



# The Tech Guru's Heart (Shifter's Regime #15)

**Author:** *Charlie Richards*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Keeping the Peace: When a musk ox shifter makes a detour to help a friend, he runs into Fate's greatest gift.

Link Rawlins may be a big man, but even though he shares his spirit with a massive musk ox, he's not a dominant shifter. He's happy in his role of helping behind the scenes, using his computers to research, hack, and compile information for others.

When Link gets a call from a fellow shifter about some family trouble, he can't say no. After all, he's already in the area. Upon arriving at Amelia's apartment, Link finds her next-door neighbor, Ezra Pendle, already rendering aid. Realizing the human's his mate, the other half of his soul, Link steps in to back up Ezra's order for Amelia's antagonistic father, Gary, to leave, and Link manages to score a date. Unfortunately, Link's shy, soft-spoken nature leaves him tongue-tied, and the date doesn't go well. Ezra is active and outgoing, and they just don't seem to have much in common.

Can Link find a way to convince Ezra they're meant to be together, or will danger created by Link's work end with dire consequences for them both?

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

“THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR picking up Rylie’s cake, bro,”

Warren rumbled through the phone line. “You’re totally bailin’ me out.”

His brother’s voice was filled with a groan as he muttered, “Can’t believe I forgot to pick up my son’s birthday cake.”

Link Rawlins smirked as he listened to his eldest brother’s lamenting tone. “It’s fine,”

he assured, shaking his head as he pushed his cart out of the grocery store. His brother’s mate, Patricia, had ordered the massive, two-flavored sheet cake nearly two weeks before for Link’s nephew’s birthday. Rylie was turning eighteen. “I was in the area.”

“Why were you in the area?”

Warren asked, sounding confused as hell. “You hate going into town.”

What his brother said was true. Link did indeed hate going into town. He much preferred ordering his groceries online and having them delivered. Link absolutely loved the invention of the Internet...well, everything computer-related, really.

Link worked for the Shifter Council in their cyber division, mainly as a hacker, and he preferred staying behind the scenes and out of sight while still helping his friends, family, and paranormals in general.

Having realized the importance of the invention of computers from the get-go, Link

had been quick to invest in stock in those companies. He'd been right, and he'd made himself and his family independently wealthy. For the most part, Link didn't bother leaving his home except for family gatherings, to go to work at the computer lab at Shifter Headquarters, or to go somewhere to shift into his musk ox form.

"Link?"

Hearing Warren's prodding tone through the earbud in his ear, Link admitted, "I can't get my favorite ice cream from my usual delivery service, and I'm out. I didn't want to wait the three to five business days the other company takes."

Warren's deep chuckles sounded in Link's ear.

"I wanted some,"

Link mumbled, rubbing his hand over his thick beard in agitation. "Mint moose tracks is the best."

Link still couldn't believe he'd eaten the last of it two days before, and he hadn't even realized it.

"Well, your mistake saved me,"

Warren told him, sounding an odd mixture of amused and relieved. "Let me know when you get home, and I'll set up a time to come grab it."

"I can just drop it off on my way home,"

Link offered. "It's not a problem."

"I don't want Rylie to know,"

Warren countered. “It’s supposed to be a surprise, and he’s home right now.”

His tone filled with pride as he told him, “He thinks we’re waiting until next weekend so we can celebrate his birthday and graduation together.”

Issuing a deep chuckle, Warren claimed, “This bash tomorrow’s going to surprise the hell out of him.”

“That it will,”

Link agreed, smiling as he thought of the surprise party scheduled for the next afternoon. “Well, I’ll be home in a bit. I’ll text you.”

“Thanks, bro. Talk soon.”

Warren disconnected before Link could reply, but he wasn’t put off by it. That was just his brother’s way.

Link carefully placed the sheet cake in the cargo area of his Hummer, then closed the door. He climbed into the cab and grunted appreciatively, enjoying the smells filling the space. His mouth watered, and he looked forward to getting home so he could eat his dinner and relax.

After several days of setting up discreet tags on all the other cyber guys’ IDs for Councilman Colearian, Link was looking forward to some downtime. Someone in their employ was willing to leak information to outsiders. His or her antics had come to light when it had put a couple of mates in danger. The council needed to know who it was.

Link felt damn proud that his friends had vouched for his integrity. As a result of their trust, he’d been tasked with figuring out who the leaker was. That meant

needing to track every other employee's action, online and off, as well as getting access to their banking files...without them knowing.

Considering Link was looking into other hackers, it wasn't an easy task, and he'd put in a shit-ton of long hours. He'd finally succeeded in writing code to track the last of the guys just that morning. With how satisfied Link felt, he wanted a treat...hence, the ice cream.

After a hot shower, Link had realized he was out of his favorite. He'd immediately climbed into his Hummer and driven to town. Since Link was already out and about, he'd placed an order into his favorite Greek restaurant, too, and the scent of the lamb gyros in the bag on the passenger seat was making his mouth water. He'd picked them up right before his brother had called. They would be perfect with a glass of wine, and his ice cream would be dessert.

Then maybe I'll log online and kill some zombies.

Link enjoyed a number of online games where he could team up with others and kill zombies or vampires or other monsters. Usually, he could find one of his cyber buddies around, and they were always happy to have him join whatever team they were on. Due to how busy Link usually was, he couldn't get online often, but the guys knew how good he was when he was around and always welcomed him.

Looking forward to unwinding, Link started his vehicle toward home. He heard his earbud beep, alerting him to an incoming call. His friend's name flashed on his vehicle's display.

Reaching up, Link hit a button on the earbud, accepting the call. "Hi, Rigel,"

he greeted. Smiling, he couldn't help but tease, "Why aren't you busy sexing up your new mate, man?"

Rigel Patterson was an enforcer for the Shifter Council and was newly mated. He'd recently met and bonded with a human named Tucker Rolden. The pair had hit a few speedbumps along the way, but they were working it out.

"I wish I was,"

Rigel replied, and Link was surprised to hear the anger in his normally friendly and fun-loving buddy's tone. "Tucker just got a call from his sister. Their father's there at her apartment, causing trouble."

"Shit,"

Link growled, frowning at the road. "What can I do?"

Link knew that Tucker's sister was Amelia Rolden. When Tucker had come out and started a relationship with Rigel, he'd been disowned by his father. Amelia was standing by her brother, choosing to walk away from their bigoted parents, instead.

Amelia was also pregnant with a rogue shifter's baby—not that she'd known about shifters at the time of her one-night stand—so not only did she have Tucker and Rigel's support, but she had the backing of the Shifter Council, as well.

"Can you tell me if anyone we know is in the area of Amelia's apartment? I'm texting you her address."

Upon hearing Rigel's request, Link winced. "Eh, sorry, Rige."

He shook his head, even though he knew his buddy couldn't see him, and told him, "I'm not in the office. I'm driving in my Hummer. I can't look up—"

Link paused as Rigel's text came through. Since he had his phone hooked up to his

Hummer's maps system, his dash immediately told him how far he was from the address. It also began giving him directions.

He was only about seven minutes away.

"Damn, I understand, man,"

Rigel began to reply. "I'll contact Theo. Maybe he'll—"

"Wait,"

Link countered. "I'm right around the corner from there."

Even as he voiced the suggestion, he fought back a grimace for a whole new reason. "I'll head over."

Link detested being front and center in any altercation, but he would do it for a friend in need...or the sister of one. Flipping on his left blinker, he began following the directions on his dash. "Any idea what I'm walking into?"

Rigel hesitated before asking, "You sure, man?"

His friend knew of Link's aversion to conflict. Just because he was a big man who shared his psyche with a huge musk ox didn't mean he was a bruiser. In truth, there wasn't a dominant bone in Link's body.

"Yeah,"

Link grunted out through gritted teeth. He tightened his hands on the wheel, doing his best to ignore the way he already felt nervous sweat beginning to pop out on the back of his neck. After taking a deep breath, Link urged, "Tell me what you know."

“Okay.”

Although Rigel still sounded uncertain, he explained, “Amelia left her two-week notice on her father’s desk when she left work this evening.”

Link winced, recalling how both Tucker and Amelia had been working for their father, Gary, at their family dealership. Tucker had been in sales but had lost his job when he came out as bi and took up with Rigel. Amelia had remained while she and her brother tried to figure out their next steps.

Evidently, Tucker and Rigel had finally convinced her to move in with them. In Link’s opinion, that was a good thing. Amelia would need the support as she grew further along in her pregnancy, not to mention after having the babe.

It takes a village to raise a child.

Link believed in that old adage, and he was always happy to spend time with his niece and nephew.

“I bet that went over like a lead balloon,”

Link muttered as he made another turn. “He there raising a stink, then?”

“Oh, yeah,”

Rigel confirmed. A growl entered his voice as he snarled, “He’s threatening to sue for custody of her baby.”

“What the hell?”

Link snapped, anger surging through him. “How the hell does he even know she’s

pregnant?”

“Don’t know,”

Rigel admitted.

“I’ll have to look into that,”

Link muttered, scowling as he spotted the apartment complex ahead. “Check for bugs or malware on her phone,”

he commented absently, his mind spinning with ideas. “Okay. I’m here.”

“Tell her we’ll be there in thirty,”

Rigel told him. “Can you wait with her until we get there?”

“Sure.”

Link glanced in his rearview mirror, thinking of his nephew’s cake in the back...and his ice cream. It’ll be fine. “See you shortly.”

After parking in the visitors’ area, Link shoved out of his vehicle. He slammed the door and began jogging toward Amelia’s apartment, using his fob to lock his doors in the process. Link reached the stairs—her apartment was on the third level—and he heard the shouting, his enhanced shifter hearing easily allowing him to make out the words.

“How dare you choose that faggot over your family,”

a male roared, and Link assumed it was Gary. “You will cease this despicable

behavior. You will move back in with your mother and me so you can relearn proper values,”

he continued to demand. “You’ll return to work until you start showing, then stay at home until the baby comes.”

The man’s voice hardened further. “Come on. We’ll put in your notice to the building super. I’ll pay the fee to get you out of your lease, then take it out of your paychecks.”

“Let go of me,”

a female replied—Amelia, obviously.

Link switched from taking the stairs two at a time to three at a time, knowing he needed to intervene.

To Link’s surprise, he heard a second male voice—a smooth, silky tenor that caused the hairs on his arms to stand up. “Hey, man. Father or not, you can’t drag her anywhere she doesn’t want to go. She’s an adult. Let Amelia go.”

“As if you could stop me,”

Gary replied with a sneer in his tone. “Get out of my way.”

Reaching the top, Link turned the corner and continued jogging forward. He spotted a toned Caucasian standing in the doorway to Amelia’s apartment. His feet were braced in his running shoes, and his lean arms flexed where he gripped either side of the door frame.

And that ass in those work-out shorts. Gods, I want to grab those cheeks so bad.

Link almost stumbled a step as the inappropriate thought slammed through his brain. Catching himself in time, he slowed his pace. After all, Link didn't want to freak out the handsome human who was obviously trying to help Amelia out.

"I may not be able to stop you, sir,"

the human replied, his voice once more causing butterflies to dance in Link's belly. "But I can sure slow you down until the cops get here."

"You didn't call the cops,"

Gary countered coldly. His tone turned to ice as he continued, "Get your friend out of our way, Amelia, before I have to hurt him."

Gary threatened again, "Don't think I won't take your bastard child away from you. No judge will let you keep it once I prove you're cavorting with abominations."

Yeah, he's a bigoted asshole, all right.

Rigel and Tucker's descriptions of the man hadn't done the asshole justice.

Reaching the doorway, Link stopped a pace behind the human. He opened his mouth to say...something. Except, then the human's smell hit him, causing his mouth to water. Link barely resisted a moan as he inhaled the earthy, masculine goodness of the guy...who must have just been returning from the gym, considering his tank top, shorts, and running shoes. The hint of musky sweat clung to the human's skin, and his flesh still shone with lingering sweat.

"Oh, gods."

The whispered words were out of Link's mouth before he could stop himself.

This human would-be hero is my mate.

At his words, everyone's attention focused on Link, and he fought back a blush. He hated being the center of attention, especially when he didn't have a computer to use as a buffer. Still, Link was there to help, and help he would...and maybe score a date with his mate.

When said mate half-turned to peer over his shoulder at him, Link found himself entranced by the man's gorgeous green eyes. The guy's sandy-blond hair flopped over his forehead, also a little damp, betraying that he'd been working out. Only the fact that the man's eyes widened and he took a step to the side to add space between them stayed Link's desire to reach out and brush those strands to the side.

The smell of unease that filled the guy's scent was a good deterrent, too.

Link knew what the guy would see. He looked at himself in the mirror every day, after all. His big, broad-shouldered body stood six-foot-four. While he had a little bit of a belly, Link had plenty of muscles, too.

On top of that, Link's thick black beard and bald head often made others guess that he was in a motorcycle gang or something. Mothers often pulled their kids to the side when he passed them on the street. Even many men wouldn't look him in the eye.

For the most part, Link rarely cared. He was what he was—a big musk ox shifter. Unfortunately, this was his mate reacting that way.

Gotta change that.

After offering his human a small smile, Link moved his attention over the guy's shoulder and focused on Amelia. Her father had her arm in a tight grip, and he glared at him from a red-flushed face. Gary's anger perfumed the air. Considering Amelia's

father stood over six feet and appeared to have a good thirty pounds on Link's mate, he understood the man's threat of moving him bodily.

That thought had Link seeing red.

Focusing on Gary, Link rumbled, "He may not be able to stop you"—he tipped his bearded chin to indicate his handsome blond mate—"but I sure as hell can."

Cracking his knuckles threateningly, Link ordered, "Let Amelia go, Gary, before I make you."

Link had never started a fight in his life, but to help Amelia and his mate, hell yeah, he would.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

EZRA PENDLE STARED up at the huge guy who'd appeared behind him, a mixture of unease and arousal swirling in his gut. The man was, in a word, huge. He towered over Ezra's six-foot-one by a good three inches, but it was the breadth of the man that truly made him feel dwarfed.

The stranger had wide shoulders that stretched his navy green t-shirt to capacity. He had tattoos of vines and birds down his left bicep. His right forearm sported a weave of barbed wire.

The guy would probably look right at home on the back of a big Harley.

While Ezra knew that was probably stereotyping, considering the lightly bronzed skin of his bald head and thick, bushy black beard, he just couldn't help himself.

And why do I find him so hot?

Tatted-up biker types were so not Ezra's jam.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Gary demanded, sneering at the new arrival. Then, curling his lip, he waved his empty hand and growled, "Never mind. Both of you, get the hell out of my way. We're leaving."

"Well, you're half right,"

the big man countered, his voice deep and gruff. With narrowed brown eyes, he

flicked his gaze toward where Gary tightly gripped Amelia's arm. "You are leaving."

He pointed a thick, tanned digit at Gary, then shifted to Amelia. "Amelia, however, isn't going anywhere with you."

He took a menacing step forward. "Let her go, Gary."

Obviously, the stranger knew who Amelia was, even though Ezra's neighbor was staring at the newcomer as if she'd never seen him before.

When Gary still didn't obey, the guy took another step forward. He struck out with one hand wickedly fast, but he didn't punch Amelia's father. Instead, he grabbed Gary's pinky and ring fingers and yanked backward, the opposite direction of their usual bend, forcing him to release Amelia or have his fingers broken.

As it was, Gary still cried out and twisted away from the man as he released his daughter.

The stranger immediately let go of Gary. He used his thickly muscled arm to push Amelia backward as he pivoted, moving her behind him protectively. Then, to Ezra's surprise, he grabbed Ezra's upper arm in a surprisingly light grip and did the same to him.

"Get out, Gary,"

the guy ordered once more. "And take your hateful slurs with you."

Gary rubbed his obviously hurting hand with his other as he stared at him with a hate-filled gaze. "This isn't over,"

he declared, but at least he went.

The stranger followed Gary to the door, perhaps making certain he truly left. Then he closed and locked the door before turning to face them.

“Are you both okay?”

he asked, glancing between them.

Ezra felt his face heat just a little when the man’s attention lingered over him, sweeping up and down his lanky frame.

“Y-Yes, thank you,”

Amelia replied softly. Cocking her head, she asked, “Um, not that I’m not grateful, but...who are you?”

The man’s bearded lips curved up into a wide smile. The move transformed his features from formidable to friendly...and downright devastatingly handsome. Even his brown eyes appeared to fill with warmth.

“Rigel called me, and I was in the area,”

the man revealed. Moving toward them, he held out his big paw of a hand. “I’m Link Rawlins. I work with Rigel.”

“Oh, you do?”

Amelia’s entire body seemed to relax as she took his hand. “Are you a—”

She hesitated, glancing toward Ezra before refocusing on Link. “Um, I mean—”

Chuckling, Link nodded as he released her hand. “Yeah. I’m in security, too.”

Then, if Ezra wasn't mistaken, the guy's cheeks took on a hint of pink behind his thick beard. "Cyber-security, though. Different area but still..."

Link shrugged one massive shoulder.

"Oh, so, like, you work with computers and stuff?"

Amelia asked, sounding just as surprised as Ezra was feeling.

"Yeah."

Link glanced discreetly at Ezra before adding, "With computers and stuff."

No way. This huge man's a computer nerd?

"Well, cool, and thank you for coming."

Amelia sighed deeply as she rubbed her right upper arm. "I never should have opened the door."

"Probably not,"

Link confirmed.

Amelia turned to Ezra and smiled at him. "And thank you so much for stopping my father, Ezra."

Her cheeks darkened in an embarrassed or frustrated blush. "He was ready to drag me home as if we were in the Victorian Era or something."

Lowering her voice, Amelia grumbled, "Or I'm a recalcitrant teenager in need of a

spanking.”

Ezra held his hands up, palms out. “Hey, I didn’t stop him. He did.”

He used a thumb to point at Link. With a grin, Ezra added, “I just delayed him a little until the true hero arrived.”

“I sure as hell ain’t no hero,”

Link muttered, looking away from them both.

That time, Ezra was absolutely certain Link was blushing.

How cute.

Not that Ezra would ever tell the big man that. He liked his features the way they were, thank you very much.

“Well, you’re both heroes to me,”

Amelia insisted with another smile. Focusing on Link, she asked, “When you talked to Rigel, did he say if they were coming?”

Link nodded. “Yeah. Should be here in twenty-five.”

Amelia moved toward the kitchen, saying over her shoulder, “Well, if you need to go, I’m sure I’ll be fine until they get here.”

She smiled Ezra’s way, too. “You, too, Ez. Thank you again for stopping.”

Even before Amelia had finished speaking, Link began shaking his head. “Nope.

Told Rigel I'd stay until they got here."

Amelia smiled gratefully, appearing relieved. "Thanks."

She opened her freezer and pulled out an ice-cube tray. "I'll definitely be keeping the door locked and chained until my brother gets here."

"You hurtin'?"

Link asked, moving toward her. As he passed Ezra, he glanced at him, and Ezra was sure the guy was checking him out.

Then Link's question to Amelia registered, and Ezra snapped his attention to his next-door neighbor. She was wrapping several pieces of ice in a hand towel.

Damn. Shoulda thought of that.

Her father's hold had looked awfully tight, after all.

