

WISHES



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THE snow crunched under Teigan's boots as he walked along the path between the pack house and the home of the man he had been sent to fetch. His breath froze in the crisp night air and lifting his head back, he gazed at the myriad of stars. The beauty of the area made up for the inconvenience of having to drive more than two hours for groceries, and it made living in the boonies worthwhile. He paused as he saw thickening clouds in the distance. The sight brought a faint worry about the incoming storm, but he thought it would be a while yet before it hit.

The soft sound of snow falling from branches on the trees brought him out of his trance and he continued on the path, happy that he was here and doing his duty for the pack. Soon he would be at Sid Martin's house, the man he was supposed to bring back for the mating.

Sid was a member of the Salazar pack that had taken over Teigan's pack nearly three years ago. Not that Teigan minded. Hell, no one did. Teigan's alpha had run their pack down, leaving them destitute and half-crazed with loneliness. Honestly, the man had been crazy. He forbade groups from getting together, wouldn't allow matings to take place, and often went on tirades about things like homosexuality. It had been very bad, and Teigan had lived in fear that his sexuality would be found out. He counted himself as very lucky that the man never did figure it out.

When the Salazar pack wanted to move into the area, they approached the Pike alpha and quickly realized that something had to be done. A formal challenge and a very short fight later, the Salazar pack had taken over, to the relief of Teigan and the others. Sid, a tall dark-haired man with a goatee, was the Salazar pack's liaison.

Teigan had worried at first that he would be asked to leave. After his experience with the old alpha and the fact that not many packs welcomed members who were gay, he thought he would have to go. Samuel, the new alpha, didn't seem to care. Instead he placed Teigan with the new pack shaman/matchmaker. Working as Edna's assistant, Teigan ran errands for the most part, but on occasion he performed a more important service.

On occasions like tonight, he got to bring mates together. He would escort one to the pack house, to Edna, and then fetch their mate. Edna would tell him who to bring, and Teigan loved doing this. It thrilled him to see their faces light up with the joy of knowing their fondest wish was coming true. Sometimes he admitted, however, that he wished it was him getting his mate. Samuel had told him that he had never seen a gay mated pair in all of his travels and that Teigan should simply accept it. He tried to resign himself to it but at this time of the year, hope seemed to bubble up in spite of the reality.

Every Peraphay, the holiday of matings, he found himself wishing again that some miracle would happen and he would get a mate. He kicked at the snow in disgust. He had even asked the spirits to help him with his wish, even though he was too old to believe in them anymore.

He saw a glimmer of lights through the tree branches as he walked the slim path. A sudden churning of his stomach stopped him again. For the first time since he had performed this duty, Teigan was nervous. The worst part was the reason, something he could never have told Edna because it would have been too embarrassing.

The initial sight he had of Sid had nearly knocked him to his knees with lust. While he had seen him a handful of times around the pack house, Teigan's breath caught each time he saw the man. Desire at first, and then, as he got to know more about the man, deeper feelings emerged. The sad part was that he doubted Sid even knew he existed. He shivered, and not from the cold.

The lights and the snow on the trees sparkled as he blinked back a couple tears of self pity. Snowflakes started to come down again, and a light layer covered his hair. Looking up, Teigan saw that the clouds had moved in while he stood mourning something that never was. He shook the snow off and wiped his eyes. There would be none of that here. He would bring the man to his chosen one and smile happily for them. It was his duty and his honor to do this for the pack. He watched as a small gray cat darted across the path, dodging the snowflakes, and he laughed. It was time to fetch a wolf for a mating.

THE fire crackled in the fireplace as Sid sprawled on his couch drinking a beer and thinking about the trip he had come back from. As the pack liaison for the outside world and with the other packs, he often had to travel. Sometimes

negotiations didn't go well but in this case they were excellent. He had gained the pack allies within the shifter clans. Samuel had been very pleased to hear that Trion Mercedes agreed to his terms. The coup to have their smaller pack allied with one of the most powerful packs in North America was worth the exhaustion he now felt. Soon they would get together and see if there were any potential matings within the two packs. That would help strengthen their alliance. The only drawback that Sid could see was the insistence that he meet the alpha's daughters, but that was part of the deal. Samuel had discussed it with him before they agreed to marry one. Both he and Samuel knew he would never have a real mate, and it would help the pack in the long run for him to do this. Sid agreed out of a sense of duty for the pack, but the truth was that he felt nothing for the woman. He sighed and just for a moment wished for a true mate, one who would be his foil, his complement, his other half. Then he laughed at himself. There was no point thinking about something that would never be. He was too old to be wishing for impossible dreams.

The wind outside his snug little house increased and the window in his living room rattled, startling him out of his musings. He peered out the window at the heavily falling snow and was glad to be inside during this storm, especially on the eve of Peraphay. Once, he had wished for a mate with all his heart but once he had figured out that guys didn't mate other guys, he had stopped. He snorted to himself as he thought of what the elders taught about the spirits helping someone find their mate. What a joke. It made him think of Teigan O'Malley, though. Someone he definitely did not want to think about when he had agreed to marry some

woman. By the gods he had lusted over the smaller man forever and had learned early on to avoid him. Samuel had not needed him screwing one of the new pack members and causing problems with incorporating both packs.

A loud knock at his door made him jump. Who would be out tonight with the storm moving in? Opening the door, he couldn't have been more surprised. It was a very cold and snow blown Teigan O'Malley, the mating facilitator and the very man Sid had been thinking about. The ache Sid felt upon seeing him surprised him and made him feel defensive. He pushed it aside as he opened the door wider for Teigan to come in.

As Teigan brushed past Sid into the house, the scent of man and oranges wafted to Sid. Oranges? He lifted a brow, "Please come in, Teigan. Or should I use some sort of title tonight if it's official business?"

Teigan stopped in mid-step and turned awkwardly to face him. The hurt in his eyes hit Sid like a blow, and he froze. Teigan spoke very quietly.

"There is no title for me. I only help Edna bring mates together. I'm just Teigan."

