

- Introduction to the world of the main character, Liam.
 - He is leaving his hut in his village. He is going to the trader's depot to search for a gift for his matched mate's birthday/anniversary/the full moon is coming up..
 - His big sister, Daena, pokes fun at him for how he's stressing about what to wear.
 - His little brother Ryder annoys him about going to the trading depot, but Liam doesn't want Ryder to go with him. Liam promises Ryder that he will take him next time. Liam is forced to take Ryder to the depot after his mother reminds him of his duties as a big brother.
 - Liam and Ryder head off to the Traders depot, they are soon united with Raven, who is capable of human form as well.
 - Liam and Raven chat about Liam's upcoming wedding and what they're going to get at the trader depot.
 - Ryder practices morphing and hunting squirrels.
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Liam looked down at the shirt he wore. It didn't feel good enough anymore. *Ugh*. He stamped his foot on the ground and pulled it over his head, tossing it off to the side. It lay atop the other shirts he had in the same pile. Now his hair was messed up. *Great, I definitely look like a dirty dog*. Liam shook his head and tried to move it back. Not satisfied, he angrily ran his fingers from the back to the front trying to get the perfect bang flip. His hair needed to be perfect. Hell, *everything* had to be perfect. Eowyn's birthday was coming soon, then their marriage.

Liam quickly flustered at the thought of Eowyn. They've known each other their whole lives, playing together as children, attending school together, and knowing their families, even though they weren't from the same pack. It was an effort to merge the two packs, to solidify and strengthen the wolve's place in the forest. They were safer in packs.

He heard movement behind him. Spinning on his heel, he noticed it was his older sister, Daena.

"For someone who is so *proud* of their wolf heritage and being the son of the pack leader, you sure look awful human today." She mocked as she strode across the room to the shirts. "Just why do you care so much what you wear to the depot? You're just going to pick up supplies." She picked a shirt up from the pile and spread it apart to examine it. "Where do you even get these stupid things?"

"Because I need to blend in and make sure that I'm not giving myself away. Because *Dad*," Liam snatched the shirt out of his sister's grip and continued, "you know, the alpha, the pack leader, always said the best way to defeat your enemy is to become your enemy." Liam slid the shirt over his head and strode back to the mirror. Liam pulled his shirt down over the waist of his shorts, then tucked it in a little. Another look at his reflection, and he let out an anguished sigh.

Liam turned to the side and took in his profile from that side. Not yet satisfied, he turned to the other side. A few more moments went by before Liam untucked the shirt and turned to the other side again.

"Oh for goodness sake!" Daena uttered. Her face was scrunched with annoyance, "The untucked look, how original." She pursed her lips and rolled her head on her shoulders as Liam brushed past her and out of the hut. Liam let her have the last word. For now.

Coming out of the hut and crossing the yard, there was a patter of footsteps and a slight tug on his shirt.

"Oh come on, Daena!" Liam huffed as he turned around but to his surprise, it wasn't her. Instead, his youngest brother Ryder stood there.

"Where ya off to?" Ryder's voice was small, which coincidentally matched his stature. When he was born, no one thought he would make it. Mom and others traveled for days to take him to a nearby village where they practiced new and "experimental", medicine. They came back quieter than when they had left. Mom didn't speak for what felt like years, but it wasn't close. The village was the quietest it had ever been. Of course, nothing stopped; people still had to live of course.

But everyone, even their dad, said that their mother saved Ryder with her love. Her sheer determination to keep her last baby alive. Their mom holed up in a nurse hut on the far end of the village. Liam could see his mother's eyes on his youngest brother. Eyes that were full of innocence and excitement, unaware of the horrors that go on outside their tight-knit community.

"I'm off to the depot. Nothing new," Liam turned on his heel but he didn't make it far before Ryder was on his heels, rattling off reasons why he *had* to go with him.

"Mom said you had to take me the next time you go." Liam pulled on his hand.

"Next time, it's almost the new moon and it's more dangerous than ever." Liam sighed. "I need to go and get some final supplies so no one has to leave."

"And I'm part of the pack, I should be able to go too! One day, it'll be my responsibility when you move up." Ryder whined.

"I need to go and get back. Mom *really* needs this stuff." Liam said. "I don't want to spend any extra time lollygagging around and teaching today."

"Are you sure you have the entire list?" Ryder chimed. He was saying anything to get Liam to stop, to take him along to the depot. It worked though. Liam stopped in his tracks.

Ryder had always been curious about the world beyond their village, where stories of fantastical creatures and enchanted forests filled his imagination. The traders' depot, with its diverse array of goods and travelers from far-off lands, seemed like a place where adventures began. It would be alluring to anyone unaware of the dangers. Liam's trips to the depot were the closest thing Ryder had to a window to the outside world, and the thought of being a part of that world, even for a short while, was exhilarating.

"Yeah?" He eyeballed his little, yet mischievous brother.

"Yeah." Ryder pipped back, rolling on his heels.

"Like what?" Liam shot back.