"Just a little,"

Amelia admitted, grimacing ruefully. "Gonna bruise from his grip."

"Your arm's red,"

Link pointed out. "Let me get a picture."

He pulled out his phone. "And have Rigel or Tucker take more pictures if it does bruise."

Even as Amelia asked, "Why?"

she still allowed Link to lift her arm and position it just so. Then the man took several pictures of her arm.

After that, Link picked up the modified ice pack and slid it onto her arm. “Because we’re gonna need these to get a restraining order against your father,”

he explained, his black brows furrowing as he eyed her. “Especially if he does come after your baby.”

Amelia sighed deeply, worry creasing her features. “I don’t even know how he found out I’m pregnant.”

Shaking her head, she muttered, “I sure didn’t tell him.”

“You’re pregnant?”

Ezra couldn’t hold in his question, moving toward the pair. He glanced between them, and even as his stomach tightened, he focused on Link and blurted, “Are you the father?”

Link’s black brows shot up, his deep brown eyes rounding.

Shock, right there.

Amelia barked a laugh even as she shook her head. “Nope.”

Waggling her brows in Link’s direction, she patted the big man’s chest, clearly amused. “Never met Link before, remember?”

“Oh, right.”

Ezra nodded, feeling his cheeks heat. He definitely was not feeling a bit of jealousy ease from his gut. No way. Clearing his throat, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I guess I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Not before this,”

Link muttered, striding toward him.

Seeing the big man reach for him, Ezra took a step backward on instinct.

“Relax, handsome,”

Link murmured, his voice low and soothing. “Never would hurt ya.”

Then, to Ezra’s surprise, Link wrapped his big hand around the nape of his neck. He placed his other hand on his waist, holding him in place.

Ezra stared wide-eyed as Link dipped his head. The feel of the large man’s lips against his own sent a bolt of shock through him. Gasping, Ezra felt his brain spin.

Link seemed to take that as an invitation, and Ezra immediately found himself with a mouthful of the other man’s tongue. He almost pulled away on principle. Except, then Link’s flavor burst across his taste buds—masculine, earthy, and with a hint of something else...something sweet, which was totally unexpected.

It shouldn’t have worked, but it did.

Oh damn, he tastes amazing.

As the hairs on Ezra’s nape stood on end, his blood fired through his veins. He couldn’t resist grabbing onto Link’s shirt, tipping his head to the side, and kissing the

man back. Ezra met him lick for lick, their tongues tangling and exploring each other. His blood flowed south, and he grunted as his dick filled faster than he'd ever before experienced. The desire to press closer, to find pressure for his aching erection, surged through him.

The sound of a soft snicker broke through the unexpected flash-fire of his lust.

While Ezra would've jerked away—he'd never been one for public displays—Link's tight grip on his nape wouldn't let him. The big man slowly eased the kiss to an end, the soft hairs of his beard teasing at Ezra's chin and lips.

Huh. That feels interesting.

While Ezra had accepted his bisexuality while in high school, he'd never kissed a guy with a beard.

Hell, he could count on one hand the number of men he'd actually kissed. Tricks didn't require it, and most normally didn't expect it.

To Ezra, kissing was an intimacy reserved for...someone who would be more.

With that thought in mind, Ezra began to withdraw.

Link held him tightly for a few more heartbeats before he eased his hold. Lifting his head a few inches, he peered down at him. A wide smile curved his lips.

“Taste just as amazing as I thought you would,”

Link declared.

With his brain not firing on all cylinders after Link's ravishing, Ezra asked the first

thing that popped into it. “How did you know I wouldn’t deck you?”

“Just knew.”

Link’s lips curved at the corners, and his dark eyes danced with mirth. “Straight guys would’ve at least pushed at someone my size.”

With a wink, he added, “You participated.”

“Yeah,”

Ezra muttered, taking a step backward while rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I did.”

He glanced toward Amelia, feeling self-conscious. To his relief, she was staring at her arm, repositioning the ice-filled cloth. Clearing his throat, Ezra kept his voice low as he swept his gaze over Link assessingly. “We seem to have chemistry.”

“Yup.”

Link brazenly reached down and adjusted the big bulge behind his fly. “That we do.”

Meeting Link’s gaze, Ezra nearly swallowed his tongue upon seeing the obvious heat filling the big man’s dark eyes. “You, uh—”

He paused, licking his lips as he made a mental decision—to offer or not? “I live next door.”

Ezra indicated to the left, deciding what the hell. “After Tucker arrives, maybe stop by so we can, um, talk about it?”

Ezra sure as hell hoped that Link understood talking was a euphemism. With how hard his dick had become just from that kiss, he sure hoped there wouldn't be any talking. Skanky, maybe, but Ezra wanted to see what Link was packing.

“Wanna bad,”

Link muttered, his thick dark brows furrowing. “But can't.”

Man of few words. Huh.

The thought flittered through Ezra's lust-clouded brain even as disappointment filled him. “Oh.”

Opening his mouth, he began to ask, “Why—”

“Got my nephew's birthday cake in my truck...and groceries.”

Growling under his breath, Link muttered, “Bad timing, but I wouldn't have been in the area otherwise.”

Ezra had the distinct impression that Link was talking more to himself than to him.

I wonder if he does that often.

“Want your number,”

Link declared, finally releasing Ezra's jaw to reach into his back pocket. “I'll call you tonight. Can you do lunch tomorrow? Nephew's party's in the evening, but I wanna see you before then.”

Okay. Maybe not a man of few words. Definitely direct, though.

Ezra could appreciate that, even if it seemed a little awkward to him. The guy obviously went after what he wanted.

And it seems he currently wants to spend time with me.

Hmmm.

Link stared at Ezra, holding his cell phone—a device that Ezra saw was top of the line. He'd priced the model when it'd come out just three months before. After seeing the chunk of change it would cost, Ezra had changed his mind. No way did he have that kind of money to splurge.

Maybe computer security pays well.

After sharing his phone number with Link, Ezra asked, "So, uh, you're going to call me tonight?"

Nodding, Link smiled at him. "Yeah. To finalize plans. See where you wanna meet."

Ezra nodded. "Okay. Talk to you later."

"Just so you remember to pick up."

Before Ezra could question that cryptic comment, Link dipped his head and took his lips again. He plundered Ezra's mouth for several heartbeats before lifting his head, breaking the kiss. The big man's nostrils were flared, and his dark eyes gleamed with lust.

"Get out of here,"

Link muttered, releasing his hip and taking a step backward. "Before Amelia ends up

seein' somethin' she don't want to."

Ezra sucked in a sharp breath as the image of Link bending him over the back of Amelia's couch popped into his mind. His cock throbbed behind his fly, even as an embarrassed uneasiness filled him. He definitely didn't want that to happen.

Taking the out, Ezra turned and fled.

The hairs on his nape stood on end as Ezra exited Amelia's apartment, and he just knew that if he looked over his shoulder, he would see Link watching...so he resisted.

As Link let himself into his own apartment, he wondered if he would have anything in common with the man.

After all, what could an outdoorsy guy like me have in common with a big bruiser of a computer nerd?

Mentally crossing his fingers, Ezra hoped for a few nights of sweaty sex, at least.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

“CONGRATULATIONS, brOTHER,”

Luke cried, grabbing Link and wrapping him in a tight hug. Moving his hands to his shoulders, he leaned away. Instantly, Luke’s wide grin slipped from his lips to be replaced with an expression of concern. “I heard you found your mate yesterday. Why so glum?”

Link’s shoulders drooped as he grimaced at his second middle brother. The man worked as a nurse in town and had a perpetually fun-loving attitude. The serious look Luke currently sported as he gave him a once-over, as if searching for injury, was completely out of place.

“I did, and thanks,”

Link mumbled, frustration surging through him anew. “We even had a lunch date earlier today.”

Thinking of his time with his mate caused mixed emotions within him. While he’d loved sitting across from him in the café booth and gazing at the handsome blond, he recognized that the silences between them had been awkward. Link just hadn’t known what to say to his human.

Conversation via text is so much easier.

“Then what’s the trouble?”

Luke squeezed his shoulder encouragingly. “Didn’t take you up on coming home

with you and jumping in the sack?”

Shaking his head, Link admitted, “I didn’t ask.”

Even though he’d wanted to do just that—badly. Holding and kissing him in Amelia’s apartment had been so easy. “Rylie’s party and all.”

Link swept a hand forward, indicating their family around them. “Would have been even more awkward.”

“Awkward?”

Luke cocked his head, staring intently at him with brown eyes a bit lighter in shade than Link’s own. “What do you mean?”

Massaging the back of his neck, Link told his brother. “I got tongue-tied.”

He scowled at nothing as he recalled his verbal fumbling. “Didn’t know what to say. Asked stupid shit like, does he like his car.”

Link felt his cheeks heat just at the memory as he told Luke what happened.

“Ezra glanced toward the parking lot where he’d parked his older Range Rover. He shrugged when he turned back to me and told me, Sure. Get’s me from point A to B, and if I need to travel on a dirt road to get to where I want to hike, I’m not worried about the paint job.”

Grimacing, Link ducked his head as he mumbled, “Instead of responding like a guy with a brain and asking about where he liked to go hiking, I smiled like an idiot and said, cool, cool.”

He rolled his eyes and groaned. “As much as I loved staring at him and enjoying his scent, his smell screamed his discomfort. My bull was bellowing in my mind to fix it, but I didn’t know how.”

Link would forever deny the whininess in his voice as he muttered, “I had to get away and think.”

“So you went home alone to hide behind your computer?”

Luke guessed dryly, a wry smile curving his lips.

Link nodded glumly.

Wrapping his arm around Link’s shoulders, Luke bumped his head against his. “Don’t worry, bro. We’ll help you.”

With a wink and a grin, he added, “That’s what family’s for.”

Luke released him only to pat his back. “So, you’re awkward as hell around the man. What’d you find out about him online?”

With a knowing look, he stated, “I’m sure you’ve already done a background check on him.”

“And put a tracker on his Rover,”

Link admitted, only feeling moderately guilty. “At least, I’ll know where he’s at...just in case.”

Luke chuckled. “In case of what?”

“He needs me for something,”

Link replied. Although he couldn't imagine that he would be his mate's first call, and didn't that thought suck giant hairy donkey balls?

Nodding, Luke stared at him steadily. “Of course.”

Tipping his head toward the drink coolers, he stated, “Come on. Quit standing over here holding up the wall of the house. I'm ready for a beer, a brat, and some potato salad.”

Wagging his brows, Luke told him, “Mammy just brought it out.”

Despite his frustration at his ineptitude, Link's mouth began to water, and his stomach grumbled. “Sounds good.”

Hell, all he was doing was stewing. His belly needed filling, and he needed a distraction. Plus, nothing good was ever decided on an empty stomach, according to his mammy.

“Hello, honey,”

Mammy greeted when they stopped at the coolers. She stood a few feet away beside a table laden with a variety of offerings. “How'd your date with your mate go?”

She glanced around the area as if Ezra would suddenly appear. “Did you bring him to introduce us?”

Link shook his head, feeling his face pale just at the thought of his family watching his awkwardness. He needed to figure out how to converse with the man before introductions. Link didn't need to give his human any more reasons that would send

him running.

“Uh, no, Mammy,”

Link quickly replied. Taking the beer Luke handed him, he murmured his thanks. Then he refocused on the matriarch of their musk ox shifter herd. “I didn’t make a very good showing at lunch today.”

There was no point in sugar-coating his actions. “I’m going to call him tonight to set up another date.”

If Ezra will take my call.

“You didn’t set up another date?”

Mammy sounded just as surprised as Luke’s expression. “Whyever not?”

Why not indeed.

“When I walked him to the car, I put a tracker on it,”

Link explained softly, rubbing his free hand down his beard in agitation. “But when I leaned in for a goodbye kiss, Ezra dove into his car.”

Recalling his mate’s withdrawal hurt. “I got flustered and, uh, just said see ya.”

“Oh, my poor dear.”

Mammy came over and wrapped her arms around him. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

Link returned his mother’s hug, enjoying the warmth of her embrace. It didn’t matter

how old he became, he knew he always had her love and support. His family was always there for each other, and he would always be grateful for them. Link knew they would help in any way he asked.

Easing away from Link, his mammy looked up at him and asked, “How can we help?”

Except, Link didn’t know what to ask for. “I’m not sure.”

“What are his interests?”

Luke asked, handing him a plate with a big brat in a bun already on it. “You checked his bank account, right? Where does he spend his money?”

Link’s family didn’t blink an eye at the fact that he’d already hacked bank systems to check him out. It was just what he did.

“And what’s his name, dear?”

Mammy asked, placing a big spoonful of potato salad on first Link’s plate, then Luke’s. “Do you have a picture?”

Placing his beer and plate on the table, Link pulled out his phone and woke the device. “He’s recently purchased a new two-person tent and a number of different food supplies,”

he told them. Pulling up a picture of Ezra, Link held it out to his brother and mammy. “This is him. Ezra Pendle. He works as an accountant, but it’s obvious he doesn’t live his life behind a desk.”

“Like you?”

Luke teased before admiring Ezra's picture. "He's a good-lookin' guy, man."

He punched Link on the upper arm. "I'm a little jealous, but happy for ya, too."

Luke's expression turned wistful. "We all want to find that special someone."

"So much for us finding them in order,"

Naomi stated with a sigh. "I know you thought you were going to be next, Luke."

Smiling wryly, she added, "Then me."

Sticking her tongue out at Link, Naomi grumbled, "Instead, you just had to butt in."

Link chuckled, appreciating the bit of levity. "Sorry, sis."

He shrugged his wide shoulders and added, "You know Fate works in her own time."

"That she does,"

Mammy agreed with a nod. "So, your handsome young man likes to camp. That's good for you."

With a grin, she pointed out, "Your animal will like spending time with him out in the wilds."

Link thought about spending time with Ezra in musk ox form, and his animal rumbled deeply in his mind. His beast liked that idea. While in human form, Link wasn't much of an outdoorsman, but that didn't match his animal half. He would be more than happy to hang out for hours in the wilds with his man.

Wonder what he'll think of shifters and my animal form.

While Link was worried about it, he looked on it with anticipation, too. He wanted to share both sides of his psyche with his human. That was just the nature of shifters.

“So, what did you talk about on your date that you think it went poorly?”

Naomi asked, pouring a stack of Pringles onto her plate. Cocking her head, she added, “I mean, I know you're not the most chatty fellow, but surely it couldn't have been that bad.”

“Really don't wanna talk about it,”

Link grumbled, dressing up his brat with mayo, ketchup, and relish. “Just couldn't seem to get a good conversation going.”

“Talk about the outdoors next time,”

Luke counseled. “Trees, plants, hell, even weather formations to watch for while out hiking.”

With a scoff, his brother added, “We've been around a lot of years. Surely, you've read up on that sort of stuff at some point.”

“Will now,”

Link assured, liking that idea. “And find hiking trails around here.”

Thinking back on what he'd seen Ezra purchase, he commented, “He bought an inflatable kayak, too. Wonder where he intends to use that.”

A backwater lake that they had to hike to would be a great place to introduce Ezra to his musk ox.

“Good idea,”

Luke encouraged. Grabbing his plate of food, he started toward a side table, and Link joined him. His sister stayed back talking with their mammy. “If you need help acclimating Ezra to shifters, ask Bruin’s mate. I’m sure Juan would be able to help.”

Link nodded, liking that idea. His older brother, Bruin, had recently found his fated mate. While Juan was a human, he’d already known about shifters. His stepfather had been an armadillo shifter, so he’d been aware of what being a fated mate to one meant.

A shifter’s mate was the other half of their soul—the one person they could bond with and bind and entwine their lives with. Finding a mate was the greatest blessing a shifter could receive. They would devote their life to that person, and their instincts to please and care for that person were damn near undeniable.

Not that a shifter should ever want to deny that instinct.

At least, no sane smart shifter.

“Can’t believe you put mayo on your brats,”

Luke teased, eyeing his dog. “Mixed with relish?”

His brother grinned broadly at him. “So weird, man.”

Link rolled his eyes. His brother teased him every single time. A human friend had turned him onto the concoction nearly a decade before. Link enjoyed the mix of

smooth and creamy mayo and ketchup with the spicy bite of relish. Combined with the flavor of the meat, he found it damn delicious, and he didn't care what some of his family thought about it.

“Hey, uncles!”

Turning toward the sound of the perky voice, Link ignored the slight break in the tone. He knew his nephew was a little self-conscious of the fact that his voice was finally changing on him. As was common with musk ox shifters, while their human sides went through puberty and gained their shifted form somewhere between twelve and fourteen years of age, their shifter genes impacted them a little later in life as well, almost like a second puberty—in males, their voices deepened, they grew taller, broader, and their frames filled out.

A female would be impacted, too, although the changes were a bit more subtle. She would spring up a few inches and grow willowier and more voluptuous. Many ended up playing basketball, which helped them develop control over their increased strength.

Link's sister, Naomi, had been a starting point guard. She'd had many a male clamoring for her attention. However, as a junior, she'd come out to them, admitting she had zero interest in the male body.

That had all been a long time ago, though.

Focusing on Rylie, Link watched the guest of honor jog toward their table. He grinned broadly, his dark hair flopping over his forehead with every step. His brown eyes shown with happiness.

“Hi, Rylie,”

Luke called, rising to his feet and holding out his arms. “How’s the birthday boy?”

Rylie laughed as he accepted a hug from Luke. “Great!”

Link rose to his feet and grabbed Rylie for his own hug. Growling softly, he lifted his nephew off his feet and swung him back and forth. Hearing Rylie’s laughter even as the teenager shoved at him, Link felt his spirits lift.

Right here. This is what I need. My family.

Placing Rylie back on his feet, Link ruffled his nephew’s hair. Rylie rolled his eyes as he swatted at Link’s hand. “Knock it off, Uncle Link,”

he whined, even as he continued to smile. When Link obeyed and settled back into his seat, Rylie plopped into a chair between him and Luke at the round table. “And thanks so much for the epic new game. I can’t wait to try it out.”

“You’re welcome, Rylie,”

Link told him, pleased that he shared the interest with him. His nephew enjoyed gaming, too. “I’ve already made up a character in it. We’ll set up a time and play together.”

“That’d be awesome,”

Rylie responded with a grin. Then he waggled his brows comically. “As long as it doesn’t interfere with you wooing your mate. Congrats, by the way.”

Rylie glanced around as if looking for him. “He couldn’t make it, huh? I guess that’s normal. Heard he’s human.”

His expression turned serious as if he were imparting some sage wisdom. “Humans take a little extra work, but I know it’ll be worth it to you. You spend too much time alone.”

Rylie wasn’t wrong. That was for sure. Link did spend a lot of time alone. As a hacker, it was sort of in his nature. Except, for Ezra, Link knew he would change.

Before Link could come up with a response, his phone pinged. He woke the device and opened the alert. Narrowing his eyes, Link frowned at what he saw on the screen.

“What’s up, bro,”

Luke asked, scooping up a dollop of potato salad with his fork. “Work?”

Link shook his head. “No. The tracker on Ezra’s car says he’s already sixty miles west, traveling on I-sixteen,”

he murmured, cocking his head. “Where the hell are you going, Ezra?”

He’d just met the man, and the thought of having him so far away caused a curdle of unease to flood his gut.

