



Coral Rustling (Kontra's Menagerie #39)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: On the Road: When a coral snake shifter succumbs to boredom, he learns the value of interaction.

Ulkna has spent the last three decades existing in his coral snake form. For most of that time, it was forced on him by witches. After being rescued over a year before, it was just easier. Then Ulkna overhears the shifters he's staying with talking about something that he's always enjoyed—horseback riding. So, he shifts.

While the guys are surprised, they welcome Ulkna on their Grand Canyon adventure. There, he scents something shocking...one of the horses that makes up the string of riding mounts is his mate. Finding him is easy, as Trey recognizes him, too. Getting Trey to leave his job as a trail mount is something else.

Can Ulkna overcome his loner tendencies enough to understand the importance of family and its implications on his relationship with Trey?

Total Pages (Source): 11

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Ulkna slithered through the house, heading upstairs. Usually when he wanted solitude, which was often, he went into the woods behind whatever house the gang rented. Unfortunately, they were in town near Albuquerque visiting a gang member who'd settled there, having chosen to stay with his human mate after bonding. Therefore, the house they were renting was in town, so no woods out back.

Due to that, Ulkna planned to curl up in a closet and take a nap. As a coral snake shifter, he'd always been a loner, and his time trapped by witches in a zoo had cemented that even more. Getting rescued had saved him from the sadistic women's poking and prodding, but he still had very little desire to interact.

Several members of the gang encouraged Ulkna to try shifting on a regular basis. He hadn't bothered to reveal that he'd regained his ability to change forms months before. Few things interested him enough to resume his human form.

What was the point when living as a snake was so much simpler?

Pausing at a closed door, Ulkna contemplated slithering under it. It would be a tight fit, but he was pretty sure he could make it. Then he heard the unmistakable sounds of two men getting it on.

Never mind.

While Ulkna wasn't a prude by any means, and he'd watched others having sex more than once over the couple of centuries he'd lived, shifters were a possessive lot. If the guys going at it hadn't been fated mates, he would have slipped in, ignored them, and made his way to the closet. Except, all the shifter pairs in the gang were fated, so that

idea was out.

It was a sign that Kontra's gang was truly blessed by the fates, and Ulkna was happy for them.

Ulkna moved down the hallway, spotting two open doors ahead. Peering into the first room, he found it empty. He headed toward the closet, prepared to curl up in a dark corner to relax.

The words of one of the guys filtered out through the other open doorway, causing Ulkna to pause.

“Really, Lamar?”

The penguin shifter, Yuma, spoke with a teasing tone.

“You want to get on a horse and ride a dusty trail into the Grand Canyon?”

Lamar responded in a slightly haughty tone.

“Rueben wants to check it out. He says it's on his bucket list.”

“Ah, that explains it,”

commented the deep voice of Hunter, Yuma's human mate.

“We'll do anything for our mates.”

Ulkna had heard that. Although he'd never understood it. He'd never felt the urge to put another's wants or needs above his own. At first, Ulkna had thought maybe it was his snake nature, but there was another snake shifter in Kontra's gang—the python

shifter, Eli—and Eli showed the same care and devotion to his wolf shifter mate as the others.

What would that be like?

Truly, Ulkna couldn't imagine it.

“Anyway,”

Lamar continued, redrawing Ulkna's attention.

“I'm asking around to see if we can get a group of guys together, and I thought you'd both be interested.”

“Well, yeah,”

Yuma replied, sounding perky.

“We'd love—”

Ulkna didn't wait to hear the rest of Yuma's reply. Reaching for his human form, he started to shift. His slender, roughly five-foot snake form expanded. Arms sprouted from his sides, and his tail split to form legs. Ulkna let out a soft hiss as he felt the peculiar pressure of his head reshaping.

After nearly a minute, Ulkna rolled his body and sprawled nude on the carpeted bedroom floor. He wiggled his fingers and toes as he caught his breath. Once his heart no longer raced, Ulkna reacclimated himself with his human form, lifting his legs, bending his knees and elbows, and rolling his shoulders.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Ulkna crunched to a sitting position. He slowly gained his

feet, using the nearby bed frame as support, just in case. Ulkna tentatively took his first step, then a second one, pleased to find himself steady.

Ulkna opened a dresser drawer, searching for something to wear. He'd seen the guys fill the dressers with sweats and shirts. Rummaging through the drawer's contents, Ulkna checked sizes. After a glance down at his slender, muscular frame, he chose a medium pair of sweatpants and pulled them on. He used the drawstring to cinch it at his hips, then went in search of Lamar.

The clean-cut peacock shifter was still in the same bedroom where Ulkna had heard his voice. Yuma and Hunter were there, too. They'd been joined by Payson and Land, and they were all on the bed, huddled around a laptop.

From their murmured words, Ulkna figured Lamar was showing them the particulars.

Payson noticed him first, not surprising since the hyena shifter was one of the gang's enforcers. Narrowing his eyes, he pinned his gray-eyed gaze on him.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Payson demanded. Ulkna opened his mouth to respond, but in the next instant, Payson's eyes widened, and he grinned broadly as he shouted.

"Carol, you shifted."

Then he snickered as he swept his gaze up and down Ulkna's body as he added.

"Guess we shoulda called you Cory instead."

Ulkna didn't bother responding to Payson's attempt to be witty. The hyena had a bad habit of giving the unshifted members of the gang nicknames, and the rest of the guys

just went along with it. For some reason, since Ulkna was a coral snake, Payson had thought it clever to switch the O and A and call him Carol.

Either no one had bothered to tell Payson that Ulkna was male, or the hyena just didn't care.

With the slightly crazy shifter, it was better not to bother engaging. The guy didn't really listen to anyone but Kontra, anyway.

Instead, Ulkna simply stated.

“Yes, I shifted.”

Then he turned his attention to Lamar and held out his hand.

“You may call me Ulkna, and I would very much like to join you on your Grand Canyon ride.”

When Lamar reached out and took his hand—probably due to rote instinct more than anything else—Ulkna shared.

“Many years ago, I was a horse trainer. I would very much like to enjoy time with them again.”

Ulkna was downplaying it a little. Before his capture by the witches, he'd worked with horses in one capacity or another for over one hundred and fifty years. He'd done everything from being a cowboy to training Civil War cavalry mounts to trick riding. There wasn't much Ulkna couldn't get the average horse to learn.

Just have to figure out each animal's personality and work with it.

“Of course,”

Lamar responded, sounding formal, which didn't surprise Ulkna. While in snake form, he'd had plenty of time to observe everyone in the gang, and they all had their quirks.

“I'll make certain you're included in the reservation, Ulkna.”

“Thank you,”

Ulkna replied, uncertain if he was appreciating the opportunity to go or if it was the fact that Lamar had used his name. Either way.

“I appreciate it and look forward to it.”

“Ulkna!”

Yuma bounced off the bed and slammed into Ulkna, wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug.

“It's so good to finally meet you!”

Ulkna tensed, doing his best to keep his jaw from clenching. While he'd been handled regularly as a coral snake, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been given a...hug. In fact, even his last, barely remembered lay, hadn't hugged him.

After a few seconds of discomfort, Ulkna slowly lifted his arms and wrapped them loosely around the affectionate penguin shifter.

“You, too, Yuma,”

he forced out evenly. Ulkna even managed to awkwardly pat the guy's upper back.

Yuma finally, finally, released him and took a step back. Even as Hunter yanked the small male onto his lap, Yuma continued to beam at Ulkna.

“How long have you been able to shift?”

As he snuggled into his mate's embrace, he added.

“Or is it the fact that we mentioned something that interested you that you decided to finally give it a try?”

Considering every shifter in the room would be able to scent any lies, Ulkna decided to go for honest...and blunt.

“I've shifted a few times in private over the last six months.”

He shrugged, adding.

“Living as a snake is easier, but I can't horseback ride in my snake form.”

Yeah, the horses wouldn't be too pleased about that.

Ulkna barely repressed a snort at that thought.

“Especially since you've been doing it for so long,”

Yuma stated, nodding as if he totally understood.

“So, you love horseback riding? Or horses in general?”

Then his eyes widened, and he hopped off of Hunter's lap.

"Oh, we totally need to introduce you to Kontra."

As Yuma continued his excited chatter, Ulkna was sort of appreciative. That meant he didn't really need to say anything. Instead, Ulkna just let the exuberant penguin shifter grab his hand and lead him out of the room and back down the stairs.

Ulkna didn't fail to notice that Hunter and the others followed close behind.

Swinging off the back of Lamar's Goldwing motorcycle, Ulkna found his feet. He took a few steps away, tipped his head back, and inhaled deeply. The hot dry air filled his lungs, reminding him of days long past while out riding the range.

Gods, I've really missed this.

I guess living in snake form does have its drawbacks after all.

With a sigh, Ulkna reached up and unstrapped his helmet. He handed it to Lamar, who'd also dismounted and had opened his rear saddlebag. After the peacock shifter took it, Ulkna slipped out of his freshly purchased leather jacket and handed that over, too.

"Thank you, Lamar,"

Ulkna murmured, just remembering his manners. Then he grabbed a pair of water bottles out of the saddlebag and offered one to the other shifter. "Thirsty?"

"Thanks,"

Lamar replied, taking it.

Ulkna twisted off the cap and drank deeply, all the while watching as his driver closed and locked the saddlebag. By the time that was done, Rueben had joined them. The big, redheaded human offered Ulkna a wide smile even as he slung his arm around Lamar's shoulders possessively.

As if I need reminding that Lamar is taken.

The shifter was saturated in Rueben's scent.

Ignoring the action, Ulkna just returned Rueben's grin with a small smile of his own. Then he turned and headed toward where the rest of the guys were gathering. As it turned out, sixteen guys had wanted to check out the tour, including himself. Ben's mate, Mutege, had declined, but he'd driven his human mate. From what Ulkna had heard, Mutege intended to hang out and explore the area on foot...or in animal form. Ulkna wasn't totally sure.

Ulkna fell into step beside the others as they followed the signs and made their way to the check-in area.

In the distance, Ulkna could make out the distinctive scent of horse hide.

Damn. I've missed that.

Except, as Ulkna inhaled deeply, relishing the familiar smell, he noticed something else mixed in there, too.

Huh. What is that?

Page 2

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Trey swished his tail at the horsefly that'd landed on his haunch. As much as he didn't mind the work of hiking up and down the canyon trail day in and day out, it was the dang flies that annoyed him the most. Even the kids bouncing on his back were easily ignored.

Biting, stinging flies. Not so much.

Fortunately, Trey's nephew, Reagan, noticed when he stomped his hoof in his attempt to dislodge another of the pests. He grabbed a white plastic spray bottle and headed his way. Closing the distance between them swiftly, Reagan patted Trey's thick neck.

"Hang on, Bubba,"

Reagan crooned with a reassuring smile, using the wranglers' name for him, just in case someone happened to be listening.

"I'll deter those pesky buggers."

Trey nickered and rubbed his head against Reagan's chest. Then he relaxed and closed his eyes in relief as his nephew doused all areas not covered by the saddle, with extra focus on his more sensitive places. As the cool mist of fly spray covered Trey, the pungent scent filled his nostrils, but he ignored it. Despite the smell, it was worth the relief from the stinging insects.

Once done, Reagan rubbed behind Trey's ear, underneath the halter he wore.

“We have a group made up of guys in a motorcycle gang rolling in,”

his nephew told Trey. His voice held a hint of concern.

“Can’t say as we’ve ever taken out motorcycle gang members before. You be extra careful out on the trail. Okay?”

Offering another nicker and chest-bump, Trey did his best to reassure his nephew. He knew that most people who rode motorcycles were perfectly nice, ordinary people. It was the small criminal element of the motorcycle crowd that gave the rest a bad name.

I wonder which kind will be coming here today.

Just as the thought flittered in and out of Trey’s mind, his sensitive shifter hearing picked up the rumble of powerful engines. They grew louder, softer, then shut off. Their gang clients had arrived.

Guess I’ll figure out what kind of people these are soon enough.

As a shifter, Trey could scent lies and usually the intent to deceive. He could even get a measure of a man just from their smell. Most of the time, evilness gave off its own distinctive odor.

Smelled it before.

Banishing memories of his past, Trey turned his head and focused on the group striding up the trail from the parking area. There were over a dozen of them, and they varied in size and shape—from broad-shouldered, thickly-muscled men to guys who could carry the classic label of twink—Black, Caucasian, and plenty of indeterminate mixed races. To Trey’s appreciation, they were all damn fine-looking men and

appeared remarkably clean and well-groomed.

If they're criminals, they're hiding it well.

Huh, there are some obvious gay couples in this group. That seems a bit out of the norm for motorcycle gangs.

Then again, what do I know?

After all, Trey had been living as a trail horse for over five years. He planned to continue doing so for at least another five...as long as his nephew stuck around. Fortunately, Reagan seemed to absolutely love his job as a tour guide and wrangler.

Trey spotted at least four couples...wait, no, make that eight. Considering the way sixteen of the seventeen men stood close to another or had their arms over shoulders or around waists, it wasn't hard to figure out who was with whom. That drew Trey's attention to the odd man out...who seemed to be focused on him...well, on the string of horses, anyway.

Hmm, he's nice looking.

The odd man out had a rangy build. Even the relaxed-fit jeans didn't hide his muscular legs. The long sleeves of his flannel shirt were rolled up, revealing lightly muscled, nicely tanned forearms. Even the cowboy-style hat on his head didn't hide the slightly shaggy, dirty-blond hair on his head.

Suddenly, Trey felt the oddest desire to toss his head, prance, and whinny, drawing the guy's attention. He suppressed it. Trey would have rolled his eyes had he been in human form.

Sure, the guy was hot, but there was no reason to draw attention to himself.

I'm just another horse on a string of trail mounts. Don't make waves for some handsome human.

With that thought in mind, Trey turned his attention to cocking a back leg and relaxing on the high-line. When he'd first started pretending to be just one mount among many on a trail ride string, it'd taken him a little time to get used to allowing himself to be tied up. As a shifter, he wasn't a fan of being restrained, but he knew it was something most normal horses learned from an early age.

Only Reagan knew that he wasn't just an average quarter horse, and Trey certainly didn't want to give anyone a reason to think differently.

To that end, Trey relaxed and watched as Reagan and another couple of wranglers handed out paperwork to register the guys. He found it interesting that all the men appeared to act courteous and respectful, never raising their voices or resisting when helmets were deemed a requirement. Perhaps that was because they were used to wearing them as motorcyclists.

Finally, Reagan and Mark—another wrangler—began leading most of them toward the horses. Mark was asking one of the smaller men for clarification on his riding experience. Whatever the man's answer, it was lost on Trey as the guys' scents finally registered over the chemical smell of the fly spray.

Shifters. Holy shit, many of these men are shifters.

