



Curse of Silver & Blood (Infinite Arcana)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Alec has been held prisoner for months, coerced into using his magic to manufacture illegal drugs for the mountain mafia. His gifts are profitable and dangerous, and his captors have no intention of letting him go. Alec engineers his escape which lands him in the territory of a local legend an ancient werewolf, a lone alpha cursed by silver and blood.

Leif has been alone for a thousand years. Forced to keep his distance from his own people, Leif settles into the depths of the Appalachian Mountains and spends his endless days patrolling his territory. One night the forest is rattled by an explosion, and the sudden appearance of a bedraggled fae running for his life.

Neither expected to come face to face with their fated mate in the cold, dark woods.

Fate has a hand in uniting Alec and Leif but it'll be up to them to forge the nascent mate bond between them, and Alec and Leif have a fight on their hands the mafia wants Alec back, and the curse laid on Leif is out for blood.

The expanded version of the FATED MATES Charity Anthology short story, set in the Infinite Arcana Universe by bestselling author Sheena Jolie (formerly SJ Himes.) Contains new content. Novella, MM Paranormal Fantasy Romance. 36k words.

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Chapter 1

Alec

The orange of the explosion was almost indistinguishable from the fiery sunset, the light from both cutting through the forest and blinding him for a long moment. Blinking away tears, Alec shielded his eyes, waiting for his vision to clear, listening for signs of pursuit. While this gave him an advantage in avoiding pursuers, the reverberating booms of the initial explosion and subsequent smaller chain reactions left his ears ringing, and waiting to move until his hearing recovered was wasting precious time. The forest floor was covered in a thick layer of leaves, the bare branches and the absence of undergrowth making it easier for sound to travel farther. It would make anyone chasing him easy to hear, but would work against him when he decided to move from his hiding spot.

The forest itself was deathly quiet, the fading echoes of the distant explosion having frightened the few remaining birds and critters in the woods into silence. A spattering of debris from the explosion fell like rain, pinging off trees and disturbing the dry leaves. Nothing larger than a marble fell near him, but he stayed under the fallen tree for a bit longer to make sure he wasn't taken out by a random, unseen chunk of concrete falling from the sky.

Not even the wind stirred in the deafening silence left in the wake of the explosion, and Alec held himself as still as he could manage, ears straining to catch any sounds of pursuit.

Nothing.

He all but collapsed to the cold, damp ground, glad he was already crouching. His limbs trembled and he curled under the felled tree, the old oak a sturdy shelter even decades after lightning set it aflame and it tumbled to the earth. The tree was scorched in the center along the core, the inside hollowed out, and the trunk was split higher up from the lightning strike. The ground around the roots was barren and the ends of a few roots remaining in the earth were blackened by fire where they once connected to the main root ball.

His senses were recovering from the bespelled shackles he had worn the last few weeks, and the raw, slow-healing scars on his wrists stung from sweat and dirt. Cold, aching, hungry, and terrified, he was miserable, but none of it mattered—he was free.

Alec waited until the shadows were longer, the night around him still and quiet, before he limped out from his hiding spot and headed deeper into the woods, in the opposite direction of his former prison.

Leif

An explosion rocked the woods, and Leif growled instinctively as he swung his head in the direction of the disturbance, ears flattening to his skull to protect them from the painful noise.

He crouched low, and despite his massive size, found cover in a dense raspberry bramble. The many thorny vines were bare of leaves but the sheer number of them was more than enough to conceal a massive werewolf, the gray and brown of the dormant bramble blending perfectly with his coat. The evening air was cold, but as long as he breathed at a measured pace, not even a puff of his warm breath would betray his position. He had no idea what was going on, and while he healed incredibly quickly, he hadn't yet tested his resilience against an explosion and wasn't keen to try.

Not even a half-mile away, his sensitive ears picked up the sounds of fire and humans shouting, and his nose caught hints of scalding smoke, charred concrete, and heat-warped metal. In the direction of the explosion lay a compound run by the local crime syndicate, a relatively small operation of the mountain mafia that nonetheless was dangerous enough that Leif steered clear of the property and its people, not wanting trouble. It was the only structure within miles of his territory large enough to account for the amount of debris falling in the woods.

He wasn't afraid, he simply hated dealing with people, and mob types were nearly as territorial as werewolves; he had no interest in that drama. As far as he knew, the humans had no idea he was out here in the woods, and they never entered the forest, aside from tossing trash into the treeline behind the buildings that were in use. Not the type to care about the environment, and that disgusted him, but he wasn't going to alert them to his presence by making a fuss .

Unless they encroached farther into the preserve—then he had no problem handling trespassers... with his teeth. His territory was old, well-established, and the locals knew better than to trespass. Most of the locals avoided the illegal operations going on at the old gravel factory, which once crushed down the massive rocks quarried from farther up the mountains. The area had been abandoned back in the late 1970s, and no one was around to raise objections when the shady group using it now moved in about a decade ago.

Leif waited until the distant furor calmed before he lifted from his crouch in the brambles, shaking out his heavy coat and grumbling at the damp earth stuck to his paws. The cold didn't bother him, not with his background, but mud was an annoyance he could do without. He aimed his nose for home and set out at a lope, ears pricked, eyes accustomed to the deep shadows of the woods.

Twilight deepened, the sky overhead clear and the stars out already. The wind was brisk, carrying hints of fire and some acrid chemicals that must have caught fire as a

result of the explosion. Thankfully, the wind had shifted with nightfall and the scent cleared out, saving his nose from the stench.

He lived farther up the mountain, on a steep hillside overlooking part of the narrow valley below. The only path up was full of tight switchbacks and random drop-offs from granite and shale cliffs. His cabin sat in the mouth of an abandoned mine, the main shaft only penetrating into the mountainside about a hundred meters before stopping at a wall of bedrock with abandoned support timbers stacked along a wall and the rusted-out heads of pickaxes the only things to be found in the depths when Leif first explored the area.

His cabin hid the mine, a tiny little shack in truth, at least from the outside. From within it was far larger, owing to the wide mouth of what must have been a natural cave before miners in the early 1800s tried their luck at digging for gold. Too bad for the miners, but good for Leif, that they found nothing and cleared out, leaving behind plenty of cut hardwood beams from the old-growth trees that once covered the entire span of the Appalachians. The beams were dry and protected inside the cave, even two centuries later. Leif managed to build himself a respectable cabin at the mouth of the mine and shore up the majority of the mine shaft, not wanting a cave-in to ruin a good night's sleep.

He was nearing the secluded entrance to the path up to his cabin when instinct had him stopping, and he crouched, senses narrowing in on the sound and scent of a warm body nearby.

Blood and iron in layers that came in varying waves of density as the person moved and the air currents pushed the scent particles ahead of the stranger. Ears twitching, he zeroed in on the direction of the person approaching, and his nose told him plenty about the intruder before his eyes even made out the struggling figure leaning on a tree not far from the hidden entrance of the cabin path.

Young, lean, pale skin streaked by dirt and sweat, and blood crusted on both wrists. Light blond hair stained by sweat and grime—the whole bedraggled picture punctuated by ragged breathing and a racing heart. Denim pants torn at the knees, less about fashion, as the scratched knees beneath told Leif that the stranger had fallen, or perhaps been pushed, injuring themselves more than once. Shoes more suited to a trip to town than hiking in dense woodlands in unfriendly terrain—whoever this was, they had not intended to be out in the woods, bedraggled and spent.

Wildflowers.

It came slowly, his nose registering the sweetness just before the stranger lifted his head and gray eyes flashed with inner light. This one was magic, a type found in the heartbeat of the natural world.

Fae.

“I know you’re out there,” the stranger spoke, voice a bit rough from exertion, but its gentle tenor spoke of youth. Not a child—grown, but definitely still quite young. Not that a youthful appearance was a true indicator of age with fae. Some fae were far, far older than they looked, but Leif had plenty of experience telling supernatural creatures’ ages based on a multitude of clues. “Whoever you are, or whatever. But I’m guessing who, since I’m not being eaten alive. Am I right?”

Leif huffed, a white puff of breath rising from his nose, and those gray eyes tried to find him in the shadows. Even scared, injured, and alone, this young fae displayed a rare humor and bravery in calling out to the predator lurking in the dark. He reminded Leif of one of his own people from so very long ago. Laughing even when death hovered on the edges of the shadows closing in, grinning and fearless in battle.

“I’m not a threat,” the stranger said, pulling Leif from his haunting memories. The young fae groaned quietly as he slid down the tree he was leaning against, all but

collapsing on his rear, grimacing. Hands dirty with mud and blood shook before he tucked them under his arms, squinting a bit as he stared with increasing accuracy to where Leif was in the shadows. “Perhaps you can point me toward the nearest road? I don’t know the immediate area, and I’m a bit of a mess right now. I couldn’t hurt you if I wanted to.”

Leif snorted in amusement, and the stranger even managed a tiny smile at the sound, and Leif was thoroughly charmed despite his wariness.

Whoever this stranger was, Leif sensed no weapon, and the magic inherent in all fae was so varied that trying to predict what offensive capabilities someone of fae ancestry had was nearly fruitless. Instinct told him the young fae was no threat, and he hadn’t lived as long as he had by ignoring his instincts.

He stepped out from the deepest shadows, and a hint of silvery light from the sliver of moon breaking the horizon was enough to illuminate him for the fae. The way those gray eyes went wide, and the freeze response in that lean form, told him the fae saw him well enough despite the limited light.

The youngling was beautiful, but it was the wary, pained, and yet somehow resigned strength in those lovely eyes that lured Leif from his long-standing resolve to remain apart from the world. He saw himself reflected in those eyes, not as he was now—but as he could be, should be, had a witch not destroyed his life and pack over a thousand years ago, Leif literally cursed to be alone. The fae gazed at him in admiration, some awe, and the appreciation had him lifting his head higher, legs straightening to his full height.

The moon rose enough in that moment that the silver light gilded the young man and the tree he leaned on, and Leif struggled not to show the impact it had on him. Soul-deep and as inevitable as the travels of the celestial bodies high above in the ink-black sky, Leif succumbed to Fate’s whimsy and capricious cruelty—a soulmate,

centuries past his decision to stop hoping, and one curse too late for love.

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Chapter 2

Alec

Alec tried not to show fear, but the towering werewolf peering down at him tested his resolve.

Werewolves were born, not bitten, and the varying ancestries and individual ranks of each werewolf determined whether or not they could take the legendary bipedal Wolfman-esque form, the terrifying monster seen in old folktales and in a century of horror films. This werewolf, though, was in the more common form, the true wolf, though the magical nature of the werewolf possessed only a passing resemblance to non-magical and non-sapient wolf species.

Bulky with deep muscles, a dense triple coat with shiny guard hairs that turned silver when they caught stray beams of moonlight, and a muzzle full of fangs far longer and sharper than evolution gave their wild counterparts, this werewolf was huge, dark in an array of hues hard to make out in the night. The wolf was a looming threat that made his nerves twitch, but the non-threatening stance and the huge, intelligent, and calmly amused eyes eased the urge to flee once their gazes met.

The wolf was an alpha—the aura around alphas was nearly a living thing itself, pulsing with a subtle but tangible field of power and strength. Even Alec felt the faint urge to bow his head to the being standing far closer than Alec had assumed the observer in the shadows to be—this alpha was adept at using the environment to his advantage, and that spoke of age. Werewolves were not immortal; they lived hundreds of years, but most werewolves in the United States were under the two-

century mark. The truly ancient wolves usually remained in the Old World in ancestral territories while the younger wolves left to find new lands to claim as their own.

Rare to see an old wolf alone, as most had packs, especially alphas. A lone alpha was incredibly rare. Perhaps he was out for a nightly run, and there was a pack nearby, yet Alec could not sense the energies in the natural world that were indicative of multiple werewolves and their interconnected magics.

“Forgive the trespass, alpha,” Alec said, squinting against the gritty sweat that ran down his temples and into his eyes despite the chill night air. He was worn to nothing and needed rest. Weeks of captivity might be over, but he was no ancient and powerful fae to recover so quickly, and his magic was still chaotic from the mortal spells used to control him. He needed food and sleep. “If you’ll perhaps lift a paw in the direction I need to go to leave your territory, I’ll be on my way shortly.”

Manners taught to him in his childhood served him well, and he saw the amusement in the alpha’s expressive eyes at the attempted courtesy. He was presumably trespassing, as wolves kept to their territories out of habit and respected boundaries of the lands belonging to other species and packs .

When the alpha approached, Alec trembled, helpless to control the instinctive response to the huge predator looming over him. A massive head lowered, jaws big enough to swallow Alec’s entire head, shoulders, and then snap him in half—but the soft snuffles and the billowing hot breath of the wolf, smelling faintly of blood and a hint of metallic...something...was pleasant and not at all monstrous. Alec couldn’t stop the delighted smile that broke free, and he itched to run his fingers through the wild coat of the wolf. The alpha huffed, amused, and nudged his massive head against Alec’s shoulder.

Arms came up and without thinking he wrapped them around the huge head,

delighting in the soft, thick fur under his palms, and the great ears that flickered at his touch, responsive to the slightest pressure. Alec pressed his forehead to the thick fur and the body heat from the alpha was staggering. A wave of warmth swept through Alec's body, momentarily easing aches and pains, a blissful reprieve from the damp and cold night air.

"Come with me, little fae," a gravelly, whispered command sounded, seemingly from the wolf, and Alec was more startled by the voice coming from everywhere, and yet nowhere, than the words the alpha spoke. "Climb up my shoulder."

"I...what..." Alec stammered, but the alpha bowed down and Alec stumbled to his feet. He found himself half climbing, half tossed by a powerful head under his rear onto the great wolf's back. He sank into the dense fur, and the alpha slowly stood, peering at him over his tall shoulders with one big eye.

"Hold tight," came that disembodied voice again, like gravel skipping down a mountainside, yet precise and not at all harsh on the ears. This alpha was very, very old. And powerful. The ability to speak aloud when in their wolf shape was almost a legend, and Alec had never heard a werewolf use it before; those he met in his day-to-day life were all young, the majority under a century, and no more skilled in the historically lauded werewolf magics than a puppy.

The fur between his fingers was dark brown and gray, a riot of colors that matched the colors of the forest, especially in the night, and if it weren't for the heat coming from the wolf and the thrumming of immense power that surrounded him, he would have thought he was hallucinating. The alpha turned carefully, and Alec didn't trust himself not to fall, so he lay down as best he could and gently gripped the heavy ridge of fur that covered the wolf's shoulders in an impressive mantle.

The werewolf took off at a fast walk, but his gait was so smooth that Alec barely noticed they were moving, the breeze changing from cold and cutting to soothing,

drying the sweat that plagued him, thanks to the heat emanating from the werewolf. Huge, wide paws made no sound on the forest floor, not a twig snapping nor the faint rustle of dried leaves, and Alec sank into the heavy coat, feeling like he could fall asleep and be quite content, certain that if he had any pursuers, they wouldn't have much luck tracking the wolf through these woods.

He hadn't felt safe in a long time. Not since he was a kid, when his mom was still alive and healthy.

Leif

"Don't fall off," Leif warned as he dipped around the twisted trunk of an ancient oak and his paws found the hidden path that wove amongst granite boulders as tall as a house, steadily climbing up the switchback trail to his home. The cliff-face was the result of a long-ago collapse of a rock shelf, probably millions of years ago, and the steep incline was covered in boulders, ridges of granite and quartz, and interspersed with lethal drop-offs and dense clusters of bushes and berry brambles. Only a few intrepid old-growth oaks and maples remained, spared by the miners when they gave up searching for treasures.

Fingers gripped even tighter in the thick coat over his shoulders, and Leif wondered idly what it would feel like for those slim fingers to scratch along his back, hunting for hard to reach itchy spots, but he banished the foolish thoughts, focusing on not toppling his charge as he navigated the difficult path. It was muscle memory at this point, but he was carrying another person and any inattention might leave his guest worse off than he was currently. Not fancying digging a grave, Leif was mindful of each paw placement and avoided going too fast as the trail twisted upon itself and dipped under and over boulders, and through blackberry brambles hollowed out over the years by his passage.

A muffled curse from above told him he wasn't as careful as he hoped, thorns from

the brambles catching at his guest, and he made sure to duck a bit more to avoid the rest of the brambles near the top of the path.

It took him easily three times as long to reach the top of the path and the small clearing in front of the cabin, but it was probably far faster than any mortal could manage on two feet. A few more strides brought him alongside the stoop and he carefully maneuvered himself so the young man could slide from his back to the top step without toppling several feet to the ground.

“Watch your step,” Leif warned, looking over his shoulder to watch the young man get off his back. “The night air makes the wood slick sometimes.”

With a few muffled curses and some moans of pain, the young man managed to get to his feet on the wooden stoop of the cabin, and a tiny squeak escaped when his legs failed to hold him up and he fell into the door, the latch giving way at impact.

Leif winced when he heard the thump of the young man hitting the floor and the subsequent groan. Sighing, Leif shook out his coat before starting to Change.

Alec

Despite falling in front of his savior, Alec surprisingly found the floor far more forgiving than a bed of dried leaves. A large rug softened the impact—woven strips of old cloth repurposed into an entryway rug that was much larger than Alec was expecting from the sight of the tiny cabin from outside.

“Are you alright?” asked the wolf, and Alec groaned a bit as he rolled to his side, aches and pains complaining the whole time.

“Better than falling in the woods...” Alec started to reply, and he blinked, shocked silent.

The werewolf was in his human shape, and obviously naked. The soft glow of a lamp beside the door cast enough light to illuminate the smooth, chiseled expanse of muscles and pale skin flushed with exertion from transforming.

Longish red-blond hair fell to shoulders wider than Alec would ever be able to boast, and a short beard redder than the hair graced a strong jaw that led to pink lips curved in an amused half-smile. Crystal blue eyes twinkled as the very naked and very attractive man stepped through the doorway and held a hand down to Alec.

He stared at the hand a long second, before a chuckle from the alpha made him snap out of it and he took the help, the alpha gently lifting him to his feet with impressive ease.

“Leif,” the alpha introduced himself with a dip of his chin, still holding Alec’s hand. “What’s your name, little greenbough?”

Greenbough. That nickname for an unspecified fae was old, older than the country they both stood upon, and Alec found himself answering without hesitation, the warm fingers holding his chilled hand sapping his normal reticence. Leif’s accent was subtle, a charming mix of southern Appalachian influences and a hint of something that sounded almost like an actor from a gritty Viking movie.

“Alec, um..oh, you’re tall...Alec Greyfeld.” The swift grin on Leif’s face was devastatingly attractive, and Alec found himself blushing, something he hadn’t done since puberty, he was fairly certain.

“Go have a seat by the fire, Alec,” Leif gently ordered, slowly letting go of his hand. “The night is cold, and the hearth is warm. You’re welcome in my home.”

Another sign of age, even if it didn’t appear on Leif’s face or frame—such courtesy was foreign to Alec’s experience but not unknown to him—his mother was where his

fae blood originated, and she taught him as well as she could before her poisoning, an unnatural death that orphaned Alec as a young teen.

“Thank you,” Alec replied softly, fighting off another blush, eyes darting away from the quick grin on Leif’s handsome face. He found himself squeaking in surprise when Leif wrapped a heavy arm around his waist and all but carried him to the fireplace, depositing him in a massive armchair draped with lush furs and woven blankets.

“But, I’m covered in mud and blood...” Alec protested weakly.

Leif arched a thick brow and grabbed a dark brown fur from the back of the chair and proceeded to wrap Alec up in its delicious warmth, ignoring the dirty clothing. Alec got an eyeful of the very naked alpha, and his wide eyes and mouth opening in a small ‘O’ of stunned fascination had Leif grinning again, sharp and a bit less human, more wolf.

“Stay by the fire,” Leif told him, his words a rumble coming from deep inside his chest, eyes flashing a bit in the light from the fire. The embers had been banked, but the touch of Leif’s fingers to a carved sigil in the stone wall fed the fire and it grew to a steady flame. Leif removed his fingers from the spell once he was satisfied with the result. He cast Alec a stern glance, as if making sure Alec wasn’t going to wander off, and then he disappeared into the shadows in the far corner of the cabin, and Alec blinked in disbelief when he realized the far wall wasn’t wood, but solid stone.

The hearth was carved into the side of the mountain, and Alec saw where the rock had once been exposed to the elements, now covered by the cabin. He realized the black depths of the shadows in what he’d thought was the far corner from the door was actually a wide opening in the rock wall. The floors were wide hardwood planks, wider than Alec had ever seen, cut from trees so large they surely had no modern contemporaries remaining in the Appalachians.

Small on the outside, and far, far larger on the inside, and while it wasn't a TARDIS, the cottage had a certain charm to it that delighted Alec. It smelled of rock, rain, and smoke from the hearth, along with the scent of a predator—blood and metal, and a musk that was not at all unappealing. Alec buried his nose in the soft fur that surrounded him, smelling the fibers of the creature now long gone, and overlaying it all, the scent of Leif.

