we’ve got eight children in two beds and one room for us all. Anyway, if you leave the farm, you’ll lose the land, according to the terms of grant. Harvest is going to begin next month, and if you don’t make harvest, you won’t make it through the winter. And you won’t make harvest, as things stand now. You got the coin to hire farmhands?”

“No,” Tyson said. She could see he didn’t. His ribs told her that, and the bare interior of the cabin. There had been some quarrel between Alpha Landeskog and his family right after their marriage - as an Omega Tyson had never been privy to the details - and they had been cut off from the Landeskog wealth abruptly. Alpha had spent what little money he had of his own on this cabin and land sight unseen, and they had headed out to the western frontier, as poor as any other adventurers looking for a new life.
“That’s what I thought,” said Mrs. MacKinnon. “So as I see it, you’ll need to pick a fellow and marry him in the next two weeks to be ready for harvest.”

"In two weeks?" Tyson shrilled. “I can’t possibly,” he said, horrified. "I just can’t. I … I’d have to get permission from my father, and Alpha Landeskog’s father, and the Community Board, at the very least, and it wouldn’t even be possible to get a letter to them never mind back in that time. And I’m Orthodox, or at least Alpha Landeskog was. My family is High Observant. They’d never give permission to marry so quick, or marry a man who wasn’t Observant.”

“You’ll starve," said Mrs. MacKinnon bluntly. "You’ll starve and die, or maybe freeze. And when winter comes, and you realise you’re dying, there’ll be no way to get in or out for weeks, and no help will come. We’ve had it happen before, to men far more able than you. Last year the Berniers died, all three of them. Do you hear me boy? There’s no time for letter writing out here, or religious qualms. You marry or you die."

“I can’t,” Tyson said. “I can’t remarry.” Now that it came down to the reality of the thing, he panicked at the thought. He’d thought he’d had several months to come to terms with the idea, not next week.

“Then go back, you stupid boy,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Go back to your people.”

“I,” Tyson said, “I don’t . . . I don’t belong to my father anymore. I’d have to go to the Landeskogs in Sweden, and I don’t even know how . . . and the fare. The fare would be impossible.” This was all true enough but Tyson, and he suspected Mrs. MacKinnon, knew there were other, more compelling reasons to avoid Sweden.

Mrs. MacKinnon sighed and nudged the bowl of soup and dumplings she had made towards Tyson. “Don’t have a spasm,” she said. “I knew you were going to say that and I got a suggestion. I’ve spoken with my husband and we’ve decided we could send you Nate for the season, long enough to get the harvest in and get you through the winter. But we’ll need a trade for the loss of his labour, and that would be all your hay.”

“Done,” said Tyson. He didn’t need to think about it, he would take any option that meant he didn’t have to remarry. “And thank you, missus, I’ll take good care of him.”

“Well,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, “I don’t know that you’re in a state to care for anyone right now. Reckon it’ll be Nate taking care of you, but he won’t mind. But tell me - you can’t remarry or touch another Alpha, but you can allow our Nate to live in the house with you?”

"It’s acceptable,” Tyson said, “so long as we maintain Bodily Integrity. He’s very young, he’s not anywhere near what we would consider a marriageable state. Back home, a widowed Omega would have the youngest family Alpha to speak for him, so Nathan would fill that role. Nathan would be my Little Brother.”

“Would your husband have allowed him to live in the house?” she asked shrewdly, and Tyson scowled at her.

“No,” he admitted.

“We never saw you at all,” Mrs. MacKinnon pointed out. “I only found you last week because I came by the house on the way back from Johnson’s as I wanted to see you since you were such a mystery. You been here nine months and no one’s caught sight of you before. I get the idea Omegas are kept away from anyone outside your religion.”
"We’re cloistered, yes," Tyson said, since this was common knowledge and he didn’t see why he should deny it. “But that’s for our own protection. Alpha Landeskog didn’t do nothing wrong."

"Who said he did?" Mrs. MacKinnon asked mildly.

She’d seen those bruises on his back, Tyson remembered, and hurried on to change the subject. “We’re violating no religious law, and anything else is just custom, so I don’t see why not. A Little Brother can live in a home with a widower, that’s certainly better than marrying a non-believer.” He crossed his arms and tried to look decisive but it didn’t seem to have much impact.

Mrs. MacKinnon just looked wryly amused. "I’ve got to tell you, Nate does not look at you like you’re his older brother. Nature made young Alphas for only two purposes, Mr. Landeskog, and the second one is work, if you take my meaning. But our Nate is a good boy, I wouldn’t send him if I had any doubts. Now you need to understand, this is only a stopgap. I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’re going to have to remarry. The most we’re buying you here is an extra year, so you need to be aware the bachelor Alphas will be calling on you, and they’ll be coming soon. You’ll need the goodwill of the neighbors to get the harvest in, even with Nate, so you’d be well advised not to burn any bridges. Receive them civilly and tell them straight out you are not open to courting now, but that it may change after the winter."

Nathan arrived early in the afternoon of the next day, carrying two large bags of supplies, a bed roll, and his saddle bags. He tapped on the door and headed into the front room where he dumped the lot onto the table.

“Afternoon, Mr. Landeskog,” he said. “Hope you’re keeping well.”

“Thank you for coming, Alpha MacKinnon,” said Tyson. It won’t be so bad, he thought. This boy was no threat, surely. Better than remarrying.

“Call me Nate,” Nathan said. “I’m glad to be here. I been sleeping in the hayloft at home, and there ain’t no damn hay in there. Plenty of rats though, a gracious plenty of rats. The floor of the kitchen here’s going to be a sight better.”

“You’re going to sleep on the floor?” Tyson said, aghast. He’d never entertained the possibility.

“It’s the floor or share the bed with you,” Nate said. “You wanna share the bed? Cause I’ll gladly share the bed. Before the hayloft I shared with my three little brothers and unless you piss yourself regular I reckon you’re an improvement.”

“I could sleep on the floor, and you take the bed,” Tyson said tentatively.

Nate gave Tyson a condescending look. “I ain’t making a convalescent Omega sleep on the damn floor,” he said. “I’ll be fine. Once we get the first of the hay I’ll make myself a pallet.” He kicked the bedroll under the table and straightened up from the bag he’d left on the table.

“Now,” he said, eyeing Tyson. “Let’s talk important things. One, Mr. Duchene came by last night and read me chapter and verse on the subject of Orthodoxy and Bodily Integrity, not that I asked, and what I take from that is that you aren’t to be touched, not no way, not no how, and that I need to apologize for picking you up last week when you fainted so I want to say I’m sorry, and I won’t do that again.”

“Oh,” said Tyson, taken aback at an apology from an Alpha. “That’s alright.”
Nate went on. “Mr. Duchene also said you think I’m your little brother?”

“Not my little brother, but a Little Brother,” Tyson explained. “It’s a title, like Uncle, or Father. It means you’re taking on the role of the youngest Alpha in my family. Back home he’d move in with me to speak for me and guide me if my husband died, or had to be gone for a spell.”

“So you have to do what I say?” Nate asked, grinning, and Tyson flared up.

“You’re not my Alpha,” he snapped, but then shrank back, afraid of Nate’s response to his sass.

“What would it mean if I was?” Nate asked.

“If you were my Alpha, you’d have charge of me and I’d have to serve you formally,” Tyson told him, cringing at the thought.

Nate must have seen that on his face because he grimaced and reached one hand out towards Tyson in an aborted gesture of comfort. “You think you do, don’t you? Well, never mind. How about I talk for you if you need me to, but you go ahead and guide yourself?”

This was a better, though terrifyingly unfamiliar, deal than Tyson had ever considered possible and he leapt on it. This boy didn’t understand anything about proper Alpha/Omega relationships and Tyson didn’t see why he should enlighten him. Anyway, he comforted himself, there was a certain amount of leeway within the Little Brother relationship, unlike marriage. He had spoken quite freely to Jordie Benn while he was Jamie’s Little Brother, even though he was an Alpha.

“Yes,” he said, trying to sound decisive. “Let’s do that.”

“Now my Ma says to tell you I’m awful bossy, so you just tell me when you don’t like my plan, and we can argue it out,” Nate added, and Tyson goggled at him. Agreeing to not receive constant direction about every tiny action of daily life was one thing, but proposing that Tyson argue with an Alpha, even one so young, was another.

“Oh, well,” he said, falling back on a familiar response that any Alpha within the Community would have understood meant he had no intention at all of following Nate’s suggestion, but Nate missed the subtleties entirely.

“Right!” he said, clapping his hands. “Now second, Mr. Duchene says you’re mostly a girl?”

"I’m not a girl," Tyson said, scowling. He winced when he realised his commitment to not arguing with Nate was paper thin. “Sorry Alpha,” he said, looking down. “I meant to say, I’m Bund, not a girl, if it pleases you.” He couldn’t believe he was having to discuss this with Nate. Everything he had heard about the apostasy of the English was apparently true.

“I don’t know if it pleases me,” Nate said. “What’s Bund?”

“What’s Bund?” Tyson said in disbelief. “Bund is the Rääjenboagen, the covenant the Lord made with Noah, and every living creature, for perpetual generations. What do you think I am? Can’t you see my crown? I’m Bund, I’m Omega, both male and female just like the Lord, his covenant that the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

“I see you’ve got an awful lot of hair up in braids, if that’s what you mean,” Nate said carefully. “And I know that marks you as Omega, and I know Omegas can have babies. But are you telling me you actually think you were chosen by God to be a physical copy of him?”

“Of them, yes,” Tyson said, fed up. “Can’t you read the Bible? So God created man in his own
Nate glanced involuntarily at Tyson’s crotch and then away quickly, and the unspoken question lingered between them. Tyson didn’t feel any need at all to assuage Nate’s curiosity. “I’m Omega,” he said again. “I’m not a girl, and I’m not a boy.”

“All right then,” Nate said, still in the tones of a man humouring a lunatic. “You want me to call you Mr or Mrs, or what?”

“Snackst du Platt?” Tyson asked hopefully.

“What?” said Nate, looking puzzled.

“Nevermind,” Tyson said. It had been a stupid question and he’d used the informal du which would have earned him a smack from any Alpha that had understood it. Of course no one out here spoke Plattdeutsch or could understand the correct terms to address him with. “In English you would say he because the English Bible uses he for the Lord.”

“Well,” Nate said, “if you say so, Mr. Landeskog, but Mr. Duchene says Omegas only do girl work, cooking and raising the babies and so on. That right?”

“Well, yes,” Tyson said. Surely that was obvious? He knew Nate would never have met an Omega before, only heard of them, but surely he knew that much. “That’s all an Omega can do,” Tyson added. “We’re called on to serve gracefully within the home, as the Blessings of the Community.”

“Right,” Nate said, still sounding doubtful. “If you say so. I’m not sure there’s a lot of call for graceful service out here in the West. You know anything about farming?”

“No,” Tyson answered. “Of course not. Why would I? I’m from the Victoria Observant Kolonie. We sell cheese, barrels and horses; but Omegas don’t get involved in that. An Omega is beautiful, and pure, and brings Blessings on the Community.”

"OK, but what does that mean in terms of actual work?" Nate wanted to know.

"We marry old rich men and have one or two babies," Tyson told him. "Omegas come from Omegas, and it’s our job to keep the Bund alive." Evidently nothing but plain speaking was going to get through to Nate.

"Oh great, that’s real useful," Nate said, collapsing into the chair as if exhausted by the job he was realising he’d undertaken, "How the hell did you end up out here? Was Mr. Landeskog rich, because he sure wasn’t old?"

"Gabe’s family was rich, yes, and he would have been if we had stayed, but they cut him off when he came out here." Tyson didn’t want to explain to Nathan the complex series of political and social maneuverings that had seen him married to the Landeskog scion. He had thought he’d wanted it, at the time.

“Can you ride, or manage the dairy, or chop wood?”

“No?” Tyson said. “Why would I know how to do that?”

“What can you do then?” Nate asked.

Tyson was feeling annoyed at having his uselessness so clearly exposed. “I can cook,” he said stiffly, “fancy and plain. I can bake. I can sew, but I hate it, I can launder, plain only. I can read and write,
English and German, better than most and I can do accounts as well as a clerk of 5 years. I can play the piano, draw, and talk nicely about local events in the paper. I can arrange hair and serve tea formally.” He wasn’t going to add that his primary skills, beauty and absolutely unassailable purity, had already been exploited. That wasn’t what Nate was interested in and he liked it that way.

Nate looked horrified and unwillingly interested. “What’s fancy laundry?” he asked, leaning forward on his elbows.

Tyson was nonplussed. “Like cuffs, and ruffs and such,” he explained. “Starching and tongs.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Nate said. “Like Sir Francis Drake?”

“I guess so,” Tyson said, shrugging, but Nate had already moved on to another point.

“And that’s it?” Nate asked. “No farm chores, no animal husbandry?”

“I can feed the chickens,” Tyson offered. After much pleading, Alpha Landeskog had agreed to this and Tyson had jealously guarded this right as it got him out of the house daily. In time he had hoped to persuade Alpha to let him keep the egg money.

Nate was visibly searching for something positive to say. Finally, he spoke. “Well, that’s better than nothing. Did you say accounts?” Nate asked and Tyson nodded. “You can do accounts, not just adding up?”

Tyson shrugged and answered, “Sure.”

“They never taught you to do anything useful, but you can do accounts like a clerk?” Nate pressed and Tyson shrugged again.

“I was always going to marry a wealthy man,” he explained. “It’s useful in running a large house and makes you of better use to your husband in his business. My father wanted me to learn so I did.” He considered further. “It was accounts or fancy laundry,” he added. “Anyone would have chosen accounts.”

Nate made a ‘fair enough’ face and rose from his seat. “Well,” he said, “we might find a use for that yet. In the meantime getting in the hay is the first step - at least the other Mr. Landeskog got it planted in time. Then we can get you familiar enough with the animals that you can run the house properly, and if you lend a hand at the field work you’ll have some idea of how to direct the hired men if you can afford them. How’s that sound to you?”

“Sounds good, Alpha, thank you,” Tyson said very genuinely. He’d never been offered a fairer deal, and even though Nate had something of the condescending older brother about him, never been spoken to more civilly either. He couldn’t believe Nate had just blithely suggested Tyson go about freely among other Alphas, doing field work. More shocking than that, Nate seemed to be assuming that Tyson would keep ownership of the farm, managing it himself once he knew enough. It occured to Tyson not only did Nate not know anything about Omegas, he also had no interest in enforcing Observant rules on him. Clearly he was prepared to allow Tyson to do anything he wanted. Whatever these new rules out here on the frontier were, Tyson resolved to grab at them with both hands. He wasn’t going back to Sweden to be the Landeskog’s pitied, widowed auntie, lingering in the family with no money or say, his only role to serve sweetly, or worse, to serve as a broodmare.

Nate interrupted his reverie. “Now you said you know how to cook?”

“Do I know how to cook?” Tyson scoffed. “I think I do, I’ve done nothing else since I was fourteen.”
“Well, thanks be for that, because I can’t cook squat. I’m happy enough to teach you to turn your hand to whatever you need to learn, but that I can’t help you with,” Nathan said.

“Well,” Tyson said, “I wouldn’t expect you to, a very young man like yourself, still living at home.”

Nate looked at Tyson askance. “Yeah, I ain’t that young, Mr. Landeskog.”

“You’re not an Alpha yet,” Tyson pointed out. As large and confident as this boy was, he was still only seventeen, not legally an adult, and it was important to Tyson that Nate understand that. Tyson was the adult here, and as such, there was no call on him to obey Nate.

“I’ll be eighteen first of September,” Nathan told him. “Near enough as makes no difference.

"Well," Tyson said, "That’s still very young. You’re my Little Brother, not a full grown man."

“I’m your Alpha, for the harvest and winter seasons,” Nate said evenly. “My Ma and Pa sent me here as a favour to you, and I’m more than a hired man - that hay isn’t going to come near to covering what my wages are worth, and I reckon you should understand that. No one of sense thought leaving an Omega out here alone was a good plan, and one of the jobs I got is standing between you and the rest of the town. I stand in the place of your husband, just by being here; I accepted responsibility for you when I agreed to come. Now I don’t undertake to demand all his rights, but I do undertake to meet his responsibilities to you, and that’s not a job a boy does. I’m a real Alpha.”

Tyson didn’t know what to say to that so he said nothing. He didn’t care for all this talk of husbands, and rights.

"Good enough," Nate said, and clapped his hands. "Now Ma sent some provisions to get us started, and there’s a pie in here. I vote we make a start on that."

"Oh, pie," said Tyson longingly. He hadn’t had pie since they were preparing to entrain for Denver. He vaguely remembered a time when he had been so fussy that he rejected pie with fruit in it, but that time was long gone.

"Yeah, I thought so," said Nate, smug. He withdrew it from the bag and put it on the table with a flourish. "You got a knife here?"

"I’ve got better than that," said Tyson. "I’ve got a pie slice. It was a wedding present."

"What the hell is a pie slice?" asked Nate as Tyson rummaged through the box of kitchen supplies. "Oh my God," he said when Tyson found it. "Is that just for pie? It don’t do nothing else? Fancy."

"It’s a bit pointless out here, I suppose," said Tyson, a little embarrassed at having such a frivolous item while Nate proposed to sleep on the floor.

"No, no," said Nate kindly. "We got a pie here, we got a pie slice, what could be more to the point? Give it over and I’ll serve."

Tyson handed it to him, bemused. In his experience Alphas did not serve, but if Nate wanted to serve the pie he wasn’t going to argue. Nate took the slice, looked at it for a moment and shrugged, turning it on it’s side and using it to cut the pie in half. He levered an entire half pie out with the slice, holding it precariously balanced. “Doesn’t really seem big enough, does it?” he said. "Hold your hands out."

Tyson, accustomed to obeying, did and was surprised when Nate placed the half pie into them. Nate
turned back and lifted up the other half into his own free hand, and carefully put the pie slice down in the empty tin. He toasted Tyson with the pie half and applied himself to it. "Ohhh, apple," he moaned. "The King of pies. You not eating yours?"

"No, I’m eating it," said Tyson, protective. “I’m eating it. You always eat half a pie at a time?"

"Not if my mother’s watching," said Nate frankly. "You sure you eating it? Because I don’t see you eating it."

"I’m eating it!" said Tyson. "You can’t have it."

"Alright, alright" said Nate. "Don’t get your knickers in a twist. I ain’t attacked an Omega yet for pie, no need to worry."

Nate didn’t seem to find anything strange about it, and so Tyson shrugged. Why not eat half a pie with his hands? He took a tentative bite and it was delicious. "You never even met an Omega before me," he said, enjoying the argument. It reminded him of his sister, or time spent with the Benn brothers back home.

“That’s true," said Nate, smiling. "And I did attack my older sister once over cake, so I reckon your risk is just rising and rising. Better eat fast."

"Did you really attack your sister?" Tyson asked.

"I did," Nate said, "but I was five at the time, so I guess I can be forgiven. Though she’s still got the fork scar to this day, so I don’t know how forgiving she feels on the matter." He grinned and mimed trying to stab someone with a fork, a ridiculous gesture, but as he did it he also growled, a full throated, real Alpha growl, and Tyson shivered.

"You sound like a real Alpha," he said.

Nate smirked and looked him straight in the eye. He suddenly seemed bigger and more intimidating. "I am a real Alpha, Mr. Landeskog," he said. "I’d be happy to prove that any time, that’s why they sent me. Now finish up, I’m going to teach you how to kill a chicken."

*#

It appeared the freedoms Nate promised came with some costs. Over the next few weeks, Tyson learned to clean out a chicken coop, start his own fire, feed, clean and milk the cows, slop the pigs, and plant the kitchen garden.

On the other hand, although Tyson had not realised how much animal manure would be involved in his new liberties, Nate had virtually no expectations regarding how Tyson kept the house. In fact, he was a willing participant in labour saving ventures, suggesting early on they stop using the tablecloth and napkins, cease changing shirts daily as Tyson was accustomed to and stop ironing entirely. The reduction in the laundry was phenomenal. Tyson had half his Monday and all Tuesday free. Tyson knew his mother, and probably Nate’s as well, would suggest they were disgusting slovens but he didn’t care. All Nate cared about were large meals, well cooked, twice a day and although it was staggering how much Nate could get through in a sitting, he didn’t care what Tyson made so long as there was plenty of it. The first time Tyson burnt the dinner, still somewhat unfamiliar with the vagaries of cooking on a western stove meant for heating, Nate took one bite and then paused. Tyson cringed, waiting for his anger. "Hand slipped a mite," Nate said mildly, and stoically plowed through the rest of the meal. He had no more to say than that, no recriminations, no punishment, no suggestion that Tyson apologize for failing in his duties.
Tyson could feel himself unfolding over the few weeks, opening like a flower under the freedom of Nate’s rule and his robust, bracing way of expecting Tyson to work alongside him. He was eager to go further afield; he learned to chop wood, tack up the team, and ride a horse.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” Nate said when Tyson balked at riding a horse astride like a man. “I mean I heard about fancy ladies in England riding side saddle, but I don’t even know where we would get one. Why you got to be so fussy?” This was a common refrain. Every suggestion Tyson made of complying with Omega rules was knocked aside with a condescending allegation of fussiness. Everything Nate thought was stupid was fussy. “Anyway,” Nate went on, “you already been married, so what’s the problem? Get on the damn horse.” Tyson got on the damn horse. Who was he to argue with Alpha, especially when Nate’s inclinations were in line with his own.

Gradually he grew stronger, the hard work outside building his appetite. He slept deeply at night for the first time in a year. When the day’s work was done and supper eaten, they would sit outside on the porch; sometimes Nate brought him tea in an enormous tin mug. It was nice to be outside, Tyson thought, good to feel the sun beating down on him, good to smell the summer flowers carried on the wind without worrying about how long he had before Alpha came to tell him to get back inside. Often he caught Nate looking at him, but it never occurred to him to look back. Nate had never been less than respectful of his Bodily Integrity and Tyson was accustomed to being stared at. This was the best bargain he had ever made, thought Tyson.

Then the suitors began to come.

When Mr. Johnson rode up to the house, Nate was in the barn caring for the horses which meant Tyson had to get the visitor settled on the porch and trudge out to the barn himself to get hold of Nate so they could all go in the house, properly chaperoned. "Alpha!" he called, "Nate! I need you in the house to chaperone!"

"Alpha!" he called, "Nate! I need you in the house to chaperone!" He really didn’t know why this enormous stranger had troubled to appear at all, but here he was and Tyson would have to deal with him. He still found talking to English Alphas unfamiliar and worrying and he wanted Nate with him both for propriety and comfort.

"You have got to be kidding me," said Nate, popping up from where he was working on Molly’s forefoot. "I’m supposed to sit there and watch?"

"You’re supposed to sit there and chaperone!"

"Godalmighty, Mr. Landeskog," Nate groaned. "You can see I’m busy here, just don’t do nothing stupid and I’ll leave you to it."

"I can’t go in the house alone," hissed Tyson, scandalized. "What will he think?"

“He won’t think nothing of it,” Nate said dismissively. “Don’t be so fussy - just go on and talk to him and leave me to the horses.”

"You know what I mean," said Tyson. "I can’t be alone with him!" Nate just shrugged and continued picking stones from Molly’s hooves. "He brought store bought cookies," Tyson offered as enticement.

"Humph. What kind?" said Nate, leaning over Molly’s broad back.

"Garibaldi biscuits."

"Nope,” Nate said, ducking back down behind the horse again. “Not worth it, you just carry on without me. Anyone shows up with ginger biscuits or those little almond ones, you come and get
me.”

Tyson stomped his foot but Nate just laughed at him. Tyson turned around to leave, muttering. “I don’t know what Mr. Johnson’s going to think,” he said, and Nate popped back up abruptly.

“Whoa now,” Nate said, emerging from behind Molly and stripping off his leather apron. “Did you say EJ Johnson is out there? Tall man with blond hair, no teeth?”

“Yes?” Tyson said, unsure why it mattered.

“Jesus Christ, he’s got some nerve,” Nate said, scandalized. “He’s got an understanding with Marnie! What’s he doing out there?”

“I don’t know,” said Tyson, but Nate was already storming out of the barn, moving awful fast. Tyson trailed behind him to see what he was going to do. Apparently what he was going to do was stomp up the porch steps and stand menacingly in front of where Mr. Johnson was seated. When Tyson caught up to them, puffing, they were locked in a glare. Mr. Johnson broke the glare to smile unconvincingly at Tyson. It really displayed his lack of teeth to disadvantage, Tyson thought.

“Don’t you smirk at him,” Nate said warningly, and Mr. Johnson moved to a flat out leer. Tyson inched to one side so he was largely behind Nate.

“EJ, what the hell are you doing here?” Nate demanded. Mr. Johnson stretched pointedly and examined his absolutely filthy fingernails.

“EJ, what the hell are you doing here?” Nate demanded. Mr. Johnson stretched pointedly and examined his absolutely filthy fingernails.

“I come to court,” he said smugly, nodding at Tyson. Tyson cringed. Ewww.

“With what? Your natural charm? I know you ain’t got no money, you were just bitching last week about how you was going to have to wait at least another three years to marry Marnie. She know you’re here?” Mr. Johnson scowled and Nate went on, “She’s going to kick your ass.” Mr. Johnson looked murderous.

“He’s not going court with someone like you,” Nate snarled, and EJ leapt to his feet.

“Well he don’t like you,” Nate yelled back, clearly nettled by the mention of his age. He settled his feet on the porch and sort of puffed himself up, arms still crossed over his chest, growling slightly. Tyson shuffled further to the side, away from both of them. He could hear Mr. Johnson’s growl building.

“He can court if he likes; you going to tell him he can’t? You planning to keep him for yourself?”

“He’s his own thing,” Nate said, “but I’m his dog, and if he points me at you I’ll gladly go.”

Mr. Johnson lunged at him. They fell to the ground grappling, evenly matched, Mr. Johnson taller and heavier than Nate, but Nate quicker and stronger. They were well paired, Tyson thought; like he and Jamie had been when they were still boys and allowed to wrestle and play fight, but with two blond heads instead of dark.

Tyson picked up the Garibaldi biscuits and unwrapped them. He ate a couple contemplatively while
watching the two of them wrestle. Mr. Johnson’s horse leaned over the porch railing looking interested so Tyson fed him a couple biscuits too and then patted the blaze on his forehead. Nathan and Mr. Johnson finally wrestled themselves out and laid in the grass, sweating and blowing, and Tyson leaned over the porch and looked down at them “You two want supper?” he asked, and Nate sat up and pointed a finger at Mr. Johnson.

“That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” he said to Mr. Johnson. “You want a free supper cooked by someone who knows what they’re doing!” Mr. Johnson looked caught out, but he didn’t deny it, just swatted at Nate’s finger, hard, and they were off again, wrestling more seriously in the grass. Tyson ate the rest of the biscuits, watching, one arm slung companionably over the horses neck. The horse was also watching them wrestle but he didn’t seem to have a favourite. Tyson hoped Nate won; he found himself all in on Nate’s side, somehow, these days. Nate finally pinned Mr. Johnson and after a few tries to escape, he subsided and tapped out.

“I think he likes Crosscheck better than you, anyway,” Nate said, nodding at where Tyson and the horse were happily cozied up. The Garibaldi biscuits seemed to have won the horse’s good favour.

“Everyone likes that horse better than me,” Mr. Johnson said, betraying no resentment about it. “He’s a quality horse, as fine as you’ll find in Colorado.”

“That’s so,” Nate agreed, and peace was restored. “How’s that shoe I did last month holding up?”

Nate’s suspicions proved correct - Tyson didn’t know what courting consisted of among the English, but Mr. Johnson didn’t direct a word to him throughout supper except to grunt “More beans” once, and he doubted that kind of behaviour drew the girls anywhere in the world.

“Good chaperoning,” Tyson said that night, as they prepared for bed. From his perspective it was, anyway, and Nate laughed.

Tyson came in to start the water for oats and froze, startled. Nate was still sleeping, spread out naked on the blanket in the corner. He was deeply asleep, limbs flung out and mouth slightly open, and his thing was hard. Tyson had never seen an aroused Alpha naked before. He and Gabe had had a traditional marriage, and they mated traditionally, so he had never seen Gabe naked. He peeked at Nate and then looked away quickly. He peeked again, checking to see if Nate was waking. Nate slept on, snoring lightly so Tyson, conscious he shouldn’t but too curious to look away, stood and stared. Nate, he was interested to see, was long and thick all over. No wonder it had hurt, he thought; look at it. Despite having been married, he still wasn’t very clear on the difference in construction of an adult Alpha and his own body, and he was interested to have this chance to look without censure. Nate’s cock was much larger than his, which he assumed was natural; he knew Alphas had a knot, and he moved down by Nate’s feet to get a different angle. From there he could see Nate’s sack and at the base of his cock, the larger ring that must be his knot. Nate's body hair was darker than Gabe’s, his entire torso tanned, with a sharp cut off where the waist of his pants must fall. His legs were much hairier than Tyson had imagined, and this, rather than his cock, became the focus of Tyson’s interest.

Like all Omegas, Tyson had very little body hair. He had seen his own father’s forearms on a few occasions, he had seen Gabe shirtless once, and Tyson wondered what it would be like to touch Nate, to feel the coarse hair on his legs, to circle his cock with his hand and see if it felt the same as his. He must have made a noise, because Nate woke with a start and sat up. He rumbled at Ty, the Alpha noise of contentment, and scratched his chest. “Morning,” he said. "What you up to there Mr. Landeskog?"
"Aaaah, porridge." said Tyson, flustered. "Making porridge."

Nate wasn’t buying it. "'I can’t touch your hair, but you’re allowed to stand there and look at me naked?" he said.

"There’s no shame in nudity." Tyson said. "I beg your pardon if I offended you, but there’s no proscription on the body, simply on the violation of Integrity via touch."

"Well, that sounds like bullshit to me," said Nate sceptically. "But it don’t bother me none if it don’t bother you. Look your fill, it’s nothing to me. I gotta piss, you want to come watch that?"

Tyson giggled and turned back to the pot. He had been taught that Alphas, once aroused, were dangerous and insatiable until they were provided relief, but Nate didn’t seem to be in the grip of an uncontrolled passion. He simply headed out the door, naked. Tyson surreptitiously looked at his bum as he went.

Nate came back in wearing only his pants, half undone and perilously low on his hips. Unselfconsciously he reached into the open fly to adjust himself.

"Where you been keeping your pants?" said Tyson, unable to suppress himself. "Why were they outside? They’re going to be full of spiders and such if you keep them out there."

"Oh, spiders" said Nate loftily. "Spiders ain’t nothing to me. I don’t pay them no mind, if they’re in my pants they’d better look out for themselves."

"That’s not what you said when you found that one in your boot last week," said Tyson. Nate never seemed to mind when he contradicted him - in fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

"That was an unusually large spider," said Nate with dignity. "It would have taken anyone like that."

"You threw the boot out the door and spooked the horse," Tyson pointed out.

Nate started to laugh. "I know!" he said. "It was huge, and it was peering up at me with all it’s horrible spider eyes, and I thought what if it jumped up at me out of there, and I panicked."

"And then you made me go get the boot," said Tyson, also laughing. He made a jumping spider motion with his hand at Nate and Nate yelped and dodged. Tyson continued, stopping just before contact every time, and they laughed, trading spider swipes and insults.

"I think we better stop," Nate said regretfully, and Tyson paused to look at him. Nate adjusted himself in his pants again, where it was evident he’d stiffened back up.

"Guess so," said Tyson a little sadly, and they just held each other’s gazes for a long minute.

Finally, Nate looked away first. "Left my pants outside as they smelt rather strong of manure," he said. "Don’t know they’re any improved."

"Maybe that’s just you," said Tyson, and they were back on their usual footing. There was a jingle of horses tack from outside and Nate spread his legs out underneath the table.

“Might be Pa,” he said hopefully. “He said he’d come by today or tomorrow to bring some seed. Maybe he’s brought cream and we can put it on the porridge.” Tyson stepped out onto the porch and it wasn’t Nate’s Pa, but a unfamiliar Alpha standing at the foot of the stairs.

"Hello," he said in accented English and tipped his hat politely. "You Orthodox or Observant?"
"Observant," said Tyson, puzzled the man knew to ask.

"Great, great," the man said and started climbed up the porch steps.

"High Observant," said Tyson, and the man hopped backwards back down in one jump.

"Why you not say in the first place?" he said from the ground. "I don’t want to offend."

"How did you know to ask?" said Tyson. "No one here knows the difference."

"I grew up in Yakutz,” the man said. “Large community of Yakutzi Orthodox there."

"You Orthodox?" Tyson asked suspiciously. If so, this man shouldn’t even be here - he should have made advances through the Community.

"Pfff, no! “ the stranger said. “We are Muslim Tartars, but I know the rules, of course."

"Of course," Tyson echoed, and Nate appeared on the porch behind him.

“Hello, Yakupov,” Nate said pleasantly, but Alpha Yakupov scowled at him.

“Why aren’t you dressed, MacKinnon?” he demanded. “You can’t just walk around naked in front of the Rääjenboagen."

“Reckon I can do whatever Mr. Landeskog finds acceptable,” Nate said mildly, but Alpha Yakupov just turned his glare on Tyson.

“Bund,” he said, and Tyson crumpled. He hurried off to find one of Nate’s shirts, and when he returned, Nate and Alpha Yakupov were in a face off, standing with their arms crossed, glaring at each other.

“You courting?” Nate asked, totally ignoring the shirt Tyson was trying to give him.

“I come,” Alpha Yakupov said, irritated, “to make sure the Rääjenboagen is safe. And I’m not convinced of that.”

“He’s fine,” Nate said dismissively, but Yakupov ignored him.

“You only need to ask,” he said to Tyson. “My mother lives with me, and we still remember the Rääjenboagen. You ever need anything, you send for us.” He nodded to Tyson, remounted and rode away without another word to Nate, who stood on the porch watching him until he was long gone.

He was nice, Tyson thought.

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"Do all Omegas faint as much as you?" asked Nate, staying seated on the porch railing but leaning away from where Tyson was bent over it, vomiting.

"Of course not," said Tyson crossly, wiping his mouth. "And anyway, I’ve hardly fainted at all, just the couple times getting up too quick. It’s the chucking I could do without. Do you think your Ma would have anything to say? It just doesn’t seem to go away since the ague."

"I heard of fancy ladies fainting from wearing stays too tight, but that ain’t the problem," Nate mused. "Do you think the well’s bad?"
"No," said Tyson, "Don’t be stupid. If it was, then you’d be sick too."

"Not if you just got a weak city boy stomach."

"Haven’t got hardly any stomach at all," said Tyson. "Everything seems to set me off. Threw up yesterday when the pig yawned at me."

“Do you think,” Nate said hesitantly, “Do you think it could be that you’re, ahhh …” he trailed off.

“What?” said Tyson.

“I don’t know how it takes Omegas, but sometimes the girls, when they’re, you know … My cousin Annie, she fainted once.” Nate looked uncomfortable but determined. “And then of course, a few months later, there was a little stranger.”

"A little stranger?" said Tyson, puzzled.

"A baby!" said Nate, exasperated and having exhausted his very limited tact. "She had a baby."

"A baby," said Tyson wonderingly. "Oh, no, I doubt that."

"Well, it’s not so out of the possible, is it, being as you were married."

"We’d only been married a few months."

"Still," said Nate. "Could be? I don’t know if you have courses like a girl, so as to tell if they stopped, or?"

"No," said Tyson, blushing. "No courses. I ain’t a girl."

"How do you know if you’re going to have a baby then?" said Nate interestedly.

Tyson looked at him like he was thick. "You get all fat and then the baby comes out, same as a girl."

Nate looked back at Tyson like he was thick. "That ain’t exactly how it works," he said condescendingly.

"How would you know?" said Tyson in the same tone. "You an expert?” and they left it there.
“Alright,” Nate said, after supper while they were still seated at the table. “The boys’ll be here tomorrow to do our farm, then the Johnsons, and Calvert’s. We’re going to start with ours, so we’ll need breakfast, dinner and supper for twenty men and barley water for the day. Can you do that?”

“No,” said Tyson, feeling panicked.

“I thought you’d say that,” said Nate, grinning, “So I asked my Ma while I was out there. Let’s see what she’s got here.” He pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and examined it. “OK, she says Johnny cake and syrup for breakfast, use the dutch oven, with bacon, that’s easy, right?” He looked up at Tyson, who nodded. He could do Johnny cake, and it doubled easily. “And then for dinner,” Nate went on, “she says to do boiled cod with potatoes and cabbage and salt pork gravy, twice as much as you think, biscuits, cold pork, pickles, dried apple pie, blueberry pie. You can do that, you’ve made all of that before for me, and your pies are very good, so you’re alright there. And for supper, she says,” - he paused and turned the paper around, peering at it. “Nate laugh?” he said dubiously, “What?”

Tyson snatched the piece of paper away from him and looked at it. “It says Not Light,” he pointed out. “She means don’t do a light supper, I suppose.” He read on and said, “Yeah, she wants me to do a full boiled dinner with cabbage, potato, swede, carrot, also biscuits again, vinegar and sliced cucumber, beet hash, radishes and butter, stewed rhubarb, custard. Whew.”

“Can you do it?” asked Nate. “I can help a bit, that’s going to be a lot of work.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Tyson said, still reading the list. “She’s written "Coffee - ONLY breakfast, ask Nate." Ask you what?”

“Oh, right,” Nate said, standing up and reaching for his saddlebags. “Ma sent along her extra dutch oven - she says she wants that back as soon as you can - and Arbuckle coffee, still sealed. She says to give them some real coffee for breakfast and they’ll forgive any mistake you make after that. “

“That’s very kind,” Tyson said, looking at the small sack of coffee beans. It was virtually impossible to get unadulterated coffee - most of it was mixed with red beans, or grains toasted almost burnt, to extend it. He knew an unopened bag of Arbuckles was a prized and expensive item. “You tell her thank you very much for me, that’s a real help.”

“You think you can manage all that?” Nate asked again.

“Yeah, I can do it,” said Tyson, feeling on much firmer ground with a menu in hand. He flipped the paper over and his heart sank. “Why does this side say ‘Day Two’ on it?” he asked.

“Well we gotta come back to get it loaded in the loft after it dries a day, don’t we?” Nate said, making it sound perfectly reasonable.

“Guess so,” Tyson said, unenthused.

Nate collapsed back into his chair and picked at the remnants of supper. “You’ll get a taste of what the wives usually make on the day between, when you come to help with the hay at the Calverts,” he said, shoveling the last of the pattypan squash into his mouth.

“Can I?” asked Tyson, excited. Even a visit to the next farm over had a thrilling novelty. “That won’t seem strange to them?”
“Nah, the girls always help, there’s never enough men,” Nate said. “They won’t think nothing of it, though some might stare at you. We’ll get you stacking the hay, that’s what the girls and the young boys do.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Tyson said, and to express his gratitude brought over the zucker pie he’d made for dessert.

“What’s this?” Nate said, poking distrustfully at it with a spoon. “Is it some weird Observant pie?” Despite his suspicion he took a minute amount on the end of his spoon and tried it, staring at Tyson judgmentally the whole time. “Oh, Christ,” Nate said as the flavour hit him. “It’s like custard pie but even better.”

Tyson ignored the blasphemy and sat down smugly at the table with his own portion of pie - he’d learned to pre portion the pies to avoid arguments - and set to with a good will.

Finished, Nate sat back and looked mournful as Tyson slowed down not even halfway finished. He just couldn’t seem to stomach much food these days. “Here,” he said, shoving over the remainder to Nate and his sad puppy dog eyes, “Have the rest.”

“I will, thank you,” said Nate, pulling it to him. He continued through his mouthful of pie, “Now what are we going to do about a hat for you? You’ll need a hat for the sun but I don’t see how you’ll get it on over all that hair. I suppose you could wear a bonnet like the girls.”

“I’m not a - “ Tyson started, and Nate finished, “ - girl. You’re an Omega. I know.”

“Well, I’m not wearing a bonnet,” Tyson said, ”and I can’t wear a head covering anyway, it’s not scriptural.”

“Is it scriptural to faint and fall out of the hay loft?” Nate asked. “Because that’s what you’re going to do if you don’t wear a damned hat. The sun’s mighty strong.”

“Fine,” Tyson said, “I’ll wear a damned hat, then. But it’s going to be a hat, not a bonnet. I’ll just bring the crown down low to my nape and I can get a hat on that way.”

“Good enough,” Nate approved.

* 

Tyson got up before dawn to start the johnny cake and then headed out to the porch to fix his hair. There was no light outside the lantern glow, but he didn’t really need to see as he’d done it a hundred times, taking apart the crown he slept in and rebraiding so he only has two large braids that will fit under the hat. He closed his eyes and listened to the bird’s morning calls as he braided. When he finished and opened his eyes again he found he had an audience of four unfamiliar men staring at him from the base of the stairs.

Startled, he squeaked and flailed, knocking over the lantern, and then panicked, scrambled to right it again as two of the men charge up the stairs to help. Tyson threw himself backwards when one of them, a tall dark haired man, reached for his shoulder. He ended up lying on his back on the porch, nightgown rucked up around his thighs, feeling like a fool, when Nate pulled open the door and leaned out buck naked to ask, “What the hell you doing out here, bud?”

The men burst into laughter, one of them calling “What you doing, buddy?” to Nate.

“Shut up, you,” Nate said, and turned to Tyson. “You alright?” he asked, and when Tyson nodded, Nate made a rude gesture at the visitors and returned inside to retrieve his pants. Tyson climbed back
to his feet, avoiding meeting anyone’s eyes. Mercifully the need to start the coffee distracted him and once he was fully dressed, he found it easier to ignore the stares.

“OK boys,” Nate said over breakfast. “Listen up. Mr Landeskog,” - he pointed at Tyson - “has kindly made you today’s good food, and is going to be helping with the hay today and at the Johnson’s and Calvert’s so he can learn how. So what you all need to remember is that Mr. Landeskog is an Omega and Omegas don’t touch. So don’t touch him.” Nate nodded for emphasis. He seemed to feel this was enough explanation, but the men started buzzing among themselves.

“What’s he going to do if we do touch him, cry?” a tall dark haired boy with a mean face asked.

“Hit you with whatever he’s holding, I hope,” said Nate. “And he’s going to be holding a pitchfork much of the day, so good luck to you, Tom. Why you asking? You planning to start some shit?”

“No,” said Tom, sullen, but Tyson made note to be wary of him. Tyson wasn’t an absolute naif - back in Victoria they had been allowed to go out, to buy a book or some candy or even just take a walk in town, if accompanied by an Alpha chaperone. The sight of two or three Omegas walking together had tended to draw followers, and occasionally one of the rash young English men would try to engage them in chat or even grab at one of them. This boy seemed much the same type.

Luckily, when he and Nate headed out to start the work, there was a familiar, respectful face waiting on the porch.

“Hello, Omega Landeskog!” Nail called cheerily when he saw him, waving. “How you keeping? My mother sends you some chak-chak, you want to try?”

“Hello, Mr. Yakupov,” Tyson said quietly, glad to see a somewhat familiar face. “What’s chak-chak?”

Nail waved him over and opened up a large tin, which contained a mound of tiny dough balls stuck together.

“Is pastry with honey,” he said, “Try!”

“You sucking up to the Omega, Yakupov?” someone asked, but Nail just stuck his tongue out, good humour unimpaired.

“I am being a good guest,” he said, “not like you ignorant bastards. Whoops, sorry Omega,” he added. Nail put the tin down next to Tyson and took one step back, folding his arms behind his back and telegraphing his intention to avoid touching Tyson, which Tyson deeply appreciated. Sometimes it was exhausting being surrounded by people with no idea how to act, even Nate. He reached into the tin and pried one of the little balls off the mound and popped it in his mouth.

“That’s delicious!” he said, pleased. “Thank your mother for me, will you, Alpha?”

Nate’s head snapped around, and he met Tyson’s eyes, looking faintly hurt and then turned to glare at Nail, who just looked smugly back at him. Tyson had no idea what he’d done wrong, but clearly Nate wasn’t pleased. Alpha Yakupov nodded politely and headed down off the porch to the wagons.

“You like him?” Nate asked. “You called him Alpha, and you never call no one Alpha but me, usually.”

"Are you jealous?" said Tyson incredulously.

“You only call people you like Alpha, I notice,” “Nate said. “You called him Alpha Yakupov when
he was here before, you talk about your friend Jamie’s brother, you say Alpha Benn, everybody else gets a Mister, but you just call me plain Alpha, and I assumed…”

“You assumed what?” said Tyson.

“I thought it meant I was your particular Alpha, but now you called Yakupov Alpha.”

“But you’re my Little Brother,” said Tyson, bewildered. “Of course you’re my particular Alpha, not Mr. Yakupov. You’re… you’re just fine. You’re fine all the way down to your bones, anyone could see that, and you deserve the name Alpha, so I use it sometimes, but for me, for an Omega, it’s using your first name that has meaning. You’re my Little Brother so I call you Nate, but I wouldn’t call anyone else by their first name. Maybe if I got married again, if he invited me to, I might call my husband by his name, but that would be it.”

“Oh,” said Nate, digesting this. “Well, alright, then.” Good humour restored, he bounded down the stairs to the wagons. “Hey, Yakupov!” he yelled. “Go fuck yourself!”

Tyson headed down the stairs rolling his eyes and went to join the group of men standing by the wagons, preparing to head out. The tall boy, Tom, was there talking.

“Where’s the Omega?” Tom asked, and Nate nodded his head towards Tyson where he had halted at the foot of the stairs. Tom didn’t realise, or maybe didn’t care, that Tyson could hear him and continued. “He ain’t so pretty,” Tom said. “Not so special, is he? Kinda scrawny.”

“Careful,” Nate said calmly from where he was leaning against the wagon, but Tom went on.

“He got a pussy or what?” he asked. “You fuck him yet?” and Nate looked over at him.

“What you say?” Nate asked, straightening up.

“Tom,” said EJ warningly.

A wiser man, Tyson thought, would have shut up then but Tom doubled down. “So you haven’t fucked him yet? He doesn’t look like he’d put up much of a fight.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Nate asked as he took two large strides over to Tom and punched him in the face.

Tom was taller than Nate and heavier - he didn’t go down, though he looked a little shook.

“Tom,” EJ said again, reaching for his arm, but Tom shook him off and swung back at Nate.

“Sorry,” EJ said to Tyson. “You’re going to want to step back a bit, oh, no, nevermind,” as Nate ducked in under Tom's guard and got off one good uppercut. Tom folded down in slow motion, ending up on his knees, not entirely out but not fully there either, and the fight ended.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Nate said fiercely, and looked at EJ. “You watch him,” Nate said. “We need him for the haying but no one wants to listen to that talk.”

It didn’t help, which Tyson could have told Nate it wouldn’t, in fact it made it worse. Now Tom was pissed off and handsy, and he took to following Tyson around whenever he moved away from the group. Tyson could feel his eyes on him all the time, watching for his chance and he found it when Tyson headed back into the house to get his hat. As Tyson passed through the door, he saw someone else there inside, standing at the back of the room by the stove.

“Come here,” Tom said to Tyson, and Tyson did, accustomed to following orders. He didn’t like the
look in Tom’s eye though, so he stayed a good arm’s length away from him. “You gonna do what I tell you?” Tom asked, using his Alpha Voice, which was so far beyond the pale when talking to a stranger Tyson just stared at him, flabbergasted. “Come closer,” Tom said, and although his Alpha voice was weak, it was still an Alpha voice and everything else faded away from Tyson - the other men talking on the far side of the door out of sight, the sound of the horses, the smell of the coffee.

He went, and just as Tom was reaching for him, a much stronger Alpha Voice rapped out. “Omega! Come here now!” so Tyson turned and walked quickly back out to the porch where Nail was waiting for him. Tom slunk off.

“Kneel, Omega,” Nail ordered, still using the Voice, but in a kind tone, and Tyson did, vaguely conscious of a sense of relief. “OK,” the Voice said, “you’re done. Thank you for your obedience, Omega.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Tyson said coming back to himself, having received the verbal signal his task was complete.

Alpha Yakupov squatted down so they were level. “I’m sorry about using the Voice on you,” he said, “but I saw you through the window and I couldn’t get there before he touched you. You want me to talk to MacKinnon?”

Tyson shook his head. He didn’t want to cause trouble. “I’ll just stay away from him,” he said.

Nail didn’t look convinced. “He was definitely going to grab you,” he said, straightening up. “What if his next order was to be quiet?”

“Don’t tell anyone, Alpha, please,” Tyson said, still kneeling. He didn’t want anymore fighting, and he was embarrassed at how quickly he went under.

“I really don’t think this is safe for you,” Nail said. “MacKinnon’s doing his best but he don’t understand about Omegas at all and him letting you just walk around with us like this… you know this ain’t right.”

“Alpha, please,” Tyson said, desperate. “Please, please, don’t tell anyone. Alpha, I was married to Gustav Landeskog’s grandson. If I go back, they’ll send me to him in Sweden. I cannot go back, Alpha.”

“Yeah, alright,” Nail said, “I’ve heard about the Swedish Orthodox. But can’t you just marry someone else and stay here?”

Tyson looked at him in mute dismay. He had no words to tell a strange Alpha that he still woke in the night sometimes, tensed for the feel of Gabe reaching for him. “I,” he said, and faltered.

“I think I understand,” Nail said gently, and Tyson doubted that he did, but Nail went on. “But someone’s got to run the farm.”

Tyson looked down. “Alpha MacKinnon says he can teach me to do it.”

“But you’re unmarried,” Nail said. “Does MacKinnon understand you’re always going to be vulnerable to the Voice without your own Alpha?”

“No,” Tyson whispered.

“And even if he could teach you to run the farm,” Nail went on, “a single man can’t run a farm alone. MacKinnon’s struggling to manage even now with you here. This is ridiculous. What happens
when someone uses the voice to make you *give* them your year’s wheat crop instead of buying it? Tom just saw it worked, how long you think that’s going to stay quiet?”

“Don’t know, Alpha,” Tyson said, miserable.

“Whoo,” said Yakupov, exhaling loudly. “You got a problem alright. This is why Omegas don’t marry out and don’t live outside the Community. Well,” he said, “I’m not going to do anything without your permission, so can I keep an eye out for you during haying, and the rest of it we can maybe discuss with MacKinnon once haying is done?”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Tyson said. “I appreciate what you’ve done for me.”

Nail’s eyes softened, and he looked down at Tyson gently. “You know I’d do anything I can to help the *Rääjenboagen,*” he said. “You ain’t a regular person, you’re special. You know what we call you back home? *табыш.* You ever heard that before?”

“No,” said Tyson. “What’s it mean?”

“It means benediction, blessing. Back home we still remember. You’re the *Bund,* the covenant with the Lord, and we honour you for that. Or sometimes people use the Russian, Printessa?”

“I’m not a *girl,*” Tyson said by rote.

“I know you’re not, you’re an Omega,” Nail said. Very gently he went on, “But Printessa, you’re something so rare and valuable, that means you got a responsibility to yourself and the community. I don’t know what you’re doing out here. You’re not a regular person.”

_Nate_ thought he was a regular person, Tyson thought rebelliously, but he held his tongue. Alpha Yakupov was very kind, for an Alpha, but he was also clearly still observant, and Tyson was not familiar enough with Muslim ways to know if they included physical discipline if crossed, like his people’s did. He hadn’t been thumped in weeks and weeks and he’d like to keep it that way. “Thank you Alpha,” he said again, and headed back down the stairs with his hat to go find out how regular people got the hay in.

*He never did really find out. He was standing on top of the hay wagon, thinking he was finally getting the hang of the stacking, when he came over all faint. It was a big wagon and was stacked almost full and ready to head for the barn, so he fell from about 15 feet when he went, and landed on Nate.

They ended up in one of the small hay carts together, Nate dumped in there like a sack of corn and Tyson urged to accompany him as no one wanted to take responsibility for him, lying on top of a load of hay and driven in to town by Mary, Calvert’s fourteen year old sister.

“Ow,” said Nate, which was the only thing he’d said aside from “Fuck” since Tyson landed on him.

“Sorry Alpha,” Tyson said again, but Nate gave him a look and Tyson subsided back into silence while they jolted and rattled their way into town. He hadn’t been to Denver since he first arrived with Alpha Landeskog and he sat up to take a look around, curious. They rattled their way up to a small house next to a dry goods store and came to a halt.

“Finally,” said Nate through gritted teeth. “Fuck.”

“Hello Mary Ann,” Mrs. MacKinnon said from the porch, sounding resigned. “Who you got for me
“Got your Nate, Mrs. Mac, and his Mr. Landeskog,” Mary Ann said, clearly relishing her part in the drama. “Mr. Landeskog fell off the hay cart onto Nate, and now Nate’s arm’s all busted up.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, stepping up onto the back of the cart. “What have you two done to yourselves now?”

“Hello Mrs. MacKinnon,” Tyson said.

“Ma, please don’t shake the wagon,” Nate gritted out.

“Sorry boy,” she said, hands on hips as she looked down at them. “It’s me climb up or you climb down. What’s happened to your arm?”

“Goddamn Landeskog happened, that’s what,” Nate said. “He fell off the hay cart onto me.”

“Nate caught me!” Tyson said.

“I didn’t catch you, you idiot,” Nate said. “I was turning to see what the yelling was and you landed on me like...like...like a sack. Like a goddamn sack of hammers.”

“I think his arm hurts a lot, Mrs. MacKinnon, he’s very disagreeable,” Tyson told her.

“Yeah, I see that,” she said. Turning to Mary Ann, she asked, “Mary Ann, can you go get Mr. MacKinnon and Sarah? They’re just in the store. Alright, let’s have a look.” She came closer and peered down at them. “Mr. Landeskog, you alright for the moment? You get hurt when you fell?”

“No Ma, he landed on something nice and soft, he’s fine.” Nate said in a pissy tone.

“I’m fine, missus, thank you,” Tyson agreed.

“Alright then, boy, scoot over a little careful as you can and let me at Nate.” She crouched down and looked consideringly at the way Nate was holding his arm. “Can you sit up without help?” she asked.

“No,” Nate said.

“Hmm. Any chance you can take that shirt off or you want me to cut it off?”

“Cut it off, please Ma,” he said between gritted teeth, and Tyson and Mrs. MacKinnon looked at each other.

“Alright,” she said. “Sarah? Oh, there you are - you got the scissors? Smart girl, thank you.” Mrs. MacKinnon knelt down next to Nate, moving slowly to minimize the jostling, and cut his shirt and undershirt off, cutting carefully along the seams to make sewing it back up easier. “Almost done,” she said, easing the shirt out from under Nate slowly, “there you are.” Nate looked very pale and sweaty, Tyson thought.

“Oh, yeah, no, that’s not broken,” said Mrs. MacKinnon when she got a look at it. “That’s just out of place. Graham, come here and hang on to Nathan.”

“Now,” she said calmly. “I know three ways to get a shoulder back in. Nate?”

“Yeah?” he said.
"You think you can grab your own knee?"

"No chance Ma," he said. "Fingers ain’t moving so good no more."

"Yeah, it’s been out a long time. That works best right after you done it. Alright, let’s try this.” Still kneeling, she gripped his upper arm firmly and bent his lower arm to 90 degrees, moving the arm slowly through a series of movements in towards his body while maintaining traction. “No, huh?” she said after several cycles. “Alright, I’m not licked yet. Graham, you slide out of there, and help Nate lie down on his back.”

Tyson watched, puzzled, as she took her left boot off and sat down on Nate’s left side, legs stretched out in front of her. Very carefully she put the heel of her stocking foot into Nate’s armpit and held his bad arm at the wrist and forearm.

“Here we go,” she said, and started to pull on his arm, her foot preventing Nate from being pulled towards her. For a long minute there was no sound but Nate’s laboured breathing and Tyson wondered if she could do it. Mrs. MacKinnon grunted and pulled a little harder - he could see from her face she was exerting most of her considerable strength in pulling - and then there was a loud ‘pop!’ and Nate sagged backwards as she released the tension, still holding his arm in place.

“Got it,” Nate said. “Whew.”

“Poor boy,” she said, gently folding the arm against his chest. ”Bet that’s better isn’t it?”

“So much better, Ma,” Nate said, hugging her with his good arm and kissing her on the cheek. “God, it always feels so good once it doesn’t hurt anymore.” Good humour restored, he turned to Tyson. “Sorry I was rude to you,” he said. “It hurt considerable and I lost my head.”

“No,” said Tyson, ”no, Alpha, anyone would be tetchy if someone fell on them from a hay cart. You all better?”

“Has he got you calling him Alpha?” Mrs. MacKinnon interrupted, incredulous, and they both turned to look at her.

Nate slumped back onto the hay, but slowly, favouring his shoulder. “That’s nice, Ma,” he said. “What did I get there, one full minute of sympathy before you were back to telling me I’m an idiot?”

“Oh come on,” she said, “that’s ridiculous. No one’s talked like that in 50 years.”

“It is a bit much,” Mr. MacKinnon agreed.

“Well, it wasn’t my idea,” Nate protested. “That’s just how they talk where Mr. Landeskog’s from, ain’t it?” He looked at Tyson for support.

“Of course I call him Alpha,” Tyson said from where he was kneeling in the straw next to Nate. “What else would I call him? Nate is the second best Alpha I ever knew, he deserves the name.”

“Second best?” Nate said.

“He’s 18 years old,” Mr. MacKinnon said. “How good can he be? He ain’t got much of a body of work.”

“But Nate is so strong, and kind, and he never hit me once,” Tyson enthused, “and he says I can talk whenever I want, and he’s teaching me to farm, and he never grabs at me, but he punches the visitors that do grab at me, and he’s very kind to the pig, even though it’s base, and he knows how to do
“That’s right,” said Nate, still lying on his back and talking to the sky, “Thank you very much, Mr. Landeskog.”

“Well,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, “that’s very -”

“Oh!” interrupted Tyson. “And he’s doing such a good job as my Little Brother, Mrs. MacKinnon, you don’t even know. I thought he was far too young for the job, but he’s stepped up and done it better than I could have imagined. A Little Brother faces outward of course, where an Omega cannot, and Nate’s done that - you don’t even know how many men he’s punched for me - but they also look inward to the home to offer good counsel and a steady hand when there’s no father or husband, and Nate’s done so well at that too.”

“What...what steady counsel has Nate offered you?” asked Mrs. MacKinnon in tones of morbid fascination.

Nate sat up carefully and said, “Yeah, I’d like to hear this too.”

“Oh, lots of things,” said Tyson, “why, every single time you’ve told me I’d regret eating something you’ve been right, you know, like that time with the plums, and the time with the berries, and the clabbered milk, and the cheese.”

“I told you that cheese had turned,” Nate said judgmentally. “I told you so.”

“Oh, you were right, Alpha,” Tyson agreed. He was enjoying the teasing now that Nate wasn’t angry with him anymore.

“You going to listen to me now?” Nate asked.

“Oh, yes Alpha,” Tyson said.

Nate looked unconvinced. “That’s what you said last time too, but you keep getting on the outside of everything you see.”

“Looked tasty though, Alpha.“

“It looked moldy, you fool,” Nate said, and Tyson maintained a dignified silence but Nate had his number. “I can tell just from the look on your face you got no intention of listening to anything I say,” he said. “Never mind.”

“And that’s it?” Mrs. MacKinnon said judgmentally.

“Oh no,” Tyson said. “Why he just knows all sorts of things! He told me that pig would bite, and he was right!”

Mrs. MacKinnon shook her head as if she were dazed. “Why did the pig bite you?”

“It didn’t care for being picked up,” Tyson said.

“Why in the name of God were you trying to pick up a pig?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked, Mr. MacKinnon and the girls hanging on her words. They looked riveted by the exchange.

“Because Nate said he could,” Tyson explained, “but I said he couldn’t, and then he said he could but I couldn’t, and I said ‘Prove it’”, so then he did pick it up, and it didn’t seem to care for that much. And when I tried to pick it up, Nate warned me, but I did anyway, and chomp! And now it
looks at me funny when I feed it.”

“Probably got a taste for flesh,” Nate muttered. “It’s gonna eat you.”

“No!” said Tyson agog. “Do they do that?”

“See it’s remarks like that what make me doubt your steady counsel,” Mrs. MacKinnon said to Nate. “So to sum up,” she went on, “Nate knows more about running a farm than you do, lets you do whatever you want, punches people and can lift a pig.”

“Yeesss,” said Tyson, feeling this didn’t fully encompass Nate’s virtues. “Also he’s very nice.”

“Could the best Alpha you ever knew lift two pigs?” asked Mrs. MacKinnon. “I just ask because it’s good for Nate to have something to aim for.”

Tyson wisely refrained from answering, and Mrs. MacKinnon ushered them into the house and went back on the attack. “I heard you been walking around naked,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, not looking best pleased about it.

“I bet you heard,” said Nate. “Them boys is the worst gossips I ever knew. It’s was the middle of summer, Ma, it’s too hot for clothes. I can’t sleep if I’m all covered up, and Mr. Landeskog is in the other room. Plus it saves on the laundry.”

Tyson nodded in agreement. The laundry argument was the most compelling to him - anything to lessen the burden of wash day. Mrs. MacKinnon didn’t seem convinced. “I been doing your Pa’s wash 23 years now,” she said, “and I ain’t found it so burdensome yet I proposed he just walk around naked instead.” Mr. MacKinnon snorted and she glared at him.

“No, Ma,” Nate said, “but it’s different with just us two, it’s like when I was living up Mr. Talbot’s place, we weren’t fussed about pants in the summer.”

“Well, that must have been nice for his wife,” said Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Ma!” Nate said, scandalized, “it was before she came, of course.”

“I’ve seen it before, anyway,” Tyson said, and then immediately realised that was a mistake when Mrs. MacKinnon’s eyes bugged out and Mr. MacKinnon started trying to muffle his laughter behind her.

“Say again?” Mrs. MacKinnon said, head cocked, “What exactly you seen before?”

“No, Ma, he just means - “ Nate tried to defend Tyson, but Mrs. MacKinnon wasn’t having it.

“I’ve seen it before too,” she said, “in various different stages of life, but that don’t mean I want to look at it over the breakfast table of a morning.” Mr. MacKinnon was laughing so hard he was slumped over the table.

“He puts his trousers on for breakfast,” Tyson said. “Almost all the time.” This didn’t seem to help, and Mr. MacKinnon let out a gasp and thumped the table.

“You ain’t helping, Pa,” Nate said, but Mr. MacKinnon just looked up and said, “Not my problem, son,” and kept laughing.

“Well, I hope you been keeping your clothes on, boy,” Mrs. MacKinnon said to Tyson.

“Of course I have,” he said, affronted. “I always wear my nightgown.”
“Yeah,” said Nate, “about that.”

“Oh, Lord, what,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, face like thunder.

“I been meaning to tell you,” Nate went on, ignoring her. “That thing’s see through.”

“What?” yelped Tyson.

“Yeah, sorry,” Nate said, shrugging and then wincing. “I thought you knew, and then when I realised you didn’t know, it seemed awkward to bring it up, but now we’re all talking about our bits, I thought I’d tell you.”

“Oh, Jesus, what a pair of idiots you two are,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Why are the pair of you here anyway? I thought Nate was haying and Mr. Landeskog, you were back at home. Surely they didn’t detour from the Olson’s to pick you up, did they, Mr. Landeskog?”

“Mmm, yeah, Ma, see…” Nate started and Mrs. MacKinnon pinched her nose with her thumb and finger.

“Shush,” she said. “I can’t take no more of you right now. Mr. Landeskog, you tell me why you’re here.”

Tyson looked at Nate and Nate looked back, but there was nothing for it but to tell the truth, even though Tyson suspected she wouldn’t be pleased with Nate allowing him to help hay while still convalescent.

“Nate took me to hay so I could learn and then I threw up and then I fainted and then I fell off the hayrick and landed on Nate,” he said all in one breathe. Mr. MacKinnon’s laughter started up again. "And I can’t stop puking and Nate says I have to ask you, but I think it’s just the ague. Or the well.”

“It’s not the well, you stupid boy,” she said gently. “If it was the well, Nate would be sick too.”

“That’s what I said!” Nate chimed in.

“That is not what you said!” Tyson barked, still angry about the nightgown. “You said I just had a weak city boy stomach. And he eats half a pie at a time, Mrs. MacKinnon, with his hands.”

Mrs. MacKinnon’s mouth twitched but she turned to Nate. “Is this true?” she said gravely. “Surely we raised you better than that, sitting around in the all together eating pie like an animal.”

“No, you didn’t,” Nate said sullen. “I’m a blot on the escutcheon, and it’s all your fault. Blame falls squarely on you and Pa.”

Finally, once Nate was settled in the one upholstered chair, arm in a sling and littlest sister delegated to fetch and carry for him, Mrs. MacKinnon turned to Tyson.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s have a look at you. Still sicking up after the ague?”

“A bit,” Tyson said hesitantly, and Nate called from his seat, “He’s fainting too, Ma! He’s puking every day and fainting.”

“Everyday?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked.

“Maybe,” Tyson muttered, and Nate bellowed “A lot, Ma! And he fainted off the hay cart today!”
Tyson shot a look of resentment towards Nate and Mrs. MacKinnon looked down at Tyson sympathetically.

“Shut up, you,” she said to Nate. “My God you’re bossy, I can’t think where you get it.” Nate snorted but wisely said no more and Mrs. MacKinnon turned back to Tyson. “Come on into the bedroom,” she said, “and we can talk without being interrupted.”

Mrs. MacKinnon’s bedroom had the luxury of a thin feather bed atop the straw pailleasse and the mattress was raised slightly off the floor by rough hewn logs. She had a tin washstand set on the cheap deal dresser that was the only piece of furniture in the room, and a cracked, misted square of mirror. The MacKinnon’s sparse wardrobe was hung on hooks along one wall, and Tyson felt a sudden surge of longing for his old room back home, with his familiar eiderdown covers and silk pillowcase to protect his hair, and the heavy, hand carved wooden furniture set. Alpha Landeskog had taken him away from that safety and comfort and then left him here, all alone. Mrs. MacKinnon turned to Tyson then and gestured to him to lie down on the bed and distracted him.

She spent a good half hour feeling all over his stomach and torso, pressing gently and then harder, saying again and again, “Does this hurt? Does this?” and asking increasingly personal questions about his bathroom habits.

“Hmmm,” she finally said. “I think you have a baby in there. But it may not last - you’ve been very ill, and it’s hard to say of course. I suppose time will tell.”

“I can’t possibly be expecting.” Tyson said, shocked.

“Can’t, or would prefer not to?” she asked. “Because there’s a great deal of difference between the two.”

“Would prefer not,” he said sulkily, and then flared up again. “What am I going to do with a baby?”

“Well,” she said. “You know as well as I do there’s only one choice. Unless you’ve family you can go back to out West or an unexpected stash of coin?” He shook his head. “I thought not. Well, you’ll have to marry before the winter. You can’t work the farm alone, and you certainly can’t do it while expecting. We can’t leave Nate out there with you now we know; the whole county would talk. Oh, go on,” she said, as Tyson started to cry. Although she sounded abrupt, she took his hand gently. “There’s worse trouble at sea. You’re far too thin, but you’re still very beautiful, and any of the bachelors would be happy to take you on. You’ll have your pick, and several of them are good workers, and kind enough, though they may seem coarse and unrefined to you.”

“No,” Tyson said. “I can’t. I’ve never… no Alpha but Gabe has sanction to touch me. His death doesn’t alter that. To let another Alpha… no. I can’t.”

Mrs. MacKinnon looked both sympathetic and fed up, a neat trick. “Oh, I think you’ll find you can,” she said. “Because if you don’t,” she went on bluntly, “You’ll starve. You’ll starve and that baby inside you too.”

“But I can’t,” said Tyson. “Through marriage it’s Grandfather Landeskog who would decide, and he’s… he’s a very firm believer.”

“I don’t think you’re hearing me,” she snapped. “Pick one of the Alphas and marry. If it’s religion you’re concerned about, there are a couple church goers among them, though it’s all the Reform church here. It’s a pity the Duchene boy is married. He’s Orthodox, I believe.”
"I don’t think you’re hearing me, Missus,” Tyson said. “I’m saying Grandfather Landeskog would far prefer I die than marry a non-believer. At least then I would die untainted."

“Well, he’s not here, is he?” she said. “So you’ll have to ask yourself if you’re prepared to die for an old man’s religious scruples.”

“But an Orthodox Omega does not remarry. We wait until we are reunited with our husbands in the next life,” Tyson explained.

“Well, it’s not going to be a very long wait, then, perhaps that will be some consolation to you,” Mrs. MacKinnon snapped. “You’ll be about seven months gone by midwinter, I reckon, and the baby will be quick. Don’t know if you’ll feel it stop moving a day or two before you go, or if it’ll maybe outlast you by a few minutes once your heart stops. Either way I reckon you’ll meet up with the other Mr. Landeskog well before this time next year. Something to look forward to.”

Oddly enough, of all the things she had said, this one resonated. Tyson, he realised, did not have any particular urge to meet up with Gabe any earlier than he had to. Still, the thought of remarriage was too awful to consider.

“Mrs. MacKinnon,” he started, “thank you for your help, but I’ve decided - “

“Do you want to die,” she said angrily. “Do you hear me boy? You’re going to die and take that baby with you. It don’t matter how unpalatable you find married life, it’s better than dead.” They paused, glaring at each other, but then a possible avenue of escape occurred to Tyson.

“Missus?” he asked, “Can you… can you get it out of me? I heard that maybe some midwives know how…”

Mrs. MacKinnon looked back at him, face hard and eyes alert. “Yeah,” she said, “I know how, at least for girls. We can talk about it, but don’t get your hopes up.” She stood up and went to the other room. Tyson heard her say “No, we ain’t done yet, still talking. Just thought we’d like a cookie while we talk, that’s all,” and then she returned with the flower patterned biscuit tin in hand.

“Alright,” she said, sitting down and prying open the tin. “Cookie? They’re coconut jumbles, not bad. You had coconut before?”

Tyson took one to be polite, but he had never felt less like eating.

“Go on boy,” she said. “There’s worse troubles at sea.”

“Not much worse,” he replied, nibbling at the cookie. The coconut was unfamiliar but he kind of liked it. There was a chewy richness to it that was pleasing.

Mrs. MacKinnon looked like she was giving it real thought. “Could be worse, could be worse,” she finally said. “Go on boy, I’ll see you right one way or another, but I need to know two things.” Tyson nodded. “How bad you want it out? You willing to take a chance on dying?”

“Yes,” Tyson said immediately.

Mrs. MacKinnon looked skeptical. “That’s a very pat answer, boy. What makes a quick marriage to a man that’s glad to have you worse than dying?”

Tyson put the cookie down on the quilt they were sat on and then picked it back up again and balanced it on his thigh. He didn’t know how to put it into words, but he had to.
“I never been good,” he started, “but I look right. I got no servant’s heart and I can’t keep sweet or even silent when I should. And Gabe said my father’s hand had been too light.” He looked up at Mrs. MacKinnon and she was looking back at him levelly with no judgment. “I thought I wanted to marry Gabe,” he went on. “I was eighteen, I had to marry someone, and Omegas marry older, you know? Gabe, he was very handsome and young, and I thought. I thought maybe. I never been good, but the Orthodox, they believe sin can be beaten out of you, but I didn’t know it was going to be so hard. It hurt all the time.”

He knew he hadn’t explained anything, but that was the best he could do.

“Mhmm,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, still working on her first jumble. “I heard this story before, I think, from other young wives. He hit you?”

“Yes.”

“Everyday?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t his fault. He had to discipline me, so I’d learn, and I just couldn’t stop talking out of turn.”

“Uh huh. He ever knock you out?”

“Couple times.”

“He make you bleed?”

Tyson hesitated. He wasn’t sure…

“Make you bleed when he hit you?” Mrs. MacKinnon clarified.

“Oh, yeah,” Tyson said, “yeah, sometimes, if he caught my mouth with his hand.”

“How about the other?” Mrs. MacKinnon pressed on. “He make you bleed then?”

“Yes,” Tyson whispered, looking down at his hands.

“Not just the first few times?”

“No,” he whispered. “I didn’t like it. It hurt, missus, it hurt a lot, but he said I had to.”

“It ain’t supposed to be that way, do you understand that? What if we found you a real nice boy, one that treated you good?”

“Would I have to do… that with him?”

“Well, a good man wouldn’t force you, but most would certainly be expecting it.”

“It hurt,” Tyson said again, still looking down. “It hurt everytime, and I tried to say no but he held me down and made me, again and again.” He didn’t like to think about it - he felt panicky and sick just discussing it. “I’m going to puke, missus,” he said in a rush, and did, although at least he made it to the chamberpot. “Missus I can’t. I just can’t. I’d rather be dead than do that again - I think maybe I was dead, the last few weeks before we got the ague. Everything felt slow and far away, like I wasn’t all there. Can that happen? Could I have been half dead?”

“No, baby,” she said, “that can’t happen. That’s not what was happening to you.” She threw her half cookie back in the biscuit tin. Maybe she didn’t like coconut, thought Tyson. “Alright,” she said.
“My second question is, is it Nate’s?”

“Nate’s what?”

“Is the baby Nate’s?” she clarified.

That was just ridiculous. “How could it be?” he said. “We aren’t married.”

“Right,” she said, looking at him oddly. “So you never touched each other? Because you seem very fond of him.”

“Sure, he touched me,” Tyson said. He didn’t understand her questions but they were a lot less upsetting than the earlier ones. “You know he touched me, even when I told him not to.”

“What?” she said, standing up. “He put his hands on you when you said not to?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to kill him” she said, and Tyson could almost believe it. She was building up a real head of steam. “I never would have thought it of him,” she went on. “I worried maybe you two were getting up to something together out there, but I never thought he would touch someone unwilling…”

Tyson didn’t understand why she was so angry, but he didn’t want her to go out there and yell at Nate, who had been nothing but good to him, and whose arm he had recently dislocated. “It’s OK, missus,” he said, pulling at her skirt. “He said he was sorry, and he only did it because he had to.”

“He had to? Wanted to, more like.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. He certainly didn’t seem to want to this time today, he called me a fucking idiot and said he should have let me fall on my head.”

“What?” she said, “he touched you today?”

“Well yes, earlier today and maybe again in the cart on the way here.”

“Today? With a dislocated shoulder? Even an eighteen year old boy can’t get a stiffy with his shoulder out. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You asked if Nate ever touched me, and he did, on three occasions. He’s caught me when I fainted twice now. Maybe a third time his arm brushed me in the cart today, I’m not sure.”

She stared at him, confused, and then a look of relief passed over her face. “Jesus Christ, Mr. Landeskog, I’m asking if Nate ever fucked you.”

“What!” he yelled, shocked. “What kinda question is that? That’s disgusting! No!”

“Well,” she said, “the baby’s very small for six months or so, and you two seem very friendly, so I thought, maybe…”

Tyson was genuinely offended on Nate’s behalf, and he still didn’t see what this had to do with the baby, but he answered the question. “He would never do that,” he said. “He’s a deeply fine man and my Little Brother. Never once has he made me uncomfortable. I wish he was my brother.”

Mrs. MacKinnon looked extremely sceptical. “Nathan doesn’t want to be your brother Mr. Landeskog, I told you that before. Nate is an eighteen year old boy, a good one, but still, and he
would absolutely do that if you wanted to. The only reason you can’t see that is because you’re very young too.”

“Maybe so,” he said unwillingly. “But even so, how can you ask me that after what I just told you?” She shrugged.

“What’s a trial with one man is a pleasure with another,” she said. “So you two just been sitting around naked but otherwise living a life of rectitude and virtue?”

“I told you,” he said, annoyed. “I always wore my nightgown. It’s a very fine lawn, I didn’t know it was see through.”

“Hmm,” she said. “Well, I don’t know what you heard, but herbs don’t work. I seen maybe a few times girls take them and then the baby goes, but many miscarry naturally and I couldn’t tell you it was the herbs for sure. And I seen a couple take enough that they had a weak liver ever after, but the baby still stayed, so I don’t play around with herbs no more. The only thing that works is doing it by hand, but that’s a very risky proposition.” She paused and fixed Tyson with a look. “You need to understand that. Do you understand that?”

Tyson gulped and nodded and she went on. “I only do it for girls who feel real strong it would be better to be dead than have the baby. I ain’t so convinced that’s the case for you yet, but I’m willing to talk about it. First though I want to tell you flat out: I done it maybe 50 times, and I killed one girl, I know for sure, and I made one real sick with a fever but she lived. And you need to hear that the girl that died, she didn’t die quick - it took a week and she was suffering real bad, I know because I sat beside her the whole time and held her hand. It’s not a small thing you’re asking me to do. You still want to do it?”

“Yes” Tyson said, certain. He would take any chance, no matter how risky, to escape this noose.

“I’ve had ten babies, eight living, and you can believe me when I tell you that I am real familiar with being pregnant when you don’t want to be, or when it’s more than inconvenient. A lotta girls get beaten and forced, and they go on to have tolerable second marriages,” she said. “You sure in your mind you ain’t willing to try?”

“I’m sure,” he said.

“Alright,” she said, shrugging. “We can talk about it, but I’m still not sure I can. What do you look like down there?”

“Sorry?” asked Tyson.

“How you made? You the same as a girl?”

“I don’t know,” said Tyson. He had a vague idea girls had no balls, but beyond that he was hazy. “Not exactly the same, I don’t think?”

Mrs. MacKinnon rolled her eyes. “Jesus,” she said, gathering up a rag and a small apothecary’s bottle of olive oil. “Take your pants off. I’m gonna need to take a look and also feel inside. I know that’s a bit much but that’s the only way.” Tyson blanched but did it.

Mrs. MacKinnon took one look and reeled back. “What the hell,” she said flatly, flipping the sheet back over his lower body. “You’re nothing like a girl, you got a cock, a small cock but you got one, and balls. That normal? All Omegas like that?”

“Well yeah,” said Tyson, vaguely affronted. He’d told her, when she was fussing about Nate and his
pants, that he’d seen it before. What did she think he meant?

She went on. “There any chance you know some anatomy and can draw me a detailed picture of what your womb looks like, and where it is, or maybe you’re carting around an Omega midwifery text?”

“No,” he said, “of course not.”

“Right, no. And you only got the one passage?” He shrugged. It was news to him if anyone had two. He didn’t see where they’d fit.

“Starting now,” she said, and Tyson felt her fingers, aided by the oil, slide up inside him. It was very strange, he thought, to be touched so intimately, but it was impersonal, yet kind enough that he wasn’t panicking. “Hang on,” she said, little pressure here,” and put her other hand on his stomach and repeated the pushing and prodding of earlier, but with one hand inside and one out. It was a decidedly odd feeling. Soon enough she was done and withdrawing her hands from under the sheet. “Alright,” she said, going over to the wash basin, “get your pants back on and we’ll have a chat.”

Mrs. MacKinnon sat down on the bed directly next to him, so that their sides were almost touching. “Well,” she said, “you’re definitely pregnant, but I can’t make much sense of your insides at all. You seem to have two channels inside you, and if I had to guess I’d say your womb’s on the wrong side, but I couldn’t swear to it.” She took his right hand, and said “You understand me so far?” and Tyson nodded. “OK,” she went on,”now I know this ain’t what you want to hear, but there’s no way I can get the baby out.”

“No,” he said, not disbelieving, just pleading. He could feel the noose tightening around him.

“Can’t do it boy, I’ve got no idea where to start.”

“No,” he said again, but hopelessly this time. “No, I don’t want a baby.”

“I know you don’t,” she said, “and I’m sorry, but you’re going to have one anyway.”

“Oh please, missus,” he said, starting to cry. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, “if I could take this cup from you I would. You want to come sit on my lap?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, and he clambered up and put his arms around her neck. He hadn’t sat with anyone like that since he was a very young boy but it didn’t feel strange. Mrs. MacKinnon was as tall and broader than him, and he felt safe and enclosed with her arms around him. He was still crying quietly, and he didn’t feel like he would ever stop. After half an hour, though, he did, and all cried out he just sat, exhausted, cuddled on her lap. “What am I going to do?” he said.

“You’re going to have to marry someone,” she said grimly. “If you say you can’t go back there’s no other choice.”

“I don’t want to marry anyone again,” he whispered, “I don’t want them to touch me. I don’t think I could bear it.”

“I know, sweetheart,” she said, rubbing circles on his back.

“But what will I do?” he said again, like a child.

“You’re going to have to find a way to bear it,” she said. “You’ll have the baby and that will help.”
“I don’t want a baby,” he said petulantly.

You’ll like it when it’s here,” she said confidently. “I know you don’t believe me, but almost everybody does. It ain’t the baby’s fault any more than it’s yours.” He stirred on her lap but didn’t argue anymore, just resting his head on her shoulder. “Tell you what,” she said, “for tonight, you don’t have to think about it. Tomorrow’s time enough. You go on to sleep now, and we’ll have a real good dinner and talk it all out tomorrow.” Mrs. MacKinnon slid out from under him and helped him lie down on the bed. She pulled his pants and shirt off, leaving his underdrawers and undershirt on, and pulled the covers over him. Tyson was aware she was treating him like a child, but it felt comforting and he was happy to allow it.

“Thank you” he said, tired from the emotional upheaval. He could feel sleep pulling at him, but he asked, “What’s for dinner?”

Mrs. MacKinnon laughed. “I thought we might go the whole hog and have a roast chicken.”

“Oh,” he said dreamily, “a chicken,” and drifted off to sleep thinking of dumplings.
Tyson woke very early the next morning conscious firstly of having slept in Mrs. MacKinnon’s bed, which meant he had put she and Mr. MacKinnon out, and secondly, that Nate was kneeling beside the bed looking at him. “Shhh,” Nate said. “Everyone’s still asleep. I just came in to see how you were. Ma wouldn’t tell me nothing last night - are you sick?”

He looked so kind and concerned, the early light limning his face, that Tyson felt tears threatening again. “I’m going to have a baby,” he whispered. For a brief moment Nate’s face lit up and Tyson had a sudden urge to touch him, to feel that happiness against the palm of his hand. Then Nate’s face fell again.

“You’re going to have to get married,” he whispered back, and Tyson nodded, throat tight. “You don’t want to get married again, do you?” Nate said. “You wanted to learn how to farm and run it yourself.”

Tyson nodded again. He was struck anew by the horror of the situation, but Nate misinterpreted his expression and looked at Tyson sympathetically. “Of course you don’t want to marry again so soon,” he said, “the other Mr. Landeskog only been gone not even three months now. I forget you’re a widower sometimes.”

“Yes,” agreed Tyson, willing to allow this misunderstanding rather than explain the real problem to Nate. For some time they were still, just looking at each other, and then Tyson said, “I wish you were my real brother, and I could stay with you.”

“I’m sorry,” Nate said, looking genuinely grieved. “I’m sorry I can’t keep you safe, and I’m sorry you’ve got to do this thing. Maybe it won’t be so bad?”

“Maybe,” Tyson agreed, although he didn’t feel hopeful. He thought fleetingly of the question Mrs. MacKinnon asked him last night and wished the baby was Nate’s. Briefly, fiercely, he flared up in rebellion against his circumstances and wished he was a plain, podgy farm girl, free to marry who he liked, free to walk among the townspeople and touch them, if he cared to, but just as quickly it burnt out leaving him exhausted and resigned. Like it or not he was the Bund and there was really only one man he could choose. Only one Alpha in this town understood what he was and how to keep him safe; he’d tried rebelling and look where it had gotten him. He drew breath to tell Nate, but they were interrupted.

“Mr. Landeskog - oh!” Mrs. MacKinnon said, entering the room. “What you doing in here, Nate?”

Nate startled guiltily and tried to stand, but in his effort to avoid touching Tyson, who was leaning over the edge of the bed, and hampered by his sling, he tipped over onto his ass and ended up sprawled on the raw wood floor. “Ow, shit,” he said. “Goddamn floorboards splintery as hell.” Mrs. MacKinnon looked down at him judgmentally.

“Get up,” she said and got a hand under his good elbow to hoist him to his feet. “Mr. Landeskog tell you what’s going on?” Nate nodded.

“Says he’s going to have a baby,” he said, looking at Tyson sympathetically. “Says he’s going to have to get married.”

“So he is,” Mrs. MacKinnon said firmly, looking pointedly at Tyson as if to reinforce the necessity.
“I’m glad to hear you’re going to be reasonable about this. It’s Friday today, so if you come to church with us Sunday, you can meet most of the single men and make a choice next week. Any luck, we’ll have you married by Sunday week.” Tyson cringed but she barrelled on. “You think you can work with that arm?” she asked Nate.

Nate tested the range of movement in his injured arm and winced. “Couple more days, I think,” he said. “I can help Pa in the store today and tomorrow, then Sunday rest and I should be alright for Monday haying. Johnson said he’d cover the stock for me til I’m back.”

“You’ll only be going back for a few days,” she pointed out. “That’s it unless Mr. Landeskog’s new husband decides he wants to hire you for the fall.”

“Guess so,” Nate said, sounding like he wasn’t at all pleased by the fact.

Mrs. MacKinnon seemed deep in thought. “Alright,” she said. “You let it slip he’s looking to marry while you’re working the counter, and I’ll tell Kitty, and that should do it.”

“Missus?” Tyson said, very quietly, but she didn’t notice, too busy planning. “Missus?” he said again over the sound of her speculations about how to avoid having to feed any extra men angling for a free supper under the guise of courting.

“Mr. Landeskog’s trying to tell you something, Ma,” Nate said, interrupting his mother, and she finally turned to look at Tyson.

“Yes?” she said impatiently. “Why aren’t you dressed yet? I got all sorts of little jobs someone expecting can easily do.” Nate rolled his eyes; Tyson suspected no one in the household was free from Mrs. MacKinnon’s little jobs.

“Missus,” he said a third time. “I know who I choose.” This time he was going to make the wiser choice, choose a good temper over a pretty face, choose the man who had protected him and spoken to him kindly over money or social position. If he had to marry, and he did, he would chose the only Alpha he could imagine being tolerable, the only one whose touch he could perhaps bear. “Missus, can you fetch Alpha Yakupov?” he said.

* 

Alpha Yakupov came, despite Mrs. MacKinnon’s mutterings about his mustache, but he wasn’t having any of it. Or rather, his mother wasn’t.

“She wants me to translate this for her,” Alpha Yakupov said carefully once they were all seated around the MacKinnon table, Mrs. Yakupova looking nervous but resolute. “She says ‘Thank you,’ to the Rääjenboagen for the honour, and she wants the Bund to know she is grateful, but she has to say no ... No, wait, to decline with respect.” He looked up at his mother and they exchanged another few sentences. “She says,” he went on, “I am her only son, and I have to marry a Muslim or be lost to the family. She says, will you convert?” He looked at Tyson and Tyson shook his head a little. It wasn’t a question of conversion, he was the Rääjenboagen.

“She says, not surprised, she understands,” Nail went on. “She says though she will help if she can, as you are the Bund. She says, what do you need? Do you need money to return home? She will give.” He paused and looked at Tyson. “I told her you were married to Gustav Landeskog’s grandson, but she says I still have to ask. Do you want help to go home?”

“No,” Tyson whispered. “I can’t go back. Tell her thank you, but I don’t need money. I need a husband.”
Nail translated this to his mother and her answer was long and involved. The word *Bund* was repeated many times, but that’s all Tyson could catch. When she finished, she nodded at Nail, “Go on.”

“No,” he moaned, “no, Mama, please,” but she nodded toward Tyson again and gave Nail a fierce look.

“OK, OK,” he said and looked at Tyson. “I don’t know if maybe you want to leave the room for this?” he asked, but Tyson thought he might as well hear the worst of it and just shook his head.

Nail looked extremely uncomfortable but bulled ahead, talking quickly and avoiding any eye contact. “She says, you are pregnant, and she will not ask the *Räajenboagen* if he has been faithful. She says, she knows you have been a good boy, she knows the *Bund* would not sin in this way, but she is worried because we are among the English who do not understand. She says, do you.” - here he spoke directly to Mrs. MacKinnon - “understand the *Bund* go for a year?”

Mrs. MacKinnon froze, the sock she was absently darning stilling in her hands. “What,” she whispered, “a year?” She turned to Tyson. “Is that true,” she said, “a whole year?”

“Yes?” he said unsure why it mattered.

“You mean you take a full year to have a baby, January 1 to December 31st?”

“Yes?” he said again.

“So you reckoned you started puking a few weeks after Midsummer - that means this baby is going to come sometime next year around Midsummer?” she pressed.

“Yes?” Tyson said, red faced. Did they have to talk so plainly about this? He looked at Nate, who had a look of dawning realisation on his face. Alpha Yakupov and Mr. MacKinnon still looked puzzled by Mrs. MacKinnon’s concern, as was Tyson himself.

“Son of a bitch!” Mrs. MacKinnon hissed and slammed the wooden darning egg on the table. “I thought maybe around Christmas or a little after, not nine goddamn months after Nate moved into your house.” Mrs. Yakupova nodded.

“Yes, problem,” she said to Mrs. MacKinnon and they both looked at Nate. Mrs. Yakupova jerked her chin at him. “How old?” she asked Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Just turned eighteen,” Mrs. MacKinnon said shortly and Mrs. Yakupova shook her head.

“Ai ya,” she said. “Eighteen, so young. Nail, twenty, too young, but eighteen … No.”

“No,” Mrs. MacKinnon agreed, and visibly gathered herself. “Well,” she said, but then petered off.

Nate cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him again and he looked steadily back at them. “I’ll do it,” he said suddenly. He turned to look at Tyson. “I’ll do it if you’ll have me.”

“What?” Tyson said, completely confused, but Mrs. MacKinnon understood.

“Oh no you won’t boy,” she said to Nate, and Tyson could see she was ginned up for a real fight but Mr. MacKinnon preempted her by standing up and thanking the Yakupovs for coming. Once they were gone, he sat back down silently at the table where Mrs. MacKinnon was glaring ferociously at Nate. Nate opened his mouth and Mrs. MacKinnon held up a hand. “Oh no you don’t,” said Mrs. MacKinnon. “I see what you’re thinking, and I won’t have it.” She pointed her finger at Nate.
“Don’t you say a word.”

Nate just folded his hands on the tabletop, managing to convey the intention to do exactly as he planned despite whatever his mother might say. “Baby’s going to need a name,” he said mildly. “Plus everyone in Denver’s going to think I got it on him anyway.”

“Not if they can count,” said Mrs. MacKinnon acidly.

“Yeah, well, they can’t,” said Nate. “Or don’t care to, more like, when there’s gossip to be had. And I doubt one in a hundred knows an Omega goes for a full year. Aaaah, shit,” he said, putting his head in his hands.

“What?” Tyson said again, bewildered. “You want me to marry Nate?”

“No I goddamn don’t,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, but Nate was nodding behind her.

“But why?” Tyson said. “Why would I marry Nate?” He looked at Nate, sat across the table from him, terribly young, hair sticking up every which way, arm still in a sling made of what looked like a rag from one of the girl’s summer dresses, and thought of falling on him from the hay cart the day before. He’d told Mrs. MacKinnon that Nate had caught him, but he knew he hadn’t, really. No one could catch a man’s weight falling from that height; no one could absorb such an impact and remain standing. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Tyson said.

