



Promise & Artem (The Wolf's Mate Generations #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She-wolf Promise has the unique ability to heal shifters. Seeking a new home where she can use her gift, she heads to a campground in Pennsylvania, hoping to find a place to belong—and hopefully her truemate.

Artem, a minotaur shifter is cursed. If he doesn't find his truemate by twenty-five, he'll shift permanently. Battling severe aggression, he spends his nights in an underground shifter fighting ring.

When Promise and Artem meet, they instantly recognize each other as truemates, and Artem feels his beast finally settle. But when he tries to leave the fighting ring to be with Promise, he's attacked by the owner and she's kidnapped.

Can Artem rescue Promise before he loses her forever?

Total Pages (Source): 23

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise Elliot, she-wolf healer and certified badass female, if she did say so herself, walked out of Lonestar after her shift and stopped to inhale the fresh night air and look at the sky. It was a few days after the June full moon and the sky was beautifully clear and full of stars.

“Hey, girl.”

Promise dropped her head and smiled when she saw London, one of her best friends. The half she-wolf, half-fairy had grown up with Promise in the small town of Allen Kentucky.

“Welcome home,” Promise said, giving London a hug.

“Thanks.” London had spent time in Ashland, Indiana after their mutual friend Lyric, daughter of the pack alphas, had married her mountain lion twin mates, Evan and Elliot.

“Find any good-looking single males up there?” Promise asked.

“Plenty,” she said with a chuckle. “But none were my truemate, which sucks.”

“Too bad.”

“I heard things got dicey with Remy’s mate?”

Not too long ago, Promise and her mom Reika had been in line for snacks at the movie theater when former pack member Remy had called in a panic because his

mate Thyme had been shot while in her wildcat shift. Because Promise and her mom were healing wolves also known as apexes, they rushed to the town of Copper Creek and were able to save Thyme's life.

"That's freaking wild," London said after hearing the details. She gave her a curious look and then said, "Are you okay? You seem a little distracted."

Promise leaned on the railing in front of the restaurant and sighed. "I'm not sleeping well."

"Any reason why?"

"Well, I think it's because I'm ready to leave but Rio's not."

"I thought you guys were planning to leave together?"

Promise and her younger sister Rio had agreed a few months ago, that they were going to leave the healings in the Tressel Pack to their mom and find new groups to join up with. They intended to simply travel around until they found their truemates and then settle with their people, becoming the healers for their new family and friends.

But every time they made plans to leave, Rio got cold feet.

"I think she's just not ready to leave home yet," Promise said. "Which is fine. I just didn't picture going on my own."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Not really." She rubbed the space over her heart. "I know I need to leave. There's zero reason for us to have three healing wolves plus fae like you who can heal with

magic.”

“You could go to Ashland and hang out with Lyric,” London suggested. “At least you would know someone in the area.”

“It’s crossed my mind, but I’m not sure it’s where I should go, or I probably would have gone already. I need to do some serious soul-searching, and I think I just need to set a date and leave, whether I’m alone or not.”

“Setting off for adventure, I love it.”

Promise smiled. “Are you going inside for a late dinner?”

“My mom ordered dinner and asked me to pick it up since I was out and about.”

“Awesome. I’m going to take off, see you later.”

“Good luck making your plan.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Promise parted ways with London and walked to her car. As she left the parking lot and drove to the single-wide trailer in a small trailer park on the other side of town, she thought about what London had said.

Should she go to Ashland and hang out with Lyric and the mountain lions? They had a dragonfae in their midst who was great at healing with magic, so they probably didn’t need another healer. But maybe she was putting too much emphasis on using her healing powers. She wanted to be helpful, though, and aside from healing Remy’s mate, she’d rarely used her healing power.

She reached her little trailer ten minutes later. Most of the unmated males and females in her age group lived in the trailer park. There was a central firepit encircled with chairs where they hung out on the weekends. She'd been living there for two years, and loved having a place of her own.

After putting her bag on the chair by the door, she yawned and trudged to the refrigerator to get a bottle of water.

The day hadn't been particularly bad. It had, in fact, been absurdly normal. She'd woken up, did laundry and cleaned the trailer, and then went to work from noon to eight. Her feet hurt, but standing for so long always made that happen and with her natural healing abilities she'd feel fine soon enough.

She was feeling antsy, though, and she knew it was time for her to go.

Allen was great, and she'd always be happy to be in the woods and hanging with her friends, but somewhere out there was her truemate and a group of shifters who needed her healing abilities.

She just didn't know where to start.

The next day, Promise had off from Lonestar, so she decided to hang out with her mom. Her dad, Bo, was a mechanic and worked at Pete's Garage, where several pack members Promise's age also worked. Her dad had been injured when he was too young to shift and had walked with a limp for years, until he met Reika and she healed him.

That apex healing didn't come easily, though. The she-wolf had to shift and use venom secreted from the gums to coat her tongue and teeth. Sometimes she used her claws as well if someone was severely injured, and then she would bite the injured person to send the venom into their body to heal. The injured person couldn't shift for

hours and had to endure what Promise likened to being eaten alive by fire ants while rolling around in a firepit.

She'd been healed once by her mom, and it had sucked hard.

On the way to the home she'd grown up in, she stopped at Pete's to get gas and say hi to her dad.

Pulling up to the second gas pump, she turned off her engine and climbed from behind the wheel with her credit card.

"Oh, hi Jessi," Promise said as the door to the shop opened and her friend walked out with three large males behind her.

Jessi was the daughter of the pack's second-in-command, Michael, who worked at Pete's. Her mates were hyena shifters, and after they were mated, Jessi had moved to Dalton to live with the clan.

"Hey, girl! Long time, no see." Jessi jogged over and gave Promise a big hug.

"Give me your card, I'll put gas in for you," Jett said, holding out his hand.

"Thanks," Promise said, giving him her card.

She stepped aside with Jessi to talk. "How's it going? What are you doing in town?"

"All's great," Jessi said. "We just came in for the day to hang out. Mom's in the mood for a cookout and I try not to pass up a chance to have her smokey barbecue ribs. What's up with you?"

"Nada. Trying to get my crap together and figure out where to go."

“Go?” Jessi tilted her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I’ve been feeling like I should take off and find my truemate, and also a shifter group that needs a full-time healer. I figure when I find my mate, I’ll find a place to settle too. Rio is dragging her feet, so I feel like I should just go on my own, but I don’t know where to go, so now it’s like I’m dragging my feet.”

“Oof, sorry. Do you want to come to Dalton and hang out? Maybe a hyena clan would be your truemates.”

Promise tried to hold back her reaction to having three mates, but Jessi grinned and Promise knew she hadn’t kept the look off her face. She couldn’t imagine having three mates, but Jessi seemed to love it. And Lyric loved having two mates.

“It’s awesome, trust me,” Jessi said, winking.

“I’m sure it is. That’s an interesting idea.”

Jessi looked thoughtful and then said, “Oh wait, I’ve got it! You should go to the hyena campground in Pennsylvania where I met my guys!”

“Isn’t the gathering in the fall, though?” The hyena clan who ran the Freshwater Campground hosted a get-together for shifters of all kinds in the fall, and Jessi had met her three mates there.

“But they live there full time. There are a few hyena clans that live and work there, plus some other shifters, and the main town has a wolf pack, too. Plus, it’s frigging beautiful up there.”

Something within Promise stirred at the thought.

“Huh.”

“Huh, what?” Jessi asked.

“I just...never thought about it.”

“Of course not, because no one ever talks about hyenas unless I come to town. I can call Ally, she’s one of the main owners. I’m sure she’d let you stay in one of their cabins for a while so you can explore. Plus, being in the mountains, there’s no telling what other shifter groups are around, not just the hyenas and wolves, but maybe bears or big cats.”

“That would be really awesome. Would you have her call me?”

“You bet.”

Jett finished filling the tank and handed the card and receipt to her. “Good luck,” he said.

“Thanks. See you guys later.”

Promise walked into the shop to say hi to her dad, with thoughts of the Pennsylvania campground on her mind.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Artem Connelly danced around the ring, sweat rolling down his upper body. His beast rolled under his skin, and he was so damn tempted to shift that he wanted to bellow.

He couldn't shift, though. The last time he'd shifted, he had trouble getting back to his human form. A terrifying six hours later, he'd finally been able to return to human, but since then he'd tried not to shift.

He'd just turned twenty-four.

He had one more year, give or take, to find his truemate, or one day after he turned twenty-five, he'd shift into his minotaur form and be stuck that way forever. It was the curse of being a minotaur and it hung around his neck like a noose. The curse meant without his truemate by his side, one day he'd shift and that would be it. No returning to human. So he fought shifting as much as he could, because he was worried he wouldn't be able to come back to himself.

Not shifting and getting older made his beast nuts and the aggression was hard to manage, so he followed in his father's footsteps and joined an underground shifter fighting group.

His vision blurred as a bear's meaty fist narrowly missed his cheek. Dodging to the side and bringing his focus back to the fight, he decided he'd fucked around long enough and ended the fight by attacking the bear with the full weight of his aggression. The male was bigger than Artem, but a few well-placed punches to the face and the male went down in a groaning heap.

The crowd cheered. Mostly human, they apparently liked paying to watch and bet on shifters beating each other all to hell.

Nero Hilliard, owner and former alpha wolf, had been ousted by his pack for fighting his pack members for money. Alphas were meant to lead, and the fact that he'd been harming his people by fighting them and been subjected to a coup that stripped him of his rank and authority would have hurt him gravely. Not to mention the fact that his former pack had a lot of balls to oust him in the first place, because it was not an easy task to take a male in that position and force him out. People died during coups. Since he'd been removed from power, he'd been running the underground fights for a decade, moving into an area under the radar of any government agencies who disliked unofficial shifter fighting groups.

Nero strode out into the middle of the ring and lifted Artem's hand in the air. "Winner, Artem the Bull! Our next fight is in ten minutes, folks. Be sure to place your bets, it'll be a wild one!"

He dropped Artem's hand and said, "You got distracted out there."

"Sorry."

"Well, how would it look if my best fighter got felled by an out-of-shape bear like Roy? Come on, the male reeks of alcohol and he's got a beer belly the size of a keg."

"I won't let it happen again." Artem unwound the tape from his hands and flexed his fingers.

"See that you don't."

It would be a lot easier to ensure the distractions didn't get the better of him if he could find his damn truemate. Without her, he was a ticking time bomb. He either

seemed to be distracted or an out-of-control maniac when it came to the fights.

Walking through the crowd, he made his way to the locker room and tossed his used tape. He washed his hands and dried them at the row of sinks, then went to his locker to get the supplies to tape up his hands again.

His phone buzzed and he was surprised to see a text from his sister Isolde. Unlike him, Isolde took after their mother and was a snowy owl shifter. But that was the way of minotaur shifters. The males took after their father and the females after their mother. There were no female minotaurs.

Hell, he and his dad were the only ones in North America as far as they knew.

And there was the tiny detail that his parents didn't know he was spending his nights fighting shifters for money. Not only had his father told him that illegal fighting rings were built by deranged males who would do anything to win and rarely cared if the fighters were hurt or killed so they should be avoided at all cost, but if he was caught by the authorities, he'd be imprisoned and face a long and lonely life behind bars.

It wasn't about the money, though.

It was about letting out the aggression from his minotaur so he didn't blow up at his family or friends. Living and working at the Freshwater Campground was something he truly loved, and he couldn't imagine doing anything else. But he also knew he had a finite amount of time left before he hit the point of no return and became a monster forever.

He answered his sister's text asking if he'd take her to town in the morning so she could pick up an old desk from the online market everyone seemed to love.

Sure thing. What time?

Seven. I told Ally I'd help her clean up after breakfast and make a batch of blueberry cream cheese muffins for lunch.

Ok. See you at seven.

He turned off his phone and put it in the locker.

"Who're you up against in the next round?" Bailey, a wolf shifter who'd been part of Nero's pack, asked with a southern drawl.

"The new guy, Varro." The male was from North Carolina and had been in a handful of fights since he joined. Artem wasn't sure why Nero wanted Artem to fight him, since the male hadn't really proved himself yet with the lesser fighters, but he was looking forward to the big payout to win the prize fight for the night.

"Well, he's not bigger or better than you, but he is determined, so watch your back."

"Thanks, man."

Finishing up his tape, Artem tossed the roll in the locker and slammed the door. Time to beat the new guy, collect his winnings, and get home before anyone realized he was gone.

He didn't want to have to explain to his dad why he'd purposely joined up with a fighting group when his father told him it was a bad idea. His parents were already worried about him. He didn't want to add to it.

He made his way out for the last fight of the night.

"I thought you were The Bull!" Varro taunted as he hopped away from Artem's fist again.

The male was proving to be harder to put down than he'd thought. He was wiry and quick, and had a mouth that never seemed to stop squawking.

Letting out a growl, Artem faked to the right and spun around, sweeping Varro's legs out from under him. As the male hit the floor with an oof, Artem leaped, fists high, ready to smash him deeper into the concrete.

Varro rolled out of the way at the last second and Artem landed on his upper arms, his weight making his wrists buckle and his joints crack.

"Fuck!"

Varro rose to his feet and Artem almost caught a foot to the face.

His vision blurred as his minotaur roared, angry that the male was harder to defeat than anticipated.

Overhead, Nero watched from a balcony, smoking a cigar, the smoke billowing around his face. Next to him stood his second-in-command, a dangerous wolf named Adir. The word among the fighters was that Adir lost his family years ago during a territorial dispute with another pack. Nero had taken him in and gave him a sense of purpose and belonging which he dogmatically clung to. The trauma of losing his family had left him with a hatred to those who threatened his new "family" in Nero's fighters, and he was exceptionally vicious toward outsiders.

Artem had once witnessed Adir's unhinged loyalty to Nero, when a group of shifters attempted to disrupt one of the fighting ring's events. He orchestrated an ambush and led the group into a trap, where he captured and killed the leader as a warning to the group to stay far away from Nero and his business.

Artem got distracted for a moment staring at the two wolves. Then pain exploded in

his temple as Varro's fist connected with his face.

Dropping to a knee, Artem blinked through the pain.

Varro crowed with glee.

The crowd cheered, the tide of appreciation turning against him.

He felt the hold on his beast start to slip as a bellow wove its way up from his chest and out his mouth. His eyes burned as his irises changed color from natural brown to bright red.

He ground his teeth together to stem the tide of his shift, but he could feel that he was losing hold.

Varro's laugh was cut off as he realized that Artem was starting to shift.

Everyone knew that once Artem shifted, all hell would break loose.

He roared and lunged, taking the young male down. His hands ached and his joints cracked as his body began to transform. His muscles burned and sweat dripped down his face, his vision blurring as his shift started to come over him.

People yelled. There was screaming from...somewhere.

A sickening crack.

The wolf crumpled under him, his body going limp. For a heartbeat Artem hovered over him, panting heavily, adrenaline making his heart pound. A chill ran down Artem's spine as he realized what he'd done.

“No,” he whispered, horror spreading through him. He dropped to his knees next to the body, his minotaur roaring in disbelief. “I didn’t mean...”

Before he could say another word, rough hands grabbed him from behind and yanked him away from the wolf’s body. He struggled, his minotaur pushing again to be free as worry for his own safety and guilt over the loss of life battled within him. An arm wrapped around his neck and squeezed tight, cutting off his air.

He tried to pry the arm away but his strength was fading fast. His vision blurred again and the last thing he saw before everything went black was the fight doctor kneel next to Varro and then look up toward Nero and shake his head.

Artem fucking wanted out. He just needed to find his truemate.

With a groan, he succumbed to the darkness.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise's phone rang later that afternoon as she was pulling weeds in the flower bed that surrounded a large weeping cherry tree. It had been her favorite as a kid, and she loved it even more now, its branches grazing the ground so delicately in the breeze.

"Hello?"

"Promise? This is Ally from the Freshwater Campground. Your friend Jessi asked me to give you a call."

Promise dropped the bunch of weeds from her hand and sat back on her heels. "Hi! Thanks so much for calling."

"You bet. So Jessi told me a little about what was going on with you. Why don't you give me the full story and I'll see how I can help, because I'm very sure I can."

Promise was warmed through by Ally's kind words. She explained her situation and the desire to find not only her truemate but a home where she could be helpful with her healing abilities.

"Well, I've never heard of an apex wolf, but it sounds fascinating and so cool! We have several small cabins that you could stay in while you search for your truemate. I'll send you a link to the map to get to the campground. When would you like to come?"

Promise's mind spun. It was Thursday afternoon, but Friday nights were busy at Lonestar with the meat buffet, and she doubted that her boss Karly would appreciate being short-staffed.

“Saturday, probably around lunchtime.”

“That’s perfect. I’ll get a cabin cleaned up for you. Drive safe.”

“I will, thank you so much, Ally.”

The call ended and Promise stared at the screen for several moments. She couldn’t believe how easy that had been. A chance meeting with Jessi at the gas station and now her world was changing.

Shit. She only had two days to make arrangements, and, oh crap, she needed to tell her parents too. Nothing like a hard deadline to make a girl get her act together.

With a smile, she rose to her feet, grabbed the bucket of weeds, and whistled a tune as she headed to the garage to find her mom and tell her the good news.

“Are you sure about this?” Rio asked as she sat on the edge of Promise’s bed and toyed with the strap of the duffel Promise had filled with shoes.

“Which part?” Promise turned from the dresser with a stack of undies.

“The campground.”

“Sure, why not? You can still come with me.”

“Nah.”

Promise stuffed the undies in the corner of the large, wheeled suitcase and stared at the contents. She’d packed for two weeks. She figured that was enough clothes for however long she was going to stay in Pennsylvania. And if she hadn’t found her truemate in a of couple weeks, she could either come back to Allen or move on

somewhere else, like Ashland to visit Lyric, or Dalton to see Jessi.

She pulled the lid over and zipped it closed. “I don’t understand why you don’t want to come with me. We’ve been planning to look for new homes for ages, and then you just put the brakes on it.”

Rio wouldn’t look at Promise, so she moved around the edge of the bed and stood in front of her younger sister. “What’s really going on?”

“What happens if I go with you and you find your truemate and can be a healer for his people?”

“I’m going to be happy dancing for weeks, but what do you mean what happens?”

“What happens to me?” At her confused look, Rio continued, “What if you find your happily ever after first and I’m stuck on my own searching for my forever guy? I don’t want to do that kind of thing alone.”

“I wouldn’t let you be alone, babe.”

“Oh please, if you find your truemate, you wouldn’t want to keep looking with me for my truemate. I mean if I find my guy first I wouldn’t want to go anywhere.”

“Nice,” Promise said with a chuckle. “I swear I wouldn’t let you be by yourself if you didn’t want to be.”

Rio sighed. “I was thinking I’d go searching with the girls.”

Promise’s brows lifted. The girls, as everyone called them, were three Angel Mates—Brenna, Dakota, and Kendall. Angel Mates were supernaturally perfect mates for wolves and when they turned twenty-one, their nature kicked in and they’d

leave their home pack to find their truemate. When they were mated and had kids, their sons would be alphas and their daughters would be Angels. The girls were waiting for Brenna to turn twenty-one in the fall.

Promise was a little hurt that Rio didn't want to go with her on their adventure, but she understood that Rio maybe just wasn't ready to leave home yet. Maybe Promise had more of that wanderlust in her than her sister did.

"I understand."

Rio lifted luminous eyes. "You're not mad?"

"Never! You're my very best friend, Rio. Thick or thin, hell or high water. I'm ready to start the next chapter of my life. None of the guys in the pack are my mate, and helping Mom heal Remy's mate really renewed my desire to get on the road and find my guy. I don't want to sit around and wait for him to wander by on chance."

Rio smiled. "I'll miss you."

The two hugged and Promise felt the sting of tears at her impending departure. She wasn't sorry she was leaving, but she was sorry to go. She could just feel in her bones that it was the best choice for her life. Somewhere out there, her mate was waiting for her, maybe hoping that she'd show up or maybe even searching for her himself.

"I need to get on my way. Help me carry my stuff out?"

Rio nodded and lifted the duffel. "Okay, how many shoes did you pack? You are coming home at some point, right?"

"Well, yeah sure, to pack and move with my truemate when I find him. Honestly? I don't think I'll be back to live in Allen anymore."

Rio stared at her for a moment. “Oh. I guess you want to be prepared for anything.”

“Yep. You never know what kind of shoes you might need.”

“Even the sexy black kitten heels?”

“You know it. And the black dress to go with them.”

“I hope you find your mate soon.”

“Me too.” They walked out to the car and put her things in the trunk.

“Bathing suit?” Rio asked.

“Yep.”

“Pajamas, flip flops, makeup, curling iron?”

“Yes, times four.”

“Charger for your laptop?”

“Ah, crud.” Promise hustled back into the trailer and grabbed the cord still plugged into the wall. She took one last look around the trailer and walked back out.

“You can move in here if you want, you know,” she said, looking at Rio.

“Why would I?”

“Maybe getting out of Mom and Dad’s house for a bit would be good for you. Like a vacation. And the trailer park has great bonfire parties on Saturday nights.”

Promise twisted the keyring until the loop holding her house key popped off. Handing it over, she said, “I’ll text you when I get there.”

“Keep me posted on everything. Lots of pics.”

“You bet.”

“Drive safe.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

Promise got behind the wheel, plugged her phone in, and selected the playlist she’d compiled for the drive. As the familiar strains of one of her favorite eighties songs came over the speakers, she waved at her sister and pulled away, putting the trailer in the rearview.

Soon enough, Allen would be behind her, and Little Hope would be her future.

She wasn’t sure why she was so certain this was the way to go, but ever since Jessi had suggested it, she hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that her life was going to change dramatically in Pennsylvania.

