



The Quokka Who Cried Dingo (Heat, Prey, Love #4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Can love overcome fear?

As a prey shifter, Sully has spent his life protected inside a haven town. So what if he often catches himself wondering about the world outside it? Hes safe here. The simple rules the haven went by were easy to follow: always mask your scent, stick with your kind, and dont go into the woods at the edge of town alone. Simple, really. Unless you were an inquisitive quokka caught on an unfamiliar scent, tempting you to wander far from home.

Imri was used to other shifters being afraid of his dingo form. He stayed away from most places, happy to live alone on the outskirts of town until he glimpsed a sweet little quokka lost in the woods. Helping him home was the right thing to do, but now the prey shifter wont stay away! No matter what Sullys nose is saying, they werent a good match. Not when Imris a quokkas biggest predator.

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Sully

Four Years Ago

Our only excuse was that we'd been drinking, otherwise none of us would have gone anywhere near the west woods. That's what I told myself, excusing our bad behavior. We knew they were out of bounds for a reason, and sober, we'd never have broken the rules. At least, that's what I thought. I was sheltered, young, and so very stupid for trusting my "friends" that night.

"C'mon Sully! Dare you to go in!" one of the football team yelled. I couldn't tell which one in the poor light. Was everything fuzzy at the edges? Clearly the alcohol was affecting me more than I'd thought.

The crowd of us, me, and some of the popular kids who made up our graduating class, were loitering in a cluster of trees not too far from the entrance to the west woods. I clutched the bottle of beer I'd been drinking in clammy hands. The buzz of the alcohol in my system made my reactions slower than normal.

My eyes about bugged out of my head when I realized where they meant. There was an old, partially overgrown track where a shed and mailbox sat not too far from where we were crowded.

Rumors said there was a house deeper inside, long forgotten and empty. No one knew if it was true because nobody went in there. I'd heard kids were arrested for just going inside the woods, not even all that far in!

“No way!”

There were boos and jeers. Cress, the fae star quarterback, slung an arm around my shoulders, pressing us close until we were cheek to cheek. The heat of his skin burned through the fog hindering my mind, lighting arousal instead.

“Sully, show us your wild side.” He ran his nose along my cheek, his lips stopping at the corner of my mouth. “If you can be brave, there’s a reward waiting right here for you.”

I didn’t dare move. Cress was everything I wanted in an alpha, not that I’d be allowed to date him. Mom would pitch a fit! Cress filled my dreams every night. If there was anyone out there hotter than Cress, then I hadn’t seen them. All I wanted was to be his. When it came, I wanted to give him my first heat.

There was laughter around the circle. Someone had lit a fire with their magic, chasing away the dark and filling the clearing with warmth. A few were roasting marshmallows on sticks while they swigged from beer bottles. I hoped they thought to place a silencing ward, otherwise we were going to get caught.

Cress squeezed me closer, his hand dangerously close to the curve of my ass as I sat on the log next to him.

My face heated. Cress was near enough we were sharing air! His proximity was overwhelming. I tried to take steady breaths and will my growing erection away. Did he really mean what he said? A reward? Did he mean a kiss?

I’d do just about anything for a kiss from Cress.

“Yeah?” I sighed. My hands were shaking. All I wanted to do was turn my head just a tiny bit and lock lips with Cress.

“A kiss for a flower from inside the woods. The prettiest one you can find.” There was a teasing quality to his voice I missed, too caught up in my longing for him.

More cheering and laughs. There was a new edge to the air. A secret I wasn’t a part of.

Later, I would realize they were playing with me. I was only there for their entertainment. A kiss from Cress was easy to come by and meant nothing to him. He told lies, whispered secrets, and stole love from willing saps like me to make himself feel good. Cress didn’t give a damn about me.

“Alright.” With difficulty, I got up on shaky legs.

Everyone followed me to the edge of the road. As a group we ventured deeper in, the trees and bushes rising up alongside us, obscuring us from view.

The rest paused at the beaten up mailbox. They ignored the shed in favor of watching me.

Cress stopped directly in front of me, making my heart stutter in my chest. He leaned in closer, cupping my cheek, his warm hand a brand on my skin. Closer and closer he came until once more we were touching, his mouth brushed my throat. All this teasing just to whisper in my ear.

“Pick me the prettiest flower you can find, one that makes you think of me, and I’ll make your dreams come true.”

I shuddered and had to lock my knees to stop me from fainting on the spot.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Good luck.” Cress moved out of the way to let me walk by him. His eyes gleamed with mischief.

The others closed in around him when I looked back nervously, Cress in the center, all of them watching me go. My footsteps were hesitant on the dirt path, but I walked slowly into the growing gloom.

Even though I knew it was wrong, that I was trespassing where I had no business being, I kept moving, desperate for a taste of Cress. I could still feel his hands on me, the touch lingering. Maybe it was just my foolishness.

Five minutes into my walk and I felt apprehensive. It was nearly impossible to see, even with shifter senses. How was I supposed to pick out a flower?

Leaving the path was my only option to find what Cress wanted. I really wished I had magic to conjure up a light so I could see.

Bushes pulled at my clothes. I got stuck a few times, having to pull myself free, tearing my t-shirt a couple times. My mom was going to murder me. Still, I ignored it all, determined to get what I wanted.

Finally, what felt like hours later, I found a patch of flowers. They were the pink of the dawn, and lit by the moonlight filtering through the trees.

I’d just picked one, the loveliest one of the bunch, when I heard it: a low rumbling growl.

The sound came from some bushes at the other side of the little clearing I’d gotten to. The same bush which held my shirt and my inhibitor, the only thing stopping me from smelling like prey to whatever was in the woods with me!

Moonlight illuminated the sandy brown body slinking out of the shadows.

A dog? What was a dog doing so far away from town?

Its teeth bared in a snarl. That wasn't a dog!

Alarms flared in my mind. I was trapped in the woods, in the dark, without my scent inhibitor, with a dingo! The one creature a little quokka like me counted as their natural predator.

I was so fucked and not in the way I hoped I could convince Cress into doing.

“Hey, um, I know I smell tasty, but I’m a quokka...” I glanced down at the beast who was nearing me slowly, looking ready to pounce. “Uh, Mr. Dingo. Please, I’m... do you understand me?”

The look in his eyes was feral. He shook with the coiling need to pounce. There was no human intelligence like with normal shifters.

He was going to eat me!

Fear overtook sense and my shift fell over me. I twisted and struggled in my clothes, trying to escape them, and flee from the dingo.

As a quokka, my senses were better, my eyesight sharper, my sense of smell more defined. I was also much, much faster.

I hopped like my life depended on it, because it did, to the thinning trees, closer to the road, towards where I could smell the fire. The dingo barked and chased after me, his snaps and snarls driving me faster. He was so close!

My heart thundered in my ears. Panic shortened my breath. I felt like at any second he was going to catch me. Those sharp teeth would snap my neck if he got any nearer.

In the distance I could hear my friends still partying, celebrating our graduation, and getting more drunk. All I had to do was get nearer to them. One of them could fend the dingo off with their magic.

So close! I was nearly there. I glanced behind me. The dingo was gone. My pace slowed while I struggled to breathe. I didn't dare stop until I was out of the woods.

Breaking out of the trees, I stopped sharply, panting.

"Look!" someone cried. "Isn't that Sully?"

Unable to speak to them in this form, I shifted back, one hand automatically cupping my junk. In the other, I still held the damned flower.

"There's a dingo! In the woods!" My words came out all strangled. "He tried to eat me!"

Then I fainted.

"Sully! Wake up!"

"Where the fuck are his clothes?"

"In the woods. D'you think he really saw a dingo?"

Someone laughed. "Nah, I think he was wasted, got scared, shifted and ran back here."

“There’s no way he was chased here carrying a flower!”

More titters as I was hoisted into strong arms. The scent was all wrong for Cress. I must have whispered his name, half out of unconsciousness because I heard more giggles.

“Your boyfriend wants you, Cress!” I heard a girl say teasingly.

I was sure I was blushing the closer I got to being awake. I tried to protest, move, but the arms holding me locked down tightly.

“Shh,” the person holding me muttered. “Let them think you can’t hear them.” I held still, eyes closed against the shame as the others teased Cress over my apparently obvious crush on him and how pudgy I was. They said so many cruel things, I couldn’t stop a couple of stray tears from falling.

“The flower was pretty at least,” Cress said. I could just picture his perfect face. While I would have liked to have said my feelings withered and died, they didn’t. I was pleased he liked the flower. “Shame about his body. I thought shifters were all muscular.”

“Nearly at my car,” Stone, the one carrying me, said in an undertone. He asked someone to open the back for him and laid me down gently. The guy was a gargoyle and very muscular for his age. I was impressed with how strong and careful he was. My weight hadn’t seemed to bother him at all. He found a blanket and covered me with it before saying his goodbyes and getting into the car.

“Wait until I pull away before you get up.” The car rocked as it made its way over the grass and onto the road. “You’ll be home in a minute. Are you okay?”

“Do you believe me?” I stayed where he left me, too despondent to move.

“I think you saw something that scared the shit out of you.” I got up and caught his kind eyes in the rearview mirror. “We had no business sending anyone in there alone. It’s lucky you’ve only got a few scrapes and you’ve lost your clothes.”

“Fuck, my phone too! My mom is going to kill me.”

“I’m sure she’ll just be happy you’re okay.” How I wished those words were true right then .

“You don’t know my mom.”

Mom was, predictably, pissed. She hid it well until Stone drove off then rounded on me with a million questions all while she treated my cuts and scrapes.

Eventually, I was able to get the story out. I could tell straight away she didn’t believe me. No one did. Why would they believe I saw a dingo in the woods or that it tried to eat me?

Dad convinced her to at least call the sheriff. A couple of deputies came out, and a group went into the woods to check.

Hours later they returned with my clothes and phone. They also had a stern warning for me not to go into the woods again since I was jumping at shadows and wasting their time, or I’d end up in jail for the night. They’d put me in front of a judge for lying and breaking the town rules.

I never felt so ashamed. Had I really made it all up?

There was proof I hadn’t when I caught the scent of the dingo on my stuff. He’d chewed one of my shoes! It had happened!

Angry no one would believe me, I threw the evidence in the back of my closet and stayed home for a while, waiting for it all to blow over. Everyone would have something new to talk about soon.

Like Cress, and his boyfriend, Frost. They were the talk of Haenvale.

My friends came over to see me. They tried to convince me that no one was talking about me. All it took was one visit to Rosie's to show that was a lie. Everyone was still laughing about me. They hadn't forgotten about me escaping the woods, bleeding and scared. They thought it was hilarious. No one thought there was a dingo, until Trisha visited my house.

I showed her the shoes and finally, someone was on my side!

"Babe, that's so scary! Anything could have happened to you!" She folded her arms around me, her wings shimmering in the sunlight filtering through the window.

"Right? I need your help. I need you to convince my mom to let me go to college early."

Trisha eyed me with doubt. "Ain't no way."

"I need to get out of here. I'm a laughing stock!"

Her brown eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Hmm, maybe we can go visit my aunt until it's time for college to start. She lives in Westerlake. It's a haven, too. We can tell your mom she's going to do a makeover for you or somethin' like it."

"If she can get my mom onboard, she can do a whole body makeover on me. You didn't hear them, Trish. They were so cruel."

“Oh, honey.” She squeezed me to her. I’d never been more grateful for her friendship.

Against all odds, Mom agreed. Maybe she’d heard some of the things the town was saying about me. Maybe she just liked the idea of Trisha’s aunt whipping me into shape for the matchmaking Mom would do when I got home from college.

Either way, I didn’t care. I was grateful to get away from Haenvale, the whispers and the shadow of the dingo in the woods.

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Sully

The screen door slammed behind me as I shoved it closed. I raced for the gate, aware she was hot on my heels.

“Sullivan Hart! Just where do you think you’re going?” she screeched, sounding much more like a bird shifter than a quokka.

My footsteps paused, my fingers on the latch. I didn’t turn around. The heat of her gaze burned hotter than the May sun on my back. “Out. Away. Not here.” My words were short, clipped with my frustration.

Why did it have to be like this with her? She knew how stressful it was being back here after everything. Why did she have to lay this on me, too?

Mom sighed. I could guess she was wringing her hands, her face a mask of disappointment. An all too common look for her since that night.

“Sweetheart, we need to talk about this— “

“You promised me the summer!” I protested, hearing how petulant I sounded. It was my turn to let out a sigh as I whipped around to face her, where, shock, she was indeed wringing her hands. Dad would tan my ass verbally, of course, for being rude to Mom, even though he would understand how I was feeling. They both would, but Mom was too caught up in this frenzy to get me mated off.

Her cheeks were flushed with shame. I noticed a few new gray hairs and a couple of

stress lines on her forehead. I felt a pang of guilt for causing her to worry. Then I straightened my spine. I wasn't the one in the wrong here.

"Sully, you're still free to choose." Her tone was carefully level, giving me the impression I really wasn't able to choose a mate of my own. To be fair, they were hardly lining the block.

"Really?" I felt my eyebrows about to hit my hairline with how high they lifted in challenge.

"Of course. We had a deal, after all." She was acting like she hadn't broken that deal all damn day!

"So what was this afternoon all about?"

Mom gave yet another sigh. Maybe she needed to see a doctor if breathing was such a problem for her. "It's just that Orson has heard a lot about you, and his family..."

All I'd heard all afternoon was about how wonderful Orson was. I was frankly sick of it. Orson this, Orson that. Blah, boring. That's what she sounded like. It made him less appealing than a wet sock.

"Look, I've barely been back a week and already I'm being asked to meet these guys you've been picking out for me. What happened to giving me time to decompress from college, ease back into things here before you start matchmaking?" I wandered closer, so I wasn't blasting our business over the neighborhood. I was pretty sure half the street was listening in.

Near to her, I could see Mom's irritation and a tinge of shame. We had the same cornflower blue eyes. Regret clouded her expression. She knew she was breaking the carefully negotiated bargain we'd come to with Dad as referee. It was part of the

agreement we'd come to for them to get me home for the summer. I wasn't going to return without rules in place.

Matchmaking was such an important part of quokka culture where the omega parent would be in charge of finding a good match for their omega child. Neither my brother nor sister were omegas, so Mom's only opportunity to create a match was with me.

"Orson is very well connected, Sully. You could have a good life as his omega," she finally said in a quiet voice. "His family understands that what happened years ago was just a drunken night gone bad. They remember the follies of youth, as they put it."

Ignoring the last part since I was sick of the constant mentions of my misadventure in the woods, I focused on the second part. Ah, a "good life as his omega," as if that wasn't code for life as a kept husband. Days likely spent barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, or dressed nicely for dinners with his business friends. A trophy, not a person. Not a life where I would be allowed my own hopes and ambitions, a job, a life outside of where my alpha left me.

My face must have shown all my thoughts. Either that, or Mom had actually listened to me yelling earlier for a change.

"You've got him all wrong, Sully. It wouldn't be anything like you're imagining."

Despite the show we were putting on for the neighbors, we did, in fact, love each other. No really, I loved both my parents. Respected the hell out of them for raising us and running a successful business. In this though, my mom was wrong. I knew exactly who and what Orson was. I was pretty sure she knew it too.

I was young, sort of pretty now that I'd lost the weight, and came from a good family. They could overlook my former "hysteria" for the good genes I would carry. My

options were limited. Mom had latched onto the Blaines as the cream of a bad bunch, or whatever the idiom was.

“You’re telling me he wouldn’t want me to have little alpha babies almost as soon as we are mated?”

Mom winced. “Well, I know he’s family oriented.”

I was about to run out of my limited patience. “Babies, Mom. He wants me so he can have babies, because I’m only twenty-two and not past my prime like a lot of these alphaholes think. And clearly, he wants them as soon as possible, since instead of getting to know me like a normal person, he arranges a marriage like it’s a fucking business deal!”

Yeah, I was aware I was shouting in my mom’s face by the end of my tirade. Ashamed of myself, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Sorry, all this mating talk’s got me heated. I’ll be back later. We can discuss it with Dad.”

Opening my eyes, I saw her hopeful face. Nothing of what I’d said had gotten through to her. She wasn’t wrong to get the matchmaking done quickly now that I was done with college. My reputation around town would only be improved by a decent match. My heart longed for something else, something more than an arrangement.

Mom and Dad were a love match, because Mom wasn’t the only omega in her family. The matchmaking was saved for her brother, who ended up loving his alpha. Maybe I’d be like my uncle and get lucky.

“Does that mean—“

“We’ll discuss it with Dad!” Another deep breath. “I’m heading into town.”

“Do you have your inhibitor?”

Holding up my arm, I flashed her the silver bracelet which covered my prey animal scent. “Got it.”

“Had to check,” she said sheepishly. “You know what you’re like.”

Yeah, I hated wearing it, though it was part of the town’s rules. of the many things to get used to again in this godforsaken town. I’d gotten out of the habit of it while away for college since I barely came home for holidays, working on campus instead.

I’d still been the target for gossip the couple of times I’d visited in the last few years. My parents actually took time off work to visit with me instead.

Stone had come to see me at college a couple times, one of the few Haenvale residents I actually wanted to stay in touch with. He was policing the tear on the human side, meaning he was uncontactable for the next few months. I worried about my friend. The tear was dangerous. Supernaturals on Earth got desperate, violent even. I didn’t want him to get hurt.

The sun glinted off my inhibitor, blinding me momentarily. Our mayor, a witch, had insisted we all wear them, hiding our true selves to make it easier for us to get along. As if there weren’t other reasons for people, shifters, witches, vampires, trolls, etc, to fight. Though I suppose not being attacked for being a little quokka by a wolf shifter was a bonus. Worth wearing the damn bracelet, even if it made my nose twitch.

Certain she would win our coming argument, Mom vanished back into the house, and I made my way towards the center of town to blow off some steam.

Life had been so different in college. Freer. Except, the only reason I’d been allowed to go in the first place was that it was for prey animals only. There was a building on

campus of witches and other supernaturals, like the odd troll, but vampires and predator shifters were strictly forbidden. It was a haven, much like our town.

Was it perfect? No. It didn't really teach us how to cope around predators, or for them to handle being around us, I guess, unless they were from big cities. My parents had terrible experiences in their pasts, not always having lived in Haenvale. Hence why we lived in a town like mine.

Haenvale was once a community of like-minded prey shifters who were sick of always being afraid. They'd come to the little beach town and made friends with a witch. From there, the town had grown into the bustling town it now was.

The rules were simple: always wear your inhibitor outside of your house and never, ever, go wandering in the woods to the west of the town alone.

"Sully! Over here!" Trisha called from the corner of Rosie's café. It was the regular meeting spot for many of the residents of Haenvale. I'd worked there while in high school. I'd quit after the incident in the woods, unable to take the snide comments from Cress and his friends who'd gotten into trouble for drinking and daring me to go into the woods.

Haenvale was a bustling town, fairly densely populated given its size. There were bars and chain restaurants all over the place. It was a popular tourist spot, after all, but none of them were as special as Rosie's.

Being at college had been kinda lonely without Trisha nearby. She had gone to study law at a mixed college where I was expressly forbidden to visit. Thankfully, my bestie came through and would meet me at her aunt's or come stay in my dorm.

"Hey," I called and headed to the counter. I waited patiently in line for my caffeine fix, knowing the iced caramel latte I was about to order would hit the spot.

A cold beer would've been nice, but alcohol messed with my heat suppressants. I was not going into heat in this godforsaken town with a line of alphas waiting to mate me, especially considering some of those candidates!

"Usual, Sully?" Rosie asked as I got to the front of the line. She was a sweet, older alpha rabbit shifter who had been running the café since before I was born. It was a wonder she still remembered my order since it had been at least two years since I'd last set foot in the place. If possible, I loved her more for recalling such a small detail about me.

"Please. Oat milk if you have it."

"You got it. I'll have Taylor bring it out."

I should have guessed Taylor would be working. They were Rosie's omega partner, a female presenting non-binary mouse shifter I adored. The couple were, obviously, couple goals. I loved them together and they, unlike my parents, modeled the kind of mating I wanted.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my parents together, they just didn't always communicate well. Even though she was the omega of the house, my mom usually got her way, often ignoring what Dad wanted. Not that he was any better. Dad always wanted an easy life, giving her anything she took a fancy to, often at the expense of me and my older siblings.

Yep, I was the baby. Mom wanted me mated to have their house back to themselves. I honestly thought if we were wild quokkas like they had on Earth, I would have been the baby she would have dropped out of her pouch to distract dingos sniffing around our den. We didn't always have the best relationship. Sometimes I wondered if she resented me for coming along after she thought her family was complete.

Rosie's fond smile brought me back to the moment. "Great. I've not seen Tay in ages. How's things?" The café was pretty busy as usual with a mix of townsfolk and tourists alike.

"Oh you know how it goes this time of year."

Yeah, I really did. I was dreading work later because a ton of new people had already arrived and were sure to need something during the night. They always did. During school, when I wasn't working at Rosie's I was working at the hotel, helping out where I was needed.

Deciding to be naughty and risk the calories my mom would probably chide me for, considering how hard I'd worked to lose weight, I asked for an oat bar too, then took a seat across from Trisha. She had her laptop set up, a crystal powering the device, a series of documents likely on the screen. She had the privacy screen on because she was diligent about keeping her clients' data safe when she was working outside of her office.

"Hey, Trisha. You good?" I asked, taking a seat opposite my only real friend in this place. Sure, there were others I was friendly with, except none of them knew me like she did.

Trisha studied me. "What did she do now?"

I slumped and rolled my eyes. "Only spent the day extolling the virtues of today's top candidate. I don't even want to think about how much money his family wants to put into the business."

"Oh, Sully, I'm sorry. What did your dad say?"

Trisha's warm brown eyes studied my face. I loved how she really listened to me.

Her brown skin was flawless in the bright afternoon light. She was wearing a gorgeous red lipstick with an orange undertone that really suited her. Her pointed ears were covered in gold jewelry, looking stylish .

Not that I was any slump in the looks department after her aunt got her hands on me. She had found products that worked best on my pale white skin, making it glow. Trisha's aunt got me to love how my nose was dotted with freckles. I would get chided for calling my hair mousy brown, because it had gold in it. With their care, I grew to appreciate my delicate features and highlight my sky blue eyes.

After losing my puppy fat, as Mom liked to call it, I had a decent body. Lean, probably in the too thin category when Mom was in charge of my diet. Yeah, I was working on the food issues I'd picked up thanks to her, but I got where she was coming from, and most of it she took from her parents. Her focus was on getting me, her only omega child, a decent mate. Alphas, even prey animals, liked to be bigger and stronger than their mate, wrong or not.

Supernaturals had strange beauty standards not unlike the humans did in their TV shows. Earth Two streamed their entertainment all the time. Humans were too interesting.

"He wasn't there, which is why she did it." I fiddled with a napkin, trying not to get angry at my mom again. I was going to enjoy the hell out of that oat bar just for spite. I was working on her seeing that health was more important than being thin for the sake of it. Especially if I was going to have kids any time soon.

"Right." Trisha grimaced.

We both moved out of the way when Taylor dropped off my order. "Hey, Sully. Glad to have you back." They squeezed my shoulder. "Don't suppose you're looking for work? The café is pretty busy and we could do with a hand." They glanced at me

hopefully through dark lashes.

Their face fell when I shook my head. “Sorry, my parents have me on reception at the hotel full time. I’m actually taking the night shift. Not that Mom wanted me working nights,” I said wryly.

I’d honestly rather work at the café, but my parents needed the help at the hotel just as much as Rosie likely needed staff. We were at the start of the peak season with fewer summer workers than normal. There was no chance of me doing both with how protective my parents were with me. They were worse since the woods. It had taken so many arguments before they let me take on night shifts on the reception desk without someone with me.

“Well...” Taylor began with a defeated sigh, “if you hear of anyone, send them our way. I swear there are more and more tourists every year, which is great for business...”

“But you’re rushed off your feet. I get it.”

Taylor rushed back to the counter to make more drinks for their mate, leaving me to get the third degree from Trisha.

“So who was it this time?”

“Orson Blaine.”

“Oh!” Trisha’s perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose. “He’s not actually that bad.”

“Not you too!” I wailed.

The walk home gave me time to think about some of the things Trisha said over our

coffees. She liked Orson from their occasional business dealings. Apparently the sparrow shifter was handsome. Meeting him wouldn't be so bad, would it?

"Did you wear sunscreen?" Mom fussed almost as soon as she saw me enter the house.

"Um..." I hedged. Okay, I knew it was the responsible thing to do, but I'd been so desperate to get away it was lucky I'd taken my inhibitor.

"Sully! Your freckles! Do you have concealer? You can't go to dinner with Orson like that!"

"I've not agreed to meet him yet!"

"What's going on?" Dad came into view, a frown on his face.

"Your son went out in this," she waved her hand to the bright light streaming in the window, "without any sunscreen!"

Dad restrained an eye-roll with difficulty. He scanned my face, looking for the flaws Mom saw. "I'm sure it was fine. You only went to Rosie's, right?" He knew me too well.

"Yeah."

"Then no real harm done."

"No harm?" Mom nearly screeched. "His freckles! They're covering his face."

"They're cute!" Dad protested.

“What will Orson’s parents think?” she replied.

“Why would I be meeting his parents? I thought you wanted me to meet him for dinner...” Suspicion settled heavily on me. There was much more to this blind date than I thought, wasn’t there?

Mom flushed. “Well... Orson thought it would be a good time for us all to get together. His parents, us and you both.” She winced at the scowl on my face.

“So have you already agreed to a price for me? Or do they need to see the goods in person before they choose how much they’ll pay?”

Dad stayed quiet, leaving Mom to splutter, “that’s not what this dinner is!”

“Right. Sure. I hope you’ve trained a replacement for me at the hotel, because you know I won’t be allowed to work once I’m mated into his family, right? Oh, and forget Sunday dinners with me, I’ll have to ask his permission to leave the house—“

“Hold on, Sully,” Dad cut in, “his family aren’t that conservative.”

“So you admit I won’t be able to work anymore? Won’t earn my own living, see who I want to and when...?”

His shared look with Mom told me he had no idea who they were selling me off to. It was her job, after all.

“We’ve already agreed to the dinner. We can’t back out now,” Mom finally said into the silence, which stretched between us .

I stared down both my parents, aware I wasn’t going to win this. Didn’t mean I was going down without a fight. They wanted me to go to dinner with potential in-laws?

I'd make them regret it.

“Fine. I'm going to get ready for work. Might as well enjoy it while I can.” Didn't have to clue them into my plan, either. Orson and his parents would be backing out of this deal they made so fast.

With a devilish smile on my face, I slammed the door to my bedroom and raced for the shower to plot.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Imri

I was beginning to wonder if Uncle Malik had secretly hated me. When I'd gotten the letter about my inheritance, I thought it was a gift, not a curse. For a moment, I'd felt like I'd won the lottery. A man I barely remembered from my childhood, had only seen sporadically through my early adulthood, had thought to give me all he owned in the world upon his death, aside from a couple of small things for my siblings.

Then I'd rocked up to the outskirts of this strange haven town, Haenvale, to be horrified at the "house" he'd left me. There was so much to do, I had a minor panic attack at the thought of making it livable. Then I went into town for supplies, only to be ticketed for not having an inhibitor, then told there were back taxes to pay on my property.

Luckily, Uncle Malik had left me a tidy sum, along with the sizable chunk of land and ramshackle house. I would need it to get the place in order! Once the taxes and fine were paid, I still had more than enough to really make this place somewhere I could settle down in the long term. Really, I'd barely made a dent in the cash from all his many inventions.

The place would be amazing, as long as I could deal with the residents.

Haenvale was like most haven towns. Holier than thou and painfully smug about how safe they were without actually teaching their inhabitants to get along with each other. I liked the idea behind the inhibitors, truly, but far from giving an even playing field, they masked future issues or shoved them behind closed doors.

When shifted, minus those handy inhibitors, the prey and predator shifters were segregated. Not that Haenvale had much of a predator population. We were very much in the minority. I felt it everywhere I went in the town. Not to mention my inhibitor seemed different from other ones, like those the prey shifters had.

Yeah, I got one of the damn things, of course. There was no way I was paying a fine every time I went into town to get food and things for the house without it on. I would follow their rules while still being grateful I'd grown up in a city where we were taught the benefits of controlling ourselves instead of relying on fickle magic. Sue me, I wasn't a fan of magic users after a bad ex. Not enough to tar them all with the same brush, just a natural wariness after being burned.

The inhibitor made me feel strange, though. I felt like there was a barrier between me and my dingo. My senses weren't as sharp. At first I thought it was just my sense of smell, the reason for having the bracelet on, but no, it was more than that. I felt disconnected from my animal side completely.

"Imri, are you sure you want to take the place on?" my mom asked, with no small measure of concern. We were on a video call, the signal surprisingly strong in the middle of the woods where Uncle Malik's, or rather my new house, was located. He had several crystals and rune engraved metals boosting the signal. Likely why the call was so clear. His inventions were in evidence throughout the large property, from the water heater powered by crystals, to the solar panels for electricity.

The building itself wasn't new. The deed said it had been standing for maybe a hundred years. They weren't sure the exact date of construction, which wasn't concerning at all.

"Sure," I replied, not sounding at all sure. "Mama taught me well. The place has good bones." The right things to say, even if they might be lies. I still had to check the plumbing and wiring. The roof, at least, was new, or newish. I gathered no one had

been in the place for about three years, maybe slightly longer. Ever since Malik had gotten too sick to manage alone and moved into a hospice. “Some new drywall, fittings in the kitchen, and it’ll be golden.”

My mama, Mom’s omega partner, had a construction business she inherited from her dad when he retired. It was being passed on to my alpha sister when it was time. She was already learning the ropes. My beta brother was getting Mom’s café, hence why Uncle Malik, Mama’s only sibling, had left his estate to me, the youngest of the family.

“Do you need us to come out? Mama can get the crew to cover if you need us. Nasir can run the café for a week or two if needed.” My brother would love the opportunity to prove himself to Mom .

Looking around the place, at the faded wallpaper, the spots of mold which suggested a leaky pipe, I sighed. “You’d have to find somewhere to stay in town. There’s no room here. I’ve got a trailer until I fix up the primary bedroom and bath. It’s small, though.”

“Give me a few days to figure out when we can come visit. We could take our camper?”

Mom sounded so hopeful they could come help me out. I knew they had a lot of guilt about me not getting a business from them because I was the oops baby, but I didn’t mind striking out on my own. Besides, what I’d gained from Uncle Malik was likely worth a lot more than both businesses combined.

“If you’d prefer. The hotel in town is busy, so it must be nice. Maybe you’d be more comfortable there.” I liked my space. Loved them dearly, just didn’t want them crowding me.

There was a beat of silence. “We’ve not been anywhere for a while. If they’re busy, there might not be room... We’ll give it a try. If not, we’ll use the camper.”

I knew my parents. They were going to move heaven and earth to get to Haenvale just to help me out. It’d alleviate some of their strange parental guilt over leaving me to my own devices so much when I was younger. I didn’t think it had done me any harm, just made me more self-sufficient.

“Okay, let me know when, and I’ll leave something decent for Mama to get her claws into.” Mama loved tiling. She could lay a floor like no one’s business, and there was plenty for her to do.

“Sounds good. I’ll give you a call in a couple of days. Don’t struggle alone! Call us if you need help!”

“I will,” I assured her before ending the call.

Giving the place another look, I held back my sigh. It would all be worth it when I got it the way I liked.

Haenvale was pretty. What? I could appreciate the beauty of the place even as I judged them for being smug over safety that really wasn’t true safety. The beaches were long, sandy stretches into the horizon. Each part of the main stretch was designed with tourists in mind, with plenty of places to shop, eat, or rest. I liked the feel of the place and how easily I vanished into a crowd.

