

ZENINA MASTERS

A promotional image for 'ZENINA MASTERS' featuring a muscular man's torso in the foreground and a sloth and a porcupine in a savanna background. The man is shirtless, wearing a necklace, and has a very defined physique. The background shows a sloth and a porcupine in a grassy, rocky landscape under a bright, hazy sky.

LITTLE PRICK

A porcupine filled with desperation seeks help from her fairy godmother and ends up at the Crossroads for a makeover and a chance at love.

Pansy is desperate. She is the only porcupine in a family of wolves, and her body is bound tightly to the local area with wild magic. All in all, she isn't prime dating material.

When her fae godmother sends her to the Crossroads and makes special arrangements for her, she wasn't sure what to expect, but a full-on Cinderella-style makeover wasn't it.

Arriving at the Crossroads is a problem, the wild magic in her system literally blew the roof off the Meditation Centre and that is only the beginning of Pansy's problems.

Axander headed to the Crossroads when he couldn't find the woman for him back at home, but travelling to the shifters' dating dimension, he finds that the woman he wanted was in front of him the whole time. She was just protected by scent-masking engine oil and an entire pack of wolves.

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Little Prick

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Little Prick
Shifting Crossroads Book Nine

By

Zenina Masters

Chapter One

Pansy Medeela swallowed heavily as she watched the man of her dreams approach. Yes, she had had a crush on him for the last five years, but she knew that, to him, she was simply a mechanic.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barkley.” She hadn’t had time to clean up, so she stood there in her boiler suit and grease smudges.

“Afternoon, Prix. Is she ready yet?” He referred to his 1960 Oldsmobile 98.

“She’s ready, but you have to

take better care of her. She is not designed for country roads. I pulled two pounds of gravel from her undercarriage.” Pansy handed him the bill and watched him sign for the repairs before giving him his keys. The repairs would be put on his account and settled at the end of the month.

“Well, I am glad that I got this out of the way. I am heading to the Crossroads at the end of the month. Hopefully, I will find the woman for me.”

He winked at her and left her standing behind the counter, her hopes and dreams crushed in his

wake.

Pansy was reeling. She didn't know what to do. Since she had first found him and his classic car by the side of the road, she had had a crush on Alexander Barkley, honey badger.

"Who was that, Prickles?" Her brother Thomas came up beside her.

"Barkley. He retrieved his Olds."

"Right. You did great work on that. She looks like new."

"She deserves better than a self-centred jackass like him. Excuse me." She left her stunned brother and retreated to the break room

where two more of her relatives were sitting and having coffee.

Her father and second youngest brother blinked at her arrival and got to their feet.

She snarled at them and slammed out the back door of the shop, heading for the woods.

Pansy climbed a tree and sat there, trying to figure out what to do next. Her life revolved around her family and fixing cars. She loved the cars, but she wanted more from life than simply fixing other people's toys.

Andrew came and stood at the foot of the tree. "What is wrong,

Pansy?”

He was the only one of her brothers not to call her Prickles or Little Prick. It was hard being not only the only girl in a family of men, but also the only porcupine in a family of wolves. She was a random, and it made her life hell when she tried to get outside her own social circle. No one wanted to mess with the pack.

“I am stuck, Andrew.”

He blinked. “In the tree?”

She laughed. “No. In my life. Even Barkley is heading off to the Crossroads and I am stuck fixing car after car and being surrounded by

fangs and tails. I want a life. I want a family, babies, a chance to have a man that doesn't hump the couch in his shifted form."

He chortled. "Yeesh, do it once and you are branded for life."

Pansy slithered out of the tree. "I just want more, and I need to go where no one knows me or you or anyone in the family."

"The Crossroads is expensive, Pansy. We can't afford it."

"I know. I am thinking of moving." She didn't mention that *she* could probably afford it. It wasn't really a matter of money; it was a matter of the pack.

His shock was visible. "Leave? You would leave?"

"I think I have to. I am not a member of the pack. I am not one of you even though I know you love me. I do not doubt that I have a wonderful and protective family, Andrew, but how can I find a mate if I can't get out of that protective circle?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and his forehead against hers, snuffling gently for comfort. "Next week is your party. Aunty Keelie will be there, and she might have some ideas."

Pansy perked up. Her

godmother's visits were always wonderful, even if the presence of a fairy set her father's teeth on edge. Pansy was the only woman she knew with an actual fairy godmother.

"Did Dad actually let her have the right date and time this time?" She smiled.

"Yup. He gave the invitations to Dougal, and Doug shuffled them before putting them back into their envelopes. No fairy weed, hexes or crushed carob this time."

Pansy sighed in relief. The drama surrounding her birthday parties was legendary. Her father moved

location, gave Keelie the wrong times and even went so far as to bribe transporters to hide the event. Somehow, her godmother always managed to find her and give her her gift.

When she was young, she was given jewellery that she thought was pretty. Now that she was an adult, she knew that she had enough money in gems to buy a large chunk of the countryside. When she turned fifteen, the gifts had become more practical, classic cars and deeds to property near her father's home. Now that she was turning twenty-five, she had no

idea what the gift would be, but she knew that her godmother would be happy to see her. She always was.

“Come on, Jarrod is making dinner and it isn’t spaghetti.”

Pansy grinned. “Oh good. Pot roast!”

Andrew tucked her under his arm and steered her through the woods, down the path from the garage to their home and into the pack house.

Pansy went up her private staircase and into her rooms, taking a quick shower before dinner. Her situation in the pack house had been a matter of concern. While she

was family, she was not pack. It was a bit of a technicality headache, but she, her six brothers and her father had managed to get the rules down and all visitors to the pack house were educated within a few hours. Anyone who didn't like it was free to give his apologies to the alpha or to face Pansy herself in combat. Most simply minded their manners.

Dressed in a long-sleeved, button-down, oxford-cloth shirt, she slipped on her jeans and a pair of ballet flats.

She headed back downstairs and sat at the kitchen counter, watching

Jarrood try to navigate his way through the second of the two meals that he could cook with dexterity. "It smells good, Jarrod."

"Thanks, Prix. You are home early."

"I had a slight emotional moment at work, so Andrew found me and brought me home."

"You still have a smudge on your nose."

She cursed and grabbed a napkin, using the toaster as her mirror as she removed the bit of grease that she had missed in the shower. "How is that?"

He glanced at her and grinned.

His own face was decorated with splashes of mashed potatoes and a smear of gravy.

“You look edible, Jarrod.”

“I promise to clean up before dinner. Roger has been looking a little peckish lately. Don’t want to deal with him chewing on my face.” Jarrod laughed.

Jarrod was the brother closest to her in age. Andrew and Jake were next then Dougal, Thomas and the eldest was Roger. They were all handsome, as most shifters were, but all still single. Some days, Pansy thought they were waiting for her to get hitched so that they were

free to find female wolves and live happily ever after with piles of puppies, but she was holding them back.

She didn't care if they wanted to mate with turtles; she just wanted them to find someone, anyone to make them happy.

Jarrood hauled the enormous pan full of beef, vegetables and potatoes out of the oven, and he settled it on the sideboard.

"Do you want some help, Jarrod?"

"Nope. I have got this." He started to move quickly, setting places at the table, covering the

meat with foil and thickening the juices into a heady gravy.

She watched him and finally whispered, "The Chilean merlot."

He blinked and jerked toward the wine rack as if pulled. He gave her a stage whisper, "Thank you."

Wine in the gravy had started as an accident when their mother cooked and had become a tradition. Pansy didn't remember her mother, but she knew every iota of information and every story and anecdote that her family would mention. Tales of their mother were carefully hoarded in her mind.

When dinner was ready and her

brothers and father were freshly scrubbed, Jarrod rang the bell and the alpha took his seat at the head of the table.

Pansy took her seat and every other brother sat on one side of the table or the other.

The visiting beta took a seat next to Pansy and scowled at being put so low in the pack order. She winked at him, and she reached behind her neck, pulling out two quills.

When her father took the first bite, she threw both quills, picking her meat and her chosen potato a moment before Roger's hand made

it to her serving. “Too slow, brother.”

He sighed, their father smirked and the beta looked green as the platter came past him, and she picked her chosen piece, laying her quill next to her plate. She repeated the procedure with the potato but settled for the spoon with the vegetables.

Darryl Rickart cleared his throat. “You don’t use the spikes for the vegetables?”

She snickered and finished prepping her plate. “Of course not. I am saving both of them for dessert.”

Her family started to laugh, she tucked in and dinner in the Medeela house began.

Chapter Two

The next ten days went by normally. Pansy spent every weekday at the garage, and on the weekends, she managed her holdings. She had four of her six homes rented, one in renovation and one open. It happened to be the one bordering on the Barkleys' home.

When she woke up on the morning of her birthday, she could feel a tingle in the air. There was only one thing in her life that made her feel like that. "Aunt Keelie?"

The air in the corner of her room thickened and her godmother sat in the same rocking chair that her mother had held her in twenty-five years earlier. “Morning, my brightest Pansy. How are you this bright and shining day?”

The fae tended to talk like they were a cross between Ren Faire employees and ancient English nobility.

Pansy squealed and lunged into her godmother’s arms. Keelie Fleur Montrose-Secuada hugged her tight. “I can’t believe you are here so early.”

“I wanted to thwart your father’s

attempts to dodge me this year. I came at dawn instead of twilight. How sneaky was that?"

"Exceedingly sneaky, Auntie." She was sitting on her aunt's lap and her heart was lighter than it had been in ages. The fae had that effect.

"Come on, this town has to have a diner or something. I want to take you out to breakfast." Keelie tugged Pansy up and got to her feet.

Her pointed ears were pierced several times, and at six foot seven, she was the tallest female that Pansy had ever met. Her clothing

was the height of fashion or at least supernatural fashion. Her long velvet coat buttoned tightly over the blouse that covered the corset that she was never without. The tight trousers snugged into tighter boots. She was a glorious spectacle with her riot of red curls and leaf-green eyes; the clothing just capped it.

“I can smell the boys making me breakfast. We can walk out through the woods and go for lunch later.” Pansy’s gaze beseeched her to understand.

“Of course, child. I call a piece of toast with jam.” She grinned and

shooed Pansy back to bed. "They are coming up the stairs."

