

## Chapter 40

*Did he just propose to me..?* Sophia stared at Shadow in shock, her mind going blank.

'I...'. She whined, trying to recollect her wits.

Temporarily unimpeded by her rational mind, every fiber of her being implored her to accept. Pure elation filled her at the proposition of spending her life as a wolf alongside Shadow. Her heart fluttered as she envisioned running through the wilderness alongside the pups they'd have together. She yearned for her body to reflect her spirit and become the wolf she knew she was meant to be.

*Say yes! With all of my heart, yes!*

'I... I don't know...' She said instead.

*What if it's the wolf and not me that wants this?* Doubt appeared as her conscious mind with all of its worries reasserted itself. *Could I leave the only life I know? Live wild like this every day? Do I have a choice?* Panic welled up in her and she wanted to run.

'What are you unsure of?' Shadow rumbled gently. 'Do our spirits not resonate together?'

'Yes!' Sophia barked, louder than she intended. 'I love you and I want to be with you, but what if I lose my fur and tail when the sun rises?'

'Then I will wait here for you,' Shadow insisted. 'Until you're ready.'

'What if that never happens?' Sophia whimpered. 'What if I stay a two-leg except on bright moons?'

'The stories...'

'The stories might be wrong!' Sophia pointed out in a high-pitched bark.

Shadow slowly closed the distance between them and tenderly nuzzled the side of her head with his. Reacting to his gentle touch, her tense body started to relax and she felt her panic ebbing. Sophia closed her eyes and took a ragged breath, concentrating on his scent.

*It's everything I ever wanted; why am I so scared?*

'I believe they're right,' he rumbled soothingly. 'We are meant to be life mates; I know it.'

*Say yes!*

Sophia nuzzled back against him and murmured, 'This is all so much... So fast...'

Shadow gave her a lick-kiss and then said, 'Our spirits call to each other; I will wait until you are ready to join me - as many nights as it takes.'

She wagged her tail and gave him an affectionate lick-kiss before yipping, 'Thank you. I... I need time... to think.'

'I understand,' Shadow told her. 'We...'

His ears perked up and he turned his head in the direction of the fallen deer as the wind shifted direction. Sophia sniffed and immediately detected what had gotten his attention. A strange animalistic scent now accompanied the deer's - alongside cervine blood. It was some sort of mammal, male... and a carnivore. Heavy guilt settled into her chest as she realized they were too late.

*Oh no! I cost him his dinner! He'll starve because of me!*

Intense guilt turned to anger and she let out a deep, guttural snarl. Without hesitating, she propelled herself forward with her 'hindlegs' and took off on all fours towards the deer. She heard Shadow bark something but was too caught up in her fury to catch it.

*I will not be the reason he starves!*

Even on incompletely changed paws and legs, it didn't take long to cover the distance. She pulled her lips back into a snarl as she neared the intruder, exposing her array of dagger-like teeth. As she maneuvered around a tree, a blurry form came into view several yards in front of her. Part of the form resolved itself into the head of a large feline as it looked up from the carcass, its eyes glinting in the fading moonlight. Time seemed to slow as the large cat bared its teeth and hissed menacingly.

Sophia's claws dug into the packed snow as she threw herself to the side to evade a large paw with deadly-looking claws. Then, there was a loud shriek as her fangs sank through fur and into flesh even as the rest of her body slammed into the cougar. She smelled and tasted blood as she held her jaws tightly closed while they tumbled. As soon as the cougar's body hit the ground, she used the momentum to pivot her body about her muzzle before letting go.

The cougar snarled as Sophia landed on all fours, her claws furiously digging into the packed snow to stop her slide. Before the cougar had a chance to fully recover, she pushed herself forward. Landing on the cougar's back, she again sank her teeth into the hide of the big cat and wrapped her hand-paws around the cougar's front. Another angry cry of pain pierced the air as the cougar tried to throw her off.

Sophia rode the cat as it jumped and bucked. As soon as the cougar's rear paws hit the ground during one twist, she released her jaws before plunging them back into her opponent. Again the cat shrieked and started to roll in an effort to get her off. Feeling the feline start to tilt, Sophia tried to let go but wasn't able to remove her 'forelegs' in time.

She yelped as she hit the ground on her side and the mountain lion landed on her left 'foreleg', pinning it. As fast as she could, she scrambled to free her trapped limb. Unfortunately, the cat was much faster and a head-butt knocked her flat on her back. He immediately pinned

her with a large paw on her shoulder, its claws digging painfully into her skin. She opened her proto-muzzle and let out as defiant a growl as she could manage.

*Shit...*

The cougar reared back, opened its jaws and started down towards her throat. Before it could reach her, a blur slammed into the big cat, knocking it off of her. Freed, Sophia rolled to her side to see Shadow facing off with the mountain lion. Fresh blood marked a new wound on its neck and it snarled.