Evidently, a few of the men must have recognized the same in Trey, for a large, brown-haired man with a scar down his left cheek exchanged a look with a lithe redhead. They started toward him, and Trey couldn't help but tense. Worry filled him that the pair would start something.

Surely, they won't with the human wranglers around.

After all, keeping the anonymity of the paranormal world was sacrosanct.

Just as the pair stopped at Trey's side, the handsome dirty-blond-haired guy who'd caught his eye slipped between them. He brazenly rested his hand on Trey's neck and stroked his fur. Humming, he leaned close and inhaled, openly taking in his scent.

"Hello, pretty mate,"

the stranger crooned into Trey's ear.

"I hope you're here by choice, but we'll help you no matter what."

"Mate?"

The large scarred shifter rumbled softly.

"He's yours, Ulkna?"

"Yep."

The man called Ulkna sounded so very pleased, and he continued to pet Trey. Smiling at him, he winked.

"You gonna confirm, handsome?"

Trey realized he'd been standing frozen, barely even breathing. Between the fly spray and the shock of realizing many of the bikers were shifters, he hadn't taken in Ulkna's scent. Tipping his head, Trey rubbed his muzzle against the crook of Ulkna's neck.

The shifter's earthy, masculine goodness flooded Trey's nostrils, and he let out a low

nicker. Rubbing his lips over Ulkna's smooth skin, earning him an amused chuckle from the slender male, Trey snuffled against him. Trey barely resisted the urge to shift right then and there, and a tremble worked through him.

"Easy, buddy,"

the big scarred shifter rumbled, resting his palm on his forehead.

"Just relax. We're here for you."

To Trey's surprise, he felt his body calm. The stranger wasn't a horse, and he wasn't certain what his animal actually was, but the man's dominant animal called to his own. Trey hadn't submitted to an alpha's nature in so very many years that he'd forgotten how soothing it could be from the right one.

"Hey, guys,"

Reagan greeted, crossing to them. He glanced between the men, noting the way they were petting Trey, and a hint of concern flashed across his face.

"We call this guy Bubba. He's a great, dependable fellow."

Looking over them again, Reagan focused on the scarred shifter.

"All our mounts will get you from top to bottom and back again, safe and sound, but you might be more comfortable on one of our large mules."

"Sure."

The brunette held out his hand.

“I’m Sam, by the way.”

After shaking, he indicated the redhead first, then Ulkna.

“That’s Payson and Ulkna.”

Reagan tipped his hat to each of them, then asked.

“So, which of you is taking Bubba?”

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

“This mare is Shirley. The other can take her.”

“I’m on Bubba,”

Ulkna declared.

“Okay,”

Reagan agreed readily.

“Do you need help adjusting your stirrups?”

Ulkna shook his head with an easy smile.

“No. It’s been a few years, but I used to train horses.”

With a chuckle, he added.

“Some things you never forget.”

“You help me with Shirley then,”

Payson stated, using the back of his hand to pat Ulkna’s upper arm.

“Will do,”

Ulkna agreed.

After another glance between them, Reagan nodded before leading Sam toward one of their large mules.

Trey’s shifter hearing allowed him to make out Sam’s whispered comment.

“Keep your mate calm on the ride, Ulkna. We’ll figure this out.”

Ulkna nodded.

Payson leaned close to Ulkna and murmured.

“Well, this is one way to ride your mate.”

He ended on a snicker with an added eyebrow waggle.

“Did I just hear you right?”

A human with shaggy black hair and big blue eyes latched onto Payson’s arm. In a low voice, he hissed.

“Did you just say Ulkna found his mate? Who? One of the wranglers?”

Grinning, Payson wrapped his arm around the clinging human. He busied a kiss to

his guy's temple before tipping his chin toward Trey.

"This horse is a shifter, cutie,"

Payson told him.

"They're mates."

The guy started to squeal in obvious excitement and even shimmied in Payson's arms.

Shirley shifted away from them, lifting her head in wariness.

Trey pawed a hoof twice and shook his head as he eyed the guy, hoping the human understood his warning. Jumping around and making high-pitched noises around horses wasn't the brightest idea. It was a damn good thing that all these trail mounts were very well trained.

Except, under the right circumstances, even the best horse could act up.

Ulkna must have come to the same conclusion, or maybe it was knowledge from when he was a horse trainer, assuming that was true.

"Hey, Land. Best calm down around the horses."

Ulkna smiled, keeping his tone low and soothing, perhaps to soften his reproach.

"And thank you."

His attention returned to Trey.

“I look forward to getting to know you.”

Land giggled, cuddling into Payson’s side.

“Now I know what you meant about riding your mate.”

Even if his words were ridiculous, at least he’d stopped bouncing.

With a soft sigh and slight shake of his head, Ulkna focused on the stirrups.

“Please forgive the pair,”

he mumbled, adjusting the length of the first one.

“Payson’s an enforcer and a good guy, but he’s an acquired taste. He and his mate are...unique.”

Trey didn’t really have a way to respond, so he remained still, just watching his mate, lost in thought. The man’s scent was masculine, earthy, and delicious. He could smell the hint of reptile undertones, and he wondered what kind of animal Ulkna shared his psyche with—maybe a snake or lizard. Trey looked forward to finding out.

After fixing both stirrups, Ulkna bent and checked both the main and rear girths. He froze for a second, then slowly straightened. Wearing a concerned expression, Ulkna eased close before glancing around furtively.

Ulkna cleared his throat, then whispered so low Trey barely made out the words.

“Did they geld you?”

Trey jerked his head, turning to peer at Ulkna with his left eye. For a second, he

wondered why his mate would even ask that. Then...it hit him.

If Trey had been in human form, he would have laughed. As it was, he let out a horsey snort. Seeing the worry filling Ulkna's hazel eyes, Trey shook his head, hoping he understood the negative.

Slowly, Ulkna began nodding. "Okay."

He glanced pointedly toward Trey's equine groin area.

"Well, I only asked to know if I should let our gang's doc know for, um...to figure out...well..."

Ulkna's voice trailed off, and he shook his head.

"Well, okay, then."

Trey nickered and rubbed Ulkna's chest with his head, hoping to reassure him. He knew he would have some explaining to do, but he didn't mind. After all, Ulkna was his mate, and it wasn't actually anything embarrassing. It was just a skill he'd honed for fun decades before that had come in handy while working as a trail horse.

Ulkna seemed to accept the reassurance for what it was.

"Well, okay,"

he repeated with a rub to Trey's head.

"Let's get this show on the road."

With a wink, Ulkna added.

“The sooner we get this ride done, the sooner we can figure out a way to actually meet.”

Bobbing his head once more, Trey agreed and resigned himself to a long, long afternoon.

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Ulkna relaxed in the saddle, enjoying the slight sway as his mate moved beneath him. A small smile teased at the corners of his lips, and he toyed with the horse's mane, threading his fingers between the coarse strands. Considering that petting his mate in horse form was the only affection he could show the other male right then, he wanted his mate to know that he was enjoying his time with him, regardless of how it was happening.

He listened as the others carried on conversations around him, appreciating that no one seemed to expect him to join in. The wranglers pointed out interesting rock formations, caves, and petroglyphs. A number of the others asked questions, and he enjoyed listening to the answers.

How long is the canyon? Over two-hundred-seventy miles long.

How wide is the canyon? Over eighteen miles at its widest point.

How deep is the canyon? Over six thousand feet at its deepest spot.

“Did you know over twenty-two thousand people white water raft the Colorado River every year,”

one of the wranglers told them, pointing at the ribbon of water below them. He grinned over his shoulder where he led the group.

“You all seem like adventurous folks, so if that interests you, you'll have to pick a date weeks, sometimes months out.”

Ulkna noticed his mate shake his head just a little, and he grinned as he leaned over his neck to murmur.

“Not a fan, my mate?”

Again, the horse shook his head.

Chuckling, Ulkna muttered.

“Good to know,”

before straightening.

“Maybe next time we travel through this way,”

Hunter stated, peering at Yuma, who was looking over his shoulder to meet his human mate’s gaze.

“Would that interest you, baby?”

Yuma grinned widely.

“Anything with water interests me.”

Hunter chuckled.

“Right. Silly question.”

Considering Yuma shared his spirit with a penguin, it was sort of a silly question.

“I love rafting,”

Reuben declared, a wide grin curving his features.

Lamar sighed deeply.

“You’re going to try to talk me into it, aren’t you?”

The peacock shifter did not sound excited...at all.

Reuben winked at his fastidious lover.

“Awww, you don’t have to, baby. I can go without you.”

Lamar’s lips pursed, as if he’d bitten into a lemon, and Ulkna would just bet that a rafting trip was in the guy’s future.

Poor sucker.

Then Ulkna looked down at the horse he rode, his fated mate. He’d never actually thought much about what his mate would be like or even what it would be like to find him or her. What would he do for this guy that he’d never met but was destined to spend the rest of his life with?

Ulkna really had no idea.

Walking away after the ride was one of the hardest things, if not the hardest thing, Ulkna had ever had to do. Even accepting his life as a captive to the witches hadn’t been as difficult. He’d lived each day in resignation.

At least this time I actually have hope.

I’ll see my mate again.

I know where he is.

With those thoughts in mind, Ulkna also reminded himself that Yuma and Hunter had pumped the wranglers for information about their operation. They knew when the last tour was, the general direction of where their overnight barns and paddocks were, and when the horses would be put up with their evening meal.

Ulkna had every intention of being there, waiting for his mate.

Fortunately, the guys were more than happy to assist him with his plan.

When they roared out of the parking lot, the group split up. Lamar—who Ulkna rode behind—headed left in the direction of the indicated barn. Along with him was Rueben, Yuma, Hunter, Sam, and his human mate, Ryan, as well as Payson and Land. Ulkna knew they were watching for a place they could set up a picnic to hang out at so Ulkna and a couple of others could search out the barn's exact location.

The rest of the guys, led by head enforcer Mutegi—who had driven his mate, Ben, to the ride but had stayed behind with the bikes—were heading back to the small town they had rooms at to report back to Kontra.

Ulkna knew the alpha needed to be kept in the loop, but he wondered just how hands-on the big grizzly shifter would be. He'd seen the guy help many of the others when they located their fated mate. Certainly, the fact that his mate was working as a trail mount, with no herd or shifter affiliation, should make it easy for them to liberate him.

Right?

He sure hoped so.

“This looks like a good spot.”

Rueben’s voice came through Ulkna’s helmet microphone as he pointed to the left.

“Trees for shade and plenty of dirt parking.”

Peering around the area, Ulkna had to agree.

There was plenty of dirt and gravel space on the side of the road. Even logs were lined up, making certain that people didn’t drive into the small meadow beyond. Trees lined the left side, and off to the right was a path leading to a scenic view area of the Grand Canyon, not too far in the distance. There was even a couple of information boards, so obviously the place was maintained.

Curiosity itched at Ulkna, and he looked forward to reading whatever was on the signs.

After dismounting Lamar’s Goldwing, Ulkna took off his helmet and peered through the trees to the left. That direction lay the trail ride staging area...and supposedly, the barn and paddocks. His skin prickled with the desire to shift and go find it.

“Eat and hydrate before you head out,”

Sam ordered, appearing next to him.

“You have plenty of time.”

He rested a hand on Ulkna’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

“After that, Payson and Land will go with you, in human form, with clothes for you both.”

Ulkna couldn't help his grimace. He hated waiting but knew the necessity of it. His mate wouldn't be there, yet, even if he found it right that minute.

Plus, really? Payson? Why him?

Sam chuckled softly, his lips curving into a wry smile.

"I know what you're thinking. I've traveled with the man for decades, so I understand people's initial reaction to his personality."

The big beta's expression grew serious as he continued.

"But Payson has proven worthy of Kontra's faith in him time and time again, even if he can be a little..."

When Sam trailed off, Ulkna snorted. "Crazy?"

Grinning broadly, Sam nodded.

"Yep. Crazy."

With a wink, he stated.

"The man definitely has a singular mind, but he knows what Kontra will accept, will back, and will not allow."

He squeezed Ulkna's nape and began guiding him to where Yuma was setting up their impromptu picnic beneath the tree line.

"Come and relax. Fuel your snake. Then we'll find their evening holding paddocks."

Ulkna's stomach growled, telling him that Sam's order was a wise one.

After grabbing a pre-made turkey hoagie, a bag of chips, and a bottle of beer, Ulkna settled with his back against a tree. He unwrapped the plastic around the sandwich, dropping the packets of mustard and mayo onto the grass. Ulkna placed the plastic on the ground, sandwich on top of it, and picked up the mayo. After opening the packet, he slathered it all over one side of the roll before flicking it onto the plastic.

Licking his lips, Ulkna picked up the thick sandwich. He eyed the hoagie, his mouth watering at the sight of the turkey, cheese, lettuce, tomato, and even a couple of dill pickles. Ulkna felt his stomach grumble again, so he took a big bite and hummed appreciatively as the flavors burst across his taste buds.

Yum!

As Ulkna ate, he listened to the men chatting around him. Yuma and Hunter were engaged in a conversation with Rueben and Ryan about the new archaeological excavation going on in the Grand Canyon. Rueben and Hunter both wanted to track down the site and take a peek during the night—evidently, neither human had been to an archaeological dig before—and while Yuma was watching indulgently, Ryan was trying to rein them in.

Ulkna was sort of on Rueben and Hunter's side. He'd never been to an archaeological dig, either. When they'd been at the bottom of the canyon, taking an hour and a half break to walk around, check out interesting sights, and letting the horses rest, the wranglers had told them about the recent find.

Evidently, only a small percentage of the Grand Canyon was actually fully investigated. A group that had gotten lost hiking had stumbled upon a previously unknown Native American adobe-like structure. According to the wranglers, there were eleven different tribes that had lived in or around the Grand Canyon over the

centuries.

It'd been fascinating.

"You know, you could just talk to Mark,"

Yuma finally pointed out, stopping Rueben and Hunter's cajoling of Ryan trying to reason with them.

"Mark said he was buddies with one of the graduate students working with the archaeologists at the site. Maybe he could get you in to view the dig."

The small penguin shifter snickered as he added with a wink.

"Then you could probably even go during the daytime."

"Yeah, but if he gets turned down, they'd be on watch for us,"

Rueben whined.

"It'd be harder to sneak in."

Ulkna fought back a snicker. Seeing the big redhead all pouty was really sort of funny.

"So, you starting in human or snake form?"

Payson asked, plopping down near Ulkna and drawing his attention. His legs were crossed, and he immediately pulled Land onto his lap.

Ulkna gave them a few seconds to make out before he bothered answering.

“I’ll start as human,”

he decided.

“If I need to get close and investigate while a human’s around, I’ll shift.”