“Call him and find out,”

Luke encouraged.

“That’d be a little hard to explain. Calling him up and asking him why he’s headed west,”

Link countered, clenching his jaw for a few seconds before forcing himself to relax. “Don’t you think?”

“Don’t be a dick,”

Luke grumbled with a roll of his eyes. “You were going to call him tonight to set up another date, anyway, right?”

His brother waved toward his phone, saying, “No time like the present.”

Just catching himself from biting his bottom lip, Link inhaled deeply before exhaling through pursed lips.

Giving himself a mental pep-talk, Link jerked a nod before hitting the button to dial on his phone.

I can do this.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

HEARING HIS PHONE RING, Ezra pulled it out of the passenger seat's cup holder. He arched a brow upon spotting the name of the caller. Ezra debated not answering, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"Hey, Link,"

Ezra greeted, answering with his phone on speaker. "I'm driving. Give me a sec to switch to Bluetooth."

"Okay."

Just as it always seemed to happen, hearing Link's deep voice caused butterflies to take flight in Ezra's belly. He could seriously listen to the man talk all day. Unfortunately, as seen from their abysmal date, Link didn't talk much.

After that disaster of a lunch, Ezra hadn't thought Link would really follow through and call him. Curious about what he could possibly want—if it's a booty call, I'll have to decline, which would really suck. I bet he's hung—he opened his center console and grabbed his Bluetooth earpiece. After slipping it on his ear, Ezra connected to his phone.

"Okay, Link,"

Ezra stated into the speaker. "I can talk now."

"Glad to hear you're being safe while driving."

Link's voice rumbled through Ezra's ear. "Like knowing you're playin' it safe."

Ezra smirked, feeling a flutter of warmth within his chest...and his groin. "Well, I was a Boy Scout,"

he admitted. "Be prepared."

"Really?"

Link paused, and Ezra thought that would be it...just like at the restaurant. Mostly one-word comments. Except, a few seconds later, Link cleared his throat and stated, "So, uh, I know lunch was a little rough. I haven't dated in...a long damn time."

A deep sigh sounded through the line. "I'm a hacker, mostly a loner, but we have chemistry, you and I. I'm not stupid enough to pass that up just because I'm uncomfortable."

A bit impressed with Link's candor, Ezra let out an admission of his own. "In the parking lot, when you leaned in to kiss me, and I pulled away, it wasn't you, it was me."

Link grunted before asking, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, PDAs make me feel very uncomfortable,"

Ezra admitted. "Even when I've dated women, I don't kiss them in public."

"You're bi?"

Ezra could hear the incredulity in Link's voice...or perhaps worry or concern. He didn't know the man well enough, yet.

If I end up knowing him much at all.

“Yeah, I’m bi,”

Ezra confirmed. He’d never denied how he identified, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to start now. “But if I’m with someone, man or woman, I’m faithful.”

Huh. Why did I feel the need to reassure him?

Plus, Ezra had only ever been in a relationship with a man once...and it had lasted all of two weeks. Still, what he said was true. He’d been faithful during that time.

“Okay,”

Link responded simply. “Uh, can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?”

As tempting as it was to say yes and turn his vehicle around, Ezra decided not to. He’d been planning his excursion for months. Ezra wanted to get out and commune with nature. It always helped him think, and Ezra really needed to think about his body’s crazy responses to Link.

The big guy was the exact opposite of his type, so why did he respond so viscerally to him?

Ezra hoped the two weeks of hiking and camping would help him understand.

“I’m sorry, Link,”

Ezra replied, doing his best to keep his voice soft and soothing. “I’m actually headed out of town. I have the next two weeks off work, and I’m headed into the mountains.”

“The mountains?”

Link repeated. “Like, camping?”

A second later, he murmured, “Oh, you said you enjoyed hiking at lunch today.”

“Yeah, I did.”

Ezra smiled, pleased that Link had caught that. “And I’m heading to Springer Mountain to start the Appalachian Trail. I want to see how far I get and test my physical fitness.”

As Ezra spoke, he couldn’t help how animated his voice became. “Been planning it for months. Someday, I hope to hike the entire trail. It spans fourteen states, ending in Maine.”

Talking faster, Ezra rambled, “This is my first time on the trail, and I’m hoping it’ll give me an idea of just how long it could take me. Average is five to seven months, and I need to know how much more prep I’ll need before planning a leave of absence from work. Definitely not during tax season. Good thing that’s in the winter, right?” Ezra finished with a laugh.

The line remained quiet for a moment, and Ezra felt his cheeks begin to heat as embarrassment started to fill him. He couldn’t believe he’d blurted all that out. What a moment to totally geek-out about his dream of hiking the whole trail.

Finally, Link responded. “I like listening to you talk about your plans. You’re passionate.”

His deep voice sounded full of warmth. “I look forward to hearing more.”

“Really?”

Ezra didn't bother trying to fight his pleased grin.

“Yeah,”

Link instantly replied. “I like the sound of your voice.”

Ezra felt his cheeks heat for a whole new reason. No one had ever offered such blunt admissions before. Clearing his throat, he struggled with what to say.

That time, Link beat him to it. “Do you have a satellite phone?”

“Yeah, absolutely,”

Ezra confirmed. “I've done several overnight hiking trips before. Solo and with friends.”

He smiled, pleased at the idea that Link worried about him. “Got all the necessities. Food for days, water filtration device, first aid kit, pup tent, and GPS maps, and more.”

Ezra forced himself to shut up.

“Good,”

Link replied softly. “Will you give me your satellite number, Ezra?”

“You gonna hack it and track me?”

Ezra teased.

It took a few heartbeats for Link to reply, “Maybe.”

Ezra lifted his brows, surprise filling him. “Really?”

Link sighed. “I won’t if you tell me not to,”

he told him, sounding a bit resigned. “But it’s sort of what I do.”

For some reason, Ezra didn’t find the idea of Link tracking him all that horrible. It was kind of flattering, actually. The big man wanted to expend time, energy, and expertise into keeping track of him, and he was upfront about it.

Not like he’s keeping secrets.

Chuckling, Ezra admitted, “You know, I don’t care if you do that or not.”

Then he rattled off his satellite phone number.

“Thank you,”

Link replied, sounding sincere. “You don’t know what that means to me.”

Ezra shrugged. “So, well, I can call you when I get back to civilization in a couple of weeks,”

he offered.

“Okay,”

Link agreed. “Be careful out there.”

“I always am.”

Ezra smiled, his gut fluttering in the face of Link’s concern. “Oh, how’s your nephew’s birthday party?”

“Real good,”

Link told him. “Rylie appreciated the game I gave him. We’re going to play together sometime.”

“Is it an online one?”

Ezra hadn’t bothered playing more than Angry Birds on his phone in years. “Or something on a gaming system?”

Ezra knew there were many different platforms available these days. Although, he could probably only name a couple of them. He knew that when people heard he was an accountant, they expected him to be a gamer, but after working on a computer for many hours a day for his job, staring at any kind of electronic device was the last thing he wanted to do to relax. Ezra even preferred his books to be the paper kind.

Wow. We really are opposites.

“It’s on a gaming system. PlayStation 5. You familiar with it?”

Chuckling, Ezra shook his head, not caring that Link couldn’t see him. “No. Not at all.”

At least, he’d heard of that one.

“Well, my nephew and I share the interest, so it’s nice to nurture that connection,”

Link told him, his voice growing quiet. After a second, he cleared his throat and stated, “I guess I should let you focus on driving. I’ll talk to you soon, Ezra.”

“Okay, Link,”

Ezra replied. “And thanks for calling.”

“I always do what I say I’m gonna do,”

Link claimed. “Bye, baby.”

Before Ezra could comment on Link’s statement or his use of a term of endearment, the line went dead. “Just something else to think about,”

he muttered with a shake of his head.

Doing as Link had suggested, Ezra focused on the road.

AFTER DRIVING FOR SEVERAL more hours, Ezra pulled into the bed and breakfast where he’d reserved a room. He yawned, more than ready for a soak in the jetted tub the room was supposed to contain. Then Ezra would hit the sack, enjoy his last homemade breakfast—the place’s website boasted amazing reviews for their food—and get an early start.

Ezra parked, shut off his Range Rover, and climbed from the vehicle. Clasp ing his hands together, he stretched his arms over his head. He twisted one way, then the other, before bending forward at the waist.

After blowing out a deep breath, Ezra reached into his back seat and grabbed his overnight bag. He locked his Rover and headed to the front door. Squinting against the porch light, he stopped on the stoop and rang the doorbell.

The front door was locked after dark, but he had a reservation and knew they expected him. A few seconds later, he heard the sound of clicking. The door opened to reveal a slightly plump middle-aged woman.

“Hi, Misses Weathers?”

Ezra held out his hand. “I’m Ezra Pendle.”

“Of course. Come in, Mister Pendle.”

Misses Weathers opened the door wide and beckoned him inside. “How was your drive up?”

“Please, call me Ezra, and the drive went smoothly,”

he responded, entering a nicely appointed entrance area complete with a check-in desk. With a wry smile, he told her, “Mister Pendle was my father.”

And he never wanted to be like his father.

May you rest in peace, you old bastard.

Amelia’s father reminded Ezra of his father—a bigoted, hateful, spiteful man.

Dismissing that thought, Ezra focused on Misses Weathers’s words. “Of course, and, please, call me Margie.”

She smiled as she led the way to the check-in desk. “I have everything written up for you. I just need your signature.”

Margie pulled out a couple of pieces of paper. “On your reservation, you indicated no

food allergies. I just want to confirm that's correct."

"It is,"

Ezra replied, pulling a pen from a jar of decorative stones. He flashed her a grin, saying, "Never met a food I didn't like,"

before focusing on the paperwork.

Ezra glanced over the paperwork, briefly checking everything. Finding the signature line, he scribbled his name. He stabbed the pen back into the pebble-filled cup and straightened, focusing on her again.

"Earliest breakfast time I offer is six AM,"

Margie told him once she realized his attention was back on her. "Latest possible is nine-thirty. What's your preference?"

Looking forward to getting an early start without being dead on his feet, Ezra asked, "Will seven-thirty work?"

"Of course. I'll have it ready for you then."

Margie pointed toward the doorway on the right. "The dining room is right through there. There's a coffee machine in there that makes a variety of coffee types, if you're into that sort of thing,"

she added with a grin. "As well as creamers, milks, and juice in the mini-fridge."

"Thank you,"

Ezra replied instinctively.

Margie took the paperwork and turned around. She quickly and efficiently photocopied them before handing over the copy to him. Then she took a key out of a locked drawer and handed it to him. It had a little plastic tag attached to it with the number 4 on it.

“I’ll show you to your room,”

Margie told him, starting toward the stairs to the left. “You can take a quick peek and tell me if you need anything.”

Ezra couldn’t imagine that he would, assuming the pictures and information on her site were accurate, but he followed in silence. When Margie indicated the door with the number four on it, he quickly opened it and stepped inside. The room was just as comfortable as Ezra had expected, with a small lounging area with TV, a king-sized bed, and, in the corner, the promised jetted tub.

Oh yeah.

Ezra made a mental note to see if this place was available in two weeks at the end of his vacation, too. After hiking and sleeping on the ground for so long, he was sure his body would appreciate it.

I can hardly wait to get started.

“This is wonderful, Margie,”

Ezra told her, flashing a smile her way. “Just wonderful.”

“Glad to hear it,”

Margie replied, beaming. “I turn in at ten, but if you end up needing something before then, please let me know.”

She pointed at the box on the wall. “The intercom connects to the kitchen, and I’ll hear it.”

“Thank you again,”

Ezra told her.

Margie nodded and headed out of the room.

Ezra closed and locked the door before placing his overnight bag on the bed. Pulling his shirt over his head, he headed toward the tub. He reached down and started the water.

Anticipation filled him, and he stripped quickly.

A few minutes later, as Ezra climbed into the tub, he thought of Link.

I wonder if he’s a tub guy and would be willing to share this with me.

With a snicker, Ezra relaxed against the side and mentally prepared himself for the coming days.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

LINK CLIMBED OUT OF his Hummer while Luke exited from the passenger side. After tossing his keys over the hood to his brother, he opened the back door and pulled out a large satchel. He lifted the strap over his head and rested it on his left shoulder.

Luke eyed him critically. “You sure this is the way you want to go about it?”

“Yeah.”

Link had thought long and hard about it. If he introduced Ezra to shifters and mates out in the wilds, he could not only prove that he was an outdoorsman—which he sort of was, being a shifter and all—but that they had things they could do in common. Also, it wasn’t as if Ezra would have anywhere to run to.

A little manipulative, perhaps, but Link would use any advantage that he could. As much as he hoped he’d made inroads with their conversation the evening before—being honest, connecting, getting honesty in return—he thought, anyway—he couldn’t scent his mate over the phone. Link also didn’t know Ezra well enough to get a read on the inflections in his tone.

“Ezra’s hiking for two weeks,”

Link told his brother when he noticed the man’s dubious look. “I can’t wait that long to see him again.”

Lowering his voice, he told the other man, “I’m a shifter. I’m not going to slow him down.”

Luke barked a laugh even as he rolled his eyes. “Of course, I don’t think you’re going to slow him down, bro.”

Smirking, he hooked his arm around Link’s neck and pulled him forward and down their couple of inch height difference so they could press their foreheads together. Luke stared deep into Link’s eyes and told him, “I’m worried that if he freaks out and runs, you or him could get hurt. Especially with you both out there all on your own.”

Link felt a swell of appreciation for Luke. His brother was a hell of a man. “You’re gonna make some human a great mate,”

he told him, lifting his hand to cradle Luke’s nape. “Sorry you didn’t end up next.”

Scoffing, Luke straightened and shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Link.”

He squeezed the back of Link’s neck while grinning widely. “Like we all said yesterday. Fate works in her own time, little brother. Whoever I end up with, he’ll be worth the wait.”

Releasing him, Luke stepped backward. “Okay. I’m gonna get a room here tonight. Ping me with your location every evening, and I’ll follow you up the mountain chain and be available to help if there’s a problem or if you both need a ride when you’re finished.”

“Thanks, bro. I know I can always count on family.”

Chuckling, Link took a step away from Luke. “I’ll keep you updated.”

He patted his bag. “I have a water filtration device I don’t need, jerky, nuts, and trail mix.”

With a wink, Link added, “Although, I can just forage on the way.” He patted his bag again and added, “I have my tablet, satellite phone, and I’ll ping my location for you every evening.”

“You’re taking your tablet and not just your phone?”

Luke scowled at him. “Are you going to work while out there trying to woo your mate?”

Link winced guiltily. “Not if I can help it, but you know how things happen.”

Luke tipped his head back and laughed. “Only you, Link. Only you.”

He shook his head as he continued to chuckle. “And I’m going to talk to Dane. He can put a post on the SC message board that you’re out wooing your mate and that you shouldn’t be disturbed for anything other than an emergency.”

Nodding, Link grimaced as he thought of the Komodo dragon shifter who worked as a Shifter Council enforcer. “Should have thought of that.”

The Shifter Council had an internal message board to post announcements for those working within their ranks. It was hidden deep within the dark web. Link rubbed his palm down his beard. “Brain’s all scattered,”

he admitted, shaking his head. “Wish me luck out there.”

Luke chuckled softly, nodding. “Yeah, Bruin got damn scattered, too, when he found Juan.”

Patting Link’s shoulder, he headed toward the driver’s side door. “You sure you got everything you need?”

Link nodded. “Yeah. ‘Course.”

Curious about his brother’s thoughts, he asked, “Why?”

Smirking at him, Luke waved toward his outfit. “You’re wearing gym shorts, a tank top, and Barefoot toe hiking shoes.”

His brother’s mirth was damn near a palpable thing. “A big, bald, bearded man dressed like that carrying a satchel-style bag.”

Shrugging, Link grumbled, “It’s summer, it’s lightweight, and I’m comfortable.”

He grinned as he wagged his brows and added, “Easy to fold up and carry in here, too.”

He patted his large satchel once more.

Luke laughed again, even as he nodded. “Yeah, man. I gotcha.”

Pulling open the driver’s side door, he winked. “I finally get to drive your Hummer.”

Growling under his breath, Link ordered, “Don’t scratch it.”

With another laugh, Luke hopped in and closed the door. He waved as he pulled out of the lot.

Shaking his head, Link watched his brother leave. Then he turned and headed toward the trailhead that would lead him to the start of the Appalachian Trail. As he walked, he enjoyed the fresh scents of nature and the rumble of pleasure in his mind from his musk ox.

We're only three hours behind Ezra. Don't want to get too close too soon.

Link intended to stalk his mate until the second day. The trick would be in figuring out the best way to reveal himself.

AS PROMISED, THAT EVENING, Link turned on his tablet and pinned his location for Luke. He received an immediate confirmation message in return. Then Link did a quick check over all the tracking systems he'd put in place for the Shifter Council, making certain nothing had been tampered with, before shutting the device back off again.

Link slipped into the woods about fifty yards off the trail and hung his satchel on a tree branch. After stripping and placing his clothes in the bag, he shifted into his musk ox form. He grazed for a while on leaves, grass, and twigs before slipping into a doze.

When Link woke at first light, he eased the satchel strap over a horn, lifting it from the tree. He began walking parallel to the trail, foraging as he went. Any time Link heard the sound of a hiker, he eased further into the trees and stood quietly until they passed.

Link easily found the place where Ezra had camped the prior evening, and he paused to enjoy the scent of his mate. The smell had already begun to fade, telling him that his human had moved on at dawn. His mate appeared to be making good time, hiking steadily.

My mate's in great shape.

Can't wait to explore his sexy toned body.

Dismissing those thoughts so he didn't sprout a boner in musk ox form—that'd be so

embarrassing, not to mention uncomfortable—Link picked up his pace. He had to balance his need to stick with his plan to not reveal himself quite yet with his animal's desire to be with his mate. He occasionally caught Ezra's tantalizing scent on the wind, telling him he was close and testing his self-control. His mouth watered with his desire to taste the man's flesh, and his body continually threatened to pop wood, even while in ox form.

That had definitely never happened to Link before, and he sure didn't intend to allow it to happen then.

Link eyed the setting sun through the branches of the trees as he rounded a large trunk. The sound of a swiftly inhaled breath yanked his attention to the right. Freezing, Link stared at Ezra, who crouched only fifty feet away.

Ezra slowly straightened, holding some sort of wrapper clutched in his hand. He'd evidently stopped to pick it up. Link hadn't realized the path ahead of him had curved in his direction, drastically closing the distance between them.

"Well, now,"

Ezra whispered, roving his gaze over him. "That's not something you see every day."

His mate cocked his head and even smirked a little. "Not sure what you are, big fella, but I'm pretty sure it's not normal to carry a bag on your horn. How'd that happen, big guy?"

Unable to help himself, Link bugled softly, greeting his mate. To his pleasure, Ezra smiled.

Unfortunately, then Ezra pulled out his phone, and Link knew exactly what he was about to do...take his picture. Can't allow that to happen. Turning away, he hurried

deeper into the trees. Link paused and looked back at Ezra, needing one last glimpse of him.

Ezra remained standing still, watching him.