When people saw me with my inhibitor on, they assumed I was one of the many visitors or even a townie, maybe. Upon check-in, hotels and bed and breakfasts—all experiencing a booming year-round trade—provided each visitor with an inhibitor, making it difficult to identify year-round residents unless you’d been there a while.

I'd like to think I had an eye for spotting who belonged and who didn't. Maybe I was kidding myself, but some of them were easy to spot. The residents had a sense of purpose and confidence about them the tourists lacked. They weren't the friendliest to me. Maybe they didn't like outsiders all that much despite taking their money.

Had to give it to Haenvale, the atmosphere was super chill. No one was on edge, hoping a wolf wasn't going to get all fangy when he scented a tasty rabbit shifter. I couldn't help but feel this was just masking a larger problem.

As a predator shifter, I'd learned control from a young age. My dingo wasn't the biggest and baddest out there, but I could still be a menace to some rabbits or mice if I caught their scent. Sending me to a mixed school was the best thing my moms had done for me and my siblings. We'd been tested constantly. Puberty, with the added risk of hormones, was a nightmare. We got through it, though. A few scrapes here and there, yet no one was seriously hurt, and I even had a few prey shifters I counted as friends.

If I was approaching a rut, I did pose more of a risk to prey shifters, particularly omegas, but more out of a need to force them to submit to me. I'd never take anything that wasn't offered willingly, no matter how powerful the rutting urge was. The chance of me hurting one, even out of my mind with lust, was minimal. A couple of times in my past, I'd been put in dicey situations and come out friends with the prey shifter. I knew myself and what I could handle.

The local hardware store was pretty impressive. I'd tried it on the off chance it had what I needed. There was a large chain store about a hundred miles away, in case they didn't. Doing my research made me feel less anxious about the task I was undertaking in this house.

I found a large flat-bed cart for all the materials I would need and wheeled it into the blessedly cool interior. The store was clearly laid out, with all I needed and more. It

was about twenty minutes before anyone approached me. I'd been wandering the aisles, picking up things on my ever-growing list of necessary items when a member of staff strolled over to me. He frowned when he clocked my inhibitor.

"Need any help?"

He was young, like probably not of legal drinking age, and tall with wide shoulders. Looked like he played football in high school not all that long ago. He had a summer tan already. Blond with green eyes, which were slightly narrowed in suspicion. A nametag told me his name was Ralf. I didn't think Ralf liked me for some reason.

"Yeah, I'm looking for sheets of drywall, and these fittings." I held out my hands with the worn bolts and pieces of pipe in my hands.

Most of the plumbing in the house was in decent shape. There were signs that someone had been working on the place. They'd likely stopped around the time Malik went into the hospice. Since then it had lain empty, jobs unfinished, and plenty of work still needing done.

"Um, sure. Over here." Ralf led me to the fittings first. I took my time picking up the right pieces while getting a not welcome vibe from Ralf. His customer service skills were severely lacking.

"That'll do for now, I guess. Drywall?"

"Here." Again, he led me to the section and waited, watching me carefully. Did he think I was there to steal shit? I picked up a few sheets, comparing them to the small square I'd cut from the stuff hung in the house. The problem wasn't buying all this stuff, it was getting it home.

"Don't suppose you do a delivery service?" I asked, wondering how this was all

going to fit in my truck. My precious car I'd traded in for something more practical for New England winters. Getting used to the thing was a task and a half. It was a stick shift, for a start! I didn't get the fascination with modeling vehicles after Earth One's cars. They were impractical.

"Depends on where you live. You local?"

"Don't suppose you knew my Uncle Malik?"

Ralf shook his head. "Sorry, I've only worked here a year."

Guessed it right. Not that it helped.

"Well, I live in the woods outside of town, the old Acreage cabin?"

His eyes narrowed. "What road do you use to come in?"

"Dunno, it winds past the lighthouse—"

"Those are the west woods. No one goes there."

"Sorry? What does that mean?"

"It means no one will deliver there." Ralf looked me up and down. "You know you're not supposed to be there, right? It's against the town laws."

I snorted. "Dude, I've paid all the taxes, have all the land deeds and permission to be there. It's my house. I own a chunk of the woods."

"Well, good luck to you. The closest anyone will come is the mailbox, which is just off the main road. We used to get dared to head up the path when I was a kid."

I vaguely remembered the dirt road. My map to the place took me on a different route and what was barely passable as tracks, not even proper roads. Maybe this one was shorter and easier on my truck.

“Right...”

What the actual fuck was I getting myself into? How had Malik done any of the work if no one came to the place? How did he get basic things when he was sick? I needed to investigate the mailbox. Since switching on the utilities, like the water, I hadn't been out there to check if I had any mail.

“Maybe Jeff will deliver there. I'd have to ask him.”

“Okay, why don't you then?” I suggested, already sick of this shit. How the fuck was I going to make this place livable without help?

Ralf sort of sneered at me, then went scurrying off. Jerk.

I stood there for a while and was starting to think no one was coming when Ralf came into view with a hulking man next to him. If I was going to stereotype, this guy was part troll or a bear shifter of some kind. His band was different from mine, so maybe not. I vaguely wondered why that was.

“Ralf tells me you're out at Malik's old place.” He glanced at my inhibitor with a frown.

“That's right. I'm his nephew. He passed it to me when he died a few months ago.”

Although we weren't close, I still felt bad about my uncle's premature death. Shifting sickness was random and incurable. He'd lived a long life with the condition when the general prognosis is death before adulthood .

“Sorry for your loss. He gave the place a lot of business, always fixing up that house.” Jeff at least was a decent guy.

“Thanks. I hear people don’t deliver out there.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Not allowed as per the town rules unless you go in a group.”

“How did Uncle Malik get stuff, then?”

“Oh, he had a shed for deliveries. We have the code on file for the lock. We’d put everything away, food in the fridge, and what have ya, then he’d get it later. Well up until—“ His words cut off. “It’s probably still standing unless some kids got to it.”

I couldn’t see how he managed with it in the later stages of the disease, when he was robbed of his mobility.

Rubbing my forehead, I sighed. “Right. I can check, then could we go back to that?”

“Sure thing...”

Jeff was looking for my name. “Imri. I’m going to give living out there a go.”

“Well, good luck to ya!”

Figured I was going to need it.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Sully

“Sullivan, could you take this to room 301, please?” Kenny asked with his snooty voice. It grated on my nerves. Why did he constantly have to act like he had a stick up his ass?

“Of course, Kenneth.” I would not be caught shortening his name. Learned from that mistake already.

The room Kenny directed me to was hosting a vampire couple who wanted to paint by the sea for the summer. Rather than renting out a house, they had chosen to live in the hotel for a month. Smart, in my opinion. They had people to clean up after them, and could order anything in. Made life super easy. It was what I would do if I had the cash.

Their blood was waiting for me in the bar. It was the expensive synthetic type, made to taste like a shifter’s blood, which was rich in nutrients because of the energy required to shift forms.

A blood substitute was necessary when the vampires came through the tear because no one wanted to be responsible for feeding the vampires forever. It had taken a while and the necessary science was yet to be replicated in the human world. At the rate they were going, they might never figure it out.

The bartender had warmed the blood to body temperature for them. They were served in insulated cups with sparkly straws and umbrellas. Unnecessary maybe, but super cute.

Carrying the tray carefully, I got in the elevator to the fourth floor, where room 301 was located. They had the best vista of the hotel, with a wide balcony which opened to an unrestricted view of the sea.

This couple had introduced themselves to me when they had checked in earlier. They kept late hours, like most vampires, and preferred to keep out of the afternoon sun because it was uncomfortable for them. While they could go out in daylight, most avoided it. Think of it like a sun allergy. They could break out in rashes and it hurt their sensitive eyes.

My family's hotel didn't discriminate when it came to guests, welcoming everyone who was willing to obey the town rules. We had a basket of inhibitors sitting on the reception desk, though this couple were clearly returning visitors, and had their own strapped to their wrists.

"Hello, Sullivan!" the older of the vampires greeted when he opened the door. He was likely ancient since vampires aged incredibly slowly, and looked to be around fifty witch years. Like shifters, they were born, growing into adulthood at the same rate as a witch or shifter would. Then, upon adulthood, around their early twenties, that aging would appear to stop. Though it just slowed right down, gaining them a year's aging for maybe thirty years or more. It depended on many factors.

Shifters lived pretty long lives too, longer than those of the witches and nature spirits who rarely made it to a century because of the magic in their blood. If I was lucky, I could live to a bit over a hundred! I'd only want to do that with my fated mate by my side, though.

"Hello!" I greeted him warmly. "I have your order here."

"Thank you." He stepped aside to let me inside. "Would you mind taking it out to the balcony? We're painting out there tonight. The light is divine! "

“No problem.” I walked over to the balcony doors, which were open, letting the fragrant night air in. It was late, in the pre-dawn hours, where the sky was awash with a full pallet of colors. Pinks, reds, greens, and blues covered both the canvases propped up on easels and the night sky above us.

“Thank you,” the vampire’s younger partner said with a pleasant smile. I’d thought they were much too absorbed in their art to realize I was there.

“Wow!” The word slipped free, shocked into being from the stunning piece he was creating one brush stroke at a time. “That’s... wow!”

The younger vampire smiled, his fangs peeking out from full lips. “Oh, I like you! Honey, don’t forget to tip him generously.”

It took me some time to extricate myself from their room. They were so friendly and nice, I struggled to keep a professional distance from them. Both of them had so many questions when I told them my parents owned the place, it was a good half hour before I managed to escape!

“Where have you been?” Kenneth’s brow was knitted in a frown when I returned to the desk.

“Room 301.”

“I sent you there over half an hour ago.”

“I know. They had questions.”

“You should have asked them to call me. It is, after all, my job as the reception manager.”

“Next time, for sure!” I answered with extra pep I wasn’t truly feeling. “You know,” I added conversationally, “you don’t have to stay so late to keep an eye on me. I know you’re a very busy person.”

“You are too new to the demands of the reception. Look at you,” he sneered, “you vanished, leaving the desk unattended for a prolonged period.”

“I—“

“What would have happened if someone called or came to the desk?”

“But—“

“Exactly.” His smile was smug. “Perhaps you aren’t cut out for working at such a demanding job. If your father asks, I might suggest a less demanding morning shift, or a different role for you.” His expression became shark-like. “Ah! I know a perfect job for you! You should try your hand at housekeeping. It would be ideal to prepare you for your upcoming mating to Mr. Blaine.”

Hours later, my shift finally ended, and I was still seething about what Kenny had said to me. Everything he implied with that statement made me so mad, I couldn’t bear to go home right away because I knew I was going to lay into my parents as soon as I saw them.

How dare they? No, not they, she. This had my mom written all over it. How dare she tell my business to the other employees of the hotel? They didn’t need to know my parents were basically selling me off! It wasn’t like I could complain at work, either. My sister was the assistant manager, my brother the head chef! Neither of them would say anything to my parents because they didn’t get what it was like for an omega in our family. My sister was an alpha, my brother a beta. They hadn’t lived like I had.

My parents thought they had the right to arrange a mating for me as per quokka culture. I was an omega. My duty was to do as I was told. Have the babies my alpha wanted of me. Run the house. Or at least, it used to be! I thought things were moving along with the rights omegas were getting to own businesses and work outside the home. We'd come so far, why was I being subjected to this outdated practice?

There were laws against discrimination, and if I thought Kenny would get fired, I would have reported him, but his comment wasn't all that bad, was it? I could already hear how they would gaslight me into believing I was just being sensitive. Hell, I was already doing it to myself.

Kenny had been unbearable to be around for the remaining hours of my shift. Thankfully, he'd been called into the office to deal with orders gone wrong or something, so I'd gotten a reprieve. Still, I wanted to slap him every time I thought of the self-satisfied smirk he'd worn when his comment had landed as intended.

The whole thing totally put me off my game for the rest of the night. I was careful not to make any mistakes, but I felt guilty I didn't give the guests the same level of care they deserved like I had before Kenny had told me everyone knew my business.

Walking home was a nice way to blow off some steam. I ranted and raved into the morning air about how shitty my mom was for telling people about Orson. Then complained about Orson wanting me. At that point, I'd decided against him forever. Trisha nearly had me convinced to give him a go. Kenny ended that. He knew as well as I did, I'd be chained to the house.

What else was there for me in Haenvale? Was I ready to strike out on my own? Going elsewhere would be scary. I knew that. I would have to learn to deal with predator shifters in other places unless I found another sanctuary town to take me in.

I'd have to go to another sanctuary. It took me months to stop having nightmares

about the dingo in the woods. All made worse because no one except Trisha believed me.

Maybe it was pointless, dreaming of escaping my fate. I should just accept it, get mated and give him the babies he wanted. Would it be so bad to be a pampered mate? He had money, right?

Really, what skills did I have to offer? I had accountancy and business degrees. Numbers were easy to me. Was that enough to make a new life elsewhere, out from under the control of my family ?

Nah, I wasn't giving up my comfortable life in Haenvale. Besides, I'd already planned to make my family and Orson's regret forcing us together for this dinner. Once I embarrassed myself, and likely them, I'd get a bad rep and I could live out my days quietly. Maybe find something I really enjoyed doing.

Maybe I'd find my fated mate in a decade or two and settle down. I had plenty of time.

My walk took me close to the west woods. All I had to do was follow the road out of the town for half a mile or so. My heart began pounding, fear causing adrenaline to flood my veins. My eyes strayed to the spot I came rushing out of, a place where the trees hadn't quite grown back.

For years, that night had haunted me. Was I going to let it shape my life forever? What would happen if I returned to the woods? Was the dingo still in there?

I'd never heard a peep about one after and I knew I was telling the truth, it hadn't been a vivid fear hallucination caused by the stress of being lost. There was proof of it still in my closet, untouched all these years later.

I stood, my feet turned towards the woods, tempted for the first time in my life to break all the rules and go where we were never to venture, to prove to myself I could overcome my fear.

A sense of possibility filled me. A yearning for something other than this existence where I was a commodity to be traded to the highest bidder.

To be more than the little quokka who had a nightmare about the dingo in the west woods. More than a cautionary tale to the little ones in elementary.

Getting a little closer couldn't hurt, right? It wasn't like I was going to go in unprepared.

Closer to the forbidden woods, a sheen of sweat on my forehead, I made up my mind, I needed to shift. Nothing would happen to me unless I went in. Playing in my quokka form next to the woods wasn't breaking any rules. Just skirting them.

Being in my shifted form would make me feel safer since I was quicker and more agile in that form. Just in case anything happened.

I stripped off my clothes in a hurry, leaving them in a cluster of trees close to the west woods. The shift came over me quickly. My inhibitor, which had been on my wrist, fell to the ground .

With my little quokka paws, I picked it up and tossed it with the rest of my things. It was useless to me in this form and would only annoy me in my pouch.

Now what to do? Still, I felt the call of the woods. I told myself it was a form of rebellion after the hellish day I'd had with my mom and then Kenny. I was taking back the power I'd lost the day I'd been dared to go in there by Cress and his lackeys.

Paws to the ground, I used my back feet to hop forward. Front paws down, hop, down, hop, on and on it went until I was nearly under a tree in the west woods. I took a leaf into my paw and nibbled on it while I considered my options. My fear settled a little. I was still scared shitless, but I was coping.

In the distance, I heard a howl.

Nope, I was not getting eaten today. I hopped back to my clothes and shifted.

Once more, my eyes returned to the woods. That was it, I decided. I was going to drum up the courage to go into the west woods and learn all the secrets behind it. I was going to prove I'd been telling the truth this whole time. After I wormed my way out of this mating somehow.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Imri

“Imri, honey, Mom says the house needs some work.”

“Hey, Mama, yeah. Look, this place is weird. Did Uncle Malik tell you who was helping him with it?” I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel in the parking lot of the hardware store. Jeff was loading my purchases to take them out to my house. Wouldn’t be right away, but I was hungry and needed to eat before I got mean, or meaner than usual.

The way the other shoppers kept staring at me was really irritating. Again, I’d noticed most had different bands to mine, the same kind Jeff had. Only one guy, a tall, lean but cute omega, had the same one I did. He caught me looking and stared back at me, his expression complicated. Watching him, I tried to guess what he was and decided he was some kind of cat. He had the same grace as one. Another predator like me was wearing the same type of band. There had to be some significance.

My stomach rumbled. I caught another frown from a local, souring my mood further. I felt too close to snapping. Once I spoke to Mama, I was going to find somewhere decent to eat.

On the other side of the phone, I heard her sigh. “You haven’t read the letter he sent, have you?”

“What letter?” She had my full attention.

“Baby boy, you need to go to your mailbox and check to see if the letter was sent.” I

heard her moving around. She was probably on a job site and taking a few minutes' break to call me.

"In it, Malik explains everything, or he said he would before he passed." She paused. When she resumed, her voice sounded sadder. I knew she was grieving for the brother she'd lost. "Look, the situation in Haenvale is complex. Malik was doing his best, knowing he'd probably not live very long. Thing was, that place is why he lived as long as he did. Malik claimed it was the sweet sea air or something. I think there was something else going on."

That comment piqued my interest. Still, I was stuck on the first part. "He wrote me a letter? "

She got that sick of my shit tone I was used to hearing from her, especially in my teen years. "Yes, Imri, there's a letter. Go read it. Call me back if you have questions, but I don't know all that much. Just bits and pieces. Malik kept a lot of things to himself."

With those words, the call was cut off. I did get a text not long after.

Mama

We'll be out in a couple of weeks. The start of June at the latest. Got a hotel. We're taking the camper for my tools. Call your Mom later.

Cool, well, at least with them at the hotel, I'd get some peace to enjoy my house. I really did love and appreciate them for dropping everything to come help me out. I'd been lucky with my family. My siblings were great, even though they were much older than me. There was a decade between me and my brother. Fifteen years between me and my sister.

Determined to get some answers and sick of the stares, I stopped by the grocery store

for some sandwich fixings instead of eating out. I took a different route back out of town, entering the woods where I'd heard the mailbox and the shed were. I drove slowly, something compelling me to linger in the town. There was this feeling I was missing something. In other places I'd have thought I'd picked up a scent, but with the inhibitor working, there was nothing to catch.

Once I'd lingered long enough that my stomach was sore from being empty, I made my way out of town to check out this letter. I was shocked at how big both the mailbox and shed were.

Turns out, I'd used this damn road, just given the mailbox and shed no mind when I'd arrived the day before. I'd been more interested in getting to the house. The property was still a mile down a beaten track, which made me glad I'd traded in my car. If I was going to stay here, getting a new road was a priority.

I parked and switched off the engine before heading to the shed. Sure enough, the code Jeff had kindly gotten for me did work on the lock. Inside the cool, dark building, there was a chest freezer and an under counter fridge. There were shelves, probably for cans and packets, then some space for odds and ends. The space was immaculately clean.

"Cool," I muttered to myself. My eyes lingered on the chest freezer. Opening it, I realized it was still on, yet the appliance was empty. Same with the fridge when I checked. There was zero food anywhere. No tools. The shed was just a shell, waiting for stuff to be delivered. Someone had to have cleared it out for him.

The mailbox was pretty big. Inside were a ton of letters. Bills, reminders from Haenvale about taxes, elections. Most of it was addressed to my uncle. A few, like the water and phone bills, were for me. Then I found it. A handwritten envelope with my name on it.

Holding it in one hand, the rest in my other, I returned to my truck. I dumped most of the mail on the passenger seat, examining the letter from Uncle Malik once more.

I decided to head back to my trailer, make a sandwich, and read the letter under the AC. When I started the engine, my eyes went to a copse of trees a few hundred yards from my mailbox. I didn't have a clue why, but my gaze lingered there for a moment, until the growing hunger in my belly returned me to the present.

Food, then I'd read the letter.

While the envelope was handwritten, the letter inside was not. Uncle Malik had only written this letter around a month before he died, by the date at the top. At that time, he was communicating with his carers through his computer since he wouldn't let us visit and see him wasting away. He could type well enough, just not speak or hold a pen for long. He had really suffered those last few months until he was able to have his petition to die accepted by the courts.

The government had him checked by two doctors before they gave him a potion to end his life and ease his suffering. There was no cure for shifting sickness. It was a kindness to help him die peacefully.

The letter was sweet and full of feeling. Unfortunately, it left me with more questions than answers. His words were moving. While I would always wish I'd said goodbye in person, I also felt gratitude to him for not allowing us to see him in those last few months. I got to remember him as the kind uncle I knew from my childhood. His memory was untarnished by the awful sickness which stole him far too soon.

Imri,

I have started this letter so many times to explain why I left most of my property, money from my inventions and my dearest possessions to you. My sister is the best of

people. She always made me feel welcome in her family, understanding why I didn't have one of my own. You always had a special smile for your poor uncle. I kept my distance, though. My time on this earth was always going to be cut short, and I didn't want to be a burden.

When I moved to Haenvale, they did not like that I was a predator shifter with this disease. They allowed me to move there, but I felt more comfortable just outside of the limits of the town. I requested to buy some land and to build a home in the woods the residents avoid. Close enough to get help when I needed it, far enough away from their judgment. Luckily, there was a house already in place, long empty, and mine thanks to the land sale.

All of it was very strange. I did not know why the town kept away from the place, still I was grateful for it when I was stuck in my dingo form for days at a time when the sickness was bad. Except one time, when I needed them to stay away most, someone did explore the woods.

Near the end of my time in Haenvale, I was stuck in my shifted form. I tried to attack someone, Imri. The poor little creature escaped without injury by some minor miracle. The sheriff came to me in the days after to tell me I was to leave if I could not control myself.

By that time, I'd met them. They were the reason I left when I did. None of us could afford attention. I felt terrible for the boy I'd scared, but I was not welcome in the town to apologize. They told him he made it up and I had to go along with it.

There is a family of witches in the woods. I love them, Imri. I couldn't bring more trouble on their heads, not for anything.

The witches are the sole reason the town doesn't use the place. They were ostracized generations ago because their magic is too strong for the inhibitors. A handful of

witches had more magic than all of Haenvale combined. The town at the time refused to let them be, fearing they would take over when all they wanted was help. The townspeople shunned them, forcing them to make a living in the woods. When I met them, there was the mother, the eldest son of about ten and two little ones. They grew and hunted their own food. I was in awe of how self-sufficient they could be. Sometimes they snuck into town and stole things like medicine or clothing. I don't think anyone in the town knows they are there now. They wouldn't let me tell anyone, threatening to hide if I did. I couldn't break their trust. That's why I went into the hospice. To protect them from the town.

When I met them, one of the littles was sick and the eldest boy came to me begging for my help. I gave them everything I had. Everything. All the food, medicine, my old clothes. Everything. Then I just ordered more.

Their mom wouldn't take it. She was a proud woman. Her husband had died of a fever after an injury and she'd done her best alone with them. We struck a deal. She and the kids would help me around the house, cooking, cleaning, some gardening, then I would teach the kids how to read. She struggled with it herself. One day, she hoped they would leave for a different place, one where they would be accepted. Once they could control their magic better.

As the eldest, Rowan, grew, he helped me with the repairs the place needed after many heavy winter storms caused damage. He's a good kid. Very smart.

Just before I moved into the hospice, their mom died. It was such a difficult time for us all. I tried to get them to move with me, but they refused. I begged them to come with me, but Rowan was fifteen, his magic was more unstable than ever, and they were grieving. The woods were all they knew.

I didn't abandon them and I beg you not to either. They'll need you. It's been three years, Imri. I'm scared for them. Every month, I've had supplies sent to the shed for

them. Food, clothes, medical supplies, books. We talked regularly on the phone. I checked on them as much as I could. There was no one I could trust to go there. My sister would have loved them hard, but they weren't ready for her. They need a gentler hand. They need you. My gut tells me it had to be my little nephew. The boy who used to sit at my knee and ask a million questions.

The kids know all about you. They've seen photographs. I told them to expect you in the weeks and months after I'm gone. Please don't delay in calling them. I've left Rowan's number, but we've got a signal worked out too in case this letter lands in the wrong hands.

Sandy and Berry are ten now. They all need magical training, schooling that Rowan can't do himself. Get him to help you fix up the house, I'm sure it's in a bad state and I'm sorry about that.

See, I gave you this house because I knew you'd have the heart and courage to help these kids, because you know what it's like to be forgotten as the youngest. Your moms did their best, they are good people, but I know you were alone a lot more than they'd liked. More than I liked.

I see a lot of myself in you, Imri. I know you'll do what's right by Rowan, Sandy and Berry. Don't go looking for them, they'll come find you. Remember what I used to do when you were little and upset? That's our signal.

I've left my usual order in a folder in the house. It's all paid for until six months after I'm gone and comes from the next town over, so no one in Haenvale knows about it.

Don't trust the town to do what's right. Agnes, their mother, begged me not to ask them to help. I fear she had tried once, only to be denied. Trust your gut. I'm sorry for giving you this burden, but there was no one else I could entrust them to except for you.

I feel in my heart I've chosen the right person.

May you have a long and happy life with your fated mate by your side.

Love, Uncle Malik.

A family. Three children, well, one young adult and two kids were a lot to deal with. It explained a lot. Like why the house was in better condition than I thought it would be. How Malik had managed all those years there, apparently alone, because he wasn't, he'd had friends, a pseudo family of his own.

How was I going to lure them out? My memories of my time with Uncle Malik were fuzzy.

The deliveries were gone. So I had to assume the kids were okay, though it wasn't long until the order stopped. They were my responsibility now that in effect, I was their guardian, I had to do things right. I wondered if I could convince them to share the house with me. I had no clue what their home was like. Maybe it was better than what I had. The witches had lived in the woods for this long, there had to be a sort of community, or the remains of one. It sounded like the kids were the last, the rest long died out.

I finished my sandwich and looked through my supplies for something sweet to tempt them out with once I remembered that's what he used to do for me.

When I was sulking about something, he would leave a candy bar on a tree trunk in our yard. Usually I hid in my shifted form and the smell always lured me out of my hiding spot.

Should I leave a note for them? Malik said he was sending books, they could read some. They had a phone. I'd text them too.

There was so much to do! I'd have to assess where they were with their learning, if they were healthy, if they had all they needed.

My thoughts brought me up short. A sense of rightness tightened my chest and tears pricked at my eyes. My uncle had really blessed me with this task. He'd given me a sense of purpose for the first time in my life. This was something only trusted to me.

With shaking hands. I sent a text to the number. With it was a photo of a fallen tree, a couple of candy bars on top.

Imri

Hey, it's Imri. I'd love to meet you when you're ready.

Message sent, I thought about everything I'd need to do while I waited.

Fuck, my moms were coming in a few weeks!

No, I'd get something in place for the kids. We'd make something up if they decided to stay in the house once we got it livable... I'd figure something out.

Once more, my eyes strayed to the town. I couldn't bring myself to hate the place. There was a reason I'd been picked by my uncle for this over my moms. We were both big believers that fate guided us. Something told me fate was giving me a push, and my gut told me part of that was waiting for me in Haenvale.

I found a comfortable spot near the fallen tree to wait. My property line was marked by a crumbling fence, which I'd get around to replacing at some point with a better one. I'd laid the candy out with a brief note explaining who I was in simple words along with the offer of safety. Then I promised at the bottom to help them in any way they needed. Finally, though it went against what I was supposed to do, I swore to

keep their secret.

It was dark when I finally saw signs of movement in the trees surrounding the house.

“Are you Imri?” a hesitant voice asked.

“Yeah. That you, Rowan?”

From the short distance between us, I could see his relief. “Did Malik really tell you about us?”

“Yeah, he did. Are you all there? Are you okay?” I felt this need to see them and check them over properly.

“We are alright.” They crept closer.

“Do you want to come in for dinner? I make a mean mac and cheese.”

“Cheese?” A younger voice asked, the boy, Sandy. He popped out of some bushes much closer than I’d anticipated. I barely restrained my flinch.

“Is that alright?” Rowan looked hopeful. Fuck, he was so young to have so much on his slim shoulders.

“Of course. You can all sleep here if you want? It’ll be a tight fit, but we can make it work.” I really didn’t want them going back into the woods alone.

“Mom said not to bother Uncle Malik. He was sick.” He looked so sad. “I don’t think she would mind if we stayed with you. I don’t see the sickness in you.” Rowan’s eyes swirled with his magic, then he snapped out of it, his cheeks heating with a blush. “He told us a lot about you. We miss him a lot.”

“Uncle Malik is gone like Mama, right?” the girl, Berry, asked.

“Yeah, he is, but Uncle Malik sent me to help you.”

Berry smiled easily, but lingered close to Rowan.

The kids needed reassurance.

“Look, I’m here for you. I know you’ve been alone for a while now and you’re clearly doing okay, but I think it’s time you had someone to take care of you again. Listen, I’m not sick. I’m not planning on going anywhere. Will you let me take care of you all?”

It didn’t even take him a moment to decide. “Yes. I’d like that, Imri. Sandy, Berry, let’s go have dinner and talk.”

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Sully

Every morning for nearly a week after my first night shift at the hotel, I returned to the same spot next to the west woods. Closer and closer, I would venture further into them until I was sure I was going to be in trouble. With each step I was proving to myself that I wasn't a coward just because I was prey. Rules be damned.

We were only allowed to go into the west woods in groups. Never alone. It had me wondering about the other rules of Haenvale. I'd been completely safe in my wandering. I didn't sense any danger in the woods, so why was it like this?

On the surface, life was perfect. Everyone was the same with the inhibitors hiding our scents from each other, but wasn't that a bad thing? Weren't we maybe a little too sheltered? What would happen if they suddenly stopped working ?

Even in the time I'd been away, I'd been cosseted. Trisha's aunt had guarded me zealously after Trisha left for law school, her genius IQ getting her through what she needed to be a lawyer in half the time it took most people.

That hadn't been an option for me. It wasn't because I was lacking the smarts, I just didn't have the same opportunities as Trisha. I'd gone to a prey only college for heaven's sake! It was the only one my parents would allow me to go to. All four years of my degrees, because I'd taken two, had been tucked away from the world for my safety. They'd only let me go to college in the first place because of the gossip in the town. Their first plan was for me to attend the community college until I was at mating age. I put an end to that when I was too afraid to leave the house to make things work in Haenvale.

Then there was the mating they were attempting to arrange for me. Yes, it was part of our culture, but why was it so important? There were other traditions we let slide. Then there was the issue of who they were choosing. Another prey animal, of course, because I couldn't be with a witch, a vampire, or heaven forbid, a predator! There were so few prey/predator pairings in the town. Why was that? Was the town controlling matings?

Why the rush? I was only twenty-two! There was plenty of time for me to date, learn what and who I liked. What was the harm of letting me make my own choice, or waiting for fate's pick for me to show up?

Then it struck me once more. I kept circling to the same point. What was truly stopping me from venturing out into the world alone to see if it was as hopeless and violent as my parents made out?

Nothing but fear, really. I knew that. A lack of courage kept me stuck in my parents' house, living the life they chose for me instead of finding something for myself.

I'd been made a mockery of after being attacked, too. My experience invalidated. I should have felt angry at the shifter, but I was out there in a town where predator and prey never came face to face like we had that night. How could I expect the shifter to behave rationally? They were clearly living outside of the town and outside of the rules. I'd probably gone into their territory. The only one at fault there was me .

Funny how a couple of years of life experience could give a person perspective. Far from being scared of the dingo now, I felt bad for him.

Was he still in the woods? Was that why we weren't supposed to go there? It made me wonder if the sheriff even looked for my assailant and what he'd done if he did find him. I hoped he hadn't been punished for my mistake.

Maybe it was the start of me claiming back control of my life that had me going to the same spot day after day. I dunno if I was growing a little bravery or shaking off some of the strict control the town had on me. Didn't matter what it was, I just knew it made me feel powerful for a change.

Something in those woods called to me.

"Sully! Are you ready?" my dad called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Coming!" I yelled back, putting the finishing touches to my outfit and smoothing my hair back.