In his coral snake form, which wasn’t all that large, Ulkna was rarely noticed. On the occasion when he was spotted, most humans would back away and leave him alone, even if they weren’t sure if he was the poisonous coral snake or the non-venomous king snake. Every once in a while, someone would get a shovel, and seeing as Ulkna was sentient and knew exactly what that could mean—they most likely intended to chop his head off—he took off at top speed.

“Sounds good.”

Payson grinned widely at him.

“We’ll bring a backpack with sweats and a hoodie.”

Shrugging, he cocked his head.

“And socks for his feet, if he wants ’em, cause no guessin’ at his shoe size, and I ain’t carryin’ a million shoes through the woods.”

Chuckling, Ulkna nodded.

“Makes sense.”

Payson eyed the remains of Ulkna’s meal.

“You ready, then?”

Grinning broadly, he teased.

“Or you gonna wait that recommended thirty minutes before exercise?”

Ulkna popped the last chip into his mouth with a roll of his eyes.

“Let’s go,”

he mumbled around his mouthful. Then he rolled his garbage into a ball and rocked to his feet.

Snickering, Payson lifted Land up, and they both stood.

Once Ulkna had placed his trash in the bag the guys had set out, he turned and headed toward the trees. He heard the guys’ calls of encouragement and congratulations and waved in acknowledgement. Ulkna slipped between trees, sensing Payson and Land following, and he began striding swiftly through the woods.

Ulkna had to remind himself on more than one occasion that Land was a human and couldn’t keep up if he started jogging through the trees. Still, it was tough to control his excitement. His pulse picked up speed, and anticipation thrummed through him.

Soon. Soon I’ll see my mate again.

And this time, maybe I’ll actually be able to talk to him.

As Ulkna spotted wood fencing appear between trees, he heard the murmur of voices. He slowed, judging direction and distance. Stalking forward, Ulkna flicked his gaze this way and that. He noted over a dozen horses interspersed amongst a number of paddocks. They milled around large feeders full of hay and appeared to be munching contentedly.

Finally, Ulkna pinpointed the source of the voices. A pair of men stood at the other end of the farthest paddock. The cowboy Ulkna recognized as Reagan, one of the wranglers from the ride, stood on the outside of the paddock.

The second man, wearing nothing but a pair of sweats and standing inside the paddock with mostly his back to him, drew Ulkna's attention like a moth to a flame. He had wide shoulders that tapered to a narrow, trim waist. Nicely defined back muscles were on clear display, and his biceps flexed enticingly in his arms where he had his forearms resting on the top rail of the fence between him and Reagan. The man's shaggy, dark-brown hair covered his neck, and he thrust a hand through it as if in agitation.

"Did anyone in the gang say where they were headed, Reagan?"

the half-naked man asked. His tenor tones were filled with frustration and uncertainty.

"What town they were staying in, maybe?"

"No, but—"

Reagan paused, looking over the other man's shoulder and sweeping his gaze over Ulkna, Payson, and Land. He smirked as he stated.

"But I don't think finding them's going to be an issue."

"What do you mean?"

Reagan pointed in Ulkna's direction, and the sexy, sweat-pants-clad man turned.

Ulkna's breath caught in his throat as he stared into the deep brown eyes of his

forever.

Gorgeous.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Trey sucked in a sharp breath when his gaze landed on the trio of men standing amidst the trees on the other side of the paddocks. Or more to the point, the wiry blond that stood in front of the other pair. The guy still wore the same jeans and flannel that fit him so nicely, and Trey couldn't wait to peel those clothes from his body.

Licking his lips, Trey took a step toward Ulkna, and that seemed to be enough to end the staring contest.

Ulkna hopped the paddock fence and began striding swiftly toward him, cutting across the horse enclosure.

“Uh, Uncle Trey,”

Reagan called nervously.

“You, uh, want some more clothes?”

His voice lowered to a mutter as he added.

“Shoes, maybe?”

Trey hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at his nephew. As much as he wanted to just run to his mate, capture his lips, and start exploring, he needed to keep his wits about him, too. He didn't know these shifters, after all.

“Uh, yeah,”

Trey replied softly, nodding at Reagan.

“Clothes would be good.”

Turning his attention back to Ulkna, Trey watched him move through the paddocks. The pair behind him followed, the redhead leading and keeping his body partially in front of the other man protectively. Trey recalled that he was Payson, the black-haired man was his human mate, Land, and he had a fairly important position in the...gang. Payson was also keeping a wary eye on Reagan while sweeping his gaze over the area, giving the horses a much wider berth than Ulkna. Trey's mate seemed to easily read the eating animals, knowing which ones would ignore him and which ones were more aggressive about their hay.

“Hi, Ulkna,”

Trey greeted as he watched the agile male hop over the last fence separating them. Licking his lips, he found his mouth watering with his desire to taste the approaching male.

“I'm Trey.”

“Hello, Trey,”

Ulkna greeted, stopping only a foot before him. A warm smile curved his thin lips while hunger filled his hazel eyes. He stared up at Trey, holding his gaze confidently, regardless of their three-inch height difference.

“It's so very good to meet you officially.”

Instead of offering his hand, Ulkna reached out and rested his hands on Trey's waist. He rubbed his thumbs over the sides of his abdominals, sending goose bumps through

his torso. Trey sucked in a sharp breath, and Ulkna's masculine scent flooded his senses.

After swallowing hard, Trey whispered.

"Good to meet you, too."

His voice came out huskier than he could ever remember it being, and he cleared his throat reflexively.

"Uh, so you found our evening paddocks."

Ulkna smiled, his expression hungry as he roved his gaze over Trey's torso. "Yeah."

Lifting his attention back to Trey's face, he declared.

"Couldn't stay away."

"Uh, Uncle Trey?"

Reagan's uncertain voice yanked Trey's attention from Ulkna's handsome features.

"Yeah, hey,"

he responded inanely.

"Uh, this is Ulkna, my mate."

Geez, standing before my mate is making me out as a moron.

Hoping to get a few brain cells to fire, Trey began to draw away from Ulkna,

planning to put a little space between them. His mate's low growl of displeasure caused him to still as his brows shot up. Even Trey's equine nickered inside him, wanting to please Ulkna, to make him happy.

To that end, Trey pivoted and rested his left hand on the small of Ulkna's back. The move gave him the bit of space he needed while keeping close to his mate. That seemed to settle Ulkna, too, for he mirrored the move, his palm sliding over Trey's bare back.

Ulkna's touch caused tingles to sweep up and down Trey's spine, but he did his best to ignore it...for the moment.

“Uh, Ulkna, this is my nephew, Reagan.”

With his right hand, he indicated Reagan.

“He keeps me and my secret safe.”

Reagan shifted his weight from foot to foot in obvious discomfort as he gave an awkward wave. “Hey.”

“Your nephew?”

Ulkna questioned.

As Trey nodded, Reagan clarified.

“Great nephew, technically.”

He pointed at Trey.

“Uncle Trey is my grandfather’s brother.”

With a roll of a shoulder, he amended.

“Half-brother, but our family never made the distinction.”

“And you know about shifters, huh?”

Payson drew closer and grinned widely at him.

“Cool. It’s good to have help when you’re alone.”

Then the redhead’s brows drew together in speculation.

“You are alone, right, Trey? We aren’t aware of this bein’ any shifter’s territory, and we haven’t scented any others around.”

Trey shook his head, doing his best not to be distracted by the way Ulkna’s fingertips teased over the knobs of his spine.

“Oh, no, I don’t have a herd,”

he confirmed. Grimacing as he thought back to the last herd he’d been a part of, he told them.

“My mother was human, true mated to my shifter father. She’d already had a son with another, a human who was no longer in the picture, but my brother was treated like a part of the herd even though he was human.”

“My grandfather, David,”

Reagan cut in.

Trey nodded, smiling as he recalled fond memories of growing up with his older brother.

“David fell in love and married a human woman, and our herd alpha allowed him to share our secrets with her. They were good together, had two sons, who also knew about us, Will and Colton.”

“Will’s my father,”

Reagan cut in, getting in on the explanation.

“He and my mom are living near the south rim and run a bed and breakfast.”

With a low chuckle, Reagan shoved his hands into his pockets.

“We get a lot of referrals from them.”

Trey reached out and squeezed Reagan’s shoulder.

“They love that you do what makes you happy.”

“That doesn’t explain your lack of herd,”

Payson pointed out.

“Sorry, got a little off track there,”

Trey said with a laugh.

“Anyway, the herd I was affiliated with is probably still in southern Oklahoma. Our alpha died in an accident. A flood, and our beta took over.”

With a sigh, Trey admitted.

“He wasn’t a strong leader, and it didn’t take long for the head enforcer to challenge him, win, and start making plenty of changes.”

Trey focused on Reagan as he murmured.

“Including kicking out any non-shifter. So our family left and made our own way.”

Resting his hand on his nephew’s shoulder, Trey added.

“That was over twenty-five years ago.”

Payson growled, the sound soft and low.

“Tell me who the fuck he is,”

he demanded, his lip curling in obvious disgust.

“We’ll report him to the council.”

Trey felt his eyes widen, surprise flooding him.

“You can do that?”

“Sure as fuck can,”

Payson declared.

“And they care?”

Trey couldn't fathom it.

“Yup.”

Land had seemed a little bouncy and maybe a bit nerdy while on the ride, but the expression he sported right then was almost feral, very similar to his mate's.

“And they're cracking down on alphas trying to separate true mates, regardless of gender or race.”

“But they're the alpha.”

The idea of someone trying to regulate the alpha just wasn't computing.

“They're word is law.”

“Not no more,”

Payson countered in a sing-song voice.

Trey scoffed softly.

“Okay. I'll give you what I can.”

As Payson nodded, he turned his attention to Ulkna.

“So, uh, anyway.”

Trey hesitated, uncertain how to ask for what he wanted...time alone with his mate.

Fortunately, Trey's growling stomach helped him out.

"Guess you didn't eat your hay,"

Payson teased, his attitude changing on a dime. Wagging his brows, he focused on Ulkna.

"I'll text Yuma. He and Hunter can set up a picnic somewhere reasonably close to where we're setting up camp."

Payson winked while leering.

"But not too close. Somewhere...secluded...so ya can get to know each other better."

Land giggled.

Reagan's cheeks started to pinken.

Trey had to fight against a blush of his own.

Ulkna rolled his eyes.

"So, uh, should I expect you back here by morning?"

Reagan asked, worriedly rubbing the back of his neck.

"Or do I need to make up a story about finding a problem bad enough to pull you from the string?"

Trey smiled warmly at his nephew, loving that he could always count on the young man.

“No, I’ll be back before morning feed,”

he assured. Seeing Ulkna’s furrowed brows and questioning look, Trey explained.

“Morning feed is at six, giving the mounts plenty of time to enjoy their hay and grain before being pulled for grooming and tacking at eight-thirty.”

Seeing Ulkna’s disappointed expression coupled with the way he opened and closed his mouth, as if to question him further, Trey quickly added.

“I only have one more day before I’m supposed to be taken off rotation for a rest.”

“A rest?”

Ulkna asked.

Trey nodded as he took the t-shirt, socks, and boots from Reagan. “Yeah,”

he began as he pulled on first the socks and boots. Straightening, Trey explained.

“Each horse is on a rotation. Working four days, then taken to the ranch for two days off. This company takes damn good care of their mounts.”

Reagan nodded.

“They know that their business is only as good as their horses.”

Ulkna began to nod, then looked alarmed.

“Are you owned by the company?”

Shaking his head, Trey chuckled.

“On paper, I’m owned by Reagan.”

He yanked the shirt over his head, grinning at Ulkna’s confused features as he settled it into place.

“A little over five years ago, it was time for me to step back from society, so we came up with this idea.”

Waving at Reagan, Trey told him.

“We forged documents that said Reagan bought me at auction, and he leases me to the trail company.”

“How hard will it be to get out of that lease?”

Payson asked, glancing between them.

“You know, so you don’t have to do this every day.”

“Uh...”

Leave his job? Trey hadn’t considered that. As odd as it might seem to others, he found the monotony soothing. He pretty much always knew what to expect. He even enjoyed the company of the other horses. In a weird way, they almost felt like younger brothers and sisters. After a glance at Reagan, Trey met Ulkna’s intense, hazel-eyed gaze.

“I-I guess...that’s something that we’ll have to figure out.”

Ulkna nodded slowly. “Right,”

he murmured. His lips curved into an understanding smile.

“I hear matings take compromise and communication.”

Trey chuckled.

“I’ve heard and seen that, too.”

Pulling away from Ulkna, he gave Reagan a quick hug, whispering.

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

Reagan returned his squeeze, murmuring back.

“Have a good night.”

Before he released Trey, he softly added.

“And be careful, Uncle.”

“I will,”

Trey assured. As he drew away, he cupped his nephew’s jaw and gave him a reassuring smile. Then Trey drew away and turned to his mate and his friends.

“So, uh, dinner?”

“Sure thing,”

Payson quipped, pulling out his phone and starting back the way they'd come.

Ulkna surprised Trey by taking his hand and twining their fingers together. When he looked at the slightly smaller man, he winked and gave his hand a squeeze. Letting out a pleased breath, Trey squeezed Ulkna's hand back.

"Come on,"

Ulkna urged, tipping his head toward Payson and Land's retreating figures.

"Let's go spend some time together."

Trey nodded. "Yeah."

They made their way through the horse paddocks, Ulkna releasing his hand only long enough to help Trey over the fences, even though he didn't need it. The trek took them back through the paddocks, the horses distracting them. Many of the animals knew and liked Trey and hurried over to him for attention and pets, which Trey was happy to give.

To Trey's pleasure, Ulkna didn't rush him, and he even offered the friendly mounts pets and scratches, too.

Eventually, Ulkna helped Trey out of the last paddock where Payson waited, leaning against a tree. He had his arms wrapped around Land's waist, holding him against his chest. His head was dipped, and he was placing suckling kisses along the column of the human's neck.

With the way Land relaxed in the shifter's arms, they both appeared completely comfortable with showing and accepting affection.

Trey didn't think he'd ever seen men quite so...relaxed with expressing their obvious love.

Huh. Wonder what that's like.

After glancing discreetly at Ulkna, Trey wondered if he would eventually find out.

"Come on, guys,"

Payson encouraged, easing Land forward and turning him toward the trees.

"Yuma told me roughly where they set you up."

With an eyebrow waggle, he told them.

"They even found a tent and sleeping bags."

A surge of anticipation and heat rushed through Trey, and while his stomach rumbled again, butterflies bumped within, too, and he wasn't certain if it was due to the promise of a meal or thinking of a night alone with his newly found mate.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Ulkna lounged on the blanket, watching Trey devour his second sandwich—a roast beef one after polishing off a ham first. His mate was also working on a canister of BBQ Pringles. There was an open container of fruit—cantaloupe, watermelon, grapes, and kiwi—and, occasionally, Trey would pluck a piece with his forefingers and drop it into his mouth.