Keelie sat next to her on the bed, her legs extended almost to the footboard. She tucked Pansy back in, and together, they greeted her siblings and father as breakfast was served.

"Hello, Karl. Isn't it amazing that she is twenty-five today?" Keelie's eyes were sparkling with mischief.

"Keelie. I wasn't expecting you this soon."

"Oh, were you planning on having a talk with her?"

Karl Medeela, alpha of the Northfur pack, flexed his features

until he could provide a happy smile to Pansy. He came to her side and kissed her cheek. "Happy birthday, Prix. Your *fairy godmother* will give you some information that you have been missing. Have a good day. I will see you at dinner." He kissed her other cheek and ruffled her hair.

That just left her six brothers, and they all gathered around and greeted Keelie, asking her if she had brought them any presents.

Pansy put jam on a slice of toast and handed it over to her auntie before diving into a selection of her favourites.

Andrew asked, "So, Aunty Keelie, why are you here so early?"

The entire collection of Medeela siblings was grinning.

Keelie snorted. "I can come with the dawn or with twilight. This year, I smartened up and picked dawn."

Andrew chuckled and Dougal smirked, the others laughed quietly. "I pencilled that idea onto the invitation."

"Thanks, Dougal. It was helpful. Catching Pansy's birthday is the highlight of my year."

Pansy ate her eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, toast, croissant and

muffin with determination. They made it, and she was going to eat it. With the wolves, everything started with protein.

When her tray was empty, she was sipping at a twelve-ounce cup of coffee and contemplating sliding down the stairs to leave the house for a walk.

“I can’t believe you finished that, little blossom.” Keelie was rummaging through Pansy’s clothing.

“I can’t believe it either, but they made it for me, and I appreciate it. Was there a candle on that muffin?” She was suddenly

worried in her food-filled stupor.

“No, just the blueberries, cranberries and what looked like half a banana.”

Her aunt pulled out some clothes and frowned. “Don’t you have anything pretty?”

Pansy shook her head. “Only the jewellery you have given me. Nothing else lasts beyond a day.”

“That is sad. Now, what do you truly want with all your heart for your birthday?”

“A place, a life of my own.” The words came from her soul.

“Good. I am very glad to hear it. That is what you are getting, Pansy.

Now, today is the day you learn about your mother and how exactly I came to be your godmother. Have a shower and I will hopefully have found something suitable.”

Pansy got out of bed with a groan and paused before she entered her private bathroom. “Have I expressed how happy I am that you are here, Auntie?”

“I can feel it, little flower. Now, let’s start your birthday properly.”

Pansy showered and tiptoed out wrapped in a towel. She wasn’t holding out much hope of Keelie finding something acceptable.

Surprise was the best way of

describing what she was feeling as she walked into her bedroom. Keelie was sitting at her dressing table, waving one finger in the air and changing a plain oxford-cloth shirt into a soft and pretty blouse and a set of jeans into a soft skirt of dark faux suede.

“That is...I didn't know that you could do that.”

Her aunt laughed. “There is a lot of wild magic in this area. It is very easy to shape and twist to my own purposes.”

“Oh, I didn't know that.”

“Yes, I was in the area doing a magical census when I met your

mother. She had just married Karl, and they were settling into being alphas. I had to get their agreement for me to be in their territory, and Bethanne was friendly and willing to show me the caches of power all around the area. We became friends at that moment.”

As she spoke, she finished the clothes, and they floated to rest at the foot of Pansy’s bed. “I will wait downstairs.”

Pansy wrinkled her nose. As a shifter, she wasn’t too worried about clothing, but Keelie must have different sensibilities.

A bra, panties and the new

clothing later, she sat at the edge of her bed and pulled on boots that would keep her from running afoul of any poisoned ivy in the area.

It was a special day, so she took out her mother's shawl and put it around her shoulders. Her hair was in a thick braid down her back, and when she looked at herself in the mirror, she had to blink at how pretty she looked. With a whimsical smile, she put on a set of dangling pearl earrings, and after a little bit of work, she managed to slip them through the holes in her ears. It had been a while since she had snuck out to get her ears pierced.

She wiped off the little bit of blood and turned her head from side to side. Aside from the red irritation of her lobes, the pearl earrings looked pretty. They swung slightly as she moved.

With a skip in her step, she headed down the stairs.

It was a Sunday, so there was no activity at the shop, but the house was empty as all the men in the house were out doing something else.

Keelie was sitting in the family room, flipping through the family albums. "She was lovely and she had so much life in her that she

could have lived.”

“If I hadn’t taken it.”

Keelie jerked. “Oh, Pansy, it wasn’t you. She found out she had cancer two days after she found out she was pregnant with the daughter she had always wanted.”

Pansy swallowed the lump of emotion. “She could have lasted longer if she wasn’t carrying me.”

Keelie came to her and lifted her chin with her hand. “Never doubt for a moment that she fought the entire time. That is why your father doesn’t want me here. I was part of that fight, and we lost. He can’t forgive me for the loss.”

Pansy took her aunt's hand. "Can you tell me the whole story?"

"Of course. It is quite the tale, so I need to pace. Sit down and I will explain it. All of it."

Pansy took a seat in one of the heavy leather chairs that easily held her brothers but made her feel like she was a small child.

Keelie started to pace, and as she paced, she started to speak.

"Bethanne always wanted a little girl. With every pregnancy, she hoped and prayed for a girl, but she had boy after boy. I visited as often as I could, but it wasn't as much as I should have or I might have

noticed the illness earlier. Then, she got the news. She was pregnant with a girl. I came to visit that weekend, but the joy had been marred by finding out that she also had breast cancer.

“Karl was devastated and told her to abort the pregnancy, but Bethanne put her alpha female foot down and refused. She asked me for help, and I did research as fast as I could. She could get treatment and have the baby at the same time if I helped protect the baby.

“I found the spell and asked her if she was ready. Bethanne held my hand, and I called the wild magic to

protect you. There was a small matter of my having to be named your godparent that was an easy decision for Bethanne.” Keelie smiled.

“You used wild magic to protect me?”

“I used it to change you into something that could withstand the chemo. The magic chose what it turned you into. Your father never forgave me for that one as well.” Keelie sighed and returned to pacing.

“You were normal when you were born. Your mother named you after my suggestion and Karl was

so delighted that she and her baby had survived the treatment, he was happy to see me. Then, we found out that the medical centre had given her a placebo because of the pregnancy. They refused to damage the child, and we had done all of that preparation for nothing. The cancer had advanced to a stage where all options had been taken from her. She had fought for you, and it amounted to shadow boxing.”

Pansy inhaled sharply.

“The medical centre settled out of court. There is a huge settlement waiting for you today, as well as

the one that bought this house and the surrounding territory for the pack. It increased the territory by several hundred acres.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Your father didn’t want you to know. It would have been hard as you grew up and depressing when you became a woman. Now, do you know how your mother’s mother passed?”

“No.”

“Breast cancer, as did your great grandmother and many of your great aunts. The change that you underwent altered you. You are the first woman in your family who

isn't in immediate danger of death via your own body. It is hard for your father to deal with. He thought he was getting a wolf cub."

"When did I first show the change?"

"Ah, that was a good day. Your mother was holding you to her breast and your snuffling turned to snorting. She peeled back the blanket and there you were, spikes and all. She laughed so hard, I think she peed a little." Keelie paused and stood by the window. She looked over her shoulder. "Your father was shocked. He knew you were his child; there was no doubt.

There had even been blood tests after your birth just to check on your health. There was a definite match to the Medeela bloodline.”

“My mom was amused?”

“She thought wolves having to raise a porcupine was hilarious. You are the one creature that they would not screw with, and therefore, you had a chance to make your own place in the family. You don’t fall within pack protocols, but they can’t intimidate you, so you have a solid family. Bethanne figured out all the rules before she died and wrote them down for Karl. Every time he

pretended to lose the list, I materialized another one. It drove him nuts.”

“Were you here more often when she was sick?”

“I was. I was with her every day.” Keelie swallowed. “I helped her with you while she was getting near the end. I even wear the scars that you left on me. You were a little nibbly.”

“What happened after she died?”

“Her will kicked in, and the fae take being a godparent very seriously. Your father wanted me to leave and not return, but my position meant you would see me

each and every birthday.”

“Yikes. Did he really try and keep you away from me?”

“Yes, but he couldn’t. Your mother had made sure of it. I am bound to this land.”

That was news to Pansy. “What?”

“I am bound to the magic of this land. That means you. The wild magic that protects you binds us together, and today is a very special day.”

Pansy blinked. “What is it aside from my birthday?”

“Today, you go from being a member of your father’s family, to being a member of mine. He only

had you for the first twenty-five years.”

Pansy was stunned.

Keelie grinned, “You might be getting the hint, but when your mother made the agreement, she gave you to me beginning with your twenty-fifth year. She knew your father would keep you close. I am here today to send you to the shifter’s Crossroads. I have a transporter meeting us at midnight. Shall we get started on that walk?”

Blinking as she absorbed the information that she had not been the direct cause of her mother’s death, Pansy took Keelie’s hand

and went for a walk. What else was she going to do?

Chapter Three

Pansy didn't know what to think. She had to ask, "So, Mom knew that she would have a better-than-average chance of dying of breast cancer."

"She did. It was the topic of one of our first conversations, and she hadn't even had the eldest of your brothers yet."

"When Dad told me, I did research and had myself tested. I don't have the cancer marker that my mother and her sisters had. I always wondered why that was. It

would be one thing if I was adopted, but my father assured me that I was my mother's blood, and so, it was a mystery that I couldn't solve."

"Yeah, Karl was not pleased when it became obvious that you were a porcupine. He demanded to know how it was possible, so Bethanne left it to me to explain. She wasn't up for the confrontation, so I faced him down, and he banished me from his territory the moment that Bethanne was gone. It was only on your birthday that I would be allowed back and only because of the

contract with your mother.”

“So, I am yours now?” Pansy thought that the idea of being adopted at age twenty-five was amusing.

“You are. If you were more amenable, I would set you up with a fae, but I think your father would explode, and you are attached to this area, so the fae would have to move here. It would be complicated.”

Pansy snorted. “You think? You mean that there are fae out there who would mate with me?”

“With your power signature? Oh my, yes, there would be a line

around the block.” Keelie grinned.

“Is that what the fae are after?”