She was looking for a fresh start and her truemate, a place to call home and a place where she could be a healer and useful to her new people.

Maybe they’d be wolves, or another type of shifter group. She didn’t care what her future truemate shifted into or if he shifted at all. She only cared that she finally found him.

I'm coming for you, future-sexy-mate.

Signaling to the right, she hit the main road and accelerated, lowering the windows and turning up the volume. She couldn't wait to get to the campground.

Artem stifled a yawn as he waited outside his sister's cabin to take her to town. She shared a two-bedroom cabin with Charlotte, the daughter of a hyena clan who lived and worked at the campground. Charlotte's three brothers had a cabin next to Artem's, who lived alone.

He didn't care to have a roommate, because then someone would be paying attention to his comings and goings, and he'd have to explain why he left at night and didn't come back until late.

Hence the yawning.

If he could swing it, he liked sleeping in until lunch, but he hadn't been sleeping well in the last year or so, as his anxiety over not finding his truemate and his aggression slowly got worse. And, honestly, he hadn't slept at all last night. Guilt had kept him up and pacing, as he thought about the wolf he'd killed. When he'd come to after being choked into unconsciousness, the wolf's body had already been disposed of and Nero had wanted to see him. All the fighting ring owner had to say to Artem, though, was how pissed he was that he'd killed a fighter when the male had been popular with the crowd.

"Aren't you angry that he's dead?" Artem had asked in disbelief.

"Eh." Nero had simply shrugged. "Everyone knows that shifters fighting is dangerous business, that's why it's illegal. He knew what he was getting into, and to be honest he asked to fight you. He thought he could take you out."

“Kill me?”

Another shrug. “He wanted to get top billing and he didn’t want to work his way through the ranks and train, he just wanted to fight you. He knew what it meant when he stepped into the ring with you.”

“Did he?” Artem asked, hardly able to keep the accusation from his tone.

“Of course.” Nero had handed him his winnings, minus the cost of disposing of Varro’s body, and told him to take off.

That was not the first time that Artem realized how callous Nero was about the loss of life and his fighters, but it was the first time that he’d been a part of it. Knowing that Varro had planned to kill him was chilling in an entirely different way. The fights weren’t supposed to be to the death, but it happened. Business as usual, Nero would say when it happened.

Artem pushed away the thoughts of the previous night and focused on the task at hand, chauffeuring his sister to town. He doubted he’d ever forget that awful feeling of waking up and knowing he’d taken a life, but he couldn’t wallow in his guilt or he’d go insane.

Isolde opened the door of the cabin with a travel mug in hand. She stopped on the porch to put on sunglasses and then walked to his truck. As she sat in the passenger seat, the ice in her mug clinked. “Morning.”

“Hey,” he said, pulling away from the cabin.

“You look like crap.”

“Thanks, that’s helpful.”

“I just tell it like it is. You didn’t sleep well?”

“I never do.”

She hummed and got quiet for a long moment, then said, “You’ll find your truemate this year, I know it.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” he said.

As he turned onto the main road that led to town, she said, “What do you want to talk about?”

“How about you risking our lives by getting a stranger’s address and going to their house to pick up some old piece of shit?”

“I’m not risking our lives,” she said. “Everyone does it.”

“Yeah, murderers.”

“You wouldn’t let anyone hurt me, and besides there’s nothing wrong with taking risks on occasion.”

He glanced at her and rolled his eyes. She gave him a friendly punch on the arm.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you, but I still think it’s dumb.”

“Meh. I’ve gotten some great items doing this, so you’re just going to have to suck it up.”

He snorted. She put the address into the GPS and talked his ear off on the short drive about the campground owners’ idea to host a summer gathering instead of a fall

gathering.

“Why would they change it?” he asked.

“Because they’ve had fewer and fewer people coming to it. They think a timing change might help.”

“Anything’s possible. So what, like in August?”

“Probably, since June is almost over. They’re going to send out an email to the groups that send unmated people to the gatherings to gauge interest before they make any changes.” She elbowed him. “Maybe your truemate will show up. Or mine! Swoon. I hope he’s sexy.”

“Ugh.”

“What, you don’t want me to have a sexy mate?”

“I don’t want to think about you and any male, period.”

“Fair enough. I’ll just keep a good thought for both of us to find our happily ever after sooner rather than later.”

He pulled to a stop in front of a small house.

“Keeping a good thought isn’t going to do much, you know. You can’t manifest your way to a truemate.”

“But being open to good things happening can’t hurt, right?” She got out of the truck and smiled at him. “Trust me on this, Artem. Your truemate is out there somewhere, hell maybe she’s on the way to Little Hope right now!”

His phone rang before he could think of something to call his sister besides being a perpetual bucket of sunshine.

“Hey, Dad,” he said as he watched his sister go to the door and knock, wanting to make sure she didn’t get snatched.

“I need you to run an errand for me. There’s a four-wheeler company going out of business and I brokered a deal to buy two of their four-wheelers, we just have to go get them. It’s at least a three-hour drive one way. Do you mind?”

“Sure. I’ll head out after I get back to town with Isolde.”

“Thanks, son. Check in with me at the shed and I’ll help you hook up the trailer for the four-wheelers. You can take someone with you if you want, like Kieran.”

“I’ll reach out to him.”

Isolde opened the door. “I need you to grab the desk, it’s in the garage.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Artem ended the call and got out of the truck, following his sister and an old lady to a stand-alone garage where a beat-up desk was covered in dust and cobwebs.

“You’re taking off?” Isolde asked.

“Yep. All day.”

“Okay, let’s grab breakfast on the way back to the campground, my treat. We can go to the bagel shop that has those really good chocolate chip bagels.”

He was going to say no but decided his sister’s earnest look and smile was enough to

make him want to go. Plus, he really did like chocolate chip bagels.

“You got it.”

She let out a happy giggle and followed him to the truck with the desk. He wasn't sure whether he thought his sister's optimism about finding their mates was a good thing or not. It was easy for her to stay positive when she didn't have to worry about someday turning into a monster if she wasn't with her truemate.

He just wanted to find his mate and put the monster-ish thoughts behind him.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise arrived at the campground around lunchtime, her stomach growling and her wolf prancing in her head in excitement. The lush, wooded area around the campground was amazing, and the mountains were spectacular. She bet the sunrises and sunsets were incredible to witness.

She parked in front of a cabin with a sign that said, “Welcome Center,” hanging from the front porch. Turning off the engine, she grabbed her purse and phone and climbed out.

Turning in a slow circle, she inhaled the sweet air and listened to the sounds of the birds and bugs. The trees rustled in the breeze and a sweet scent pricked her subconscious.

She closed her eyes and inhaled again, but the scent was gone.

Whatever it was, it had been spicy and masculine, like sun-warmed leather and cinnamon.

Which was a very strange thing to smell outside like that. Whatever it was, she liked it.

Turning her attention to the welcome center, she climbed the steps to the porch and pushed open the door. A bell overhead tinkled, announcing her arrival.

As she reached the counter, a female stepped out from a back room. “Hello! Are you Promise?”

“I am, are you Ally?”

“I am!” The female laughed and came around the counter to give her a hug. “How was the drive?”

“Good. Uneventful, which is what my dad says the best road trips should be.”

“So true.” A male walked out of the room she’d come from and introduced himself as Richard, one of Ally’s mates.

“Welcome. I just texted Charlotte to come to the center to take you on a tour of the grounds. Are you hungry? Lunch is chicken salad wraps and chips and will be ready in a half hour.”

“I didn’t expect you to provide me lunch,” she said. She’d planned to run out and get groceries after she got settled.

“Nonsense,” Ally said. “While you’re here, you’re family.”

“That’s so sweet, thanks.” She put her bag on the counter and unzipped it. “How much do I owe you for the cabin? Or do you want to wait until I’m ready to leave to settle up?”

“No charge,” Richard said.

“What?”

“No charge,” Ally said. “We have a bunch of empty cabins right now, so you’re not taking any rental income from us, and it’s our pleasure to help out a fellow shifter. Well, I’m not a shifter, I’m human, but we’re all one big happy family here at Freshwater. If you decide to stay here, we’ve got job openings too.”

“Oh, well,” Promise said, “I don’t know what the future will bring.”

“No pressure at all,” Ally promised with a smile. “I’m just laying it all out there. We’re really excited for your mate-finding adventure.”

The bell tinkled as it opened and a pretty brunette walked in. “Hi, I’m Charlotte. Are you Promise?”

She nodded with a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too! Do you want to drive or walk?”

“How much walking?”

“A lot if we go around the whole place.”

“I wouldn’t mind walking, I’ve been cooped up in the car for a few hours.”

“Let’s hit the road and then we’ll come back and grab lunch. We’ll stop at my cabin and grab my roommate Isolde and she’ll go with us.”

“Sounds great, thanks.”

Promise smiled at Ally and Richard and followed Charlotte out of the welcome center. “Those are my grandparents,” Charlotte said. They stepped off the porch and hung a left onto the dirt road. “Their kids—Harry, Mark, and Taylor—mated Jenny, and they formed a clan. Then they had four kids—me and my brothers, Kieran, Owen, and Davis. Do you know much about hyenas? I know your friend Jessi sent you here. I met her at the gathering where she found her truemates.”

“I know some things about hyenas, but not much.”

“Well, a clan is a group of three hyenas, usually brothers but sometimes cousins, and their truemate. The clans get together and form a baro, and the eldest hyena from each clan is the leader, and all the leaders get together to make decisions for the baro.”

“Cool. Are you mated?”

“Not yet. I hope soon, though. I’m tired of being single and going to the gatherings every year. Some males that come to the gatherings only want to find a hyena to mate with and don’t care if they’re truemates or not.”

“There are wolves like that, too.”

As they walked down the sun-dappled road, Charlotte pointed out the pond where guests could fish and swim, and ice skate in the winter, the building where meals were put out for guests who wanted to pay for the meal plan provided by the campground, and the various paths that led to unique lookouts and scenic areas around the territory.

They picked up Isolde, who was using a hose to rinse off an old desk she’d gotten from an online yard sale group. She had white-blond hair and bright blue eyes and smelled like snow.

“I’m a snowy owl,” she said. “I heard you’re a unique wolf.”

“An apex. I have healing venom that I can use when I’m in my shift to help accelerate a shifter’s natural healing abilities.”

“That’s freaking awesome,” Isolde said. She turned off the hose and wiped her wet hands on her shorts. “I’m starving. I heard Ally made chicken salad, it’s my favorite.”

“We still have half the tour to go! I haven’t shown Promise her place yet.”

“Okay, just don’t get mad at me when my stomach scares off all the wildlife.”

Promise grinned at their banter.

“Mine is growling too, don’t worry,” she said.

They continued their walk around the campground, the females telling Promise about the activities offered, as well as the stores in town for whatever she might need. Promise caught the same spicy scent as they reached a four-wheeler tour building.

“Do you smell that?” she asked.

They stopped and all looked at the big building. A wooden sign, similar to the one at the welcome center, creaked from metal hinges.

“Smell what?” Isolde asked.

“I don’t know. I caught it earlier at the welcome center. It’s spicy like cinnamon but also reminds me of sunshine and leather.”

“I only smell pine trees and nature,” Charlotte said.

“Me too,” Isolde said.

Promise inhaled again, letting her wolf out a little. “I smell that too, but also the leather and cinnamon.”

“Maybe...I don’t know actually,” Isolde said with a laugh. “Maybe your nose is on the fritz.”

“Maybe.”

She met the couple who ran the four-wheeler tours—Brierley and Axtyn—who greeted Promise warmly.

“If you want to go on a four-wheeler tour, just let us know,” Brierley said with a wide smile. “Our son Artem does tours in the afternoon.”

“I do too,” Isolde said.

“Only if you want to get lost,” Axtyn said.

“Dad!”

Promise grinned. She loved family banter. It was clear that Isolde had a great relationship with her parents.

“Thanks for the offer, it was nice to meet you both.”

“We’re heading to the welcome center to grab lunch,” Isolde said. “See you later.”

“Have fun,” Brierley said.

They continued their walk around the campground with a stop at a very cute studio-style cabin, that had one large room with a Murphy bed and a kitchenette, plus a bathroom and a small laundry closet.

“I love it,” Promise said, looking out the back door at the woods. “It’s perfect.”

“I hope you find your truemate soon and he lives in the area,” Isolde said. “It would suck if you came all this way and had to keep traveling.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be worth it to find him, though.” Wherever he is.

Once more she thought about the leather and cinnamon scent and wondered who it belonged to.

Promise woke while it was still dark out, feeling disoriented. As her eyes adjusted to the moonlight through the open window, she remembered she was in a cabin in the mountains.

But it wasn’t the location that had woken her, it was the strange dream.

She’d dreamed she was in an arena with a cheering crowd. Everything was smokey, like someone had lit a large bonfire and wind had blown the smoke into the arena. The ground was sand, and the stands creaked as the crowd rose to their feet. Ahead of her just inside the arena was a male with broad shoulders and a tapered waist. He wore jeans that hung low on his hips, and there was a large scar between his shoulder blades.

He moved like a predator, confident in his ability to take on anyone who came against him. Something about him called to her, made her want to close the distance between them.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came. When she tried to go to him, she couldn’t move any farther into the arena. The crowd, now obscured by the thick smoke, roared its approval, and the male strode forward into the shadows and smoke, leaving her alone.

As the dream faded when she woke, she could only lay back on the bed and stare at the ceiling, remembering the way the male moved, all grace and deadly intention.

Who was he? And why was she so attracted to a male in a dream? It seemed

impossible to even consider, but she couldn't help but wonder...had she dreamed about her truemate? Had coming to Little Hope triggered some kind of vision?

Grabbing her phone, she looked at the time and saw it was nearly two a.m. Far too late to call Rio or London, and what would she say anyway? That she'd had a weird dream and was a little turned on by the bare back of a male she had never seen before in her life?

Rolling to her side, she stared out the window at the darker shadows of the trees, the moonlight highlighting the trees. Her wolf let out a curious whine in her head and she mentally shrugged.

She didn't know what the dream meant, and maybe it was just a coincidence, maybe it was simply too much chatter about finding her truemate and having an adventure, and her subconscious put together some weird dream about it.

But she wasn't sure she believed that.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

On Saturday, Artem didn't get back from the campground until late with the four-wheelers, and it took him and Kieran an hour to unload them into the workshop so they could be checked out, tuned up, and ready to be put to use.

"I'm hitting the bar in town," Kieran said, rolling his neck. "I need a drink after sitting in the damn truck all day."

"Yeah, all those construction detours and traffic turned a six-hour trip into a fifteen-hour one."

"Owen and the others are already there, you in?" Kieran asked as he rocked back on his heels. "I hear it's dollar drink night for the ladies." He waggled his brows on the last word and Artem shook his head.

"You're a nut. I'll pass, I'm exhausted." Which was true. But he was also supposed to fight tonight and needed to get ready to head out.

"Suit yourself. More ladies for me and my brothers."

"Sure, sure."

He finished locking up and drove his truck to his cabin, sending a text to his dad to let him know the four-wheelers were in the workshop and ready to be checked out.

Thanks for making the trip, sorry you guys had so much trouble.

No worries. All in a day's work, right?

You bet. If you want to help me look them over tomorrow, I'll get started after breakfast.

Yeah, unless I decide to sleep in.

Whenever you get over to the workshop, I'll appreciate the help. Thanks again.

Sure. Night.

Good night, kid.

He smiled at his dad's sentiment. He'd called him 'kid' for as long as he could remember. He sure wasn't a kid anymore, but he still liked the term of endearment.

He changed into comfortable jeans and a tank, which he'd take off before he fought. As he put on his boots, he yawned and rolled his neck.

He wished he didn't need to fight tonight but being cooped up in the truck all day had made his beast antsier than usual.

If he was only the sort of male who could go for a long run and work off steam, but it was just his luck that his minotaur liked to hit people. For a moment, he considered walking away from the fights. But he doubted that Nero would allow him to walk for something so shallow as being tired. Once he found his truemate, though, he'd definitely stop fighting because he wouldn't need an outlet for the aggression anymore.

He couldn't fucking wait.

When Artem climbed into bed at three a.m., his jaw bruised and aching from a lucky sucker punch by a wolf with mismatched eyes, he was thankful he'd managed to win

all the fights and had only been matched up for three of them. His winnings hadn't been that big, but he didn't really do anything with them anyway. Because he'd killed that newcomer wolf, some of the fighters weren't interested in going against him anytime soon, and that was okay with him. Hell, he didn't need the money, he pretty much just stuck it all in a firesafe box under his bed where he could get to it if he needed it.

He rolled to his back with a groan and a yawn combined. His dad would be working on the four-wheelers around eight probably, which meant that Artem could get five hours of sleep if he wanted to help.

Assuming he could sleep, which seemed unlikely because he didn't sleep much.

Once more he thought about telling his dad about the fights. But he didn't want a lecture and he didn't want him to be mad, so he pushed the thought away and closed his eyes.

Sleep, damn it.

Artem was walking in unfamiliar woods on a night with a sky full of stars and a bright moon that made everything look blue. Ahead he could see the flickering orange of a campfire, so he moved in that direction. His beast was excited, bellowing in his head as he reached a clearing with a huge firepit, and a wild bonfire that soared a dozen feet in the air.

Through the flames on the other side of the massive firepit, he could see a female with long, dark hair. He couldn't make out her features, but he was certain as his heart clenched and his body tried to shift, that she was his truemate.

"Where are you?" he asked through clenched teeth.

He heard a whisper through the crackling fire but couldn't make out what she was saying.

“You're my truemate! Where are you? I'll find you!”

She laughed and he immediately liked the musical sound. He tried to move to her, but the fire blazed so bright he had to shield his eyes.

When he opened them again, it was morning and he'd fallen asleep. As he sat up, the dream flitted through his mind like a movie. A female in woods he didn't know, with a bonfire...what did it mean? Where was she? Who was she?

He needed answers, but he wasn't sure where to get them.

Mulling over the situation as he stared out the window of his bedroom, he remembered his parents telling him that they'd dreamed about each other before they met, but hadn't known where to find each other. They'd only known their truemate was near, which was helpful and not helpful at the same time to Artem.

If only she'd told him her name or where she was!

His minotaur let out a hopeful bellow.

Maybe the dream meant he would meet her soon.

It seemed like a far shot, considering there were no people checking into the cabins at the campground until next weekend, so how the hell was he supposed to meet his truemate?

He looked at his phone and saw it was after eight, which meant he'd managed to get a passable amount of sleep. The dream still lingered in his mind as he showered and

dressed, then made his way to the workshop to help his dad with the new vehicles.

After saying good morning, his dad gave him a curious look. “You okay? You look...your eyes are red.”

“Red like bloodshot?” Artem asked.

“No, red like your minotaur.”

“Oh, I had a weird dream last night.”

“A mating dream?”

“Do people have sex in mating dreams?”

His dad paused then shrugged. “I have no idea!” He laughed. “I just dreamed about your mom before I met her, but it wasn’t a sexy dream.”

Artem wrinkled his nose. “Good.”

“Hey! Sex is how you came into existence, I’ll remind you. But anyway, I don’t know if our people have actual mating dreams or not, but we certainly have dreams about our truemates. Did you talk to her?”

“I tried.” He explained the dream to his dad who pondered it for a few quiet moments.

“Well hell, I’m not sure what to make of that one. It’s not our woods?”

“No.” That much he was certain of.

“Maybe it’s where she lives. Maybe she’s with her people and coming here for some reason or passing through. You never know what fate has in store for you.”

“It would be great if she could have talked to me.”

“Well, with your mom and me, she asked where I was and I told her I’d find her. I don’t know how the hell I thought I’d accomplish that, but in the end that asshole I worked for kidnapped her thinking she was someone else’s mate and brought her right to me.”

“Good thing you were there to save the day.”

“That’s what minotaurs do best. Maybe you’ll have a different dream tonight and you’ll get some more clarity.”

“That would be awesome.”

“You sure you’re okay? Not feeling too aggressive?”

“I’m good, actually. Aside from the weird dream, I slept pretty well. I’m not sure why my eyes would be red.”

“They’re not anymore, it was just for a few seconds.”

Artem hummed. “Strange.”

“That’s our people in a nutshell. You’ll find your truemate soon, I’m sure of it.”

“You and Isolde are saying the same thing to me.”

“Well, she’s an optimist like your mother. I’m a realist, but I also am hopeful you’ll

find her soon.”

“Me too, Dad.”

Artem picked up the manual for the four wheelers and flipped through it while his dad worked on getting the vehicles into the computer system to track any repairs needed.

The words on the page in front of him blurred and his minotaur let out a curious bellow in his mind.

He had the sudden urge to leave the workshop.

Putting the manual down, he walked toward the open door.

“Kid?”

“I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Oh okay, well, be careful.”

Artem stepped outside and raised his head, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. As he sorted through the scents in the air, he wasn’t sure he picked up anything out of the ordinary, but he had the strangest urge to go somewhere. Find someone.

His truemate?

He let out a low growl as he stalked away from the workshop. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he was going to let his minotaur lead.

And the way he was leading was toward the cabins on the far side of the campground.

Lead the way.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise hadn't slept well after waking from the weird dream, so after tossing and turning for hours, she'd woken up before dawn, made a cup of coffee, and sat on the back porch of the cabin to watch the sunrise through the trees. Even without getting to see the full effects of the sunrise, she still loved seeing the light break through the darkness, filtering between the tree trunks and leaves to shower her with golden light.

Once she knew her sister was awake, she video called her and propped the phone up on the dresser while she unpacked.

"Ugh it's early," Rio said.

"But you're an early bird."

"Maybe I stayed up late partying with the trailer park peeps."