While on the surface, my outfit looked like I was going along with my mom's plan for this date, I was rebelling in a quieter way. I didn't want to humiliate either myself or Orson. A few days to calm down and some introspection, made me see that he might not be the captain steering this ship. His parents obviously played a part in the matchmaking process.

For my outfit, I'd gone with a button down, open at the neck, no tie, and a blazer. The shirt was blue, the jacket, navy. Both colors suited my light fawn skin and bright blue eyes. I wore navy slacks with the outfit, bringing the look together to be more boardroom than date. This felt more like a casual business meeting, a merger of families, than it did a get to know you for a future mate. Respectable, though, and unlikely to ruffle any feathers.

From some snooping, I'd learned that Orson Blaine was nearing forty and had little to no social media presence. He had websites for his various ventures where there was a basic bio about him, but nothing that told me about his values, or his aspirations outside of his businesses. He had fingers in many pies, yet nothing showing him having fun.

Already he seemed too serious for me. I decided to test that theory with some makeup. This was the rebellion part of the evening.

My mom hated my freckles, so I covered them with a little foundation. I rouged my cheeks lightly with a rose pink, highlighting my killer cheekbones, thank you Dad for the bone structure. It gave me a healthy glow after the foundation. I brushed a little taupe eyeshadow over my eyelids, making the blue pop that bit more. Then the mascara. I was not gifted with the long dark lashes my mom had. Makeup would have to improve what my parents gave me. I brushed on the dark liquid, my eyes looking doe like after it was applied.

Lastly, a little sheer lipgloss. Perfect. All I had to do was get past Mom. I tiptoed down the stairs to where she was waiting with Dad.

“No. Go wash your face—“ she said as soon as she caught sight of me.

“But my freckles!”

“The eye stuff. Take it off. And the lipgloss.”

“Honey, we really don’t have time for Sully to do all that. We’re cutting it fine as is,” Dad protested.

Something I’d planned.

“Fine.” She stalked off to the car.

Mom bugged me in the car, trying to get me to wipe some of it off. My dad, in a surprising turn of events, said I looked really good and Orson would either accept me for who I was or not at all.

It shut my mom up. She stewed so hard about it, I thought she was going to bust something. By the time we got there, I knew I had to say sorry to her. I felt guilty because maybe I'd taken it too far. The point was to bug Orson's parents, not my own.

Ugh, I knew I had to be the bigger person because I'd really provoked her. I knew she wouldn't like the makeup for this date, not that she minded normally. Mom just wanted to make a good impression on Orson and his parents.

"Mom," I whispered, in the quiet of the car. Dad was rounding the vehicle to open her door for her. They did sweet things all the time. It reminded me my parents had a life outside of me and my siblings. They were mated and had been for many years before we came along.

She turned in her seat to look at me. Dad's hand lingered on the door, sensing we needed a moment. "Yes, Sully?"

"I'm sorry about the makeup. I just—"

"No, Your dad has a point. If Orson doesn't like you when you're being yourself, you won't work long term. Besides, I did fuss at you about your freckles. What did I expect you to do?" She let out a little sigh. "I'm sorry if I'm pushing this too hard, Sully. I just want to see you settled with someone nice. Us taking control of things isn't ideal, we hadn't intended to arrange anything, but I worry about you."

The night in the woods, my damaged reputation, lingered between us. I knew it made it harder for Mom to find me a match. There were no other quokkas in town, so another prey shifter would have to do, and pickings were slim for me. It was fifty-fifty which shifter any babies would take after, but we wouldn't learn that until they presented around three years old.

My mom was complicated. She loved me fiercely. I knew that. She just went about things the wrong way. Still, it was good of her to apologize.

“It’s okay, Mom. Just... give me room to pick this for myself. I’ll try to get to know him, I swear it. He... he might not be who I’d choose to date for myself, but I will give him a fair shot.”

“That’s all that I ask. Thank you, Sully. Let’s go have a nice dinner, okay? Maybe tomorrow we could spend some time together? I’ve missed our lunches out.”

Things had been tense between us since I’d come home from college. I’d changed and Mom needed time to adjust to the newer, braver me. The gossip about me wasn’t going to get me down like it had just after high school.

I smiled, a genuine grin crossed my face. “Yeah, we should have lunch. Rosie’s?”

“Where else?”

“You two ready?” Dad asked, opening the door and taking Mom’s hand.

“Yeah.”

My first impressions of Orson were that he was boring. Frightfully dull with no ambition to brighten his life. Maybe it was unfair of me after my promise to my mom to write him off so quickly, but his hand was clammy when I shook it! He barely maintained eye contact! At least he didn’t bring up my past, aside from asking about college.

We all ordered after making small talk about my degree and his recent business ventures. I immediately forgot his parents’ names. For their part, my parents did keep him occupied in conversation while we sat next to each other awkwardly.

“Why don’t we let the young ones move to another table and let them talk without us interrupting them?” Mom suggested with a polite smile. She caught my eye and gave a subtle wink.

Okay, it was possible Orson wasn’t speaking because his family took up all the words and air in the room. His dad was rather oppressive. I was glad we were wearing inhibitors because his pheromones would have been overwhelming.

A server was able to get us a table where we were seated opposite each other, like a proper date.

“Sorry about all this. I would have liked to meet you alone for our first date,” Orson’s words were softly spoken and earnest.

“I get it. Parents can be overbearing, can’t they?”

“Yes. Mine are determined to get me mated off before they hand control of the company over to me.”

Ah, like I’d started to suspect, he had little input to the whole thing.

“Mine want me out of the house!”

We both laughed, the ice broken. I took a sip of my iced water. Across the restaurant, I could see my mom smiling at us.

Orson leaned in as if telling me a secret. “I like your makeup. You look pretty.”

“Uh, thank you.” I could feel my cheeks heating. “My mom was upset I got all freckled in the sun, so I thought I’d cover them.”

“I bet your freckles are cute.” Yep, I was blushing. A grin stretched across his handsome face in response.

All I could do was smile at him even as I was flustered by the compliments. He was sweeter than I’d expected. Softer somehow. Where was the business guy I thought I was meeting? If he could be this charming, how had he not been snatched up already?

We lapsed into silence when our food came, occasionally offering up a comment about the food and the surroundings, eventually moving onto our friends and things we liked. Conversation was easier with just the two of us.

When we got to the dessert, a tasty cheesecake, Orson received a call. During the course of the meal he had checked it several times, occasionally replying to texts. It gave me the impression of someone overworked or maybe married to his job. He looked at the screen with a frown. He made his apologies then answered.

“Hello?” A pause. “Now is not a good time.” Sounds came from the other end which he tried to muffle, seeing I was listening in. “You know I’m on a date tonight.” The other person spoke for a moment while a flush climbed Orson’s cheeks. He turned away a little, making it harder to see the expression on his face or listen in to the conversation. He whispered something into the phone I didn’t catch.

Louder he said, “I can’t. It would be rude to Sullivan.” When he turned back to me, there was an imploring look on his face. For a second, I wasn’t sure what to do. He clearly didn’t want to be with me, someone else had his attention.

For the briefest of moments, I felt a prickle of anger. I hadn’t wanted this date in the first place, now he was trying to ditch me! Then I realized it was for the best. I could escape this failed date much faster if I gave him what he wanted.

“Go,” I mouthed. “I’ll walk out with you. Make it look like we’re leaving together.”

It was the best way for us to keep our dignity. My parents would assume I was at fault if I returned to their table.

He stood and I followed. "I'll meet you at the pier," Orson muttered, with an apologetic look for me. He tucked his phone away with another frown.

"Sully!" Mom called over. "Everything okay?"

"We're going to go for a walk," I lied hastily, earning myself a look of gratitude from Orson.

"I've paid for dinner," my date said, leaving a pile of money on the table. He was generous at least.

Rounding the table, I tucked my arm in his. "Go with it," I whispered when he stiffened.

We got outside into the cooler summer night, still arm in arm. Together we walked away from the restaurant and rounded the corner before Orson spoke once more, pulling away from me gently.

"I'm so sorry. This is incredibly rude."

"Don't worry about it. Maybe we can try again another time?"

He looked conflicted, adding to my suspicions. "Alright," he eventually said. He leaned down to kiss my cheek. "Goodnight, Sully."

With those words, he walked away. Didn't make sure I could get home okay, or anything. Points deducted from him for sure. While he was attractive, I was certain Orson had another side to him, maybe someone his parents didn't approve of. That

call sounded more like a lover than a business dealing, but I could be wrong.

Unable to return to the restaurant without Orson, I wandered the streets, enjoying the night air and quieter atmosphere. I could have called Trisha, or any of my friends, except I wasn't up for company. I needed to be by myself for a bit.

Eventually, the pull of the woods became too much. I returned to my recent haunting ground, stripped, and shifted. Once in my quokka form, I went even deeper than ever before, desperate to find the reason I kept coming back to the forgotten woods.

Further in than I'd ever dared, I found myself turned around. My sense of direction wasn't the greatest at the best of times. Here, in unfamiliar territory in the growing dusk, I had no chance of figuring things out.

I thought I recognized the shape of a tree and hopped over to it. A mistake. It was a completely different tree, the scents all wrong. I could smell magic in the air. Was that why we weren't allowed in the woods? Was there wild magic in there?

There were no recent dingo scents. Whatever had been there was washed away by time. I wasn't sure I was even in the same part of the woods where I'd encountered the dingo.

Completely lost hours later, it was too dark for me to continue. I was exhausted, sweaty, thirsty and more than a little scared. I would just have to wait until morning then trace my way back home. Who knew, maybe someone would be looking for me when they noticed I didn't come home.

Except, my parents thought I'd gone for a walk with Orson. They probably thought we'd hit it off and I'd gone back to his place. He lived alone as far as I knew.

Shit.

I was lost in the woods, a place I wasn't supposed to be, with no one expecting me home until maybe afternoon!

A scent pulled me closer to a thicker patch of trees. There was a loud snap of a branch, my foot twisted and I stumbled, my back foot stuck on roots. I pulled, wrenching a cry from my little quokka mouth as agony flared through my leg. I scrambled with my paws to free myself, then hopped unsteadily away from the nasty tree.

There, under the relative safety of a bush, I laid down. Everything would feel better once I got some sleep. My foot would heal, it would be light, and I could get myself out of this mess.

I hoped.

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Imri

“This room looks good. You sure you want Sandy and Berry to share it? There’s room to give them one each.”

Uncle Malik’s old house was... surprising. What appeared to be a ramshackle home was actually one under expansion. I think he’d begun making space for Rowan and his family long before his symptoms worsened. It’s what I would have done.

Unfortunately, while the shell, electrics and plumbing were mostly okay, the weather had caused a leak in the roof, which in turn, had damaged some of the interior walls, meaning we had to replace them. Rowan had already patched the roof, so the place was watertight.

With Rowan, and even Sandy and Berry pitching in, we’d gotten two bedrooms and a bathroom done. The kitchen was nearly there. It needed redecorating, but it was serviceable for the time being.

“We will all share until another bedroom is ready for me. They don’t want to be separated.” It had taken a lot for Rowan to tell me no. He often went along with what I thought best instead of voicing an opinion, so I had to respect him for speaking up for his siblings.

“Alright. The beds should be here in a day or two. Will you be okay until then?”

I’d made a run into Haenvale, braving the stares of the residents, the night after they came for mac and cheese. It was a firm favorite with the young ones. I’d gone to get

blow up mattresses for the trailer and some better, kid friendly snacks. Yeah, it was a tight fit as I'd predicted, but I didn't feel right about letting them return to their home deeper in the woods.

Rowan was tired. That first night, I'd ended up with both Sandy and Berry sharing my bed with me in my dingo form. They'd sort of imprinted on me, I guess. We shared an instant connection. They felt like mine even though they were witches and not shifters. Seeing his siblings so content and feeling safe for what had to be the first time in a long time, Rowan slept deeply on the tattered couch covered in a blanket Mom had made for me in college. He was out for like twelve hours straight.

While he rested, I got the little ones up and made them breakfast. When their brother woke, they left my trailer to get their things, promising to return. I told them I was going to get some things to make them more comfortable and to make themselves at home if I wasn't there when they got back.

Let me tell you, it was something special to see the three of them with all their possessions waiting for me. I'm not ashamed to admit I nearly cried over it. Rowan had even started taking in the sheets of drywall, informing me in a no nonsense tone, that a summer rainstorm was predicted. He was right, and the boards would have been useless if it wasn't for him.

The day after that, I took them to the next town over to get them new clothes. The twins had gone through a growth spurt, outgrowing pretty much everything. They hadn't enjoyed traveling in the truck. Berry got sick, which I'd prepared for with a plastic bucket and bottles of water to wash it out. Sandy kept asking if I was giving them away. It broke my heart.

"I'll never give you up. You're my family now. All of you," I swore with all I had. We'd gone to just one store, getting the essentials, then returned to the house to reassure them they were safe with me.

Malik had known I'd love them as my own as soon as I met them. My heart ached when I thought about him preparing to go into the hospice and leaving them behind. I couldn't imagine how guilty he felt in those last months, but he'd done the right thing. Those kids would have been taken from him straight away if they'd been discovered. He had done everything he could to ensure their safety, aside from what most would have considered the best thing to do: alert the authorities.

We hadn't discussed it, me and Rowan, but I know he would have fought like hell to stay with the kids and out of social services hands if Malik had told anyone.

There was no telling what they would have done to him with his unstable magic. At ten, the twins, I'd just found out, weren't sparking with magic at the same rate as Rowan. He confessed late one night he thought about taking them into town and leaving them for a family to find. They could have the normal life he was denied.

Rowan cried as I held him, calling himself selfish for keeping his family together when they were his only reason for living. His magic wasn't even that bad. My anger over how he lived burned hot within me. I hated the town for making these kids so scared. Rowan was impressive, not scary. There was nothing selfish about him.

To protect us, he'd laid wards all around the property. It gave us all a measure of security knowing we would be alerted if anyone broke the rules and ventured too close to the house. How many practically untrained witches could do something so complex?

Another thing, he and the kids hadn't just survived, they'd thrived. These weren't dirty, unkempt, uneducated, and starving children. No, thanks to Uncle Malik, they'd continued learning about the world. They had clean clothes. Rowan knew how to use the washer they had at the home they'd once shared with their mom. Rowan grew their fruit and vegetables. They kept chickens until a fox got them. He'd used solar panels and a wind turbine for power to light and heat their home and power their

fridge. He recharged their crystals with magic in the darker months. They made things work for them .

Meeting me just made life easier. They could play more, spend more time reading books and doing math. Sandy was great at math. Berry was great at growing things.

“She helped me so much in the garden,” Rowan said with a smile as he watched his little sister water the plants.

“Berry’s a wonder.”

Yeah, Berry was already transforming the vegetable patch in our yard. She was remarkable. They all were.

In a week we went from strangers to family. At thirty-five, I’d been ready to settle down. Adopting three kids, well one young adult and pre-teen twins, wasn’t what I’d had in mind, yet fate was a tricky thing, and I truly felt like we were meant to find each other.

Still I found myself looking out into the woods.

There was a jingling sound.

“Imri? That’s the delivery sound. Want me to come with you to the mailbox?” Rowan offered. The kid was barely an adult and more mature than anyone I’d ever met his age.

“Sure.” I called out to tell Sandy and Berry we’d be back. Sandy was reading under a leafy tree and Berry was weeding the garden.

We walked in silence for a little while. The mailbox was quite a distance from the

house, close to a mile maybe. There was a cart for us to carry things on that Rowan had found for me.

“Thank you for making things so nice for my family. I’m grateful Uncle Malik sent you to us.” I loved how they referred to him as Uncle Malik. He was as much their family as he was mine. It kept him with us in spirit.

“So am I. We’re family now...” I paused for a moment, thinking of how to word what I wanted to say. “I’d like to make it formal. We can get documents made... My mama knows someone who can forge papers and we can make it like I took over a while ago. Pretend you weren’t alone, if you like.”

“My magic—“

“Really isn’t bad and I think Mom might know some witches who could train you.” He looked worried. “We can afford a tutor. If you want that, I mean,” I assured him. “This isn’t me trying to get rid of you. I want to adopt you all. This way, if we do it so it happened years ago, then you were young enough for me to adopt.”

“Adopt us? All of us?” Rowan’s face was alight with happiness. “Yes! I would like that. ”

“Do you think Sandy and Berry will agree, too?”

“They love you already. Even with Uncle Malik, they kept some distance. As soon as they saw you, they let their guards down.”

Warmth spread in my heart at how easily they all accepted me.

Working as a team, we got the beds back to the house and then set up in their room.

“I think I’d like to share with them a little longer. Can we focus on the dining room or living room instead?”

“Rowan, you’re still sleeping on the floor!” I said, aghast. “I think I’d rather get you your own space set up before we do anything else. Please, you need your own space. A bed at the very least!”

“But—“

“Why don’t we try and see if we can fit another bed in here? Or hell, I’ll stay out in the camper and you can have my room. You need a proper bed, Rowan.”

“No!” he was quite insistent. “You can’t! I’ll help you get my room ready,” he relented. “I won’t sleep on the floor. Sandy will share with Berry and I will sleep in his bed. ”

“Okay. Our next job is your room because your bed is due in a few days.” I grinned, happy I’d gotten my own way and I’d been able to reveal my surprise.

“What?”

“I saw the one you liked and bought it.”

Rowan never asked for anything for himself, so when his eyes kept straying to a queen sleigh bed when we were out shopping, I’d made sure to order it for him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly and full of feeling. His hug was brief, but tight. Rowan wasn’t the most physically demonstrative with me, which was fine, I got it. He’d been an adult for a long time.

Later that night, I tucked the twins into the same bed while Rowan read in the bed

next to the window, a lamp on the table next to him for when it got dark. He held a power crystal in his hand, siphoning some of his magic into it. Rowan found charging stones helped him spark less.

Once down, I said goodnight, then went to the peaceful bedroom we'd worked on for me. All the work getting our rooms ready had exhausted me. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow after my brief shower .

What felt like only an hour later, but was actually closer to dawn, Rowan woke me by nudging my shoulder.

“Imri? Imri, wake up!”

“What is it?” I asked around a yawn.

“Something tripped my alarms.”

I was alert instantly. “Okay, where?”

He explained they were just outside the boundary of the property, close enough to need our attention if someone was coming to harm us.

“Stay here with the others. Don't wake them, they'll only worry. I'll go shifted.”

Rowan followed me down the creaky stairs and through the kitchen to the back door. There, I stripped off my clothes, laughing at Rowan's blush.

“If you're gonna be my kid, you have to get used to me shifting. We're all born naked.”

My dingo form fell over me quickly. On four legs, I trotted out into the yard and to

the boundary of the property. I hopped over the drooping fence, something we really needed to fix soon, and then caught a scent.

The pull towards it was overpowering! The smell of almonds and sugar. It took me a little while to locate the source of the scent.

A little rodent-like creature was sleeping under a bush! Nothing terrifying, not the townspeople coming to get us for having unregulated witches, just a lost little beast. There was this urge to play with it, not hunt, which struck me as odd.

Damn, it was cute. Its little nose twitched and it looked like it was smiling while it slept. I nosed at it gently, trying to rouse it from its sleep. It wasn't safe for such a little thing to be sleeping alone in the open like it was.

Suddenly, its eyes flew open. It made a startled sound. A sort of high-pitched squeal of panic and fear at my scent. Then it flipped around, scrambling out from under the bush it had slept under.

Hopping away from me a little, it paused, looking hesitantly at me for the briefest of moments.

In a second, it was gone. I felt a need to chase and hunt, my instincts rising before I pushed them down. Still, I needed to make sure it left the woods and stayed away from the house.

I followed the little beast until I realized my pursuit of it was making it terrified. I could smell its terror and pain .

All I could do was stop, drop back, and follow at a greater distance. On four legs, where I was better able to see in the dark, I trailed it all the way to the road, where the shifter took his human form.

He took off at a run then, limping slightly from his injured foot.

In seconds, he was gone from sight, making me feel a sense of longing.

Who was he?

Sully

Fleeing the woods where my waking nightmare haunted me once more, I got back to my clothes in record time. Seriously, I bet I broke sprinting records on a twisted ankle, too. I had no memory of how I found my way back to the road or the copse of trees where I left my things. Naked as well. One minute it felt like I was running for my life, then the next I was out of breath next to my clothes.

It had happened again! The dingo was still in the woods. I had to tell someone! Or did they already know? They'd clearly missed him four years ago. They'd obviously gone into the woods, because they found my stuff and returned it to me, so they hadn't lied about that. Had they fibbed and said the place was empty? There had to have been signs of my struggle to get out of there .

Why would they make me out to be a liar instead of making up some excuse? Knowing there was a predator in the woods, one willing to attack unprovoked, would be a much better deterrent than making me out to be a fool.

I paused while halfway dressed, thinking the encounter over. Little things about it were off, or at least different from the last time I'd met a dingo in the woods.

Then it hit me: it wasn't the same one.

Their scent was different from the one locked in my memory. That one, from four years ago, evoked terror. This one, just... didn't. I felt warm under his gaze, because that was a male alpha dingo looking at me. There was no anger or aggression there either. He almost seemed amused and fond.

What was I going to do about it? Would anyone believe me if I told them? Did I really want them to go hunting this dingo?

The thought brought me up short. Why was I protecting him? He'd scared the living daylights out of me! Though if he'd shifted, I still would have been as scared. Random naked man in the woods was just as terrifying to a little omega as a big dog-like beast was to a quokka .

Once I caught my breath and finished clothing myself, I made the slow walk home. My ankle throbbed something fierce! I was sure it wasn't broken. Twisted for sure. It had stung when I'd pulled it free of the branches.

Nearing home, I wondered what to do. My best choice was to be quiet and careful. I could sneak into the house wearing my now rumpled clothes, my hair a mess, and with my sore ankle, before my parents got up for the day, so I could avoid their inevitable questions. They probably thought I was still with Orson. Maybe they thought I spent the night with him.

I opened the back door silently, thanking whatever gods that Dad maintained the house regularly. I tried to tiptoe through and up to my room without being seen.

No such luck. Mom was sitting in the kitchen wearing a robe, her hands around a mug of tea. When she looked up at me, she frowned.

“What happened?”

I limped to a chair and slumped into it, letting my blazer fall to the ground.

“Funny story...” I could see her patience running thin. “There's a dingo shifter living in the west woods. ”

It just popped out. I hadn't planned to tell her anything, wanting to keep it to myself.

"No, there's not," she automatically denied. "Not this again, Sully. We've been through this before. There was nothing there."

"I wasn't lying then and I'm not lying now. There's a dingo in the woods. A different one this time."

"There's nothing in the woods because no one goes in there. They're out of bounds."

"There is. I was there. I saw him."

"But you were out with Orson... you can't have." Her eyes snapped to mine. It was like watching her brain come to a screeching halt. "You went back there! You were in the west woods!" her voice rose in accusation.

"Mom—"

"Sully! That's so dangerous!" Horror filled her expression. Her fingers clung to the edge of the table. She looked ready to fly into motion at any second.

"It was an accident!" I defended myself automatically. Not that it made anything better. She still looked fearful.

"How did you 'accidentally' go into the west woods?"

"I kept feeling something drawing me to the woods, so I shifted and... explored a little," I finished meekly.

"Explored? Sully! Anything could have happened to you! Don't pretend I didn't see you limping!"

Mom-mode activated, she moved from her seat to the floor. Gingerly, she picked up my ankle. With gentle fingers, she tested it, noting each wince.

“A sprain. Here,” she moved her chair for me to rest my foot on, “I’ll get some ice. Your healing should deal with the worst of it by lunchtime. If not, I’ll get you a poultice.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said gratefully. She laid a cloth covered bag of ice on my foot, immediately easing some of the throbbing pain.

We had our issues, me and Mom, but I truly loved her and knew she loved me. Case in point was the date last night. Orson was very different from who I thought he was. I could admit I was wrong, and she was right about him. Almost a shame I believed he was completely taken, though. She was going to be disappointed when it came to nothing.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you going into the woods and how it sounds like this isn’t the first time. I thought after what happened last time you went exploring, you’d be done with the place for life. You better explain it to me.” She leaned against the countertop, watching me.

“Okay. Part of it was wanting to prove myself right. Or at least if I was wrong, take back my power a little.” Mom nodded at me with understanding. She got me. I continued. “Also, I caught this feeling over the last week or so. It kept drawing my attention to the woods. I couldn’t take it anymore. I had the time after me and Orson—“

“We’re coming back to him.” Figured she wouldn’t let that go.

“So I went for a look. I barely went in!” I swore. “Then I got turned around, and it was dark. Then I got lost...” My words trailed off. “I must have passed out. When I

woke up, he was there, standing over me!”

Mom flitted to my side and cradled my head against her stomach. She smoothed my hair out of my face as if reassuring herself I was okay. “Oh Sully, it’s lucky you weren’t badly hurt! Anything could have happened to you. We don’t know what’s in those woods. Just that we’re never to go there! ”

“I swear, Mom. There was a dingo shifter. He’s real, but I think it’s a different one. This one didn’t try to hurt me.”

Mom’s fingers twitched, the only sign of stress. Neither of us were wearing our inhibitors, but as close relatives, her pheromones didn’t affect me. I didn’t pick up any sign of stress in her scent, completely nose blind to her, which was common with family.

She took another seat at the table, leaving my foot propped up. It did feel better from her care. I felt confident I’d be up to another adventure in the woods soon.

“You can’t risk yourself like that, Sully. Falling asleep alone like that? Anything could have happened.”

“Do you believe me?”

She looked torn. “I want to, baby, I really do. You were so upset when the sheriff came back with your things. I know you saw something there last time. Could you have been dreaming? You must have been so scared!”

“Terrified!”

With one last hug, she returned to her first seat, holding my foot in her lap, as if she had to keep touching me to reassure herself I was mostly unharmed. “Well, there you

go. Remembering the last time you were there, you must have imagined this new dingo.”

“But—“

“No, baby. You need to stay away from the place.”

I was not going to keep out of the woods because I was certain that dingo meant me no harm. He could have done anything to me, instead he woke me gently and followed at a distance. I knew he was there. He dropped back when he got close. I felt him.

Once my foot was better, I was going back. In my human form, though. I’d take a flashlight and something to mark the trees so I didn’t get lost.

“You look tired,” Mom said after I stayed silent. She knew from experience when to drop it.

A yawn escaped me. “Yeah, I am. My foot hurts.” Even with the ice, it was throbbing.

“You’ve had a rough night,” she cooed sympathetically. “I’ll get your dad to carry you up to bed. We can order in lunch once you’ve had some sleep and you can tell me about your walk with Orson. Give me all the juicy details!” She even winked as she left the room to get him!

Dad wasn’t up for hearing me either. They both seemed to think I’d gotten myself lost and had a waking nightmare or something. I don’t know how they accounted for the scent that seemed to linger on me in my hair even after Mom had smoothed it back. Maybe it was just a memory of how he smelled. Either way, it was comforting.

After laying me down carefully on my rumpled bed, Dad arranged the covers over me and smoothed back my hair, much like my mom had. Both my parents were always showing their love, with hugs and gentle touches. I felt like a pampered prince like in those human stories. They were my favorite growing up. Dad even called me his little prince sometimes.

“No more going into the woods, Sully,” Dad chided, his fear clear on his face. Like Mom, he was showing some signs of age. “What would we do if we lost you?”

Guilt struck my heart. I hated making them worry, especially since they were so stressed with the hotel’s busy season and the matchmaking. I felt even worse knowing their pick wasn’t going to work. Orson would have been a good match for me, but he already had someone. The more I thought about it, the surer I became.

Instead of agreeing with him, I kept silent, my eyes closed against his worry. I snuggled down into the bed and let sleep take me.

My last thought before I drifted off was the tender way the dingo looked at me. How he’d followed at a distance until I was safely out of the woods, and if I’d been in my rational mind, maybe I’d have tried speaking to him instead of running away.

I knew I shouldn’t go back to the woods, but I was going to find that dingo and prove everyone wrong!

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Sully

When I woke, I knew I couldn't let go of what had happened. I also felt terrible. Like absolute dirt. Adrenaline crash coupled with a twisted ankle and a lack of sleep meant I wasn't at my best. Giving up on being awake, I drifted off for another nap. There was no pressing need to be awake.

I felt somewhat refreshed after my second nap. I was glad I'd gotten a little sleep, but wished I'd thought to wash my face first. It felt all gritty, and I badly needed a shower!

Dad had plugged in my phone and it was lit up with messages from Trisha asking how my date went with Orson. There was even a text from the man himself apologizing for ditching me and pleading with me to continue our ruse. My mom had given me his number after giving mine to him .

I texted Trisha back with the bare minimum before turning to Orson's texts. Maybe I'd get away with putting Trisha off until I had more details about what happened to me. She was super busy with cases. It would buy me some time.

Orson's situation proved to be as complicated as I suspected. Nice to have my instincts proven correct after all the doubts about me.

Orson

I'd like to take you on another date, but it would be a platonic situation.

Sully

Look, I know you have someone and that's fine with me. We can pretend our date went well enough for a second, but you need to come clean to your parents.

Orson

I just need some time. Be my cover until then? I swear it won't be for long.

I was grateful he wasn't denying there was someone special in his life. Vaguely, I wondered who it was. My curiosity nearly got the best of me. Before I knew it, I'd typed out a message asking who they were, then thought the better of it and deleted it, instead sending:

Sully

I'm in.

Being Orson's cover worked for me as well. If my parents thought I was out with him, then they wouldn't suspect I was out in the woods tracking down the dingo I'd seen. He meant something. While I didn't understand the pull I felt, I knew I had to track him down, preferably still in daylight.

"Sully, you're up!" Mom said from the doorway. "I was just coming to check on you. Hungry?"

"Starving!"

"I'll go order a bunch of your favorites. Do you need your dad to carry you back down?"

Testing my weight on my foot, I hobbled over to my attached bathroom. “Nah, I’m good. Need a shower, though.”

“Okay, yell if you change your mind.” She left me to get washed.

The hot water was heavenly. I got lost in running the washcloth over my skin, daydreaming about what I thought the dingo looked like in his human form. In my imagination, he had such dark eyes they were nearly black. I could get lost in those eyes, I was sure. His lips were obviously going to be full, and I wondered what kissing him would feel like.

I was all prune by the time I got out of the shower. My parents were waiting for me to have lunch with them, my favorites laid out and ready for me.

My parents were happy to have me home, where they could bug me about my date with Orson. They were disappointed I wasn’t madly in love with the man I’d met once, but what could I do about their wild expectations?

We hung out, something we hadn’t done for a long time, and just relaxed all day. My parents were scaling back on their hours at the hotel now both my brother and sister were increasingly involved in the day to day running of the place. It meant they had more time for their pet project: mating me off.

If they weren’t going to listen to me about the dingo in the woods, I wasn’t going to take their pushing towards Orson. Besides, they didn’t know it was pointless, and I couldn’t exactly tell them. Orson’s secrets would be revealed when he was ready, and not before .

Lying to her about Orson didn’t feel good, but I reasoned we did walk for a little while. I said he got a business call he had to take and left not long after. Close to the truth, at least.

Both of them steered any potential mention of the woods back to safer topics. Still, I knew in my heart he existed, and I would be damned before I let this go.

My parents were called into the hotel around dinner time. I made use of the time alone to wrap my foot and head into town to make sure I had the supplies I needed before venturing out.

I had a scooter and used that to travel to the beach. The main stretch was busy, with barely anywhere to park.

“Hey, Sully!” people greeted as I walked past Rosie’s to the camping goods store. Plenty of tourists like to camp out on the east side of Haenvale, where there were a couple of really beautiful waterfalls.

“Hey!” I called back .

“Sully!” Orson gave me a start when his hand landed on my elbow. Really, I could stand to pay better attention to my surroundings. It felt like he just appeared from thin air, but he had to have been in one of the stores and seen me walking by. “Could we talk for a moment?”

“Sure. Rosie’s?”

“Works for me.”

