

Mike stumbled up the sidewalk, his legs stiff and sore, his fur matted with dirt and dust, his arms heavy and dangling. The sun was just low enough to hide behind nearby houses, but still painted the sky a dull orange and slipped free just long enough to cast a sharp glare in the goat's eyes. He had his keys looped around his middle finger and held his backpack in his other hand, where it jangled with the muffled sound of metal tools inside it. It was always easy enough to keep his momentum going during work, but the moment he stopped, a day's worth of fatigue always came back to hit him. It was all he could do to put one leg in front of the other and keep moving forward.

His favorite sight in the entire world was that of his house at the end of a long day. One-half of a duplex-style townhouse, it stood hidden in a neighborhood underneath the overpass, tucked away and quiet. It was more than Mike thought he could afford, but he was also fortunate enough to not be living alone. His hooves made soft clicking sounds on the concrete pathway and he stopped at the door for just long enough to lean against it and catch his breath before slipping inside.

The kitchen was put to frequent use in their home. That evening, it smelled of something baking, a crusty scent of fresh bread, and the promise of something sweet. Mike stood in the doorway for a moment and breathed in the taste of home, feeling his muscles finally release all the tension they'd carried through the day. Here, rest was something you could pluck out of the air and use to line your pillow.

When Mike dropped his bag on the ground, he glanced up at the sound of movement, thumping from upstairs. He took a moment to use the bathroom, then stepped out to the sight of a six-foot-tall feline creature with inch-long fangs, horns, and clad only in its blindingly white fur.

"Huh." Mike cocked his head to the side as the huge creature swayed its long tail across the floor, its end tipped with a small tuft of blue fur. It was purring loud enough to hear across the room. "A...lion?"

"Nope!" the feline said in a male voice with a faint accent. Its arms were short, but ended in huge paw-hands as wide as dinner plates.

"Okay...paaaaanther?" Mike tried again, throwing his hands up.

"Love, what panther has horns?" the feline said, tapping the bony points on his head. "Try again."

"Uhhh...ppptthhhppb." Mike blew a raspberry and tapped his hoof on the floor. "I got nothing. Tell me."

"A Charr!" The feline giggled and excitedly clapped his hands, making soft, muffled *paff* sounds. Mike scratched around the base of one of his own horns and squinted, making sure he'd heard him correctly.

“A...charr? What’s a charr?”

“They’re one of the races you can play in this new video game I found!” the ‘charr’ said, excitedly.

“Oh, so it’s not a *real* species.”

“Well, no...” The charr smirked and moved one of his huge hands down to his equally large belly, which had grown proportionally to suit his new form. “Not *yet*, anyway.”

What stood in the living room as a ‘charr’ was, in reality, every bit as complex as Mike’s relationship to him. This creature, Mike’s friend/lover/roommate/co-parent, wasn’t a charr. He wasn’t a lion, a panther, an otter, a goat, a tiger, or anything else. He was a Shifter, an enigmatic race of shape-changers that few people claimed to have even met. He and Mike had met by chance, through mutual friends that probably didn’t know what he really was. Mike had gotten to know the Shifter as an otter and was surprised to find himself waking up the morning after next to a goat like himself.

“So does this one have a name attached to it?” Mike asked. He’d gotten used to a great deal of change in the past few years of living with the Shifter.

“Yes! Call me ‘Whiteside.’ That’s my character’s name in the game.”

“Whiteside?” Mike nodded and approached the newly dubbed ‘Whiteside’, smoothing his hands across his belly. “It’s appropriate. I think ‘Snowball’ would’ve worked, too.”

“If we just picked names after our *shapes*, you would’ve been named *Pointy*.” Whiteside flicked one of his fingers against Mike’s horn, making a dull *click* sound. Like all Shifters, Whiteside’s perception of identity was fluid. He changed species by the week, sometimes by the day, based on nothing but his mood. Often times, Mike would go to sleep next to an otter barely taller than his chest and wake up being pushed halfway off the bed by a horse. Even his name changed often enough that Mike simply referred to him as ‘The Boyfriend.’ Only three things about Whiteside remained constant: his gender – which was male by preference, his white fur with deep-blue hair, and, most recently, the heavily pregnant swell to his stomach that changed to fit every form he took.

“So if *you’re* a charr now,” Mike asked, smoothing his hands across the globe of Whiteside’s belly, “does that mean *they* are, too?”

“For the moment,” Whiteside said, leaning back and pressing his fingers into his stomach.

“Though...I think this one might need to catch up. They’re feeling a little smaller than the-”

A sudden lurch came from inside Whiteside, as if a small explosion had happened. He grunted in discomfort as his belly seemed to dip an inch lower.

“Nevermind, there they go. They’re all the same size, now.”

“The fact that you can turn into a fictional race,” Mike said, tapping on Whiteside’s belly for

emphasis, “and then *have children* of that fictional race is blowing my mind.”