Promise straightened from where she'd bent to put a pair of shorts into a drawer and stared at her sister. "Did you?"

"Ha! You know me better than that. I was in bed by eleven. But I did hang out with everyone for a while. It was fun, but once my social battery was depleted, I bailed."

"You and your social battery," Promise chuckled.

"It's a thing."

"Yeah, I feel you. I spent yesterday with two females—one is a snowy owl and one is a hyena—and we had lunch together and then dinner, and then they wanted to hang

out around a bonfire. I was so ready to not talk to a soul by the time I made it to my cabin for the night.”

“I’ve never met an owl shifter.”

“Me either. Get this: her dad is a minotaur.”

“Like the goat guy?” Rio’s face scrunched up as she spoke.

“Not goat, bull. Apparently, his whole body changes but he stays on two feet that become hooves and his head is like a bull. So wild. She has a brother too, but I haven’t met him yet.”

She had met the hyenas who lived and worked at the campground, though, including Charlotte’s brothers, and another set of siblings: Cade, Daxton, Varick, and their sister Lorelai.

“Any of them your truemate?”

“That would be way too easy,” she said. “But they sure do grow hot males here. You should definitely come for a visit while I’m here.”

“I’ll think about it. I could use a change of pace.”

Promise zipped up the empty duffel and tossed it into the closet. “I still feel like this is the best thing I could have done.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.”

“I’ll be happy when I find my mate. Until then, though, I’m content.”

“When are you going to the wolf pack?”

“I don’t know.” She put her hands on her hips and looked around the room, and then looked at her sister. “I had a dream last night.”

“If it was a sexy one, save the details for someone else, because gross.”

Promise laughed. “It wasn’t sexy.” She explained the dream and the strange feeling she had when she woke. “I think he might be my truemate.”

“Wow. It sounds like a mating dream, but where on earth would an arena like that be?”

“I have no idea. I don’t even know anything about mating dreams, if that’s what it was. What if my brain is just trying to cobble together a mate for me because I spent so much time thinking and talking about finding him?”

She was fairly certain the entire campground knew she came there to find her mate. Which was fine, but also made her feel oddly vulnerable. Finding a mate was a private thing, wasn’t it? Not a group effort.

“Well, maybe it was your brain trying to give you hope, but maybe it’s just what happens to supernatural creatures like shifters...that sometimes we’re special enough to get mating dreams.”

“I’ve literally never heard of anyone we know having a mating dream, have you?”

Rio’s face screwed up in thought, which made Promise smile.

“No. But could it mean your mate isn’t a shifter? Or maybe he’s a unique kind of shifter. Oooh, like a dragon! Wait, do fairies have mating dreams? You should call

London and ask her.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“It’s been known to happen.”

Promise grinned. “I miss you. I wish you were here.”

“Allen is the right place for me at the moment. But the second I feel like I should leave town to find my mate, I will. I just think by the time it’s right for me, you and your dream guy will already be mated.”

“Well, I’d love to meet my guy soon, but who knows?”

“Keep a good thought.”

“I will.”

They said goodbye and I love you to each other, and then the call ended, the screen with her smiling sister going blank.

Promise finished unpacking her suitcase and took her toiletries into the small bathroom to get ready for the day. She wasn’t sure what the day would bring, but her wolf was optimistic that it might bring her and her mate together.

She was filled with hope. It was a new day in a new place, and she was ready to see where the day took her.

Hopefully into the arms of her mate.

Artem’s beast was huffing impatiently as he walked around the campground toward a

group of cabins. He didn't think there were any renters in the cabins, but he did remember hearing from his parents that Ally had said a she-wolf from a pack in Kentucky was coming to hang out for a couple of weeks. She was on some kind of search, but he couldn't recall what the search was for.

And he wasn't sure why she popped into his head. At the time, he remembered thinking there wasn't anything in Little Hope that would draw someone from out of state, unless they really liked hiking in the mountains.

His beast grew more anxious as the cabins came into view.

He inhaled and picked up a sweet, honey scent in the air and he paused, letting his beast out enough to locate the scent.

With a growl, he moved forward, letting his beast lead him to one of the one-room cabins. As he neared the small cabin, the front door opened, and a gorgeous brunette stepped out. She wore shorts that hugged her curves and a tank top with a daring dip in the front that gave him a tantalizing peek at her cleavage.

She pulled the door shut and then froze, her hand tightening on the knob.

Letting go of the knob, she faced him fully, her gaze clashing instantly with his.

His beast bellowed happily in his head and a happy snort sounded entirely too loud in the quiet as it escaped his nostrils.

Her brows drew down and even from the distance that separated them, he could see her eyes turn amber.

The visiting she-wolf.

She was his mate.

His one true mate, the other half of his heart, and the only one who could save him from his fate.

Moving forward to close the distance between them, he opened his mouth to say something but the only thing that came out was a grunt.

She leaned forward, planting her hands on a short railing in front of the porch.

Her eyes widened as he came within a few feet of her before he stopped.

Finally feeling like he could speak, he said, "I'm Artem."

"Promise."

"Promise what?"

"My name is Promise."

"I like it."

"Oh, well, I'm glad," she said with a laugh. "I've had it my whole life. It was a gift from my parents."

He realized she was teasing him and some of the tension eased from his body. She had a great laugh and sounded just like the female in his dream. He wanted to hear it all the time.

She stared at him for a long, quiet moment, and then said, "You're Isolde's brother. The minotaur."

“Yes. And you’re the she-wolf who came here to look for something.”

“Well, not exactly.”

She stepped off the porch and stood in front of him. She was shorter than him by a foot, all petite and curved in just the right places. His hands actually ached for want of touching her.

She stared up at him and bit her bottom lip for a moment. “I came here looking for you.”

He frowned. “Me?”

“I came here to start my search for my truemate. I knew he wasn’t in my pack. I’m a healing wolf, and so are my mom and sister, so I thought I’d go out on my own and look for my mate. I hoped when I found him, that his people would want a healer around to help out. Because that’s what I really want to do.”

“Help people.”

“Well,” she said with a smile that made his whole body feel warm. “I wanted to find you first, and then see about becoming the healer to your group. Which I guess is the hyenas?”

“It’s just me and my dad who are minotaurs, but yes, we’re part of the hyena baro.”

“I met your parents when Charlotte and Isolde took me on a tour of the campground. They’re really nice.”

“I’m glad you got a chance to see the campground and meet my parents and sister, too.”

His hands were sweating and his knees were weak, and his minotaur was bellowing so loudly in his head that he thought he'd go deaf from it. He couldn't help but reach for her with trembling hands and pull her close. As he buried his face in the crux of her neck his whole body jolted with joy at finally finding her. He inhaled her honey scent and everything inside him quieted for the first time in years. He could feel the aggression already leeching away from him as his beast recognized fully that they'd finally found their truemate and they could relax.

No more threat of turning into a monster with no hope for reprieve.

No more need to fight to stave off the aggression.

Pulling her even closer, his beast hummed as she wrapped her arms around him and returned the tight hold. He could feel her trembling too.

"I'm so glad I found you, Artem," she whispered. "I feel like I've been looking for you forever, but this is the first time I left home to search."

"I can't believe you're here. I can't believe you're real."

She leaned away slightly and smiled, her eyes fully amber and the honey scent of her morphing to smell like the woods in the fall. "I'm here and I'm real. And I'm yours."

He crushed her against him, their lips meeting for the first wild and sweet kiss. She was temptation in the flesh, more beautiful than he'd dared to imagine his mate might be. As the kiss deepened, the woods came alive around them as if in celebration, and his beast let out a happy bellow.

They'd found her.

Finally.

Their truemate's name was Promise.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise couldn't believe she'd found her truemate the day after she arrived at the campground! And not only had she found him, but he was sexy as hell. Dark hair shaved on the sides and a little long on top, a rugged jaw covered with a day's worth of stubble, and dark brown eyes like melted chocolate.

And he could freaking kiss!

She'd never been held so tenderly and kissed so expertly, but damn was she putty in his calloused hands.

Her wolf was turning somersaults and prancing like a show pony in her head.

She remembered the dream, and she slipped her hands under his shirt and up his broad back. He stiffened as she reached what she was looking for: the scar she'd seen in her dream.

"It's you," she said, breaking the kiss.

"Your mate?" he asked, his thumb stroking lightly over her jaw. His eyes were a beautiful scarlet red, and she suspected it was the color of his beast's eyes. She wondered if hers were amber.

"No, I dreamed about you."

"When?"

"Last night. Or it was really early this morning. It was a weird dream, but I saw a

male with a scar on his back. I wanted to see if my dream really was some kind of prophecy. Wolves don't have mating dreams."

"Minotaurs do."

"That explains it. My sister suggested that when I told her about my dream today."

"Tell me about your dream," he said.

She looked around, remembering they were outside, in broad view of anyone who might come by. Not that she cared if people saw her fondling her mate, but she wanted to get somewhere comfortable so they could talk.

"Have you eaten breakfast? I can make us something to eat and we can talk."

"I haven't, but I'll only let you make me breakfast if you let me help."

She smiled. "You got it."

She took him into the cabin and to the kitchenette. "Your sister and Charlotte took me to town yesterday for groceries. Ally and Richard said I could eat with the employees whenever I wanted, but I didn't want to always have to go on a walk to have something to eat."

She opened the fridge and pulled out a small carton of eggs and a jug of orange juice. "There's bread in the cabinet," she said.

He made toast and filled glasses while she fried up some eggs and plated them with the toast. She didn't have jelly but she had picked up butter.

While they worked, she told him about her dream. "So do you know why I dreamed

about some kind of fighting arena?”

There wasn't a kitchen table, so they took their plates, silverware, and glasses to the little living area and the comfortable couch and wooden coffee table.

“I do, actually,” he said.

When he didn't keep talking, she prompted him, “Is it bad? You can tell me anything, we're mates.”

Her wolf loved to hear that word. Mate.

The corner of his mouth crinkled in a grimace. “It's not great.” He paused again, staring at his plate, then looked at her. “I don't want you to be sorry that we're mates.”

“I won't.”

He stared at her for a quiet moment, then said, “Do you know anything about minotaur shifters?”

“No. I didn't even know your people were real.”

“I don't think there are a lot of us, actually. So it's just me and my dad. But what makes our people unique is that we're cursed.”

“Cursed like a fairy tale?”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “Kind of. The males of our kind are cursed to grow progressively more aggressive the closer they get to age twenty-five. It gets more and more difficult to return to human form when we shift, and sometimes the shift comes

along suddenly and can't be controlled. I've done things in my shift that I'm not proud of."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"So you're having trouble coming out of your shift?"

"Not anymore," he said. He rubbed the space over his heart. "I can feel in my heart that finding you has fixed all that was broken with my beast. I won't be totally free of the curse until we're mated fully, but already the aggression isn't biting at my neck like it was before we met."

"What happens if you don't find your mate by twenty-five?"

"We shift and can never shift back. That's the curse: to be a monster forever."

"Geez, that's awful." She'd heard of curses before. The mountain lion pride that her friend Lyric was part of now had been cursed by a goddess ages ago, and until the curse had been broken, the males and females didn't mate with each other because the females were cursed to never know love.

She put her fork down and reached for his hand. Her wolf let out a happy sigh at the contact. "I'm sorry you were dealing with the aggression of your beast. I feel like whatever you did under the curse of that aggression isn't your fault."

He looked like he didn't believe her.

Inhaling sharply, he said, "I think the arena in your dream was related to my fighting."

“What kind of fighting?”

“Underground shifter fighting...for money.” He explained that even though his dad had gone down a similar road as a young, unmated male, he’d cautioned Artem not to follow in his footsteps. “I didn’t listen of course,” he said with a wry laugh. “I knew my aggression was getting out of control once I turned twenty-four, but I thought I could handle it. I just killed a male I was fighting. I wasn’t totally sure I had until I woke up after getting choked out by some of the other fighters who were trying to keep me from killing the people watching the fights.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m so sorry you went through that. Do your parents know you fight?”

“Hell no. They’d be so pissed.” He scrubbed his free hand through his hair. “I found out when I woke up after the fight that the wolf I killed was planning to kill me. He wanted to be the best fighter and get the big prize money. It doesn’t change the fact that I didn’t mean to kill him and I’m still wrestling with guilt about it, but it’s chilling to think I went into the fight planning to actually just fight when he wanted me dead.” He shook his head. “I still can’t wrap my head around it.”

“I can understand your guilt at taking a life, but it also sounds like your minotaur wanted to come out to protect you because he wasn’t going to stop coming after you. Maybe you didn’t know for certain he wanted to kill you, but maybe your beast suspected it.”

He hummed, his brows rising. “I hadn’t thought about that. It was just instinct when my minotaur was trying to come out. I still took a life, though. Self defense or not. I don’t think I’ll ever really forgive myself.”

“I’m not just trying to make you feel better about something that you feel bad about, but I think if you don’t forgive yourself for what happened it’s going to eat at you.

That's no way to live, honestly. Regardless of what happened, I'm thankful that you were victorious in the ring, because if you hadn't won, if that wolf had killed you? I would never have met you."

"I'm glad for that too." He smiled at her. "I need to talk to my parents about my fighting and I also need to quit."

"Why?"

"Because I don't need the outlet for my aggression anymore. I don't need to fight. I never liked it anyway, it was just a means to an end."

"That makes sense." She smiled. "Did you get that scar on your back during one of the fights?"

"I drove a four-wheeler down the mountain on a dare when I was twelve and cut my back open on some rocks. I wasn't old enough to shift so it just scarred."

"A daredevil, huh?"

"Maybe in my idiotic youth."

"Okay, so I dreamed about you fighting. What did you dream about?"

"A bonfire. I saw you, but all I could really see was that you had dark hair. You were talking to me, but I couldn't hear the words."

"Our pack always has bonfires on the full moon. Maybe that's why."

"Makes sense."

They ate and talked, not speaking any more about his fighting during what she figured were spectacularly bloody battles. She couldn't believe that people paid to watch shifters beat each other up and even placed bets on who would win. She was definitely glad that Artem was going to quit because she didn't want to worry about him.

Even if she could heal him with her venom.

She told him about being an apex, and how she hadn't used her healing venom in ages until she'd helped her mom heal her friend Remy's mate, Thyme.

"It's so freaking noble to use your power like that to help people," he said. He pushed his empty plate away and leaned back on the couch. "So much more noble than me punching people several nights a week."

With a laugh, she leaned back on the couch and turned so she could face him. "The roads we chose in our lives brought us to this place, so I don't have any regrets except that I wish I'd come here sooner."

"I wish you had too." His eyes simmered, the brown getting eclipsed by the red as the spicy leather scent of him made her stomach flip.

"What now?" she whispered.

He leaned over and brushed his lips across hers. "I'm supposed to be helping my dad look over some new four-wheelers I brought in last night. Would you like to walk over to the workshop with me and meet him?"

"Sure."

He kissed her again. "Promise, I want to take you to bed and mate you right now. But

we just met. And I haven't even asked you to be my mate properly. I want to take you out tonight and then we can see where things go between us." He gave her a curious look, his eyes darkening back to brown. "If you think I don't want to strip you and find out what you sound like when you fall apart, you'd be greatly mistaken. Because it's all I can think about."

Her cheeks heated and her skin tingled. "It's all I can think about too."

"Later." He rose to his feet and brought her with him. "You're the definition of addictive, beautiful."

"You are too."

They left the cabin, hand in hand, and walked to the workshop. She couldn't believe she was about to meet her truemate's dad.

She couldn't wait to call Rio and tell her the good news.

And her parents, too.

The hyena baro didn't have a healer on staff, and that meant she'd not only found her mate but also a place she could be useful.

"This is the best day ever," she said, their shoulders bumping as they walked.

"Wait until tonight."

She shivered at his tone.

She couldn't wait.

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Artem knew he needed to come clean to his dad about the underground fights, but he sure wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

Or the fact that he needed to tell Nero he wasn't going to fight anymore. He'd made a commitment to fight, but he'd never agreed to any specific terms. Nero let fighters leave from time to time, and he was certain the male would let him leave as well. If he didn't, then Artem would cross that bridge when he came to it.

For now, he was going to focus on his beautiful mate.

He needed to plan a kick-ass first date. He wanted her to see that he would always put her first and would be the best mate for her, giving her everything she wanted and needed.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been out on a date. Knowing he hadn't found his mate had meant dating was pretty meaningless, so he'd had some one-nighters to stave off the urges, but even that had soured for him as well.

Now that he'd met Promise, he knew that nothing else compared to her. Everything in his life before her was just shadows and mist.

They reached the workshop and he opened the door, letting Promise in ahead of him. His dad was leaning over one of the four-wheelers with a flashlight.

"Dad?"

"Hey, kid," he said, not looking up. Then he glanced at them and straightened. "Oh!

Hi.”

Artem smiled. “Dad, you remember Promise. She’s my truemate.”

His dad turned off the flashlight and brushed off his hands. “Are you kidding? That’s amazing news, congratulations!”

He joined them with a big smile.

“So how the heck...when did this happen?” And then he hummed. “Oh, it’s why you left suddenly!”

Before she could say anything, Artem’s dad suggested they go to the cabin to talk to him and his mate Brierley, and Artem thought that was a great idea.

“Isolde’s working this morning around the campground with Charlotte and Lorelai, but your mom was talking about having Angel come over, so she’s probably at our place. Let’s go see.”

“Sounds good,” Artem said.

They followed his dad away from the workshop and toward the group of cabins reserved for staff members. He pointed out his place to Promise as they passed it by.

“This is such a neat campground,” she said. “I can see why people like to come here.”

“The gathering used to be the biggest thing we did, but we’ve gotten into weddings too, so we do a nice business year-round,” Axtyn said.

“My friend Jessi met her mates at a gathering here,” Promise said. “She’s the one who suggested I come here and look for a new place to call home.”

Axtyn gave them a curious look and Artem said, “We’ll save that story for Mom too.”

“You got it.”

Axtyn opened the front door of a cabin and called, “Sweetheart? Are you here?”

“In the kitchen, my love.”

Axtyn stepped aside and said, “Come on in.”

Artem gave Promise’s hand a squeeze as they walked through the hall and into the kitchen, where his mom was looking at her old recipe book with her best friend, Angel, who also lived and worked at the campground with her mates.

After telling his mom and Angel the good news, his mom whooped a cheer and raced around the island to hug them both.

“Oh, honey!” she cried, “I’m so very happy for you! I’m so happy for you both!”

Brierley stepped back and his dad put his arm around her. Angel said, “Congratulations to you both. This is a family thing, so I’m going to scoot.”

“But the rolls?”

“We can do that later!”

Angel was gone moments later.

Brierley said, “So I want all the details! How did this happen? When did this happen? And where? Oh my gosh! Are you hungry, do you want something to eat or drink?”

Look at me, I'm so happy I'm shaking!" She held up her hands and they were trembling, which Artem thought was sweet.

"We're good, Mom. How about we sit on the back porch and chat? We've both got a lot to tell you."

His dad growled and his eyes flashed red. "I told you not to get into those damned shifter fighting rings, Artem."

"I know," he said, rubbing his thumb over Promise's hand. Their fingers were linked, their joined hands resting on his thigh. He couldn't stop touching her. It made his beast feel grounded and not out of control.

His mom put her hand on his dad's arm. "Hold on, that's important and everything, but the main news is that once they're mated, then there's no danger to Artem for shifting and never coming back from it. Let's celebrate that and be happy, you two can deal with the fighting thing later."

His dad gave him a long look. "When is your next fight?"

"Not for a couple nights."

"All right, so you've got time to enjoy your mating and then I'll go with you to get out of the fighting."

"I can go by myself."

"No way. The guys who run these things are always unhinged. You need backup."

Promise elbowed him. "He's right. You shouldn't take your safety lightly. I just met you, I need you to stick around for a few decades."

“Just a few?”

“As many as possible,” she said.

“Okay, thanks Dad.”

“Well, I’ve always thought we should have a healer in the baro,” Brierley said. “I can’t believe there are wolves out there who can heal.”

“To be fair, it’s pretty painful,” Promise said. “My mom healed a deep cut I had on my hand and it was really terrible to go through.”

She told them how they’d saved the life of an alpha wolf’s mate.

“Incredible,” his dad said. “And really wonderful.”

Artem was damn proud of his mate, and he’d only just met her.

“So what are your plans? A first date?” his mom asked.

“Yes,” Artem said. “But I can still work on the four-wheelers for a while this morning and Promise can hang out with me in the workshop.”

“Are you sure? Because I’d love the help,” his dad said. “Then you can take the rest of the week off.”

“I’ll come too,” his mom said. “I want to know more about this wolf pack in Kentucky. I’ve only ever been around the wolf pack in Little Hope and also one in New Jersey where Angel is from.”

“I thought Angel was human.” Promise said.

“She is, but her stepdad is a wolf and brought her and her mom into the pack,” Brierley said. “Angel brought me here so I could work for Ally and her mates, and she ended up loving the area and stayed. She met her hyena mates here.”

“This place seems like good luck,” Promise said.

Artem agreed.

He’d never considered the Freshwater Campground to be anything more than a place to lay his head and a job. But it was the place where his mate had come looking for him, and for that reason alone, it would forever be special.

They walked with his parents to the workshop, Promise and his mom ahead of them, speaking quietly. His dad walked beside Artem.

“Are you pissed at me?” he asked.

“A bit.”

“Oh thanks,” Artem said.

“Well come on, I told you not to get involved in those damn fights. You didn’t even tell me you’d been struggling with your beast.”

“I’m sorry.” Artem had found the underground fighting group when he’d been at a bar outside Little Hope and saw a flyer for an “open fight night,” where anyone could show up and fight and have a chance to win money. He hadn’t cared about the money, just the chance to work off some aggression. It worked, and he got hooked.

