

“Bonded”

by

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I tremble as the branch under me shifts in the wind. People usually would say I am nimble, but that is usually because Ileana is with me. Without her, I am just as clumsy as the Normals.

The wind blows another strong gust and I tighten my grip on the trunk of the tree. I cannot bear the thought of climbing out to the end of the branch. I must grab the necklace that Jordan threw up, but I'm not sure if I'm brave enough to do so. He is a jerk for throwing it up in the first place and I have no clue as to why he's making me getting it. Maybe because he's a bigger jerk than I thought.

Taking a deep breath, I take a step out onto the dancing tree limb. My balance is immediately thrown off as another gust hits me, but I manage to straighten myself up before I fall to the ground. Where is Ileana? She is taking so long to show up. If she was here, then I would already be done. If she was here, I would probably make her do it, actually.

I hear Jordan's laughter from below me. A quick glance down shows him leaning against the trunk of the tree, his arms crossed over his chest. I hate him right now. So. Much.

I go to take another step, but the branch moves at the same time and I lose my footing. Instead of my foot touching down on the tree limb, it slides through the air beside it. As I fall sideways I hear a scream come from my mouth. I am barely able to grab the branch in time to prevent me from falling.

Jordan's laughter has stopped. I don't look down to see his reaction, but I can bet he is a little shocked. He has never seen me unable to climb through the trees with grace and speed. And even though he is a huge jerk, he is my best friend.

“Maria!” I hear him yell my name, worry filling his voice. If I was down on the ground with him, I would tease him about it. However, I am not down there and am instead stuck hanging from this tree. It's a lovely predicament, isn't it?

My grip is loosening on the branch, I can just feel it. I try to pull myself up but only succeed in almost falling. I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut. I will not worry about falling. Jordan will catch me if I fall. He will catch me. I hope.

That is when I feel Ileana's presence approaching. The energy of our bond feels my body and a smile starts working its way upon my lips. If only she can get a little closer.

Jordan calls my name once more from below. I take a quick look down and see him directly underneath me, his arms extended to catch me if I fall. I knew I could trust him to not let me die this way.

Ileana's presence is strong now and I can feel my limbs itching to move. I start swinging back and forth, back and forth... When I know that I have swung forward high enough, I jump. My feet touch the next branch a few moments later and even though I feel I will not fall now, I grab the wood protectively.

"Why are you sitting there like a newly hatched bird afraid of learning to fly?" Ileana's high-pitched but adorable voice fills my ears. I look up to see her light and dainty paws in front of me. Her puffy tan tail covers them up as she swats my face. Sometimes I wonder why I was cursed with a trouble-making, teasing squirrel as my Bonded. Most of the time I wonder why I was blessed with her.

I scowl at her, swatting her tail away. "Jordan decided to throw the necklace into the tree that Mama gave me. Then he wanted to see me retrieve it while you weren't around."

Ileana giggles and I give her a glare. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

I wonder this myself, but I wouldn't dare tell her that. "You were taking too long."

I slowly stand up on the swaying branch as she jumps over, grabbing my necklace. She is back with me before I have fully straightened out. I reach my arm down to her and she jumps onto it, landing neatly before racing up to my shoulder. Now that Ileana is with me, I am not afraid to move through the tree. I jump between all the different branches until I am finally on the lowest of them all. I see Jordan watching me carefully, worry still in his eyes even though he looks relieved.

My feet land lightly on the ground beside him. Ileana has put the necklace around my neck, so I grab it and give him a smirk. "I was able to get it." I hear Ileana clear her throat beside me. "Okay, *we* were able to get it."

Jordan smiles and crosses his arms again. "As I can see."

I roll my eyes but allow myself a laugh. Jordan always tries to act so tough and it can be so cute at times. Please don't tell him I said that. He has always hated anything having to do with the word. It's always amusing when I ask him if he thinks I'm cute and he tries to think of a proper response without admitting or denying it.

We start walking back toward the village. The wind has calmed a little, but it still blows my hair around. The storm that is accompanying it is almost over us and I am beginning to feel a little worried. There is still about a fifteen minute walk back home and the rain is most likely to start

pouring down long before then. Sure enough, as I am thinking it, a tiny raindrop attacks my nose. I wiggle it and sigh.

“We’re not going to make it back in time,” I say. Of course, if Jordan wasn’t here with me, I could make it back sooner. Being Bonded with Ileana allows me to be quick going through the trees. Jordan is only a Normal, though, so it would be unfair to leave him alone out here.

“I think I saw cave somewhere close by on the way over,” he says. “Maybe we could hide in there until the storm passes.”

Ileana moves to my other shoulder as I nod. Her footsteps tickle a bit, but I hold back the giggle. It is not the time for that.

Jordan leads us in the direction of the cave and soon enough we have found it. I throw my arms around him in a hug and he shifts embarrassingly. He is only like that when I touch him and Ileana always teases him about it. She doesn’t now, however. I think she is saving it for when we get into the cave. Jordan and I both start picking up speed as more rain starts to fall from the heavens. Within moments we are in the cave.

