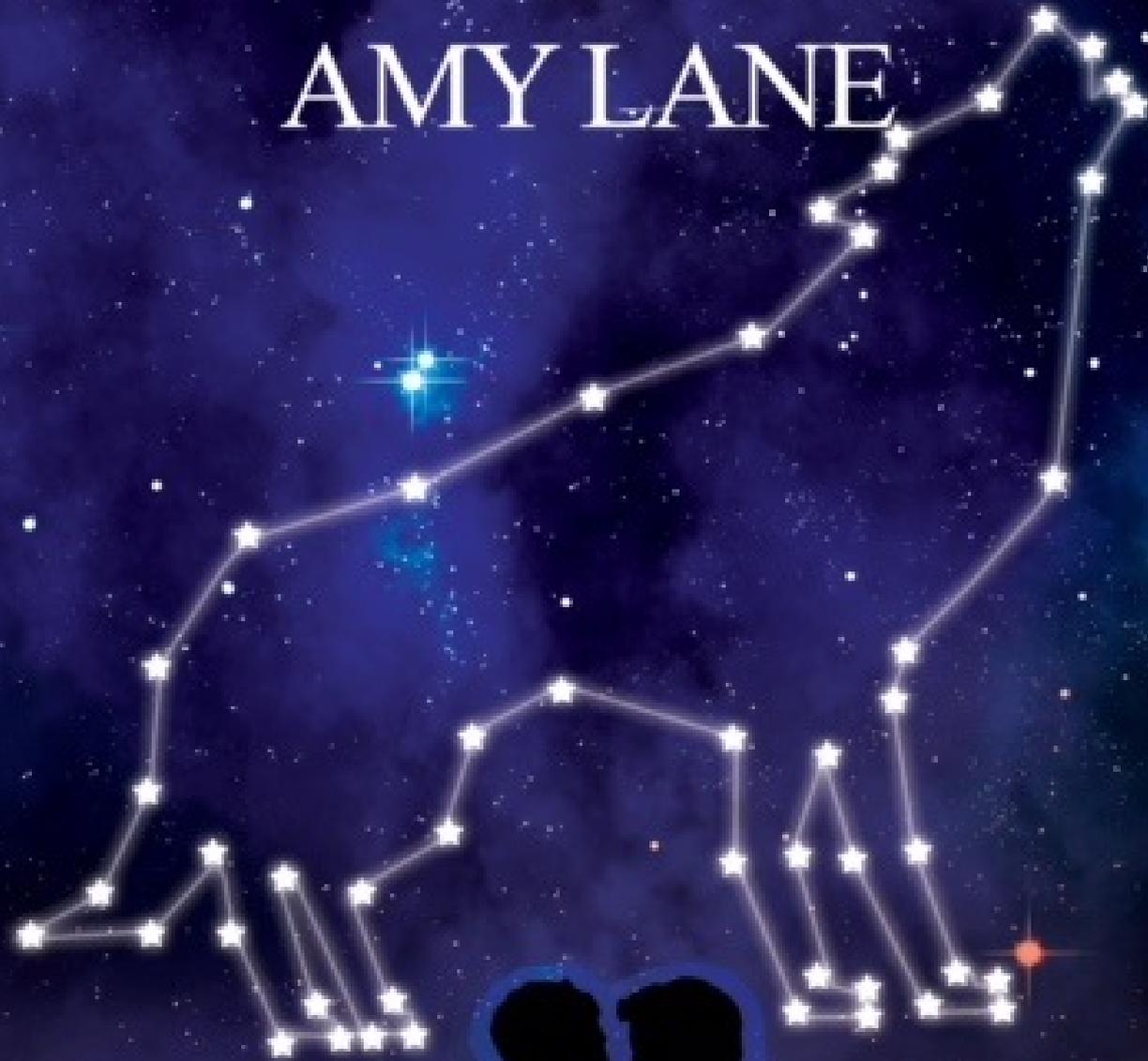


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Scorched Haven



From The World of the Little Goddess

Scorched Haven

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Running

Running.

Running until his chest would burst.

God, leaving his car was a fucking mistake.

Hell, coming down here was a fucking mistake—and he'd volunteered for the mission!

Oh, holy Goddess, he wished he'd listened to his alpha. Teague Sullivan had been worried, Lady Cory had been worried—even the elves worried about him coming down here, and those people always seemed like the petty needs of humans, weres and vamps were so far below them.

But nooooo...Zeb Crandall, fresh on the gay-train, were-rehabilitated junkie, was going to go prove he was a *man* and try to get to the bottom of the were problem in Southern California.

Hey, Teague—it'll be no problem. I'll go down, play at Disneyland, sniff around a little. I mean, you guys just got back from that sitch in Redding and fucking Monterey. And we all know she's going to be rough to deal with.

Teague made a sober sound over the phone. Lady Cory, Queen of the Fey and Undead—and mother to be. She was not going to take that information well. Zeb liked being the werewolf nobody knew. He was Spear Carrier Number Three on the stage, and maybe a hero in his own two man (or werewolf) play someday. Zeb was just as glad

that Teague Sullivan was the big dog in the were community who would take that that hit as her friend. But Zeb knew what was coming on the hill, and Teague was still off recuperating from the last time the hill had been prepared to fight for its life.

Calling his leader to ask permission to do this had been a big deal—but Zeb knew that when shit hit the fan, the personal problems of the leaders would send the whole hill into upheaval. He wanted to help—but he wanted to be gone too.

“Go ahead,” Teague said guardedly. “I’ll clear it with Green. You’re right. Even if you just get out of the car at the Grapevine, take a sniff around and come back. Southern California is a big space—I’d like to see if this Monterey thing is a fluke.”

Be careful what you ask for. Teague sent him with an Avian named Ritchie Turner—who was a nice enough guy. Totally straight, and still buying the Avian party line that they couldn’t sleep with a person and not bond. Zeb himself had his doubts, but he wasn’t going to urge anybody to take the word of a chem/psych major who dropped out of school because of an inconvenient heroin problem.

And even if he and Ritchie *had* bonded, that would have sucked, and sucked *huge*, because Ritchie had been taken *out* in a restaurant on the Grapevine.

They hadn’t even made it to Disneyland before some fucker had made them for out of territory, and Zeb’s life had exploded.

He’d been gassing the car at a practically deserted 76

Station at a town on top of the Grapevine who's name Zeb did not know. Ritchie—who had kept up an amusing string of conversation all the way through the barren shithole that was I-5—had to take a leak, and Zeb waved him on.

“I’ll get us some sodas!” he’d called. Ritchie had given him a brief salute for thanks and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, Zeb had gone to see if he was okay. Were creatures didn’t usually get digestive problems—in fact, pretty much every time Zeb had shifted to his werewolf form, he’d had to take a huge dump, to get rid of whatever he’d eaten as a human. He’d decided to put off getting the sodas, which probably saved his life.

He’d walked into the bathroom and into a horror show. Ritchie lay dead—and dismembered—on the floor.

A guy wearing a bloody clerk’s uniform was *gnawing on his arm*.

Zeb hadn’t hung out to see if the murderer was partially changed into a demented werewolf, or maybe a rogue vampire, or even a fucking zombie or ghoul—neither of which Zeb thought actually existed. He was too preoccupied with his own short-sightedness, and how grateful he was for interfering queens of the known universe.

Because for reasons unknown to him until *this exact moment*, all the were-creatures were required to put their cell phones and keys on a lanyard.

Had made absolutely no sense to him—he’d thought it

was the most bullshit autocratic rule he'd ever heard of, but Lady Cory said so, and by God, did those people at the hill jump around that homely little college student like she was the virgin queen mother. Zeb—good spear carrier on the left that he was—had complied with the letter of that fucking law.

But it wasn't until he was running through the wilds on top of the Tehachapi mountains, away from I-5, away from the godsforsaken 76 station in the nameless little fucking town on top of the pass, that he realized he was looping that lanyard over his neck even as he changed.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck— thank God and Goddess for cargo shorts with no belt, loafers with no socks, and a T-shirt that fit a wolf as well as a man.

He launched in to an all-out wolf-run, the reassuring thump-thump of his cellphone and keys against his chest the only thing that kept him from losing his fucking nerve.

He felt the gunshot before he heard it.

As the echo hit his ears, his back end wobbled, and his brain registered pain. God. Fuck. He was hit. It felt like his spine had been ripped off his hipbones, holy holy holy *hell*.

Zeb kept running. He'd seen Teague Sullivan rip a wolf's throat out with his teeth once. The wolf had regenerated and gone back into the fight.

Teague had ripped the wolf's *heart* out with his bare, human hand then. The wolf had stayed down—but speculation in the common room that night had run that it was because the wolf had made it all the way to crazy and couldn't think of a reason to live.

Everybody in the common room claimed to have seen worse at some point in their lives, and Zeb was okay with that.

Right now, running and regenerating and running some more, he figured it was the only reason he was still breathing.

But his breathing was getting labored and a second gunshot—from farther away this time, he reckoned—shed more of his blood.

He needed to go to ground, call someone at Green's, and get the fuck out of So-Cal *right now*. God—what a clusterfuck. And he so needed to call Teague and let him know that whatever the actual situation down here, there was no use sending ambassadors or scouts or even vampires. If the threat was coming to NorCal—like Teague and Cory had anticipated for over a *year*—then they needed to take it out when it got there, and let the rest of this shit alone. Control over half the state was plenty when the bottom half tried to kill you dead just for gassing your car.

His body wobbled—and his mind was wandering.

Behind his closed eyes he could see the gas station clerk, and the more often he closed his eyes, he became convinced he'd seen a partial change to werewolf. Poor Ritchie—he'd been so excited about finding a girlfriend and getting married and getting laid.

Zeb didn't have the heart to tell him that sex wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Of course all of Zeb's sex had been quick and dirty one-offs, where neither person could look each other in the eye at the end until he'd met

Adrian. Yeah, sex with Adrian had been life-shatteringly awesome, and once Adrian had pulled Zeb to the hill, Zeb had enjoyed the promiscuity that sort of “dogged” the unattached werewolves—and that had sort of rocked his world too. But Ritchie had been talking about the kind of sex that would last an extended lifetime, and Zeb? Zeb wasn’t sure there was such a thing.

Now that Ritchie was dead and wouldn’t get a chance to have any sex at all, Zeb, in his blood-loss, wooziness, and exhaustion, was starting to wonder if maybe he should find out before he tried to do his leaders a favor again.

It would be nice to think someone at the hill besides his captain and his queen would miss his mangy ass if he didn’t get it back.

Think, asshole, think! There was a werewolf—or a lot of them after his ass. They could smell him—and God did he stink!—and he would need to shake them.

He found a dip in the hillside and the corpse of a fallen tree, tucked in and closed his eyes, trying to come up with a plan.

He smelled water.

There wasn’t a lot of it in the Tehachapi Mountains— this must be an irrigation ditch leading down to one of the lakes. But if he could maybe go drink from it...

He could. He could get some water, spread his blood smell all over stream bed and lose the bird-eating psycho with the gun. He just needed some water, and some sleep, and maybe a rabbit. Yeah—a rabbit would be *outstanding*. But water first.

Sniffing carefully, he emerged from his hiding place.

When he didn't smell cold steel or gas—scents that he'd registered on the enemy before he'd even changed—he slunk through the tall grasses that surrounded him and stayed down, heading for the smell of water.

It took him an hour. He could *feel* the time sweated out of under his fur, as he moved, one leg at a time, swearing every move was going to draw the headshot that would end even a werewolf's life. His first shotgun wound was completely healed by the time he found the steep-sided irrigation ditch, but his second one was still oozing. He needed that water, and as he lowered his head carefully, lower, lower, lower, he was pretty sure he'd die if he didn't just get a tongue full before he carried on.

Shoop!

He slipped in and thank God it was warm, because he dog-paddled and drank and allowed the terrifying current to carry him down the mountainside to the lake he knew was coming.

He didn't even try to swim against the current. Zeb knew two things about himself. One was that he sucked at fighting the current. The other was he *rocked* at going with the flow. Third spear-carrier on the left, being carried away, sir.

His cell phone thumped against his chest in its case, mocking him as he paddled.

Carried away from safety, carried away from his contact with his hill.

Third spear-carrier on the left, exit stage irrigation ditch

down the mountain.

Shit.

* * *

The water ride ended eventually. There was a moment of darkness, of being underground, of paddling with his nose being the only part of his body not submerged.

Then he was *all* submerged, and just when he was wondering if his lungs would regenerate, he popped out into the lake like a big furry cork, where he dragged himself to shore. He lay, panting for a moment, wondering if his pursuer would have thought of *this*.

Surprise, motherfucker— I zagged when you thought I'd zig!

He kept his eyes closed, breathing and scenting the air.

Pant pant pant... Nope. Nothing out here but real animal. No rogue wolves with their sickly sweet scent. No psycho gas station wolves, no blood but his, still lingering in the fine under hairs of his pelt.

Okay. Good. Water—more than enough. Sleep—next on the agenda. He smelled game here—rabbits, fish, voles, moles—he'd catch something.

But first, shelter. He closed his eyes and followed a teasing smell of man-made something with his mind. Woodsmoke. Treated wood. Exhaust.

A campground.

A man-made s substance. Vinyl. The heinous chemicals used to treat human waste.

An outhouse.

And there—yes. Absolutely. Wood, dead fish, and glue.

A fishing shack—deserted. A quarter of a mile away.

He opened his eyes and looked at the ragged coastline of the lake, and thought he could see the crevice between the spar of land that ended this particular inlet.

There. It would be there. At first he thought he was going to have to drag himself, but after a few minutes of *that*, he tested his back end and found he could walk.

Exhausted and wobbling—but trotting like a wolf—he found the shed.

It had a porch.

Zeb crawled under the porch and flopped on his side.

Then he did something that Adrian had begged him to do, Adrian's lover, Green, had begged him to do, and Teague and Cory had looked at him reproachfully for *not* doing.

He trusted in fate—or the Goddess.

He hoped.

And then he slept.

Eavesdropping

Someone was wandering into the cabin.

Zeb woke up, still in his wolf form, when he heard the voices.

“Dude—you’re sure no one’s up here?”

“Naw, man. My grandpa died two years ago—no one’s used this place since.”

A rough guffaw. “Someone’s used this place.”

“Oh, gross! Seriously! If you’re going to get laid, maybe take your rubber with you!”

The floorboards creaked and the voices assumed a sudden intimacy. “Why use rubbers, dude?”

The smack that rejoined this remark was surprisingly satisfying. “Because STD’s, moron. When I put out, there had better be rubbers involved.”

Oh. Oh dear—Zeb was apparently underfoot a romantic rendezvous of the two-peened kind. Well, at least one of them had a modicum of sense—because young people? Not always carriers of that particular disease. Zeb was living furry proof.

“Are you saying I’m an AID’s baby? Fuck you, man!”

“Aw, Jesus Denny—don’t be a douche. I’m saying safety first.”

“Yeah, well, whatsa matter, Colton—you afraid of getting knocked up and stuck here?”

“Well, not knocked up,” Colton muttered. “I’m just saying—I thought, you know. Making out in my grandpa’s old fishing shack should maybe not change our lives!”

“So, I’m forgettable? Geez, thanks a lot!”

“No! I’m not saying that—c’mere.” Colton’s voice sank to a cajoling tone, and Zeb thought *No, Colton, don’t do it. He just wants to get you to give in so he can fuck you and leave you and not have to feel like a jerk because he forgot rubbers and lube!* Well, some of Zeb’s first sexual experiences hadn’t been...pleasant. And Colton sounded like a smart kid.