He smelled like a wolf, of course, and something more. Something that made Alec's eyes close, and he breathed in deep, face buried in the furs, each deep breath a comfort.

"Here, I found these. They might fit you." Leif's sudden reappearance had Alec blinking up at him in a fog, frowning to see that Leif had wrapped a short length of dark red fabric around his waist in a rudimentary kilt. He'd secured the end on his left hip with an iron clasp, and the cloth fell to about mid-thigh. He was certain Leif was naked under the kilt, and there was no mistaking the blessedly large bulge cupped by the dark red cloth. Nothing was left to the imagination, and Alec idly thought that perhaps if he asked, Leif might go back to being naked.

Alec reached out from his comfy cocoon of furs and took the neatly folded clothing from Leif, who backed away with a short nod and a gesture over his shoulder. "There's a water-closet in the back hall if you want to change in there, or need to use the privy," Leif informed him, and he went to fuss over the fire, swinging a large iron teapot over the flames on an iron arm bolted into the rock wall. He sounded less American and more Nordic the longer he spoke, giving Alec even more hints as to his age.

The flames of the fire were now bright enough to illuminate the room, and his host. Alec pulled the clean clothes to his chest, wondering idly if he could just get changed in the chair since the hearth was so warm and he wasn't sure of his footing, when something caught his eye.

There was a scar on Leif's left pectoral muscle, shiny and smooth, a paler hue than Leif's already fair skin tone, and Alec only saw it because the light reflected off it in a silvery flash, making him squint. The glare was gone in an instant, but the scar was more visible as Leif worked, rotating out different iron arms to move various cooking apparatus over the flames. One a grill, about two square feet, another a deep iron pot that swung beside the kettle that had a thin tendril of steam already rising from the spout.

"Do you eat meat?" Leif asked over his shoulder, that brow rising again when he saw Alec was unmoved, still staring. "Need some help? I didn't want to presume."

Alec stopped staring and investigated the clothing. A thin t-shirt and some sweatpants, the kind with the drawstring waist so he could tie them up, as there was no way the pants would stay up on his narrow waist without some help.

"I'll eat anything," Alec said, meaning it. "I haven't eaten in over a day."

Leif's eyes darkened and his mouth tightened, but he refrained from voicing his anger. Alec knew Leif was not angry with him, but a part of him still shivered in alarm. In his experience, when men got angry, he got hit. It was uncharitable of him to be wary of Leif like that, but ingrained habits were hard to break .

Leif must have seen something on his face since he slowed his movements and made sure that Alec was looking at him before he made any big motions with his arms, like reaching out one big hand toward Alec, palm up, fingers relaxed. Alec held the clothing to his chest with one hand and took the offered help with the other, letting Leif pull him gently from the warm nest in the chair and to his feet. He wobbled a second, and then Leif gently slid a big arm around his waist, and Alec found himself neatly swept off his feet and carried toward the dark recess in the far cabin wall.

It was cooler than in the cabin, but not by much, and it was utterly black until Alec's

eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he stared in amazement at what must have been a mine shaft, wide enough for a car to drive through, and about nine feet or so tall, the walls shored up with thick timbers spaced evenly along the walls and ceiling of the shaft. About ten feet into the shaft there was a door, the frame also shored up by thick timbers. Leif opened the door with his free hand and set Alec beside the threshold, leaning him against the wall. A light came to life overhead, a simple glass lamp that hung from the ceiling on a chain, the wiring encased in tubing that ran back toward the doorway and out into the mine shaft. Realizing there was power in the mine had Alec mesmerized, but the finished flooring, smooth walls, and the rich scent of fresh, clean spring water had him eager to get washed up and changed.

“Water is fresh, straight from a well,” Leif gestured to the sink, which looked like it was carved right out of the stone wall, next to which was a toilet, the only piece of porcelain he’d seen so far in the entire structure. “Past the toilet is a shower. Can you see magic?” Leif asked abruptly, peering down at him with a slight frown .

“I can,” Alec replied, though he didn’t want to go into the specifics of what he could see and do. It was his abilities that had brought him to the attention of some really bad people and while he doubted a super powerful alpha werewolf needed a fae alchemist, he was reluctant to risk losing the unexpected safe haven he’d found with Leif.

“You’ll see the spells for hot and cold water then. There’s fresh towels hanging on the wall. Call out to me if you need help. I’ll have an ear out for you. Food should be ready once you’re done.”

Alec was at a loss for words, really. All he could do was nod once and offer a shaky thank you. Leif nodded in return and left Alec alone, heading back out to the main room. The mine shaft was empty, from what he could see, but he sensed no danger in the shadows just past the bathroom—or water-closet as Leif had said—and he went inside, deciding to trust the handsome stranger a little bit longer.

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Chapter 3

Leif

He listened in a distant fashion as Alec used the water-closet, only paying enough attention to catch if the young man fell or hurt himself in his weakened state. He didn't sense any major injuries; the scent of blood was faint in comparison to the saturation in the air that came from open wounds or severed arteries or veins. Alec was covered in scratches and bruises, and his wrists were swollen, rubbed raw in places from either rope or cuffs of some sort, and he had what appeared to be a partially healed split lip and a fading black eye under the dirt and mud.

Alec was running from something. Someone. He sensed no malice from Alec—his ability to see into the nature of a person had more to do with centuries of experience than any magical gift. Alec was tired, scared, used to violence from big men, and had literally escaped from a bad situation. Leif was not one to believe in coincidences so he was very certain the explosion had something to do with Alec.

He heard Alec finish up just as he ladled some venison stew into a deep earthenware bowl with a spoon, putting it on the small table beside the armchair. Alec came into the main room at a slow shuffle, and Leif approved of the fortitude shown by the young fae, despite his willingness to help. Alec was much like Leif, it seemed.

Hair wet and finger-combed back from his face, Alec was clean at last, and he was swamped in the too-large clothing Leif found for him to wear. The pants hung past his bare toes and the drawstring was pulled as tight as it could be, bunched at his waist, but at least they were staying up. The shirt was huge on him, the collar wide

enough it kept falling off one shoulder, and Alec had to pull it back up a couple times before he gave up with a grumble.

He was adorable.

Leif held out a hand to help him across the living room, and Alec took it despite his earlier hesitation, and he quickly got Alec back in the chair, bundled with warm furs, with a bowl the size of his head on his lap. Leif was reminded again of his size compared to his guest when Alec picked up the long-handled spoon, which looked like a serving spoon in his hand instead of one meant for eating stew.

Leif enjoyed the sight of the pretty young man eating his food with obvious and vocal delight, Alec's happy little groans making heat pool in his belly. He'd gone far too long without carnal companionship and for Fate to hand over a sweet, adorable, and attractive young man was a temptation he was not expecting so he had little in the way of defenses.

Leif left Alec to eat, and went to the front door, opening it a handful of inches and breathing in deep, as much to clear out the enticing scent coming from Alec as to make sure they hadn't been followed. Nothing was outside except the usual suspects—the owl that perched in the pine tree on the south side of the cliff and a few critters in the underbrush. No humans, no fae, no other wolves.

Leif shut the door and threw the latch for the first time since he built the cabin decades before—no one had ever been here except a mountain witch he hired to set the sigils and wards in his cabin right after he built it. And she hadn't been back, taking his bundle of cash and disappearing into the brush without a word.

If he needed supplies, something he couldn't build himself, he went into town, an hour away as the wolf runs, and he usually went as a wolf, carrying clothing and shoes in a large bag with a reinforced strap that he could put his head through as a

wolf, and then carry it back the same way, full of supplies. Last time he went was the week prior, so he wasn't strapped for food or necessities like toothpaste or toilet paper. He might live alone in the woods, but he wasn't an animal, and nothing compared to modern conveniences like toilet paper, an actual flushing toilet, and a bidet.

He leaned against the door and listened to the night, able to hear out past the cliffs and down into the valley, the mountain's natural acoustics helping to catch the sounds of even the stealthiest of passersby—and humans were loud, even the trained ones.

"What are you listening for?" Alec asked, quiet, as if afraid to disturb him.

"Nothing," Leif answered, and hurried to explain when Alec's face fell, not wanting the young man to think he was brushing him off. "The night is quiet. No one followed you, at least not yet."

Alec eyed him with a mixture of suspicion and admiration. He leaned forward and set the now empty bowl and the spoon on the small table in front of the armchair. He tucked himself back into the furs, snuggling, and Leif caught the way the young man buried his nose in them and breathed in deep before looking at him with somber gray eyes.

"What do you know?"

"Not much," Leif tapped the side of his nose with a finger before tipping his head to the side, much like he would as a wolf. He spent a lot more time in that form than his human and lycanthrope forms. "My nose told me of stress and fear and pain, blood and metal. A hint of fire. An explosion happens on the edge of my territory, and then you appear. Those people who took over the old gravel factory at the edge of the woods aren't the type to help, more to harm, and you've been held in shackles."

Leif dipped his chin and Alec looked down, where his hands were hidden under the furs.

“You know a lot,” Alec replied ruefully. “Damn werewolf noses.”

Leif snorted out a short laugh and Alec smiled, the first real smile he’d seen on his face since he found him lost in the woods.

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” Leif said. “I won’t make demands of you. You’re tired and hurting, and not from around here. I might not get out often, but I know the area well enough, as well as most of the residents within twenty miles. You don’t smell like a local.”

“My stepfather sold me to the mountain mafia, and I blew them up while escaping into the woods,” Alec said, and Leif’s brows went into his hairline from surprise, even though he’d suspected some of it. Not the stepfather bit—that needed some more context.

“I don’t mind a story before bedtime,” Leif replied .

“It’s not a long one, but it is a mess,” Alec said. “I don’t feel right involving you in my troubles.”

“I’m old, little greenbough, and my teeth are sharp,” Leif informed his guest with a faint smile with a hint of those sharp teeth. “Trouble doesn’t want to get involved with me.”

Alec

Even though he trusted Leif not to eat him, those sharp teeth made him gulp, very aware he was locked away in a cabin in the mountains with a sexy, protective alpha

werewolf. Alec was feeling hungry himself, and not for another helping of the sumptuous-smelling stew bubbling away over the fire. Leif was wildly appealing, in a feral way that had nothing to do with his werewolf nature and everything to do with the way he stared at Alec with a hunger of his own in those expressive eyes.

He wanted to thank whatever deity was responsible for his happy improvement in circumstances.

Leif left his place by the door and prowled closer, and Alec jumped a bit when Leif sat on the floor beside the chair, long legs stretched out in front of him toward the fireplace, and his back leaning on the chair, pressing against Alec's legs from knees to feet. He curled in his toes, afraid to press the cold digits to warm flesh and risk driving off the very welcome sensation of all that wild, half-naked manliness sitting at his feet.

"Tell me this messy tale," Leif ordered, though not unkindly. He was big enough to lean forward a bit and swing the kettle steaming over the fire away from the flames, and then grab a pair of mugs stacked on the edge of the hearth.

Watching Leif make tea was relaxing and hypnotizing.

"Oh. Um," Alec gathered his scrambled thoughts, the memory of the past several weeks enough to ruin his growing arousal at being so near Leif.

"My mom was fae, she's where I got my magic from," Alec said, and Leif made no reaction to that opening comment, making the tea from loose-leaf sachets he filled from a small box on the hearth near the mugs. Leif stayed silent, but his patient expression told Alec he was listening attentively while making the tea. That easy silence helped him relax even more, absorbing the heat from the large man beside him as well as the tender care from a complete stranger, who somehow felt less like a stranger with every passing moment.

“My mom was on her own for a long time, and I never knew my dad. No idea who he was or is, and Mom never told me. She ended up marrying a human man when I was nine, and he was a rotten bastard. Not at first—he played the besotted and doting husband long enough to con my mom into selling her powers out to his buddies.”

“Dozens of fae species, and a nearly infinite variety of gifts,” Leif said softly as he poured hot water into the mugs, the scent of rich, fragrant tea rising with the steam. Black-leaf tea and bergamot. Leif handed Alec one of the mugs; it was huge, more suited to someone of Leif’s size than Alec’s, and he had to hold it with both hands.

Leif’s words made sense, in a way. All those who weren’t human knew that to try and categorize who and what the fae were after the Great Migration from the Old World was a pointless and frustrating endeavor. After reaching the shores of the New World, many of the younger fae peoples interbred with humanity, breeding like wildfire and muddling what little humans and magic folk alike knew about the fae. Plus much of the knowledge of who and what they were, their original cultures, had been lost either to time or to genocide at the hands of the High Council in Europe.

And adding human bloodlines made for some random and entirely unpredictable modern fae abilities and gifts.

He held the mug in his lap, waiting for it to cool. Leif sipped his, impressively unflinching at the temperature. Alec found it hard to look away, and made himself continue his story. “Stuart is my stepfather. Mom got sick from the various jobs he forced her to do, using her powers to make designer drugs and illegal potions and shit. She died.”

“Younger fae, then,” Leif added, though without any judgment in it. The elder fae species were increasingly rare in these modern times—the remaining fae species were those called collectively the younger fae, species that arose in concurrence with humanity, and came with the less impressive, and not nearly as divine gifts that the

elder fae could once boast.

Alec nodded. "I had her cremated before Stu could sell her body on the black market." Alec grimaced. "He never forgave me for that, and the only reason he didn't make me take her place right after she died is that I was enrolled in public school at the time and my teachers kept an eye on me. I was out of luck when I graduated high school."

"What happened?" Leif asked, though he could probably guess considering how he found Alec in the woods.

"Stu hired me out, but I wasn't so great at doing what the customers wanted of me. Stubborn, and I back-talked and fought Stu on it all the time. I call myself an alchemist, one born, not taught, and there's enough interest out there from legal entities and practitioners that I could pay my own way. I was about to get my own place when Stu finally had enough and sold me outright to the mountain mafia."

Local gangs and crime organizations in the hills went by different names. The ones typically run by the humans in his home county were the mountain mafia, homegrown thugs aiming to be rivals with the more infamous outfits run in the major cities. His stepfather started as a junkie and moved to dealer once Alec and his mom were under his thumb, and most of the people he farmed their talents out to were drug runners and local manufacturers of drugs with a magical component.

Instead of asking what gifts Alec had that made him so valuable, Leif sipped his tea, waiting patiently. Alec tried sipping his own tea, cautious in case it was still too hot, but the tea was finally at the perfect temperature and helped soothe some more of his aches as he slowly drank it. He managed a solid third of it before stopping, Leif watching him with blatant satisfaction. The general consensus that alphas enjoyed taking care of people was on the mark, it seemed.

“How’d you blow up the building?” Leif asked. “Same magic that makes the drugs?”

Alec figured he had nothing to lose. “I can alter the basic molecular structure of physical matter and even incorporate spells on a microscopic level. Or at least, magic with a purpose and intent that’ll last beyond my active control. Spells are more of a practitioner thing—I’m fae, and I’m more instinct and intent than structured casting and rote spellwork. It’s why I call myself an alchemist.”

Leif frowned a bit. “Not sure what exactly that means but it sounds like it meant making fancy drugs with a magical kick to it?”

“And making explosives out of random bits and pieces in my prison cell.”

Leif leaned into his legs, a gentle pressure. “Well done, greenbough.” He paused, tipping his head back a bit to look Alec in the eyes. “Do they know you’re alive?”

Alec shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know, I hope not? I made sure to take out the lab and the room they were keeping me in, and that half of the building. Whether they noticed I was gone before it all blew or not...” Alec let that sentence die out. Leif nodded anyway, understanding.

“They might be looking for you, then. And there’s no government out here in the woods, not in my territory, so no authorities to come investigating. It’s at least thirty miles to the east to find decent people with badges.”

“Yeah.” Alec finished his tea, not relishing the prospect of another hike through the woods, even in daylight. And involving the mundane police with his business merely meant exposing himself to more people who might want to use him for their own ends. Fae, no matter the species, had an almost instinctual aversion to mundane policing, based on thousands of years of abuse, genocide, and forced assimilation.

“No one is looking for you here,” Leif declared with charming confidence, and Alec found himself believing it.

“What about you?” Alec asked. “Where’s your pack? I thought lone wolves were a human myth.”

Leif stared into the flames for a long moment, and Alec had a feeling he’d put his foot in it with that question. “I’m sorry. That was rude. I’m tired.”

“A normal thing to ask, under the circumstances.” Leif rubbed a hand over the scar on his chest. “Not much to tell, really. All boils down to an evil witch and a curse.”

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Chapter 4

Leif

Alec's face was priceless—shock and curiosity, and some amusement. He expected nothing else, really—most people assumed he was telling a story when he disclosed the truth behind why he was living alone in the woods without a pack. Werewolves did not do well alone, both mentally and emotionally. Like their natural counterparts, werewolves were gregarious, with magics inherent to them as a species that were meant to be connected to others of their kind, an interwoven tapestry of magic and souls that kept them strong, both as individuals and as a people.

Werewolves weren't meant to be alone.

"It'll sound like a fairy tale," Leif warned, leaning forward just enough to grab a log from the stack beside the hearth and place it on the fire. He usually went to sleep in the deeper hours of the night, though he was known to sleep through the morning entirely and wake midday. He had no need to work, no nine-to-five ordeal for him, so the hours he kept were more inclined to favor the wilder side of his nature .

He used the iron poker to arrange the logs burning on the grate, and got up to sweep in the ashes and coals, banking the fire out of habit. His bed was deeper down the mineshaft—there was no space for a bed in the cabin section of his home, even with the additional space from the old cave entrance.

"I used to love bedtime stories," Alec murmured, perhaps picking up the hints from Leif that it was time to sleep. "But I won't ask you to tell me if it'll be too much of a

bother.”

“Not a bother.” He paused, putting away the fireplace broom and tidying a bit around the hearth. “Those I’ve told have either laughed it off as a tall tale or eyed me with pity and some fear, as if the curse will rub off on them merely for knowing about it.”

“Mundane humans?” Alec asked, fingers tugging on the furs in his lap.

“Some. Others were practitioners, curious about my lack of pack on my travels. I’m far from my ancestral lands, and lots of folk look askance at a lone wolf—it’s less romantic a thought when most lone wolves are exiles from packs for atrocious behavior.”

“You hardly seem atrocious to me,” Alec said firmly. “You could have left me in the cold and damp, but you brought me to your home and fed me, took care of me. Unless your plan is to fatten me up and eat me.” That last bit was said with a teasing lilt and flushed cheeks.

“Eat you? Nah, not unless it’s for something other than food, little greenbough.”

Those high cheekbones grew redder, and the honeysuckle sweetness of arousal filled the cabin, making a low growl ease out from his chest.

Alec’s blush was delicious, and he wondered if the young man tasted as good as he looked. But then he scolded himself, reminded that Alec was recovering from being held captive and needed sleep. He went to the armchair and held out his hand, and Alec took it with flattering alacrity.

“I can tell you a bedtime story if you like,” Leif offered. “You need sleep. My bed is clean and warm, and it’s yours for the night.”

Alec accepted his help, getting slowly to his feet, a slight wobble helping to remind his libido that seducing his guest was bad manners.

“Where will you sleep?” Alec asked, a wicked gleam in his gray eyes belying the innocence of his tone.

Leif grumbled a bit under his breath, and Alec snickered, a hint of flirtation under the exhaustion and aches. “In my fur, under the moon,” Leif replied. Wouldn’t be the first time.

He hated seeing Alec take such painful steps, and he indulged his instincts and swept the young man off his feet and into his arms, cradled to his chest. Slim arms went around his neck and Alec pressed his forehead to Leif’s temple, not at all put out by the presumption, if the sweet scent of arousal and the tight grip were anything to go by—but consent before and during sex was important, and Leif needed the words instead of relying on scent, so he went no further than carrying his guest down the mineshaft.

The lights along the walls came on as he went deeper into the den, motion-activated lamps hanging from the walls on iron hooks, the wiring recessed into carved tracks in the ceiling and walls so nothing hung down in the way. There was a slight slope, not much, but about thirty feet later and a few feet below the main floor of the cabin lay his bed. It was a raised wooden platform about two feet off the ground, circular, about ten feet in diameter and more than enough space for a fully transformed werewolf alpha to stretch out. The bedroom ceiling was carved rock, and he had plenty of headroom even when standing on the platform as either man or wolf.

“Is this your bed?” Alec asked, voice a low murmur as if he were falling asleep already.

“Yes,” Leif answered, and he set Alec down on the edge of the platform, the stone

around the bed long polished by his paws and human soles over the decades. “Now it’s your bed until we can get you home.”

He had more than enough furs and blankets to keep his guest warm, along with pillows of assorted colors and designs in rich earth tones. Lights hung from chains around the bed, coming to life with a low, soft glow that was more than enough to prevent stubbed toes, or to read a book if he were so inclined.

The temperature was a tad cooler in the mine, but not too bad, and not damp like an unaltered cave might be—he made sure over the years to make it a comfortable, if lonely, place to live.