“I understand,” his dad said. “I felt the same way. I didn’t like fighting but I also craved it. But taking a life with your beast is rough, and I know that for a fact. If you

ever need to talk, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Dad."

His dad lowered his voice. "She's great, kid. I'm so happy for you."

Artem grinned. "I'm pretty damn happy too."

Now to plan the perfect first date.

The last first date either of them would ever go on.

Who knew what the night would bring?

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Artem dropped Promise off at her little cabin after they spent several hours in the workshop together, while he and his dad worked. She loved his mom already, she was so sweet. And his dad had a great sense of humor and clearly loved his family.

And she was one hundred percent falling for Artem too.

Such a sexy, sexy male.

They went for a walk on one of the hiking trails and had lunch with his sister and their friends at the welcome center, where a large kitchen had space for everyone to sit and eat meals together.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” he said.

His gaze was heated as they stood together on the porch, their arms around each other and their bodies pressed together.

“Can we shift together sometime? I’d like to see what you look like.”

“Are you sure you won’t get scared?”

“How could I? You’ll be like a myth in the flesh.”

She squeezed his biceps, feeling the firm muscle under her fingers.

He let out a soft growl. “I’d love that. I haven’t voluntarily been in my shift in a while.”

She understood what he meant. She knew he just as easily could have lost his own life in one of those fights, so she was thankful he was done with it.

Or that he would be, as soon as he let the owner know he wasn't going to fight anymore.

"I'll see you soon," he said, his voice gruff.

She went onto her toes and kissed him.

They'd been sneaking kisses all day. And sometimes boldly making out when they were alone.

She loved kissing him, loved how her body responded to his and her wolf was always howling happily in her head. They fit so easily together, she understood now why people waited for years to find their truemates: it was incredible to find the other half of your heart in the flesh.

He pulled from the kiss and reached over, opening the front door. "Bye, beautiful."

She let go of him and walked into the cabin, smiling at him as she closed the door. Leaning against the door with a happy sigh, she pulled her phone from her pocket and called her mom.

"Hi, sweetie," her mom said. "How are the mountains?"

"Amazing!"

Her mom paused and then said, "Did you find your truemate?"

"How could you tell?"

“Because you sound so happy!”

“I am,” she said, making her way to the couch and sitting down with a contented sigh. She waited while her mom grabbed her dad so he could hear the good news too, and then she told them both about the dream and finding Artem.

“A minotaur shifter?” her dad asked. “I’ve heard of them but never met one. It’s pretty neat that you were both able to have a dream about each other.”

“What are your plans?” her mom asked.

“Well, the only real plans we have right now involve a first date in about an hour. But after that? We haven’t gotten that far.”

“You’ll stay in Pennsylvania, though?” her dad asked.

That was one thing they had discussed. “Yes. I’ll obviously bring him down to Allen with me so he can meet you two and also help me pack up my place and move up here. The timing of that is open, as is an official mating ceremony.”

“If we can be there for the ceremony, we’d love to come,” her mom said. “But we also understand that sometimes outsiders aren’t welcome. I’m sure Alpha Jason would handle your mating ceremony here in the ways of our people, even if Artem won’t be joining up.”

“I’ll keep you guys posted.”

“Well, have fun on your date,” her dad said. “Love you, honey.”

“I love you too,” her mom said.

“Love you both,” Promise said.

The call ended and she rose to her feet and headed to the bathroom to get ready for the last first date of her life. She couldn't wait to see Artem again and see where the night took them.

Artem hadn't worn dress clothes since Isolde's twenty-first birthday party, when she'd insisted that everyone wear dressy clothes at a fancy restaurant in Philadelphia. He wore that same outfit: black dress shirt and pants with dress shoes. He'd borrowed a tie from his dad since the only one he had was cherry red and reminded him of Christmas.

He'd stopped by Angel and her mates' cabin before getting in his truck. She'd cut a bouquet of wildflowers that she cultivated in her garden to use in craft projects at his request. The pretty purple and yellow blooms smelled amazing and he hoped that Promise would like them.

He drove to her cabin and got out, carrying the flowers with him. Promise opened the door as he approached and he froze in place.

She looked incredible in a curve-hugging black dress that showed just the right amount of cleavage to make his mouth water. She had a gauzy floral wrap around her shoulders, and her dark hair was curled and looked like a glossy waterfall around her shoulders.

“My wolf let me know you were close,” she said. “Even before I heard your truck's engine.”

He closed the distance to them and gave her the flowers. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you, so do you. These flowers are gorgeous.”

“The only gorgeous thing I see is you, Promise.” His voice was gruff, his beast wanting to forget the plans to romance her and simply haul her over their shoulder and take her to bed immediately.

Her cheeks pinked and he loved the blush on her skin.

Lowering his head, he kissed her just once, even though he wanted to do much more.

“Let me, ah, put these in water,” she said, biting her bottom lip. “Artem.”

“Yeah?”

“You make me want to pull the Murphy bed down..”

“I want that too,” he said, grasping the doorjamb and squeezing until his knuckles turned white. “But let me show you how important you are to me and take you out. You’re special, you’re my truemate. It shouldn’t be a race to the bed.”

Her eyes softened, amber peeking around the edges of the brown he adored. “I’m feeling pretty dang lucky.”

“Me too.”

He followed her into the kitchenette and told her where he got the flowers, and then when she’d arranged them in a vase and set it on the coffee table, he took her hand and led her to his truck. After closing her in on the passenger side, he got behind the wheel and said, “There’s a place I want to take you. You can look up the menu online and make sure there’s something you’d like to have. It’s a steak and seafood restaurant called Elysian Grove. It’s about thirty minutes from here.”

She took her phone from her small, black purse. “Do you know what you want?”

“They have a filet that’s supposed to be out of this world. And I’m a meat and potatoes kind of guy so I’d get the truffle mashed potatoes.”

“That sounds good,” she said.

While he drove them to the sophisticated restaurant that was known for its rustic charm coupled with modern elegance, they chatted about the menu and the types of food she enjoyed.

“The pictures make this place look amazing,” she said. “The menu looks really good. I’m thinking about the filet, but maybe the salmon. I don’t get to have that very often.”

“You can always have some of my filet if you want to get the salmon.”

“That’s sweet.”

He brought her free hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “Everything I have is yours.”

“That’s extra sweet.”

He grinned. It was easy to be sweet with her. He wanted her to have every good thing.

By the time they reached the restaurant and were seated, she’d decided on the salmon. They both got a glass of wine and placed their orders, then looked at each other over the candlelight.

He took her hand. “I don’t know what to say, all I keep thinking is how beautiful you are and how damn lucky I feel that we met.”

“I feel the same way.” When she smiled, her eyes crinkled at the corners. She told him about her conversation with her parents and a call to her sister while she was finishing getting ready for their date. “Everyone is happy for us and can’t wait to meet you.”

“We can go visit anytime you’d like,” he said. “I’ve got the whole week off and even if we don’t go down this week, my time is flexible so I can take off whenever you need me.”

“That means the world to me.”

After the food arrived, they both split their entrees and shared with each other. While they ate, they talked about the wolf mating ceremony, because minotaurs didn’t have a mating ceremony that was performed in front of people.

“Maybe we could come up with a mating ceremony of our own,” he suggested. “One that combines your traditions and mine.”

“I’d love that, but what would we use for your traditions if your people don’t have a ceremony?”

“Well, I think the tattoo is the first thing.” At her curious look, he unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it up to reveal the black symbols inked on his skin. “This is ancient Greek used by minotaurs for millennia. The symbols mean: loyalty, honesty, and bravery. When my dad mated my mom, he added two more: family and love.”

Promise traced the symbols with her fingertips, and his skin felt like it was on fire from her simple touch.

“I love the meaning behind the symbols,” she said. “Okay, so wolves use sacred oil, blood from a fresh kill, and ash from an olive tree to mark each other, and a leather

tie is wrapped around their joined hands as a symbol of unity. What do owls do?”

He wasn't a fan of owls because his mother had been treated so badly by her people. With a grimace he told her the story of how her mother was nearly forced into a mating with a male who'd beat his first mate to death. “If it wasn't for a wolf and her hyena mates who came through the owls' territory and rescued my mom, I wouldn't be here.”

“Ah, okay, so probably we can skip owl mating stuff then.”

“Definitely.”

When they'd finished their meal, they opted against dessert because they were both stuffed. He laid enough bills in the black folder to include payment plus a generous tip and rose from his seat. He stood next to Promise and looked down at her, rubbing his fingers up the nape of her neck. She shivered and held his gaze.

“I have an idea for the rest of the night. How do you feel about a little adventure?”

Promise raised an eyebrow. “What kind of adventure?”

“A walk through the woods,” Artem suggested, “to a secluded hot spring. It's a beautiful spot, especially under the moonlight.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

She stood slowly, her body bumping against his, and took his hand. They left the restaurant and got into the truck. As the engine roared to life, he glanced at his mate and smiled, then put the truck in gear and pulled away.

Heading toward the campground, Artem's excitement grew, his thoughts filled with

the possibilities of where the night could lead, and the promise of a deeper connection to his beautiful mate and a future he couldn't wait to explore.

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Promise could hardly contain her excitement at the prospect of the hot spring. She'd never been to one, and thought it sounded romantic as hell.

Artem drove them through the campground and parked near her cabin. He got out and gathered a blanket from behind his seat, and then took her hand and led her into the woods. "If you turn on your phone's flashlight, it'll be easier to find the path in the dark," he said.

"Gotcha." She turned on her flashlight and shone it ahead of them, but didn't see a path.

"That's because this isn't an official trail. It will take us about ten minutes to get to the spring, but in another minute we'll pick up a path that we cut through the woods."

When the path appeared, they followed it, talking quietly. Fireflies dotted the night, flickering like golden stars.

The night was cool, and she was thankful the hot spring would be warm and that she also had her lightweight wrap around her shoulders.

She felt the heat of the spring before they walked out into a small clearing. She let out a soft gasp at the beautiful scene before her, with the steam rising off the water and the moonlight and stars dancing on the water's surface.

"This place is magical," she whispered.

Artem smiled, looking at her with a softness in his eyes. "I thought you'd like it."

They stood there for a moment, taking in the tranquility of the scene. Then with a playful grin Artem laid the blanket at the water's edge and began to unbutton his shirt. "Skinny dipping?" he suggested.

Promise laughed, feeling a thrill of anticipation. "I'd love to."

They didn't take their eyes off each other as they undressed. She'd never stripped so boldly in front of a guy before, and she couldn't stop watching as he slowly revealed every sexy inch of his body. He had muscles on top of muscles, and oh my, his whole body looked like it was made for pleasure.

Just for her, because they were truemates.

He stepped into the pool and pointed to a shallow ledge that ran around the perimeter of the water, explaining it was around six feet deep in the center. His eyes were glowing scarlet when he offered her his hand.

"You're the most beautiful female I've ever seen in my life. Come here, gorgeous. The water's perfect."

She joined him, the water slightly warmer than bath water. Her heart fluttered as he stepped down another carved ledge that brought the water up to his hips and pulled her to him. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and her skin prickled with awareness.

"This is perfect," she whispered. "You're perfect."

"Just for you, sweet Promise."

He stepped into the center of the pool and dunked under the water, and she followed suit. He pulled her against him and they floated to the edge where he held her with one arm and gripped the grassy ledge with the other.

He kissed her, the water rippling around them as they leaned in together, their lips meeting in a soft and tender kiss that was filled with the promise of something new and wonderful.

The kiss grew more heated. She loved the way he took command with the kiss, the soft growls from his beast letting her know just how much he desired her. Her hands strayed down his sides, feeling the taut muscles. As she slid her fingers down the cut of his abs, he chuckled and pulled from the kiss, then lifted her from the water and set her on the blanket with her legs dangling in the water.

“Beautiful, if you start touching me, I’m going to get distracted.”

“It’ll be a fun distraction, though.”

“Vixen.”

He pushed her thighs apart roughly and she inhaled sharply. Her skin prickled in the cool air, and she shivered when he licked water droplets off the inside of her knee.

Fitting his hands under her knees, he pulled her bottom closer to the edge, her legs spreading farther to accommodate his broad shoulders.

His eyes were a simmering scarlet red when he gazed up at her, his upper body highlighted by the moonlight, his skin glowing with an ethereal, silvery luster, and everything about the world filled with magic and possibilities.

“Promise, I want to ask you to be my mate, but I realize this is not a story we’d want to share publicly. Let me mark you tonight as my beloved, sweet mate and then we’ll talk about getting married and building a life together.”

“Yes, I want that. All of it. All of you.”

He pulled her a little closer with a growl and kissed her navel, then licked a heated path toward her pussy. She leaned back on one elbow and wrapped her hand around his wrist.

He tilted his head and licked slowly up her pussy, swirling his tongue around her clit and delving back to her entrance. She tilted her hips to give him more access, and he rewarded her by finding just the right spot on her clit to drive her wild. He slipped a finger into her pussy and she let out a moan.

He played with her, licking and sucking her clit and rubbing her walls. Her legs trembled and her belly clenched as she soared toward climax. As she fell headfirst into pleasure, she cried out his name.

He rose from the water and lifted her into his arms, carrying her away from the water's edge and stretching out over her as he set her down on the soft blanket. She wrapped her legs around his hips and tugged gently, but he held himself above her on straight arms.

“Promise,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “Be mine.”

“There's no one else for me,” she said with a thick voice. “I'm yours. Always.”

He thrust into her in one smooth, fast motion and her head kicked back. She groaned as his thick length filled her and their bodies were joined tightly together.

She felt an overwhelming sense of their connection as true mates, as if she'd been searching for this exact moment her entire life. It was better than anything she could have ever imagined or had ever experienced in the past. Her previous trysts were just a memory now, fading shadows compared to the dazzling reality of what she and Artem were sharing right this moment.

They stayed like that, holding each other tightly, for a brief moment, and then he began to move, thrusting in and out, and driving the breath from her lungs.

He reached under her hips and lifted, balancing them on his knees as he increased the pace. She stretched her arms over her head and let go into the pleasure that coursed through her. The angle of his thrusts pressed his body against her clit over and over, until the throbbing in the center of her body heated and spiraled. As she crested another great height of pleasure, she screamed out as everything inside her went white-hot.

He shouted as he followed her into bliss, his cock thickening inside her as he thrust a final time and held her tight.

She heard him snarl and then he struck, sinking his fangs into her neck and marking her as his mate. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight as he extracted his fangs and tenderly licked the marks he'd made.

"Me too," he said hoarsely, tilting his head to expose his neck to her.

Females didn't usually mark their mates, but she could think of nothing better. Her fangs elongated and she bit him. Their connection as mates solidified as she pulled her fangs from him as gently as she could.

Sighing happily, she snuggled into his embrace as he rolled them both to their sides and held her close.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Promise," he said, kissing her forehead.

"Me too," she said. "I'm so glad I came to Pennsylvania. Without coming here, I never would have met you. I feel like I waited forever, and I couldn't be happier that

I found you.”

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Artem woke the next day with Promise in his arms and all the warm feelings in his heart from marking and mating his truemate. His minotaur was content, and the aggressiveness he'd been battling for months was gone. He'd finally found peace, and it came in the warm embrace of his Promise.

After the hot spring, he'd brought her back to his cabin and they'd made love again, then fallen asleep in each other's arms.

He'd never slept so well in his life.

It was positively soul-restoring.

As if sensing he was watching her, Promise stirred, stretching with a squeak and a yawn.

"Morning, beautiful."

She smiled sleepily and pressed her warm hand against his cheek. "Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in a long time," she said as she snuggled closer. "I still can't believe that this is real, it seems like a dream, and if it is, I never want to wake up."

"It is real, and it's just the beginning. We've got a lot to look forward to."

She smiled again, but her expression quickly turned serious. "Speaking of looking

forward to things, or I should say things I'm not looking forward to, when are you going to talk to that owner guy?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. He'd planned to wait until his next fight, but he knew it was probably better to get it over with. "Later today, before Nero heads to the warehouse for the fights." It was definitely time for him to leave that life behind now that he'd found his mate.

"You're sure it's safe? Even with your dad? Promise's brow furrowed with concern. "I'm worried he's not the kind of guy to just let you walk away."

That had been on Artem's mind as well. "My dad's dealt with people like Nero before, and I know how his mind works. He let people leave before, I don't know why he wouldn't let me leave."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you. I just found you."

"You won't lose me, I swear. We'll meet with Nero, make it clear I'm finished fighting, and walk. I don't need to fight anymore, my beast is content with you."

"I'm glad. I'm ready to start our life together."

"Me too."

"Just be careful."

"Always."

They lingered in bed a while longer, kissing and talking, before they spent long enough in the shower that the water went cold and then they had to warm each other up. Eventually, they made their way to the welcome center to have breakfast.

“So everyone who works here eats in the welcome center?” Promise asked as they walked hand-in-hand around the property.

“Pretty much. Ally makes most of the food. She does breakfast and lunch, and a couple of times a week she and her mates host a dinner for everyone.”

There were twenty-four people who worked at the campground on various tasks. Artem and his parents ran the four-wheeler tours, a hyena quartet of Ally’s sons and their shared mate who handled the landscaping, along with another hyena from a different clan.

“One big happy family,” she said. “Sounds like a pack, where everyone works together.”

Inside the welcome center’s big kitchen, they found his sister and Angel and her mates’ sons, Cade, Daxton, and Varick.

“Saved you some waffles,” Isolde said, pushing the platter over as Artem and Promise sat on one of the benches at the big table.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Is there coffee?” Promise asked.

“You bet, let me show you where Ally keeps all the fun stuff,” Isolde said.

“Fun stuff?” Artem asked with an arched brow as he put several large waffles on a plate.

“You know, syrups and sprinkly stuff.”

Promise stood and kissed his cheek. "I take it you like your coffee black?"

"You know it."

"I'll bring you a cup."

When the girls had disappeared into the pantry to discuss the fun coffee items, Varick said, "I can't believe your true mate just freaking showed up here."

"Right?" Cade said. "We should be so lucky."

"Maybe yours will show up at the gathering, especially if they're able to pull off getting one going earlier in the season," Artem said.

"We heard about the fighting league," Daxton said, lowering his voice.

"What? How?"

Cade rolled his eyes. "Our moms are best friends, dude."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I'm going with my dad tonight to talk to the owner and explain that I won't be fighting anymore."

"Will it be so easy?" Varick asked.

"I hope so," Artem said. But he was a strong fighter and if he needed to use force, he would.

"Do you want us to come with you for support?" Cade asked.

"No, but thanks for offering. I'm hopeful we'll be in and out without issue."

“You should have let us know you were fighting at night, we would have gone with you,” Varick said, punching the air a few times.

Artem chuckled. “Next time I join up with an illegal fighting league, I’ll let you know.”

Promise returned with a cup of black coffee for him, and a very light-colored coffee for herself, with ice cubes and what looked like whipped cream and caramel sauce on top.

“Is that even coffee?” he asked, eyeing the brew.

“You sound like my dad,” she said with a laugh. “Yes, it’s coffee and it’s awesome. Not like your boring old black coffee.”

“Hey!”

He took a sip and put the mug down, then kissed her. She tasted like caramel and whipped cream.

“So what’s on tap today besides going to leave that fighting thing?” Isolde asked.

“You know too?” Artem asked.

“Mom told me.”

“Nothing’s a secret in this family I swear.”

“Hey, you managed to keep it a secret for however the heck long you were fighting, so I’d say at least you can keep secrets.”

“Good point.”

“We don’t have any plans though,” Promise said. “Right? Until you leave with your dad?”

He gave her a heated look. “I can think of a few things.”

“Ew,” Isolde said.

Promise grinned and whispered, “I’m game.”

“Wait,” Isolde said. “How about you and me get lunch in town? There’s a super cute diner that has amazing chicken salad and fresh croissants.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“Fine,” Artem said. He put his fork down and put his arm around Promise. “But I’ll keep you busy before and after lunch.”

“Again with that!” Isolde said, making a face.

Everyone laughed and Artem playfully flipped his sister off. While they finished eating, they talked about working at the campground and what Promise might do once she moved up there and, of course, after they took time off for their mating.

While he’d love to take a few months off to get to know his sweetheart and enjoy their mating, he knew he’d have to go back to work in a week. No matter how much time they took off to spend together, he knew he’d never get enough of being with her.

Artem stood on his parents’ front porch with Promise while his parents were nearby,

his dad already in his truck. It was just after six, and the fights wouldn't start until nine, so he would be able to catch Nero in the B&B that he was using for his home base.

"I don't like this," Promise said. "I just have a really bad feeling."

"I'm sorry sweetheart, but I have to do this. I can't just walk away without saying anything, he could come after me."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said, pursing her lips. "Damn it. I know you're strong and can fight, just come back to me, okay?" She hugged him tightly, a shudder weaving through her.

He put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "I will, I swear. See you soon."

With a last kiss goodbye, he left Promise on the front porch, said goodbye to his mom, and got in the passenger seat of his dad's pickup.

His dad looked at him. "Ready?"

"Yeah. The sooner I cut ties with Nero, the better."

His dad put the truck into gear and Artem watched Promise in the side mirror until he couldn't see her anymore.

"She said she had a bad feeling," Artem said, sinking down in the seat. "I hope she's not prophetic."

"I have a stop to make first," his dad said as he pulled over in front of Angel and her mates' cabin.

“Why are you stopping here?”

The door opened and Ian walked out. “He used to fight for the guy I worked for in the underground league before I met your mom. I told him what we were doing and he wanted to come along. For support and extra muscle.”

Artem opened the door and scooted to the center of the bench seat.

“Hey guys,” Ian said.

“Thanks for coming,” Artem said. “I didn’t know you used to fight.”

