



King of the Wood

A short story by Jay Mountrney

KING OF THE WOOD

The holly and the ivy
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees within the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

(refrain from Christmas carol though to have pagan origins and be over one thousand years old)

Rowan often wondered what his parents had been thinking or even whether they had thought at all.

“Did you have some kind of reverse instinct?” He assumed his mother would know what he meant.

“I think they just liked the names,” said his sister, Holly.

“We had no idea how either of you would turn out,” said their mother.

“Don’t upset your mother,” said their father, but Rowan ignored him because this was Dad’s reaction to almost any question put to his rather delicate spouse.

He had known, ever since he was old enough to understand, that he came from a family of shifters and that his changes would begin at puberty. Nobody could know exactly what he would be, but that didn’t matter. He wouldn’t, everybody assured him, be out of proportion to the rest of the family. Normal social relationships would not be affected. And of course they would all be plant shifters; that went without saying.

So in his teens he’d been prepared and then slightly startled but not shocked by what happened. His twin sister changed at about the same time and that was all right, too, but what was stupid, to his mind, was that he, Rowan, was a sturdy holly tree and she, Holly, was a slim and graceful mountain ash.

“They got the names mixed up when they registered us,” he said but Holly laughed.

“I think it’s just because we’re twins,” she said. “Mum and Dad wouldn’t have had a clue what we’d be and it’s just a strange coincidence that we’ve sort of swapped names and kinds.”

Rowan liked his plant form, misnamed though it was. He was proud of his solid smooth trunk, his glossy foliage, even his prickles. He loved that he was an evergreen. He knew he’d never bear berries: that honour was reserved for female hollies and only when they were near a male. He thought perhaps his flowers might make a contribution to someone’s berries, somewhere around the neighbourhood, and that was fine. It wasn’t as if he had to do anything about it. He’d already decided he much preferred males anyway, in his human form at least, and had no intention of having children. Holly might have children, he thought.

“Will you give them grandchildren?” he asked her. “If you do, don’t let them choose the names.”

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “It isn’t as if I’ve met anybody special and I’m not likely to for a few years. And I’ll insist on names that are not plant related. Charles is a nice name. So’s Anne.”

Rowan grinned. “Sounds about right,” he said.

He forgave his parents and the subject was never really mentioned again. Throughout his late teens and early twenties he enjoyed the routines of family life, including the periodic changes that affected them all. Mum was a corkscrew hazel, dizzyingly tangled and attractive. Her name was Hazel, too, so her parents must have had a presentiment. She spent her changes in a large pot in the garden, one made out of an old barrel cut in half. Rowan adored her spring catkins. Dad was an oak but since his name was George there seemed to be no connection unless you squinted and thought of English oaks and the patron saint of England. His favoured spot was the end of the garden where it met the adjoining woods. He could see the house and his family and could commune with other plant shifters at the same time. He said he didn’t think any of his acorns had grown up locally.

Rowan couldn’t decide where he liked to be. He listened carefully as his parents explained that the frequent appearance and disappearance of a tree in the front garden might cause a lot of raised eyebrows locally. He didn’t want to do anything to ‘out’ his family. But no spots in the back garden felt exactly right and he’d tried quite a few.

“That’s because you need your own house and garden,” his dad said. “You’ll know when you find them.”

Now Rowan was almost thirty and he hadn’t found his own space yet. He was still living at home though Dad had kitted out the basement as an apartment with a separate entrance for him. Holly had treacherously wandered off with a hawthorn shifter and they had an old cottage up on the moors. Perfect for both of them, and not a lot of regular passers by to notice the movement of the trees’ position.

It was, they all thought, essential that full humans didn’t discover their secret. They were too vulnerable during their changes. Well, they were vulnerable anyway, though they avoided danger by being careful where they stood. Rowan shuddered when he thought what could happen if someone with malicious intent got wind of their abilities and their altered state. He could foresee himself being chopped up and sold as Christmas decorations in the local market.

Most plant shifters were not even keen to have animal shifters know about them as individuals; the werewolves inevitably knew there were tree shifters in the forests. Again, nobody wanted the hassle that could occur if an

unfriendly wolf or cat found them out.

Rowan and Holly used to frighten each other silly when they were children, telling gruesome tales about plant shifters who fell foul of beavers or woodpeckers, natural or otherwise.

So Rowan made sure he only planted himself in the back garden, one that Dad had carefully screened with tall fences and Leylandii (not shifter ones). And he tried to enjoy his basement flat even though its windows were too high in the walls to see through. He was tall, but not that tall.

And he was totally gay. Which meant it was even harder to find a partner than it had been for Holly who had definitely wanted someone of the opposite gender. If gays were about two per cent of the population that gave only a minuscule number of gay shifters even on a nationwide basis, and the chance of running into one of them was slim.