“People are going to think it’s my baby,” Nate told him, still looking down at the table. “It’s going to be a scandal in the town, and no one’s going to want to marry either of us now they think we did that. The only way for both of us to stay unshamed is for me to marry you.”

“But we weren’t married,” Tyson said, puzzled. “I was married to Alpha Landeskog, so obviously it’s his baby. You can’t have a baby if you’re not married.” Everyone else at the table looked at each other and Tyson was conscious he must be missing something but he couldn’t think what.

“I really do not know what your people were thinking,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, sounding exhausted. “There’s chastity and reserve, and then there’s just plain ignorance. Did your mother never talk to you?”

“Of course she talked to me,” Tyson said. “She talked to me all the time.”

“Well she didn’t talk to you enough,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Most ladies take nine months to have a baby. If the baby came at Christmas, it would be clear it was your husband’s. But if it’s coming at Midsummer, no one will believe anything but it’s Nate’s. A baby don’t come from being married. It’s a whole different thing that makes a baby, and you can definitely have a baby without being married.”

“What,” Tyson said, shocked, “No!”

“Yes,” Nate said wearily from his slouch at the table. “Ma’s right. People do it all the time, and if the boy marries the girl, soon enough everyone stops talking about the baby that came early but weighed nine pounds. But if the boy don’t marry the girl, the boy is shamed and the girl is destroyed. No other man will have her. No woman will speak to her, no one will do business with her, every man in town thinks she’s easy pickings.”

“But Nate did nothing wrong,” Tyson said feebly. He didn’t really understand how Nate could have made a baby with him without being married, but he understood the important point, which was that this town would undoubtedly believe he had.
“You did nothing wrong either, Mr. Landeskog,” Nate said. “But here we are anyway.”

After that they took a sort of a pause. Mrs. MacKinnon made the breakfast porridge they had skipped that morning in favour of buttermilk biscuits with jam for company, and Nate and Mr. MacKinnon headed out to check on the store. Tyson slipped into the elder MacKinnon’s bedroom to retrieve his other shirt and when he turned around from picking it up, was startled to see Nate there behind him. He clutched the shirt in both hands and looked down; he felt unaccountable shy of Nate. “I’m sorry, Alpha,” he murmured, and he was, deeply, truly sorry to have dragged Nate into this debacle.

“Come sit down,” Nate said, and they did, side by side on the bed closer than they had ever been, although still with a decent foot between them. “I’m sorry too,” Nate said, looking a little embarrassed. “I didn’t mean for either of us to be caught like this. I didn’t expect I’d marry someone so suited to my tastes, so this is a chance for me, but not for you, and I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault, Alpha,” Tyson said, still looking down. He wasn’t clear at whose feet the blame laid, but he felt certain it wasn’t Nate.

“Maybe not anyone’s fault,” Nate said, “but I know you don’t want to do this. Is there no way you could go home? We could find the money somehow - I could even escort you back if you don’t think you can go alone.”

“I’m sorry,” Tyson said again, conscious of the fact that his refusal meant Nate was trapped, but not willing to sacrifice himself to save Nate. “I can’t go back. If I have to marry to stay, I’ll marry.”

“Alright,” Nate said. “You should know before you decide; I’m not very fond of girls.”

“No?” Tyson said, puzzled by Nate bringing this up now. “You seem to like your sisters fine. I can’t make any promises about the baby - Omegas mostly have boys but you never know.”

“That’s… not quite what I meant,” Nate said with a strange look on his face. “I was never going to be easy to suit; I admire a boyish figure, if you take my meaning.” Nate paused and peered at Tyson. “Do you understand?”

Tyson did not understand, and Nate could clearly tell. “Nevermind,” he said. “I like you, and I didn’t expect this, but I can live with it.” He ducked his head, a little shy, so different from Nate’s usual swagger. “I do think that you’re awful pretty.” Tyson was unmoved; everyone thought he was awful pretty. What good did it do him? “Would it be so bad, to be married to me?” Nate asked.

“I’d like to not marry anyone,” Tyson said bitterly and Nate winced.

“But if you’ve got to take someone, will you take me?” he said, and for the first time Tyson thought beyond his fear of the wedding night, to what it would really mean to be remarried to a believer. He looked over at Nate sitting so scandalously close to him that they might as well be married already, by Tyson’s people’s standards - for that matter, they were alone in a room together, which was even worse, although he supposed they’d been alone back at the cabin for months. He’d probably never be allowed to speak to Nate again. No religious Alpha would tolerate it: he’d have to be re-cloistered, he’d be subject to physical discipline, he’d be doing penance for months just to cleanse himself of the sin associated with Nate, and worst of all, he realised, his baby would never, never be free from the taint of possible English parenthood. Most Alphas would demand it be sent back to Sweden for the Landeskogs to deal with. And yet marriage to an English stranger would, in its way, be worse. Nate appeared to be offering a safe harbour but he had to be sure.
“What about the baby?” he asked Nate. “What would you do with the baby?”

“What would I do with it?” Nate asked, bemused. “Why I’d love it. What else is there to do with a baby? They got no point, except to be loved, and carried around, and admired.”

“I meant, would you send it away?” Tyson clarified, and Nate looked appalled.

“I’m not going to send it away,” he said angrily. “I think I’m a little better than that.”

“What name would you give it?” Tyson asked, and Nate looked shy again. “I’d like if it could be a MacKinnon,” he said, looking at Tyson to see how this was landing. “I know Landeskog was his father but I would be his father now, and people should know.” He paused. “I would be his father,” he said again in a wondering tone. “It would be my baby, and any others that came after him, they’d be mine, and you’d be MacKinnon too. Would you want very much to keep the Landeskog?”

“No,” Tyson said, and bent to the inevitable. “MacKinnon.”

Mrs. MacKinnon didn’t seem to feel it was inevitable, though.

“What kind of goddamn half-assed idea,” she began, shrieking. She was not a woman who Tyson thought was prone to shrieking much, being more a bellower of orders, and it didn’t sit easily on her. She made a sort of incredulous sputtering noise, but then found her voice and let loose. Tyson sidled out of the room when Nate began yelling back.

“Can I sit, Alpha MacKinnon?” Tyson asked, edging up to the table where Mr. MacKinnon and Sarah sat, back from the store for supper. Sadly he noted the absence of the chicken he’d been promised, but he supposed that was only for people who didn’t propose to marry Mrs. MacKinnon’s ewe lamb against her wishes. Mrs. MacKinnon and Nate had argued right through dinner, taken a brief pause to refresh themselves and then rolled through the afternoon intermittently yelling at each other in between chores. Supper was porridge, nothing more.

“Of course you can sit, boy, you don’t need to ask,” said Mr. MacKinnon, startled. “Porridge?” he offered, pushing a bowl across to Tyson. It was the good kind, with pinon nuts and dried berries added to it, and the morning’s cream in a small jug. Tyson watched Mr. MacKinnon carefully, but he seemed as easygoing as his son, and he made no sign of disapproval as Tyson reached for the plum jam and added many heaping spoonfuls to his porridge. A fleeting look of disgust crossed Mr. MacKinnon’s face as Tyson stirred the jam and cream into the porridge and set to, but he didn’t say anything. Mrs. MacKinnon and Nate were still arguing in the bedroom, clearly audible, and Mr. MacKinnon nodded towards them. “Kathy told me about your situation last night,” he said. “I see they’re still at it hammer and tongs in there. You want to marry Nate?”

Tyson looked around frantically to see if the remark was meant for anyone else, but there was no one but them in the room. He shook his head No, lips tightly sealed. No he didn’t want to marry Nate, No he didn’t want to marry anyone. No he didn’t want a baby, and No he didn’t want to talk to an unrelated Alpha. God knew what stupid thing he might say. He shoved another large spoonful of porridge in to avoid saying anything.

From the bedroom there was a stomp of booted feet and Mrs. MacKinnon yelled, “You’ll do what I tell you boy!” and then they emerged into the kitchen. Nate looked stormy and Mrs. MacKinnon looked exasperated. “You eating?” she said to Tyson. “Good. Have another bowl. We got to talk this
Tyson had honestly never considered there might be a greater authority in the MacKinnon family, or possibly all of Denver, than Mrs. MacKinnon, but both she and Nate turned to Mr. MacKinnon to resolve their argument. Surprisingly, Mr. MacKinnon wasn’t violently opposed. “Can’t say I think it’s a good idea,” he said mildly, “but it’s not the worst. Nate was always going to be hard to suit, Kathy, you know that, and rumours of an illegitimate baby floating around town aren’t going to make it any easier.”

“Many of nature’s bachelors,” Mrs. MacKinnon began, “find the right girl, and then - ” and Nate interrupted her.

“Ma,” he said. “For God’s sake. I’m not a natural bachelor, you know perfectly well what I am.” Mrs. MacKinnon shot him a look of distaste but Mr. MacKinnon went on.

“This might not be the worst luck if they think it could work,” he said. “What do you think Mr. Landeskog?”

Tyson was so surprised to be asked his opinion, which had been entirely dispensed with thus far, that he had no idea what to say. “Well, I,” he started, and then bogged down.

“Just so,” said Mr. MacKinnon, inclining his head towards Tyson. “Now I saw the other Mr. Landeskog several times,” Mr. MacKinnon went on, “and unless I’m much mistaken, there’s going to be a little blond baby eight months from now, isn’t there Mr. Landeskog?” He turned to Tyson and looked inquiringly.

“Y...yes,” said Tyson hesitantly, “the Landeskog looks breed true. But Omegas, we take a year, so there’s no way it could be - ”

“That’s right,” burst in Mrs. MacKinnon, “so we just make sure everyone knows that, put it about the town, and even if the baby looks like it could be Nate’s, people will know it ain’t.”

“Ma,” said Sarah gently. “Ma. No one’s going to believe that, even if it’s true.”

“What do you mean, if,” said Nate. He shot a disgusted look at his sister and pointed at Tyson. “Do you think we’d be sat here if that was my baby? I wouldn’t be looking for permission if that was the case, we’d already be married.”

Mr. MacKinnon looked at Nate. “Simmer down,” said Mr. MacKinnon, “no one’s saying either of you did anything to be ashamed of, but Sarah’s right, Kathy, whole town’s going to believe what they like, and what they like is scandal. Don’t really matter what’s true anymore.”

“Nate’s reputation will be ruined,” said Mrs. MacKinnon in tones of anguish.

“Really, Kathy, that’s easily fixed,” said Mr. MacKinnon, waving off her concerns. “We just send him to Rimouski, or Nova Scotia, let him work with the Crosbys a few years. Rumour about a bastard in another country’s a whole different thing than staying in Denver while the whole town watches to see how much the baby looks like Nate as it grows. People will forget. The person with the real problem,” and here he turned to Tyson, “is Mr. Landeskog. He’s in a hell of a situation. Can’t work the farm, can’t go back home, going to have a hard time finding a good man that wants to take on what might be your husband’s child, might be Nate’s.”

“There’s men’ll take him,” said Mrs. MacKinnon. “He’s still an Omega, still beautiful.”

Mr. MacKinnon shook his head. “You think their families aren’t going to have the same
conversation we’re having? The good men’s families will block it, and the bad men… You want to tie him to one of them for the rest of his life?”

“Well, now,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “No one knows it takes twelve months - he could just keep his mouth shut and marry next week - no reason his husband ever needs to know that baby was made before the wedding.”

“Kathy!” Mr. MacKinnon said, shocked, and Mrs. MacKinnon folded.

“Sorry,” she said, “sorry. That was too far.” Tyson gaped at her but she was unimpressed by his shock and went on. “I ain’t going to allow it,” she said emphatically. “No one knows but us and we’ll keep it that way till we find a solution. Or, well,” she trailed off and looked away.

“What,” Nate said, flat.

“If Mr. Landeskog left before anyone knows, went back to his parents, it wouldn’t be a problem, would it?” she said. “Mr. Landeskog?”

“Can’t go back,” Tyson said to the top of the table. He couldn’t bear to look up at Mrs. MacKinnon’s face as he talked. “My father’s business failed a couple weeks after we married, that’s part of why we came out here. They’re living with my aunt now, and there’d be no room for me, and anyway, that Community won’t have me no more. I belong to Alpha Landeskog’s Community still, and I don’t think you understand how Orthodox they are. If I go back, they’ll exercise the Rule of Rachel. They paid good money for me, and they’ll expect to get their money’s worth.” He looked up tentatively and everyone was looking back at him blankly. “The Rule of Rachel?” he said again, “you know, Rachel and Bilhah? In Genesis?”

“No,” said Nate grimly, shaking his head, “Let’s hear it.”

Tyson looked up at the ceiling and recited, thinking of happier days memorizing Scripture as a child. He began, “And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son.” Here Sarah made a noise, and Mrs. MacKinnon hushed her. Tyson went on, and when he got to the bit about Rachel claiming the children as her own, Mrs. MacKinnon winced, and there was silence for a moment when he finished.

“Wasn’t Bilhah a slave?” said Sarah slowly. “Didn’t Rachel use her again to get more children from her husband?”

“Yes,” said Tyson. “You got the right of it. They’ll take this baby and anymore they get on me. I’m not going back. Better to stay here and starve.”

There was a cracking noise and the handle of the china mug Nate was holding split in two. Nate got up and left the room. “Let him go,” said Mr. MacKinnon. “Let him cool down.”

Tyson woke up the next morning anticipating another day of MacKinnon family wrangling, but before they could get started Mrs. MacKinnon arrived back from fetching the bread with the news that Nate had gazumped them all.

“Well,” said Mrs. MacKinnon tight voiced, coming in and putting the bread on the table with an audible thump. “Kitty down the bakery tells me congratulations when I come in to get the bread. And when I ask what for, she says, sly as anything, ‘Why Kathy, I expect your boy’s going to marry
that Omega now, ain’t he?’ And if that gossip Kitty knows, everyone in Denver knows. But what I wonder is, how does she know? And do you know what she told me?” Here she paused and swept her gaze across them. “She says she heard it from Mrs. Forsberg, who heard it from Mrs. Sakic, who heard it from Mrs. Roy, who, surprise, heard it from her son last night.”

She turned to Nate and said quietly, “Tell me you didn’t go straight to the Roy brothers to spread the news when we thought you stepped out to simmer down last night.”

“I did,” Nate said looking her straight in the eye. “I’ll tell the truth and shame the devil.”

Mrs. MacKinnon slapped him across the face hard enough to make him stagger, the crack ringing across the room. “Devil’s in you, boy,” she said. “You goddamn idiot.”

Nate straightened back up and brought his hand to his mouth, checking for blood. “Ma,” he said, “Come on now.”

The younger children were milling around distressed by the fighting, but Mr. MacKinnon waved them off. “Go on,” he said, “Ma’s just real mad, but there isn’t going to be anymore slapping, hey? Nate and Mr. Landeskog are going to get engaged today. You girls want to take the little boys and go get the milk and eggs, and then we’ll have flapjacks to celebrate? We’ll have syrup and applesauce.” Cheered at the promise of sweeties, the youngest six trooped out the door in a crowd of chatter.

Nate waited till they left and then he turned to his mother. “Ma,” he said, catching her hand gently, “I’m sorry, but it’s done, I made sure of that. I ain’t going to keep arguing for days, Mr. Landeskog’s not up for it.”

Mrs. MacKinnon ripped her hand away from him and he looked hurt. “You damned fool,” she hissed. “You don’t know what you’ve done. You got no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“That’s true,” said Nate. “But I know for sure what will happen if I don’t do this now.” Mrs. MacKinnon, looking defeated for the first time Tyson had ever seen, turned away from Nate without a word and went into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Mr. MacKinnon looked over at Nate reproachfully.

“You maybe could have done that a little more gracefully,” he said. “Now you upset your Ma.”

“Pa,” Nate said, “Come on. A five year engagement wouldn’t have been long enough for Ma, not for me, and the fighting was upsetting Mr. Landeskog. He’s going to be my husband; I got the same responsibility to him you do to Ma.” Mr. MacKinnon looked thoughtful instead of angry and tilted his head at Nate.

“Yeah, alright,” he said begrudgingly. “That’s the spirit.”

“Sorry about the fuss,” said Nate, sitting back down at the table across from Tyson. “Want to get married?”

“Guess so,” said Tyson with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “Your mouth is bleeding.”

“Hmm, so it is,” Nate said, looking at his fingers. He shrugged. “Well, that still went better than I expected, thought there’d be a lot more wrangling.

There anything in particular you need to be engaged? Something your people do?” asked Nate.
“No,” Tyson said slowly, “we just announce our Promise in Church. The commitment before the Community is binding. Sometimes we might have a poesy ring, but not always.” He didn’t want to explain an Omega marriage was subject to months, sometimes years of intense formal negotiation and that the announcement in church was made after the exchange of written contracts and the dowry. The idea that Tyson could make this decision on his own, and give himself away for nothing was antithetical to everything the Community had taught him about Omegas. And yet, he thought, how had that served him, or Gabe, to be sold off as a Blessing? Maybe this was a fairer exchange. He knew Nate would give him full measure.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“Pretty much the same,” Nate said. “People will start to come by this afternoon to congratulate us, now the news is out.”

“So are we engaged now, then?” Tyson asked.

“Guess we are,” said Nate, smiling.

“Did you really go out last night to tell your friend?” Tyson wanted to know.

Nate rubbed his hand over his face, embarrassed. “I did,” he said. “Ma won’t bend until the decision is made, sometimes, and we could have been fighting til the baby come; I don’t want that for you.”

“Your Ma going to stay mad?” Tyson asked.

“Nah, she’ll get over it,” Nate said. “She’s just mad because I’m so young.” He looked pensive. “She’s not wrong, you know. I am too young, but I’ll try real hard to do right by you and the baby.”

“Thank you,” said Tyson, “I’m sorry you had to do this.”

“No have about it,” said Nate cheerfully. “I chose to, and I ain’t counting the cost.”

* * *

“Alright,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, emerging from the bedroom with a face like thunder. “Let’s get going. You,” she said, pointing at Tyson, “come on boy, I’m not too pleased with you either right now, but we’ve got to get started making some buns, we’re going to have all of Denver through here this afternoon. Nate says you can cook a bit, so come here and you can help.”

Tyson got up and went to her, a little hesitant as he didn’t want a slap, but all she did was tweak his ear gently. “Not your fault, boy,” she said. “I know that.”

“We going to have flapjacks too, Ma?” asked Nate, which Tyson thought was really pushing it, but Mrs. MacKinnon just gave him a dour look.

“Ask your Pa,” she said, he’s the one talking about flapjacks.”

“I’ll do them, Kathy,” Mr. MacKinnon said. “How many do you boys reckon you can get through?”

“Twenty easy,” said Nate with perfect confidence, but Mr. MacKinnon scoffed at him.

“Last time you had fifteen and you moaned for an hour, so I don’t see how you’re going to manage twenty.”

“Still growing,” said Nate, grinning and patting his stomach. “We’re all growing out at our place, some of us upwards and some of us sideways.”
Here Tyson shot him a look, but Mrs. MacKinnon interrupted before he could say anything. “Well he ain’t growing enough, boy,” she said to Nate, gesturing at Tyson. “He’s at least one third gone, maybe half, and you couldn’t tell to look at him. It’s a good thing the haying is done, because if you want to have any chance of keeping that baby you’re going to have to let him rest, and feed him up.” Nate grinned at her and she glared back, still angry.

“I will Ma,” he said eagerly. “I’ll take care of him; I’ll do just what you say.”

“Hmmph,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Then go on down and talk to the pastor. What can’t be cured must be endured, and we might as well get this done tomorrow as next week.”

Late that night, alone in the kitchen, Mrs. MacKinnon turned to Tyson. “Now you ain’t going to do anything stupid, are you boy?” she asked.

“Like what?” he asked, confused as to what she meant. It seemed to him all the stupid decisions had already been made.

“Like chuck yourself down the stairs, or drink lye?”

“No, Missus” he said, resigned. “I’m going to do like you said, I’m going to try to find a way to bear it.”

“Good,” she approved, “good. You already know Nate better than most new marrieds, and he’s a good boy. That’s more than many have to start with. With a good will you two can build something together. But listen - “ she fixed him with a fierce look, the same look he had seen Nate bring out on occasion when he was readying to punch a man or grab a runaway horse - “I know that boy, better than you, I know him right down to his bones. One day you’ll know him better than me, but not yet. And I want to tell you, if you let him, he’ll love you faithfully the rest of his life. I hope you can see that, that you been dealt several unfair hands, but now you got something fine given to you.”

“I do see that,” Tyson whispered, “I do. But it’s hard.”

“I know it is, boy,” she said. “And it ain’t fair, but here we are. Now I’m going to tell you something else. I’m not going to give you the talk about marital relations I would give my daughter the night before she married - you been married before, and I really don’t know what to say anyway, seeing as you’re marrying my son, but what I want to tell you is about the cat. Nate ever tell you how he got Cat?”

“No,” said Tyson. He didn’t see what the MacKinnon pet cat, a large ugly grey brute, had to do with marital relations.

“Nate tell you about the fire?”

“No,” he said again. “Well, I know you lost your farm two years ago in a fire, and you moved into town. Why?”

“I told you yesterday,” she said, “I’ve had ten babies but only eight living. One was Minnie, a long time ago, she came between Nate and Mary, and when she was only five months she took the summer diarrhea and was gone in a week.”

“I’m sorry Missus,” Tyson said.

“It’s done,” she said, waving him off. “I hope to see her in Heaven, but it was a long time ago, and it
ain’t so fresh as it was. She was a good baby though, fat and happy, just learning to sit up. Nate was only two when she passed, so he knows about her but he don’t remember anything much.” She wiped her eyes with her apron and sighed. “But the other was Rose. It goes Sarah, Nathan, Minnie, then a pause, then Mary, Elizabeth, Alice, then Robert, William, Thomas and then Rose. Rosie was the baby but she was Nate’s baby especially. He was fifteen when she was born, and I was laid up for a long time after, so he took particular care of her while Sarah ran the house, and he just loved that baby like it was his own. He’d carry her around all day, he doted on her so.” She smiled, remembering, and then continued.

“She was asleep in the house when the fire come down the valley. I was alone with the little boys up in the garden by the river, and I got the boys in the water and then I went back for her but I was too late. I couldn’t get anywhere near the house, though I tried.” Here she stopped and looked down at her hands on the table. “I tried,” she went on, voice gravelly, “but I failed, and they tell me she didn’t suffer, but I ain’t so sure of that. I don’t see how that baby wouldn’t have called out for me, wondering why I didn’t come.” She petered to a stop and wiped her eyes again with her apron.

Tyson felt he could have used a swipe of it too. She cleared her throat and went on. “Anyway, Nate and Graham had to go through what was left of the house, looking for her. Took two days - they had to pull the second floor down real careful and use a ladder, the frame was so burnt. I was no use, my hands were so burnt, and coughing up black for a week.”

“Did they find her?” Tyson asked.

“They found her,” she said grimly. “What was left to find. Nate was sixteen when he helped me do the last service we could offer that baby and dress her nice and bury her.“

“I’m sorry, Missus,” Tyson said softly.

“Thank you,” she said, knuckling at her eyes. “I tell myself I got eight out of ten and that’s more than many got, and I should be grateful, but I’m not. I’m just angry. Anyway. Whole family was deep in grief but Nate was almost unhinged. We were worried for him, but he found a kitten day she was buried, near where the house was. It must have been in a nest that got burnt over cause we never found the mother, and all the other kittens was dead, but this one was alive, just barely. It was about two weeks old, eyes still closed, and burnt all over. It was the ugliest goddamn thing, fur burnt off, all patchy raw skin weeping. I told Nate to let me put it out of its suffering but he wouldn’t have it.” She cleared her throat. “You know kittens at all?” she asked.

“No,” he said, “they’re base so we never had animals in the house.”

“Hmmm. Well, a kitten that young can’t even shit by itself, you got to wipe its bottom with a wet cloth to make it go, and feed it milk with a medicine dropper every hour, and of course they piss all the time. They are pretty base, really, and not the kind of thing you’d want down your shirt, but that’s what Nate did, he carried the damn thing around for a month, tucked into his undershirt so it stayed warm enough, feeding it every hour. It gave him something to do to take his mind off Rosie, you see. The only thing you can do for burns is rub butter on them, so he did that too. You never seen anything so disgusting; it looked like a horrible little scabby potato, and the smell! Rancid butter and cat piss, my God. He carried that slimy little bastard around, willing it to live and it did, although it was very touch and go for a while.

Anyway, that was Cat. I want you to consider this before you get yourself too worked up about tomorrow night. Boy that’s willing to rub butter all over a stinking cat and carry it around in his shirt for a month in the place of his baby sister isn’t a boy that’s going to hurt you.”

“That’s no guarantee though,” said Tyson, not disagreeing but not convinced either. “Mr. Landeskog wasn’t a bad man either. He acted according to Community standards. The fault was in me.”
“Fault’s not in you boy, and it wasn’t in me either. The fault’s in our circumstances. We did our best and it wasn’t good enough. Mr. Landeskog did his best too, maybe.”

“He did,” said Tyson, “but I didn’t. I never truly desired to serve him like I should, and so it hurt. I need to have a servant’s heart.”

“Bullshit,” Mrs. MacKinnon said harshly, and Tyson looked up at her, startled. “You ain’t required to desire to serve him none. You’re required to do a good day’s work, work you may or may not have the heart for, but you gotta do anyway. But you ain’t required to like it. You think I liked washing shitty diapers for twenty years? I didn’t.”

Tyson just looked at her. He was ashamed to say he’d never given a second thought to what the women of motherly age might have liked or not liked. Their role was simply to keep sweet and do the backbreaking work uncomplainingly.

“The inside of your head is your own,” she said, “no matter what anyone tells you different.” She wiped her eyes again with her apron. “God,” she said, “all we seem to do together is cry. I’m looking forward to a better time soon when we’ll be happier, and I hope you are too. Now go on to bed. We’ll have cinnamon buns in the morning, and I saved some lemon juice to make a sugar icing with, and I think you’ll enjoy it. You want raisins in them?”

“Yes please,” Tyson said.

“Raisins in half,” she said, “because raisins is disgusting little dead grape lumps in my opinion. Now go, you’re getting married tomorrow.”

* *

The marriage ceremony in a Reform church, Tyson discovered, was a great deal less formal than an Orthodox Omega wedding. Mrs. MacKinnon found him a new shirt, and he’d redone his crown with the fascinated help of Nate’s crowd of little sisters. But there was no silent procession through the church, no penance done the night before, no vigil, no separate service. There was certainly no exchange of contracts, or the gifts of dozens of heavy bracelets made of many thousands of dollars worth of gold, left behind when they left Victoria, but Nate did come to him the morning of the wedding, hesitant, and offer him a posy to wear in his buttonhole. Nate also had a new shirt, and his old Sunday best pants, and when Tyson saw him without his hat while they were waiting on the porch for Mrs. MacKinnon to finish supervising the dressing of the little ones, he realised Nate had cut his hair and shaved.

“You look very fine,” he said, wanting to acknowledge Nate’s efforts.

“Thanks,” said Nate shifting from foot to foot nervously. “You look - did you put that posy in your hair?”

Tyson had; no Omega would walk to marry without a gift of at least a gold pin in their crown. Tyson himself had worn both the richly decorated Landeskog and Barrie combs, walking silently down the aisle to meet Gabe with the heavy jewels catching the light and telling the onlookers of his value. Nate didn’t understand, but Tyson did, and if these flowers were the only gifts his new husband gave him, he would honour him by wearing them.

“Yeah,” said Tyson, “back home, we always… you know.” He didn’t know how to explain what it meant to marry an Omega to someone outside the Community, that Nate was now charged with the central religious purpose of their community, keeping alive the memory of the Covenant. More prosaically, Nate had also acquired an enormously valuable asset, marriage to an Omega providing
social, financial and religious capital. Tyson wasn’t sure he wanted Nate to know any of this.

“You always what back home?” Nate asked.

“The Omegas, we always… we would have big weddings, and we wear things in our crown,” Tyson said, sorry he had brought it up. He didn’t want Nate to think he was complaining about their much simpler ceremony. “Omegas, we’re a Blessing and a Covenant, but we’re also walking capital, and we gotta have big weddings to keep up the appearances, you know?”

“What do you mean, walking capital?” Nate asked.

“Omegas bring a bride price,” Tyson said, writhing internally. He knew what the next question was going to be, but could see no way of avoiding it.

Sure enough, Nate asked, “How much was yours?” and Tyson winced.

“How thousand?” he tried.

“How many thousand?” Nate pressed.

Tyson knew exactly, it had been a hundred days wonder among the traditional community, but he didn’t want to say. The Landeskogs had insisted on the prettiest Omega of his generation and proposed removing him from his home community for breeding purposes and had been charged accordingly. “Hundred fifty thousand dollars,” he whispered, “half cash, half jewelry I wore at the wedding.”

“Holy shit,” said Nate staring at him wide eyed. “And now you got a couple flowers I picked in the backyard.”

“Don’t want any jewelry,” Tyson said. “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold. That’s Proverbs,” he added, “but it’s still Scripture.”

Nate looked deeply sceptical. “You got the whole Bible memorized?” he asked.

“No,” said Tyson, “obviously not. Just the Pentateuch and some other bits. Why?”

“Obviously,” echoed Nate, but they couldn’t get further into the argument because the six little MacKinnons poured out the door in a clatter of boots and well brushed hair.

Tyson didn’t want to leave it like that, but he couldn’t imagine a way to articulate more clearly the jumble of feelings he had right then, waiting to head to the altar a second time. He had no regrets about the poverty of this second wedding but he was afraid of everything the future held: afraid of the winter, afraid of giving himself over to any Alpha again, afraid of the wedding night, deeply ambivalent about the baby unwillingly lodged inside him, and gradually becoming more aware of a conviction that Nate was a rock solid choice to rest his hopes on.

“This is good,” he said in a near whisper, “I like this. I like you.”

“Alright then,” said Nate, taking his hand for the first time, “that’s good, because you’re stuck with me now.”

They simply stood up after the regular Sunday Service when the pastor signalled, and walked to the front of the congregation side by side and listened to his blessing. He asked them to clasp hands and
recite the promise, and it was then that it became evident Nate didn’t know Tyson’s first name.

“I, Nathan MacKinnon,” he began, the words familiar to everyone, “do take you, aahh …” He looked over at Tyson, eyes panicked, and Tyson realised Nate had never called him anything but Mr. Landeskog. How ridiculous, he thought, that they were marrying without even knowing each other’s full names.

“Tyson Barrie,” Tyson prompted him, leaving out the Landeskog that was no longer his. A titter rippled through the congregation as people realised what had happened.

“... do take you, Tyson Barrie,” Nate started again, and the familiar words carried on.

Tyson was too busy thinking about how odd it was to hold Nate’s hand, which was larger than his and calloused in different ways, to do more than mutter responses when prompted, and soon it was done. They were married.

Nate didn’t release his hand but used it to tow him down the aisle to the door before the rest of the congregation got there. Apparently they were expected to stand there and accept congratulations from the town. It was an uncomfortable better part of an hour for Tyson, dodging extended hands again and again as Nate said “Omegas don’t touch,” as respectfully as he could while shaking hands without letting go of Tyson. Eventually Nate put an arm around his waist and switched sides with him so that Tyson was tucked between Nate and the wall to more effectively block the townspeople. Finally Nate had shaken hands with or been kissed on the cheek by every member of the town, and they could make an escape. They headed down the street for the short walk to the MacKinnon house, still holding hands. Tyson felt enormously exposed touching an Alpha, even his new husband, in public, but he supposed if Nate thought it was alright it must be. Still, he was glad when they came in sight of the house.

Mrs. MacKinnon, who had sat through the church ceremony with a face like thunder, was standing among the cavorting children next to a large, dripping block of ice and a ice cream maker. She had a large pan of custard in her hands. “Look,” Mary cried, “Ice!” The children were dancing around in excitement at the thought of the luxury of ice cream on the unseasonally hot day.

“Hello, Ma,” Nate said, hesitantly. Mrs. MacKinnon still did not look at all pleased. She didn’t smile, but she did put the pan down carefully, rather than heaving it at Nate as Tyson sensed she wanted to.

“Ice cream,” she said unnecessarily. “You’re still a god damned idiot, but it’s your wedding day, and you only get one, so I borrowed the Forsberg’s ice cream maker.”

“Thank you Ma,” Nate said gratefully, accepting the olive branch. “Give it here and I’ll crank.”
Tyson sat down next to Nate on the bed still covered with the Wedding Ring quilt he’d been given on his marriage to Gabe, now faded from the aggressive washing with vinegar Mrs. MacKinnon had put it through to clean the disease from it. The straw filling the mattress was new, though, the old burned up in the same cleaning. He missed the luxurious feather pillows they’d brought from back East - they’d been burned also, and there was no money to replace them. He’d met his marital responsibilities to Gabe under this quilt many times, and he’d do the same for Nate. Resigned, Tyson stood to pull the bed cover down but Nate caught his wrist before he could reach it.

“We’re married,” Nate said, disbelievingly, and Tyson looked down at his wrist where Nate’s hand held him. He liked Nate so much, and he wished he could have remained his Little Brother, but they were rapidly reaching an end to their good fellowship. He didn’t think he could feel the same about a man who did that to him, although he knew Alphas felt more affectionate towards their spouses if they obediently didn’t make a fuss about marital relations.

Still. Nate was very gentle, for an Alpha. He thought of the list of Nate’s virtues he had reeled off for Mrs. MacKinnon and tried to be brave. “Yes,” he said, and Nate pulled him closer until Tyson was standing directly in front of him.

“We’re married,” Nate said again and kissed the underside of Tyson’s wrist. Tyson’s heart sank. Right up to that first touch he had cherished a small, faint hope that Nate would not ask him to do that.

“I suppose you want to…” he said, and Nate smiled up at him, thumb sweeping over Tyson’s wrist where his lips had been.

“Well yes,” he said, “I do, I been waiting for this for years. We’re married now, Tyson, we can do as we like.” He seemed to think this was a license that would recommend itself to Tyson, but it really, really wasn’t.

“Alright,” Tyson whispered. Better to get it over with, he supposed. “Do you know how it’s done, or shall I tell you?”

Nate was sitting very still, looking rather stiff and worried. “Well, I’ve seen the cattle at it,” he said “and I reckon I can make out well enough. Do you know how it is done?”

“I’m a widower,” Tyson said. “Of course I know.”

Nate looked up at that and smiled. “Well then,” he said. “We’re all set.” He reached for Tyson and Tyson, contrary to all his good intentions, froze instantly. Nate completed the movement, his hand ending up on Tyson’s other wrist. “You alright there?” Nate asked. Tyson nodded sharply, throat too dry to speak, and Nate tilted his head, looking at him assessingly, but he seemed to decide Tyson was telling the truth, or merely had first night nerves, or perhaps, thought Tyson, Nate didn’t care how he felt, but simply wanted to do what he’d been waiting on for so long. Whatever the reason, Nate smiled sweetly and stood up, still holding onto Tyson’s wrists.

“Come on, Tyson,” he said coaxingly. “Come to bed.”

Tyson swallowed, staying within Nate’s grip, but he couldn’t bring himself to lie face down on the bed as he knew he should. Instead, he just stood there, looking blankly at Nate, waiting for an order from his new husband. His new Alpha. God help them both, he was now in the charge of an
eighteen year old boy. The smile slowly slipped off Nate’s face, and his hands slid down Tyson’s arms to hold his hands. “Do you not want to?” asked Nate softly. “We don’t have to.”

Tyson pulled his hands away from Nate and his answer was more abrupt than he’d meant it to be. “Wants got nothing to do with it. It’s got to be done. I’d appreciate if you could be gentle, keeping in mind the baby.”

Nate looked back at him, hurt and appalled, but said nothing. They froze there, the two of them standing beside the bed, staring at each other. It was painfully obvious to Tyson that this was going nowhere, and so he steeled himself and climbed on the bed. He took a deep breath and lay down with his face cradled in his hands. He’d found that if he blocked out all the light and focused on his own noisy breathing, amplified by his cupped hands, he could ignore to some degree the use of his body. There was a long pause where Nate did nothing. Was he looking at him? Was he regretting this marriage? What was the boy doing? Surely he couldn’t be having second thoughts, Tyson had seen Nate hard in his pants, looking at him. Why couldn’t he get it over with? Tyson surreptitiously wiped a couple stray tears away with his thumbs.

Nate put his hand on Tyson’s shoulder and Tyson flinched. “Are you crying?” said Nate with great gentleness. “Tyson, are you crying?”

“Of course I’m not crying,” Tyson said, turning his head to one side to look at Nate. “Get on with it.”

“Do… do you miss the other Mr. Landeskog?” Nate asked in the same tone. "Is that why you’re crying?”

“I’m not crying!” insisted Tyson. Nate stood next to him and patted clumsily at his shoulder.

“Well, you are a bit,” he said. “Do you miss him very much?”

“Can we please just get this over with?” Tyson said miserably, turning his face back into his hands.

“Get what over with?” said Nate. “You just flung yourself face down on the bed crying because you miss your first husband, and I don’t know that we’re getting much more than that done right now.”

“What are you talking about?” said Tyson, peeking back out. “Get the mating over with.”

“The what?” Nate said. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Tyson rolled over to his side to goggle at Nate who was being surprisingly stupid. “Marital relations. The thing. Like you said, we’re married now and you’ve got rights. Don’t you want to?”

Nate paused and looked at Tyson. Tyson could feel his eyes travelling over him slowly.

“You got no idea how much I want to,” Nate said fervently. “But not while you’re crying for God’s sake. And I thought we could maybe kiss a little first.”

“I’d rather just get it over,” Tyson said, feeling pulled taut, waiting for the inevitable. Any other time he would have been keen to explore the idea of kissing, but not now.

“Get it over with,” Nate mouthed after Tyson. “Get it over with? Hold on,” said Nate, “you don’t miss the other Mr. Landeskog - you’re afraid.” His eyes narrowed and he looked Tyson over again, this time quite differently. “You are, aren’t you,” he said in dawning comprehension. “You’re afraid.”
“Well, what if I am,” said Tyson. “That’s normal.”

"Is it?” said Nate. "I’m not afraid."

This was too much for Tyson to bear obediently and he shot up in the bed and pointed accusingly at Nate. "Of course you’re not afraid!” he barked. "You don’t have to get a huge great sausage stuffed up your passage. What have you got to be afraid of!"

Nate’s face travelled through several different emotions and settled on poorly disguised amusement. "You make it sound so nice,” he said. "My. I’m getting all fired up again."

"Sorry Alpha,” Tyson said, looking down submissively. Why couldn’t he ever keep his mouth shut?

"Oh no, don’t start that again,” Nate said. "You go on and say what you like. At least now we’re getting somewhere. Why’re you afraid?”

“Hurts,” muttered Tyson.

“Hurts?” said Nate. “No, only the first time, and you done it before.” Tyson looked down at his hands and shrugged. He wasn’t going to argue with Nate about it but it definitely hurt. And more than hurt, it was a grave violation of his self, but he didn’t know how to convey that to Nate who was obviously keenly excited for his first time.

“Don’t you like it?” Nate asked. “I thought you would… I mean, I assumed you having been married before, you know, you must be missing it.”

“Like it?” said Tyson, driven to honesty by distress. “Why would I like it? I hate it.”

Nate sat down heavily on the bed. “You hate it?” he said. “That’s why you were crying?”

“I wasn’t crying,” said Tyson. He wasn’t a baby, to cry and carry on at the thought of marital responsibilities. Well. He was, a bit, but Nate didn’t need to know that, and anyway. He hadn’t been crying, exactly, he’d been breathing deeply.

“Yes you were,” said Nate. “You were crying, and you had your face in your hands like you were afraid, and when I touched you, you pulled away. Did you think I would hurt you?”

“No, Alpha,” Tyson said, although he was lying. He knew Nate was going to hurt him.

“But why do you hate it?” Nate said, speaking aloud as he thought. “If you don’t think I’m going to hurt you, then… did the other Mr. Landeskog hurt you?” Tyson looked away from Nate’s gaze. He wasn’t going to speak against Gabe, who had done nothing wrong and had only demanded what was his right.

“But how could he hurt you?” Nate said, honestly bewildered. “He must have loved you, and been careful, surely? I’ll be careful, Tyson. It’s meant to be fun, and to help us love each other. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I’m sure you can show me.”

Nate’s words sounded so much like Tyson’s own thinking before his wedding to Gabe that he was forcefully reminded of his innocent hopes which had foundered so abruptly on that first night, and he started crying again despite his best resolutions.

“Don’t,” said Nate softly, “oh, Tyson, don’t. Come on, baby, don’t cry.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said, ”sorry, Alpha, I’m sorry. Just go ahead, I’ll stop.” He didn’t want to drag this
“Go ahead and what?” Nate said. “Are you telling me to fuck you while you’re crying?” Tyson nodded and wiped at his eyes with his hands.

“It’s alright,” he said, “I don’t mind.” In a burst of honesty, he added, “I’d start crying during anyway, so it doesn’t make any difference,” and Nate suddenly looked like he had realised something.

“Are you telling me,” he said slowly and dangerously, “are you saying, Landeskog used to make you cry, and then just keep going? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Tyson answered. “That’s normal.”

“That can’t possibly be normal,” Nate said. “Did that happen everytime?”

“Yes?” Tyson said, unsure what answer Nate was looking for.

“Jesus Christ,” said Nate, getting up to rummage through his belongings for a hanky. “No wonder you hate it.” He found one, clean but crumpled, and brought it back to Tyson. “Come here, baby,” he said, sitting back down beside Tyson and carefully mopping at his face. “I’m calling a stop to this. This is a goddamn disappointment but you’re terrified and upset, and I’ve got to be up to do the hay tomorrow so let’s just go to bed, and there won’t be no mating tonight.”

“I’m sorry,” Tyson said again, feeling deeply Nate’s use of the word disappointment. “I am sorry, Alpha, I’m sorry I disappointed you, I’ll try to do better.” Nate looked at him oddly.

“I said I would see you safe,” he said gently. “Do you think I’m excusing myself from that? I’m not. Now budge over and let me lie down.”

“You’re going to sleep here?” Tyson asked. “In the bed with me? Not in the kitchen?” His voice might have betrayed his strong preference for Nate sleeping in the kitchen. Tyson was familiar with the state young men woke up in of a morning.

“No, sorry,” Nate said, looking disagreeable for the first time that evening. “I’m sleeping in this bed. I been waiting for this night since I was thirteen and looks like I’ll be waiting some time longer after all and I can live with that, but by God I’m a married man now and I don’t aim to sleep on the goddamned kitchen floor with the mice one more night.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said, yet again. There didn’t seem to be anything else to say.

“Oh, I hardly think any of this is your fault,” Nate said in a tone that suggested it was just as well Alpha Landeskog wasn’t still alive. “Now is it going to scare you if I give you a cuddle?”

“I… don’t know,” Tyson answered honestly. He could remember wanting to be held and petted early in his first marriage, but touch had quickly turned to something to fear. In the cold of last winter he and Alpha Landeskog had slept with their backs pressed together for warmth, but no more. Alpha had been displeased with him for his constant talking and failure to serve willingly, and he didn’t deserve attention beyond what Alpha chose to give.

“Let’s find out,” Nate said, lying down and arranging the two of them until he was satisfied with their positions, Tyson lying on his side, back pressed against Nate’s chest, Nate’s bad arm supported by Tyson’s body. “Oh, yeah, that’s the stuff,” Nate said, relaxing. “You alright?”

“Yes?” Tyson said, bewildered. Was Nate really going to go to sleep when he had just said how
much he had been looking forward to exercising his rights? Nate was slumped against him, breathing into his neck and rumbling gently with every breath; he didn’t seem to pose a threat at the moment.

“You go to sleep,” Nate ordered. His arm tightened around Tyson and his rumble turned into a growl. “And don’t you worry about none of this. You’re mine,” he said fiercely. “You’re mine and I’m yours and he can’t touch you no more.” Nate heaved an enormous sigh, and his body relaxed where he was wrapped around Tyson. More prosaically, he added, “I’ll take what I can get and you smell terrific. Like fancy soap, and you feel so nice and warm, and we’re married now and sleeping in this bed together. Go on to sleep baby, we’ll work it all out in the morning.”

They didn’t work it all out in the morning. Tired from lying awake worrying next to Nate for hours, Tyson slept later than usual and Nate slept deeply beside him until they were woken by EJ pounding on the door. Nate started awake at the first crash, arm tight around Tyson.

“Get your ass out here, MacKinnon,” Johnson yelled, letting himself in by the latch string. “I know you busted your arm on Friday but you can still drive the horses.”

Tyson and Nate looked at each other and Nate laughed. “Don’t get up,” he whispered. “That nightgown really is see through.” Tyson pulled the blankets over his head, embarrassed, and Nate laughed again.

Johnson’s boots came clomping across the floor and Tyson could hear him clearly through the bedding.

“Are you still in bed?” EJ said, scandalized, footsteps stopping at the bedside. He kicked the bedframe with one large boot. “MacKinnon? Where’s the Omega? Oh!” Tyson peeked up and Johnson was standing over them with his hands on his hips, looking down at both of them. “MacKinnon, you are in so much trouble,” Johnson said, sounding gleeful at the prospect, but Nate was equal to the situation.

“You married the Omega? How the hell did you swing that?” he asked. “I’m twenty five and I can’t afford to get married. Wait...” He got a calculating look on his face and Tyson braced for whatever awful thing he was going to say next.

“You did not,” EJ said, mouth hanging open.

“Did too,” Nate said pleasantly, pulling on his pants. “And I’ll thank you not to assume my husband would do anything shameful, because he wouldn’t, and he didn’t.” Tyson watched this exchange from the bed, embarrassed to be seen lying in bed by Johnson but conscious getting up would expose even more of him. Johnson peered back at him disbelieving.

“You married the Omega? How the hell did you swing that?” he asked. “I’m twenty five and I can’t afford to get married. Wait...” He got a calculating look on his face and Tyson braced for whatever awful thing he was going to say next.

“Hold up,” Nate said, one hand in the air. “Wait, wait, I got to get my boots on.” EJ looked puzzled but obeyed, saying nothing while Nate finished lacing up his boots and pulled his wool shirt on gingerly over his bad arm. “Oh, hang on,” Nate said. “I need to strap my arm up.” EJ opened his mouth to speak and Nate held up his hand again. “Ah,” he said. “Wait!” and EJ snapped his mouth back shut. Nate fumbled with the sling his mother had given him for a minute but couldn’t do it one handed. He crossed back over to the bed and knelt beside Tyson. “Can you fix this for me, baby?” he asked Tyson. “Just sit up,” he whispered, “but keep the blankets over your lap and he won’t see nothing.” Tyson did as he was told, conscious of EJ’s eyes on him the whole time. It felt very strange
to be touching Nate, especially with an audience, but of course as Nate said, they were married and they had done nothing shameful. Finally, he got the sling tied around Nate, his arm bound firmly to his side and Nate stood back up. “Feels good,” he said, twisting to test it. “Thanks, baby.” He took several deliberate steps away from the bed and turned towards Johnson.

“All right EJ, spit it out,” he said. “Say whatever stupid thing you got to say.”

“Did you get him in a condition?” Johnson said in a rush. “Did he have to marry you?” Nate rolled his eyes and looked over at Tyson who didn’t feel quite so cavalier about it. Johnson wasn’t entirely wrong.

“No one,” Nate said quellingly, “did anything shameful. Omega MacKinnon and I married because we decided to, when he found out he was expecting a baby with his first husband.”

“You did,” EJ chortled. “You did, you bullshitter, you got him pregnant! He been married before, I bet he was gagging for it -” He cut off abruptly as Nate’s good hand closed around his throat and Nate drove him to the floor, his knee in EJ’s groin. It was an impressive physical feat considering EJ was three inches and thirty pounds bigger than Nate and Tyson sat further up to get a good view.

“Shut your fucking mouth, EJ,” Nate said, holding EJ down by his throat. “I won’t have it, do you hear me? Don’t you talk about Tyson like that.” Johnson growled at Nate and tried to buck up but Nate bounced EJ’s head off the floor with a sharp rap and he subsided.

EJ lifted his hands to pull at Nate’s bad arm and Nate began to growl and pressed his knee threateningly into EJ’s crotch. EJ subsided in a show of submission, arms and legs loose at his side, head tilted back to bare his neck under Nate’s hand. “Fine,” he said. “Get off me, MacKinnon, we got to do the hay.” Nate growled one last time and climbed off him, still looking displeased as EJ got back to his feet, feeling at his neck.

“You are such an asshole, MacKinnon,” Johnson said, wheezing slightly. “Congratulations, I guess,” he said to Tyson. “Hope you like bossy assholes.”

There wasn’t much Tyson could say to that, and he just watched silently as Nate gathered his hat and gloves and headed out for the day. He had just stood up, feeling bad that Nate hadn’t taken any lunch with him, when Nate darted back in through the door. “I forgot!” he said, returned to the cheerful boy Tyson knew better than the dangerous Alpha prone to taking offense. “I can kiss you goodbye now we’re married! Can I kiss you?”

Tyson nodded. Of course Nate could kiss him, he was the Alpha. He could do whatever he liked. Nate cocked his head and looked at him. “I’m going to need a little more enthusiasm than that,” he said, rather than kissing Tyson on the lips, he bussed him on the forehead, leered comically at his nightgown, grabbed a hunk of left over bread and some cheese, and departed.

Tyson went through his chores by rote, but all day there was an undercurrent of worry. He’d heard the stories - what Omegas wouldn’t give, husbands would take by force, and although Nate had never turned his Alpha strength on Tyson, there was nothing stopping him. As unpleasant as marital relations had been in the past, they were owed to Nate and he had clearly expected it last night. Tyson had expected it last night, and although he hadn’t been looking forward to the act, he had been anticipating maybe some affection after. He’d heard some men got very soft hearted after and Nate seemed like the type. He’d been thinking about Nate’s suggestion that they kiss a while, too. There had hardly been any opportunity to kiss with Gabe before they were married and Gabe grew more interested in other marital activities, but what there had been Tyson had liked.

*
He resolved to try harder that evening, and felt easier in his mind. It was no betrayal of Alpha Landeskog to acknowledge that Tyson felt he knew Nate better than he ever did Gabe, and he was a deal more comfortable with Nate’s free and easy ways. Nate was a patient man, and now that Tyson reflected on it calmly, he thought on the dozens of times he had seen Nate be gentle where he could have used force: smoothly controlling the horses, freeing the idiot chickens when they repeatedly got tangled in the tack in the barn, teaching Tyson to chop wood. Surely Nate could be trusted to be as gentle now, and quick, so it would be as tolerable as possible.

Yes, he thought, he would try harder to suppress any tears, and he wouldn’t say stupid things like asking for it to be gentle, which Nate clearly hadn’t liked, and when they were done, he thought, emboldened, he might ask if they could cuddle a bit as a reward. He’d liked last night, lying curled in Nate’s arms, feeling warm and safe, and if he could have that to look forward to, he thought, he could perhaps tolerate his responsibilities more easily. Nate was an indulgent man. There really was no need to fear him.

“I’m back,” Nate called, and Tyson jumped. He’d been so deep in thought he hadn’t heard the horse or the door as Nate returned from a day haying at the Olson’s. Nate came striding in looking fine, tall and broad, still wearing the moosehide chaps he used when farriering. At some point in the day he had abandoned the sling. He took off his hat and the shorter hair was a surprise again. Tyson abruptly felt shy, overly conscious of the fiasco of last night and of this stranger, his husband. “How you feeling?” Nate asked, laying his hat and the saddlebags on the table. “You fainted or anything today?”

“I feel fine, I’m caught, not dying,” Tyson said, fussing with the dishes for something to do. “Sorry,” he said, cursing himself and his inability to ever keep sweet the way he ought. “I meant, Hello, Alpha.” He considered kneeling but he knew it often didn’t please Nate.

“No, no, no,” Nate said, waving a hand. “Don’t start with that talk again please, just sing out like your own natural self, like you used to do. You were getting positively chatty there before, and I liked it.”

“Sorry, Alpha,” Tyson said, keeping his gaze downcast as he should, and then he realised that was exactly what Nate had told him not to do. “Sorry,” he said again, looking back up at Nate, and Nate laughed and stepped forward.

“Come on,” he said softly, curling one hand around Tyson’s elbow. “We were good friends just last week. Can’t we be good friends now?”

“It’s different now,” Tyson said, not daring to meet Nate’s eyes. “You’re my Alpha, not my Little Brother, and I owe you obedience and respect.”

“What if I don’t want obedience and respect?” Nate asked. “What if I want you being your own self, all sassy and ridiculous, arguing about things?”

“I don’t think you’d really like that Alpha,” Tyson said sadly. “I’ve got an awful lot of that sin nature.”

“No, I think I would,” Nate insisted. “I like you just fine, but the Omega obedience worries me.” Tyson wasn’t sure Nate really understood what he was asking for but rather than get further into it, Nate pulled out a biscuit tin from his saddlebags and waved it at Tyson. “Mrs. Olson sent cookies,” Nate said. “Little fancy ones with bits of cherry. But if you want them, you’re going to have to come get them - ” and so saying, he took off out the front door, waving the tin tauntingly.

Tyson managed to restrain himself, staying sedate as a married Omega should, following Nate
outside at a walk, but he really wanted a cookie. Nate was draped over the porch railing, picking through the cookies but when he saw Tyson, he turned around and began walking backwards, waggling the tin at Tyson. “You want one?” he said through a full mouth. “Go on, have a cookie.” He held the tin out, but when Tyson reached for it, Nate snatched it away. Tyson’s restraint, always paper thin, snapped and he lunged at the tin, laughing.

When Mr. Duchene rode up, neither of them heard him approach as they were wrestling on the ground, laughing wildly as they fought over the cookies. Nate was hampered by his sore arm and concern for Tyson’s bump, but Tyson had no such worries and threw himself merrily into the fight, elbows and knees flailing. As a result, Tyson was sitting triumphantly on Nate’s back, wrestling with the cookie tin while Nate cried out, warning of damaged cookies, when he noticed Alpha Duchene above them, looking down judgmentally from his seat on the horse.

Nate also looked up, noticing Tyson’s silence. “Hello, Matt,” he said brightly. “What’re you doing here?”

"I come to tell you congratulations, and make sure Omega Landeskog’s new Alpha was treating him well, but I see my concern was somewhat misplaced," Mr. Duchene said.

"Omega MacKinnon now," Nate said. "Tys, go on and get off me, will you?"

"Sorry Alpha," said Tyson, and clambered off Nate’s back. He couldn’t believe he’d been treating Nate like Jamie, roughhousing with him as if he were another Omega, and then to be caught at it by an Orthodox Alpha! He stood in the approved posture to greet Mr. Duchene, hands behind his back and his head slightly bowed, eyes firmly trained on the ground.

Mr. Duchene huffed an amused snort. "You’re seeming a great deal more hale than last time I saw you, Omega. You enjoying it out here? It’s a sight less Observant than Victoria, I reckon."

Tyson looked at Nate before he answered, not raising his head but darting looks out of the corner of his eye to track Nate’s reaction to his words. "Yes, Alpha," he said quietly. "Thank you for your concern."

"You can look at me," said Mr Duchene gruffly. "If it’s alright with your Alpha of course."

They both turned to look at Nate, who shrugged. Tyson looked up and met Mr. Duchene’s eyes, and nodded towards Nate. “Thank you Alpha,” he said. "I’m sorry for my display earlier."

“That’s your Alpha’s problem, Bund,” Mr. Duchene said, tone strongly implying Nate had made a stick for his own back.

“Thank you Alpha,” Tyson murmured.

"Good," Mr. Duchene said. "How’s your health?"

Tyson writhed internally but he knew better than to lie. Alpha Duchene doubtless already knew, or at least had heard the rumours, and wouldn’t allow a lie to pass unchastised. "Very well, Alpha, thank you. I’m looking forward to new family visiting next Midsummer time or so."

"Huh," said Mr. Duchene. "I heard that rumour, but you still surprise me."

"God disposes blessings when he will, Alpha," Tyson mumbled. He certainly didn’t feel blessed.

"True enough," Mr. Duchene said. "Should you be wrestling then?"
"Probably not Alpha, I apologize."

"Don’t apologize," Mr. Duchene said absently. "I leave it to your Alpha. Midsummertime, you said?"

"Might be a ways before, we reckon. Maybe as soon as Easter."

"Huh. Now you do surprise me. That’s a situation," He looked consideringly at Tyson. "I hear Mr. Landeskog’s head of house is Gustav Landeskog? The one that does the preaching?"

"Yes Alpha," said Tyson.

"You write to him?"

"Yes Alpha, but haven’t heard back yet."

"Hmmm," said Mr. Duchene. "You ever meet him?"

"No Alpha, just heard family talk of him."

"I’ve met him," Mr. Duchene said, surprising Tyson. "Heard him talk up North. He’s very firm in his belief, I’m sure you’re aware."

"I’ve heard that Alpha," Tyson said.

"I don’t know that he’s going to view you as part of the Community no more," said Mr. Duchene, consideringly. "You aware of that?"

"Yes Alpha," Ty said again, looking down. He knew perfectly well he had failed in his duty by remarrying an outsider and that he and the baby would be regarded as tainted by any Orthodox. He didn’t care so much for himself, but he knew Gabe would have been hurt.

"No, don’t look down," said Mr. Duchene gently. "I ain’t saying I agree with him. I ain’t so Orthodox as all that, Omega. You aren’t part of the Community no more, but you’re still an Omega and a Blessing. It’s for the Lord to decide."

"Yes Alpha," said Tyson again, although inside he was steaming. He didn’t see why this stranger had to show up and offer unsolicited opinions. What business was it of his?

"Tell me though," went on Mr. Duchene. "Are you very sure of when you plan on family visiting?"

"Well," said Tyson consideringly, "could be earlier, I suppose. Alpha Landeskog and I were married in November, so…”

"Rare for an Omega to have family visit so quick," mused Mr. Duchenne. "You quite certain they ain’t coming later? Wouldn’t be nothing a thousand others haven’t done."

Tyson flushed red with anger and shame. He still didn’t understand exactly how Nate could be the father of his baby, given that they were not married, but he understood that was what Alpha Duchenne was implying. "They could not possibly be coming later," he ground out. "Alpha."

Mr. Duchene looked at him calmly. "No need to get testy, Omega. Just asking. How can you be so sure?"

Tyson just stared back at him mutely. He had no idea what to say. "Answer, Omega," Mr. Duchene said. His tone held no warning in it - it didn’t need to. Both he and Tyson understood what would
happen if Alpha Duchene had to ask Tyson a second time. "Don’t make me ask again."

"Only one train ever been to that station, Alpha," Tyson said, at a loss for how else to phrase it.

"Huh," Mr. Duchene said looking over at Nate speculatively. "Wouldn’t have guessed it. Well, I’d expect the Landeskogs are going to be pretty displeased with an Omega got Landeskog baby being raised by an eighteen year old Reform farm boy." Tyson held his tongue - he wasn’t delighted with the circumstances either but he didn’t appreciate the implied criticism of Nate.

Mr. Duchene nodded at Nate. "He have any idea what we’re talking about?"

Stressed and overwhelmed, Tyson bridled at the suggestion he had misled Nate. "Of course he knows!" he snapped. "What do you think I am?" Mr. Duchene’s eyebrows shot up, and Tyson realised what he had said.

"Sorry, Alpha," he said, dropping to his knees, head down. He snuck a look over at Nate, who was looking back at him in shock. Tyson prayed Mr. Duchene wasn’t going to ask Nate to discipline him right now, because it would be extremely embarrassing to be backhanded in public like a child. Or worse, that Nate would give Mr. Duchene permission to do it. Tyson had never been good at being obedient, but he hadn’t stepped so far over the line as to need public discipline since he was fifteen. "Sorry Alpha," he said again, directing it at Nate. "I was wrong to speak out."

"I meant to say, were we talking too much Orthodox for an Outsider to understand, not did he know you were expecting. Now stand up," said Mr. Duchene mildly. "I leave it to your Alpha of course, but my wife’s an Orthodox girl from Saanich, did you know that?"

"No Alpha. Thank you Alpha," said Tyson quietly, getting back to his feet.

"Well she is," said Mr. Duchene. "And you’ll be familiar with the Saanich Orthodox, I suppose, being from Victoria yourself?"

"Yes Alpha," said Tyson, still looking down. He knew what Alpha Duchene was getting at, the Saanich were famously strict. He was definitely going to get pasted in a minute - he just hoped it didn’t hurt the baby. But Alpha Duchene surprised him.

He went on. "Then you’ll understand what I’m saying when I tell you my wife rides a horse, and keeps her own egg money, and no Alpha raises a hand to her?"

Tyson looked up in surprise. Mr. Duchene was apparently somewhat Reformist in his ways. "Think so, Alpha. Thank you, Alpha," he said, relieved. "I appreciate your restraint."

"Hold up," said Nate, coming over to stand between them. "Why are we talking about hands being raised? And why were you kneeling, Tys?"

Mr. Duchene made a ‘tell him’ gesture at Tyson.

"I was disrespectful to an Alpha," Tyson began, "and so Alpha Duchenne would expect to discipline me, or have you do it as my Alpha."

"Discipline how?" said Nate suspiciously.

"However you choose to, Alpha," said Tyson.

"What he’s not telling you," broke in Mr. Duchene, "is that the usual method of discipline is to backhand them across the face until they hit the ground."
"Jesus Christ!" said Nate. He looked at Tyson. "Is that true?"

"Oh yes, Alpha, of course it is."

"Holy Shit," said Nate. "Hold on. Ok, first of all, Matt, you touch him and I’ll kill you. And second, Tyson, there ain’t gonna be no disciplining."

Mr. Duchene rolled his eyes. "Jesus, MacKinnon, did you not just hear me say I wasn’t going to lay hands on him?"

"No," said Nate. "I didn’t. What I heard you say was you weren’t going to raise a hand to your wife, and then I heard you say the usual discipline was to belt a breeding Omega to the floor."

"I was telling him," said Mr. Duchene, huffy, "that although my wife’s people are extremely observant and she could expect physical discipline, I don’t do that because I don’t believe it’s necessary. And I think he understood me just fine, didn’t you, Omega?"

"Yes Alpha," said Tyson, nearly holding his breath. "And I appreciate that Alpha, and I’m sorry I back talked you."

"See?" said Mr. Duchene. “They learn just fine without being hit, so long as you’re firm and consistent; a kind word goes a deal further than a blow, I believe.” His horse shuffled a step and he clucked to it. “And of course,” he went on, “here’s always stress positions if you need to. Even a fallen Omega can kneel on rocks for a morning with no lasting harm.”

"Matt," said Nate. "Are you seriously suggesting I make my breeding husband kneel on rocks for hours as a punishment?"

"Well, only if he needs it," replied Mr. Duchene. "The girls almost never do, but Omegas get bold real easy. Couple hours on the rocks with his hands behind his head’ll calm him right down. You have to make him understand you mean business so he respects you."

"So he respects me?" said Nate, incredulous. "I got no respect for anyone who would do that. I just lost any respect I ever had for you. I never heard such horrible talk. Matt, you even think of disciplining him in any way and I swear to God, I will see you dead."

"Big talk," said Mr. Duchene condescendingly. "Well, that’s because you’re very young, and unfamiliar with Omegas. You’ll learn better, soon enough. Your Omega here can tell you, what I’m proposing is a very liberal Orthodoxy indeed." He turned to Tyson. "This is why we should never marry out," he said. "You and this infatuated boy are going to ruin each other." With that parting shot, he whipped up his reins and left.

Nate stared after him as he left for a long time, and then he turned to Tyson. "There ain’t going to be any disciplining," he said emphatically. "You’re just going to have to govern your own self like the rest of us."

Tyson wasn’t sure what to do. There was nothing it seemed safe to say that wouldn’t escalate the situation. He suppressed the urge to sidle closer to Nate, as he knew from experience that could earn a slap as well. “As my Alpha says,” he tried, a classic of agreement without content.

Nate gave him a look. "You know what I hear when you say them things?" Ty shook his head. "All I hear is “Please don’t hurt me.” “Yes Alpha, No Alpha, I apologize Alpha.” All it means is don’t hurt me.”

Tyson nodded carefully but he didn’t take Nate’s point. Of course he didn’t want to get hurt.
"You eat already?" Nate asked, and Tyson nodded. "Me too, we had Disgusting Ham again at the Olson’s, I think it’s her speciality now. What do you think of just going to bed and talking a while?" He clearly noticed Tyson’s hesitation, and went on. "I’ll tell you right now ain’t going to be anything more than kissing tonight, so you can be easy in your mind."

"I’m happy to do anything you ask, Alpha," Tyson said.

"And if I believed that for one hot second, I’d gladly take you up on it," said Nate.

Tyson couldn’t refute such an obvious truth, but he didn’t want to give Nate the impression he was going to be a problem. "It’s for you to say, Alpha." he said passively. "I’m at your disposal."

"Right, well, dispose yourself into your nightclothes and come over here if you would," said Nate, patting the bed. "Someone’s obviously been mishandling you something fierce, and we’re going to have to talk about it." But once they were both in bed, faced with each other, it didn’t seem so easy to talk. They sat stiffly side by side, Tyson thinking nervousely about the coming night. Nate said nothing but kissing but Tyson didn’t believe him. He’d been very clear last night that he’d been hoping to exercise his marital rights and Tyson didn’t see what there was to stop him.

After a few minutes, Nate spoke. "Do you think," he said tentatively, "you could take down your hair? Is that allowed?"

"Of course it’s allowed," said Tyson, surprised to be asked for such a simple thing. "Hang on, it’ll take a minute," he said, reaching for the pins holding the braids to his head. He was glad he hadn’t bothered sewing them into place as he had done back in Victoria; it took almost an hour and a special pair of scissors to undo that.

"Can I?" said Nate. "Can I do it?"

"Well yes, of course, if you’ve a mind to," Tyson said. Why not, he thought. Not usually an Alpha’s role, but what harm was there?

Nate fumbled with the pins at first, but soon enough caught the trick of it, clever hands releasing the bound up braids so all twelve tumbled down Tyson’s back. Nate smoothed his hands down their glossy length and Tyson leaned back into the caress, humming with pleasure. "It’s beautiful," Nate said. "Just like a bird’s wing." He gathered them together in both his hands and pulled gently and Tyson moaned. The change in weight and pressure after having them up for days was delicious. "Can I undo the braids?" Nate asked.

"Yes Alpha," said Tyson. He was still humming which distantly struck him as odd, but he didn’t care, too caught up in Nate’s hands stroking his head and braids. Nate found the ties at the end of the braids and began to undo them, but then he stopped.

"You’re purring," said Nate in amazement. "I heard Omegas could do that but I didn’t believe it."

"Huh," said Tyson, surprised. "Haven’t done that since I was married, thought I grew out of it. Guess not." Nate wasn’t continuing with the braids, and Tyson squirmed to remind him. "Why’d you stop?"

"Not stopping," said Nate. "Just surprised. Does everyone do that?"

"Not everyone," said Tyson, hoping Nate would keep going. No one had touched his hair since Jamie and it was so familiar and comforting. "Only Omegas."

"Yeah," Nate said "but do all the Omegas purr?"
"All the Observant ones do. Can’t say about anyone else - never really knew an Omega from anywhere else," Tyson said. "Maybe the Orthodox ones don’t? Alpha Landeskog didn’t care for it, told me to stop before we got married, said it was base." He twisted around to look at Nate. "I can stop," he offered. "You want me to stop?"

"Hell no I don’t want you to stop," Nate said. "I never seen anything like it, you just go on and purr whenever you want to. What makes an Omega purr? Is it like a cat?"

"I’m not a cat," said Tyson. "That would be base."

"You think everything’s base," said Nate affectionately, still stroking his hair. "Nothing wrong with cats. They’re very clean and pretty, and they purr when you pet them, and when they’re happy, and to their kittens. You much different?"

"Guess not," said Tyson, a little truculent.

“How many braids you got here?” Nate went on.

"Twelve," said Tyson, "one for each of the Apostles."

"And why’s it so long?” Nate asked. He began the unravelling process on the first braid and Tyson leaned into the gentle tugging, still purring. If Nate didn’t object, he would allow himself to continue.

"It’s Scriptural," Tyson said. "An Omega’s hair remains uncut to mark them as pure, and then the crown goes up at thirteen so everyone, even Outsiders, can tell we’re Omega." Nate moved on to the second braid and Tyson added, "I hear some places Far East do a hundred and eight braids."

"Lotta work," agreed Nate. "So no one touches you from the time your crown goes up until you marry?"

"No Alpha touches us because we are pure,” Tyson told him, “but of course the girls can, and if there are any other Omegas they can too. When I was at home I had five Omegas almost same age as me in town. I was very lucky to have so many."

"Why was that?” said Nate softly. He had moved on to the left hand foundation braid and was slowly running his fingers up it, loosening the strands. Tyson purred and pushed into the pleasure-pain of the release as each part fell.

"Well, you know," he said, “the Community has a much higher rate of Omegas. Some say it’s a sign of God’s favour. But others say it’s just inbreeding."

"No," Nate said, “I mean why was that lucky?"

"Oh. Well, it’s good to have company that understands, and of course someone to wrestle with. Sometimes the girls were envious because we were the Blessings of the Community, but at the same time the discipline for young Omegas is very strict, much stricter than girls, so it was a comfort to have other boys who knew how it was. But then of course they all married before me but Jamie so I didn’t have them anymore for the last few years."

"Did they marry someone nice?” Nate asked, starting on the right hand foundation braid. "Were they much older than them? Omegas marry older, that so?"

"No one nice as you," said Tyson, only realising the truth of it as he said it. Nate just hummed and kept unbraiding. "They were nice enough, I suppose. It’s mostly whoever your father chooses, usually a widower. Omegas make ideal second wives."
"How’d you come to marry Mr. Landeskog then, he being so young?” Nate asked.

“My father’s business was overextended,” Tyson told Nate. He didn’t see any harm in admitting to this, it was all public knowledge. “The Landeskogs made that problem go away, for a while, and they hadn’t had an Omega born to the Landeskogs in three generations - I was supposed to make that problem go away. They told us to marry, though Gabe was awful young. I should have been married when I was eighteen but his family wanted the likeliest Omega, even though I’m two years older than him, and we had to wait three years in the end so he could do military service in Sweden.

"You are very beautiful,” said Nate. "Anyone would think so. Did you love him?"

"I fancied I loved him, while I was waiting for him,” said Tyson. "He wasn’t much of a letter writer, so I just filled in the blanks. I wanted to love him. My people don’t marry for love but we try to let it grow after, and I hoped it might; but then we were married and heading out here because he said so, and there was so much to do, and he was Orthodox, which was hard for me to get accustomed to, what with the not talking unless he said, and the traditional mating, and then he died. I imagine I might have grown fonder of him, in time."

"Did he love you?” Nate asked quietly.

"Oh, I wouldn’t think so, no,” Tyson said. “He wanted an Orthodox Omega and I’m really not much use at that. My people let us talk, you see, and I never could get in the way of Orthodox silence. Too much back talk. He was kind enough though, he could have been much more strict than he was."

“Did he discipline you physically, like Mr. Duchene was talking about today?” Nate asked.

Well sure,” Tyson said, puzzled Nate had to ask. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."

“So he just backhanded you?” Nate asked. “Whenever you talked?” Tyson nodded. “Jesus,” Nate whispered, hands still in Tyson’s hair. “A big fellow like that, hitting you again and again, and you with your pretty ways, and pretty hair, and so eager to please.”

“It was his right, Alpha,” Tyson reminded him. “It’s your right too. And I do talk out of turn, I know I do, and I try not to but I forget, somehow.”

"I like your back talk," said Nate. "I like all your talk; and I don’t see that I have the right to hit nothing smaller than me, and I sure don’t see why you’d enjoy marital relations with nobody that’s thumping you regular. Wait.” Tyson could practically feel Nate coming to a realisation, his body rigid behind Tyson’s. “Did Landeskog hit you if you didn’t want to?”

“Yes, but,” Tyson began, about to explain that had only happened once - he hadn’t made that mistake twice and had usually been able to hold himself still so that Alpha Landeskog had not had to pin him down - but Nate was already reacting. His arms went around Tyson and clamped down as he began a sub vocal growl that was very different from the one he had made while they wrestled. “Jesus Christ,” Nate said again, sounding grieved. “If the Lord made you so special, why’d they treat you like that? How could anyone treat you so unkind?”

"You’re very kind, Alpha,” Tyson said, purring. Despite the growling, he felt more relaxed than he could remember being in years, here in this dim, warm room, being told by this kind Alpha how good he was, while the same Alpha drew his hands through his hair again and again. He would gladly do whatever Nate asked of him.

"And what is traditional mating?” said Nate, and Tyson’s purr faltered.
"Why?" he said, "Do you want to?" He hadn’t expected his resolve to be put to the test so quickly, but if that was what Nate wanted, he would do it.

"Don’t think so, certainly not tonight," said Nate. "Calm down, you’ve gone all stiff. There isn’t going to be any mating tonight, my word on it. But tell me what traditional mating is."

"Yes, Alpha," Tyson said reluctantly. He recited the familiar words, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That everyone of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God:"

"That really didn’t clear nothing up for me," Nate said. "That sounded like the Orthodox try not to do it."

"Ideally, yes," Tyson said. "But it’s better to marry than to burn, so the Orthodox mate as God has decreed, and the model of what God has decreed can be seen in the animal kingdom. But the Orthodox, to abstain from fornication, unlike animals, remain clothed."

"What exactly are you saying?" Nate pressed. "That the Orthodox never drop their drawers, even in the act?"

"That’s it, yes," said Tyson, blushing. He wished Nate would stop this line of inquiry.

"But how can you -"

"Well, obviously you push them aside a bit, and so on."

"And what do you mean ‘the model can be seen in the animal kingdom’? Are you saying you do it from the back, everytime?"

"Well yes. Of course," Tyson said, puzzled. How else?

"And did you like it?"

"I’m happy to meet my Alpha’s needs," Tyson said. He was familiar with the correct response to this, at least.

"But did you like it?"

"Alpha liked it, and I like to please my Alpha," said Tyson tentatively. "What more is there?"

"Hmm," Nate said, sounding displeased, but he kept on slowly running his hands through Tyson’s hair and gradually, Tyson relaxed again. Whatever the source of his displeasure, it didn’t seem to be directed at Tyson.

"And did you kiss?" asked Nate. "Did you like kissing?"

"Oh, yes," said Tyson eagerly, happy to have a question he could answer positively. "I did like kissing. I liked kissing very much. I think Gabe thought other parts were better, but I liked kissing the best of everything."

"Doesn’t hurt, I suppose," Nate said, dry as dust.

"That’s right!" said Tyson, pleased he understood. "I might like kissing you," he said shyly. "Do you think we could maybe do it after mating sometimes as a reward?" This request was too forward for an Orthodox, he knew, but Nate was far more liberal. Nate was flat out over indulgent really, but
Tyson was determined not to take too much advantage of it.

Nate laughed and pulled his handful of Tyson’s hair gently. “We can kiss,” he said in a husky voice. “We can definitely kiss. I think I’d like it too.”

“Thanks Alpha,” Tyson said, and Nate pulled Tyson’s hair to one side and very gently pressed his lips to Tyson’s neck. Tyson froze, afraid this was an overture to mating but Nate seemed to know what he was worried about.

“Nothing but kissing,” Nate said quietly. “I swear it. And only if you want, and no punishment.” Tyson considered this offer for several minutes while Nate continued to run his hands through his hair. Finally he tilted his head slightly, inviting Nate to continue; Nate kissed up his neck slowly, ending up behind Tyson’s ear, a space Tyson was surprised to discover was wildly sensitive. Nate noticed and came back again in the same spot, this time sucking slightly, and Tyson shifted in his seat with pleasure. This wasn’t kissing as he had known it before, but he liked it. He liked it all: Nate’s careful presence, the gentle hands in his hair, the kisses being peppered up and down his neck. Privately, Tyson thought he’d be willing to put up with an awful lot of mating if this was on offer afterwards. “You smell so nice,” Nate said, lips whispering against Tyson’s nape, and Tyson was just about to turn around and see if they could try kissing on the lips when Nate bit, very gently, behind Tyson’s ear and Tyson gave a sort of involuntary squeak.

Nate laughed, but it sounded almost strangled, and he pulled away from Tyson with a sound of some regret. “Alright,” he said, “I could keep at that all day and maybe I will another time but right now I got a couple more questions. I don’t understand why you’re telling me it hurt when you did it.”

Tyson wasn’t sure what answer Nate was looking for. “It just hurts, Alpha,” he said tentatively. “But I understand I have a responsibility, and I won’t shirk it.”

"Hmm," Nate said. “Not sure about that but I’m pretty sure I got a responsibility not to hurt you. Can you tell me, step by step, how you and Landeskog mated?"

"Aaah," said Tyson stalling for time. "Scripturally?" This line of questioning seemed very odd to him, but it was best to humour Nate, he supposed, and really, the talk of mating was a great deal more palatable than actual mating. Maybe Nate didn’t fully understand how to do it?

"Go on," said Nate, shaking him gently. "Tell me, please."

Finally Tyson decided that embarrassment aside, he’d better honour Nate’s request. The evening had been so nice so far, he didn’t want to lose Nate’s favour. "The Omega lies down face first and the Alpha puts his… you know," he said.

"Cock?" said Nate.

"Yes," said Tyson, blushing ferociously. "That. He puts it in and then he goes back and forth until he… you know."

"Knots?" Nate said.

"No!" said Tyson, scandalized. "Omegas aren’t for knotting. That’s not traditional."

“Sorry, what?” Nate said.

“Omegas aren’t for knotting,” Tyson repeated. “Everyone knows that.” Nate thumped his forehead onto Tyson’s shoulder and made a noise of despair.
“Sorry Alpha,” Tyson said, afraid he had ruined the evening.

"Is there a scriptural basis for that?" asked Nate, who seemed to be cottoning on to Orthodox ways.

"Yes, of course," said Tyson, glad to see he understood. "You want me to recite it?"

"Not in the slightest," said Nate. "Just give me the gist."

"The Omega born are a blessing from God, not base with original sin like women born. Knotting is base, so you can’t knot an Omega, it would taint the baby,” Tyson told him.

"Yeah I think I’m starting to see why Omegas don’t catch so easy,” said Nate. "So then he goes back and forth until…"

"Til he finishes," Tyson spat out desperately, hoping to end the conversation.

"Right," said Nate, seemingly impervious to embarrassment. "And by finish, you mean…"

"He releases his stuff," said Tyson, reduced to being explicit. “You know.”

"And that’s it?" said Nate. "What about you?"

“What about me?” asked Tyson, genuinely puzzled.

"No kissing?" said Nate. "No touching before?"

“What for?” asked Tyson.

"That’s it?"

“That’s it,” he confirmed.

"Did you like any of it?" Nate wanted to know, and Tyson paused to think.

"I liked the kissing when we were engaged?" he said.

"And all that you just described," Nate said, “it hurt, did it? Everytime, not just the first few times?"

"Well yes," Tyson allowed. He didn’t want to malign Gabe, but he wasn’t averse to letting Nate know, subtly, that he would appreciate a gentle touch. "During and after - sometimes it was pretty bad when I used the privy, too."

Nate paused. "Wait," he said, "I don’t understand. It hurt to use the privy? Are you telling me he fucked you in the ass?"

"Yes?" said Tyson, who wasn’t really sure what Nate was talking about.

"He fucked you in the ass," Nate said flatly. "What."

"Yes?" Tyson said again.

"Why would he do that?"

"Um. I don’t … where else would he have done it?” whispered Tyson. He really didn’t understand why Nate was so shocked. Was it possible those outside the Community had an entirely different way of going about the act?
“Well your, you know, your pussy of course,” Nate said.

“My what?” said Tyson. “I don’t think I have one of those.”

“Your girl part,” said Nate, fed up.

"I’m not a girl," Tyson said, still puzzled. “I told you, I’m an Omega.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nate said, “but you got girl parts and boy parts.”

“I don’t think I have no girl parts,” Tyson said, not entirely sure about the distinction. “I only got the one.”

"No," said Nate, fascinated. "Are you telling me you only have one hole?"

"Are you telling me you have more than one?" said Tyson.

"Well I’m not fixing to have any babies," said Nate. "Girls have two."

"Well, I’m an Omega,” Tyson said, crossing his arms defensively, “not a girl, and I have one."

"Like a chicken?" said Nate.

"Not like a chicken, like an Omega,” Tyson said. “Don’t you know anything?"

"Apparently not," said Nate. "Oh my God, is the baby in an egg?"

“No,” said Tyson, scathing, although he wasn’t a hundred percent certain. "I’m not a chicken, I’m an Omega.”

“Yeah, alright,” Nate said. “But that is like a chicken, if you only got the one but you can have a baby. That’s not how everybody else is made.”

“Well, that’s because God made us special,” said Tyson, unclear on what exactly anyone else looked like but unwilling to admit it. "We’re a specific Blessing for the Community, a sign of God’s Covenant to never again destroy the Earth if we keep his ways."

“Mnmhm,” Nate said doubtfully, but his hands started up again, stroking through Tyson’s hair, and for once Tyson’s contrary nature didn’t prompt him to continue the argument. He just leaned back, purring, and enjoyed the sensation. All this talking was shocking to him - he’d never heard these topics discussed at all, much less so graphically, but he supposed this was just the English way of things.

So Alpha Landeskog,” Nate began, and Tyson tensed up again. “He took you from your parents house, fucked you till you cried, didn’t touch you otherwise, didn’t allow you to speak, and backhanded you every time you talked or slipped up. Have I got that right?"

"That was his right as my husband," Tyson said, puzzled at Nate’s angry tone. "You make it sound worse than it was - I knew he was Orthodox when I agreed to marry him. He did nothing the Community would have sanctioned him for. I just had to try harder to get used to it."

"Yeah, that’s what I thought," said Nate rather grimly. "Thank you for telling me. You want me to get your hairbrush and brush your hair?"

"Ooh, yes," said Tyson. "Yes please." Married life with Nate was turning out better than he’d ever hoped.
Just before he dropped off, a thought from earlier recurred to Tyson. "What’s Disgusting Ham?" he asked.

"I don’t know," said Nate. "I mean, it’s clearly pork, you can see that much before it goes in the pot, but how she’s achieving the end result, none of us can riddle."

"Huh," said Tyson dreamily. "Disgusting Ham. I want to try it."

"No fear there," said Nate. "Can’t hardly avoid it no matter how hard you try,"
Chapter 5

Tyson woke up the next morning warm for the first time in weeks. As he shifted he realised this was due to Nate, wearing only his bottom johns, wrapped around him, head tucked into Tyson’s neck. “Morning,” he mumbled into Tyson’s nape, and Tyson shivered. “You cold?” Nate said, and pulled Tyson closer to him. “Gonna snow any day now.” Nate felt solid and relaxed against Tyson, his bare chest against Tyson’s nightgown covered back radiating heat, a little space between their bottom halves.

“Mmmm,” said Tyson, considering sinking back into sleep.

“You want to stay in bed and I’ll start the fire?” Nate asked.

“Yes, I do,” said Tyson, surprised by the offer. “Thank you, Alpha.” This was an offer completely outside of his imagining. Omegas did not lie slug-a-bed while Alphas did their work for them.

“OK,” said Nate, kissing the back of his neck gently, “Stay there,” and he got up and began to poke and blow the fire back into flames where it had been damped overnight. Lying luxuriously in the warm bed, Tyson could see Nate clearly as he crouched before the stove feeding in logs, still wearing only the worn bottom johns. The muscles of his thighs and his morning erection were outlined by the thin fabric, and Tyson felt distantly worried about what Nate might want to do about that. Fire lit, Nate pulled the covers back and climbed back into bed to wait for the room to warm up. “Come here,” he grunted and pulled Tyson against him. “Should have put my boots on,” he said and pressed his icy bare feet up against Tyson’s calves. Tyson shrieked and tried to get away, but Nate’s arms were like steel bars. “Nope,” he said, “you got your duties Omega, and that includes warming my feet. Reconcile yourself.”

Tyson laughed and thrashed some more, trying to fight his way out of Nate’s hold, but even with his new arm muscles from chopping wood he made no headway. Nate just clamped down and held Tyson against his chest even more firmly. Tyson tried prying at his forearms but couldn’t get enough of a grip to get between them and gain any leverage, and scrabbling with his heels had no effect. “Ouch,” he said and went limp.

“Oh, sorry,” Nate said and immediately relaxed his hold. “You alright?”

“Ha!” Tyson crowed and rolled over towards him to grab his arms. After several months of good eating, there was less disparity in their weight, but Nate still outweighed Tyson by an easy fifty pounds. Nate just rolled his eyes and let Tyson try, pulling against him gently but allowing Tyson to move his arms. Tyson grabbed both his wrists and pinned them to the bed between them. “Got you now,” he said, “What you going to do about that?”

Nate gave him a condescending look and growled warningly but Tyson just laughed and gripped his arms more firmly. The wrestling reminded him of happy times spent playing with Jamie back home, long before husbands and marriage became realities. If he didn’t think too much on the fact that Nate was his Alpha and owed respectful deference, they were just two boys playing together. Nate certainly didn’t seem to be interested in deference. Nate growled again, a longer escalating note, and Tyson could feel it vibrate through his chest, but instead of taking it as the warning to desist it would have been from any other Alpha, he could tell Nate was continuing the game. Tyson threw a leg over his hip and tried to pin him to the bed. Nate’s growl was interrupted by a laugh and there were several minutes of frantic tussling which ended with Tyson on his back, arms above his head while Nate crouched over him, holding him down with his hands around Tyson’s wrists and his knees on the outside of Tyson’s hips.
“Got you,” Nate said. “And what are you going to do about that, smartass?”

“Nothing, Alpha,” said Tyson. “You win.” He relaxed and smiled up at Nate, happy in that moment to be close and warm and safe with him, growing more and more confident that being in bed with Nate was not the same as it had been with Gabe. Nate was still hard but was carefully ignoring it and not pressing against Tyson and Tyson was happy to pretend to ignore it too.

“You are the prettiest damn thing I ever knew,” Nate said wonderingly, smiling back at Tyson. “Can I kiss you?”

“You can do whatever you like, Alpha,” Tyson said passively. He hoped Nate would kiss him.

“No,” said Nate, “you don’t understand. When I say ‘Can I kiss you?’ what I mean is ‘Do you want me to kiss you?’” Abruptly his face became more serious. “I ain’t going to give you orders, and I ain’t going to discipline you, but I’m asking you to do something for me. You listening?”

“I am, Alpha,” Tyson said, wondering what Nate was going to say.

“When you don’t like something I’m doing, anything, especially when I’m touching you, you’re to tell me. You say ‘I don’t like that.’ You got it?”

Tyson nodded, big eyed. Nate could call it a request but it was clearly an order, and he’d been given plenty of orders by Alphas over the years, but this was by far the most peculiar. What was the point of it, he wondered. He was hardly likely to pit his will against an Alpha’s. Still, he wasn’t going to disagree with the first direct order Nate had given him, especially when it was so benign. “Say it, please,” said Nate, giving his wrists a little shake where he held them still against the bed.

“I don’t like that, Alpha,” Tyson parroted obediently.

“Good,” said Nate. “It pleases me when you tell me if you don’t like something, you hear? There’s never going to be punishment for telling me, just reward, I promise. I want you to tell me the truth. In fact, now we’re on the subject, I want to tell you, there isn’t going to be punishment ever.”

Tyson nodded, but he didn’t believe it for a second. There was always punishment for stepping out of line and Tyson, especially, stepped out of line a lot. No matter how he struggled, he had never been much good at controlling his mouth. He could well believe indulgent, gentle Nate would be more of a slap on the back of the hand man than a belt you to the floor man, but there was always punishment of some kind. He thought of his years in Victoria and the way the other Omegas had tried to encourage him to be more obedient.

“Why can’t you just keep sweet?” Jamie would cluck, hands busy repairing whatever damage had been done in the latest bout of punishment, tidying Tyson’s hair, wiping his face and then bringing a cool cloth for his bruises. Gentle, outsize Jamie who found it so easy to have a servant’s heart. Tyson hoped he was happy with Alpha Latimer. He wondered if he wrote to Jamie, would his Alpha let Jamie write back even though Tyson had shamed himself by marrying outside the Community. Letters were expensive, but he thought Jamie would like to know he was expecting.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” said Nate, looking at him shrewdly. “No, don’t say anything, I can see you don’t believe me.” He shrugged. “Well, I guess you’ll see, I will or I won’t keep my word, but let me tell you this; my Pa don’t hit my Ma and I don’t see any need to be different.” He let go of Tyson’s wrists and sat back on his haunches, his calves running the length of Tyson’s thighs, boxing him in but carefully resting no weight on him.

“Yes Alpha,” Tyson said.
“About that - why do you only call me Alpha now?” Nate asked. “You haven’t used my name since we got engaged, and you used to call me Nate all the time.”

“You’re my Alpha now,” Tyson said, puzzled, “and I owe you respect and service. Before you were my Little Brother and I could use your name with no disrespect.”

“Are you saying you aren’t allowed to use my name once we’re married?”

Tyson didn’t know how to explain to Nate that the use of an Alpha’s name, if granted, was a sign of a marriage that had grown over the years into a love match. Most Omegas were never given the right to address their husbands by their names, and those who were were much envied. “Your name’s not for me,” he said, which was the best he could do.

“OK. Can I call you by your name?” Nate asked.

“You can, Alpha, it’s your right to address me anyway you like,” Tyson said, but internally he thrilled at the idea of Nate calling him by his name. He knew Nate didn’t know what it meant, but it still felt like a caress, a pet name, a reward for long and faithful service.

“Would you like it if I called you by your name?” pressed Nate, and Tyson tried to honour his request to tell the truth rather than just agreeing automatically.

“Yes,” he said, “I would like it. I would like that very much, Alpha and thank you.”

“Right,” said Nate, clearly bemused. “There’s more going on there than I understand, but maybe we can come back to that another time. You got anything you want to ask from me?”

Tyson considered it. A wiser Omega would ask for a major concession, he knew, while Nate was eager to grant favours in the first flush of marriage. He should probably ask for something permanent that would make his life easier; an agreement to mate only once a week, or control over any money he earned, or permission to speak when he liked, but just as he was unable to keep sweet in the way he should, Tyson had also always been lacking in managing Alphas. “Can I send Jamie a letter?” he blurted out. “Have we got enough money for that?”

“Of course you can, baby,” said Nate. “You can send as many letters as you like, you don’t need to ask. Who’s Jamie?”

“He was my best friend back home, he will have heard about Alpha Landeskog from the letter I sent to my father, but I know Jamie would like to know about the baby,” Tyson said.

“That’s nice,” Nate said, “was he your Little Brother?”

“Heh,” wheezed Tyson, laughing at the very thought, “no. No, no he really wasn’t. Jamie’s an Omega, a couple years older than me, we two were the last to get married so we were home alone together for a couple years. I think I got a daguerreotype somewhere here.”

“Show me later,” Nate said. “You look awful pretty when you’re happy - can we go back to the kissing question?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, still smiling, “what was the question?”