Sid swallowed hard as that damn scent floated by again. "Teigan, I apologize. That wasn't fair of me, and I know you wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the damn storm. Edna shouldn't have sent you this far out tonight, even for a mating." Even if Teigan was the last person on this planet he wanted to see at the moment.

Warm brown eyes lifted to meet his gray ones. "Even if it's your mating?"

He laughed. Really, he couldn't help it. Sid stopped abruptly. Unless, Teigan meant that his union was to take place already. He swore out loud, and Teigan jumped. Sid grimaced and got ready to apologize again when the smaller man frowned at him.

"Having a mate should be the most important thing in the world for you. I would do anything to have one of my own. You should be honored to get this visit even if you don't care for me." He shook with righteous indignation and cold.

Sid's eyes were drawn to the man's shivering body and he realized that Teigan's coat had soaked through. "Give me your coat," he said gruffly as he stretched out his hand.

Teigan gaped at him for a moment. "No, we have to go to the pack house for your mating."

"Are you joking? Look outside, there's a storm and it's getting worse. No way are we going anywhere tonight."

TEIGAN looked out the living room window to a solid sheet of white. Oh, by the gods, the storm had moved much faster than he had thought. The clouds he had seen only a short time ago were now dumping snow like a kid pours water from a bucket. How were they going to get to the pack house? With his teeth chattering, he asked about a car. Sid looked at him like he had lost his mind.

"Teigan, we aren't going anywhere. This is a blizzard. You're lucky that you made it here. Now give me your coat and strip down. We need to get you warmed back up."

Fumbling with the zipper, he tried to get his coat off but it caught on his arms, and Sid had to help him pull it away. Then, before he could blink, the dark-haired man unknotted Teigan's tie and begun to unbutton his shirt. The brush of those warm fingers against his chest had an unwelcome effect on him as his cock hardened. He tried to jerk away but his body wouldn't cooperate, and was Sid *sniffing* him?

"I... I can finish it." Teigan hated that his voice sounded shaky.

Sid drew back with an odd look and then nodded. "I'll get the shower going so you can warm up. I'll find you some clothes too. When you're done, come back here to the living room. It's the warmest room in the house."

The shower water felt wonderful on his frozen body and he luxuriated in the warmth. The small gray cat he had seen crossed his mind and he hoped that it had found someplace safe and warm too. After warming up in the shower and finding some sweats on a hook for him, he wandered back out to the living room. He sneaked a peek at the bedroom as he went by. The massive bed took up almost the entire room and made him think of all kinds of wicked things. He swallowed hard and sternly told himself to remember that this man was to be mated as soon as the storm stopped. He came around the corner to the sight of Sid on the couch and the smell of cocoa in the air. Sid looked up and smiled at him.

"Thought maybe you'd like some hot chocolate tonight," Sid said as he ran a hand through his dark hair, "since you're stuck here with me."

Teigan smiled and debated where to sit since Sid was in the middle of the couch. He didn't want to appear standoffish because Sid seemed to be trying to make him comfortable here, but he wasn't sure it was a good idea to sit close to the man he had desired for so long. However when he saw the older man's face fall slightly, his heart led him over to the couch. Sid's face lit up and he handed Teigan a cup of cocoa with marshmallows in it.

Teigan hid a grin as he took a sip of the warm drink. Marshmallows, that was cute. Who would have thought the serious man would put marshmallows in his hot chocolate? He jumped slightly as Sid tucked a blanket around his lap. His body's immediate reaction embarrassed him, and he closed his eyes for a moment. The gentle caress of rough fingers against his cheek made him open them. Gray eyes, looking confused, stared back as Sid stilled next to him. Then the moment passed and the hand dropped.

An uncomfortable silence fell between the two men.

"I'm sorry, Teigan. I don't know what I was thinking. You just smell so good, like oranges...."

Teigan frowned slightly. He smelled like fruit? Was that some sort of back handed slap because he was gay? Sid seemed to know it sounded bad because he continued talking.

"I love the smell of oranges."

"You like the way I smell?"

Sid laughed softly. "One of the few scents that I can't get enough of is oranges, and that's what you smell like to me. My mom used to use dried orange peels to scent our house. It smells like home to me."

“So, a comfortable smell.” Teigan couldn’t help the note of disappointment in his voice. It was wrong of him to feel that way and he knew it. He shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have whined about it like I was fishing for something more.”

SID was quiet as he thought about it. No, it was that it wasn’t a comfortable smell, more like a feeling of being home. How could he explain this to Teigan without it sounding like he desired him? So what if it was the truth? Nothing could ever come from it. He shifted awkwardly as his jeans tightened on his groin. He cleared his throat and answered Teigan honestly.

“Teigan, your scent makes me hard as stone, and I would love nothing more than to take you into my bedroom and fuck you through the night. But I doubt you would agree to that.”

The other man looked shocked and a brief burst of heat flared in those brown eyes. It faded quickly as he seemed to remember who he was talking to. Sid watched as Teigan shook his head.

“No... no, I do want to, but....” Teigan looked at him with serious eyes. “I’m the one who will bring you to your mate. How can I face her or Edna and the alpha knowing that we....” His voice trailed off.

Sid nodded. His respect for the younger man rose even higher with the knowledge of the other man’s honor and sense of duty. Unfortunately for him it also made him desire

Teigan even more. He sighed heavily as the weight of doing his duty hit him hard.

“You are right, Teig. I have my duty too. When this storm stops, you will take me to the pack house where I’ll do my duty and marry a woman I have no interest in. We both must put aside ourselves for the pack.”

They sat in a comfortable silence now, watching the flames dance in the fireplace until Teigan looked at him with a puzzled look on his face.

“How can you already know about your mate?”

Sid closed his eyes momentarily. He knew this would sound so wrong to the younger man but he needed to be honest with him.

“I’ve already met her. Her father is Trion Mercedes.”

Wide-eyed, Teigan choked out, “The alpha of the largest pack in the Northwest?” His voice was squeaking by the end of the question.

“Yes, and he wants to ally our pack with his. But he asked for certain conditions to be met and one of those was a marriage to one of his many daughters.”