“No, man,” Denny sulked. “Cause what? You give me a blow job like always, and don’t put out, and then you’re on the first train outta Lipsky? And it’ll be okay with you, right? Cause nothing ‘life changing’ happened here, and I’ll just be some guy in your rearview.”

“No!” Colton said, legitimately hurt. “I, you know, thought we could bail together.”

Nope, Colton—this kid’s got small town myopia. Wherever the hell “Lipsky” is, he’s sure it’s the epicenter of the universe quake.

“Man, you know that ain’t happening. Junkyard’ll never allow it!”

“Well who in the hell is Junkyard and why does he suddenly get a say in our lives?”

Suddenly Denny’s voice sank, became uncertain and quavery—a child who had been disappointed in his elders. Reluctantly, Zeb felt some sympathy. “It’s...I mean, unless you go to one of Junkyard’s meetings, you

don't get it. I mean, it's not fair, but...but we just need to listen to him, that's all."

There was some squeaking overhead, and the voices grew closer together. Suddenly Zeb got the sense that these two boys had known each other for a very long time. In that moment, Denny wasn't the villain and Colton wasn't the hero—they were just...boys. Boys trying hard to deal with life in a nowhere town somewhere to the west of the Grapevine in the Tehachapi Mountains.

"Denny—come on. He's a guy. He's sort of the bully who ran the junkyard, right up until last Christmas. Why should that change? Why's he suddenly got hold of us like this. We should be able to come and go as we please, right? I mean, we're twenty years old! Why's he get to say whether we get to go to college or not?"

"Because he just does." Denny's voice had the hint of tears. "And now I can't leave this place, ever. And you're planning to leave me!"

"Denny!"

Zeb smelled it then. Oh, man—he hadn't caught it before. Maybe because his own blood scent had been so strong, and maybe because he'd needed to recover, but he smelled it now.

There was something wrong with Denny's scent.

It was werewolf—definitely werewolf—with a little bit of ick thrown in. Oh. Oh man—this is what those wolves had smelled like last winter. Including the one who'd gotten his heart ripped out and who'd carried his switchblade in a plastic bag up his ass.

Zeb hauled himself up to his feet and slunk to the edge of the porch, looking around. Had these kids come alone?

He smelled exhaust and cocked his head. Car—old Nissan sedan—a college student's car.

“Denny? What are you doing? Man, that looks painful! Oh my God!”

Of course. Denny wanted to keep Colton with him—what better way than to give him the eternally furry clap? Not the act of a sane man, but then, those boys who'd shown up from SoCal and threatened Green's hill hadn't been sane.

Zeb didn't have time to think—he should have thought, because what he was about to do might kill him, but he'd gotten invested in the characters of the little peep show in the fishing shack. Denny loved Colton in that wholly selfish way that young men had. Colton wanted to raise them both up, but Denny would rather drag Colton down. Except this was scary, it was for real, and it was irrevocable, and if someone had been there to rescue Zeb from his first shot of heroin, he would be forever grateful now.

He woofed.

Colton's voice inside the cabin rose to a frightened shriek. “Denny!”

Zeb heard the rattle of claws on the floor of the fishing shack, heading for the door and knew Denny had taken the bait.

Balls out, no holds barred, Zeb started running.

* * *

As tired as he was, he was also full grown. And smarter. And he knew how to use water and he knew how to think through a problem.

He escaped hot pursuit by jumping in the lake, swimming to an inlet, and running back around to the service road the kids had used to find the fishing shack. He stopped for a rabbit then, because he was starving, but after that it was just a matter of following his nose to the car by the shack.

And, huddling on the porch, peering into the falling darkness, he found Colton.

“De—Denny?”

Well, hell. Zeb got a little closer so the kid wouldn't have the dark as an excuse, and changed.

“Oh my God!”

“Damn, kid! Not so loud. I think he swam by me in the lake and hopefully has another six miles to go, but that guy was going to bite you and we don't have much time!”

“You're naked.”

Zeb gaped for a moment. “That's what you're worried about?”

The kid's jaw snapped shut, and Zeb got a chance to actually see him. Not a bad looking kid—about 5'7", powerfully built. Not a waif like the conversation had implied. In fact, he probably weighed more in sheer muscle than Zeb, who had a few more inches on him. Zeb had an impression of dark hair and dark eyes in tanned skin, and a stunningly male, square-jawed

handsomeness to him.

Zeb hadn't expected that. This kid was fully blown hot, and, well, surprise!

"What—where's Denny?" The kid's jaw trembled. "Did you...did you eat him?"

Zeb curled his lip and wrinkled his nose, knowing the gesture was more wolf than human. "No. I just eluded him. But it won't last for long. Who's car is that?"

"Mine," Colton replied, and Zeb shook his head.

"Then what in the hell are you still doing here?"

"My parents won't let me go away to school—they think it's too dangerous." This said with big, guileless eyes and a vulnerable quiver to his full lower lip.

Zeb couldn't hardly stand it. "Kid, you are killing me."

Colton seemed to pull himself back to where he was supposed to be. "Oh. *Here*. Denny is my friend—I can't just leave him!"

Oh hell. "Look, Colton? He's sick. I mean, the kind of werewolf he is. There's something wrong with them. I..."

He grimaced. "The blood on my shirt? Most of it's mine—because there was a werewolf running through the brush shooting at me with a rifle—how's that make sense?"

Colton gaped. "I don't understand."

Off in the distance Zeb heard it—the bay of a wolf who had just caught his scent. Fuck.

"Kid—look. Do you have a gun?"

“No!”

“Good—so you can either hop in the car and take me to fucking Bakersfield, or I can throw you over my shoulder, lock you in the trunk and drop you off when we get there.” Way to go, Zeb! Scare the kid to death!

“Why Bakersfield? Is that where you live?”

“No—but that’s the outer edge of the turf war you just got involved in. What’s it gonna be?” Denny bayed again, and fuck if that kid wasn’t making time. Zeb knew his werewolf strength and speed, and he had some control after three years as a wolf. While using wolf-speed to zoom closer to the building, he closed his eyes and turned only his claw. With a swipe of his paw he took out the railing of the fishing shack porch and then looked at the kid, knowing his eyes flashed gold.

“I don’t want to steal your car, kid,” he growled. “And I really don’t want that fucker to bite you—but either way, I’ve got to get back to my turf and warn people that shit’s about to get real.”

Colton’s eyes grew huge, and he unconsciously wet his lips. “Bakersfield?” he asked, voice high. “Is that as far as I can go?”

“What?”

“Wherever you’re going—take me. Or I’ll take you. I’ll get out, right now. Just say I can tag along.”

Zeb almost laughed. “You make that call when we get there,” he said urgently. “But right now?”

Colton was nodding when Zeb heard another wolf bay, this one from slightly further away. Oh fuck.

“Kid, fucking move!”

The Nissan was small, but damn it was hauling ass up the trail when Zeb looked behind him and saw four wolves breaking into the clearing with the shack. All four of them sniffed the air, probably smelling Zeb and Colton in the car, and howled, and Zeb’s heart threatened to throttle him with its pounding.

“Faster,” he whispered. “Faster, kid, faster...”

Colton didn’t respond, but the car jolted ahead and gave a slight fishtail. Zeb heard something bump on a divot in the road and he wondered if they were going to have to steal a car on the way back across the fucking state.

And then all he could focus on was relief as they hit actual road and sped away at faster-than-werewolf speed.

The Road Trip Begins

As soon as they hit the Grapevine, Zeb turned around and started going through the stuff in the back of the car.

“What the—”

“Oh, thank God, clothes.” He came back with sweats—not fresh out of the dryer, but not ripe either—and a T-shirt that wasn’t crusted with blood and called that a win.

“You’re welcome for my stuff,” Colton said dryly, and Zeb realized he felt no shame or embarrassment for completely seizing anything he needed.

“That’s awesome, do you have a phone charger?”

“iPhone?”

“Yup.”

“Sure.”

Oh my God. “Seriously?” And sure enough, there it was, plugged into the portal by the unused ashtray. Zeb pulled his phone from around his neck and plugged it into the charger, and then declined to look.

“Is it working?” Colton gave it a sort of side-peek and Zeb shook his head.

“We can only hope. I went swimming with that thing twice. It would be great if it did though. My boss could have people waiting for us in Bakersfield, and it is scary out there alone.”

“But...” The kid’s eyes slid over Zeb like he was unsure this was okay to say. “Uh, aren’t you a werewolf?”

“Yeah, and so’s your friend,” Zeb sighed. He looked out of the window in time to see the sun scorched lunar landscape of I-5 pass him by. “Apparently all the werewolves south of Bakersfield are nucking futz.”

“There are werewolves north of Bakersfield?” The kid sounded anxious and frightened, and Zeb couldn’t really blame him.

“Look, kid—”

“Colton.”

“I knew that. Anyway, Colton—you gotta understand. From my part of the country, being a werewolf is all happy fine.”

“You mean everybody knows?” He was so startled the car actually swerved, and Zeb settled the wheel before they both became road hamburger.

Zeb sort of leaned then, in the front of the car, so Colton would feel his animal warmth and be comforted—it was a very wolf thing to do, a very Green’s hill thing to do, and it seemed to work. A pretty kid—darkly tanned skin, dark eyes, hair that hung down past his collar.

“Calm down,” Zeb said—probably unnecessarily. “The whole world is the same place. But underneath the stuff you know—in the places you can’t see—there are people you never knew about, okay? Werewolves, elves, vampires—”

“Seriously? Are they sparkly?”

Ugh. “They’re the scariest warriors I’ve ever seen and most of them are sarcastic fuckers to boot. God, we need

to make another vampire movie, I'm telling you."

Colton's smile showed even white teeth. "So noted," he said dryly. "So there are things."

"Yes there are. And in my neck of the woods, they co-exist. The vampires feed from the were creatures and the were creatures act as the hired muscle and the elves oversee everyone and own the businesses and we all keep each other safe."

"Do you sing Kumbaya at breakfast and dinner?"

"God, you should have been a vampire. No. But we watch each other's backs." Zeb felt the loss of the guy who'd gotten dismembered in the bathroom keenly. "I was sent down with a perfectly nice Avian-shifter, and he's dog food. My people are going to be pissed, and I'm quite frankly scared. We're not easy to kill and every wolf I've run into down here has smelled like a vomit barbecue"

"Thanks a lot," Colton sniffed, and Zeb rolled his eyes.

"You know, we have a recruitment program. They'd love to convert you, you'd fit right in."

"Yeah?" Colton glanced at him to see if he was kidding or not. "What're the recruitment requirements?"

Zeb grunted and stared out the window again. "Mostly, you have to have fucked up your life so completely that dropping off the map and starting over again as a werewolf or a vampire is no big deal."

The sound Colton let out was plaintive, and Zeb glanced at him in time to see a bleak, lost expression cross his expressive face. "I just left the only place I've ever lived,"

he said, voice raspy. “The guy I thought I had a crush on turned into a werewolf and tried to eat me, and I’m in the only decent possession my family has, speeding towards Bakersfield with a guy who was wearing blood and fur about half an hour ago. That doesn’t qualify?”

Shit. “Are you so addicted to heroin you stole someone else’s shoes to buy your last fix?”

Colton let out a short bark of a laugh. “Uhm, no.”

“Then you’re doing better than I was.” Zeb’s sigh shook his toes. “God, all I wanted was to do a favor for my leaders, you know? Three years of laying low, not being a leader, just keeping my head down and hoping they let me stay, and just once I wanted to earn my place at the table, right?”

“Can I ask what happened?” Colton’s voice shook, and maybe it was a scary question when the answer was coming from a guy who had been mostly wolf all day.

“We knew something shitty was going on down here,” Zeb muttered. “We knew it. And our people got attacked in Monterey, so I asked Teague, our alpha wolf, if I could take a look. And hey, he just fell from like a ten-story drop and is still recovering, and he said, ‘Yeah, sure,’ so I snagged another shapeshifter, and hey. Trip to Disneyland, right?”

“Right,” Colton sounded a bit dazed.

“Except we stopped for gas over the Grapevine and some guy carves my friend up like sushi and tries to blow me away. And all I want right now—all I seriously want—is to be back on my hill, hiding under my bed, after I scream ‘Abort abort abort! Natives *aren’t* friendly!’ so I can say I

did my job.”

Colton was laughing, snickering softly, and Zeb felt like a complete asshole.

“What?” he muttered.

“Not really a warrior werewolf, are you?”

“Nope,” Zeb said sourly. “They save that job for the vampires. You know what job I do best for them?”

“I got no idea,” Colton said, still smiling.

“Lunch.”

Colton’s snickers rattled through the car and the alien landscape of Central California stretched before them, if only their gas would hold.

Leadership

Zeb stared out past the rolling hills of the Grapevine Pass and grunted as Kettleman City came into view.

That rabbit he'd eaten had about disintegrated into his bloodstream, between the losing blood and the multiple changes and the massive adrenaline dump.

"Hey," he muttered, "do any of these places have drive-thrus?"

"Yeah—do you got cash?"

Zeb let out a groan. "You don't have any money?"

"Well, twenty bucks—but we're going to need gas!"

"Don't you have a bank card?"

"Yeah, but..." Colton's wrinkled his nose. "Won't they be, tracking my bank card or something?"

Zeb thought about it. "Like, CSI or the FBI? Does your town have those kind of connections?"

"Uh..." Colton suddenly started laughing. "Okay, so we share a police station with the adjoining town. Their computer still uses dial up and they do most of their phone work on landlines."

Zeb had to laugh too. "I think you're safe." Then he remembered Ritchie and sobered. "No, not safe. Okay."

He sighed. "God—I don't think Kettleman City is going to be overrun with werewolves—it's too damned public." It was the Hwy 5 depot in the foothills of the Tehachapi—anyone coming off the Grapevine or getting on the Grapevine usually stopped in Kettleman City or

Grapevine to fill their tank, bleed their lizard, and get one more coffee to sustain them for the drive. “But... I don’t know which one is safer for you,” Zeb confessed, shuddering. “I sent Ritchie inside thinking he could take a leak in peace, and he ended up sushi. I’m afraid to be the one going in, and I’m afraid to be the one staying out.” He tilted his head back against the seat and thought. “I’ll go in,” he said after a moment. “You fill the tank, start the car, and wait for me—if things go south, take off.”

“Take off?” Colton squeaked. “But you said you’d find me safety!”

“Safety’s easy to find, kid. Drive up five for over three-hundred miles, take the turn-off to 80 East, keep going for another 100 miles or so to the foothills, and take a right at the Forresthill exit in Auburn. Drive until you hit Lake Clementine, go down to the lake, sit on the car, and shout out to anyone who comes by, ‘Do you know Green and Cory?’ Trust me. Safety will find you.”

Colton squinted at him. “But what about you?”

“Take the turnoff, Colton. Odds are good, I’ll be fine.”

Zeb swallowed, thinking about how nice it was that somebody would miss him. “But it’s sweet of you to worry.”

“I’m not sweet,” Colton muttered.

Sure he wasn’t.

Zeb went to the bathroom first, practically vibrating on his toes the entire time he had his dick out. God he wasn’t meant for this shit—no wonder Teague and Green had asked him repeatedly if he wanted to go. And it didn’t

help that he'd let Ritchie die. God that rankled. The guy had gone to the bathroom, and Zeb had done what he'd done his entire mortal life too.

He'd let the guy down.

Jesus—Adrian almost had him convinced that he could be better than that. But Adrian had been dead for two years now, and while the rest of the hill had seemed to find its balance without him, Zeb was still mourning the promise of having somebody—even if not a lover, but somebody—believe in him.

He washed his hands, nose practically quivering like a wolf's as he tried to smell past the diesel fumes and the bad food and the antiseptic and the super strong soap to see if he could pick up any hinky werewolves.