Nate slid down, carefully keeping his weight off Tyson, and rested his elbows above Ty’s shoulders, and then threaded his fingers through Tyson’s where they were still stretched above his head. “The question,” he said, leaning in so he spoke quietly into Ty’s ear, “is would you like me to kiss you? And I’ll promise again, nothing but kissing today, so tell the truth.” he added.
“Yes,” said Tyson equally quietly.

“Good,” Nate said, “because I really want to. I don’t know how I got something so fine but I aim to keep you here with me happy.”

“I am happy,” said Tyson. “You’re very kind.”

Nate looked down at him a little grieved and quirked a smile. “Well, that’s a place to start, anyway,” he said, and leaned down and kissed Tyson.

Nate kept his promise. There was nothing but kissing although Tyson could feel and see Nate hard against him every morning and evening, and it continued to worry him. How long would Nate be willing to go without his rights? Better to get it over with, he thought, rather than have it forced upon him. On the third day of their marriage, Nate came home a little early from shoeing the local horses at the Johnson farm and caught Tyson standing by the stove, eating new bread with butter and sugar. He had been lavish with the sugar, and started guiltily when he saw Nate.

“Oh, good,” Nate said, instead of smacking Tyson for greed as he expected. “You’re eating. Hope that means you’re keeping well, because I’ve been thinking about kissing you all day, but I don’t want to impose if you ain’t well.”

Tyson was charmed. "Of course you can kiss me," he said. "You don’t have to ask, you’re my husband, you have every right to kiss me whenever you want. And I feel fine, I’m caught, not dying."

“Yeah, no,” said Nate. “That was the wrong question. Let me try again. Do you want me to kiss you?”

“Yes,” said Tyson shyly.

“Good,” Nate said, “only kissing right now, nothing else, I promise,” and he swooped in to catch Tyson around the waist with one arm, leaning down to kiss him on the mouth. At first it was tentative, and Tyson felt strange at the too intimate press of his lips against another’s, out in the daytime for anyone to see. Nate had been chewing wild mint, Tyson noted, and he wondered if that had been for him, or just because Nate liked mint, but then Nate brought his hand up to hold Tyson’s face and deepened the kiss, and Tyson stopped worrying and leaned up into him. Nate nudged Tyson gently towards the kitchen table as he kissed him and Tyson allowed himself to be guided. So long as it wasn’t the bed he was happy enough.

“Come here,” Nate said softly, pulling Tyson down into his lap as he sat on the kitchen chair. His hand had been nowhere but Tyson’s face and briefly, around his waist, but now he toyed with the hem of Tyson’s shirt as he continued to kiss him, pulling and stroking at the material and letting his fingers occasionally brush against the skin at Tyson’s waist. Tyson was pleased. He wasn’t scared at all and this was already going better than he had hoped for earlier in the day. He’d be happy to let Nate do it every night if it meant getting to sit on his lap like this and kiss first, the sole focus of Nate’s attention. Nate was kissing Tyson’s jaw and neck, and Tyson preened. Daring, he kissed Nate lightly on the hinge of his jaw, and Nate rumbled in response.

“I’m sorry about the wedding night,” Tyson said, nervous but wanting to get the subject out of the way quickly. “I’ll undertake to do better tonight.”

“Nothing wrong with what you did then,” said Nate, in between kisses. “That was on me, I was too
eager; I should have considered your natural feelings on the matter. Normal enough for there to be missteps; we won’t fuss on them, and we won’t be doing nothing but kissing tonight either.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” said Tyson, melting against him with relief. It seemed Nate was forgiving of both his small and large flaws.

Nate’s hand slid under his shirt and spanned his back, the touch of his hand against Tyson’s bare skin electric and thrilling. “This alright?” Nate asked and Tyson nodded eagerly, happy to sit there with Nate, kissing and being close. They kissed until Nate shifted and pulled at his pants. “These aren’t the most comfortable for this work,” he said wryly. “I gotta at least take the chaps off.” He set Tyson aside and stood up to start on the left hand buckles. Tyson slid to his knees and began on the right.

"Whoa," said Nate, hands stopping on the buckles. "You don’t gotta do that, but I gotta tell you, you look mighty fine like that." Tyson smiled up at Nate. He had no idea what Nate was talking about, but if Nate was pleased, he was pleased.

Nate reached a hand out to touch Tyson’s crown of braids lightly, and when Tyson just smiled shyly at him again and continued to work at the buckles, Nate put both hands on Tyson’s head and ran his fingers over the crown, following the pattern of intertwined braids. "So pretty," he said admiringly. “I never seen anything like it." His hands moved down, to trace Tyson’s ears and neck; Tyson leaned into the caress for a second and then moved on to the left hand buckles, pressing into Nate’s legs to reach behind him. Nate’s hands faltered for a second and then continued on, exploring Tyson’s face, stroking his cheeks and lingering on his lips for a moment. Finally, they ended up resting on Tyson’s shoulders as Nate just looked down at him, open mouthed, watching Tyson finish the last of the buckles.

"Alright," Tyson said. "Done." He curled his fingers in the waistband of the chaps to catch them as they fell and Nate moved one big hand to grip firmly at the back of Tyson’s neck.

"You really got no idea what you’re doing, do you?" he said huskily.

"Did I do it wrong?" said Tyson.

"No baby," said Nate, stepping out of the chaps and letting go of Tyson. "You’re doing good."

Grimacing and stepping carefully, Nate went to put the chaps away in the barn, and Tyson stayed on his knees, thinking. Nate was gone for a surprisingly long time and Tyson used it to work himself into a real lather about the issue of marital relations. Nate could say he wasn’t mad all he wanted, but the truth was Tyson had seen him leaving the room hard and a little bow legged, wincing, and he was going without what a married man had the right to. The more he thought on it, the more it seemed to Tyson that Nate was going to come back in that door and demand Tyson make good on the marriage contract.

“Get up,” Nate said gruffly when he returned and found Tyson still in position. “No more kneeling all the time - come here to the table, I got to talk to you.” Tyson moved to the table obediently, but hovered next to it. Was Nate going to send him away? He knew his patience with the lack of mating would run out eventually.

“Don’t look so worried,” Nate said, sitting down at the table with his saddlebags. “I just been kissing on you, why would I be mad?” Tyson looked away. He didn’t want to point out most men wouldn’t appreciate stopping at kissing but it seemed obvious. “I want to talk to you about marital relations,” Nate went on, and Tyson’s suspicions were confirmed. “I said, don’t worry,” Nate said. “I’m not angry. I got two things I want to tell you. You listening?”
“Yes Alpha,” Tyson said by rote, but he was listening, listening intensely. He felt the course of this conversation would determine his future, whether that was to be sent away, or to be used for Nate’s rights this evening, and he needed desperately to know which so he could prepare himself.

“Alright,” Nate said. “First off, I want you to understand it’s not supposed to hurt. Do you understand me? I want to tell you, there’s a whole different name for what it is when someone makes you do it while you cry and it hurts.” Tyson nodded, although he was unconvincing. He understood the word Nate was getting at, rape, but he knew also there was no rape within marriage. His vows meant he had agreed eternally, to whatever his husband demanded. “Yeah you don’t believe me, do you?” said Nate. “Well, you’ll see.”

“I want you to be happy,” Nate went on. “I told you, I don’t know how I got something so fine as you, but I aim to make it good for you here; I can’t give you much like you’re used to in the way of fancy things, but I can treat you kind and sweet, and it seems to me that’s what most people want, more than golden teacups, or such.” He looked at Tyson for a response, but Tyson stared back, blank. He had expected to be told Nate was done with him or to lie down on the bed right now; instead here was Nate rabbiting on about Tyson being happy. “We never courted and you didn’t have an easy time in your first marriage,” Nate added kindly. “I want this marriage to be better for you and it’s maybe not so surprising that you need some time.” Tyson continued to stare at him. He wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, but Nate didn’t appear angry.

“Right,” Nate pressed on when Tyson gave no response. “So what I want to say is that there isn’t going to be any mating until you feel you want it, and if that’s no time soon, that’s fine.”

“You have rights, though, Alpha,” Tyson said, although he wasn’t clear in his own mind why he was arguing against Nate’s proposal. “You got needs.”

“I got no right or need to fuck a man that don’t want to be fucked,” Nate said. “I got a powerful want, that’s true, but I lasted this long with just my hand, I reckon I can last a good while more.” Tyson was puzzled by the mention of Nate’s hand, but accepted this as just one more mysterious English saying. Nate seemed to be done talking and was clearly waiting for a response, so Tyson said, “Thank you, Alpha,” although he wasn’t entirely sure what he was agreeing to. Was Nate really telling him there would be no sex until Tyson asked for it? He’d be waiting a hell of a long time then, Tyson thought but managed not to say. Nate seemed to find this an adequate response and moved on.

“Anyway,” he said, “the second thing is I been thinking about this, and although I know it’s not supposed to hurt, I can’t say I know exactly how it is supposed to go, especially when one of us is scared. Now I’m not going to ask my chucklehead friends for advice, and I’m certainly not going to ask my Pa, so I talked to Mr. Sakic today while I was working on his horse.” Tyson just gaped at him. Had Nate actually gone out and asked a neighbor for advice on marital relations? Apparently he had. “Joe’s the tightest lipped man in Denver, and he’s got three kids in four years,” Nate said, “He and the Missus are always kissing on each other, so I reckoned he’d have some thoughts. Also, I got pie - turns out they got wild strawberries growing up near them, and I went up to Joe’s after to help drench a sick cow so Mrs. Sakic she gave me two pies.” Begrudgingly Nate added, “She says I’m to tell you the extra one is just for you because she heard you have a real fancy for sweets, and she wishes you well.” He pulled it out of the saddlebags and presented it to Tyson with a flourish, balanced on both hands in a mimic of the Omega presentation pose. “You want to split the shared one now?” Overcome by his good fortune Tyson sat down. Nate was as sweet as ever and he had an entire pie to himself.
"Romantic," said Tyson. "Just like the first day you came to stay."

"Be a sight more romantic if you shared the second pie," said Nate.

Tyson wavered but ultimately decided to assert his rights. "Mrs. Sakic said that pie is mine," he said, tucking in. "You're welcome to watch me eat it if you like."

"Reckon I might," said Nate. "I like when you're happy, and I like your lips, and I like the little noises you make when you're eating something sweet."

Tyson blushed and turned away, suddenly over conscious of his mouth, but he didn't stop eating. Nate began on his half pie, and then they moved on to supper, salt cod, mash, pumpkin and late greens.

Nate didn't bring the conversation back around to his talk with Mr. Sakic again and Tyson let it lie until bed. "What did Mr. Sakic say?" he asked as they got settled for the night. Nate had developed a habit of admiringly watching Tyson get ready for bed and Tyson found he didn't mind. He’d been stared at all his life but Nate’s gaze somehow sat more easily on him than most others.

"Eh?" Nate said, jolting back into focus. "What’s that?"

“I asked what Mr. Sakic said,” Tyson repeated as he climbed under the covers. Omega submission didn’t allow him to make demands by cuddling up to Nate, but he laid down primly slightly more towards Nate’s side than not and Nate took the hint. He grabbed Tyson around the waist and pulled him back against his chest until they were snuggled up together cozily. Tyson had grown up so wealthy that he had always had a bed of his own, and so he had not understood what he was missing out on until he and Nate began to sleep in the same bed together. Threat of marital intimacy aside, lying in bed with Nate was the best part of the day and Tyson suspected Nate felt that way too. Certainly his happy rumbling suggested he did. Tyson could feel Nate vibrate behind him, his rumble buzzing through Tyson’s bones and kicking off Tyson’s purr.

Nate interrupted their snuggling to answer the question. "Mr. Sakic, he says it isn’t supposed to hurt at all. He says we got to undertake to get you wet down below to ease the passage."

"Wet?" said Tyson doubtfully. "Like blood? That only happened the first few times."

Nate recoiled. "God, no, not like blood. Like grease. He says a well petted Omega makes their own slick, like aloe. And that you aren’t designed to have nothing in there until that slick has come, and that a scared or hurt Omega can’t make none. And then he told me how to pet you, and then he told me to fuck off and never make him talk about this again." Tyson giggled. “Anyway,” Nate went on, “I think we’re going to stick to kissing for the moment. What happened to you should never have happened, even if you don’t know that, and I ain’t doing the same."

"How does Mr. Sakic know anything about Omegas if there hasn’t been one in Denver in thirty years?" Tyson wanted to know. Nate shrugged.

"Comes from Vancouver way, knows more about Omegas than anyone else here,” he said. “Still, you’ve got me there, I believe he may have been drawing on experience with girls, but he reckons the mechanics are the same. And you been an Omega for twenty two years, but you don’t seem to know this."

Tyson looked away. "We don’t talk about this at home," he said. "Day before I married my father told me it would hurt, but it was supposed to, and I was to let him, and that’s all I know."

"Well, whether it’s supposed to hurt or not, it ain’t gonna hurt when we do it," said Nate, stubborn.
"It don’t hurt wives that like their husbands, and it shouldn’t hurt you."

"Maybe it just hurts Omegas," said Tyson doubtfully.

"Nature ain’t going to make mistakes like that," Nate said confidently. "And if God made you special to be a Blessing and a Covenant, he wouldn’t leave you lacking either. Landeskog was just a fuckwit."

Tyson felt compelled to defend Gabe, even though he was somewhat persuaded by Nate’s arguments. "Gabe couldn’t have been that wrong, he got me breeding," he said.

"Sure," said Nate disdainfully. "If your goal is just breeding I reckon you can do it like the cattle, and that’ll be good enough."

“Well, what’s your goal, then?” said Tyson, nettled at Nate’s tone.

"Goal’s to make you love me," Nate just flat out said, unashamed. "Want you to love me, Tyson."

"Well," said Tyson, "Hmmph." He pulled the blankets over his head to hide his blush.

"Do you love me?" said Tyson, curious enough to ask through the embarrassment.

"Not yet," said Nate honestly, "but I can feel it coming on. Get back to me this time next year."

"This time next year we’ll have a little baby," said Tyson, relaxing into Nate’s hold. He ran his fingers over Nate’s larger hands and forearms where they wrapped around him. Tyson had never considered forearms at any length before, but Nate’s held his interest. It seemed somehow acceptable to explore them while they were wrapped around him, in front of him and almost separate from Nate, a public part of his body in a way even his upper arms were not. Tyson ran his palms up against the grain of Nate’s forearm hair and Nate shivered and held him tighter but said nothing. Tyson ran his fingernails down one arm and Nate shivered again. Tyson could feel the hairs on Nate’s arms standing up, and it was strange to think he had done that by such a small touch. He wrapped his arms over Nate’s and intertwined their fingers, and Nate squeezed both hands welcomingly, and that was strange too. For all this talk of love and marriage, this was the first time he’d taken the initiative to put his hands on Nate, and clearly Nate welcomed it.

"A baby," said Nate eagerly, and he brought one of their intertwined hands around to cup Tyson’s belly. "Gonna have a little baby at Midsummer, and he’ll be big and strong before the winter comes. This time next year he’ll be sitting up and reaching for things, starting to crawl."

"How do you know it’s going to be a boy?" asked Tyson.

"Just guessing," said Nate, "but don’t Omegas mostly throw boys?"

"We do," Tyson allowed "most of the time, not always."

“And what’s the chance it’ll be an Omega?"

"Not high," said Tyson. "Omegas come from Omegas, but Gabe’s family hasn’t had an Omega in three generations, so not very likely."
"D’you think it will look like you, or Landeskog?" asked Nate.

"Oh, Gabe," said Tyson. "The Landeskog looks are very strong."

"What did Gabe look like?" asked Nate hesitantly. "I only saw him the one time, when you came through town when you arrived, and we were all looking at you."

"Why were you looking at me?"

"Because you’re beautiful?" Nate said. "Because no one had seen an Omega in Denver in 30 years?"

"Because nothing interesting ever happens in Denver?" Tyson suggested.

"No, I think it was the first thing," said Nate. “I remember I saw you waiting in the wagon as they loaded it, and the first thing I noticed was how beautiful you were, and how pale and cold you looked, but still pretty like a painting, with your eyes, and your cheekbones."

“I was cold," said Tyson. "The train only had one stove in each car and we weren’t anywhere near it for the last half of the day, and it was freezing! And then when we got off the train, there was so much snow. Back home we never get much snow at all."

"And then," Nate went on, "The second thing I noticed was your hat."

"My hat?" said Tyson. "I wasn’t wearing a hat, the crown has to show."

"I know!" Nate laughed. "I thought you was wearing some giant fussy hat covered in brown astrakhan! I thought ‘Damn! Pretty boy’s got a hell of a hat,’ but then I looked again and I realised that was your hair, and you were Omega."

"A hat?" Tyson said, amused. "Are you blind?"

"It was snowing!" Nate said.

"Gabe looked kinda like a lion," Tyson said, returning to Nate’s question. "I mean, they all do, a little, the Landeskogs. A lot of face, if you know what I mean, and then the hair. There’s a lot of blond hair, and their heads are really big, and their faces… You ever see a really good dog, looking into the wind, and they just look so noble? That’s what he looked like. But tall."

Nate started laughing. "That’s not what I was expecting," he said.

"What did you think I was going to say?" asked Tyson.

"I thought you were going to say he was unusually handsome," Nate said.

"Oh, no, he was, he was," Tyson said. "He was the best looking boy of our generation in the broader Community. But somehow that wore off after a while, and nothing came to replace it after I got used to looking at him."

"He never had a chance to get dear to you," Nate said and Tyson startled at the thought. It had never occurred to him to think that way but Nate was right.

"That’s it exactly," said Tyson. He squirmed back into Nate’s arms and got settled ready to sleep, thinking about whether he had ever laid like this with Gabe. He knew he hadn’t, and he had difficulty imagining that they ever would have. Daringly, he whispered, "But you are. You aren’t as handsome as Gabe, but you’re more dear to me than he ever was. I like the way you’re kind to the
animals and I like your face. And your muscles."

Nate squeezed him and laughed again. “I like your chatter,” he said. “And your face, and I like your muscles too, now that you’ve got some.”

"I’m sorry I’m not untouched," Tyson whispered.

"I’m sorry too," Nate said low, "cause I reckon you didn’t like it, not even one time, and I am sorry for that, but I don’t care about the rest of it."

"And I’m sorry it isn’t your baby," Tyson went on, half asleep. "I’d give you your own baby if I could."

“Oh, it is my baby,” Nate said. “You’re my husband and it’s my baby. Can’t take it away from me now, I got my hopes set on it. This time next year we’re going to have a big fat baby that looks like a lion."

“Be great if it actually looked like a lion,” said Tyson dreamily. “Be great if it actually was a lion,” he went on, developing the thought as he fell asleep. “It could hunt deer for us and scare the neighbors.”

“Yeah, you go on to sleep,” said Nate affectionately. “You’re an idiot.”

“You’re an idiot,” Tyson said, a shocking transgression that Nate ignored, and then he slept.
Chapter 6

Nate continued to keep his promise, and there was nothing but kissing. Once again, Tyson could feel himself growing and blooming under Nate’s affectionate rule. He slept deeply at night, warm beside Nate; he did chores outside, under the bracing November sun and wind. Inside the cabin he was the master of his household, Nate requiring only that he try to take it easy with an eye to the baby. Nate still brought him tea in the large tin mug, but now he also brought him anything he thought Tyson might like to eat and encouraged him to eat it: apples, beet tops, handfuls of nuts, the occasional store bought cookie, drinking chocolate; once, an enormous and particularly fine Savoy cabbage Nate begged from the Olsons.

Everywhere there was Nate, Nate’s face growing more dear and familiar: Nate touching him gently, Nate whispering into his ear and making him shiver, Nate wrestling carefully with him, Nate slapping him on the ass goodbye, building the fire in the morning, pulling Tyson into his lap to kiss instead of clean, Nate telling Tyson he was good, and clever, and beautiful, and what a fine job he was doing being a husband and growing a baby. He still caught Nate looking at him but now sometimes he looked back.

“Come here,” Nate said, twisting around in his chair to catch Tyson by an arm as he walked past after carrying the breakfast dishes to the bucket. “Turn a little for me,” Nate asked, and Tyson did, rotating a quarter turn so his profile faced Nate. Nate looked at him, cocking his head. “Can I?” Nate asked, free hand hovering at the bottom hem of Tyson’s shirt. Tyson wasn’t sure what he meant, but he’d come to trust that Nate wouldn’t hurt him, so he nodded and Nate slid his hand up under Tyson’s shirt. “I can see it,” Nate said in a tone of wonder, “I can see it now, Tyson.” He spread his big hand over Tyson’s belly and then leaned in, pulled the shirt up and looked again. “I can see there’s a baby in there now, you’re all round, and I can feel it too, it’s harder.”

Tyson grimaced, knowing Nate wasn’t looking at his face. He was glad Nate was happy, he supposed, but his interest in this pregnancy was nil. Nothing about it seemed real to him. Distantly he assumed when the baby made an appearance he would like it, as people seemed to do, but at the moment it was hard to believe there was a baby growing inside him, put there by a dead man. Tyson preferred not to think about mating with Gabe, and that divorced him even further from the process, but Nate had no such qualms. He was delighted by every change in Tyson’s body, every sign of the growing baby.

“Come here baby,” Nate said, and gently guided Tyson down into his lap, one hand still spread over his bump. “Look at you,” he crooned, “you’re doing such a good job.” Tyson did like praise, though, and he squirmed happily against Nate’s hold and leaned back against him.

“Thanks Alpha,” said Tyson, rubbing his cheek against Nate’s neck, enjoying the feel of the stubble. Like most Omegas Tyson had almost no facial hair, and Nate’s beard was of great interest to him - he’d never had the freedom to touch like this before and he was enjoying it.

“How you feeling?’ asked Nate, “anymore puking?’”

“Not bad,” said Tyson, “not bad at all. I think I might be done with that. Your Ma said it would stop at some point.” Like a switch, the vomiting and lightheadedness had passed off as quickly as they had appeared, just as Mrs. MacKinnon had said they would.

“Good,” said Nate, “now you’ve got to turn your mind to eating, eating and eating til you get fat like
a little bear for the winter. I’m doing the last trip into town today before the snow starts - is there anything you need?”

“No,” said Tyson, looking around the barrels and tin boxes that crowded the edges of the room. “I think we’re set. You could get more sugar if they got it not too dear.”

“Alright,” said Nate, “how about anything you want especially? Something to eat? I wasn’t joking about the eating, you’re too thin still and you’re going to feel the cold something terrible. You want something familiar from home, maybe? Is there anything in particular you got a fancy for?”

“No, Alpha,” Tyson answered distracted. The back and sides of Nate’s wedding haircut were growing back in where they had been shaved, and that texture also interested him. He was busy exploring it with the tips of his fingers, running them up and down, eyes closed while he leaned against Nate’s shoulder.

Nate clucked his tongue. “This is very cozy, but you’re not even listening, are you? Tell you what, why don’t you come on in with me, and maybe you’ll see something you want. After this might be the last time we go into town till March at the earliest - don’t want to miss your chance at a barrel of syrup.”

“Can you get syrup in barrels?” asked Tyson, intrigued - he had only ever seen it in gallon earthenware jugs.

“Yeah, see, I knew that would interest you,” said Nate smugly. “We’ll get you roly-poly yet.”

“You like sugar too,” said Tyson, stung.

“I like eats in general,” Nate disagreed, ”and that’s not surprising because I’m still growing. But you like sweeties more than anyone I’ve ever known. I saw you eating sugar with a spoon a couple days ago.”

“It’s true,” said Tyson, unrepentant, “I ate a jar of that plum jam your Ma gave us too, it was delicious.”

Nate shuddered and Tyson hung onto him, laughing, as he started to slide down to the floor. Nate grabbed him around the waist and hitched him back up onto his lap, carefully avoiding any pressure on the bump. “You eat whatever you got a fancy for,” Nate said, “but ugh. How can you just eat it straight like that?”

“Maybe I am a little bear,” Tyson said, feeling playful.

“Not a bear yet,” Nate said, lifting Tyson a few inches above his lap with ease, “Still a hummingbird. Gotta get some more meat on you.” Tyson yelped and grabbed at his shoulders for purchase, but Nate just laughed. “Not going to drop you,” he said, “I got you, don’t worry,” and lowered Tyson back to his lap.

How nice it was, Tyson thought, to sit here in the house with Nate talking nonsense. He looked around the room, crowded with bags and hams hanging from the rafters, barrels and crates of food stored for the coming winter. A year ago he and Gabe had been preparing for the train to Colorado, and he had been, he saw now, terrified and with good reason. And now the house was ready for the winter, full of good things to eat, the woodpile a year ahead, and here he was, sat on the lap of a new husband talking freely, being petted and told to do whatever self indulgent thing he liked. For the first time, thinking of the previous year didn’t fill him with shame and a queasy anger. Instead, it seemed far away. He was suddenly overcome with a wave of fondness and threw his arms around
Nate’s neck and kissed him gently on the mouth.

“Hello,” said Nate smiling, “what’s that for?”

“You’re very nice,” Tyson said shyly. “I like you.”

“Hey Mrs. Hejduk,” said Nate, tipping his hat politely, “How you keeping?”

“Nate Mac,” said the tall woman behind the counter, “How are you? That your husband?” She peered at Tyson near sightedly.

“It is,” Nate said, still pleased by the novelty of introducing Tyson as his husband. “Tys, come here,” he said, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Tyson, this is Mrs. Hejduk, she was my teacher back in school. Zlatuse and her husband own the store. You ever need anything, I reckon you could always come talk to her, she’s in the store everyday but Sunday.”

Mrs. Hejduk held out her hand and Tyson moved forward shyly to shake it. He’d never been in a Western store before and he was interested to see that the goods were stacked outside of the serving counter, piled everywhere with narrow walkways between them. Only the materials needing weighing were behind the counter. He supposed it was a necessity when there was only one person to serve the whole store. “Hello, Mrs. Hejduk,” he said. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Oh, you’ve got nice manners,” she said smiling. “Pretty manners for a pretty man.” Tyson smiled politely but he still felt awkward talking to the English. Luckily she carried on without him. “That’s right,” she said kindly, “if you’re in town you just come along and see me if you need a thing or two and we’ll put it on Nate’s ledger. I’m always here, seeing as how Milan’s not one for doing the accounts.”

“Do you want to take a look around and see what catches your eye while Mrs. H and I dicker?” Nate asked. “See if you can find something you want to eat? - Oh!” he said, turning to her, “We’re going to need a couple lengths of cloth for baby gowns, you got any of that?”, and embarrassed at even this somewhat oblique reference to his pregnancy, Tyson took himself off to explore the deep recesses of the back of the store.

There was an awful lot to pick through - he’d had no idea what things people were importing to the frontier. He peered at battered tins of oysters and beef pies, clearly local jars of canned fruit, glowing in the dimly lit room, next to nasty grey jars of some kind of canned meat. There were enormous barrels of sour pickles, something he had entirely forgotten from his childhood but upon reacquaintance was seized with a fierce longing for, and as advertised, mid sized barrels of golden and molasses syrup. He moved further into the aisles, past bags of flour and beans, until he halted at a soft noise to his left. There was a cat, and on inspection she had five out of season kittens snuggled in her nest with her. Mercifully she had chosen a bag of seed corn as her home, rather than something people were going to eat.

“Puss,” he called, ‘Puss,’ but she resisted his entreaties and hissed. He’d never seen anything so cunning as those kittens and longed to get his hands on them. Animals being base, he had never seen a kitten before, and they were even better than the miniature cat he had vaguely imagined they would resemble. Their little faces, and their tiny paws; he had to pat them. He looked to the left and right - there didn’t seem to be anyone else in the store but he and Nate, so very softly he purred at the mother cat. She looked puzzled but got up and came over to sniff at him; evidently he passed muster as she bumped his hand and let him scratch her head. When Nate came round the corner some time later, Tyson was sitting on the floor while all five kittens crawled over him.
“D’you find anything you want - ” Nate was saying, but he cut himself off when Tyson looked up at him pleadingly. Tyson knew Nate didn’t believe animals were base; anything that held still long enough near Nate got patted, cats, chicks, the horses, Tyson - but he wasn’t sure how Nate would feel about Tyson touching them. His father, Tyson knew, would have been horrified at the violation of Bodily Integrity and disciplined him vigorously. “Oh looks like you did, kittens, look at that,” Nate said. He knelt beside Tyson to play with them. “You know what you want yet?” he asked.

Tyson looked down at the kittens rather than Nate, uncomfortable asking for something even though he’d been invited to by his Alpha. “Can we get some pickles?” he whispered, and Nate laughed. “Of course we can,” he said, “but no one ever got fat off pickles - you see anything else?” Tyson picked up the kittens still in his lap - a matched pair of grey tabbies, asleep - and looked up at Nate. He couldn’t bring himself to ask for something so base, but he hoped Nate would take the hint and Nate, like always, came through. “They’re too young to leave their mother yet, baby,” Nate said gently. “Little things need to stay safe with their parents until they’re ready, hey? Maybe in the spring we’ll try to find you a kitten that’s a little older.”

“No?” Tyson said, disappointed. He had been kind of counting on Nate, who had so far proven incredibly indulgent, but he could understand they shouldn’t take a baby away from its mother. Tyson made to get up but Nate put his hand on Tyson’s shoulder. Nate looked sort of disappointed too, and Tyson didn’t care for that, somehow. “It’s alright, Alpha,” he said. “I don’t mind. Thank you for considering my request. You been - ” He paused, unsure how to say what he wanted to. “You’ve been kind,” he finally settled for. “You’ve been very kind, when I know I don’t deserve it.” It didn’t seem to make Nate feel any better, Tyson noticed. If anything Nate looked a little grieved, as if it pained him not to give Tyson every little thing he wanted.

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“No, you stay there,” Nate said, pushing him back down gently. “I got to talk to Mrs. H a little more, I’ll come get you when I’m done.”

“Alright Alpha,” Tyson said, happy to have more time with the kittens. Nate headed back down the narrow row of seed corn and wheat.

“We’re going to need pickles as well then, Mrs. H, if you would,” Tyson heard Nate say. Tyson couldn’t hear her answer clearly, but Nate laughed and said, “Man wants pickles, I don’t see why he shouldn’t have pickles. God knows he don’t ask for much.” Tyson could only hear indistinct murmurs from Mrs. Hejduk but he could hear Nate’s half of the conversation clearly. Tyson had the impression Nate didn’t realise he could hear him.

There was another sound from Mrs. Hejduk and Nate spoke again, “No, no, he ain’t well, he had the ague Midsummertime and he was sorely underfed going into it, I don’t know how they made through it last winter. And now he’s having a hard time with the baby, but that’s the least of it.” A pause, and then, “Way he tells it, they pretty much had him locked in the house until he went to the highest bidder, and then. Well.” Here Nate’s voice lowered and darkened and Tyson had to strain to hear him. “It ain’t right. It ain’t right what was done to him, arranged marriage or no.”

Mrs. Hejduk said something lengthy Tyson couldn’t hear, and Nate said, “I’m trying, Mrs. H. I understand people got their ways, but what they did to him, it ain’t right.” Nate went on, “What? Oh, no, he’s a lovey, just a complete sweetheart, but he’s entirely handsy, and no wonder.” There was a further noise from Mrs. Hejduk, and then Nate sighed. “Well, that too,” Nate said, “you heard right. There’s a world of difference between discipline and beating the shit out of someone, especially someone that don’t ever fight back.” There was a pause, and then, sounding younger and very different from his usual cocky certainty, Nate said, “Maybe I’m not the right man for this job, but I’m the one that’s got it, anyway.” Tyson couldn’t hear the answer but Nate laughed. “Thank you, Mrs.
“Hello, Milan,” Nate said, “haven’t seen you in a while, how you doing?” Again Tyson could only catch indistinct sounds from Mr. Hejduk. “Thank you, Milan,” Nate said, “Yes, just back mid October, and then the baby to come around Midsummer. What?” They both laughed and then Nate said, “Long as you’re married before the baby comes, that’s close enough!” and they laughed again, Nate sounding jolly but artificial. Then Nate went on, “Alright Mrs. H, good night, I’ll see you sometime in the New Year,” and Tyson could hear footsteps clomping up the wooden stairs to the second floor.

Nate was speaking to Mr. Hejduk again and Tyson listened carefully. He noticed Nate sounded quite different speaking to Mr. Hejduk, more formal and adult, and thought Nate didn’t like Mr. Hejduk so well as his wife.

“I know that’s drifting around town,” Nate said stiffly, “but I’d appreciate it if you wanted to spread the truth, which is Omegas take a year and it’s Landeskog’s baby. I don’t care about me but people should know he’s done nothing shameful. If you knew him you’d understand, he’s got nothing bad in him, he would never never do that.”

More murmuring from Mr. Hejduk and then Nate replied, “No, they keep their Omegas very close - yeah, I heard that too. Yeah, that’s about right,” and Tyson wondered what he was talking about. Then Nate answered what must have been another question, his voice tight and angry. “Well,” he said. “I don’t know if that’s any of your business Milan. He is very pretty, but I don’t think I care for you remarking on it like that.”

There was a reply, loud enough Tyson could catch the word ‘pussy’, and he winced.

“He’s my husband, Milan, not a sideshow for you to wonder about,” Nate said threateningly. “I better not hear no one talking like that about him. I’m awful fond of him and I won’t stand for any of it.”

There was an angry buzzing, and then Nate said indignantly, “Don’t laugh at me. If I can’t be sweet on my own husband, who can I be sweet on? He’s beautiful, but better than that, he’s good, he’s just good, and sweet, and loveable, all the way to his core. You stop talking about him.”

Tyson picked up the kitten currently asleep in his lap and kissed it. He was full of a jumble of emotions. Before he could give it much thought, Nate reappeared at the head of the aisle and Tyson went to him.

“Can you go along to my parents by yourself?” Nate asked. “Only it’s that I’m going to buy some things for Christmas and I don’t want you to see.”

“Oh,” said Tyson, taken aback at the request. He’d never been allowed to walk anywhere alone before, and he was hesitant now but he didn’t want to disappoint Nate. “Yes, I guess I can. Straight down to Larimer Square, right?”

“That’s right,” said Nate, “you just ask anyone where the MacKinnons are if you get confused.”

“I’m not going to get confused,” said Tyson.

“Yeah?” countered Nate, “which way’s North?”

Tyson pointed at random, figuring he had a one in four chance. “Nice try,” Nate said, rolling his eyes. “You get going, and I hope to see you again one day, if you make it there alive.” Tyson gave
him the stink eye, but carefully, so no one else could see, and Nate just laughed. “That’ll take you past the saloon,” he said, kissing Tyson on the cheek. “You have any problems, you just tell them you’re married to Nate Mac and ask if they want to come talk to me about it.”

As he walked down the street, Tyson worried about his reception at the MacKinnons. What if Mr. MacKinnon opened the door and he had to talk to him? Was Mrs. MacKinnon still angry about the forced marriage? His worrying was wasted though, as once he put his foot on the porch steps Mrs. MacKinnon pulled the door open.

“Ah hah,” she said, “I heard you two were in town. I been expecting you. Come on in, I made pie and it’s waiting on you.” She reached out and pulled Tyson into a hug that went on for over a minute. It felt awkward, since Tyson had assumed Mrs. MacKinnon still viewed him as an interloper, but it seemed she had forgiven that. “I told Graham to stay down the store till dinner,” she said, “so we can talk about things. But you look very well indeed.”

“Oh,” said Tyson, taken aback at the warmth of the greeting. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, “come on and get something to eat, we’ll hold dinner til everyone is here. Is Nate coming on in a bit?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, “he’s down at the Hejduk store right now, buying presents.”

She laughed. “I bet he is,” she said, “he loves Christmas more than most. Your people do Christmas?”

“No,” answered Tyson. He knew what it was, of course, but the Observant celebrated New Years, not Christmas. A thought occurred to him. “Is Nate going to expect a present from me?” he asked.

“He is,” she answered, “and I had an idea about that. You should make him some molasses popcorn, he loves that more than anything and it keeps pretty well. Though I don’t know how you’re going to make it without him knowing.”

“How long does it take?” he asked. “Could I do it while he was feeding the stock?” Mrs. MacKinnon’s answer was detailed, and carried them through any potential awkwardness as she ushered Tyson into the kitchen.

Molasses popcorn explained, Mrs. MacKinnon had more questions for Tyson. “How is the being married going? “ she wanted to know. “Are you bearing up like you planned?”

Tyson looked at her, face burning. He couldn’t believe she would ask a question like that about her own son and he had no idea where to even start answering it. “Get your mind out of the gutter boy, don’t look at me like that!” she said. “I wasn’t asking for details, I meant does he make you want to drink lye?”

“Missus” he said sincerely, “I got that stuff in a cut once, I’ll tell you, no one makes me want to drink lye. Might drink laudanum, but never lye.”

“That’s the spirit, boy,” she said laughing. “There you go. Not as bad as you thought?”

Tyson considered this. He didn’t want to discuss intimate business with Nate’s mother, both because it was embarrassing, and because he felt a sense of obligation to keep their business private. It was hard to know what to say that wasn’t overly explicit or too intimate. He certainly wasn’t going to tell her Nate was still a virgin; he didn’t think Nate wanted that bandied about. “He’s very excited about
the baby,” he settled on. “That’s nice - someone should be. If I got to be married to someone, I’m lucky it’s Nate.”

“Good,” she said, “I’m glad you’re somewhat reconciled. But how are you in yourself? Can you sleep? You still crying during the day? You feel far away from everything anymore?”

“Oh,” he said. He’d never considered those questions. “I’m not sure.”

“Well, think about how it was one month after you married Mr. Landeskog - you thinking?”

“I recall,” Tyson said, pulling out a chair and sitting down at the table. He didn’t like being made to think about that time and cast around for something to do with his hands. Mrs. MacKinnon handed him a mixing bowl full of red beans and another empty tub.

“You wanna pick beans, or darn?” she asked.

“Beans,” he said. He hated darning, everyone hated darning. It was too fiddly and he always produced a lumpy patch. Thank god Nate did his own socks.

“Good choice,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, sitting down with him, “Graham damn near broke a tooth last time we ate these beans, I think they’re half rocks.” They picked beans in silence for a minute - Mrs. MacKinnon was right, there were a lot of pebbles hiding among them - and then she said, “Alright, now think about how you are today, one month after you married Nate.”

“Better,” he said without hesitation, “much better. I ain’t hardly afraid at all, and nothing seems far away. “

“Good,” she said, “Good. We’ll leave it at that.”

“I do have to piss a lot, though,” he said.

“No cure for that, I’m afraid.”

“I thought that’s what you’d say,” he said gloomily. “When’s supper?”

“Now I feel like you’re a real member of the family,” she said cheerfully. “Supper’s when you finished picking those beans and everyone else is back.”

“Where is everyone?” he asked, still picking. He’d never seen the house quiet for so long.

“They’re all down the store making nuisances of themselves.”

“Oh. And what’s for supper?”

“Biscuits, gravy, stew with last of season greens, cold pork, pickles, pie two kinds, custard,” she reeled off, and then Nate arrived with all the other MacKinnons in hand, and it was a rush to get supper on the table.

The late fall days flew by, filled with kissing, kissing in the morning when they woke, kissing on the porch when Nate returned home, kissing in the evening before they settled to sleep. Tyson practically spent more time in Nate’s lap than he did sitting alone on a chair, and that was fine with him. He felt he was getting awful good at kissing and Nate, who had started out strong, was refining his technique to a keen edge. Still, Tyson was puzzled by Nate’s apparent lack of interest in going further. He’d been taught that if allowed the slightest liberty, Alphas would become ungovernable;
that a kiss would lead almost immediately to being thrown to the ground and taken. This was certainly consistent with his experience, but here Nate was, seemingly able to simply ignore his erections. In fact, Tyson noticed, they had become less insistent over the weeks. Where initially they seemed to be constant presences, they had become less pressing, still appearing in the morning, but the frequency after work dying off. Nate did seem to be spending some time in the privy of a morning, and returning home a little later than he had before they married, but Tyson didn’t like to inquire.

Tyson assumed Nate was simply not a very randy man. This seemed odd, since Nate obviously enjoyed kissing and was devoted to all the other pleasures of the flesh - eating, sleeping, luxuriating in the pond down by Olson’s on a hot day, - but Tyson didn’t devote much time to worrying about it; he was just grateful for the reprieve and glad to spend his time kissing. This he thought, was a great deal more like what he had hoped for from marriage. They never seemed to have as much time as they might like, somehow, farm life being what it was, the animals needing attention in the morning, too tired at night to stay awake long, but Sundays spread out before them, a whole day of prescribed rest. They were too far a ride from the town church to be expected to appear regularly, and Tyson had giddily acceded to Nate’s suggestion they observe the Sabbath at home, which was entirely acceptable.

“Oh, God,” Nate said in tones of deepest satisfaction, stretching luxuriously in late November. “Sunday. It’s Sunday and I got my husband in the bed with me, and a whole day to do as I like.” Despite this, he only kissed Tyson lightly and then rose from the bed to see to the stock. “Animals can’t wait,” he said when Tyson looked questioning. “You stay there, and I’ll feed the chickens real quick for you while I’m at it. See if you can get some more sleep and I’ll come back to bed when I’m done.”

“Here,” he said, tossing Tyson an apple and rooting thoughtfully through the cake tin. “You eat that, and this,” - he passed a turnover to Tyson and stuffed one into his own mouth - “and I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Tyson considered praying, decided he’d start later, and fell asleep again still clutching his turnover and apple. He woke to Nate bent over the bed, carefully taking the apple and pastry out of his hands and setting them on a tin plate on the floor. Tyson smiled up at him, half asleep and Nate smiled back. “You’re so pretty,” Nate said, “so awful pretty. Let me back in that bed, I want to kiss you.” Willingly Tyson pulled the quilt back, making space for Nate: Nate shucked his pants and shirt in a trice and crawled into bed.

“Shouldn’t we be praying?” asked Tyson, and Nate turned towards him and took him in his arms.

“Mmm, yeah, praying,” Nate grunted. “Sure. C’mere.” So saying, he failed entirely to start praying and kissed Tyson instead. Tyson didn’t argue; Nate was the spiritual and mundane head of the household, and if he felt Sunday mornings called for kissing, not prayer, then so be it. He pressed closer to Nate - like usual in the morning he could feel Nate was hard against him, but this morning, rather than pulling back to avoid contact, Tyson pushed forward, rubbing against Nate’s large thigh covered only in the thin material of his summer long johns. He pressed back, pushing his leg forward until it was right up between Tyson’s. The pleasure was diffuse, and Tyson explored it, grinding forward slightly. He’d been noticing that his cock, so much smaller than Nate’s, got harder too when they kissed, though not exactly the same as Nate’s. He tried various different angles of approach, pushing and rubbing until his groin felt warm, and full, but there was no urgency to the feeling.

Nate seemed to be feeling some urgency though, and groaned and rolled away onto his back, panting. The covers had been pushed to the end of the bed and Tyson could see his erection through the thin cotton long johns. Unselfconsciously Nate palmed himself and heaved a long sigh. “I got to go take care of this,” he said, rolled off the bed and headed out to the front porch. Puzzled, Tyson
watched him go. He could tell Nate wasn’t going very far as he didn’t put his clothes or boots on, but where he was going, and what he proposed doing about his hard on was a mystery to Tyson. Sure enough Nate returned five minutes later, cock soft, face red, and flopped back down on the bed.

“Where did you go?” Tyson asked, bemused. “And what did you do with your - you know?”

Nate looked back at him, puzzled. “I pulled myself off,” he said. “What do you think I been doing all this time?” Nate obviously had not pulled it off, it was quite clearly still there, so Tyson assumed this was another English expression he didn’t understand, and he told Nate as much.

“I jerked it?” Nate said, looking at him oddly. “What did you think I’ve been doing all this time? I been jerking it every morning before I head out and every evening before I head back home. How you think I’ve been keeping myself cool when we been kissing so much?”

“What do you mean jerked it?” Tyson asked. He understood Nate meant something sexual, but he couldn’t imagine what.

Nate gave him an odd look but answered civilly. “I used my hand,” he said, a little red. “I used my hand on my cock and made myself come.”

“What?” Tyson said, new vistas opening up in front of him as he spoke. “You can do that? And it’s just the same as marital relations?”

“Well I wouldn’t know, would I?” said Nate. “When the married men talk they seem to think fucking’s better, but jerking it feels pretty good, and it makes my cockstand go down. Don’t you jerk it?”

“Do I jerk it?” Tyson repeated. “No. I never heard of that. How do you do it?” Nate sat back up, astonished.

“You never touched yourself up in bed, or in the bath?” Nate asked.

“Oh no,” said Tyson. “It’s a sin to touch yourself. You can use a flannel once a day to have a wash, but that’s it, more would despoil your purity.”

“Never?” Nate said slyly, but Tyson was equal to the question.

“Never,” he said firmly. “It’s just Alphas that have needs like that; I don’t think Omegas do. I don’t.”

“That sounds like bullshit to me,” Nate said. “You like kissing.”

“Well, sure,” Tyson said. “Kissing. That’s different.”

“Maybe,” Nate said, considering it. “But you were just pressing up against my leg while we were kissing, and you were moving like you liked it. That’s what got me so hot I had to go step outside. And Alphas like it, and girls like it, and I don’t see why you’d be the only thing God created that doesn’t like it.”

Tyson waved this aside to consider later and refocused on the important point. This was incredibly irritating news. He couldn’t believe there was an alternative to the marital act, and no one had told him; it sounded from what Nate was saying that it didn’t have to hurt at all. What a missed opportunity, if he had been able to fob Gabe off with this. He wondered if Gabe had known about it - from what Nate said, all Alphas did.

“How, exactly, do you do that?” he wanted to know, and Nate looked taken aback.
“Well, I,” he started, and then stopped. “Do you want me to show you?” Nate asked carefully and Tyson considered it.

“Would it hurt at all?” he asked, and Nate shook his head.

“No,” he said, “I’d like if we could kiss while I was doing it, but if you want I could certainly do it first without even touching you at all.” Tyson gave it some more thought. It seemed awkward to just watch Nate touch himself, but on the other hand this was important information, and they were married, they were allowed. Still, Tyson had only seen Nate naked below the waist once and Nate had never seen Tyson with his nightgown off; it felt like quite a big step. Tyson looked over at Nate, undecided. Nate was looking at him hopefully and Tyson could tell Nate wanted to, anyway, and that was enough for him.

“Yes,” Tyson said, trying to sound certain and unbothered, as if it were nothing to him to see his husband naked. “Yes please, Alpha, show me.” Nate boggled at him disbelievingly but then scrambled to sit up against the cabin wall that formed the headboard of the bed. His cock, Tyson observed, was almost entirely erect again. Nate pushed his long johns down to mid thigh, took himself in hand, and looked at Tyson like he couldn’t believe his luck. Tyson looked back, intrigued. Nate was remarkably free with exposing his body by Observant standards, but even so Tyson had only gotten one clear look at Nate naked while he was asleep, and since they’d been married Nate had respectfully kept his long johns on in bed. Nate was barechested and flushed, remains of his summer tan still visible above his waistline. Below, his skin was milky white except for where his cock peeked out a harsh red above and below his gripping hand. “Go on,” Tyson said, and Nate looked uncharacteristically shy but spat into his hand, which really was disgusting, Tyson thought, and began sliding it up and down his cock.

It seemed a very simple matter, Nate growing gradually more and more red faced as his hand moved along his cock. There were small variations in his movements, hand passing over the head on occasion, ending every second pass with a twist at the top, sometimes bringing one hand down to tug at his balls, but all in all he was simply sitting there, staring fixedly at Tyson, moving his hand increasingly quick up and down. It really was no wonder, Tyson thought, that it had hurt; Nate’s cock was clearly too large to be designed to go inside another person. He wasn’t clear, never having seen it, if Gabe’s was the same but he supposed so, and this seemed like a much more satisfactory way to go about the proceedings.

Possibly it wasn’t entirely satisfactory for Nate; he had taken on a strained look of pain and was breathing in deep gasps. Now Tyson could see why Nate had used the phrase ‘jerk’ to describe the process; Nate was pulling and tugging harder than Tyson would have dared. Just as Tyson was growing concerned, Nate straightened his legs out and with one great moan dug his heels into the straw mattress, arched his back, and flung his head back as his cock twitched once, twice, three times and then spat out a load of white liquid. His hand continued to move slowly for a few seconds, and then Nate slumped back to the bed, panting, and he was done. It all seemed much quicker than Tyson remembered marital relations with Gabe being, but maybe that was a trick of his memory.

“That’s it?” Tyson asked, amazed. He hadn’t felt a thing, except interest, and a conviction that Nate was the smartest Alpha he had ever met. How clever he was to have arrived at this painless solution. Tyson opened his mouth to tell him so but Nate reached out an arm and flailed his hand, reaching for Tyson.

“You alright?” Nate asked and Tyson caught his hand.

“I’m fine Alpha,” he said. “I’m entirely fine, and you’re awfully clever. How did you ever come up with that?”
“Just came natural somehow,” Nate said, laughing. “I like your low expectations - come give me a cuddle, will you?” Tyson did, willingly, sliding up to Nate and running his hand curiously down Nate’s chest to touch the tacky spend.

“I didn’t know it was white,” he said wonderingly. “Is everyone’s white?”

“Think so,” Nate grunted, his eyes sliding closed like he was ready for a nap. “Can I give you a kiss?” he asked, and Tyson leaned forward to kiss him.

“And you’re doing that twice a day?” Tyson asked. It occurred to him this might be why Nate often seemed to be in the privy for a surprising amount of time in the morning; previously he’d thought Nate probably needed to eat more greens.

“At least,” Nate said. “Kiss again, please.”

Tyson obliged, thinking. “Where are you doing it?” he wanted to know, and Nate’s eyes popped open.

“Anywhere I got a moment alone,” Nate said. “Why?”

“Is that why you’re in the privy so long?” Tyson asked, and Nate started laughing.

“Yes,” he said, “and it’s disgusting. I used to stop half way before I met Johnson in the morning but he caught me once and I think he thought it was the horse that made me hot, so now I do it before, even though the privy is pretty foul.” Tyson, flushed with goodwill, felt terrible for Nate stuck in the outhouse, patiently taking care of needs Tyson was failing to meet.

“You could do it in bed,” he offered. “I wouldn’t mind, and it seems awful nasty, doing it in the privy.”

“Really?” Nate said, “that wouldn’t scare you none?”

Tyson wanted to do something for Nate to show how much he appreciated his kindness and forbearance, and he thought back to Nate saying he’d rather be kissed while he was jerking it. Oh, well, Tyson thought. That was nothing, really, if Nate wanted to be kissed while he did it, why not? “It won’t scare me Alpha,” he said, pleased with his own broadmindedness. “We could kiss while you do it if you like, too.”

“Really,” Nate said, in an entirely different tone. “I would like.”
Chapter 7

Christmas Eve dawned like any other day - Nate got up and did the fire, still a fresh luxury to Tyson - and headed out to care for the stock, leaving Tyson to lie in bed and worry about how he was going to get Nate out of the house long enough to make the molasses popcorn. Before he had come to any decision, the problem solved itself. Nate returned from the barn and said, “I’ve got to head down to Johnson’s for a bit,” he said. “Can we have breakfast real quick, and then I’ll head out?” Happy with the solution, Tyson got up, made breakfast and then waved Nate off cheerfully. Three hours later Nate returned with Johnson’s sleigh.

“I thought you might like to go for a ride tomorrow,” he said casually. “You ever been in a sleigh? They’re good fun, there’s much less weight for the horses to haul and they can step right along. So if it’s fine, and if there’s no sign at all of snow, and if I think it’s safe, we’ll go out tomorrow, and if the conditions are right, we’ll head in to my parent’s house for an hour or two, alright?” Tyson nodded obediently - it wasn’t much to him either way, but Nate seemed very determined to hedge the plan about with warnings, which he didn’t understand. “I just don’t want you to be disappointed,” Nate said. “I won’t take you out unless I’m happy there’s no risk of blizzard.”

“Alright, Alpha,” Tyson said, since it seemed important to Nate, but his mind was already on the tin of popcorn hidden away behind the sack of cornmeal, ready for tomorrow. Mrs. MacKinnon was right, that stuff was delicious. He’d only regretfully stopped eating it to have enough to fill the tin. “You want popcorn?” he asked. He was very pleased with his subterfuge - he had cleverly thought to make some plain popcorn to explain the smell.

* 

First thing Christmas morning Nate leaned over the side of the bed, rooted around for a minute, and then came up with an apple in a sock, which he presented to Tyson. “Merry Christmas, baby,” he said proudly. Tyson could tell from Nate’s tone this was meant to be a real treat, and he was always happy to have an apple, especially since he had thought they finished their store a few weeks ago, but the role of the sock was a puzzle.

“Thank you,” said Tyson, and unclear on the proper response to the sock apple, kissed Nate as he was certain that would be well received. He was right.

“Hey now,” Nate said throatily. “That’s a fine Christmas morning,” but he was in for a surprise. Boldly Tyson stuck his hand down Nate’s pants and took hold of Nate’s hard cock. Nate squeaked in surprise and his hips jolted upwards into Tyson’s grip. He flailed his free arm about, looking for somewhere to put it that wouldn’t be too much for Tyson.

“Shoulder,” Tyson said, and Nate followed his direction, resting his left hand on Tyson’s shoulder, his right trapped underneath them. Tyson leaned forward and kissed Nate again, and then, still kissing, began to stroke his cock. He’d been kissing Nate while he jerked himself off for weeks, and it all felt quite familiar. The only difference was the hand on Nate’s cock. Nate made a happy noise and kissed back eagerly.

“Oh holy shit,” Nate said reverently, looking down at Tyson’s hand on him. “Look at that.”

Tyson had been growing curious about what Nate would feel like in his hand, and after several weeks of watching him jerk it, creeping closer and closer until they were seated side by side on the bed, and then lying behind him, pressed up against Nate and watching over his shoulder, he felt confident enough to put his hand on Nate. Nate’s cock was rock hard but warm and velvety and
Tyson was surprised to discover Nate grunted approval when he gripped it tighter. It felt oddly … friendly, not intimidating as he had thought, Tyson still in full control and Nate staring up at him open mouthed and stunned, as if Nate’s cock was a willing assistant in letting Tyson undo Nate.

It was unexpectedly exciting, and although he had imagined simply stroking Nate off, after a few passes Tyson began to wriggle his hips and press forward against Nate’s thigh. He didn’t initially feel the need to do more than that; he liked the vague arousal, he liked making Nate happy, but most of all he liked the feeling of power and competence. Nate was entirely in his hands, physically and emotionally, gazing admiringly up at him from where he lay holding himself still from grabbing at Tyson. After a couple minutes Nate was reduced to panting and gasping, completely at his mercy, and experimentally Tyson stilled his hand. He noticed he was still pressed up against Nate, rocking against Nate’s thigh with each pass. He tightened his thighs around Nate’s, liked the sensation and lost focus on Nate. Just as he was starting to feel a novel something building in his groin, Nate jolted into movement, grabbed Tyson around the waist, pulled him firmly against him, and gasped.

“Please, please, please,” Nate said, looking desperate, and Tyson started again, faster. It was clearly just a matter of gripping firmly and making passes up and down; there was nothing more to it. He was surprised to discover it was the simplest thing in the world. He could feel Nate grow even harder in his hand and then suddenly he stiffened and his cock throbbed once, twice, three times and he came, head thrown back and abdominal muscles clenching. Tyson could see the ring of flesh at the base of Nate’s cock, slightly raised and hotter to the touch but like always it stayed static, no knot swelling up. He stroked a few more times until Nate gently pulled his hand away and then they were done, Nate staring up at Tyson slack jawed and adoringly, Tyson looking back at him, pleased with how easy it had been. He liked feeling he was meeting his marital responsibilities when he had failed at it for so long.

“Oh, geez,” Nate panted, blissful, and collapsed on his back still holding Tyson’s hand. “Good Christmas gift, thanks.” He reached up and pulled Tyson down on top of him where Tyson squirmed happily, enjoying the friction but not interested enough to pursue it beyond that. The moment had passed but he thought he might be interested in exploring it further another time. What, he wondered for the first time, would it be like to have Nate’s hands, those careful, adept large fingers, directly on him? ‘You alright?’ Nate asked, and when Tyson nodded, he kissed him, rumbling. “Thank you baby,” he said, his hands running up into Tyson’s hair.

Tyson seized the moment, knowing that Nate was in the best possible of moods. “What’s the sock for?”

“It’s a Christmas stocking,” Nate said, sitting up to look at him. “Don’t your people do them?”

“No,” said Tyson. “We don’t do Christmas, I told you. But why’d you put the apple in a sock?”

Nate leaned over the bed and dug out the stocking again. “It’s a Christmas stocking,” he explained. “It’s meant to be an orange, but as I’m not a millionaire, it’s an apple, and a few other little bits.” He handed it back to Tyson and nodded encouragingly at it. “Go on,” he said, “have a look.”

Tyson reached a hand in and pulled out the apple. Underneath it was a handful of nuts, and beneath that, a small paper wrapped parcel and a twist of paper that felt intriguingly familiar. It was a bar of the fine milled soap he used on his hair and a poke of assorted hard candies. “Thank you,” he said, meaning it. Although his people didn’t do Christmas, they did do Orthodox New Years, and last year’s had passed in this same cabin, unremarked in a haze of misery. He’d done nothing to celebrate, which he suddenly realised must have been hard on Alpha Landeskog as well, and Alpha Landeskog had been in a phase of particular strictness, requiring penance for every perceived
transgression. There had been a great deal of kneeling on the cold floor.

“Maybe it’s not what you’re used to,” Nate began, sounding awkward, and Tyson looked up at him and realised Nate was ashamed his gift was so small. He couldn’t bear the thought that Nate should doubt himself or feel lesser for one minute, and he threw himself at Nate, throwing his arms around Nate’s neck and hauling himself into his lap.

“It’s better than what I’m used to,” he said emphatically, snuggling into Nate’s neck and pulling their chests together. It was hard to talk to Nate, sometimes, but Tyson could rely on their bodies to communicate what he wasn’t able to say, or didn’t even understand himself, and Nate seemed to understand that too as his arms closed around Tyson and he hugged back.

There had been last year, better forgotten, and the year before that Tyson had received a gift from family of his trousseau and an expensive present of some kind from the Landeskogs, carefully chosen to demonstrate their wealth and piety and so totally impersonal that Tyson had forgotten already what it was. From Jamie, a copy of Great Expectations, all the more valuable because it represented months of careful saving given how little cash they were allowed to handle. The soap and candies Nate had troubled to notice he liked, and the carefully hoarded apple represented a great deal more to him than any expensive gift he had ever received. He hugged Nate harder, trying to convey this, and Nate hugged back.

He could see why Nate liked the sleigh. The air was cold and crisp, but not so cold as to be intolerable, and the ride was smooth and excitingly fast as they glided along. With the new laid snow, the driving still required Nate’s attention but wasn’t as demanding as getting the wagon along the rough roads in the spring, and on the good stretches Nate could free one hand to hold Tyson’s under the blankets. Halfway into town, Nate pulled over to let the horses rest a minute and check their feet.

“How you doing?” he asked Tyson, his breath puffing out clouds into the air. “You warm enough? Tyson looked down at where he was swathed in essentially all the blankets they owned, over bundled to the point of immobility, and laughed.

“I’m alright,” he said. “You wrapped me up pretty good. I feel like a Entenbroden.”

Nate scoffed at him and took one glove off to fuss at the mass of blankets around Tyson. “I wrapped you up like a pregnant person who needs to stay warm,” he said, shifting Tyson’s muffler about until it was tucked in to his satisfaction. “And like something special to me. That brick still hot?” It turned out Nate did get awful soft hearted after marital relations, even just partial ones, and Nate under the influence of relations and molasses popcorn was just a giant ball of sentiment. He had clasped the tin of popcorn to his chest and grown briefly teary eyed. Evidently he had not been expecting a Christmas present and was delighted to receive two, especially two so tailored to his tastes. “Best Christmas I ever had,” he said, shoveling in the popcorn.

“Brick’s good, thanks Alpha,” Tyson said, enjoying the fussing. He was pretty pleased with matters too. His first hesitant foray into marital relations with Nate had been a rousing success, the molasses popcorn had been rapturously received, and tucked into one of his pockets was the poke of candies his husband had given him as a sign of his genuine affection. His Alpha had spent the morning fawning over him, kissing and petting him with gentle hands, looking at him like he was something precious. If this was Reform Christmas, he liked it.

“First Christmas married,” Nate remarked, and Tyson said, “First Christmas ever,” and Nate smiled. “You enjoying it so far?” he asked, and Tyson looked at Nate, swathed in his heavy coat, a horrible
cobbled together monstrosity of worn wool cloth and bits of poorly cured fur. He had a washed out woolen muffler wrapped around his neck and across his chest, and worst of all his winter hat which he had a particular misplaced fondness for. The first time he’d put it on and Tyson had stared at it in shock, Nate had misinterpreted it as admiration and he had told Tyson, pleased with his discernment, that he had trapped the racoon that constituted most of the hat himself. It retained significantly more of the racoon than Tyson thought necessary or wise but Nate loved it.

Then he looked down at Nate’s hands in his heavy gloves, Nate’s one vanity - unlike most men, he didn’t wear heavy felt gauntlets over his leather gloves when driving in the cold. Nate insisted it was because this gave him a better feel for the horses but Tyson suspected he was proud of his expensive fur lined gloves, made of moose leather tough enough to last many years. Those hands had been on his body not two hours ago, clutching and gripping as Nate lost himself but never too tight, always gentle.

“Yeah,” Tyson said, “pretty good so far.”

“You want to try driving?” Nate asked, and when Tyson agreed, pulled him along the bench into his lap, rearranged the blankets over both of them, and they drove the rest of the way together, Nate holding loosely onto the reins in case of disaster but Tyson guiding and controlling the horses. He’d never been allowed to drive before, and Nate cheerfully pointed out he was terrible at it, but Tyson enjoyed it, the horses pulling against him but his new arm muscles equal to the task.

“Hello hello!” Nate called, bounding up the MacKinnon stairs in high good humour. Mr. MacKinnon opened the door, took one look at Nate’s face, overlaid with the smug and near manic look of a very young man who had just had significantly more sex than he’d ever experienced before, and turned his gaze on Tyson. His eyebrows rose slightly and Tyson was convinced he knew what they had been up to but mercifully the children poured out the door and rescued him.

“Nate!” they cried, delighted to see their brother and Nate had to usher them all back inside and then kiss and hug every one of them, exchanging Christmas greetings. Sarah graciously kissed Tyson on the cheek and wished him a Happy Christmas and the youngest three, unconscious of any awkwardness, followed her lead and gave Tyson sticky kisses and mumbled Merry Christmases before they ran back to their presents.

The house smelt of cinnamon and turkey, and there were pine boughs hung above the mantle. The children had each been provided with a stick of candy and a small, homemade dolly, and the big girls had new hair ribbons. Tyson and Nate were asked to admire five rag dollies and Sarah’s hair ribbon (pink) and Mary’s (blue) before they could progress into the kitchen to speak to the adults.

“Tyson made me molasses popcorn!” Nate said proudly, and Tyson noticed Mrs. MacKinnon jerk her head very slightly at Sarah. Sarah got up quietly and slipped out of the room.

“Did you now,” said Mrs. MacKinnon to Tyson. “What a clever idea,” but she sounded approving as if he had managed to exceed her low expectations.

Later, after dinner while Mrs. MacKinnon was occupied mediating a conflict between the littlest boys and the pig bucket, Tyson slipped into the kitchen and looked for the molasses popcorn he was certain Sarah had been sent to hide. Sure enough he found it, a great big tin of it, hidden behind the flour barrel. As soon as he opened it and tried a bit he realised he’d overcooked the living hell out of the batch he’d made. Philosophically he ate a bit more. Well, he thought, now he’d know for next time, and it was sweet of Nate not to have said anything about it. They could call it even for Tyson’s forbearance about the hat.

“You ready to head out?” Nate asked coming into the kitchen, and guiltily Tyson slammed the tin
shut. Nate gripped him around the waist and peered over his shoulder. “Ah-ha!” he said. “I been wondering where that was.” He reached around Tyson and plucked the tin out from its hiding spot. “I’m going to take this one too,” he said, setting it on the kitchen bench. “Ma!” he bellowed towards the front of the house. “Ma! I’m going to take the tin of popcorn, alright?”

“Damnit, Nate,” Mrs. MacKinnon’s voice replied. Tyson could hear her boots thumping quickly across the wood planks of the front room and then she was in the kitchen. “I was trying not to shade your boy,” she said, looking cross, but Nate just shrugged.

“Nothing can shade Tyson,” he said simply. “But I want this popcorn too, Ma, alright?”

“Take it if you like,” she said, resigned. “I made it for you two after all. Both of you, now, mind - see that Mr. Landeskog gets a look in.” Nate laughed and let go of Tyson to kiss her on the cheek. He seemed almost giddy with Christmas cheer. It was only the second time Nate had seen his mother since she had struck him on the day he and Tyson were engaged, and Tyson was glad to see them fully reconciled.

“You don’t know him so well yet Ma, but you don’t need to worry about Tyson getting his fair share of sweeties. And he’s not Mr. Landeskog anymore is he?” Nate said.

“I suppose not,” she said. “It’s good to see the two of you looking happy.”

“I am happy, Ma,” Nate said, and kissed her again, and Tyson caught the look she gave Nate, of heartbreaking worry and hope, although Nate did not. Mrs. MacKinnon turned and headed to the front door, but before Tyson could follow Nate took up both of Tyson’s hands and kissed the palms. “Yours was the best,” he whispered. “I liked the popcorn a lot but I like the other even better.” Tyson felt a little flash of heat pass through him when he thought of what they had been doing.

“Sorry Alpha,” Tyson said. “I burnt the popcorn a bit, I tried but I know it wasn’t too good.”

“I see you trying,” Nate said, surprising Tyson. “I see you trying so hard, stuck here in this new place, with new rules to follow, and you’re doing a good job. Now come on, I got one more present for you.” He began towing Tyson to the door. “And your popcorn was the best,” he added, smiling. “Tastes like my husband’s starting to like me;”

“I always liked you,” Tyson said, trailing behind Nate.

“Tastes like my husband thought about what I’d like,” Nate said, grinning, and Tyson realized suddenly that Nate had wanted exactly the same thing for Christmas as he had, to be seen. He hadn’t understood they were so much the same before. Nate had been a strange bulky other, necessary but essentially strange. Now he saw that Nate was what his mother had called him, a boy, a boy like Tyson had been, like Jordie Benn, like even Alpha Landeskog had perhaps been. He mulled this thought over while they climbed back into their heavy winter wraps and boarded the sleigh.

“Here we are,” Nate said only a few blocks from the MacKinnon’s house. He pulled over by the General Store. “I’m only going to be a minute, can you hold the horses?” Tyson obediently took the reins and watched with interest as Nate swung off the sleigh and into the store. He was hoping for more candy or maybe a book, but Nate remerged with nothing but his hat, which he held out in front of him upside down.

“Alright now,” Nate said, climbing back up on the bench seat and carefully handing the hat to Tyson. “You’re going to have to be awful careful not to let them get loose on the way home. Try to keep them in the hat so they stay warm, and we’ll tuck them in under a couple layers of blanket as well.” Tyson looked down - inside the hat, cuddled up together and looking about curiously, were
the two tabby kittens from the litter he had seen last month.

“Alpha, are they for me?” Tyson asked, hardly able to believe it.

“They are,” said Nate, clearly pleased with himself. “What you think of that?”

Tyson didn’t even know what he thought. He knew they were base but he didn’t care. He had longed for them so back when he first saw them and now here they were, a little larger and ready to come live with him. He had never considered the possibility of such a generous gift. He clutched the hat carefully to himself and then both scrambled at once to escape the hat and Tyson jumped.

“Whoops,” Nate said, using one large hand to fence the kittens in, “Let’s get these boys tucked away.” He burrowed his other hand into Tyson’s nest of blankets and created a little space to put the hat, close in against his body where the kittens could stay warm. “Let’s go,” he said. “I’m not too keen on the colour of that sky.” Tyson looked up but it looked the same as always to him, steel grey and low. Tyson was so enchanted with the kittens, who eventually fell asleep after they had tested the boundaries of their blanket pen, that he didn’t notice how Nate was driving the horses on until they passed the big pine marking half way that Nate had stopped at on the way in.

“Not stopping, Alpha?” he asked, but Nate just grunted in reply. Tyson looked over at him and saw his face was tense. Nate squinted at the east where the sky looked slightly more grey, and then pulled his muffler up over his ears. “Hold on,” he said tersely, and slapped the horses into a quicker gait. The snow came down just as the barn was in sight, and they reached the shelter with no time to spare.

“I got to get the ice off their hooves,” Nate said. “You stay here and I’ll walk you over when I’m done - it’s dangerous in a blizzard, even a little way.” Tyson nodded but he wasn’t really listening. The kittens were stirring in their hat and he was concerned they would escape and be lost to the corners of the barn. He waited five minutes, the kittens growing increasingly restless, but Nate was still at the hooves, muttering about needing to teach Tyson to help with the chore, so he left. Obviously he knew exactly where the house was - it was no more than 50 feet from the barn. Even with the heavy blowing snow whiting out his sight, he knew all he had to do was walk straight forward and he’d bump right into the front porch. He set out briskly, holding the hat closed against him.

It was an awful lot of snow. He’d never seen anything like it, not in Victoria of course, and not even last year. Nate told him last year had been an unusually mild winter, but he hadn’t really understood that until he was twenty steps from the barn and he realised he was completely turned around. He looked behind him at where he thought the barn should be, but couldn’t see it either so he continued trudging forward to where surely the house must be, head down against the wind. Twenty steps further, he became even more unsure of his direction. He took twenty more steps, and then twenty more again, and realised he must have overshot the house and be on the open valley floor. He paused and tried to puzzle out what direction to head. His hands were growing numb and holding the hat was more and more difficult but he carried on a dozen more steps and then stumbled over a hillock and fell. He managed to keep hold of the kittens, but snow got down his shirt and the back of his pants under his coat, and suddenly he realised he was lost. Entirely lost, and rapidly growing so cold he couldn’t feel his fingers or toes. He stood for five more minutes, trying to think what to do. The wind caught his breath and pulled it from him, and just as he felt all was lost, a large arm wrapped around his waist and Nate was there, deeply pissed off and miraculous.

The wind had picked up even further and it was too loud to talk, so Nate simply turned Tyson around by the waist none too gently, and then holding him close with one arm, the other on the rope
he was using to guide himself back to the house, they made their way back to the house, hunched against the wind.

but when Tyson peeked up at Nate from under his scarf, Nate looked enraged in a way he had only seen directed at others. He quailed but continued on, conscious the kittens needed to get inside.

Nate had to all but carry him up the steps, and help Tyson take off his coat. His hands were too chilled to do it. Ultimately, still stone faced, Nate picked Tyson up and deposited him and the kittens on the bed and then knelt down to unlace Tyson’s boots. “You stay there,” Nate said, tugging off each boot, cold and angry.

“I’m sorry Alpha,” Tyson said in a small voice, sitting in his stocking feet on the bed while Nate built the fire up. Nate finished and turned back around to look at Tyson, still strained. “That’s going to hurt,” Nate said, looking at Tyson’s fingers and then toes when he had knelt down again and removed Tyson’s socks. “You’re going to cry when they thaw, and serve you right. You’re lucky you didn’t hurt the kittens, too.”

Tyson looked down, hands folded in his lap, the picture of penitence, and then deliberately opened his eyes wide and looked up at Nate from under his eyelashes, head tilted just so. He wasn’t unaware of what he looked like; he and Jamie had practiced on each other and in the mirror. “Don’t you even try that,” Nate said sharply. “Don’t you look at me like that, trying to play me, as if being pretty was enough to make it alright for you to freeze and die because you’re too silly to listen when it matters.” Tyson dropped the coyness and scowled. He didn’t want to wreck this very nice Christmas day, but he was suddenly conscious that he didn’t really know how to apologise like adult; he only knew how to perform penance and evade punishment through a display of his beauty.

“I’m sorry,” he said slowly, trying to talk to Nate as he would have Jamie. “I’m very sorry, and I really mean it. I should have followed your orders, Alpha.”

“No,” Nate said, “Try again.”

“I should have listened to you?” Tyson said, groping for what had really been wrong. “I should have listened to what you said. Because you want me to be safe. So you told me what was safe, and thought I’d listen. But I didn’t.”

“No you didn’t,” Nate agreed. “Why was that?”

“Well I’m very silly, Alpha,” Tyson said, eager to explain to Nate that it wasn’t his fault. “Omegas are like that, our minds are soft and silly, like a child.”

“There is nothing wrong with your mind except the heap of shit your parents filled it with,” Nate snapped, but something about saying that seemed to make him soften and he sighed. “Come to bed,” he said, “come on to bed and get warm, and bring those kittens too. You know they like to chase your hand under the blanket?”

“Do they?” said Tyson, delighted, and scrambled to obey.

Later that night they were snuggled under the blankets, cozied up together, the kittens down at the foot of the bed asleep, and Nate returned to the earlier discussion. “Do you understand I’m not talking just to hear myself yap?” Nate asked, and Tyson paused in his wriggling to get comfortable to listen. “I’m not saying things just to say them,” Nate went on. “I’m telling you what’s important, and trusting you’ve got enough sense to hear me. Do you?”
"Of course I do, Alpha," Tyson said, a little stung.

"I’m not sure you do, though," Nate said. "That was incredibly stupid, to go out alone, and it scared me. Not just because I thought I’d lost you, but because I thought you had more sense than that. I’m getting worried you’re going to drop the baby down the well."

Tyson listened to what Nate was saying, and thought of Jamie, the model of what an omega should be. Jamie’s gentle submission was held up admiringly as an example of ideal Omega behaviour but Tyson privately thought it was terrifying. Jamie was so passive and obedient that Tyson could indeed imagine him dropping a baby in a well if he was told to; he doubted Jamie would hesitate. Sense was not a quality Tyson or Jamie had ever striven for. They were to be quietly, passively beautiful, submissive and gentle, silent and decorative. They both failed spectacularly in different ways; Tyson couldn’t shut up or stop arguing and Jamie was too tall, too fat, just too big in every dimension to be desirable. Tyson thought he was sweetly pretty, with his big brown eyes and glossy black hair, but no one else did. Jamie got backhanded a great deal less than Tyson, though, and Tyson had never, til this day, considered this was anything but an accurate assessment of their virtue. Jamie was the better Omega and it was sadly unfair that Tyson had been given the pleasing looks that meant his value was magnitudes greater than Jamie’s. When Tyson had left with Alpha Landeskog, Jamie just had been in the process of getting engaged, dismally late for an Omega, to Alpha Latimer an aging, wealthy man notable for his strict belief and nasty habit of sucking his teeth loudly.

“I told you before,” Nate crooned into his ear, “I’m not playing, and neither should you be. This thing we’re doing, there’s no pretend about it. This isn’t work for a fool. I take you out past sight of the house on the sleigh, that’s life or death. We hunker down for the winter in the cabin, life or death. Stove goes out midwinter and we don’t have more wood, that’s just death. There’s no rehearsal, no second chance, but you can depend on me to get it right and I’ll keep you safe, baby, but you got to listen when I talk and use your brain."

Now here was Nate telling him different, telling him not to passively follow orders but to listen and think. Tyson was deeply convinced by now that Nate could do no wrong. Nate had saved him again and again, first from a forced marriage to a stranger and finally from the horrors of the marriage bed. “Alright,” he said, eager to please Nate. “I’m not sure if I am a twit or I’ve just been acting like one for so long I don’t know any other way, but I can try.”

“You’re smart,” Nate said, full of conviction, and Tyson chose to believe him.

“Maybe,” Tyson said. “I’d like to be, for you.” Nate turned to him and kissed him and Tyson sank happily into it.

* *

The New Year found them entirely socked in by snow, with nothing to do but explore the boundaries of Tyson’s new interest in Nate’s hands on him. Nate was happy to oblige.

* *

“Come here,” Nate said hoarsely, and Tyson did, leaning forward to kiss him, one of Nate’s thighs between his. Nate turned them, pressing Tyson to the wall and holding him there with one large thigh pressed between Tyson’s, Tyson’s nightgown rucked up between his thighs. He ground against Nate as they kissed and discovered the pressure between his legs made the kissing even better. When they finally broke apart Nate was red faced and mussed and Tyson doubted he looked any better but he didn’t care. All he cared about was getting that pressure back against himself but Nate pulled away, hands on Tyson’s shoulders and head hanging down between his arms, trying to calm down. Tyson could see Nate was hard in his pants, cock bulging against the fly and Nate
followed his gaze and laughed. He reached down to adjust himself in his pants and Tyson wondered again at his lack of shame. Nate could clearly tell what Tyson was thinking.

“We’re married,” Nate said, “we can do what we like. And there’s nothing wrong with liking this - how else we ever going to get a baby?”

“We already got a baby,” Tyson pointed out, looking down between them where there was just a hint of a bump beneath his nightgown. “And what’s this got to do with getting a baby anyway?” He could tell from Nate’s flabbergasted expression he’d said something stupid again but he wasn’t sure what.

Five minutes later he was still mulling over everything Nate explained to him, appalled, but then his heart leapt with hope. “So if I let you do it to me now, could the baby be yours instead of a Landeskog?” he asked.

“Oh, no sweetheart, I’m sorry, no,” Nate said, shaking his head. “That’s not how it works. Just the first time makes the baby.” He looked away instead of kissing Tyson again and Tyson narrowed his eyes.

“Are you jealous?” Tyson asked him, and Nate wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Jealous of who?” Tyson asked genuinely. “I never done this before in my life. I didn’t even know you could do this.” Everything they’ve done has been a revelation to him. “Alpha Landeskog,” he said, struggling to find a way to say it; “What he did, it wasn’t... we never...”

“No?” Nate asked, painfully hopeful.

“No,” Tyson said definitely. “Only you. Now you sure about the baby? Because not every time makes a baby, or people would have a lot more babies.”

“I’m sure,” Nate said, kissing him gently again. “Not every time makes a baby but once it’s made that’s it.”

“Shit,” Tyson said, but despite this setback he leaned in again to kiss Nate and pulled him back against him. If he couldn’t change the father of his baby, he at least wanted to pursue that maddening sensation between his legs that Nate seemed so familiar with.

“You got something on your gown,” Nate said, and Tyson looked down to where Nate was pointing. There was a wet patch on his nightgown where it had been caught between them.

“Ah hah!” Nate said triumphantly. “That’s how you do it,” and he swept back in to grab Tyson and hitch one leg back up around his waist. Nate was right, Tyson found out about ten minutes later. That was how you did it.

At least one of the ways of doing it. It turned out there were quite a few, and Nate had devoted some thought to most of them.

“Can I?” Nate asked, and Tyson nodded. It was so much easier if he didn’t have to talk about it and Nate let him get away with it, going back to kissing him as his hand slid down into Tyson’s pants. The discovery that Nate’s hands were large enough to span everything of interest to them both at once - cock, balls, hole - pleased Tyson each time Nate touched him. Flat of his hand pressing pleasingly against Tyson’s cock, Nate’s fingers stroked against the lips of Tyson’s hole and Tyson shivered. Nate made pass after pass, exploring and spreading the slick around until Tyson felt wet and open and each touch was welcome as Tyson ground up against his hand, straining for more
contact.

“Yeah?” Nate said, and continued to kiss him deeply, pressing down with his palm so Tyson got the pressure he was wanting, and dipping, just very slightly, the tip of one finger inside him. Tyson tensed but then relaxed as none of it hurt. Everything was so slippery it felt very natural and easy and if it pleased Nate to do this then he guessed he didn’t mind since Nate maintained the pressure on Tyson’s cock at the same time. Nate had promised him there would be no fucking and he believed him.

“Oooh,” he said as one of Nate’s fingers slid further inside, but then while he was thinking about that Nate bit behind his ear where he knew Tyson was particularly sensitive and Tyson was too distracted to worry.

When he came back to himself Nate had one finger deep inside him, holding it still and the heel of his hand pressed up between Tyson’s hole and balls. “Oh,” Tyson said again, not entirely sure, and then Nate drew back slightly and his finger passed over something inside that made Tyson suddenly very very sure. He looked up and Nate was staring down at him, worshipful and open mouthed, watching as his fingers pushed into Tyson’s body, eyes trailing over Tyson’s face, tracking his flush as it moved down his body.

“Look at you,” Nate said, hoarse and admiring. “Look at you, so pretty and so brave, you’re letting me try, do you like it?” Tyson nodded, too embarrassed to say anything, but Nate smiled at him and made another pass. “I know you do,” Nate went on, “I can tell you like it, I like it too, I can feel inside you Tys, you feel all wet and warm and soft, there’s nothing wrong with you at all, you’re perfect,” and the enormous relief of that statement hit Tyson like a hammer blow. He just wanted to curl up and hide, the thought of there being nothing wrong with him enjoying this too much to bear while looking so closely into Nate’s eyes, and clever clever Nate seemed to realise this too because he ducked back in to kiss Tyson and their eye contact was broken.

“No,” Tyson said, “no one but you.”

“Just for me,” Nate said, “and me for you,” and they fell asleep, twined together.
Tyson woke up in the morning and it all flooded back to him, making him blush at his own shamelessness. Nate had put his fingers inside him and he’d liked it. More, Nate had looked at him, stared directly into his eyes while he was inside of his body, deep inside his most intimate places, and Tyson had shamelessly liked that too, stretching his arms up to be kissed and urging Nate on. He couldn’t even muster up any worries, all his muscles too languid and relaxed. He got up to use the privy and even that was a revelation. Nothing hurt, not a goddamned thing. If he hadn’t been there, writhing on Nate’s fingers, he would never have known what they’d done last night.

Sadly for Nate, Tyson’s interest only lasted for five weeks. The sixth week the thought of anyone touching him made Tyson feel overheated and peevish.

“Well,” Nate said philosophically when Tyson slapped his hands away for the second time that day. “It was fun while it lasted.”

“Goddamnit!” Nate snapped, driven to one of his rare moments of real anger. “Quit cheating!”

“I wasn’t cheating!” Tyson howled back. “I told you, Omegas are lucky!” They had been arguing this out for days while they were trapped inside by the snow - Nate had cobbled up a backgammon board and taught Tyson how to play but the game, which had started out with kisses as the forfeit, had turned unexpectedly competitive once Tyson became more competent.

“You’re looking before you roll!” Nate said, increasingly red faced. “I can see you doing it!”

“I’m not!” Tyson shrieked and flounced off. There wasn’t very far to flounce - the kitchen table and the bed were at opposite ends of the one large room - but Tyson did what he could and huffed over to the kitchen table. It was getting more and more difficult to move quickly as his belly grew and Nate laughed disagreeably as he watched him waddle his way there in his nightgown and boots. Nate’s laughter angered Tyson further; what right did Nate have to laugh at him? and he sat at the table and slammed one fist down on it in a rage.

“Don’t you slam your fist at me,” Nate said warningly, and in a fit of upset, lost to all sense, Tyson smashed his fist down again, rattling the entire table. There was a very ominous silence from where Nate was seated on the bed, and Tyson cringed. He had already gone miles beyond what would have merited physical correction from any other Alpha.

“You’re acting like a baby,” Nate said condescendingly, “You just come over here and apologize for cheating and we’ll call it even.”

The smug, avuncular tone, so familiar but not from Nate, touched Tyson on the raw and he muttered “Wasn’t cheating,” into the tabletop.

“What was that?” Nate said, an edge to his voice, and heedless Tyson discarded any chance of forgiveness, picked up the tin mug of cold tea sitting on the table, and threw it at Nate. Nate caught it in one hand, still upright, his extraordinary reflexes serving him as always but the tea continued its flight out of the mug and into his face.

“Goddamnit,” Nate roared, leaping out of bed fists clenched. “What the hell was that?” He threw the mug onto the floor where it bounced once and then collapsed, dented with the force of his throw. Tyson looked up at him across the wood stove. Even mid-March thin, wearing a red union suit and too small grey Icelandic sweater Mrs. Johnson had made years ago, Nate in a rage presented an intimidating picture.
“DON’T YOU THROW THINGS AT ME!” Nate yelled at him, a full throated Alpha roar, full of power and command. Not the Voice, but not far off either. Tyson just stared back at him. He’d never seen Nate do that - he hadn’t known he could do that.

“You apologize,” Nate ordered and abruptly all the frustrations of the last four months boiled over. Being trapped in this one room together, eating nothing but bacon, oatmeal and turnips for the last month, growing ever more pregnant against his will, it all welled up in Tyson and pressed against his back teeth.

“I’m not sorry,” he yelled, completely beyond any rational behaviour. “I’m not! I’m not!” Nate swept over to him and grabbed him harshly by the shoulders and Tyson, utterly undone, snapped his head around and bit Nate on the forearm as hard as he could. Shocked, Nate raised his other hand to backhand him and then froze. They stayed like that for several seconds, both panting with anger, blood welling up where Tyson’s teeth had pierced through Nate’s skin. Tyson closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable, already feeling himself start to pull away from his own body anticipating the blow, but Nate surprised him.

“Not today, you jackass,” he said, lowering his hand and letting go of Tyson. “I said I won’t hit you and I meant it. You want to be an asshole, you go ahead, but there won’t be any hitting in this house. Now I’m going to go out and check on the horses,” - here he fitted words to action and shrugged on his heavy coat and gloves - “and when I come back in I hope your mood is a little less viper like.” He left in high dudgeon, but thirty seconds after he had set the latch to, he reopened the door and leaned back in. “And I’m sorry I shook you, and I’m sorry I yelled,” he said stiffly. “There was no call for that no matter what you did.” Tyson slumped back down at the table and fumed.

Unlike the previous year, there had been one last burst of winter weather in March, dumping several feet of snow on them and trapping them in the house. Nate said this was typical for Denver but it was very tiresome for both of them, stuck in the house together yet again just when it had looked like spring had almost arrived. Nate came back in with a gust of cold air, carrying an armful of logs and another bucket of oats. He still looked very cross which was fine with Tyson as he also felt disagreeable although a creeping shame was filtering in as well. Nate had no right to accuse him of cheating, and it felt like a betrayal. Tyson slouched further onto the kitchen table pointedly.

“Come on,” Nate said to Tyson, “Don’t sit there and get all cold. It’s not good for the baby.”

“Don’t care,” said Tyson crossly. He really didn’t know what to do with himself. Nothing about this exchange had gone according to any script he knew, and he was still steaming mad.

“Well, take the blankets, anyway,” Nate said, draping most of them over Tyson’s shoulders. Meanly, Tyson hoped Nate would be cold and huddled into the wool blankets so they covered most of his head as well. He drew his feet up under him and leaned forward onto the table and rested his head on his arms. He could hear Nate reloading the stove and propping new logs against the outside to dry, ready to burn. Then he heard the clink of the kettle, always half full on the back of the stove, being moved and the clatter of glass jars. What was Nate doing among the herbs, Tyson wondered, and then realised what Nate was up to when he smelt mustard. Nate was making a mustard plaster for his arm with the boiling water.

“You don’t use mustard for bites,” Tyson said, leaning out of the blankets a little. “Don’t you know that?”

“No, I don’t know the remedy for being bitten by your husband,” Nate replied, clearly still pissed. Tyson pulled the blankets back over his head entirely, ashamed of himself but also still angry. “You
got to use turpentine, or caustic soda,” he said, and Nate said “What?”, unable to hear him under the
blankets. Tyson lifted a blanket corner up and spoke out the hole. “I said, you got to use turpentine or soda, but not too strong, and then soak it in salt water.”

“Well, we got none of that,” Nate said. “How about just salt water, I guess. Is it supposed to be hot?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, lifting up the corner again. “Hot but not scalding.”

“Alright,” Nate said, gathering a basin and throwing in a handful of salt. “Let’s try it.” He sat down at the table and settled his arm into the water with a hiss.

Tyson watched him surreptitiously through a hole in his blankets. Nate had grown thinner over the winter, pared down by the slim rations that were barely enough for Tyson but too little for Nate and his insistence that some things, such as the fat rich pinon nuts and the dried fruit, be reserved for Tyson. “I can make it back up in the summer,” he had said, patting Tyson’s bump, “but you can’t, you need it now.” Nate had gotten an elk early in the season, but most of it had been lost to an unexpectedly enterprising wolverine that found their cache, and there had been no hunting luck since. They were nowhere near starving but their diet was monotonous and dull.

“I’m sorry for biting you,” Tyson said, still under his blankets. “That was very wrong of me.”

“Yes it was,” Nate said censoriously, and Tyson flared up again.

“Well, you don’t got to call me a cheater,” he muttered, and Nate cast a dark glance at him but wisely kept his peace.

Tyson slumped back down beneath his blanket hood and thought about how stupid Nate was. He hoped his arm fell off.

He woke to Nate carrying him to bed, blankets and all. “Come on Tyson,” Nate said, heaving him up, one arm under Tyson’s knees and another behind his back. “Come to bed now, it’s cold.”

Tyson was still mad, but not so mad he would turn down Nate’s warmth in the bed, and he passively allowed Nate to carry him the few steps to bed and rearrange the blankets around him. Silently Nate went about banking the fire and emptying the chamber pot, washed his hands and came to bed. He laid down next to Tyson, still wearing his union suit and woolen socks, and there was a heavy silence while Nate did not curl around Tyson like usual, and did not kiss him goodnight. The silence stretched out but Tyson couldn’t think of any way to break it. He was still too angry to apologize again, and he felt Nate also owed him an apology for speaking to him demeaningly. Finally, aware that Nate was still lying awake and silent beside him, Tyson willed himself back to sleep, but he was conscious of a feeling that something had been lost between them.

He woke again to Nate putting more logs in the stove in the middle of the night. Although it was more correct to bank the stove overnight, save the fuel and suffer through a few cold hours in the morning, as winter wore on and it became clear they had enough wood to last out the cold, Nate had begun getting up half way through the night and refilling the stove so that the cabin was constantly at a temperature above freezing. “Can’t freeze the baby!” he had said merrily when Tyson asked, and Tyson thought of that now, watching Nate kneeling there in the dim light from the edges of the stove door. There had been dozens of little acts of service and affection from Nate over the winter, and Tyson had repaid him by biting him in a passion. He still felt ashamed, but the anger had gone.

Nate turned to him from where he squatted by the stove. “Go on back to sleep now Tys,” he said,
sounding tired. “Nothing’s broken we can’t fix tomorrow.” Tyson didn’t find this comforting; something was broken, Nate had spoken to him contemptuously and laid hands on him, and Tyson had done even worse. Childishly, he wanted a return to Nate petting him and calling him baby but he didn’t know how to get there. The only way he knew to ask for forgiveness was through penance and he knew Nate didn’t want that. He would far rather Nate had hit him than this coldness between them.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and Nate shut the stove door with a clank and navigated to the bed in the dark.

“I’m sorry too,” Nate said, climbing under the blankets. “I’m sorry I spoke to you in that way, I only did it to make you mad, and I guess it worked.” He hauled Tyson up against his chest in his usual manner. “It wasn’t fair, was it?” Nate said. “You’re a deal more frightened of me than I am of you, but I was yelling orders at you like I was your father and then I grabbed you.”