“Doesn’t he believe in matings?”

“I don’t know. He wants matings between our packs but he insisted on a marriage with just one of his daughters as a condition for the alliance. Samuel asked me to do it and I agreed. I knew I’d never have a true mate....” He stopped and looked distant. “Samuel asks so little of me and when he asked this I didn’t think twice. I thought I’d have more time, though.”

A hand stroking the side of his face brought him back to himself. Sid gazed into Teigan's brown eyes. "I wish it was different. I wish...."

"That you would go there and your true mate would be standing there waiting for you. I wish for that every Peraphay." Teigan laughed softly.

"I did, too, until I realized that it was never going to happen for me."

"Of course it would happen for you. It happens for everyone. This woman must be your mate, since Edna sent me to fetch you."

Sid stared down at his cup. "No, Teigan. I feel nothing for her."

TEIGAN felt his heart break for this man, his voice sounded so sad. Sid seemed to try so hard to do the right thing for the pack. He said softly, "Why do this, then? Why give up all hope?"

Sid looked blank for a moment, and then he laughed. "Oh, Teigan. I'm gay, so we both know there'll never be a true mate for me. The only thing I'll get from this marriage is the knowledge I helped the pack, and possibly cubs of my own. That was why Samuel asked me to do it. Who else would give up their mate other than someone who would never have one?"

Teigan sat stunned. Why the hell had he been sent to fetch Sid for a mating? Samuel would just have them do a civil ceremony for the marriage. It made no sense to him that

he would be sent unless... a strange and slightly scary thought crossed his mind. Was this some sort of trick? A test or was it fate?

He studied Sid carefully and voiced his thoughts out loud. "Why would Edna send me to fetch you if this was to be a marriage of convenience?" A gust of wind hit the house and the other man jumped slightly. Teigan hid a smile. Sid looked at him suspiciously and flushed.

Teigan had to tease him. "Winds are strong tonight, stronger than usual. Do you think they are getting help from the other side?"

"Shut up, Teigan. There's no such thing as spirits."

Teigan grinned. He couldn't help it. The big, bad Sid was cute when he was jumpy. He reached out and ran a finger down Sid's side. "Watch out, Sid... the spirits are coming." Sid grabbed his hand. Teigan laughed until Sid pushed him down and kissed him. Then it was like a dam burst, all the pent-up longing hit Teigan in the gut. He wrapped his arms around the bigger man's waist and pulled himself closer. For a brief moment he let the intense feelings wash over him as he enjoyed the sensation of male lips claiming his and the scratch of whiskers against his face. A warm tongue swiped the inside of his mouth, the delicious flavor of the other man bursting over his taste buds. He moaned and tried to draw Sid's tongue in deeper, losing himself in the moment.

It was then that the feeling of icy fingers on the back of his neck made him jump. Sid let go as his face whitened.

"What the fuck is that?"

Teigan shivered as the feel of those cold fingers trailed down his back. He couldn't help the leap forward on top of

Sid, shifting to wolf on the way, the sound of ripping clothing the only warning that Sid had. Sid's eyes widened as the heavy animal landed on his lap, knocking him backward and off the end of the couch.

"Jeez, Teigan, get off me!"

A tinkling laugh echoed in the room, and Sid looked over Teigan's body. With wide eyes, he shifted as well, into an even larger black wolf, his torn clothing falling into a heap on the floor. Teigan pressed against him as he turned to stare at the strange sight in front of them.

Teigan couldn't stop the whimper that came out of his throat. A small girl stood there. Well, not a girl exactly, Teigan thought as he stared at faded colors that made up the transparent thing standing there. She looked like she was about ten years old, with a mischievous smile. Her dress seemed old-fashioned. He shivered as she laughed again. As she moved forward, he heard Sid growl, and he nudged him. The situation called for caution until they figured it out.

The girl frowned at Sid. "Are you going to be a stubborn doggie? Or are you going to mind your manners and be a good doggie? What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" And with that, she changed into a small gray cat.

SID knew his eyes even in his wolf form must be as round as saucers. His mind kept gibbering about how spirits didn't exist and at any moment he was going to wake up. He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, the scent of oranges and the unique smell of Teigan penetrated his nose but no other scent was there. Satisfied that he would open his eyes and

wake up, he did just that and stared at a small gray cat who gazed back at him.

“Oh yes, doggie... I’m still here.” The cat lifted a paw and swiped a pink tongue over it.

He felt rather than heard Teigan growl and pressed warningly against him. Sid wasn’t sure what was going on, but things had gotten strange fast. Pausing to prepare himself for anything, Sid changed back to man.

The cat stopped cleaning herself and looked at him with frank admiration.

“No wonder the puppy likes you so much. Are you sure you aren’t part Great Dane?”

Sid’s mouth dropped open and he could feel the heat rising in his face. Grabbing the blanket off the couch, he wrapped it around his waist.

“Listen, I don’t know who you are, but get out of my house.”

The cat drew herself up and narrowed her eyes at him. “You really don’t want to have me go yet. You need the spirits’ help tonight with your mating. You would be wise to listen to me.”

Sid shook his head frantically and heard Teigan give an odd moaning sound from behind him. At that moment he hated the cat, no matter what she was. The fact that she offered them something that could not happen was hurtful and cruel.

“There are no spirits and there will be no mating for either of us. Now... get out of my house!” His voice rose to a roar.

She hissed at him as the fur on her tail puffed out. Changing back into the young girl, she pulled her shoulders back and stared haughtily at them. For a moment, Sid thought she would argue with him but then her eyes turned sad and she was gone.

A warm hand touched his back and Sid shuddered slightly. The temptation of a warm, naked Teigan whirled in his head, along with the dangerous hope of a mating, until with a choked cry, he staggered across the room to the hallway. He paused to whisper to Teigan.

“I’m sorry... I can’t... sorry.”

He made it down the hallway to his bedroom and managed to shut the door before collapsing on the floor. Anger and pain in his chest had him slamming his fists onto the floor. How dare she? How dare she offer him his dream on the eve of doing his duty? He choked back a cry as the injustice of it hit him. Trapped in the storm with a man he desired above all others and a person who seemed determined to prey upon his self doubt. What he couldn’t quite understand was the how or why of it.