We headed back to the café where Orson stood patiently next to me while I ordered my usual. He made a skeptical face at my drink.

“Have a sip,” I offered.

Holding out the glass straw to him, I held the cup steady so he could try it. His sip

was tentative.

“Hmm... that’s nice. Actually, could I get one of those, too, please?” he asked Taylor.

“Sure thing.”

Once we both had drinks, we found a table in the corner. I was aware of people watching us together and gossiping.

“Thanks for talking with me and for being so understanding about my situation,” Orson said quietly, with a faint blush on his cheeks. Objectively, he was attractive. Being mated to him wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. If it had to be someone, I could cope with it being him. Unfortunately, both of us were focused on others.

“No worries. We can be friends, right?”

He looked at me gratefully. “I’d like that. It’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Drawing boundaries. The person—“

“Don’t tell me about them, just in case. Must be hard being on the other side.”

“We... we’re making some difficult decisions. I want to know if...” Orson leaned closer to speak at a lower volume. “If you’ll be okay if we leave town?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Because everyone thinks we’re dating. I don’t want your reputation to be damaged. Not after—“

“Right,” I cut in. We didn’t need to go over the story once more. “At this point, it’d

probably do me a favor. I can wait for my fated to show up instead of getting mated off to whoever will have me.”

Orson winced. “If it helps, I picked you. My parents had put you on the no list.” His face flushed, and he reached for my hand. “I didn’t mean to tell you that.”

“Oh.” I let him hold my hand in his. This time, it wasn’t clammy. This was the touch of a friend, comforting me. “Why did your parents go for it, then?”

“Well,” Orson cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. He didn’t let go of my hand. “Your parents are very successful. They don’t need all that much put into the hotel. A bank would lend them the money for an expansion with no conditions. I also looked into you. The degree you attained is compatible with our interests—“

“You would have let me work?” My voice rose in shock.

Orson smiled, sadly. “Yes. Likely part-time because my parents want grandchildren. My mother wanted to take some of the childcare duties on.”

“Wow! That’s a lot to take in.”

“Mom also thought we would make cute babies.” Orson sounded wistful.

“Baby talk already?” a new, unwelcome voice cut into our conversation. Orson’s hand tightened on mine. His expression darkened. “Must be serious. I mean, I heard the rumors, O, but I thought nah, he can do better than dingo boy here. Sully’s family must be paying yours to take him off their hands.”

“Thank you, Cress, but I am the one who picked Sullivan. Not the other way around.”

I turned my head to look at Cress. He hadn’t changed all that much since graduation.

I heard he hadn't gone to college. There was no need for him to with a well-paying job ready for him, with his family. As the source of my humiliation, I couldn't bring myself to say anything to him.

Unfortunately, he was still as ridiculously handsome as he was years ago. His body was wiry with muscle, his hair grown out. It suited him.

He reached out with slender fingers to play with a lock of my hair. "You got pretty, Sully. You could always ditch O here and have a night with me. What d'you think?"

I knocked his fingers from my hair with my free hand, threading my fingers with Orson's. "A night with you or a lifetime with Orson, someone who respects and understands me? I'd pick Orson every time."

"Your loss," Cress snarled, red-faced.

"No," I shook my head and grinned. "It really isn't."

Buoyed by my coffee with Orson, I got all the things I needed for my next adventure. I parted ways with Orson soon after Cress left, with an understanding of the man. We were both getting things out of this arrangement, giving us an equal footing.

For this adventure in the woods, I was armed with a fully charged phone, some string and a pocket knife, along with a flashlight, the little battery crystal fully charged.

There were hours before it got dark, so I'd have time to fully explore the area before I had to truly worry about getting lost.

I ate a bean burger on my way into the cover of trees, my scooter parked so it was hidden from the road. The crunchy, flavorful treat was exactly what I needed before going for a hike.

The sun was still pretty high in the sky, making me wish I'd worn a hat and some sunscreen. I began to sweat as I picked my way through the brush to the dirt road I'd once traveled down.

Things got a little strange when the path widened. My vision went blurry, and I made a turn, certain I was going the wrong way.

Once more, I found myself completely lost in the woods. My phone didn't want to work, either. I felt a burst of panic until I thought about things.

I had supplies. I could be methodical about tracing my way back to the road.

It was tempting to shift and use my quokka nose to find any scents to help me. I thought about trying to make a call, though my signal was spotty.

No, the only way out was through.

Wandering the woods for another hour, I felt myself growing despondent. I was so far from where I wanted to be.

My feet moved automatically, just drifting through the old fallen leaves and broken branches until I came to a part which felt familiar to me.

I paused to take a drink of water. All the walking had tired me out. I was not built for lots of activity! Taking time to rest, I found a stump to sit on while I gathered myself.

It could only have been minutes, suggesting wherever he lived, he was nearby, when the dingo came trotting into view, his tail high, eyes sharp.

His footsteps paused when he saw me waiting for him.

“Hello, I hoped I’d see you again.”

The dingo stopped and just stared at me. I didn’t sense any aggression or fear from him. Just curiosity, the same I felt for him.

“Why is it I feel so safe around you when the other one scared the living daylights out of me?”

Honestly, I hadn’t expected him to answer, so when he shifted, revealing himself as the man of my recent fantasies, I fell off the stump I was perched on.

“Fuck!”

“Is that a curse or request?” came a delicious, rumbling voice.

Imri

Night was drawing in when I heard the alert. Since our last visitor, Rowan tweaked the spell so I could tell when it had been activated without one of the kids having to tell me. He'd also ensured the look-away aspect of the spell was stronger. People could walk directly up the dirt path to the house before the magic took hold and sent them into the woods and far away from the house.

Paranoid, maybe, but I had to ensure the safety of the kids. Until we had adoption papers, anything to prove they were mine, I didn't want to risk discovery. Besides, I was a predator in nature, I needed to protect my den from threats, even little rodent like ones.

"Imri? Want me to come with you?"

"Not necessary. Stay here with the other two. Don't let them raid any snacks before bed, they've had too much sugar as it is. Oh! And make them brush their teeth if I'm not back in an hour," I said while I threw on some shoes to go check things out.

This time I was going in my human form, hoping secretly it was the little creature again and I could tempt him into shifting so we could talk.

I only wanted to warn him, gently, away from the woods. To tell him to stay away for his safety. At least, that's what I pretended to myself. What I really wanted to do was see his face, to see what he looked like. He smelled so damn good he just had to be a pretty omega.

Plus, I also wanted to know what kind of beast he was. I'd never seen anything like him!

"Okay, I think they are over to the south of the house. They must have gotten pretty turned around. D'you think I made the spell too strong?"

"Only one way to find out." I was supposed to be immune to the effects of it. Rowan had keyed all of us into the spell. My parents should also be able to find the place because they share the same blood as me.

In a matter of moments, I was in the yard.

"Imri! Wait!" Rowan rushed to catch up with me. "Take this stone. It will tug your hand in the right direction."

"Perfect. Go back inside, okay? Be back soon." I ruffled his hair, making him jerk away with a muffled curse.

Sure enough, the stone picked up on our intruder's location pretty quickly. I walked through the woods with growing difficulty. These paths were overgrown, completely wild. It had to have been some time since anyone traveled this way.

The path I was using got too narrow for me as a man. I decided to shift and hold the stone in my mouth. I tried it first just in case and the thing still worked.

Stripping quickly, I took the time to fold and place my clothes on a branch. It felt like our visitor had paused in their wanderings. Probably lost.

I let the shift fall over me. My dingo was always there, ready to take control. He felt extra antsy to get going and find this intruder though. I was vaguely concerned about it, put on edge by his need to claim what was his.

With my improved senses, I didn't need the stone anymore. I dropped it not too far from where the little beast was. I could tell it was the same one as before. They shared the same scent. It was intoxicating, drawing me forwards like I was under a spell.

He was in his human form, and fuck me, he was cute! Sandy brown hair with golden and red highlights woven in the strands. The most stunning pair of blue eyes I'd ever seen. They were the blue of the sky on a summer's day. There were freckles dusted along a straight, pert nose, and over high cheekbones. His lips were a rosy pink and full. He wet them after greeting me. While he was pale, he had a healthy, pink tone to his skin. I could smell sweat on him, likely from exertion from all the walking he'd done. He was far from the road.

In short, he was perfect. If there was an example of the ideal omega to me, then it was him.

"Why is it that I feel so safe around you when the other one scared the living daylight out of me?" Without thinking about it, I shifted, standing naked before him.

He jerked back, falling off his perch in surprise.

"Fuck!"

"Is that a curse or request?" I went over to him, extending a hand to help him up. This close, his scent was overwhelming. The omega in him was clearly reacting to my pheromones.

He took my hand easily. My fingers brushed over his bare wrist. No wonder his scent was so strong. I would have never been able to smell him if he had his bracelet on.

"Oh, shit! I've lost another inhibitor. My parents are going to kill me." He held on to

me even as he sat back on the stump, defeated. His skin was warm and silky soft. It heated further under my touch.

“Do your parents know you’re out this late?” I teased.

The omega in front of me dropped my hand with a frown, sitting up straighter, full of indignance. “I’m an adult. I don’t report to them.”

“Is that right?” I raised an eyebrow at his fiery spirit.

“Yeah, I’m twenty-two. What about you? On the run from the retirement home? Does your nurse know you’re out here, gramps?”

A laugh burst free. “Touché, little omega.”

He blushed prettily. “You’re not the dingo from before. From years ago, I mean. ”

I was surprised he had the presence of mind to notice the difference between me and Uncle Malik. This had to be the shifter he scared.

“How can you tell?”

“Your scent. I think the other one was a beta. His scent is long gone from my stuff.”

Huh. He’d learned a lot from the brief encounter. Despite what had happened to him, he didn’t look angry at my uncle, or wary of me, which was a pleasant surprise.

“That was my Uncle Malik. He hated scaring you, but he had shifter sickness—“

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry!” His compassion was a sign of his sweetness. “He only scared me, didn’t hurt me. Is he okay?” He stopped, halfway to my side. “You said was.

He's gone, isn't he?"

Of course, he knew the outcome for shifter sickness.

"Yeah, he hung on for a few more years than he really should have, but he died a couple months ago."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

He touched me again then, as if he couldn't bear not to be in contact with me somehow. I felt the same. There was this desperate need to have him close to me. I needed to say something to keep him with me a little longer.

"Not that I mind, but the woods can be dangerous. Why did you come here?"

His blush deepened. "The town made me a laughing stock after the first time—"

"I'm sorry about that. Malik hated being a part of that deception. In his condition, though, he could have really hurt you."

My hand automatically reached out to brush the hair out of his eyes. We were so close, and at the height he was sitting, he was up close and personal with my dick. I could see the effort he was making not to look at it.

"Now that I know what he was going through, I'm sad for him and grateful it wasn't worse than it was. He just scared me, that's all."

The pull I felt to him was magnetic. I could sense his sweet pheromones clouding the air between us, stronger than they should have been.

"So you came out here because you knew I wasn't the same dingo? How could you

be sure I wouldn't turn on you like he did?"

"You followed me all the way to the road. I fled because I was scared at first, then because you were guarding your territory. You could have done anything to me and it would've been my fault. I was breaking the rules. You kept me safe and got me out."

He picked up on that, huh? This little omega was fascinating.

"Could I try something?" he asked timidly.

"What is it?"

"Lean down a little."

His face tilted up. He let go of me to cup my face. In an incredibly slow move, he drew our faces together until our lips were only a breath apart.

"Is this okay?" the sweet caramel scent of his breath washed over me.

Without answering, I closed the distance, pressing my lips to his.

Who I was, who he was to me, snapped and reformed in that moment. This was my fated mate. The omega I'd dreamed would come.

The kiss deepened, his mouth opening to my tongue as my hand cupped his neck, directing him to get more of his addictive taste.

Finally, the world felt right.

I felt the surge of pheromones from both of us this time, reacting to what we were to each other, encouraging us to mate, to cement a bond, to breed. The omega's skin

flushed with heat and arousal as his scent sweetened further.

Worse, I could feel my rut responding to him entering his heat.

We were so fucked!

Breaking away from the kiss, I tried to put some distance between us, even though it physically hurt. There was this ache in my chest while my cock was harder than steel. It leaked a bead of precome as the omega followed me.

He pulled off his shirt and began unbuttoning his jeans. The primal omega urge to mate after being thrown into a heat.

I went to him and stopped his hand. “No. We can’t.”

“Why?” he whined. “It hurts. You’re my mate. I need you.”

This close to him, I could see his pupils were blown wide. The scent of his slick made my mouth water.

“I should get you home before we do something we’d regret.”

“I could never regret you. We belong together.”

“We don’t,” I denied. It felt like someone stabbed me in the chest to say the words. I hated this, but there were three reasons at home why I couldn’t have him. I wasn’t too out of my mind to have rational thought. Close, but not there yet. The longer I spent around his incredible body and scent, the harder it was to deny I wanted him with my very soul.

“Not even once?” He kissed me then. I couldn’t help but return it. The feel of his

body against mine was so right. His mouth felt too good.

He pulled away, pushing his pants and underwear down and kicking them and his shoes off. "Help me, please. It hurts."

His thighs glistened with his slick. His heat had come on so fast and was already intense. I couldn't imagine the pain he was in. He needed me. Needed my cock, my knot, to break it.

Seeing the desperate way he was clawing at his skin, the panic on his face, broke me.

I stalked the short distance between us. I hoisted him into my arms while I fused our mouths together. My fingers found his cleft, sought his leaking hole, and plunged inside. He was so wet and warm. His body was already open for me.

"Ready?" I asked as I broke the kiss.

"Please!" His begging was so cute .

Pressing him into a tree, I raised his leg over my hip, I notched my cock at his hole and slid inside in one slow movement.

His moans were like music. Every sound he made while I thrust inside him lit me up with joy. This was perfect. Nothing would ever come closer to perfection than having my fated around my cock. Being so deep inside him, we were one.

Over and over, I plunged my cock into his wet hole, his inner muscles hugging me so tightly I struggled to hold back my orgasm. I needed him to come first. His noises were like music, his face flushed as he clung to me.

"More," he begged. I gave him what he wanted, pumping my hips harder.

The scent of his blood had my rhythm faltering. His back must have gotten scratched up from the tree. I turned us, his weight nothing to me in this state.

My hands took his hips in a firm grip while I used his body to bring us both pleasure.

He came with a squeal I absolutely had to hear again. I went to my knees, lowering him to the ground and fucked him harder until he came once more, milking my cock until my knot grew .

It had been a long time since I'd knotted anyone, but the instinct to shallow my thrusts was still there. My hips jerked in small movements as my knot expanded and slipped inside my mate's body. He shuddered as we were locked in place.

Tied together, my come filled him, seeking that inner part of him, his womb. My dingo wanted to fill him with a pup, to claim him. This early in his heat, I couldn't. Not yet.

Even with the kids waiting for me at home and the risk my mate posed, I still wanted to keep him so badly it hurt.

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Imri

We caught our breaths while still locked together in a tangle of limbs on the forest floor. My mate tucked under me, my body weight held off him with straining muscles. With us locked together, I could feel his rapid puffs of air against my sweaty neck. He was napping nicely, a content smile on his pretty face.

All I wanted to do was bite him, mark him, keep him. None of that was possible. All we would have was tonight. Just this one wild heat, then I would have to tell him not to come back even if it broke my heart.

Holding him close, I let him sort of doze while he was out of it, lust drunk on our mixed pheromones and his heat. Every so often, he would wiggle and nuzzle my chest. Adorable.

Too soon, my knot went down, allowing me to pull free from his body. I slumped back on my ass, the buzz of need under my skin like an itch I couldn't scratch.

He was on me suddenly, rocking in my lap as he licked up my throat.

"Can I suck you?"

"That's just your heat. We should talk about this."

"Can't," he panted, still rocking and mouthing kisses along my jaw. "Need you."

I grasped his shoulders, gripping him even as he tried to lean into me. "You have to

understand, this is a one-time thing. Just this heat. One night, that's all."

He struggled against me. "I need you."

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" My frustration was growing. I wanted him so badly, but he was all wrong for me.

Finally, his eyes met mine. "Only tonight? Why?"

"We aren't a good fit. I can give you this because you need it and I don't want to leave you in pain."

"But won't us having this make it hurt more?"

Maybe he had a point. Greed for him had me in its clutches. "Don't you want the memories of when you fucked a stranger through your heat in the middle of the woods? "

"It does sound daring. Not like anything I'd normally do," he agreed with some hesitation.

"I can take you home right now if you want? The worst of your heat is coming, but I could get you back before then."

Waiting those moments for him to decide, while he was still perched on my lap, naked and smelling divine, was pure torture.

"If I can only have one night, then that's what I want," he finally said. This time, there was a determined look in his blue eyes. He had them locked on me and, as I watched him, he smirked. "Now can I suck you? I really want a taste."

“Have at it.”

He slid off my lap in a fluid move, brushing his slender body along my very interested cock. On his knees on the forest floor, he nuzzled my balls before licking along my length. His hum of pleasure at the taste of my precome sent shivers down my spine.

Using one hand to jerk the shaft, my mate sucked on the tip, his eyes sparkled in the dimming light. Slowly, he took me deeper. The guy had skill, taking my length into his throat with apparent ease.

We were made for each other, I guess. It was a sobering thought. Here I was, getting the best blow job of my life, knowing I'd be ruined for anyone else, and remembering I had a duty to the kids in my care.

The feeling of his hot, wet mouth around my cock had my balls drawing up.

“Wait! I don't want to come in your mouth.”

“That good, huh?” My little beast smirked once more. He was a naughty brat in need of taming.

“You're gonna need my knot very soon. Did you bring a flashlight or anything? I want to watch you ride me.” Controlling the rut was hard. Harder than my very interested cock. Once was not enough with this little omega.

His smile widened. “I did!” He crawled towards his clothes, drew a flashlight out of a cloth bag, and laid his shirt on the ground next to me. “Better than nothing,” he explained.

With the compact lantern illuminating the small clearing we were in, I lay back on the

t-shirt, which smelled of my mate. I pulled him on top of me, taking a taste from that perfect mouth. His whimpers and sighs as I touched him lit me up inside.

I ran my hands down his body, squeezed his pert ass, then traced a finger down his crease. He easily took a finger, still pretty open from the last time. I quickly added two more and pumped them in and out of him.

His body responded with another burst of pheromones as his temperature rose. This time, when I knotted him, I'd probably hit his womb.

He wriggled, moaning louder as I hit his prostate. Slick covered my fingers. He was getting desperate to be filled with my cock.

I couldn't stop kissing him. My tongue wrapped around his. I swallowed his groans while I moved him so I could spear him on my cock. The rut, the need to breed him taking over.

Body taut at the sudden invasion, my mate broke the kiss to wheeze out a few breaths.

“So deep!”

Planting my feet, I pumped my hips, pushing deeper inside his body with each movement. Holy shit, he felt so good! His inner walls pressed down on my shaft, trying to suck me back inside where I belonged.

He put his hands on my chest and pushed himself up until he was seated on my dick, the tip resting against the mouth of his womb.

Rocking in place, he gasped, “yes, there!” a look of ecstasy on his face. His movements became more frantic as he worked his hips to get my cock exactly where

he wanted: inside his womb so I could breed him. Chances of a pregnancy taking were incredibly slim. I'd ask him to take a potion, just in case. Hell, he'd probably do it without me asking. This was one and done, after all.

Come streaked my chest while he moaned from a long orgasm. He looked ready to melt onto my chest. I held him upright, my hips thrusting, pushing past the last of the resistance to get to his womb.

I'd never felt anything like it! Utterly incredible! The spasms around me sucked my cockhead deeper in, sparks of pleasure tingling down my spine to my balls. My knot expanded in a blink and I came.

Drawing him down gently, I wrapped my arms around him, letting him rest once more.

Later, I used his jeans, because his shirt was toast, to cover the stump, and fucked him over it again, breaching his womb once more.

We lay in a patch of grass for what would be the last of his heat. I wanted to take things slower, really savor the experience, but the little beast was demanding. He wanted to be taken hard and fast. He came twice before he passed out, my knot tying us together, my come in his womb for the final time.

A small, selfish part of me wanted to leave something behind for him to remember this night by. Rational me didn't want to ruin my mate's future with a baby. He could go on, mate with a better alpha, a prey alpha, and have a good life.

Soon I would be a distant memory, no matter how much that hurt.

"Imri?" came Rowan's hushed voice. "Are you okay?"

“Don’t come any closer. I’m with another shifter and we’re both naked.”

“Oh...Oh! Do you need anything?”

“His clothes are here, ruined, but they’ll have to do. He’s knocked out. Maybe a blanket if you can get one?”

“If you cover him, I could maybe force a shift. I found your clothes. Had to take another path because the one you took was too overgrown. ”

I was still stuck on him being able to force a shift. “You can do that?”

“What?”

“Force a shift?” I reached for my mate’s clothes to cover him as I picked up the sounds of Rowan nearing us.

“It’s not something I like to do, but Mom taught us how to do it just in case the town sent shifters after us. A wolf can’t use a gun and it’s easier to get away from most animals.”

Fuck! Just how scared was Agnes that the town would turn on her kids? I hated that she was so stuck there was nowhere for her to turn. Having Uncle Malik protecting them must have felt like such a blessing.

“Okay, he’s covered. You can come closer now.”

Rowan’s eyes rounded when he saw the sleeping omega in my arms, his modesty covered by his ripped shirt. Seemed the man had been a little hasty when undressing, then our use of it did the rest. Heat really did a number on omegas.

“Hold on.” Rowan made a complicated motion with his fingers. In response, his magic flared, turning the man in my arms to the cute beast he’d been before. I laid him down carefully and pulled on my clothes.

“What is it?”

“No idea, some kind of rodent, maybe?” I said, while shoving my feet into my sneakers Rowan had thoughtfully bought. I grabbed up the bag and torch my mate had brought. He was well prepared for a hike through the woods.

“It has back feet like a kangaroo.”

“Use your phone and look it up.”

Teaching Rowan how to use tech was hilarious. He and the kids had had a pretty basic phone to contact Malik, but I’d ordered better devices with a heap of apps for them to use for their schooling. Berry and Sandy were much quicker at picking things up and already shared a tablet with educational programs. Yeah, I’d looked into a homeschooling curriculum. It had been a busy week. They were awesome at using the web, Rowan not so much. He preferred to stick to books.

“This says it’s a quokka. They are a marsupial, native to what is Australia in the human world. So it’s a prey shifter, right?”

“Yeah, an omega, too.” This close to it, I still could pick up the subtle omega pheromones designed to trigger an alpha’s protective response. The last of his heat was done. We were out of the worst part.

“Is that... bad? You’re an alpha, right?” Rowan blushed. “You, um, had sex. I can smell it.” He wrinkled his nose.

“Yeah, we did. Don’t worry, I’ve got control of myself, I’m not in a rut anymore. He’s safe with us.” Years of practice made my words sound certain. I didn’t tell Rowan this was my mate.

Picking him up, I followed Rowan, who had conjured some light for us now it was so late.

“Sorry I was so long. He, uh, went into heat. Really fucking stupid of him. Dangerous. If it was anyone else...” my words trailed off.

“It’s, uh... it’s fine. I just got worried.” I could hear the lingering anxiety. His scent was tinged with the bitterness of it.

“You better not have thought I wasn’t coming back.”

The look of shame on his face told me he had feared it.

“Kid, you’re mine. You’ll never lose me, okay?” This was why I had to get rid of the little quokka, as cute as he was.

I laid the creature on the sofa. The movement must have jostled him out of sleep. He shifted back into his human form and reared back, readying a scream at the change of place. His nose twitched. He took a deep breath and practically yelled.

“Where am I?”

“My house.”

“Are we going to bond now? I feel so good after my heat, thank you.” His cheeks reddened prettily. He had dirt smeared over his body, leaves in his hair. I’d never seen anything so beautiful. His scent beckoned me to him, demanding I protect him.

“No. We’re not. Remember? One and done. I’m going to take you home.”

“What? I thought you were kidding! You’re my fated mate!”

His eyes strayed to Rowan. Who did he think he was? Did he think he could shame me into accepting him or something? Anger rose inside me.

“No, I’m not,” I automatically denied while looking him over.

He stood, bristling with anger, and I got a better look at him under the lights of the living room. He was shorter than me. Omegas usually were. He was maybe five-eight to my six-three. His pale skin was flushed, his pheromones working overtime to allure me into protecting him. His beautiful blue eyes welled with tears.

“You are!” he cried. He drew closer to me, his nose still sniffing out my scent. I tried not to groan at his proximity.

“I can smell me all over you. You shared my heat with me. You can see how good we can be together! Why can’t we be mates?”

“I’m a dingo, remember? That’s why I can’t. Predators and prey aren’t a good match.” I latched onto any excuse to get him out of my house.

He paused, just a moment’s hesitation before he shrugged it off. “You still smell like my fated mate.” He obviously had no survival instincts. “Fate clearly doesn’t care what either of us are.”

Slumping down on the sofa, he pulled a throw blanket over himself to avoid Rowan’s gaze. I was grateful for that, the alpha in me demanding we stop anyone else from looking at our mate.

“Well, I care. It matters to me.” I crossed my arms over my chest defensively while I lied my ass off. “You’re just confused,” I added. “You were going into heat, found me attractive, kissed me and got caught up in the hormones. When your heat started, I got pulled into a rut. Basic biology. We had fun, but that’s all this was.” I felt like the biggest asshole.

One glance at Rowan told me he was watching us avidly. “Rowan, could you get...”

“Sully,” the quokka offered his name. A cute name, too.

“Yeah, could you get Sully something else to wear. His clothes are ruined. I’ll give him a ride back into town.”

I needed him out of my house immediately. He was too tempting, but I had three reasons to deny what he claimed. A mate like him would draw far too much attention.

“Okay.” Rowan kept glancing between us. His magic stayed at bay, which I was grateful for. Sully hadn’t tried to pick up his scent, a small miracle.

“Thanks,” I said in a soft voice, not showing the strain of having this too sweet shifter near me. Everything about this sucked.

“What’s your name?” Sully asked when Rowan left us alone.

“That’s nothing you need to know. I take it you live in town?”

He wasn’t in the least bit offended at my rudeness. “Yeah. I work at the hotel. I’m not long back from college. ”

Okay, so he hadn’t been lying, he was twenty-two like he said. I wondered vaguely what he’d studied, and if he’d gotten his degree. The pull to him was so strong!

Wasn't like I could ask him anything since it would suggest I was interested in him.

"Great. I'll take you home," I repeated. "Or do you have a car I can take you to?"

"Scooter."

"We can put it in the back of my truck."

"Do I really not get to know your name?" he asked with a sexy pout.

"No."

Rowan returned quickly with a t-shirt and sweatpants more likely to fit Sully's lean form than they would my taller and wider frame, meaning they were his. I didn't like the thought of my mate in another guy's clothes, but it was better than giving anything of mine.

"Here," he handed my things over, phone and my keys. I was grateful he didn't say my name. "I'll watch Sandy and Berry until you come back."

I ruffled his hair. "Go back to bed at least. Even if you don't sleep, try to rest."

"Okay. "

Sully tried to hide his interest in what we were talking about as he put on the borrowed clothes. He followed me out to my truck once he'd dressed, unable to delay any longer. I noticed he was limping, except I didn't comment on it. He was mobile enough to get outside without help.

"Have you lived here long?" Sully put on his seatbelt, not acting at all bothered that a predator shifter had found him asleep and vulnerable in a bush then had a wild night

of sex with the same guy.

“A little over a week. Do you always go shifting in the woods at night? This isn’t the first time you’ve wandered into my territory.” I turned the truck onto the dirt path out to the road.

He blushed. “I... it’s against the rules—“

“To go into the woods alone. Which is why I asked.”

“Huh, so you know the town rules?”

“Yeah, I’ve been made aware. Got one of those inhibitor thingys.”

“You don’t sound like you’re a fan of the town?”

“Astute, aren’t you? No, I’m not. Look, let’s find your stuff and get you home.” We made it to the main road and I pulled onto it, heading towards Haenvale.

“Oh, there!” Sully pointed at a copse of trees. The one I’d found myself staring at a time or two. I stopped the truck and hopped out to get the scooter and helmet. I put them in the truck bed easily, then returned to the driver’s seat. “Thank you for this. My house is just over that side.” He directed me further into the town.

We were quiet for a moment. His scent was everywhere. I wished he’d put his inhibitor back on. I could see it poking out the pocket of his jeans on his lap.

“Are those your kids? Do you have a mate? Is that why you won’t tell me your name? Is that why we can’t bond?” Sully fiddled with the hem of the borrowed t-shirt.

“I adopted them. No, I don’t. You don’t need to know my name because we shouldn’t

be together. I'm not your fated, Sully."

"Why not?" he asked, latching onto my reason against us.

"I don't think anyone in this town would like it." I stopped the truck. "This close enough?"

"Yeah," he said, sadly. "That's my house there." He pointed in the direction of a large house, outside lights shining. When he made no move to open the door, I leaned across him to open it. He unclipped his belt and turned to face me. "Thanks for bringing me home. Maybe I'll see you around?"

I got out to put his scooter on the road behind the truck facing his house. When I returned to the cab, he was still looking at me.

He was so obviously hopeful that I would change my mind about him, it crushed me to say no. He was a complication I hadn't considered. Why would I have thought I'd meet my mate in this wretched town?

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, slowly. "You should stay away from the woods, Sully. Be safe, okay?"

"Could I have one more kiss? I wanted to remember this night properly."

Leaning into him, I brushed my lips over his.

His fingers grasped my head, his mouth met mine again. He kissed me deeply, his tongue plunging into my mouth. There was a tinge of desperation in this sensual assault. My cock thickened against my thigh as his pheromones filled the cab of the truck.

He broke away. “How about once more? Then I won’t bother you again.” I think we both knew that would be a lie.

Sully was a drug and I feared I was addicted.

Sully

“Sully,” he groaned. It was awkward as fuck not knowing his name, but there was also something hot about it, too.

Who was this little prey omega who had heat sex with a stranger in the woods? Even if said stranger was my mate, it still felt forbidden. I was a good boy who did what my parents told me, not one who did what I wanted in the pursuit of pleasure.

This other side of myself was more daring, and truthfully? I liked it. Which is how I found the courage to ask my mate for what I wanted: another time with him. I needed to convince him to take a risk on me. The town would adapt to us, or we could leave, right? He came from somewhere before. We could go back there.

With no small amount of difficulty, given how stiff my body was after all the sex on the cold, hard ground, then over the tree stump, I swung my body into his lap, just missing the car horn.

Instinctively, his hands landed on my hips. His fingers flexed possessively as I rocked forward to fuse our mouths together once more.

Kissing him was the best. His skin was soft, with the barest hint of stubble across his cheeks. His lips were firm, tongue hot. He took charge of the kiss quickly, dominating me perfectly.

I ground my ass against his hardening cock while my fingers worked their way under his shirt. His chest was smooth and defined. Likely from the work being done to his

house. My mate was so sexy!

Breaking from his mouth, I trailed a path of kisses along his jaw and down his throat, nipping at his Adam's apple, making him groan.

"Just once more," he finally relented, while he pulled down my borrowed sweats. His eyes were zeroed in on my body. I knew he found me attractive. Why wouldn't he give in to this incredible chemistry between us?

I quickly pulled the door shut and locked the truck. I rose up from his lap so he could get the sweats down to my knees, at the same time as I reached for his zipper .

Freeing his cock, I got a better look at it while it was hard for me. No wonder I ached, my mate was thick and longer than I was used to. I was pretty sure I was ruined for anyone else.

Taking him in my hand, I lowered myself onto the tip of his cock.

Slowly, I slid down on his length with a loud moan.

"Sully!" he groaned, fingers tightening once more on my hips.

I began to rock, the limited space making it more like a grind. He was so deep inside me it was almost too much! Every tiny movement lit up more nerves inside me.

