



What's Rogue Got To Do With It (Fur-Ever Mountain Pack #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Not all packs are by birth.

After my father is challenged and loses his place as Alpha, leaving my den isn't a matter of choice, it's a matter of life or death. Now I'm marked as "other" and living in the shadows between the human and the shifter world, not belonging in either. It's a lonely life, but at least I'm still here. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

I'm fine. Really, I am— in the way "fine" is always a lie.

It's not until I'm out scrapping metal and I stumble upon a wolf, that I see a future.

Only two problems remain : 1) The gorgeous wolf shifter's stuck in a bear trap and unconscious. 2) My fox recognizes him as ours and rogues can't mate, upon penalty of death.

Total Pages (Source): 24

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

LARKIN

“Bobby, order up!”

The boss’s voice yelling at my co-worker barely registered as I studied the grease trap. It needed cleaning again.

I pressed my back against the metal prep counter and stared at the congealed mess floating in the industrial sink.

Three weeks I'd been washing dishes at Chester’s Highway Diner, and in those twenty-one days, the grease trap had been my nemesis.

The putrid smell roiled my belly and I pinched my nose and pictured running through the woods in my fur.

Being a shifter with my super sonic senses made the stink worse than it would be for humans. Lucky me!

Despite the waves of nausea that rolled over me when I caught a whiff of the grease trap, the cash Chester slipped me every Friday kept me turning up for my daily shift. He was a star, paying me cash and keeping it off the books.

Crockery shattered and someone cursed followed by Chester yelling to clean up the mess, his gravelly voice cutting through the clatter of plates and sizzle from the griddle.

I grabbed the latest stack of plates. Gross.

You'd think being a shifter and witnessing my beast take down his dinner would give me a strong stomach.

But dealing with people's leftovers had my breakfast rising up my throat.

The remains of eggs over easy, hash browns, and bacon stuck on the white porcelain made my wolf whine saying he needed to hunt.

I plunged the crockery and into the sudsy water.

The routine was mindless. First scrape, followed by rinse, wash, and lastly, stack.

I could do this in my sleep. My hands did their thing while my mind wandered to the room I'd rented above the auto shop.

Though I liked Chester and the people I worked with, I never stayed in one place very long.

One month was about my limit and I was getting close to that.

I'd been following a pattern for a while now.

Roll into town, find work that paid cash, keep my head down, and leave before anyone asked questions.

And before local packs or dens picked up on an omega who wasn't one of them on their land.

A lone shifter was viewed with suspicion by my kind.

I had to leave before I was pummeled with questions about my family and den and why I smelled wrong because I didn't have the den's protective scent markers.

The lunch rush died down around two, leaving me alone with the neverending pile of dishes. Through the service window, I watched the last trucker polish off his pie and coffee. The man's scent carried a hint of the forests and mountains I'd been dreaming about and my wolf stirred.

Are you done yet ? My beast slept while I worked, unable to understand how humans ate such gods awful food and why I got paid for cleaning up after them.

I'd been born in a pack as most wolf shifters were. My folks weren't betas or on the council.

They weren't pack elders and technically they were not part of the pack.

But they were allowed to live in the land and they worked hard and respected the Alpha's wishes.

But the Alpha had a son my age and I was always top of the class even after the teachers massaged the grades.

I beat him in athletics and was a better debater.

His anger simmered for years until my parents were killed in a car accident. Soon after, while I was grieving, he convinced his father I'd stolen his cash and I was cast out, before my first shift, never able to return to my parents' graves.

Every instinct screamed at me to belong.

I longed for shared scents, hunting with the pack, the routine of the seasons and the

joy of finding a mate.

But most wolf shifters belonged to their birth pack and though it wasn't unheard of for outsiders to join, there was a rigorous interview process before the council would consider admitting any newcomer.

I had a past that shadowed my every move.

"You doing okay back there, Larkin?" Chester appeared in the doorway, wiping his hands on his apron. He was human but had lived around here all his life and he knew enough to not ask questions when someone's beast appeared in the forefront of their gaze or fur sprouted on a guy's arm.

I figured he'd seen a lot in his sixty plus years which was why he'd never pried into my background.

"Just fine." I plastered on a smile. "Getting through the last of them."

He glanced away and then at me. "My nephew's coming to visit next week. Nice guy, about your age. Works construction up in?—"

"That's kind of you," I interrupted. And it was. "But I'm here to do my job and don't want to meet new people."

He nodded. "Well, the offer stands. You're good people. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

The bell above the front door jangled, and Chester disappeared to greet the new customer. I returned to my dishes, but it wasn't just the remains of bacon I was smelling. The scent that drifted from the dining room made me go still.

It was an Alpha and in the three weeks I'd worked here, the man had not entered these doors. His scent would have lingered if he came when I wasn't around. His scent tracked as strong and confident but that wasn't news as he was an Alpha. My guess was he wasn't here for Chester's pie.

My hands stilled in the water and I considered tearing out the back entrance and forgoing my final wages.

"Coffee, black," the alpha said. No please or thank you and no greeting Chester and asking about his day.

I kept washing the dishes, not wanting to draw attention to myself. Maybe the Alpha wouldn't bother me and he'd finish his coffee and leave.

"Chester." The alpha's voice suggested he was used to being obeyed. "Do you mind if I have a word with your dishwasher?"

The blood in my veins turned to ice. My hands clenched around a plate, and the ceramic cracked.

"L-Larkin?" Chester's voice wobbled. "There's someone here who wants to talk to you."

There was no point in running. The Alpha would catch me before I made it to the back door, and running would only confirm whatever suspicions had brought him here.

I dried my hands slowly, my mind whirring, and I walked into the dining room as if being commanded by a pack Alpha was an everyday occurrence.

The alpha sat in the corner booth, an elbow on the table but he radiated power.

He was younger than his voice suggested, maybe in his early thirties.

Most Alphas were a decade or more older and I wondered if he'd been thrust into the role or whether he'd done what my father's killer had and overthrown the one who held the title before him.

His flannel shirt and worn jeans marked him as a local, but his posture shouted pack leader.

"Sit," the Alpha commanded.

I stayed where I was. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"I know." The alpha's expression didn't betray his purpose. "That's why we're having this conversation instead of a different kind."

Chester hovered nearby. He was protective of me but he had to live and work in this town and he couldn't disrespect an Alpha.

"It's alright, Chester. This is a friendly chat."

He retreated to the kitchen, and it was as though I'd lost my last friend.

"My name's Fenton," the alpha continued. "I run the Fenwild Pack and my betas informed me you were here a week ago."

I clenched my jaw.. "I'm not causing trouble."

"I agree you're working, keeping to yourself and not hunting on our land. I respect that." Fenton leaned forward slightly. "But you're also an unmated omega with no den or pack protection."

I braced myself for what was coming.

“And that makes you a liability.”

The words stung like tiny barbs piercing my skin because they were true. I'd heard them many times from different alphas. And like the others, Fenton was polite but he'd tell me I had to leave.

"How long?"

"Tonight would be best. Tomorrow morning at the latest." His tone was even but there was no mistaking the steel underneath. "I'm not trying to be cruel. But I've got a pack to protect, and lone omegas attract the kind of attention nobody wants."

I'd known this would happen because it always did. "I understand."

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

That question was new. Most alphas didn't bother asking about my plans. "I do." I didn't but I'd find somewhere.

Fenton studied me, and I fought the urge to shuffle my feet under that penetrating gaze.

He sighed. "If circumstances were different..." He didn't finish the sentence, but there was no need.

"I'll be gone by morning."

He tapped the twenty he left on the table for his untouched coffee. "Safe travels."

I returned to the kitchen where Chester was pretending to organize inventory. "Everything okay?" He didn't look at me.

"I have to go. Tonight."

He put a hand on my shoulder. "I figured as much. That's how it goes with young folks these days. Everyone's always moving on."

I'd had this conversation with many employers since I'd been forced from the pack where my family had been seeking refuge. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need." He pressed an envelope into my hands. It'd be my wages plus extra, knowing him. "Take care of yourself."

I didn't trust myself to say anything and finished the last of the dishes before hanging up my apron, and walking out.

I collected my pack from my room and strode out to the highway.

It stretched in both directions, north and south, leading to new towns and the same problems. My wolf paced beneath my skin, tired of the endless cycle of arrival and departure.

But there was no alternative so I shouldered my pack and started walking south, toward whatever came next.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

CREVEN

I looked down at my phone to see my father's name lit up. Great. That was the last thing I needed.

It was my day off and my plan had been to spend the morning drinking coffee on my back porch, ignoring the world around me. Of course, being the son of the den Alpha meant that I, of all people, couldn't ignore his call. If I did, he'd make an example out of me... a very public example.

It was one of the bazillion reasons my father and I didn't get along. He believed that the son of the Alpha had to be the perfect role model. In his mind, if I did something wrong, that showed that he was somehow less than.

"Hello."

"It rang three times." Great. He was in a bad mood, too.

"I'm sorry about that. It was in my pocket, and I didn't realize at first." It wasn't a lie, but I should've known better than to mention it.

"Just apologize. Don't make excuses." If I'd been in his presence, he'd have had me on my knees as he reprimanded me.

"Yes, Alpha. I apologize."

There had been a time when I'd have pushed back. That time was over. Keeping the

peace was always better, especially since my dad died. I no longer had anyone to be a buffer.

“I need you to get the van keys and head up to the warehouse store.” And suddenly he had his business voice back on.

“Isn’t that Ryan’s job?” I instantly regretted the words. Never poke an Alpha. “I... I mean, yes, Alpha.”

“I don’t know why you’re so defiant.” The affection in his tone caught me off guard. Wasn’t he still mad at me? “Sometimes I really do know better.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I need Ryan today. Come get the list and keys and go pick up everything.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes and Father, I am sorry.”

I didn’t inherently hate shopping, but going to the warehouse store for our monthly supplies was a pain in the ass.

I wasn’t picking out a loaf of bread and some instant noodles to stock my own kitchen.

I was buying food for the entire den, which meant flatbed trolley after flatbed trolley of food, which I then had to load into the van to bring back—to unload then unload it all back here.

Not to mention being in a metal building surrounded by humans.

I didn’t have anything against humans. They were fine.

But humans... They felt uncomfortable around me.

They didn't always realize it, or know why, but when I would walk down an aisle, they'd back up or swirl around me, giving me a wide berth.

Children would cling to their moms. Once I'd had a couple of humans report me as, quote, "being creepy"—all because I bought six gallons of milk.

How buying milk was creepy, I had no idea.

And it wasn't always that bad. Some days I could push my fox down far enough where the reactions were less in your face. But today wasn't going to be one of those days. My fox had been a butt for about a week, demanding we hunt multiple times a day.

I wasn't sure if it was because I was getting to the age where I should be settling down and I refused to take a mate, or if it was just him going through a phase, but whatever it was, I was ready for it to be over.

The warehouse store was an hour and a half from the den lands, and I pulled in just as they opened to the public. I filled the first flatbed trolley with paper goods, cleaning supplies, and fruit snacks.

For some reason, the kits all loved fruit snacks and while they didn't need a lot of human snacky stuff, preferring to focus on the den's homemade jerky, fruit snacks were the exception. They weren't on the list, but my trip, my rules.

I stuck to the list as I filled the second, and the third with food before navigating them to the check out where my first one awaited.

"Record time." I closed the back of the van doors. It was barely after lunch, and

everything was inside, and I was on my way back home.

The traffic was light and I pulled down the dirt road toward our den with plenty of day left to enjoy.

The weather was gorgeous. The sun was bright, the wind was blowing softly.

But even so, I still didn't see anyone outside.

Not a kit playing or a parent walking, not a fox sitting on their porch reading. No one.

That should've been my first hint that something had gone wrong.

I pulled behind the kitchen, banged on the back door, and it didn't open up. I banged again. Nothing. Giving up, I went through the front and propped it open while I unloaded the groceries and put them away solo.

Still not a fox in sight.

And then I heard it—the bell. The bell that told us that a challenge had been called.

“Fuck.”

I ran to the clearing where all den business took place to discover that everyone was already there.

Children sitting on their parents' laps in the back.

Silent. This hadn't just begun—whatever was happening was already well underway.

No wonder I hadn't seen anyone. They had all been here and I hadn't been notified.

My stomach dropped and I ran to the front, pushing my way through, without so much as an excuse me.

My father stood where he always did and the look on his face told me everything I needed to know.

This was why I had been asked to make the run.

If I hadn't been so fast, I wouldn't have heard the bell.

He didn't want me to witness this. He knew it was coming.

“Alpha,” I dared not call him father now, despite, in that moment all I wanted was my father to hug me and tell me that everything was fine and there was nothing to worry about.

He opened his bond to me, the one that was usually only between Alphas and Betas, but somehow found us. He was scared. Terrified. But not for himself. No... he was scared for me.

I crossed over to him, baring my neck, and he gave me a nod and then said so low that only I could hear, “No matter what, keep your skin.”

I nodded and took my place behind his right shoulder, as was custom for all official den gatherings.

And as I was turning around to face the center, Rayne walked into the circle.

“I, Rayne, officially challenge you for the position of Alpha.”

This wasn't the official call to challenge. That had been done before the bell was

rung. He was doing that for me. His eyes glaring at me as if I somehow was at fault for any of this.

I'd never particularly liked or disliked Rayne before now. I knew that he was not pleased he'd been overlooked for the job of Beta, but that was to be expected. Not once had he acted in a way that caused me to worry he would pull something like this, that was for sure.

While he was within den law to challenge the way he did, he was going against tradition. Instead of challenging Ryan, he went straight to the top.

My father dropped his robe, stepped into the ring. "Challenge accepted."

Ryan's job as the highest-ranking member outside of the challenge was to call it to begin.

He recited the rules one at a time. I didn't hear a single one of them.

It was all coming at me too hard, too fast, too loud.

Someone was going to die and as much as I didn't always see eye to eye with my father, I wasn't ready to let him go.

Ryan stepped out of the ring and officially started the challenge.

Both men shifted, only Rayne's shift was faster than my father's, and his feet barely touched the ground before he lunged at my father, grabbing his neck mid-shift and clenching down on it hard.

Both of them landed on the ground with a thump. Blood everywhere.

My father hadn't stood a chance.

There was no rule that stated challenges needed to be fair. Once they were called, it was game on. But I'd never heard of one where the challengers didn't wait for the shifts to be completed before attacking.

More than anything, I wanted to race in there. Just be by my father's side as he took his last breath, to tell him I was sorry, that I loved him.

But his words kept echoing in my head. Keep your skin. Keep your skin.

He'd been warning me... telling me not to go in there. Because the second I did, I, too, would become part of the challenge. I was no match for Rayne. Not in my skin. Not in my fur. Not in anything—except for possibly bookkeeping, and there was no challenge for that.

Instead of acting on impulse, I crumpled to the ground, sobbing.

The ceremony announcing Rayne as the new den Alpha began, one by one, the den members walked up to him, bore their necks, giving their allegiance... beginning with Ryan.

I doubted Ryan would see the sunrise. In Rayne's mind, he was the enemy too. But he didn't need to challenge Ryan. He could just kill him. He was the Alpha, after all.

And his strategy of going straight to my father finally made sense. Why go up the ranks when you can start at the top and destroy everything below you? Fuck. If I'd only seen Rayne for who he was earlier, maybe my father would still be alive.

The entire den, including the children, had sworn their allegiance, leaving only me. It took all I could do to get up. My eyes blurry, my cheeks tear-stained and burning.

I didn't need to walk to him. He came to me. Bastard was loving this.

As I tilted my head, unsure what to do next but knowing I had to live to see another day he snarled, "Don't bother."

His hand darted out in a partial shift, swiping my shoulder once and then again in an X format, the pain searing.

"You, Creven, are no longer den. You are not welcome here. You are not welcome in the world of shifters. You will leave here with nothing but a backpack. And you shall never return. It's that or death. Choose now."

Technically, he didn't have the authority to put me down. Not when he just marked me a rogue. Not unless I came back.

But I remembered what my father said. He wanted me to survive this.

"I choose rogue."

I had no idea how that would work. What it would be like, living among humans who were put off by me, and ignored by shifters—or worse, treated horribly by them. But that was a worry for another day.

Marcu gave me till sundown to get out, allowing me to watch them put my father on the fire.

His body had already been taken away. I didn't have a chance to say a proper goodbye.

But then again, he was with the Goddess.

So it wouldn't really be goodbye, as much as me finding closure.

I could do that later. For now, I needed to survive.

Giving me time to pack had been foolish on Rayne's part.

It gave me the time to open a new online bank account and transfer over the money my father and I had saved in our own accounts.

I wasn't sure how much the den had access to and this would keep our money safe from Rayne.

Being rogue was difficult enough without adding being penniless to the mix.

With my finances situated the best they could be and my backpack on, I watched as Ryan placed my father on the burial pyre. Rayne set the flames only minutes before sundown.

"You have five minutes. If you are on den lands in six minutes you will die."

My time with the den was done. Now was the time to run.

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LARKIN

The trucker who picked me up outside of Chester's let me off at the edge of what could barely be called a town.

Gravel Ridge had the air of a place that had given up judging by the weathered storefronts.

The single main street stretched from one end of town to the other and the cars and trucks on either side were manufactured over fifteen years ago.

I shouldered my pack, groaning at its weight. Though I had shifter strength, getting kicked out of yet another town was taking a toll on my emotions. I'd bitten my nails down to the quick and had scratched the skin off my forearm.

This town might be different . My wolf was gazing at the surrounding woods, thinking of the prey he'd catch.

Maybe . I doubted it though.

Gravel Ridge was unlike the highway stops I'd grown used to, with their constant stream of travelers who minded their own business.

This was a place where newcomers stood out as if they had a siren attached to them or a neon sign blinked on their head.

I was familiar with these places and everyone knew their neighbor's business as well

as their shoe size and what lube they used.

I got off the road because of the huge potholes and walked along the cracked sidewalk. The local council mustn't have had much money and I wondered where their funds went. Not on the upkeep of the public areas.

As I ambled along, I drew glances from people sitting on a bench outside the general store.

I nodded and added a smile but they didn't reciprocate.

They paused their conversation as I passed and I sensed their eyes on me.

They were wondering who I was and what I was doing in Gravel Ridge because few strangers ever came here and the few that did were on the run or up to no good.

For sure they were eyeing my worn boots and backpack and thinking I was trouble. There were rarely jobs in towns this size so I might have to hitch another ride. But how many cars passed through that weren't local? I might end up sleeping in the woods and raiding garbage bins for food.

The air smelled clean apart from the dust kicked up by the one passing car whose driver slowed down to gawk at me through his open window.

But there were no shifter scents marking territory or warning of pack boundaries.

Just humans and car exhaust, along with the dust but with a hint of sweetness.

I guessed there was little in this town that produced that sweet aroma so it must have been crops growing beyond the town limits.

That's good and bad . My beast put my feelings into words.

Yes . There'd be no Alphas demanding I leave but being the only shifter for miles, emphasised how alone I was.

I passed a small diner and stared through the window. I awarded the staff points because the glass was spotless and having worked in similar places, I was aware how difficult that was. I could mosey in and ask for a job but I'd bet the staff consisted of the owner, a waiter and a cook.

The guy behind the counter peered back at me and if I went in, he'd ask a million questions and know my life history in five minutes or less. Except I'd have to bob and weave, add a fib or two and an outright lie because I never knew when my past might catch up with me.

The Alpha vowed I'd never step on pack land again and while I was nowhere near there, I was always looking over my shoulder, searching for his scent because pushing me out of the place I grew up would never tamp down his opinion that I was "other."

Chester had never pushed for information, maybe because he had something in his past he didn't share but most folks in small towns did their utmost to drag the details out of strangers. So, I kept on walking as diner customers ignored their coffee and studied me.

Next to the diner stood a barbershop, its blue, red, and white pole spinning and I half expected it to take off.

It probably wanted to escape this life. There was a small post office, a grocery store and a gas station.

As I suspected, the town had few employment opportunities.

I doubted the diner needed a dishwasher and the grocery store was probably manned by one, maybe two people.

And if there was something available, they'd want social security numbers, bank accounts and home addresses.

My wolf stirred, saying if he took his fur, I could stop thinking about my life while he hunted. But there were eyes on me and people might get curious if I snuck off into the trees. I refused to do anything that drew attention to me, other than walking down the street.

But my beast understood that this small town was wrong for us because he sensed the tension bubbling inside me. It left little room for him and he wanted it gone.

Gravel Ridge was a dead end and I headed back to the highway.

But as I passed the grocery store, a paper flapping in the wind had me turn my head.

I'd missed the community bulletin when I'd walked past the first time.

It was covered with notes offering babysitting services, used cars for sale, and another looking for a lost cat. But one flyer caught my attention.