Yes—but no. Not strong. As though the werewolves who had been through had been among the myriad—the three stoners, the guy who needed a nicotine patch, the many dads who helped change babies or hold toddlers, the toddlers themselves, and the adolescents stinking of puberty. The werewolves had been a part of the constant stream of people through that bathroom, and that was all.

Zeb couldn't actually relax, but as he moved from the bathroom to the snack bar, he took a look outside to see Colton leaning against his car, hands in his pockets, glancing about him anxiously. He waved then, glad to see the young man brighten a little. They weren't safe, not by a longshot, but for the moment, they could appreciate their hot dogs and sodas in peace.

"You do like to live dangerously," Colton said when Zeb

got into the car with his bag of convenience store hot dogs and peanut butter M&Ms.

Zeb looked at the junk food and smiled good-naturedly. “Best part of being a werewolf,” he confessed. “I can seriously eat anything. No heartburn, no diarrhea—just fuel.”

Colton raised his eyebrows. “But my stomach you’re willing to risk?”

Zeb grinned and winked. “Well, you know, just stick your head out the car to vomit. And pick the hamburgers—they looked safer.”

Colton chuckled and Zeb felt a reluctant curl in his stomach. Yeah, yeah—he was pretty, Zeb already knew that. Dark hair—long enough to curl around his ears—dark eyes, a delicate chin and jaw—very male, but, well pretty. But the chuckle, the ability to laugh in the darkness—that was more important than the good looks, and Zeb was just lonely and scared enough to admit that it did something for him.

He set up the sodas and the food in the island between the two seats, and tore into the hotdogs he’d picked for himself.

“You eat like a wild animal,” Colton said next to him, putting the car into drive and leaving Kettleman City in their dust. “When was the last time you had food?”

Zeb closed his eyes. “Yesterday morning,” he said in wonder. “Ritchie and I left yesterday morning—sausage, eggs, cheese, toast, a little bit of fruit for sweet—we ate really well.” They’d thought they’d be in Disneyland today, and his heart ached a little for the nice Avian who

hadn't made it there.

"Your friend," Colton apologized. "I'm sorry about him?"

Zeb grimaced and then gave it up. Yeah. His friend. Five hours in the car hadn't made them brothers, but it had definitely made them friends. "Thanks," he said softly.

"We hadn't known each other long. We both just..."

Damn. "Wanted to be of service, I guess." God, I-5 was bleak. Nothing to look at, nothing to distract him. Nothing to do but tell his story.

"Green's hill is really someplace special," he said after a moment. "Nobody would have thought worse of me if I'd stayed home. And I haven't put my neck out in three years. I mean, yeah, there was a war once, and I totally pledged my loyalty and all that shit—but nothing...you know..."

"Special?" Colton suggested.

"Yeah," Zeb sighed. "I just never felt like I had anything to offer. Except this one time, when I thought 'Hey! I'm expendable—and Teague is still recuperating, so he needs me. And the whole hill is about to erupt into chaos, and I'm the least important person here. I may as well make myself useful.' And I couldn't even do that right."

"Why's the hill about to erupt into chaos?" Colton asked, and Zeb grimaced.

"See, you know, like with the president? How, if he gets a dog, the whole world shits its pants?"

"Yeah," Colton nodded. "Sure. My favorite TV star got hit by a car—I didn't leave the TV for a week."

"Exactly. So, we have sort of a leadership committee. And

there are three people on it who—well, their magic sort of holds the hill together. There’s Green, the leader, and his wife, Lady Cory, and her other husband, Bracken.”

“Two husbands?”

“Three, actually,” Zeb filled in, because he didn’t like leaving Nicky out, even if he wasn’t one of the head honchos. “But we’re talking leadership here, and the other one is more of a foot soldier, like me. Anyway, Cory’s pregnant—with twins, one from each of the main guys.”

“That’s, uh, odd?” Colton’s eyebrows were arched and delicate, and they did all sorts of strange and wonderful things as he tried to digest this information.

“Yeah—well, it’s even odd in our world so don’t strain yourself. Anyway, she doesn’t know yet.”

“How’s *that* work?”

“You have to understand— her job is to run the entire freaking hill, right? Her and Green, with Bracken as her backup. So she’s not paying attention to her body right now, and Green and Bracken have been waiting for a good time to tell her.”

“When’s a good time to tell her?”

Zeb shuddered, remembering the scars and the stories. “Well, it’s not when she’s getting her throat slit, which happened a couple of weeks ago. And it’s not when she’s jumping out of a helicopter, which happened like, last week. So, I was thinking, ‘Hey, it’s probably going to happen in this relatively peaceful time when people are talking about doing scouting missions and stuff.’”

“So you decided to be one of them,” Colton said dryly. “That’s heroic of you.”

“You have no idea,” Zeb muttered. “You don’t get it. When she gets laid—or fights with one of her lovers or smiles at him and touches the back of his hand—the entire hill feels it. And now she’s pregnant, with gigantic twins.”

“So say an entire girls soccer team during their menstrual cycle?” Colton asked, hazarding a good guess.

“Mm... more like an entire convention of cutthroat female business woman having their period during the full moon.”

Colton let out a low whistle. “That’s dire.”

Zeb shook his head. “You have no idea.”

“But you weren’t going to be gone for nine months!” Colton said, laughing. “I mean, what? The entire hill is just going to run away screaming while she hormone cycles out? That’s weird man. Just totally weird.”

“No...” Zeb was doing this badly, he could tell. “No. In fact, I want to be there for some of it. Because when they’re all leading and it’s all working? Man, it is something to fucking see. I understand that the night she got her throat cut, she led like five were-creatures, two vampires, herself and Bracken up against an entire kiss of vampires and took half of them out before she achieved her objective.”

“What was her objective—world domination?”

Zeb shook his head. “No. That’s the thing. She hated doing it—somebody in the kiss was hurting kids, or she

wouldn't have. But can you imagine? That's a reason to fight, you know?"

"Yeah," Colton said, looking at him sideways. "I can see you're looking for a purpose, that's what I can see."

Well, it was true. "Like maybe a young man who was looking to get the hell out of his small town?" Zeb asked pointedly.

"Score," Colton said, voice soft. "Got it in one—shit!"

Zeb looked in the rearview mirror and bristled. "You weren't going that fast."

"I know," Colton said lowly, pulling to the side of the road. The cherry lights of the police officer—not CHP, Zeb noted, local po-po—pulled up immediately behind.

"Keep your foot on the brake and don't put it in park," Zeb muttered under his breath. "Lower your window right now." Zeb did the same, scenting the air without being too obvious about it, and keeping his eyes glued to Colton's rearview mirror.

He saw the drawn gun at the same time he smelled the werewolf rot.

"Gun it!" he shouted, and the car jerked away at the same time the shot fired.

The back window exploded and Colton was thrown forward against the steering wheel, foot practically standing on the gas.

"Shit!" Zeb screamed, and Colton just screamed, his entire shoulder disintegrating into a mass of pulp. The car lurched forward and Zeb pulled Colton's body back

against the seat, steering the car into traffic as the wheels spun in an attempt to catch up the the revving of the motor. Zeb found the buttons on the steering wheel, the ones for cruise control and hit them both, keeping the car in the slow lane, hoping that the quarter of a mile between them and the car in front of them was enough time.

“Colton, you okay?”

“Zeb, he shot me! I wasn’t doing anything and he fuckin —God!”

Oh Jesus. Colton! Zeb thought hard and fast. “Okay, so he’s following us, but not officially—cherry lights, no sirens. Here—I’m going to steer, and I want you to crawl into the back seat, okay?”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Do you want him to get us?”

“Fuck!”

They almost died three times—but they didn’t. And if the cop wasn’t going to try to chase them down with siren after Zeb steered the damned car all over the fucking road, he was never going to do it. As soon as Colton flopped over the back of the passenger’s seat into the back, he put his foot on the gas and killed cruise control and drove like he could get shot out of the front window and put himself back together.

Because he could.

It was the pretty kid in the back of the car he was worried about. He figured Colton had about twenty minutes, tops, before Zeb had to make a decision that would

permanently change his life.

Consequences

Zeb drove like he was playing a video game and crashing the car would have no consequences, and he'd just get another life.

Of course Zeb would be able to survive a car crash at 120 MPH, but Colton, moaning in the backseat and losing blood by the quart wouldn't be so lucky.

Goddammit!

Green!

He wasn't aware he'd even done the psychic scream thing until Green popped into his head, a cool burst of water in a shaded glen.

Hello, there, my boy. Long time no hear. We've been worried.

Oh God. He'd been missing for a day—Ritchie had been dead for a day, and he'd known about a kid named Colton who was now dying in the backseat of this car for less than eight hours.

Ritchie was killed yesterday at the Grapevine. I got away and got help but... He couldn't make words, could only project a picture of that pretty kid with the strong jaw and long dark hair, bloody and undignified in the backseat.

Oh no. Green's concern helped a little. It meant he was taking this seriously, didn't it?

He's a good kid, Zeb said, aware that he sounded like he was begging. *He helped me, he was worried for his friend, his family. He wanted out of that town so badly, and I told*

him...I told him...Oh Goddess. The hubris, of thinking that Zeb could rescue Colton the way that Adrian had rescued him. I just wanted to get to Bakersfield, Green. I thought if we could get there, I could get hold of someone, and we could at least get him up to the foothills. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... He was crying. He was driving 120 MPH down Hwy 5 and he was sobbing. Desperately he wiped his eyes with his wrist and tried to pull his shit together.

He felt disoriented for a moment, and then as though it were more than Green's voice in his head. Oh, oh God—was Green's entire mind in Zeb's head?

For a moment, Zeb was afraid Green could see all of his insecurities, all of the times he'd felt like a coward and failed. Oh, he'd rather wreck the car than have Green, or Teague, or Lady Cory know that he wasn't worthy of living on the hill. He'd spent three years laying low so nobody knew what a mistake Adrian had made, recruiting him. Three years not getting involved so nobody could see that he didn't count anyway.

And now Green was in his head, and who knew what he'd see? Oh crap oh crap oh crap—Zeb's hands were sweating so badly he could barely hold the wheel.

Okay, mate—I need you to calm down. Bakersfield was a good try, but I want you to aim a little closer here. There's a turnoff coming up—Bracken says you can take back farm roads through Visalia, to Yosemite. Yosemite will be good, Zeb, because we know most of the people there. It hasn't been taken over by the crazy yet, and your friend is going to need some wide open spaces.

He can barely move, Zeb thought, glancing at Colton's almost blue face as he stuttered for breath through what

looked to be a river of blood. He tried to keep the bark of insane laughter inside.

He'll surely be moving after you bite him, right? Now get ready—Bracken says you need to take one of the farm exits coming up. Yerkes, does that ring a bell?

Oh God. That was right... "Fuck!"

With one yank of the wheel, Zeb darted through two lanes of traffic toward the offramp, speeding toward's an intersection about a half-a-mile ahead. In his rearview he saw cherry lights following him, and he kept his eyes glued to the cross traffic coming down the overpass. Timing. If he could time it before this semi and after this little Toyota, he could hit the two-lane farming road at full speed.

Timing...timing...timing....

He skidded around the curve, jumped the light and bolted ahead of the semi. The oncoming lane was clear so he veered into that and stood on the gas, passing the Toyota and veering back into his own lane with nothing but free air in front of him.

Took the exit, Green, he said meekly to the passenger in his brain.

That a boy. Now in two stretches of trees, you're going to see a tiny road to your left. It leads to a one horse town that should have a gas station. You'll need to stop there.

For what?

Gas?

We just got some.

You just squandered most of it going too fast for this car, which, by the way, will fall apart bolt by bolt if you don't give it a rest.

Zeb toned the speed down to 100 MPH and listened guiltily to the doors rattling inside the joins. God, this thing was not sturdy.

And to bite your passenger, dear boy. He's going to die if you don't.

Wait— wait— you want me to bring him over? ME?

Zebulon, you trusted this young man with your life. And now we owe him. Of course. Do you think we hold such service lightly? Now get to the gas station and then see if you can reach me by phone. Tired.

Green's psychic kiss on Zeb's forehead smelled like wildflowers and rich warm earth, and for a moment Zeb's heart rate slowed down and his adrenaline stopped dumping into his blood stream.

Of course he was tired—he didn't usually project into someone's head long distance—and when he did, it was usually someone he was much more closely connected to, which made the communication easier.

Colton groaned behind him, and some of that calmness seeped into Zeb's voice.

"Okay, kid. We've got a plan."

"Hospital?" Colton managed.

"No, better. Werewolf bite. You game?"

"No choice," the kid whispered, blood bubbling up between his lips, and fuck if Zeb was going to let him die.

The turnoff was almost invisible, and fuck Bracken for no warning at all. Zeb saw it and pulled a 90 degree turn in Colton's aging sedan. He managed to hold the thing to the road when by all accounts it should have just popped into a demolition derby style roll, and then he floored the car again.

Zeb, you've got about thirty seconds before he dies.

Zeb checked the rearview for cherry lights, saw none, and hit the brakes, fishtailing to a halt on the dusty side of the road.

Colton was unconscious, the blood bubbling from between his lips coming at gasping intervals, and Zeb didn't even bother to get out of the car or even stop the engine. He turned in his seat and grabbed the hand resting on Colton's thigh. It sat in his own hand, limp and unresponsive, and he closed his eyes and concentrated on the change.

Just his muzzle changed, a thing he'd practiced out of boredom one day, but had never considered a power or a skill, particularly. Until now.

As soon as he felt his muzzle in the shape of a wolf's, he lifted Colton's hand to his mouth and nipped quickly. As soon as he tasted the fresh blood welling through the skin, adding to the copper patina of old blood crusting over Colton's hand, he dropped the hand back onto Colton's thigh and turned around, letting the change slide off his features.

He could only hope now—and try to get to the gas station before the car rattled apart. Mindful that a functioning car needed doors and a chassis, he lowered

his speed to sixty MPH and watched the road ahead.

He didn't even realize he was holding his breath, listening with his super-hearing for a heartbeat, praying to the Goddess herself for help, until he heard Colton's low moan behind him.

He didn't realize he'd said thank you out loud until Colton mumbled weakly, "You're welcome. For what? And I'm hungry again."

He'll live, he said gratefully, hoping Green could hear him.

Good. Now fix your phone.

Well, yeah. One thing at a time.

Shift

Colton's healing wasn't comfortable. His breathing may have evened out—he even spoke—but his body kept twitching, like a puppy with fleas.

“Hurts,” he grumbled, and then sat up. “And starving.”

“Yeah,” Zeb replied, looking around. “We need food. Green said there's a gas station nearby but—”

“Starving!” Colton cried, puzzled and apparently in pain. Well, he'd been losing blood, and he'd just had to reknit tissue and bone, and the change left everybody hungry.

“Okay!” Zeb said, asserting some authority over the panic. “Here's what we're gonna do. We're on a back farm road—” He closed his eyes. “I smell plenty of game. There's jackrabbits all over the fucking place. Gophers, voles, feral cats—” He jerked the wheel to the side of the deserted road, and undid his belt.

“Cats?”

“Cats are apex predators, buddy, and don't you forget it. If it's got a collar and smells like people, feel free to let it wander. If it's got scars all over and thug-walks to intimidate you? Eat it. It's dinner. But you can't go wild. Just enough to tide you over, okay? You need people food too.”

“Woof,” Colton muttered, fidgeting. “Seriously? People food?”

“Yes!” Zeb felt a surge of panic. All of this, and some farmer with an Uzi could take him out. “Look,” he

growled, pushing forward over the seat until he was nose to nose with his new recruit. “We’re going out hunting, and you’re eating and drinking until you can think straight. And then we’re coming back to the car, you hear me? I did not get you out of that shitty town and then convert you to have you go running amok killing cows. I’m getting you to safety if I have to drag you there by the scruff of the neck!”