He helped Alec sink into the furs, covering him in soft blankets until the young man was all but invisible, just the top of his head peeking out. Leif went to the control switches for the lights and turned the lamps on the wall leading up toward the bathroom on, in case Alec needed to use the toilet in the middle of the night.

Alec’s breathing was slow, steady, far closer to sleep than wakefulness. “I’ll be in the cabin if you need me. Sleep well.”

He turned to leave but Alec made a soft noise of distress, and Leif looked back to see Alec peering up at him from the blankets. “Don’t go yet. Tell me the fairy tale. ”

“It’s not pleasant,” Leif stalled, not wanting to see pity or fear in Alec’s eyes.

“Scary stories never bothered me,” Alec said, and one hand crept out from the blankets and fingers wiggled at him in entreaty. “I don’t want to be alone.”

He eyed Alec for a long moment, but the pleading in those pretty gray eyes slayed his resolve and he took the offered hand, the gentle tugging making him sit at first on the edge of the platform, and Alec shuffled back a tiny bit. He tried not to smile but lost

the battle, and he acquiesced without a fuss, sliding down to lie on his back beside Alec.

A rustle and some grumbling, and he found himself with an armful of fae, Alec sprawled on his chest, head tucked under his chin. “That’s better,” Alec breathed out, gradually relaxing, even with them plastered together, thin cotton sweats and his loin wrap all that were keeping them apart. Alec was warm and snuggly and smelled of wildflowers, and he fit with utter perfection in his arms.

“Once upon a time,” Leif began, smiling up at the ceiling when Alec made a tiny, exhausted giggle at the line. Smiles were rare. He gently tightened his grip on Alec, who snuggled in even more.

“In a far off land, along the seaside cliffs of what would one day be Denmark, a very long time ago, an evil vampire and an even eviler witch decided they wanted to be together forever,” Leif began his tale, and he could tell Alec was listening, not quite limp in the way of deep sleep. Hopefully this tale wouldn’t give him nightmares. “But as everyone knows, vampires can only mate where true love flourishes, and neither the vampire nor the witch were the kind of souls capable of truly loving someone more than their own selfish desires. Obsession and lust could not grow a soulbond, so desperation and greed turned to murder. ”

He paused, and Alec stirred a bit, nuzzling into Leif’s chest, warm breath brushing across his skin. “Keep going.”

Leif gave up waiting for Alec to fall asleep and took up the tale again. “The evil witch concocted a spell to tie her to her vampire lover for eternity, since the soulbond failed to grow between them. She hunted for victims to steal their years of life, and keep them for herself so she need never grow old and die. Humans had too short a lifespan to interest her, and the fae were impossible to trap and kill. Vampires spurned her lover and he lacked a clan to provide unsuspecting victims, so she turned

her eye to the werewolves.”

“Oh no,” Alec whispered, likely guessing where the story was going, arms holding Leif tightly, as if afraid he might disappear into the dark.

Leif hummed in agreement with Alec’s dismay. “The evil witch, with her lover, hunted for werewolves, and in the depths of a moonless night killed a small pack, sacrificing the children to fuel her dark magics. Whispers of the atrocities they committed spread through the forests and glens, and packs united to stop them. Alphas led hunting parties after the killers, but the vampire was old, strong, and willing to kill to protect his lover. The witch was canny and skilled, and obsessed with immortality. The losses were great.”

Memories of funeral pyres and the howls of grief echoing through empty forests rose up, and he took a moment to breathe in the warmth of the man in his arms. Nearly a thousand years later and he held proof that no spell lasted forever.

“What happened next?” Alec whispered, barely awake.

Leif was feeling tired too, but he wanted to finish the story.

“A young alpha, full of bravery and not much sense, tracked the vampire back to his witch, and they fought. Nearly dying, the alpha prevailed against the vampire by pure luck, having attacked near dawn when the earliest rays of sunlight weakened the old vampire enough that the werewolf took his head, but not without being grievously wounded himself.”

Blood, hot in his mouth and on his skin, haunted his memories. The bitter vampire blood, not sweet as humans claimed, choked his senses, and he remembered dropping the headless corpse and collapsing to the forest floor a few steps away from his defeated enemy.

A scream of rage heralded the witch's appearance from the trees, and the flash of silver as she struck with a wickedly sharp athame, plunging it into his chest and narrowly missing his heart.

"The witch stabbed the alpha as he lay wounded not far from her dead lover, missing his heart, and he struck out in reflex, claws ripping her from throat to belly. She had enough breath in her to lay a curse, her own life's blood giving it power as she died."

Alec was on the edge of sleep, but fingertips gently ran over the scar on Leif's chest. "What was the curse?" The words hung in the still, quiet air, too soft to reach farther than the comfortable softness of the bed.

"To die, but not alone—the cursed blade was meant to drain the life from an alpha, along with every member of their pack, using the pack bonds, stealing their long lives and power and giving it to the witch." Leif sighed before finishing the tale. "The wounded alpha knew he would die unless he removed the blade, but he was too hurt for control, and the athame broke within his flesh when he tried to pull out the blade. A part remained lodged in his flesh, behind bone and muscle, but the breaking of the blade blunted the worst of the curse, and he lived. But not without cost."

Alec was silent, and Leif wondered if he was awake enough to hear the end of the tale. "Instead of draining his life-force and leaving him a husk of fur and bone, the broken athame and weakened curse became instead a siphon of life magics. Instead of draining the alpha, the curse pulled from the pack bonds, eating away at his family, friends, loved ones. He healed, but his mere proximity weakened any wolf he shared a bond with, and so in the end, he still lost everything. Any werewolf he shared a bond with was in danger. They would never be safe. So he became an alpha without a pack, and carried a curse that killed any chance of gaining a new pack. And so the alpha left behind his people and his homeland, and wandered the world for a thousand years until he found a small, abandoned mine and made a den, still carrying a curse that can't be lifted."

Alec was asleep, totally limp, breathing slowly. He figured that was for the best. Alec wouldn't remember the sad tale, and Leif could avoid the pity that usually came his way when someone learned of his...affliction.

With the witch dead, the years she had already stolen from innocent lives cut short went instead to Leif. A healthy werewolf might see five to six centuries before dying of old age—he was cursed with the life-force of every werewolf killed by the blade, potentially a dozen or more lifespans, and he suspected he had a few thousand more years to go before he saw his first gray hair.

After a thousand years, with the witch long dead and the curse a mess, the tip of the silver blade burning whenever he stayed too long among his own kind, he had given up trying to lift the curse and retreated from the world.

Practitioners of all types and creeds tried to remove the curse, but the consensus was that it was tied too indelibly to his flesh and blood, and removing the silver blade would require an intrusive surgery his own nature would compromise. He healed too fast for a surgeon to remove the metal, and the curse drained his heart and soul if anyone tried defeating the magic and leaving the metal behind. Removing the curse would kill him, and removing the metal was an impossible task of butchery he refused to ask of any surgeon.

The silver didn't hurt him, not anymore. His body covered it in scar tissue and he was in many ways immune to the effects of silver after constant exposure. It wasn't fatal to him, not like human stories claimed. Not anymore. The early years he suffered through sporadic illnesses and spates of weakness until his body grew accustomed to the toxic invasion and adapted.

All he had in the end was an ache in his chest to match the loss of his people, and he got by as best he could.

Yet now Fate sent him a gift, in the most unusual fashion, so maybe he wasn't meant to be alone. He never thought his future might include a wildflower-scented young man with pretty gray eyes and a smile that lit up a room.

No avoiding it, not really. Fate somehow decided his time had come, and his mate was at last in his arms. Whether he lived to see his happily-ever-after remained to be seen, but he had hope now, instead of endless years of loneliness.

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Chapter 5

Alec

He was in bed with a giant werewolf.

That was the first thought that crossed his mind when he opened his eyes in the dim light the next morning—at least, he assumed it was morning. Wherever he was, and no matter his bedmate, he was far more comfortable than he had been in weeks—hell, years.

Living with his stepfather had been stressful and frustrating and he was glad to be free, though he wanted to visit Stu merely to see the fear in his eyes when Alec punched his smarmy face. Stu was a grade-A asshole and deserved to reap every drop of karma Alec could wrangle up, but none of that was currently as pressing as his need to pee.

He remembered everything from the day and night before, mind clearer and body on its way to healing now that the magic-nulling shackles were off and he had a decent meal in his belly after weeks of junk food and dirty cistern water.

Bruises and scrapes were healing, and were not as painful as the day before. He felt stronger already, like he could rebuild the world from the atoms up, but that all had to wait while he navigated escaping the huge bed and the giant wolf curled around him like he was a pup and Leif a mother wolf guarding her den. Leif must have Changed sometime in the night after Alec fell asleep.

A tall shoulder blocked his view of the tunnel, and there was enough light to make out the shape of tall, fluffy ears and the thick, heavy mantle of fur covering the upper portions of the sleeping wolf's neck and shoulders. Leif was curled around him with only a space just in front of his nose for Alec to crawl past.

He managed it, tumbling free of the blankets, and found himself on his butt on the stone floor, looking up at a very amused werewolf staring down at him, jaws cracked in a wolfish smile, teeth long, bright white, and wickedly sharp.

“Good morning, greenbough,” Leif said in the rumble wolf voice, words coming from everywhere and yet somehow soft enough to only just be heard. His jaws did not move with the words, so it was magic that gave him a voice in that form. “How did you sleep?”

“Well, thank you,” Alec said as he got to his feet, stretching. A black nose was there for him to catch himself as his muscles protested the movements, and Leif sniffed along his torso and up his neck, great bellows of hot air and the earthy scent of fur and blood following. A large tongue licked along one side of his face, and Alec burst out laughing, gently pushing away the huge head, fingers landing in dense fur.

“No wolfie kisses until after I use the bathroom,” Alec scolded lightheartedly.

“I shall make breakfast, then,” Leif waited for Alec to move away from the bed before stepping off the platform, and he shook out his heavy coat, ears flapping, tail flagging high enough it nearly brushed the ceiling of the tunnel. Bright eyes watched him steadily, unblinking, as he made his way up the incline of the tunnel and slipped into the bathroom.

He caught a glimpse of the great beast as he padded past the bathroom door before Alec shut it completely, and he marveled at the sheer size of the werewolf in his wolf form. He'd never seen or heard of a werewolf so...huge. Even in his human form he

was big, though attractively proportionate. Alec's cheeks burned as he recalled the sight of Leif naked and he washed his face in cold water to ease the hot blush in his cheeks.

He used the toothbrush Leif gave him the night before and cleaned up as best he could before leaving the bathroom and heading up the tunnel to the cabin portion of the...den.

In daylight, it was clearly a den. The space near the fireplace was meant for someone with hands to work, cooking essentials clustered around the hearth, a metal sink with an antique hand-pump coming out of the wall beside it, and shelves on the walls. No refrigerator that he could see, but there was electricity, and the windows overlooking the outside clearing in front of the cabin let in a lot of light, even with the cabin on the westward face of the mountain. There was little in the way of human detritus like trinkets and keepsakes and comforts, aside from books and blankets, and lush furs that hummed with magic, preserving them. Alec wasn't the most keen student in school but he doubted there were any animals in the Appalachians that grew a pelt that matched the ones in Leif's collection.

It was a straight line from the door to the tunnel, and the wooden floor was clean and well-maintained, but it still bore the evidence of constant travel by a large creature with claws back and forth, and the path from door to tunnel was kept free of any furniture.

Alec had a feeling Leif spent a lot of time as a wolf. Living as he did in the deep woods, that was probably the most efficient form to take.

He saw no sign of his host, and the door opened just as he thought to look out front. Leif stepped in, a tall man instead of a wolf, naked but for a towel around his waist, hair damp and flipped back over his shoulders, and he carried a basket in one hand. "Is it raining?" Alec asked, squinting out the nearest window, but he saw no sign of

rain or dark clouds.

“I brought food in from the root cellar,” Leif said, holding up the basket. “And I had a shower outside at the well.”

“It’s cold as hell out there.” Alec worried he’d kept Leif from using his own bathroom to clean up. “I’m sorry, I’m taking up your personal space.”

“I hardly noticed the morning chill,” Leif said with a disarming smile. “Don’t worry about me. Let me feed you, and we can discuss what you want to do about your situation.”

Alec nodded, not sure what to say. Leif went to the sink and began to wash potatoes, and Alec decided to make himself useful and tend to the fire, but when he went to the hearth it was already happily crackling away on some fresh logs, and Leif had already positioned the kettle over the flames, and a wide iron skillet was held in the flames on a grate on its own arm protruding from the stone walls of the hearth.

“You can make the tea,” Leif called over his shoulder, as if reading Alec’s mind and knowing he felt a bit out of place .

Alec happily went about searching out mugs on the shelves on either side of the fireplace, and he found a collection of herbal and black teas, picking out flavors by scent and touch, knowing what they were with a fingertip to the dark leaves.

Tea was steeping when Leif came over from the sink, washed potatoes in one hand and a long knife in the other. Alec was impressed when Leif cut the potatoes directly over the iron pans, each slice hissing at it landed on the seasoned metal as he made short work of the potatoes. He returned the knife to the area by the sink, walking through a beam of light from the window, and Alec stared in surprise, a hint of something catching the light in Leif’s wake.

“What...” Alec breathed out, trailing behind Leif, who turned at his voice. Alec frowned, and gestured for Leif to come toward him. “Walk back into the light?”

Confused, Leif humored him, and he paused when Alec sucked in a sharp breath and held up a hand, halting his steps. Leif looked down, eying himself. “What’s wrong?”

Alec saw a hint of something. It was like gold flakes floating in the air, but not in an aimless cloud disturbed like dust by those passing by—no, the gold shimmered in Leif’s wake, a narrow line from the center of his torso, through the sunlight, and then...

Alec stepped into the light, too, and saw the thread of gold reaching out to him, and he felt when the golden thread made contact. It lit him up from the inside, and he felt like he was mainlining espresso but without the nausea and jitters.

“There’s a thread reaching between us...” Alec breathed out, and he was startled when Leif made a deep whine in his chest and went to step away. Alec reached and grabbed Le if by the wrist, stopping him from fleeing. “It’s not the curse. It’s not evil. It’s...warmth and comfort...and energy and...”

Leif’s expression was doubtful, worried, and with a hint of fear. Alec hurried to reassure him. “I can see the curse if I wish, and feel it now that I know it’s there, but it can’t see me, not like you fear,” Alec rushed to explain. “I’m not a werewolf.”

“I know,” Leif said slowly. “But the curse drains anyone I form a connection with, and you’re...”

“What am I?” Alec demanded, though not harshly. He felt Leif’s racing pulse under his fingers where he still gripped his wrist. “What is the golden thread I see, alpha?”

Leif froze for a second, the words reaching him in a way they hadn’t before.

“A golden thread?” Leif asked, almost stammering. Alec nodded once, a firm dip of his chin.

“You’re my mate,” Leif burst out, eyes wide. “Fated mate. It’s rare, so very rare it’s nearly a myth even among werewolves, and not at all like the movies and TV shows portray. But this...you...you and I are meant to be mates. The longer you’re here with me, near me, the more the mate bond will grow and bind us together. And then the curse will...” Leif tugged gently on his arm but Alec refused to let go, stepping into the alpha’s personal space and looking up at him.

“What?”

“The curse will drain you of your life and years, and leave you a dead husk. I refuse to see that happen to you. So we’ll have a nice breakfast, and then I’ll escort you out of the woods to someplace safe, and you can get on with your life.”

Alec let go of Leif’s wrist but before Leif could back away, he reached up and wrapped his arms around that strong neck, and hopped up. Leif caught him immediately, hands cupping his ass.

He looked with his gift down at Leif’s chest, squinting. He saw a hint of something silver and very, very old magic, a tangled mess of glowing lines and torn sigils and a thread of silver that had a ripped tail, presumably where it once led to the witch, feeding her years and strength. The multitude of stolen lifetimes glittered within that shattered curse. With that connection sundered, the stolen years stayed with Leif. A horrible burden to carry, but it was not Leif’s fault or desire. He nearly died stopping evil from harming his people further, and while Alec mourned for Leif’s past, he was beyond grateful that the curse let Leif live long enough for Fate to send Alec his way.

The curse lay like the unfortunate, severed segments of a dead snake circling the shard of silver surrounded by scar tissue, and it made no move to intercept or follow

the glowing golden thread that began at Leif's strong heart, reaching out to Alec. If he concentrated, the mate bond was more substantial and visible, and when he let his ability to see magic relax, it returned to the faint sparks of golden flakes in sunlight.

Alec sighed happily and leaned in just enough to press a soft, gentle kiss to Leif's lips. Wide, startled eyes stared back at him, and Alec decided he needed to be very clear with his very confused mate.

"I. Am. Not. A. Werewolf." He made sure to enunciate each word very clearly. "That curse doesn't even notice the mate bond. And the more I touch you," Alec said with a wiggle, his fingers carding through long, soft hair— "the more I learn about that nasty curse. It won't turn on me because it's meant to kill werewolves, and I am not one. And once I understand it better, I'm very sure I can change the curse at a micro-magic level to stop it from killing any werewolves if we decide to join a pack in the future."

Eyes searched his expression, and Alec held as tight as he could to his newfound mate when Leif finally seemed to accept what he was saying and took his mouth in a devastating kiss.

Leif kissed like he was dying and the only way to live was to leave Alec a whimpering mess of sexual desire and lust. He fisted both hands in Leif's long hair and gave back as good as he got, tongues tangling, and he shivered in a wave of arousal when he felt claws prick at his skin through his sweatpants.

He pulled back, panting, and glowing eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth greeted him when he finally took a deep breath. Grinning, Alec released one fistful of hair and traced his thumb along Leif's lower lip, gently testing the edge of a fang that dropped from his upper jaw. A tiny droplet of blood welled up before a thin tendril of pain bloomed, and Alec was surprised by how much he liked it. Leif took the digit in his mouth and sucked the droplet off his thumb, making Alec moan softly.

“Are you certain the curse can’t hurt you?” Leif asked, squeezing Alec’s ass cheeks in his big hands.

“Very,” Alec promised, nibbling along that strong jaw. Leif smelled so good, and tasted even better, his skin like spring water and salt.

“And finding a mate who happens to be cursed isn’t off-putting?”

Leif sounded so worried about it, and Alec kissed his forehead, hugging Leif around the shoulders, delighted by the fact that Leif had yet to put him down. “I escaped a dead-end life and forced servitude to find a sweet, sexy, caring alpha werewolf who wants me forever. I have no complaints.” Alec paused. “Well, maybe one.”

“What? I’ll do anything.”

“I want more kisses.”

Leif’s grin was sharp and hungry, and Alec thrilled at it, wanting more, not at all afraid of those fangs or the hunting glow of wolf eyes.

A hint of smoke distracted them, and Alec found himself rushed across the room and gently deposited in the armchair as Leif attempted to save the burning potatoes, swinging the iron arm away from the hearth, and Alec gasped when Leif grabbed the scorching hot skillet with one bare hand, freed it from the arm, and then strode to the front door, trailing smoke behind him.

Leif opened the door and jumped to the grass past the stoop, dropping the smoking pan and the blackened contents and shaking out his hand. Alec sprinted from the chair and was outside to cradle the burned hand in both of his, wincing in sympathy and dismay at the reddened skin swelling with blisters.

“Are you okay?” Alec asked, despite seeing the proof otherwise. “I’m sorry I distracted us both while cooking, I could have started a fire.”

Leif had lost the towel in his run out the door, and it pooled now around his feet. He was unperturbed by the burn on his hand if the hardening cock were any indication, and Alec was torn between tending to the burn and seeing if he could get Leif even harder. He was both a grower and a shower, and Alec’d never been so delighted by a sight before.

The burn was red and angry, and yet even as Alec considered trying his hand at healing, something he’d never done before, the blisters stopped growing and began retreating, smaller and smaller until the palm was smooth and unblemished, and the red faded to a healthy tan. No trace remained.

“I knew werewolves healed fast, but I didn’t know it was that fast,” Alec breathed out, running his hand over the palm of Leif’s healed hand. “That’s incredible.”

“Normally werewolves don’t but I’m a different beast compared to my brethren. Old age never came my way, and each passing year I grow stronger. I heal about as fast as a master vampire now, I think. I would be wizened and decrepit at this stage if not for the curse.”

Alec looked up and met Leif’s eyes, and he knew Leif was still waiting for him to get scared or upset, and yet nothing in him was bothered by Leif’s peculiarities. Alec spent the summer making illegal drugs under threat of death, and then escaped his captors by blowing up the labs and the bad guys. He probably killed a few of them, too, and yet Leif was not at all shocked or upset when Alec told him what happened. He ached for Leif, and wanted to help him however he could. Mate or not, Leif was a good person and Alec wanted to help him.