One hand let go of my hip to cup my throat, angling my head for a bruising kiss. My lips were swollen and sore, but still it wasn't enough.

Grinding harder, moving up and down a little, I felt my orgasm building.

"Close!" I said, breathily. "Knot me?"

“Yeah. Close, too!” His grip on my hip tightened. He used his hold to work my body harder. Planting his feet, he pumped up into me.

That was it for me. My orgasm had my vision darkening as come covered my stomach, some landed on him.

With a finger, he gathered up a little and sucked it. “Delicious.”

If I could have, I would have orgasmed again from the smirk and the way I felt his knot expanding. After so many rounds, I had almost nothing left. I felt oversensitive, raw.

I felt his come spurting inside me. All that would be left of our encounter aside from memories.

Nestling my head on his chest, I fought back my tears. He wouldn’t get to see how much this was wrecking me. I’d agreed to this, so it was my fault I was in so much pain.

Maybe he sensed it, or maybe he did feel something for me, because he stroked my hair and held me tightly.

“Wish I could keep you,” I thought I heard him murmur. His heart was hammering in my ear. Probably just wishful thinking.

The sun was almost fully up and my night with my fated mate was done.

Once his knot went down, I eased back into my own seat, pulling up my borrowed sweats before I sat.

I looked at him. “I’ll wash them and return the clothes. ”

“Keep them. It’s not safe in the woods for you Sully. Stay in the town and out of trouble, okay?”

Unable to talk, the tears threatening to fall once more, I just nodded.

“C’mere.” He drew me to him and closed his mouth over mine.

It was impossible to remember every detail of how he tasted and felt. It was all too overwhelming.

He brushed away a stray tear. “You’ll be okay.” I don’t know if he said that to reassure himself or me.

“I’ll... uh... get a potion.” Getting one might be tricky. People in town would assume it was Orson’s baby I was trying not to have.

“Right. Good.”

Tension rose between us. I needed to go before I begged him not to end this.

“Bye.”

“Bye, Sully.”

I got out of the truck, my ankle protesting at the rough treatment, and closed the door, ready to break down once he was gone.

For a long moment, I lingered despondently at the side of the road, watching as my still unnamed mate drove out of my life for good. Finally, the pain in my ankle drove me towards my scooter and home. The bone wasn’t broken, or at least with my shifter healing, it wasn’t now. Maybe re-sprained at best. I should have rested longer, really

taken the time to heal before I went chasing a strange dingo.

One who turned out to be my mate.

How fucked was it that the same night I'd found him, I'd been rejected by him? He'd done it kindly, sure. I bet he had decent reasons for it. He said it was the town, and to be fair to him, there was a lack of prey/predator pairings/groups in Haenvale, so perhaps he had a point.

Nope, I wasn't going to cry in the street. How humiliating!

Missing out on a fated mate after the wild night we had, sucked big time. I thought I could convince him with how magically my body fit his that last time, but failed. We'd been compatible with the little banter we had. The sex was out of this world. I wasn't sure if it was a predator thing, or just him. He'd owned every inch of my body, it felt like. I ached all over from it.

So watching him drive away without a backwards glance was hard. Didn't mean I was giving up on him. Nope, I was one determined quokka. I would give him a few days. I had to heal up this foot first. Once I was better, I'd look for him again. Besides, I was tired and needed to look my best for my fated mate.

Dressed in borrowed clothes, covered in dirt, and with dark circles under my eyes was not it. After a day of sleep, I'd get that potion, take a day or two off work to heal properly, then I'd go looking for him. I'd find a way around his worries.

We were fated. It had to mean something. Bad things happened to those who went against fate. He'd learn that and come for me if I couldn't get to him.

Rubbing my chest, I pushed my scooter into our yard, my ankle protesting the whole way. We had a wide driveway with a well-maintained lawn. Out around the back of

the house, we had a pool. Not too far away was a lake, so Dad had installed an outside shower.

I struggled to get my clothes off now that my ankle was throbbing and didn't want to bear my weight. The shower's water was cold, designed for a quick rinse in the summer months when we went swimming in the afternoon, not a cooler morning wash, but there was a water heater if needed. I didn't bother. It would take too long and I was exhausted.

The clothes I dumped in the corner of the shower cubicle. I'd deal with them when I felt better. My torn clothes I'd throw in the trash, even if I wanted to keep something with his scent on. My mom would have a fit if she saw the evidence of what I'd been up to.

Getting the scent of sex off me took longer than I would have liked under the frigid spray. My skin stung from the force of the water and from the lemon soap Mom left out here. While I was grateful for something to wash with, I wished there was something that didn't sting the cuts and scrapes I'd picked up. Still, I was lucky Mom even used the pool and kept the shower stocked. She liked to swim sometimes if she had the afternoon off. Said it was good exercise .

There were towels in the locker next to the shower. I wrapped myself in a big fluffy one when I shut off the water.

What were the chances Mom was waiting for me again?

I tried to be quiet, but nope, there she was.

"Should you be on that foot?" She glanced at me, saw me limping worse than before, and hopped up. "Sit down! I'll get a poultice. Do you need a healer?"

“Nah, I should be fine. I just need to rest.”

“Instead of using that damn scooter, you should have told me you were heading out for coffee with Orson! I would have driven you. The town is buzzing with talk of you two!” Her delight was evident. I knew the rumor-mill would be working overtime, just didn’t realize how quickly she would hear about it.

“About that... Mom... it’s not going to work.”

Mom frowned, her fingers still fussing with the poultice she was applying to my swollen ankle. Fuck, I’d really done a number on it. She began cleaning the cuts and scrapes on my shoulders and back with a tingly gel some vampire scientists developed. Closed them up much quicker .

“Why not? Everyone said you were holding hands and there was baby talk.”

“Maybe before.” I paused before blurting. “Mom, I met my fated mate!”

She gasped. “Orson?”

It was my turn to frown. “No. He wouldn’t tell me his name.” I knew I was scowling. “But he’s living in the woods. I was inside his house! He gave me his son’s clothes—“

“His son?”

“Adopted.” I waved that away. Having kids wasn’t a dealbreaker to me. They were his family, so I’d grow to love them. “Anyway, he was the dingo I saw. Not the first one from years ago, that was his uncle. Mom, he’s my fated mate!”

“Impossible,” she denied. “Baby, you’re all mixed up.”

“But—“

“Sully, no.” She shook her head. “You’re telling me you went into the woods, again, I might add, and came across this dingo you said chased you the other day, and you what? Kissed him?”

Blushing, I tried to tiptoe around what had happened. “He shifted to talk to me. I knew he was safe because... well, I just did, okay? We talked a bit and the pull to him was just... I couldn’t control myself, Mom. I had to kiss him! Then I knew it.”

“So why isn’t he here?”

Fuck.

“He doesn’t want to be my mate.” My emotions were all over the place. I wanted to cry again.

“That settles it, then. He can’t be your mate. I’m sorry, baby, but if he can deny what you think happened, then he isn’t the one. Besides, you’ve got Orson. He’ll make you very happy.”

By the determined set to her shoulders, I knew there was no getting through to her.

Unable to keep the news to myself, and sure I was telling the truth, I called Trisha.

“Hey hun. How was that date? You didn’t reply!” I could hear the smile in her voice. “The town’s talking ’bout you. All good this time!”

“I’ve got so much to tell you!” All of it came spewing forth. The trips out to the woods, going further and further in, the info on Orson, then meeting him, my mysterious fated mate .

“Babe, that’s... wow! I can’t believe you acted so wild, giving your heat like that! He must be fine, right?”

“Kinda had no choice. I messed up taking my suppressants, then him and his amazing pheromones, with our connection, it threw me into it. Normally, I would have been fine. It just created a perfect storm, I guess. Normally there’s more warning. This time there was none. I was outta my mind with it in moments. I couldn’t have waited.”

“Shit, Sully, that could’ve been dangerous!”

“Yeah, but I just knew he wouldn’t have hurt me.”

Trisha sighed. “Okay, I’m gonna believe this was just your bond and not your poor judgement talking. He’s hot, right?”

“Gorgeous, Trisha. He’s stunning and kind. Just my type, tall, muscular like he’s clearly seen hard physical work. Wide shoulders to grip onto. Strong arms to haul me about.” I sighed dreamily. “Golden brown skin, deep brown eyes and black hair. His hands were slightly calloused, and felt amazing on my skin. His smile... he’s perfect. I mentioned kids, didn’t I? The eldest is a teenager, maybe seventeen or about that. I didn’t see the others, but their names were mentioned.”

“You sound so smitten! Gah, it makes my heart happy. So you’re going to find him, right?”

“You know me so well! I think I know which road he took out, so it shouldn’t be too difficult to find him again, but—“

“Fated mate bonds are hard to deny. Maybe give him a day or two. Your foot needs to heal anyway.”

Knowing she was right was different than admitting it. All I did was sigh.

“Sully, do not make me come over there and sit on you! Rest. Heal. Then we can go find this guy another day.”

“You’ll come with me?” I sat bolt upright, ignoring the twinge to my foot.

“Of course I will! Gotta make sure that man isn’t a serial killer or something.”

I loved Trisha so much.

“Just get Orson to drop you off with me in a couple days. We’ll take my daddy’s truck. This girl isn’t walking around the woods any time of day.”

“Me neither after last time!” I looked down at myself. After getting the scrapes cleaned, I’d changed into comfortable pajamas. When I could move better, I’d make sure the borrowed clothes were washed before I returned them.

“Well, at least you got some sense knocked into you! What were you thinking, wandering off alone like that? Anything could have happened to you!” Her voice was getting a tad shrill from her concern.

I rolled my eyes fondly. “Now you sound like my parents.”

“Aaannd my work here is done!” she said with extra drama. “Make plans with Orson for like, day after tomorrow or something, then text me, okay? Better get back to work!”

“Thanks, Trisha. Love you!”

“Love you, too. Bye!” The call ended, leaving me with a huge smile on my face.

Then I remembered what else I needed to ask her. Shit. A potion. My eyelids were growing too heavy to stay open. I'd deal with the contraception after a nap.

When I woke, it was dark once more. Fuck! I'd wasted the entire day. My stomach rumbled, giving me a plan.

Like in the human world, there was a delivery app. You could get just about anything, even in a town like Haenvale. The house was quiet, so I ordered in some food and an after heat contraception potion.

I'd been lax in taking my suppressants, then come across a fairly dominant alpha. His pheromones, along with our fated mate connection, had pushed me into the heat. My fault completely. I knew better. I was just grateful he didn't leave me to suffer through it alone.

The delivery didn't take long. My order of butternut squash curry was divine. The smell made my mouth water. I ate it quickly while checking over the instructions for the potion. Best taken after food. Good, at least something was going right.

"This product will only prevent implantation by expelling the product of a heat. The closer it is taken after sex, the more effective it is. If this does not happen within 30 minutes of taking this product, you may be pregnant. Warning: causes cramping. The efficacy of this potion is reduced when used with partnerships of a fated connection."

Double fuck. It has been hours, more than half a day, since the start of my heat. How long since he had breached my womb? And fated connections reduced how it worked? That would have been handy to know before.

Dinner eaten, I wasted no time in swallowing the bitter potion.

I sat and waited with a glass of water for the pain to start.

Thirty long minutes went by without a single cramp or gurgle. An hour.

Oh shit.

Unable to stand the not knowing, I put in another order. This time for a slice of cherry pie with ice cream and a pregnancy test.

They arrived quicker than my curry. I took the test to the bathroom and peed on the stick, crossing my fingers this was just one big mistake. A faulty potion. One put in the wrong box or something.

I was wrong.

The test had one word on the screen: pregnant.

How was I going to convince my mate this wasn't me trying to trap him into mating with him?

In less than a month, everyone would know I was pregnant. I had until then to change my mate's mind and have him choose me for me or risk losing him forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Imri

Driving home was difficult, considering how conflicted I felt.

Leaving Sully on the side of the road was the last thing I wanted to do. I felt inexplicably drawn to him. Okay, I knew the reason. He was right. Sully was my fated mate. Even though I'd denied it to his face, I knew it in my heart. He was mine as much as I was his.

Was I really going to deny our bond?

Yes, I was.

There were three reasons why I'd do so waiting for me at home. Our relationship was too new, too fragile, for a partner to come in. A young omega, a prey animal at that, who might want kids of his own. How likely was it a young omega would accept the kids? Especially ones with a complicated past like mine had.

He also came from Haenvale. As soon as they got wind of our relationship, if we were to have one, they'd drag me over the coals to prove I was worthy of one of their precious prey shifters. I had to keep the town off my back.

It was no good. We were too different for it to work. Maybe if I'd met him before the kids... No, that was unfair to the kids. They weren't disposable. Not a burden. They were mine.

As soon as it was a decent time of day, I was calling my moms for their help. I'd put

it off, but this was too important. I had no clue what Sully would say to anyone in town. The last thing I needed was a bunch of people knocking on my door asking questions I couldn't answer.

They could take Sandy and Berry from me. I couldn't allow that to happen.

Forcing myself to pay attention to the road, I brushed all thoughts of Sully away. All I could control was the stuff with the kids. I'd get the necessary papers forged to make it official enough looking to pass scrutiny, because I'd have people looking over every inch of my life if they found out about us.

It was only a matter of time before Sully said something to the wrong person and the authorities were at my door. Time in our little bubble was running out. My first instinct was to flee, but the woods were all the kids had ever known, and Rowan's magic was too unpredictable to move for a bit. It wasn't his fault, just the facts of the situation.

Rowan was waiting for me on the porch when I pulled up. He had a coffee in his hands, worry lined every part of his body. He was hunched against the early morning chill, cradling the cup like it held all the answers.

He waited for me to park the truck and join him on the porch before he spoke.

"Is he really your fated mate?" It was asked so quietly I almost missed the words.

He handed over the still warm coffee to me. I sipped it before I answered. "Doesn't matter either way. He's not for me."

"Why? Is it because of us?" Rowan looked on the brink of tears.

I didn't know how to approach this. The truth was, the kids were part of it. Not all of

it. Honesty was the best policy and all that... ugh, I just hoped this wouldn't make Rowan take the twins and leave.

"Part of it is, yeah. We don't have what we need yet to ensure the town doesn't take you three from me." I held up a hand to stop his words of protest. "First thing this morning I'm calling my moms. I'll introduce you three to them, and they'll fix it."

"So you can have your mate once that's fixed?"

"No."

"Why not?" With the way he was frowning, it was easy to see just how young Rowan was. He was idealistic, untarnished by the outside world because he'd barely met anyone or been disappointed.

"Because he's still from that godforsaken town," I muttered bitterly. "And I'm still a predator and he's still prey. There's no changing that. Besides, they'd never go for it," I sighed, feeling a heavy weight on my shoulders. "I'm not interested in fighting a town."

"So you're just going to give your fated mate up?" Now Rowan was frowning at me.

"We've only just met. He doesn't even know my name," I pointed out. "Neither of us are missing out on anything."

In our short time together, we hadn't had time to form a bond. We barely knew a thing about each other, by design on my end, aside from our shifter types and that Sully was twenty-two. A big age gap. If we were both a little older, it wouldn't matter so much, but he was only just considered an adult. Fresh out of college, with no real world experience.

His heat might have been an error. I should have taken him home instead of giving him my knot. Already I craved more of him. Something that would lessen with time, I hoped.

“It just doesn’t seem right.” Rowan leaned his head on my shoulder. Rare for him. He was starting to initiate touches more. I enjoyed how tactile the younger kids were. They often came for hugs and Berry loved having her hair brushed.

“Maybe not, but it’s how things are for now. If the town proves me wrong about them...” I didn’t really want to voice my secret hope. After our time in the truck, I might have ruined things for good with him. He looked so sad in the rearview mirror.

Having Sully in my life didn’t look likely for the time being.

“Imri? Is it not early there?” Mama sounded sleepy even though it was already after seven, and I was on my fourth coffee.

“Can I start a video call with you? I need to show you something.”

“Hold on.” There was rustling, then the call changed, and she came into view, a robe tightly tied around her ample form. Mom fed her well. “What’s wrong? Is it the house? We’re able to come sooner if you need us.”

“No, it’s not the house. I’ve got some helpers to pitch in.” It was utterly nerve-wracking to reveal what I’d been hiding from her.

“I thought no one was allowed in those damned woods?” I heard her muttering about backwards hick towns and bit back a smile.

The rant she had gone on the day I told her no one came out to the house was epic. My parents were so fierce in their protectiveness for all of their children, and the

littles my siblings had.

“Remember that letter?”

“Do I remember the letter, he says?” she turned to ask Mom, who was at the stove cooking eggs. “He wouldn’t tell us what was in it, would he?”

“Nope.” Mom’s eyes shone with fondness.

“You want the long or short version?” I grinned playfully.

“Short, my eggs are nearly done!” Mama called, she’d gotten up to help Mom with breakfast by taking the plates out of the warming shelf in the oven.

“Okay, well, you are grandparents again. I’ve adopted three kids!”

Mama nearly dropped the plates. Mom shut off the burner. “Baby, you’re gonna have to give us the longer version.”

It took some time to convince them to eat their breakfast while I explained the details of the letter. Both of them got emotional hearing how Malik had taken the family under his wing. What wasn’t in the letter was that the kids’ mom, Agnes, was the one who performed healing on Malik, delaying the disease slowly killing him. Rowan told me he had tried to do the same after she died, but it wasn’t as effective .

“Oh! Those poor babies!” Mama cried, she had a tissue held tightly in her fist, fresh tears welling in her eyes. “Let me see them, please, Imri. Are they okay?”

“Better than you would’ve thought, considering they had to wait for me. They’ve got no one else.”

“Not true. They’ve got grandmas now. So let us see them.” Mom, more stoic than Mama, even had unshed tears begging to fall.

“See?” I said, walking my phone through to the living room where the kids waited for me. “Two grandmas, just waiting to meet you.”

I turned the camera to face the kids. They each waved nervously.

“The twins are Sandy and Berry. The big one is Rowan. He’s been helping me fix up the house.”

My moms excitedly greeted the kids, making relief flood my system. I unbunched my shoulders and took a full breath for the first time since Sully had woken on the couch.

“What do you need?” Mom asked about half an hour later, after the kids felt safe enough to ask to go outside. They’d gotten along so well with both my moms, it was a massive relief for us all.

“You’re not going to tell me to turn the kids over to the authorities?”

“In that town?” Mama sounded offended. “Have you lost your head? No, we support you keeping them. You are planning on keeping them, right? They love you, Imri.”

“Of course I’m keeping them!” It was my turn for my hackles to rise. “I’d never introduce you as their grandparents if I wasn’t. That’s stupid and cruel!”

“Good. So what do you need?” Mom intervened.

“I need your witch hacker friend to make them identities,” I said to Mama. “Fake an old adoption certificate for them all going back to when Malik went into the hospice.”

“So no one knows they were alone. Right. Makes sense. I can do that. I’ll need dates and their birth names.” She was already fiddling with her phone, ready to act.

“I’ll text you that. We’ve been working with the younger ones on our story. At the minute, the story is we only came here because Malik’s estate finally transferred to me. I’ve had someone check on the house periodically, which is why it wasn’t as bad. Malik was their guardian after their mom died, until the hospice, but I agreed to take them when he got too bad. We lived not too far from you, pretty isolated. All that shit.”

“Smart. I always knew you had the brains. All perfectly plausible and giving no one reason to dig too deep will keep you all safe.”

“The documents will help.”

“They will. I’ll get on that as soon as we’re off the phone. When they are ready, we’ll come with them, help you get more of the house ready. We want to visit our grandbabies, don’t we, honey?”

I heard my mom in the background, shouting that she was already packing. “I’m canceling that hotel. That town isn’t getting a dime of our money if I can help it!”

Mama’s smile was vicious. “Damn straight!”

“You know the town probably doesn’t know about the kids, right? The clan that came here generations ago just slowly died out. The townsfolk don’t go into the woods because they probably think the ghosts of that clan are there, waiting to attack. It wouldn’t have crossed their minds that a family still lived there.”

“Maybe, but I don’t like how they treated Malik, either. They sound like bigots.”

I opened my mouth to convince her they weren't, but stopped myself. There was no proof they weren't. Didn't I say to Sully they wouldn't like me being with him because of what we were? I'd seen enough from the way they'd looked at me and in the rules they had in the town charter to make that decision for myself.

"Fair enough. You'll have the camper, right? If we focus on it, we can get the spare room ready for you."

"The camper will be more than fine. We don't get to use it often enough," Mom said, returning to her mate's side.

"Thanks, Mom, Mama. I knew you'd know what to do."

"You're more than welcome, Imri." Mama's eyes shone with her love for me. "We don't say this often enough, but both of us are very proud of you. Always have been, just especially today. You've brought so much light into our lives. I can't wait to meet them. I'll call when we get the documents, okay? Might take a couple of days, though. Love you."

"Love you both, too."

Some time later, Rowan, Sandy, and Berry joined me in the kitchen. Rowan slumped down into the chair, his head tipped back, looking at the ceiling.

"I like our grandmas," Sandy said confidently. He never let anything bother him.

Berry perched herself on my knee, leaning back against my chest. "Me too. Grandma Ellie said she was going to bring me a pretty dress."

"A pretty dress for a pretty princess. That's right."

“Can I have wellington boots for the garden instead?” She’d learned about wellies from the TV shows about Earth One. I tried to limit their screen time because too much wasn’t good for them.

“Why not both? Grandma Farah might get you some boots.”

Sandy didn’t ask for a present, unused to the idea. He didn’t like the TV as much as Berry did.

“They didn’t try to talk you out of it.” Rowan finally looked at me. His eyes were red-rimmed. “They want you to keep us, too.”

“Of course they do. I guarantee it’s a done deal. They were bugging me for your details as soon as I hung up with them. Might take them a couple of days to track down their witch friend, she’s a free spirit, but I guarantee they are out here by the end of the week.”

“What would you bet?”

I ran a hand over Sandy’s brown hair and squeezed Berry to me. “If they aren’t here by the end of this week, I’ll make you a pie of your choosing, just for you.” Rowan’s appetite was epic. “If you lose...”

Humor danced in Rowan’s eyes. “If they come visit before the week is out, I’m on cooking duty.”

“Cooking duty, huh? How long?”

“A week?” Rowan hedged.

My eldest kid was an amazing cook. I almost wished my parents would be delayed

and Rowan would lose.

“I agree to those terms.”

We shook hands, making the twins laugh. My chest ached and I was exhausted. Still, protecting them almost made it worth giving up Sully.

Sully

With shaking hands, I hid the positive pregnancy test. I had to decide what to do about the mess I found myself in.

I had a fated mate who didn't want me. An arranged mating partner who also didn't want me. In parts of the town, I was still a laughing stock. All over an event the police and probably the mayor's office knew actually happened, but they hid the truth from everyone, possibly at the risk of the town and certainly harming poor Malik. Shifting sickness was a terrible disease with horrible side effects.

Oh, then there was me, being a twenty-two-year-old recent college graduate who lived with his parents in their house, working at their hotel. What would they do when they found out about me being pregnant with a stranger's baby? It didn't matter that he was my fated mate if he didn't want me, did it? What kind of alpha would accept me with another's child?

Mentally, I scoffed. These days people had blended families all the time. I wasn't ruined because I had a kid on the way. The mating with Orson was sunk, anyway. This would just give him a decent excuse to leave with his chosen partner. In a few years, once my baby was older, I could try again for a mate.

How could I have a baby alone? Again, I chided myself. Who said I was alone? My parents would be upset, sure. Things might be difficult between us for a time. Did I really believe they'd let me go it alone?

Even if they did, I had my brother and my sister. They wouldn't see me out on the

street. I could count on their love and support.

Then there was Trisha. She was a little older than me. We'd met working at Rosie's and hit it off. My best friend was child free by choice, still I knew she'd help me when I needed her. Trisha would be the best damn auntie who'd ever auntied.

Feeling better about the situation, I got into bed. I was utterly exhausted despite my earlier nap. Having a heat always took it out of me, which is part of the reason I'd been taking suppressants, though I'd forgotten to take them a couple times, oops. I was glad my heat cycle had waited to start until I was away at college because having one alone in Haenvale would have been miserable. Trisha's aunt had helped me through my first one by using a service. The alpha chosen for me was fairly inexperienced himself, which strangely, set me at ease. We'd fumbled through the entire thing and laughed about it after. We were still friends.

Things weren't all that bad. At least I knew I had a fated mate. I might not know his name, and maybe I'd been rejected, but he'd left me with this little gift.

In my bed, I cradled my stomach tenderly. I would keep this baby, even if having an abortion, or giving it up for adoption, might be easier in the long term. It didn't matter to me that I might be doing this without my alpha, or that I was pretty young to be a parent. I wanted this baby.

Strange, because the idea of having a baby with Orson had been a big no. I'd scoffed at the idea of starting a family this young.

This, though, was my choice. No one else knew. No one could influence how I felt. Besides, this was the one part of my fated mate I could have.

My thoughts spun as I lay in bed, willing my brain to switch off so I could get some more rest. Memories of my mate flowed through my mind, while I wondered if I

should tell Trisha about the baby. She would be so mad about my mate rejecting me if she knew. Maybe it was better to have her support in getting him to change his mind first. I'd tell her before the tell-tale signs showed up. Same with my parents.

If I wanted to get my mate to choose me, he had to do it without the burden of a possibly unwanted baby. I'd figure him out, see if he was open to having more kids before I sprung my surprise on him.

When I woke late the next morning, I felt terrible. Mom took one look at me and told me to go back to bed. If I didn't improve in a day or two, she would get a healer to visit me.

Calling in sick for work sucked. Kenneth was incredibly smug over the phone about me not being able to handle an upcoming mating and a job. Unfortunately for him, Dad was in the room when I made the call. Kenneth was now on incredibly thin ice. There was going to be an investigation about him when I made it back to work.

Trisha sent chicken noodle soup and a couple of Earth One movies she thought I'd like to keep me occupied while I was sick. It was an adaptation of a fae book series, because there weren't enough fae movies in her opinion. The lead was a human girl called Jude, and the love interest was a prince called Cardan. We'd loved the books when they'd first come out and I'd bought her the trilogy when it was released as a movie.

She'd also sent me a ton of texts sympathizing with me that I couldn't head back out to the woods. Truthfully, I was a little wary of being rejected in front of my friend and Trisha had cases coming up she had to prepare for, so she was busy. I hoped I could see my mate one more time alone to give me a chance to convince him without the pressure of my bestie looming over us. She meant well but it was already so embarrassing to be rejected.

Her support was well meant, and I truly loved her. There were just some things a guy needed to do by himself, and finding his sexy mate was one of them.

A couple days of being at home and there was no improvement. An elf healer was called. They frowned a lot, used their magic to scan me, and ushered my parents out of the room.

“Do you know?” she asked.

Amethyst was the head of the clinical team at the local surgery. My parents really had pulled out all the stops to get me looked at. A home visit was even more special. I kind of felt bad about this preferential treatment, considering what I was hiding.

“About the baby? Yeah.”

“Who is the father? I assume it’s not Orson or he would be here and your parents would know. They didn’t mention it.”

“It’s a secret until I can tell the father.” I picked nervously at a thread on the blanket covering me. “It’s not Orson. I met my fated mate...”

“And you had heat sex with him?” She was so matter of fact.

“Yes.” I could feel the heat rising off my face.

“What aren’t you telling me, Sullivan? I need to know so I can treat you correctly.” She scrutinized my expression. “Nevermind. I shall guess. You were rejected, correct?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry.” Clearly, she meant it. Her manner softened, expression sincere. “That must be difficult for you. It is part of why you are feeling ill. A sort of mourning for your bond. It will pass. A few more days and you should be fine.”

“What are you going to tell my parents?”

“That you are having a reaction to the heat suppressants you were on and need some rest. Everything else is yours to share when you are ready. I assume you know—“

“That I’ll start showing signs in about a month? Yeah.”

Unlike a quokka who carries a pregnancy for twenty-seven days and then holds the joey in their pouch for six months, I would be pregnant for around seven months, give or take. My parents would notice the changes in my scent and body around the month mark. The town might take a little longer with the inhibitor, I forgot if it hid the telltale scent, but I wouldn’t be able to hide a bump forever .

“Okay, good. Come to the clinic next week for a check up, alright?”

I told Amethyst I would, and she left soon after. My parents fussed over me a while longer until they had to go to the hotel. With me out, they had to cover, and my siblings wanted an update on me anyway.

Orson texted.

Orson

Are you well enough for a visitor? Your parents said I should keep you company while they are out. They are keen for us to plan another date. I could bring one of those coffees you like?

Sully

Please. Company would be nice.

My parents had left the door unlocked. Orson came straight up, following the directions I'd given him. The first sip of my drink was heavenly until I worried about the baby and caffeine. I shrugged it off. One coffee a day wouldn't do much harm, would it? I put it on a mental list to check out later. I was so uninformed about pregnancy !

"You're doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Just need to rest up a bit."

Orson took the chair near the bed my mom had facing the screen mounted on the wall. I was watching the movies Trisha had sent over for the third time. I let it play as background noise.

"Oh, I liked these books."

"You did?" I stopped the movie, ready to restart it if he wanted.

"Yes. My parents thought they were silly. I've never watched the movies before. Baxter would—"

"Is that the omega you want to be with?"

"He is. Um... this is delicate. The coffee shop caused problems between us. He believes it would be best if we made our mating official, you and I, not me with him."

"What?" I asked, horrified.

“He knows we have an agreement you are happy with because you are getting something out of it, too. He’s just jealous we don’t get to be open. He wanted me to make this real with you.”

“I met my fated mate!” I blurted out, unable to hold back. I felt sorry for Baxter. He needed to know I had a mate of my own.

“What?” Orson’s head whipped around so fast, I worried about him injuring himself.

“Okay, maybe I didn’t tell you everything over text. Thought it was best. The dingo I saw in the woods? Well, I went back. We talked. I, uh, kissed him and it told me that he’s my fated mate!”

“That’s... that’s great!”

Was it? He didn’t sound so sure. Maybe it was a vibe I was giving off.

“Meh, not so great. He denied it, wouldn’t tell me his name, and dropped me home without a backwards glance, but I’m close to cracking that hard exterior, y’know?”

Orson chuckled, his hands loosened on the armchair. “How so?”

I couldn’t tell him about the baby, but I could tell him about our wild night together.

“We had sex. More than once. I forgot to take my suppressants and it just sort of happened. Our chemistry is out of this world!”

Orson blushed. “There’s more to a relationship than compatibility in bed.”

“True but there was just this spark between us, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know. Why did he deny he was your fated? ”

“He said predators and prey can’t be together here. Didn’t make sense to me... now though... I’m wondering.”

“So you have a predator for a mate and he sees the town as it truly is.” He fixed me with a look. “This is why I can’t be with Baxter. My parents wouldn’t want me to have a Pallas cat for a mate.”

“Is Baxter your fated?”

Orson frowned. “I’m not sure.”

“How can’t you be sure?” the words were sort of rudely spoken. “Sorry, that was—“

“It’s fine. We’ve just never had our inhibitors off around each other. He’s worried he might do something to hurt me since he’s never been around a prey shifter without one. And the inhibitor affects our senses, it’s possible we could be missing the bond.”

“Oh, wow! I... Well, I never thought about it like that. I always thought when a mating was close to happening we would take off our inhibitors and then we’d know, y’know?” Orson nodded. “But if he’s a predator, then there’s a chance...”

“That he could attack me. You’ve had to have seen how few predator/prey matings happen in Haenvale. We don’t mix with each other much.” He sighed. “Baxter is from here. He’s never been anywhere else. Sully... you don’t see how badly predators are treated here. There’s few places they can be themselves, without magic stealing their animals.”

“Stealing their animals? What d’you mean?”

“They can’t shift with their inhibitors on. Baxter has to take his off first. There’s something in the ones they make for predators that stops them from shifting.”

“Seriously?” If I didn’t take mine off, it fell off after a shift, since it didn’t change size with me. I hadn’t realized at all that predators couldn’t shift with them on.