The way Trey sucked the juices from his fingers damn near had Ulkna's cock twitching. He wondered what his mate's lips would feel like around his dick's crown and immediately had to shove the thought away. Ulkna knew he needed to wait, to see to Trey's needs first.

Every once in a while, Ulkna would take a piece of fruit for himself, mostly the cantaloupe. He enjoyed watching his mate eat heartily. Ulkna figured carrying people up and down the canyon burned plenty of calories, and shifters ate more than was standard as a general rule.

“Thank you for letting me stuff my face,”

Trey mumbled after swallowing a chip. His cheeks had a hint of pink to them, but that didn't stop him from taking another bite of his sandwich.

Ulkna smiled.

“It pleases me to watch you eat,”

he admitted. Scoffing, he told him.

“I know I didn’t really make the food, but”—he paused for a second, analyzing his feelings—“it still gives me this sense of satisfaction. As if I’m providing for you.”

Trey chuckled as he swallowed. “Yeah.”

He grabbed a grape, and before popping it into his mouth, he stated.

“I know it’s a shifter thing.”

“Exactly.”

Ulkna nodded.

“So, I’ve already told you a bit about myself,”

Trey pointed out as he glanced from his half-eaten roast beef sandwich to Ulkna and back again.

“How about you tell me a little about you while I’m finishing up?”

Trey waved his sandwich in the direction of where the guys were setting up camp about a quarter of a mile away.

“How’d you end up with them?”

With a laugh, he shook his head.

“They sure seem to be an eclectic group.”

Ulkna let out a laugh.

“You don’t even know the half of it.”

Humming, he eased to a seated position and rested his forearms on his upturned knees.

“I suppose I could give you the Reader’s Digest version because the in-depth version would take too damn long.”

Trey’s dark brows shot up, betraying his surprise, confusion, and probably interest.

“So, uh...”

Ulkna thought about just where to begin.

“Well, I’m a snake shifter. I share my spirit with a coral snake.”

He figured the basics would be best. To his relief, Trey nodded, not showing the least bit of reticence or fear—so many people had an issue with snakes. He was glad that, evidently, his mate wasn’t one of them.

“My kind aren’t real family-oriented, but we did live in a loose pod.”

Ulkna waved a hand dismissively.

“That was a long time ago. Over two hundred years, and I haven’t spoken to anyone from there in...over a century.”

“How old are you?”

Before Ulkna could answer, Trey added.

“I’m one hundred forty-two.”

“Two hundred and fourteen,”

Ulkna told him. Although, beyond confirming that a mate had reached the age of consent, most shifters didn’t really care. Their long life spans made that sort of thing irrelevant.

“And the gang?”

Trey lifted his sandwich to his lips.

“How’d you get mixed up with them?”

Before taking another bite, Trey asked.

“Is it because the guys are gay, so you felt comfortable joining them even though they’re not snakes?”

Shaking his head, Ulkna shared.

“No, I’ve only been with them a little over a year. I was captured and held by a circle of witches who drew my blood to use in their spells.”

He grabbed a chip from the canister and lifted it to his lips, his focus on it.

“I was rescued by the Horseman of Death and his demons. They—”

Hearing Trey begin coughing, Ulkna snapped his attention from the chip to Trey.
“Shit,”

he hissed. After dropping the chip, Ulkna rocked forward and began patting his mate on his back.

“I should’ve waited until you’d swallowed. I’m so sorry.”

He grabbed the open Gatorade that Trey had been drinking and held it to his mate’s lips.

“Take a few sips.”

Trey obeyed, slowly regaining his composure. His voice sounded a bit hoarse as he asked.

“Did you say the Horseman of Death?”

Ulkna nodded as he changed to rubbing Trey’s back, enjoying the smooth play of muscle beneath his palm even through the thin shirt.

“Yeah. Death as in one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

Trey stared at him with wide eyes, the scent of his shock rolling off him. With a smile and a shrug, Ulkna returned to resting on his ass.

“Uh, so, the witches drew the Horsemen’s attention when they started kidnapping their demons.”

Waving his hand, Ulkna shook his head.

“Anyway, that’s a long story for another time.”

Trey took a few more sips of his drink as he nodded.

Easing backward, Ulkna settled cross-legged.

“So, there were a half-dozen of us freed, and Death took us to Alpha Kontra and his gang for rehabilitation,”

he explained, trying to finish up the basics swiftly.

“I’ve been with them for over a year now.”

“Wow,”

Trey whispered, his amazement clear. His deep brown eyes were wide as he stared at him.

“I-I don’t know if I should say that I’m sorry that happened to you or not.”

It was Ulkna’s turn to be surprised, and Trey obviously sensed it, for he scoffed and told him.

“You’re here now because of that path, and it’s led you to me.”

Trey set his bottle aside and reached out, cupping Ulkna’s jaw.

“Which I think is the greatest gift.”

Ulkna nuzzled into Trey’s hold for a few seconds, before turning and pressing a kiss to his mate’s palm.

“And I agree with you,”

he assured his mate. Keeping his voice low and intimate, Ulkna held Trey’s gaze.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t change anything. Fate has gifted me for my reward for overcoming tribulation.”

Lifting his hand, Ulkna cradled Trey’s hand where it still rested on his jaw and nuzzled into it again.

“You’re my greatest gift, too, Trey.”

Pulling away, Trey tossed the last couple of bites of his sandwich into the container of fruit before sealing the lid. Then he screwed the cap onto his drink. He shoved everything into the cooler the guys had provided.

Watching with bated breath, Ulkna could only stare as Trey rocked forward and rose to his knees. He began crawling the short distance between them. Levering over Ulkna, Trey kept coming, bumping his chest into Ulkna’s and urging him backward on the blanket.

Ulkna was only too happy to recline back, anticipation flooding him when Trey straddled his thighs. Reaching up, he gripped his soon-to-be lover’s upper arms, encouraging him down. Trey pressed his chest to Ulkna’s, lowering his head to the crook of his neck.

Tipping his head to the side, Ulkna welcomed Trey’s sniffing and licking. He groaned in pleasure upon feeling the gentle nips his mate slipped in at the point where his neck met his shoulder. Ulkna’s cock strained against his jeans, and his snake hissed in his mind.

He was totally on the same page as his animal. He wanted his mate’s teeth deep in his shoulder in the worst way. His prick actually oozed a bead of pre-cum, and his balls began to tingle. He’d been on edge all day, and he feared just the prick of Trey’s canines would send him over the edge.

Except, that wouldn't be so bad.

I could definitely stand to take the edge off.

With that thought in mind, Ulkna groaned and rocked his hips. His groin rubbed against his mate's, the fabric too thick between them. Still, Ulkna could make out the feel of Trey's erection pressing against his own.

"Shit, Ulkna,"

Trey hissed, grinding against Ulkna's jeans-covered cock. "I know—"

He rocked against him again, sending another surge of heat through Ulkna's veins before he started again.

"I know we h-have a shit-ton to talk about."

Trey continued rocking, grinding, seemingly unable to stop as he struggled with his words.

"B-But I w-want this. W-Want you."

A low growl escaped Ulkna's throat, more than on board with that. "Yessss,"

he snarled, tightening his hold on Trey.

"Let's get this party started."

Trey snickered for a second, and while Ulkna appreciated the sound, he wanted to taste his mate even more. He turned his head and captured his new and forever lover's mouth. Working his lips, Ulkna parted Trey's so he could slip his tongue

between them.

Ulkna groaned into Trey's mouth as his mate's flavor exploded across his taste buds. His unique, masculine muskiness was mixed with the food and drink he'd just eaten. The potent essence set Ulkna's blood on fire, and his groin tightened so-damn-fast.

He didn't know if it was the fact that it'd been so long since he'd been intimate with someone or if it was that this was his mate, but the tingle at the base of his spine told him he was nearing the edge.

Shoving a hand between them, Ulkna grappled with the fly of his jeans. A quick flick of the button and a shove of the zipper freed his throbbing shaft. Never had Ulkna been so relieved that he went commando.

Needing Trey right there with him, Ulkna gripped the elastic band of his sweatpants. He pulled them forward, then pushed them down. Ulkna felt Trey's shaft slap against his own, ripping a groan from his throat. Grabbing both their cocks, he began jacking them swiftly.

"Yesss,"

Trey hissed against Ulkna's lips, not even bothering to break the kiss. Then he went back to exploring Ulkna's mouth, using his tongue to map his cavity.

Ulkna groaned into Trey's mouth, reveling in the way Trey ravished him. His body shuddered as his balls drew up, and he didn't fight it as his hormones sent him flying over that bliss-inducing edge. Ecstasy rushed through his veins as he unloaded, his orgasm sending his senses soaring.

A second later, pain stabbed through Ulkna's shoulder, there and gone so fast he barely registered it. The intense pleasure that followed nearly fried his brain. His

body bucked in Trey's hold as a second release pulsed through him.

With Ulkna's senses bliss-drunk-blinded, his instincts took over. He tilted his head, opened his mouth, and struck. His canines sank into soft, warm flesh, and delicious, iron-rich blood poured over his tongue. Grunting with pleasure, Ulkna sucked, coaxing more onto his tongue.

One thought reverberated through Ulkna's brain.

Mine. Mine. All mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Dark spots danced behind Trey's eyes, and he blinked slowly, trying to get his vision to clear. With the way his blood zinged oh-so-pleasantly through his veins, he did it languidly. Trey hummed as he nuzzled his mate's slender neck.

"Wow,"

Trey mumbled with a heavy, satisfied smile.

"Just wow."

Ulkna licked over where he'd bitten Trey, sending a shiver down his spine.

Oh, that feels amazing.

Trey chuckled quietly as he nuzzled his temple against Ulkna's.

"Yeah,"

Ulkna whispered, turning his head a little and bussing a kiss on Trey's temple in return.

"Definitely wow."

Lifting his head, Trey stared down at Ulkna. He took in his mate's relaxed features and the sated tilt of his lips. His face remained flushed, and his hazel eyes gleamed with pleasure.

“Gods, you’re a gorgeous man,”

Trey murmured, threading his fingers through Ulkna’s dirty-blond hair.

“Love that expression on your face.”

Dipping his head, Trey pecked a kiss to his mate’s lips.

“Wanna put it there often.”

Ulkna grinned up at him.

“I’ll let you put it there any time you want.”

Trey chuckled.

“You will, will you?”

“Yep.”

Ulkna cradled Trey’s neck and drew him down into a slow, thorough, tongue-fucking kiss.

Feeling renewed heat kindle in his veins, Trey eased up. He rested his weight on his elbows as he teased his fingertips through Ulkna’s short, dirty-blond hair. Trey massaged the skin of his scalp, hearing his mate’s hum of pleasure as he pressed into his touch.

Trey relished that reaction. He loved knowing that his mate enjoyed his touch so much. Even though he wanted to keep going, to continue touching, kissing, and petting, he knew they needed to share a few words first. While Trey understood it

was the shifter way to bond first and figure out the rest later, he wanted time to leisurely explore, too.

That meant finding somewhere a little more secluded.

Like that lovely tent right there.

Trey pecked another kiss to Ulkna's lips before easing up.

"Let's get cleaned up and move this party,"

he encouraged, rising to his knees.

Once kneeling, Trey whipped his shirt over his head and began rubbing at his belly and groin, clearing his body of their combined seed. His movements stilled as he stared at Ulkna, taking in his mate's exposed flesh. He hummed appreciatively as he viewed his lover's flushed torso.

Trey licked his lips as he eyed the streaks of cum coating Ulkna's still-hard dick and abdominals.

"Want to taste that so bad."

The sound of some critter rustling in the bushes reminded Trey that they were out in the open. While he wasn't a prude by any means, he was finding that when it came to his mate, he was a possessive bastard. Trey didn't want to share his forever lover's handsome naked body or beauty in pleasure any more than he would have to, considering his mate was a shifter who'd need to get nude to shift.

To that end, Trey pushed aside his desire to lick Ulkna clean. Another time, he promised himself. He finished a quick swipe over his own body before turning his

attention to giving Ulkna a swift wipe-down, too.

“Come on, Ulkna,”

Trey urged once he was finished, tossing the shirt toward the backpack Payson had left them. Rising to his feet, he held out a hand to his still-reclining lover.

“Join me in the tent.”

Trey couldn’t help how husky his voice became.

“I want to explore.”

A feral grin slowly curved Ulkna’s lips as he placed his hand in Trey’s.

“Only if I get to explore right back.”

Trey tugged Ulkna to his feet.

“That’s exactly what I hoped you’d say.”

Ulkna continued to eye him as Trey took the few steps to the tent’s entrance. There, he unabashedly shoved down his sweatpants and toed off his socks, leaving him nude. Bending at the waist, Trey grabbed the tent zipper, and peering over his shoulder and flexing his ass cheeks in what he hoped was an enticing manner, he slowly unzipped the flap.

Seeing Ulkna’s gaze riveted to his ass, Trey grinned as he shoved the flap open.

“Come on,”

he urged again, slipping into the tent. When Ulkna moved to follow, Trey held up his

hand, palm out, to stop him. Then he used a forefinger to indicate all of him.

“No clothes in the tent, my mate.”

With a soft growl, Ulkna narrowed his eyes. Just as quickly, he began stripping.

Trey watched hungrily as Ulkna bared himself to his appreciative gaze. Easing to his knees, he held open the flap. Once a gorgeously naked Ulkna joined him, Trey made quick work of closing them inside and rolling out the sleeping bag.

Then Trey sprawled on it, beckoning Ulkna with a lifted hand and crooked fingers.

Ulkna settled next to him without hesitation, curling around him with an arm over his waist and his leg slung over his calves.

A relaxed, pleased sigh escaped Trey's lips as he curved his arm around Ulkna's shoulders and tucked him even closer. While he was the larger male, and his mate seemed more than happy to cuddle into him, he didn't kid himself into thinking he was the more dominant. After all, Trey remembered the way Ulkna had growled when he'd tried to put distance between them in the paddock earlier.

Because of that, Trey would always relish every chance he got to hold Ulkna. He hoped it was often. Having grown up with a pretty touchy-feely family, he'd missed the affection shown between them over the years of his semi-solitude.

Maybe my mate will be willing to give that to me.

The feel of Ulkna sliding his palm down his stomach drew Trey out of his thoughts. The scrape of his lover's fingernails along his treasure trail pulled a soft hum from his throat. When Ulkna bypassed his erection to cradle his balls, Trey groaned with bliss and spread his legs wider.

“You have about all eternity to stop doing that,”

Trey mumbled, reveling in the tingles that were spreading through his groin. Hearing Ulkna chuckle huskily, Trey grinned and sighed.

“Gods, love your petting.”

“Good,”

Ulkna rumbled, leaning up and placing licking, sucking kisses along his collarbone.

“Because I sure like petting you.”

