



BITTEN BY
THE ALPHA
BOSS

SKYE WILSON

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A FORBIDDEN SHIFTER ROMANCE

SILENT RIDGE PACK

BOOK 2

SKYE WILSON

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HANNAH

I sucked down my iced coffee, hoping that would cool the raging fire of indignation within me. But the sweet and salty caramel deliciousness could only do so much to quell my nerves.

When I'd first signed on to be an intern in the company that helped fund my pack, I was ecstatic. I dreamed of working hard, proving myself, and earning a full-time position where I would go on to be a team leader and eventually have my own projects.

Instead, I was working some bizarre spy routine to hack into a company we'd feigned interest in partnering with. I got why it was important, especially since there were still two moonstones that were missing, but that didn't mean I had to *like* it.

Because I really didn't. I was running around advising and organizing like our company had a future with Mr. Bronson, while also hacking and doing whatever it was Jacobian deigned to order me to do. It wasn't grunt work and it *was* important, but God, it sucked.

Granted, I would probably be less cranky once I graduated.

I was in the top of my class, but because of everything going on with my pack, I hadn't felt comfortable starting my senior internship until recently, which delayed getting my diploma. While Mahlan and Theo more than understood, it rankled me to feel like I was behind the rest of my classmates. Especially since to aid in my subterfuge, I had to bat my eyes

and laugh at the milquetoast, tie-wearing human men in Mr. Bronson's company.

Gross.

I finished sucking down my adult caffeinated milkshake and looked over the numbers in one of the eighty billion excel sheets I had in front of me. But that lasted maybe three minutes before I loaded up my proxy server to see if I could hack into another department's group chat. I figured that would be the easiest way to get info without being blatant about it.

The thing was, every department had their own group chat where they would message each other about unofficial information or quick tasks. They also let their walls down a little, and shared plenty of personal information they didn't realize could be used against them. I could probably ask and get my way in there with some excuse or another, but I wanted to save that tactic as a last resort. The more people thought I was just some hottie with a body, the more I could get away with.

It also would have been easier if I had any sort of group chat at all. HR had told me all about them when I'd first started consulting, while Lyssa was doing her corporate sabotage thing. But they also explained that I wouldn't get one, since I was a freelance worker and not an official employee with a team.

I wasn't really one for office chitchat, but it was so lonely. I was isolated from my pack, isolated from the other workers unless I was fake flirting with them. All in all, it was bringing me down.

It wouldn't be such a big deal if I hadn't moved for college. But even residing just a half hour away from the heart of the city had me feeling separated from so many of the people I grew up with and loved. I still went on runs, of course, and still called and texted my friends, but it just wasn't the same. It was far from high school, where I'd been relatively well-liked and part of the homecoming court.

“Come on, work with me, my dude,” I grumbled to my computer, monkeying around with the security as best I could without tripping anything up. I didn’t want to get caught with my pants down, as it were.

If only I had the skills that Jacobian did. He was a large part of why I’d even sought out the internship in the first place, even though the commute was rough. He was well-known throughout not just our pack but also rival ones for his expertise with all things computers, including hacking. Many shifters didn’t feel comfortable with technology, even in my generation, but he was completely at ease. I’d always admired him through and through.

But maybe there was a reason they say to never meet your heroes. It wasn’t that he was...*bad*, per se. But he was very reserved, and also exacting—he was more meticulous than my grandmother when it came to making moon-water tea. I always felt like I was failing him, which drove my type-A personality up the wall. I wanted to impress, but I just didn’t feel up to snuff.

Ugh.

Frustrated, I shut down my keystroke program, connection server, and everything else before I packed up my laptop and headed to the coffee shop right across the street. Should I have another dose of sugar, caramel syrup, and caffeine? No. But I was young, and a wolf, so I would burn it off just by existing.

Hey, there had to be some benefit from all the stress of being a shifter lately. And while I didn’t know if the ability to guzzle liquid sugar made up for the kidnappings and killings, it wasn’t a bad consolation prize.

Thankfully no one stopped me on my way out, which was unusual. Davidson from the third floor, Smith on the fourth, or sometimes even Connor on the ground floor would typically stop me to try flirting, the talk usually revolving around sports or the holidays.

Boring.

Not that I had anything against humans. After all, I had plenty of good friends who were human. But I just couldn't bring myself to care about football and bar crawls when I was dealing with my people being magically hunted down by who knows what, while my dreamboat of a boss didn't recognize me beyond my technical capabilities.

Not that I *needed* him to recognize me beyond that, but still, it would have been *nice*. Jacobian was talented, smart, successful, and a certified hottie, so it would have been nice if he registered me as something beside a peon.

"Calm your ego," I chided myself under my breath. And maybe the person in front of me in line gave me a strange look, maybe they didn't. I didn't really care either way. I had too much else to worry about.

Even though the line was quite long, I got through it way too fast and found myself standing outside the door, swirling the double whipped cream into the deeper parts of my drink. I wasn't quite ready to go back, but I didn't know what else to do.

A walk maybe?

Sure, that would buy me at least a few minutes.

Sucking down the first few sips of my drink, I strolled down about half a mile before circling back and heading back into the office. I couldn't avoid it forever. All I needed to do was get to the weekend and I could refuel enough to get through another week.

Ugh, this was real adulthood, wasn't it? No wonder so many shifters were rejecting the modern world. It sucked. We worked and worked and worked to pay our bills, and our bills were all things we needed to survive, and on the circle went.

Then again, I was getting paid a *considerable* bonus for engaging in such an important mission for our pack, so I wouldn't have to put my nose to the grindstone too much longer.

Just a little while more.

That thought bolstered me as I headed back in. Still sipping at my drink, I tried to appear casual as I listened hard for anything that might help me. Yet another good thing about being a shifter: the enhanced hearing.

Mostly it was just idle chatter or painfully boring gossip, but as I was about to get on the elevator, I heard something much more engaging.

It was Chris—or was it James? Matt? Some generic American human name on a guy who looked like a generic male. He was speaking to one of the women from the department I couldn't lunch with.

“—bring today?”

“Oh, I was so exhausted last night, I didn't make myself lunch for today.”

“What're ya thinking then? Ordering takeout? I'll go in with you.”

Somewhat surprisingly, the man didn't sound flirty or teasing. A genuine office friendship? That was kind of nice.

Then again, maybe I was being judgmental about all the flirting in the building. I loved reading AU fanfics where the boss and employee definitely had an inappropriate relationship. And by inappropriate relationship, I meant lots of hot, steamy sex that never happened in real life.

Oh, well.

It wasn't that I was hard up. I'd had plenty of experimentation and booty calls in college. But I didn't have time for it anymore. And I probably wouldn't until after I graduated. So yeah, sometimes I liked to read harmless fantasies about stone-cold hunks hooking up with their plucky but respected employees. It wasn't like I would ever *do* something like that.

“No, I think I'm just gonna hit the caf so I can catch up on my reports.”

“Word, I think they're supposed to have some good stuff today. Chili, Tex-Mex, and I think poke?”

The woman laughed. “Like I would ever trust raw fish from this place! Not unless it’s being served on the executive floor.”

“Ha! Okay, maybe you’ve got a point there.”

The elevator dinged, and unfortunately, I had to be herded inside, cutting off the conversation. But still, I had plenty of information to help me that I hadn’t had before.

Naturally, I’d casually asked about the mystery department, but I’d been told it wasn’t my business and I didn’t need to worry about it. I’d *also* been told that I needed to leave them alone because their work was sensitive and they didn’t need any distractions.

Which was fine, I got it, and I gave them a wide berth so I didn’t draw attention to myself. But still, while I was warned not to bother that department, no one said I couldn’t casually become friends with them during work-approved meals.

Loopholes. I lived and died by them.

Heading back to my tiny sliver of an office, I booted up my computer and made some notes on the encrypted file-sharing drive I had with Jacobian and the rest of the Silent Ridge team. Once that was done, I made do with busywork that made me look like I was doing the consulting part of my disguise, then made my way to the cafeteria.

Thankfully, there was quite a spread for me to select from, allowing me to kinda mill around until I caught the scent of the woman from earlier. Slowly making my way over to her, I ordered a tostada, a burrito, and some chips with both salsa and guac. It was a lot, but not enough to fill me up. I would definitely be back later once I finished establishing contact with my mark.

Ha, establishing contact with my mark. I was going to start sounding like Jacobian if I wasn’t careful.

Then again, I could think of worse things.

Unfortunately, I made a miscalculation. My hot food took a few moments longer than her simple taco salad, so the

woman headed off before I could follow. I did my best, but I ended up behind someone else.

I silently fumed at my stomach's betrayal, but after a few moments, I was finally able to notice a scent other than the delicious aromatics floating up from my food. It seemed that I'd inadvertently ended up near the guy I'd overheard earlier from the same secret department.

Well, that was lucky.

All I had to do was think of how to drum up conversation in a smooth, inconspicuous, and inventive way.

“So, whatcha getting today?”

Or I could do that.

Whatever, there was only so much skill I could be expected to have. I was going for a business degree, not vying for a BA in espionage.

But he turned to me, a wry grin across his features. Aw, he had a nice smile—that would certainly make talking to him a bit easier. I did have a thing for lovely smiles. Maybe it was because there was so much darkness in the world that I tended to gravitate towards things that reminded of the good. Maybe it was because seeing a nice smile made me think of nice fangs, and nice fangs made me think of someone hunky biting into my mating gland until there was a tsunami in my panties.

Either or.

“Tex-Mex all day,” he said with a grin. “I know it's not authentic, but my stomach couldn't care less.”

I let out what I hoped was a natural-sounding laugh. It was hard to say, considering I wasn't exactly an actress, but I thought I did a pretty good job. “I get what you mean. Throw meat, cheese, and sour cream together and I'm probably gonna like it.”

I was feeling pretty proud of myself, sure that we were about to launch into a charming conversation that planted me in his head, but instead, he just laughed before turning to the cashier and sliding his employee card through the reader.

“That’s pretty much the trifecta! You have a nice day now!”

And then he power-walked off, joining the woman and settling across from her.

Well, drat.

“*Whatcha getting today?*” I whispered mockingly to myself. “Real smooth. Ingenious.”

But I wasn’t entirely SOL. All the single or smaller tables were occupied, meaning these two had to sit at one of the longer, emptier cafeteria tables. I tried to sit close enough to them that I could hear everything, but not so close that it looked suspicious.

Sitting alone, I made myself comfortable, pulling out my phone so it seemed I was completely occupied. Which wasn’t that hard, as I found myself opening my texting app and sending a message to Jacobian and Theo, but mostly Jacobian. While he wasn’t the best texter, Theo was borderline absent, considering the insane hubbub he was going through with his own mate.

I’d noticed the ice king of our little pack pining over our alpha’s sister ever since I hit puberty and became aware of boys as something other than a loud annoyance. My mother said I was always a bit too keen on watching people, but all those wonderful hormones left me acutely aware of things. One was that Mahlan, our alpha, seemed intrinsically dissatisfied, another was that Theo was head over heels for Emmaline, and finally Emmaline was lost in the sauce for Kaleb.

I didn’t get it. Not that Kaleb wasn’t hot. He definitely was, as were all of Mahlan’s friends, but he was also so...so *bland*. If I had to guess, Parker, his best friend, got to see a lot more of his personality, but that was about it. People had a right to their privacy, but I also had the right to be bored by them.

HEY, having lunch with a couple of employees from that secret department.

MAYBE I WAS EXAGGERATING the situation and was just manifesting. After all, I was desperate for some progress so I could eventually escape and go back to my normal internship and graduation prep.

And maybe, just maybe, I also wanted to be more adventurous and badass like Lyssa and Emmaline. One had just graduated high school, and she'd already broken a powerful spell over her inner wolf, fought a witch, and bagged our perpetually single alpha. The other had killed a witch trying to assault both Lyssa and Mahlan, survived a direct attack, and was navigating being forcibly mated by circumstances with grace.

I was older than Lyssa, younger than Emma, but I felt so outclassed by either one. Not that it was a competition, but I just admired them so much that I wanted to *be* like them.

Unfortunately, there was no answer, which left me listening to the couple I had my eye on.

Nothing, nothing, idle gossip, nothing, nothing, the woman had a fear of her cat being spayed after her other one had passed during surgery complications, which was pretty heavy stuff for lunch. Nothing, nothing, their department was so cold that multiple people, especially the woman, were complaining that their hands were getting too cold to type.

Oh.

That was my in!

Leaning closer, I cleared my throat. "Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear about the temperature. And yeah, they like to keep it *freezing* in here, it's such a problem!" Actually, it wasn't an issue for me. As a wolf, I ran much hotter than a standard human female. They could turn the air conditioning to the max and I'd be just fine.

“Oh my God, it is, isn’t it?” the woman agreed, smiling broadly and sighing in relief that someone agreed.

“Totally, but I found a way to get around it.”

“You did?!”

“Yeah, so what you need to do is have your entire department agree on a temperature, usually by using the median of where everyone says they’re comfortable, then go to HR and present them with what you’ve all agreed on.”

“What, really? It’s that easy?”

“It is! My office was, like, totally freezing when I first started. Now it’s much more comfortable!”

“Wow, thank you so much. That’s a lifesaver.”

I grinned at her, giving her the most charming smile I could muster. She shared it, and I was so sure that I was going to be asked to join them.

“No problem, girl. Anything that can help!”

But then, the woman nodded and returned to her conversation with the dude, locking me out entirely.

Fuck.

Well, I had time. It wasn’t like I was doing much else, anyway.



TWO DAYS.

It took two days of trying to subtly orbit those two and anybody else I could find from their office before I could finally make my next move. I liked to think I wasn’t the impatient sort, but with everything going on with Emma—and apparently witches trying to hunt our pack down—I was chomping at the bit to have *some* sort of progress. The straight-A go-getter in me was going crazy at the idea I was utterly useless.

So naturally, when I saw the guy in the copy room, I decided to summon all the bimbo, dumb-blond energy I had and see what I could weasel out of him. Nothing like playing on people's perception to get some secrets.

Because while I was hot, I was also *just* fat enough for some of the population to automatically look down on me. I had friends who had it much worse, and I hated how much a good part of the population felt free to judge or openly discriminate against plus-sized people. But I wasn't above using it for my own means. I was gonna turn my freshman fifteen—more like thirty—into opportunity.

“Oh, thank God, there's someone here,” I said breathlessly, but not too much. I didn't want to appear out of shape. It was tricky, pretending to be just pathetic enough for him to help, but not enough to play into any prejudice.

“Hey there,” he said, standing up and shooting me the standard polite smile. “Did you need help with something?”

“Yes, absolutely! The printer is out on my floor. Apparently, it's declared loyalty to Skynet and death to all humans, so I came down here. But I have no idea how to do double-sided copies. I just went on a full walk-through to try and find an intern, but it's like they all escaped to Canada or something!”

He chuckled, which definitely encouraged me. The best way to get on someone's good side was laughter. Well, the best way to get on a human's good side. For wolves, it was food.

“Don't worry, this machine is finicky, but I can definitely help with that. Let me show you how to do it since I've got a whole stack here I need to copy for our meeting.”

“You are my certified lifesaver,” I said, crossing to his side. “So what do they have you copying?”

“Financial slips,” he answered before walking me through a process I already knew how to do. But I cooed and made other appreciative sounds as he gave me his mini-tutorial, all the while trying to memorize what I could see of his papers.

“Thank you so much again,” I said as he finished.

Then, I had the bright idea to take a page out of young Lyssa's handbook. I tripped over nothing, sending my own papers fluttering to the floor. "Shit! God, I am having *such* a morning, I tell ya."

"Ha, I've had a few of those myself," the guy said before bending down to help me.

"Oh, you don't have to do that!" I exclaimed while surreptitiously reaching for the print page and grabbing three of his papers. It wasn't all the financial slips he'd been copying since there were about ten pieces of paper in each packet, but it was certainly better than none.

"It's no problem. Four hands are faster than two."

"You got that right!"

Quickly folding the papers I had stolen and shoving them into my bra, I bent down and picked up the distraction-papers. We got the mess cleaned up relatively quickly and the man handed me my stack once he stood.

"Good luck! Have fun with the printer while yours is plotting the extermination of the human race."

"I'll try!"

I was hoping that maybe this could lead into a longer conversation, but it seemed that all the employees in the secret department weren't exactly the social type. With a polite tip of his head, the man walked off, taking his papers with him. Hopefully, he wouldn't be suspicious when he realized three pieces were missing.

Oh, well. No risk, no reward.

Finishing up on all the copies I didn't need, I hurried back to my office. Grabbing my phone from where I'd left it in my purse, I saw I finally had a response from Jacobian.

My heart thundered in my chest for a moment, and I had to hype myself up to just open the message. Sure, while Jacobian wasn't what I was expecting, and he was borderline unfriendly with me, I still was starstruck by him. And the truth of the matter was that while Jacobian was in charge of the interns, I

was the only one with his personal number. That seemed so significant to me, even if he didn't treat me differently from anyone else.

I was also the one working an incredibly important case while the rest of them never had an assignment outside of our pack's office, so that definitely meant something.

Or at least I hoped it did.

I got my thumb to flick over the message and it finally opened.

HAVE you found anything out from your marks yet?

UGH. That didn't sound happy. I knew I was projecting my own insecurities onto his toneless text, but it was the teacher's pet in me. How could I know if I was succeeding without feedback?

Sometimes being a perfect student and go-getter was incredibly inconvenient. Sure, it had instilled some great habits in me, but it had also created a crushing need for approval from authority figures.

Sigh.

I FOUND the copy machine and printer they use, managed to swipe a few documents, so we could probably load some sort of spyware on it so you can see whatever they're printing.

WHILE THE COMPANY had excellent external firewalls, they didn't have many protections from someone on the inside physically downloading software onto their servers. Because who would do that? Everyone in the office had been screened. Well, except me, of course.

Sure, they *thought* they'd meticulously vetted me and even had an in with our pack's company because of my presence.

But the reality was that Jacobian had made an entirely false digital profile for me, so that once I needed to disappear, no one would be able to find me. Which, again, was as impressive as hell, and half of why I'd agreed to do it. I would rip someone's throat out before I'd let someone use my personal information to hurt my family. While I was always a bit more independent than my mother liked, I still loved her and my little siblings down to my bones.

I'LL CREATE something like that for you tonight. You can bring it in tomorrow. Good work.

GOOD WORK.

Good work.

Two simple words, but they rushed through me in a fizzy wave. Jacobian thought I was doing a good job, and that rush was probably enough to get me through my week.

Maybe.

TODAY HE SAID he was working on financial slips.

Which makes sense considering I always just get a final statement doc from that department.

They've gotta have their own finance guy.

IT WAS POSSIBLY the most I'd ever written him all at once, but now that I had a hit, I was on a roll. I wanted to soak up all that gold-star attitude while I could.

I WOULD AGREE. Keep it up.

Wow, two compliments in one day. If this kept going, I would have a real combo in the making! It took nearly all of my willpower to clamp down on doing a happy dance. I was a grown woman, and I could save my celebratory gyrations until I was in the comfort of my own apartment.

I did have my own place now, and that certainly was an upgrade from the dorms. I'd have never been able to afford it if it weren't for my internship.

Thank God our entire pack didn't put money ahead of life because there were no such things as unpaid positions within Silent Ridge's company. Everyone got paid a living wage, from the interns to the top dogs.

My phone buzzed again before I could enjoy my own wordplay. Looking back down, I saw I had another message from Jacobian! Three in one day? Had to be a new record.

WHY DON'T you go ahead and take the rest of the day off. I'll send an email to HR there to tell them we need you in the office ASAP.

A CHANCE TO get out of Mr. Bronson's annoying department early? I'd take it with both hands and run with it. Not that it was a truly awful place, but between the stale coffee, way too many perfumes on way too many people, and the sound of perpetually humming fluorescent lights, I was ready to go.

But apparently, my struggle not to break into a choreographed number took too long because suddenly my phone was ringing. I picked it up and saw Jacobian's name sitting right there on the screen.

He was calling me?

Jacobian Helton was calling me?!

Composing myself, I took a deep breath and tried to answer coolly.

“Yes?” I asked, proud that there wasn’t even a waver in my voice.

“Hey, I just wanted to check in since I know the reception isn’t the best there. Did you get my texts?”

“Yes! Thank you!”

“No problem. You’ve been working very hard and deserve a break while I crack down on this. I’ve got to order bugs and cameras that won’t be picked up on any RFID readers or bring up flags with their internal security measures.”

“That sounds like a lot,” I said, wanting to prolong the conversation between us.

“It is, and that’s why you should enjoy the downtime. Besides, saying we need you back at our office makes your position that much more believable.”

“True,” I agreed. “I think I’m gonna enjoy a glass of champagne and a good long soak in my tub.”

Jacobian didn’t speak for a beat, and I realized I’d essentially told my boss I was about to take a bath. And there was a big difference between saying I was going to go wash and saying I was about to get naked and bask in hot, bubbly water.

Whoops.

“Alright, you have a good day then. We’ll speak later.” Jacobian finally said before hanging up.

Oh.

The abrupt disconnect made my anxiety spring forward. I was normally such a confident, driven person, and it really threw me through a loop how quickly Jacobian’s perceived approval or disappointment could affect my mood. I knew I wanted to prove myself, but still...I could relax a little and not go too far into personal detail. Jacobian was clearly as by the book as they came, and I needed to respect that.

At least I’d have plenty to divulge at family dinners, where everyone treated each other like lifelong friends. Having

friends again after nearly four years at college far from home certainly wasn't a bad thing.

I would take what I could get.

JACOBIAN

I set the resolution for my newest screen, sitting back in satisfaction when it adjusted to the right format and linked up with the rest of the monitors.

“Say hello to 4K,” I muttered to myself, collecting all the packaging materials and shoving them in their original boxes. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with how much Styrofoam and bubble wrap was needed for such things. It seemed like it kind of went against the whole being a wolf thing and valuing nature. But I supposed there wasn’t any way around that. I certainly wouldn’t have been happy if my new tech upgrade had arrived smashed.

So much had been going wrong lately as it was. Our pack had gone through the loss of our alpha’s son, then the loss of our alpha proper. The moonstone was stolen, and Mahlan had had to ascend to the role much sooner than we’d been prepared for.

And then people had started disappearing.

I’d thought it was strange at first—perhaps another rival pack from the west coast who was looking to infringe on our territory. It was no secret that wildfires and human expansion had pushed a lot of shifters out of homes they’d held for generations. And while most of them tried to peaceably negotiate space with other fae communities, there were some who were...much less gracious.

But apparently it wasn’t a rival pack, at least as far as we were aware.

Thanks to Mahlan's new mate, a young woman named Lyssa, we found out there were witches involved. But these witches were much different than the ones we occasionally hired. They were hungry for something...power? Blood? Magic? But I wasn't the strategist in the pack. That was Theo and Mahlan. I was the tech guy, and I was proud of it. Many shifters, especially bears and wolves, resented the modern era, living their lives free of technology. But I didn't agree.

The humans had changed the entire world with the internet and it affected everyone, from the tiniest fae to the most famous humans. And I, for one, didn't want anybody to use that technology against me. Ever since I was young, I'd been fascinated by the magic of computers, pulled in by them instead of repelled. Now that I was an adult, it wasn't uncommon for other packs to request my services. Sometimes the travel was annoying, yes, but it helped build bonds between packs so we didn't have to deal with another Sawyer tragedy.