Smoking pan at their feet, Leif gloriously naked, Alec breathed in deeply, taking in

the cool autumn breeze and the weak sunlight around them. He inhaled a lungful of Leif, earthy and metallic with hints of blood, and the scents of damp leaves, and wet earth, and freedom. The damp grass under his bare toes, the slight warmth of sunlight on his shoulders, and the fresh breeze swirling in Leif's long hair—it was a moment in time he'd never forget. Especially when the golden thread made itself known, a plume of heat and energy alighting in his core, prompting him to breathe in deep again, senses exploding, everything heightened.

Leif cupped the side of Alec's face with his free hand, leaning down enough for their lips to brush together. "The mate bond is trying to complete itself. It's happening quickly, but you can stop it or slow it down if you don't want this."

Alec shook his head even as he reached up and fisted a hand in that thick, soft hair, holding him in place. "I want you and the bond."

He kissed Leif. No hesitation, fully accepting, and so very happy that Fate decided he should get lost in this wolf's forest.

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Chapter 6

Leif

Never in his wildest dreams had he expected to find his soulmate practically on his doorstep. It was as if Fate decided one random day to save him from his lonely existence, and he was not about to question the whims of Fate, not with Alec in his arms, kissing him back with everything he had.

The taste of Alec on his tongue was enough to rouse his body with desire, and his teeth ached to bite his delicious mate on the junction of neck and shoulder, securing Alec to his side for eternity.

And it might very well be eternity—he had no idea what Alec’s lifespan was going to be, as the various fae species all had different life expectancies. Even after centuries, Leif had no real idea when the stolen years he’d inherited would run out. All he could hope for now was a lifetime with his mate.

He wanted to sink to the grass and ravish his mate, but the ground was damp and cold, the meager sun too weak to provide warmth, and he wanted to take his time exploring every inch of Alec .

A swift tingle of magic raced across Leif’s shoulders and he broke the kiss, fighting to focus on what his instincts were telling him. Awareness bloomed and his senses expanded, bringing him information.

Someone was hunting in his territory.

“What is it?” Alec asked, immediately picking up on his tension. “Is someone coming?”

Leif gently released Alec and took a few steps toward the cliff, lifting his face to the wind. While werewolves were supernatural creatures formed from magic, they had less active control over it, unlike practitioners such as sorcerers and witches. What abilities they did have tended to run in the oldest bloodlines, in the claws of the most powerful, the strongest alphas and betas. Leif was one of those wolves blessed with control over his inherent magics. He was from a time long lost to history, and he was raised in an era of ancient primal magics.

All of that meant he knew when a predator was hunting in his land. When the boundaries were broken by something or someone who was a threat.

Those instinctual magics had not been roused by Alec, as he was the opposite of a threat to Leif, and he smiled at that realization even as he caught the cloying, insidious scents of multiple intruders.

“Several men,” Leif told Alec with a growl. No need for a wolf this time—he was going to kill anyone who was after his mate. “They stink of fire, chemicals, and blood. I smell the stench of ozone and gunpowder, too. They’ve got guns.”

Alec moved up to stand at his side, holding a hand over his eyes and looking out over the forest, trying to see who Leif could scent approaching. “That combination means the mafia. They probably accounted for all the bodies and figured out I’m not dead.”

“They’ll all be dead soon, so that won’t matter anymore,” Leif said as he stretched out his arms, opening his mouth as the fangs within grew larger, his muscles bulging.

His lycanthrope form was the bipedal monster popular in movies, though his transformation was not the horrific spectacle that moviegoers lost their appetite

over—being so old had its benefits. He had complete control over his transformation, making it smooth and effortless.

His vision changed as the transformation took over. Infrared was added to his sight, and colors were muted, but the shadows were easy to pierce and his range was increased ten-fold. His arms and legs lengthened, fingers tipped by claws, dark brown and gray hair covering his shoulders, and arms, and legs, the shaggy pelt concealing him in natural cover among the trees.

Alec stared up at him in some wonder, mouth agape, and Leif was pleased that he scented no fear from his small mate. He now stood over nine feet tall, three times as wide as Alec, heavy with muscle and yet built for speed and with lightning-fast reflexes, clawed toes gouging the damp earth, and steam rising from his skin as his body ran hot with bloodlust.

Leif crouched to the ground, one massive hand reaching out to gently tip up Alec's chin so they were eye to eye. "In the chests behind the bed, there are weapons. Daggers, a sword or two. No guns. Arm yourself and stay inside the cabin."

Alec narrowed his eyes and reached out his own hand, and Leif snorted in shock when his mate flicked his canine nose with a finger, scowling. "I'm getting my shoes. Stay right here. Then we are going to see who's here uninvited."

"Dangerous," Leif protested, words garbled by his longer muzzle, his human mouth transformed to hold a set of three-inch fangs.

"I blew up a drug lab with magic," Alec retorted, already jogging to the open door of the cabin. He found his shoes by the door where Leif set them the night before, and sat on the stoop to tug them on, and just as quickly he pulled the cabin door shut and rejoined Leif. "I don't need a weapon."

Leif was still crouched down, and he rumbled out a laugh when Alec, without missing a beat, climbed onto his back, arms around his neck, and his knees clamped to Leif's ribs, his back too wide for Alec to wrap his legs around him. Leif stood, Alec's heart racing where his chest was pressed to Leif's shoulders, and he put one hand behind himself to support Alec under his ass.

"Do not let go," Leif ordered. "I'm taking the fast way down."

"I won't," Alec promised, kissing Leif's neck not too far from where a mating bite would go, and he growled happily. He took one, then two leaping strides to the right side of the yard, reaching the cliff and the long drop below to the forest floor.

The barest pause and then a more powerful leap outward, Alec gasping and clinging to him even tighter, and Leif made sure he kept ahold of his mate as they dropped in a shallow arc, landing on a ledge about halfway down, and with a bend of his knees, Leif took them down the rest of the way.

Their landing on the forest floor was anticlimactic, since no one was around to see Leif stick the landing, but Alec was giggling in nervous astonishment, beyond excited.

"That was crazy!" Alec whispered loudly, shaking a bit, eyes wide as Leif knelt enough for Alec to get off his back and on his own two feet .

"You alright?" Leif asked, sniffing along Alec's face and neck, ears pricked and listening for footsteps deeper in the woods.

Alec giggled when a cold nose met warm, soft skin, and Leif was startled but pleased when Alec darted in and kissed the side of his furry head, hands scratching behind his ears. "So fluffy," Alec sighed happily.

“I’m a terrifying monster, little greenbough,” Leif grumbled, pretending his tail was not wagging.

“Of course you are.” Alec dropped his hands to his waist, looking around. “Which way are the people coming from?”

Leif pointed with a long, clawed finger to the west, in the direction Alec had come from the day before.

“Let’s go,” Alec said, and surprised Leif again when he took one of Leif’s drastically larger hands in his, holding firmly, not at all put off by the inhuman fingers or long claws.

He took a few steps but his stride was far too long for Alec to keep up without running. Leif grumbled, but knelt beside his mate, who smiled wide and climbed back up on Leif’s back, and Leif helped arrange him so Alec could tuck one knee into Leif’s left armpit and he could help hold his mate up with light pressure on the bent leg with his upper arm. Alec’s weight was negligible.

Mate secured, Leif took off in the direction of the trespassers. The wind was quiet but there was just enough of a current that he was easily able to follow the scents of the mortal men to their position in a couple of minutes. He took his time, not wanting to get into the line of sight of a rifle, not with Alec on his back.

There weren’t many shadows for the intruders to hide in—the leaves had fallen and the forest floor was thick with them, which helped him pinpoint their position with ease. Sunlight hit bare gray and brown trunks, making the dark forms of the mortal men shrouded in black from head to toe stand out in the autumnal palette of the forest. Leif’s coloration helped him blend in with the trees and the leaf-covered ground, and he moved fast enough that if anyone thought they saw him he was gone before they could turn their heads to double-check.

A slight rise from an uprooted tree gave Leif a safe place to crouch without being seen, and he let Alec slide from his back. Leif held still among the twisting roots that still clung to the base of the tree, giving them plenty of cover. They were about fifty feet from the six armed men loudly walking through the woods in their general direction, and one was sucking on a mint-scented vape that irritated his nose.

A seventh man stumbled along behind the group, middle-aged and out-of-shape, bald head covered in sweat despite the cool temperatures, face pale and cheeks flushed from exertion. He was breathing loudly, clearly winded, and he wore gym shoes, holey jeans, and a thin denim jacket over a stained white t-shirt, standing out like a sore thumb from the rest of the group.

Alec peeked through the roots and hissed in a sharp breath, pulling back quickly into Leif's side, as if seeking protection. He wrapped an arm around his mate and ducked his head to Alec, who whispered into his ear. "The guy sweating his life away is my stepfather, Stu. The one who sold me to those guys," Alec pointed to the men in black who were kicking at the ground, probably trying to find tracks or any sign of Alec's trail through the woods. "I recognize all of them. All mafia men."

"They're trespassing in my territory," Leif grumbled as quietly as he could—he was a bit too large to whisper well. "And they harmed you."

"I did try to blow them all up," Alec replied quickly. "I don't care if you kill them. Leave Stu to me, please."

"As you wish," Leif eased away from Alec slowly. "Wait until I call for you to come out. You're not bulletproof."

Alec nodded and stayed behind the tree.

Crouching on all fours, he waited for the group to pass their hiding spot before

slinking out from behind the tree, none of the humans looking in his direction. He paused, eyed the distance, and then leapt.

Alec

Watching Leif attack the men who held him prisoner for weeks was both liberating and shocking. It felt great to see threats to his freedom and life get struck down with such ease, and only shocking because it was way better than anything he'd seen in a monster movie featuring werewolves.

Shots rang out, and Alec winced, but if a lucky bullet or three found their target, Leif had no reaction, not even a flinch. He picked up one man who fired an entire clip at Leif without reaction from the werewolf, and then bit the screaming man's head clean off and spit the skull out. Three men screamed in terror and split from the group, but Leif was on them instantly, two others shooting at the werewolf but hitting one of their own with friendly fire.

It was over quickly after that. Two men ran, but Leif caught up to them in seconds after dispatching his previous targets with quick slashes of his claws across throats. Leif squashed one of them by leaping several yards and landing on his back, the crunching of many bones loud in the woods, that man dying with a gurgle from a crushed chest. The last man died with a wail of terror when Leif hamstringed him a few feet from Stu, Alec's stepfather having fallen on his ass in the leaves, frozen, staring in horror as Leif decapitated the last man with a wrench of his jaws, blood spraying in a fountain over Stu.

Steam rose from hot blood scattered over disturbed leaves and damp earth, the harsh breaths and whimpers of Alec's stepfather the only sound in the woods.

"It's safe, little greenbough," Leif called out, and Alec stood carefully, then made his way over to his mate, doing his best to avoid the worst of the gore and pooling blood.

“Are you alright?” Alec asked, eyeing the numerous bullet wounds on his mate. He was amazed to see the bullets be slowly pushed out by Leif’s healing ability, falling to the ground like bloody stars, loud as they hit the leaf cover. The holes closed, and there was barely any blood on Leif that was his own. His jaws and arms were soaked with blood, and his mate would need another bucket shower from the well before he went in the cabin.

“I am well, my mate,” Leif declared, standing as tall as his lycanthrope form allowed. His voice was a deep rumble of thunder among the trees, blood dripping from his red teeth.

Alec finally turned to his stepfather. “Hi, Stu. Been awhile. What’re you doing out in the woods?”

Stu shivered, a whole-body wrench as his mind tried to re-engage after shutting down in terror. “I..um..they said you ran away. I was... I was looking for you. Worried about my stepson. ”

Alec rolled his eyes, and Leif growled so loudly the dry leaves shook at their feet. “I bet they made you come out here to help find me, or else they’d demand a refund of my purchase price. You were worried about your own hide, not mine. You did sell me to them in the first place. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Stu’s face morphed into a rictus of anger and greed. “You ruined everything, you fucking fairy. Should’ve stayed where you were told. At least your stupid mother made me a profit before she died.”

Alec had never felt rage like that moment—it didn’t cloud his vision or his thoughts, not like it would for a human. For him, the rage fueled his gifts. The world was bathed in light all around him, even the odious Stu, whose blood coursed through vessels nearly clogged by cholesterol and a brain and liver damaged by lifelong bad

habits.

Lief roared, a terrible sound that shook the world, and Stu flinched back and tried to crawl away, but Alec moved to stand in his path. He knelt down, and held out his hand. He smiled, and Stu, confused and disgustingly hopeful, took it with a slow motion. Alec squeezed, but instead of helping his stepfather stand, he unleashed his gifts.

It took almost nothing to dislodge several clumps of white flakes in the arteries of the heart, making them denser, heavier, bulky enough to lodge in deeper and block the flow of blood to the muscles of the heart.

Alec let go, and slowly stood, watching as Stu writhed in agony, gasping for breath, hands scrambling at his chest, face going white, moaning in pain.

The heart attack was massive, swift, and merciless. Better than Stu deserved. His stepfather was dead in under a minute, faded eyes staring up at the blue sky through barren branches .

The woods were quiet again. There was only the croaking of ravens in the distance, and the scent of blood was thick in the air, likely to draw in scavengers quickly once they left the area.

Alec looked around, shrugged, and went about searching the corpses, stripping the dead men of cash and valuables, leaving the phones and IDs with the bodies. He figured he deserved the money influx after weeks of captivity. He'd like to buy a refrigerator and a computer. The cabin had electricity, and he wondered how much it would cost for a satellite hookup. He ignored the guns. Those he had no use for.

Alec found an unopened water bottle in one dead man's jacket pocket, and held it up to Leif, who was slowly transforming back into a man from his massive lycanthrope

form.

His mate opened the bottle and washed his face and hands as best he could, though there wasn't much the sixteen ounces could do against the pints of blood soaking his mate from head to toe. At least his face was mostly clean.

Not a mark remained on Leif from the fight, all bullet wounds gone as if they never existed. He knew werewolves were durable but Leif's healing ability was amazing, even by supernatural standards.

He stuffed the goodies in the deep pockets of his borrowed pants, tying the drawstring again to keep them from falling off his hips, and rejoined his mate. Leif opened his arms, and Alec, uncaring of the remaining blood, slipped into his embrace and hugged him back, hard. A kiss landed in his hair.

"Do we need to move the bodies?" Alec asked, enjoying the body heat pouring off Leif.

"Not yet." Leif said, holding him, one hand rubbing up and down his back, soothing. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Alec answered honestly. "I've wanted to kill Stu for years after what he did to my mom. Kinda weird that he's dead and I did it."

"Revenge can be both freeing and baffling. It never quite ends up being what you expect it to feel like," Leif shared. "But in this case, it was deserved and handed out with impressive swiftness. I'm proud of you."

Alec grinned, and tilted his head back as far as he could to meet Leif's gaze. "You're a badass. Very scary. Very sexy."

Leif grinned as well, tossing his blood-dampened hair back with a proud flip. “Thank you, greenbough.” He paused, then asked, “Do you have plans for your spoils?”

He was afraid Alec would leave.

“Stu came to me, so I don’t need to go back home to find him. Does Amazon deliver out here anywhere? I need a phone and a computer, and we need a refrigerator and a generator. The cabin is great, but I need some more creature comforts. Do you have a washing machine or dryer?”

Leif stared at him with wide eyes, shocked, and then he threw back his head with a peal of delighted laughter. Alec was lifted off his feet and soundly kissed, leaving him dazed and happy.

Leif held him aloft and chuckled, shaking his head a bit. “I have a small fridge at my place but that’s it, except for solar panels on the cliffs and a well. But I’m not a poor man—I’ve been alive a long time, and have more than enough money set aside in banks to fund a new life for my mate and myself. Are you certain you can destroy the curse?”

Alec was nodding before Leif finished asking. “I am. I’ll need to examine the curse again, but we can hide out in the woods for a while, get to know each other.” Alec grinned when heat flashed in those wolfish eyes. “I just got mated, you see, and I need time with my mate. Lots of alone time.”

“May we have all the time we desire, my little greenbough.” Leif pressed their foreheads together, and sighed happily. “I’m so very glad I found you in my woods.”

Alec agreed wholeheartedly. “Fate knew what she was doing.”

Leif kissed him, slow and sweet, and swept Alec up into a bridal carry, making him

laugh. “Let’s leave the bodies to the scavengers. We have lots of...learning to do...with each other.”

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Chapter 7

Alec

Leif carried him in his arms like he weighed nothing. Bridal style, too, which was perfect for kissing. The blood and gore was an afterthought. Leif's tongue in his mouth had Alec thoroughly distracted.

They stumbled when Leif bounced off a tree that had sprung up out of nowhere, and they broke apart in laughter.

"Maybe we need to get back to the cabin before we go too much further," Leif said between chuckles.

Alec pouted, but agreed. "How fast can you go?"

A wicked gleam entered those wild eyes and Alec squealed when Leif clutched him close and took off so fast that the forest passed in a blur. The wind was cold and biting but the heat pouring off Leif was enough to keep him from freezing to death in the run back to the cabin. The path up the cliffside in the daylight was a complicated maze of brambles, huge boulders, and sharp switchbacks with dizzying falls, but Leif was surefooted, even in his human form. Though not entirely human—Alec caught a glimpse of Leif's feet, skin covered in mud and leaves, and saw claws and the dark sheen of gray fur.

Alec had had little interaction with werewolves prior to meeting Leif, but what little he did know was being upended with every passing hour by his new mate. Leif

handled a partial Change with ease, so swift that it was almost impossible to track.

They reached the cleared yard in front of the cabin, the cast-iron pan and the burnt potatoes still where Leif had tossed them aside in the dead grass not far from the stoop. Leif stopped next to it and gently set Alec on his feet, though he held onto Leif's arm when his legs threatened to give out under him.

"Alright?" Leif asked, bending down to grab the pan from the grass, shaking it to dislodge the few remaining charred bits of what would've been their breakfast.

"I'm a bit shaky," Alec shared, deciding that trying to hide how he was feeling was stupid—Leif had found him at his worst, and took care of him, an utter stranger, and never made him feel bad about it. "I think some food and a nap before sexy times might be a good idea."

He had used his magic to kill Stu. While he did not regret it, he was feeling the residual effects of being held in nullifier cuffs for weeks on end, followed by a desperate escape and a subsequent trek through the mountains in autumn without a proper meal or rest. While he was feeling loads better than he had the night before, he was not yet fully recovered, and expending energy using magic had strained what little reserves he had.

Leif set the pan on the stoop and grimaced at himself, as if noticing the blood for the first time. It was cold and drying, sticky, and he was covered in mud and forest debris as well, especially his lower legs and feet. His hands were covered in blood, and blood soaked his skin from his chin all the way down his chest.

Even though he saw Leif heal in real time, Alec still checked for signs of injury—Leif was in perfect health, no signs of being shot over a dozen times. Not a scratch.

Except that silver scar on his chest. He understood now why it was there—the tale was gruesome and tragic, and Alec resolved to destroy that curse if it was the last thing he ever did—not that he was aiming to be self-sacrificing, but he hated to fail.

And Leif didn't deserve to be alone the rest of his life, either.

Though...not entirely alone. The bond was new, and still forming, but if Alec focused he could feel it, a warmth near his heart that radiated outward through his whole body, shoring him up. He rubbed a hand over his chest, the not-quite-achy feeling of the bond noticeable, and Leif caught the motion.

His expression was one of joy and worry—as if hoping that Alec was happy about the bond and afraid he would be upset by it.

“I do not regret meeting you,” Alec declared abruptly. It was true. “Meeting you was Fate and I’m no foolish human to argue against my destiny. I want you and this bond and I’ll never regret it.”

He was damn near growling out that impromptu speech by the end, hands on his hips, glaring at Leif, who stared back at him with a flabbergasted expression, lips twitching into a grin.

Leif left the pan on the stoop and took a few strides back to stand in front of Alec, then leaned down to place a firm kiss to Alec's forehead. “Yes, my mate.”

Leif smelled of rain and stone and blood. Alec hummed, relaxing, enjoying the sensation of being doted upon when Leif swooped him up in one massive arm and then gently deposited him on the stoop. “I need to rinse off the blood and muck. There's a small fridge underneath the counter; should be some sausage in there. Eggs are in the basket on the countertop under a hand towel, and there's a spare pan hanging beside the hearth on a hook.”

“I can cook,” Alec promised, nodding. “Don’t be too long, please.”

“I won’t,” Leif assured, and headed around the corner of the cabin toward the sheer cliff that rose up steeply behind the small structure.

Leif

Alec’s impassioned declaration filled him with reassurance and warmth, the bond echoing with the young fae’s determination and resolve. Along with exasperation and a growing fondness. Leif had his issues, and hoped Alec had the patience to wait for him to develop hope for the future. He was so used to resignation and despair and loneliness that he needed to relearn how to exist with a brighter future.

Alec entered the cabin and Leif could hear him moving about. He made himself head to the well and pump the spout to wash off. He could shower inside but he didn’t want the stink of the dead trespassers in his den for even a moment.