Then he nipped over the skin where Ulkna had marked Trey, causing a fresh wave of tingles to spread over him, and his nipples beaded. Before Trey could find his tongue, Ulkna rolled his balls and crooned into his ear.

“But now I really need to know. Why does your horse form look like a gelding?”

Ulkna’s massaging felt so good, it took Trey a few heartbeats to process his mate’s question. When he did, he barked a soft laugh. Trey opened eyelids he hadn’t even realized he’d closed, and he grinned at Ulkna.

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

Trey teased the sensitive skin at the top of his mate’s ass crack and smirked.

“You wanna know about...my horse form?”

Grunting, Ulkna shifted his hips against him. Still, he muttered.

“Well, yeah.”

He frowned up at him.

“I’m curious.”

Trey couldn’t resist chuckling once more.

“It’s really not that interesting,”

he told his mate, but seeing the way Ulkna furrowed his brows, he let out a resigned sigh.

“Very well.”

Fighting through his arousal, Trey forced his brain to work.

“Do you know much about horse biology? Specifically, when we’re young colts?”

After a few seconds of hesitation, Ulkna shook his head.

“Not really. I never bred horses,”

he shared.

“Just trained them.”

Not surprised, Trey revealed.

“Well, for the first year or so of a colt’s life, they have the ability to suck their testicles into their body.”

Trey watched the way Ulkna's eyes rounded, and he chuckled.

"It's normally something a colt does as a fight or flight reflex. Something to keep them safe."

"Ooookay,"

Ulkna replied slowly, sounding uncertain. He skimmed his fingernails over Trey's ball sack. "And you?"

Trey fought back the heat that threatened to creep up his neck, and that time, it wasn't caused by arousal. After clearing his throat, he explained.

"I learned about that about a hundred years or so ago and found it fascinating. I wanted to know if I could figure out how to control those muscles."

Trey scoffed depreciatively.

"So, uh...it took months of practice, but I finally mastered it. I could pull my testicles up while in horse form, making me look like a gelding."

Peering down at Ulkna, Trey smiled wryly as he admitted.

"The skill never did me any good until this trail riding gig."

"Really?"

Ulkna released Trey's ball sack and began teasing a fingertip around the base of his erection, lightly tugging his pubes gently and causing Trey's gut to clench. "How so?"

The way Ulkna continued to play with his groin made it increasingly hard to focus.

“Insurance,”

Trey managed to mumble. He tightened his arms around his mate a bit before managing to relax again.

“Can’t insure a stallion for trail rides. Liability’s too high.”

When Ulkna skimmed his fingertips around his sack once more, Trey felt his cock jerk as pre-cum beaded at his slit. “Shit,”

he hissed, more than ready to move on from the conversation.

“Want you, damn it.”

Ulkna chuckled huskily as he squeezed Trey’s ball sack gently.

“Can you do it in human form?”

Trey let out a snort as amusement momentarily beat back his arousal. “No.”

Seeing his mate’s smirk and arched brow, he added.

“Totally different sort of anatomy.”

Nodding, Ulkna murmured.

“Makes sense.”

Then, evidently done with the conversation—thank the gods—Ulkna rolled and half

sprawled over Trey. He levered up a bit, sliding his free hand up so he could thread his fingers into Trey's hair. Using the hold, Ulkna held Trey's head in place as he captured Trey's mouth with his own.

Trey opened instantly, welcoming his mate's plundering kiss. Dueling with Ulkna's tongue, he lapped and suckled. He relished his lover's enthusiasm and shivered upon feeling his nipping caresses.

Flexing his fingers, Trey clutched Ulkna to him. The heat of his mate's body against his own caused his arousal to burn even hotter. His dick flexed and twitched at his groin, and the feel of Ulkna squeezing and jacking his cock caused him to groan into the other man's mouth.

Ulkna broke the kiss only to begin working down Trey's jaw and along his neck, leaving wet sucking kisses and light nips that left goose bumps in their wake.

"So responsive,"

Ulkna crooned, his voice low and rough.

"Love the noises you make."

Trey wouldn't have been able to stop the grunts, moans, and mutters of pleasure even if he'd wanted to. The feel of Ulkna's hand working his cock combined with his mate's mouth on him created a riot of sensations in his blood. The hairs on his neck stood on end, and his balls began to tighten.

"U-Ulkna,"

Trey whined, rocking into his strokes. "C-Close."

Growling in Trey's ear, Ulkna muttered, "Not yet."

Then his mate's hand on his cock was gone.

Before Trey could voice his dismay, Ulkna shimmied down his body. His fingers were replaced with his mate's hot, wet, sucking mouth. Trey's prick was surrounded by the sweetest suction, and he barked a cry as his hips bucked.

Ulkna gripped Trey's hips, forcing them down. He followed the move with his mouth, swallowing him to the root. His mate's throat muscles worked around Trey's crown, and a jolt of bliss rocked through him as his orgasm slammed into him. Trey poured burst after burst of seed down Ulkna's throat, and his mate took it all, continuing to suck and bob on his unloading prick.

Finally, Trey's dick grew too sensitive even as it still felt wonderful. He whined and shifted his hips, and Ulkna seemed to understand. His mate released his cock with a pop and grinned up at him, his hazel eyes dark with his satisfaction.

Trey panted harshly, trying to catch his breath, as he smiled back. He eyed Ulkna's smug expression, and his mate had every right to look that way. The man had damn blown his mind.

"I want to fuck you so bad right now, Trey,"

Ulkna declared gruffly. His nostrils flared as he rubbed his chin along the side of Trey's damp shaft.

"And I sure hope you're a switch, because afterward"—Ulkna paused to flick out his tongue, teasing at Trey's sensitive crown—"I want this beauty in my ass."

Moaning in anticipation, Trey nodded.

“Hell, yeah.”

Ulkna grinned broadly, then popped the cap on a bottle of lube. Where it had come from, Trey didn't know, and he didn't care. Spreading his legs, all he cared about was getting Ulkna's long, slender prick into his ass as swiftly as possible.

With the way Ulkna quickly began to prepare him, Trey figured his mate was of the same mind, and he was more than on board with that.

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Ulkna pressed a second lubed finger into Trey's channel, stretching the shifter swiftly. His erection throbbed, and his balls ached. He feared he would come before he even managed to get inside his lover.

Been so fucking long.

Even with the taste of Trey on his tongue, Ulkna's mouth watered for more. Only realizing his mate had begun to feel uncomfortable had made him stop sucking the man's delicious prick. He'd tasted so good, and he'd been the perfect mouthful.

Ulkna had always enjoyed giving head, and he had the sneaking suspicion that sucking Trey would quickly become a favorite pastime.

Won't mind that a bit...bet he won't either.

Sliding a third finger into Trey, Ulkna refocused his attention on readying his lover. The tight, wet heat called to him. His body felt primed, and he shivered with need. Ulkna burned to bury his erection as deeply inside his mate as humanly possible.

"I'm ready, damn it,"

Trey declared, using his grip on Ulkna's upper arms to try to urge him up. "Take me."

Only too happy to go along with that demand, Ulkna nodded as he eased his fingers out of Trey's chute. He knee-walked forward while gripping his erection, spreading the remaining lube along his length. Ulkna paused between Trey's spread thighs and

rested his weight on his left hand as he used his right to guide his cock head to his mate's stretched hole.

Ulkna pecked a light kiss to Trey's lips before softly urging.

"Push out, my mate."

Lowering his head, he nuzzled his temple against his lover's.

"Let me in."

His body practically vibrated with anticipation.

"Push,"

Trey encouraged, slinging his right leg around Ulkna's upper thighs. Exerting pressure, he urged him forward as he huskily whispered.

"Get that hard dick in me."

With a moan, Ulkna did as requested. He pushed. He hissed when Trey's guardian muscle gave way, and his cock head slipped inside his mate's passage. Zings of blissful fire shot down his cock, making his balls ache, and they threatened to tighten embarrassingly fast.

Gritting his teeth, Ulkna thrust, sinking deeper. He froze for a heartbeat, taking a shaky breath, hoping to center himself. Once Ulkna felt as if he had the slightest semblance of control, he eased backward a little before reversing. In one long, steady glide, he buried himself as deeply as possible.

When Ulkna's balls pressed against Trey's ass crack, he stilled and reveled in the

exquisite heat encasing his erection. A shudder worked through him as he fought his body's need for release. His breath came in raspy pants as he reached between them and gripped Trey's hard cock.

"Tell me I can move,"

Ulkna grunted out. Sweat popped out on his brow as he fought for control. With his body shaking, he pleaded.

"Pleeeeeease."

"Fucking move,"

Trey demanded, rocking up to grind his ass against Ulkna's groin.

"Fuck me, damn it."

Letting out a whine of relief, Ulkna eased his cock nearly all the way out. He immediately reversed direction and slammed back into his mate. Ulkna moaned Trey's name as he began pounding into his lover, unable to stop now that he'd started.

"You feel soooo good,"

Ulkna moaned.

"So damn good."

Ulkna's gut clenched, and his body felt on fire as his control waned. He did his best to strip Trey's prick in time with his thrusts, but with his brain fritzing out from the ecstasy coursing through his system, he wasn't certain he succeeded. Just as Ulkna

feared he would tumble over the edge before he'd satisfied his lover, he heard Trey's bark of pleasure, felt his chute clench around him, and the way his body jolted beneath him.

The scent of Trey's seed filled the confines of the tent, yanking Ulkna over the edge. Slamming deep, he groaned deeply as his balls squeezed up to his body in exquisite bliss. His senses soared, and spots danced across his vision. His cock pulsed as he poured burst after burst of seed into his lover.

"My mate,"

Trey murmured, his tone full of possessiveness that thrilled Ulkna to the bone.

Then Ulkna felt it, the touch of Trey's teeth on the flesh where his neck met his shoulder. On instinct, he tipped his head to the side. His mate took that as the invitation it was, and he sank his canines into his flesh.

Ulkna cried out as bliss-inducing tingles swamped through him. When his second orgasm hit, he moaned with the ecstasy of it. His mouth watered, and his snake urged him to return the favor.

Mirroring Trey's position, Ulkna did just that. He sank his teeth into his lover's flesh. The sweet iron-rich flavor of Trey's blood flowed across his tongue. As Ulkna swallowed one mouthful, then sucked for a second, his snake hissed in his mind, and he completely agreed.

Mine. My mate. He's all mine.

Once his brain came back online, Ulkna eased his teeth free of Trey's flesh. He licked over the bite mark, admiring the snake-like fang scar. A sense of possessive pride swelled through him, and Ulkna couldn't help but smile.

“Feeling smug, my mate?”

Trey asked in a teasing tone.

Ulkna lifted his head and met Trey’s gaze. Seeing an answering look of satisfaction in his mate’s deep brown eyes, he grinned.

“As if you’re not.”

Craning his neck a little, Ulkna tried to see the claiming scar Trey had left on his neck, but he couldn’t seem to get the angle right.

“Wish I had a mirror.”

Trey chuckled. Lifting his head, he bussed a soft kiss to Ulkna’s flesh, to the scar, sending a wash of tingles up his neck. When he lowered his head, Trey winked at him.

“It’s there.”

“Hell, yeah, it is,”

Ulkna replied breathlessly. With a scoff, he muttered, “Wow.”

Ulkna dipped his head and pressed a languorous, sipping kiss to Trey’s mouth. Feeling the drying cum between them begin to itch, he brought it to an end. He couldn’t help but stare at his lover for a few more heartbeats, just admiring the handsome, larger male. Trey was just too damn good-looking—well-muscled and rugged, tanned and tone.

“You’re something else, Trey,”

Ulkna purred as he eased his softening prick from his mate's chute.

"I'm so damn blessed."

"I feel the same,"

Trey assured, teasing his fingertips along Ulkna's spine, as if he couldn't get enough of touching him.

Ulkna didn't mind that one little bit. It'd been decades since he'd had anyone touch him in such a way, with kindness and affection. Ulkna figured he was the definition of touch-starved, and he knew the man Fate had brought him would help fix that.

"Let me get something to clean us up with,"

Ulkna stated, needing to care for his mate. With a wink, he added.

"Then we'll cuddle and talk while regaining our strength so you can fuck me."

Trey chuckled, just as Ulkna had hoped.

"Well, you certainly won't have to twist my arm for that."

Laughing too, his heart feeling light, Ulkna exited the tent to track down some cleaning supplies.

"I'll be waiting at the paddocks when you get done this evening,"

Ulkna assured as he walked with Trey through the trees. The rising sun's rays barely filtered through the trees, but his shifter vision made the going easy. With a chuckle, Ulkna admitted.

“It’ll be a hell of a wait.”

Now that Ulkna had found and bonded with his mate, he hated the idea of being separated from him for any length of time, let alone ten-plus hours.

It won’t always be like this.

Even as Ulkna gave himself that mental reminder, Trey squeezed his fingers where they held hands.

“I’ll be missing you, too, my mate,”

Trey told him with an understanding smile. After a second of hesitation, he added.

“But it won’t be for much longer.”

Ulkna wasn’t certain if Trey was referring to his job as a trail horse or not. Their future was the one thing they hadn’t discussed. By some unspoken agreement, they’d both steered clear of that subject.

We have time.

“We have time to figure all that out, Trey.”

Ulkna repeated his thought, doing his best to reassure his lover.

“Nothing has to be decided today.”

Spending the evening with Trey, listening to his stories, Ulkna had realized just how important family was to his mate. His parents were still alive, and he was in touch with most of his nieces and nephews. His great niece and nephew, on Trey’s nephew

Colton's side, had known him as their regular uncle, since Colton had chosen not to share shifters with his wife and children. As a human who fell in love with a human not in the know, Colton had seen no reason to introduce the world of the paranormals to them.

Trey had been saddened, but he understood. The human life span was so much shorter than a shifter's.

Instead, Trey would watch Colton's son and daughter grow up through pictures with the occasional chat with his great-nephew. With the rest of the family, he made a point of seeing them as regularly as his trail mount schedule allowed. Reagan helped a great deal, aiding him in keeping his secret and still being able to see family.

"What are you going to be doing today?"

Trey asked, changing the subject.

Yup. He's not ready, either.

"I figure I'll—"

Hearing raised voices as they approached the paddocks, he snapped his mouth shut and listened.

"Who the hell would do this? And why?"

"How the hell should I know?"

another man answered gruffly.

Ulkna didn't recognize the voices, so he turned his attention to Trey and arched a

brow in silent question.

“That’s Silas and Dwayne, two of the wranglers,”

Trey told him, pulling away and starting to strip.

“I don’t know why they’re here so early.”

Realizing their time was at an end, Ulkna placed the backpack on the ground and opened it. He took Trey’s clothes. As he shoved them into the pack, he listened to the guys’ continued conversation.

“I’ll call the cops,”

the first man stated, his voice heavy.

“Down four horses. Can we still accommodate our scheduled rides? Or do I need to run to the ranch?”