Grabbing my box of trash, I carried it through my apartment and out the door, heading down the hall to the garbage chute. It was one of the reasons I wasn't in the same apartment building as Mahlan or Theo. Their spaces were higher-end, bigger, fancier, and they just weren't my style.

I preferred a sort of techno-minimalist aesthetic and an open concept that allowed me to enjoy my various set ups in my home. I had my desktop, with four monitors and all of my various hacking tools. I had my gaming systems—not that I ever had time to play them. Even my kitchen was full of gadgets and other things that fit into the smooth, crisp lines of my place.

Once the trash was taken care of, I headed back in and made sure I locked the door. Not that a padlock would do anything to discourage most witches, but it made me feel better.

I was tempted to launch directly into putting together everything Hannah needed to bug the copier/printer she'd texted me about, but I knew if I started that, I would forget to eat. And if I did, I'd be ripped away from my work far too

soon by my stomach yelling at me and my head feeling dizzy. An accelerated and intense sense of hunger was the price to pay for our advanced healing and other regenerative abilities, and I'd long since learned it wasn't something to trifle with.

Glancing at my phone, I realized the evening was rushing by. Places were going to close soon if I didn't get a move on. I could cook for myself, but that would take time away from working on the software I had to cobble together, so cooking was out.

Grumbling to myself, I opened the first delivery app on my phone that I saw and the first restaurant that popped up. *What I ate* wasn't so important as that I needed to get something in my stomach, so I ordered three dinner specials without reading them, then went through the checkout. I didn't have any food allergies I had to worry about, so unless something was truly repugnant, I'd be just fine.

Noting that I had just under an hour before the food was delivered, I sat down at my computer and got things started. As I settled, my phone buzzed again. I picked it up, hoping it was Hannah, even if that made no sense.

The young woman was charming, that was for certain, and always quite polite to me, but I could pick up an undercurrent of...something in her that I couldn't quite place. Stubbornness? Domination? I wasn't sure, and I'd have to get to know her to find out, but things needed to cool down a bit first.

And who knew when that would happen?

Not that I needed it to. While Mahlan and Lyssa had found true love, and Theo and Emma seemed to be working things out, I wasn't exactly thrilled with all the changes to our pack, one after the other. Would it kill the world to just calm down for approximately five minutes? I just wanted some time to adjust, even if I was happy for my friends.

My phone buzzed again, reminding me I'd just received a text. Opening it, I saw it was Mahlan. Because who else would it be?

Rolling my eyes, I opened his messages to see he was asking me to do some light hacking concerning what was going on with the pack. Well, that certainly was my job, after all, so I said I'd handle it. It probably wouldn't even take me that long, an hour tops. I could probably whip it out just after my food arrived.

Wait...what had I even ordered?

Realizing I'd pretty much just gone through the motions on the app, I loaded it up and saw that I'd spent about seventy dollars on sushi. Huh. Not the worst decision I'd ever made, though there wasn't much actual decision-making involved.

I buckled down and worked, turning my phone volume on max so I wouldn't miss notifications from my delivery driver. It wouldn't be the first time I'd gotten so embroiled in my work that I let something sit outside until it was either cold or stolen.

Just as I'd hoped, I finished just before my intercom buzzed that the driver was downstairs. I hurried down to get my food. Once I was back in my apartment, I proceeded to scarf it down, only half paying attention as I got into coding. It wasn't the best way to enjoy high-quality sushi, but it wasn't like I could just sit down and enjoy my meal. I had things to do, after all. Things only I could do.

Concentrating, I fell into the rhythm of problem-solving, coding, and making sure everything was in ship-shape. While that idiot Bronson's company didn't have a very strict or robust internal security system compared to its external one, it wasn't like they were completely defenseless. So I had to ensure our little spy cams didn't connect to any of their networks or let off a signal that could be picked up on their monitoring devices. I also had to check that the battery would last long enough for the devices to be of any worth. It wasn't like Hannah would be able to go and charge them daily.

Then there was the drive that held the key-logging and scanning programs we wanted to install on that copier. I didn't know if there were security cams in that part of the office, and Hannah hadn't mentioned them, but as a rule, I assumed that

there were. I had to make the device incongruous so she could stick it in the machine and not have anyone notice it right away.

I figured disguising it as a tube of lipstick would do just fine. No one would find it odd for Hannah to have that on her person, considering how meticulously she presented herself.

It took time to get it all assembled, even if a lot of it was just copy-pasting and cloning old projects. I'd certainly lived an interesting life since graduating from college at nineteen years old.

I remembered when I was younger, I'd always thought that advancing ahead of my grade and leaving for college early would hurt my relationship with my friends, especially considering that I was the eldest of the bunch. And since I was viscerally attached to my little circle, I'd pretended to be an average student for quite a long while.

It was stupid, but after Kaleb's mother had lost the fight with her mental illness, it was like we'd all been glued together by our very souls. I felt a deep-seated respect and loyalty for Mahlan, who always tried to do his best by us, and a streak of protectiveness for each and every one of my friends. I would die for them. So to junior Jacobian, it just made sense to dumb myself down.

It was Ellibie who had eventually stepped in and read me the riot act, telling me that my friends wanted me to succeed in life, not to purposefully hold myself back. She also said I should try online college if I was so concerned about being far away. I'd ended up doing blended courses both in person and online, and I owed Ellibie so much for it.

But the truth was, if those options hadn't been available, I wouldn't have gone to college at all. When it came down to it, I was always going to choose my pack. Day in and day out. Which was why I was perfectly fine with only four hours of sleep so I could get us ahead with Bronson.

But once I finished, I looked at the clock and realized it was nearly half past ten. Where had the day gone? I'd told Hannah she could go home around two pm and had pretty

much hit the grind right after that, finishing setting up my new monitor, then jumping into all the espionage stuff.

If I wanted to get it to her before she went back to work the next day, I needed to either have a courier run them over or take them myself. But I was reticent to entrust my work with just anyone. Especially considering that it had been Lyssa's best friend who was a witch who had helped curse her, or... something like that. I wasn't exactly clear on all the details. But that betrayal proved it was impossible to know who had ill will and who didn't, making me even more paranoid than usual. And that was saying something, considering the firewalls, proxy servers, *and* a VPN that I had created for our pack.

I knew it was unorthodox for a boss to go to his employee's home after 9 pm, but it wasn't like Hannah and I were complete strangers. I saw her nearly every week for our dinner get-togethers, and we'd been tunneling through Bronson's company for quite a while.

I supposed I should call her rather than beat my brain worrying about it.

Hoping I didn't wake her, I started to pull up her contact when her words echoed through my head.

"I think I'm gonna enjoy a glass of champagne and a good long soak in my tub."

Right.

Before I could clamp down on my mind, it constructed a picture of Hannah in a luxurious bath, rose petals and suds covering the surface. But not so much that I couldn't see her décolletage just kissing the line of the water, or those thick thighs of her just barely gracing the surface. That soft skin of hers was just beginning to pink, an homage to the first roses of spring.

There was no reason for my mind to construct such a detailed image of her, with those cheeks flushing from the heat, that thick, healthy hair of hers piled atop her head, revealing those strong, beautiful shoulders.

“Stop it, Jacobian,” I hissed. “Get a hold of yourself.”

As enticing as the image was, I felt a bit like a pervy old man. While I was only seven years older than Hannah, she was still graduating college whereas I was her literal *boss*. So I did my best to shut her out and keep only an air of total professionalism between us.

It was definitely harder than it should be when my brain kept making softcore porn of her all slippery and wet.

Shaking my head, I tried to banish those thoughts, composing myself so I could call my employee.

“Hello?” She answered on the first ring and sounded awake enough, so I didn’t have to feel too guilty. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine,” I said in a bland tone. “I finished up everything you need. I can have it couriered to you, but I’d rather keep my eye on it. Mind if I swing by? Maybe do a sweep of your apartment to make sure it hasn’t been bugged?”

“Nobody’s been in my apartment but me,” she said with a chuckle. “But sure, come on by. I was just folding some laundry.”

Right, laundry. That was decidedly less erotic than the bathtub thing. But at the same time, I was somewhat intrigued to see her in such a mundane, everyday situation. While I felt like I’d spent plenty of time with her between runs, dinners, and our work together, I didn’t really know all that much about her.

“Alright, I have your address. Mind if I head out in about fifteen minutes?”

“Not at all. Just give me a text when you’re here and I’ll walk you up.”

“Alright.”

And that was it. I hung up the call before I said something stupid, then gathered everything I needed into a nondescript package. I made sure to lock all three of the locks on my door

and headed out to my car in the gated parking lot. No one was planting an explosive spell on my vehicle, no siree. It had been a gift from my grandfather the last time I had visited the rez before he passed, and I wasn't about to let anybody damage it.

Making sure the package was safely nestled beside me, I set the GPS to Hannah's apartment and headed there. I knew she lived on the western side of our city where some of the poorer members of our pack were located, but as far as I knew she wasn't destitute. Not like Lyssa, who'd been squatting in one of our pack's luxury apartment buildings for years.

But as I pulled up, I realized that maybe Hannah was a little worse off than I remembered. I knew her father had passed when she was young, but that was about it. Considering she'd gone to college and was on our intern team, I'd just assumed she was middle class. But judging by the pothole-filled parking lot and rundown building I was facing, my assumption was way, way off.

I'M HERE

I TEXTED her quickly before heading to the main entrance. I felt a frown etch itself into my features as I realized how far a walk it was from the parking lot just to the very front apartments of the complex. What would she do if she needed to make a speedy getaway? Sure, she could turn into her wolf form, but shifting wasn't always the solution. Especially with so many humans around.

Security risks, security risks everywhere. It grated at my nerves, thinking of Hannah living her day to day life so exposed. And if I had my facts right, she also had no roommates, occupying her one bedroom entirely by herself. Surely she had to realize that she was putting herself in danger? While she wasn't the alpha's mate or his sister, she was quickly becoming a part of our inner circle. It was probably only a matter of time until the witches located and attacked her.

My stomach twisted at the thought. I would definitely need to install some security measures. Maybe some cameras in the rare blind spots, and I could hire that coffee-addicted, uppity green witch to ward the place. Yeah, that would be a nice start.

“Hey, there you are!”

I looked down the narrow, dark passageway between the two buildings to see Hannah standing there in an oversized t-shirt and a comfy-looking pair of sweatpants. It was definitely the most dressed down that I’d ever seen her, but it was charming in a way. Like I’d been trusted with a side of her that she normally didn’t show most people.

“Here I am,” I said, going for a polite voice. I wasn’t sure how well I hit it considering her expression faltered ever so slightly.

“Sorry for looking a mess,” she said, her cheeks coloring slightly while her scent soured. I had done something wrong, but I wasn’t sure what. Or maybe she was just self-conscious about me seeing her more natural state.

I hoped not.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, handing the box over to her. “You should get some sleep. You’ll need to go in an hour early most likely to get this set up.”

“Sure, makes sense.”

I nodded my head, ready to move past her to do a sweep of her place for any bugs, but I paused when I smelled something *delicious*.

It was relatively faint at first, but once my nose got a hold of it, it was like I was doused in the scent. It was warm and vaguely nutty, with notes of bergamot and lemon balm beneath it. It was summer incarnate: the promise of warm, hazy nights and cool breezes, the royal blue velvet of twilight quickly slipping into a deep purple before finally reaching the blissful dream of a pitch black sky.

I could feel my mouth begin to drool and I took a healthy step back, trying to figure out if Hannah was cooking something particularly heady. But that was when I realized

that I actually recognized that scent—it was just ten times more powerful than I was used to.

“Do you use scent blockers?” I said, unable to hide my surprise. Sure, they were useful things, especially for lone wolves who were travelling through other pack’s territories, but no one in our pack utilized them. Or so I thought.

Hannah’s cheeks went from slightly flushed to crimson and her brow furrowed. I supposed that I had just blurted a very personal question, yet I couldn’t help my shock.

If *I* had a scent that utterly delicious, that beckoning and comforting, I would wear it with pride. It would certainly help me in social situations when I rarely knew what to do. Computers were so much easier to deal with than people.

“Yeah,” she answered, her tone telling me that she wasn’t pleased with my invasion. But it was like I’d opened a program and it wouldn’t shut down because I blurted out the only thing I could think of.

“*Why?*”

“Because my scent is strong and it can be distracting,” she said much more tersely.

Drat. I was well-aware that I had taken the conversation in a wrong direction, but how could I not? I wanted to bury my nose in her dirty laundry until she was all I could smell.

Wait.

Once those words played through my head, I did realize that maybe there was a perfectly solid reason she preferred to mask her scent, especially considering that she was a young woman who lived alone.

And I was contributing to her discomfort. Yikes.

“Right, of course. Didn’t mean to pry. I have to get back to my projects, so we’ll talk tomorrow morning.”

“Wait. Didn’t you want to sweep my apartment for bugs or trackers or whatever?”

“Another time,” I said, swallowing hard. The idea of being in her apartment, surrounded by that intoxicating scent, was a bit too much. I *had* to remember that she was an employee and deserved the highest respect. “I’ll make you a sweeper that you can use yourself.”

“Uh, okay then.”

“You have a good night.”

With a tip of my head, I hurried off, cursing myself at how I’d fumbled that entire interaction. Oh, well, tomorrow was another day. Hopefully I could spend the night removing my foot from my mouth.

This was why I preferred coding to conversation. Outside of the inner circle, of course. Part of me was tempted to call up Parker or Theo and confess my fumble, but I quickly dismissed that idea. None of them needed to know that I’d just gotten weirdly personal with our young employee.

Some things were better left unsaid.



MY MORNING STARTED AS MOST of them usually did. I went for a half-hour run in my human form, heading towards the edge of the city, then shifting into a wolf and taking the back roads as far as they could take me. Then I would head into my place as a human once again and take a shower before brewing some strong black tea. While the caffeine didn’t really have an effect on me, thanks to my accelerated metabolism, the taste had a wonderful sort of familiarity that grounded me. It spoke of early mornings on the rez, sitting on the front porch with my grandfather, watching the shadows of night give way to the coral blush of the sun’s head as it crested the horizon. My grandfather would tell me about his life, and the life of our family before him, tales of indigenous shifters that I couldn’t find anywhere else. And while I was only half native, he never held that against me. No, he’d always treated me as just as worthy as any full-blood.

And for that, I would always be grateful.

I'd only just begun to sit down with my tea in front of my desktop when the phone rang.

"Hannah?" I asked as I picked it up.

"Yeah," she whispered. "I've got that button hot-mic you gave me. Am I coming across alright?"

"You're coming across just fine. Are you ready for me to walk you through?"

"Yeah, I am."

Of course she was. Because why else would she call? It wasn't like we had any other reasons to communicate.

"Alright, I'm gonna temporarily shut down the cameras so they don't have footage of you meddling."

"Much appreciated."

"I'll be able to see you through them soon, so you don't have to worry about describing everything to me."

She nodded, which I was only able to see because the feed finally loaded on my computer. It wasn't the smoothest, dropping frames every few seconds, but it was enough that I could keep track of her and make sure that she was safe.

Not that she was in danger in Bronson's office, but it never hurt to be careful. Besides, this way, I could keep an eye out if anyone was sneaking up on her.

"Here goes nothing," she said, grabbing a truly impressive stack of papers and hurrying out of her little office. I watched, a silent digital follower as she traversed down to a lower floor and finally entered the copy room. As she approached the final door, I realized it had a mnemonic opener that could be opened with an electric signal. I was maybe showing off when I opened it for her.

I was feeling pretty cheeky with my subtle help, but Hannah didn't seem to notice as she hurried inside.

"Huh, not gonna thank the gentleman for opening the door for you?" I joked, hoping my tone came across.

Thankfully, she laughed, watching as the door swung shut behind her all on its own. “My apologies. How chivalrous of you, my good sir.”

“Technically chivalry is the rules of engagement when jousting.”

“And technically we’re in the middle of a high-stakes job here.”

A swing and a miss.

“Right.” I cleared my throat and proceeded to walk her through everything she needed. We were about halfway through when Hannah let out a little huff.

“Something wrong?”

“No,” she murmured as she rebooted the settings menu we’d been navigating together on the copier. “Just thinking that this is very straightforward. Dontcha think you could have given me written instructions so we didn’t have to risk being overheard?”

There was a challenge to her voice that grated on my nerves. I respected Hannah’s chutzpah and drive, but I wasn’t exactly thrilled with her questioning everything. It drew out an already stressful process.

“What, you don’t like the sound of my voice?” I countered somewhat playfully.

“No, it’s not that. Just a bit distracting, is all.”

“Ah, I see. Well, if I’m so distracting, perhaps you should insert the scanner drive yourself.”

I expected her to falter a little, or hastily backtrack and admit she needed my help, but she just shrugged.

“Okay.”

Reaching behind the machine, she hurriedly opened the access panel and started fiddling with it. I couldn’t see any of her actions from the camera feeds. Growing more curious by the second, I gave her about a minute before I spoke again.

“Sure you don’t need any instructions?”

“Nah, I stopped listening to you about three steps ago.”

She what? Now *that* rankled me a bit, and I had to tell myself that I was far too old to let someone rile me up by going her own way. After all, it wasn't like she was egregiously messing up or anything. In fact, in a different situation, I would probably be impressed by her skill.

I was the one who needed an attitude check. She was just doing her job.

“Well, let's see if that pans out—”

“Done!”

Alright, but she could perhaps do her job a little less cheekily.

“Very good,” I said honestly, and I meant it. Her dismissive attitude needled at me, but that didn't mean I had to be rude or lie about her accomplishments. “I'm impressed.”

“If you think that's good, you should see what I do when my boss isn't micromanaging me.”

She said it with a chuckle, like she was joking around with an old friend, but something about it just rubbed me the wrong way. I wasn't micromanaging her, I was watching out for her and making sure an intern didn't make a mistake that could tank our entire mission.

“Micromanaging, huh? Is that what you think I'm doing?”

“I'm not saying it's what you're *not* doing.”

“Hey, I'm just watching out for that expensive tech you're handling. You've got more than most people's salaries between the bugs and what's on the drive.”

Hannah moved as I spoke, planting the bugs at vital points in the blind spots of the camera. Huh, she really was good. I mean, I always knew she was bright, but clearly she had a knack for the little details.

“If I'm really handling such expensive equipment that's vital to our situation, then I think I deserve a raise.”

She wasn't wrong about that. We were already giving her a sizable bonus, but considering how long everything was stretching on, perhaps adding some weekly hazard pay would be appropriate. Especially if I was dropping off things at her house late at night and requiring her to come in early.

I would have to float it past Theo, as he was the finance guy, but he was so busy that maybe I would just take it out of my personal spending budget with the company. Even if Hannah was grating at my nerves, she deserved to be properly compensated.

But it wasn't something that was going to be fixed within a day, so I pushed onward.

"For that last bug you've got, put it on the bottom of one of those empty trash cans just beside the locked doors. That way, hopefully one of their security-approved janitors will take it in tomorrow."

"If the janitors can get in there, why didn't we just get one of our own on the sanitation team so they could get into the department?"

Now that was a good question. "We did try that, but it was a no-go. It turns out their entire janitorial staff has been with the company for over twenty years and they don't replace anyone until one retires. So it'll be approximately...seven years before we would have an opportunity."

"Ah, that's a bit late."

"I would agree."

She finished putting the last bug into place, then straightened and fixed her outfit. She was wearing a rather attractive number with a polka dot top and a temptingly tight pencil skirt with a ruffle at the bottom.

"Last question," she said, looking at one of the cameras. And for some reason, the direct stare made me feel strangely seen in a way I wasn't used to, even though I was miles away.

"What's that?"

“If you can just open doors for me and replace their live feed with a previously recorded clean feed, *and* wipe records of me swiping my employee card, why not just open the door to that department’s elevator and let me spy my way through there?”

I chuckled at the thought of Hannah “spying” her way into an empty office, *Mission: Impossible* style. And not surprisingly, she sure looked good in the outfit my mind conjured up for her. Was there any way I could hack Bronson’s HR department to change their dress code to skintight jumpsuits and harnesses that bit into ample curves just right?

Easy there, boy. Professional. P.r.o.f.e.s.s.i.o.n.a.l. Respect your damn employee.

“They’re on a completely different security system. Pretty much every single aspect of it is remote and I haven’t been able to find a single gateway, connection, or backdoor anywhere. Whatever they’re hiding in there, it’s important enough that they’ve basically sealed it in a digital tomb.”

“Creepy,” Hannah remarked.

I couldn’t help but agree. We’d spent weeks trying, with me going directly at the security while Hannah either ran distractions or physical errands that I needed to get me an in.

“I’ve been trying to get into their group chat server as well,” she said.

“Eh, don’t waste your time with that. It’s likely just as locked away as everything else.”

There it was again, a frown pulling down the corners of her lips. While I wasn’t the most sociable guy, it wasn’t like I was inept, and I couldn’t understand why I always seemed to say the wrong thing to Hannah.

“I can’t say I like being underestimated,” she said.

Of course she didn’t. She was a bright woman and obviously talented. I wasn’t underestimating her, though. I just thought that her attention would be better directed elsewhere while I handled the heavy hacking.

But before I could say any of that, Hannah strode out of the room, head held high.

“The way I look at it, if we can’t hack the system, I’ll hack the people.”

Well, that was certainly a statement. “Just don’t be too obvious,” I cautioned. I didn’t want to discourage her because she’d proven to be plenty capable several times over. But she was also young and untested in a lot of ways. She was going to school for business, not spy games, and while I didn’t doubt her charms, I couldn’t help but worry.

It felt like we were on the cusp of a breakthrough. But maybe that was just errant hope, borne from all the dead ends we’d crashed into.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be,” she answered primly. “Now, if there’s nothing further, I’m gonna go shove a bagel in my face because I was too nervous to eat.”

Finally, something I knew how to handle. “Hey, you’ve done a really good job today. And while I can’t get you breakfast, I can buy you dinner. As a thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“And as an apology for underestimating me?”

“I *didn’t*—” I started before cutting myself off. There were some fights worth fighting, but this wasn’t one of them. “Yes, absolutely.”

“Alright, I’m game then. I’m so behind on washing dishes that I didn’t want to cook, anyway.”

“Behind on dishes?” I teased. “You need help loading them into the dishwasher?”

“Pffft, I wish. My place doesn’t have a dishwasher. It’s just a sink and sponge for me.”

Oh.

While I hadn’t grown up with a dishwasher, either, I’d had one pretty much since I started doing online gigs to help pay for college. It had been quite the transition, going from lower

middle class to exponentially rich, but I'd forgotten what it was like to have to do so many things manually.

"I got you. Well, at least you won't have to tackle them tonight then. I'll text you the location. Think you could meet me there at six?"

"Sure thing."

"Great."

I hung up before I could say anything else and make it worse. I was lucky that Hannah had agreed, considering how often I seemed to suffer from foot-in-mouth syndrome around her. Part of me debated sending her breakfast so she wouldn't just have a bagel smeared with the low-fat, bland cream cheese they had in the cafeteria. Perhaps that was a strange thing to remember, but she'd complained about it plenty of times in passing, and for some reason, that had always stuck with me. Mostly because a bagel without salmon, lox, and full-fat cream cheese seemed like a sin against man and shifter kind to me.