Link was so damn tempted to return to him. The pull was so very strong. Swallowing hard, he stuck to his guns and turned away, moving deeper into the forest.

Tomorrow, Link promised his animal.

According to the map, there was a river crossing the next afternoon. He would make it to the water and cross it first. Then he would wait and shift when Ezra paused to put his hiking shoes back on. According to his mate's receipts, he'd bought water shoes, and Link was betting that it was for this reason.

LINK EASILY SLIPPED past Ezra the following day. By late morning, he reached the river. There were warning signs as well as a rope spanning the river, attached between two trees. Link assumed that was for when the river was deep or rushing more strongly.

At this time of year, late summer, the river was pretty low, and the water didn't even make it halfway up Link's legs as he crossed. He imagined that Ezra wouldn't even get his knees wet. Once on the other side, Link found a good place to hide. As he watched and waited, he grazed on the leaves and grasses around him, helping to fill his belly while passing the time.

The sound of footsteps reached Link, and he swallowed his mouthful. Keeping in the shadows, he watched as Ezra appeared on the opposite bank. In the morning light, Link thought his mate's lean, toned body looked amazing in his khaki shorts and a form-fitting, sweat-wicking polo top.

Ezra paused and swept his gaze over the crossing, obviously taking it all in. After setting his backpack on the ground, he crouched beside it and extracted his water shoes. Ezra made quick work of swapping his footwear. Once he'd shoved his socks into his boots, he used his laces to tie them to his backpack.

Standing, Ezra slung his pack back into place. Carefully, he began making his way across the river.

Link watched, ready to rush forward if his mate needed help. Of course, he figured his appearance running toward him in the water would do more harm than good. That didn't mean his instincts didn't scream at him to be ready to help.

Not surprising, Ezra agilely made it across. He lowered his pack to the ground and pulled a small towel from his bag. He began the process of drying his feet and legs and swapping footwear again.

Taking advantage of Ezra's distraction, Link lowered his head and slipped his satchel off his horn. He moved slowly from between the trees, not wanting to spook his mate. Once he stood at the mouth of the trail, Link waited for Ezra to notice him.

It didn't take long.

Ezra's head slowly lifted from where he'd been focusing on tying his boot. His lips parted, and his brows shot up. Glancing left and right, Ezra softly cleared his throat.

"I was gonna look you up on my phone, but I don't have good internet,"

Ezra commented softly, staring at him intently. "But you're definitely not a moose or an elk, and I can't think of any other big herbivores that would be out here."

Looking beyond him, Ezra murmured, "And we're not supposed to approach them, so

I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to approach you, but you're standing in the trail. How long do you think you'll be there?"

Grabbing his backpack, Ezra began easing to the left. "Are you trying to get to the water? Am I in your way?"

Deciding to take advantage of how calm Ezra seemed, Link began his shift. Most of his shifter friends were council enforcers, so he'd worked very hard to streamline his change. If Link went running with them, he didn't want them to be standing around waiting for thirty seconds for him to finish gaining his animal form. He'd managed to become nearly as swift as them, shifting in under fifteen seconds.

Link knew that worked in his favor. He heard Ezra's gasp, and he knew his human mate's brain would take approximately five seconds just to process the fact that something weird was going on. After another five seconds, shock and disbelief would set in. Finally, that would most likely give way to panic and fear, kicking in Ezra's flight instinct. Link was finished before Ezra could act on it.

"Please don't run, Ezra,"

Link rumbled from where he knelt on the ground. "You're safe. I'd never hurt you."

Link recalled saying that to Ezra once before...at Amelia's apartment, but he figured it bared repeating.

"L-Link?"

Ezra clutched his backpack to his chest in a white-knuckled grip. Disbelief was etched clearly on his pale features, the scent thick in the air. He shook his head once, looked around as if searching for the animal, then refocused on him. "H-How? Wh-What?"

“I have so much to explain, sweetheart,”

Link told him, the endearment rolling off his tongue without conscious thought. He rose to his feet and took his first step toward the man who would be his forever. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Ezra shook his head again, clearly overwhelmed. Then his eyes began to roll to the back of his head, and he started to drop.

Lunging forward, Link barely reached Ezra before he hit the ground.

“Well, shit,”

Link grumbled, holding Ezra against his chest. “That didn’t work out like I’d hoped.”

After a glance around, Link swung Ezra into his arms. He clutched him close to his chest as he stared down at the handsome face of his sleeping human. Even though Ezra had passed out, Link still smiled, relishing the chance to hold the other half of his soul.

Link continued to smile as he headed between the trees, needing seclusion for when his mate woke.

I’ll explain everything when he wakes, and everything will be fine.

Link would accept no less.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

ROUSING SLOWLY, EZRA fought through his grogginess. He groaned quietly, turning his head and nuzzling the firm yet soft pillow his head rested on. His muscles felt relaxed, but sore...as if he'd strained himself.

What the hell happened? Did I overtax myself?

Ezra decided that could be the only logical explanation for what he was feeling.

So how did I do that?

Racking his brain, Ezra searched his memories for what he'd done on the prior day's hike. He drew a blank. He couldn't think of anything that would explain his fatigued soreness.

I woke up, ate a small breakfast of fruits, nuts, and jerky, and hit the trail. There was nothing real strenuous about any section. Nothing I haven't handled plenty of times before.

So what...wait, did I make it to the river crossing?

Recalling swapping out his shoes, Ezra knew that he had.

Did I slip in the water and hit my head or something?

Then the image of the big, shaggy ox-like animal filled his mind.

Did it attack me?

A second later, Ezra recalled Link...appearing in the trail...directly where the big animal had been.

“What the hell?”

Ezra gasped, snapping his eyes open. He tried to jackknife into a sitting position, but something held him immobile.

“Easy, Ezra.”

Link’s deep voice crooned into his ear. Ezra felt big, soothing hands caress his neck, shoulders, and back, and his hair stood on end as goose bumps broke out on his flesh. “You’re safe, sweetheart. You’re okay.”

Turning his head, Ezra realized a couple of things at once.

First, the firm, soft pillow was actually the crook of Link’s shoulder. A few inches away, his light-brown nipple poked up from within a smattering of dark, wiry chest hair. That led across his broad pectorals and down over his slightly rounded belly to disappear into the waistband of a pair of jogging shorts.

Second, Link held him in a firm hold while rubbing his back with one hand and massaging his neck with the other. They were reclining beneath the trees on Ezra’s sleeping bag. The huge, bearded man sported a worried look, and concern filled his warm, dark-chocolate-brown eyes.

“L-Link?”

Ezra whispered, uneasy confusion flooding him.

“Yeah?”

As usual, the timbre of Link's voice caused a rush of heat to fill Ezra's veins. He forced himself to ignore that in favor of asking, "Uh, wh-what are you doing here?"

Doing his best to keep his voice steady, he added, "A-And how? Why?"

Another thought struck him. "Are you stalking me?"

"Uh, I guess you could say that, in a way, I am stalking you,"

Link muttered, grimacing. "But, uh, I just couldn't stand the thought of not seeing you for weeks after just finding you."

A fresh wave of shock flooded Ezra, and he gaped at the big man.

Damn. At least, he's honest.

Link's dark eyes widened, and his cheeks took on a distinctive pinkish hue, so dark it was even easily seen through his thick, black beard.

"Shit,"

Link whispered. "Can't believe I said that."

He swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed as he stared up at the trees above them. "I really would never hurt you, Ezra."

Link's arm tightened around Ezra just a little, as if the big man expected him to hop up and run. Peering at Ezra again, he stared at him beseechingly. "Please believe me."

Confused as hell at not only his sudden desire to soothe the big man, but at the man's sudden rambling admission, Ezra slowly shook his head.

“Please?”

Link repeated pleadingly.

Realizing Link had gotten the wrong idea, Ezra gave in to his odd compulsion to soothe the big guy and rubbed his palm over his chest. The feel of his wiry chest hairs against his palm caused the hairs to rise on his arm. The rushing heat of awareness surged through Ezra, and blood flooded his groin. The handsome man next to him was barely half-dressed, after all, and he'd been attracted to him while he'd been fully clothed.

“Uh, well...you saved me from that animal, right?”

Ezra commented almost absently, offering Link a small smile. “That entitles you to a bit of goodwill, even if you are a stalker.”

While Ezra had meant that to be a joke, Link winced and looked away again.

“Sorry, Link,”

Ezra mumbled, feeling a bit bad. With a sigh, he glanced around the area. “So, uh, what happened, anyway?”

“Didn't save you from the musk ox,”

Link told him, teasing his fingertips under the hem of Ezra's shirt. It had ridden up at some point, giving the other man access to his skin. “Wouldn't have hurt you, even in that form.”

With the way Link skimmed his fingertips over the knobs of Ezra's spine, he was having a hard time concentrating on the man's words. Maybe that was why they

didn't make much sense to him. On the other hand, it could've been the feel of Link's wide torso under his own roving hand.

Wait. "Musk ox?"

Ezra snapped his attention to Link's bearded face. "Is that what that was?"

Confusion filled him anew, beating back his completely inappropriate arousal. "Heard the name, but I can't imagine they're native to here."

"Not native to here."

Link took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly through pursed lips. "But as a shifter, we can end up anywhere."

Ezra froze, stilling his hand on Link's broad chest. Although, he couldn't keep his fingers from twitching a little. "I'm sorry. What?"

Staring at Link's handsome bearded features, Ezra wondered just how the man could explain.

"A shifter."

Link repeated the unfamiliar term. "A paranormal being who shares his psyche with an animal."

His dark-eyed gaze pinned Ezra with an intense stare. "Humans aren't alone on the planet, Ezra. They never have been."

Barking a laugh, Ezra grinned widely at Link. He waited a couple of heartbeats, feeling certain that the other guy would soon grin, laugh, and tell him that he was just

joking. Except, Link didn't. He just continued to eye him, his gaze steady, his expression serene.

"A-Are you...are you being serious right now?"

Ezra couldn't help but ask the question, even though, from Link's expression, it was plain he clearly believed his words. Without waiting for a response, Ezra quickly continued, "Of course you are."

He lifted a little, rising onto his elbow so he could peer down at Link, his brain spinning. "But why would you believe such a thing?"

"You saw me shift, Ezra,"

Link insisted. After a second of hesitation, he added, "And you saw me yesterday. I had that satchel hanging from my horn."

Pointing, Link indicated a satchel to Ezra's left that looked distinctly familiar. "You were about to take a picture of me, so I had to get away from you."

With a scoff, Link muttered, "Sure can't have you posting pictures of my musk ox form on social media or somethin'. That'd draw the wrong kind of attention."

"Wrong kind of attention?"

Ezra repeated, a fresh wave of confusion filling him. "What's that mean? Who're you talking about?"

His brain fritzed in another direction, and he mumbled, "Surely this is supposed to be a secret, right? Why would you tell me about this?"

“Well, no, we don’t normally tell anyone about us,”

Link admitted, flicking out his tongue and wetting his bottom lip. The move nearly distracted Ezra from his next comment of, “But you’re my mate. Um, my soul mate, so you need to know about this shit.”

“Your mate. Soul mate?”

Ezra felt as if he was parroting Link’s words an awful lot, and he felt a rush of annoyance. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Link hunched his shoulders a little, and he winced, his lips pinching as his brows drew down.

Ezra felt a niggle of guilt that he didn’t understand. His frustration warred with his need to see that expression gone from Link’s face. While Ezra didn’t comprehend it, he had to acknowledge that something within him made him want to see the man relax and smile at him again.

Shit. What the hell is this that I’m feeling?

After blowing out a breath through pursed lips, making the beard hairs around his lips quiver just a little, Link focused his dark-eyed gaze on Ezra once more. “I promised to answer all your questions, and so I shall.”

Link wetted his lips again, almost derailing Ezra’s need for answers. The move reminded him of how pleasurable the big man’s kisses were, and his desire to experience that again flooded him. Ezra’s cock thickened, swelling and filling the confines of his cargo shorts.

His nostrils flaring, Link sucked in a sharp breath. “Gods, the smell of your arousal is

making it tough to concentrate,”

he rumbled gruffly while flicking his gaze toward Ezra’s bulging fly. Grimacing, Link refocused on Ezra’s face. “But as much as I want to suck you off and bury my cock so far up your ass you’ll feel me in your throat, I need to explain why you want those exact same things.”

Hearing Link’s blunt description of his desires caused a flare of heat in his groin, and his cock twitched behind his fly. He wanted those exact same things...oh-so-badly. Except, then he processed Link’s final words.

With a groan, knowing Link was right, Ezra lowered his hand and adjusted his hard prick. He blew out a breath and returned his palm to the big man’s thick pectoral. The feel of the hard muscle twitching under his fingers didn’t help a whole lot.

Ezra grunted in frustration and flopped to his back. The move should have put a little space between them, but Link didn’t seem to want that. Instead, the big man moved with him, and it was his turn to rest his head on the crook of Ezra’s shoulder. Link’s beard prickled Ezra’s side, causing his nipples to bead.

“Damn, it’s hard to concentrate when we’re touching,”

Ezra mumbled, but that didn’t stop him from curving the arm under Link’s back up so he could rub over his shoulder blade.

“I like touching you, too,”

Link replied softly. After a few heartbeats of silence, he cleared his throat and stated, “So, uh, let me start answering your questions.”

“Oookaaay,”

Ezra drawled, still unable to wrap his mind around what Link was claiming.

There's just no way.

“So, I know you don't believe me, but you will,”

Link claimed confidently, a small smile teasing around the edges of his bearded lips.

“There's a reason I decided to share that I'm a shifter with you while you're out here, after all.”

Ezra didn't know how to respond to that, so he kept his mouth shut.

Link's dark eyes seemed to twinkle. “You know that old adage seeing is believing?”

He didn't wait for Ezra to confirm, immediately adding, “Well, I figured that should be my first course. I showed you my musk ox form, then shifted in front of you.”

Grimacing, Link murmured, “I should've known you'd faint. Most humans who aren't verbally prepared first usually do.”

He scoffed softly before muttering, “Even some who are told in advance what's about to happen still faint.” Link shrugged, jostling them. “Most humans just don't accept it the first time around.”

“They don't?”

Ezra piped up. When Link shook his head, his beard sliding gently across his skin, Ezra fought back a shiver as he muttered, “Glad I'm not alone in that.”

“Another thing I've heard over the years is the way a human will comment, I'd think I'm dreaming, but I don't have the imagination for this sort of shit.”

Link winked, grinning widely. “How about you? Ever imagined this sort of thing? Like to read paranormal fantasy books or watch those sorts of movies?”

Ezra hummed, realizing the truth in Link’s words. He definitely did not have the imagination necessary for a paranormal called a shifter. Shaking his head slightly, Ezra side-eyed the big man curled against his body, staring at him expectantly.

“Well, I think you can guess the answer to that considering I already told you I’m not a gamer,”

Ezra pointed out softly. “And I don’t watch movies much. I enjoy the outdoors way too much to sit in front of the boob tube after working for hours in front of a computer for my job.”

“That’s understandable.”

Link rubbed his palm up and down Ezra’s side as he softly continued, “I’m a shifter, and I love being outdoors in my musk ox form. It’s why I came out to spend time with you...so you could see we’re compatible, even though I’m a hacker.”

Goose bumps broke out along the skin of Ezra’s side, and he struggled to focus on their conversation. He knew it was important, no matter what his aching dick thought. The huge male cuddled up to his side had claimed they were soul mates...and after a few seconds of thought, Ezra had been able to figure out the meaning of that one on his own.

“So, you think we’re soul mates.”

Ezra figured that was the next huge thing he needed to deal with—shifters aside, of course. “I mean, yeah, we have chemistry, but why would you jump to the conclusion of soul mates?”

“You need to understand that a shifter lives a lot longer than a human. To alleviate the prospect of a long, lonely life, a shifter has a mate out there, only one, and it’s a pairing blessed by Fate herself, and we consider finding him or her the greatest of gifts.”

Link’s voice rumbled through the air, soft and deep. “She allows us to recognize that person by scent, and that person is the one we can bond with and build a life with, so we’ll never be alone again.”

A husky chuckle filled the air as Link squeezed Ezra’s side. “When I smelled you at Amelia’s apartment...just day-am.”

Smiling widely, Link tipped his head so he could peer at Ezra fully. His dark eyes twinkled with his obvious pleasure. “I sprang wood and just about swallowed my tongue.”

He turned his head and inhaled deeply, before letting his breath out on a groan. “Gods, you smell so damn good, sweetheart.”

Considering Ezra had been hiking for three days and hadn’t bothered to apply deodorant because he wasn’t planning to head into town for supplies for a few more days, he couldn’t imagine how Link could enjoy his scent so much. He felt his cheeks heat with embarrassment. Ezra shifted a bit in discomfort when Link did it a second time.

Perhaps Link noticed his unease, for his head popped up, and he leveled a piercing look at him. “Your scent is the greatest aphrodisiac, Ezra,”

he declared, his expression serious. “Never doubt that.”

Ezra licked his lips while sucking in a sharp breath. “So, uh, mates.”

A disturbing thought hit him. “Blessed by Fate.”

He wasn’t going to touch the idea of Link believing in the mythical being, but he had to wonder. “Is that why we’re so attracted to each other? Because of this Fate and mate thing?”

Wait. Wouldn’t that mean I have to believe in shifters, Fate, and mates for that to be true?

Even as Link quickly shook his head, Ezra realized he truly didn’t know what he suddenly believed.

Shit. Could everything Link is telling me actually be true?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

“NO, OF COURSE THAT’S not the only reason,”

Link declared, knowing that was a normal human response, too. The value of free will and choice and all that. Needing to alleviate Ezra’s concerns, Link explained, “We’d have been attracted regardless. Fate just gives what we feel for each other a bit of a boost.”

Seeing the disbelief in the narrowing of Ezra’s eyes, Link added, “Lowers our inhibitions a bit, helping each of us have a little extra incentive when there might be obstacles to overcome. Maybe something that we’d otherwise let get in our way.”

“Like the fact that I’ve only ever seriously dated women,”

Ezra murmured, sounding a bit dazed. “Well, except for this one time for like...two weeks...years ago.”

Huh. That’s news.

I’ll follow up on it later.

Instead, Link nodded. “Uh, right. That.”

Thinking quickly, he added, “Or how Tucker was bisexual, but he’d never come out to his family because he knew he’d be disowned, but he did it for Rigel.”

It almost seemed as if a lightbulb came on over Ezra’s head. “Wait. Amelia’s brother, Tucker?”

Even as Link began to nod, his mate continued, “Tucker came out for Rigel because...because”—his voice lowered as if imparting a secret—“they’re mates?”

Link resumed nodding and opened his mouth to confirm verbally, but Ezra wasn’t done.

“Then Rigel is a”—Ezra waved a hand to indicate Link’s body—“like you.”

His eyes widened almost comically. “Or is Tucker one? What about Amelia?”

“Tucker’s human,”

Link cut in before Ezra could start off on another tangent. “Amelia is, too, but she knows about our kind. Her baby will be one.”

Seeing the way Ezra’s eyes managed to open even further, Link added, “It’s one of the reasons Amelia’s moving in with Tucker and Rigel...so they can help her with the babe.”

“Holy shit.”