Seasonal Help Wanted for the apple harvest. Fair wages, start immediately. Contact Stan MacFarlane at MacFarlane Orchards.

Below the text was a hand-drawn map giving directions to the farm.

I calculated it was about three miles east of town.

Farm work was backbreaking but as a shifter I was strong and had more endurance than humans.

Also the pay was usually terrible, but I might be able to sleep in a barn. There were worse places.

Another advantage to working on a farm was the farmer cared about an employee's work ethic and if they had strong backs and arms. They paid cash, asked few questions, and didn't insert themselves into their workers' lives.

I studied the map. The orchard sat at the end of a road that wound through farmland and forest. Being isolated was perfect because I could earn money and there'd be no curious neighbors sniffing around.

It was getting late and if I wanted to reach the farm before dark, I needed to get moving.

According to the map, I could get there on the main road but it wound its way around the countryside, not taking a direct route to the farm.

If I cut through the woods that bordered the town to the east, I would get there faster and the forest was my home.

Our home !

My beast could navigate underbrush and rough terrain, and in my human form, my shifter reflexes and enhanced senses helped avoid obstacles and find my way. I wouldn't have to worry about passing cars wondering who the stranger was walking along the road.

I headed toward the treeline. The woods welcomed me and I inhaled the aroma of

grass, moss and pine. While my beast longed to be part of a pack, being part of a group with rules and hierarchies had its disadvantages. While in the woods, I could pretend all was right with my life.

My wolf demanded to shift but until I had secured the job and scouted around for small cabins or hunters, I refused, and followed a deer trail that headed in the right direction.

It was almost dark and too late to speak to the farmer who would be an early to bed, early to rise kinda person. But I had snacks in my pack and my wolf could curl up under a tree for the night.

As I strode through the trees a sharp metal click punctuated the silence along with pain that exploded through my left foot and calf. Something clamped onto me, piercing the skin and reminding me of the fangs belonging to a rogue wolf I'd fought after leaving the pack.

My beast yelped, echoing my cries and when I glanced down the teeth of a leg-hold trap were buried in my calf and my pants leg was seeped in blood.

Black spots danced in front of my eyes as I dropped to my knees.

Who would set a trap this close to town?

And why hadn't I smelled any human scent on the metal?

My hands shook as I tried to pry the trap's jaws apart, but even with my supercharged strength, I couldn't do it. Every movement sent fresh waves of pain up my leg. My wolf begged to shift, but he couldn't escape either and if whoever set the trap found they'd snared a wolf, they might kill us.

I'd dropped the pack with my phone and couldn't reach it. Besides, there'd be no signal as I had one bar in town.

I'd avoided pack alphas, humans, and shifter politics, but was felled by a piece of rusty metal in the middle of nowhere.

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CREVEN

I didn't need a lot of money. After a rough few months, I'd managed to find a cabin in the woods that had been left vacant for decades.

The earliest cans in the pantry were from before expiration dates existed.

And aside from needing some major roof repairs, the rest of it was livable until I could fix it up.

If the owners came by, I'd deal with that then, but the odds were very much in my favor.

While the housing was free and my fox able to hunt most of our meals, there were some things I needed to buy. As careful as I'd been with it, my money situation wasn't as solid as I'd hoped it would be. It had gotten to the point where I didn't have a lot of choices to make more, either.

I couldn't go to a town where shifters were part of the business community. I'd be blackballed so fast I doubted I could find a human restaurant or warehouse that would hire me.

And towns that were mostly human hadn't done well for me.

The people tended to be put off by my beast, not really understanding why, just that I made them uncomfortable.

It wasn't intentional. Try as I did to hide my beast, he was always there.

The few times I attempted to get a job including the most un-sought after jobs in town, they wanted no part of me.

If I had internet, I could find some online gigs. But my place didn't have cell reception, too deep into the woods. Heck, it didn't have any electricity. I ran my fridge and hot water using a generator. Unless I set out to find a new home, that was off the table.

My fox loved to run through these woods and staying felt right.

There were days, however, when he got a little too distracted by his hunt that he ended up near a road.

That's when I discovered just how gross humans were. It was embarrassing how much garbage lined the woods from cans to wrappers to full on trash bags people didn't take all the way to the dump.

Unable to let it go, I started cleaning the roadside.

I picked up a huge box of trashbags at the local grocery store and set out to do one or two a day.

I took the trash to the dump and cashed in the bottles and cans.

What started as a nice thing to do ended up bringing in enough money to keep my generator running without dipping into my limited funds. It felt like a win-win.

But there was more than just trash and cans left in the gullies and one day Joe, from the dump, asked why I never sold any of the metal. And the truth was, I didn't know I

could do that. From that day on I had my dump run, my can run, and I saved all the metal and scrapped it when I collected it.

Scrapping didn't pay much, not unless I was lucky and found copper. But it was a way to make money while making my new home more habitable.

One of the first purchases I'd made was an ancient pick-up truck.

It was so bad that the passenger side floor had a section you couldn't put your foot on for fear of it going through.

Not that I had any passengers. Other than the polite thank yous that came with my small purchases and a random conversation with Joe, I was all alone.

But the truck worked and once it was filled with the metal, it was worth the trip two towns over to scrap it...

usually. The first time, it was only \$20.

The second time, another \$20 and change.

But over time, it added up. And now it became almost like a game, something to keep my brain occupied—a treasure hunt.

I learned how to strip wire when there was copper inside. Those were the good finds.

Today wasn't supposed to be a scrapping day. I hadn't planned to leave the cabin at all, but my fox insisted on it. He'd been restless from the time I woke up and became increasingly pushy. I couldn't remember a time he'd ever been this bad.

My original plan for the day had been to work on repairing the back steps with some

wood that I had split a couple weeks ago and was finally dry enough. But my fox didn't give two shits about my plans. He wanted to go explore the woods. Oddly, he wasn't pushing to hunt. He just wanted me out there.

I didn't trust him enough to go out wandering in my fur, not when he was like this, but I compromised, and let him take the lead while I kept to my two feet.

As far as scrapping went, I didn't have a ton of luck, but made a few trips back to the cabin with a small haul, once with a hubcap, another with some old roofing sheet.

But no matter how much I found, my fox just kept getting antsier and antsier and pushed me to stay out.

More than once, he tried to stop me from bringing my finds back home.

This wasn't at all like him, and I half feared that being without a den was the root cause.

I started towards the north and he pushed so hard I nearly lost the battle and ended up on all fours.

"Fine," I grumbled to him. "Which way do you think we should be going?"

He liked that, pushing back enough to let me know I was in charge while leading me south, much to my chagrin.

The area was one where I'd found a few bear traps.

I'd snapped them closed and sold them as scrap, but just because they were gone didn't mean I'd found them all.

There were also some rabbit snares, which, well, human me wouldn't be harmed by, but in my fur?

Yeah, that wouldn't end well and it was another case of me not knowing if they were all gone.

It was the lowliest, worst kind of hunting, if you ask me. My animal might be small, but he was fierce. And if we were going hunting, we were going hunting. No setting traps. No letting mechanical devices do the dirty work. We did it... unlike the human that laid these.

I tried to convince him to turn around, but my fox was determined. And about 45 minutes in, I scented why.

There was blood. A lot of it.

“Fuck.”

It didn't take but a few minutes for me to find the source... a man passed out, his foot stuck in a bear trap.

Only the man wasn't human. He was a wolf.

And as I got closer and tried to figure out a plan to get him loose without causing further injury, I scented the biggest problem of them all.

He was mine.

He was my mate.

This wolf, out here, struggling for life, bleeding out, was my mate. If I'd met him

when I was still in my den, it would be the best day of my life. How could it not be? I dreamed of this... of finding the one for me. But that dream was shattered the day I was marked rogue.

I no longer could have a mate. It was law and not den law. It was shifter law. Rogues could not mate. Full stop. The penalty— death.

I pushed my fox back and tried to clear my mind as best I could. Focusing on what could never be wasn't going to help my mate. I needed to make sure I got him out of here.

Over the past few months, I'd dealt with enough of the bear traps to be able to get it open and him out without making matters worse. But he was bleeding—bleeding so hard, his wolf wasn't repairing him.

“Hey.” I put my hand on his cheek. “Hey, listen. I know you're in there. I need you to really try and wake up. We need to get your wolf working on your leg.”

I took off my shirt and ripped it, covering his wounds the best that I could, tying it tight enough to slow the flow of blood, but not too tight that it would cause damage. Or at least that was my hope. My medical training was nonexistent and I was winging it.

“You're safe with me. I promise.” I bent down and picked him up the best I could. He was limp, unable to help me by holding on, and the trek back was slow—so slow—only impeded by me stopping to make sure he was breathing.

I fought back tears. This was not the time for them.

I needed to be strong. I needed to get him to the cabin, to clean his wounds, to get him to wake up... or at least to get his wolf to wake up.

Most days, I didn't mind not having any contact with anyone, being alone in the woods, not having a den to have my back.

But right now?

I'd do anything... anything, to have a healer I could call... one who could come and fix him up.

I might not be able to keep him, but he deserved to be on this earth. And knowing that he was here... that would be good enough.

It had to be. Because that was all that fate was giving me.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

LARKIN

The first thing that registered as consciousness clawed through the darkness was warmth. Instead of the bone deep cold of the forest floor and the metallic bite of the trap, heat wrapped round me as if I was in a cocoon.

Is it kindness ? My wolf was pushing toward the surface scenting our surroundings.

I should have jolted up in fight or flight mode, trying to survive. But I was floating and my beast was purring though he usually got annoyed if I used that word.

We're safe .

Yes .

But it didn't seem possible. Perhaps I'd been drugged though it was rare for human medication to have such an effect on shifters. If we had to be medicated, a shifter physician pumped us with ten times the amount they'd use on a human.

Wherever I was, there was no immediate danger. There was no cold wind biting my cheeks, the pain from the trap had lessened and the scent of blood, while present, was dry rather than oozing over my skin.

My wolf urged me to sniff but all I caught was the scent of an untamed forest. Not the dust of the small town or a human scent but something wild. Had it been raining? The aroma mingled with a fresh smell that had a hint of shifter.

A fox , my wolf alerted me.

I breathed in and out, trying to contain my anxiety. Being in the company of a shifter didn't have to be a disaster. He'd helped me when I was close to death but once I recovered, he'd tell me to get lost because his scent suggested he was an alpha and alphas didn't respond well to lone omegas.

But instead of panic churning in my belly, that sense of quiet I experienced earlier warned me it wasn't that bad.

With the little strength I had, I forced my eyes open, blinking against the soft light.

Where was I? I was staring at a ceiling of wooden beams and a fire crackled nearby.

I wasn't in a hospital but someone's home or perhaps a hunting cabin.

Maybe it was the same person who'd set the trap though probably not.

Hunters didn't make a habit of rescuing what they'd caught.

I was covered in a patchwork quilt that had the same enticing scent my wolf picked up on.

I want to roll around in it . He was teeheeing and reminded me of a puppy.

What's with you ?

"You're awake."

If I wasn't before, I was now and I bumped my head against the wall with a loud thunk. The voice sent goosebumps sprawling over my skin because it was layered not

just with kindness but love. But that couldn't be right. My senses must be faulty.

A face accompanied the voice and I was glad I was lying down. Gods he was gorgeous with a strong jaw and what my omega dad had called an aristocratic nose 'cause it tilted at the tip.

I turned on my side toward him, not wanting him to see my arousal outlined under the quilt. I couldn't wrap my mind around being intoxicated by a shifter when I could have died however many hours ago. His beast, like mine, was a predator and in the wild, our kind usually avoided one another.

"How are you feeling?"

I swallowed, willing a response to pop into my head and when I found one, I said, "Confused." I pulled my knees close to my chest, again hiding my engorged cock. "What... where am I?"

He explained he'd found me caught in the trap set by poachers and memories flooded back. I tensed, recalling the cloying aroma of blood and the pain that had my wolf howling. I tried to sit up, needing to get away from this place that reminded me of being a prisoner.

"Hey. You need to take it easy. You lost a lot of blood." He added that my wound was infected when he discovered me and he couldn't gauge how long I'd been unconscious.

He placed a hand on my shoulder and heat surged through me.

My body tingled and I lay back, conflicted at how safe I felt and yet I should have been sprinting away.

Okay maybe a fast limp 'cause I was in pain.

"You're a fox." Those words would make anyone think the injury had affected my brain. Why would I state the obvious? A smile tugged at his mouth. Glad he was amused but I was tempted to pull the covers over my head and pretend I needed to sleep.

"Guilty." He smoothed out the quilt and his hands were dangerously close to my crotch. "And you're a wolf."

Oh we were playing samies. What was next? I'd say he was an alpha and he'd reply I was an omega.

"And you don't scent pack although there is a hint of one there... possibly from long ago?"

His nose told him that? Or his fox did? What else was his beast whispering in his ear?

"I should go."

"Your leg needs time to heal."

I'd never been seriously injured before because my shifter abilities healed me quickly. But as my beast couldn't shift and get us out of the trap, losing so much blood and the wound getting infected, had weakened us.

He pressed a palm on my forehead and I gritted my teeth, not because I was in pain but the opposite.

I slapped my arm, trying to distract from the sensation that had taken hold of me.

He raised a brow so I rubbed my skin, pretending I was itchy.

It was awkward and silly but this fox shifter ignited a fire in me.

Mate . That was what I'd been sensing in the air. Tenderness and love. He was my mate. My wolf was bounding around inside me, making me dizzy and nauseous and I told him to cut it out because I was vibrating.

But this couldn't be. He was rouge. Just as he'd discovered I was without a pack, I'd picked that up in his scent.

There was an element missing that should have been there.

A mate bond needed stability and the security that came with pack protection.

And it was against shifter law to mate a rogue and it went against all shifter instincts to mate a lone shifter.

I might not technically be a rogue since I'd never been marked as one, but I might as well be.

What could I offer a mate except a life on the run?

"What's your name?" His question dragged me back to the present.

"Larkin." Damn I should have given him a fake name. Too late now.

"I'm Creven." His eyes never left my face. "And before you start planning your escape, your leg won't hold your weight for at least another few days, so we might as well get comfortable with each other."

My mind flitted to us getting naked with cocks in holes or maybe a tongue licking my rim but I pushed those images out of my head.

I should have argued and insisted I could take care of myself, but I was exhausted.

The infection and the blood loss had sapped my energy but there was also the emotional turmoil of finding my fated and knowing we couldn't mate. It was a lot.

"But I can't stay here. We both know that."

"We'll talk about it when you've recovered."

As he was rogue, he had no Alpha to contact or a den to inform. There'd be no Betas sniffing around, wondering where he'd been. Maybe I could stay another day and gain my strength.

I must have slept because when I opened my eyes again, he was gone.

We must find him. My wolf didn't give a damn that we were a rogue and a lone wolf. He just wanted Creven with us. But his scent lingered in the cabin so he couldn't have been gone long or it would have been stale.

There was a different aroma, a spicy one near the bed. A bowl of soup on an upturned crate beside me. My belly growled. How long had it been since I'd eaten?

I'm starving .

Yes but you can go much longer without food than my human form .

It wasn't just that Creven had cooked. He was looking after me and I hadn't experienced that in years. When was the last time I'd felt safe enough to sleep without

waking up every few minutes, wondering if I was in danger?

I managed a few sips of soup before the spoon tumbled from my fingers and clattered into the bowl. I slept again and every time I opened my eyes, Creven was there, and he'd put the spoon to my lips and insist I eat. Some of the liquid dribbled over my chin and he dabbed at it.

"You don't have to run anymore."

I gulped what he was feeding me, and raised my head so I was staring into his eyes. I glimpsed sincerity that matched what was in his voice. "I don't know how to stop."

"I'll teach you."

Those three words were easy, unlike what we faced. But who knew? Maybe we could change fate.

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CREVEN

I'd never been so scared in my life as I did when I discovered my mate lying on death's door.

Not when my dad died. Not when Rayne challenged my father.

Not when I was sent out as rogue. None of that came close to what was running through me now.

This was the kind of terror I never wanted to experience again.

When Larkin had asked me what had happened, I couldn't give him the details he deserved, the entire first day a complete blur.

I had no idea what order anything happened and lost full chunks of time.

After getting him home and cleaning him up, it all melted together...

from making soup just in case he woke up, to using cold washcloths on his forehead in an attempt to keep the fever down, to listening for each breath, asking the goddess for it not to be his last.

At the time, I'd been on auto pilot, which in hindsight was good. If I stopped to think, all of the emotions I'd been ignoring would've slammed back into me and I'd have been useless.

It wasn't until he woke up that the reality of how dire our situation had kicked in. And maybe that was me being melodramatic, because at the end of the day, I was going to be left heartbroken and alone. But I was allowed to be. The situation sucked.

Larkin sensed who I was immediately, even if he didn't realize it at the time.

His arousal filled the room, the quilt slightly tented.

Being in extreme pain hadn't stopped his body from responding to me.

I didn't acknowledge it. He didn't need to be embarrassed, and I wasn't ready for that conversation anyway.

Instead, I kept taking care of him.... feeding him when he needed... being his crutch when he needed to use the restroom... changing the bandages on his wounds.

And everything seemed like it was on the right track...

that was until this morning. His fever was higher than it had been, so high, I could feel it radiating off of him like I was standing next to an oven.

But that wasn't the scariest part. His words weren't coherent.

Not even close. And there was a stench coming from his wound.

His infection was getting worse and quickly.

There was no way around it, I needed to run to town and get some better supplies. My place wasn't set up to be a mini hospital. At the very minimum I needed sterile bandages and antibiotic cream.

I waited until he fell asleep, wrote a little note explaining where I was going with a stick figure of me with a stethoscope and set it up like a tent by the nightstand. I hated the thought of him waking up and thinking I had gone.

My truck went through the path in the woods and then the dirt road at speeds far beyond safe for the old thing. I didn't care.

My first stop was the pharmacy for disinfectant spray, rubbing alcohol, bandages, antibiotic creams, anything and everything that said it might help. If they didn't have what I needed, I might try the grocery store.

I didn't read labels or make choices. I snagged it all and planned to sort through it later. For now, getting home was more important than paying for supplies I didn't need.

An older man in a white coat, possibly my grandfather's age, walked past me, looked in my basket, glanced back up at me, then to the basket again.

"Looks like somebody needs to be going to the hospital."

"Thank you, sir, but no. It's just a little infection." How had he seen infection from my hot mess of supplies?

"This doesn't look like a little infection." He scented the air. "Doesn't scent like it either." This time he whispered. "Meet me outside."

I wasn't sure what came over me. Normally, if a human told me to meet them outside, I'd have assumed that was the last place I wanted to be. But something about this man had me trusting him.

After grabbing one more roll of gauze, I headed straight to check-out, tossing in some

candy as the cashier rang me up, thinking sugar might make Larkin smile.

I barely had my bags in the truck when the man came out and straight to me.

“I know what you are,” he whispered, his eyes darting back. “Here.” He grabbed my hand and put a bottle of pills in it. “Follow the directions. It’s the only way to get rid of an infection.”

“How did you get that?” Humans needed prescriptions, and I sure as hell didn’t have one.

He pulled on the collar of his coat. “Inventory is going to be off.”

I didn’t understand any of this. Not how he knew what I needed or why he wanted to help enough to risk stealing from his job. But I was grateful.

“Use it until it is gone. Whoever it’s for is going to need it.”

I leaned in, scenting deeply, wondering what kind of shifter he was and surprised my fox hadn’t already picked up on it.

“You can scent all day long, and you won’t know what beast I am—because I don’t have one.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “That was rude.”

“Nah, don’t be sorry.” He put his hand on my arm and spoke slightly lower. “I was born to one such as you and a human. I don’t have a beast but I’m not human, either. Now go. If I can scent the infection on you, this can’t wait.”

A quick thank you later and I was racing back home.

Maybe the world wasn't as black and white as I'd thought. If the pharmacist's parents were a rogue and a human, maybe rogues could have mates.

No. The law was clear and allowing myself to fantasize about happy ever afters wasn't going to do either of us any good. The man's parents had been lucky, nothing more.

My fox kept pushing me to go faster and faster on our way home, but ramming the truck into a tree wasn't going to get those pills to my mate. I did hurry though and parked too close to the house, running inside to find my mate, looking at the note, his eyes half closed, small smile there.

"I just woke up." His voice was hoarse and weak. "I don't... because I don't feel so good today."

I dropped the bags, gathering the pills first.

"The pharmacist gave these to me. He said they would help."

"Gave?" He opened his mouth and I put a pill in, holding up the water so the straw reached his lips.

"Yeah... gave. He scented your infection on me."

He sucked some water and swallowed the pill.

"Not human?"

"No. Not fully."

He froze. "I need to leave."

