



Rumble of the Crumble (The Rhubarb Effect)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Two alphas. That couldn't work, could it? If it could, would Leonidis be able to open up his scarred heart and make himself vulnerable when all he'd known was pain?

Universe be damned, that was how Leonidis felt when Fate stepped in to deliver him one stalk-tastic mate, the town Sheriff. A mate he really did not want—or he tried not to want.

Fate and his mate are persistent and as the pair grow closer, so does the danger. With secrets revealed and more at stake than ever, the Sheriff has to consider the entire, growing pride, not just his mate. Can these two find a middle ground in the chaos as everything unravels and danger comes knocking, before it's all too late?

If they do, which alpha will save the day?

Rumble of the Crumble – book seven of seven, the last book in The Rhubarb Effect, where love can heal all wounds. Where two alpha defy the odds while they fight a pride that will do anything to get back what they lost. It's time for the rumble of the crumble! The authors advise to read the books in order due to an overarching ARC threading through the books.

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Leonidis

Ricky gave me a sloppy grin over the rim of his mojito glass. “Had a few cocktails.” He hiccupped and clapped his hand over his mouth.

The rhubarb surrounding him giggled, too. They appeared to be as drunk as him.

Cocktails? Now? Was the stalk high? “Why aren’t you at home with your mate and your babies?” I was not pleased to be sent on a mission to the bar to find the errant father.

“He told me to go away.” Ricky stared mournfully into his glass. “He said I was annoying the babies.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “Your mini-bull, who wants to spend all his time climbing you like a pole, even when he’s the size of a small house, and could squash you like a bug—”

“Are you going to get to the end of this sentence?” Ricky was so drunk, it surprised me he was even keeping up. “And my Burke is not that large.”

“Man, I love Burke like my brother, and he can cook like an angel, but he’s a bull.” That was more diplomatic than what I’d been about to say. “And he was screaming for you to get your ass home. I’m here to make sure you do that.”

Ricky flapped his hand like it was unimportant. He had to be drunk because I could never see him dismissing Burke like that. “Your mane is all floofy.”

I resisted the urge to tamp down my hair. I was in my human form, not my lion. No matter what he said, it wasn't floofy, no way. My hand still crept up to check, though. I sighed. He might be drunk, but he wasn't blind.

"It gets all floofy when you see your sheriff."

I glared at him. The last thing I needed was him talking about Sheriff Butch and he absolutely wasn't my anything. "You're talking out of your drunk ass. Drink up. You've got a passel to cuddle, though I'd suggest you don't breathe on them."

Ricky obliged by falling off his seat.

I groaned in complaint and bent down to haul him off the floor. I held him as his legs decided to do some sort of weird dance while working to hold him up. It would have been funny if I wasn't the one getting booted. "How can you be so graceful on the pole and a total klutz now?"

He turned to look at me, but his eyes went in opposite directions. "You wanna learn to pole dance? I can teach you."

His breath hit me and I was convinced another hit would get me as pissed as him. I made a scoffing noise in the back of my throat. "I'm a lion. We don't climb poles like a panther."

"You just want to climb our local law enforcement," Ricky mumbled, failing at side eye.

I ignored him as I gripped his bicep and steered him to the door. "This is not about me. This is about you evading your baby daddy duties."

Ricky tripped over his feet. I caught him before he face-planted the asphalt. "I love

my babies and my ballsy-bull.”

Dear gods, I don’t need to hear him loving on Burke’s balls. It was bad enough having to listen to it every night, or in the day when they couldn’t seem to figure when to stop.

I shoved him into the pride’s van. “Come on.”

Then he started singing. My ears rang with the god awful racket.

“Oh, hell no,” I muttered crossly, grabbing for my noise-canceling headphones, because I went nowhere without them these days. A lion couldn’t be safe anywhere. I ignored the wannabe Tim in the back of the van. One yodeling stalk was definitely enough.

Not ten minutes later, I opened the kitchen door and pushed Ricky into Burke’s arms, leaving him to be scolded and loved at the same time, their stalks squashed between them.

The pride house kitchen had turned into a creche. Tim nursed his lion cub, and Maximus, the pride alpha, sat next to him at the kitchen table cuddling their stalks to his chest. The mini-bull calf was currently fast asleep in Apollo’s arms, resting on his slight bump.

Apollo had just gotten over his morning sickness, to everyone’s relief. Constant hurling had been miserable for all of us with how he liked to project the sound, bouncing it around the whole damn house. Pregnancy was not fun!

Maximus looked over at me. “The sheriff’s looking for you.”

Every hair on my body stood erect at his words.

“See, I told you,” Ricky crowed and slurred. “Any mention of the sheriff and you go floofy.”

I scowled at them. “I don’t know what you mean.”

After the recent run in, which I wasn’t ever thinking about, I’d hoped they’d all get with the programme and just drop it.

Apollo chuckled smugly. “You look like you’ve stuck your finger in an electrical socket.”

I snarled at him and stomped toward the door as they all laughed at me. As I reached for the handle, the door flung open and smacked me in the face. I staggered back, ending up on my butt, staring up at a gruff stalk in a baseball cap I didn’t want to see. One who wasn’t getting the message. This would not work.

Liar! Of course I wanted to see him, the mating pull was undeniable, despite how much I refused to acknowledge it.

Sheriff Butch regarded me with dark, smouldering eyes, framed by really long inky-black eyelashes. He wasn’t pretty, far from it. His features were too strong and his jaw too square for that. He was ruggedly handsome with a drool-worthy body. The T-shirt he currently wore hugged him like a second skin, revealing not an ounce of unwanted flesh.

Some folks had all the luck.

My gaze dipped to what he was packing, but his chuckle brought my gaze back to his dark, bemused eyes. “Why’re you on the floor?”

“Because you put me there,” I groused back, working on making it sound like he was

stupid for asking.

I held out my hand because the urge to touch was too much to resist, and he hauled me to my feet. I gasped and staggered back. It was as if I'd received a bolt of electricity from my hand to my cock. Sheriff Butch grabbed me before I butt-planted once more.

He looked amused and I flushed, knowing I was making an idiot of myself. "Thanks," I muttered.

"You're welcome."

"Could you guys just get on with the mating instead of staring at each other? It's painful," Tim said from across the room.

"We're not all dancing queens," Drew said as he wandered into the kitchen. "What is that smell?"

Drew was the biggest drama llama going, but no one was stupid enough to say it, especially with his huge alpha stalk right behind him. I swear Goliath was so huge, he could make mincemeat out of Maximus.

"What smell?" Tim questioned, going back to the question Drew asked.

"I can't smell anything," Apollo said.

I wasn't focused on the smell. Butch was still holding my hand. I tugged at it, but he didn't let go. A warm, disconcerting feeling was creeping through me.

"We need to talk," he said, breaking the spell. From his somber tone, that wasn't a euphemism for 'let's get jiggy'.

“I don’t want to talk,” I muttered. “I’m done talking.”

I’d had no choice but to bare my soul to the stalk that was supposed to be my mate, and I hated it.

“You two need to go on a date,” Drew said brightly. He leaned back against Goliath, who wrapped his arms around him and buried his face in Drew’s hair.

“Like you two did?” I snarked back, knowing they’d done no such thing.

Goliath had declared Drew was his and llama-napped him from the doorstep. I didn’t see any dating involved.

“It’s a good idea,” Maximus said. “Take Leonidis out.”

Butch looked as happy as I did about being ordered to date on command. But then he turned to me and pressed my hand to his heart. “Would you like to come out for dinner with me?”

I gave him a dubious look. “This is a small rhubarb town. The only restaurant is vegan.”

Butch grinned at me. “Let me cook for you. I have a grill.”

He still didn’t let go of my hand.

“Say yes,” Tim hissed.

I sighed. Like I had a choice? I ignored the obvious answer when no mate would force another to do anything they didn’t want. “Why don’t we share? I’ll bring the meat.”

Of course someone had to snort, but I ignored them, focused only on Butch's smile.

"Perfect," Butch declared. "Are you ready?"

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Butch

Leonidis blinked at me, his beautiful, thick lashes brushing his cheeks, before his eyes opened to stare at me again.

“You want to do the date thing now?” I drowned in his golden amber depths. His silky hair framed a gorgeous, pretty face that was more suited to an omega than an alpha. Especially the full, pink, kissable lips. He was stocky, but nothing like me, yet I got a sense of inner strength that was a real turn on. Pinning me to the floor will be a memory I’ll never forget. Fuck, I could come just from recalling the power vibrating from him.

Great Rhu had given me the most beautiful mate that ever existed. But it couldn’t work...could it? We were both alphas. I’d always wanted a mate who would be my equal in strength and mind. I’d expected a beta, rather than an omega. But an alpha? How would that work in the bedroom? I couldn’t submit to another, any more than Leonidis could.

When I’d returned to the pride house with Goliath after the ‘incident’, Leonidis and I had completed the mating ritual to prevent me from wilting. That is to say, my mate had lioned out and pinned me to the floor. Fuck, it was hard not to think of the effect on me.

To prevent the wilt, he’d bitten me in stalk form, that was it. To me, that didn’t make us mates in a genuine sense because that came with a more intimate connection. There was no link between us, or if there was, Leonidis blocked it. I didn’t dwell on how that thought hurt, when Tim had projected to the parcel how he had a link with

Maximus just after they met.

After the deed, Leonidis had left me aroused to the point of pain, telling me it was for the best. He'd explained how I needed a mate who 'wasn't broken', tearing my heart out of my chest. The sense that he was irretrievably broken after what that monster, Amell, did to him haunted me.

They were his words and fuck, I wanted to make him believe differently. I thought he was perfect, from his glorious mane to the tips of his cute little toes.

On top of all that, there was the alpha on alpha issue to contend with.

"Sheriff?" A soft voice broke through my thoughts and I started, making me blush the color of my stalk. I realized I'd gotten lost in my head and Leonidis was waiting for an answer to his question. "Unless you're busy?"

"He's not busy," Maximus said with a toothy grin.

Leonidis glared at him, but the alpha just shrugged. "It's gotta happen sometime, Leo. Grab a steak and get to know your mate." He wagged his brows suggestively.

"I'm not ready," Leonidis spluttered.

I raked my gaze over him. Tight shirt and sinfully tight jeans. He looked perfect to me. I smoothed my hand over his hair, then noticed his wide-eyed stare. "Your hair is sticking up. That's better."

"Told you," Ricky crowed from his corner of the room.

"Don't be mean," Burke scolded, then spoiled it with a chuckle. "He can't help it if his mate makes him all floofy."

What did that mean? Leonidis's cheeks glowed crimson and he refused to meet my eyes.

Drew opened the refrigerator and drew out a pack of meat, which he handed to me. "Get him out of here, sheriff, before the dating advice starts in earnest."

Leonidis opened his mouth as if to protest. I sensed a wave of fear and was convinced it was coming from him. It was now or never. He needed me to take charge, otherwise he might keep trying to find excuses. I released a breath and took his hand firmly in mine, leading him out of the kitchen.

"I'll bring him back later," I said to Maximus.

It was a ridiculous thing to say. I sounded like a teen taking a boy on a first date. But I wanted to prove to the alpha that I respected the pride and Leonidis's wishes.

Maximus nodded, and I herded my lion out of the kitchen.

"This is ridiculous," Leonidis exploded as I shut the door. "I don't need to go on a date with you."

"I would really love to," I admitted, putting my heart on the line now that we didn't have an audience.

"You... would?" Leonidis licked his lips, a nervous habit I noticed he had. "You want us to date?"

"I don't get time to relax," I supplied, looking for something to entice him to come with me. "Even in Rhubarb, there's always something that needs my attention. I like the idea of some downtime to get to know you."

Leonidis huffed, and his hair puffed out a little. I itched to smooth it down again. Was that a clue to his feelings for me?

“Okay. Okay. It’s been kinda frantic since everyone started finding their mates and the ‘you know what’. Time away from the house would be good.” He peered at the steaks I’d forgotten I held. “These look good, too.”

I was vegan; I was a rhubarb after all. Like most stalks, I usually spent time in the soil to get my nutrients. But we’d gotten used to out-of-towners eating meat. If steak made my mate happy, I’d keep a refrigerator full of it... a separate refrigerator.

Leonidis seemed to relax the further we drove away from the pride house. It had to be hard for him in a house full of loved-up couples and babies.

“Sometimes,” he said. “I love them all, but there’s no space in the house now. We really need to get the building work started.”

“You... heard my thought?” I asked carefully.

Leonidis hesitated, and I wondered if he would make some excuse.

“I did. But not intentionally. Your thoughts are always loud when you’re close to me.”

Great Rhu, had he heard me lusting after his eyes and thinking he was perfect? I glanced at him. His lips twitched.