“We are attracted to magic. It sings in our blood and hums in our brains. Power is literally an aphrodisiac for us.”

“Do you have a family?”

“You are my family, Pansy.” Keelie hugged her with one arm.

“I mean aside from me. A fae family.” Pansy smiled.

“I have parents and one sibling. My brother is far too elevated to associate with shifters.”

That brought up an interesting topic. “Is there much of a class system around the fae, even

today?”

The bluster of laughter spilled out of Keelie. “You could say that. The fae don’t know where shifters come from, and they don’t care. They treat you like a spontaneous rash in the magical community. Humans are tolerated because they can hold tremendous power, and it doesn’t restrict itself to bloodlines. You never know when a new wave of power will come from an unexpected source.”

“So, you give the humans respect?”

“Well, the fae generally admire humans. They are lovely and so full

of energy.”

“So, what is their problem with shifters?”

The leaves were crunching under their feet and the woods were silent. Pansy waited while Keelie formulated her answer.

“Shifters can smell us, so from the moment the fae tried to mix with humanity, your people were giving us away. It created an animosity that still remains to this day.”

“I see.”

“Probably not, but it is a problem most of the time when we run into each other in public settings. My

brother works with the state department, and he dreads running into shifters when he is at a function.”

“Why?”

“You may not know this but you tend to sniff the air when there is a fae in the area. It is rather obvious.”

Pansy laughed. “If you want to know why, it is because you smell like wind, leaves and sunlight. Those are all scents that catch our attention.”

“I hadn’t heard that particular description before.” Her aunt looked around her, and the wind came out to play with her locks.

Pansy was content simply to walk for a while in the very familiar woods.

Keelie turned their path to the mound at the edge of the property. "This is where I first met your mother. Right here."

Pansy smiled. "Really?"

"Yes. She was confronting me about being on her territory. She knew what I was, and I have to admit that I was a little taken aback by her flashing fang at me."

Pansy was enjoying the story, and she took a seat on a fallen log.

Keelie sat on a nearby rock.

"What did you do?"

“I inclined my head politely, begged her indulgence and explained that I was tracking magical hot spots. We happened to be standing in one.”

“Why do you look for those spots?”

“Why do people seek water tables? We look for the magic, because with the human population shifting and moving into the wild spaces, the natural magic is harder to find. Looking for the packs of shifters is usually a good clue that there is a magic well in the area. Your folk don't even know that it is here, but you gather

around it.”

Pansy perked up and closed her eyes. She could feel the energy that Keelie was talking about. “It feels like wind and mint if that makes any sense.”

“It is the same scent that you have, Pansy. You are part shifter and part pure magic. You are tied to me and tied to this land. It is the reason that I have been giving you properties in this area. You need never leave the home that you are part of.”

Pansy frowned. “Do you think I can find a man who will come back here with me and face down my

family?"

"The pack won't have a choice. You are going, and you will find a mate of your own who will accept you for what you are, or so I have been told." Keelie blinked with a wry grin.

"You don't know?"

"No fae allowed at the shifter's Crossroads. This is for you alone. I mean, it would be nice if some of the half-breeds had a similar place to go, but we would have to create it for them, and I don't see any fae willing to part with that much magic."

"How did the Crossroads get

built?"

"A few very old and very powerful shifters created it so that their offspring could meet in a safe environment. Part of the design was to reduce inbreeding in areas that did not have a lot of movement socially. You will see it when you arrive, and perhaps, you can explain it to me when you return."

"But what is it?" Pansy knew that there was something Keelie wasn't telling her.

Keelie looked around and then leaned forward. "It is a mobile bubble dimension that floats around, and the human mages

known as the transporters can lock onto it at certain times when it is in their vicinity. Only the Guild Master can make the connection whenever she wishes it.”

“So, where is my transporter going to appear from?”

“Oh, she will be here at midnight. Don’t worry about anything. You can obtain all you need at the Crossroads. Consider it an all-inclusive vacation resort where the men are all looking for mates instead of just trying to get laid. It makes for a stimulating, if tense, atmosphere.”

Pansy sat in shock. “Tonight? I

am going tonight?"

"There is no time like the present, and this will be a true birthday gift –the chance at a new life with someone who doesn't set you aside in your own house. Don't tell me I am wrong. I have noticed it every year I have visited you."

She shook her head. "It is pack protocol. We did the best within the rules of the pack regulation. I live with my family, we eat together...I am just not allowed to do any chores in the pack house. I do my own laundry and housekeeping."

Her aunt sighed. "Well, that is

less horrible than what I had imagined.”

“I am not a Cinderella figure. I am just a woman who doesn’t quite match her family. Of course, playing touch football when we were kids was hilarious. The amount of scars my brothers are wearing due to grabbing me too tight are highly amusing. I couldn’t actually control my shift until I was thirteen or so.”

Keelie sighed and leaned forward. “Now, why don’t you have any girly clothing?”

“I don’t go anywhere that requires it. I work, I go home and I

read. And then, I do it all over again. Weekends are spent with family and running around in the woods. I like my life, but I am tired of the alone parts. So, I never have need of fancy clothing.”

She bought and hoarded fashion magazines but that was not what Keelie had asked her.

“I see. Do you mind if I send instructions along to the store? You are going to need a head-to-toe makeover before you begin.”

The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. “It isn’t necessary.”

“Oh, it is. Your clothing is more suitable for Nascar than for

courting. I am not insulting you, and I know that your clothing has served you well. This is a change in your life and that will necessitate a new uniform.”

Looking at it that way made sense. “Can I get a new wardrobe there?”

“They will provide what you need. If it isn’t there, they will bring it in.” Keelie smiled.

“How do you know all about the Crossroads?”

Her aunt sighed, “When your mother got sick, she gave me all the contact information she could lay her hands on. It has taken me the

last five years to get it all together, but I am prepared for the send-off that you truly deserve.”

Keelie got to her feet. “So, are you ready for lunch or is that breakfast still backed up to your collarbone?”

“I am on the way to hungry, Aunty. Never underestimate a shifter’s appetite.” Pansy stood up. “I do have to ask one thing that I have always wondered.”

“Please. Today is not a day for secrets.”

“Who the heck named me? Pansy doesn’t match the rest of the family names.”

Keelie's mirth rang through the forest and brought birds to seek the source of the musical sound. When she sobered, she put her arm around Pansy's shoulders. "Your mother lost a bet."

Shock turned into amusement and a creeping smile made itself at home on her lips. Her name had a story she hadn't suspected. This day was looking up.

Chapter Four

Everyone in the diner froze in place when Pansy and her aunt entered. Pansy waved a cheerful hello to Sandra and picked her favourite booth near the window.

After the heavy protein of breakfast, she ordered chili fries and a salad, watching Keelie's puzzled frown as she looked over the menu.

Pansy kept her mouth shut and didn't offer any suggestion and let Keelie pick her own salad and cheeseburger with an iced tea.

Sitting and waiting, Keelie kept a benign smile on her features. "I am guessing that you still don't get many fae in this area."

"Not really, no. I think I have only seen one around here before. It was about seven or eight years ago."

Keelie's face clouded over. "Was it a male?"

"Yes. He was really pretty. Dad and he ran into each other at the garage, and after the first glimpse of him, he disappeared. We merely assumed that he left."

She sighed. "He did leave. He didn't say where he had been, but

he was a mess when he returned to his home.”

“Who was it?”

“The fae ambassador. My brother. When I started giving you the properties that I had accumulated, he decided that it was his responsibility to find out what kind of hold your family had over me. The fae don’t willingly part with their properties.”

Remembering the scent of blood on her father’s hands, she winced. “I guess that Dad had a *talk* with him.”

“Well, the scars healed rather messily, so it was a conversation

worth witnessing.” Keelie grinned.

“You were afraid he had come after me?”

“Oh, he did come after you. I am just glad that Karl stepped up.”

Pansy blinked as she realised that her father had defended her. Sure, he kept other werewolves from trying to think she was an easy target, but she had never known that he had taken on a giant fairy and won.

Watching Keelie eat was not something Pansy had ever been treated to before. She handled the food gracefully and not one drop of the burger escaped, which filled

Pansy with envy. She usually looked like she had massacred the darned thing.

“How do you manage to eat so neatly?”

“Long practice, Pansy. I am older than I look.”

Pansy knew when she should keep her mouth shut, and a woman's age was definitely that topic.

They finished lunch with a staring audience, and it struck Pansy that aside from the fact that she had known Keelie all her life, she never changed. They looked like they were the same age but

that was where similarities ended.

“How do you do it?”

“Do what, Pansy?”

“Live every day knowing that you will outlive those around you by decades if not centuries.”

Keelie paused on their way back through the town, and the traffic on the sidewalk ceased movement with her. She sighed, stroked Pansy's hair and urged her off the paving and into the woods.

“I was born knowing that I would outlive humans and shifters alike. We are taught that we do not burn as brightly, but we burn longer. I think of humans as

fireworks—brilliant and I wouldn't miss watching for the world. Shifters are bonfires. You have to be careful, but they are beautiful and deadly all mixed together. The fae of all kinds are slow-burning candles. We light the corners and cast the shadows."

"Very poetic."

Her aunt grinned. "Thank you. It has taken a while to work out suitable comparisons. Fire seems to be the best unit of measure as we all burn out in the end. It just takes some of us longer than others."

Pansy couldn't get that image out of her mind. "When did you meet

your first shifter?"

Keelie stepped lightly over a fallen log on the path. "I worked for a dragon quite a while ago as a housekeeper. She was a good friend and remains so to this day. She was my first shifter."

"An actual dragon?"

"They do exist, you know. Most of the mythical shifters do, somewhere in the world. I have heard whispers of the phoenix, tales of unicorns and, of course, seen the silhouette of a gryphon. You just have to keep your eyes open."

The thought of mythical

creatures had Pansy grinning. "You never did tell me how I was named."

"Ah, that. Well, your mother had six boys already, and she said, *I bet this is another boy*, and I said, *I bet you are wrong*. She said, *If this is a girl, you can name her*. I asked, *What if it is a boy*, she said, *You will have to give him a car on his sixteenth birthday*."

Keelie smirked, "It was confirmed after the first trimester, so I named you after my grandmother. Pansy Adara."

"You knew I was going to be a girl."

