



OF MAGIC
AND
CONTEMPT
BOOK THREE

Civil
CONTEMPT

JADE THORN

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Contempt

Of Magic and Contempt Book 3

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Please note that due to its content this book is not meant for readers under the age of 18.

**Readers may also find some scenes
distressing.**

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Happy reading

Jade

xoxo

1. Melody



Waking in her bed with no recollection of getting there was becoming something of a habit, one that Melody hoped to have broken by now.

Because of her last few experiences she carefully checked her limbs. The lethargy was still there, but she found no residual aches or pains. It was surprising to be alone, although she could hear the low rumble of voices nearby and slightly further away a loud, rhythmic thumping. Her familiars were near, but not *with* her. She wasn't sure if being so dependent on them was a good thing or not.

At Bestia, she'd never have been allowed to hold a bond this long, never mind having shifters looking after her needs. But these men had been by her side since she'd bonded Dean, caring for her, protecting her, helping her. They were more than just familiars, but she didn't know what to call them. Her history of relationships was so skewed, that Melody really had no idea what she was doing. They were all friends though, which was a start. That much she had experienced with the shifters back at the compound.

Was that how she should think of them? Friends?

They kind of were, they certainly looked after her like friends, and it wasn't like she could call them her familiars, because not all of them were. But friends just seemed an insufficient title to give them, and calling them best friends sounded even worse. Like they were some sort of sorority, a bunch of girls laughing and living together was not the image that came to mind.

Family.

That felt more accurate.

Dare she call them that?

Truly, her aunt was no example, and Melody's memories of her mother became fainter every year. The warmth in her chest when she saw them, however, certainly reminded her of the feelings her mother had engendered in her younger life.

She could feel their bonds inside her, flickers of emotion in her chest. Irritation, concentration, longing, worry, determination and more. With so many shifters now residing in her heart, and with the bonds all so new, it was hard to tell who was feeling what and why. Scratch that, it wasn't hard, it was impossible.

The one thing she did know was that none of them were with her. Where could they all be? They never left her alone like this.

Carefully she sat up, again checking herself for injuries and finding nothing but a deep fatigue. The light framing the curtains on her window was bright enough to suggest that it wasn't first thing in the morning, although there was an oddness to it that she couldn't put her finger on. It was softer, more diffuse. The sounds had a different resonance too, more muted.

It wasn't the dawn light that she should have been rising to, so obviously Melody had missed classes again. If this trend didn't change soon, she was going to fail all of her subjects on attendance alone.

A tap sounded on her door, and before she could answer, Ryan poked his head around it. Melody squeaked in surprise. She hadn't heard his footsteps approach, nor the floorboards creaking.

Ryan grinned at her. "Good, you're up. Asher is getting you something to eat, why don't you have a quick shower? The others should be back soon."

He withdrew, closing the door before she could even open her mouth to ask a single question.

Fine.

A shower. She could do that. It would allow her the time to think through what she knew and decide what she wanted to ask. There was something going on, but until she could remember what had happened, nothing made sense. Something felt off about her room, but Melody couldn't focus her thoughts enough to see what it was. It wasn't dangerous, whatever her senses were picking up, just different.

Melody threw off the blanket, surprised by its weight, until she realised that it was actually three. Had she been cold? The room was certainly chillier than she'd expected, the floorboards like ice under her toes, making her realise that the soft rug was gone. Maybe it was being washed.

Her thoughts wouldn't clear. Something had happened yesterday, Melody knew that in her bones. A deep-seated sense of dread enveloped her whenever she tried to think about the previous day, but no details were forthcoming.

She stepped into her en-suite bathroom, and fumbled with the taps until she got the water right in the shower, slipping under the steamy deluge. It felt so good, warming her up and making her realise that she had, in fact, been cold.

Even here, in the bathroom, things seemed different. The echoes were harsher, louder. They seemed to ping at her from a different direction. All of it just added to her quiet sense of unease.

The next surprise was her shampoo. When Melody reached up for it, it wasn't there. Neither was the basket that her toiletries were hung in. She finally realised that the shower curtain was a different colour, and the vanity and toilet were beige instead of white.

Most concerning for her right at that moment, was the lack of a bath mat and towels. Having just stripped out of her nightshirt and boy shorts — something her familiars must have put her in — Melody realised she had nothing to dry herself or cover herself with. This was a shit start to the day. She couldn't remember anything, and everything looked wrong. Her frustration only grew.

Then a moment of clarity hit her. She wasn't in their little cabin. Her heart pounded in her chest. Just where exactly was she?

Before she could even step back into the water, the bathroom door flew open, Dean framed by the light behind him as he looked around wildly.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” he growled, still looking for a threat.

Melody blushed. “I have no towel, no mat, and uh, no soap and I only just realised that I’m not in our cabin. I just had a small panic. Where are we?”

His gaze snapped to hers, reassured that she wasn't in danger, but then it slowly travelled down her body. Tawny eyes blazed golden as his lion also took interest.

Melody wasn't overly worried, the shower curtain was wrapped around her, protecting her modesty. At least, she didn't until she realised that it was stuck to her skin, and wherever it was attached, it had become almost entirely see through.

“Dean,” she called, hoping to redirect his attention. “Some soap and a towel?”

The smile he gave her was nothing short of lewd, and he followed it up by pulling off his shirt. “I can help you get clean.”

“Dean,” she warned him, peeling the wet fabric from her. “I’ve got no soap, no towels, no anything. I’m going to be freezing when the hot water runs out.”

He took two steps to the vanity, pulling out several towels and the bath mat, as well as some bottles of shampoo. He threw the towel on the top, the mat on the floor, but the toiletries he shoved at her, kicking out of his pants even as she struggled to find somewhere to lodge the bottles. When Melody turned back around, he was naked and in the shower with her.

“Dean,” she whispered, taking a step back, but it was the wrong thing to do in front of a predator.

Faster than she could track his movement, he had her in his arms, his mouth fused to hers. She resisted for a moment, just a moment, and then the rising desire within her won. Melody wasn't sure whether it was all hers, or a combination of them both from the bond, but wherever it came from, she wanted more. She was tired of holding her shifters at arm's length.

Dean buried his fingers in her hair, tugging her head back until the water was cascading down her scalp, the fine spray of the shower tickling at her face. Then his tongue was there, licking the water up, making her giggle. It was raspy and broad. Maybe it belonged more in her lion's mouth than her familiar's.

His hands explored her skin, stroking, teasing, kneading, loving her until she was on fire. She knew what was coming, she'd seen and heard enough of the shifters back at the compound, making the most of the quiet hours of the night.

Melody had never had sex though, despite pressure from her aunt to breed with one of the shifters. It was only through the shifters refusing to rape her that she'd managed to escape, and several of them had paid for their defiance with their lives. Time and again, her aunt had tried to force her to mate with the strongest shifters in the compound, but the last thing Melody had wanted to do was bring a child into her dismal situation, and with the fertility charms and spells her aunt had laid upon her, the risk of pregnancy was too high to give in to any urges to bond with the shifters there in any sort of manner.

As soon as Melody had bonded Dean, Mrs Hardinger had fixed her up with contraceptive spells, so at least she was safe now, but this was still a whole new experience for her, and she was as nervous as she was lustful.

Melody let out a yelp of surprise when he lifted her, pushing her hot back against the cold tiles as his mouth devoured her breasts, drinking the water running over her nipples as though his life depended on it.

He didn't say a word, but his lion was purring as loud as it could, letting her know that they were both happy. With a shove, he lifted her higher, and she barely had enough time to

grasp his wet locks, before his mouth was between her legs, and he was kissing and biting and licking with a ferocity that surprised her. His roughened tongue added to the level of sensation.

Men had touched her there before, but none of them had used their mouths. Goddess, it felt amazing.

Unbidden, a moan slipped from her mouth as Dean's efforts became more frenzied. His purr had become a soft growl, and his tongue moved faster. Without warning, he slipped a finger inside her, pressing on something within that made her hips buck, and her hands clenched into fists.

“Oh! Dean, I...”

But that was all she managed to get out because he slid another finger inside her and redoubled his efforts. Moans, gasps, pleas — all fell from her lips as he brought her pleasure higher and higher.

She was close, she could feel it, her body beginning to tighten as it crawled towards the peak.

“Dean,” she gasped again, unable to say anything else.

Then she was falling, but not in the way she wanted. Dean let her slide down the wall until they were face to face.

“Mine,” he growled, as his golden eyes blazed in passion. “Need you.”

His hips bucked, his thickened length sliding against her, seeking entry, but he paused, waiting.

“Please?” he whispered against her lips, sipping from her mouth before kissing along her jaw and down to her neck. “Mel, please.”

It was now or never. If she didn't accept him now, she probably never would. Things were heating up with Trent's kitsune, and she knew the next time the wily fox shifter had her in his arms, he wouldn't stop. Dean deserved better than that kind of rejection.

Hell, she deserved better than that. It should be her choice as to who was her first.

“Mel,” Dean groaned against her shoulder, his hips slowly grinding against her, driving them both wild. She’d taken too long to answer.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Melody had expected him to thrust inside her and keep going until they both fell over the edge. Instead, Dean panted, whimpering a little, as he slowly teased his length inside her, pausing when she flinched.

“Mel? Are you...?”

It was time to take her fate into her own hands. Before he could stop her, she grabbed onto his shoulders and threw her weight downwards, impaling herself onto his hard length.

Oh, goddess that hurt!

“Fuck, Mel!” Dean’s cry was hoarse with need as well as her own pain. “Baby, you shouldn’t have done that. I never wanted to hurt you.”

It stung, she had to move, to get off him, but as she pushed up, a warm heat started up inside her, slowly eclipsing the discomfort.

Could that be the answer? To just keep moving?

Slowly, this time, she lowered herself again, feeling the warmth flare into pleasure. She moved a little faster, Dean panted as he held her, keeping himself still, letting her set the pace even as he supported her weight.

She looked down, watching as he disappeared and emerged from her core, a little blood staining his length being washed away by the water. It wasn’t just the blood going, though, his length began to chafe inside her.

“Dean, move out from the water,” she commanded, and he obeyed instantly, moving her to a new chunk of cold tile against her back, while his warm hands cupped her ass.

Once he was sure she was balanced again, he looked up at her, his expression wild. “My turn,” he growled.

This time, Dean thrust into her, just as she'd imagined, holding himself inside before drawing out slowly.

Oh, oh, that felt so good.

“Hold onto me,” he ordered.

Melody wrapped her legs tightly around him, locking her ankles behind his back. He grunted when he felt it, giving her ass a slap before he let go. Belatedly, she grabbed him around his neck, but his head was lowering, and then he took a nipple in his mouth. One hand snaked up to tease the other breast, while his other hand slipped between them, gently massaging her clit.

The combination of all the sensations, including his wet hair tickling against her skin, was too much. Melody's body tightened, then released, pushing her over the edge as she came hard.

Dean didn't pause, only moving harder and faster as he chased his own release. There was a pain against her breast, a sharp counterpoint to the pleasure coursing through her, and it heightened her awareness of everything.

“Mine,” Dean growled as he lapped at her skin.

It was only then that she saw what he'd done. Blood dripped down her breast where he'd bitten it in his passion. The eyes that watched for her reaction were knowing and unrepentant.

“Mine,” he growled again, lunging upwards and claiming her mouth with a roar as his hips gave a powerful thrust, stuttered a couple of times, and then stilled against her. He growled into her mouth as his cock pulsed inside her. Dean grunted and thrust once more. Then held her tightly to him.

How could she possibly tell him how amazing that felt? There weren't words to describe it, and thank you didn't seem like it was anywhere near enough.

You just did, and you're welcome, although it's I who should be thanking you, he told her.

Melody gaped. *You just ... I could*

It's part of the bond for true mates. You're mine, and now we can hear each other like this. Dean still held her tightly, his stubble grazing her neck as he rubbed against her in a cat-like fashion.

We're linked now, forever, even breaking the familiar bond won't touch this. You. Are. Mine.

The first time she'd had sex and she'd formed a life-long mate-bond. Nothing in her life was ever normal or average.

That's because you are beyond a normal witch and nothing about you as a woman is average. You are a goddess, Melody, and I want to worship you for the rest of my life.

Okay. That had to stop, he couldn't keep reading her thoughts. There had to be a way to mute it at times. What if she ended up bonding to one of the others? What if they were having sex and Dean could hear it?

Baby, you better believe that you're not having sex with another shifter without me. I wouldn't just be hearing it, I'd be there with you, watching you enjoy it. There's no secrets between us now, I won't allow it. You're mine, and I don't want to miss another moment of you.

Well, they'd address it later, it was likely his lion was still riding him hard, and the bond was so new. They could talk about it later.

Dean chuckled against her skin and slowly withdrew. They both shuddered at the sensation, and he carried her over to the water and held her under it.

She allowed her legs to slip down off his hips, and with a sigh, he let her body slide against his all the way to the floor. Then he stepped forward under the water with her, holding her head against his chest.

“Why can't I hear your thoughts? You seem to pluck mine out of thin air, but I can't find yours.”

Dean chuckled. “It doesn't work like that. We can think things to each other, like a kind of internal speech, but you

won't be able to read my thoughts.”

“Well, that doesn't seem very fair,” she said, pouting.

“I'm your familiar. It's to enable me to anticipate your needs, to be there ready for you, to serve you to the fullest of my capacity.”

So, if I thought about wanting Trent to come and join us right now, you'd go fetch him? She thought, cheekily.

“Mine,” snapped Dean, kissing her fiercely again. He nipped her lips, nuzzling along her jaw and down her neck to the juncture with her shoulder where he bit a little harder.

“Don't push my lion right now,” Dean warned her. “He's wanted this since he first smelled you, and he's reached the end of his patience. Give him time to calm down a bit, let him gloat a little, before you start trying to bring the others in on this. I know it's a dick move, but if you give him a little time now, it's going to save a lot of trouble later.”

“He's really pushy, isn't he?” Melody asked, concerned.

Dean laughed against her neck. “Baby, you have no fucking idea. I'm just glad I have you now to help me keep him under control.”

“Well, I'm glad that I bring something to this bond,” she teased.

Dean reared back, his face aghast, until he saw her smile. The look he gave her then was nothing short of predatory. “Stop now, or I'm going to show you what it's like to really be fucked, and I don't think you're ready for that yet, little girl,” he growled.

Golden eyes regarded her steadily before they were scrunched shut.

“Fuck, Mel,” Dean said, shaking his head. “Don't rile him up, please? I haven't lost control of him like that since I was a teenager. He's really riding me hard right now.”

This, she knew how to fix. She grabbed his head between her two palms and pulled his face down towards her, looking deep into his eyes that had popped open in surprise. “Listen to

me, Lion. Dean is now mine, not yours. I like you, but if you hurt him, I will force you to emerge and geld you. It's the fastest way to tame a male cat, and it won't affect Dean once he shifts back. He'll be intact, not you. I will only put up with so much nonsense from you, do you understand me?"

The gold disappeared from Dean's eyes so quickly, it almost made her wonder if she'd imagined it there in the first place.

"Damn, Mel, that's cold," he complained. "He's curled up in a corner, whining that his new mate is mean."

Melody gave him a cool smile. "I might not espouse much of what was done in my coven, but I do know how to look after, treat, and control shifted beasts. While my aunt is insane, our coven is the best at beast magic in this country."

The smile fell from his face. "Our coven?" he asked, quietly.

She froze. Had she really just said that?

"Yeah, you kinda did." Tawny eyes watched her, carefully.

She hated this. Hated that her aunt had taken their coven and twisted it into something brutal and ugly. Once upon a time, Bestia had been something to be proud of. Now it was only something to be ashamed of, a true house of horrors.

Yet it was still the place where her mother came from, where she came from, and she would not cower from that.

Dean made eye contact with her and nodded. "Yeah, you and your mother are two beacons of light in a pool of darkness. There's nothing shameful about being proud of your roots, just as long as you're no longer part of that darkness."

That she could guarantee. The only links she had with Bestia now, were the shifters that she'd failed to save.

2. Melody



The water was starting to cool against her skin, and her mood was cooling along with it.

“Let’s get washed up, and then you can tell me why I’m no longer in my room. Because I’m not, am I? Are we in the shifter dorms?”

Dean grabbed the shampoo bottle, spilling some into his hand before lathering her hair. She was surrounded by a spicy apple kind of scent, while his powerful fingers dug into her scalp, easing tension she hadn’t even been aware of.

“No, we’re not in the shifter dorms, we’re in our new house. The old caretaker’s cottage.”

Melody remembered seeing it on the campus map, a larger cabin that was removed from the main part of the campus, almost completely surrounded by forest and very private. She’d never actually seen the thing, but she knew where it was.

“Well, at least we can put up broader wards, and it means we’ll know when anyone is approaching. Privacy is good, right?”

Instead of answering, he pushed her backwards. She had just enough time to close her eyes before the water sluiced over her face. As soon as she finished rinsing her hair and stepped out, Dean was at her again, this time with some conditioner.

“Under normal circumstances,” he said after working it through all her hair, “privacy would be good.”

“It means we’re more protected from threats on campus,” Melody said, agreeing.

“But less protected from those off-campus,” Dean warned her.

She tried to think of where the house stood in comparison to the edge of the college wards, but couldn’t quite picture it. From what Dean implied, however, it had to be too close to the wards for comfort.

“We’re too far from help to get to us in time if we’re attacked, although hopefully the next time the provost will act sooner. I know the councillor gave her hell for allowing them to fail in the first place.”

It was as if Dean had pushed a button.

Everything from the day before came rushing back, the attack, the injured shifters, Justin, new bonds, killing the infected shifters and the arrival of the new students.

“Justin!” she gasped.

Dean smoothed back her hair. “He’s fine. Sleeping it off, but they healed him, there won’t even be a scar. We’re all fine, we’re all safe. You have nothing to worry about. Well, except how they’re all going to react to the scent of what we just did,” he told her with a saucy wink.

Despite being in the shower, Melody felt dirtier than ever. Quickly she jumped under the cooling water, rinsing the last of the conditioner out, while Dean rubbed his hands all over her with soap, cleaning her body.

Everywhere.

It was embarrassing, knowing he was cleaning up everything that she could feel leaking out of her while she desperately worked the conditioner out of her locks. The sooner Melody could take over the task, the better, but she’d never get the conditioner out if the water went truly cold, and she needed a distraction from her thoughts. The last thing she wanted to do was face the reality of the situation they were in, but her anxiety ramped up higher and higher.

The reaction of the other shifters wasn't something she was prepared to think about either, although it would pose a more immediate problem, it wasn't at the top of her list of dangers. She wasn't ready to process what they wanted, hoped for or expected. It was time for another subject change.

"What's the house like?" she asked desperately, emerging from the spray. "Is it nice? It seems cooler than our cottage."

Dean huffed a laugh as he rinsed the soap from her body and wrenched the taps off.

"Let's just say it's a fixer-upper. We've been ordered to fix it up on top of everything else. Shay and Quinn are going to help us on the sly, because I don't think the provost would approve of us getting help from anyone."

It wasn't working. Dean's answers were only adding to her anxiety. She knew he could feel it, had no idea how to block it from him, but when he pulled her shivering body to him, his eyes blazed golden. No longer sulking, his lion was back at the forefront, ready to protect her. She was going to need that.

"Mel, hey, baby. It's okay. We'll get it fixed up in no time, don't stress. We've been around a long time, we've all learned a thing or two about building repairs, and most of us can manage a hammer without losing a digit."

He had no idea. No idea what she'd discovered, just how much danger they were in and what they were facing. He didn't know how close the enemy actually was. They were going to have to do more than fix up the house, they were going to have to fortify it and pray to the goddess that it was stronger than the last cabin they'd been in, because that hadn't lasted well at all. She needed to tell him. She needed to tell *all* of them.

"It's not that, it's more than that. I found something out yesterday. I couldn't remember anything when I woke, but it's all coming back to me like a nightmare. I need to talk to you, to all of you. I don't want to think about it, but it's not going to wait for us. We need a plan, and we need it now."

Dean eyed her a moment. Her shivers and chattering teeth weren't just from the cooling water and the even cooler air now swirling around them. He could see it too.

He straightened, coming to a decision.

“Alright, baby, here's what we're going to do.” He stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her, then got another one and rubbed her hair, ignoring the water running down his own body.

“First, we're going to get you dry and dressed, because you're seriously chilled. While you're doing that, I'll grab one of the dragons and get them to call the rest here. You can have something hot to eat while we're waiting. Then, we're all going to sit down together and talk this shit out. Between us all, we've got power and experience. There's nothing we can't handle if we put our minds to it.”

Melody looked up at him, his expression loving yet fierce. He truly believed that. He believed in her, in *them*, in their chance at building a life together. She only hoped that what she was about to reveal wouldn't crush his faith, they were going to need that kind of optimism to survive what was coming for them.

For Dean's sake, Melody tried to stay calm, cooperating with his efforts to warm her up and get her dressed. She even shooed him away to get dried himself while she went into her room to find clothes. That was where her plan fell apart.

Opening the drawers, she quickly discovered that they were all empty, as was the simple closet on the other wall. Aside from the bedding and blankets, there wasn't actually anything in the room at all to indicate occupancy. Maybe her things were in a box or bag in the common area.

Tucking the towel around her, she opened her bedroom door and stopped in shock.

Obviously the men had worked furiously to prepare that room for her, because the rest of the house was in shambles. All along the walls, the chinking was cracked or had fallen out in large pieces, leaving gaps where she could see through

either to the next room or outside. In some cases, vines and leaves pushed their way inside, giving the place an almost treehouse-like feel.

If it weren't for the chill air coming in, it would have had a fairy-tale atmosphere. There were no internal ceilings, only a vaulted roof, which had several tiles missing and more verdant growth peeking through. The floor was a mess where rain had obviously come in and destroyed whatever furniture and soft furnishings had been there. The wood was rotten and buckled in places, while in others, there were shadows and moss growing, indicating a missing lounge and rug at the very least.

Once upon a time, it might have been a lovely place, but now it was damaged and derelict, and going by the fungus and mould growing everywhere, not somewhere fit to live. Not even for the men in their animal forms. If Melody had slept in the only intact room, then where had they spent the night?

“Uh, yeah,” Dean said, stepping through behind her in a pair of grey sweats and a form-fitting black T-shirt, his feet still bare. “I was going to warn you about that. Nick and Justin used a bit of magic to get your room up to scratch, but they've been too busy building new wards around here to do more than that. I know it looks rough now, but it's so much bigger than the cottage, and we will really be happy here once it's all sorted.”

In her chest, she could feel his anxiety, his worry and his desperation to please and reassure her. Before she could say a word, however, Asher came barrelling in through the front door, an overnight bag in his hands.

“Oh, good, you're up. Here's your clothes.”

It was only then that he seemed to register what she was wearing. Or rather, just how much she wasn't. His eyes became burnished bronze as he stalked rather than strode towards her.

“Although I have to say,” he continued. “I don't object to seeing you like this.”

He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent, before stopping abruptly.

“You claimed him?” he snarled.

Before either Melody or Dean could react, the towel was snatched from her body, and she was pressed back against Dean, sandwiched between the two men as Asher ground his growing erection against her belly while his mouth left a trail of heated kisses along her shoulder.

Dean spun, shoving her behind him and turned to face the asshole still trying to reach her.

“She gets a fucking choice,” Dean snarled. “Neither of us let her choose when it came to bonding us, the least we can do is let her choose to claim us. You’ve already got more than you deserve, show her some fucking respect or I’ll teach you how to.”

The wolf shifter sank to his knees, head down, chest heaving.

“Fuck, Mel. I’m sorry. He’s pushing so hard, I’m sorry. I can’t ... He just ... FUCK!”

Asher shifted and ran back out the front door, his tattered clothing strewn behind him. It was only a second later that Trent rushed in.

“Melody, are you okay? Asher ran out of here like ...” he paused and inhaled deeply, then did so again.

Golden eyes rapidly became amber, and his posture changed as a dark smile spread across his face.

“Well, well, well, sweet witch. I was wondering how long the lion would wait. You lasted longer than I expected, brother. Kudos to you for exceeding my expectations.”

Trent prowled towards her, pausing to grab her towel on the way. When Dean began to snarl in front of her, he stopped, holding out the towel. Dean snatched it, holding it behind him for her, and Melody gratefully wrapped herself up again.

“I see why the wolf left, you are quite the tempting morsel, but I have *very* good impulse control. Do you know what

‘edging’ is, Melody? I’d love to teach you. Maybe the next time you play with your *kitty*, you could invite me along.”

He gave her another sly smile, holding up his hands and retreating when Dean began to growl again.

“Wait!” Melody cried.

In front of her, Dean froze and there was a pang of pain in her chest. She couldn’t understand it, until Trent started moving towards her again.

“Are you sure, Melody? I’m not going to force you, in fact, I think I’d prefer to make you beg before I claim you.”

He was going to what?

Melody blinked.

“Goddess, no, that’s not what I meant,” she replied, and the ache eased. It made more sense now.

“I was just going to ask you to find the others and bring them inside, I found something out yesterday, and I need to tell you all.” She paused and looked around the empty space again. There wasn’t a single stick of furniture, and they really couldn’t justify bringing anything in until the most basic of repairs and cleaning was done.

“How about we meet on the front porch?” Dean suggested hesitantly. “We can all sit on the edge, and you can stand and face us. Or you can sit on the edge and we’ll stand and face you.”

He groaned, running a hand through his tawny locks. “Look, Trent. Just fucking tell them to meet us out the front. We’ll get dressed and meet you there, okay?”

Trent snickered and gave a half bow, then left to find the others.

A tension she hadn’t even been aware of, seemed to leave her body with his departure.

“Pass me the bag, please?” she asked. “I want to get dressed before anyone else overreacts.”

Dean sighed. “I did it again, didn’t I?”

Melody took the proffered bag, heading back into her room. She left the door open, letting him decide whether or not he joined her, but either way, she knew that he could still hear her clearly.

“Did what again?”

“Left you with little option,” he replied.

She thought about it, while digging through for her underwear with one hand, holding up the towel with the other. Not finding it, she gave a little growl and let go of the fabric, digging through the bag with both hands until she found what she was after.

“You might have moved things further faster than I was prepared for,” she told him, and he groaned from the next room. “But I don’t regret it.”

There was movement at the door, he stood there, watching her, hope in his eyes.

“Really?” he asked huskily.

“Really. It was my own insecurities holding me back. I’ve spent my whole life with shifters, I don’t care about witching norms or the demands of society. I also don’t think my familiars are any less worthy of attention than the next person. You’re all just as capable and wonderful as any other student here. I hate how shifters are treated.”

Dean gave her a shy smile, coming in and grabbing her jeans, holding them up by the waistband for her to step into.

“You’re even better than anything I’d ever fantasized about,” he told her quietly, his gaze on what she was doing. “The others were more desperate to get out of the academy, they would have taken just about anyone other than Shawna and her lot.”

“But not you?” Melody asked him, just as quietly. This tender side of him was new, and she was frightened to do anything to burst this little bubble.

She picked up her sports bra and slid it into place, but he was ready and waiting with a long sleeved T-shirt.

“I guess I still had hopes, or dreams. Whatever you want to call it. I wanted to find a witch that could not only best my beast, but one that I could respect, one that I could love. Then my lion caught a whiff of you, and all that went out the window. Yet here you are, and you’re amazing. You put everyone before yourself, and you do it without fanfare. I don’t know whether you’re just conditioned to serve ... no, no, hang on.”

Before Melody could even protest what he was saying, Dean was already retracting his words.

“That’s not right because you’re not passive and you’re not submissive. You fight for us, Mel. You are conditioned, in a sense, but not to be less than what you were born as, but *more*.” He leaned in, kissing her gently. “You’re kind of my hero, and I want to spend the rest of my life living up to your example.”

All of the breath rushed out of her lungs. How on earth did she respond to that?

Dean didn’t wait for her to answer, he simply tugged her into his arms and kissed her again. Slowly, gently, tenderly.

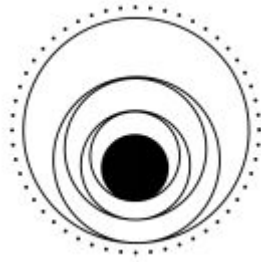
“You’re my mate, Mel, and you’re a dream come true. I know that whatever it is we’re facing, we’re going to do it together, and we’ll win. Because the determination that I’ve felt from you, that innate need to protect others, it won’t allow you to do anything less. So, pull on your big girl panties, and let’s go fix some shit.”