Yeah, he’d heard. I wanted the ground to open up and bury me whole. “I forgot to block my thoughts,” I admitted.

He snorted. “You have met my roommates, right? If it’s not my pride listening in, it’s

their stalks, and if it's not them, it's being part of Valentine Growville's nosy network. My head is always busy now."

I swear I heard an outraged squawk in my head and was sure that was Tim. So I did what any sensible stalk would do and ignored him.

"I'll make an effort," I promised. "You don't need to hear my thoughts."

"I like it." Now his cheeks were back to the pretty red that matched my stalk. "It's nice to know someone finds me... handsome. He said I was ugly."

I pressed my lips together, working to contain my anger. I didn't need Leonidis to tell me who 'he' was. Amell. His previous alpha. The monster trying to kidnap my mate.

"He lied," I said, my voice harsh, unable to hold back my fury at how the asshole had hurt my mate. "He wanted to hurt you because you're beautiful inside and out."

Leonidis sucked in a deep breath. "The scars..." he whispered quietly.

Scars left by Amell. I'd seen them when I had to photograph them. Just the thought of that lion hurting my mate stoked every violent impulse to shred the monster into pieces, then feed him through a damn blender and turn him into hamburgers.

I breathed in Leonidis's sweet scent to calm my rocketing pulse. "Are part of you, which makes no difference to me," I assured him, putting my hand on his thigh gently. "I can't lie to my mate, I'm incapable of that. You know this. Also, I'm incapable of being diplomatic, too. I'll say it as I see it and sometimes that will hurt, but I'm always honest with you."

"Promise you won't lie?" I heard the emotion, barely held in check.

I chuckled and declared, “If I lie, you can bury me in a hole and set fire ants on me.”

Leonidis released a delightful giggle that warmed my heart. “Maybe you shouldn’t promise anything as radical. If my pride hears you, they won’t hesitate to follow through if you screw up.”

When I stopped the car in the middle of the street, I turned to give my mate my full attention. “I didn’t make a promise to your pride. I made it to you. Do you believe me?”

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Leonidis

Did I believe him?

I wanted to. Every fiber of my being wanted to believe Butch was trustworthy. I locked gazes with him, and he leaned forward. Was he going to kiss me?

Oh, to the lion gods, he was, I could feel his need. Then I nearly shed my skin at the sound of the horn next to us.

Butch jumped and smacked his head into the door. “Fuck!” He grabbed his head and turned to glare out of the window.

I looked over to see Red, Tartie, and Glass grinning at me.

“You’ve finally pulled your head out of your asses,” Glass said. “Well done.”

From Butch’s expression, he didn’t take the compliment well. “Do that to us again and I’ll feed you to the pan to make c-r-u-m-b-l-e,” he growled, totally meaning it and making me feel a little giddy.

The three stalks, all mated to members of my pride, shivered at the thought. I’d quickly learned it was the worst curse you could aim at a rhubarb. No rhubarb shifter ever wanted to end up in the pan.

“Don’t do that,” Red begged, all wide eyes.

“What were you playing at?” Butch growled as he rolled down the window fully. “I expect this behavior from Tim, not you guys.”

“You stopped suddenly,” Glass said. “We stopped to see if you were alright.”

I was touched they cared enough to check, despite how much I really wanted the kiss.

“Then Tartie leaned over to press the horn when it looked as if you were gonna kiss,” Red added, throwing the sheepshearer under the bus without a second thought.

“Thanks,” Tartie said dryly.

Red smirked at him. “You’re welcome.”

Butch sighed and turned to me. “Let’s go.”

Leaving the smirking stalks behind sounded like the best idea ever if it came with the kiss.

Butch drove away without another word. “I’m sorry,” he said, as we reached Main Street.

“What for?” I asked, confused. What was he apologizing for?

“Those three.”

I shrugged. “They cared enough to check on us.”

“Which is the only reason I didn’t arrest them,” he growled.

I patted his thigh, touching him for the first time that wasn’t under stress. It was...

nice. “Forget about it.” Then I couldn’t help smirking at the thought of Maximus getting the call that three of the omega stalks were in lockup for nearly giving the sheriff a concussion. Especially Glass, who was destined to be the next alpha of Valentine. I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that call.

Butch sighed, but his lips twitched. “You think I’m overreacting?”

My smile faded. “You were about to kiss me, and they ruined the moment.”

His grunt told me I was correct.

“At least you didn’t get cockblocked by a chicken like Tartie did,” I pointed out.

Butch’s sour expression changed into a chuckle. We’d all heard the story of Tartie nearly ending up as dinner for a hungry chicken. If it hadn’t been for Burke’s spectacular maternal meltdown, Clucky would have been a midnight snack for me, Apollo, and Maximus. I swear Tartie still had a secret desire to do evil things to the chicken.

“Life is never quiet with the pride,” he said ruefully.

“Do you regret us coming to Valentine?” I asked. “We brought trouble to the town.”

Butch took so long to answer, my heart sank. I was sure he was going to say yes. “You did,” he agreed. “But if you’d never come to Valentine, I wouldn’t have met my fated mate.”

I leaned against the passenger window, staring at the few houses in the town. “I can’t be your fated mate. Two alphas can’t be mated.”

“You’re saying the Great Rhu got our mating wrong?” He didn’t sound angry, more

curious.

“Maybe. You know I don’t want a mate because...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“You should ask Great Rhu to find you someone else.” It really was for the best.

“We’ll see ‘bout that,” Butch said as he drove up to a small one-story like most of the homes in Valentine. No one needed a lot of space as most of the residents took their stalk form and slept in the soil. “How about we fire up the grill and chill?”

The words ‘we’ll see ‘bout that’ made my tummy buzz at how he didn’t suggest he would. “I’d like that,” I admitted, feeling flustered.

Having time to relax was a rarity since we arrived in Valentine. Between the matings, the abductions, and the babies, I don’t think I’d relaxed for a second.

Butch jumped out of his vehicle and around to my door before I had a chance to move. He opened it like I was someone special and guided me up the stoop to his front door, his hand tucked under my elbow.

“Wait! The meat.”

He jogged back down the stoop, reached into the car, and pulled out the pack of steaks. Then he joined me again.

His home was exactly as I expected. Basic, comfy furniture, no photos or homey touches. It was the place for someone who didn’t spend much time here but needed to relax when he did.

“We need to get the grill on.”

He led me through to the garden, which was even more basic. A patio with a grill and

a large bed, presumably where he slept.

Butch caught me gazing at the soil. “I have a normal bed, too.”

“Huh?” I turned, and the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“I have a normal bed in my bedroom. Sometimes I need a mattress to sleep on.”

“Oh.”

“It must seem odd to you, spending time in the dirt.”

I shrugged. “You’re shifters. We’ve all got different needs. At least you don’t cannibalize each other.”

He stared at me. “What?”

“It was something Doc Picker said about potato shifters. They have to eat parts of the potato when they mate.”

“That’s just weird.” Butch sounded vaguely disgusted.

I snorted. “It takes all sorts in our wacky world.” I meant it as a joke, but he nodded like I’d said something profound.

“You’re right. Who’d have thought to put lions and rhubarbs together?”

Butch left it at that as he fired up the grill.

“Who’d have thought?” I whispered, my heart pitter-pattering at how much the idea wanted to grow on me.

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Butch

I think Leonidis expected to man the grill, but in my house, I'm always the stalk in control of the grill.

"I'm a lion," he said dubiously, when I unwrapped the steaks. "I like them mooing."

"Show it the grill and put it on the plate. Understood." My mate didn't look convinced I could cook to order, but he nodded and didn't take over. Instead, he helped prepare a large salad while I sliced zucchini, squash and bell peppers for me.

"Why do you have a grill?" he asked. "You don't eat meat. I thought you took your food from the soil."

"I bought it initially because I have out-of-town friends who are carnivores," I explained. "But I like to spend an evening relaxing on the patio, eating grilled vegetables too. Crimson sometimes joins me for dinner. We discuss anything we need to about Valentine over a meal." I smiled wryly. "We discovered there are fewer arguments that way. She likes my cooking."

Leonidis couldn't hide a sudden frown. "You and Crimson?"

"She's Valentine's alpha and I'm the sheriff," I pointed out as I started grilling my vegetables. They would take longer than the steaks. "The town is our responsibility. Even in a little town like ours, there's always trouble." I felt rather than saw him twitch. "Even before your pride arrived, there were always young stalks getting up to mischief and out-of-towners causing chaos."

“In other words, I’m being ridiculous.”

I turned to see his pinched expression and hooded eyes. I stepped into his space, ignoring the knife in his hand, and cupped Leonidis’s jaw, watching his hair fluff out.

“I like the fact you’re jealous.”

“How...” He scowled. “You do?” He didn’t sound convinced.

“I do.” Great Rhu, I wanted a kiss, but turned back to my vegetables, not wanting to crowd him. I hid my grin at his disappointed gasp, and the way he had almost leaned into me.

When the veggies were grilled to perfection, I plated them and turned my attention to the steak. Two minutes later, I handed Leonidis his plate, piled high with meat.

“Is this how you like your meat?”

He stared at the barely seared steak. “Perfect. How did you—”

“I have wolf shifter friends, remember? They’re even fussier than lions.”

I snorted at his grunt. Lion and wolf shifters. They were all the same. They despised each other. I couldn’t wait to introduce the wolves to my mate... if he let me.

We filled our plates with salad and sat down on my Adirondack chairs to watch the sunset.

“We do this at the pride house,” Leonidis said, sighing as he settled into the chair.

“Do what?”

“Watch the sunrises and sunsets. It’s the first time we’ve spent anywhere long enough to relax. After the last town ran us out, I thought Maxi was mad choosing that old house in yet another small town, but he was right.”

Anger boiled inside me at the thought of my mate and his pride struggling to find anywhere that would accept them.

Leonidis patted my thigh. I guess it was meant to be a comforting gesture, but it sent fire straight to my cock. I wonder if he realized just how often he gave me gentle, reassuring touches since we’d left his home.

It was nice.

“Calm, my sheriff.”

My sheriff? I sucked in a breath. Did he hear what he’d just said?

Leonidis carried on, as if he hadn’t noticed my reaction. “No one wants a mixed pride like ours. The predators saw half our pride as prey, and towns filled with prey animals saw us lions as predators. We never fit in anywhere. I didn’t consider finding a home in a town full of rhubarb.”

I became filled with pride at the thought of my town. Valentine Growville was a special place in the world. I never wanted to live anywhere else. I hoped my mate felt the same way.

We ate in silence for a while as the sun slowly dipped beyond the trees. I didn’t feel the need to move.

Leonidis finished the last mouthful of steak with a satisfied groan. “That was amazing.”

“Don’t groan like that,” I said before I could hold back the words, my body reacting.

He blinked at me. “Huh?”

In for a penny. “Only your mate should make you groan like that.”

“You did make me groan,” Leonidis pointed out. “You cooked the steaks.”

He had a point.

I turned to regard him, feeling the tension in his body as if it were rolling toward me in waves. “Leonidis.”

“Yes?”

My mate sounded nervous, and I hated making him feel worried.

“I’ll take you home when you’re ready.”

He frowned. “You’re offering to drive me home?”

“Yes.”

“But…” Leonidis licked his lips. “Don’t you want to fuck me?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “But not today and only when, if, you’re ready.”

“But you asked me on a date.”

“A date, not a hook-up.”

He fidgeted in his seat. “But—”

I swung my legs around so I could face him. “Today was just about me offering you dinner and a chance to watch the sunset. That’s all.”

“I think I’d like to go home.”

I nodded, disappointed he didn’t want to stay longer, but I’d said I’d take him home when he was ready.

“I’ll help you clear up first,” he murmured shyly.

We cleaned up, and he loaded the dishwasher while I cleaned the grill. Then I drove Leonidis back to the pride house.

He hesitated before he got out of the car. “Well, thanks—”

But I leaped out of the car and rushed around to open his door.

“We’re going to have to talk about this,” he muttered.

I ignored that and walked him to the front porch. He put his hand on the door handle and hesitated, then gazed at me.

“Thank you.”

I knew he was thanking me for more than just dinner.

“You’re welcome.”

My mate licked his lips again, a nervous gesture. “Would you like to come in for a

coffee?”

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Leonidis

I had to be freakin' crazy asking Butch if he'd like to come in. What I needed was to say goodnight and close the door on him, because the more time I spent in his company, the stronger the urge was to leap on him, bury my fangs in his neck and fuck him senseless. Then do it all over as a lion and a stalk.

"Whoa!" Butch stared at me wide-eyed.

"What's the matter?"

"I... heard all of that, " he gasped, wide eyes revealing the truth.