“You’re the head of the household,” Tyson said quietly. “It’s your right to speak to me however you like, and to discipline me.

“Don’t start that again,” Nate said, shaking Tyson a little. “I got no right to talk to you like you’re a child and I shouldn’t have laid angry hands on you.”

“I got no right to bite you,” Tyson responded, patting at Nate’s arm near where he had bitten it. “I am sorry, I’m very sorry, and I hope your arm doesn’t fall off.”

Tyson could feel the ripple of laughter that passed through Nate at that. Nate moved his arm over to put his hand on Tyson’s stomach. “I hope it doesn’t fall off too,” he said. “That’s my right hand and I got big plans for it. Going to carry that little baby around with it, going to touch you up with it, going to use it for a hundred better things than smacking you, even if you lose your temper and bite.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said again, but Nate wasn’t having it.

“What happens when you grab a cat that don’t want to be grabbed?” he asked.

“It bites,” Tyson said. “But it’s not the same, I’m not an animal, I know I shouldn’t bite.”

“Still,” Nate said. “A man with any sense don’t grab an angry cat.”

“I’m not a cat,” Tyson said, more for form than because he cared.

“Yes you are,” Nate said. “I could get you purring in a minute, I bet.”

Tyson disagreed again, glad to be engaged in their familiar back and forth. “No you couldn’t,” although he suspected that Nate maybe could. He already felt pretty good, lying there snuggled up with Nate, back on a happier footing, and it didn’t take much to get him going these days.

Nate made a noise of disbelief and manhandled Tyson back around so he was facing Nate, still on his side. Tyson drew breath to argue some more but before he could say anything one of Nate’s hands moved up to cradle the back of Tyson’s neck and then he dug his fingers firmly into the muscles there and Tyson expelled his breath in a sharp “Ooh!” as his head lolled back involuntarily. He hadn’t been aware of the muscles being tight but the pressure was delicious.

“You’re all talk,” Nate said smugly, running his fingers up into Tyson’s hair and covering the base of his skull. Tyson’s eyes fluttered shut and his body went limp as Nate’s hand spanned the back of his head, strong fingers massaging at his skull and jaw until Tyson could feel the purr starting up, out of his control. Just to be contrary he bit his bottom lip harshly, hoping the pain would stop the purr, and
Nate laughed.

“No fair,” he said fondly, and Tyson opened his eyes, teeth still clamped down on his bottom lip. Nate was staring at him, heavy lidded. The chinks in the door of the stove let out enough light that Tyson could just barely see Nate; his profile lit up by the golden light, every hair on his face caught in relief. Tyson looked back at Nate and they were caught in a mutual silence, Nate’s hand still, Tyson on the edge of a purr. He let his gaze travel over Nate’s face and then raised his hand to run it over the side of Nate’s face, each beard hair rasping against his palm. Nate closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

“That’s right, baby,” he said softly, and Tyson thrilled at the return of the pet name. “No more angry hands, no more hitting, just going to pet you and treat you good. Going to treat you so good, always.”

Nate raised his hand and pressed his thumb to Tyson’s lip, pulling it down and away from where his top teeth still bit it. Tyson let him do it and then without thinking tilted his head and bit down gently on Nate’s nail, trapping the finger between his teeth. Nate hummed happily.

“No going to hit you, baby,” Nate said lovingly. “Never going to hit you, going to pet you till you love me.”

“You always treat me good, Alpha,” Tyson said, releasing Nate’s finger. “You treat me better than I deserve. I’m sorry I bit you.”

“I treat you just like you deserve,” Nate said, a little crossly. “You deserve nothing but good things. Now go on back to sleep and let it warm up again.”

Tyson finished up with the hens and turned to look west, looking for Nate who usually returned around this time. There he was, and as Nate came into view, Tyson shaded his eyes.

What was Nate doing? As he got closer, Tyson realised why Nate’s movement on the horse looked so odd - he was simply standing in the stirrups while Molly trotted, balanced inches above the saddle, and he was holding a large pile of something pink in both arms. In fact, as Nate got closer, Tyson watched Molly move at Nate’s urging from a trot to a canter and Nate stayed up in the stirrups. Tyson had ridden enough to know what a feat of strength it was to hold the position for any length of time, and Nate was effortlessly maintaining it as they cantered towards him.

He drew closer and Tyson could see he wasn’t wearing a shirt and his hair was wet. He’d been in the pond down by Olson’s again. What was he carrying, Tyson wondered, and as Nate came even closer, Tyson could see his strong shoulders and thick neck, covered in heavy muscle built from work. He wasn’t beautiful, not as Gabe had been beautiful on the few occasions Tyson had seen him without his shirt on; Nate was raw and blotchy, with patches of sunburn on his back and neck and a smattering of jarringly dark chest hair, but he was a young animal, healthy and laughing, full of pleasure in the day and pleasure in his body, strong enough to do whatever he asked of it effortlessly, and he invited Tyson to join in his pleasure with every movement and word. He pulled Molly up next to Tyson and leaned down, muscles in his stomach and chest flexing as he twisted, and held out both arms, which were full of wild roses, their bushy stems, leaves and all, pink and full blown and fragile.

“Look,” Nate said. “We had to cut down the bushes at Olson’s, so I brought them to you. They won’t last, but I wanted you to see them.”

“They’re beautiful,” said Tyson. “I love them.”
“Do you really?” said Nate, pleased at this unusual demonstrativeness. “Hold your arms out and I’ll pass them over before I put Molly away.” Nate piled the great cloud of roses into Tyson’s arms and then picked one and carefully tucked it into his braids. “There,” Nate said. “A jewel in your crown. No king has better.”

“No, they don’t, do they,” said Tyson, and he ran one hand up Nate’s bare arm, up over the bulge of his upper arm, over his traps, to the back of his neck and pulled him down for a long kiss. When he released him Nate looked gratifyingly dazed. “No king ever had better,” said Tyson, low. “Thank you for the roses.”

Nate sat back on Molly and looked at Tyson for a minute. He had a strange look on his face and he opened his mouth as if to say something, paused consideringly, and shut it again. “If this was a fancy novel,” he finally said, “I’d swoop you up in my arms and we’d ride away together, but I reckon if I did that we might kill the horse.”

“Yes,” Tyson agreed looking down. “I’m in no fit state for swooping anywhere.” Mrs. MacKinnon kept making disapproving noises about how thin he still was, but he sure didn’t feel it, and as they approached Midsummer, he could no longer see his feet. Nate smiled, but he looked thoughtful and maybe a little sad. Tyson wondered what he was thinking about.

Finally Nate leaned forward again. “I’m glad you like the flowers, anyway,” he said. “They reminded me of you, somehow. How you feeling?”

“Like a toad,” Tyson said. “Like big old toad, all swollen up.” Nate barked out a startled laugh.

“You don’t look like a toad,” he said. “I was just thinking how beautiful you are, cheeks all rosy like the flowers, and your hair so shiny. You might feel all swollen up but you don’t look it, you look sweet and peaceful, a rose among all the other roses.”

“I look right,” Tyson said, a little bitterly. “I always look right. But I never been right in my heart, and I don’t want to be pregnant, even though I know I should be resigned; I’m sick of feeling like a tick, all swollen up and ready to burst.” He could hear his own voice start to tremble, and looked away, trying not to cry.

“You always been right,” Nate said to him gently. “Maybe you never been what they told you you should be, but you always been right. You want to go on and sit down and we’ll have some lemonade once I put Molly away?” Tyson was particularly partial to lemonade these days and Nate knew that. He’d bought Tyson a dozen expensive lemons, a luxury even in Victoria, the last time he’d been in town.

“Yes,” Tyson said, suddenly weeping at Nate’s thoughtfulness, “Thank you, Alpha,” and started to trundle off to the porch with his flowers. He had only made it a few feet when he heard Molly trotting behind him and Nate swung back down alongside him.

“Ahh, come on now,” Nate said gruffly, “Don’t cry.” Taking the flowers out of Tyson’s arms and managing to balance the roses in one arm and keep hold of Molly’s reins in the same hand, he took Tyson’s hand in his free one. “I don’t like to see you upset,” Nate said, still bare chested and bare headed, walking Tyson back to the porch with Molly trailing behind him. He wrapped Molly’s reins quickly around the porch post and then handed Tyson up the steps, a totally unnecessary courtesy that Tyson still appreciated.

“Come on and sit down now,” Nate said, pulling out the chair on the porch so Tyson could sit and dropping the flowers at his feet. “I’ll get the lemonade, and your hairbrush,” Nate went on. “You let your braids down and I’ll brush it for you while you sit, how about that?” He left before Tyson could
say anything, so he just got started taking down his crown, his hair spreading in great waves and curls down to his hips. He had almost finished when Nate reemerged from the house holding the pitcher and a glass full of lemonade. Silently, Nate set the glass and pitcher down on the bench near Tyson. He stepped back and looked at Tyson, sitting with the roses piled up around his feet, for a long time.

“I’m going to remember this picture for the rest of my life,” Nate said quietly. “You sat there so pretty, with your hair loose and the flowers set beneath you, and the baby coming soon. I know you didn’t want it, but I hope you can learn to love it.”

“I hope I can too,” Tyson said, conscious that they may not have been talking entirely about the baby. “I’m trying; that’s the best I can do.”

“Fair enough,” Nate said, moving behind Tyson to start brushing. Like the lemonade, Nate brushing Tyson’s hair was a great indulgence they didn’t often have the time or means for. Summertime farming meant long, hard days, Tyson had learnt, and there was no space in the day for things that weren’t necessary. Tyson luxuriated in the brush passing through his hair, Nate’s hand sweeping the same path after each stroke for a few minutes and then reached for the lemonade and simply revelled in the luxury of lemonade and hairbrushing combined. He looked out at the grass, and the barn, and the garden and thought happily about Nate riding shirtless towards him, bringing roses just for him. He thought about Nate kissing him good night every evening since they got married; he thought about the baby, which still seemed like a strange, alien idea, not a real immediate thing, and Nate buying a dozen lemons they couldn’t really afford, and decided that if Nate loved the baby so, when it wasn’t even here yet and it wasn’t Nate’s own, then he could probably love it too. Nate hadn’t steered him wrong yet, he thought, and opened his mouth to say so but then Nate spoke.

“Can you please call me by my name?” Nate said softly. “I don’t think I care for Alpha all the time no more.”

Tyson, half asleep and drifting, thrilled quietly at Nate’s offer. Nate had made the same suggestion very early in their marriage but Tyson had barely known him then, and it had seemed wrong to call him by his name. Now, Nate still didn’t fully understand what the offer meant to Tyson, but Tyson understood him to be asking for the use of his name rather than his title out of affection and a desire for closeness, and that was good enough. That was a great deal more than he had ever expected. “Your name is for me,” Tyson murmured, letting himself fall back entirely, purring. “Nate.”
Tyson was having his second little sit down of the day, which Mrs. MacKinnon told him was normal, when he heard distant yelling. He waddled out to have a look and there was a haze to the east, and Nate coming down the valley from the west at a flat out sprint. He’d never seen Nate ride that hard, down low as he could get, body tucked into Molly’s back, head along her near side neck. He was using his spurs viciously, and Tyson marvelled at the turn of speed he was getting out of Molly who was, despite her many virtues, quite definitely a work horse made for pulling plow and hauling around someone of Nate’s size, not a racer, when he realised what Nate was yelling.

"FIRE!" he was yelling, gasping for breath. "Fire in the east!" He shot past Tyson, barely slowing enough to skid through the barn door still on Molly. Tyson began a sort of fast trot towards the barn, where he could hear a lot of shouting and crashing, but before he could get there the two big barn doors burst open and the cows began to stream out, encouraged by Nate slapping and screaming at them to "Go, you fuckers, go!" He turned and saw Tyson approaching and pointed at the pig enclosure. "Get the pigs!" he yelled, and Tyson changed course.

He’d only made it to the gate when Nate reappeared and gestured at him to throw the gate wide; Tyson did, standing behind it, and Nate charged into the paddock, yelling. "Get, get, pig!" he shouted, kicking at their rumps from Molly and whipping them with a stick. "Go you pigs!" he yelled, and they did, pouring through the gate in a crowd of indignant pig noises and heading swiftly west.

Nate turned to Tyson. "Get to the house," Nate said, low and intent. "Grab any money we got, as many skins of water as you can get quick, and kerchiefs. I'll get Rosie and meet you there." He turned Molly around and Tyson grabbed Nate’s arm.

"I don’t think I can ride," he said looking down at the bump.

"You’re going to ride or you’re going to die," Nate said harshly. "Now go! There’s no time."

Tyson looked to the east where the haze was visibly closer, and he felt the first stirrings of fear, a cramping, chilling fear that passed through him in a wave. He shook it off and headed for the house. By the time Nate made it back leading Rosie, barely tacked up, Tyson was ready on the porch with the money, kerchiefs and water as well as some blankets and all the cooked food in the house tumbled into a larger bundle. "Good," said Nate, taking the bundles out of Tyson’s hands and putting them on the ground. "Come on," he said, holding out his cupped hands for Tyson to step on to mount, "Hurry."

Tyson stepped one foot into Nate’s hands, hand on his shoulder for balance, and Nate essentially threw him up into the saddle and then passed up the blanket bundle to set in front of him. "Oof," said Tyson, trying to recover from the impact. The fear gripped him again and he shifted uneasily.

"Sorry, baby," said Nate as he swung back onto Molly. He leaned forward and kissed Tyson once, firmly, on the forehead. "This is going to be rough - we gotta go fast," and he clucked at the horses and then spurred them into a quick canter, headed northwest.

At first Tyson couldn’t understand where Nate was going - the obvious choice was to head for the path towards the Olson’s and the river and try to outrun the fire, but when he looked back and saw how much closer the fire was already, he realised there was no way they could make it the length of the valley before the fire caught them. Then he understood what Nate was doing - they were headed up, straight up the valley wall, aiming for the pass called The Crack. Bare rock with nothing to burn,
they could wait the fire out if they didn’t suffocate but it was going to be a very close race to get up past the tree line before the fire caught them. He put his head down and concentrated on keeping the fear at bay.

The ride was brutally uncomfortable. Each stride jolted his belly, causing a deep, cramping pain, and although he tried to get his feet under him and post he wasn’t strong enough to maintain it for any length of time with the added weight of pregnancy. The smoke had begun to catch up to them and it was hard to breathe. Sweat rolled down his face and stung his eyes but he couldn’t let go of the death grip he had on the reins to wipe them. He gritted his teeth and concentrated on coping with each small distance. Now to this rock, he told himself. Good. Now to that tree. They rode on, the smoke reaching them and then thickening by the minute. It seemed to go on endlessly, the pain interrupted only occasionally by deer and smaller animals flitting past them in their own attempt to escape the flames. He hoped desperately the cats had been smart enough to run.

Nate, a horse length ahead of him, was standing in the stirrups as he urged Molly on and looking back behind them. Tyson looked up briefly and met his gaze and a look of terror crossed Nate’s face as his eyes moved to the valley behind them. He pulled to one side and slowed slightly to let Tyson get ahead of him.

"Go!" Nate yelled, hoarse. "Straight to The Crack and stay at the top!" and he slapped Rosie into a gallop. He spurred Molly on behind but Tyson could hear she was wheezing and making heavy going of the hill. She wasn’t made for the sprint back to their house from the Olson’s, and now she was labouring badly up the slope under 210 pounds of Nate and the smokey air. When he looked back he could see he was rapidly outstripping Nate and Molly on his relatively fresh horse and the fire was still racing towards them. "Go!" Nate screamed, voice raw. "You go!"

Rosie stumbled and almost fell, and when Tyson was able to look back again Molly was two hundred feet behind, gamely following them, but Nate was not atop her. The fear gripped him again. Tyson looked frantically through the smoke and saw Nate running at an angle to the trail. He was trying to beat the flames to the tree line by going straight up the slope, but it was an almost undoable feat of athleticism. He was half running, half climbing as he barrelled up the 65 degree slope, grabbing grass and small trees to pull himself up, strong thighs propelling him from rock to rock. Ninety nine men in one hundred couldn’t have done it. An older man couldn’t have done it, a younger man couldn’t have done it, a man less than afraid for his life couldn’t have done it, but even as Tyson watched, horrified, Nate broke the treeline and began to pick his way through the scree field, inching along to meet Tyson at the top of the trail.

A hundred feet above the trees, gasping, Nate scrambled up to Tyson and patted his leg as he passed. "Keep going," he wheezed, and headed back to catch up Molly’s reins as she broke through the tree line.

Three hundred feet above the trees Nate signalled and they paused to wet the kerchiefs in water to help them breath. From here they still needed to move quickly, but they could keep the horses at a quick walk, not a gallop. After Nate got a good look at Tyson he took Rosie’s reins to lead her as well as Molly so Tyson could hunch forward over the blanket roll and focus on breathing. "You OK?” Nate said, and Tyson gutted out "Yeah," which was as much as he could manage, but the fear wasn’t going away and he was having a hell of a time staying on the horse.

He realised it wasn’t fear as they began to climb the rocky slope below the pass and he felt something pop and he wet his drawers, but there was no point in saying anything until they made it to the top of the pass and could stop. Four hundred feet later they reached the pass and Nate dropped the reins and collapsed.
“Are you kidding me?” said Nate, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Tyson mutely shook his head at him, panting for breath against the pain. Nate looked up from where he was bent over red faced, hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath. "OK," he said, "'We’ll be OK, first baby, could be a full day before it comes," and Tyson felt the pain and terror recede in a wave of familiar irritation at Nate’s unrelenting, stupid optimism.

"Shut up," he grunted and then leaned to the side and threw up.

"Oh shit," said Nate, who as the son of a midwife was familiar enough with human birth to know what that was a sign of. “You’re gonna have to at least get off the horse, Tys," he said, and Tyson grunted, "Can’t.” His voice had gone low and guttural, and he could only think in one word answers. The thought of any movement was unimaginable. The only way he could cope with the rolling waves of contractions was to hold perfectly still and allow them to pass over him. He could feel his focus being drawn inwards, narrowing to himself and the pain.

Nate was also familiar enough to know not to argue with a person in labour, and wisely just agreed, pulling down the blanket roll and spreading it on the ground against Molly’s saddle to make a backrest. Then he turned back to Tyson and reached up one hand very gently to his belly. He waited through two contractions only a minute apart as Tyson gripped his wrist and breathed and then, when Nate could feel the contraction had eased, very carefully pulled Tyson off the horse and settled him on the blanket, ignoring all of Tyson’s objections. "You’re doing good, baby," he said very gently. "Not much longer now." He pulled Tyson’s pants off, maneuvering them carefully over his boots, which he left on, and Tyson felt fleetingly embarrassed but then the pain hit again and he lost all sense of anything else. When he came back to himself, Nate had covered him with a blanket and was sitting behind him acting as a backrest. "Drink some water, baby." he said, and Tyson did. Up at the top of the pass, the air was fresher as the wind came from the other side of the pass, and Tyson gratefully took deep breaths. He couldn’t find a tolerable position and shifted irritably.

"You want to stand?" asked Nate, and Tyson nodded. "OK," Nate said, "You say when."

Tyson waited until the next wave passed and held his hands up to Nate; Nate carefully pulled him to his feet and another wave immediately hit him. He fell forward making a low moaning sound and Nate caught him, pulling Tyson’s arms up around Nate’s neck and putting his own around Tyson’s back so that Tyson could rest his head and chest against Nate, Nate taking most of his weight.

Tyson was caught up in the pain; there was no longer any break between the waves, overwhelmed and consumed by it. He panted open mouthed against Nate’s neck and moved his arms to rest his elbows on Nate’s shoulders. Nate shifted his stance to widen his legs and took even more of Tyson’s weight.

"You’re doing good," he whispered into Tyson’s ear. "You’re doing it just right," and that was all Tyson could hear, and feel, and sense, and he was in a bubble with Nate, fire forgotten, only the sound of Nate humming encouragement, and his own deep, rasping breaths, and his hand wrapped around the back of Nate’s neck, gripping on to Nate’s sweaty nape, the only point anchoring him to anything outside the fierce all consuming pain, his other hand clutching the back of Nate’s shirt as Nate’s arms held him up, the two of them leaning into one another to create an immovable triangle, strong enough to stand against any battering, and Nate said "Breath," and he did, and Nate said "Hold on," and he did, and Nate reached one arm down to touch him where there was a ring of burning, sharper pain, and Nate said "Go like this," and panted at him like a dog, short quick breaths, so Tyson did, and then Nate said "OK, whenever you need to,” and Tyson took a deeper breath and pushed, and rested against Nate, and took an even deeper breath, down to his toes, and pushed, and
Nate dropped to his knees, rebalancing Tyson so he was bent over resting both his hands on Nate’s shoulders, and then suddenly there was a baby in Nate’s hands, an entire, squalling, living baby just there as Nate looked up at Tyson, awestruck, and said "A baby," and then everyone was crying, Nate and Tyson and the baby all together, and then Tyson really really needed to sit down so they did, a new family.

And then there were a few unpleasant and surprising minutes where Tyson found out about afterbirth, which somehow no one had ever seen fit to mention to him, and he viewed it as very unfair, arriving just after he thought he had finished all his work, but then it was done.

Mrs. MacKinnon had frozen at the door for a minute when they arrived, filthy with soot, Tyson mute with misery and exhaustion after the long walk back down the pass and across two valleys.

"Farm’s burnt," Nate said. "Baby’s here".

"Goddamn," Mrs. MacKinnon replied. "We was hoping you boys was alright when we saw the smoke. You have to run?"

"Yeah, right up The Crack," Nate said. " Barely made it, and then ten minutes after we hit the pass the baby came."

Mrs. MacKinnon made a noise of surprise and respect and looked at Tyson. "You do all that on a horse headed up the pass?" she asked, and he nodded. "Well, good for you, I know it ain’t easy, but it don’t seem to have done you no permanent harm. Come in and we’ll get you sorted."

"Give me the baby," she said holding her hands out, "and I’ll hold him while you get cleaned up." Tyson hesitated. He didn’t think Mrs. MacKinnon was going to officially repudiate the baby after one look, but he wasn’t sure either and he was too tired to think. Gabe’s mother, he knew, would never have touched Nate’s baby in the same situation, and if he had proposed it, there would have been discipline, fresh from the birth or no. If Mrs. Landeskog, a kind woman but a fervent believer, had somehow ended up holding him, she would not have flung the baby from her as Scripture directed, but she certainly would have put it down on the settee right sharpish, allowing him to drop the last foot or so to meet the scriptural requirement. And yet the MacKinnons were gathered around jostling each other in their eagerness to get at what was, objectively, a filthy baby unrelated to them, wrapped in a piss soaked kerchief and Nate’s sweat stained undershirt. A tiny pretender to Nate’s name. He looked at Nate hoping for a cue.

"Go on," said Nate, proud and happy. "Show Ma the baby - he’s real strong, Ma, tried to hold his head up the whole way back, and he looks right at you, and he’s got a good firm grip." He looked set to continue listing the baby’s virtues but Tyson sidled towards Nate slightly and bent his head.

"Do they understand this baby looks nothing like you?" he hissed and Nate looked hurt but he needed to understand. "This baby isn’t a MacKinnon, do they plan to Repudiate him?"

"No one’s planning to Repudiate anyone," said Mrs. MacKinnon scornfully. "Now give me that baby - he looks real pretty but he don’t smell the freshest. I saved one of Nate’s gowns with an eye to this day, and I aim to put it on his first son, and so I will, but not til he’s clean."

Mr. MacKinnon appeared from the back. "Is the baby here?" he said eagerly. "Oh, oh, give him here, let me see."

"Pa’s going to cry!" called out one of the sisters, and the others picked it up; "Pa’s going to cry, Pa
always cries when there’s a new baby!” “You gonna cry, Pa?”

"What if I am?” said Mr. MacKinnon placidly. "It’s my boy’s first baby, I can cry if I like, girls."

"Give him to Graham," Mrs. MacKinnon said. "Let him get it out of his system."

"Can’t help it," said Mr. MacKinnon, cradling the baby as Tyson gingerly handed him over. "They’re just so tiny and new and perfect," he said, tearing up. "Ahh, geeze, there I go."

"Pa’s crying!" chorused the girls gleefully. "Pa’s crying again!"


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"Oh, I see the way to your heart now," Mrs. MacKinnon said, watching Tyson shovel in roll kuchen. "You want another?"

"Yes please," he said, still chewing. They weren’t quite as good as back home, but they were still pretty good, especially with this soup thing Mrs. MacKinnon had made. “What is this?” he asked, poking at the bowl with his spoon.

"It’s split pea soup,” she said. “You never had it before?"

"No," he said, “but it’s not bad. You got any more?"

“I do,” she said, fetching him another bowl. “Mrs. Penner down the way told me you might know these and gave me the recipe. I’m glad you like them - where you putting it all?"

Tyson nodded down at the baby lying on a pillow by his side, asleep. He was visibly bigger than he had been four weeks ago when they arrived at the house and he was developing rolls of fat around his wrists and neck. “They all eat this much?” he asked Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Oh yeah,” she said, “especially at the beginning, you got to just open up your shirt and feed them every time they squeak. Be glad you got a good eater - a little weight helps keep them healthy. The ones that don’t eat are the ones that don’t stay."

“Don’t stay?” Tyson said. “Where do they go?"

“They die,” she said bluntly. “They die from the summer diarrhea, quinsy, cholera, teething, pneumonia, whooping cough, diphtheria, scarlet fever, any of it. Don’t take much.” She slapped another kuchen on his plate to punctuate her advice. “You like him?” she asked.


"Why?" Tyson asked, suspicious. “‘Course I like him, I like him fine. You think I don’t like him?"

“It’s hard to tell what you think," Mrs. MacKinnon said mildly. “You don’t talk much and you don’t smile much either. But you’re doing a good job," she added. “I been watching and you’re taking very nice care of him. Always clean and well fed and you handle him gently."

“Oh, well," Tyson said. He felt vaguely embarrassed but more pleased at the praise than anything else. He didn’t feel he’d been making a bang up job of much in his life the last year, but Mrs.
MacKinnon didn’t offer praise casually so he supposed he must be doing alright with the baby. “I just do what you tell me.”

“Some girls don’t,” Mrs. MacKinnon went on, “and some can’t. Some girls, specially when they didn’t want the baby, they get real sad after the baby’s born and some girls even get the melancholia so bad they can’t be left with the baby safely.” She bent down and stroked one of Johnny’s tiny toes where they peeked out from the bottom of his gown. “I knew one girl,” she went on, “she thought the devil was come to take the baby and she killed him to keep him safe. Drowned him in a bucket while we thought she was taking a nap.”

“Well I don’t think I’m going to do that,” Tyson said with some acerbity, and then burst into tears. Mrs. MacKinnon watched him dispassionately.

“No, I don’t reckon you will,” she said, “but I wanted to be sure. Have a hanky.”

“Thank you,” Tyson said, mopping at his face. He looked down at Johnny asleep next to him, so heartbreakingly vulnerable. “Why would she do that?” he asked. “How could she take the baby and hold him under the water?” He thought of doing that to Johnny, of his little eyes opening up under the water, looking up at Tyson puzzled and afraid, and started crying again.

“Oh Christ,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, sitting down at the table, “You’re going to get me going too. Gimme that hanky back.” She took one look at the hanky, which Tyson had blown his nose on, and tossed it back at him. “Never mind,” she said and raised the hem of her apron instead. “She wasn’t right in the head,” she said, dabbing at her eyes. “Sometimes it takes people like that and they get confused in their minds. Usually it comes to the ones that already got too much to bear, like a bad marriage or no husband.”

“But God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it,” Tyson said piously, but even as the words left his mouth they felt wrong. Mrs. MacKinnon confirmed his suspicions.

“Ahh, bull,” she said. “God sends more than we can handle all the time and many falter beneath the weight.” She got up and started to clear the table, leaving Tyson seated and staring at her.

“No,” he said, but his tone didn’t sound convinced. “Don’t talk heresy. God is faithful.”

“Maybe so,” she said, “but it was happening to you. You told me yourself, when we found out you were expecting, you said the last couple months you were married to Mr. Landeskog everything felt strange and far away. You said you thought you were half dead. What do you think was happening?”

“Well, I was…” Tyson started, but then he stopped and really thought about it. What would have happened if someone had given him Johnny while he was sleepwalking through those last few months? He remembered not caring enough to wash or eat for days at a time and twisting the skin on his arm until it bruised in an effort to distract himself from other more distressing pains in his body.

“You were in a state,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, clattering the dishes about as she spoke. “You were in a hell of a state when I first met you and when you turned up pregnant you went right back into that state, because you’d had too much to bear. You been doing a little better over the spring but I reckoned you were quite likely to be a danger to the baby.”

“I think I was losing my mind,” Tyson said with horror, looking back at those last few months with new eyes. “I think I was so scared, and hurt, I was losing my mind.”
“And do you think God sent that trial to make you better?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked.

“Maybe?” Tyson said.

“And did it work?” she pressed. “Is your belief firmer? Are you a better man?”

“No,” he said ashamed. “I’m the same sinner I always been. But that wasn’t a flaw in the Lord, that was a flaw in me. I never truly gave myself over to serving Alpha Landeskog whole heartedly so he had to discipline me. A husband is the spiritual and physical head of the household, and I never accepted his direction so the Lord chastened me through Alpha.” He looked up at her, busy at the bucket, and she looked worried and drawn.

“Don’t worry,” he said, trying to mollify her. “Nate’s headship is much easier to bear.”

Mrs. MacKinnon wheeled on him.

“Nathan is eighteen years old,” she shouted at him. “He isn’t ready to be the head of anything and he knows it even if you don’t. He hasn’t made a single decision for you that he hasn’t been in here talking it over with me and his Pa, and he’s right to do so because you clearly, clearly weren’t managing.

“I’m managing,” he said, stung. Wasn’t he doing the cooking and laundry like any other wife? He wasn’t meeting his marital responsibilities, but surely she didn’t know that. What more did she want?

“Boy you don’t hardly even talk,” she said.

“Well, I…” he started.

“I don’t believe Alphas like that. Alpha Landeskog, he was Orthodox and Orthodox wives and Omegas, they don’t talk unless asked.”

“You ain’t Orthodox no more,” she said. “Do you see me waiting until Graham tells me to talk?”

“No,” Tyson said, smiling down at the table. He didn’t see Mrs. MacKinnon waiting for permission to do anything. It was like living with a very large, well intentioned rat terrier. She simply gripped each new task by the neck and shook it til done.

“You know I asked Nate to leave you here?” she said.

“No,” said Tyson, surprised. “I thought I was staying because the house isn’t rebuilt yet.”

“That’s part of it,” she said. “But the other part is I wanted to make sure you could manage and you didn’t take against the baby.”

“Why would I take against the baby?” Tyson asked, gathering Johnny up. Who could take against him? He was the sweetest baby he ever knew, so soft and trusting and good, with his pert little face and shock of blond hair. Secretly, Tyson thought he was growing to look a little, just a little, like Nate.

“Well you never wanted him,” Mrs. MacKinnon pointed out, “and you didn’t want to marry neither.”

“Well,” Tyson said. “Well. I guess I like him now he’s here.”

“Good,” she said, “That’s the way. You actually got quite a sunny nature when you aren’t hysterical, don’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Tyson said. “My mother, she said I had an extra helping of sin and
obstinacy in my nature, and the pastors said the same. I just never been able to keep sweet.”

“Don’t know what that means,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, “but I suspect it’s following orders with no backtalk. Have I got that right?”

“Pretty much,” he agreed, “and no complaining.”

Mrs. MacKinnon grunted, the grunt Tyson knew meant she thought you were being stupid, but she took it no further. Instead she changed her tack. “You know why I’m bringing this up?” she asked, and Tyson shook his head while he cuddled Johnny. “I want to make sure you don’t get any funny ideas in your head about the baby. You start thinking anything funny, can you undertake to let me know?”

“Like what?” Tyson wanted to know.

“Bad thoughts like you want to hurt him, or ideas about God talking to you, or maybe needing to keep him too clean, to get the sin out. Can you promise faithfully to tell me or Nate if that happens?”

Tyson really wasn’t sure why she was asking this - Mrs. MacKinnon seemed to have wildly overestimated his interest in religion beyond following the rules as he understood them in an effort to avoid being smacked. Additionally, if he was going to develop a mania, it certainly wasn’t going to revolve around cleaning anything, not even Johnny. He didn’t see the harm in her request though, so he agreed. “Alright, missus,” he said. “Sometimes I think Shut up, you little ratbag, I want to sleep,” he offered, trying to be transparent.

“No, we all think that,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “That’s normal. Now go take a nap with the baby, your mind can’t get better if your body isn’t strong.”

“You want some help?” he offered, feeling guilty leaving her with all the work.

“No I don’t,” she said, waving him off. “You take this chance because it’ll never come again, not once in your life are you ever going to find a time where you don’t have no tasks but caring for one new baby, so enjoy it while you got it. Your work right now is to get clearer in your head and keep that baby nice and fat.”

Nothing loathe, Tyson headed back to bed for a nap, full of roll kuchen and good advice.

* * *

“Oh, side pork and gravy!” Nate said, coming into the kitchen dripping sweat and filthy. “Thank you Ma.” He took his hat off, exposing his flushed, blotchy face, eyes ringed with exhaustion. He was riding several hours into town from the farm every second day, making fourteen hours days even longer so he could see the baby regularly and, Tyson suspected, so Tyson wouldn’t be entirely alone with the MacKinnons.

“How’s that baby doing?” Nate said, looking around for Johnny, who was tucked away in the MacKinnon cradle.

“He’s sleeping,” Tyson told him, “but you’ll swear he’s bigger when you see him, he just grows and grows.”

“Just as well,” Nate said, taking his coat off and laying it over a chair. “I’m too dirty to touch him right now.” He turned to Tyson. “And how you doing, baby?” he said, sitting down on the bench next to him. Nate smelt terrible and was smudged light grey from working on the burnt over farmhouse, but Tyson raised one hand and brushed his cheek.
“You look tired,” he said, and Nate leaned into his hand.

“I am tired,” Nate said, closing his eyes. “I’m glad tomorrow is Sunday and I don’t got to go back out til Monday.” Mrs. MacKinnon passed him a plate and he set to.

“I can come out with you,” Tyson offered again. He’d made this offer several times previously but he felt bad leaving Nate alone with no one.

“No, you really can’t,” Nate said through a mouthful. “I’m sleeping out the Johnson’s hayloft and it’s not so bad in this heat, and Marnie’s agreed to keep feeding me til the house is done, but that’s no situation for someone that just had a baby. I’d feel a lot better knowing you’re safe here with my Ma.”

“Mmm,” Tyson hummed, and changed the subject. He didn’t feel like discussing what Mrs. Mackinnon thought of him under her watchful eye. “The baby can lift his head up and follow you when you talk to him now.” he offered. “I held him up to the glass in your Ma’s room and I think he recognized me.”

“Oh yeah?” Nate said, interested. “What else?”, and they were off on the safer subject of Johnny which carried them until Nate was done his meal.

“You want to take a bath?” Tyson offered when Nate was done and Nate looked longingly out the back where the metal tub was kept in the summer.

“No,” he finally said, “I’ll just have a rinse. I don’t want you hauling water and I’m too tired to do it myself. Think I’m going to fall asleep right here.”

“Well you’re in luck there,” Mrs. MacKinnon interrupted, “because your boy traded with the girls and they filled it up this afternoon.” Nate looked up at Tyson, surprised.

“You clever thing,” he said, “Thank you.” Tyson blushed and Nate looked at his red cheeks and smiled again. “You’re so cute,” Nate whispered, and Tyson blushed harder. He would have liked to kiss Nate but not sat in the kitchen in front of his mother. Tyson tried to convey this with his eyes instead but wasn’t sure he was successful since Nate just yawned.

“I’m going on to bed,” Mrs. MacKinnon went on, “Just leave the water and I’ll get the little boys to use it on the garden tomorrow.”

“Alright Ma, night,” Nate said, and turned back to Tyson. “What did you trade the girls?” he wanted to know.

“Said I’d braid their hair fancy for church tomorrow.”

“Oh, smart,” Nate approved. “I reckon it’ll take you no time at all - you must have more practice than the mother of ten daughters.”

Tyson smiled and rather than stifle it, said what came into his head. “Back home, we used to do each other’s crowns, and I was the best plaiter there.” He paused, but Nate looked interested so he went on.

“Jamie - you know, I told you, he was my best friend - he has such long, thick hair, his braid was thick as my forearm and I would do his crown sometimes.”

“Yeah?” said Nate softly. “Do you miss him?”
“I do miss him,” Tyson said. “I wrote him a while ago, you remember, but he never wrote back. I guess his Alpha didn’t want him writing to someone out of the Community.”

“That’s too bad,” Nate said.

Tyson shrugged, but he did feel disappointed. He knew Jamie didn’t read and write so easily, but he did well enough that they could have corresponded, and it would have been good to write to someone who understood, even if he was far away. “He’s got a brother Jordie, a very kind man, and I reckon Alpha Benn will tell Jamie my news once he hears it from my parents. We knew Alpha Landeskog wouldn’t let me write, so he wasn’t expecting letters from me anyway.”

Nate looked up at Tyson from where he was propping his head on his hand. Nate had very fine eyes, Tyson thought. They weren’t any particular colour, just a muddy blue, but they were familiar to him, kind and gentle. He had been pleased to see that Johnny’s eyes were similar in colour, although Mrs. MacKinnon said they often changed.

“I want something better than that for you baby,” Nate said quietly. “You deserve to hear from your friend if you want.”

“That’s not how it works,” Tyson said, “and I got you and Johnny, and you’re awfully good to me.”

“Am I?” Nate asked. “We got no house, you’re sharing a room with seven of my brothers and sisters and all your fancy wedding gifts burnt up. We’ll be moving back into a one room shack with no cook stove and we’re going to be extremely hard pressed this winter. Not sure I’m too good to you.”

He sighed and said, “I’m sorry I can’t give you something better.”

“I like you though,” Tyson said, fussing with the cloth on the table. “I like you, and I like Johnny now he’s here. I like your Ma too, she made me *roll kuchen* today cause she thought it would be familiar. You never raised your hand to me once and I don’t care about those wedding gifts, and if I had to choose, I’d choose you, Alpha.”

“Ah, that’s sweet,” Nate said, sounding dispirited despite the words. “But you didn’t want to marry me in the first place, and maybe if you hadn’t the fire never would have happened, and the house would still be standing, and you’d be better off.”

“And maybe the fire would still have happened and I’d be dead, and Johnny too,” Tyson countered. “No. Anywhere I go I’m better off with you beside me.”

“That is the single nicest thing you ever said to me,” Nate said, kissed Tyson on the cheek, and headed out to the bath.

When Tyson came out the back five minutes later, Nate was asleep lying back in the bath. He barely fit in it and had to sit with his knees bent up but he looked to be enjoying it, head tipped back and eyes closed, and Tyson stood quietly and looked at him. It was a rare chance to look at Nate naked without him looking back and Tyson let the lantern play over him, casting more light so he could see Nate better. As it was, he could see Nate outlined by the golden lantern light, the broad sweep of his shoulders and back highlighted against the endless dark. He was an Alpha, taller and broader than Tyson, with rough hands holding the edge of the tub and a thick neck corded in muscle, but he was also several other things. He was still a boy in many ways, as his mother had said, and he was Johnny’s father. The role of parent felt new and artificial to Tyson but Nate had embraced it with great joy, hardly putting Johnny down when he was home and growing teary when he had to return to the farm.

What sort of father would Alpha Landeskog have been to Johnny, Tyson wondered. Kind, Tyson
thought, but stern. The Orthodox had strict rules for the conduct of children and infants, and they were also subject to physical discipline. The expectation had been that Tyson, married to such a young husband, would bring Omegas back into the Landeskog line and Alpha Landeskog would not have been best pleased with Tyson for giving him a boy first try. Still, they might have learned to love each other a little, found each other a little easier to live with, pleased with their baby. Mrs. MacKinnon’s suggestion hung over him like a pall though; he couldn’t say she was wrong, and he wasn’t sure how he would have felt all alone with a tiny baby and Alpha Landeskog.

He thought about how Nate had behaved after Johnny was born. Nate had loved Johnny so immediately and completely it had been a banner for Tyson to follow in those first days when he felt so adrift. Shocked and exhausted by the physical reality of birth, which no one had ever explained to him, he had withdrawn into Orthodox silence. Nate had stayed beside him for the first week, a quiet familiar presence to turn to in the busy MacKinnon household. Tyson knew it wasn’t normal for any husband, Orthodox or Reform, to spend a week away from work to coddle their spouse, but Nate had done it uncomplainingly.

In those first few days Nate had insisted on sleeping on the floor beside their straw pallaise so Tyson was not disturbed by his movements. Nate had been the one to teach Tyson to fold and pin a diaper and sat beside him looking on admiringly while Tyson fumbled his way through learning to feed Johnny. He had hovered over him, bringing Tyson glass after glass of water and cracking walnuts for him to keep up his strength while he was feeding the baby. Nate had brought him expensive imported invalid food and beef tea because he had heard they were good for people who had just had babies, and raspberries and liquorice because he knew Tyson liked them. Then he had sat back down beside Tyson, one arm slung around him and told him what a good job he was doing and spent hours together just looking at Johnny, transfixed by the new baby. Those… were not things Alpha Landeskog would have thought to do or even been allowed to do by Orthodox belief.

Tyson grew sick of his own maunderings and tapped the tub with his boot to wake Nate up, but he over shot and kicked it. Nate jolted awake. “I’m up!” he said, “I’m up! What time is it?”

“Five minutes from the last time I saw you,” Tyson said. “I came to bring you the soap and a rag for drying - you forgot them inside.”

Tyson knelt by the wash tub and pulled the shutter almost closed on the lantern so there was only a thin stream of light pointing away from them. “Hey,” he said quietly. “You want me to wash your hair? You look awful tired.”

Nate looked over at Tyson from his reclining position, startled, but then smiled.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ll take you up on that if you’re offering.” Tyson moved closer to the tub but then Nate raised a hand to stop him. “Is this something Omegas do for their Alphas?” he asked, wary. “Were you taught to serve your Alpha like this?”

“Was I taught to wash a naked man?” Tyson said, amazed at the very thought. “How would they have taught me that? You’d need a naked person to practice on.”

“You got a point there,” Nate said, and subsided. “Alright, if you’re just being nice, go ahead.”

“I mean, I guess I could just practice on myself,” Tyson said, still thinking about it, “and there isn’t any particular trick to it either, it’s just washing, but still.”

“Alright,” Nate said, splashing a bit. “I got it.”

“And if you think my parents were going to suggest I ever look at a naked man,” Tyson said, unable
to stop now the idea had him in his grip, “never mind wash him, you’ve completely misunderstood the Observant.”

“OK, OK,” Nate said, “you going to get to the scrubbing or what?” Tyson pulled a bar of toilet soap from his pocket and gestured for Nate to get his hair wet.

“Oh fancy,” Nate said approvingly and leaned forward to wet his hair. The tub was too small for him to lie back and submerge his head. Then he sat up, eyes shut, and Tyson began to soap his hair.

“Your mother says,” Tyson began, and Nate grunted at him to continue. “Your Ma said she was worried I would hurt the baby.” Nate startled and made as if to open his eyes. “Keep them closed!” Tyson said. “I’m almost done.”

“Sorry,” Nate muttered, trying to keep his mouth closed to avoid the soap.

“OK, dunk,” Tyson ordered. “Am I as bad as all that?” he asked when Nate resurfaced.

“You’re not so bad,” Nate said, bobbing back down to wet his face again and flip his hair back. “Gimme the lye soap.” Tyson handed it over and Nate unselfconsciously began to wash everything below the waterline.

“You aren’t so bad,” Nate repeated, working on his feet with the coarse soap and the rag. “I mean. I think the way you won’t talk much worries them, and they think you’re crazed with religion, but other than that…”

“Do you think I’m going to hurt Johnny?” asked Tyson.

“No,” Nate said decisively, and Tyson felt comforted. “If I thought that we wouldn’t be going back to the farm. We’d be staying right here until you were well. Can you do my back?”

“I like Johnny,” Tyson said, taking the wet rag and everyday soap to make a start on Nate’s shoulders and back. There was a lot of acreage there, broad shoulders and a wide back, all covered with pale skin and freckles where the sun had hit. Experimentally Tyson ran one finger down Nate’s spine and Nate gave a great shudder like a horse, sending water rippling over the edge of the tub.

“I know you like Johnny,” Nate said, leaning forward a little so Tyson could get at his lower back. “I hear you sing him little songs when you think no one’s listening. Do you think you’re going to hurt Johnny?” he asked. Tyson scrubbed a little harder at the ground in charcoal that was exposed now he’d gotten the first layer of grime off. It looked like every scrape was full of it, driven right under the skin like a tattoo.

“No,” Tyson said after some thought. “But your Ma was right to watch me. I think it could have gone either way.”

“I think it’s the not talking that worries them the most,” Nate said judiciously. “You seen us in action, the MacKinnons aren’t too familiar with silence.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said quietly, but Nate wasn’t having it.

“You’re doing just fine,” he said, “You’re doing better than fine, you’re taking wonderful care of Johnny, but I like your chat, and they’d like it too if you let loose. They’re worried you got the melancholy, but I know you’re still just getting better.”

“Better from what?” Tyson said. He was now, at the two month mark, almost completely healed from Johnny’s birth.
“You been beat and forced for nine months and told to be quiet for twenty two years - it’s no wonder you’re a little hesitant to sing out,” Nate said.

“Alpha Landeskog - “ Tyson started,

“-didn’t do nothing wrong,” Nate finished wearily. “So you say.”

“Well, he didn’t, you know,” Tyson muttered. “A man has marital rights in the law, and he has the right to discipline his chattel as he sees fit.”

“That’s sadly so,” Nate said, “but will it get him what he wants?”

“I think so,” Tyson said. “Alpha Landeskog seemed to get what he wanted, alright.”

“I doubt it,” Nate said, surprising Tyson. “You know I don’t like him for what he did to you but I been thinking about it since Johnny was born. I got Landeskog’s son now, and I owe him something for that, and I’ve been thinking he was just a boy, same as me, and had no idea what he was doing, and he just did what he’d been taught was right. But I reckon he wanted you to love him, same as me. Tys, I don’t think anyone could marry you and not want you to love them. Just the way you look makes men covet you but more than that, you’re awful nice. I know you said Landeskog was sweet on you when you met. I think he must have wanted you to love him, just like you hoped.”

Tyson sat back on his heels and thought about it. “Maybe,” he said finally. “But he certainly went about it the wrong way. You done better all the way through, though you’re so young. You were awful nice to me after Johnny was born.”

“I didn’t do nothing anyone else wouldn’t have done,” Nate said.

“I think you did,” Tyson said. “I liked when you brought me nuts, and water. I liked when you took care of me. It helped a lot. I didn’t really understand how babies come, and I was …”

“Surprised?” suggested Nate.

“Taken aback,” Tyson said feelingly. “That’s not how I thought it was going to be.”

“How did you think it was going to be?” Nate asked, sitting up. Tyson thought about it for a minute while Nate climbed out of the bath. He admired Nate’s body as he stood beside the tub, dripping. It was always interesting to look at Nate, he was so different, and large.

“Less messy,” Tyson finally said. It was a serious understatement, but there was no way to convey his shock at both the mechanics of birth and the way it tore through him, the process determined to complete itself. “Maybe fewer horses, too,” he added, and Nate chuckled.

“Yeah there’s usually hardly any horses,” he agreed. “And mostly less fire, too. Didn’t no one ever explain to you how it worked?” Tyson looked away, embarrassed. Animals were base and he had never seen them mate or give birth. It was certainly never discussed in the family. He and Jamie had speculated between themselves but they had been wildly off base in their assumptions: their theories had hinged largely on the belly button. It was a pity he couldn’t let Jamie know how wrong they had been.

“You did a good job, though,” Nate said, reaching for Tyson’s chin with his wet hand. “Look at me, baby. You did it just right, no one could have done better. And now we got Johnny, and he’s perfect.”

Tyson looked up, his chin cupped in Nate’s hand and met his eyes. Nate looked back at him and
Tyson could see Nate’s sincerity; he wanted to give him something in return.

There was no opportunity in the house unless they wanted an audience of Nate’s entire family, which was fine with Tyson as he had no interest. Mrs. MacKinnon said he was doing remarkably well, but he still went to the privy a little gingerly and although it didn’t hurt, his chest felt *weird* where it was swollen and puffy. He had almost never had less interest in sex but he imagined Nate might so he reached up and gently gripped Nate’s soft cock. “You want me to?” he asked but Nate caught his hand and smiled at him wryly. Tyson could just barely see his face in the moonlight.

“That’s a very kind thought,” Nate said, moving his hand away, “but I’m too tired to take you up on it right now, and I don’t think you’re too interested either. You know what I’d like?”

“What’s that?” Tyson asked.

“I’d like you to give me a kiss and then put me to bed,” Nate said sighing. “I’m going to fall asleep standing up any minute.”

“Alright,” Tyson said, “I can do that.” He stood up and kissed Nate, their hands still holding onto each other. Nate’s lips were chapped and he still smelt faintly of smoke, but Tyson relaxed into the kiss and enjoyed it. He always liked kissing and kissing Nate was a reliable pleasure, safe, familiar and comfortable even when he didn’t want to go any further. Nate broke the kiss after a few minutes to yawn enormously so Tyson stood and beckoned him back into the house.

Nate groaned with pleasure as he climbed into bed next to Tyson. “God I’m glad to be back here with you and Johnny, and this mattress, too,” he said, rolling over and spooning up behind Tyson. “Maybe tomorrow we can take a walk down to the river,” he whispered into Tyson’s ear. “You want to do that? We can take Johnny and when he falls asleep I’m going to lie you back in the grass and kiss you till you purr. How you like that, baby?”

Tyson liked that just fine but before he could say so Nate relaxed against him and began to snore.

The next morning dawned fine and sunny; the sisters made breakfast and Tyson braided their hair to much acclaim at home and then at church. After church they had a dinner of Mrs. MacKinnon’s finely handled salt cod mash with late peas, carrots, and beets, both top and bottom. After dinner, all the adults of working age - Nate, Sarah and the senior MacKinnons - looked at the family Bible sat on the decorative shelf waiting to be read as was proper for a Sunday afternoon and as one shrugged. Instead, they took the only sanctioned period of rest available to them and drifted to various seats in the house and promptly fell asleep.

Mary cheerfully waved him away when he offered to help with the dishes and the children all ran off out the back. Tyson drifted through the house but all the adults were asleep. It was not the Sunday rhythm Tyson was accustomed to back home but he didn’t object, although it left him at loose ends as the only adult family member uninterested in napping. Mrs. MacKinnon was asleep in a kitchen chair leaned back against the wall, demonstrating the same preternatural balance her son had and Mr. MacKinnon was seated in the one cushioned chair in the house, also sawing wood. Nate had fallen asleep in the grass behind the porch where the sun hit.

Even Johnny was sound asleep so Tyson put him carefully in a little nest of blankets at Nate’s head and crawled up next to Nate. Nate didn’t rouse but he turned over in his sleep and wrapped himself around Tyson. The younger children ran up and down the field, playing a tagging game that had a chant - Tyson could hear their voices drifting down to him, rising and lowering as they came closer and then further away. The sun beat down, warming the grass around them and Tyson’s feet where his black boots drew the heat; slowly his eyes closed. He put one hand on Nate’s arm where it was flung over him and one hand up to touch Johnny’s foot, and sank into sleep.
He woke to Nate’s voice next to his ear. “Wake up baby,” Nate said. “Time to get up, it’s suppertime.” They had slept all through the afternoon and the sun was lowering. Johnny was still asleep in his spot, little limbs splayed akimbo in his gown and cheeks pink from the sun. “Wake up,” Nate said again, kissing him behind the ear. “It’s Sunday night pork roast and beans, come on.”

Tyson’s enthusiasm for the ever present pork, pork, pork was not as great as Nate’s, but he did like Mrs. MacKinnon’s beans, heavy on the molasses. “What’s for afters?” he asked. Dessert was always the most interesting part of the meal.

“Stewed prunes,” Nate said dolorously. “Cream if you’re quick, there’s never enough.”

“I like stewed prunes,” Tyson said, rolling over to face Nate. “I like the squish.”

“You like the squish, do you?” Nate said, laughing. “I’ll squish you,” and he made to roll over on top of Tyson. Tyson squealed and pushed at his shoulders and they fell into a gentle mock tussle, Nate conscious of Tyson’s still tender middle and both of them careful not to wake Johnny. After a minute they lay panting, intertwined in each other’s arms, and Tyson could hear the gang of younger MacKinnons thundering back towards them, their footsteps echoing through the ground.

The children ran towards them laughing and shouting to each other, lead by eleven year old Robbie. They barreled up to where Nate and Tyson lay, calling their big brother. “Nate, Nate,” Robbie yelled, running a wide circle around them. “It’s suppertime, Nate, come on!”

“Mind the baby!” Nate ordered in a stern voice and shot out his arm to block them from where Johnny lay, but Robbie just laughed and jumped over their feet. One by one all the children followed, running once around Nate, Tyson and Johnny, jumping over their legs, and heading into the house for supper.
Chapter 9

Tyson fed the baby again, slumped against the head of the bed barely awake. Mrs. MacKinnon said they did this sometimes, ate and ate and ate for a week or two when they were growing even faster than usual, but he hoped it would end soon. It seemed to him he’d fed Johnny not an hour earlier and he wondered where all the milk went. Blearily he sat Johnny up to wind him and the question of where all the milk went was abruptly answered as what looked like an entire feed showered over Nate who was asleep on his back beside him.

“Gaaah,” Nate yelled, waking suddenly as the torrent of half digested milk hit his face and bare chest. He leapt from the bed, shaking his head and pawing at his eyes. Tyson stared blankly at him, unsure what had just happened. Nate was spluttering and hacking - some must have gotten in his open mouth. "What the goddamn fuck was that?” Nate yelled, fists balled at his side and face angry. This is it, Tyson thought, Nate was surely going to paste him one. They’d both been snappish and bad tempered for days, Tyson with the baby’s constant demands for feeding while he tried to finish the canning and Nate working eighteen hours days in the unseasonal September heat to bring in the last of the hay. This was beyond what anyone could expect even the kindest of Alphas to tolerate. Tyson knew he should get on his knees and start apologizing in the hopes it would mitigate what was coming, but he was so exhausted he couldn’t muster the energy to move. He just looked down at Johnny who had dropped into a deep, guiltless sleep, and back up at the wreckage of the bed and Nate. Nate was still standing at the side of the bed glaring at Tyson, covered in baby puke and breathing heavily while he clenched his fists again and again.

Nate made a sound of profound, soul deep frustration and stomped out of the room. Tyson watched him go and then carefully put Johnny in his Moses basket. He lowered it to the floor and tucked it under the bed so he was out of Nate’s sight and, hopefully, out of mind enough to escape any punishment. Tyson could hear Nate under the pump. It sounded like he was sluicing water all over himself, not just washing his face and chest.

“Well, come on,” Nate said re-entering the room naked and dripping with a lit lantern. “Get the sheet off the bed before it soaks through and stinks up the mattress. What you waiting for?” He started to pull the sheet off but couldn’t because Tyson was still sat on it. “Come on, come on,” Nate said impatiently, “Chop chop. Get off the damn bed and help, I got about four more hours before daylight and I gotta head back out to the Johnsons, and I’d like to get some sleep.”

Tyson stood up and helped strip the bed and then just watched silently as Nate took the dirty sheets out to the porch and hung them over the railing. Nate returned to the bedroom while Tyson was tucking in a new sheet on the bed and Tyson carefully finished and then stood very still, waiting for Nate’s next order. He didn’t want to anger him further with any undirected actions. “That’s better,” Nate said, “That was disgusting. Can you try to point him the other direction next time? You think he’s sick?” He looked around for Johnny to presumably inspect him for signs of illness. “Where is he?” Nate said. “What the hell?” He climbed across the bed to look over at Tyson’s side and saw the edge of the Moses basket sticking out. “Why’s he under the bed?” Nate asked, lying across the bed and reaching under it to pull the basket back out. “What’d you stick him under there for?”

Tyson said nothing, still waiting for the other shoe to fall, but he had an inappropriate urge to slap Nate’s bare ass where he was laid out on the mattress. He refrained and just waited silently. He knew anything he said would make things worse.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Nate asked. “You still asleep? You’re acting awful strange.” He pulled the basket all the way out from under the bed and plucked Johnny out. Tyson stilled and
waited, poised on a knife’s edge. He wasn’t sure what he would do if Nate raised a hand to Johnny, but he was going to do something.

“You terrible puker,” Nate cooed at Johnny, “you filthy little upchukker, you got me so good.” Johnny slumbered unaware as Nate felt his head for a fever and then carefully put one finger down the neck of his gown to see if he was overheated. “I think he’s OK,” Nate said, straightening Johnny’s gown to make sure there was no vomit on it. “You want him in the bed with you or back in the basket?”

"Basket, please,” Tyson said, confused by what Nate was doing but still thinking Johnny was better off away from him.

“There you go,” Nate said to Johnny, kissing him as he put him back in the basket. “Now try to stay asleep for a couple of hours, you hear?” Nate climbed back onto his side of the bed and got under the sheet. Tyson kept still where he was; he knew from experience better to do nothing than do the wrong thing. After a minute Nate sat up - the lantern was still on the floor, lit and Tyson could see him clearly. "You going to get in bed or what?” Nate asked. “Come on, I want to sleep.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Tyson said, and got in the bed, but Nate noticed the use of Alpha and sat back up.

“Why you being so strange?” he asked Tyson. “Why was Johnny under the bed?”

“Keep him out of the way,” Tyson whispered.

“Out of the way of what?” Nate wanted to know.

“Discipline,” Tyson said. “I shouldn’t have let him throw up, and I’m real sorry he got you Alpha.”

“Oh baby, no,” Nate said with real sorrow in his voice. “No. You thought what? That I was going to fetch you such a crack that I might knock you over on the baby? Because he puked on me? No no no,” he muttered, gathering Tyson to him. “Come here baby, I’m not going to hit you, not even if you did something on purpose and certainly not because a baby puked. Can’t help that.” He pulled Tyson into the length of his body and wrapped his strong arms around him. “I’m sorry I scared you,” he went on, talking into the crook of Tyson’s neck. Tyson tentatively put his arms around Nate and hugged back; seemed like he wasn’t going to get disciplined today. Giddy, he relaxed against Nate. He was exhausted and Nate was a firm, warm cushion to rest against.

“Thank you,” he said, draped over Nate.

“Come on, baby,” Nate said, kissing at Tyson’s face and neck, little pecking kisses. Nate smelled fresh and nice from his recent rinse at the pump, and his arms were warm and comforting. Tyson had always liked the smooth heavy muscle of his arms, feeling it against him, watching them when Nate was clothed, even better when he wasn’t, and he felt himself begin to stir and kissed back. They kissed for a minute but then, both wrung out, they separated and settled down to sleep. Nate leaned over and blew out the lamp and with one last kiss he heaved his usual giant sigh and Tyson waited for him to fall almost immediately into sleep, his nightly routine. Two minutes later, another huge sigh but Tyson could feel Nate still wasn’t asleep and Tyson discovered he couldn’t fall asleep either without Nate draped over him, boneless and snoring. Apparently at some point in the last year he’d gotten used to it. Tyson laid there, still, trying to sleep but unable. He wriggled a little bit and Nate rumbled back at him and pulled him closer. Tyson tried to will himself to sleep but his contrary brain could think of nothing but his half hard cock, and Nate, crushed up against his bottom. Half asleep, he drifted and thought about Nate; his big hands and kissing with Nate’s fingers inside him, until he was slicked up and his cock was hard. He realised he’d been clenching his thighs when Nate pushed against him and Tyson felt Nate was fully hard as well.
It felt dreamy and unreal - the dark night, the relief from recent upset made him feel loose and fearless. He shuffled back until Nate’s cock was pressed against him, and Nate rumbled his approval again. Tyson could feel Nate starting to wake up, or at least tense up - he writhed around a bit trying to get some friction and then Nate reached down between them and pushed his cock down to lie between Tyson’s legs, along his hole, nudging up against his balls, and that was just right. Pleased, Tyson brought one hand down to his own cock and tightened his thighs around Nate. Pressing into his own hand, he encouraged Nate to start a slow back and forth, his slick quickly covering Nate’s cock and making each pass a tantalizing glide. They carried on like that for a few minutes, Nate waking a little more, and Tyson thought, his hand still on himself. He felt he wanted more, somehow, each pass of Nate’s cock close but not enough. He thought back to Nate lying above him, two fingers deep inside Tyson, and Tyson panting, crying out joyously as Nate fucked him with his hand. He did not think back to his first marriage; that was not the same as this. Nate had told him he wouldn’t hurt him and Tyson believed him.

He knew, now, the purpose of this slick, the mystery of his body not such a mystery anymore, knew how to call it forth when he would. It was strange to recall a time when he didn’t know this about himself; he didn’t understand how he hadn’t discovered it late at night, quietly, under the sheets, but he hadn’t and he’d had to depend on Nate to tell him. It served no purpose but pleasure that he could see, and he knew with absolute conviction he was the Bund, the living Covenant made by God both male and female in his image; and so he knew also that God themselves must inhabit a body that did this, solely for pleasure. Possessed of this knowledge, he turned to face Nate and without thinking about it, without any worries about possible pain or fear, he spread his legs and Nate, still half asleep, eyes closed and hips pumping lazily, took his invitation and rolled on top of him.

There was nothing careful or considered about it and there didn’t need to be; Nate rested his face in Tyson’s neck and fitted himself inside with one slow push, gliding in easily and naturally on a gentle exhale. There was no pain, no force, nothing but Nate all around him, enclosing Tyson in a safe cocoon of his arms, gasping and pausing, hesitant, until he slowly started to move and then his cock dragged over something inside and Tyson jolted, every part of his body clamping down around Nate, trying to prolong the feeling. Nate shuddered in his arms and moaned, overwhelmed, and then started to move again, each pass winding Tyson higher and higher. Nate was clearly undone, breathing harshly, more overcome than Tyson which made sense, Tyson thought, as at least he’d done this before where Nate hadn’t, although certainly Tyson had never done it this way before, face to face, kissing, Tyson’s body welcoming Nate in and Nate tender and mindful, grateful to be allowed entry. It was so dark he couldn’t see Nate’s face and he was glad - having to do this in the sight of another, even familiar Nate, would be too much.

Tyson discovered he could rest his legs around Nate’s waist and pull him even further inside and that he could throw his arms around Nate’s neck and kiss, slow drugging kisses with no heat behind them, breathing together gently while they moved in time, a slow soft push and pull directed more by Tyson to his surprise, than Nate. It was completely different from any time before. They were almost silent and entirely gentle, barely moving, but gradually a quiet burn built and built through Tyson until he arched up one last time and called out and Nate groaned and came too, clutching Tyson close, this also gentle and smooth and with a last kiss they slipped into sleep.

Tyson woke to Johnny crabbing for milk again, but he felt terrific. He could gladly have slept another twelve hours and he didn’t relish the thought of getting up and canning tomatoes all day in the heat, but he still felt relaxed and cheerful. He could feel the remains of Nate’s spend inside him, tacky and damp, and even that pleased him, a reminder of the ease and closeness of last night. The birds had started singing but the sunrise was still a half hour or so away, and he leaned down to pick Johnny up. “Come here you hungry baby,” he murmured fondly, and put him to the breast. One of the things he’d been surprised to discover about babies was that once Johnny was a few weeks old, he would stare intently back at Tyson while feeding, small fat hand patting gently at his chest.
Luckily, Johnny only nursed for a few minutes and fell back asleep, so there was no risk of disaster like last night.

“Put him back in the basket when you’re done, will you?” came Nate’s sleepy voice from where he was lying face down next to Tyson. “C’mere,” Nate ordered once Johnny was settled, and he pulled Tyson down to lie beside him. “That was awful nice last night,” Nate said, voice still rough with sleep as he pulled Tyson against him, luxuriating in the full lengths of their bodies together, one hand running up and down Tyson’s side knee to shoulder.

“Was it?” said Tyson doubtfully, thinking of the vomit, but he relaxed into Nate’s warmth.

“Well not the puking, no,” Nate said, “but the fucking, that was very nice. I woke up thinking about it.” He nudged his morning wood into Tyson to punctuate his statement and Tyson laughed.

“How’s that any different than every morning?” he asked, and Nate grinned.

“It’s not,” he said, “but I was thinking about it. Thank you for letting me. I know you were scared about that, before; you weren’t scared then, were you? I liked it; did you like it too?”

“I did like it,” Tyson said, startled to realise that was true. “I liked it a lot.”

“You were awful sweet,” Nate said, shyly.

“Was I?” Tyson said, putting his arms around Nate’s neck. “I liked it.”

“Oh, I liked it too,” Nate said fervently. “I really really liked it, you got no idea. I was trying to be careful of you though, but I’m not sure... I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You were plenty careful,” Tyson confirmed, charmed by the question, and Nate smiled brightly at him. “You don’t have to be so gentle as all that,” Tyson said, “just careful, like you were.

“Good,” Nate said, “I’m glad. I mean, I liked it of course but I also liked lying with you so close and sweet, and I want you to feel that. You’re so good to me even though I know you didn’t want to marry me; I want to be good to you too.”

“I was afraid of the bed stuff,” Tyson said, “but I always liked you, even when you were my Little Brother. And you make it easy to be good to you, anyone would.”

Tyson looked at Nate bashfully ducking his head as he thanked Tyson for finally, finally allowing marital rights that Nate could have demanded a year ago, and realised what should have been obvious to him long ago, that he was the one in charge. Nate was going to push like he always had for closeness, to be allowed to cuddle and hold Tyson, and continue to be unashamed about his desires and the actions of his body, but Tyson was the one who determined if and when and how. If he said no, Nate heard No and stopped.

“You’re awful sweet all the time,” Tyson said, because it seemed true to him. Sometimes Nate was disagreeable, grunting in the morning as he faced another long day of hay after Johnny kept them up, or … Well, that’s really all Tyson could think of. Nate didn’t like getting up in the morning which probably wasn’t too odd as he was still growing and Johnny, who was also growing, roused them several times a night. Even so, the worst he’d done was scowl a little over breakfast, and even that Tyson had found could be relieved by producing unadulterated coffee or heavily sugared porridge. There was always a kiss for both of them when he left, a kiss when he returned, a kiss at the end of the day, and never a raised hand. He’d undertaken to do the work of a man ten years his senior, caring for a child and a spouse years before he should have to and he did it without a word of complaint no matter how useless Tyson was. He insisted on paring his toenails at the kitchen table,
and he wouldn’t use a handkerchief but horked on the ground, and he thought he was funny when
he farted in bed, but in between those moments were hundreds of others spent keeping his temper
when it was tested and treating Tyson like a human being, not a valuable piece of fancy china subject
to very strict rules.

Experimentally, Tyson ground gently against Nate and Nate bit his own bottom lip and one large
hand clamped down on Tyson’s bottom. “Yeah?” Nate said, low and scratchy and Tyson kissed him
in response.

“Yeah,” Tyson said, “Yeah. I never known such a good Alpha. I like you loads.”

“I like you too,” Nate said, one of his fingers drifting down to Tyson’s hole and brushing against it.
“You sore?”

Just that touch got him fired up again - he thought that maybe Nate had got him trained to start
slicking up at the touch of his hand, but he wasn’t complaining. He tightened his thighs and squeezed
them together while he rubbed against Nate again, and he could feel his cock harden while his hole
sort of pulsed with excitement. “No,” he breathed, “not sore at all,” and one big finger slipped into
Tyson. Tyson spread his legs and pushed back into Nate’s hand, the slick glide where his hole was
wet from last night and growing newly slick exciting him further.

“Can I pull you off while I do me too?” Nate asked. This was a common request, something they’d
done often since Johnny was born.

“If you want,” Tyson said, “but how about this?” He threw his upper leg over Nate’s hip and pushed
closer.

“Really?” Nate said, thrilled, “Again?”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, “come on.”

“Well then,” Nate said eagerly, “I’m not arguing,” and to Tyson’s surprise the same thing as last
night happened - Nate just fit right in, no mess, no fuss. Well, maybe a little mess, because Tyson
could feel Nate’s cock displacing his own come from last night and that was so tantalizingly dirty, so
far beyond any of Tyson’s imaginings, that he shuddered and pulled Nate closer. Nate took the hint
and slipped his arm under Tyson’s knee, hitching it up and on the next thrust Tyson mewed. He
didn’t know what Nate was hitting, but by God he wanted him to keep at it. Nate seemed to be
taking to this new thing naturally; he was going harder than last night, eyes screwed up and face
creased with concentration.

“Whew,” Tyson panted, “whew. That’s...just...right. You fit in me so good.” Nate tipped them over
so Tyson was on his back and it got even better. With one leg over Nate’s arm, Nate reached deeper
than last night and Tyson wrapped his other leg around Nate’s ass. He discovered Nate would
obligingly follow his lead when he pulled him closer, pushing and grinding at Tyson’s direction.
Tyson opened his eyes and saw Nate’s face, right there. He’d never seen Nate before when they
were doing this, and he realised Nate didn’t look stern or Alpha at all, but rather silly as he bit his lip
and tucked his chin into his neck unflatteringly. Suddenly Tyson was flooded with tenderness for
Nate’s stupid vulnerable sex face. He reached up to kiss him and Nate kissed back, moaning and
shifting his arms to wrap them entirely around Tyson. Tyson wrapped his own arms and both legs
around Nate. Why hadn’t they been doing this all along, he wondered. The hand play had been fun,
but this, wrapped in each other’s arms and so close, holding Nate to him and being held, was
something else again. Not an intrusion, not even using Nate to scratch an itch, but an action
undertaken together, the push and pull of equals working towards a common goal.
“Harder,” Tyson said, and Nate did. Nate was close, reduced to panting, head alongside Tyson’s and making deep throaty grunts with each thrust, but Tyson needed just a little more and thanks to the position he could get it. He clamped his legs tightly and held Nate still against him so his cock was rubbing against Nate’s abs. Nate understood and started to grind into him, circling his pelvis against Tyson until Tyson found himself making a series of high pitched noises, calling out “Oh, oh, oh” as he and Nate ground against each other, Tyson pulling and pulling Nate into him with his legs.

“Fuck!” Nate bellowed, and came at the same time as Tyson’s cock spurted and his hole spasmed.

An hour later Tyson was feeling significantly limper as he considered the several hundredweight of tomatoes he aimed to get through today and the mounting heat while Johnny grizzled in his basket. Nate came whistling through the kitchen on his way to the barn, hat in hand. He leaned down and kissed Tyson deeply. “You’re in a good mood,” Tyson said, and Nate smiled and kissed him again.

“I am in a good mood,” he said, ticking off his points one by one on his fingers. “No one’s ever had such a bonny baby,” he said, nodding at Johnny, “and that’s because you’re taking such fine care of him, and it’s the last day of haying, thank God, and Johnson’s wife told me she’d trade a meat pie if I made them new hinges for their barn, so no need to worry about making anything for supper as I see you got a lot to do here, and tomorrow we can go to the pond if you like and just lie about all day in the cool, and I had a very fine time last night and this morning with my very beautiful and very willing husband, and I say thank you for that. Who wouldn’t be in a good mood?”

“I didn’t do it as a favour to you,” Tyson said, feeling unaccountably shy, “I did it because I wanted to.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Nate, “and that’s why I liked it so.” He leaned forward to Tyson’s ear and whispered, “You fucked me so good, two times, and I loved it. And now I’m not a virgin no more.”

A thrill ran through Tyson and emboldened he whispered back to Nate, “I didn’t know you could do it like that but I liked it. And I still got your come inside me.” Nate’s eyes flew open and he grabbed Tyson around the waist.

“Why Mr. MacKinnon,” he said. “You’re so rude! I think I like it.”

Tyson blushed but he said, “Anyway, maybe we can, again, tonight.”

Nate’s eyes lit up and he kissed Tyson once more, hard. “Yeah,” he said enthusiastically. “We certainly could, if you’d like. I could stand to be even less a virgin than I am now. No harm in making sure it took.”

Tyson giggled and kissed him back but soon Nate broke the kiss. “OK,” he said regretfully, “I got to go before I bend you over the table. I don’t know why I got such a horn, considering what we already been up to.”

“It’s probably the tomatoes,” Tyson said nonsensically. “They used to call them love apples.” Unfortunately, Johnson entered just as Nate was expounding on what an effect the love apples were having on his cock.

“I didn’t need to hear that MacKinnon,” EJ said, looking around the kitchen surfaces covered with tomatoes. “But if that’s the case, you must be in a hell of a state.”

“Shut up Johnson,” Nate said, picking up his hat from where it had fallen to the floor and kissing Johnny goodbye. “You wish your wife had several hundredweight of tomatoes.”

“My wife does have several hundredweight of tomatoes,” Johnson replied, “and it don’t seem to be
bring her much joy, I’ll tell you that. Oh, by the way,” he said, turning to Tyson and tipping his hat. “Marnie says, if you’re doing beets this year, do you want to come can them with her next week Tuesday, it’s much less boring with someone else.”

“Oh,” said Tyson. This was the first invitation he’d had from the community wives and he was startled at how much he really did want to accept. It’s a little faster with two, he knew from back home, but the work felt ten times lighter with some company.

“Yes, thank you Mr. Johnson,” Tyson said. Later in the day he’d realise that was the first exchange he’d had with a Denver Alpha that he conducted entirely by himself, but for then Nate just looked approving and kissed him goodbye.

*

“I feel like the pond would be more fun if it wasn’t full of cows trying to get a drink,” Tyson said as he sat in the water next to Nate.

Nate splashed at the nearest cow, which was entirely unmoved, and said, “Fancy city boy, eh? You want water with no cows? You should have married a rich man in the city.”

“I did,” said Tyson, slapping at Nate’s shoulder, “but I still ended up soaking in this pond that’s half cow. Hi! Betsy, get off!” he yelled as one of the cows licked his leg. “That’s a little too far,” he said to her, pushing her head away with his foot. “Why do they insist on coming in at this end anyway?”

“They’re only here twice a day,” Nate pointed out reasonably. “You want a pond that’s really crowded, the one up near Mr. Talbot’s place had a hornet’s nest, which was fine so long as you eased into the water and didn’t splash, but when the cows showed up it was anyone’s guess if they’d bump it and set off the hornets. One time we had to spend a whole afternoon underwater, bobbing up every minute to see if the hornets were still buzzing.”

Johnny made noises indicating he was awake and Nate stood up. “I’ll get him,” he said eagerly. “I feel like I hardly seen him all haying season. You think he’d like to sit in the water with us?”

“Try it,” Tyson said, and watched as Nate carefully stripped Johnny and sat him on his lap. Johnny looked considering at the unfamiliar sensation and then slapped his hands in the pond. Delighted at the result, he did it again and again, crowing and looking at his parents to make sure they saw. Tyson splashed his hands too but Johnny didn’t like that.

“Only the king can splash,” Nate said. “Please don’t splash the king.” He pulled Johnny up against his chest but Johnny squawked an objection and Nate lowered him back into the water.

“Does he need a hat, do you think?” Tyson asked Nate, and Nate looked at Tyson, braids down low again so he could cram on Nate’s old hat while Nate wore his current hat to fend off the sun, and started to laugh.

“Don’t think it’ll fit him,” he said. “Besides, we’ve run out of old hats, you’re wearing the last one now. His bonnet will do if you think he’s getting too hot. Anyway,” he went on. “Why are you asking me? Do you think he’s too hot? You’d know better than me.” A strange figure approached before they could get into it and resolved in Alpha Yakupov.

“Mind if I join?” Alpha Yakupov asked and Nate grunted and waved his hand.

“Can I speak to your Omega, Mr. MacKinnon?” he asked.

“We ain’t doing that,” Nate said, “Tyson can talk to whoever he likes whenever he likes, you don’t
got to ask and he don’t need permission.” Alpha Yakupov looked taken aback but shrugged. Tyson peeked around Nate to see and waved at him. The mustache was still unfortunate, but his happy smile was good to see.

“How you doing Omega MacKinnon?” Yakupov asked. “I haven’t seen you in half a year, and you’re looking real well.”

Tyson doubted that as he was sat waist deep in a pond wearing a full union suit and Nate’s old hat, but sure. Maybe Yakupov was thrilled at the sight of his bare feet. Even the union suit must be daring in Yakupov’s opinion, but he wasn’t saying anything about it. Thank god Tyson hadn’t gone naked like Nate had suggested. Yakupov got his overshirt and pants off and paused. He looked at Tyson sitting fully covered next to Nate, whose modesty was protected only by the baby perched on his lap.

“Can I go like the Reform, or would you rather not?” he asked Tyson. Tyson shrugged. He really didn’t care so long as Yakupov kept his drawers on.

“Thanks,” Yakupov said, shedding his undershirt and settling into the water in his drawers next to Nate. “Too hot to be Orthodox.”

“No one here is Orthodox,” Nate said in a forbidding tone and Yakupov took the hint and changed the subject by smiling at Johnny.

“Is that the baby?” Yakupov asked. “Can I see him?” Nate passed him over carefree, and Tyson watched to make sure Yakupov knew how to handle a baby, but Johnny seemed happy with him, cheerfully gnawing on his own hand. “Look at you,” Yakupov cooed. “Beautiful baby. Son of the Rääjenboagen, you’ll always be lucky.”

Tyson watched him play with the baby and thought that if he’d had his way Johnny would have been Yakupov’s son. How strange, to imagine the same Johnny with a different name, a different father, a different fate. Even stranger to imagine touching and kissing Yakupov like he has Nate. Surely that could never have happened?

“Baby’s looking well,” Yakupov remarked to Nate.

“Oh, that’s because Tyson takes such fine care of him,” Nate said, casual, as if he was just stating a fact everyone already knew. “Tyson’s awful clever with babies, and accounts, and books and such. Tyson’s awful smart.”

Yakupov, who knew exactly what Tyson was raised to be good at - looking pretty and serving tea beautifully while keeping silent - smiled kindly at him.

“I just done what your mother told me,” Tyson mumbled. Mrs. MacKinnon had handed him a bag full of baby clothes she said she sincerely hoped she was done with and told him to feed the baby everytime he squeaked and Tyson had diligently done so. He’d had a vague idea that back home Johnny would be swaddled more, and fed less, but Mrs. MacKinnon had fixed him with a gimlet eye and ordered him to feed the baby all he wanted, let him kick everyday, and to use a fresh diaper every time, even if that meant boiling the diapers twice a week rather than just rinsing and drying them when Johnny wet.

“It’s not so easy to keep babies alive - you got to give him every chance if you want to keep him,” she said. “You look at mine and do what I say.” Tyson, clutching the bag of clothes and Johnny to him, looked at the ten tall, hale MacKinnons gathered around to admire the baby, and rejected all thought of doing anything other than what she said. And her advice had been sage - Johnny was
enormously large and alert for a four month old.

“He must be,” Yakupov agreed, “because it seems to me Johnny here is a very considerable size for a baby his age.”

“Oh he is,” Nate eagerly agreed, embarking on his favourite topic, Johnny’s superiority to all other babies. “We had him in to my Pa’s store the other week and put him on the scales and he looks to be well over 20 pounds. 20 pounds, Yakupov! That’s more than most would weigh at a year.”

“Well, that’s good,” Yakupov said. “Maybe one day you’ll have another, one of your own,” and the atmosphere suddenly chilled.

“Johnny is my own,” Nate said tightly, snatching Johnny away from Yakupov. “I’m sorry you don’t understand that, but it don’t alter the case. Johnny is my baby, Yakupov, and I don’t care for the suggestion otherwise.”

“Oh, begging your pardon,” Yakupov said, nettled, “That’s certainly not how it was presented to me when your mother had me in to ask me to marry your husband.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Yakupov,” Nate said calmly. “Not my fault you’re too stupid to take your chance when it’s offered to you. Now you got no wife and I got the prettiest husband in Denver and the finest baby. Fortune favours the bold.”

“Yeah you might want to take that up with my mother,” Yakupov said. “She don’t favour the bold unless the bold are also Muslim, so that was never going to be, not even for the Räajenboagen.” “Bund,” he went on, looking at Tyson, “you don’t seem too sad about that, hey? You think you married the right man?”

Tyson, irritated by Yakupov’s remarks about Johnny not belonging to Nate - Nate, the best and kindest Alpha he’d ever known, the man whose hands brought nothing but pleasure, never pain - very daringly reached out one hand and put it on Nate’s knee, looked Yakupov dead in the eye, and said “Yes,” quietly. Nate had no idea what Tyson had just done, but Yakupov understood and burst into laughter.

“Oh ho!” he said, fanning himself with his hat. “I see how it is,” and nudged Nate with an elbow.

“What?” said Nate, looking between the two of them, “What?”

“He likes you MacKinnon,” Yakupov said, “He likes you a lot”

Tyson blushed, but Nate just laughed and looked at Tyson with a happy, open smile. “That’s good,” he said, “because he’s stuck with me, and I like him a lot too.” He leaned forward to kiss Tyson and Tyson’s eyes shot to Yakupov. A fleeting touch on the knee was one thing, but a kiss! Yakupov grimaced back at Tyson and clamped his eyes shut while Nate, unaware, kissed Tyson thoroughly.

Oh, what the hell, Tyson thought, and kissed back, but when Nate released him he was too embarrassed to look up so he just stared down at the water.

“Why you got your eyes shut?” he heard Nate ask.

“I’m not going to watch you kiss the Räajenboagen,” Yakupov said sounding scandalized. “What do you think I am?”

“I was just kissing him,” Nate said, “Nothing wrong with a married couple kissing.”
“No,” Yakupov said, “You can do whatever you like I guess, whatever you English think is decent, but I’m not going to watch it, I got some respect for his station. He’s the Bund, the Räajenboagen, for cripes sake. It’s bad enough he’s sitting there half naked, you don’t got to paw at him like a showgirl.”

“A showgirl?” Nate said amused, “a showgirl? He’s wearing my old union suit.”

“I can see his feet,” Yakupov said sounding scandalized. “And the shape of his, his body! He’s wearing a hat! If his father could see him now he’d whip him something good. He’s the Räajenboagen, you should treat him with some respect.”

Tyson curled his toes and shuffled his feet until they were covered by the mud at the bottom of the pond. He knew Yakupov was looking at them. He couldn’t do anything about the union suit but he tried to shrink into himself and make it less clingy. He knew he should have just worn his regular gear, but Nate got all fussy.

“If respect is keeping him locked in the house on a day this hot,” Nate said, “then I guess he’ll just have to settle for affection, because I’m not making him swelter in the name of religion.” Yakupov took Nate’s attempts at peacekeeping amiss.

“T...
their baby, Nate’s gentle loving hands on his body, showing him what God meant for a marriage to be; and he was repulsed at the thought of being locked away again, of everything God meant for him and put in him being wasted by the rules of men.

Nate, insulated by recent sexual congress, just looked smugly at Yakupov. Tyson could tell exactly what Nate was thinking though he wasn’t sure Nail realised. Nate gave Nail the condescending look of a young man who had recently had sex several times looking at a virgin years older than him with no immediate prospects of that status changing. Nail looked back puzzled and Nate smirked at him. Tyson thought longingly of the possibility of just slipping under the water, leaving Nate’s old hat floating there and burrowing into the sand like a catfish never to return but decided against it and just looked over at Yakupov and shrugged.

“I got what I want,” Nate said to Nail, one hand on Tyson’s thigh, one holding Johnny. “I got what others want too, and can’t have. I could work up a real good head of steam taking offense at what you just said, but the haying’s over, and my baby’s the best in Denver, and my husband likes me, so I’ll leave it be.”

Nate shot Yakupov one last warning look and then laid down in the shallow water with Johnny lying on his chest. Carefully he put his hat over Johnny so the sun wasn’t beaming directly into his face; Johnny made a puzzled noise at the sudden dark but then one small hand crept out from under the hat and began tracing the edge of the brim, and Johnny seemed to find this entertainment enough as he was quiet, floating in the cool, dim water with his Papa.

Tyson shrugged again and laid down with them, deliberately not looking at Yakupov. For the moment this was good enough.
Another Baby

Chapter Notes

Well, that took longer than I thought, sorry! Here we go, one chapter a week, posting every Wednesday.

“You know if we do this,” Nate said, paused sweaty faced and chest heaving above Tyson, “you’re likely to get pregnant?”

“Pshaw,” said Tyson. “No I’m not. Omegas hardly ever catch.”

“What are you talking about?” said Nate. “You caught last time within six months, without ever knotting.”

“That was a fluke,” Tyson said. “There’s no way it’ll happen again.”

“You are such a chucklehead,” Nate said. “You’re going to be puking everywhere again in two months if we knot.”

“Won’t!” said Tyson, certain, and drew Nate down to him to try this one last thing he’d been told Omegas couldn’t do. Everything else he’d been told his gender precluded him from doing was a lie; why not this as well? And gasping, sweating, crying out ecstatically he discovered this, too, he could joyously do.

*

Two months later he was significantly less cocksure. “What did I tell you?” said Nate. “Said you were going to be puking everywhere, and here you are, puking.”

“Shut up,” moaned Tyson, hunched over the porch railing.

“You want a glass of water?” Nate asked him.

“Yes please,” Tyson said. Nate fetched it and a cool cloth and gave both to Tyson and then hovered next to him looking pleased with himself. “What?” snapped Tyson after he rinsed his mouth out.

“Do you think you are?” Nate asked, practically vibrating.

“Yes,” Tyson said, “I do. I feel exactly the same as last time, it just comes on me and then I feel fine until the next round. And don’t you dare say ‘I told you so’ again.” He looked over at Nate, scowling. Nate looked much the same as he had when they met two years ago; still far too young to be someone’s father, and the terrible beard he was trying to grow didn’t improve matters. Last December he’d caught a hind leg to the face while shoeing Molly and his nose was permanently crooked now. His huge, stupid grin was irritating Tyson. “Your eyebrows always been so funny looking?” Tyson asked.

“Yes,” said Nate, “they always been like that.” He leaned forward and kissed Tyson’s forehead, holding his face in his hands. “And now you’re going to have a baby with funny eyebrows too.”
“Guess so,” said Tyson, grabbing Nate around the waist and pulling him in, “Guess so.” Nate didn’t feel like someone’s father either. Even a well prepared for winter was long and hard, and they’d had enough, but no more, all through the long dreary months. As Nate was still growing he was thinner this spring than last, although he was still covered in hard muscle. “You’re getting very scrawny,” Tyson said, grooping at Nate’s back, feeling all the bands of muscle. “Still got a bum, though,” he said, putting his hands down the back of Nate’s pants and squeezing while he pressed himself against Nate’s front. Nate rumbled in response and bit Tyson’s ear gently.

“Gonna have a baby,” Nate said, “gonna have a little baby next spring, and John’ll be almost three, aren’t you clever, spaced them out just right.”

“I’m glad you think I planned this,” Tyson said, sliding his hands around to grope further at Nate’s ass.

“Urgh,” Nate said, distracted by the feel of Tyson’s hands as he ground their fronts together. Tyson could feel Nate stiffening against him. “You want to?” Nate asked.

“Yeah,” said Tyson, hands moving to undo the button fly on Tyson’s pants. “Tell you what, baby’s asleep on the bed, you want to bend me over the porch railing?”

“Alright,” said Tyson, kissing Tyson and then turning him around to face the railing. “Look at your ass, baby, that’s a sight,” he said as he pushed Tyson forward, one hand on the back of Tyson’s neck and the other pulling his pants down to mid thigh. Nate stepped forward, pants undone and cock in his hand and fit himself to Tyson’s hole, rubbing his cock up and down to cover it in slick. “Get on with it,” Tyson ordered, bent over and holding the railings. “Come on!”

“I’ll give him his due, that baby’s all Landeskog and he’s a hell of an athlete. Look at him go,” Nate said, watching John run through the field in front of the house towards the corral. He swarmed up the

“I fucking love it,” Tyson said. “I love it, I love it, I love you, now fuck me harder, please,” and Nate did.
fence surrounding it and then, balanced on the second rung from the top, called over Molly who obligingly came. Tyson didn’t have anything to compare him to but agreed with Nate. Surely he was unusually able for a twenty two month old child? John climbed to the top rung, one hand on Molly to steady himself, and turned to look at his parents. “Look!” he crowed, and jumped from the fence onto Molly’s back.

“Should he be doing that?” Tyson asked Nate.

“Probably not,” said Nate. “THAT’S THE WAY, JOHNNY,” he yelled towards John, who turned and waved at him. Molly just continued to plod along, ignoring John’s frantic attempts to spur her into a trot. “What you think this new one will look like?” Nate asked, putting one hand on Tyson’s belly. “It would be nice if it looked like you. A girl with your hair.”

“I’m not a -”

“Girl,” said Nate, “I know. I’m just saying you got nice hair.”

“Hmmph,” Tyson said. “Not likely to be a girl. Omegas almost never have girls.”

“Omegas almost never have two babies in three years,” Nate said smugly.

“You got me there,” Tyson said. “You don’t want one that looks like you?”

“Don’t really care,” Nate shrugged. “I haven’t got anything so special in the way of a face that it needs to be repeated. Anyway, if we carry on this way, we’ll end up with a bunch of boys like me whether we fancy it or no. Two in three years really is a lot for an Omega.“

Tyson was unconcerned. “Omegas never have more than three,” he said. “Back home it was a seven days wonder if any Omega had a third. That’s why we’re such good second wives, we don’t have a lot of babies to mess up the inheritance and we’re always available.”

“Jesus,” Nate said, face screwed up with disgust, but he dropped it and returned to his original point. “You’ve got no idea what you’re messing with here,” he said. “You go on, but you’re going to look back at this conversation and laugh one day.”

#

“Want Nate,” Tyson said again, panting. Nate could hear him from outside in the hall where he’d been hovering since his mother kicked him out several hours ago.

“Come on now,” Mrs. MacKinnon replied, “this isn’t a time for menfolk.”

“I’m not a girl, and I want Nate!” Tyson yelled.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” his mother said. “Fine,” and she opened the door to stick her head out in the hall. “You might as well come on in here,” she said, and Nate pushed past her to Tyson.

“How you doing baby?” Nate said, kneeling down to where Tyson was curled on the bed.


“I know,” Nate crooned, “I know, but you’re doing such a good job. You want me to come lie down with you?”

“Yes please,” said Tyson, grabbing Nate’s hands and squeezing as another pain passed through him. When his grip grew a little less intense and his face relaxed, Nate gently disengaged and climbed
onto the bed behind him. Tyson’s hair, loose for the birth so the baby could find its way without getting tangled up, was everywhere. Nate pulled it gently together into one great mass and then looked puzzled.

“Don’t braid it,” his mother hissed.

“I know, Ma,” Nate said, ‘but what am I going to do with it? He’s not supposed to cover it at all, so he won’t want a bonnet, but I don’t want to lie on it.”

“That’s an awful lot of hair,” she said as they both contemplated it. Tyson seemed to be briefly asleep.

“I know,” Nate said, “it’s never been cut.”