He took her hand and pulled her outside behind him, both of them barefoot. The mould was cold and squishy beneath her feet, but she tried not to give it any mind, imagining that she was walking through a quiet forest rather than what was meant to be her living room.

Dean’s inspirational talk, and the solid confidence he felt in her, bolstered her own feelings so that when she stepped outside, and the others stood there waiting, she knew he was

right. Whatever it was that her aunt brought against them, they would succeed, because they could not allow Bestia — and thus Aunt Georgia — to win.

3. Asher



Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Every time. Every fucking time.

He only had to be within ten feet of her and his wolf was a slobbering mess, and Asher wasn't much better.

The lion was right, he really was a fucktard who shouldn't be allowed within half a mile of her, at least not until he could get his wolf under control. The only thing he'd have to deal with then, was his own idiotic alpha tendencies.

"Wolf," the little fox called to him. Although when Asher turned to tell him off, he noticed that the submissive man had the darker eyes. So it was the kitsune then, not the fox.

"Beast," he replied with a smirk. "Or should that be freak?"

Trent's smile was vicious as he approached. "You've no idea how freaky I can be, little pup. Best to save those little milk teeth for a foe that fears them."

His wolf wanted to challenge the fucker right then and there, but there was a presence in Trent's kitsune that made them both back down. Much to his disgust, Asher lowered his eyes.

"So, you do possess a modicum of intelligence then. It gives me hope that you may eventually be worthy of our mate. Try to do better for her, and you may even earn my respect."

Each word hit him like a lash, but they were no worse wounds than the ones he inflicted on himself in his daily litany. He was a fool. There was no other word for it. He'd

approached an unknown witch, simply because it was rumoured that she would have the power to set him free, and he'd challenged her. Worse, he'd forced her to accept when she didn't want to. Half of him had been excited about winning her, and the other half chagrined that she didn't want him.

Still, however it had happened, he *was* going to make this work for both their sakes.

The freak was right. He had to do better, and he would.

“What do you want?” he growled, still unable to meet Trent's eyes. The fox might have been submissive, but this kitsune was far from it.

“Melody wishes us all to gather together, she has something important to impart. I will head this way and usher those I find, if you would go in the opposing direction, then we should halve the time needed. The first of us to find a dragon, will get him to open the link and summon us all.”

Without waiting for a response, Trent headed off, and after a moment's pause, Asher copied him, heading in the opposite direction as indicated.

The sound of axes hitting wood told him where Oz and Ryan were long before he scented them. He knew at least one of the Apex would be around here, the need for firewood and timber to make repairs was high enough that they'd be spending a lot of time in this little grove near the house.

Between the two of them, they'd cut up a considerable amount of firewood already, and Asher knew that he'd be conscripted to help them carry it back, he didn't even pause before bending down and grabbing the first of what would be many armfuls.

“Mel wants to talk to us, head back to the cabin, I'm going to see if I can find Nick or Jus.”

Mel wants us back at the cabin, she needs to tell us something. Please head there now, we're meeting out front, Nick's voice sounded in his head.

Well, that was quick.

Doing an about face, Asher headed back with his load of wood, leaving the other two to get their shirts back on and grab their own armfuls.

It wasn't far to walk, but by the time the three of them got back, everyone was there, except Justin who was supposedly recovering, although it was more likely he was still sulking. Asher had gone to the healer's hall the night before to visit him, but Justin had simply rolled on his side, facing away from him. The unspoken message was to leave him alone, so Asher had.

Now it was Trent's turn to bug him. The kitsune smirked triumphantly, as though it had been a race to find one of the dragons. Asher wanted to punch the fucker, but instead looked around in case the missing dragon shifter showed up. Surely Justin had heard Nick's summons? Or was Melody's rejection still keeping him away? It happened sometimes. The bereft shifter unable to even approach the witch who had rejected him.

Asher's wolf squirmed, reminding him that she hadn't entirely accepted *him* either. Okay, so he could probably feel a *bit* of compassion for the guy. While Asher hadn't been a wanted familiar, Melody had outright rejected Justin, even when she'd been free to accept him. He knew that shit hurt, but after the connection they seemed to have, and everything they had been through together? Yeah, he was glad it was the dragon and not him. His wolf wouldn't have survived that.

The tramp of feet behind him warned of several others approaching. Given that the Apex were all there, whoever it was, wasn't welcome. He inhaled deeply, scenting humans, or given their locality, witches, and a shifter.

Bear.

It was that creepy European fucker who'd also transferred in for a shot at challenging Melody. The fucker wasn't wasting any time. Asher didn't blame him, although for Melody's sake, he hoped that the bear would hold off. She still hadn't bonded all of the shifters that were already waiting for her.

“Hello, Melody,” Alexander Canticum said, striding ahead of the other three witches and the bear. “I’ve come to see your new accommodations. The provost seemed quite excited about them yesterday.”

Melody froze, and Asher wanted to step between them, to defend her, protect her. Yet the heir to her coven posed no actual threat. What the fuck was he meant to do? He could feel her fear and confusion through the bond, but he couldn’t make out what they were from. Melody might have been able to read Dean as she said yesterday, but there was no way he could decipher her emotions and their causes.

Oz snorted from his right, bringing him back to the present. “Yeah, why don’t you go look at the fabulous accommodation provided for us, then maybe you’ll get a better feel for life at Adolphus for Melody. She’s barely better off here than she was in her old coven.”

The grumpy witch from yesterday strode forward and punched Oz in the face, knocking him to the ground. “Know your place, beast! You speak when you’re spoken—”

That was as far as he got before he went flying back in the air. The other witches took defensive stances, looking around them, but Melody stood there shaking. If he didn’t know better, Asher would have assumed she was afraid, but he could feel her fury rolling through the bond in waves.

“Get out of here,” she screamed at the downed witch. “Go away, and do not come near me nor my bonded shifters again. You had no right, no right!”

She crouched beside Oz, who grinned up at her with a bleeding nose.

“Mel, I’m fine. Shifter healing, it won’t even bruise. No offence, but he hits like a girl.”

Ryan snickered, all of the shifters coming around to bracket Melody. All except the bear who stared at her in shock, along with Alexander Canticum and his cronies.

“You defend him. You choose him over the witches?” the bear asked, incredulous. “We are people, yes? You defend us,

little one?”

Melody snapped upright and stalked towards the stunned men.

“Every. Single. Time,” she snarled at them. “If you want me to remain in your coven, Alexander, then you need to remember that. Shifters are not second class citizens. They are living sentient beings, and I refuse to be a part of the system that designates them as anything less than our equals. I will not bring my shifters to a coven where they’re treated like slaves. I’ve already lived that life, and I refuse to do it again. Is that understood?”

The heir to Canticum coven regained his composure and regarded her carefully.

“I will not condone an attack on one of my witches, Melody.”

“I was defending my familiar. I will not condone an unprovoked attack on any shifter, mine or not,” she responded.

Asher’s heart swelled with pride. She really was standing her ground. Here she was, barely free from Bestia, and already standing up for what she believed in, against her new coven. Melody had nothing more than the clothes she brought with her, and some textbooks, but she was still willing to walk away from the security of a coven, for them. Shifters. The beasts looked down upon by so many witches.

He might have been a fucking idiot for challenging a witch without learning her circumstances, but goddess be damned if he hadn’t ended up picking the perfect fucking witch.

“Maybe we can start again?” Alexander began, trying to charm his way forward, but Melody didn’t back down.

“Alexander, I need to know. Is this going to be a problem? Because I can’t stay in a coven where my mate is treated like a slave.”

“You’ve mated one of the beasts?” growled the other witch. “Of course you fucking have. The sluts of Bestia are little better than their animals.”

This time, Melody didn't get a chance to respond. Alexander spun on the spot and hit the witch with a spell that sealed his lips shut. "You are both being sent back to the coven in disgrace."

With a flick of his wrist, each witch was slapped in the chest with a letter, Alexander's shaking arm pointing them in the direction of the admin office. "Take yourself out of the front gate, and then portal back to the coven. You may present my mother with my letters and await her judgement."

Asher couldn't help but be impressed. While Coven Canticum seemed to hold a poor attitude to shifters, the heir at least was open to changing it. That in itself was promising. The issue was whether they wanted to be a part of that revolution, constantly facing challenges and trials to prove themselves more than the beasts that many witches claimed them to be.

It was an exhausting prospect, and Melody deserved far better.

Eyeing up the three men in front of him, Asher waited for the next faux pas. It was unlikely to come from the bear, at least not yet, but the final witch had yet to speak. Even Alexander turned to him, waiting to see yet another Canticum witch fuck up.

The man in question shrugged. "I have no issue with familiars, I prefer not to call them beasts, nor the branch of magic, beast magic. Whether Melody finds me suitable as mate material or not, I would very much like the opportunity to learn more about working with familiars."

Melody's shoulders relaxed a fraction, and Alexander nodded his head regally, as though conferring a favour. Then again, given that he was heir to the coven, he probably was.

"And you, Alexander?" Melody asked coolly.

He regarded her warily and sighed. "I am honest enough to admit that my mother sent me here to see if you were suitable mate material, either for myself or for the three men I

brought with me. The opportunity to observe your magical specialty was a close second as far as intent goes.”

Dean growled softly until Oz nudged him.

“But?” Melody prompted.

Alexander stood there, obviously weighing his words carefully. His shoulders slumped. “Melody, I find myself faced with the most extraordinary witch I have ever met. You are beautiful, although in the witching world that is of little consequence when compared to the power you wield. For a witch as strong as you, I would be stupid to allow your looks to influence my choice.”

Now it was Asher’s turn to growl. Who was this fucking idiot to judge her like this?

“You are not only strong, but with a sound moral code, despite your despicable upbringing — and I say that in terms of the conditions you were forced to live under. I have only heard a fraction of your tale, and I’m already horrified and outraged on your behalf. You are resilient, a brilliant scholar from all accounts, and someone my aunt deemed worthy enough to risk her job and give her life for. I have to say, I agree with her judgement.”

Melody didn’t react to his praises, she just stood there, waiting. They were all waiting. The other shoe had yet to drop.

The young heir sighed again, looking down at his feet. “Melody,” he began softly, making even Asher’s shifter hearing strain to listen in. “I find myself not wondering whether you are good enough for me to consider as a mate.”

Piercing blue eyes looked up at her, fixing his gaze to her own.

“I find myself wondering whether I am good enough for you to consider. It is the judgement that I will be sending back to my mother. That when finding a suitable mate for you, we consider whether they are worthy enough, for you are a superior witch in every sense of the word.”

Melody stared at him for a moment, surprised enough to be lost for words.

“You’d better come inside then,” Nick said, sweeping an arm toward their cottage. “There are a few things that you need to know, and Melody was about to tell us all something really important. I think that we’re going to need your help more than you expect.”

Alexander nodded, he and the other man and the shifter following Nick inside.

Asher almost laughed, they were in for quite the wakeup call, and he had a feeling that Melody’s news was only going to compound their troubles.

4. Melody



Melody was relieved Nick had invited them inside, she needed a moment to pull her wits together.

For a few moments there, she thought she'd need to find *another* new coven, and given the brevity of her time in Canticum, and the fact that the previous provost, a prominent member of their coven, was dead because of Melody — her chances of getting another offer were slim to none.

So, to discover the coven's heir apparent was not only forgiving but supportive, and that he took her side and the side of her shifters over his own coven members was a shock as much as it was a relief. Still, it didn't bode well that he'd had to choose sides at all, and from the comments of one of the disgruntled witches, the prejudice in the coven was deeply ingrained. It was going to be an uphill battle just to get a modicum of respect for her familiars.

Was she really going to be better off at Canticum?

Especially if their greatest priority seemed to be mating her off rather than ensuring she completed her education.

Now she had to tell her familiars of the new danger they all faced, and in front of the future head of the coven. Could this get any more awkward?

Melody went inside, the others following her, although there was nowhere for them to sit, and no refreshments to be offered. The room smelled dank and was dark, the light fittings mere wires dangling from the ceiling and walls.

"I would ask if you include me in invite, but now I ask if this is joke? This is storage shed, yes? Not perfect house that

provost offers. This is wrong building?” the bear shifter asked.

Yes, of course it could get more awkward.

“I’m sorry, I don’t even know your name,” she told him, waiting for him to offer it.

“Nikolai Ursa. As yet, unclaimed. No coven,” he replied proudly.

It wasn’t surprising, he was a strong shifter, although from what she could sense, nowhere near as strong as the Apex, Trent, or Asher.

“Well, Nikolai,” she said, acknowledging him, even as the other two men looked around in horror. “This is not a joke. This is exactly what the provost thinks of me, and I fear it is merely the symptom of a much larger problem.”

She turned to face her familiars. “I’ve got something to tell you all, and it’s not good news, and I don’t even know where to start, because I can’t prove anything. Even so, I don’t have a single doubt of the truth of what I’m about to tell you.”

Dean growled softly, walking up to her and putting an arm around her shoulder. “We’re with you, Mel. Whatever it is, whether you can prove it or not, we’re with you.”

In a way, what he said was comforting, but in another way, it just made it harder. Here she was, putting them all in danger again, and this time most of them were bonded to her, they had no choice. Yet leaving them unbonded wasn’t exactly safe either.

“Just tell us, Melody, whatever it is, we can overcome it together.” Alexander moved to stand in front of her, boldly taking one of her hands between his. Under any other circumstances, it would have been a sweet gesture, but all it did was rile up Dean, and in turn, her other familiars.

Before things could escalate further than the men growling, Melody withdrew her hand and took a step back.

“Familiars are kind of possessive when the bond is new, Alexander. Let that be your first lesson in familiar magic.”

Startled, he nodded and backed up, his hands raised to show innocent intent.

“And your second lesson is this; stand your ground.”

Melody rounded on the men behind her, all of them growling and glaring daggers at Alexander.

“He is a guest in our house, and you will show him the appropriate respect. He’s also the heir to the leadership in our coven. Whatever your beasts are telling you, he’s higher ranked than me, and thus higher ranked than you. There was no threat to any of us, you don’t get to react like this, get your beasts under control.” Melody spoke low and firm, she didn’t want to embarrass them any further, but they needed to learn their boundaries a little better.

Even Ryan was overreacting. It was kind of understandable with everything that had gone on, especially with the fact that she’d said she had bad news. Still, they needed to work on their control.

All of them backed down then, although surprisingly it was Nick who was struggling the most, his hands clenched into fists and his pupils slitted as silver eyes glittered at her.

“Nick, you need to rein him in, I don’t want you reacting further and hurting someone by mistake. Imagine how bad you’d feel if you accidentally shifted and destroyed the cabin, or even worse, hurt someone?”

Ryan gave a snort. “There’s not much cabin left to destroy.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Mel,” whined Oz. “You’re killing us, just tell us and we’ll work it out.”

Yes, it was time to rip off the band-aid.

“Yesterday, the provost kept making veiled references to allies. She said I needed allies, people I could trust, and how important they were.” She glanced around at blank faces . Okay, maybe she was overreacting, to Melody it had sounded ominous. “I couldn’t concentrate on what she was saying

though. I mean, yesterday was horrific, but I was distracted. I couldn't stop staring at her necklace, which was odd. It took me a while to realise that I recognised it, and even longer to work out where I'd seen it before."

Now she had their undivided attention.

"It was my mother's. She used to wear it all the time."

Melody didn't want to lead them any further. Either she was right, or her aunt had left her too paranoid, jumping at every shadow.

Dean squeezed her shoulders. "You want to get it back, Mel?"

Yeah, maybe she was misreading the situation after all.

"Melody," Alexander said softly.

There was such a stillness about him that everyone stopped.

"This pile of sticks we're in. How close is it to the academy boundaries?"

"It's the closest building to the boundary of any of them," she told him, equally quiet.

Alexander paced back and forth, muttering to himself, the tension in the room ratcheting up.

"I don't get it," Oz complained. "What's Melody's necklace got to do with the boundaries?"

"I have to go, you know that, right?" Alexander asked. "I need to report this to my mother, we need to get you reinforcements, and I'm going to have to tell her in person. This ... this is a serious accusation, I can't send it by letter."

Her hopes hit the floor. Not only was she right, but already her potential allies were leaving. There was no way his mother would allow Alexander to come back and help her, nor would she waste resources helping to defend a witch who was already too much trouble to her coven. Melody would be cut off and left to sink or swim on her own.

"What about me?" asked the other witch.

Melody turned to him in surprise.

“Alexander, as the heir you can’t be allowed to travel alone, but at the same time, we can’t leave Melody here when she’s so vulnerable. The next attack will be soon, if not tonight. They’ve had enough time to regroup, and the wards are still only partially erected. A single witch alone against that? She doesn’t stand a chance, I don’t care how powerful she is.”

The front door banged open and everyone jumped, a tall figure was backlit by the morning sunlight until he stepped inside.

Justin had returned.

“She’s not alone,” he growled. “Nick and I both have magic. Explain the threat, Melody, they need to know.”

They all turned to her again, but Melody’s focus was on the surly shifter at the door.

“Justin! You’re back. Your injuries, are you alright?” Melody ran to him, running her hands over his sides, his arms, his face. She couldn’t see a single scar, but when Nick had brought him back, he’d been horribly burned.

Hands gripped her face, and she was forced to halt when two blazing silver orbs hovered close to her own, taking her full attention.

“I am fine, my dragon is fine. We are healed. Now, explain everything. Make sure that everyone is on the same page. We can’t afford any more mistakes.”

The others looked at her, agitated. Unable to understand the threat, they were naturally reacting to the tension in Melody, Alexander, and now Justin.

“Okay, think of it in terms of timeline. My mother was murdered. My aunt moved into her bedroom the next day. Everything that was my mother’s, became property of my aunt. Little things, big things. There was a huge four poster-bed. It had been in the family for generations, the matriarch always slept in it. When my aunt discovered that the

matriarchal power had been passed to me, she was furious. She ordered the bed chopped up for firewood.”

Melody had loved that bed. She’d spent many nights in it with her mother while they whispered stories in the dark, giggling together until she fell asleep. It was just another thing that her aunt had taken and destroyed.

“Everything my mother owned was taken and dispersed,” she told them. “Her clothes were thrown away, her books given away or burned. Her jewelry, however, my aunt held onto. One or two pieces were given to other members of the coven, but mostly my aunt liked to wear them. They were family jewels, things owned by matriarchs throughout the ages. The necklace the provost is wearing was one of them. She must have got it from my aunt.”

Dean had started growling half way through what she was saying, he’d put things together before the others, but they weren’t far behind.

“When you add in the comments about allies and the fact that she’s not only insulted us by giving us this cottage, but she’s made us even more vulnerable to attacks from outside the wards; the only conclusion that makes sense is that the provost is working with my aunt. This cottage is isolated, dilapidated, and close to the wards. Too far for help to reach us in time, too weak to stand more than basic attacks, and too easily accessed. She’s technically fulfilled the letter of the law by providing us a larger place to stay, but she’s made sure that it’s worthless and puts us at greater risk.”

“Fuck,” growled Ryan. “We can’t stay here. I don’t care if we all shift and sleep in the forest, Mel can sleep on us like a bed, but we can’t stay here where they expect us to be.”

“They have shifters, yes? Can sniff you out. No place to hide. Must make this one strong,” Nikolai told them. “You must bond me. More shifters, more strength. Use us for power, use us to make safe.”

Melody looked at him, wondering how she could turn him down without offending him. It was a generous offer, and he was strong, but she already felt pulled in too many directions

as it was. There was a reason that most witches only had two or at most three familiars. Melody was strong enough for more, but that didn't necessarily mean that she should bond them.

Before Melody could say anything, Justin was in her face. "You'd fucking bond him, but not me?" he growled. "Unfuckingbelievable."

He was out the door and gone in a heartbeat, everyone looking at her in shock. What on earth just happened?

"His loss," Ryan said, prowling towards her. "The bear is right, you need to bond us, Justin and I. I'm also over waiting. Melody Canticum, I challenge you."

5. Melody



“Holy shit,” the other witch said quietly. “I’ve never seen this before. What happens now?”

Nick frowned. “Right now, he’s going to take his ass outside, because I don’t trust this shithole to remain standing if any magic goes stray around us. Then she’s going to force his shift. You’d best ask her how she does it, I’ve got no clue.”

Ryan nodded and jogged outside, stripping his clothes off as he went.

“Dude, what’s your name?” Oz asked the witch.

“Rupert,” the man replied, scrambling to follow them all outside.

Behind her, she heard one of the others snort in response. The stronger covens tended to go for more old-fashioned names, it wasn’t like he could help it. Besides, she thought it was cute.

There was a mass exodus to the sparse lawn in front of the cottage, Ryan had shifted before she could get through the door.

“Please, Melody,” Alexander asked. “Could you show us how?”

“You want a familiar?” Melody asked, looking pointedly at Nikolai. “I can’t speak for personalities, but he’s a strong bear. He would be a good bodyguard. Nikolai, Alexander is the heir to a powerful political coven. He’s already demonstrated respect for shifters. You could do a lot worse.”

“Thanks a lot,” Alexander muttered.

Melody gave him a wan smile. “Your coven obviously has strong anti-shifter factions, he will constantly be questioned, checked, and sometimes even abused. I’m willing to bet, however, that he would never be enslaved. It might take decades for him to win the respect of your coven members, especially the older and stronger ones, that’s a long time to suffer. However, if he can hang it out, then he would be very well placed indeed.”

“You do not wish me?” Nikolai asked, obviously disappointed.

She moved over to him, but Ryan shoved his snout between them before she could get close.

“Nikolai,” she said, pushing Ryan’s nose down out of her crotch where he sniffed enthusiastically. “I’m about to bond a third wolf, to go with my lion, fox and two more wolves.”

There was a growl behind her.

“Plus a dragon,” she amended, instantly able to tell it was Nick by the pulse of annoyance in her chest. “These shifters come as a group, they are family, there is no dividing them, and I wouldn’t ask them to separate. But I think the bonds are pulling me in too many directions as it is. It would be several years, if ever, before I considered adding another bond to that. I’m sorry.”

The big bear shifter looked at her forlornly for a moment, then his gaze flicked back and forth between her and Alexander. “He is in your coven?”

“I am the heir to the leadership of her coven,” Alexander reminded them all.

“I would still see you? You would be with us?” Nikolai asked.

“Dude,” growled Oz. “She’s already got a Nick, and enough dicks to last her a lifetime.”

Dean snickered, but Melody rolled her eyes. For all their years there, they still acted like a bunch of toddlers at times.

“And the only way you’d get to be near her naked body is if I skinned your bear and fucked her on your pelt by the fire,” Trent added, surprising her until she turned and saw his amber eyes, meaning his kitsune was at the forefront. Yes, of course he’d say something like that.

Ryan growled, as if in agreement.

“All of you, that’s enough!” Melody snapped. Seriously, who did they think they were, talking to the bear like that?

“Mel, you can’t smell the lust coming off him,” Dean snarled, then sneezed. “It’s not just being bonded to a strong witch he wants. He wants you.”

When she turned back to the bear, it was only to see him with a sheepish grin and a blush. “Beautiful, strong magic, good to shifters. Plus I can smell lion on you. There is chance for more, yes?”

She gaped at him. What the hell was she supposed to say to that?

A snicker to the side drew her attention to Rupert.

“Forgive me, Melody, but I can see his point. Every single one of us are hoping to be chosen by you as a mate. As for me, I don’t mind sharing, whether it be with your lion or all your familiars, but somehow, I can’t see you picking me. I’m not strong like you, I don’t have the political connections that Alexander does, and I don’t have the magnetism that your shifters have, nor their familiar bond to enhance your magic. I would, however, be honoured if you considered me as a friend, especially when you are in need of several.”

Ryan had had enough, he growled loudly, nudging her until Melody was forced to take several steps backward.

“Alright, alright. Give me a moment to show Alexander.”

Melody beckoned the heir over with her arm, indicating that he should stand beside her.

“So, Ryan has challenged me formally, and then shifted in front of me. You need to wait until the shift is fully complete, or it can be challenged,” she said, wryly.

“Learned that one the hard way,” Oz muttered.

“If you have any enhancement items on you, that may also be grounds for dissolving the bond, no matter what enchantment they hold.”

“Also learned that the hard way,” Oz added.

There was a dull thud behind her, and when she turned to glare at him, Oz was rubbing the back of his head. Dean stood beside him, arms folded across his chest and a smug expression on his face. Honestly, they were as bad as each other.

“You had issues?” Alexander asked solicitously, bringing her back to the topic.

“Yes,” Melody replied, but Ryan nudged her again. “I can tell you about it another time. If we leave Ryan hanging too long, his wolf may gain control. Let’s put them both out of their misery.”

“It hurts him?”

Melody looked at the other shifters. “I know it’s uncomfortable while they’re waiting, and borderline painful if you reject them. You’ll have to ask them.”

She grabbed Alexander by the arm and took a step back from Ryan where he’d stalked forward to be nearer to her.

“I don’t know if there’s a proper distance, my aunt always made me do it just over an arm’s length away. Given the amount of magic I’ll need to hold this, I’d rather not be doing it over a distance. Now, open yourself to your magic, then send a small amount out to mingle with mine, feel what I’m doing with it, it’s the best way to explain. When I say go, pull it back, otherwise you’ll end up in the bond with Ryan and I.”

Beside her, she felt him follow her instructions until a tendril of his magic slithered around hers. She gathered it all into a ball then and sent it towards Ryan, allowing it to caress his shape, learn it, feel it. She felt his innate magic, the length of his fur, and the life force that was Ryan himself. This was a much longer process than she normally took, but Melody

wanted Alexander to feel it, he had no experience with this kind of magic.

“There’s no spell, no formula. You need to know the shifted form in all its dimensions, because you’re going to wrap it in your magic and squeeze it, forcing it out of shape. The shifter will automatically flex into their alternative form. It isn’t used often, but you can do the same thing to force them to shift from their human form into their alternative one.”

“I can feel him, everything about him, his heartbeat, everything. I always thought it was much quicker, but this is so intense.”

“Alexander, I’ve done this hundreds of times, perhaps even a thousand. It takes me no longer than two blinks to do this. I’m slowing it down because I want you to learn how to do it properly. Otherwise your magic will fail the challenge. It might give the shifter a zap, but it shouldn’t hurt them. You, on the other hand, will have a killer headache if you fail badly. There’s no permanent damage, except to your ego,” she told him with a chuckle.

“It hurts to fail?”

“Usually, the first or second time because people put too much effort into the force and not enough into the shape, so the whole thing ends up being a massive backlash. Think of it like a massive bubble popping. Once you’re experienced, if you’re simply not strong enough, it should just be a mildly uncomfortable sensation as your magic pings back to you unexpectedly.”

“Okay, so, expect a headache or two for starters, got it.”

Dean grunted. “Dude, if you’re listening to her properly, and following her instructions, you should get very close to getting it right, if not succeeding the first time. You’re not stupid, and you’re not weak. Just pay attention.”

Rupert gasped at Dean’s rebuke, but Alexander rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, okay. You have to admit, your mate is pretty distracting, and her magic is even more so. It feels amazing.”

Ryan growled, baring his teeth at the heir, who took a step backwards.

“Yeah, okay, focus. Sorry,” Alexander said.

“Spread your magic out with mine, I want you to feel Ryan’s dimensions with me, I want to see how you manage it.”

There was a moment or two of silence then as sweat began to bead on his forehead, but Alexander did what she asked. She could feel his magic slowly expanding, encompassing Ryan, just as her own had. She withdrew her own a little, making way for him to touch Ryan’s fur directly.

“Like that?” Alexander asked in a strained tone.

“Mmm, almost. You’ve missed his tail, and part of his left hind leg, can you feel it? Here, and here?”

She sent her own magic forth to pinch at the edges of his, pulling it out until he’d enveloped the wolf entirely.

“Got it,” Alexander said on a whimper.

“What’s wrong, Alex? Is it ok if I call you Alex?” Melody asked.

“Yesofcourse,” he said quickly on a grunt. “My magic wants to flow forth, to wrap around him, I’m struggling to hold it back so I don’t accidentally bond him.”