"How?" I had our link locked down tighter than a... than a bear's ass.

Butch quirked a smile. "A bear's ass?"

"I couldn't think of what to say," I snapped, realizing he was picking up everything.

"Are you standing outside the door all night or are you going in?" Gordon asked from behind us.

I hadn't heard him or Red arrive. For some reason, there were daisies woven into Red's hair.

Red noticed me staring and blushed. "You know Gordon loves flowers."

This was true. Our goat shifter adored them. Since meeting his mate had calmed his libido, he'd had time to focus on other things, like planting flowers around Red's dirt bed and presenting his mate with the huge bouquets he loved to make.

No, I didn't get it either, but it made Red happy and if it made Red content, Gordon was too. That's all that mattered. I wanted the pride to be happy. I'd put them through so much.

The pride couples had their quirks. Glass and Apollo did it with handcuffs, Burke and Ricky with poles, Maximus and Tim with a disco soundtrack, Tartie and Randy with clippers, Drew and Goliath... I wasn't sure what their quirk was. I glanced at Butch. He didn't seem remotely bemused. I guess in a town of rhubarb, he'd seen it all.

"Hey."

I looked up to see Gordon scowling at me. "What?"

"You didn't put us through this nightmare. Amell did that. You, Maxi and Apollo saved us. Without you..." He swallowed hard. "Without you, there wouldn't be us."

The door opened, and I wasn't surprised to see Maximus and the rest of the pride standing there vying to get in the doorway. Just the pride, not the mates. I ended up in the middle of a pride hug and if there were some sniffles, no one cared.

We saved each other! That was Maximus, and we all agreed. We'd saved each other.

"Does this deserve a song?" Tim trilled.

Maximus groaned, and his head landed on my shoulder. "Couldn't it have been anything else except singing?"

“You want him to put you in handcuffs?” I asked, grinning cheekily.

“Oohhhhh,” Tim said breathily.

“Don’t even think about it,” Maximus snapped. “I’ll always be the one with the key.”

Tim’s hum didn’t sound convincing.

“Let’s go inside,” Randy said, herding us into the house and shutting the door on the outside world.

My head snapped up. “Where’s Butch?” Shit, I’d left him on the doorstep.

“Red took him around the side of the house into the kitchen as you guys were making out in the hallway,” Tim giggled. “We thought we’d have our own make-out session.”

Maximus rolled his eyes. “Don’t scare him off. He’s still new to the pride.”

I opened my mouth to point out that Butch wasn’t part of the pride, but Randy herded me down the hallway and into the kitchen before I had a chance to protest.

“I think he fits right in,” Maximus said quietly.

I stopped in the doorway at the sight of my gruff sheriff cuddling Burke’s sweet and totally feral baby against his chest. It made a ball of emotion gather in my throat as I watched him whisper in the baby’s ear. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“He’ll be a wonderful dad,” Randy murmured in my ear.

I knew that. But we were two alphas. We couldn’t have children. I could feel the love

as he rocked the baby through our link and felt a deep sadness.

Butch looked up at me and smiled. "Alright?"

I nodded. Randy gave me a shove. "Go take care of him or he'll end up nursing all the babies."

"Where's Ricky?" I asked, noticing his absence.

"Hungover. Crashed in the soil to recover," Maximus chuckled.

"You mean he's hiding from Burke." I kept my voice low, but of course the mini bull heard me.

"So he should," Burke grouched. "What did he think he was doing? I need him here."

I flung my arm around him. "Ricky screwed up. Don't make him suffer too long."

He leaned against me. "I won't. He needs the soil to feel better. The babies and I will cuddle around him later. What about you? When are you gonna put Butch out of his misery and make him yours?"

I sighed heartily. "It's not that easy."

He patted my back. "It really is."

"Okay, I'm not that easy."

To give him credit, Burke didn't laugh at me and make a snarky remark.

"He needs someone better than me."

“He doesn’t.”

“I don’t.”

I raised my head to see Butch standing in front of me, still cradling the baby. Burke squeezed my shoulders and plucked his baby out of Butch’s arms. “I think you owe your mate a coffee.”

“That would be nice,” Butch agreed, smiling at me, which made my belly roll.

“Come on.” I took his hand and weaved around the pride to the coffeemaker.

“Is it always this busy here?” he asked, leaning against the counter as I busied myself with the machine.

I snorted. “You’ve been here several times. Has it ever been quiet?”

His laughter was deep and rich. “I guess not.”

“You have the town. It’s always busy.”

“This is like having the town condensed into one room.”

“You like the quiet?” I asked worriedly.

“Some. But I like being with you, wherever you are .”

The sheriff had his hands around my heart, he really did. So why did I feel like I needed to run? Fight or flight. That was all I had left.

“Leonidis?”

I felt his warm hand on my shoulder. I realized I'd stopped moving and was just staring at the coffeemaker. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not and I understand."

"How can you understand?" I snarled, then gave him an apologetic smile.

"I'm the sheriff," he said simply. "I see what monsters do to good people all the time."

That stopped me in my tracks. "I guess... you do."

He knew. I'd already told him. I didn't have to explain again.

The room was quiet aside from the sweet cries of the babies, the pride pretending not to listen.

Butch nudged me out of the way and finished making the coffee. I stood there and watched him, unsure of what to do. Maybe it didn't matter.

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Butch

Leonidis was overwhelmed, it was easy to see that. I tucked him against me as we drank, not talking, just watching the chaos of the kitchen. He slumped against me as if the touch comforted him. I didn't intend to stay long, but I needed his body against mine.

There wasn't room to breathe in the kitchen as everyone skirted around each other. How did they live like this?

Because we need each other.

That wasn't Leonidis. Who said that? I looked up to see Maximus's gaze fixed on me.

You can't take Leo away from us. Even through the link, I heard the threat.

I don't want to, I protested.

You do. I can feel your need to pick him up and run away with him.

I did want to do that, it was true. If possible, I wanted to run far away with my mate so the monster Amell would never find him.

Maximus shook his head. He will find you. He has contacts everywhere.

We kill him. That was Leonidis.

I was law enforcement. They couldn't take the law into their own hands. Thirteen pairs of hard eyes told me differently. They'd all been listening to this conversation.

"He tangled me in barbed wire," Randy said. "I still have the scars." He shivered, slumping against Tartie, who enfolded him in his arms.

"He nearly abducted my mate twice," Gordon barked. "I'll kill him if he steps near my mate."

"He did stalknap my mate," Apollo snarled. "They were going to c-r-u-m-b-l-e him."

We all shivered.

Glass enfolded him in his arms. "Hush, you don't need to get upset. It's not good for the babies."

"Shifter law allows us to exact justice for wrongs against us," Maximus pointed out, his eyes burning with anger. "He bullied or hurt every animal in the pride. He stole from me, from them. You know what he did to your mate. We demand justice for all of it and we will get it."

I turned as the llama coughed and spat something at my feet. What the Great Rhu? Was that a love heart?

Leonidis picked it up and grinned. I peered at the writing.

"What does it say?" Tim asked, all giddy stalk.

"Rumble of the Crumble," I replied. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Okay, you know, sometimes the gods can get a bit cryptic," Gordon said, "but they

come clear in the end.”

“Gods?” I asked, confused.

“The messages on the love hearts are from the gods,” Drew explained. “I’m just the one to deliver them.” His nose wrinkled. “I hope they give me a break now. The smell makes me want to gag.” He shrugged at my wide-eyed stare. “I know. I know. But every fated pair I know gets a message from the gods.”

I frowned at him, puzzled. “Rumble of the Crumble. That sounds like a war cry.”

Leonidis snorted. “I can live with this one.”

“We could have a song to sing as we go into battle,” Tim suggested, grinning as everyone groaned. He didn’t seem the least bit fazed. “I’ll write one. Tartie could knit us pink sweaters from Randy’s fleece.”

“I’m not facing Amell in a pink sweater,” Maximus growled.

I thought they were all crazy, but maybe they were right. Running away would achieve nothing. It was time to face this monster and deal with him once and for all.

I left soon after that revelation. Leonidis walked me out via the kitchen door. I turned to face him as we rounded the house, and we stared awkwardly at each other for a moment. Then I cupped his neck and drew him close to me.

“One good-night kiss.”

His hum of approval was swallowed up as I brushed my mouth over his full lips. I pulled back. “Good night.”

He took a moment to focus on me. “That’s not a kiss,” he protested.

“Why don’t you show me?” I suggested, feeling him gather his courage.

He growled, then pressed his lips to mine in a chaste but fervent kiss. When he pulled back, we were both panting.

“I think we ought to try that again,” I murmured softly, not wanting to break the mood.

“Practice makes perfect,” he agreed.

I cupped his head and captured his mouth, wrapping my free arm around his back so that we were flush together and our erections brushed against each other. Everything narrowed down to this one moment. To this perfect man—lion who was mine.

I ran my tongue against the seam of his mouth, seeking entrance. His lips parted and our tongues danced together, a spicy yet sweet tango of need.

Now that’s a kiss.

I heard him say it, although I wasn’t sure if Leonidis was saying it to himself or to me. Either way, I agreed with him. The kiss went on until my lungs were burning and I had to pull back, then I rested my forehead against his, breathing in the scent of his arousal. It was heady.

“I think I’m ready to go now,” I murmured.

He gazed into my eyes. “I must be mad letting you leave.”

“There’s always tomorrow.” I kissed his mouth one more time, then I pulled away.

“Sleep well, my beautiful mate.”

I drove away before I caved and dragged him into bed. Slow and sure would win my lion.

Not too slow.

I grinned at his plea. Our link was wide open now. “Not too slow,” I murmured back, giving him my sweet promise.

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Leonidis

Once Butch left, I couldn't face the kitchen full of loved-up couples so I headed to my bedroom. I needed time to decompress after the evening and hide my body's reaction.

So much had happened in a few hours, I wasn't sure which way was up. I stripped off, dumped my clothes in the hamper, and shifted into my lion form to resist doing something that everyone in the pride would know about.

I paced around the limited space in my bedroom, restlessness rolling through me. My enormous bed took up most of my room and I had limited space to move. But I was too wired to sleep, and too tired to want to go back to the kitchen.

What I really wanted to do was take my night time run through Valentine. After the first few shrieks, the nocturnal stalks had become used to seeing a lion bound through their streets. But Maximus had lost his mane when he caught me sneaking out and told me if I did it again, he'd clap me to my bed in handcuffs.

Like I couldn't get out of handcuffs. But worse, he told the rest of the pride.

Bastard!

Have you ever tried to face down a sobbing mini bull? Worse, a sobbing pregnant mini bull? Ricky made me promise, on pain of getting Tartie to shear my mane, that I wouldn't do anything that stupid to upset his mate. Of course I promised. If I didn't, Burke would end ten feet up a pole somewhere. His babies were like that.

At the time, I hoped Maximus realized the glare I threw his way meant retribution would happen. From his smug look, I'd known he didn't care.

I felt like I was going to implode with how I couldn't set myself free. What could I do?

Leonidis?

Great, now I'd disturbed Butch and worried him. I'm okay.

Talk to me, mate, he coaxed.

I'm restless , I confessed, throwing myself on my huge bed, making it creak. I want to go for a run.

Not a great idea.

I scowled. Like I needed my mate scolding me, too?

I know that. I didn't hide my annoyance. My tail twitched angrily.

There was a long silence. I sighed. I'm sorry.

It's okay. I understand.

I held back another snap. No, he didn't. How could he? It wasn't his freedom being curtailed.

I can think of a way to make you sleep.

You can? My mane fluffed out as his low, sexy drawl went straight to my barbed

cock.

Uh-huh.

I chewed on my bottom lip. I didn't need a manual to work out what he was suggesting. Was I ready for that yet? I looked at my hard dick, spikes and all, with a drop of pre-cum oozing from the head. My mind might not be sure, but my body was all ready for him.

Is this taking it slow? I teased back nervously.

Not too slow. He threw my words back at me.

Option one: let Butch help me. Option two: pace around the bedroom all night. What should I do?

Shift for me.

I obeyed, stretching out as I regained my human form. I sensed Butch doing the same thing, stripping off his clothes and settling on the bed I'd spied when I'd used the bathroom.

My breath caught in anticipation. I'd never done this before. Phone sex yes, before... well, just before. But across our mating link was so much more. It was as if he was here with me because he was flooding my senses with how he felt. I didn't need to close my eyes to visualize him. I could feel him, body and soul.

Do you still want this?

Dammit, he'd caught my thought about before. I do. I want this. I need this. Need you. I hadn't meant to confess that, but it seemed to reassure him, and he relaxed. A

first time doing it at a distance? Yep, this could so work.