“Can I touch it without giving offense?” she asked and Nate nodded. Mrs. MacKinnon leaned forward and deftly piled the hair into a loose coil and tucked it under the pillow. “There,” she said, handing Nate a small bolster, “that’ll do for the moment. Go on and lie down and press this against his lower back when the pains hit. He’s got a while still, see if he can sleep between them. I’ll take the lamp and leave you to it - call me if anything changes.” She went, and without the lamp they were left in the dim light of the late evening, only the full moon shining through the window. Tyson was still asleep, and when Nate curled against his back, he could feel that Tyson was purring very softly. Nate laid there a long time, feeling the purring vibrate through his bones, watching the moon outside the window, quiet and thinking about the baby soon to come.

It wasn’t a good or convenient time for a new baby; there was a reason most didn’t marry until after 25 in their part of the country. Men needed to build up resources before marriage, and 21 was shockingly young to have two children for good reason; they really could not afford this baby. They had no cash reserves and were still under a load of debt from rebuilding after the fire; the previous year’s harvest had been poor and they were squashed together like sardines in the poorly insulated cabin, Tyson was still underweight no matter how many sweeties he gobbled, and Johnny needed new boots every six months they couldn’t afford.

And yet Tyson had been happy, happy the whole time; chatting and laughing and growing fatter round the middle, pleased with himself for his cleverness in making another baby, busily sidling up to Nate for a kiss and a cuddle in between the long days of work, expecting and receiving praise, a sharp contrast to the sad, silent boy waiting on his knees to be forced by a new husband. He was heartbreakingly pleased with little things no one should have found novel: the freedom to eat as much as he liked, whenever he liked, Nate doing the fire of the morning, the courtesy of a cup of tea or piece of toast brought to him. Nate putting the bottom sheet back on the mattress, correct corners and all; being addressed by his name and being asked to use Nate’s.

Nate couldn’t find it in himself to regret that Tyson was having a chance to do it over properly, especially now they had sorted out the issue of physical correction which Nate had vetoed absolutely the first time he caught Tyson preparing to backhand six month old Johnny.

“*”

“No?” Tyson had said, genuinely puzzled, as Nate held his hand where he had caught it mid swing.

“No,” Nate said, scrambling for some way short of the Voice to impress on Tyson how serious he was.

“But look at him,” Tyson said, pointing to where Johnny was reaching for the forbidden glass on the table again. “What’s that if it’s not sin? He won’t do a thing I tell him, he keeps touching it. His
rebellious nature’s got to be beaten down.”

“It’s native curiosity,” Nate told him, “and I haven’t asked for much but I told you last winter and I’m telling you again, there won’t be any hitting in this house.

“But you can’t just let his sin nature have free rein,” Tyson said. “How’s he going to learn to control the Devil if we don’t correct him?”, and Nate at least knew the answer to that.

“The same way I do, and the same my Pa does,” he said, knowing that Tyson had grown deeply fond of his father, and was significantly more than fond of himself. “The same way you do now these last two years. My parents never hit me beyond the occasional tap on the ass, and I’m doing all right.”

“Yeesss,” Tyson said, sounding ready to be convinced. “But I’m a terrible old sinner - it’s just bare luck I haven’t done anything awful since you’ve been in charge of me.”

“You never committed a sin in your goddamn life,” Nate said, angry at everyone who had ever laid a hand on Tyson, and angriest of all at those who had convinced him to strike at Johnny, who was sitting on the table looking up at them trustingly, unaware. “He loves you,” Nate said, gesturing at Johnny who smiled at them. “Don’t hit him.” Tyson still looked unsure and Nate tried another tactic.

He let go of Tyson’s hand and pulled him against him. “I love you,” he said, hands under Tyson’s shirt to pull him close against him. “And I don’t want you to hit the baby please.”

“Yeah?” Tyson said, looking down shyly as he always did when the word love was bruited about, which Nate thought was just about the cutest thing he’d ever seen. Like always, touching Tyson derailed Nate from his intended purpose. Tyson had the finest skin of anyone Nate had ever known; touching him at will was still novel and glorious, and he let his hands roam over Tyson’s back and ass while he kissed his neck. Tyson melted against him making those little breathy noises Nate loved that meant he was turned on but trying to hide it in front of the baby. The baby was the second best thing that had ever happened to Nate but he and Tyson had only been having full relations for two months and he desperately wanted to take the rare chance of a free afternoon and spend it in bed. Failing that, he would settle for 10 minutes with his dick inside Tyson.

“What’s the chance of him taking a nap, right now?” he asked hopefully, eyeing the baby, and Tyson scoffed.

‘None,” he said. “He was asleep an hour ago and he won’t go down again until suppertime at least.”

“What if we were to stick him in the tea chest and give him a rusk?” Nate asked, desperate, and Tyson looked considering.

“Lid up or lid down?” Tyson asked, which was exactly the sort of question that made Nate even more certain that physical discipline needed to be made entirely verboten for Tyson. He had no sense at all of what was normal.

“Up, of course,” Nate said. “I don’t want him to suffocate, I just want him somewhere safe so we can leave him alone for 15 minutes and we can go round back.

“It’s pretty cold,” Tyson pointed out but Nate shamelessly bit him behind the ear and sucked until his knees began to wobble. “Yeah, alright,” Tyson said breathily, and installed Johnny in the tea chest with a jam smeared rusk in one hand and two spoons in the other. Johnny looked well pleased; a sweet rusk was a rare treat and he’d never before managed to get his hands on the teaspoons that were part of Tyson’s wedding tea set and normally entirely off limits. Nate grabbed two blankets off
the bed and hustled Tyson out before Johnny could notice their departure and start hollering.

“I want to fuck you so bad,” Nate said as he swung one of the blankets around Tyson’s shoulders and pressed him back against the outside wall of the cabin most sheltered from the wind. “Can I fuck you?” he asked as he pulled the other blanket around his own shoulders and leaned forward, hands pulling the blanket with him so they were encircled, trapping enough heat to make it tolerable as he undid the flies of their pants. Normally he’d play with Tys a bit first but they didn’t have much time and he just desperately wanted inside; Tyson hitched one of his legs up around Nate’s waist and Nate ground forward frantically, kissing Tyson while he moved against him. “Alright?” he asked, and Tyson nodded, but he, or Tys, had misjudged a bit. He shoved inside, the angle weird standing up, and knew from the feel Tyson wasn’t ready. He knew Tyson wasn’t lying about wanting to; he had slowed Nate down on several occasions for one reason or another, and even declined entirely twice, so Nate believed him now when he said he wanted to but he was not as slick as he should have been and Nate stilled. “You alright?” he asked but Tyson didn’t seem to be in any pain.

“Alright?” Tyson said, wriggled, and then reached down and took hold of himself. Nate stared riveted as Tyson licked his fingers and began playing with himself while Nate was still inside him. Nate could feel Tyson tightening up and relaxing around him, and then Tys moved his hand a little lower and Nate could feel Tyson’s fingers spread around him where he entered while Tyson pressed with his palm against himself. It was the single most erotic thing he’d ever experienced.

“Alright?” he asked but Tyson didn’t seem to be in any pain.

“Yeah, hang on,” Tyson said, wriggled, and then reached down and took hold of himself. Nate stared riveted as Tyson licked his fingers and began playing with himself while Nate was still inside him. Nate could feel Tyson tightening up and relaxing around him, and then Tys moved his hand a little lower and Nate could feel Tyson’s fingers spread around him where he entered while Tyson pressed with his palm against himself. It was the single most erotic thing he’d ever experienced.

“Alright?” he asked but Tyson didn’t seem to be in any pain.

“Alright,” Tyson said, still sounding dreamy. He often got like that after they did it, Nate had noticed. That and hair brushing were the two things guaranteed to leave him drowsy and calm; Tyson was not by nature what could be described as quiet. “Maybe you’re right,” Tyson went on. “You’re very kind; it doesn’t seem to have done you any harm, not being chastened.” Nate had some idea of what Tyson considered chastening, and he shuddered at the thought of subjecting Johnny to it; Tyson seemed agreeable to Nate’s request but Nate wanted to be entirely confident Tyson would
not correct Johnny physically.

They hadn’t really resolved anything, Nate had thought later that night as he flipped through the Bible Concordance looking for a verse to reinforce his wishes to Tyson, but it had been enjoyable. He found the verse he’d been looking for and luged the Bible over to the bed. “Alright,” he said to Tyson, who was lying stretched out across the bed luxuriously, “I got three things to say.” He had planned it out; he was going to ask Tyson again not to physically discipline Johnny, read him Matthew 25:40, and then reinforce it by ordering him not to hit Johnny. He wasn’t 100 percent confident about the ordering; Tyson seemed very sure Nate was in charge but Nate knew better and his authority had never really been put to the test.

“Yes, Alpha,” Tyson said, looking satisfied with life. Johnny had gone down without a fuss and there had been a wild turkey for supper. Tyson had finally figured out how to make gravy as good as his mother’s and for afters there had been baked apples and a piece of horehound candy each. It had been a wonderful Sunday.

“You want to do it again Alpha?” Tyson asked, and Nate looked at him severely. What kind of question was that?

“You know I do,” he said. “Obviously. Later though; don’t distract me when I’m telling you something.”

“Alright Alpha,” Tyson agreed, and reached down to his crotch and delicately stroked himself through his nightgown. “Go on,” he said to Nate. “What were you saying?”

“Fucksakes,” Nate said succinctly and dropped the Bible. Biblical exegesis could wait until later. “You’re not to smack Johnny at all,” he said urgently, falling on Tyson like they hadn’t just had at it a few hours ago. “I’m ordering you not to smack him and I’m asking you not to smack him.”

“Alright, Alpha,” Tyson said peaceably, but Nate needed to be sure.

“You promise?” he asked, hand up Tyson’s nightgown, and Tyson dropped the use of Alpha and gave him a real answer.

“I do promise,” he said, both arms around Nate’s neck, pulling Nate against him. “You been a good father, and a good husband, both,” he said, surprising Nate. “I wasn’t much use at the beginning, I know, and you’ve never complained but just been awfully kind. You don’t need to order, just ask; if this is what you think is the best thing to do, I’ll do it, and gladly.”

“Thank you,” Nate said, pleased by both the compliment and the promise; Tyson just smiled and drew his hands back down.

* 

Tyson shifted and his purr stuttered and Nate was jolted back to the present. The baby was coming tonight whatever his concerns; the pregnancy had brought such joy to Tyson that Nate couldn’t bring himself to worry about the wisdom of another baby. What would the purpose of doubts have been, anyway? There was no way to reliably control pregnancy but abstinence, and they certainly weren’t going to do that. He had one arm under him and one curled over Tyson, his hand spread across Tyson’s belly. He could feel the next contraction start even before Tyson seemed to, the muscle pulling and growing rock hard under his hand before the purring sputtered to a halt and Tyson woke up.

“Another one,” Tyson said, taking Nate’s hand off his belly and pressing it to his hip. “Push please,”
and so Nate did, providing counter pressure to the labour pains in his back. “OK” Tyson said when it passed, pulled Nate’s hand up to his lips and kissed it gently and then immediately fell asleep again, leaving Nate to listen to his very quiet purring. The cycle repeated again and again as the moon slowly moved across the window until eventually the contractions came closer together and Tyson stopped falling asleep between them. “Whoa,” Tyson said, struggling to sit up after two in quick succession. “I got to stand up.” Nate climbed off the far side of the bed and went around to help him but Tyson waved him off. “Wait,” he said panting, in the grip of another contraction less than minute after the last, “Wait. Oh.”

“What?” Nate asked, alarmed, but Tyson didn’t seem concerned, he just had an introspective look on his face, as if he was thinking very deeply about what was happening inside him.

“Huh,” Tyson said, and just like that, he was pushing. He was still sat on the edge of the bed and Nate could see that wasn’t going to work, so once the first bout of pushing was done he helped Tyson lay back against the pillows and turned to fetch his mother, but Tyson wasn’t having it.

“No,” he said, holding Nate’s hand in a death grip, “you stay.”

“I got to get my Ma,” Nate said gently. “Just one second, baby.”

“Too late,” said Tyson, taking a deep breath and making a low, powerful noise like a distant landslide as he pushed the baby out into his own hands. “Ouch,” he said.

“Holy shit,” Nate said. “MA!”

When Nate came in first thing in the morning from doing the morning chores, Tyson was sat up in bed looking perky. It was just the same quilt they’d always had, rumpled and bleached, and Tyson was wearing his old nightgown with the hole on the shoulder seam, hair loose and curling around him, and maybe it was his happy face, or the way the spring light fell on him, or the contrast with how he looked right after Johnny was born, stunned and terrified, but Nate was gripped with a sense that he was seeing the real Tyson, the person that used to poke out accidentally between the Omega manners and the Orthodox training and then pop back into hiding to avoid a smack, finally come to stay.

“I’m so glad to see you, baby,” he said, sitting beside Tyson and wrapping his arms around him.

“I’m…glad to see you too?” Tyson said, hugging back but sounding confused, probably because he knew Nate had seen him as recently as this morning, since he had slept on the floor next to the bed last night. He didn’t pursue it though, too caught up in the baby. “Look at the baby,” he told Nate, picking up the well wrapped bundle beside him. “It’s a girl, look, look!”

“I know it’s a girl,” Nate said gently. “I was there, remember?”

“He looks just like you.” Nate said awed, stroking the curls with one finger. “She looks just like you.” In the lantern light last night he hadn’t seen the resemblance so clearly, but now in the daylight every plane of Tyson’s face was replicated in miniature on the baby. “She’s going to be a beauty,” Nate murmured, and was overcome with gratitude as he had been last night, right after the baby had come, and could feel tears begin to crawl down his face again. Gratitude for another
perilous passage safely navigated, both Tyson and the baby alive and well, gratitude for Tyson’s unlikely presence in this small, isolated farm in the depths of Colorado, gratitude for the girl he had wished for, a girl who looked exactly like Tyson.

“Oh geez,” he sniffled, unable to say everything in his heart. “Thank you.”

Now Tyson was crying too, still clutching the baby and leaning into Nate. “No,” he said, “thank you. It’s a sign of great favour for an Omega to have a girl. It was you - you gave me a girl.”

“I gave you a girl?” Nate said.

“Yes,” Tyson said, “everybody knows that. The Alpha decides.” Nate wasn’t sure that was correct but he wasn’t going to argue with Tyson right after he’d had a baby, so let it go.

“What’s for eats?” Tyson asked, still hiccuping. Strong emotion always made him hungry.

“My God,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, coming into the kitchen with Johnny. “Why are you up? And are you eating blueberry preserves on cold beans?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, muffled through the food. “I’m hungry.’

“Well,” she said admiringly, “you’ve got the constitution of an ox. What are you doing up, you had a baby six hours ago. Sit, sit, and I’ll bring you something hot.” She gave Nate a sharp look suggesting he should have kept Tyson in bed, but Nate just rolled his eyes to the ceiling and waved his hands in a gesture of futility.

“Man wants to eat cold beans standing up, I can’t stop him,” he said, picking up Johnny. “Come see the baby, Johnny. Look, it’s your little sister.” Johnny peered down at her with interest, sucking one finger.

“Baby,” he said, and then wriggled to get down so he could run to Tyson and grab his leg. “Baby!” he told Tyson, “There’s a baby!”

“I know, sweetheart,” Tyson said, still shovelling beans in. “You want to show Granny? Mrs. Mac,” he said, turning to her, “have you seen this baby?”

“Oh,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, turning away from the stove and letting Johnny pull her towards the cradle.

“No, but look at her,” Tyson said.

“That really is a beautiful baby,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, looking down at her. “And a straight up Barrie, too. Such dark hair.”

“Looks like Sneewitchenn,” Tyson said and the other two adults turned to look at him, puzzled. “You know, like the story? Sneewitchenn und Rosenrot?”

“Oh,” said Mrs. MacKinnon. “What’s that in English? It sounds awful.”


“You can’t name the baby Snow White,” Nate said. “That’s ridiculous.” He realised his mistake as
soon as the words were out of his mouth and he saw Tyson gathering himself to dig his heels in. “Rose is nice,” Nate said desperately. “I like Rose.”

It was an unexpectedly successful gambit as his mother softened and said, “Oh, Rose, yes, that’s a beautiful name,” clearly thinking of the Rose she lost. Tyson looked at her with a soft expression too.

“Yes,” he said, “Rose. Let’s call her Rose.”

“Done,” Nate said, enormously relieved.
Tyson was just considering what to eat next - he’d done some real damage at the buffet supper but felt he could do a little more, and Missy Smith had brought her tarts - when a stranger sat down next to him. Tyson looked around for Nate or Mrs. MacKinnon but they were both off talking to friends and Mr. MacKinnon was deeply asleep at the table next to him, head tilted back in his chair.

“Hello?” Tyson said, wondering if the young man knew Nate. He looked about the same age as Nate - maybe they had known each other in Nova Scotia. The stranger gave him a overly familiar look and turned in his chair to face Tyson. “Are you new in town?” Tyson asked, but the man took it as pleasant chit chat rather than the “What the hell are you doing?” that Tyson meant.

“I am!” he said, pleased at Tyson’s interest. “I’m Joe Compher. I been down in San Antonio a couple years and just got back. And who are you?” Tyson was still thinking about the tarts; would there be enough? If he took one right away, and Missy saw him do it, he might have trouble getting hold of a second. Could he send Johnny on a mission to collect one, or would he be better off sending one of Nate’s many little brothers? Or, an intriguing thought, could he send both and acquire two?

“I’m ... Tyson MacKinnon?” Tyson said. Two years ago Denver had been small enough that just that would have been enough; everyone knew about the Omega married to the oldest MacKinnon boy, but now with the expansion of the railroad and the exponential growth of the Gold Rush, it was commonplace to meet strangers who didn’t know who he was or that he possessed a large, protective husband. It was tiresome, and he was a little sorry he had bothered to come into town for the church social. Still, tarts. Tyson decided to just be blunt in the hopes this man would leave him to his schemes. “I’m an Omega,” he said, “Omegas don’t touch.”

“Oh I know,” Mr. Compher said, leaning forward, his arm almost on the back of Tyson’s chair. “I saw your hair and I came over to tell you it’s awful pretty. What you doing out here all alone?”

Tyson edged away from him and looked around again for Nate. What use was a husband if he wasn’t available to deter unwanted company? “I’m not alone,” he said. “I came with the MacKinnons.” He turned Rosie over under the guise of adjusting her in his arms - could this man not see he was holding his baby?

“Is that your little sister?” Compher asked. “She looks just like you.”

“She does, doesn’t she,” Nate said, reappearing with Johnny in tow and only catching the last half of the sentence. Johnny was clutching a matrimonial square in one hand and an apple fritter in the other; by the looks of it he had made some inroads on the dessert table. Tyson looked closer and recoiled slightly - Johnny was also covered with a thin sheen of grease. “Got into the fritter oil,” Nate said by way of explanation. “Want to trade?”

“No,” said Tyson shortly. He did not want to trade Rosie, who was asleep and not at all greasy, for Johnny. “I’m watching the baby.”

“Hello, Bund,” Johnny chirped. “Look! I got a fritter!”

“Yes you do,” Tyson said. “Why don’t you go with your Pa and let him clean you up?”

“Reckon I will,” said Johnny, whose sole goal in life, fritters aside, was to imitate Nate in every respect. Tyson looked pleadingly at Nate and rolled his eyes towards his unwelcome suitor but Nate, focused on tidying Johnny, didn’t notice.
“Thanks for that, Tys,” Nate said, casting around for a napkin to mop Johnny up with. “Thanks very much. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Mr. Compher,” Tyson said, “he’s new to Denver.”

“But I like it very much so far,” Mr. Compher broke in, looking at Tyson, “so many pretty faces.”

Nate looked over at him in disbelief and then turned his gaze to Tyson. Tyson grimaced back at him. He’d been trying to tell this idiot he was married. “I’m Nathan MacKinnon,” Nate said holding his hand out to shake. “Pleased to meet you.” Evidently he also thought the name alone would be enough, but Mr. Compher just stood and shook his hand rather gingerly as Nate had also acquired something of a high gloss from contact with Johnny.

“And who is this?” Mr. Compher asked, looking down at Johnny, who was eating his fritter with his right hand and smearing his greasy left hand over the tablecloth, leaving nasty stains. Nate sighed and pulled him gently away from the table.

“This is my boy Johnny,” Nate said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take Johnny here out to the pump and see if I can scrub him up a little.” Nate left and Mr. Compher sidled a little closer to Tyson. Tyson glared after Nate as he left for abandoning him to this persistent fool.

“Was that your brother?” Mr. Compher asked, sitting back down even closer to Tyson, apparently determined to get the wrong end of the stick. Over the years Outside Tyson had eased up a little. He walked freely among the English and talked even more freely to them; he allowed Mr. MacKinnon to sit next to him on the couch, although Graham was always very careful to never touch, and he had abandoned many of the more unwieldy rules of Bodily Integrity such as the requirement that he never use crockery previously touched by an unrelated Alpha, but the nearness of this stranger was making his skin crawl. “Would you like to take a walk?” Mr. Compher asked. Tyson could hardly think of anything he’d like less. He tried to kick Graham to wake him up but couldn’t quite reach.

“I think not,” Tyson said, but Mr. Compher was unswayed and edged even closer. He didn’t seem ill intentioned, just totally oblivious. There would have been nothing objectionable in his behaviour if he had been talking to a young, unmarried girl who welcomed his attention but he wasn’t and Tyson wished he knew how to indicate that more clearly in a way the English would understand. He wasn’t accustomed to having to articulate his social position or preferences. Back in Victoria he had literally never met anyone who was not already familiar with his position, family and marital status.

“Would you like a tart?” Mr. Compher asked and Tyson perked right back up. He would like a tart, yes, and perhaps Mr. Compher, unfamiliar with Missy’s cutting remarks, could be persuaded to fetch him two. He was just drawing breath to say so when EJ appeared out of nowhere.

“Why you sitting so close to the Omega?” he barked and Tyson felt a rush of goodwill towards him.

“Who wants to know?” Compher challenged. “You his keeper?” EJ made a face of offended disbelief.

“Hardly,” he said, looking at Tyson. “To begin with I couldn’t afford to feed him, never mind the yapping. And I reckon my wife would object some too.”

Tyson narrowed his eyes, irritated at the slight. He wouldn’t have married gross old EJ no matter how hard he begged, but he resented the implication EJ wouldn’t have been glad to marry him.

“Alas, Alpha,” he said demurely. “It was never to be.” He looked up at EJ as innocently as he knew how and EJ just looked fed up.
"Let him alone," EJ said to Mr. Compher. "That’s my advice to you. He can cook, but he’s awful otherwise and his husband’s prone to offense and crazy in love with him.” Mr. Compher looked like he wasn’t certain how much of this was true and how much jokes. EJ turned to Tyson and looked considerably at him for a minute. “You remember when you first come, and you wouldn’t say a word to anyone but Nate?” he asked. “I miss them days.” Tyson stuck his tongue out at him and EJ ignored him. “Now give me that baby,” EJ said. "Somehow you and Nate made the prettiest baby in Denver and I want to show her off. " Rosie opened her eyes on cue and smiled at EJ who smiled back, displaying his lack of teeth. Their smiles were disturbingly similar, Tyson thought, but then EJ was making grabby hands at Rosie and Tyson laid her gently on the table so EJ could pick her up without any risk of contact. “Alrighty,” EJ said when he had Rosie settled in his arms to his satisfaction, “I might be back with your baby, or I might not; depends.” He wandered off, and Tyson watched him go, no doubt heading to find Nate and tell him Tyson was having an affair. EJ was a terrible old gossip.

“Do you really have a husband?” Mr. Compher said, looking like he sincerely hoped Tyson didn’t.

“Of course I have a husband,” Tyson said, annoyed. “Where do you think the baby came from?” Mr. Compher’s eyes widened at this bluntness, but before he could make another objectionable suggestion, Nate reappeared.

“EJ says you’re in here flirting up a storm with some youth,” Nate said, back from the pump without Johnny and noticeably damper than when Tyson had last seen him. He looked judgmentally down at Mr. Compher, still seated close to Tyson. “That’s my husband you’re cozied up to,” Nate said.

“Get.”

Mr. Compher looked Nate up and down, obviously considering his chances; Nate was startlingly young to be married with children and Compher clearly wasn’t entirely convinced Nate was Tyson’s husband. Nate looked back at him levelly. “Oh, I wouldn’t,” Nate said pleasantly. “Maybe you’d like to ask around before you take this any further?” Mr. Compher looked discomfited at this suggestion and Nate grinned nastily at him. He held the smile for an uncomfortable length of time and then made a false start at Mr. Compher. Compher flinched and got.

“Hmmph,” Nate said, stepping up to Tyson and pulling him to his feet and then against him pointedly.

“I wasn’t - “ Tyson began, but Nate interrupted him.

“I know you weren’t,” he said. “It never occurred to me you were.” Nate spoke with such complete confidence that it was both flattering and a little insulting. “Firstly, you ain’t going to stray - it’s not in you, not at all. But second, if you were to stray, it’d have to be a man with something I don’t got, so I reckon it’d be a man owns a candy store.” He caught Tyson up close and whispered into his ear. “You find a candy shop man who can fuck you better than me, you let me know and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Mmmm, candy,” Tyson said just to be contrary and Nate pinched him on the waist.

“That boy’s got nothing on me,” he said, grip softening and his thumb stroking over Tyson’s ribs. “He ain’t never spent a year learning how you like it, and he ain’t never raised two babies with you, and he don’t love you like I do. Now you just come on home and I’ll remind you how good you got it.”

“Bossy,” Tyson said, but he loved it, really.

“That’s right,” Nate said, nuzzling at Tyson’s neck in a way that was scandalous for the public
setting. “I’m the boss of you alright, I know what you like.” He turned Tyson around in his arms and pulled him back against his chest. Now Tyson could see what Nate had known the whole time; Mr. Compher was watching them from the corner, his face screwed up with jealousy. Nate bent down to Tyson’s ear and delivered the killing blow while maintaining eye contact with the onlooker. “I sent Johnny home with Ma and she’s going to get the grease out of his wool pants,” he murmured in Tyson’s ear, and Tyson bent over laughing. It wasn’t what he had expected Nate to say but it was better, really, as washing and drying heavy homespun trousers was an all day job.

“You do know what I like,” he said, one arm up and over Nate’s neck, melting against him, showing off a little for their audience.

“And I stole you three of Missy Smith’s tarts,” Nate added. “Can your boy do that for you?”

“He’s not my boy,” Tyson said, thinking happily about the tarts. “You’re my boy. Let’s go home and eat tarts and fuck.”

“Mmhmm,” Nate said, grinding gently against him, “that’s right, tarts and fucking, I know what you like.” He tipped his hat condescendingly to Mr. Compher and they withdrew.

“Got your husband,” Alpha Johnson said the next morning, laconic as always. “It’s not good.”

It had taken an hour to get Nate back into the house from the far field where Molly had shied and thrown him onto a pointed rock breaking his femur. They had poured laudanum down him to get him through the cart trip back to the house, and he was insensible by the time Tyson first saw him, which was just as well since Tyson was hysterical, clutching a confused Rosie and crying. Mrs. MacKinnon, collected from the Calvert’s where she had been visiting the new baby, shoved Tyson into a chair and stepped over to Nate where they had laid him out on the kitchen table. She carefully cut his pant leg off, took one look, blanched, and sent Johnson’s helper boy for the doctor.

“Go get Dr. Iginla, fast as you can,” she said, and EJ interrupted her.

“You sure you want Iginla?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said firmly, “Iginla, no one else. He’s the only doctor in town with any sense.”

“You sure?” Johnson pressed again, “you know he’s…”

“Black?” she said. “Yeah, I noticed. There’s not a doctor in this town with a real degree, but Iginla’s at least got good sense and a brain.” She turned to the boy again. “You tell him he’s not to come without chloroform - tell him we’ll pay, but he’s to bring it with him, without fail.” She quieted a little and added, “And his bone saw. Tell him he’ll need his bone saw too.” They sent the boy off on Johnson’s fastest horse and then there was nothing to do but wait.

“What’s the bone saw for?” Tyson asked from his chair, tear tracks still marking his cheeks.

“What the hell do you think it’s for?” Mrs. MacKinnon replied. “To take that leg off if he has any chance.”

“Off?” Tyson whispered. “I thought you were - I thought you could…” he trailed off and Mrs. MacKinnon looked at him scornfully.

“You thought I could what?” she said. “That bone’s right through the flesh in two places and broken besides. You put it back in, even if the bone knits, blood poisoning will fester and kill him slow.
Leg’s got to come off and the faster the better. He’s strong - he might live.” EJ nodded gravely beside her.

“He might live?” Tyson repeated.

“At least we got the chloroform,” she said. “I seen this done without it and that’s enough said of that.” Tyson bolted for the door and vomited just outside. “You’re not in a state are you?” Mrs. MacKinnon wanted to know, hands on hips, peering at Tyson as he hunched over the railing.

“Yes,” Tyson said, because he was. They were going to cut Nate’s leg off. Of course he was in a state.

“We got no time for a state,” she said, “no time for any fussing at all. You go get the wash kettle on to boil and pull yourself together.” Tyson went, glad to have an order to obey but once he got the kettle on the stove and Rosie down to sleep he was at a loss and the tears began again. Mrs. MacKinnon was organizing Nate’s move to the back bedroom and didn’t notice Tyson until she returned to the kitchen a half hour later.

“You’re still in a state, aren’t you?” she said and Tyson answered honestly again, “Yes.”

He knew it was wrong and weak, but he couldn’t stop, all he could think about was Nate, and what would he do if Nate died, and Nate lying in the field waiting for someone to find him, and how much it would hurt Nate to cut his leg off, and he couldn’t seem to catch his breath.

“You listen to me,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, taking a hard grip of Tyson’s upper arms. “You’re not a baby anymore, it’s time to grow up. It’s your turn to help him, and by God, you’re going to. You’re going to help him do this terrible thing, or maybe die - do you want his last sight of you to be you snivelling like a goose?” She shook him a little for emphasis. “Now if he dies you’ll come to us and no expectation you’ll marry again, unless you want. When Graham and I go you’ll go to Sarah, unless one of the children is grown and you fancy living with them. We’ll sell the farm and you’ll have a little money of your own. So that’s settled - and I got no more time for your vapours.” She shook him again. “D’you think you can at least pretend to be calm? Can you do that?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, gulping. He could pretend, even if he didn’t feel it.

“Good enough,” she said. “Now we’re going to go in that room and you’re going to be calm. And if he wants you to stay while we do it, you’re going to stay, because that’s all you can give him. You got it?”

“I got it,” Tyson said. “Thank you missus.”

* *

“Oh, baby,” Nate said, clearly still sedated. “I’m sorry. Don’t cry,” and Tyson was completely undone. He felt his face crumple and drew in a breath to start crying again but just as he really got going Mrs. MacKinnon’s hand shot out and she pinched him ferociously on his upper arm. He jumped and shrieked a little but the shock helped and he was able to get himself under control.

“You’re not a baby,” she hissed and he straightened up. She was right. He could do better than this, for Nate.

“Go on, Ma,” Nate said slow and thick. “Don’t pinch Tyson. I love him the best of anybody.”

“Yeah?” Mrs. MacKinnon said, dry. “You surprise me. You got some left for your Ma?”
“I got a lot left for you Ma,” Nate said seriously. “You know I love you, and Pa, and Sarah, and Mary, and -”

Mrs. MacKinnon cut him off with a wave of her hand. “I know you do, sweetheart. Now give me and the baby a kiss, and then you can talk to Tyson alone for a few minutes, alright?”

“Alright, Ma,” Nate obediently said and kissed her on the cheek when she bent nearer to him. She held out Rosie for him to kiss as well, and Nate raised one hand carefully to Rosie’s tiny cheek, cradling the whole side of her head. “She won’t even remember me,” he said wistfully and then kissed her gently on the cheek and one of her pudgy little hands. “Johnny still at yours Ma?” he asked, and when she nodded, he settled back a little. “Good,” he said, sounding exhausted, “Good. He doesn’t need to see this.” He sat up again a little and winced. “Wait,” he said, stretching out a hand to her. “You're going to take care of Tyson, right, Ma?”

Mrs. MacKinnon looked down at him, holding Rosie at her side. “You know I will,” she said. “You don’t have to ask.” She reached out and took his hand, very gently. “I’ll take good care of them all for you, you can be sure of that. You gonna talk to Tyson now, before the doctor comes? You can have more laudanum if you like, but you ain’t got too long; once the doctor’s here we got to get started soon as we can, before the blood poisoning takes hold if you’re going to have any chance at all.”

“I’m alright, Ma,” Nate said. “I don’t want more - I need to keep a clear head, and it doesn’t hurt too bad.”

“Liar,” she said fondly and squeezed his hand.

“Thank you Ma,” Nate said looking up at her, the expression on his face childlike. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Nate,” she said. “You always been my good boy - my first boy, my best boy; there’s nothing to be sorry for. All you got to do is be brave a little while longer and it’ll be done one way or another. I’ll stay and take care of them if you can’t.” Tyson sat down in the chair beside the bed; those words had sounded very very final. Kathy turned away, face a mask of grief, and left the room.

Once she was gone, Nate turned to Tyson and took his hand. They sat quietly for a few minutes, looking at each other, Nate’s eyes occasionally growing unfocused for a few seconds. He looked terrible, Tyson thought, sheet white, covered in sweat and blood from the grazes on his face, somehow diminished. He looked like he was already turning away from Tyson and the world, turning inwards to prepare for his final journey. Worst of all, the laudanum made him seem weak. Even Nate’s grip was weaker, the large hands so familiar to Tyson only holding on loosely. Tyson wanted to crawl into the bed with him, curl up against Nate and go to sleep until this bad dream passed but he couldn’t even touch the bed frame without jarring Nate’s leg so he held on a little tighter to his hand as that was all he could do.

“Does it hurt a lot?” Tyson asked, unable to articulate the jumble of things he was thinking. He was very conscious of how little time they had.

“No, baby,” Nate said gently. “I’m not. There’s no fix for this. I’m going to let them cut since I’d rather go quick than slow, but it’s too high up and I’m probably going to die. And maybe that’s
better, anyway, because without the leg what will I do?” Tyson simply looked at Nate; he couldn’t
find any tears where before they had come so easily. None of it seemed real. Nate was here, now,
alive; how could he die? “I’m sorry baby,” Nate said in tones of anguish. “I’m sorry to go and leave
you all alone again so soon.”

“I want you to stay here with me,” Tyson whispered. “I need you. Can’t you stay?”

“I can’t sweetheart,” Nate said. “You know I would if I could; you know I’d do anything for you.”
He paused, paler than before. “I’m so sorry to leave you and the babies,” he said, voice rough, and
started crying. “I’m sorry to leave you in such a bad position.”

Tyson had never seen Nate cry before, barring the children’s births. “No,” Tyson said, completely
unmanned, and Nate held his hand tighter, still crying. “Maybe you can,” Tyson said. “Maybe you
can stay. Omegas are lucky.”

“You’re going to need to be, sweetheart,” Nate said, fading, his grip weakening. “I’m sorry. I would
have done better for you if I could.” Tyson glanced down the bed. The sheet over Nate’s leg had
slipped off and his thigh was visible, the brutal damage plain, skin and bone and muscle torn apart
beyond repair. Tyson reached out to touch it and stopped. Just last night he had put his hand there on
Nate’s thigh; now it was forbidden to him as Nate shrank back into himself, receding into a place
Tyson couldn’t follow. Nate was going to die. There was no cure, no help coming and all Tyson
could do was sit beside him as he went far away.

“I’m scared,” Nate whispered to him, “I’m scared it will hurt, and I’m afraid,” and this was somehow
the worst of it all, that Nate should be scared. Tyson considered prayer but it offered no comfort to
him. Instead, he very carefully drew the chair closer to the bed and put his head down on Nate’s
shoulder. Nate tilted his head so he was leaning against Tyson and pulled their clasped hands against
his chest. “Love you,” Nate said quietly, slipping back into the half-sleep of laudanum. “Love you,
baby.”

“Love you too,” Tyson said. “Don’t be afraid.” He shut his eyes briefly where he rested on Nate’s
familiar shoulder. “I’ll stay with you,” he said, because this was all he had to offer. “I’ll stay til it’s
done.”

They gave Nate another dose of laudanum after Dr. Iginla’s first touch made him scream like a
trapped deer, and he was mercifully unconscious for the rest of it.

“What you think?” Mrs. MacKinnon said to Dr. Iginla in the kitchen after. “It’s awful high to cut.”

“It is,” he agreed. “It is. I don’t like the chance of hemorrhage that high up either, and he’ll never use
a false leg with any ease.”

“You ever seen a leg off that far up?” she asked, and Dr. Iginla shrugged.

“I trained during the war,” he said. “I’ve seen a lot of things. Cut that high, halfway to the hip, less
than one in ten would live.”

Mrs. MacKinnon paled again but rallied. “Well,” she sighed, “We’re going to have to try. There’s
nothing else to do.”

“Maybe so,” Dr. Iginla said. “Maybe not. You heard about Lister?”
Mrs. MacKinnon made Tyson read her the entire journal article while Dr. Iginla put the first carbolic dressing on. She had refused to even present the treatment to Nate until she understood what Dr. Iginla was proposing, but had agreed to let him apply the dressing since it might do some good and couldn’t do any harm. They had time to kill anyway while they waited for Nate to emerge from the laudanum.

Finally Nate was conscious again, propped up against the headboard of the bed, sheet slung over his shattered leg, listening carefully to the doctor as he explained the new, groundbreaking treatment with carbolic that could prevent infection and allow his leg to heal. When Dr. Iginla was done, Nate looked over at Tyson. “What are the odds?” he asked Dr. Iginla, still looking at Tyson.

“If we do nothing, you’ll die. If we cut, less than one in ten,” he said, “and you’ll never walk easy. With the carbolic, if it works as they say you’ll live and the leg will never be strong, but at least you’ll have one. If it doesn’t work, most likely it’ll be too late to cut and you’ll take blood poisoning and die. Up to you.”

“Hmm,” Nate said, looking down at Tyson’s hand where their fingers were twined. “What do you think, baby?”

“Carbolic,” Tyson said as confidently as he could. “Carbolic, please.” He felt strongly Dr. Iginla had been sent to save Nate - Mrs. MacKinnon was less convinced. She was a sensible woman with no objection to new ways, but as she pointed out, Dr. Iginla had never actually used or seen the carbolic treatment - the only evidence they had was the journal article he’d brought with him, prepared for her resistance and eager to try this new treatment.

“You’re young and strong,” she said, plumping for the known treatment, however risky. “Surely that’ll increase your chances to better than one in ten,” but Nate ignored her and turned to the doctor.

“Alright,” he said. “Carbolic. Omegas are lucky, let’s do it.”

Dr. Iginla nodded, obviously pleased. “Alright,” he said to Mrs. MacKinnon, “How strong are you? It’s going to take two men to get that leg back into place - the thigh muscle’s hellish strong.”

“I can do a shoulder on a strong man alone,” Mrs. MacKinnon said consideringly. “And I done a simple thigh once with only my daughter to help, when she was ten.”

“Good enough,” Dr. Iginla said, clapping his hands. “How many long bones you done? You want to guide it or should I?”

“Counting arms, bit less than 50,” she said. “If you served in the war, you must have done more than that.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said. “Not many fractures without the skin broke there, so we didn’t reset them much, just took them off.”

“Alright,” she said, pale but stalwart. “Let’s do it. Chloroform?”

“I’d rather not. He’s had an awful lot of laudanum,” Dr. Iginla said. “I’m not sure about his breathing if we pile the chloroform on top of it, and I don’t think I dare give him morphine either. We could give him another half dose of laudanum - that would blunt it a bit. No one ever died from having a leg set, no matter how unpleasant. Can you manage with him awake?”

Mrs. MacKinnon sighed and looked at Nate with a grimace. “Yeah,” she said. “I can do it without if you’re willing, son.” Nate nodded and looked at Tyson.
“Can you stay?” he asked, and Tyson took his hand again. He’d known Nate would ask and had been preparing himself. At least this, he told himself, wouldn’t kill Nate, and he should be grateful for that.

“Of course I can stay,” Tyson said. “I told you I would. Your name is for me.”

“That’s right,” Nate said, “I knew I could depend on you.” He was looking more cheerful by the minute; he had clearly set his mind to hanging on to the hope the carbolic treatment offered. “I reckon you’ll give me laudanum for the first week or so?” he asked, and Dr. Iginla nodded and headed to the kitchen to gather his tools.

“Alright, “ Nate said to Tyson. “Get a pencil. Write this down before they knock me out again: Johnson owes me two days, I owe Olson three, I’ve got the good hay rake in the barn right now - make sure you tell EJ - they can use Molly for the haying but be sure to remember that means they owe me one day of labour each...” Tyson was frantically scribbling as Nate dictated, but he was feeling happier too. A bossy Nate was a Nate determined to live, and to not be cheated out of his pigs. “Don’t you let that asshat Girard forget he owes me for the shoat last month - he still ain’t paid me -” Ass - shoat - Girard - $ Tyson scrawled, and then Nate said, “And you’re going to have to hire a man for the season.”

“We don’t have the money for that,” Tyson whispered, glancing at Mrs. MacKinnon. This couldn’t be news to her but he felt hesitant about discussing it in front of her.

“I know,” Nate said, wincing and leaning back, clearly exhausted. “Ma?”

“We can get it,” Mrs. MacKinnon said confidently, and Nate nodded as if he had known it. “Pa and I’ll find the money,” she told Nate, and he settled back, reassured.

“Alright,” he went on. “Now Ma will send you Robby to back you up,” - he looked up at his mother and she nodded - “but it’s going to have to be you bossing the man. You think you can do that?”

“What will you be doing?” Tyson asked.

“Trying real hard not to die,” Nate said, and Tyson could see he was completely serious. “I’m going to be under laudanum for at least a couple weeks,” Nate went on, “and it’s an ugly lookout for hired men around here these days - there’s no chance you’ll find anyone good enough to work alone. You’re going to have to be there, directing them.”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, completely unsure but loath to let Nate see it. He glanced up at Mrs. MacKinnon and she grimaced at him. Clearly he was not to disagree with the invalid.

“Would it help if I ordered you?” Nate asked. “Or I could use the Voice if you think it would make it easier.”

Tyson considered it. “No,” he decided, “let’s try without first. It’s not good to be under the Voice for so long.”

“That’s right baby,” Nate said approvingly. “Now I know you haven’t done it for a long time, but the first rule is absolutely no kneeling. You hear me? I order you not to kneel to any of those bastards. You speak for me now, and I don’t kneel. OK? You got that?”

“Yes, Alpha,” said Tyson, feeling hazy, but before they could get further into it Dr. Iginla reappeared with his bag.
“Alright,” said Nate, “this is going to suck. Baby, you think you can stay here and give me your hand? I’m going to scream and cry and beg, I reckon. Might even have a little puke.”

“I can,” Tyson said, although he was terribly afraid. He’d seen Nate brush off some mighty painful things like they were nothing, and he could see Nate was afraid now. What did it take, he wondered, to make Nate afraid for himself. He guessed he was going to find out, but if Nate wanted him to stay he would stay and face it with him.

“You ready?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked from the end of the bed.

“I’m ready, Ma,” Nate said taking a deep breath. He and his mother looked at one another and held each other’s gaze in that ferociously intent look Tyson had seen on them when they were about to undertake something difficult.

“Here we go,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Not stopping til I’m done,” and so saying she gripped Nate’s leg around the ankle and pulled, Dr. Iginla assisting by holding Nate in place. The bones audibly grated over each other and Nate screamed, high and shrill. His hand clamped down on Tyson’s and he turned his head towards him. His face was ashen. “Aww, fuck,” he said, and then screamed again when Mrs. MacKinnon rotated his leg slightly. “Oh fuck,” he said again, “oh fuck, oh fuck oh fuck.” Tyson gripped his hand back and started to cry himself but he kept his gaze matching Nate’s as that was all he could offer him in the way of comfort.

“Hmm,” said Mrs. MacKinnon. “Shit,” and she rotated the leg back the other way. Nate blanched even more and his eyes widened slightly.

“Fuck, fuck, FUCK,” Nate yelled, vomited over the side of the bed and passed out. Tyson looked at Mrs. MacKinnon for a cue and she just glanced at him, glanced at Nate’s slack face, and shrugged slightly.

“Probably better,” she said. “If he’s lucky he won’t wake up til I’m done.”

It took another solid hour but by the end Nate’s leg was as straight as she could make it, poulticed against infection, and neatly wrapped. Nate was propped barely conscious in the bed. He had briefly regained consciousness, unwillingly taken some soup and fallen back into a hazy, drugged sleep.

“You’ve gotten awful fond of him,” Mrs. MacKinnon said later that night as they sat at the kitchen table drinking tea, both too shaky and wound up to sleep. Nate had been installed in the back room where he was likely to stay for the next several months and the children were asleep in the small second bedroom they had added on the previous fall.

“I guess,” Tyson said. He still felt queasy from the setting of Nate’s leg, and everytime he thought of getting up the next day to direct the haying he felt queasier still. “What are we going to do tomorrow?” he asked. They sat at the table and looked at each other. Finally Mrs. MacKinnon spoke.

“Well,” she said, sounding so wrung out that her words were clumsy. “Nate says you’re to hire a man and go out to work with him. He seemed to think you could do it.”

“He’s wrong though, isn’t he?” Tyson said, hoping Mrs. MacKinnon would tell him he was wrong. He had in many ways retained the beliefs of home; Alpha was not, in his conception of the world, ever wrong. Nate could do anything, Nate knew everything, all good things sprang from Nate and he was his comforting shield against the world.

“He’s wrong,” she confirmed and Tyson slumped back against the table.
“I just don’t see how you’re going to handle a hired man,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not like it used to be - everyone here now came for gold, not farming. The only men for hire are too stupid or too drunk to drag up a stake to prospect, or they’re failed farmers themselves; none of them can work without direction. And I don’t know that there’s going to be much direction coming from Nate, no matter what he says; it’ll be a miracle if he doesn’t take blood poisoning or pneumonia. He’ll be in no state to direct anything for quite some time and you’ve got to get through the haying and harvest now, this week. You got no time to figure anything out.”

“Yeah,” Tyson agreed. There were things he was afraid to do, but had learnt to, and then there were things he simply didn’t know how to do, and this situation was the latter.

“It’s worse than that, though,” Mrs. MacKinnon went on. “We don’t have the money and can’t get it neither,” she told him bleakly. “We don’t own the house or the store to mortgage, and every last cent is in the stock of the store for the next year - even if we sold it wholesale we’d only recover part of the cost, and then Graham and we’d be starving with no income. Robbie’s too young, Graham’s not well, and you don’t know what you’re doing, and there’s the baby besides. We could send Lizzie out to work but there’s no work for a girl that’s safe out here, and her wages wouldn’t cover a man’s anyway. Is there anyway your parents could…?” she trailed off, and Tyson jerked his head negatively. He received a stilted letter once a year at the New Year of family news expressing their distress at his contamination and apostasy and that was it. There had been no response in the the four months since he had written to tell them of Rosie’s birth. There had been no mention of recovered fortunes and if it had occurred, they would have mentioned it.

“You can’t do it,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, and Tyson nodded agreement. He couldn’t. He was going to try but he didn’t see how he could. Nate’s injury was particularly badly timed, coming on the first day of the fall hay as it did. There was simply no leeway in the heavy demands on the other local farmers that would allow them, no matter how well intentioned, to step in and cover a man’s labour for months. To do so could mean the loss of their own harvests and Tyson knew from their perspectives it would be an act of straight up charity; not a man among them expected Nate to live. Putting aside the issue of Tyson’s ability to manage a hired man, first they had to find the money.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” Tyson said. “I’m going to go to Alpha Yakupov.”
“That is not a good idea,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, arms crossed over her chest, but Tyson ignored her. It was the only idea he had and she had nothing else to offer. They went to bed scowling at each other, Tyson to the small back room with Rosie, Mrs. MacKinnon to a pallet on the floor of Nate’s room to watch over him, and Tyson wasn’t looking forward to the argument he anticipated having the next morning.

However, grace appeared in the most unexpected form. EJ arrived at the kitchen door around four am, just as Tyson was getting ready to head out on the long ride to the Yakupovs. “Howdy,” EJ said, hat off and looking suppressed for the first time Tyson had ever seen. “How’s Nate doing?” When Tyson explained they weren’t going to amputate, he looked very sceptical indeed. “Well,” he said, once Tyson had explained the carbolic treatment in detail. “Sounds like bullshit to me. I ain’t so convinced about these germs you keep talking about, but I don’t suppose it makes no difference in the end. I came to help. You planning to hire a man? Olson said he’ll cover for Nate today but he can’t keep at it.”

“Yes,” Tyson said, not sure if he should explain the situation, but EJ surprised him.

“You got the money?” he asked.

“No,” Tyson said shortly. EJ knew he didn’t. EJ didn’t have the money either, which was why Tyson had to look further afield.

“No one’s going to give you a mortgage even if you did own the land outright,” EJ told him, which he also already knew. “You still got one year to go to meet the terms of the grant, don’t you?”

Tyson nodded. “Eight more months,” he said. They were almost there.

“And you got to know no one will give a woman, or an Omega, a loan in their own name anyway,” EJ continued. “You got no legal standing to sign a document, and if you did they can’t enforce it.” Tyson nodded again. He knew all that - that was why he was half dressed, ready to head out and humble himself to ask Alpha Yakupov for a loan. “Anyway,” EJ went on, “you don’t know enough to direct a hired man and you’d have to let him live in the house with you, and that’s a recipe for disaster with no husband about.” Tyson didn’t bother to point out he very much hoped he would have a husband about; whether Nate lived or died, he wasn’t going to be able to get about the house enough for months to dissuade a man with bad intent.

“No,” EJ said. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to get a hired man with a mortgage on my farm, which they’ll give me no problem. Marnie grew up on a farm and knows enough for the day to day, and she’s a whole lot meaner than you,” - here EJ looked faintly misty eyed at the thought of his, truthfully, extremely assertive wife - “and she can handle a hired man fine, so long as I’m back every night. Alright so far?” Tyson nodded. “Right,” EJ went on. “You got someone to do the stock?”
“Robbie’s coming,” Tyson said. Nate’s oldest brother was almost 15 and well able to handle the morning chores, although not grown or knowledgeable enough to run an entire farm. “And Lizzie to help with the house.”

“Good,” EJ said. “So I’ll do my own stock in the morning, and then I’ll come down here soon as I can and do a day’s work on the farm. I’d appreciate it if you could give me dinner, and maybe supper twice a week to take some weight off Marnie. You can pay back the mortgage as you’re able. If Nate dies, which I got to tell you I think is likely, we’ll carry on with the hired man and when you remarry and you’re clear of the terms, you sell and pay me back. Now I’m going to also suggest you come out into the field with me so you get idea enough you can direct a man in future - even if Nate lives this is stuff you should know, and if you agree to that, Marnie says if you send them up with Robbie in the morning, she can watch the children during the day some of the time. You see any problem with that plan?”

“No,” Tyson said, awed. It was an incredibly generous offer and he wasn’t going to quibble with EJ about the remarriage plans. He wouldn’t be remarrying, no matter what happened. “Thank you.”

“Oh, well,” EJ said, scowling ungraciously as if exposing his decent heart offended him, “Nate woulda done it for Marnie, I know, so I thought I’d come by. You got any coffee?”

“I do, I do,” Tyson said, hustling to get the kettle on. He’d never spent any real time alone with EJ before, and although he saw a lot of him as their nearest neighbor and Nate’s good friend, EJ’s relationship with Nate was one of alternating good fellowship and antagonism so his impression of EJ previous to this had been largely one of a very coarse and abrupt man prone to fits of anger. Now, of course, he was seeing what Nate had always insisted was there underneath the toothless grin and the competitive burping.

“Now listen,” EJ went on, sounding hesitant. “There’s one more thing I want on my side of the deal and you can’t tell Marnie.” Tyson’s stomach sank. He’d been made these kinds of offers regularly when he went in to town for supplies and he knew exactly what followed a demand to not tell their wife. EJ didn’t notice his disquiet and bulled on. “Can you maybe for God’s sake teach her how to cook a little better? She’s Mrs. Olson’s daughter and you know what that means.”

Tyson laughed, giddy with relief. He did know what that meant, everyone in Denver knew. Mrs. Olson’s cooking was famously awful. “I could do supper twice a week like you say but ask Marnie to come down and help, and maybe take it from there.”

“Yeah,” EJ said. “That sounds good - she’ll be glad for the company. But listen.” He pointed at Tyson and tried to look intimidating. “You just remember you owe me, and you don’t dare tell her I said her cooking was bad, or she’ll kill me and who’ll work your farm then, eh?”

“Alright Alpha,” Tyson said demurely, but inwardly he was laughing.

“Ugh,” EJ said. “Don’t call me Alpha, that’s weird. You can call me EJ or Mr. Johnson if you got to.” He drained his coffee and refilled it from the pot. “You think Nate’s awake yet?” It was approaching five am, well past time for Nate to be up and doing on a normal day, but Tyson hadn’t heard anything from the bedroom yet. He shrugged and opened the bedroom door so he and EJ could peek in. Nate was awake and alone; his mother had headed out the back.

“Hey,” EJ said, and then just stood there at a loss while Nate looked blearily back at him. “How you feeling?” he finally asked, and Nate mustered up enough energy to scoff at him.

“Really fucking awful, thanks EJ,” he said. “My leg’s busted in two places and I’m looking at pissing in a bottle til the New Year.”
“I wouldn’t worry about that. You won’t last more than a month, two tops,” EJ said unhelpfully. Tyson could have cheerfully smacked him.

“No,” Nate said, voice weak but bossy as ever and Tyson thrilled to it. “I’m going to live, and fuck you for thinking any different, Johnson. Now get out and go do some work. You going to help Tys with the hired man?”

“Something like that,” EJ said. “And fuck you too,” he added affectionately, and closed the door carefully behind him. Tyson looked at him with raised eyebrows and EJ raised his hands and made a face back. “You think he’s going to make it?” EJ asked.

“Yes,” Tyson said emphatically, and EJ looked at him hopefully.

“Maybe,” EJ said, as if he were willing to be convinced. “If anyone can do it Nate can.” He still didn’t seem very certain but Tyson wasn’t going to argue about it. “Alright,” EJ went on. “I’m going to head into town now and sort the money and the man out; I’ll be back tomorrow at six, and you better be ready to come out and do a day’s work.”

“I will Alph - Mr. Johnson,” Tyson said, eager to show willing. “But what about -”

“Just say Johnson, will you?” EJ said. “I’m not going to Mister you everyday for the rest of the year and neither should you me. Why you wriggling like that? You got something to say?”

“The baby,” Tyson whispered, looking down. It was shameful to have to discuss this with an Alpha, especially EJ, who was not a man of great delicacy of feeling.

“What about the baby?” EJ said.

“I got to visit the baby every couple hours,” Tyson said. He couldn’t bring himself to be any more explicit than that, and as EJ and Marnie had no children, EJ didn’t seem to find it obvious what Tyson was getting at.

“What,” EJ huffed, “Every couple hours? You going to miss her? You need to have a little chat about politics, or what? Why can’t Lizzy watch her?”

“The baby,” Tyson tried again. “She gets hungry…” He trailed off.

“Well have you tried feeding her?” EJ said with heavy sarcasm. “I find it works a treat when I’m hungry,” unintentionally making the whole conversation a great deal more awkward from Tyson’s perspective. Now all he could think about was EJ, reduced to baby size but still in the same adult proportions, same toothless mouth and dirty work denims, kicking miniature work boots as he cried to be fed at some monstrous breast. Tyson stared at the floor, defeated. Somehow he could chuff EJ just fine with Nate beside him, like he had at the tea only two days ago, but now, standing alone, he couldn’t even bring himself to explain to EJ he needed to nurse the baby regularly. He felt overwhelmed by hopelessness and the magnitude of the task set before him and angrily dashed away the tears trickling down his face.

“Oh hey now,” EJ said, alarmed at the tears. “Don’t cry. If you really think you’re going to miss the baby so much as that I guess we can arrange something.” Tyson could hear from EJ’s tone he thought Tyson was completely mad but was humouring him and it touched him on the raw. He stomped one booted foot in irritation.

“I’m not going to miss the baby, I got to feed the baby,” he snapped. “I got to feed the baby every couple hours, or else my milk will dry up and and the baby will starve because she can’t take nothing else yet.”
“Well why didn’t you say?” EJ cried out, offended. “You only had to say.”

“You don’t make it so terrible easy to say,” Tyson muttered, and unexpectedly it had a chastening effect on EJ. He kicked at the dirt and sighed in a put upon way but his tone was surprisingly kind.

“Sorry,” he said. “Marnie says that too sometimes.” He stopped there and an awkward silence hung between them. They had exchanged more conversation than Tyson had ever had alone with an unrelated Alpha, and he was exhausted.

“I’m not,” he began, trying to explain himself to Johnson. “I never…” and luckily EJ picked up what Tyson was trying to say.

“Nate says your people don’t let you talk to no one outside your religion,” EJ began, and Tyson nodded. “Though you were chatting away saucy enough at the tea last Sunday,” EJ went on. “And you been talking a great deal more the last couple months whenever I seen you.”

Tyson nodded again; he had indeed been yapping away merrily to all and sundry since Rosie had been born. Most of his doubts about living among the English had been washed away with Rosie’s birth; clearly the Lord was happy with his choices, blessing him with the greatest sign of favour an Omega could receive, a girl. Additionally, he had felt entirely different after the birth this time. He recalled the welter of emotions after Johnny was born; shock, fear, exhaustion, for several weeks a worrying disconnection from everything around him, and then later a tentative, creeping pleasure in the baby, but this was entirely different. This time he had been delighted to realise he had made a baby with Nate and that happiness had buoyed him throughout the pregnancy. Delivering a daughter was more than he had dared hope for, the final religious seal of approval on this second marriage, and the period immediately after Rosie’s birth had been one of the happiest times of his life. Of course he had been yapping; he had so many things to say. And yet now he couldn’t find the words to explain to EJ that he needed to nurse the baby regularly.

“We don’t,” Tyson said, trying again to explain an Omega would never have done field work, never have been alone with another Alpha, even for a minute. “My people, my job was to be chaste and beautiful, and silent. It’s uncouth to talk about feeding a baby. I’m just supposed to be pretty and quiet.”

“Eh,” said EJ, unmoved by Tyson’s worries. “That’s stupid. Who wants a silent wife?” Tyson didn’t reply but EJ barrelled on without any encouragement. “And I’m sure you’re very handsome,” EJ said, sounding quite unconvinced of that, “but it really ain’t clear to me if you’re a boy or a girl, and I don’t especially admire anyone what isn’t pretty definitely a girl, so…”

“I’m Omega,” Tyson said, already weary of explaining himself yet again. “I’m not a boy or a girl, I’m both - ”

“Shut up!” EJ roared, both hands clamped over his ears. “It’s not like you to be so coarse,” he said resentfully to Tyson.

“You brought it up,” Tyson said, resentful as well. EJ had a lot of gall accusing him of being coarse. He’d seen this man openly smell his own finger after scratching his ass.

“Right, I’m going now,” EJ said, clapping his hat back on his head with an exasperating air of having won the argument. “I’ll be back tomorrow early like I said, and silent or no I’ll expect you ready to work. You can bring the baby or have Lizzy run her out as you like.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Tyson said again, still very conscious of the favour EJ was doing their family. EJ grimaced at the ‘Alpha’ but said nothing and left with a wave as Mrs. MacKinnon came back up
“You going to Yakupov?” she asked. “And what did Johnson have to say?”

“Says he’ll take a loan on his farm and get a man for his place,” Tyson told her, “and that he’ll come down here everyday to help, but I’m to help him in the field.” She looked considering.

“That’s a hell of a kind offer,” she said. “Guess you won’t need to see Yakupov then?”

“Guess not,” Tyson said vaguely, occupied with thinking of Nate and what he would need for the next several days, and how to manage Rosie and what use he could possibly be, out in the fields with EJ. His stomach rumbled and he realised he hadn’t eaten since breakfast yesterday, turned to head for the stove to start the porridge and came over all faint. Mrs. MacKinnon lunged and caught him.

“Did you just faint?” she said in a horrified tone and he shrugged her off but she continued. “Oh God,” she said, “tell me you aren’t pregnant. That’s all we need.”

“I don’t know,” Tyson said, absolutely exhausted, slumped in the chair she had set him in. “We haven’t, you know, since Rosie was born, but maybe?”

“What do you mean, you haven’t?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked. “I told you more than two months ago you were alright to have a go; you asked me specifically.”

“No, we done that,” Tyson said, too tired to work up any embarrassment. “Just not knotted, I mean.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she moaned. “Tell me you haven’t been doing that last one regular - don’t you know that’s a sure fire way to get pregnant, every time?”

“Yes, thank you,” Tyson said. “I’ve been made aware.”

“Good,” she said, “well, hopefully you aren’t. You been puking aside from yesterday?”

“No,” he said. “Just then because I was so upset, not before or since. I didn’t faint now anyway, I just took a turn because I haven’t eaten for a day.” Mrs. MacKinnon looked relieved and collapsed into the chair beside him.

“Well thank the Lord for that,” she said waspishly. “I wouldn’t have expected to have to tell you to eat; you’ve got to keep your strength up. If you go down you’ll take the whole ship with you.”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, pawing through the bowl of filberts sitting in the middle of the table and looking for the nutcracker. “You think if I am, I won’t be able to work with EJ?”

“Whether you are or not you’re going to have to work with EJ,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “I got up day after I had Alice and did the spring planting with Graham. You’re able to do a great deal more than you think, but you won’t like it none. You probably aren’t, with how often you’re feeding that baby but I suppose time will tell; assuming you aren’t, see you keep it that way for at least a year. You don’t need another one in the middle of all this.”

“That’s illegal,” Tyson whispered, appalled and fascinated. Any attempts to prevent conception were both illegal and immoral; even mention of the idea was enough to be excommunicated back home. “The Comstock Law says - how?”

“Comstock can go fiddle,” Mrs. MacKinnon said rudely. “Sometimes it ain’t the time for a baby and there’s nothing wrong with trying to stop them, though I’ll tell you -” she gestured at herself - “it doesn’t always work.” She peered at Tyson and evidently could see him drooping. “It’s time for you
to eat something. You go sit with Nate a while and I'll bring you both your porridge.”

“Thank you Mrs. Mac,” Tyson said, gratefully heading to the bedroom. He was exhausted already and he’d only been awake an hour and a half.

“It’s illegal though, just as you say,” she called after him. “So don’t you go talking about this to any of the men, not even Nate. Sometimes they got very stupid opinions on this, and I don’t aim to hear them.”
Hello, I’m back! I think the second half of this story is trying to kill me - the day after I wrote the comment saying I would post in February and March I had a serious fall and concussed myself badly enough to be off work for two weeks and recreational screens for 6 weeks. Anyway, to celebrate my return to middling health, here’s a new chapter. God willing and the creek don’t rise, I will post another long one in 2 weeks.

I also went back and changed the Mikko character’s name in Chapter 2 to ‘Tom’, an OC. The use of Mikko had been bugging me since youabird(nevulon) pointed it out in the comments - thank you for doing that! Rpf is weird - why is it OK (with me) to characterize Gabe as I did, but Mikko didn’t sit right? I thought about it for a while, and I guess the line for me is that using Gabe specifically was necessary to the story but Mikko wasn’t. Also, I feel like the Gabe character is recognized as trapped by his circumstances and a little sympathetic? Maybe that’s just in my head.

Anyway, with this chapter we turn our focus from Nathan MacKinnon’s Beefy Neck to Nathan MacKinnon’s constipation. Oh boy.

Next morning bright and early Tyson was ready: boots on, Nate’s second best hat to hand, baby fed and settled for a few hours until Lizzy brought her out to the field. Nate had had another bad night, in and out of sleep as he struggled with the pain and the laudanum and Mrs. MacKinnon had stayed with him again, letting Tyson sleep. He crept out to the kitchen to do the porridge and johnny cake while Lizzy, Robbie, Johnny and Rosie slept on in the small room. He drearily surveyed the makings of breakfast; they had planned out a lean fall to save cash for the taxes due in the New Year, and what little they had put away for the purchase of winter supplies had been used on the doctor’s fees. Early September ought to have been a time of abundance with the harvest rolling in and the first of the cash from the wheat, but last year’s wheat had been poor, this year was shaping up the same, and there was nothing in the pantry corner but oats, cornmeal, the bottom of the last barrel of flour, and saltcod. The cow was dry and there was no milk. At least the chickens were still laying, but the eggs needed to be saved for their supper; they’d be having plain porridge and dry johnny cake for breakfast and not just today. He’d been meaning to speak seriously to Nate about what they needed to prepare for the coming winter but that was off the table for the next several weeks at least and possibly forever. The jingle of EJ’s horse interrupted his thoughts and Tyson rose to greet him.

Silently they headed out to the far east field where EJ handed over a worrisomely sharp looking sickle and began to work his way along one of the valley walls with the cradle. The mechanical reaper had come ten days ago and most of the wheat was dry and ready to move to the barn but the sloping fields running up the side of the valley still needed to be cut by hand. The wheat had done poorly there with no terraces and Nate said they wouldn’t waste the effort next year, but they had grown it so they harvested it. Some could be done with a cradle but much of it was so sparse and short that it had to be done with a sickle. Tyson had no idea how to handle either; in fact he had never even seen either in use. He stood and watched EJ for several minutes, unsure where to even begin. Eventually EJ turned and looked at him, and he looked back blankly at EJ. EJ gestured at the sickle and back to Tyson. “Well?” EJ said. “Let’s go,” and Tyson was forced to admit he didn’t know how. “Fuck’s sake, MacKinnon,” EJ said, and Tyson got the distinct impression Johnson was
cursing Nate, not Tyson. Still, he fairly civilly showed Tyson how to cut the wheat and they began again, EJ muttering about people being babied.

Nate did baby Tyson and he loved it, but maybe it wasn’t quite so necessary anymore. Although no one would describe frontier life with children as light duty, Tyson hadn’t lifted a heavy bag for years and essentially never used a farming implement beyond clearing out the chicken coop or driven the team alone, and he’d never made it out into the fields like they had talked about, leaving him in the situation he was now in. He did still chop some firewood but that was because Nate liked his arm muscles and he liked Nate. He thought about it while he very gingerly employed the razor sharp sickle. Perhaps Nate had been right when he told him Tyson could manage. Even the girls out here, like EJ’s wife, were capable of running a farm. Why shouldn’t he? Surely it was simply a matter of knowledge, not some fundamental incapability as he’d been taught. The thought carried him through several hours, and finally he stood up and surveyed the very small area he’d managed to mow proudly. EJ had gotten through a great deal more, but then of course EJ had a great deal more practice. Tyson bent back down and continued, the day growing hotter and his optimism growing limper as the heat built and his palms blistered. He stopped for a drink and looked up the slope. Abstractively he noticed EJ taking off his shirt but he couldn’t muster up enough energy to be shocked. He snuck a look or two out of curiosity. There was an awful lot of him, a great slab of chest and muscles and all of it tanned an appealing bronze, but he thought he preferred Nate somehow. He peered at EJ as he climbed the highest part of the slope just ahead of Tyson, the muscles in his back stretching and flexing as he caught the wheat in one hand and cut it with his other. It was all very nice, Tyson supposed, but had this man ever offered to darn Tyson’s socks because he knew Tyson hated it or pretended he hadn’t noticed that Tyson had stained the bedsheets two weeks after Rosie was born, and then washed the bloody sheets himself? No, he had not.

At noon they broke for dinner. Tyson had done the best he could but it was a sparse meal and EJ looked askance at him. “No pie?” he said sounding disappointed, but he necked down the dry bread and cheese eagerly enough and plowed through the pork and pickles with the aid of cold mint tea. Pie would have to wait until Tyson had a chance to get out and pick some berries and where he would find the sugar he just didn’t know. He didn’t know where he was going to find a great many things.

While he was mulling that over, Mrs. MacKinnon appeared on horseback with Rosie. “Take the baby,” she said. “You’ll have to keep her till supper time but I’ve kept her awake and hopefully she’ll sleep. Graham’s not well and I’m headed back home for a few days but I’ll be back Saturday and the doctor will be by tomorrow. I hope you won’t have too bad a night but Nate’s not handling the laudanum so well and he’s pretty confused and he’s arguing. Don’t let him get excited - try to keep him calm.” Tyson took Rosie and gratefully sank back down to sit a while longer as he fed her. “Now look,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, very seriously. “I’m sorry about Lizzy, but she was the only one we could spare.” Tyson watched her leave, puzzled. Lizzy had always seemed fine to him, an agreeable girl and a hard worker. He shrugged; he supposed he’d find out what she meant at home.

That evening he staggered back inside, exhausted and still smarting from the unfamiliar work and EJ’s unflattering remarks on his performance and collapsed into the chair beside Nate’s bed. One day down, he thought grimly and looked over at Nate, desperate for a moment of sympathy. Johnny was bellowing in the kitchen about some perceived slight, Robbie was yelling back at him, and Rosie was grizzling in her basket where Tyson had deposited her. Thank God Lizzie was here to do supper, he thought. He wondered if he could sit, very very carefully, beside Nate and cuddle up against him just for a few minutes of comfort. Nate was unconscious, drooling unattractively into his pillow and Tyson knew any touch would cause him significant pain. There was no respite to be had there, and eventually Tyson pushed himself to his feet and went to settle the troops.
Tyson discovered what Mrs. MacKinnon had meant that night. Cooking; she meant Lizzy’s cooking, which was absolutely appalling. “Holy God,” Tyson said dispiritedly, raising a spoonful of soup and letting it pour back into the bowl. “How did your mother produce a girl who did this?” Nate looked at him commiseratingly but said nothing. He was only partially awake, propped up on the pillows, leg immobilized, and still heavily sedated. Tyson had changed his dressing, carefully navigating the jagged cuts in Nate’s leg and the deep blue bruises covering most of his thigh. There were no signs of blood poisoning visible on his leg, and for that Tyson was deeply grateful. There was nothing to do about Lizzy’s soup; they were hardly going to throw it away, so he ate his share as quickly as he could, trying not to pay attention to the taste, settled Johnny, bathed and fed Rosie, made a week’s bread, prepared the lunch for tomorrow, helped Lizzy clean the kitchen, wiped down Nate’s hands and face with warm water and fell exhausted onto the pallet next to their bed, hoping for some sleep so he could get up and do it all again the next day. Sadly, it wasn’t to be. Rosie woke him first, demanding milk to make up for the missed feeds over the day and when she fell back asleep Nate woke, struggling out from under the laudanum and confused, trying to stand. They alternated for the remainder of the night until morning came and Lizzie had to shake Tyson awake so he could stumble back out to the fields.

The days turned into a blur of sleeplessness. Tyson had thought he was accustomed to interrupted sleep with two little babies in the last three years and Johnny such a champion eater, but he’d known nothing, really, until he had charge of Rosie and Nate at the same time. He grew more capable but the days were brutally long, doing a full day in the fields while feeding a young baby and then managing a house at night. Lizzy did what she could but she was still only 15 and most of the burden fell on Tyson. He looked longingly back on the days of only tending to the house and the children; he’d had no idea what luxury he’d enjoyed. In the past when matters were too much for him, the children fractious, the housework overwhelming, the isolation of deep winter too profound, he would seek the comfort of Nate’s body, crawling into his lap. It was something he had never imagined years ago envisioning what marriage was, that he would sit on his husband’s lap cradled in his arms, safe and happy, his head tucked into Nate’s neck, eyes shut, talking quietly until he was restored but he had grown accustomed to it and he missed it ferociously. Nate was not a real presence in the house anymore; Tyson sat beside him at night, holding his hand, and Nate seemed to find some comfort in that, calming and sometimes falling into a less restless sleep, but Tyson did not. He simply felt adrift, unanchored without Nate’s commanding presence.

EJ bossing him was an entirely unsatisfactory alternative; EJ simply didn’t care if Tyson was exhausted and was evidently unaware of the fact that he was by nature and design too delicate to be meant for rough work. It was the first time in a long time Tyson felt himself among strange coarse foreigners with no understanding of what he was. And yet perhaps EJ understood what he could be better than Tyson or even Nate did, because when EJ rudely prodded Tyson with the handle of his shovel, and told him to stop being such a crybaby, Tyson found he was able to keep going even when he didn’t think he could. “Look, you,” EJ said, looking down at Tyson sprawled in the muck of the pig barn where he had fallen, hungry, cold and crying; “There’s nothing so special about you that you can’t learn to do this. My wife’s out doing the same thing as you, but better, so that I can be here helping you so get back on your damn feet and start shoveling.” He poked Tyson hard with the handle of the pitchfork and to his shame Tyson just hunched further into himself, sniveling and self pitying. “I got the baby, though,” Tyson said, conscious even as he spoke that he was whining. “I got to feed the baby and take care of Nate at night, and I’m tired.”

“We’re all tired MacKinnon, but we just get on with it, not sit in the pig shit whining. Marnie’s free to do my job so I can take on Nate’s and most of yours because she don’t got no baby to feed,” EJ said bleakly. “And she isn’t going to either, never. So shut the fuck up and get shoveling.”
Tyson looked up at him and EJ stared back, implacable. Tyson got back on his feet, still sniveling, and began shoveling again. He didn’t like it but EJ was right - there was nothing so special about him. Gradually, unwillingly, he learned to live without Nate’s direction; he learned many things independent of Nate for the first time.

Tyson learned to lie to Nate. Dr. Iginla said Nate was under no circumstances to be upset and so they didn’t tell him about the loan: they didn’t tell him about the terrible price they got for the first of the wheat, they didn’t tell him his father was ill or that although Nate was on an invalid diet he was still getting the bulk of the nourishing food in the house. Nate was struggling under the haze of laudanum and was difficult to soothe; he was argumentative and confused in turn and it was Tyson’s job to go to his room every night and attempt to settle Nate down enough that he would eat something and fall into a restless sleep and then go back to the kitchen and try to find a way to keep the children healthy on what was left. Telling Nate that they were facing down disaster would only agitate him further and Tyson was glad to spare him although he had a creeping sense of concern about the hopefully inevitable day Nate was well enough to be told.

Tyson learned to be hungry. He thought he’d already known but he’d been wrong. Now, confronted with everything he ate a mouthful taken away from Nate or the children, he realised he’d never been more than peckish. Even when they were eating turnips that first winter, Nate had still been directing the pinon nuts and dried fruit to him, fat heavy slabs of bacon, the last of the butter and powdered milk; Tyson had been bored, not hungry he saw now. He learned why men drank beer; it was a way of using less than fresh grain to fill themselves up, and he was reduced to drinking a glass from their small beer keg every night so he could be satisfied with less food. He never learned to like it but it was food they already had and as the children and Nate couldn’t have it, he wasn’t taking it away from them. Where they had planned a lean fall for two adults and two small children, they were now struggling to feed five adults and the children. The elder MacKinnons did what they could but they had little to spare and Tyson learned to eat things he previously would have discarded without a second glance. Cheese rinds, mouldy heels of bread, handfuls of chicory from the fields; he ate them all and was grateful for them. He began to chew pine pitch when he could get it, as it took his mind off the unrelenting hunger, a little, and he learned to eat whatever disgusting thing Lizzie had made for supper and like it.

He learned to do the farm work capably, though slow. At first he snivelled and complained, and when he looked for sympathy from EJ there was none. EJ had taken to correcting any errors or irritants by pushing Tyson over onto his ass and although he was careful enough that Tyson had never been seriously hurt, it was beginning to grate. Finally after weeks of ruminating on the issue, when EJ set his pitchfork handle against Tyson’s shoulder and gave him a warning look yet again, Tyson learned to fight back. Tyson tried to swat the handle away but EJ was too quick for him and shoved, knocking Tyson into a pile of old straw he’d just scraped from the bottom of the pig stall. Tyson popped back up and started yelling at him. He’d had about enough of being knocked over every time EJ thought he should be working faster.

“Shut up,” EJ said after a minute of listening to him. “It’s like being told off by a chipmunk.” Tyson took no notice and continued to tell EJ just what he thought, amazed at himself even as he did it. Here he was, yelling at an Alpha. EJ stood bemused, staring at Tyson open mouthed, and frustrated Tyson picked up a turnip and heaved it at EJ. It connected satisfactorily with his chest, knocking him back a step. “Here now,” EJ said and stepped forward to grab hold of Tyson’s shoulder but Tyson brought up his pitchfork and jabbed it tines first into EJ’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” Tyson yelled and then stood panting at his own effrontery. He had once been knocked unconscious for the crime of taking a sip of water before the Alphas at the table had started,
and now he could see the tines of the fork had punctured the cloth of EJ’s shirt, although not his skin. Carefully he withdrew the fork, but he didn’t drop to his knees and he didn’t apologise. EJ eyed him mildly and took a step back.

“Alright,” he said, inspecting the holes in the shirt of his shoulder. “Beg your pardon.”

Tyson learned to behave like Mrs. MacKinnon. He had started the month in his usual state, half admiring, half terrified by her commanding presence, and midway he had grown to understand why she was such a martinet. He had never had charge of big boys and girls like Robbie and Lizzie and he’d had no idea what terrible things they could get up to. It wasn’t just troublesome behaviours, like Robbie sleeping in the barn instead of mucking out the pigs, or Lizzie letting the milk sit out next to the stove all afternoon and spoiling the whole pan, it was flat out dangerous things. The day he caught Lizzie forcibly feeding Rosie dry oats and Rosie choking, he felt a deep kinship with Nate’s mother and an understanding of why she was so loud and firm. Quietly posed requests were nothing to Robbie and Lizzie. The following day, when he found Johnny alone, peering into the well perched on the cover Robbie had left balanced half off, perfectly situated to tumble back in and take Johnny with it, Tyson felt a strange alteration take place in him and he drew breath and began to yell. The MacKinnon family Bellowing had come upon him.

He expanded his yelling to include EJ and he found it answered very well. EJ was still unsympathetic and abrupt, but once Tyson began standing up to him a little, and stopped looking for praise from him like he would have Nate, they began to rub along more easily. Tyson tried to keep the yelling somewhat suppressed when Nate was awake, assuming Nate wouldn’t like it but the first time Tyson forgot, turned his head to the bedroom door and yelled out to the kitchen, “Jesus Christ, Lizzie! What did I tell you?” Nate just laughed.

“You’re a real MacKinnon now,” Nate said in a rare moment of levity. He had not taken to convalescence as well as one might have hoped. His leg was strapped straight and raised slightly in a fracture box with a sheet thrown over it, rendering him immobile. Nate had never spent a day sitting still in his life and he loudly, pointedly, didn’t care for it now; he was on a light diet that he endured with no grace at all and he was afflicted with strange, frightening dreams due to the opium. The only mercy was that the carbolic appeared to be working as promised and his leg was slowly healing over cleanly.

They reduced the laudanum by half in the third week and Nate spent 10 days snapping at everyone, teeth gritted and sweaty. That still left Nate on enough opium to confuse and disinhibit him somewhat, but now he was also awake enough to struggle with the pain and monotony. When Tyson was in the house and not occupied by other tasks, he tried to read aloud to Nate to keep him entertained. They were slowly working their way through 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, translated into English just in time to be given to Tyson as a wedding gift and spared by the fire due to its presence in a tin trunk; Nate was riveted and insisted on a page every evening and a chapter on Sunday, but there was only so much time in a day and Nate was alone for much of the time. The suffering had not refined his character. Nate grew more disagreeable by the day; his choices were limited to sitting propped up and staring at the wall or lying down and staring at the ceiling, so long as his bad leg stayed entirely still and he was alone, bored and fractious most of the day. His temper grew explosive, yelling and hurling things at the slightest frustration.

Tyson was all in on Nate’s side of course, but Nate was, Tyson had realised over the last three years, possibly, perhaps, just a little, prone to fits of temper. Very sure he knew how things should be done, Nate would bully to get his way, although never truly unkindly, more an older brother convinced he knew best, and worse, would use the threat of his anger to force others into line. Nate, Tyson had
been surprised to learn, had a reputation among his friends as a man who flew into a violent pet
when things didn’t go the way he thought they should and his anger was intimidating, but he’d never
thought of suggesting that Nate stop, or change. It had never been directed at himself before and he
had thought no further than that. He wasn’t afraid of Nate, but certainly he scurried to obey him, and
if Nate grew increasingly irritable and snappish, why, surely that was Tyson’s fault for not
anticipating his needs?

“I can hear you,” Mrs. MacKinnon yelled, ripping open the door and interrupting Nate’s loud
harangue about the forgotten illustrated paper he’d been planning to read. “I can hear you in here,
bitching and moaning. Cut it out.” She pointed at Nate. “You need to stop yelling at everyone, and
you,” - she pointed at Tyson - “need to stop letting him.”

Tyson looked at her puzzled. Of course he brought Nate things when he asked, and of course he
tried to bring them before Nate even had to ask, and of course Nate might have cause to yell if Tyson
forgot something he’d asked for. He should have known Nate would want that paper and not gotten
distracted by the dishes. That wasn’t spoiling, that was marriage; it was his job to serve. Nate had
never once hit him, or even threatened to, and didn’t Nate bring him a cup of tea on occasion,
unprompted, wildly exceeding Tyson’s expectations of Alpha behaviour? What more did she expect
Nate could do?

“You’re yelling at me right now,” Nate snapped back petulantly and Mrs. MacKinnon stomped into
the room.

“Am I bigger than you?” she yelled at him. “Are you afraid of me?”

“No,” Nate said very sullenly.

“Well then it’s different, isn’t it?” she said. “So stop being a spoilt child and be a man.”

“Well alright,” Nate said in a pissy tone. “I’m trying.”

“Well, try harder,” she advised, and Nate looked like he was going to burst a blood vessel. Still, he
said nothing although Tyson could tell he was aching to yell back at his mother. “This is why I told
you not to marry so young,” she added and poked Nate in the shoulder, and he erupted.

“I’ll yell at who I like!” Nate bellowed at his mother in a roar that shocked Tyson but left Mrs.
MacKinnon unmoved.

“Don’t you goddamn dare,” she said to Nate. “You’re too young and you never really learned to
master yourself; you don’t scare anyone but your boy here and the babies, and maybe you’d like to
think about that, and whether you ever heard your Pa go around yelling at me.” Nate’s admiration for
his quiet, gentle father was absolute and he deflated at the comparison.

“Sorry Ma,” Nate said in a small voice.

“Now take this mending and make yourself useful,” she said, thrusting a basket of clothes into his
hands. “I know you’re hurt but you can still improve the shining hour and we’ve all got better things
to do than listen to you bitch.” She pinned him with a glare and then satisfied Nate was sufficiently
squashed, left.

“Good riddance,” Nate muttered, but he said it in a very quiet voice, too low to carry through the
door. After a minute he turned to Tyson. “I’m not yelling that much, am I?” Nate asked, clearly
expecting a negative answer, but Tyson, surprising both of them, told him the truth.

“Little bit,” he said, and Nate looked extremely taken aback. Tyson would sometimes playfully disagree or more often do something Nate had told him not to out of Nate’s sight, but he virtually never soberly contradicted Nate or offered even the mildest criticism of him.

“But you don’t mind, do you?” Nate pressed, and Tyson thought of how often Mrs. MacKinnon had been right, and how she had watched over both of them, even him when she owed him nothing, and how she had just said Tyson was partially at fault for spoiling Nate, and he was brave and told the truth, which he wouldn’t have done or maybe even recognized a month ago.

“I don’t like it Alpha,” he said, and Nate winced. Tyson had never before had call to use the phrase Nate had fed him so long ago.

“Well,” Nate said, lips tight. “Damn me,” and he laid back, pulled the bedsheets over his head and pretended to sleep, grudgingly refusing to discuss any of it; but the next morning there was a lot of ferocious, irritable darning of socks and muttering. That night, before Tyson read him his page, Nate apologized very sincerely and as forgiveness Tyson read him two pages before he fell asleep where he sat. Nate was never going to be a quiet, even toned man with mildly held opinions but the frustrated gloss of meanness was gone and the merry, bossy Nate was a little closer to the surface than he had been; so Nate learned something too.

Tyson learned to lie even more convincingly to Nate. In the sixth week they weaned him off the laudanum entirely and shaking, sweating and irritable, Nate battled through the addiction to the opium and began to return to himself. Finally he had longer periods fully awake and lucid. Still, the doctor had been extremely clear; any worries could set back his recovery, and so they didn’t tell Nate about the cow dying of trembles, rendering it inedible, they didn’t tell Nate about the doctor’s fees, they didn’t tell Nate about the land tax that the town voted to double unexpectedly. “How’s it going, baby?” Nate would ask, and it was Tyson’s job to smile and say “Good.”

He learned to disobey Nate. As Nate grew better his bossiness returned and he spent the evenings telling Tyson what to do on the farm but of course he didn’t have any idea of what a disaster was playing out beyond the bedroom door and his advice was largely useless. Tyson and Mrs. Mac spent many evenings whispering over the accounts. Once Tyson took over the money and gained a clear understanding of their circumstances he realised to his horror that Nate had no idea what he was doing. Their accounts were a hideous jumble. A small, tentative decision began to form in his thoughts; he wasn’t going to give control of their finances back to Nate. Tyson was clearly more capable. He discussed it with Mrs. MacKinnon late one night in hushed whispers, Nate half asleep in the near bedroom.

“Why would he know what he’s doing?” Mrs. MacKinnon shrugged. “He’s never handled anything beyond a few dollars saved for Christmas. He hadn’t finished his apprenticeship so he’s never earned a man’s wage. This is why you shouldn’t get married so young.”

“Alright, missus,” Tyson said, irritated. “It’s done and we’ve got to deal with the problem now.”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference,” Kathy pointed out. “Good or bad, it’s not like he’s been frittering it away - you two just don’t have enough money. I don’t know you’re going to be able to make it through the winter out here; you might need to come back to ours, but you’ll lose the farm.”

“We cannot lose this land,” Tyson said grimly. It was the only asset they had, and they were so close, only seven months off completing the terms of the grant.

“It might be losing the land or starving,” Kathy pointed out, and Tyson grimaced.
“We’re not quite there yet,” he said, although he knew they were worryingly close. “EJ says it’ll depend on the price we get for the second half of the wheat, but it isn’t looking good.”

Nate was completely free of the laudanum and awake all day, leaving him more able to participate in family life. He grew less irritable and Tyson could see he was making a real effort to master his temper. He mended every piece of clothing in the house that needed it, then moved on to knitting socks with strikingly ornate Fair Isle patterns and caring for Rosie most of the day. Nate taught her how to hold his wool, clap, and make a horrible, loud shrieking noise on his signal, and Rosie grew touchingly attached to him. Nate made her a series of increasingly ornate knitted bonnets, culminating in his masterpiece, a six colour selburose pattern that he painstakingly lined with a bit of flowered cotton; Tyson would often come home to find the two of them sitting side by side, Rosie wearing her bonnet and listening happily as Nate read a paper aloud. Nate had also taught Rosie to go on command when held over the chamberpot in an effort to avoid changing diapers. “At least she can go,” Nate said morosely one evening as Tyson read to him. “At least one of us can.”

“Oh God,” Tyson said, desperate to head Nate off. Laudanum, he had learned, had several lingering effects, not just that of pain killing and Nate was constipated as well as extremely resentful about the indignity of having to use a chamberpot.

“Tight as an owl,” Mrs. MacKinnon had said with unseemly relish. “Binds you right up. Sometimes you don’t go for weeks.” Tyson had winced but he had not foreseen just how much and how openly Nate was willing to complain about this private issue.

“I love you,” Tyson said, putting down the book and reaching for Nate’s hand. “You’re the best husband I ever had. But please stop talking about the chamber pot.” If it had been him, Tyson often thought, he was sure he would have borne the indignities of convalescence with pretty resignation, maintaining a dignified silence on the subject of chamber pots and whether he had gone that day or not, but Nate had taken a different approach, encouraged by Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Have you yet?” she would ask around the bedroom door and Nate’s affronted voice would boom back.

“Have I not!” he would bellow most days, irritated with what he saw as another betrayal of his body, and follow this up with what Tyson privately called the Pot Report. Previous to this Tyson had not known Nate prided himself on his regularity, and he felt he could have happily continued on in ignorance a while longer. Sometimes in his fatigue all the English terms involving pots got jumbled in his mind and he thought of it as the Lancashire Hot Pot Report, which had put him off the dish for life.

“Love you too,” Nate mumbled half asleep, and Tyson squeezed his hand and thought about how much he loved Nate; then Nate revived enough to start bitching about his guts again and Tyson thought he’d gladly kill him for a second’s silence on the topic. Marriage, he thought to himself, was a mixed bag. “The best husband ever would be able to go,” Nate said bitterly, and Tyson got up to do something, anything, that didn’t involve listening to the details of Nate’s battle with constipation.

“I think he wants to talk to you,” Tyson said untruthfully as he passed Mrs. MacKinnon in the kitchen. Let Kathy listen to him, Tyson thought uncharitably. She was the one at fault here, raising Nate with an unhealthy interest in his internal doings. He would go check on the horses, none of which had ever said a word to him about their bowels.

They were still at it when Tyson returned from the barn.
“Have a bit of castor oil,” Mrs. MacKinnon said in tones of exasperation. “It’ll blast it right out of you and then we won’t have to listen to your carry on any more.”

“I’m not having castor oil, Ma,” Nate said, equally obstinate. “You know what it does to me.”

“I know what it did to you once when you were eight years old and drank half the bottle on a dare,” she said, clattering the dishes. “I don’t know that a well measured spoonful would do the same, you great fusspot.”

“Well I don’t aim to find out,” Nate said, and Mrs. MacKinnon heaved a great sigh.

“I used it myself many times,” she began, and Nate looked extremely put off at the prospect of hearing the details of his mother’s constipation but held his tongue. “There’s nothing so good for getting a baby out when it won’t come,” she went on, and Nate’s face changed from distaste to horror. “Why we’d never have shifted your sister Mary without it. We tried everything: red raspberry tea, long walks, the same thing that got her in there - your Pa was getting quite fatigued - “

“Oh, God, Ma!” Nate cried. “Stop! I don’t want to hear that and I’m not trying to crap out a baby.” Mrs. MacKinnon clattered the dishes even harder in irritation and Tyson feared for his only good gravy boat.

“Crap out a baby,” she muttered. “Crap out a baby. That’s charming that is. What a turn of phrase you have, boy.”

Tyson reeled backwards in horror; he wanted no part of this argument. Nate turned towards him to try to enlist him on his side and Tyson fled the room.

Constipation aside, for another month from mid September to mid October that was how it went, Tyson growing stronger and more able than he would have believed he could be, visiting Nate briefly in the evening to hold hands and share a few words, then fall asleep on the chair beside him and get up and do it all again in the morning. All he had to do was hold on, he thought. One more month and the harvest would be in and the field work over. Only the final slaughter and preparation of the stock would be left and then they would be settled in for the winter, waiting for the snow. It was hard, but it seemed possible. Then the second load of wheat was sold for an even worse price than the first, and it became clear; they could not get through the winter on what they had. Tyson was still thinking of ways to present the unpalatable facts to Nate without setting back his recovery when EJ stepped in again.