The pump was the kind from centuries past, made of solid metal and a long arm that drew water up from the well. The cabin was fully plumbed, something he managed to get done thirty years or so earlier, but he kept the hand pump for situations just like this—washing down after a hunt.

The well water was ice-cold and unpleasant, but necessary, Leif filling bucket after bucket and sluicing himself down head to toe. The water ran clear after a few buckets, and he twisted about the best he could to make sure he wasn’t missing a spot.

He let the pump arm drop and brushed his hair back from his face with one hand. The sun was higher in the sky, and he was glad to see the sky was clearing out from the previous long stretch of gloomy, overcast days. Autumn was in the last gasp before winter arrived, and clear, sunny days were going to be rare until after the winter

solstice in this stretch of the mountains.

He smelled sausage cooking before he rounded the corner to the front of the cabin, the cast-iron pan gone from the stoop as he stepped up and into the cabin, shutting the door behind him to keep the heat in.

“Smells great,” he told Alec with a grin, the young fae bent over the hearth, using a long fork and poking at the fresh venison sausage crackling in the pan. Alec had sorted out how to attach the spare pan to the correct arm while he was washing up, and the kettle was steaming, mugs ready and awaiting the hot water.

“I cut up some more potatoes; home fries sound good?” Alec asked over his shoulder.

He made a tempting sight bent over like that in his borrowed clothing, and Leif reminded himself that Alec needed food more than he needed an amorous mate distracting him before he could eat.

“Sounds perfect. Need any help?” he asked, despite it being his home and food—his mate was clearly in charge of making breakfast and he was quite content to leave it be if it made Alec happy.

“Pour the tea? Sausage is done, waiting on the home fries to cook through.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alec chuckled at Leif’s gentle teasing. Leif poured the tea as instructed and while it was steeping, he headed to the bathroom to make sure he was free of any remaining blood and gore. He felt Alec’s eyes on him as he went, and it made him happy to know his mate liked seeing him naked. He rarely wore clothes when he was alone—no reason to wear anything when he spent his time patrolling his territory as a wolf and only went out as a man when he needed supplies once a month. He did

enjoy cooking and the comforts of home, so the cabin was fashioned with that in mind instead of merely being a den of stone and dirt.

His reflection caught him off guard. The smile on his face was wide and uncontrollable, and he let himself enjoy the emotions whirling in his chest and belly. This time yesterday he had been trapped in a rut of depression and loneliness, and a day later he was full of hope and a rising joy.

He left the bathroom after making sure no blood remained and he went to the chests behind his massive bed; the bed's platform was also full of storage drawers and hatches full of stuff. Mostly clothing, weapons, and a few personal items from his long life.

Equipment and supplies for cabin upkeep were kept farther down the mine shaft at the dead end, another seventy or so feet past the walls he built behind the bed platform. The bedroom was built in the main shaft, the wall behind the bed cutting off access to the remaining mine shaft.

That wall had a hidden door that led to the rest of the tunnel, and the door was fashioned in such a way that it was impossible to see, the seams obscured by design, the hinges recessed. He knew it was there, but if someone entered the cabin while he was gone, they would find next to nothing to steal. Maybe the copper wiring and pipes, and some of the antique swords in the chest he mentioned to Alec might fetch a thief some decent cash.

The end of the original mining tunnel was used for storage and he was happy to expand it into a room for Alec if his mate wanted his own space.

If Alec even wanted to stay here in the woods with him once the initial rush of the mate bond lifted. Alec mentioned getting things to make it easier for him to live in the cabin—which Leif supported—but then, they'd been mates for less than a day.

Leif learned long ago to never argue with Fate, but Fate seldom laid out the clearest path to its end goal.

Never take anything for granted. It was the fastest way to die...and break your own heart.

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Chapter 8

Alec

Breakfast was filling, and Alec hid a massive yawn behind his hand, jaw creaking. Leif was watching him with a soft expression, and Alec blushed. He was not used to a man gazing at him with any kind of softness. Affection was a foreign concept after the death of his mother, and the few sexual partners he'd had weren't the kind for softness or concern.

Alec was dressed again in clean clothes borrowed from Leif; he'd left the previous bloody garments out on the front stoop before making breakfast to keep the smell from the cabin. Dishes washed and put away, enemies dead and left for the carrion birds, Alec was ready for a nap. A warm, solid arm curled around his back, and Alec leaned into Leif, snuggling into the heat of that big, strong body. Leif reminded Alec of an ancient oak tree, standing tall despite centuries of storms, wildfires, and greedy humans with axes.

He was really tired.

Alec realized his eyes were shut, and he blinked them open, yawning again. "Can I take a nap? "

"I was about to suggest just that," Leif murmured, and Alec hardly noticed when Leif swooped him up in his strong arms and carried him down the tunnel to the bedroom. His mate obviously liked to carry him around and Alec had no problem with it.

“Nap with me?” Alec asked, nuzzling into the warm skin of Leif’s neck. Breathing in the scent of his mate, he felt the bond stir to life. Each touch, each glance, every breath laced with the scent of Leif made the bond glow, as if happy, content. “You can go wolfy if you want.”

“Wolfy?” Leif chuckled, “is that an official word for the Change?”

“Yes, I just decided right this moment,” Alec teased, smiling, barely awake but happy to banter with Leif. He was so different from what society said alphas were like—he was powerful, but kind, patient, and tender. Not at all the brutish, overprotective, possessive alpha-hole from urban legends and romance novels.

Alec dozed in and out but was alert enough to register Leif tucking him into bed, the werewolf stripping out of his clothes, but pausing before removing his pants. “Clothes off?”

“Clothes are evil,” Alec muttered, making Leif snort out a laugh, the alpha shucking his pants and tossing them to the side. He was gloriously naked and Alec loved the view.

Alec wiggled around until he was able to remove his own shirt, and then big, hot hands helped him get out of his borrowed clothing. He reveled in the feel of the furs and clean sheets on his bare skin, and then the heat pouring off of Leif as his mate slid under the covers beside him.

Alec rolled into Leif and fussed about with soft whimpers, making Leif laugh again, but his mate understood Alec’s silent demand and wrapped him in strong arms, holding him securely to his broad chest. Alec pressed his nose to the firm expanse and sighed happily, falling asleep before he even managed to finish a breath.

Leif

Alec was asleep instantly, his breathing evening out as he gradually went limp, his soft, near-snores vibrating against Leif's chest. Holding his naked mate in his arms was arousing and delightful, but he was old enough to tell his cock to behave and wait until Alec made it clear he wanted sex. Nothing was more of a turn-off than an unenthusiastic partner.

A few hours later he woke to Alec sprawled out by his side, and found himself in his wilder form, having Changed in his sleep. He slept most nights as the wolf, but now that he had a mate, he might need to be a man more often. A habit to build.

Alec's head rested on Leif's foreleg, both arms wrapped around his leg, fingers buried in thick fur, as if afraid Leif would disappear while he slept.

He sniffed along Alec's head and down to his shoulders, unable to stop his tongue from licking the bare skin he found. Alec twitched, tickled, and Leif made himself behave, resting his head atop of Alec, covering his mate. Alec wasn't a small man, but he was far, far smaller than Leif when he was the wolf, and it made a primitive, wild part of him quite satisfied at the size disparity.

They spent the day in bed, Alec sleepily asking if he could stay abed instead of getting up, and it made Leif incredibly happy to let his mate recover in his bed. Between food and water breaks, Alec always reached for Leif, needing to touch. The bond grew in the quiet moments, and Leif rested, content, protecting Alec as he slept.

Alec

Riding a gigantic wolf in broad daylight was a far different experience than doing so in the dead of night.

Wearing his old clothing from captivity was less than ideal, but the borrowed clothing from Leif was comically oversized and he didn't want to spend the hours of travel in

the woods fighting with his clothing to stay on.

Alec wore a backpack with Leif's clothing, the straps unclipped and rearranged to be worn on the shoulders and not around the neck of a great wolf. Alec did not mind—the thought of a bag hanging around his mate's neck waiting to get caught on a tree or boulder if they had to run was enough to make him demand the backpack before Leif even tried to get it on.

Looking around, he recognized the area from the morning before.

The bodies had been disturbed, yanked and tugged from where they fell, mauled and pecked. Alec heard the cries of ravens and crows, and there was a pair of turkey vultures soaring overhead, visible through the bare branches.

“Coyotes got to them,” Leif said in that delicious wolfy voice of his.

“Did we scare them away by coming through?”

“We did, but they'll come back when we leave. I try not to bother them too much—I'm not what they expect from a wolf, so they tend to avoid me.”

“How do you mean?” Alec asked as Leif crouched enough for Alec to slide down. Alec picked his way through the chaos of blood and leaves and knelt by Stu's body, digging a hand underneath until he came out with the keys he forgot to get the day before.

“No pack. A lone wolf is unnatural, so to them I'm an oddity, a danger.”

“Makes sense,” Alec said as he hopped back up into place on Leif's back, wiggling until he felt secure.

“Ready up there, little greenbough?” Leif asked, amused.

Alec took two big handfuls of fur from the mantle across Leif’s huge shoulders and nodded. “Yup! Mush!”

Alec laughed when Leif growled, gently shaking him from the force of it.

“Sassy once you feel better, aren’t you? We’ll see about that...”

“What do you mean...”

Alec bit back a screech when Leif took off like a bullet from a gun, the wind biting at his face. The screech turned into a delighted laugh soon enough, and Alec leaned forward into the wind, snuggling down into the thick coat beneath him to stay warm.

Alec

His face was freezing by the time they entered the lower valley. Their progress through the woods was in a general downhill direction the whole way, and he felt the muscle strain from maintaining his balance on Leif’s back. Leif followed no track or trail that Alec could see, but then that was smart—it helped protect his location in the woods all the better if there wasn’t a trail right to the front door.

Leif followed his nose and memory, from what Alec could tell, and he was impressed by his mate. Easily impressed, probably, but then Alec was allowing himself to be so, as finding a soulmate was nearly impossible. To have one handed to him in such a manner, after imprisonment, trials, and pain, made it all the more important that he enjoy himself and the process of bonding.

“What’s the nearest town?”

“Gelridge Hollow,” Leif replied. “It’s tiny, doesn’t even have a stop sign, but it has a storage unit facility where I keep my truck, and a gas station.”

“That sounds familiar, is it near Hemlock?”

“About thirty minutes down the highway,” Leif answered him over his shoulder, one big ear flickering as they spoke. “Why?”

“I lived in Hemlock with Stu and Mom,” Alec said readily. “The keys I took off his body are for the house and his bedroom. I need my license and paperwork and stuff, unless he sold it all along with me. If he kept it, it’ll be locked up in his bedroom.”

“We can check; it’s on the way to the nearest superstore.”

“Sweet! Thank you.”

How quickly his life had improved in a matter of days. He went from beaten and poisoned by chemical exposure on a daily basis to talking to his mate about shopping at the store for essentials.

Alec only knew they’d made it when Leif stepped out from behind a tall pine tree and they were standing at the back of a parking lot, rows of storage unit bunkers in front of them. Orange and red sliding garage doors signaled they were in the right place, and the parking lot was made of dark, small-grade gravel, rutted in places from vehicles coming and going and thanks to mud from autumn rain.

It was impossible to see past the rows of units, and Alec worriedly looked around for cameras—it wasn’t illegal for a werewolf to be in their wolf form in public, but humans were easily scared and violently protective over their property. No point in courting trouble. “Is it safe?”

Leif sniffed the air, great black nose working, and then he twitched both ears backward at Alec. “No one has been here in days.”

“Okay,” Alec sighed in relief, Leif crouching down to let him get off. He jumped the last bit and adjusted the backpack on his shoulders.

“Unit with my truck is F23.” Leif offered, pointing with his nose in the right direction. “Key is in the front pocket of my bag.”

“Gotcha.”

Alec found the key and headed in the direction Leif indicated, his mate following behind him, big head swinging as he scented, ears twitching. “Expecting trouble?”

“Always expect trouble in the hills when I’m in this form,” Leif said. “Especially closer to towns.”

“People don’t like werewolves out here?” Alec asked, surprised. He didn’t experience any prejudice growing up, at least not for being fae. For being poor, yes, but not for being fae. That was so normal in the hills. The younger fae got along well with humans, and interbreeding was as natural as breathing, and had been going on for hundreds of years now.

“This form is the problem, not the nature,” Leif replied. “Homesteaders shoot first, and don’t bother with the questions later, either. Coyotes are bold out here, not enough wolves or big cats as competition. Bears get in as much trouble as the coyotes do. Wild wolves haven’t been here in decades.”

“Ahh, yeah, gotcha,” Alec said, grimacing. He had a horrible image of a small farmer shooting a massive shotgun at a scrawny, terrified, fleeing wolf. “That sucks so much.”

“It’s not easy being a predator surrounded by humans. They tend to think everything is theirs, and zealously kill any perceived competition.”

Alec understood that truth on a visceral level. While the younger fae were generally welcomed amongst humans to the point of interbreeding, that was mostly a regional thing in the Appalachian Mountains and the assorted ranges within, and outside of that, humans and fae tended to maintain species lines and divisions. The non-indigenous peoples of Appalachia owed their lineages to immigrants from Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Germany, all places with rich cultures and a history of interacting with various fae species.

All that fell apart, though, when it came to fae species that could not, and never would, pass as human or vaguely humanoid, whether in face or form. There were fae species, both Elder and younger, that were quadrupeds, or insectoids, or came with scales and feathers in place of hair and trimmed nails. Those precious few species were quick to seek shelter in the wilds of the Americas during the many migration waves from the early 1700s to the mid-1900s from the Old to the New World. Human history was rife with stories of humans killing or reacting with violence to the more fantastical fae peoples in the Old World. There were myriad accounts of death and horror, and those fae that survived to escape across the sea disappeared as soon as they made landfall in the Americas.

That was the limit of what Alec knew—schools taught human-centric white colonizer history and what little he did know he got from his mother before her passing.

Alec found the unit and unlocked the garage door, lifting it for Leif as he was still a wolf and lacking thumbs. Lights flickered on automatically, and Alec was impressed to see a large, dark blue extended cab truck with tires meant for mountain roads. Also inside the unit was a large couch along one wall, a simple metal table with a lamp, some spare tires leaning against the back wall, and a rolling tool cabinet. There were shelves tacked to the walls as well. The unit was climate-controlled and had

electricity, and Alec wondered how much money it cost Leif to rent this place.

Sounds of flesh rearranging came, and Alec politely kept his eyes averted, not wanting to presume—Changing was an intimate thing, uniquely vulnerable. He and Leif might be mates, but they were also still learning about each other. Alec was happy to be patient and take his time understanding his mate and what made Leif who he was as a person.

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Chapter 9

Leif

A few times that day Leif thought he was dreaming, that Alec was a figment of his imagination and not real, not really there with him, and not his mate.

Time might chip away at the disbelief, but he hoped it never touched the gratitude he felt for finally having his mate. And not just any mate—Alec.

The man who turned away to give him privacy when he Changed. Rode wolf-back with an exuberant smile and a sassy attitude. And wanted to live in an old cabin in the mountains. Leif was less sure about the cabin situation but Alec seemed keen, so he was going with it.

Living for hundreds of years meant Leif had a comfy nest egg set aside, enough money to support his wanderings every few centuries. He usually stayed in one place until it got too difficult to remain—he fled Europe during the early waves of the Great Migration, when humans drove supernatural beings by the thousands out of Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. During that time, werewolves specifically were hunted by human governments for pack lands and territory, most of it fueled by the insidious influences of the High Council of Sorcery. He was old enough to recall the mass murders of entire packs for the land they lived upon, either directly perpetrated by the Council or funded by them.

Leif finished Changing, the process as smooth as ever, and he approached Alec and took the backpack from him, his mate blushing hot at Leif's naked proximity. He

sensed arousal and desire from Alec, and that cheered him considerably.

Leif took out his clothes and got dressed. “You can turn around now.”

Alec promptly turned around with a smile on his face, and Leif found himself smiling back, enchanted. Alec was quite pretty when he smiled.

“You’ve got a lot in here for someone who lives in the mountains, hours away,” Alec said, gesturing to the items lining the walls and the rolling storage bins and cabinets. Not to mention the truck taking up most of the space.

“Every few years I toy with the idea of buying a house somewhere quiet, but then I remember people exist and I lose interest pretty quickly,” Leif shared, fishing out the truck keys and unlocking the doors.

“I too dislike people,” Alec shared with a grin, and he got in the passenger side without a word from Leif. He followed suit and got behind the wheel, starting the truck.

He made sure to run the truck every time he came down from the mountain, so it started without a hiccup and rumbled, ready to go. Leif pulled out and stopped just past the door, then got out to close and lock the storage unit before getting back in and heading out of the storage facility.

Alec

The drive to Hemlock went quickly, the highway a breeze with little traffic. Leif took the only exit for Hemlock, blinker on and without needing direction from Alec, the tiny town visible through the trees off the highway.

“Turn right at the road, then it’s about a quarter-mile down on the right. Stu’s place is

a tiny blue house with a bunch of broken-down cars out front,” Alec directed, and Leif made a small hum in acknowledgment as he made the turn into Hemlock off the exit.

Main Street in Hemlock was an ode to the previous century, when the town thrived off coal mining and timber mills, but both enterprises dried up in the 1970s and the population of Hemlock dried up with them but for a few intrepid humans and a small but significant fae population.

Including Alec’s late mother, Aleria. A human and younger fae hybrid, her powers were much like her son’s, able to manipulate and alter the molecular structure of the physical world, but she was deeply vulnerable to synthetic chemicals and her health was poor due to the work Stu made her do—she faded, and in her weakened state, died from long-term poisoning by the very drugs Stu forced her to make.

Leif followed Alec’s directions, driving them past the nearly abandoned main drag of town, only the corner gas station and the tiny post office open. Alec frowned, eyeing the 24/7 diner that was usually open, its windows shuttered, the sign flipped to Closed as they passed .

“What day is it?” Alec asked, realizing he had no idea. He wasn’t even sure of the month.

“I think it’s Tuesday,” Leif answered, pointing to the dash of the truck that showed the time and date. “I haven’t flipped the clock on this since I bought it, so I’m not sure if the time is right or not, but the calendar should be good.”

“Huh,” Alec murmured.

“What?”

“Hemlock just seems...emptier than usual?” Alec said, frowning as he gazed at the passing houses, nearly to Stu’s place. He saw no one, not even a passing car. “Where is everyone?”

Leif rolled the truck to a slow stop in front of Stu’s house, the tiny blue cabin appearing even more run down and decrepit since Alec had last been there.

“I hope he didn’t trash my stuff,” Alec sighed. “I guess we’re about to find out.”

Alec got out of the truck, Leif turning it off and following, the big alpha shadowing his steps as Alec headed through the mini junkyard on the front lawn and to the door. Everyone in town knew the house was Stu’s and what Stu did for a living, and Alec never saw him or his mom lock the doors, so when he tested the knob, the door opened easily.

“He was the trusting sort,” Leif commented as he followed Alec into the tiny house.

“Not really. No one wanted Stu on their ass if they stole from him,” Alec said. “He had friends in high places, and he wasn’t shy about threatening people.”

“He sounds like a stellar guy,” Leif said with a heavy dose of sarcasm that made Alec snort out a laugh as he looked around the small living room, the single armchair littered with fast-food wrappers and cigarette butts, beer cans set on the floor around the chair like mini offerings to the god of lazy excess.

“Too bad I killed him,” Alec replied with a grin. “Lemme see if he left my room alone. I doubt it though; he never wasted a chance to steal from me.”

Alec went to the short hall and then his room. The door was open—and he was right, the room was trashed. Clothes were torn apart, the seams and hems ripped or stretched, and jeans were cut to shreds with a knife. Even his underwear was ruined,

tossed on the floor and stomped on by dirty boots. “Fuck, I guess I won’t be grabbing anything, Stu went through it all.”

Leif came up behind him in the hall, his big body a reassuring presence at Alec’s back. Leif took a look over Alec’s head and a soft growl escaped. “Asshole.”

“Yeah, that he was,” Alec confirmed. “I wonder if he sold my license and birth certificate, or if he kept them?”

“That his room?” Leif gestured with his thumb to the door at the end of the small hallway.

“Yeah,” Alec said, Leif already headed in that direction. His alpha opened the door to Stu’s room and shook his head in disgust.

“Guess I didn’t need the keys off of Stu after all,” Alec said, shaking his head.

“Stinks to high hell in here,” Leif grumbled, taking a couple steps into the room that was full of unwashed laundry and even more trash than the living room.

“I don’t know where to look,” Alec said, skin crawling in distaste at being in the room Stu once shared with Aleria. Any hint of his mother’s presence was long gone.

Leif took a long breath in, and then another, and Alec realized he was scenting when Leif suddenly went to the dresser buried under laundry, knocking aside dirty clothes and opening the second drawer down.