Then everything I thought I knew about mates blew out of the window as his hand curled around my cock. I could even feel the callouses on his fingers.

What! The! Fuck!

OMG!

My brain went offline as I stared at my dick. It was here, attached to me, yet someone jacked it slowly.

I could see it moving! “What the hell?” My voice cracked embarrassingly in the room's silence.

So it does work. Butch sounded smugly satisfied.

Did you know you could do this? I demanded, around a gasp of delight at the hand sending coils of pleasure through my shaft.

I read about fated mates being able to fuck even when separated, but I didn't know if it was possible.

It's possible, I yelped as he jacked me again. I wanted to watch, but my eyelids grew heavy with the desire coursing through me until they closed at the continual sensation that made my balls throb.

I should do this for him, but I couldn't get my brain working to think about asking what I'd need to do.

It's alright. This is just for you, Leo. Lie back and let me make you feel good.

I couldn't do anything else. I focused on the feel of his hand sliding up and down my shaft, slowly at first until I humped the bed, desperate for more.

Please! I begged. That was all I could say, coherent speech beyond me.

Whatever my mate wants.

He increased his rhythm, my balls tightened, my toes curled.

So close! So close!

Come for me, he ordered, and like an omega, I obeyed, my body doing what my brain hadn't gotten its head around.

My climax hit me like a freight train, steaming through me as I spurted over my belly, my chest, and one spurt even hit my chin. As I rode through my orgasm, I could sense Butch reaching his. He must have ridden the same wave as me.

I sank into my fluffy covers, messy, sated, and sprawled like a starfish as I grinned up at the ceiling. My chest heaved as I recovered my breath. Who knew it could be like that?

Feeling less restless? Butch sounded contented, sleepy, and somewhat smug. I didn't blame him.

I'm ready to sleep now.

Think of me holding you in my arms as you fall asleep. You'll always be safe with me.

I wished he were here, holding me against him. I wasn't sure I was ready to say that

to him yet. A feeling he knew came and went.

I couldn't hold back a yawn.

Sleep tight, mate , he crooned. The gruff sheriff of Valentine Growville was a romantic. Who knew?

At some point, I was going to have to process the way Butch had made me come on command, but that could wait for another day, when I had all my marbles lined up.

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Butch

So maybe that wasn't taking things as slow as I'd planned. But my mate needed something I could provide. That was okay, wasn't it? As Leonidis was sleeping peacefully now, I guessed it was more than okay.

When I'd felt his distress, the temptation to drive straight back to the pride house was there, but I didn't know if Leonidis would welcome me there. So I tried something I'd only read about, and it worked. Projecting was a talent, like with the thoughts, and I grinned at how easily I'd managed, loving his shocked response. So this stalk could teach a lion new tricks and have some fun doing it until he got comfortable with me.

I cleaned up the mess on my belly with an old T-shirt and dropped it on the floor. I needed to do laundry before I ran out of clothes. It would mean getting up early and doing it before work.

Like my sweet mate, I felt relaxed and sleepy, and I hoped he'd be willing to do it again. Real soon. We can go as slow as he wants, but I'm more than willing to help his restless needs.

I fell asleep smiling as I replayed our encounter in my mind. I knew lions can't purr, I'd checked, but now our link was open, his sleepy breathing sounded almost like a slow purr to me and it lulled me to sleep.

The loud buzz of my phone tore into a dream about my mate. Muscle memory made me reach out, finding the phone unerringly on the nightstand in the same place I put it every night. I'd missed too many calls before I trained myself to put the phone in the

same place.

“Sheriff?” The voice of our dispatcher barked in my ear before I’d said a word.

I sat up, realizing it was only three a.m., and knuckled my eyes. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a fire at the pride house. The fire house is already there.”

We so rarely had fires, Valentine Growville shared a firehouse with the next town.

Leonidis! I screamed his name in terror through our link, leaping out of bed and hurrying to my chest.

I’m okay, Butch. We’re out.

Is everyone okay? The babies?

Rage boiled in me at the thought of someone trying to kill the babies.

The babies are safe too. He sounded scared, but also furious.

I’m on my way.

You don’t—

I do!

“Sheriff?”

I’d forgotten I remained connected to dispatch. “Sorry, Honey. I’m on my way to the

pride house.”

“Okay. I’ll let them know.”

I didn’t bother to tell her they already knew. I disconnected the call, finished dressing, and grabbed my badge and weapon. I’d never shot anyone, Valentine Growville wasn’t that kind of town, but right this minute, I’d put a bullet in anyone who tried to hurt my mate and my new pride.

You know we can all hear this? Tim sounded amused.

I grunted, glad they couldn’t see me blush. No, I’d forgotten I was now part of pride central.

Leave the sheriff alone , Maximus ordered.

He fits right in, Gordon said.

I said nothing. I knew how to filter out the town. In my position, I had to. I’d forgotten I needed to do that to the pride now, too.

Leonidis said nothing, but I felt something new from him. Pride. I’d declared myself a protector of my new pride, and he loved that.

I’ll be there in a minute, I said, hoping it was just to him.

He sent a wave of need to me. Not lust. Need for me to be there for him.

I arrived at the pride house, having driven like a crazy stalk to find it surrounded by fire tenders, ambulances, and police cruisers. It looked as if half the county had answered the call.

A uniformed stalk put his hand up to stop me as I approached, then he recognized me. “Sorry, sheriff.”

He stepped back to let me pass through until I reached the pride.

From the lights trained on the house, it looked intact, but the firefighters were still spraying foam and water on one corner. I knew from experience they wouldn’t be able to return to the house for a while. Leonidis and another pair could stay with me. Red and Goliath could do the same.

I ignored everyone, searching through the crowd until I found the one shifter I cared about.

Leonidis.

Covered in soot and holding a chicken, he was the best sight in the world. When he spotted me, he loped over, clutching Clucky under one arm. Considering the hen was in the arms of one of the few creatures who would eat it, Clucky seemed remarkably content.

“Should I ask?” I said as I reached him, eyeing the chicken, who looked like he wanted to peck my eye out.

“Burke was worried about Clucky.”

As if that explained everything. Knowing the relationship between the bull and the hen, it explained it all.

Leonidis’s mouth quirked up at one corner. “Burke lost it when Tartie made a crack about barbeque chicken.”

I winced. “And the stalk is still breathing?”

“Just. Ricky had to hold Burke back from throwing Tartie into the flames. And only because Tartie promised to build a palatial coop for Clucky once we’re allowed back.”

That reminded me why I was really here.

“Tell me what happened,” I asked gently.

“I’m not sure,” Leonidis admitted. “I was out cold.” He coughed, and we both eyed each other for a moment before he continued. “I woke up to Randy shaking me hard and the sound of the smoke detector. We were the last two to get out. Someone set a fire in our kitchen.”

He sounded distraught, and I was sure part of that was losing the kitchen. It was such an important part of pride life.

I pressed my lips together. I was done with this. “Have you been checked out for smoke inhalation?”

“I’m fine, I promise.”

That sounded like a brush off.

“What about the babies?”

“Doc Picker is taking care of them. They’re well away from the house and being protected at Goliath and Drew’s place. They’re fine, I swear.”

“Take me to Maximus.”

Leonidis nodded. He led me over to the alpha lion, who was deep in conversation with Crimson.

Then I turned to the nearest EMT, a sweet-faced young woman. “Leonidis needs to be checked for smoke inhalation. Don’t let him leave the ambulance until he’s been thoroughly assessed.” My mate looked like he’d swallowed something sour. It was my responsibility as his mate to take care of him, no matter what. I took Clucky from him and gave him a kiss on the end of his nose before pushing him in the direction of the EMT. “I’ll be back to you as soon as I’ve spoken to Maximus.”

“Minus the chicken,” the EMT said.

“Without the chicken,” I agreed, keeping my amusement to myself.

I turned and headed over to Maximus and Crimson, handing the chicken to Glass on the way. I knew better than to give him to Tartie.

Glass didn’t look thrilled to be babysitting Clucky, but he didn’t protest.

“Why aren’t you with your mate?” Crimson demanded, eyeing me like she’d often done when I was a young stalk, causing trouble.

“He’s with the EMT,” I muttered defensively.

“You should be with him. He needs you.”

I knew that, but I’d made sure he was being taken care of, hadn’t I? I was the sheriff, and I had a job to do. A job that required me to protect everyone.

Maximus gave me a sympathetic look. “Give him a break, Crimson. He’s the sheriff. I want to be with Tim and my babies, but I’m needed here.”

I mouthed a thank you and cut to the chase. “It’s time we put a stop to this.”

Maximus’s shoulders slumped. “It’s time the pride left. It’s too dangerous for Valentine with us here.”

“So you can just take the danger to another town?” Crimson snapped. “I don’t think so.”

“I agree with Crimson,” I said, giving him a hard stare. They were not leaving with my mate. Hell, no.

Maximus stared at me. “Your mate nearly died. We can’t carry on like this.”

“I agree.” I curled my lip. “It’s time we turned the tables on the monsters.”

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Leonidis

“I can’t believe he did that,” I said, staring after Butch. I’d expected him to haul me into his arms and not let me go.

“Took the chicken?” the EMT questioned cheerfully. “No, I can’t believe that either. The sheriff isn’t fond of animals. He says they cause too much trouble.” Then she clearly remembered who she was talking to. “No offense.”

“None taken,” I lied. He wasn’t fond of animals!

I most defiantly am. He sent me a warm hug I felt but couldn’t see.

I could not deny how cool that was.

The EMT must have realized my earlier annoyance, because she pasted on a smile and hustled me over to the ambulance.

“I don’t need this,” I pointed out as she poked and prodded at me.

“You inhaled smoke, Mr...uh...”

“Just Leonidis.”

“Your lungs can continue burning long after getting out of the fire.”

“I’m a lion shifter, not a human. I just need to shift, and I’ll be fine.”

She looked at me. “I don’t know much about shifters. I’m a human.”

“How about I shift, then shift back, and you take your tests again?”

“Okay,” she said uncertainly.

I hesitated as she stayed still. “I need to strip,” I pointed out.

“I can’t leave you alone in here, Leonidis. It’s not like I haven’t seen it all before. The human, at least,” she amended. “How about I turn my back, and you shift and shift back? You won’t hurt me, will you?”

I sighed inwardly. “I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve offended you again.”

“It’s okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’m not used to being around humans. I stay very close to the pack.”

“May I see you as a lion?” she asked tentatively.

I nodded, and she turned her back on me. I quickly stripped, dropping my clothes on the bed, and shifted. Then I nudged her with my head.

She turned and gasped. “You really are a lion. Your mane...”

She reached out, then pulled her hand back. I dipped my head, indicating she could feel my mane. Her touch was gentle, respectful, and as she stepped away, she thanked me, turning so I could shift back.

Did you let her touch you? Butch asked as he appeared at the door of the wagon.

Yes.

I felt the ease in my lungs straight away. The EMT was right. I didn't know how bad it was until it was gone.

As I dressed, I avoided looking where Butch was because I knew he wasn't happy to have the EMT touching my mane.

"My pride mate, Randy, inhaled smoke too. He should shift," I said, to distract myself when my mate's possessive thoughts made my belly tremble in a way that didn't scare me.

She grinned at me. "Is that your way of saying I was right?"

"We both were."

"Fair enough." She glanced through the gap in the door. "Which one is Randy?"

"The one with pink hair."

She pushed the door fully open and yelled for her co-worker. "We need one of the pride here, stat. The guy with pink hair. And all the pride members need to shift."

I sat on the gurney. "Test me again."

"Okay."

A minute later, there was a knock, and she ushered in Randy. She blocked whoever was with him. "There's no room for you, big guy. Let me finish with Leonidis and you can come in."

I grinned at the disgusted protest from Tartie. “Hold your clippers, Tartie. Let me convince the nice EMT I’m fine and then you can hop in.”

Randy rolled his eyes as the EMT shut the door. “He’s kinda freaked.”

I patted his arm. “Of course he is.” I wish my mate was similarly freaked about me instead of ignoring me.

I’m not ignoring you. And we will talk about you letting that woman touch your mane.

Maybe it was time I went after him and set him straight. “Ready to cut me loose, ma’am?”

She grinned at me. “You can go. Thanks for the advice and, well, letting me see your true side.”

Randy turned to me, wide-eyed. “You shifted in front of a human?”

“You’ve got to shift and shift back or your lungs will burn,” I explained. “You think you’re okay, but I promise you, you’ll feel so much better once you’ve shifted.”

I hopped out before he could question me further, and grabbed Tartie’s bicep. “He’s got to shift to get rid of the smoke damage. The EMT will explain. She’s human, but she’s willing to listen to us.”