“Yeah, today’s scheduled rides are pretty light, but we probably won’t be able to accommodate any big walk-up groups,”

the other man replied, sounding resigned.

“Can’t believe this shit happened. I’ll pull the security footage.”

“Security footage?”

Ulkna whispered, alarmed.

What if they’d seen Trey shift the night before?

“I know where the blind spots are.”

Trey gave Ulkna’s hand a squeeze before lowering to a crouch.

“No one ever sees.”

Ulkna nodded once, then frowned.

“Someone stole some of your horses?”

Trey shrugged.

“Guess so.”

Then his mate began to shift. Fur sprouted on his skin as his body expanded. The sounds of muscles popping, bones snapping, and tendons cracking filled the air, and Ulkna winced, hoping the wranglers wouldn’t hear it. Trey’s head reshaped as his tail and mane sprouted, and Ulkna admired his horse form.

He really is a handsome animal.

“Hey, what’s that noise?”

one of the guys asked.

“Shit,”

Ulkna mumbled. Whipping off his belt, he wrapped it around Trey’s newly formed neck. He slipped the tab into one of the holes so it wouldn’t tighten, then he hung onto the tail end as if it was a make-shift lead rope. When Trey’s big brown eye focused on him, Ulkna told him.

“I think they’re coming this way. Let’s wing it.”

Trey gave him a horsey nod, then began following him docilly as Ulkna led him through the trees.

One way or another, Ulkna would see what was going on.

Exiting the trees, Ulkna began rounding the paddocks with Trey in tow. He spotted the pair of men. One of them was on the phone, and the other was frowning in his direction. His eyes widened when he saw them, and he smacked the other guy’s stomach before heading toward Ulkna and Trey.

“Morning, guys,”

Ulkna greeted, heading their way.

“Uh, I found this guy wandering the woods near where I was camping this morning.”

Doing his best to smile harmlessly, Ulkna shrugged.

“I remembered riding him yesterday. Must have an escape artist on your hands.”

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Trey was pretty sure he wasn't the only one who spotted the way Dwayne narrowed his eyes in disbelief.

“Well, thank you.”

The dark-haired wrangler stepped forward and held out his hand, obviously asking for the end of the belt.

“Didn't think there were any campgrounds in the area.”

Ulkna scoffed as he shook his head.

“Naw, there aren't,”

he replied, grinning. Clearly unabashed, he claimed.

“One of the guys' motorcycles broke down, so we wheeled it into the woods. Then a few of us camped out to make certain nothing happened to it while the rest headed to town to source out parts.”

Handing over his belt end, Ulkna indicated Trey.

“He's a friendly guy, so wasn't too hard to catch.”

“So, uh, we're only down three, officer,”

Silas stated into the phone.

“Yeah, one was just returned to us.”

After a pause, he added.

“By a guy who took a trail ride with us yesterday. Said he found him wandering and recognized him.”

Silas listened to whatever the officer on the phone was saying to him before turning his attention to Ulkna.

“The officer wants to know if you can stick around until they get someone out here, give a statement, then show us where you found our horse.”

“Yeah, sure,”

Ulkna agreed, sounding amicable.

“I’ll just need to phone my friends so they know what’s keeping me, but I’m happy to help.”

His brows furrowed as he glanced around the group, feigning ignorance.

“You’re missing more than just this handsome guy?”

Ulkna rubbed a hand over Trey’s neck affectionately.

Trey didn’t want to be led away from his mate, yet, and balked. Turning, he nuzzled Ulkna’s shoulder.

Ulkna chuckled and rubbed his forehead.

“Like I said. He’s a friendly fellow.”

Then he furrowed his brows, and his expression turned thoughtful.

“You know, I thought I heard a bit of a commotion down the road a piece from where me and the guys were camped out.”

Crossing his arms, Ulkna hummed.

“That was about...two AM.”

Trey wondered if that was true, but had no way to ask. At that moment, he suddenly had the odd wish that his mate was a vampire instead of a fellow shifter. If he had been, they would’ve ended up having a mind-link upon bonding, giving them the ability to speak telepathically with each other.

Immediately, a bit of guilt hit him.

Never mind. My mate is perfect just the way he is.

Hell, Trey would never second-guess Fate.

Silas had hung up the phone and tapped the back of his hand against Dwayne’s chest.

“Hey, maybe that’s where they were taken to be loaded.”

Turning his attention to Ulkna, Silas asked.

“Think you can show us where you found Bubba? Bet he got away from the thieves, and that’s how you ended up finding him.”

Silas kept adding to his line of thinking.

“Maybe we can find the direction they were taking them.”

Looking dubious, Dwayne asked.

“What would be the point of that?”

Shrugging, Silas muttered.

“Maybe we could get an idea of about the size of the trailer or something.”

“Right.”

Dwayne scoffed.

“You do that.”

He pointed back at the corrals.

“I’ll be right here getting ready for the first ride and waiting for the police.”

Then Dwayne began urging Trey forward once more. Following, he tipped his head a bit to watch those they were leaving.

Silas grimaced, appearing uncertain.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Reagan called, trotting toward them.

“You guys are here early.”

“I woke up and checked our security cameras, same as I do every morning,”

Dwayne told him, frowning.

“Saw a number of horses missing.”

Pointing his thumb over his shoulder at Trey, he continued.

“Saw that this end paddock was empty.”

Dwayne frowned in the empty paddock’s direction.

“Didn’t realize you put Bubba in with Glen, Pixie, and Shirley.”

Trey knew he was referring to the trio—a gelding and two mares, respectively—that typically occupied that paddock each evening.

“Damn,”

Reagan muttered, frowning. He glanced between Ulkna and Trey and back again.

“Uh.”

His attention snagged on the belt around Trey’s neck, causing his eyebrows to lift a notch.

“Uh, and I’m sorry. You look familiar, but—”

Reagan’s voice ended in a clear question.

Obviously, Trey's nephew had no idea how to finish that without giving away the fact that he knew exactly who Ulkna was.

"I'm Ulkna,"

his mate jumped in, holding out his hand.

"Was here yesterday."

As Reagan shook his hand while nodding once, Ulkna continued.

"Spotted this fella and returned him."

"Oh. Okay."

Reagan was clearly at a loss for words.

"He's willing to show us where,"

Silas commented, his expression still troubled, and he no longer sounded so confident about his idea.

"But we need to get ready for the day, and...maybe I should be here since I'm the one who called the cops."

"I'll go with him,"

Reagan stated, pivoting. As he began jogging toward the barn, he called over his shoulder.

"I'll grab a halter for Bubba. We'll ride bareback and double on him. It'll be

quicker.”

Trey was pleased by that plan and happily acquiesced to Dwayne’s light tug on the end of Ulkna’s belt.

“I’ll start feeding,”

Silas stated and began throwing hay to the remaining waiting horses.

“I’m going to see if the security footage saved,”

Dwayne stated, handing the belt to Ulkna.

“Maybe it’ll show something.”

Reagan nodded as he returned with a halter and lead rope.

“Keep me posted,”

he ordered as he slipped the halter over Trey’s head and buckled it into place.

“And I’ll let you know if we find anything.”

Then Reagan handed Ulkna his belt, and he quickly threaded it through the loops around his waist.

Dwayne grunted, but that wasn’t anything new. The wrangler really wasn’t much of a morning person. With him out there so early, Trey was surprised he wasn’t carrying a massive travel mug of coffee.

It was a good thing Trey had never bothered developing a taste for the fragrant drink.

With him living as a horse, he probably would've really missed it. Instead, he was more than happy with the bucket of lemon water Reagan offered him every day.

Mmmmmm...lemonade.

The feel of Reagan tossing the lead rope over his neck returned Trey's attention to where it should be—the paddocks and the missing horses. His nephew had tied the end of the lead rope through the opposite side of the halter, creating make-shift reins. It wasn't as if Trey was going to try to run off or anything.

Noting the way Reagan gripped his mane near his withers, Trey squared up his legs, readying himself. With a bounce and swing, his nephew leaped onto his back. He settled himself, using his thighs to squeeze lightly to secure his position.

Then Reagan reached down with his left hand. Without hesitation, Ulkna gripped Reagan—their hands clasping each other's forearms—and jumped up behind him. Trey felt Ulkna shift his weight a little, apparently finding a comfortable position.

“Ready,”

Ulkna muttered.

Obviously taking him at his word, Reagan squeezed Trey's sides with his calves as he used the lead rope like reins and asked him to turn toward the far paddock and the forest. Trey began walking. Easily handling the weight of the men, he felt the way they moved with him, and if he'd been in human form, he would have smiled.

Ulkna definitely hadn't been kidding about his horsemanship abilities. His mate moved with him with ease. Reagan did as well, but Ulkna had taken his nephew on rides plenty of times, and he was familiar with the man's movements.

Trey didn't even bother waiting for Reagan's signal and began trotting, taking them back the way he and Ulkna had so recently come.

Once they were a distance into the trees, Reagan asked.

"You wanna tell me what the hell is going on, Ulkna?"

As Trey jogged through the woods, Ulkna explained the little bit they knew. Once back near their campsite, he slowed to a walk. The sound of several guys chatting could be heard through the trees.

"Why am I up this early?"

Payson whined, sounding grumpy as hell.

"I wanted morning sex with Land."

"I need you to track Ulkna and Trey,"

Sam responded, sounding a little exasperated, as if he'd already explained once.

"We need to know—"

"No tracking necessary,"

Payson grumbled, cutting in.

"They're right—"

His words were cut off by the distinctive sound of a yawn.

When Trey entered the small clearing, which still contained their tent, he watched as a grumpy-looking Payson lowered his hand from his mouth, having obviously finished yawning.

Trey would have laughed had he been in human form.

“Ulkna,”

Sam rumbled, striding toward where Trey stopped.

“I received a call from Alpha Kontra. He says Vail and Draven overheard chatter on the police band about a cop being dispatched to the trail guide business.”

The man’s frown caused Sam’s scarred cheek to twist oddly as he asked.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Stolen horses,”

Ulkna revealed, slipping from Trey’s back to land on his feet.

“Not this one,”

he added, snickering as he patted Trey’s flank.

“Any of the guys hear a commotion last night?”

“Let’s go ask.”

Sam glanced at Trey and ordered.

“Shift and come,”

before pivoting and heading toward the trees.

As soon as Reagan slipped from his back, Trey began to shift. He'd just finished changing form when a pair of sweatpants were being dangled in front of his face. Lifting his gaze, Trey found Ulkna standing before him, holding them, and the other three men were heading away from them.

Grinning, Trey swiped the sweats from Ulkna's fingers. “Thanks.”

He quickly yanked them on before pecking a kiss to his thoughtful mate's lips.

Ulkna winked as he grabbed Trey's hand and threaded their fingers together.

“Wasn't totally altruistic,”

he admitted as he led the way after the others.

“Didn't want to share the view any more than necessary.”

“I get it.”

Trey squeezed Ulkna's hand in understanding.

“You're a coral snake, so not real big, right?”

Seeing his mate nod, he smirked and told him.

“I guess I got lucky then.”

Arching a brow, Ulkna asked.

“How do you mean?”

Trey grinned at his clearly confused mate.

“Well, I’ll only have to worry about your nudity when you shift back to human form.”

Raking his lover with a lascivious gaze, he pointed out.

“You can shift while clothed and slither out.”

To Trey’s pleasure, Ulkna barked a laugh as he nodded.

“True enough.”

Reaching the secluded area where the rest of the group had camped for the night, Trey peered around at the men milling about. Some were tending fires, while others prepared food and drink. A few more were taking down their tents and cleaning up their supplies.

All in all, the group appeared to be keeping everything tidy.

Trey bet that when they were done, there would be little to no trace of them having been there.

Huh. A conscientious shifter gang.

Sam was already calling attention to himself, sharing about the missing horses. Everyone exchanged glances even as they continued with their tasks when Sam asked

if anyone had heard anything during the night. After a minute, Ryan rose from near a fire, holding a...teapot.

“Uh, yeah, actually,”

Ryan claimed, his dark brows furrowing.

“I did. Around about three-fifteen this morning.”

Looking concerned, Sam asked.

“Having trouble sleeping?”

“Not due to dreams, handsome,”

Ryan replied with a warm smile, obviously catching on to Sam’s concern. Then he shrugged, his expression turning wry.

“Just had to piss.”

Clearly relieved, Sam headed to his human mate and slipped his arm around his waist.

“Okay. What did you hear, babe?”

Ryan blew out a quiet breath, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the teapot.

“Well...there was a bit of thumping and some snuffling of animals,”

he began. He absently thanked Yuma, who handed him a metal mug. As Ryan poured the tea into the cup, he added.

“Then I heard what sounded like a couple of different voices on the wind, followed by the sound of a diesel engine.”

Handing off the teapot to Lamar, Ryan used his cup to point east.

“The noise came from that direction.”

Sam nodded. “Okay.”

He pecked a kiss to Ryan’s temple as his human took a tentative sip of his drink. Then he glanced around the group.

“Payson and Ryan, you’re with me.”

Sam pointed in Trey’s direction.

“You three, come with us. Let’s see what we can find.”

As everyone began to move, the beta scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Reuben, as long as Lamar doesn’t mind, you can come, too.”

The human in question grinned broadly and, after pecking a kiss to Lamar’s lips, began shoveling his breakfast into his mouth.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Between Payson's nose and the tracks in the dirt, it didn't take them long to locate where the horses had been loaded into a trailer. The ballsy thieves were only a couple of miles away from where the gang had camped.

If Ulkna hadn't been so exhausted from making love and bonding with Trey, he figured he would've heard them, too.

The problem was, with it having been done hours before in the middle of the night, Ulkna was sort of in Dwayne's corner. Just what the hell were they supposed to do with the information? While Ulkna could guess that the truck and trailer had been pointed in the direction they were headed, there was no guarantee they hadn't turned around. Plus, how could they locate their destination beyond that?

"Now what?"

Trey asked softly, clearly wondering the same thing.

Payson tipped his head back and inhaled deeply.

"They used a stock trailer,"

he declared, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets.

"No storm or breeze last night. The air's pretty stagnant."

The hyena shifter focused on Sam.

“The smell of horse hide’s still pretty heavy in the air.”

“Can you track them?”

the big beta asked.

Grinning broadly, Payson waggled his brows.

“Does a bear fuck in the woods?”

Sam rolled his eyes.

“Not how the expression goes,”

he grumbled, turning back toward where a few of them had parked their bikes.

“Let’s go.”

Ulkna led the way to Lamar’s borrowed Goldwing. The peacock shifter had stayed behind with Yuma and Land. The trio were finishing packing up their stuff. Ryan swung up behind Sam, having left his motorcycle behind so they would have transportation to take their supplies to the rest of Kontra’s gang in town.