From the sound of Ezra’s hoarsely whispered words coupled with the myriad of ever-changing scents wafting from him—disbelief, shock, fear, amazement, and everything in between—Link knew he’d completely overwhelmed his mate. His human would need time to mentally process. Link even knew exactly how to help him do that, too.

“Look, I know this is a lot to take in,”

Link rumbled, purposefully lowering his tone to a soft croon. In the past, he’d used the tone to soothe his niece and nephew when they’d gotten hurt. Link sure hoped it

had the same calming effect on his mate as he claimed, “This is always a lot for a human to take in. It’s understandable. Very few actually hear the news and shout with excitement about the discovery.”

Creatures of myth and legend just weren’t believed in very much anymore. Just as religions, politics, and governments changed over the millennia, so too did cultures. These days, science seemed to be reigning supreme, and if something couldn’t be easily referenced, cataloged, or quantified, it didn’t exist.

Boy are those guys wrong.

Magick and the paranormal were alive and well across the globe over...and into dimensions beyond.

Link just had to give Ezra’s brain time to accept the facts. To do that, as much as it sucked, he needed to take a step back and give his mate time. It wasn’t as if Ezra could go far.

And that was the whole point of following him out here.

“I know you need time to process this, Ezra,”

Link crooned, rubbing over his side, taking a moment to slide his fingertips under the hem of his shirt and caress his smooth flesh. It was just too inviting. “And while I want to get to know you, I didn’t come out here to ruin your vacation.”

To Link’s relief, the tension slowly began to bleed out of Ezra’s body. “You need time to process. I get that.”

With a smile, he eased to a sitting position. “How about I let you get back to your vacation? Hiking is your happy place. It’ll help you decompress.”

Ezra slowly followed his lead and moved to a sitting position. “Uh, okay?”

Link lowered his hand to Ezra’s thigh and squeezed lightly, enjoying the feel of the firm muscle and the soft thigh hair. “I’ll shift back into my musk ox form so you can see I’m telling you the truth.”

When the tension instantly returned to Ezra, Link realized he’d forgotten something vital. “I’m completely cognizant while in my animal form,”

he assured, rubbing over Ezra’s thigh once more. “I know exactly who you are, and I would never ever hurt you.”

Still scenting his mate’s disbelief, Link added, “I would even defend you to my dying breath, sweetheart. I would never let anything or anyone hurt you.”

After a deep swallow, Ezra nodded. “Right. Uh, you certainly didn’t before, so...I can see that.”

Grinning, Link leaned forward and pecked a kiss to Ezra’s lips. “I’ll let you get back to your vacation, my mate, but I’ll be around.”

Knowing he had to make his intentions clear, Link told him, “And I’ll join you when you make camp this evening. Then you can ask any questions you’ve come up with. I’ll answer anything. Everything.”

Link didn’t mind repeating himself because he knew just how important this was. “I’ll always do my best to tell you the truth.”

Still looking a little dazed, Ezra nodded again. “Okay.”

“I do have just one request,”

Link stated, skimming his fingertips along Ezra's thigh muscle once more. When Ezra peered up at him, Link couldn't help but think that he still appeared a bit stunned, but he ventured ahead, saying, "You can't say anything about shifters to anyone. No one you pass on the trail, and no one you may call on your satellite phone. Secrecy is key for our kinds' safety."

"Right, yeah, yeah,"

Ezra immediately replied, nodding. "Of course."

Link smiled and nodded back. "Okay."

Then he began easing forward, intending to rise to his feet.

Suddenly, Ezra snapped, "No."

He grabbed Link's wrist in one hand and grumbled, "Oh, hell, no."

Confused, thinking they'd been on the same page, Link froze. "What?"

What did that mean?

"You're not leaving me to go hiking with a hard-on,"

Ezra snapped, clearly annoyed. He scowled up at him while waving his free hand toward his groin. "What happened to wanting to please me and make me happy?"

"Uhhhh..."

Oh, real eloquent, Link.

His mental fumbling didn't stop Link from allowing his attention to stray where Ezra had indicated. Spotting the blatant, tell-tale bulge behind his mate's fly, he sucked in a sharp breath. That filled his lungs with the heady goodness of his human's arousal—masculine, slightly musky, and oh-so-delicious.

“Oh,”

Link whispered.

Yeah, still real eloquent.

“You said Fate helps us push through inhibitions we might otherwise have, right?”

Link could just nod at Ezra's question, his gaze riveted to the visual proof of his mate's desire. He licked his lips, praying to whatever gods cared to listen that his human was about to ask him for what he hoped. His mouth watered with his desire to taste, and his own prick jerked behind the thin fabric of his jogging shorts.

“You've been rubbing my chest, my back, my arm, my thigh—”

Ezra paused, hesitating, before he looked Link in the eye. “I invited you over for a one-night stand that first day. I know you didn't miss that.”

“I didn't,”

Link murmured, grimacing. “I hated having to say no.”

“So, don't say no now, Link.”

Ezra cupped himself, blatantly outlining his hard dick. “I don't wanna hike with a hard-on, so how about you suck me off?”

Groaning, Link felt a bead of pre-cum ooze from his dick. “My pleasure,”

he growled, twisting where he sat.

More than on board with Ezra’s idea, Link moved a hand to Ezra’s shoulder. He pushed back gently, urging his mate to recline on the sleeping bag. To his pleasure, Ezra relaxed and watched Link with a sexy, heavy-lidded expression, the skin of his neck and cheeks flushing darker.

“You’re so fucking sexy,”

Link muttered as he reached for Ezra’s fly. “Can’t wait to taste.”

Link made quick work of Ezra’s button and zipper. He reveled in the sound of his human’s sharp, panting breaths as he gripped the shorts, as well as the waistband of the boxer-briefs he found beneath, pulling them forward and down. Upon seeing Ezra’s slender rod bounce free, Link moaned appreciatively, nearly drowning out his mate’s quiet grunt.

Licking his lips, Link admired the maybe eight-inch shaft jutting from Ezra’s neatly trimmed thatch. His mate’s prick was slender with a red-hued, bulbous head. As Link watched, a bead of pre-cum gleamed from the wide slit.

“Gorgeous,”

Link whispered before lowering his head.

Instead of opening his mouth and tasting Ezra’s dick, Link pressed his nose to the groove of his hip. He nuzzled what he knew was sensitive flesh by the sound of his mate’s hiss. Smiling, Link pressed a kiss to his new lover’s smooth flesh.

Upon feeling the shudder that traveled through Ezra's body, coupled with his grumbled words of, "Stop teasing,"

Link chuckled and moved his hands to his human's slender hips, holding him in place.

"Patience, my mate,"

Link rumbled, licking and nipping over his groin so his bearded cheek nuzzled against Ezra's shaft. "We'll get there."

Then Link pressed his nose deep into his man's pubes while inhaling noisily. His mate's musky fragrance invaded his senses, causing his cock to twitch and throb. He let his breath out on an appreciative moan.

"So good, Ezra,"

Link mumbled, lapping around the base of his man's shaft. "So, so good."

"Link,"

Ezra whined, trembling beneath him. "Come on, man."

Chuckling huskily, Link took pity on Ezra...and gave himself what he wanted as well—to taste his mate. He stuck out his tongue and swiped up his human's dick in a long, slow glide. Ezra's flavor burst across his taste buds, lighting them up and making him crave even more.

Link took a few seconds to pause just below the cap so he could suckle lightly on Ezra's frenulum. The sound of Ezra's moan of pleasure was music to his ears, sending his pride soaring...as well as his heartrate. Giving in to his own desire, Link

finally wrapped his lips around Ezra's swollen crown and lapped across his pre-cum dampened flesh.

The flavor of Ezra's lightly salted pre-cum burst across Link's taste buds, and he hummed appreciatively.

His mate groaned, obviously appreciating the extra stimulation.

Link smiled around his mouthful before sinking down, taking Ezra's cock to the root. With his mate's crown lodged in his throat, Link swallowed around it once, twice. Humming, he vibrated his mate's shaft.

Ezra shuddered and tried to buck with the pleasure Link was giving him. Holding him down, Link sucked strongly as he eased partway off his lover's delicious shaft. Another spurt of pre-cum hit his tongue, and he swallowed quickly before sinking back down and taking him deeply once more.

Link sucked and bobbed, licking along his flesh, stimulating every inch he could. At the top, Link pressed against his frenulum before sliding over his crown. On each downstroke, Link buried his nose in Ezra's pubes while swallowing around his knob.

At the same time, Link slid a hand down and cradled Ezra's ball sack. He used the hold to gauge how close his lover was to coming. As a long groan escaped Ezra, Link felt the man's testicles pulling tight.

Peering up Ezra's body, Link admired his flushed face and heavy-lidded expression. His lover had his head thrown back, and he squeezed the sleeping bag in a white-knuckled grip. He gritted his teeth around a groan, growling Link's name—in warning or pleasure, Link didn't know and didn't care. He just reveled in the bliss-tortured sound.

As Ezra's cock began to spurt, Link eased partway off so the creamy goodness would hit his tongue. He hummed and swallowed, enjoying the salty flavor of his mate's seed. Doing his best to extend his lover's pleasure, Link rolled Ezra's balls gently, urging another burst from him.

The sight, sound, and flavor hit Link's senses like a freight train. He felt his own balls pull tight, and he groaned with pleasure. Link had just enough time to shove the band of his shorts down before his orgasm hit, and he released into the grass beneath him, barely missing the end of the sleeping bag.

As shudders worked through Link, he released Ezra's cock and pressed his forehead to his mate's hip. He breathed slow and deep, trying to catch his breath as endorphins pinged through his system. Link hummed as he floated, taking a moment to enjoy their intimacy.

After Link didn't know how long, he felt Ezra's hands on his bald head. He glided his fingertips over his scalp, tentative at first, but soon with more certainty. Ezra petted him, and Link smiled, relishing his mate's light touches.

Finally, Link lifted his head and smiled up at Ezra, meeting his green-eyed gaze.

"You taste fantastic, my mate,"

Link rumbled, licking his lips appreciatively. "Can't wait to do that again."

Ezra offered him a small smile. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah,"

Link confirmed, pressing a kiss to Ezra's bare hip. "Enjoyed that oh-so-much. Thank you."

Chuckling softly, Ezra murmured, “Pretty sure I should be saying that to you.”

Link winked. “Next time.”

Furrowing his brows, Ezra asked hesitantly, “So, uh, you don’t want my help with—”

He lifted a hand and waved toward Link’s body.

Realizing what Ezra meant, Link grinned broadly and winked. “No need.”

Completely unabashed about his enjoyment, he told him, “Your taste, your cries, so good I came from sucking you off.”

“Seriously?”

Ezra sounded shocked. When Link grinned and nodded in confirmation, his mate muttered, “Damn.”

Link laughed as he bussed another kiss to the smooth skin of Ezra’s hip. Then he couldn’t help himself, and he crawled up his mate’s body so he could capture his mouth. For just an instant, Link felt Ezra stiffen beneath him, but to his pleasure, after a few seconds, his human relaxed and returned his kiss.

Hell yeah.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

EZRA HIKED STEADILY, his movements relaxed and easy as he strode along the trail. His brain whirled with everything he'd just learned. He could hardly believe it, but he couldn't deny what he'd seen with his own eyes.

But mating? Love...or lust, rather...at first sight? A one and only? Shifters and paranormals and bonding?

It's all just so crazy!

Ezra pointedly ignored the memory of Link's explosive blowjob. Any time he allowed his thoughts to dwell on the experience, he instantly began to plump up. No point in thinking about it and ending up hiking with the hard-on Link had relieved him of with the blowjob, after all.

Every once in a while, Ezra heard something moving in the trees to the left or right, and he would pause to peer amidst their foliage. He would spot a hint of brown, noting the shape of a large animal. Ezra had worried about it the first couple of times it had happened.

What if there'd been a bear out there?

Somehow, Link must have known, for he'd revealed enough of himself so Ezra knew it was the musk ox. Just as the man had promised, he was keeping pace with him. Link was giving him time to come to grips with everything he'd shared.

To Ezra's surprise, he realized he found it reassuring. Hiking alone could be dangerous. There were risks. Out in the wilds, anything could happen.

With Link around, following as a sentient animal, Ezra knew he had a built-in safety net.

Huh. That's actually kinda cool.

I like hiking alone. I don't have to figure out chatter with someone else or moderate my speed for another.

Ezra enjoyed silence and nature.

I get to enjoy my hiking and know that I have someone watching out for me.

Well, damn. Ain't that a kicker?

Ezra smiled at his thoughts. That was definitely something he could get used to. Of course, it would mean accepting all the other things that being with a shifter entailed.

And that's another weird thought. Being with a shifter.

Except, if Link was to be believed, that would mean he would be devoted to him—to his pleasure, happiness, safety, and health. Wasn't that what every person wanted in a partner? Well, unless they were the dominant one who wanted to be the one caring for the other person.

In truth, Ezra had always found taking care of his girlfriends exhausting. He'd assumed it had something to do with him being attracted to high-maintenance women. However, maybe that wasn't the case at all.

It would definitely be nice to have someone care for me for once. I bet I could get used to it.

Ezra allowed his mind to spin with those thoughts as he hiked along. Enjoying the scenery, he made a mental list of questions. He didn't want to lead Link on or anything, but he definitely wanted a chance to explore the big man's sexy body.

And gods, the way his beard felt against my groin. So fucking fantastic.

Predictably, Ezra felt his dick begin to plump behind the fly of his cargo shorts.

Ugh, stop thinking about sex and Link.

That was harder said than done, though. For some reason, Link just pushed all of Ezra's buttons. Even ones he hadn't realized that he had.

Maybe that's the mate-pull thing Link had mentioned.

To Ezra's surprise, he found himself looking forward to his evening camp when Link said he would join him.

JUST AS THE SUN WAS beginning to sink behind the trees, creating long shadows and pockets of gloom around him, Ezra spotted a good spot to bed down for the evening. The space was flat and mostly clear, and he quickly cleaned up the few sticks and stones littering the area. He rolled out his sleeping bag and settled on it cross-legged.

Ezra placed his backpack on his lap and pulled out several soup packages. After deciding on the potato corn chowder, he hesitated, wondering if he should make a double batch so Link could have some. He hadn't planned to consistently feed two people, and it would definitely eat into his stores.

Still, Ezra didn't want to be rude by eating in front of him.

Setting aside two packages, Ezra put the rest away. He could at least give him the option. Ezra pulled out his small propane cookstove and set it up off to the right of his sleeping bag. After placing the small cook pot on the burner, he filled it with twelve ounces of water. He would add more if Link decided he wanted some.

As if conjured by his thoughts, Link appeared from between the trees...in human form.

Ezra felt a small measure of disappointment. He'd wanted to see Link's big musk ox again. He wondered if he would be given the opportunity to pet the animal.

Would it be rude to ask?

Only one way to find out...but later.

"Hey, Ezra,"

Link greeted softly, a hint of uncertainty in his tone. "How, uh...how are you doing? Have a good hike this afternoon?"

"Hey, Link. I did, thanks."

Feeling the strange desire to set Link a bit more at ease, Ezra patted the blanket beside him. "Take a load off. I'm making potato corn chowder. Want some?"

Link smiled as he eased his bulk onto the blanket, mirroring his position. Sitting cross-legged before Ezra, his thigh muscles bulged where they stuck out of his gym shorts. His shoulders bunched as he rested his forearms on his legs.

"No, thank you, Ezra,"

Link replied, resting his satchel against his leg. “I don’t want to eat your food. I know you weren’t expecting me.”

Shrugging, Ezra pointed out, “There’s towns along the way. I can buy more.”

It would cut into his timetable, but he could do it. It wouldn’t be the end of the world.

Shaking his head, Link told him, “I grazed quite a bit while walking, so I’m not really hungry. Plus, I brought a few things to supplement.”

“Grazed?”

Ezra asked curiously. “What do you mean?”

Link pointed at his pot. “Your water’s boiling.”

“Oh.”

Ezra quickly grabbed his package and opened it. “Thanks.”

He poured the soup contents into the hot water, grabbed a spoon from the side pocket of his bag, and gave it a stir. “So, grazed?”

Nodding, Link told him, “As a musk ox, I can eat a lot of the vegetation around here.”

He indicated the forest around them. “Grass, stalks, shoots, moss, flowers. That kind of thing. So I’ve been eating as I walk.”

Reaching into his bag, Link pulled out a pouch of jerky and opened it. “And for a boost of protein.”

He took a piece before holding it out, giving him a hopeful smile. “Want some?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Ezra took the bag and snagged a piece, then handed it back. From the pleased expression on Link’s face, he knew he’d made the right choice. He tore off a piece of the succulent jerky and chewed the surprisingly tender meat.

“Good,”

Ezra murmured as he watched Link eat his own piece. Needing to move past the awkward silence, he searched his brain for something to say. He’d made a mental list of questions as he’d hiked, but suddenly, his mind was coming up blank. Finally, Ezra blurted out, “So, mating’s done through sex, and that’s how a shifter bonds with their other half, and that’s like marriage. Right?”

Ezra shoved another bite of jerky into his mouth to stop himself from continuing to ramble. At the same time, he fought down a blush. While he wanted confirmation, he couldn’t believe he’d just blurted it all out like that.

Link nibbled his bottom lip for a few seconds, which Ezra found totally adorable on the big man. “Yeah.”

He cleared his throat, then added, “In a nutshell.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Link told him, “Fate doesn’t make mistakes. She brings mates together when one or both need each other, so while I’m uncertain of her timing right now, I want you to know I’ll be good for you.”

Grimacing, he amended, “I’ll make it good for you. I want to support you, not hold you back or anything.”

Reaching over, Ezra rested his hand on Link's knee. He rubbed lightly over the hairy flesh, surprised to find he liked the feel of the crinkly hair beneath his palm. Ezra didn't have much body hair, but considering Link sat there without a shirt, his broad chest clearly displayed that he did.

Man, I wanna explore so bad.

"I haven't met anyone I've wanted to try a relationship with in...a really long time, but—"

Ezra hesitated, taking a second to glance at his soup. He stirred, focusing on his simmering meal as he collected his thoughts. Mulling over things while alone and hiking was so very different than trying to voice his thoughts when a very sexy Link sat before him.

Appreciating that Link gave him a few minutes to sort his thoughts and find his words, Ezra turned off the burner so his soup could cool. He turned back to meet Link's gaze and scoffed softly. "How I respond to you really makes me want to try."

Before Link could reply, Ezra admitted, "I've never had a relationship work long-term, and that definitely concerns me. I mean"—he lifted a hand, then dropped it into his lap a second later—"you make it sound permanent. Bonding for life, right?"

"Yes,"

Link confirmed, his deep voice quiet and sure.

"What if we get tired of each other?"

Ezra asked uncomfortably. "I've had it happen before."

After a while, Ezra would just...lose interest in his girlfriend. Sometimes, they would go their separate ways amicably. A few times, Ezra had ended up getting an earful from the ex about how he was cold, distant, or uncaring.

“That’ll never happen for me, Ezra.”

Link smirked, his eyes narrowing in a smoldering expression. “And I can guarantee that it won’t happen for you, either.”

“How?”

Ezra shook his head, even as his body responded to that look. “I don’t think that’s really something you can promise.”