“Yes sir,” Colton said, and to Zeb’s surprise, he didn’t sound sarcastic in the least. “How do we do this? I would like to be a wolf now so I can eat.” His voice cracked tearfully on the last word, and Zeb decided not to try his patience.

“Okay, clothes off.”

Colton stared.

“Otherwise you shred them or lose them in the dust. Believe me, son, this is not the time to get modest. You’re about to see more people naked than you’ve ever wanted to in your life.”

And to prove it, Zeb got out, walked over to the passenger side of the car and started to unbutton his shirt.

When he’d first moved to Green’s, this part had freaked him out. Naked people in the living room, playing cards, naked people in the kitchen, cooking food. Naked people in the garden, fucking like lemmings—you named the place, and someone was going to be missing their trousers.

But he was a werewolf, and that was pretty fucking cool. Eventually being amazed over being something so cool

had trumped being freaked out because people were naked. Colton would get used to it eventually.

He folded his clothes neatly and kicked out of his shoes, and turned around to see Colton looking woefully at his blood-soaked shirt and jeans.

“Not sure I’ll want to wear these again,” he muttered.

“You got anything else in the trunk?”

Zeb sounded casual but he tried not to stare. Yeah, sure. Naked people naked people blah blah blah—this kid was built. And obviously over eighteen.

Wide shoulders, olive skin, dark nipples, muscular pecs. Whether he’d been in sports during high school or threw hay bales around now, it didn’t matter. He put Zeb’s rangy, stringy muscles to shame. Even the sobering view of his blood, drying to his skin around the now-closed wound, couldn’t take away from the magnificence of that amazing body.

And hey. Wolves didn’t mind licking dried blood.

“I do,” Colton said, smiling shyly, pulling Zeb to the real concerns. “Same stuff I had for you in the backseat, actually, but not as clean. It’ll be enough to not attract attention I think.”

“Good—sometimes these little service stations have shorts and tank tops and stuff. We’ll buy some of that if we have to, as long as, uh...” Zeb’s lower body was starting to tingle.

“Yeah,” Colton agreed. Well, Zeb was probably not his first choice in rescuer. Besides being stringy, he had a narrow face and ordinary hazel eyes under dark brows.

Green may say constantly that all his children were beautiful, but Zeb was pretty sure he was the exception. “Uh,” Colton fidgeted, “where should we put the keys while we’re gone?”

Zeb reached into the car and pulled them out, swinging the lanyard back and forth. “Here,” he said. “You take the keys, I’ll take my phone. We’ve got to be back in an hour, because we don’t know when our friend the bad cop is going to track us down, okay?”

Colton nodded and slipped the lanyard over his head while Zeb did the same.

“So...what now.”

Zeb smiled. This was actually the fun part. “Okay. Close your eyes, and smell. Tell me what you smell.”

“Car exhaust,” Colton said promptly, which was good, because the cars were at least six miles away. “Dust. Uh...mown grass. Hay.” He paused and breathed, calmed, as Zeb was, by the natural smells under the car exhaust. “Trees. Fruit trees—sweet wood.” Breath. “Ooh...a rabbit!” Zeb saw Colton’s body straighten as he became self-aware. “How’d I know that?”

“Don’t worry how,” Zeb said. “Look, kid—usually you’d have a month before you had to do this. Or a week—whatever until the full moon when it gets easier. But we’ve got an hour to get you fed and to get some of your adrenaline bled out, so just...close your eyes and smell the smells. And the next time you smell rabbit, think about dinner.”

“Fine, fine...”

They both closed their eyes again. “Okay,” Colton murmured. “Dinner. Rabbits. Jackrabbits. Muscles. Mean. Hot. Hot, hot blood... “

Zeb opened his eyes when he felt the change wash over him, distorting his bones, pulling at his muscles and skin.

Colton’s eyes were still closed, but he was no longer human, hair sprouting from every pore, muscles and bones bending, twisting organically, changing his shape as fluidly as sand going from one bucket to another.

When Colton spoke again, it was a growl.

Zeb met his eyes, and saw wolf’s eyes, tranquil and accepting, staring back. Zeb lifted his muzzle and smelled. Yes. There they were. Rabbits—a whole group of them. Wild rabbits—right through that forest and down that ravine.

Zeb could smell the fresh water.

He gave a jerk of his muzzle in Colton’s direction. *C’mon, kid, let’s hunt.*

He had a rookie to feed.

Needs

Zeb never forgot what a gift his wolf form was.

He loved smelling his world like a wolf, because even if the smells were bad, they were three dimensional, and his brain did whole other things with smells as a wolf than they did as a human. He loved seeing the world in terms of blue sky and prey.

He loved hunting.

Confidently he led Colton the wolf down a small animal track, nostrils flared, in search of game. Oh yes—there we go. A jackrabbit!

Behind him, Colton whined, probably with hunger, but Zeb growled, keeping him on the leash. Don't spook dinner, dammit! He threw a glare behind him and gestured with his muzzle to a large patch of rushes at the bole of giant tree. They were running through orchard land, and this tree didn't fit in with the others. It wasn't fruit bearing for one, and it was old—a willow perhaps? Birch? Zeb didn't know dick about trees, but this one was meant for shade over a swimming hole. There were probably rabbits in there.

Sure enough, while Zeb watched, Colton blundered through the brushes, clumsy as a human, and three jackrabbits popped out, running toward Zeb at full speed.

Snap! Snap! Swipe!

Zeb moved with the Goddess's speed (he'd heard Cory call it hyper speed) and took down all three bunnies, then yipped shortly to Colton.

Who was there in a heartbeat, devouring them, bones, skin, and all.

Zeb waited patiently, nursing his own hunger. He was the grownup here—he'd had his own first transition three years earlier, in controlled circumstances, about three weeks after he'd been bitten and cleansed of his addictions. There had been a ceremony, and a chance to run with all of the other were creatures under the full moon. Afterwards he'd ended up back in his room at Green's hill, a random pixy boy in his bed.

The run had been glorious and the sex had been sweet—if not repeatable. Unless they had a bonded marriage (a thing so rare Zeb knew of only a few couples who had done it) the fey tended to be promiscuous as a rule.

But, as he'd learned in the following three years, sometimes the moment was as important as the future after it, and that moment had made him happy.

Zeb didn't have a full moon feast to give Colton, or a sweet little pixy boy to teach him about happy sex, or an Adrian to tell him that his fuckups didn't matter, he still had so much to offer.

All he had was three rabbits, and the wherewithal to wait for a frozen burrito at the gas station before they were forced to flee again.

Colton finished the final jackrabbit, grunting a bit in what was still hunger, but obviously sated enough to think.

Zeb jerked his nose toward the car, and Colton gave a downcast look.

Yeah, it was cool being a werewolf—he probably wanted

more time.

Zeb licked his ear gently, understanding, and then gave it a little tug. Colton nodded, and together they trotted back to the car.

For a moment as they drew near, Zeb panicked. He couldn't remember how he'd figured out how to turn back—one minute, he'd been an animal with his pack, and the next he'd been...oh no. Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no—

He was in the middle of a full-blown panic when Green sounded faintly in his head. *Fight it or fuck it, Mate—pick your comedown.*

Zeb remembered now. He'd become human because there'd been a cute pixy boy, naked and grinning, stroking his pink and blue cock in the middle of the Goddess Grove. Suddenly Zeb had been naked too, and stroking it for him.

Oh.

Zeb picked up speed, hoping to get to the car in time to change, hoping he could give Colton some of what he'd need before the boy got rough. Zeb could take it—like Colton, he healed bullet wounds within minutes. But there was a lingering guilt when you hurt someone during intimacy, even if the Goddess had a hold of you and you were trying to fight it.

He arrived at the car about two hundred yards ahead of Colton and, looking quickly to make sure they were still unmolested on this empty stretch of road, he changed.

And closed his eyes and thought of Colton, naked, wanting, his skin aching with need.

It didn't take him long to get hard—a few moaning strokes of his cock. He heard a rustle from the weeds by the car, and when he opened his eyes, Colton was there, in wolf form, gazing at him as he masturbated, with hunger in his golden wolf's eyes. Zeb met those eyes and sucked his thumb into his mouth, and then, very deliberately, skated his thumb across the dripping bell of his cock.

That quickly, Colton was a man, naked, crouching before Zeb, and he pulled Zeb's cock into his mouth like it was the thing that would save his life.

Zeb groaned, sagging back against the car, and let him. Suck, suck, suck, suck... *Oh, that's a boy—you know what you need. You need it filling you, your mouth, your throat. You need me, servicing you, slipping my finger behind you, making you scream—*

“Aaah!” Zeb screamed, arching and spilling down Colton's throat. God, that had been quick—and he needed to be just as quick on the return. Colton wouldn't be able to think—wouldn't be able to run—unless he got this need met. Damn changeling werewolf biology—it certainly didn't help two guys on the run.

Colton was still suckling—and Zeb was getting hard again—but that couldn't happen. Not now. Zeb reached down and grabbed Colton by the hair, pulling him up as he whimpered reluctantly.

“My turn,” Zeb grated, whirling Colton around so he could lean against the car. But first...oh Goddess. This poor kid—forced to change on the run. Forced by drives he barely understood to do this thing, this private thing, with a guy he hardly knew. Zeb pressed their mouths

together, urgently, taking him in a carnal kiss of apology, apology for getting him shot, for making him change, for dirty sex on the side of the road. He tasted rabbit blood, salt, even tears, and it didn't repel him, because they'd been wolves together, and this thing they were doing, even as humans, it was still mostly wolf.

Colton let out a sigh and then a whine, his hard, muscular body thrusting up against Zeb's without thought. He needed—so bad it probably hurt—and Zeb dropped to his haunches and took what was truly a magnificent cock into his mouth. Thick and uncut, Zeb pulled the foreskin back and played gently with the bell against his palate and tongue. He was rewarded with Colton's whine and rough fingers in his hair.

"Zeb, it hurts. My skin's gonna explode!" he moaned. Zeb rewarded his honesty with a strong fisted stroke, and a firmer pressure on the head. "Yesssss..."

And again, and again, and faster and harder, until Colton was holding his head and thrusting his hips, shoving that thing down Zeb's throat while Zeb gave thanks he didn't gag. Oh Lord, this kid felt so good in his mouth. His smell and his taste were intoxicating, his thickness filling and good. He shoved his head forward, taking Colton to the back of his throat and it was Colton's turn to whine, Colton's turn to scream, while Zeb swallowed hard, swallowed it all, gave thanks for more, and took all that kid had to give.

At last, he was done, and Zeb leaned his head against Colton's thigh for a minute's respite.

"Zeb?" Colton asked uncertainly.

Zeb looked up and smiled, taking the kid's offered hand and standing, then pulling him into a tight, comforting embrace. "Good kid," he whispered. "Good kid—you did fine. It's okay. Don't worry about the sex—it wasn't wrong. Not your fault. You did good."

Colton relaxed into him, pliant and needy for a moment as Zeb didn't think he was that often. "Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you. Thank you."

"You did good."

"Thank you."

One more moment, holding him. One more moment consoling him for all the things he'd lost and all the frightening things he'd gained. One more moment, their bare skin pressed together in the dusty sun.

And then they had to change and run, because one moment was all they could afford.

Respite

Zeb pulled up to the gas station warily, and looked down at his clothes in despair.

His borrowed sweats were caked in blood, not that they'd been too clean in the first place. Colton's clothes were way worse, but with a bullet hole in the front and back that couldn't be explained away. He sat there, car at the pump, thinking about turning into a wolf and shoplifting clothes, when a tiny man, maybe 4-feet tall with thin, delicate features and limbs, came trotting out.

"Go inside!" he called. "Get clothes. Get food. Wash up!" He held out his wrist, and it was covered with a tattoo—limes resting in the heart of a blooming rose.

Zeb was so grateful he almost cried.

"We're Green's," he said—unnecessarily, because it seemed this man already knew. He pulled up the sleeve of his T-shirt where a giant thorn-less rose rested, its stem sprouting oak leaves, a lime hanging from each leaf where an acorn might ordinarily go.

"I know," the little man said, flashing a grin replete with spiny teeth. "Nibbles. I'm Nibbles. Let me doctor your car. Go doctor selves." He turned his smile to Colton in the passenger's seat, who, to his credit, got a little wide-eyed but didn't say a thing.

"That's a deal," Zeb said, getting out of the car.

"Roll up windows!" Nibble said. "Blessed wash, first. Goddess's children, you know."

“Oh!” Zeb felt stupid, and he turned the key enough to roll the windows up before turning it off and getting out. Colton got out on his side, and they headed for the gas station. “Thank you, Master Nibbles,” Zeb said respectfully. Adrian had drilled that into all of his converts—you respect the elves, because they protected the vampires and the were-creatures. And the vampires and were creatures navigated the human world for the fey.

“You’re Green’s. Green’s good. We’re Green’s. Oh! Hot metal!” As Zeb approached the door he looked back and saw Nibbles’s limbs splitting, dividing into many, like tree-root hairs. One of his sturdier limbs reached for a hose near the bottom of the pump, and Nibbles started spraying the car down.

“What’s he doing?” Colton asked, “I mean, who is he, and what is he doing?”

“Well, he’s one of the lower fey,” Zeb said, remembering his hierarchy lessons upon coming to the hill. “Fey don’t usually touch cars. It’s one of the things we can do but they can’t. Some of them though—the metal workers—they’re good at it. But they need to bless the car first—salt water and herbs, to remove the taint of man. Anyway, Nibbles is making the car safe so he can work on it while we shop.”

“We’re going to shop Chevron?” Colton asked, and then the second door swung open and he let out an appreciative whistle.

Clothes—about three racks, every size from child’s size to men’s 4X sweats and T-shirts. Two pairs of men’s Large cargo shorts and a couple of T-shirts weren’t that hard to find. The T-shirts were plain colors—Colton

grabbed rust and then handed Zeb a green one.

“Uh, thank you?”

Colton just looked at him evenly, a slight smile on his face. “You have nice eyes,” he observed mildly.

Zeb couldn't fight the flush that tried to crawl past his neck. “Thanks,” he said, looking anywhere but into Colton's eyes. “You do too.”

“So, men's room?”

There was a small shower in the men's room—in the back corner, with a drain and a boundary, so the water didn't flood the floor. Zeb made Colton go first, while he ran into the gas station and found some shampoo and soap, and, of course, a gaudily colored beach towel from the racks of clothes. When he got back, he threw the towel at Colton and started to strip himself.

Colton stopped him. “You're not even going to look?” he asked, and Zeb met his eyes grimly and then looked his fill.

His original impression remained. Not tall—but broad in the shoulders, even at nineteen or twenty. Slim-hipped, with a square jaw and thick, shiny hair down to his shoulders. And warm golden eyes.

“You're a good looking kid,” Zeb said gruffly. “I thought that when I first saw you. What we did—that wasn't a hardship for me.”

Colton nodded, looking unhappy. “I needed it.” He closed his eyes. “I need it. Like a fire in my heart and my thighs and my...my cock.”

Zeb stripped quickly, while Colton watched, and then threw his clothes in the trash. He walked into Colton's space and leaned forward, brushing his lips against Colton's temple. "It's like that," he said quietly. "The first week or so. It takes you and you could fuck a tree if one was willing. Don't worry. I'll be your tree. When you're ready to leave me behind, you'll know the blood fever is all gone."

Colton closed his eyes with Zeb's caress, and leaned into him. "What makes you think it will go away?"