Tyson was feeding Rosie, cloth thrown over his shoulder to enshroud the two of them fully, which he didn’t bother with at home, staring off down the valley at the wheat already cut and below it, the late hay to be harvested next week. He’d made a little haystack of his own to support his back while he fed Rosie, and he leaned back against it enjoying the warmth on the crisp day. He was exhausted, tired beyond anything he had ever imagined his body would be capable of enduring, although it was a fatigue quite distinct from what he had felt four summers ago at the tail end of his marriage to Gabe. Back then he had felt he was fading into a haze of waking sleep and welcomed it as an escape. Now he felt that if he could only get some sleep, an uninterrupted day perhaps, he would leap back up stronger than ever. He decided he wasn’t going to worry himself with those thoughts on such a beautiful day, Rosie warm against him with the blanket over them both; Nate doing well, wound clean of infection and almost closed, Johnny chipper as always, delighted with Robbie to trail behind all day. Warm front and back, stomach half full - the best it got these days - he leaned further
into the hay and let his eyes slip closed, just for a second.

He woke to see EJ crouching directly in front of them and started backwards. “Shhh!” EJ said sharply. “Don’t wake the baby!” Propinquity had made EJ an even more enthusiastic disciple of Rosie’s, convinced he knew best what should be done for her at all times. It was quite maddening really and if he’d been Tyson’s husband there would have been a reckoning but as it was Tyson just gritted his teeth and let him boss to his heart’s content, ignoring him 90 percent of the time.

Unusually, EJ didn’t take Rosie immediately from Tyson; instead he just stayed crouching in front of them, giving Tyson a calm looking over.

“What?” Tyson said, unnerved.

“I bet people told you your cheekbones were beautiful all your life,” EJ said meditatively. From any other man Tyson would have viewed this as a prelude to very unwelcome attentions but not EJ. What you saw, Tyson had learned, was what you got. If EJ was making remarks about his cheekbones, it was because he was genuinely thinking about his cheekbones.

“They did,” Tyson said, hesitant. “Why?”

“They’re kinda sticking out,” EJ said. “You’re starting to look sorta stretched out like a lampshade, or a milch cow with a worm.”

“Yes, well, thanks,” Tyson said, affronted. It was true he’d lost a good bit of weight, doing the better part of a day’s work on the farm as well as another day’s work in the house, and waking multiple times a night to tend to Rosie and Nate; it was also true the eats in the MacKinnon household had taken a sharp downturn in quality and quantity recently as they scrambled to cover the doctor’s bills, but EJ didn’t need to point it out.

“Show me your wrists,” EJ ordered, and puzzled, Tyson did.

“Yeah,” EJ said, as if his suspicions were confirmed. “That baby eating anything yet?”

“No,” said Tyson, puzzled. EJ knew perfectly well Rosie refused all solid food and was prodigiously sick when fed cow’s milk. “Why?”

“No reason,” EJ said vaguely and stood up, dusting off his rear. “I think we’re done here for the day,” he added, surprising Tyson who had thought the plan was to spend another couple hours at least in the fields, but he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. “We’re going back to yours to do inventory.”

“What’s that?” Tyson asked, getting up to follow him. Even two months in, EJ still used english farming terms Tyson had never heard. Finding out what having a cow served meant had been quite the eye opener. He understood the term inventory of course, but he didn’t see how it was applicable in this case. There really wasn’t much of anything to inventory. Still, he climbed back in the wagon peaceably and let EJ drive them home, glad of the break.

“This soup,” Nate said, a look of distaste on his face, “is very watery.”

“I bet it fucking is,” Tyson said, sitting down on the chair that was kept permanently next to the bed now and handing over Rosie. “That’s because it’s mostly water.”

“Mmm,” Nate said, juggling Rosie and his soup bowl. He said no more - there was nothing more to say. They both knew why the soup was mostly water and that there was nothing to be done about it.
It was reminiscent of the winter after Johnny was born, when they had lost almost everything to the fire. At least then they had had baby Johnny to distract them, and their health, but neither of them ever willingly ate turnips again. There had been an unpleasant six week stretch in February and March where Nate had watched Tyson get thinner and thinner while he himself pretended not to be lightheaded when he stood up too quickly. When they got another typical Denver dump of snow in the first week of March, he had had to snowshoe to EJ’s, itself a risky proposition in the uncertain weather, and haul back a borrowed barrel of salt pork and another of flour. He didn’t like to borrow but if Tys lost the ability to feed Johnny the odds were not on their side and he also needed to finish the winter in good enough shape to work in the spring. He didn’t know how his parents had done it with all of them. Now they were back in the same position but the odds were stacked even more against them.

Nate looked over and Tyson was asleep in the chair. “Sorry baby,” Nate whispered, a little prayer for help to get well quickly every time he said it. “You’ve got no complaints, do you sweet stuff?” he said to Rosie, and offered her a bit of carrot from his soup, but just as he had expected she turned up her nose at it. She was a cheerful little baby, bright and alert, but she would take no food other than milk and threw up voluminously if given cow’s milk. Tyson was still her sole source of nourishment. They had know a year ago they would have to scrimp to afford the taxes coming due on the land, and planned accordingly for a lean year but the unexpected doctor’s fees were killing them and he knew the money for the hired man was more than his parents could afford.

Nate sat morosely alone, stewing over the figures, adding and re-adding the numbers which never changed. They had to stay on the farm for the winter to meet the terms of the land grant. To stay, they needed food and fuel; they didn’t have enough to get through the winter and he could do nothing about it. What little cash they had had going into the year was gone on doctor’s fees. Johnny needed to be fed properly so he could grow, Tyson needed to be fed so he could feed Rosie, and he needed to eat to have any hope of his leg mending properly. If he couldn’t get back on his feet by spring, he would take the whole ship down with him. He could perhaps take the extreme step of sending Tyson and the children to his parents to for the winter, but he was loath to do it and his parents would also struggle to feed everyone. Finally, the issue of how he was to care for himself wintering over alone while unable to walk was a live one.

“How you doing?” EJ asked, coming in and sitting down in the second chair while Tyson slept on. Nate was glad to see him - he was glad to see anyone, it was desperately boring alone in the room all day - but he was surprised to see EJ at suppertime on a Thursday. His usual routine was to eat supper on Monday and Friday with the MacKinnons, and Nate looked forward to and dreaded those days equally. He was glad of the company, but every mouthful going down EJ was one less in the deep of winter. He hoped EJ wasn’t going to stay for supper tonight. EJ, unaware of Nate’s turmoil, regarded him from the chair. He clearly had something to say, but EJ always got there in his own time so Nate didn’t ask. Finally, EJ huffed a sigh. “You know Marnie can’t have no babies?”, he said, surprising Nate. This wasn’t the sort of topic even good friends normally discussed, but if EJ felt he needed to unburden himself, Nate would listen.

“No,” Nate said. He’d known it had taken Marnie a long time to recover after a recent miscarriage but he hadn’t realised it had been as serious as that. “I’m sorry. The doctor say there’s nothing you can do?”

“No,” EJ confirmed, and said no more, staring off into space. After some time he gathered himself. “At least I got Marnie,” he said, “and she’s feeling well now, back in good flesh. Not like your little shrimp here,” he added, smiling at Rosie who smiled back at him and flailed until Nate passed her over. EJ and Rosie had adored each other since they first met and EJ clearly felt somewhat proprietary about her. “She still not eating?” he asked Nate, and Nate shrugged.
“Ma says to just keep trying and she’ll do it in her own time,” he said, but EJ understood the dangers of a poor eater as they headed into winter as well as he did.

“Yeah,” EJ said. “About that. The eats are getting real crap around here.” Nate bridled but said nothing. EJ knew perfectly well why that was, but he didn’t have to bring it up. EJ ignored him and went on. “And that husband of yours is getting very skinny, and I don’t think I care for what that might do to my best girl here. So I come to tell you I talked with Marnie and we decided. We got two pigs we’re going to give you, each two hundred pounds undressed; two hundred pounds flour, two hundred pounds of potatoes, hundred pounds of beans, fifty pound barrel of codfish and you can take every damn pumpkin we got as well, I can’t stand those things. That and what we’re harvesting off your place ought to get you through the winter, and I’m going to give you one of the pigs now, because I want both of you to start eating better right away. The way you’re set right now, I don’t see how you can make it through the winter.” He stopped and looked at Nate for his response. To his horror, Nate felt tears threaten, but EJ noticed and kicked the bedframe, giving Nate’s leg an excruciating jolt.

“Fuck!” Nate said, and had to take several deep breaths to avoid throwing up. “What the fuck was that for, you goddamn asshole?” Nate said, outraged, and EJ smiled sweetly.

“Don’t let’s get all sentimental,” he said. “I got no brothers or sisters, and I got no parents anymore. Looks like I won’t be having any little girls neither, so I got to take good care of Rosie here. We got enough to keep you and yours alive, as well as mine, so just shut up and let me do it.”

Fine,” Nate said, overcome with equal measures murderous rage about the kick and weepy gratitude. He looked over at Tyson still asleep in the chair, thin and worn down by the burden thrust on him, and now, miraculously, saved. “Thank you.”

“Lemme just say,” EJ said, waving off any thanks, “I’m going to expect a hell of a lot of free horse shoeing in the future.”

The butchering of the pigs was surprisingly straightforward; EJ brought them down live and he was large and skilled enough to simply straddle their backs and slit their throats before they knew what had happened. The processing of the meat, however, was more of an undertaking than Tyson had imagined. Mrs. MacKinnon reappeared Sunday morning while he was elbow deep in pig guts. “Hello,” she said, reining her horse back from the large kettle steaming by the porch. “Where’d you get that pig?”

“EJ,” Tyson grunted, struggling with his dull knife and a particularly recalcitrant trotter. Mrs. MacKinnon looked considering.

“Well,” she said. “Hmm. That was good of him. He give you anything else?”

“Another pig,” Tyson said, still sawing away and not too focused on the question. “Two hundred pounds flour, same potatoes, a hundred pounds beans, some molasses, and a shedload of pumpkins for some reason.” He looked up and noticed her eyebrows were raised. “What?” he said, and she urged the horse a little closer.

“That was very generous,” she said evenly. “He’s been very generous twice now. He ask you for anything?”

“No,” said Tyson. “We got nothing and he knows that.”
“No,” she said with a peculiar emphasis. “Did EJ ask you for anything?” Tyson looked up at her puzzled for a moment until he realised what she was asking and then he was surprised to find he was offended on EJ’s behalf.

“He didn’t ask me for anything,” he said stiffly. “I don’t believe Mr. Johnson would do that.”

“Mmm,” she said. “I don’t believe you would do that.”

“I might,” he said, surprising them both. “Not that, but I don’t know what I would do, if I had to.”

“Well you didn’t,” she snapped, “and God willing you’ll never need to, but it’s good you understand. Nate and Graham, they always do what’s right, and they’re easy to love, but you and I, we make the nasty decisions they don’t want to touch. You haven’t had to make many yet but I known you could do it since you decided to marry Nate rather than go home.”

“I had to marry Nate,” Tyson said, stopping his struggle with the pig. The day, now he paused for a second to notice, was beautifully crisp, the breeze bringing the smell of cut hay. “There was no alternative; I had no choice.”

“You did though,” she said levelly. “You could have gone home. Someone had to take the hit and you decided it would be Nate, not you.”

“You still mad?” he asked, though he thought he knew the answer, and what she said next confirmed it.

“No,” she said in the same even tone. “I would have done the same, and it was Nate that put the cap on it anyway. You’re a twit and a lazy housekeeper but you done better than many and Nate’s awful fond of you.”

“Nate said I didn’t have to iron the shirts or use a tablecloth,” Tyson said, stung. “By all means. I say you’re making a real cock-up of that pig.”

“Well, missus, that’s because I got no idea what I’m doing,” Tyson said, irritated. “Tastes the same no matter what shape I cut it, anyway.”

“I suppose,” she said. “I came to talk you into coming home with me for the winter, all of you, but if you got almost enough maybe Graham and I can get you all the way there. Is there anything particular you still need?”

“Oh, missus, sugar,” Tyson sighed. “Sugar, and just a bit more flour, enough for cakes and such, and a bit of cheese would make such a difference, you don’t even know.” He hadn’t had the time to bake a dessert in what felt like a hundred years.

“Alright,” she said. “We’ll see what we can do. Where’s EJ?”

“Around back,” Tyson said. “He’s unloading the pumpkins with Johnny.” He watched her until she was out of sight behind the house and then he downed tools and crept along after her, curious to know what she wanted from EJ.

She rode round back and found them, EJ standing in the back of the wagon unloading pumpkins while Johnny watched admiringly. “Hello baby,” she said gently to Johnny. Johnny clambered up onto the wagon seat and leaned forward to kiss her cheek and then laughed when she pulled him onto the horse in front of her. She didn’t really look anything like Nate, who was closer in
appearance to his father, but the gesture was so Nate-like that Tyson felt a twinge of almost nostalgia, thinking of the many times Nate had done the same. “You being a good boy for your Bund?” she asked, and Johnny laughed again.

“Pumpkins, Gran!” he said, which was about right Tyson thought. Three year olds, he had learned, were not very coherent conversationalists, but certainly enthusiastic ones.

“That’s a lot of pumpkins, alright,” she agreed, and let Johnny slide down onto the ground. “You go on and tell Lizzie I want her, will you, baby?” Pleased with his task, Johnny raced off to find Lizzie and Mrs. MacKinnon turned to EJ.

“Johnson,” she said levelly, looking down at him from the horse. “You give Nate and them that pig the boy is making a real hash of out front?”

“I did, missus,” EJ said. “Gave ’em some other stuff too.”

“You alright for the winter?” she asked, and EJ just shrugged.

“We’re alright,” he said, and Mrs. MacKinnon nodded consideringly.

“Mmph,” she said and EJ looked away, abashed, as if he knew what she meant by that and was embarrassed to be thanked. “Nate’s boy says you been good to them, very square,” she went on. “I’ll remember that. Now I know Marnie saw the doctor a few months ago and there was bad news. If I happened to come across a baby or so, just lying about that no one wanted, you think you’d like to have it?”

EJ whipped his head back around to her. “Yes, missus,” he said, “we would. We would very much appreciate that.” He and Tyson knew that the midwife could do what the doctor could not, coming and going without notice, keeping the secrets of the town close. A hidden, unwanted baby would flow through her hands, not the doctor’s.

“You going to treat it nice, like your own?” she asked. “You seen how Nate treats Johnny - you going to do the same?”

“Johnny is Nate’s son,” EJ parroted and Mrs. MacKinnon nodded approvingly.

“That’s right,” she said. “We’ll talk about this again in the spring.” Tyson crept back to his pig. This was clearly meant to be a secret, and he would keep it, even from Nate.

The influx of good food changed everything - the atmosphere of the house lightened and everyone was more cheerful. Nate, having mastered colourwork moved on to Aran patterns, picking apart and repurposing their old, worn sweaters. Rosie learned to crawl, Johnny learned to write his own name, and Tyson learned to make rude noises.

“Hello,” Tyson said, toting in a basin of water and washcloth to Nate’s room. Nate was still trapped in bed. The skin of his leg had healed but Mrs. MacKinnon and Dr. Iginla weren’t confident about letting him put weight on the bones for at least another month. Nate was forcibly maintaining his good cheer but was restive. They had finished 20,000 Leagues and moved on to Around the World in Eighty Days. Tyson hoped Nate’s recovery stayed on schedule; the only book they had left was Anna Karenina and he dreaded to think how that would be received. “Look what EJ taught me to do!” Tyson said. Nate looked suspicious, as well he might, but gestured for him to go on. Tyson put the basin down and proudly burped the first three letters of the alphabet.
“You make me sick,” Nate said but he didn’t sound angry. “Go get Johnny, right now,” he ordered, so Tyson did, puzzled. He had expected Nate would be impressed with his efforts.

“Your Pa wants you,” he told Johnny, picking him up off the chair where he was assisting Mrs. MacKinnon in the preparation of dinner. Johnny clung to Tyson with all his limbs, gripping on as he carried him across the room and Tyson hugged him back. Johnny’s toddler pudginess had begun to fade in the fall; he was developing long legs and thin, wiry arms, and Tyson felt a moment of sorrow at his fleeting babyhood. He’d been so terribly sweet that first winter just as Nate had predicted, a fat, blond bruise learning to sit up and reach for things and then to crawl and wrestle with the bedclothes. It had been a very lean winter, tighter than any other they’d been through together but in Tyson’s memory it was wrapped in a happy haze; he’d spent the long months falling in love with both Nate and Johnny and he remembered it with pleasure. He kissed Johnny’s cheek, still plump and babylke, skin a beautiful light golden colour neither Tyson nor Nate possessed. Tyson didn’t think about him much anymore, but Johnny was growing to look very much like his father, a glowing blond beauty none of the MacKinnons had. Nate was intensely proud of him, carrying him into town to show off at the slightest excuse from that first spring when he was nine months old, Johnny hanging onto the pommel of the saddle in front of Nate, crowing and shrieking as they rode and later gravely shaking hands as Nate had taught him when introduced to any passerby who held still long enough.

“This is my boy Johnny,” Nate would tell them, and although Tyson didn’t think Nate was aware of it, he was telling the town two separate and important things with that phrase. Johnny, unaware of Tyson’s ruminations, leaned over his shoulder and shouted towards the open bedroom door.

“Pa!” he shrieked, practically deafening Tyson in one ear. “Pa! I’m coming!” He wriggled to be let down and Tyson dropped him gratefully; Johnny took off across the wood floor, little boots thumping.

“Don’t touch the bed!” Tyson and Mrs. MacKinnon yelled automatically and Johnny slowed to a saunter as he entered the room.

“Hello Pa,” he said, crashing into the bedframe as always, and Nate winced but said nothing, as always. “How you feeling Pa?”

“Better now you’re here, boy,” Nate said fondly, and Johnny beamed at him. “Now sit down, boy,’ Nate went on. “I’ve got something to show you.” Obediently Johnny sat. “You paying attention?” Nate asked, and Johnny nodded eagerly. “Tys?” Nate said, and Tyson nodded. “Alright,’ Nate said, satisfied, and gulped air like a bullfrog and then held one finger up, eyebrow cocked, to ensure they were entirely focused. Tyson and Johnny watched, transfixed, as Nate took one last gulp of air, swallowed, and then burped the letters A to L. “Eh?” Nate said, waggling his eyebrows and looking pleased with himself. “Eh? What do you think of that?” Tyson was genuinely impressed and said so; Nate graciously accepted the praise as his due. Johnny boggled at him and Rosie gave him a clap, her one party trick.

“My God,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, leaning in the door. “You must be feeling better, you’re back to your repulsive ways.” Nate smugly took a bow from his seat on the bed and his mother rolled her eyes. “Supper’s ready, anyway,” she said. “You want to eat in here all together?” They had installed a small, ramshackle stove in Nate’s room in anticipation of the winter, cobbled together from some pipe EJ had found in his barn and a old steel pail set on a large rock. It was an imminent danger to the children and would sometimes glow an alarming cherry red when it got overheated, but the room was warm and cozy and once they’d dragged the table in, Nate, Johnny, Mrs. MacKinnon and Robbie all yelling directions as they maneuvered it through the door, there was quite a celebratory atmosphere. Tyson was given pride of place and allowed to sit behind Nate, who was stuck facing
forward on the bed with his leg extended, as Tyson was the only one aside from Mrs. Mac responsible enough to hold still and not jostle Nate’s leg. He held Rosie on his lap and the rest of the family sat crowded along the far side of the table.

“Oh, Ma,” Nate said, “watch this.” Mrs. MacKinnon had been back in town for two weeks and was not up to date on their doings. Tyson winced; he knew exactly what Nate was going to show her and she wasn’t going to like it.

“Where’d you get that cap?” Mrs. MacKinnon interrupted, pointing at Rosie, who was looking particularly fetching in her little *selburose* bonnet.

“Made it,” Nate said proudly, and Mrs. MacKinnon gave him a nod of respect. She knitted for speed and efficiency, trying to cloth ten family members as economically as possible and could knock out a sweater in a week but didn’t do fancy work. Still, she knew good craftsmanship when she saw it. Tyson didn’t knit at all when he could avoid it, and thus far in their marriage had managed to, skating by on socks Mrs. MacKinnon had taken to judgmentally giving as birthday and Christmas gifts, and sweaters for Johnny that Nate’s little brothers had grown out of.

“Pass the baby,” Nate said to Tyson, and Tyson passed her over. Nate set Rosie on the thigh of his good leg and looked at her seriously. “Rosie,” he said in his baby voice. “Rosie! You ready? You ready baby Rosie?” Rosie was practically vibrating with pleasure at his attention. Nate was a more doting father than Tyson had ever known or imagined, but barring the winters he was out of the house at least twelve hours a day, six days a week, and he had never spent as much time with the children as Tyson did. Now, however, he had taken over as Rosie’s main caregiver, and as odd as it was for an Alpha to undertake the task Tyson had to acknowledge he was very good at it. He did, however, have some peculiarities in his methods. “One, Two, Three, Roar!” Nate said to Rosie, and she released an earsplitting shriek, just as Nate had taught her, and Nate, Rosie and Johnny fell apart, laughing. Tyson, Lizzie and Robbie were resigned, but Mrs. MacKinnon was outraged.

“And to think,” she said to Tyson cuttingly, “when you two proposed to marry I was worried you were too fancy for him.”

“Joke’s on you,” Tyson said, too cheerful to bother taking offense. It never worked anyway - Mrs. MacKinnon didn’t care if he was offended or not. “I’m terrible at being fancy, no matter how they tried.”

“And you,” Mrs. MacKinnon went on, turning to Nate. “What the hell is the matter with you?” she said. “Why would you teach her to do that?”

“You got no vision, Ma,” Nate said condescendingly, kissing at Rosie’s pudgy cheeks. “Soon we’ll be able to sell her to the circus.” “Eh?” he said to Rosie. “You want me to sell you to the circus?” Rosie crowed and seemed to agree and Nate looked over at his mother smugly. Mrs. MacKinnon huffed but said no more, and they all settled down happily to stewed pumpkin, farmer’s sausage and cream gravy, and the newly lifted potatoes too small to store. There was a blackberry buckle waiting on the kitchen stove, and the last of the cream Mrs. MacKinnon had brought with her. Tyson plowed through his portion and called for more while Nate looked on admiringly.

“Have some liverwurst,” Nate said, pushing the bread towards Tyson. Nate was very proud of that liverwurst; he had ground the meat himself, although Tyson had done the rest. Every leftover scrap of the pigs they had slaughtered had gone into either farmer’s sausage or the liverwurst and Tyson was pleased with his first attempts at both.

“Thanks,” Tyson said, spreading blackberry preserves on top of the liverwurst. He considered the bowl of stewed tomatoes and then added one to the bread. Not bad, he thought, although even if it
had been he’d have gladly eaten it. He looked around the table with pleasure, watching everyone eating. He’d only been hungry for a bit less than two months, and he hadn’t had to watch his children grow thin and weak at all, but he had seen what could have happened very very clearly and he was grateful to have the family gathered around this makeshift table, well fed and healthy.
Thanks for all the kind wishes about the concussion - I am continuing to feel better every day.
Here's another short chapter - does anyone have a preference about short chapters (@5000 words) weekly vs. a longer chapter (@10,000 words) every two weeks?

“Oh look at this,” Nate said the following morning. “The hair’s out and all. Come over here and give me a kiss.” Happily Tyson did, trailing his great cloud of half dry hair behind him. After the good meal last night, everyone was feeling cheerful. Dr. Iginla had been by three days earlier and said Nate’s leg was healing well; Nate had been able to sleep through the night without pain for the last several days and Rosie had slept a solid seven hours the night before - Tyson felt terrific. Sunday morning had dawned crisp and bright and he had raced through the morning chores so he could fire up the stove and wash his hair for the first time in a month. He even luxuriated in the tin bath for ten minutes, scrubbing at the ingrained dirt on his hands and feet and yelling threats at anyone who tried to come out onto the back porch, lest they see him. When he was done, he gave Rosie and Johnny a good scrubbing in the same water and then ordered Robbie into the tub despite his reluctance. He threw a pork roast into the oven for Sunday dinner, Nate’s favourite, and showed Lizzie how to make an edible pumpkin soup and then left her to it. He was going to spend an hour reading to Nate, a luxury they couldn’t rise to any other day of the week. They had only made it through five pages before they drifted off to talking happily about the coming year and further into the future that now seemed possible.

“How’s the leg today?” Tyson asked, and Nate smiled broadly at him for what felt like the first time in a long time.

“Good,” he said, making one sweeping gesture to encompass his leg, Tyson’s hair, the bright light streaming through the window, and Rosie asleep on the bed beside him, looking sweet in her swaddling and little cap. “I feel good, and I got you here with me, and you’re looking so fine, and soon I’ll be able to get up and be some use, I hope.” He paused to cough into his hand, both of them looking at Rosie warily to be sure she wasn’t disturbed, but she slept on. “Look at her,” Nate said fondly. “You’ve done such a good job. I know it’s been hard for you baby but you’ve done everything anyone could have asked, and you did it well.” He drew Tyson forward by his hand, kissed him and rested their foreheads together.

“Not so sure about well,” Tyson said quietly. “I hacked that pig into a thousand pieces,” and Nate laughed.

“I know you did,” he said. “My Ma told me. She said we’ll be eating odd shaped pork for the next three months, but who cares? Tastes the same no matter the shape.”

“That’s what I said!” Tyson replied, pleased by the similarity of their train of thought.

“Better times coming,” Nate said, sitting back. He finally had some colour, Tyson thought, a bright flush on his face. “We’ll have regular shaped pork next year, and plenty of it, maybe enough cash to buy another cow and Rosie will be a big girl, running about. If the wheat’s good I’ll buy you lemons, a hundred lemons and some of the fancy things you’re used to, pretty cushions and such.”
made a rude noise.

“How about a stove that draws proper?” he said

“If you like,” Nate said agreeably.

“Or a girl for the laundry?” Tyson said, pressing his luck. Girls for laundry fell into the category of ‘lazy housekeeper’ both here and at home, but he was aware there were women even here who had them and he desired to send his wash out with great passion.

“Alright,” Nate said. “Whatever you like.”

Jamie would be very pleased with him, Tyson thought; look at him managing his Alpha. Although, secretly, he knew the word managing rang hollow - knowing that Nate would happily hand him anything they could afford if only Tyson asked for it meant there wasn’t much managing required, really. Still, it felt a very grown up, married, adult Omega thing to do, so he luxuriated in the feeling. Perhaps the fact that Nate was so easy to handle was more a testament to Tyson’s prowess than not? And he had done a good job, just as Nate said, doing a man’s work and not snivelling, at least this most recent week, and even EJ had grunted “not bad” at him recently. Nate smiled as if he knew what Tyson was thinking and Tyson smiled happily back. He had done what he would never have thought he could, and done it well, and he should be pleased with himself, and he was. If his father would have been appalled, well - Nate wasn’t, and that was enough.

“A stove and a girl for the laundry,” Tyson said dreamily, and Nate laughed and squeezed his hand.

“And a girl for the laundry,” Nate agreed, “soon as we can afford it.” He coughed, a long wracking spasm - he had caught the cold Johnny had shaken off easily the previous week.

“Don’t tell your Ma about the laundry,” Tyson said, starting awake. “She won’t like that.”

“I’m a married man,” Nate said grandly. “I’ve got two children and my own farm; I’m not afraid to tell my Ma I put out the laundry.” Tyson looked at him doubtfully. “Well,” Nate said, a little sheepishly. “I didn’t plan to tell her until we found the money, anyway, so that could be some time.”

“Good,” said Tyson, settling back. “And maybe another baby?” he went on, sounding Nate out under the guise of dreaming of better times to come. Mrs. MacKinnon had explained to him how preventing babies worked and it was apparent Nate was going to have to be involved. They hadn’t had much opportunity or desire to do anything that might produce a baby in the two months Nate had been bed bound but it was on the horizon now. The idea of controlling pregnancy was quite new to him; he’d never considered it something anyone could control, much less a decision he could make for himself, and he was interested to hear what Nate made of it. He’d had no understanding at all of how it worked; Mrs. MacKinnon had had to engage in some very plain speaking.

* 

“Well he’s going to notice that,” Tyson had said, shocked, after Mrs. MacKinnon had explained the mechanics to him.

“Yes,” she said, “I suppose he would. But he’s the one that’s got to finish outside or buy them from the drug store, you know, so he was going to notice anyway.”

“From the drug store?” Tyson had said, voice rising to a horrified squeak at the end; his nerves had already been rattled by the explanation of what she meant by ‘outside’. “Just walk right up in the sight of God and everyone and call his order out?”
Mrs. MacKinnon had fixed him with a gimlet eye. “I’m going to talk about this to Nate;” she had said in a very chilling tone. “And I expect you to agree when he asks you later unless you want 10 children as well?”

“No, missus,” Tyson had said feebly. He felt sure that any protests about Omegas never having more than three would just irritate her, and left off. “Thank you,” he had added, and meant it. Thank God there was someone to explain all this to him, he had thought; if Mrs. MacKinnon’s facts of life were somewhat coarse and abrupt, at least now he understood what was happening.

“Oh no,” Nate said quite seriously, disturbing Tyson’s musings, “no more babies, not for some time. Not till we got enough money to feed them all, and then we can go to town, as many as you like.” It sounded like his mother had gotten at him too, Tyson thought, because this certainly wasn’t the song he’d been singing a year ago.

Tyson had never previously given one second’s thought to whether they could afford more babies, or even Johnny and then Rosie, and he was taken aback at the suggestion. It was of course an Omega’s duty to have as many babies as was possible, but he had considered only whether he would like them, not the inevitable expense. After seeing Nate’s clear delight in Johnny, he had regarded Rosie as something of a love gift to Nate, and when she was born a girl a wondrous, unexpected gift to himself. Of course they couldn’t afford them, and he suddenly felt quite ashamed at his lack of forethought. “Sorry Alpha,” he whispered, appalled at what he had done, burdening Nate so young with two children so quickly. He knew Nate loved them, he didn’t question that, but that was only due to Nate’s good nature; Nate would love any little thing put in front of him. But maybe he hadn’t wanted them, at least not yet.

“Hey,” said Nate, jerking at his hand gently. “Cut it out. I knew better than you that you were likely to catch if we knotted, and I still did it, you recall?” Tyson nodded. “And I wanted that baby, maybe more than you did,” Nate said fiercely. “I damn sure wanted Johnny more than you did. You want to hear a secret I’m ashamed to tell you?”

Tyson looked up at him. It was hard to imagine what Nate could be ashamed to tell him. He had always been strikingly unashamed on the subject of babies and how to get them. “I wanted my own baby too,” Nate whispered. “I know it’s not right or fair and Johnny is my boy but I wanted to get another on you and so I did, damn the money or timing. It made me feel you were mine, though I know it’s wrong. I wanted one made of us both, and I wanted her to be a girl and I wanted her soon after Johnny so people could see I treated them the same, and I got it. I don’t care if we can’t afford her, I wanted both those babies. I got everything I wanted and I’m not sorry.”

“Did you really?” Tyson said beaming at him, spirits restored. “That’s because Omegas are lucky.”

“That’s because I was 19 and I fucked you every time you’d hold still for it,” Nate said a great deal more prosaically.

“I never hold still,” Tyson said perfectly truthfully, and Nate laughed.

“No, you don’t, do you?” he said. “You wriggle cause you like it.”

“I do like it,” Tyson said nostalgically and Nate sighed agreement and coughed again, a little harder.

“Ah, well,” he said, looking down at his thigh. “We’ll be back at it soon enough, I guess, and we can be careful this time and try to hold off on more babies for a while.”
“Alright,” Tyson said, happy to agree although he knew Nate was fussing unnecessarily as Omegas never had more than three babies. Only a few ever had the third - he’d never heard of an Omega having more. He didn’t think it was possible. Still, if Nate wanted to hold off on even the chance of a third for a while it was fine with Tyson. He knew it was his duty but he had never been one of those Omegas like Jamie who wholeheartedly longed for children and he didn’t mind a pause although he did think he’d like one last one eventually that looked like Nate. He entirely understood Nate’s desire for one of his own; he had wanted to give Nate one of his own. It took nothing away from Johnny, who would always hold the position of First, first baby, first boy, first grandchild, Nate’s first son. Tyson sighed happily. Perfectly in accord, roast pork with pumpkin soup and pie still to look forward to and a great deal of enthusiastic rogering in the more distant future, he felt everything was going right, at last. Nate had drifted off to sleep and he left him to it, heading out to check on the soup.

Nate woke, flushed and coughing harder at dinner time, but he insisted he felt fine. He didn’t make much work of the pork though, Tyson noticed, and uncharacteristically he laid down to sleep again right after dinner.

“Nate’s snoring sounds strange,” Tyson said to Mrs. MacKinnon, emerging from the bedroom where he had been feeding Rosie, and she stiffened where she was bent over the dishes. She had been caring for Mr. MacKinnon for the last two weeks and Tyson could see the strain on her. She had told them Mr. MacKinnon had had another attack of his kidney trouble, but Tyson wondered if it was more than that - he had been surprised she was willing to spend any time away from Nate, and wondered if Graham was worse than she was saying.

“Yes?” she said calmly, but she looked worried as she headed into the bedroom, and when she reappeared five minutes later she looked worse. “I think he’s got pneumonia,” she said, sitting at the table uncharacteristically still. “I thought this might happen; you can’t sit there that long taking laudanum without getting water in your lungs, but I hoped…” She petered off and Tyson poured a cup of tea and nudged the sugar towards her. She pushed her dirty hair back away from her face and suddenly she looked old, old and exhausted.

“No,” Tyson whispered, though he didn’t dispute her diagnosis. She wouldn’t say it if it wasn’t true. He knew pneumonia killed a full half of the people it touched, and Nate was already weakened by poor food and fighting off infection in his leg. “What are we going to do?” Tyson asked. Mrs. MacKinnon always knew what to do.

“The only thing left to you,” she said. “We got to go all in on Nate getting better, because if he don’t you’re fucked. He’ll need a full time nurse and medicine from the doctor. We’re going to have to borrow more.”

“From who?” Tyson said hopefully. “And what if he still doesn’t get better?” The only prospect they had of paying off the money they already owed was years of backbreaking work to make the farm pay. If they borrowed more and Nate died, they would lose the farm: they would lose all their holdings, EJ would be brought to the brink of disaster and Tyson would be left in penury. The only mercy was that as an Omega Tyson could not be held legally responsible for the debts; this same fact meant it was virtually impossible for him to find a source willing to lend to him.

“If he doesn’t get better?” Mrs. MacKinnon said hollowly. “If he don’t. Well. You could marry again, to keep the farm long enough to make the grant terms, but then of course it’s in that man’s name not yours and I reckon you’d put up a real fuss anyway if you had to marry again sharpish?”

Tyson nodded. He’d had a taste of the real thing with Nate and he wasn’t accepting any imitations. If Nate died they would be reunited in the afterlife and he aimed to meet Nate there with a clear conscience, able to say he’d been waiting on him. He wouldn’t be remarrying, no matter how
extreme the circumstance, and no man would ever touch him again. He knew she had to have a plan. She always had a plan.

Mrs. MacKinnon belted her tea in one go and looked up at Tyson. “We’ll do our damndest to see he doesn’t go - but if he does, then the thing to do,” she said, “seems to me, is pray God Nate holds on til Robbie turns fifteen in two weeks.” She held up a hand to stop Tyson as he drew breath to refuse. “Don’t make a fuss!” she said. “It’s only paper - you marry Robbie and the farm stays in your hands. Once the grant is met, we sell it, pay Johnson off, and you come back with us to town and divorce if you feel you got to. But we’re going to have to find the money for the doctor, right now.”

“Marry Robbie,” Tyson whispered, horrified at the audacity of her plan. It made perfect sense; it would allow him to keep control of their only asset and certainly he would be the dominant partner in the marriage. Robbie was still very much a child in Tyson’s house, grouped together with the younger MacKinnon children in the family thinking.

“Well you don’t got to consummate it, at least not right away,” she said, and Tyson blanched. He hadn’t even thought of that aspect of the matter; he would not be consummating squat, especially not with Robbie. Once the farm was sold they could divorce he supposed, now that it was legal, but it would taint Robbie’s prospects indefinitely and he couldn’t believe strategic Mrs. MacKinnon was suggesting something so disadvantageous to Robbie. The very idea was a sign of her affection for Tyson and he appreciated it while also being repulsed.

“Robbie,” he whispered again. Robbie, who still had to be nagged out of bed, Robbie, in a half grown man’s body but still very much a child, the little brother of four older sisters, petted and cosseted and indulged. He was a good boy, but he was no Nate. “Well,” he said, marvelling internally at himself, not crying, not going to pieces or shutting down wailing at the suggestion, just managing it. “No need to worry about divorce, Kathy. We’d be able to annul that marriage instead.”

“Oh would you now?” she said, eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” he said, “Yes, I think so. There’ll be none of that.”

“Robbie’s a good boy,” Kathy said, testing the waters, “but I don’t know he’s so patient as Nate.”

“I don’t know that I care,” Tyson said, surprising both of them. “No, I don’t think I care how patient Robbie is. How resistant is he to being kneed in the crotch?”

“About average,” Kathy said, laughing and leaning forward to grip Tyson’s hand tightly. “Come on. We got a hundred things to do yet and Robbie needs to go for the doctor again. No need to worry about marrying now - first we got to get the doctor and find the money for the nurse.

“Doctor said he was coming by this way today anyway, he should be here soon,” Tyson told her, and she sighed.

“All right,” she said. “99 things left to do. Let’s get going.”

Face grave, Dr. Iginla confirmed Nate had pneumonia. “You’ll understand what he needs, Mrs. MacKinnon?” he asked, and she nodded. “Skilled nursing,” he went on. “There’s medication that can help but the only thing that can save him is - “.

“- a nurse,” she said. “He needs a trained nurse to have any chance at all. Can you get one?”

“I can,” Dr. Iginla said, “but it’ll cost, and the medicine too. I can wait a bit for my pay, but the nurse
and the druggist won’t wait.”

“Yes,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, “get the nurse. We can pay, though I’d appreciate it if you’re willing to wait a bit for yours.” Dr. Iginla inclined his head in acknowledgement and looked at Tyson, who had been completely ignored throughout this exchange.

“Thank you,” Tyson said and Dr. Iginla looked at him gently.

“We’ll do the best for him we can,” he said, “but you need to understand it’s not a good outlook. This came on very fast and it seems a severe case. It’s in both lungs, and he’s going to need a great deal of luck as well as very skilled nursing and invalid food.” Tyson said nothing but he reached out his hand and Kathy gripped it.

“Just get the nurse,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, sounding unutterably weary. “No purging, though,” she added and Dr. Iginla nodded in agreement.

“An outdated treatment,” he said. “I have a lady in mind; I’ll send her first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Thank you,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, and he departed. She slumped back at the table and stared bleakly at the tablecloth she had insisted on using. Tyson sat down across from her. Lizzie, Robbie and Johnny were out back merrily carrying on at some game, unaware of what was happening inside, and Rosie was asleep again. Tyson leaned in across the table; Kathy was crying.

He felt sick to his stomach. He had never seen Kathy crying over anything short of her baby’s deaths - she hadn’t shed a tear even when Nate first broke his leg and during those terrible few hours they had thought he would die.

“Kathy?” he said, reaching out for her arm tentatively.

“Graham’s not well,” she said, looking angry with herself even as she continued to weep. “Don’t tell Nate!” she added sharply, looking up and Tyson nodded. “Alright,” she said, and went on.

“Graham’s not well at all. He’s much worse than I told you. Doctor says his kidneys are failing and I don’t know that I can leave him for long right now. And the money - we just can’t find the money. We’re already in hock to the doctor for Graham’s fees and Nate alone will run another hundred dollars, at least, with the nurse. If we scramble and beg and borrow, maybe, maybe we can afford the medicine and care for one of them. The other one’s going to die.” Tyson let go of her arm and sat back.

“We could split the money between them,” Tyson suggested, but he knew the answer to that before she said it.

“Then they both die,” she said roughly, and he knew it was true. Half measures were not enough. “Only one’s going to live,” she said, angry. “Maybe not even that, but we’ve got to choose. Who’s going to live?”

“I don’t know, missus,” Tyson said. If Kathy couldn’t weigh the facts and make the rationale choice, how could he be expected to? Nate was young and Graham seemed very old to him; on the other hand, Graham’s survival seemed more possible and he had seven children left to raise where Nate only had two. He didn’t know who had a greater call on the money and he didn’t really care. He wanted to throw all their resources at Nate, but he knew better than to say this to Kathy. “What should we do?” he asked her and she swiped at her eyes angrily.

“You and I,” she said, “we do hard things because we have to. But this one is too hard for me boy. I can’t make that choice.”
“Is it God’s will, maybe?” Tyson asked, not really thinking he wanted to give up and just let Nate die, but struggling to understand why they were beset again and again by disaster. Mrs. MacKinnon’s hand shot out and grabbed him punishingly hard around the wrist.

“Don’t you goddamn dare,” she hissed, as angry as Tyson had ever seen her. “I will pit my will against God every time, if that’s what it takes. I will keep one of them alive and by Jesus you will help me. No more talk of God’s will.” Silently Tyson nodded.

“Anyway,” she went on, calmer. “It’s not God’s will either anyhow. People just get sick.” She paused and looked at him for a long time. There was a challenge in her gaze and desperate resignation. “I know which one you’d choose, boy,” she said. “But I love them both. And I know something else, too. I know who Graham would chose.”

“What will we do?” Tyson asked again and she heaved another sigh.

“We’ll begin,” she said. “And hope to continue.”
“Pneumonia?” Nate said disbelieving, and then descended into another wracking cough. He was a terrible colour and Tyson could see the flush he had thought was healthy just that morning was actually fever. “Yeah,” Nate said grudgingly once he caught his breath. “Alright. I thought it might but I hoped not; I feel like shit.” He looked up at his mother. “Sorry Ma,” he said, and she looked back at him, no sign of her tears of only a few hours ago.

“Oh, well,” she said airily. “It’s no trouble to me, boy. We’re going to get you a nurse and all, so it’ll be no extra work for us.”

“Jesus,” Nate said, sitting back against the pillows. He was still holding Tyson’s hand, his grip firm and staunch, different from two months ago when he’d been so weak under the laudanum. Tyson felt it must be a hopeful sign. “What’s that going to cost?”

“A great deal,” Mrs. MacKinnon said softly, and Tyson looked over at her but her face stayed calm. “We’ll find it, don’t worry about that.” Nate seemed to accept what she was saying at face value and Tyson was surprised he was so easily gulled. Still, mothers, Tyson thought. One was inclined to believe them.

“And sorry to you too, baby,” Nate said. “You’ve done so well but you’re going to have to be in charge a while longer, looks like.” Internally Tyson quailed but externally he tried to imitate Mrs. MacKinnon.

“We’re going to send Johny back with your Ma,” he told Nate, “and she’s sending Sarah to me instead of Lizzy, so there’ll be hardly any work at all. We don’t even need Robbie anymore.” Robbie had been a giant pain in the ass, sleeping through the morning, avoiding chores at every turn, alternately sullen and argumentative. Mrs. MacKinnon had just rolled her eyes when complained to.

“Fourteen,” she had said, as if that was explanation enough and maybe it was but Tyson couldn’t believe Nate had been so awful at that age. “That’s sweet,” Mrs. MacKinnon had said when Tyson expressed this belief, but she didn’t employ a tone that suggested she thought it was sweet at all. “You’ll see,” she had added, glancing at Johnny, sounding like a Cassandra.

“Alright,” Nate said, sounding exhausted. “You got time to sit with me for a minute?” Tyson nodded and Mrs. MacKinnon left them alone. Nate sighed and squeezed Tyson’s hand again. “This is becoming a habit.” Nate said, but he didn’t seem to have enough energy to get worked up about it. “Now look. If I die what you’ve got to do is - “

Eager to avoid any discussion of his death or money and to let Nate know he had everything well in hand, Tyson interrupted and explained their plans to him - oddly Nate didn’t seem at all soothed.

“Robbie?” Nate said incredulously. “Robbie?” His face turned a terrible colour and for a moment Tyson wasn’t sure if he was enraged or laughing. Mercifully, he began a weak laugh, interspersed with gasps. “My God,” he said, still an awful colour. “You’re just cursed with husbands who have no idea what they’re doing in bed.”

“I’m not going to, you know, with Robbie,” Tyson said crossly and Nate stopped laughing and looked at him seriously.
“No, you’re fucking not,” he said. “You’re not *you* knowing with anyone else, and you’re not marrying anyone else because I’m not going to die. You’re stuck with just me.” He reeled Tyson in by his hand and nuzzled his cheek. “Now come and give me a kiss and make sure you put a bit of the Omega luck into it, and then let me go to sleep so I’ll be as strong as I can.”

Tyson did so, carefully kissing him on the cheek rather than the mouth, and Nate sighed. He held out his hand to stop Tyson from leaving. “But if I do,” he said, and paused. “Do it. Marry Robbie, sell the farm, live with Ma - you do what you think is best. You’ve managed so far, I got faith you can handle the rest.” Tyson had absolutely no confidence he could manage any part of the next several days but he didn’t want to let Nate see that, so he just nodded and left the room.

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“I told him what you said about Robbie,” Tyson told Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Well,” Mrs. MacKinnon said grimly. “That’ll take his mind right off the constipation.”

*  

Tyson and Mrs. MacKinnon had decided between them Sarah could replace both Lizzie and Robbie given the reduced outdoor work as they moved into winter, and had packed them off with Johnny in tow early on, Nate still asleep in the bedroom. Now they talked over the money problem again. “I could sell my tea service?” Tyson suggested. It was the only wedding gift of real value that had survived the fire. He knew it had cost about $500 when it was given to him, but he had no idea what it could command now.

Mrs. MacKinnon waved a weary hand, knocking the suggestion away. “No call for that out here,” she said. “Anyone that could afford it wants it new, anyway. I wonder could we sell one of the horses?”

“How much do we need?” Tyson asked. He had no idea what a trained nurse cost.

“15 dollars a week and maintenance,” she said. “For at least one month, barring his death sooner.”

It wasn’t so much, thought Tyson, but it was an absolutely insurmountable sum nonetheless. They simply couldn’t scrape it up from any source, the doctor’s fees having decimated their reserves already.

“And food,” Mrs. MacKinnon went on. “Pneumonia patients can’t eat heavy food - it’s not like the leg, the different food’s necessary. And the medicines, and the doctor - he’ll need all that to have any chance, so maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty all told. And Graham needs the same, less the nurse. Can’t do it,” she summed up. They stared at each other hopelessly for a minute and then Mrs. MacKinnon went to lie down on the bench seat at the side of the room, a shocking sign of her complete despair and Tyson was left to glance nervously at her and stare out the window thinking about where they could find the money.

It was not the Sunday afternoon Tyson had been expecting when he woke so full of good spirits. Nate was asleep, his rasping snores ominous in the quiet house, Rosie asleep in her basket in the small bedroom next to Nate’s, and Tyson sat alone at the table, thinking hard. Where were they to get the money for the nurse? EJ couldn’t help them anymore, he knew. He heard a horse’s tack jingle and looked out the window; Alpha Yakupov was there. Since Nate had been laid up there had been a regular string of visitors, some to enquire genuinely if they could assist, some to test the waters with regard to a potential deal on the farm, some to drop hints at truly offensive personal offers they suggested Tyson might want to consider. Tyson paused to consider. Nothing he owned could be
traded for the money he needed, but he was still the Räajenboagen and perhaps he had other things to trade. His favours alone were a very great thing to those who believed, and only a few years ago he had been worth 150,000 dollars. He raced back to where Mrs. MacKinnon was still lying on the bench. “Kathy!” he hissed. “Kathy! Yakupov’s on the porch; let me talk.”

“What the hell is he doing out there?” she snapped, but it wasn’t with her usual vigour; they both knew exactly what he was doing out there. The news had taken only a few hours to spread.

“Being useful,” Tyson said, “whether he planned to or not. I think he might be the fix we’re looking for but his mother won’t like it; I got to convince him first. Let me talk.”

She looked at him doubtfully but nodded. “Hair up or down?” he went on, and she looked up, startled, but then understood. There was a pause while she considered him for a second and then moved forward to help him get the pins and ties out quickly. He had pulled it back in one thick braid with an old shoe lace when the doctor came; he hadn’t had time for the hour long process of properly braiding and pinning the crown. Thank God he had washed it just this morning.

“Down,” she said, nodding to herself. “That’s just private, not naked, have I got that right?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, mouth full of hairpins. Alpha Yakupov had probably seen his sister with her hair down, and doubtless his mother, but he had almost certainly never seen more than a glimpse of an unrelated young woman’s hair loose and he had sure as shit, Tyson thought to himself, never been slapped in the face with this. The time spent on the farm with Nate, even with the hard winters, had been the only time in his life that he had been able to eat as freely as he liked and between that and Rosie’s recent birth his hair had grown longer and thicker than ever. It was down to mid thigh when it was loose and the natural curl combined with the braids to produce a wild halo of curls once he shook the braids out, curling and waving like a living, protective thing all around him.

“Alright,” Kathy said, looking at him judiciously. “Wait - take this.” She handed him a pristine white hanky from her apron pocket, pushing it into his hands. “In case you need to cry,” she said, and then pinched his cheeks to redden them.

Alpha Yakupov looked taken aback when Tyson emerged onto the porch but greeted him properly, right hand over his heart, with a slight bow. “Omega,” Alpha Yakupov said from his horse. “How are you? I’ve been out on my claim but I heard you’ve had some trouble.” He sounded genuinely concerned and Tyson believed he was, unlike some of the other visitors who had come solely to try their luck. However, even though he was sincere Tyson knew Alpha Yakupov also genuinely believed the best solution for Tyson would be a retreat into an Omega cloister, possibly one provided by Alpha Yakupov after Nate’s convenient death, and Tyson had no intention at all of doing that.

“Alpha,” Tyson said, looking at the ground. “Thank you for coming, that’s very kind. I’m sorry you find us so unprepared. Would you like to come inside for a minute?” Alpha Yakupov looked unsure; Tyson could see he didn’t want to be rude but was also unwilling to be alone in the house with Tyson. “My mother in law is in the kitchen,” Tyson added and Alpha Yakupov relaxed.

“Thanks, I will,” he said, “I’d be grateful for a drink before I head back.” Tyson waited for him on the porch, thinking about his next move as Alpha Yakupov tethered his horse. Tyson opened the door with correct Omega submission and ushered Alpha Yakupov into the house.

“Alpha,” Tyson said, waving Nail on to the kitchen. “Please. Can you give me one minute while I settle the baby?” Alpha Yakupov nodded and Tyson zipped back into the house. Frantically he tucked, pinned and primped in the second bedroom where Nate couldn’t see. He looked down at Rosie where she was sleeping and considered whether she would be a useful prop or not. On the plus side he recalled Yakupov had seemed fond of babies. On the other hand, she was a reminder
that he and Nate had had marital relations at least once, and that Tyson was married to another. Her eyes popped open, roused by Tyson’s presence and she began to wriggle in her wrappings and then smiled gummily. The smile decided him and he quickly changed her napkin and wiped her face so she was as fresh and sunny as she could be, and wrapped her loosely in her best blanket. Where Johnny had been a remarkably large baby, cheerful and charming as any healthy child, Rosie was notably beautiful, dark hair and huge dark eyes making a picture. She really did look exactly like him, Tyson reflected. It couldn’t hurt. He took a deep breath, picked Rosie up and gave her a kiss and headed back to the kitchen. Kathy had Alpha Yakupov seated at the table, kettle on the stove. Tyson approached to an appropriately demure distance and sank elegantly into a formal kneeling posture, eyes on the floor. Rosie had gotten one hand out of her wrappings and was firmly entangled in his hair. It was like the world’s largest cockleburr; she was pulling at a lock and trying to eat it as she twined herself deeper into the mess. He hid his wince and concentrated on the formal manners he hadn’t used for so long.

“May I speak, Alpha?” he said to the floor, and Mrs. MacKinnon made a low grumbling noise but held her tongue.

“Of course you can, Omega MacKinnon,” Alpha Yakupov said, and Tyson looked up carefully at him.

“May I join you at the table?” Tyson asked, and Alpha Yakupov jumped.

“Of course,” he said, sounding chagrined, “of course.” He rose in a fluster and pulled a chair out for Tyson. “I’m sorry,” he said, another sign that he hadn’t grown up in the Observant Community. “I should have thought and said already. You can speak and look at me whenever you like, Omega.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Tyson said, rising gracefully with some effort as Rosie was trying to pull to standing from his arms using his hair to do it. He smiled demurely at the floor and walked slowly and elegantly to the table, resisting the urge to grimace and wrestle Rosie away from his head. An Omega did not display strong emotion.

“A girl,” Nail said wonderingly, looking admiringly at Rosie.

“A very great blessing,” Tyson murmured, completely sincere although the blessing was currently ripping a handful of hair from his head and he couldn’t shriek and flail his arms as he wanted to, since it would doubtless spoil the effect.

Rosie smiled broadly at Nail, her affections indiscriminate at this age and Alpha Yakupov smiled back, charmed. “Would you like to hold the baby, Alpha?” Tyson asked, and when Yakupov nodded eagerly he handed her over via the table, pausing for a second with Rosie cradled carefully in his arms while they both looked straight at Yakupov, making sure he saw them together, looking as like to a prettily posed picture of the Omega Virgin and Child as Tyson could get. Mrs. MacKinnon brought the tea service to the table and thumped it down, still looking irritated.

“Tea, Alpha?” Tyson said, holding the cup out in a classic Omega service pose. Yakupov gestured at the table, allowing Tyson to set the cup down in front of him rather than taking the cup out of his hands and risk making contact. Nice manners, Tyson thought to himself. Alpha Yakupov hadn’t grown up in a Observant Community but he was clearly appraised of many of the rules.

“Young husband must be very pleased, to have a girl by an Omega,” Yakupov said, and Kathy looked at him curiously.

“Yes Alpha,” Tyson said submissively.
“What do you plan to do about that?” Yakupov asked and Tyson darted a look at Kathy. She still looked puzzled.

“It’s for my Alpha to say,” Tyson said, hoping Yakupov would move on and luckily he did.

“Do your people believe a girl means the Lord’s favour?” Nail asked, and Tyson nodded.

“We do, Alpha,” he said.

“Yes, mine too,” Nail agreed. “But also it means любовный матч, a love match,” he went on, looking at Tyson curiously.

Tyson wasn’t at all sure where Yakupov was going with this, but he murmured agreement.

“Do you love him?” Nail asked abruptly. He looked uncomfortable directing such a personal question to an Omega but he still asked.

“I do,” Tyson said. He wasn’t sure what answer Nail was looking for but there was no point in trying to lie.


“No,” said Tyson simply. He hadn’t, and there was no point in lying about that either.

“How did he make you love him?” Yakupov asked.

“Ummm,” Tyson said. He wasn’t too keen to get into the specifics, which had essentially been an unrelenting regime of daily civility and heavy petting. “Like anyone else, Alpha,” he said. “He was kind, and we grew together.”

“But you’re not like anyone else,” Nail pointed out. “You’re special.

“I’m not so special, Alpha,” Tyson said, trying to make it sound more like modesty than disagreement.

“You’re the Räajenboagen,” Yakupov disagreed. “You need to be taken care of and I’m not so sure MacKinnon knows what you need.”

Tyson’s stomach roiled but he knew his cue. “Do you know what I need, Alpha?” he said, looking demurely down at his hands but carefully leaning forward in supplication. Mrs. MacKinnon looked like she was going to have a rupture but stayed silent.

Yakupov cleared his throat after slightly too long. “You need an Alpha to take care of you,” he said. “Someone to make the proper choices for you. I heard rumours in town about you doing man’s work,” he added and looked at Tyson searchingly. “Tell me that’s not true, Omega.” Tyson looked away.

“I’m sorry, Alpha, it is,” he whispered. “Someone had to get the hay in.”

“Have you been doing the field work?” Nail asked, aghast.

“Some,” Tyson acknowledged. EJ had recently told him he was “about a quarter as useful as someone who knows what they’re doing”, so some seemed about right. Yakupov looked horrified.
“You say you love him and I respect that,” Yakupov said. “It’s a great thing to earn the favour of the Rüajenboagen but nature made you weaker, body and mind, and MacKinnon should be mindful of that when he makes decisions for you.” He took on a tone of kindly scolding. “You absolutely cannot be in the fields, shaming yourself among men. I’m surprised I have to remind you of this.”

“Yes Alpha,” Tyson murmured again, but inside he was steaming. What did this fool think he should have done instead? Prettily starved to death to spare Yakupov’s feelings?

“I’d be glad to help,” Yakupov said, finally adding something useful to the conversation.

“I would be grateful for any assistance, Alpha,” Tyson murmured passively.

“I don’t think what you’re doing is right, you know,” Yakupov said, face scrunchsed up in thought. “God set you here, the living Covenant, to remind us all and you need to be with folk who respect that, though your Lord doesn’t seem to object and you look happy enough. But you should be with your people in Community where you can be taken care of and protected during your trouble.”

“Yes Alpha,” Tyson said, looking down at his teacup. He was surprised every time he had doings with Alpha Yakupov at his interest in Tyson’s happiness and purity both. He wondered how they must treat their Omegas. “I have, as you say, had some troubles, and I would welcome an Alpha’s advice.” He paused, not sure if Nail understood what he was getting at.

“Speak,” Nail said, and Tyson wondered again where he was getting the correct response from. Were their people so similar?

“My Alpha is very unwell,” Tyson told him. “He has pneumonia and we fear for him. His father is unwell and far away, and all his brothers are too young. Alpha Johnson doesn’t understand our ways or know what I am. I need direction from an Alpha I can rely on.” Nail sighed and leaned forward.

“If you were in Community,” he said very gently, “this problem wouldn’t exist. There would be family and Community members to take care of you.” Tyson couldn’t gainsay it. If he was still in Community, there would have been a hot meal delivered twice a day, Aunties to care for the children, a dozen younger Alphas ready to take over the farm for however long it took, the Community Emergency Fund available to him. An Alpha family member to direct him. The larger Community structure would have enfolded him and cared for him while his Alpha was incapacitated.

“Alpha,” Tyson said, “Alpha that’s all very true. Thank you for your counsel. Perhaps I should return to my Community.” Tyson very carefully put one hand to his throat and trailed a finger down it slowly, trying hard to look frail and worried. He certainly felt worried, though he wasn’t so frail. He’d packed maybe ten pounds of muscle on since his first marriage and he knew he wasn’t as delicate as an Omega should be, but he was still the person that Alphas had come from the mainland just to look at in church. “Alpha,” he said, in the low, yielding tone he had once thought was his real voice, “Alpha, I need to ask you for direction. My husband is here; my children are here. The Lord has given me a girl, Alpha, and I believe the Lord has convicted me to stay.” He folded his hands on the table and glanced up through his eyelashes to see what Yakupov was making of this. Yakupov was staring at him, transfixed, and Tyson bit his lower lip gently, tilted his head very slightly and widened his eyes. “Alpha,” he said, and then corrected himself. “Alpha,” he whispered. “Alpha, please tell me what to do.” He had a sudden, strong urge to make a hacking noise like a cat with a hairball but refrained.

Yakupov just continued gawping at Tyson for a minute until he cleared his throat and finished his tea. The baby was propped in the crook of his right arm, happily slapping at the buttons on his shirt, and Nail unconsciously adjusted her as he leaned forward, one big hand splayed over her belly to keep her upright. Tyson had the same strange disjointed moment he remembered from two years ago
in Olson’s pond when Johnny was near her age. Rosie could have been Yakupov’s daughter. It wasn’t so fanciful as all that; she looked a great deal more like Yakupov than Nate with her dark hair and eyes - perhaps she would have been their daughter, if Nail had gone against his mother and said yes.

“You need a Little Brother, Omega,” Yakupov said earnestly. “If you can’t go home you need a Little Brother to care for your interests.”

“Do I?” Tyson said, internally cheering as Yakupov walked down the path he wanted.

“You do,” Yakupov said definitely and set down the tea cup.

“As you say, Alpha,” Tyson said graciously. “Whatever you think is best.”

“Will you accept?” Nail asked him formally, and Tyson looked down at his hands demurely.

“I accept, Alpha, and thank you,” he said.

“Alright,” Nail said. “That’s settled. I’ll get going now then, and I’ll be back tomorrow morning. You alright for the moment?”

“I am, Alpha, and thank you,” Tyson said again, and it was as simple as that. Nail wished them goodbye, Tyson on his knees once more, and was off. They waited until the clatter of his horse was out of earshot and then Mrs. MacKinnon hauled Tyson to his feet.

“The Lord talked to you, did he?” she said wryly.

Tyson laughed. “He didn’t tell me not to,” he said.

“Close enough,” she agreed. She sat back down and poured both of them another cup of tea. Without asking she began to spoon sugar into Tyson’s. “Yakupov says he’s going to come be your Little Brother,” she said with clinical interest. “That’s not what you want, you need money. And how does he think that’s going to play out, anyway? Does he think Nate’ll die and he’ll just take over?”

“He’s not so wrong,” Tyson said. “If I were in Community that is what would happen, most like. Little Brother’s meant to be a younger cousin or a real brother - you’d almost never get a unrelated Little Brother, that’s just a scandal waiting to happen.”

“You didn’t mention that when you let Nate stay with you,” she said, and Tyson laughed.

“And look what happened,” he said. “Scandal! And that’s why his mother would never allow him to be my Little Brother. She’ll be here with him tomorrow and she’ll be glad to loan me the money instead of letting him live with me.” Mrs. MacKinnon laughed.

“He’s a good man,” Tyson went on, trying to get his hair back in some semblance of order. There was no point to rebraiding it now, he was going to have to redo the crown entirely for Yakupov’s visit tomorrow. “He’d probably help anyway, but you know his mother controls the purse strings and I’m not so sure she’s willing; a little extra push never hurt, it’s an awful lot of money.” He finished with his hair, pulled his shirt out where he’d tucked it into the waist of his pants and slumped back down out of the formal posture that sat so oddly on him now.

Mrs. MacKinnon was watching, flabbergasted as he shed his Omega manners. “I didn’t know you could do that,” she said. “I always kind of assumed you didn’t really know what you looked like, somehow.”
“I know,” Tyson said sourly. “Trust me, I know. They made damn sure I knew. I used to practice in the mirror.” He slurped his over sweet tea rudely and looked about for a biscuit.

“Does that work on Nate?” she wanted to know.

Tyson shrugged. “I got no idea,” he said honestly. “If I want something I just ask him civil, and if he can’t, he tells me why. He doesn’t require pretty begging.” He paused and thought. “Anyway,” he went on, “if I wanted to sway Nate, I’d be better to just strip down and use an apple turnover as scent. Nate’s not a demanding man; you feed him, you fuck him, he’s happy.” He realised what he had just said to Nate’s mother and clapped his hands over his mouth, horrified, but she was laughing so hard her eyes were watering.

“Oh my God, you dirty bird,” she said, still laughing. “You took my mind right off everything, and I wouldn’t have thought you could do that.

It was still only late afternoon, just time to check on Nate and then feed the stock. His Sunday day of rest hadn’t proven very restful yet Tyson thought as he headed for the barn and his thinking was right. The hiring of a nurse seemed to have spread the news about Nate far and wide; Alpha Duchene was standing outside tying up his horse and Tyson looked on him with no little disfavour. He wasn’t over fond of Alpha Duchene, and hadn’t missed his presence. Still, he addressed him politely; there was no reason to make enemies. “Hello Alpha,” he said, eyes trained on the ground. It felt very odd after so long without, odder than when he spoke to Alpha Yakupov and he realised he hadn’t missed this either, navigating the demanding rules of his own people. It seemed to be his day for Orthodox manners.

“Omega,” Alpha Duchene said. There were no inquiries about Nate’s health or how Tyson was coping. “Got a letter here,” Duchene went on coldly. “Gustav Landeskog wrote the Victoria Kolonie and they forwarded it on to me as the only Orthodox Alpha in town. It’s just like I said; they aren’t so pleased about an Omega got Landeskog baby being raised by a Reform farmboy, especially one that was barely legal when you married.” He looked at Tyson and waited for his response. Tyson stared back at him, at a loss. “They want to know what you’re going to do about his father’s rights,” Duchene added.

“Nate is Johnny’s father,” Tyson said, puzzled. Surely Duchene knew that?

“Keep a civil tongue in your head,” Alpha Duchene snapped, and Tyson realized he had forgotten to append ‘Alpha’ and had looked up directly at Duchene. “You know as well as I do MacKinnon’s not that boy’s father.”

“Alpha, he’s my husband,” Tyson said very softly, looking away to avoid further offence.

“Laajna!” Duchene barked, the first time Tyson had heard a word of Platt spoken in three and a half years. “You’re meant to be the Gotteslausm, and you’re spinning lies like this? You can call him your husband all you like but you know the Community hasn’t sanctioned it, and it don’t make him that boy’s father. An Omega only ever has one husband and a child belongs to his sire.”

The feeling of being trapped between the truth and the demand he agree with an Alpha was unfortunately familiar to Tyson, and he didn’t like it any better than last time he’d experienced it. “I only have one real husband, Alpha,” Tyson said quietly, but he didn’t think Duchene quite took his meaning.

“That’s right,” Duchene said encouragingly. “I’m glad to see you’re going to be reasonable about
this. That MacKinnon boy won’t last long anyway, not with pneumonia in both lungs.” He held out what Tyson assumed was the letter from Gustav Landeskog, in a battered manilla envelope. “Now you’ve had a turn of luck,” Duchene said, all civility so long as Tyson appeared to agree with him. “Landeskog’s twin just had an Omega. Gustav Landeskog’s willing to settle for the return of the boy. He’s not demanding you come back too, even though you’ve been proven to breed girls. Can’t say fairer than that.”

Tyson looked at him, confused. “But Johnny’s only three,” he said. “He can’t go visiting alone.” Mr. Duchene looked back at him scornfully.

“Now you keep sweet about this,” he said warningly. “I don’t want a fuss. Landeskog’s not suggesting he visit, he’s telling you to send the boy back to live with his kin.”

“What!?” Tyson yelped, and Duchene backhanded him across the face.

He wasn’t braced for it in any sense; no one had hit him for so long he went right down, physically and emotionally. He hit the dusty ground, and instead of scrambling back up and continuing the argument as he had done so many times before, back in his pre-Nate life, he stayed down, shocked, gawping up at Duchene. Duchene didn’t think anything of what he had just done, Tyson knew, but Nate would have been murderously angry and Tyson himself wasn’t so sure, now, that Duchene had the right of it, belting him. He didn’t feel at all chastened, or improved in any way; instead he felt he would do whatever Duchene wanted long enough to get him gone and then save this little encounter up, just really hone his dislike, until Nate was well again and then enjoy the ensuing whoop ass. Duchene was going to regret this. He never for one second considered the possibility that he might obey and send Johnny to Sweden, or go himself.

“Get up,” Duchene ordered, and Tyson climbed back to his feet. It was only when he saw the look on Duchene’s face that he realised he should have stayed kneeling. He was entirely out of practice.

“You did what you had to, to survive,” Duchene said, “and I understand that, I guess, although it shames you. But you know that marriage ain’t valid.”

“The Reform church,” Tyson began, although he knew it was a wasted effort, and Mr. Duchene cut him off with a gesture.

“You aren’t a member of the Reform church,” he said contemptuously. “There’s one true church and you know it.” He looked at Tyson and Tyson looked back, considering his odds if he ran. “Kneel!” Duchene thundered in the Alpha Voice and Tyson dropped again like a stone. Alpha Duchene’s voice washed over him. “They want the boy sent off before the New Year,” Duchene said. “If you got any sense you’ll travel with him and ask them to accept you back into the Community. Children that travel alone tend to arrive in a different condition than when they left. They sent a cheque with funds for you to travel - I don’t suppose you have any way to cash it without your Alpha, so I changed it for you.” He drew out a small pile of banknotes and dropped them by Tyson’s feet along with the letter. “That’s $400, enough to buy first class passage for you and the boy to Sweden. I’ll be back in a week to see you onto the train,” he said. “And you’d better be ready.” Duchene swung back on his horse, uninterested in Tyson’s reaction. He clearly expected no opposition and Tyson wasn’t going to be stupid enough to give him any.

“And why is your hair down, you slattern?” Duchene asked as he rode off, half abstracted as if he expected no better from Tyson. “Don’t you have any self respect?”

Tyson sat on the ground, stewing over the encounter for some time. Then he gathered up the money, stuffed it into the envelope carefully and carried on to the barn. The animals still needed water and feed whatever else might happen. When he returned to the house Kathy was still seated at the table,
cold tea in front of her, looking worried.

“I been thinking about the money,” Kathy began and Tyson pulled out the envelope.

“Yeah,” he said. “About that.”

“Well now,” Kathy said very softly, after he finished his story. She took the pile of bills and tidied them into a neat stack and tapped it on the table. “Will anyone go short without this? Will any children be hungry, or good men shy of care?”

“No,” said Tyson. “They’re rich. It’s nothing to them.”

“How rich?” she asked.

“Well, then,” Kathy said very softly, after he finished his story. She took the pile of bills and tidied them into a neat stack and tapped it on the table. “Will anyone go short without this? Will any children be hungry, or good men shy of care?”

“No,” said Tyson. “They’re rich. It’s nothing to them.”

“How rich?” she asked.

“Very rich,” he said. “They paid $150,000 bride price for me.”

Her eyebrows rose. “And did you see any of that?”

“No,” he said. “That went to my parents.”

“And what did you get out of it then?” she asked, and Tyson shrugged.

“Sold to a scared boy who hurt me,” he said, “and Johnny.”

“Yes,” she said, tapping the money again. “You got Johnny. And they sent this money to you?” she said, still softly. “For you and Johnny?”

“Yes,” he said, and Mrs. MacKinnon cleared her throat decisively.

“Well then,” she said in her normal tones. She set the money on the table in front of him. “I reckon that money is yours, to do as you like, and I certainly never seen it, and I’ll sleep just fine. What you going to do with it? You going to Sweden?”

Tyson picked the pile up and fanned it out. He created four smaller piles. “One hundred to the nurse,” he said, laying a pile on the table, “and maybe there’ll be some left.” He laid a second pile down. “One hundred for the doctor’s fees, for Nate and Mr. Mac both.” He wasn’t unaware that the MacKinnon family resources had been disproportionately directed at him and Nate for the last several years. He had had time and money and food and support from the older MacKinnons, all while they had seven other children to feed and clothe. He put one more pile down. “One hundred for good food and medicine for Nate and Mr. Mac, so they can get better,” he said, “and the last hundred in reserve until they’re well, and then it’ll go to the debt to EJ.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, and scooped up one of the piles and tucked it into her shirtwaist. “Good boy.” She looked at him closely. “Why you so upset?” she asked, and he broke and started to cry.
One more long chapter next week with unhappy bits to go, and then we're back to fluff!
Negotiations

Chapter Notes

I lied, sorry, it got too long and had to be split into two chapters, so one more chapter after this and THEN fluff, I swear.

I think the tags cover it but this chapter contains physical violence and creepy sexual touching of people's jaws.

Mrs. Yakupova appeared first thing after breakfast, Nail trailing behind her with several bags. “You could have just asked,” she said wryly, clocking Tyson sitting prettily behind a full formal tea service, braids oiled and perfectly arranged, best shirt ironed so that his collarbone was displayed to advantage without a button being scandalously undone, shirt carefully tucked and pinned at the back below his belt to show off his waist and sleeves folded back one turn to allow a glimpse of his wrists. “For me?” she said, knowing full well it was not. “I will have some tea, yes,” she said. “Tea and some chit chat, hey? Sit down, Nail,” she added, and he did.

“Yes, missus,” Tyson said, absently noting Mrs. Yakupova’s english was miles better than she had allowed them to think when discussing marriage to her son three years ago.

“Nail came home and said you need a Little Brother and you have no plan to leave this place. Is so?” she said.

“Yes, missus,” Tyson said again, handing over the tea formally.

“Mmm,” she said, inspecting his homemade sour milk biscuit judgmentally and then deciding it passed muster and dunking it. “I hear you believe in germs, or some such.”

“Yes, missus,” Tyson said. “Cookie?” He passed the plate of fancy imported Peek Freans, opened solely for this momentous occasion and Mrs. Yakupova cast one glance at them and looked away contemptuously.

“Really?” she said, and clicked her tongue. “From store. I think not. You think Nail is so stupid he is seduced by pretty looks and cookies made by infidels?” Alpha Yakupov was sitting silently beside her trying to telegraph apology, humiliation and his ability to resist seduction, but it wasn’t working and he just looked like a young man overpowered by his mother. Mrs. Yakupova looked over at him and rolled her eyes. “OK, probably he is, and that’s why I come.” She took another biscuit and tore it in half. “Not terrible,” she said grudgingly. “Butter?” Tyson opened the flowered butter dish with a flourish. The porcelain tea set had been one of the few things to survive the fire and he’d never been more grateful. Mrs. Yakupova ate the biscuit slowly, eyeing Tyson with disfavour the entire time.

“So,” Mrs. Yakupova said. Tyson kept silent. “You want a Little Brother, hey? You’d do better to go home, to your Community.”

“My husband’s still alive in the backroom, missus,” Tyson said. “How can I go?”

“You like your husband?” she asked, sounding idly curious. Both the Yakupovs seemed very interested in Tyson’s marital happiness.
“Yes, missus,” he said again, wary of her temper.

“That’s nice,” she said. “It’s not required but it’s nice to have. You understand your first two children would never be accepted as part of our community?” Tyson understood exactly what she was saying; evidently negotiations began now.

“I can’t go back,” he said, looking straight at her. “And I don’t want to remarry. The children belong to Nate’s family and so do I. I don’t want to marry your son. Molasses cake?”

“Little bit,” she said, taking a small piece. “We could maybe talk about you keeping the girl.”

I don’t want your son,” Tyson said again, peeking at Alpha Yakupov apologetically, Nail surprised him by winking at him and flustered, Tyson turned back to Mrs. Yakupova. “I’m not negotiating another marriage,” Tyson said. “But if I had to it would be within the family. If Nate dies I’ll marry his brother then sell the farm. I don’t need a new husband - all I need is a Little Brother.” He couldn’t believe he was in a position where he was insisting he was going to marry a 14 year old.

“So you say,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “Little Brother? We all know how that ended last time - I don’t think so.”

“Mama,” Alpha Yakupov began and his mother silenced him with a look.

“Nail is a good boy,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “But soft hearted, and my only son. If he stays here two weeks even, he’ll think he loves the children and maybe you too.” Tyson made a moue and offered the molasses cake to Nail. He wisely declined.

Mrs. Yakupova sighed and sipped her tea. “I can’t stop him,” she said to Tyson. “I can’t stop him if he takes it into his head to do something stupid. But I can block your older boy from coming with you and I will, and I’m asking you not to do this.”

“I don’t want to take anything from you,” Tyson said, carefully leaving but I could unspoken. There was a brief pause as they all sipped tea.

“No jam?” Mrs. Yakupova asked irritably, when it looked like Nail might dare to say something else. “I can’t drink this tea without jam.” Tyson got the jam. Mrs. Yakupova ate another biscuit. “You let the milk sit out?” she asked, “or add vinegar?”

“Vinegar,” Tyson said, and she grunted as if even this displeased her.

“Alright,” she finally said, sitting up and dusting off the biscuit crumbs. “What do you want if you can’t have my son as Little Brother to marry when your husband dies?”

“I hired a nurse missus,” Tyson said. “God willing, my husband will not die, not now.”

“Oh ho,” she said, eyes sharp. “Now we get to it. You need money for the nurse?”

“Yesterday,” Tyson said, “when I asked you here, I needed money. But now I need protection.”

“Wait,” Mrs. Yakupova said, holding one hand up, and Alpha Yakupov looked very interested as well. “Where’d you get the money for a nurse since yesterday?”

“Don’t ask,” Tyson said and her eyebrows shot up.

“You been keeping the covenant?” she asked accusingly and suddenly Tyson was fed up with this stupid talk. He thumped the steak knife they had been using to cut the biscuits point first into the
“They sold me,” he said, voice shaky with anger and upset. “I am the Räajenboagen and still they sold me. They put their hands on me in anger and sent me far from my home. They hurt me and did things to me I didn’t understand and then left me unprotected. I married outside the Community to keep myself from worse in Sweden and through all of it I have carefully hallowed God’s name with my body and done as I was told. Do not ask me if I have kept the covenant because everytime, despite all of this, I have.” He wrenched the knife back out of the table and smoothed at the hole in the wood, feeling silly. It was the only good table knife they had and now he had blunted it in a fit of dramatics. “I don’t want another husband,” he said, more calmly. “I want the one I have to live, the one who treated me kind and honoured me.” Mrs. Yakupova looked startled but still skeptical.

“You better be,” she said nastily. “You’re causing us a lot of trouble here, and I won’t be bothered for someone that isn’t pure.”

“Mama,” Alpha Yakupov said gently, putting his hand on her arm. “Leave it.” Mrs. Yakupova gave him a tight lipped look but subsided. “She shouldn’t have asked you that,” Nail said to Tyson. “You are the Räajenboagen and we respect that. You are a pearl in its shell.”

“Well,” Tyson huffed, appeased by the familiar phrasing. “Thank you.”

“They love each other, Mama,” Nail said to his mother, half commanding, half imploring. “We can help.”

“I was always going to help him,” she said tightly, still in english for Tyson’s benefit. “But I don’t got to help by giving him my only son as his third husband.”

“Since you ask,” Tyson interrupted, feeling there had been enough talk of third husbands, “last night Alpha Duchene gave me money from the Landeskogs to go back to Sweden but I’m using it to pay the nurse and buy food.” Alpha Yakupov barked a startled laugh but his mother just settled back in her chair.

“What do you need then?” Mrs. Yakupova said, leaning forward.

“All I need is for you to buy me time,” Tyson said. “Long enough for Nate to get better. Duchene says he’s coming back next Sunday to see me onto the train for Sweden and I don’t think he’s going to take no for an answer, especially since I took the money.”

“Easy,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “Don’t take Duchene’s money.” She waved expansively. “You are the Räajenboagen - money we can give. We will give, but we sent the year’s earnings back home last week and used the rest to buy the winter supplies. We will have to wire to Yakutz for the money; a month, maybe a little less.”

“I don’t think Duchene is going to be satisfied by that,” Tyson said doubtfully, but even as he said it he could see by their faces they didn’t understand how Orthodox Duchene was. Return of the money was not going to stop him.

Mrs. Yakupov upped her offer. “No Little Brother, but Nail will stand for you as your Alpha until your husband is well and tell Duchene he will not allow you to leave. But!” she said holding up one finger. “Nail will not stay in the house, he will not be alone with you, and you can just keep your hair to yourself. We’ll come back Saturday after supper and Nail will sleep on the porch. On Sunday we’ll tell Duchene Nail will make good for the money and you owe him nothing. You need us before that you send for us.”
“Done and thank you, missus,” Tyson said, genuinely grateful. He had gotten everything he needed and it had cost him nothing but formal manners.

“I’m coming too,” Mrs. Yakupova said warningly. “And I’m old,” she added, “and I need a real bed. You got one for me?”

“Oh yes,” Tyson said, grateful Rosie and Sarah were small enough to easily sleep on a pallaise on the floor. “And we’ll pay you back soon as we’re able, though it might be some time.”

Mrs. Yakupova simply gestured as if brushing away a fly. “Omegas are lucky,” she said. “Maybe your husband will live, Inshallah. We will do a good deed either way and gain the gratitude of the Räajenboagen, and Nail will not get any stupid ideas about pretty faces. Either way, for the Bund, no loans. We will give.”

“Thank you,” Tyson said again. Negotiation done, he offered the plate of cake around again and this time Nail took a slice. Mrs. Yakupova slurped her jammy tea and looked around, satisfied.

“Not bad,” she said, taking another bit of the molasses cake and laying it approvingly on her saucer. “Fancy dishes.” Nail reached for a Peek Frean and she slapped his hand, quick as lightning. “Stop trying to eat things made by infidels!” she snapped and Nail subsided.

“Aren’t I an infidel?” Tyson asked idly, looking at the untouched plate of cookies which he was planning to gobble as soon as the visitors left.

“Räajenboagen’s made by Allah,” Mrs. Yakupova grunted, twiddling with her teacup. “Mohammed, Jesus, all the prophets who cares, all the same God, so long as you truly believe. The one God made you as a covenant and we respect that. You think I’m fussy but I’m not so fussy; eating biscuits you made in the same pan you cook pig in, most like.”

“I’m afraid I did, missus,” Tyson said, feeling terrible. It hadn’t even occurred to him, and if it had, there was nothing in the kitchen untouched by pork.

“Ugh,” she said, waving it off. “The Lord, He knows I do the best I can, that’s all I can do.” She set her tea cup down with a decisive clink and stood, ushering her son out. “We’ll be back Saturday,” she said and trotted out the door, Nail trailing behind her.

Nail popped his head back around the door frame just as Tyson was standing to clear the table. “Forgot my bag,” he said, heading for the table to fetch it. “Missus,” he said, nodding at Mrs. MacKinnon. “Printessa,” he said to Tyson and Tyson knelt down before him correctly. He was taking no chances of disturbing their arrangement. Alpha Yakupov paused and looked down. “I’m engaged, you know,” he told Tyson.

“No idea,” Nail said, perfectly cheerily. “Never met her, but her family’s very respectable. My friend Alim says she’s pretty, and sweet. We’re going to marry when I get home in the New Year. Maybe if I’m as kind to her as your husband she’ll love me, maybe not, but either way I’ll be back home with my people. Mama’s right, you know - even with the full weight of my family our community would never accept your oldest boy, and I don’t think you’d be happy without him.” Mutely Tyson nodded. “I don’t think you’d be happy at all if you had to marry a third time, would you?” Nail said gently. “Printessa, if you wanted me to love you I would try. But you don’t want that, do you? You just want help, and that I can do for you with a good will and then I’ll be glad to go home and marry a nice girl, and tell my friends I helped the Räajenboagen who the English treat so badly. Maybe I’ll give Matt Duchene a thumping and he can see how he likes it.” Tyson looked up from his position
on his knees and Nail smiled at him.

“I see now you won’t go,” Nail said, “You’d be better off in Community and they shouldn’t let you run around like a man, but if you’re so set on staying here I’ll help you do it. But don’t tell Mama,” he said, putting one finger to his lips in an exaggerated gesture. “She thinks I’m stupid, but I’m only a little stupid, and this way she’s happy to help.” He smiled at Tyson again, gave him a correct goodbye, right hand over his heart and left, pausing only to snatch up a Peek Frean and cram it in his mouth. Tyson stared after him as he went, open mouthed.

After dinner the nurse, Mrs. Brown, arrived accompanied by Sarah. She was a tall woman of indeterminate age, disagreeable, bossy, abrupt and entirely competent. She made her range of duties - No cooking for the family, no laundry, no cleaning outside the sick room - extremely clear. Nate, Sarah and Mrs. MacKinnon disliked her on sight but Tyson liked her brusqueness. She reminded him of his aunties back home. “You a boy or a girl?” she snapped at Tyson. Surprised, he stuttered “Omega, missus,” and she looked at him with disdain.

“No such thing,” she said definitely. “Boys is dirty and try to grab you and aren’t allowed in my sick room; girls keep clean, can cook and are allowed. So which is it?”

“Girl,” Tyson said. “I’m a girl.” It was nothing to him what misapprehensions she wanted to labour under, and he was getting in that sick room by hook or by crook. “Want to see my baby?” he said, eager to prove his girl bona fides. He held Rosie up before her trying to soften her with Rosie’s charms, but she was not charmed, not at all.

“Keep it out of my sickroom,” she said. “I’ll need quiet in the house, and beef tea, milk puddings, boiled eggs and oranges if you can get them for the patient three times a day. He’s on a light diet from now until 14 days after the fever passes.” Everyone else in the room winced; Nate had not been receptive to the light diet of convalescence over the past months. There had been yelling and threats. “I’ll need my pay first of the week, no exceptions,” she went on. “No pay and I walk, and the patient dies.” Tyson and Mrs. MacKinnon nodded, overawed.

“No purging,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, and Mrs. Brown looked irritated by her presumption but answered civilly enough.

“No purging,” she agreed. “That’s the first sensible thing I’ve hear you bunch say yet. It’s an outmoded treatment and I’m a scientific woman, a graduate nurse. And I won’t have any interruptions in my sickroom management, you hear?” They all nodded, impressed by her certainty. “Alright,” she said. “Get out!”

Tyson was allowed in for 15 minutes after Nate’s bed bath. Nate looked stunned and thoroughly under Mrs. Brown’s thumb. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been so clean before,” Nate said musingly. “My God.”

“Did she wash all of you?” Tyson whispered, half scandalized, half amused.

“All of me,” Nate confirmed. “Every little bit, with the scratchiest flannel God created. It was like being dragged through a hedge backwards while the hedge makes insulting remarks about your cock.”

“Didn’t!” Tyson said, and Mrs. Brown banged back into the room.

“Yes I did,” she said definitely. “Best to begin as I mean to go on and the patient needs to understand
one body’s the same as another to me. I’m a married lady, I seen it all before and better, god rest Mr. Brown’s soul.” Tyson and Nate paused to digest this information and Mrs. Brown turned to the pair of socks on the table. “You make this?” she asked Nate, turning over the top of the uppermost sock to inspect the back. “Your floats are tight,” she said disdainfully, and flipped the sock back at Nate. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you how to do strandwork?” Nate’s eyes practically bugged out of his head with rage and Tyson watched, fascinated. Nate sagged back onto the pillows. Clearly his spirit was willing to make a hell of a fuss but his flesh was weak. Mrs. Brown was unmoved.

“You know how to make a mustard plaster?” she asked Tyson.

“Yes,” he said tentatively.

“Oh jesus,” Nate said. Nate had a particular antipathy to the smell and taste of mustard.

“Shut up,” Mrs. Brown snapped at Nate. “You want to live, you’ll do as I tell you.” There wasn’t anything Nate could say to that, so Tyson just grimaced at Nate sympathetically as he was borne out of the room to be instructed on the proper way to make a plaster and what foods he was to collect in town.

Tyson examined the invalid diet sheet Mrs. Brown had written out for him. It contained things that seemingly made no sense: old bread, but never new, cucumbers meant an instant decline; items so rarified as to be fantastical - champagne? What good could that do Nate? - and items that were frustratingly commonplace but simply didn’t exist in Denver in late fall. There was no fresh cod or hake to be got at any price. The things they could do, beef tea, barley water, arrowroot, eggs and milk he secured, the last by way of purchase of a nanny goat and her tiny, charming baby. Certain items were easily had but Tyson had his doubts about their reception; plain gruel, although perhaps the recommended addition of port or sherry, neither of which they had, would have made it more palatable, and water toast which was he supposed at least better than toast water, also on the list. Raw eggs beaten in coffee they could manage; poached rabbit or quail was perhaps possible, but he simply could not countenance trying to feed Nate raw mutton and sugar sandwiches no matter their availability. He cleared out the General store’s stock of Shippam’s meat pastes and several tins of canned butter, ordered a hideously expensive side of beef and the canning jars to preserve the beef tea in and called it a day.

“My God,” Tyson said, reeling back with surprise. He had not expected this. Between the weight loss and the hair, Nate looked about 15 and much diminished. He was sitting hunched over a steaming bowl of hot water and menthol, a fire roaring in the rickety stove. Mrs. Brown sat in a chair beside the stove, irritably knitting. It appeared she had picked apart one of Nate’s projects and was redoing it the way she felt was correct.

“What you looking at me like that for?” Nate asked. “Come, come, give me a cuddle - She says don’t kiss me but you can sit beside me for a minute.”

Tyson sidled in, unnerved by Mrs. Brown’s glowering presence even though she remained silent.

“What happened to your hair?” he whispered.

“She says it keeps the brain cool when the crisis comes,” Nate said shrugging, and indeed he had a noticeable fever though he also seemed to be feeling the cold; he was bundled up in a shawl crossed
over his chest and pinned in place.

“Do you want your hat?” Tyson asked, moved enough by Nate’s illness and sad state to offer to fetch the hideous fur cap Nate loved so much.

“She already saw it,” Nate said sadly. “She says no.”

“She is the cat’s grandmother,” Mrs. Brown interjected testily, but Nate ignored her.

“She said it looked like a typhoid sink and it was a wonder it hadn’t killed us all, and it was only good for being pissed on by dogs,” Nate went on, sounding increasingly offended but Tyson experienced a moment of real sympathy with Mrs. Brown. He’d often thought the same but never dared to say it.

“Well, maybe later,” Tyson said and at a loss for anything else soothing reached up to pat Nate’s head. He was allowed now to sit beside Nate on the bed so long as he was extremely careful not to jostle the bad leg.

“Hrrmph,” Nate said grouchily but leaned into Tyson’s hand. They sat like that for the 15 minutes Mrs. Davie allowed, sides pressed close together, Tyson patting at the thin stubble on Nate’s freshly shaven head, Nate’s eyes closed and head on Tyson’s shoulder. Tyson listened to the clack of the knitting needles, the fire in the stove and Nate’s raspy, slow breathing as Nate gradually fell asleep. It was very strange, Tyson thought, to sit and support Nate like this, Nate so lessened and enfeebled by illness that he was more like a child than the head of the household. He’d though he would feel better once he was back at home with the food, a concrete thing he had done for Nate and the bulk of the fall harvest done but he was still terrified, waiting for Duchene’s return in six days, waiting for the crisis of Nate’s illness to determine if he lived or died, waiting for the winter snow to blanket and enclose them, a period of trial and danger he would have to navigate alone even if Nate lived. He felt resentful and angry that Nate had failed him like this, growing ill just when Tyson needed him, and then guilty at his unreasonable anger.

Finally Mrs. Brown got up and came to take the bowl of water away; she set it on the table and then carefully put one hand on Nate’s chest and gestured to Tyson to be silent. She listened to Nate’s breathing for several minutes and then gestured to Tyson to leave. “He won’t die tonight,” she said absolutely certain, and Tyson decided to take it at face value. He slid carefully off the bed, trying not to wake Nate but Nate roused a little and opened his eyes. He looked momentarily confused and heartbreakingly young.

“Go back to sleep,” Tyson whispered into Nate’s ear, hoping Mrs. Brown couldn’t hear. “Don’t die. I got all kinds of expensive things for you to eat.”

“Oh boy,” Nate said and fell back asleep.