“Of course I did. Your mother’s scent changed and her power signature was shifting dramatically. You had to be a girl. Once that was determined, the second part of the plan was put into action, and I grabbed all the information on power bonding to a shifter that I could find. While you were still developing, you were given all the magic that this area could muster and that changed you from wolf to porcupine before you even saw the world.”

“Why were you willing to put that much power into me? I mean, it must have cost you beyond what

the local land gave up.”

“Very perceptive. I do not have children of my own yet, and the opportunity to be godmother to a little girl whose mother was not long for this world was too tempting. I had to take the chance. There might never be another opportunity for me to be involved in a child’s life. It was too good an offer for me.”

“Are children scarce in the circles of the fae?”

They were approaching her home, and Pansy could sense all of her brothers and her father inside its walls.

“They are not common. Our kind is slowly approaching its demise. There are small programs in place to blend us with humans, but there is the old guard who believe that if we are dying, we should do it with pure blood. I say, whatever happens, we should fight it and spread ourselves where we can, even if it is sharing our energies with other species.”

“That is a very forward-thinking attitude.”

“It is not a popular one among the fae. Our half-bloods have been less than what has been hoped for, but the amusing thing is that if our

elders were keeping close track, they would notice that the children of the half-bloods are showing tremendous increases in magic. It is almost as if the power needed time to adjust to being in human form.”

Pansy looked into Keelie’s face and nodded. “I can see how it might need time to adjust. Do you think that my children will have more of the natural magic than I do?”

Keelie blinked. “I hadn’t thought about it. Your children might go with your form, the form of your mate or they could revert to wolves. As for the magic, no one

knows. This sort of thing doesn't happen much. There are no records of it occurring before."

"It must have happened though, or how would you know how to do it?"

Keelie snickered. "I improvised."

Pansy laughed helplessly. "I am glad you have creative impulses, but I am more delighted that it was successful."

Keelie sobered. "I hope you know that I would have kept trying. Nothing would have stopped me from trying to carry out Bethanne's last wish."

Pansy hugged Keelie with one

arm. "I know you would have kept going. I am just glad that it worked and you were able to spend some quality time with my mother before she faded."

"As was I. Now, on to your party. I am sure that your family will throw you an event to remember."

Wrinkling her nose as she opened the door, Pansy said, "They usually do."

Chapter Five

Dinner was a selection of her favourites. Pot roast, spaghetti and a giant bowl of glazed carrots were among the dishes.

Once the meal was over, the cake was sliced and it was time for gifts. Each of her brothers gave her something small, but her father's gift always made her tear up.

"I give you the gift of this home and access to all within it. Life and safety within the pack house and access to all of its lands." He kissed her forehead, and Keelie applauded

with approval.

She had been given the same gift every year since she was born. It didn't matter that she wanted a pony; she got access to her family instead.

Finally, after the hugging that was traditional, Keelie stood in front of her. "Time for my gift."

Pansy stood up. "It is not necessary."

Keelie smirked. "I offer you a transporter, unlimited time at the Crossroads and all the items you need to give yourself a makeover. Do you accept?"

Pansy looked over at her family

and nodded. "It is time for me to move on."

The men looked relieved.

Keelie nodded sharply and looked to Karl. "May I bring the transporter into the pack house?"

He nodded with the short head jerk that Pansy was so familiar with.

Keelie removed a small seedpod from inside a lock of her hair. She crushed it with her thumb, and a moment later, there was a flash of light and a strange woman was standing in the living room.

"Transport Guild Master, this is my goddaughter Pansy. She is

ready to leave.”

“Lady Keelie, I am only too happy to serve.” The woman inclined her head.

Pansy inhaled, the woman was human but her body was rippling with magic. “Welcome to our home.”

The woman smiled. “It is an honour to meet you as well, Lady Pansy. I must say, someone with your signature does not come along every day. Do you have the vial?”

Pansy blinked, and Keelie reached into her sleeve to produce a glass tube wrapped in gold wire. “Here you are. All of her genetic

lines are represented.”

Pansy’s father jerked his head sharply in a nod.

The transporter looked at the vial and smiled. “There is quite a bit in here, isn’t there?”

“One of her spines, her father’s fur and a tooth from her mother.” Keelie’s voice was emotional when she mentioned Bethanne.

The transporter paid attention to the tension in the room. “Right, well, here are the documents for you to sign. Once they are complete, I will send you through.”

Five minutes at the desk going through release after release and

promise to abide by her animal's choice left her father with one final signature and Keelie with another as the funder of the entire arrangement.

When all the documents were complete, the transporter got to her feet. "All right then. As you are picking up what you need in the Crossroads, prepare to leave."

Pansy's eyes welled as she hugged her brothers, one after another, and finally squeezed her father until he grunted.

"Go on, Pansy. You are going to have to search out the next step in your life, despite what I think." He

ruffled her hair and chucked her under the chin.

Pansy smiled. "I will be back, maybe not here but nearby."

"Don't make promises your mate might not let you keep." Karl was serious.

"Dad, if I pick him, we will be living nearby. It is not up for negotiation." She scowled at him until he laughed.

She turned toward Keelie. "Thank you, Auntie."

Keelie hugged her close. "Do your best. Enjoy everything you can and pick a good one. The people who run the Crossroads will take

care of all the incidentals. Just keep them apprised of what you need.”

“I will. I promise to call the moment I am home.”

Keelie grinned. “Wait until after the honeymoon, sweetheart. Now, go.”

She turned to the transporter, and the woman inclined her head and opened a ball of light until Pansy could walk through it easily. “Here you go. Have fun and may you find what you seek.”

With a final look at her family, she smiled and then turned back to the doorway of light. Pansy took the step forward that would lead

her to her future, and the moment that the warm energy wrapped around her, she screamed.

Hands lifted her and voices were speaking to her softly. When Pansy finally opened her eyes, she was looking at a woman with the golden skin of a lioness but hair nearly as dark as Pansy's. The other woman standing there was a vivid purple-blue with hair that seemed to shift colour the longer that Pansy stared at it.

The lioness sighed in relief. "You are awake. Excellent. How do you feel, Pansy?"

"Sore. What happened?"

The blue woman exhaled with her own relief. “You overcharged the portal. Krisia knew that you were charged with fae magic, but she had no idea that you were full to the gills with wild magic. It was like shoving a lightning bolt into a household socket. Kris is suffering a little, but she wasn’t the one inside the portal when it blew. I am Teebie, by the way. I will be your tutor and help you with your makeover while you are here.”

The lioness snorted. “She runs the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast and is the only non-shifter here. Your friend got in touch with her,

and she pulled strings from her end of things for the full makeover.”

Teebie laughed, “This is Lee, by the way. She is our medic, and her husband owns the Crossed Star Bar where you will be spending as much time as it takes to find a man that speaks to you and your beast.”

Pansy sat up and looked down. Her body was naked and covered in scorch marks.

Teebie disappeared for a moment and reappeared with a short, light cotton robe. “You can wear this until we cross the street and get your clothing. By the way, we are not the usual welcoming

committee, but Teal and Tony are repairing the damage you're your arrival caused."

Pansy winced as the robe slid on over scorched skin. "Can I shift first so I can heal a little more?"

Lee nodded. "Of course."

Pansy handed the robe to Teebie and shifted into her porcupine form, making a few laps in the medical office before she resumed her human shape.

Teebie's face was bemused. "I haven't seen a porcupine before."

Lee blinked. "Come to think of it, I have only seen the pointy animals, never the shifters."

Pansy slipped on the robe. "We are not common shifters and are randoms whenever we occur. Usually, a porcupine shifter will occur in a beaver family when we do show up. It caused some consternation in my family, I can tell you."

Lee asked, "Your family aren't beavers, I am guessing."

"Wolves."

Teebie reacted to Lee's expression of shock. "I am going to go out on a limb and say that wolves aren't very accepting of the different."

Pansy wrinkled her nose. "Not so much, but my father and brothers

did what they could to make me as close to part of the pack as they could. It took some creativity, but they managed pretty well. We were still a family.”

“What about your mother?” Lee asked.

“She died of breast cancer when I was a baby.”

Teebie cleared her throat. “Enough for today. We need to get some clothing on her before you continue to grill her.”

“Right. I apologize. You are not here to fill me in on your life story, but if you want to meet at the Crossed Star tomorrow after lunch,

we could have a nice chat.” Lee’s tone was hopeful.

Teebie snorted, “Or you can just come for breakfast, Lee. You know that I am closed to all guests except for Pansy. If she extends the invitation to you, I will play host.”

Pansy smiled at Lee. “Would you please join us for breakfast tomorrow?”

“I would be only too happy to. I will also need to confirm your recovery, so two birds with one stone.” Lee started to tidy up her office, and the dismissal was unmistakable.

Wobbling a little, Pansy took

Teebie's arm and walked out into the sun of the Crossroads for the first time.

Chapter Six

She had heard of shopping as an endurance event but had never tested it herself. Teebie and the young male who ran the shop were on her side, but it felt more like a battle than anything Pansy had ever done in her life.

The effort it took to try on outfit after outfit, to fit test bras and underwear, not to mention the balance of high heels, it all exhausted her.

“Being a woman in modern times is tiring, or so my sisters say.”

Andy grinned and took away the items that Teebie rejected based on the way they fit, leaving Pansy surrounded by the piles that had been authorized as suitable.

Working in the garage and living with her family, she really had no clue as to what the modern woman looked like outside of the fashion magazines. Most of the women that Pansy came into contact with tended to wear uniforms. Medical personnel, waitresses and construction crews were the majority of her exposure to other women.

The clothing that she had tried on

so far was light, airy and wouldn't stand up to a round in the tumble dryer. It did feel like puffs of air on her skin though, so that wasn't all bad.

She was in jeans, low heels and a silky top that was a gorgeous lavender studded with tiny glittering gems. Her underwear matched for the first time in her life and was neutral enough to disappear when the lavender fabric of her shirt threatened to turn transparent when certain angles of light struck it.

“Good clothing should make you feel confident and put together, not

that you are hiding. You should also never advertise anything that you do not intend to deliver, so make sure that you can look yourself in the eye when you check out your own reflection. It is an old-fashioned means of thinking, but when you are dealing with shifters and instincts, stay with the basics. Show what you are comfortable with and defend your body when someone gets too close.”