“Well, it’s a great way to let off steam but the guys who run these things are notoriously unpredictable. You probably won’t need me or your dad, but if you do, we’re here.”

Artem felt a little bit of tension seep away.

It was good to have friends and family.

“Thanks. I appreciate it so much.”

“That’s what family’s for, kid,” his dad said.

They pulled away, leaving the campground behind and heading out of Little Hope toward the industrial town of Trumble, and—he hoped—the very last time he’d ever see Nero again.

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Artem's nerves were singing as they parked at the B&B where Nero and his top people were staying. He'd always wondered if the owners of the B&B realized what the males were up to, but since they were human they probably didn't even know they were shifters in the first place.

They were parked at the back of the lot near the street so they could make a fast getaway if they needed. When they exited the truck, Artem looked at the two males with him.

"Nero is dangerous, but his second-in-command, Adir, is even more so. He used to fight for Nero, but after he killed a bunch of people during the fights, Nero promoted him." He'd be the one to watch out for in Artem's opinion, but any of the males who were in Nero's inner circle could cause problems for them.

"We'll be watching your back and each other's, don't worry," Ian said.

Artem nodded.

They walked across the half-full lot as the sun set and entered the B&B's main office. He'd met with Nero there once, and the male always had dinner in the dining room before he went to the fights. If he wasn't there, he'd call his cell and ask him to come and meet with them.

The interior of the B&B was quaint in that old-world kind of way, with worn furniture and dim lighting. The main room smelled like tobacco and wood.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" a middle-aged female asked from behind the wooden

counter.

“I’m looking for Nero,” Artem said. “I believe he’s in the dining room.”

“Yes, of course, go right in. If you’d like to eat, pay the waitress directly.”

“We won’t be long,” Artem said.

They walked into the dining room and Artem found Nero at the back of the room seated alone at a table for four, with his phone in front of him and an empty plate pushed to the side.

Without looking up from his phone, Nero said, “Artem. What brings you here?”

Artem exchanged a quiet look with his dad, then stepped forward. “I’m here to tell you that I won’t be fighting anymore.”

Nero pressed the side button on his phone and his screen went blank. He lifted his gaze to them, a faint smile on his lips.

“Is that so? What’s prompted this sudden change of heart?”

Artem wasn’t about to tell Nero that he found his mate and wanted to be done with the fighting. The last thing he wanted was for Promise to become a target.

“I’m ready for a change,” he said. He kept his gaze locked on Nero’s, his beast ready to shift and defend his actions if needed.

“Are you? You’re one of my best fighters, and popular with the crowd. Walking away now would leave money on the table.”

“I’ve made up my mind. I’m done,” Artem said firmly.

Nero stood and slowly walked around the table, stopping a few feet away. “The fighting league isn’t a hobby to put away whenever you please, it’s a business. And walking away from a business like this will have consequences.”

“Are you threatening my son?” his dad asked, his voice low and challenging.

Nero’s gaze moved deliberately from Artem to his dad. The hint of a smile on Nero’s face faded, replaced with a calculating look.

“Just stating facts. Artem is free to make whatever choices he wants, but he’s not free from the consequences of those choices.”

Ian moved forward slightly, growling. “You should be careful of the threats you spout. Someone might take them the wrong way. Your choices have consequences as well.”

As if they’d been waiting for some kind of cue, males appeared around Nero, including Adir, and they were suddenly outnumbered.

“You may go,” Nero said, turning with a dismissive wave. “But I’d suggest you think long and hard about walking away.”

Artem took a step forward as the need to ensure he had the freedom to walk away from the fights rode him hard. Ian put a hand on his shoulder to keep him back as Adir let out a deep growl and his eyes went to the amber of his beast.

“Try me, monster,” Adir said. “I’ve been wanting to see how we’d match up since you walked into the fights.”

“I’m done fighting,” Artem said.

Although it warred with him to give the males his back, he turned and walked away, with his dad and Ian on either side of him.

A knot of tension formed in his gut as the realization that he may never be free of Nero and the fights seemed to be a possibility. What if Nero threatened Promise? The male didn’t know Artem’s last name, where he lived, or anything about him save that he was a minotaur. But that didn’t mean that the male couldn’t find that information.

“I don’t think we’ve seen the last of him,” Axtyn said as they left the B&B.

Artem shook his head. “Me either. I’m really sorry about all of this. I’m sorry that I didn’t listen, and I joined the fighting league and possibly endangered us all.”

His dad put his hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be all right. We’ll get the baro together and set up a security detail to patrol the campground. The most important thing is that our mates are safe, as well as any guests staying with us. He’ll realize you’re well protected and leave you alone, I’m sure of it.”

Artem wasn’t so sure, but he wanted to believe that everything would be okay.

He needed it to be.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Ian said.

The trio headed across the parking lot in silence, Artem wondering just how badly he’d fucked up getting involved with Nero.

Nero watched from the dining room as Artem, his father, and another male stood on the front porch. The calm facade he'd presented just moments earlier gave way to the cold and calculating male who didn't let people fuck him over. He scowled and a low growl rumbled in his chest.

Apparently, Artem hadn't been told the truth about the fight league: the only way out was in a body bag. If he thought he could leave because he didn't want to fight anymore, then he was seriously mistaken about the sort of male Nero was.

To Adir he said, "Make sure Artem regrets trying to leave. No one is allowed to leave whenever they feel like it. It's my league and I'm the alpha. He lives and breathes at my pleasure, and he will keep his commitment to me."

"How bad do you want him to regret leaving?"

"Bad enough to send a clear message. You can be as creative as you'd like."

"On it."

Adir and two others hustled from the dining room. Nero ran his thumb back and forth along the edge of his phone as he waited to see what Adir would do.

He didn't have to wait long.

As Artem and the two males with him walked across the parking lot, a vehicle with its lights off cruised toward them from behind. It was an electric vehicle and traveling at a low rate of speed so there was no sound from the engine.

A moment later, the tires squealed as the car raced forward and rammed into Artem, sending him flying several feet into the air and landing hard on the ground.

There was a sickening crunch as he hit the concrete and a cruel smile crossed Nero's face at Adir using his car as a weapon. That would certainly teach Artem a painful lesson.

Artem's father and the other male shouted in alarm and raced to him. Adir swung the vehicle around and returned to the front parking lot.

Nero walked back to his seat and put his phone on the table. In another hour he'd need to head to the warehouse for the fights. He was pissed that Artem wouldn't be fighting until he healed, because he'd lose money without his top-billed fighter there. But the money loss was a small price for Nero to pay to ensure that Artem knew his place. Besides, it wasn't like he'd ordered him killed, just injured.

He was certain no matter how extensive the injuries were, that once the male shifted into his minotaur, he'd heal and should be a little bit wiser in the process.

He suspected the healing process would be painful. He'd been hit by a car, after all. And it would be good for Artem to be in as much pain as possible so he didn't forget who he worked for.

Nero was not a male to be trifled with and Artem had learned a hard lesson tonight.

He fully expected to see the male at the fights during his next scheduled match, and if he didn't? Well, then Nero would find someone else to harm in Artem's life to ensure he knew he was never going to be free. One way or another, the male would keep fighting for Nero, no matter who was harmed in the process. He had no qualms about having the people closest to Artem hurt to keep in line. Hell, he didn't care if Artem's family died as long as Artem kept fighting.

Nero's phone buzzed.

“Yes, Adir?”

“You want us to follow?”

He hummed. “Yes. I’m curious about where he lives since he never shared that information. Report back to me with anything you find interesting, including if he has a mate. She might be useful as collateral if Artem decides not to fight.”

“He’d be a fucking idiot if he did,” Adir said.

“Indeed.”

He’d warned Artem that his choices would have consequences. Hopefully, he learned his lesson with the first warning. It would only get worse if he had to use force again to get his point across. The longer it took for Artem to realize he had no other option but to fight, the worse it would be for him, so it was better for him to accept his fate and keep fighting. Adir could do much, much worse things to him than hit him with a car.

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Promise hadn't liked watching Artem leave to confront the owner of the fighting league. She hadn't been able to shake the worry that had plagued her ever since he'd told her he'd take care of it that night.

When he'd suggested she hang out with his mom while he was gone, she'd decided it was a smart idea. Not only because she wanted to get to know Brierley better, but also because all she'd do while he was gone was sit and worry.

Not that she wasn't still worrying, but at least she had his mom as a distraction.

"So why did they take that other male with them? Ian?"

"Because he used to fight in a similar league before he and his brothers mated Angel. They were living in an RV in the woods near the campground but outside of the baro territory, and Ian was going to fight at night. The fight owner, Wallace, died at my mate's hands because he abducted me one night."

"What? Why?"

Promise turned from where she was looking out the front window into the darkness.

"He knew that Ian had a mate. Angel and I had shared a cabin at the time, but the night Wallace came to abduct her, she and her mates were in another cabin for their mating-time, and he found me instead. I'd already had a dream about Axtyn and I knew that Wallace would take me to him, so I didn't resist. It was still scary as hell, though. Axtyn warned him to let me go, but he wouldn't, so he killed him. He killed all of them." She tilted her head and pressed her lips into a thin line. "Minotaurs are

dangerous, period. Not only before they find their truemates, but whenever their family is threatened. There isn't anything that Axtyn wouldn't do for me or our kids, and there's nothing that Artem won't do to keep you safe. Whatever happens tonight, we just have to trust that they'll be able to end things with this Nero fellow and walk away. Safely."

"I hope so too."

She looked at her phone. They'd been gone over an hour, and while Trumble wasn't too far away, it was still a bit of a drive round-trip.

Rubbing the sudden chill that made her skin prickle, Promise said, "Shouldn't they be back by now?"

Brierley joined her as she turned back to look at the window. "Lemme check Axtyn's location." She lifted her phone and opened an app. "Oh, they're...wow they're moving fast."

Promise's heart jumped into her throat as a wave of something passed over her. Fear. Anger. And so much pain.

"Oh no!" She raced for the front door and threw it open as Axtyn's truck skidded to a halt in front of the cabin.

"He's in the back," Axtyn shouted as he leaped from the truck and ran to the back, lowering the gate.

Promise didn't waste a second and jumped onto the bed of the truck, stifling a gasp as she saw her Artem. He was badly injured and covered with blood.

She dropped to her knees and pressed her fingers to his pulse, holding her breath until

she felt his faint heartbeat.

A male she figured for Ian, came to the bed of the truck and said, “He hasn’t regained consciousness. That asshole Nero’s males ran Artem down with a car. It was an electric one, so we didn’t hear it coming until it was too late.”

“If he could shift, he could heal himself I think,” Axtyn said.

Brierley sobbed quietly. “Promise?”

She lifted her mate’s hand and pressed it to her lips. “I’m going to fix this, baby. You have to trust me.”

She scurried to the edge of the truck bed and said, “I’m going to shift. Get him inside as carefully as you can. Lay him on a blanket so he’ll at least be a little comfortable.”

“You can heal him?” Brierley asked.

She looked at him once more, really cataloging his injuries. “I believe so, but it’s going to hurt him a hell of a lot. I’ll be stuck in my shift. Make sure he doesn’t shift himself for four hours. If he’s still not fully healed, I’ll bite him again.”

“Bite?” Axtyn asked.

“It’s how the healing venom gets into his bloodstream.” With a final look at her mate, she hopped from the truck. She was trembling and furious.

The fucking asshole Nero.

She hoped karma came for him with a dump truck.

Promise ran into the house and stopped inside the kitchen to strip and shift while her mate's family brought him inside to the family room. She was shaking and her heart was pounding, and her wolf was howling for healing and vengeance.

She couldn't shift.

Her wolf was too worked up.

She clenched her hands together until her nails dug into her palms and she closed her eyes. As she drew in slow, measured breaths, she focused on the memory of her and Artem making love in the hot spring. Unclenching her hands, she rolled her neck and shoulders as her heart rate returned to normal and she could feel her wolf ready to shift.

Precious minutes had passed since he was injured, but she believed she could heal him.

She had to.

She called for her wolf and shifted.

Out in the family room, she found Artem had been laid on a blanket and stripped, another blanket laid over his lower body.

She could see the full extent of his injuries and it broke her heart. He had a broken leg, his chest and abdomen were dark with bruising so he had internal injuries and probably broken ribs as well, not to mention his spine and neck could be hurt. And there was a deep gash on his head.

It was good that he was unconscious right now, because he'd be in a tremendous amount of pain. Well, when her venom hit his bloodstream, he'd be in a lot of pain

anyway, but at least he was unconscious.

Looking at his parents, she let out a low whine that she hoped sounded hopeful, and then she clenched her jaws together to force the venom to coat her teeth. She lifted a paw and licked her dark claws to place venom on them. While she coated her teeth, tongue, and claws with the healing venom, she looked at him lovingly.

As a kid, she'd been trained by her mom to heal, watching her as she used her venom on pack members. She was using all her knowledge now.

She just hoped it worked.

Flexing her venom-soaked claws, she sank them into Artem's thigh, ripping through the skin and muscle until she felt the scrape of bone, and then she bit his side. As her teeth embedded into his side, her venom seeped into his body. She extracted her claws and fangs, soaked her claws a second time, and cut into the flesh of his neck and shoulder, driving venom farther up his body. Moving to the other side, she bit higher on his chest.

When she'd delivered as much venom as she could into his body, she sat back on her haunches and looked at him critically. Had she done enough? Were his injuries too great and her healing too late?

She tilted her head and listened to the slow beating of his heart, the irregular thump making her nervous.

As she thought she might bite him again, he suddenly shouted in pain and thrashed on the floor. His dad and Ian grabbed his arms and his mom put her hands on his head.

"Artem! Artem, stop! You were hurt and your mate healed you. Don't shift. She said stay human until her venom heals you."

His eyes opened and they were bright red and filled with pain. “Promise?” he wheezed out as a tremor wracked his body.

She leaned over with a soft whine and licked his cheek.

Clenching his teeth until his jaw cracked, he snorted out a growl. “Nero.”

“We’ll deal with this when you’re healed,” Axtyn said. “Just focus on healing and not shifting.”

He tried to nod but stopped himself as another tremor made his teeth clack together.

She scooted close and laid down next to him, nuzzling his biceps, which seemed to be one of the few body parts that weren’t injured.

She hoped to hell she didn’t need to bite him again, but she would. She’d bite her mate as many times as he needed, so he would be healthy and safe.

I’m sorry it hurts.

“You’re not going to fucking believe this,” Adir said when Nero answered the phone two hours after he’d sent the male to follow Artem.

“What’s that?” he asked. “And where are you, anyway?”

“You know that campground?” Adir was whispering and sounded like he was moving quickly, his words coming out harsh as he panted for air.

“The one that the hyenas have? Yeah. What of it?”

“That’s where Artem is.”

“And?”

“And he’s being healed.”

“So he’s awake and shifted into his minotaur? I thought he’d be unconscious longer.”

“No. He was unconscious when they brought him to a cabin. There was a female who I watched through the cabin window and saw her turn into a black wolf. Then she bit Artem and stuck her claws in him. I was watching for a while, and I saw that he had a broken leg and it’s healed already. I don’t understand how the black wolf biting him healed him like that without him shifting into his minotaur.”

Nero’s brows rose. “Are you sure the female turned into a black wolf?”

“Yep. Black but kind of blue? I’ve never seen a wolf with fur that color before.”

There was a creak of a door opening and then the hum of an engine.

“And you’re certain that she bit him?”

“Yep. Do you know what that was about?”

“I do, actually. Get back to the B&B and gather a handful of my best males. I’ve got a new job for you.”

“On it.”

The call ended and Nero settled back in the chair in the dining room. This was an interesting piece of information. He’d heard about apex wolves, but he’d never met one. They were highly coveted by their pack, and revered for their healing abilities, which begged the question of why the female was at the hyena campground.

Except that perhaps she and Artem were mates.

Well, having Artem back as his best fighter was one thing, but having an apex to heal on command? That was something special.

And he definitely had a use for her.

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Artem fought shifting for hours. His body was on fire. It literally felt like he was burning from the inside out, as if tiny little bonfires were alight in all his major organs and joints, and his bones had turned to molten lava.

The pain was tremendous, and much more than he'd ever experienced before.

But he vaguely remembered Promise telling him to trust her and not shift.

So he was going to do those two things. Even though he was fairly certain that not shifting was going to kill him. Had he ever wanted to do something so badly? Except for making love to his truemate, he couldn't think of a single thing he wanted to do more than shift and put an end to the torturous pain.

Promise was lying against him, her soft fur a warm comfort despite the searing pain throughout his entire body. He could actually feel things healing inside him. A rib, a punctured lung, his broken leg.

How had he even survived getting run down like he'd been?

Nero, that fucking asshole, had sent people to incapacitate Artem and send a message that he wasn't allowed to leave the fighting league. Artem had been willing to walk away and leave Nero to his fights. But now that he'd come after him the way he had, Artem was going to hurt him, hurt his business, and drive him away from Pennsylvania for good.

He wasn't sure how, but he'd do it. So that he knew Promise would be safe.

She whined softly and licked his cheek.

He'd kept his eyes closed because his vision was blurred by pain, and it seemed to make things worse if he was looking at anything. But he opened his eyes to see his mate standing over him, her beautiful fur glistening in the overhead light.

"It's been almost four hours," his mom said softly from somewhere in the room. "Will you have to bite him again?"

Again?

What fresh hell was this?

Promise made a curious sound and moved down his body, her warm nose running along his skin and over every section of his body that had been injured. She snuffled at his leg and then moved up the other side of his body, stopping near his head where a headache had been blooming but had since healed.

Probably had had a concussion or brain damage, or both.

Thankfully, her healing venom was magic.

Painful magic.

She let out a soft bark which sounded like yes he can shift.

"You've got twenty more minutes," his mom said.

Damn it.

Promise leaned over him again and licked his cheek, touching her nose to his, and

then she padded off.

“She’s going to shift,” his mom said. “You’re doing great honey. Just a little bit longer.”

Easy for her to say. She wasn’t being eaten alive by fire and brimstone.

He clenched his hands as a wave of heat and pain mixed together rolled through him. He wanted so much to shift.

Cool hands touched his fevered cheeks and he opened his eyes to see his beautiful mate leaning over him once more, but this time she was human.

Her eyes were luminous and filled with concern.

“Just a little while longer. You’re almost fully healed. Honestly, I thought I was going to have to bite you again because your injuries were so…” her eyes filled with tears and she sniffled. She pressed her forehead to his and he felt the splash of her tears on his skin. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

He heard his parents leave the room.

Everything in him ached, but mostly he just wanted to hold her.

He couldn’t wait until he could.

Promise ran her hands over Artem’s heated skin once more to ensure he was fully healed before she let him shift. The final healing would occur as his body shifted into his minotaur, the venom disappearing with the shift so he wouldn’t be in pain anymore.

When she was sure he was healed, she patted his cheek and waited for him to open his eyes. When he did, she said, “You can shift now.”

He snarled for a moment and then he shifted.

She scooted back as he changed, his legs turning to those of a bull with thick hooves, dark fur, and a long tail. His upper body widened and bulked with muscle, dark fur flowing everywhere. His arms were heavy with muscles and even his hands changed into larger ones with fewer fingers. As his head changed into that of a bull, with scarlet eyes and huge horns, he rolled to his knees and exhaled loudly through his nostrils, and then he rose to his feet with a bellow.

She stared up at him in shock.

The only time she’d ever seen a minotaur was in drawings since they were mythical creatures. But the male before her was no myth.

And he was at least seven feet tall.

He swung his head down to look at her, his eyes practically glowing.

Then he offered her his hand and she took it, letting him pull her gently to her feet.

“He can’t talk in that form,” his dad said.

Promise leaned around Artem to see him in the doorway.

Axtyn smiled. “He’ll be in his form for a couple of hours. I take it everything is all healed now?”

“Good as new,” she said, relief flowing through her.

“It’s really late. Do you want me to go walking with him so you can rest?”

“No, I’m good,” she said. She was tired, but also wired in that weird way when someone you were crazy about nearly died.

“All right, we’ll see you whenever you both are up for the day. Rest well. And Promise?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for saving my son.”

“You’re welcome. But I wouldn’t have been able to save him if you and Ian hadn’t been there with him, so thank you for that.”

Axtyn nodded and walked away.

She looked up at her mate.

“Ready for a walk?”

He nodded his big head. She walked with him to the front door and swung it open all the way. He had to go out sideways because of his horns, but once he was out on the porch, he lifted his head to the sky and let out a deep bellowing roar that seemed to shake the trees.

Her wolf was so happy he was okay.

She moved to step off the porch, but he stopped her, dropping to one knee in front of her and motioning to his back.

“Oh yeah? You’re going to carry me through the woods? All right.” She climbed onto his broad back. He looped his arms under her legs and rose to his feet. She let out a laugh and said, “This is high! Holy crap!”

He took off toward the other side of the campground, walking along the dirt road, and then he veered off toward the mountains she could see in the distance, their darker shadow standing out against the night sky.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she yawned.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.”

He hummed in agreement.

“Okay, so since you can’t talk, let me tell you about being a healing wolf. It’s pretty freaking epic. The first time I saw my mom heal, I was six...”

Artem could have listened to his mate talk about her family and their healing abilities, about the pieces of her past that came to her mind as he alternated between walking and running, forever. She had a musical voice he found enchanting, and he loved how tightly she held onto him.

He was falling hard for her.

Even if she hadn’t been the sweetest female on the planet, or incredibly beautiful, or an amazing healer, he’d still give her his whole heart because they were truemates and he felt that connected to her.

He wanted to tell her in an epic way, though.

Make a whole night of it.

Take her out somewhere nice and show her how much he cared, and then he'd give her his heart and ask her to be his wife, too.