But as tempted as I was to get her something tasty, I figured the dinner thing was far enough, so I let it be. Besides, I had plenty of things to occupy my time until I got ready.

Pushing Hannah from my mind but still keeping my phone close, I got to work searching through digitized yearbooks and student files to see if we could get any sort of lead on the brothers or the witches. But even Sarah James's paperwork was largely fruitless.

Systematically searching through multiple districts over the past forty years was definitely a task, however. I felt like I'd barely made a dent when my alarm went off.

I rinsed myself off pretty thoroughly in the shower, making sure to use my scent-neutralizing body wash. This wasn't anything like actual scent blockers, which nearly suppressed a shifter's natural scent, but it did take the musky edge off of my odor. Not that I was ashamed, but I preferred it when people around me couldn't sniff out the moment I was aroused, angry, or feeling any other strong emotion. And unlike Theo, I wasn't

very good on clamping down on my pheromones manually. It was definitely a skill, but one I didn't possess.

The place we were going to wasn't overly fancy, so I dressed in a pair of jeans and a simple blue button-up. It was an outfit that definitely reminded me of my grandfather, and I couldn't help but wonder why he was on my mind so much lately. Were the ancestors trying to reach out to me?

I wasn't sure. While I'd spent several summers on the rez with him, listening to his wisdom with rapt attention, I hadn't been raised there. My mother, who had been fully white, had lived in the heart of the city, where she worked as a tutor for pack members' kids having trouble with math. It wasn't that she'd deprived me of my culture, just that she was desperately needed, and my father had been so busy fighting that he was rarely around. And their absence only amplified when they divorced.

Especially since I was the one who had exposed my father's cheating to my mother.

So yeah, losing my only native parent had been difficult, especially since he'd sworn to never speak to me again because of my betrayal. But the joke was on him, because his own father had sworn him off until he got therapy and apologized to my mother and I.

Except Dad never had, so I hadn't spoken to him since I was twelve.

Oh, well.

Hopping into my car, I headed to the restaurant and waited outside for Hannah to pull up. She drove an old beater of a car that was pretty hard to miss, with zip ties holding the hood down because the locking mechanism had long since broken. She'd told me how it was her mother's old car that had been passed down to her when their family could finally afford an upgrade, and she planned to drive it until she couldn't anymore. And considering how good Ellibie was and that she offered free repairs for the pack, that was going to be a good long time.

“Hey,” I said, crossing over to where she parked.

“Hey,” Hannah answered as she got out. She still looked quite put together and stunning despite her no doubt very long day at work. I knew I certainly wouldn’t look so composed after spending more than eight hours in an office setting. That was the reason I was the first of our inner circle to start working from home at least half the time.

“Shall we?” I asked, heading in. My instinct was to offer her my arm, but I didn’t want to come across as overly familiar. Thankfully, Hannah followed along.

“This is one of the places you own, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a smaller-scale one. I wanted to diversify, as fine dining places can be feast or famine.”

What was I doing? Hannah didn’t want to hear about my business portfolio after a long day at work. I probably sounded like such a stiff.

Being a wolf was easier when I didn’t have to speak.

“Yeah, I read that it’s like, a crazy number of restaurants fail within their first five years. What was it, like ninety percent?”

“Yeah, something like that,” I said as we entered.

I had hoped that we could keep it relatively low-key, but the moment I came in, the host rushed over to us.

“Mr. Helton,” he said in an only slightly panicked voice. “We weren’t aware that you were dropping in today! To what do we owe the honor?”

“Just a casual dinner with my work associate, if you don’t mind.”

“Right, of course, of course. This way. We’ll prepare your table for you right away.”

Well, at least no one was actively fawning over me. Hannah seemed vaguely amused by it all, chuckling slightly as we sat down.

“Something funny?” I asked lightly, hoping we could get off on a better foot than the one we’d been on lately.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you be so flustered before. You’re the humble sort, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know about *humble*,” I said. “I just don’t feel the need to boast about things. I feel like only insecure people need to openly brag about their financial accomplishments.”

“I know a lot of dude bros who would definitely disagree with you.”

“Well, thankfully I’m not a dude bro.”

She snorted lightly. A sound that probably would have been grating from anybody else, but from her, it was endearing. “No, you’re far too old for that.”

I nearly choked on the water that had been set in front of me. “*Old?* Did you just call me *old?*”

“Oh yeah,” she said, propping her chin up on her hand and sending me a snarky look. That smile looked so good across her full cheeks, and the sinful upturn of the corner of her full lips made me think of things that were decidedly *not* conducive to a professional meal. “You’re in your thirties, right? So you’re practically *ancient*.”

I could tell that she was pulling my leg, but there was only so much a man could take.

“I’m thirty-one, and that is not *ancient*.”

“Sure you’re not, grandpa.”

I narrowed my gaze at her. “You’re awful saucy for someone who still gets charged extra whenever she has to rent a car.”

“Ouch, way to hit me where it hurts.” She placed a hand over her chest in mock indignation. I couldn’t help but be charmed. Sure, I wasn’t a robust conversationalist, but I appreciated good banter when it fell into my lap. And Hannah was certainly good at banter, her eyes sparkling with charisma and her smile drawing me in.

The more we talked back and forth, the harder it was to deny I had a thing for her. A most definitely unprofessional thing—not that I would ever act on it. Hannah deserved a workplace free of any sort of sexual harassment.

But there was something about her that viscerally interested me, and had ever since I'd seen her headshot with her bright green hair. I'd debated hiring someone so young without directly talking it over with Theo. After all, she hadn't even graduated college yet, but in the end, I had brought her on.

I'd almost been disappointed when she'd switched her hair back to normal to blend in at the company, but I also admired her dedication. Once everything was over and things went back to normal, I needed to tell her that she could go back to whatever color she wanted. I wasn't the type to believe in corporate aesthetics. In the past, they'd been used far too many times to discriminate against my people and others like me. Tattoos, piercings, colored hair—none of that mattered as much as intelligence, loyalty, and dedication to the job.

“If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen,” I shot back, realizing I'd let the conversation drag just a hair too long into awkward silence.

But Hannah recovered like a champ and our dinner continued on. She was still her bright, engaging self while I kept myself firmly fettered with professionalism.

But one thing was for sure. I was going to need a cold shower once I got home.

HANNAH

Dinner with Jacobian gave me a weird mix of feelings that simultaneously kept me up way too late and up too early. On one hand, I was irritated by how he'd talked to me when we were setting up in the copy room. I respected him as my boss and an expert in his field, but I'd thought he was condescending to me a bit.

I'd tried to hold my tongue, but once I felt like he was underestimating me, I couldn't any longer. When I'd first said something, even though I had tried to do it humorously, I was sure that I was about to be canned. Especially when he asked me to dinner. In my mind, it was just him trying to take me to a neutral setting to tell me that it wasn't working out and I needed to go home.

But he hadn't done that at all. In fact, dinner had been quite pleasant, and we'd even been able to joke back and forth with each other. Some of those walls that seemed to perpetually surround him had lowered ever so slightly, allowing me to tease him and poke the wolf a bit, while he returned the favor.

I didn't even feel self-conscious eating in front of him, which was something. I was a very confident woman, sure, and I loved my size, but sometimes the insecurities from high school still came a-knocking. I remembered running for hours as a wolf and human, trying to live on rice and broccoli—not a great diet for a shifter or anyone who valued their olfactory senses. Thankfully, Ellibie, who was a larger woman herself,

had taken me aside several times, sat me down at her table, and helped me learn to love myself.

And that was saying something, considering that Jacobian was super fit. While not every thinner person hated fat people, a lot of them judged plus-sized folks like myself, especially in situations where food was involved. But I didn't feel an ounce of that from Jacobian, even if I felt...watched.

It was a confusing bundle of emotions. I still wanted to impress Jacobian, and I was more determined than ever to find an in with those secret department employees. And while I recognized that I didn't *need* to prove myself to my boss, well...my ego didn't really care.

Goodness, my mother had always warned me that pride comes before a fall, but she'd never mentioned that pride could also create a lot of overtime.

Whomp, whomp.

Nevertheless, I arrived at the office with more resolve than ever. I quickly set a mental schedule for getting that secret department guy's attention, and actually doing enough work for it to seem like I was really consulting. At least that part wasn't hard. I had been able to install an auto-clicker as well as an activity macro on the laptop they'd provided to make it look like I was still being productive in my office.

I may not have been as gifted a hacker as Jacobian, but that didn't mean I didn't know my shit.

Once I had my entire day planned out, I headed to the breakroom on that floor and started to make coffee. I was one of the earliest ones in, so I found myself surrounded by the 8 a.m. crew instead of the 9 a.m. But as I observed the faces around me in my peripheral vision, I realized that I'd hadn't ever seen anyone from the secret department in this large, minimal space.

Interesting.

Did they have their own location? That was the only thing that made sense, and it *was* a pretty great security measure.

The breakroom was the number-one place for idle gossip and learning things that people probably didn't want to get out.

Realizing that I wasn't going to be doing any off-the-cuff socializing in that particular room, I made myself a cup of cream and sugar with a side of coffee, then headed back to my office.

Once I was sure I was completely alone, I pulled out my phone and called Savvy.

That was another thing I never thought would be a normal occurrence in my life: being friends with the pack alpha. But Savvy had taken over the position shortly before I'd come back home for my internship, and we'd both connected over feeling like the odd ones out.

It wasn't like anyone was specifically unwelcoming to us, and I definitely had it better than the nurse, considering that I had grown up with the pack. But there was a noticeable gap between those who had always been in the inner circle and the two of us. Granted, once Lyssa had arrived out of nowhere, that gap had definitely begun to close, and I was infinitely grateful for that. She was a sweet girl, that was for certain, and I was happy to have her as our alpha's mate.

DUDE, Savvy, I totally need your help.

I DIDN'T EXPECT her to reply right away. Her day job as a nurse was demanding, and with everything going on with the missing people, it wasn't like her nights were much better. I knew that Mahlan had offered to subsidize her living so that she didn't have to work at all, but Savvy had insisted that she wanted to hone her skills and have a point of contact in the hospital in case any shifter accidentally ended up there. In the age of cell phones and social media, one unconscious wolf shifter or even a succubus could end up becoming national news.

And that was something nobody wanted. Humans were a scary bunch, that was for sure, and I would prefer not to be on

their bad side.

But Savvy must have been in the middle of a break because my phone buzzed maybe three minutes after.

WHAT'S UP?

I'M TRYING to buddy up to these two workers who are a part of that ghost department we can't get into.

And it's like...

Not going ANYWHERE

Got any ideas to weasel my way in with them?

I SET my phone down again, chewing on my thumb as I composed another expense report and began to highlight where erroneous spending was. Which, frankly, was everywhere. Mr. Bronson did not run a tight ship for being so concerned with wealth.

But I'd hardly even gotten through the first ten lines when my phone started rapid-fire buzzing. Wow, must have been a slow day at the hospital.

I'D SAY to just be bold with it.

Maybe spill a drink around them?

Ya know, to drum up a conversation while/after you clean it?

IT WAS A GOOD IDEA, but I was pretty sure that wouldn't work.

EH, I already played the dummy bimbo card before. I can't do the clumsy bit twice in a row.

That'd be far too sus.

HMM...

I TOTALLY UNDERSTOOD if Savvy needed to think about it for a bit. I was certainly stumped, but I tried my best to be patient. Or at least I was until my personal laptop—the one *not* supplied by the company I was infiltrating—let off a very particular ding.

Concerned by the new sound, I opened it to see that it was a security feed of the copy room, and the guy was just outside the door.

Score!

I'LL HAVE TO TTYL, Sav, the target is on the move.

GOTCHA!

Best of luck!

TUCKING my phone into my bra, I hurried down to the room, taking a bunch of stuff to copy with me. On my way there, I tried to figure out what my best opener could be, but I just didn't know enough about the guy. So I decided to just go with playing dumb again. After all, I'd already established that as my character, so why mess with something that worked?

Fortunately, I hustled in right as he was finishing up, counting the stacks of paperwork he had. I somehow managed not to sigh in relief, as that would have been way too much of a tell, so I swallowed the sound and pasted a smile on my face.

“Oh, hey there,” he said, giving me a banal, friendly smile. “Good to see you again...uh, I'm just realizing that I never asked your name.”

“Goodness, I’m just realizing that, too! I’m Hannah.”

“Staten,” he said, offering his hand in a shake.

I took it, hoping this would be the time I made the distance. But at least I’d made some progress no matter what. “But I prefer to be called Tate.”

“Tate, right. Well, *Tate*, I gotta admit that I’m happy to see you here.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I need copies again and I can’t remember how to get started.”

“Ah, your printer still in the middle of its rise of the machines?”

“Yeah, it’s all *Viva La Revolution!* in my office, lemme tell ya.”

“Well, lucky for you, I have a couple minutes to spare.”

He walked me through it again and I did my best to sound raptly fascinated and grateful as he explained the basic mechanics of a relatively simple machine. Not that I could blame him, because I was the one who asked for his help. I just wished that playing dumb didn’t grate on my nerves so badly. It worked far too well, especially when I had a little cleavage showing.

“Thank you so much,” I gushed profusely as we finished up and I started getting my useless copies done. “I owe you!”

“Nah, it’s no big deal.”

“But it is to me!” I insisted. “Please, lemme make it up to you.” I could tell that he was going to protest, so I kept going, not allowing him the chance. “Let me grab you lunch!”

It was a bit of a Hail Mary, but who knew when I would get another opportunity? And the crux of the matter was that the more that I tried and failed, the more suspicious I would become, which would make future attempts even less successful.

So I needed to strike while the iron was hot, so to say, even if my earnestness was a bit risky.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said, chuckling. And for a moment, I thought I’d blown it yet again, only for him to keep going. “But hey, you should join us at lunch! Me and a couple of friends usually like to grab stuff from the cafeteria during a project crunch.”

I returned his laugh but just a hair nervously, as I most certainly was aware of that. But there was no need to verbalize it. There was only so much humiliation I could take in a single day, and pretending to not know how to use a copier was the limit.

“Sure, yeah! What time?”

“We usually like to head there at one, miss the initial rush.”

“Gotcha. I’ll be there! Thank you for everything, you’ve been so nice!”

“Don’t worry about it. We all gotta stick together, don’t we?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

With that, I hurried back to my own office, not wanting to jinx it somehow. Once I was there, I heaved a sigh and whipped my phone back out to update Savvy.

Except I found there was already a text waiting there for me from none other than Jacobian.

Oh, what did he want?

Surprised, I opened it, my cheeks blushing a violent crimson as I read it.

FUNNY, I never pegged you for the dumb blond type.

I WAS SO shocked that my urge to be pithy beat out my brain. The next thing I knew, my thumbs were automatically hitting

“send.”

YOU'VE NEVER PEGGED me period.

...*WHAT?*

OH NO.

Oh no!

Had I really just said that to my boss? It didn't even make sense, considering I very much doubted he needed a strap-on.

WHAT? I responded back, mind going into panic mode. I usually liked my smart mouth, but now was certainly not the time.

THIS IS A TEXT. You realize that doesn't work, right?

I HAVE no idea what you mean >_>

ALRIGHT, well...

Look, you're brilliant. You don't need to dumb yourself down for these idiots.

Be the green-haired woman who inspired me to bring her onboard.

BRILLIANT? Inspired him? The compliments made my cheeks burn even more. I couldn't help but roll my eyes at my own giddy response.

I SAW THAT.

FUCK. Of course he did. And of course he thought it was about him and not me being frazzled by my own silly self. Yikes, I was flaming out for sure.

Well, the only way to go was forward, so instead I flipped off the room. It was brazen, yes, but I'd already talked to my boss about pegging, so how much worse could it get?

VERY MATURE OF YOU.

YUP, that's me, the epitome of grace and maturity.

YOU KEEP ON THINKING THAT. It seemed that I had gotten away with it, which was a huge relief. But still, I needed to be much more careful. It didn't matter how much I hacked the assholes in the secret department if I ended up being fired for sexually harassing my boss.

BUT WHAT HAPPENED with the man you were talking to?

FINALLY, something I could brag about!

HE INVITED me to lunch with him and his friends! So multiple points of contacts I can establish.

I THOUGHT he would be proud of me, would give me one of those little kernels of approval I craved so much. But instead, there was far too long of a pause.

If it were any other situation, I would have bounced my leg anxiously or chewed my thumb. But Jacobian could see me, and I didn't want to appear nervous. When he finally answered, I hastily opened the message.

SHOULD you really be going to lunch with this guy?

WHAT THE HELL did he mean by that? I'd finally weaseled my way in, and now he was having doubts? Bullshit!

YEAH, absolutely. There will be at least two of them there, but sometimes there's as many as four. It's a golden opportunity.

I'M SAYING, there's gotta be other options. Safer ones.

If you're already so set on a lunch date, I can send a car for you right now.

WHILE I APPRECIATE your concern for my safety, I'm going to see my efforts to fruition.

I HATED TO THINK IT, but Jacobian was really starting to piss me off. I'd been delighted that I'd always felt respected as a woman and an equal during my internship, despite my relatively low position on the totem pole, but this didn't feel respectful.

AND WHAT IF I tell you no?

WAS he really playing that card? Suddenly, I found my admiration for him fading rapidly. He wasn't giving any sort of reason for me not to go to lunch with secret-department

guy, and that just made me feel like a child being scolded by my babysitter.

So I laughed, I outright laughed, my thumbs flying across my keyboard. I was well-aware that when people thought of high-stakes wolf shifter drama, they thought of territory disputes and wild fights, not tense texts between an intern and boss.

YOU CAN, but Theo already gave me permission like two weeks ago when I mentioned I was taking my lunches by them. Remember?

SURE, he hadn't responded until midnight when I was well asleep, but it *had* happened.

THEO DOESN'T KNOW what he's talking about.

WAIT, what? *What!?* Where was all of the aggression coming from? Suddenly, I found myself wondering if I'd been wrong about the entire internship program.

KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL.

And this is coming from your actual boss.

OH, I was definitely going to need a meeting with the HR of Silent Ridge's company because that wasn't going to fly with me.

I CAN NAVIGATE INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATIONS, Jacobian.

YEAH, that was right. I was pulling out the first-name card. I wasn't going to let him intimidate me.

I'M NOT some simpering idiot who will be in danger in a cafeteria full of people during broad daylight.

AND THAT WAS THAT. More than a bit furious, I put my phone into "do not disturb" mode and shoved it right back into my bra. If he wanted to continue to message me, he could talk to my tiddies, because I certainly wasn't answering.

Fuming, I went back to my numbers, hoping the lunch get-together went better than my morning had.



FOR A LITTLE WHILE, I was worried that Jacobian would burst through the door and fire me right then and there. But after a couple of hours passed, I figured that he was most likely going to wait until after work or the next day. Which was fine with me, because I needed to talk to Theo about what had happened. It had been completely inappropriate as far as I was concerned.

Eventually, however, lunch rolled around and I had to calm myself down. I was pretty sure I'd managed to by the time I got down to the large room and chose my food, trying to channel serenity and happiness. I didn't want the mystery crew to find me stressful and sign me off forever. That would just prove Jacobian right and was about the last thing I wanted.

I was so concentrated on schooling myself that I didn't even notice Tate approaching before his food was suddenly on my tray. Blinking, I saw that he'd gotten an egg salad sandwich, an apple, and a cupcake.

God, what a boring meal. I was probably biased as a wolf, but where was the *meat*?

"Oh, am I buying your food after all? I'd be happy to!"

“Nah,” Tate answered with an easy smile. “I’m buying yours!”

“What? But I’m the one who’s supposed to be paying you back for helping me!”

“Like I said, don’t worry about it.”

He shot me a glowing grin, then took my tray up to the cash register, paid, and led me over to the table. I followed along, trying not to look nervous, but it was a hard emotion to clamp down on.

“Hey everybody,” he said once we were close enough. “This is Hannah. Hannah, this is Jessica, Kailey, Trenton, and Sydnee.”

There was a chorus of greetings from the group and I managed a little wave. “Hi guys. Thanks for letting me sit with y’all.”

“Of course,” Jessica said, and I recognized her as the woman I’d talked to before. She’d dyed her hair red since I’d seen her last, which looked quite good on her. But I didn’t want to comment on it because I didn’t want to come across as having spied on them. “The more, the merrier, right?”

“Absolutely,” I said, sliding into a chair as Tate sat across from me. The interesting thing about him putting his food on my tray was that we essentially had to share the same platter, which seemed strangely intimate.

And of course that thought made my mind replay everything that Jacobian had said. Was I playing with fire?

No. I wasn’t going to let him get into my head. I was a grown woman and more than capable of buttering someone up for a little corporate subterfuge.

“So, you’re that new consultant, right? Helping trim the fat or something like that?”

“Yup, that’s me,” I answered, seeing an opening to get more info. “I’m sorry, I’m still learning my way around here. What department are you with?”

“We’re in our own little cluster,” Sydnee answered helpfully. “We do a broad range of things from finances, customer relations, reorg.”

All general things I knew, but I pasted a smile on my face. “Well, at least you can switch it up day to day!”

“Ha, yeah, something like that.”

The conversation flowed from there, ranging from pets, to the weather, to new movies. All normal social stuff and absolutely zero office gossip. Which was annoying. Come on, where was the tea? The inter-office conflicts? They were killing me!

I did my best, reminding myself that I couldn’t be too smart and needed to maintain my air-headed disposition. It wasn’t the easiest thing in the world, but somehow I managed.

Or at least it seemed like I did, because as everyone was finishing up and leaving, it was Sydnee who turned to me again.

“You’re fun, Hannah. You should join us whenever we’re all here at the same time.”

“Sure,” I said, the inner wolf howling in success. It wasn’t the thrill of the hunt that she so craved, but I’d been stuck in a scholastic or corporate setting so long, she was taking what she could get. “That would be nice.”

“Alright then! See you around!”

“See you around,” I agreed, heading to my own office.

Full of my accomplishment, I looked up at the camera, just knowing that Jacobian was watching me.

“Just so you know, I met four other members of the department and they’ve invited me back anytime we’re both in the caf together. If that’s not progress, I don’t know what is!”

I expected an answer right away, but when none came, I wondered if I was being an idiot. Jacobian was a busy guy. Why would I assume he was just waiting around for me to return?

But then I remembered that I'd put my phone on "do not disturb," so I quickly hauled it out from where I'd tucked it in my bra. I knew some people found that gross, but if they wanted me to change the habit, God needed to make my boobs smaller and fashion designers needed to start putting pockets in women's clothing.

Sure enough, the moment I turned it on, a slew of texts slid through in rapid succession, all basically chewing me out. Jacobian was *livid*, that much was for sure, and my emotions were rapidly vacillating between panic and righteous indignation.

How *dare* he talk to me like that! I was just doing the job that I had gotten direct permission for, and doing it *well*. He needed to yank the stick he had up his ass before I kicked it so hard, it came out of his wolf's mouth.

But the very last set of texts made my stomach sink even further.

A MISSION like this requires the highest scrutiny and you are nowhere experienced enough to go off on your own half-cocked.

I am your boss and you need to listen to me or you could put everything we've done in jeopardy.

This is unacceptable.

I have plans tonight, but know that we absolutely need to have a meeting.

As soon as possible.

