



Valentine's Day Treasure

(One True Mate Holidays #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Its Valentine's Day in the not-so-distant past. In Serenity, Illinois, four couples have gathered together on the same hobby farm, living together for strength in numbers: Trevor and Ella, Graeme and Heather, Crew and Dahlia, plus Beckett and Cerise.

The males are shiften sworn to protect humans, while the females are half-angel humans with shattered pasts and fledgeling powers. The prophecy has matured and the mates are being gathered, but until the next mate is found, everyday life continues.

The day starts with an isolating 500-year-storm that takes out the power to the area and closes vital roads. Graeme and Heather are called away on dragen business, something to do with treasure, while Trevor is determined that his mate, Ella, will have a relaxing and fun day, and so he sets his team to work on figuring something out, as the snow continues to fall.

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Bearen —humans who can shift into a bear.

Deae —goddess, or little goddess. This normally refers to Rhen.

Dragen —humans who can transform into a dragon.

Echo—a common animal who ‘echoes’ or mirrors a shiften, sent as a divine messenger.

Felen —humans who can shift into a big cat, like a mountain lion.

Foxen —humans who can shift into a fox and are rumored to be aligned with the demon.

Khain—the demon, the opposition of Rhen, who lives in the Pravus, a hell-like dimension.

KSRT—The KSRT is the Khain Special Response Team, aka the Kilo Special Response Team, and their mission is to oppose the demon, Khain.

Renqua —a mark on the left shoulder of a shiften , both in animal and human form, which is a sign of their connection to Rhen.

Rhen—the goddess of the shiften and the dragen, who lives in the Meadow, a divine dreamscape.

Ruhi —telepathic communication. Most shiften can speak it, some can’t.

Shiften — bearen, felen, foxen, and wolven .

Wolven —humans who can shift into a wolf.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Location: Serenity, Illinois

Sleep.

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Dream.

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Deep dreams of chase and kill and hunt and prowl and find and feed and fuck and play and live and risk and die and live again.

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CRACK.

Somewhere to the north, a great crack sounded, startling Trevor Burbank awake. He lay still and listened intently, eyes wide open but seeing little in the early morning darkness. He was at home, in his bedroom on the second floor, in bed, with his mate, Ella, asleep beside him, their feet entangled—but something was wrong because the constant, familiar hum of electronics in the house had ceased. Outside, the wind whipped and howled, while inside, the room seemed unnaturally dark. Trevor rubbed his eyes, realizing the power was out. He rolled to his back, listening closely to the sounds of the house, sensing his brothers awake downstairs, doing the same.

All good? Trent's voice rumbled in ruhi his head.

All good up here , Trevor replied.

Here too, Troy chimed in.

The house generator started with a thump and a dull roar, and the electronics quietly whirred back on.

Trevor picked up his phone and looked at the time—3:04 in the morning, and he had no notifications, which was very, very good. He put the phone down and settled back on his pillow, snuggling closer to his mate, listening to the whipping winds outside and the snow slapping wetly against the windowpanes. They were in the middle of a big storm—so big that Serenity Civil Defense had called a briefing yesterday afternoon, saying it could bring a foot of snow overnight. Trevor closed his eyes, not worried about a little snow and wind.

He dozed.

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Graeme Kynock slept lightly, dreaming he was in dragon form, reclining on a pile of gold. The pile shifted and moved underneath him, and the coins tinkled like music, which slowly melded into the sounds of a voice.

We belong with ye , the voice said from all around, again and again.

Graeme woke with a start, the phrase still echoing wildly.

We belong with ye.

He sat up in bed, wearing only silk boxers with no blanket, one hand on his forehead, eyes still closed, trying to recapture the dream. He pondered for a few minutes, until he was certain he'd captured it all.

Aye, deae , as ye wish , he said in resigned ruhi , directing it to Rhen, keeping his opinions out of it. Rhen wanted her gold brought to Serenity and the task fell to Graeme, the last dragen. He would do what was asked of him.

He dropped his hand and looked around his bedroom, taking note of the sounds of the storm outside. His mate Heather slept beside him, beautifully naked, her blonde hair loose on the pillow, and she'd kicked her blanket off sometime earlier, like usual. A golden armband flashed on her left arm, just above the elbow, matching the one on his right arm—their binding rings. Heather moved in her sleep, then moaned like she was hurting, and curled an arm around her four-months-pregnant belly, bringing her legs up.

Graeme watched her closely, wondering what ailed her, and thinking of ways he

could provide comfort. When she moaned seemingly in pain again, he got out of bed and transformed into a dragon the size of a big dog, tucking his boxers into his internal cache, then he settled in on the floor next to the bed. He shot a stream of fire out of his snout straight at Heather's belly, while dragen magic protected the linens and bed.

Heather settled right away. Her body relaxed and her breathing deepened. Graeme was glad. He stayed where he was, breathing fire onto her in slow waves.

CRACK.

A noise like cannon fire sounded from miles north of their cabin, and then their power went out. Heather grumbled in her sleep but didn't wake. The battery-operated clock on the nightstand said it was 3:04. The generator rumbled to life.

Graeme decided he would check on the weather later, for now, he would take care of Heather. He returned his attention to his bond mate, caring for her tenderly, with a special gentleness forged from the deep despair that he'd left behind the first time she'd touched him.

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Crew Arcoal sat in the oversized reading chair set in the corner of the bedroom he shared with his mate, Dahlia, reading a paperback book. Dahlia snuggled next to him reading on an e-reader, her long brown hair tucked over one shoulder. They were covered with blankets and surrounded by pillows, with drinks, snacks, notebooks, and more books, all in easy reach. They'd been reading for hours and Crew wasn't tired. He never felt tired while Dahlia was around.

CRACK.

Their electricity cut out, leaving the room dark, with the only light coming from the e-reader in Dahlia's hand.

Crew dropped his book on the end table and stretched. Outside, the wind whistled and howled.

"There it goes," Dahlia said.

They'd figured they would lose power at some point overnight, because it'd been stormy and snowing with high winds for hours. The bad thing was this cabin they lived in was newly-built and there was no generator installed yet, so their plan had been to go to the main house, which did have one, if they got too cold. Ella had prepared extra beds, bedrolls, and cots, just in case.

Crew put an arm around his mate. "Guess I'm going to bed, Doll."

Dahlia waved her e-reader. "Not me."

Crew gently grasped her wrist and turned the e-reader so he could look at the time: 3:04 in the morning. He let go.

“Damn, I gotta get some sleep before work.”

He stood, kissed his mate on the top of her perfect head—she was already reading again—and made his way across the room to the bed, stripping off his clothing as he went. He flung himself onto the mattress and stretched out on his belly, finding lacy fabric under his pillow. He grabbed it, trying to figure out what it was, then he realized it was the lingerie he’d ripped off his female the night before. He pulled it to his face and scented deeply, growing quickly and fully erect.

Doll, he growled in ruhi.

She didn’t answer.

Doll, I’ve got something for you over here, he said, palming his erection.

No response.

“Doll,” he growled out loud, getting up on one elbow.

She startled, looking up, then laughed. “You were calling me, weren’t you? I thought it was just another voice in my head. There’s a lot going on in there right now.”

“My voice is the sexy one you’re hearing.”

“The sexiest,” she said. She smiled at him, then made a note in a notebook next to her. Crew waited until she put her pen down, then he growled, long and low.

“What?” Dahlia teased. Before he could say anything, she jumped up and said, “You

know I can't resist it when you do that."

She propped her e-reader in the chair so that it faced them, throwing a bit of light onto the bed, then approached him, taking off her shirt.

"Leave it on, Doll."

"Nuh uh," she said. "This is my favorite shirt. You're not ripping it."

He reached out and tugged on her panties. What about these? he growled in ruhi.

She didn't respond, only yanked the panties down and stepped out of them, then pounced on him. He laughed and wrestled her underneath him, pinning her arms above her head with one hand.

"Oh no," she said in a high voice. "Whatever shall I do?"

He growled and bit at her nipples. She fought to get her hands free, making him hold her with two hands.

He growled long and low, talking to her in ruhi. That's right, Doll, see if you can break free. See what happens to bad girls when they act naughty.

She grinned and yanked her hands but couldn't free them. He pinned her with his bodyweight, until she tired and relaxed into the bed, breathing heavily. He held her with only one hand then, using the other to explore her body. His cock was trapped between them, forgotten for now, because his mate was laid bare and he planned to feast. He moved off to the side, dipped his head, and captured a gorgeous rosy nipple, sucking and nibbling, while he plucked at the other nipple with his fingers. She moaned lightly and bucked her hips.

“Greedy girl,” Crew murmured into her skin, sneaking his way up her inner thighs with light touches, then he veered off and went around to her ass cheeks, grabbing and kneading them roughly, pressing his cock into her side. Then he went back for more light inner thigh touches, while he kissed and sucked on one nipple after the other. He ran his hand lightly up her thighs, skimming her softest parts, dipping one finger inside her for just one second, then he veered off and around to her ass cheeks again, then down her legs, down the backs of her thighs, touching every inch of her skin he could.

She panted his name. “Crew.”

“Doll,” he said against her nipple, keeping up the cycle, wanting her begging.

“Crew,” she panted again, bucking her hips again, trying to guide him where she wanted him.

Crew withdrew his hand completely and moved up her body. He took her lips in a rough and needy kiss. He pulled his hand up her body, lightly caressing her neck and hair. He let go of her wrists, although he kept a gentle hold on her hand, entwining their fingers. She didn’t seem to notice she was free, kissing him back hungrily, sliding her wrists along his palm, moving against him, breathing his own name into his mouth.

Good girl, he said in her mind , and for that, you get the rewards.

He moved his hand down her body, caressing, grasping, massaging, while they kissed like first-date lovers. Finally, after a slow and leisurely trip around all her sensitive spots, he settled his hand where she wanted it, right on her clit, which pulsed hotly. Dahlia rubbed against him as best she could and he took pity on her, holding pressure so she could try her best to get off on his hand, but when her movements tightened and her breath quickened, he pulled his hand away.

Dahlia realized her hands were free and she reached for Crew. He grabbed her wrists again and forced them over her head, this time with her elbows bent. He held her tight, moving on top of her again, nudging her legs apart with his knees.

She grinned slyly at him and raised her hips. He considered teasing her more, but decided he was done, for now. He pressed her to the bed with his body and positioned himself, holding his cock with one hand and dragging it through her wetness, then swirling the head of it around her clit a few times.

“Oh,” she cried, pulling back at first, then pushing forward, moving against him, going for leverage and motion.

He worked her for a minute or two, watching her face, whispering her name, calling her beautiful and sexy. When she looked like she might come, he moved his cock down, then pushed inside her, slowly, inch by tight, swollen inch.

She cried out, then cried his name, her expression looking like she was in pain, but then it smoothed out, and when he was in as deep as she could take him, her face had gone sublime, teasing even. She lifted her chin, wanting a kiss, and he dipped his head for it, focused only on her, her body, her pleasure. He thrust into her, then pulled out slowly, alternating between fast and slow, hard and soft, gentle and rough.

She bucked her hips, and called out, her voice breathy and sensuous. “Don’t stop, do that, just like that...”

He stopped. He pulled out, and went down on her.

She pouted. “Crew!” but then she softened. “Crew...” Her hands crept to his head and pulled on his hair as she tried to steer him.

He took her hands and held them by her sides, licking at her softest spots until she

begged him to stop. He could go far longer than she could.

“Please, Crew, please.”

He growled his approval, long and low in the quiet room, talking to her in ruhi all the while. Of course, Doll, anything you want .

He released her and moved up her body, kneeing her legs apart again, grabbing his cock and putting it right in the sweetest spot, then thrusting in once, drawing out slowly, then teasing back in and setting up a steady rhythm for his Doll. Soon she was panting, grabbing the blankets, and bucking her hips against him, and then she was coming beautifully on his cock, crying out sweetly.

She fell back, sated. He stared at her beautiful face as he continued to thrust in and out of her, working his way toward his own orgasm.

“Fuck,” he gritted out, as he came, spilling his cum inside her. She held him tight, as his waves of pleasure mixed with the last of hers. He relaxed on the bed, partially draped over his mate.

“So good,” he said, relaxed enough to fall asleep immediately.

Dahlia murmured something he was too blissed out to understand.

“Uh huh,” he said as he rolled off to the side, then kissed her on her bare shoulder.

Dahlia kissed him back, on his chest first, then his cheek, then she got up and went to the bathroom. Crew lay there, watching her. When she came back, she went to the reading chair and picked up her e-reader.

Crew meant to say one more thing to her, but then his eyes shut and he drifted off to

sleep.

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Sleep.

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Dreams.

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CRACK.

Beckett Oswego startled awake in the darkness, eyes wide open, his hand reaching for his gun, his mind reaching for his shift. He rolled out of bed on two legs with his brother's name in his throat, thinking, forget the gun, just shift . He landed on the floor on four legs, teeth bared, ready to fight, but then his mate, Cerise, spoke from the bed.

“Whazzat?” she asked sleepily.

Her voice soothed Beckett and brought him to reality. He was home, in, or rather he had been in bed, and there was no danger, but the electricity was out. He shifted back to a man, slipped his boxers and socks back on, then climbed back up onto the bed, pulling the covers over himself, breathing steadily and easily, willing himself to calm.

“Power's out,” he whispered.

Cerise didn't say anything right away, then she sat straight up in bed, her eyes on the window. “Oh no!” she cried softly, as she got out of bed and hurried over to cup her

hands against the glass. She was dressed only in a shimmery silver babydoll negligee that he'd given her as an early Valentine's Day gift. It looked amazing on her and gave Beckett a good look at her legs and ass. He whistled, but she ignored him.

"I knew it," she said, turning to him and motioning to the window. "Our Valentine's Day plans are ruined!"

He and Cerise, plus their besties, Crew and Dahlia, all had an overnight trip planned to Serenity Falls Resort, which wasn't far from the property. They needed a guard because all the One True Mates were being guarded around the clock, and it had taken him forever to convince Trevor to let them go, but he wanted Cerise to have a real vacation, even if it only lasted overnight—a real holiday, just for her. He'd even had to fill out paperwork, and he wasn't going to let any stupid-ass storm ruin it.

"No worries, darlin'," Beckett drawled. "We can still go."

"Nuh uh, come look."

He got up, grabbed his camouflage baseball cap from its place on the night stand, fixed it on his head, then went to the window and looked out, not sure what he was seeing at first, but then he realized it was snow, packed up tight against the window.

"It didn't snow that much," he said, turning and heading out of the bedroom, down the hallway, through the house to the front door. He yanked it open, trying to see in the darkness. Snow was everywhere—his entire porch was full of it and more was blowing in heavily. He slammed the door shut and shoved his feet into his boots, then changed his mind and took them off.

He hugged Cerise and said, "I'll check out the storm, Cherry-girl. Be right back."

She nodded and kissed him.

He took his cap, socks, and boxers off and hung them on the couch, then he winked at Cerise, and shifted into his wolf. Her eyes got big and he went down on his belly and rolled over. She laughed as he got up and went to her, giving her knee a little nip. She touched his head and ran her fingers through his fur, down his neck and back.

They went to the door and she opened it for him.

“Be careful, handsome,” she said.

He barked once—meaning he was never careful unless she was around, and then he went out into the snow. He was a large white wolf with black fur on each foot—the Booted Wolf of prophecy.

He took off, loping over the snow on the porch and out into the yard, head low, senses alert, muzzle pointed into the wind. He climbed on top of a snowdrift against the windward side of the house. The snow was packed enough to hold him in some places, and plunged him through to his belly in others. He made it up and over the drift, cutting between some trees, and around the house, where he found a relatively quiet spot protected from the worst of the wind and snow. He kept going, looping the cabin, checking on his mate, who was staring at him wide-eyed from their front window. She had a lantern near her and a flashlight in her hand. She gave him a thumbs up and he dropped her a wolfy wink.

He climbed up the snow drift again, came down the other side, then crossed the yard to the next cabin over, which was where Crew and Dahlia lived. Beckett circled the cabin, finding all in order, so he headed back to his place, sparing the main house only a cursory glance. Trevor, Trent, and Troy had it together up there—they didn’t need him. His duty was with his mate. He headed inside the tree line of the nearby forest for a quick check, then he returned to his porch.

Cerise was there, holding the door open for him. She’d put on a long jacket. With her

negligee underneath and her slim feet still bare, she looked like a fairy nymph welcoming him in from the cold. He shook off on the porch, spraying snow and water everywhere, then went inside, where he shifted to a naked man in two steps and stood smoothly, embracing his mate.

“Oh my,” she said under her breath when he pressed his naked body against her.

“Maybe we can’t go, honeybun,” he said quietly into her ear, nuzzling her neck. She giggled as always at his smooth, country-boy twang. “But don’t you worry none. If we’re stuck here, we’ll have a good ole time no matter what. It’ll be the most fun Valentine’s Day this place’s ever seen.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, just hugged him back, then she whispered. “I know,” and Beckett couldn’t tell her mood by those two words. He pulled away to look at her, and she didn’t seem upset. She was still wide-eyed, staring at him like he was a superhero. He grinned. She always liked seeing him as a wolf and he would use that to his advantage, right now.

He kissed her on the forehead, then held her at arm’s length and said, “Put some warm clothes on, darlin, let’s go check out this ‘500-year storm’ folks are carryin’ on about.”

He shifted into his wolf, cocked his head, and looked at her expectantly, loving the smile that grew on her gorgeous face.

“Yeah,” she said, delight in her voice. “Okay.”

She ran into the bedroom and was out in only a minute dressed in jeans and a sweater, socks in hand. She sat on the floor in the entryway to pull her socks and boots on, then got out her warmest jacket, hat, and gloves, and pulled them all on. She turned on the flashlight, then beamed at him.

He chuffed at her, thinking she looked adorable, all wrapped up warm, with her long strawberry-blonde hair tucked under her hat and lying down the front of each shoulder. He howled playfully, moving close to her, rubbing against her, circling her, barking and whining his affection for her. He pressed his side against her hip.

“Hello,” she said, hugging him again, then she playfully pretended she was going to climb on his back. He encouraged her, getting underneath her, and when she was on him like a horse, he took her to the door on his back. She laughed and opened it. He took her onto the porch and right out into the snow.

“The door!” she called, climbing off him and running back to close it, then she ran back to him, her hair flying wildly around her shoulders and fat snowflakes collecting on her hat and jacket.

She climbed up the drift and touched thick icicles near the roof, then came back down, smiling and laughing. She shone her flashlight in all directions, then came close to Beckett, shining it directly into the flying snow.

“It’s like we’re in hyperspace!” she shouted into the wind.

Beckett chuffed at her, until she grabbed onto his fur. He led her around the drifts, to the protected side of the house, where she let go of him and twirled around, looking up at the snow flying over their heads with obvious delight lighting her face.

Beckett pressed against her, the wheels in his head already turning as he planned to make the entire day this special for her.

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“Ooh, it’s so cozy here,” Cerise said, loving the side of the house where no snow fell and the wind moved high overhead. She shut off her flashlight and leaned against the wall, her heart full and happy. Her wolf—Beckett—came close and leaned against her, lending her warmth. She cuddled him standing up, loving him so much it was like she could burst with it. He was real, he was good, he was strong, he took care of her, he listened to her, and he cared about what she wanted. Her old life had been so horrible, but the last two months had made up for it all.

Cerise and her wolf stood like that for several magical moments as the storm raged on around them, but didn’t touch them. The snow seemed to absorb much of the sound, giving the wind a mystical quality that Cerise had never heard before, adding to her pleasure.

Beckett chuffed and shook his head, making his ears fly.

“Let’s build a snowman,” Cerise suggested, instantly in love with the idea. She put the flashlight down and propped it so it lit the area.

Beckett chuffed his agreement, ran to a good spot and started digging, making snow fly everywhere.

Cerise laughed and grabbed two handfuls of snow, piling it on his back. Beckett shook, making a mini snowstorm. Cerise turned away to shield herself, then ran, calling to Beckett.

“Over here!”

She started a snowball, then dropped it on the ground to roll it, but the snow was too wet in some places, and frozen solid in other places, and it didn't want to pack properly. She kept trying, but the snowball fell apart again and again.