Sophia pushed herself onto all fours and quickly moved alongside Shadow before growling as deeply as she could manage. The cougar glared at the two wolves and yowled loudly. When the couple didn't back down, it turned and bolted into the woods. Sophia watched it go, her snarl turning into a breathless pant.

*What did I just do?*

Her body began trembling violently as the import of what she had just done hit her and her adrenaline ebbed. Burning pain erupted in her shoulder and she collapsed into the snow as her limbs gave out. The smell of her own blood joined that of the cougar in her nose. Turning her head, she looked at her stinging left shoulder and saw blood mixed with fur. Instinctively, she immediately began licking at the wound, her tongue thick with her saliva.

*I just tried to fight a cougar.* Luckily, the scratch wasn't deep, but it stung. *I can't believe I just fought a cougar!*

'You're hurt!' Shadow whined, his scent thick with worry. He padded over to her and nosed the side of her neck.

Sophia paused her efforts to clean the scratch, 'It's not bad; the cougar just grazed me.'

'You fought well!' Shadow told her, his scent surprised, but relieved. 'Very few wolves survive a fight with a cougar on their own.'

*It almost killed me...* The pain in her shoulder waned with each swipe of her tongue. *If Shadow had been any slower... Why did I do that?*

'Never do that again!' He pleaded in a growl, echoing her thoughts. 'I thought he was going to kill you before I could reach you.'

Sophia slowly clambered back onto her 'paws' as her energy returned. The injury was no longer oozing blood and the pain had faded to a dull ache. She could smell the blood of the mountain lion on the fur around her face and chest. It gave her no small amount of satisfaction and she had to admit she had never felt more *alive*.

'I didn't want you to lose your kill,' Sophia yipped, her voice trembling, as they started towards the deer. 'It was my fault you didn't get to eat it yet. It felt like my duty.'

Shadow huff-laughed ruthfully, 'Thanks, but I'd rather lose a meal than you. A wolf is nothing without his pack... or her pack. And we're a pack of two.'

*I would do it again, she realized. At least the wolf would. But is the wolf really me? Is the wolf going to get me killed?*

'Thanks for saving me and I'm really sorry,' Sophia apologized solemnly. 'It was... very foolish.'

*I can't tell where the wolf ends and I begin.* She searched in vain for Wolfgirl in her mind, but the only parts of her that felt alien were human. *Will I still feel so comfortable with surviving as a wild animal in the morning?*

'It's alright; I'm just relieved.' Shadow reassured her, standing next to the carcass. 'Share the deer with me, my brave wolfess.'

The mountain lion had started in on the deer's haunches, but most of it was intact. Her nose noted the bit of Shadow's urine on its back fur he had used to mark it.

Sophia's stomach felt like it was twisted in knots from anxiety, 'I'm not feeling hungry right now. I should start heading to my two-leg den.'

*Shadow had to put himself in danger because of me. I could have gotten him killed.*

Disappointment rolled off of Shadow, 'You think you're going to become a two-leg again?'

*A two-leg. That's what I'll always be.* On top of her fresh doubts, she could feel the all too familiar tingling sensation starting. *I'm not a real wolf; I don't belong out here.*

'I can feel it coming,' Sophia confirmed, her tail drooping sadly.

'You should eat,' Shadow insisted. 'You smell as hungry as a hard-paw just before shedding season.'

*I don't know what that means, but it does smell good.*

'Maybe I'm a little hungry.' Sophia conceded and bent her head down to bite into some exposed muscle.

*Crap, I lost track of time. The tingling has gotten a lot stronger.* Sophia finished swallowing the bit of shoulder muscle she had in her mouth and examined their meal. *I guess I was hungry.*

They had long since torn open the deer's abdomen and consumed the tasty organs located there. After that, she had gone to work on the doe's shoulder and chest muscles while Shadow had turned his appetite to its rump.

*What am I doing?*

'I really need to go,' she whined miserably, turning her muzzle towards Shadow.

'Please stay with me,' Shadow pleaded, looking up from the intestines lining he had been gnawing on.

*I need to accept reality... and tell him the truth.* Sophia closed her eyes and took a breath before opening them.

'Thanks for sharing with me... thanks for everything, but I don't belong out here.' Sophia told him. 'I'm just a foolish two-leg that thought she was a wolf.'

'What?' Shadow barked in astonishment.

'You're better off without me,' Sophia told him, shaking. 'I can't get you hurt because of me. You deserve a real wolfess as your mate.'

Shadow was silent for a moment, his scent shocked. Then, he padded around the deer until he was only a few inches from her.

'Many Scents,' he rumbled tenderly, his scent turning to understanding. 'You might have been born without a tail and paws, but you are a wolf as sure as I am.'

Sophia collapsed into the snow and started whimpering, 'You almost lost me because of my two-leg foolishness. I could have gotten you killed.'

The male wolf covered the gap between them and touched his nose to hers.

'Our spirits are tied together,' he said firmly. 'Yours has called to me since I was a pup. Whether in this life or the next, we are meant to be mates.'