Tartie gave me a curt nod and pushed by me to get into the ambulance, the usually laid-back stalk only focused on being with his mate.

Trying to center myself, I took a deep breath and regretted it, coughing as the smokey air hit my lungs.

“You need to go to the hospital,” Butch said as he appeared at my side, pulling me closer.

“I’m fine,” I muttered, still a little disgruntled and excited. “I’ve shifted and my lungs are fine. Anyone who’s inhaled smoke needs to shift.”

“All the pride has shifted after we got the EMT’s message, and the town has promised beds and soil for everyone.”

Then Butch surprised the heck out of me by wrapping me tightly in his arms, sticking his nose in my hair, and inhaling despite the smell of smoke clinging to me. “I’m sorry I didn’t stay with you in the ambulance. That was wrong. You’re my mate. You deserve better,” he mumbled into my hair.

I tried not to scowl at him, but he couldn’t see any way because he never took his nose out of my hair. “Is this about the woman touching my mane? I know you’re the sheriff. You have a job to do, no matter how I feel.”

He didn’t let go, I was flush against him, my face pressed into the crook of his neck. “No. You’re my mate, and I know we’re not... fully together, but my priority is you. I want you to know that, and that Crimson reamed me out for leaving you.”

I raised my head, dislodging him to lean back so I could see his face. He was avoiding the whole mane touching issue, and I let him for now. “She did? What did she say?”

Butch looked rueful. “Everything I just said, plus a whole lot more about having a mate. She was right. That’s why I came straight over here... for you.”

“I should have warned you through our link,” I admitted, “you know, before, but I knew they’d call, and it was all so busy.”

Butch's arms tightened, a flash of pain filling his eyes. "We should have been together. If anything had happened to you..." He trailed off and I could feel his fear through our link.

"I'm okay," I murmured. "Sending me to the EMT was a good call, even if you did leave me. She told me of the danger to my lungs and once I shifted, I knew she was right." I left out the mane part.

I also knew he meant we should be together as mates. But I wasn't ready to discuss that just yet. Especially not here, in the burned ruins of my home. I let him hold me as the chaos continued around us. Soon enough, Butch would have to take charge. And me...what would I do then?

Butch

At some point, I realized dawn peeked over the horizon, but with the smoke surrounding the house, it was barely visible. The arrival of daylight illuminated the full devastation of the pride house.

I know I screwed up leaving Leonidis alone. Crimson managed to make me feel like the world's worst mate for not staying with him, but I did have a job to do. I was going to have to talk with Maximus about how he handled the responsibility. In the past, I would have talked to Crimson, but I could do without having another lecture. I was still a little—okay a lot—put out at that EMT touching Leonidis's mane. I wanted to be the only one to touch it.

He chuckled inside my head.

I kissed Leonidis's forehead and let my hands drop to rest lightly on his hips. "I've got to talk to everyone and make sure the house is safe. Will you come with me or do you want to rest with the pride?"

"You need to work without worrying about me," Leonidis replied, giving nothing of his thoughts. "And Maximus needs my support. We've lost our home."

"You'll have a home with me, if you want." I needed him to know this was the truth. I wanted him with me.

"We'll see," he answered. Not what I was hoping for. "We need to rebuild the pride house."

“The town will help you,” I promised, knowing the townsfolk would pull together to help.

I wouldn’t even have to ask them.

Leonidis’s smile was sweet. “We’re so lucky to have you.”

“Right back atcha,” I answered, grinning.

Anything else I was going to say was lost in shouts as more flames went up in the house. I doubted the house could be saved at this point, if I was honest. I saw Maximus’s bleak expression in the light of the flames.

You may have lost the house, but you still have a home here, I assured him.

He turned to look at me. Not until Amell is finished. He won’t stop until he has destroyed us.

I felt, rather than saw, the fear Leonidis tried to hide from me and I took him in my arms again. I will protect you, my mate.

Leonidis’s expression was as bleak as his alpha’s. I felt so frustrated. They came here to start a new life. They’d become part of the town and brought love and fun to Valentine. Now they were being driven out of it, and for all my strong words to Crimson and Maximus, I felt powerless to help them.

Welcome to my world, Maximus growled.

I felt the pride crowd into our minds, even the babies’ tiny presence. Then the town joined us too, with words of comfort for the pride. Even old Bart was there.

“It’s suddenly very crowded in my head,” Leonidis murmured to me.

“You’re now truly a part of Valentine,” I said, chuckling. “Welcome to my world.”

The group hug across the link didn’t last for long. There was too much to do. But I could sense the pride felt better for it. I cupped Leonidas’s jaw and gave him a tender kiss before he joined Maximus, then I focused on my job. The crime scene had become a trampled mess, covered in foam and water. I needed to know where and how the fire started. Who started it wasn’t a mystery. Amell or his cohorts. But how had they gotten access to the house?

I spotted the chief of the firehouse and headed over to him. He was a rhubarb shifter, too.

“Congratulations,” Chief Sutton said as I reached him.

“Huh?”

“You found your mate.” He jabbed a thumb at Leonidis.

I couldn’t help breaking out into a smile. “I did. Thanks, Sutton.”

We went back a long way together, and at one time, we’d talked about a relationship. It hadn’t lasted. We were both alphas, looking for our omegas—betas. I paused... alpha. Wow, had I been testing the water?

I heard a growl in my head and didn’t need to be told where that was coming from. I looked over to where my mate was scowling at me. No need to be jealous. He’s always been more of a friend to me. And I found the right alpha for me, didn’t I?

As long as that’s all he is. You’re mine.

A surge of his possessive feeling hit rather inappropriately, considering what was happening. By Great Rhu, I wanted to push him to acknowledge he was claiming me for the first time. But this was the worst time to cut loose. I limited myself with an image of me holding his cock.

I know that. Chief Sutton has his fated mate. They've been together for years.

The grunt in my head sounded less disgusted than before, and there were also whispers of desire. I just grinned at him.

"Do you want to carry on winding up your mate, or do you want to talk business?"

I smirked at Chief Sutton's raised eyebrow. "I've learned I can multi-task."

Sutton shook his head, then he got down to business. My amusement faded as he told me what they'd discovered so far. This arsonist meant business.

"He wanted to burn them in their beds," he said, deep lines between his brows. "I'm not one to pry into police business, brother, but you need to protect this pride."

Not 'you need to throw them out of Valentine' but 'you need to protect them'. I squeezed his shoulder in thanks, ignoring another growl in my head.

"Come and meet my mate and his alpha. They need to hear what you have to say." I projected that as I said it.

"Are you sure he's not going to eat me?" Sutton asked, one eyebrow raised.

I chuckled. "Maximus looked growly, but he prefers a steak to chow down on, not rhubarb. He's a carnivore."

“I meant your mate. He’s the one snarling at me.”

I looked at Leonidis, scowling at us with his arms folded across his chest, his hair all floofed out. Even from this distance, I could hear him snarling.

“No promises there.” Great Rhu he was precious.

Leonidis

Why was the fire chief grabbing my mate in a bear hug? He had his own fated mate. Why did he have his hands all over mine? I looked closer. No way was my mate grabbing him? I folded my arms across my chest and glared at Butch.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Maximus said out the side of his mouth.

“How would you feel if someone had their hands all over Tim?” I snapped back, feeling put out after Butch’s reaction to the ‘mane touching’.

“They wouldn’t dare,” he snarled. “He’s mine.”

I raised my eyebrow, and Maximus grunted at me. “You haven’t claimed him yet,” he said.

“We’ve mated,” I muttered.

“Only so he wouldn’t wilt. When are you going to claim him?”

I kicked at a stray stone on the ground. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for... that.”

Then I looked up and saw Butch watching me closely. Maximus followed my gaze.

“I think you’ve gotten someone who will wait for you.”

“But for how long? What if he gets fed up waiting for me?”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

“I’ve done nothing but talk,” I said with a touch of exasperation. “The sheriff knows about the worst time in my life.”

Having to bare my soul, to explain how I got the scars on my body, tortured by another lion, was mortifying. “Butch must think I’m so weak.”

You’re never weak. You’re strong and resilient.

Then Butch was in front of me as the fire chief introduced himself to Maximus. Butch ignored them as he focused on me. I’d never known what it was to have a man solely focused on me with such a look of affection. He took my breath away.

Butch leaned forward and whispered, “I will wait for you.”

I gave a shaky nod. “When Amell is caught. I can’t focus. Every time I think I can relax, something like this happens.” I waved at the house. “He could hurt you. I’d never forgive myself.”

He looked taken aback. “You don’t have to protect me.”

“I’m the lion in this relationship.”

Butch frowned. “And I’m the sheriff of this town.”

He wasn’t listening to me. “Tartie nearly got eaten by a chicken.”

“I’m the sheriff,” he repeated.

“And Amell’s a monster,” I yelled.

Then Maximus was at my side and the chief was by Butch.

“Guys, can you postpone the hand-wringing for now,” Maximus muttered, eyeing us both without amusement. “The firefighters want us away from the house. It’s unsafe.”

I pressed my lips together. I knew he was right, but dammit, I just wanted Butch to understand. “Where am I going?” I said curtly.

“Randy and Tartie are taking you to Goliath’s home.”

I’d been so caught up with Butch, I hadn’t realized they’d joined us.

Tartie rested his hand on my shoulder. “We don’t want you to be on your own and the sheriff is gonna be tied up here for a while. He can take you back to his place when he’s finished.”

I gave a curt nod and followed them without a word or a backward glance. Then I caught the look Randy sent my way.

“What?” I snapped.

“You didn’t say goodbye to your mate.”

I opened my mouth to say that he wasn’t my mate, then I closed it again. The sweet ram looked disappointed in me for some reason. Guilt rolled in my belly. I turned on my heel and ran back to Butch, who was talking to Maximus and Chief Sutton. He looked startled to see me, but I hauled him close to me and kissed him hard.

“See you later. You will fetch me?”

A smile spread across his face. "I promise."

I nodded, kissed him again, and ran back to Tartie and Randy.

Randy beamed at me and slung his arm across my shoulders. I spat out the sudden mouthful of pink hair.

"Nice," Tartie said.

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Is the rest of the pride already at Goliath's?" I asked.

"Red and Gordon have taken Tim and the babies back to their place. Red insisted Tim needed family stalk time."

I translated that as, Red was freaked out and needed his brother. My suspicions were confirmed when Tartie continued. "Glass and Apollo will go there later. Everyone else is at Goliath's for now. Goliath is making sure every stalk can bed down in soil if they need to."

"He's a good stalk."

"He is, although I don't really know him. Our paths don't cross."

I nodded, but my thoughts were already straying to Butch. I hoped he was safe and stayed away from the fire.

I'm alright, he soothed across the link. Don't worry about me.

If I'm your mate, it's my job to worry about you, I thought tartly, as I climbed into

the pride van.

If? Butch sounded exasperated.

I know you're my mate. It's too much to process at the moment.

I know and I'm sorry. I promised I wouldn't push you.

Before I could respond, he said I've got to go. Stay safe. And then the link was empty.

"Hey, Leo."

"Huh?" I looked up to see Randy staring at me. "What's wrong?"

"That's what I asked you. I guess you were talking to your stalk-a-luscious."

"Stalk-a-luscious? What are you? Twelve?"

From the driver's seat, Tartie leered at his mate. "Definitely not twelve."

I sighed, closed my eyes, and ignored them as they eyeballed each other. Thankfully there was no one else on the road as I felt the van swerve.

"Try not to kill us before we get there, huh?"

They ignored me.

Apollo hauled me into a hug as soon as I got out of the van. Then it was Drew's turn, followed by Burke with the babies squished between us. I received a hug from everyone there. I'm not sure if they were reassuring themselves or me, but it was

needed. We were all filthy and tired and stressed, but at least we were together.

Then Glass hugged me, saying, “This one’s from Tim, Red, and Gordon.”

I hugged him back. “Thanks. I needed that.”

When he stepped back, Drew presented me with a large cup. I peered at the contents.

“Hot chocolate?”

“You need to sleep. Doc’s orders. No coffee.”

“Is Doc Picker here?”

“He’s asleep. Drink up, then you can sleep. We’re taking it in turns to guard the place.”

I wasn’t going to argue. My throat was raw from the smoke, and I needed a drink.

The hot chocolate soothed my throat. “I can guard while you sleep,” I offered after taking several sips of the yumminess.

Apollo shook his head, his curls dancing around his face. “No. Shift and curl up with Randy and Burke.”

“I don’t think I can sleep.”

“Just try. You need the rest.”

I didn’t have the strength to argue. I handed the cup back to Drew. Then I stripped and shifted, the solid ram and mini bull curling around me. If I couldn’t have my

mate, my pride would comfort me. I couldn't resist reaching out to Butch.