Since Ulkna was the smaller of the pair, he swung up behind Trey. He was more than happy to hang onto his handsome horse shifter as they cruised down the road. They followed behind the others, Payson in the lead sans helmet, with his head tilted, obviously tracking.

Honestly, it was the slowest Ulkna had ever seen the speed-loving hyena shifter ride his bullet bike.

They'd been traveling along the windy road for nearly an hour when Payson slowed to a stop...right in the middle of the road. Lifting his nose, he inhaled deeply. A frown creased his features.

"Lose the trail?"

Sam asked, sounding concerned.

"Maybe a crosswind took it out?"

Obviously, the beta was trying to be understanding.

Huffing in annoyance, Payson grumbled.

"Stay here, guys."

He growled under his breath as he declared with a snarl.

"I'll find it again."

Ulkna relaxed on the backrest as Trey followed the other guys' lead and wheeled them to the side of the road. He watched Payson gun his bike's engine and streak down the road for a couple of hundred feet. Then the hyena shifter tipped his bike left, stuck out a foot, and swept his rear end around in a one-eighty before racing back toward them, his engine roaring uncomfortably in Ulkna's ears.

"How is that shifter not deaf?"

Trey muttered, tugging his helmet off to rub his ears.

"Not a clue,"

Ulkna replied, peering over his shoulder to watch Payson.

The hyena shifter slowed and began weaving all over the two-lane road. He swerved from one side to the other. It was a damn good thing there wasn't any traffic so early in the morning.

Finally, Payson stopped nearly a hundred yards behind them and got off his bike. He stalked toward a closed yellow gate—the kind parks and recreation employees used to access federal land not open to the public for one reason or another. Standing before it, Payson took a deep breath. With a clearly pleased grin, he looked back toward them and pointed down the narrow gravel road.

The group U-turned and drove to the closed gate.

“Any idea where this leads?”

Sam asked, turning to glance between Trey and Reagan.

Trey shook his head.

“No, sorry.”

His mate looked at Reagan, who was seated behind Hunter.

“Any ideas?”

Reagan opened his mouth, then closed it again. Furrowing his brows, he cocked his head, clearly thinking. Finally, he stated hesitantly.

“If this is the access road I think it is, then there's nowhere for them to go down there.”

Reagan scowled as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“This accesses a staging area that’s used by maintenance crews to keep a section of hiking trails cleared.”

“Why would it be closed?”

Sam asked what Ulkna was wondering.

“You sure there’s no other outlet?”

“Well, they closed all those hiking trails due to the archaeological dig.”

Reagan pointed further down the road.

“That’s accessed by a road five miles up that way.”

Shaking his head, Reagan confirmed.

“And nope. One way in and out.”

“Could they access the archaeological dig by horseback from here?”

Hunter asked, peering over his shoulder at Reagan.

“Well, sure,”

Reagan replied.

“But why when there’s a perfectly good road that leads right to it that way?”

He pointed up the road again, clearly confused.

Huh. Trey's nephew has such a good heart.

"Is the road into the dig monitored?"

Ulkna asked, arching a brow pointedly.

Reagan frowned.

"Yes, of course."

Groaning, Sam obviously caught on to what Ulkna was suggesting.

"Guys that steal horses aren't above stealing priceless artifacts."

Waving a big hand toward the gate, he added.

"And if this is supposed to be locked, no one is going to suspect that this is where they took the horses."

Ryan nodded slowly, obviously following his mate's logic.

"All they have to do is wait a day or so for the police activity to die down. Then they load whatever they want onto the horses, bring it back up here, and drive away with it."

"Is the gate open?"

Sam asked Payson.

Payson inspected the gate. He even gave it a little jerk for good measure. Then he shook his head. “Locked.”

“There’s an inside man,”

Ryan surmised.

“Could be,”

Hunter agreed.

“Or someone with light fingers.”

Reagan scowled.

“Light fingers?”

Ulkna smiled.

“A pickpocket,”

he explained. Going further, he added.

“Or someone suave and skilled enough to lift them from a semi-secure park ranger cabin or office.”

“Well, best go and see if we’re right,”

Sam stated, turning to help Ryan from the bike. Then he glanced around, hesitating.

“We need somewhere to hide the bikes. If anyone comes around here, we don’t want

to make it obvious someone's looking into the area."

Pointing up the road, Reagan told them.

"There's a hiking trailhead in that direction. You could park them there."

Payson frowned as he cocked his head.

"Didn't you say the trails in this stretch of the canyon were closed?"

Reagan nodded even as he explained.

"This trail heads away from the canyon into boulder country."

He pointed at the tall bluffs behind them.

"The trail leads to a viewpoint that offers a stunning panoramic view. Great for photos."

"Sounds like a plan."

Sam began wheeling his motorcycle back onto the road.

"Payson, get on your bike unless you want Ryan to drive it."

Even as Payson's eyes rounded in clear dismay, Ryan rubbed his hands together, his expression turning gleeful, as he took a step toward the hyena shifter's bright yellow bullet bike.

"No, no."

Payson rushed back to his motorcycle and swung aboard.

“I’m comin’.”

Ryan tipped his head back and laughed.

Sam smirked as Hunter chuckled.

Even Ulkna couldn’t help but chortle a little. He’d never heard of anyone else riding the man’s bike. Clearly, he wasn’t a fan of sharing the powerful machine.

“Ryan, stay here with Ulkna and Reagan,”

Sam ordered, waving toward the closed gate.

“Stay under cover. We’ll be back as quickly as we can.”

Ulkna didn’t like being separated from Trey, but it wasn’t as if he could go against the gang beta. After swinging off the Goldwing, he pulled off his helmet. He held it in one hand while cradling Trey’s nape with the other and leaning in for a kiss.

It was a little awkward since Trey was still wearing his helmet, but Ulkna didn’t care. He slipped his tongue into his mate’s mouth and took his time. It wasn’t until a couple of the guys chuckled that Ulkna brought the kiss to an end.

“Aww...newly mated shifters,”

Payson teased, snickering while grinning broadly.

“As if you’re not like that with Land every second of the day,”

Ryan pointed out as he slung what was clearly a gun case over his shoulder.

“And you’ve been mated for years.”

Where the hell had he been carrying that on the motorcycle?

Land just grinned unabashedly as he brought his bike roaring to life.

“See you shortly,”

Sam claimed before leading the way in the direction Reagan had indicated.

A second later, Trey took the lead, having probably shared that he knew the trailhead Reagan had indicated.

Once the five bikes were out of sight, Ulkna followed Ryan around the gate. He ducked into some trees off to the side, found a rock, and settled in to wait. Appearing ill at ease, Reagan parked his ass on a rock nearby. Ryan decided to find a sturdy tree and shimmied up, perching on a forked limb, clearly keeping a look-out.

“So, uh...you think grave robbers stole our horses?”

Reagan asked quietly.

“Maybe,”

Ulkna replied, unwilling to commit without having more information.

“Why?”

“There’s a lot of money in archaeological artifacts,”

Ryan commented from above them.

“Even without provenance.”

“Provenance?”

Reagan looked up at the ex-military human, his brows scrunching in obvious confusion.

“What’s that?”

“Paperwork that proves where it came from,”

Ryan explained.

“It’s meant to authenticate it.”

“Oh.”

Frowning, Reagan glanced between them.

“Well, shouldn’t we call the cops then?”

“This is just a hunch,”

Ryan told him.

“No proof.”

Then he scoffed before adding.

“Plus, how the hell would we explain how we came up with our theory of the horse trailer being taken down here?”

Peering down at Reagan, Ryan gave him a wolfish grin.

“A little hard to explain that our hyena shifter friend has a nose better than a bloodhound and could smell the horses even as he drove his motorcycle.”

Reagan’s eyes widened.

“Hyena! That guy’s a hyena?”

“Yup,”

Ryan quipped back.

That was when Ulkna realized that he hadn’t actually told Trey what any of the gang members shifted into. Hiding a grimace, he hoped his mate didn’t have a problem running with predators. Of course, Payson was more likely to bounce around Trey’s legs like a playful puppy than to attempt harm.

“Huh.”

Reagan eyed Ulkna, then Ryan.

“So...what are you guys?”

Trey’s nephew winced, and a pink hue began to creep up his neck and into his cheeks.

“I know it’s bad form to ask that sort of thing, but since you guys were sharing, I

figured—”

Reagan paused and waved his hand as if uncertain how to finish that thought.

Ulkna scoffed lightly as Ryan offered a reassuring smile.

“We don’t mind,”

the beta’s mate assured.

“It’s okay when you’re amidst friends.”

Pointing to his own chest, Ulkna shared.

“I share my psyche with a coral snake.”

He pointed up at the tree.

“Ryan’s human.”

“A c-coral snake?”

Reagan stiffened and even leaned a little away from him, eyeing him askance.

“Really?”

Not taking offense, Ulkna smirked at him.

“Not a fan of snakes?”

Grimacing, Reagan shook his head.

“Was bit by a rattler a couple of years ago.”

His cheeks darkened even further.

“Made me a little leery of them.”

Ulkna nodded.

“Understandable. Venomous snake bites hurt.”

Then he grinned broadly.

“Or so I’ve heard.”

Reagan nodded as he mumbled, “Sure do.”

The sound of hooves beating the dirt drew Ulkna’s attention to the road. Before he could spot what was making the sound, Ryan chuckled.

“Well, now,”

he murmured dryly.

“There’s somethin’ ya don’t see every day.”

When the group came into view around the bend, Ulkna had to agree.

Sam, Trey, and Payson were in animal form and were jogging steadily toward them—loping and bouncing in Payson’s case. Reuben rode Sam’s large, Texas longhorn bull, whooping with a hand in the air as if he was bull riding. If a bull could appear exasperated, Sam was pulling it off nicely.

Hunter sat atop Trey's quarter horse form. His shoulders were tense, his body stiff, and he was holding onto Trey's mane in a white-knuckled grip as if his life depended on it. The man had even caught his bottom lip between his teeth.

While Ulkna had heard that Hunter was trained as a large animal vet before joining the gang, and he'd claimed to know how to ride, that knowledge evidently didn't extend to going bareback.

Ryan chuckled as he jumped down from the tree.

"Lookin' good there, handsome,"

he told Sam's bull as the large animal stopped next to him. He even pecked a kiss to the beast's snout before looking up at Reuben.

"Slide back, man. I'm getting in front of ya."

As Reuben obeyed, Ulkna eyed their make-shift transportation and shook his head.

"No sense either of you trying to carry three of us. I'll shift and curl up on Payson's back."

With a smirk at the startled-looking hyena, he challenged.

"You won't mind carrying me in shifted form, right?"

After a second of hesitation, Payson cackle-yipped before easing to his belly, obviously accepting the dare.

Ulkna grinned back, told Reagan to hand Reuben his clothes, seeing as he was wearing a backpack, and shifted.

“Well, it’s no longer just a guess,”

Ryan commented dryly, his voice coming out so soft Trey barely heard him, even with his shifter hearing.

“Nope,”

Ulkna muttered from next to him.

Crouched behind a number of boulders, Trey watched with the group as silhouettes moved beyond the thick fabric tent siding. They appeared to be putting items into storage crates or bags. It was tough to tell.

What was obvious, however, were the three trail mounts tied to a make-shift high-line someone had strung between that tent and another. They each were kitted out with packhorse rigging, clearly waiting for whatever crates or bags the pair in the tent were filling.

“Hurry up, Mark,”

one of the men urged.

“I wanna be out of here within the hour.”

“Keep your voice down, Perry,”

the second man ordered, his voice quite a bit softer.

“Don’t want the guard to hear you.”

The first man, Perry, scoffed.

“Don’t worry about Barny. Guy’s half deaf.”

His tone turned amused as he continued.

“When one of the other grad students asked him about it, Barny laughed it off, saying he’d gone to too many rock concerts in his twenties.”

The men’s conversation turned to the artifacts they were packing up, and Trey turned to stare at Reagan in shock.

“Tell me that’s not Mark’s voice.”

Reagan appeared just as shell-shocked.

“I-I just don’t believe it.”

Whether or not his nephew believed it became a moot point when Mark strode out of the tent, followed by another man. They each held the end of a crate, holding the pair between them. Mark led the way to the horses, approaching Shirley first—the calmest of the trio.

They placed the first crate on the left side of the rig, where Mark strapped it into place. Then, with each man holding onto the rig’s X-bar to keep the uneven load from sliding, they lifted the second crate. After strapping that one down on the second side, Mark adjusted the straps.

Trey imagined he was checking for tightness and balance. Once Mark seemed

satisfied, they headed back into the tent.

“Time to call the police,”

Reagan insisted. He pulled out his cell phone, turned it on, and cussed under his breath.

“No service.”

“They may be using a signal jammer, just in case the guard does catch onto their activities.”

Ryan scowled as he muttered.

“I noticed ski masks hanging out of their back pockets, so they’re prepared to cover their faces.”

“I’ll take it up,”

Payson offered, tugging off the jeans he’d donned—as had all the shifters.

“I’m fastest.”

“Yeah, but they’re our missing horses. Our responsibility,”

Reagan declared, indicating between him and Trey.

“The cops are going to want to talk to me.”

He must have noticed Payson’s dubious expression, for his tone turned mutinous.

“I can call the guys and find out if the cop that was supposed to arrive is still there.”

Before Payson could counter, Sam stated.

“Okay. I’ll carry you up. Payson, you can accompany us.”

He lowered his voice to a whisper as he focused on Ryan and ordered.

“Stall them if they look like they’re getting ready to make their getaway.”

Ryan nodded. “Will do.”

Leaning over, he pecked a kiss on the big beta’s lips.

“Be careful.”

Sam scoffed.

“I have the easy job.”

As he shoved off his jeans, he looked around at everyone.

“You all be careful.”

Then Sam and Payson disappeared up the trail, Reagan following. As soon as they were out of sight, Trey heard the faint sounds of bones snapping and muscles popping, telling him they’d shifted. Once the noises faded, Trey heard Reagan mutter.

“Shit, you’re a big bull.”

Trey wasn’t the only one who chuckled softly.

Rueben grinned broadly as he shoved their clothes into his backpack.

“He is a damn big bull.”

They grew silent again as they watched the would-be robbers exit the tent, carrying another pair of crates.

“Using your horses was a great idea,”

Perry praised, grinning.

“With everyone off today and tomorrow, we can be in and out without even having to pass Barny.”

A chuckle escaped him as he continued.

“No one will be the wiser for two days.”

“Yup.”

Mark smirked, his expression smug.

“I’ll tuck the crates in the back of the hay loft until things die down. Then we’ll fence them and make a fortune.”

With a sneer curling his lips, Mark grumbled.

“No more dealing with shitty tourists and their inane chatter and stupidity.”

Trey gaped, shocked to hear Mark’s words. The wrangler had always seemed so happy and friendly. With a ready smile and calm manner, he’d helped many a

customer.