He could picture their future so easily now that they were together. The wedding, fixing up the cabin so it was more of a home than he'd ever made it, and a few rugrats running around.

He carried her partway up the mountain, his hooves perfect for the terrain. When he'd reached a plateau he knew would be perfect for viewing the sunrise, he set her on her feet and settled onto the rocky ground.

She rested her hand on his shoulder. "Oh, I can see some gold in the darkness, that's the sunrise! Oh, it's perfect."

He patted his knee and she sat, snuggled in his embrace in the chill of the early morning.

They watched the sunrise, the golden orb painting the midnight sky with oranges and yellows, pushing away the darkness and letting in the dawn.

"It's so gorgeous up here," she said wistfully as the sun rose fully and they could feel the warmth on their skin.

He nuzzled her neck, silently promising to bring her back up here whenever she wanted to see the sunrise.

Putting her on his back again, he carried her down the mountain and right to his cabin, where he shifted into his human form and hugged her so tightly that she let out a little chuckle and squeak combined.

"Thank you for saving me, Promise," he said gruffly, his face buried in her neck and

inhaling her sweet scent.

“You’re welcome. I’ve never been so thankful for my healing powers, trust me.”

He chuckled. “I’m certainly grateful for them.”

He lifted his head from her neck and stared down at her.

“Um, Artem?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“You’re naked.”

“You’re not.”

She grinned. “I can fix that.”

“Let me.”

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her to the bedroom, plans to make her the happiest female on the planet swirling in his mind.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise watched Artem make breakfast, insisting she sit at the kitchen table while he “worked his magic.” Which seemed to involve scrambled eggs and toast. Not that she was complaining, because it was her very favorite sort of breakfast, plus he was so sexy she wouldn’t have cared if he burned everything.

“So how many kids?” he asked as he stirred the eggs.

They’d woken up after eight and snuggled in bed, talking about the future. On Friday, they were going to Allen to pack up her things and bring them to Little Hope. But today? Ally and her husbands had reached out to say how thankful they were he was okay and asked if they’d like to look at some of the three-bedroom cabins that were reserved for staff who were mated or had families.

She liked his cabin, but it had only one bedroom which wouldn’t be big enough for them to have a family.

Her stomach flipped just thinking about it.

Heck, she could be pregnant now. They hadn’t used protection.

“Well, it’s just me and Rio, but I always wished we had a brother. Did you ever wish you had more siblings?”

“Definitely. I grew up with the hyenas in the campground and they’re like family, but it’s not the same as having actual family. I love Isolde, but it would have been nice to have a brother too.”

“So...three?”

“That sounds good to me,” he said.

She grinned. “I can’t wait to look at the cabins. It’s like house hunting!”

“I think there are two that have three bedrooms, but we’ll have to see what Ally and her mates say. They set aside a dozen cabins for staff. This is the only cabin that has one bedroom, the others have two or three.”

“When did you move out of your parents’ place?”

“A couple of years ago. The first part of the aggression with my age and not being mated started happening when I was twenty-one. I didn’t sleep well, and Isolde complained that my pacing at night kept her up. I liked living with my folks, but it was easier to move out than explain how unsettled I felt with my beast always riding me to shift.”

“Rio moved into my trailer when I left, but she was living with our parents before that. I moved out a couple of years ago so I could come and go without being accountable to anyone.”

“I get that feeling.”

He set two plates with eggs and toast on the table and took the seat across from her. She sipped at the coffee and smiled. “Thanks for making breakfast.”

“Anytime.”

“So when we talk to Ally and her husbands about switching to a larger cabin, we can also talk to them about what I might do here for work?”

“Absolutely.”

She wanted to have a job around the campground like Artem and his family did. Use of the staff cabins was considered part of their salary, so she wanted to contribute.

“Are you part of their baro?” she asked.

“Yes. Dad’s the head of our family group, what the hyenas would call a clan, and he gets together with the other clan leaders to discuss issues. They don’t do get-togethers like packs do, though.”

“Did your dad tell them about what you’re dealing with?”

“I’m sure he has by now if he didn’t before everything went to crap last night.”

She stabbed a large chunk of egg. “If Nero had his guy run you over to send a message that you couldn’t leave the league, he must expect you to show up to the next fight and be ready to go.”

He nodded as he chewed. When he’d swallowed and took a drink of coffee, he said, “That’s what I figure. If I don’t go to the fight, then he might try to find me. He’s resourceful, so while I’ve always felt fairly safe from being discovered, I don’t feel that way anymore.”

“What should we do?”

“You’re not doing anything,” he said, pointing his fork at her. “Except staying safe from harm. I’m going to make sure that Nero knows I won’t fight for him anymore.”

“I’ll do my best to be safe, but I also want to know what you’re planning, even if I’ll be staying here at the campground.”

“I think the best thing I can do is call the authorities,” he said. He finished his plate and then leaned back in the chair. “Shifter fighting groups like his are illegal, so if the authorities are alerted they’ll shut him down and arrest him. He’s been chased out from other cities by the authorities and he seems pretty good at getting away without getting in trouble, like posting bail and then leaving town.”

“If that doesn’t work?”

“I’ll take out the warehouse where the fights are.”

“With...”

“Something that explodes and causes a lot of damage so the warehouse is unusable..”

She snorted. “When will you call?”

“Later.” He pushed back from the table and lifted his plate. “We’ve got some cabins to see and some plans to make.” He rested his hand on the table and leaned over, smiling down at her in a wonderfully wicked way. “And a date.”

“What?”

“A date. You and me. Tonight.”

“Fun. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. But wear something sexy. And feel free to forget panties.”

“You’ve got the best ideas.”

She finished her breakfast and helped him with the dishes, and before long, they were

on their way to the welcome center to check in with Ally and her mates, to find a new place to live and the possibility of work for her, and also...to see where the day would take them.

Taking Artem's hand, she gave it a squeeze and said, "I'm so glad you're mine."

He kissed the top of her head. "I'm so glad you're mine too, beautiful."

Promise loved the two cabins. One was closer to his parents' cabin and the other was closer to the Welcome Center. They were nearly identical inside: three bedrooms, two bathrooms, an eat-in kitchen, and a family room. But where they differed was that the cabin close to the Welcome Center had a sliding door in the master suite that walked out to a private patio surrounded by the thick woods.

When they were back at the Welcome Center, they found Ally and her three mates—Richard, Troy, and Blake—in one of the offices.

"What did you think?" Ally asked from where she was perched on a large desk where Richard, the oldest of her mates, sat.

"They're both great," Promise said. "But I have to ask about the one with the private patio off the master suite."

"We built that cabin for us," Blake said.

"I thought you lived here?" Promise asked.

"We do," Troy said. "But when we first bought the land for the campground we really didn't know what we were doing, so we built a home for ourselves first, and then we slowly built the other buildings."

“At first, we didn’t even have the Welcome Center,” Richard said. “We just let people come up here with tents and RVs and take parking spaces and camp out. It was rustic, but it was enough to get our business off the ground.”

“When did you move in here?” Artem asked.

“After the kids were born and we needed to be able to work and also keep an eye on them,” Ally said. “I loved that cabin. Our boys stayed there before they found their mate, and then she really wanted to be closer to the lake so they moved out. It’s been empty ever since.”

Promise looked at Artem and he gave her an encouraging nod.

“We’d love that one,” she said. “It’s magical there.”

“It sure is,” Ally said. “You’re very welcome to it.”

Richard smiled. “Whatever you need to make it your own—paint, flooring, furniture—let us know and we’ll help in whatever way we can.”

“Thanks so much,” Artem said. He shook the males’ hands while Promise got a hug from Ally.

Ally said, “Isolde told us that you worked at a restaurant in your old home?”

“Yes, Lonestar. I did food prep, waitressed, and helped in the kitchen whenever I was needed. I didn’t go to college, but I did independent study on using herbs for healing through an online program.”

Ally looked at her mates and they were all smiling.

“We actually were looking to hire someone to help out with our meals,” Richard said. He explained that both Angel and Brierley had helped at one time with meal prep for the staff and guests, but over the years they moved on to other things.”

“What would it involve?” Promise asked.

“Helping to plan the meals for the staff and guests, shopping and food prep, and serving when we need it,” Troy said.

Ally nodded. “Right, sometimes we have weddings, and they want a sit-down meal with service, so you’d be helping with that. Do you like to cook?”

“Small things,” she said with a smile. “I make a great crispy sugar cookie, and one of my favorite things to do is try to make new sandwiches, plus I like the bento box style lunches.”

“What’s that?” Blake asked.

“A bento box is a container with sections for ingredients for a meal. It’s something a person might take to work for lunch,” she said. “I used to make them for my parents. It might be something like a fajita bowl with a side of chips and salsa or a wrap sandwich with veggies and cookies. They’re fun to make .”

“What’s your favorite sandwich?” Ally asked.

“For a hot sandwich, I love cheesesteaks. For cold sandwiches, I like chicken salad.”

“That’s my specialty!” Ally gushed. She looked at her mates who all smiled. “We’d love to offer you the job. You can also help out with the four-wheeler tours if you’d like to, we’re very casual here.”

Promise couldn't stop smiling. "I'd love to. It sounds amazing."

"Then you can start on Monday," Richard said. "That gives you both the rest of the week off to enjoy your mating. We'll have Angel and Brin give the cabin a once-over this afternoon so you can start moving in tomorrow."

Artem rose to his feet and shook their hands. "Thank you all for everything."

"Welcome to the baro, Promise," Richard said. "We're all family here."

Promise and Ally hugged again. "Invite your folks up for a visit anytime, we'll set them up in a nice cabin."

"Thanks, I will."

She and Artem left the Welcome Center hand in hand. "What now?" she asked.

"Let's go to your cabin."

"For?"

"You need to pack. But also? I'm feeling like sexing you up." He pulled her against him with a soft growl and she giggled.

"I'm feeling like that too."

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After he and Promise tumbled into bed at her cabin, they packed her bags and cleaned up, then headed to his place to drop things off. He'd texted Isolde, who stopped at the cabin while they were there, and took Promise to town to get her nails done, giving him the opportunity to run out for an errand of his own.

After picking out the perfect ring for her and hoping to hell it fit, he got into his truck and dialed a number he'd snagged from her phone.

"Hello?" a male answered on the third ring.

"Hi, Mr. Elliot, my name is Artem Connelley, and your daughter Promise and I are truemates."

There was a brief pause, and then he said, "It's nice to talk to you, Artem. Promise told us about you, and said she'd be down this weekend to visit and would bring you along."

"That's the plan," he said.

"Please call me Bo. What can I do for you?"

"Bo," Artem said, his voice cracking as nerves sang through him. Grimacing, he cleared his throat and said, "I wanted to ask for your permission to marry Promise. I want her to be my wife and not only my truemate."

"That's wonderful! I felt the same way about my Reika. It's great to be truemates, but it's even better when they also have your last name and you both belong to each other

officially. Yes, you absolutely have my permission, and my mate's as well of course."

Relief coursed through him. It wasn't that he thought he would say no, it just wasn't something he'd ever done before. He wanted her parents to like him and asking them for permission seemed like a good way to get off on the right foot.

"Thank you so much."

"When are you planning to ask her?"

"Tonight. I've got plans for dinner at a fancy restaurant and then a stroll through the woods at the campground, where I'll ask her."

"Sounds amazing. Best of luck to you tonight, and we'll see you this weekend."

"Thanks again, Bo."

"You bet."

The call ended and Artem leaned his head back against the headrest with a happy sigh.

He had the ring. He had permission. And he had a plan.

He couldn't wait for tonight so he could ask Promise to be his wife.

Promise and Isolde walked out of the nail salon arm-in-arm. She loved Artem's sister, she was so sweet.

Promise curled her free hand toward herself to look at her nails. "I think these are

perfect.

She didn't normally wear polish, but she never turned down a chance to get a manicure. She'd chosen a pale pink, and the nail artist had added thin swirls of glittery gold polish on each nail.

"They look awesome." Isolde had gone with a dark peach topped with silver glitter.

"Yours do too," Promise said. They stopped on the sidewalk. They'd been gone about three hours, between grabbing a snack at a local bakery and window shopping at the boutique stores, the day was topped off by the manicures where they shared stories of their childhoods and got to know each other better. They were sisters now, after all.

They headed toward the corner to walk the length of the building to the parking lot. As they rounded the corner, Promise swore something in the air changed, an odd electric tingling that made her skin prickle with awareness.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Isolde asked.

An engine revved suddenly, and Promise looked over her shoulder to see a large SUV careen around the corner toward them. She pushed Isolde away, worried the SUV was going to run onto the curb.

Instead of continuing down the alley, it stopped and the back doors opened. Two males wearing dark clothes lunged at Promise and grabbed her roughly, pulling her toward the vehicle. She screamed and struggled, but the males were far stronger than her.

"Hey! Let her go! Help! Someone help!" Isolde cried out, rushing toward them.

One of the males grabbed Isolde by the throat and lifted her off the ground. “Stay out of this.”

“Leave her alone!” Promise shouted.

The other male punched Promise in the face and her vision blurred as pain coursed through her. Her wolf let out a howl of panic as she was shoved backward toward the SUV. “No! No!” Promise yelled, struggling to get away. “Isolde!”

The male holding Isolde tossed her to the sidewalk. Promise tried to get out of the SUV but she was shoved back and then bracketed on either side by the males who’d grabbed her. She tasted blood from being punched, her upper lip split and the front of her face aching.

“Hand over your phone or I’ll take it from you,” one of the males said as the SUV raced down the alley.

She was tempted to play dumb, but she was at their mercy and scared to pieces. Digging her phone from her front pocket, she handed it over. He rolled the window down and tossed it.

“Hey!” she shouted.

She looked over her shoulder as the SUV turned the corner and the alley disappeared from view. She saw Isolde getting to her feet and running after them, her phone to her ear.

She was calling Artem, Promise was sure of it. Or the police first and then Artem.

Turning slowly around, she said, “What do you want with me?”

The person in the front passenger seat turned and stared at her with an unnerving, calm gaze.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked after what felt like the longest pause on the planet.

“No.”

She could see the scenery blurring by as they left town. She remembered seeing a gas station as she entered Little Hope when she first arrived and they’d just passed it.

Where the hell were they taking her?

“My name is Nero. Perhaps your mate told you about me?”

She tried to school her features so she didn’t reveal anything, but she knew she failed when his calm gaze turned smug.

“I’m sorry you were hit, I told my men not to hurt you.” He let out a short growl and the male who’d punched her lowered his head.

Promise recognized that Nero was a wolf shifter and powerful. He was middle-aged, with the hard look that came from a male who’d been fighting for everything he’d ever had and didn’t mind taking out anyone who got in the way.

She’d known he was dangerous from what her mate had told her, but she’d been worried about Artem, not herself. It never occurred to her that she might be taken.

“So what do you want with me?” she asked, folding her arms.

“Your mate made a mistake. He thought he could walk away from the league, but no

one leaves without consequences.”

“You ran him over with a car. I’d say that’s a decent consequence.”

A smile curled the corner of Nero’s lips. “Perhaps, however, he’s still valuable to me as a fighter. I make quite a bit of money anytime The Bull, fights.”

She arched a brow at the nickname. Not very clever.

“If you want me to call him, you shouldn’t have had your goon toss my phone out the window.”

“I don’t need your phone, I can contact him myself.”

“Then what am I doing here?” She had an idea of what they wanted her for, as bait to force Artem to come fight. A knot formed in her stomach, her wolf growling in worry.

“You have a gift, Promise. And yes, I know your name. I know quite a bit about you.” Nero smiled. “You and your healing abilities.”

She frowned. “You want me to heal someone for you?”

He hummed. “Perhaps. But also, you and your healing could make Artem unstoppable in the ring.” He paused again, which was beginning to get on her nerves. Then he continued, “And if he won’t fight willingly... perhaps the right incentive will change his mind.”

“You think Artem will do whatever you want because you kidnapped me?”

“He will if he cares about you, which I suspect he does going by that mating mark on

your neck. If he doesn't do what I want, then I will still have use of you. A healing wolf is very remarkable, my fighters would be invincible."

The SUV came to a stop at an old warehouse. She didn't know where they were, but she suspected it was where the fights were held.

The male on her left got out and held out his hand. She stared at it, looking past him to see if she might make a run for it.

"If you run, the punch earlier will seem like a pleasant dream," he said, voice dark and eyes flashing amber.

"You don't have to be an ass," she said. She touched her face gingerly, where pain still throbbed. She could feel blood under her nose and used her shirt-sleeve to gently wipe it off. Her eyes watered as she brushed her nose with her fingers as even the lightest of touches hurt. She got out of the SUV and wobbled a little as a dizzy spell made her world turn upside down and spin like a carousel. Her head throbbed as much as her face where she'd been punched. The male's hand shot out to steady her and she slapped it away, leaning against the open door until the dizziness passed.

They walked inside the warehouse. The air was thick with the scents of old blood and sweat. It was a large open space with a big ring in the center and metal bleachers on three sides. Above was a second story that reminded her of the boxes at sports stadiums. She remembered Artem telling her that Nero watched the fights from an enclosed room.

Nero stepped close to her. His voice was low and laced with danger that made her wolf uneasy. "Now, behave. You will keep Artem in line and fighting, and you will heal whoever I want you to heal. If Artem steps out of line...well, I don't really need him, I just need you."

Nero let the threat linger between them. It wasn't Artem who was irreplaceable, it was her, which meant Artem's life was the one in danger. Her eyes stung, but she refused to cry in front of him. He nodded and the males grabbed her by the upper arms and took her to a small room. They pushed her inside and she stumbled, catching herself on the stone wall. The door swung shut and locked quickly, and she was alone in the room with only a cot and a bare bulb swinging from the ceiling. She scanned the room and was glad she was alone.

Stark, cold fear washed over her and she sat on the cot, the legs squeaking as she settled on it. She was alone, at the mercy of a male who saw her as a tool—not just to bring Artem back to fight but also to heal on command.

The fear felt like a wave and she had a moment where she tottered on the edge of a full-blown panic attack, but then she felt her wolf let out a single, low growl in her mind.

Artem was going to come for her.

They were marked mates, and he would find her.

He had to know by now that she'd been taken and he would know that Nero was behind the abduction. Hell, he might even suspect he knew where she was right now.

She rubbed her eyes and pushed away the fear.

She was ridiculously outnumbered and out of her depths. She'd been taught by her dad to fight in her shift when she'd been old enough, and she knew how to throw a punch and protect herself if the need arose. But the reality was that she was surrounded by males who fought for a living and her mate, who was the fiercest male she'd ever met in her life, considered these males unhinged and dangerous.

Even if she could get out of the room she was locked in, what could she do if the males decided to hurt her to keep her in line?

She was better off keeping her head down and biding her time. If she could escape, she would. But either way, she knew in her heart that Artem would come for her.

He would get her free and they'd figure out how to get Nero to leave them alone for good.

But first, Artem had to find her.

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Artem pulled to a stop in front of his cabin. He'd successfully gotten everything he needed for the most spectacular date Promise had ever been on, and would culminate in him asking her to be his wife.

As he turned off the engine a strange feeling washed over him, a mixture of fear and anger. He paused with the door open and wondered at the weird feeling. When it didn't happen again after a long moment, he grabbed the bag from the seat next to him and got out.

Another wave of fear hit him straight in the heart and he gasped, his hand clenching the paper bag.

Something was very wrong, but he wasn't afraid of anything.

Promise came to mind, and he knew that whatever he was feeling must be an echo of her feelings.

She was scared and angry.

Shit.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and realized he'd turned the ringer off. His sister had been calling. He flipped the ringer on just as it rang again.

Isolde's name appeared on the screen.

"Isolde? Is everything okay?"

“No! Some males grabbed Promise and stuffed her into a black SUV. I tried to help but this guy grabbed me. I thought he was going to break my neck!”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m scared, Artem!”

“What did the males look like?”

“They were both big guys, muscular. The one who grabbed me had tattoos all over his arms and up his neck, he was scary as hell.”

Artem knew exactly who it was who’d taken Promise.

Nero, that fucking asshole.

As if knowing that Artem was cursing his name, a call beeped and Nero’s name appeared on the screen.

“Are you on the way back to the campground?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, drive safe. Nero is calling me.”

He switched the call and tucked the bag under his arm. Putting the phone to his ear, he ran toward the four-wheeler workshop to get his dad.

“Where’s my mate?” he demanded when the call connected.

“No hello? Well, I see your manners haven’t gotten any better since the lesson I

taught you about keeping your commitments.”

“Where is she?” he growled.

“She’s safe. For now.”

He hit the door of the workshop with his shoulder and dropped the bag on the counter. His dad looked up from where he was leaning over one of the vehicles. Artem put the phone on speaker.

“What do you want?”

“You, fighting. There’s a fight tonight, as I’m sure you’re aware. You’ll be at the warehouse at nine, ready to fight. You’ll win, and that way, everyone wins. Including your mate.”

Artem looked at his dad, who strode over with a frown.

“Let Promise go. I’ll keep fighting, I swear.”

Nero chuckled. “She’s too valuable to let go. The two of you together—your fighting and her healing—would make my league unstoppable. I have big plans.”

Artem looked at his dad, feeling helpless for the first time in his life.

“Let me talk to her,” Artem said.

Nero sighed. “Very well.”

There was the sound of a door unlocking and then Promise yelled, “You don’t have to manhandle me you jackass!”

Artem could have cried in relief at hearing her sassy voice.

“Talk to your mate,” Nero said.

“Artem?”

“Hey, sweetheart, are you okay?”

“I’ve been better. I’m at?—”

“That’s quite enough,” Nero said, and Promise grunted as if someone had hit her.