He didn’t stand a chance and he didn’t even know it.

Trying to keep the smile from her face and voice, she told him to try.

“This is a good experience for you. Trust me when I say you’re not strong enough. I want you to slowly release your magic, keep coating him, and if you are okay with a headache, I want you to start to squeeze. Don’t push yourself to your limits, but get a feel for what it’s like to push. Remember to keep the tension even across the surface of him. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

The others were watching her in awe.

“You bonded us all in a heartbeat,” Oz said quietly.

“I’ve been doing this since I was four, Oz. Hundreds of shifters, dozens of times each, sometimes more. I’ve probably had more experience at this than any other witch alive. I don’t even have to think about it. I just open myself to my magic and it’s done.”

“I don’t understand,” Rupert commented, as she monitored Alexander’s attempts to encompass Ryan with more magic.

“More on his neck, you don’t want to risk breaking it, especially in a smaller shifter,” she instructed. “Don’t understand what, Rupert?”

“If you’ve bonded so many shifters, where are they?”

Her heart thumped painfully, and Dean moved closer to her. She could feel his heat against her back and sank into it gratefully. It made it easier to explain.

“You saw the shifters in the gymnasium? My aunt used me to wear the shifters down, then broke the bonds and took them away to experiment on. She gave them to weaker witches, who didn’t care if they broke a leg while forcing their shift. Those things in the gymnasium, were what was left of those who survived.”

Rupert asked no further questions, but she could hear him swallowing hard.

“There,” she said gently to Alexander. “Start squeezing, Alex, keep the pressure slow and even, don’t overexert yourself. In another shifter, you’ll feel yourself reach a point where the tension feels like it could go either way. It could explode or implode. At that point you command them to shift, and then you squeeze harder. I’ll keep my magic monitoring yours for your peace of mind, but I seriously doubt you’ll reach Ryan’s tipping point. He’s an alpha, he packs a punch.”

“You’ve forced his shift?” Alex asked, even as she felt his magic begin to contract against the wolf.

“Not Ryan’s, but I’ve been challenged by alphas before. Oz and Asher are both alpha wolves, and Dean is an alpha lion. They’re much stronger than the average shifter of their

species. There's a reason they lead packs, and it's got nothing to do with charisma, although that doesn't hurt either."

Ryan growled.

Melody couldn't feel anything worrying. Alex was maintaining even pressure and as far as she could tell, he wasn't anywhere near the wolf's tipping point. Helpless, she looked at Nick for an answer.

The dragon shifter smirked at her. "Ryan says that it's beginning to tickle, and that if you don't stop soon, he's going to need to scratch. He's not sure that the witch will be able to maintain control if his wolf moves."

Alex looked at her, startled. Ryan was right, it was likely that Alex would lose control.

"Alright, Alex," she told him. "I want you to start withdrawing your magic from Ryan, I'm going to wrap him in mine, so if you do lose it, I should be able to grab your magic and slow down the backlash. It might save you from a headache. Just release your magic as it comes back to you, slow and steady."

Once again, the heir obeyed her, withdrawing his magic in a way that showed he had more control than she had credited him for. It boded well for their coven.

When Melody had replaced Alex's magic with her own, she wrapped Ryan completely and then began increasing the pressure. "Keep a tendril with me, like you were feeling something out, because that's what you'll be doing. You'll be monitoring my magic until I tell you to withdraw. I'm going to try to do this slowly, but I can't guarantee it. My magic knows what to do, and it just wants to do it. I want Ryan, he's *mine*, and I don't want to wait any longer."

Golden eyes fixed on her then, pinning her in place. She couldn't have stopped now even if she'd wanted to.

Faster than she wanted, she poured her magic towards him, pushing him, forcing him to change his shape.

"Now, Alex, pull back now. Can you feel it?"

His magic withdrew quickly. “It’s like a trembling, I can’t explain it, but yes, I felt it.”

“Shift,” she commanded Ryan, and a moment later, the man stood before her. A second after that, she was in trembling arms as his mouth crashed against hers.

Melody allowed him a moment or two to get his emotions under control as he held her against his lean length, his cock hard against her belly. It was only when he began grinding it against her, that she pulled back.

“Knock it off, Casanova,” Oz snapped at him, throwing jeans at Ryan. “Cover that shit up, we’ve got other things to worry about than the state of your cock.”

Melody chuckled, stepping back further as Ryan reluctantly dressed. It didn’t stop her from looking. He was hers now, and she knew that shifters had different standards when it came to nudity. When she looked up, however, it was to see Alexander watching her. The heat in his eyes said that he hadn’t minded her kissing Ryan. In fact, it seemed that he’d enjoyed it. It was something to file away for later, right now, she had enough on her plate.

6. Dean



Every time Dean thought he knew how amazing his mate was, she took it to the next level. Watching her teach Alexander, seeing how easily she managed to dominate Ryan's wolf, and knowing how she could do it not only to medium sized shifters like him and the wolves, but gigantic shifters like the dragons, blew him away.

She was fucking amazing, and completely unaware of it.

Dean, like all shifters, could get a feeling for a witch's power level. It wasn't an exact science, but it allowed them to guess whether a witch was worth challenging. Of course there were always outliers. Witches who felt strong but were unable to carry out the process that Melody had just outlined. Or ones who felt like they could barely claim a fly, yet packed a wallop that wouldn't soon be forgotten.

In the early years of his time here at Adolphus, Shawna had stood out as one of the stronger witches. He'd hoped for an early escape from the academy, but realised soon after how lucky he was that she'd been unable to claim him. Like the other Apex shifters, he'd immediately gone about strengthening his beast so that he would always be out of her reach. The woman was just too much trouble, and she treated shifters like shit when she didn't get her own way.

It might not have been in their best interests to work so hard at avoiding the very thing they sought, but a bond with Shawna would have been a fate worse than death. Even if they had to stay confined in the academy for longer, it was worth it to escape her clutches.

“Alexander Canticum, I challenge you,” Nikolai announced, looking at his target with determination.

The witch in question appeared startled.

“Melody, what if I...?”

Melody looked back and forth between the two. “Well, first of all, you need to decide whether or not you actually wish to accept the challenge. Do you want Nikolai as your familiar? This isn’t a game, it’s a bond for a lifetime. He’s going to learn all of your secrets, see all of your fears. He’ll be beside you for your best and your worst days. He’s going to be your most trusted confidante, your most loyal advisor and probably your best friend. Unless you’re both attracted to men, at which point the bond may even encourage you to become lovers.”

The two men looked at each other and firmly shook their heads. Dean wanted to laugh at them. Their apparent fear was amusing. Alexander would be permitted to have a male lover, but as heir, he would be expected to marry and produce the next generation of leadership. His mother would probably kill him if he took a lover before he took a wife.

Dean wondered if this was actually a good idea. The familiar bond often urged pairs to become intimate, regardless of their orientation. He certainly had no complaints as far as his bonding and mating of Melody had gone, but witches were often caught off guard by the magic. Some witches thought they could escape those urges by taking a familiar of the same gender.

The magic didn’t work like that.

“Gentlemen,” Nick said, drawing their attention. “It’s not just a case of where your preferences lie. The bond urges pairs to come together. Even if you’d never thought of another male in that way, or find it unpalatable, you’ll still find yourselves drawn to each other emotionally. It’s strong enough that it can overtake your mind. You need to be prepared for that. It’s one of the most common causes of pairs seeking to dissolve the bond. It’s why Mrs Hardinger prefers to talk to all witches and familiars here before they go ahead with a challenge.”

“Well, I can’t bloody do that if they’re not students, but I’m willing to help out in this instance,” said a strident voice, surprising them all. Mrs Hardinger and Toby approached them not from the direction of the academy, but from the west instead. Her face was a little flushed and her breathing harsh. The stout witch had obviously been walking for some time.

Dean cursed himself. They were right by the academy boundaries, Melody had just spelled out that they had enemies within the academy as well as waiting outside of it, and they had all let their guards down. *He* had let his guard down. What kind of familiar wasn’t able to protect his witch?

He could see the turmoil and shame he felt inside reflected on the faces of those around him. Well, except for Nick and Trent. Nick was facing the direction she came from, so he’d probably been aware of her approach for a while. Trent, however, had his back to the counsellor and her familiar. His expression was smug, so the bastard had likely heard or scented them coming — probably both from his expression — and was enjoying the discomfort of Dean and the wolves.

“I’m comfortable in who I am, and my sexuality, thank you. Anything else would need to be discussed between my familiar and I, and is nobody else’s business. Nikolai, if your offer still stands, I’d be honoured to accept you as my familiar,” Alexander responded.

Interesting. He at least wasn’t phased by the idea of being intimate with the bear shifter. If it weren’t for Nikolai’s origins, Dean wouldn’t have worried so much. Shifters were generally fluid in their choice of partners, regardless of gender, but if Nikolai had been raised to fear intimacy with men, then maybe a male witch wasn’t a good idea for him.

“My sleuth follows old ways, is not issue. We are not humans who are afraid of their urges. We celebrate life. My challenge stands, witch,” Nikolai announced, putting an end to that discussion.

“Well, I can see you’re as stubborn as each other. It’s all well and good when you’re working on the same goal together, but when you disagree, it’s going to put a strain on

your bond,” Mrs Hardinger warned them. “I gather neither of you are virgins?”

Dean wanted to laugh. Trust Mrs H. to just put it out there. She never held back.

“Bears like to fuck,” Nikolai said in his heavy accent. “I have strong bear. I was man at fourteen.”

Mrs Hardinger’s eyebrows rose, but she said nothing, turning to the Canticum heir.

“I’m the heir to a coven. I’m expected to marry and breed young, and to have many children, even bastards would be welcomed. I was sixteen. I’ve had women throwing themselves at me since my mother declared I was of marriageable age at sixteen. I am also not a virgin,” Alexander said.

Fucking hell. Dean hadn’t realised that the pressure for witches to breed was so high. No wonder they were so uptight about it.

“You also realise that logistically, that you will need to move here, Nikolai?”

“I came for strong witch. No plan to return,” Nikolai stated.

“Then, by all means, proceed. We can cover the rest of it later,” Mrs Hardinger told them.

“Melody?” Alexander called to her, worry on his face.

She reached out and took his hand. “I’m going to guide you through it, but this time, you’ll be holding the magic, and when I feel you hit his tipping point, I’ll be the one pulling back. I’m reasonably sure you’re strong enough to force him, it’s more the ability to hold the form that will be harder for you.”

Nikolai began removing his clothes, neither Melody, nor Mrs Hardinger looking away. Dean couldn’t smell lust on either woman, but he couldn’t help but notice Melody checking the bear out when he finally stood there naked.

Dean was glad when the man shifted immediately, not prolonging the process, although it was cold enough that he understood why Nikolai didn't muck around. The bear stood patiently, watching as Melody took Alexander through the process again. Dean could feel her concentration through the bond, and a sense of something tingling too.

Was that her magic?

It had better not be an attraction to the fucking witch. It was one thing for her to bond with his brothers, and even the fox and the asshole, it was quite another for her to form a mate-bond with another witch. Dean's lion rumbled in agreement. Melody was theirs, she belonged to her shifters, and none of them were going to stand for her being dominated by a witch mate. It was a story that was too frequent in the witching world. Witches who finally took a human mate and neglected or rejected their bonded familiars.

Not. Fucking. Happening.

Dean watched as she worked closely with the heir, his body pressing against her side as she explained this aspect or that to him again, as he imagined their magic twining together, bonding their souls and driving their bodies to passion. His guts twisted in pain as his heart beat faster and faster. He was losing her, Dean was sure of it, his lion began to pace frantically.

What the fuck is wrong with you? Nick asked him. You're growling at them.

He can't have her, Dean growled back. She's mine, and the witch can't have her. I won't let him come between us.

Before he could make a move toward the pair, two sets of hands had a hold of each of his arms, and a chest was pushed against his own. The owner of the chest nipped Dean's earlobe, catching his attention. No animal liked their ears being touched unless it was by a mate. The voice that rumbled in his ear was calm, but stern.

“He will not take her from us. None of us will allow it, but if you interfere in this spell, you could hurt the three of them.

Do you want her accidentally bonded to the bear? Do you want her to be angry with you? Do you want her to regret your bonding, your mating? You've got something that the rest of us would kill for, and we're not going to let you fuck it up, brother."

Dean's whole body vibrated with his need to reach his mate, but the male in front of him wrapped arms around him, holding him tight, rubbing his back, whispering soothing thoughts and gradually calming him down.

Slowly, reality returned to him, his panic leaving an inch at a time until his body relaxed. Only then did the wolves holding his arms let him go, and Dean hugged Trent, the man who had put himself in danger of physical harm, to prevent Dean from doing something stupid.

It was the fox shifter, not the kitsune who stood in front of him. It was the fox shifter, whose pants began to bulge as Dean held him. It was the fox shifter who began to purr, louder the longer Dean held him.

"I-I can't help it. Your lion is dominant, and he makes my fox feel protected and happy," Trent murmured in Dean's ear.

Dean hugged him tighter, turning his head to bury it in Trent's neck, inhaling his scent, tasting it. Trent was slightly taller than Dean, putting him at the perfect height to run his nose along Trent's jaw to his chin and then back again.

"I am hers, first and foremost. Your kitsune pisses me off. Your fox, however, belongs to us. You don't have to be an alpha to be our brother, Trent. All we ask for is your loyalty," Dean growled. "I could have ripped your fucking throat out just now. Don't risk it again."

To drive his point home, he nipped lightly at Trent's pulse point, directly in front of his lips. Trent whimpered and his hips bucked against Dean, driving his hard length against Dean's belly. If he kept it up, it would soon be against Dean's own erection, which surprised him.

It was true what he'd said to Trent. Dean didn't like the kitsune part of him, he was far too sly and seemed to have no

regard for the other shifters in their group. His fox, however, was submissive, and Dean was growing increasingly protective of him. He'd never fucked a male before, but Trent was well on the way to becoming the first. As long as his alter ego didn't fuck things up.

“Yes, alpha,” Trent whispered back.

Goddess, now *that* made him hard. Especially imagining Melody saying it to him. Dean grunted and slowly extracted himself from the hug.

Looking past Trent, he realised that he'd missed all of the action. Nikolai sat there, buck naked, a dazed expression on his face. The bear shifter's expression was matched by the bemused expression on Alexander. The pair stared at each other, before Nikolai broke out in a grin. Then Alexander beamed at him, and soon the pair were laughing hysterically at nothing.

Dean looked over to Melody, whose eyes shone brightly with unshed tears. Mrs Hardinger stepped up to her, pulling her into a side-hug.

“I've never seen anyone teach bonding like that. Your instincts are phenomenal, girl. You'd have a long career if you ever thought to go into teaching,” the counsellor told her. “I've also never seen a witch succeed on their first attempt, especially not with the levels of magic involved in this instance. The three of you should be very proud of yourselves.”

Alexander was now hugging a sobbing Nikolai, looking in desperation to the two women for answers. It was Trent, however, who stepped forward to provide them.

Dean noted that Trent's eyes had changed from their usual gold to the amber, meaning the asshole was in charge, and braced himself for whatever was about to spew forth.

“When you've waited as long as we have, finding your witch, achieving the bond — it can be overwhelming. The sheer relief, knowing that you're no longer stuck in one of these fucking institutions You've just given him a get out

of gaol free card, Alexander. Melody was his best hope in decades, and she denied him. It must have been more crushing than he let on. Then you step up, an unknown, someone that none of us would have considered, and you saved him. You've done nothing wrong, Heir of Canticum. Just give him this moment to recover."

His advice was surprising enough. Dean had yet to see the kitsune do anything but mock or tease, but then the beast went on to shock them all. Trent's kitsune persona moved around behind the bear and hugged him, squeezing the bulky shifter between himself and Alexander.

Nikolai shuddered, but immediately calmed. His breath occasionally hitching in silent sobs, but his overall demeanor became more tranquil.

"Well, I was coming to see how you were getting on," Mrs Hardinger said, breaking the tableau. "But right now, I think I need the pair of you to come with me, while I go over what you can expect in the next few months. I'll be back to check on you later, Melody."

Together with Toby, the older woman shepherded the pair back towards the campus, Rupert tagging along behind them, and leaving the rest of them standing around in their wake.

"Come on then," Ryan said with a chuckle. "I've had enough drama for one morning, let's replace some roof tiles."

Dean groaned, looking at the pile of slate lying off to the side. They'd unearthed them yesterday when they were pulling the weeds away from the edge of the house. Several of the tiles were already broken, and he doubted that they would have enough to replace all the damaged ones on the roof, so it was going to take some magic to get them through this. At least, from what Nick had said — repairing a slate tile was easier than trying to conjure one from the earth.

No matter where the tiles came from, it was going to be a hell of a lot of work, and the sooner they started, the sooner they'd be able to look at the myriad other problems the building had. It was going to be a very long day.

As he trudged towards where the ladder was lying, Dean was surprised to feel Melody's small, cool hand slip into his. He couldn't help the smile that lit his face as he looked down at her own upturned one. No matter how many years they had together in the future, he knew that he'd never get tired of seeing her smile at him.

"Nothing will come between us. Not another familiar, nor a witch, not even my aunt. You're mine, Dean, and I'm yours. Nothing will ever change that," she said quietly, then pulled him down for a kiss.

The universe ceased to exist. All he could feel was her lips on his, her hands circling around to his back, slipping under his shirt. Two small icicles on his skin, making him shiver. She smiled against his lips, running her hands higher against his back, enjoying the heat of his body, and Dean melted.

Anything she wanted, he would provide. If that meant warming her frigid hands, then he'd do that. As long as she didn't put them on his cock when they were that cold.

As if thinking of it brought the damn thing to life, Dean felt a rush of blood to his groin. Melody's lips became more insistent, picking up on his need, and her body pressed against him. Her soft curves embraced by his hands as he held himself in check. His lion rumbled in protest, but Dean reminded him that it was Melody who was in charge. They would follow her lead.

"I'd stop there, unless you want to fuck us all, princess. Personally, I don't mind watching, but you're driving the others to the limits of their endurance, especially with all our bonds being so new," Trent warned them.

Fucker.

Melody sighed as she lowered her face, pressing her forehead against his heaving chest. Her own breath coming in short pants. Dean was thrilled to see her as affected as he was.

He's right, he told her across their bond. If we don't stop now, I'll take you against the fucking wall, and the others probably won't be able to hold back from wanting to join in. At

the very least, they'll touch you. They'll all want more. Much more.

Melody's breath hitched, and his cock throbbed even harder. Damn, she was intoxicating.

With obvious reluctance, she pulled away from him, but her heavy lidded gaze showed him how hard it was. His lion practically purred in his chest, loving how much she wanted him. Dean was just relieved that he hadn't frightened her off when they'd mated, because the idea of never having her again was enough to break him.

He was head over heels for her and so was his lion. If she loved him even a tenth as much as he loved her, then he'd be a lucky man indeed.

"Come on, loverboy, let's get our girl a house she can live in," Oz said, shoulder checking him as he walked past.

Dean gave a rueful chuckle and followed the wolf. If his lion was going nuts at the thought of being with Melody again, then those poor fuckers had it a hundred times worse. Not only were they not mated to her, but their new bonds were driving them hard to get even closer to her.

From the lust he could smell around him, Melody was going to have a hard time making them wait for much longer. His brothers loved her as much as he did, and Dean couldn't wait until they were united as a real family. A pack like no other in existence.

7. Melody



The thud of a hammer seemed painfully slow in comparison to the thud of her heart. Dean's kiss had nearly brought Melody to her knees and it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, to walk away from him.

From the bulges in their pants, and the feverish eyes fixed upon her as she moved around, Dean's assessment of her other familiars was correct. Every single one of them wanted her, and none of them would have objected to loving her together.

That made her heart pump faster again, the thought of them all with her, all touching her, all enjoying intimate time together. While she'd heard of shifters sharing mates, it was certainly something she'd never witnessed back at the compound. The shifters there had been as discreet as possible in the open-living cells.

Any females who had gone into heat had been taken away to another part of the compound, and the males chosen to breed with them taken too, so she'd had no idea of what happened when more than one male was involved.

But she could certainly imagine.

Firm hands gripped her hips, and an aroused male ground against her ass. There were only two of her familiars who would be bold enough to do this, and her money was on Trent over Asher.

"I can smell how excited you are, Melody. What did that lion say to you to get you so aroused? I'm sure any single one of us would be more than happy to carry out your every desire," Trent whispered in her ear.

She had no doubt at all which one of his personalities was in control. It was time to knock him off balance.

“How does that work, Trent? Dividing your head into two personalities?” she asked him, desperately trying to change the subject.

Melody knew if she let the kitsune get away with any more, he'd have her inside and mated before she could blink. This wasn't something that she wanted taken for granted. She wasn't a sex toy to be passed around amongst the men. The sooner they all learned that, the better. She wasn't a sure thing.

Not for them, not for anyone.

Trent chuckled against her back. Too late she realised she hadn't moved away from him, and he grew bolder, his fingers tugging at the hem of her shirt that was tucked into her jeans. Melody spun to face him, stepping backward and meeting his gaze. The kitsune needed to understand that it wasn't happening, at least, not here and not now.

“It doesn't matter which one of us is in charge, Melody, all of us want you.”

Trent stepped forward, once again bringing his body against hers, his arousal hard against her. Part of her wanted to give in, the familiar bonds were pulling so hard at her to take their relationship to the next level, but the reality was, she wasn't ready. She hadn't really been with Dean, but even less so with the mercurial fox in front of her.

“No,” she said, as firmly as she could without shouting.

Trent froze, his expression uncertain.

“I'm not saying never, but I can't do this right now. I've only just mated Dean, I've yet to bond Justin, that's if he still wants it, and there is so much pressure on me from so many other angles, I just can't think straight. This isn't casual for me, Trent. I'm not on-call, or as you demand, and mating you isn't guaranteed. I promised to bond you as familiars, that's it. If you want more, then you need to convince me why it would be a good idea.”

He leered at her then, pulling her harder against him. “I can think of any number of ways to convince you,” he murmured.

This time, Melody was firmer and louder. “No, Trent. I mean it. No!”

Growls erupted around them, and the others rushed to the confrontation.

Trent looked at her, confused. “I don’t understand. You’re my fated mate, my reward for faithful service to the Goddess. Can’t you feel the familiar bond pushing us together? We’re meant for each other. You were *made for me!*”

There was a tawny flash, and then Trent was on his back, the jaws of Dean’s lion against his throat.

Melody grabbed his mane, tugging on it, but not enough to pull him away. If she couldn’t get her message across, then maybe her mate could.

“I’m not a trophy, Trent. I’m not some fuck toy to be passed around amongst all the shifters who claim me as their fated mate. I have free will, and I’m exercising it right now. No. And if you can’t get your mind around that, consider this — if you don’t back off, I’ll break the familiar bond. I’ve spent my whole life serving at the will of others, and I’m not escaping one bad situation to enter another one. If you can’t respect me as a person, then I’ll have no option but to reject you.”

Trent whimpered, his eyes no longer the burning amber, but the golden ones of his fox.

“I’m sorry, my sweet fox. His actions hurt us both, but I will not be bullied by him. Either he wants a partner, or he gets nothing,” she said, kneeling beside him and stroking his hair.

“He’s so strong, Melody. When he wants the lead, I can’t hold him back. I don’t know why the Goddess cursed me with a second soul. This was never my choice, he was never my choice. Believe me, I agree with you. I do ask that you give him time. Kitsune are ... more different than you can imagine. Even those who have their own bodies, who aren’t hitching a

ride with someone else, are more arrogant than you can imagine. I also gather that he's been alone for a long time," Trent begged.

She looked away. What was she supposed to say to that? Melody didn't want to hurt the fox shifter, but the kitsune was out of line.

"It doesn't excuse him," Oz growled from behind her. "He's right, Melody is a gift from the Goddess, but it's the potential of the bond that is the gift, not Melody herself."

Dean shifted back beside her. "She's my fated mate too. He's not the only one who has been given the gift of such an opportunity. Tell him from me, the next time, I won't hold back. I will rip his throat out, consequences be damned."

Trent's eyes frantically searched hers, closing in pain when he saw no mercy from her. She wanted to, goodness knew, killing him would destroy something inside of her forever, but they couldn't allow him to go unchecked. The kitsune was such a powerful entity, that left to his own devices, he'd quickly overpower them all. There was no guarantee that he'd be kind, either. Kitsune were tricksters, and as often malicious as they were good.

"C'mon, Trent," Nick told him. "I think Mrs Hardinger might be able to help you both. I'll walk with you over there."

The dragon looked around at them all. "I'm in constant contact with Justin, so I'm keeping him safe, but the rest of us don't travel alone anymore. Given what Melody revealed earlier, it's not safe for us here. Pairs or more."

They all nodded.

Ryan threw a pair of sweats at Dean who stood and pulled them on, while Nick helped Trent to his feet. The five of them watched as Nick threw an arm around Trent's slumped shoulders, leaning in to talk in his ear as the pair walked away.

Her chest ached. She longed to run to him and pull him into her arms and comfort him, but the risk of his kitsune pushing forward to intercept was too great. It was breaking them both, and she hoped that Mrs H. had some answers.

“C’mon, Mel,” Oz called her gently. “Why don’t you come inside with me and we’ll get a start on that moss. If they’re fixing the roof, then we don’t have to worry about it growing back.”

Asher and Ryan moved over to the pile of slate tiles that had been uncovered so far, separating them out into those that were whole, and those that could be repaired. Dean grabbed the ladder and set it against the eaves.

Taking it as their approval, Melody headed inside with Oz, looking at the floor in disgust.

“I know you just want to magic it all away, to fix this whole place up with magic, but I think we need to do as much of this the old fashioned way as possible. You need to conserve your magic as much as possible, because you and Nick — and Justin if he turns up — are the only ones of us with it. I think it is part of her plan,” he told her, watching for her reaction. “The new provost that is. I think she wants you all to wear yourself out fixing the place up, so that you’re weaker when your aunt comes back.”

That was a seriously disturbing thought, but Oz was probably right. Right then, she seriously doubted they could rely on the flighty dragon, so it was really down to her and Nick. It made sense, the more they could do manually, the better.

“That’s a good idea. So, I’m thinking if we get some shovels or something smaller like a trowel, we can probably just scrape most of the moss off. Maybe a bucket or two to dump it into. The mould, while a vinegar solution might do the trick, there’s just so much of it, and it’s so ingrained into the wood, that I think magic is the only option. But let’s start with the moss. If we can clear all of that out today, that would be an awesome start.”

Oz nodded. “Okay, I’ll go get the tools, let’s see how fast we can do this. If I can find two buckets, then we can race to see who fills their bucket first.”

“Oh man, you’re on. Cleaning is my superpower. I did all the cleaning back at the compound, you’ve no idea of the beast

you've just woken," she told him with a giggle.

He grinned back at her. "Well, in that case, game on, woman. My shifter speed against your freak cleaning powers."

Of course she knew what he was doing. Oz might play at the carefree wolf, but she knew that underneath his facade, he was actually much more intelligent than people gave him credit for. They saw his breezy smiles, the way he interacted with Ryan when the other alpha was goofing off, and people dismissed them both as brainless.

Ryan was the consummate jokester, but it was also a disguise. The pair of them had been at Adolphus long enough that many of the shifters there looked at them in awe. The whole Apex suffered from that. Although, it was possibly also due to the pack mentality that they all adopted. From what she had witnessed, The Apex were a law unto themselves, even the teachers treated them differently. The only exception to that was the new provost, but that was a whole other barrel of fish.

The clatter of Oz returning with the tools brought Melody back to the present.

One thing at a time. Right now, that was scraping moss from the walls and the floor. She could do this. They could do this. Her aunt and the provost would have to do better than this if they thought to defeat them and take her familiars from her. They were aware and they were prepared. Nothing was going to get the better of them.

8. Trent



Nick's scent, wrapped around him with his arm, was an enormous comfort. Fuck, how had his life become this? One giant drama, with only doom in sight.

Trent hadn't been lying earlier. The Goddess hadn't asked him if he wanted the kitsune's soul to join him, she'd just given it to him. She'd also made his fox freakishly large, but that was beside the point.