Rowan was not a virgin and he didn't go without sex. He frequented gay bars and clubs and usually had a good time. But he couldn't share more than transient physical intimacy with anyone he met and sometimes he just wished and wished, in vain.

"There'll be someone out there for you." Holly was trying to be reassuring but Rowan was not impressed.

"Yeah, and if they're in another country and we never get to meet?" He wanted to believe his sister but it was hard.

"You really need to be a bit more positive," said his mum.

"That's all very well for you to say," he responded. "You found Dad quite early in life."

"Don't upset your mother," said Dad.

Rowan and Holly grinned and winked at each other. Despite her apparent fragility they knew their mother was as tough as a proverbial pair of old boots.

The Case is Altered was an old pub. The odd name was, Rowan knew, debated fiercely by publicans who had hostelries of that name. Some of them thought it was a corruption of a Spanish phrase, dating from Tudor times, or a reference to the travelling altars carried by Catholic priests around the same period. It could, in some cases, be simply named after the play by Ben Jonson from 1609 – or maybe the play was named after a pub. Rowan had no decided views about this but liked the pub. The building was old, though not perhaps dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was a kind of mock Tudor style but Rowan didn't think it was truly ancient. Maybe early Victorian or late Georgian? The exposed beams were too uniform and the ceilings were not quite low enough for a genuine Tudor inn.

It was also a gay meeting place. You wouldn't guess but it was in fact the hostelry of choice for a lot of gays in the town. Although he could be sure of meeting fellow gays there it was also somewhere he could happily take his

sister and her husband for an evening out. The atmosphere was subdued, as was the lighting. The beer and the food were good.

He went alone one evening, not exactly looking for sex but certainly on the alert for the possibility of congenial company. The bartender, Jim, knew him well and pulled a pint of bitter as soon as they had nodded to each other when Rowan entered.

He took the traditional glass pint tankard, one of the few Jim kept for favoured customers and found a seat where he could see the door and the bar. Sipping his drink he watched for potential companions. There might be one or more of **the** various men he'd enjoyed an evening with in the past or there might be someone new and worth approaching. Meanwhile he would enjoy his beer.

His patience was rewarded.

The young man who came into the bar was simply beautiful: slim, graceful, incredibly good looking. He had delicate pale features, dark expressive eyes and hair that defied nature since it was dyed bright green with darker green highlights. He wore jewellery; more than the average straight guy would wear. His clothes were fashionable but not outrageously expensive looking. Jim appeared to know him too, and was already pouring a glass of white wine. Rowan wondered why he'd never seen him before, but then considered that his own attendance at the pub was far from regular.

He was wondering how to effect an introduction when the young man appeared at his side and asked if the chair opposite was free. Rowan gulped. This was a dream come true. Yes, he half hoped to meet someone but there were usually more hurdles to overcome, more rituals to be observed. He gestured to the chair and the young man sat down, smiling.

The smile was shy but at the same time provocative and Rowan felt almost dizzy as he smiled back.

"I understand it's quiz night," said his new companion. "I don't do quizzes and I thought you looked as if you might not, either..." He looked questioningly at Rowan who grinned.

"Total lack of trivial general knowledge," he agreed. "Especially in sports and popular music." Then he introduced himself. "I'm Rowan Forester, by the way. A regular but an irregular one, if that makes sense."

"Perfect sense." The young man's eyes were dancing with amusement. "I'm Ivor Stone, and I enjoy both sports and music without ever remembering any names or dates."

"We'll just watch together, then," said Rowan, feeling immediately at ease in Ivor's company.

In fact, they both knew a few of the answers to the quiz questions but were bemused by others even when the quizmaster had explained in detail.

"And that," said Ivor, "is why I don't do quizzes. I'd be a liability in a team."

"Same here," said Rowan, ruefully. Their lack of quiz qualifications

seemed to cement an instant friendship and Rowan enjoyed the evening immensely. He wanted more than friendship but wasn't even sure whether Ivor was gay, despite the green hair and the air of fragility.

They agreed to meet again for a drink later in the week.

"Maybe the weekend," said Ivor. "I sometimes work late on weeknights." He was, he told Rowan, an interior designer, and although a lot of his work could be done at his own pace on his computer he had deadlines to meet and customers to please.

"Suits me," said Rowan. His own work as a carpenter complemented Ivor's job perfectly. He loved creating special pieces to order or exquisite carvings and chairs for display in the local shops. He wondered if Ivor had ever used any of his work; he would ask, eventually. Like Ivor, he was in control of his own work schedule but again, he had orders to fulfil and people to satisfy.

They met on Friday and Saturday nights over the next few weeks, avoiding the Tuesday quizzes and the Thursday karaoke by unspoken agreement even when they might both have been free for leisure activities.