“Here,” Leif said, and Alec jumped across the junk and clothing to join Leif at the dresser. There was a pile of what had to be stolen IDs, and Alec’s driver license and birth certificate lay on top, carelessly tossed into the pile of contraband.

“Guess he never got around to selling them,” Alec said in relief. He reached in and, carefully, only touched his items, leaving no prints behind on the other stuff. “Wipe your prints off the dresser drawer and shut it.”

Leif grabbed a shirt from atop the dresser and wiped the handle before shutting the drawer firmly. “Worried about the cops?”

“Always worried about the cops out here,” Alec shared. “They’re on more than the state’s payroll.”

“You need anything else from here?” Leif asked, looking around the room.

“Stu has a stash of cash around here somewhere, but I don’t want to be here any longer than necessary.”

“I’ve got plenty of cash and a new mate to spoil—let’s get out of here,” Leif gestured back the way they came, and Alec jumped back across the room to the door; he laughed when Leif did the same, clearing the mess.

“You don’t need to spend your money on me if you don’t want to,” Alec said, trying to convey his sincerity without getting too emotional. No one spent money on him, not since his mom passed.

“You’re my mate and I want to,” Leif promised him, guiding him back out the hall to the living room. He used the shirt to wipe the door handle then tossed it aside. He paused, turning to the front of the house, frowning. “There’s a car slowing out front.”

Alec went to the nearest window overlooking the front. “Shit.”

“What is it?”

“The cops.”

Leif

Alec led the way out of the house, stopping in the middle of the yard and waiting on the two deputies who took their time getting out of the older-model cruiser. The driver was a tall, scrawny man, Leif’s nose telling him this one was a regular smoker and nervous for some reason, eyeballing Leif’s truck like he wanted to hock it at the nearest chop shop.

The passenger was a bigger man, not taller, but broader, and Leif smelled salt, gunpowder, and blood. This one was a hunter. He smelled only deer, but that was enough—it was the off-season, and no one, not even the police, were allowed to hunt in the off-season. Poaching was an option for poorer folks, one Leif understood, but this man was hardly starving and drew a steady state check, judging by his flashy watch and healthy muscle mass.

“Alec, haven’t seen you around in a while,” the bigger man said, placing himself as the one in charge, passing the remains of the sidewalk and coming to a stop not far from Alec on the brown grass. “Where’ve you been?”

Leif did not like the way the deputy was staring at his mate, but he held back the instinctive growl .

“Hey, John. Been living with my boyfriend,” Alec replied without hesitation. “Came by to get the last of my stuff.”

“This the boyfriend?” the bigger deputy, presumably John, asked, jerking his chin at Leif.

“Yup,” Alec replied, not volunteering a name, and Leif said nothing, merely stared at

the humans with distaste.

“Stu never mentioned you got a boyfriend,” Deputy John said, sounding like he didn’t believe a word Alec told him.

“The boyfriend clearly exists,” Alec retorted with a wave to Leif from head to toe, making Leif smirk in amusement. “What’s it to you?”

Leif was suspicious of the human deputies—they showed up so quickly after Alec and Leif arrived at the house. Too quickly. Someone must have been watching the house, probably a neighbor, and called it in. Though Stu had hardly been gone more than a day, judging by the scents in the tiny house, and no one knew the bodies were in the woods up the mountain.

At least, not yet.

“Ain’t nothing but curiosity,” Deputy John defended. “Got a call that strangers were in Stu’s place. Had to check it out.”

“Oh, sure. Thanks for checking, I’m sure Stu will appreciate it.” Alec sounded appreciative and gave the deputies a shallow smile, there and gone again. “We were just headed out.”

“You don’t have anything, though? Thought you came for the last of your stuff?” Deputy John asked, eyeing Alec.

Alec sighed, loudly, and rolled his eyes, gesturing back over his shoulder. “Stu trashed my room. Nothing worth keeping in there. You can go check if you want. But you know Stu—man never picked up a thing in his life. ”

The deputy grimaced in distaste. “That’s alright, I believe you. We’ll see you around

then, yeah?”

“Sure.”

“Never got your name, Mr. Boyfriend,” Deputy John said to Leif directly.

“Leif,” he replied, short and simple. His surname was the modern equivalent of ‘son of the wolf’ and he didn’t feel like spelling it aloud for the deputies.

“Leaf?” the deputy repeated with an exaggerated, deep Appalachian accent, making it obvious he was pronouncing it wrong on purpose.

Leif said nothing, merely stood there, watching intently, though he did let his wilder side come to the fore—he knew his eyes were glowing when the deputy startled a bit, swallowing hard.

“Right, let’s get back to our patrol; see ya around Alec,” Deputy John said, hustling back to the cruiser, the other deputy hurrying to catch up.

“Why we running?” the other deputy hissed out, looking back at Alec with a frown.

“The damn boyfriend is a wolf you idiot; I ain’t messing with that,” Deputy John hissed right back as they got in the cruiser, doors slamming.

Leif relaxed, eyes no longer glowing. The cruiser started up with a roar and the deputies peeled out a bit before driving off well past the speed limit for the tiny town. Neither of them said anything until the cruiser was out of sight.

Alec chuckled, smiling wide, eyes curious as he turned to Leif. “What did you do?”

“Made my eyes glow a bit,” Leif said. “Ready to go shopping? ”

Alec jumped into his arms, held tilted back for a kiss, and Leif obliged, bending down for a slow, sweet kiss.

Chapter 10

Alec

Shopping with a mate was something of a treat. Leif paid attention to anything Alec focused on—he noticed things that Alec hovered over, reading the packaging, noting the price, even asking if Alec was hungry and whether he wanted to go eat based on what food items he paused by in the grocery section of the store.

All of it made Alec feel well-cared for and tended to and he loved it. After weeks of isolation, abuse, and being forced to use his powers to make drugs, he was enjoying the freedom and the safety of being with Leif.

He wasn't afraid of what might happen if they came across someone who knew that Alec had been sold off to the mountain mafia.

There was no way Leif was going to let anyone hurt him or use him again. He knew that with a certainty that reached down to his bones.

They headed to the electronics section at the rear of the store, and Alec took Leif's hand in his and held it as they walked. Leif squeezed his hand and held it in a firm grip, not at all worried about PDA. Alec smiled, wide and silly, blushing a bit, and he caught Leif grinning at him from the corner of his eye.

Alec went straight to the laptops on display, cruising along until he found a model he liked with the right amount of RAM and disk space, and with a powerful CPU. The model was a popular one with good ratings, and he looked around for an associate to

help him.

“They cost that much?” Leif asked, puzzled, eyeing the sticker price with disbelief.

“Good ones do,” Alec replied. “If it cost less for these specs I’d be worried about it falling apart after a few weeks.”

Leif hummed in response, clearly thinking. He spotted a person nearby in a uniform vest. “Let me get the associate.”

“Thank you.”

Leif headed off to get help, and Alec went back to examining the computers; though he was set on the model he’d picked, it never hurt to have a backup.

With the stack of cash he took off of Stu and the other men, he had enough to walk out with the laptop he wanted. Crime apparently paid well, and he was astounded by the choices they made to go hunting with so much cash in their wallets. He was reading the stats again when he felt a tickle of awareness—he was being watched. As nonchalantly as he could, he looked up and glanced around.

A figure ducked back behind a row of clothing in the next section over from electronics, their furtive motion catching his eye more than anything else. He had no idea who it was, and had no desire to go hunting through the stacks without his mate. He wasn’t an idiot—if someone was watching him, then they were either a creep or a mountain mafia goon.

Alec’s senses were heightened, and aside from Leif and the associate heading his way, there was no one else nearby. Maybe he was just being paranoid. He was confident everyone who knew him and where he’d been the last several weeks was dead. Maybe. He hoped.

Leif

Alec was nervous about something, and when Leif came back to his mate with the associate in tow, he leaned down and scented his mate while Alec spoke to the employee about getting the laptop. Inhaling hints of distress and anxiety, Leif was immediately hyper-aware of their surroundings. He pressed a kiss to Alec's temple, and took a few steps back, turning slowly as he perused the aisles and shoppers, looking for a hint of what might be making Alec nervous.

Humans revealed much of themselves in their scents. Emotions, wants, fears. Even superficial things like annoyance shifted and changed the baseline scents for everyone, and it took practice, but an experienced werewolf, or any shifter with a nose, could read another person with a high degree of accuracy.

Leif wandered out only a single row from Alec, discreetly patrolling, scenting as he went, but there was nothing but the scents of the superstore—hundreds of people, cleaners and chemicals, and food from the grocery section. It was a nightmare of scents, but he breathed through it all, parsing out the scents and dismissing them from his higher mind, searching for something that stood out .

He found it floating in the air in the main aisle between electronics and the kids clothing section. A hint of sour anxiety, avarice, and fear. He refused to let Alec out of his line of sight—he mentally catalogued the person's scent markers and returned to his mate, remembering the scent for the future.

Alec was just paying with a wad of cash when Leif returned to him, his laptop box in a bright blue bag, Alec taking the receipt with a happy smile he shared with Leif.

“All set?” Leif asked, taking his mate's bag and then his hand in a gentle grip.

“All set; I got a phone too. It's prepaid so it's all set up,” Alec shared, waving the

shiny new model in his free hand. He thanked the associate and they headed out of electronics, detouring to the adult clothing section.

Alec went tearing through the displays and racks, Leif grinning the whole time as Alec wasted not a moment finding his sizes and grabbing pants, shirts, underwear, and socks, all the essentials. He even found a pair of hiking boots in his size, sitting down to put them on in place of his ruined sneakers, ripping off the tags and leaving the box on the shelf. “I’ll pay for them with the tags.”

Leif grinned at the growing pile in Alec’s arms and snagged an empty cart left in an aisle, then directed Alec to dump all his items so he’d have his hands free.

His mate was a speed shopper.

“Are you gonna try anything on besides the boots?” Leif asked, amused, as he followed his mate with the cart—he never tried anything on, either. He kept an eye on the people around them also shopping or walking by, but no one matched the scent of the person he thought might be bothering Alec .

“Nope,” Alec said with a grin. “It’ll all fit. I’ve shopped these brands before.”

Leif pushed the cart close to Alec as he debated over a blue shirt or a green one. “What had you worried earlier?”

Alec was briefly startled before blinking it away and smiling in amusement, tossing both shirts into the cart. “You noticed, huh?”

“I did, little greenbough,” Leif confirmed. “What was it?”

“I thought someone was watching me,” Alec shared. “I didn’t get a look at them, they ducked out of sight too fast.”

“Where?” Leif asked.

“The kids section across from electronics.”

It was the next section over from their current location, and was where he had noted the sour scent. “Let’s walk by there, see if the scent matches the one I picked up nearby.”

“They’re probably long gone though,” Alec said, but he followed Leif as he pushed the cart in the direction of the spot the watcher had been.

“Their scent won’t be,” Leif promised his mate, who nodded in dawning understanding.

“Werewolves have better noses,” Alec said with a wide grin, a bit of a feral edge to it. He didn’t have fangs like Leif, but his smile was sharp and predatory. His mate had a dangerous edge to him that Leif liked. “I can’t define the scents in here, it’s so overwhelming between the food department and the number of people.”

“Show me where exactly?”

Alec pointed to the end of the nearby row of clothing, and Leif went up and down the aisle, scenting. It matched the scent he’d noticed earlier.

“Got ‘em,” Leif said, returning to his mate, eyeing their surroundings, but whoever it was had left already, their scent trailing toward the front of the store and presumably the exit. “I’ll know the scent if we cross it again.”

“It might have been a creepy person ogling me,” Alec said, but he sounded as if he doubted it. Leif agreed—too soon for coincidences.

“It’s a small world,” Leif said. “Anything else you want?”

“Toiletries, then we can get out of here,” Alec declared.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Alec

The quiet domesticity of shopping with his mate was comforting and left a warm sensation in his chest, and he made sure to push it along the nascent mate bond to Leif as the feeling grew the longer they were out. Leif not dismissing his concerns about being watched helped cement the certainty that Leif was the wolf for him. Leif cared and wanted him safe. Just days after meeting, Leif was already growing more solicitous and caring; Alec ate it up.

There were no more incidents as they finished getting everything Alec needed and left the store, heading for the truck. He had several bags in the cart, and while it wasn’t a crazy amount, it was more than would fit in a backpack on the way up the mountain.

“How are we getting this up the mountain?” Alec asked. “I feel bad treating you like a pack animal.”

“I’ve got a large sled I can pull for heavier gear or appliances, but also some rucksacks I can secure to a harness. Depends on how much it all weighs. We can get groceries in Gelridge Hollow, and that’ll determine which I use.”

“Good to know,” Alec helped Leif load up the bags in the extended cabin of the truck. He took a thorough glance around the parking lot, but didn’t recognize anyone, nor any vehicles. Not that the vehicles were a sure bet—he’d been locked up inside most of the last several weeks. He knew faces better.

He paused, seeing a police cruiser parked several spots away, but there was no one in the vehicle, and the way it was parked made it hard to see what town it belonged to. It could be the cruiser from Hemlock, but he didn't notice they were being followed at any point, so he doubted it was the same cruiser.

"Recognize anyone?" Leif asked casually, loading the last bag and shutting the door. Alec took the cart, shaking his head.

"No," Alec replied. "There's a police cruiser parked a few spaces away, but I can't tell if it's the cops from Hemlock or not."

Leif turned and saw the cruiser. He gestured for Alec to follow him, and he headed a few spots down toward the cart corral. Leif got within one spot of the cruiser before turning and heading back to his truck, nodding grimly to Alec as he went.

Same cruiser, same cops. Hard to fool a werewolf's nose.

He pushed the cart to the corral, mindful of Leif watching over him, the alpha waiting for him to return before getting in the truck after Alec hopped into the passenger seat. Leif locked the doors the second he was inside, and he grinned at the protective actions of the alpha wolf. Alec was in no hurry to be kidnapped again, so any actions Leif wanted to take to keep them safe, he was all for it.

"Was it them?" Alec asked, just to be sure, as Leif pulled out of the superstore parking lot, heading toward the highway.

"Yup. Matches the scents in the store, too, for who was watching you. The wind was blowing the wrong way for me to get much at Stu's place, but the cruiser reeks of them both and fits the scent trail in the store. They were watching you. At least one of them, for sure."

“Probably Earl, the quiet one. John makes him do all the work.” Alec said, checking behind them for anyone following, glad the truck’s windows were tinted so no one could see inside.

“Think they’re in on it? That mess with Stu and the mafia?” Leif asked him, hands on the wheel, knuckles white. His voice was deeper, too, full of fangs and growls. Leif was feeling protective.

“They’re on the mafia payroll, so I’d bet anything they told whoever they report to that I’m loose and alive.” Alec faced Leif directly as his mate drove. “I’m sorry to get you caught up in all of this. They’re gonna try and find out who you are now, where you live.”

“Only a handful of people know my full name, and only one person knows where I live for sure, and that witch ain’t talking to no one,” Leif informed him. “We should expect them to send more people after that first group we took out.”

“Dammit,” Alec groaned. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Leif told him, briefly taking his eyes off the road and giving Alec a stern expression. “I’m not sorry one bit. You shouldn’t be either. This mess brought me you, and that’s more than worth all the trouble.”

Alec reached out and Leif took a hand off the wheel to grasp his smaller hand in his larger one, squeezing firmly. “We got this, you and me.” Leif told him, warming Alec from his toes to the top of his head.

“Yeah, we got this.”

Alec

Grocery shopping went swiftly. The tiny store in Gelridge Hollow had a varied selection, with regional flavors like flash-frozen fiddleheads, crawdad bushels, and locally sourced meat butchered in the back of the small deli.

Assured by Leif that he had a root cellar that stayed cold year round and a large chest freezer in the lower section of the mine he had yet to see, Alec filled the cart at the grocery store, mostly with things easily frozen. He splurged on a bushel of crawdads after checking with Leif that he had a propane cooker and fuel for a crawdad boil. They were going to be eating well that night.

Checking out was slow, the cashier recognizing Leif and talking to him about what had happened since the last time he came in, which Alec guessed was over a week. Leif made awkward small talk, but he gifted the whole store with a huge smile when Alec added his two cents.

“What brings you back so early? Usually we see you once a month?” the cashier asked, ringing up their items.

“He met me,” Alec piped up, loading the belt as Leif loaded the shopping cart after items were scanned.

“Oh? And who are you then?” the cashier asked, curious .

“His mate,” Alec declared proudly, grinning. Leif’s answering smile was incandescent, the cashier stunned by both the words and the smile.

“Congrats!”

“Thank you.”

They had a ton of stuff by the time they were done checking out, and Alec worried

again how they were getting it all up on the mountain.

The tiny parking lot was packed, and Alec and Leif made sure to get eyes on all the vehicles. None of them were the cruiser from Hemlock. Leif scented the air as they loaded up the truck, shaking his head in the negative when Alec asked him if he scented anything.

No one followed them there, as far as he could tell, and there was no one watching them now. Well, except the cashier through the store front windows, who was smiling at them and waved when they saw Alec looking back at them. Alec chuckled and waved back, certain they were as safe as they could be at the moment.

Alec

He shouldn't have worried about the amount he bought.

When they got to the storage unit, Leif went to a large shelf and pulled down what appeared to be a huge pile of leather straps and ropes, but when he laid it out on the floor and began untangling the lines, Alec saw it for what it was—a huge harness.

It had clips for attaching things, like the matching nylon bags Leif also retrieved from the shelves, and velcro and buttons for attaching all manner of objects and items along with the bags.

“Let's bag everything up first,” Leif said, “then once that's done, we'll get the truck back in the unit and I'll Change. I can carry this all without any trouble, so no need for the sled. You'll need to get the harness and then the bags on the harness for me—I won't have hands.”

“How have you done this before without help?” Alec asked as he and Leif went through the grocery bags and got everything into the nylon bags.

“I paid the storage unit employee to help me last time I did this,” Leif looked at Alec with a grin. “Glad I don’t need to pay someone now.”

Alec sputtered out a laugh and took a pretend swipe at Leif, who dodged in an exaggerated manner, making Alec laugh outright.

Teasing his mate was fun, as Leif had a good sense of humor.

Leif stripped down, handing Alec his clothing one piece at a time. Leif made no move to turn away, smiling when Alec took the bold invitation to stare at every inch of skin that was revealed by the casual striptease. Alec folded the clothing and stuffed it into the backpack they’d used coming down the mountains, and the warmth of Leif’s body clung to the garments.

Leif took off his pants and then his socks, standing in skin-tight boxer briefs that hugged his bulge and left nothing to the imagination. Leif was thick with muscle and his thighs were massive, the iliac crest of his hips defined and lickable. Leif was a big man and it was all muscle.

Alec bit his lip and fought the urge to reach out and grab Leif—gently, of course. He behaved, and Leif grinned at him and his very obvious struggle not to get sidetracked .

“If I watch you Change, will that bother you?” Alec asked, desperate to change the subject so they both didn’t end up naked in a storage unit. “I’ve only seen the movie and TV versions of it.”

“You can watch,” Leif assured him. “I’m old, and I Change fast. You won’t see much unless I slow it down, but that’s a bit difficult. It’s more effort to hold it back.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Alec said. “I’m just curious.”

Leif stripped off his boxer briefs and tossed them to Alec with a wink, and Alec grinned wide at the delicious sight of his naked mate. Leif's cock was thick and plump, groin neatly trimmed and his balls temptingly large. Alec stuffed the underwear into the backpack and zipped it shut, watching patiently as Leif began to Change.

Leif was right—there wasn't much to see. It wasn't a horror show of mutating flesh—there was a shimmer of muted light that swept over Leif and he grew taller and then leaned forward, falling to his four paws as a giant wolf in less than a second.

“Fuck me, that was fast,” Alec muttered, eyes wide.

Leif was a gorgeous, rich brown and medium gray, a dappled mixture of colors that matched the trees and underbrush perfectly in the dense hills. He was as stunning in the daytime as he was in the moonlight. Big ears brushed the ceiling of the storage unit, and Leif ducked down and exited the unit, giving Alec space to hop in the truck and back it into the unit. It fit with a couple of feet to spare, and Alec hopped out and locked the truck, making sure to put the keys in the same pocket Leif had when their trip began.

Alec dragged the harness out of the unit, and Leif crouched down to help Alec get the harness on him easier—with Leif explaining the process, he got the massive leather and nylon harness onto Leif, tugging and reworking straps until it was snug, and nothing was too tight.

“Now the bags, little greenbough,” Leif directed in that deep, rumbling voice.

Alec snapped the bags onto the harness, making sure that the weight was distributed as evenly as possible. By the time he got the last bag snapped into place, it was approaching late afternoon and Leif was laden with a half dozen huge nylon bags stuffed with everything they'd bought that day. Alec shrugged on Leif's backpack

and eyed the space on Leif's back. He would fit, but Leif was already carrying a lot of stuff and he didn't want to weigh down his mate any more. Leif was not a mule.