Zeb took the next few steps into the shower and turned it on, grabbing the bottle and using the soap liberally, glad the soap and the spray gave him an excuse to avoid the boy's eyes. "Werewolves mate for life," he said, eyes closed. "I'm nobody important, Colton. You'll have a banquet at Green's. Better meals than me."

He rinsed his hair then, scraping the water back from his eyes before he turned off the spray. When he could see again, Colton was no closer to being dressed. He was staring at Zeb's body, long and lean with a bare patch of hair between his pecs. Zeb had hazel eyes but he was one of those guys who sported a beard after two days, and it was already growing in.

"Uh..." Zeb reached his hand out for the towel, and Colton unwrapped it from his waist, crossing his arms unrepentantly. Zeb dried his hair first, and then his body, and then, uncertain, he used the towel on the floor while he grabbed his clothes off the counter. "What are you looking at?"

"You," Colton said quietly. He stepped in behind Zeb and took the underwear out of his hands, pressing his slightly

damp body up along the back of Zeb's. Zeb closed his eyes, aware of how long it had been since he'd had a long, sweaty, heart-pounding bout of sex.

"Uh, we probably don't want to do this here. I saw some camping gear in the station—we can—nungh..."

Colton was kissing the back of his neck, the line of his shoulder, back up to his ear.

"Colton?" Zeb whimpered, his cock full and aching, with just the press of bodies, a simple caress.

"You don't look like a tree," Colton whispered, thrusting up against Zeb's backside. Zeb moaned, holding on hard to the counter.

"That's not what I meant," he muttered, although he could have made a case for sporting wood.

"You meant I should use you." Colton leaned forward and pulled gently on Zeb's chin, until Zeb met his mouth in one of those awkward, over-the-shoulder kisses that made him want so much more.

Colton pulled away and Zeb nodded, feeling both pain and pride. "It would be my privilege to be so used," he said formally.

Colton shook his head then, and backed away. Zeb slumped for a moment against the counter, and then grabbed his clothes one more time, handing Colton his.

"You'll need it," Zeb said, trying to make it clear that there was no judgment here. "Colton, it's real noble to say you're not going to take me—use me. But you'll need it." Quickly he slid into his boxers, adjusting himself against arousal, and then climbed into his cargo shorts and T-

shirt, grateful when Colton did the same.

He bent and picked up the sodden towel then, wringing it out and folding it neatly. He knew all the stuff in the station was theirs to use—Green didn't operate on a cash exchange, but rather one of fealty and service—but the towel would be useful, and he made a mental note to grab a dry one while they were “shopping” the store.

He drew near to the door, waiting expectantly for Colton to open it so they could leave, but he didn't. Instead, he reached out and clasped Zeb's hand, bringing to carefully to his lips.

“I didn't say I wouldn't need the sex,” Colton said quietly. “I just said I'm not going to use you and lose you.”

Zeb thought he was above being touched—but he wasn't. He fought a burning behind his eyes. “You're a great kid,” he said, voice thick. “But we mate for life. You keep hanging out with me after your new werewolf thing wears off, and you're going to be stuck with me. And kid, I wanted better things for you than that. I sat under that porch and listened to you trying to figure out your life, and I wanted better things for you than what you had planned. That hasn't changed. Better things. Better than me. I'll be your tree—that'll be good.” He closed his eyes. “That'll be real good.”

Colton brushed his lips gently against Zeb's. When he pulled back, he brushed a kiss on each of Zeb's eyelids, and along his temple. “I want you so bad,” he whispered in the hollow of Zeb's ear. “But I wanted you when you sat next to me in the car and tried to make me laugh. Trust me, Zeb. This isn't going away.”

“Sure,” Zeb said, his knees weak—but not his resolve.
“C’mon. Let’s go get some gear.”

Colton snaked a hand around Zeb’s waist and hauled him in for a brutal, frustrated kiss. Zeb melted against him, out of starch to fight. Colton had to be the one who ended it, jerking his hips back and feathering his knuckles along Zeb’s cheekbone.

“You’re important to me,” he whispered.

Then he opened the door.

August Starlight

“I think the car runs better now,” Colton said, sounding surprised.

Zeb nodded, his foot on the accelerator, making sure he went fast enough to keep up with traffic and slow enough not to get noticed. They were still on the back country roads, running a series of frontage lanes and town main streets to crawl east without using the freeway.

“I think the color was more of a surprise than the tune up,” Zeb said pragmatically, and Colton laughed. When they’d gotten out of the service station—after eating their weight in frozen burritos and surprisingly tasty hot dogs—the battered brown sedan had been renovated into a dent-less, crisp green mom-and-dad mobile. Zeb’s phone, clean and dry and apparently working, sat in the charger. “Green’s people—magic, it trips me out every time.”

“You said only those fey can touch the cars?” Colton asked curiously, and Zeb gave himself a mental smack in the head.

“No—see, if they treat the cars right? The salt and herb wash? Then all the fey can touch them. But the metal workers don’t need the salt and herb wash. It helps, but they’re good with metal without it.”

“So Nibbles...” Colton inquired delicately.

Zeb laughed. “I have no idea. But I liked him.”

Nibbles had been the one who had run inside and made them eat more, while, in his words, “Fey-lings, they are

experimenting. Not too many chances to help wolves on the lamb.” He’d pronounced the B deliberately, laughing at his own pun.

“I did too,” Colton said. “He was…”

“Kind,” Zeb supplied. “Green’s people are kind. It takes a lot to get used to.”

“Was that why you went there?” Colton asked.

Zeb hated talking about himself, but he sort of felt like he had to. “Yeah. I uh got pretty fucked up, dropped out of school, was blowing guys for my next fix. You know. Junkie. And one night I blew this guy. Goddess. He was so beautiful.” Zeb hadn’t been Adrian’s only lover by a long shot—but Adrian had a way of making every lover feel like the missing piece in his rich life. Zeb would treasure that blow job, Adrian’s kindness, everything that came after. “He was a vampire, actually—no, don’t laugh!”

Because of course Colton was laughing. Why wouldn’t you laugh if you found out about one more impossible thing? “Okay,” he said after a moment, voice still bubbling. “I won’t laugh.”

“He was special,” Zeb maintained with dignity.

“Were you in love with him?” Colton sounded hesitant, like this mattered a great deal.

“No,” Zeb replied promptly. “But I loved him. We all loved him. His lovers—like, his dedicated lovers, Green and Cory, who run the hill now—they loved him most of all. They almost died when he died—”

“How’d he—?”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Zeb said gruffly. “I’m sorry. I just...most of us can’t, you understand?”

“Okay.” Colton’s voice was gentle. “But if he was a vampire and you’re a—”

“Werewolf.” Eventually it would get easier for the boy to say. “The change, it cleans out your blood. So, one minute I was addicted to smack and the next minute I wasn’t. It took me a while to be able to change, though. A couple of weeks. I think because my body was so weak. I needed to recover, you know?”

Colton nodded. “I get it.”

“Well, you—you were strong and well—”

“Until I got shot!” He was laughing.

Zeb couldn’t laugh. “Yeah. Until I got you shot. Anyway—once your wound had healed, you could change immediately. And once you change—”

“Fuck city?” Colton said hopefully. Next to him, on the driver’s island, was a little paper bag filled with lubricant and wet wipes. Zeb approved of the lubricant, but he didn’t have the heart to tell Colton that the wet wipes would be unnecessary. Wolves tasted everything, even if humans weren’t on board with it.

“Sure,” Zeb said. He looked to his left and realized they were passing a lightly wooded field. It used to be an orchard of some sort—there was even a pull-out and a dilapidated fruit stand. Beyond a couple hundred feet of trees, the land started a gentle slope in the general direction of an old irrigation ditch. It was no longer actively transporting water, but it apparently still carried

some runoff, because a few trees before the end of the orchard, grass grew again, thick and tall.

Zeb pulled into the parking lot for the fruit stand and turned to Colton. The sun was about to go down, and besides the fact that they'd need rest, the boy was a probably trying hard not to crawl out of his skin.

"We have a tent," Zeb said brightly. "A couple of sleeping bags—shall we sleep under the stars?"

"Not in the tent," Colton said, swinging out of the car and stretching. The sky over them was a dark, smoky purple, soon to turn deepest black. "The trees are thick enough to hide us from the road, and..." Colton raised his face to the stars. "I'd really like to make love to you out here."

Zeb had to give his heart a fierce "Down, boy!" before he nodded. He didn't want to hurt Colton, injure his probably already confused feelings, but what they had done before wasn't making love. Zeb had actually made love a couple of times in his life. He knew the difference. But he nodded, so he didn't squash the poor guy, and together they got the camping equipment—including a little ice chest with about a pound of cooked hamburger patties and bread to eat them with, as well as ten pounds of raw ground chuck—and moved forward.

Camp was set up in minimal time, and looking around, Zeb realized that the orchard picked up on the other side of the ditch as well. They really were hidden, especially since they'd laid the sleeping bags—zipped together—in the center of the tall grasses. Zeb allowed himself to partially turn and sniffed the air. Rabbits, water, old fruit, frogs, grass, car exhaust, but far less than their first stop—and best of all, no wolves. A few coyotes, but they

wouldn't be excited to meet Zeb and Colton.

This was a good place. This was a place where they could lie, undisturbed, and Zeb could take his time, kiss the boy slowly, show him some of the good stuff.

He had just completed that thought when Colton's warm, shape-shifter body aligned itself along Zeb's back, and Colton moved his hands to Zeb's shoulders. "Nobody can see us," he said, quiet as prey.

"No."

Colton's hand cupped his throat, capturing his pulse and his breath, and Zeb tilted his head back, baring himself in an ultimate expression of trust. "I know you think I'm going to fuck you and chuck you," Colton said, licking his ear. "But you have no idea how much I *want* you."

Zeb tilted his head and Colton nibbled on his throat. He tried to open his mouth, to talk again about the lust of the newly turned werewolf, but Colton sank his teeth lightly into the tendon on the side of Zeb's neck. Zeb whined instead.

Colton shifted to the other side, his impudent hands pushing underneath Zeb's T-shirt, exploring Zeb's chest relentlessly. His fingers found Zeb's nipples and pinched lightly, and again, and again, and Zeb could barely breathe for the aching erection straining against his shorts.

"And I know you're going to say it's new-werewolf lust," Colton breathed, pulling Zeb's shirt over his head. He'd taken off his own shirt—Zeb knew because his bare chest, with diamond point nipples, was pressed tightly, skin to sweating skin along Zeb's now-bare back.

“It is,” Zeb got out in a rush, because oh God, the kid was nibbling at his jaw and shoving his hands below Zeb’s belt line, and Zeb could hardly talk, much less give the werewolf-in-training speech.

“You want to think so,” Colton whispered. “Would make you feel better, right? You turn the kid, he fucks you and leaves you, you go back to being nobody important?”

“Works for me,” Zeb panted. Colton backed up a bit and yanked at Zeb’s shorts. Zeb stepped out of them almost unconsciously, kicking off his shoes at the same time. He was standing, naked under the August sky, staring at the stars while the breeze played over his distended, tingling nipples and his already dripping erection.

And this beautiful, smart, crazy awesome kid seduced Zeb into what should have been no-strings fucking.

Colton’s rough hands turned Zeb around and Colton crouched before him. Zeb looked down into his gold-brown eyes. “You want to think so,” he whispered, letting his tongue flick out and taste Zeb’s pre. He tilted his head back and shuddered. “So good,” he whispered hoarsely. “Come tastes better as a werewolf. They should put that in the brochures.”

Zeb half laughed, but he’d dropped his hands to tangle in Colton’s hair. Colton arched his back, like Zeb meant something to him, and then licked his cock head again. “I know so,” he whispered back, trying to think through the piercing shards of desire. “You, wanting me—fluke—”

Colton swallowed his cock to the root, and Zeb clutched at the kid’s shoulders as his knees buckled. Colton kept up the pressure while he cupped the back of Zeb’s

thighs and lowered him to the blanket.

Zeb moaned, arching into his mouth, blind with pleasure, with desire—oh God, he wanted this kid’s mouth on him some more. He wanted his gruff possession, his pretty words. Zeb had longed to be someone special for so long—for just this moment, he wanted to believe it was true.

Colton kept sucking and Zeb thrust into his mouth, tangling his fingers in that silky hair. Colton positioned himself between Zeb’s thighs and Zeb felt the spit Colton let slip through as he laved and sucked and milked Zeb’s leaking cock.

It coated his buttocks, his thighs, and when Colton shoved at Zeb’s legs until his knees were bent and his thighs spread, wanton and lewd, Zeb knew what was going to come next. Colton gave his cock one last, long, pulling suck, spending some time on his cockhead before he pulled away. Then, as he positioned himself, leaning on his elbows while he spread Zeb’s cheeks, he began to talk again.

“I’m going to make you come,” he promised. “Again, and again, until you can only say my name.”

“Kid!” Zeb begged. Colton’s breath dusted Zeb’s slick, spit-coated pucker, and his whole body was starting to shake.

“And then,” Colton swiped his tongue across Zeb’s taint, “I’m going to come inside you, hard, until I’m part of you.”

He swiped his tongue across Zeb’s balls. “And I’m going to do that again, and again, and maybe I’ll bend over and let you fuck me, until I’m crying for your cock.” He parted Zeb’s cheeks wider, and licked his crease, once, twice, tongue falling into ground zero.

“God!” Zeb cried, lost and frightened by the intensity. This should have been over. Colton should have lubed him and fucked him like a virgin sacrifice to an angry god. This careful seduction—this wasn’t planned. Zeb was weak against it.

“Not God,” Colton said, licking some more. “Colton. I’m going to mate with you, if I have to hide you in a cave and fuck you blind for weeks. You need to remember my name.”

“Kid!” Zeb cried as Colton dug in with his tongue. “Colton, please! God, baby, I need to... Need—”

“Me!” Colton pulled Zeb’s cock into his mouth and penetrated Zeb’s asshole with two fingers, all at once. Zeb gasped, crying out, fists flailing into the blanket below him.

“You!” he echoed harshly, when he swore he was going to say, “To come, I need to come!” But it was out already, and Colton sucked him relentlessly, fucking his ass with his fingers until Zeb howled, an animal in human form, and climaxed fiercely into Colton’s mouth. Colton swallowed, repeatedly, then sat up and pulled his fingers out of Zeb’s body. Zeb whined, wanting them back, absolutely pliant and at Colton’s mercy.

Colton fumbled with the lube for a moment before surging up, placing his cock at Zeb’s asshole and pushing determinedly in.

“Yes!” Zeb panted. “Yes, oh God, yes!”

Colton thrust in to the root, and Zeb wondered if he would explode, shatter like stars, join the night he was

being fucked into.

“I told you,” Colton panted, pulling out. “Colton. Say my name.”

“Kid—ah!” Because Colton slammed into him, cock filling Zeb in ways he’d not believed an ordinary body could.

“Colton!” he snarled. “Say it, Zeb. Say my name!”

“Please,” Zeb begged, not sure if he was begging for orgasm, or to feel Colton pump come inside him, or if he was begging for amnesty from the torrent of emotions cut loose in his heart.

“Say it!” Colton demanded, fucking him harder, deeper, until Zeb’s soul felt split in two.

“Colton!” Zeb half-sobbed. His body was on fire, and Colton’s intense, golden brown eyes were boring into his soul. “Oh God, please, Colton, come. I need to—you need to—oh please!”

Colton pushed up just far enough to grab Zeb’s cock, and Zeb shrieked, almost more wolf than man. Those final, pounding, thrusting moments, locked inside an explosion of emotions and climax and ejaculate, overwhelmed Zeb, destroyed him, until he was not much more than moaning, begging nerve endings, convulsed in one long climax.

And then Colton froze, hips rocketing away as his cockhead dragged over Zeb’s sweet spot over and over and over again. Zeb howled—full on wolf howl, while still in his man’s body, and Colton raised his head and joined him, back bowed with the force of his orgasm.