"It's not working," she yelled into the wind, as snow splattered her face and some flew into her mouth. She wiped it away, tasting snow and leather, then piled more snow in a lumpy mound in front of her.

Beckett ran close at full speed and bit her mound of snow in half, his teeth snapping together audibly. He flipped around in the air and came in for another pass, biting at the pile and making snow fly everywhere. She laughed at him and scooped up a big handful of snow, chasing her wolf with it, but he ran away. The drift she was walking on gave way, plunging her through the crust. She tried to crawl out, and Beckett ran back. He dug at the snow all around her and pushed at her with his head, trying to help her up, making her collapse in giggles instead.

"You destroyed my perfect snowman!" she yelled, grabbing for him, but he leapt away easily. She pulled herself free, pushed to her feet, and ran to the little protected area by the house, where she leaned against the wall to catch her breath. Beckett was still in the snow, head down, eyes on her. He was beautiful and she loved how unique he looked with his fur 'boots'. He loped back and forth in the snow with his head down, occasionally raising it and looking around, then he'd look back at her.

He shifted, surprising her since he was naked, standing knee deep in snow with bare feet, butt hanging out, willy swinging free. He scooped up a snowball and threw it her way, then shifted back into a wolf before the snow even hit the wall of the house near her.

She laughed at him and dodged. He shifted into a man again and threw another snowball, closer this time. Cerise yelled in mock outrage, then giggled and ran for a handful of snow. Beckett grinned at her and waited for her with open arms. She

scooped up a second handful of snow, reached him, and painted his bare chest with it. He gave her his sexiest grin, then he was shifting, pitching forward, arms becoming forelegs, face becoming muzzle, fur sprouting everywhere. Cerise stood still, completely transfixed by the transformation. When he was fully a wolf, she grabbed him and just hugged him, feeling so happy. They stood like that in the snow for several minutes, until they both had snow piled on them. Cerise broke the hug, and when she did, Beckett burst free of the snow that had piled on him. He leaped clear, landing several feet to her right. Cerise brushed snow off herself and ran close to the house.

Some snow had worked its way into her boot and she took off her gloves to dig it out, only then realizing that her hands were freezing, and her toes were cold.

“I’m getting cold,” she said, grabbing up the flashlight.

Beckett moved close to her. He shifted into a naked man for just long enough to talk. He couldn’t speak ruhi.

He said, “I want to take you a little way into the forest before we go inside. You’ll like it.”

She nodded at him, smiling, and he shifted back into his wolf, then pressed against her side. She held onto him tightly with one hand, and they headed out into the snow like that. She used him for balance as they made their way over and through the deep snow together. They reached the forest quickly and Beckett took her along a familiar trail. After a few minutes of walking, he stopped and nosed at the flashlight. Cerise turned it off, and the result was magical. The deep snow all around, combined with the high evergreen trees made the storm sound distant, like something calm and soothing. Cerise, barely able to see a thing, just listened, smiling foolishly, loving her mate and her life in that moment.

Her wolf whined and pressed against her, and they sat like that for another minute or two, then it was time to go. Cerise stood and made to walk out but Beckett got in front of her.

“I can ride you?”

Beckett pressed against her and nodded his wolfy head.

“All right,” she cried excitedly. She threw a leg over and he handled her easily, trotting down the forest trail, making her bounce up and down a little. As soon as he left the forest, the going was more difficult and she climbed off. The wind whipped her hair and Beckett’s fur, as they moved quickly to their porch and in the front door.

Cerise stomped the snow off her boots, saying. “The forest was amazing.”

Beckett padded down the hallway to the bathroom as a wolf and came back out as a naked man, drying himself with a towel, his thick cock fully visible. She smiled, her cheeks heating because she couldn’t look away.

“Glad ya liked it, darlin’,” he said, dropping her a sexy wink and grin. This man, she thought. He did things to her. Her cheeks heated and she looked down, taking off her snow clothes and hanging them up to dry. By the time she was done, Beckett had put his boxers and tube socks back on.

“C’mere, darlin’, let’s snuggle,” he said, inviting her to the couch.

They sat cuddled together, Cerise mostly on Beckett’s lap, looking out the living room window, seeing nothing but snow flying sideways and piling up against the windows. They watched the snow, not speaking. Cerise pulled a blanket over them and snuggled into her man’s chest, just loving him in a semi-dozing state.

After a bit, Beckett said. “It’ll be light soon,” his voice heavy and quiet.

“D’you have to work today?”

“Yeah. I better get a couple more hours of sleep.”

“I’m tired, too,” Cerise said, standing. She folded the blanket up. “It’s cold in here.”

“Sure is, want to go up to the main house?”

Cerise shook her head. “No, I want to sleep in my own bed. We can use lots of blankets.” She headed for their bedroom, but Beckett grabbed her and pulled her close.

“Hold on, sugar, I’ve got another gift for you and this is a perfect time.”

Cerise smiled at her man and hugged him. He’d been giving her gifts for days—chocolates, flowers, lingerie, jewelry. “Another gift?” she asked, feeling swept away.

“Course,” he said. “Just gotta get my boots on.”

He went to the entryway and pulled on his boots and jacket.

“It’s outside?”

“Yeah.”

Cerise looked out the window. “You want to get it now?”

“Yeah, now is good,” Beckett said. He put his hand on the knob and pointed at her.

“Close your eyes—no peeking.”

She gave him a look then covered her eyes with her hands.

“I mean it, no peeking, no matter what you hear. Promise?”

Cerise curled up on the couch and pulled the blanket over her. “Promise!” she called.

She lay still, listening while Beckett opened and closed the door, all was quiet except for the sound of wind blowing. After a minute, the door opened and he came back in and she could hear the sound of something clattering to the floor, then the door closed.

“I’ve got all the holes pre-drilled,” Beckett said. “So this won’t take but a minute.”

“Okay!”

She listened as unknown stuff was moved around the house, musing about what he could mean about pre-drilled holes. It sounded like he was in the bedroom... then she heard his drill start up and screw something together. A few more things were moved around and put down, and Beckett ran upstairs to the loft, where the nursery would go once she got pregnant. She couldn’t imagine what was going on up there. He came back down and everything was silent for a few minutes.

“Okay, ready,” he called.

Cerise bounced to her feet, smiling in anticipation. Beckett took her hand and led her to the bedroom. The door was closed and she pushed it open and peeked in, but was unable to see anything.

“Here,” Beckett said, putting a flashlight in her hand.

She turned it on... and gasped in surprise.

“You made me a canopy bed?” she cried, looking at the thing. It was gorgeous, four posts made of dark wood and connecting over the bed, with sheets of silver fabric draping the bed.

Beckett went into the room and picked up something from the dresser, bringing it to Cerise. It was a roll of pink fabric and a roll of black fabric.

“Pick your favorite.”

She shook her head, taking the fabric from him. “I can’t pick. I love them all.”

“All it is,” he said.

She hugged him and he hugged her back. Together, they hung the pink and the black fabric up with the silver, then pulled all the drapes closed. Cerise stood back and played the flashlight over it, admiring it. She gave the flashlight to Beckett so she could caress the pretty, silky fabric.

“Looks gorgeous,” she said. She pulled a curtain back, climbed onto the bed, then lay down on her pillow, looking up into the darkness. Beckett climbed in next to her and lay on his pillow, then he put a flashlight in her hand. She shone it up at the fabric enclosing the bed.

“It’s so pretty,” she said.

“And pretty warm,” Beckett said.

“It’ll stay dark so we can sleep in.”

“Shit, they’re gonna come pounding on the door soon.”

“Put a sign up maybe.”

“Good idea.”

Beckett left the bed and headed out into the living room, and Cerise followed. He got a piece of paper and a marker and put it down on the kitchen table, writing in large blocky letters:

We’re FUCKING—

“Beckett!” Cerise exclaimed, laughing.

He held up his marker. “I’m not done.” He went back to work on it.

We’re FUCKING SLEEPING. Leave us alone.

“Perfect,” Cerise said.

They taped it to the door, making it a two-person job.

“The wind,” Cerise said.

“It’s stopped.” Beckett yawned sleepily. “Still snowing though.”

“Yeah.” Cerise hugged him, her own eyes heavy. They made it inside and closed the door, then quickly got ready for bed. Together, they made their way back to Cerise’s beautiful new canopy bed.

Beckett held the curtains aside and bowed, a smartass grin plastered onto his face.

Cerise patted him on the back of his neck as she passed him to climb inside her beautiful bed. She lay flat on her back, her head on her pillow, and Beckett joined her. Just enough dawn light filtered into the room that she could see the fabric of the canopy around her. She felt like a princess, one who had found the best prince in all the land.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Anything for you, Cerise,” he said, his voice warm and sincere.

Her heart was warmed. She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back. In no time at all, they were both asleep, still holding hands.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Trevor woke one minute before his alarm buzzed at 7:00 a.m. and silently switched it off. The bedroom was dimly lit, the sun rising past thick clouds, and he could still hear the generator—the power had been out for hours. He no longer heard wind and he rolled to his back to look out the window and saw fat snowflakes still falling, but straight down now.

Trevor rolled toward his mate and nuzzled into her hair. She smelled sweet and sleepy, but was slowly waking. He cupped her 4-months pregnant belly gently, loving every warm curve.

Morning, pups, he said to her belly in ruhi.

Her belly squirmed and Trevor grinned, feeling the young in there turning somersaults.

“Erm,” Ella said, cupping her belly and squirming—then she sat straight up in bed, threw off the blankets, and quickly headed for the bathroom saying, “Gotta pee.”

She wore one of Trevor’s t-shirts and it barely covered the curves of her ass, pleasing Trevor into a grin and a growl. She looked hot as hell, her long black hair flowing midway down her back and her legs on full display.

“Sexy ass,” he called after her as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Trevor relaxed onto his pillow and resisted the urge to check his phone. It wasn’t making any noise and he wasn’t going to ruin that miracle by looking at it.

Ella returned quickly, smiled sweetly at him, then immediately dove under the blankets and pulled her pillow over her head. Trevor lifted the blanket and scooted closer to her, joining her under her pillow.

“Morning, beautiful,” he murmured into her ear, kissing it lightly, breathing deeply of her sweet scent.

“Cold,” she said, tucking her cold hands and feet under his body. He moved so she could get farther under him, and then he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her as close as possible, warming her with his body. They lay that way for several moments. Just when Trevor wondered if Ella had fallen asleep, she spoke.

“The wind stopped.”

“Yeah.”

“The generator’s on.”

“Since three in the morning.”

Ella pulled her hands and feet out from under Trevor, then she turned over so her back was to him. She scootched back and wiggled her ass against his front. His cock went instantly hard. He spooned her, tucking her into his body, his arms around her. She reached back with one hand and pulled him closer.

“Mmmmm,” he hummed, kissing down her neck, then running her hair through his hands. “You tempt me.”

Her hand slipped between them grasping for him through his boxers. She held him like a flashlight.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Valentine’s Day present.”

She gripped him tighter for a second, then let go and sat straight up in the bed, making him groan and her pillow go flying.

“Valentine’s Day! I almost forgot,” Ella said.

Trevor raised up on one elbow, grinning at his female. “Not me.”

She shook her head and her black hair flew. One hand crept unconsciously to her belly while the other waved toward the window. “No, I mean, I didn’t really forget, but with all the worry about the storm, I forgot it was today.”

“Not me,” Trevor said again, grabbing her around the waist and hips and pulling her closer. He nipped at her thigh playfully.

“Think we’ll still go to dinner?”

Trevor looked out the window again, then back at his mate. “Maybe not, especially if it keeps snowing and the power stays out.”

She nodded like she expected that. They’d had plans to go to a fancy restaurant for Valentine’s Day dinner with Graeme, Heather, Wade, and Lorna, but yesterday, during the Civil Defense briefing, she’d whispered to him that a foot of snow overnight meant everybody would close their doors. She hadn’t been upset, just commenting.

“But you’re not cooking,” Trevor said. “I’ll cook if we can’t go anywhere.”

Ella smiled at him. “Mmm, tacos.”

He grinned. It was his go-to meal. “I could go for something good to eat,” he said, no longer talking about dinner.

He moved in close to her and kissed her collarbone. She put her head back, giving him access, then ran her fingers through his hair. When he checked her expression, it was challenging. He growled and nipped her again, thinking, It’s go time . He sat up and whipped his shirt off and flung it away, then resumed his position with his arms around her and his face pressed up against her thigh. She put her fingers back in his hair, then ran her hands lightly down his back. Trevor pulled her down to the bed, yanked the covers over the top of them, and pressed his body down on top of her. Her scent deepened and sweetened, and he took a deep breath, losing himself in it.

She pulled him in close, rubbing against him, then she yanked her shirt off and threw it to the side. He went for her neck, kissing her shoulder line, while the blankets tented over the top of them, surrounding them in their own private cocoon. He kissed across her shoulders, then down her arm, to her hand and fingers, nibbling on them. Then he headed back to her shoulders, and down to her breasts, brushing her black hair out of the way, growling lightly at the sight of her nipples. Ella arched her back, pushing her breasts into his face.

“Hot,” Trevor rasped.

He flicked her nipples with his tongue, while Ella’s hands traveled from his hair to his chest, to his back, and then she grabbed his cock with purpose, pulling at it, before letting her hands slide down it. Her touch was like velvet, soft yet firm enough to make him putty in her hands. She ran her fingertips up and down his cock lightly, making him stiffen and moan.

She teased him gently, and he panted against her chest, unable to form a thought, his

body running the show.

She grabbed his cock like a handle and pulled, trying to guide him up toward her head. "Let me have a little."

"What, your mouth?"

"Yeah, give it to me. Let me have a taste."

"Shit," Trevor said, moving so fast the bed made a sproing sound. "Your wish is my command."

He knelt near her head so she could grasp his cock and pull it to her mouth. She licked it a little, sucked it into her mouth, then popped it back out and the sight almost drove him over the edge right away. She stroked him a few times, sat up and pushed him back onto the bed, then went down on him, both stroking and sucking. He moaned and put his hands in her hair, pulling it to the side, away from her face, so he could see what she was doing. She drove him mad, alternately kissing and licking, sucking and stroking,

She climbed on top of him, then reached between them and slipped him inside of her. Slowly, she inched her way down on his cock, while he watched her face. Once he was fully inside her, he grabbed her hips, held her how he wanted, and thrust into her from below.

"Ohhhh fuck," she said, then she fell forward and clenched him until he slowed and changed the direction of his thrusts. She moved with him, then slightly against him, working toward her own orgasm. Within minutes, she was there. She went still and shuddered on top of him, and he groaned as her body clenched around his cock.

He took both her wrists and held them by her sides, and then he thrust into her again,

and again, slowly at first, lost in the moment, focused only on her. She made sweet little noises of pleasure that really got his engine running. He thrust into her deeply, until his own release grew out of control, and all he could do was thrust one last time. He came, buried deep inside his mate.

“Unngggrrrr,” he growled out his pleasure, as Ella collapsed onto his chest and he held her tight. They stayed like that for several moments, their breathing calming little by little.

After a bit, Ella moved and dropped to the bed, then lay her head on her own pillow and sighed with satisfaction. Trevor grabbed a hand towel from a drawer and wiped her up as best he could, then rinsed the towel in the bathroom and threw it down the laundry chute.

“Thanks,” she said, face-down, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“No, thank you,” he said, bending to kiss her on the shoulder, then covering her with the blanket.

She took the blanket and rolled to her back, her face flushed, her hair beautifully messy on the pillow. She flung one arm over her head and looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes. “I can’t believe we weren’t interrupted.”

Trevor leaned over her and pulled all her hair into one thick ponytail. He combed his fingers through it gently, then draped it neatly on the pillow. He smiled at his mate, as he picked up his phone and looked at it.

“I can’t either,” he said... then he saw something he hadn’t seen before.

“Oh shit,” he said, turning the screen around to show Ella. “No service.”

“Ah, okay.”

Trevor leaned over the bed and kissed his mate one more time, then said, “I’m gonna take a shower, then I’ll go downstairs and see what’s up.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Ella said, snuggling into her pillow.

Trevor picked up his clothes that he’d laid out the night before and headed into the shower. All he needed was ten minutes, and then he’d be clean, dressed, shaved, and ready to grab the day by the throat.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Trevor checked himself in the mirror one more time, then he knelt and tied his boots. He left the bathroom and found Ella on the bed in the exact position he'd left her. He was glad, thinking maybe she would have a relaxing day, but her eyes popped open and she smiled at him as she got out of bed. She headed for the bathroom, naked, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, kissing her neck.

"I thought you were going to sleep a little more," he said.

"I want to get downstairs and see if anyone needs anything."

"You work too hard taking care of everyone," he murmured.

She laughed and looked him square in the face, "I could say the same about you." Then she continued on her way to the bathroom. Trevor followed, still holding her hand.

"I'm heading out to the tent to see what's up with those males," he said.

"Ok, I'll be down after I take a shower."

Trevor kissed her hand. They smiled and waved good-bye to each other, then she closed the door.

Trevor, about to leave the bedroom, changed his mind and headed to a window to look out at the snow in his driveway. What he saw made no sense at first. Snow was everywhere—bright white and blinding, several feet on top of what they'd already had, weighing the boughs of the evergreen trees down and covering any sign of the

ground. The temporary structure that housed their constant guard was gone. His truck was gone. The other vehicles that were always in the driveway were gone.

Trevor scowled and looked closer, until he could puzzle out what he was seeing. His truck was there, covered completely in snow, and parked where it shouldn't be. In fact, all the vehicles were parked funny—in two rows, about six feet apart, with what looked like a passageway between them. Trevor growled in annoyance and left his bedroom, hurrying down the stairs, talking to his brothers in ruhi.

Where you at? he said to both of them.

Out front, Troy said, with the team.

Out back, Trent said, patrolling the property.

Trevor opened his front door, prepared for what he was going to see, and it still irritated him. Someone had made a tarp tunnel through his driveway to his house. He walked in a few feet, and his irritation eased a little. The thing was solid, and it was cool. They'd obviously worked hard on it. He heard voices on down the tunnel a ways and he kept walking.

"Pull it harder, Troy, get some leverage," a voice said and he recognized it as his best friend, Blake, who was a Serenity Police Department patrol officer who frequently volunteered for the guard duty out at Trevor's place. Blake and Trevor had hit it off easily when Trevor had moved to Serenity and taken over leadership of Serenity's KSRT team, over two years ago.

Trevor was the lieutenant of the KSRT, which was a specialized police unit full of wolveren males, all focused on opposing the demon, Khain. Trevor was the big boss of the unit, and only Deputy Chief Wade Lombard gave him orders. Mac was the sergeant of the KSRT, Trevor's second-in-command. Mac had a tendency to be

brash, loud, and more trouble than he was worth, but he was a damn good Sergeant, especially since he'd quit being a dick to Trevor, which hadn't happened until the rescue mission into the Pravus a few months back.

Trevor rounded a bend in the tarp tunnel and found Blake, Troy, and Mac, working to fix a cave-in. Snow was all over the ground and Mac was shoveling it out a crack between two tarps, while Blake and Troy wrestled with the overhead tarp and bungee cords.

Troy was a big black wolf with a white mark on his left shoulder—his renqua , which looked like a bomb falling. He and Trent were both non-shifting, stuck as wolves forever.

Mac was 6'3" or so, which put him 4 inches shorter than Trevor himself. Mac had dirty-blond hair, cut short, and was wearing a dark blue tactical uniform and black boots. Blake was about Mac's height, with brown hair cut in a crisp high and tight, wearing a similar tactical uniform.

Troy held the bungee cord tight with his teeth, while Blake smoothed the tarp into place, then he took the end of the cord from Troy and wound it around the cab rack of the closest truck.

"Thanks," Blake said and Troy replied with a quick bark.

Blake saw Trevor and broke into a smile. "Hey, L.T.," he said.

"Hey, Blake," Trevor said. "What the hell's going on here?"

Blake smirked. "You like the tunnel?"

"No."

Blake raised his eyebrows, then looked at Mac.