I SWALLOWED, sitting back in my chair and trying not to look like someone who'd just royally stepped on it. I was pretty sure that I'd just put my job in jeopardy, which was great, just great. Granted, I didn't think I would have done much differently if given the chance. My plan was a success and I had permission from Theo, who was higher up in the company than Jacobian. And it wasn't like the hacker hadn't known

that. He was a part of the group chat where I'd posted the original messages, and he'd been fine with it then.

So what had changed? Other than our dinner on our own, where I felt we'd really started clicking as a team, everything had pretty much stayed the same.

Maybe it was stress from what was happening with Lyssa, Emma, and the witches? Or maybe he was covering even more bases because of Theo's absence? Maybe, that certainly made sense, but it didn't mean I deserved to have it taken out on me.

Besides, the whole situation never would have happened if Jacobian hadn't suddenly decided to be such an *ass* out of nowhere. One thing was for certain: whatever meeting we had, HR was going to need to be there because I certainly had plenty to tell them.

JACOBIAN

I fiddled with the buttons on my sleeves as I walked into Theo's restaurant to meet up with the guys, sans Theo himself. Normally, we wouldn't really assemble without him or Mahlan, as that was a third of our circle, but given the circumstances, we figured it would help our leaders if we were all on the same page.

After our trip to Lyssa's pack just a couple weeks earlier, I'd dedicated myself to sifting through database after database of digitized records. I was pretty sure that I'd narrowed our search down to four sets of human brothers. The only issue was that according to their records, none of them were in a coma. In fact, the whole lot seemed to be in pretty good health. Not that I didn't put it past them to have somehow manipulated public records and articles.

It frustrated me that I hadn't found them yet, as internet sleuthing was my *thing*. Mahlan was the alpha and the best fighter amongst us. Theo was the strategist and had an eye for the little details, making him ideal for puzzle-solving. Kaleb was the quiet but observant type who was good at blending into the edges of rooms and seeing all sorts of things. Meanwhile, Parker was the heart of the group, full of positivity and an effervescence that I'd never had.

Which left me as the tech guy. The hacker. A purveyor of the dark corners of the web. What good was I if I couldn't even do *that*?

The thought left a bitter taste on my tongue and I was more than ready to order a drink to wash it away once we sat down. Thankfully, the waiter knew us well enough that he didn't even have to take our order but just showed up with our favorite drinks and appetizers. That was definitely an upside to owning our own restaurants and going out all the time.

"Please tell me that one of you has an update about the moonstones," I half-groaned, wanting to hear at least something positive.

I was in a foul mood, and it was largely to do with Hannah. I hadn't meant to snap at her like that, but she had just been so *difficult*. Not to mention outright disrespectful of my authority.

Sure, she was charming and no doubt could have that Trent, Trevor, or whatever his name was wrapped around her finger, but it just didn't sit right with me. I didn't like the thought of her dulling her shine or pretending to be stupid when all of her should be celebrated. It was like sticking a beautiful, powerful light under an opaque dome where no one could see it.

She'd taken offense almost immediately, and even though I could tell that she was getting defensive, I couldn't seem to pull myself out of the situation. And it probably didn't help that I'd lost my temper, too. I just wasn't used to being challenged like that, and I kept getting frustrated with just how *stubborn* she was.

So yeah, I'd handled it about as terribly as possible and I knew that it was going to take a lot to repair it. But it wouldn't just be *mea culpas* from me. Hannah needed to acknowledge that she'd crossed a line, and if she wanted to continue to work on such a high-profile case, she had to listen to me.

Granted, as the boss and older person, I was definitely more responsible for the situation. Ugh, when did my life become so messy?

Probably when witches had started attacking my fellow packmates.

“Sam’s been trying to heal ours to see if it can reconnect to us, but it hasn’t really been working. It tires him out real easily, though, considering all that Mahlan and Theo has him doing.”

“Like what?” I asked, trying to wrack my brain if I knew those particulars. There was so much going on, it was all beginning to turn into mush inside my brain.

“Like trying to break Emma’s curse, a bunch of stuff with Lyssa’s pack, warding stuff, trying to track witches, trying to track the brothers, you know. *Stuff.*”

I let out a low whistle. “That is an awful lot to have on his plate.”

“We should basically salary him at this point,” Parker continued.

“Wait,” Kaleb said, setting down his drink as if he’d just joined the conversation. And who knew, considering his reserved nature. Maybe he just had. “Is that why you’ve been coming home late each night?”

I watched in amusement as Parker’s cheeks colored the faintest pink. “Uh, yeah. I’ve been helping him.”

“I’m sure.”

“Hey, I *have* been helping him! Sam’s basically the best chance we have at figuring the moonstone out and breaking Emma’s curse. So if we want that to happen, we need to make sure he’s fed and watered.”

“Just like a houseplant, right?” Kaleb remarked dryly.

Ah, there it was, one of the rare but always-appreciated Kaleb quips. He wasn’t a comedian by any measure, but he had a delightful wit to him I always appreciated. We were always sending darkly funny memes back and forth.

However, Parker seemed delighted by the comparison. “Yeah, a lil’ green witch houseplant.”

I could hear the fondness in his voice and wondered just what was going on between them and what Kaleb thought of it. It was no secret to anyone in our entire pack that he and

Parker were basically attached at the hip, a sort of yin and yang ever since Kaleb's mother had died.

Being older than them, I remembered how Parker's mom and Kaleb's had been very close friends, having grown up together in the pack and living through all the trials that occasionally plagued Sawyer's time as alpha. Parker's mom had been devastated once the note was found, and had basically adopted Kaleb in everything but human law. They'd been best friends ever since, and it had kicked into overdrive in high school when Parker had been bullied terribly. I never really got why, but I figured it was just because the kid was a happy sort, and a lot of people didn't like that. A lot of miserable people, anyway.

"We're going to need to make a move soon," I said, downing my drink. "We can't let this go on forever."

"No, we can't," Kaleb agreed. "But while we're stuck in limbo, we need to give Theo and Mahlan all the support we can."

I nodded. "Do you think any of you could take over scheduling patrol? I know that's always been Theo's thing, and I have no doubt he's going to want to keep organizing everything around Emma's shop, but if one of us could take over the rest, that would certainly take some burden off him."

"I'll do it," Kaleb offered.

"And I'll ask him if I can take over inter-pack communication for a while," Parker added. "That's something I can do while helping Sam."

"Perfect," I nodded. "And I'll see if I can completely take over Addison's point of contact. Between her and Hannah, I'm sure we'll have things locked up at Bronson's in no time."

"Alright, good. We're all agreed then. We do whatever we can for the pack while we try to figure out why these witches are attacking us and where the brothers are hiding."

"Agreed," I answered before waving the waiter down for another drink.

Goodness knew I was going to need it.



I WOKE up stiff and already behind schedule, hurrying through my morning routine so I could head to our office a little early. As much as I loved my working-from-home days, what I needed to do required a professional setting.

Goddamn, I was getting sick of that word. It felt like it was ruling over my life far more than it had any right to. I was a *wolf* after all. When would I actually get to rip and tear into things like I should?

I wanted to call Hannah immediately and summon her to my office so we could get things handled, but unfortunately, life didn't work out like that. I had several meetings I needed to attend, my other interns to delegate, as well as more record-diving. Normally I would do that from home, but I figured any downtime could be research time, so I made sure not a second was wasted.

Before I knew it, my stomach was rumbling and one of our secretaries was bringing me a lunch that I hadn't ordered. Perhaps in another company that would be presumptuous, but it was standard protocol that if any of us went past two without eating, they had full permission to use the company card to get us something. It would probably sound silly to most, but it helped avoid any "hangry" office incidents.

Crap, I was supposed to talk to Hannah. Thanking my secretary for the emergency burger with the thick slice of avocado on it, I pulled out my phone and called her immediately. While it rang, I scrubbed through footage of her office and saw that she'd left right around one pm. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she'd headed down to the caf with that Tater-tot fellow.

That same uncomfortable, curling feeling happened in my stomach. The one that made me feel so tense that I could burst. I didn't like the situation, not one bit. Especially when Hannah didn't answer at first.

Concern lancing through me, I hastily flicked through other cams and saw that she was heading back to her office, her stride long and unwavering. A cloudy expression rested on her features and I couldn't help but feel that I was responsible for it being there.

Damn. We definitely needed to talk. The longer it went on, the worse it would be. Better to rip the Band-Aid off and have it out rather than let things stew.

Once she was inside her office, she pulled her phone out and mine lit up. Ah, she was returning my call now that she was in a safe position. Smart.

“Yes?” she asked when I picked up, as if it were my call that had gone through to her.

“Any progress for the day?” I asked, not quite sure where to pick up on things. I didn't want to just blurt out that we needed to talk—that sounded way too much like a relationship.

“It's going well. If that's all, I need to get back to the numbers.”

She was icing me out, of that much I was sure, but considering I had a huge debugging session coming up for our own company, I wasn't exactly eager to stay on the phone when it was already awkward.

“Alright then, carry on.”

Hanging up, I sat there for a moment. Probably my longest break of the day. But I could only loiter for so long; I had shit to do. Booting up my work rig, I started processing the info that Mahlan had gotten about Lyssa's pack. There was a possible lead connecting to the brothers.

Once I got all the points of data loaded onto a digital map, I began looking for connections via birth records, crime reports, anything I could think of. It was like chasing ghosts, except they were ones we didn't know the name of. Trying to track anything down was a nightmare.

Picking up my phone again, I called Sam. I was surprised when he picked up and sounded perfectly awake.

“Huh, when it rains it pours, doesn’t it?” he said practically in sing-song.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m actually on my way to your offices now. Gonna talk about my compensation with your big boss man.”

“Right, well, could you swing by my office? I have some information I want you to look at and do your witchy thing on.”

“My...witchy thing?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t think that I do. Would you care to elaborate there, buddy?”

I let out a low growl. “Don’t be difficult.”

“I try, but then life just gets so boring,” he said before taking a long, noisy sip of something. “But yeah, I’ll swing by. Don’t you worry your lil’ hacker head.”

There was something fundamentally wrong about Sam, a witch barely old enough to drink legally, calling me “lil’.” But I chose to ignore it.

“I’ll see you then.”

“Right on!”

Hanging up, I went about my work again, trying to stay aware enough that I wouldn’t be completely oblivious when Sam showed up. While I mostly trusted the young man, there was only so far to take that trust. You never really know, and I would hate to be stabbed in the back when I was least expecting it.

Although, if I was honest, Sam would never stab anybody if he had a choice. No, he struck me much more as an “ironic curse” type. Dancing to death to an endless internal playlist of Britney Spears songs, or maybe even drowning in iced coffee seemed way more likely than any sort of knife play.

The thought amused me, and I needed the chuckle. Far too many things were far too serious lately, and that was coming

from me, admittedly the most serious of our group. Except for maybe Theo. Well, pre-Emma Theo. I could see a lot of our beta's sharp edges slowly fading, even with all the tension still present from their unintentional coupling. Funny how over a decade's worth of unrequited love suddenly being requited could improve someone's mood.

True to his word, Sam showed up in about an hour's time, knocking at my open door. Usually I worked with it closed, but I hadn't bothered, knowing he was going to be rolling in soon.

"I would say sit down, boy, but you're already parked," the young witch said, waltzing into my office.

"Well, it's a good thing that you didn't say that because then I'd have to tear your throat out."

Sam was entirely unruffled, just grinning ruefully at me. "What, no praise kink?"

Well, if he was going to play that way, I could play, too. Fixing him with the flattest tone I could, I kept my voice low. "What about me ever gave you the idea I might be a bottom?"

At that, he swallowed, the slightest flush showing up on his umber cheeks. "Noted."

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with," I answered quickly. "Now, about the connection I called you about."

"Right, right. So where's this data you want me to look at?"

I turned one of my swivel monitors towards him, pointing at the digital web I had woven, then my other screen, with the spreadsheet I had full of conflicting or matching personal data. Sam stared at it for a long moment, his eyes flicking this way and that.

"You mind if I touch it?"

I shook my head. "Figured you would have to."

"You did?"

I nodded my head. “I’ve done some research since meeting you, and from what I’ve learned, green magic is very tactile. Part of the whole sharing energy and encouraging growth thing.”

Strangely enough, Sam looked...touched? That was bizarre. “Huh, you know I think you’re the first one out of your own pack who’s tried to learn anything about green magic.”

I frowned. We were risking things with trusting Sam with some of our deepest secrets and no one had even bothered to do some basic research? “That’s concerning.”

“Ah, give ‘em a break. Not everyone is as prepared as you. Besides, I was kinda able to skip the vetting process because of being ol’ friends with my girl Lyssa.”

That was true, but also wasn’t very good standard protocol. We’d lucked out with him, that was for sure. Especially considering what happened with Lyssa’s friend Sarah.

“Anyway, security concerns aside, lemme at that screen.”

I rolled my chair over to let him get closer, and he pressed his full palm to my monitor, first one and then the other. I felt the crackle of magic flow over me, but it was over almost as soon as it began.

“I’m not picking up any blatant magical patterns or anything like that, but I can take some print-outs of this and look at them...” he paused, trailing off as his brow furrowed.

“Are you trying to think of when you have time to fit this in?”

Sam let out a truly impressive sigh. “Yeah. Between the moonstone, trying to research into tracking witches through Emma’s curse...it’s been rough.”

“I can imagine. But hopefully we’ll find out why we’re doing this soon and take down the woman who’s attacked Emma twice.”

“Yeah, hopefully. And then Theo and Mahlan can finally move forward with their romantic dramas. I’m pretty sure

engagement is in the air for our alpha.”

My eyebrows went up at that. “You think so?”

“Oh yeah, I would say I know so. And that’s not just my magical intuition.”

That was a lot to wrap my mind around, but I chose to tuck that into the back of my head to worry about later.

“How is the moonstone thing coming?”

“Not great. I’m worried the reason I’m having trouble is that whatever other witch is connected to it is also dead, just like Sarah.”

“And it’ll be a total dead end if it is?”

“Yeah.” Sam heaved another sigh, and I felt bad at how defeated he sounded. “I think that I’m getting the vaguest hint of a feeling it might be one of Sarah’s birth parents?”

“What, really?”

“Yeah, I need to look into it more, but the magic feels maternal to me. I wish I could focus more on it, but right now, tracking down the witch who cursed Emma is paramount.”

“Of course, of course,” I said with a nod. “Thank you, for everything you’re doing for our pack.”

“No problem. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m about to go negotiate monetary gains for my help. Later!”

He shuffled out and I allowed myself another moment to sit and figure things out. We certainly had a lot going on, so worrying about Hannah being pissed at me shouldn’t even register as important to me. But it most certainly was.

Well, considering the timing, it would have to be yet another day. But first, maybe I would just check in that she was alright. Especially since that douche Tater or whatever his name kept hovering around her...

HANNAH

I looked between the pulled pork and the pitas, wondering if I wanted to make myself a particularly messy sandwich or a delicious gyro. Normally I would always go with BBQ, but they'd broken out their slow rotisserie roasters and had what looked like actual lamb meat at the ready.

If there was one thing I appreciated, it was that the cafeteria always tried to switch it up. Sure, they had their constants, like salad, subs, and grilled cheeses, but the other mains were pretty diverse.

I was so deep in thought that I didn't even realize Tate was approaching until he was right behind me.

"Hey there, Hannah. What's shakin?"

I made sure I had a broad smile across my face before I turned around. "Hey Tate, just thinking about my lunch before I joined you at the table. I really do appreciate y'all inviting me."

"Don't worry about it! You're hilarious and definitely a breath of fresh air. Most of us have already told each other all our jokes."

"Ha, I know how that is."

"Exactly. But hey, I did want to catch you before we got to the table."

"Oh?"

“Yeah, you see, I was just wondering...” Tate was getting flushed and my intrigue just about tripled. Either he was about to say something that would tank everything I’d worked for, or something that would make it all worth it.

And that I could rub in Jacobian’s face.

“Would you want to grab dinner Saturday?”

“Oh, are y’all doing some sort of group outing? That’s so kind of you to invite me!” I was pretty certain that it wasn’t a group thing, but I needed to be 100 percent sure.

“No, uh, I was...I was actually thinking more like uh, ah...” *Come on, spit it out man!* “Like a date.”

I would have been stunned if he hadn’t taken so long with the ramp-up, but victory bloomed in my chest. “I would *love* that, Tate! But Saturday I have a family dinner and I just *can’t* skip again. Could we do a different day?”

“Oh yeah, for sure. Lemme just check my calendar for this week and I’ll get back to you sometime after lunch?”

“Sounds perfect to me!”

Grinning, I followed him to the table as usual, making sure I wasn’t visibly gloating. I was yet another step closer to getting an in with the secret department.

But as we ate, and I kept up as much friendly conversation as I could, my mind went to exactly what Jacobian would think.

I had no doubt that he would object, and if it was anything like last time, I didn’t want to deal with it. Granted, meeting someone outside of work was different from meeting someone in front of a cafeteria in the middle of the day, surrounded by people. But it wasn’t like Tate was a shifter, witch, minotaur, or any other kind of fae. He was just a regular guy. One I could tear limb from limb if I had to.

Besides, he was kind of handsome and I enjoyed talking to him. It wouldn’t exactly be a burden.

By the time lunch ended, I decided that I was going to pitch the date to my bosses. If it were actually a romantic sort

of affair, I wouldn't have cared what they thought. But I wasn't interested in Tate at all. At least not beyond getting into that juicy secret department of his.

Interestingly enough, Tate walked me back to my office, his stride much surer and steadier than when he'd first come in. I supposed saying yes to his initial query was a pretty good confidence boost.

"I'll let you know as soon as I can find an evening free," he said, standing in my doorway. "I want to make sure that I can take you somewhere special."

"Somewhere special?" I echoed, practically batting my eyelashes at him. "Gee, all this fuss for little ol' me?"

"I'm sure you're more than worth it. You're a funny lady, Hannah. And you ain't so bad to look at, either." He winked at that and I giggled like a twit. Not that there was anything wrong with being amused by him, but his humor wasn't exactly mine. I wouldn't say that I was sarcastic outright, but I did like a whole lot of snark and irony.

"Well, lemme know then!"

"Will do."

With a tip of his head he was gone, leaving me alone in my office. I closed the door, checking my phone to see if I had a million and one texts from Jacobian telling me absolutely no way.

But I was surprised to not see a single message. Was he off the comms system? It wouldn't be the weirdest thing. It wasn't like he was constantly monitoring me—I would hate that. But he usually checked in after lunch.

Huh.

Well, I might as well get the hoopla over with. Gritting my teeth, I went ahead and called him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, sounding quite distracted.

"Uh, no, there was just something I needed to ask you."

“Can it wait? I’m working on formatting a print out to help Sam with something.”

“I, uh...” What, was I Tate all of a sudden? Telling myself to wolf up, I rushed forward. “Tate has asked me to meet him outside of work and I’d like to—”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“You didn’t even let me finish!”

“I didn’t need to. You’re not meeting up with Tate outside of work. Period.”

“You can’t just—”

And with that, he hung up.

Well, wasn’t that a pile of shit.

I was raging underneath, but calm and placid on the outside. I didn’t have a problem with authority, I really didn’t, but I *did* have an issue with “because I told you so” reasoning. So far, Jacobian hadn’t given me a single logical reason why I couldn’t continue what I was doing. It wasn’t like I was floundering at every pass. I’d gotten Tate to ask me out in just a week of talking!

I could feel that I was chasing myself in circles, so I just sent Jacobian a text.

WE NEED to discuss this further. Your behavior has been incredibly inappropriate.

I ALMOST EXPECTED a horde of texts to flood my phone, one right after another. But instead there was just silence and my phone screen eventually went dark.

Well, I could sit there and just stare at it, tormenting myself as I waited, or I could just move on with my day while I waited for the inevitable.

One thing was for certain—I wasn’t going to waste any more of my energy on Jacobian being a complete ass. Instead

of dwelling on it, I just got back to work.

While my nerves were fried waiting for the other shoe to drop, I made it through the rest of the day without any contact with Jacobian. Sure, I'd been dreading our one-on-one meeting in the back of my mind, yet I found myself wanting to meet so I could rip into him.

I didn't get it. The first two months of working together on the project had been easy-peasy. He'd been nothing but professional, even when a mysterious young woman had shown up and turned out to be our alpha's true mate. And when he'd chosen me to work on such a special project, I'd felt flattered. Like I'd won an award.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I understood a lot was going on. Emma had been attacked in her own shop and cursed, Theo had been forced to save her life and mate with her. Then the witches attacked again while the guys were out on a fact-finding mission with Lyssa's old pack. And I was aware that Jacobian and his inner circle were setting up some sort of trap for the witches involved, but it all relied on Sam being able to break Emma's curse. And as far as I knew, that was very slow-going.

But Jacobian had remained steady through *all* of that. It wasn't until I took charge and defied his orders to have lunch with Tate that he started suddenly going all aggro. And while I may not have been an alpha in any capacity, it didn't mean I was a doormat.

The whole situation bothered me all the way until I got home without a response from Jacobian. Well, if he wasn't going to his duty as my boss, I would just go to *his* boss.

Pulling out my phone with gusto, I called up none other than Theo. Hopefully I wouldn't be interrupting anything important.

"What's wrong?" he asked the moment he answered, his tone serious. I had to admit that I was a bit taken aback and wondered if I'd made the incorrect choice.

“Why does something have to be wrong?” I asked reflexively. Again, I was probably being too mouthy, but I was so stressed and tired of being talked down to.

“Because you usually check in with Jacobian,” he answered in a matter-of-fact voice, and his tone made me feel even dumber. The teacher’s pet in me was withering away, suffocating from his disapproval.

But I tried to keep my tone steady as I answered. I couldn’t let myself falter just because my inner child was suffering from some major rejection sensitivity dysphoria. I wasn’t going to lie, either, and decided to tell the truth.

“He already gave me his opinion, but I wanted a second one,” I answered plainly, trying to keep any sort of emotion from my voice.

Thankfully, Theo answered after only a beat. “You know we trust you to make your own choices.”

“I am aware.” Too bad Jacobian didn’t get that same message. I was half-tempted to ask Theo to remind him, but I knew that was definitely pushing things too far. Sure, I was a passionate person, but I didn’t want to let my anger rule me.

“What is it you need an opinion on?”

Right, I should probably get a move on. Taking a deep breath, I explained. “So I have a potentially complicated interpersonal issue.” I paused and a sigh forced its way out of me. Not exactly the best way to present my case, so I just continued on like it hadn’t happened at all. Maybe I would get lucky and he would think it was just the phone making noise. “A fellow coworker from a different department, the one that we’re having trouble getting access to, asked me to dinner.”

I finished, and we just sat there for a moment, the slight buzz of the phone line sounding like a trumpet in my ear.

But eventually, Theo spoke cautiously, but not with condemnation. “That’s certainly more than was asked of you.”

Okay, a neutral answer, but that was better than outright rejection. I pushed further. “But it could also open doors to get into that department.”

Another slight pause, but not nearly as long as the last one “Do you have any interest in the man? Or would this be purely corporate espionage?”

I couldn't help but laugh in relief at the idea, and once again, I decided to go with honesty as the best approach. People could say a lot about my flaws, but no one could call me a liar.

“He's handsome enough, but not really someone I'm into. It would be one-hundred percent professional. But I also recognize that if I botch things, it could compromise my whole mission.”