How did a cat shifter get in his house, and how did she disappear so fast? It didn’t seem possible. And how would he be able to face Teigan after all of this? Most importantly, why would someone do this? Was Samuel testing him? No, he dismissed that thought immediately. Samuel was more the direct-asking kind, not the sneak-around kind like... Trion Mercedes.

Once the thought entered his mind, he couldn’t stop thinking of it. It would be just like the other alpha to test him, and he must have set this up with that cat. Cats were

sneaky; she could have gotten in. Ignoring the facts of the storm and the house being locked up tight made it easier to believe. Maybe Teigan was in on it, too, playing him with teasing touches and smoldering looks until he had caved and kissed the man.

A small voice in the back of his mind told him he was being unfair to Teigan. The man had turned him down, after all, but fear made him unreasonable. In a flash of a second he had made his decision: he would avoid Teigan until time to go back to the pack house.

The little voice that laughed at him sounded suspiciously cat-like.

THE sound of the fire popping snapped Teigan out of the daze he had fallen into after Sid left the room. What the hell had just happened here? He'd stopped believing in spirits years ago but knew that sure as hell whatever had been in this room had not been living. The girl or cat had no scent, and unless technology could make illusions touch people, it hadn't been faked. The problem was that if it wasn't faked and it wasn't someone living, there was just one explanation left.

He frowned at the flames as he ran her words through his head. Mates? What did she mean their mating? He was here to bring Sid to his chosen, but who could there be for him? The treacherous thought of Sid naked and willing popped into his head. He felt his face grow warm as he remembered the feel of other man's warm skin under his hand.

He shook his head as if that would dislodge the thought and send it flying. A mate for him wouldn't be Sid, however. Mates were for having children and for that there had to be a woman. He snorted loudly; like he was going to be able to bed a woman. No, the cat must have meant something else.

The worst part for him had been to see Sid's pain. It must have been galling to be on the eve of your marriage and be told that you should hold out for your mate. Unless she meant that this woman was going to be Sid's mate. He snarled at the flames. He felt terrible, but he really hated that thought. Guilt welled up and he flushed with shame. He should be happy for Sid.

Letting out a sigh, he nearly jumped out of his skin as a paw tapped his foot.

"Holy shit!" He scrambled backward across the floor as the small gray cat curled her tail around her legs next to the fire and stared at him.

"So, are you ready to listen to me now, Teigan?"

"Uhhh, what?" Inside he cringed, he sounded like an idiot.

"We need to discuss your mating."

Teigan paused for a moment, trying to decide how to put this. "Ummm, spirit, you do realize I'm gay?"

"Call me Kitty, and of course I do, T. Why else would I be here?"

Feeling like he had just been insulted, Teigan snapped back without thinking. "It's not something that needs to be fixed, you know. I'm happy being gay."

A tinkling laugh filled the living room. "I'm not here to try and *cure* you from being gay. I'm here to help you with your mating."

Hope springs eternal, Teigan thought sarcastically even as he felt his heart beat faster.

"Kitty, I'm not going to have sex with a woman." He tried to make his voice firm.

He didn't think that cats could look flabbergasted but the small animal managed it just fine, and then she snorted.

"Are you really that dense? Of course you won't be having sex with a woman. You'll be having sex with your mate."

Frustration grew to a boiling point inside him. He ground his teeth as he tried to find a tactful way to put this.

"Kitty, I'm not going to having sex with any woman. I like men." The thought of Sid crossed his mind.

Kitty sighed heavily. "I see I'm going to have to...."

SID had heard enough. "Leave him alone. I don't know who you are, but you need to stop with these games. I don't care how much Trion is paying you, it isn't worth it." He came around the corner of the hallway.

Teigan scrambled up and hurried over to him. "Hey, man, what's this about Trion?" He looked confused.

"Cat here is working for him. I figured it out. I don't know how she's getting in and out so fast but I'm tired of

being jerked around. I gave my word and you can tell him I won't go back on it."

A hurt look crossed Teigan's face, but then he made a visible effort to smile at Sid.

A loud snort brought his attention back to the cat. She licked her paw and cleaned her face carefully as she made an obvious effort not to look him.

"What, are you going to deny it?"

"Far be it for me to correct your stupidity, dog." Condescension dripped from her voice as she sniffed. "Dogs are notorious for being loyal and somewhat trainable; forgive me for assuming you would be smart enough to understand what was going on here."

Sid couldn't say a word for a moment. Flustered and angry by the cat's harsh criticism, he clenched his jaw and tried to think of a comeback. Before anything came to mind, yellow eyes met his and she continued speaking.

"I work for something much greater than a silly alpha dog. You need to pay better attention. Now, sit... stay!" Her voice echoed loudly through the room, and Sid found his legs give out, dumping him on the floor. Teigan sat quickly by him.

"Sid, she's not a shifter. Take a whiff. You won't be able to smell her." Teigan's voice was quiet.

He took a deep breath and the only thing he could smell, like before, was Teigan with his spicy orange scent. There was no other scent at all. He stared hard at the cat as he took another sniff. Nothing... goose bumps rose on his arms. This was not possible. Ghosts or spirits did not exist.

He didn't realize he had spoken out loud until the smaller animal answered him.

"Yes and werewolves aren't supposed to exist, either. Yet here you are. Hmm, wonder what that could mean, puppy?"

"So what do you want?"

"You and Teigan need to learn a lesson about mates."

"We know about mates. We also know about not having them. I'm gay, I'll never have a mate."

"Pfft, who told you that nonsense?" Her tail flicked about her paws.

Teigan spoke up. "Everyone knows that. Shifters who are gay don't get mates. Mates are for having children and ensuring the lines continue. We can't do that so no mates are needed."

"Or wanted?" Kitty looked curious.

Sid spoke up at once. "We never said that. I don't know about Teigan but I once hoped for a mate before I knew that I would never get one. I used to wish...."