“You don’t.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “Trust me. I’ll be the first one telling us to go if I sense any problem. Trust me.”

I wasn’t sure if he did or not, but his eyes were already sagging, and I eased him back down to his pillow.

“I need to do some really thorough cleaning of your wounds. It’s going to hurt. I’m sorry.”

I pulled back the quilt, took off the bandages, and began to disinfect again. This time, being a bit rougher than I had before, not allowing a speck of dirt to remain. I hated that I was hurting him, but I’d rather that than bury him.

He fell back asleep after I cleaned and finished treating his wound. I woke him when I needed him to take a pill or have a little bit of soup, but other than that, let him sleep. He needed it for his body to heal.

For two days, we held that pattern. And then, on the third, he woke up looking better than I’d ever seen him.

“I stink,” were the first words out of his mouth.

He did and the fact that he cared meant he was a ton better.

“Yeah, good thing I have water and soap.” A sponge bath and new sheets would do him wonders.

“Do you think I could stand enough for a shower?”

“I could hold you.” Going from bed ridden to a shower was a pretty big leap, but if he wanted to try, I was going to do everything I could to help him.

He looked at me, bit his lip, and sat up.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Fabulous. I made him uncomfortable, which was the exact opposite of my intent. “I wouldn’t?—”

“No,” he cut me off. “I never thought that you would... it’s that my wolf is kind of being... pushy.”

“Tell me about it. My fox is the same way. He doesn’t understand why I haven’t marked you already.

But let’s not worry about that now. Let’s get you all the way healthy first.” If our conversation went poorly, which, how could it not?

I’d feel horrible having him feeling stuck here. It was far better to wait.

“How about this... I tell you about where I grew up while you take a shower? That way, if you need me, I’m there—but it doesn’t feel... you know .” I wasn’t sure I knew— too personal, too arousing, too close? But it was definitely too something.

He agreed and I helped him to the bathroom and turned on the water.

He only wore a pair of boxers, his high fever making him sweat regardless of what he was wearing.

I helped out of them and into the shower making sure to look away so this wasn’t more awkward than it had to be.

The shower was the size of a tiny little phone booth, which normally sucked, but in

this case was good.

He might not be able to stand up fully, but he wasn't going to fall down either.

“What do you want to know?” I was an open book, at least for him I was.

“What was your favorite thing as a kit?”

“Hmmm, let me think.... my favorite thing was ... den dinners. Not the normal ones, but the ones we had when the grown-ups went on their runs.”

I told him all about the potlucks and especially the cookies my dad used to make and how the other kits and I would crawl around and pretend we already had our animals. It was a carefree time and one I enjoyed talking about.

A few minutes in, he admitted defeat and asked for my help, which I gladly gave. Washing his hair first and then his skin until the water ran cold.

When he was dried off and in a new pair of shorts, he looked like an entirely different person. He still had a way to go, but he'd get there. The medicine was doing its magic.

His stomach rumbled loudly. “I think... I think I could eat.”

“What can I make you? I've got noodles, rice, hamburger in the freezer, and some chicken too, I think. Or my fox can go out and hunt if you want something like a rabbit.”

“You know what I really want? Red licorice. Isn't that weird?”

I perked up. This was my time to shine. I dug through the bag from the pharmacy. “I

picked these up. Figured you might need sugar.”

“Look at you. You already know me so well.”

I didn't. But I really wanted to.

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LARKIN

The cabin was too quiet.

Creven and I had spent almost every moment together in the days since he'd rescued me. And now I was alone, something I was used to since I left the pack, and I longed for company. Not just anyone though. Him, my fox shifter mate.

I sat on the edge of the bed, testing my weight on my injured leg.

It was much better thanks to the antibiotics he'd somehow managed to buy and the attention he'd been giving the wound.

He was resourceful getting the medication with no prescription and without the pharmacy setting the police on him.

But people like us, ones who didn't belong, had developed skills we'd never needed within the safety of a pack or den.

Creven hadn't been gone long but I was restless, not because I wanted to bound about.

There'd be none of that for a while thanks to my injury.

I was missing him and wanted him by my side so I would be whole.

It was silly when I knew so little about him but he was my mate. Any other details

would come slowly.

I didn't want to consider what would happen when my wound healed. He and I were not like other shifters and mating wasn't possible for us. I shouldn't be eager for him to be here and instead enjoy the slow passing of time.

My wolf had been calm the past few days, basking in our mate's presence and the safety of the cabin. But now, with Creven gone to town for supplies, my beast was pacing beneath my skin. I imagined the sensation was similar to when humans spoke of butterflies in their tummy.

I couldn't calculate how long it'd been since my beast took his fur because I was fuzzy on days and dates. But he yearned for the freedom of being on four legs with the forest floor beneath his paws. And he wanted to hunt and he was picturing a plump rabbit.

I need to run, my wolf whined. He clawed higher, making me gasp as I pushed him down. He was insistent and I spent the next hour reasoning with him. Not that it did much good.

Please give me my fur. I'm tired of being cooped up inside you .

I twirled a chunk of hair around my fingers, a sign I was frustrated, both with Creven being gone and my wolf pestering me.

But Creven asked us to stay inside while he's gone. I promised .

I clung to the promise and in my mind, it was more binding than any oath a shifter would swear to a pack. Not that I had one. But I was thinking with my human brain and my beast didn't give a toss about promises. He was trapped in his skin and he wanted out.

Please don't test me .

A beast could ignore his human's will and take his fur, but my wolf hadn't disobeyed me. He was itching for fresh air and I distracted myself by looking around the cabin.

There wasn't much to see as it was small but the floors had been swept and the dishes washed.

Laundry hung outside but Creven must have washed the clothes by hand.

I studied the handful of books with worn spines on a shelf.

Creven had either read them many times over or he'd picked them up second hand.

Though the place was sparsely furnished, it spoke of a man who was content with being alone. He'd built himself a life away from pack politics and disputes. Me too. We existed in the space between the human world and shifter.

But my wolf grew bored looking at books and clamored to get out. The. Pressure ballooned inside me, much like water building up in a dam until cracks appeared. Despite my limp, I paced the floor and ignored the ache.

I must shift, my wolf demanded. Please, I can't be in here a moment longer .

"No," I said that out loud rather than in my head as I gripped the back of a chair. He'll return soon. We can't... no!

The world flipped sideways as my injured leg gave out and I slid onto the floor. My wolf clawed at me, shoving me aside as he took his fur. My skin erupted and he surged out of me.

I'd never experienced this. Our shifting was a mutual decision. We were partners who could never be separated. Him taking over was as though I'd been pushed in the back seat and he was at the wheel.

Sorry but I need to do this.

I tried to fight him, but I was weak from the infection and though he was me, he'd been resting and had gained some of his strength. My clothes shredded as dark fur spread over my limbs.

My beast landed on four paws but he was unable to heal my injured leg, possibly due to the medication in my body. He howled and I urged him to be quiet. If someone heard him, they might arrive at the door with a gun.

Mate. He inhaled our mate's scent. I couldn't deny him that because it smelled different, not as comforting, when he was inside me.

Yes.

I expected him to charge out the door but he lowered his head and sniffed around the room, imprinting our mate's scent.

He eyed the front door but padded to the bed, and leaped onto the mattress.

Awww he wanted to smell our mate without any barrier between the fox shifter and him.

He curled up in the quilt where Creven's and my scent mingled.

A big yawn from him and my eyes closed before his.

The cabin door clicked and I was wide awake. "Larkin? I'm back."

Panic threaded through me because I'd ignored my promise not to shift. Or did I agree that I wouldn't go outside. Maybe they were one and the same. If I took my skin, I'd be naked. That was no biggie to a shifter but my wolf refused to let me take over.

Footsteps approached the bedroom and stopped. My wolf didn't move, pretending to sleep. Though I couldn't see him, I sensed Creven's gaze on me. His scent changed as he registered surprise.

"Well, I wasn't expecting this. It's nice to finally meet you.

" He brushed a hand over my wolf's thick fur.

He moved away from the bed and I picked up the rustle of fabric.

I cracked open an eye and understood why my wolf hadn't wanted to shift.

Seeing Creven through him was like looking through gauze.

The mattress squeaked when Creven sat on the bed, bare chested and clad in his jeans. There was a rough X on his shoulder that signaled he was rogue. He met my beast's eyes and the sounds from outside faded. There was just him and me, his fox inside him, my wolf outside.

"Your wolf took over, I'm guessing without permission."

Put your head on his hand. Show him you're sorry . My wolf followed my instructions.

“It’s okay, big guy. You needed your fur. Me and my fox understand that.” My beast whined. “It’s been ages since you shifted and I should have taken you outside for a run. It’s not healthy being crammed inside your human.

He paused. "Do you mind if I join you? My fox has been wanting to meet your wolf."

A sudden flap, flap flap on the headboard made it jiggle and bounce. It was my wolf’s tail. Creven laughed and patted his head.

"I'll take that as a yes."

He finished undressing, and I couldn’t look away, eager to take a peek at his cock.

And I wasn’t disappointed. It was thick and oh so pink and if I was human form and wasn’t injured, I would have swallowed it.

But seconds later, Creven vanished and was replaced by his fox whose fur was a glorious shade of red.

His busy tail twitched, a movement that matched the twinkling in his eyes.

His fox approached the bed, but my wolf didn’t move. He lowered his head as if issuing an invitation. The fox leaped onto the mattress and settled against my wolf who curved his body around the newcomer. Red fur against dark. I wished I could take a pic.

He’s smaller than me . My wolf had never been paired with another beast.

This was what I'd been missing. Not just a mate, but a partner in my skin and fur. Someone who understood the dual nature of our existence, who could meet me as human and beast.

The fox kneaded my wolf's fur which created a rumbling in my wolf's chest. It was contentment, something foreign to us since we'd been on the road.

Can we sleep like this? You don't have to go anywhere, do you ?

I withheld a giggle because he'd been desperate to go outside less than an hour ago.

We have nowhere else to be .

I marveled at how we fit together. We were both predators and yet we complemented one another rather than being competitive, though that might change when they hunted. The fox soothed my wolf's restlessness, while my larger beast offered protection and warmth.

My wolf and I had found where we belonged.

CREVEN

I hadn't wanted to leave Larkin, but I'd used the last of the gas for filling the generator, and once it was gone, we wouldn't have any electricity. I had no choice but to run into town and refill the reserves.

He was doing so much better. The medicine had done everything the pharmacist had hoped it would. That didn't mean I wasn't worried about my mate. Of course I was. I had a feeling worry kind of came with the whole mate package.

But as it turned out, it seemed like what he truly needed was for me to be away so his wolf could come out. It wasn't that Larkin wanted to be alone or that he didn't trust me, but sometimes our beasts do what they're going to do and having their mate seemed to be the catalyst he needed.

Larkin's wolf was stunning. Absolutely, positively stunning. And I could've watched him all day long. But my fox had other ideas. He wanted to meet him too.

I sort of always thought when I met my mate, our first shift would be hunting and we'd team together for our first hunt and fell larger game of some sort. Maybe a deer, possibly a boar, all depending on who my mate's beast was.

But that was back when I had a den. And after my father's challenge, the notion of having a mate was gone. My chance was over. I was marked as unmateable.

Only fate didn't give a shit about my rogue mark.

They sent Larkin anyway and in a way I couldn't possibly deny him.

Maybe if I'd walked past him in a market, I might've been strong enough to ignore his scent and give him a chance at a better life— one without me.

But we didn't meet at a store, we crossed paths when his life depended on me.

Well played, fate. Well played.

As I fell asleep on the bed beside him, our animals nestled together, I couldn't help but be grateful. I didn't know what would happen from here, but I knew two things for sure— I couldn't mark him as mine and I wasn't going to be able to let him go.

When I woke in the morning, I was no longer in my fur, but I was warm. Warm and safe. My mate's arm was wrapped around me, his leg between mine, holding me to him. Our beasts must have both shifted in our sleep.

I couldn't think of a more beautiful or perfect way to wake up.

"You're awake," his warm breath hit my shoulder.

"Yeah. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't." His cheek rubbed against my back. "I just heard your breathing change. Been awake a while."

"How come you didn't let me know?"

His erection was pressing against my back. "You were tired and trust me, I wasn't sad to be like this."

I turned in his arms so I could face him. He looked so much better—not perfect, but you could really see how the wolf in him helped heal him even further than the medication had.

“You’re so beautiful.” I cupped his cheek. “So completely beautiful.”

“You... thank you for helping me.”

He’d thanked me before, but this time, it felt like it had more weight... probably because he was so much further along in his healing process.

“I couldn’t leave you there. It was hard enough leaving you to get gas.” While I was there I even bought new gas cans to fill, in an attempt to avoid town for as long as possible.

He chuckled. “It was hard for me not to follow you.” He leaned in close, pressed his forehead to mine. “Would you mind if I?—”

Before he could answer, his lips were centimeters from mine. “Say I can.”

I did better than that, closing the short distance and brushing my lips against his once, twice, three times and then we kissed. A real kiss. Deep and filled with affection, but also heat that was close to the surface.

I pulled back, but not too much. There were things to say, things that couldn’t wait as much as I wanted to get back to kissing the sexy man in front of me. “We have to have a conversation. I’m rogue. I can’t mark you.”

He gave a single, tiny nod—one that was barely discernible if I hadn’t been paying attention.

“And you can’t mark me.” I had to be firm.

This time, he looked at me before reluctantly answering, “Okay. But can we still...?”

“I think, as long as we know the rules?—”

He slammed his lips to mine, kissing me hard with a deeper passion than he had before. And this time, the kiss didn’t break. We just kept kissing, our hard erections pressed between us.

Then my hands went down his back and then back up again, gently, sweetly. And once that happened, both our hands just started wandering everywhere.

Our bodies moved together, giving the needed friction our growing erections begged for. I was harder than I thought possible.

I wanted him so badly.

But I was worried.

Worried my fox wouldn’t listen. Worried my fox would act on his own. Worried that Larkin’s wolf wouldn’t understand. Larkin had never been den, and he wasn’t rogue. He couldn’t grasp just how serious a mistake like this could be.

I needed to be the voice of reason for us and that was not my gift. Maybe if it had been, I might’ve seen what was happening in my den and been able to stop it before things got so out of hand.

His hand slipped between us, wrapping around our lengths as best he could and jerking us together and all thought was gone.

It was just Larkin and I and this connection between us.

The scent of slick tickled my nose, and I knew that saying no to this man wasn't going to be possible.

I decided to go with it and just make sure that I had control of my fox.

He can be ours. Only if you don't bite.

My fox didn't answer, but I pushed him back as far as I could and he allowed it. He was willing to give up marking to not have to give up our mate. In an ideal world we wouldn't have to give up any of it, but we weren't living in an ideal anything.

I broke the kiss, instead nibbling along his jawline, down his neck, going lower and lower and lower until I reached his erection.

I kissed the tip and a growl built in his chest. Sexy as fuck. I tapped the inside of his thighs and they fell back. I kissed down his length and then lower and lower to his slick hole. I licked his entrance, gathering his slick on my tongue, savoring his taste before breaching him with my tongue.

His hips bucked in response. The moans releasing from him—everything.

And I took him in my hand as I continued to fuck him with my tongue— In and out, in and out, until I could hear a change in his breathing. He was close... too close if I were gonna be inside him when he came.

I kissed his inner thigh, then backed up, skipping over his cock, not wanting him to explode too soon. I licked a path back up his chest, giving his nipples the attention they deserved, before snatching a pillow and placing it under his hips.

“Please, Creven, please. I need you.”

“I got you,” I told him over and over again, as I lined myself with his entrance and slid inside in one smooth motion.

I stayed like that. The two of us joined together. The feeling of perfection, of being whole. I could’ve stayed like that forever.

Larkin didn’t agree.

Begging. Pleading for me to move.

And with his legs up over my shoulders, I did. Thrusting in and out of him slowly at first, then faster, and harder.

He grabbed my arms, meeting me thrust for thrust, making the most delicious sounds.

I wanted this to last, but knew that it wasn’t going to. It couldn’t.

This felt too good. Too perfect. Too everything.

I took my hand back from Larkin, needing to give his cock attention. I refused to come before he did.

I jerked him once, twice, three times, and on the fourth, his cum spurted out on his chest and was coating my hand. As he roared out his orgasm, I picked up my tempo, seeking my own release this time and finding it quickly.

My knot grew inside him, locking us together, binding us as one, as I called out his name like a prayer and collapsed on his chest.

My fox behaved, not once pushing to mark Larkin. My beast wanted this as much as I did. And he knew that if he attempted anything, I'd have stopped him.

At least, that was my assumption. He wasn't saying anything, just prancing around like he won the lottery.

I refused to let myself get too comfortable with his compliance. I had to stand guard, because with it feeling this good to be in our mate's arms, I wasn't so sure I could stop him in the future.

I rolled us over so that he was on top of me, not having to feel my weight.

I didn't know what to say. So I didn't say anything.

Instead, I held him close as we caught our breaths and savored the moment.

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LARKIN

I yawned and stretched before downing the rest of my coffee and studying Creven as he picked up firewood. The part of me that enjoyed order was pleased at how he stacked it.

I'm glad we're whole again .

Me too . Not that we were because I didn't have a pack but my injuries had healed and I could reach for something on a top shelf without grimacing.

My mate and I had enjoyed two weeks of domestic bliss, something I'd never experienced. I should have been ecstatic and skipping through meadows full of bluebells.

My beast clawed at my insides, instinct telling him to do what fated mates did and that was showing the shifter world that we were fated.

Every moment Creven and I spent together was torture whether we were cooking or falling asleep.

Even more difficult were the intimate moments.

Even him brushing against me or blowing a kiss was enough to make my belly cramp.

It should have been everything I wanted and it was except for the constant,

overwhelming urge to sink my teeth into his shoulder and mark him as mine.

My wolf paced within me, coming up with plans for how he could sneakily mark our mate.

Not happening , I told him for the hundredth time that morning.

He wasn't well versed on the ins and outs of the human world but even though he didn't admit it, he understood the ramifications of two outsiders mating.

Us marking one another would threaten the current pack system which held the belief that shifters couldn't survive outside their pack or den.

If we proved it was possible, Alphas and shifter councils would stamp us out so they could maintain the status quo.

Rogues and loners didn't get the security and permanence that came with a true mating bond.

"You're thinking too hard." Creven appeared in the doorway. There was no need to look at him because his eyes would show the same frustration as mine.

"Can't help it." I rinsed my cup. "My wolf is..."

"Demanding. My fox, too." His jaw tightened and he ground his teeth. Thank gods they had shifter strength and hadn't been worn down. "Maybe we both need a distraction."

"Does it involve getting naked?" I was hopeful we could return to bed.

"Nope."

Thirty minutes later I was bouncing along a road full of potholes in Creven's ancient pickup truck.

The bed was loaded down with scrap metal he'd been collecting including copper pipes, old appliances and bits of machinery he'd salvaged from abandoned farms. He sold it to a recycling center and the money was enough to buy food and gas and have some left over.

"There's a place about an hour from here that pays fair prices." He drove off the rough track and onto the main highway. "Figured we could make a day of it. Maybe catch a movie and grab dinner somewhere. It'll make a change from my cooking."

Like a real couple. Movies and dinner was what regular people did whether they were shifters or humans. We could pretend we were mates who were spending the rest of our lives together and not outsiders stealing moments of normality in the cracks of a world where they didn't belong.

Gladstone was a mid-sized city, the kind I usually avoided.

It was big enough to have multiple packs and if we came to their attention, we'd be in trouble.

But its size provided cover for a lone shifter.

But as we drove through the streets with Creven beside me, and the radio blasting a song we were singing along to, I could pretend we were like everyone else.

The recycling center was on the industrial side of town, surrounded by chain-link fences and factories, the kind where workers streamed out at the end of the work day. We pulled into line behind two other trucks, and I helped my mate sort the metal into the correct categories while we waited.

But my wolf and I picked up scents, a hint that became a whiff before they floated to us on the breeze.

And they signaled trouble. Three wolf shifters radiated arrogance—the kind that came with belonging to a pack—and were standing near the weighing station.

They leaned on their vehicle, surveying the world through aviator sunglasses. They'd picked up on our scent when we got out of the truck and their beasts were at the forefront of their eyes.

My skin prickled as they ran their gaze over me.

“Creven.” I jerked my head toward the shifters. “We've got company.”

He lifted his head and his heartbeat sped up. “Be cool and stay calm. We'll finish here and leave.”

But as we moved our first load of copper toward the scales, the largest of the three stepped in front of us. I had to guess, I'd say he was aiming to be his pack's next Alpha. He scented of ambition and a lust for power.

“Look what crawled out of the woods.” His voice was loud enough for everyone in the yard to hear. Creven paused but didn't step back or go around him.