From his earliest memory, his alter ego had been a part of him, although he vaguely remembered a time of great pain, one that the kitsune had said was their joining. From then on, Trent's life had taken a completely different path. Instead of being the venerated eldest son, he'd been despised by his fox family for being too big and too physically strong, while the kitsune clan saw him as impure and beneath them.

"We'll work something out, Trent," Nick told him, kissing his temple.

The warmth from that simple act alone nearly overwhelmed him. Trent was instantly reminded of the kiss his kitsune and Nick had shared. It had been the hottest thing he'd ever experienced, aside from the time his kitsune spent in bed with Melody. His hopeful mood turned sour.

The two best experiences of his life, and neither of them were truly his.

Trent pulled out from under Nick's arm, distancing himself from the dragon. It didn't feel right to intrude on a relationship that wasn't his.

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Nick chided, pulling him closer and caging him against the trunk of a tree. Soft lips touched his own as Nick moulded their bodies together.

“Nick, don’t. He’s not here,” Trent protested, even as Nick kissed along his jaw.

“Thank fuck for that, it’s not him I want to kiss,” Nick told him.

That wasn’t true at all. “Yeah, it is. That day, that kiss, that was him, not me. It’s not me you want to kiss.”

As if to disprove his theory, Nick’s mouth returned, pressing hard against his mouth. Trent shuddered as Nick’s tongue teased him, seeking entry, and when he gave in and parted his lips, Nick devoured him.

He’d never been kissed like that before, with such passion, such devotion. In fact, Trent’s whole life had been devoid of anything that resembled affection. Witches wanted to control him, to own him. His family shunned him. Most shifters avoided him, because he switched from submissive to overwhelming dominance.

Here though, here was something entirely new.

Masterfully, Nick applied his mouth to showing Trent everything that he’d never known existed. Nick’s hard body pinned him in place, the bulge in his jeans pressing against Trent’s own. Mercilessly, Nick ground the two of them together until Trent was a limp and whimpering mess, wanting more but not daring to ask for it.

Nick gave it anyway.

The dragon pulled back, watching his face as his hands undid Trent’s jeans, slipping inside and stroking his length. Trent’s hips bucked into the touch, his body desperately seeking the contact.

“Nick,” he whispered. “I’ve never *He* has, but I’ve never ...”

Desperately he looked into silver eyes, the slitted pupils telling him that Nick’s dragon was also enjoying this. Trent

groaned at the thought of the giant dragon enjoying his body.

“Then we’ll take it slow, Trent, but make no mistake that it’s your fox I want. That *we* want,” Nick said, his voice gruff with desire.

Helplessly, Trent clung to Nick’s shirt, his hands clenching and releasing like cat’s claws. What did he do next, what did Nick want?

Before he could panic too much, Nick reached into his own pants, withdrawing his hardened length, and then wrapping his long fingers around them both, pressing them together.

Trent’s legs nearly gave way at the sensation.

Slowly, Nick ran his hand up and down the dual rods, squeezing them and grinding them together, the friction more than Trent could handle. Just the thought that Nick would touch him at all was enough to have him blow his load, but this ... it was more than anything he could imagine, and yet another reason for his family to despise him.

“Nick, stop, I’m going to ... ” Trent gasped, his balls drawing up.

Nick stepped to the side, but didn’t let go of Trent’s cock, sliding his hand up and down, his thumb gathering the moisture at the tip and running it down the sensitive underside. It was the last straw.

Trent groaned long and deep as he climaxed, hips jutting involuntarily as white ropes of his release streamed forth, but Nick didn’t stop. Up and down, harder and faster, until Trent was begging him to stop. He was too over-sensitised, and yet he noted that he was still as hard as a rock. What was going on?

Nick kissed his neck, nipping him lightly, but still his hand didn’t stop, even as he rubbed Trent’s cum up and down his length.

“All of it, Trent,” Nick commanded, an alpha tone edging his voice. “Give me all of it.”

It was like a switch had been flipped.

Instead of over-sensitive, he was now nearing the peak again, his shudders turning to shivers and his body priming for release. What the fuck?

Lightning shot down Trent's spine, his lungs seizing, his body rigid, and Nick kissed him hard as he came again.

"Such a good little fox," Nick purred, and Trent felt the beast within him preening at the compliment.

Trent stared at the dragon shifter in shock. How had Nick done that? Even when he'd touched himself, Trent had never been able to achieve that.

"There's a lot you can do with magic, Trent. A lot more than you'd think," Nick told him, smiling against his jaw where he was still peppering him with kisses. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Trent turned and stared at him, at the smug satisfaction in the dragon's eyes. Belatedly, his own gaze dropped to where Nick's erection was held casually in the hand that had just been wrapped around Trent. Slowly, Nick was massaging the mess that Trent had left on Nick's hand onto his own length, using it as his lubricant. The sight was almost enough to get Trent hard again.

Instead, Trent dropped to his knees, tasting himself as he took Nick's cock into his mouth. Above him, Nick groaned, thrusting forward gently, his left hand coming around to the back of Trent's head. Trent's fox began to purr, the vibrations travelling up his throat and down Nick's shaft, making Nick groan again.

"Fuck, Trent. I'm not going to last if your fox keeps that up."

In response, his fox purred louder and harder.

"Fuck!"

Nick tried to pull Trent back, but he was having none of it. He wanted this, he wanted to taste the dragon, to feel that connection that only came with such deep intimacy. He

wanted to bring this man to his knees, to own him, to control him. Trent might have been submissive to Nick, but Nick belonged to Trent. Melody could have her share of him, but this, this moment belonged to Trent.

Giving in, Nick thrust deep and stilled, unloading down Trent's throat with a gusty sigh. Dutifully, Trent swallowed him down, savouring the salty taste, before finally withdrawing.

"Does your magic work on you too?" Trent asked him huskily.

Nick blinked at him a moment before smiling. "Did you want more? Greedy little fox," he joked.

Trent shrugged. He might not have had sex before, but he'd done this once or twice. Neither time, however, had been half as satisfying, nor had his other partners taken as much interest in Trent's own completion.

"Another time, perhaps, but now that we're both relaxed, we should really go and see Mrs H. She's bound to have an idea or two to help."

Nick flicked his hand, and when it stilled again, all traces of Trent's spend were gone — not just from Nick's hand, but from both their cocks. The only bits left that Trent could sense, were on the forest floor. Nick tucked himself away again, and Trent hurried to do the same, not sure how to take it. Not only were they clean, but all traces of Trent's scent had gone from Nick's skin.

Was Nick ashamed?

It wouldn't surprise him, although Nick hadn't hesitated when the kitsune had kissed him in front of Melody. Trent's own family, both sides, had made it clear what they thought of his open preferences. The truth was, he liked both. Male and female, the humanoid bodies both attracted him. Foxes fastidiously refused to acknowledge it, preferring to stick to their strict hierarchies and arranged matches, but Trent knew that the ease of shifters switching between partners of different

genders wasn't an unusual thing. He'd just never experienced it firsthand. Well, not really.

Before Trent could get too lost in his thoughts, Nick grabbed him and kissed him again, then rubbed their faces and necks together. Belatedly, Trent realised that he was now covered in Nick's scent again, and Nick in his.

"I'm not hiding this, Trent. If you plan to, you'd better give me a good fucking reason why," Nick growled at him.

Trent looked up at him in surprise. What had he done wrong now?

"You smelled of shame, Trent."

Oh!

"I thought ... when you" Fuck. Why was it so hard to talk about this with Nick? He'd never struggled before.

It's because you care, idiot, the kitsune grumbled inside him. *You want this to be more, you want it to be a part of being bonded with Melody, but you don't know how to ask for it.*

Well, that made sense, humiliating sense, but understandable. Still, the kitsune wasn't someone he wanted to hear from right then. Because of the idiot, Trent still might lose everything.

Oh, for fuck's sake, the kitsune growled, seizing control. *Once again, I'll step in and save you, shall I?*

"His family drilled it into him that men being together was shameful. You wiped his scent away when you cleaned up. You wiped all scent away, and he felt rejected. He's too embarrassed to ask you, and too naive to know more," the beast growled at Nick.

"Thank you for humiliating my partner. I'm sure this has done wonders for his confidence, it's so very thoughtful of you to take over and stop him from discovering how to work out relationships himself. No wonder he barely talks to us. You won't let him," Nick snarled in response.

Trent felt the kitsune rear back, even though outwardly, they showed no reaction. It was rare that the cranky beast ever

had someone push back against him. He was too used to ruling the roost and being more dominant than all the shifters around him.

“I wonder just how much of your attitude is the cause of Trent’s submissiveness, and how much of it is his own. It’s obvious that his upbringing has been difficult. Just how much harder did you make it, beast?”

As quickly as he’d seized control, the kitsune relinquished it. *Fine, you want to stumble through this and fuck it up on your own, so be it.*

Through his bluster, Trent felt a note of unease. The kitsune had taken the dragon’s words to heart. As his equal in the mythological world, the dragon would have more weight in the kitsune’s thoughts than Trent ever would.

“Ten times harder,” Trent said, knowing the beast still listened. “Daisuke was always impatient with me. It didn’t help that he came to me fully mature when I was just a pup. He hated me playing with toys, so he always took over and broke them. My parents got tired of my excuses and stopped buying them. I learned not to get attached to anything, because if Daisuke was pissed with me, he destroyed it. It wasn’t just toys, it was friendships, jobs, anything I enjoyed, he’d take it from me.”

“That’s fucked up,” Nick growled. “What did your family say when you told them you had a kitsune?”

What did they say? Oh man, he could remember that conversation like it was yesterday. He could still feel the lashes he’d been given for lying.

It wasn’t until Nick’s fingers drew his chin up that Trent realised he’d been curling in on himself.

“It didn’t go well. Not until Daisuke could shift and prove it. Then they took me to the elders and tried to get the demon spirit exorcised. That was when the Goddess spoke to our oracle and put a stop to it, but it was too late. They were all embarrassed and didn’t know what to do or how to take it. She

gave no instructions, and Daisuke had no explanations other than his name said it all. Fat lot of help he was.”

“Daisuke, that’s the name of the kitsune?” Nick asked him gently, rubbing a hand up and down his back.

“Yeah, it means large, and depending on the kanji, it can be big help, or big mediate, law, blessing, ceremony or assist. In his case, it was written as ‘big assist’. I don’t know who he is meant to be assisting, other than the Goddess, but it’s certainly not me.”

Nick chuffed a laugh, understanding the comments from earlier.

“But you think now it has something to do with Melody?” Nick prompted.

“Yeah, I do. He’s always popped in and out as he’s pleased, but he’s never been focussed on anyone like he is her. He wants her, so much it makes me want to escape. He’s not lying when he says that the Goddess has blessed him as fated to her, but like Melody said, that’s not a guaranteed thing. If we can’t work out how to curb him, she’s going to break our bond. I don’t know what to do.”

Trent felt himself shaking, the post-orgasm high having worn off and leaving him as tired and as frightened as before.

Nick pulled him in for a hug. “We’ll work it out, little fox. I can’t believe that she put him in Melody’s path for no reason at all. I also can’t believe that she gave him to you without purpose. There’s a piece of the puzzle that we’re missing, and it might not seem like it, but I’m sure that whatever is going on will make more sense when we have it. It will all be worth it. Think of what Melody’s been through, and how it’s shaped her. There’s a higher purpose at work here.”

Trent could only nod and hope that the dragon was right, because anything else didn’t bear thinking about.

9. Nick



The more time Nick spent around Trent, the more he wanted to. Daisuke notwithstanding, the fox shifter was pleasant company and had obviously had a much harder life than any of them could have imagined. They might have been the same height, but Nick found himself feeling protective of the fox, as though Trent was smaller not only in his beast form, but his human one.

He kept his arm around Trent's shoulders as they walked the rest of the way to Mrs Hardinger's office. Hopefully she wasn't in class this time of day, although you could never tell.

Fortunately, when they got there, not only was the door wide open, but the paint on it was green. Somehow she'd managed to charm it so that it was red when she didn't want to be disturbed and green when she was open for appointments. Absently, Nick wondered if they should set up something like that on Melody's bedroom door, providing that she ever got to the point of mate-bonding more than one of them.

Nick's dragon rumbled in his chest, causing Trent to glance at him worriedly. His dragon wanted no doubts in Nick's mind that Melody would mate them, but from what he'd just witnessed, Melody was by no means a guaranteed mate prospect.

As Nick rapped on the door, it turned red. Had someone just walked in ahead of them?

"Come in, I don't have all day to dawdle," a strident voice called out.

Interesting, so the paint already knew that this was to be an appointment, before they'd even entered the room?

Leaving aside the mystical paint for a moment, Nick ushered Trent in ahead of him, closing the door behind them.

“Well, gentlemen, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Where are Nikolai and Alexander?” Trent blurted, looking around as if the two large men could be hiding behind the comfy wing-backed chairs scattered around the room.

“They returned to Coven Canticum to announce their bonding. I assume they'll return at some point, I gather his mother wants him to mate Melody. He can bloody get in line if that's the case,” she said with a snort.

Nick's gaze met her own, and he saw the twinkle in her eyes. Obviously she'd already surmised that most, if not all of them, wanted the mate-bond with Melody.

He mentally rolled his eyes at himself. Who was he kidding. They were shifters. Of course they all bloody wanted her.

Trent, however, looked like a deer caught in the headlights. As much as Nick wanted to rescue him though, he knew that the fox shifter was going to need to step up and learn to do it himself. Nick was here for moral support and to give his insight if asked. So, rather than replying, he looked at Trent, waiting.

The fox shifter's scent was panicked, making Nick's dragon rumble in concern, but still he held back. If anything, Daisuke's latest display had only undermined Trent's lack of confidence, and it wasn't just from the kitsune taking over when things became difficult. Reading between the lines, Nick was willing to bet that the bastard also had no hesitation in putting Trent down.

Following his lead, Mrs Hardinger also looked expectantly at Trent.

“I need to control Daisuke,” Trent blurted again.

The witch looked to Nick and then back again at Trent. “Who is Daisuke and why do you need to control him?” she asked in a cool tone.

Helplessly, Trent looked to Nick for help again, but he shook his head, backing away and sitting down in one of the overstuffed armchairs.

Trent’s hands twisted together before him. “He’s the kitsune, he’s out of control and threatened Melody.”

The counsellor’s eyebrows disappeared under her hair.

“He wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Trent continued, oblivious to her reaction now that he’d finally begun talking. “He thinks of her as an entitlement. She’s his fated mate, and he thinks that means it’s a done deal. He can’t understand why she might be hesitating. They’ve already...”

The nervous man ground to a halt, his scent changing from panic to embarrassment.

“Fuck me,” growled a voice that wasn’t Trent. “You can’t even say it aloud, how do you ever hope to do anything if you can’t even talk about it? We fooled around, okay? Melody and I fooled around.”

“I gathered that. You’re just the type to spring a mate-bond on her, so I knew that you hadn’t had sex,” Mrs Hardinger responded.

If Nick had thought her tone cool before, it was positively glacial now.

“So, you’re Daisuke? What makes you think that Melody is someone for you to order about like a slave? Is that the way you treat a mate where you’re from?”

“He’s from Ohio,” Daisuke replied drolly. “They treat mates there the same as anywhere else, I’d guess.”

The witch huffed. “It’s not where you’re from though, is it? What kind of kitsune are you?”

Trent’s whole posture had changed, from fidgeting and shrunken to tall and proud.

“Who are you to question me, witch?” Daisuke sneered. “You are neither my intended mate, nor anyone I choose to respect.”

It wasn't just Nick's chest that rumbled with a growl. From behind one of the armchairs, Toby's panther stood, baring his teeth.

“I'd tread very carefully if I were you, boy. You want to know who I am? I'm the witch who decides if Trent gets the help he's asking for or not. You don't want to mess with me, I'll send you right back to the Goddess if need be.”

Daisuke snorted. “I'd like to see you try.”

Mrs Hardinger barely raised her hands, but Nick felt the power flow forth from her. Feeling the strain it put upon her, he guided his own magic to her to aid in whatever she was doing. He trusted her that much, he'd allow her to do whatever she felt was needed to Trent's body.

Trent shuddered and fell to his knees. Then he looked up at them both in wonder.

“He's gone! You did it, he's gone!” the fox said gleefully.

Mrs Hardinger, however, grimaced. “It's not permanent, boy. Much as I wish I could, he's obviously protected by the Goddess. This is a temporary banishment, but we should make the most of it before he returns. So, tell me, how long has the kitsune been with you?”

“Since I was about three or four,” Trent told her.

“He takes no other form than the kitsune or controlling your human form?”

“Not that I'm aware of.”

“Hmm. I think I can work with that.”

The older witch moved to her desk, rattling around in one of the drawers until she returned with a small silver pendant. On it was a wolf.

“Nick, be a darling and change that to a fox, a kitsune to be precise,” she said, handing him the pendant.

He took it in his hand, thinking about how to do it. Grumbling, his dragon gave him some insights and between them they sorted it out. Then Nick held it in his closed fist and focussed his magic.

His dragon had argued that it wasn't worthwhile making a dye-cast style figurine like the wolf had been. It would require much more magic and they would need that to help protect Melody. The simplest option would be to flatten the lump of silver into a disc and then *draw* the kitsune on it like an engraving.

In minutes, it was done and he passed the new pendant back to her.

Smiling, Mrs Hardinger fed it onto a chain and gave it to Trent. "Put this on, pray to the Goddess and ask her to bind Daisuke to it. He has no earthly form, so he has no right to take over yours when he pleases. Once he's bound, he'll only be able to emerge when you ask him to."

Trent looked at her agape, and Nick felt his own estimation of her rise at her clever response. Rather than trying to confine or control the kitsune inside of Trent, she'd gone for the more simple option of confining him to a different vessel. Trapping him like this gave Trent the ultimate control over the kitsune and meant he'd only be allowed out in his shifted form, not taking control of Trent's human body. No threat at all to Melody. It was ingenious.

While they watched, Trent closed his eyes, his hands cupping the pendant where it hung on his chest. There was a swirl of powerful magic around them, and then all was still again.

"Did it work?" Nick asked, desperate to know.

Trent's shocked golden gaze met Nick's own. Then the fox shifter smiled.

"Fuck yeah," Trent said. "He's cussing up a storm in my head, but he can't seize control. I can feel him, but it's not the same. I feel his presence, but it's not inside me."

Now the fox shifter beamed, grabbing Mrs Hardinger in a tight hug before hugging Nick as well. Even Toby got one, chuckling at the younger shifter's antics.

"You don't know what this means," Trent said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "To be in control of my own body, to know that only my voice will pass my lips, that he can't speak for me anymore. This freedom, it's ..."

Then he sank to his knees and began to sob.

Nick couldn't even imagine what the guy had been through. He sank beside Trent, crossing his legs, and pulled the distraught shifter into his lap. Then he just held him, rubbing his back, but allowing his brother to just let it all out.

This was what pack was about. Dragons called it clan, but it was the same sentiment. Being there for those you cared for, in whatever capacity they needed. He had time for this, it was clearly a big deal for Trent.

"I'll go make some tea," Toby said softly, heading for the door.

"Thanks, love," Mrs Hardinger told him with a smile.

It was refreshing to see such a healthy partnership between a witch and her familiar. Not that Nick expected anything less from Melody, but so often the relationships that he saw forming after a challenge weren't anything like he was brought up to expect.

Back on his clan lands, it was unusual for a dragon to bond to a witch. It wasn't necessary, their elders were able to help with any dragon stuck in their shift. Even as he comforted Trent, Nick wondered what Melody's reception would be like when he took her there. He had no idea where she wanted to live once she graduated, but there was a hope in his heart that she would want to stay with his family for a while. It had been far too long since he had lived there.

It suddenly occurred to Nick that he hadn't reached out to his family to tell them of his change in status. They knew that he was interested in a witch, but not all of the drama that was associated with Melody. Given the danger they were now in, it

was probably a good time for him to talk to them. At least, it would be later, after he was sure that Trent was alright.

Trent gasped a smaller sob, and then a little later another one. His emotions were obviously settling down, the shock of his freedom, receding.

“What happens if I take it off?” he asked, tremulously.

Nick had no idea, and looked to Mrs Hardinger, who looked just as perplexed.

“I really don’t know,” she told them both. “It would depend on what the Goddess intended when she bonded him to you. I would keep it on you, just in case he transfers back to your body if you take it off. I gather that she wants him with you, otherwise she wouldn’t have bothered sending him back when you asked.”

Well, that made sense. In a way. Still, if it was Nick in that situation, he’d never take the damn thing off again. Daisuke was quite a toxic personality at times. It would be interesting to see how Trent’s confidence was affected without the fear of the kitsune taking over all the time.

“He won’t shut up,” Trent grumbled. “He’s seriously pissed that we’ve done this.”

“Tell him if he hadn’t fucked up, then we wouldn’t have had to. It’s obvious that the Goddess agrees with us too, because she’s allowed it.”

“He can hear you,” Trent said, more quietly. “He was already responding while you were talking. I don’t think he listened though.”

“He can see and hear everything you can?” Mrs Hardinger asked.

“I think he can, yes.”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully. “On the one hand, that’s not fantastic, because you can’t hide anything from him. On the other, however, we can all talk about him and there’s nothing he can do about it, and he has to sit and listen to it. Frankly, I’d rather focus on that.”

Nick laughed, even so, he noticed the counsellor watching Trent carefully as she chuckled with him, observing the effect of her words upon him.

Suddenly Nick had insight into how she operated. She might have been blunt and forthright, and frequently humorous, but Nick suspected that it was all a mask. That she sat there behind those eyes noticing every single twitch of those within view. His intuition told him she analysed and thought through what they needed to hear and what she was prepared to say. People were always reacting to her, oblivious to her method of delivery, but Nick realised that she was actually quite devious.

It took him a moment to realise that her bright brown gaze was fixed upon his own. She winked and gave him a nod. He wasn't quite sure what she was approving, but he'd take it. She might be younger than he was, but he had a feeling that she was a hell of a lot wiser.

10. Melody



By the time Nick and Trent came back, Melody and Oz had cleared all the moss from the floorboards throughout the house. Oz had won the first round of filling their bucket, but Melody had won the next two. The ridiculous game had helped pass the tedium of cleaning, punctuated by shouted requests outside to hold the ladder or to pass up another slate tile.

Melody wasn't a builder by any stretch of the imagination, but from what she could see, the roof over the living room was now completely weatherproof. At least, they'd patched the lining under the tiles and replaced it. From the sounds of things, they were now working on the gaps over one of the other bedrooms.

It was a relief to feel Trent and Nick returning. Melody had picked up some intense emotions from both him and Nick. She suspected that they had found some time alone together for something wonderful, but Trent's anxiety rose to a peak. Then he felt shame and finally liberation. It was a sensation so overwhelming that she had gasped and dropped to her knees. Melody felt Trent grieving something, yet celebrating at the same time.

What on earth would he miss and be glad to see the back of at the same time?

There was only one answer to that question.

His kitsune.

The kitsune was simultaneously the bane of Trent's existence and the strength that he needed. She only hoped that

they knew what they were doing. It was time to trust them all.

From Nick, Melody had only felt surprise, compassion and a grim satisfaction. Whatever had gone on, he definitely approved of it. She also felt a growing sense of affection and a need to protect. That was the only way she could think of the urges clinging to her heart. The longer she was bonded to these men, the more she was able to discern.

Of course, Dean's bond was much clearer than that. He might have the advantage of being able to hear her thoughts, but Melody was getting better at reading his emotions.

"Mel! You still here?"

Oz wrapped an arm around her, giving her a gentle shake.

"Yes, sorry. I can feel Trent and Nick coming back, and I was trying to work out what had happened. Trent feels ... He feels light, and yet guilty about feeling light. I think they've done it. I think they've managed to contain his kitsune somehow."

"Wow, that's gotta feel fucking huge for him, right?"

She nodded. Yes, Trent definitely felt lighter. The two shifters in question darkened the doorway, Nick holding back to let Trent come first.

"You did it?" she asked him.

Instead of responding, the fox shifter held up a necklace with a pendant.

"His physical form is bound to this vessel. He can only come forward now when I call him, although I can still hear him, and he can hear and see everything I do."

It was genius, and Melody told them so.

"It was Mrs H's idea," Trent said. "Nick made the pendant, and then I prayed to the Goddess to return him."

"Return him from where?" Oz asked.

"She banished him first, it was a temporary thing, because he's tied to the Goddess, but Mrs H sent him back first," Nick

explained. “Then she got Trent to ask for him to be confined. He’s not gone, it’s just that Trent now has the upper hand.”

“So what happens when Trent calls him forward and he won’t go back?” Oz asked them.

“That’s the brilliant part,” Nick replied with a grin. “He can only come out as his kitsune form, because he’s bound, it’s not Trent’s human body he gets to control.”

The wolf looked confused, so Melody spelled it out for him.

“Oz, he’s in his beast form. What do you think will happen when I’m confronted with a beast who won’t shift back?”

The light dawned in his eyes, and Oz grinned. Then he gave a rueful little chuckle. “Man, he’s so fucked, isn’t he? He plays up, Trent won’t let him out, and if he gets out and won’t behave, Melody spanks his ass and sends him back.”

Trent moved to stand in front of her, taking her hands in his. “It means no more interruptions,” he explained. “When I’m talking to you now, it’s me. He can yell all he wants to in the background, but you’re not exposed to it. Now, when it’s you and me, it’s just you and me.”

Through the bond, Melody could sense the sheer relief that being in control gave him. Looking into his golden eyes, she reached up and took his face in her hands, pulling him down to her. Then she kissed him, gently, her lips barely brushing against his.

Trent sighed against her mouth, his hands holding her hips as he held back, giving her control even as he trembled. His need for her pulsed in the background of her thoughts, but he didn’t act on it. For the first time, when passions were rising between them, it was Trent in control, and he was giving that over to her. This was their time, and there would be no interruptions.

Excited by the thought of exploring the submissive fox’s boundaries, her hands explored his body, running across his shoulders, down his arms, and then across his chest. On an urge, she dropped them to his waist, untucking his shirt and

sliding underneath, her fingers warmed by the heat blazing from his skin.

“Fucking hell,” Oz murmured in the background, reminding her that they weren’t alone.

Rather than pulling away, Melody moulded her body against Trent’s, watching as Nick’s eyes turned silver and the pupils slitted. Oz’s wolf rumbled deeply, almost like a purr, and his gaze burned as it traveled down her body, noting where her hips nestled against Trent.

Nick took a hesitant step forward, then another. Oz was bolder. In a flash he was pressed against her back, his hard length pushing into her ass. But it was when Nick did the same thing to Trent that she finally understood some of what she had been feeling. That the two of them were closer than ever was obvious in the way Trent sighed, leaning his head back against the slightly taller dragon.

Was it wrong that her heart beat faster when the dragon’s strong hands gripped the fox’s hips? Or that she moaned when Trent was pushed against her in a way that told her the force was Nick’s?

Melody was familiar with sex, but this was way beyond her experience. Was this okay? Were they okay with it, or was she abusing her familiars by allowing their emotions and needs to get the better of them. When it came to having a familiar, just what was the line between witch and mistress? For all her experience in bonding and disciplining shifters, she was completely clueless when it came to matters of the heart and body.

“Melody?” Oz said, stilling behind her.

Somehow she must have portrayed some of her apprehension. The other two froze, golden and silver eyes watching her, their expressions worried and questioning. No matter how embarrassing, it was time to tell them her concerns.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she told them simply. “There wasn’t much privacy at the compound, so I’ve seen

plenty of sex, although we all did what we could to give the couple privacy. But that's just it, it was always couples. I'm worried that I'm taking advantage of you all. That this is just hormones and your beasts, and that if I let it go any further, you're all going to regret it later. I'm worried we're rushing into things, and like I said to the kitsune, I also don't want to be taken for granted."

"You want to know if this is normal?" Nick summarised.

"Well, kind of. I mean, what's normal? I have six familiars. There's nothing normal about that. Yet there's nothing wrong with it either. I guess, we just haven't talked about where we all want this to go. You're my familiars, but I don't know what your hopes and dreams are beyond being bonded. The bonds will pull at us, but it doesn't mean we have to mate, and I don't want to fall into the trap of having sex because we're being urged to by the magic, because that's when we'll let our guard down and mate without intending to."