Nothing was said, but it became quite clear that Ivor was gay. It was more what he didn't say that mattered: no girlfriends or women in his life, though presumably he'd had a mother; no comments about film stars or barmaids; cautious admiration expressed for a few actors and singers but never stridently. And always, the decorative clothing and the dyed hair. That changed to black and silver at one point, startling Rowan into comment.

"I like it," he said, "but I liked the green even more."

Ivor smiled. "Next time," he promised.

Of course, Rowan wasn't altogether sure that he had outed himself adequately. Ivor might be wondering about him, too. On the other hand, he too had never mentioned women and he was pretty certain he'd followed a few guys around the pub with his eyes. Time to talk about family, he decided. It might help to open up other topics as well.

Ivor looked jealous when Rowan told him about his twin sister and their loving parents. He was clearly almost green with envy when Rowan described his basement flat.

"I'm a bit estranged from my family," he said. "They live on the west coast of Wales and I don't visit often." He didn't say much more but Rowan got the impression the estrangement wasn't necessarily Ivor's idea.

"So why choose the midlands?" He hoped he wasn't being too pushy.

Ivor shrugged. "Access to a lot of museums, fabric stores, design studios. Online research is all well and good but sometimes I need to feel things between my fingers, you know?"

Rowan did know. He loved the feel of wood, the grain, the hardness, the warmth. He could imagine that the choices of materials for interior decorating

would be similar.

Ivor lived in small flat over a furniture store on the main street of their town. “I get a reduced rent if I recommend them occasionally,” he said. “That’s no hardship because they stock some lovely things. Not all my customers can afford them, but at the very least they can look at the stuff and then try to source a cheaper copy.” He mentioned the name and Rowan laughed with happiness.

“They show some of my work,” he said, and the rest of that evening was spent talking about chairs and cupboards and panels and table legs.

The two had a lot in common, ranging from an inability to do well at quizzes to a love of furnishings and beauty. They were becoming fast friends and Rowan was delighted. He hoped Ivor was delighted, too. At any rate, their evenings together were now a permanent fixture in their lives.

Eventually, and not without some trepidation, Rowan invited Ivor to meet his family. Sunday lunch, he decided, when Holly and Thornton would be there. Might as well get everyone introduced at once. Ivor accepted the invitation but looked sad.

“I can’t reciprocate,” he said, when Rowan asked him why he looked miserable.

“Well, no, West Wales is a bit far for Sunday lunch,” said Rowan.

“It’s not just that,” said Ivor. “My parents didn’t want any more to do with me once they knew I was gay.” In a sense, that was good news. It confirmed Rowan’s suspicions and meant he could at least try for more than friendship.

Nobody was in a changed state that weekend and everyone was welcoming. Dinner was perfect, and so was the wine Rowan had chosen. Then his mother surprised him.

“What are you?” she asked Ivor. It was a question only ever addressed to shifters and Rowan had not mentioned shifting when he’d asked to bring a friend. Had his parents assumed, and if so, why?

But Ivor was blushing and looking extremely uncomfortable. He must at least gather what the question implied; an ordinary human would respond with information about their work, surely.

There was a brief silence while everyone took in the fact that their guest was upset. Then Holly changed the subject, telling everyone about the dining furniture she’d ordered for their new house on the moor. She’d chosen modern pieces, ignoring Rowan’s offer to create something for her.

“Rowan says you’re an interior designer,” she said to Ivor. “Maybe you can help me pick out the right paint shades. But only if you want to. It must be annoying to be asked to work for nothing just because the people who ask are friends.”

“We could pay,” said Thornton, but he looked doubtful. For all they knew, Ivor could be ridiculously expensive.

Ivor grasped the lifeline with clear gratitude. “I’d love to help,” he said. “Maybe Rowan could bring me to visit you and I could get an idea of the house. And I can easily forget to charge you – I don’t have many friends who ask my opinion.”

The incident was over, for now, but when Rowan was helping his mother load the dishwasher she turned to him, frowning.

“I’m sorry I made him feel awkward,” she said. “But he’s obviously a shifter and I thought you must be quite serious about him to have brought him home, knowing that.”

“I didn’t know,” said Rowan. “I don’t know how you did.”

“Oh. Well, I could sense it, I suppose,” she replied. “I’ve always been able to sense other shifters, and I forget that not everyone has that kind of ability.”

Nothing more was said but Rowan kept thinking about the conversation. His mother was rarely wrong and if she said Ivor was a shifter she was almost certainly correct. But why was his friend afraid to answer? Partly, presumably, because he would have no idea what the Foresters were. If they were wolves and he was a rabbit, for instance... Or for that matter if they were small plants and he was a rabbit... Rowan would have to ask, preferably quite soon, and clear matters up satisfactorily.

Next Saturday in *The Case is Altered*, Rowan psyched himself up to asking outright.