“Afternoon, Daniel. Didn't know the Hollowbourne Pack had expanded into the recycling business.”

“We haven't. But we do keep an eye on who comes and goes on our land.” His smile didn't reach his eyes. “Especially rogues who forget their place.”

My wolf snarked at his cruel words but I pursed my lips so his growl was just a

rumble in my tummy. My mate had dealt with his guy before as they were on a first name basis so I'd let him handle it while the hostility was words only.

"I'm not on pack land." Creven didn't raise his voice. "This is neutral ground."

"Is it, though?" Daniel threw out his hands and did a 360. "Because I'm pretty sure everything on this side of Gladstone falls under our protection." He grinned, revealing yellowing teeth. "So rogues pay a toll."

I'd never witnessed a shake-down. During my years of running, most Alphas told me to leave. This public humiliation was on another level.

"How much?" Anger flared and I curled my hands into fists at the resignation in his voice. I moved to stand beside him.

"Let's see."

Daniel pretended to calculate on his fingers, suggesting he was either making up a price or he couldn't add. Maybe it was both but he was enjoying himself and I had to restrain myself and my wolf because both of us wanted to take a running jump and make him go splat.

"Call it two hundred dollars. Rogue tax."

"That's robbery." Oops. I should have shut up.

Daniel's attention swiveled to me, and his nostrils flared.

"Another rogue or something that doesn't belong." He sniffed and spit, the saliva making a loud splat on the rough ground. I took that as a warning. "Worse than that. You're without a pack. Are you two playing house somewhere?"

The mockery in his voice had my wolf seething and he made sure the guy could see him in my gaze. But Creven's hand pulled me back

"Pay him," he murmured. "It's not worth the trouble."

But I couldn't allow this to happen and I loathed how no one else in the yard said anything and Daniel's pack mates were grinning and enjoying him making fools of us.

"Hey." All heads swiveled toward the newcomer "We have a problem."

A man in his sixties strode out of the demountable office. "Are these guys bothering you, Creven?" He ignored Daniel.

"Nothing we can't handle, Joe."

"Uh-huh." Joe turned his attention to Daniel. "Are you here to sell something or just harass my customers?"

Judging by Daniel's expression he wasn't used to a human telling him what to do. "Stay out of it."

Joe laughed. "This is my business. If you want to shake people down, do it somewhere else."

Daniel hesitated but if he caused a scene with a human, his Alpha would be on his ass. He might bleed him and dear old Daniel could lose his place in the hierarchy.

"This isn't over," he hissed at my mate.

"Yeah, it is." Joe wasn't messing about. "And if I see you harassing my customers

again, I'll call the cops.”

With Daniel and his henchmen gone, we finished up. Neither of us wanted to stay in town so we headed home.

"Does that happen often?" I asked as we turned onto the dirt road leading to the cabin.

Creven's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Sometimes."

This man who'd saved my life, who I adored, had to pay protection money to entitled pack wolves who viewed him as something to be scraped off their shoe. Neither of us deserved to be treated as a second-class citizen.

But when he arrived home, my mate busied himself preparing dinner. He rebuffed my efforts to discuss what had happened at the recycling yard. Living in the cabin, away from the rest of the world, it was easy to forget that other shifters wanted to hurt us.

And based on what Daniel had said, he was aware of where we lived. This cabin was a tiny piece of paradise and I didn't want to be on the lookout for him and his cronies.

Perhaps together my mate and I could come up with a solution.

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CREVEN

One of the many things that I loved about my mate was his intelligence. He knew a lot about the world, especially that of humans. He'd never quite been part of it, but he'd always been human adjacent, and that gave him insight I didn't have.

When I told him that I really wanted to be doing work that wasn't looking around for scraps and having to deal with assholes like those jackholes again, he asked me what I liked to do.

When I told him how taking a hot mess of paperwork or files and turning it into something neat and organized that was also usable was my super power, he listened like it was the most fascinating job in the world.

When he asked why I wasn't pursuing it and I explained that I needed internet, he said, "I got you." And he did, hooking me up with satellite internet, something I hadn't realized was a possibility. It took some money and a whole lot of skill, but he managed to get it set up and ready to go.

Now that we had full access to the internet, so many new doors were open. I managed to pick up some gig work and had my name in for a few remote positions. It wasn't big money.

While I worked during the day, finding new leads, completing gigs, submitting proposals, my mate was outside, creating something from nothing.

Obviously, he wasn't actually creating something from nothing, but that's how I

always felt about gardens.

One day you had this patch of dirt, and then a month later there were plants growing out of it, sometimes with flowers, sometimes with food, but it was always filled with magic.

Scientifically, I understood the process... you planted a seed or bulb, and you watered it and it grew, but learning the basics of plant growth never took the wonder away from me.

And my sexy wolf? He had a green thumb or maybe a green hand. Was that a thing?

I sent the completion notice for my latest project and got up to stretch, looking out the window to see what my mate was up to and hoping he might be in a good spot to take a break, too.

I found him quickly, bent over the new patch of garden that he'd just tilled.

I wasn't exactly sure what he was doing, not because I didn't understand the process, but because I was too distracted by his ass in the air, calling to me.

No one had a right to look that sexy covered in dirt. No one..

"Guess it's time for a break." I could hardly ignore him looking so yum.

I shut my laptop. Part of working for yourself meant you worked on your own time, and right now, it was mate time.

I quietly walked out, down the steps, and over to him, putting both my hands on his hips.

He froze, then relaxed in my touch, sitting upright and leaning against me, his eyes to the sun, angled so he could see me as well.

“Are you done with work already?” He asked.

“Well, somebody was out here distracting me.” I kissed the top of his head and then went to kneel beside him. “Show me what you’re doing?”

He did, explaining that it was the perfect time of year to plant the particular beans he was sowing, and then taking me over and giving me an update on the other things he’d planted.

We’d been living a pretty good life here.

Hours turned to days, turned to weeks, and now to months.

This had become our home. It wasn’t easy—I’d be lying if I said it was.

Having my mate here and not being able to mark him kept my fox on edge all of the time, and his wolf was no better.

But it was what had to be. We might not have made the rules, nor did we agree to them, but that didn’t mean we could break them.

“I think these will be ready to pick soon.” He pointed to some kind of squash I didn’t recognize.

They were small, and he said we could just cook them whole, which was definitely different than any squash I’d had.

My dad had always been a squash-in-the-fall, bake-it-in-the-oven-with-maple-syrup-

or-brown-sugar kind of guy.

That had me thinking about this land and if we, too, could tap some trees. “How many maple trees do you think we have?”

“I never really counted them, but a bunch.” He tilted his head as if trying to figure out where I was possibly going with this.

“I like maple syrup, is all. Maybe we could make some syrup come season.”

“I’ve never done that. Could be fun.”

“Mr. Green Thumb has never tapped a tree?” That surprised me. I thought he was the Dr. Doolittle of plants.

“I just know how to grow a garden. It’s not that—”

I pressed against him, wanting my scent all over his and then kissed him deeply.

As interesting as this conversation had been, and I was enjoying it, being this close to him without tasting him wasn’t going to happen.

He kissed me back and it wasn’t until his stomach rumbled that we broke apart, both hard and needy.

“What do you say we have some lunch?” I wasn’t really asking. If my mate needed to eat, I was making sure he ate.

“I can do lunch.”

He dusted his hands off on his jeans and intertwined our fingers together, bringing

my hand up to his lips and kissing it. “I will never turn down an opportunity to spend time with my mate.”

Back inside, we had sandwiches made on a flatbread I’d perfected.

Buying bread and bringing it here wasn’t too feasible.

We’d need to go to town way too often because it didn’t last long.

And with limited electricity, we didn’t have a lot of freezer space.

Flatbread took very few ingredients. Cook it on the skillet or on the grill if we wanted to. It’d become our go-to.

We were becoming homesteaders and I wasn’t mad about it. I loved being in our own little world where we could just be ourselves and enjoy each other’s company. But also, I wasn’t sure how much we should do to make this place our own.

It was nice here. I’d never deny that, but even with all the improvements we made, it didn’t quite feel like home.

Larkin felt like home, but this place... something about it didn’t fit.

Maybe it was being surrounded by packs and dens full of shifters who wanted no part of us.

Maybe it was that the people in town were put off by us.

But whatever it was, I didn’t think this was our forever home, and I hated that.

My mate had been working so hard at helping this be the place that we needed it to

be.

Between the internet and the garden and all the projects we'd done to fix the cabin, this place had been transformed.

Maybe I was overthinking things. The run-in we'd had with those rogues a while back was still fresh in my memory.

They were supposed to ignore us. They did not. That wasn't good, and the more I replayed the day, the more I increasingly felt unsafe.

It was illegal to try to extort money from a rogue, but what council member was gonna listen to a rogue about that?

Those laws were put on the books not so much to protect the rogues, but to give a sense of order and control.

That's what the council had been about from the very beginning: control.

Although I suppose that's true with any power structure.

My dad was all about controlling our den, and look where that got him...

usurped by someone who wanted the same thing.

There were still days I wondered how I managed to get out of there alive, why Rayne decided to let me go.

In challenges like that, the alpha's family were often the first casualty.

But even in his cruelty, I sensed that he didn't want to do that, to slaughter me.

He wanted power, absolutely, all of it, but he was fine with me leaving.

And maybe that's because he knew I would.

I had no intention of going back there until I, too, had power... enough power to take over. But that desire had waned. Things were different now that I had a mate. Priorities had shifted. My goals now always revolved around him.

“That was a delicious lunch for me.”

He took my plate for me, stood up. “When I come back here, I want you completely naked.”

And into the cabin he went.

He didn't have to ask me twice. I was stripped down to nothing before he walked back through the door.

I waited for him to step closer, thinking he was wanting to have a little after-lunch dessert, but instead, he stood in front of the door and pulled his shirt off while he kicked his shoes off, and then, far too quickly for me to enjoy the show, he too was naked.

“Ready?”

I looked him up and down. I was ready for anything, but I wasn't really sure what he thought he was communicating.

“For?”

“Running with my wolf.” He tapped the tip of my nose.

I'd been hoping for something sexier, but at the mention of running my fox perked up. He was all about getting on all fours and romping through the woods with our mate.

“Just to be clear, we are naked to run, not to get knotty?”

He gripped the nape of my neck, pulled me close, and kissed me breathless. “I'm always down for getting a little knotty, but after we shift.”

Another hard kiss later, he jumped off the porch, shifting mid-air. You'd never be able to tell how weak and close to death he'd been when I found him. He was so vibrant, so strong, so powerful. In a lot of ways, he was more like an alpha than an omega. It was so fucking hot.

“Fine, we can shift first.” I stuck out my tongue at his beast. I doubted he cared at all, if he noticed at all. He was ready to run.

I took my fur and waited for him to take off, thinking we were in for a game of chase.

It was one of our favorites. Sometimes he would run after me, and sometimes I'd run after him, and always, in the end, we both won because we were together.

But today his wolf wanted to run side by side with my fox.

We weren't playfully gallivanting. We were doing a perimeter run, which, as someone who'd lived in a den, was pretty common for me, but he hadn't had that growing up. This was all instinct to him.

Then, for a split second, I worried there was a reason for this action, that something was wrong. He licked my head and booped me with his nose, and all was forgotten except the two of us running around in this land that we currently called home.

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LARKIN

The forest was our beasts' home and they responded to us tearing between the trees as if this was their first time venturing into the woods. They leaped over rocks and tumbled over the damp forest floor while the wind ruffled their fur.

After weeks of domestic routine with me creating and tending the new garden, and Creven working long hours at the computer thanks to the recently installed wifi, my beast needed to be free. And for me, taking a back seat and leaving any problems in my human form was as good as a holiday.

This was what we'd both been missing. Not just the freedom to be in our fur but the joy of being wild together. My wolf had never experienced a partnership because we had been alone for years, always fearful whether in our fur or skin that someone would tell us to move along.

Our beasts rested on a pile of rocks and my wolf waited for Creven's fox to decide if we played more or hunted but the fox took off, leading my wolf on a winding path through the trees until we reached a stream.

We paused to drink before racing up to a steep ridge.

At the summit, we could see for miles with forests stretching to the horizon.

I let myself imagine a life where we didn't have to hide and where no one would question our existence. That was a dream but it would never be our reality because we were on the outside looking in and no packs or dens wanted members who

scented of desperation.

Creven's fox lifted his head, scenting the afternoon air. He'd picked up the smell of something yummy and was already tearing down the slope and through the underbrush, his fur a flash of red against the green of the woods.

While his beast favored smaller mammals 'cause his fox was small, we sometimes hunted the same prey. Rabbits and squirrels were no match for a fox and wolf intent on hunting and devouring fresh meat.

My mate's fox darted between trees and leaped over fallen logs with my wolf chasing him. My beast's longer legs ate up the distance but he wasn't as nimble as the fox.

When we came upon him, the fox had already taken down a rabbit so my wolf bounded past him through the trees in search of bigger prey. These woods teemed with deer and as he swerved around a prickly bush, he scented one.

The expression 'deer in the headlights' came to mind when we crashed through the shrubs into a clearing. The deer froze for a second, before leaping away. But that small fraction of time cost the animal their life.

I allowed my mind to wander again as my wolf devoured his kill.

When Creven and I took our skin, we'd return to our cabin, him to his computer and me to the garden.

It was a lifestyle busy city workers dreamed of.

But we were stuck, like those mice on an exercise wheel, except they could get off.

There was no offramp to a different life for us.

Creven's fox trotted into the clearing and when my wolf had eaten his fill, the fox pressed against him. What we shared was real and he was enough. We didn't need a pack.

We made our way through the forest, following game trails that would eventually bring us back to the cabin. The sun was sinking and it was the right time for more hunting but our beasts were sluggish after making their kill.

The wind shifted and carried a familiar but unwelcome scent. My wolf snarled and his hackles rose, but I warned him not to howl and alert the newcomer to our location.

Daniel. The asshole from the recycling center.

What was he doing here and in his fur? He was miles from his pack land.

His comments that day suggested he had an idea where Creven was living but guys like that talked big but didn't always follow up.

But Daniel must hold a grudge and he'd come to the area, looking for us I guessed and because the woods were riddled with my mate's scent, he must have tracked us.

Creven's fox must have caught the scent too.

He flattened his ears and pressed low to the ground.

He looked at my wolf, and an understanding passed between the two animals.

One that spoke of destiny. As a fox, my mate would be unlikely to win a fight with a wolf and Daniel was a big guy, suggesting his wolf was huge.

If Daniel found the cabin, our sanctuary was compromised and we'd have to run and

leave everything we'd built.

But first we had to get back to the stream and submerge ourselves, something our beasts weren't fond of. That would minimize our scent trail and hopefully Daniel would get bored. Taking our skin would help but it would leave us naked and vulnerable and far from home.

We raced to the water and jumped in, making a huge splash.

I hate water, my beast complained but he dunked his head before climbing out and tearing toward home. But as we neared the cabin, every bush, twig and leaf scented of the alpha. He'd been here recently.

We moved slowly, using the low hanging trees as cover. My wolf's anger built with every step. This was our home and no one had the right to trespass here or threaten us.

About a hundred yards from the cabin, my mate's fox froze. I followed his gaze to a shadow moving between the trees. It was too large to be anything but a wolf. The beast stepped onto the path. He was massive and his black fur had distinct white markings on his head.

This wolf's confidence was a sign he'd taken down other beasts, perhaps his own kin and he expected to win any battle, particularly one with a fox who had no den to back him up.

He'd rip my mate's head off before taking me on.

My wolf, though fierce, was much smaller than Daniel's and he may not give me a second thought until he tossed my lifeless body into a heap.

We have to protect our mate . I was proud of my beast. He wasn't backing off and trying to get the fox to run away. He was going to fight Daniel's wolf. We must defend what is ours .

There was a niggling thought in my head that injuring or killing Daniel would bring a heap of trouble on our heads.

His wolf pack wouldn't ignore one of their alphas being killed.

But my wolf didn't care about consequences.

Daniel threatened our mate and to a wolf, there was only one way to deal with that.

As I suspected, Daniel's beast was focused on Creven's fox. I didn't think and neither did my wolf. He exploded from the underbrush with a snarl and hit the other wolf with enough force to send our beasts tumbling.

The larger wolf recovered, spinning to face my beast. His jaws snapped but the intimidating maneuver didn't work.

He'd made a mistake and underestimated what a wolf would do when protecting his mate. He must not be mated, because if he was, he'd have been more savvy and brought all his strength and experience to the fight.

Or perhaps like his human, he was all bluster.

We crashed together in a tangle of fur, teeth and claws. Daniel would have spent his years since adolescence training to protect himself and his pack from enemies. I had none of that. But I was fighting for the other half of me.

His teeth found my shoulder and tore the flesh. Blood gushed from the deep gashes. I

couldn't staunch the flow but the pain only sharpened my wolf's focus and the only thought in his head was Protect our mate .

My wolf's canines clamped onto the soft skin below his jaw. Blood belonging to our opponent flooded my beast's mouth as the other wolf struggled to free himself. His frantic movements came too late. He'd underestimated my wolf and he was going to die because of it.

He raked his claws along my beast's flank, but my wolf wouldn't let go. Even in death, his jaws would not be pried apart. His pulse hammered against my wolf's teeth as the two animals tussled and blood spurted from the black wolf's arteries.

He was weakening and when my wolf dropped him to the forest floor, Daniel the man was at the forefront of his beast's gaze.

There was fear in his eyes as they closed and the huge beast lay still.

My wolf's head fell back and he howled. The trees shuddered as birds who settled in the nests flew off. The forest rustled when small animals raced away. They'd return later to pick at the carcass.

Creven took his skin and raced to my beast who'd sunk onto the ground.

"Larkin, oh my gods. Let me see you."

I shifted, using the last of my energy and wondered if getting rid of Daniel had created a lifetime of problems.

"No one has ever fought for me." Creven buried his head at the base of my throat.

"Thank you."

CREVEN

Shifting with my mate, running through the land that surrounded our home... hunting, playing, even running the perimeter, all of that should've equated to a nice way to spend the afternoon. Instead, it turned into a full-on nightmare.

I wasn't naive. I didn't leave the recycling center thinking we'd fixed things with Daniel. I knew full well that he hated us— me, especially. For whatever reason me being marked as rogue was personal to him. It made no sense. It wasn't as if he had been from my den or anything like that.

Not that it mattered why he hated me, just that he did. It didn't matter if he hated us because our shoes were ugly or because we'd done some unthinkable crime, the result was the same. Daniel or maybe his beast, despised us. If only I'd realized how much.

When we ran into him at the recycling center and he pulled his crap, I assumed he got off on being a bully and that would be that. Daniel played the big bad wolf game instead of ignoring me the way others were supposed to. The law I was to be shunned, ignored, not antagonized and tormented.

I didn't know anything about his pack other than what he spat at us during our first confrontation, but I didn't need to. They were weak. His behavior off of pack lands shouted that loud and clear.

As horrible as that day, I'd believed that as long as I stayed away from him, our issue ended there. It wasn't like I planned to ever encroach on his land. I was smarter than that. And in a way, it was exactly the kick in the ass I needed to pursue my current

work.

Had I handled that day the best that I could?

Probably not. The entire situation had caught me off guard and I was in full on protective mode.

But as many times as I replayed it in my mind, I had no idea how my behavior turned me into enemy number one for the alpha, one worth hunting me down.

I was literally one fox living with one wolf as we minded our own damn business.

Hardly a security issue or a true threat.

It wasn't enough. I'm not sure anything would've been.

He found us, came onto the land we'd been using, and then he forced my mate to do the unthinkable.

As much as I wished none of it had happened, not a single fiber in my being cared that he was with the goddess.

Good fucking riddance to that piece of shit.

My mate's wolf made the only decision he could. And now that it was over, Daniel's body lay there, lifeless. Nothing but a carcass. And my mate was shaking beneath me as I buried my face into his throat, wanting to give him comfort, but also needing to feel that he was alive.

There had been a second there when I was sure that Larkin was the one who was going to bleed. Daniel was no weak-ass wolf and my mate's, while strong and fierce,

was an omega, one not trained by a pack. The entire fight could easily have gone the other way and it was too much to bear.

Closing my eyes, I still saw those images of them facing off. I doubted I'd ever be able to forget them. It had been close, too fucking close.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” I kissed my man's shoulder and neck, his arms slowly coming around me, all of him trembling in my embrace. He didn't say anything for a long time, the two of us just holding each other. And when I looked up, I saw the tears streaking down his eyes.

If he'd grown up in a den like mine, this kind of challenge would've been something he was familiar with. But he hadn't. Everything about today's fight was foreign to him. It was a miracle he survived. I couldn't imagine what he was going through, not that it was over and his wolf had retreated.

