

## The Run

Nina stamped her feet and rubbed her hands. It was the coldest, longest night of the year, so of course they were standing out in the middle of the open, waiting to get this dumb tradition over and done with.

She tried not to look as members of the prowl sauntered around naked. Of course, they didn't feel the cold. No, thanks to their leopard shifter genes they could run around in the snow with wet hair while eating ice cream and still feel toasty. But she didn't get the shifter gene. Every so often one of them didn't. She was the only one in four generations, and the only one amongst her five siblings.

Nina jutted her chin and pulled her coat around her a little tighter. She told herself she didn't care; she was proud to be human. But she could never forget the look of disappointment on her father's face when it came the time for her first shift and it never happened.

But, she didn't care. At least by being human she was beneath the notice of the prowl. The other females were expected to stay in the prowl, to be good leopards, and take mates and have dozens of cubs. Since she was human, she had been allowed to leave, allowed to go off to college. But now she was back, and perhaps, she couldn't have picked a worse time to come back, because it appeared that now, for the first time in ever, the prowl had noticed she existed.

It was winter solstice, and while to a lot of people on the planet, that meant just the longest day of the year, to the prowl it was much more important. This was the night of the mating run. The night when all of the eligible females had to run and the males would give chase, catch them, bite their shoulder, and they would mate. After this night, they were essentially married. This would then be followed by celebrations up until the New Year. It was an important time for the prowl. All the males and females were excited for it. Nina understood the run could be quite brutal – and not just because of the neck biting thing which sounded horrific to Nina and her tiny shoulders - but the males would often get into fights over the females – determined to be the first to claim her. Because, the first female they caught had to be theirs – they couldn't throw her back and try again. They were the rules!

All prowl members attended the start of the run, though those who weren't taking part filtered away back to their homes to await the sounds of the triumphant howls after they had mated. Nina had always found it barbaric, and as soon as it became clear that she was never going to shift, she had asked to stay at home for the event. Her father had only found her more disdainful, while her mother was saddened that she wouldn't even try to fit in. Thankfully, the alpha of the prowl didn't really care what she did. So, she hadn't attended one in years.

Last year, she hadn't even bothered returning home at all. A college friend had invited her to spend Christmas with her family. As someone who had only seen Christmas celebrations on TV in shows and movies, Nina had been quite excited to see what all the fuss was about. She had to admit, she rather liked it. Yes, there seemed to be plenty of family members who were constantly drunk, and arguments broke out intermittently, and there were a couple of aunts who gossiped non-stop, but it had just been nice. The prowl solstice celebrations were more about hunting, mating and ripping small animals apart with their teeth – not things she could enjoy.

But, her father insisted she come home this year, and while Nina had expected to just stay in her home for this, fate had other plans. Now, she was twenty-one – now, she was of age, and, in spite of her mother’s pleadings and attempts to protect her, the alpha insisted she join the mating run.

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Hunter strode past his prowl mates. His inner leopard yowled impatiently. He had been waiting for this for a long time. Finally, he could take a mate. Rawr.

All of the males were eager for when they finally came of age. As he looked at the amassed young men, he noted they were just as keen as he was. They were virtually salivating over the females. They had crazed looks in their eyes that suggested if they were forced to wait a moment longer than necessary, they would snap and go bananas.

A few of the females smiled at him and cooed hellos to him. Hunter nodded but his leopard merely grunted.

Most of the males already had females picked out – ones they were determined to chase and catch, while the rest would just take any female they could.

Hunter was keen for a mate, yet, he had not decided on the female he wanted. His leopard had been reticent about settling his hopes on any female. There were plenty of attractive females, yet he was not...

“Ouch! Watch where you’re going!” squeaked an irate voice.

He looked down to see a small female scowling up at him. Her cheeks flamed bright red under his scrutinizing gaze.

“You stood on my foot,” she said in a fainter voice.

Hunter grunted. Over the past few months, the females had virtually been milling around him and the other males – sizing them up to see which male they wanted to catch them, and perhaps encouraging a few to try. More than a few had suggested he chase them. They had simpered and smiled and intimated that they would make good mates. But, he had not seen this female amongst them.

Unlike the other females, she was small and curvy. The prowl females were tall and lithe. The other females were standing around naked as the day they were born, while this one huddled in an oversized coat.