Everything behind Zeb’s eyes zinged like stars.

Colton fell on top of him, body still lodged inside Zeb's, and for a moment they both gulped air like they'd been running for their lives.

"Zeb?" Colton whispered harshly, and he didn't sound lost or needy or any of the other things Zeb had remembered from being a new werewolf driven to fuck.

"What?"

"Say my name."

Zeb closed his eyes, knowing the name was probably etched on the muscle of his heart with a rusty razor.

"Colton."

"Look at me."

Zeb did, raising a hesitant hand to brush tangled hair back from those laser-intense gold-brown eyes.

"Looking," he said gruffly.

"Not fucking a tree here," Colton said, not angrily, but as though teaching a particularly recalcitrant child a lesson.

"No."

"Fucking you. Zeb. You're mine."

Zeb closed his eyes, because he knew. Colton might not know, but Zeb knew. This felt like everything to Zeb. It felt like every mark of possession he'd ever dreamed of, right down to the dripping, aching, stretched and full asshole.

But nobody wanted Zeb like that. Not for keeps.

"Look at me!" Colton snapped again.

Zeb had to. Pain or not, this was part of him now.

“Looking,” he repeated, wrecked, broken, at this kid’s mercy.

“You will know you’re mine,” Colton promised, bringing his mouth down in a crushing kiss.

Zeb responded because he had no choice.

And because he wanted it to be true.

Daybreak

Zeb was used to his werewolf metabolism healing him faster, making him stronger. He was used to a night of acrobatic sex being nothing more than a pleasant memory and a hope for a further friendship.

What Colton did to him, between sunset and sunrise was not going to be healed with the bruises and aches that came with a sexual marathon.

Zeb woke slowly much the way he had after his first change—disoriented, destroyed, renewed. He peered into the gray sky, feeling the temperature plummet in the deserted fruit grove and huddled deeper into the sleeping bag, edging away from Colton's somnolent form.

Colton snaked out an arm and pulled Zeb up next to him.

"God, you're stubborn," he whispered.

"Preparing myself," Zeb said back, honestly. He was exhausted. New werewolves could literally fuck until their bodies burned muscle—he and Colton had only stopped having sex to eat. Four times. Zeb's skin was flaking with dried spend—thighs, ass, chest, chin, cheeks, hair. In spite of having eaten almost five pounds of ground beef, all he could taste was come.

There was no room in him for anything but honesty. Not to save his dignity, or his pride, or his heart.

"Why?" Colton asked, his embrace possessive. Zeb didn't know how he'd missed it—Colton's drive, his

determination, his resistance to his friend's coercion. Colton was an alpha werewolf. Maybe not *the* alpha. Teague pretty much had that locked with his wiry, no bullshit military bearing, but Colton was a leader, a possessor—a man who could claim another man and not give a fuck about timetables.

“You need to get to Green's,” Zeb muttered, feeling dead. “You'll get there and you'll have safety. You'll see.”

Colton blew out a frustrated breath. “I don't accept that answer,” he said, which wasn't surprising because he'd been rejecting it all night.

“Ask another question.” Could they get an hour's worth of sleep in before they had to be on the road? Maybe two? What was it, four? Five in the morning?

“Why a werewolf. You didn't tell me that.”

Hadn't he? Zeb tried to remember. “They're warm blooded,” he answered. He gave in to yearning and stroked his cheek along Colton's bicep, savoring the contact of skin to skin. “I loved Adrian, but he was cold.” So cold. “I felt like that when I was high. I wanted to feel alive.”

“Mm...” Colton nuzzled the back of his neck, but not in a sexual way, really. Zeb accepted it, eyes closed. Now, maybe, sleep? “Why'd you start getting high in the first place?”

No. No sleep.

“Same old bullshit,” Zeb muttered. “Mommy and daddy didn't love little gay Zebulon, and their big happy family didn't miss one kid to put through school.” It was so

embarrassing now. It was, in fact, how many of the men and women at Green's Hill ended up at Green's Hill. Because in some way, shape, or form, their own families or world had rejected them, and they set out to find a better one.

Or had the good fortune to get seduced by Adrian, and he brought them in and showed them how.

"I love gay Zebulon," Colton chuckled, nibbling at his neck. Zeb felt him, getting hard again against Zeb's backside. When Colton moved his outside hand to lift Zeb's thigh and give him access, it was just as easy to give it. His entrance was so slick and used after the night before that Colton's cock slid in with only a little pressure, and Zeb had no choice but to let the pleasure wash over him, a passive beach assaulted by waves over which he had no control.

"I love gay Colton," Zeb answered, lost and honest in a way he might not have been if they hadn't been in the throes of sex and passion for the past eight hours.

"You do!" Colton crowed, thrusting a little faster. "You said it!" Damned brat—his voice was only a little strained.

"Ahhh..." Zeb sighed, his first climax washing through him, his traitorous cock giving up a little bit of come.

Colton laughed throatily and bit his shoulder hard. He sprouted fangs, just enough to puncture, and the pain woke Zeb up, added another dimension to the hallucinogenic layering of sex and pleasure and exhaustion that left him helpless to Colton's overtures of love.

“Colton,” he moaned, and Colton pumped his hips harder.

“I told you,” he whispered, licking the punctures at Zeb’s neck as they closed. He locked his fingers in Zeb’s hair and slammed hard, his body making a new form inside Zeb’s, like it would fit there forever.

“Wha’...ohhh...”

“You will always say my name,” Colton told him.

“Colton!”

“Again!”

“Colton!”

“Who loves you!”

Oh! Green, Adrian, Teague, Cory, just not like this, never like this, not like—“Oh Goddess!” he cried saying her name in the purity of a heart that could not bear to be broken.

“Say it!”

Zeb broke, one more orgasm wringing his body dry, sobs rocking his stomach, Colton’s body taking over, rendering Zeb a helpless acolyte to his stunning belief.

“Colton,” he wept. “Colton.”

With a groan, Colton spent inside him, and for a moment they could hear nothing under the dawning sun.

“You love me too, right, Zeb?” Colton asked, sounding uncertain for the first time since they’d arrived in this place.

“Yeah,” Zeb mumbled, meaning it. “Yeah. Of course I do.”

He closed his eyes, waiting for the shoe to drop, the spell to be over with, for Colton to wake up and realize what they could not be.

It wouldn't change the fact that his heart had been remade in the past day—it would just make his nakedness complete.

* * *

They woke up a couple hours later, sweating in the sleeping bag. Colton crawled out and gave Zeb a hand into what was left of the irrigation ditch, and they washed each other off. Zeb could hardly look at Colton as he stood and let the younger man rinse his body like it was a sacred object.

Colton hunkered, down on his knees in the running water, and looked up at him beseechingly. “Admit it,” he said huskily. “Admit it was real.”

“It was real to me,” Zeb said, stroking his hair back with utmost tenderness. “But we need to get going.”

Colton stood and kissed him, hard. “We'll get back to your house, and it will stay real,” he assured.

Zeb nodded, without words. He was done trying to explain—he would simply accept and deal. It was all he had, for the time being.

In that quiet of the morning, when the cars had barely started on the road, they both heard it.

And met desperate eyes.

“Was that?” Colton whispered.

“Yeah. Clothes, keys, phones—now!”

The scrambled, their morning hunger and tumultuous emotions forgotten. They’d heard it—the shaky, shrieky howling of a deranged wolf.

And the return howl of another member of the pack.

They dressed in record time and then Colton grabbed the bag while Zeb grabbed what was left of the food. They heard the howl again just as they started across the grove.

“How far out?” Colton asked.

Zeb started running. “Close enough to hear our voices. Another fifty yards he’ll be able to smell us.”

“Faster!” Colton hissed, and together they sprinted with supernatural speed across the terrain. They threw their gear in the backseat and Zeb started the car and pulled out before either of them had even closed their doors. As he screeched onto the road, a cacophony of howling broke out and in his rearview he could see an entire pack, running to keep up with the car as he stepped on the gas.

They disappeared in the rearview, and Zeb slowed down a little and cracked his window, listening and smelling with his heightened senses. Shit.

“They’re organized,” he muttered. “There’s wolves in front of us calling to the ones behind us. Look for a side road.”

He pulled Colton’s phone off the charger. “We need to get on the freeway at this point. How close are we to Turlock?”

“I’m looking, I’m looking,” Colton muttered. “Damn. I always knew good sex didn’t come free.”

Zeb snorted. “Well, I hope you got your jollies, kid, because it’s gonna be a while before you get that much time in bed again.”

“Colton,” he growled. “And we. Say it, Zeb.”

And they weren’t in bed, and Colton wasn’t breaking him with tenderness and pleasure.

And Zeb was still washed clean of evasion and prevarication and done with protecting himself from this terrifying young man who now thoroughly owned him.

“Colton,” he repeated. “And we.”

“Good. Now you’ve got about a hundred yards before you can hang a left and break through the oleander onto the freeway. It’s risky but—”

Cherry lights—far ahead, maybe a mile, and easy to see on this straightaway.

“Hold on to your ass Colton, we’re gonna make a left!”

Some Things are Non-Negotiable

They burst through the guard rail, missing an oncoming car by a fraction and joining traffic with a few wobbles of the wheel.

“Wow,” Zeb muttered, stunned.

“You just did that!” Colton sounded so excited for him—Zeb hated to break it to him.

“I did jack! I’m not sure what Green’s people did to the damned car, but it’s like driving a magic carpet.” Zeb accelerated about five miles per hour, and then grinned. The despair of his morning revelation forgotten, he felt the thrill of speed and a new toy thrum through his bloodstream. “How many miles to Sacramento?”

Colton glanced at a road sign just as they passed. “Says 120. Why?”

“Well, 120 plus forty to Auburn and Foresthill— I’d say we’re three hours from home.” And like that, the sweetness of having Green’s Hill sank into his chest. “I’d love for you to see home.” The gardens, the shapeshifter’s common room, the fey and the vampires wandering through in their time.

The care from the people he served.

The worry for his wellbeing.

Suddenly he had something to give Colton. It wasn’t his per se, but —still—it was part of the world he’d opened

up with the bite. It was a good place. Zeb found a tiny sliver of pride.

“Where will we stay there?”

Zeb swallowed. “Well, there’s usually spare rooms.” He cut around an old Jeep going criminally slow. He couldn’t see any lights in his rearview, but he figured the further up the road he got the less likely it would happen.

“Teague and his family just moved into an outbuilding—that frees up a suite and another room, because Katy kept her room when Jack and Teague got together.” And speed up, because he could, and swerve around a Toyota with a girl rocking out behind the wheel. She didn’t even notice him. “So, probably Katy’s room. Some of the darkling rooms are free—Kyle is keeping Adrian’s room, but I got the feeling Ellis was moving out of his, and Leah is joining the Avians out at the aerie—”

“Jesus!” Colton half laughed.

“What?” Zeb cut in front of a red Kia and gunned it into the great yawning gap between car clots.

“It’s a good thing we heal, because damn, you drive like your head’s on fire and your ass it was catching! And that’s a lot of fucking people—how big is this house?”

Oh. “I want to get home,” he said, like that wasn’t plenty clear enough. “And don’t think of it like a house. Think of it like a college—a small one, but a college. Because there’s lots of common areas and everybody eats in the same five places, and you have to report to a higher authority—a couple of them—but mostly there’s a lot of people minding their own business and fucking around when they can get a free space.”

For the first time, Colton frowned uncertainly. “Can we go to college for real?”

Zeb felt another bolt of relief. “Definitely. No worries. If we go on the Little Goddess days, though, we’re expected to help with the detail—”

“The detail?” Confusion. Well, understandable.

“See, Cory—she doesn’t go alone. Ever. It’s a rule.”

“Why? Is she afraid of—”

Zeb scowled, remembering the times she’d led people into battle. The herb wash they used on iron and cold steel and silver to protect the creatures that were allergic to those metals had a very distinctive smell. Zeb remembered that smell from the night Adrian died, and he avoided the hell out of the common room when it permeated the hill forever after. Zeb wasn’t a warrior. He never would be. Rescuing Colton was about the bravest thing he’d ever done, and most of that was running.

“Nothing,” he said shortly. “She’s afraid of nothing. But she’s important—she can lead a troop elves, vampires, and werewolves into battle without blinking an eye, but when she’s forced to play by human rules, she’s really vulnerable. She’s getting like multiple degrees to help Green run the hill—but it means she has to go to school, and that means a security detail—several of them. If you’re going on one of her days, you may have to take a class with her, or be scheduled to be in the quad at the same time she is—they don’t let her see nearly the number of people who are watching her. But we’d be expected to be that.”

Colton grunted. “So this is a tiny island? Like a country

within a country?”

Oh yes! He understood! “Yes,” Zeb said soberly. “And with these werewolves—and all this bad fuckin’ blood, her country’s under siege.” Hell. “This is what I’ve brought you into, Colton. I’ve been trying to tell you. I mean—the hill will probably be safe, but there’s tough times ahead.”

To his surprise, Colton grinned. “That’s just fine,” he said. “In fact, you know? That’s better than fine. That’s like a cause. That’s why people join the military right out of school. They want to do for something bigger than them. You saved my life, this guy Green’s saving my bacon, the girl sounds like she’s okay—”

“Stop it right there.” Oh, he had to fix this. “The girl isn’t just ‘okay’. The girl is a fucking warrior. She’s *bad ass*. She’s killed more people than lived in your pissant little town. You don’t get to go to Green’s if you don’t respect the Lady Cory.”

“Oh.”

Zeb grunted. He saw lights, far behind them, and he stepped on the gas some more and kept up the bob and weave. the speedometer said 105, but it didn’t feel fast enough. “Oh what?” he asked between gritted teeth.

“I just...I mean, I know you said there was a leadership thing—that there were three of them. I just really thought the two guys would have been leading mostly. I never thought woman in charge.”

“Well you better get your brain around it right quick, because we do not want Bracken leading. That’s her other lover. Teague’s our alpha—but he looks to Lady

Cory. The vampires are stronger than us in almost every way. And she leads them. Green's the leader of the hill—but he lives and breathes her safety. You don't blow her off, you don't ignore her, you don't interrupt her when she's speaking. You bow low and deep and you be fucking grateful she doesn't cook you like werewolf bacon."

"So some psycho bi—"

"Forget you ever heard that word!" Zeb shouted, and then, going 110, he swerved the car into the guard rail and through, ignoring the ripping sound of metal because he was pretty sure it was the guard rail and not the car that was ripping. He popped out on the frontage road barely controlled the skid.

"Jesus!" Colton was hanging onto the Oh-Shit-Bar. "You must really love this woman!"

"She's my queen, dammit! And if I bring you to the hill, she needs to be yours too! You have got to show some respect to this world, Colton! If we survive this fucking day, it's because of these people!"

The car was running without a hitch, and Zeb made a mental note to send something special and awesome to Nibbles, who had apparently James-Bonded the car into complete indestructibility.

"Where are we?" he demanded, looking around. "I mean, there's a town nearby—this looks like old orchards, made residential. Whose guardrail did we just pop?"

"Turlock," Colton said, sounding subdued. He pulled something up on the phone Zeb had charged the night before. "Turn right and we'll run through town and then

get back on the freeway. There's a college there, and—fuck!”

Fuck was right. Behind them in the rearview mirror, two police cars darted in quick succession. Too quick, apparently—one of them peeled itself like a can opener and flipped out of view, but the other one was right on their ass.

“Okay,” Zeb said, thinking fast. “We’re going to pull into the college.”

“What?”

“And steal ourselves a car.”

“How in the—”

“Quick—call Green. He’s in my presets.”