“Yeah. I didn’t notice until he pointed it out, but theirs are different from ours.”

“Really?”

“Next time take a closer look at how their inhibitor is made. Theirs are thicker, with more magic in them. It cuts them off from their animal senses.”

What the hell was going on in Haenvale?

After Orson left, without watching a movie with me, but with the crystal on him to watch it at home, I took a walk to the lake near my house.

The day was scorching and I planned for a dip to cool off now that my foot was all better. All traces were gone from that night, aside from the baby.

I still felt like crud. I hoped a little vitamin D would help with that. Not the D I wanted necessarily, I laughed at my thoughts, feeling a little unhinged from being cooped up so long.

There were decisions I had to make, and soon. Did I let this fledgling bond, because that’s what it was, I’d looked it up, fade away, or did I hunt my mate down?

Was I willing to give up on fate?

Hell no.

I'd take another day or two to sort my head out, then go find him.

At the water's edge, I stripped off my t-shirt and cargo shorts, left my shoes next to my abandoned clothes and walked into the water in my smallest pair of swimming trunks. May as well show off my body while I still had a flat stomach!

Not that anyone was around to see anyway. Most of the tourists were probably at the beach, the residents of the town were split between nocturnal and daytime hours and probably had work if they were awake.

I had the lake to myself and the water was heavenly.

"Didn't know they made trunks that small, or that quokkas could swim," the most delightful rumbling voice said behind me.

Turning, I saw my mate, delicious chest on show, his wet, white briefs clinging sinfully to his hardening cock, wading in my direction, his gaze hot.

Maybe, just maybe, he was feeling this, too.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Imri

With time before my moms arrived with the paperwork I needed to keep the town off my back and the kids safe, I roped Rowan and the twins into getting more of the house and yard ready for our visitors.

We talked every day with one or the other of my parents, even my brother and sister called to say hi to their niblings. The cousins were introduced to each other, and my siblings made plans to visit us later in the summer, before school started, so everyone could hang out together.

At no point did I discuss having a fated mate. It was a point of contention between me and Rowan. He didn't understand why I could trust our family with my kids and not my mate. I even shut down conversation with him over it.

My mate was my business. The less I thought about Sully the better. My entire body ached with a need to hunt him down and claim him. I missed him with a fierceness I thought impossible before I met him.

How could I claim such a sweet little quokka when I was a dingo, literally a quokka's main predator in the wild?

I made a couple of trips into Haenvale under coercion. We needed supplies, and no one wanted to make the two hundred mile round trip to get supplies elsewhere. Rather than wait for a delivery, it was quicker to just go get it.

Unable to risk taking the kids into town just yet, I went alone, head constantly on a

swivel, looking for any sign of Sully. I was in real danger of just appearing at his house.

He wasn't anywhere, and there was no one in the town I could ask about him. Not that I should. We were a one and done, no matter what my traitorous heart said.

What I did spot was more of a divide than I'd first noticed. The service predators received compared to neutral supernaturals and especially prey ones was usually surface level polite, where everyone else got warmth and interest. The few prey/predator couples I saw while exploring the town were mostly out of towners. They had a look about them which screamed tourist. The ones who lived there were subdued, as if afraid to take up too much space and attract unwanted notice.

It only worked to make me more sure of my decision to keep away from Sully.

"Imri?" Rowan called. He was speaking to Mama on the phone. "Gaga says they've finally tracked down their witch friend. She can get the documents in a few more days. A week tops."

Yes, my moms had chosen their titles. Mama was Gaga and Mom was Noona to my kids, the same as their cousins, my niblings.

Rowan had a playful grin playing about his mouth while he held the phone to his ear. I wondered what Mama was saying to him. He knew he was winning our bet. My moms had tried to find this witch for days with little success.

"Cool. Gives us time to get the flooring down in the spare room if you're up for it."

"Yeah. Gaga's also asking if she can share my number with Ginger. They think she might be good at training me to control my sparks."

We'd nicknamed his overpower as his sparks. I thought by giving it a harmless name, it would feel less scary for Rowan and the kids. He was doing it less, powering things around the house instead, so maybe it was doing the trick.

"Sounds good to me." A witch trainer who knew where he came from without the town being involved was ideal. I needed to thank Mama for that one.

In the kitchen, Mom was cooking via a video call with the twins. She was teaching them how to make cookies.

"Imri, Sandy dropped the last egg," Berry complained with a whine.

"That's okay. We've got a grocery delivery coming in a few days," I soothed. I grabbed some cleaning spray and a rag to clean up the spill.

"I want to make muffins tomorrow!" Sandy looked upset by the accident. I guess there were times they had to be careful with food. A spill would mean less for another day.

With a sigh, I sprayed the cleaner over the spot and wiped it away. "Guess I'll head into Haenvale again. Maybe we should look into building our own chicken shed and run. What do you think?"

"Leave that for your mama when we arrive. She's built a couple before," Mom advised, then turned her attention back to Berry. "Great mixing, princess! Sandy, you look ready for the chocolate chips. Great job!"

"Right, if you're all okay without me, I'll head out." I put the cleaning supplies away and grabbed the keys to the truck.

Everyone waved me off, far too occupied to pay close attention to the extra pep in my

step.

In all honesty, the last couple of days had been hard. Getting out of bed in the morning, I felt more exhausted than I had the night before. Every part of my body ached, and the only time I felt better was when I was in Haenvale.

The grocery store wasn't too far away. I got a couple of boxes of eggs, more flour and sugar, just in case there were more baking accidents.

On the way home, I found myself driving back to the street where Sully lived. His house looked empty, though it would in the afternoon on a gorgeous summer's day. Everyone was likely at work.

Further up, there was a sign for the road down to the lake. Instinct pulled me that way.

I parked my truck under some shady trees and wandered to the water's edge.

My breath caught in my throat. Sully was in the water.

Standing alone, looking completely naked, his pale skin gleaming, he'd never looked so beautiful.

There was a wistful expression on his face. I wanted to kiss it. Completely wrong of me considering this mess was my fault, but I couldn't help how my heart leaped at the sight of him, his head raised to the light, his eyes closed.

Without thinking too deeply, I stripped down to my briefs and waded into the water.

Fuck, he was a sight for sore eyes. Getting closer to him without him even noticing, I spotted what he was wearing. Those were sinfully tiny!

“Didn’t know they made trunks that small, or that quokkas could swim,” I remarked, sure he could hear my splashes by now.

He turned to face me, his eyes lighting up when they landed on me. His hot gaze roved my body, taking in how my wet briefs clung to me and how I was reacting to the sight of him.

I stood still, waiting for his answer. He slowly made his way closer.

“Are you going to tell me your name this time? ”

“No.” I didn’t know why it was something I wanted to keep from him until I discussed it with Rowan. In part, it was so he couldn’t look up every detail in my life before the paperwork was in place. I’d have to ask Ginger to manufacture some social media or something for the kids.

Magic was also about intention and names. Having my name would make it easier for him to break through the barrier Rowan had put in place to protect the house. The look away spell was now keyed to make people turn back as if there was nowhere else to go.

Sully looked slightly amused. “Of course. I didn’t expect anything else, Frank.”

“Frank?”

“Not a Frank then. Maybe a Tom?”

I shook my head with a laugh. “You can play all you like. I’m not going to tell you.”

“That’s okay, Joe. I can try other methods of persuasion.” He closed the scant distance between us, tucking himself under my chin and nuzzling my throat.

“Is that right?” I murmured while I wrapped my arms around him.

Everything felt good now Sully was close. Nothing else mattered, not the town, not my worries over the kids. Nothing except how good he felt in my embrace.

“Hmm... you smell so good, Keith.” I laughed. The touch of his fingers on bare skin and his lips on my throat had a shiver running down my spine. “My house is empty. Will be for hours, and I forgot to put on sunscreen.”

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?” I hoisted him over my shoulder, earning a squeal. I swatted his ass lightly while he smacked mine as he hung there, not fighting me while I walked back to shore.

I leaned down to gather up my stuff, giving him time to escape my clutches, but he stayed hanging upside down, perfectly content to let me carry him.

“Ivan, my stuff’s over there!”

His name choices were ridiculous. I gathered up his things and walked along a path I hadn’t noticed before. It led straight to Sully’s street. His house was still empty when I got to it. I walked straight to the front door.

“No, round back! We need to shower off.”

Following his directions, I walked around the house, past the pool, and to the outside shower. It was completely hidden from prying eyes .

I set him down just outside it so he could turn the water on. Every movement he made was graceful and easy. I wondered if he’d been struggling being apart like I had. He’d looked so relieved to see me, I thought he must have been.

He stepped close, his fingers lingered on the waistband of my briefs. “Want to share the shower with me, Bob? I can wash you, then you can wash me, and if there’s orgasms in there, all the better, right?”

With a chuckle, I let my gaze fall to where he was touching me. “We should conserve water where we can.”

“I knew you were environmentally responsible, Jeff,” he said with laughter in his eyes as he shoved my briefs off.

His scent sharpened with his arousal at the sight of my hard cock. Naughty little quokka wasn’t wearing his inhibitor.

“Hello, old friend,” he muttered. His fingers closed around my length and stroked from root to tip with a delicious twist at the end.

I groaned. “Are you talking to my dick?”

“Maybe.” His fingers tightened their grip. “Depends on if you’re going to give me what I need.”

“What do you need, Sully?” Unable to resist, I dipped my head to his throat, my hands to his ass. I pushed his tiny speedo down to tease a finger around his leaking hole. He groaned when I breached him.

“If I can’t have your name—“

“You can’t.” I pumped two fingers inside him. He was so wet for me.

“Then I want your cock inside me.” He didn’t pause his strokes.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I said against his ear. I nipped at it and he moaned.

“Probably not, but I want you anyway. Give me your knot, Ivan.”

“You’ve used that name already,” I teased, hating the other names, but unable to risk him having my true name. Still, I worked him open for me.

“I’m horny, Randy. Give me that knot. Make me come so I can sleep without dreaming of you.”

My stomach churned with guilt. “Sully—“

“Just... just fuck me, please. I need to feel you deep inside me again.”

I cupped his chin to kiss him soundly. He returned it enthusiastically, walking backwards until we were both under the warm spray of the water.

Sully found the soap and rubbed it over my back and ass while I enjoyed the taste of him, the feel of his body pressed up against me. I hiked one of his legs over my hip, exposing his hole. He was slick and ready for my cock. I pressed him against the tiled wall while my tip met his entrance.

With one easy thrust, I was inside him to the root. He dropped the soap to claw at my back, voicing his pleasure while I pumped into him.

My lips barely left his the whole time, totally addicted to his kiss. All I wanted to do was fuck Sully until he forgot every name in his head, including his own. Until he could barely stand. Until he understood this situation was fucking me up, too.

He clung to me, returning each kiss, each touch, until he whimpered and came, all

without my touching his neglected cock.

The feel of him coming pulled me into my own orgasm. My knot grew, stretching his rim. I pumped my hips in shallow thrusts while I filled him. Sully came once more with a deep moan against my mouth. All I wanted to do was sit with Sully in my arms until my knot went down, then fill him up again.

Coming home with him was a mistake. Each taste of him was pulling me further into his life. I wasn't ready for the chaos that being his mate would cause. I might never be.

He found more soap and handed it to me, letting me clean him up as best I could without moving too much.

Sully studied my expression, then sighed. "This wasn't enough, was it, Billy?"

I struggled to smile. "Everything is perfect when it's just me and you, but I've got the kids—"

"The kids aren't a problem for me!" he protested. "I love that you're a dad!"

"Rowan is nearly your age, and that doesn't bother you?"

"No. At his age, he needs a friend, not another parent. We would find our own thing in time."

"Okay, but what about the town?"

"What about it? There's no rules against predator and prey shifters being together. It's not like it bothers you either."

“It doesn’t, but I’ve been around prey shifters my entire life. Growing up, I had mouse friends.”

“See? Not a problem.”

“Sully... the to wn—“

“They’ll get used to it. We’ll start a new trend!”

He was so idealistic. Life wouldn’t be that easy. “Do you really want that for your life?”

“We could move!”

I stared at him in shock. “You’d do that.”

“You’re my fated mate, I’d do just about anything for you.”

“Sully—“

“This isn’t fair, Steven.” Neither of us could muster a smile at his name game. “You can’t just appear, give me hope, then vanish again. Don’t you want me?”

I rested my head against his with a sigh. “This isn’t easy, Sully.”

“Am I not worth fighting for?”

“You are. You really are, Sully. I’m just not worth damaging your life for.”

My knot went down enough for me to slip free of his body less than a minute later. Neither of us spoke. Sully was doing his best to push back tears. I kissed him gently

one last time, gathered my dropped clothes, and left Sully to cry alone.

Only when I was back in my truck did I give in to my own tears. I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life: hurting Sully.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Imri

Unable to sleep, I tossed and turned throughout the night, catching an hour of rest here and there. Eventually, I got up, feeling all muggy-headed.

The ache in my chest, which had vanished when I saw Sully, returned with a vengeance. I rubbed at it unthinkingly at the breakfast nook, drinking my third coffee before six am.

Rowan took the seat next to me. “Can’t sleep?” He laid his head on my shoulder, his presence reassuring.

“I fucked up.”

We sat in the quiet a moment. “You saw him yesterday, didn’t you?”

“How did you know?”

He sat thoughtfully for a long moment. “We could all tell you’d been crying. Your eyes were red. ”

Apparently I hadn’t done such a good job of hiding it. “How did you know it was Sully?”

“Who else could make you feel so guilty? Your lines are sour with it.”

“Lines?” I ran my fingers through his hair, enjoying this quiet moment to bond with

him. Rowan had been responsible for the others for too long. I wanted to be a safe space for him to be a kid again, even if he was technically a young adult.

“Sometimes my magic can see a person’s aura. I’ve never had much of a chance to play with that ability. I used to try it out on Uncle Malik. It’s how we’d know if Mom had to try another treatment with him.”

“In case I’ve never said it, you’re remarkable, Rowan.” I laughed. “Remarkable Rowan sounds like a superhero name. Your powers are your epic magic.”

Rowan’s laugh was sweet. “I’m supposed to be making you feel better, not the other way around.”

“We can do both, right? Having the three of you makes all this mess with Sully worth it. Once we get the documents and some photos, I can decide.”

“What’s there to think about?”

“Your mom kept you from that town for a reason. Every time I’ve been there, it’s shown me there’s a darker side to it. Sully is the kid of the people who own the best hotel in the town. There’s no way they’d want him with a dingo shifter.”

“Is that a good enough reason to stay away from your fated mate?”

That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it?

Hours later, the kids forced me out of the house. They were done with my pacing, my short temper, though it was never directed at them, and my general grumpy behavior. They threatened to have my moms call me to talk some sense into my head if I didn’t just go see Sully.

Finding my mate wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. His scooter was at his house, but after knocking for five minutes, I knew he wasn't.

I drove to the main street and parked, determined to stretch my legs while I waited for him to come home. What I was going to do if his parents were there, I didn't know.

Sully wasn't in any of the shops, but more than once I thought I heard his name when I stopped by the busy café, Rosie's. Thinking it must have been my overactive imagination, I brushed it off. Besides, they kept talking about this other guy with him. Sully hadn't told me he was mated. He didn't wear a bite.

Acting irrationally and asking someone was out of the question. I couldn't damage his reputation when I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

More and more, I just wanted to give in to this incredible pull I felt to him. He was sweet, but not a pushover, he was gorgeous and kind. He was handling my bullshit with grace far older guys wouldn't have been capable of.

I was in awe of his maturity.

After a couple coffees and an incredible BLT sandwich, I decided to head by the hotel and circle back towards Sully's home.

It was tempting to go into the hotel and ask if he was working. I didn't, because that would bring unwanted scrutiny on us both.

While I was heading back towards his house, I spotted him. I pulled over to the side and rolled the window down.

"Hey, want a ride home?"

Sully looked at me with a mix of mistrust and hope. “Um...”

I hated that I’d caused so much damage in one afternoon. “Just to talk, okay? I feel awful about yesterday.”

“Alright,” he said with a little hesitation. He climbed into the truck with a nervous smile. “Were you looking for me?”

“I was.”

His face lit up with joy. The smile he sent my way was blinding. To be on the end of smiles like that would be worth anything the town put us through, right?

“There’s something I wanted to show you,” Sully said after a moment. The truck took the turn into his wide driveway easily. I parked behind his scooter, leaving room for other vehicles.

“Mom and Dad are going straight from the hotel spa to a party. They’ll be out all night,” he explained at my wary expression.

“Good. I can’t stay too long, but I’d like to spend some time with you, if that’s okay?”

“You’re kinda giving me mixed signals.” He gave a tiny laugh, though he was obviously nervous to be alone with me.

I sighed. “I know. This bond has got me all mixed up, and Rowan is on my case about you.”

“Is that the only reason you tracked me down?”

His eyes met mine. I didn't want to crush the hope there. "No. I can't stop thinking about you, Sully."

"Do I get to know your name yet, Pete?"

We shared a grin. "Not yet."

"That's not a no, Jim."

"Exactly. I'm getting there, Sully. Just... give me a little more time, alright?"

"I can do that. How about I show you what I've been working on?"

We left the truck, and I followed him into the house. There was no need to lock doors when wards were keyed to inhabitants.

Following Sully up to his room, I explored while he dropped his bag on a chair and closed the door. I picked up a framed photograph.

"This your family?" I hadn't seen either of his parents. Didn't know if he had any siblings. I barely knew a thing about him aside from his age, what he sounded like when he came and that he graduated college. His certificates from his degrees were also on the wall.

"Yeah, my mom, dad, sister, Vanessa, she's an alpha. My brother, Todd, is a beta. I'm the youngest by ten years and they never let me forget it."

"I'm the baby, too," I said with a smile. "My older sister is also an alpha. Amira is following my mama into construction. She's mated with two kids."

"Vanessa has two kids, too! She'll take over the running of the hotel. Todd is a chef.

He's got a mate and they have one boy."

"Our families are so similar! My brother, Nasir, is also a beta. He's got a baby with his wife and will look after Mom's café when she comes to visit. They felt bad they didn't have anything for me, so when Uncle Malik asked if he could leave me the house and his money..."

"I'm sorry about your uncle. After you told me about the sickness, I did some research into it—"

"Don't worry, it's not contagious, or hereditary," I said, automatically. More than once over the years, I had to explain about my uncle. I'd lost a few friends thinking I'd get sick too .

"Oh! I know." Sully looked embarrassed. "I just felt bad for misunderstanding what happened that night. He was probably scared and trapped in his dingo form. I hope he wasn't punished because of me."

Seeing him looking so guilty, I had to do something to make him feel better. I went to him and wrapped him in my arms, holding him tightly. I leaned my head against his.

"He'd been alive a lot longer than anyone would have guessed. He had another three years in the hospice where he got the best of care."

"Did... Did the town make him leave his home?"

Unwilling to lie to him, I told him the truth. "Yes. It's part of why I don't like this place. They claim to be a haven, but when a resident needed their help, they cast him out."

"That's what I wanted to show you." Sully tried to break free. "You're going to have

to let me go if I'm going to show you what I've been working on."

Reluctantly, I let him go. I took a seat on the bed. "Okay. What've you been up to, Sully?"

With a grin, Sully went to his desk and pulled out a tablet. He used a stone to bring down the larger screen on the wall and cast his chart to it. There I could see the town charter from when it was established hundreds of years ago, along with the pivotal changes it had made.

"See this?" Sully pointed to the bylaws. "They are still active. I'd have to check with Trisha. She's my best friend, fae, and an awesome lawyer. She graduated early, she's so smart. They basically say the town is breaking the law with your inhibitors."

"Seriously? You know about them?"

"I didn't," he said, sheepishly. "Honestly, it never occurred to me that they were any different from ours. I didn't mix with predator shifters much. Well, not at all, really. My parents..."

"Sully, it's fine. You didn't know. How did you find out?"

"Well," he winced. "My mom has been arranging a mating for me."

The whispers from the café clicked into place. "Orson?" I felt a prickle of jealousy, which was silly. Shifter law put fated pairings before any other type of mating. Fate would not be denied. As we'd learned by trying to be apart.

"Yeah, Orson." Sully blushed. "He... we have an agreement. He's in a relationship with a predator shifter and wants to mate with them, but they aren't like you. They don't come from outside—"

“So they haven’t been exposed to prey shifter scents, and they don’t know if they’ll hurt your friend.”

“Exactly.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier for you two if you mated? If your mom set this up—“

“We don’t argue with fate,” he growled. It was pretty sexy. “Besides, I don’t see Orson like that. Never have, even before you came along.”

The words did little to soothe the jealous monster in my heart. After rejecting Sully and making him cry, I had no right to feel that way about the person his family had picked out for him.

“Ricky, come here,” Sully called, taking a seat in the middle of the bed. I’d gotten up to pace the room in my agitation. He patted the space next to him. “I’ve got a plan.”

“Okay.” I settled next to him. I could feel his body heat and smell the cologne he wore, but not the delicious scent which made up Sully, the fated mate, who was undoing all my objections. “Hold on a second, please.”

I took my phone out and sent Mom a message, begging her to hurry up with the documents. It was ridiculous staying away from Sully. The only reason I hadn’t told him my name yet was because I liked our game, and I didn’t want him wandering the woods alone trying to find me.

As soon as I had a paper trail for the kids, I’d find him, then I’d ask him to give this a try. Town be damned. Sully had found proof they were breaking their own laws. We could work with that, or I’d take him and the kids away, if he wanted to be with us.

“Kids okay?” Sully asked with interest.

“They’re fine, thanks. Rowan has the twins searching for plans to make a chicken coop when my moms come to visit.”

“How old are the twins?” It was obvious Sully was genuinely interested in them.

“Ten. Rowan not long turned eighteen. Want to see some pictures?”

“I’d love to!”

Some time later, we were laying on the bed together, side by side, swapping stories about our lives. Sully loved seeing Sandy and Berry. He especially liked hearing about Berry in her garden and Sandy cooking .

“Adam?” I grinned at another new name. Sully was on his side, staring at me, his fingers so close to touching mine.

I turned my head to look at him better. “Hmm?”

“Can I kiss you?”

I hesitated. “That’s not what I came here for. I never even said sorry for yesterday. I’m so sorry, Sully, for how things have been between us.”

“Is that a no?”

“Only if you promise not to come to the woods alone again. Wait until you have my name.”

“Are you going to give your name?”

“Soon.”

He kissed me then, with a frustrated little growl that made me grin against his lips, before I took the kiss deeper.

It escalated quickly. I meant to keep it fairly innocent, I swear I did. Suddenly, I had Sully topless and straddling my waist while he tried to unbutton my jeans.

“Hey, wait.” I stilled his hand, then twisted us so he was under me. “Why don’t we slow this down?”

“I want to feel you. Will you fuck me?”

Instead of answering, I opened his pants and dragged them down his body. I roughly shoved at my shirt and jeans, leaving them on the floor.

“You’re gorgeous, Sully,” I said, while tracing my hand over his body. He barely had any body hair and just the tiniest patch of curls around his hard cock.

I flipped him onto his stomach and went to town on opening him up with my tongue. The taste of his slick was my new drug. He was incredible. The sounds he made while I got him ready for me had my cock leaking.

“Please!” I was glad he wasn’t using other names on me when he was like this.

Once he was up on his knees, ass in the air with four fingers inside him, I knew I had to get inside him before I blew my load at the pretty sight he was making.

“Need to see you,” I muttered when I turned him over.

He looked incredible on the bed, his hair wild, cheeks flushed, his eyes on my body. His arms reached for me, and I went, desperate to kiss him.

We both groaned when I slid inside him. It was a gentle, slow rock to our mutual pleasure. The feel of being inside him wiped all sense from my mind. I nearly told him my name!

It felt like hours, but still not long enough as we moved together, sharing air, staring into each other's eyes. I'd never felt such a connection to anyone before.

After, he lay on my chest until my knot went down. I hated having to leave him, yet still had to. The kids were waiting for me to come back.

"Do you have to go?" Sully asked, sleepily. I wiped him clean and covered him with the blanket.

"I'm sorry."

"I get it. Soon, maybe it won't be like this, will it?"

"Not for much longer," I swore.

The proof of what Haenvale should have been, had the potential to be, was on the screen in front of me. I had a little research of my own to do. Then I could have my mate.

I left him a note for when he woke:

Sully,

I loved getting to know you better. Let's do this again soon,

Love, I x

Had to give my mate a hint in the name game.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am

Sully

My mate was a tricky thing, I thought, looking at the note he left me for the tenth time that morning. It was a sweet gesture after an amazing afternoon with him.

Despite not knowing his name, I still felt closer to him. His obvious love for his kids and family was adorable. Sweet alphas just did it for me.

At this point, I kinda liked not knowing his name. True, it was frustrating at times, but it felt like a secret we had between us. He was my mysterious mate, so mysterious I didn't know his name.

Okay, maybe I was making the best of a bad situation. He was trying to slow things down between us, which fine, I understood when he had three kids at home to look after.

Every part of me longed to find him so badly it hurt. I had to ignore the ache in my chest. The bond was pulling tighter, quicker, now that I'd been with him outside of my heat. My growing feelings for my mate were only an issue if I didn't suspect he felt the same for me. I glanced at the note again with a smile.

I noticed Dad glancing at Mom with worry when he caught me rubbing my chest over dinner only hours after I, whatever that stood for, had left.

Ivan?

Igor?

Iain?

Looking up all the names beginning with i was a pain.

My parents were happy, though, when I informed them Orson was taking me on another date later, not knowing it was all fake. A ruse so I could track my mate down. I couldn't handle this secret any longer.

I'd been messaging back and forth with Orson since I woke up, sorting the details of the plan. Orson was aware Trisha knew of our schemes. I worried I'd overstepped by telling my bestie about him, but Orson was okay with it as long as it was only her I told, which was fair. He understood my need to talk to someone, and I'd extracted a promise from Trisha to take it to her grave.

They were shocked at the information I'd found out in the charter and promised to look further into it. Knowing Trisha, she'd have the history of the town picked apart in days! With all three—or maybe four, if Baxter got involved—on the case, then we'd have a plan for going public with the mates we had chosen for ourselves.

I felt sorry for my mom. She had picked a decent mate for me, just not the one fate wanted me to have. I hoped she would fall for him like I had, in time. They had the same values in life. I couldn't get over how similar our backgrounds were!

Stuck on the morning shift at the hotel, I was bored. The other manager, a witch called Grace, was in charge. She was much easier to get along with than Kenneth. We were friendly of sorts, but to work with her all the time would mean moving to morning shifts, something I didn't want to do, since it had taken a lot to get my parents to agree to let me work nights, when there were more people to meet.

Yeah, we were working on our boundaries and expectations. My parents couldn't expect me to be involved with the hotel if they wouldn't allow me to work the busier

night shift for fear of my safety. Working in Haenvale was as safe as we got. Besides, with a baby on the way, I needed the cash. I didn't want to rely on my alpha to provide for us. I wasn't sure what he did for money, though he had told me he had inherited more than the house.

Haenvale's nocturnal population meant the mornings were slower. I spent a lot of time looking at the system, checking that we had the right amount of staff in to cover each shift, and ensuring we weren't double booked anywhere. Grace usually handled that side of things, but she trusted me to deal with it while she sorted out a maintenance problem in one of the rooms.

It was late morning, about eleven, when I took a strange call.

"Good morning, Haenvale Premier Hotel. I'm Sullivan. How can I assist you today?"

"Hi," a harried female voice said. "I'm calling to cancel a booking. I forgot to, earlier. We don't need the room anymore." Very short and to the point.

"Alright, if I could just have a few details from you, such as the name it was under and the duration of the stay. "

"The booking was for Ellie and Farah Kalid. We were supposed to stay for two weeks, potentially longer."

It took me a moment to call up the booking in the system. I lingered over the cancel button, waiting for confirmation they really wanted to end their reservation.

"I'm sorry you won't be visiting Haenvale. It's beautiful at this time of year."

"Oh, we're still coming, just not sure we're coming into town. We're staying with our son."

I could hear someone in the background complaining about the caller over sharing and waiting until the last minute to cancel the booking. Not that it was too late to be canceling it. There were still a few weeks until they were scheduled to arrive.

“What I mean is, we’ve got a camper,” they amended.

“Okay, well, I can give you the names and numbers of our two campgrounds. They have great facilities—“

“That’s not necessary. Our son, Imri, has land and a house in need of fixing up.” Again I heard their companion complaining about them telling me too much. “We’re visiting him and his kids.” I could hear the pride in their voice.

The name, Imri, sent a delightful shiver down my spine. “Oh, that’s lovely! Are they young, the children?” A nosy question for sure, but I got the sense the caller was waiting to brag about their grandchildren. Mom always said I had a knack for getting information out of people, part of why I was in a customer facing job.

“Well, the oldest, Rowan—“ I almost stopped listening. What were the chances? It had to be them, right? “He’s eighteen. The little ones, Sandy and Berry, are ten.”

Those two names sold it. Rowan, Sandy and Berry. The ages were right, too. Those were my mate’s kids. Imri’s kids. It felt right in my mind.

I cleared my throat nervously. “Great ages! If you could just confirm the card details we have on file, I can cancel your stay without a fee.”

The caller gave me the info, sounding much friendlier than before. “Alright, that’s your booking canceled. I hope you have a great time visiting the area.”

“Thank you! I can’t wait to see them.”

They ended the call, not realizing they'd gifted me my fated mate's name.

Orson came to the door to pick me up like the gentleman my family thought he was. With a friendly smile, he endured ten minutes of my parents grilling him over our date plans, which were a picnic date and maybe a movie. We'd agreed to keep it vague to make it easier to fudge the truth later.

If I got my way, I wouldn't be coming home later. I'd be staying with Imri!

Every time I thought of his name, the better it sounded.

When I got in the car, I noticed there were bags in the back.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"If you're going mate hunting, then me and Baxter are leaving town for a few days. We're going to try being without our inhibitors." Orson pulled away from the curb, then glanced at me.

"No way! That's awesome. I hope he's your fated."

Orson smiled. "Thank you. I do, too." Anxiety tinged his expression. "You probably think I'm being a coward, running away."

"No way! I'm scared to confront the town, so I don't blame you for taking a few days away from it all."

"You don't?" Orson appeared relieved.

"Orson, if I could skip all the arguments that are gonna come with being with Imri, then I would."

“You know his name, then?”

I knew I looked smug. “I do! Now, drop me at the meeting spot and have a great break.”

I was processing Orson’s decision to escape Haenvale and the probable fallout of my mating when I got into Trisha’s car. She’d already told me she couldn’t borrow her dad’s truck because it was recharging.

“Honey, you better explain that look on your face!”

Outlining everything Orson and I had talked about only took a matter of minutes. She was happy they were giving their relationship a go, away from prying eyes.

I loved this woman. She had been in my life when I’d really needed someone. As one of the fae, she was seen as neutral, so my parents were cool with her. The fae had a bad rep back on earth, but here, in Pangea, they weren’t chaotic or bad. They just liked nature and could do magic. Trisha had beautiful translucent wings she kept glamored. I wished I could fly sometimes.

“I’m still so angry about the inhibitors!” she cried, looking the most upset I’d ever seen her. “Dad helped spell the inhibitors. He never said a thing about this!”

“Right? Just shows how little we know about Haenvale. Are all towns like ours the same?”

“Who knows?” She shrugged. While it looked like she was brushing it off, I could see the knowledge weighed on her. We shared a look, then we both tried to push it away. “I’m going to work on some more of the charter, and gather more sources.”

“I’ve got some notes stored in a crystal.”

Trisha had pulled the car over to the side of the road until she got answers out of me. She turned the engine back on. “Should we eat and decide if you still want to find this guy?”

“Imri, and I need to see him.” I rubbed at my chest. The bond aching. “Life might be complicated for us in Haenvale, but he’s worth the fight. I still want the mate fate picked out for me. I’m not settling, Trisha.”