Unlike the other females, she didn’t appear to be impressed by him. He wasn’t blind to the other females’ interest. Nor was he oblivious to the fact that, other than the alpha, no leopard in the prowl was as large as him, could run as fast as him or could hunt as well as him, and soon, even the alpha wouldn’t be able to compete. The alpha was already making noises about preparing him to take over. Other prowl mates had noticed this, but this female didn’t seem to know, and she didn’t seem to care much either.

“Who are you?” he rumbled.

Her eyes flashed in irritation, and his leopard growled softly.

“Nina,” she muttered.

He racked his brain thinking of a Nina, but the only one... His brow furrowed. The only one he could think of was the human. His eyes drifted over her enormous fake fur lined coat, and noted the way she was huddling in it. She had to be human. Being the daughter of two leopards, she smelled no different to any other shifter, and yet, she was infinitely different.

“What was that you were saying?”

Her dark eyes flashed again, and, as before, his leopard growled in interest.

“You stood on my foot,” she muttered, cheeks now fully blazing.

Though, her embarrassment could very well be a result of the fact that a six-foot-four naked male was hovering over her. He understood that some women were shy about that sort of thing.

“You appear to have survived the ordeal,” he said, wondering at his teasing tone.

“That’s not the point,” she huffed. “The last thing I need is a limp right now.”

Hunter glanced at the running shoes she was wearing. His leopard snarled unexpectedly.

“You’re participating in the run?” he asked in horror.

The run where they all changed to their leopards, ran around all night, the males fought over females, and when they finally won one, they mated out in the open. Obviously, he had not participated before, but he understood it could be pretty brutal.

Nina gave him a defensive look. “I have no choice. With any luck I’ll just be left alone.”

There was almost a hint of disappointment in there, something his leopard noticed, but Hunter was too busy glaring at all the other males due to take the run. He wondered whether any of them would care about their mate being human.

His accusatory stares were interrupted by the alpha, “Prowl mates, it’s time for the run!”

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Nina flinched at the sound of collective growl. Yes, it was time for the run.

All the females had a ten minutes head start. Around her, a dozen young females shifted into leopards and took off as fast as they could, growling and snarling and prancing around. Though, she noticed a few didn’t run as fast as they could. Yes, they couldn’t wait to be caught. Probably couldn’t wait for Hunter to catch them she thought disdainfully. Yes, they would swish their tails at him, hoping for him to catch him, just because he was big and handsome and had a voice smoother than velvety hot chocolate...

After a glance at her mother and siblings – who were various shades of nervous and angry and her behalf, Nina started running – at least as fast as she could. Given that she was only five-foot-three,

was not very fit, and currently wearing a coat that was built for warmth and felt like it weighed twenty pounds, progress was not fast. Even the loitering she-leopards outstripped her. But there was no way she would lose the coat. Her mom had insisted on that at least.

Her father fully approved of her being in the run - he had said that she needed to act normal, to be a part of the prowl. He had never wanted her to go to college. But her mom - who had always doted on her, and feared for safety constantly - had gone against every instinct to obey the alpha and marched right on over to him, demanding that Nina be exempt. It hadn't done any good. The alpha claimed that she was a part of the prowl and needed to act like it - that he had already given her far too much leeway, and needed to behave like the other females.

Though, at least she was permitted her clothes. The alpha had all been for putting her out there naked like the other females - but they had fur to cover their shame! But, her mom had argued until she was, at least, given that one concession. The main objection being that she might freeze without them, and in that case, there would be zero point in her taking part in the run anyway.

She hurried on past a few trees, touching them all, hoping to spread her scent around and cause confusion. Her mom had given her a few tips on avoiding capture that didn't entirely rely on speed or agility. The problem was that she didn't smell different to the other females, and in the heat of the moment, in his excitement, a male might scent her, pin her, and then they'd be stuck with each other as mates.

Nina doubted any of the males wanted her for a mate. Honestly, she had barely spent any time with them since she went away to college, and very little before then. But, she was sure the males would feel the same about her as her father did - that she was a disappointment.

She remembered the way he had looked at her - Hunter. She'd known who he was the moment his head came into view - towering over all the other males. Good news like him traveled even to her ears. If someone like him could claim her then this whole mating thing wouldn't be such a bad thing. Heck, it might even be pleasant. But she couldn't see it happening - not to her. She wondered whom he would chase after. He would probably want the fastest, strongest, most beautiful female - and Nina didn't even belong in any of those categories. Would he look at her the same way he looked at Nina earlier - with that deep, penetrating gaze. She found herself immensely annoyed at whichever female would be.