And if Jacobian was just willing to have a thorough talk with me about things, maybe I wouldn't be so set on proving myself right.

“We'd want you to have covert security if the two of you go out, but if you want to, I won't stop you. And I do agree it very likely will be useful.”

Yes!

Yes, yes, yes, yes, *yes!*

It felt good to finally have a professional, adult conversation, and the fact that Theo agreed with me was just the cherry on top.

“Alright then,” I said in what I hoped was a calm and pleasant reply. “I'll think about it overnight, but I'm banking on going. I'll send you the details tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

And that was that. It was amazing what I could get done when my boss wasn't being ridiculously difficult over nothing. “Thank you, Theo. I'll be in touch.”

Hanging up, I was more than a bit proud of myself. Jacobian had basically cock-blocked me with his unprofessional behavior, but I'd found a professional way to deal it.

Then again, I wasn't stupid enough to think there wouldn't be any fallout. Pouring myself a glass of champagne, I headed

to my bath and started to fill it up. While my one-bedroom wasn't the best, and it certainly was more expensive than it should be, I had chosen it for two reasons. One was proximity to other pack members in my income bracket, but most important was the *tub*.

It was one of the few big enough for me—a plus-size woman who wasn't really all that short—to fully sink into and soak. And I meant really *soak*. I did the whole nine yards. Relaxing bath salts mixed with a clarifying oil that stripped off my powerful scent-blocking lotions, deodorant, and perfume. While I didn't like walking around with anyone being able to smell my rather strong scent, I liked that my home could fill up with as many of my pheromones as I wanted and no one would complain or try to take advantage.

But as I settled into the warm, welcoming water, my mind turned to Jacobian. There was a possibility that I had permanently damaged our relationship, but I didn't see what choice I'd had. He was refusing to treat me like an employee, instead acting like I was some kid he was babysitting. If I had to go over his head just to do my job, well, that was on him.

Ugh. I still wasn't looking forward to the consequences. I was sure it wouldn't be pretty.

But once again, I wasn't going to allow myself to dwell on it. Shutting my eyes, I let myself thoroughly relax, the beautiful and assuring scents of my bath filling my small bathroom.

I couldn't say how long I lingered, but when I did eventually finish, I'd drained and refilled the tub twice. My fingers were so pruny that they could probably be harvested for some sort of terrible, raisin-filled trail mix.

I was reticent to get out of the tub, but I supposed I should probably feed myself. Ever since I'd joined Tate and his crew for lunch, I hadn't been able to pig out as much as my inner wolf would like. Because even if I was chubby by societal standards, I ate way more than any woman my size should be able to. A suspicious amount.

Hauling my body out of the tub, I dried off, then practically swaddled myself in the fluffiest oversized robe I had. I could really go for a full deer, tearing its meat from its bone in my wolf form, but there wasn't time for that. Besides, with so many witches running around, I was pretty sure that it was far too dangerous to be hunting alone late at night, anyway. There was a reason wolves were pack hunters—safety in numbers, right?

Instead, I opened a food delivery app so I could order. I decided on some Chinese food, as it was relatively cheap, and wonton egg drop soup sounded delicious. While I waited for the delivery, I went about tackling my dishes.

Not the best follow-up to my relaxing bath, but the task finally didn't seem overwhelming, so I knew I needed to strike while the iron was hot.

Putting on music, I got a bit lost in it, shaking my hips or occasionally swaying to the beat. It was almost kind of fun, or at least as fun as something like washing the dishes could be.

I was barely a quarter of the way through it when my phone began to ring, interrupting my music. Looking over at my screen, I saw it was Jacobian.

Well, I certainly wasn't going to pick up my expensive phone with wet, slippery hands while I was right next to my sink. He'd had the whole entire day to answer me, so he would just have to wait until I was done with my chore.

I went back to washing, only for my phone to ring again. And then again. Persistent, wasn't he?

Turning my water off, I dried my hands and finally grabbed my phone, but the moment my hand wrapped around it, it stopped ringing. At least he'd finally given up and realized that angrily calling me around nine at night wasn't appropriate.

But then, right as I was going to set my phone down, there was a loud, angry knock at my door.

No.

That couldn't be Jacobian, could it? Sure, he'd been to my place once before, but that was to deliver vital supplies. Surely he wasn't pounding at my door after dark to yell at me... was he?

As if to answer my question, my phone started ringing again. And this time, I answered it.

"Is that you out there?" I said as soon as the line connected.

"Yes, it's me. Open this door right now."

"Are you kidding me!?"

"No, I am not. Now, answer this door."

A lot of things ran through me all at once. But mostly, it was a whole lot of rage and a whole lot of shock. Storming over to the door, I threw it open, facing down my boss in nothing but a robe and pure, unadulterated indignation.

I was entirely ready to chew him up and spit out his bones, but the moment we were face to face, that feeling died. It wasn't that I was any less angry, but it *was* that Jacobian looked...

Well, he looked hot.

Angry, betrayed, and deliciously hot.

His long, deep black hair was down, falling loosely about his shoulders and down his back. I'd always known that he was Native American, at least partially, but I'd never really thought about it before. But his heritage was undeniable now, with his strong brow, broad nose, and lustrous hair cloaking him like the night sky.

And maybe, just maybe, I liked the thrill of how angry he was. He was staring me down like a predator, and my own inner wolf snapped her teeth in interest. She always did like a challenge.

But just as it was jarring to see him in a new way, he seemed equally surprised by my state of undress. His dark, demanding eyes flicked over my body, up and down, before managing to return to my face again.

“Are we gonna do this out here where all your neighbors can see, or do you want to do this inside?” he said, voice low. Dangerous.

I couldn't ignore the thrill when he spoke, but I did my best to not react. Instead, I took a step back and allowed him in. He shut the door behind him before returning to staring me down.

“You went over my head,” he said. His tone shouldn't have sent a shiver up my spine, but it did. I didn't know if I wanted to punch him or kiss him, and the logistical part of my brain began to wonder if maybe I could do both.

“You wouldn't let me do my job,” I countered.

“You can't do your job if you don't *listen*.”

“How are you going to talk about listening when you won't even let me speak!”

Our voices were quickly rising, and I didn't realize that we were slowly coming closer and closer together until our chests bumped.

I was angry, *so* angry. How dare he come to my apartment! How dare he blow up my phone and barge in like he *owned* me!

“Your job isn't to speak!”

“And it's not to sit silently, either, you ass!”

I shouldn't have sworn at him. I shouldn't have insulted him. I knew that, and yet I did it anyway as the fire simmered under my skin.

We stood there a moment, staring each other down, electricity crackling between us.

And then he was kissing me.

It was like my mind completely blanked out. Excitement, exhilaration, and arousal were coursing through my system all at once. It took me a moment to catch up, and when I did, I realized that Jacobian was still ravishing my mouth, his strong fingers wrapped in the lapels of my fuzzy robe.

I should have been infuriated. I should have slugged him across the face. But I didn't do any of that. Instead, I wrapped my arms around him, clinging to him like he was my last lifeline, giving him exactly what he gave me.

I went from furious to incredibly turned on, my body surging with the thrill of it all. I wasn't virginal by any means, but I hadn't really been with anyone since my sophomore year. Not for lack of interest, but I was so busy and dedicated to my grades that I didn't really have the energy to date. And while I'd tried hook-ups and one-night stands, they didn't really do it for me.

See, all of my flings had been with humans, and humans just didn't satisfy whatever my inner wolf was craving.

But my inner wolf was most *certainly* intrigued by the attention Jacobian was lavishing on us, his kiss bruising in the best ways. It stole my breath away, but I wanted to suffocate. Choke on it until there was nothing left.

Then, just as suddenly as it had happened, Jacobian practically wrenched himself away, his back hitting my door. Yet again, we found ourselves staring at each other, breathing raggedly.

"Put on some fucking clothes when you answer the door," he snapped before throwing my door open and storming out.

What.

The.

Fuck?

I knew I was relatively young, but I was pretty damn sure that wasn't normal. I wasn't sure if I should run after him, but in the end, I didn't, choosing to slam the door closed. I was sure my neighbors would complain about the sudden noise, but I didn't care.

Taking a few cautious steps back, I rubbed my lips, wondering if I had just hallucinated the whole thing. But no, my lips were still soft and puffy from where he'd demanded them, and touching them made another pulse of arousal go through me.

That was right around when I realized that in our torrid kiss, my robe had fallen open. Meaning, I'd basically flashed my boss. That thought made my cheeks burn, but also something inside me churned with pleasure.

I wouldn't say I was an exhibitionist, so the thrill surprised me. I looked up to Jacobian, and I had admired him before our bickering started, but that didn't mean I wanted to make the beasts with two backs with him.

Except I did suddenly find myself suddenly quite interested in getting supine with the lupine, as it were, my mouth watering at the idea.

“Come on, Hannah, get yourself together!”

Hurriedly, I crossed to my fridge and pulled out some juice, chugging it straight from the bottle. Not something I would usually recommend, but I lived alone, so who was around to complain? It wasn't like I had to worry about someone else tasting my backwash.

I'd just made out with my boss. I'd just made out with my *boss*.

And it had come out of nowhere. I was well-aware that it definitely wasn't a good thing, yet I wasn't exactly upset about it. I'd certainly enjoyed myself, and I could feel my inner wolf asking for more. She wasn't happy with the sudden cut-off, and neither was I.

But at the same time, it had just come out of nowhere. And it was *wrong*. He was my boss, point blank, and he was in my alpha's inner circle. He'd been a dick to me for—

Oh.

Oh.

Suddenly I got it, the idea birthed from the passion in our shared kiss. Jacobian had suddenly shut me down because he was jealous!

In order to be jealous, though, he'd have to want me, and I was certain that couldn't be the case. He was just caught up in the passion and lack of sleep, that was all.

Still, I wasn't looking forward to what the next day would bring. No matter what, things between us would be incredibly confusing.

Letting out a frustrated scream, I abandoned my dishes and went about putting myself to bed. I may have not been the one being hunted down by witches, but I was far too stressed from dealing with the rest of the mess.

Sleep. I needed sleep. Everything else could be dealt with later.

JACOBIAN

I paced next to my car, done with my day at the office but still pissed as hell. And I had absolutely no reason to be so upset. Yet I knew exactly why, and that was driving me further up a wall.

The truth was I was angry that Hannah was going on a date with that idiot, Trevor. Or Trent. Whatever his name was. And I was angry that she was defying me. That didn't mean I could walk all over her, but I just wanted her to be safe. Didn't she get that?

Frustrated, I yanked my phone out of my pocket and dialed Theo. If there was anyone who would help me with the situation, it was him. He hadn't earned his reputation as an Ice King for nothing.

I wasn't sure if he would answer, considering all that he had going in his life, but he picked up on the last ring. I certainly wasn't going to call him twice unless it was an emergency.

"Hello Jacobian," he said, sounding ever so tired. "I figured you would call."

"Oh? Why's that?" I was usually more of a texter than a caller, and honestly, I wasn't exactly the most active in any of our group chats.

"Hannah called me."

My eyes widened, and the anger in me doubled into full-blown rage. "She did?"

“Yes.”

“And?” I prompted, knowing my tone was terse but not caring.

“And she explained the situation to me. If you’d like to correct any of it, you’re more than welcome to, but as far as I understand, she was requesting permission to go on a fake date with an employee of the department we’re trying to get into.”

It sounded so *rational* when he said it like that. He didn’t get it! “Listen, she—”

“Unless the next words out of your mouth are a correction, it’s just a waste of time.”

I paused, silently seething as I figured out if there was anything I could add. But no, Theo had pretty much said the long and short of it. I couldn’t explain the nuance to him without sounding insane.

Maybe I *was* insane. I kind of felt like it.

“Right, I thought as much. Listen, Jakko-boy, I understand being concerned considering all our pack members who are going missing, but she and I agreed that she’d have a covert escort. She’ll be perfectly safe, and this could be a huge boon to the company.”

He was right.

He was right, and I knew he was right, but still I wanted to argue.

“It’s more complex than that. She’s young and—”

“Jakko-boy, I don’t know why you’re being so difficult with this. Hannah is an incredibly bright woman and if she believes she can handle this, then she can.”

That was the issue! She was incredibly bright and capable, which was why losing someone like her would be incredibly detrimental to our entire pack! Not to mention if the enemy captured her. What if they tortured her to get information out of her? The thought made my fangs start to grow and my nails sharpen.

“It doesn’t matter if she’s bright or not,” I snapped, talking to our beta in a way I hardly ever did. And especially not since we’d all gotten out of puberty. “You’re putting her into a situation that’s incredibly dangerous!”

“Yes, a situation that she asked to be in and believes she is fully capable of executing safely. You helped pick her for this position, Jacobian. Has she given you any reason to distrust her?”

“No... “ Dammit, why did he have to make sense? My inner wolf was snarling, telling me to challenge him and protect Hannah. But I had no right to feelings like that. She was my employee, not my mate. “I guess not. It’s just...” I trailed off, wanting to say more but unable to summon up the words.

“It’s just *what*, Jakko-boy?”

“Nothing. You’re right. I’m probably just being paranoid.” Yet, a growl slipped out of my mouth, surprising me. I usually had a better clamp on my emotions than that.

I could tell when I was beaten, but I wasn’t going to just give up. Hannah was far too precious. While a covert escort was good, it wasn’t enough. “But I’m telling her she needs a bug before she goes on her date tonight. You can never be too careful.”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

“Alright. I’ll talk to you later, Theo.”

“You too, Jacobian.”

He’d used my entire given name, not the silly nickname the inner circle sometimes called me, which meant he had to be exhausted. It would be better if I left him out of things.

I hung up feeling guilty that he’d been disturbed twice, but then the anger came dripping back in. Hannah had gone over my head. I was her boss, and she’d blatantly given me the run-around by going to Theo.

Suddenly I felt like I was going to burst from my skin. I got into my car and sped the entire way to my apartment, but

that didn't help. I showered, changed into more casual clothes, and took my hair down to braid it like my grandfather and mother used to do for me when I was a teenager, too overwhelmed to keep up with all the work that went into having healthy warrior's hair. But after my third time starting the plait, I realized my hands were shaking far too much to get it done.

My inner wolf knew what it wanted. It demanded I go out and challenge Hannah, just like she'd challenged me. But I wasn't a slave to my baser urges. I was her boss and would act accordingly.

If only someone could tell that to my teeth and the fur spreading across my forearms.

I was too far gone, and I knew that. Cursing, I rushed out of my apartment and jogged toward the park. I didn't have the most privacy around the high-end apartment complex, but it was more than Mahlan or even Theo had. I only had to run a short ways before it was clear enough of other scents that I could shift.

And boy, did I shift. I didn't think I'd been in my wolf form since we'd run for Emma's shop during the second attack, our entire inner circle barreling out of the van to charge to the rescue. It felt good to be a wolf again, my paws against the earth and the wind in my sizable lungs.

Sometimes I worried that I had lost track of what being a shifter was all about. That I was too wrapped up in the internet and corporate sabotage. But when I let myself slide into my lupine form, everything felt right again.

It didn't take me long to reach Hannah's small apartment, and I shifted back into my human form towards the back of the building. Blood pulsing through me, I charged up to her door, my phone already in hand so I could call her.

It rang, it rang, and it *rang*, each shrill bleating like an exclamation point to my ears. And when she wouldn't answer, my temper flared harder.

I was out of control, my wolf taking over after being denied play and fight time again and again. But I couldn't stop myself from calling.

And calling.

And calling.

The disrespect was just far too much, so I banged on the door. Finally, I heard the water that had been running inside shut off, and I belatedly realized that Hannah might not have been actively ignoring me. Hadn't she mentioned something about dishes that she needed to wash?

But I didn't have time to worry about it, and instead, I called one more time.

"Is that you out there?" she asked, sounding shocked. Which was understandable. I'd heard music playing faintly. That, combined with the water, could easily make it so she couldn't hear me, even with her enhanced senses.

"Yes, it's me," I snapped, completely fed up with her. "Open this door right now!"

It was ballsy to demand as much, yeah. But it wasn't entirely unheard of. In some packs, their alphas could just walk in whenever they wanted, demanding food, space, or even companionship. However, that kind of extreme tyranny and control had largely fallen by the wayside, with most shifters realizing it would be better to be on their own than part of a toxic cult. Besides, they could ask to be adopted or marry into a healthier pack.

But shifter culture aside, I was going to talk to Hannah and reestablish the pecking order of our little hierarchy.

"Are you kidding me?!" she spat back with just as much venom. While that definitely made me angrier, there was also some part of me that liked it. Liked the challenge in her tone and the sheer chutzpah she had.

"No, I am not. Answer this door."

She hung up, and if she was going to leave me outside, I was completely ready to knock again. Hell, I'd knock all night

if I had to.

Thankfully, it didn't come to that. I heard her footsteps approaching the door and I composed myself as best I could.

Strangely enough, I wasn't prepared for her to throw the door open and glare at me, but that was exactly what she did. The sound of the slamming no doubt disturbed at least a few of her neighbors, but neither of us really cared. We were well beyond that.

And that was right about when I noticed what she was wearing. Or perhaps more importantly, what she *wasn't* wearing.

My eyes traveled up and down her body, taking in the oversized, fluffy robe covering her. Technically, she was more clothed than when I usually saw her, but the idea that she was completely naked underneath that one layer drove my inner wolf wild.

Flicking my gaze up to her face, I saw that she was still pleasantly flushed from her shower, her hair just damp enough to send the occasional little rivulet of water down her face, the side of her neck, and her décolletage.

It was an alluring sight, that was for sure, especially paired with the glare in those eyes of hers. She had an intensity to her that thrilled both me and my inner wolf, my body responding in kind.

But it wasn't enough to completely distract me from my anger, and I pushed myself forward.

“Are we gonna do this out here where all your neighbors can see, or do you want to do this inside?” I asked, voice low. I wanted her to know how completely serious I was and that I had been playing nice earlier. She couldn't just walk all over me and flout the very hierarchy that kept our pack safe. I was a reasonable person. I was.

Except, apparently, when it came to Hannah putting herself in danger.

She opened the door wider and stepped to the side so I could come in. I slammed the door behind me without

meaning to. Whoops.

“You went over my head,” I said, my tone holding no quarter. It was a strange sensation, my brain being so set on reprimanding her, but my body quickly growing interested in something else entirely.

It was just that she was so *goddamned* beautiful. And smart. And headstrong. All the things that piqued the interest of my inner wolf and left it salivating.

“You wouldn’t let me do my job,” she countered, her brow furrowing as she took a step closer.

I didn’t realize it at first, probably because I’d been so angry, but as she drew closer I was suddenly enveloped in that amazing scent of hers again.

Shit.

Of course she would take her scent blockers off in her own house, especially fresh from the shower. Suddenly I was acutely aware that the deep, enticing scent wasn’t just coming from her, but it was *everywhere*. On the walls. On her furniture. It was driving me crazy in the best way, making my heartbeat thunder in my ears.

If I’d have known that she could smell so strongly, so alluringly, I probably never would have been able to get through a single pack dinner. It was like her pheromones had been designed specifically to beckon me, a siren’s song tempting me to crash along the rocks.

And I was tempted. Oh, was I *sorely* tempted.

“You can’t do your job if you don’t *listen*,” I countered, somehow able to pull myself out of the tailspin of desire I could feel my mind falling into. It was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before.

Sure, I’d dated a handful of shifters casually, and while several had been great fun, that was all they’d been. Fun. What I’d felt like with them was something completely different from the bone-crushing, heart-rending, blood-pumping attraction I felt to Hannah.

“How are you going to talk about listening when you won’t even let me speak?!” Hannah yelled, taking yet another step towards me. I didn’t realize that I was coming just as close to her until our fronts physically touched, and the moment we did, it was like I was struck by lightning.

Desire, so visceral it whited out all logical thought, swamped me so thickly that for a moment there was nothing else. It filled my veins and rose my temperature, calling my inner wolf right to the front of my consciousness.

I was losing my footing to myself and I tried to wrench myself back, reminding myself of exactly why I was there. And it was to reprimand Hannah, not simp over her.

“Your job isn’t to speak!” I blew up right back. I knew in the back of my head that we sounded like teenagers yelling at each other, but it was far too late to retreat.

“And it’s not to sit silently, either, you ass!”

I swore that fire crackled between us, those full lips of hers pulled back to show her sharpened teeth, her inner wolf clearly just as incensed as mine. She was a force of nature, an inferno, a tempest, a hurricane that I wanted to experience. I wanted her to tear me to shreds, to change me forever by experiencing everything she had to offer.

So I kissed her.

It was wrong. It was stupid. I was her *boss*. And yet, it felt oh-so-right. Every single cell in my body was electrified while my inner wolf was practically in a frenzy, encouraging me to lose myself to the moment.

I should pull away. I *needed* to pull away, but my fingers laced themselves through the lapels of her fuzzy robe, clinging to her like I was afraid she was a dream that would slip through them and disappear.

I pressed further, knowing my kiss was demanding too much, was too bruising, too dominating, but she returned it in kind, her arms encircling me like she was just as taken by the passion consuming me.

It was too much, all of it. I was violating rules that I swore to follow. I'd never lost such complete control and, even though I knew I was messing up, I didn't want to stop. Especially with Hannah giving everything I gave her right back.

It was a maelstrom, alright, but then the tiniest of moans escaped from her mouth and that somehow snapped me back to reality.

I threw myself backwards even though it pained me, breaking a kiss that I never should have stolen in the first place. Vision bleary, I looked to Hannah's face, trying to catch any discomfort or unhappiness across her beautiful features. But she just looked half-lidded and sexed-up, her cheeks pink and her lips kiss-swollen in the most perfect way.

God, she was gorgeous.

But then my eyes traveled downwards and I realized that her robe had fallen slightly open. Not enough to bare her completely, but certainly enough to recognize the bountiful curves of her breasts, the soft swell of her stomach, including that particularly plush part that drove me crazy every time she was wearing a tight pencil skirt.

Then there was the slightest hint of her blondish hair in an enticing glimpse between those thick thighs of hers. The very thighs that I wished I could hold, bite, and otherwise worship.

She was a goddess, standing before me like a vision, and she didn't even know. A deity, and yet I was there *yelling* at her.

I...I needed to go. I'd lost all of my control and I'd basically sexually harassed my subordinate, even if it was the best kiss I'd ever have. Panic rose again, replacing all my anger, and the next thing I knew, I was snapping at her.

"Put on some fucking clothes when you answer the door," I ordered before throwing her door open and storming out.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

As soon as I was out of there and to a safe part, I burst into my wolf form and went right back home, trying to push that experience from my mind. But trying to forget kissing Hannah was like trying to forget heaven itself, and I could still taste her even when I reached my apartment.

So I brushed my teeth, the only natural conclusion I could come to. I knew there had to be a shit-storm on the horizon considering what I'd done, and the thought was pushing me into a spiral I didn't want to go down. So instead, I threw myself into my work.

I did everything. I refreshed servers, updated security. I encoded more information about Lyssa's pack and plugged that data into the programs I had that was tracking it all and mapping it all out. I even trawled through local and non-local hospital records, hoping for any leads that might help us track down the brothers.

Somehow, I managed to get lost in it, especially when I moved onto banking records, and before I knew it, it was well into the night.