“Okay, then.” She took us back to her place where she made us a tofu curry that was heavenly. We didn’t talk all that much, both of us lost in our thoughts.

I felt like Imri was coming around to the idea of being together, which was good since I was carrying his baby. Keeping the secret was shitty, but I wanted him to want me for me, not the baby I carried. We were so close to having a plan in place for dealing with Haenvale. Learning his name felt like fate.

One of the great things about Imri was that he was from somewhere else. Me being prey never seemed to bother him. He’d told me he had practice being around prey shifters. I’d seen firsthand how he hadn’t struggled at all with me when we’d met, though that could have been our bond.

It was a great counter argument for my parents and the wider town when they protested about me being with a dingo shifter and having his baby.

I felt so bad for Baxter and Orson. Hopefully, they were fated and they could have a life together that was long and happy, not one where they worried about Baxter losing control and eating the sparrow shifter.

“Do you still want to do this?” Trisha asked after we’d loaded the dishwasher.

“Yeah. I have to. It’s making me... it hurts.” I rubbed at my chest again.

“Okay.” She drove us out to the road where I was sure Imri’s truck had driven along. Not too far in was a decent turning circle, a shed, and a pretty big mailbox.

“Sully, my car...”

“It’s okay. Do you want to wait here? I’m just going to plead my case and give him my number.”

“No. It’s not safe. I’ll come with you.”

We left the car and walked the dirt track for about a mile.

“There’s a lot of magic. It’s trying to turn us around.”

I stepped forward, using a guess, I spoke Imri’s name like a password. The pressure to go back where we came from vanished.

“Well done, Sully.” Trisha beamed at me, her pretty wings on full show. Instead of walking, she fluttered above the ground.

Finally, a house came into view. Clearly, it was a work in progress. There was a large camper van and a smaller trailer parked in the yard, a decent sized vegetable patch nearby.

Homey. The place was nice. There was a sweet vibe to the area. I liked it instantly.

“There’s a ward here, Sully,” Trisha warned moments before half a dozen people came rushing out of the house, looking alarmed.

“Hey, Imri!” I called with the friendliest smile I could muster.

His footsteps paused. “Sully?”

“Yeah, I wanted to come back, clothed this time,” I chuckled nervously. Everyone was just standing on the porch watching me. “I won the game!”

Imri grinned. “That you did.”

“I didn’t come alone.”

He spared Trisha a glance. “No, you didn’t.”

“I’m not willing to wait any longer, Imri. I’m your fated mate, and I’m ready to fight the town just to be with you.”

There were gasps of shock. Heads kept moving between us. We only had eyes for each other. I waited for him to say something, worry churning in my gut the longer the silence continued. All while Imri’s dark eyes were fixed on mine, his expression was complicated.

“You are who fate picked out for me. That has to mean something. Don’t you want to at least try?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:35 am

Imri

Heading home after the sweetest afternoon with my mate was more difficult than I anticipated. My chest ached only hours after leaving him. I'd wanted to leave him my number, but feared I'd be constantly watching it, waiting for him to call.

This entire situation with Sully was getting my emotions all mixed up. I was blaming all of this sentimentality I was feeling about finally meeting my fated mate and being unable to have him without a fight. This was a bunch of bullshit, a cosmic joke: I'd been given a prey animal shifter mate in a town that ostracized me for being a predator shifter.

Yet everything he'd shown me in the charter gave me hope that there was a way forward for us. A place we could carve out in Haenvale where I wouldn't have to rip the kids from all they knew so I could have my mate in my life.

The things my moms had said about being proud of me kept coming to the front of my mind. As the youngest, there were times I was left to fend for myself, and I'd always thought I was okay with it. Hearing my moms tell me how proud they were of me for my choice to raise my kids was something I never thought I'd get. Granted, I wasn't sure I'd ever have kids. They were something I wanted in the abstract, but knew I was a long way off actually having them. Until I inherited them, in a sense.

I didn't think they'd be proud of me for the way I was dealing with this mate situation, though. They'd be angry at me for playing games with Sully. They'd call me a coward for hiding away, forgetting I had three lives on the line. If it was only me and Sully to think of, then I'd have accepted him straight away, town be damned.

The kids needed time to get used to me and have the security that they wouldn't be taken from me now that we'd bonded.

My kids were amazing. The way they'd accepted my family was awe-inspiring. Rowan had taken a little longer to warm up to his new grandmas. Sandy and Berry were much more accepting of the situation. They were open to having grandparents, having seen shows and read books where the characters had a wider family. Their brother, not so much. Rowan confessed once that he worried they would convince me to give him and his siblings up for an easier life. He had a lot of guilt over how they'd been living, often thinking he should have left them somewhere. I was grateful he hadn't. We were all together now, and I wasn't letting them go.

Rowan was a great young man with solid views of the world. Once he felt more comfortable with me, he felt able to tell me what he thought of Sully—he was a big fan—and how I was mishandling the situation. He didn't like me putting my mate aside from him and his siblings, though he understood the need for a delay. Rowan told me to confess everything to Sully and trust he could handle it. My eldest was more idealistic than I was.

The rest of the day passed slowly while I tried to get more done around the house before our guests arrived. No matter what they said, Mama would want a more comfortable bed than the camper offered. They promised to call before hitting the road and not just appear. I just hoped the kids were okay with my moms in person. They could be overwhelming.

My first impressions of the house made it seem worse than it was. Really, it wasn't in bad shape. The decor was tired, not to my style, but Uncle Malik had done his best with the place. I liked it. The house and the surrounding woods had a great vibe.

In my pocket, my phone buzzed with a message.

Mom

Just picked up the documents. Hitting the road early morning. Will be there around lunchtime. Mama found the cutest boots for Berry.

I owed my eldest son his own pie, even though I'd already given him the largest piece at dinner the night before. A bet was a bet, after all. I was supposed to put him on cooking duty, but my moms let me down by taking so long! Nah, really, I was happy he won so he could get the pie to himself. The way he ate, I felt like he had some growing to do. Soon he'd be taller than me. I wanted that for him, though. Wanted to show him love and safety by always having an abundance of food he liked to eat. I wished for him to never again go through the lean times like he must have when deliveries were only coming monthly .

When the day finally ended, I found myself restless. I was exhausted and needed to sleep, it just wasn't in the cards for me. I laid in bed, the house silent around me, just thinking about the last few days, wondering what deity I'd pissed off.

At least one thing went smoothly. Having documents would make everything much easier. I'd find another witch to evaluate the kids, with my moms helping me. I didn't want to rely on Ginger. As nice as she was, she wasn't dependable. Once I knew where their power level was, I could decide if we were staying in Haenvale long term or not. I really didn't want to take them away from the memories of their mother. I hoped we could stay.

Part of me wanted to pack up the kids and return to New Boston, where everyone had to get along or suffer the consequences, instead of dealing with the worried stares of the prey shifters in Haenvale. Maybe it was my paranoia speaking, but my visit to Rosie's hadn't been all that bad.

Life in New Boston could be hard for the vulnerable. There had been areas of the city

where things were rougher. Gangs of predators, usually wolves and bears, resorted to crime. Life wasn't easy when you could turn into something dangerous. Many made assumptions about who you were. A label was stuck to you as soon as you presented, around age three. Even in more open places, there was distrust.

A place like Haenvale, where we all wore inhibitors, should have been friendlier. I'd already learned it wasn't. Did I want my kids growing up around open prejudice?

A knock came from the door. Sandy and Berry were asleep, and had been for hours. Rowan had been reading in his room, letting me do the night time routine with the twins.

"Imri? Can I come in?" Rowan called from the other side of the door.

"Yeah."

Rowan entered the room and took a seat at the end of the bed.

"C'mere." I patted the space next to me as I sat up against the headboard.

"It's okay..." He hesitated, torn. He clearly needed to get something off his chest.

I fixed him with a mock glare. "Come over here, Rowan."

He finally moved to sit close to me. I wrapped an arm around him, letting him sit quietly with his thoughts for a moment.

"When Gaga and Noona come, will you tell Sully the truth about us?" he finally asked.

"Is it that important to you that he knows?" The more I thought about how I handled

things with Sully, the more I regretted my decision. He could have been with me all this time. He had a lawyer as a best friend, though. Would she have put aside the law for him if he asked?

“Yes. It is. If we’re going to be family, then there shouldn’t be any lies between us.”

Rowan was right. When I asked Sully to accept me and the kids, I would do it with him knowing everything. I’d let him decide if we were worth the problems that were sure to come with a single dad to three witches in a town where anything dangerous was feared.

“Oh, when Berry and Sandy call you Dad in the morning, don’t make too big of a deal about it, okay? They’ve been worried about it. We talked it over and decided that’s what we’re going to call you now that you’ve adopted us, okay?”

I was speechless. “Alright,” I said, finding my voice.

He stayed with me a moment more, then got up. When he got to the door he said, “Night, Dad,” and left, without witnessing the smile that took over my face.

Dad.

Just one word, but it was magical.

Mate.

Another equally amazing word. Haenvale may have its issues, yet there I’d become a dad and soon, if Sully was willing to forgive my stubbornness, then I’d have a mate, too.

When I finally fell asleep, it was to thoughts of Sully. He was beautiful. I had his

image tattooed on my brain. As soon as I could comfortably leave my moms with the kids, I was tracking him down.

I was grateful for the minutes the proximity alarm bought us. It gave me time to pack away the remains of the kids' lunch. My parents had gotten delayed, arriving mid-afternoon. They'd stopped and eaten after a flat tire delayed them a couple hours.

Half of me expected Sandy and Berry to hang back once my moms left their vehicle. Nope, they went straight over to their new grandparents to show them things they'd been working on. It felt like they'd always known each other. An immediate bond formed.

Again, Rowan hung back, practically clinging to me, until Mama came over to praise him about the work he'd done on the place. She wanted to know all the details of the systems and materials he used on the house. Sure enough, that broke the ice with Rowan and I was left alone for the first time in hours.

It took Mom a while to have a minute for me. When she broke free of the twins, setting them on her mate and their brother, she gave me a fierce hug.

"So proud of you, Imri! Those kids, this house. You've done so well!"

"Not sure you're going to think the same when I tell you something." I grimaced.

"Why don't we go inside and make some tea? This feels like a tea conversation."

"Feels like a whisky conversation, actually."

An hour later, after Mom had calmed down, she saw why I'd done what I'd done, even if she didn't agree with it.

We were just making dinner when the proximity alarm went off. My stomach dropped and twisted. Nervous butterflies took flight in my gut.

Please, I thought to myself. Please let it be him and nothing else. I don't want another thing to get in our way.

Hearing him call my name was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard! I was glad he'd won the game. I wanted to know how, but there was time for that. Later, though, much, much, later.

Mom at least was warned about Sully, she clearly hadn't had time to fill Mama in on it because she and the twins gasped in shock. Even Rowan made a noise of surprise. I guess my eldest hadn't expected Sully to lay it all on the line like that.

I couldn't keep my eyes off him. The way the early evening light hit off his sandy brown hair, picking out the strands of gold, was mesmerizing.

He was all mine if I could just take that chance. So when he asked if I wanted to take that chance, there was only one answer.

"With you? Of course, Sully. I'm yours if you want me." I winked. "You won the game after all," I couldn't help adding in a teasing tone.

Sully laughed, a sound so full of joy everyone smiled.

"Um, hi, Imri, everyone, I'm Trisha, Sully's BFF. If he's okay here, I'll just..."

"No need, Trisha," Mom called, "come in, we're making dinner. There's plenty for everyone."

"Oh! That's so kind, but we've already eaten," Trisha protested, backing away while

throwing looks at her friend.

“Come inside and let these two talk,” Mom practically ordered.

Trisha, being the smart woman she was, took the hint and followed my moms and kids into the house, leaving me alone with Sully.

“Do you mean it?” His eyes were full of hope.

“I do. There’s some stuff I’ve got to tell you. Why don’t you come up here, take a seat, and I’ll get us a drink. D’you want a beer or anything?”

“Uh, no to the beer, but I’ll take a soda or just water if that’s okay?” He joined me on the porch. There was a comfortable swing which sat three people easily. It was somewhere I imagined spending a lot of nights with Sully, if he was okay with what came next.

“Sure. I’ll just go grab them. Back in a sec.” I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly once I was inside the house.

“Doing okay?” Mama clapped a hand on my shoulder, startling me as I rooted around in the fridge for drinks.

“Yeah. A little overwhelmed, but Sully needs to know it all.”

“You’ll make it work.”

I found Uncle Malik’s letter to me and took it outside with the drinks. Opening his, I handed it to him. He muttered his thanks nervously.

“It’ll be easier to explain things if you read this letter first. Is that okay?”

Sully took it, his fingers shaking with his nerves. “Um... alright.” He began to read, his eyes widening further with each paragraph. “Oh, no! Poor Malik.” His head snapped up, his eyes wide. “They came from the woods?”

“Yeah. It’s all they’ve known.”

He returned to reading. “They stayed behind? They weren’t with you?”

“I didn’t know about them until I came here.”

Tears ran down his face. I kneeled in front of him, taking his hands. “You just took them in without question,” he finally got out.

“They were meant to be mine. Ours, if you’re willing.” His smile was a trembling, beautiful thing. More tears fell from those pretty blue eyes .

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Someone... Rowan... told me there should be no secrets between family. The main reason I fought what we have is because I needed to get paperwork for the kids. It sounds so mundane and pathetic when I say it out loud.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yeah, it does. Here I was, a stranger to the town, a predator shifter, with three kids who clearly aren’t blood related. The last thing I needed was someone questioning us and me having no proof they were mine.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything.”

Kissing his fingers, one by one, I couldn’t help but be awed by Sully. “I know. You

wouldn't have needed to. The people of the town will. There's plenty of scrutiny still to come, once we go public with this, if you still want me."

"Of course I do." He made a pained expression. "I've got a confession of my own first. You deserve to know before we do anything else."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, exactly," he hedged. His eyes lifted to look directly at me, his fingers tightening around mine. "I'm pregnant."

Sully

There was a heartbeat of silence following my announcement. Following Imri's example, I wanted to go into this mating secret free, and I'd been keeping something incredibly important from him. Something that could make or break our mating.

Imri's eyes widened. "Are you serious?" he asked in an incredulous tone. I didn't quite know what to make of it, but answered with a nod.

I'd never understood the expression about a person's eyes lighting up until I watched it happen to Imri. Except it wasn't just his eyes, it reached every inch of his body. He was delighted! Relief made my limbs feel like rubber.

He launched into movement, grabbing my hands and pulling me with him to the front door, which he threw open .

"Sully's pregnant!" he yelled as he towed me into the kitchen.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to stare at us, then erupted into congratulations. All except the little boy, Sandy.

Seeing his sweet face scrunched with worry, I tugged my hand free of Imri's hold, letting my mate hug the rest of his family while I tended to Sandy.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Does this mean we have to leave Dad? Is he replacing us?"

I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, yet it was impossible to resist going to my knees, throwing my arms around the little boy, and gathering him into a hug.

“Oh, no! That's not it at all. We need you, Sandy! Who else is going to teach this little baby how to live in the woods? Show them where's safe to play? Me and your dad will need all three of you if we're going to cope.”

He pulled back to look at me. “You will?”

“Absolutely. Our family wouldn't be complete without you in it. Now your dad is awesome, but I've never lived anywhere aside from home or college. I don't know how to cook!” His expression was borderline hilarious. He was horrified and determined.

“You don't? I can teach you.”

“See?” I took his hands in my own. “We need you around. More than that, your dad would be sad if you went away.”

“He would?”

“Yeah, I would,” Imri assured him. “I couldn't imagine my life without you here. All of you have made me so happy. The baby won't change anything. Not how much I love any of you. They are just another part of our growing family.” He stroked Sandy's hair off his face with a tender touch.

He was already a fantastic dad. I couldn't wait to see how he was with our little joey, or pup, I guess. It was fifty-fifty on if they would take after me or him, though we wouldn't find out their form until they shifted at around three years old.

Even though I was scared about the pregnancy, I was happy about it. Maybe I'd

gotten pregnant far sooner than I'd anticipated, but this was my fated mate in front of me. I couldn't resist following fate's plan for me.

"Dinner's ready. Now, Trisha and Sully, I know you've already eaten, but can I tempt you to try some?" one of Imri's parents asked from next to the stove.

I winced. "Um, we're both vegetarian."

Imri laughed. "Of course you are."

The parent in charge of the cooking joined in with Imri's laughter. "Not a problem. We've got a tasty salad, some sides. You eat dairy and eggs, right? You'll need lots of protein growing a baby."

"Yeah, I do."

We were ushered to seats at the table. I sat next to Imri, who made the introductions. The food was great, the company better. I even got to help with bedtime. The twins wanted me to read to them, which Imri said was a sign of acceptance.

It was getting late by the time we went back downstairs, where Trisha was chatting with Ellie and Farah like they were old friends.

"Um... we should probably get back."

Ellie frowned. "I thought you two would bond now everything is out in the open."

"I... we don't have to rush into anything. I mean, I want you, but there's time still, before people realize I'm pregnant."

Unfortunately, while inhibitors hid the scent of what we were, they weren't designed

to cover the change when someone got pregnant. I'd recently found that out when I read it in the charter. It was to ensure the pregnant person's safety.

Besides the new scent note, which urged others to protect, there were slight physical changes fairly early on in pregnancy. My hips would widen and my chest would grow, getting ready to provide milk for the baby.

"That's not... Honey, have you had any symptoms because of being apart from Imri?" Ellie's concern began to worry me.

"Uh, a little. I got ill, but the doctor didn't seem particularly concerned."

"I've had this feeling in my chest—" Imri added.

"That doctor needs a talking to!" Farah interrupted. She was clearly upset.

Ellie nodded at her mate. "That's a fated bond pulling at you." She met my eyes sympathetically. "Honey, staying away from your fated while pregnant can cause a miscarriage or early labor."

"Breathe, Sully, just breathe." Imri ran his hand over my back while I sat with my head between my knees.

"I've ruined everything!" I cried. Tears flowed freely down my cheeks. I hiccuped with sobs, barely getting a full breath.

"No, you haven't, sweetheart," Imri soothed. Having my alpha next to me was the only thing keeping me together.

What a mess!

He pulled me into his arms and rocked me until sleep took me under.

When I woke, I was somewhere else completely. I hadn't even noticed us moving. Wherever it was, it had the most comfortable bed. The only illumination was fairy lights all around the space, making it homey. It felt like a trailer or camper. There was soft music playing from speakers, adding to the ambience.

“Where—?”

I turned over to find Imri lying on the soft, red sheets with me. He was only wearing his boxer briefs and a t-shirt. I don't know why, but the sight of him lying there, feet bare and hair rumpled, was more intimate than anything we'd done so far.

“We're in my trailer. You slept for about an hour. Trisha's set up in Rowan's room for the night. Rowan went to share with the twins. My moms have gone to the guest room, so it's just us.” He had all the answers to the questions I didn't have a chance to ask. “I thought if we were going to bond, you'd like more privacy than just our room.”

“Our?”

“Well, it will be if you'd like to move in. Once we're bonded, you'll have time to decide what you want to do.”

“I don't want to bond—“

“What?” Imri looked like I'd struck him.

With a sigh, I continued. “I don't want us to rush this bonding just because I'm pregnant. We can take some time, spend time together first, before we decide. It should be enough.”

“Sully, I don’t want to wait. Now that everything is out in the open, I want to be with you.” His gaze was imploring. “We’re meant to be together. The thought of you leaving here scares me.”

“Scares you? Why?”

“It’s... It’s irrational. I worry you won’t come back. That you’ll find someone better for you than me.”

“There’s no one better for me than you.”

“Then would you consider bonding with me? Here and now.”

My mind raced. “Are you sure this isn’t just because of the baby? I didn’t want to go into a bond with you without telling you since a bonding bite can trigger a heat. Still, I don’t want to feel like you had to just to keep the baby safe! This is a mess!”

“Sully,” he started patiently, “I wanted this before you said about the baby. Our baby. If you don’t want to rush, we can bond and you can take your time moving in.”

I studied his handsome face. His dark eyes twinkled with affection. It was too soon to be love, though I knew we would grow to love each other very much. I knew I could study the slope of his nose, the curve of his cheek, the shape of his eyes, and still be fascinated with him in the years to come.

Maybe we were doing things backwards, but we’d grow into our bond .

“If we do this, I want to move in straight away, except fuck! I’ve got my job...”

“We’ll work something out. I’ll take you to work if you want. Or you can take the truck. I’ll go pay a ridiculous amount of money to get a better road to the house. I’ll

buy you a car, because you aren't scooting about carrying the two of you on that death trap!"

I kissed him. Imri was perfect. I was sure there would be times when we got on each other's nerves, but times like this would be worth it. He smiled against my lips before returning the kiss, his tongue invading my mouth as we got caught up in the growing need between us.

Finally, he broke away. "Want to take a risk and see where this goes?"

"Yes. I really do."

We shuffled until we were sitting up. Imri helped me remove my shirt, being careful of the buttons, then chucked his over his head, earning himself a laugh. He pulled me onto his lap.

With a shaking finger, he traced where he'd put his bite. "I never thought I'd be doing this. I'm glad it's you, Sully."

He leaned down to kiss the spot, then opened his mouth wider, letting a partial shift of his teeth come through. He clamped down on the spot. Sharp teeth broke the skin. I cried out in surprise. It wasn't that it really hurt, just stung.

I waited for him to lick the bite and swallow my blood before nuzzling where I'd chosen to put my bite. My little quokka teeth, designed for ripping leaves, not flesh, easily slid into Imri. The burst of his blood on my tongue cemented our bond.

Once I'd sealed it, I leaned back, content just to stare at my mate. He followed me, pressing his mouth to mine in a hungry kiss.

Before I knew it, I was stretched out on the bed with Imri above me.

“I really want to take my time with you. Are you working early tomorrow?” I shook my head. “Good, because you’re not leaving this bed until we’re both completely wrung out. That might take some time.”

He went to work then, kissing and sucking marks all over my body.

“These freckles drive me wild.” He kissed along my shoulders, making fresh marks on my collarbone. He nipped my throat, driving me out of my mind with need .

Each time I tried to touch him, he batted my hands away. “My turn to play. You can have a turn next time.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it.”

Imri worked his way down my body, teasing my hole while sucking on each of my balls, then mouthing at my cock. I wanted to fuck into his throat when he finally took the tip into his mouth.

“Oh, fuck!” I whined.

He sucked while his fingers slid into my wet hole. I was so ready for him to fill me up. I could tell he was close to breaking.

“Need you,” Imri ground out just moments before he pushed inside me, his thick cock stretching me open.

I made a strangled noise as he began to thrust. His arms came around me, holding me tightly. All I could focus on were the emotions through our mate connection and the incredible feeling of Imri inside me, hitting all the best spots.

We clung to each other, kissing, just sharing breath, while Imri set a steady pace, pushing his cock deep inside me. In and then nearly all the way out, a smooth glide from all the slick I'd made when he sucked me and worked me open for him.

My fingers dug deep into his shoulders when I reached my peak, the friction of his abs on my dick sending me over the edge.

He came soon after, his knot grew and pulsed with his orgasm, sending aftershocks through me.

Imri turned us carefully. "I'll get you something to drink in a minute, okay?"

I nodded, perfectly content. We had the chemistry to burn up the sheets, for sure. We'd figure everything else out in time.

Sure enough, Imri doted on me as soon as his knot went down. Then it was my turn to play.

Exploring his body was fun. I'd never had an alpha who would let me tease his hole in return. I used my slick to ease two fingers inside him at the same time as sucking the head of his cock.

"Fuck, Sully! I'm gonna come if you keep... ah!"

I giggled once I'd swallowed his come at the expression on his face. "That, my mate, is your prostate," I declared.

He pounced, pinning me to the bed. "Oh, you're a cheeky thing, aren't you?"

Sully

We ended up shifting to sleep on a few clean blankets on the floor, too tired to get clean sheets for the bed after a night of amazing sex. Perhaps not the most romantic of ways to end a bonding night, but going nose to nose with my dingo mate was thrilling. After all these years of people dismissing me, telling me I'd made it up, the jeers of "dingo boy" ringing in my ears, this was my vindication.

Not only had there been a dingo in the woods, there was one there again. Even better, he was my fated mate. He'd never put those sharp teeth to use in harming me, only protecting.

When we'd shifted, my little hindbrain had been petrified of breathing too deeply and making Imri attack, completely forgetting it went against our bond to do so. No, my dingo was a little puppy for me. He playfully licked my face, sniffed me all over, then curled around me to sleep for the rest of the night.

Waking, still in my quokka form, I momentarily wondered why I was so hot. The trailer's AC had gone off in the night and I was suffocating under the weight and fur of a dingo.

Imri was a cuddler. Adorable, really.

Unable to get the traction to push him off with my stronger back feet, I shifted back into my human form, feeling aches and pains all over. A night on the floor had been a bad idea.

“Move!” I shoved at Imri. The dingo opened a lazy eye. “We can’t sleep in. I’ve got work this afternoon and you better come meet my parents before they find out about us from someone else.”

Imri’s eye closed. He turned his head, pretending to be sleeping. I tapped him with my foot.

“Don’t ignore me. Besides, if I know anything about kids, they’ll be here soon.”

Really, it was like I’d summoned them. Someone knocked on the door.

“Dad? Noona said Sully had a sleepover. Will you make us pancakes?” Sandy shouted from the other side of the door .

My mate shifted back so he could speak. “Give us a few minutes, Sandy. See you back at the house.”

“Pancakes?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” Imri sighed with a fond smile. “I’ll make pancakes.”

Sandy scurried away with a noise of delight.

Imri helped me off the floor, then pulled me into his arms. He dipped me low as he kissed me, earning a laugh for his silly but romantic behavior.

“Breakfast with the kids, then go meet the parents?” he asked, nuzzling his nose against mine. I loved how physically affectionate he was! He pulled away and took his time dressing, his body full of tension.

Why did he look like he’d rather walk over spikes in bare feet than meet my parents?

I laid my hand on his back, feeling the muscles bunch and release with his movements. “Are you nervous?”

“Sully.” He turned, gripping my hips. He continued, mock patiently, “I fear I’m not as brave as you are. Parents scare me.” His shudder was exaggerated.

“If I really thought you couldn’t cope, then I wouldn’t have suggested it. You took in three kids and made them your family. You are plenty brave.”

He held my hand as we walked up to the house.

“Dad, Gaga let me drive your truck!” Rowan’s face was bright with his excitement.

“I thought the boy should start learning to drive, especially now that you have a pregnant mate,” his mom, Ellie, said, clearly waiting for an argument.

“Okay, well, I’d like to take over lessons, if that’s okay, Mom?” She nodded, pride in her eyes. “Where did you go?”

“Oh, we just drove Trisha down the track to her car, then came back. We really need a better road.” Rowan’s smile dimmed some. “Do you think it’ll be safe to have people come here to do it?”

“Rowan, your magical control isn’t nearly as bad as you think,” Imri stated simply, honesty in his tone.

“You have a problem controlling your magic?” I asked. “Because I didn’t even know you were a witch until yesterday,” I pointed out from my place at the table. The twins were waiting anxiously for their breakfast, Berry cuddled up to Farah, and Sandy almost in my lap. Apparently, I’d made an impression on him.

“Really?” Rowan’s hope was a brittle thing, I could sense it.

“I’d never lie to you,” I vowed. “Until it was mentioned, I had no clue you might have a problem with managing it. I think you’d all be fine if people came to fix the road.”

He took his place next to Imri at the counter, ready to create a feast for us all.

The approval I saw not only in Imri’s eyes, but those of my new in-laws, warmed my soul. These people were my people. My new family and a place where I really thought I’d fit in.

Breakfast was a noisy, chaotic event and I wouldn’t have changed it for the world. Imri pushed his mom out of the way to whip up an enormous batch of pancakes for everyone. Aware I didn’t eat meat, his mama prepared some fruit for me. They bickered lovingly amongst themselves while cooking.

By the time we were finished, I was fit to burst! I got the impression Imri was stalling some, though.

“Imri, we need to go. I’m supposed to have an afternoon shift and I want to pack up some of my stuff to take here.”

“You’re moving in?” I could tell he was utterly delighted.

“Yeah, so I’m gonna need you to fix that road so my scooter—“

“Absolutely not!” The objection didn’t come from Imri, though I was sure it was on his lips. Nope, his mama, Farah, blurted it out. “Imri can leave you with the truck and he can use your scooter until we get you a car and get this damn road fixed.”

Oh-kay, I was not arguing with Farah.

“It’s for the baby, Sully. Scooters are so dangerous, and when you get bigger, your center of gravity will be off. I think we’d all feel better if you were driving something a little more solid,” Ellie added.

When they put it like that, I couldn’t really argue with them. Imri had said he wanted me to get a car and we would need it with three kids and a fourth on the way. Wow, had my life changed in the span of a day.

Even I was nervous when I pulled the truck into the driveway of my parents’ house. There were a couple of hours before my shift, meaning we didn’t have long for the interrogation they were likely to give Imri. I’d already called them to let them know I was on my way home and needed to speak to them.

They’d thought I was out with Orson until Orson’s parents realized he’d left town. Then they’d started blowing up my phone, worried until I said I’d been with Trisha.

I’d placated them enough to get a hesitant Imri into the truck and on the road into Haenvale. He’d even let me drive, saying I needed the practice.

“C’mon, better not make them wait much longer.” I ushered Imri into the house.

My parents froze when they saw us appear in the living room. None of us were wearing our inhibitors.

“It’s alright,” Imri said, calmly. “I might smell like a predator, but I’m used to prey animals. Besides, Sully is my mate. I’d never harm his family.”

I thought my mom was going to pass away from fright. Maybe she had a flashback of the events which pushed her towards Haenvale. She never told me what happened,

just that she needed to be safe. She clutched at my dad's hand until her knuckles went white.

"Mate?" Only one word escaped her lips.

"Yeah, Mom, I told you I'd found him." I squeezed Imri's hand, not entirely enthusiastic about how things were going, considering my much warmer reception at his home. I had to give my parents a little grace. They were prey animals reacting naturally. They also had traumatic pasts I knew very little about.

"We thought you just didn't want Orson," Dad said, looking puzzled but less scared than before.

"To be fair, Orson didn't want me either. He's run off with the omega he's in love with," I announced.

"You knew?" Mom's eyes widened with shock.

"Um, yeah? He had his bags with him last night. He dropped me off with Trisha, then went to pick him up." I gave a careless shrug. I was delighted for Orson, and knew he would be happy for me in return.

"Oh Sully! The town's talking about how you must be devastated!" Mom wailed.

"Well, I'm not, because I found my fated mate and we're bonded." She looked upset. Okay, if she wasn't about to have a heart attack, my next announcement might just kill her off. "And we're pregnant!"

"What?" Mom screeched.

I gave up trying to calm my mom down, instead telling Dad I was going to take Imri

to my room to pack some of my stuff. He was upset that I was already moving out, but considering how they were reacting to my news, I thought a bit of space was in order.

“That went...” Imri sighed. He slumped onto my bed, falling back to lie with his arms open, waiting for me to join him. He sat up when I didn’t. “You okay?”

Inside my closet, I brushed a tear away. It was stupid. I knew my surprise had shocked them, and they’d eventually come around, but I’d childishly hoped they’d find a little happiness for me, or at least welcome Imri into the family.

“They didn’t even ask your name!” I let out a sob.

In the next moment, Imri’s arms were around me. “Are you sure you want to go to work? Things might be worse than this at the hotel and I won’t be there...”

“I can’t just quit. Can I?”

“Sweetheart, I’ve got a ton of money from Uncle Malik. We can work things out until you decide what you want to do with your life. You’ve got your degrees. Are you even using them at the hotel?”

“No.” I shook my head against his chest. He was so warm and comforting. I’d never felt so safe in my life.