Alec made sure the lights were off, the truck and cabinets locked, and then closed the steel door to the unit, dragging it down until it landed with a thump on the concrete floor. Alec locked it, making sure to put the keys in the same pocket as the truck keys before zipping it up.

"Ready?" Leif asked.

"Ready!" Alec hefted the backpack onto his shoulders and started heading for the woods, stamping his feet to make sure his new boots were snug and fitting perfectly. He wouldn't normally wear new shoes for a hike—that was a great way to get blisters—but he was able to alter the structure of the boots at the molecular level and make them more comfortable, avoiding blisters altogether. He just needed to break them in a bit to find the friction points before changing anything.

"Smell anything suspicious before we get in the woods?" Alec asked, eyeing the empty lot and the storage unit buildings around them. He saw nothing and no one, the front gatehouse near the entrance holding one person on duty that was out of sight and several buildings away .

"Nothing. I don't hear anything, either. I think we're okay," Leif grumbled, sniffing the air.

"Alright, let's go!"

Leif walked slowly beside him as they entered the woods, the slope of the hillside gentle and not at all steep enough to worry Alec yet.

"I can carry you too, greenbough," Leif rumbled. "It's not any trouble."

“I can walk,” Alec stressed. “You’re carrying a lot of stuff already.”

“If you insist,” Leif grumbled good-naturedly, shaking his massive head a bit, ears flopping a little as he shook himself out, settling the harness and bags.

Leif was soon in the lead on the nonexistent trail—he knew the way, unlike Alec. He wasn’t woods-savvy or at all familiar with rural living—the most hiking he’d ever done was a field trip in middle school. He was still recovering from his captivity, too, but he refused to voice how tired the hiking was making him, and figured his labored breathing was telling Leif enough on its own.

Alec was soon realizing the error of his decision when thirty minutes passed and they were making horrible time. The terrain was growing steeper, and Alec was struggling to keep up, forcing Leif to halt and wait for Alec to catch up numerous times before his mate finally stopped and crouched down in front of Alec.

“You’re not taking advantage of me, little greenbough,” Leif rumbled patiently, eying Alec from one great eye that caught the sun and flashed red. “Climb up now.”

“I give up,” Alec gasped out a bit, dramatically falling into Leif’s huge shoulder with a flop, making Leif snort in amusement. “You’re right.”

Leif crouched down even lower, and held still while Alec clambered onto his back, adjusting his legs to fall forward on either side of Leif’s neck in front of bags clasped to the harness, not wanting to clip Leif with a muddy boot. He sighed once in place, muscles already happy for the respite.

Leif got carefully to his feet and Alec grasped a handful of the thick fur over Leif’s neck and shoulder, holding on tight.

The ride home wasn’t as fast as the trip into town, but they were going uphill. They

still made better time with Leif carrying Alec than they would have otherwise, and Alec gave up trying to spare his mate the indignity when it was clear Leif felt fine carrying their stuff and his mate.

Chapter 11

Leif

Alec fell asleep at some point, and Leif was happy to discover that the full bags clipped to the harness helped keep Alec in place on his shoulders, his mate lying along Leif's shoulders and neck. His mate was limp, breathing deep and slow, heart rate steady and at peace. Leif was pleased by that—all signs that Alec felt safe with him, safe enough to rest while Leif got them home.

Alec was still recovering from his ordeal, despite the energy and attitude he'd had all day. His wounds were nearly healed, but the long-term damage and resulting exhaustion needed more time.

Leif soon came within the vicinity of the bodies, keeping a fair distance so as not to disturb the carrion eaters who were feasting. The coyotes sensed him, but he stayed out of their way, keeping enough distance to avoid chasing them off. The ravens and crows set off a chorus of alarms at his proximity, but he ignored them in favor of hurrying home, and eventually the noise stopped as he continued past without pausing.

There were no scents of new intruders, and the sense of his territory remained quiet, the edges of his reality peaceful and undisturbed by trespassers of the two-footed variety.

The sun was near setting by the time Leif climbed the path to his cabin, the switchbacks of the trail jostling Alec enough that he woke with a wide yawn.

“Are we back already?” Alec murmured, sounding half-asleep.

“Almost there,” Leif promised.

He reached the path’s summit and the clearing in front of his cabin, and the air was crisp and cool. The sun was setting in the west, painting the rocky face of the mountain above the cabin in brilliant gold, reflecting off the glass windows. The sun was warm and soft, the shadows deep and long.

Leif crouched beside the front stoop, and Alec slid off his back onto the top step, yawning. He stretched, revealing a strip of skin at his waist, and Leif wanted to lick it.

The door was unlocked, and Alec shrugged off the backpack and gently set it inside the cabin. Leif lay down in the grass, and Alec came down the steps at a jog to help remove the bags from the harness.

Alec

Leif was free of the bags and harness in no time, and was able to Change back into his human form just as the last of the sun was setting.

Alec was putting the last of the bags alongside the kitchen wall when Leif stepped inside, stark naked, the sun gilding his side and rear in gold. He was beautiful and Alec wanted him.

The bond between them was growing stronger, a day in each other’s company enough to make it more tangible, and Alec experimented by sending a rush of affection and arousal along the bond. Leif immediately looked at him, eyes full of want and need, and Alec grinned.

“Put away the groceries with me?” Alec said, wanting Leif closer to him, grabbing the bag with the cold items that had thankfully stayed at temperature due to the low-level preservation spells in the insulation. The bushel of crawdads were going to stay fresh if they got...sidetracked.

Leif came over and gently took the bag from him, flipping it closed and setting it by the other bags. One big hand cupped Alec’s jaw, thumb tracing his lips, and Alec nibbled on the digit with his teeth, a deep growl coming from Leif. Alec held his breath, wanting more.

“You tempt me,” Leif growled, eyes full of want.

“You tempt me, too,” Alec replied roughly, sucking air into his starving lungs, eyes wide, Leif’s thumb still on his lips. “Please.”

Leif let go of his jaw, only to grab Alec around the waist and lift him into his arms. Alec gasped at his strength, wrapping his arms around Leif’s neck and his legs around Leif’s waist. The kiss was deep, full of teeth and tongue.

“Bed,” Alec gasped out when they broke for air, his head thrown back when Leif kissed and nibbled along the side of his neck.

“Yes,” Leif growled, low and deep, the rumble vibrating against Alec’s chest. Leif turned and strode for the tunnel, long strides eating up the distance between the cabin and the bed.

The lights came on as they passed, and the lights around the bed flickered on with a low glow that was enough for Alec to see Leif’s face and the glowing red of his eyes.

Alec found himself gently dropped on the bed, Leif standing between his knees. Leif reached down and grabbed the hem of Alec’s shirt, pulling it up over his head, Alec

sitting up to help get it free of his shoulders.

That put Alec at the perfect height to greet the large, hard, thick cock jutting out from a neatly groomed patch of reddish-brown hair.

Leif sucked in a breath when Alec leaned in and licked the hooded crown of Leif's cock. It tasted of salty musk and Alec wanted more, a hint of precum on his tongue making him ravenous. Both hands came up to grasp the heavy cock, hot in his palms, throbbing with the beat of Leif's heart.

He gently ran his hands down the length of his mate's cock, Leif growing harder, the crown freed from the foreskin and flushed red, clear drops of sticky precum waiting for Alec to lap up. He leaned down and swallowed around the smooth crown, causing Leif's hips to jerk a bit, pushing his cock an inch or so deeper before he found his control and stopped moving.

Alec sucked once, hard, before popping off. "I want you to fuck my mouth."

"Little greenbough," Leif growled, thumb rubbing along Alec's lower lip. "I want to come inside you."

"Fuck my mouth, then fuck my ass," Alec negotiated with a wicked grin. "I can take it, if you can manage it."

Leif accepted the challenge and both hands came up, fingers sliding into Alec's hair and gripping his head, holding him firmly. Leif brushed the head of his cock over Alec's lips, a thick droplet of precum painting his lips. "Pinch my thigh hard if you want me to stop. "

Alec showed his agreement by lifting his hands and sliding them around Leif's thighs, urging his mate closer. He opened his mouth wide and groaned in aroused joy

when Leif fed the thick, hot length of his cock into Alec's mouth, stretching his jaw and flattening his tongue. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes and he fought his gag reflex as Leif nudged at the back of his throat with the plump head before pulling back a smidge to let Alec breathe.

Lips stretched and burning, eyes watering, Alec took the solid weight in his mouth and tried to suck, but Leif was nearly too large for him to do anything but take it.

Leif wasted no time in setting a punishing rhythm, hips snapping back and forth, thick cock thrusting into Alec's mouth, flirting with his nearly nonexistent gag reflex. Hard balls slapped Alec's chin, saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth, tears falling from his eyes. The thrusting continued, Leif teasing Alec's obscenely stretched lips with his fingers as he stared down at Alec, eyes red-hot and glowing, hints of the wolf in his visible fangs.

Alec relaxed into the face-fucking, taking in air when able, hands gripping the thick thighs driving Leif's cock into his throat.

He loved it.

Leif pulled away with a snarl, hand going to the base of his cock, squeezing hard to keep himself from coming. Alec fell back on the bed, gasping, breathing hard, absolutely wrecked and wanting more.

Alec held out a hand and beckoned to Leif, who came immediately and climbed atop Alec, hands tugging at his pants and deftly removing his shoes and socks before tossing the pants away as well. Alec was nearly naked, and then a slash of claws removed his underwear, leaving him bare to Leif's heated gaze. Alec chuckled, hands reaching up to Leif's shoulders, pulling his mate down until he lay under the alpha wolf in his shadow.

Leif licked and nipped and sucked his way down Alec's body, making him gasp and squirm in delight. "Leif!" he gasped out, tugging on Leif's long hair. "I want you!"

He tugged until Leif came back up to devour his mouth in a fierce kiss. Big hands spread his thighs and Leif settled between them, hard cock pressed to Alec's. A hand gripped his hair, holding his head still as the kiss went on, and another gripped Alec's hard, aching cock and stroked it from root to tip, the grip almost too tight. He loved it and whined for more.

Fingers stroked his cock, making him shiver and moan. Claws pricked his scalp, Leif's eyes glowing a brilliant ruby-red.

The golden thread connecting them—as bright as Leif's eyes, and as thick as his arm—glowed visibly to Alec, illuminating the shadows between them. Heart to heart, soul to soul, the mate bond grew and grew, solidifying, and Alec cried out as it reached what had to be the final distance to completion, joining them together forever.

Leif jolted, gasping at the bond's completion, shaking with need. The bond eased, stable and secure, and faded from sight, no longer visible but still there, a comforting weight tying them together.

"Get in me, mate," Alec said, nipping at Leif's lips with tiny, urgent kisses. He wanted, so badly.

Leif managed to free a hand to root around in the blankets on the side of the bed, hitting the nightstand, and he fumbled for a second before coming back with a tube of lube. Alec grinned and took the tube, uncapping it and squeezing a dollop on his palm. He tossed the lube aside and applied a thick layer to Leif's cock, making his mate jerk.

“You need some,” Leif growled out when Alec pulled back and wrapped both legs around his lean waist, heels digging into Leif’s muscular ass, trying to draw him closer.

“Not human,” Alec reminded him with a salacious smile as he arched up to meet the hot cockhead pushing against his hole. “I don’t need it.”

Leif’s eyes flashed brighter, and he gripped Alec by the waist and held him still as he pushed, the wide head popping inside, stretching him inexorably as Leif sank deeper. His body thrilled at having Leif there, so deep and full, clenching and releasing in waves as Leif pushed in as deeply as possible.

Leif

Alec was impossibly tight and slick, his body welcoming him in. Leif shuddered, balls deep in his mate’s ass, and he waited for Alec to give him permission to move, not wanting to hurt his mate.

Alec surprised him, rolling his hips beneath Leif, legs tight around his hips, and the motion almost ruined Leif’s control. Alec did it again, both hands coming up to thread his fingers behind Leif’s neck, holding Leif to him. Alec lifted up enough to press a kiss to his lips, breathing out, “Fuck me, mate.”

Taking Alec’s command, he pulled back and thrust in, hard, setting a rhythm intended to drive them both wild. Alec gasped and rose to meet him on every thrust, skin slapping and sweat gathering. Alec was a lithe, sensual creature who was wilder with every passing second, his gray eyes full of magic and want, hands rushing over Leif to touch every part of him he could, cries of pleasure escaping from behind lush, reddened lips.

Leif plundered his mate, arms coiling around Alec, holding him tightly, shifting his

angle to slide the head of his cock over Alec's prostate with every thrust. Alec cried out, clinging to him, eyes blind, arching upward, spine bowing.

Alec came, hard, shooting cum across his abs and Leif's stomach, his body growing tighter, clenching Leif as he climaxed. Leif thrust faster, harder, chasing the sensations, and came right after Alec, shuddering and jerking with each pulse of his release deep inside his mate.

Chapter 12

Alec

Alec sat beside Leif on the bed, his mate sleeping on his back, arms over his head, relaxed in a sexy sprawl. The lights were bright enough that Alec was able to see the cursed scar on Leif's chest. He had no idea what time it was, though he knew they'd both slept for several hours.

He ran his fingertips over the scar, light and gentle, looking beyond the layers of skin and muscle to the curse that thrummed balefully beside Leif's strong heart.

The curse was fractured, interrupted by the witch's death hundreds of years prior. The curse's purpose had been twisted, burdening Leif with the stolen lives of the witch's victims. The amount of power coiled inside the curse was staggering.

Leif was going to live a very long time. Even when Alec unraveled the curse, Leif would still have all those stolen years—the original owners of those lives were dead, and Alec had no idea how to take away the years without killing his mate in the process. He wasn't even going to try .

Leif was already past the maximum average lifespan of a powerful alpha. Alec guessed Leif had a few thousand more years in him before the stolen years ran out.

Alec pondered this, wondering if he would be around to see his mate finally grow old, rich brown hair turned silver by age and time. Alec was mostly fae—there was some human ancestry a couple generations back, but younger fae species lived long,

long lives too. He hoped he lived as long as Leif, not wanting his mate to spend a lifetime without him.

“What has you so pensive?” Leif asked, voice rough from sleep. Leif yawned, stretching, and Alec admired his form.

“Just wondering about the future,” Alec sighed, refocusing on the task at hand. “The curse should be easy enough to alter. I think I can dismantle the portion that harms other wolves when bonds are forged. You could have a pack again, if you wanted.”

“Truly?” Leif pushed up on his elbows, wide awake. “How? So many practitioners tried and failed to break the curse.”

“They all went big,” Alec replied, placing the flat of his hand over the scar. Leif was hot to the touch, skin smooth and soft. “They tried to do too much at once...too grand in their actions. I work best in the tiniest of spaces—molecules and atoms and motes of magic that make up a spell. All I need is time, and I think I can unmake the curse.”

“Unmake it?” Leif asked.

“Breaking a curse requires an act of force stronger than the curse itself, literally breaking it, then destroying the remnants the same way. I can get down to the base foundation of a spell, to its components and pieces, and dismantle a curse by altering the foundation of what it’s made of and how it’s put together. Unmaking.”

“That sounds really difficult and complicated.” Leif worried, reaching out and putting a hand on Alec’s knee. “Is it dangerous?”

“If I do it right, I don’t even think the curse will put up a fight before I have it unraveled.” Alec paused, eyeing his mate. “I’d like to try it now, if that’s okay with you.”

“What do you need me to do?” Leif asked, looking a bit shocked but willing to listen.

“Just lie back down and relax. Try not to move, though I want you to tell me if something hurts. It shouldn’t, though. Pain would be a sign the curse is reacting to what I’m doing.”

Leif did as directed, easing back on the pillows, hands behind his head, those crystal blue eyes watching him intently.

Alec reached out a hand, hovering over the scar, when Leif moved so quickly his hand was a blur, catching Alec’s hand before it made contact. Alec froze, eyes wide. “What?”

“Something’s wrong,” Leif said, sitting up, eyes unfocused. “A group of humans just crossed into my territory.”

Alec tugged his hand free and rolled off the bed, hunting for his clothes. His underwear was ruined but the rest of his old clothing was relatively intact. Leif got out of bed as well, opening a section of the wooden wall behind the bed to reveal a closet. He tugged on a pair of sweatpants, but that was it, and he headed up the tunnel toward the cabin.

“Wait for me!” Alec called, tugging on his new boots, tying them hurriedly before hustling after his mate.

Leif

The boundary magic that told him when intruders were in his territory was going wild. There were several humans that had crossed the territory lines at the same place the previous group did—Leif suspected that whoever had sent the first group was there to find their missing people, and likely Alec as well.

Alec caught up to him at the door of the cabin, Leif waiting on the stoop. It was late; the sun had set, the moon was full enough that he could see a fair distance in the night. He breathed in deeply, searching for the scents of the intruders.

Alec shivered in the chill air and snuggled into his side, cold hands wrapping around his waist. “What do you sense?”

“Several humans crossed into my territory where the first group did,” Leif shared, catching hints of the humans on the wind, breathing deep. A growl rumbled out with his next words. “They’ll come across the bodies soon; they’re likely following their tracks. Huh. They’re trying to be stealthy.”

“Not surprising. They probably guessed the first group is dead, or at least in trouble. We should burn the bodies this time.”

Leif snorted out a surprised laugh. “This time?”

Alec hugged him tightly before letting go and heading to the laden bags, tugging out one of the new coats they got earlier. He yanked off the tags and shrugged it on, zipping it up before giving Leif a brilliant smile. “If they came in peace, we’d let them live—but if they’re trying to be stealthy, they mean trouble, and I say kill troublemakers. ”

Leif breathed in again, and caught the scents of gunpowder and old blood. “They’re here for violence.”

Alec nodded and returned to the door, both of them facing outside, the shadows deep. “Like I said, kill them.”

“My bloodthirsty mate,” Leif murmured, leaning down and pressing a kiss to Alec’s soft hair.

“Are they still heading this way?” Alec asked him.

Leif nodded. “They are. Anyone coming from that direction has to be the mountain mafia.”

“Alright, we should have expected this. They’re probably looking for their people.”

“And you.” Leif reminded Alec.

Alec grimaced. “Yeah.”

“They likely won’t find the path up the hill,” Leif said, tucking Alec under his arm. “And the cabin is far enough back from the cliff edge that they won’t see the interior lights if they’re down where the bodies are. We can let them pass.”

Alec scoffed, looking up at him with a dubious expression on his face. “Like you’d let the mafia stomp through your territory without stopping them.”

“You know me so well already, little greenbough.” Leif gave Alec another kiss to the top of his head. “What’s our plan then?”

“Hunt them down.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Alec

He was dressed for shenanigans in the woods this time, with properly fitted boots, gloves, a warm coat, and a beanie. Leif was distractingly hot, dressed in just his sweatpants, the waist elastic enough to handle it when Leif Changed into his lycan form and got huge.

Leif was huge everywhere.

His mate was enticing, but the situation they were in was dangerous, so Alec made himself set aside his lustful thoughts.

They stood at the cusp of the cliff overlooking the forest below. Leif pointed in the direction of the intruders, and sure enough, Alec could make out the beams of flashlights cutting through the trees in the distance. The woods were pitch black but for the gilding of silver from the moon, making the humans easy to spot.

“They aren’t worried about being seen.” Alec mused. “Didn’t you say they were trying to be stealthy?”

Leif waggled one massive hand tipped in claws. “My ears tell me they’re split into two groups. The main group is the one with the flashlights—a few people have moved ahead of the bigger group, likely the trackers. They might be using magic or have night vision goggles.”

Alec focused intently on the ambient magic fields—the fields of energy that existed everywhere on the planet, accessible to human practitioners of sufficient skill level and certain younger species of fae—like Alec. His mixed bag of genetics allowed him access to the energy of the world around him, letting him absorb power from the ambient magic fields, or directly from objects like a living tree, the earth, or a magical object. He didn’t need any energy, but the fields would react to magic being cast by practitioners, like stones thrown in a pond, the surface rippling in waves .

“I can’t sense any magic,” Alec told Leif, dropping his focus and rolling his shoulders, trying to relax. He was keyed up, adrenaline making him anxious.

“I can’t smell any, either,” Leif agreed. His voice was deeper and rumble in his lycan form than his human. “Shall we?”

Leif knelt, and Alec climbed on his back like he had before, arms clinging to Leif's shaggy shoulders and thick neck. Leif was warm, even through Alec's coat, and he buried his nose in the thick fur of Leif's lycan form.

"Comfortable?" Leif rumbled, one big hand coming up to clasp Alec's wrists in a firm but gentle grip.

"Yup."

Leif jumped into the darkness below.

Leif

The journey down the cliffside was easy, Alec clinging to him like a burr. He made it down in two jumps, not wanting to hurt Alec by trying the full distance in a single bound. The inertia could dislocate Alec's shoulders or risk Leif losing his grip on his mate.