“I think I need to know more about you,” he began. “My mother sensed you were a shifter, like us, and if we’re to be friends we need to know whether we’re compatible in our changed state, if only so that if we aren’t we can avoid being around each other then. We’re all plant shifters, by the way.”

“Me too,” said Ivor, in a low voice, looking around to make sure they weren’t in danger of being overheard.

“But you looked worried,” Rowan continued. “Why? Or did you think we might be something aggressive?”

“It’s just...” Ivor paused then began again. “I haven’t met many others, you see. When my parents threw me out I lost contact with a lot of friends and relations.”

“If it helps,” said Rowan, “Dad’s an oak tree, Mum’s a hazel, Holly’s a rowan, and yes, I know she got the wrong name, and Thornton’s a hawthorn. I’m a holly so the name switch went both ways.”

“Thank you,” said Ivor. “I told you we lived on the coast. Dad’s a bladderwrack, a kind of seaweed. Mum’s a patch of marram grass on the dunes. I never fitted in anyway quite apart from being gay.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what you are?” By this time Rowan was having all kinds of suspicions. Bindweed wouldn’t be too good. Nor would some lichens.

“Ivy,” said Ivor, glancing up at Rowan shyly. “I’m no good in the sea air, and other shifters aren’t keen because they think I might be clingy.” His hair was green again this week and Rowan could suddenly picture him in his full glory as a lush creeper on an old wall.

He smiled contentedly. “So we’ve nothing to worry about,” he said.

Ivor looked unconvinced. “There’s the gay thing,” he pointed out.

“But since we’re both gay,” Rowan started then stopped because Ivor’s mouth had fallen open and he clearly hadn’t had any idea.

“I, I didn’t, didn’t kn-know.” Ivor was stammering.

Rowan sighed. It seemed Ivor’s distance from his family had affected him badly. He, Rowan, might not be able to tell when someone was a shifter, but he was pretty good at telling when someone was gay. It had been good to have it confirmed, of course, but it was hardly a surprise.

In the end it took about six months of friendship before Rowan made a serious move. They had established a strong bond and had found, to their relief, that their change periods coincided to a great extent. Plant shifters stayed in their altered state long enough to tend to their roots and leaves and repair any damage caused by storms or other accidents. One result was that freelance work suited them better than employment where they might have to account for long absences. It was never months but it could be a few weeks at a time, and that would be difficult to explain.

“I’m so glad you’re a plant shifter too,” said Ivor. “I was thinking up all kinds of excuses about having to travel for work but now I don’t need to.”

“I’m glad we’re the same in that respect too,” said Rowan. “Not just because of the absence thing, but because we can take advantage of plant communication.” At least, he hoped they could.

Ivor nodded vigorously.

Shifters had always assumed it was a kind of magic that went along with shifting abilities, but researchers had recently shown that trees could to some extent communicate using the underground network of fungi. Of course, for natural trees, such communication was merely along the lines of ‘hot weather’, ‘rain coming’, and so on, but shifters could use it almost like a telephone system. Once they knew each other they could keep in touch. Rowan knew his father often tuned in to the forest ‘telegraph’ too, but personally he found it quite boring. His mother said Dad found it soothing but Rowan thought a daily weather forecast on the radio was quite enough.

Their first change proved that they could indeed contact each other and when Rowan arranged to meet Ivor at The Case is Altered he was still in holly

form but intending to change back within a day or two.

“Welcome back,” said Ivor as Rowan walked into the pub. Jim was on duty at the bar and nodded a greeting.

“Hi, stranger,” he said, but Rowan knew his erratic custom was accepted as normal for him, and merely grinned.

They’d been apart for over a fortnight and Rowan had had plenty of time to think of how to approach the issue that was uppermost in his mind whenever he saw Ivor. The latter’s hair was dark green with blond highlights this time and his face looked pale but healthy and somehow adorable.

Rowan started by putting his hand over Ivor’s on the tabletop and was pleased when his friend not only didn’t object but turned his hand and curled his fingers round Rowan’s. There wasn’t much more they could do in such a public place though Rowan made sure his feet touched Ivor’s frequently. When they left, as soon as they were in the street Rowan made a grab for Ivor and they walked down the road hand in hand.

It was Ivor who suggested Rowan come up to his flat for coffee.

“Or other things,” he muttered, almost inaudibly but Rowan heard him.

“Other things then coffee,” he suggested and Ivor gave him an almost blinding smile.

The other things involved a great deal of kissing and caressing but it took a few more evenings before they went any further. Both men seemed to be on the same page: take things slowly and get them just right.

When at last they tumbled into bed, in Rowan’s basement, the sex was perfect.

Rowan had never been with another shifter and hadn’t realised what a difference it would make knowing there were no secrets and that they understood so much about each other. He was pleased, too, to find that Ivor was only too happy to be submissive and that his natural tendency to dominate could be given full rein.