Sleep well, Leonidis.

I smiled at the quiet words from my mate and relaxed. Even if I didn't sleep, I knew I was safe with Butch and my pride.

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Butch

“Hi.”

The soft voice set my heart pounding.

I turned to see Leonidis smiling at me. I hauled him into my arms and he hugged me hard. My mate wrapped his arms around me and held me so hard I coughed. His grip eased a fraction.

“Sorry.”

I leaned into him. We both stank of soot and sweat, but I didn’t care. It was more important to have him in my arms. “It’s okay. I needed that, needed you.”

It was well into the following day, and I still hadn’t left the scene of the pride house. Over his shoulder, I wasn’t surprised to see Apollo, Glass, and Tim talking to Maximus. Tim had his mate in his arms and I swear he was giving Maximus a scolding for not coming to find him. At least he wasn’t singing it.

“What are you doing here?” I scolded, easing back to stare into Leonidis’s beautiful eyes.

“I came to find my mate as he didn’t join me.” I could hear the reproach in his voice.

“Sorry.” I slumped against him, letting him take my weight. “It’s been a long night. I didn’t want to leave the scene until I had some answers on how the fire started.”

“Do you have any?” he asked.

“Chief Sutton thinks the arsonist came in via the back door and started the fire in the kitchen.”

“There are scratch marks around the lock,” Sutton added.

I felt Leonidis stiffen. Not interested, remember?

I heard the grunt in my head. My mate clearly wasn't going to be convinced.

Give me time, he pleaded.

Just remember, I'm a faithful kinda stalk.

Sutton had that resigned look as if he were well aware of the internal conversation. “Leonidis, you and Butch will have to come around one evening so I can introduce you to my mate.”

Leonidis hesitated, and I nudged him. He was going to have to get over his jealousy. “That would be good,” he managed, completely insincerely.

Then Tim bounced over, reaching up to kiss Sutton's cheek. “Hey. How's Arrow?”

Sutton beamed at him. “Almost ready to have the babies. Doc Picker's been wonderful. You have to keep him.”

I felt Leonidis relax at the proud father's news.

See? I teased.

You could've told me.

Maybe next time you'll trust me, I said mildly.

Another grunt. He wasn't going to admit to anything. I smirked at him and held him close. He'd learn.

Tim's eyes lit up at the news. "You and Arrow will have to join us. We could start a creche. Did you know Apollo is pregnant?" He leaned forward. "I swear Drew is too. He's gone that funny shade of green."

"Morning sickness is hard on the omegas," Sutton agreed.

I felt a momentary sadness that Leonidis and I would never have children because we were both alphas. Feeling the same sadness from him, I pressed a kiss to his temple. "We'll have a lot of baby pridelings to take care of."

"We'll be the best uncles ever," he agreed, forcing a smile on his face.

I caught Tim's speculative look as he surveyed us.

"You should really talk to—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Maximus came over. "Chief, Livingstone wants to talk to you."

Sutton jogged over to one of the firefighters, leaving me with the three lions, Apollo having joined us and Tim.

Time to get down to hard facts.

I looked at the four of them. “Do you think this was Amell or one of his pride?”

“Amell,” Maximus growled. “I can smell him.”

The other two lions nodded.

“He’s like a stink you can’t wash off.” Leonidis shivered.

I tugged him closer, hoping he could feel me and inhale me to replace the horrid memories.

“We have to find him,” I said. “We can’t carry on like this, waiting for another attack.”

“You could set a trap,” Leonidis suggested.

I gave him a wary look. “What do you mean?”

Leonidis shrugged. “We know what he wants. Set me as bait.”

“No,” I barked out, the breath knocked out of me at the suggestion. “Never.”

“It’s not really your decision,” he said.

I took a step away from him so I could look at him properly. “We’re fated mates. Any decision we make, we do it together.”

Tim coughed, and I scowled at him. He held out his hands. “Leonidis has a point, just as Crimson did. You can’t run away, and we need to catch him before he hurts us or our babies.”

“You’re not putting my mate in danger.”

“We’re not full mates yet,” Leonidis said, “so this is my decision.”

Now Tim shook his head.

Maximus huffed. “Make up your mind, Tim. Are they mates or not?”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Just because they haven’t played stalk the lion, doesn’t mean they aren’t fated mates. One,”—he counted on his fingers—“they received a love heart. Two, they have a link. Three—”

“We get the point,” Leonidis snapped, looking flushed.

Tim tilted his head to stare at him. “Do you? Because from where I’m standing, you two are trying to make decisions for each other, not together. This one is big. You have to talk to each other.”

We all fell silent, Leonidis and I not looking at each other.

Maximus reeled Tim into his side. “You’re a wonderful omega mate.”

Tim beamed up at him. “I could sing them into submission.”

Leonidis groaned. “No, no, no.”

Maximus raised an eyebrow. “You heard my mate. Talk or he will sing.”

They left us alone then, Maximus tugging Tim away despite his protest, the two of us still not meeting each other’s gaze.

I held out my hand. “Leo.”

To my relief, he took my hand and smiled at me. “You heard him. We need to talk, or he will karaoke us to death.”

Oi! I’m a great singer.

I pushed Tim out of our link. “Let’s go back to our place for a couple of hours.”

“Our place?” Leonidis blushed.

“My home is your home.”

I took him via my deputy and told him I was taking a couple of hour's break.

He gave the two of us a knowing look, but he said nothing. That was good because I sensed Leonidis’s frustration and readiness to bop someone on the nose if they said the wrong thing.

I drove us to my—our—home and shut the door on the world, leaving the two of us together. We kicked off our shoes, then I held out my hand. “Let me take you to bed?”

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Leonidis

“I-I don’t know if I’m r-ready—” I shivered just at the thought, not all of it from apprehension.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Butch assured me.

I raised an eyebrow. “You want to take me to bed, but you don’t want to do anything with me?” Did I sound peeved? I felt peeved. God, this was all so confusing with how conflicted I felt. I was swinging back and forth between what my body craved and what my mind said shouldn’t happen, faster than a porch swing.

He leaned forward to whisper, the warm breath making me shiver again as it wafted across the shell of my ear. “Oh, I want to do all kinds of down and dirty things with you, believe me, my lion. My fuzzies yearn for you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I might be a screwed-up mess, but I longed for my mate to want me just as much as I desired him. My body wanted to jump his bones, my dick wanted to bury itself inside Butch, but again my head... it was still whirling around. Stupid head.

I stared down at the other head, which was ready to drill its way out of my filthy sweats. It knew what it wanted. Maybe I should turn my upstairs head off and let my dick do the talking, if that was possible?

“Hey.” Butch cupped my jaw and raised my head to look at him. “Stop thinking you have to leap on me. Let’s have a shower and take a nap. I haven’t slept in forty-eight

hours.”

“That sounds perfect,” I confessed. Cuddling, yeah, I could totally get on board with that. If we were naked, even better.

He led me to the bathroom and stripped me of the clothing I’d grabbed when Randy woke me. I was conscious of the scars on my body, but he paid them no mind. I watched him undress and switch on the water in his shower cubicle. He tugged me in and we stood under the powerful, hot spray of water as the dirt and soot streamed down our bodies to swirl around our feet and down the drain.

“I needed this,” he groaned, resting his forehead on my shoulder. I ran my hands down his back in slow circles. At least I’d slept for a few hours earlier in the day.

I picked up the shampoo, squeezed some into my hand, and massaged it through his hair. Butch’s eyes fluttered closed and I could feel how much he was enjoying my hands on him. I made him rinse the shampoo out of his hair as I grabbed the body wash and smoothed soapy bubbles over his face. They trickled down his neck and arms, then over his broad chest, and my hands followed, thumbing over his nipples. They hardened under my touch. He had the fuzzy hairs of all the rhubarb, but they were thick and soft over his lower belly. He wasn’t as hairy as me, but he had enough below the belt to keep this lion interested. His fuzzies tickled my palms, sending tendrils of desire straight to my cock.

I squeezed more body wash into my palm, then sank to my knees, working on instinct as I washed his firm butt, his solid thighs and calves, and down to his feet. I avoided his cock even though I felt how much he wanted me to touch him. It was hard to avoid the way his dick hardened as I gazed at it. A thought struck me. I snorted, and he looked down at me.

“What’s funny?”

I stared up at him. “I’m wasting my time washing you if all you want to do is bury yourself in the soil.”

He grinned. “I needed awash. I felt so gritty. But you seem to have missed a spot...”
He waved his thick shaft in front of my face.

Now it was my turn to smile. “Is that so?”

“Yes, it’s feeling very neglected.” His eyes begged for what he wanted, but he didn’t move, just waited for me to make the decision.

His smell, sweet and sexy, was too tempting, and I leaned forward to lick the tip of his cock. He groaned as custard pearled in the slit. His flavor hit my taste buds and encouraged me to explore. His custard was all mine. Only mine.

All his custard .

With your cream, he added.

Trifle!

We said the last word together, joking, and then I gave in to the desire for more and sucked the tip of his cock into the cavern of my mouth, holding it against my tongue, watching his eyelids dip with wanton desire. It flooded through me. The moment... felt right. We were far from having sorted out how this was going to work, but right then, I wanted to try.

He groaned his approval, as if picking up on my thoughts.

I was sure all of Valentine Growville could sense what we were up to. Figure out their sheriff was getting sucked off, and I reveled in it.

The one thing Butch was going to discover about me was that I had no gag reflex. And I couldn't wait to see how he reacted. I took him all the way down my throat. It was one thing having sex over our link, but my hands cupping his butt, his dick fucking my mouth, and my knees protesting at kneeling on the cubicle floor as the water poured over us, it was nothing like I'd imagined... but so much more. I didn't feel defective. Or damaged. I felt... invincible at how the noises grew deeper, louder, begging me to suck harder, faster. I did everything he asked of me while he held still, leaving me with the control, which I knew was hard for him to do.

I dug my nails in his ass cheeks, pulling them apart, stretching his hole, heightening his sensations as he fed me his pleasure. The desire to sink inside him grew to epic proportions. Would he let me?

Yes.

I groaned around his cock at his immediate answer. No hesitation, just pure need for me.

Always.

Butch carded his hands through my hair and gripped tighter, showing me how he wanted me, and what he liked. I forced him to stay still, wanting him to understand I was an alpha and I wouldn't just cave. His growl made me growl right back. He fed back to me how the sensations vibrating up the tip of his cock added to his pleasure as I let a finger slip over his wet hole, feeling it flutter under the tip.

I knew from the way his muscles tightened that he was on the brink of his orgasm. I wanted to lead him to the cliff edge and jump over with him, so I sucked him down to the hilt, cupped his balls in one hand, and gently moved my fingers over his taint.

He arched his back, pushed in that fraction deeper, and flooded my throat with

custard as I tried and failed to yell around his throbbing shaft as my untouched dick sprayed cream over his shin and my thigh.

Holy lions!

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Butch

Fuck!

That was all I could manage as I slumped over Leonidis. Fuck custard and cream. My brain was trifle now and his sweet kiss on the end of my dick left me with a wild desire to haul him to my bed and let him do all the things floating through his mind.

“Knees,” he managed through puffy lips, looking at me through heavy-lidded eyes.

I took that to mean his knees, not mine, so I firmed my wobbly leg muscles and lifted my mate up, pressing his back against the tiles. His legs wound around my middle and my cock twitched at the glide of wet flesh against me. I pressed against him more fully, tiredness competing with the delight that was my mate. It was his turn to lean back and close his eyes. I studied him, not missing the dark bruising under his eyes that encouraged me to leave things as they were. I wanted him, and I also wanted to keep my promise to go at his pace.

“I know you’re watching me,” he murmured, peeking out from under one lid.

“You’re worth watching,” I rasped, totally enchanted.

Had I said this before? I wasn’t sure.

I shifted until he was under the spray more fully and, using my lower body to keep him against the wall so he didn’t have to stand, washed him with the same reverence he’d shown me. He groaned, low and needy, and my hands skimmed his waist and

over his thickening cock. The mate bond buzzed between us.

With effort, I stopped and carried him out of the shower after turning it off, placing him on the rug so I could quickly dry myself before taking my time rubbing the soft, fluffy towel over him. He swayed, his eyes no more than glittering slits as he stared at me.

I wanted to have the time to treasure him, here and now. Us both being alphas meant absolutely nothing with how he captured my heart with his strength.

“I wasn’t strong enough to stop—”

I pressed a gentle kiss to his swollen lips. “It’s hard to fight when he played dirty. I’ll make him suffer for that, I swear!”

He wrapped his arms around my neck and clung on. Despite that, his next words broke my heart. “You should stay away from me, I only bring danger... death.”