“Well, they aren’t going to be *born* as charr,” Whiteside said. He moved his hands out of the way to give Mike full access to his rounded middle. “Shifters aren’t born as anything but Shifters, as their original forms.”

“And you’re the only one allowed to see them?” Mike asked. “Even if they’re my kids, too?”

“I’m afraid so,” Whiteside nodded, though there was a tinge of regret in his eyes. “Even the midwives cover their eyes. No one but me and my father know what my true form is, and he only saw it the day I was born.”

“Can you describe it?”

“Not with words,” Whiteside said, smiling and stroking the goat’s head affectionately before moving his hand back to his middle. “But whatever they look like, they’re yours. And they always will be.”

Whiteside used his new size and strength to pull Mike into a tight, back-breaking hug, which the goat could only wiggle impotently against. He could feel his unborn children moving inside Whiteside. When they’d discovered how many they were having, Mike had trouble staying on his hooves while the Shifter expressed some mild disappointment that he was pregnant with a litter of ‘only’ four.

“What are you making?” Mike said after Whiteside finally let him go. “It smells amazing.”

“Well, the bread is nearly done,” Whiteside said, walking into the kitchen with a wide-legged shuffle caused by his belly, a trait shared with every bipedal form he took. “That will be for sandwiches and the like. There’s also some dough rising for a cake, but the icing isn’t done for that one just yet.”

“Did you cook like this in the caravans?” Mike asked, stepping into the kitchen next to Whiteside. “You probably didn’t have a full kitchen.”

“No, but I learned a little from everywhere we stopped,” Whiteside said. He braced one hand against his belly and reached for the handle on the oven. “That’s why I want to use everything here while I can. I hardly ever get a real oven to...Ngh. Damn.” Whiteside pawed uselessly at the handle with hands too big to actually grasp it.

“I think you’re gonna have to turn into something a little more handy to finish this up,” Mike chuckled. He pulled the handle on the over and lowered the door, feeling a wave of heat wash past his face. On the rack was a loaf of bread in a rectangular pan beside a circular dish of dough. Both of them were a pasty shade of unappetizing pale.

“Mm. Not yet.” Whiteside stood and arched his back, straining under the weight of his belly. “*Ow*. No matter what form I use, they never seem to get any lighter.”

“Well, right now they’re about twelve pounds each,” Mike said, patting the Shifter’s stomach

with sympathy. "I think you did this to yourself, though."

"But...I wanted to be a *charr*," Whiteside pouted.

"And so did they." Mike stepped aside to let Whiteside pass, which was still a tight squeeze through the kitchen door. "Do Shifter babies in the womb always change to match the parent?"

"Most of the time," Whiteside said as he flopped onto the couch and lounged across it, stroking his belly absentmindedly. "But not always. My father told me I was always shifting before I was born. He'd wake up with his belly twice the size of when he went to bed because I'd shifted while I was sleeping."

"And...you're *sure* you shifting doesn't hurt them?" Mike asked. He sat on the floor next to Whiteside and leaned his head against the Shifter's belly, making sure his horns didn't dig into him.

"It doesn't. On the contrary, if I stay in one shape for too long, it could make it harder for them to shift when they get older." Whiteside sighed and rolled over onto his left side, resting his belly on the cushions. "I'm talking about myself too much. What about you, love? How was today?"

"*Ugh*," Mike groaned. He reached up and began stroking Whiteside's middle. "It kind of sucked. We were loading in for some concert at the convention center. An R&B singer I've never heard of. I spent most of the morning unloading crates from the truck, which is, like, the only thing I don't like doing. I didn't have to do it all day, thankfully, but I still get irritated."

"That sounds frustrating," Whiteside nodded, sympathetically.

"It's just lots of moving and lifting heavy stuff. I'm not good at that."

"They should've called *me* in," the pregnant Shifter said. "I've been getting a lot of practice with that."

"You'd probably do a better job than I did," Mike said. "Even while pregnant."

"Get up here, love. What are you still doing on the floor?"

"Do *you* see any room, 'Whiteside?'"

The charr perked his head up and looked over his larger body, which was taking up the entirety of the couch, even without taking his belly into account. He scratched his chin, then sighed and closed his eyes. A moment later, the huge feline warped into a diminutive hyena with white fur and blue spots, sporting a pregnant belly that looked just a little too big for him.

"Only for you," Whiteside sighed as he made room for Mike.

"You could've just sat up," Mike said as he climbed onto the couch.

"I'm pregnant, I get to *lounge* if I want to." Whiteside crawled across the couch and pointed to Mike's crossed legs. "Lap. I demand it."

Once he had space, Whiteside lumbered awkwardly across Mike and flopped into the goat's lap,

wiggling to get comfortable and leaning his head back against his chest. Mike grunted under the now-hyena's surprising weight, but found a spot where he could still breath and keep his legs from *entirely* falling asleep. He slid his hands down Whiteside's shoulders and let them rest on his sizable belly.

"Huh." Mike cocked his head and measured the shape of the Shifter's body with his hands. "You seem...bigger."