“Uh, so how are you going to cover up the fact that we used the trail business’s horses?”

Perry asked curiously as he helped them strap the crates to Pixie, the second mare.

“I mean, surely they’ve noticed them gone by now.”

Mark laughed derisively.

“Those guys are such gullible fools.”

Trey scowled.

“Asshole,”

Ulkna hissed.

Agreeing, Trey nodded, gritting his teeth in irritation.

“Uh, o-okay.”

Perry didn’t seem to know what to do with that answer.

As Mark led the way back into the tent, obviously preparing to get the last of their crates, he stated belligerently.

“I’ll take the horses and release them close to the paddocks. They’ll either wander back on their own, or I’ll pretend to find them.”

With a shrug before disappearing back inside, Mark continued speaking, his voice carrying through the canvas.

“I’ll convince the guys that the gate must have been left open, or they jimmied it loose, and they wandered away. Just lost horses, not stolen.”

Trey growled low in his throat upon hearing Mark’s plans.

“No way is he getting away with this,”

he declared angrily, self-righteous anger surging through him.

“Nope.”

Ulkna squeezed his forearm encouragingly.

“We’re gonna stop ’em.”

His mate glanced toward the trail Sam and the others had disappeared up.

“That’s why the guys are calling the cops.”

Before they could say more, the pair brought out a third set of crates. They approached Glen, but the gelding didn’t seem too keen on being a pack horse and kept side-stepping and shimmying away. It took several minutes for Mark to get the animal settled enough for him to be able to lift and tie them into place.

Glen was a great trail mount, but evidently, this was something new, and he wasn’t too keen on it.

Trey smiled as an idea formed.

A great trail horse.

“I have an idea,”

Trey whispered, glancing around the group. Seeing their questioning expressions, he explained.

“To slow them down. To give the cops time to get here.”

Trey had no idea how long that would take, and he certainly didn't want this pair to be able to make it to their trailer and get away.

Not gonna happen.

“What did you have in mind?”

Ulkna massaged his palm soothingly.

Trey pointed at the horses.

“They're trained to follow the horse in front of them. They know me.”

Indicating the others, he told them.

“If you guys can give us a distraction, I can lead them along one of the hiking trails to a cave I know about. Ulkna can ride me to make certain they follow. Although they really shouldn't give us much trouble til we want to lead them into the cave.”

Pointing off to the left, Trey indicated where he planned to head.

“We'll hide out there until the cops get here and arrest them.”

After the guys exchanged looks, Trey was surprised when their attention fell on Ryan instead of Ulkna, considering his mate was the shifter there. Except, then he remembered that Ryan was the beta's mate.

While he's human, these guys must consider him to be the boss in the guy's stead.

Huh. That certainly wouldn't have happened in my old herd.

After a second, Ryan nodded. "Okay."

He swept his gaze over the area, then pointed at an escarpment fifty feet up.

"Give me a sec to climb up there."

Ryan indicated the direction Barney should be in.

"Hunter, Reuben, head into those rocks over that way and make some noise. Toss some rocks or do something to get attention. Pretend to be lost hikers or whatever comes to mind."

Reuben grinned broadly and gave Ryan a thumbs up.

"We got this."

Hunter didn't look so certain, but he still nodded gamely.

Grimacing, Trey suddenly realized just how dangerous this could be, and he began second-guessing himself. He had no right to put these strangers in such a position for his nephew's livelihood, the herd he worked with, and sort of considered family pets, and after hearing Mark's comments, his wounded pride. Before Trey could attempt to call it off, Ryan slung the strap of his rifle case over his shoulder and ran off, his

footsteps silent even on the rocks.

“Shit,”

Trey mumbled uncomfortably.

“Maybe we should just wait a little longer.”

Surely the cops wouldn’t be too much longer, right?

Ulkna rubbed his back, teasing his fingertips along his bare spine.

“Don’t worry, babe.”

Leaning over, he pecked a kiss to Trey’s temple.

“These guys know what they’re doing.”

“Yep.”

Reuben drew a handgun from the backpack and winked at him.

“We’re good.”

Focusing on Hunter, he ordered.

“Stay here, man. I got this.”

Hunter hesitated. Then he nodded, and Reuben slipped away.

“Uh.”

Trey didn't know how to respond.

Snorting, Ulkna bumped his shoulder with his own.

“These guys have taken on plenty worse than these amateur criminals.”

Patting his shoulder, Hunter smiled.

“It's fine.”

Reminding himself that they could have said no, after all, Trey nodded. “Okay.”

Ulkna pointed toward the trail behind them.

“Looks like they're about done with Glen. Why don't you head a bit farther away and shift?”

Trey nodded. Knowing they didn't want to draw attention with the noise of his change, he crept away. When he felt he was far enough, he quickly shifted. After shaking out his mane and tail, Trey moved closer, peering between the rocks.

Catching sight of him, Ulkna skulked to his side. He quickly fitted him with the halter and lead rope.

“For appearances' sake,”

he whispered. Then...they waited.

It didn't take long.

As soon as Mark disappeared back into the tent, Perry on his heels, a scratching noise

filled the air.

The silhouettes of the men froze.

After a few heartbeats, Perry hissed.

“What’s that?”

With the quiet only broken by the scuffle of hooves on stone, the creak of harnesses, and the rustle of tarps, neither man moved. Finally, Mark grumbled.

“Who gives a shit.”

His form reached out and smacked Perry’s.

“We need to clean up and wipe down any metallic surfaces we could’ve touched. No fingerprints or hoof prints.”

Mark started moving. “Hurry.”

Before Mark had taken two steps, the sound of scratching sounded once more, louder that time. They both froze again.

That time, the noise was followed up by a low hissing voice that Trey barely recognized as Reuben.

“I know what you boys are doing in there.”

He chuckled—soft, low, and mean-sounding.

“I got pictures, thieves.”

“Shit,”

Mark snarled. “Get him.”

Mark charged out of the tent, Perry on his heels.

To Trey’s shock, he spotted a gun in Mark’s hand. The sound of feet scrambling over rocks, accompanied by laughter, filled the air. The wrangler sprinted around the tent and out of sight, his conspirator following.

“Come on,”

Ulkna urged, jumping over the rock they’d been hiding behind. He rushed past where Hunter was hiding, and the human swiftly followed. Seeing the pair rushing toward the horses jerked Trey out of his shock, and he darted around a rock and trotted after them.

The noise drew the horses’ attention. They lifted their heads and looked at them. Shirley nickered at him, and after a second, Pixie whinnied her own greeting.

“At least they’re happy to see us,”

Hunter muttered as he began untying Shirley.

“I think they’re greeting Trey.”

Ulkna crossed to Pixie.

Trey stopped next to Glen, hoping his presence would keep the still-unsettled gelding calm. It seemed to work a little too well. His fellow mount neighed loudly before bumping his nose into Trey’s side.

“Hey, that asshole’s a distraction,”

Mark hollered. A second later, his voice rang out again.

“Back to the horses.”

“Shit,”

Hunter hissed, tossing Shirley’s lead rope over her back, copying what Ulkna had done to Pixie. Eyeing Trey’s mate, who was untying Glen, he asked.

“What do we do?”

Ulkna handed Glen’s rope to Hunter.

“Just stay calm. We’ll be fine.”

Then...Ulkna’s body appeared to sink on himself. His clothes tumbled to the ground. A few seconds later, a long, slender coral snake slithered from amidst the fabric and disappeared into the rocks.

“Hold it right there, asshole,”

Mark shouted, stalking toward them.

“Tie them back up, or you’re a dead man.”

Trey eased a step forward, doing his best to shield Hunter.

Even as Hunter reached up as if to retie Glen, Mark screamed and jumped into the air, kicking his leg wildly.

“What are you doing?”

Perry cried, finally appearing from around the tent.

“Snake,”

Mark cried, aiming the gun at the ground and firing.

“Snake bit me.”

A loud shot rang out, and dirt puffed from the ground at Perry’s feet.

“Drop the gun,”

Ryan ordered loudly.

Instead of doing as ordered, Mark lifted his weapon as if to search out Ryan.

He didn’t get the chance.

Rueben lunged from around the opposite side of the tent and tackled Mark. In a swift move, he disarmed the man, laid him out on his stomach, and rested a knee on his spine to hold him in place. With his own gun in hand, Rueben pointed it at Perry...who slowly lifted his hands in surrender.

“I got’em,”

Rueben claimed.

“Come on down, Ryan.”

Without taking his gaze off of the thieves, he hollered.

“You good, Hunter?”

“Yup,”

Hunter replied, patting Trey’s neck as he grinned.

“Good timing, man.”

A smirk curved the redhead’s lips. “Course.”

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As Mark whined about his snake bite, Hunter discreetly tossed Ulkna's clothes behind a rocky outcropping. Ulkna shifted as swiftly as possible, and he rested on his back in the dirt and panted quietly, catching his breath. When he heard Mark moan about suing them, he rolled his eyes and grabbed his jeans.

Once dressed, Ulkna made his way out of hiding and took in the scene as he crossed to the backpack Rueben had left where they'd been hiding earlier. He noticed Perry sitting in the dirt, his hands tied behind his back. Mark rested with his hands tied in front of him and his leg elevated on a nearby rock.

"Come on, guys,"

Mark cried.

"One of you needs to suck out the poison."

Curling his lip, Ulkna shook his head as he pulled out a bottle of water before slinging the backpack over his shoulder. He took a big mouthful of the slightly warm fluid, swished it around, then spit it back out again. He did that twice more, getting rid of the foul taste of Mark's flesh.

Yuck. I hate having to bite people.

Still, Ulkna knew it had been the easiest way to distract the gunman, giving his fellow shifters time to subdue him.

And it worked.

After taking a deep drink, Ulkna returned to Trey and Hunter's side.

"You guys okay?"

he asked quietly, offering the bottle of water to Hunter.

"We're all okay."

Hunter smiled and shook his head.

"I'm good for now, thanks."

Lowering his voice, he murmured.

"Quick thinking. Totally forgot you could do that."

Ulkna winked.

"Happy to help."

"Do you have a signal jammer stopping calls, or is this really a dead zone?"

Ryan asked from where he stood over Mark, his arms crossed over his chest. When the wrangler's expression turned mutinous, Ryan stated.

"I can't call my doc friend to get you antivenom if my phone doesn't work."

That did the trick.

Mark told Ryan about the jammer in the tent, and the beta's mate headed into it. A moment later, Ulkna heard Ryan on his phone with Alpha Kontra. Trey noted the words Doc Eli and antivenom and tuned out the rest of the conversation.

Wrapping his arm over Trey's withers, Ulkna sighed deeply. He really wished his mate could shift, allowing him to hold him. Unfortunately, since the thieves had seen him in horse form, he knew he would have to wait to fulfill his desire.

Ryan's next call was to Sam, letting him know what had happened.

Fortunately, they didn't have long to wait until the police arrived. Reuben had gone and talked with Barny, explaining what had happened, so the old guard wasn't surprised by their arrival. The cops quickly took control of the situation, the thieves were read their rights and taken to the patrol cars, and statements were being asked for.

Ulkna helped remove the crates from the horses' pack rigs and carried them back into the tent.

"Hi, I'm Detective Reyes,"

a man greeted him, holding out his hand.

"If you'll follow me out of the tent, I'd like to talk to you about what happened."

Taking the detective's hand, Ulkna realized he smelled the distinct scent of feline shifter.

"Of course."

After releasing Ulkna, Detective Reyes escorted him out of the tent and to Trey's side. The slender, five-foot-ten male smirked as he glanced between them. He even shoved his hands into his pockets.

"So,"

Detective Reyes began, glancing between them.

“Should I just write up something similar to what Ryan, Rueben, and Hunter told me?”

With a grin, he continued softly.

“Reuben and Hunter wanted to check out the excavation. You, Ryan, and your friend”—the detective glanced pointedly at Trey—“tagged along to keep them out of trouble where you stumbled across the thieves and stopped them.”

“Well, if you don’t mind,”

Ulkna responded with a chuckle. He appreciated the strange shifter’s sense of humor and willingness to help.

“That’d be great.”

Detective Reyes grinned and pointed at Trey.

“Why don’t you guys find a nice secluded place to...rest while the other cops finish up?”

More than on board with that, Ulkna nodded.

“Thank you, Detective.”

After tipping his hat, the detective turned and headed back to where his fellow officers were clustered around the tent, finishing up...whatever needed doing.

Ulkna was more than happy to get away. He grabbed Trey’s lead rope, and they hurried around a bend in the trail. Once a fair distance away, Ulkna removed the

halter and stepped back.

His mate immediately began to shift.

Trey took the sweatpants and shirt Ulkna handed him, tugging them on quickly. Then he slipped his feet into the hiking boots his mate placed before him. After that, Trey sagged into Ulkna's embrace, resting his forehead on his lover's shoulder and enjoying the feel of his strong arms around him.

Ulkna nuzzled his lips against Trey's temple, holding him close.

"After we get all this shit taken care of with the horse rustling and attempted archaeology thefts, we'll have to talk about making definite plans for our future."

Upon hearing those words, Trey tensed, but Ulkna just squeezed him tighter and whispered.

"But there's one thing I want to say now."

After taking a fortifying breath, Trey lifted his head and met Ulkna's gaze.

"What's that?"

He felt grateful he managed to get his voice to remain steady.

Smiling warmly up at him, Ulkna stated.

"I figure that soon, there'll be a wrangler position opening up at your trail riding place."

His hazel eyes twinkled as he asked.

“Think Reagan will put in a good word for me? I’m sure the guys can forge whatever past I need to make me look awesomely qualified.”

For a second, Trey wasn’t certain he’d heard the words correctly.

“Y-You want to get a job as a...a wrangler?”

Ulkna smiled and nodded once.

“How about it?”

“Y-You’re willing to stay here?”

Trey barely managed to whisper the words, and his heart pounded so fast as hope slammed into him.

“Near my family?”

Threading his fingers through Trey’s hair, Ulkna continued to smile at him.

“After the guys helped me, I didn’t have a reason to think about doing something other than travel with them.”

He teased his thumb along Trey’s jaw as he continued to hold him with his intense gaze.

“Now, however, I definitely have a reason...and that’s you. I want to make you happy, and I know staying here, with these horses and your family, will make you happy.”

“I want to make you happy, too.”

“I know,”

Ulkna assured.

“You and me, together, no matter where, will always make me happy.”

Anticipation for their future swelled through Trey. His mate was offering him everything he could ever dream of—his family, his job, and his mate.

Grinning, Trey claimed.

“Yep, I know for sure my nephew will give you a glowing review.”

“Excellent.”

Ulkna tightened his hold on Trey’s hair, pulling his head closer. Just before their lips touched, his mate murmured.

“After all this time, I have everything I could possibly desire.”

Trey silently agreed as he accepted Ulkna’s kiss, sealing their plans for the future—their future...together.