“Never gonna happen,” I said firmly. “I don’t care what happens. Whatever we do, I’m yours and you are mine. I’ll glue myself to your side for eternity. “

He gave me an uncertain smile, and I sensed his worry that I’d change my mind when the shit hit the fan.

I swept my lips over his in the softest of kisses, holding his gaze. “Think about it. Fate chose an alpha for us each for a reason. You’re mine, Fate doesn’t make mistakes. Let me love you. Let me treasure you.”

His giggling was so adorable and made my heart shudder in my chest, reinforcing the need to protect him with everything in my power. I felt the moment he let go, let me in, and tears filled my eyes. “I won’t let you down.”

He pressed his nose to mine. “I won’t let you down either.” The lion was there in his eyes and Great Rhu, I wanted to roll over his fur.

“I can arrange that, if you want.”

I blushed the color of my stalk at him catching my thought. “Could you now?” I finally managed to say when the blood finished pooling between my legs and showing him exactly how I felt about the offer.

He nudged me back and a moment later, there was my scarred lion. He was glorious, his mane floofed out, his eyes tracking me as I came closer to shift and land on his mane. I groaned in delight at the feel of his fur rubbing against my fuzzies.

He lowered to the floor, and I took the opportunity to roll down his back, hearing his chuckle at how I gloried at the feel of him against my stalk. Custard leaked from my stalk as I slid down his tail and wriggled under it, finding his spined cock.

Intrigued, I rolled to it and he moved so I could get closer. The second my stalk tickled it, he groaned in my head and a spike caught on the fleshy part of my stalk.

He roared, digging more spikes into my flesh and I custarded all over his spiny length before I could gather my wits. Then he was spurting cum over my leaves, making me shiver in delight. Great Rhu, how hot was that?

I lay fanning my leaves over my stalk, spraying his cum over me, groaning at the feel of it sinking into my flesh. His scent mixing with mine.

We are mates! Proper mates. It was my last thought as the lack of sleep caught up with me and the darkness slowly claimed me. A furry body tucked me closer. I was in heaven.

I awoke dazed and confused, trying to figure out why I was lying in the bathroom on a bed of fur. “Why am I on the floor?” I asked sleepily, looking at the window, seeing daylight and trying to figure how long I’d slept for.

The lion beneath me growled when I moved. A huge possessive paw tried to pull me back as I rolled to sit up, chuckling. “I have to get up, my darlin’. I need to catch an arsonist.”

A moment later, a naked Leonidis stared at me shyly. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” I murmured, coming forward to kiss him because who could resist when he looked sleepy, warm and most definitely mine.

“I am,” he answered, his eyes sparkling with joy in a way they hadn’t before.

I got up and tugged him with me when I became tempted to say ‘fuck work’ and take him to my enormous bed and ravish him.

“I’d like that.” A pretty blush appeared over his chest, spreading up his neck.

“Me too.” I walked him into my bedroom. “When this is all over, I’m not letting you out of here until I’ve had my fill of you.”

“I think I’d be agreeable to that.”

My cell-phone dinged, alerting me to a text message. I groaned and went to where I’d left my phone, opening the message from Deputy Livingstone.

I frowned, heart skipping a beat at what was on the screen and looked about for some clothes, my mind racing over the next move.

“What is it?”

“There’s been a sighting of Amell. I need to go.”

He blanched, but he nodded. “I’m coming with you.”

I was shaking my head. “No, you need to go stay with Maximus, please,” I begged, sensing the denial before his lips parted. “I need to know you are safe so I can do my job.”

His gaze roamed over my face while I felt him probe my thoughts. I remained open so he could read all of them. No, I didn’t think he was weak. I just knew I needed to give this my full attention and worrying for him would only distract me from the job at hand.

“I’ll go,” he said softly, reaching for his dirty clothes.

“You can wear some of mine, if you like,” I offered, pulling clean sweats and a T-shirt out of the closet for him first, then some for me. I didn’t bother with my uniform. Right now, what I wore wasn’t important, only that I had my gun with me. I shielded my thoughts as we dressed quickly.

He walked off with my cell to his ear and I went to my gun box, getting my ankle holster and another handgun I tucked into the back band of my jeans.

I raised an eyebrow when Leonidis returned, frowning. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, Gordon wants me to go to Red’s house as he needs reassurance.”

“What’s wrong with Red?”

“I told the others Amell has been sighted so I think Red’s convinced he will go after all of us. He’s worrying about the two of us.”

“You and me?”

“We’re not staying with the pride, so he’s worrying we’re vulnerable.”

I nodded, understanding the fear because it was the same fear I had for my mate.

“Red is still convinced Amell and his monsters will try to abduct one of us again after he failed at burning us alive in the house. The only time he feels safe is when Gordon and the rest of us are all close by.”

I would not dismiss his fears. Twice they’d tried and nearly succeeded. They had also a pro who had managed to disable the security cameras with a jamming device to pour lighter fluid all over the kitchen and set the fire undetected. The monster was a fucking animal who needed putting down. “Why don’t we go there then?” I suggested, warming to the idea of safety in numbers. “The last thing I want is Red to be scared.”

Leonidis’s smile returned. “For a big gruff stalk, you’re so sweet.”

I blushed at his praise. Sweet was the last thing the stalks of the town called me, particularly when I arrested them.

I packed some extra clothes into a holdall and handed it to Leonidis, grinning. “These are for you just in case we don’t get back for a day or two.” I assured him when he lost his smile, “It’s gonna be okay.”

My mate kissed my cheek after a moment of hesitation. “Thank you. And thanks for the clothes, I don’t care what they look like. It’s just a relief not to wear these.” He

bent to pick up his dirty clothes. “Although these are all I have left,” he sighed forlornly.

“I know you feel like your entire world is crumbling around you, but you’re not alone. I’m here for you. We’ll figure this out together.” I needed him to know he wasn’t alone. He had his pride and the town, but more importantly, he had me.

I captured his mouth in a kiss, and he sank into it, taking all the comfort I could infuse into it and then murmured against his sweet lips, “We got this.”

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Leonidis

“How will you afford to rebuild?” Red fretted as he clung to Gordon, his eyes puffy from the crying he’d been doing on and off since Butch had dropped me off. “Do you have insurance?”

Maximus, who’d arrived with Tim and the babies not more than an hour ago, was the one to answer. “I have insurance, but it won’t cover the cost, not by a long stalk. All I left behind, I’m gonna petition the county to claim it back. My land and money. Yeah, I’ll speak to the bank about the frozen accounts.”

“You aren’t going to leave are you?” Tim questioned, giving his mate a hard stare.

“Of course not, you silly stalk.” He kissed the top of his head. “But I will have to take a trip. I’ll need to because all the paperwork I had went up in flames with the house fire.” He ran a gentle hand over the head of the parcel Tim held, looking worried.

“Paperwork?” Red asked wearing a perplexed look.

Maximus glanced at the stalk. “When Amell took charge of the pride after getting rid of the old alpha, he decided he had rights to all the land the pride lived on. All of it belonged to my family—belongs to me—”

“Are you rich?” Tim blinked owlishly at him.

“He is,” Gordon answered, laughing at the comical expression the stalks were wearing.

“I suppose. Amell continues to work to steal it all from me and the pride.”

“How so?” Glass asked, leaning against Apollo, rubbing at his round belly.

“My family leased the land they owned to the pride centuries ago. From generation to generation, they continue to live on the land with a fairly loose agreement. Basically, everyone paid a nominal fee yearly for the right to live on the land. Up until a few years ago, it went into a couple of different bank accounts set up in my name by my father, so I’d be independent of the pride. He could see what others couldn’t.” His voice became choked, and Tim laid his head against his arm.

All his family were dead.

We were his family.

I walked to him and patted his arm, trying to offer support, knowing how hard this was because he’d left his home to protect me.

“I left to protect us all,” he directed at me. “Problem was, I didn’t have time to access all my bank accounts and get all my money transferred out. I’ve contacted the bank, but Amell has a hold over everyone on pride land, so no one will give me what I’m entitled to. He’s been getting the pride to give him the money instead of letting it go into the account. In fact, if Greg is telling the truth, then Amell is claiming all the land as his and feels he’s entitled to what’s in the bank accounts, too. He’s been trying to get access to my accounts, but he can only do that if I’m dead, under pride law.”

Tim gasped, clutching his parcel tighter, his head firing up so he could look at Maximus. “Why didn’t you tell me!”

“Because I was hoping to avoid this. The house fire means we are out of options

because the deeds to the land were in the house.”

“Have you checked?” Red asked.

Maximus frowned. “No, with all the damage and the fire department banning us from going in until they make sure the structure is safe, I didn’t think to ask them to check,” he answered.

“How much money do you have?” Glass questioned absently.

“More than god, I’m told.” Maximus said it so casually that the stalks laughed, clearly not getting he was serious.

Maximus was loaded. It was how we’d afforded to move and not have to find jobs. He was a very generous alpha to his pride.

You’re my family.

I know.

“You’re rich,” Tim squealed a second later, clearly figuring out he was serious.

“We’re rich, my stalk. And when we sort out the Amell issue, I’ll use some of the money from the other accounts to build several homes on our land, so we are all together once more.”

I wasn’t sure that was what everyone wanted anymore, not now that we had all found our mates. Goliath most definitely wouldn’t want to be crowded, I knew that much. Butch wasn’t a shared house type, either. I kept that thought to myself.

What the fuck!

The words rang around my brain and my pulse went from steady to crazy as I leapt up.

What is it? I shouted at Butch. I waited a second, everyone watching me. Butch, answer me?

Amell, he's here. I need you.

“What!” I screeched, eyes wheeling, looking for Amell.

Maximus was staring at me. “What am I missing?”

“Butch, he says Amell is here?”

Red shrieked and clung to Gordon.

Maximus darted to the window, looking outside, brow furrowed. “Here?”

Butch, where is he?

More silence followed, then I got a strange feeling up my spine. It was the same sensation as when he'd touched my cock.

It was too similar to discount, then I retched as pain lanced my skull. “Argh,” I cried out, gripping my head and falling to my knees.

Maximus was right by my side. “What is it?”

“Someone has hit Butch over the head. I can feel his pain as if it's mine.” My lion roared in my head and my shift was upon me before I could even consider stripping. I burst past everyone and halted at the door, Gordon opening it before I could look at

anyone.

I raced out, roaring, with only one thought, I needed to save my mate. Maximus and Apollo chased behind me. I felt them through our link, but I pushed it aside, focusing on Butch's energy.

I'm coming, hold on for me. You are not to die on me.

Tears mattered my fur as I ran on pure gut instinct. The weird connection guided me. At the edge of town, I was running on pure adrenaline. I stopped a second to get my bearings, then circled to run towards the pride house. Were my senses leading me astray?

I didn't want to second guess myself when my lion was adamant this was the direction we needed to go in. I didn't see any sign of Butch's police cruiser. Are you sure this is not his scent from earlier?

My lion roared once more and everything inside me went cold at the scent of fresh blood. Butch's blood. The same blood that ran through my veins after I'd bitten him. It led me straight to him. I didn't stop to assess the danger, just charged into the burned out building, desperate to get to Butch.

My paws crunched over broken glass and burned wood as I skidded at the sight of Butch slumped on a broken chair, bloodied and unconscious, judging by the fuzzy connection between us. The fact it was there, was the only thing stopping me from losing my shit when it gave me hope.

Only the sight of the lion behind him, holding a gun to Butch's head and grinning like the evil lion he was, made my worst nightmares seem like fairytales.

Did he know Butch was my mate?

“Well, if it isn’t my wayward slave.” The devil's eyes roamed over me, hungry with insanity, making my fur stand on end. There had always been something off about the other lion, but now he looked rabid. And he was far too close to my mate for my liking. That he was alone said how out of control Amell was.

With no thought to my own safety, I pawed at the ground, growling with all the rage fueled by the years of abuse he had inflicted on me. At the pain I’d suffered at his hands—claws.

“Look at you, being all macho. You know how much it turns me on.”

Keep him distracted, Maximus requested. We got you covered.

There was no problem there. I was going to rip the fucker's throat right out for daring to touch my mate. I shifted, wanting to throw Amell off his game. He’d always gotten distracted by my body, believing it was his to use.

I cocked out my hip, getting closer, taking a chance when the air scented with his lust, his beady eyes roaming over me.

“You want me, come get me,” I rasped past my too tight throat.

When the gun rubbed against Butch’s bloody skull, I took another step closer to the devil.

He cackled, an ugly sound that left my innards jumping like I’d swallowed an entire pack of jumping beans.