Nina was so irritated, she almost ran right into a branch. She ducked at the last second and scolded herself. Okay, come on, focus! She just needed to get through the whole night and make it until daybreak - if she spent the whole night without getting caught she was free... until next year. At least it would give her a year to plan ahead.

Nina tripped on a branch and hurtled to the ground. She put her hands down in something squidgy and tried to push herself to her feet. But, when she heard the roar - the sign that the males were now off the collective leash - she stilled and hunched her shoulders, trying to protect them from any bites.

"Oh no."

As she thought of what she was doing a year ago – baking holiday cookies with her friend and watching Elf, she almost wept. As far as she was concerned, the solstice was the worst night of the year.

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Hunter padded through the woods. He was taking his time, moving carefully. He had already encountered a couple of females who had virtually thrown themselves at him, hoping he would pin them and then be forced to claim them. But, he had avoided them. They seemed like perfectly fine she-leopards, but neither beast nor man had been able to raise any interest for them. He was a little surprised at himself, given that he had been counting the days until this night. As far as he was concerned, the solstice was the best night of the year. What leopard didn't want to find a mate? He then thought of the little human, huddled in her giant coat and scowling at the world in general. He slowed his progress, his claws digging into the ground. He wondered whether any male would want to claim her.

He vaguely recalled Nina from when they were younger, but they had never been playmates. For one, she didn't really play with the leopards. Her mother and all her siblings adored her, and could be pretty fiery and very protective over her. Her siblings had always surrounded her, daring any of the other prowl mates to dare to try and pick on her or hurt her. Then she went off to college, and she was rarely seen. But now she was back, and all alone out here in the woods, where a bunch of horny leopard shifters roamed. And this time, there was no doting mother or protective older siblings to protect her.

Hunter yowled. He was sure the fact that she was human would put off many males from wanting her, fearing she would pass this onto her cubs. But, that wasn't the case, in truth, she was a leopard shifter, but one who just couldn't shift. There was no reason to suggest her cubs wouldn't – especially given that she had siblings and parents who were all strong shifters. Some males might realize this. Some unworthy males might realize this. Then again, given her scent, some males may not bother and stop and look before they pin her and claim her. If they let their noses lead them, they might pin her and bite her before their horny haze abated and they saw she was human.

He thought of her large dark quivering eyes, the way her small mouth bunched in irritation, the way her cheeks flushed at the top of the hat, and finally he thought of the curves he could detect even beneath the behemoth of a coat.

The leopard scented the air and took off running. The man took a back seat to the leopard. The man didn't really understand what was happening right now. Humans so rarely could understand the simplicities of mating – they made everything too complicated thought the leopard. But he knew, and he was going to do what needed to be done.

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Nina let out a yelp as she all but ran into an enormous leopard. It curled a lip at her. She wasn't one hundred percent sure, because with apologies to the leopard population, just about all of them looked alike to her. But she had a feeling that this was Rex, mostly because of his smell – and given that her senses were definitely human, it said a lot about how strongly he smelled. He was a fairly large male in his human form, but had a habit of not washing very often, which resulted in a strong

unwashed smell and lank, greasy hair. It wasn't just his hygiene that was greasy though, his whole manner was, and had often been cautioned by the alpha for his behavior to females. She doubted any female wanted him to claim her tonight.

"Rex?"

The leopard sneered. Yep, that was pretty much how he looked in his human form too, though, naturally, the leopard was prettier – all leopards were handsome to look at, there was no escaping that fact.

He was a couple of years older than her, and had first done the run two years ago when it was Nina's sister's turn. It was rare for a female not to get a mate during the run – it was very rare for there to be less males than females, but when there were more males than females, it always meant that the excess males didn't mate. They then attended the run the following year.

Her sister told her after that he had tried to corner her, tried to bite her and force her into submission, but her sister, being a strong leopard had fought back and ran into the waiting paws of the male she wanted. Apparently, Rex had not been overly pleasant about it over the past couple of years. Her sister dryly told her that he did drive-bys on her house, but all that did was wake her cub and rile up her mate – who then sought out Rex the following day and duly socked him in the mouth. Though, actually, she said he had started to behave himself in the last couple of months, so maybe... maybe he thought he could get back at her sister by mating Nina.

Nina started backing away, holding out her hands in a placating gesture. "Hey, now, plenty of fish in the sea – or leopards in the forests even," she said, trying to jolly up the mood and get rid of this sense of foreboding that was currently gnawing away at her stomach.