"Me too. I mean, I used to wish too." Teigan looked at him and smiled. A longing stirred in Sid's chest and he had to take a deep breath to continue speaking.

"So you see, cat, we do understand."

"Doggie, you have no clue. It's like you're living in a medieval world. Actually, even then there were gay shifters and their mates. They just stayed very low profile."

"Would you stop calling me a dog?" Sid was cross. "I have a name, it's Sid."

“Then stop calling me cat, I have a name too. Call me Kitty.”

Sid felt his lips twitch as he struggled not to laugh. He saw the cat narrow her eyes and made an effort not to let even a snicker pass his lips. Then he couldn't help himself.

“Guess that's better than pussy.” He laughed as the cat's ears went back.

The laughter stopped when an eerie snarl rang out. “You are trying my patience, Sid!” The emphasis on his name didn't escape Sid's notice. He gulped and subtly tried to back up a little, pressing his back to the wall. Teigan reached out and took his hand, holding it tightly.

“You two, as in both of you, have a mate. Can you guess who it is? Now, enough of this pussy footing around and get your asses in bed, doggie style... ha ha!” With that, the small cat vanished.

“What the hell did she mean by that crack?” Sid's voice shook a little. She couldn't be saying what he thought she was saying was she? He did really like Teigan. Okay, no, that was a lie. He more than liked the man. If he was honest, the more he was around Teigan, the more he craved him.

He met Teigan's gaze and his breath stopped. Teigan looked at him with such desire and want in those brown eyes as well as something more that he didn't want to think about. For a brief moment he swayed forward, but then caught himself.

“She's messing with us, offering us something that isn't true.”

“Why, Sid? Why bother? You’re already committed to marrying that woman for the pack and I-I will... go on being the mating facilitator. Nothing changes for us unless....”

For a moment Sid was angry with Teigan. Somewhere deep inside he had hoped that Teigan would say something different. Maybe even yell at him, telling him that they were mates and belonged together.

“Wait...what do you mean unless?”

“What if she’s right? What if you and I do have mates?”

“Not possible.”

“But what if it is? What if you and I can have a mate? What if you....” Teigan’s voice trailed off and he flicked a glance to Sid before looking away.

“There are no mates for us.” Sid’s voice was loud and harsh. He wasn’t sure if Teigan was involved in this or not, but his insistence about mates aggravated him.

“So there’s no hope for either of us?”

“There never was. To think differently is just fooling ourselves.” Sid looked down at his clasped hands. “Even if we were each other’s mates, we have other duties and responsibilities.”

“Do you think... I mean, maybe that we could be...?”

“No. We’re gay, Teigan. She’s offering us a pipe dream and that’s cruel. We should....”

“Oh by gods, the two of you are so dense. Do I have to spell this out for you?” The gray cat appeared between them. Sid jumped in his seat and saw Teigan do the same.

“Pay attention, doggies... Sid, you are Teigan’s mate. T, you are Sid’s mate. Your duty is *together*. Come on, get

together. How much more do I have to do here? I'm a spirit, not a miracle worker." Still muttering she faded away.

Sid stared at the spot where she had been. He was afraid to look at Teigan. He knew what he'd see, and he knew he'd have to crush it. He chanced a quick peek and his stomach dropped. Teigan's eyes, hell, his whole face glowed with hope. Sid stifled a groan. Didn't Teigan understand that this was impossible? They had commitments to the pack. They couldn't just go off and do their own thing because it affected the whole pack.

He cleared his throat. "Teig, even if it's true, so what? It doesn't really change anything. I still have to marry Trion's daughter, and you can't be the mating facilitator if you're with me. They won't let you. The pack is more important than we are." He watched the hope drain out of Teigan's eyes and hated himself for it. He knew it was better in the long run, but it felt terrible to him.

"Why? Why can't we take what is ours. Sid, this is our chance, our dream. Haven't we wished for just this very thing?"

"Because this isn't about us. It's about our duty. Or do you want us to shirk our duty or maybe leave the pack?" Sid was deliberately cruel. He needed to make Teigan see there was no hope for them.

"This is about us, our dreams, our hope, hell, and our wishes. Sid, can't you forget duty for one moment and think about that? We have a chance to be happy."

"Duty comes first. Our happiness comes second. Why can't you see that?"

“Because I’ve waited years for this, hoping and wishing for just this thing, and now you’re telling me that I can’t have it? That you want to go through this sham of a marriage rather than mate me?”

Sid saw the liquid brightness in Teigan’s eyes and swallowed hard. “This isn’t about what I want. It’s about what’s right.” He watched in dismay as Teigan spun around and rushed from the room. He took a step forward as his heart broke into a thousand pieces but stopped when he heard the bathroom door close. This was what he wanted, wasn’t it?

TEIGAN sat on the side of the tub in the bathroom trying desperately not to cry. He couldn’t believe this was happening. How could Sid even think of still marrying that woman when he had a mate? And what was he supposed to do, go to the wedding and smile happily for them, knowing that it was his mate standing up there?

He sighed heavily as he stared at the sink. Once he had calmed down somewhat, he thought about what had happened here. Perhaps this was for the best. After all, the pack was going to benefit greatly from Sid’s sacrifice. As for him, nothing had really changed. He was still alone, but now at least he knew that his wish had been heard and answered. Not in the way he had intended, but he was no worse off than before.

“Are you sure about that, puppy?”

He jumped and then laughed at himself. He really should be used to this now.

“Kitty.”

“Yes, T?”

“I have to let him go. He needs to do his duty for the pack.” Teigan knew his voice sounded dull but he was tired, both physically and emotionally.

“What about the fact that you guys are mates? Isn’t that important, more important than the pack?”

“No....” He let the word trail off. “Besides it doesn’t matter. Sid has chosen and it wasn’t me he picked. I have to live with that.”

Sad yellow eyes met his and an understanding passed between them.

“When will you tell them you’re leaving? Where will you go?”

“I’ll wait until the marriage has taken place, and then I’ll tell Samuel. I’ll tell him some excuse and I think I’ll move to the city. It will be easier for me to be alone there, away from Sid.”