Mac threw his shovel on the ground and faced Trevor with a look that could melt steel. Without a greeting, he said, “We’ve been up all night working on it while you slept in your comfy bed. It was either this or we spent the entire night in your living room.”

Trevor nodded slightly. “This is better, then. Good idea.”

Mac gave a knowing nod, his expression hard. “Damn right it’s better. My idea. Lemme show you the rest of it.”

He took off down the tunnel without a look back and Trevor followed, while Troy and Blake kept working. Trevor caught up with Mac at the entrance to the temporary shelter that had sat in his driveway for months now. The canvas door was rolled open, and they walked right in. A male lay fully-dressed with jacket and gloves on a cot in the corner, possibly sleeping, maybe just resting—a felen —Trevor thought his name was Nalan. Another male, a bearen , sat next to a table, dressed in a fire department uniform, talking on a satellite phone. Trevor hadn’t seen him before. The bearen raised a hand to them, then got up and walked down the tunnel.

Mac gestured to the equipment-covered table. He tapped on a police radio, then said, “Police radio’s out, except for portables. The antenna on top of B building partially collapsed about three hours ago from the weight of the snow. It took us a while to figure out what was going on, but fire still has communications, so we’re piggy-backing on their channels. Power is out because a row of 80-foot trees out on the old highway fell over and took out several poles.”

He scooped a clipboard off the table and read the first page, then the second, then clattered the thing to the table. “The electric company won’t send a crew out until the roads are cleared. Serenity streets are not being plowed—something to do with

staffing issues. They're calling in drivers from Chicago but it's taking a while. I've talked to Wade on the satellite phone and he says all is in order in town and we're on our own out here. We won't be getting any shift changes until the roads are cleared and who knows when that'll happen."

Trevor was nodding along. Mac gestured for him to follow him through to the back exit. The canvas door was rolled closed and Mac opened it, then they slipped through to the outside where a four-wheeler with a snow-plow on the front was parked. Surprisingly, a five-foot-wide lane was plowed through Trevor's yard to the forest, with snow walls that reached his waist and higher, but just a look at it told him where it went.

"This is to Bob and Sharon's place," Mac said. "We've been plowing it all night so we can get there quickly if we need to."

Trevor nodded. "Nice work," he said. Bob and Sharon were Lillian's parents, and Lillian was Cerise's 'little sister'. The whole family had come to live on the property because the traitor wolf, Grey Deatherage, was after them.

Mac looked at Trevor like he didn't expect the praise. He spat on the ground and said, "I was supposed to be off today, but I guess I'm stuck here."

Trevor opened his mouth to say something, but stopped when he heard a noise from the forest—a snowmobile engine. He looked at Mac, about to ask if they had any males on snowmobiles, but Mac shook his head, watching the forest. Whoever it was, they were ready.

The snowmobile exited the forest and Mac grinned. "Bruin!" he yelled, running that way.

Bruin was a bearen , and Mac's bestie since the day they met. He was on a

snowmobile, coming in fast.

“Mac attack!” he yelled, and then he leaned to his left, stuck his foot in the snow, tilted the snowmobile, and revved it, shooting a spray of snow up over Mac’s head.

Mac ducked the snow and ran for Bruin, then hopped on the back of his snowmobile, and they took off into the forest. Trevor turned around and went back through the structure and the tunnel by himself, thinking. Blake and Troy were no longer where he’d left them, but the tarp tunnel was in good order.

“Stuck out here,” Trevor said aloud. “Can’t leave, can’t go to work, no meetings, no rank stopping by...” He picked up speed, his mind working fast, then he broke into a run, heading for his house, wanting to find Ella.

They were going to have a real day off for once.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Graeme, still in dragon form, watched his mate, who was still sleeping. He had stopped breathing fire onto her an hour or so before, because she no longer seemed to need it. He'd kept his post though, just in case, but now the clock on the dresser said it was just after 8:00 a.m. and Heather would be waking soon. Graeme decided to check on the weather. He transformed smoothly into a man and went to the fireplace to open a decorative metal door the size of a file folder. It was an exit chute he'd installed himself that ran along the length of the chimney. He transformed into a dragon the size of a hummingbird, and flew inside, straight up and out the top.

He flew high up, growing in size, until he breached the crown of trees around his place, now the size of a Clydesdale, which made it easier to handle the falling snow that splattered against him, sizzling into steam. He cloaked himself with dragen magic, essentially making himself invisible to all but the strongest augurs and, of course, anyone with a touch of the divine.

He leveled off and surveyed Trevor's property. He could see nothing but snow at first so he rode the air currents, sensing the ground below. Slowly, his senses adjusted. He could see both ultraviolet light and infrared heat signatures when needed. Below, he sensed Trevor's house, with the residents moving around inside and more people in the driveway, plus the other residents in their cabins directly behind the house, and the horse in the barn. Graeme and Heather's cottage was set off in the forest a bit, away from the others, and he circled it one more time before he left the property. All was in order, so he headed north, scouting to see what had made the loud noise before the power went out.

Snow continued to fall heavily through the overcast sky, but the wind had stopped. Below, nothing moved, not one car on any road. He flew high enough to see most of

Serenity, and it was clear no people were out and no traffic was moving.

A whimper cut through his mind, and then his name.

Graeme .

It was Heather, and she was hurting.

Coming, he said.

Graeme aimed up, flipped in the air, and flew home as fast as he could, getting back to the property in under a minute. When he saw his cabin in the forest, he folded his wings and hurtled down through the trees, shrinking as he went, until he was tiny again. He landed in a snowdrift with just a soft floomp . He transformed into a man, still wearing only silk boxers, and burst heat around him, melting the snow into steam, then ran to his front door and inside the house.

He found Heather in the bathroom, naked, dry-heaving into the toilet.

“Leannan , ” he said softly, calling her sweetheart in Gaelic. This had only happened a few times during her pregnancy thus far. He went to her, wrapped a robe around her, then gently pulled her hair away from her face. She looked at him weakly and tried to smile. He helped her to the sink, where she rinsed her mouth and brushed her teeth half-heartedly, then they went back to the bed. Graeme went to the kitchen, got crackers and water, and took them to Heather.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, but she didn’t look better. She was breathing heavily and wiping her face with her hands. She put the crackers and water on the nightstand and said, “I can’t tell if I’m hot or cold.” She stood and took the robe off, then put it back on. She

rubbed her pretty, rounded belly, then paced a little.

Graeme put on his slippers, then took her hand. “We’ll go outside,” he suggested. “It’s cool out there.”

Heather followed him willingly, put on her flip-flops at the front door, and cinched her robe tighter around her. Outside, the ground he’d melted the snow from was already white with a thin layer of fresh snow. Heather took small steps, and Graeme slowed his stride to her pace. She had her eyes on the ground and was scowling slightly, her blonde hair hanging free, snowflakes falling on her and instantly melting. She seemed perturbed.

“I’m not cold,” she said. “Not hot either... I’m...”

“Nauseous?” Graeme suggested.

“No. I’m...” She wasn’t watching where she was going and a branch of a small tree they were passing hit her in the head. She swore, then grabbed the tree by the trunk. It burst into flame.

“Oh,” Graeme said. “Yer angry.”

“What? No I’m not,” she snapped, her eyes on the fire, which strengthened under her gaze and reached high into the sky, until the tree had burned to ash. Water from snow on the trees above them pelted them like a rainstorm. What was left of the tree collapsed to the ground and Heather turned and found a bigger tree. She put her hands on its trunk, her expression irritated. The thing started on fire from the inside out, and within a few seconds, the entire tree was blazing.

“Are ye certain?” Graeme said, chuckling softly.

Heather spun to face him, a clearly peeved look on her face. She grabbed his wrist and fire blazed around the both of them.

Graeme laughed out loud. “Would ye burn me, too, leannan?”

Her expression softened. “Graeme, no, I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s...”

He held her upper arms and pulled her to him, then kissed her softly on her lips. “Burn me up, my bond mate, we burn together.”

She softened in his arms and their kiss deepened as fire blazed around them both. They kissed passionately, absorbing the flames around them in a way that united them beyond sex, beyond bonding, beyond anything he’d ever known before. Graeme sensed his young in Heather’s belly, delighting in the flames, and dancing in them.

Graeme broke the kiss and touched foreheads with his beloved, bonnie Heather. Her fire began to recede and then they stood, unburning, and the steam dissipated, until snow fell again.

“Rhen’s gold is calling me,” Graeme said. “Our goddess wants her gold brought to Serenity and I have to find a suitable spot to hide it. Would ye care to accompany me on a search this day?”

“Meaning flying?”

“Aye, the snowfall is perfect cover—it mixes well with dragen magic.”

Heather’s eyes lit up and she broke into a smile, all signs of irritation falling away. She grabbed him and hugged him. “Yes, yes, yes! But what if I puke over the side?”

“Ach, a little puke’ll nae bother me.”

“What about dinner tonight with Trevor and Ella?”

“Everything is closed, even the roads, it seems. We can be back by dinnertime, though.”

They headed back to their cabin, hand in hand.

“What should I wear?” Heather asked as they got close.

“Comfortable clothes. We might go to Scotland.”

Heather squeezed his hand and picked up speed, her voice excited. “Overnight?”

He shook his head no. “I havnae planned a trip, only received communication from Rhen this morning.”

As she stepped on the front porch, Heather looked at him quizzically, then said, “Ok, I’ll get dressed.”

“And get some food if ye want some.”

Graeme wanted none. He would eat after the day’s flying was done.

They dressed quickly, Heather in pink and gray camouflage cargo pants with a stretchy belly panel, a black t-shirt, and black boots with a low heel, while Graeme wore a dark-blue tactical uniform with combat boots.

Graeme finished dressing first and left the bedroom to secretly get his Valentine’s Day gift for Heather—tickets to a reptile exhibit in Chicago next month. He’d also arranged to have some of her glass-blown reptile art pieces on display at the exhibit, but she wouldn’t know that till the day they went.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” he called.

“Okay, I’m almost ready.”

Graeme went outside and transformed into a horse-sized dragon. He called Trevor in ruhi.

Trevor, a word?

After a moment, Trevor responded. Yeah, Graeme, what’s up?

My mate and I are leaving the property today, maybe the country, on an assignment from Rhen. We’ll be back by dinnertime.

Got it. Do you need a few males to go with you?

Not today, Lieutenant. The snow makes me strong. My mate makes me strong. My mate is strong and full of Grádóiteán this day.

Grah doi what?

Love of burning. We fear no one today—the world best fear us.

Got it. Be safe.

You as well.

After a few moments, Heather came out the door, with her blonde hair braided in one plait down her back. She smiled when she saw him as a dragon.

Yer hair.

She touched the braid.

“You like it?”

Aye, he rumbled. Love it.

She smiled at him and held his spiky face in her soft hands. She kissed him on the forehead, then walked around him, running her hand down his neck. He shivered with the pleasure of her touch, and dipped his head to nip her on the butt as she went by.

“Hey!” she said, laughing, pushing at his snout. “What about my pendant?” she asked, her voice growing serious.

The angel father of the One True Mates had left a powerful pendant with the mother of each of them.

Bring it if you want, Graeme said in ruhi, remembering the last time she’d needed it, it had come to her by magic.

“I don’t think I want it,” she said.

Up you go, then.

Graeme folded his legs and dropped to his belly. Heather climbed on top of his back, straddling him like a horse, then leaned forward, gripping him with her thighs, legs hanging down between spikes and wingmounts.

Graeme stood. We’re going straight up. Remember your training?

“Aye,” Heather said, imitating his brogue.

Graeme shivered, rattling Heather in her seat and making her laugh. Because of the trees, he had to take off vertically. They didn't fly as much as either of them would like, but they practiced this takeoff often, so Heather always knew what her growing belly felt like on his back.

Graeme slowly rose on his back legs until he was nearly upright. Snow continued to fall heavily all around, steaming into mist, and creating a little cloud of steam around them already. He paid close attention to Heather's grip and balance as he moved. He shivered again, harder this time, and when she stayed solid in her seat, he spoke in her mind.

Hup. Hie. Ha. Go!

On hup, he bent his back legs, on hie , he opened his strong wings wide, on ha , he beat the air once. Heather leaned forward, gripping him tight with knees and arms, and on go, he jumped into flight.

"Whoo!" Heather shouted as they left the ground.

Graeme cleared the trees, disguised them with magic, and then leveled off immediately, loving the weight of his mate on his back, but not wanting to go too high until he knew how she was doing.

All good?

"Great!" she shouted into the slipstream.

He chuckled to himself, loving that she felt better. It was going to be a good day.

He banked and flew east, reaching the catamount statue quickly, but only giving it a passing glance. He'd been there enough times to know it was not a suitable place for

Rhen's gold. They would check the bear statue and the wolf statue, but Graeme thought neither would prove to be an adequate location to hide this treasure.

What he wanted was a deep cave or, better yet, a waterfall.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Ella stood in her bathroom, wrapped in a towel. She'd been out of the shower for a few minutes and was towel-drying her long black hair, thinking of babies and car seats and strollers and delivery dates. She was 18 weeks along and had a noticeable bump that she absolutely loved, and so did Trevor. She turned sideways to admire her bump in the mirror, smiling as she thought about her life these days. She was married, or mated, as the wolves called it, to a wolfen, a man who could turn into a wolf, and he was the sexiest and best man she'd ever known. She loved him so deeply that it threatened to overwhelm her often... but right then she just felt happy, and so much more. She felt happy, sated, cared for, and appreciated, and she liked it a lot. Even the constant threat of the demon seemed unimportant when Trevor was near. Besides, the demon had already gotten her once but she'd been rescued. She and Trevor were alive and thriving and at times like this, Ella could almost forget any of that had ever happened.

Ella wrapped herself in a robe and went out to her closet to dress. On the way, she thought she heard someone yell outside and diverted to the window to look out. So much snow! It was all she could see. She didn't hear anything more so she crossed the room to a window that looked out over the back of the property. Here, too, almost all she could see was snow, but she could make out Crew and Dahlia's cabin, and next to it, Beckett and Cerise's. A flash of black was visible at the edge of the forest for a moment. Ella watched, but didn't see it again.

Her housecat, Chelsea, came into the room and wound between her ankles. Ella stooped to pet the cat then looked out the window again. The cat wandered away, out the bedroom door.

Ella called her mate's brother in ruhi. Trent, are you out back? I thought I saw

something in the forest by the cabins.

I'm patrolling there now.

Okay, it was probably you.

Trent growled softly in her mind, agreeing with her.

What's going on? Ella asked, leaving the window and heading for her closet. I haven't been downstairs yet.

The storm is a bad one. It took out police radio communications and all the roads are closed. The team outside won't be getting relieved today or fed, either. Serenity is essentially shut down.

Crazy. Ella said. Maybe I should put some breakfast on the stove for them?

If you want. It might be the only way to keep the horde out of your fridge.

Thanks, Trent.

Again, he growled low and soft in her mind.

Ella smiled and picked out a comfortable outfit of a jersey knit t-shirt with a cable knit cardigan, and soft yoga pants. She slipped her feet into some fuzzy slippers, then headed downstairs. The house seemed empty at that moment, but it wouldn't last. She savored it while she had it, pattering around her kitchen, making a large pot of coffee, and thinking about what to cook. When the coffee was finished, she poured herself a half cup, added sugar and cream, then leaned against the counter sipping it, mentally counting how many males she would have to feed—nine or ten, probably. She decided to start with sausage and peppers, plus pot roast and potatoes. She pulled two

large crockpots out of the pantry and placed them side by side on the counter, then she pulled several packs of meat out of the fridge and put them on another counter.

Trevor pulled open the front door, saying, “Ella!” Then he stopped short, listening to something, someone calling in ruhi probably. He locked eyes with her and held up a finger—he’d be right back—then he went back out onto the porch. Ella smiled at him and continued with her food prep.

After a moment, Trevor came in, bringing the smell of cold air with him. She smiled at him again and he smiled back at her. “We can go back to bed,” he said.

“Not me,” she said. “I have breakfast going.”

He came into the kitchen and pinned her against the counter, murmuring, “I’m not hungry, are you hungry?”

She kissed his cheek and said, “Not for us. Trent says the team outside can’t get any food delivered, so we’ve got to feed them.”

Trevor relaxed his hold on her and leaned against the counter near her, looking sideways in that way he did when he was thinking.

“Okay,” he said. “But can you make a big pot of something that will feed them all day, so you don’t have to cook again?”

“I’m way ahead of you,” she said, but then she looked at her crockpots, thinking. She’d been wanting to try something new she thought Trevor and the others would like for a while, and maybe now was the time. She’d pre-cooked and wrapped several dozen pounds of meat to freeze at the beginning of the month because they went through a lot of meat. She’d have to dip into that stash, but that was cool.

“Yeah,” she said, “I can do that. Get me some packages out of the freezer?”

“Of course.”

“Get me one package each of #1, #2, #4, and two of #5.”

Trevor nodded, repeating it to himself. “Be right back.”

He left, heading for the garage, and Troy came inside through the doggy door set in the living room wall. She knew it was him and not Trent because of the way he snorted as he came in. Trent was always silent, like a cat, but Troy never was quiet.

He came into the kitchen, a shockingly big black wolf with a bit of white on his left shoulder, eyeballing the meat on the counter, but then he saw her fuzzy slippers. He dropped down like a puppy and chewed on one, then shook it violently, half pulling it off Ella’s foot.

“Troy!” she said, kicking at him.

He laughed in her head and chuffed out loud.

Sorry, he said in ruhi . Couldn’t resist. Whatcha making?

She smiled at him and said, “Something new. I call it Ten Meat Stew.”

Troy sat like a dog who’d been offered a treat and licked his chops.

It sounds amazing.

She grinned. Troy loved everything she cooked, as long as it had meat in it. He was her favorite taste-tester.

Trevor came back in with the packages of meats she'd asked him for and dropped them on the counter in a pile.

"Need anything else?" he asked.

"Not right now. Thanks."

Some males moved around on the front porch, making a ton of noise, and Trevor headed that way.

Ella put the meat in the microwave to defrost and went back to prepping, with Troy still sitting in the middle of the kitchen, watching her.

I wish I could help, Troy said.

"I know." It wasn't the first time he'd wanted to help her in the kitchen.

It already smells great. Ten meats. I don't think I've ever had anything with ten meats in it.

Ella switched to ruhi. It doesn't really have ten meats in it, just six, and some are variations—like there's bacon, ham, and pork roll, she said. There's also ground beef and ribeye, and just a bit of ground chicken.

Troy didn't say anything. Ella turned to look at him and couldn't read his wolfy expression, but he didn't look happy. Maybe he was alarmed? Or offended?

She gave him a 'what' look, then went on with her cutting.

I was really excited to eat the Ten Meat Stew, he whispered in ruhi. You should call it Six Meat Stew if it only has six meats in it.

Ella stopped chopping and turned to look at him. I have ten different meats, but I didn't know if it would be a good idea to put them all in a stew.

Troy cocked his head, looking pretty sure of himself. It would be a very good idea, he said.

She considered, then said, "Alright, ten meats it is."

Just then, Trevor walked by. "Trevor, could you get me more meat from the freezer?" she called to him.

"Sure, which?" he said, changing direction.

"Get me a #3 and a #7."

He stopped walking and stuck his head in the kitchen. "You told me never to touch #7."

"It's a special occasion."

"Okay... be right back."

Troy was grinning at her.

#3 is turkey and #7 is a mixture of wild elk, moose, and deer, she told him.

His eyes got big and he licked his chops. 10 meats— you're like a cooking wizard.

She blushed. He was easy to please. "I just learned quickly," she said. "I pay attention to what you all like most."

Troy gave her the most endearing wolfy grin ever. She smiled at him and went back to prepping.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Heather, riding on her dragon's back, relaxed and leaned forward to lay her cheek on her dragon's scales. They were deliciously warm. She kissed the scales, then sat back up in her seat, nestled safely between his dragon spikes like a saddle. They'd been flying for a bit, maybe almost half an hour, and Heather felt euphoric. Nothing made her feel as free and as invincible as flying with Graeme did.

She was a little damp from the snow, but not bad. There was a kind of steamy bubble around them, moving with them, and it kept most of the snow off her. Whenever she got too wet, she blazed fire around her, while protecting her clothes with dragen magic, and then she was dry again.