Link chuckled. “Because after we bond, you’ll be the only person I can ever get it up for.”

Wait. What?

“Huh?”

Ezra gaped for a few seconds. “Really?”

“Really,”

Link confirmed, sounding serious. “You know what that means?”

Ezra shook his head.

“That means I’ll make it my mission in life to give you so much pleasure you’ll never look elsewhere for satisfaction.”

Link smirked again, obviously taking in Ezra's dumbfounded expression. Letting out a husky chuckle, he claimed, "And sex between mates is far more enjoyable than anything you could experience with anyone else."

Link wagged his eyebrows suggestively. "That blowjob was just the tip of the iceberg."

Gaping, Ezra felt a rush of heat flood his body just thinking of experiencing more with the other man. It had definitely been the best damn blowjob of his life. His prick thickened behind the fly of his shorts, pressing against the material almost uncomfortably.

And I do want more...so very much.

Unable to help himself, Ezra reached down and adjusted himself into a better position. The move drew Link's attention to his tented shorts. The bigger man's nostrils flared, and he swept out his tongue and licked his lips.

"Wanna help you with that,"

Link declared gruffly, his tone betraying his desires.

"Yes, please,"

Ezra murmured reflexively.

Link began to set aside his bag of jerky, then hesitated. His attention fell on Ezra's soup. He pointed at Ezra's meal and opened his mouth.

Ezra was about to say, it can wait, when his stomach took that second to grumble loudly.

Smiling, Link cleared his throat. “You’ve expended a lot of calories hiking today.”

He indicated the soup again while holding Ezra’s gaze. “Part of taking care of you is making certain you’re fed. Please eat.”

With a reassuring expression, Link told him, “I’m not going anywhere.”

With a groan, Ezra nodded. He knew the other man was right. That didn’t make setting aside his carnal thoughts any easier. Still, Ezra did it.

Ezra pulled a metal trivet from his backpack and placed it before him. Gingerly, he rested the small cook pot on it. Then he stirred his soup and blew on it, helping it to cool faster.

After a moment, Ezra carefully took a tentative bite. It was still a bit too hot, but the flavor bursting across his tongue caused his stomach to grumble again. He hummed appreciatively as he eased another small spoonful between his lips.

“Damn, that’s a great sound,”

Link rumbled, drawing Ezra’s attention. He eyed him with a somewhat feral glimmer in his dark eyes, causing the hairs on Ezra’s arms to stand on end and his cock to twitch. Link grinned as he narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, wanna pull those kinds of noises from you while I’m stroking my hands over your body and burying my dick inside your hole.”

Link’s nostrils flared, and his expression turned a little vacant, as if he was imagining just that. “Know you’ll feel so tight and hot around me.”

Ezra swallowed hard, trying to get moisture into his suddenly too-dry throat. His breath caught in his chest, and heat rushed through his veins that had nothing to do

with his hot soup. It even felt as if his heart skipped a beat in anticipation.

The soft sound of a device vibrating filled the air, effectively yanking Link out of whatever daydream he'd been enjoying. He blinked a few times while shaking his head. Offering a sheepish smile, Link chuckled, soft and low.

“Sorry, mate,”

Link murmured, glancing from Ezra to the device wrapped around his thick bicep and back to him. “Your aroused scent mixed with the sounds of your enjoyment...ha. Drove me to distraction.”

Then Link grabbed his satchel while ducking his head, perhaps trying to hide the flush that was creeping up his neck. “Um, while you eat, I’ll, uh...just check this.”

Once again focusing on his food, Ezra ate hungrily as he watched Link absently. He saw the man pull a tablet and...something else...from his bag. Link quickly twisted a few things, and a second later, he was setting up what looked like a mini satellite dish.

“What’s that?”

Ezra couldn’t help but ask before shoveling in another spoonful of delicious potato corn chowder.

“This is a nifty device that allows me internet access just about damn near anywhere.”

Link flashed a grin Ezra’s way as he turned on his tablet and began tapping on it. “My own design, and I worked with a couple of guys to tweak it and make it even more powerful.”

“Cool.”

Ezra didn't really have much else to say. If it wasn't technology related to accounting, he'd never paid attention to it. Instead, he ate his meal and enjoyed the scenery...namely, Link's gorgeous body.

It only took a moment for Ezra to realize that the silence between them was comfortable, and he felt no need to fill it with chatter.

I could get used to this.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

LINK ROUSED SLOWLY, relishing the feel of his mate's naked body curled up against him. After a delicious round of sixty-nining with Ezra, his human's long day had caught up with him. He'd muttered something about getting dressed before snuggling into Link's arms and promptly conking out.

It was the best.

Recalling the feel of Ezra's mouth on him had Link's morning wood responding predictably. His half-hard prick swelled, and he instinctively shifted his hips. When Link's erection slid deliciously against Ezra's thigh, he let out a soft moan.

Feeling Ezra's arm around Link's torso tighten and his mate hiss and press his answering erection against his thigh, Link tightened his own hold. He rolled onto his side so he was facing Ezra. At the same time, he moved a hand to Ezra's thigh, hiked it up his hip, and slotted their bodies together, aligning their erections.

Then Link began a slow rutting, grinding against his human.

"Oh, damn,"

Ezra muttered, his voice still a little thick with sleep. "That feels...mmm..."

He pressed his forehead into the crook of Link's neck as his words drifted off.

Link didn't need words, though. Between the scent of arousal wafting between them and the way his mate clung and rubbed against him, Link knew exactly what Ezra needed. He slipped his arm under Ezra's leg, using the crook of his arm to keep it

where he wanted him. That allowed Link to settle his palm on his human's ass cheek, and he took the liberty to squeeze.

Ezra grunted and began placing wet, open-mouthed kisses along the tendon of Link's neck.

Letting out a low moan of his own, Link tipped his chin up and offered more room, reveling in the tingles that coursed down his chest, causing his nipples to bead. He briefly wondered what it would feel like to have Ezra sink his teeth into him. Link had heard bites from a mate caused incredible pleasure, and he longed to do it to Ezra, but he'd never considered that his human mate might be willing to return the favor.

Something to think about later.

Link's balls began to tighten, and the tingle at the base of his spine told him he was seconds from erupting. Needing Ezra right there with him, he slipped his forefingers into his mate's crack and gently caressed what he knew would be sensitive skin. The way Ezra shuddered in Link's arms sent a bolt of satisfaction through him.

Unable to resist, Link teased his fingertip over Ezra's hole. He heard Ezra's hiss and felt his jolt. Then his new and forever lover arched his back and pressed back against his digit.

Answering Ezra's unspoken plea, Link pushed with his finger, sinking it into his mate's tight heat. Hearing his human's low pleasure-filled moan, he crooked his finger, searching...searching... Ezra hissed and jolted, and wet heat spread between them.

At the same time, Ezra bit, perhaps on reflex.

Link felt the sting of pain in the flesh of his shoulder, and he tensed in surprise. Then the pain morphed into the most intense wash of tingles, and his brain fizzed out. His balls pulled tight as his orgasm crashed through him, and he added to the mess between them.

Floating on what was undoubtably the best release of his life, Link held Ezra tight and smiled. His racing heartbeat slowly began to ease into some semblance of normal. When Link felt Ezra lift his head a bit and lap against his skin, his thoughts began to push at him.

My mate actually bit me! Our bond is more than started. It's halfway complete or more.

A bit of guilt curled in Link's gut, but it wasn't enough to beat out the happiness he was also experiencing. His mate might not understand it, but he was giving in to his instincts perfectly.

"Damn, I broke your skin,"

Ezra murmured, easing his head back a little and eyeing Link's neck. "Didn't mean to, but it's already stopped bleeding, so I guess I didn't bite quite as hard as I thought."

"Shifters heal damn fast, Ezra,"

Link reminded him, easing his finger from his mate's channel so he could rub up and down his spine soothingly. After a second of hesitation, he added, "And biting is part of bonding in shifter culture, so it actually feels really, really good."

"Oh."

Ezra met his gaze, furrowing his brows. “Does that mean you plan to bite me, too?”

Link thought he’d explained all that, but they’d gone over so much information the prior day that he couldn’t be sure. Plus, there was little to think that Ezra would retain it all at once. Most human mates didn’t, needing time to accept it in increments.

“Absolutely,”

Link confirmed, anticipation filling him, and he licked his lips. With an eyebrow waggle, he added, “And you’ll come from it...every time.”

Ezra gaped at him, his expression one of clear disbelief.

Chuckling, Link leaned forward and pressed his lips to Ezra’s in a chaste kiss. “You’ll see.”

He went back in, intending for a much deeper good morning kiss, but Ezra leaned back and turned his head. Growling softly, Link cradled his mate’s neck and forced him to meet his gaze. “Why?”

“Morning breath,”

Ezra answered, licking his lips and swallowing. “And I didn’t brush before passing out last night, so I’m pretty sure I’m rank.”

Link sighed and shook his head. “Your taste will always appeal to me, but I understand.”

The drying cum between them began to itch, reminding him of the mess they needed to clean up. “Let’s get cleaned up. Do you normally cook something for breakfast or eat on the go?”

As Link asked the question, he eased his hold on Ezra and carefully pushed the blanket off of them. He kept an eye on everything and made certain he didn't drag the fabric in cum. He didn't have anything to clean it, after all. To Link's relief, they'd been lucky, and their loads hadn't leaked onto the blanket beneath them, either.

Lucky break. Gonna have to be a bit more careful of that.

"Normally, I eat a granola bar and some jerky along with plenty of water as I slowly get started,"

Ezra admitted, rolling away from him with a grimace. "Damn. Can't believe I slept nude in the middle of the forest."

Link chuckled. "Get used to it."

Unable to resist, he leaned forward and squeezed Ezra's ass cheek. When his mate peered over his shoulder at him with a cocked brow, Link grinned unabashedly. "Can't help myself. Love touching you."

Ezra licked his lips before quietly admitting, "Same."

His gaze roved over Link's torso and groin. "Look forward to exploring even more."

Renewed heat filled Link's veins, but he did his best to ignore it even as he stated, "I look forward to feeling you do just that."

Link then tore his gaze away from his handsome, naked mate and rolled to his knees. After grabbing his canteen and a hand towel from his bag, he began washing away the evidence of their pleasure. Out of the corner of his eye, Link noticed Ezra doing the same.

“Hmm, next time, I think I’d prefer to lick that off you,”

Link mused, his mouth suddenly watering at the thought of it. He also couldn’t help the way his dick twitched at his thoughts. Chuckling, both at Ezra’s wide-eyed expression and his own body’s reactions, Link shrugged. “Can’t help it.”

Ezra blinked, then scoffed softly as he eyed Link’s burgeoning erection. “It’s a mate thing?”

he guessed.

Link noticed Ezra’s responding body, his slender prick once more extending from amidst his nest of neatly trimmed, dark-blond curls.

Groaning, Link turned away, rubbing his palm over his bald pate. “Shit, you drive me crazy,”

he grumbled under his breath.

An answering chuckle sounded behind him. “Back atcha, big guy,”

Ezra muttered so quietly that if Link hadn’t been a shifter, he didn’t think he would’ve heard him.

Blowing out a deep breath, Link knew he needed to let Ezra get on his way before he had him sprawled on the blanket again. He wanted in his mate so damn bad, his dick in his ass and his teeth in his neck. Except, he knew he couldn’t force his human. Link had to give him time to accept their connection.

“I’m going to shift and head off, Ezra,”

Link told his mate, half-turning back to face him. Upon spotting that Ezra had dressed, he bit back his disappointment. “Can I join you when you stop for lunch?”

Ezra nodded immediately, which pleased Link. “I’d like that.”

After tucking his soiled cloth into a plastic bag, Link folded the shorts he’d discarded the night before and placed both items into his satchel. He began to call to his musk ox. Before his shift could begin, Link felt Ezra’s hand on his forearm, and he refocused on his mate.

“Did you want me to carry your satchel for you?”

Link thought about that for a few seconds before shaking his head. “No, thanks.”

He placed his left hand over where his mate’s hand rested on his right. “I have no intention of letting anyone see me in animal form since I’m not native to here,”

Link explained to soften the perceived rejection. “And I’ll need easy access to my tablet, shorts, and shoes, just in case.”

Nodding, Ezra glanced at Link’s armband. “Do you wear that in your musk ox form?”

“I do,”

Link confirmed. “The band’s elastic and easily hidden under all my animal’s hair.”

With a chuckle, he added, “The first time I felt it as my musk ox, I nearly jumped to the moon, it startled me so bad.”

Ezra’s grin caused Link’s heartrate to spike.

My mate is so damn gorgeous.

“You have a good hike, Ezra,”

Link encouraged, squeezing his hand lightly. “I’ll be around if you need anything. Just holler.”

Nodding, Ezra squeezed Link’s forearm before lifting his other hand to the back of Link’s neck. “I brushed,”

he told him, applying a little pressure.

Link was more than happy to give in to Ezra’s urging. As their lips touched, he parted them a little. He slipped his tongue out and teased along his mate’s plump lower lip. To Link’s appreciation, Ezra parted for him, and he took advantage, tasting his mate deeply.

Ending the kiss far swifter than he wished, Link lifted his head. He couldn’t resist pecking one more chaste kiss to Ezra’s mouth. Then Link smiled as he drew away, brushing his thumb along Ezra’s slightly prickly jaw.

“Stay safe, baby,”

Link rumbled, his voice deep, betraying the arousal that his hard cock clearly displayed. He couldn’t help it. Kissing his mate had that effect on him and always would.

Just the way it should be.

After taking a couple of steps backward, Link initiated his shift. The tell-tale sounds of muscles popping and tendons cracking filled their secluded sleeping nook. In

seconds, he stood before Ezra in his musk ox form.

To Link's pleasure, Ezra stepped forward, lifting a hand toward him. When his mate hesitated, Link lowered his head a little and stretched toward him. He even vocalized quietly in invitation.

Ezra settled his hand on Link's broad forehead. With a surprised-sounding chuckle, his human rubbed up to the top of his head, then down one sweeping horn. His expression was one of awe that Link took deep pride in.

"Wow, Link,"

Ezra whispered. "This is..."

He began running his fingers into Link's thick mane. "This is amazing."

Link rumbled, expressing his own pleasure at Ezra's petting. Then he nudged his mate's shoulder before slowly turning away. With a last look over his shoulder, seeing Ezra reach down and grab the strap of his backpack, Link slipped his horn through his satchel strap before moving into the trees.

Within a few minutes, Link heard Ezra head off.

Just as Link had done before, he carefully shadowed Ezra, watching over his mate as he hiked.

FOR THREE DAYS, LINK and Ezra fell into a rhythm.

Ezra hiked while Link followed. They would meet up for meals and each night for camping. They spent the evenings exploring each other's bodies and sharing stories about themselves.

Link learned that Ezra had an older brother, Edward, who lived an hour north of his home in Savannah. They weren't exceptionally close, but they made a point of meeting up monthly. Ezra was supposed to share a meal with Edward as soon as he returned from his two-week trip.

When Link had heard that, he hoped that Ezra would invite him to meet Edward as his boyfriend.

Keeping my fingers crossed.

Link loved falling into a sated sleep each night after making out and exploring each other with hands and mouths. Rousing with the man snuggled against him, warm and naked, was even better. His mate had gotten over his reticence about sleeping nude damn fast.

It helped that Link's sensitive shifter hearing could easily make out anyone approaching with plenty of time for them to throw on shorts. Even asleep, he would wake. It'd happened their third night together, but Link had realized it was an elk before he made the mistake of waking his lover for nothing.

WHEN THE SUN BEGAN to set, Link drifted closer to where Ezra hiked. He watched as his handsome human paused at the edge of a meadow. On the other side was a lake, the sun gleaming on the smooth surface.

Ezra peered around the area, obviously admiring the wildflower-covered area. When he inhaled deeply, his narrow chest expanded. Then he smiled as he let it out on a quiet sigh.

Heading toward the left side of the meadow, closer to the lake, Ezra glanced toward the trees. "I'm taking a dip to rinse off the sweat of the day,"

he called. “Coming, Link?”

Link was more than on board with that. After a quick glance around, as well as a few seconds to confirm he couldn’t hear anyone else in the area, he left the cover of the trees. Hurrying after his lover, Link headed toward where his human had dropped his backpack and was stripping to his briefs.

Tipping his head to the side, Link allowed his satchel to slide off his horn to rest beside Ezra’s stuff. He took a few seconds to nuzzle his human and get a few pets. Then Link lumbered toward the water.

Unable to resist, Link galloped into the lake, enjoying the cool liquid as it splashed over his heavy hairy coat. Upon hearing Ezra’s open laughter, if he could have grinned in musk ox form, he would have. Instead, Link dunked his snout, then lifted it quickly, sending a surge of water over Ezra’s chest and arms.

Ezra barked a surprised laugh, then called, “Oh, it’s on.”

For the next several minutes, they traded splashes, soaking them both.

Link couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun as his musk ox, and he reveled in the knowledge that his mate was accepting him in animal form just as he did in his human form.

Needing to kiss Ezra senseless for his acknowledgment, Link shifted, grabbed his mate, and proceeded to do just that.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

EZRA PANTED SOFTLY as he lay on the bank of the small lake, letting the setting sun dry his relaxed, sated body. He never would have thought that Link could be so friendly and playful in his musk ox form. Every time Ezra interacted with Link as his animal, his lover proved that he was sentient and himself in both forms.

He also couldn't believe the amount of sex he'd had in the last few days. He'd gotten off more times than he had in the entire prior year. Looking over at where a naked and wet Link sprawled, he realized it wouldn't be long before he would want to touch the man all over once more.

His fingers actually twitched with his renewed desire.

And if I accept everything Link's told me, I can have this every day for the rest of my life.

Hell, yeah.

Deciding it was high time for Ezra to grab onto what Link was offering with both hands, he rolled toward the other man. He half sprawled over him, and the larger male immediately wrapped both arms around him and held him close. Link smiled up at him, looking so very pleased to have Ezra in his embrace. His deep brown eyes even appeared to gleam with his happiness.

Damn. Could that be love in his eyes?

Ezra's gut warmed and clenched at the thought, not that he would ever ask. He wasn't ready to admit to that kind of emotion, yet.

Instead, Ezra dipped his head and placed a soft kiss to Link's bearded lips. He'd never kissed a man with a beard before Link, but now he couldn't seem to get enough of it. Ezra made a mental note to tell Link how much he enjoyed his soft, thick facial hair.

Definitely don't want him to think he needs to shave it off.

After another peck to Link's mouth, Ezra smiled down at him. He teased his fingertip around Link's beaded nipple, feeling it peak further beneath his touch. Just that fast, Link's expression went from relaxed and happy to smoldering and hungry.

Ezra would never get enough of that look, either.

"What do you say we move this to a place that's a little more secluded?"

Ezra asked huskily. He lowered his hand from Link's chest and brazenly gripped his lover's thick, swollen length. "Then we can set about getting this beautiful piece of meat in my ass."

Link growled roughly as his nostrils flared, and a shudder rolled through his big body. Spreading his legs, he offered Ezra more room to fondle him, so he did just that. Sliding his hand lower, Ezra cradled Link's balls, rolling the large orbs in what he'd learned was a sensitive sack.