“I’m so sorry, T. I thought I had gotten through to both of you about what was important here. I know your mind is made up but do me a favor and think about what matters here. I’ll abide by your decision either way.”

He smiled at the small cat. “I’m going to miss you, Kitty. Will I get to see you again?”

She looked at him in a mysterious way and then yawned. “Maybe, puppy, maybe.” In the blink of an eye, she disappeared.

He stood and stared at himself in the mirror. Somber brown eyes stared back. At that point, Teigan knew what he

needed to do. With one last look at himself, he opened the door.

After walking down the hallway, he found Sid in the living room staring sadly out the window.

“Hey.” Teigan tried to be calm even as his heartbeat was speeding up. Sid turned and gave a half smile. “Look, I’m sorry about earlier. I know you’re trying to do the right thing for the pack. I overreacted.”

“No, Teig. I’m asking the hardest thing in life of you and it’s not fair. I wish I could change it, but I can’t. You had every right to blow up at me.”

“Well, regardless I shouldn’t have acted like a girl about it.”

“Shhh, don’t let Kitty hear you.” Sid gave a half-hearted grin.

Teigan smiled back and motioned for Sid to sit on the couch with him. They sat together quietly. After a while, they discussed how to deal with things. Since they had rarely seen each other before this, they agreed to avoid each other when possible. Once the storm stopped, Teigan would go back to the pack house and inform Edna that Sid was on his way. Then he would find an excuse to not be there for the wedding. Sid would follow and do his duty. The pack would be happy and well.

SID watched the flames for a while, and Teigan stared out the window. As the night passed, they didn’t speak but looks of regret passed between them. Finally, as the morning

dawned, they could both see that the snow had stopped falling. Sid got up and moved to the kitchen. He started the coffee pot and pulled eggs out. He busied himself with fixing breakfast to keep his mind off of what was happening. It didn't help, and neither did facing Teigan when he came in the room with his wounded eyes. Sid looked down at the table and made himself ignore the smell of oranges. Suddenly he knew that he'd never be able to have anything orange-scented in his home again.

After eating breakfast, Teigan spoke up. "So this is it? I'll go now, and we'll pretend that everything is fine?"

"Teigan, it's how it has to be. I want you to go. Don't make this worse than it already is."

Teigan nodded, but Sid didn't fail to see the hurt in his eyes. For a moment there was a tiny hope that he wouldn't go but then Teigan pushed back from the table, turned, and grabbed his coat. Sid could hear his footsteps as he walked down the hallway.

Once the door slammed, Sid laid his head on the table and closed his eyes. He felt numb. The door had shut and the best thing in his life had walked away. Teigan was gone without a backward glance.

"Wasn't that what you told him to do, dog?" The grating nasal voice made his hackles rise in his human form.

"He could have chosen to stay if he had wanted to."

He had never heard a cat bark before, but Kitty managed the most sarcastic bark he had ever heard.

"Why should he have stayed when you made it clear that duty came first above all else?"

“Duty is important.”

“More important than anything else?”

“No, of course not. But....”

“More important than family?”

“No....”

“More important than your mate?”

“He can’t be my—”

The cat interrupted him before he could finish. “Don’t say it, dog. Don’t deny him here with me. I know better, remember?”

Sid swallowed back the words of denial he had been about to say and stared hard at the cat.

“It doesn’t matter now. He chose to leave.”

“And if he came back? What would you do? Would you refuse him again? Push him away so you can make everyone unhappy?”

“I’d make my alpha happy and the woman happy.” Even to him, his voice sounded weak and disbelieving. To his surprise, Kitty looked at him sadly but said nothing. He waited for a moment but she was quiet and his own words echoed in his head.

Slowly he said, “I can’t make them happy if I’m not happy.” At the small cat’s nod, he went on, “And I’ll never be happy without my mate.” He looked down at Kitty and nodded back.

“I have to stop him. I have to convince him that we belong together.” Panic made a lump in his stomach and he hurried to the door, nearly tripping on the throw rug in the

entryway. Just as his hand touched the knob, the door flew open, whacking him in the cheek. Reeling backward, he cursed as his hand flew up to cup his face. To his shock, Teigan's surprised face hovered into view.

"Teigan?"

"Sid, I need to tell you...."

"Teigan, I love you, don't leave me."

Teigan stopped speaking and his mouth gaped open.

"Sid, I-I... I think...."

His heart falling toward his feet, Sid waited numbly for Teigan to finish speaking as his face throbbed.

"I mean, I thought I'd have to convince you we belonged together. I love you, Sid Martins. And we're mates and we belong together."

His voice sounded so sure and strong, it made Sid smile until he winced.

"Sid, oh my God, what happened to your cheek?" Teigan's eyes were wide and then knowledge dawned. "Oh shit, when I came through the door. Oh crap, let me get you some ice. You should sit down... no, lie down... maybe you should...."

His voice trailed off as he rushed past Sid toward the kitchen. Sid had to laugh. He straightened up and headed to the bedroom. If he was going to lie down, he was doing it in there because there was no way he was passing up the chance to get his mate in his bed. He didn't even notice the small gray cat watching him with satisfied eyes as he went past.

TEIGAN grabbed a dish towel and opened the freezer door. By the gods, how stupid could he be? Bashing his mate's face in while trying to tell him that he loved him wasn't the best start to their relationship. A small pat to his ankle had him jumping until he realized it was Kitty.

"Damn it, Kitty, don't do that." He knew he was being cross but he couldn't help it. She had practically scared him to death. Her small feline face looked up at him with a puzzled look on her face.

"Darling T, what are you doing in here when you have a gorgeous man in an enormous bed back there?"

"I... uh, ice?" He floundered for an answer as the idea of Sid in bed short-circuited his brain. Kitty grinned wickedly at him.

"Ice... what a kinky idea, you naughty puppy, you." Her gold eyes sparkled as he flushed. He turned back to the open freezer and grabbed a bag of frozen peas. Not looking at her as he wrapped the dishtowel around it, he nevertheless couldn't miss her snicker.