“My love.” I kissed his one cheek and then the other, wanting my scent to be on him, to give him that small comfort. “You had no choice. We should've known he was coming— I should've known.”

He held onto me tighter.

“His wolf was broken, that's the only explanation for him violating the law so boldly.

He was to ignore us, to shun us, to pretend we didn't exist. When he chose to hunt us down, that was him throwing out all the rules and in a sick way giving us permission to do what you had to do. It was a form of a challenge.”

Later, I'd explain to him that within a pack there was always a challenge protocol. That even though this... this was nothing other than a challenge. And that meant death was inevitable.

I pressed my lips against his, just leaving them there, wishing for him to feel all my love and safety. My fox was freaking out at the way my mate was coming undone. I tried to pull back, unsure that I was going to be able to control my beast while still being the mate Larkin needed.

My mate's arms held me there and that was all the encouragement my fox needed to lunge forward. Before I could regain control, our teeth sank into my mate's shoulder, marking him as ours.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I jumped back as far as I could, trying to regain control of my fox and failing miserably. He forced a shift and circled my mate over and over and over again.

Mate . My fox needed everybody to know that. Not that anyone was here. Just the corpse of that piece of shit who came here to challenge us and tore our peaceful afternoon to shreds.

Larkin's hand went to his shoulder, covering the wound I'd left, his jaw open, watching my fox as he circled him, my mate twisting and contorting to make sure that he never lost sight of my beast.

"Creven, come back to me. Please stop pacing. You're making me scared." His trembling turned to rock, his tears still coming. "I need you back. Please, please come back. Stop."

His pleas were enough for my fox to give me control, allowing me to shift back.

"I'm so sorry." Now it was me who was crying. "I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have done that. I?—"

“Don’t be sorry. Fate made you mine. It’s only right that I wear your mark. We’ll figure this out. I promise. But first...” He glanced over at the dead wolf. “We should take care of this.”

He wouldn’t shift back to human and avoided the danger of a person discovering his body, but that didn’t mean other shifters wouldn’t scent him as one of their kind. We needed to burn the carcass and not wait it out, hoping that enough animals would come and devour it.

It was good, though, because it gave us something to do. Something that wasn’t thinking about what had just happened, what it might mean for our future, and what the fuck we were going to do next.

We carried the wolf back to our cabin and set up the fire pit like a burial pyre.

With no ceremony, we placed the wolf on the sticks and set it ablaze.

It wasn’t as big as the one they used for my father.

And there were no kind words sending him off to the goddess...

no saying goodbye. There was no love lost here.

This was alleviating a problem, nothing more.

I felt bad, but if he’d had strong family ties, a strong pack—he wouldn’t have been here alone. At least, that was how I justified it to myself.

As the fire burned, I held my mate, watching it only to make sure no sparks would cause any threat. The two of us were shaken up but safe in each other’s arms. And for now, that was all we could ask for.

But tomorrow? Tomorrow we had some things to figure out.

Because one thing was for sure, that mark on my mate was nothing but a target on us both.

LARKIN

The mate bond hummed beneath my skin, beating in time with my heart.

But unlike the vital organ in my chest that I mostly ignored and let it get on with keeping me alive, this was in my nostrils.

It was the sensation under my skin when I touched something and there was ringing in my ears.

Every breath carried Creven's scent and reminded me of what had happened. I couldn't blame him because I'd been faced with the same choice every minute since we met.

His fox had overwhelmed him and marked me.

We were mated and bonded until our last breath.

Being who we were as individuals, we weren't welcome in shifter society but now he'd marked me, we'd become targets.

Shifters, like humans, were fearful of those who were different.

I couldn't blame them because history had taught people to be cautious.

"We can't stay here." I stared at the pile of ashes and bone that was all that remained of Daniel. "But first we have to get rid of this."

“Water.”

“Yup.” Like we had done earlier, we had to dump the ashes in the river, but not all in one place. And we had to disguise our scent as much as possible.

I ran to my garden that had been a source of joy and grabbed all the sage leaves and garlic bulbs. We crushed them and rolled around naked in the aromatic mess. We split up, agreeing to meet at the cabin in an hour, with each of us taking half the ashes.

Creven took off in the opposite direction to me.

I headed to a small rapids on the river but paused before tossing some of the remains in the water.

I was holding what was left of a life. I'd behaved in accordance with shifter law but being without a pack and now mated to a rogue, I doubted that law protected me.

Daniel was dead and Creven and I feared for our lives so I tossed the ashes in and tore through the trees to another section of the river, where it merged with a second fast-flowing body of water.

Two more ash dumps and I was rid of the last of him. I dove into the water and raced back to the cabin. I couldn't call it home because that was the past. Our future was uncertain and it wasn't here.

My mate arrived a minute after me. He had no color in his cheeks despite running for an hour and I stuffed clothes into my worn backpack, urging him to take what he needed.

"Daniel's pack will come looking for him." We'd done what we could with the

evidence but the pack would scent us in the cabin.

They'd find the scorched earth where we burned him.

Shit. We didn't have time to disguise it so we grabbed wood from the shed and added chairs and bedding, anything from the cabin that would burn. It'd have to do.

We had to get away and couldn't stick round disguising what we'd done and be still here when Daniel's pack arrived. We were screwed but I didn't say that to Creven. He was as aware as me what fate awaited us here.

"Where can we go?" Soot smudged Creven's cheeks as he doused the flames, and I wiped it off with an old shirt, not wanting any part of Daniel on me or my mate. "Every pack between here and the coast will be hunting for us once word spreads."

I paused, trawling through memories of my folks instilling in me what to do in an emergency if they weren't around.

As a kid, I thought they meant if they were shopping or at the movies but I'd been much older when I was aware they spoke of a time after they were dead.

Sometimes I'd wake late at night with the house in darkness and my parents were murmuring about a future they might not see.

"There's someone." How did I explain how I came to have his details? "My parents... before they died, they gave me a name. Someone to contact if I needed help."

Creven looked up from the box he'd stuffed with food. He was shoving his precious computer in a messenger bag over his shoulder when he asked, "Who?"

"Auden. My father said he was the only person he'd trust if I was alone." I swallowed

hard, remembering the fear in my father's eyes when he'd pressed the folded piece of paper into my hands. "I never thought I'd need it."

"Where?"

I yanked at an inner pocket in my pack, one I hadn't opened in years. The paper had yellowed and frayed and a water stain made the name difficult to read. But I'd memorized it and the address.

I grabbed my mate's phone using our internet connection for the last time. A small town named Stanmore tucked into the base of a mountain was where we had to go. It was remote and perfect for two runaways.

"It's about a day's drive." I showed him the map. "Maybe more, depending on how many towns we have to detour around."

My mate studied the route. "I don't know how many pack lands we'll have to cross to get there. Perhaps if we take back routes, we'll be safer."

We gathered what we could fit in the truck and abandoned the rest. The cabin that had been our sanctuary these past months was now a death trap.

Not knowing Daniel's habits, we had no idea how soon he'd be missed.

The pack Betas could be heading here now, or if he liked to go off by himself for days, he wouldn't be missed yet.

But Daniel didn't appear to be a guy that enjoyed his own company. He'd needed others to prop him up, laugh at his antics, and protect him when things went sour. Him being in his fur, looking for us wasn't consistent with who I thought he was, so his friends could be nearby.

The mate bond amplified Creven's anxiety and coupled with my own, threatened to send me to my knees. But I was no longer a lone wolf and I had to straighten my spine and look after my mate.

I took one last look around the cabin, memorizing details of the place where my mate saved me as he started the truck. He'd spattered mud on part of the license plates which might buy us time.

As we drove away, we agreed that if we were stopped by humans, we'd say we were seasonal workers heading toward a farming community who'd promised us work.

That might satisfy a local sheriff who was bored and was hoping to fine someone for a busted tail light.

But shifters? Even ones who hadn't been notified about us would scent our status and that could lead to a heap of trouble.

We stayed on back roads that kept us away from major population centers and wound through farmland where workers bent low picking vegetables dotted the fields. I glanced at the mirrors every few minutes but the only vehicles behind us were tractors and delivery trucks.

"Tell me about Auden." Creven merged onto a highway. "What do you know about him?"

"Not much. My father had told me he'd been born in a pack but now lives alone, by choice." Something Father had said made me think he also helped shifters, ones like him who didn't conform to pack hierarchy.

The landscape changed from farmland to forest as we climbed into the foothills.

With the window down, I scented shifters.

They were more at home close to the woods and weren't drawn to farming.

This land might have pack patrols because it wasn't close to an urban center and strangers were rare.

My wolf was on edge, sniffing and pacing inside me, asking how much longer.

We stopped for gas and while Creven filled the tank, I grabbed snacks and drinks from inside, keeping my head down and avoiding eye contact with the bored teenager behind the counter.

"Any trouble?" my mate asked as we pulled back onto the highway.

"The cashier was human. Didn't look up from his phone."

The afternoon wore on and we didn't say much, just listened to the crackly radio. Just before dusk we passed a diner. Though we had enough food for a few days, we wanted to save that, not knowing what was ahead.

The dust-covered diner's parking lot was full of big trucks.

Again, the drivers would be mostly humans, as shifters preferred being close to their pack.

But it was busy enough to provide cover.

Inside, the diner reminded me of my folks' pics from the 1970s with wood paneling and vinyl booths.

We chose a corner table where we could watch the entrance and the parking lot.

Night was the most dangerous time, because if any packs ran patrols it was late in the evening or in the early hours of the morning.

Creven met my eyes across the table. "If we're going to be caught, it'll be after dark."

"We'd better not get caught." I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt.

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CREVEN

Our trip wasn't exactly what most people would consider long. It wasn't a quick trip to town, by any means, but I'd been on longer trips. I was sure my mate had, too. Still, it felt like an epic journey.

It had been so stressful that it might as well have been three years long.

I was worried that around every corner, danger was at the ready.

Trying to go under the radar wasn't easy on a good day. I'd already known that, but doing so when your mate's life might be on the line by one bad move...

it brought everything to an entirely new level, a shitty level at that.

And as much as I trusted my mate, I couldn't help the feeling building inside of me that this was a wild goose chase at best and walking into a death trap at worst. We were going to find this man that we only knew from a name given to him by Larkin's parents before they passed.

We knew next to nothing about him aside from his name and that they trusted him.

It would have to be enough. I didn't see another choice.

I wasn't sure what to expect when we met this Auden.

But the cute old man with a resting bitch face we found hadn't been it.

The thing that took me aback as we pulled up to his place was the way it felt like he was expecting us.

He'd been sitting on the steps of his trailer, whittling a piece of wood into what I suspected was going to become a whistle, not at all looking surprised that a vehicle was there.

Had we been in a city, that would've made sense.

But we were in the middle of pretty much nowhere.

I'd have been surprised to learn if another vehicle had been here at all this week.

When we first pulled up, he froze slightly and then went back to his project. Maybe I'd read him wrong. Maybe this was his way of keeping guests off guard. If it was, it was working beautifully.

The second my mate climbed out of the truck, everything changed.

His shoulders relaxed and his face bloomed into a smile.

He recognized Larkin. Did my mate look like his father?

Was that why? Or did he have a picture of him he looked at often?

I had no idea, but I intended to find out.

We were here to protect my mate and I was going to do whatever it took to make that happen.

But for now, weren't in danger here. At least not from him. My fox agreed.

There were other cabins in the area in different states of disarray, and a few other trailers, one of which looked like it was about to crumble.

I wasn't exactly sure what this area had once been...

if it was the equivalent of a ghost town for loggers and this shifter came and squatted, or if maybe others lived here despite the look of abandonment.

It didn't scent that way, but I'd learned long ago that sometimes scents lied.

"We're looking for Auden," I said even though I was 99% sure that's who we were looking at.

I took my mate's hand, gave it a squeeze, and the old man laughed.

"Who else would I be? You're Louie's kid." He tilted his head at my mate.

"Yes, sir. They gave me your name and said if I ever was in need after they were with the goddess, to come here." His voice was beginning to crack, his emotions close to the surface.

I hated that my father was gone and how it happened, but with Larkin, you could feel the void from their deaths.

He loved them so deeply and I wanted nothing more but to be able to take his hurt from him.

"But I'm not really sure where here is."

"This, my young friend, is my pack lands." He swished his arm around in a huge circle. "All of this belongs to the Stoney River Pack."

I tensed up. I was not supposed to be near a pack... any pack.

“I can go,” I whispered to my mate.

“Let me introduce you to my pack first,” the older man insisted.

He set down the wood he'd been working with and stood up. “I am Auden, Alpha of Stoney River Pack. Introductions are now over.”

I was so freaking confused.

“You're a pack of one?” At least my mate had enough ability to form a question. I was still trying to figure out if we managed to cross timelines on our way here.

“Sadly, yes. I'm a pack of one. My pack died out a long time ago and instead of forming a new one or rebuilding this one, as is my right, I've been living like a lone wolf, avoiding other packs so they don't try to absorb me and steal my land. But I'm not rogue like you.”

Now he was talking directly to me. “You're marked as other... as rogue.”

“I know, Alpha.” I bore my neck, unsure what else to do.

“Wait a second.” He walked over to my mate, inhaled deeply. “You're kidding me. Please tell me you didn't mark him.”

“I— I?—”

“Hold on. Let's go inside and have something to eat.

I've a feeling this is going to be a long conversation, and sitting down might be for

the best.” He was shaking his head the entire time, his hands flailing in the air, but at no point did I feel he was a threat. “Come on. Let’s go into my trailer.”

He led us inside. It was remarkably nice compared to the outside.

Everything was very dated, the furniture shouting the 1970s chic, but it was all well kept and in really good shape.

I wasn’t sure if he was going for a retro kind of feel or if this furniture had been there that entire time, but in any case, It gave the trailer a more welcoming feel.

He had us sit at the table as he put on a pot of spaghetti noodles and a jar of store bought sauce.

“Humans have figured this out. How many centuries have we wolves been hunting and skinning and cooking our dinners, when now, for two dollars during a BOGO I could buy spaghetti and sauce?”

I wasn’t sure if it was a rhetorical question, one reserved for my mate since he mentioned wolves, or a conversation starter. I erred on the side of caution and didn’t say anything.

“If that doesn’t tell us humans have some things figured out better than us, I don’t know what does.” The old man was practically giddy over a human struggle meal. I kinda loved that about him despite said struggle meal was nothing I’d normally eat.

As dinner cooked, we told him the story of how we came to be there and why. He listened, nodded appropriately a couple times, asked a few clarifying questions, but didn’t really offer much advice or criticism or anything... mostly just listening and taking it all in..

Soon enough, the pasta was done, and he made all three of us a large plate full and plopped a pat of butter on each one.

“Don’t ask questions. Trust the process,” he’d said.

And who was I to argue? It was food made with kindness. It was more than I could ask for, despite nothing about it sounding good.

It was after we stirred everything together and began to eat the food that I finally saw what he meant. The spaghetti was good... very good. Go figure.

Auden finally shared some feedback on what we’d told him, and it wasn’t what I wanted to hear.

“I don’t mean to be harsh...” He was not starting off well. Little did I know it was about to get worse. “A half bond is the worst thing that can happen to a wolf.”

“No,” my mate snapped at him. “It’s not the worst thing. This way—he’s my mate and I’m marked. I can think of a million other things that would be worse for my beast starting with a bear trap... although that turned out well too, if you think about it.”

“I don’t think you’re listening to me.” This time he sounded pissed. “Your wolf will lose his ability to reason. With this half mark, it will literally drive him insane.”

I put my hand on my mate’s and took over the argument from him. Auden needed to understand why the decisions we made were made.

“I’m marked as rogue, Auden. Marking my mate is against the law, we all know that.

I will face death if the council discovers what I’ve done.” I sucked in a deep breath,

letting it out slowly.

“But if he marks me back, he will face that fate too, and I refuse to allow that. This is the only way that I can keep him safe.”

“Goddess, does no one teach you young people anything anymore? You were den, you should know that that’s not how any of this works!”

And before we could continue the conversation, the fire alarm started going off and the man jumped up. There was no fire, but there was a lot of smoke.

He’d left the burner on with the empty pot where the spaghetti was still on it and the results were not good.

Not good at all, but a whole lot better than doing what the old man suggested and putting my mate in harm’s way.

I refused to let that happen, no matter the consequence to me.

He was my mate and my job was to protect him, full stop.

I’d already failed by marking him and I refused to fail again a second time.

LARKIN

“I’ll show you where you can bunk down.”

We were done talking about our situation for the night.

The cabin Auden led us to was larger than his trailer, with walls that had seen better decades and windows that rattled in their frames when the wind picked up. But it was mostly clean with a wood burning stove and a bed that might not collapse when we both climbed in.

"It's not much." He placed sheets that had been mended many times on the mattress and opened a cupboard containing a quilt and pillows. I assured him we'd be fine for the night and I was pleased we'd saved our own quilt from the bonfire at our former home.

“This place used to house my beta and his mate, back when..." Auden’s voice trailed off and there was a faraway look in his eyes. Living alone in the middle of nowhere must have had a lasting impact, especially when he didn’t intend to live alone. Wolves needed to be surrounded by their kin.

“Thank you.” Creven had driven most of the way today and his voice carried the weariness of a man who needed sleep.

After spending hours in the truck, fearing every vehicle and the heads that swiveled toward us, this place would do. We were lucky to have a roof over us rather than sleeping in the truck, though these rickety walls would crumble if a pack was intent

on finding us.

"We should only stay the night."

We'd been back and forth between the truck and the cabin, bringing in our belongings and had made the bed. Clouds of dust spiraled into the air but we were too exhausted to take it outside and whack the heck out of it.

My mate's hands shook as he unpacked. I suspected that wasn't just from exhaustion and worry about who might be on our trail. The half-bond also had my wolf pacing and demanding I allow him to mark Creven.

We hadn't discussed it, not really, but my mate was burdened with guilt at not stopping his fox from marking me. There was little I could say to convince him he wasn't responsible.

"We're putting Auden at risk by being here." Creven sneezed thanks to the dust.

"And go where?" I tested the mattress. Not bad. "We've got limited funds, a truck that needs four new tires and every pack within a thousand miles has probably been alerted to look out for us."

I fell into his arms and mumbled against his shoulder, "We have to rest." Tomorrow we'd have this conversation again but for now I needed to close my eyes and block the reality that this could be our last night together.

Long after my mate fell asleep, I lay awake listening to his breathing and the creaking of the old cabin.

The sounds of the forest drifted through the thin walls.

Owls called, maybe looking for a mate, and I envied them their freedom.

I scented deer but my wolf wasn't interested in hunting.

Instead, he was focused on our half bond with Creven, pestering me about when he could mark him.

Despite not sleeping until the wee small hours, I woke at my usual time. Not wanting to get up and face the morning, I tried going back to sleep until my belly grumbled. I opened the door to air out the cabin and squinted at the bright morning light.

Auden was on his trailer porch drinking coffee from a metal mug "Sleep well?" He beckoned me before grabbing a pot and two more mugs

The coffee was so bitter I was tempted to leave the rest but downed most of it, the taste distracting from my worries.

"Good. Because I've been thinking and I've got a proposition for you."

We were back to reality and couldn't avoid it.

My mate appeared in the cabin doorway. His expression told me he was ready to jump in the car and take off.

"We appreciate the hospitality, but we can't stay." He flung his pack in the truck. "We're putting you in danger by being here."

"I've been in danger since the day my pack died and I chose to stay here instead of joining another one. A couple more rogues isn't going to make things worse."

"But I'm the rogue, Larkin is?—"

Auden silenced my mate with a wave. "Sit." He might be in a pack of one but he was the Alpha and his tone told Creven to obey.

"This place has been home to lost wolves for generations. My grandfather built the first cabin and there's always been an understanding with the surrounding packs. This is neutral ground."

"Neutral ground?" It sounded as though it was a place where packs met to conduct a war council.

"It's a sanctuary, of sorts. Not officially recognized, but tolerated.

The big packs are aware of us, of me, and as long as we don't cause trouble, they leave us alone.

"Auden glanced between us. "That half-bond of yours is going to kill you both if you don't do something about it. But running isn't the answer."

"Then w-what is?" my mate asked. Exhaustion and desperation mingled in his voice.

"I need to talk to some people. There might be a way to legitimize what you've done." Auden drained his cup. "Give me a few days to work on it, but this is where you belong."

I repeated his words in my head. Where you belong. How long had it been since anyone had said that to me other than Creven? And we'd left the place we'd called home. Could this be where we created a new one?

"But," my mate started before Auden cut him off.

"No arguments. Consider it an Alpha's command."

We were being given permission to belong, even if it was only temporary. My mate hesitated but after sharing a glance with me, he nodded.

We spent the morning exploring the small compound. One cabin had been used recently as I caught the faint scents of other shifters.