With a groan, Link whispered Ezra's name, his appreciation obvious. "Yesss,"

he hissed. "Want that so fucking badly."

"Fucking,"

Ezra countered with a cheeky grin. "That's exactly what I want."

Ezra's chute clenched in anticipation. While he'd never taken anything Link's size, he couldn't wait to experience it. He knew his lover's erection would stretch and fill him so good.

Link tightened his arm around Ezra, clutching him close. With his other hand, he reached down and gripped Ezra's wrist, ceasing his playing. His expression intensified, and a tick pulsed at the corner of his jaw, barely visible at the edge of his beard.

"I want to mount you so damn bad, Ezra."

Link's deep voice came out a husky, rumble growl, which sent a shiver down Ezra's spine that made his prick twitch. Link continued speaking, and Ezra fought to focus on his words. "But if I do, I won't be able to stop myself from claiming you. Are you ready for that?"

Swallowing hard, Ezra tried to find his tongue, and Link quickly repeated, "Are you ready to be mine for all time?"

Link's words should have given Ezra pause, but all they did was send a fresh rush of anticipation through him.

"Yes,"

Ezra assured, giving Link's erection a squeeze. "Yes, I want to be yours."

Then he narrowed his eyes at the larger male. "That means you'll be mine, too, right?"

"Yes,"

Link instantly responded. “Yes, I’ll be yours, and you’ll be mine.”

Ezra grinned and winked. “Then I think it’s time to move this party.”

“Hell, yeah.”

In an impressive show of strength, Link rose to his feet without releasing Ezra. Instead, he swung him into his arms and lifted him. He even made it look easy as he started across the meadow toward their gear.

Wrapping his arms around Link’s neck, Ezra held on for the ride. He was even more impressed when his lover swept both the satchel and his backpack up without stopping or setting him down, barely even slowing. He continued to hold Ezra in one arm, carrying their stuff, as he headed between the trees.

Link was obviously a man on a mission, and Ezra could feel that mission tap against his ass cheek with every step he took. The warmth of pre-cum smeared across his skin. The fluid evidence of Link’s need caused the hairs on Ezra’s legs to stand on end, and his own erection ached where it pressed into his stomach.

When Link seemed to have found the spot he wanted—a tiny clearing full of pine needles—he stopped and dropped their stuff.

“Perfect,”

Link declared. Finally placing Ezra on his feet, keeping him within the circle of one arm, Link cradled his jaw and peered into his eyes. “This first time is going to be hard and dirty, mate.”

Before Ezra could assure Link that he welcomed it and wouldn’t want it any other way, Link continued, “Scenting you, holding you, and touching you, for days without

biting you has tested my control to the edge. Then you ask to be claimed.”

His big body shuddered against Ezra’s own as he declared, “I just need you so damn badly.”

“I’m right there with you, Link,”

Ezra told him, bussing a kiss to the edge of his beard. “Make me yours.”

With a moan, Link released him only to urge him onto his hands and knees.

Ezra was more than happy to sink down and present his ass to the bigger man. His chute clenched in anticipation, and he felt his breath catch in his chest when Link knelt behind him. He felt Link’s big palm on his ass cheek, squeezing lightly while pulling to one side.

Turning his head, Ezra watched Link grab his satchel with his free hand. He opened a front zipper pouch and pulled out a tube of lube. Link used his thumb to pop the cap, and Ezra soon felt the cool slick dripping down his crack.

“Came prepared?”

Ezra needed to tease, his voice sounding husky to his ears. “You a Boy Scout, too, Link?”

Link scoffed as he eased a thick digit into Ezra’s channel, stretching him. “Nope,”

he rumbled gruffly. “Just hopeful.”

Ezra opened his mouth, although he didn’t know what he was planning to say. Instead, a heartfelt moan ripped from his throat. The feel of Link’s fingers—when

had he added a second one—sliding over and rubbing his prostate lit up his senses. His erection jerked at his groin, twitching and throbbing.

After swallowing hard, Ezra urged, “Hurry. Faster. Need.”

Never could he remember being reduced to one-word pleas, and he reveled in the passion building between them.

Growling, Link sounded almost pained. “Don’t wanna hurt you.”

Feeling a third finger stretching him, Ezra breathed through the burn. He must have tensed up or something, for a second later, Link was pushing more lube into his body. Then Link dropped the tube in favor of rubbing a hand up and down his back soothingly.

Ezra sighed, his body relaxing. He rocked into each of Link’s finger-thrusts, relishing the sensations heating his groin from his lover’s continued stimulation to his prostate. The base of his spine tingled, and he felt his balls begin to tighten.

“Shit, wait,”

Ezra ground out. “Too close.”

“Not without me, my mate,”

Link declared, sliding his fingers out of him.

Unable to help himself, regardless of the fact that it was what he’d just asked for, Ezra let out a moan of dismay.

“Easy, baby,”

Link crooned.

Ezra felt Link position his cock head at his hole. He focused on relaxing and breathing as he registered the pressure. A second later, Link's large knob pushed past his guardian muscle, stretching him obscenely.

Ezra hissed and grunted in surprise at the sensation, and to his relief, Link paused. His lover bent over him, resting his weight on his left hand. Link wrapped his right arm around him, palming his chest and playing with his nipples.

“Relax, baby,”

Link urged, his voice tight with strain. “You can take me.”

He nuzzled Ezra's neck, placing sucking kisses along his flesh. “You were made for me.”

When Link's hand lowered to his groin and began fondling his prick, which had softened a bit at the pain, Ezra managed to relax. He sighed as his dick once again swelled. Pushing back toward Link, Ezra signaled he was ready.

Link moaned Ezra's name and pressed forward. He slowly sank deep, deeper, until Ezra felt his pubes tickling his ass crack. The big man growled as he tightened his arm around his torso, clutching him close.

“Mine,”

Link snarled into his ear, sounding feral. “Finally, all mine.”

Ezra didn't get a chance to respond. In the next instant, Link set a punishing rhythm. He pounded into Ezra, nailing his prostate with each thrust, lighting up the nerve

endings within his chute.

Moaning in response, Ezra tried to rock back into each of Link's thrusts, but his lover held him too tightly. All he could do was hang on for the ride...and what a ride it was. Link's balls slapped against his own, sending tingles through his sack. His leg hairs slid against his own smoother flesh, creating delicious friction.

Before Ezra even realized it was happening, his balls pulled tight, and his release crashed through his system. He shouted Link's name and rode the sweet bliss of his orgasm. His erection spurted pulse after pulse with his ecstasy.

As Ezra floated, he vaguely registered the masculine grunt above him. Then the unmistakable feeling of Link's cock erupting within him, coating his insides with hot cum, registered to his blissed-out brain. Ezra started to smile, having never experienced such intimacy.

Then Link bit, sinking his teeth into the crook of Ezra's neck. For just an instant, a sharp sting stabbed through his flesh, and he opened his mouth to express his pain. A second later, the most delicious tingles spread through Ezra's body, and he let out a cry of pleasure as another orgasm surged through him.

Black spots flashed across Ezra's vision as his brain fritzed out.

**EZRA ROUSED.**

He wasn't certain how long he'd been out, but his body still hummed with satisfaction. He realized that he was lying on his side with Link spooned up behind him. The big man held him tightly, his hands roving over his chest.

As Ezra began to move so he could turn and face Link, he discovered something else. Link was still hard, and his erection was still inside his body. His lover even

continued to micro-rut inside him.

“Please, don’t move,”

Link murmured into Ezra’s ear, then pressed a light kiss to the sensitive skin behind his ear. On a quiet moan, he muttered, “Feel so good, my mate. So good.”

Relaxing against Link, Ezra enjoyed the sensation of being filled. “You, too,”

he admitted.

While Ezra had never been much of a bottom before, with the way his system was already rousing for another round, he knew he would come to crave the feel of Link’s big dick very quickly. His gut clenched as his own cock twitched. The way Link suckled on his neck caused the hairs on his nape to stand on end.

Groaning with renewed desire, Ezra mumbled, “This shouldn’t be possible.”

“Told you.”

Link licked a stripe up his neck. “Always more intense between mates.”

Nuzzling his beard against Ezra’s neck, he sighed in obvious pleasure. “Will never get enough of you.”

Finally, Ezra could believe it. The feel of Link’s passion was something he would get addicted to so damn fast. The thought that he should be concerned about that was in and out of Ezra’s mind, ever-so-fleeting.

Then Link wrapped his hand around Ezra’s dick, and all he could focus on was the pleasure his lover gave him. He didn’t know how it was possible, but his balls

tightened. The base of his spine tingled, and he groaned with ecstasy.

“Love those sounds,”

Link rumbled from behind him. “Love the smell of your arousal, the way your skin gleams with sweat from your pleasure.”

Licking up his neck again, Link hummed. “Taste so damn good.”

That pushed Ezra over the edge, and his body spasmed with his release.

Link groaned and shuddered, and more warmth filled Ezra’s ass.

Panting harshly, Ezra tried to catch his breath. “Wow.”

Chuckling roughly, Link rubbed his beard over Ezra’s neck again. “Yeah.”

“Love the way your beard feels,”

Ezra admitted, turning his head and offering more room. “Don’t ever shave it.”

“Good.”

Link did it again. “And I don’t intend to.”

Link tightened his arms around Ezra, squeezing him for another minute. Then he relaxed his hold and sighed deeply. Slowly, Link drew away, easing his softening member from Ezra’s body.

Ezra felt something oozing from his chute, and he clenched, feeling oddly empty. Realizing it was Link’s seed, he grimaced. That would take some getting used to, too.

Having obviously caught on to his reaction, Link rolled Ezra to his back and pecked a hard kiss to his lips. “I’ll clean you up, my mate. Don’t worry.”

He pushed to his knees and held out a hand. “Let’s go to the lake. Is there soap in your bag?”

“Yeah, there is,”

Ezra confirmed, eyeing Link’s hand. “But my legs feel like jelly. I don’t think I can walk, yet.”

Link grinned broadly, clearly pleased by that comment. “I’ll carry you.”

Then Link swept Ezra into his arms and did just that.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

LINK ROSE FROM WHERE he spooned Ezra, pushing the blanket aside. After pressing a kiss to his mate's shoulder, he eased off their improvised sleeping pallet. Link grabbed his shorts from his satchel, then set about using his satellite dish and connecting to his tablet.

As much as Link wished he could have remained curled up with Ezra, the device strapped around his bicep had vibrated, waking him. Someone had sent him an alert that needed his attention. Even though Link was wooing his mate, he still had responsibilities to the Shifter Council.

Considering his friends knew where he was and what he was doing, whatever the problem was had to be damn important.

Once his equipment was hooked up and online, Link opened the message marked urgent. He frowned, his anger spiking. Link glanced over at his still-sleeping mate and tamped down his desire to growl.

Instead of continuing with his hike, Ezra had insisted on taking the day off with him. They'd spent most of their time lying around and exploring each other's bodies. They'd also spent hours talking, sharing their hopes, fears, and even expectations of the future.

Link had been surprised yet extremely pleased that Ezra had insisted on taking a day out of his vacation to spend cementing their bond. He hadn't expected that. While Link had heard that the mate-pull affected the human in the pairing, too, seeing it in action was something else.

Damn it. I will keep my mate safe.

With that thought, Link grabbed his satellite phone and powered it up. He called Theo, the man who'd sent the alert. When Link had started tailing Ezra, he'd turned over the monitoring of his systems to the technological expert.

"Hey, man,"

Theo greeted. "I'm so sorry to be the barer of bad news."

"It's not your fault,"

Link countered, keeping his voice quiet, hoping Ezra would sleep through his call. It wasn't that he wanted to hide anything from his mate. Link just wanted him to get plenty of sleep, considering Link had woken Ezra up twice in the night for sex. Link just couldn't get enough of his handsome, sexy human. "We knew going in that I was investigating hackers damn near as skilled as me."

Some were even better than him, not that Link wanted to admit that to anyone.

"Well, at least we know who's been selling information, now,"

Theo pointed out. "Unfortunately, Shawn knows you're the one who figured it out, and he's coming after you."

Before Link could come up with a response, Theo added, "And he knows you found your mate and that you're somewhere on the Appalachian Trail."

Link grimaced, rubbing his hand over his bald head. "It's not as if me finding my mate was a secret,"

he pointed out. “It’s why I’m off work, remember? Common knowledge.”

Then Link frowned, scowling at nothing. “But how did Shawn find out that I’m hiking on the trail?”

“I’m trying to figure out who was privy to that information,”

Theo told him, his voice sounding troubled. “But, honestly, finding a mate is instant gossip. There’s no telling who blabbed to him or even just while around him.”

“True,”

Link conceded. “So, Shawn disappeared from the headquarters before the enforcers could catch up with him.”

He spoke softly, musing through what they knew. “And he’s threatened revenge on me and Ezra because I outed him and the council named him rogue.”

“Yup,”

Theo commented dryly. “That about sums it up.”

It had been the information in his email, after all.

Link rolled his eyes. Still, he had to smirk upon hearing that response from his friend.

“What about Taleen?”

Link asked, referring to Shawn’s lover. They didn’t call each other mates, but they did live together. “How’s she taking this?”

“According to Taleen’s friend, Sherry, she said she’s going back to her mother’s bear clan,”

Theo told him, having obviously expected the question since he had the answer readily available. Plus, Theo was a very thorough human. “When the enforcers got to their place, the closet and bathroom were empty of nearly all her stuff.”

“Okay.”

Link had always thought Taleen a little shallow...being with Shawn for his position and money, working for the council and all. “Can’t say I’m surprised by that.”

“We want you to come in for your protection. You and Ezra,”

Theo told him. “Tell me your closest town, and we’ll send a couple of enforcers in an SUV to pick you up.”

Link knew Theo meant well, and by we, he meant Theo’s mate, Councilman Regales, but he still shook his head—not that his friend could see it. “No,”

he countered. “I’m not cutting Ezra’s trip short. He’s been planning this too long.”

Scowling, Link grumbled, “What? You think just because I’m a computer nerd that I can’t keep my mate safe? Hello, pot. I’m kettle. You’re black, too.”

Theo barked a laugh. “Yeah, yeah. I’m the pot calling the kettle black, huh?”

Scoffing, Link pointed out, “You’re just as big a computer nerd, and you’re a Navy SEAL, so—”

He paused and shrugged.

“Okay, so you’re not coming in.”

While Theo’s voice held a wealth of concern, he admitted, “Not that I blame you, but you do see that this is a little different, right? You do remember Shawn used to be an enforcer, right?”

“Yeah,”

Link snapped, then glanced at Ezra. Upon seeing his human’s sleepy-eyed-gaze trained on him, he smiled while continuing his call. “Your point?”

“He’s a trained grizzly shifter,”

Theo pointed out. “Like you said, I’m a trained SEAL. Were you ever trained?”

“No,”

Link admitted. His eldest brother, Warren, was their head enforcer, so he’d been trained in combat and tactics, but Link had never been considered a fighter by his family. “But this is my mate, Theo.”

Holding Ezra’s gaze, Link declared, “I will keep him safe.”

The sound of Theo blowing out a sharp breath could be heard through the line. “Okay. Well, keep your eyes open,”

he encouraged. “Our enforcers lost his trail northwest of Savannah, so we know he’s headed your way. You know they’ll do their best to intercept the bastard before he reaches you, but be careful, my friend.”

“I will,”

Link assured. “And you know how to reach me if you have any updates that I need to be aware of.”

“Yep.”

With that, Theo disconnected the call.

Link lowered his device as he held Ezra’s gaze. His mate’s beautiful green eyes were full of questions. He smiled as he set down his satellite phone before returning to their makeshift bed. While Link didn’t look forward to explaining the situation to his human mate, he would never purposefully lie to him.

I’d just hoped to have him more settled within our culture before trouble came calling.

Wrapping his arms around Ezra, Link pulled him against him. “How’d you sleep, baby?”

he rumbled, nuzzling his beard against his temple. He loved the way Ezra pressed into his touch. His mate had become surprisingly tactile.

Another benefit of the mate-pull, I think.

Ezra chuckled softly as he pecked a kiss to Link’s jaw at the edge of his beard. “You exhausted me repeatedly,”

he teased, nipping at his neck. “So when you did let me sleep, I slept like a rock.”

Link chuckled, liking the play.

“So,”

Ezra began, putting a little space between their faces so he could meet his gaze. “That call sounded a little ominous. What’s up?”

Grimacing, Link took a deep breath, held it for a couple of seconds, then let it out in a sigh. “Yeah, afraid so. It has to do with my job at Shifter Headquarters, the council, and changing policies, and of course, a vengeful asshole who got caught trying to make money on the changes.”

“Ooookay.”

Ezra stared at him with furrowed brows. “You’re gonna have to explain a little more than that.”

Tracing along the side of Link’s beard, he added, “Your conversation made it sound like it’s gonna affect us.”

“It just might.”

Link rubbed up and down Ezra’s bare back, more to soothe himself than his mate. “I work in the tech department, keeping an eye on anything online that could hint at our existence, making certain it never sees the light of day.”

Giving Ezra a wry smile, Link admitted, “And you know I’m a hacker.”

Link explained briefly about what he’d been trying to do for the last couple of weeks—namely, find who was betraying their secrecy and selling information about shifters’ movements to those with nefarious purposes. That person had put more than one mate in danger. A fox shifter had nearly lost his life before his dragon mate had saved him.

“So, you wrote some kind of code that helped you figure out who this asshole is, and

now the asshole is on the run,”

Ezra summed up.

“Yes.”

Link grimaced. “There are enforcers tracking him, but they say he blames me, and he’s headed this way.”

Ezra scoffed as he rolled his eyes. “Sounds about right. What asshole wants to take responsibility for their bad decisions?”

Easing to a sitting position, he reached for his backpack. “So, I imagine they think we’re in danger and need to cut our trip short.”

Link heard and scented Ezra’s disappointment.

“Yes and no.”

Link took Ezra’s hand, pausing his action of pouring water into a tin cup. “We’re not cutting your trip short, baby. We’re just gonna take precautions.”

Seeing Ezra’s questioning yet hopeful look, Link told him, “Instead of me following you in animal form, I’m going to hike with you.”

He smiled as Ezra’s look of surprise. “Don’t worry, I won’t hold you back.”

After nibbling his bottom lip for a moment—which Link found extremely distracting, but he knew his mate was still uncomfortable with morning breath and kissing—Ezra nodded once. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, my mate.”

Link squeezed Ezra’s hand before releasing it so his mate could resume his morning ritual. “I know how much you’ve been looking forward to this, and I want you happy. Always.”

I’ll just have to remain vigilant to keep him safe at the same time.

While breaking down their little camp, Ezra shared what they should expect upcoming on the trail. He was so animated about the flora and views they should pass. Ezra also shared his hope of seeing an elk or other wildlife.

Link hoped for his mate’s sake that something made an appearance. He also vowed to keep quiet and his ears open. Maybe he would be able to hear something and point it out to his mate.

I’ll do my best.

Once they were ready, granola bars and jerky in hand, Link asked if Ezra wanted him to take a turn carrying his backpack. After all, all Link had was his light satchel. His mate refused with a laugh and a shake of his head.

“My hike, my responsibility,”

Ezra told him. He patted Link’s chest, possibly trying to soften the denial. Then he winked and led the way out of their secluded love-nest, saying, “Let’s get rolling, hot stuff.”