"Peas, interesting choice."

Teigan rolled his eyes at her. "It's for his face. I hit his face when I rushed back in here. I'm surprised he even let me talk to him after that."

"Oh puppy, I don't think talking is what he has in mind."

He looked at her blankly and then he dropped the towel wrapped peas as what she said hit him.

He didn't bother saying anything as he rushed down the hallway to the bedroom. Once there, the sight of a naked Sid stroking his hard, leaking cock stopped him in his tracks. Lust burned from Sid's eyes as he stared at Teigan.

"One of us is wearing too many clothes, and it's not me." There was a husky quality to Sid's voice.

Teigan closed his mouth and started stripping, never removing his gaze from Sid's. Naked, he stalked toward the bed. Sid sprawled out there was a sight he could not resist, and he pounced. To his relief, Sid didn't fight him at all, only opened his legs wider to accommodate Teigan's body. Teigan reached out slightly and stroked gently along the swollen cheek.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"No, I'm sorry I hurt you." Sid looked serious as he caught and held Teigan's gaze. "I was a jerk and the fact that you came back to me... I can't believe...."

Teigan surged forward and kissed Sid. It started out hard and desperate but quickly became something more. Heat coiled around the two men as they explored each other's mouths. Teigan stroked Sid's tongue and then pulled back slightly to lick at his lips. Sid watched his tongue and whimpered. A feeling of wicked pleasure shot through Teigan. He leaned forward and nipped at those luscious swollen lips, delighting in the little gasp Sid made. Sid followed his mouth back as he pulled away, moaning as Teigan pushed him back.

"No, this is my show. We go at my speed, my way this time." He grinned slyly as Sid groaned, but was pleased to see Sid lay back. "Now where was I? Here?" He ran his

mouth softly along Sid's jaw line. "Or here?" He placed gentle kisses down his neck, delighting in the tremors that ran through Sid's larger frame. "Or maybe here?" He swirled his tongue around one of Sid's nipples.

Sid cried out and arched his back as Teigan licked and sucked at first one and then the other taut nipple. Once Teigan had him making incoherent noises, he moved down his belly until he faced the hard fact of Sid's arousal. He paused there to admire the swollen member. Leaking and deep red, curving up toward his stomach, Sid's cock was a beautiful sight. Underneath was another lovely sight, one Teigan couldn't resist. He nuzzled those lovely fuzzy lumps, drawing in deep breaths of the heavy musky scent. He gently mouthed one and then the other, thrilled with the way Sid responded. Running his tongue over them he got a taste of leakage. The flavor burst into his mouth and without thinking he followed the taste up to the tip of Sid's cock. Wrapping his hand around it and lapping at the slit, Teigan lost himself to the joy.

He came back to himself when he realized he was humping Sid's leg, and Sid's sack had drawn up. Sid was making mewling noises and getting louder. By the gods, he wanted in his mate. He lifted himself up so he could see Sid's face.

"Sid... Sid!" He waited until Sid's eyes opened and locked on his. "I'm going to fuck you now. You understand?"

Sid grinned at him. "Why talk when you can do?" He pulled his knees up and stared hotly at Teigan.

Teigan grinned back. "Lube?" He didn't bother asking about condoms. Being shifters had its advantages, like no

STDs. He watched Sid reach under his pillow and pull out a bottle of lube. He tossed it to Teigan.

“Gods, Teig, hurry. I want you so bad.”

Teigan had to laugh. “I thought I was running this show.”

Sid chuckled. “You are, you just need to run it faster.”

Pouring cold lube down Sid’s crack, Teigan gave an evil snicker. “You’ll get what I give you and beg for more.” He slowly worked one finger into Sid’s hole, watching as Sid’s eyes glazed. He worked a second one in and wasn’t surprised when Sid growled at him.

“In me! In me now!”

Placing the head of his cock at Sid’s entrance, he paused until Sid glared at him. Then with a push he slid slowly into the hottest, tightest place he had ever had his cock. For a brief moment he thought he might come from the initial sinking into Sid. He held himself still as he fought for self control. It took him a minute to understand the moaning sound he heard was from him, not Sid. Sid looked up at him with such love on his face.

“By the gods, that’s so sexy. I can’t believe it. Teig, move, I want to see you.”

Teigan whimpered as he started to pump his hips. He couldn’t take his eyes off Sid. Every move he made, Sid reacted to and made better. The desire and heat wound up higher and higher until Teigan thought he would die from trying to hold back until Sid came. He felt his balls draw up and that tingle in his spine just as Sid keened and shot thick white spurts between them. The feel of the tight passage

pulsating and gripping him shot what little control Teigan had. He came so hard that the world grayed out around him. Instinctively, he pulled Sid's head over and bit down on the curve of his neck and shoulder. Gasping and shuddering, Sid returned the favor, striking swiftly as Teigan collapsed on top of him. The mating bond completed and both men gasped as it locked into place.

They held each other tightly as the enormity of what had happened sunk in. They were mated. The bond was complete and they would never be alone. They were linked together for life. Now they had to tell their alpha and face the consequences.

Outside their bedroom door, a small gray cat purred and slowly faded away.

SID opened the door to his house. The smell of oranges nearly brought him out of his bad mood, but not quite. By the gods, he was pissed. The alpha was a bastard who deserved to be shot like a rabid wolf. He paused and thought about it for a moment then said it out loud.

"Things didn't go well, then?" Teigan came around the corner and hugged him. "You need to give him time. You did kind of spring it on him, you know."

"Time? Time for what? He knows it's what's right. He needs to let it happen. His daughter deserves it."

"That might be, but you have to admit that just getting him to accept the two of us was major work. Now his little girl? Come on, Sid, you know he needs some time. If he

won't let her mate then she can move here and petition Sam for mating rights."

Sid growled and then laughed. "Okay, stubborn mate of mine, I guess you're right. Not every alpha can be like Samuel."

Teigan nodded. "We were very lucky. An alpha who accepted us and who was willing to fight for us with the shifter council is unusual. Add in the fact that he got you out of the contract with Trion and that marriage."