The leopard growled again and snapped in her direction. She squeaked and he could swear that the beast was laughing.

"Come on, now, you don't want me – I can't shift. There's a possibility that our cubs wouldn't shift."

She tried not to be too revolted by the idea of having cubs with this male – though she was throwing up in her mouth a little, and concentrated on the bright side him not mating her.

"I won't be able to shift or hunt, our cubs will probably be tiny weaklings like me. I'll be stuck at home all the time cooking and cleaning while you're out hunting. I'll be..."

The leopard cocked his head, and she realized that to a Neanderthal leopard shifter, this might actually be appealing.

Nina sagged a little. "Seriously, I won't be a good mate. I won't..."

He snapped at her again, and she gave up on reasoning and decided to run. She knew she couldn't outrun him, but she had to try. She couldn't bring herself to merely give in and allow him to have his way with her.

She turned and ran straight into a tree. Blackness.

Hunter frowned at the bump on her head. He wasn't too familiar with humans; he wasn't sure how long it would take them to heal, though he suspected it was far longer than for a shifter.

His inner leopard growled, still antsy for the way they found her – passed out on the ground with that leering idiot, Rex, about to clamber all over her. He had seen red and roared, leaping at Rex and throwing his off her. They had fought and it had been nasty, Rex was hardly a weak male, and the scratches all over his body were a testament to just how badly Rex had wanted to claim her. But, he had been beaten, and Hunter was triumphant, which left him with the question of what to do with the passed-out Nina.

He could hardly leave her in the snow - she would surely freeze. Not to mention what would happen if some other male came across her. No, he hadn't needed to think about it for long, he had shifter to his human, picked her up and brought her back to his cabin.

Hunter gently pressed the swelling bump on her head.

"Ow!" she growled as she awakened.

His leopard roared happily as she scowled at him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded and pressed her fingers to the lump. "Ow, what the hell? What did..."

Nina stopped abruptly, and her bee-stung lips formed an O as her eyes widened.

"Rex," she breathed, fear sparking in her huge eyes.

The leopard inside growled with both disgust and triumph. "Gone."

Probably off to terrorize some other female he considered weak. Hunter just hoped they could all run fast.

Nina looked around the cabin, whipping her head back and forth and then wincing at the pain.

"Where am I?" she mumbled and started flushing as she noticed he was still naked.

"My cabin," he replied simply.

She looked down at herself, eyes widening even more as she realized that he had shorn her of many of her wet layers of clothes, and that she was lying in bed.

"Is this your bed?" she gasped.

Hunter gave her a crooked smile. "Well, I don't allow anyone else to keep a bed in my cabin."

Nina gave him a wary look and pulled the covers up to her shoulders – trying to protect them. Well, that wouldn't happen for long he thought as his fangs started lengthening, itching to be free and pressed into her flesh.

Yes, he had no choice now – the solstice was nearly over, and by bringing her back to his cabin that meant he had halfway claimed her.

Nina opened her mouth as if she was about to say something and then snapped it shut. Finally, after a few abortive attempts to say something, she asked, "What happened?"

His leopard snarled grimly. "I found you passed out and, fearing you were injured or might freeze, brought you here."

He told her the truth; he just skipped over a few of the details.

"That was kind of you." Nina winced uneasily. "But, Rex..."

"Decided to move on. Have some water," he suggested, nodding at the glass by the side of the bed.

Nina looked at him in suspicion and he smiled back amiably. Eventually, she snaked an arm out from the covers and grasped the water. She took a healthy swig before pursing her lips at him.

"Stop it," she said.

"Stop what?"

"You're looking at my shoulder like you want to sink your teeth into it." She put the glass down and primly covered her shoulder again.

His leopard growled that he had been doing that – he had to bite her shoulder now.

"I do," he admitted gently. "I have to now. By bringing you here, I essentially claimed you."

Nina breathed in and out, fear marring her pretty face, but then she shook her head. "No, you don't have to do this. I'll leave now, and you can go out and find some other female."

Hunter shook his head. "The night is almost over."

"But there's still time," she argued, "maybe you could find another..."

His leopard huffed. She didn't seem altogether pleased at the prospect of having him as a mate.

"I brought you to my cabin. It shows I have claimed you. There is nothing that can be done now."

Nina chewed on her lip. He could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

"I must bite you."

Her eyes flared in panic.

"I will be as gentle as I possibly can."