“You don’t have to hurt her,” Artem said, seething. His minotaur bellowed in fury that anyone would lay a hand on her. He wanted to climb through the phone and slaughter them all.

“I won’t, if she does what she’s told. And that goes for you as well. Be at the warehouse at nine tonight. Do as I say and you’ll both be fine. But Artem, be very certain of this one truth: she’s valuable for her healing powers, but you’re only as valuable as your next win. If you fail in any way, I won’t have any qualms about putting you down. You’re expendable. Remember that.”

The call cut off and Artem let out an angry bellow from his beast. His temples ached as his beast wanted to shift and hunt down the male who took his mate.

His dad grabbed him and gave him a hard shake.

“First of all, where is your sister? They were together.”

“She’s on the way here, she called me just before Nero did.”

“Good. Now let’s go to the Welcome Center. We need all the help we can get to bring Promise back here.”

“Dad,” Artem said, looking at his phone screen where a picture his sister had taken of him and Promise at the lake the day before was his wallpaper. “This is dangerous. I should go alone.”

“Hell no,” his dad said vehemently. “They took your mate and they threatened your life. There’s no way you’re going alone, don’t be foolish.”

“I just...maybe I should fight.”

His dad shook his head. “You’ll never be free and there’s a good chance you’ll die someday in one of the fights. We have to put an end to this.”

“I just want her back.”

“I’ll help you.”

Artem and his dad raced from the workshop toward the Welcome Center, his dad making several calls as they ran.

Be careful, sweetheart. I’m coming for you.

Promise had only been in the room by herself for a couple of minutes when the one goon had dragged her out to talk to Artem. How long had she been gone? Maybe a half hour.

Now he knew for sure who had her.

And he now knew that Nero thought he was expendable but she wasn’t.

There was something oddly calming about knowing that Nero wasn't planning to kill her, but it was tempered by the knowledge that he wasn't above hurting her regardless. When she'd tried to tell Artem where she was, the tattooed male slapped her hard enough to make her eyes water.

Then he grabbed her arm and hauled her back to the room, shoving her inside and slamming the door. As the lock clicked, she touched her injured cheek, which now throbbed as much as her face where she'd been punched.

At least Artem knew she was okay.

And she was certain he'd be able to figure out where she was.

She got up from the cot and went to the door, pressing her ear against it. She could hear the hum of voices, but couldn't make out anything.

She moved toward the hinges, and in the space between the door and doorjamb, she could hear more clearly.

"He's obviously going to come here," a male said.

"Of course. To fight," Nero said.

"To get his mate," the first male said.

"He'll toe the line, trust me," Nero said.

Promise didn't like how confident he sounded. How was he going to ensure that Artem fought in the fights and didn't just try to free her?

"How do you know?" another male asked.

“Because he’s not the valuable one, she is. If he won’t fight to keep her safe, then he’ll die.”

Promise moved back to the cot, her mind spinning. Artem was only safe if he fought. His refusal could mean his death. She couldn’t let him be harmed, but she didn’t know what she could do about it, locked up in a room alone.

Artem didn’t want to wait a second longer than necessary to get his mate back, but his dad was right: he couldn’t just run into the warehouse and try to get her back on his own.

Assuming she was even being kept at the warehouse.

He’d tracked her phone after the call, but Isolde had picked it up off the street after they’d thrown it out the window.

Isolde showed up at the Welcome Center while they were gathering all the males to help. She gave Promise’s phone to him. It was scratched up but still on.

He pressed it to his nose and inhaled the lingering sweet scent of his mate.

Then he put it in his pocket.

Giving his sister a hug, he said, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

She sniffled. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop them from taking her.”

“You were outnumbered and caught off guard,” their dad said as he hugged her tightly. “Your mom’s at the cabin with the other mates and females, she’ll be chomping at the bit to see you.”

“Good luck,” she said. Giving Artem a long look she said, “Make sure you and Promise, and everyone here, come back safe.”

“We will,” Artem said.

As the rest of the males filtered into the large kitchen, Artem filled them in on what happened.

“I’m not going to lie. Nero has dozens of males on his side, and they’ll fight for him no matter what, and they won’t think twice about hurting or killing if he says so. Nero’s made it clear that Promise is not in danger of dying, but that he’s willing to hurt her to keep me in line.”

“What’s the plan?” Ian asked, folding his arms.

“Show up as if I’m going to fight,” Artem said.

“While he’s keeping Nero busy,” Axtyn said, “the rest of us will infiltrate the warehouse and find Promise. Once she’s safely away from Nero and his cronies, we’ll call the police and let them shut down Nero.”

Richard looked at them. “What if the police don’t show up or what if Nero disappears before they do?”

“And the big what-if,” Brin said, “Is what if Promise isn’t at the warehouse?”

Artem blew out a breath. He rubbed the space over his heart. “I’ll know if she’s there when we get there. If I don’t feel her, then we’ll have to search for her.”

Brin nodded. “We shouldn’t leave the campground unprotected. Some of us should stay behind to keep an eye on things. Nero shouldn’t be underestimated.”

“Good point,” Axtyn said. “Who wants to come with us and who is willing to stay?”

Although everyone wanted to go help out at the warehouse, three males volunteered to stay behind, one from each clan.

“I have to be there at nine,” Artem said. “But we can scout the area and maybe, just maybe we can get Promise out before the fights even start, and then none of this will be necessary.”

“We can hope for that,” Axtyn said, “but also be prepared in case you do have to fight. Or all of us do.”

With a nod, they dispersed to get ready for a fight, planning to return to the Welcome Center in one hour.

Then they’d leave for Trumble.

As he and his dad walked away from the Welcome Center, his dad said, “You should call her parents. I would want to know if you or Isolde were in danger.”

“I will,” he said.

It was not a conversation he was looking forward to having, but he owed it to her family to let them know what happened.

He parted ways with his dad and went to his cabin to get ready.

Then he’d call her parents and vow to get her home safely and to never let another hair on her head be harmed again.

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They parked a half mile from the warehouse several hours before Artem was supposed to show up to fight. Their plan was to get into the warehouse before the stands were filled with civilians and the fighters were in the locker room getting ready, so they could set Promise free without the fighters coming to Nero's aid or any civilians getting hurt.

That was assuming that Promise was actually at the warehouse.

The warehouse was on a back road and at one time had been used by the mining company before the shafts went dry and the company went belly-up. Nero hadn't had any trouble taking the building over and using it for his fights.

Hell, the town of Trumble didn't even have a police force. If there was trouble, the locals called the Little Hope cops.

Artem and the others were in the woods that surrounded half of the building's property, giving them ample cover while they watched to see who was coming and going.

The building looked like it was deserted from the front, but they saw vehicles at the back and although the windows were covered with newspaper, light was visible in some of the torn sections.

Ian stood next to Artem. "Is there a basement?"

"I don't think so," Artem said. "Front and back doors, and there's a ladder up to the roof."

Ian hummed. “You can get inside from the roof?”

“I don’t know, I was never up there.”

“If there’s roof access, it’s probably not being covered by anyone,” Axtyn said.

They quieted as two males walked around the corner of the building. They were dressed in dark clothing but didn’t have visible weapons.

Artem stared at the males as they walked casually along the back of the building and rounded the corner.

“Does Nero normally have guards walking around the building on regular fight nights?” Mark asked.

“No,” Artem said, shaking his head.

“So she must be there, and he must know you’d come for her,” he said.

“That makes sense to me too,” Blake said. “What do you want to do?”

“Try the roof,” Artem said.

“Then let’s do that,” Axtyn said. “I’ll go with you and we’ll text if we can get in that way.”

“Be careful,” Mark said.

Silently, Artem and Axtyn crossed the property to the warehouse. The ladder was a security style that didn’t reach the ground. Artem backed up a few paces and raced to the wall, jumping and pushing off the bricks to propel himself upward. He narrowly

missed the bottom of the ladder but managed to grab it with one hand. His weight brought the ladder squeaking downward. He froze as it rattled to a stop, wondering if the sound would bring the guards back. But after a long, quiet moment where he held his breath and hoped to hell no one heard it, they didn't see or hear the guards.

Letting out the breath he'd been holding, he climbed upward, his dad following and pulling the ladder back up after them so the guards wouldn't see it.

They reached the roof of the warehouse a few moments later. As they scouted for a way inside, Artem stopped at a maintenance hatch near the far side of the building. He pointed to it and called his dad over.

The hatch was secured with a simple latch, but the hatch itself was rusted shut, so it took some effort to pry it loose without causing too much noise. Once it was open, it revealed a ladder that led down into a room.

Artem wasn't sure what room it was, but it didn't look like the main area where the fights took place.

Axtyn texted Richard. It was quickly decided that a few more would join him and his dad and the others would wait outside unless they were needed.

Artem let the ladder down once the guards went past a second time, and then Ian, Blake, and Taylor joined them on the roof.

Ian peered down. "This should get us in quietly, that's for damn sure."

"Hopefully it doesn't lead to a locked door," Artem said. "I'll go first and whistle if the coast is clear."

He climbed down the ladder, moving quickly and silently. The metal rungs were cool

and slick under his hands and he tried not to move so quickly that he would slip from the ladder and make noise.

He stepped down from the ladder and turned slowly, his heart in his throat as worry that he'd just taken a ladder into a room full of fighters came to his mind.

But the room which seemed to be filled with janitorial supplies as well as the water tank and electrical panel, was empty.

He leaned over and whistled softly.

Moments later, his dad and three friends were in the room with him.

Artem tested the door and found it unlocked.

He remembered from being in the warehouse that there were public bathrooms down a hall away from the fights, and he'd seen a door that had a maintenance sign on it.

"I know where I am," he whispered, explaining where things were situated, including the locker rooms and the balcony box where Nero spent time during the fights. The question was: where was Promise?

Artem walked to the door and closed his eyes, searching for his beast and the connection he had to Promise as marked mates. He thought about her pretty brown eyes, the musical laugh he adored, the way she smelled so sweet when she was turned on, but mostly that he loved her, with every ounce of his being.

A tug in the center of his heart pulled him out of the room. He was so damn happy to feel the connection to her, to know that she was actually being held in the warehouse that he wanted to shout her name until she answered him and run to her. But he knew he couldn't do that without drawing attention from Nero and his men, so he kept his

excitement in check.

Inhaling deeply and focusing on the feeling of where she was, he opened the door and peered out. The hallway was empty and he didn't hear anyone coming, so he stepped out and so did his friends.

He felt the tug to the left, so he followed the hall, realizing quickly that Nero had put her in the main room of the warehouse. Artem looked around the open doorway leading into the room where the fights were held and he saw only one male in the room behind one of the long metal bleachers. The male was leaning casually against the wall next to a closed door.

Axtyn touched his shoulder and when Artem looked at him, he pointed up.

In the balcony box, he could see Nero and several other males. Their backs were to the open room, though, which meant they had at least a moment to sneak in.

The male guarding the door was on the phone and distracted.

Perfect.

Promise had the strangest feeling that Artem was nearby. Her heart clenched and she thought she could smell the leather and sunshine scent of him.

Moving to the door, she pressed her ear against it and listened.

There was a thud and then nothing.

Her heart pounded.

The key slid into the lock and twisted, the sound loud as it unlocked.

Click!

She backed up a few paces, her mouth dry and her palms sweaty. What if it was Nero opening the door?

The door opened and Artem, fierce and furious, stood in the doorway like a dark angel, ready to wreak havoc on any and all who'd hurt her.

She could have fallen to the ground and cried she was so happy to see him.

But she knew that time must be precious, so she took his hand and rushed from the room. His dad and several males from the campground were with them.

Nero's voice boomed all around them. "Find them. Don't let them escape!"

The sound of pounding feet made Promise's wolf snarl in worry. Artem and the others rushed toward an open door, but males rushed in.

Artem and the others stopped and Promise crashed into Artem's back.

"Stay close to me," Artem said.

"You really thought you could waltz in here and take her?" Nero called from behind them.

They turned and found Nero and several other males standing near the fighting ring. "She belongs to me," Nero said. "You both do. Your friends can leave, but you two aren't going anywhere."

"Dad?" Artem said under his breath.

“I texted the others. The police are on the way, we just have to hold on until they get here.”

Artem gave Promise’s hand a squeeze. “Stay with Ian.”

Before she could ask what he was going to do, he bellowed out a war cry like some ancient Viking and rushed toward Nero and the males. Horns were sprouting from his head and his body was bulking up.

His dad and two other males rushed into the melee that followed, but Ian grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the fray. “Let’s get to the roof where it’s safe.”

“I don’t want to leave Artem.”

A male stalked toward them with a deep howl, and Ian pushed her behind him, letting out his claws. The two met head-to-head and fought, and Promise had to duck as Ian flung the male over his shoulder and into the bleachers.

“Okay,” she said as he grabbed her hand. “Let’s get to the roof before someone else sees us.”

They rushed from the main room, Promise looking over her shoulder to see her mate turn into his minotaur form and take on several males.

Be safe, Artem.

And kick ass.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Artem saw Ian get Promise out of the main room and knew he was taking her to the roof or outside. Either way, she'd be away from harm and that's what mattered. He hadn't meant to fully change into his minotaur form, but he'd been unable to stop himself after Nero threatened him and Promise. Again.

Adir, that wolfy bastard, had come for Artem as his friends battled Nero's fighters. The warehouse echoed with the sounds of the fights, growls and grunts and the clashing of claws and fists.

With every move Artem made, he was protecting Promise from future harm. He had to get through Adir to get to Nero, who was looking less smug by the minute. He fought relentlessly, furiously, his fists finding home on Adir's body and face again and again. His arm broke with a satisfying crack that made Adir howl and lurch away from Artem's fists. The male was a tough and dangerous opponent, but this was so much more important than fighting for money.

His life was literally on the line.

He knew that Nero would keep coming after him and Promise, so he had to make sure that he didn't come for them anymore.

Adir's face was bloody and swollen from where Artem's fists had hit home, and he couldn't use one arm. But he still fought, still growled and kicked and moved. Artem bellowed in anger as Nero tossed a blade to Adir, who slashed Artem's thigh. Before he could strike again, Artem disarmed him and lifted him into the air, tossing him with all his strength into the bleachers. The male hit the top bleacher with a crunch and flopped over the side, landing face down on the concrete.

Snorting in anger, Artem turned to deal with Nero.

But he was gone.

The far door was open leading outside, and the sounds of sirens could be heard in the distance drawing closer. As soon as Nero's people realized the cops were on the way, they abandoned the fights and scattered.

Axtyn put his hand on Artem's shoulder. They couldn't talk in their shifts, just grunt like bulls. He was surprised to see his dad had shifted too.

But judging by the unconscious and injured males around them, he knew that his dad and their friends had fought valiantly and prevailed.

"Can you guys shift back or do you need to bolt too? I don't know how the police will react to you guys," Taylor asked, wiping blood from a cut on his brow.

Artem and his dad nodded. Fighting had wiped the aggression from them, and while they normally would need time to return to normal, they could force themselves back to human form if they needed to.

So they did.

Calming his heart rate and breathing, Artem closed his eyes and thought about Promise, and how good it would feel to hold her in his arms again.

His human arms.

As his body returned to normal, he was thankful he'd at least put on workout pants that had been loose enough they hadn't torn when he shifted, but his shoes were ruined and his shirt was ripped.

“Damn I liked that shirt,” his dad said, pulling off his torn shirt.

Artem smiled, doing the same. “Better a ripped shirt than being dead, though.”

“Definitely.”

Ian brought Promise back into the main room and Artem hugged her tightly, so thankful she was free and in his arms. He held her face gently to inspect her injuries. There was bruising around her nose and dried blood. He was pissed all over again at seeing her injuries.

“Does anything hurt but your face?” he asked.

“No,” she said, wrapping her hands around his wrists. “When it first happened I was dizzy from the punch, but that’s passed. Now it just aches.”

“I’m sorry you were hurt but I’m thankful it wasn’t any worse.”

“Me too, trust me.”

The police arrived a few minutes later, and Artem, Promise, and their friends gave statements and then watched the police load up the injured and unconscious and take them away.

Promise stood in Artem’s embrace in silence as the last of the police vehicles left several hours later and the red lights disappeared into the darkness.

“What will happen to them?” she asked.

“They’ll be processed and taken to the hospital,” Axtyn said.

“A judge isn’t going to look kindly on them,” Ian said. “The state of Pennsylvania hates illegal shifter fighting. If any of them know where Nero is, they might get a good deal, but I doubt any of those guys know where he went.”

“To the B&B?” Promise asked, looking at Artem.

“I doubt it,” he said. “Adir died when I threw him to the bleachers, so his right-hand male is gone. I’m sure Nero has a safe house somewhere, a place where he would go if things went tits up.”

She shivered. “I hope it’s far from here.”

Artem kissed the top of her head. “I hope so too.”

He felt his dad looking at him, so he glanced in his direction. His dad’s arched brow told Artem that his dad didn’t think they were finished with Nero, and Artem was sure that was true. He was dangerous and now he’d lost not only Artem, but Promise, plus his arena and many fighters. He’d come for them again, he was sure.

But this time? Artem would make sure it would be the very last thing the male ever did.

“Let’s get home,” Axtyn said.

“You need to call your parents,” Artem said, taking her hand as they left the warehouse.

“I’m sure they’re worried sick,” she said.

“He never hurt you, though?”

“Aside from his goons hitting me a few times? No. He did scare me to pieces, though. But I knew you were going to come for me.”

“I’ll always come for you. But let’s not let anything like this happen again.”

“You’re going to be extra strength crazy about my safety from now on, huh?”

“You know it.”

They walked to their vehicles, leaving the empty warehouse behind them. Nero was out there somewhere, a shadowy threat on the horizon, looming in the periphery.

But he had Promise back and they were safe for now.

He was going to do whatever he needed to keep it that way for good.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Promise didn't sleep well once they were back at the cabin, but she hadn't thought she would. She was too keyed up to do more than doze and startle awake.

And even after Artem had sexed her up good and she'd been bone tired, she still hadn't slept.

She kept wondering if Nero would come for them. If he was watching them right now, or if he'd bide his time until they weren't on edge anymore and then strike. There were a lot of ways that their lives could go sideways if he attacked them.

She just didn't want anyone to get hurt. Especially Artem.

As she stared at the ceiling with Artem snuggled at her side and breathing deeply in sleep, she thought about the things she'd learned as a kid about hunting. Her dad had told her that it was always best to be still and watch, to wait for the perfect opportunity to strike and not to rush. Young wolves tended to want to just barrel into the woods and chase anything that moved. But the veteran wolves knew it was better to follow the scent trails and wait for just the right moment.

She wasn't the most patient person on the planet, and maybe less so when she was in her wolf form. But the best luck she ever had hunting always came when she took her time and didn't strike right away.

Her mind flitted to Nero.

He was a wolf but he was also dangerous and probably a little insane too. She was certain he was going to come after them. They had not only gotten her away from

him, and he saw her as a valuable asset, but they'd also gotten the authorities involved and shut down his warehouse and fighting league. She didn't know how many fighters got away and whether Artem was right and he had some kind of safe house elsewhere that others knew where to go to meet up with him.

But Nero was dangerous all on his own and he certainly didn't need an army of fighters with him to hurt her and Artem and the people they cared about.

He just needed to strike at the right time.

Which would be...when?

A branch's shadow that had been making a lazy pattern on the ceiling in the moonlight moved suddenly in a strange way. Promise's wolf let out a curious sound, and she had the urge to get up and look out the window.

Gingerly, she extracted herself from Artem's embrace and slid from the bed. Grabbing Artem's shirt from the floor, she tugged it over her head and crept over to the window.

The large window had black-out curtains but they hadn't been closed before they went to bed. She moved slowly and peered around the edge of the window.

What had she thought she saw? A branch moving?

What if it was just a squirrel?

Her heart was pounding in her ears and she couldn't hear anything else. Inhaling deeply, she blew the breath out slowly and tried to calm her flying pulse.

She was sure she'd seen something.

There was nothing outside of the window but darkness. The moonlight wasn't bright enough to really show anything but shadows. The large bedroom was at the back of the cabin and overlooked the woods.

Wait...was that shadow moving?

She stared for a long moment, holding her breath, and didn't see anything.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something out there.

Someone.

As she turned to wake up Artem so he could share in her worrying, she saw a strange flame appear in the woods.

It was small and moving side to side. It suddenly arced in the air and grew larger as it came toward the house.

She screamed Artem's name and raced for him, tackling him and rolling, taking the two of them off the other side of the bed where he landed on the floor and she landed on top of him.

"What?" he asked.

Something hit the floor on the other side of the bed and exploded, filling the room with bright flames.

Shit!

Artem was only sure of two things in that moment: someone had sent a Molotov cocktail through the bedroom window, and somehow, Promise had saved his life.

He scrambled into action and put her on the floor next to him, and they hurried through the bedroom door on their hands and knees as the room filled with flames and smoke. He shut the door to keep it as contained as he could.

As he stood to head toward the front door, Promise grabbed his hand.

“We have to go out another window or something.”

“Why?”

“Because the fire came from the back of the house, so they have to expect us to use the front or back doors. Not a side window.”

“Good point.” He covered his mouth to cough as the smoke billowed from under the closed door. Nothing like a house made entirely of wood to go up like kindling in a fire.

They moved to the laundry room and shut the door. He peered out the window, careful to keep out of sight.

“I don’t see anything,” he whispered.

“This has to be Nero doing this.”

“Yeah. And he’s probably got friends with him.” He stared into the darkness, his beast wanting to shift in case he needed to fight, but if he shifted inside the house, he’d never get out the window, so he’d wait.

He opened the window all the way and brought the screen inside.

Then he leaned out and looked both ways to ensure no one was watching them. When

he was certain the coast was clear, he helped Promise out. She dropped to the ground with a soft grunt.