Sid shuddered. Oh man, it had been bad. First, having to explain about their mating to Samuel, having to prove their mating bond, and then having the council try to deny them and force their bond to break. It had strained the pack to almost the breaking point but Samuel had proven why he was an alpha. He forced the council to acknowledge that there was a mating bond between Sid and Teigan. Then he maneuvered Trion into withdrawing the contract between the two packs. Of course it had helped that a small gray cat kept appearing at odd times during the negotiations. It had seemed to make Trion uneasy, and made Teigan laugh.

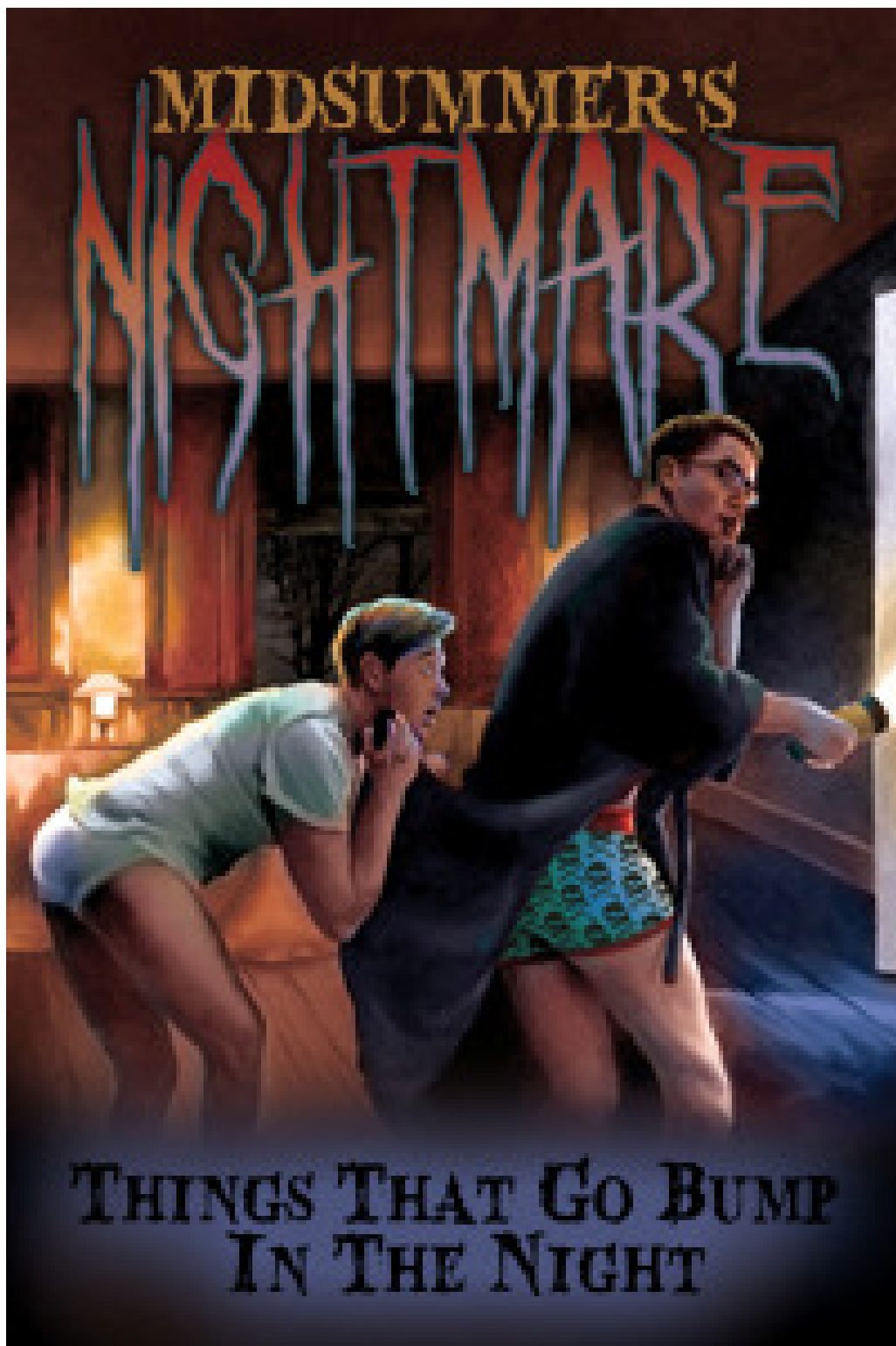
Then to top of the whole thing, he extended an offer to any shifter who was different to petition to join his pack. It had caused a huge uproar but some good had come out of it.

Teigan had started his shaman training with Edna, who had been very impressed that one of the spirits had contacted him. Sid had his job changed to deal with the influx of applicants petitioning to join their pack. There were so many that their small pack had grown to the point that they rivaled even the Mercedes pack. There had been far more shifters out there than even they had realized, not only

gay or lesbian but a rainbow of people. All of them had two things in common: they were all outcasts, and they all did one thing the same.

They wished....

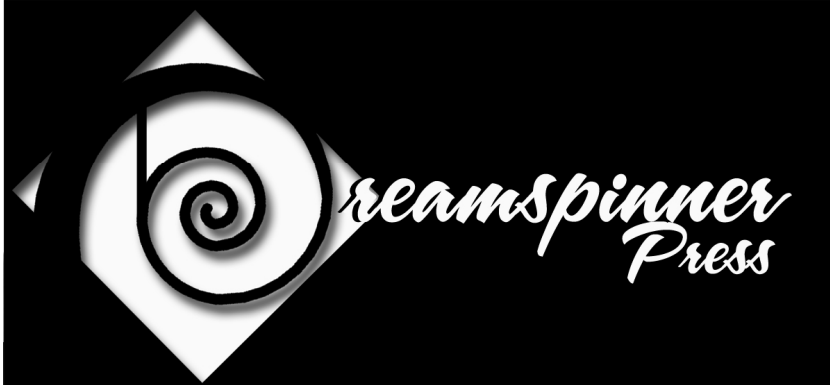
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