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Right, because leopard bites were completely painless! Nina felt worried for the bite, but actually, she wasn't as panicked as when Rex was coming at her with slavering fangs and snapping jaws. Nope, now that she was here with Hunter, she was actually relieved. Well, not just relieved, another part of her was threatening to boil over in excitement. The most handsome and sexy man she had ever seen was sitting in front of her, naked as a... a... well, a leopard, and he was saying that he



wanted her to be his mate. How could she not be excited?! All her fears for the evening had morphed into something completely different. Never in her wildest dreams would she have thought that someone like him would claim her. Actually, yes, in her wildest dreams she did think he might have – but she never expected it to happen in reality.

Except, it wasn't really that he had chosen her to be his mate. Nope, he was just being a good Samaritan. He had seen her at the mercy of Rex – and who knew what that sleazy oaf would have done to her in her passed-out state – ugh – and he rescued her. He was just being a decent, sexy, nice, sexy, good, incredibly sexy guy. He didn't really want her, and now he was stuck with her. She felt bad for him – for being lumbered with a mate he didn't want, and bad for herself for having a mate who would resent her. Would he look at her the same way her father did – with disappointment and bitterness?

Instinctively, she slapped her hand on her shoulder – the one he was eyeing. “Surely, you can still...”

“No,” came the blunt reply.

“But...”

“No.”

“I.”

“No.”

“You don't know what I was going to say!” she cried.

Hunter smiled and her insides fluttered. Oh, that was a smile that could launch a thousand libidos.

“It doesn't matter.”

“Doesn't matter?” she squawked.

“You were going to suggest something that simply can't happen now. I have claimed you, there is nothing that can be done.”

Nina felt herself sagging internally. But if there was, he would do it, she thought morosely. For why would he want her?

“I just need to...”

He lifted a hand to her shoulder.

“No!”

Hunter stopped with his hand in the air, and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“You, ah, don't have to do it yet, right? I mean, just as long as it is done before the New Year, then it's still binding.”

She knew that because over the past couple of weeks she, her mom, and all her siblings had been poring over the books of prowl laws in the hope of finding some loophole to get her out of this. It hadn't worked, but she was pretty sure she was now an authority on the mating rules.

He dropped his arm and regarded her warily. "I suppose."

"I'm just... I'm just not ready," she said, which was true. "I need to psych myself up for it."

The bite would heal for the she-leopards, but she would be stuck with a scar for life. Plus, maybe she might be able to slip away from the prowl before the bite became necessary. Her initial plan for this night was to try and evade capture all night. But, failing that, she was hoping to reason with whatever male who caught her into waiting to bite her so that she may escape before that happened. She had wanted to run from any other male because she didn't want to be with them. But for Hunter... well, being mated to him sounded quite appealing, but she didn't want to do that to him, she wanted to leave so that he could find a mate he actually wanted.

Hunter inhaled deeply, and she was surprised to see a flash of disappointment in his eyes. She supposed that, unlike her, he had been looking forward to this. Well, he could do this properly next year and find a female he wanted.

"Yes, I suppose," he agreed reluctantly.

"And ummm," she could feel her cheeks heating, "we don't need to actually..." she gulped, "consummate our mating tonight. Again, this just needs to happen before New Year."

This time, the displeasure was obvious, and she did wonder about it, but well, a horny, het up, leopard shifter probably wasn't too picky about the female he took to his bed.

"I..."

"Please," she whispered.

It wasn't that she didn't want him – far from it, and given the way his manhood was swelling, he also wanted her in that moment. But he deserved a real mating night with a real leopard shifter. Anything he did with Nina would surely be regretted later.

"Fine," he gritted.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" he snapped and then calmed a little. "Yes, I'll wait until you are ready."

"Thank you," she muttered, a little disappointed that he hadn't argued more.

Boy, she was just never happy, was she?

"I might get some sleep," she said finally.

Hunter cupped her head and looked at her bump – which was sure to be an unattractive purple color soon. "Are you sure you don't need medical attention?"

Nina shook her head. "I'd just like to rest, it's been a long night."

Hunter nodded. "I may go out hunting, I won't wake you when I return. Good night." He smiled slightly, and then added, "My mate."

Gently, almost reverentially, he placed a kiss on her forehead, carefully avoiding the bump.

"Oh ah, yes, good night, mate," she flustered.

She watched as he strode through the cabin, cursing herself as she remembered every luscious inch of his perfect body.