However, when they were both sated and tired, Rowan snuggled down hoping to curl up with his new partner for sleep but found Ivor sitting on the edge of the mattress looking ready to bolt.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. All sleepiness fled as he watched the play of expression on Ivor’s face.

“I’m scared,” came the unexpected reply.

“Whatever for? I won’t hurt you. Was I too rough? I didn’t mean to be, but maybe you need gentler handling. Just tell me. I thought we were well suited but perhaps...”

“No, no, it’s not that.” Ivor sounded really worried and Rowan sat up, putting his arm around him. Ivor twitched but didn’t quite shrug off the embrace. “I just. I mean. You know I’m ivy and you know we take some of the characteristics of our plant form into our human shape. Well, I don’t want to come across as too clingy or needy. I want it all to be good for you as well as

for me. I don't think I could bear it if you rejected me now."

"Reject you? Nothing could be further from my thoughts." Rowan thought back over their lovemaking. Ivor had been beautifully flexible and sweetly accepting. His only fear was that he had been too overbearing and perhaps too much for his gentler partner. His fingers twined in a tendril of green hair. Ivor had been going to have it cut but Rowan had managed to dissuade him.

He persuaded his nervous partner back under the duvet and held him, keenly aware of the rapid heartbeat of the man in his arms.

"Rejection just isn't going to happen," he murmured. "Not from me, not now, and maybe not ever." He felt awkward at making a commitment so soon but he had to soothe Ivor and make sure he was comfortable with their new relationship. "I like clingy, if that helps. I like to feel needed, to feel strong, to feel in charge. But I'm not a total top and if you wanted..." He stopped. Neither of them were in any fit state to follow through with that thought just yet.

"Perhaps," said Ivor, his voice muffled by the fact that his lips were pressed into Rowan's chest. "It's just that my parents didn't like what they called my neediness. My mother was as sharp as the blades of her plant form, and never gave hugs or any affection. My father was worse in a way because he spent most of his change under water and when he was in human form he wasn't exactly touchy feely. They thought my desire for physical contact was perverse and then of course they disapproved of my liking for my own gender too."

Poor Ivor. It must have been awful growing up without family affection. Rowan had always had plenty of hugs from his parents and his twin. He couldn't imagine being rejected in that way and what effect it must have had on Ivor's development. He had no idea of what to say but just hugged harder.

When they woke up they were still entangled in each other's arms, their legs, too, twisted together. A green curl was tickling Rowan's nose and he hoped they could wake up like that on a lot of mornings to come.

Everyone was pleased. Holly was delighted that her twin had found someone special. Their parents were equally enthusiastic. Finding other plant shifters was always a problem. You couldn't exactly advertise. And life with an ordinary human would have too many difficulties, however much both partners tried to make it work.

For the moment, Rowan and Ivor were seeing each other every night but retained their respective apartments.

"When are you going to look for a house together?" Hazel wanted her son to have all the finer things in life and thought that demanded his own house and garden.

"I'm not sure we are, yet," said Rowan. He glanced at Ivor who was with

them again for Sunday lunch.

“Ivor could move in here with you,” said his mother.

“Mum, I said ‘not yet,’” said Rowan, feeling a little exasperated. He didn’t like to feel people were pushing him.

“Don’t upset your mother,” said his father, almost automatically, concentrating on carving a joint of lamb.

Rowan tried not to lose his temper and failed. “I said not yet because our relationship is still quite new. I suppose it’s fine for you to upset me by piling on the pressure.”

There was a brief silence then Holly, always the peace maker, started to talk about the heather on the moor and how pretty it was.

“Anybody know any heather shifters?” she asked brightly, and when everybody said that no, they didn’t, she faked severe disappointment, getting laughs all round.

Later, as they walked back towards the town centre and Ivor’s flat, Rowan apologised for his parents.

“I don’t mind,” said Ivor. “It’s nice that they care so much. Mine don’t. And since they brought the subject up, maybe we could think about it.” He blushed as he spoke and slipped his hand into Rowan’s.

They did think, and a few weeks later Rowan took Ivor to look at a picture in an estate agent’s window. The house was small but well maintained and had a long narrow garden with high fences on every side. Best of all, it was stone built and the back wall would be perfect for Ivor in his plant form.

“I know you find old walls all over the place,” said Rowan, “but it always worries me when you’re out there alone. I love having our garden to change in, and I want the same for you.”

It didn’t take long for Ivor to agree. Then there was all the hassle and delay common to every house purchase. Both men had money saved, from their respective jobs and from the low cost of their current flats, so a deposit wasn’t a problem. Rowan’s father guaranteed the mortgage once he was happy about the property they’d chosen.