Goddess, she was ruining this. Here was this special moment, this intimate thing, and she was just word vomiting all over it.

Frustrated, Melody wrenched free. "I don't know how to do this!" she said again, louder, throwing her hands in the air. "I can do friends, I can do compassion, I can do help. But more? Other? I'm so lost, and I'm killing it."

"Don't overthink it, Mel," Oz said gently, reaching for her, but she pulled back.

"That's just it Oz. I am, because I have no idea how to proceed. The things I'm feeling for Dean, it's so intense, so beyond what I've ever experienced, and I know part of it is from the magic, and that with time that will settle and it will be purely us. It's just so overwhelming, and there are the rest of the bonds, hammering away at my will, pushing me to take it further. It's ironic, because I'm so inexperienced, and the only people I can talk to about it are involved."

"Mel!" Nick said loudly, talking over the top of her. "Mel! Just calm down. C'mere."

He moved forward, grabbing her and pulling her into his arms. This time Trent came and hugged her from behind, and Oz stood to her side, wrapping his arms around the other two men.

“You’re right, there is no blueprint for this, no example to follow and very little guidance to be had. But you’re wrong if you think you’re alone. For starters, you’ve got Mrs Hardinger. Okay, she might not have had a witch with so many familiars before, but you can’t think that you’re the first witch to have more than one, right?”

“You’ve also got me, bitch,” called a strident voice from the door. “There is no way you’re getting all that man meat and not talking to me about the details.”

Melody spun to the door, where Carla and Quinn stood, grinning at them.

“Thought you could use some help,” she said, holding up a bucket with some simple tools and what looked like gardening gloves. Behind her, Quinn did the same.

“I figured I might not have magic but I’ve got muscle,” Quinn offered.

“Fuck yeah, you do babe,” Carla said with a grin, her dark curls bobbing as she spun to face him. She wrapped a dainty hand around his bicep. “All these muscles, and they’re all mine, but I’m willing to lease out his arms.”

“Lease, huh?” Melody asked her, walking over to give her a hug. “And just what is that going to cost me?”

“You just paid for it,” Carla said, her eyes a little shiny. “I can’t ... What happened ... I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, Mel. Everything was hazy. At first, I couldn’t believe all the stuff that she was saying about you, but the more she said it, the more sense it made. Even Quinn couldn’t get through to me.”

Melody knew.

Quinn had been devastated by her actions, although he had stood by her. She was his witch, regardless of the fact that she’d turned on him. Now that Carla was free of the spell

influencing her, Melody hoped that her friend understood just how amazing Quinn was.

“It wasn’t you speaking,” Melody reassured her. “I know it was that spell. It took a while to figure it out, but looking back it was kind of obvious. I’m just glad you’re free of it, although I wish more action had been taken against Shawna. She put your bond with Quinn at risk.”

The wolf shifter in question gave a little growl, moving closer to stand behind his witch.

“I know I don’t deserve it, but can we start again?” Carla asked, shyly. “I promise, I’ll be your renovation bitch. I’ll deal with all the spiders and creepy shit, okay?”

There was still a pang of fear in her heart, that worry that everything would go wrong again. How often had she seen it back in the compound? Just when Melody thought things were going right, that they were improving, down would come Marjory or her aunt, and things would become worse than they’d ever been.

Part of Melody was waiting for the other shoe to drop. For the kick to come, for the pain to return. Yet, there was also a newer part, one still emerging from the darkness, that urged her to seize every opportunity that came her way. It was a quietly desperate emotion, the need to experience as much as she could before it was ripped away. Because when it all went to hell again, she’d need those happy memories to sustain her.

“I can do you one better,” Melody offered when she realised she’d been silent too long. “How about we pick up where we left off? Like the whole time with Shawna never happened, because that really wasn’t you. It was like you’d leased out your body to another person, so, let’s treat it like that. Like you were gone on holiday, and now you’re back, and that other stuff happened to me while you were gone.”

There was a beat of silence and then Carla threw herself at Melody, sobbing on her shoulder as Quinn looked on proudly from behind her.

Thank you, he mouthed to her.

“Come on the muscles,” Oz said, grabbing Quinn and heading outside, Trent and Nick following. “Let’s see what you can actually fucking do.”

Holding onto her friend, Melody looked around her. Yes, the place was in rough condition, but there was hope. With so many people pulling together to help, how on earth could they possibly fail?

11. Daisuke



That the fat little witch had been able to banish him back to the celestial realm, even temporarily came as a surprise to Daisuke. Not only was it a shock, but an insult.

Who the fuck did she think she was? Casting him back to the heavens like some irritating spirit. He was a fucking spirit warrior, chosen servant of the Goddess herself. The witch should have some fucking respect for that if nothing else.

Daisuke, said a warm voice in his mind, instantly calming him. *Why have you returned to me so soon? Your journey is not complete.*

Ah, fuck. This was going to sound a lot worse than it really was.

Glad he had at least appeared in his ceremonial robes, he sank to his knees and lowered his forehead to the ground. Of course, there was nothing there, and he was more mist than real, but it was the thought that counted. This was his Goddess, the one who created him. He owed her everything, and it was his honour to serve her.

I had a disagreement with my host, Your Graciousness, a witch observed it and banished me temporarily. I will be able to return soon, he told her.

Daisuke, she chided. *You cannot hide things from me. The story between your words screams out in denial. Tell me everything.*

Yep, this was not going to go down well. Damn that whiny little fox.

With little choice, he laid out the argument he'd had, filling in more detail when she asked for it.

This seems a dramatic response, although I am not happy with how you have treated your fated mate. She is a gift to you from me, a reward for your loyalty. Does my favour mean so little to you that you would treat her thus?

But she's mine! Daisuke argued, hating the small whine that had crept into his mental voice. *She won't admit it, but she's mine.*

Dark eyes framed by a face as white as the moon, glared at him. *She is not a toy to play with, nor an object to possess. I gave you the gift of being called to each other. I did not take away her free will. I fear that I have kept you too long in the celestial realm. Perhaps when this task is finished, I should send you to live in a body of your own, allow you to live and grow and have a greater understanding of relationships. Your spirit seems to be greatly lacking in empathy.*

Her last comment was the one that hurt the most. It wasn't censure, simply a statement of fact, but to him, it was as good as a condemnation. His Goddess found him lacking. The shame of it threatened to crush him.

Your host has asked me to confine you to a vessel. I think that it is prudent. It will allow you to better observe how he interacts with others, for I fear that you have been too forceful in his upbringing. He was not a submissive fox when I created him.

That surprised Daisuke.

From a very early age, Trent had acquiesced to his every demand. His need to speak, to step out in his kitsune form, the desire to act, protecting Trent from those who would have bullied him. Had he taken away the young fox's will? It was a disturbing thought.

As much as he hated the idea of being outside of Trent, it also appealed to him. To not have that constant responsibility of protecting the weaker shifter, and to not be affected by the hormones that were running around in his blood, would be a blessed reprieve.

Even though Daisuke hated having been sent back against his will, to be able to commune with his Goddess, to rest in his spiritual form, was a sheer relief. Still, he wondered just what kind of vessel he was being sent to. A sword would be good, or a bird, like a raven. They were easy enough to control and he could fly reasonably well. Yes, a minor beast that he could take over would serve his purposes very well. The sword could be left behind, the beast would allow him more freedom than he'd had when held by Trent.

His Goddess sighed.

Daisuke, I sent you to the fox to help the witch. Regardless of her soul calling to yours, she is the priority here. You seek your reward like a hunter, yet you have yet to achieve the goals I have set before you. She must prevail, she must outwit those who stand against her. Right now, she is in greater peril than ever before. Instead of using your mind to control the fox, use it to help him help her, for he is now your only conduit to reach her. Prove to me that you can be compassionate and think beyond your own needs.

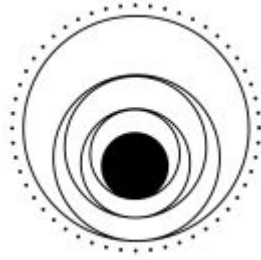
Before he could agree, before he could even grovel, she was gone, and so was he.

It took Daisuke a moment to realise that he was back with Trent. Whatever vessel contained him, it felt much smaller. There was a warmth to it, but it was innate. A moment later, he realised that it was an object, not a living creature. So much for him being able to move around at his own leisure.

It was only when he reached for Trent's mind, that Daisuke got a glimpse of his new home — in a medallion on a chain around the fox shifter's neck.

He began to swear, and he didn't stop for quite some time.

12. Ryan



Life quickly settled into a hectic routine for Melody. She attended classes during the day, spent an hour or so helping clean and repair the cottage, and then spent the rest of the evening with one or another of them tutoring her.

They all took turns accompanying her to class, one of the dragons always with whoever was with her, their magic helping to deflect the worst of the spells thrown their way. It was the part he loved and hated the most. A whole day with her and just one other familiar, and yet a whole day of protecting her from privileged assholes and bitches.

On other days, he was labouring. Cutting wood, caulking the holes in the walls, patching the floor, replacing pipes or just general old fashioned scrubbing, trying to get the organics off the floor and walls.

The provost had refused to replace the windows, so Melody and the dragons had done it between them. At night, they all piled into a heap in the living area, none of them willing to move into a bedroom when the cottage was still so draughty. They'd managed to get a pile of blankets, and all bar Nick, shifted to sleep. Because of his size, Nick usually got the most comfortable spot in the middle, and then the rest of them added to the warmth that his human form needed.

Dean slept beside Melody.

He really just slept.

They were all too exhausted to do anything else, and Melody was likely aware of the fact that they could all hear her every breath. As it was, she was usually asleep as soon as

her head hit the pillow. Ryan was worried about her, she was growing thinner and paler, her anxiety preventing her from eating as much as she needed, and her schedule preventing her from getting the rest that her body required.

Today it was his turn to escort her to classes, along with Nick, which was a relief. The tension in the air when Justin came with her, was more than his wolf liked to deal with. Ryan couldn't see the issue. The damn dragon should just get over himself and challenge her, or talk to her, or do any fucking thing other than ignore her really.

While Melody and Nick were handling the magical attacks, it was up to Ryan to watch the attitudes of those around them, predicting physical ones. It was Thursday, which meant the morning was going to be a shit show.

Fuck, I hate Thursdays, he sent to Nick, who had opened the pack link between them.

What's so bad about Thursdays?

Ellesmere, Jensen and Beynon. Three of the teachers who hate her, and they're the first three classes. Shitshow, bam, bam, bam. You know she takes it hard.

Fuck. But are Thursdays any worse than other days? Nick asked him.

Yeah, the other days the shit show is spread out. She might have three teachers that don't like her, but in between she's usually got some who do. It keeps her evened out.

Let's hold back then, let the others go in first, I don't want to be fighting an uphill battle before we even get in.

No good, Nick. It means we don't get to sit near her, and she'll end up getting shunted to the front row, right under Ellesmere's nose. Of course he's going to pick on her then.

Nick took a hold of Melody's elbow and urged her to walk faster. She looked up at him, startled, but didn't protest as he guided the three of them close to the front of the line waiting to go into the lecture room.

A hard knock in his back made Ryan surge forward, bumping into Melody who crashed into Nick. Snickers sounded around them, but when he turned, nobody was there to take responsibility. Fucking hell, how old were these people?

“Stop it,” Melody said under her breath, looking at him.

It was only then that Ryan realised he was growling. This was the worst part of it. No matter what came their way, whether it was hex, spell or curse, neither Nick nor Melody would respond to it. Even harder for him to cope with, even if the attack was physical, he couldn't retaliate.

Inside, his wolf rumbled angrily again, frustrated that he couldn't protect his mistress. Half of the crap that came their way would have been resolved if they'd just been able to put these shit-heads in their place. The problem was, those very same shit-heads would go running to the provost who was just looking for an excuse to expel Melody. Without anywhere safe to live, they'd all be sitting ducks waiting for Bestia to come and knock them down.

Ryan took a deep breath and turned, standing in front of Melody, protecting her from anyone coming up behind them. They might have gotten the jump on him once, but it wouldn't be happening again.

They were surrounded by unfriendly gazes, not just the witches, but the shifters too. Melody had made several enemies by turning down so many of them

“Move aside, come on, make way. How the hell can I teach you if I can't even get into the bloody classroom?” a cross voice called.

Nick pulled Melody to the side of the doorway and Ryan followed, making sure that she was protected.

“Oh, so it was you three causing all the trouble. Very well, report after classes today for detention,” Mr Ellesmere said gruffly, after pushing his way through everyone else.

Ryan gaped, but Melody just nodded. Nick, he noted, ground his teeth together as he held his jaw tightly closed. So,

it wasn't just him who was pissed.

"You will all stand aside and let everyone else through first. Maybe that will start to teach you some manners about blocking people."

He couldn't help it. His wolf grumbled loudly, and Ryan's lips pulled back in a snarl.

"Miss Bestia, please see ..."

"Canticum," Melody said loudly and firmly over the top of him.

"I beg your pardon?" the lecturer said, his eyes narrowing.

"My name is Canticum. I have denounced my former coven and anything to do with it. My name is, and has been for several weeks now, Canticum."

Ryan turned to look at her. Far from being cowed or angry, Melody stood calmly, addressing her teacher as though talking to a peer. She wasn't reacting at all, just stating a simple fact. It was all there in her body language.

"Miss *Canticum*," he said, sarcastically. "Please see that you control your familiar. Of course, I will have to report that your wolf is out of your control to the provost. You might think that you are helping these young men by bonding them, but your failure to teach, train and control them is only doing them a massive disservice. You would be best to admit your error in collecting so many of them, and break the bonds."

A shocked silence met his words. Although she was calm on the surface, Melody was furious through the bond. The tables had turned, and now it seemed, Ryan would be the one keeping her calm, because from the silver in his eyes, Nick was in no condition to stop her.

Around them, everyone paused with bated breath, waiting to see what happened next.

"Mr Ellesmere, if you think that my wolf threatened you, or that he acted without my consent or control, then I suggest that it is *you* who needs educating on what a familiar bond entails. Then again, having no familiar yourself, it would be

impossible for you to understand the nuances of communication between a witch and her familiar,” she shrugged, nonchalantly. “By all means, report that my familiar was communicating with me, I’m sure that the provost would be thrilled to hear that we are getting along so well and that our bonds are so strong.”

Ryan wanted to cheer, but it would undermine everything she had said, so he simply stood stoically staring the teacher down as his face turned red and his mouth opened and closed.

“What is the meaning of this?” a harsh voice called, interrupting.

Ryan’s heart sank. Of all the places and times, the provost turning up here and now was the last thing they needed.

“Why aren’t these students in class? The bell rang five minutes ago. Mr Ellesmere, I thought your classes had better discipline.”

The look of hatred that Mr Ellesmere shot at Melody gave Ryan pause for thought. This wasn’t simply some flunky jumping on the provost’s bullying train. The man genuinely hated her, there was something else going on there.

“I was in fact restoring order. It seems that Miss Bestia decided to block the doorway to the classroom to prevent us all from entering,” he responded, throwing her under the bus.

“Mr Ellesmere, the door is locked. I had no reason to block it,” Melody reminded him, just as the provost reached their side.

There was nothing to be said to that, the evidence was right in front of them. The furious teacher spun, unlocking the door and striding inside.

“Remember what I said, Miss Bestia. The last one in,” he called angrily over his shoulder.

“Well, that’s interesting. I thought you had changed covens,” the provost said, slyly.

“I have, Provost. I denounce Bestia and all they stand for. They are merely bullies with no real talent for beast magic and

care. They aren't real witches. I have already corrected Mr Ellesmere, but he seems to have difficulty remembering for more than a few moments," Melody replied casually.

Ryan didn't know where Melody was getting her calmness from, nor her strength, but he was thrilled at how she was handling things.

"Mmph," the provost replied, tutting and pushing her way in front of them when they went to enter the room.

As predicted, there were no groupings of seats left. There was one single seat in the middle of the front row, and two seats at either end of the same. That was all. They wouldn't be close enough to her to protect her physically or magically. Nick wouldn't have a direct line of sight to anything incoming. It was obvious that they were all going to have a field day attacking her.

It was ironic that the only thing that might hold them back, was the presence of the very woman seeking to hand Melody over to her aunt. Ryan had no doubt in what Melody suspected. If anything, he thought that she was being too generous. The bitch in front of them had probably orchestrated the entire fucking mess in the first place. Ryan was sure that he'd seen her in the battle where Provost Aer-Canticum had been killed, but he couldn't prove it.

On the brink of beginning his lecture, Mr Ellesmere hesitated, looking over at where the provost stood. "My apologies, Provost, I was distracted. Did you wish to address the class?"

"Please proceed," she replied, coldly. "I am here for a spot inspection of the class and its participants. After all, I'm new here, and I need to get to know all the students."

The whole time she spoke, the bitch stared at Melody. She wasn't even bothering to try and hide it. She wasn't here for a meet and greet, she was here to cause trouble.

Don't react, Nick warned him. We won't be able to intervene unless Melody's life is in danger. She's counting on us to fuck up, we can't give it to her.

Inside, his wolf clawed to get at the surface, even as his heart pounded. Adrenaline flooded his body. Everything inside him was screaming at him to get Melody and take her out of there, but the threat was more imagined than real.

“Very well. Today we will be practicing the meditation techniques that we’ve been discussing for the last few weeks. Divination is an artform that is rarely accessible for more than a few moments, even by the greatest practitioners. However, it is essential that you learn how to school your mind and to find the appropriate technique for your personality. Please form into pairs. We will spend twenty minutes with one person attempting to reach the divine, while the other records what they say. Then we will switch about. At the end, with whatever time is left, we will discuss your findings.”

Shifters were unable to participate in the practical section of this class, which Ryan thought was bullshit. The underlying message was that they didn’t have the requisite intelligence to school their thoughts enough to allow the divine in. It was a crock of shit. There was no shortage of shifters who had the ability, but the witches refused to recognise it. They claimed that only those with higher magic were able to achieve the connection.

The only significance it had here, was that neither he nor Nick could partner up with Melody. In fact, with the odd number in the classroom, nobody did.

“Miss Bestia, you had best come forward and partner with me,” Mr Ellesmere told her.

Melody sat back and closed her eyes. Ryan could feel her emotions settling, even as he watched her breathing calm. Now was the perfect time to attack her, when the teacher and provost were focussed on her small act of rebellion, and everyone else was moving around.

Ryan’s wolf went on high alert, even as he scanned the classroom for danger, but nothing concrete presented itself. Several small missiles were deflected by Nick’s magic. If not for that, he would have assumed that nothing was happening at all, that they were finally leaving her alone.

“*Miss Bestia!*” the teacher called more firmly, but still she didn’t respond.

Ryan smirked.

“*Miss Canticum,*” the provost said in a saccharine voice.

Melody opened her eyes and looked at the woman in askance. Ryan wanted to laugh, but refrained.

“I believe that Mr Ellesmere was trying to attract your attention. He seems to have forgotten your name again.”

Well, wasn’t she a cunt little bitch? The provost had drawn attention to Mr Ellesmere’s attempt at riling Melody up, labelling it as a lapse in memory, rather than a true attempt to insult her. The man’s face was puce as he stared at Melody, who pretended that she’d been unaware. His petty attempt to demoralise her had not only missed its mark, but now made him look foolish to boot. The provost had effectively ensured that he hated Melody even more.

From there the class went downhill. Mr Ellesmere tutted, corrected and critiqued Melody’s every move, announcing rather loudly at the end of her twenty minutes that it was such a shame that a witch lauded to be so powerful, had such an obviously poor connection to the divine. He sent her back to her seat, telling her to write a short essay on the various meditation techniques for the second half of the class, to be submitted at its conclusion. He also reminded her very loudly that she had detention.

Of course, that caught the provost’s interest.

“Detention? What on earth for, Mr Ellesmere? I had assumed that Melody’s poor performance was from a lack of proper instruction, rather than her paltry attempts to achieve the divine.”

“For her poor attitude, Provost,” he growled.

It was obvious that he’d just realised that his earlier claims of her blocking the door were now redundant, however, the slights that she had delivered while standing there still rankled him. The provost’s clear lack of respect for him during the entire class wasn’t helping matters either.

“She fails to show the proper respect, and she is unable to control her familiars. The wolf threatened me.”

“Then we shall simply bring him to heel,” she responded. “Melody, you are hereby forbidden to have any contact whatsoever with your familiar for a period of forty-eight hours. Let him have a taste of what will happen when we find that you are unable to care for so many strong shifters.”

“You mean, *if*, Provost, do you not?” Nick corrected her.

The woman grinned smugly. “No, Nicholas, I mean *when*. It is clear that she lacks the required strength and discipline to care for you all, and the sooner she realises this and relinquishes your bonds, the better it will be for all of you.”

“And then what?” Nick asked, pushing.

“Why then we find you a proper witch to bond you. Dear Nicholas, we only have your best intentions at heart.”

“Is that why you told Melody to bond me, or you’d expel her from the academy?” he argued, rising to his feet.

“Melody, dear. You really do need to teach your shifters control,” the provost chided, smirking around the room. “As you can all see, bonding multiple familiars in a short period of time can be severely taxing on a witch’s control.”

“With all due respect, Provost, I have the necessary control over Nick. I just disagree that he’s a lesser being because he’s a shifter and not a witch. I don’t think he has done anything that would demonstrate a lack of control on his behalf,” Melody responded.

“You mean on your behalf,” the provost corrected.

“No, I mean on his behalf. I am his bonded witch, not his mistress and not his puppet master. Nick is perfectly free to hold and express his own opinions, just like any other sentient being. Our bond is to strengthen my magic where necessary, and to aid him in controlling his shift. Although he hasn’t yet needed that.”

“Ah, but your other dragon has, hasn’t he?” she said with a smirk, not backing down for a second.

Fuck, Ryan hated her. She was perfectly suited to Melody's mad aunt from what he could tell. The two of them had a superiority complex that came from having authority, but not true power. His heart pounded in his chest. As much as he was enjoying her matching wits with the bitch queen, Ryan knew that no good would come of it.

“Two things, Provost,” Melody responded, as the class eagerly listened in. “Firstly, he is not yet my dragon, so it is not my failure to control him. Secondly, he was reacting to the fact that I'd just rejected his challenge. Most familiars struggle with their beasts after that has happened. It's a well documented fact, one any beast tamer with a modicum of ability would know.”

The implication that the provost was not in that category was lost to nobody, and gasps sounded around the room. But the provost merely smiled serenely.

“Yes, Melody. I can see why you have such poor control over your familiars. You barely have control over yourself.”

On that note, she turned and left.

If only that had been the worst part of their morning.

From the disastrous divination class, they had gone on to herbology with Mrs Jensen, a rather shrewish teacher who didn't particularly like anyone, least of all Melody. She seemed to relish the fact that Melody's plants were failing to thrive, not at all interested in the fact that Melody had secretly marked her pots, and that they were now sitting on another witch's bench. Another detention was issued for answering back, forcing Melody to admit that she already had one for that afternoon.

The cantankerous bitch had merely smirked and said that Melody could serve them back to back. Which meant she'd get fuck-all studying done that night.

Neither Nick nor Melody spoke a word as they all had their morning tea break, Melody studiously reading all of her notes, trying to make the most of the time in lieu of study that night.

The final straw, however, was hexes and curses with Mrs Beynon.

Their instructor saw fit to use Melody for every demonstration, hitting her with spell after spell to show their effects before showing how to defend against them. At the end of the lesson, Melody had barely been able to leave the room under her own steam, and Nick and Ryan had barely been able to hold their beasts in check.

Nick, what the fuck was that? I've never seen a live demonstration of the curses before. You've been here longer, have you?

The resounding silence and the fury on Nick's face was all the answer he needed. The fuckers were taking this to the next level, converting the teachers and egging them on. It was all just another attempt to get Melody either expelled or forced to leave.

It was time to fight fire with fire, and Ryan knew exactly who they could go to for help. First of all, they needed to get her into shields with Mr Phelps, and then after lunch, a double session of wards with Professor Simmonds. That was going to be a good start, but Ryan figured that Mrs H was the person to go to for the rest of it. She'd have a solution for sure.

13. Melody



After the morning she'd just had, followed by the pounding she'd taken in hexes and curses, all Melody wanted to do was crawl back to the cabin and go to bed. A bath sounded wonderful, but she doubted that she'd have the strength to hold herself up in it.

By the time she'd limped from her last classroom, across the central hub to where her next class was on the other side, she was barely on time, Mr Phelps having just opened his mouth to begin.

He watched her slow progress with narrowed eyes, as she found her way to a vacant seat in the back row. It was obvious that nobody expected her to be bullied in this class, because she wasn't held up front and centre for torture. There still weren't three seats together, but at least she wasn't being called upon for every question and expected to fail.

The irony that she was being taught the very means to block the hexes and curses that had hit her so hard in the last lesson, wasn't lost on Melody. It wouldn't surprise her to discover that Mrs Beynon had actually structured her lessons so that Melody wouldn't have the requisite knowledge to block them beforehand.

She took copious notes, determined not to suffer those spells again, but deep in her heart, she knew it wasn't enough. Somehow, Melody would have to find a way to be ahead of the rest of the class, so that she was no longer a target. If she could set her enemies off balance, then it might just give her the breathing space she so desperately needed.

When the bell went at the end of the lesson, she remained in her seat, letting everyone else leave before her, and thus reducing the amount of spells directed her way as her peers not only practiced their new knowledge, but targeted her as well.

“Melody,” Mr Phelps said, making his way to her. “What on earth happened to you? I can feel the residue of multiple spells on you.”

He waved a hand in front of her, muttering an incantation, and immediately she felt better. It seemed that Mrs Beynon had left some of those curses active, rather than cancelling them as she had claimed.

“I was the student chosen for the live demonstration of the curses that you just taught us how to block,” she said, simply.

For a moment, he didn’t react, although Nick and Ryan were growling as they stood beside her.

“Live demonstration?” Mr Phelps asked, disturbingly quietly.

“In all my years here, I’ve never seen anything like it, sir,” Nick growled. “Not only did she not give any warning of each spell, but she left them there for several minutes so everyone could see what they did.”

Melody pushed up the sleeve of her sweater, showing multiple cuts, bruises and lacerations on her arms.

“They’re just the ones I’m willing to bare to you. The others are in places that are too personal.”

All the desks and chairs, aside from where she sat, and everything else not bolted down, flew against the walls in a tumultuous crash. Wood splintered, iron bent, and glass shattered. At the epicenter, the four of them stood or sat, untouched by the destruction around them.

“You can’t stay here, you can’t go out there. They’ve got you trapped,” he growled.

“I need your help, sir,” Melody said, trying to get him to turn his mindset around. “I need to be ahead of the syllabus. I’m already studying to test out of herbology. I hope to move

on to Mrs Rasmussen's class by the end of term. If I can get ahead in your class too, then not only will I be safer, but it's one less class to stay here for."

Mr Phelps looked at her, his grey eyes sad and tired. "There are only so many hours in the day, Melody. You already look unwell. I'm not sure how much more you can take on."

Grimly, she looked back at him. "I can take on as much as I need to. Whatever it takes to survive this place."

He nodded, a determination stealing over his expressive face. "Very well, I will see you after classes today, and tomorrow I'll not only provide you with a copy of the syllabus I'm teaching from, but all my lesson plans for the remainder of the year. If she's working to the plan that you only get the answer to what she hits you with *after* her lesson, then all you need to do is jump a week ahead. That's not too great a load."

No, it wasn't, but it also wasn't enough.

"I want to test out, the more classes I pass, the stronger I am, and the sooner we can get out of here," she told him.

"And go where, Melody? You're not safe here, but I doubt even Coven Canticum could keep you safe from the dangers you face."

"To the clan lands," Nick answered for her.

To the what?

Yet Mr Phelps was nodding, delighted. "Yes, of course, why didn't I think of that? With her bond to you, she is most welcome there if I know my lore properly, and with all those dragons and their ancient magic, even the magic of the clan lands themselves, she'd be safer there than anywhere else."

"But it's still a cage," Ryan reminded them all. "No matter how gilded it is."