She could see little on the ground. The snow was still falling thickly.

Are we going in circles? she asked in ruhi.

Aye—to be sure of the bounding circle.

Heather didn't think she'd heard him talk about a bounding circle before and she was about to ask what it was when Graeme explained.

Imagine Serenity sitting in the middle of a triangle, with the points of the triangle marked by the three statues around the town—the catamount statue to the west, the bear statue to the east, and the wolf statue to the north. The bounding circle will be similar to what your mathematicians would call the circumcircle of such a triangle, passing through each vertex and encircling the entire area. If I hide the gold as well as I ought and it is within the bounding circle, it will be safe.

How do you know Rhen wants her gold brought over?

I had a dream.

And that's it? Just a dream?

Aye, that is the way of it, for all of dragen history.

What does she look like?

Heather could hear the smile in his voice while he spoke. If I told you she was a great and scaly dragon, what would you think of that?

Really?

Graeme laughed softly in her mind . I havnae seen her. I dreamt I was in dragon form, sitting on a pile of gold, and the gold had a voice, and it told me, 'we belong with ye'.

That doesn't sound like much to me. How do you know it wasn't just a dream?

It is never just a dream. It always means something.

When Heather didn't say anything, Graeme added, It took me two hundred years to learn it's never just a dream.

Heather stayed silent, thinking. Graeme was over 900 years old and he'd been in charge of Rhen's gold for much of that time. Her own dream of the night before swam into her mind. She'd been a pinkish dragon with leathery wings, a long snout, and shimmery scales, which was not too unusual—she'd been dreaming of being a dragon off and on since she'd bonded with Graeme. In last night's dream, she'd been walking through the forest on four strong legs, flexing her wings and thinking she

wanted to test them, when she entered a meadow. In the center of the meadow had been a stack of gold bars. The stack had been waist high and four-feet long, with an item on top—a present wrapped in red and white paper with a silver bow—and then she'd woken and had run to the bathroom to puke.

I had a dream about gold, too, you know, she said, a bit of sass in her voice, anticipating a fun little bit of banter with her man, her saying dreams were just dreams sometimes, and him saying something smart.

Instead, Graeme, still flying, bent his neck back to look her in the eye, something she couldn't remember him ever doing before.

Aye? he said, in an intrigued voice, then he looked forward again. Tell me all about it.

She described it to him.

Interesting, was all he said.

In front of them was forest, seemingly appearing from nowhere. Graeme flew up, skimming the trees.

Crimson Bluff, he said.

This might be a good place, Heather said. There're caves up here.

Many, but it strikes me that this bluff belongs to the foxen and they would sense the gold and look for it.

But not find it?

I dinnae think they would, but the chance isnae worth it. The foxen in Serenity are especially cunning.

There're caves up Morning Bluff also.

Aye, but what I really want is a waterfall, I think.

Heather thought about it. She'd grown up in Serenity and knew all the good spots.

There's a waterfall near Trevor's place—Serenity Falls. It's super popular when the weather is warm, though.

Isnae problem, Graeme said. Direct me.

Go to Trevor's and head due east. Once you pass the old highway, look for a dip in the land. The water falls over the furthest south portion of Blue Island Gorge.

Whose land?

Government land. It's a city park.

Braw.

Heather knew that meant 'good'. They made it there in a few minutes, and Graeme flew low, banking left and right, until he found the waterfall. It was frozen solid, and they landed right in front of it.

Heather threw a leg over and slid off Graeme's back, landing in deep snow. She raised her temperature and it melted, water gushing away from her, melting snow as it rushed into the gorge.

Graeme transformed smoothly into a man, looking sexy as hell in his uniform. He gave her a smile and took her hand and they walked under the waterfall together. Behind it was only a small area, and then solid rock.

“Not too much room,” Heather said.

“This is perfect,” Graeme said, looking at the wall of solid rock.

Heather understood then. “You’re going to hide it in the rock?”

“Aye.”

He heated his hand until it glowed red-hot and then touched the rock with his fist. The rock shuddered and groaned as a hole melted around his fist, and rock tried to flow down the wall like lava. Graeme spun his hand slightly, and the melted rock vortexed back up on itself, while he pushed his arm in deep, until he was up to his elbow in rock. He pulled his hand back out, and let the molten rock drip to the ground, increasing his heat until the last bits flaked off him. Graeme pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his hand.

“That’ll dae fine,” he said. “Next is Scotland, but we have one more errand to run first.”

Heather looked at him, waiting for him to explain. Instead, he grasped her hand and took her back out into the gorge, then he transformed into his beautiful red and yellow dragon. He brought his wings forward, positioning them around her. She knew what he wanted. They’d traveled like this before, through worlds and between worlds. She stepped close to him and he wrapped his strong leathery wings firmly around her, then pulled her against his chest.

sidestep

Intense heat and pressure assailed her, but it was over quickly. She expected to be let go, but Graeme walked forward twenty or so paces instead, still holding her in his wings, and then

sidestep

The heat and pressure were back, and then gone again.

Speak only ruhi, Graeme said, and then he released her from his wings. Heather's mouth dropped open. She was in what was obviously another world, like one she'd never seen even in movies. There were no houses, roads, or signs of civilization, and not even one tree. The ground she was standing on was a bare, dull red, almost like the surface of Mars. The sky was a deep purple and filled with wispy yellow clouds.

This way, Graeme said.

Heather turned around and saw a purple ocean, a colorful beach, and three large moons glowing silver off the horizon. She was too stunned to say a word. Graeme took her hand and got her moving. She felt light-headed, and squeezed his hand, leaning against him.

The oxygen mixture here is different than what yer used to. Nae bother, our business will be quick.

Heather focused on breathing deeply and felt better right away. As they got closer to the beach, it became clear that what she'd first thought were smooth stones, like river rocks, were not actually rocks. They were smooth and they were round, but they were also vibrantly colored, and some were transparent. Past the rocks, purple water lapped gently at the shore, and the familiar sound of the waves put Heather at ease.

These crystals are of similar substances but different properties than the ones ye are

familiar with. These will melt nicely at high heat, Graeme said.

Heather looked at him, wide-eyed. You mean glass-blowing?

Aye. Take a few. I've been wanting to bring ye here since I first saw ye at yer hobby.

Heather looked back at the beach of smooth, round crystals, her mind whirling. Crystals normally were too unstable to work with, but these were obviously different. Some looked like quartz, and other minerals she recognized, but others looked completely foreign.

They made it to the beach. Heather gingerly stepped on the round spheres, while Graeme took a few normal steps to show her it was safe. It was like walking on packed, oversized marbles, and Heather was fascinated. She bent to pick one up, then stopped and looked at Graeme. He nodded at her and motioned that she could touch it. It was the size of a tennis ball, bright blue, and perfectly round. She picked it up and was so surprised she almost dropped it again. It was hot, as if the ground under their feet was volcanic. It also seemed to weigh very little. Heather moved a few spheres out of the way to touch the ground beneath, but the others weren't hot and neither was the ground. She moved on and found another bright blue sphere and picked it up. It was hot also. She compared the two and picked her favorite, putting the other down.

Heather spotted a spattering of fluorescent pink spheres, and she headed that way. She found another the size of a tennis ball and picked it up, running her thumb over a crack in it.

Something touched her ankle. She looked down to see a wet red tentacle emerging from a hole in the ground and wrapping around her leg. Heather screamed, unable to help herself, and immediately, a riot of sound exploded under her feet, with the spheres popping one by one and many at a time. Sharp crystals flew in every

direction. Heather bent forward, protecting her face and shooting her temperature up as fast as it could go. She blazed with fire and the sharp, shooting crystals melted in the air like thick rain—and then Graeme was there. He wrapped her in strong wings and—

sidestep

Intense heat and pressure from all sides—

sidestep

The pressure was gone but they weren't on the ground—they were falling through the air, plummeting, because Graeme's wings were wrapped around her. They were going to hit the ground—

I'll flip ye! Graeme called in ruhi.

Flip? What? Heather called back, but then she was out of Graeme's wings and flipping in the air and with a fwump, she landed on his back, with her legs side-saddle. She wobbled in her seat and he banked to correct her balance. She flipped one leg over, grabbed him with her forearms, and dropped her torso to lie on his back, breathing heavily, still clutching her treasures.

They were back on Earth and it was still snowing heavily. Graeme landed in an empty cornfield and transformed to a man before she was even off of him. He turned and caught her before she could fall to the ground and then he hugged her tight.

“How did you do that?” she asked, her voice muffled by his shirt.

Flip ye? I don't ken, exactly, but I was certain I could do it, or I wouldnae have tried. I would have flipped myself to hit the ground on my back instead, protecting ye.

“What happened?”

I had no time for calculations and entered this world at altitude.

When her breathing had slowed, he held her at arm’s length and spoke out loud, as snow continued to fall all around them.

“Let’s have a swatch at ye,” he said.

She laughed weakly. “A what?”

He smiled and kissed her nose. “A look. Are ye fine?”

“Fine, yes,” she said, her brain still spinning from everything that had happened. She held her belly, feeling a bit of nausea, glad she hadn’t eaten anything. The nausea passed quickly.

Graeme took her hands and turned them over so he could see them. She opened them to show him her two round crystals.

He nodded at her, a proud look on his face. “Ye melted the whole beach, but not the ones in your hands. Impressive control.”

She smiled, warmed by his compliment, but also worried about what she’d done. “Will that world be okay?”

He nodded once. “The world’s name is Franronigen and it’ll be fine. That’s happened before, many times.”

“But what blew up?”

“There is one particular crystal on that beach that will explode upon hearing a voice. It is purple and black and usually smaller than the others, about the size of a golf ball. I didnae see any, but they were there. One crystal exploding will explode all its mates. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” she repeated, still a little shaky. “And the tentacle?”

“Only a giant sandworm. It wouldnae hurt you.”

Heather shuddered—the thing had been big, and gross. Graeme hugged her one more time, then transformed into the horse-sized dragon and knelt before her.

Now to Scotland, he said.

She stuck her foot on a spike and climbed on, and in no time, they were in the air. Graeme flew in a steep incline for a long time, while Heather silently studied her crystals and thought about what had happened. Eventually, she put the crystals in her cargo pockets, then settled in for the long flight over the Atlantic.

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Crew woke up when the bed moved. He got up on one elbow and rubbed his eyes. Daylight shone around the curtains on the windows. Dahlia had climbed into bed and she was already on her pillow, wearing long pajamas. She pulled the blankets over her, until all he could see was her long, straight brown hair.

“Did you sleep yet?” Crew asked.

“No.” Her voice was muffled by the blanket. “I finished the book.”

“How was it?”

“Soooo good. Wait till you read it.”

They were reading the same series, but Dahlia was a faster reader than Crew, and she had more time to read, so she was two—now three books ahead of him.

“What time is it?”

“Don’t know.”

Crew found his phone and looked at the time: 9:30 a.m., but he had no service. He sat up in bed, realizing the power was still out and it was cold in the room.

Crew got up and started gathering his work clothes. “Doll, I gotta go check in with Trevor for work. Do you want to go to the main house and sleep there? They’ve got heat.”

She didn't say anything.

Crew pulled the blankets away from her face. She looked like she was sleeping already. He sat down next to her and rubbed her shoulder.

"Do you want to go up to Trevor and Ella's?" he whispered into her ear.

"Yeah," she said. "But I'm so sleepy."

"I can carry you," he said.

She smiled with her eyes closed and snuggled into her blankets. "Okay..." she murmured. "... so strong."

Crew cleaned up and got dressed in his uniform, then looked out the window. It was still snowing, and the drifts on the ground were deep. Shit, he thought. Maybe he wouldn't be able to carry her. He left the bedroom and headed for the front door. Once outside, he saw that someone had recently plowed a path from his front porch to the main house.

"Good deal," he said out loud, and went back to get Dahlia.

Angel, their pet bobcat who was still scarcely bigger than a kitten, darted across the top of the bookshelves in the living room, streaking past Crew and running for the door. He stared at it, making a chirping sound, until Crew turned around and opened the door for him. Angel ran out into the snow, heading for the forest. Crew shut the door and went to the bedroom. Angel wouldn't be back till bedtime, and if he couldn't get in the cabin, he'd get into the main house through the wolf door and sleep wherever Ella's cat, Chelsea, was sleeping.

Back in the bedroom, Crew grabbed his book and shoved it in his cargo pocket, then

he wrapped Dahlia's blanket around her like a cocoon. He took the top sheet from the bed and put it on top of the blanket, even covering her face and hair, then he lifted her bridal-style from the bed. She snuggled into his chest, making a noise of contentment.

Crew carried her through the house and out the front door, and then followed the path to the back door of Trevor and Ella's place. Troy saw him coming and pulled the sliding glass door open with the wolf-friendly handle.

"Thanks," Crew said.

No problem, Troy said in ruhi. Is she ok?

"Yeah, she's sleeping—stayed up all night. Smells good in here."

Ella looked up from a large pot on the stove. "Thanks." She pointed to the stairs. "She can sleep in the guest room."

Crew grunted and carried Dahlia upstairs, took a left at the top, and went into the guest room, then lowered Dahlia to the bed and pulled the wet top sheet off her, wadded it up and dropped it to the floor. Dahlia rolled over and found the pillow immediately.

"I'll be around, Doll," he said, leaning down and kissing her. "But if I have to go somewhere, do you want to come with me, or do you want a guard?"

"Come with... unless Trent and Troy..."

"Got it. Otherwise, I'll wake you up when?"

"Mm," she said, eyes closed, body fully relaxed.

“I’ll wake you in six hours,” he said.

“Mmmkay,” she said softly.

Crew kissed her again, left the room, and went back downstairs. He stood at the bottom of the steps, looking for Beckett. Ella and Troy were still in the kitchen, and now so was Trevor. Mac and Bruin came in the front door. Mac ignored Crew, while Bruin raised a hand to him. Crew raised a hand back. Mac and Bruin went into the kitchen and Mac opened the fridge, which Trevor shut immediately.

“No way, Mac, food’s coming. Wait for it,” Trevor said.

Crew was about to ask what smelled so good when Trevor spotted him and bulldozed toward him.

“Crew,” he said. “I’m glad you’re here.” He pointed at his stove and said, “Take a good look.”

Crew shook his head, not sure what Trevor was getting at, but then Trevor waved him toward the back door. Crew followed him. From this vantage point, Trevor pointed into the kitchen again, right at Ella working at the stove.

“She’s cooking for fourteen people,” Trevor said.

Crew nodded, still not sure what was up.

“We have a chance for a real day off today, but only if we get out of this house.”

Crew scratched the back of his neck, still not sure what Trevor was saying. “Day off? We’re not working today?”

Trevor gave him a look that said, ‘where in the hell have you been?’ and then he said, “The roads are closed, Serenity’s shut down. We’re not going anywhere and no one is coming out here.” Trevor opened his hands and said, “It’s Valentine’s Day.”

“I know it’s Valentine’s Day. Me and Dahlia’re going to stay at Serenity Falls Resort tonight.”

Trevor shook his head. “Did you hear anything I just said? The roads are closed, the electricity is out, and the phones are down. There’s no way to get there and they’re probably closed anyway.”

“Oh,” Crew said, looking out the back door at all the snow and finally understanding.

“We’re not working today, but you aren’t going on your overnight and we’re—” he pointed at himself and Ella, “—not going out to dinner like we planned, but I still want her Valentine’s Day to be a good one, so you’re in charge of figuring out something else to do.”

“What? Me? Why?” Crew said.

“Yes, you. Because I said so.”

“What, like sledding?” Crew said.

“She’s pregnant.”

“Skiing?”

Trevor growled.

Crew laughed and said, “Well, hell, I don’t know, then. You’re the one who said

Serenity is shut down. Maybe uh...a treasure hunt in the snow?"

Trevor nodded, like that hadn't been a suggestion that Crew had just pulled out of his ass. "A scavenger hunt." He clapped Crew on the shoulder. "Now you're thinking."

Crew blinked at him, thinking, seriously?

"You know you could just kick everybody out and lock the door," he said.

Trevor shook his head. "I already tried but Ella wouldn't go along with it. She insisted everyone was fed and warm."

Crew meant to protest, but Trevor clapped him on the shoulder again. "Good wolf," he said, and then he went back into the kitchen, shoved Mac away from the fridge, shut the fridge door, then took up guard in front of it, arms crossed.

Crew shook his head, then went out the back door and headed for Beckett's place, ignoring the snow collecting on his uniform and boots.

At Beckett's front door, he found a note.

WE'RE FUCKING SLEEPING. Leave us alone.

Crew tore it down and crumpled it up. "Not anymore you're not," he muttered, as he pounded on the door. "Beckett! Wake up!"

Crew knocked until Beckett, bleary-eyed, bare-chested, and pissed, ripped the door open. He had his camouflage cap on his head and he glared at Crew from under the brim.

"The hell do you want?"

“Assignment from Trevor,” Crew said, pushing past him and flopping down on the couch. “Get your fucking clothes on, we gotta get going—Hi, Cerise.”

Cerise, dressed in gray leggings and an oversized SPD sweatshirt, entered the room.

“Hi,” she said, not looking at him, which was her way. She only had eyes for Beckett.

She went into the kitchen and Beckett disappeared into the bedroom. In a few minutes he was back, dressed in the dark blue KSRT uniform with black combat boots and his cap on his head.

“What’s the assignment?” he asked, tucking his shirt into his pants.

“Find some shit to do so Ella can have a good Valentine’s Day.”

Beckett froze. “What? Why us?”

Crew threw his hands up. “That’s what I said, but I swear that’s the assignment. Serenity is shut down, the roads are closed, our overnight is canceled, and we gotta come up with something fun to do.”

Beckett finished setting his uniform right, then pulled his phone out of his pocket and turned it on. “I ain’t got phone service or internet, do you?”

Crew shook his head.

“So who canceled the overnight?”

“I don’t know. Trevor said it was cancelled.”

“He’s full of shit. I say we head over there and see if the place’s still open. It’s a

hotel. They have to stay open if they've got guests."

"Roads're closed."

"It ain't far as the crow flies. We could go by snowmobile."

Crew considered. It wasn't a half-bad idea. "You got a snowmobile?"

"Matter a' fact, I got two snowmobiles, and they're in the shed behind Trevor's garage. They just need a quick tune-up and then we're set."

Cerise popped her head out of the dark kitchen. "Snowmobile?" she said.

Beckett turned to her and put out his arm. She floated into it. "Yeah, you wanna drive it?"

She beamed at him. "You know I do."

He kissed her on her nose. "You wanna help me tune it up?"

"Heck yeah, I do."

Beckett kissed her on the lips, softly and thoroughly. Cerise leaned into it.

Crew shook his head, stood and headed for the front door. "I'll meet you two there. You have five minutes."

Half an hour later, Crew was perched on a stack of police barricades in the cold shed, reading his book, while Beckett and Cerise checked belts and changed fluids or some

shit.

Crew, Trevor barked in his mind. Where are you? What have you come up with?

In the shed , Crew replied, eyes on his book. Getting out Beckett's snowmobiles. We're going to— He looked up and saw Beckett and Cerise sitting on the same snowmobile, facing each other, with Cerise on Beckett's lap. They were kissing like teenagers at a drive-in, and Beckett had his hands up under Cerise's sweatshirt.

Crew cleared his throat loudly. "A-hem."

Beckett broke the kiss, then straightened Cerise's clothes, a grin on his face. "Shit," he said. "Guess we kind of forgot where we were."

"And what you were doing. Trevor's calling me and he ain't happy."

"Trevor can hold his fucking horses. Shit takes time."

"Sure does," Crew said, rolling his eyes.

—Going to what? Trevor demanded.

Ah, going to snowmobile out to Serenity Falls Resort to see if they're still open. It's only three miles through the neighboring corn fields. The resort has a buffet and entertainment.

Trevor didn't say anything for a minute, then he growled in Crew's head and said, When?

"How long?" Crew asked Beckett, who was back to work on the snowmobile.

“Thirty minutes,” Beckett said.

Two hours, Crew told Trevor, buying them a little more time.