Alec lifted his head from Leif's shoulder when they reached the bottom of the cliff. Leif took deep breaths, the air filled with the scents of approaching humans. The scent of death was on the wind as well, though not overpowering; the cooler temps were keeping decomp to a minimum.

His sensitive ears picked up the careful tread of at least three humans, the scent of steel and gunpowder coming to him at the same time .

"Three humans ahead of the main group," Leif growled softly to his mate. There was a faint sheen of moonlight, not enough to help humans all that much, but surely Alec's vision was better than a human's, and he pointed in the direction his senses told him the intruders approached.

“Can we spy on them? See what they’re doing?” Alec whispered quietly, nearly silent, Leif’s hearing sharp enough to hear.

“Let us beat them to the killing field,” Leif replied. “They’re heading in that direction.”

“Okay.”

Leif took off at a lope, claws finding purchase in the soft earth, the faint crunch of leaves too low for humans to hear, his speed too fast to follow in the darkness. He was careful, though—the three scouting ahead likely had infrared night vision, meaning they would see him and Alec with ease if they weren’t careful.

Leif got them to the killing field quickly, and he set Alec behind the large fallen tree, same as before, and he covered Alec’s body with his own, his much smaller mate crouching beneath his huge form. Alec peeked around the root ball ripped from the earth, the myriad roots obscuring his view, the darkness heavy and oppressive.

He put his muzzle by Alec’s ear and spoke as quietly as he could manage. “Stay hidden until I come back for you. Infrared can see you even in pitch black.”

Alec nodded and crouched even lower, obscured by the huge roots and branches of the fallen tree. Leif licked Alec’s cheek, his mate chuckling quietly, and a swift kiss met his nose before he slinked away from his mate, staying low.

The humans were a few hundred feet away. Leif hunkered low to the ground, keeping behind trees and thick blackberry brambles.

Alec

There was little Alec could do in the darkness; though he could see better than a

human, he was no match for infrared goggles if Leif was right.

He stayed there on the ground, leaning on the fallen tree, the trunk higher than his head and the roots and branches thick and dense. He was idly wondering what felled the tree to begin with when there was a crack of a stick breaking.

Alec froze, listening. A faint step, then another, from the far side of the clearing by the bodies. Too large of a footstep to be a coyote or raccoon, and the critters would have cleared out with Leif so near.

A harsh crackle like static came, then Alec heard voices. “Sir, we found them. Checking the bodies now. Looks like animals got to the bodies, too.”

A man’s voice, with a local accent from the hills. There was a faint chirp from a radio, then a deep, angry voice came over the radio, and he too sounded like a local. “Is it all of them?”

There was a new voice, another man speaking in the clearing. “Yessir, it’s all of them, even Stu. Not sure how he died, though. The others are torn apart. Something big got the entire crew.”

“The rumors of this being werewolf territory might be true then. Keep an eye out, we’ll be there in a few minutes,” came the disembodied voice of whoever was in charge over the radio.

Alec recognized that voice. He didn’t know the face to match it, but the voice and name he knew. He’d heard it outside his cell several times during his captivity, or on the phone when one of his jailers got a call checking on production when he was in the lab being forced to work.

That was the mountain mafia boss.

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Chapter 13

Alec

His name was Dale Rodgers, according to local legend and rumors stretching back longer than Alec had been alive. He had never seen a picture, or the man in question, but he knew the voice sure enough. Alec's little slice of rural Appalachia was considered to be a mere blip on a map to bigger and better places. How a man who ran one of the largest criminal organizations in the Southern USA had even heard of Alec to begin with was surely thanks to the dead man lying not far from where Alec hid in the dark.

Stepdad Stu never wasted a chance to make some money, and selling his fae stepson to the head of the mountain mafia was perfectly in line with his character, though Alec was still surprised Stu had the courage to approach the man to begin with—but then, greed emboldened men like Stu.

Alec kept himself small, listening to the men in the clearing as they moved around the bodies, swearing colorfully at the carnage, boots moving leaves and sticks.

One man swore, and Alec heard enough to recognize the voice. It was the talkative deputy from Hemlock, Deputy John. Which perhaps meant one of the others with him must be Deputy Earl.

Who it was didn't matter—they came with violence in mind.

"I bet it was the boyfriend," Deputy John said. "A big motherfucker like that could do

this kinda mess. I told you he was a werewolf.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Deputy Earl complained. “I heard you the first million times. Where’s the werewolf now though? Huh? I don’t think they’re living out here in the trees. Ain’t nothing out here but critters gnawing on dead things.”

The third person in the clearing said nothing, but Alec heard them walking, and then the sharp line of a red laser cutting through the night, hitting the leaves on the ground several feet away. Alec froze.

“You find something?” Deputy John asked.

“Tracks,” the third person said, and Alec went cold. They were following the tracks toward the downed tree Alec hid within. If they had infrared goggles, Alec was dead.

“Tracks? What kinda tracks—” Deputy Earl said, but his words were choked off by a gurgle, and the air was thick with the scent of hot blood, raining down on the leaf litter with a thick spray.

“Shit!” Deputy John shouted. “What the fuck was that?”

“What? What happened?!” the third person shouted, the laser disappearing as they turned away in a hurry.

Alec risked a peek over the huge trunk—the light of the moon was enough to see a twitching body on the ground, night vision goggles knocked off into the leaves, two figures standing over their dying companion.

Lights flicked on, and Alec ducked down, closing his eyes to preserve his night vision. Beams of light swooped overhead and through the trees, and Alec knew his hiding spot wasn’t going to last much longer.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” someone gasped out. “His head’s been ripped off!”

Gunshots rang out, an automatic rifle tearing through the air and trees, bullets riddling the ground and pinging off the oak tree Alec hid behind.

“Quit it! What the fuck you firing at! You wanna hit the boss?” Deputy John shouted, interrupting the shooting. “Whatever it was is gone, just use your eyes?—”

A harsh scream completed that sentence, and a cacophony of shots tore through the woods. Voices crackled over the radio, but it died with a screech of feedback and then went silent.

The shooting stopped, too.

Ears ringing, Alec waited for a sign it was safe to look.

A huge shadow leapt atop the tree trunk, and Alec smiled up at his mate, visible in the fallen flashlight beams in the clearing. “Did you get all three?”

“I did, little greenbough,” Leif replied, reaching down with one huge arm and helping Alec climb up out of the branches of the fallen oak. He sat on the trunk beside Leif.

“How many more in the woods?” Alec asked, taking in the fresh mayhem. There were three new headless corpses in the clearing that weren’t there a few moments prior, and Alec leaned into his mate, satisfied.

“The big boss, and three more of his men.” Leif pointed with his muzzle deeper into the woods. “They heard the shots and the screaming.”

“Are they running away or toward us?”

“I believe they’re foolishly coming this way,” Leif growled out .

“Idiots,” Alec said with a heavy sigh. “You okay saving the boss for me? I want to have a word with him.”

“With pleasure, little greenbough,” Leif said, and with a mighty leap, he disappeared into the shadows.

Alec stayed seated on the trunk, eyeing the growing pile of bodies in the clearing. “This is going to be a big bonfire.”

He pulled out his new phone, pleased to see he had several bars of signal this deep in the woods, and looked up whether they were in a burn ban area. No sense in starting a wildfire just to dispose of some inconvenient bodies.

Leif

His prey were carrying large flashlights and they were jogging through the heavy leaf layer toward the spot where Leif killed their buddies. They were loud, their breathing harsh and panicked, and none of them were the least bit observant, despite being dressed in quality camo gear with large hunting knives strapped to their waists. They stunk of stress and fear, and his primal instincts rode him hard, demanding he kill the interlopers.

They were hunting his mate.

He waited for the group to pass him in the darkness, and with one arm reached out and plucked the last man in the group off his feet, crushing his skull. He tossed the body aside, the others making enough of a racket that they heard nothing as Leif continued to follow them.

Two men and the mafia boss remained.

He presumed the man in the priciest camo getup was the boss—he carried a handgun and a rifle, and the two men remaining with him carried automatic rifles of some kind. Humans and their guns.

The boss had his handgun out and pointed at the ground with one hand, sweeping the area with his high-intensity flashlight with the other; he paused with the light illuminating the killing ground where Leif had left the corpses of his men.

“Come out and face me, you monster!” the man shouted, firing his gun into the air twice.

Leif rose from the shadows behind them and reached out, claws raking across the throats of the two henchmen from behind. They managed to fire a few times, narrowly missing their own boss as they jerked and flailed, dying as they hit the ground.

“Fuck!” the mafia boss swore and he turned, firing point blank into Leif’s chest, emptying the gun.

The shots hurt, but he began healing immediately, the bullets forced out of his chest, bouncing like fat raindrops of blood onto the leaves as his body healed.

He loomed over the human who was sweating and shaking; terror made him keep pulling the trigger even after the click signaled it was spent. He tossed aside the handgun and struggled to move the rifle off his back into his hands, but Leif ripped the rifle away from him as the human stumbled back and then fell on his ass, flashlight falling to the ground, the beam lighting up Leif as he roared in challenge and rage, bending the rifle in his clawed hands, the wood of the stock shattering and the barrel bent in half.

“Thank you, my mate,” Alec said from the shadows, though Leif saw him easily. He still sat on the trunk of the fallen tree, hands in his pockets, watching intently. Leif puffed up, growling happily—his mate was pleased.

“You...what...what the fuck!” the ma fia boss shouted, scrambling at his waist for a large hunting knife, struggling to get it free.

Alec’s grin in the shadows was sharp and deadly.

Alec

Leif was amazing. He was deadly and powerful and Alec wanted to give him the world.

He would, too, once he dealt with the human monster in his midst.

Leif grabbed Rodgers by the throat and dragged him to where Alec sat on the tree. The flashlight was bright enough that it lit up the clearing, one of those huge high-intensity lights poachers used lazily to shoot deer from the road.

Rodgers was wearing hunting gear that looked brand new and never used, and the knife he struggled to pull from his belt seemed to be stuck in the sheath.

“Let me help with that,” Alec said, leaning forward as Leif lifted the struggling human off the ground. Alec brushed the man’s hands away and unlocked the sheath guard, pulling the huge hunting knife free. “Leif, my mate, this is Dale Rodgers, boss of the mountain mafia in these parts.”

Leif pushed Rodgers to the ground on his knees, making him look up at Alec. His eyes were wide with terror and anger, and Alec thought he smelled piss. That pleased him.

“You know who I am?” Alec asked casually, holding up the knife to the light, admiring the serrated edges near the hilt and the sharp point .

Rodgers gurgled a bit and Leif loosened his grip just enough for the human to speak. “I don’t...who...monsters!”

Alec smiled, the motion a bit crooked but genuine. He pointed the knife at Rodgers. “You’re here with two crooked cops, henchmen, and armed with automatic rifles and tricked-out hunting gear. At night. In the deep woods. No one hunts at night with automatic rifles unless it’s for hogs, and there’s no hogs on this mountain, not with it being werewolf territory.”

Rodgers rolled his eyes in an attempt to look at Leif, but Leif’s grip on his neck made it hard. Alec tsked, holding the knife, waving the point a bit. “He isn’t your biggest worry right now. I am. Do you know who I am?”

Rodgers flailed a moment before he gasped. “That fae mutt I got from Stu.”

Leif growled, squeezing tight for a second, Rodgers’s eyes bulging.

“Careful, Dale. Can I call you Dale? He’s my mate, the wolf who has you by the neck. He’s very protective of me. Which is wonderful, since no one has cared about me since my mother died.” Alec gestured to the nearby corpses with the knife, Rodgers’s eyes following the steel as the edges caught the flashlight beam like fangs under the moon. “Are you going to answer my questions? Or is Leif going to eat you, one piece at a time?”

Leif growled low and long, Rodgers shaking in his grip.

“Alright! Alright! Call off your dog!” Rodgers screamed.

“Rude,” Alec said, tapping Rodgers on the nose with the flat of the knife. “My next question is an easy one. Who do you work for?”

“Work for? No one. No one tells me what to do!” Rodgers all but shouted, anger and fear strangling his voice, his hands scrabbling at the grip Leif had on his neck to no avail.

“You sure?” Alec sighed, looking around him at the carnage. “I don’t want more bodies in these woods. Is anyone gonna come looking for you if you don’t come back?”

“Lots of people! Everyone is gonna tear these woods apart if you kill me!” Rodgers spat out.

Leif grumbled and leaned over Rodgers, sniffing at his neck and face. “His scent is full of lies, and his heartbeat agrees. He is lying.”

“Oh, really!” Alec smiled. He put the point of the knife to Dale Rodgers’s chest, the mountain mafia boss shivering as Alec pushed the knife tip through his clothes, stopping just shy of piercing skin. “Who is going to come after you?”

“I...my men! They won’t rest until I’m avenged,” Rodgers tried to bluff, Leif chuckling as Rodgers lied again. Leif shook his great shaggy head, red eyes glowing in the night.

“Seems like no one’s gonna care you’re missing,” Alec declared. “The great Dale Rodgers, mountain mafia boss, goes missing and no one cares. Well, people might rejoice down in Hemlock, that’s for sure. Goddess knows that town will benefit with you dead and gone.”

Alec kept the knife pressed to Rodgers’s chest.

“Stu forced my mother to make drugs for him until it killed her, then he planned to do the same thing to me, except this time he sold me to you,” Alec said, making eye contact with Rodgers. “I was chained and forced to work with dangerous chemicals and poisons. It would have killed me eventually, like it killed my mother. You bought me, a person, and forced me to make drugs that hurt people. I was damn near starved, living in a cold cell for weeks, and beaten if I was too slow or refused to work. I blew up the warehouse to escape, and you chose to send people after me, either to kill me or drag me back. You sent them to their deaths. Tonight, you did it again. These people are all dead because of you.”

Alec leaned in and pressed enough on the knife that it cut Rodgers’s skin, making the man hiss in pain.

“I love my mother, but I am not her,” Alec told Rodgers. “She refused to fight. She faded and died instead of escaping or protecting her only child. I won’t be the same. I have someone to fight for, to live for, and I’ll never let anyone use me again.”

Rodgers’s eyes went wide in terror as Alec pushed the knife into his chest.

No need to use his powers, not when he had something important to save all his energy for after they dealt with the mess.

Leif

The bonfire they made out of the fallen tree burned bright and hot, sending smoke and embers high in the sky, lighting the surrounding forest, the trees seeming to dance in the flickering lights.

Alec leaned into his side, holding the knife he’d used to kill Rodgers. “What are you going to do with the knife? Keep it?”

“I don’t really need a knife,” Alec said. “I’ve got an amazing mate with fangs and claws.”

Leif growled happily from low in his chest, hugging Alec tighter to his side. Alec smiled up at him, his wildflower scent mixed with coppery blood and hints of contentment. He was amazed by Alec’s calm, but he was happy and equally content with the choice Fate made for him in a mate—Alec was not at all bothered by the violence he was capable of, and he never shied away from the blood and carnage.

“I was saving my energy, but I can spare a bit for this,” and Alec held the blade up in the light. Leif watched in impressed awe as the blade shimmered, and then fell away into dust, Alec holding his hand out for the wind to blow away the remnants of the hunting knife.

“How...” Leif asked.

“I changed its molecular structure, turned it into metal dust.” Alec brushed his hands together. “No murder weapon to find, even if there was a body left to examine after the fire.”

“I am so impressed right now,” Leif said, and he hugged Alec to him, careful not to crush his mate.

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Chapter 14

Alec

Dawn came with a quiet flood of white and gold light, the forest brightening slowly, birds waking, the few remaining species calling to each other as the sun's glow spread over the mountains.

Alec sat on Leif's lap, his huge mate in his lycan form keeping him warm through the night as they tended the fire, making sure everything was reduced to ashes and the fire didn't spread past the fallen tree.

A few bones remained, along with blackened metal from buckles and weapons, but Alec would take care of them after he sorted out his mate's curse.

"Can you Change back for me?" Alec asked, hand on Leif's chest where the scar was hidden under thick fur.

In answer, Leif Changed, smoothly transitioning from lycan to human form in seconds, Alec in his lap the whole time. Blood and gore spotted and smeared his pale skin, but the area over his scar was clear.

"What's on your mind, little greenbough?" Leif asked, smiling down at him with crystal-bright blue eyes.

"I want to try to dismantle the curse," Alec said, spreading his fingers over the ancient dagger mark, sending his awareness deeper into Leif to the silver blade tip

surrounded by dense scar tissue.

Leif held him gently, watching him with trust and affection, and Alec breathed in deeply before reaching out with his magic.

The silver was old, so old, the inimical curse anchored in the metal, sending out strands of hunger to consume the life force of any wolf that dared to form a pack bond with Leif. His poor mate, alone for centuries, cut off from the essential and necessary bonds with his own species, languishing on a lonely mountain until he stumbled across Alec in the cold woods.

Alec closed his eyes, focusing on the silver. Any surgical attempt to remove the chunk of metal would be butchery, as Leif's healing would compromise every second of cutting by a scalpel—so Alec did not cut.

He changed.

The silver chunk trembled, making Leif gasp, and Alec kept going, not daring to stop once he started, fearing what the curse might do if he failed his attempt. He sent more energy into Leif, propelling his focus and skills to the deepest level, the molecular structure of the element shining bright in his mind's eye, and he made it respond to his will.

Solid no more, the silver pooled in the pocket it once occupied as a blade point, and Alec thinned the scar tissue as he worked, calling the silver to the surface, past blood vessels and muscles, through skin, beading on the surface of the scar.

Alec lifted his hand away, letting the liquid silver run freely from the scar, and he plucked at the motes of the curse that followed the silver to the surface of Leif's skin. He caught them like a bug, each deep-red mote of magic, and he eroded the form of the curse one piece at a time until it was nothing but energy that he let float away into the ambient magical fields around them.

Leif gasped and shuddered when Alec released the last bit of energy, his hand coming up to his chest, but Alec stopped him, not wanting him to smear the liquid silver. He grabbed a handful of leaves from the ground and wiped at the silver, cleaning most of it away before tossing the leaves to the embers of the bonfire, where they caught and burned in seconds. Leif wasn't affected by silver anymore, but better not to take chances with the curse gone.

"The curse is gone, but the lifetimes it stole from those long-dead wolves remain," Alec quietly told Leif, pulling his awareness back into his body, swaying a bit. That took a lot out of him. Leif caught him by the shoulders and held him upright. "But you can join a pack now, or even make your own, my alpha."

"Alec," Leif whispered, eyes full of tears and relief, and some incredulity after so many years with the curse. Alec understood what it felt like to be free, finally. Freedom was everything.

"I love you," Alec told his mate, the golden cord between them shining bright in the morning light.

"Thank you," Leif breathed out, pressing his forehead to Alec's, overcome. "Thank you, Alec."

"Anything for you," Alec promised him.

"I love you," Leif said, blue eyes bright. Alec smiled, pulling him into a kiss.

Alec

No one came looking for the dead mobsters, at least not in the hills. Not even the police for the crooked cops, though they were reported missing by the state troopers when the cruiser was found abandoned in Hemlock several days after they failed to report in for their shifts.

Leif and Alec listened to the gossip in Gelridge Hollow from the friendly cashier on their monthly trip out for essentials.

“Heard that the feds raided Rodgers’s house a while back, looking for him, and everything was left, like he stepped out and was meaning to come back, but they never found him,” they said as they helped Alec pack the groceries.

“Sounds like he ran before the feds could catch him,” Alec said, nodding along.

“I bet he’s in the tropics, drinking margaritas on the beach,” the cashier said.

“Probably,” Alec agreed, smiling.

Leif was at the cart, loading items on the checkout belt. The cashier took a look at Leif and then leaned closer to Alec and whispered, “Your mate is an alpha, right?”

“He is, why?” Alec answered, curious.

“My kid’s bestie is a werewolf. There’s no pack in the area, and I was wondering if your alpha was accepting pack mates? The kid’s family moved to the area a couple months ago and it’s just him and his parents. They seem really lonely. None of them are alphas.”

Leif stopped loading the belt and looked up, and Alec felt his heart pang at the eagerness and hope in Leif’s eyes. Leif was speechless, and Alec sent him a rush of love and calm through their mate bond .

“You got your phone?” Alec asked the cashier.

“Yeah!” they eagerly pulled it out and Alec gave them his number.

“Pass that number along, tell them that Alpha Mate Alec Greyfeld would love to talk

to them. No pressure.”

“Thank you so much! I’ll pass it along for sure!”

Minutes later they were in the parking lot, Alec checking the lot out of habit, Leif smiling as he loaded the groceries in the truck.

“What’s that smile for?” Alec gently teased his mate, smiling wide himself at the happiness coming along the mate bond from Leif.

Leif leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead, Alec feeling Leif’s grin against his skin. “Thank you, Alec.”

“I just passed along my number,” Alec grumbled good-naturedly.

“You saved me, and gave me a future full of possibilities.”

“Anything for you.”