"It doesn't have to be permanent," Mr Phelps argued, and she saw Nick wince. "It only need be for as long as it takes to eliminate the threat of Bestia. Once that ghost is laid to rest,

there's nothing stopping you from doing whatever you want. Hell, you could even start your *own* coven."

For a moment, time stood still. Something about that idea resonated deep inside Melody. Her own coven. A safe place. A place of equality where witches and shifters could come together and live in harmony. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

"You want that, Melody?" Nick asked her.

"My own coven? Not really, but a safe space? A haven for familiars and witches who respect them? Yes. I could get behind that. I would fight for it."

"Then you're right, you need to graduate as soon as you can, and you're going to need all the help you can get." Mr Phelps told her. "I'll talk to some of the other teachers here, and we'll get behind you. It's about time someone came along and bucked the system because the one we have isn't working. But we can sort that out this afternoon after classes."

"She can't this afternoon," Ryan told him. "She's got two lots of detention."

Mr Phelps just blinked.

"Did I hear you correctly?"

Nick snorted. "Yeah, it's their latest effort to grind her down. The provost is just itching for a reason to expel her, but not before she's found grounds to break our bonds."

"But that would leave you vulnerable to other witches. Your beasts would be pining for a bond, they'd challenge just about anyone to get it."

"Yeah," said Nick. "That's exactly why they're doing it. Already the provost is doing everything she can to undermine us. This morning she had some bullshit random inspection of the class, where she not only implied that Melody couldn't care for and control us, but she also managed to humiliate the teacher and insinuate that it was Melody's fault. The man was an ass to start with, but now he's outright hostile. I don't know how we're going to get her a pass when it's obvious that all he wants is revenge."

“Hmm, yes, that is a bit more serious. If I were you, I’d be seeking out any and every political contact that you have right now, and starting to spell out the circumstances of your education, young lady. From the sounds of things, this is all going to go to hell in a handbasket, and the more political leverage you’ve got behind you the better. That means not blindsiding them with all of this. Let them know where things are at so they can better prepare themselves.”

Melody wanted to laugh, the idea of her having any political sway anywhere, was ludicrous. So much so that she snorted. It was only a step from that to a giggle, and then she laughed outright.

“Mr Phelps, you do realise that I was a slave to my coven for my entire life. That I’d never left the compound until I came here, and that since coming here, all I’ve done is made enemies without even trying. Just for being who and what I am. An ant has more political leverage than I do.”

“That’s not true, Mel,” Nick corrected her. “For starters, the dragon clan will be behind you. We might not be witches, but we’re not exactly lightweights either.”

“And that fucking witch. The heir. He’s so hot to get in your pants he’ll do anything you ask him,” Ryan added, his head bobbing forward when Nick smacked the back of it.

“And what about that councillor? The one who came and questioned you after ... after the attack from Bestia?” Mr Phelps added. “That’s not a connection to be ignored. You don’t have to be on his Christmas card list for him to remember that he’s met you. He’s also been here and seen some of what has gone on. I think that is where I would start. Renewing that connection before other voices can get to him and change his take on what happened here.”

Put like that, Melody realised that she did have a few more connections in the witching world than she’d previously suspected.

“I’ll get Justin to come and stay for a few days with you, and I’ll go home and visit my family. They’ll be keen to hear

from me anyway, and they're going to adore you. You can count on having them at your back already," Nick told her.

"I'll put in a call to your councilman for you, as I doubt you'd get through to him otherwise," Mr Phelps said.

"I'll go talk to Mrs Hardinger while you're in wards with Professor Simmonds," Ryan offered. "You're safe in that class, he won't let anything unscheduled happen."

"Mm, true," Mr Phelps said. "It pays to be vigilant when teaching with attack and defense magic."

"Then that just leaves Alexander. How are we going to get a hold of him?" she asked.

Nick just smiled at her. "Ryan, while crude, wasn't exactly far from the mark. Alexander admires you greatly. I don't think he'll be gone from your side for long. I think his mother will push to have the two of you mated, and sooner rather than later."

"Then it sounds like we have the beginning of a plan," Mr Phelps said. "Try not to get any detention tomorrow, Melody, and we'll work with you after class and over the weekend. Because if we're going to do this, then you do need to graduate sooner rather than later."

Melody nodded. She understood.

From now on, there was no such thing as free time.

14. Justin



Jus, man, we need you to swing by the house for a few days. I gotta go back to the clan, Nick sent.

His fingers stilled, his hand still wrapped around his shaft. Fuck, Nick had the worst fucking timing.

Yeah, okay. Everything alright?

No. They're looking for just cause to break our bonds, and expel Melody. Bestia will be waiting, and Shawna and her lot will try and snap us up while we're pining for a bond. It's fucked up, but we have the beginnings of a plan. Getting the clan behind us is part of it. I think it's finally time we stepped up.

Your Dad isn't going to go for it.

Then I'll fucking make him, because I'm not going to allow myself to become a slave to a witch, and I'm not going to let my brother lose the chance of ever bonding to his fated mate.

Fuck. That sentence there was enough to quash any protests he had. It was also enough to get his hand moving up and down his shaft again, faster and harder than before.

Yeah, be there in ten, he replied.

More, he needed more.

Rather than imagining Melody on her knees, looking up at him as she sucked down his length, right to the hilt, he pictured her underneath him, writhing and mewling with pleasure as he took her hard and fast. The first time, he knew, he wasn't going to last, so he'd make sure that he took her

with him. He wanted to brand not only her body and soul, but her mind.

Faster.

He was going to slam his cock home in the only place it had ever belonged, driving himself deep inside until everything about them was connected. Magic too. Just the thought of her power twined around his was enough to bring him to the edge.

Harder.

Fuck, he needed this. He needed her screaming beneath him, her nails scoring trails down his back as she marked him in return.

More.

Justin was going to make her come like she never had before. He'd take her body to new fucking levels, and she'd make him see stars.

That was it, that was what made lightning shoot down his spine, while his balls churned with bliss.

It was then that the door of his room blew open, magic wafting ahead of it as Jaynie stood there, watching him jerk off. It was like she knew exactly where he was up to. She practically ran across the room, diving to kneel in front of him just as the first rope of his cum shot forth, lacing across her open mouth, marking her face and making her moan.

“Oh baby, yes. Give me more, I want more,” she moaned.

What the fuck was wrong with her?

Caught in the throes of his release, Justin could only grunt as his hips thrust forward, more white strands decorating her face as a second figure stood in the open doorway. He turned to see who it was, his body tensing when he recognised her.

Melody!

Fuck!

“Mel, it's not what you think,” he groaned, even as his cock kicked and let forth another traitorous load. His dragon

battered against his insides, desperate to come out and meet her again. It was urging him to pull her close, rip off her clothes and ram himself inside her, so that the rest of his release was inside her, where it belonged. Where he belonged.

“I’ll come back later,” she said, looking from him to Jaynie and back again, before spinning abruptly and leaving.

“Mel, what the fuck?” Ryan said as he came around the corner. “Oh dude! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The disgust in his voice was clear.

“Hey, I was jerking off and she blew the door in and knelt down just as I was unloading. This isn’t what it looks like,” he protested.

Rather than complain, Jaynie leaned forward and took the tip of his cock in her mouth, moaning and making a huge production out of it. Justin jerked back, disgusted.

“Get the fuck out of here, you crazy bitch,” he growled, using his magic to push her from the room.

“Get that fucking shit off your face,” Nick growled.

“Nuh-uh,” Jaynie said with an evil laugh. “This here is fuel for the fire baby. I’m going to get every tongue wagging in this place. She won’t be able to step anywhere without people talking about how you marked me as yours.”

Before Justin could act, Nick did. There was a surge of his magic, and then all the evidence of Jaynie’s plans was gone.

“Stay the fuck away from me, you psycho bitch,” Justin roared, amplifying his voice. Every single shifter in the building would have been able to hear him. “If you come anywhere near me again, Jaynie, I’m reporting you for sexual harassment. I don’t know how the fuck you got in here, but I know how the fuck you’re getting out.”

Jaynie screamed as a gust of wind picked her up, carrying her to the end of the hall where the stairs were. There was laughter and jeers from other shifters along the corridor as they watched her progress.

Justin wasn't too careful as he let his magic take her around the corner and down the flight of stairs, dumping her into the common room. Then, before he could forget again, he put up a personal ward against her getting into the stairwell again. She would still be able to visit shifters in the common room, but she wouldn't get any further in than that.

"Fucking clean yourself up, then come to the cottage. We were swinging by to get you, because nobody walks alone on campus, but I think you've pretty much fucked that up now," Ryan said, sneering.

"You go ahead with Mel," Nick said. "I'll walk with Justin."

The wolf shifter nodded and loped off, chasing after Melody who was long gone from this level.

"Fuck," Justin groaned as he grabbed a tissue and began cleaning himself off.

"No, man, do it better than that. You'll drive the others nuts if they can smell it. It's already tense enough over there with the bond pushing us hard. You turn up smelling like that, and it'll be like a match to gasoline. They're already thinking of sex all the time as it is."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll take a quick shower," he growled.

Fuck, could this day get any worse?

Melody probably already hated him, she'd already fucking rejected him once, and now, for her to walk in on that of all things. Yeah, he didn't stand a chance.

Inside, his dragon mewled piteously. It wanted his mate.

"I'm going to pack you a bag," Nick said through the open bathroom door. "It won't be everything, but as much as I can fit. It's time you moved in with us, brother."

Justin thought about that for a moment. It would be like heaven and hell all at once. A glimpse of what he could have had if he hadn't fucked it all up. The agony of knowing that it could never be his, would never be his now.

He wrenched the taps on with more force than necessary, dropping his sweats and stepping out of them, before moving under the scalding hot water. He could feel it searing against his skin, but his shifter healing kicked in immediately, leaving him with a stinging burn as the next set of drops hit, and a deep satisfying ache in his bones. Justin would take that any day over the look of betrayal on Melody's face.

Fuck!

Already his cock was hard again, the faintest hint of her scent driving him wild, while the thought of her having seen him come brought him right to the edge again. Desperately he gripped his length, wrenching his hand up and down painfully, punishing his cock at the same time as he gave it what it wanted. It was agony and ecstasy and he came within a minute.

Before he could get distracted again, Justin quickly washed his hair and soaped himself down. Then he wrenched the taps around until only the icy cold water was left, drawing a soft cry from his lips, one that he couldn't hold back. It was the only way to stop his cock from rising any further. One moment of her in the doorway, and already he was fighting to keep himself under control. He'd only just mastered it, and the little he'd had was blown away.

"You okay, Jus?" Nick asked, poking his head in and immediately seeing the problem. "Again?" he asked, incredulously.

"She's my mate," he said, simply.

Nick nodded. While his brother wasn't pulled as hard, there was no doubting that Nick's dragon wanted Melody too.

"Already jerked off in here, and I'm still fucking hard, despite the cold water."

Nick's eyebrows raised, his hand coming forward to test the temperature. Despite it being icy, it was doing nothing to his raging hard-on.

"I need her, Nick. I need her bond. Tell me that it's easier when you've at least got a familiar bond?"

Rather than agreeing, Nick shook his head.

“I found her attractive enough beforehand, but the bond, it just pushes you for more. Dean’s there, the rest of us want to be, and we’re all ducking off into the forest to do what you are, as often as we can get away with it. Anything to ease the pressure.”

There was a look on Nick’s face, distant, but fond. Justin knew what that meant, and he wanted to kill his brother for it.

“Who is she?” he growled.

Nick’s face showed guilt, and he swallowed. “Trent,” he said, hoarsely. “I’m pretty sure she knows, too.”

Well, fuck. That wasn’t what he’d expected at all.

“The kitsune again?” he prompted.

“No, Jus, the fox. Trent’s sweet little fox. He’s fucking amazing, and that fucker Daisuke is now confined to a pendant around his neck.”

“Daisuke? That’s the kitsune?”

“Yeah, that fucker. Melody said no, and he ignored it. So, we dealt with it.”

Justin’s dragon roared, his skin turning to scales, while around him, everything was tinged with red.

“You let him fucking rape her?” he snarled, ready to kill Nick right then and there.

“No! Fuck no! He was getting too handsy, she told him to stop, and he fucking claimed that she was his. Like she was some sort of sex doll that had to obey him. We put a stop to that, and then we put a stop to him. Mrs H had the idea of confining him to a pendant. He can’t take over Trent’s body anymore. He’s only got his beast form left, and that’s only when Trent summons it forward.”

“Yeah, and what the fuck is going to happen when he doesn’t want to go back, huh?” Justin growled.

Nick, however, laughed. “Melody will force his shift,” he said proudly.

Well, that worked. In fact, it was the perfect solution. Justin laughed. It was genius, pure, fucking, evil genius.

While he was distracted, imagining Melody magicking the kitsune onto Trent's naked ass, Nick stepped forward. Justin had no idea what he'd intended, until a firm hand clamped down hard on his rigid dick, and Nick's gentle lips teased his own.

"Need a hand?" he murmured into Justin's mouth, before his tongue plunged into it.

Justin pulled him in under the icy water, and Nick gasped. Blindly, he groped behind him, finding the hot water and adding it to the mixer until it was at a bearable temperature, and then he focussed on getting his packmate naked. Of course, stripping off wet clothes was easier said than done. Eventually he gave in and just ripped them, Nick moaning at his need.

While Nick was far from submissive, Justin's need was great enough that he pushed for control, spinning Nick around and pressing him against the wall, while he played with Nick's ass.

Nick groaned, his hips thrusting upward, sliding his hot length along the cold tiles, the base of it firmly in Justin's grasp.

"I'm not going to be gentle," he warned.

Nick just moaned and thrust backward at him. It was obvious that Justin wasn't the only one who was needy. He spat on his hand, and then rubbed it around Nick's pucker, dipping a finger in, and then a second. Nick moaned and relaxed, allowing him to slip in a third, before Justin pulled him away from the wall and pushed him down.

Spitting again, Justin coated his cock, and then slowly he fed it into Nick's ass. Both of them groaned at the sensation, their bodies coming together until Justin was buried to the hilt. One hand rested on Nick's hip, where he held the other man still. The other was tangled in Nick's hair, the honeyed locks a chocolate colour now that they were wet.

He eased back slowly, drawing a whimper from his friend, before he rammed home again. Nick grunted, then groaned, his ass clenching around Justin's length. Fuck, if he kept that up, Justin wasn't going to last long.

As if he heard his thoughts, Nick moaned. "Jus, I'm not going to last, fuck me now."

Well, that he could do.

It was more than three strokes, but it wasn't very long before they were both panting together, Justin's legs quivering with the need to thrust forward and just come, but Nick wasn't there yet.

Curling forward over Nick's back, Justin slipped a hand around the front and grasped Nick's cock, sliding up and down its length. Nick groaned and thrust backwards against him, but it wasn't quite enough. That was okay, Justin knew exactly what Nick needed.

One hand on Nick's cock, the other left his hip and slid up his slick chest to his throat. Justin drew Nick upright, the angle meaning he didn't get as deep, but what he was about to do, would drive them both over the edge.

Justin bit him. Hard.

Nick roared, his cock kicking and jumping in Justin's hand, as his release spurted and drizzled down his length, while his clenching ass, drew forth Justin's own release, his hot seed coating his friend's insides.

Was it Melody?

No.

Was it enough for now?

It had to be.

Justin knew he'd fucked up big time. Again. For now, he'd take this, but he needed her, and soon. He just had to convince her that she needed him too.

15. Melody



Her heart hurt. Goddess, after the morning she'd had, everything hurt, but more than anything else, Melody's heart ached.

Nick had suggested that they swing by Justin's rooms to escort him to the cottage, because none of them were safe moving around alone. The scene that greeted her, however, was enough to break her.

She couldn't deny it. There was something about the surly dragon that called to Melody. Rejecting his challenge was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do, but if they were ever going to have a future together, it had to be built on trust and respect. Forcing her to bond him, when she'd only just begun to understand what freedom meant for her, was the exact opposite of that.

What she needed now was Dean, and he knew it.

Despite all the warnings about not moving around the campus alone, he met her in the forest on their way back to the house. Without a word he strode up to her, in nothing more than a pair of sweats, pulling her into his arms and holding her there while Ryan looked on.

Dean smelled of wood shavings and a faint sweaty musk, but mostly, it was how he felt that captivated her. He felt like safety, like she'd finally found her home. Maybe it was that realisation, or maybe it was the culmination of everything that had happened, but before she could prevent it, Melody was sobbing on his bare shoulder.

His skin was searing hot, despite how cold it was, and it felt smooth and silky, despite the dirt that clung to it. His muscles were hard, yet they gave under her touch, and his body was strong, yet supple against her. He was everything she never knew she wanted, and yet there was more, something was calling her for more. The man she'd just left in that room, the one who rendered her heart in two — he was part of that more, and now she'd never have him.

Her legs were swept from under her, as Dean picked her up and the three of them proceeded back to the cabin. As they approached, she could hear the noises of others slow and then cease as they silently bore witness to her return.

“Oz, Trent, go get her some food,” Dean ordered, carrying her inside, but then he stopped abruptly.

“Melody?” called a familiar voice. “What the fuck is wrong with her? What have you done?”

Having calmed a little, she turned her head to see who it was, surprised that it was Alexander, and he wasn't alone. Four more male witches stood behind him, each of them looking at her curiously.

“Mel, baby, what's wrong? Where does it hurt?” Alexander crooned, his eyes scanning her from head to toe.

“Dean?” she whispered, pushing against his arms where he carried her.

Sighing, he relented, bending to set her feet on the ground, rather than letting her just slide down his body. That alone showed a great deal of restraint. She could already feel his resentment through their bond. Still, he gave her exactly what she wanted, while remaining close, guarding and supporting her.

“I'm fine, Alexander, really,” she began.

“Doesn't fucking look like it from here, doll,” one of the witches said.

Dean growled, long and low, the vibrations trembling through her bones, even though he wasn't touching her, telling her that there was even more of it that was subsonic. She

didn't know whether the others came in out of curiosity, or in response, but there was a clatter of feet as they moved to stand behind her.

Alexander spun on the spot, snarling at the man. "I warned you. My mother fucking warned you. You treat her with respect, and these men, or you fuck off right now. I'm not allowing narrow-minded bigots to embarrass us any further, is that understood?"

The witch who had spoken stepped forward. "Forgive me, Melody. It seems that I have some bad habits in dire need of correction." He bowed low to her.

She wasn't sure if he was serious or mocking, but right then, she didn't care. It was something that the others could sort out later — some sort of pecking order or ranking. For now, she had more than enough on her plate.

Dean sat on a crate, the closest thing to furniture in the living area, and pulled her back onto his lap. "What happened, Mel? What has you this upset. The pain beating in your chest, it's ripping me apart."

Oh, Goddess. That was the last thing she wanted to do. Desperately she tried to quash her feelings, to calm herself down, but the harder she tried, the more upset she got. That was, until she realised it wasn't her own emotions that she was feeling, but Dean's. The more she tried to shut off what she was feeling, the more upset he got.

"Don't," he growled, giving her a little shake. "Don't hide from me, Mel. I can't stand it. Please, rip me to shreds, I'll only love you more for it, but don't hide from me. You're my everything, and if you hide that, you take it away."

She couldn't get anything right today, it seemed. No matter what she did or didn't do, she was hurting someone, or making matters worse.

"It's a Thursday, so let's get that out there for starters, it was never going to be a good day," Ryan said, starting off the explanations.

“What does that mean?” Alexander asked, moving forward now and kneeling in front of her. He took one of her hands in his, holding it firmly. “Talk to us, Melody.”

“Ellesmere, Jenson and Beynon — first three classes,” Ryan explained.

“Ah, fuck. Yeah, okay, Thursdays officially suck,” Dean said, squeezing her in a little hug. “But that’s not what this is. You’ve been frustrated all morning, before you were in enough pain that Nick reached out and told me that you were handling it together, and not to come and make a scene.”

Of course he had felt that. Melody berated herself for putting him through even more.

Slowly, she began outlining her morning from hell, from the confrontation with Ellesmere and the provost, to becoming target practice for Mrs Beynon. But, explaining more than that, was impossible. Melody hadn’t even begun to process Justin’s betrayal.

“And then there was the fucktard dragon,” Ryan said, when it was obvious that she would say no more.

“We swung by there to pick him up, and, well, the door was open, and we were just in time to see ...”

“Exactly what she fucking planned for you to see,” interrupted Nick.

They all turned to him and Justin. Seeing him there with an overstuffed duffel bag was more than her heart could take. Of course, he was moving in for the next three days while Nick went to update the dragon clan. It made her pause and wonder. Did she really need a second magic user in the cabin? Especially when Alexander was back with a small army of bodyguards.

“Mel, I was jerking off, alone,” Justin began, and several of the men began to snicker. “I was close, so fucking close. All I could think about was you, and it was driving me fucking insane. Just as I was about to unload, my door blew open, it was locked, so she used magic. Jaynie was out of breath, like she’d been running, and she skidded into the room and landed

on her knees in front of me, just as I went over the edge. I swear, she'd not been there for any of that beforehand. Somehow she knew what I was doing, and she came to cause a scene."

"Well, she succeeded," Melody told him.

"Mel, I don't think she did, at least not as much as she wanted to," Nick told her. "I think she knew you were coming, and she ran up those stairs ahead of you. Justin said she was out of breath, so it would make sense. She ran up there, set herself up and gave you the wrong impression. She was going to walk out of there, with his come all over her face, and make everyone think that Justin had marked her. I thought Shawna was bad, but Jaynie is fucking certifiable."

"I swear," Justin pleaded. "It was all a set-up to try and come between us."

It was all just a bit too convenient, and far too insane. Who put that much effort into something like that?

Justin got on his knees in front of her. "Mel, in my head, this all went differently. You would force my shift. We'd be bonded, get to know each other a little more, and then when the time was right, I'd get you alone, and I'd tell you. But, right now, I'm thinking that if I don't tell you, I'm going to lose everything. So, here goes nothing."

Silver eyes looked up at her, his face pleading for her to understand.

"Mel, you're my fated mate. You're my sun, my moon, my stars. You are my first waking thought, and you haunt my dreams at night. I would do anything for you, be anything, I'd die for you. Fuck, I let that woman kiss me and rub on me, all to try and get you a place in a coven, so you'd be fucking safe. I let her defile me, just for you. I don't think you understand what that costs a shifter, when he does something that goes against the wellbeing of his mate. It ripped me to shreds, but I'd do it over and over again, if it saved you from what you had to go through, if it saved her, so that you wouldn't have to grieve for her."

Justin dropped his head onto the back of their clasped hands.

“Mel, I love you, and it will never be anyone else. For me, there is nobody else. Just you.”

Dean’s arms tightened around her. “Mel, if you’re his fated mate, then he’s just like me, only stupid. He’s fucked up, several times now, but it would kill him to deliberately hurt you. He’s a fucktard right now, and he’s pissing me off, yet, at the end of the day, he’s my brother. He’s also another one of your mates.”

“Hey, just a fucking minute there,” one of the witches called out, striding forward. “Respect goes both ways, Melody. You can’t just expect us to stand here waiting for you to consider us, while you go ahead and mate with a bunch of fucking shifters.”

When she looked at him, Alexander had the grace to blush. He let go of her other hand, and held both of his up in front of him. “Not my orders. They come from my mother,” he explained.

What the ever loving ... Was he insane?

“Orders?” she practically yelled at him. “I’m being ordered to choose one of you?”

Alexander winced, that was telling enough.

“My mother is determined to breed you into our coven. Her orders are for you to choose one of the five of us as your mate before the end of term. You’re to graduate as soon as possible, and when you return, you will be mated.”

More and more, the idea of her own coven appealed. “I’m being ordered to spread my legs and pop out babies like some broodmare. Has your mother heard of the word, rape?”

This time, it wasn’t just Alexander who winced. Several of the witches did too. Behind her, Asher, Ryan, Nick and Justin growled, but Dean’s reaction was the strongest of them all.

Once again, Melody’s legs were swung up into the air, as he lifted her, turning to pass her to Nick, before he rounded on

the witches in front of him.

“That’s my mate you’re talking about,” he growled, menace dripping from every syllable. “She will not be forced to bond or mate with anyone not of her choosing.”

“Well of course she gets to fucking choose,” one of the men called back. “There’s five of us.”

This was ridiculous. Melody squirmed, letting Nick know that she wanted down, he carefully let her, but then held her back from interfering, so Melody pulled the same trick that she had on the witches in the changing rooms. She froze them. Every single last one of them, then she slipped out from Nick’s embrace.

“I don’t care if there are five thousand of you,” Melody said, carefully, evenly. “If it is not something that I am seeking out myself, then it is being forced upon me. Just what would happen if I said no? Would I be cast out? Is that what this is? Breed in, or fuck off? Is that my only value to this coven? A nice little womb to pop out genetically enhanced babies who will be groomed from birth into accepting sexual relationships that are not appropriate?”

None of them answered, none of them could. It was only the frantic tugging of Dean’s bond that made her relent, but even then, she only released her familiars. Immediately they surrounded her, seeking solace in her nearness.

“Hey, we got food,” called Oz, striding obliviously into the room. “We got enough for ... oh fuck. What’s gone wrong now?”

“Coven Canticum has ordered me to select a mate before the end of term. Then, when I graduate, I’m to mate and breed as soon as possible.”

“Who do I fucking kill first?” Oz growled, bending to put the packages in his arms on the floor.

The smell rising from them was enough to make her mouth water, despite the situation that she found herself in. It reminded her that no matter what was going on in her life, the

world was moving on, with or without her. It was time to release the witches.

“Melody, please?” Alexander begged. “I agreed only to pass on her orders. I told her how amazing you are, what you’re up against here, and what we should be doing for you as a coven. This was her idea, her price as she put it. If you wanted her coven to risk more of their lives for your freedom, then you had to give something back.”

Even as he spoke, Alexander shuddered.

“I told her that if she forced you to do this, I would step down as heir. I’ve got plenty of cousins for her to choose from, but I wouldn’t stay part of a coven that treated its members like that.”

Melody hadn’t expected that. She knew that it wasn’t really Alexander’s fault, that he was just the messenger, but right then, he was the face of the problem.

“So, what did she say then?” she asked.

“Let’s just say that I’m no longer heir to the coven. That I no longer have the right to be here at the academy, but that I’m not going to tell the provost that if I can help it,” he grinned cheekily at her. “I’m also yours, Melody, if you’ll have me. Whether that’s as a soldier, or a friend or a lover, I’ll take what I can get, but I’m willing to walk away from my coven, my family, for you.”

Surprisingly, not a single one of her familiars objected. The witches behind Alexander, however, were furious.

“You’d betray us?” asked one of them.

“When my coven has betrayed me, hell, when it’s betrayed its own core values, yes, I’d walk away from that,” Alexander replied. “And if you can’t see what’s wrong with my mother’s orders, then you’re part of the problem. You need distance and perspective, before you end up walking down a much darker path than you had ever intended. Melody wasn’t wrong when she said it’s rape. Just because she’s not tied up, doesn’t mean it’s not forced. The threat is there. Fuck one of us, or face

expulsion from the coven, and the threat of Bestia coming down upon her.”

At that, the others looked aghast.

“Is that really what your mother would do? Or is it a threat to keep her in line?” the first guy asked.

“Put it this way, guys. I’m no longer the heir. My mother has renounced me. I don’t know which of my cousins she’s choosing, but I can guarantee they’ll be as much of a hard-ass as she is.”

“What would happen if I chose you?” Melody asked. “If I said you were the one, and I’d bear your children?”

Rather than beaming with joy like she’d expected, Alexander shook his head. “No, Mel. I won’t be part of that. Even if I did agree, I’d simply be your mate. She would still replace me. She can’t afford for an heir to stand up to her on this issue.”

“But you’re still part of the coven?” a witch asked.

“Yes, for now,” he told them.

“What do you mean for now?” Oz asked.

“Exactly that. I don’t want to be part of a coven that forces women to breed against their will. Coven Canticum was founded by a long line of strong female witches. To disrespect Melody like that, goes against everything we stand for. I’m staying until I can find another coven who will take me in.”

Melody looked at Nick and he nodded. They knew exactly the kind of coven that Alexander would need.

16. Nick



It felt fucking amazing for Nick to stretch his wings in a flight that he hadn't completed for over half a century. He'd been at the academy far longer than that, but the last time he'd left was when his aunt had died. They had granted him compassionate leave to attend the funerary rites.