Teebie was precise when she spoke; her voice rang with authority.

“Okay. What is the next lesson?”

She watched as Andy collected all of the clothing that was being purchased, and he headed for the counter.

Teebie grimaced. "Makeup. Your friend sent your colouration ahead. I thought I was going to be working on Snow White for a while, but now I see what she meant. Does all of your family have porcelain skin?"

"No. I am the lucky one. My father used to joke that I had my aunt's colouring."

Andy prepped one bag and handed it to Teebie. "That is the makeup, here is the overnight bag."

Her blue friend took the bags, and together, they headed out onto the street, past the café and into the mild foot traffic. “I have to say, this is very exciting. Very few fae interact with shifters. I am glad to know that it isn’t an isolated incident.”

“Someone you know?”

Teebie laughed. “My grandmother a few centuries ago. Her children couldn’t shift, but their daughters were very powerful.”

“So, it rippled up the chain, so to speak?”

“Yes. Each generation gets

stronger. Well, some of us do.” Teebie grinned. “Of course, I ended up looking precisely like my grandfather. How my grandmother could mate with something so different way back then was an amazing thing to me. She must have been a gryphon with nerves of steel.”

Pansy froze in place. “Your grandparents were a shifter and a djinn?”

“Yup. That is what I have been saying. My aunt is a dragon, and she raised her sister’s children before returning them to their father’s people. She wanted them

to know a life, a true life, before being wrapped in djinn tradition.”

“Wow. Dragons and gryphons, it is just like my aunt said.”

They resumed their walk and passed several bed and breakfasts before approaching one with a charming sign that proclaimed it the *Open Heart Bed and Breakfast*.

Once inside, Teebie led her up the stairs to the room with a starburst on the door.

“Since you are my only guest this week, you can come and go as you like, breakfast will be served after you are moving.”

“Can I go and get myself

something to eat at the café?"

"Of course. Where is it?" She wandered into the room and lifted a small icon. "Ah, here it is. Since you were scorched, we decided to wait until you were up and around before we gave you this."

Pansy saw the same starburst on it as the door icon. "Does this mean something?"

"Well, anyone who sees it will know who you are."

She slipped it on her wrist and asked, "Wait, how long was I out?"

"Three days. We have a lot of work to do."

"Then, give me a moment to

refresh myself, join me for dinner and we will get underway." Her mind tried to adjust to the change in dates, but it was difficult.

Teebie laughed. "I will have a selection brought here. We don't need to waste any time. You need makeup training right away, and I am not the woman to give you instruction."

Pansy looked at her blue companion and laughed. "Right. Of course. Give me five minutes, and I will meet you downstairs."

The smells of food drew Pansy downstairs after she finished clearing the last of the smudges

from her features. No sense putting makeup on soot.

An elegant woman with snow-white hair was sitting with her host. Teebie grinned, "Pansy, this is Teal. She is one of the guardians of the Crossroads."

"I am glad to see you are up and around. I am sending your aunt a bill for the damage to the Meditation Centre. I have never seen anyone blow the roof off before. Good thing we have that collection of beavers or I might not be so cheerful right now. As it was, we are having to explain the damage to all the new comers,

there was even one from your area almost immediately after you arrived. He helped put the fire out.”

Pansy turned bright red but reached for the food.

Teebie snickered. “You have boarding-house manners, but you are precise in your placement.”

“I have six brothers. I usually throw a quill at the food I can’t reach to mark it as mine. Today, I am merely using my hands.”

Pansy grinned and Teal snickered.

She ate with her napkin in her lap, and she speared the food

precisely before she put it between her lips. The two women, who were watching, nodded with approval.

Teebie grinned. "Excellent. Food etiquette is usually the hardest thing to teach."

Dinner was placid and unremarkable, but immediately after, Teebie brought out a folding mirror and enough makeup to paint Pansy from head to toe. This was not going to be an easy lesson; she could feel it in her bones.

"Who knew that stabbing yourself in the eye twelve times wouldn't blind you? Consider me

convinced of your teaching skills, Teal.” Pansy blinked and admired the fact that her eyes seemed to be recovering nicely. They also appeared deep and mysterious, the purple in the shadow made the green flecks in her eyes quite a bit stronger.

“You will lose your makeup if you shift, so keep that in mind.” Teebie was eating popcorn and watching with her feet propped up on one of the antique chairs.

Lipstick was complicated. The shade that Keelie had selected was good, but Teal had run out to get one that was a touch more vivid.

With the powder, the liner and the top up of gloss, it was quite the layering effect.

“This is a worst-case scenario. If you have to head to a formal event, this is what you would have to put on your face. For a normal day, just a bit of liner and the matte lipstick is good. With your skin, nothing else is necessary.” Teal sat back and finished her handiwork.

Pansy looked in the mirror. Her hair was matte black, her skin was pale with a hint of rose and her eyes were huge and mysterious. “Oh wow. This looks different.”

“Do you feel up to a trip to the

Crossed Star?"

"Like this? Shouldn't I put my hair up or something?"

Teal shook her head. "No. Scent is carried in the hair as well as the skin. You will need to move though. Can you dance?"

Pansy blushed again. "No, it wasn't something that was on my regular schedule."

Teebie chimed in. "Andy is coming tomorrow around eleven to give you dance lessons."

"Andy? Andy from the general store Andy? Well, I guess he has already seen my underwear, how much worse could it get?"

The two women with her laughed.

Apparently, it was time to head to the bar.

Chapter Seven

The music was loud enough to mask casual conversation but not so loud that the sensitive ears of shifters were overloaded.

Their trio took a seat at one of the tables.

Teal looked at them. "What would you like to drink?"

Pansy blinked. "Beer?"

"Easy enough. I will be right back."

Teal slipped from the table and walked up to the bar.

The man behind it looked toward

them, and he grinned, a serpentine fang visible even from across the room.

Teebie smiled. "That is Chuck. His mate, Ivy, is just over there. And she is coming over."

Ivy came up, her midnight hair sliding around her and her smile bright. "So, you are the one who blew the centre? Very nice."

Ivy extended her hand, and Pansy answered it. The light spark that Pansy always felt when she touched a shifter ran up her arm. Ivy was a strong shifter. Pansy had looked into the different hierarchies among her own kind.

The library of a pack was a wonderful thing. All sorts of books could be found inside the library of a pack, even books on reproduction. Her father hadn't been interested in explaining things, so she had to figure it out for herself.

Shifting and watching couples in cars had filled in some of the gaps as to what foreplay actually entailed. It was handy to be a beast in a tree sometimes. It was certainly educational.

"I didn't intend to blow the centre." She smiled as Ivy settled in with them and Teal brought a tray full of drinks. Pansy took her beer

and sipped while the rest of the women compared what they had seen at the moment of her arrival.

Teal saw light and nothing else for several minutes. Teebie felt the wave of magic as it rippled outward. Ivy saw a blast of fire as the roof came off the centre. She had been one of the first responders, right on Lee's heels.

Her arrival had definitely made an impression on the Crossroads.

They sat together, and Pansy felt the rhythm of the place. She watched men and women meet, flirt, dance and occasionally depart together.

Her gaze fixed on one man in particular. Alexander. He danced, he flirted, but he didn't leave with any of the women. He stayed, had a few drinks and finally left. He left alone.

Pansy's heart tripped in her chest every time he glanced her way, but she hid behind the more dramatic colouration of Teebie, and they never made eye contact.

Finally, her host said, "If you are done playing peek-a-boo, we should get going. You have to chisel that makeup off and get a full night's sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day, Cinderella."

The ladies got up, swayed a little after four hours of drinking and split up with a round of hugs.

Pansy and Teebie staggered off arm-in-arm. The comfort of the Open Heart awaited them, and Pansy really could use a good night's sleep.

Dawn stroked her lids, and she flipped back the fluffy duvet. Pansy yawned and stretched, smiling at the peculiar sensation of rising at dawn but not having anywhere she had to be.

The shower was wonderful, and she brushed her hair afterward, noting that the colour had shifted

from dark brown to jet black since her arrival at the Crossroads. It could have been the explosion, or it could just be the magic that she could taste in every breath she took.

“Hmm...what to wear?” She exited the bathroom, laughing because she only had the one outfit from the day before.

She looked around the room and jerked in surprise. Between her rising and taking the shower, all of the clothing from the shopping trip the day before was neatly laid out in matching sets.

“That isn’t creepy at all.” She snickered. The residue of djinn

magic hung in the air.

Humming to herself, she picked one of the matched outfits. Since she was going to practice dancing, a dress and heels was probably a good bet. The dress she picked was a blue cotton sundress with ivory eyelet lace around the neckline. The t-strap shoes were the same matching ivory.

With a nice new set of matching underwear and the dress and shoes, she felt very grown up when she walked down the stairs to greet Teebie in the dining room.

“Wow. You seem to have taken to being girly with a bit of a

vengeance.”

Sudden insecurity assailed her. “Is it too much?”

“No, it is perfect. I am sorry to have commented. What you are wearing is ideal for today’s activities. You look like a fairy-tale princess on her regular day off.”

That made Pansy feel remarkably better. She swung back and forth with her skirt, loving the way it swayed around her knees.

“Coffee?”

“Oh, sure. Thank you.” She sat and waited. Coffee was the first thing then muffins, bacon, toast, the offer of eggs, which Pansy

wasn't in the mood for.

They sat, talked and Lee cruised in halfway through Pansy's second muffin.

"I hear I missed girls' night."

"You were asleep, Lee. I asked about you at the bar, and apparently, you were under lockdown until you caught up on some of the time you spent watching Pansy." Teebie sighed and poured another cup of coffee, sliding it in front of the lioness.

Lee wrinkled her nose. "That sounds like one of Jim's orders. Butthead. I would miss the world if he had his way."

Teebie laughed, "You would miss the world and spend eternity in his arms. Not a bad way to spend your time."

Lee grinned. "You have a point. Chuck has remarked that since I came along, James looks very... rested."

Pansy was blushing, and she tried to keep the thread of the conversation. She thought they were discussing sex, but she couldn't be sure and didn't want to ask.

Lee smiled at Pansy. "Can I see one of your quills?"

Blinking, Pansy reached behind

her head and tugged out one of her quills from her weapon segment. When she was young, she had marked out a section of skin and practiced summoning quills in that one spot. It served her well when she needed one.