"I don't know," Ryder trailed off, with his feet dragging behind him. "Guess you'll have to ask her to make sure you're not missing anything." Ryder turned completely and darted towards the hut where their mother was tending to the herb garden. His tiny feet moved as quickly as they could, and he burst in with a breathless plea.

By the time Liam slid into the hut, Ryder was already working with their mom to be able to tag along to the depot. Liam knew he'd lost already.

"And isn't it so important that I learn the ropes, and how to do things? I mean, Liam won't be able to go every time." Ryder pleaded with Mom.

Liam's mother stands there over her herbs, handpicking off the dead leaves and parts. Her long, white hair was tucked neatly in a bun. She smiled as she wiped her hands on her apron which was riddled with dirt and roots.

"Liam, it won't hurt you to take him," She said. "Who better to teach him the routes and depot than his big brother?"

Liam took heavy and long strides, almost purposefully as to lose his brother. *Always has to be me.* Ryder hopped behind him dandily, happy to just be there. Reaching the gate, Liam took the time to give his first lesson to his overly eager student.

"Don't mess with the gate." Liam grabbed one of the iron bars. They traded a lot of game at the depot to get this from the blacksmith. They had to space out their trading when others started to notice they were bringing in a lot of meat. They had to adjust their hunting methods to be less conspicuous. "It's really to keep intruders out, not us in."

"So how do we get out?" Ryder asked.

"We climb." Liam leaped up to the brick pillar with ease and turned around with a showman's display, arms in the air. "Come on!"

Ryder giggled with excitement as he climbed up the pillar meeting his brother at the top. Liam greeted him with a high-five.

In the background, his mother watched adoringly as her oldest son and baby boy topped the brick pillar of the gate that separated their territory from, well, everyone else.

Behind her, Daena lurked around the corner, watching her mother look upon her brothers as they set off for adventure. Daena wasn't allowed to leave the village.

For it was worse to be captured roaming if you were a woman and suspected of being a wolf. There was no worse fate. As the boys disappeared over the gate with laughter, Daena's lip curled. *Oh to be a boy.*

"Come, Daena," Her mother sighed and turned back. She didn't have to see Daena, she knew she was there. "I need help prepping the rest of the herbs. I'm not sure if we'll have enough."

Daena begrudgingly followed her mother back into the hut, accepting defeat.

The boys trekked through the forest; Liam swatting away overgrown branches and Ryder trotting behind.

"Now, the important thing to remember about the Trading Depot is to not draw any attention to yourself." Liam looked to Ryder to make sure he was still paying attention. He nodded.

"And always try to keep your hood over your head." He playfully grabbed Ryder's hood on the back of his cloak. "We don't really need it on right now but when we get close I'll let you know when to put it on."

Walking a few more steps, Liam stopped and looked around at the trees.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm looking for our pack symbol we carve into the trees to help guide us." Liam gestured. "See if you can find it." He gestured to Ryder to look. Ryder peered around, inspecting the trees closely. Liam leaned against a tree and took in the scenery, looking at each tree, and breathing in deeply to detect any new presence or change in the wind. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"Here!" Ryder said.

"Great job, Ryder." Liam ruffled Ryder's hair.

"But how do we know which direction we need to head?" Ryder looked around for a more distinct footpath to follow. "It's so hard to tell where the path is."

"You'll know by the direction it's facing," He pointed at the mark, "Goes this direction." Liam pointed behind them." He moved forward, over a fallen limb, and through some brush to reveal their direction. Liam studied the trees on either side, moving from one to the next with diligence.

"This one goes this way. See the extra markings? It's for our tribe and then direction." Liam looked in the opposite direction they came and pointed, "This is to the Trader's Depot."

"How am I supposed to know what the symbols mean?" Ryder asked.

"Well, after a few more times you'll be able to remember. You just have to keep practicing." He reassuredly put his hand on his little brother's shoulder and Ryder just beamed back at his big brother.

"Are you excited?" Ryder asked.

"About what?" Liam responded.

"Your upcoming wedding of course." Another voice spoke behind the boys. Liam defensively jumped in front of Ryder, turning to face the source of the quiet approach.

WHOOSH.

A large pair of jet-black wings covered the visitor but only for a split second. As they blinked Liam's friend, Corvus, appeared before them.

"Oh, man! You gave us a hell of a scare." Liam said. Liam grabbed Corvus into a big embrace after a moment. "Good to see you, buddy."

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. I was flying overhead when I saw you guys passing the oak tree." Raven put his hands in his pockets. His long, black hair fell in front of his eyes. "Where are you heading?"

"To the Trader's Depot!" Ryder jumped with excitement.

"Oh, neat. Can I come?" Corvus asked.

"Of course. The more the merrier," Liam wrapped his arm around Corvus, "Maybe you can help me pick out my wedding present."

[End scene here.]

Begin new scene

The trading depot was busier than normal, swirling with excitement. It's almost the new moon. Liam ventured further into the crowded marketplace. Colorful tents and stalls donned handmade fabrics and trinkets line the lanes, each manned

by traders from distant tribes, each with stories to tell. Negotiations between hagglers and sellers both trying to get a fair price.