What they didn't understand was that the woman was over three thousand years old. It wasn't a mournful event, it was the fucking biggest party he'd ever been to. For dragons, the end of life just meant the beginning of the next journey. Their strong connection to the divine had allowed them all glimpses of what waited for them beyond this mortal coil.

Beneath him, the countryside blew by in blurred shades of green and yellow and the occasional orange. Nick wasn't interested in looking. All he wanted was to see his family again. To rub wings and thump shoulders. His Mother would cry, that was guaranteed, and his father would remain stoic, but the pride would practically bleed from his eyes. It was a reunion that would be all too bittersweet, because of its brevity, and the reason for his abrupt return.

Not that bonding with Melody was anything to worry about, but the trouble she was in, was another thing entirely.

It wasn't long before the landmarks became much more familiar. In total, the flight from the academy to the clan lands was little over an hour and a half when he was travelling at top speed, yet the need to hide from humans and dodge aeroplanes meant that few of them took it regularly. For Nick, the situation counted as enough of an emergency to risk it.

Besides, he'd become incredibly adept at glamouring his way past the humans.

The ward passing over his scales was like a welcome caress, and it would alert his family that he was back. He only wished it could be for longer.

Nick's wings ached as he banked them, slowing down and stretching his hind legs out to land with a more jarring bump than he'd expected.

"You're out of practice, son," a gravelly voice chided him.

Nick shifted back, catching the pair of sweats his father threw at him, before he moved forward to hug him.

"Time off for good behaviour?" one of his cousins asked cheekily, only to be cuffed by the nearest adult.

"Oh Nicholas! Who is it? Your aura has changed, you're finally bonded! Oh, my son has come home to me," his mother called out, fat tears pouring down her soft cheeks.

"Her name is Melody, and she was from Bestia coven," he told her, sweeping her up in a hug, but not before he saw her face fall. "And she's not like the rest of her coven. She's fighting hard to bring them down."

"Bestia?" his father growled. "They're disbanded now, aren't they? Wasn't there some disgrace?"

Nick sighed. So, it was straight to business. Fair enough. That worked too.

"I know it has been far too long. Aunt Selma's funeral was the last time I was here, but I'm afraid that I have important news that I must bring to my alpha. Once we've had time to discuss it, I will be available to one and all for cheek pinching, hugging and becoming a walking handkerchief for those of you who like to shed tears," he announced with a grin.

There were answering cackles from the crowd that had formed, and he smiled inwardly. It was the response he had been aiming for. Good naturedly, the crowd dispersed, willing to forgo their reunion in respect for the news that he brought to their alpha.

Together, Nick and his father, and one or two select males, headed for the council chamber. There, the remainder of their council waited for him. With the arrival of his father and the other men, it was ten males and ten females. A large governing body, and yet it worked very well for them.

“You said you had news for us, Nicholas?” his father asked.

“I do, and it is worse than you have feared. Bestia not only abused hundreds of shifters, they’ve experimented upon them as well. The witches were trying to force shifters to change beasts, from whatever they were born with, to dragons. The experiments were only partially successful, creating a mindless hybrid that undoubtedly suffers greatly with every breath and is unable to hold a stable form.”

There were gasps of horror from around the table in front of him.

“This is not mere hearsay,” Nick told them. “I had the misfortune to encounter some of these creatures. Melody, my bonded witch, was able to confirm that they were Bestia familiars that she had thought were long dead.”

“And just what is her relationship to this mess?” one of the women asked him.

“She was an unwilling participant, a slave to her coven from an early age. Her aunt murdered her mother, but not before her mother was able to pass on the hereditary matriarchal power to Melody. She was four, it should have been too great a burden for her, and yet she survived.”

“How do you know she was unwilling?” his father asked.

“Because her aunt started loading her with geasen before her mother was cold in the ground. I was there when they broke. She screamed for over half an hour non-stop. These were no frivolous spells either. On several occasions I saw them almost kill her, for trying to protect shifters. There is one more factor that you will need to consider, before you judge her worthy of acceptance here. She is Justin’s true mate.”

Muttering broke out around the table, as the gathered elders twisted to the side to speak to their companions, picking apart the information for the things that Nick had not said.

For the next two hours, he stood there and answered their questions, until finally, his father had called a halt to the proceedings.

“So, you think there is a war coming?” he asked.

Nick shook his head. “I think these are small battles in the lead-up to a true war. That if we don’t win these, then we won’t stand a chance. These beasts that Bestia are creating, are strong, mindless, and obedient. If they were given a kill order, it would not be hard to imagine a dozen of them overcoming a grounded dragon.”

That was enough to set them all talking again, debating on the future of their race.

“So what would you have us do, son?”

“For centuries we have pushed for representation on the witching councils. I think that it’s time we took a new approach. In Melody, we would have a witching advocate, a woman strong enough to be a council contender herself in the future. For now, she needs a coven that won’t see her as either a source of power, or a source of babies. Melody has been a slave for almost her entire life. She deserves the chance to experience a little freedom, before she settles down into her responsibilities. Forcing her to find a mate and produce offspring in the next two years is not only disrespectful, it’s abhorrent.”

“You want us to back her as a leader of a coven, align ourselves with her, and then push forward our own agenda once Bestia is taken care of.”

“Melody is at risk. She’s the true mate to a dragon. Can we really call ourselves a clan if we do not come to her aid?”

“Those are pretty words,” a elderly woman said, leaning forward across the table. “Emotive, strong, and utter bullshit.”

Nick opened his mouth to protest, but she waved a hand at him, telling him in no uncertain terms not to interrupt.

“There is a lot more at risk here than clan pride, and you know it. Shame on you for trying to manipulate us.”

“When I return to the academy, I plan on convincing her to become my mate. Can you blame me for doing all I can to protect her?”

This was something that Nick wished he'd been able to tell his father in private. Not that it would make any difference, he still would have had to share it in the council chambers, but at least it wouldn't have been a surprise to him.

Technically it changed nothing, but as the undeclared heir to the clan, having Melody as his mate changed everything.

“How many other familiars does she have again?” Martha asked. She was his mother's closest friend, and had never shied away from asking the difficult questions.

“Myself, Justin, Dean, Oz, Ryan — you've known about us for years. Asher is another alpha wolf who transferred in from another academy, and Trent is a very special fox.”

“Special how?” Martha pushed.

“Special enough that I permitted myself to be under a geasen so I couldn't be forced to reveal his secret. That type of special.”

“That's hardly reassuring, son,” Albert said.

If Martha was the pain-in-the-ass, then Albert was the hard-ass. Still, if Nick could convince them both, then the rest of them would be a pushover.

“And still not my secret to tell. I can say, however, that although it can be difficult at times, his secret isn't one that is detrimental. It has the blessing of the Goddess.”

“He's god-touched?” Gemma asked. Of all of them, she was his favourite. She was the kind of woman who snuck him lollies when his mother wasn't looking. Gemma was the fun aunty kind of person who never let an opportunity to enjoy herself pass her by. The one thing Gemma was not, was judgemental.

Still, Nick thought about her question. Daisuke was the direct servant of the Goddess. He might have overstepped his bounds as far as Melody was concerned, but he was still permitted to bother Trent. It likely made Trent god-touched. Still, he didn't want to condemn the man either.

“Define god-touched,” he said.

“Just that, Nicholas. It's not a trick question. The person in question has been directly impacted by the Goddess. She has heard their prayer and it has been answered.”

Well, in that case, Trent definitely was. So was Daisuke, but it would be Trent's face that they would deal with if he came to the clan lands.

“Yes, he's god-touched.”

“What was her role in Bestia?” Simone asked. Another one not afraid of asking the harder questions.

This time, Nick knew that he couldn't avoid it. If he dodged this now, and the full story came out later, they would never trust him again, and that was something he couldn't afford. Not with Bestia still keen to get their hands on the three of them — Nick, Justin and Melody.

“They used her to break the shifters. She would force their shift, then her aunt would break the bond, over and over, until they were weakened enough for one of the other witches in the coven to take the bond,” he told them. “You have to remember, she was conditioned to obey from the age of four.”

“And how are we to trust her now, if she's so unalterably changed?” Martha asked.

That, at least, was an easy question to answer.

“Because she remembers her mother, and the genuine love that they had. Her aunt's abuse only encouraged Melody to hate her, which was probably why she was under so many geasen — because even as young as four, she was already fighting back.”

There was a long silence after that, as they all digested their own thoughts. Finally, his father stood, catching all of

their attention.

“The proposal is set before us that we allow this woman to form a coven, and that we align ourselves with it. Who seconds that?”

“I do,” called Gemma.

“And I,” responded Martha.

“Very well. Are there any further questions for Nicholas?”

There was a moment of silence as his father met the eye of everyone in the room.

“In the absence of further questions, I put it to the vote. Those of you who agree that we follow this woman and join her coven, raise your hand.”

If his father had named Nick as the heir presumptive, then he would have had a vote, but being chosen to attend Adolphus Academy as one of two token representatives had put a halt to that. So, all that Nick could do was watch as reluctantly, several people around the table raised their hands. It wasn't quite half of them.

Fuck.

But, before he could rise and try again to convince them, two more hands went up. In and of itself, it was significant because they now had half of the table in agreement. However, it was Albert and Martha who had raised their hands, each apparently surprised to find themselves agreeing with the other. Being the most stubborn, their votes held more weight, and there was a gradual raising of hands until everyone had agreed. It was unanimous. They would join Melody's coven if she formed it.

Nick couldn't wait to go back and tell her.

17. Melody



There was an uncomfortable stretching feeling in Melody's chest. It was like a string of gum that was about to break. The only thing that made sense was Nick's absence, and she wondered if he felt it too.

Between her studies, which now went on until almost midnight, avoiding attacks, repairing the cottage and attending classes, three days passed in a blur. There was one constant that she hadn't been expecting.

Alexander.

While the other witches had taken up residence in the cottage he'd been assigned as an heir, Alexander himself had stayed with her familiars, sleeping on the floor with them.

Later, she would wonder who had noticed first, but that particular night, it was a shout from Alexander that woke them all.

"The wards are down!" he yelled, startling Melody from a deep sleep.

Dean was out of bed in a shot, heading into the living space where the others were trying to work out what to do. Melody was a little slower, still pulling on her socks when she hopped in to join them, but no less alert.

"Justin, can you call Nick? We need him back," she said, calmly.

Justin nodded at her, his eyes losing focus for a moment. "He's on his way," he said eventually. "But it will be two

hours before he can get here. He is bringing a couple of cousins to help.”

“Trent,” she said next, and all eyes turned to him. “Can you shift and get through to Mrs H? She’ll know who to rouse from the staff, or whether we need to put out a larger alert to the students.”

There was the sound of ripping fabric, a flash of orange, and then Dean was holding the door open for him.

“He’s a better fighter than you think, Mel,” Ryan told her.

“I’m sure he’s magnificent,” she replied. “But if you think that any of you can skulk through these grounds better than he can, then you’re sorely mistaken. I didn’t send him away to protect him. I sent him, because he’s the best shifter for the job.”

They all blinked at her for a moment, before turning back to their circle.

“I think,” Melody continued, “that Justin should shift. Dean as well, but that one of the wolves should stay as a means for me to connect with your pack link. This battle is going to be harder than the last one, because there’s only us, and the Goddess knows how many of those beasts are coming at us. I also think we should get out of here, because this is the first place that they will come looking, and we’re sitting ducks inside.”

The men agreed, all of them stripping down and accompanying her out of the side door and into the forest. From the other side of the cottage, came low guttural sounds and moans, the advancing force of monsters closer than she had thought.

“How many?” she asked as quietly as she could.

Justin clapped a hand across her mouth, while Dean held up two hands palm outward, and flashed them at her five times.

Fifty. He thought there were at least fifty.

They weren't equipped to deal with that, it was time to retreat to safer territory. Yet where could they go without luring the horrors behind them towards more innocent witches and familiars.

Okay, so maybe they weren't exactly innocent, but they certainly weren't the intended target of her aunt. If Melody moved towards the academy, there was the possibility that she was only inflaming the conflict. Didn't those other students deserve the chance to study and improve themselves in peace?

In the end, the decision was made for her. Rather than dragging her in a direct line towards the academy, which really would have been as obvious a route as staying in the cottage itself, Justin tugged her around the perimeter of the grounds, following the forest past the greenhouses and up towards the cottages where she had originally gone to live with Dean and the others.

Behind them, wordless screams filled the forest as the attacking force realised that they weren't there. When a loud crash sounded, Melody paused and turned, but Justin just kept pulling her. None of them said a word, not until Trent rounded the corner and stood up as a man again.

"Took me a minute to find you. Mrs H and Toby are rounding up the staff and the unbound shifters. We're going to meet at the arena. It seems to be the most open area, and the best for fighting. It means Justin can shift and not worry about taking us all out."

As one they turned around ready to head there, but that was as far as they got. With no warning, scaled monsters appeared on all sides of them, silent and faster than the ones that had attacked the cottage.

"Justin, how far away is Nick?" Melody asked.

"Too far to count. I'm going to shift. Let's see what a little dragon fire does to them."

Around her, the others were shucking their clothes too, all except Asher who stayed glued to her side.

“You wanted communication, well, I’m it, sweetheart. You will do what I say, when I say, and we’ll get you through this.” Unabashedly, he reached down to adjust himself. “Fuck if the idea of you obeying my every command doesn’t get me harder than a fucking rock”

Melody rolled her eyes, before erecting a barricade around them. If Asher couldn’t shift because of her, then the least she could do was keep him safe. The others had already shifted and moved amongst the beasts trying to get to her. There were too many of them to do more than use guerrilla warfare, darting in to attack and moving away again before the enemy could retaliate.

“Don’t forget to watch for the witches,” Melody told them, sending her magic out in ever widening spirals, but no matter how far she went, there was neither hide nor hair of her aunt and her cronies.

“They can’t be far,” she muttered. “Half of these things are mindless automatons. They need direction.”

On the one side of her, fire bloomed, and she paused in her search for a moment, to watch Justin as he set over a dozen of the beasts aflame. It was a mistake to turn away from the other side.

There was a loud roar, followed by a pained yelp, and by the time Melody’s head had whipped back around Dean was standing over a wolf protecting it. It took her a moment to realise that the shaggy brown fur belonged to Oz’s wolf and he wasn’t moving.

“Come with me,” she ordered, grabbing Asher’s hand.

Melody used her shield as a battering ram, forcing her way forward until both Dean and Oz were contained.

Her hands ran quickly over Dean’s golden fur, ensuring that the blood was that of his enemies, before she smiled at him. “You’re amazing, you know that, right?”

The big cat purred, licked her face, and then trotted through her shield and back into the fight. Beside her, Asher whined, looking from her to the fight and back again.

“You’re also amazing,” she told him. “Go, do what you need to, I’ve got Oz.”

Asher didn’t need telling twice, leaping out and into the fray, tearing at limbs indiscriminately until he paired up with Dean and the two of them turned the area around them into a charnel house.

Melody turned her attention to Oz, who for all his stillness, seemed unharmed. Gingerly she felt across his body, finding no obvious wounds or broken bones. Just as she got to his hind quarters, his tail gave a couple of heavy thumps on the ground. Looking back to his head, she saw his eyes open, although he didn’t lift it to look at her.

“Are you going to be ok” she asked him.

Thump, thump, went the tail.

Melody smiled at him. “Mind if I throw my hat in the ring then?”

This time, Oz lifted his head and his tongue lolled out of his mouth in a wolfy laugh.

“Good to know,” she said. Then she let the thought go. She let all her thoughts go, the sounds around her, and then she pulled in her magic, allowing it to ball up inside her. If she was going to do this, she would only get one shot at it, because it was going to almost completely drain her of her magic.

Without Nick, there was no way they had a chance of defeating all these awful creatures. This was going to leave her vulnerable, but it was a risk she had to take.

Every single horror surrounding them, had once been a shifter.

A shifter that she had bonded and broken.

Which meant she could still find the threads of their bonds.

One by one, Melody sent her magic out, collecting and collating the broken threads of the mutated shifters around her. Then she reached further, into the trees where even more were making their way. Finally, she did a sweep around the entire academy, finding no more.

Interestingly, she found none of her old coven either.

Carefully, without letting them attach to her, Melody grabbed the threads and began weaving them together into a rope. More and more, tighter and tighter, she threaded the bonds together until it was almost like a living breathing thing. Then she did one more thing.

She yanked.

Instead of pulling the bonds towards her, however, she cast them up into the sky, ripping them from the bodies of the creatures around her.

The effect was immediate and devastating.

One after another, almost like living dominoes, the creatures jerked, and then fell, twitching in their death throes.

Melody pulled harder, until every single last one of them was down in a writhing twitching mass. She'd done it. She'd defeated them. Her men were safe.

Lethargy hit her hard, she could see her men turning, their faces pale with panic and shock, but she couldn't even lift her hand to reach for them.

Melody crumpled, and everything turned black.

THE END

A NOTE FROM JADE

Don't hate me.

I promise, this isn't the end of Melody's story. I got ten thousand words into this and realised that this book was either going to be "hu-normous" (my 8yo's favourite made up word), or two books. I don't have a publication date for the next one, because this was meant to be one book, but if you ask my alpha readers, they'll tell you that I have A LOT planned for Melody.

I do hope that you enjoyed this part of her journey, and I look forward to sharing the next and final leg of Melody's story.

Jade Thorn

xoxo

Other books by Jade Thorn:

Please turn the page for other books by Jade Thorn

The Siren Saga

Catriona is a siren. They're supposed to be extinct, but they've been hiding for a very long time. Now, a chance encounter in a bar has led to her being claimed by a pack of wolf shifters, and it's the flashpoint of a war between those who want a chance to live, and those who want everything. Catriona and her fated mates must find a way to stop the horrors that will arise, while finding their own way forward in their strange new relationship.

Book 1: [Siren](#)

Book 2: [Sovereign](#)

Book 3: [Saviour](#) – Part 1

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Of Magic and Contempt

A slave of her coven, Melody is being sent to Adolphus Academy with a mission: she must defeat and bond The Apex. Five incredibly powerful shifters, they will make the perfect breeding stock for the army her aunt is building. If Melody fails, she dies - if she succeeds, The Apex will.

This is a dark reverse harem with a slow burn. It contains content that some readers may find distressing. Recommended for readers 18+.

Adolphus Academy Trilogy

Book 1 - [Beneath Contempt](#)

Book 2 - [Held in Contempt](#)

Book 3 - [Civil Contempt](#)

Book 4 - [Breeding Contempt](#) - coming 2022

Claremont College Trilogy

Book 5 - Criminal Contempt - coming 2022

Book 6 - Self Contempt - coming 2022

Book 7 - Day of Contempt - coming 2022

The Brotherhood:

Grace isn't your ordinary witch and neither are the members of the Elite Squad in the Brotherhood. Seven cities across the USA have come under attack by demons. It's up to The Brotherhood to find who or what is behind it all, and push them back to the demonic plane.

At the same time, they also need to navigate their own issues and find the delicate balance between seven men who want the same woman.

Please note, this series has content that some readers may find disturbing. Recommended for readers 18+.

Book 1 – [Kurt's Honour](#)

Book 2 - [Grace's Guys](#) (A Christmas Novella)

Book 3 – [Levi's Fury](#).

Book 4 – [Nick's Envy](#).

Book 5 – [Gage's Languor](#) - Part 1

Book 6 - Gage's Languor - Part 2 coming 2021

Book 7 – Trent's Desire – coming 2022

Book 8 – Jack's Need – coming 2022

Book 9 – Sam's Lust – coming 2022

Book 10 – Saving Grace – December 2022

Book 11 – Grace's Gift – December 2022 (A Christmas Novella)

The Portal Series:

Being revealed as a Portal is like finding out you have the plague. Nobody wants to be anywhere near you, especially if you're as strong as Jacinta is proving to be. As if she didn't have enough things on her plate already - like her new lecherous boss, now she has to contend with her Events increasing in frequency and strength.

Then there's the Pure Human movement who see all Portals as mutants who should be destroyed. At least her protective detail is on her side. They're not friends, but they seem to like her.

Don't they?

A reverse harem series, recommended for readers 18+.

Book 1 - [Stellar](#) - coming June 2021

Book 2 - [Supernova](#) - coming mid 2021

Book 3 - [Black Sun](#) - coming September 2021

Excerpt from “Siren”

Book 1 of The Siren Saga

Chapter 1

Catriona

Shayla and I are on the prowl. The club is heaving, the music is amazing, and there are more men than a girl could need in a night, but finding the right man is proving more difficult than you would think.

The song beats into the next one, and we both smile and walk up to the bar, landing against it with loud huffs and giggles. Her red wrap-around dress looks amazing against her coffee coloured skin and her tight dark curls bounce wildly. Although I'm not overly tall, she's tiny compared to me. It's not the only difference between us either. Her hair is almost black and springy while mine is long, mostly straight with a slight wave, and the colour is more a walnut brown. It really makes my eyes pop, and I think that they are my best feature.

I am not difficult to look at, but I wouldn't call myself beautiful. Besides it's not our faces that men usually look at. When you fuck to eat, well, you don't tend to get fat, now matter how good a streak you are on. I'm not saying that I don't have curves, I've certainly got enough to hold on to, and if I were more of a feminist, I'd be constantly telling guys where my eyes are, but I don't want them to remember my face, so I'm happy to show a rather daring amount of cleavage. The little black dress I've got on tonight highlights my alabaster skin, and I know that I'm getting plenty of attention. Well, at least my body is, and that's all that counts, right?

"How about that one?" she asks me, nodding towards a guy at the back.

"No, too short."

"Well, that one then, he's not short at all." She's not wrong, he's got to be nearly seven foot. Probably not human then, but I can't say that aloud. "I bet his cock is proportional too!" She grins at me.

"Ha. Probably not, but he's got that unibrow thing happening, and he's got hair, like, everywhere." I shudder. "He

can be someone else's shagpile, thanks."

Shayla tips her head back in laughter. The guy next to her lifts his beer and takes a sip, sneaking a glance at us as he does so. He's playing it cool, but he's definitely listening.

"OMG! Kat, that's just wrong, so wrong." She scans the crowd again. "What about him, in the pink shirt?"

I look at the guy she's indicating. His shirt is impossibly tight against a well-defined chest, his short blonde hair curls a little in a cute little boy way. He'd be totally my type if he wasn't gay.

"Gay."

"What? No way." Just then a guy walks up to him and they lock lips passionately, grinding against one another as they dance. "Well, damn. I did not see that one coming."

I laugh at her. "Yeah, I saw them together earlier."

"Over there, electric blue. He's been checking you out, too."

"Yeah. No. He's either a kisser, or a crier. I'm not in the mood for either."

"Kat. There's a room full of men here, seriously, just find one and fuck him. All you need is his cock's undivided attention for half an hour, and then we can really get this party started." She laughs, poking me in the ribs. My actual target is right beside her and she knows it, and she's getting bored with the charade. "I know, what about the twins in the corner over there. They're quite hot!"

"Yeah, but they're already with someone. I don't need the drama. Fuck why is it so hard to find a good strong cock in a place like this?" I moan. If my target doesn't take the bait now, I'm moving on, we've already wasted enough time on him. The night is still young, and Shay and I want to *party!* Then there's my hunger. I've left it too long between feeds – again – and I'm in bad shape although I don't show it. My skin feels too tight, I'm freezing inside and I'm only functioning on the most basic of levels. If I don't feed soon, my body will switch to survival mode and things will get seriously ugly.

“Are you two for real?” he finally asks, and we turn to look at him.

“About as real as it gets, sugar.” Shay tells him. I can see he’s unimpressed with her sass.

“What, do you think only men have needs? We’re modern women, we have needs too. The difference between us and most men, is we have standards as well. I’m not just going to fuck anyone, if he’s lucky enough to get between my legs, then he’s got to be able to get me off too.”

His eyes flash golden at me, fuck, he’s a shifter! “You’re pretty full of yourself, aren’t you?” And that there, ladies and gentlemen, is where he loses. You don’t throw down a gauntlet like that to a Siren because we cannot resist and we will win every time, one way or another. Of course, he doesn’t know that I’m a Siren, just that I’m bruising his male pride.

Shayla likes to find a man, *croon* to him until he’s rigid and salivating, and then just fuck him dry or until he passes out. It’s too easy. But me? I love me a challenge. This shifter, a wolf I’m thinking and alpha to boot, well, he’s just begging me to come and make him submit. And I will, but not before I’ve hooked him, and I refuse to croon to do that. I normally steer well clear of anything paranormal, but I’m starving and in the mood for something different, and his body is just my type. Broad shoulders, lean hips, dark brown hair long enough to run my fingers through, and just enough of a hint of asshole to him that I know I’m going to love taking him down a peg.

“Sweetheart, I know exactly what I have to offer, and if I fuck a man... well let’s just say I’ve never had a complaint, and I always leave them begging.” I smirk at him. I’m betting that that’s a line that *he* would normally use. His nostrils flare and I know I’ve hit my target. A challenge to his ego. “But if a guy wants some of what I have to offer, then he has to work a little for it. Manscaping at the very least. He needs to look after his body if he wants mine to worship it, and he needs to understand that I’m not after a relationship, I don’t even want to spend the night. Just an hour of bliss together and I’m gone.”

His pupils have dilated, and his breathing has picked up. I think I've started leaking some pheromones, not much, but he's a shifter, so he'll smell them more easily. I'm so hungry that my body is taking over. The club is loud and dark, but I can tell. It's wired into me. His attention is so focussed on me that he hasn't even noticed that Shayla is gone, she's out on the dance floor bumping and grinding with the twins she pointed out earlier. There are two women back in the corner glaring daggers at her, but she wouldn't have gone after them if there was a bond there. That's another thing that sirens can do, we can sense the bonds between people. No point in luring a man if his woman is pointing a gun at your temple, right? Shay and I tend to steer clear of the taken ones, too much drama. If I hadn't already had my sights on the wolf, I might have walked past them to check their bonds out myself.

“So, you just want a good hard fuck, huh?” He growls into my ear, sending pleasant shudders through me. Yep, alpha, and not afraid to let a little alpha rumble accompany his words. Mmmm, this is going to be fun. I know it's taking a risk, shifters can get addicted to us, but I don't plan on hanging around long enough for that to happen. A quick feed or two, and I'm gone, he's empty, and we're both very happy.

I lean my body into him and we fit together like a hand and a glove. “Why? Do you think you're up to it?” I purr into his ear. I lean back pressing our pelvises together, he's hard as a rock and I haven't even put any real effort into him yet. I look him in the eye, issuing a challenge with my raised eyebrow. He grabs me by the hips, pulling me even harder against him before his mouth crashes into mine. He doesn't even realise how far he's under my spell, and I haven't had to do anything beyond what my natural allure and a hint of my scent does for him. Of course, being a wolf shifter, he can also smell my arousal and that probably has something to do with it as well.

“Hey, I know you!” A hand clamps down on my shoulder. Seriously? Now is not a good time. Whoever he is, he's more than a little drunk. “You're that girl, the hot girl!”

I break the kiss with Mr Tall Dark and Wolfy to look at the drunk human. There's no way he remembers me, I make sure

to erase the memories of those I take to my bed, or my bench, or my wall. They can remember everything but my face. I don't want a relationship, I just want to feed! "Sorry buddy, I think you've got me confused with someone else." I turn back to my wolf, but the guy has grabbed me again and spun me around.

"Yeah, it's you! My friend Pete fucked you like a month or two ago, and he's been looking for you ever since! It's like you're a drug and he's addicted. He can't stop talking about you, just wait until I tell him you're here." He pulls his phone out and sends a text before I can stop him.

Now, here's where being a Siren sucks. I can't wipe this guy's memory of me tonight unless I fuck him, and if I fuck him, I won't come because he just doesn't do it for me, but it's what I need to do. This guy just doesn't appeal to me at all. Worse than that, I'll miss out on Mr Wolf here, who's still interested enough in me to growl at what he perceives is the competition. Well, that could work for me in the short term, as long as this thing with the drunk dude doesn't escalate.