All mine, she thought possessively. Yes, he could be, but her inner self, the part that was both cringing and proud, said that it wasn't to be. She would not lumber him with a mate that didn't want her – she wanted him to have the mate he desired, and she too felt like she should have a mate who wanted her. Nina just hoped that the consequences of what she had planned didn't hurt him in any way.

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Nina stirred and found herself hot and trapped. It reminded her of that college party her roommate threw while she was asleep, and she woke up to find three people had fallen asleep on her bed – on top of her. Her roommate freshman year really sucked.

She started wriggling, trying to get free, but two large arms clamped around her.

"Mmm, morning," rumbled a deep voice in her ear.

Nina let out an eep as she realized that Hunter was lying beside her. Well, not just lying, he was curled around her body, pressing up against her almost indecently. At least, the large, hard, hot thing she felt behind her was indecent.

"Uh, morning," she whispered and then almost yelped as he kissed her ear.

She was surprised, but, actually, as she wiggled against his toasty body, this wasn't unwelcome. Oh my, this was a fun way to wake up! Usually her mom just shook her awake or sprinkled water on her to encourage her to move her butt.

"Hungry, baby?" he rumbled.

"Ah..."

Her stomach rumbled audibly and he chuckled. She mewled in protest as he slipped out of bed. He noticed the sound too and chuckled even harder.

"C'mon, baby, I'll make you pancakes. There's a robe on the chair."

He tapped her lightly on her rump and strolled over to the kitchen, humming lightly. She watched him, eagerly enjoying the movements – he was still naked and seemed completely unconcerned by it. Living in the human world for the past few years had given her plenty of hang up about her body – about which she was already pretty neurotic – but she didn't mind him being naked.

Nina looked over the robe hung over a nearby chair, and she slipped on the floor. She felt a swell of affection at his thoughtfulness. But then, she considered that he had planned on getting a mate, and those had been put there for whoever she was – they weren't particularly there for her. It was petty but it sobered her a little, and strengthened her resolve. Yes, she was going to wait until he went out hunting or something and then she was going to make a run for it. She was sure one of her college friends would take her in.

As she watched Hunter rattling around the kitchen, her heart skipped a beat. It was for the best... right?

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Hunter smiled encouragingly as she devoured her pancakes. His leopard was prowling in irritation. He wanted her bitten and he wanted them mated and he didn't want to wait. Hunter wanted the same things – as soon as humanly possibly – but, there was the issue – she was human. She had asked for a little time and he would give it to her. He was not some kind of deranged animal who could only think with his libido. Well, half of him wasn't some deranged animal, and thankfully, that half of him was in charge until further notice.

She was hesitant and unsure about having him for a mate, and he was a little miffed about that. Hey, he knew he was a catch, was it too much to expect her to think that too? All the she-leopards knew it. But, then, if he had wanted a grateful she-leopard, one who thought that sunshine shined out of some unmentionable areas of his body, he would have mated a she-leopard. As it was, he had chosen Nina.

He thought back over the night, and considered whether he had made the right choice, but he knew he had. Instinct had driven him to protect Nina, and he doubted he would or could have done anything differently even if he wanted.

"Eat up," he said piling four more pancakes on her plate.

Nina scowled at him through a syrupy mouth. He grinned at how cute she looked.

"How much do you think I can eat? Where do you expect me to put it?"

He gave a long glance up and down her body, noting the dips and curves, and he could think of a few places. Female leopards shifters tended to be lissome and slim, but Nina was curved in a couple more places than them, and he found himself aroused at the thought of finally getting his hands on them.

Nina blushed and dipped her head to focus on her pancakes.

"So, what do you want to do today?"

Hunter knew that if she had been a leopard, then they would stay in the cabin all day mating, hoping to get her pregnant with a cub. But, she wasn't, and although he hoped she might suggest doing just that, he doubted it.

Nina looked up sharply. “Ah, I don’t know. Maybe you should go hunting?” she suggested, though she seemed pretty depressed by her own suggestion.

Hunter shrugged. “Maybe later. Why don’t we go for a walk?”

“Oh, ah, I’m not sure.”

She licked her lips and Hunter tried not to growl in desire. Yes, a walk sounded mighty fine right about now – the cool air would certainly help his mounting libido.

“Nope, let’s go – right now!”

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Nina tried not to feel too complacent as Hunter rubbed her foot. But, she was starting to feel a wee bit loved and doted on, and it was starting to go to her head.