Got it. Report back to me ASAP.

Will do.

One hour later, Crew sat astride one of two snowmobiles in front of Beckett and Cerise’s place, fully dressed in snow gear, laying on the snowmobile horn, with snowflakes collecting in his hair and on his jacket.

HONK! HONNNK!

“What’s taking you so long!?” he shouted, honking again.

Crew had already checked on Dahlia, eaten some tasty Ten Meat Stew, gotten Dahlia a guard of Trent and Troy, procured Trevor’s credit card, checked on Dahlia one more time, then dressed for snowmobiling, and he was still waiting on Beckett’s slow ass.

He climbed off his snowmobile and headed for the front door, grumbling, “I’d better not find them horizontal.”

They didn’t answer the door, but as he was starting to get really irritated, they appeared from around the back of the house, dressed in matching yellow snowmobile suits and holding hands.

Beckett hooked a thumb back the way they had come, in the direction of the barn and

pasture. “We were feeding the horse.”

“Don’t you look cute,” Crew said.

“Yeah we do,” Beckett agreed. “Like two corn niblets.” He winked at Cerise and she kissed him on the cheek. “Ok, sugar,” he told her, fishing a key out of his pocket. “Are you ready for more fun?”

“Always.”

They got on the second snowmobile, Cerise in front. Crew got back on his machine, while Beckett coached Cerise. Crew started his snowmobile and took off into the woods, getting stuck immediately. He rotated his machine around and found a path through the yard to another forest trail. He revved his engine and shot across the yard to the new trail, where he stopped to look back. Cerise was going slowly in a straight line from where she started, while Beckett talked a mile a minute and gestured to the right. Slowly, Cerise turned to the right, and then she picked up a little speed, smiling broadly.

They were on their way.

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Ella, still in her kitchen, scooped the last bit of stew out of the crockpot and ladled it into a food container. She put the lid on and placed the container into a box with six others, then she stacked paper bowls, napkins and spoons on top.

She turned to the bearen waiting in the hallway, his eyes on the floor. He held his hands together and alternated looking at the floor, the wall, and at Trevor, who was sitting at the kitchen table, eating stew.

“You’ll get half of this to Bob and Sharon and Lillian?” Ella asked him.

“Yes, ma’am,” the male said, his voice deep but soft. He’d been acting nervous since he came in the door.

“And you can feed the rest of the team, too?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded at him but he still wouldn’t look at her. She stepped away from the counter and motioned at the box, telling him, “Come back if you need more.”

The big male came timidly into the room, snatched up the box, and made a beeline out the front door.

Ella watched him go, then asked Trevor, “What’s his name?”

“Who?”

“The bearen who just took the stew.”

“I don’t know,” Trevor said. “He must be new. I’ll have Troy find out.”

“Never mind, it might make him more nervous.”

Troy came down the stairs. He was on guard duty over Dahlia, who was sleeping in the upstairs guest room, while Crew had been off doing something for the last hour or so. Troy made his way up and down the stairs every few minutes, while Trent patrolled the perimeter of the house outside. They took guard duty seriously.

That’s Hugo, Troy said. You make him nervous, Ella.

“Me?” Ella asked, surprised.

Yup. He’s fascinated that you’re half angel, and that you went to the Pravus and fought Khain, but Trevor terrifies him, so he’s scared to talk to you.

“Shit. I’ll give him something to be scared of,” Trevor growled from the table.

Troy ignored him. Plus he’s nervous about your power, he told Ella, though Trevor could overhear. He thinks if he says the wrong thing, you’ll blast him into oblivion.

Ella gaped at him. “I would never,” she insisted.

Troy chuffed a laugh. Yeah, but he doesn’t know that.

Troy disappeared up the stairs, but now he was laughing in her head.

Ella looked over at Trevor, throwing her hands up, wanting him to do or say something.

He nodded at her. “If he looks at you funny, you better blast him before I do.”

“I wouldn’t,” Ella said again, shaking her head, noticing her feet hurt. She made herself some toast with butter, some stew, and a glass of water, then went to sit down at the table.

Trevor, looking handsome as could be, held up his spoon. “This is pretty good stew,” he said.

“Thanks.” She gave him a smile. “Troy said it was the best thing he’d ever eaten.”

“Troy says that about everything you make, but this is good.” He finished the bowl, then repeated, “Damn good.”

“Mac had three bowls.”

Trevor shook his head, a scowl on his face. “Greedy ass.”

Then, as if they’d summoned the man himself, the door opened, and Mac came into the kitchen, empty bowl in hand. He went straight to the stove and looked in the pot, then groaned.

“Empty?!” he said, looking around accusingly.

Ella pointed to the second crockpot. “There’s more.”

Mac opened the lid and looked in, then broke into a broad grin. “Thank Rhen.” He scooped out some stew and put it into his bowl, then said, “You saved my life, Ella. I hadn’t eaten all night.”

Trevor rolled his eyes.

“Glad to help,” Ella said, laughing.

The back door opened, and Crew, Beckett, and Cerise came in. Crew looked Trevor in the eye and said, “Mission accomplished. You’re going to be happy.”

Trevor wiped his mouth with his napkin, then turned to Crew. “Good. I like to be happy.”

Beckett and Cerise went into the kitchen. Ella motioned for them to get bowls of stew for themselves, which they did.

“Let me check on Dahlia, and then I’ll tell you everything,” Crew said, heading up the stairs. In just a moment, he was back, and Troy was following him down the stairs. Trent came silently inside the doggy door with Smokey, the black cat who was also his echo, just behind him. Trent took up sentinel in the living room, quietly watching everyone in the kitchen, while Smokey disappeared under the couch.

“The resort is open,” Crew said, sitting at the table. “They’ve got a generator, and they’re honoring our reservation. They’ve got other guests that are already there and can’t leave, so the buffet and activities are open. The Presidential Suite is available, and it has a movie theater.” He pointed at Ella. “You get the Presidential Suite since your male is paying.”

Ella looked at Trevor. He was grinning at her and nodding like the cat who ate the canary. “We’re going to a resort?” she asked.

“Serenity Falls Resort,” he said, clearly proud of himself. “We don’t even have to stay the night, if you don’t want to, but there’ll be dinner and dancing and you won’t have to cook anymore today.”

“I love it,” Ella said. She liked to sleep in her own bed, especially since she was

pregnant and sometimes didn't sleep well, and sometimes woke up with morning sickness, but she was excited about going out to dinner, and she was excited about snowmobiling, too. She held her stomach, asking herself if she felt safe on a snowmobile or not, and decided she did, as long as Trevor was with her and as long as they went slow.

"We're all going," Trevor said, "except we'll leave a small team here at the house and at Bob and Sharon's."

"I'll stay here and guard the stew," Mac said, lovingly scraping his bowl with his spoon.

"You're coming, Mac," Trevor said. "Bruin, too. I don't think Ella's going to want to stay the night—" He looked at Ella and she nodded, "—so we'll need to leave Trent and Troy with the four who are staying the night, but Ella and I will need you and Bruin to come back with us."

What about Graeme? Trent asked.

"Graeme and Heather are off-property on an assignment from Rhen. I'm hoping they'll be back by the time we want to return. It would be good to have them with us."

Mac mopped up the last of his food with some bread. "What about the stew?" he asked.

"What about the stew?" Trevor said, his voice suddenly hostile.

"I think we should bring it."

"Bring it?" Trevor said, getting up from his chair, facing Mac, irritated. "We're not

bringing it.”

Mac snarled and Trevor growled. Ella got up and walked between them on her way to the sink, saying, “Lieutenant, Sergeant, is this how you settle a disagreement?”

Trevor relaxed a little, but not Mac.

“We’re going to have to haul gear anyway,” Mac said. “So why not the pot of stew? That hotel ain’t gonna be serving anything that’s got ten fucking meats in it.”

Ella shook her head while she washed her bowl, laughing a little. She didn’t know whether to make the stew again often... or never again.

Behind her, Trevor surprised her by saying, “You’re right—we will have to haul gear. Beckett, how many snowmobiles do you have?”

“Only two, and neither has a tow assembly.”

“Bruin’s can tow a sled,” Mac said quickly.

Ella turned around to watch the males as they started to work together. Trevor had his hand on his chin, his eyes on the ceiling.

“The females will all ride,” he said, ticking off three fingers on one hand. “Two on one snowmobile, and some gear can go behind the single rider.” He pointed at Mac. “Mac, you and Bruin get the sled out of the garage and hook it up. You can take the stew, and everyone’s uniforms. The rest of us are going in wild.”

Ella felt a rush of excitement. She was going to snowmobile and Trevor was going to run as a wolf?

The day just got interesting.

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Graeme flew over the Cairngorms Mountains, going lower and lower the closer he got to home, breathing deeply of the crisp Scotland air, a mix of conflicting feelings twisting his mind. Nae bother. His home was with Heather now, and the young in her belly, with a fierce pack of wolverines and half-angels as their friends.

They'd been flying for three hours, faster than a plane, and the time difference from Serenity to Scotland meant it was now 7 p.m. and dark out. The night was cold and the sky cloudless. Graeme scanned the mountainside, and the forest below, sensing no humans, no people at all, but plenty of wildlife sleeping and hunting in the forest.

"There it is!" Heather shouted, pointing in the correct direction.

My cottage? Can ye see it?

No. I guess I just... feel it.

Can it appear.

What?

Make it appear.

From up here?

If ye can sense it, ye can make it appear.

Graeme tilted a bit to compensate as Heather leaned to the side, getting a good look.

Her temperature flared briefly, and the cottage appeared.

Heather squealed in delight and Graeme swelled with pride at his little dragen mate. His whole life, he never would have considered someone a dragen if they couldn't transform, but Heather proved she had a dragen's heart every single day. He flew past and around his cottage, descending in slow circles, skimming the dark treetops, relishing the feel of his mate on his back, thinking she must surely make him stronger. The ground came up too fast, and he spread his wings wide to go up again, skimming the clearing in front of the cottage, making Heather whoop and grip him tighter with her thighs.

Aye, lass, that's the way , he purred at her, feeling suddenly like having her underneath him rather than on top of him.

She didn't respond for a second, then she laughed silkily in his head. Are we flying or...?

Graeme landed in the clearing near the front door with a bit of a thump. Again, he transformed and spun, catching his mate before she could fall. He pressed his lips to hers, pulling her close, his hands on her hips, hers around his shoulders. He put her down gently, pressing her against him, still kissing her, until, regretfully, he had to pull away. Her eyes were closed and she smiled slightly, her face upturned, her lips parted, as she waited for more. He gave her one more soft kiss, and then he let go of one of her hands and smiled at her. She opened her eyes, and only then saw his secret project.

“What's that?” Heather said, pointing at the edge of the trees where a small building stood that had not been there the last time they'd visited.

Forest loo , Graeme said.

Heather smiled at him. “For me?”

He laughed. Isnae for me, lass.

She squeezed his hand and said, “Thank you.”

Yer fine, he said, with a wink and a smile . It’d cost a fair bit to have the composting toilet built way out in this remote area, and the police chief had had to pull a few strings for him, but Heather’s comfort was important to him, and he had plenty of money.

“I need it right now,” she said and pulled away from him. When she came back out she was smiling. “There’s water and towels and everything. I love it.”

He held out his hand to her, and when she took it, they went to the front door. Graeme opened it with a touch but only stuck his head in. The one room was covered with dust and obviously had not been entered since the last time he and Heather had been inside. He pulled the door closed and they went around to the back. Once there, Heather pulled away and went straight to the hidden cellar doors. She knelt and touched the ground and the doors appeared. Graeme gave a low whistle of appreciation, then moved in close to grab the door pulls. He heaved both doors open, then stepped in and down and picked up a lantern from the steps. He lit the wick with his fingers, then he reached back for Heather’s hand, and they descended together. Almost immediately, Graeme felt a strange suspicion, although he could not say why.

Be on yer guard, he told Heather in ruhi . Someone’s been here.

Her temperature flared high, and stayed high, and she squeezed his hand. He squeezed back and they continued down the steps, fully alert and ready for anything. When they were almost to the treasure room, the steps opened up into a brick-lined room that had never been there before.

Ach, he said. This is new.

He held the lantern high. In the middle of the room was a massive, locked, wooden treasure chest, with metal bars on the sides meant to be dragon holds for transport. Sitting on top of the chest was a much smaller chest, one the size of a breadbox.

In step with his mate, still holding her hand, Graeme circled the square, stone room and found no strange scents, no traps or calling cards, only an exit at the back that led to more steps. He knew what he would find inside the chest, because this had happened before. What he didn't know was who had packed Rhen's gold for him.

Whoever it was has come and gone, he told his mate. And left no wee tricks for us, only a chest full of gold to be moved.

She shook her head and looked at him, her expression distressed. This room wasn't here before.

Aye, and won't be again. Once we take this gold, the room will disappear.

How do you know?

Because I've seen it—not here, but at a nearby site, centuries ago. The gold was packed by an unkent guest, then placed in a room that did not exist before or after.

Unkent—unknown?

Aye.

Like a leprechaun or something?

Graeme looked around the room . A foxen more likely.

A foxen!?

Aye.

I thought they worked for Khain.

Aye, but sometimes they work for Rhen. They are the only shiften who can choose either. Besides dragen, foxen are the best choice to guard Rhen's gold because natural laws govern all, including the hiding of things, and foxen study those laws and are good with them.

How does Rhen know they won't steal her gold?

A foxen who has learned to work for Rhen has their own gold and no want to steal the gold of others.

Heather fell silent. Graeme led her back around so they stood facing the front of the chest, suspecting what the smaller chest was, and wondering if Heather did. He turned to look at her, and as he did, she pulled her hand from his, gasped, and pointed at the small chest.

"The gift from my dream!" she blurted out. Her voice did not echo, but seemed to be sucked up by the brick all around them.

"Aye," Graeme said proudly. He took her hand again, leading her toward the exit at the back of the room, switching back to ruhi, saying, We'll check on the rest of the gold, before we take possession of this.

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Heather let herself be led away, still looking back at the two chests. Graeme pulled her through the doorway, and they went down more stairs, all the way to the bottom, into the treasure cave. Heather was silent as Graeme inspected the piles and stacks of gold and other precious metals and gems. Rhen's gold had not all been packaged—some stayed behind, and the rooms were full of more treasure. Some was Graeme's, some belonged to others, and all seemed in order.

Back up the steps they went, until they were again standing in front of the chest.

“Go on, then, open it,” Graeme said, releasing Heather's hand.

She approached the large chest, then reached her hand out to touch the metal lock of the small chest on top. It clicked open as soon as she touched it. Heather made a noise of disbelief, and then she lifted the lid of the chest, revealing a leather bag atop a closed compartment. Graeme recognized the bag at once, and knew what was in it. He felt a strange mixture of anticipation and apprehension as Heather opened the bag and pulled out a golden, filigreed diadem Graeme knew well—when his mother had been alive, she'd worn it several times in her human form, mostly in rituals. In the very center of it was a burning flame smaller than a dime—an everlasting flame.

Heather's expression took on a rigid cast, and she raised the diadem to her head immediately, dropping it down over her hair. It settled into place with the flame centered slightly above her eyebrows. Purple flame licked across Heather's irises, startling Graeme, but then it was gone.

Is it a crown? she asked, and her mental voice sounded different—colder somehow.

A diadem, he said, watching her closely. Worn like a crown, but meant for a dragen.

Heather took the diadem off her head and examined the flame.

Is it magic? she asked.

Aye.

She put it carefully back in the bag, then looked at Graeme, eyes wide. Is it for me?

Graeme nodded. It used to belong to my mother. She traveled to a distant fire world, killed the fire priestess who ruled there, and stole the everlasting flame the priestess kept. She had the diadem made from Rhen's gold, and she fixed the everlasting flame to it with powerful magic, calling it a tribute to Rhen. As such, I ken it belongs to Rhen more than it belongs to me, and your dream from last night says it is a gift to ye.

Heather gripped the bag tighter, still looking at him, but he had no more answers.

Graeme motioned for her to keep looking in the chest, saying, I see a second compartment.

Heather turned back to the small chest, her heart beating faster than normal, as it had been since she'd seen the diadem. The thing called to her even now, wanting her to wear it. When she'd put it on, power had coursed through her, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. She'd felt pinned in place by the intensity of it, and it had scared her. It had taken all the strength in her to take it off, but once she had, she'd been able to breathe more easily, and when she put it back in the bag, the call of it had been weakened, leaving her relieved. She didn't know if she wanted the diadem

but she also didn't think it was a good idea to refuse a gift from a goddess.

She put it aside, patting her belly with one hand—the baby felt like she was doing jumping-jacks in there—then, with trembling fingers, Heather lifted a cloth divider in the chest and revealed the lower compartment. It contained a red velvet bag, which Heather picked up. Below it was a wooden jewelry box. She opened the top and there were 12 lined compartments, and each compartment except the second held an arced gold circlet, smaller than the diadem, slightly bigger than a bracelet. Each circlet was etched with a repeating design. She looked closer, discovering that each design was a different plant. The first had a fern frond, the third, a flower, and the fourth, two cherries with connected stems. Confusion stirred inside Heather as she thought she almost knew what this meant. The next band designs were a lily pad and flower, a willow tree, an exotic-looking flower, a cattail, another tree, a bouquet of upright leaves and flowers, one more tree, and then another bouquet of hanging leaves and flowers.

Heather looked up at Graeme and didn't know what to make of his expression. He'd leaned in close, studying the etchings on the bands. He stuck his finger in the empty second compartment, then pointed at the bag in her hand.

She opened it and found one more beautiful, arced circlet of gold, this one etched with countless tiny bell-shaped flowers, clustered at the end of leaf-covered stems.

So pretty, Heather said.

That one's yers, Graeme said.

Heather turned it over in her hands then slid it up her hand like a bracelet but it went up to her elbow.

For me? Do you really think so?

Graeme slid the gold piece off her arm. He traced the engravings with his thumb, saying. This is Scottish heather, d' ye see?

She nodded, enchanted with the beauty of it. Graeme unclasped it and it opened on a hinge. It's an anklet. This curve sits on top of yer heel, and this one on top of yer foot.

Heather looked at her mate, sensing that he wasn't telling her everything.

What aren't you saying? she asked.

His expression tightened. He pulled another gold band out of its compartment and held it up. Anklets like these were battle attire for female dragen .

Heather looked over the row of compartments again, and it clicked for her. She pulled the anklet out of the first compartment, speaking out loud in a rush.

"A fern. Ella's real name is Fern."

Graeme also switched to speaking out loud. "Aye, and that flower is a dahlia flower, and those cherries are for Cerise."

Heather pulled the rest of the anklets out of the compartments, looking each one over.

"Battle attire?"

He nodded, his face contemplative, speaking softly. He tapped on the golden band above her left arm, making a slight, metallic plinking sound. "The anklet is meant to be worn on the leg opposite of the arm the binding ring is on, to provide counterbalance in case yer mate falls in battle."

Heather stared at him, horrified. "I don't want it," she said. She shoved it in the bag

and tossed it on top of the diadem, but then she thought better of it. She took the anklet out of the bag and put it with the rest of the anklets, in the second compartment where it obviously belonged. She felt like throwing the whole bunch of them in the Atlantic Ocean on the way back to Serenity.

Graeme must have seen her intention on her face. He touched her arm and spoke soothingly. “Mayhap I was wrong to tell ye how it was used in the past. Rhen may intend nothing more than unique, valuable gifts.”

Heather nodded at him, then picked up the bag with the diadem in it, meaning to put it on top and then close the small chest and... and what? Maybe give it to Graeme for safe-keeping. Her horror at being given battle attire as a gift was already fading. The diadem called powerfully to her. Irritated, she shoved her hand into the bag and pulled it out, then placed it on her head. Power surged through her, and she wanted to use it. She snatched up the jewelry box with the 12 anklets in it and held it in one hand then, feeling like she could do no wrong, she placed her other hand on the small chest until it flared into flame and burned to nothing. She ran her hands over the ash to clean it, deliberately not looking at Graeme, even though she could tell he was staring at her. The chest was gone, and she didn't know why she had destroyed it, but she kept moving. She crushed the jewelry box between her hands like an accordion.