"Huh," I murmured to myself, grateful for all the time passing. I had certainly been spared letting my anxiety beat me up for several hours.

But even with the break from my nerves, I was still in a mood. I wasn't angry anymore, at least I didn't think I was. What I felt was...shame.

I'd crossed a line, there was no doubt about it. Violated her trust in a way that should never have happened. Sure, maybe she hadn't punched or kicked or objected, but she never should have had to. And I most certainly shouldn't have reacted how I did. It was unprofessional—there was that word again.

I should apologize to her. Talk to her. Make sure she knew that I knew I was in the wrong.

Fumbling for my phone from where I'd left it on my desk, I hit her contact. It wasn't until the phone was actively ringing that I glanced at the screen and realized just how late it was.

“Four a.m.?!” I cried, completely shocked. I knew that I’d gotten lost in my work, but not *that* lost. I rushed to hang up, but the call was accepted before I could.

“Hello?” she asked groggily, sleep evident in her voice. Guilt washed through me once again, knowing that like most of us, she probably wasn’t getting enough unconscious hours in.

“Hey,” I answered, suddenly at a loss. My enhanced hearing picked up a rustle, and then suddenly, in a move that was just about the last thing I expected, a call request came through to switch to FaceTime.

Surprised, I accepted the invite, only to see Hannah, eerily illuminated by the light of her phone in an otherwise completely dark room. It made her look almost haunting in a way, the features of her face that I admired so much taking on an ethereal appearance. Naturally, my eyes traveled over her, studying everything the phone revealed, and I realized that she was in just a bralette, the rest of her body fading into the pitch black.

Oh.

It was the second time I’d seen her in a state of undress in a single day, and my inner wolf responded right along with my dick. Suddenly I was rock-hard and very much remembering exactly what her body had felt like pressed up to mine as we kissed.

“Why are you calling at...” she paused. “Four a.m.?” Her voice was a mixture of annoyed and confused, which somehow mixed to make her seem cute to me. I liked drowsy Hannah, if only because she was too sleepy to realize just how angry she should be with me.

“I’m sorry,” I started, trying to say the words when my eyes kept wanting to flick down and admire her ample cleavage. I’d always liked bigger women, the softness of them, their femininity, how my fingers could sink into them when I gripped them, coaxing me to go harder. “I couldn’t sleep because I wanted to apologize to you.”

She didn't seem to expect that, her sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes suddenly snapping open much wider. "Well, that's good, because you had no right to speak to me how you did, especially since you had no logical reason why I couldn't do the project. And you also had no right to come to my house and yell at me, then order me about what I can wear or not."

I nodded, in full agreement. "I am truly sorry, I am, but I don't think FaceTime this late at night is exactly appropriate for boss and employee."

I internally cringed, wondering if she was going to bring up the fervid kiss that *I* certainly wouldn't be forgetting anytime soon. But instead she shrieked, and the video feed flew through the air before going totally black.

I couldn't help it, I chuckled. Because how could I not? If I hadn't majorly violated an employee-boss boundary earlier, maybe I would have outright laughed.

"Oh my God, why didn't you tell me I hit FaceTime instead of speakerphone! I was wondering why you were being so quiet."

"Hannah, you're a wolf. There's no such thing as quiet."

"You know what I mean!" After some more huffing, I was pretty sure I heard her open a drawer, then I heard a fabric rustle. When she finally picked the phone back up, she unfortunately was much more covered and wearing a t-shirt. Part of me wanted to see her spread out before me, preferably on silver, satin sheets that would look impeccable against that soft skin of hers. But the other had at least half a brain cell and was very aware of why her being more clothed was actually a good idea.

Not a fun idea, but at least a good one.

"Look, I'm sorry for going over your head. I won't do it again, I swear, as long as you treat me fairly. I respect you as a leader and my boss, but there has to be a bit of a two-way street. I earned my place in the mission by now, I think, so all I'm asking is you at least hear me out, especially when I'm so sure of something."

“I respect what you’re saying, I do, and I hope you do accept my sincere apologies. But-”

“Apologies don’t have buts,” she said, cutting me off with an irritated expression.

“*But*,” I continued. “You have to understand that you can’t just run to the beta of our pack, our alpha’s right hand man, because you’re mad at your boss.”

“I didn’t go to him because I was *mad*,” Hannah snapped. “I was just finally making progress, and since you wouldn’t even hear me out, I had to go to someone who would give an unbiased response. And I got it.” Her tone softened ever so slightly and those bright eyes of hers met my own gaze. “Trust me, I know how to take care of myself.”

A stubborn part of me wanted to argue, but I knew I couldn’t. She was right. The discomfort I felt about her going anywhere with Tate had influenced me, and I hadn’t treated her how I would any other employee. Which I owed her.

“Alright,” she said. “Now, unless you have any more comments to make about my clothing, I’d like to go to bed.”

I shouldn’t have said anything beyond a goodbye, but apparently my wolf was in control, because the next thing I knew, my mouth was moving. “Eh, I liked what you were wearing earlier personally.”

Hannah froze for a moment, and it was interesting to watch her blush creep up her face in real time. Swallowing, her voice was hoarse when she answered. “You would, wouldn’t you?” That was all she said before she cleared her throat. “You know, you’ve seen me in a state of undress twice now. Some would call that unfair.”

What?!

It was my turn to stare for a moment. It was only the growing panic on Hannah’s features that bolstered me back to life.

“Sorry, it was a bad jo-”

“Fair is fair,” I said quickly, interrupting her. Reaching back, I hauled my shirt off, pulling it over my head before letting it fall to the ground. I studied Hannah as she viewed me, feeling strangely electrified by the thought of being so observed.

It was strange, most certainly a kink I hadn’t explored before. I wasn’t even sure it *was* a kink. Or at least I wasn’t until Hannah caught her lip between her teeth, biting it like she was enticed by what she saw.

And I liked that she was enticed. I wanted her to look at me and feel desire, arousal. My inner wolf practically rumbled at the thought of having a mate who appreciated him, who looked forward to his arrival and raised his pups.

A warm, welcoming fire began to burn in my belly, spreading out through all my limbs in a pleasant inferno. I was turned on more than I thought was physically possible, and it was all just from Hannah *looking* at me.

The moment seemed to stretch on beyond time, going somewhere else where linear experiences didn’t matter and everything was all *feeling*. But eventually I supposed we did have to come back to reality.

It was Hannah who broke the spell, drawing in a shuddering breath and disconnecting the video feed. I could still hear her breathing, though, so I didn’t hang up.

“Good night, Jacobian,” she said, using my given name in a way I’d never heard it uttered before.

“Good night, Hannah.”

Then she hung up, leaving me with a whole lot more to think about.

HANNAH

I needed a break from espionage.

Locking myself in my office, I worked on what my actual position was for our pack's company, which was running numbers and making sure there wasn't any fat to trim. Granted, I was doing that for Mr. Bronson as well, but the difference was I *liked* my pack.

It was nice to focus on some budgetary puzzles and give my mind a break from worrying about who was saying what and how I appeared, sneaking around like the worst James Bond/ Jim Halpert role play.

I let my mind get lost in it for as long as I could, but for once I regretted how much I liked discretionary budget sleuthing because I was left with not much work to do.

After eventually submitting all of my reports, I twiddled my thumb for a moment before I logged into my proxy server that was run through a remote VPN and got to an entirely different type of sleuthing.

Sarah James was of particular interest to me. She was just so young, but the fact that she'd been used by the other witches to power such an important spell made it seem, to me, that we were missing something.

Jacobian had mentioned that he'd searched for her a while back, but ever since we'd learned about the brothers, that had severely fallen off. Maybe, just maybe, if I found something that would really help him out, he'd have the extra time to

remove whatever had crawled up his ass to make him such a pain in mine.

I started with the general stuff, everything that would work on a normal person. But of course, Sarah wasn't exactly a "normal person." She was the real double-o, working an undercover job from her freshman year on. And apparently Lyssa had never suspected a thing.

But as I went on, I discovered she didn't have much beyond that obviously doctored student record Jacobian had gotten from Lyssa's school. No hospital records, no social media. Not even college applications, as far as I could find. Sure, I wasn't a Jacobian, but I was pretty thorough.

Now, did they scrub her from the internet after she died, or was her entire existence completely fabricated? Usually there was a middle ground with these kind of long-term fae stings. After all, the best lies were ones rooted in truth, creating a solid layer of fact to build their undercover identities around.

I felt the back of my head tingling the way it only did when I was solving a particularly juicy puzzle. I started logging any questions or other interesting facts into my own encrypted document. Just in case I had any brain blasts down the road.

"Is there a witch academy or something?" I continued to muse to myself. I wasn't normally one for self-talk, but the audio feedback made me feel a bit less alone and overwhelmed. Besides, if it was too quiet, I felt like I was going to just think about Jacobian and how soft his lips were.

And they were really, *really* soft.

Naturally, that sent me down the mental path of thinking about Jacobian and what had happened between us, which was exactly what I was trying to avoid. The next thing I knew, I was uploading all the most pertinent info to our shared drive and sending him a text.

I DON'T KNOW if you've been able to spend much time tracing her, but here's what I could find on Sarah James.

I DIDN'T EXPECT a response right away, but my phone buzzed only a couple moments later.

YOU'RE RIGHT, I haven't been able to spare much time at all.

This is all very good.

Hey, I have a list of possible aliases, do you have time to scrub info off them?

MY EYEBROWS WENT UP at that. I hadn't been aware that he had even gotten that far with her profile.

SURE, yeah. The standard medical records, paystubs, scholastic and legal records?

YEAH, and throw credit on there, too.

IT WAS a bit weird that we were just talking business like everything was normal, but it was also pretty refreshing. Like last night had been a particularly spicy dream I didn't have to worry about, instead of a job-ending, pack-rending, bad decision that would tank both of us.

Granted, even if we weren't in the middle of a witch-assault with a side of shifter kidnapping, I was pretty sure neither Jacobian nor I wanted a scandal like that on our hands. No thank you. I'd just returned and I wasn't looking to ostracize myself when I was just starting to reassimilate.

CAN DO! Where did you get these?

MADE an algorithm that ran through family names that had actual data at some point, but then vanished entirely with no death certificate. A lot of it is probably false flags, but better than nothing, right?

YEAH, totally, I answered, more than impressed and wishing I had come up with something like that. It certainly would have been useful. But that was probably why Jacobian was the boss and I was the intern.

Feeling a bit invigorated, I dove into scouring everything I could for every alias. Jacobian was right that most of them were dead ends, but each one I ran into just encouraged me to go further and try harder.

I was so focused that I didn't even realize how much time had passed until a gentle knock sounded at my office door, yanking me from my intense concentration.

"Oh, Tate!" I said, opening it and giving him a harried sort of smile. "What's up?"

"You weren't at lunch. I was worried that something happened."

Crap, I had missed lunch, hadn't I? Checking my phone, I did see that the hour had long since passed. And naturally, there was a brand-new text sitting there from Jacobian.

THIS GUY IS THAT NEEDY, huh?

WITHHOLDING my urge not to roll my eyes, I set my phone back on my desk and flashed him a bright smile.

"Oh man, I didn't even realize! I was so knee-deep in these numbers, I think I forgot to come up for air!"

Thankfully, some of my spreadsheets from earlier were sitting up, and I quickly lifted one as proof before subtly setting it face down. Didn't need good ol' Tate spying our pack's financials, even if it was only peripheral information.

“Ha, been there, done that. But you do need to eat, you know.”

“You’re right on that. I’ll have to make up for it when I get home.”

But Tate just shook his head. “No, no, that won’t do. You just hold up here a minute.” Without any other explanation, he hurried off. Shrugging, I settled back at my desk and made sure I minimized everything that could possibly be spied on. I’d just finished arranging the papers on my desk into a much more secure stack when he returned with both a sandwich and chips. Not exactly a feast for the gods, but it was the thought that counted.

“Awww, that’s so sweet of you,” I said, beaming as I took them. Now that my groove had been interrupted, I was suddenly ravenous. While skipping the occasional meal wouldn’t kill a wolf shifter, it sure did a number on the stomach. I felt like I’d set up some sort of acid manufacturing plant in there.

“It’s no problem. I know what it’s like to get a bit lost in that work sauce.” He sent me a grin that matched mine, and I couldn’t help but feel the tiniest sliver of guilt for tricking the guy. He seemed genuinely nice, not in that creepy, internet “nice guy” (™) way. For a brief moment, I wondered what it would be like to date him—just a normal human who was happy to be good at his work—then go home and live his normal human life.

Boring.

I had to be honest with myself about that. He could be as nice as he wanted, but in the end, I was part of the fae world and needed someone much the same. Sure, while I did hope things had calmed down a little and witches stopped hunting down my people, I never wanted the stereotypical Americana fantasy.

“Besides, I can’t have you starving to death before our date. Don’t think the experience would be quite the same.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to be the life of the party if you’re missing that whole being alive part.”

He chuckled softly. “That logic certainly checks out.” He glanced over to my desk and my newly organized papers, giving out a low whistle. “You’ve got some heavy output here, huh?”

“Yeah,” I admitted with a sigh. “My duties from my actual job have been lightened, but I still need to look over certain things for final approval. And while I’ve been methodically going through everything I’m supposed to do here, there’s still the occasional hang-up that takes more time than I scheduled.”

“Like the inevitable AI revolution by your floor’s printer?”

“Exactly. Not to mention that negotiating with our future AI overlord has sucked up far too many hours.”

“I bet.” He shifted for a moment, as if he wasn’t 100% sure of what he was going to say next. “You know, if you ever need help with work things, feel free to ask. You know, other than impromptu tutorials on more amenable printers. I’ve worked in finance for years, so chances are I might be able to be useful.”

“Oh man, I appreciate that. I’ll definitely have to pick your brain later.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I kind of expected him to go after that, but instead, he just leaned in the doorway as I bit into the sandwich. It was good, especially for not doubt being one of the last things remaining right before the cafeteria closed, and I let myself enjoy it.

“Speaking of plans,” he kept on. “Would tomorrow night work for you? You know, for our dinner? I figured we could meet at one of my favorite places. I’d love to show it to you and get your opinion.”

“Yeah, that sounds great to me! My schedule actually just cleared up for tomorrow. Just text me the details and I’ll be there.”

“Great!” Aw, he was so genuinely excited that he reminded me a bit of a golden retriever. But as lovely and cute as that

was, I was a wolf. I needed someone who could meet me and my inner wolf on my level. Unfortunately, that would never be Tate.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said in a tone that I hoped would communicate politely that I was ready to have my privacy again.

“Alright, well, I’ll let you get back to work then.”

With a nod, he sauntered off and I returned to my meal, pulling up the alias spreadsheet I’d been working on. Naturally, my phone was buzzing off and on, and I had no doubt in my mind about exactly who was blowing it up. I waited until I finished my sandwich before I answered.

WHAT A SWEETHEART, he brought you a dry-ass sandwich.

NOW I REALLY ROLLED MY eyes. Judging from that kiss we’d shared, it was clear to me that Jacobian was jealous of Tate. But the “why” was beyond me. Other than that single instance, he’d never shown interest in me, not even once. Was it a prejudice thing? Because Tate was a human? I didn’t get it. It wasn’t like I actually wanted Tate. It was all about the job and saving my pack.

AT LEAST HE got me lunch. You certainly didn’t.

...I WAS WORKING.

EXCUSES, excuses.

IT WAS BORDERLINE FLIRTING, or maybe even outright flirting, right? I couldn’t help but feel like it was, considering everything that had happened. But at the same time, what did

that mean? If Jacobian was indeed flirting with me, was it because he was interested? Or just being playful? Was he making up for being such an ass and overcompensating?

All these thoughts swirled in my head, making dread and excitement bubble in my gut. I supposed the most important question I should be asking myself was did I *want* him to be flirting with me?

Oof, that was a heavy one, layered with complicated feelings of admiration, irritation, and attraction.

Why couldn't life be simple? I never thought I'd be craving my early college days, but at the moment, they certainly felt like they were easier times.

WE'LL SEE if your UwU sweetheart judgment lasts after dinner.

Me and security will be on hand if he or witches try anything.

HE'S JUST A HUMAN, Jacobian.

SURE, and so was Sarah James.

HE HAD A POINT WITH THAT. But when another text didn't come in, I didn't bother to answer, feeling that the conversation was pretty done.

Oh, well. In a little over twenty hours, we would quickly find out which one of us was right. I just really, *really* hoped that it was me.



I HUMMED to myself as I got ready for my date, curling my hair in what I hoped was a retro look. While I wasn't nearly as stylish as Emma, I did have a penchant for classic pin-up and

rockabilly looks. I felt like they accented my curvy body in a way that was celebratory instead of trying to hide things. Far too much plus-sized fashion was focused on hiding fat bodies, which wasn't for me.

It was only an hour before my date, and my gut was churning with hunger and nerves. Once more, I was struck by a bit of guilt by fooling someone like Tate, who so far had only been extremely helpful, friendly, and warm. What if I was pulling him away from someone who had genuine interest in him? Sure, I wasn't going to be in the picture for long, but what if I was denying him his true happily ever after?

Ugh.

It made me feel ever so slightly like I should have never been so headstrong about my idea. But when I'd made it, the people in the secret department had been faceless humans, people who didn't really matter to my life and people I'd never know. But as I'd learned more about Tate, that clearly had gone by the wayside.

Ugh.

I'd really made a—

“Ow!” Jerking my hand away from my head, I realized I'd burned myself with my curling iron, leaving a bright red line along the swell of my thumb. “Son of a bitch!” Turning on the faucet in my bathroom sink, I ran my hand under lukewarm water until most of the heat was drawn out of it. Once my skin wasn't actively sizzling, my accelerated healing took over, making the red mark fade and shrink until there was only a pale strip of skin, and finally, no visible mark at all.

But the whole healing process reminded me of exactly who I was and what was at stake. Was it nice, what I was doing? No. But if it helped me save a single shifter from being kidnapped, cursed, and otherwise abused by the brothers and their witch cronies, Tate would be alright in the end, and it would be worth it.

Nodding to myself in the mirror, I finished getting ready, slipping into my dress from Emmaline's. I had to hand it to the

brilliant woman—despite being quite thin herself, she always had a broad range of sizes in her boutique. Unlike most places, which either didn't have anything above a 14 or relegated the few plus-sized pieces to the farthest corner of the store, she carried up to a size 32 and had several beautiful extended outfits on display, right smack in the middle of her store.

I did feel pretty hot in the dress, the fabric hugging the curves of my body in some spots and flaring out in others. It wasn't quite a body-con, but it certainly was the right side of stunning.

“Go get ‘em, slugger,” I mused to myself before breaking into a chuckle. The moment of levity broke the nervousness in me, and I headed out to my junker of a car.

The drive over there was smooth, with no big traffic incidents and a surprising number of green lights. When I arrived, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd beaten Tate there. But no, I recognized his tall form standing by what had to be his car.

Well, it wasn't a fancy whip or sports car like Mahlan and his friends had, but it wasn't anywhere near my beater, either. Whatever his position was in the secret department, he wasn't doing too shabby.

“Hey there,” he said, a gentle smile playing across his pleasant features as he approached me. It was only when he pulled me into a soft hug that I realized that I was going to be under some fairly heavy surveillance. Somewhere, most likely nearby, Jacobian and a security team were watching me.

Creepy.

Those nerves were back full force, leaving me fighting internally not to show a shred of it on my face. I needed my date with Tate to be somewhat successful if I wanted to further infiltrate their little hidden department circle.

“You look beautiful,” Tate continued, drawing me back into the conversation and out of my spiraling guilt.

“Thanks. You don't look half-bad yourself.”

“Ah, so full-bad then?” he said, giving me a wink as I let out a mock gasp.

“You stop that now. I am far too gorgeous to be on a date with anything other than a ten!”

Was Tate *actually* a ten? No, not in my opinion, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was him *feeling* like a ten. And not just because I was fishing him for info.

“Well, you’re right on that one.” Offering his arm, he fixed me with what most women would no doubt see as a dashing grin.

But all I could do was wish Jacobian would look at me like that.

Whoa, that was out of left field. Sure, Jacobian was handsome, and intelligent, and more than a bit intimidating, but he wasn’t the Prince Charming type. He didn’t do *charming*. Maybe dangerous. Maybe mysterious. Maybe a pain in my goddamn ass, but not *dashing* or anywhere adjacent.

“Shall we go in?”

“Yeah, let’s,” I answered, looping my arm through his.

The restaurant was nice. Not quite as nice as Theo’s higher-end restaurants, but it wasn’t exactly casual dining, either. The middle ground was nice, though, just fancy enough to feel special, but not so extravagant that I felt out of place. Because while Mahlan, Theo, Jacobian, and the rest of their circle were millionaires, I had no such financial security. The only nice places I ever went to were the family dinners, and I still wasn’t quite sure why I’d been invited to those. I was an intern, but Jacobian had like ten interns, and no one else was asked to come to them except for Addison.

And Addison was...well, *Addison*. I liked her plenty—she was hilarious, after all—but she spoke so rarely and had an uncanny sort of ability to just fade into the background. I got the feeling that she was content there, too, watching and learning with those sharp eyes of hers.

She'd gotten me quite a lot of info since starting at Mr. Bronson's stupidly bloated company, and I probably wouldn't have discovered the secret department without her. It kind of made me wonder what the disabled shifter had on our pack leaders. One thing was for certain, though—we were lucky that she was on our side.

The host greeted the two of us with a smile, but there wasn't the shocked recognition that usually followed Jacobian showing up at a place. Probably because Tate didn't own three restaurants like my boss did. But even without that clout, we were seated quickly, and Tate ordered a bottle of wine.

That was...sweet, of course. I liked wine alright, but as a shifter, it certainly didn't do much for me beyond the taste. And, as it were, far too many wines were way too sweet, like someone had decided that fruit wasn't tasty enough and needed some extra corn syrup to make it pop. Blech.

Thankfully, it turned out to be a drier wine. Not *too* dry, as that usually just ended up tasting like floor cleaner, but exactly the right amount. I was pretty impressed.

“So, has the rebellion on your floor ended?” Tate asked, flashing me a charming smile. I knew so many women who would just be melting in a puddle at his feet.

“Yes, but only because of my complete and total surrender.”

“The printer turned out to be too powerful of an enemy?”

“I think I had it even for a while there, but once the thermostat and coffee maker joined forces, I was done for.”

He nodded sagely before we both broke into chuckles. “Truly insurmountable foes.”

It was nice, actually. Far nicer than I ever thought it would be. I had been so sure that it would be awkward with Jacobian and my escort listening in on everything. But it was easy enough to forget they were there at all. Except when my mind would occasionally flash to the kiss Jacobian and I shared.

That was certainly distracting.

But every time my mind started to move there, I hauled myself back to the present and concentrated on Tate. Or at least I tried to. And I liked to think that I did a pretty good job right up until I spotted Jacobian.

It was just a flash out of the corner of my eye, a slight bit of movement in what I thought was an empty car parked outside. But once I narrowed my vision, I saw it was indeed Jacobian. Seeing him like that was a jolt, which made no sense because I *knew* he would be there.

And yet, it rattled me. I found myself unable to concentrate. It was like Tate had been taken out entirely, leaving only a Jacobian-shaped void sitting across the table from me.