“Goodness,” Ileana says in her exasperated tiny voice. “I thought we would never get over here. You two are so slow. And Jordan, why did your face get so red when Maria hugged you? Is she not allowed to hug you?”

Jordan and I look at each other. She is indeed in her teasing mood. I do, however, also wonder why his face was red. I always wonder.

A low growl comes then from the back of the cave. All three of us freeze. The sound has stopped and only the rain can be heard again. Yet none of us move in fear of what lies beyond in the darkness. I turn so I can face the back of the cave and look into the shadows. A figure moves in them and I almost jump. It is a panther, sleek and beautiful. It’s coat gleams even in the darkness and I want to scream. This animal is out of its natural environment and it looks in a mood to kill. There is no way to run away without it catching us. Maybe I could have stood a chance with Ileana here, but Jordan would not make it out alive.

The panther crouches, ready to attack. I slowly take a step back. My hands are shivering, I am so afraid.

I am preparing to take another step backward when the beast pounces. I squeal and fall backwards instead of taking my footstep. My hands are up in the air, covering my face. I am ready for the panther to hit me, even though I am afraid. I do not want to die. Ileana’s screams fill my ear and I feel her hiding behind my neck. She is just as afraid as I.

I hit the ground and it takes a moment for me to realize the creature has not touched me. I lower my hands to find it has disappeared.

A purring sound suddenly comes from behind me, as soothing as the sound of the raindrops hitting the ground outside the cave opening. I turn around slowly, wondering what could have made the beast calm so. My eyes are shocked to find the black animal leaning against Jordan's legs. His eyes are so wide, like he still can't believe it, but he is petting the panther.

Ileana hesitantly comes out from beneath my mane of hair. Her paws are trembling so bad and I immediately put her in my arms, hugging her. I whisper in her ear, "It is all right, Ileana. You are safe."

I have never seen her so afraid.

"Maria, come here," Jordan says. I look back up at him. His initial look of shock has disappeared and instead contentment fills his face. It is a good look for him.

Since I trust him, I stand up and walk over. I stare down at the animal that had so shortly before been the scariest thing in my life.

"Pet her," my friend says. I give him a look that says he is crazy. He just laughs. As I reach my hand out to touch the beautiful panther, his arm shoots out. His hand touches mine and leads it over. The moment I feel the fur, I smile. I can tell that this animal will no longer hurt us.

"Do you feel it?" I ask Jordan, scratching the panther under her chin. My friend looks at me curiously.

Ileana wiggles out of my one-armed hug and jumps onto the other animal. She gives Jordan a knowing look as he asks, "Feel what?"

Then the panther turns around, looking my friend straight in the eye. She does not even bother with Ileana sitting down on her head. Instead, she opens her mouth and speaks. "We have Bonded, young man."

Jordan's mouth flies open and I must admit he looks pretty funny. He has never seen anyone Bond with an animal nor has he ever expected to Bond himself. Almost everyone in the village had given up hope on him, since he was almost to the age of seventeen where he would be permanently a Normal.

We wait for the rain to subside. Jordan is silent for a long time, but eventually he speaks when our Bonded have drifted into a silent slumber.

"I still can't believe it."

My eyes find his as my head turns to the side. "It took me forever to get used to the idea when Ileana and I bonded."

"But... Everyone knew *you* were going to Bond, Maria. Your ancestors were the original Bonded pairs. It's in your blood. Me... I was a lost cause."

I give him a very angry look as I lightly punch him on the arm. “Jordan Richardson, don’t you ever dare call yourself a lost cause again.”

He chuckles and we both fall into silence once more. A few moments later, Jordan speaks again.

“Maria, there is something I need to tell you or I will have to forever call myself a lost cause.”

Curiosity fills me as he moves closer to me. Our faces are a mere inches apart and I can feel my cheeks heating up.

“Maria,” he says, “I have been meaning to tell you this for a long time. You always tease me about asking if you are... well, you know.” I giggle because he refuses to ever say the word ‘cute.’ But my giggles stop as I look upon his serious face. “I think you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. You are funny and amazing and wonderful. And ever since I first saw you, I have been in love with you.”

My heart almost stops in my chest. My cheeks feel like they are on fire and I fall backward as my arms lose their grip on the cold, stone ground. Jordan catches me before I fall too far and once again our faces are close, almost too close. My mind races. Tough, sometimes mean, Jordan. Teasing, comical Jordan. Kind, beautiful Jordan. How can someone so wonderful love someone like me?

His face moves closer and in no time at all his lips are upon mine. I do not fight it. I kiss him back. His arm is underneath me, keeping me up, so I wrap my arms around him. I feel so alive, so full of passion. I have never known a kiss could be so magical, but I have never kissed before.

It seems to be over too quickly. Jordan’s eyes look down at me and they seem to be sparkling with laughter. I pick myself up and hug him. He doesn’t seem so embarrassed this time.

“Finally!” I heard Ileana squeal from behind us. I ignore her and look outside the cave. The rain has stopped.

It is time to go home.