“I just need to deal with this minor issue, then we’ll leave this godforsaken place. I’ve got a nice little cage with your name on. You know I’ll need to punish you for leaving.” An evil gleam in his eyes made it hard to resist stepping back. The past me,

who wasn't mated, would have. This new me, the one who'd accepted what Fate had given me, was a whole parcel of rhubarb different.

A flash of Maximus's mane behind Amell gave me courage and, with my focus on saving Butch, I leapt. Shifting mid-air, claws out, I ripped at the devil's throat.

His eyes widened in shock while his brain took time to communicate that he was pissing blood down the front of his immaculate button-down. My momentum took us both to the floor, but as his hand hit the ground, the gun went off. Pain bloomed in my shoulder, but I didn't let go as my jaw clamped around his bloody throat and I tore at the flesh. Like a cannibal who hadn't eaten for months, I didn't stop until there was nothing but a bloody pulp that had once been a monster.

Enough, Leo. You need to stop now, you're hurt.

The whispered words floated around my subconscious right before I fell forward, the world nothing but red.

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Butch

I awoke to the sound of distressed crying, and grizzly noises of flesh being torn from bone. The pain in my head from the pistol whipping the fucker had given me was going to be a minor price to pay when I hauled his fucking ass to jail for the last time.

As the thought ran through my pounding skull, my eyes finally focused and the sounds I could hear made sense. I all but fell off the chair at the sight of my lion, drenched in blood and attacking a bloody pulp that I suspected had once been Amell, by what remained of his clothes.

Enough, Leo. You need to stop now, you're hurt.

Maximus's voice boomed in my head. Already reaching carefully towards Leonidis, I paused and glanced at the huge lion in the doorway.

Leo is hurt? I gasped in alarm when my sluggish brain caught up.

He's been shot.

"No. No. No," I wailed, twisting to drag my mate away from the mess, now only worried for his safety. Before I could do more than grab his mane, he slumped, his face mashing into the mess.

"Leo, don't you dare die on me. You hear me," I cried, tears streaming down my cheeks as I hauled the dead weight of my mate closer to me, trying to lift his head so I could look at him.

Working my fingers into his bloodied fur, they slipped and slid in the junk. There was so much blood I couldn't tell what was his and what wasn't.

A naked Maximus was there, bending next to me. "Let me help. Drew is bringing Doc Picker."

"He needs to go to the hospital."

"We need to get the bullet out before we move him," Maximus argued.

I glanced about the burned out building. "Not here! Fuck, this is all my fault!"

"We'll take him outside, lay him in the soil. He's ingested your blood, Doc said the healing nutrients in the soil could help him."

We staggered outside, with me doing my best to keep my fingers in the slippery fur, and not drop my mate when my own legs were like rubber. My lion was bigger and heavier than I ever imagined.

Breathless and sweaty, with a pounding skull, we managed to drag him into a clear patch of soil.

"What did you mean, this is your fault?" Maximus growled from his position next to Leonidis's large head.

"I came without backup, got myself pistol whipped and called to Leo."

Maximus gave me a searching look. "There's more to this. You aren't saying everything."

A truck screeching to a halt stopped the conversation. A moment later Doc Picker

appeared carrying a medical bag.

“Come on, make room, I need to get to him.” Doc Picker all but shoved me aside, so I crawled around the other side next to Maximus, who was still eyeing me suspiciously.

“This is gonna be difficult, I’m gonna have to dig into his shoulder muscle, which will hurt.”

“Fuck!”

“Just do it, he’s losing too much blood,” Maximus said, while I struggled not to fall apart at the very thought of the pain Doc was about to inflict on Leonidis, who had already suffered so much.

“You’ll need to hold his head so he doesn’t try to bite me.” He looked at me, then at Maximus. “And you need to keep hold of his damaged front leg.”

Everything went in slow motion, yet raced through my head as I held Leonidis, looking at his closed eyes.

Baby, Doc needs to dig out the bullet in your shoulder. It’s gonna hurt, but I’m here and so is your pride. We’re all here for you.

I never stopped talking as Doc Picker used a huge pair of forceps to dig into the hole in Leonidis’s shoulder, making it bleed profusely. At the lack of response, a wave of panic shot through me.

“He’s injured, his mind is protecting him. He’s not dead.”

Doc Picker’s voice floated over my head as I willed Leonidis to open his eyes.

Minutes passed, possibly hours for all I knew, as I stroked the matted fur and told my lion how much I wanted him. How I was going to treasure him for the rest of our lives and beyond into the afterlife.

You'll never escape me, you're mine. You hear me?

Everyone can hear you, Tim snorted. Then he started to sing loudly, You're no one until you're something to someone .

What the heck is that racket? Leonidis murmured. Have I died and Tim has somehow followed me?

I laugh-cried and buried my face in his mane, uncaring of the blood and guts clinging to the fur. No, my love. You're very much alive.

He shifted and there was my mate, bloody, torn flesh, covered in scars. He'd never looked more beautiful to me.

"I was... worried... there for a second."

I kissed his bloody lips. "Me too," I confessed. "You're my hero. You saved me."

The smile was barely there, but it was the best sight in the world. "Someone had to."

Everyone chuckled, and I blushed. I kissed him again, resting my head against his. "I love you so fucking much," I murmured, holding his gaze.

"Same. But could you stop kissing me, cause all I'm getting is the taste of that rat bastard."

I glanced at Doc Picker. "Can we move him now?"

He gave the wound, which was starting to close as he'd rubbed soil on it, a closer inspection. "Yep, but he'll need meat, a shower, then more time in the soil. The healing properties are almost as good as Potatoville. Let's hope they do the job."

I didn't argue; I scooped Leonidis up, taking a second to get my bearings with my head reminding me a gun had hit it, then looked at a rather amused Maximus. "Can someone drop me off at my place? I have meat."

"Let's hope that's not a euphemism for cock," Apollo giggled, and I just shook my head when Leonidis snorted.

"I like both."

I kissed his forehead. "Then you'll get both."

"You always were greedy," Apollo sob-joked, coming after us as I walked with him through the burned structure.

"I took your cookie by mistake once ," he complained weakly, but I could hear the amusement, which made my stomach unclench.

"I'm sure it was twice," Apollo fired back as he opened the truck door for me, sniffing loudly.

Leonidis didn't lift his head, but he did open his eyes. "When you next go to the bakery, would you get moaning mini over there two extra-large, double chocolate chip cookies? Then he might stop complaining at me."

I climbed into the truck carefully, making sure not to wack any part of him as I settled down, grinning at the filthy man. "For you, my love, anything."

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Leonidis

Butch stared wide eyed at Doc Picker. “No, you’re wrong! I’m an alpha.”

That was on replay in his head. I’m an alpha. I’m an alpha.

Darlin’ we all know you’re an alpha. I couldn’t resist saying it because I was feeling utterly smug. I mean, why shouldn’t I? I’d impregnated my mate, my alpha.

“Pregnant. How the heck did that happen?” he screeched at Doc Picker, who chuckled.

“If I need to explain that to you, there’s something wrong.”

“I know how babies are made, but we’re alphas!” he pointed out, jabbing his finger at Doc Picker, his eyes wild. “I don’t have any omega bits. How am I supposed to have a baby?”

And back was the screeching. His eyes landed on me, and I struggled to keep my amusement to myself.

We’d planned for Doc Picker to come to Butch’s house to give my shoulder its final check. The soil had helped heal the skin, but the muscle underneath hadn’t knitted as fast. He’d insisted I didn’t shift, so it had taken weeks to heal. I’d listened to him, and he’d monitored me closely. I had full movement back and another scar to add to the others. But this one I was proud of when it came with the knowledge the monster was dead and could no longer harm anyone else. That I’d fought my demon, and best of

all, protected my mate.

I'd gotten the impression from Doc Picker he was doing some kind of research too, on the differences between my DNA and other shifters. I was cool with that when he was clearly fascinated by what he was finding. Today, it seemed we'd given him something else to add to the extensive file of information he had. This revelation was definitely making him smile as he ran his hand-held scanner over Butch's ever so slightly swollen belly. "See there, you have a cub."

"Holy fuck!"

Andddd there was my screechy mate.

"This is all your fault," he accused, glaring at me. "If you hadn't insisted Doc check me out..."

"You'd still be pregnant, my love."

He scowled, his eyes going back to the screen. "I'm pregnant." This time, I felt more than just panic.

I reached over and stroked his belly. "We're gonna be daddies." Saying it made it more real and my heart leaped with excitement.

Butch burst into tears, and I bit my lip. This was part of the reason I'd asked Doc to check him over. As well as the fact he'd been off his food, he'd also been acting all emotional and crying at the drop of a stalk, which was not like him at all.

Maximus had said I'd turned him into a marshmallow. I'd done more than that, it would seem.

"Being smug does not suit you!" He looked back at Doc Picker. "How can this be?"

he asked again.

Doc Picker blushed and coughed. “How have you been having sex?”

He wasn’t the only one blushing then as Butch kept his gaze averted and left me to answer.

“I... erm... yes. Spikes... stab his stalk... cum and yes, it covers everything.” Yes, we’d done more touching in our shifted forms for sure. But I was becoming more relaxed, which made it easier with getting friskier when I wasn’t in lion form, especially when my thoughts battled over us both being alphas. He didn’t rush me, we both knew it would happen at some point—soon.

Because Butch didn’t push, I learned to stop worrying about it, because I felt how much he loved me and wanted to go at my pace. The rest didn’t matter, since it wasn’t a competition of who gave up their ass first. I had my money on him, he just didn’t know it.

“This explains it. Olowin, a wolf shifter, also an alpha, got pregnant when Russ, his mate, was in potato form.”

Butch was the color of his stalk. “And he was okay... with the... you know... icky bit?”

The giggles were out before I could stop them. He glared at me, then waited for Doc Picker to answer.

“He was fine. Your body will adapt, I’m positive. And I’ll be here for you.”

I became reassured by this, but my mate, not so much. “Maybe we could talk to this Olowin and see what he says?” I suggested.

“I’m sure he’d be willing to do that.” Doc Picker patted my hand and turned his attention to packing away his things after wiping off the goop from Butch’s belly.

A minute later, he rose. “I’ll leave you both to come to terms with the news.”

He scuttled out while I held Butch’s gaze. “We’re gonna be daddies. I’m not going to be odd lion out.” I hadn’t intended to say that, but it was what came out. Apollo, Drew, Randy, and Red were all pregnant. It was like it was catching and though I’d been happy for all of them, I’d worried secretly about how Butch would feel about losing out on the opportunity.

“I was never losing out. I have you, I won the lion lottery.”

He lifted me into his lap, and I sobbed into his chest. “We’re having a cub!”

“Yes, we are!”

I pulled back, feeling the slow excitement building in him, despite the apprehension. “Let’s go to Goliath’s and tell everyone.”

I didn’t give him time to answer and jumped off his lap so he could get off the couch, where he’d been lying for the scan.

“Come on.” I dragged at his arm, and he came with me, laughing.

“It’s a good job Maximus is building the creche on his land, we’re going to need it.”

I whooped and kept dragging him with me. “Let’s hope the builders Maxi found work fast.” They’d already started rebuilding the pride house. Maximus, Tim, Burke and Ricky, along with their babies, were living with Goliath and Drew for now. Goliath’s home was big enough for the adults and the babies. The others were staying at Red’s house, and I had moved into Butch’s home. There’d been talk by Maximus to build

new homes for everyone.

Goliath and Burke had declined, and Maximus had spent a day brooding before Tim had sung him around. I'd been glad not to have been living with him after listening to Burke complain. It was strange being in a house that was so quiet, but I was loving it.

"It's not gonna be quiet for long," Butch pointed out as we left the house to get in the truck.

"That might be so, but it won't be Tim singing, will it?"

He roared with laughter all the way to Goliath's.

There was my pride on the big porch. In the middle stood Maximus, wearing a big foolish grin.

"Well?"

Butch looked from me to Maximus with raised eyebrows as he walked around the hood of the truck. "Did you tell him?"

I shook my head. "He guessed. I didn't think he was right..."

"You owe me twenty bucks," Maximus said to Drew, holding out his hand and wiggling his fingers.

"You made bets?" Butch sounded astounded.

"You bet I did. This crazy pride mixed together, there was no way you weren't escaping the baby bug. I know Leo, so my money was on you getting preggers first."

He spluttered until he was red faced once more, while I wrapped my arms around him

laughing. “I’m just that Butch!”

It took a second, then everyone was falling about laughing.

“You’re not funny,” Butch said, while his lips twitched.

I came forward and kissed his trembling lips. “Then why are you laughing?”

“Because I’m the luckiest stalk in the parcel. Why else?”

There were sighs and gagging noises, along with more giggles. I didn’t care because that first rumble over the crumble brought us all here, to the rhubarb fertile triangle, where a stalk was so much more than just a stalk.