“Run to my parents.”

“I’m not leaving you!” she whispered harshly.

A branch broke in the woods and Promise froze with a whimper.

Artem dove out of the window and rolled to his feet, grabbing her hand and taking off for the front of the house. He had only a heartbeat to glance back and see the back of the cabin go up in flames when he heard someone running toward them.

Several males stepped around the corner of the house and Artem didn’t have to have good lighting to know the male in the middle was Nero.

With as gentle a shove as he could manage, Artem sent Promise into the woods and called for his beast. As he shifted, he bellowed out a call and shouted, “This ends now, Nero!”

His last words turned into a roar as his beast came out ready to fight. Like the minotaurs of legend, Artem was much taller and bigger than the males with Nero, but he still needed to keep his wits about him.

“Get the girl,” Nero said.

One of the males veered off and Artem grabbed him by the hair and hauled him toward the house, throwing him through a window.

Artem growled and settled on his haunches, daring any of the males to move.

“You can’t keep her safe forever,” Nero taunted.

I can and I will.

As Promise brushed sticks from her bare knees and stifled a groan at the sudden aches her tumble into the woods had given her, she knew that Artem had pushed her into the woods to keep her safe.

She stood in a moment of frozen indecision.

She knew she should run to get help. Get his parents and the rest of the baro, because not only was Nero and whoever he’d gathered to help fighting Artem, but the cabin was on fire and that put other cabins in danger.

But she didn’t want to leave her mate.

Her wolf paced in her mind as she watched from the shadows as Artem fought Nero’s males. He was in his minotaur form, a huge, hulking impressive male who used not only his hands and feet, but also his horns as weapons. Every time someone tried to come her way, Artem would stop him. It had started with three, but more showed up. Most of them went airborne when they crossed Artem. Some got to their feet after their flight, but many didn’t.

How many more males were going to come for them?

And how long could Artem hold them off?

She should go for help.

Then she realized that one of the males was facing her.

She was still in the shadows, still hidden. But he seemed to know exactly where she was and she was certain it was Nero.

He took a step back from the fight, where Artem was tangling with three males at once.

And then he took another.

Artem was too distracted by the fight to see that Nero was slowly making his way toward her.

Oh shit.

She should have gone for help.

If she ran away, she could maybe get to help before Nero caught her. Was he fast? Was she faster?

Her wolf let out a demand in her head. This male had tried to kill her mate twice. He deserved every ounce of pain he'd ever inflicted on others and he couldn't be allowed to harm anyone else for profit.

As long as he was alive, she and Artem would never be able to relax and have peace.

She couldn't imagine what that would be like.

Pulling Artem's shirt over her head, she tossed it aside and called for her wolf, shifting as fast as she ever had before. With a furious howl, Promise leaped forward as her beast's words slid through her mind: I will end this for my mate and our future. Tonight.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 pm

Artem tossed one of the three males surrounding him over his shoulder, then stomped with his hoof on his chest, enjoying for a heartbeat the way the ribs cracked loudly. He was aware suddenly that Nero wasn't watching him.

The cabin was now fully engulfed in flames.

He could see Nero heading into the woods toward where Artem had given Promise a shove to get her out of harm's way.

He took a step toward her and one of the males grabbed him around the neck and pulled backward with all his weight, toppling Artem off his hooves. He bellowed in alarm, flailing as he landed hard on top of the male who didn't get out of the way fast enough.

He rolled to his side and saw a solid black wolf sail through the air, teeth gleaming as her jaws were opened wide. She sank her teeth into Nero's left shoulder and scraped her claws down his abdomen.

He screamed in pain and fell to the ground, but Promise didn't let go, she growled and worked her claws and fangs deeper into him.

The sound of rushing feet brought his friends and family into the area. Artem jerked to his feet and bounded toward his mate and Nero.

The male who'd come for them and tried to take his mate again, was screaming and shaking, paralyzed by the venom of Promise's apex nature.

Promise extracted her jaws from his shoulder and jumped aside as Artem grasped Nero's head and twisted sharply, ending his life.

It was too good for him.

Too fast.

But it was over.

Promise lifted her muzzle in the air and howled, the sound echoing through the woods as the distant whine of sirens grew closer. Then she leaped into his arms and he turned to check on the males who'd come with Nero.

They were all either unconscious or unable to get away.

"Get your mate to safety, we've got this," his dad said.

Artem looked at Nero's body.

His dad came over and put his hand on his shoulder. "You can talk to the police after you're out of your shifts. She's a wolf and you're a minotaur. You're going to freak out the humans. Mom's at the house, you can go there."

With a nod, Artem jogged away, Promise in his arms.

First, Promise had been too keyed up to sleep.

Now she was too keyed up to shift back to human, even though she'd been in her shift for almost four hours.

She was pacing in Artem's parents' house while the police and fire department were

dealing with the fire and injured people.

And the one dead guy.

She was absolutely not sorry for her part in his death.

He deserved a lot worse than he got.

Artem had shifted back an hour after they'd shown up at his parents' house. He'd dressed in his dad's clothes and sat on the couch while she slept fitfully and ended up just pacing and hoping she'd shift soon.

She had no idea when that would happen, though.

She'd never had this problem.

Artem dropped to his knees in front of her as she turned to keep pacing from one side of their family room to the other.

He cupped her head and kissed her nose. "You're so beautiful. I love your fur, it's the coolest color."

She hummed at the praise.

He was pretty dang awesome in his shift too.

He ran his thumbs over her cheeks a few times and then said, "I'm going to tell you this when you're human too, but I wanted to tell you that I love you. I fucking love you so much. I don't care that it's only been a few days, you're the other half of my heart." His eyes got bright and he cleared his throat. "The day you were taken, I was going to ask you to marry me on our date and tell you that I loved you then. Of course

all the plans went to hell and then it's been one long nightmare ever since. But it's finally over. We can breathe easier now knowing that the threat to our future is dead and you and I are both safe. No more underground fighting league. No male who wants to use your healing powers for his own purposes. Just you and me, and the future. So when you get back to human, I'm going to tell you I love you again and ask you to be my wife, but I didn't want to wait another second."

Her heart swelled as the love she had been feeling for him overflowed.

And her shift finally let go.

As she returned to human, she hugged him and kissed him, and told him that she loved him too.

"I wanted to tell you too," she said. "I can't believe how much danger we were in, one terrifying event after the other."

He held her tightly and she rested in his embrace. "We don't have to worry about him anymore. Are you okay?"

"I'm awesome. My mate loves me and I love him."

He leaned back and kissed her, then said, "I fucking do, beautiful."

"So about this proposal?"

"Yeah?"

"Is the ring in the burned up cabin?"

"No, it's in the four-wheeler workshop, I left it there when I got the call from Nero

that he'd taken you."

She wiggled her brows.

"Really? You want me to get it right now?"

"Not right now, but...after we talk to the police. But first I need some clothes."

"Here you go honey," Brierley said, stepping into the family room and setting clothes and shoes on the couch. "I wasn't eavesdropping."

"Sure, Mom," he said with a laugh, rising to his feet and bringing Promise with him. "You just happened to have clothes at the perfect time."

"I'm just that great at being a mom."

"You are for sure," Artem said.

"Thank you so much," Promise said.

Axtyn left to get the police so they could make their statements.

As Promise dressed, she said, "We're not in trouble, right? I mean we don't need to lie about what happened or go on the lam?"

"Not at all," Artem said. "Our lives were in danger and we defended ourselves. He was never going to stop so we had to stop him."

"Self-defense," Promise said.

"One hundred percent."

“I just wanted to make sure we were okay.”

“We are.”

A few minutes later, two police officers walked into the cabin with Axtyn. Promise and Artem sat at the kitchen table with them and gave their statements. When the officers were gone, Promise said, “I can’t believe they waited four hours.”

“They’re still dealing with the males who came to fight,” Axtyn said. “They didn’t have enough ambulances for them so there was a lot of running one person to the hospital and coming back for another. I think they’re all gone now, but the fire department is sticking around for a while longer to make sure a fire doesn’t start up again.”

“Is the cabin totally gone?” she asked.

Axtyn nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said to her mate.

“Hey, you saved my life, beautiful. Don’t be sorry. I’m not. We can replace things. We can’t replace each other.”

Brierley walked over and hugged them both. “My sweet boy and his mate, I’m so happy you’re both safe. If you want to go look at the cabin, you can come back here and stay the night.”

Artem looked at her and she smiled with a nod.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course. I’ll make up the bed in your old bedroom.”

Axtyn walked with them over to the ruined remnants of the cabin. One firetruck was standing by with a few males watching. Axtyn handed them sports drinks he’d brought along and thanked them for their help.

The baro was standing nearby, and Promise had a chance to thank them for helping Artem.

Isolde gave her a hug. “I’m so glad you’re both okay.”

“I am too, trust me.”

“It’s over, right? The bad guy is dead?”

“He is,” Artem said.

“Good freaking riddance,” she said.

Promise agreed one hundred percent.

Artem lifted his hand in front of Promise where a ring sparkled in the floodlights from the firetruck.

She looked at him. “Are you...just handing this to me?”

“I already asked you to marry me.”

“I was a wolf!”

“It still counts.”

She let out a low, grumbling growl.

Isolde and their friends took a step back.

Artem grinned and dropped to one knee. “I’m kidding! Beautiful, you are the most precious thing in my life. I love you with every fiber of my being and I can’t imagine my life without you in it. I was adrift and angry and worried about my future. Now I have you, and I can’t wait to see what the future brings. Will you be my wife?”

“Yes!”

Their friends clapped and cheered as he slipped the ring on her finger then rose to his feet and kissed her.

He swung her in a little circle, and she laughed.

“This is a great ending to a terribly shitty night,” she said as he set her on her feet.

“The good news is we can move into the other cabin right away, as soon as we go shopping for new furniture,” he said.

“I can’t wait,” she said. Her voice lowered as she said, “The first thing we need is a big, comfy bed.”

“You got it, beautiful. You can have whatever you want, I saved all my winnings from the fights in a fireproof box under my bed.”

“I just need you.”

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Artem wasn't much of a traveler. Living at a campground his whole life and having the mountains and woods as a playground meant his childhood had been filled with vacations involving tents and campfires with friends and family. Aside from occasionally traveling for work to pick up supplies and of course the fighting he'd participated in, he was pretty much a homebody.

And now that he had Promise in his home, he was even more appreciative of quiet nights in so he could treat her like a queen and make her moan in ecstasy. Despite his homebody leanings, he was looking forward to meeting her family and hanging around a wolf pack.

There was a pack in Little Hope and several members worked for the campground, but he'd never gone on a full moon hunt with them or even spent time in his shift with them.

This was a whole new thing for him.

"What are you thinking about so seriously?" Promised asked him as she pointed to the right for him to take the next exit.

"How I like being home."

"You mean you didn't want to come today?"

"Hell no, I just mean I'm a homebody, you know? And I like being home with you even more."

She rubbed the back of his neck, massaging it lightly. “It must have been really lonely having your beast so aggressive and the illegal fights to deal with.”

“It was. The cabin was a sanctuary.”

“I’m sorry it got turned to ash.”

He put on the blinker and exited the highway. “Me too. Richard said they might move the greenhouse to the space since it’s larger than where they have it now. But we’ve got a great place to live already, and the new cabin definitely feels like home with you in it.”

He glanced at her and she was beaming.

“It feels like home to me too.”

They’d moved into what had once been the owners’ cabin two days earlier. The baro had really come through for them with furniture since everything he’d had was either burned up or too damaged to repair, and whatever they hadn’t been able to get through gifts they’d bought with the money from his fights. He hadn’t really had anything of value in the cabin so he wasn’t mourning the loss of anything.

He was mostly just damn grateful that they were both safe and going to stay that way.

She pointed out landmarks in Allen as they passed through town on the way to her parents’ house.

“So a lot of males work at the garage,” she said when they passed by Pete’s. “It’s named after Alpha Jason’s dad, who was alpha before him. Alpha Jason’s mate Cadence works there. My dad works there, too.”

“That’s cool,” he said.

“My mom works at the community center. Oh, here’s Lonestar! That’s where I worked. Oh crap.”

“What?”

“I forgot to tell Karly that I was going to quit.”

“Didn’t you tell her you were going to search for your mate?”

“Yeah, but she told me she’d hold my job for me when I found him and came home. I never let her know that I was for sure moving to Pennsylvania. But my mom probably did. I’ll have to make sure I check in with her.”

“I’m sure your mom told her. If the pack is anything like the baro, gossip is a hot commodity.”

“Definitely.”

He turned down a quaint street and parked in front of a ranch with tidy flower beds filled with shrubs and colorful flowers. “This was my dad’s place before he met my mom,” she said.

“So how does the ranking work with the pack?” he asked.

They got out of the truck and met at the front, linking hands and walking toward the front door.

“Only the males are ranked and they fight in wolf form on the full moons whenever Alpha Jason sets it up. Everyone starts out as an omega, unranked and low on the

totem pole when they shift as a teenager, and they have to fight their way up. The alpha position is hereditary. Jason's son Bram will take over when he steps down. Once Jason steps down to retire, the high-ranked males will also step down and Bram will have a new set of high-ranked males to help him lead."

"Can someone try to take over as alpha?"

"Yes and no," she said. They reached the front door and stopped to face each other. "So within the pack ranking system, technically if someone wanted to take over, they'd have to fight their way up. But if someone just wanted to outright challenge him, they could. But he can turn down the challenge if he wants and kick the wolf out of the pack."

"Has that happened?"

"It did a little while ago when his niece Jessi and her mates had come for the full moon. A family in the pack conspired to challenge Jason and tried to cheat with a syringe full of drugs, but one of Jessi's mates saw what was happening and stopped it."

"That's wild," he said.

She opened the front door and he held it while she stepped in and then followed her inside. "I take it that no one has tried to take over the baro?"

"Well to be fair they'd have to fight all the heads of the individual clans and wouldn't just have one person to challenge."

"That's a good point."

They found her parents in the family room watching TV. Her dad stood and shut off

the show and her mom got up and gave her a hug.

“Mom, Dad, this is Artem Connelley. Artem, these are my parents, Bo and Reika Elliot.”

He shook their hands. “It’s nice to meet you in person finally,” he said.

“You too,” Bo said. “Have a seat.”

As they sat on part of the sectional sofa, Reika asked, “Are you thirsty or hungry?”

“We’re good Mom, thanks.”

“So you’ve had quite a crazy week,” Bo said, putting his arm around his mate.

“It definitely felt like the universe was against us,” Promise said. “Just one freaking bad thing after another.”

“You’re definitely safe now though?” Reika asked.

“One hundred percent,” Artem said.

“I had no idea there were shifters who had a curse like you did,” Bo said. “That must have always been on your mind.”

He nodded. “I’m thankful to not have to worry about it anymore, that’s for sure.”

They talked for a while about Promise moving to the campground but being able to remain part of the pack so they could come join in on full moon hunts whenever they wanted.

“Do you need help packing?” Reika asked when they said they needed to get over to the trailer.

“Thanks, but Rio and London already started packing for me, so I think we’ve got it handled. Then we’re going to stop at Alpha Jason and Cades’ to talk to them, then we’ll see you for dinner.”

“Six?” Reika asked.

“That’ll work,” Promise said. “Oh, did you happen to tell Karly that I wasn’t going to come back to Allen?”

“Um, no. Why?”

“I never let her know about my decision to stay in Pennsylvania and she said she’d hold my job for me.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand. She’s sweet that way.”

“We can stop in and talk to her, maybe grab a slice of Zoey’s chocolate cake if she made it today.”

They said goodbye to her parents and headed to the trailer, stopping at Lonestar to speak to Karly. Promise was tickled to get to take a piece of cake with them. The seven-layer chocolate cake was very popular, but Zoey had set aside a piece when she heard Promise was coming to town.

Once they reached her trailer, he met her sister Rio and her friend London who were already packing up her things.

“Will you stay here?” Promise asked her sister while Artem hauled the only piece of

furniture Promise wanted—a large bookshelf that doubled as a TV stand.

“I think so,” Rio said. “At least for now. I still don’t know what I want to do with myself.”

“I had to leave home to find my heart,” Promise pointed out.

Rio made a face. “I don’t remember you being so lovey-dovey-romantic before you met Artem.”

Artem grinned as he hefted the now-empty bookshelf on one shoulder and headed for the front door.

“I didn’t have a reason to be lovey-dovey-romantic until I met him.”

He felt the same damn way.

Once he’d secured the bookshelf, he returned to the house to pick up the bags and boxes as they were being filled.

He paused after dropping another box in the back of his truck and stared at the woods around the trailer park.

“It’s nice here,” Promise said as she snuggled up to his side.

“It is,” he said. He kissed the top of her head. “We could stay here if you’d like. You know I’d be anywhere you are without question.”

“I love the campground, though. It feels like home to me and my wolf. Plus, I wanted to be in a place where I could use my healing skills, and there are already plenty of healers in the Tressel Pack.”

“I’m glad we can come here to visit, though.”

“Me too.”

She went onto her toes and kissed him. He was very tempted to chase her lips and kiss her some more, but they still needed to see the alphas before going to her parents for dinner, so kissing would have to wait.

But hopefully not for too long, because he did love to kiss his sweet wolf.

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Promise hadn't expected the alphas to invite them to have dinner at their house along with the high-ranked males and their mates, plus her family and close friends. After the meal, they were going to hunt together, and she was so excited to have a chance to run through the woods with Artem.

Jason manned the grill with the males standing nearby and discussing proper grilling of various foods, while the females all admired Promise's engagement ring and how thankful they were that she was safe now.

"I didn't know minotaur shifters were real," Cades said. "But he's great and we're so happy for you."

"I'm happy too," she said.

When the grilling was done and the picnic tables were set, Alpha Jason stood and lifted his beer. "It always does my heart good to see one of the pack find their truemate. Artem, as your people don't have a mating ceremony per se, and you and Promise are now mated, Cadence and I are extending an honorary membership to you for the pack as Promise's mate. You're welcome to hunt with us anytime."

He lifted his beer a little higher and said, "To Promise and Artem."

The group lifted their drinks and repeated the toast then clicked their glasses and bottles together.

Promise and Artem shared a kiss and then clinked their glasses together.

Platters and dishes were passed and plates were filled, and then before they knew it, they'd eaten their fill and were heading out to find some privacy to strip and shift.

"I can't run that fast in my shift," Artem said. "But I'll try to keep up with you."

"I won't leave you behind. I don't care about running fast, I'm just excited to get to be in our shifts together when our lives aren't in danger."

He grimaced. "Yeah, I'm looking forward to that too."

She smiled and stepped into his arms to kiss him. "I'm so crazy about you. Thank you for coming here with me and sharing this time with my family and pack."

"I'm crazy about you too, Promise. And I'm glad I can be here. Your pack is amazing and so is your family and friends."

They finished stripping and shifted together, him into his imposing Minotaur form and her into her sleek, black-furred wolf. He petted her gently with his big hand and scratched under her chin with a happy grumbling sound, and then he rose to his feet and stretched with a snort.

She wished she could talk in her wolf form. She'd tell him he was a sexy beast, man or minotaur.

But since she couldn't talk in her shift, she'd just tell him how much she loved him and how sexy she thought he was once they'd run their fill and returned to human. In the meantime, she let out a bark and hopped away as he loped after her with a happy bellow.

By the time they got back to the campground on Sunday afternoon, Promise was dead on her feet. They'd stayed up late Saturday night after the shift and hunt with the alphas and the high-ranked members, including her parents, before they headed to her

childhood home for the rest of the night. Her parents had treated them to a late breakfast at Lonestar before sending them off to their new home.

And now she was freaking exhausted but so very happy.

“So,” Artem said as he parked in front of their new cabin. “Do you want to get right to unloading the truck?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t we?” She asked as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

“Because you look like you’re about to pass out and you kept dozing off on the trip up here.”

“I did not.”

“You snored.”

“No way! You’re just teasing me.”

“You snore like a foghorn or some kind of weird, mythical creature.”

She stared at him in shock and then saw the glimmer of humor in his eyes.

“You jerk,” she said with a laugh.

He leaned over for a kiss and she tilted her head away for a moment before he said, “Hey, I’m sorry!”

“You should be. I’m an angel and I don’t snore.”

“You’re definitely an angel,” he murmured before their lips connected. “But you definitely snore.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed as they got out of the truck. Stretching with a squeak and a yawn, she said, “I think I’d like to take some stuff into the cabin, but mostly I’d just like to crash.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They grabbed bags from the back of the truck and headed into the cabin. They set the bags in one of the spare bedrooms and then faced each other in the master, which had a brand-new bed with matching dresser and nightstands that they’d picked out and had delivered before they left for Allen.

Putting her knee on the bed, she climbed up and prowled to him. His nostrils flared as his eyes flashed briefly to scarlet.

“I thought you were tired,” he said. He fisted her shirt and pulled her a little closer, dropping his head to the crux of her neck.

“I’m suddenly feeling like celebrating our new place, we didn’t get a chance to christen the new bed before we went to Allen,” she said, slipping her hands under his shirt and feeling the smooth warmth of his skin.

“Baby, you have the best ideas on the planet.” His voice was all low and growly, and it made her skin prickle.

As they tumbled to the bed tangled together, she thought there was nothing better than the way it felt to be in Artem’s arms. He’d rescued her, protected her, and promised her a future filled with love and laughter.

She was very sure that their life together was going to be all that and much more, in the mountains of Little Hope.

The healer wolf and her minotaur mate.

Thank you so much for reading Promise & Artem! This is the last book of this series, but don't worry, I have lots of other series for you to enjoy, including a 6-book completed series about hybrid shifters: Cider Falls Shifters.