She hadn’t been thrilled at the idea of a walk, but she had surprised herself by enjoying it. They must have presented an odd pair – her in a mountain of layers and him completely naked so he could shifter if needed, even more so as they were holding hands at his instance. He had pointed out lots of different animals to her – birds and rabbits – things she never would have spotted on her own. They had crouched in the undergrowth and watched as a rabbit hopped along the snow – it was adorable. Oh, she sure hoped none of the prowl tried to eat the little cutie later.

She had never really spent any time in the woods before. She couldn’t hunt so what was the point, and while most of her family loved her, they hadn’t shown interest in taking her into the woods like this and showing her all the amazing things she was missing.

Hunter was amiable and patient, not once scolding her for being too slow, and not caring that he had to carry her down a few snow banks. No, he actually seemed to enjoy those parts. She was amazed at how easy he was to be around, and amazed that she couldn’t sense any kind of disappointment in him for having her as a mate.

Of course, she eventually tripped over and hurt her foot, ending their walk – it was kind of inevitable for her, but he hadn’t cared. He had swung her into his arms and carried her back to his cabin.

Then he had made them lunch – her favorite pizza, and was now rubbing her foot while they listened to music. He didn’t own a TV, most of the prowl didn’t. It was such a human thing to have, but she considered that she would want one if she lived here. Which, she never would she reminded herself uneasily.

But, she wasn’t uneasy for long, for Hunter didn’t give her chance. He asked her about college, about what life was like living amongst humans. She had told him many stories of her college adventures over the past few years, and while they were hardly adventurous, more amusing than anything, he had been fascinated to hear them, and either suitably impressed or horrified to hear about the kind of things humans really did. She told him about Christmas, and the traditions humans had every year. He had certainly liked the ideas of presents and decorating a tree.

In the end they talked for hours, only realizing it was dinnertime when her stomach rumbled again. He duly made them steaks with a bunch of trimmings. He certainly had a lot of food in the house, which he probably got for his mate she thought, only a little miserably. But she couldn't stay miserable for long, for he started regaling her with stories of the things he and his boisterous brothers had done over the years, and soon she was in tears of laughter.

Eventually, she was yawning, and sleep beckoned, and before she knew what was happening, he had scooped her up and was depositing her in bed. He curled himself around her again and kissed her ear.

"Good night, mate," he crooned.

"Mmm, night," she murmured as she drifted away.

She realized she hadn't enjoyed herself so much since... well, she'd never enjoyed herself this much before, and she started to wonder about just why she was planning on leaving.

\*

Hunter growled awake at the banging on the door. Nina gasped in his arms and his leopard snarled, furious at whomsoever had woken his mate.

"What's happening?" she murmured.

"Stay here, baby," he said, and started to get up before remembering himself, kissing her cheek, and then running to the door.

He hurled it open and growled.

"Sorry, but the alpha sent for you," rumbled a prowl mate. "Rex reported that there are bears in our territory. We need to drive them out before they hurt any cubs."

Hunter grunted. They had been on bad terms with the bear shifters for years. No one quite remembered why, but undoubtedly it was for some inane reason that no longer made any sense.

He nodded and shut the door. Nina was sitting up in bed, watching him in concerned interest.

"Gotta go – bear problems. Stay here, I'll be back soon."

He winked and blew her a kiss. She flushed and he chuckled as he left. This better not take too long – he had a mate to woo.

\*

Nina hesitated with her hand on the door. Right, this was her chance to leave. She should be running as fast as she could. Except... every inch of her didn't want to go. She couldn't quite make her legs move.

Yes, she knew all of her objections to staying in the mating. Most importantly, she wanted to leave for his sake, but she also knew that by mating she would have to stay here, she wouldn't be allowed to leave and finish college. She probably wouldn't be able to see her friends again.

She tried to steel her resolve, but she couldn't, because she didn't want to leave him. Did he seem disappointed by her? Not even a little. Did he seem annoyed to have a non-shifting mate? Not even a smidge. No, he had been charming and wonderful and the thought of not having this charming and wonderful man in her life made her feel sick.

The more she thought about it, the more she thought that she could be a good mate. They could have a good life together – they could be happy.

She should stay... right?

Just as she seemed to have finally made a decision, the door flung open. She lit up expecting Hunter, but it wasn't him.

\*

Hunter pounded through the woods. The alpha quickly put out the howl that there were no bears – their land was bear free. None had come to their land for a picnic today. Then it dawned on him just who had claimed there were bears – Rex.