* *

The rest of the week passed in a blur of late season preparation for the winter and worries about Nate’s rapidly worsening state. Although Mrs. Brown seemed to regard it as a normal course of illness, watching Nate grow weaker and struggle for breath was painful and terrifying. Tyson spent as much time as Mrs. Brown would allow sitting with Nate, watching him breathe while he slept and reading to him while he was awake. Just the movement of his chest and his rasping breath was a comfort, proof Nate was still alive. Every night Mrs. Brown ordered Tyson to bed, assuring him Nate wouldn’t die that evening. Tyson had no time to worry about Duchene’s planned return. “Not tonight,” Mrs. Brown said Friday night, hand on Nate’s chest, but for the first time she sounded uncertain.
He woke Saturday morning aware of the fact that Duchene would return the next day, rose and checked on Nate. “Tonight,” Mrs. Brown said, standing at the door of the room, barring his access. “It’ll be tonight. The crisis will come and he’ll live, if his heart can stand up under the strain. I’ve done what I can and now he needs absolute quiet and nothing to excite him at all. Do you understand me?” she said fiercely, and Tyson nodded. “Not a sound!” she said. “You keep that baby silent, not a raised voice or dropped pot.” Solemnly Tyson agreed and tiptoed out to the barn. EJ was still coming down one day a week to help but he hadn’t arrived yet and Tyson needed to get started feeding the animals, no matter how sick Nate was.

Matt Duchene was in the front bay, still sitting on his horse. “Well?” he said, looking at Tyson. “You packed to leave?”

“No, I -” Tyson faltered, completely at a loss. He had expected to have Alpha Yakupov here well in advance of Duchene and to have Yakupov do all the talking.

“Alpha,” Duchene reminded Tyson, looking extremely displeased. “You address me as Alpha, if you must speak at all.”

Tyson tried to gather himself and prepared to spout some bullshit to buy time, but just at that moment EJ stomped past the open barn door, entirely naked, hair matted down with brown mud. He was clearly unaware of his audience and cursing up a storm. From the look of things, Tyson suspected the goat had gotten him in the back of the knees again while he was standing next to the slurry pit. Maisie was sneaky like that. “Jesus motherfucking gooddamn fucking goats,” EJ said bitterly, confirming Tyson’s suspicions. The timing was unfortunate as Duchene saw him too and was moved to action.

“This is completely unacceptable,” Duchene said. “You come along right now, and you can stay with us in a decent household where you’re properly taken care of and managed until you leave. We won’t be having anymore of this.” So saying, he made a grab for Tyson’s collar from the horse but Tyson dodged. He had a fairly clear idea as to what Mr. Duchene meant by ‘managed’ and he didn’t care for it, especially the part where his children were separated from him as tainted English. Duchene’s eyebrows raised and he snapped out “Kneel, Omega,” in the Alpha Voice, but Tyson, insulated by marriage to his own Alpha, managed to stay on his feet and skittered back a little further, warily watching Duchene.

“Alpha,” he began, hoping he could still smooth this over, but Duchene simply dismounted and walked slowly towards him.

“This is worse than I had even imagined,” Mr. Duchene said. “You’re awful bold.” Tyson remembered what Mr. Duchene had proposed years ago as the cure all for bold Omegas, hours of kneeling on rocks in a stress position, and nothing about it appealed to him. He thought he could probably make it away from Mr. Duchene, now he was off the horse, if he could just get past him and reach the door but sadly he had underestimated Mr. Duchene’s reach and the Alpha lunged out and caught his arm. “Kneel,” Duchene thundered and Tyson dropped, Duchene’s hand falling away.

“What is the matter with you?” Duchene said, almost wonderingly. “Why are you acting like this, so contrary to the will of the Lord? Have you abandoned your belief, living out here among the English?”

“No Alpha,” Tyson said, and he hadn’t. He believed Matt Duchene should fuck right off.

“Are you ready to go, then?” Duchene asked and Tyson, although he knew he shouldn’t, told him the truth.
“Not going, Alpha,” he said. “I won’t leave my husband and I won’t send Johnny.”

“I suspected something of the sort,” Duchene said. “I heard you hired a nurse and bought a load of food. That was the Landeskog’s money, given to you to follow their instructions, and yet you disobeyed.”

“Alpha,” Tyson tried. “Alpha! Alpha Yakupov, he speaks for me, he has decided for me, I cannot go,” but Duchene wasn’t buying it.

“An unbeliever, worse than the English,” he said. “You’ll turn to anyone, won’t you, anyone who tells you what you want to hear.” He moved one step closer to Tyson and Tyson cringed internally. Duchene was not following the Orthodox script as Tyson knew it and he had a sinking feeling he knew where Duchene was going with this.

“You lose the protection of the Covenant when you abandon the rules of the Covenant,” Duchene said musingly. “Without the Covenant, what are you? Just another slut, walking around exposed, at the mercy of anyone.” He reached out a hand towards Tyson but halted it just before he touched him. Duchene stood there, his hand almost touching Tyson’s neck while Tyson knelt, staring down at the straw on the floor, holding his position and trying to seem unconcerned as he would if under the sway of the Voice, but secretly tensed against the possibility of Duchene’s touch. Discipline aside, no Alpha but Nate and Gabe had ever touched him and to have Duchene touch him while he held himself still for it would be a great violation. At least Gabe had had the right to touch him. Duchene did not.

Duchene’s hand trailed very softly, two fingers barely grazing Tyson’s neck, behind his ear and travelled to the point of his jaw where no one, ever, had touched him but Nate and Tyson shuddered internally but stayed still, everything in him devoted to holding his position, holding his appearance of compliance long enough to escape, a facade of stillness and softness and placidity designed to mislead. He thought he was like a rabbit, still and frozen while the fox was about but heart still alive and quick, waiting for his chance to run.

What would Nate say, Tyson thought, and in that moment could almost hear Nate’s voice, whispering direction to him. Hold, baby, Nate said, wait, and he did.

He let his body take over, obedient to the commands while his mind remained his own. He felt himself pull away from his body as he had done for many years, blunting the impact of discipline, and then he shifted very slightly, even that a violation of Omega obedience; his knee caught a sliver in the floor that poked him and he was jolted back into himself, the light and dark of the barn shadows, the sweet smell of the hay, his knees aching and his fingers tightly clamped in the approved position, all of these immediate and real, his body and perceptions belonging to him again, and the sense of peril returned but he also felt thrummingly alive, filled with rage he couldn’t allow to surface.

Duchene bent slightly towards Tyson, to do what Tyson didn’t know, and Go, Nate whispered to him. Now. Now’s your chance, and Tyson burst upwards, catching Duchene unaware and tried to sprint out the door.

He almost made it too, but Duchene swung an arm out at the last second and caught his shirt and then used it to reel him in as Tyson frantically tried to wrench himself away. Duchene ignored his efforts and punched him, once, hard, in the stomach and then when Tyson was bent over gasping, punched him again in the side of the head. “You don’t say No to me,” Duchene said, face twisted and red with rage, and punched Tyson again in the ribs. Tyson had never before been hit with a closed hand and even as he tried to fight back he was aware of how much more dangerous this was than anything he had ever experienced before. Duchene, Tyson realized, was prepared to go much
much further than he had imagined.

*Fight,* Nate said and Tyson did, silently, unable to scream or call out lest Nate hear it, but it was no use and Duchene got several more shots in at his ribs and gut.

“Let go of me,” Tyson hissed, and even as he said it he could hear himself and was filled with fear. He didn’t sound angry or threatening, he sounded panicked, and he was. It was going to be a matter of seconds before Duchene got a good enough swing at him to knock him unconscious. He was pretty sure he would wake up in an even worse situation, probably a locked room in Duchene’s house, ostensibly for his own good. He had very limited legal rights of his own, and the rights Nate had to him were of no use if no one knew where he was.

Without any warning Duchene backhanded him across the head, knocking him to the floor. “Get up!” he ordered and Tyson pushed himself back onto his knees. Duchene pulled him up to his feet by one arm. “I told you that infatuated boy would ruin you, and I was right,” Duchene said, taking another swat at him. He dodged Duchene’s swing and thought of Mrs. MacKinnon’s advice to him when he first began to tentatively conduct business on his own at the store and men would howl at him as he passed the saloon.

“First you lie,” she had said. “Be nice if you think it’ll work, say anything you think will get rid of them. If that don’t work, you tell them you’re married to Nate Mac and he’s coming to join you any minute. And if that don’t work, and they lay hands on you, kick them in the balls and run.” He’d never had occasion to move beyond the second step, but he had seen Molly kick Nate in the crotch once; Nate had turned green, crumpled to the ground, and been incapacitated for a good ten minutes. He’d spent the evening sitting in a cool bath complaining and the following week riding very gingerly. Tyson drew back his leg, waited for his chance and kicked. Duchene’s hold on Tyson’s arm released and he fell to the barn floor.

Panting, Tyson caught hold of the pitchfork leaning in the corner and brought it down on Duchene’s neck. *Kill him,* Nate said, and he didn’t.

“Get out,” he said instead, letting the tines press against the flesh of Duchene’s neck, but not quite pierce the skin. Duchene swatted at the fork and Tyson pressed down a little harder. “Get out,” he said again. “Get out and never come back.”

Duchene, apparently made of sterner stuff than Nate, climbed slowly to his feet. He looked absolutely murderous but he was moving very hesitantly and clearly didn’t have the strength to engage with Tyson again. It took him a couple careful tries but he managed to mount his horse. “Oh I’ll come back,” Duchene said grimly. “I’ll be back with the sheriff tomorrow and you can explain to the law where my money is.” He spurred the horse directly towards Tyson and Tyson stepped aside, pitchfork pointed down. As he passed Duchene aimed one fierce kick at Tyson, the force of the moving horse and Duchene’s leg combining to catch him ferociously in the side of the chest and knock him to the ground, winded.
I said (in the comments) I was going to post this last Sunday. Yeah. Sorry, life got in the way. Anyway, here it is and that is it for the unpleasant stuff. Fluff to follow shortly.

Mrs. MacKinnon was in the kitchen, feeding Rosie Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup. “What?” she said defensively when Tyson stumbled back into the house. “It’s only half a dose and only this once, to keep her quiet.” Tyson waved her off and collapsed into a chair. It was hard to breath and his ribs stabbed him with every inhalation. “What’s wrong with you?” Kathy said, rising to her feet. “Did the horse kick you again?” She put Rosie to one side and went to him.

Frantically Tyson gestured at her to be quiet - the kitchen table was well within hearing distance of Nate’s room if their voices were raised. “Duchene touched me,” he rasped and Kathy darted to the door, looked out and darted back to him.

“Is he still here?” she said urgently, and Tyson shook his head, no. “Alright,” she said, “Good. We don’t want no noise.” She glanced at the shut door to Nate’s room. “Good,” she said again and then looked at Tyson more closely. “Touched you where?” she asked, her voice growing tight.

Tyson couldn’t even say it - he opened his mouth to tell her but was overcome with shame and started crying, silently; stone faced, Kathy moved closer to him and took his shoulders in her hands. “You tell me,” she said firmly, keeping her voice low. “You tell me right now - where did he touch you?”

“My face,” Tyson whispered, deeply ashamed to admit it to anyone, even Kathy who had seen more of his body than anyone but Nate.

“Why’re you such a mess, then?” she asked, looking unconvinced. “Your hair is everywhere and your shirt’s torn. Did he touch you under your clothes? Did he force you?” She smoothed his hair back away from his forehead and spoke very gently. “It’s not your fault but you need to tell me. If he forced you we need to clean you up, right now quick as we can so there’s no chance of a baby.”

“No,” Tyson said, stomach queasy at Kathy’s suggestion. “Just my face.”

“What happened to your shirt, then?” she asked and Tyson shrugged and then winced.

“He caught me in the barn and told me to come with him and when I said no he disciplined me. He says he’s coming back with the law.”

“Disciplined how?” Kathy asked so Tyson told her and she looked first relieved and then angry again and then finally reluctantly amused. “Serves him right,” Kathy said and began taking Tyson’s shirt off to inspect his ribs. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place? I hope his balls swell up and kill him.”

Once she had established to her satisfaction he had no broken ribs, Mrs. MacKinnon listened to Tyson cry some more, patted his back where he knelt with his head on her knees, made sympathetic noises and then when he was done, propelled him to the table for a cup of tea. She opened their
second last can of condensed milk, made him a mug of two thirds tea, one third milk as he liked it and then looked at him levelly. “Why’s being touched on the face worse than a beating?” she asked, but Tyson had no answer. It just was. One was discipline and to be expected but the other was an act of intentional violation and his skin still crawled when he thought of it.

“He touched me,” Tyson whispered. “No Alpha but Nate has sanction to touch me and still he touched me.” There was no way to communicate the shame and shock implied in that to someone outside of the Community.

“He touched you,” she repeated. “Only the outside of you. Nothing that counts. I know it means something to you, but do you think the Lord, or Nate, would blame you for it?”

“No,” Tyson said, surprised to realise he was certain of that. “Nate will blame Duchene, though,” he said with relish, thinking of the beating Nate would surely mete out.

“Yeah,” Kathy said grudgingly. “But no telling until Nate’s better, and maybe not then.”

“No,” Tyson agreed. “And we can’t tell EJ either or he’ll raise a ruckus too.”

“That’s right,” she said approvingly. “What we don’t want is a ruckus disturbing Nate. You think Yakupov would make a fuss?”

“Maybe,” Tyson said. He knew Nate would have.

“I’ll speak to his mother when they get here,” Kathy said, and then it was just a matter of waiting. Kathy wouldn’t allow Tyson to tidy up, although he didn’t really understand why. Tyson occupied his time with worrying about Duchene’s return and worrying about Nate. Mrs. Brown would allow no visitors but leaned out the bedroom door every so often to demand more water and scowl at them.

“Still breathing,” was as much as she would say. Tyson’s ribs grew stiffer and stiffer as the day progressed and finally, after the dinner neither of them could eat, he heard the Yakupovs’ horses.

Mrs. MacKinnon swept out the door and caught the Yakupovs in the front yard before they could enter and disturb Nate. She drew Mrs. Yakupova away from Nail and whispered into her ear. Mrs. Yakupova snapped a look at Tyson, still mussed, and said nothing but sighed and turned to Nail. “Get out!” she said fiercely. “Go check the stock.” Nail looked extremely surprised at this greeting but he turned around obediently and headed for the barn. Rapidly, Kathy pulled Mrs. Yakupova back into the kitchen and they huddled together, talking rapid fire as Tyson trailed behind. Suddenly something Kathy said made Mrs. Yakupova stop, turn and stare at Tyson.

“He touched you,” Mrs. Yakupova said to Tyson, horrified. “Touched you, not discipline?”

“Yes,” Tyson whispered, ashamed, and she visibly paled but then gathered herself.

“Well,” she said matter of factly, shaking out her skirts as if to shake off her dismay like the rain, “That’s his shame, not yours. I know you been a good boy.” She made an abortive gesture as if she would have liked to take Tyson’s hand and he wished she could.

“That’s not what you said last time,” Tyson said, trying to smile though it came out very watery.

“Oh, well,” she said, looking ashamed of herself. “I was angry about the hair. You could have just asked.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said, and she waved the apology off.
“Look,” Kathy said, pulling Tyson’s shirt aside and Mrs. Yakupova’s quick eyes scanned over him, taking in the disordered hair, his torn shirt, the purpling bruises on his sternum and side. “Duchene. And he says he’s coming back with the sheriff.”

“To demand the money?” Mrs. Yakupova asked, returned to her usual no nonsense self.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. MacKinnon said grimly.

“Do you have it?” Mrs. Yakupova asked.

“No,” Kathy said shortly. “Of course we don’t. And he won’t be satisfied til he takes Johnny back to Sweden, and if Tyson don’t allow it, Duchene will charge him with theft. Even with your boy refusing to let Tyson go as his Alpha, Duchene can still charge Tyson with theft and demand Johnny. Johnny doesn’t belong to Tyson - he belongs to his father’s family. Duchene’s got the right of it there.”

“Mmm,” Mrs. Yakupova said, clearly thinking deeply. “We need tea.” Obediently Tyson hauled out the battered tin teapot they used for everyday and Mrs. Yakupova made a noise of disapproval. “You want my son to lie for you,” she said. “Ah - “ she held up one hand, “- don’t say. You know it’s true, you want him to lie, and he will, but at least we should have the good dishes.”

“Fair enough,” Tyson said and put the tin teapot away so he could arrange the good tea service. It was seeing a lot more use and under very different circumstances than he had imagined when he received it at his first wedding.

“And cake,” Mrs. Yakupova added. “You got any cake?” Tyson got out the cake tins while Mrs. Yakupova headed back outside to catch her son up on events and impress on him the importance of silence. If the weather had been any less awful, they could have conducted matters outside but it was sleet, so it had to be whispers inside.

“Alright,” Mrs. MacKinnon said once they were settled at the table, cakes, teapot and all arrayed in the middle. “What are we going to do about this?”

“Tea first,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “Can’t think without tea.” Tyson poured the tea and passed the jam.

Mrs. Yakupova sipped a full cup of tea and slowly ate a piece of raspberry platz before she turned to Tyson. “So you took the money,” she said. “How much you spent?”

Tyson really didn’t see what that had to do with anything, but he answered. “Fifteen to the nurse,” he said, “and thirty five at the General. Haven’t paid the doctor yet.”

“Right,” she said, pouring more tea. “You mention it to anyone?”

“No,” he said. “Why?”

“What happened to the letter the Landeskogs sent?” Kathy asked.

“I have it,” Tyson said, pulling it out of his pocket. “Why?”

“No reason,” Kathy said, reaching over to shove it into the stove. Mrs. Yakupova nodded approval while Tyson and Nail looked on bemused as it burnt up.

Mrs. Yakupova took another piece of platz. Almost casually she turned to Tyson and said, “You know, you’re very stupid, maybe.” Nail looked offended on Tyson’s behalf and moved to say something but she waved him off. “Just an Omega,” she went on. “Your mind not even as good as a
“Ummm,” Tyson said. He didn’t think he was all that stupid.

“Terrible dim,” Kathy said and Tyson turned to her, betrayed.

“Can’t get a loan,” Mrs. Yakupova said.

“Can’t sign a contract,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, nodding. Tyson looked from one to the other, confused.

“Can’t be forced to testify,” Mrs. Yakupova said speculatively.

“Word’s no good if you do testify, only worth one fifth of a man’s,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Especially if you’re expecting,” she added in rising excitement. “Can’t even be jailed, then.”

“Not in a delicate condition,” Mrs. Yakupova added.

“Might very well be breeding,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. Tyson looked at her, aghast. What had been the point of all that plain talking he had had to suffer through? He was definitely not pregnant. “You know how it disorders the mind.”

Mrs. Yakupova nodded deeply. “Mmhmm,” she said. “Could be, could be - who could say?”

“I’m not…” Tyson began and Mrs. MacKinnon silenced him with one raised finger.

“Very easily confused, of course,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “Probably doesn’t know what’s happening.”


Meditatively, both women sipped their tea. Tyson was puzzled but held his tongue.

“I think Tyson here might be confused,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “I think maybe there’s no money that changed hands.”

“You think maybe the Bund never saw Duchene’s money?” Mrs. Yakupova said to Kathy.

“Yes,” Mrs. MacKinnon said and turned to Tyson. “Duchene can sling all the accusations he likes, but you’re fragile and stupid and I don’t think you ever saw that money. You got no idea what Duchene’s talking about.”

“You know, I think you might be right,” Tyson said, catching on. “Yes.”

“There was no money,” Mrs. Yakupova said cheerily. “The Bund never saw it, and no one can prove you did.”

“What money?” Tyson said, entering enthusiastically into the spirit of the thing. “I think I feel faint?”

“You obviously feel faint,” Mrs. MacKinnon said approvingly. “It’s your condition. Do you feel confused?”

“Very confused,” Tyson said. “What money?”

Nail looked half amused, half scandalized as he watched the exchange. “Here now,” he said. “Surely you two aren’t proposing Omega MacKinnon lie. That isn’t necessary.”
“I wouldn’t say lie,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Just, you know, he’s very stupid, maybe. Easy to confuse.” Alpha Yakupov didn’t look convinced.

“Tell Nail what Duchene did,” Mrs. Yakupova interrupted. “You tell him so he understands.” Tyson balked and received the full force of both women’s glares; he cringed and looked down at the table. It was too humiliating to speak of it to Alpha Yakupov while looking at him.

“Duchene came by this morning to see if I was ready to leave for Sweden,” Tyson whispered. He was ashamed at having been touched and he wasn’t looking forward to telling an unrelated Alpha the second half of the story.

“Duchene tried to take Tyson back to his, forcibly,” Mrs. MacKinnon interrupted. “Hurry it up, he could be here any minute.”

“What?” Nail said. “He threatened you?”

“No,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Worse.”

Tyson shut his eyes and dug the nails of one hand into the other, hard. He was ashamed to have to retell this story but Mrs. MacKinnon said he had to, and he understood the necessity. He swallowed. “Alpha Duchene,” Tyson began, “put his hands on me.” Nail, who had been busily stuffing cake in his mouth, froze.

Mrs. MacKinnon pulled up Tyson’s sleeve and silently showed them the bruise on his arm where Duchene had grabbed him; the teacup Alpha Yakupov was holding made a noise like a shot and cracked in his hand. Tyson winced internally. That was a Haviland Limoges ‘Poppy’ teacup, part of the complete setting given to him for his wedding. The entire set had cost five hundred dollars and he had no way of replacing any pieces. Still, the accident unexpectedly endeared Alpha Yakupov to him. Tyson could remember Nate doing the same thing the night before they were engaged, angry at the way Tyson had been treated, and the similarity made him look at Alpha Yakupov again. He was twenty four now, a grown up man, still with the same stupid mustache but also with the same happy open smile, and he was looking at Tyson with genuine concern, no smile on his face now. “He disciplined you?” Nail said leaning forward very intently, and Tyson pulled the sleeve back down his arm, embarrassed.

“You alright?” Nail asked, leaning forward. His expressions weren’t as familiar to Tyson as Nate’s, but he seemed angry, though apparently not at Tyson. “That’s not all, is it?” Nail asked. ”What else?” he said, looking closely at Tyson. “Why did Duchene treat you like that?” he asked. “I thought he was a believer.”

“I think he believes, Alpha,” Tyson said. “But what he believes is that he can beat the sin out of me, and that my marriage to an Outsider is invalid, and that my children are tainted and should be separated from me. He grabbed at my collar, caught my arm, and took a swing at me, then once he had me he punched me.”

“He punched you?” Nail said, getting to his feet.

“He touched me,” Tyson admitted, the final, most shameful truth coming out. “He touched my face, not discipline, and I tried to run but he caught me and he punched me and he kicked me.”

“I’ll kill him,” Nail said, completely serious.

“Oh no you won’t,” Mrs. Yakupova said. “You sit down. You’re going to tell them you never saw any money and be you’ll calm about it too. There’ll be no killing.” Nail opened his mouth to disagree
and she stood and grabbed his ear. “We’re on the right side of the law and you’ll stay there.”

“Mama,” he said, shaking her hand off. “Enough.” His face was grim. He bowed to Tyson, hand over his heart, and left the room in slow measured steps.

“That boy needs to get married,” Mrs. Yakupova said, watching him go. “And not to you either,” she added, looking at Tyson. “Show me where he hit you,” she asked, changing tack, and he showed her again where Duchene had kicked him in the chest, and the bruises on his upper arms and ribs.

“Only where you can’t see,” she pointed out. “You think that was on purpose?”

“Dunno, missus,” he said, sunk in misery at the thought of showing the marks from mishandling to strange men. He simply couldn’t expose himself to an unrelated Alpha.

She looked thoughtful. “You won’t want to show them, will you?” Tyson grimaced. He didn’t but he was going to have to and there was no more to it. “It’s a pity he didn’t hit you in the face,” she said, using the same tone she had a few minutes ago discussing Tyson’s stupidity. “I could not,” she said, and looked pointedly at Kathy. “But the Räajenboagen’s mother, who lives already with and attends him, has the Queen’s blessing, she perhaps could help.” Tyson looked back at her blankly but Kathy looked like she understood. Mrs. Yakupova moved to the door. “I’m going to see how Nail’s getting on,” she said, “Be quick,” and left for the barn. Confused, Tyson turned to Mrs. MacKinnon, who sighed and stood.

She looked at Tyson and gestured to him to stand. “Can you do it?” she asked him seriously. “Can you lie?”

“Yes,” he said, knowing there was no alternative. “I can do it, if I have to.”

“Alright then,” she said. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” and turned to her bag. Tyson wondered what she was doing, but she just rooted out a tin of peppermint drops and showed them to him, then set them on the table. “That’s for after,” she said. “You been a brave boy and I’m sorry about this,” and then backhanded him ferociously across the face, making sure to catch the side of his eye where it would bruise the most. “That looks good,” she said, leaning over him with a hand extended to help him off the floor. “You want a mint?”

“Yes,” said Tyson, feeling gingerly at his face. She certainly had an arm on her. “Can I have two?”

“You can have five,” she said generously, “because you been a clever boy and a credit to the family.”

In the end, it was simple enough. After a couple hours Nail returned to the house with his mother and looked at Tyson closely but appear to decide he had missed the bruising around his eye previously. He agreed to play his part, although he attempted to press his case for killing Duchene. They were still arguing it out when Duchene, the Sheriff and two deputies arrived. Mrs. Yakupova looked stolidly at them, retreating into her pretense of poor english, but Kathy stood and went out to greet them, hands smoothing down her skirt.

“Try to look pitiful,” Kathy advised as she passed but Tyson didn’t have to try. His hair was still disordered, his shirt torn, and his eye had purpled and swollen gratifyingly. Moving very stiffly, he followed her out to the front yard where the men waited. As soon as Tyson drew up to them, Duchene began.
“This Omega,” Duchene said with relish, “has taken my money and defied my orders!”

“Is this true?” Sakic said directly to Tyson. Nail tried to interject but Sakic stopped him. “Let the Omega answer,” he said. “Omega MacKinnon?”

Tyson twisted his fingers together, wondering if he ought to kneel. He looked at Kathy who nodded encouragingly. “I defied his orders, Alpha,” Tyson whispered. “He wanted me to send my son to Sweden.” He looked beseechingly at the Sheriff, none of his distress false. “I can’t send my son away,” he said, bursting into tears. “I can’t.”

“I gave him 400 dollars,” Duchene interjected. “The Landeskogs sent the money for him and the boy. He can go too if he’s so concerned about the boy.” Sakic waved them all to silence.

“What’s your version of this?” he asked Tyson kindly, and Tyson looked over beseechingly at Nail. Sakic waved him off again.

“I’m so confused, Alpha,” Tyson said. “What money? There wasn’t any money. Why would Alpha Duchene say there was money?” Duchene made a noise of frustration but Sakic hushed him.

“I want to hear from the Omega,” he said. “Now just think hard,” he said to Tyson gently. “Do you remember Mr. Duchene coming last week?”

“Yes,” Tyson whispered.

“Good,” Sakic said. “And did he tell you to go to Sweden?”

“He said Johnny was to go to Sweden,” Tyson confirmed. “He said I should go too. But I can’t, Alpha!” He let himself start crying again, not a difficult trick. The deputies murmured sympathetically.

“Just take it easy,” Sakic said to Tyson. “Why can’t you go?”

“My husband is here,” Tyson said between sobs. “How could I leave him? And how could I afford passage to Sweden? We spent the last of our money this week, on the nurse for my husband.”

“Lies!” Duchene thundered and Tyson looked up at Sakic, dabbing prettily at his tears.

“Duchene,” Sakic said, sounding tired. “The Omega is fond of MacKinnon, everyone can see that; MacKinnon’s taken a problem off the town’s hands and raised the boy as his own. Is it really necessary to try to force them to Sweden? Can’t you leave this be?”

“No,” Duchene said emphatically and smugly. “My faith demands it of me.”

Sakic leaned forward onto the pommel of his saddle, looking fed up with the whole affair. “You can’t force anyone to obey religious law, Matt,” he said. “Every person’s bound by the state laws, and as an Omega his Alpha’s got to answer for any civil accusations. Are you saying he stole that money?”

“What money?” Tyson repeated. All he had to do was keep repeating it, and Nate to keep breathing, and eventually all this would end.

Mr. Sakic gestured at him. “Exactly. Now I’m not saying there was money or not - but if there was, Matt, you already said it was intended for him. I don’t see how that’s theft.”

“He took the money!” Duchene insisted.

“I don’t recall,” Tyson said, letting very real tears come to his eyes. “Alpha Duchene shamed me and
I fell down."

“He did what?” Mr. Sakic said, looking closer at Tyson. “Somebody’s been hitting you boy - was it your Alpha?”

“No, sir,” Tyson said. “He’s not well sir.”

“No,” Mr. Sakic said, “he’s abed with pneumonia isn’t he? You got someone to speak for you then?”

“Yes sir,” Tyson said. “Alpha Yakupov, sir.”

Sakic finally looked at Nail. “You speaking for him?” he asked.

“Yes,” Nail said.

“Alright,” Sakic said. “You know about any money?”

“No,” Nail said with total conviction. “I never seen any money.”

“And will you allow him to go to Sweden, with or without his son?” Sakic asked.

“Absolutely not,” Nail said. “His husband needs him here at home, now more than ever.”

“Good enough for me,” Sakic said. “You been hitting this Omega?” and Nail bridled at the suggestion.

“Of course not!” he said. “Duchene laid hands on him; he punched him, he kicked him, he left bruises all over Omega MacKinnon and he should be tried for that.”

“Domestic chastisement’s not illegal,” Sakic said calmly. “Did Duchene kill you?” he asked Tyson. Tyson shook his head no, silently, wondering if Sakic was trying to make a joke but he went on. “Did he outrage you?” he asked. “Kidnap you?” He waited for Tyson’s ‘No’ and then continued. “Did he make you miscarry?” At Tyson’s embarrassed ‘No’, Sakic shrugged.

“Did he hit you with his hand, no stick?” he asked, and Tyson nodded again. “Then he’s well within the law,” Sakic said, making an open palmed gesture of resignation. “In the worst possible taste,” he said pointedly to Duchene, “but perfectly legal.”

“He’s the Räajenboagen!” Nail said, enraged, but Sakic just shrugged.

“He’s a woman, in the law,” Sakic said. “He’s got the same rights a woman does, which puts him a little behind a horse but ahead of a child.” Duchene nodded gravely, clearly convinced Sakic had the right of it. “Which isn’t to say,” Sakic added, “that it doesn’t offend any man of good conscience. It does.” Duchene looked a little less smug. “If he took the money, then any discipline is for his Alpha to decide,” Sakic said. “But what I’m seeing here today is an Omega that someone beat beyond all good taste or judgement and to my mind that’s punishment enough, especially for a crime I doubt occurred.” He looked over at Duchene, who was fuming. “Is that acceptable to you?” he asked him.

“Acceptable?” Duchene said. “No. I demand you examine this Omega under the Voice. He’s lying, but he can’t lie to the Voice.”
Sakic looked at Duchene with real dislike but evidently decided he couldn’t deny his request. “Beg your pardon,” he said to Tyson. “Omega - kneel!” Tyson dropped like a stone and Duchene looked satisfied. “Speak the truth, Omega,” Sakic said, all in the Alpha Voice but somehow sounding displeased to be doing so.

“Yes Alpha,” Tyson said. They had not accounted for this in their planning but he was equal to it. He let the Voice wash over him, the hazy relaxation of following commands familiar, but his mind was still active, not in the correct Omega state of passive obedience. He supposed he wasn’t quite so stupid as they thought.

“Did you take Duchene’s money?” Sakic asked, and Tyson knew the answer to that.

“No, Alpha,” he said, using his sweetest, most obliging voice. It wasn’t Duchene’s money, and it never had been.

“There you go,” Sakic said to Duchene, disgusted. “He testified to it under the Voice. That’s good enough for me. We’re done here.”

“No we’re not,” Duchene said. “My faith demands that child be returned to Sweden, to live with his father’s family and I’ll see it done!”

Sakic turned to Duchene, his face hard. “We’ve established the Omega’s done nothing. On the other hand, what I’m hearing is a man threatening to take another man’s son, and that’s a crime you need to answer for to the state.”

“MacKinnon is not that boy’s father!” Duchene protested, and the surrounding men looked uncertain. Johnny didn’t particularly look like Nate, but then Rosie didn’t either. Nate had tried early on to spread the truth about Johnny’s parentage but it had never really caught hold, especially with the way Nate would cheerfully introduce Johnny to all and sundry as his boy. The timeline was too jumbled; to the majority of the town, Nate and Tyson had lived in the same cabin for several months, married hastily and produced a blond baby a few months later. Smart money was on Nate, seemed to be the consensus.

“Oh there’s always been doubt about that,” Sakic said, and Tyson chanced a glance up at him. Joe Sakic was probably the only man here who knew beyond a doubt Nate was not Johnny’s biological father. Nate had gone to him years ago asking for advice in pleasing his shy new husband, unwilling to force Tyson. Sakic had counselled Nate to wait, wait as long as it might take and Nate had, much to their benefit. Sakic knew they hadn’t even kissed until well after the wedding. “But I’m not concerned about that now,” Sakic went on. “Whatever the case, clearly MacKinnon stands as his father now, and I’m not inclined to let you send a three year old alone to Sweden to satisfy your religious bullshit.”

“He kicked me in the balls!” Duchene said and all the men around them laughed.

“And why’d he have to do that, Matt?” Sakic said pointedly to Duchene. “If I understand you right, you came on this Omega, and instead of offering to help like any decent Alpha, you decided to grab at him and try to carry him away. Seems reasonable to me he’d fight, especially since you know they don’t like to be touched.”

“That, that is a complete misrepresentation!” Duchene spluttered. “He is obliged, by custom and law, to follow my commands and he disobeyed. His son belongs to the Landeskogs and I will see him returned to them.” He looked around as if this should have been explanation enough but he didn’t seem to have swayed the crowd.
Sakic rested his forehead on one hand, as if this conversation wearied him beyond bearing. “Matt,” he said. “Are you admitting you tried to abduct this Omega and plan to kidnap his child?”

“My belief demands,” Duchene began, huffily, but Sakic waved him silent.

“Shut up Matt, before you make it even worse,” he said. “This isn’t the first time we’ve had a problem with your brand of bullshit.” He leaned forward on his horse so that he was looking directly into Duchene’s face. “I’m not going to let you take the child and I’m not going to let you take the Omega. Now get out of here. You hear me?”

Visibly enraged, Duchene clenched the reins in his hands and nodded. “I’ll be headed home,” he said, but he shot Tyson a look that suggested he wasn’t finished with him, not by a long shot, and Sakic saw. He reached out and caught Duchene’s arm to stop him.

“Matt,” he said warningly, but Duchene shook him off.

“I said I’ll be off,” he said tight lipped. Nail smiled nastily at Duchene.

“I’ll just ride along a spell with you,” he said. “I had a thing or two I wanted to tell you.”

“There’s nothing I want to hear from you,” Duchene spat at him and Nail leapt at him.

There was a brief, intense scrum of bodies that finally resolved itself in Duchene under Nail and then several members of the constabulary atop them. Finally with a lot of shouting and punching Nail and Duchene were ripped apart and Duchene reinstalled on his horse, somewhat the worse for wear.

“Get out of here Matt,” Sakic said. “You better hope MacKinnon dies because if he lives you best start running. He’s got a temper on him and good reason to go after you, after what you’ve told us today.” He paused and glanced at Tyson, still on his knees. “I’m a busy man,” Sakic went on. “I got things to do and I don’t want to be chasing over the county, trying to stop MacKinnon from killing you, so I’d advise you to give some real thought to heading back to whatever misbegotten place you come from, if you’re going to insist on behaving like this. If not, I look forward to seeing you in three months when the circuit court judge makes it here.” Duchene paled. The district judge was famously in Sakic’s pocket.

“Do you understand me, Matt?” Sakic said. “Get out of town before MacKinnon is back on his feet or I’ll find a reason to lock you up.”

“I hear you,” Duchene said, looking much suppressed, and rode off, escorted by the Deputies.

Tyson watched him go from his position on his knees, thinking longingly of a tree falling on him or a wandering bear. Finally Sakic looked over at him. “Sorry,” he said to Tyson. “Omega, stand, you’re done.” Tyson heaved himself up stiffly and dusted his knees off.

“Thank you, Alpha,” he said politely but Sakic just rolled his eyes at him and looked over at Mrs. MacKinnon.

“Kathy MacKinnon,” he said, “I see you back there. How’s your boy?”

“Not so well, Joe,” she said, advancing cautiously. “He’s got pneumonia in both lungs. The nurse says the crisis will come tonight.”

“You got that termagant Mrs. Brown?” he asked. She nodded. “Well, if anyone can browbeat a man into living, it’s her,” he said. “Have her take a look at this one, why don’t you,” he said, gesturing at Tyson. “I don’t like the way he’s moving; I think Duchene got his ribs.”
“He did,” she said, “but nothing’s broken - I already checked.”

“Alright,” Sakic said. “Now listen Kathy. You know I don’t like a man beating on women or children but there’s only so much I can ignore.” She nodded reluctantly. “And Gulanaz,” he said to Mrs. Yakupova. “I know perfectly well you understand me. I don’t want any dramatics or killing out of either of your boys, you hear me?”

“Yes sir,” they chorused, although Nail said nothing and just looked mutinous. Sakic turned towards Tyson, standing demurely to the side.

“And you,” he said consideringly. “I would have said you were a shitty liar, but it seems not.”

“Yes sir,” Tyson said. “No sir.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Sakic advised him. “Go on inside and take care of your husband now, and all of you stop making trouble, especially you, Kathy, you schemer.”

Mrs. MacKinnon gave Sheriff Sakic a sudden, unexpected smile, her face open and laughing. Tyson could see, fleetingly, the young girl she had been and Sakic smiled back at her.

“It’s not scheming, Joe,” she said, “it’s just evening the playing field.”

“Fair enough, Kath,” Sakic said and tipped his hat to them all. “Glad to help.”

“Didn’t even have to say you were expecting,” Kathy said with satisfaction over the last of the cake.
Mrs. Yakupova surveyed the table with satisfaction. The cake tins were empty, the jam decimated, and she had insisted on a new bread and butter plate for each piece of cake, so that she had six small plates in a semi circle in front of her, which she also seemed to be enjoying. “Omegas are lucky,” she said, dusting her hands of crumbs. “The problem is taken care of, and we are going home. “

“All right?” Tyson said, surprised. “Let me make you supper at least, before you go.”

“Going home to Tartarstan, I mean,” she said. “Time for someone to get married before he gets hold of Duchene and has to eat pork in jail.” Nail looked pained but said nothing and at her direction set about gathering their things and fetching the horses. Tyson waited until Nail had left the room and then turned to Mrs. Yakupova.

“Missus,” Tyson said hesitantly, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs below the table where she couldn’t see. “Do you want - I’ve never done it, but if you like I could - I thought maybe before you go you would like…”

“What, Bund?” she said sharply, but Tyson thought she had an idea of where he was going.

“Would you like me to do the Blessing for you?” he said in a rush. “I never did before, but I guess now I got Rosie, I can.”

“Yes,” she said, clearly eager. “If you’re offering it freely, yes, I accept, and thank you, Printessa.” Kathy was looking on, silent but clearly puzzled.

“All right,” Tyson said, nodding. He stood up and followed her out to the front yard, where Nail stood waiting with the horses. Next to him was EJ who had been annoyed to discover he had deliberately been excluded from the goings on.

Tyson felt silly, standing there in the cold rain, growing damp and mussed when he was supposed to be a figure of religious faith. He wasn’t, though, he was just Tyson. Kathy had trailed behind him to watch and was standing on the porch; he wondered what she was making of all this. “Hi Alpha,” he said to Nail, who looked tired and irritable under his hat. He had not been pleased by his mother preventing him from pursuing Duchene. “I said I would do the Blessing for your mother; do you want it too?”

Nail looked extremely taken aback, as well he might, and shot a look at his mother; an Omega Blessing for an unrelated Alpha was rare enough even Tyson had only seen it done twice, once as a benediction for a dying, much loved stepfather, and once as a last desperate act for Benno Penner
when the doctors had told his adoptive auntie, an Omega, that no treatment would stop the tuberculosis that was burning through him.

“Are you offering?” Nail asked formally, and Tyson answered him formally.

“I am offering my Blessing,” he said. “Do you accept?”

“I accept,” Nail said, voice shaky. He knew what a Blessing consisted of and was obviously moved at the offer. “Am I the only one?” he asked, and Tyson knew what Nail meant immediately. He could name every man who had ever touched him: his father, Duchene, the Community Alphas that had disciplined him, and none of them counted, even Gabe, He had only ever touched one man willingly: Nate. Only Nate, and now forever there would be a second: Nail.

“Yeah,” Tyson said.

“Why me?” Nail asked.

“You helped me,” Tyson said. “When my Alpha couldn’t you did and you asked for nothing in return. Exerting all his will power, he managed to refrain from blurting that although Nail had done Tyson a service in dealing with Duchene, giving the Blessing was actually more in the nature of making a small return to Nail for stepping aside years ago to make way for Nate.

First he turned to Mrs. Yakupova, moving back up onto the porch to meet her. He pulled her in gladly, his hands resting on her shoulders. Gulnaz was not a particularly small woman but she was thin and felt almost frail to him, maybe because he had grown so much stronger over the fall. He had thought a long time about what the blessing should be for both of them. He began with the traditional words; “I am the token of the covenant. My soul doth magnify the Lord, for he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation,” and then looked down at her. She was looking intently back at him, wide eyed and uncharacteristically silent. He knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life and he felt a zip of satisfaction that Kathy should see a little of what he was and understand how he was revered; then he remembered Kathy had also seen him sitting naked atop a chamber pot, straining to take a poo while nursing Johnny and gnawing at a cold baked potato. She had opened the door by accident, cast one scathing, judgemental glance over him and shut the door again, silent. She had never spoken of it but Tyson felt that was the sort of event that stuck in the mind, effectively destroying any awe Kathy might been inclined to.

“Prosper,” he whispered to Mrs. Yakupova, holding her by her upper arms. “In all your doings, and all of yours. The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” He gave her the kiss on her forehead and took a step back.

He called EJ over to the porch and leaned forward so he was within arm’s reach and Tyson was looking down at him. EJ was a problem; Tyson wanted to include him in the Blessing in return for all EJ had done for their family, but he was damned if he was going to kiss him. To do so would be a violation of Integrity rather than a Blessing as EJ had been very clear he did not believe and EJ would lord it over Nate for the rest of their natural lives. “You don’t even understand this,” Tyson said to EJ, “and I’m not going to kiss you. But here.” And with some real satisfaction Tyson pulled on one of his fine kid gloves left from his life in Victoria, kissed his own palm with a flourish, and then reached down and whacked EJ firmly in the forehead with his open palm covered in the cloth, hard as he could. “Baby,” Tyson said. “Have a baby, a big dumb baby just like you. The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.”

“What the hell?” said EJ, entirely bewildered.
“And still don’t touch me, ever,” Tyson reminded him, pointing a finger at him fiercely. “Omegas don’t touch.” He stripped off the glove and walked down the stairs to Nail who was laughing but stopped as Tyson moved towards him. He had considered kissing Nail on the lips - it was barely, arguably, within the bounds of the Queen’s Blessing and the drama of it appealed to him, but when he thought, really thought about doing it he felt a little queasy. He had heard the old stories, of the Omega blessing being given to men of great favour, of the Queen’s touch curing illness, but these weren’t the old days and Duchene’s touch still lingered, making Tyson feel queasy every time he thought of it; and anyway, Nail would not see the violation of Bodily Integrity as a gift but as a shame. Instead, Tyson gave him the only thing he could, the traditional Blessing.

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee,” he said, and leaned forward to deliver the kiss, but Nail stopped him.

“Are you sure?” he said, looking like it was dragged out of him, and Tyson did him the courtesy of really thinking about it.

They could have been married and Tyson could see now they would have been happy, eventually. If he had never known anything different than the Orthodox cloister he would never have missed the world outside, and Nail was kind, and gentle, and merry. And if he never would have ordered Tyson to ride a horse astride like a man he would have touched him gently and treated him kindly, and if he wouldn’t have waited a year for marital rights he would have, in time, been tolerable, and it would never have occurred to Tyson to look for more in the night. In due course they might have had a little dark haired baby and Tyson would always have had a place of respect in the family, honoured for what he was though never any more than that.

It would have been, Tyson imagined, much like the marriage he had envisioned when he was seventeen. There was a great deal in Nail to respect and much to love; he believed differently than Nate but who was to say if he was wrong. If he had never known Nate he could have loved Nail, in time, and served him as well as he had been able.

“Yes,” he finally said. “I want you to have it.”

It was very strange, leaning in that close to another Alpha. Nail smelled different than Nate, though not bad, and the scruff on his face was rougher. Tyson had never touched the bare flesh of an adult man other than Nate with his hands; if he had made contact with any part of Duchene’s skin he hadn’t been aware of it during the struggle, and although he had kissed Gabe on several occasions he had never dared to unassumingly raise a hand and touch his skin. Certainly Orthodox mating had required no use of Tyson’s hands. Now he placed them on the side of Nail’s head, holding him steady for the Blessing, touching his thick hair, coarser than Nate’s. “Love,” Tyson said, a very unorthodox Blessing indeed, and leaned forward and kissed Nail’s forehead. He had thought about health, or prosperity, but ultimately decided that he would give Nail what Nail had made possible for Tyson. Just the fact that Nail had been given a Queen’s Blessing would also aid him in his financial and social dealings in traditional communities for the rest of his life.

“Love,” Mrs. Yakupova said, sounding like she had recovered from her religious awe. “Love? You couldn’t give him something good, like health, or luck?”

“He’s already healthy,” Tyson said, irritated, gesturing at Nail. “He’s happy, he’s hard working, he’s easy going; he’s off to get married, what does he need more than love?”

“What does he need less than love?” Mrs. Yakupova said sourly. “Ai ya, an Omega Blessing and you give him love.”

Shrugging, Tyson stepped back away from Nail, who was standing stock still, arms stiffly at his side.
to avoid touching Tyson. “Love,” Nail said, one side of his mouth twitching up. “I don’t need it but it’s awfully nice to have.”

“That’s what I thought,” Tyson agreed, and for a moment they just stood, grinning at each other. “Good luck with the marriage,” Tyson said, and he moved back towards Kathy, still standing on the porch. He felt quite shy now, and had to suppress an urge to hide behind her.

“No kiss for me?” Kathy said, joshing, but Tyson answered her seriously.

“You already have the Queen’s Blessing,” he said. “Family that lives with an Omega all have the Queen’s Blessing just from touching us. Omegas are lucky - it rubs off.” Mrs. Yakupova nodded, agreeing, and looked encouragingly at Kathy. “But I’ll do it anyway,” Tyson said and drew her in by one arm. Kathy was not the kissing sort, generally, but now Tyson pulled her to him in a heartfelt hug and kissed her brow. “Good health,” he said to her. “You gave me your son, and a hundred things more besides, and I am the token of the covenant. The Lord bless thee, and keep thee, and give you and yours good health all of your days, especially Graham.”

“Thank you,” Kathy said, looking awkward, but she gamely hugged him back and even gave him a little peck on the cheek.

It was while they were all paused, silent that Mrs. Brown popped out of the front door unexpectedly and surveyed them all sourly. “Good to see you’re all relaxing,” she said. “Don’t mind the patient. He’ll live, no thanks to all of you, making noise.”

Mrs. Brown had brought the patient through the perilous waters but she was an extremely jealous shepherd. She absolutely forbade telling Nate of the disastrous doings of the fall, and Tyson still wasn’t allowed to cook for Nate, come near him without a good scouring, sit beside him or read to him too long, all in the name of convalescence. Rosie and Johnny were barred from the room and had to hover at the door to see their Pa for the little time allowed. Once Tyson dared to creep inside the room and sit on the bed beside Nate while Mrs. Brown was taking her daily airing on the porch; she caught him asleep beside Nate and her anger was biblical. The root of her objection seemed to be that she felt Tyson was trying to make marital demands of Nate.

“Are you trying to kill him?” Mrs. Brown shrilled, and Tyson jolted awake, surprised. “Can’t you control your base desires for even a few days?” she said and Nate laughed from the bed as Tyson scrambled to escape back out the door.

“Yeah, Tyson,” Nate said. “Control yourself.”

Tyson made a terrible face at Nate. He didn’t even see how that would work, what with Nate’s leg immobile and unable to bear any weight. He wished passionately that he had been able to impose on Nate in a marital sense, but he hadn’t, not for months, and he sometimes thought he might explode. He scowled at Mrs. Brown and resentfully skulked off to have a very quick misuse of himself in the privy, which really, he felt, was extremely unsatisfactory.

After much negotiation and some yelling on Nate’s part, eventually Tyson was given permission to visit regularly so long as he kept his hands to himself, and when that didn’t cause a setback, Rosie was allowed back into the room where she sat on the bed beside Nate like a queen returned to her rightful place. Gradually the rest of them were allowed to spend more time with him and finally, mercifully, Mrs. Brown left before the winter snow trapped her for the season, and still they had told Nate nothing of what had happened while he was sick.
Finally the great day came when Nate could test his leg. “Come here,” Mrs. MacKinnon called and Tyson obediently headed to the bedroom. Nate was sitting up dressed and looking anticipatory; Mrs. MacKinnon waved Tyson over. “Come on and give him a hand, now,” she said. “We’re going to get him standing and see how it goes.”

“Me?” Tyson asked, surprised. “Shouldn’t it be you?”

“You’ve always been taller than me, boy,” she said. “And I think you’ve got more muscle on you now than I do.” Tyson looked down at his chest where she had gestured vaguely - it felt very odd to be told, approvingly, that he had built up muscle. It certainly wasn’t something he had been encouraged to do back home; his food had been carefully restricted so that he remained thin and elegant. Still, it made the baby hefting and farm work a deal easier, and Nate had made a complimentary remark on it a time or two.

“Come here Mr. Muscles,” Nate said, and Tyson rolled his eyes but he did as Nate said. Very carefully Nate shuffled around until he was sitting on the edge of the bed, legs hanging off the side. Tyson bent down and Nate slung his arms around his neck and Tyson put his under Nate’s armpits and around his back.

“Careful,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Careful. You take the weight, don’t let him put it all on the leg.” Nate and Tyson rose in concert and that close to Nate’s face Tyson got an up close view as Nate smiled, happy to be upright for the first time in four months and then, as they made it to standing, as Nate’s eyes rolled back in his head and he fainted, body limp and forehead tipped onto Tyson’s shoulder. Panicked, Tyson looked over at Mrs. MacKinnon but she just clicked her tongue in irritation.

“Thought that might happen,” she said, unmoved. “Set him down and we’ll try again.”

It took five attempts before Nate could stay conscious long enough to try bearing weight on his leg. “This is the worst dance I’ve ever been to,” Nate said cheerfully, clutching on to Tyson as they shuffled forward together.

Rosie had watched the whole process doubtfully from her usual seat on the bed; now she leaned forward and crawled to the middle of the mattress to get a better view and sat back down. She looked very uncertain, sucking anxiously at two fingers. Nate turned to face her fully and she shrieked and scrambled to back away from what was presumably to her a strange tall alien with her father’s face. Given her age Tyson was sure she had no memory of Nate ever walking or standing. Mrs. MacKinnon bent forward and scooped her up, taking a step towards Nate but Rosie liked this even less and started screaming and trying to fling herself to the floor. Mrs. MacKinnon brought her closer to Nate so she could see his face; Rosie bucked forward to escape and caught Nate fiercely in the nose with her forehead.

“Christ!” Nate said, letting go of Tyson with one hand to staunch the bleeding.

Drawn by his sister’s shrieks, Johnny burst through the door. “Pa!” he cried, delighted to see his father upright. “Pa! You’re up!” He lunged forward to hug Nate and stumbled, catching Nate in the crotch with the full force of his head.

“Jesus!” Nate yelped and turned white, heroically not slapping Johnny upside the head but looking as if he’d like to. Tyson helped him carefully back to the bed and moved away.

“Jesus Christ,” Nate said, feeling at his nose and crotch. “Wanna get the cow in here too just to finish off the trampling?”
“Cow’s dead, Pa,” Johnny said cheerfully, and Tyson glared at him.

“What now?” Nate said, a suspicious look on his face.

An hour later no one was happy. Apprised of most of the events over the last four months, Nate had yelled at Tyson, violently, unprecedentedly angry. The yelling had drawn Mrs. MacKinnon who had done some yelling of her own. By then the children were both in floods and Tyson was beginning to feel a little trembly too; he tried kneeling but Nate wouldn’t have it. “Get up,” he’d snapped, hauling Tyson to his feet roughly by one arm. “You can stand and take it like everyone else, don’t you pull that shit with me.”

Tyson turned away from Nate, silent and Nate trailed off. “What’re you doing?” he asked but Tyson said nothing. He shrugged Nate’s hand off his shoulder, something he had never done.

“Oh for goddsakes,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, turning away and heading to the second bedroom she’d been sleeping in. “I’m going to leave you to it. Don’t let him put too much weight on that leg too quick and come get me if it snaps.”

“Where are you going?” Tyson asked, trailing after her and she just made a face at him.

“Going home,” she said. “Graham still needs nursing and I’ve got better things to do than listen to you two fight it out.” She crammed the last of her clothes into her saddle bags and an old carpet bag and took one last look around to see if she’d forgotten anything. “You want a piece of advice,” she offered off hand as she carried everything to the door. “Just wait it out. He’s going to want to yell at you, and then fuck you and then love on you. Just let him. He’s pissed because he thought he was in charge.”

“*"

“I’m pretty mad,” Nate said, sitting white faced and thin at the kitchen table. “You lied, and then you kept on lying, and I had a right to know, and to help you. I’m the Alpha and I had a responsibility to take that weight from you, and you took that away from me.”

“What could you have done?” Tyson said evenly. He’d expected Nate would be mad but he didn’t see what difference telling him at the time would have made, but to worry him when he was sick. Nate had nothing to say to that so Tyson just carried on with the supper dishes and neither of them spoke until it was time for bed.

“I could sleep with Johnny,” Tyson offered, facing down a glaring Nate over their bed. He had been looking forward to finally being able to sleep in the same bed as Nate but one more night on the pallet on the floor with the children would do him no harm.

“Get in the bed,” Nate ordered, voice deep and absolute. It was clear there was to be no arguing and Tyson, resentfully, climbed into the bed. This was not the homecoming he had been looking forward to for so long, and he was still deeply pissed with Nate for yelling at him.

“I don’t mind the floor,” Tyson tried again but Nate just made an irritated noise.

“We’re married.” Nate said, rolling over. “We sleep together. You’ll sleep in the bed.” Resigned, Tyson laid down and tried to sort of inchworm his way against Nate for a stealthy cuddle but Nate huffed and shrugged him off.

“Sorry, Alpha,” Tyson said, and at a loss for anything else to do, moved his hand to the front of Nate’s crotch and cupped him. “You want me to?” he said, not terribly interested but thinking he could get there. It had been a long time. Nate writhed and pulled his hand away a little too hard.
“No, I don’t want to,” Nate said petulantly. “I never felt less sexy in my life.”

They went to sleep silent, back to back for the first time when both of them were well, Nate quiet and angry, his thin new body lying beside Tyson like a line of angry words, a charge against Tyson, all of it true but necessary. Tyson had kept the family intact and the farm in their hands; he regretted nothing and if Nate didn’t like it, well, at least he would have the chance to learn to live with it, here on their farm with the children and Tyson beside him. He’d already told Nate so once, he wasn’t going to drag the argument out, so he just bedded down and tried to go to sleep, waiting for Nate’s big sigh that was still Tyson’s cue to fall into sleep too. It never came, and finally Nate reached over and flicked Tyson hard in the ribs. Tyson yelped and slapped at Nate and Nate grabbed his hands and turned to look at Tyson, Nate’s thin scruffy face, skin pulled tight over his cheekbones like a medieval painting, all of it dear to Tyson and so desperately necessary that he would have done the same again a thousand times to keep it.

“Fine,” Nate said, still grudging. “I don’t like it but it’s done and I like you just fine. It’s not how I would have done it but you managed, and I wouldn’t have thought you could.”

Thrilled they were at last back on a friendly footing, Tyson told him the final thing they had hidden from him.

“Duchene touched me,” Tyson whispered, and Nate stiffened in his arms. “He touched my jaw, right here,” he said and drew Nate’s hand to his face where Duchene had touched him and Nate froze.

“He what?” Nate said dangerously. He touched Tyson’s black eye, very gently. “You said that was the horse.”

By morning they had reached an armed truce, but that was all they had achieved. There had been very little sleeping. They passed through the chores of the day tight lipped and silent, alternately overly courteous and short with each other. By the time bedtime rolled back around, Tyson was exhausted.

“Alright,” Nate said, sounding tired. “I’m going to bed whether you want to come with me or not.” He was leaning naked after a bath against the rough wall of the room, supporting much of his weight on the wall, his bad leg gingerly resting on the ground. He shifted to put more weight on his leg, winced, and leaned against the wall again. It was only the fourth time he’d been up and the first day he had managed to stay awake the entire day. Using his cane he very carefully walked the three steps back to the bed and laid down across it. After so long sitting he had taken to resting and sleeping on his front and looking down at him lying face down on the bed, Tyson noticed how thin he was all over again, his right thigh noticeably smaller than the left, but his entire body reduced. He was hardly the man he had been the night before the accident, nodding condescendingly at challengers for Tyson’s affection, so strong and certain he had dismissed Compher without a second thought, laughing and kissing Tyson cockily. Now he was fish belly white everywhere except for the livid scar down his thigh, and he looked fragile, ribs, elbows and knees poking out knobblily. Even the joints of his hands were attenuated and prominent as his weight loss drew the skin against his bones and his face was harsh and sharp angled, the large, pointy MacKinnon nose seeming to flourish while every other feature diminished. He had acquired an odd, sour smell, a lingering sign of ill health, and where Mrs. Brown had shaved his head at the time of the crisis his hair was growing back patchily.

He looked a little like a newly fledged owl, partially ready for flight, partially still fuzz.

“Do you feel strange?” Nate asked, sounding a little shy. “I feel a little strange, maybe - everything is different. I think you probably weigh more than me now, and I don’t think we can do it like we used to, the leg won’t like it if either of us is on top.”
That last night they had crashed together like usual, laughing and grabbing at one another after the long wagon ride home, Nate bearing Tyson down to the bed while Tyson laughed and play fought, kissing frantically while Nate pulled off their clothes and then twined his fingers through Tyson’s. Hands gripped together above Tyson’s head, Nate had held him down and fucked him, biting and kissing at Tyson’s neck and shoulders while Tyson writhed underneath him, straining upwards with his legs to hold Nate against him until together they had collapsed in a sweaty heap, sated.

It had been athletic and carefree and very much what Tyson had grown to consider the normal way, at least their normal way, of marital love, and he didn’t know any other. This tentative suggestion, followed by a pause to accommodate Nate’s new weakness seemed very strange and although he had been longing for weeks to be soundly rogered, now he felt mainly shy and sorry for Nate, the signs of his illness written all over his body.

“Maybe a little,” Tyson said, sitting down beside Nate and patting his exposed bottom. “Poor old bum, just leg tops now, hardly any bum left there at all.”

“It’ll come back,” Nate said, sounding much more like his usual bossy self. He stretched slowly and luxuriously where he was spread out on the bed, cracking each joint methodically and as Tyson watched his muscles flex and contract, toes point and the soft soles of his feet move, he felt more at ease. Nate’s comfort in his body was deeply familiar. No one inhabited their body so thoroughly as Nate - he had a perfect, absolute confidence in his physical abilities; he ran, swam, rode, made love with a supreme confidence and ease, blithely unaware others were not so able.

“Don’t you give it one second’s thought,” Nate said. “I’m going to run, I’m going to walk, I’m going to sit a horse just fine, I’m going to get right back up on my feet and fuck you blind. There was a moment there I was worried at the start but Omegas are lucky and that luck won’t break now.”

“Oh,” said Tyson, surprised by his certainty but pleased. “When, exactly, do you think you’ll be fucking me blind?”

“Soon,” Nate said with confidence, but he yawned enormously and Tyson knew his hopes for the evening were doomed.

“Hope so,” Tyson said and ran his hand up the sweep of Nate’s back, watching the goose flesh follow his fingers. “I been abusing myself something terrible.”

“Have you now,” Nate said with interest. “Go on,” and Tyson giggled. Nate rolled over and pulled Tyson to him. “Come here,” Nate said very quietly. “Can I kiss you? I been missing you.”

“Of course you can kiss me,” Tyson said. “You’re my husband, you don’t got to ask.”

“Yeah,” Nate said, and kissed him sweetly. Nate put one hand on Tyson’s neck, thumb just under his chin and the other fingers gripping the back of his neck, very gentle as always but also firmly controlling Tyson’s movement and finally Tyson felt they fit together again as before.

There was a quiet moment, the house silent, the fire in the small stove that they had installed in the room for Nate crackling gently. “You going to fuck me or what?” Tyson said and Nate scoffed and then leaned forward and very gently bit the tip of his nose. Tyson devolved into giggles. “You forgot how!” he snorted. “That’s not right at all!”

“Oh I remember,” Nate said. “I remember, sure enough,” but despite his braggadocio, he fell asleep five minutes later mid kiss, Tyson thinking sadly of the passionate first night back in the bed together he had hoped for. Nate farted loudly under the blankets and Tyson gave up and went to sleep too.
The next day they were still stilted and cool with one another. Nate had caught sight of the bruises over Tyson’s torso while they were dressing in the morning, remembered that Tyson had lied to him and grown silent and sulky again. Tyson was more and more short tempered through the day also, his ribs giving him hell everytime he lifted anything heavy and the thrill of having Nate up and about tempered by the realisation Tyson would still have to do virtually all the work in the household. That night he opened the door to their bedroom with some trepidation. He was exhausted and not in the mood to continue the fight.

Nate was sitting on the edge of the bed, shirtless, legs spread, hands loose and resting on his thighs. He was 40 pounds lighter than he had been the night they had gone to the tea, washed out, frail and vulnerable but he looked up as Tyson paused in the doorway and it was still Nate, his eyes defeated and his face closed off but also the man Tyson had learned to love and trust and Tyson went to him, all anger gone for the moment, and knelt beside the bed, his head on Nate’s thin knobbly knees. “Why didn’t you come save me?” Tyson said, not knowing beforehand he was going to. “I looked for you but you never came, and I had to lie, and cheat and Duchene touched me. You’re the Alpha - you were supposed to take care of me but you didn’t, and I had to.”

“No, you fucking idiot,” Nate said very gently. “You had to save me this time. That’s how it works.” He tugged at the lobe of one of Tyson’s ears and Tyson started crying, every tear he had held back all through the fall, half of them petulant resentment, half terror, pouring out onto the knees of Nate’s old work pants, the thick weave smooth and almost greasy under his face.

Nate let him cry for a while, smoothing at his hair but saying nothing and then leaned forward and caught him under the armpits. “Come on,” he said, heaving Tyson up to the bed with some effort. “Come to bed and it’ll be better tomorrow, and better yet the day after.” Carefully he unbuttoned Tyson’s shirt for him and childlike, Tyson allowed it. Stepping very carefully Nate fetched a wash cloth, wiped Tyson’s face and readied him for bed.

Usually Tyson kept his hair up in between weekly washings, the tight braids holding through the nights; on occasion he would leave it down in one long braid but he never kept it entirely loose at night. There was simply too much of it and Nate and the children would be entangled, or lie on it and awaken Tyson in the night, and Nate complained bitterly when he found hairs in the crack of his ass; now though Nate pulled it down and undid the braids, a long fiddly process. He sat quietly behind Tyson, running his hands briefly through the loosened braids and then he gently pushed Tyson to lie down. “Look at those arms,” Nate said, looking down at Tyson shirtless with his hair spread around him and Tyson interrupted his snivelling to mutter “Sorry,” for having arms like a man, a serious violation of the Omega standard, but Nate waved him off. “I like it.” Nate said simply, looking down at Tyson spread out on the bed. “You’re beautiful.” He undid Tyson’s boots and tugged off his socks and then pants. They rarely slept naked, not with the children in bed with them so often and the cold, but then Nate just pulled the covers down, shucked his own clothes and climbed in with Tyson, both of them entirely bare. He pulled the covers back over them, a motley collection of blankets and quilts and one silk wadded eiderdown Tyson had brought from Victoria, and plastered himself against Tyson’s back. “You warm enough?” he asked and Tyson pressed back against him, his body in the cradle of Nate’s lap, ass pressed against Nate’s soft cock.

“Been missing you,” Nate whispered, hands sweeping along Tyson’s body from neck to mid thigh, the full reach of Nate’s arm, not pausing at the sexy parts but just re familiarizing himself. “Sunday tomorrow,” Nate said. “Just us. You want an easy day? I reckon I can brush the horses, anyway, if Johnny helps, and feed the chickens and such, and I’ll do the fire tomorrow and then maybe you can
make a really good breakfast, potatoes and sausage and biscuits, and onions and all? You want to do that?

“Alright Alpha,” Tyson said. He did want to do that, he wanted it a lot. It was comforting and familiar, and well within his sphere of easy competence. He could do the sour milk biscuits everyone liked, and there was half a tin of condensed milk still, and a bit of coffee, and applesauce and wild plum jam, and if he tripled the potatoes they could have bubble and squeak for supper, no trouble at all.

“That’s right,” Nate said, still very gentle. “And then after breakfast you wanna read the Bible?”

“Not really,” Tyson breathed, half asleep and Nate chuckled.

“How about you sit and I bring you some tea and you read that new book for us then,” he said. “And I can do the dishes for you, sitting at the table. That’s about all I’m good for right now. And we can let Johnny sweep, and Ma left a cold pie for dinner, and then all the chores are done but the evening feed; and you can sit beside the fire and I’ll brush your hair and then when the baby sleeps we can all take a nap together. How you like that plan?”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, feeling things settling back into place. “I like it a lot Alpha, thanks.”

“You still got to do all the cooking, though,” Nate whispered tenderly in his ear. “Less we all want to die of indigestion.”

“I don’t mind, Alpha,” Tyson said, clutching Nate’s arm to his chest.

“And feed the baby,” Nate whispered, somewhat less tenderly. “And come to think of it, the horses too cause neither Johnny nor I can heft the bucket over the stall edge right now. And you can feed that fucking goat you bought, that thing’s possessed. But we’ll get you a good ten minutes somewhere to sit down, anyway.” He laughed, but it wasn’t really all that far from the truth. “I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Nate whispered. “And I’m sorry you still got to do so much of the work.”

Tyson thumped him on the arm, but he didn’t pinch him, a sign of his willingness to forgive the yelling. “I don’t mind, Alpha,” he said again. “I’m strong, I can do it til you’re better.”

“Say Nate,” Nate whispered and Tyson did.

“Nate,” he said, meaning a great deal more.
Together Again

Chapter Notes

Nate is very resentful about not being able to kill Duchene. At least he still has sex to console him.

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Tyson woke in the middle of the night, unsure of what had roused him. He listened carefully but the children were asleep in the other room and there was a still hush to the night that suggested it was snowing. Nate shifted slightly and Tyson realised he was awake and hard, his cock nestled between Tyson’s thighs. Tyson pushed back luxuriously, revelling in the brush of skin over skin, Nate’s body finally wrapped around him again. He wriggled against Nate’s cock and pulled one of Nate’s hands down to his own.

“Yeah?” Nate said. “You’re not still mad?”

“Well not so mad I don’t want you to fuck me,” Tyson said honestly, and Nate scoffed but his hand moved down Tyson’s cock and behind to where he was already soft and wet. Tyson moved to sling his leg back over Nate’s, carefully, but Nate caught hold of it and pushed it further forward instead, tipping Tyson onto his front with one leg bent up and one straight to open him up then followed with his own body, his hand still resting on Tyson’s upper thigh.

“Yeah?” Nate said into Tyson’s ear. He was spread over Tyson’s back, weight held by Tyson and Nate’s good leg, his cock pressed up against Tyson, making slow passes along Tyson’s slick hole.

“Get in me,” Tyson said but Nate just continued on, his hand moving down and around Tyson’s thigh to press over his cock and finger at his hole.

“I really think you better get yours first,” Nate said. “Reckon I’m going to put on a pretty poor showing once I get in, I haven’t done this for four months.”

“No come on,” Tyson said, wriggling the little he could with Nate’s weight on him. He just wanted Nate to fuck him like they used to, he didn’t want to fuss about it. He bucked a little and Nate grunted in discomfort. The leg was still very delicate and Tyson had made contact with it. “Sorry,” Tyson said.

“Cut it out,” Nate ordered, and shifted his weight onto his good leg entirely so he could fish out Tyson’s great mass of hair from between them. He pulled it all to one side and twined his hand in it, using it to hold Tyson’s head arched very slightly, exactly where he wanted him. “Be still,” Nate said and lowered his weight back onto Tyson.

“Sorry Alpha,” Tyson said, a kind of lip service to Omega submission he enjoyed now and then, especially in bed, and Nate kissed him in reward first on the back of his neck and then up the side of his neck to behind his ear. He bit gently on the side of Tyson’s neck and when Tyson groaned and writhed, bit harder and then harder still until Tyson stopped moving and went limp underneath him, entirely pliant. Finally, satisfied by Tyson’s submission, Nate let up on his neck and nudged Tyson’s leg forward a little more. Holding Tyson firmly in place, with a firm push he shoved inside, knocking
Tyson’s breath out of him.

“God,” Nate said reverently, still for a moment while they gathered themselves. “I love this.” He put one hand on the back of Tyson’s neck and held him down firmly, which he knew Tyson loved; Nate’s hand and weight pinning him, immobilized, Tyson had no alternative but to just take it, enjoying the depth of each thrust and grind. Nate, rarely loud in bed, Tyson clearly being the talker in the marriage, was babbling. “Oh god,” Nate said, “oh, god, you feel so good, baby, I missed you so; I think your ass is fatter, you feel like silk, oh fuck,” just a string of loving nonsense as he kept up a pattern of slow deep thrusts.

“Nate,” Tyson panted, carefully still beneath him. “Nate, Nate. Alpha, I missed you,” and Nate bit down hard on his jaw, right where Duchene had touched him and came, arms tight around him. The feeling of constriction and safety, and the jolt of pain at his jaw threw Tyson over the edge and he came as well, a deep spasm inside him as he clenched down around Nate’s cock.

“You did a good job,” Nate said into his ear, his voice deep and slow. “I want you to know that; you did good.”

They dropped back into sleep but a few hours later, the room still dark, Tyson woke to Nate pulling him over from his side to his back. “Sorry,” Nate said, sounding almost frantic, “sorry. I need …” What Nate needed became apparent once he’d gotten Tyson all the way onto his back and Nate carefully rolled atop him. “Sorry,” Nate said again, “I just - can I?” He nudged at Tyson with his cock.

“Go on,” Tyson said, spreading his legs and encouraging Nate with his hands on his bum. “Go on, then.” He wasn’t as horny as Nate evidently was, desperate and panting as he moved above Tyson, but Tyson had always liked early morning sex, waking to have one off and then sleeping again for a few hours before the demands of the day came to roust them out of bed. He had no objections now and reached down to assist Nate, guiding his hard cock inside. He particularly liked Nate fucking him soon after coming in him; the shocking idea of doing it twice in one night, knowing what his husband had put in him and Nate choosing to push in again among his own come and fuck it all back out of Tyson was enough to get him going and he slung one leg up around Nate’s good side and moved against him.

Nate groaned with pleasure and kissed him, Tyson happily thinking of how extremely dirty this all was. The thought of their previous bout lead him to realise they were failing to follow Mrs. MacKinnon’s directions regarding preventing babies. “Your Ma says,” Tyson began and Nate looked down at him with dismayed horror and then cut him off.

“Oh my God, shut up,” Nate said. “Four months and the first words out of your mouth once I get inside are about my Ma? You want to get fucked or what?”

“Stop talking about it or I’ll come on your hair,” he said again. “I wasn’t going to, shut up” he said again. “Stop talking about it or I’ll come on your hair, and then you’ll be sorry.” Tyson bucked in irritation at the hair remark - Nate knew perfectly well it was a full day’s activity to wash and dry his hair - and Nate grunted and then flattened himself entirely onto Tyson, holding him down with the weight of his body and using the movement to screw himself even further inside.

“You just did come inside,” Tyson pointed out, still moving underneath him. “Not two hours ago, you just - “

Nate stopped him with a kiss. “I’m the Alpha and I’ll do what I like and I’ll get as many children as I like,” he said grandly. “And what I like,” he added, pushing in fully and then slowly, luxuriantly
pulling all the way back, sighing with pleasure, hand busy at Tyson’s cock, “is to have exactly as many as you’d like, so outside it is, but can you please not bring up my Ma?”

“Yeah, alright,” Tyson said agreeably now that Nate had fallen into line.

“Anyway, I forgot,” Nate said sheepishly. “I got carried away there before, it was all so new again after so long and you felt so good, even better than I remembered.”

“You feel like I remember,” Tyson said dreamily, “Your cock’s still the same, just how I like it.” His hands drifted over Nate’s back and shoulders and Nate snorted with laughter.

“That’s more like it,” Nate said. “Go on about my cock, if you like.”

Obligingly, Tyson did. “I never had anything inside me before, like this,” he said, “and I missed it. I tried with my fingers, but it wasn’t the same.”

“Yes?” Nate said, panting.

“Yeah,” said Tyson, testing out a theory. “You’re so big and hard and it feels so good. It’s enormous.”

“Yeah?” Nate said again. He didn’t even look abashed at this pandering, he was just uncomplicatedly enjoying Tyson’s chatter about his cock while he stuffed it into him at the same time.

“Oh yes,” Tyson said, really letting himself go. “I can feel it fucking out all your come in there from before and it just fills me up so good. I want you all the way inside of me, I love when you’re inside me.”

Nate looked absolutely transported, flushed and making little choked noises of pleasure.

“I just want to come around you, want to squeeze down and feel you inside me,” Tyson said, suit- ing actions to words. “No one could ever fuck me like you, I like it when you put your hands on me, your fingers in me, but I like your cock even better, all the time, it fits in me so good and I can feel you, feel you way inside me deep and it just feels…” he trailed off, and Nate nudged him to continue. “Just you,” Tyson panted, growing distracted as he came. “Just you, you, you.”

Nate groaned and pulled out; frantically he stripped his cock while staring fixedly at Tyson, one hand cupping his balls and the other moving quickly up and down. Tyson moved to feel at himself where he was wet with his own slick and Nate’s come from earlier. He didn’t think he could come again but he enjoyed the sensation, fitting a couple fingers inside himself and using his thumb to play with his cock. Nate’s eyes narrowed and he came with an explosive groan, all over Tyson. “Ugh,” he said when he could talk again. “I never heard you talk like that before - I like it.” Heedless of their mess, he collapsed onto his good side and spread himself over Tyson. “Missed you baby,” he said, tucking Tyson into his side the way he liked, his bad leg draped carefully over Tyson. “Now I feel like we’re back where we should be.”

Tyson wasn’t sure if Nate simply meant their position in the bed, lying together as they always used to, or if Nate was referring to taking the dominant role in their fucking, but he knew Nate was pleased and seized his moment. “Alpha,” he said and Nate grunted in return. “Alpha?”

“What?” Nate groaned, half asleep.

“Do you think - would it be acceptable to you if I were to do the accounts from now on?” Tyson whispered and to his surprise Nate just grunted again. He’d been expecting significant resistance and was prepared to negotiate down to simply being allowed to do the entries at Nate’s direction. Full
agreement would leave him entirely in control of their finances, a rare position for a woman or Omega.

“Alpha?” Tyson said, and Nate grunted once more as if he resented his post-coital languor being disturbed.

“You don’t got to Alpha me,” Nate said. “Just ask,” so Tyson did.

“Can I do the money from now on?” he said. “You made a rare old mess of it.” Nate had. He’d written practically nothing down and Tyson had been forced to pay out debts he couldn’t prove Nate had paid before, Nate had borrowed at an usurious interest rate, and worst of all, debts owed to them were uncollectable. Nate flapped a hand at him but didn’t deny it.

“You sure?” Nate roused himself to ask and Tyson didn’t need to think about it. He’d learned to keep books for his father and knew he was capable.

“I’m sure, Alpha,” he said.

“Alright,” Nate said, as simple as that. “If you’re sure you’re up to it I’d appreciate it. And don’t call me Alpha when you want something, just say it.”

“Thank you, Nate,” Tyson said quite sincerely. This was a far greater concession than any bed gift he could have hoped to coax out of an Observant husband. Nate had just handed over the keys to their entire lives and not unknowingly either - he had done it because he believed Tyson was able. Nate kissed him again where his face was pressed up against Tyson’s neck, gave his usual great sigh and fell asleep.

Warm, happy and fairly sticky, Tyson did the same, sinking into sleep with his husband cuddled up around him, well fucked, accounts his to manage and a glorious Sunday of luxurious relaxation to look forward to.

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There was nothing like purring to knock the baby out, Tyson thought the following day, although she hadn’t been getting much of it the last four months. Rosie was draped over his chest, sawing wood, his braid firmly gripped in her little hand. Johnny was asleep curled beside him, on the far side from Nate for leg protection purposes, and Nate was seated next to Tyson, flipping idly through War and Peace. They had finished 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea earlier in the day.

“Who gave you this?” Nate asked, making a face. “I know it came out around the time you married that dipshit but ugh. Was it a wedding gift? Did they not like you?”

“That was from Jamie,” Tyson said, offended on Jamie’s behalf. “He likes me! He likes me fine!” Constrained by honesty he was forced to admit “I think he bought the thickest book they had, though - there’s no chance he read it.”

“Mmmm,” Nate said, still flipping through. “Dead, despair, adultery, dead,” he muttered. He jumped forward 300 pages. “Oh, Christ, is that french?” he said in outraged tones. “What kind of book is this? I can’t believe they let you read this. You weren’t allowed to see your father’s forearms but they let you read this?”

“I don’t think anyone knew what was in it,” Tyson admitted.

“French!” Nate muttered, disgusted. “French. I mean really.” Nate wasn’t scandalized by the content of the book, Tyson knew, he just didn’t feel anyone with any self respect needed anything
but good plain english and a rollicking adventure tale. “Read me the Verne one again instead, will you?” Nate said.

“Verne is French,” Tyson pointed out as Nate located *20,000 Leagues* where it had been hiding under the pillow.

“Yes, but he had the good sense to write in english,” Nate said, handing the book over.

“He didn’t write it in english,” Tyson said, “he wrote it in french and someone translated - oh, never mind.” He couldn’t tell if Nate was winding him up or really believed it. “And I couldn’t see my father’s forearms because it violates Integrity, that’s different from reading you know.”

“Mmmmm,” Nate said, pointedly smoothing the hair on his forearms down with a flourish. “You just must be in a constant state of tittervation, then, eh? Integrity thrown to the wind, bare forearms fore and aft.”

“I’ve never violated the fundamental tenet of Integrity,” Tyson told him, scowling.

“What *is* the fundamental tenet of Integrity?” Nate asked.


“Why?” Nate said, and again Tyson couldn’t tell if Nate was trying to wind him up or not, but he answered him seriously.

“I’m the living Covenant with God,” he said surprised Nate needed to be reminded, but Nate had never been one to keep religion at the forefront of his mind. “The Lord made me in their image and I am not to touch or be touched but by those the Lord has sanctioned. The Covenant is pure.”

Thoughtfully, Nate stretched up and gently touched Tyson’s black eye, now an ugly medley of dark green and purple bruises.

“Why’d Duchene touch you then, if he’s so Observant?” Nate asked. Nate’s complete rejection of the idea that Tyson had been soiled by Duchene’s touch, coupled with his conviction that Duchene had still done gravely wrong in hitting Tyson had done much to soothe Tyson’s distress. Nate was the spiritual head of the family, and if Nate didn’t feel Tyson had been soiled, why then he hadn’t, that was all.

“Orthodox,” Tyson said. “He’s Orthodox, not Observant. And he touched me because he said I’d lost the protection of the Covenant.” He thought about it for a bit. “But really,” he added, “he did it because he wanted to, because he’s nasty.”

“How come they can thump you then, if they’re not to touch you?” Nate asked.

“Oh, well, discipline,” Tyson said. “That’s different.” The rules were the rules, he felt. Examining them for sense or consistency was a waste of time and effort.

“Well I don’t care about the rules,” Nate said. “No one’s allowed to thump you, that’s my rule.” He abandoned the book and curled around Tyson, looking ready to go to sleep. “Did I mention I’m going to kill Matt Duchene?” he added in a casual tone.

“You said,” Tyson answered. Nate had indeed said, at some length and in some detail, during their several days of fighting.

“Yeah,” Nate said, yawning. “Not now of course, I’m not going to bother snowshoeing into town. He can wait til I’m stronger in the spring. Gonna chop some wood everyday, let you feed me up, get
good and strong again. Then I’m going to head in and kill him, April, mid May at the latest. Going to punch that smug look right off his face and then strangle that son of a bitch.” He snuggled into Tyson’s waist and tugged at his arm. “C’mon and lie down,” Nate urged. “Come have a nap.”

Tyson looked down at him, puzzled. That had sounded worryingly specific. Surely Nate didn’t really mean it? He put it aside and slid down the bed to let sleep take him, Rosie’s weight a comfort, Nate’s arm and bad leg slung over him, Johnny warm at his side. The down filled duvet crackled pleasantly as he moved and he fell into sleep.

Nate meant it. EJ snowshoed over to spend the night the following week. “Marnie says hello,” EJ said, sitting at the table. “You got any pie about?” he added. “She’s not feeling well these days and she says pastry puts her right off; I haven’t had any pie for weeks.” Moved by EJ’s lament, Tyson produced a dried apple pie, one of several he had made, and EJ fell on it with a will. Nate sat at the table, leg propped on another chair, still thin and pale, picking at his own piece of pie. EJ had come to tell Nate about Duchene and Nate enjoyed a chance to expound at some length on his plans. Johnny was distressingly enthusiastic but EJ and Tyson looked at each other, worried. When even Erik Johnson felt your plans were ill advised, Tyson thought, you’d best re-examine them. EJ had once to Tyson’s certain knowledge conceived of and then executed a plan to consume two gallons of milk in one minute to impress a girl and when a man still widely known to his peers as ‘Pukin’ Johnson doubted you, it was best to pause and consider.

EJ, surprisingly, was the voice of reason. “You can’t go around killing every man that smacks his wife,” he pointed out.

“Can I kill everyone that smacks my wife?” Nate asked bitterly. “What would you do if that had happened to Marnie?”

EJ sat and gave it some thought, staring off into space. “I woulda punched him,” he finally said. “And if he fell over and hit his head and died I wouldn’t have been sorry, but I never would have thought to kill him. A smack’s not a killing offense, no matter how angry you are, and you’ll have the law after you.” Nate pointedly looked away. Irritatingly, the only thing Nate had taken from the entire experience was an absolute conviction that if he had been in charge, none of it would have happened and a burning desire to kill Matt Duchene.

“Well I’m just going to kill him, that’s all,” Nate said grouchily. “Sorry you’re not enough of a man to do it.”

EJ refused to be drawn. “You’re being a complete asshole about this,” EJ said, stealing Nate’s pie and gesturing at Tyson. “He did a good job while you were down and if you insist on trying to kill Duchene you’re going to have yourself dead or in jail and leave him all alone again - it’d be as bad as if you’d died right after your leg. Take the chance he got smacked to give you. And besides,” EJ finished, “you still owe me money. No going to jail until you pay up.”

Nate would hear no reason on the subject. “Well, I’m going to kill him,” he insisted, “and that’s the end of it.” He reached out and snatched his pie away from EJ, who looked wounded. “Leave my food be.”

Disappointingly for Nate, Matt Duchene proved to possess a well developed sense of self preservation and upped sticks in the very early spring, deliberately leaving no forwarding address.
“My God,” Mrs. MacKinnon said despairingly over dinner. She had invited them over ostensibly to enjoy the early pieplant she had grown under a heap of hay, but also to deliver the news of Duchene’s departure. “I knew you were going to be pissed,” she said to Nate, “but I didn’t think you were going to act such a baby as all that.”

Nate, apprised of the news, had hurled his mug to the floor boards, bellowed ‘Fuck!’ loud enough to wake the baby and stomped from the house. He was returned several hours later, drunk, by a very tall, very pale Finn unfamiliar to Tyson.

“Got something of yours here,” the man had said, tipping his hat and looking past Tyson to smile at Mary in the kitchen. “Seems to be in a bit of a mood.”

“Fuck you, Rantanen,” Nate muttered.

“He tried to punch me, Mrs. MacKinnon,” the Finn said, clearly trying to curry favour. “But I didn’t punch him back, even though he called me a goat fucker.”

“Yes, that’s very nice Mikko,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, abstracted. “I appreciate it. You want to talk to Mary?” Mikko nodded enthusiastically and took off for the kitchen. “On the porch, hands to yourselves!” Mrs. MacKinnon shouted after him.

“Well, looks like you’re going to have to stay here tonight,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, looking down at Nate, slumped on the floor, judgmentally. “He’s in no fit state to travel back.”

“Sorry,” Tyson said but she waved him off.

“That’s fine, boy,” she said. “We’ll have a lie in and let Nate get up with the little boys tomorrow.” Tyson winced. The little boys were hell on wheels. “And serve you right,” Mrs. MacKinnon said to Nate. “You sodden thing.”

“Shut up, Ma,” Nate mumbled. “Four months sat on my ass and I didn’t even get to kill Duchene,” he added bitterly.

“You’re the ass, boy,” Mr. MacKinnon said. “Don’t talk to your mother that way.”

“Sorry Pa,” Nate said automatically. “Sorry Ma.” He belched and then fell asleep as they all stood gazing down at him. Nonplussed, Tyson covered him with a blanket and moved to the table to eat Nate’s pie for him. He had a particular liking for pieplant, although they had called it Ruboaba when he was growing up.

“Do you think he’s taken to drink?” Tyson asked Kathy. The Community had been largely teetotal but even he, sheltered, had come across men who drank too much.

“Because he’s gotten drunk once in four years?” Kathy said. “I think you’re alright. You’d do better to worry about the spring planting - he still looks too thin. You going to help?”

“I am,” Tyson said, proud of himself and his usefulness.

“Good,” Kathy said approvingly. “And still no baby?”

“No,” Tyson said, glancing at Mr. MacKinnon and lowering his voice. “We’re being careful. You know.”

“Good,” Mrs. MacKinnon. “Good. Well, this should get it out of his system and he can forget all about Duchene.”
Nate did not forget about Duchene. Tyson could have told Kathy he wouldn’t; Nate with a grudge was like an elephant and he occupied a great deal of airtime over the next several weeks moaning on about lost opportunities. Finally even Tyson grew tired of listening to it and arranged with Marnie to have the children on a Sunday.

Nate scowled down at his breakfast Sunday morning after EJ had come to take the children. “Very nice, thanks,” Nate said, but he just toyed with the eggs and ham and cheesy grits Tyson had made specially for him. Grits were revolting Tyson felt, but Nate loved them. Completely fed up Tyson thumped down in the chair next to him and drank Nate’s coffee.

“Marnie’s keeping the children til tomorrow morning,” he told Nate. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to kill Duchene but would you like to spend the day in bed fucking me? Also I got pie.” He gestured at the pie safe with a dramatic flourish. He’d made five apple pies, Nate’s favourite, exhausting their stock of dried apples entirely. “I got some cream as well,” Tyson added to sweeten the deal.

“Oh, well, if you got cream and all,” said Nate, throwing down his fork and pulling Tyson onto his lap to kiss.

“There’s a price, though,” Tyson said a few minutes later, panting. “You got to stop being grouchy about Matt Duchene.”

“Alright,” Nate said, but it sounded unwilling. “I just wanted to kill him, that’s all.”

“Well I don’t want you to kill him,” Tyson said. “You’ll end up in jail or hung and what good are you to me then?”

“What good am I to you ever?” Nate asked morosely. He’d been struggling with the early planting, still thin and weak, his leg not doing what he asked of it. This, Tyson suspected, was the real gist of the Duchene issue.

“You’re an awful lot of good to me,” Tyson said tenderly, holding Nate’s face in his hands and running his thumbs along his stubble. “You made me love you, and you showed me how to love the babies and you been the best father I ever imagined, and more than that, you been what I dreamed of, when I was just young thinking of romance and marriage. I never thought I would have such a nice husband, so good to me, and I love you.”

“Soppy,” Nate said but he looked like he liked it, turning a little red and smiling. They didn’t sit around announcing their love to each other much, but sometimes it was nice to hear it, Tyson supposed.

“And you fuck me awful nice, there couldn’t be another better than you,” Tyson said.

“That’s true,” Nate said, cheering up slightly. They were united in their conviction that Nate was extraordinarily gifted in the fucking department, and nothing Tyson heard from the local ladies had altered his opinion. It seemed like a vast desert plain of thoughtless three minute men, few of them concerned with washing enough or kissing beforehand. “I just really wanted to kill Duchene,” Nate added pitifully.

“Maybe he’s gone to Florida and he’ll get eaten by an alligator,” Tyson said coaxingly.

“I heard of them,” Nate said, perking up a little more. “You think?”

“But you think?” Tyson said. “Omegas are lucky.”
“Well I hope it hurts,” Nate said sincerely. “I hope it eats him bit by bit in its nest or whatever.”

“Sure, sure,” Tyson said. “You want to knot me?” Nate shifted underneath him and Tyson could feel him stiffening up through the thin material of his night shirt and Nate’s spring long johns. Knotting was a rare treat, reserved for times when they were alone in the house and confident they could stay awake to enjoy the almost hour long tie.

“Yeah,” Nate said, voice low and intense. “I do. We haven’t done that in over a year,” and Tyson was surprised to realise he was right. Tyson didn’t like to be knotted by mid pregnancy and then Nate had been sick. “You might get breeding though,” Nate added.

They had been as careful as they could, which wasn’t really very careful at all since their good intentions often flew out of the window when they fell into bed together and they had been prevented by the snow from making it to the Pharmacy for french letters, but they had refrained from knotting and most of the time Nate was able to pull out before he came.

“I don’t care,” Tyson said. “I’ll take that chance. Rosie’s a year old and if God sends another I don’t mind, especially because this would be the last.”

“Come on now,” Nate said, kissing on him. “You can’t know that.” Tyson pulled away, surprised. Every so often they still hit upon a point of difference but this one he was sure he was right about.

“I know I didn’t understand,” Tyson said, “all the facts of life and so, but this one I do know. Omegas can’t have more than three. I told you that, remember? That’s part of why we’re special.”

“Come on,” Nate said again, but Tyson needed him to understand.

“We learn the Roll of Fruchtartn as obligation,” he said, “and I’m telling you, no Omega in our line has ever had a fourth. We can’t do it. That’s 437 Omegas since 1750 and not one has had a fourth.”

“What’s Fruchtartn?” Nate asked.

“Harvest of berries,” Tyson said, and Nate didn’t look like that cleared matters up, but he left it.

“Well,” Nate mused. “If it’s really three and done that changes things a bit. One more would be alright but I don’t want for you to have a baby every year, or even a baby every two years, less you want?” Tyson scoffed. No one in their right mind wanted a baby a year. It was a terrible risk, and a drain on resources, and an affliction many women had to suffer through if they had a feckless husband, but the Lord had made him to be spared it. He would gladly have a third and final if it was Nate’s, though, the very thought making him squirm with shameful pleasure. To deliberately take a day to lie in bed together was debauchery enough, but to let Nate fill him up, again and again, his stuff inside Tyson, plugged there by Nate’s cock, hard and swollen, full of his seed and both of them aware of the chance of making a baby, was gloriously dirty. Sometimes after Nate liked to finger him to another orgasm using his come, Tyson spread out and languid beneath him, legs wide and on display, unashamed in front of his husband. Tyson shifted, pleasurably warm.