Sophia lay there quietly for a time, just enjoying the touch of their noses together. His resolve and certainty calmed her, but her doubts did not disappear entirely.

*I love him so much.*

Finally, she gave his gut-covered muzzle a lick-kiss before rumbling. 'I want to be your life mate - more than anything - but I need time.'

Shadow's ears and tail perked up at that admission, 'Then I will wait for as long as you need.'

'I love you, my strong wolf,' Sophia rumbled, placing her own blood-stained proto-muzzle against his shoulder. 'And I'll be back when it's bright. Even if I'm a two-legs again.'

'I'll go with...' Shadow started to say.

'No, eat,' Sophia interrupted him with a growl. 'I didn't nearly get killed by a cougar for you to lose your kill again.'

Shadow stood silently, his scent conflicted.

*Even if he's right and we're supposed to be mates, I don't have a choice right now. If I go back to being a two-leg, I'll be furless.*

'I'll be okay,' Sophia reassured him and gave him a loving lick-kiss before backing away. 'Here, I'll leave my scent.' Aiming her rear in the general direction of a tree trunk, she marked it. 'I love you!'

Shadow relaxed his body although his scent was reluctant, 'I love you more than anything. Hurry back, my mate!'

Sophia turned to go, and padded forward a few steps when a thought occurred to her.

Turning back around, she barked, 'Do you have a name?'

Shadow's tail perked up and he barked, 'Wolf with a Mischievous Nose!'

'Mischievous Nose, I like that,' she replied with a huff-laugh. 'Fits.'

'What's yours?' Shadow barked.

'Mine is a two-leg name, but I like Wolfess of Many Scents!' Sophia told him happily. 'We'll be together again soon, I promise.'

With that, she turned and started trudging home.

*I wish I had had an opportunity to memorize my den... house's scent.* Sophia looked towards the blurry lights of town anxiously. *How far is it?*

Her limbs were aching and her eyelids were getting heavy. The only thing keeping her moving was her rising panic. Her vision was spinning and the incredibly detailed tapestry of scents that made up the world had become a knotted mess in her head. She could detect her own, human-ish, scent but trying to focus on it long enough to follow it was proving a herculean task.

*Maybe I should have let Shadow come with me.* Her skin started to burn and she forced herself to move faster. *Okay, those lights must be from the houses bordering the field.* She shook her head, trying to remember how many houses from the corner hers was. *I think it's five?*

Throwing her previous caution to the wind, she left the cover of the trees. She started trotting as fast as she dared across the field towards the houses. Luckily, the uneven ground of the field still gave her some cover and the moon had set below the mountains. Unluckily, the distribution of the snow in the field didn't necessarily match the elevation of the ground it was on. By the time she was halfway across the field, her fur was covered in snow.

*My scent is strongest... that way!* She started towards a particularly strong concentration. *No, that's away from the houses. Damn it, all I want to do is sleep.*

Every nerve felt like it was firing at once and it seemed like her body was being simultaneously pushed and pulled in all directions. Despite that, her eyelids felt impossibly heavy and she nearly fell asleep on her feet multiple times.

*Maybe if I close my eyes for just a few seconds...* She teetered on the brink of giving in even as she stumbled into the back edge of a yard. *No! I can't!*

Looking up, she sniffed the air and peered at the darkened house the yard belonged to. There was something familiar about the scents coming from it that she couldn't place, but it wasn't hers.

*Not that one...* She stumbled across the yard into the next, her body starting to shake. *This one smells like me but wrong - I smell like two-legs?* She stopped confused. *Two-legs! Danger!* Her paws pounded against the ground, carrying her away from the two-leg dens towards the safety of the mountains and her mate...

Sophia's eyes flew open to find herself still standing on all fours in her yard. Pain was radiating up and down her spine and it felt like her own body was pulling on her tail, ears and muzzle. Her stomach seemed like it was twisting and writhing inside of her. The scratch on her shoulder and the inside of her vaginal canal burned.

*Almost... there...* Somehow, some way, she found the energy to drag herself across her yard and up the steps of her house's deck. *Door... slides... unlocked... please...*

Steam seemed to pour off of her hand-paw as she put it against the sliding door. Her heart skipped a beat as her pads and claws just slid across the glass, leaving several faint etches. Desperate, she tried again and this time the door slid open slightly. Sticking her fingers in, she slid the door wide enough for her to squeeze through.

The heated and scent-laden air of the house disoriented her even as she managed to crawl in on her knees. Every part of her body felt like it was on fire and sweat was pouring out of her pores. She yelped at the bizarre feeling of her spine pulling into her body, the unnatural crunches and snapping sounds roaring in her ears.

The soaked fur on her knee slipped against the hardwood floor as she turned into the hallway and she slammed into the floor painfully. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she gritted her teeth against the bizarre twisting and writhing sensations all across her body. The last thing she was conscious of was the image of black claws shrinking and reshaping into human fingernails.