She held the quill in her hand and extended it to Lee.

“You know, they are researching porcupine quills in an effort to make a more effective hypodermic needle. Because it has barbs to keep it from being removed, it can be a most effective tool.” Lee took the quill carefully and held it reverently. “May I keep it?”

“Sure. When I get really bored, I make jewellery with them and sell them on eBay.”

Lee laughed and Teebie snickered.

A knock at the door produced Andy, and the day took a sudden turn for the strange.

“I think you are ready, Pansy.” Andy was barely limping anymore, and he looked proud of the progress she had made in one afternoon.

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t think, just let him lead, and from that moment on, he is to blame for the success of the dance.

Your weakness lies in you wanting control. Want it all you like, but give it up for those few minutes on the dance floor.”

She snickered and curtsied. That had been Teebie’s contribution while Andy got treatment from a very amused Lee for a stomped arch.

Teebie loitered in the doorway. “Well, if dance has been introduced, it is time for her to change and take it for a spin. You have half an hour, Pansy. Let’s see what you come down looking like.”

Pansy kissed Andy on the cheek and headed up the stairs.

Teebie looked at the smitten expression on his face and shook her head. "She's not the one, Andy. Bear with me. I will tell you when you have met your match."

He sighed, "Well, I can still dance with her."

Teebie winked. "That you can do. Now shoo. You have your own matters to attend to."

He left, and Teebie altered her clothing to eveningwear with the wave of her hand.

Teebie watched the clock, curious to see how much Pansy could accomplish in half an hour.

The slow applause that greeted

her brought a smile of relief to her lips. Her gauzy silver top fluttered as she walked, the jeans were dark and had a glittering touch at the hip and back pocket. The shoes were black t-straps, and she held her head high as she walked with a compromise between the formal and casual makeup.

“Well done, Pansy. Now, let’s head to the Crossed Star and see how well this makeover goes over.”

Pansy nodded. This was her test. She would walk into the bar and see if she ran or if she stayed. If she found a compatible partner she was hungry enough to go for dinner

and that was a good thing.

It was time to see if Alexander was really the one.

She tried to walk without a wobble, but after a day in heels when she wasn't used to them, her thighs ached with every step.

Pansy walked into the bar, waved to Ivy and continued on to order a drink from Chuck. He handed her her beer with a grin, and she perched at the edge of the bar, well in the visible zone for any of the males in the Crossed Star.

The music was easy to listen to, so when she was first asked to dance, the male in question brought

her out of a trance. She jerked, smiled and put her hand in his. After an entire day plastered against Andy, something different had to be on the menu.

This male was tall, had dark hair and a slow, shy smile. They danced, she felt his body against hers, but it was nothing special. It was good—but not amazing—when they moved together.

When the dance was over, she thanked him with a smile and sat down again. A new beer on its way to her in seconds. She only had time to sip it for a minute before she was asked to dance again. It set

up a pattern that ran through the next hour until the hand that was held out to her was Axander's.

She smiled at him and bit her lip as she walked with him to the dance floor. Pansy turned into his arms, and she felt the click of rightness when she swayed against him. Now, she just needed to know if he felt the same.

Axander pulled her closer and pressed his cheek to her temple. She could feel him inhaling, and a shudder rolled through him. Pansy wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

When he held her to him and she

felt the erection that was making itself known, she decided that it was a good thing.

When the song ended, she pulled away, but he held on. "What is your name?"

She blinked. Of course, he wouldn't recognize her. She was outside of his frame of reference for her. She beckoned him down. "Pansy."

He blinked, leaned back and looked at her in the dim light.

She saw the moment that he recognized her and an excitement took over his features.

"My name is Axander, but I am

guessing you already knew that.”

She grinned and nodded. “Would you like to go somewhere quiet?”

He sighed and nodded. “Please.”

She led him out of the Crossed Star and headed for the restaurant. “I apologize. I am a little peckish. Do you mind if we have dinner?”

Axander shook his head. “Please. I would love to have dinner with you.”

She looked at him, and there was still a stunned pleasure on his features.

Once seated, he looked at her over the menu. “So, you are really Thomas Medeela’s little sister, the

mechanic?"

She sighed and put the menu down. "I am. I creep around under cars in my family's garage. That is my day job."

"You look...I mean, I heard about your beauty in school, but there was a rule against even looking at the Medeelas' sister. It just never occurred to me to actually see what I was missing."

She blushed. "Well, I do normally dress for the job. There is no reason that anyone should have noticed me."

"It wasn't you, it was always the brother behind you scowling and

snarling a threat.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice that you are never alone when you are at the front desk. There is always one of your siblings or your father there, silently threatening any male who would mention anything other than business.”

Pansy thought about it, and with dawning horror, she realised he was right. She really was never alone. “Well, that would explain a few things.”

He started to laugh and finally turned his attention to the menu. “I have wondered if you were

dedicated to your pack, but I have also heard that you aren't a wolf at all."

She read her menu carefully. "That would be correct. I am not a wolf. My mother was a wolf, my father is a wolf and I am a random."

"Wow. May I say that you look lovely this evening?"

She blushed and began the first date of her life.

They stayed at the restaurant for three hours, discussing events back home and their hopes for the future. He wanted a family; she wanted a family. He was nocturnal;

she was nocturnal. His mother had signed off on any woman he would bring home; her father had agreed to the same regarding her mate.

She bit her lip. "In the interest of full disclosure, I am bound to our area. It has something to do with my not matching my parents. I have a number of properties given to me by my fairy godmother. Is that a problem?"

"Are you drunk?"

"Nope. My godmother is a fae, and she is generous. She knows about my handicap and has gifted me accordingly."

"You are serious? She is an actual

fae?"

"Yes."

"Cool. How old is she?" He had the same curiosity that Pansy did.

"I am guessing that she is over four hundred. She doesn't look a day over thirty." Pansy sat back and sighed. "I have no idea what happens next."

He cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean now. This is my first date. I have no idea what to do now."

He smiled, "I think we should go for a walk in the moonlight."

That suited her, so she watched

him swipe his charm to pay for their meal, and she took his arm as they exited the restaurant and breathed in the magical air of the Crossroads.

Chapter Eight

Shifting with a stranger was surprisingly intimate, even though she had known that stranger for her entire life.

Pansy shook out her quills and looked over at the honey badger at her side. It was funny that he was an Asian badger born to a North American family and she was a porcupine born to wolves. Neither of them matched their parents.

She headed for the trees at a rapid waddle. While he started rooting around, she climbed and

watched him from a nearby branch. Wrestling with him would cause him injury, so she had to settle for watching him dig.

Boredom set in, so she returned to ground level and shifted back into her human form. She wrapped her arms around her knees and watched him.

In under two minutes, he noticed her and his shift was as rapid as hers had been.

Her first kiss started slow. He brushed his lips against hers before he backed her against the tree trunk and pinned her there. Being naked, their contact went from exploratory

to intimate in a matter of seconds.

Pansy's body throbbed, and she twisted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and opening her mouth to him. The taste of Alexander was addictive. Musk, honey and a hint of the wine from dinner all mixed together to make an elixir that she sought out with her own tongue while his slid into her mouth to explore.

His hands were moving on their own, stroking down her torso, cupping her breasts and teasing the nerves that hadn't received any action before. She moaned into his mouth.

When he slid a hand between her thighs, she blushed at the slick wetness he found there. She kept reminding herself that she could stop this at any time, but she didn't want to stop it. She wanted to find out what was behind his polite exterior, and she was hoping that her quills kept quiet while she explored.

Pansy bit his lip when he slipped a finger inside her. She released him and moaned again, hiding her face against his shoulder while he slipped another finger in and moved them in a slow rhythmic motion.

His thumb pressed and relaxed on her clit, causing a tension to build deep inside her beyond the reach of his hand.

She stroked his chest and worked her way down to his erection, hissing at the heat of his skin while she examined the thick shaft and slick head with her fingers.

When his fingers moved more rapidly inside her, she gasped. He carefully removed her hand from his cock, and without any warning, he was on his belly between her legs, using his mouth to supplement the strokes of his fingers.

She was embarrassed, she was self-conscious, but the next moment, she was clutching his hair and arching into his mouth as the length of his tongue unfurled inside her and the tension snapped, releasing a wave of pleasure through her.

If she had been at home, birds would have taken flight. Here at the Crossroads, there was only the wind to answer her cry.

He held her locked in the throes of pleasure until her body shivered and shook with fatigue.

When he finally lifted his head, he licked his lips slowly and smiled

as he kissed and licked his way up her body.

She bit her lip as she watched his slow progress and felt her body waking up again.

The moss that covered the roots made for a comfortable, if somewhat lumpy, bed. He eased her to her back and moved over her. "You taste like honey."

She didn't. She knew she didn't. She had read up on oral sex once and tried to figure out what her partner would taste. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't honey. The worshipful look in his eyes made her keep her lips uncharacteristically shut.

He kissed her again and fitted the head of his cock in her sex.

Pansy was busy trying to decide where she wanted to concentrate her attention when he thrust into her with a short jerk of his hips.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” She hissed against his lips, and she clawed his shoulders while the burning pain kept her focus.

She smelled blood and kept writhing against him until the pain subsided. He remained stoic and motionless inside her. The blood wasn't just hers; it was the claw marks she had made in his shoulders.

Moonlight lit them both, and he eased back, thrusting gently into her. When she lifted her hips against his, he thrust a little harder.

They rocked together in the moonlight until that delicious tension built again. When she broke apart, she heard Axander mutter something with relief, and he groaned long and low, his back arched and his hips thrust firmly against hers.

She moaned as he shuddered and relaxed onto her body. She clutched him with arms and legs, holding him tight and soothing his sweat-covered skin with long strokes of

her hands.

The occasional twinge of pain made her wrinkle her nose. She had known that losing her virginity would not be comfortable, but she hadn't counted on his determination to make up for it. She didn't know if she was going to have enough energy to get her back to the Open Heart.

Axander lifted his head and smiled, "Hello, mate."

She smiled shyly back, "Hello, mate."

He nuzzled the join between her neck and shoulder. "This was not how I imagined this evening going,

but I am not complaining.”

“I am. You are heavy.”

He laughed and rolled until he was under her. “Better?”

“Yes. I wasn’t imagining this for my first date either. Heck, I only learned to dance this afternoon.”