“I told you that you needed your own house and garden,” he told his son. “Now you’ll find a special spot and Ivor will always be near.”

It was almost like getting married though neither man had mentioned that idea yet. Maybe if living together worked out they could have a formal ceremony. Rowan wasn’t particularly bothered. He didn’t feel a need for marriage. His family were aware of his choice and he hoped he never needed anything like hospital or social care that might necessitate a legal arrangement. Ivor felt the same way but admitted he’d quite like to flaunt a wedding ring.

“I can give you a ring, if that’s what you want,” said Rowan. “A ring won’t cost nearly as much as a wedding.”

Ivor laughed. "I don't want it that badly," he said. "I just want to be with you and it would be nice some day to have a ring on my finger."

He had given notice that he was leaving his flat and the landlord was very happy since he had promised to keep pointing customers in the direction of the store and Rowan would still be providing occasional pieces of furniture for display. Rowan's parents had plans for the basement that included a bed and breakfast business but would do nothing about it until Rowan and Ivor were settled in their new home.

That was something that seemed to be subject to interminable delays. First the estate agent told them the current owners wouldn't be able to move out for a couple of months because their purchase was also delayed. Then the solicitor acting for the vendors went on holiday and didn't leave adequate instructions with their clerks. Everything was set when there was a storm that damaged some tiles and they decided to wait to move in until the roofer's scaffolding had been dismantled.

But if the move was going slowly, their relationship was deepening correspondingly fast.

"The holly and the ivy," said Ivor, grinning at his lover one night. "Only you won't bear any berries."

"I hope I bear the crown in your personal forest," said Rowan, tugging Ivor close to him. "I think Holly's doing enough bearing for all of us." Holly had recently announced that she was pregnant and that all the signs suggested twins.

"Rowan berries," murmured Ivor, and Rowan laughed.

They had both changed and when Rowan returned to human form he expected to see Ivor soon, or at least in the following week. When there was no sign of him at *The Case is Altered*, Rowan waited a few days then called at the furniture store. It was a fortnight now since he'd been back in human form and he was missing Ivor badly as well as worrying about him. He didn't usually call at the flat – no need – but he felt concerned. There was no response to his knock on the apartment door and the manager said he hadn't seen him for a while. They compared notes and it seemed the last anyone had heard of Ivor was when Rowan had contacted him via the plant network during their change. (He called it texting to the manager...) Ivor had seemed distracted and had said something strange was going on around the wall where he was staying but he hadn't elaborated. Rowan hadn't pushed because he assumed if there was a serious problem Ivor would say.

He went home and consulted his parents.

"If nobody has seen him it can't be a relationship problem," Mum pointed out. "And I think you're assuming a lot when you expect Ivor to tell you things. Remember he doesn't come from a very functional family and he must be used

to keeping his own counsel.” Ivor had eventually told the Foresters all about his childhood and his unaffectionate parents.

“You’ve really no idea where he is?” Dad was frowning and Rowan admitted he had absolutely no clue. “Then I think,” Dad continued, “you ought to change again, just temporarily, and try to contact him. You’ll get a clearer message in plant form. I’ll change too and listen in. Between us we might get a sense of his location. Then we can change back and go and check it out.”

Rowan wasn’t sure but he usually trusted his family to have good ideas and anyway, it couldn’t do any harm. He went out to the back garden and in a moment there was a holly tree firmly planted in the lawn. A moment later there was an extra oak on the edge of the woods. Hazel had decided not to change but to remain near a phone just in case of news.

The network was buzzing with surprise. Shock, rather. Apparently a derelict building that had been some kind of school was being demolished and all the trees in the grounds were to be cleared. Rowan gulped inwardly. He tried to reach out for Ivor but got nothing. Then he heard whispering from the trees. One of the beeches said he had heard what he could only describe as a plant scream followed by silence. Trees were notoriously hazy about time measured in anything shorter than decades, but it sounded as though this was recent.

He changed back quickly and saw his father streaking up the garden to the house. When they were both dressed Hazel had the family car already started and had a local map on her phone of where the old school was.

“That scream,” said George. “If it was Ivor we need to find him as soon as we can.”

“You can’t exactly demolish ivy,” Rowan said. “And we’re not certain he was there. But yes, we need to hurry.” He had thrown extra clothing into a sports bag just in case and had it on the seat beside him.

“You can’t demolish it but you can do a lot of damage,” said his father.

“Can’t you go any faster?” Rowan was drumming his fingers on the back of his mother’s seat.

“Don’t upset your mother,” said his father. “Especially not when she’s driving,” he added for good measure.

“It’s all right,” said Hazel. “I know he’s worried. I am, too. I like your Ivor, Rowan, and we have to make sure nothing bad has happened to him.