Heather gasped and dropped it, then ripped the diadem off her head and flung it to the top of the large chest.

“I broke it!” she cried. “I melted them!”

Graeme shook his head and picked up what Heather had dropped. He placed it back in her hands, then cupped them with his.

“Nae broken,” he said, smiling reassuringly at her. “Only compressed for travel and fully recoverable.”

In their hands, the box opened back up and returned to full size, with the anklets fully intact inside.

Heather stared at them, then looked at her man. “And the chest? Is it...”

Graeme gave her a lopsided smile. “That, you destroyed. Nae bother. It was a very dragen thing to do. We destroy what we have no more use for.”

Contemplating that, Heather pressed her hands together again, not sure what she was doing or how she was doing it, but willing the jewelry box and anklets to ‘compress’ again. They did, into a neat little package about the size of her phone. She held it up, disbelieving, and Graeme smiled at her. She smiled back, then put the thing in her left cargo pocket and buttoned it closed.

She picked up the diadem and shoved it in the bag quickly, cinching it tightly closed, and holding it by the strings, ignoring its call.

“Right, then,” Graeme said.

He touched the large chest and the lock popped open. He lifted the lid and they both looked inside. Heather whistled in amazement. The thing was packed full, up to the very top with crates full of gold bars, and one more small, closed chest.

Graeme closed the lid. He motioned for Heather to stand back, then he transformed into a dragon. He wrapped his wings around the chest full of gold, and when he released it, the chest was small enough to carry. He transformed into his human self, looking strong and handsome, picked up the chest, and nodded to Heather.

“We’re done?” she said.

“Aye.”

Heather carried the lantern, and together, they headed up the stairs.

15— Dragen Booty Duty

Heather was panting and holding her belly as they walked up the stairs, falling farther behind Graeme with each step.

When he realized, he said, “We take a break here.”

Heather sat down. Graeme came and sat next to her. He’d offered to carry her but she’d refused, saying he had a job to do and it didn’t include babying her. When she was rested, they got back to climbing the stairs, and in a few more minutes, they were at the top.

Graeme put the chest down against the wall of the house. He banged on the top once and it shuddered, then expanded to full size.

Heather sat down in the grass, breathing heavily. She held up the bag with the diadem in it. “Can this go in the chest?” she said.

“Aye,” Graeme said, taking it from her.

He took all six crates and the small chest out, placing them on the ground and opening them, examining the contents under the light of the moon.

While he worked, Heather had an idea.

“Graeme, can I clean your house?”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to look at her, a questioning look on his face. She stood up and looked in one of the windows, although she couldn't see much in the dark.

“Remember when you tried to teach me how to clean with dragen magic?”

He nodded.

“I haven't been doing it,” she said. “I've just been dusting by hand.”

Graeme smiled at her, then returned to inspecting his crates. “I know, leannan, I've caught you at it a time or two, and I've been secretly helping.” He winked at her. “Also by hand.”

She laughed. “I want to learn the magic, I've just been nervous to try because of what you said about it.”

He nodded. “Cleaning isnae easy. It takes a delicate touch, one I don't possess.” He motioned to the house. “Yer welcome to try. Nothing inside holds importance for me any longer.”

Heather gave him a kiss and left him to his work. She went around to the front of the cottage and pushed the door open. It was dark inside and she walked by the light of the moon shining in the windows and touched the counter lightly. Her fingers collected dust easily and she recalled what Graeme had told her months ago.

Ye imagine the dirt or dust burnt to ash, and the ash burnt to nothing, then you flex the fire-making muscle in your mind gently. There's a real art to it and if ye overdo it ye'll destroy everything around ye, so be nice and easy. If ye are inspired to say words, say them, but silence is most conducive to dragen magic.

Heather skimmed her fingers over the dirt on a countertop, then she closed her eyes, imagining and flexing, being as gentle as possible. She opened her eyes and the counter was clean. Even the dust on her fingers was gone. A sense of accomplishment bubbled up inside her.

Graeme appeared at the doorway with the lantern.

“I did it,” she called to him, running her hands over the counter. “Over here.”

He came to her and hugged her, then shone the light around the entire room. “Ye got the whole place,” he said, his voice warm.

“No way,” she said, but he was right. Everywhere she checked was clean and dust free, even the floor, and nothing had been damaged.

Graeme hugged her close and said, “Yer a natural.”

She lifted her face for a kiss and he kissed her first on the forehead, then gently on the lips. Heather’s body responded at once, quickening and warming. She kissed him back passionately, eyes closed, as their tongues gently touched, warm and firm and familiar. His spicy hot cinnamon scent overwhelmed her with need and made her remember another time she’d felt the same.

She broke the kiss and gazed at her man in the dark, gripping his muscular upper arms. “Last time we were here, you wouldn’t have sex with me,” she said.

“I was a fool,” he whispered, his hands sliding down her hips to her ass, pulling her against him, where she could feel his cock growing thick and hard in his pants. “I’ll make it up to ye now.”

Heather melted into her mate, her heart beating faster, her body responding fully to

him. His arms encircled her, and he snuck one hand into her hair, pulling her head back gently, then he took her mouth roughly. She clutched his shirt and he backed her against the counter, where he lifted her up to sit on. She opened her legs wide to him, then crossed her ankles around his back, running her hands up and down his muscular arms. Everywhere she touched, his skin heated. Everywhere he touched, her skin begged for more.

He took her shirt off and dropped it on the counter, nuzzling her breasts through her bra, biting her nipples softly. She took her bra off, baring her breasts to him, and he made a low, guttural growl.

Yer my everything, Heather, he said in her mind, bending to nip at her bare skin, his hands on her ass, kneading the strong muscles there. And if you hadnae been so persistent, I would still be lost. I never dreamed life could be like this. He returned to her lips and kissed her softly.

She grasped his shoulders, pulling at his shirt. You saved me, too.

He took his shirt off, then pulled her from the counter to stand, and they embraced for a few minutes, kissing, and petting heavily. Heather was consumed with lust for her bond mate, but also fully aware of the compressed gold in her pocket. She wanted to get rid of her pants, but at the same time, she was gripped by the need to keep the gold in her possession.

Graeme moved them across the room, still kissing her. He led her over to the couch, and then he gently laid her down on it. She curled up on her side, into what had become her favorite sex position since her belly had begun growing, then she slipped her pants off.

Graeme growled approvingly at her, making her laugh, but still, her mind was on the gold in her pocket. She felt compelled to protect it and keep it safe, no matter what

else she was doing. She folded her pants up small and put them under her head like a pillow.

She was on her side facing away from her mate, but she heard his belt unbuckle and she turned to look at him. He was undressing, his eyes on her. His boots lay toppled nearby and his pants dropped to the ground as she watched. His naked body was a thing of beauty—strong pecs, thick arms, huge thighs, ripped abs. He joined her on the couch, spooning her, his skin hot like fire. She reached back and gripped his cock, making him suck in a breath.

Aye, lass, that's the way, he said in his sexy, rolling brogue, and she laughed, remembering when he'd said it earlier.

You had this planned.

Graeme chuckled in her head but said nothing.

Heather turned and looked back over her shoulder at her mate. He got up on his elbow and loomed over her, kissing her, while his cock nudged at her ass. He rubbed it smoothly against her and it felt silky and hot. She raised one leg over his thigh, and he slipped forward until he was right where they both wanted him to be. Heather arched her back to guide her male inside her.

He groaned and clutched at her, saying My sexy, bonnie lass, in her mind.

He thrust in slowly and she ground back against him, countering his advance. He withdrew deliberately, an inch at a time, then lay down fully behind her, his hands on her shoulders, playing with her hair and stroking her skin, as he spoke softly in her mind, telling her how beautiful she was, and how perfect, and how much he loved her, as he established a slow and steady rhythm.

Heather moved with her mate, letting the tensions and the excitement of the day fall away, loving the smooth and sensuous texture of it all. Little by little, she felt drugged by the motion of his thrusts: in and out, in and out. His hands felt so good on her skin and she moaned, making small noises of encouragement and satisfaction. He grasped her throat gently with one hand and she slid his hand to her mouth so she could nibble on it and kiss his palm. He moved his other hand down her body, to her clit, and he caressed it softly, then rubbed it in the way she'd shown him.

Intense pleasure started in her belly, almost overwhelming her, and a pang of nausea gripped as well. She swallowed the nausea down, thinking, not now, not now. She closed her eyes and focused on the feelings of impending orgasm, then she came, hard and intense, crying out into the dark room, her growing belly a thick knot of tension that relaxed in sweet waves.

“Just like that, leannan, come all over me,” he growled into her ear.

She stiffened and squeezed both of Graeme's hands as the waves of pleasure faded. He hugged her tight, continuing to thrust into her until he slowed and groaned out his pleasure, coming in hot spurts inside her.

Heather, feeling relaxed and sated, closed her eyes for just a moment... and without meaning to, she fell into a deep sleep, dreaming vividly...

She was a huge dragon, pink and covered in scales and spikes, romping through a forest, knocking over trees for fun. She blew fire out of her snout, then roared and snarled, just because it felt good. She felt like catching and killing something, tearing into it with her dragon teeth, and eating it raw. She looked around for something to hunt. Suddenly, the forest melted away and she was falling. She unfurled her wings and flew up, a feeling of freedom guiding her higher and higher—until she was somehow disconnected from gravity and her wings didn't move her anymore. She floated, and then all daylight disappeared, and stars popped visible, one by one, over

a vast distance above and below her. After some time, a female voice spoke softly from all around.

“Well done, Heather Herrin, Mistress of Flame, fated mate to Graeme of the line of dragen.”

Heather blinked as a shining, iridescent dragon rose over the horizon. It was immense in size, almost as large as the full moon, and twice as radiant. Clearly, this was where the voice was coming from.

“Now you are to hide my gifts well, in the manner of dragen . The diadem is yours to do with as you like, but the circlets you must hide away and mention them to no one. When you are all together, and the time comes, you will be given a sign to distribute them.”

Confused, Heather tried to speak, but all that came out of her mouth was a plume of fire.

“Tell no one,” the massive dragon said again.

But... my mate? Heather asked in ruhi.

“Your mate is the exception.”

Heather exhaled a deep sigh of relief, and then she drifted into a dreamless sleep.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Dahlia woke up when the bed moved, groggy, and not sure where she was. She opened her eyes and Crew was laying next to her, up on his elbow, facing her and grinning, looking hot and handsome with sexy scruff on his face, his short dark hair perfectly combed.

“Time to get up, sleepyhead,” he said.

Then Dahlia remembered where she was—in Ella’s guest bedroom.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“3:30 in the afternoon.”

He rolled and picked something up off the floor. It was her duffle bag she’d packed for their planned overnight trip.

“I’ve got all your stuff,” he said.

“Oh, ok.” Dahlia still felt sleepy. She laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, speaking softly. “What about my e-reader?”

“Grabbed it, plus your notebooks and pens.”

“Good.” She pulled the blanket up to her chin and snuggled into her pillow.

Crew yanked the covers down. “No way, Doll. Up and at ‘em. Everyone’s waiting on you.”

Dahlia sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Are we riding with Beckett and Cerise?"

"Not just Beckett and Cerise. Everyone's going, even Mac , Bruin, Troy and Trent. The roads are closed but the resort is still open, so we're all going by snowmobile." He rolled off the bed and stood up.

Dahlia got up and stretched, feeling sluggish. "Snowmobile?" she said, trying to make sense of it all. She really just wanted to get back in bed and pull the covers over her head, but the heavy snowfall out the window caught her attention. She went to the window and looked around, but she could only see white.

She turned back to Crew. He held her pendant out to her. "Trevor thinks everyone should wear their pendants. You good with that?"

"Sure," she said, feeling a little more awake now. She took her pendant and fastened it around her neck. "Is Ella wearing hers?"

"She still won't touch it, so Cerise has it."

"Oh good, that's smart."

Ella wouldn't touch her pendant because in the past, it had 'traveled' her to dangerous places. Cerise didn't have a pendant because it had been stolen, but she could hold Ella's without any problems, and since Heather had been able to do some powerful things with Ella's pendant when they'd needed it, they thought Cerise probably could, too.

Crew held up a stack of clothes topped with a white and purple snowmobile suit.

"We're really going by snowmobile?" she asked.

“You, Cerise and Ella are, plus Mac and Bruin. The rest of us are running there as wolves.”

Dahlia was surprised. The males rarely went anywhere as wolves, and never together in a group that she’d seen so far.

“Trevor thinks it’ll be fine because of the snowfall. The roads’re closed and no one’s out and about. Serenity’s shut down.”

“But the hotel’s open?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Dahlia said. She went into the bathroom to get ready. When she was finished, Crew was waiting for her.

“Hey, Doll,” he said, looking impossibly sexy, moving in close, wrapping his arms around her and whispering in her ear. “You look pretty in that snowsuit.”

She smiled sweetly at him and kissed him on the cheek. He held out his hand and she took it.

“Wait!” she said. “I have to get your Valentine’s Day gift.”

He grinned and dug in the bag, then held it up. She’d gotten him a signed book from one of his favorite authors and thank goodness she’d wrapped it days ago.

“I found it with your notebooks and figured you’d want me to bring it.”

They made their way downstairs to the living room, which was empty, but, through the sliding glass door, they could see the team was clustered on the back porch, where

they were protected from the snow. Trevor was talking, while Ella, Cerise, Beckett, Trent, and Troy were listening.

“If there’re any issues at all, switch to route B. Got it?”

Troy barked and Beckett said, “Yessir.” Ella, Cerise and Trent nodded. Dahlia slid open the door and Cerise saw her right away. Cerise was dressed in an adorable yellow snowsuit and she waved enthusiastically at Dahlia and then grabbed Beckett’s hand, pointing at his identical snowsuit.

Dahlia grinned. “Twinsies.”

Cerise ran down the porch steps, motioning for Dahlia to follow. “You’re with me,” she said, heading for the snowmobiles which were parked under a tarp. Dahlia and Crew followed.

Cerise got on one, patting the seat behind her, but before Dahlia could move, Trevor stepped in front of them, obviously wanting to tell her and Crew the plan. Behind Trevor, Ella also got on her snowmobile and waved at Dahlia. Dahlia waved back, then paid attention to Trevor.

“Everyone on snowmobiles will cut across the property,” he was saying. “then follow the fence line of the neighbor’s cornfield. Once you hit the old highway, stick close to the road. The rest of us are going to stay inside the tree line. When we have to cross the highway, we’ll do it in spaced intervals.”

The sound of a snowmobile engine caught Dahlia’s attention and she looked around. A third snowmobile came around the side of the house and zoomed by them, with Bruin driving and Mac behind him. They went up a snowdrift and caught air, Mac whooping, and Bruin steering for dear life—and then they hit a tree. The snowmobile’s engine cut off, the machine stopped short and crashed to the ground,

sending a mini avalanche of snow from the tree's branches, which covered Mac, Bruin, and the snowmobile completely.

CRACK.

The unmistakable sound of a tree branch breaking made Dahlia's breath catch. It was a thick branch on the tree they'd just hit, and looked to be falling directly toward the two males and the snowmobile.

Dahlia clapped her hands to her mouth and Cerise covered her eyes. Trevor yelled and ran that way, even though there was no way he could reach them in time.

Beckett and Crew both said, "Oh shit," in unison.

Ella, on her snowmobile, shouted and thrust both her hands straight out at the falling branch. Power flew past Cerise, rocking her in her seat. The branch splintered, making twigs fly deep into the forest, and in the eerily quiet aftermath, snow continued to fall like nothing had happened. Ella dropped her hands to her belly, her eyes on the tree.

Everything was quiet and still. They all stared spellbound at the big mound of snow under the affronted tree.

Trevor stopped running, sliding to a halt in the snow. "Mac?" he called, with something sounding suspiciously like worry in his voice.

Mac burst out of the mound, face covered in powdery snow, yelling, "I'll save you Bruin!"

He dropped to his knees and dug, both arms flying, but then the snowmobile's engine burst to life and it and Bruin emerged from the snow like a submarine breaching the

ocean. Bruin took off across the yard at high speed, then turned and looped a wide circle around Mac. They were both covered head to toe in snow and grinning like lunatics.

“Climb on, Mac, I’m itching to go!” Bruin shouted, still moving.

Mac grabbed Bruin around the shoulders and flung himself into the second seat and they zoomed off into the forest.

Trevor watched until they were out of sight. He turned, shaking his head. “On second thought,” he said, “you three stay just outside the tree line, and we’ll stay just inside. We’ll deal with crossing the highway when we get there.” He patted the bags strapped to Ella’s snowmobile. “All the essentials are here.” Ella smiled at him, and he moved in close to touch her belly, giving her a questioning look. She nodded slightly, and he bent to give her a kiss.

Beckett pointed at the cargo sled. It held an oversized bag labeled, ‘pop-up tent’, plus two duffel bags, and a metal stockpot with the lid duct taped on.

“They forgot the stew.”

The noise of the snowmobile had faded, but now it was back and increasing. Dahlia giggled as Bruin and Mac drove slowly past, sheepish and snow-covered, with Trevor, Crew, Trent, and Beckett glaring at them. Troy was lying on the ground, his fur starkly black against the bright white snow, and his big body shaking as he laughed his ass off. Bruin stopped the snowmobile near the cargo sled, he and Mac hooked it up, then they drove off without saying a word.

“Alright, time to head out,” Trevor said. He took off his boots and socks and put them in a bag strapped to Ella’s snowmobile, then walked barefoot through the snow onto the porch and into his house. Crew and Beckett both took their boots off and put them

in the bag, then they went into the house, too.

A short time later, three wolves came out. Trevor was first, a big black wolf with a boomerang shape in white on his left shoulder. He looked almost exactly like Trent and Troy except he had sprays of silver and gray fur around his face and neck. Next was Beckett, who was always interesting to look at, because of his black 'boots', but the only one Dahlia really cared about was Crew. He exited last, then pulled the door closed with the wolf-friendly handle, and came down the steps. He was big, silver and black, with amber eyes and a dark starburst pattern on each shoulder. He moved with a simple grace that fascinated Dahlia and she could not look away. He loped right over to her and pressed his nose to her face. She hugged him.

Ready? He asked in her mind.

Yeah . She kissed his furry cheek, then released him. He loped across the yard to the forest and Beckett followed. Cerise started the snowmobile and Ella started hers. The three of them put their helmets on, and then they were on the move, leaving the property and heading for the resort.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Beckett bounded through the forest, bringing up the rear of the team. Trevor was in front, Trent and Troy were just behind him, while Crew and Beckett lagged a bit behind them. They were on a forest trail, heading due east, within a mile of the resort. The three snowmobiles were moving on the side of the road just outside the forest. They'd met up with Mac and Bruin at the edge of Trevor's property, and since then, the pair had been behaving.

Beckett was enjoying himself. He didn't run as a wolf near enough, and every time he caught a glimpse of Cerise driving the snowmobile, he imagined she was having the time of her life, and he liked that. She loved to drive anything with a motor.

The sound of the snowmobile engines changed and Beckett stepped off the path to see what was going on. Bruin and Mac had left the others and cut into the forest, driving straight across Beckett's path, making him stop short.

"Sorry about that, Boots," Mac called out as they crossed Beckett's trail.

They went around some trees, then cut out of the forest, then back in, and it pissed Beckett off. Those two assholes were going to get stuck and have to be dug out.

The two dumbasses went past some evergreen trees and then the engine cut off. Beckett headed that way to see what was up. He made his way around a large evergreen tree, then another, then he could hear them talking from behind a third.

"This is what we're gonna do," Mac was saying. "We knock the stew over, spill some of it in the snow, then we tell everyone it was all spilled... and then we can finish it off, just the two of us."

“Good plan,” Bruin said.

Beckett heard the clang and slosh of a full stockpot being moved around and his irritation spiked. What the fuck was wrong with those two?

He rounded the tree good and pissed, shifting into a man as he went, saying, “That’s a fucking stupid pl—”

He stopped short. Mac and Bruin were in their seats on the snowmobile and the stew was still duct-taped shut and strapped down.

Mac laughed, and Bruin grinned. Mac hit Bruin on the shoulder. “Go, go!”