“Then why don’t you quit? You can go work in that café you like if you really want to have a job.” I’d told him all about my job at Rosie’s when I saw a takeout cup in the truck from there.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. Your happiness is all that matters to me. If that’s working at a café while you figure out your next steps, then great.”

“You’re amazing! I’m so lucky. ”

“No, I’m the lucky one. I got myself a cute, smart omega.” He kissed my forehead tenderly. “Now, why don’t we gather up everything you can’t live without and go car shopping?”

My sister’s calling interrupted our packing. We’d barely started while I worked up the courage to call the hotel and quit. Vanessa saved me the stress by getting there first.

“Hey, Ness.”

“Hi Sully. Listen, I know you’re supposed to be in soon, but we don’t think that’s a good idea. Mom and Dad... they just need time, okay?”

“So I’m fired? No, congrats on your mating and the baby—“

“It’s true? You’re pregnant? And you really mated to a dingo shifter?” I couldn’t get a read on her reaction.

The line was silent for a moment, probably confirming things for Vanessa.

“Sully, I’m proud of you for taking your own path! Congratulations. I’d love to meet your mate—“

“Imri. His name is Imri. He’s got three adopted kids, Rowan, Sandy and Berry. He’s the best, Vanessa. I think you’d like him.”

“If you do, then I’m sure I will. Just give Mom and Dad time to wrap their heads around it.”

“Ask her if she’d like to come for dinner soon,” Imri whispered.

I passed the invitation on, which she readily accepted. I couldn’t help but smile at my mate. After how things went with my parents, he was still open to trying with my family.

“Can’t wait to meet you, Imri,” Vanessa called. I’d put the phone on speaker so I could pack at the same time as talking to my sister. He returned the sentiment. “Proud of you, Sully,” she repeated before she ended the call.

We packed up everything I really wanted quickly after that. I even called Rosie’s to check if they were still hiring. I had a job starting the next week before I managed to get my question out.

Imri’s arm around me was the only thing stopping me from breaking down when I left my parents’ house. Dad tried to apologize.

“Sully, please, give us some time. I... we just need to get used to the idea.”

Silence filled the space between us until he finally spoke again. “You’re safe, aren’t you?”

“Of course! Imri would never hurt me. I’m where I want to be: with my mate. ”

We left then, Imri feeling my pain over the bond. I knew I’d shocked my parents, still I’d hoped for a better reaction.

“Why don’t we go car shopping tomorrow?” Imri asked. “You look worn out.”

I felt mentally and emotionally exhausted. All I wanted to do was go home to the woods where I felt loved, safe, warm.

He drove us back, leaving me to process the day in silence. His hand kept returning to my leg, reassuring me he was with me. Together, we'd get past this.

The house, our home, was full of life and laughter when we returned. Everyone was delighted I didn't have to work, so I could play instead.

Surrounded by my new family, thoughts of my mom and dad felt a mile away. They'd adjust, or we'd learn how to be without them. I didn't regret chasing the dingo in the woods since it got me my mate and a new, better life.

Imri

Nearly two weeks passed before we saw any sign of Sully's parents coming around to our mating and the baby. Over that time, I attempted to keep Sully's spirits up. A test of our fragile bond.

Over and over, Sully reassured me he didn't regret what we'd done. I tried my hardest to ensure he'd never feel bad about giving up his family for ours, the one we created together with the kids and our growing baby.

I showered him with love and affection. We had dates in and around the house. I drove him towards the next town where we had a picnic under the stars, just the two of us.

Even getting him his own car in this town was an ordeal. Nothing about Haenvale was simple. First, we had to go into town, where the whispering followed us pretty much everywhere we went. Then we had to deal with Cress. His dad owned the biggest car dealership in Haenvale, but he made me wish we'd traveled elsewhere, with his snide remarks to Sully.

He soon changed his tune when his dad had to take over the sale because of his attitude. His father was a far better salesperson and was delighted to find us a vehicle which would hold our growing family. Outside of the staff at Rosie's and Trisha, he was the first in the town to congratulate us on our mating and the baby. He even got Sully to smile. That alone was worth the price of the car.

I drove behind him in my truck the whole way home, chatting to him on the phone,

listening to him rave over how cool the car was. It was the safest model I could convince him to pick.

When we parked, Sully rushed to me, throwing his arms around me in delight. The kids loved the car, though we'd have to work on the travel sickness once we knew they were safe to go to Haenvale.

That night in bed together, I heard Sully whisper the words I never thought I'd get to hear from a mate:

"I love you, Imri. You mean everything to me. I know these few days have been hard, but you're worth it."

"I love you, too, Sully. You're everything I've ever wanted and more."

My old friends would have thought a younger mate would mean we wouldn't have anything in common, but we found plenty, from our taste in human music and movies, to what we liked to read. There was always something to talk about.

Sully had some experience with alphas from college, yet was open to experimenting, since he was still finding out what he liked. I think I blew his mind the day I asked him to top me. He'd shown me how great my prostate was with his fingers and made me wonder what it would feel like to have him fuck me for a change. I was open to trying anything with my mate, in and out of the bedroom.

"You really want to try this?" he asked, double checking. How hard he was suggested he was fully into the idea.

"After that blow job the other day? Absolutely. I got some lube, just in case."

His fingers were gentle when he opened me up to take him. He sucked my cock,

distracting me from the strange feeling of his fingers inside me. He held the tip in his mouth, teasing it with his tongue .

I caught him squeezing the base of his cock to hold off his own orgasm. Yeah, he was into it.

“This is fucking hot. I love the feel of you inside me,” I panted. Sully stretched me with another finger. “Put it in!” I demanded, desperate to feel him before I came.

He came off my cock with a cheeky smile. “Put what in where?” He tried to play innocent, but the sparkle in his eyes gave him away.

“Your dick in my ass before I blow my load!”

His laughter was the best sound in the world. I’d never get tired of hearing it, nor being the reason behind it.

He slicked up his cock with more of the lubricant, then slowly eased inside. The burn was sharper than I thought it would be.

“Slower!” I urged.

Sully watched my face until I relaxed. Once he was sure I was okay, he pushed in deeper.

We lay there, Sully’s groin against my ass, just breathing while we adjusted to the new sensations.

“This is—“ Sully breathed. He leaned down to kiss me, pouring all he was feeling over our bond. The longer we were together, the better I could parse his emotions from mine .

“Move, please.” I held onto him, fingertips biting into his slender shoulders as he pumped his hips.

Every nerve ending was set alight. He kept nailing my prostate, his breathing growing heavier, sweat dripping with each thrust.

He reached for my cock and with barely a touch, I came, my knot forming so quickly I think I passed out from blood loss. Sully massaged my knot and snapped his hips in the same rhythm, his strokes soon faltering when he filled me with his release.

“Oh, wow!” He slumped on top of me, his hand still working my knot, my come sticking us together.

“Right?” I could barely think about the mess we were making, just how content I felt to have experienced that with Sully.

“Yeah, that’s—“

I held him close. “We can do that again whenever you like.”

His head came up so he could meet my eyes. “You really enjoyed it?”

“Sully, there’s no faking a knot. I loved it.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you. Gimme a minute, and I’ll get us cleaned up. ”

“I’ll do it.” He eased out of me carefully. Petting my hole, his eyes fixed on it, he asked, “Okay?”

“Perfect,” I answered with a grin.

He jumped off the bed and ran to the adjoined bathroom for a cloth to clean us up.

“Let me play alpha!” he cried with a giggle.

Life with Sully would never be boring.

The kids kept him busy between his part-time shifts at Rosie’s. He was just helping out over the summer season until his pregnancy neared the end. The café’s owners were aware he was expecting, so they’d promised to keep an eye on him and not let him overdo it. That made me feel better about having him away from me where I could look after him.

I liked the owner and her mate. Both of them genuinely seemed to care about Sully’s wellbeing. They offered to take care of him without having to be asked. They were also on our side against some of the town who distrusted me for being a dingo shifter. Whenever I went in to say hello, they always had a smile for me.

Sully’s mom was actually the first to call him and apologize. “Honey, I’m sorry about how I reacted. How is mated life treating you?”

“Good. So much is happening here,” he said, a tentative smile on his face.

“I’d love for you to tell me all about it. We owe you both an apology. We shouldn’t have reacted like that.” His smile grew. It felt good for her to admit how she had hurt him. “You deserved a better response, but we let our past cloud our judgement. You’d never be with anyone who was harmful just because they were your mate.”

Being the bigger person, Sully forgave her immediately, holding nothing back. He regaled her with stories about the little things I liked to do to show my love for him. He told her how I made him a strawberry smoothie each morning because he missed

coffee, but it made him nauseous. Having something sweet instead of his favorite drink made him feel better.

He also told her all about the kids, well, the stuff he could share without problems. How they needed a tutor for their magic because Ginger had vanished into the wind once more. He told her the kids wanted to go to school instead of being homeschooled because they wanted to make friends.

She pulled through there.

Vicky, Sully's mom, was a well-connected woman. She knew everyone in town of importance, at least in her opinion. Once she came to visit us at the house with Danny, her mate, I knew she was fully onboard with our mating. She stormed into our little world, ready to make up for the false start. I respected the hell out of her for it.

My moms loved her after a few minutes of tense silence. It only took Berry asking Vicky if she liked to bake, and then the ice was broken.

Rowan was the one who charmed Vicky, though. They just clicked when Rowan impressed her with his plant knowledge. The three of them, Vicky, Rowan, and Berry, were as thick as thieves in the vegetable patch, within minutes of Rowan explaining how he taught Berry everything she knew. Her magic meshed with the plants, making them grow beyond anything Rowan could do himself. Vicky was in awe of them.

She found a magic tutor for them that afternoon. With their help, the kids could be enrolled at the local college and school, giving them the chance to make friends for the first time.

By spending time with his son and Sandy, Danny gave my moms the opportunity to pack, now that we were settled. They hadn't wanted to leave with Sully upset over

how things were with his family. Now both had apologized, they were ready to head home. Besides, the house was almost done, nothing still unfinished was anything I couldn't manage myself.

The day after his parents' visit, his sister came by. She marveled over the house, was welcoming to the kids, and warm to me. I liked her instantly. She brought her kids with her and they soon had a game going with their new cousins in the backyard. It gave me hope for their time at school.

When it was just the adults on the back porch, Vanessa announced, "I've been talking with Trisha over what she found in the town charter. We've called a town meeting tomorrow. We'd like it if you came."

"Last time I spoke to Trisha, she didn't have much. Is it worth holding a meeting?" Sully wondered aloud. His best friend was a regular visitor to the house and had helped us find a crew willing to fix up the road. We had a week more of the bumpy track before the new road was laid.

Vanessa's grin was shark-like. "We had a breakthrough after Orson's return to Haenvale. His great-great-grandfather was mayor once upon a time. I think you'd be surprised by what we've learned."

"Any hints?" I asked.

"You'll have to come along tomorrow to find out."

"Imri, I'm nervous." Sully's hand was clammy in mine as we made the walk up to the town hall. Finding somewhere to park had been a nightmare.

"Me too. It feels like there's a lot riding on this."

“Sully, Imri!” Trisha called from the front. “I saved you seats over here.”

We took our places and settled in for an eye opening event .

Trisha was running the show. Once the mayor called the town meeting to order, she handed the floor open to Trisha.

“Haenvale’s existence as a haven town is a lie,” she proclaimed.

Gasps followed her announcement. She used a crystal to shine the charter onto the walls of the vast building.

“This point here, a haven for all, has never truly been realized in our town. Until recently, even I believed the lie until I had my eyes opened. Haenvale was supposed to be a place where prey shifters could be free from the persecution they suffered at the hands of predators, but,” she paused dramatically, “that was never to be at the expense of the predator’s animal sides.”

“Nothin’ happens to them. Predators complain’ ’bout nothin’!” someone yelled from the back.

“Have you ever asked a predator, a wolf, a fox, or a lion what it feels like to wear their inhibitor? Do you know there are different kinds depending on what you are?” Murmuring rose in the crowd. “They prevent them from shifting. They can’t access their animals, at all! ”

Trisha waited for the crowd to calm, to continue. “Haenvale has laws to prevent discrimination by species. There were funds and land set aside to create safe zones where all shifters could meet and mix to find their fated mates, to make friends outside of their type. They were designed to teach them how to cope with each other. It can be done. We see it in cities all the time. So why were they stolen from

Haenvale's residents? Greed is why. The money and land were robbed from the town."

"Stolen?" Sully whispered, his head tucked close to mine. "Somehow I'm not surprised."

"After all I've learned about this place, neither am I."

The meeting took hours! We had to stop for refreshments halfway through because it had devolved into bickering with one side slinging insults at the other.

Finally, Trisha took a stand at the front. "We need to fix this for the future of Haenvale. I would like to raise a motion to purchase Cliff Park from the town administration for the people to create a place where shifters can mingle in safety."

The town owned a strip of land which held no value for domestic or commercial properties. Apparently, the bylaws prevented anything from being built on it because the space was earmarked for a park. They hadn't wanted to draw attention to what they'd been up to. Rather than trust the town to turn the land into the park it was supposed to be, Trisha had a plan.

"I have met with several business owners of Haenvale who have a stake in seeing the town reach its full potential. Together, we have created a trust called the Haenvale Alliance. We have raised funds to buy the land from the town in order to create a safe shifting space for both predator and prey shifters. A place where they can learn to coexist in harmony. Would the town vote on a motion to approve the sale of this land?"

While it was a close one, the vote passed. It was a step forward.

Sully

Baby steps. Progress was made in baby steps.

None of us thought that our announcement would make a rapid change in Haenvale, so no one was disappointed when there was a lot of back and forth over who would control this land until it was clear the Haenvale Alliance had this all in hand. They wanted outright ownership now that faith in the town was lessened. Playing hardball was Trisha's forte. Soon, the sale went through and the next set of hoops rose for the trust to jump through.

There were the licenses, the insurance, security. In short, the town didn't make it easy for the Alliance to get shit done.

Orson was the one to step in. While his trip with Baxter wasn't the smoothest, they learned a lot about each other and were determined to make their relationship work, especially since I was pregnant and mated to my alpha. I never asked him if Baxter was his mate. That was his secret to tell when he was ready. Not that it mattered, they were committed to each other and very much in love.

Perhaps his parents saw it as a way to elevate their social standing, but they supported him in his crusade to get the park up and running. They also wanted him to claim the Pallas cat omega he was in love with as his mate. They put money and political clout behind the Alliance now Orson's dad was running for mayor.

The park finally opened mid fall. Stone had returned to take charge of running the place. A perfect job for the gargoyle now he wasn't working in policing the tear. I

was glad he was back to meet my mate before we became parents again. He bonded with Imri and the kids easily, slotting into our lives like he'd always been there.

I'd finished working at Rosie's at the end of the summer season. The pregnancy made it uncomfortable to be on my feet a lot, even with the adjustments they made for me, like a stool behind the counter to rest on between orders, meaning I had to quit with a couple of months until my due date.

Carrying twins would do that to you, though .

Yeah, two babies. Imri was over the moon about it, and honestly, so was I. We had a lot of work ahead of us, but with my family helping out and our kids at home lending a hand where they could, I knew everything would be fine.

All of the kids were thriving. They didn't start school until after the summer, and it was a huge adjustment for them. We were just grateful Rowan had his license to drive them. Imri had gotten him a little car from Cress' dad again, much to the irritation of Cress.

I loved having my independence and realized I missed working less than a week after giving it up. Imri was the one to encourage me to find something I could do that would balance well with family life.

"Come work with me," Trisha suggested. "Just a day or two in my office a week. You can start your own accountancy firm."

I was certified, having taken all the tests in college. Supernatural schools were very different from human ones, or at least they appeared to be in the movies and books I'd come across. It's how I could have two degrees at only twenty-three, I'd had my birthday in September with everyone around me to celebrate it .

Trisha's office was a relaxed place. She didn't work there all the time, preferring to meet some clients in Rosie's, or just work through lunch there herself. I could take the babies to work with me if I wanted, or leave them with their dad, because Imri worked at home improving the inventions Uncle Malik had been working on before he died.

"Sweetheart, you need to focus at work. I'll take care of the kids," Imri insisted when I floated the idea of taking the babies to the office with me.

So that's how I found myself with a tiny office at home and a part time space in downtown Haenvale. I shared the space with Trisha and a couple of other businesses. They all hired me on to do their books, gaining me my first clients after my parents.

Yeah, once they came around, they were fully on board. My mom video called Ellie and Farah at our first scan while Imri just stared at the screen, tears running down his face. We had all the kids there to meet their siblings, taking one of their first visits into Haenvale now that we knew their magic was settled enough.

Their tutor loved them. All three were her prize students. She believed Rowan had a future in teaching magic, if that's what he wanted to do. He was developing spells under her care, further increasing his control.

Our eldest was going to be published in magic journals! His wards were revolutionary, and he was in great demand.

"I'm not leaving you and Dad," he swore when the first government summons letter came for him.

"No, but you're not missing out on this opportunity either," I told him. "Dad will go with you. I've got Sandy and Berry to keep me company for the week, okay?"

“What if you need help?” Rowan’s anxiety was something we were working on. Getting him a therapist, one for all of them, was high on our list.

“Gran and Gramps are only a short drive away.” My parents had chosen what they wanted the kids to call them. “Gaga and Noona are just looking for an excuse to move in for a couple of months.”

Rowan grinned. We’d agreed Imri’s moms could come stay for a while just before the babies arrived and for about a month after. Now that they were retiring, passing their businesses on to Imri’s siblings, they had plenty of free time. As much as we would have liked them to move to Haenvale, they had other grandchildren in New Boston. Besides, it wasn’t that far of a drive.

I had about six weeks before the scheduled c-section for the twins when Rowan and Imri flew to New Washington for discussions with the government about his warding skills. It gave me time to get the nursery the way I wanted and spend some quality time with the younger two. My dad came every day to make sure I wasn’t overdoing it, and to drive the kids to school. My bump was too big to make the drive comfortably everyday.

“Poppa!” I heard Sandy shout when he came into the house. It was finally decorated to our taste. Both Imri and I had similar visions of what our home should look like.

“Poppa?” Berry repeated, obviously looking for me.

“Nursery!” I called back to them. I was sitting in the middle of the floor surrounded by little onesies. They’d all been washed, ready for the little ones to arrive.

Thundering steps came up the stairs. Sandy reached me first, skidding to a halt on the hardwood floor .

“No running in the house,” I reminded him.

“Can Robbie come play in the treehouse and stay for dinner, please?”

“Only if his adult can drop him off and pick him back up again, alright? Let them know I can’t drive just now.”

“Thank you!” Sandy rushed off to make a call.

“Poppa, can I have a friend stay for dinner too?” Berry asked from the doorway. School hadn’t been as easy for her, compared to Sandy, but she had made some friends and was adapting.

“Sure thing. Same rules.” I struggled to get to my feet.

“Here.” Dad took my arm and hoisted me up. “No more sitting on the floor.”

I rubbed my rounded stomach with a sigh. The babies wriggled inside me. Grabbing my dad’s hand, I placed it where I could feel their feet.

“They’re really active right now,” he remarked with a soft smile. I was glad he and my mom were playing an active role in our lives.

“Yep, playing with my bladder, too.” I laughed. Pregnancy was great and all, but I was looking forward to having my body back.

“Probably missing their daddy. You shouldn’t have let Imri go off with Rowan this close to your due date. It’s not good for you to be without his pheromones for so long.”

“It’s barely been three days, Dad. I’m fine.”

“Mom agrees I should stay here until they get back, just in case.”

To be honest, it sounded like a good idea. “Okay, Dad.”

It was just as well my dad came to stay with us. Being apart from Imri began to take its toll on me by the fifth day, leaving Imri with no choice but to return or risk us getting worse. Neither of us wanted me to spend time in the hospital.

He and Rowan told the government they would have to visit Haenvale next time they wanted to talk to our son, because he wasn’t leaving his family vulnerable if he could help it. They needed him more than he needed them. Our eldest was in demand !

I was so grateful they returned quickly. As soon as Imri was home and wrapped around me, I felt worlds better.

“You’re alright,” Imri had soothed that night once everyone was in bed. “Rowan was glad to come home early. He hated New Washington. I don’t think we’ll be visiting New Boston any time soon.”

“Are you sure? I feel like I damaged his chances with the government. A contract with them would set him up for life.”

“Sully, he’s nineteen.” His birthday was in October, and we’d celebrated it by having a small event at Rosie’s. “He’s only just in college and has got a lot to learn about who he is or what he wants in life. The last thing he needs is a big contract dictating what he can do. This way we can delay any big decisions.”

My alpha had been against the trip in the first place. I’d convinced him we owed it to Rowan to at least talk to the government. Maybe I’d put too much pressure on all of us.

“Shh, Sully, it’s fine. He got a lot out of it. You were right to push him to check it out. If we can make it work, he’d never have to worry about money. I just hated to be away from you. So did Rowan.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. By your side is where I belong.”

Feeling marginally better about needing my alpha and eldest son home early, I fell asleep.

With twins coming, I was told a caesarian was my best choice. One of the twins was sitting in breech position and they couldn’t turn her.

Imri was with me for an appointment because my ankles were swollen and I felt really uncomfortable with over a week to go before the surgery.

“Hmm,” the midwife said thoughtfully. “I’m not liking these numbers, Sullivan.”

“Sully, please.”

“Well, Sully, I think we should get those babies out today if we can.”

“Today?” Next to me, Imri tensed up.

“Yes. You’re showing signs of preeclampsia. It’s important we ensure both yours and the babies’ health by getting them out of there. I need to make a call. Check if there’s room for you to go up now. Do you need to make arrangements?”

I looked at Imri for guidance. “I’ll go call your parents, ask them to look after the kids. Then I’ll call my moms and get them to hit the road a bit sooner than planned.”

“Will that be okay?” I wondered anxiously. Getting to meet the babies sooner was fantastic, but I was scared, too.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine.”

Imri squeezed my hand, then left the room to make his calls. The midwife picked up her phone to call the hospital.

I tuned out, going into my head, so worried about what was about to happen, I jumped in my seat when Imri returned and touched my shoulder.

“Mama said they’ll be on the road in an hour. Your dad is going to take the kids out for dinner, keep their mind off of it until they can come visit. Are you okay? Do we need anything?”

Shaking my head, I answered, “No, the hospital bag is in the car already. Mom said it was best to have it ready well in advance. ”

“Smart.”

“Sully? The hospital can fit you in later this afternoon. They’d like you to head over now for observation, alright?”

“Okay.”

The hospital was clean, bright, and welcoming when we arrived. I was quickly taken through the necessary paperwork and checks. Then it was time to get into my gown to be wheeled into the operating room.

Imri held my hand the entire time I was numbed and cut open. He watched with wonder as the first of our twin girls was pulled free. The sensation was strange, a

tugging feeling without any pain. Hearing her petulant cry was worth the long months, the sickness, and discomfort.

I cried when her sister's cries joined hers. The bed was adjusted so I could see them both get weighed and checked over. Then we'd get to hold them.

"Here you go, Poppa," the doctor laid Aspen into my arms. Another handed our other daughter, Hazel, to her dad.

"Hello Aspen, I'm your poppa."

The little baby in my arms rooted around, already looking for her first feed. Hazel began to fuss, too .

My mate handed me Hazel. "Hello Hazel, I'm your poppa." Her scent was slightly different from Aspen's. The only difference they had, since they were identical, though I'm sure only me and Imri would be able to tell which one was which.

I fed them while the doctors took care of the rest of the procedure and healed me until it looked like I'd given birth a week ago, not minutes before.

"You're amazing, Sully," Imri said with love in his eyes as I fed both girls. "I'm so glad you didn't give up on us."

"Me too."

Imri

Four Years Later

The Haenvale I'd come to over four years before was very different from the one I lived in now. Gone were the different inhibitors. Guests to the town still wore them, but most of the residents had learned how to live in peace, thanks to Sully, Trisha, Vanessa, and Orson.

Sully, who had started this thing off so he could have me as his mate. Trisha, who had done all the research with Vanessa helping out, seeking a Haenvale which was fair, not discriminatory. Vanessa, who had also found some of the money and brokered the deal with the town. Then finally, Orson, who had a vested interest in seeing the park come to life. The same guy who had invested his own money into the project and hours upon hours of his time getting it right .

It worked. Sure, there were blips. The occasional injury from shifters who just weren't ready for the sensory overload not having an inhibitor gave them. Having healers on staff along with magic users was a genius idea from Sully. Without having to think about it, he made it a requirement, ensuring the park could continue to open after the first accident instead of shut down for everyone's safety.

"Dad, the plaque has arrived. Would you open it for me?" Rowan asked, on the other end of the phone. He was now the same age Sully was when I met him. Done with college, Rowan had many security companies vying for his attention. Mainly, he worked for the defense department of the government, but at home, not in New Washington. Our oldest child hated cities with a passion.

“Sure. Be there in a minute.” I put down the invention I was working on with a frown. It was a variation of the inhibitor. The idea being it would be used to soothe a prey drive. Still in the very early days, it had the potential to be helpful to many families settling in the growing town. If I could get the damn thing right.

Rowan’s home was at the other end of our backyard. He’d moved out, just hadn’t gone far, which we thought was a blessing. He got to be a part of his siblings’ lives and have his own space.

The house was a simple two story, two bedroom home with a sparse design. Rowan didn’t like a lot of fussy decorations or clutter.

He was staring at the plaque when I walked in. It was obvious what it was from the packaging. He’d clearly tried opening it himself, then gotten overwhelmed and given up.

“Do you want Poppa?” Sully was better at this stuff than me.

“No, it should be you.”

“Alright.” When Rowan was like that, it was better not to question him.

I didn’t hesitate, just ripped the paper covering the ornate plaque gifted to Rowan, Sandy, and Berry to honor their mom and the witches who were cast out.

Haenvale Remembers, it read. A symbol of our deepest sorrow over the loss of the Oaken Coven. An apology to those who we lost. A promise to do better.

The plaque held an ornate oak tree. It dominated the piece, making it beautiful.

“Do you think Mom would like it?” Rowan asked, standing next to me .

Unable to lie, I shrugged. “I think maybe some of the sentiment behind it. It’s too little too late for them, but now at least things are better. You, Sandy, and Berry have a life she could only dream of. That, I think, she would be happy about.”

Rowan leaned his head against my shoulder and wrapped an arm around me. As I suspected, he now stood a head taller than me after hitting a final growth spurt when he was almost nineteen.

“Mom would like you and Poppa. You’ve been everything she wanted for us. You’ve given us so much.”

“We love you. It’s easy.”

“Hello? Rowan? Imri?” Sully called from the porch. He was aware that sometimes Rowan worked on sensitive material, and always announced his presence before entering. Plus, there had been the occasional lover over, though Rowan didn’t have anyone at the moment, newly single after a bad break up.

“In here, Poppa.” I knew Sully loved Rowan still calling him Poppa like the younger ones did.

Berry and Sandy, now fourteen, came in first. They stopped to stare at the plaque.

“Thoughts?” I asked.

They shared a look and a smile. “Mom would have said it was a start,” Berry answered.

“Oh, that’s lovely!” Sully rounded the corner, Aspen and Hazel tussling in their dingo forms around his feet. They shifted, taking their dresses from Sully to wear.

“What is it?” they asked together.

Sully leaned down to explain it to them in terms they'd understand. Both the girls had my coloring. Same golden tan skin, dark hair and eyes, though they had Sully's nose and mouth. His sassy attitude, too.

Looking at my family, I was grateful I'd come to Haenvale and thankful for Uncle Malik's gift.

Sully

As a family, we'd returned to their village deeper in the woods to install the plaque together. There was a road there now, making the journey easier. The town had protected the place with spells, preserving it as a landmark of historical relevance. A sign of their shame and how they had to do better by the generations to come. We'd taken all of Agnes' things to our house before anyone could see them, keeping her privacy.

Rowan, Sandy and Berry would always grieve their mother, but Agnes had raised them well, giving them all the tools they needed to survive with only Uncle Malik to help them. I felt like she would be proud of the people they'd become and hopefully approved of us as parents. Imri and I loved them so damn much!

Installing the plaque took no time at all. Rowan placed some spells on it to keep the elements off it. He struggled with his mom's loss more than the others. Therapy was helping.

We had a nice dinner together, talking over memories they had of the village before the little ones got too tired. It ended off an emotional day well.

The girls were in bed, Sandy and Berry were doing their own thing. They'd finally moved into their own rooms once Rowan had moved out, but they were always pretty considerate of the girls' bedtime. It was just me and Imri doing the endless chores around the house.

No one had ever prepared me for how much laundry kids could create , I thought to myself ruefully as I folded the second load of the day.

“I know that look,” I teased when I looked up to find him watching me, heat in his expression.

“What look?” Imri attempted to act innocent while he helped me fold. It was all a ploy.

“Imri, honey, I know you. Spit it out.”

“Your heat is coming up...” The man kept a better record of my heats than I did. I had them roughly every sixty days, but they could be a little unpredictable. They’d taken a few months to return after Aspen and Hazel were born, mainly because I was breastfeeding them, which helped as a contraceptive.

“And?” I teased.

“I was wondering if you felt ready for another baby.” He looked so hopeful.

Though I’d suspected he was getting broody for another baby, I wasn’t sure he was going to ask this time around.

Was I ready?

Our lives were busy and full of love. I adored each of our children, adopted and biological, exactly the same. Every one of them was a wonder with something special about them .

Then there was Imri. My mate cherished me with a love I’d never thought possible. We went on dates regularly. We tried things in the bedroom, our chemistry still as combustible as the day we met.

My career had taken off. I had employees, only two of them, but I still had to hire more staff. We had an office of our own, having outgrown Trisha's shared one. Things were great.

Would another baby fit into our busy lives?

"You're not ready, are you?" A momentary look of disappointment flashed over his face. He shook it off. "It was selfish of me to ask. You've got your company and everything. We've got time."

Imri wrapped his arms around me. I sank into the feeling of his love surrounding me. The bond showed me his pang of hurt, yet also his love and trust in me.

"Are you sure?" If it was something he really wanted, I'd give it some more thought.

"I'm sure. Just... can we re-visit another baby? Maybe in a year or two?"

That I could do. He always looked on the bright side. Was always problem solving or finding a compromise. It was one of his best qualities.

"Absolutely. I think it would be better once Aspen and Hazel are in school, especially if we split the week like we did when they were younger."

The youngest went to a daycare during the week for a few hours, giving Imri time to work without interruptions at home. I was splitting my time between the office and home and limiting my working week to thirty hours maximum, so we could have a decent work/life balance.

"Yeah, you're right. We can still have your heat, can't we?"

"Oh, yeah. We'll grab some contraception potions and get my parents to babysit for a couple days. Have some time alone as a couple. What do you think?"

“I think you have all the best ideas.” Imri nuzzled my neck.

“Why don’t I ditch this and we can go practice?”

“Yeah, my mate has the very best ideas.”

Imri scooped me into his arms and raced up the stairs to our bedroom. As we passed Sandy’s room, he caught sight of us, sighed and put his headphones on. “Night, Dad and Poppa!”

“Night!”

He dropped me onto the bed and in a flash, my mate was on me, his mouth covering mine. His tongue pushed my lips apart.

Surrendering, I kissed him back, my arms coming around him. I’d never get tired of being with Imri. His touch always set me alight.

Soon we were naked and Imri’s thick cock was stretching me in the best ways. We knew each other’s bodies better now, knowing exactly which buttons to push. When we both came, we lay there, wrapped around each other, all sweaty but sated.

After we cleaned up, I rested my head on his chest, ready to go to sleep. Imri whispered words of love to me and held me close just as sleep claimed me.

I’d gone into those woods almost five years ago to find proof of the dingo I’d seen in there, only to find my fated mate. To the town, I was still dingo boy, but now it was a point of pride because I’d been right to follow my curiosity. It had given me the life of my dreams and more love than I’d ever hoped for.