He knew that Rex hadn't managed to catch an unsuspecting female, and given what he was doing the other night, he feared for Nina. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

\*

"What are you doing here?" Nina asked in annoyance.

Rex sneered at her. This time, he was in his human form though it wasn't any more reassuring.

"To finish what we started."

Ugh. "Hunter claimed me. He's my mate."

Stating this didn't seem to have the desired effect. He merely smirked – it was a horrible sight.

"He's not here, and he hasn't bit you yet – so you're still up for grabs."

"Up for grabs?" Was she a radio contest?

"Yeah," he sneered, "your sister made me look like a complete idiot. So now, you've got to pay."

Nina let out a sound of disgust. Really? He was still pissed that her sister understandably didn't want to mate him that he wanted to make her life a misery over it - so he could somehow get back her sister?

"You are an idiot," she hissed, "and Hunter will kill you if you touch me."

Rex smiled horribly. "He's not here."

"Guess again," growled an aching welcome voice.

Rex yelped as Hunter, in all his muscled naked glory tossed him aside.

Hunter's face flashed in fury. "You okay?" he rumbled at her.

"Yes," she breathed. "He didn't... nothing happened."

Hunter nodded and strode over to Rex who had the sense to cower.

"No, I'm sorry, okay, it was all her fault – she led me on!"

Nina gaped and stamped her foot. "Liar!"

Hunter howled and picked Rex up by the throat. A second later the alpha and another prowl mate ran into the cabin, panting slightly.

"Hunter," snapped the alpha, "let him down."

"He tried to take my mate," rasped Hunter, who seemed to be struggling to maintain his human state.

"I'll deal with him," said the alpha gruffly, and with more than a little struggling, he managed to extricate the whining Rex and drag him away.

Hunter came over to her and pressed his head to hers. Finally, she could calm, and her heartbeat could return to normal – as much as it ever did around him at least.

"I'm okay," she murmured over and over, smiling as her mate embraced her.

"Were you leaving the cabin?" he asked softly.

"I ah..." She faltered and blushed, her guilt written all over her face.

Hunter pulled back and gave her a narrowed eye look. "You were planning on leaving," he said dully.

Nina gulped from fear – but not fear because of him, fear that she had hurt him.

"I ah... I just thought that I should. I thought that you could do better than me – I thought if I left you could find a real leopard mate. You were kind of stuck with me as a mate because you were being kind. But, I changed my mind, because I don't want to leave. I don't want you to find someone else."

Hunter looked at her in confusion. "Stuck with you? Baby, I found you that night because I wanted to – because my leopard wanted you."

"You wanted me?" she asked in a small, emotional voice.

He smiled genuinely. "Yes, you're my mate. My leopard knew it before I did, but now I'm sure too."

Nina beamed at him, her heart blossoming with happiness, but then a niggle made her stutter. "But, I want to finish college, and I have human friends and I..."

Hunter hushed her and chuckled. "Details, baby. I'm not going to stand in your way of being happy."



“You make me happy,” she admitted shyly.

Hunter pulled her into his arms and swung her around before kissing her soundly.

“Good, now, whip out your shoulder - it’s time I bit you before my leopard explodes or some other crazed lunatic bursts in here trying to take you away from me.”

\*

*One year later*

“Ouch!”

“Everything okay?” called Nina.

“Fine,” grumbled Hunter.

“Another papercut?” she teased.

Hunter grunted and she giggled. He was trying to wrap Christmas presents, though clearly, he was having a little trouble. They were trying to bring a few Christmas traditions into the prowl – no need for this time of year to be just about running around the woods naked and mating.

“Why don’t you let me do it?”

“Can’t let you wrap this one,” he chuckled.

“Ooh, is that for me? Let me see, let me see!”

She walked over to him and leaned over to look. Sadly, it was already wrapped... mostly. It was kind of a cacophony of wrap and bows, and possibly mostly sticky tape. But, she couldn’t wait to open it.

The last year had been amazing. She had managed to finish college – Hunter had gotten leave from the alpha to go with her, and they had rented an apartment for both of them. Living among humans had been quite an eye opener for him. He had enjoyed it, but had been relieved to return home. They still left now and again to visit her friends, but they were both pleased to be back in the prowl, even more so a few months from now when their own cub was born.

She leaned down and kissed him and he growled softly into her mouth. They heard some roars from the surrounding woods and they both chuckled.

“Looks like someone found their mate,” he murmured.

Nina giggled and kissed him again. She hoped it worked out as well for them as it did for her.

The end