Bruin started the snowmobile and zoomed out of there, with Mac yelling, “See ya later, No-Boots!”

Beckett shifted back into a wolf, shaking his head. He returned to the team, not saying a word to anyone. He should have known they were baiting him.

Within a few more minutes of trotting, Trevor and the others stopped at the edge of the forest. Beckett caught up with them and saw they had arrived at the resort. Across the road was the turn-off, and the snowmobilers had driven halfway down it, then parked near the resort sign. Beckett was the only one who couldn’t speak ruhi , but he knew the plan and it didn’t involve him just yet, so he waited.

Trent and Troy left the cover of the trees and went out to the snowmobiles. Beckett knew the road was out there somewhere, but the snow was so deep he couldn’t see it. Across the way, Ella was putting ‘police dog’ vests on Trent and Troy, and in a few minutes, the snowmobilers were back on the move, but now with two ‘police dog’ escorts.

The three wolves paced just inside the tree line and when Beckett lost sight of the snowmobilers, he lay down to wait. Crew did the same, while Trevor stood, staring at the road.

Dahlia smiled, enjoying herself as they snowmobiled down the road. She really liked catching glimpses of the wolves running through the forest as they kept pace with the snowmobiles, and now that Trent and Troy were running with them, it felt like they had wolf escorts. She loved it—she'd felt a deep connection to wolves her entire life, and now that she was mated to a wolven, she knew why.

They rounded a bend, and there was the Serenity Falls Resort, looking like any other roadside motel you could see on the side of any highway in the U.S., making Dahlia wonder if it was just a motel that called itself a resort. There were several large mounds of snow in front of the building that were probably cars, and the light was on inside the office, but those were the only signs of life.

Ella parked her snowmobile and so did Cerise, while Mac and Bruin kept going, around the back of the place. They took their helmets off and stood up.

“So much fun!” Ella said. Her color was high and her eyes were flashing.

They stomped snow off their boots, then the three of them went inside while Ella held the door open for Trent and Troy. A young man sat behind the front desk, his feet up on it, watching a movie on a laptop. When he saw them, he paused the movie and faced them. He looked bored as hell, until he saw Trent and Troy.

“Whoa,” he said, eyes wide. “Is this a raid?” His nametag said he was ‘Brent’.

“Not a raid,” Ella said, grinning. “We’re checking in. We called ahead about our dogs

and were told it was no problem.”

“You a cop?”

Ella pulled something out of her snowsuit, like maybe she might be, and Brent’s eyes went wide, but it was just a wallet. She slapped it on the counter.

“Not me,” she said. “I just want a room.”

“Rooms we got,” Brent said. “Name?”

“Burbank.”

Brent tapped away at his keyboard until he found the reservation. Within five minutes, they all had room keys, and they were back outside. Dahlia had room 10B and Cerise had room 11B, while Ella had the Presidential Suite.

They walked down the row of rooms until they found 10B. Before Dahlia could put her key in the door, Crew and Beckett walked around the corner of the building, both wearing jeans, jackets, and snow boots.

Dahlia grinned and kissed her male. “Where’d you come from? How’d you get dressed?”

“Mac brought our clothes and we walked in.”

“Perfect timing.”

Beckett waved Ella around the building in the direction they’d come from. “Trevor’s waiting for you at your suite.”

Ella smiled and headed that way with the two wolves.

Dahlia opened 10B, Cerise opened 11B, and they went in their respective rooms. Dahlia flipped on all the lights and... was not impressed.

The place was small and dark, even with the lights on, and it was old and maybe a little dingy.

“It looked bigger in the pictures,” she said.

“Sure did,” Crew said, flopping down on the bed, which squeaked and creaked. He frowned and checked the pillow. “Smells alright,” he said, his boots hanging off the end of the bed.

“Well, at least it’s clean,” Dahlia said, making the best of it. “Let’s see what Cerise and Beckett’s room looks like.” But before they could leave, there was a knock on the door. It was Beckett and Cerise, who came inside.

“Our room’s a cracker box,” Beckett said.

“It’s nice, though. Cozy...” Cerise said.

Beckett snorted, then hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. “If by ‘cozy’ you mean ‘teeny tiny’, well that’s fine, darlin’. If you like it, I love it.”

“We should go to the Presidential Suite,” Dahlia said.

“Let’s check it out,” Beckett said, opening the door.

But Mac was standing there, and he had someone with him who Dahlia had never seen before. A human? The guy was a foot shorter than Mac’s 6’3”, with salt and

pepper hair. He was dressed in a maintenance uniform and had snow on his shoulders and in his hair.

Mac looked past Beckett saying, “Ah, Cerise, could we get a little help?”

“Uh, sure?”

“This is Chet, he works maintenance here, and apparently they have a building across the way in the woods, and well, he says he saw some wolves out there.” Mac rolled his eyes and tilted his head.

“Uh...okay, I see.” Cerise said.

“We told him you could explain to him what he really saw—foxes, right?”

Mac was nodding while he spoke, with his eyebrows raised, his intense gaze on Cerise almost comical as he tried to signal to her what he wanted her to do. Dahlia hid her face, trying not to laugh. Cerise’s power was mind control, and she’d had to fix this kind of thing before.

“Sure, I can do that,” Cerise said. “Hi.”

“What are you, a scientist or something?” Chet asked.

“Wildlife biologist,” she said smoothly. “What exactly did you see?”

Chet spoke excitedly, pointing at the forest. Cerise listened, nodding along, until she’d heard the whole story. She was silent for a moment and then she moved closer to Chet and spoke firmly.

“What you saw were definitely foxes.”

Chet shook his head and frowned. “But—”

“My colleagues and I recently completed a study of those woods,” she continued, cutting him off, “and we catalogued several foxes that were abnormal in size but were, in fact, foxes. We’re now working on getting grant funding to study what makes them so large. It’s really exciting stuff.”

Dahlia watched Chet’s face as Cerise spoke, and she could see the exact moment when Cerise ‘pushed’ him, as she called it. His frown relaxed and he looked thoughtful, then calm and full of trust.

“Huh... I’ve never seen a black fox,” he said, tapping a finger on his chin, one eyebrow raised. “Or a white one with boots.”

While Cerise continued talking in soothing tones, Dahlia pulled out her phone and googled ‘black fox’ to see if there actually was such a thing. She found pictures of black foxes and discovered they were black because they had melanistic coats, but they were called silver foxes, because of their silver undercoat. There were also white foxes, of course, but they lived in the arctic. Hopefully Chet didn’t know that.

“Oh, I see,” Chet was saying. “Fascinating. They live in these woods, you say?”

“They do.” Cerise nodded with a smile.

“Problem solved,” Mac said, clapping once, then rubbing his hands together. He opened the door then not-so-gently shoved Chet toward it.

Perfect, Dahlia thought. She took one last look at the image of the silver fox, and then imagined it, projecting an illusion across the parking lot.

Chet saw it and yelled as he pointed. “Whoo, there’s one!” He ran out the door.

Mac stepped outside, then turned back to Cerise. “Thanks.” He looked at Dahlia. “Nice one,” and then he pulled the door shut behind him.

Cerise grinned at her and gave her a thumbs up. They ran to the door and opened it. Chet had stopped on the far side of the parking lot and was looking every which way. The fox had only lasted a moment and he wouldn’t see it again.

“Now we can go,” Beckett said from behind them.

Beckett seemed to know where he was going, so the rest of them followed him. He took them past the front office, to the next door, and then he went inside, bringing them to the end of a long hallway.

“Mmm,” Beckett growled. “I smell steak.”

“Me too,” Crew said.

Suddenly the males were speed walking. Dahlia and Cerise had to jog to keep up.

“Dinner’s at 7,” Crew said reading the sign on the closed restaurant doors. “And there’s a dance floor in there.”

Dahlia and Cerise cupped their hands to the glass but couldn’t see inside.

Beckett wandered across the hallway, where there was a large, open room, with comfortable chairs placed around an oversized river rock fireplace. Beckett picked a chair and sat down, looking like he might stay a while. Cerise followed, sat on his lap, and within the space of zero point two seconds, they were making out like teenagers under the bleachers.

“Oh no you don’t,” Dahlia said, grabbing Cerise’s arm and tugging on it. “You can

make out in Ella's room." She pointed to herself and Crew. "That's what we're going to do."

Cerise laughed and Dahlia pulled her far away from Beckett.

"Come on, Beckett, where is it?"

"Okay, okay."

Beckett got to his feet and they were on their way down another hallway, to an exit door, and outside. A short path just outside the door led them to what looked like a two-story house. A sign in front said, "Presidential Suite."

"This is a room?" Dahlia asked.

Crew nodded. "The whole house is the suite, but it's not as big as it looks. The entire upstairs is a movie theater that seats fifteen people."

They knocked but no one answered. Beckett laid on the doorbell, but still no one came to the door. Dahlia got her phone out and texted Ella and within a minute, Ella opened the door.

"Come in, come in." She pointed over her shoulder. "Look around. I gotta get back up there before they pick out the movie without me." She started up the steps.

The opening sounds of orchestra music started playing, loud.

"Too late," Dahlia said.

Ella hustled back up the stairs, one hand under her belly.

“Guess we’re staying,” Beckett said.

They took off their snow clothes then made their way up the stairs into an open room full of leather seats and round tables with a serve-yourself concession stand along one wall, with popcorn, candy, and sodas. A full-sized movie screen covered an entire wall. Mac and Bruin were in the seats closest to the screen, with soup bowls in front of them, and a massive container of popcorn between them, both of them eating fistfuls of it. Near them on the floor was the stockpot full of stew. Trent and Troy lounged in the aisle. Ella was in Trevor’s lap at a corner table, feeding him popcorn a piece at a time.

On the screen, a muscle car zoomed down a road with a woman in labor screaming in the back seat, and the man driving asking her how fast she thought they were going.

“Talladega Nights,” Cerise whispered. “This is hilarious.”

Crew grabbed Dahlia’s hand. “Have you seen it?”

“No.”

“It’s funny—you’ll like it. Where do you want to sit?”

They grabbed snacks and chose their seats. Dahlia sighed happily and kicked her shoes off, folding her feet under her in the comfortable leather chair and eating a little popcorn.

This was going to be a treat.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Heather woke up suddenly, still on the couch in the semi-darkness, with her mate asleep beside her and a wet spot beneath her.

“Ew,” she whispered, rolling off of it.

“Aye, deae ,” Graeme murmured, his eyes closed.

Heather sat up, nausea gripping her. She wrapped both arms around her stomach, breathing deeply and waited for the feeling to pass. Next to her, Graeme began to wake. He opened his eyes and saw her uncomfortable.

“Ach.”

He got up quickly, and crossed the room. He hurried back to her with a pot in his hands, putting it in front of her just in time. She retched and held her stomach, once, twice, and then it was over. She held the pot out weakly and Graeme took it. He gave her two hand towels, then put a third over the wet spot.

“I’ll get ye something to drink,” he said. He left the cottage naked, taking the puke pot with him. The sight of his tall, strong form made Heather smile a little. She sank back down on her pillow and watched him pass in front of the windows in the moonlight.

She wiped her mouth and felt better, so she got up to get dressed, and once she had her clothes on, she immediately checked on the anklets. They were still as she had left them. She put them back in her pocket as Graeme came in the door with a pitcher of water. He poured some in a mug for her.

She took it and drank some. Cold! Clean! The water tasted like nothing she could find in Illinois, but still she only sipped. She didn't feel like throwing up again if she could help it.

"I had another dream," she said. "I'm supposed to put the anklets away for a year and tell no one."

Graeme looked at her closely, took the pitcher from her hands and put it on the table, then held both her hands.

"Who told ye such?"

"A dragon as big as the moon."

Emotions played across Graeme's face—confusion at first, then understanding, then acceptance, and then... joy? He dropped his head and covered his eyes with his hands, then looked up again, smiling the sweetest smile she'd ever seen. He reached up to stroke her cheek, a look of awe on his face, then he took both her hands in his.

"Yer being trained to guard gold as any dragen would be. I didnae foresee it."

He hugged her tightly and Heather hugged him back, thinking about what he'd said, her earlier feeling of accomplishment flooding back.

"But..." she said into his chest, as he still hugged her close, "why can't I tell anyone? I don't like that part."

"Aye, it doesnae seem right at times. Ye can ask to forget information ye arenae allowed to share."

She thought about that for a few moments while they embraced in the quiet cottage.

“What was your dream about?” she asked into his shirt.

“Dream? I didnae dream.”

“I heard you talking in your sleep. You said, ‘Aye, deae .’”

He was quiet for a minute, then he shook his head. She looked up to find his expression disturbed.

“I dinnae remember,” he said gruffly.

Heather kissed him on the cheek, then stepped away. “I gotta pee,” she said, and headed outside.

She crossed the small clearing in the moonlight and went into the ‘forest, all the while thinking of what Graeme had said.

When she returned to the cottage, Graeme had the lantern on the table, and some packages of food out next to a bucket with a label that read ‘ready-to-eat meals’. He motioned to Heather to help herself.

“I had these brought up when they built the loo,” he said. “Just in case.”

Heather picked out some crackers and munched on them. Graeme finished a packet of beef macaroni, then started on some shredded beef in barbecue sauce.

“Not bad,” he said, then he pulled an envelope out of his pocket and dropped it on the table.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he said warmly.

Heather looked at the envelope, looked at Graeme, then without warning, burst into tears.

“I didn’t bring your gift,” she wailed miserably. She knew she was overreacting, but she couldn’t help it. Emotions were swirling inside her and she felt inconsolable at that moment, while being fully aware that pregnancy hormones were the devil.

“Leannan,” Graeme said, opening his arms. She went to him and he smoothed her hair and kissed her on the top of her head, hugging her until she was calm and quiet.

He held her at arm’s length, looking in her eyes, and said, “Ye are my gift.”

Tears leaked down Heather’s cheeks. She cradled her belly with her hands, thinking she didn’t want to be crying but she couldn’t help it.

Graeme motioned to her. “This is my gift, my weepy female who loves so openly.” He pulled her close and kissed her gently, moving a hand to her hands on her belly. “Ye are my gift and I thank ye for it. Our young thrives in comfort and protection, and I cherish every part of ye, each tear and hiccup.”

Heather wanted to bawl, but she smiled instead, tears still running down her face. The baby kicked, hard, and Heather pressed her hand to the spot.

“Do you think the dreams made me puke? I thought it was the baby.”

“It could be the bairn, if she's resisting Rhen’s communication with you. She'spart dragen, and likely to be strong-willed.”

“I was thinking morning sickness, but... good to know.”

She sat, opened the envelope, and shook it. Out dropped two tickets to a world-

famous reptile exhibit in Chicago.

“Oooh,” Heather said. “We’re going to this? Me and you?”

“Aye.”

She clapped her hands together. “I can’t wait. Thank you.”

“Yer welcome, love.”

He bent for a kiss and she gave him a good one. When she released him, he pointed at the food.

“Finish off whatever else you want, then we’ll head home. I think we can be back by dinnertime.”

Heather mindlessly ate a few crackers, her thoughts on how much she had to look forward to.

Heather sat on her dragon’s back as he flew through the dark night sky higher and faster than a plane. She fidgeted in her seat, trying to find a comfortable position. She never thought she’d even think this, but she’d had enough flying. It had been three hours from Scotland to Illinois and her butt hurt. Her thighs hurt. She was tired and finally felt hungry—really hungry because she’d barely eaten anything all day.

Graeme started descending.

“Oh thank goodness,” she muttered, the pain and irritation fading as she perked up.

They dropped into the level of the clouds and her clothes grew damp. She blazed hot to dry out.

We'll be down in a few minutes, Graeme said.

Okay.

She leaned forward, thinking about the chest of gold in Graeme's claws and how he was going to land. They dropped out of the clouds, and it was still snowing. She couldn't see much because it was so dark, but she sensed it when they dropped into the gorge.

Graeme hovered, the chest thudded to the ground, then they landed gently near it. He folded his wings and dropped to his belly. All around, snow melted to water and rushed away from them. Heather swung a leg over his back and carefully slid to the ground, where she checked on the compressed packet of gold anklets right away. All was in order.

Thank you, kind sir, she said.

The pleasure was mine, bonnie lady. He lowered his head, then asked, The diadem, do ye want it?

Heather shook her head. No, hide it with the rest, please.

Aye.

As they headed out to the waterfall, Graeme transformed into a man and carried the chest in his arms. He stepped behind the frozen pillars of water and stopped at the wall of solid rock. He transformed to a dragon, still standing on two legs and holding the chest in his forelegs. He brought his wings around, enfolding both the chest and

his body, then fire burst around him until he burned white hot. He walked directly forward, pressing into the wall. It held solid for only a few more seconds, then it groaned and sputtered, and heated into molten rock, spraying the smell of sulfur and rotten eggs everywhere, making Heather cover her nose and mouth. Graeme pressed forward into the rock like a knife through butter, then he disappeared completely.

Heather gasped, not expecting that to happen at all. The rock seemed to glow and merge behind Graeme, and she held her breath until his dragon emerged without the chest. The wall blazed with the fire of his exit and rock melted off him, dripping to the ground like water. Behind him, the rock sputtered steam as it cooled and solidified.

“Wow,” Heather breathed, a little lightheaded.

Graeme transformed into a man and put his arm around her shoulders. “That’s a job well done. We can go home—”

He quieted, then spoke to her in ruhi. Someone’s close by.

She held his shirt and froze, quiet. Listening.

He spoke ruhi, not to her, but she could hear him.

Trent?

Graeme?

Aye—we’re in the gorge near the waterfall.

Heather and Graeme left the nook behind the waterfall and walked out into the gorge, barely able to see the black blob in the snow that was Trent. He was halfway down

the incline into the gorge, making his way through deep snow, wearing a reflective 'police dog' vest .

Trent stopped moving. I didn't expect to see you two out here. Are you good?

Aye. Fine. What about ye? We're miles from home.

Everyone went to Serenity Falls Resort for the night. We already watched a movie and now they're all eating dinner. I finished my steak so I came out to patrol.

Who's everyone? Heather asked.

Ah, Ella, Trevor, Troy, Mac, Bruin, Cerise, Beckett, Crew and Dahlia. They're at the buffet. You guys can come eat. Trevor prepaid for your dinner, just in case you showed up.

Graeme's stomach rumbled. I'm hungry enough to eat the head off a loch monster, he said.

Heather stepped away from him and looked at him like she'd never seen him before. You what?

A horse, he said. I'm hungry enough to eat a horse. Do ye like that better?

She laughed. Actually I do.

Come on, Trent said. I'll take you there.

Within a few minutes, they were approaching the resort. Heather had been there before years ago, but she was certain Graeme never had. Trent took them around the back of the resort where they could hear grunting and swearing. Heather moved

closer to Graeme and he took her hand.

Under an overhang, Mac and Bruin sat at a picnic table just outside a door, arm wrestling, with beers and a large, covered stockpot next to them. They both were straining but neither was moving the other. Bruin saw them, looked back to Mac, and gave one mighty heave that knocked Mac over into the snow. Mac bounced to his feet, downed his beer, and dropped his elbow back on the table.

“That was your last freebie, Teddy McFuzzy, ” Mac snarled. “Let’s go.”

But Bruin stood and fist-bumped both Graeme and Heather. Mac waggled two fingers at them, then sprawled his legs out, looking bored.

“Graeme! Heather!” Bruin said. “You two missed a great day.”

Graeme said nothing, but Heather nodded and smiled.

“Glad you’re finally here! Everyone’s inside.”

He opened the door for them. Graeme went in first, holding Heather’s hand, and Trent followed. They were at the far end of an empty dance floor lined with speakers playing rock music, and the delicious smell of roasted vegetables and seared meat made Heather’s mouth water.

They walked across the dance floor, and the moment they saw the food, Graeme pulled her that way. Heather saw her sisters at tables around the room. They were all dressed up and looked beautiful. She waved to them, thinking very deliberately, If I can’t share, I would like to forget, and the answer came back at once—not a voice in her head, exactly, but more an understanding.