Link grinned, appreciating the nickname, and followed behind him.

As they hiked, Link found his attention drifting to Ezra’s ass and legs over and over.

Following five feet behind his human gave him a fantastic view. The backpack covered part of the delectable mounds he liked to part, but his imagination more than filled in what was hidden. Plus, the flex of Ezra's calves and thighs in those shorts were things of beauty.

It wasn't long before Link was hiking with a boner that wouldn't quit, and he resigned himself to a very uncomfortable morning.

LINK AND EZRA FELL into a new routine. Ezra set the pace, and with Link's shifter strength, even though he'd rarely hiked in human form, he had no trouble keeping up. They stopped for lunch and shared a quickie, then continued on.

Their evenings were filled with energetic lovemaking before they both passed out in sated bliss.

The only real problem ended up being food. With Link staying mostly in human form, coupled with his shifter appetite, they were going through Ezra's meals far swifter than planned. They agreed to head into a town the next day so Link could buy his own supplies, as well as replenish Ezra's.

After setting up camp, Ezra set up his cookstove as normal. When he opened the packaged meal, the smell hit Link's nose. He grimaced as he eyed the contents with trepidation.

Evidently, Ezra caught the expression before he could hide it. "Uh, not a fan of split pea soup?"

He motioned toward the simmering soup. "It has ham chunks in it."

"No."

Link shook his head. “Definitely not a fan.”

Wincing, he rubbed over the slight bulge of his stomach. “I’ll skip it and just eat a couple pieces of jerky.”

“Are you sure you don’t even want to try it?”

Ezra questioned, appearing concerned. “It’s a great brand.”

Scoffing softly, Link settled on their sleeping bag. “I’m sorry, no.”

He eased a little further from the cooking food to get away from the smell. “Hard no.”

Seeing Ezra’s look of surprise, Link fought back a blush as he admitted, “When I was young, I was playing truth or dare with my siblings.”

“Oh, no.”

Ezra winced. “Do I want to know where this is going?”

Link shrugged, rubbing over his upturned thighs. “Well, my dare was to open a can of split pea soup and eat it cold.”

Thinking back on that always brought bile to his throat, and he swallowed hard. “I ended up so sick.”

The wind shifted, bringing a wave of cooking split pea soup scent to his nostrils. Link winced and shook his head. “Now, just the smell—”

He paused and turned his head to get a breath of fresh air.

“Bummer.”

Ezra reached over and rubbed up and down Link’s calf. “Sorry, man.”

His concerned expression brightened. “Hey, why don’t you shift and head upwind to do some grazing? That way, you won’t go hungry.”

Desire to get away from the smell of Ezra’s dinner warred with his need to stay near him.

“Go on, Link,”

Ezra urged again, patting his leg. “You won’t be far. A shout away.”

Then he wagged his eyebrows and offered, “I’ll even brush my teeth after I eat so we can spend some time making out.”

Once Ezra had learned of Link’s love of necking, he indulged him often.

Link nodded. “Okay.”

He grinned and started stripping. “You got a deal.”

Before changing, Link leaned over and pressed a swift, hard kiss to Ezra’s lips. Then he moved off the blanket and called to his musk ox. The shift was smooth and seamless, and soon Link rubbed his big nose against his mate’s shoulder before lumbering into the trees to graze.

Less than ten minutes later, Link realized his mistake. He heard Ezra loudly state, “Who are you?”

“Name’s Shawn,”

a male replied with a mixture of cockiness and coldness, sending fear spiking through Link. “Surely Link told you about me.”

Link didn’t wait to hear Ezra’s response. He turned and began galloping through the forest, trampling small trees in his haste. Before he could reach the clearing where he’d left his mate, a large grizzly appeared in his path, roaring in challenge.

One sniff sent Link’s mind racing, and he fought back his panic.

Taleen hadn’t returned to her mother’s bear clan after all.

After another second of hesitation, Link bellowed, lowered his massive head, and charged. One thought reverberated through his brain—get back to my mate. When his heavy frame slammed into the huge bear, he drove her into a large tree trunk, making the earth shake around them.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:03 am*

SUDDENLY, THE FOREST grew quiet around Ezra. He felt the hairs on his nape stand on end. Turning off the burner on his cookstove, he did his best to keep his heartrate from spiking. Whatever was coming, Ezra knew he needed to keep his wits about him.

Or maybe Link's problems from work are making me jump at shadows.

The snap of a branch drew Ezra's attention. He peered to the left as he continued to kneel beside his heated split pea soup. Stirring it slowly, Ezra watched a man come from between the trees.

Okay, probably not a human, considering he's nude.

Yeah, never would that thought have popped into my head even a week ago.

"Who are you?"

Ezra asked, raising his voice a little so it would carry. He knew Link wasn't far, and he needed to draw his attention...just in case.

"Name's Shawn,"

the dark-haired man replied, his tone decidedly cocky even as he stared at Ezra with a narrow-eyed, chilly expression. "Surely Link told you about me."

The man, Shawn, smirked as he stalked toward him, waving toward his naked body as he did so. "You don't seem surprised or concerned, after all, so you know about

us.”

Ezra didn't take the bait and admit to knowing about shifters. “Well, he certainly didn't tell me you liked to streak in the mountains,”

he muttered, rising to his feet. Taking in the way Shawn's lip curled in disgust at his quip, Ezra really wished he was holding a knife instead of a spoon.

Not that I'd have a chance against a shifter's strength, but it'd make me feel better.

Ezra had seen Link's strength on more than one occasion during the last week. The way his lover could carry him around as if he weighed nothing still blew his mind. It also made his dick hard.

Banishing that thought, Ezra focused on the trouble in front of him. “I'm not alone out here, Shawn.”

He hoped to give the man pause. “Link is just through those trees.”

Ezra indicated the trees that Link had slipped between.

Shawn's sinister smile did nothing to reassure Ezra. “Oh, don't worry.”

He continued to prowl closer. “Your lover boy is being...delayed.”

Before Ezra could ask what Shawn meant, a loud roar echoed between the trees. That was followed by a bellow Ezra recognized as Link's musk ox. A second later, Ezra heard a loud crashing noise even as the ground beneath him shook.

Ezra would have taken advantage of the way Shawn was staggering, trying to remain on his feet, except, whatever caused that force knocked Ezra on his ass. He sprawled a couple of feet from his bedroll, losing his grip on his spoon.

“What the hell was that?”

The words were out of Ezra’s mouth before he could censor himself.

Shawn laughed, obviously finding Ezra’s outburst funny. “That, my simple human, is my lover. She’s delaying Link while I take care of you.”

His fingers began to change, drawing Ezra’s attention. A spike of fear surged through him when he saw the long, lethal-looking claws. “The moron should’ve known to stay out of my business.”

His tone turned cruel. “Of course, Link should also have known better than to leave his mate all alone.”

Ezra scrambled to his feet, grabbing his pot of hot soup as he moved. At that point, in his mind, anything was better than nothing.

“But he’s not alone.”

Snapping his attention to the right, Ezra gaped as he watched a naked woman stride through the trees. The fact that she was nude wasn’t what shocked him. Instead, it was the three huge musk oxen that accompanied her.

God, I’ve seen more naked people in the last few days than I have in years. I must be getting desensitized to them.

None of them held a candle to Link, though.

Another ground tremor shook the area. One of the oxen glanced at the others before galloping amidst the trees.

“No!”

Shawn roared...and it was turning into a roar. As he continued to yell, his body morphed into that of a very...large...grizzly bear.

“Oh, fuck,”

Ezra whispered, backing away swiftly as he peered up at the massive animal.

The grizzly lunged at Ezra, swiping out one long forearm.

Pain erupted through Ezra's left upper arm even as he dove to the right. At the same time, he swung the hot pot of food. The split pea soup soared from the container, splashing all over the bear's face.

The grizzly roared again, rising to his back legs. He shook his head, obviously trying to shake it off. The two musk oxen surged past Ezra and slammed their massive horned heads into the distracted bear. The grizzly tumbled ass-over-teakettle.

“Come on, Ezra.”

The woman was at his side, gripping his upper arm and opposite shoulder. “Can you stand? Let's get you out of the way.”

“I-I think so,”

Ezra replied, rolling to his knees. When he tried to get to his feet, he registered the pain in his arm, and his head swam. “Shit.”

“Okay, Ez. I gotcha,”

she assured, sliding her arm around his waist. “Come on.”

If the nudity hadn't given it away, the woman's strength as she practically lifted him

off the ground would have. This woman was definitely a shifter.

Ezra did his best to ignore the pair of musk oxen facing off with Shawn's grizzly. Instead, he focused on banishing his pain while putting one foot in front of the other. His burning arm nearly had him forgetting about Link facing off against Shawn's girlfriend—nearly.

“What about Link?”

Ezra asked, concerned by the memory of his bellow and the shuddering of the ground. “He needs help.”

“Don't you worry about Link,”

the woman told him. “He probably could have taken that bear hussy alone, but Bruin will back him up.”

She waved a hand in the direction that the other musk ox had run. “Link'll be fine.”

Frowning at Ezra's arm, she muttered, “You, on the other hand, need some first aid. Do you have supplies in your backpack?”

Ezra nodded. “Yeah.”

After a quick glance at his arm again, he grimaced and turned his gaze away. Blood streamed down his bicep and forearm, and he wasn't so good with blood that was his own. “Shit.”

Then the name that the woman dropped registered. “Bruin. Link's brother.”

Ezra focused on the woman and asked, “You a sister or somethin'?”

“Yep. I’m Naomi,”

she replied with a quick smile before refocusing on digging out his first aid kit. “The ones taking out Shawn are Warren and Luke. Warren’s the bigger one.”

Then Naomi began offering platitudes and encouragement as she began cleaning his wound. After a moment, she scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Luke should really be the one doing this,”

she muttered, sounding cross. “He’s the nurse, after all. But noooo, I’m a girl. I can’t possibly fight.”

Naomi’s tone turned derogatory as she deepened her voice mockingly. “Can’t possibly let my sister fight a grizzly. She might get hurt. Then Mom and Dad will be mad.”

Listening to Naomi caused a soft bark of laughter to escape Ezra. She was definitely great at distracting him. In just a few minutes, she’d managed to clean and wrap his arm in a roll of bandages.

“Thanks, Naomi,”

Ezra murmured, taking the single-serve package of pain meds from her. “I appreciate it.”

“Course, new little bro.”

Naomi smiled at him. “Wish we’d met under better circumstances, but we’re family.”

She held out his canteen and helped him take a drink. “We’re pretty tightknit, and we watch each other’s backs.”

With a gentle squeeze to his shoulder, Naomi stated, “You’ll learn that soon enough.”

Ezra nodded. “Okay.”

While he and Edward chatted fairly regularly, he wouldn’t call them close. To have a group at his back was a novel idea to him. He’d been a loner for so long that he wondered if he would end up bothered by people being in his business.

For Link, it’ll be worth it.

When the musk oxen that had taken on Shawn moved toward him and Naomi, Ezra looked past them. He spotted the fallen grizzly behind them. The bear was being picked up by what appeared to be a pair of giant lizards. It took Ezra a moment to recognize them as Komodo dragons. He assumed they were shifters as they dragged Shawn’s bear away amidst the trees.

Huh.

A moment later, two naked men knelt before Ezra. He made a point of focusing on their faces.

“Hi, Ezra,”

the more serious-looking, dark-haired man greeted. “How are you doing?”

Smirking, Ezra quipped, “I’d be better if I wasn’t meeting my boyfriend’s family while they’re naked.”

The man with lighter brown hair and twinkling hazel-brown eyes barked a laugh. “I bet,”

he responded with a grin. “Sorry.”

He shrugged good-naturedly. “Shifters. You’ll get used to it.”

“I’d offer you all some of Link’s clothes, but he didn’t bring enough for all of you,”

Ezra countered, still doing his best to focus on their faces. “And once the painkillers kick in, I hope I’ll be fine.”

Ezra glanced at his arm, then peered at Naomi. “You bandaged it. What do you think?”

Naomi shrugged. “Like I said, Luke’s the nurse in the family.”

She pointed at the friendlier brother. “You should have let me fight the bear so you could do the honors.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “Not happening, sis. If—”

Naomi lifted her hands in surrender. “I know, I know.”

She heaved a put-upon sigh, then smiled. “Love you, too, bro.”

Then Naomi grew serious. “Actually, the scratches from Shawn weren’t all that deep. We should definitely keep an eye on it for infection, though.”

Nodding, Luke told him, “I’ll come back out with antibiotics for you, just in case.”

He patted Ezra’s shoulder, eyeing the bite scar there. “With you having bonded with Link, your healing will get a boost, but better be safe than sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Ezra glanced around. “Speaking of Link. Where—”

As if the mention of his name had conjured him, Link came rushing through the trees.  
“Ezra!”

he cried, skidding to a stop beside him and sinking to his knees. In the next instant, Ezra found himself pulled onto the lap of his naked lover and crushed to his chest.  
“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, big guy. I’m okay,”

Ezra assured. Rubbing his palm over Link’s chest, he did his best to soothe his trembling lover. Seeing Link tease his forefingers along the bottom of the bandage on his arm, Ezra told him, “It’s just a couple of scratches. Your family stopped Shawn from doing any serious damage. I’m okay.”

Ezra cradled Link’s bearded jaw and urged the man to focus on his face and meet his gaze. “Really.”

Tipping his head, he pecked a kiss to the big man’s lips, hoping the contact would get through to him. “I’m okay.”

“Gods,”

Link whispered hoarsely. “I was so scared when I heard Shawn’s voice and got stopped by Taleen.”

He hid his face against the crook of Ezra’s neck as he blew out a shaky breath.  
“Scariest fucking moment of my life. I’m so sorry I let you down.”

“You didn’t let me down,”

Ezra insisted. He nuzzled his lips against the side of Link’s bald head. “Lay blame where it’s due, Link, okay? And that’s on Shawn.”

Not getting a response, Ezra pinched Link's nipple lightly. "Hear me?"

Link's head popped up, and he sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes began to dilate, and his expression grew hungry. His attention focused on Ezra's lips.

"Yeah,"

Link rumbled huskily. "You're right, of course."

When Link dipped his head, obviously going in for a kiss, Warren shoved Link's shoulder and growled, "Hey, none of that right now."

Right. An audience.

Ezra couldn't believe how being in Link's arms made him forget everything around him.

Sure like it, though. This is how being in a relationship should be.

Grinning sheepishly, Link ducked his head a bit, maybe in an attempt to hide the blush creeping up his neck. "Sorry, Warren,"

he muttered with a shrug. "He's my mate."

"And he was just in danger."

Warren offered a half smile. "I get it. Really."

Link glanced around at everyone. "Uh, so I guess you've met all my siblings."

"All but him."

Ezra pointed at the man who'd joined them with Link.

"I'm Bruin,"

the man told him with a smile and nod.

"Well, uh, as odd as the moment is"—Ezra smirked gamely—"nice to meet you all, and thanks for the assist."

Warren nodded. Luke snickered. Bruin smirked, and Naomi barked a laugh.

Cocking his head, Link asked, "So, uh, not that I'm not appreciative, but what are you all doing here?"

He focused on Warren, his eldest brother. "How'd you even know I could be in danger?"

Link had told Ezra that he was the only one in his family who worked for the council.

Scoffing, Luke answered, "I've been tracking your position from your nightly pins, remember?"

When Link nodded, he continued, "And I've been in contact with Theo. He told me what's been going on."

Warren crossed his arms over his chest. "When I heard about the trouble you were in, of course, we were going to come."

Shaking his head, he glowered at Link. "I should have heard about it from you, not Luke."

Grimacing, Link muttered, "It was Shifter Council shit, so I didn't think to involve

you.”

“You’re my fucking brother,”

Warren insisted with a growl.

Bruin rolled his eyes. “Dumbass.”

“Totally,”

Naomi agreed with an unladylike snort. “We met up with Luke, and he showed us where you were. We’ve been discreetly following you both for three days.”

Ezra thought of all they’d been getting up to in those three days, and embarrassment flooded him. His cheeks and neck heated, and he knew his face had to be beet red. He wasn’t the only one, either. Link’s face was flushed, too, probably due to him thinking about the same thing.

Luke tipped his head back and laughed.

Scoffing, Bruin told them, “Don’t worry, guys. We kept a discreet distance.”

He grinned, adding, “We know how newly mated shifters are.”

A small smile curved the corners of Warren’s face as he stated, “There are definitely some things a brother doesn’t need to see his bro doing.”

Link cleared his throat. “Good. Uh, good.”

He glanced around at everyone. “And thank you again.”

“You’re welcome, Link,”

Bruin assured. "Anytime and always."

Naomi nodded. "We're family."

Glancing around, Link asked, "Uh, so what happened to Shawn? I saw enforcers Dakota and Germaine taking away Taleen before I rushed back here."

With a worried frown, Link continued, "He didn't get away, did he?"

"Nope. Warren and I totally kicked Shawn's ass,"

Luke quipped, sporting a satisfied-looking grin. "The council wanted Shawn alive, so Delanrue and Dane took him away."

With a feral-sounding snicker, Luke wagged his brows. "Delanrue is going to have some fun with him."

Link winced.

"What's that mean?"

Ezra asked, expressing his confusion. He glanced around the group, noticing their rather harsh-looking, satisfied smiles. "Torture or something?"

Shrugging, Link issued a half-nod. "Or something."

After a moment of hesitation, he explained, "Delanrue is an interrogator, as well as an enforcer. He'll be tasked with finding out who Shawn's been in contact with, how, and how much information he's sold or compromised."

Ezra shivered even as he nodded. While he wasn't totally sure how he felt about that news, he understood that he'd stepped into a whole new world. The secret of shifters

and paranormals had to be kept above all else.

“We’ll get out of your hair now, guys,”

Warren told them, rising as he patted Link’s shoulder. “Congrats, bro. I’m happy for you.”

They received similar words from the others as they began moving away from them. They began to shift into their musk ox forms, obviously intending to travel that way. For the best, really, since a group of naked people would definitely draw attention.

Just before Luke began to shift, he told them, “And I’ll bring those antibiotics out tomorrow. Keep me pinned with your location.”

“Will do,”

Link replied.

A moment later, Ezra was alone with Link. “Wow,”

he whispered, staring around the trampled area. “That just happened.”

“Yes, it did,”

Link confirmed, rubbing Ezra’s back. His expression appearing concerned, he asked, “Are you okay with...well, everything?”

Am I?

Yeah.

Grinning at Link, Ezra nodded. “Yes, Link.”

He pecked his lover's lips again, lingering as he tasted his man's bearded mouth. "I'm definitely more than okay with everything that just happened. Do you wanna know why?"

Link licked his lips, eyeing Ezra's mouth, obviously wanting more. "Why?"

Ezra relished his lover's husky tone, the sound of it sending a tingling rush through his body. "Because it means I have you."

"Yes,"

Link whispered. "I'm yours."

"Show me,"

Ezra encouraged, surprised at how much he suddenly needed the man holding him. "Now."

"Anything you want,"

Link agreed.

Picking Ezra up in his arms, Link carried him back to their sleeping bag and did exactly as Ezra asked.