Soft lips. Thick hair. The scent of a strong wolf surrounding me. My mind supplied all the details, repainting the restaurant into a watercolor version of my tiny apartment's entryway.

“Are you alright?”

“Huh?” I blinked, pulling myself from the moment to blink at Tate. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

But I wasn’t. I had lost my cool, and suddenly it felt like the ground was liquid sand below me, shifting this way and that.

Ugh.

“I...” I needed a reason, an excuse, something that would get me away long enough so I could shove everything Jacobian out of my head and focus on proving myself. I *could* do this, I *could!* “I just need to go to the bathroom.”

Tate looked like he was going to say something, but I didn’t give him time. I hurried off, trying to take deep breaths as I hastily skittered to the ladies’ room.

What the hell was I doing? Wolves didn’t *skitter*. I was a shifter, a fae of great power. I didn’t *skitter!* And yet that was exactly the word to describe my frantic pace until I was behind closed doors.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself before turning all the taps on. It wasn’t the largest bathroom, with only three stalls and as many sinks, but it was enough to make the wire on me nearly useless. As nice as it was to have enhanced hearing, it did myobfuscate white noise.

It wasn’t like I was trying to nuke the mission, I just needed a minute to catch my breath without an escort in my ear. I didn’t want them to know how affected I was, especially since nothing had happened.

Nothing at all.

Except that wasn’t quite true, was it? Because Jacobian really had burst into my apartment and kissed me senseless.

And maybe it would have been different if it didn’t excite me so much. But it did. It excited me to my core and terrified me at the same time. I wanted more, and yet I knew that I shouldn’t. He was my boss. He was older. We’d spent the last few weeks fighting like cats and dogs.

But none of that seemed to matter to my inner wolf. She was chomping at the bit, her nerves frayed from the tight restraints of civility and modern culture. Something about Jacobian spoke to the wild side of her, the part I was never able to conquer. Not that I was inclined to.

Get yourself together, girl. You’re not proving anything to anyone like this!

I glared at my reflection in the mirror, as if that could put my unruly emotions back into place. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so surprised, considering how close to the full moon we were, but I’d always been a bit sensitive to her waxing and waning.

I was in the middle of a particularly stern internal monologue when the door opened. I snapped upright, trying to slap a mask of normalcy on my face, only to realize it was Jacobian.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice sharpened to cover for my embarrassment. He was probably there to

lecture me. Ugh. I knew I could get through it, but I certainly wasn't looking that way.

“There was interference on the coms. Wanted to make sure witches weren't involved.” He gestured to the three sinks, which were all still running at full blast. “I see now that's not the case.”

“Nope, most definitely not,” I answered. “So now that you know it's not a case of magical sabotage, you can go back to your post.”

“I could,” he murmured, his voice low. But instead he just reached behind him and locked the bathroom door.

Wait...what? What was happening?

“Or I could stay right here and help you calm down.”

“Calm down? I don't need to calm down.”

Another step closer, and his scent surrounded me. His pheromones were so dominant, but not in an unpleasant way. They filled my nose, delivering a whole binder full of information to my inner wolf. Lust, attraction, jealousy—they all combined together in a peppery bouquet that nearly made my eyes water.

And also turned me on to the highest degree.

That was complicated.

“That's not what your pheromones are telling me. That's not what your body language is telling me. That's not what...”

With every sentence, Jacobian took another step forward. His voice was so low, so heated, it was barely a rumble, and yet it was enough to electrify me. I loved it, wanted to drown in it, my body responding with a keyed-up furor. I suppose it helped that I'd been thinking about our kiss for the last half hour. The wolf wanted what the wolf wanted, after all.

“...your lips are telling me.”

“My lips?” I breathed.

By the last utterance that fell from those full, delicious lips of his, I was backed up against the wall, and he was barely a

breath away from me. There was an electric sort of tension in the air, surrounding us, threatening to suck out all the air until there was only the two of us left.

And then he was kissing me.

It was just as sudden as the first one, and somehow, just as intense. My heart thundered in my chest as his arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me flush to him. His body was hard against mine, and I felt the chiseled muscle that he rarely showed off under those dark, professional clothes of his.

Suddenly I was caught up in the desire to rip them off, whether with my hands or my teeth, I wasn't sure. What I did know was that I wanted to *feel* him, to map out every single muscle, bulge, or scar until I could perfectly replicate him in my memory.

But then his teeth sank ever so slightly into my lower lip, turning all my thoughts to mush. All I could do was stand there and kiss him back with what I hoped was just as much intensity.

God, he was certainly good at making out.

It was just kissing, but it wasn't *just* kissing. It was that and so much more. Energy crackled between us, and I could only hope that he was just as affected as I was.

A moan escaped from me, the tiniest of sound, but Jacobian responded with a growl that had my body viscerally responding. I could feel my teeth elongate and my nails sharpen, the very first sign of a shift beginning to happen. I hadn't lost control of my wolf form in *years*, and yet Jacobian had me slipping with just some really, *really* good mouth action.

When he stopped, pulling back just a hair, it was like all the warmth in the world had been ripped away from me. I let out a keening mewl that was downright embarrassing, but Jacobian growled again in an approving way. "That's it. Lose control for me, baby."

That shouldn't have done that for me, it *shouldn't* have, and yet another wave of desire moved through me. If I wasn't

careful, my eyebrows were going to turn into fluffy caterpillars, and my eyes were going to turn yellow. Which was certainly a look, but probably not one I wanted to put on in the middle of a public bathroom.

“I can’t,” I gasped. “Not here.”

“Why not?” he said, and God, if his voice wasn’t sin itself. It made me want to do things that were really inadvisable.

“We’re in public!”

“The door is locked.”

“You’re my boss.”

“That I am.”

With every word from his mouth, his fingers drummed against my sides, keeping me distracted and unable to grasp onto the lifelines my left brain was desperately throwing out. “We... we shouldn’t.”

There was a beat as a silence fell between us, and I swore that my escort had to be able to hear my heartbeat from across the entire parking lot. But they didn’t come bursting in, leaving just me and Jacobian.

When he finally spoke, it was like a shock wave through my body, drawing me further into his grip. “All you have to do is say no.”

No. No, no, *no*. Such a simple word, only two little letters, but it wouldn’t fall from my lips. It was the wise thing to say. Perhaps even the healthiest. But it wouldn’t come out.

Instead, I stared at Jacobian, my heart thundering in my chest, my inner wolf throwing itself at what few shreds of control I had. I wanted him—I had to admit that to myself. The admiration and tiny crush I’d had on him had suddenly burst into a ravenous beast, and goodness, was it a beast that was quite convincing about being fed.

“And if I don’t?” I whispered, barely believing the words out of my own mouth.

“Then I kiss you here until Tate grows suspicious, and you go out there looking completely ravished.”

I didn't think it was possible, but his voice went a shade lower. He must have been using shifter sub-harmonics to communicate. It was the only thing that made any sense.

But as alluring as his words were, they weren't quite what I was expecting. Yeah, I liked kissing him. I liked kissing him a *lot*. But the way he was acting made it seem like he was going to escalate. In fact, it was that very forbidden promise of *more* that made me feel I was barely able to draw in a breath.

“Is that all?”

I swore that right then and there, his eyes flashed. “Why? Do you want something else?”

There was a challenge to his heated words, and even as enraptured as I was, I could never resist a challenge. It made my inner wolf bear her teeth, and my pride was snarling. “What if I did?”

There was defiance in every single syllable that escaped my lips, and I did nothing to hide it. As much as I liked to prove myself capable, I also had a kink for someone who put me in my place.

And right now, that meant Jacobian. I'd admired him for so long, it was clear that I'd gone and accidentally stumbled right into an authority kink. Not because I was disrespectful, or needy, or any other stupid stereotype. It was just that I found it incredibly hot when someone was powerful and intelligent enough to take control in a way both my wolf and I approved of.

“If that were the case, all you'd have to do is say *yes*.”

Could our escort hear us? Did I want them to? The thought made my cheeks burn in the most delicious way. Again, I didn't know. All I knew was Jacobian nearly glaring at me with an unmet hunger in his eyes.

Did I want to match it? Did I want to give in?

So many questions, all stacking on top of each other. But even with their rickety ladder, they couldn't compare to the thoughts piling up of getting *more*. Of releasing my inner wolf and letting her get her fill for once. No chains of diplomacy or professionalism. No worry about decorum or unsolved mystery. Just two shifters and their inner desires.

"Yes," I whispered finally.

And that was when my entire world changed.

Jacobian crashed his lips into mine again. But while our other kisses had been intense, animalistic, even borderline feral, this was another thing entirely. My toes curled in my shoes and my body burst into a raging inferno, making heat flush from the soles of my feet to my hairline.

Fuck, *fuck*, kissing Jacobian was so good. And with the way his hands were gripping me, just shy of bruising, was the perfect cherry on top. But this time, it wasn't *just* kissing, was it? After all, I had asked for more.

Goosebumps raised along my arms, which was certainly interesting because I was far from cold. I was so on fire that I wouldn't have been surprised if I combusted.

Was it the taboo of it all? Maybe. But it didn't matter.

"God, you're all I could think about since that night," Jacobian hissed, not having to elaborate what he meant by "that night." My brain was too saturated in arousal to respond, but thankfully, I didn't have to because Jacobian had the situation completely handled. And by "situation," I meant my ass, as he gripped it with both hands and physically picked me up.

I let out a yelp, more than a bit surprised, and my legs wrapped around his waist. Shifters were all quite strong, but I wasn't used to my partners being able to haul me off my feet like I weighed nothing.

It was hot, I wasn't going to lie, and it impressed my inner wolf. And it was like Jacobian could *smell* my excitement. My pheromones and ketones had to be off the charts with how much want and desire I was pouring into the air.

“Wanted to feel you, to taste you,” Jacobian continued, though I could hardly parse out his words. I was more turned on than I’d been in years and I worried I was about to go thermonuclear. But I also wanted to. Wanted to be pushed to the farthest reaches my libido could provide.

“You smell so goddamned incredible, do you know that? Like a drug, and all for me.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. The movement drew Jacobian’s gaze to my neck, and the next thing I knew, his teeth were there.

“Fuck, Jacobian!” The cry was out of my mouth before I could clamp down on it, my every sense now rocketing up to eleven. It wasn’t the most eloquent outburst, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

All I could think of was how it felt to have Jacobian’s mouth against mine, his teeth grazing my skin. It wasn’t anywhere near my mating gland, thank God, but the idea of it was still plenty intoxicating. I had just about zero desire to settle down and be mated. I was still trying to graduate college!

But then, Jacobian’s tongue was sliding along my skin and I forgot all about my scholastic career. Degree, schmegree. What I needed was that hot hacker action.

“I’m gonna ruin you,” Jacobian continued, his voice a heated whisper that was somewhere between a dangerous threat and illicit promise. “I’m gonna fold you in half and mark you everywhere until you forget what it was like before me.”

Holy shit, I believed him. A lot of guys liked to talk a big game, but Jacobian? He definitely had the chops to deliver.

So I kissed him again, draping my arms over his back to dig my nails into him. He was wearing far too much clothing for my tastes, but it wasn’t like we could get completely naked in a public bathroom. Then again, we shouldn’t be hooking up here, either, but that was already happening.

Or at least I hoped so. If Jacobian suddenly put me down, I'd have the biggest case of blue balls in history.

“Gonna wear you out until even your healing won't be able to help you walk straight tomorrow. You'll have to wear flats instead of those wedges that make that goddamned ass of yours stick out so much.” At that, he squeezed both cheeks, the pain a sharp but welcome counterpoint to all the pleasure flooding me. I would have thought it would be grounding, something to pull me back into reality, but the sting of his nails just drove me further.

I was getting lost in the sauce, as it were, high on everything that was Jacobian, but I was past resisting. My wolf and I were unhinged, ready to take whatever we wanted.

And what we wanted was to be railed by our boss.

“Can you feel how much I want you?” Jacobian continued in what had to be the filthiest conversation we'd ever had. Certainly a different note than our peer-to-peer review on my organizational accomplishments. And if it was anybody else, I would have just rolled my eyes at them. But there was something about Jacobian that booked no quarter. What he said was the truth, even if it was insane that a millionaire shifter like him would want an intern like me. “I asked you a question, baby girl.”

Oh, he had, hadn't he? I could feel his manhood pressing against me, hot and heavy against the seam of his jeans. I had never been so happy that I'd worn lacy, thin underwear. When I'd gotten dressed, it was because I didn't want to have any VPL under my cute dress. But now? Well, now I was celebrating the ease of access.

“I'm gonna need you to answer me, baby girl.”

It was a command that was both saccharine-sweet and so filthy, it might as well have been caked in mud. I knew what he was doing—checking in on me to make sure I was alright with everything happening. Except I was so dizzy with my *need* that I was practically nonverbal.

Against all odds, I managed a nod. And thankfully, Jacobian accepted that as an answer, because then one of his hands was sliding down my body.

I couldn't believe that he was holding up my entire weight with a single palm. My back was pinned against the wall, but still, it was so impressive to me. I could feel his muscles below my soft thighs and middle, strong steel against all of me. The juxtaposition was enough to make my head spin.

"Wanna hear exactly what you sound like when you come apart," Jacobian said before his fingers did just that.

"Holy fuck!"

I had never had a simple touch jolt me down to my soul, but that was what happened. His fingers slid against my panties, only just brushing against me, and it was like I was hooked up to a live wire.

"Oh please, please, *please*," I gasped, delirious with the rush of it all.

"Don't worry, baby girl. I know exactly what you need."

A laughable idea, really, and yet I wasn't laughing at all. No, I was mewling, whining, pleading, but not laughing. Especially when his fingers slid under my underwear and stroked me.

Amazing. Magnificent. Mind-altering. Dizzying. It was like my brain had turned into a thesaurus in an attempt to compute the sheer level of pleasure rushing through me. Somehow, without ever having hooked up before, Jacobian knew just how to work me. He teased me, stroking my walls, spreading wetness from my center but never diving in. He never touched my clit, either, slipping up to it several times but never quite hitting home.

He was revving me higher and higher, but I just couldn't reach that peak, not without some sort of direct stimulation. I whined, trying to position myself just right to force his hand, or his finger, as it were, but I couldn't with how he was both pinning and holding me.

“Patience,” he practically purred, his voice pure sin in my ear.

“Easy for you to say,” I retorted, fairly impressed with myself that I managed to round up a coherent response.

“Ah, ah. If you have enough energy to be snarky, you’re not ready yet.”

Oh, but I was ready! I was dripping into his hand, I could feel it, and my own pheromones were thick enough in the air to choke me. If any shifter came into the bathroom after us, they’d probably think someone got caught in the middle of heat.

But I wasn’t in heat. I was being driven to the pinnacle of desire by Jacobian and those expert fingers of his. I just needed a little bit *more* to get me there.

Judging by the way he was looking at me, he was going to get me there eventually.

I just had to make sure I survived the ride.

JACOBIAN

All I could taste was Hannah.

I hadn't meant to slip into the bathroom and practically accost her. My intentions had been pure! All I'd planned was get her head back in the game so she could get the answers we wanted.

After all, I was pretty sure that her sudden nerves were because of how opposed I'd been to her plan. Adamant enough to go to her apartment and demand to be let in. That was bound to work up some anxiety, even with her seemingly boundless confidence.

It was supposed to have been just a little pep talk. But once I walked in that door and saw her, *smelled* her, it suddenly became so much more.

I couldn't really say how we'd gotten from point A to point B, but I wasn't complaining. No, if anything, I was praising every god, spirit, and deity known to fae kind. Somehow Hannah was even more delicious on my tongue than I had imagined, sending me into a nearly feral frenzy.

Everything about her was perfection, designed specifically to drive me crazy. If it weren't for the sheer power she had over all of my senses, I would have thought I was in the most explicit dream I ever had.

And hell, maybe I was. But if I were unconscious, I definitely didn't even want to wake up.

“I’m so close, Jacobian,” Hannah mewled, and fuck, if her voice didn’t go straight to my dick. I was already hard as a rock, yet her pleading made me throb even more. Could she feel my heat? Feel how I was practically bursting out of my pants for her? It seemed like it, with how she was whining.

And goodness, she sounded so pretty.

I worked her over and over and over until she was sweating, and her scent was so thick that I could practically swim in it. I could feel her trembling against me, my hand drenched with her juices. I was pretty sure I would never wash it again, just so I could smell her and plunge myself into memories whenever I wanted.

“Are you?” I murmured, teasing her further. While I’d always loved drawing out my partner’s pleasure, I was going above and beyond with Hannah. Part of it was because the noises she made were just too darn cute. Another part of it was because of the fire in her. I loved it, and yet I also wanted to see just how far I could stoke her flames. Would she challenge me? Or crumble under the sweet, sweet ecstasy I poured into her?

I licked my lips as I watched Hannah struggle to speak coherently. I wasn’t going to lie, it was intoxicating to see her so verklempt. Hannah was intelligent, well-spoken, and I had firsthand experience of her sharp tongue, so seeing the visible effect I had on her was quite the boon to my ego.

“Yes,” she whispered finally, her breathless gasp sending so much *want* spreading through me. I couldn’t believe it. I had Hannah in my arms and under my lips, and I still felt so damn *desperate* for her.

“Then let *go*, baby.”

As my order was issued, I finally let my fingers slide up to Hannah’s oh-so-sensitive place. It was engorged with blood and practically pulsing under my touch, which made me much harder. Which again, I didn’t think was physically possible, and yet there it was, trying to drill a hole in my pants.

All it took was a single half circle from my fingerpad, and Hannah's thighs were squeezing my waist like a villain in a Bond movie. But the pain only stoked my desire.

God, the cries that issued from those perfect cherry lips of hers. Could they be any more enticing? Every note sent more ripples of pleasure through my brain.

Apparently, not quick enough to get Hannah out of my system. But I was just fine with that. In fact, I was eager to get into *her* system, as it were.

All in good time, anyway. Yes, she was on a special mission. And sure, Tate was probably feeling pretty lonely at their table. But I didn't care. I had Hannah right where I'd wanted her for so long, and I wasn't about to let her go. Not when she was so willing and wanton in my grip.

It was pure elation watching Hannah fall apart from my touch, and I kept the gentle circles up until she winced from over-stimulation. Slowly, I slid my hand away and let her slump towards me.

"Oh my God," she whispered, her voice sounding thoroughly fucked. It was fairly impressive given she'd had one of her hands pressed against her mouth the entire time.

"Glad you approve."

Suddenly, in what may have been the worst moment in the history of bad timing, my earpiece crackled.

"Jacobian? Are you there? You've both been silent on comm nearly to red-level. If you don't respond in the next minute, we have to come in."

I let out a long, long sigh, my soul whispering apologies to my straining cock. Part of me was tempted to just keep going and bury myself so deep within Hannah that I could taste myself on her breath, but I also knew that neither of us would enjoy her escort bursting in to find us... *attached*, so to say.

"Looks like the fun's over for now." I gently set her down, making sure she was ready to take her own weight. While I wanted to sink my teeth, my fingers, and my manhood into her, I didn't want to hurt her, even if it was something as

simple as taking a little tumble. I could feel the desire to protect her, to provide for her, building in my chest impossibly fast.

She's an employee, not a mate, I tried to remind my inner wolf. But it didn't care about any of that. Yes, my fingers may have just literally been inside of her in a public bathroom, but that didn't make her a mate, either.

Just a really, *really* good hookup.

"Are you alright?" I asked, keeping her steady as I looked her over. There were beads of sweat across her forehead and a strong flush to her cheeks that shone through her foundation. Some people would probably call it messy, but to me, it was rapturously beautiful.

My inner wolf was practically crying inside of me, begging to completely ruin her until she was drenched in sweat and sticky so we could lick her clean again. It was certainly a visceral image, my brain supplying exactly what it would be like to lick at those luscious breasts of hers, or bury my face between those thick, *thick* thighs of hers.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. *Bring it back, bring it back*. I needed to stop thinking about such things, or we were never going to get out of the bathroom.

Once Hannah was steady, I crossed to the sink and turned off all the faucets. Honestly, we were probably lucky that they hadn't overflowed. It was pretty easy to lift Hannah's bountiful figure, but adding water-slick floors would have added an entirely new complication.

"Jacobian checking in, perimeter is clear. Just needed to assess the situation with Hannah."

There was a beat of silence, and I could practically hear her escort mentally calling me on my bullshit. "...code word, sir?"

Ah, good on him. With the powers of the witches we were dealing with in mind, and how they seemed to have their sights firmly set on Emmaline, we'd developed a secret word to ensure none of us were replaced with some sort of shape-

shifter or been possessed by a spell or hypnosis. Granted, we could still be charmed or beguiled, but we would just do the best we could.

“Fenrier,” I said, watching as Hannah tidied herself up. It was strange how just looking at her filled me with a pleasant sort of...of...

Actually, I didn’t have the word for it. All I knew was that it was a good feeling, one that made something warm and comforting bloom in my chest.

“Alright, sir. Is the mission resetting?”

“Yes,” I answered, composing myself enough that hopefully my tone wouldn’t give anything away. Thankfully, the comms helped distort anything a shifter’s enhanced hearing would normally be able to pick up. It was the little things in life. “Hannah will return to Tate. I will go out through the back entrance a few moments later and return to my position.”

“Yes, sir.”

With that, the comms went quiet and I looked at Hannah, who was reapplying her lipstick in the mirror. If it weren’t for her mussed hair, one would think that nothing had happened to her. For some reason, that stood out in my mind as a challenge. What exactly would it take to have her truly off-center and messy? I wanted to see it.

Maybe later.

Wait. No. I needed to be practical. We’d had a tryst, yes, and my body still called out for her like it called out for oxygen, but we couldn’t keep going. I was her older boss, and she was my *intern*.

“See you,” she said, her voice...strange.

“You alright? You can take a minute if you need.”

“Nah, you see, I have this boss who always hates when I do a half-assed job, so I better get back to it.”

“He sounds like a real tool,” I said, reality slowly sinking in.

“He can be,” was her answer before she unlocked the door and slid out.

Huh.

As more and more details of the situation drifted in from the logical side of my mind, the more my stomach twisted. Had I really just finger-banged my intern in a public place? It certainly seemed like it. And as much as I knew I should be repentant, to swear I’d never do anything that wrong again, I couldn’t bring my internal thoughts to be all that contrite. I had wanted Hannah. I *still* wanted Hannah. To the point that it made my teeth hurt.

But did she feel the same?

A sudden deluge of similar questions now plagued me. Was she alright? Did she need extra time? I should have asked her earlier, but the whole comms thing had distracted me.

Well, at least one of us had the mission on their mind.

I would need to check in with her when we were truly alone, not when we were relying on running faucets to give us privacy. In the meantime, I needed to get my head on straight and make sure we extracted all the information we could out of this Tate douche.

The few minutes I had to wait to exit the bathroom seemed like an eternity, but I eventually headed out the employee exit with my hands in my pockets. Just like before, nobody really gave me a second look. I liked to think it was because I was just that stealthy, but the reality was that it was the dinner rush, and the only people here would be servers sneaking in a smoke break.

It didn’t take me long to get back to my car as I tuned into Hannah’s conversation, just as she was explaining her absence. She sounded appropriately apologetic as she explained her boss had called, how she’d had a hard time getting him off the phone. Tate had sounded surprised at first, remarking how this was very much against the HR policies of work, and that was when Hannah said it was her boss for the company she actually worked for, not his.