I consider my options. I can ignore the guy and grab my wolf and try to go, but from now on, Shay and I will have to avoid the club, at least for a couple of months until the post-coital thing wears off on the guy and he loses interest. I can repulse him, send him away dazed and confused, except that will tip off the wolf that I'm not human and it will probably make him too cautious to proceed with me. If the wolf wasn't an alpha, I could invite the jerk to join us for a threesome, but there's no way this bad boy is going to share me with a puny drunk human. Or, I can just walk away from them both and start hunting again, but Shay is already impatient with me to just fuck and be done with it so that I have enough energy to party with her tonight.

I don't like giving up a hunting ground as fertile as this one, but right now, staying away for a few months is the option that sucks the least. Shay is going to be pissed, it's not like me to leave loose ends like this, but I've been stringing out my feeds too much and getting careless it seems.

“I’m sorry I can’t stay to see him. My friend and I were just leaving, tell him I said hi.” I grab the wolf and we start heading for the doors, but the drunk dude is following us. Here’s hoping that his friend isn’t close by, because this could get awkward if he finds me, the charm wiping his memory would be undone, and the only way to redo it would be to fuck him again. Which would also mean I’d need a stronger charm because, hey, I’d fucked him on two occasions – that’s the beginning of a bond. Yeah, not happening.

Of course, the universe is against me. Before I can get through the doors, an excited looking guy who seems vaguely familiar is pushing his way in. Now, to be clear here, seeing me won’t trigger the release of the charm. I’d have to be actively pointed out to him. So, I do the only thing I can, I put my head down and barrel past him, dragging my wolf behind me. And that’s when I hear him, the helpful buddy at the bar.

“Dude, that’s her, you just walked right past her.” Fuck. He hasn’t seen my face, not yet, there’s still a chance.

“Run.” I growl to the wolf. I let him go, kick off my heels and grab them up before I bolt for my car. He’s a powerful wolf shifter, so of course he heard me over the ruckus, and of course he kept up with me.

“Just why are we running?” he growls.

“Ex. Stage five clinger. I cannot do this tonight. Let’s just go somewhere and fuck.” I huff at him. Of course, it’s the wrong thing to say to a protective alpha, even if I don’t know him. I can hear said stage five clinger calling out desperately to us, running behind us as I flick the fob on my car keys and unlock it. When I open my door, I realise that I’m alone. The wolf has gone all alpha on me, he’s stopped in the middle of the street and he’s about to face off with the poor guy who can’t let a good ride go.

Well, that blows that. I put my car into gear, do a screaming u-turn, and get out of dodge, leaving both men staring at my tail-lights in shock. Yep, wolf should have listened to me, and now we’ve both missed out. Worse still, I’ll never be able to go back to the bar. The clinger will

eventually forget again, because he didn't see my face, but the wolf? Yeah, I'm so on his shit list now and I know if he finds me again there'll be questions. Damn I'm so hungry!

FUCK! I bang my hands furiously on the steering wheel while at a red light. Halfway up the next block is a supermarket, so I pull into the carpark and text Shay.

Got outed, lost the mark. Starving, off to hunt elsewhere. Club is OoB for me for a couple of months, more if the wolf hangs out there. FUCK. Off to croon, see you soon. It's her favourite catch-cry.

You going home after? She responds.

Yep. Sick of this fucking shit.

I pull out onto the main drag and lose myself in the motion of traffic until I find what I'm looking for, a small bar advertising a big screen television. It's not a game night for anything that I'm aware of, but there will be some sort of sports on there. Probably not a high IQ level, but that's ok, like I said before, I want a meal, not a relationship.

Of course, my outfit for the club is a little too skimpy for a place like this. The guys here will hit hard and heavy if I flash too much flesh, and that's how you get into trouble. Because of course the fuckers couldn't just take responsibility for their actions. Oh no. It must be the girl's fault for showing too much flesh. I reach over to the back seat and snag a pair of leggings, wriggling into them before I get out of the car. I switch out my heels for a pair of flats from the passenger side floor, and I'm good to go. Glittery sexy black dress is now a glittery slightly long top. Hey, I'm a Siren, I want *a* guy, not *all* of them!

Inside the lighting isn't much brighter than the club, which suits me fine. It makes everything more alluring when you're trying to pick up. I do a quick scan of the place, sure enough, there's a hockey game playing on the big-screen tv, and a bunch of muscled-up guys are hooting and hollering along with it. Better still, a path to the bathrooms leads right under the screen. So, all I have to do is have a drink and then make eye contact with the guy of choice as I head towards the bathrooms. It will be quick and dirty, more a snack than a

meal, but it will tide me over until I can find something better. I'm so desperate right now, I'm seeing stars.

I watch the jocks while I sip at my coke, I don't want alcohol to cloud my judgement, this is a place where things could go wrong fast. While I can look after myself, and if worse came to worst, I could take down every male here with one move, I'm part of the supernatural world, and it's like fight club. You don't talk about it unless it's to someone who's part of it. To save myself, I'd have to out myself, and it's a last defence thing. With careful planning, that's not an issue.

There are five in total, all broad-shouldered and smouldering. See, I told Shay that a place like this was a better hunting ground, but she wanted to dance. Frankly, any one of them would be handsome enough to turn me on. In this case, beggars *can* be choosers. If I were feeling stronger, I'd suggest all five of them follow me and I could feed enough to last me a few weeks, but I'm too weak to keep them all in line.

In the end, I do 'eeny meeny miny mo', because they're all just as appealing. 'Mo' turns out to remind me a little of my lost wolf. Slightly shaggy dark brown hair, and just a bit taller than the others, his eyes are blue, totally opposite to the hot brown ones from the club. I flick him a glance and a wink as I head to the bathrooms, his buddies notice and slap him on the back as he gets up to follow me, but thankfully someone scores a goal on the big screen above me, and all five of them look up. Good, the friends shouldn't remember me if I take a path away from the toilets that doesn't take me into their line of sight.

The place is pretty much empty aside from the jocks and a couple of older guys at the bar, so I head straight into the ladies' room and lock the door when he follows me in. I might be able to have more than a snack after all.

"Well, hello sugar." He drawls at me. "What's your name? I'm Toby, just so you know what to scream out when I make you come."

Oh yes, he's going to be just perfect! "Just call me 'Baby'". Tonight is a one-off event. You won't need anything more than

to groan out that, when you come again, and again, and again.” I grin wickedly at him. He smirks back and undoes his belt which is fine by me, saves me having to do it. He shucks his jeans and I’m pleased to note he’s commando underneath. I turn my back to him, flip up my dress and lower my leggings and underpants before I wiggle my ass at him. “Wrap it up and you’re good to go Toby.” I know he can see the evidence of my arousal already, and he stares at my glistening pink bits.

I brace my hands on the countertop of the sinks and watch him in the mirror. He’s moving so fast now that he’s a little clumsy, it’s cute. He rips the first condom in half he’s so desperate to get it open. Discarding it on the floor, he pulls out another and opens it more carefully before sliding it over a glorious cock. He puts his hands on either side of my hips, his tip lining up with my opening.

“You ready for this Baby?” he asks me softly. In answer, I thrust back sending him plunging deeply. One great thing about being a Siren, I’m always ready to go. I don’t need foreplay, although it certainly doesn’t hurt. He feels amazing inside of me and I gasp, while he groans. “Fuuuuuuuuck.” Just then, his eyes shimmer gold, and my brain wakes up from its lust filled haze. Another shifter? Really? Then I smell him. Another wolf. Well, what are the chances of that? Astronomical as they are, I no longer care as he sets a brutal pace, pounding into me, filling me and easing the hunger that had made my skin start to sting.

His cock stretches me wide as it rubs back and forth across my g-spot, a slow burn starting to build inside of me, flashes of fire travelling up and down my legs, my arms and my spine. I arch my back, allowing him to drive deeper, and he leans forward, wrapping himself around me, his hands settling on my breasts as he palms them and squeezes. It sends a jolt of pleasure down to my core and I groan loudly.

“Cum for me Baby,” he growls, and I’m there with him, right at the edge.

“You first Toby, I need to hear it, I want you to roar so loudly all your buddies will know that you just came inside

me.” I clamp down on him tightly, when you orgasm a lot, you get lots of muscle. It’s like doing kegels.

His hips slam into me and the roar that he releases makes all the mirrors rattle. There, the energy that he releases with that roar, that’s what I feed on. I scream my own release triggered by his fulfillment.

“Oh yeah. Now that’s what I’m talking about.” I grin at him in the mirror. He’s panting, and his eyes are a little glazed. His wolf senses are being swamped with the pheromones triggered by my release. Well good, we’ll get a round two and probably a round three then, without much effort on my part at all.

“I hope you got more condoms Toby, because it looks like we’re not done.” His cock is still hard inside me, still pulsing occasionally.

“Yeah, I got a few more.” He pants, then pulls out before he discards the condom. He cleans up a little and then puts on another one. “Damn Baby, it’s been a while since I’ve been ready to go again so fast.”

I grin at him while I hop up on the counter. I don’t bother undressing much, because I know that round two is going to be just as fast as round one. I let my shoes drop off before I kick off my leggings and underpants that were gathered around my ankles.

All the better to wrap my legs around you, you hunk of wolf. I think as I smile to myself. He wants more though, and before I can stop him, my dress is up and over my head, and my bra is falling to the floor. Damn, he moves fast.

I can feel his wolf pushing to the surface, trying to alert him to the fact that not all is what it seems, but I just smile and hum to myself a little. Not a full croon, but it’s enough to knock his beast back on his butt and allow the human side of him to be completely there. He’s so far gone, he doesn’t even notice. Suits me just fine.

He moves towards me then, wrapping his arms around me and leaning in for a kiss. I twist to the side a little so that his

lips land on my neck. “No kissing Toby, just you and your cock. I want you to fill me up again and make me come hard! Come on Toby, fuck me like you mean it.”

He gives no warning, he just thrusts into me, and we both groan at the feel of it. My skin still feels too tight, and the lights are still too bright, but inside the cold is starting to warm up. His fingers start by gripping my hips so hard that I know I’ll have bruises in the morning, it only sparks the lust further. I slide my hands around his neck and pull his head down until it’s against my breast. His hot tongue darts out to circle my areola, and an electric spike of need shoots down to my greedy core. I moan aloud as he does it again, before he suddenly latches on and nibbles at my nipple. The pain followed by a shaft of pleasure has me reeling, my hips jerking forward to meet his, and my fingers clawing trails across his shoulders. I know I’m drawing blood, but he’s a shifter, it will be healed well before we come.

Although hot and hard, it’s longer than last time, and I groan as his spiralling energy leeches into me, filling the emptiness inside and making me whole again. My head rolls back, and my hips thrust in time with his as we both fast approach our climax again. He’s grunting with every thrust and every now and then I hear his wolf growling along with him. They’re both enjoying this, which relieves me. His wolf knows there’s something off about it all, but he’s not adverse to a good fuck either. I can feel his climax rushing toward me, his hips pistoning into mine, his thick cock rubbing hard against all the glorious places inside me. It’s so goooood.

“Baby, I’m gonna blow, you need to come now.”

“Then come with me.” I command, putting a little croon into it. It’s a compulsion much like an alpha compulsion, and he’s helpless against it. “Roar again for me Toby. Let’s give those boys something to talk about.” And just like that he explodes, again the burst of energy inside triggering my own release.

The warmth inside me spirals outward until I’m pleasantly tingling all the way to my fingertips. Damn. When was the last time I fed so well? I can’t do it often, but it seems that wolf

shifters have a bit more oomph to give out than humans do when they come. It's obvious why now that I think about it, they're much stronger than humans overall, of course they give off more energy, I just wish that I could sample the crowd a little more often. I must be careful though, all Sirens do. Over the centuries, many of us were captured and put into harems to serve overlords and packs. These days, things are more civilised, but we still must hide ourselves from the rest of the supernatural world. Most think that we're extinct. It's a lie that Shay and I have no trouble at all perpetuating.

"Damn Baby. That was fun." Toby huffs against my neck. He pulls out of me, now completely limp, and disposes of the used condom before cleaning himself up.

"Oh Toby, we're not done yet." I grin at him.

"I'm afraid we are, sugar. It'll be an hour before I'm good to go again, and as lovely as you are, I have no intention of hanging around in a fucking bathroom with you for that long." He looks around the bathroom in disgust. It's clean, but it's hilarious that only now is he registering his location.

"Come back out to the bar and have a drink with us."

"No, we're not quite done yet." I tell him as I drop to my knees before him and take his flaccid length in my mouth.

"Baby, I'm sorry, but that just ain't gonna work." He smirks at me. "I mean, damn, you're hot and eager, and I love that, but I need a little recovery time here, you know."

I hum a little as my mouth takes him in, and already I can feel the blood rushing to answer my call. I also release a few more pheromones just to be sure. After three pumps with my mouth, he's as hard as a rock and ready to go again.

"What the fuck?" he yells in shock, as his cock kicks against his abdomen.

"Got another condom there Toby? Because I think you're ready to go after all."

There's a knock on the door. "Hey Toby, you in there dude? You ok?" It must be one of his friends.

“Well, you gonna go out there, or are you gonna use that condom?” I challenge him.

“Yeah man, all good. Round three, you know?” He laughs and I grin back at him. I know that this time he’s going to need a little help.

“You fucking serious man?”

“Yeah he is, I’ve got a magic cunt, now fuck off.” I yell out to his pal, and Toby and I laugh.

His wolf is at the surface again, appraising me. He starts rumbling in his chest, but it’s not a challenge. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that he was singing to me. “Your wolf approves at least.” I chuckle, then realise my mistake. He thought I was human, so I wouldn’t know about the wolf, would I?

Toby has already thrust inside me a couple of times, but now he stills, looking at me. “What did you just say?”

Inspiration hits me. “Well, I used to date a guy who was a shifter. Long story. Anyway, your eyes keep changing, so I know that your wolf is there. It seems like he likes me, at least that’s what my ex used to say. His wolf was always coming out to meet me because he liked me or something like that.” I shrug my shoulders like it means nothing unusual to me. Fuck, let him buy it, let him buy it. I wiggle my hips, wanting the contact to continue.

“You dated a shifter?” He gives in a little as he thrusts into me again and we both groan. “How is that even possible?”

“My Aunt had an affair with this guy, he was one. It was one of his sons that I dated. The whole thing got messy quick and it didn’t last. Come on baby, I need this, please, fuck me again.” I jiggle my hips again and his resistance ends. He pulls out slowly before slamming into me, over and over again. The pace is slower, but more intense. I can feel each inch of him sliding in and out, his tip sliding over my g-spot, rubbing it until it burns white hot with pleasure. I know I’m going to need to come again soon, but this time, his release is nowhere near ready. I literally can’t come without it.

I grin at him and slowly lick up and down my right hand, and then up and down my left. He watches to see what I do next. I drop my left hand beneath us, taking his testicles as I gently roll and knead them in my slippery fingers. He groans long and loud and lets his head fall back. The pressure is starting to mount inside of him, but I'll still be there long before he will.

My other arm snakes around behind him, and I start to run my lubricated fingers around his dark hole, feeling him jerk up in surprise before he moans again. It never ceases to amaze me how much men like that. They're always shocked too, which makes it feel really naughty.

I clamp down on his cock again, making him work to get in and out, the extra friction ramping him up even further. With every thrust now, he's gathering momentum, until he's right there with me. Just as he's about to come, I slip a finger just inside him and he roars his climax again, but this time, there's a word, and I know I'm in deep shit.

"MINE!" He roars, his canines extending, his wolf right there at the surface, his hips pumping madly with his release. His mouth comes crashing down towards my neck as I scream, all thoughts of my own release evaporating, although his energy is pumping into me and revitalising me. There's a thunderous noise from the door and it suddenly bursts inwards, and I know I'm well and truly fucked now as I look up into the furious brown eyes of the alpha male that I met at the club earlier.

Even as Toby's mouth descends to my neck, the alpha is there, roaring at him to stop, and holding him in a headlock. Toby's fingers are about to break my hips, and his cock is still spurting into the condom inside me as he struggles to get his head free to claim me. Oh, fuck no, anything but that. Toby's hot, but a solid diet of him and him alone for the rest of my life is not what I want.

They're all there now, the four friends staring at me, checking me out while I'm unable to do more than shove at his chest and keep him from claiming me with his bite.

“Felix, help me get him out of her. Sam, help her cover up. Joe, see if you can find some air freshener because the smell in here is going to drive us all crazy. Matt, keep watch in the hall, make sure the owner doesn’t come in until we’re ready.” He looks at me coldly. “Lady, you better tell me what the fuck is going on, or I swear to the goddess, I’ll let my boys rip you to pieces after they’ve all fucked you.”

Well, none of that was a threat as far as I was concerned. I was now more than happy to reveal that I was supernatural like them, and because so little was known about Sirens, they wouldn’t know exactly what I was either.

“Toby, you will back off and submit.” I tell him, using a strong croon in my voice. I know that my eyes are flashing a silvery blue, despite being green. He immediately stops struggling and falls to his knees on the floor, his head down and to the side, showing his neck in complete submission to me.

They all look at me in shock. I hop down from the counter and start dressing as Sam passes me articles of clothing. Long tapered fingers hold out my underwear first as his dark eyes watch me hungrily, then my leggings followed by my bra, dress and shoes. His jet black hair flops in his face, it’s shaved to just above his ears and then longer on top. It suits his obvious Asian heritage. When I look closer I can see that he’s dyed the ends a deep midnight blue. It’s not obvious at first, but it really suits him.

“Toby, you will get dressed.” I tell him, and he complies immediately.

“How can you do that? I’m still his alpha, I can feel his connection. I can’t even feel what you’re doing to him through that bond, it’s like you’re just talking to him, but I know that his wolf is cowering at the moment. What the fuck are you, lady?”

“I was a woman in need of a fuck, and certainly not needing to be claimed. Your friend will be fine in an hour. He’ll remember me, but not my face. Don’t worry, I won’t come back here again, or to the club where you saw me earlier.

I'll do my level best to avoid you all, and I ask that you do me the same courtesy. Don't worry about the door, I'll tell the manager that I locked it accidentally and had a panic attack. I'll pay for the damage. Get him some water, he's probably a bit dehydrated after all that." I smirk and turn to leave.

"No, no way. I saw that guy tonight. I was ready to fight him off when you left. He was delirious he wanted you so badly. Is that what you've done to him? Is he a basket case now like that guy? What did you call him, a stage five clinger? Damn woman, you're cold. You know that Toby thinks that you're his mate, right? You can't just walk out of here without telling me what the fuck you are and how to counter this shit."

I bend down to Toby who collapsed to his knees again once he was dressed, and looked into his beautiful blue eyes. They're a little hazy, but I can already see him coming to. I need to leave before he gets a good look at me, or the charm will have been wasted. It's much harder for them to forget me if they can remember my face. "He's fine. It doesn't last. He'll be a little out of it but back to normal within the hour. As for the clinging – yeah, he's going to be like that for a month or so, hopefully not the whiny little bitch that the other guy was but give him time and he'll forget. Mock him and make fun of him, make it sound as ridiculous as it is. The sillier he feels, the faster he'll let it go. I'm not his mate, my kind don't work like that, and that's all I'll say about what I am. I'll know in future that for wolves, twice will have to be enough, although hot damn, I bet we could have had three or four more rounds."

I sigh lustily. Of course, I find a beast that can keep up with me and he goes mental after just two orgasms. Humans usually only last two, three if they're strong, but their recovery is slower, and they're so clingy.

"Damn girl, you came three times in less than an hour and you want more? You should have invited us all in." Grins Matt from the hall. Like the others, he's tall, although not the tallest of them here. His short dirty blonde hair is just long enough not to be a spike, just enough for a girl to grab onto. I look him up and down appreciatively, and then stop myself. No, no, nope. Not going there. His hazel eyes twinkle merrily at me, as

though he can see what I'm thinking. He's too confident by far and it's as sexy as hell.

I laugh. "Down boy. I came twice, he came three times, and hell yes, I could always go more, that's the problem. I don't ever do repeats though, I don't want a relationship, well-fucked men get too possessive and I just don't need the drama. It's why I fuck them and charm them to forget me."

"You're a succubus?" Felix asks, his lip curling up in a sneer. What is it with all of them? Out in the bar they all looked hot, but in here under the bright lights? I can see how truly magnificent they all are. Damn! His light blonde hair is long enough to show a bit of a wave, and it looks like he might have used a bit of product on it to get it 'just so'. His cheekbones are chiseled and he has a strong chin with a cleft in it. I sigh, it looks totally lickable, and don't get me started on his mouth. Plump lips that look like they're made to be bitten. Fuck, I'm no longer hungry but I can't stop looking at these delicious men!

"Please, they're amateurs. Thanks for the help though boys, nice to meet you alpha." I go to step past him and he grabs my wrist.

"No, you're not going anywhere until we know he's ok." He growls at me.

"I'm telling you he's fine, and he can't see my face, or it breaks the charm, and then he will be actively looking for me instead of just whining about it. Neither of us wants that." I let my power flow to the surface again. "You will submit and let me go." I tell him, my croon rumbling with authority through my voice. I really do hate compulsion, but I'll do whatever it takes to keep safe, and something tells me that this bunch of wolves is anything but safe. I could let go with my siren call, but the humans outside would hear that and be affected too. I'm not explaining how I managed to make a stack of people deaf with my voice, so it's not an option just now.

They all drop to their knees, the others even going down flat to the floor. One, I think his name was Joe, even rolls to his back and presents his belly. Curly brown hair flops back

from his face and his brown eyes watch me closely. It's a calculated look until he smiles and flashes a set of dimples at me. Seriously. Dimples! I said jump and he did it as hard as he could. That boy has 'trap' all over him, if he got his hands on me, I think he'd claim me before I could blink twice. Definitely dangerous. The alpha though, he stays on his knees, but he doesn't let me go.

"Stay." He commands using his full alpha strength against me, only it doesn't work like that. Not when I'm embracing my power. It does tickle though, insanely, and I cannot hold back the giggle to save his dignity, no matter how much I try.

"Sorry baby," I tell him, "it just doesn't work that way, and it really tickles. Please don't make me command you any harder, because I can, and I don't want to hurt the others." My eyes find Joe on his back, his expression is now a little dazed. He's not a weak wolf by what I have sensed from the others, but he's certainly the weakest wolf in this room.

"Phone." The alpha mutters, pulling his out of his pocket and opening it up to add a new contact before handing it to me.

"Fine." I growl back, giving him my details. First name only and my mobile number. "But if you bug me, I'll block you and change it." I warn him. He nods, but he's still holding me. I frown at him when I see that he's dialling the number. Huh, I hadn't thought of giving him a fake, but my phone is on silent. He glares at me until I pull it out of my pocket showing that it's ringing, and his number is on the screen.

I reject the call and quickly add him to my contacts. He growls when he sees his listing as Alpha Hole. I laugh. "Well, it's not like you gave me your name now, is it? You're lucky to be getting my number at all." He lets go of my wrist, and it's odd, but I miss his grip. Who knew I had a fetish for being dominated? Because that's all it is, right?

As I turn to go, he growls at me again. "Marcus."

"What?"

"My name is Marcus."

I nod and spin on my heel, heading out towards the manager to deal with the situation there. There's a bounce in my step that hasn't been there for a while, and I can feel the flush in my cheeks, I even swagger. Rather than a day or two, I think it will more likely be four, maybe even a week, before I need to do this again.

Using my extra energy as compulsion, I smooth things over with the manager, and I'm out of there in minutes. I wonder how Shay's doing with her twins and I laugh. I think I did better than she did tonight. It's time for me to head home before the wolves emerge from the back, no point in undoing what I managed to achieve. I press the fob on my keys as soon as I'm clear of the door. My car beeps a little forlornly, a bit like my heart does leaving these men. All the more reason to leave them, I can't afford to get attached. Within minutes I'm in my car zooming home and for once I'm glad I let Shay drag me out to a nightclub.

Chapter 2

Marcus

I can tell as soon as she leaves, there's an attraction, like a magnet, pulling me towards her. It started as a hum in the bar earlier, and it's getting stronger the more time I spend around her. It shouldn't, but the fact that she could withstand an alpha call from me turns me on, and her compulsion? I've never felt anything like it. It took everything my wolf and I could pull together to resist even an inch of it, and she said she could have used a stronger one but didn't want to hurt the others.

My wolf shivers inside me, a tingle running from his snout to his tail and then down into his balls. He wants her, he wants to do what Toby nearly did, he wants to sink his teeth into her, leave his mark, and make sure she understands that she belongs to him. It's totally fucked up, because we both know she's not our mate, she couldn't be, she's not a wolf. I shudder again, if this is what I'm feeling, then Toby is in for hell. The bastard had a taste of her, three by his account at least. We're going to have to chain him up, and this woman and I, we're going to have words. Lots of words.

And then I'm going to fuck her.

Joe

She's a goddess, and I want her with a longing I've never felt. When her alpha call rolled through me, my cock went rock hard and my wolf rolled us onto our backs. She wanted us to submit? We would do anything for her, endure the ultimate humiliation, humble ourselves so much she couldn't help but be pleased with our response. Maybe she would bend over and tickle our belly, our cock. Maybe she would ride us.

But no, that fucker Marcus had to keep taking her attention. I know she saw us, saw us doing this to please her, and boy, would we like to please her. Anything to get inside of her, and then, when she was relaxed and limp against us, then we'd claim her. Fuck the others, this female was ours.

“Fuck Joe, get up off there, it’s a fucking bathroom man, it’s like a sewer in here.” Growls Matt. I roll on my side and get up awkwardly and the others laugh. “Can’t you even do a crunch to get up?” he laughs.

“Fuck off,” I growl, “My cock is so hard if I did that I’d snap the fucking thing in half.” I lift the bottom of my shirt showing the head and a good part of the shaft above the waistband of my jeans. I undo the button and heave a sigh of relief. The imprint of the back of it and the fabric around it is clear. I slide a hand in to protect myself while I edge my fly down. The individual teeth have left their own imprints. Damn, that feels so much better, even with my brothers looking on though, it’s still not going down.

“Put that shit away damnit,” says Felix, “if Toby sees you with that out while he still thinks she’s here, he’s going to rip your fucking throat out.”

“I can’t dude, I’ve never been so hard, there’s no room in my pants, it’s killing me.”

“Then go into the men’s and deal with it. We don’t need him freaking out.”

“Knock him out.” Orders Marcus, and we all look at him in surprise. “You’re all sporting boners, even I am, I don’t know about you, but my wolf is slobbering stupid for her.” He winces, his wolf obviously having something to say about that. “We’re all releasing pheromones, fuck, we’re all responding to hers. This is just a clusterfuck waiting to happen. Sock him, and we’ll pass him off as drunk. Joe, sort that fucking shit out, and maybe buy some bigger pants if they’re too small for what you’re packing. Do I have to wipe your fucking ass too?”

“Hey, it’s never been an issue before, I’ve just never been so fucking hard. I’ll be back in a minute, this isn’t going to take long at all, and don’t try and tell me that the rest of you are any different.”

I push the door open to the men’s room. At least I can breathe clearly in here. The smell of sex in the other bathroom was overwhelming, even with the door busted off its hinges. I grab some hand towels and remember what I saw as I came

into the room. Toby was balls deep in her, I could see the muscles in his ass clenched tight as he tried to get even deeper, she was sitting on the counter between sinks, her breasts heaving with her breath, her skin flushed, her green eyes blissful... and I come. Just like that, without even touching myself. I barely get the towel there in time before I mess my pants, and I just come, and come, and come. I imagine myself in Toby's place, balls deep, and before I catch my breath my balls draw up and I come again, so hard my vision blacks out for a bit. I feel my canines lengthening and I let out a roar.

“MINE!” My wolf growls through me, and I come again. Marcus appears in the doorway, a shocked expression on his face. The fucker thinks he can take her from me. I drop the soaked piece of paper and lunge for him, my teeth going for his throat.

“Back off.” Growls Marcus with a full alpha tone, and it hits me like a brick wall, but I'm able to push through it. I have to protect my mate. He barely manages to get his hands up in time, he'd expected me to drop and submit. I'm not a weak wolf, but of all the wolves here tonight, I'm the least strong, and yet here I am, snapping at the fucker's neck. Damn straight he's not taking her from me. I'm so confident, I don't see it coming, I just feel the impact of his fist, and once again my vision goes dark.

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