"He's not lying about this being a sanctuary." Creven examined the cabin. "I can scent at least six different types of shifters who've stayed here."

"All rogues?"

"Seems like it. I can't detect any pack scents." He examined a carved symbol on the doorframe. It was a tree with many branches and deep roots. "I wonder what this place was like when it was alive with Auden's pack."

If this became our permanent residence, others might join us and the cabins would be full of laughter and conversation.

In the afternoon we cleaned our cabin, saying goodbye to years of dust. We had fun using a broom to hit the mattress and rugs, using it as an outlet for our fear and frustration.

"It's temporary," Creven reminded me as I hung my clothes. "Don't get too attached to this place."

But I was already imagining how we could improve it by fixing the loose floorboards, getting new curtains, ones with no holes, and modernizing the kitchen.

Auden invited us for dinner and he brought out beer to celebrate our arrival. I wondered how long he'd had the bottles but it tasted okay. He regaled us with stories of shifters who stayed here, some living the rest of their lives on this land and others

who passed through.

"What happened to them?" I was intrigued about the rogues and shifters without a pack.

"Some found other packs willing to take them in and others moved on together. A few..." He pointed out the window to a small cemetery at the edge of the clearing. "...stayed until they went to the goddess."

This wouldn't be a bad place to live out our days but our situation had to be resolved. Creven and I would have to discuss it but we were out of options. We couldn't go back and venturing into the world could result in my mate being captured, maybe tortured, and being put to death.

"What do you think?" We were getting ready for bed and I was at the window studying the constellations. They'd been staring at earth for thousands of years and our problems wouldn't even register as a blip to them.

"Let's see if Auden comes up with a solution. If everything he says is true, his diplomatic skills ensured he and the former residents were unbothered by outsiders."

The next morning, Auden was gone.

I woke to find a note propped against the coffee pot on his porch.

Left for a few days. Look after the place. Stay put. Going to town puts all of us at risk. Back soon. A.

"Think he'll be back?" My mate was reading over my shoulder.

This place had been his home for decades, since before I was born. He wouldn't

vanish. And if he was the man my alpha father believed, he wouldn't abandon us, leaving us to face the wrath of the surrounding packs.

"He will."

Our food had dwindled but Auden had plenty and an adjoining shed, which was an outdoor pantry of sorts, housed dry goods. I wondered why the local rats and mice didn't raid the place but he'd marked every inch with his Alpha scent and that was better than any "Keep Out" sign.

As the days passed, we joked more and didn't scan the road leading up the slope with binoculars as often as we had when we arrived.

I marked out an area for a new garden but without being able to go into town, I couldn't plant anything.

Even the half-bond seemed less urgent here.

My wolf enjoyed the wide open space and stopped pacing.

Whatever Auden was planning, I hoped we could stay.

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CREVEN

Some found other packs willing to take them in at the time.

Auden's words kept playing in my head on repeat.

When he first spoke them, they hadn't registered.

We'd just learned that this place was a sanctuary and I'd been so busy wrapping my head around that, nothing else sunk in.

But now that he was gone and answers were unavailable, they came flooding back to me and refused to leave.

At the time there had been so much information being hurled at me. The more I discovered, the more I realized how little I knew about shifter life outside of my old den.

My father had been very much team 'we keep to ourselves'.

We didn't have alliances with local packs and we didn't work together the way they seemed to around here.

If anything, my father saw them all as potential threats, shifters to be leery of and on guard around.

I'd thought that was the norm at the time. How wrong I'd been.

Everything about this pack and region were so new to me. There was a lot to take in and process. And now? Now my entire being was hyper aware of that one sentence.

Gods, I wished Auden was back already so I could ask him what he meant by that. Maybe it had been a slip of the tongue. That would make the most sense. Laws were laws. But what if it hadn't been a slip? What if they really were with a new pack.

How did they find another pack willing to take them in... willing to risk their own safety for a rogue? There had to be a loophole I was missing, right? Only he'd said it like it was an easy peasy solution, not like a huge deal. I had so many questions and zero ways to answer them.

I slipped out of bed and went outside, needing the fresh air.

We were still a couple hours or so away from dawn, but I was restless.

Sleep wasn't going to come again and the longer I stayed in bed, the greater the chance I'd wake up my mate.

He had enough on his plate without losing sleep over something his mate may or may not have misinterpreted.

The moon was still high, casting light on the land we were currently habitating. It had an eerie beauty. I closed my eyes, trying to envision what it had looked like back when the pack had been thriving. How wonderful it would be to see the place vibrant and full once again.

It would take a lot of work to get most of the property safe enough for people to live there.

The buildings were in various states of repair, and none of them good.

Trees and brush were overgrown and what looked like had once been a community garden was now a pile of weeds. The place was a disaster.

But there was so much potential here. We could easily set up an area for chickens, pigs, and maybe some sheep. And the garden could be brought back to life with some hard work.

Except, I had to remind myself that this place wasn't ours— there was no 'we' when it came to this land. There was Auden. Only Auden.

And that by my mate and I being here, Auden wasn't safe. He could say all he wanted that this was a sanctuary city, but all it took was one shifter to freak out and go to the Council for that safety to be out the window.

I knew too well how easily one person could get their ass in a fit. My mere existence had Rayne threatening me with death and casting me out. And Daniel? All we did was exist and that was enough to make him hunt us down. Sanctuary or not, we wouldn't be able to stay here long.

Despite knowing that our days here were limited, I kept thinking about all the ways to bring these packlands to life.

I wanted Auden to have a pack again, not just in name, but in numbers.

And maybe it was growing up as the son of the den Alpha that had my brain working over time, but the ideas for how to achieve that end kept flowing.

I tiptoed back inside and found an old notebook I'd seen on the counter when we first arrived and a pencil.

And after making sure my mate was still asleep, I sat on the stoop and started writing

down all of my ideas—each and every one of them.

The great ones, the horrible ones, the half ideas, all of them.

It gave me something to do and I figured that once they were on paper, my brain might let them go.

My pencil glided over page after page, my attention so focused on what I was doing that I hadn't noticed the sun rising or my mate coming out with a cup of coffee in his hand until he said my name and I nearly fell off the stop.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Don't be.” I patted the space beside me for him to join me and shut the notebook, placing it beside me. Somehow I managed to fill over half of it already.

“What are you working on?”

“I was just brain-dumping. I figured if I got everything out of here,” I tapped my head, “then I wouldn't be focusing on it nonstop.”

He kissed the side of my head. “I made you some coffee.”

“Oh! This is mine? Thank you.” Before I could take it from him, it fell to the ground and he took off into the tree line.

I raced after him, keeping back as he emptied the contents of his stomach. My poor mate was miserable. I inched closer, wanting to give him privacy, but also wanting to take care of him. He crossed over to me and wrapped his arms around me.

“That wasn't fun.” He snuggled into my chest. “It came out of nowhere, but I feel

good as new. A little gross—but other than that, like I was never sick.”

“Let’s get you back inside to clean up.” I kept my arm around him as we walked the short distance back. He said he felt fine and I believed him, but still, seeing him sick like that had my fox extra protective and I’d never be mad at him for that.

Larkin went into the bathroom to clean up and I toasted up some stale bread we had. It had always been my comfort food when I didn’t feel well.

“I smell toast.” He crossed over to me and grabbed a piece. “You’re a good mate. I’m gonna keep you.”

“That works for me. I plan to keep you too.” Larkin was the best thing that had ever happened to me and I planned to protect and love him until my dying day.

“I know.” He winked at me. “You licked me. Now I’m yours.”

I did more than lick him, but I didn’t want to get into that. It wasn’t a mystery. Heck, it was why we were here. And as much as I was happy that he was mine, the guilt weighed on me.

He ate his toast and with each bite, my fox got antsier and antsier until I could no longer keep him in.

“My fox needs out.” That was all the explanation I could give before getting my clothes off in record time and shifting. This kind of conversation needed to be in my fur. I don’t know how I knew that, but I did.

Mate. Kit. Mate. Kit. My fox was insistent.

Larkin’s having a baby? I needed to be sure.

Kit. Kit. Kit.

I took that as a yes.

I shifted back and tackle hugged my mate. “Best news ever!”

“I’m confused.” He stepped back, meeting my eyes. “So confused.”

“You were sick to your stomach. But now you feel fine.”

He nodded.

“And we’re mated.” Half mated, but close enough.

Another nod.

“I led you to the answer, I can’t make you drink.” My eyes went straight to his belly, and his hands followed.

“You think I’m pregnant?”

“My fox insists you are.”

“He would know.” Larkin pulled me close and kissed me deeply. He seemed as happy about our growing family as I was.

That didn’t mean it was going to be easy. There was nothing ideal about the timing, but that didn’t stop the joy bubbling up inside me. My mate and I were having a baby.

“I love you, omega mine,” I mumbled against his lips.

“I love you, alpha mine. I love you.”

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LARKIN

It wasn't unusual that a shifter's beast discovered a pregnancy before the omega. Humans needed a test to convince them and a voice in my head, not my wolf's, wanted one, too. I needed the two pink lines or blue or whatever color they were.

But we couldn't go to the store because Auden had told us to stay here and a pregnancy test wasn't something he would have lying around. If he did, it'd be years out of date.

"Are you sure?" I asked for the third time.

"There's no doubt." He grabbed both my hands and we danced around the room. He hadn't been so bubbly and excited since... since... had he been like this since I met him? Nah, I didn't think so. When he scented me, he didn't just gain a fated mate but also a whole heap of trouble.

We stared at each other across the small space. A baby. Ours. Getting pregnant should have been impossible for one outcast and a rogue. We had no pack, land or future. What could we offer a baby?

Love ? My wolf piped up.

Yes .

My mate pulled me into his arms. "We're going to be a Daddy and a Papa. And I have dibs on Papa."

I grinned because him saying dibs... those were fighting words.

This child was proof that love could exist outside pack boundaries and mates could create life even when the world said they shouldn't.

But thinking about the implications of my pregnancy would come later. Now, I needed to be close to Creven.

My mouth was at the base of his throat and I breathed in his scent. My emotions were making my head spin and if he didn't hold me, I might collapse into a heap. But his scent in my nostrils calmed me.

"I love you so much."

"I love you too." His hands framed my face. "I can't believe this is real."

For the first time since we'd run—no before that, since I'd been on my own, and for my mate since he'd been rogue—we both had a bright future and something to cherish and look forward to.

If Auden couldn't reach an agreement with whoever he was talking to, we'd fight with everything we had because we had a child who needed us.

"We're going to be great parents." My mate nuzzled my head and when he pulled away, he placed his lips on mine. I lost myself in the kiss, wanting to savor this moment and bookmark it so I could return to it whenever I wanted. We'd experienced so little happiness during our time together, except for those brief weeks in the cabin, and I was scared that if I didn't hang on to this moment, it might slip through my fingers.

The kiss started soft, but the mate bond hummed within me and pricked my skin.

It was that delicious emotion of pain and pleasure, amplified by what we'd created.

I took deep breaths expecting it to overwhelm me as had it had been doing, but if I was interpreting it correctly, it was urgent rather than desperate.

"I need you." My hands tugged at his shirt. Having him inside would make this real. It would have sounded silly if I said the words in my head but my hole and cock were doing the thinking.

Creven responded with a growl as his hands roamed over me as if he was memorizing my curves. He pressed kisses over my jaw and down my throat, whispering how much he loved me. I shivered as his words resonated on my skin. He'd marked me already but I imagined his whisperings strengthened our bond.

He dragged me to the bed as each of us fumbled with our pants and we were naked from the waist down when we toppled onto the mattress.

"Mine," Creven whispered as his mouth, tongue and teeth licked, flicked and grazed my skin.

I tangled my fingers in his hair. "Yours."

His growl vibrated against my throat and sent shivers down my spine as he tugged off my shirt and his own before running his hands over the dips and curves of my body. His lips followed the path his fingers had traced leaving a trail of heat on my skin.

"I love you." He breathed against my skin and rolled us over so I was pinned beneath him.

Lowering his head to my nipple, he grazed his teeth over the point.

I yelped and bucked my hips as waves of pleasure washed over me.

My hand roamed over his back, noting the toned muscles I'd memorized since our first time.

His hand slid over my hip and his fingers slid between my legs. "You're so ready for me." He fingered my hole, slippery with slick.

"Stop talking. I need you inside me."

He guided himself to my entrance and the head of his cock pressed against my hole. A knot of anticipation formed in my tummy as I waited for him to fill me. I wanted his length wedged in my channel so tight that maybe he'd stay there and never leave, providing me with endless pleasure.

I lifted my knees so they pressed on my chest, knowing he was eying my hole. Reaching down and using two fingers, I spread it wide and shoved a finger in.

Creven's eyes narrowed. "That should be me in there." He yanked my finger out and rammed one of his in. I gasped because he was inside me but also longed for his dick.

"You like this or my cock?"

He was teasing me, damn it. But he didn't wait for my answer, instead he thrust in, sheathing himself deep in my channel. Gods whenever we had sex, he seemed bigger and thicker than the last time.

How lucky am I ?

With his dick buried to the hilt, he pressed his brow to mine. I squeezed his butt and he yelped. He pulled away and I gazed at his smoldering eyes while desire threaded

through my veins, almost undoing me.

I slapped his butt. “Hey, this isn’t a choose your own adventure. I wanted fucking and gods I’m going to get it.”

He studied me, not moving but I knew his game and I gripped the bed sheet because he was going to fuck me hard.

“Oh yeah?”

He pulled out, all the damned way, and I fumed until he rammed his huge cock into my channel again, going so deep, I dug my fingers into his back as tremors wracked my body.

“Is that what you wanted?”

Instead of answering, I wrapped my legs around his hips, locking my ankles at the small of his back. I pulled him closer and muttered, “Move.”

He thrust back in and each powerful plunge hit that spot deep inside me, while I brushed my fingers over his stubble and his lips.

I thought about the whispered promises that had passed through them and blinked away tears of joy.

Creven buried his face in the curve of my throat and nibbled at the delicate skin before lapping at it to ease the sting.

He plowed into me and each powerful spoke created a friction that intensified deliciously with each thrust. Sweat dotted his brow and his hair stuck to his skin as he continued to fuck me with droplets falling onto my chest.

His thrust in deeper and faster and his breathing sped up as did mine. The bed complained while I arched my back and as I lifted my hips, I took his cock in deeper.

“Yes... oh gods, yes.” I choked on the words until they became a whimper as Creven intensified his thrusts.

The bed creaked as skin slapped against skin and our gasps and whimpers mingled.

I clenched around him, knowing ripples of please would be lapping at his body.

He moaned and bit the soft part of my ear.

I couldn't hold on much longer, a predicament where I longed for release but wanted the fucking to continue.

But my orgasm wasn't creeping up, it was hurling toward me like a freight train.

My body convulsed and sweat dribbled into my eyes, making it difficult to see.

But that made my climax more intense as I was feeling him, scenting the slick and reacting to his grunts of pleasure.

Tugging at his hair, cum spurted from my cock over both of us and me coming triggered his own release. With a roar and his head thrown back, his cock pulsed deep within me.

Creven collapsed onto me as his knot swelled and filled me. When the tremors subsided, he kissed the mark on my shoulder.

We lay in one another's arms as the mountain air cooled our skin. My eyes closed and I was drifting off to sleep when my beast surged forward.

We can't wait. With a baby on the way, you must mark him . In my wolf's mind, Creven had marked and claimed me twice, one with his bite, and again by getting me pregnant.

I'd fought this urge but I was floating on a cloud of pleasure and my body was like jello. I could have gathered my strength and fought my beast, demanding he pull back and marking Creven would be done when I decided it was right.

But I couldn't argue with him and his instinct to mate and mark was honed by shifters over centuries. With a baby cradled in my belly, the half-bond wasn't enough.

"It's time." Claws erupted from my fingertips and my canines lengthened. "I can't and I won't..."

My mate didn't pull away but tilted his head and bared his throat. He trusted me. My heart somersaulted and my wolf howled.

"Do it."

My teeth sunk into my mate's flesh. The permanent scar would be a sign to every shifter that we were bonded, though Creven had the sign of a rogue clawed into his shoulder. But our connection was unbreakable and it brought on a sense of calm that was at odds with our precarious situation.

Mine .

"It's done." I licked the blood from his wound to speed up the healing.

We were still wrapped around each other, when an approaching vehicle made us both freeze. A door slammed and footsteps approached the cabin.

“Hello. I’m back.”

I scrambled for my clothes. Auden would scent sex but shifters weren’t weird or squeamish about people having sex. He would note the fresh mating mark at the base of my mate’s throat, though.

When we opened the door, Auden ran his eyes over me and broke into a grin. “Congratulations and not just for the pregnancy.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. Not because he’d caught us in a post-coital glow but he’d sussed out the little one in my belly.

"How did you?—"

“The baby?” Auden's grin widened. "I've been around long enough to scent when an omega is pregnant." His expression grew more serious. "But the completed bond... that changes things."

"What do you mean?" Creven asked, his arm automatically coming around my waist.

"Well," Auden settled himself on our porch steps. "The good news is I've found a solution to your problem. The bad news is, it's going to require both of you to be brave."

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CREVEN

Brave . That wasn't a word I'd ever associated with myself. Not ever.

If I'd been brave, I would've challenged Rayne, tried to avenge my father's death, despite knowing my father wanted me to flee.

I could say all I wanted, to both myself or others, that I left my den because it was my father's last wish.

But the truth was, I'd have made the same decision had he not said a single word because I hadn't been brave then, I'd been terrified.

And now Auden was back. I was fully mated to my pregnant mate, and he needed me to alpha-up and be the mate I needed to be. A life on the run wasn't an option. Not with a growing family. Our kit or pup deserved better than that.

I reached over and grabbed Larkin's hand and held it tightly. We were in this together.

"We'll do whatever it takes." Larkin's voice came across as confident and strong.

If only I could say the same for how I was feeling.

"Well done." Auden bit back a yawn. "Let's have a meal by the fire tonight. We can discuss everything." And off he went.

I didn't want to wait. Knowing that there was something that needed to happen and that decisions needed to be made, all for the protection of those I loved had my fox on edge.

Not knowing what was to come, that caused a level of stress I struggled to handle.

So I did the only thing I could do and held my mate close, promising him that I was brave enough and that we would be okay. A promise I feared I couldn't keep.

He held on just as tightly, telling me he trusted me not to underestimate him. I didn't. I never would, but I didn't want him to have to carry the burden of any of this. I was the one who brought him danger, it should be I who protects him from it.

They say that fate gives you the mate that you need.

I never really understood what that meant.

In my mind, that equated to fate giving me the person who had my heart racing, who made me smile, who liked similar things to me.

And there was that with Larkin, but that wasn't what I needed.

It was more like a fun free gift with purchase.

Fate knew what they were doing, they gave me an omega who would be strong when I wasn't, brave when I couldn't, optimistic when I only saw darkness ahead. I could only hope that I was that for him as well.

Waiting until it was time for us to meet around the fire had been rough. I kept waiting for the shoe to drop. Auden wasn't one to play games, from anything I had seen. He wasn't doing this to keep us on edge or as some sort of power play.

And still, I felt like a pawn, which wasn't fair to Auden. He'd done nothing to make me think that he was using us. If anything, we were the ones reaping all of the benefits.

Even with my mate by my side, working on the overgrown garden as a way of distraction, my mind kept spiralling.

A couple of times, I nearly allowed my fox to take over and hunt the annoying squirrel who kept startling me.

But abandoning my mate to sate my beast didn't sit well with me and I pushed on, determined to be the strong, brave alpha he deserved.

After what felt like decades, it was time to meet Auden and discuss his trip. My mate and I sat near the fire, waiting for him to join us.

When he came over, his eyes were still sleepy. "Thanks for waiting. I needed a nap."

A nap? I'd been in inner turmoil all day because he needed a nap? He'd been tired from his trip, from all that he'd been through since he left and needed downtime. Or maybe that was an excuse he gave to pull his thoughts together. I'd been known to hide away while making decisions a time or two.

"I'd love to hear about your trip." Larkin might not understand the workings of a pack, but he innately had the diplomacy required of them.

"Before I start, I need you to trust that you are safe right now." His words were not instilling confidence.

"I went to the Shifter Council."

My mate grabbed my hand, squeezed it tight. Neither of us said a word.

“I reminded them that my pack existed, and that I am a pack of one, and that a pack of one is no pack at all.”

I hadn't considered it in that light and it saddened me. Auden was a self-sufficient shifter who had ties to the local packs. That was great and all, but being a pack of one as opposed to a lone shifter, felt like a very different thing.

“They agreed that my pack wasn't what it needed to be and offered to buy the pack lands for Council use—and to help me find a new pack.”