"Why, thank you," Whiteside purred, nuzzling his face into Mike's neck.

"No, I mean more than you should be."

"Oh, I think a couple of them are still charr cubs," Whiteside said, prodding his belly to see. "I've been a charr most of the day, it sometimes takes them time to-"

A large shift occurred inside Whiteside, followed by a second movement that shrank his belly down to a more proportionate size. He sighed as a little pressure eased out of his middle and gave his stomach a pat.

"*There* you go, lovelies..."

"So I thought you told me shifter pregnancies were as long as the species of the other parent," Mike asked. "That's nine months. You...passed that a while ago."

"I know," Whiteside said with an unhurried, easy tone. "There's a Shifter caravan near here at the end of the month. I'm holding off until then."

"Ah. Okay." Mike lapsed into silence and chewed on his lip. With his hands cradling Whiteside and his belly, he leaned down to whisper in his ear, "So...you're sure you're going to go?"

"It's for the best."

"I know, I know. I just..." Mike sighed and moved his hand to where one of the babies was moving. "I wish you didn't have to go with them."

"The caravan can't stop for just one person," Whiteside said, placing his small hand over Mike's larger one. "And I need my people's help for the birth. Shifter children are...difficult."

"But why can't you just, I don't know, go have them there, then bring them home?" Mike knew he was being unreasonable, but he felt he had some cause to be upset. They were his children just as much as they were Whiteside's.

"It wouldn't be good for them, love," Whiteside said. He reached up and stroked a hand across Mike's cheek.

"And it would be better to carry them across the country for the first months of their lives? Right after they're born?"

"To be honest...yes." The hyena climbed off Mike's lap and settled on the couch next to him so they could look eye-to-eye. The goat slid his palm over Whiteside's belly, trying not to tear up at the

thought that he wouldn't be there when his children were born.

"We're different than you are, love," Whiteside explained. "Shifters *need* change. Moving around like that is good for us, especially in our early years."

"Then...I'll come with you. I'll join the caravan, at least until-"

"It takes months for a caravan to complete a loop," Whiteside interrupted, gently. "Can you really drop your entire life for that long?"

"I would." Mike sniffed and leaned down to touch his forehead to the Shifter's belly. "For them, I would."

"I know," Whiteside said, scratching behind the goat's horn affectionately. "But I don't want you to. Don't go homeless for us, love. Stay here. Give your children somewhere to come home to."

Mike didn't lift his head for a long time, keeping it pressed to his lover's pregnant belly as he stroked it. Shapes moved within it, a mystery to him what form they took, but they were his, nonetheless.

"Promise you'll come back," Mike whispered. "Please, promise me you'll come back with them."

"You have it," Whiteside said, lifting Mike's head to look him in the eye. "I promise."

"And stay in touch," Mike continued, his voice rising. "Let me know that the birth goes alright. And send pictures. Tell me where you are. Call me, at least once a week. Maybe more."

"Of course."

"And if you can record some video...Do you want my camera? I have an old camera, you can take that to film them with."

"Mike, don't worry so much," Whiteside said, affectionately pinching one of the goat's floppy ears. "We're still here. Just enjoy us while-"

Whiteside grunted and gasped as the wind was knocked out of his lungs by a sudden lurch from his belly as one of the shapes inside it rapidly doubled in size, making it appear lopsided.

"*Oof*. I think one of them took a liking to the charr shape," Whiteside chuckled. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and shifted back to the exotic feline body in the blink of an eye. Mike was nearly thrown off the couch as the cushions adjusted to the rapid change in weight.

"That's better..." Whiteside purred, stroking his belly contentedly. Mike put a hand to it and felt the quadruplets shifting to match their father, displacing space in his womb with soft, sudden movements. Mike couldn't even imagine how strange it must have felt.

"If nothing else, I promise to come back just for this kitchen of yours," Whiteside said, sniffing the air as the bread and cake dough finished baking.

“Maybe I’ll bake you a welcome home cake when you get back,” Mike said. Whiteside smiled and gave the goat an affectionate kiss on the nose.

“Please,” he said, “don’t. Leave the baking to me.”

“I have been. For over nine months, now.”

“And I think I’ve done an *excellent* job at it,” Whiteside said, standing and planting his hands on his hips. He was tall enough for his head to nearly touch the hanging light.

“I don’t know…” Mike said, poking Whiteside’s belly like testing a pumpkin. “They seem a little *overcooked* to me.”

“Perfection takes time.” Whiteside paused to sniff the air. “Speaking of which, I think my *other* baking project is nearly done.”

“I’ll probably lose twenty pounds as soon as you’re gone,” Mike said, following him into the kitchen. “I’ll be skin and bones by the time you get back.”

“All the more reason for me to fatten you up now.” Whiteside paused and turned to give Mike a peck on the cheek. “Love is shared through the stomach.”

“Clearly,” Mike said, giving the charr’s belly another affectionate touch.