They found the school on the third try. The map wasn’t too good at showing one-way streets or cul de sacs but they made it eventually. The entire place was surrounded by chain link fencing and there were hard-hatted workers everywhere. There was a large waste skip near the entrance and Rowan recognised Ivor’s backpack in the rubbish. He tumbled out of the car and tried to grab it but a worker stopped him.

“Here, you can’t just go trawling through our trash,” he said, quite belligerently. He was right, but Rowan knew this backpack.

“This belongs to a friend of mine,” he said, clutching the pack to him.

“Then it had no business being where it was,” said the man. “We reckon you young folk have been using this place for drugs or something. Maybe we should call the coppers.”

“No need for that.” George’s voice was cultured and mature and the man wilted a little in the face of what was clearly authority. “We can return the pack to the young man concerned, and I can assure you he’d have nothing to do with drugs. I imagine there was a romantic tryst or something of that nature involved.”

Rowan glared at his father. Romantic tryst indeed. Still, it seemed to take the wind out of the workman’s sails. He walked away grumbling and Rowan threw the pack into the car. Then he stopped by a tree in the street, a young birch sapling, and held the trunk tightly, hoping to get information that way.

It worked. He could hear faint calls for help and that was definitely Ivor in panic mode. George joined him and they listened until they were sure of the direction of the calls.

“Behind the school,” said Rowan, and they walked into the grounds moving as if they had every right to be there.

There was a lot of ivy on the old building. Rowan could tell it wasn’t shifter ivy but he could just imagine that Ivor had thought this a good place to spend his change. The leaves were shivering, and he tried to send gentle thoughts to them but wasn’t sure he succeeded. There must be more ivy on the rear walls and maybe Ivor was there. He’d have left his pack inside the building so that he had clothes when he changed back. There were a number of broken windows to uphold that theory. But why were the men clearing the interior?

“You shouldn’t be here,” came a shout and then workers were running towards them. Wait, not towards them specifically; away from the building itself.

There was a loud but dull sound, something like a bomb going off in a film, and the walls seemed to fold in on themselves. The entire structure collapsed just like one of those playing card edifices he and Holly had enjoyed building and demolishing as children.

Very faintly, Rowan recalled the posters on the chain fence. The school was to be pulled down to make way for a block of offices and flats. The current building would be used as rubble in the foundations. They’d have removed anything that didn’t make for good underpinnings. A backpack with heaven knew what inside wasn’t the right material for the job. And when he thought about it the skip had also held a lot of broken desks and chairs.

He and his father raced around the building as all this ran through his mind. The walls were falling inwards and although there was a great deal of unpleasant dust, they were unlikely to meet with any actual harm.

The back walls, of course, were just as flattened, and Rowan felt sorry for the ivy that lay trapped in the ruins. But as far as he could see, that was all it was. His lover wasn’t there. Ivor would have changed with the stress of the

situation and there was no sign of mangled limbs. That was a temporary relief but where could he be?

It was George who spotted the outbuildings. They were extremely old, probably bomb shelters from the second world war, repurposed as storage of some kind. A couple of workers were walking towards them carrying a crate of what could be explosives, judging by the care they were taking.

George engaged them in conversation while Rowan ran to the buildings, calling Ivor's name.

At last. He heard a noise, a kind of whimper, and ran into the doorway nearest to where it appeared to come from. He found Ivor, curled up in a ball, naked and quivering.

Quickly, Rowan shrugged off his jacket and wrapped it round the obviously badly shaken young man. He picked him up in his arms, thankful for his own sturdy frame and Ivor's delicate one, then carried him out into the daylight.

"What was he doing in there?" It was the worker who had tried to stop the rescue of the backpack. "And more to the point, why is he in the nude? I knew I should have called the cops."

"We might well be calling them ourselves," said Rowan, thinking rapidly. "He's been the victim of a senseless prank and we're here to take him home."

"Stag do or summat?" The man was nodding sagely and seemed inclined to leave it at that.

"We'd of checked proper, guv, before we set the explosives," said another of the men, looking worried and relieved at the same time.

Rowan carried Ivor to the car. Somehow he managed to get him into some sweatpants and a T shirt then added his own coat again just to make sure. Ivor seemed cold and clammy.

"Shock," said Hazel. "We need to get him home and get a warm drink inside him."

"I gave the men a tip," said Dad, joining them. "I think I led them to believe they were instrumental in helping Ivor escape a particularly nasty situation where he was left naked and unconscious in the house and only came round when they were clearing the place. He fled to the outbuildings, being unclothed and a trespasser with no real idea of what had happened. That's the story, anyway. I don't think any of them will investigate further or contradict it. Hazel," he added, turning to his wife, "we can go home now."

Strong tea with a dash of whisky revived Ivor sufficiently for him to tell the true version of what had happened.