My mate leaned into me, his body trembling slightly. I felt the same. He's set out to help us and the Council took that as an opportunity to try to take what little he had left from them.

“I refused them.” Could one do that? Refuse the council? Apparently so because Auden was sitting up straight, looking physically stronger than I'd seen him since we met. “This is my pack and I want to watch it flourish once more.”

He stood up. “And what did they do? They laughed. How could an old man like me grow a pack? Ha! They don't know about you two. I have everything I need right around this fire.”

“The Council approved?” Nothing I'd heard about the Council suggested they were flexible on anything. But also, I was quickly learning that there was a lot I'd been taught about shifters that was full-on wrong.

“They didn't know who they were messing with.

I grew up learning the laws of old as well as the laws of modern times.

I don't count on a Council Librarian to find me answers," he tapped the side of his head, "I have all the information right here. When I quoted the rights of a pack Alpha from the laws of old, they backed off. I suspect they are waiting for my failure. They'll be waiting a long time. "

I hadn't really considered that he was the pack Alpha.

But of course, he was. He was the only one left.

It wouldn't matter if he was an alpha or an omega.

He was the leader. It didn't matter that leadership was over exactly one person.

Looking at it through that lens changed my perspective, that was for sure.

"And that's where I need you to trust me, and be brave.

I want to mark you as pack. I'm an old man without much to offer other than what you see, but when I tell you that while you two are not the first to pass through these lands, please believe that you are the first I'd ever considered inviting to be pack. "

"But I'm rogue." As tempting as his offer was, I couldn't bring him harm. I refused.

He nodded. "You are. But if the Alpha of a pack marks a rogue as Pack while reciting the ceremonial words nearly lost with time, you will no longer be rogue, you will be pack, under the eyes of both the goddess and the council."

"I didn't..." words weren't coming, the possibilities he'd opened up tossing everything I thought I knew out the window.

"It rarely happens. Most packs don't acknowledge that this method exists. They don't

want the trouble that taking in another outcast might bring. It's easier to forget that there's a way around the mark."

His eyes fell to where I was scarred. "And I'm sure that some packs have removed it from their pack education for so long that no one alive still remembers. But I remember... and I'd like to make you pack. But that means you would need to stay here, to truly be Pack."

"Do you think the packs you have an agreement with have a problem with this?" I asked. If they would, it was a no brainer. We'd leave.

"I don't think so." Not a resounding yes.

I turned to my mate, and he put his free hand on his belly and gave a single nod.

"It would be an honor to be pack." I answered for us both.

The ceremony was short. He spoke the ceremonial words in a language I was unfamiliar with. I wouldn't have been surprised to discover that Auden didn't know what they meant word for word. I wasn't sure they mattered, because without that knowledge, they still felt right.

And when the final words were spoken, he reached out his partially shifted hands and clawed each of us. Me, over my rogue mark, slicing deeper and wider than the scar.

I was able to keep a cry of anguish coming from my chest, the searing pain nearly too much. But as bad as that was, it wasn't as difficult as seeing my mate bleed.

"As your alpha, I command you to shift."

And for the first time since my father passed, I felt the power of an Alpha. Even if I

hadn't wanted to shift, it was happening. There was no choice. My beast took over before I could reach the hem of my shirt.

Auden might be this cute, little, adorable man you expected to see at a bingo if he were human, but there was no mistake about it— he had power... power he'd been using for the benefit of others for years.

And now, he was using it for us.

I didn't know what the future would hold from here, but as the three of us treaded off into the woods, following Auden's lead, I knew one thing.

This was home.

And these people? They were my pack.

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LARKIN

The drive back to our old cabin was very different to the one when we fled our home.

We trundled over the same roads but we were no longer hiding.

When we got off the road at a rest stop, we got glances as everyone did when we walked in the door.

But after a quick once over, people went back to what they were doing.

But we were different. Creven bore my mating mark and the one from our new pack, while I was pregnant and also has Auden's pack mark.

And though we couldn't change Daniel's death and that I killed him, my ending him was justified.

He'd threatened my mate. Auden had cleared this with the council but there would be resentment from Daniel's pack and as much as I loved our first home, I wanted to be in and out. There'd be no dawdling.

"It's hard to believe." My mate navigated around a pothole that had gotten bigger since we'd left. "A council ruling that recognizes new pack formation. Who would have thought?"

I touched the fresh mark on my shoulder, still tender but already healing as though it had always been there.

“Auden is a persuasive Alpha.” Despite the details he’d provided, I wondered if he had a history with any of the council members. Were there people who owed him favors and he’d told them it was payback time?

My mate rounded the last corner and the clearing appeared. The cabin was still standing when I’d wondered if Daniel’s Alpha had ordered it destroyed. And would the pack have trashed the insides carrying off anything of value?

The cabin was smaller than I remembered and tears filled my eyes.

It was sad we were going to leave it alone.

I hoped another lone shifter would find it and make themselves a home.

What I'd planted was overgrown with weeds but the scorch marks from the bonfire were still visible. The grass had been trampled and there was an overwhelming stench of angry shifters. Maybe they hadn’t destroyed it, thinking they might lure us back.

“What if Daniel’s friends ignore the council ruling and are waiting for us?” I stood on the porch, my hand on the door. Maybe we were foolish to have returned. I was still processing that we weren’t outlaws.

“If they value their life, they’ll keep away.” My mate took a big breath. “Hard to believe we were so scared.”

Perhaps it was because I was carrying our baby that I was more reluctant to embrace our new freedoms.

“If we were human, I’d carry you over the threshold.” He put a hand on my hip.

“Shouldn’t that be the other way round? I was your mate when we left but you

weren't mine. Not officially.”

“And none of our acting actions were legal.”

I shoved the door and we stood at the entrance surveying what had become a museum. Books were on the coffee table and night stand and there were moldy dishes in the sink. Ewww. We wouldn't be taking those. We'd left clothes scattered over the floor during our hasty departure.

We packed our books, clothes and kitchen equipment, minus the dishes covered in ants and mold.

The chairs we'd burned in the bonfire or as I referred to it the “what remained of Daniel fire” and the closet and bookshelves were too big to transport in the truck.

But we took the bed apart and carried out tables, an armchair and some lamps.

Anything we could salvage that would fit in the truck went in, including a chopping board my mate had carved.

I wandered outside and hefted what remained of the wood in the shed. That would be useful during the cold nights in the mountains.

When we were done, we took off to the river to get clean, preferring it to a shower. I headed to our favorite spot but Creven pulled me upstream. “Not there. I got rid of some of Daniel there.”

Ewww. The part of me that had been holding on to this place let it go. It was tainted with his memory and the stench of his burning body. Our swim was shorter than we intended and after a quick wash, we headed back.

“Our little one will grow up in a pack, not fearing when they’ll be asked to leave or when an alpha will threaten them.” My mate slung an arm around my shoulder.

So far it was a pack of three, four if we counted our baby.

“I can't wait to show the baby the woods around our new home.” My mate started the truck. “We can teach them to track and hunt.”

“And if they’re a wolf, my beast can show them how to take down a deer.”

Creven side-eyed me. Now we weren’t anticipating an attack, we joked with one another, something that had been lacking when we lived here.

“Oh, you think the odds favor you, huh?” He elbowed me and put the truck in gear.

“Didn’t say that. But there’s a 50% chance our baby will be a wolf.” I put my hand over his on the gearstick. “Let’s go.”

I peered out the window as my mate reversed and wound the window down. “Thank you for everything. We’ll keep you here.” I pressed a hand to my chest. “I hope someone stumbles upon you and makes a home here.”

And we were off.

On the drive back to our new home we sang along to the radio and discussed what we were going to do to the cabin. I was planning a garden and we even discussed baby names, though that ended in an argument.

“The cabin doesn’t need a new roof.” Creven was adamant it needed new shingles before winter.

I wanted to build an extension for a nursery because with my mate working from home and a baby, we needed more space so we weren't tripping over one another. And our little one deserved their own room.

Auden seemed pleased to see us when we pulled in though it was hard to tell. He wasn't the kind of guy that clapped and hollered when he was excited but he grinned, so I took that as a welcome.

"How'd it go?"

"Better than expected." I climbed out of the truck. "No sign that anyone had been in there and we got everything we wanted."

"Good. I've been thinking about those improvements you'll need." He wandered over to our cabin. "There's a hardware store in town that owes me a favor or two."

How many people owed Auden a favor, including any members of the shifter council I'd been musing over? I liked the guy and I was forever grateful for what he'd done. As our Alpha I respected him but I suspected he was able to manipulate people and that shouldn't be surprising. He was an Alpha.

"You'll be needing a nursery."

My mate and I shared a glance and burst out laughing. "We've been discussing that on the drive."

Auden tapped his head. "I'm a mind reader."

Wait what? Was he serious? Or was he just good at reading people? He'd make an excellent gambler, not that I approved of betting because people lost everything when they gambled.

But him mentioning what needed to be done to make our cabin a home and how he interred himself into our plans... well that was what Alphas did even if you didn't agree. But the flip side was that you had people around you who looked out for one another.

"There's something else." His expression had grown more serious. "I've been in touch with some other displaced shifters. Ones who might be interested in joining us and making this a real pack instead of the three of us."

My reaction was instinctive. I'd talked about wanting to expand the pack but the thought of strangers coming in and upending our routine was unsettling. My chest tightened and I rubbed my flat belly, concentrating on the baby.

Creven paused unloading our belongings. "What kind of shifters?"

"Good people who are alone. A wolf whose pack dissolved after their alpha died without naming a successor, and there's a bear who enjoys his solitude but would like having backup when he needs it.

" Auden glanced between me and my mate as if assessing our reaction.

"None of them are rogues but like you, Larkin, they are loners. "

If Auden said they were good people, I trusted him.

We'd be a real pack and our cub would have aunties and uncles. Maybe there'd be more kids in time, and we'd have a school and perhaps a clinic. This was what I'd dreamed of during the years on the road.

That evening we sat on our cabin's front porch enjoying the sunset. Other than our planned renovations, there was nothing to fear. We were mated and had a baby on the

way. And we belonged to a pack.

"Happy?" Creven put his arm around my shoulders.

"I am. We've finally found where we belong."

CREVEN

Settling into the new pack life and knowing for the first time since I was marked as rogue, that I wasn't moving, that we didn't have a target on our back for being mated... what a difference it made.

My mate and I worked together not only to get the garden ready to plant next season, but also fixing up the different buildings, including our new home.

And at night, the three of us ate around the campfire, talking about our day and listening to tales of what the pack had been like.

We'd settled into a nice routine, one that made my fox happy.

This might not have been where I envisioned being mated and raising our family, but now that we were here, I couldn't imagine doing it anywhere else.

There might be only three of us, but it really felt like a pack in all ways.

And my fox was settling into life with an Alpha that wasn't our father easily.

I hadn't realized how antsy and confused he'd been by not having our den anymore.

I felt similarly, but I thought that with our mate, he'd been doing okay.

And he definitely had been doing better after we found our mate.

But when we took the vow and were marked, something more snapped into place.

He was back to his old self... only happier.

Tonight, we were having stew, and it wasn't settling well with my mate's stomach.

My mate didn't say as much, but he put it down after only taking a few bites, which wasn't like him, especially not with one of his favorite meals.

When I gave him a concerning look, he assured me it was fine...

just the pregnancy talking. What I would do to take that away from him.

And not just the nausea. I'd take the exhaustion, the discomfort, and the weird dreams. Anything and everything I could to make this pregnancy easier on him.

Unfortunately, it wasn't an option.

"Tonight, we need a pack meeting," Auden said, setting his empty bowl down.

I had assumed it was about finances or something similarly boring.

Because, well, that's what most pack meetings I'd been to were like.

At least the meeting kinds. That, or security issues.

From everything we knew, there was no need for us to worry about security.

Auden's beast wouldn't be able to hide his worry over anything like that from us if something had recently changed, either, not with our connection to him.

After we became official as a pack, I saw for the first time how powerful the old man was.

Our open bond to him as his packmates was stronger than the one I had with my father.

When he allowed it, I could feel emotions running through it quite clearly.

And really strong feelings, like when he stubbed his toe, those came through without him trying.

Larkin said he didn't have the same flow of emotion with Auden that I did, although it was there.

He described it to me as more a feeling of belonging than what I was experiencing.

I half wondered if it was because I was the closest thing Auden had to a Beta or if it was that my mate had been a lone wolf. Not that it mattered, not really.

"That sounds ominous," Larkin teased. Or at least I thought he was teasing, until he grabbed my hand and held it tightly. Maybe I was missing something here—or possibly his stomach was that bad or maybe he was reading Auden differently than I was.

"Do you think we could wait another day? My mate's not feeling so well." I'd never have considered saying anything like that to my father when he was Alpha. Son privilege only went so far. But this was Auden. And our pack, in many ways, was very... loosey-goosey.

"It really can't."

And my mate had read the room much better than I had. This wasn't something small that could wait. So much for thinking I could feel emotions through our connection.

Auden had seemed happy enough, and I crossed my fingers I was working myself up for no reason.

“This can't wait. I'm gonna cut to the chase. We need to have a change of power here. I'm too old, and I'm too weak to be Alpha.”

“You seem perfect to us,” Larkin said.

Larkin was looking at it through a different lens than I was. I understood instantly what the old man was talking about. It wasn't about whether or not he was the leader we needed, it was about him being the leader others would perceive as being weak.

Now that attention had been brought to the pack and it had grown, people were going to look at this land and his position and see it as an opportunity to come in, challenge him, and take over. The histories of our people were filled with that.

I always thought it was a thing of the past. But the more Auden spoke, the more I realized he didn't. He never said if he heard rumblings or if it was just a gut reaction, but he was firm in his belief that I needed to take over the pack and become the Alpha.

I had the pedigree from my family lineage. And while my mate looked far more Alpha and his beast possessed a lot of strength, he was an Omega and that wasn't going to help us, not in the eyes of others.

“I won't fight you. I won't. You've already done so much for us. If I need to fight for a pack to protect you, I'll do that, but I won't be the one to end your life. Not for a title. Not after all you've done.”

And then Auden did something I never in a million years would have expected him to do. He laughed... laughed so hard he started to choke. Then he laughed until he snorted and eventually until he fell off his seat.

The old man was losing it.

“What’s going on here?” Larkin asked, and I didn’t have a clue.

If he thought this was the normal pack protocol I could explain away, my mate had a lot to learn about pack structures. Because never had I ever heard of an Alpha who laughed at someone worried about it and trying to avoid a challenge.

Finally, he set himself right again, his eyes tearing from all the laughter.

“I don’t see what’s funny.” I said, my eyes darting back and forth between my mate and our Alpha.

“It’s not really funny. But it just reminds me of how I... let’s just say anticipating the look on your face when you realize what I really asked you.”

I still had no clue what was going on. So I stared at him, waiting for him to clarify. He eventually shrugged and shook his head, the silliness he’d shown gone.

“Who is the Alpha of this pack? Let’s start there.”

“You’re Alpha, Auden.” Larkin answered for us.

“Exactly. And who decides how we do things in this pack?”

“We do?” Larkin asked.

Auden shook his head. “Nope. Me. I am the Alpha. And I have decided that blood challenges are what get most packs into trouble. If someone from the outside comes in and blood challenges us, we have to go by shifter law. But within the pack, we don’t need to allow them at all.”

“So you’re saying... I just become Alpha?” That didn’t sound right.

“No. There needs to be a challenge—that we can’t change. Stand up.”

I did.

“Okay. We’re going to decide this the only way we can: Rock, Paper, Scissors. Do you know the game?”

Just when I thought he was being serious and rational... There was no way he was serious, except when I nodded, he said, “Perfect. House rules which apply only for today: the challenger can only use paper.”

If I was playing Rock, Paper, Scissors anywhere else, I rarely used paper. There was always something that just felt so weak about it. But then he called, “The challenge has been set. Rock, Paper, Scissors... now!” And my choice was to obey or not.

And as I threw paper, just like he commanded. He threw rock and went, “Oh no, I lost! You’re Alpha.”

This could not be my life... but also it very much was. Before I could say a word, he got on his knees, bore his neck, and swore his allegiance to me as Alpha. He then called my mate over to do the same.

We went from having dinner, to listening to what I thought were the ramblings of an old man, to me being Alpha of our pack of three, in a few minutes' time.

I wouldn't have believed the ceremony worked, if I didn't sense the Alpha bond already forming and my beast commanded that we shift together.

“And now we shift.” Became my very first act as Alpha.

This isn't how you thought it would happen, Father, but I finally became what you always wanted.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

LARKIN

There was a hint of autumn in the morning air as we loaded into Auden's truck.

Unlike the cabins that varied from needing work to having to be torn down, the vehicle was his baby.

The paintwork gleamed from his polishing and it had a radio that didn't need constant fiddling.

I sat in the back while my mate was in the passenger seat.

Auden had asked if Creven wanted to drive because as the Alpha it was my mate's decision but he let the former Alpha get behind the wheel. Auden navigated the winding mountain roads with the confidence of someone who'd been making this drive for decades.

"Dr. Granger is an excellent physician." Auden glanced in the rear view mirror as we descended the mountain toward the town nestled in the valley. "She's been taking care of shifters in the county for twenty years. Heck, she's delivered half the cubs in the surrounding packs."

My belly clenched but not with morning sickness.

This was nerves. My medical appointment wasn't just a pregnancy checkup.

This was my first official appointment as a member of a pack.

There was no bribing one of the staff into letting me use a fake name.

I didn't have to worry that someone would put a hand on my shoulder in the waiting room and haul me outside.

My mate must have sensed my anxiety because he reached out and placed a hand on my knee. That accompanied by a reassuring smile and him saying he'd be with me, eased my jitters.

"Does she know about us?" Creven's fingers tightened on my leg.

"Don't worry. You're good to go. Nothing much fazes the doc but I've filled her in and she'll charge us pack rates and not human ones." Auden grinned at me in the mirror.

The modern clinic was small and it was tucked between a bakery and a bookstore on the town's main street. Once we finished and we'd satisfied ourselves the baby was healthy, I was charging into the bakery and buying something yummy.

Dr. Granger must have been looking out for us because even though there were a couple of people in the waiting room, she met us at the door and greeted our former Alpha as an old friend.

She carried the scent of lavender on her skin but it wasn't perfume or body wash.

Having grown the herb, I suspected she was also a gardener.

The aroma was calming and I loosened my grip on my mate's hand. Auden plonked himself in a chair and picked up a magazine, telling us to bring him a pic of our little one when we were done.

"So, you're the famous rogues who've been causing all the excitement." She gestured for me to get on the examination table. "Auden's been talking about you two for weeks."

"Not both rogues but close enough." That was my mate.

"But you're looking at the new Alpha. Ta da." I gave Creven a mock bow.

"Ahhh. That was Auden's plan." She put a finger to her lips. "But he's still standing and I didn't notice any bruises."

We both laughed. "I'll let him tell you how we did it."

The doctor checked my blood pressure and took my temperature, though from my experience, a nurse usually performed those tasks. I was glad she did though, as being with strangers who weren't out to make my life difficult was still new to me.

"How are you feeling? Any morning sickness?"

"Some nausea, but nothing that's kept me down." I went to bed earlier than usual but with the upheaval in our lives, that wasn't surprising.

"That's normal. Let's have a look at your little one, shall we?"

She warmed up the gel and spread it over my belly as Creven held my hand. I'd watched this procedure so many times on TV and now it was happening to me. And our baby wouldn't be the child of a lone wolf and rogue.

My mate squeed as a grainy image appeared on the screen and while I was desperate to see our baby, I couldn't make out anything. Was that a leg or an arm?

“This is so exciting.” Creven was rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet but I was squinting at the screen, getting irritated if he could see what I couldn’t. But my annoyance vanished as a regular thump thump filled the room.

“Our baby’s heart?” I sobbed and my mate kissed the top of my head. We’d been through so much to get to this point and our little one’s heart was beating in time to my own. My shoulders heaved and I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand.

"There's your cub." Dr. Granger said I was about three months. She pointed out the head, spine and limbs. “And the heartbeat is strong.”

Awww our baby had arms and legs.

“There’s only one baby.”

Our little one’s heart beat echoed around the room and bounced off the walls as Creven and I shared a glance.

“One? Were we supposed to have more than that?”

Dr Granger laughed and explained that wolf shifters often carried more than one cub. Thank gods for only one baby. We would have loved multiple babies who arrived all at once but I was thankful for one. One healthy baby who had arms and legs.

"Farmer's market next." Auden demanded to see the ultrasound image and now I was an expert, I pointed out the baby’s limbs before grabbing a cream-filled cake from the bakery.

The weekly market filled the town square and stalls were full of fresh vegetables, flowers, fruit, bread, and plants, along with homemade jams, soap and wine. Auden and Creven perused the food while I bought seeds and pots of herbs.