“Why do you—”

“Just do it, Colton! I’m trying to keep us alive, okay? I’ve got a very basic trick used by a particularly wily woodland bird, and I’m going to use it.”

Colton hit speed dial and speaker.

“Hello, Zeb. What can I do for you?”

Zeb almost cried. “We’re in a college town, Green, and we’ve got cop cars all over us. I want to go to the university and steal a car.”

“Very tricky with the new electronic ignition, Zebulon—but as it happens, I’ve got an ally there. Let me just send her a text...done!”

“So, are we stealing a car?”

“No, my boy, you’re borrowing one. And you’re leaving her the one you’re driving in it’s place.”

Zeb grunted. “But Green, they’re looking for this one!”

“They won’t be by the time they find it.” Green’s voice lowered. “Trust me, Zeb. I know it’s hard—but please. We want to get you both home.”

Of course. “Thanks, Green. Give me directions.”

Green did.

Zeb wasn’t sure what his sources were—elves, other were creatures, friendly humans—but somehow he managed to guide the two of them through a series of shortcuts and into the campus parking area in such a way that Zeb lost their tail and he and Colton could breathe a little easier.

“Now what car am I looking for—crap!”

“What?”

“Oh, geez,” Colton muttered. “Zeb, you hit a guy! Oh my God—wait. That guy’s getting up and—he’s not human!”

“Some dumb jerk with a goofy little hat and a deadhead goatee jumped right in front of the car,” Zeb snarled. God, he could see the guy getting up and self-healing in the rearview. “He must be bad werewolf or something—but jumping in front of my car when I’m going forty miles an hour—dumbest fucker on the planet.”

“Mm…” Green murmured. “Yes. My contact says he’s the dean of her department.” He chuckled. “She asks that you go back and run him over again, but I’ve assured her you don’t have the time. Now look for a cherry red mini

with a skull and crossbones on top.”

“That’s the car we’re going to hide in?” Zeb demanded.

“Yup. Now do you see—”

“Jesus!” Colton yelped. “God, you’re terrifying.”

“I’m going to miss this car,” Zeb said sadly, yanking the hand brake and killing the motor. “You sure this one’s good to go? Should we transfer any of our stuff into it?”

“No—just hurry up. Drive out at an average pace, and don’t mind what you see when you look back. Some of Nibbles’ brethren are going to be fixing Kim up a new ride for a bit, yes?”

Zeb slid behind the seat of the mini and turned the key that was set up in the ignition. “Make sure it gets fixed up really good, Green. I have the feeling I’m going to like this one.”

* * *

Oh, he did, and for a few miles of rather tame driving, the road-hugging suspension of the Mini almost made up for Colton’s thoughtful silence.

“What?” he asked after the sign announcing Sacramento in 20 miles popped into view. “Women’s rights is a deal breaker?”

“No,” Colton said, sounding young. “I’m sorry I got defensive. And crude. You were right. I listened yesterday—but I didn’t really hear. You were trying to tell me about where I was going to live, and what I needed to know to live there. I’m sorry. Lady Cory. I understand now.”

That was too easy. “What do you mean, you understand

now?”

“That guy on the phone—he calls his friend and we have a new car. You run over a guy, and he’s got a kill order—”

“Well, if he hadn’t have been a werewolf, I would have been suicidal, you know that right?”

“Yeah, I know that too. But in your world, he’s going to be a werewolf. I...” For a moment Colton faltered, and a part of Zeb howled in angry triumph. This kid wasn’t strong enough. He wasn’t old enough. All those promises made had been crap, and Zeb had known it all along. Then his hand, warm and intimate, rested on Zeb’s bicep. “This doesn’t change you and me,” Colton said, voice unyielding. “It just means I need to grow up so I’m worthy of you.”

“Non-negotiable,” Zeb rasped, knowing he was risking everything. “Lady Cory—respect for her—is non-negotiable.”

“Understood,” Colton said, subdued. “What do you think the traffic’s going to be like in Sacramento?”

“Heinous,” Zeb said glumly. “It’s always fucking heinous.”

But at least he and Colton were on the same page. Hope. They’d awakened that morning and Zeb had been owned, body and soul, by the kid next to him—but he hadn’t had hope.

Now, he did. The miles flew by under the Mini. They were going home.

The Long and Winding Road

The traffic in Sacramento sucked as always—Zeb hadn't been wrong about that. But he piloted the little Mini through the never-ending construction in Natomas deftly, and within an hour they were passing Madison and on their way up the hill toward Auburn.

And then Colton let out a little whine—and even Zeb could hear the gurgling in his stomach.

“Call Green for me again,” he said, swinging the car off at the Madison exit and ignoring the honking and middle-fingers that came with that decision. Funny how driving on the lam could give a guy a sense of “I'm an asshole so what” when it came to road rules. He thought of all the useless frustration he'd spent in traffic and wished for this amount of adrenaline all the time.

“Where are we going?”

“A carnivore's last best hope—In & Out.”

Colton's relieved laugh was followed by another stomach gurgle.

Ten minutes later, after ordering twelve double-doubles and animal style fries (mostly to hear Colton chuckle when he did it) Zeb pulled onto Madison cursing traffic all over again. Getting back onto the freeway was going to be a bitch. As they'd been in line at the drive thru, he'd seen five cop cars zooming onto the freeway headed east, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that something was doing up the hill.

Colton had been unable to get hold of Green when

they'd been in the drive thru, and now as Zeb headed east on Madison and battled with gridlocked traffic, he had Colton pick up the phone and try again.

When the phone went to voice mail again, Zeb grunted with worry.

“This is not good—I need to—“

Bad news is that I'm a little busy right now. Good news is, every wolf for miles is going to be focused on shit going down in Auburn. Your job is to get home without getting dead, deal?

Deal Green. Be safe.

And he was apparently too busy to respond.

“Okay,” Zeb said, thinking fast. “We’re going to stop for gas here, where the wolf thing isn’t a deal, and then you and I are going to take the long and winding road back home.”

“Snacks?” Colton asked, working on his third sandwich without slowing down.

“Snacks,” Zeb agreed.

“Sex?” He asked hopefully.

“Alas, no.” Zeb felt the loss keenly. They were so close to Green’s Hill where Colton would discover a cornucopia of possible mates. The hope that had filled Zeb earlier drained out of him as he thought of the trip around Folsom Lake and up through El Dorado Hills. “We just added another fifty or so miles to our trip—and something tells me we need to get to the hill while the rest of the team is busy. If Green is called into action,

then big shit is about to go down.”

“So, we’re the little fish sliding to safety while the whales are engaged?”

Zeb thought of the last clash of the titans he’d been there to witness. “We are indeed,” he said softly. “Gear up, little fish. Shit’s about to get slippery.”

Once Madison passed the intersection with Fair Oaks, the scenery changed slightly. Fewer strip malls, fewer old businesses, more trees. In this moment, in the cusp of August and September, Zeb felt a little bit of peace. Cooler days were coming, bracing days with a good wind and the smell of rain.

Cory had left the hill when Adrian died—but she’d come back to the hill in the winter. Winter gave him hope.

He turned left toward Folsom, then took another left on Blue Ravine toward El Dorado Hills. Colton looked around with interest, taking in the two sides of Folsom—the older side, the historic district of Riley Road with the old brick buildings, antique shops, and restaurants—and the newer side, the developments that had come up in the past twenty years, the new high school, bright and hopeful as a shiny penny, and the big homes built into the foothills.

“This would be a good place to live,” he said thoughtfully. “Pretty. Lots of hope.”

Zeb laughed at how that word kept popping up and took a left that would lead them to Coloma. “Hold on to the hope, buddy. The next stretch of road is haunted as fuck.”

“Haunted? As in ghosts?”

Colton’s voice pitched, and Zeb took a moment to appreciate that this he seemed to take seriously.

“Oh yeah. Green’s Hill is like a giant ghost-free zone in the foothills. The rest of this place was made by miners or entrepreneurs coming to seek their fortunes. When shit went south and their bodies did too, their souls hung around for a bit. There are some scary-assed places down this little country road—believe you me.”

“Does being a werewolf let us, you know, see them?”

Zeb grunted. “No. Just the opposite, actually.”

“I don’t understand?”

“We talked about the Goddess?”

“Yeah...”

“Well the idea of a spirit and an afterlife—that’s sort of God’s purview. Most of these spirits—they believe what you learn in church, so they suffer and they twist and they get pissed off. The pagans went on to become part of the earth, or part of a larger consciousness, or to a happy field to fuck and fight and do it again—whatever afterlife turned their key. So these guys, these ghosts—we might believe in them, but odds are, they don’t believe in us. So we can’t see each other—but we can sure sense their moods. So, like, a pissed off spirit might actually be visible to a tourist on the side of the road—but one of us passes through it, and we just get...” He shuddered—it had only happened once. “Like a blinding flash of pain behind our eyes. We’re two beings not meant to occupy the same space, you understand?”

“This happens to everybody?”

“Only were-creatures. Not the vampires—I think because they’re technically dead. Not the elves, and no, I don’t know why. Just the shapeshifters. It’s like our special curse.”

“And we’re driving down a haunted road? For real?”

Zeb watched as the houses dwindled, the stretches of property getting bigger and bigger, the age of the buildings getting higher and higher.

“That farmhouse over there?” he said, pointing to a recently renovated white clapboard house with red trim.

“Yeah?”

“We came up here when I was a kid, and I saw a woman in a bloody dress. Scared the shit out of me. My parents thought I’d come unglued.”

“And now?”

Zeb took a deep breath and resolved to keep his eyes open on this stretch of road. “Five, four, three, two...”

“Augh!!!”

They both screamed together, but while Colton doubled over, moaning in pain, Zeb kept his eyes open and on the road. The Mini cleared the cold spot and he sagged against the leather seat, whimpering, covered in sweat.

“Oh Jesus, that sucked,” Colton moaned, leaning his head against the window. “One more like that, I’m going to have to throw—”

“AAUGH!”

Zeb was too nauseated to even scream—but he kept it locked inside. Werewolves. There were werewolves on their tail with a shitty smell and crazy eyes. Green was busy with big fucking goings down. And Colton trusted him to get them home.

Five.

They encountered five spirits through Highway 49, and up the canyon under the Foresthill bridge. Colton had to roll down his window at the third one, and Zeb pulled over to the side of the road, while both of them tried to breath through the spirit-induced migraine.

When Colton had finished emptying his stomach—and drinking some water and rinsing off the car—he got back in and asked the obvious question. “How do you people live so close to this bullshit?”

“We never take this way,” Zeb told him. “The last time someone went down here was sometime before the bridge was even built. One of the elves, I think—and a vampire. Green just sort of laid down the law—off limits. People listened. Besides this road—and, oh, yeah, a scary fucking house down off of Foresthill Road—we mostly stay away from graveyards. I’m not sure Cory even knows about this glitch—it seems to me like it might not even effect her.”

“Not a shapeshifter?”

“Nope.”

“Aces.”

“Yeah, well, she’s got—”

“Her own problems. Okay, are we read—”

“Fuck!”

And that was number four.

They got to the top of the hill near sunset, Zeb feeling nauseated and wrung dry. As he sat idling at the stop sign that—oh God—so close—allowed them to merge onto Foresthill road proper for the final mile before the magic little turn-off, he saw three black SUV’s coming over the bridge—followed by what looked like half a dozen cop cars.

Normally, Zeb being the good citizen he tried to be, the invisible boy he’d worked his whole life toward, he would have let all of that drama just pass him by.

But watching that bullshit head toward him, two things happened.

One, was he recognized the SUV’s—they were Green’s.

The other was that a shaggy form stuck it’s head out of one of the cop cars.

On the driver’s side.

And Zeb realized that once, just once, he was going to have to put himself first.

He stepped on the gas and prayed.

Behind him he heard the squealing of brakes and probably the blue curses of the people he loved best, but he didn’t care. He stood on the gas, taking that Mini to 110 before he saw the turn-off.

It was the best bit of driving he’d ever done in his life,

taking that car at a ninety degree turn into the turnout to home, and he kept gunning that thing until he was at the garage, when he spun off, giving the SUV's a chance to jam in behind him.

They didn't. Instead, the doors to the last one swung open and five people spilled out—and if Zeb had any words, he would have used them all in curses.

A tiny woman with wild red-blond hair, one medium sized man, and one who was humanly tall, all three with the rangy builds of people who burned a lot of calories really fast. And one beautiful giant neanderthal with wild black hair and eyes that threw amber sparks, even from fifty feet away.

Cory, Bracken, Nicky, and Max— it was like the president's cabinet and the speaker of the house getting out of the same car. Most of the time the secret service wouldn't let it happen. The only one missing was Teague.

Cory—no less tiny than she had been when Zeb had left four days ago—turned to Max and snarled, “Stand back!”

Then Nicky went bird, lofting into the air with a squawk, and Cory and Bracken—oh, holy Goddess, he knew Cory could do this, but it was usually saved for when shit got real— lifted up in tandem.

They were flying, and shit was real.

Bracken wobbled— as far as Zeb knew, this was a brand new skill for the young sidhe.

But Cory had been practicing, and her course stayed true.

“Jesus fuck us,” Colton whispered.

Zeb still didn't have words.

Cory held out her hands and screamed, a giant power flare coming from her hands aimed at the point where the turnout met the road. Zeb held his breath and then—

Heard it. The screech of metal, the scream of people trapped inside, and another, and another. The final sound was a car stopping just in time, before Cory sank to the ground. Bracken fell gracelessly next to her—and then wrapped his arms around her as she wobbled and fell.

“What just happen—” Zeb held up a hand, needing Colton to just trust him for once.

Green got out of the car and waved his arms. Tall and regal, a blonde braid falling down past his hips like liquid sun, he was just as kind, just as protective as Zeb remembered. Zeb's heart hurt, seeing him like this—a leader in wartime once again, but just as determined to keep his people safe. As he waved his arm and spoke quickly, an army of... well, people just like Nibbles, as well as walking rock piles and some teeny tiny little metal people all went scurrying to the front of the gate—the clean up crew.

From the driver's side of the SUV Green had cleared, Arturo got out, and Green nodded to him. Without a word of protest, Arturo strode toward the entrance, where Lady Cory had just wrecked five cop cars, and assisted with the clean up.

Green strode toward Cory then, but Bracken had already scooped her up, in spite of protest they could hear from where they stood.

“Dammit, Brack—I’m fine. Put me down!”

“No.”

“Nicky!”

Nicky squawked from above them, obviously still supervising cleanup.

“Dammit.”

Green murmured something over her, and she relaxed into Bracken’s embrace, and then the three of them came striding toward the stairs that led up to the main floor entrance. The other SUV opened up, disgorging a host of people Zeb knew only by reputation, and they followed, leaving the vehicles outside, probably to be serviced and parked by people like Nibbles, who adored the task.

Green peeled off from the main group though, walking toward Zeb and Colton, and opened his arms. Zeb’s throat grew tight.

“After all that, he’s coming to see you?” Colton asked, awed.

“That’s why he’s our home,” Zeb whispered. “That’s why we’re here.”

He walked toward Green—and then he ran toward him—taking his embrace and all the comfort, all the warmth it offered.

“Sorry I wasn’t there at the last,” Green said quietly.

“You obviously had some other shit to sort.”

Green laughed and kissed the top of his head. “You

want to introduce me to your friend? And then, inside, both of you. Bath and food and comfort, I think. We've got you set up in the same room for tonight. I hope that's okay."

Zeb nodded, his heart sinking and rising at the same time. It was almost over. But he and Colton, they'd have one night to say goodbye and part as friends.

"Green, this is Colton. Colton, this is Green. Welcome to Green's Hill."

Colton—Goddess, that kid. He came around the car, and before Green could embrace him, he sank to one knee.