Axander was drawing patterns on her back. “Who taught you? Teebie?”

“No. Andy from the general store. He was a pretty good instructor.”

Her mate stiffened under her. “He held you, touched you?”

She blinked. “Uh, yeah. We danced.”

He was tense.

She stroked his chest and the marks she had made on his shoulders. "Why are you so tense?"

He shuddered under her slow touch. "No one touches my mate but me."

"But I wasn't your mate this afternoon."

"My beast is protective. So sue me."

She wrinkled her nose and kissed his jaw. "Your beast just mated with the prickliest creature in our vicinity. Me. I made up my mind that it was you and you alone that day that I rescued you and your

poor car on the side of the road.”

He grinned. “You were my knight in a shining pickup.”

“Well, I was going for lady, but I can understand your confusion. Is my job going to be a problem?”

“Only if you insist on it while you are pregnant. I don’t want to imagine you under a car with a huge belly.”

She twisted her lips. “I was thinking of keeping my participation to administration from now on. Well, until I get another job. My family might not be comfortable with me if I smell like you.”

He blinked. "I hadn't thought of that."

"My godmother did. She has—over the years—provided me with plenty of territory and enough money to live on. Will that make you uncomfortable?"

"No. The family business could use summer help now and then. Would you like to work with my mother?"

She laughed. "We will see. There might be a less drastic course of action." She shivered.

"Are you cold?" There was concern in his tone.

"A little. Can we head back to the

Open Heart?"

He blinked. "You are staying at the Open Heart? Damn. I tried to book a room there, but they were locked down for a VIP."

She ducked her head. "That would be me, and I am far less VIP than DIY."

He laughed and sat up, slipping out of her. "Well, let's head back to your territory then. As long as I get to hold you all night, I don't care where we are."

Pansy smiled. "That was the right answer."

They gathered their clothing and headed for the Open Heart with a

shower and a good night's sleep on the agenda. Anything else was incidental.

Chapter Nine

A quick shift in her room healed both of them of the aches, pains and minor damages they had inflicted on each other. The shower took care of the rest.

Pansy had never slept with someone, but her inner beast was completely at ease. She finally understood what Keelie had so tactfully tried to tell her. Her beast chose its mate at the Crossroads. She merely had to negotiate the details. Simple.

As she lay wrapped in Axander's

arms, she thought about jobs and income streams. Her favourite past time was making the porcupine-quill jewellery, but she had always wished to try her hand at clock making. It was an extension of her fascination with cars but one that would keep her in her territory and away from car hoists.

She had a feeling that her Aunt Keelie would be able to help her set up with that particular hobby. Pansy wanted a large family, so it would be best for her to find an income stream that she could engage in from home. It only made sense.

Smiling, she let idle thoughts drift through her mind until it was time to rise. The moment that Axander woke up, his hands tightened and then started to move.

He pressed his lips to her shoulders and whispered, "Morning."

She snuggled back against him and shifted her buttocks against his erection. Her instincts took over, and she reached behind her to grip his hip, pulling him into firmer contact.

He stroked his hand down the back of her upper thigh and pulled her leg gently toward her chest. He

slid his fingers down the seam of her buttocks and parted her slowly.

Pansy let out a ragged breath as he pressed against her and slipped inside. There was nothing to distract her this time. No sounds of the wild, no whispers of wind, no howls in the distance, just Pansy and Axander starting a slow dance that would bind them for the rest of their lives.

Entry from the rear provided a stroke against the front of her channel. She curled forward with every inward slide until he pinned her back against him with one arm around her chest, cupping her

breasts with his hands as he continued to rock inside her.

She covered his hands with hers for a moment before stroking down her belly and touching her clit a little awkwardly.

He released her and moved her fingers aside with his own.

Pansy heard her voice in breathy cries, and his grunts and groans matched her own as his hips jerked more violently against her.

He bit and nibbled at her neck, she twisted to kiss him, and the change in position caught her by surprise, sending shockwaves of pleasure through her and offering

her pleasure to him in the form of her vocalizations.

She took his sharp grunt of release in turn and put her hands on top of his, holding him tight as the morning was greeted in the most wonderful way.

When their heartbeats reached normal, she turned to him with a smile. "That was almost as good as bacon for breakfast."

"Almost?" He raised his dark brown eyebrows with a smirk.

"Well, yes. That is the best morning I have to compare it to, so that is my yardstick, either that or I am hungry and Teebie is making

bacon.”

He looked a little offended, but then, he lifted his head and inhaled. “Bacon, muffins and honey. Why are we still in bed?”

She burst out laughing when he carried her to the bathroom and squealed when he stuffed her into the shower and the cold water struck her before it warmed. “That was nasty.”

He chuckled and crowded her back. “Tough. It was revenge for saying that bacon was better in the morning than I was.”

She pinched his nipple with a hard tweak. “If you aren’t willing

to work, this isn't going to be much of a union."

Axander winced and grabbed her hand. "All right, if you want me to work, I will."

He pinned her hands to the wall and lifted her against the cool tile. Between the heat of his body, the warmth of the water and the temperature of the wall behind her, her mind was reeling as it tried to figure out what was going to happen next.

He kissed her, his chest against her breasts and his hips holding her in place. Axander bit at her lips and snarled low.

She shivered and held tight.

He whispered, "Is this better?"

She blinked into his eyes and noted the small gold flecks against the mahogany brown. "Better than what?"

He nibbled at her neck under the pounding spray. "Bacon."

The laughter welled up and burst out. "Much better than bacon."

He bit her neck softly. "Are you sure? Bacon is pretty good, almost as good as honey."

"Almost isn't good enough." She tilted her head to one side as she shivered.

"Ah, you are sweeter than honey

when you are in my arms.” Alexander stroked her torso with the hand not holding her arms above her head.

She twisted, seeking more contact with him. He laughed softly and released her, standing back and scrubbing her back before sliding his fingers inside her. She had no idea what was going to happen next, so she was hot, bothered and leaning against him when he righted her and patted her bottom. “I will be with you in a moment, Prix.”

She winced. “Please don’t call me that. I have been Prix, Prickie,

Prickles, Prixie and Little Prick all my life. Can you call me something else?"

"It will be an adjustment. I mean, even your coveralls have said Prix." He pointed out the obvious while lathering up his cock.

She tried not to look, but it was hard. "I know, but that was a joke by one of my half-dozen brothers. My coveralls have had any number of names on them. None of them have been Pansy."

"I will work on it."

She grinned. "Thanks, honey."

He winced. "Okay, anything but that." He rinsed off and turned off

the water.

She handed him a towel and dried her hair before chasing water droplets across her skin. It was hard for shifters not to shake dry, even when in human form. Pansy had developed a routine that resulted in her being dry from head to toe, in that order.

When she was done, Pansy wrapped herself in her towel and headed back into the bedroom. She froze in her tracks. "Damn, she is good."

Axander bumped into her. "Whoa. Did she really come in here?"

Pansy looked up at him. "I doubt she set one foot in the room. Have you seen Teebie?"

"At the bar the night before last. She's blue. Why?"

"She's a djinn, the same way my godmother is a fae. Magic is in their blood. You can't separate one from the other. They use it the way other folk use hands."

Pansy found her hairbrush and took a seat at the makeup table, brushing until her hair fell down her back in a damp curtain.

"How long does it take you to do your hair each day?" Axander was sliding on his jeans.

“I brush it and go. When it’s dry or when I have to climb under a car, I braid it or tie it up.” She ruffled her roots with her fingers and the flat sheet of hair rippled into even waves.

Pansy grabbed her underwear and shimmied into the sparkly blue fabric. She slipped her bra on and tried to settle her breasts without him noticing. She heard him chuckle and knew that he had seen her. Well, having a big bust was her problem, and if he wanted to watch, she would give him a show. Pansy bent over, settled herself properly and stood up.

“That is quite the sight.”

She turned and her bra was perfectly aligned for the shirt she slipped over her head. “Thanks. The ladies had me practicing until I could get them in without any trouble. I used to just yank on a sports bra that squished them flat.”

A pair of sparkled jeans and some low heels and she was ready for breakfast.

“I have never seen a woman get dressed so quickly.”

She waited for him to open the door and gave him a peck on the cheek. “I am used to working under a tight deadline. By the way, do you

cook?"

He blinked. "Now and then. I eat out a lot."

"Sweet. I have always wanted a reason to learn."

"You don't know how to cook?"

"The kitchen is in the pack common area. I am not allowed to cook." She smiled brightly. "You had better hope that I learn quickly."

Teebie met them at the foot of the stairs. "Pansy, I have never met a faster learner. You must be Axander."

He was a little hesitant when he extended his hand, but the moment

that her hand slipped into his, he relaxed.

“Come this way. Breakfast is ready.”

With that invitation, Axander relaxed even more. He slipped an arm around Pansy's waist and urged her to follow their host. Honey and bacon were waiting.

Chapter Ten

Pansy held Axander's hand and looked at Teal and Tony. "Are you sure that this is going to work?"

"All repairs have been made, and as long as he surrounds you when you transport, you should be fine." Tony grinned. "Any explosion will be on the other end."

Axander laughed. "Very nice. It is a good thing we are arriving away from her pack's house. They might be even less hospitable if she blew the roof off."

Teal chuckled and beckoned

them over to the flat stone in the centre of the Zen garden.

With all the paperwork done and their mating safely recorded for both their families, there was nothing to do but return home. Axander was carrying both their packs, and as Tony positioned them, Axander put his arms around Pansy and held her tight.

She tried to relax. "Ready when you are, guardians."

Teal grinned. "Stay calm and let the portal do the work. We are going to turn up the power gradually until your magic pulls you through. Think about where

you want to go and then move yourself there.”

“Right.” She had been given a five-minute briefing and was confident that she could hold herself together for the few seconds it would take to transport back home.

“Okay. We are starting now. Stay relaxed.” Teal smiled encouragingly and extended her arms.

Pansy had to imagine that Tony was doing the same, and when she felt the tingle in her extremities, she fought the panic and kept her focus on the arms around her. The tingling became a prickling, and the

moment that Axander tightened his grip, she knew he could feel it too. The light went from a glow around their feet to a column of light, and after a flash, she could smell home.