“It’s awful hard on you, too many babies,” Nate went on, and Tyson was overcome with gratitude for Nate’s kind thoughtfulness, even if he had been perseverating on Duchene recently. So many women had no recourse and even the topic was absolutely taboo, but here Nate was, kissing him before and after, making sure he liked it, and willing to finish outside to spare Tyson babies he didn’t want.

“I’ll take the chance of one more,” Tyson whispered into Nate’s ear, shifting to feel his thighs rub together where he was swollen and warm. “After the third we can do what we like, too,” he added.
“Holy God, what was that?” Tyson asked, little shudders of pleasure still rolling through him and Nate grinned down at him, hair sticking to his forehead with sweat, pleased with himself.

“Twins,” Nate said, laughing. They had been knotted for a good hour and a half, longer than they had ever done and Nate had made Tyson come four times; it seemed to have effected the cure. There was no more talk of Matt Duchene.

But it wasn’t twins; no baby made its presence known which was surprising as they had conceived Rosie the first time they had knotted, so far as they could tell. Still, Tyson had no complaints in that regard; no baby was fine with him and there was the spring planting to get on with, and then the summer canning, and then the first wheat and then the fall harvest, and they were careful but not strictly vigilant, and still there was no baby, which really was a mercy. There were several mercies as the year ground on: they completed the terms of the grant and took ownership of the land; despite Nate’s leg continuing to trouble him the final tally of the wheat was good, very good; they were able to pay EJ back and put a little away besides; the animals flourished, especially the evil goat which grew fat and then produced triplets, which trotted proudly behind their mother.

The weather was perfect all year; everything they planted did well, most importantly the cash crops but also Tyson’s kitchen garden. He grew several summer squashes of enormous size, of which he was very proud. A traveling photographer came through Denver and for the first time they had the money for a picture. They had previously had no pictures of their wedding or the children but now they acquired portraits of both children and one of Tyson with a fixed grin standing beside a 4 foot long squash. Nate insisted on having cabinet frames made of each of the children and then surprised Tyson with the one of Tyson and the squash, displayed proudly on a high shelf. Mrs. MacKinnon rolled her eyes but said nothing. They hadn’t quite reached the heights of wealth that would allow them to hire out the laundry but Tyson would happily pore over the books in the evening and he could see it in the distance. Another couple good years and they would be there. The seasons rolled on, through another winter, easier than the last, through another spring and summer; no baby came, no misfortunes, just good fellowship and happy times amid the hard work.
Why do they keep having so much sex? They aren't anywhere as good at it as they think they are.

“This isn’t working,” Nate said in the fall of the following year, coming up behind Tyson while he was frying potatoes in the most enormous pan they owned. The family appetite for fried potatoes was rapacious - Tyson often wondered what would happen if they had more children. They didn’t make skillets any bigger than this so far as he knew.

“It’s working fine,” Tyson said puzzled. “Look.” He held up the browned underside of one of the potatoes with his fork to show Nate. “I strained the fat properly this time, it’s fine, don’t keep going on about that grease fire. And this is as fast as I can go, I told you, it’s going to be another quarter hour or so.” He turned around to see if Nate wanted to start on the biscuits that were sitting to the side but faltered at the look on his face. “What?” Tyson said, setting down the fork. “Your leg hurt?”

“It always hurts,” Nate replied calmly. “You know that. But today I fell off the plow and damn near lost an arm. We can’t keep going like this. I asked EJ to call in while he’s in town and have Ma send Robbie for the week, but that won’t do forever.”

Tyson had gotten a deal tougher during Nate’s convalescence the previous year and that was why he picked up the fork again and continued frying potatoes rather than throw himself on a chair and cry as he wanted to. Whatever else happened, come death or despair, the children were going to need their supper. Still. The thought of Nate falling from his perch on the mechanical harvester, tangled in the lines, was terrifying. It was no joke once the horses were pulling - many men and boys did lose arms to that mishap. And what, it occurred to him to wonder, did Nate telling him this really mean? How many times had he fallen and brushed it off before he was willing to tell Tyson about this one fall? “I could help,” Tyson said, slowly and carefully turning each potato slice.

“I know you can, baby,” Nate said lovingly, running a hand over Tyson’s neck. “And we’re not quite at disaster yet, but we got to make a move before it hits. Even if you help I’m still likely to fall doing any field work at all.” Tyson nodded, his suspicions confirmed. Nate’s leg was a great deal worse than he cared to admit. Only absolute necessity had driven him to acknowledge it. “And if we stagger along,” Nate went on, “you helping, what happens if you have another baby? What happens if I get taken out for another season, or a year and you have to take over entirely again?”

“We can’t do that forever,” Tyson said and Nate nodded. They both knew Tyson had avoided disaster a year ago by the skin of his teeth and the good will of the neighbors, but there was only so much goodwill got you. If Nate wasn’t capable Tyson couldn’t cover for him indefinitely.

“No, I agree,” Nate said. “I got an idea and I’m telling you now so we can discuss it with my Ma and Pa next Sunday. What if we moved closer in to town and I started back up with the blacksmithing?”

“Oh,” said Tyson, surprised at how simple Nate’s suggestion was. He had no particular attachment to the farm, aside from it being a happy place he had learnt to love Nate and the children, but the well was always iffy and the isolation difficult. So long as Nate and the children came with him, he didn’t think he’d miss it all too much. He’d be glad to be close enough to easily trade visits with the larger
MacKinnon family, and being near a proper school could only benefit the children. “That’s not a bad idea at all,” he said to Nate. “Why’re you looking so worried?”

“It’s not so simple as that,” Nate told him. “I only did two years apprenticeship with Talbot. I’m a farrier, not a smith, and normally it would be a full seven years to be a master smith. I’d have to go back to Max for at least half a year to be any use and the only time it makes sense to go is the end of harvest, so that’d be a few weeks from now. You’d have to go through the whole winter alone.”

Tyson took the giant frying pan off the high heat and moved it back a little to the cooler part of the stove using both hands to manage the weight. He piled all the potatoes up in one corner to make room for the many handfuls of onions he added and he stood there thinking and stirring while the onions cooked down, a full five minutes. He shoved the onions over next to the potatoes and then forked the chops in carefully before he turned to answer Nate.

“That’s,” he said, feeling a resurgence of the urge to throw himself about crying, “that would be hard.” He’d never been alone a night in the house barring the night Alpha Landeskog lay dead and Tyson unconscious. He’d never been alone a night in his life otherwise and he couldn’t imagine it. Even the overnight vigil before he married the first time, kneeling on the church floor in penance for what seemed now like imaginary sins, Jamie had sat beside him holding his hand and whispering about Tyson’s soon to be husband. “I can do it, though,” Tyson said, hoping he sounded more certain than he felt. “I can do it if it has to be done.” If this was the cost of Nate’s safety, he would gladly bear it.

“I’m sorry,” Nate said, an echo of his first words to Tyson after he broke his leg. “I’m sorry I have to ask you to do this, baby.”

“I’m not really a baby, though, am I?” said Tyson, turning to Nate and smoothing his hands down his apron. “I’m at least half grown by now.”

“That’s right,” Nate said encouragingly, filching a fried potato and burning his fingers. “You can do it.”

“*”

“Well,” said Mrs. MacKinnon, tapping the letter from Max on the tabletop. “Sounds like you’ve got it all planned out. The question is, can you do it?” She turned to Tyson and looked pointedly at him. Tyson felt she had gained some respect for him since the crisis of Nate’s leg but he suspected she still thought he was something of a twit. He suspected she was right, too, which was an extremely deflating thought.

“I can,” he said, trying to sound certain and un twit-like. “Johnny’s a good little help now, and we were thinking you could send one of the boys to me for the winter as well. I’d be well able to handle the work with Robbie, maybe.”

“Ahem,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Maybe not Robbie.”

“Why not Robbie?” Tyson wanted to know. Robbie, at sixteen the oldest of the little boys, was the obvious choice. “He’s gotten so big the last year, I’m sure he could do it.” The MacKinnons all looked at each other and Mr. MacKinnon made a rude snorting noise.

“You remember what I told you when we sent Nate to you back when he was seventeen?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked.

“You said young Alphas were only made for two things and the second one was work,” Tyson
recalled. “Why?”

“The first one comes on you before the second one does,” Nate said, and started to laugh along with his Pa.

“Shut up, both of you,” Mrs. MacKinnon ordered. “We’re trying to get something done here and you two are just laughing like baboons. I known you both a long time, and Nathan, you were just as bad, and Graham, you were worse.”

“I was not,” Nate said, indignant. “Never once did anyone see me mooning at my in-laws, and I certainly never got caught with my hand in my pants in church.”

“Did he really?” Tyson asked, scandalized. “In church?”

“Well, out back, but it was the middle of service,” Nate said.

“You thought Mr. Crosby back home was pretty dashing, though,” Mr. MacKinnon said. “Don’t deny it.” Nate blushed and Mrs. MacKinnon looked cross.

“Robbie needs a firm hand right now,” Mrs. MacKinnon began again, and Nate and Graham exploded into hysterical laughter.

“Firm hand!” Nate howled. “That’s the last thing he needs!”

Mrs. MacKinnon silenced both of them with an ice cold look. “Be quiet!” she demanded and then turned to Tyson. “There is nothing,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, “Nothing so repulsive as boys age fourteen to seventeen. You’ll see. They got their little habits, and no care at all for who got to do the laundry, and I don’t think I want to visit that on you for a winter.”

“Ugh,” said Tyson, taking her meaning clearly. “Well, I mean,” he went on, “I don’t care how much he, you knows,” - here he made a vague hand gesture - “so long as he gets his work done.”

“None of the MacKinnon boys grab at girls,” Mrs. MacKinnon said firmly. “They’re good boys and if they ever think of not being they’ll answer to me. But someone let slip the plan he’d marry you if Nate died and now he’s all puffed up. He’s not a bad boy but he thinks he’s meant to be the boss of you.”

“Well,” Tyson said, trying to be agreeable but by God someone was coming to his farm to shovel out the pigs because he wasn’t doing it, “how about the little two?” William and Thomas, at thirteen and eleven were still young boys but they could perhaps together be as useful as one man.

Mrs. MacKinnon looked very unsure about this idea. “Oh God, you don’t want two of them,” she said. “The pair of them,” she said despairing. “They’re just a couple of horrible little prats, no use to anyone. I caught them yesterday trying to ride the pig again.”

“Tys can manage,” Nate said, support coming from an unexpected quarter. Mrs. MacKinnon looked at Tyson; she had a particular look that suggested she was wondering if it would be simpler to just throw him down a well rather than correct his failings, and she was employing it now. He tried to sit up straight and look capable of managing but then a thought struck him.

“What if we just sold the farm to EJ?” he asked.

“Well we can’t do that,” Nate scoffed, but his father looked considering.

“You could though,” he said slowly. “If Johnson wants it, you could, and there’s the Olsen place a
little east of town - it’s just right for a smith. You could buy that and you’d have some to spare.” He stopped there and just looked at them placidly.

“Huh,” Nate said, the same look of consideration on his face and ultimately, that was what they did.

“What are you doing?” Tyson said that night in bed, appalled. With the prospect of Nate leaving every interaction had taken on a greater sense of urgency and they had started out clutching each other passionately but this he felt was beyond the pale. Nate stopped kissing him for a minute to look puzzled.

“What?” he said. “I’m not doing anything. Same as usual.”

“You got your…” Tyson said, gesturing down Nate’s naked body spread over his.

“My what?” Nate said, peering down between them to where he was buried inside Tyson. “Seems about right to me.”

“You still got your socks on!” Tyson said, and Nate just laughed at him.

“My feet are cold,” he said clearly intending to carry on but Tyson dug his fingernails into Nate’s bum, hard, and Nate stopped mid thrust. “What?” he said again, and looked down at Tyson’s face more seriously. “Oh for god’s sake,” Nate said. “You’ll let me tumble you behind the house in December and up in the hayloft with EJ down below, but my socks are too much?”

“Take them off,” Tyson insisted and Nate made a beleaguered face. “Off!” Tyson said again, wriggling slightly so he slid a little up. Nate grunted, gripped Tyson firmly and pushed back in, grinding against Tyson the way he especially liked.

“Can I keep them on if I do this?” Nate asked, biting behind Tyson’s ear and sucking until Tyson writhed against him.

“No,” Tyson said faintly, but his will was faltering and Nate knew it. Tyson was forced to bring out the big guns. “I think I hear the baby,” he said, and Nate froze.

“Aah, shit,” Nate said, and Tyson could practically feel him wilting inside him. There was always that one quiet moment where they both paused, listening, hoping against experience that the baby would fall back asleep and Nate was in that posture now, still against Tyson waiting for the second cry. Tyson struck. Bucking up and twisting he managed to flip them so he was on top of Nate, lying across Nate’s legs laughing as he scrabbled for Nate’s socks, “You liar!” Nate said and slapped at Tyson’s now exposed ass. Triumphant, Tyson ripped one of the wool socks off Nate’s foot and grabbed for the other one, leaning forward on his knees, unconcerned by Nate’s uncharacteristic lack of fight. He got the second sock off and swiveled so he was sat back up on his heels, calves either side of Nate’s thighs, facing Nate. Nate was staring intently at him, hand moving on his cock which had stiffened right back up and was glistening with their intermingled juices.

“Come’ere,” Nate grunted, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him forward until Tyson was sat over Nate’s groin. When Nate got really, really excited the lisp came out which Tyson always found adorable but Nate didn’t look so adorable now. He looked ferocious; he held Tyson around the waist with one arm and with the other easily lifted both of them and moved back on the bed so he rested against the wall and Tyson was in his lap. Tyson often sat in Nate’s lap like this, but never naked; Nate looked intent and then with his hand guided himself back inside Tyson and with his other hand on Tyson’s shoulder pushed gently so he sank onto Nate’s cock. They had never done it
like this and Tyson lowered himself slowly until he was fully seated and then lifted up slightly and came back down. Nate shivered and pushed up into him, hands on Tyson’s hips. Tyson realised he was still holding the second sock and threw it onto the floor so he could put both hands on Nate’s shoulders for balance. He sat, considering the sensation, and Nate pulled him down a little at the same time he thrust up; it was good, very good, deep in a way he’d never experienced before.

“Socks off,” Nate said, “alright?” Tyson nodded and Nate tightened his arms around Tyson and just went to town. “Yeah?” Nate said.

“Yeah,” Tyson panted back. “Yeah.”

“You going to miss me?” Nate said, mid thrust, and Tyson tightened his hands where they gripped onto Nate’s traps.

“Maybe a little,” Tyson said, underselling his worries considerably. “Gonna miss this, anyway.”

“That’s right, baby,” Nate said and smugly pulled him down again.

*

Nate was right, Tyson thought six months later, tying the horse and wagon to the hitching post near the train station. He had missed him, both Nate himself and his cock. It had been a long six months and he was excited to see Nate again after so long. They had exchanged letters but the winter had made the mail erratic and only so much could be said in a letter meant to be read by all the family.

Tyson hung over the gate to the station platform looking for Nate among the arrivals, but it was Johnny who saw him first. “Pa!” he squealed, wiggling out from his position flanking Tyson and clambering over the fence. “Pa!”

Nate’s head shot up at his voice and he waved and headed towards them. He was very much changed from when Tyson last saw him— he’d lost a good twenty pounds he didn’t have to spare and succeeded in growing a full beard for the first time. He’d cut his hair close, presumably for the trip and was wearing a heavy woolen coat and smart boots Tyson had never seen. All together he presented a picture of an intimidating, grown up Alpha, a far cry from his homely scruffy beloved Nate in his old work pants and soft shirt.

Tyson looked over at Rosie, still standing beside him on one of the stale piles of snow that lingered into April throughout the town, holding onto the railings and peering hesitantly between them. “It’s Pa,” Tyson said. “You want a boost over the fence?” Rosie looked unsure. Six months was a long time for an almost two year old, but finally she nodded and Tyson gave her a lift over. He watched her go, trotting along in her little red woolen dress and white shawl, the only bright spot of colour on the platform. He didn’t care what anyone said about dark colours being more practical, against all odds God had given him a girl to dress and he’d do as he saw fit. As he watched, Nate caught up Johnny and swept him up into a hug. Rosie veered away, turning to grab Graham’s leg, her grandfather more familiar to her than the father she hadn’t seen for half a year; she peeked out at Nate from behind Graham warily. Nate gave his father a quick one armed hug and still carrying Johnny, walked to the fence and reached for Tyson. Although Nate was clearly pleased to see the children and Tyson, he seemed off somehow, a little tight and reserved. Instead of the hearty, borderline inappropriate kiss Tyson usually got, Nate pecked him on the cheek and then clapped him on the shoulder as he might have a friend.

“Tys,” Nate said longingly, his hand still on Tyson’s shoulder, and for one minute he seemed familiar, but then he stepped back to get his trunks and the connection was broken.

Tyson retreated to the wagon, puzzled, to avoid the crowd which had grown large enough it was difficult to avoid being touched. Sitting on the box seat, he craned his neck to see Nate and could see
he had pulled his father aside and was whispering something to him. Mr. MacKinnon laughed and nodded and they both turned to look at Tyson. Graham waved to him cheerily but Nate’s face was tight and closed off and Tyson was suddenly filled with terrible imaginings. Perhaps Nate had met an Orthodox believer who persuaded him Tyson should be returned to the Community with the children, or worse, persuaded him Tyson should be returned to the Community without the children. Perhaps Nate had taken religion himself, or Nate had met someone else, younger and prettier and less inclined to yell when he hogged the bath water while it was hot. Then as Tyson watched, Nate bent down to shy Rosie and began to play peek-a-boo with her, hunkered down on the platform careless of his fancy coat dragging in the mud. She was still hesitant of this bearded man she’d never seen and Nate waited her out, Johnny fidgeting beside him, squatting there to peek-a-boo for several minutes until she broke into a smile and patted his beard. He picked her up and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, his face as open and loving and Tyson realised he was wrong to imagine Nate was angry or uninterested. This Nate, the one so familiar to Tyson, would never leave him, never send him away. Instead, he began to think that perhaps Nate was worried, not angry - could it be he was sick, and afraid to tell them? He felt queasy in a way he hadn’t the whole time Nate had been gone. The more he meditated on the idea, the more convinced he became.

Nate leaned over the side board startling Tyson, who had been so focused on his worries he hadn’t noticed Nate’s approach. Nate put one hand on Tyson’s knee, but then moved it away again. “I’m going to send the children home with Pa,” he said, leaving no room for discussion and Tyson’s heart sank again. What would it take for Nate to not want to spend his first evening with the babies? “Just for tonight,” Nate added. “We’ll pick them up after church tomorrow.” He started to heave his trunks into the back of the wagon and Tyson moved to help but Nate waved him off. “Alright,” Tyson said, and kissed the children goodbye. He was going to be brave, he had decided, and face whatever terrible thing Nate had to tell him with dignity. Nate probably had consumption, he thought. That would explain the weight loss and not wanting to be too near the children.

Nate clambered into the wagon and gently shoved Tyson out of the driver’s seat. “Over you go, baby,” he said, whipping up the reins and heading out, Tyson sitting beside him. It was a particularly repulsive spring day in Denver, warm enough that the grey slush was clinging to the wheels and kicking up into their faces, but cold enough there was still a cold breeze rattling at them, made worse by the speed they were travelling at. Nate was driving the horses on at a great pace. The sky, so beautiful and far away on a sunny day, now hung dully over them and it all seemed of a piece with Tyson’s dour thoughts. Tyson had been looking forward to showing off how well he could drive now. Six months ago, the week before he left Nate had given serious thought to insisting Johnny drive rather than Tyson because, as Nate had gracelessly said, “Johnny’s a lot better than you,” and Tyson had been eager to show Nate how he had improved.

Tyson sulked and Nate remained in his strange, drawn silence, occasionally looking over at Tyson but saying nothing. They had a tense, largely silent ride back to the new house, mercifully only twenty minutes from the station, Tyson thinking alternately of how irritating Nate was, wrecking his much anticipated homecoming and worrying about Nate’s health. This newly arrived, older Nate seemed a stranger, stern and cold like the men Tyson had known growing up. He desperately wanted to talk to Nate but didn’t feel he could break his cold reserve.

Finally they arrived and Nate hitched Molly to the porch and left the trunks in the wagon. “Fuck them,” he said when Tyson asked, and Tyson thought this too seemed very unlike Nate, usually possessed of a poor boy’s care with his belongings. Before he could say anything Nate grabbed his arm and hustled him up the stairs. He seemed to be in a great rush to deliver the bad news. At the door he took hold of Tyson by the shoulders and rested his forehead against his. “I’m going to fuck the shit out of you,” Nate said, startling Tyson into a nervous laugh. He wasn’t opposed but it seemed a strange way to deliver the news Nate had tuberculosis.
Nate took no note at all of Tyson, simply pulling at his clothing and pushing him down the hall towards the back of the house and their bedroom. Nate’s big hands, fingers rough in a new unfamiliar way, were working at Tyson’s shirt buttons while he kissed him fiercely and briefly Tyson was caught up in the kiss. He kissed back and Nate made a satisfied growling noise as his fingers tightened on Tyson’s waist. “Wait, wait,” Tyson panted, “Wait. Do you have consumption?” That managed to get through to Nate where nothing else had and he stopped walking Tyson backwards towards the bedroom.

“Do I have consumption?” he repeated. “Why would I… what are you… consumption?”

“But you look so stern,” Tyson said bewildered. “You’re so thin, and you look grieved with me, and you sent the children away, and I thought maybe you were saying goodbye one last time before you go up to the Sanatorium.”

“I look,” Nate said tightly, “like a man who has been trying to keep his cockstand down for the last twelve hours and failing.” He planted one hand on Tyson’s ass and pulled him firmly against his front to punctuate his explanation. He was rock hard in his pants and Tyson shifted slightly against him to enjoy it. “I haven’t seen you in six months,” Nate went on “and I been sharing a bed with Max’s three year old which let me tell you, has put a very serious crimp in my habits. They get six feet of snow up there, so I could either jerk it in the outhouse, standing in sight of the main house in snow up to my eyebrows, or in the forge next to the apprentice boy with the wonk eye. I started thinking about you somewhere around Kansas City and I haven’t been able to stop since - it was a terrible mistake because I damn near embarrassed myself in front of everyone on the train. And I’m thin because I been swinging a hammer twelve hours a day six days a week, not because I got consumption.”

“Oh,” Tyson said, taken aback. “Well, good.”

“My God,” Nate said, ”can’t you tell the difference between consumptive and randy? I wouldn’t kiss you if I had consumption, Tys. That wouldn’t be so much ‘Goodbye’ as ‘See you soon,’” if I was going around tongue kissing you with consumption.” Tyson giggled. “Now. I been looking forward to this for some time,” Nate said, starting in on Tyson’s shirt again. “So let’s get back to the matter at hand, which is to say, I want to fuck you til you shout, and then eat a little something, and then fuck you again, and then go to sleep somewhere that isn’t a train or a bed with a three year old in it, and then wake up and fuck you again.”

“Yeah?” Tyson said, pleased with Nate’s agenda, and wrapped his arms around Nate’s neck. Suddenly everything Nate had done since he arrived home had a new meaning. “I missed you.”

“I been thinking of you so much, baby,” Nate said, and returned to walking towards the bedroom while stripping off Tyson’s clothes. Tyson relaxed and let Nate have at it. His hands were a bit clumsy and he wasn’t talking anymore, just making short grunts. He was completely heedless of Tyson’s pleasure and Tyson loved it. If he hadn’t wanted Nate and known him well it would have been a very different thing but Tyson did and he let go and let himself simply be taken, pushed down to the bed, shirt pulled off roughly and pants pulled down to mid thigh while Nate shucked his own clothes completely. Tyson had a minute to admire Nate naked, leaner than he’d ever known him healthy, chest and arms absolutely corded with new muscle before Nate was on him, flipping him over onto his front and pulling his pants down to his calves, one hand on the back of his neck and his knees trapping Tyson’s. Tyson’s pants were caught on his boots holding his ankles together and no matter what he did he couldn’t spread his legs more than two feet apart but the feeling of being trapped was strangely enjoyable. He liked the feeling of being safely held and possessed, desired so intensely that Nate had lost all his graces. What made Nate Nate was still there however; Tyson felt it in the core Nate took even while manhandling him onto the bed, the two fingers that swept down to
check Tyson was wet before he shoved inside him, in the sound Nate made as he was fully seated.

“I missed you so much,” Nate panted, rutting into Tyson harder than he’d ever done, cock like a steel bar. “I missed you baby,” he said, one forearm under Tyson’s chest, hand gripping his shoulder to pull him back to meet each of Nate’s thrusts. Tyson arched as much as he could and pushed back at Nate, scrabbling to get one hand down to pull at his own cock. Nate grunted and knocked his hand away, spreading one big hand over Tyson’s cock and balls the way he liked, dropping his whole weight onto Tyson so he was flattened to the bed and pushing into Nate’s hand with every thrust. He tried to push back but Nate’s weight was enough to keep him down, Nate breathing harshly, arms wrapped around him not for closeness but to hold him still while he fucked him, his big hands spread possessively on Tyson’s shoulder and hip, pinning him in place to be used. It didn’t feel like he was being used, though, it felt like Nate was desperately trying to make a new connection, to force them back together in the most basic way, his breath growing sharp and ragged as he neared orgasm.

“Do it,” Tyson ordered and Nate did, plowing into him with one great roar, coming and coming while his knot swelled inside Tyson. Everytime they did this Tyson remembered again how much he liked it, tied to Nate and wriggling on his cock, Nate’s arms wrapped tightly around him, Nate as vulnerable and tender as he ever was, heart bare and completely at Tyson’s mercy. Physically Tyson liked knotting fine but it did something entirely other to Nate, who every time was overcome with emotion, holding Tyson against him and whispering how much he loved him as he kissed and petted him. It wasn’t unusual for Nate to cry a little midway through the tie, although Tyson would never have told anyone. And that Tyson loved, Nate undone and willing to let Tyson see it. He’d never imagined anything like it back home in Victoria, dreaming of his future husband who would be tall and handsome and order him about in a manly fashion, the head of the household making decisions with perfect, smooth confidence and showing Tyson’s beauty and obedience off at Church. Instead, he got Nate, tall and dear and young, sometimes smelly and often unsure but never wavering in his love for Tyson and desire to do well by him, full of conviction that Tyson was a person not a Spakjschwien to be shown off, demanding that Tyson stand up alongside him; willing to let Tyson deep inside where he was most exposed. Tyson hadn’t known he wanted him, but oh, he did.

“I missed you,” Nate said, returned to speech by his release, “Oh, baby, I missed you so much,” and Tyson laughed.

“I missed you too, Schauz,” he said into the pillow, muffled. “I liked that.”

“Yeah?” Nate said, rolling his hips against Tyson, testing the tie, “Did you?” And then the petting and cooing began, and Tyson remembered how much he liked it all over again, Nate kissing his neck again and again, tipping them over to their sides and reaching around to hold Tyson’s hand. “I just really, really love you,” Nate said, completely sincere but also a little ridiculous. “I just wouldn’t want you to forget it.”

“Which one did you choose?” Tyson asked as they were falling asleep, spooned up together warm and sweaty. How clever Nate was, Tyson thought, sending the children away for the night so they could luxuriate in bed.

“Which one what?” Nate mumbled.

“Outhouse, snow or forge?” Tyson said.

“Outhouse,” Nate sighed. “Outhouse, and it was exactly as disgusting as you imagine. Max knew what I was doing too, and he thought it was funny to come by and throw rocks at the privy while I was in there. Can we not talk about it?”
“OK,” Tyson said, half asleep already. “I like the beard, maybe.”

“Mmm, yeah, I’m maybe on it too,” Nate said, “but it keeps the face warm up there in the goddamn Arctic.”

“How’s the leg?” Tyson asked, patting at Nate’s thigh where it was curled around his.

“Good,” Nate said, “hardly pains me at all anymore. I missed you all something awful but it was the right decision.”

And that was how they got Teddy.
“Why does this keep happening to me?” Tyson said plaintively from where he was hung over the porch railing. “I’m getting real tired of this view.”

“You know why this keeps happening,” Nate said, approaching with a cloth and the only good glass left that had survived the depredations of the children. “You said Omegas never have more than three, and you might as well get them all out of the way. And then I said, you sure about that, and you said stick it in me right now Nate, or else.”

“Shut up,” Tyson said weakly, leaning back over the railing to vomit once more. Nate stood beside him, making useless noises of sympathy and dabbing with the cloth at the back of his neck.

“I was just real happy to see you,” Nate said a little guiltily, but Tyson ignored him to be sick again.

“It’s not my time,” Tyson said for the third time, irritated at Nate’s insistence he was in labour. “I just got a bit of back ache but it’s been like this for a while. It doesn’t mean the baby is coming, I’d be able to tell. I want to go for a walk.”

“Oh, I got your number,” Nate said. “Ma isn’t going anywhere this time, and neither are you. You’re going to stay in this house and have a baby. With Ma this time.”

“No,” Tyson said, pitifully. “Don’t leave.”

“No, no I’m staying too, baby,” Nate hurried to reassure him. “Don’t worry.”

Tyson had had a back ache since the day before, and he was in no mood. He’d barely been able to stuff down a large chicken dinner and then make the weeks bread, biscuits, and some of those little dough cakes he liked, then do a light wash, and then feed the children and put them to bed and knock back his supper of cold chicken, pickles, a slice or two of ham and some turnip tops before he’d had to sit down for a minute. He hadn’t even been able to eat dessert before Kathy had turned up and insisted on taking liberties. Shocking. And Nate had been no help, with his “Go on baby, let Ma take a look,” and “Come on baby, please?”, and “Really, Ma? But he seems …”

“Soon,” was all Kathy had said. “Any time now. I’ll stay the night just in case.” Tyson glared at her, smoothing down the nightgown he’d changed into after she’d insisted he had to take his pants off to let her check. The nerve. Tyson was feeling very disagreeable about everyone in the room, but since he needed Nate, he gave Kathy a look of gloating triumph over Nate’s shoulder to indicate his cleverness at not being in labour just like he said. Ha. Kathy just scoffed at him and smoothed her paper. She didn’t read very well but she could puzzle out an illustrated paper if she had enough time, a rare commodity. “Go ahead,” she said to Nate. “Mr. Big Talk there’s not quite started yet, you got time for a walk. Don’t mind me, I got my paper and a cup of tea and I brought some sweeties. I’d be glad of a bit of a sit down.”

She pulled something out of her skirt pocket and Tyson saw she had a whole tin of Y&S liquorice. He made a longing sound and she rattled the tin at him. “You don’t deserve none,” she told him. “I saw you giving me the eyeball just now you rude thing.” Tyson keened and made grabby hands; if he didn’t get some of that liquorice he thought he might die. Kathy rolled her eyes but softened. “You can have four pieces,” she said, “and let this be a lesson to you that grace comes even to the undeserving, even to those what make faces at their mother-in-law.”
“Sorry Kathy,” Tyson said, willing to say anything to get his hands on the liquorice.

“Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ,” she said, and picked out six pieces and put them in his hand.

“Und hat den Menschen Gaben gegeben,” Tyson said, the traditional response, but Kathy didn’t understand, or maybe she did, because she just smiled at him and sat back down with her paper.

“Most people wouldn’t want to eat liquorice while they’re having a baby,” she remarked, “but go on.”

Tyson loves Nate very much. He’d had no idea how it was done, but Nate and Johnny showed him how and now it comes as easy as breathing, easy as anything. Every moment of the day he loves him, because he’s kinder and more handsome and more generous with his affection than any other man that ever lived. And that is why Tyson, very unwillingly, held out one and no more of the precious liquorice pieces to Nate. Nate, the best husband any man could have, rolled his eyes and declined so Tyson happily stuffed all six pieces into his mouth. “My God,” Nate said judgmentally.

“You’re going to be breathing liquorice fumes all over the poor baby when it comes.”

“I’m not having the baby tonight,” Tyson insisted again. “I told you!”

“Yeah alright,” Nate said. “How about that walk?”

They took a walk, or at least, they took part of a walk. They walked to exactly 20 feet past yelling distance of the house and then Tyson grunted, bent over and clutched the trunk of the sour cherry he was stood next to. “What?” said Nate. “What? You feeling sick? Oh goddamn it, you got me again, you’re having the baby aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Tyson grunted, but he knew he was. It was a remarkable feeling, like an entire labour compressed into several minutes. Nate was in a flap but Tyson had no focus to spare for him.

“OK, you stay here and I’m going to run get my Ma,” Nate said, and Tyson transferred his death grip from the tree to Nate’s arm.

“Oh you’re not going anywhere,” Tyson said in tones of such menace Nate did a double take, but there was no time for arguing as Tyson was having a baby right then, and Nate had to scramble. Only three minutes later Tyson was holding the baby. “Ha!” Tyson said, pleased with himself for outfoxing Kathy yet again.

“I am going to lock you in a room next time,” Nate said in tones of great passion, and Tyson drew breath to say something snappy back but then he felt the most peculiar sensation. He looked up at Nate to say something but Mrs. MacKinnon appeared from around the entrance of the small orchard, took one look at Tyson and started running.

“I thought you might be at it,” Mrs. MacKinnon panted, approaching them. “Shit,” she snapped, taking a good look at Tyson. “Lie him down, lie him down right now!” she said to Nate but it was too late. Tyson heard what sounded like the ocean back home rushing out and then black rushed in, narrowing his vision to a point. He saw Nate’s worried face turned to him and then nothing.

He woke up flat on his back, and it must have been only a minute or so because the baby was set on his chest and Mrs. MacKinnon knelt at his side with her entire weight pressing down on his stomach, both hands compressing his guts. “Don’t,” he said, and reached down to pry her hands off.
“I have to,” she said, “you’re bleeding bad,” and he could see she meant it so he released the one hand he’d lifted and she went back to squishing him. It was profoundly uncomfortable. “See if he can feed the baby,” she ordered Nate. “It might help to make his womb tighten.”

Nate looked terrible, Tyson thought abstractedly, all pale and sweaty. Still, he managed to get Tyson’s collar open and Tyson and the new baby took it from there, Tyson being an old hand at it now. “Come on,” Mrs. MacKinnon was muttering, “come on,” as she pushed and pressed, but it seemed to be the baby that did the trick because as soon as he took a couple good pulls, it was like a giant fist grabbed Tyson’s middle and squeezed.

“Ouch!” he said, affronted at the indignity.

“Keep going,” Mrs. MacKinnon urged him. “We got to get this stopped or I’m going to have to try to stop it from the inside.” Tyson blanched at the thought and jostled the baby gently to keep him awake and feeding.

“Sorry baby,” he murmured, looking down at the poor boy who was trying his best but wasn’t getting anything much since the milk wasn’t in yet, and now he was being shaken awake to boot. “Sorry you pretty baby.” Luckily the baby’s efforts were enough and the bleeding slowed and then stopped. Mrs. MacKinnon didn’t let up on compressing his middle for what felt like a very long time and even enlisted a frightened looking Nate to take over for her while she bustled about. Finally, slowly, she allowed Nate to ease his weight off and then after a period of careful watching seemed to feel Tyson would do. Nate sat down on the ground with a thump, his face pale.

“That was a lot of blood,’ Nate said shakily and Tyson looked down at himself for the first time. Nate was right, that was a lot of blood. The lower half of his gown was saturated and there was an alarming pool spread around him soaking into the ground. Blood always looked like more than it was but even so it was a worrying amount of blood.

“I feel alright, though,” he reassured Nate, who didn’t look very reassured but gave him a weak smile anyway.

“Sure you do,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, “until you sit up, and then you’re going to fall over again. That was a considerable amount of blood.” She turned to Nate. “I don’t want him standing up until we’ve got the same amount of water and beef tea back into him. If I ran back and brought blankets and such, you think you can carry him?” Tyson could see Nate wavering as he looked down at Tyson; Tyson knew better than anyone his leg still pained him. Every night Nate settled into bed with a groan and a wince, and a few times a week it was bad enough he asked Tyson to make a hot poultice for it. The smithing was tolerable but long days of riding or farm work were more difficult.

“No,” Nate finally said reluctantly. “I’m not sure the leg will hold the whole way and I don’t want to chance dropping him. How about the wheelbarrow?”

“Oh, now, come on,” Tyson objected, but Mrs. MacKinnon just snorted.

“That’s right,” she said, “We’ll just heave him in there and wheel him back home like a prize cabbage.”

“I can walk,” Tyson tried, and they both looked at him. The combined weight of the MacKinnon gaze made him stop his objections. “Wheelbarrow it is,” he said.

“There,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, returning with the wheelbarrow, a lantern and a billycan of strong
sweet tea, “I put hay in it and all for you. Luxury!” For all her mocking tone, Tyson could see she had gone to some trouble. The barrow was full of hay and she had thrown one of their old quilts over that, making really quite a comfortable looking ride. “Let’s get some of this tea down you,” she said, “and see how you do.” She’d also brought a larger can of water to rinse off the blood, and baby blankets, and in short order Tyson was feeling much fresher, briskly rinsed and scrubbed and then bundled into an old sheet with a great wodge of rags beneath him. Nate, who had been embarrassed by the aftereffects of childbirth when Johnny was born, was by now entirely unmoved and simply fetched and carried at his mother’s direction. With Nate’s arm under him to prop him up very slightly, Tyson drank a bit of tea and then laid down again while Mrs. MacKinnon washed and wrapped the still unnamed baby.

They paused then while Tyson tried to drink more tea and eat the handpie Mrs. MacKinnon had brought out from the house. All three of them sat on the ground a little way away from the soiled earth, drinking tea and talking quietly as the lantern cast a cheery circle of light. Outside the light loomed the young trees of the orchard but they felt friendly, like safe walls protecting and encircling the three of them. It was a quiet, happy moment and Tyson was content as he laid there munching and admiring his third and final baby.

“What will you name him?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked.

“Theodore, but called Teddy,” Tyson answered. “It’s the traditional name for the third born of an Omega - it means ‘Gift of God’.”

“Right,” Nate said, amused. “First I’ve heard of it, but apparently we’re naming him Teddy.”

It was a bit of a production getting Tyson into the wheelbarrow; he was able to sit up at about a 45 degree angle, but any further and his vision started to get hazy. Eventually Nate had to set him in the wheelbarrow with his head at the low end so his feet were higher than his heart. “I feel like an idiot,” Tyson complained, but Nate just continued to push carefully, trying to avoid as many bumps as he could.

“You look like a bit of an idiot too,” Mrs. MacKinnon assured him, trotting along ahead of them with the baby and lantern.

“Thanks, Kathy,” Tyson said, and Mrs. MacKinnon just clicked her tongue at him. When they arrived home she hustled him straight into bed and sure enough he fell asleep directly, still protesting he was fine.

* He woke the next morning to Nate kneeling by the bed, looking down at him rather than the baby who was off to the side in the cradle. “Hey,” Tyson said, rolling over to face Nate. “What’s the matter?” Nate’s face was unusually solemn.

“I went out to clean up, after I did the cows,” Nate said, “and that really was a lot of blood. I’m glad you’re alright.”

“I’m not going to die,” Tyson said cheerily, but Nate wasn’t in a cheery mood.

“Sometimes people do, though,” he said softly. “How you feeling?”

“Like a half slaughtered pig,” Tyson wanted to say, but Nate looked genuinely distressed so instead he just said “Parched,” which had the benefit of both being true and giving Nate something to do. He went buzzing off in search of some fortifying liquid and returned with his mother. Mrs. MacKinnon
had a suspiciously ingratiating smile on her face when she set down the billycan and handed Tyson a cup of tea made the way he liked and one of the liquorice candies.

“What?” he said suspiciously, but he still drank the tea and ate the candy.

“Now I’m sorry about this,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “I know I said I was going to give you beef tea, but extract’s never so good as the real thing, and of course there’s no fresh beef this time of year, so I’ve got pork tea here for you instead.”

“There’s no such thing as pork tea,” Tyson pointed out. “That’s just ham water.”

Kathy looked annoyed but resolute. “Call it what you like,” she said, “but it’s got all the strength in it of the bones and the flesh, and I put early greens in too.”

“You want me to drink ham water.” Tyson said disbelieving.

“Oh I don’t just want you to drink it,” she said, dropping the facade, “you’re going to drink it.”

Tyson considered his chances of success if he pitted his will against hers, gave a glancing thought to the fact that so long as Kathy was here she would be doing all of the cooking, childminding and most gloriously, the laundry, and then meditated for a minute on whether or not she was likely to have more tins of candy in her bag.

“Fine,” he said. “Give it.”

Triumphantly, Mrs. MacKinnon handed over a large tin mug half filled with a murky liquid. It appeared in honour of his invalid status she had strained the tea and so there were no chunks of greens in it which might, he thought, have actually made it better since then he could perhaps have thought of it as soup. As it was it was clearly, indisputably, ham water. He choked it down from his half reclining position and Kathy looked on approvingly.

“Right,” she said, “good. Now I’d like to see you get through that can before dinner time, and it’s awful salty so you’ll need to drink the same amount again of tea, and if you can manage all that we’ll see about you sitting up and maybe trying a little bread and milk for supper.” Tyson had never heard such a dispiriting agenda in his life and made to sit up to make his objections known, but Nate’s big hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“Come on Tys,” he said. “Stay down if Ma tells you to.” Tyson subsided. It was rare for Nate to sound so somber when he spoke to Tyson; Tyson looked up at him and saw he was still pale and unhappy looking.

“Alright” Tyson said, “I will, and I’ll do what you say, but can Nate stay and lie down with me?”

“Good idea,” Mrs. MacKinnon approved. She also looked a little surprised at how suppressed Nate seemed and just watched silently as Nate took off his boots and climbed in beside Tyson

“What’s the matter?” Tyson asked and Nate buried his face in the pillow.

“You looked dead,” he said quietly. “There was so much blood, and you were so white, and I thought…”

“I’m OK though,” Tyson said, stroking Nate’s hair. It was worrisomely hard to keep his arm in the air so he rested his elbow on the bed between them. Nate had shaved the sides of his head again recently, and the tip of his ear was sunburnt. “I’m alright,” Tyson said again and pulled gently at Nate’s earlobe. “Have some ham water,” Tyson offered, but Nate just smiled at him to acknowledge the joke without any real mirth and shuffled closer. Nate knew better after three children than to pull
Tyson against him by his waist right after a baby so he slowly inchwormed his way forward until they were pressed together. “I need you to stay,” he said quietly and fell back into silence, lying cuddled against Tyson with his face buried in his neck. Tyson laid quietly beside him, stroking his hair until he fell asleep and then drank some more horrible ham water and looked over at the cradle beside him. The baby was still deep in a newborn stupor and didn’t seem to need any attention, so he rested his head beside Nate’s and let himself fall asleep too.

Mrs. MacKinnon roused them several hours later with a new can of tea and the news that Tyson could try sitting up. Propped up by all the pillows they owned, cup of tea in hand, Tyson felt a great deal more perky and so, it seemed, did Nate. Nate was seated on the bed beside him atop the covers, legs stretched out before him, back against the headboard of the bed enjoying his own cup of tea. His spirits had risen with Tyson’s health and now that Tyson was upright and eating Nate had regained his usual optimism. He looked on approvingly as Tyson plowed through a bowl of bread and milk and then called for more.

The baby stirred in his cradle and Tyson picked him up. “Look at this boy,” he said, smoothing back the baby’s wispy blond hair. ‘Look whose boy he is,” holding him up so Nate and Mrs. MacKinnon could see him clearly. The baby, still asleep, looked comically like a tiny disgruntled Nate.

“Look at that,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, wiping one hand off on her apron to touch the baby’s cheek gently. “He looks exactly like his Pa. I know they often do, but this…”

“Hey baby,” Nate said. “You scared us.” He turned to Tyson. “Next time you won’t fool me again. I’m locking you in a room with my Ma in month eleven.”

“Won’t be a next time,” Tyson said with some satisfaction, pleased with the cleverness of his make up, the remainder of his life stretching out unencumbered. “Omegas never have more than three. That’s it.”

Tyson never had a favourite but Teddy, who might otherwise have been a little overlooked, last in a pack of louder, bolder, prettier children, was Tyson’s special baby, his lovely, easy baby that looked just like Nate, his very last, precious one, the best looking baby in Denver.

“Hmm,” said Nate when this was proposed. “That’s very flattering but I don’t think anyone but you thinks a baby that looks like me is going to win any contests.”

Tyson clutched Teddy to himself and hissed at Nate. How dare he. “You sound just like a goose,” Nate pointed out unconcerned. “He is an awful nice baby,” he went on, taking Teddy out of Tyson’s arms to kiss at his pudgy cheeks. “Aren’t you?” he cooed, “Aren’t you now, you old baby?” Teddy seemed to agree because he flung his arms around Nate’s neck and kissed Nate’s cheek clumsily back, a trick he had picked up a few months previous.

“Your mother thinks I’m right,” Tyson pointed out.

“Yeah, and if I had a dog it would probably agree too,” Nate said. “But that’s it. You’re the looker in the family.” He turned Teddy around to face Tyson and said, “Isn’t he, Teddy? Isn’t your Bund the prettiest?”

Teddy seemed to agree with that too because he began to blow kisses to Tyson, wetly smacking them onto his own fat palms and then blowing them with great vigour. “Bund,” he said, reaching for Tyson, “Bund bund.”
“You want him?” Nate asked. “Or should I? I’m going down to EJ’s for that hammer he promised me, and I could take him. You want to come with me?” he asked Teddy, “You want a horse ride?”

“Horse!” shrieked Teddy, rocking madly in excitement. “Horse! Hooorse!”

“I think you’re committed now,” Tyson said. “Don’t let him fall in the slurry again, please.”

“No promises,” Nate said. “You want to fall in the slurry?” he asked Teddy.

“Slurry!” Teddy said and laid his head down on Nate’s shoulder. “Slurry,” he told Tyson confidingly, thumb drifting towards his mouth.

“Yeah, slurry,” Tyson said wryly. “Huzzah.”

“I’ll take the rest of them and throw them in the slurry too,” Nate said, kissing Tyson goodbye. “Who wants to come to Johnson’s?” he hollered towards the front porch and Johnny and Rosie rocketed in. Tyson waved them off as they headed out.

Teddy, Tyson was quite convinced, had brought luck with him. Unlike the first two, no disaster was associated with his advent; quite the contrary in fact. Denver continued to grow and with it their fortunes, everyone having need of a blacksmith. Everything was good, he thought - Nate healthy in the smith, bringing in more than they would have ever made on the farm, a comfortable home, three healthy children and no more and that girl for the laundry within his sights. What more could he want? He turned away from the door and headed inside to root out his secret hoard of sweeties.

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“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tyson said. “I can’t do that, I’m Omega.”

“You do it or the family pays someone to do it,” Mrs. MacKinnon said and Tyson subsided into silence, stumped. He didn’t know what to make of Kathy’s request that he take over the books for the elder MacKinnon’s store and Nate’s smithy. He looked over at Nate who was busily stuffing dumplings into his mouth; when he caught Tyson’s eye he stopped and guilty swallowed. The enthusiastic gobbling carried a faint whiff of suggestion, Tyson felt, that Mrs. Mac’s pastry might be better than his and he didn’t care for it. Nate shoved another dumpling down his maw and wiped his mouth.

“Tys doesn’t have to do the accounts for the store unless he wants to,” Nate said loyally. “But you’re awful good at keeping the books and accounts and such,” he added, looking at Tyson.

“That skill’s for the use of my husband,” Tyson said, puzzled. “Not to be taken out into the world, so people can stare at me and wonder why my Alpha doesn’t shelter me. It’s to be a better manager of the home.” Nate looked doubtful, as well he might. He had walked in on Tyson asleep in the afternoon twice that week and once seated at the kitchen table eating a bowl of whipped cream while reading a florid romance novel. “I’m engaged in stringent economy in the home,” Tyson said piously, possibly overplaying his hand.

“Do the stringent economies occupy much of your time?” Nate asked mildly, picking apart another dumpling and eating only the filling. “I just ask because Millie down the General told me you bought 50 pounds of raisins and a case of potted shrimps last week, which doesn’t seem so economic as all that.”

“The almanac said there was going to be a blight!” Tyson hissed, wounded.

“A blight on shrimps?” Nate said doubtfully.
“Of raisins!” Tyson said.

“Even if the entire crop was wiped out,” Nate said, “do we get through 50 pounds of raisins in a year?”

“Well, no,” Tyson admitted. “But we could.”

“Oh I heard about that,” Kathy said, looking interested. “Millie told me too because she thought you might be fixing to make some kind of foreign dish with them. Did you?”

“No!” said Tyson reeling backwards, repelled at the thought. “What kind of casserole could you make with raisins and shrimp?”

“I don’t know,” Kathy said. “You’re always reading those fancy magazines we bring in for you - I thought there might be a recipe in one of those.”

“I’m not making a casserole with raisins and shrimp!” Tyson insisted.

“Glad to hear it,” Nate said quite sincerely. “What did you do with them then?”

Tyson looked extremely shifty. “Go on,” Nate urged and pointed at him with his fork.

“I ate them,” Tyson muttered.

“What was that?” Nate asked politely.

“I ate them!” Tyson barked. “I ate the shrimp! I just had a fancy for shrimp!”

“You ate a case of potted shrimp?” Mrs. MacKinnon said wonderingly. “Really?”

“Only half the case,” Tyson mumbled.

“Hunger probably brought on by the fatigue of stringent economy,” Nate said kindly while the rest of the family roared with laughter, and they left the discussion there.

“I wondered why you smelled like that,” Nate said meditatively as they got ready for bed that night. “Anyone else I’d ask if they were expecting, but you - you’re always like that. You don’t think you are expecting, do you?”

“Omegas never have more than three,” Tyson reminded him sullenly. He did not smell like shrimp, he was sure. Surreptitiously he smelled his hands just to be certain.

“You don’t have to go out to work if you don’t want,” Nate said as he tucked Tyson against him the way he liked. “But the family purse’d appreciate it and I think it would be good for you.”

“Good for me?” Tyson echoed.

“Yes,” Nate said. “I wonder if you’re getting a little bored now the children are all in school.”

Tyson had never considered if he was bored. Housekeeping was boring, yes, but he had never thought about whether he could do anything else. His main concern was to dodge as much of it as possible. “Well, I…” he said. Housekeeping was, really, pretty deadly. “I could try it, I suppose,” he said. It might be nice to get out occasionally, and it would all still be within the larger family, and if his Alpha thought it was alright, he supposed it must be.

Three years later he was convinced. By far the most confident reader and keeper of figures in the MacKinnon family, Tyson’s bookkeeping had been so successful they had him out at the various
MacKinnon businesses five days a week and they had been able to afford a girl to do the laundry, the sewing and some of the heavy cleaning. Tyson had settled happily into a routine of coming in three days a week to sit behind the big counter in the MacKinnon store and make chit chat while he did the accounts. There had been some stutters but to his surprise Tyson found he could deal with the customers, even the Alphas, easily, never needing more than a confident tone when he parried their banter and the occasional rap on a wandering hand with his heavy steel tipped ruler. He was doing things he’d never thought he’d be allowed to, and he liked it.

Occasionally Tyson still struggled with his religious beliefs; Johnny posed a problem. By the time he was sixteen, tall as Nate though half the width and clearly well past the age where propriety and Observant religious law required Tyson to maintain Bodily Integrity, Tyson was in a fuss. He was no longer a child, and Tyson knew he shouldn’t treat him as one, but Johnny didn’t seem to know this and still came to cuddle with his parents on the couch, and lie happily with his head on Tyson’s leg while Tyson read aloud. The thought of never touching Johnny’s little face again or tousling his hair tore at Tyson and the requirement that he never be alone in a room with Johnny was both unwieldy and, when the underlying principles were examined, disgusting. No one but Tyson expected this - Tyson knew Nate would be distressed by the suggestion. He and Johnny still stood with their arms slung around each other’s shoulders, Johnny cuddling into Nate on occasion, at least until Johnny remembered his dignity and let go.

Nate was technically the spiritual head of the household and the final word on issues such as this. Since he’d never once issued an edict on religion, Tyson couldn’t say in good conscience Nate was doing much of a job; regardless, Tyson brought the issue to Nate after several months of fruitless thought. “Don’t be so stupid,” Nate said, poring over a seed catalogue. They hardly did any farming anymore but Nate still took an interest and liked to order a few novelties every year for the kitchen garden. “African Horned Cucumber,” he read, and waggled his eyebrows. “Good Venture Geranium. Monarch, or Elephant Swede.”

“We already got one of those,” Tyson said irritated, and Nate looked up, curious. “John-John,” Tyson said. EJ and Marnie, following closely behind Tyson and Nate in every stage of life, had produced their own son a year after Rosie. He rejoiced in the name John Johnson, largely because EJ thought it was hilarious and was currently asleep in their attic with the MacKinnon children. Almost thirteen, he was already as tall as Nate and looked fit to outstrip his father soon. He ate often enough at their house that EJ had given Nate a breeding pair of pigs as compensation. Nate laughed and put down his catalogue.

“Why’re we talking about this bosh again?” he asked. “I thought I heard the last of it when you sadly failed to pith Duchene?” Nate, as Tyson had expected, still cherished his grudge against Duchene and liked to bring it up quarterly or so.

“Don’t start,” Tyson said warningly and Nate subsided, at least on the subject of Duchene.

“I’m not having it in the house,” Nate said calmly. “You know how I feel; if you want to keep your ways personally that’s for you to say but I won’t have it stopping you from touching the children.”

“Yesss,” said Tyson, wanting to be convinced. “I am the Rääjenboagen, though,” Tyson said uneasily. “Omegas don’t touch.”

“You aren’t really,” Nate said off hand, distracted by the catalogue again. “You’re Omega like I’m Alpha, you’re still you.” Tyson felt unconvinced by this and it showed on his face. Nate rolled his eyes.
“You want me to order you?” Nate sighed.

“Yes please,” Tyson said, climbing up beside him on the couch.

“Well then I order you not to stop touching Johnny,” Nate said, sounding tired of it all. “When you going to let go of all this nonsense?” he said to Tyson, tugging on his ear gently. “You’ve been living here in Denver almost as long as you lived in Victoria and it’s not right you should worry about your old ways. The Lord don’t demand you can’t touch your son, that’s the pastor.”

“That’s true,” Tyson said, comforted by that piece of good sense, and turned his mind to more important things. “Did you get any of the crullers?”

“Don’t talk to me of crullers!” Nate said bitterly, still annoyed by the recent debacle - Teddy and John-John had been exposed that afternoon as having eaten a full half gross of crullers meant for the church fundraiser - and Tyson withdrew from Nate and moved to the table with a flourish. He whipped the top off the cream pan and there hidden inside were a dozen crullers he had stashed earlier.

He pulled out the potted meat paste he’d been hoarding and smeared it on his cruller. “Are you sure you aren’t expecting?” Nate said, face contorted in disgust.

“Omegas only ever have three!” Tyson said shortly. He’d been over this before, he thought as he arranged his cruller to his satisfaction. “How many times I got to tell you? It’s not possible to have a fourth.” He bit down with enthusiasm. “And anyway,” he added. “We’re all getting a bit old for that, don’t you think?”
Urgh, that was no fun - I had flu and missed my usual Thursday posting. Well, at long last here is the final bit of the Nate and Tyson part - I am putting up Chapters 22 now and the (short) 23 later today. If anyone doesn’t care to read the Jamie Benn/Tyler Seguin chapters, stop here at the end of Chapter 22 and when the whole story is complete, skip to the last chapter for the epilogue if you like. Jamie shows up in Chapter 24 and the focus turns to him for several chapters, although Nate and Tyson are still a large part of the story.

I’ve decided I don’t love the 5000 word format so will be moving back to longer chapters of @8000-10,000 words on Thursdays. I will not be posting anything next Thursday, June 27th but then back once a week on July 4th.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh, I don’t know we’re so old as all that,” Nate said, drawing Tyson down to kiss him. Tyson kissed him back but then pulled away to attend to his cruller. Nate didn’t take it amiss. He was accustomed to being second in Tyson’s heart to dessert.

“Ah, well,” Nate said, taking a cruller of his own but declining the meat paste. “Maybe it’s just as well. You’re pretty busy with just the four of us to take care of, and you and Ma running the store.”

“I’m not running the store,” Tyson protested. He was definitely running the store. Graham had never had a head for business and Kathy could not read or figure with any ease, though she had an encyclopedic memory and could haggle more ferociously than any man in town. Tyson’s role had grown over the years from a half day spent totting up the accounts to managing the extensive correspondence and taking over the orders and financial doings of the store, just as he had learned to do in the years he was waiting to marry. Together he and Kathy had slowly, carefully, turned it into a thriving business supplying the entire town. “You’re the Alpha. I’m just helping my husband.”

“You know I’m just the muscle,” Nate said placidly. “You’re the brains of the operation.”

“I’m not,” Tyson said, still chomping at his cruller.

“You are though,” Nate said. “You been running the store with Ma for years now and we’re all better off because of it. That was the best day’s work I ever did talking you into it.” Tyson wriggled with pleasure - there was nothing he liked so much as Nate telling him he had done well and lip service to the idea that he was following his Alpha’s orders allowed him to feel he was still in his proper place.

“You are to me as God is to man,” Tyson said piously and Nate made a gagging noise meant to indicate his distaste for this philosophy. “The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church,” Tyson went on, and Nate rolled his eyes.

“Oh for fuckssakes,” Nate said. “Cut it out,” and they left it there, but sometimes Tyson worried.
He broached the subject again with Kathy on Christmas Eve the following year, after they’d had their dinner and made their way through half a bottle of brandy, Nate and Graham asleep on the couch and the children out making their own Christmas visits to friends,

“Graham’s no God to me, boy,” was all Kathy had to say. Pointing at Tyson she went on, “What could I have been if I’d been born a man? Not a shopkeepers wife, that’s for certain.”

“I was born a man and I’m a blacksmith’s wife, or husband, anyway,” Tyson said. “Don’t know I ever wanted to be much else.”

“You’re not a man, though, are you?” said Kathy. “Ahhh - “ she said, holding up a hand, “Don’t tell me you’re not a girl - I know. But legally you’re same as a woman. And you’ve lived a girl’s life, don’t tell me you haven’t.”

Tyson mulled this over a long time. She was certainly right about the legal aspect of the matter - Omegas and women were lumped in the same class, legally distinct from and less than men. And he acknowledged that whatever the shape of his body, like all Omegas he had lived a girls life, told to go and he went, decisions made for him, raising the babies and cooking the meals. Anything else was at Nate’s sufferance and could disappear in an instant. “I’m an Omega,” he said slowly. Still, after all these years, he didn’t have the words for it in English. “An Omega is a specific thing, back where I came from. But no one here knows that, do they? And maybe that was to my benefit, because the thing that an Omega is, even though it’s not a girl, isn’t something that could ever be free.” He made a moue at Kathy meant to convey the hopelessness of arguing against fate. “Still,” he said more pragmatically, “Don’t know I ever wanted to be a captain of industry anyway.”

“Well I did,” Kathy said, leaning forward over the table. “I wanted to go to school, but there weren’t none when I was a girl and girls didn’t go anyway past the time they could be of use. I got a great deal of brain power and it shouldn’t have been wasted.”

“No,” Tyson agreed. “And I shouldn’t have had to marry a boy I didn’t know who thought Headship meant absolute submission. That was a mess.”

“I was always surprised you and Nate worked it out after that,” mused Kathy. “I could see you liked each other but I thought after that start there was no way you’d manage to … you know.”

“To what?” Tyson asked. He knew what she meant but he wanted to see what she’d say.

“You know,” she said, waving her hand.

“No, what?” he asked, pretending not to understand her.

‘Marital relations!” she snapped. “Don’t tell me you don’t know what I’m getting at.”

“Was that why you were so against Nate marrying me?” Tyson asked, but the answer surprised him.

“Yes,” she said, “but that was only a part of it. Another part was that you were so young - I know you were twenty two but you were so sheltered it was really more like I was handing off a maybe thirteen or fourteen year old child back to the marriage bed. I felt strongly we should have kept you ourselves but we just couldn’t afford it, we were in a barely keeping the children alive way. That’s why we were so ready to lend you Nate in the first place - he’d only been back a couple weeks and we were struggling to feed him. I knew I was doing wrong to send you back into another marriage but I couldn’t find no way to do right, either. God forgive me but I didn’t want to have to watch a baby be forced up close. I wanted you far enough away I could put out of my mind what I had done.
And I didn’t want to look at my son and know he was the one doing it.”

“Huh,” Tyson said. He couldn’t work up any anger over it, not after so long. “Nate never did that to me though, Kathy,” he said. “He was always real kind to me.”

“Good,” she said and clearly meant to leave it there, but Tyson was half drunk.

“Kathy,” he said, pulling on her sleeve. “Kath. You know what?”

“What?” she said, wary.

“We didn’t do it for a year,” he said, anticipating her surprise and embarrassment. “Not till well after we moved back out to the new place after Johnny came.”

“Awww,” she said, confounding his expectations, her face fond. “Nate’s such a good boy, I can’t believe he hung on that long. He musta been shitting bricks.”

“You were right, though, really,” Tyson went on. “I did have to marry someone. Who were you going to marry me to, then?” He knew Kathy better now, and he knew she would have already made a decision. Again her answer surprised him.

“Jacques Martin,” she said. Tyson had never even heard of him, and back then Denver was a much smaller place. “He was sixty one back the and I thought an older man, not so inclined to make demands on you, could maybe just pet you and treat you kindly til you grew up a little. And I reckoned he’d die soon enough, either way, so it wasn’t a life sentence.” That sort of brutal pragmatism from Kathy didn’t surprise him, but then she said, “Or Johnson,” and Tyson choked on the candy he’d been nibbling.

“Erik Johnson?” he said. “Oh my Lord, why?”

Kathy looked surprised at his reaction. “Nothing wrong with EJ,” she said. “He’s eight years old than Nate, so he was old enough to marry, and he was a deal better off than Nate; I know Johnson’d been saving for years to marry back then.”

“Yeah, to Marnie,” Tyson said, but Kathy just shrugged.

“They weren’t engaged yet then, and he’s better looking than Nate and I thought you might like that.”

“Kathy!” Tyson said, slapping her on the upper arm, and she giggled and slapped him back.

“Well he is,” she said, laughing.

“He’s got no teeth,” Tyson said. “And he doesn’t like boys, either.”

“You’re not a boy though,” Kathy said, puzzled, and Tyson petered off. Tyson wasn’t touching the boy-liking with a ten foot pole. Kathy, for all her virtues and forward thinking had never come around on the issue of Nate’s clear preference for men.

Mr. MacKinnon had acknowledged it years ago, saying only “Well, there’s some as are like that and Nate’s lucky to have you,” and leaving it there but Kathy had always been adamant that Tyson was, if not a girl the equivalent of a girl, and Nate just happened to be willing to overlook any oddities of construction.

“I’m not a girl,” Tyson said wearily. He appreciated the freedoms he’d had out in the English world,
and he wouldn’t have gone back for anything but it was tiring still, sometimes, trying to explain himself. Even Nate didn’t really understand fully. Sometimes he longed for just one person from back home to talk to.

“Well you’re a girl in the law,” Kathy insisted. “Anyway, it’s a lucky year for us all,” she said. “Ladies and Omegas got the vote now in Colorado. How you going to vote, Omega MacKinnon?”

“Why just however my husband tells me to,” Tyson said demurely and then cracked up. They were still cackling when Nate and Mr. MacKinnon woke up. Tyson put his worries away and thought no more of them until the following summer.

“Ugh,” said Nate, and Tyson flopped his hand vaguely in agreement. They were lying in bed naked with the covers thrown off trying to catch a breeze from the window.

“Think the porch would be better?” asked Tyson.

“Think the porch has mosquitos,” Nate said and Tyson grunted in agreement. The purchase of screens for the windows had been money well spent. One day they might be able to afford to screen in the porch and use it for sleeping in the summer, but not this year. They had been in the house next to Nate’s smithy for fifteen years now, and there had always been something more pressing to spend on. They had grown more comfortable financially but with the children growing up they always had some need that seemed more immediate than screening the porch.

Tyson spread his legs a little more to let his balls air out. He’d been feeling the heat this summer and he didn’t know why. “Too damn hot,” he said.

“Yeah,” Nate agreed. “You want me to get you a glass of water?”

“No, I’m alright,” said Tyson, “but thanks, Boakje.”

“Calves looking good though,” Nate said and Tyson agreed.

“About time,” he said. There had been an unusual run of twin calves in the spring and they had been slow to start growing.

“Finally getting some meat on their bones,” Nate said approvingly. “You’re getting some meat on your bones too,” he said turning onto his side and patting at Tyson’s small pot belly. Tyson gave him a look but did no more as he knew it was true. After a lifetime of being too thin he’d noticed that summer he’d finally been able to hang onto a little weight. “I like it,” Nate said. “It’s cute. You got a little belly.”

“Getting old,” Tyson said gloomily. Why had the weight gone solely to his belly? His arms and legs were still thin as ever. Was he doomed to be one of those skinny old men with the big beer bellies? It seemed very unfair, he thought - he hardly ever drank beer. Irritatingly Nate, who drank beer all the time, had no belly at all and at thirty eight was still covered in muscle. He’d grown broader over the years but it had just made him more attractive, Tyson thought, and stronger than ever. He could even lift two pigs now, which Tyson knew for a fact as Nate and Johnny had gotten into an Alpha pissing match in the spring and made the whole family come watch as they engaged in increasingly stupid contests of strength. The pigs were nervy for days and Nate had thrown his back out, which he only admitted to Tyson in a whisper under cover of night.

“You’re not getting old,” Nate said admiringly. “You’re as fine as when we met and you’ll always be lovely. You got that face.”
“We all got faces,” Tyson dismissed.

“Not like yours,” Nate said, always wonderfully partisan. “You and Rosie, raising the standard for the MacKinnons.” He took Tyson’s hand and kissed his knuckles but left it there. It was too hot to think about going any further which was a pity because Tyson had been right up for it lately.

“Johnny, though,” said Tyson, always willing to argue a little, and if the arguing allowed him to also brag on his children, all the better.

“Yeah, OK, Johnny too,” Nate said, and Tyson kissed his hand to reward him for agreeing. Johnny had grown up to look exactly like his biological father but behave like Nate, a devastating combination. The girls were falling over like skittles although Johnny didn’t notice, tunnel vision focused on courting the Zadorov’s oldest daughter Sophie. Neither of them brought up Teddy who at thirteen was not at the height of his powers. He had recently begun to stretch out to man size but his nose had seemed to start off ahead of the rest of him and he presented an odd, unattractive picture at the moment. Still, Mrs. MacKinnon assured them Teddy looked just as Nate did at that age so Tyson had great hopes for improvement.

Tyson settled back, vanity assuaged for the moment. His children were the best looking in Denver and Nate still thought him beautiful. And although he was growing older his jawline was still sharp and his hair as thick and lustrous as ever; in fact, it seemed as though his hair had actually gotten thicker lately he thought, stroking the long plait he had it in for bed. Oh well. Maybe a little pot belly wasn’t the worst possible thing, he thought, hand resting idly on his own belly. It wasn’t really a little pot belly though, was it. More of a mid size belly, and now that he took a moment and noticed, oddly firm. It wasn’t soft and jiggly like fat should be, or even like his stomach after each of the children were born. It was actually more like….

“Oh my God,” he said, sitting up to stare down at his belly, clutching his arms across his chest which he now noticed was, yes, puffy and tender. “I think I’m pregnant!”

Nate made a face. “You haven’t thrown up once,” he protested. “You practically turned yourself inside out with Teddy. You can’t possibly be, you’re forty two and Teddy is thirteen. Could it maybe be a tumour?” He spread his hand comfortingly over Tyson’s belly again and rubbed. Tyson could tell he was talking more to himself than Tyson. “We’ll go in tomorrow and see the new doctor - now they got that chloroform, they can do amazing things and - ” He cut off abruptly and snatched his hand back. “Oh shit,” he said. “You feel that?”

Oh yeah, Tyson felt that. And now that he thought about it, it had been going on for some weeks. He’d been so busy with the store and Johnny courting that he’d put it down to indigestion. He still had the childish habit of greedily eating things he knew wouldn’t agree with him and indigestion was not a rare occurrence. He spread his own hands over the bump, feeling that now familiar tautness of late mid pregnancy and then another strong kick. “Oh my God,” Tyson said. “How pregnant am I?”

“You’re not pregnant,” Nate said, but it was more for form than anything else. There was no conviction behind it.

“You better hope I’m pregnant,” Tyson said. “There’s something alive and kicking in there and if it isn’t a baby we got a real situation.”

Kathy MacKinnon was sixty five years old but she’d lost none of her sharpness and Tyson insisted on her for the baby although Denver had a real doctor now, a full time, sober doctor who delivered babies for the well off families. “Enough people seen my bits,” he said. “I don’t need any more
staring at me. Anyway, you’ve got to know more about Omegas by now than any doctor out here does.”

“You got a point there,” Mrs. MacKinnon agreed. “How many people seen your bits, then? I wouldn’t have thought it was that long a list.”

“Living people?” Tyson said. “You and Nate and that’s enough. And it’s only fun when it’s Nate.” Kathy made a face at him.

“I see you’re bearing up pretty well under the yoke of marriage,” Kathy said wryly.

“Oh, well,” Tyson said, “I guess. Turns out it’s not so bad if you like them.”

“Well, it’s only one,” she said, straightening up to wash her hands. “That’s good, anyway. How you feeling?”

“Not sick,” Tyson said. “That mean anything?”

Mrs. MacKinnon looked considering. “If you were only a few weeks gone, I’d say maybe it means it won’t stay. But you’re probably eight, nine months gone. And if you’d only ever had boys, I’d say maybe it means you got a girl, but you haven’t. So I don’t know. Maybe you’re just lucky this time.”

“Don’t know about that,” Tyson said. “Johnny’s going to be twenty come Midsummer. Not sure I’d call this lucky.”

Kathy shrugged. “You been lucky all the way through,” she said, “every birth easy, every baby alive; only fallen three times before this, you never had one a year like many that marry so young. You and Nate can afford this one easy, maybe even think about sending it to college in Boulder. Be nice to have a little baby again, too. Lucky enough.”

“College,” Tyson said. He’d never considered the possibility of further education. They’d gotten Johnny and Rosie through high school which was more than most, but college… Suddenly he could see possibilities opening up. Kathy had always been the bold one of the family, Tyson thought, much braver than he was, but at least he had the wit to follow her lead. Huh. College.

“I thought you said Omegas never have a fourth?” Nate said to Tyson, laughing. He was very pleased with himself once he’d gotten over the surprise.

“Well they don’t,” Tyson said but Nate just laughed again.

“Looks like sometimes they do, though,” he said, puffing out his chest, half joking, half not. “When they got such a fine husband as you do.”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, softly. “Looks like.”

It was a real situation, though - he’d never considered the possibility of a fourth and it knocked his world apart. Everything he thought he knew was altered, and he had to spend some time just staring out the window, thinking about things. Nate kept catching him thinking and it clearly worried him.

“You alright?” Nate said quietly, setting down an offering of tea.

“Yeah,” Tyson said vaguely. “M’alright.”

“Because you’ve been quiet a lot, lately,” Nate went on. “Are you not happy about the baby?”
“What?” Tyson said, jolted out of his contemplative haze. “No, the baby’s fine.” The problem was Tyson. He’d changed, and he worried the baby was a sign of a fundamental change in him, a movement towards something he couldn’t recognize and away from being the Räajenboagen. Omegas only had three; what then was Tyson if he was having a fourth?

Nate had changed too over the years; once he would have been authoritative and absolute, telling Tyson what best to do and certain he was the Alpha but now he just shrugged and looked at Tyson with soft eyes. “Yeah?” he said gently. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” Tyson said, patting Nate’s forearm, full of affection for Nate and the children. That much he was certain of.

*

The birth was easy like all the others had been. Johnny was almost grown up and it was a simple matter to leave the smithy to him and head into town for two weeks so that Mrs. MacKinnon could cluck over them and do the cooking. She said she didn’t mind living alone now that Mr. MacKinnon was gone and the children grown, but Tyson wondered. She certainly seemed to enjoy the company. Nate did a little work in town but largely they had a happy time together eating, visiting and playing Euchre, which Nate was shockingly bad at.

*

“Well, Ma, guess what?” Nate said, greeting his mother at the door. Kathy had stepped out for an afternoon of tea and gossip with friends down the street, laughingly reminding Tyson to call her this time if he felt any pains.

“He’s never done it again, has he?” she said. “The man’s like a cat, he wants privacy.” She stripped off her heavy woolen coat, her muffler, her hood and her mittens and set off to have a look.

“Well, you got me again,” she said to Tyson, standing beside the bed he sat on holding the already cleaned and wrapped baby. “I think Nate is probably the most experienced Omega midwife in North America outside a Kolonie at this point.” Tyson was uncharacteristically silent, seemingly engrossed in the baby. “Let me see the baby,” Kathy said, leaning over them as Tyson fed him for the first time. “I don’t like the sound of his breathing.”

“He’s fine,” Tyson said, and hunched over a little to shield the baby from her sight. He wasn’t having it.

“No, come on, let me have a look,” she said again. “He sounded alright at first but now he’s got a rattle I don’t like. Give him over and let me have a listen up close.” Tyson hunched further over and looked at Nate who was sitting beside him on the bed, one arm around Tyson’s shoulders, looking down besottedly at this surprise fourth baby.

“No,” Tyson said decisively. “Nate, you tell your Ma no.”

“Why would I tell her no?” Nate said bewildered. “She’s right, I can hear him wheezing from here, let her take a look.” He reached out to take the baby from Tyson and Tyson’s hand shot out lightening fast and smacked Nate’s hand away. “What the hell?” Nate said, looking genuinely surprised. They had always play wrestled of course, but Tyson had meant it just then. Mrs. MacKinnon and Nate looked at each other and Nate tried again. “You feeling alright?” he asked, slowly placing his hand on the baby. Tyson gave him a look and hunched protectively a little more but didn’t outright stop him. The baby fed on unconcerned.
“He’s not wheezing,” Tyson said tightly. “He’s fine. Leave him be.”

“I can feel him wheezing,” Nate said, “He’s vibrating where I’ve got my hand on him, I can feel his lungs rattling something fierce. Go on and let Ma have a look. I don’t know if he needs a chest plaster or steam or what.”

“He’s not rattling,” Tyson insisted. “Send your Ma away and let me be.” Nate looked at him puzzled.

“Tys,” he said slowly. “I don’t want to fight with you right after you had a baby.” He paused and went on. “Whatever you want we’ll do,”

“But?” Tyson said suspiciously.

“But nothing,” Nate said. “If you don’t want Ma to check him over, that’s what we’ll do. We can call in the doctor if you like.”

“No!” Tyson said on the edge of tears, and pulled the baby even closer into him.

“Is that what you want?” Mrs. MacKinnon urged him. “You want the doctor? Because I’ll get the doctor rather than let the baby get worse.” She and Nate exchanged another worried look. “This isn’t something to wait on,” she added.

The baby finished feeding and fell asleep, mouth still open around the nipple, and Tyson gently sat him upright to wind him, the baby’s head cupped in his hand, his back along Tyson’s forearm. The baby burped quietly but was otherwise immobile and still, deep in the profound sleep of newborns. He made no sound at all breathing but they could see his chest rise and fall. Nate got a considering look on his face. “Why,” he said slowly, “why isn’t he wheezing now? Was he having trouble breathing when he was feeding?” Tyson just shrugged and shot a worried glance at Kathy. Nate looked back at him and for a moment Tyson glared defiantly but then he looked away, defeated and a look of dawning realization crept over Nate’s face. “We need to tell Ma,” he said very gently. “She’ll keep the secret.”

“A secret between three people isn’t a secret anymore,” Tyson pointed out as Mrs. MacKinnon looked between them, still puzzled.

“Midwife’s no good if she goes around blabbing,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Spit it out.”

“The baby’s not wheezing Ma, he’s purring because he’s Omega.” Nate said.

“Omegas purr?” Mrs. MacKinnon said, looking at Nate. “You been keeping some secrets too, eh?”

“It’s not a secret,” Nate said, “It’s just private.”

“So you knew when he started purring, then?” she asked Tyson.

“No,” he said, looking away to avoid meeting her eyes. “I knew as soon as I saw him.”

“Why didn’t Nate know, then?” she asked and Tyson cracked the first smile since she’d returned to the house.

“So this is normal?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked Tyson. “You’re all like that?”

“Yeah,” Tyson said, “you see where it comes forward more?”
“Mhmm,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, leaning forward with Tyson to peer at the baby’s crotch. “So the baby can pass through the hips I suppose?”

“You’d know better than me,” Tyson said with a shrug. “All I know is that’s how we are.”

“What?” Nate said, “what?” Whatever the two of them were getting from staring down at the baby, he was missing.

“You married very young,” his mother replied, which really didn’t clear things up for Nate. “And you were always a good boy,” she added, which made Tyson giggle. Nate didn’t look like he found her remarks entirely complimentary.

“Yes?” he said, jutting his chin out. “So?”

“So,” she said, “You never seen a girl, have you?”

“Ma!” said Nate, shocked.

Mrs. MacKinnon was unmoved by his horror and went on. “Didn’t you ever change Rosie?”

“He says the smell makes him gag,” Tyson said, rolling his eyes. It was a well worn argument and one he had long since despaired of winning. “He used to call Sarah in to wipe her if I wasn’t there.”

“You useless git,” Mrs. MacKinnon said fondly. “Surely you’ve given her a bath?”

“That would be me,” Tyson said again. “He’s strong on puke though, I’ll give him that.”

“I’ve delivered calves,” Nate said sullenly. “I know girls got two holes. Can we stop talking about Rosie’s bits now?”

“But you’ve seen men,” she pressed. “You been swimming and such when it was only you men?”

“I’m not going around looking at everyone’s asshole, Ma!” Nate snapped but Mrs. MacKinnon ignored him.

Mrs. MacKinnon wrapped the baby back up and sat down on the bed. “The question is,” she said, “what do you want to do about this?”

“You think we could get away with it if we just said he was a boy?” Tyson asked, leaning forward.

Mrs. MacKinnon tapped one finger on her mouth in thought. “I think maybe you could,” she said, “at least while he’s little. Like Nate says, people aren’t going around staring at assholes, and I don’t know anyone would notice so long as he’s standing. They’re going to think he didn’t get too lucky in the todger department, but that ain’t unheard of. That what you’re going to do?”

“I’m not sure,” Tyson said, still in shock. “I got to think on this. Omegas are the Räajenboagen and I don’t dispute that, but properly I should take this baby back to the Community to be raised and protected. But then why’d God let him be born here outside the Community? I don’t know. I got to puzzle this out.”

“Alright,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. She could clearly see Tyson was distressed and she kindly withdrew and left he and Nate to it.

“You probably shouldn’t touch him,” Tyson said hesitantly to Nate. It wasn’t right for an Omega to be handled by their Alpha parent even as an infant, although something about telling Nate not to touch the baby seemed very wrong. He looked up and saw Nate’s face, distraught at the suggestion,
and every piece of advice and direction and loving and angry thing Nate had said over their whole long marriage came flooding into Tyson, a tsunami of love and affection and common sense flowing over him and removing all the objections the Community had embedded in him.

“No,” Tyson said, “No, we’re not doing that. You can touch him. How could that be wrong?” He passed the baby over to Nate. What the next step was, though, he was still very unsure. “You want to tell me what to do, Alpha?” Tyson asked hopefully. He felt this decision was too much for him and he was afraid to make it.

“If I carried you everywhere you wouldn’t know how to walk,” Nate said and Tyson made a noise of annoyance. He had asked for an order to take the responsibility off him, not a reminder Nate thought he was a capable adult. Nate offered nothing more than that, though, busy cooing at the baby and Tyson sagged back against the pillows. They would tell no one of Ollie’s Omega status but Nate could handle him, and that was enough for the moment. Still, he was very unsure if he had the right to raise Ollie outside the Community.

Even with this much of the decision made Tyson had to lie in bed for several weeks, thinking further and eating things while Nate fussed around him and Kathy gave him the stink eye.

“It’s no different than a girl,” Kathy finally said, frustrated with his refusal to get out of bed. It was, in her defense, her bed which Tyson was sure was annoying for her. He was overwhelmed by the problem that lay before him, not just Ollie’s life but what of Rosie’s children too, a concern he’d been deferring since she was born.

“It is entirely different from a girl,” Tyson said. “You don’t understand what this baby is worth.”

“This baby is worth nothing,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, looking down at Oliver distantly. “Nothing but what we decide he’s worth, and there will be no selling of him, no negotiating, no match making, nothing.”

“Are you telling me how it’s going to be?” Tyson said, ready to take offense and refuse. Already people were trying to dictate this baby’s life to him.

“I’m telling you how it could be,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, unruffled. “You make this what you think right, no need for him to be a princess or whatever your people believe he is.” Tyson looked up at her, surprised. “You send this one to school,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, still looking at the baby. “You keep him close and then you send him to college and you give him something no one can take away. Set him up in an educated trade, a lawyer, a chemist. Maybe you cut his hair, maybe you don’t cut his hair. Don’t send him back.”

“It’s not that simple,” Tyson said, despairing, but Kathy didn’t understand. “I’m extremely upset,” Tyson said. “Can someone get me a sandwich?”

Despite the stink eye Kathy humoured Tyson, bringing him breakfast in bed everyday for the next two weeks; Kathy had always been able to bang out a good meal and now she really let herself go, tempting him with vast quantities every morning. Setting aside his emotional turmoil Tyson enjoyed the breakfasts, sitting up to eat them off a tray, wearing his new bed clothes. He had indulged himself and bought a fine night robe made of delicate cotton, double ruffle on neck with Valencia lace inserts, which he thought very fetching and well worth the $1.50. Midday he was allowed to receive visitors and he enjoyed that too, receiving them in state in his robe still in bed. This brought him some small measure of satisfaction as did the catalogue outfits for the baby he had bought along with the night robe, things they could never have afforded with the first three. He enjoyed showing off
Ollie to the visitors, dressed in his little sacque and frilly silk cap that looked exactly the picture Tyson had hoped for. Tyson felt it was very accommodating of all his children to have been born with hair which showed to advantage in a cap.

He liked it when the visitors were gone, too, and it was just he and Nate. Sometimes Nate rejoined him in bed, sitting atop the covers with his boots off, luxuriating in the rare chance of having no animals to tend and no pressing work. With Kathy in the next room, all the cooking done for him and no laundry or cleaning and no children but Ollie to care for, Tyson and Nate could sit side by side in bed talking as if it were one long Sunday.

“I like a baby,” Nate began, cuddling Ollie close on his chest. After all the years it still did something to Tyson to see Nate holding one of the children against him, big hands engulfing the baby and a soft look on his face as he peered down at him. “You know I like a baby,” Nate said. “But a purring baby is even better.” He looked up at Tyson with an open look of surprised pleasure on his face, inviting Tyson to join in his wonder at the baby snuggled against him, purring gently, his little face lax. “Are you going to write to the Community?”

“Oh no,” Tyson said, quite certain. One thing he knew without thinking about it. His parents had passed the year before and he wouldn’t have told them in any case - telling any part of the Observant or Orthodox community would bring a shitstorm down on them that would make the issue of the Swedes trying to claim Johnny look like nothing. “We won’t be telling anyone about this unless we go back. Look what happened with Duchene. Better to keep it secret.”

“But Duchene was after Johnny,” Nate said puzzled. “That had nothing to do with Omegas.”

“That was never about Johnny,” Tyson said, surprised Nate needed this explained. “They wanted Rosie, and they wanted me, on the off chance I could give them another girl. They knew I’d come with Johnny and bring Rosie.”

“What?” Nate said. He had long harboured a hatred for Duchene but Tyson realised he had never really understood why Duchene had pursued Johnny so aggressively.

“Omegas come from Omega daughters,” Tyson said, a guilty feeling stealing over him. He had never actually articulated this basic fact to Nate and he probably should have. “Not usually directly from Omegas, but their daughters, guaranteed.”

“Wait,” Nate said, still holding Ollie to him. “You mean Rosie - “

“I told you what would happen,” Tyson said. “I told you back before we married. They would have exercised the Rule of Bilhah to try to get more girls from me and then the girls would give them Omegas.” Nate looked queasy and suddenly Tyson was reminded of what a narrow escape he had had. It would not have gone well for him had he returned to Community without the protection of a husband. “I’m never going to step foot in that fucking place again,” he said and realised his decision was made for Ollie too.

“Why don’t you tell me these things?” Nate said. “Ma!” he yelled at the door. “Ma! Tyson’s spilling secrets again! You want to come on in here?”

Tyson whipped the covers off himself and turned to get up. He was clear in his own mind now and ready to be up and doing. The store needed his attention and the children were doubtless at home eating his candy stash.

“Oh no you don’t,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, appearing at the bedroom door. “You’re not to set foot on the shop floor for another two weeks. You’re an old fart now and need to take it easy.” Tyson
looked doubtful. “And anyway,” she added, “if you were to poke your nose in the store before a month people would talk and we’d lose custom.”

“You horrible old woman,” Tyson said to her fondly, fully restored to his usual state. “If I’m decrepit what are you?”

“The boss of you,” Kathy said briskly. “Get back in that bed. Nate, you come fetch the books from the store and we’ll bring them back for this fool to look at.”

“Tell the children not to eat my candy!” Tyson yelled after Nate as he left to do his mother’s bidding.

Tyson laid back down with the baby, meaning to rest for a minute but he woke an hour later to Nate crouched beside the bed and looking levelly at Tyson, their heads at the same height. “You want a drink, baby?” Nate asked. “I got the store ledgers here,” he added.

“No, come lie down with me again,” Tyson said. The sun was streaming through the windows, pouring over he and the baby and he felt that if he could lie there in the sun with Nate and Ollie forever that would be just fine. He still had many worries about the future but could defer them to seize this moment with Nate.

Nate looked surprised they weren’t returning to their earlier conversation but obediently piled the ledgers on the floor and laid down next to Tyson. There was silence and then Nate leaned back over the edge of the bed and grabbed his hat to cover his face from the sun. There was another brief pause and then he sat back up to pull a baby blanket from the pile Tyson had discarded and lay it carefully over Ollie’s little bare head, making sure there was a space created so some air flowed in alongside him where he lay face down on Tyson’s chest.

“Been married a long time,” Tyson said, not knowing how to begin and Nate grunted assent. “Not going back,” Tyson said as an initial sally.

“You said,” Nate replied, arranging himself on the bed.

“What if I didn’t want to cut his hair?” Tyson asked.

“Up to you,” Nate said, taking Tyson’s free hand.

“What if I wanted to send him to college?” Tyson said speculatively.

“Could do,” Nate said from beneath the hat.

“Well,” Tyson said. “Good.” He looked over at Nate half asleep beside him, mouth open, snoring unattractively and felt a great wave of love roar through him for Nate, fucked up nose, weak leg and all. He would get on the damn horse and see where it would take him, though what that would mean, exactly, he wasn’t sure.

“Gonna be OK?” Tyson asked, needing assurance.

“Omegas are lucky,” Nate said confidently and they fell asleep.

The next month, while Tyson was still worrying away at his concerns though at least doing it from
his own home, he got a letter.

Nate brought it back from the post office when Ollie was two months old exactly. It was addressed to Tyson, which was odd enough, as whenever his parents had written they had addressed the letter of course to Nate. No one else from the Community wrote to Tyson. However, this letter was in an unfamiliar hand and clearly addressed to Omega Tyson Barrie, not Landeskog, not MacKinnon, and stranger still, the return address was Alpha Phillip J. Benn. Tyson turned it over in his hands, thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 23 in a couple hours!
The Letter

Chapter Notes

Finally, Jamie!

*Omega Barrie*, the letter read,

*I write in the hopes that your Alpha will allow this correspondence, and I ask for his forbearance in the face of my informality and presumption. Alpha, if you will not allow this address, I ask then that you will not discipline Omega Barrie as the fault is all on my side - we were children together once and it is for the sake of the friendship we had between us and the affection I still hold for my brother, Omega Benn, that I dare presume to write directly to your Omega in the hopes that one of our Community will best understand my request.*

*Omega Barrie, may this letter find you and your family well. Your parents, before their passing, often spoke to me of your news, and Omega Benn, when he was able, took a great interest in any tidbit I was able to convey to him. I know that were he well, he would have me tell you he thinks of you often and fondly.*

*Sadly, however, I write to tell you Omega Benn is not well and has not been for some time.*

*You will understand from the return address of this letter that my father has passed and I am now the Alpha of the Benn household, and thus you will also understand I now have the authority to make decisions for the Benn household. As you know, the Community does not move in lockstep with the outside world, and I believe you will understand me when I tell you matters here are, for better or worse, much the same as when you last resided in Community.*

*I hope you and your Alpha will forgive me for speaking so plainly of personal matters.*

*Omega Barrie I am aware you have married outside of the Community. I remain High Observant and I believe in the Law and the Faith but I understand from your letters that you have been blessed with an extraordinary three children including a daughter and your health and spirits are excellent. From the tenor of your letters I understand also that the partnership of marriage has flowered successfully between yourself and your Alpha, despite the lack of Community supports.*

*I cannot say the same for Omega Benn and I fear matters here have reached a point where my Faith is not great enough to allow me to let Omega Benn return to the embrace of our Lord and Saviour without attempting to alter matters that he might remain here on this sinful plane a while longer.*

*Please know I did not make this decision lightly. I have taken Jamie away from his husband.*

*I am writing to tell you that we will entrain for Denver on March 28th. I have made this decision in the hopes that a novel setting with familiar faces might assist in improving Omega Benn’s health and spirits. His doctor has also suggested this course of action, hoping that the mountain air may affect some improvement.*
Alpha, I thank you again in advance for your forebearance. We are scheduled to arrive on April 3 and I look forward to making your acquaintance. I should not like to think my presumption might cause any difficulty for Omega Barrie; I ask you to reserve any concerns you may have for my arrival that I might present an immediate and robust defense of my decisions in person. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

The just shall live by faith,

P.J. Benn

“What the fuck?” said Nate, reading over Tyson’s shoulder.

“He says Jamie is sick, close to dying, and his husband isn’t treating him right,” Tyson translated. “They’re coming here and they need help. He wrote in English so you’d be able to read it and he wants me to know the Community’s still not pleased with me. Jamie must be almost dead if Jordie’s willing to take him away from his husband.” Nate had the look on his face he always got when they discussed Tyson’s Community, but he said nothing. “And he says he’ll punch you good if you whack me because he addressed the letter to me,” Tyson added, pointing to the underlined bits. Nate looked even more sour.

“You think he knows about the baby?” Tyson said, plans whizzing through his head to move, escape, flee.

“Doubt it,” Nate said unconcerned. “How could he?” Calmed, Tyson turned his mind to more pressing concerns.

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