I beckoned my mate when I came across a booth that sold handmade baby clothes.

“This is so cute.” It was a onesie with elephants emblazoned over the fabric. I had to buy it even though the baby would outgrow it quickly.

"Alpha Auden!" A woman waved from behind a table laden with loaves of fresh bread. "Haven't seen you in town for weeks."

“I’m no longer Alpha with an upper case A.” Auden introduced Creven and the woman gave a little curtsy.

I stood tall, knowing we were a pack and a family and I was proud that Auden was announcing it at a busy market. We left her stall with sourdough that had just come out of the oven but I had my mate run back for another loaf that I could nibble on in the car.

Everywhere we went people greeted and congratulated us, wanting to meet the new Alpha and me, the Alpha Omega. There was little for this Alpha’s mate to do as yet besides grow our baby and create a garden out of the dusty patch behind our cabin.

"This is what pack feels like," I murmured to my mate as people had us sample herbs and a new batch of jam and they greeted us with smiles rather than snarls.

“Did we buy all this?” I marveled at the bags in the back of the truck. As well as bread, vegetables, fruit and jam, we had cheese, pies, and grass-fed beef.

“Nope. Some of it was gifted.” My mate offered me a pear and when I took a bite, the juice dribbled down my arm. He licked it off and Auden tut tuted, saying there’d be none of that on the way home.

“We got a bit carried away.” Auden munched on a juicy apple while I kept my loaf of

bread close, yanking off bits, enjoying the soft fluffy texture that almost melted on my tongue. “With the shopping.” He caught my eye and winked.

At home, my mate took charge of the grill, seasoning the steaks with herbs from our haul while I prepared a salad.

Auden busied himself with side dishes. Creven dashed inside and stole a piece of avocado but I smacked his hand, telling him I didn’t care that he was Alpha, he’d wait and eat with the rest of us.

When the food was ready, we ate at the picnic table Auden had built years ago.

Everything tasted better when shared with people you loved. Creven stood and raised his glass of iced tea. “To us. We are creating a legacy, not just for us but for generations to come.”

“To us.”

Auden filled us in about a new pack member that was arriving next week and two more the following week.

He’d put that in motion while he was still Alpha, but Creven had to okayed it.

He wasn’t sure if they’d be here long term, but our pack didn’t demand loyalty from birth to death.

He and my mate would be fixing up one of the remaining cabins to make it habitable as one of the newcomers had their own trailer.

Before we went inside I looked up at the stars, wondering if my folks were looking down. Wherever they were, I hoped they were proud of me and happy that I was safe,

loved, and about to become a dad.

“What are you thinking?” My mate was at my side.

“About how fate put me in that trap so you could find me.” I'd have preferred a less owie introduction but it was memorable and I bore the scars as a reminder.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

CREVEN

When I became Alpha of our pack, it hadn't really been a choice.

Accepting the responsibility had been the only way to keep my mate safe.

And while I'd have loved for there to have been time to really think about what my decision would mean for my mate and I and what it would look like, I didn't regret taking on the role.

Auden had been right. If we were going to be a pack, we needed to not show weakness and sadly, in shifter politics, age was often a weakness.

In a lot of ways, I assumed my life was going to look exactly like what I'd been living and the pack would be the same as when we arrived plus two. Auden had just kind of been living his life in his own little sheltered world and I was happy to be part of that.

Only now it would be the three of us officially, so much had changed. We were a new family and that took adjusting to. All packs were families of sorts, of course, but with Auden, it went deeper than that.

My mate and I were both orphans, and Auden took on, not really a fatherly role, more like a grandfatherly. It was both beautiful and frustrating, depending upon the day. And if that didn't shout family, I wasn't sure what would.

For the most part, life did go on as normal, as normal as it could be when your omega

was expecting your first child. It was to be expected. Pregnancy hormones were no joke.

The one change that caught me off guard since becoming a pack was the way the Alpha bond connected me.

Auden and I were able to get each other's attention no matter where we were in the pack lands through the bond.

That was helpful, especially if one of us dropped a tool while we were on a ladder or were announcing dinner was ready.

It took a little to get used to, there was a sense of invasiveness that came with it, but the pros outweighed the cons.

But with my mate, that connection went far deeper than that.

It wasn't surprising given we were mates, but it still took getting used to.

Just like with Auden, I could sense when he needed me, but more than that, there were times when I felt his pain as if it were my own.

As his pregnancy progressed, so did his discomfort.

Not once did he complain to me, but his back would ache at things that at one time would have been no big deal.

He'd had numerous cramps in his legs at night that I felt before they tore him from his sleep.

And there was ligament pain during particular growth spurts that hurt parts of me that

didn't exist, which— whoa.

It made me feel helpless. There was nothing I could do to help him other than be there by his side. More than anything, I wanted to take it from him, to bear it as my own.

But today, something new went through our bond, something I'd never experienced before. It was the laughter, but not the kind when he found something funny. No. This was his happy laugh, the beautiful sound that came when he was overcome with joy.

I followed it into the woods, where he was staring at a tree that was in the deepest part of the river, using a stick to try and reach it.

“I'm thinking you're seeing something I don't?” I rested my chin on his shoulder, wrapping my arms around him the best I could, kissing our mating mark, snuggling in close. He leaned into me, his head falling back, angling for a kiss, one I gladly gave.

“No, we're looking at the same thing.”

“I see a tree?” What I didn't see was what made it special.

“Yep,” He dropped the stick and turned in my arms to face me, my arms not quite able to reach around him anymore. “We need to get it out of the river.”

“Okay, I can work on that.” Denying my mate wasn't happening... ever... at least not until he replied by telling me he was going to help.

“Not going to happen.”

He stuck out his bottom lip in a faux pout. “Being pregnant doesn't mean I'm not

capable of helping.”

I lowered my hands to his belly. “Being pregnant means you’re not supposed to do things that could put stress on the baby. I can get it out. What are we doing with it?”

“I saw a video once where you could take the trees that had been in the water for a long time and use them to make beautiful instruments.”

Of all the possibilities I had considered, that wasn’t even in the same county as them.

“Are you planning on singing for me, my love?”

“No, but I was thinking that we could use it to make a crib for our little one.”

I had no idea if it would work or what it would entail, when the lumber would be ready... any of it, but I spent the next two days extracting it from the water, watching videos, and making a plan.

If my mate wanted a fancy crib for our little one, he was getting one.

It broke my heart when I realized that the timing wasn’t going to work to get the project done before little one’s birth.

Taking waterlogged wood and turning it into something useful without specialized drying equipment took a long time.

And it made me determined to find something equally special for our little one.

“We’re going out,” I said, holding my hand out for my mate.

He took my hand and allowed me to help him up and out of his spot on the stoop.

There had been a time when he'd fight me on it, telling me he could do it.

But that was no longer the case. He was not as agile and steady on his feet as he was even the day before.

He carried our baby all up front. If you looked at him from the back, you wouldn't suspect he was with child, but from the side, it looked like our sweet baby was laying from head to toe with their feet at my mate's navel.

Larkin was adorable and sexy like this.

"Where are we going?" He brushed off the back of his paternity pants.

"It's a surprise."

"That surprise better include ice cream," he mumbled under his breath as he waddled with me to the truck.

I was taking him a couple towns over to a shifter carpenter I had heard of named Jeb. Auden told me made the most beautiful pieces and had a knack for knowing exactly what you needed. Hopefully, something there would catch Larkin's eye.

But first, we did stop for ice cream, because if my mate wanted it, he got it. We sat under the pine tree, cones in hand, on a day that was far too chilly for the cool confection.

"You weren't really taking me for ice cream, were you?"

"The second you mentioned it, I was." I wiped my thumb under his lip, gathering up some drips of his mint chocolate chip, and licked it clean. "But no, that isn't the plan. You know how the crib project isn't quite working as quickly as I wanted?"

He nodded. "It's fine. Pregnancy sometimes makes me have emotional ties to things I shouldn't. Our little one will be fine anywhere."

"Emotional ties to our land are good. It means we're feeling like a pack in all ways. And our little one will be sleeping in a bed made from that tree, it just won't be a crib."

"A big kid bed lasts longer." He leaned in and licked my ice cream. "Delicious."

As we finished our cones, I told him about the carpenter and once he learned Auden knew him, he was excited. That excitement changed to joy as we met the older man, a beaver shifter, because of course he was, leading us to the back where his finished cribs lived.

"This is it." My mate went straight toward the far corner. It wasn't until we got closer that I saw why. Carved into the panel was a fox and a wolf. "This is our baby's first bed."

Jeb smiled. "I had a dream that I needed to make that one. I guess I know why. You're Auden's new Alpha, right.?"

"I am." It was interesting that he didn't refer to our pack by name, but by its association with Auden.

"I grew up the next pack over and we were friends. This is my gift to you. Please accept it as a thank you, for making my childhood friend no longer alone, and for giving him what he always wanted, a pack filled with love."

LARKIN

The contraction took hold of me as I was staring at the snow piling up on our back porch. I doubled over and gripped the ledge until my knuckles turned white. A gush of warm liquid told me I'd either peed myself which wasn't unheard of in the later stages of pregnancy or my water broke.

Baby's coming. My wolf knew what was about to happen.

"C-C-Creven!" My voice cracked when I managed to get his name out because panic and excitement combined and goosebumps paraded over my skin. Every nerve ending and synapse tingled and announced, "It's time!"

My mate appeared in the doorway having just woken up.

He blinked and stumbled toward me as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

We'd been expecting the contractions because I was three days past my due date. We'd gone on long walks, I'd eaten food laden with chili, and we'd had a lot of sex.

But nothing had encouraged the baby to leave the warmth and safety of my belly.

"Are you sure?"

I was tempted to yell, "No. I decided to scream as a practice run for when I really go into labor." But my body cramped again and I leaned on the wall doing my best to breathe through the pain.

“Very sure.” I staggered into our bedroom before turning around and waddling out again. Where was I supposed to be now I was in labor?

Since last night, the storm had been dumping snow faster than Auden had seen in decades and when I’d woken at dawn, our former Alpha texted me the road to town was impassable. But the storm would stop before the baby wanted out. That was what I’d repeated as the world outside the cabin blurred.

But our little one didn’t listen to me. I hoped that habit would change once they were here.

Dr. Granger was in town and couldn’t make it up the mountain. But first babies took ages to arrive and the storm would stop before I had to push.

“You hear that my darling?” I patted my belly. “We need to slow down until the dorset arrives.”

Creven reached for his phone and told me to breathe. I bit back another snarky response. What else was he supposed to say and do? If I was going to yell at him, I should keep my insults until I was pushing and in agony.

But another contraction wrapped itself around me. The time between this third one and the second was much shorter than the gap between first and second. Damn, I shouldn’t have eaten all that chili.

“Who are you phoning?”

“Dr Granger.” But my mate stared at the phone and shook it. “No signal.”

Unless she planned on holding the line for hours, there was nothing she could have done anyway.

The front door opened and I braced myself as the wind ushered in two visitors.

“I heard moaning.” Auden and Colin removed their coats, hats, and gloves and stamped their feet. “Unless Creven hit his thumb with a hammer, you’re in labor.”

I responded by panting and groaning as my belly tightened. Being in a pack had its advantages but having the whole pack attend my labor wasn’t something I’d considered.

“I’ve been present at births when I lived in the bear den.” Colin breathed with me as my mate rubbed my back.

“And I’ve delivered babies.” Auden looked so pleased with himself as he placed an old bag on the table. Perhaps he and Colin had brought snacks and they’d eat while I screamed.

“The contractions are about five minutes apart.” My mate had been paying attention and timing them. “His water broke maybe twenty minutes ago.”

Auden pulled out gloves, towels, a pic of a sunny beach, rolling pin, ice chips and a kettle from his bag. They were going to make tea and enjoy it while I labored. Lucky them.

“We have our own kettle,” Creven pointed out. “If you’re thirsty.”

Auden and Colin shared a glance and laughed, making me want to stamp my foot and tell them to keep it together because I was bringing a child into the world.

“The soap operas always have people boiling water, hence the kettle,” Colin added. “So we had to bring one.”

Despite my irritation and another contraction looming, I giggled. My belly jiggled and I grunted as the cramp took away my ability to speak, leaving me only able to shriek.

Creven breathed with me and Colin and Auden joined in. I hoped the baby could hear how the entire pack was helping.

“How do you want to do this?” My mate’s cheeks were as pale as the world outside the cabin. But he wasn’t freaking. Instead, he looked directly at me, making me understand we were united and I could do this, even without a doctor.

We’d discussed birthing positions but now that I was laboring, getting on all fours wasn’t what I wanted. Or maybe it was. Perhaps the baby should decide.

“Not sure. When I want to push, I’ll let you know.”

My pack mates took turns to wander with me around the cabin, pausing while a contraction took hold of my body. Creven made tea for the other two and gave me ice cubes to suck on. It was weird having ice in my mouth when outside the path to the shed and the road were covered in the stuff.

I reminded myself that shifters had been giving birth without a doctor present for hundreds of years.

That was fine in theory because it happened to other people.

But my pack was acting as if giving birth during a blizzard on a mountain without a doctor happened every day.

That prevented anxiety bubbling out and me being unable to push the baby into the world.

Thank gods my labor was progressing faster than the literature said it would for a first baby. If I'd been in labor for thirty-six hours, I might have told everyone to go home and return another day when I was calmer.

“You're doing so well, my love.” I was on the bed, naked, and my mate was using a rolling pin on my back. Who knew a kitchen implement would be so useful in easing my aches.

“Help me up.” I had a desire to push and didn't want to be prone. “Put a quilt on the floor and cushions.” I wanted to squat and wondered if Auden had a mattress in his little black bag.

But my mate dragged the mattress off our bed and I got on my haunches as he supported me. It was owie, and going to be more owie, but this position felt right.

I grunted and pushed, thinking maybe the baby would pop out. Nothing happened and I leaned my head on Creven's shoulder where his pack mark lay on top of his old rogue one.

“Push with me, babe. Not sure I can do this by myself.”

Everyone groaned and panted, not just Creven, as each contraction gripped me.

“Picture each push as bringing the baby closer to being born.” Auden was crouching, hoping he could see the head.

“Anything?” I yelled, using most of what was left of my energy.

“Soon.”

I cried out and everyone panted and pushed some more.

“Now, I can see the head.” Auden hugged Colin. Great, they were congratulating one another while I was doing the hard work. “The little one has a lot of dark hair.”

I squeezed my mate's hand hard enough to break human bones. Thank gods he was a shifter. “I want you to hold the baby as I give birth.”

Creven changed places with Colin and told me he was touching our baby's head.

His voice wavered and tears streamed over cheeks.

I bore down and the head was out. More pushing brought the shoulders before our little one slid into the world.

Gods that was the best feeling, I couldn't describe the relief of no longer having to push.

“We have a son, Larkin.”

Our baby's first cry was strong but I was convinced he was complaining. If I'd been evicted from a warm, safe place, I'd cry too.

Colin helped me onto the quilt and Creven placed our son on my chest. Our two pack mates blew me kisses and left.

“What about the tea?” Giving birth was thirsty work.

They boiled the kettle as my mate wrapped us in the quilt.

“He has healthy lungs.” Creven kissed our son's damp head, “But despite the noise, he's oh so perfect.”

“Better get used to more crying,” I told him.

“Him or me?” he joked.

Colin and Auden brought tea and snacks but before they could slip away, the mountain erupted in howls.

“The mountain packs know he’s arrived. He’s the Alpha’s heir and that’s a big deal in any pack, but especially so in ours.” Auden nudged Creven and told him he had to respond.

My mate gave me a look before tearing into the snow and responding to the congratulations with a howl of his own.

“We need a name.” Creven was shivering and slipped under the quilt with me and the baby.

I yawned. “Let’s think about that tomorrow. I’ve done enough for today.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:20 pm

CREVEN

I never thought that naming our child would be the difficult part of having a baby.

My fear had been I wouldn't be strong enough to stay by his side with his pain running through me.

When I pulled the midwife aside, they assured me I'd be fine.

What they didn't say was that the Alpha bond shut down during labor.

It felt like cheating at the time, but allowed me to be the mate he needed when he needed me most.

In the back of my mind, I'd convinced myself that we'd see our baby's beautiful face and instantly know their name. And our son was beautiful and perfect, already looking so much like his father. But as to his name? Nothing popped out at my mate or I the day he was born.

It took two days before we found one and the second we heard it we knew. My mate had asked how Oak was doing. He meant the tree that we were drying out to become our son's crib, but I misunderstood, thinking that he was calling our son Oak . We both instantly agreed it was his.

Oaks were strong, powerful trees, and he was going to be a strong, powerful shifter.

And I knew this without a shadow of a doubt because he already had all three of his

pack mates wrapped around his finger.

Even now that he was beginning to crawl, he was the one in control. How could we deny his adorable smile?

The moon had already been rising when Auden called a pack meeting. Larkin swayed from side to side, encouraging Oak to fall asleep. He'd been having a grumpy evening thanks to a combination of teething and skipping a nap.

Oak paid attention to everything and often fought sleep when something interested him. Auden said it was a sign of intelligence and that it'd suit him well. And maybe it would, one day, but it wasn't suiting our sleep habits now.

"Did Auden say why we're meeting?" I asked.

Larken shook his head.

In my old den, the Alpha called the meetings, but I was Alpha here and power had never been a goal of mine.

From the beginning, we had an open policy that anybody could call a pack meeting at any time.

It wasn't as if there were fifty of us and we had to worry about being in non-stop meetings.

If we ever decided to grow, that rule might change, but for now, it suited us.

Larkin and I went out to the fire, the place that had become our pack meeting spot, where we found Auden holding a stick in the flame, toasting a marshmallow. The old man always kept us on our toes.

“Ah, you’re here. I picked those up in town,” he said, pointing to the bag of candy. “Reminded me of sitting around the fire during the pack meetings of my youth.”

“Did you call us here to eat sweets?” Larkin sat down, Oak finally asleep in his arms, snuggling in close. “I’m not saying I mind. Just curious.”

“Yes and no. Yes, I called you to eat the marshmallows, but also I wanted to talk about whether or not we should open the pack to others.” It was a topic we’d tiptoed around since forming and it was time we hashed it out.

We spent the next hour eating more sugar than anyone should as we talked about our goals.

We all agreed that we didn’t want to grow too quickly, but had to balance that desire without squashing who we were, shifters who cared about shifters, rogues, lone wolves, and all.

It was productive and important and with the candy, far less painful than it could have been.

“Auden, is there a reason why you picked today to bring this up?” Larkin rocked back and forth, Oak still continued his peaceful sleep.

“There’s been some rumbling,” he told me. “There’s an increase in traffic around here. Shifter traffic... both rogues and lone shifters alike. I’m thinking that people are checking us out from a distance, and that we might have some requests soon.”

It made sense. I’d been reaching out to local packs, and I met with the Shifter Council on a couple of occasions.

There had been a common theme that ran through all of those discussions— our pack was unique, and there were other people like me out there...

shifters who were displaced as rogues, not because they caused harm to their pack, but out of fear that they someday would come into power.

Many were very young and had done nothing wrong.

And sure, there were some who were marked as the Alpha's way of not giving the ultimate punishment... pushing their problems onto the community at large, but those were rare.

I wrapped my arm around my mate's shoulder, thinking about how different our lives would've been if we hadn't met...

if we hadn't become pack. How alone I'd have been, how lost, how broken.

My beast would've eventually turned feral and then instead of ignoring me, one of the packs would've taken care of business.

It might've been in 20 years or fifty, but fox shifters didn't do well in isolation, unlike their wild cousins.

We didn't know what today or tomorrow would hold, and who might or might not cross our paths, but we all agreed that we wanted everyone to be as happy as we were now. Happy as a pack, as a growing family.

Being mated to my one true love, raising our family in a pack that was a true family had changed my perspective on everything. Back in my den, I focused on myself and my goals. Now? Now I lived each day making sure that those I care about have the community they need to thrive.

"Well, I'm glad that if there's need for us, that we can be there for others." I kissed my mate's cheek, then took Oak from him so he could get up and grab another marshmallow. "Toast away."

As much as he loved eating them, he also loved scorching them and then watching them turn black before going about enjoying the sticky goodness.

Try as I did, the ones I made for him had never been quite right.

He never mentioned it, being the sweet mate that he was, but I could feel it through our bond.

“You sure? There’s still half a bag left, I might be a while,” he teased.

“Go get a cavity or two.”

“Best mate ever,” he gave me a quick peck and set about the serious business of burning sugar over an open flame for he and Auden as I rocked off our sleepy boy.

Growing up in a den that embraced power and authority, I never knew it could be like this, but I did now? Now I couldn’t fathom anything else. This was what pack life was meant to be. I was finally home.