"I've used that wall quite often," he said. "It was always so peaceful. Nobody disturbed us and the other ivy seemed healthy and well established." His face clouded at the thought of the mess of leaves and stems that would be in

the rubble. "I knew there was a demolition order but it had been in force for years and I thought there would be a lot more site clearance before they started on the building."

"It's like all these things," said George. "Nothing happens for far too long then everything happens at once."

Ivor nodded. "Well," he said, "I was on the wall when they came. I saw them put the fence up but as I said, I thought nothing of it. Then I saw them chuck my bag in the skip and knew I'd have problems when I changed. Though I thought I'd have plenty of time and could just contact Rowan." He smiled at his lover. "I knew he'd come and get me. I just never thought it would be such an emergency rescue."

"And then you saw them set the explosives," said Rowan. He shuddered, thinking of what might have happened if Ivor had still been in plant form when the building collapsed.

"Yes, and I realised there was no time to lose so I changed quickly. I gave a sort of yell, hoping it would reach you, and I gather it did." He looked at Rowan inquiringly.

"Only once I changed myself and listened to tree gossip," he admitted. "You must have yelled once I'd changed back and was looking for you at the pub. Also, the trees called it a scream, but I don't blame you in the least. I'm pretty sure I would have screamed."

"No," said Ivor slowly. "The scream wasn't me. There was a lovely cherry tree in front of the main doors and they took a chain saw and... Well, the scream probably drowned out my yell."

"Not a shifter?" Hazel sounded worried.

"Not so far as I know," said Ivor. "But it was a beautiful tree. Anyway, I couldn't think what to do. A naked man rummaging in the skip for his pack of clothing would have made quite a stir. It was bad enough as it was but at least you were there to vouch for me and get me out of the mess I was in."

"At least you found the outbuildings. And then realised they would be coming for those, too," said Rowan. "No wonder you were in shock."

"It had never occurred to me that we were in so much danger from the human world," said Ivor. "There was the chainsaw, of course, but they wouldn't bother chopping the ivy down when the walls were set to tumble anyway. They mentioned weed killer but I think that was for the shrubs near the gate. Still, if I'd changed again and stayed on the outbuilding walls they might have done some damage so I'm almost grateful they decided on blowing the place up instead."

"And this," said Rowan's father, "is why it's so much better for plant shifters to have their own special places. Your parents should have warned you."

"I don't suppose it crossed their minds," said Ivor ruefully. "The sea and the dunes aren't prone to human interference as a rule. If anyone decides to

build it can take years even to get planning permission.”

“Didn’t you check local permissions on that school?” asked Hazel.

“Yes,” said Ivor, “but as I said, the plans had been approved for years and nobody had been near the place. So I agree I was a bit incautious, but I thought it would be all right. Thankfully, I had Rowan to rescue me.”

Rowan thought he liked his new role as a knight in shining armour though he had to confess, to himself, that he wouldn’t have done as well without his parents’ help.

Hazel made some kind of delicious stew with dumplings for dinner and told Ivor to eat well and get his strength back. He smiled at her and tucked in obediently.

“And in future, make sure you know all about the wall you’re going to cling to,” said George.

“That would be our wall,” said Rowan. “I thought as soon as we saw it that it would be perfect for Ivor.”

They moved in on a grey day in January, but the little house was aglow with lights and ringing with music. Rowan’s family were all there to celebrate the housewarming and there was a large cake decorated with holly and ivy leaves in green icing on a layer of marzipan. There were a few friends, too, shifters known to Hazel and George, a park ranger who worked with Thornton, and a couple of people from *The Case is Altered*, including Jim, the bartender. Rowan hoped the humans just thought the cake decoration was a quirky choice.

Holly was carrying new-born Heather, the latest addition to the family.

“Will she be heather?” Ivor had wanted to know.

“I have no idea,” said Holly, “but it’s a pretty name and she’s surrounded by the real thing at our house. She can be anything she likes.”

“Or whatever she’s fated to be,” said Rowan.

Thornton was carrying Charles, Heather’s twin, and Rowan remembered the conversation he and Holly had had about names.

Now he looked out at the garden and knew that in years to come there would be a sturdy holly tree in the centre, perhaps, eventually, with strands of ivy wrapped firmly around the trunk like a wedding ring on a finger.

Meanwhile, the back wall would keep his Ivor safe and he glanced across at his partner, admiring the hair, which was bright green this week, and sending loving vibes that he hoped would meet their target.

They probably did, or at any rate Ivor returned his look, and Rowan could sense the love in his eyes. For a moment the guests blurred into a fog of dimly seen faces and the only person in the world for him was Ivor.

He assumed the heady days of romance would morph into steady love. That would suit his holly nature and he thought it would suit Ivor’s ivy, too. Together, in their own special place. Perfection.

For the moment he accepted a knife from his mother then took Ivor's hand. They stepped forward together in total accord and cut the cake.