And so you shall, once the gold is well-hidden.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Troy, underneath one of the empty tables, finished his second steak. He licked the plate clean, then ducked out from under the tablecloth. Trevor had asked for the entire restaurant and dance floor to be reserved just for them, and the resort had agreed, for a price. Trevor was willing to pay because Wade had given him approval to use department funds that came directly from Rhen's gold in personal matters that involved the One True Mates.

Troy wound his way through empty tables with his head held high, liking the idea that he was on Rhen's payroll. He found a spot in the corner of the room where he could see everyone and jumped up to sprawl across a few stacks of chairs.

The back door opened and Graeme and Heather walked in along with Trent. Troy was glad to see Graeme and Heather. They brought a lot of power to the team, and they were just plain cool. Trent stayed near the door while Graeme and Heather went straight to the buffet. Trevor went over to talk to Graeme for a few minutes, then returned to his table.

When he got there, Ella pulled out a wrapped present and gave it to him. Trevor smiled and fished out another wrapped present from under the table and gave it to her. They opened their gifts at the same time, and each had gotten the other family photos in expensive frames.

Next to them, Graeme and Heather sat at an empty table, each of them shoveling down food like they hadn't eaten in days. Just watching them made Troy think about a third steak.

Across the room, Crew and Dahlia were exchanging gifts, and they both got books

for one another. Big surprise there. Boring gift if you asked Troy, but Crew and Dahlia both seemed happy. Dahlia shoved her tongue down Crew's throat and Troy looked away at that point.

Near them, Cerise was opening a large square gift. It was a picture inside a mahogany frame and she gazed at it with an amazed smile on her face, then gave Beckett a big hug and kiss.

"Let's see it!" Trevor yelled from across the room, and Cerise turned it around to show everyone. It was an aerial picture of their cabin from directly overhead.

"I want one," Ella called.

"I'm taking orders," Beckett said.

Cerise put the picture on the table and gave Beckett his gift. He ripped it open. It was a camouflage baseball cap, similar to the one he had on. He took that one off and put the new one on his head then he pulled Cerise's chair close and gave her a serious thank-you kiss.

The music changed and a lively song came on. Ella bounced to her feet and cat-walked to the dance floor, then turned and beckoned to her mate. Trevor wiped his mouth, whipped his napkin across the table, then he was on the dance floor, moving fast, grabbing Ella and twirling her under his arm. She laughed as he caught her against his body and they swayed to the music with him nuzzling her neck. Graeme and Heather joined them with their hands raised, doing a waltz or some shit, smiles plastered on their faces.

Troy grinned. It was good to see the big guy, and the other big guy, relaxed and enjoying themselves. Beckett and Cerise were next on the dance floor, and Crew and Dahlia were not far behind, but the four of them were doing less dancing and more

making out.

Troy snorted. He'd show 'em how it was done. He jumped lithely down from the chairs, then loped over to Trent.

Come on, Trent, let's dance.

Nope. I'm on patrol anyway. I'm out.

Trent went to the back door and stared at it for a few seconds, then Bruin opened it from the outside and Trent disappeared.

Suit yourself.

Troy ran in between the couples and bounded around, shaking his hindquarters and howling with the song.

"Go, Troy," Ella called.

"Where'd you learn to twerk, Troy?" Beckett shouted.

Ella moved into the middle of the dance floor, motioning to Troy and Trevor. They got into position, Troy in the center, Ella and Trevor on either side of him. Ella started the line dance and Trevor followed, and so did Troy, executing the footwork they'd worked out perfectly.

Left, left, back, back, right, right, forward, forward, spin, bend, and then do it again.

Troy spun, and saw Beckett and Cerise stealthily slipping out the front door. He knew where they were going, and why. He waited till the song was over, giving them plenty of time to get to their room, then he asked Trevor to open the door for him.

Troy loped out into the hallway, following their scent, making sure they'd gotten where they were going safely. When he knew they had, he picked a spot across the way, where he could see their door and waited patiently, snow falling on him steadily.

See me, Rhen? I'm guarding the shit out of those two.

A lone star twinkled in the semi-cloudy night sky and Troy watched it, thinking the snow would stop soon.

Cerise hit the wall and Beckett stopped just long enough to turn his hat around, then he pressed in close to her, tilting her chin up and kissing her roughly. They were just outside the restaurant in the empty, darkened hallway. They'd barely been able to keep their hands off one another all day, and it'd gotten worse once they got dressed up—Beckett in tight jeans, cowboy boots, a black Henley shirt, and of course his new baseball cap; and Cerise in her form-fitting dress with a cropped sweater over it, and ballet flats.

Her hands were around his waist and she melted into him as they kissed. He took one of her hands and put it on his cock through his pants, dragging her hand up and down the length of it. He let go of her, and trapped her with his palms on the wall behind her head, gently touching his tongue to hers, as their lips met. She palmed him through his pants again, while his clean, masculine scent flooded her senses, driving her crazy. He'd been teasing her all damn day and she was ready for him.

"It's going to take forever to get back to our room," Beckett whispered between kisses.

"We can't do it out here," Cerise breathed.

“Right. Come on, darlin’.”

Beckett kissed her one last time, then pulled her gently but steadily toward the room, adjusting himself in his pants several times, swearing softly and walking stiffly. Cerise couldn’t help but giggle at that, and in very little time, they were inside their room with Beckett kicking the door shut.

Beckett backed her against the wall just inside the door, then he kissed her, and while they were making out, she pulled her dress up to her waist, revealing her panties.

He ran his hand down her body. “Easy access, I like that.”

He caged her in with his body, leaning to take her lips roughly, then he wrapped his hands around her thighs and lifted her up against the wall. She wound her legs around his waist, meeting him kiss for kiss.

“I knew you would,” she told him, breathy, panting. “It’s why I bought the dress.”

He growled and nuzzled her neck until he took her lips again. She ran her hands up under his shirt. “Take it off me,” he rasped, helping her. When his chest was bare she dipped her head and kissed his skin while he ground against her.

“I’ve been waiting all day to get you naked,” he rumbled.

Ella’s pendant was around Cerise’s neck and she unclasped it, tossing it to the dresser, then she took off her sweater and dropped it to the floor. He growled approvingly, thumbing her nipples through the fabric of her dress.

Beckett released her to stand, and then he kicked off his boots. He crowded her against the wall, then dropped to his knees and put one of her legs on his shoulder, kissing her through her panties, making her suck in a breath. He kissed her, teasing

her, moving the lace to the side and breathing on her.

“Mmmm,” he said, his lips right on her, making her hips thrust forward. After the day they’d had, it was too much for her to handle.

“I’m going to come already,” she whispered. She pulled at him, wanting him inside her when she did. He stripped her panties off, then stood and kissed her, making sexy growly noises deep in his throat. He dropped his pants and lifted her with his strong forearms, then lowered her onto him, inch by inch. Cerise moaned and cried out, then dropped her head to bury her face in Beckett’s shoulder, not wanting to be too loud.

He eased her lower and lower, until he was as deep as he could go, and then he lifted her slowly, then lowered back down just as slow, thrusting on the downstroke. Cerise ground against him, gripping his shoulders as he thrust and withdrew, picking up speed and force.

“You feel so fucking good,” he gritted out, eyes closed, working her over.

Cerise buried her face deeper into Beckett’s neck, crying out as an orgasm rocked her. He thrust into her several more times, and then he stiffened.

“Fuuuuuuck,” Beckett groaned, and he came hard, deep inside her, holding her close.

They recovered together, Beckett still holding her up, as their breathing and their bodies calmed. He let her down, quickly went and found a towel and gave it to her. She wiped herself up and righted her clothes and put the pendant back on under her sweater.

Beckett gave her a lopsided smile and took his hat off, then rubbed the back of his neck. “That was hot,” he said.

She smiled and he put an arm around her shoulders. They squeezed past the bed together, to the tiny bathroom to clean up.

After a bit, they left the room holding hands, and when they made it back to the restaurant, they slipped back inside without anyone noticing they'd been gone.

"I wanna dance," Cerise said.

"Alright, let's boogie."

They went to the dance floor as a slow song was playing and Beckett pulled her in close. Cerise rested her head on his chest as they swayed back and forth.

Trevor passed them and Cerise watched him curiously. He opened the front door and Troy came in. Cerise gave him a small wave and Troy smiled at her, which made her laugh, because it was such a scary beautiful smile, with all those sharp teeth.

"Fun day," Beckett rumbled.

"So fun," Cerise said. "The best day ever."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Cerise sat at the table, buffet dishes and glasses stacked all around, watching Ella, Trevor, Graeme, Heather, Trent, and Troy leave out the back door. It was almost midnight and those six were going to head home, while Beckett, Cerise, Crew, Dahlia, Mac, and Bruin planned to stay the night. Crew and Dahlia had gone back to their room a few minutes ago, and Mac and Bruin were already conked out on the couches in the suite. The plan was that Trent and Troy were going to come back and spend the night for extra security, after they'd seen the other team safely home.

"Ready?" Beckett asked.

"Ready."

Once they'd returned to their room, Cerise sat down on the bed and a spring poked her butt. When they'd first arrived, she'd been so excited that she hadn't cared about the bed, but now she did. She lay down and rolled around. The bed was not comfortable.

"You know..." she said, looking at him, then the bed.

"You want to see what the beds are like in the Presidential Suite?"

"Or we could just go home," she said, keeping her tone bright.

"That's way better." He snatched up the phone and called the next room. "Dude. Do you want to go home? Cerise wants to go home." He waited a beat. "Good. Try to catch Trevor and them." He hung up and pointed at their bag. "I'm packing."

“I loved this place, Beckett, I had a really good time.”

He stopped packing. “Me too, dumplin’ but you want to sleep in your own bed?”

“Yeah.”

“Power might still be out.”

“We can start a fire, or sleep at Ella’s place. It’s close enough and familiar enough to be home. I just want to be home, I think.”

“I gotcha honey bunches.”

He threw everything into the bag except their snow gear and they left the room.

Within fifteen minutes, they’d met up with the rest of the team and were on their way home. Cerise was back riding with Dahlia, Ella was behind them, and Mac and Bruin were bringing up the rear.

It was still snowing, but not very hard. The road was still unplowed and empty. Cerise, going slow and steady, looked up, trying to see the dragon flying overhead but she only saw clouds and a few stars peeking through. She knew he was there, with his mate on his back, keeping pace with them, and she liked the idea that he was watching over them, too. Inside the tree line, the five wolves trotted in a line and Cerise could only catch glimpses of them now and then.

When they were almost to the cornfield, they saw their first vehicle. It was a snowplow, a big one, on the other side of the road spraying snow high. The driver honked and they all waved.

Ten minutes later, they were pulling up in the backyard, the wolves running fast and scattering, some going to the house, some going around to the front. Cerise stopped her snowmobile near the back porch, and so did Ella, while Mac and Bruin zoomed to the front of the house. The cabins were fully dark, while the main house was lit up, and the generator was still running, resonating deeply in the night.

Ella got off her snowmobile and took her helmet off. She looked at the sky. Cerise and Dahlia did the same.

“It’s stopped snowing,” Cerise said.

“Finally,” Ella said. She was walking up the back steps. She stopped on the porch and turned back to them.

“Dahlia, you and Crew can sleep in the guest bed, since you were in there earlier and I haven’t changed the linens yet. Cerise, Troy’s going to bunk with Trent tonight, so his room will be open for you and Beckett if you want it. I’m going to change the linens right now.”

Cerise followed Ella to help her, while the others put away the gear. Goodnights were said all around, and then Cerise met Beckett in the back and they checked on the horse in the barn.

Finally, once everything was attended to, they headed to bed. The house was quiet and dark, but people and wolves were still moving around here and there. Cerise and Beckett didn’t speak much as they quickly showered, then fell into bed.

Beckett yawned and dropped onto his pillow, reaching for her. She snuggled next to him, bone weary and happy. Beckett was asleep almost immediately—Cerise could tell by his breathing—but she lay awake in the dark, thinking about the day and how fun it had been, until the constant backdrop hum of the generator ceased, and she

realized the power was back on.

She snuggled into her man, waiting to see if he would wake. When he didn't, she closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

Dahlia headed up the stairs, carrying her bag, and pulling Crew behind her. He was flagging, hard, but she still felt pretty fresh.

"C'mon sleepyhead," she said.

He mumbled something she couldn't understand as they entered the guestroom and Crew immediately flopped facedown on the bed. Dahlia dropped her bag, then unlaced his boots and pulled them off him.

"C'mon, turn over and take your pants off."

"Not tonight, Doll, I'm tired. I'll be locked and loaded for you in the morning," he said, his voice muffled by the pillow.

She snorted. "Take 'em off so you can sleep, that's all."

Somehow, she got him undressed and under the covers, as he snored through it. She changed her clothes, stored away her pendant in her bag, then she found the book Crew had just given her and her e-reader. She took them both with her to bed.

She smelled the new book and read the back cover, then she turned on her e-reader and read the last page over again, trying to decide which book to read right that moment.

The constant hum of the generator cut off.

“Power’s on,” Dahlia whispered to herself.

She crawled out of bed and went to the window overlooking the backyard. Their cabin and the one beside it were dark and quiet. Nearby, a black wolf left the tree line and circled the cabins—Trent, and he had Angel the bobcat with him. Angel, so much smaller than Trent, had to bound through the snow like a fox to keep up.

Dahlia smiled. So that’s where the little guy was. He had food and several beds throughout the houses. He would sleep when he wanted to.

She went back to bed and made her decision: she would tandem read, starting with her new book. She put her e-reader under her pillow, then she cracked open her new book and lost herself in it.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

Heather walked hand in hand with her male through the forest. They'd landed at the main house and helped to put gear away, and now they were on their way to their cottage. Heather's fingers touched her pocket, feeling for the packet of anklets for the hundredth time that night.

The day had been long and challenging, and the night had been so much fun. Heather was exhausted, but one thing bothered her.

"Why didn't anyone ask us where we'd been?" she asked Graeme.

He looked up at the sky, which was slowly clearing of clouds and filling with stars and didn't answer right away.

"I dinnae ken," he said finally. "Mayhap Trevor told everyone it was a secret. I told him before we left what we were about."

They reached their cottage, and once inside, Heather checked on her lizards right away—they were all fine and sleeping.

Finally, she could finish her business with the gold.

First, she took the two crystals out of her pocket and placed them carefully with her glassblowing equipment. She opened her tool chest, lifted the top tray, and fished out Graeme's Valentine's day gift—a ticket for a flying lesson in an antique bi-plane. She put it in her pocket and went into the living room to look around with fresh eyes.

Graeme had told her she would know the proper hiding place for the anklets when

she saw it, and that something as small as them would likely be best hidden in or near their home, especially considering the personal nature of them.

Graeme, already dressed in his silk boxers, appeared at the bedroom door.

“I’ll be lying down, but nae sleeping.”

She nodded at him, knowing that was his way of leaving her to her business, but staying available at the same time.

Heather wandered around her house, but nothing was jumping out at her. She went into the bedroom and walked around the bed, thinking the fireplace looked interesting. Graeme, lying on the bed with no blanket, looked at her suddenly, almost startling her.

He sat up and swung his legs over, speaking in ruhi. I remember my dream. I’m to be handing over the keeping of yer pendant to ye.

Really? Heather didn’t even know where her pendant was. Graeme had hidden it after they’d last used it and she hadn’t asked where.

Aye. He stood, crossing the room to the fireplace, his right forearm and hand burning red, then white hot. He knelt to thrust his hand into the stone at the base of the fireplace, and the room filled with an acrid smell. He pulled his hand out, holding a small metal box. He handed it to her, then returned to the bed.

Heather peeked inside the box. The pendant was there, with the dragon on one side and the angel on the other. She closed the box quickly, attempting to guard herself against the swirling emotions the sight of the pendant brought up in her. Now she had two things she had to hide.

She circled the room, looking at everything. The only thing that was interesting to her

now was the fireplace. She left the room and circled through the house once more, even pausing in the kitchen. She frowned. Nope, still nothing.

She went back into the bedroom, and suddenly, the fireplace was the only thing she could see. It loomed larger than anything else in the room, making her feel dizzy. She covered her eyes, and when she looked again, the fireplace was normal, but seemed... brighter somehow.

“Is it okay if I hide my pendant in the same place you did?”

“Aye, if it calls to ye.”

Heather crouched there and inspected the rocks Graeme had taken the pendant from. They looked like the rest of the river rocks, and somehow she knew what to do with her hands to make them melt that way—a certain swirling movement would do it.

She cupped the box with her pendant in it, protecting it from heat, while blazing her hand red hot. She stalled out at red hot, unable to reach the same high temperatures as Graeme.

Nae bother, Graeme said, relaxed on his pillow, watching her with hooded eyes. Will still work. Try.

So Heather tried. She pressed her hand to the rock and raised her temperature a few more degrees, focusing with all her will, and the rock softened. She pressed hard and her hand went in two inches. Heather laughed in surprise. Her temperature shot up several hundred degrees and she was able to sink her hand in as deep as her forearm. She spread her fingers in the molten stone and released the box, then pulled her hand out, giving the rock the little twirl and smooth she'd thought of. It cooled quickly, quickly returning to normal.

She turned to look at her mate and he was grinning at her.

Nicely done.

She held up the anklets. Can these stay compressed?

Aye, but only for sixty years. After that, the gold will be less likely to recover its shape, no matter what.

She almost laughed at the absurdity of the number of years, but then she remembered she was in training, and so she repeated the fact to herself several times.

Now I need to find a place to hide these , she thought.

The correct place popped into her mind—just to the right of the pendant. She picked her spot and increased her temperature, this time getting hot enough on the first try. She pressed her hand in, holding the compressed anklets tightly. When she felt she was even with the pendant, she opened her hand and released the anklets, withdrew her hand, then swirled and smoothed the rock.

Another job well done, Graeme said from the bed, his eyes closed, his mental voice soft.

Heather stared at the rocks at the base of her fireplace for a long time, thinking... thinking there was something else she should do. She sat down on the floor, and reached out to touch the rocks where she'd hidden her pendant. They were still warm. She smiled to herself, feeling so good that she'd been able to hide her own pendant the same way Graeme had.

Her belly moved and she dropped a hand to it. "Okay little one," she said softly. "Let's get ready for bed."

She got to her feet. Graeme was asleep, breathing deeply and evenly, his body relaxed. She took his Valentine's Day gift out of her pocket and put it on the

nightstand near him so he would see it when he woke up.

She went to the bathroom and cleaned up, pulling her hair out of the braid, and dropping her clothes in the hamper. The microwave in the kitchen beeped softly, and she realized the generator had shut off, meaning the power was back on. Good.

Heather went to bed and curled up next to her mate. She snuggled into her pillow, and within a few moments, she was asleep.

Ella dragged the load of linens to the washer and put it on top for the morning. In the kitchen, she put the last of the food in the fridge, made sure both housecats and the bobcat had food and water, then she did a tour of the house, turning off lights and checking doors.

She'd had such a fun Valentine's Day, spending the entire day with her new family, and now she had a full house, and a happy heart, two sore feet, and one sore back. She started up the stairs, thinking she'd be lying down soon.

The front door opened and Trevor came in. He met her on the stairs and embraced her, rubbing the small of her back automatically.

Everyone's eaten, the guard is all good, and Bob, Sharon, and Lillian are all safe, he told her in ruhi.

Good. Crew and Dahlia are set up in the guest bedroom, and Beckett and Cerise are in Troy's room.

We can go to bed, he said with a kiss and a smile.

Soft lights in the kitchen flickered once, and the generator whirred to a stop.

Trevor grinned. Power's back.

I wonder if anyone will go home, Ella said.

They stood on the stairs for a few moments, but when all stayed quiet, they started up the stairs hand in hand.

Trevor brushed his teeth then headed to bed while Ella was still taking her makeup off. She washed her face and brushed out her hair, then went to the bed, unable to see anything in the room while her eyes were adjusting. She crawled in next to Trevor, to the safest place in the world, and he snuggled her in close to his body, cupping a hand under her belly, then lazily rubbing her shoulders with the other.

"Love you," she said.

"Love you," he said.

Ella closed her eyes, and she fell asleep, dreaming deep dreams of love and life, her heart filled with the promise of tomorrow.