With a squeal, she turned in Axander's arms. "We did it! No explosion!" She hugged him with all her strength, gratified when he returned the embrace and snuffled at her neck.

She looked up and kissed him with everything in her. They were home and all other details could be worked out.

"Prix!"

She ignored the voice and kept

kissing her mate. His hands roamed over her and nothing else was going to distract her.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she lashed out with some of the residue of the transport. She heard a grunt, a shout and then a thud. She nibbled at Alexander's lips and sighed softly. "I guess I have to deal with this."

"I am with you." He kept an arm around her and steered her toward her family.

The brother that had grabbed her was Roger. He was sitting at the base of a tree and rubbing his arm. "What the hell was that, Prix?"

“New day, new mate, old name. Call me Pansy.”

Her brothers were arranged in an amused semi-circle with her father in the centre.

“Dad, I would like to formally introduce you to my mate, Axander Barkley. Axander, my father, Karl Medeela.”

Axander inclined his head and extended his hand to the older man. “A pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Her father looked at him, sniffed and tilted his head. “You are not a wolf?”

“No, sir.”

“Not a porcupine.”

“No, sir.”

“What are you then, son?”

Pansy sighed in relief, as did her brothers.

“I am a badger, sir. A honey badger to be specific. I am an in-species random.”

“Ah, you know my daughter is special.”

“I do.”

“You know she has magic of her own.”

Axander looked down at her, and he squeezed her. “I have never doubted that for a moment.”

Pansy blushed and smiled at her father. “You can let them bring

their mates home now, Dad. I can defend myself from their females.”

He reached out and touched her cheek. “You knew?”

“I suspected. There have been reps from every family in the four closest states. The boys come home smelling like strange females in heat. There has to be something going on.”

Her father nodded. “I never wanted you to feel unwelcome in your own home. Keelie gave me a bit of a lecture after you left, and I am at peace with you moving into your own home.”

She looked up at Axander and

back to her father. "Our home but bordering your territory. We will have to negotiate the borders as your family keeps expanding. It might mean weekly dinners."

Karl grinned. "Jarrod would like the practice."

"Oh, no, Dad. I meant me. In fact, I would like to request Jarrod as a tutor if I may."

Her father crossed his arms. "I am unsure that it would be a good idea. We all know that you have been coaching him through the meals for the last two years."

She blushed. "How did you learn that?"

“You have been gone a week. We figured it out.” Her father’s tone was wry.

Axander snickered, and it was the sound that broke her brothers’ restraint. Hugs flew, Thomas hauled her mate aside for some detailed interrogation, and she was once again in the embrace of her family.

Roger sprang for takeout, and they all sat around the huge table. Apparently, no one wanted to chance Jarrod’s smoked chicken. With all the windows open, the smoke was clearing rapidly.

After a lot of congratulations,

Pansy had to know, "So, what happened to the transporter?"

Andrew cleared his throat. "Well, the Mage Guild Master showed up and picked up his wife, then he asked what the hell happened, and when we told him, he asked us what the hell we were doing sending a mage to the Crossroads."

Doug said, "Aunt Keelie stepped in then and spoke to him. He stepped back a few times while she was talking, but eventually, he nodded and took his mate away. She was dazed and her hair was sticking out but otherwise fine."

Jake nodded. "It looked like she

licked a light socket.”

Pansy groaned. “That is going to zing me.”

“Aunt Keelie said she would handle it when you got back. Just call her, and she will be ready with an intervention.” Andrew nodded.

“That sounds ominous.”

Her father sighed and reached for the Moo Shu Pork. “It *is* ominous. You zapped a Guild Master, Pansy. There will be consequences.”

With that conversation killer, dinner was over. Pansy excused herself and showed Axander her room.

“Holy crud. I imagined a tiny

space on the top floor. Not this.” He smiled and admired the benefit to living in a longhouse-styled home.

Her room stretched the one hundred feet of the house, giving her a workshop, a bedroom and a bathroom that many would envy. Her living space was confined to the windowed sides where light could wake her in the morning. The rest of the area was just too dark, even with the lighting that ran from one side to the next.

“The house is designed to look small from the front. The additions were modular and done with the

full approval of the town council.” She smiled and put the extent of her wardrobe into one duffel bag. “Okay, I am ready to leave.”

“Just like that?”

She grinned and slid her arm around his neck. “Would you like sobbing? I mean, I broke my toe once, and I think I could remember how to cry if it was really necessary.”

“I like you sassy. Let’s keep the crying for the big stuff.” He leaned down and kissed her short and sweet.

“Excellent. Now, on to my new home and your new home if you

like it.”

He chuckled. “Let’s see and compare. I live on my family’s property, so this might be a good change.”

“Right. You are involved in a family business. I forgot.”

“Yes, we drill wells. My expertise is in determining the strata layers and how deep the water is.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“It has its moments.” He laughed. “You sometimes find mineral deposits on the way down. It can be very lucrative for folks.”

“Do you just do water wells?”

“Well, no. We also own a number

of mines around the country. I travel about a month a year.”

They were at the base of the stairs when the entire family stopped them. In silence, one by one, they hugged her and when she finished embracing her family, there were definitely tears in her eyes.

“Okay. I have my cell. I am taking a few days off until I figure out what happens next.” She wiped her eyes, and Axander steered her carefully out of the pack house.

Once outside, she was able to straighten up and Axander held her hand as she led him through the woods, out of the pack territory and

onto her own territory.

The yard was immaculate and well-tended. The topiaries were neat and in lovely geometric shapes.

Axander paused. "You win. If the house matches the yard, I am pledging my undying love for your horticultural skills."

"This isn't all me. My Aunt Keelie set up the landscaping years ago. All I have done is kept up the housekeeping and made a few additions." She led him through the grounds and toward the house.

"You still win." He squeezed her hand. "I can feel that this place has

the same energy that you do. This is home.”

She grinned. “I am so glad. It means I won’t have to move the go-kart track or the mini golf course in the back.”

He laughed. “I am eager to see the interior but prepare yourself. When it comes to mini golf, I am a Viking.”

“I stand warned. So, let’s go pick a bedroom. I like blue, personally.” She laughed and hauled him forward at a run. He didn’t take much coaxing.

One week later, they had their first visitor, followed almost

immediately by their second.

“Auntie Keelie!” She squealed and ran to hug her godmother.

Axander was amused, and he followed at a statelier pace.

Pansy turned to watch him approach. He was wearing a tight black t-shirt and faded jeans. He was a treat to look at.

“Keelie, this is my mate, Axander. Axander, this is my fae godmother.” She inclined her head formally.

Keelie shook Axander’s hand and then hugged him. “Welcome to the family, Axander. Now, I am sorry to bring trouble, but there is a mage

guild representative behind me by about a minute. And here she is.”

A flash of light preceded a woman of mature years who looked to be in her fifties and who would tolerate no bullshit. “Is this her?”

Before Keelie could answer, there was a ball of light heading toward Pansy. She pulled a quill, charged it and flicked it toward the ball of light in an instant. The quill continued and buried itself in the woman’s shoulder.

“Ow! Okay, so the reflexes are there, the power is definitely there. She will have a tutor within the

week.”

Pansy walked over and pulled the quill. “What are you babbling about?”

“Didn’t the fae tell you? You are getting mage training. We don’t have one of your kind on record as containing this much power, so we want you trained as a local mage and occasional transporter. This isn’t negotiable.” The woman scowled and rubbed her shoulder.

Keelie cleared her throat. “Assessor Win, please give us a moment.”

The woman growled and stomped off.

Pansy blinked and took Alexander's hand. "What is going on?"

"The blast when you entered the Crossroads showed a power signature that isn't usual to shifters. Magical shifters can come and go without incident, but you almost blew the place apart. Your magic is bound to fae and human magic, not shifter kind. The second shape you have is a product of your genes and the magic is your environment. You are nature and nurture all in one. The question is are you, Alexander, prepared to deal with what this will bring? Many of your kind will

not be pleased to have her combination of talents in the area.”

Axander held her close. “I am hers, she is mine, our beasts are incomplete without the other. I am with her even if she grows a tail and can’t shift it back.”

Keelie smiled. “Good. Karl is on board as well. You will have familial support.”

“Will Assessor Win do the training?”

“Oh, stars no! You are going to be trained by the Transport Guild Master, Krisia. She’s the one you blew up, so she knows your power like none other. Your training will

start in four days.”

Keelie turned with her long coat fluttering.

“Just like that? You are leaving already?”

“Oh, honey, the idea of you having strange powers has turned your mate on. Do pay attention, sweetling. I will be back to help with your training. Part of your magic is mine, after all. Have a good day, Pansy. I know Axander intends to.” Keelie waved farewell, grabbed the assessor and they disappeared in a swirl of energy.

Pansy turned and blinked. “She came and it wasn’t dawn or

twilight. This must have been important.”

“It sounded important. Your aunt is perceptive.” His eyes narrowed, and he began to stalk her.

She giggled and a slight bit of anticipation ran down her spine. “Is she? Well, she isn’t a shifter, what could she know?”

Without warning, Pansy turned to run. If she got up the tree in the front yard, he would never be able to climb after her.

She didn’t even make it off the front porch. He grabbed her, and she kicked and squealed, laughing as he hauled her up to their room

for a discussion on the finer points of instinct.

They had four days until she would start her training; he had better make the most of it.

Afterword

Nine children, each with a different shifter shape, were born to the Barkleys. Each one had a fae godparent, handpicked by Keelie.

Pansy's pursuit of magic was remarkably successful and each of her offspring had her talent, her control and her ability to walk in high heels. It made the boys very popular during drama presentations at school. Five of the children married fae spouses and

lived happily ever after. The other four went to the Crossroads under their own power and found the mate for them.

The Medeelas did indeed have mates waiting. Well, most of them did. Four were wed within two months of the Barkleys' wedding and the other two were the first beings that Pansy sent to the Crossroads...but that is another story.

Author's Note

Each one of these books is a different family, different situation and different set of rules. The only constant is the Crossroads itself and many of the staff members.

In *Getting Wet*, we will revisit an otter that we first met in *Born Cheetah*. With her sister mated and limited options in sight, going to the Crossroads is her best bet to find a man who likes to do it under water, in either shape.

Thanks for reading,

Zenina Masters

<http://www.zeninamasters.com>

About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there. She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis. In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch,

needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush. Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.