"It's an honor to meet you," he said, head bowed. "Zeb has told me so much about you."

Green smiled.

The Comforts of Home

“Why aren’t we in your room?”

Zeb looked up from dumping his duffel bag on the chest of drawers in the corner.

“I have a roommate,” he said with a little shrug. “Nice guy—were-kitty. They don’t bond as mates and he likes poly. Not my thing, so we weren’t likely to bond together.”

Colton frowned and looked around the room—which was, all things considered, pretty nice. Wooden king-sized bed featuring a sort of fractal rainbow design on the quilt, with hangings on the walls to match. The wood paneling in evidence in all of the hill was here, a light-colored wood, that made much of the sun coming in from the window over the headboard.

“It’s a nice room,” Zeb said defensively. His bare feet squished happily in the plush area rug. Yeah, it was nice. Better than his student flat had been, even before he’d sold all his possessions for drugs.

“Well yeah, it’s nice!” Colton half-laughed. “But it doesn’t make any sense. You do realize we shouldn’t have a window to jack from here, right?”

Oh. That.

“It’s... well, nobody talks about that here. It’s sort of elven magic, but real subtle like. The elves like sunlight and the vampires need half the hill to be underground.”

“Oh shit—right!”

He had to smile at Colton’s enthusiasm. The kid sort of

took to this life like he was born to it. It had taken Zeb three years to accustom himself to the casual magic that permeated every breath he took.

“Yeah. So don’t ask me how we have a window—but the only rooms that don’t have windows are the rooms that wouldn’t see sunlight if half the mountain sheared off.

Green’s doing his best to feed everybody’s soul, you know?”

Colton nodded, and tucked a piece of hair behind his ear. “So, uh…”

“I’ll shower,” Zeb said promptly. They’d both thrown up on that horrible ride. “And nap. Green will probably call a banquet tomorrow to explain shit. In the meantime…”

Zeb bit his lip. This was so embarrassing. “Green will probably come get you. Don’t, uh, feel bad for anything that happens. I mean, even if we were going to bond, or already bonded, it would happen. It’s how Green gets to know people. It will make you feel good, trust me. There’s no shame involved at all.”

That scowl was lethal. “I’m not just going to cheat on you because we’re not—”

Zeb grabbed his hand, shivering with reaction just from the contact. He took a step into Colton’s space and breathed in, feeling that smell surrounding him again. They’d been inside each other, again and again and again. In his entire life, Zeb had never committed to anything—not even Green’s Hill—with the fervor he’d committed to this young man.

“It’s not cheating,” he said softly, nosing the hollow of Colton’s neck. Colton shuddered and tilted his head

back. “It’s answering to your ultimate pack alpha. There might not even be sex involved—and even if you come, it won’t feel like sex. It’ll be important.” Zeb took a step back, fighting the erection that had become an almost permanent thing since he’d awakened that morning, replete and exhausted, in Colton’s arms. “I’m going to shower first,” he said, feeling grubby and road worn. “And brush my teeth. Uh, if you want food, go into the kitchen and—oh!”

Tiny glowing lights had —abruptly appeared and then, bless everybody, a platter of what looked like tri-tip, complete with biscuits and gravy and steamed veggies, appeared.

With two forks.

“I guess there’s snacks,” Zeb said, smiling faintly. The meat smelled great—but he wasn’t a new werewolf. He could wait. “I’ll be out in a few. Save some if you can.”

If he couldn’t, Zeb knew where to go.

He set the shower to parboil and coated the sponge in body wash. The last three days—Ritchie’s death, his own wounding, then Colton, all of the world, all of his heart and body about Colton—lay heavy on his skin. Maybe he could wash some of it off, right? Maybe he could scrub and scrub and let the days run down the drain in a swirl of dirt. Maybe if he rinsed off the scent of Colton’s come on his skin, he could erase the way his heart ached at the thought of Colton moving into his own room, discovering the other creatures there at the hill.

He’d been so fine, so noble, going down on one knee before their leader. Learning the ins and outs of this

world from Zeb's hurried, half-distracted explanations.

Zebulon, third spear carrier on the left, was not a mate for that fine young man.

His chest hurt, and his throat, and his eyes burned. He stayed under the water until that went away, and he was worn from letting it out.

When he got back out, Lady Cory was sitting on the bed, looking exhausted but interested as she spoke to Colton, who was sitting across from her on a room chair.

“So he crashed through a guard rail!” she said, her voice holding the thrill of someone asking about a fight at school. “That’s sick.” She looked up at Zeb, who stood with a towel around his waist, feeling stupid. “He’s telling me about your mad-ass driving skills—I’m totally impressed!”

Zeb flushed, feeling unworthy. “It’s amazing what you can do with the right motivation,” he mumbled.

“Right?” She grinned at both of them. “Did you see Bracken fly? I mean, we’ve been practicing in the last couple of days, but still, not his favorite, right? He wobbles—but dudes, you should have seen us at the thing, with the place? Bracken was badass.”

“The thing with the place?” Zeb asked, winking at her over his shoulder. He was rooting around the drawers to see if he could find some sweats or something.

“Well, you missed a lot while you were gone.” She grew quiet then. “We’re sorry about Ritchie. I know you guys weren’t close, but it’s hard to lose someone. And he was your friend.”

Zeb paused, boxers and pajama bottoms that had just magically appeared in his drawers held in hand. “Thank you,” he said, moved. “I liked him. We could have been brothers with some time.”

“Well, five hours in a car will do that,” she said back seriously, and he could have kissed her just for understanding. Then she turned back to Colton. “Now, Green usually likes to talk to all the new recruits—but he’s sort of got his hands busy tonight. Do you think you can wait until tomorrow?”

Colton nodded unhappily. “Do I have to sleep with him?” he asked baldly, and Zeb wanted to bang his head against the dresser.

She regarded him with the sober attention of a judge. “Not have to—and it’s not really ‘sleeping’ or ‘sex’.” A wicked grin appeared. “I mean, yeah, sometimes it is. But sometimes it’s just talking, in private, to someone who won’t judge you for the thing in your heart that you fear the most. So don’t worry about it. If it’s sex, it’s sex. If it’s not it’s still time with Green—and that’s important.” She grimaced. “You are really lucky, you know? I mean, Zeb might not have told you, but usually bites don’t work like that—especially not when you’re so close to death. You must have been really damned strong—but more than that.”

“More?” Zeb asked, surprised.

“Oh yes.” She nodded and wrapped her arms around her knees. She was wearing stretchy shorts and a ginormous white T-shirt over them—Zeb had seen her dress for a formal audience and look stunning, but here, in their

temporary room, she looked very domestic. A plain young woman with freckles and thick curly hair and a bold nose.

Her power was almost more terrifying like this.

“See,” she said, talking to both of them earnestly. “What you have to understand is that it doesn’t always work—not the were-creature bite, not the vampire bite. I mean, it works mostly here because Adrian chose a lot of you, and if he didn’t, his people did. And he just sort of knew, right? Who would fit in? Who would welcome the transition? But some of our people—like Jack? Teague’s mate? He’s such a stubborn asshole, Teague almost couldn’t keep him alive long enough to meet with Green, so he could accept the change in his life. And Charlie—Charlie was dying of cancer. He got the bite, but he was so weak Whim had to invoke the power of the Goddess to change him.” She half-smiled. “It was pretty awesome, actually—I mean, that’s what everybody says. They wouldn’t let me go.”

That last thing was spoken so wistfully, Zeb had no choice but to accept that there were some parts of being Queen that he wouldn’t want a damned thing to do with.

“So why do you think it worked with me?” Colton asked her—but respectfully, as though he understood how much she would have loved to have been involved in everybody’s life.

“Oh! Because Zeb was already half in love with you,” she said, and Zeb sucked in a breath.

“We’d only just met,” he said, not having anywhere good to look. Colton was staring at him, hunger in his eyes. The bedspread and wall hangings were damned bright.

And Lady Cory looked so surprised.

“You didn’t know?” she asked. “Neither of you?”

Colton was glaring at him now—Zeb could feel it. “He keeps trying to tell me that I’ll get here and it’ll be some sort of porn-ucopia and I won’t want him anymore.”

Cory snorted—an unladylike sound. “Bullshit. Zeb, look at me!”

He did, and her eyes were incredibly, sincerely, velvet green/brown.

“Are you paying attention?”

He nodded.

“Good. Because you couldn’t have saved his life if you hadn’t cared for him. And if by some miracle he’d lived, he would have ripped you to shreds after his first change—especially because it didn’t happen supervised, or during a full moon. Even the way he changed was Goddess-given. Zeb, you must have fallen in love with him at first sight. Because your heart—the power of your heart alone—is the only reason he’s here.”

Zeb couldn’t look at her anymore, but the only place he could look was into Colton’s wet, limpid eyes. “Your voice,” he said weakly, exposed—literally, naked. “I was hiding under that porch, and I wished *everything* for you. I was rooting for you to get laid until I realized he was a douchebag, and then—God, Colton. I just wanted more.”

Colton nodded.

“I’m nothing special,” Colton said quietly. “I’m a small-town guy with a narrow mind. But you saved me from all

that. Why won't you let me save you?"

Zeb blinked. "From what?" But he felt it—the yawning void of nothing that he had been. The quiet despair of being the third spear carrier on the left.

"From being invisible to yourself," Colton said, standing.

Lady Cory popped off the bed and padded out, shutting the door quietly behind her, and Colton approached and stroked the side of his face with gentle fingertips.

"I'm going to shower," he said softly. "I'm going to take about a minute and a half. Eat the leftovers—you're going to need your strength."

Zeb just gaped at him, and Colton turned toward the bathroom. He paused at the doorway. "Don't bother putting on your pajamas," he warned.

Zeb let them fall into the drawer, and headed for the tray which sat on the end table. He pulled back the covers and sat down thoughtfully, towel still wrapped around his waist, and managed a couple of bites of meat before Colton came back into the room—damp and smelling like body wash—and naked.

Zeb dropped the fork with a clatter. "Uh—"

"Are you ready for this?" Colton asked. He stood in front of Zeb, so Zeb was eye level with his crotch, and he managed a sarcastic eyebrow-lift as he looked up at Colton's face.

"Very funny," Colton told him, dropping to a crouch. He leaned forward and kissed him, a kiss devoid of desperation and fear for their lives—but still very much

full of the passion that had driven them for the past days.

Zeb opened for him, holding nothing back. Why should he? His queen and leader had already laid his secrets bare. Colton knew—had known from the very beginning, that Zeb was his for the taking.

Colton pressed him back into the bed, kissing relentlessly, hands moving over Zeb's body with sure possession.

Zeb was his—all his. They'd done this dance, and Zeb had conceded. The only difference was that Colton knew any objection he'd made had been pretense and bullshit anyway and now they both knew it.

Colton covered Zeb's body with his own, their skin soft and silky together, as Colton sucked on his neck and jaw hard enough to leave love bites. Zeb bucked at the zing of pain, and Colton bit his neck harder.

"No more hiding," he growled into Zeb's ear. "Whose are you?"

"Yours," Zeb breathed willingly.

"Who wants you?"

"You do."

"Who loves me?"

Three remarkable days. Three days that changed his life more profoundly than the bite that pulled him into this world, this amazing world that he would never leave.

"I do."

"I love you too," Colton growled.

He shoved two fingers into Zeb's mouth and Zeb sucked. Colton pulled them out and Zeb gasped, "Lube in the drawer."

Colton paused to grin, the grin making him boyish and young. "Lube would be good," he said, lowering his hand to tease Zeb's entrance anyway. Zeb flailed for the drawer as Colton penetrated one finger and rubbed, the harsh friction making him crazy stupid needy.

"Here," he gasped as Colton penetrated with the other finger. "He—eeerrrr..."

Ah! the mix of pain and pleasure—almost... almost...then Colton fumbled with the lube bottle, and the sudden cooling of slick on Zeb's sphincter was an arousal in itself.

Colton laughed softly and kept stretching him, fingers scissoring as Zeb spread his thighs in abandon.

He would give himself to the boy—this man—again and again and again. And he wouldn't feel used, or used up. He would feel rebuilt and reborn, every time Colton took him.

Colton poised his erection at the slicked, stretched entrance of Zeb's body, and Zeb moaned.

"Yes."

"I belong here," Colton told him, thrusting in.

He did—he belonged in Zeb's body just as surely as they both belonged in Green's Hill.

"Yes..." Zeb breathed again, and as Colton began his stroke, rocking back and forth. "Yes—Goddess, Colton,

all of me. Take all of me!”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Colton’s flurry of thrusts left Zeb breathless and pleading, aching for climax, cock throbbing for release.

And repossession.

Forever and ever again and again.

Colton’s hand on him, gripping him into orgasm was almost anti-climactic next to the revelation that Zeb was already bonded. This man’s every touch was magic on his skin, on his soul. He was the most important thing in Colton’s life, and Colton wanted it that way.

Colton wanted him.

Zebulon’s deep throated groan of come resonated through his entire body. Colton must have felt it, because he gave his own cry of climax, and fell into Zeb’s arms, rutting still, even as Zeb wrapped his arms and legs around Colton’s body.

“You love me,” Colton panted, as though Zeb’s soul hadn’t been bared for him just moments ago.

“I love you,” he confessed.

“I love you back,” Colton told him, an almost shy smile pulling at his mouth.

“Good.”

Colton kissed him then, with such incredible sweetness he wanted to cry.

And then he wanted to do it again.

Colton was a new werewolf after all.

* * *

Cory sat in the common room, knitting, and Green huffed in, looking miffed.

“Are they still at it?” she asked, amused.

“It’s been hours!” he complained good-naturedly. “Usually new recruits are, you know, sort of anxious to meet me, right?”

Cory laughed softly, and Green regarded her, knowing his expression was fond and not caring.

“Are we feeling slighted, oh fearless leader?” she asked, voice all sweetness and sarcasm.

He rolled his eyes. “I have things to do this morning, you know. I was sort of hoping to make sure the poor kid isn’t going to hate it here.”

“Well, judging by the great schmoopy eye-fucking they were giving each other last night when I went in to visit, I think he’s going to be okay.”

Green rolled his eyes. “I still have to—”

“I know.” She set her knitting down and stood, rubbing her hands up and down his arms. Her touch sent a wave of yearning right to the pit of his groin. Yes, he spent much of his day serving his people—but Cory, always Cory, was so much different than that. “I’ll tell you what. You let them have round four or five or twelve or whatever, and you and me...”

She raised her eyebrows and smiled prettily.

He reached under her bottom and pulled her up until she was straddling his waist. “We make hay while we have a quiet house, right?”

“Every chance we get.”

Enemies were out there and allies were uncertain. Their children were, even now, growing in her body, making her every breath more of a burden.

But love and lovemaking were the fire in their blood that reminded them that they were alive, and that even the worst that could happen was not a tragedy if love had been made when the Goddess gave them means.

Her mouth opened for his, and he carried her, kissing and moaning, hands roaming his chest and back, into his room.

He closed the door behind him and made sure it was locked for good measure. Lovemaking was sacred in Green’s house, and he was going to make love to his beloved.

It was his most heartfelt prayer for the safety of all he watched over.

About *Scorched Haven*:

This story is a short side trip in the Little Goddess world. If you enjoyed this trip to Green's Hill, be sure to pick up the other stories in this series starting with [Vulnerable](#), found at Amazon and other fine retailers on the web.

About Amy Lane:

Rainbow Award Winner, Indie-Fab Winner, and RITA award nominee Amy Lane writes urban fantasy, contemporary gay romance, and mystery/suspense. She lives in a crumbling crapmansion in California with her Mate, her kids, and her furbabies, and writes to quiet the voices in her head.

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