It felt strange, listening to them when my fingers had just been inside her, after feeling her clit. But instead of making me feel possessive, or like I had some successful grip on Hannah, it just made me feel lacking.

I had it so much worse than I thought.

I knew, I *knew* that I didn't have any real claim on her. I also knew that nothing could really happen between us. Our tryst was a fluke, one I wasn't entirely sure I hadn't dreamed up, and it wasn't likely to happen again.

So I just had to sit with it, and listen to the two of them chuckle and flirt.

"It seems like your boss isn't accepting healthy work boundaries."

Hannah let out a humming sound that neither confirmed or denied it, and I frowned. It was true. Hannah and I had definitely gone past any healthy boundaries between a boss and employee.

"Or to put it in layman's terms, he's kinda a dick."

I didn't expect the laugh that bubbled out of Hannah's throat, but it came over the comms loud and clear. Well, that certainly didn't sit well. The sound of it curdled in my stomach, and I usually loved the sound of her giggling.

"That's not an entirely inaccurate statement."

They shared more laughs, and then Hannah returned to her line of questions about his work. The conversation was annoyingly long-winded, especially with Tate making moony eyes at Hannah the entire time, but that was mostly because I knew what Hannah was up to. No doubt her date was having the time of his life.

Goodness knew I would be if I was the one there with Hannah.

"So, if your boss is some sort of mega dick, how did you even get involved with the company you actually work for?"

At this, I leaned in. While I knew plenty of details about Hannah's life, as I did with every intern I vetted, I didn't know

her true story, especially not from her perspective. And I was more than eager to hear it.

Except it wouldn't quite be the truth, would it? It wasn't like she could say that we were all part of the same pack, and we specifically hired within our circle. But knowing Hannah, she probably had a full explanation in her back pocket.

"I lived here all of my young life and had a really strong sense of community, but by college-age...I dunno, I guess I felt a bit suffocated by it. I wanted to find out who I was outside of the *pa-community*, so I moved away to a college much farther away from anyone else I'd known."

"Sounds kind of lonely," Tate offered.

"It was. I was kinda... adrift for a while, but then this speaker came to our college. He was a part of some conference about indigenous and P.O.C. success in modern spaces. Normally, I never go to those things, but it was for extra credit, so I ended up in the audience.

"I expected it to be a total snoozefest, but it wasn't. He talked about making a difference and the importance of community, about how finance and business didn't all have to be about corporate greed. It really...I guess you could say it moved me, because I knew I had to go and work for his company."

That situation sounded awfully familiar.

But it couldn't be me, could it? Surely not.

And yet, I did remember speaking at several colleges outside of the city and even a few out of the state. I knew it was relatively rare for a Native American man to have such a high-level, successful business, and I wanted others to know it was possible. That we weren't chained to the reservation or destined for a life of poverty from the purposeful circumstances that were created to destroy our populace and culture.

"I'm guessing that's one of the owners of the company you work for?" Tate's somewhat nasally voice in my ear drew me

out of my retrospection. However, Hannah didn't answer right away, and her hesitation hung in the air.

“Yeah, it was.”

“There's like five of them, right? Thought that was pretty weird when I heard it, but I think it's kind of cool that a group of friends can go into business together and stay together through the years.”

I swore I could hear my own blood rushing through my veins. She was talking about our company, and by extension, I couldn't help but think that she was talking about *me*.

That single idea sent my thoughts swirling. I'd only vaguely remembered Hannah before she'd been hired. As someone younger than me, it wasn't like we were ever in classes together, and then when she ran off to another college, she kind of slipped through the cracks. I had no idea that it was *my* speech that had possibly encouraged her to return.

“Yeah, it's pretty amazing the work they do for the community. It's not just money, money, money all the time.”

“That is a good thing,” Tate agreed. “Who was the one who was at your college, if you don't mind me asking?”

“Jacobian Helton.”

She said my name.

She said my name!

I sat there, more than a little dumbfounded. I had no idea that those seminars had ever done anything for anyone. I'd often felt that my efforts had gone to waste, and I was a fool who was too far removed from my heritage to be an effective speaker.

And while Hannah wasn't indigenous like me, she was a shifter. We would always share that identity as a pack.

As the shock ever so slowly, began to fade, I suddenly was overwhelmed with just how much of a dick I'd been ever since the whole Tate thing had started. Hannah was an incredibly bright young woman who had left our pack to find herself, and had returned because of *me*. It was my speech that had

encouraged her to come home, and it was *my* intern program that she'd specifically applied for.

Wow.

I was an ass.

I licked my lips, lost in these revelations as the date continued. Part of me was ashamed of my actions, besetting Hannah in the bathroom like a wild animal. While she'd given as good as she got, I hadn't been acting like the inspirational man she'd described.

Damn.

This was why I liked data and computer programs. They were much less complicated.

And a whole lot less beautiful.

Suddenly, I realized that I was probably crossing a boundary by being on the date at all. I wasn't needed at all, especially not with Hannah's hidden escort there. I had to leave.

Grumbling to myself, I turned my engine on to get going. But the moment I was resolved, the date ended, and Hannah and Tate were both standing up.

Well, since I was already there, surely it wouldn't hurt to just watch them leave? Just in case he got any wrong ideas at the last minute.

Yeah, that was it. I was just looking out for Hannah. I was one of her pack leaders and I needed to make sure she was safe.

I watched like a hawk as they left the restaurant and went out to the front. They certainly took their time walking across the parking lot, and I withheld a growl despite no one being able to hear me.

I couldn't help but think that should have been me. Which was absolutely ridiculous, point blank. There was nothing between Hannah and I, and there never could be. Yet she had my scent all over her, no doubt thick and cloying. And my hand still smelled of her in a way that made me want to suck

on my fingers until they lost every bit of flavor. If Tate was a shifter, he would have scented my mark from a mile away.

I managed to get a handle on my completely ludicrous feelings, only for Tate to put his arm around Hannah's shoulders. My teeth snapped together and a snarl pried itself out of my mouth, the desire swirling back up in me like a maelstrom.

I could hear from the comms that Hannah was just giving pleasant goodbyes, and it was normal for physical contact at the end of the date. I was fine. I was *fine*.

But then, Tate suddenly leaned forward and *kissed* her.

“Oh!”

That soft little sound was from Hannah, and that same simmering rage overcame me. It burned hot through my veins like wolfsbane, scouring me from the inside out. Which, again, was stupid. Immature. Inappropriate. But I couldn't make it stop.

The creaking of the steering wheel is what brought me back from my furor, and I realized the handle was groaning from just how hard I was squeezing it. Lifting my hands, I saw ten perfect pricks in the wheel that went fairly deep.

God, I'd lost control enough for my claws to come out? I needed to get a grip. I was acting like a little high school shifter who was suddenly coming into his hormones and didn't know what to do with his sudden urges. I was better than that, and even if I wasn't, Hannah *deserved* better.

At least Hannah quickly cut the kiss off as she cleared her throat. It was all I could do not to rip the mirror off my own car.

There were more pleasant goodbyes, but I'd had enough. I threw my car into reverse and drove home. But as I pulled my car up to my place, I was still bubbling over with so much energy that I just didn't want to go in.

So instead, I put my phone and keys in the mailbox, and walked over to a thicket of trees that bordered some of the forest still peppering the edge of the city. Once I was sure I

was out of sight, my inner wolf burst out, and I shifted so fast it made me dizzy.

Shifting wasn't normally painful when done right, but it seemed my wolf didn't have the patience for that. Or maybe I just craved the pain as punishment for all I'd done. Like that would somehow make up for how rude and domineering I'd been with Hannah. I liked to think I was much more composed than I had been acting lately, and that a little corporeal discipline would get me back in line.

That wasn't really how the world worked, but it was nice to think it did.

Heart thundering in my chest, I let my wolf run. And run. And run. We were one, and yet we weren't, two halves of a whole as with any shifter, trying to sweat out the turmoil festering in my soul.

Because while I was stuck trying to navigate my position in the pack and my desire for one of my interns, the wolf had a much less complicated point of view. It wanted Hannah, Hannah acted like she wanted us, and the moon was inching ever closer to fullness.

Ugh.

I couldn't say how long I was out there, running, panting, sniffing, but by the time I returned home, the sun had long since set.

Shifting back into a human, I took a shower and got into a change of clothes. The ritual of it all centered me quite a bit, and by the time I was braiding my hair into its standard warrior's plait, I realized what I needed to do.

Opening my laptop, I shot off a quick email to Hannah. Nothing too lengthy, just a firm statement that we needed to meet in the morning. It was tempting to say more, or to try to coax her to my place to finish up the scene that we'd finished far too soon, but I just shut my laptop and went to bed.

Tomorrow. We would discuss things *tomorrow*.

JACOBIAN

I stared down into my coffee as if the deep, swirling brown would somehow have all the answers for me.

It didn't, naturally, which was probably why witches preferred tea and the prophetic little leaves it left behind.

Ugh.

I was cranky.

No, I was worse than cranky; I was outright unhappy, with so many feelings coiling in my gut that it was hard to discern them all. I had hardly slept, which didn't help things, either, giving everything a much sharper edge. As a shifter, I could function on much less sleep than a human could, but the penalty was that eventually it would catch up to me and I would need to crash for nearly a day or two, or possibly lose control of my wolf.

So while one night of tossing and turning wouldn't kill me, it didn't exactly make me feel particularly *charitable*. Towards myself or anyone else.

It was just that all night I kept seeing Tate touching and kissing Hannah. And then the way I'd yelled at her before. Then those delicious little sounds she'd made when I was fingering her with all that I had.

It was a miasma of heady feelings, and far too much for so early in the morning. It had followed me from when I'd gotten out of bed, then through my morning workout and shower, and

then prepping my breakfast. Not exactly conducive to a productive day.

Shaking my head, I took my coffee and went to sit at my desk in my home office. Might as well since I was awake so early, anyway. Booting up the presentation I'd been working on, I tried to put all thoughts of Hannah out of my head.

That was about as successful as one would expect.

I supposed the crux of the issue, my real hang-up, was that I wanted her to want *me*. She'd made it very clear that our coupling was consensual, and yet she hadn't really expressed any particular desire for me *specifically*.

Not until her conversation with Tate last night.

Her words swirled through my head along with everything else, making my thought process even messier. I liked to be organized, but now my head was a whirlwind of disarrayed feelings, impressions, and morals.

How inconvenient.

My teeth twitched in my mouth, longing to sink into Tate's neck and rip his throat out. Which was far too dramatic of a reaction, despite my inner wolf insisting it was perfectly logical. Abruptly, I had a new appreciation for Theo. I had no idea how he was dealing with the attack on Emmaline. Goodness knew if witches burst into Hannah's place of work, I'd go absolutely feral.

Hopefully, we'd figure out what the witches were up to and break whatever curse was on Emmaline so Theo wouldn't have to be so tightly wound. Even if he was trying not to show it on the outside, his absence in the office was evidence enough that he had too much on his plate.

I pattered about on my computer for another half hour or so before packing up and heading to the office. Naturally, my phone started buzzing before I could even make it there, cluttering up with all the emails, notifications, and other fetters that came with running a successful corporation involving multiple interests. But with each little vibration, I felt my

mood souring, and by the time I arrived, I was practically chewing my own tongue.

“Cancel all my meetings except for the one with the intern,” I practically growled to my assistant as I stalked into my office, putting my phone on silent. “And keep any invaders the fuck away from me.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Good.”

It wasn't how I normally talked to my staff, but my nerves were beyond frayed. Enough so that when I finally sat behind my desk, I pulled up several finance reports in the hope they would appropriately dissociate me from reality.

It must have worked, because the next thing I knew, my assistant was knocking. There was no way enough time had passed for it to be my meeting with Hannah...right?

“This better be the only person I told you could interrupt me,” I said, still feeling quite uncharitable. I definitely owed my assistant a gift basket once things calmed down.

Suddenly, the door was opening and there was Hannah, pushing her way in like she so often did in life. Not that I was complaining, of course.

“Hey, you don't talk to her that way. What's gotten into you?”

The reprimand was earned, but no less surprising. I blinked for a moment while she thanked my assistant, then closed the door behind her.

While I recognized that what Hannah was wearing was a standard, put-together office outfit, it looked like anything but to me. She was styled just right, with everything hugging her body where it should, drawing my eye back to all the places I had touched and all the ones I still longed to.

It really was a sin that I hadn't seen those perfect breasts of hers. But our coupling had been so impromptu, so rushed, that I hadn't gotten to explore her nearly as much as I would have liked. Granted, even several hours wouldn't be enough for me

to fully drink Hannah in and revel in the masterpiece that was that voluptuous body of hers.

Wait, what was I thinking? Dammit, I needed to stop getting distracted by her like some horny teen who'd never had a girlfriend.

But clearly Hannah had her own ideas about where the conversation was going because she marched right up to my desk with all the righteous furor I'd come to expect from her.

“And if this is you terminating me, you've got another thing coming, Jacobian. I will *not* bear the brunt of whatever bullshit midlife crisis you're going through!”

“Midlife crisis?” I repeated, baffled. I knew I had a few years on her, but I was hoping I lived well past my early sixties. Granted, that didn't seem to happen in our pack too often, at least when it came to leadership roles. Alpha Sawyer hadn't even hit his mid-fifties when he'd died, and his son had just turned twenty-four when he'd followed him to an early grave.

Casualties of war, it seemed, and those numbers were only increasing, thanks to our witchy opponents.

“I'm not firing you,” I said quickly. And that seemed to surprise her more than it should have. Had she really thought her internship was on the line? Clearly, I needed to be a lot better about communication. No wonder she'd been so on edge and aggressive.

“If you're not firing me, then why that terse email? Why the orders to report to your office first thing in the morning?!”

Terse email? Oh God, I should have just called her. Text was far too easy to misinterpret. I thought that my email had been very professional and diplomatic.

“I apologize if my email came across that way. I was aiming for a respectful tone.”

“You what?” That definitely seemed to take the hot air out of her sails, and this time it was her turn to blink at *me*.

“But to clear the air, no, you’re not getting fired, but I do want to pull you out of Mr. Bronson’s company. We’ve gotten about as much out of them as I think we’re ever going to get.”

“W-what?”

“You’re at risk even looking into this information, and frankly, you’ve put yourself on the line long enough. I know these are fraught times, and everyone is pushing themselves to their limit with these witches, but it’s also important to avoid risks that don’t need to be taken.”

She was staring at me like I had grown another head, so I felt myself eager to hurry along. Funny how she could affect me with as little as a look.

“You don’t have to worry about it reflecting poorly on you, either. I’ve lined up several great companies that I genuinely think you will love working for. Several of which are based in charity, which I know you have affinity for.”

Hannah’s eyebrows went up, and I wondered if she didn’t know that I’d noticed this aspect about her long ago. When it came to helping children, the sick, or really with any other fundraiser, she was always willing to throw down. I figured it was because of her own background. She was from one of our poorer families, and while we didn’t let anyone in our massive pack go hungry, there was still a very stark difference between growing up as a wealthy shifter and a poorer one.

“No,” she said finally, which was about the last thing I expected. I thought she would be relieved to get away from me and my poor behavior. But no. If anything, she looked angry.

“No?”

“I have a job to do with Mr. Bronson’s company, danger or not. And when this internship is over, I fully plan to apply with Mahlan and Theo, both of whom clearly respect me as a professional. If they hire me, great. But I don’t need you trying to mother-hen my career.”

She was ramping up in energy as she went along, and while I knew most people wouldn’t like that she was raising her voice, I found her passion exhilarating. She was a growing

storm in front of me, full of fire and fury. I was beguiled through and through.

“So, if you don’t have any other helpful suggestions, I’m going to return to my office and continue working. And yes, that does include the fake relationship I’m cultivating with Tate and his department mates to get the answers our pack needs!”

She gave me a hard look as if daring me to challenge her, but I didn’t want to. My inner wolf was simply exhilarated by her defiance. Partially because, well, it was just plain hot, partially because it meant she cared deeply for our pack, and by extension, *me*. Maybe it was arrogant of me to think that, but I could still dream.

“Very well than,” I said neutrally, because where else could the conversation go? It wasn’t like I was going to throw her across my desk and ravage her, knocking papers and electronics this way and that while I entered her gorgeous body...

Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea.

Down, boy.

Hannah nodded once, then marched right out. And maybe I enjoyed the view as she exited, maybe I didn’t. I still found myself alone in my office.

Well...that had certainly been an experience.

I hesitated a moment longer after she left, thinking about everything she’d said. I was shocked she still wanted to be with the company, considering the hard time I’d given her lately, but I was also happy to hear it. What I wasn’t so pleased about was that she thought she had to apply to Mahlan and Theo. She could come to *me*.

Granted, she’d mentioned that they saw her as a professional, and it was very obvious that I was miserably failing at doing that. Complete bungling, catastrophic mishandling...there were dozens of ways to say that I was fucking this up, and fucking up hard.

There I went again, torn between my desire to be a good man and boss to treat Hannah with the respect she so clearly deserved, and my raw attraction for her. From her mind, to her spirit, to her body, I was irrevocably drawn to her in a way I'd never experienced before.

Messy. It was all so *messy*.

But I was tired from chasing my thoughts in miserable circles. Instead, I pulled out my phone and ordered coffee for delivery from that specialty bistro down the street, making sure to get my assistant's usual order, as well as a couple of overpriced scones. Hannah was right. I shouldn't have let my frustration out my staff, and I owed my assistant an apology.

Once that was settled, I buzzed over on the intercom.

"Hey, sorry about earlier, it's been rough lately. I ordered a little something as a treat." I cleared my throat, trying to sound warm and amiable. Not exactly my strongest suit, as I tended to fare on the more serious side. "Next time, feel free to call me on my bullshit."

"Don't worry about it, sir. We all have bad days."

"We do, but I shouldn't take it out on you. Or any of our staff. I need to be responsible even if times are tough."

"I really appreciate that you think that, sir."

"You're appreciated."

With that, I got off our intercom and got back to work. But first, I checked in on the video feeds Hannah had installed in Mr. Bronson's office, as well as their actual security system, to see if she'd returned safely.

Invasive? Probably. But at least she was one-hundred percent aware of where I'd be watching her.

Naturally, she hadn't arrived yet. But I was sure she would get there soon. Actually...considering that I'd gotten her out of her apartment early, maybe she could use some coffee, too.

After all, she certainly seemed to enjoy the shitty food that Tate had gotten her.

Picking up my phone once more, I put another order in, but this time at the coffee shop that was right outside of her work. There. Hopefully that would put her on the right track for the rest of her day.

HANNAH

I rubbed my temples, really resenting that Jacobian had made me get up an hour early just to haul myself into his office. I'd mentally prepared for some sort of battle—I mean I was *really* ready to throw down—but that hadn't seemed to be the case at all.

I'd really been all fire and brimstone, but Jacobian had just agreed, like I was right all along. I guess I just wasn't used to him being so...nice.

I was left to make my way back to Mr. Bronson's company, where I continued to pretend to trim redundancies from their set-ups when in reality, I was researching the multiple aliases that Jacobian had me looking into.

I wasn't going to lie, I was cranky, detached, and utterly exhausted. Thanks to Jacobian, I hadn't even gotten my morning coffee. Caffeine couldn't actually affect me, but it was the ritual of it that still helped me wake up and feel ready to tackle my morning.

I was about to give up on concentrating and haul myself to the break room when a knock sounded on the door. Crossing over to it, I opened up to see one of the company's interns standing there with a drink tray and small bag in their hand. Funny how in this fake position I was some prestigious, salaried person when in reality, I was an intern, too.

“What's this?” I asked, taking them from him and recognizing it from the coffee shop across the street.

“Courier dropped it off. Said it’s a thank you from the company you work for.”

Jacobian.

I didn’t allow myself to react how I wanted to, and pasted a smile across my face. “Aw, thanks for running this up to me! It’s appreciated.”

“Of course! You need anything else?”

“No, I’m good here, thank you.”

“Alright then, you have a good day now.”

“You too!”

I waited until he went down the hall before shutting my door and practically collapsing in my chair. The coffee was up to my lips before I could even fully compute what had just happened, the delicious beverage sliding down my throat.

My phone buzzed and I assumed it was Jacobian with some clever comment about the coffee, so I ignored it and allowed the placebo effect of the brew to carry me back to my work.

While the first batch of names had been a relatively quick process, the second batch Jacobian had given me were not going as smoothly. No matter what database I ran them through, no matter what records I scrounged up, all the names were like ghosts. These people didn’t even have a single meme attached to their digital footprint.

It was possible for people to maintain that level of anonymity, but it was incredibly unlikely to happen en masse. Someone was deliberately scrubbing their presence from the internet, or they were all fake to begin with. Either scenario had some pretty dire consequences, and I wasn’t sure which would prove to be worse.

Ugh. I felt bad that I’d been so distracted from the true threat at hand: the witches. It was just with Jacobian and Tate and everything else, I’d gotten a bit side-tracked. Surely no one could blame me.

Or maybe they would, if they knew I'd been panting and wanton in Jacobian's arms in the middle of a public bathroom.

Yeah, that had definitely happened.

I crossed and uncrossed my legs, swallowing hard as the memory grew stronger. It made me flush with a heat that I didn't really want to think about but couldn't ignore. I was getting deeper and deeper into this mess, but what was I supposed to do about it? Jacobian was like my personal kryptonite: mysterious, moody, smart, and noble. And also kind of an ass. It wasn't that I went for bad boys specifically, but my inner wolf seemed to enjoy the challenge.

I wished I had a therapist—that was something that we didn't have for our pack yet. Not that shifters were generally accepting when it came to mental illness, but we were far ahead of many other packs. I'd heard horror stories from farther-flung ones, groups of shifters that had really resisted integration with the modern era, and Mahlan was leading us far away from that path. I supposed I could just go see a human therapist, but then I couldn't be open about any of the issues I had, not without accidentally exposing my people to humanity. Which was a pretty big rule here.

My mind beleaguered the point for the rest of the day, with me pointedly ignoring any and all calls, messages, or other forms of communication with Jacobian. After our meeting that morning, I just wanted a break from him. He was so hot and cold. One minute a whirlwind of sexual energy, the next a micro-managing asshole of a boss.

Blurgh.

Nevertheless, I trudged through the day, doing my best to investigate each and every ghost, no matter how hopeless it was. But the more I cleared, the more it became apparent that my theory was correct. Everyone on this list had been scrubbed.

By the time I got home, I was so stressed and worn out that I made a beeline for my bath. Wolves just weren't cut out for the civil, restrictive requirements of the corporate world. Sure, I made out alright, but it really did wear at me.

I swore to myself that I would not let the next pack run we had go down without me running for several hours straight and hunting down several large prey animals. I needed blood on my tongue and viscera between my teeth. I needed to *rend* and *tear* until my inner wolf was a bit less frustrated and I was properly satiated.

Soon. *Soon*. We just had to get through the insane situation the witches had put us in. And protect Emma. And make sure that shifters stopped getting kidnapped.

Yep, nothing too complicated.

At least I had my beloved bathtub. Now that I had full time access to one, I was never going to give it up. That was the one aspect of modern society that I believed all wolves should embrace with open arms.

When I was sufficiently warm and relaxed, I dragged myself out of the tub and wrapped myself up in my fluffiest robe. I knew that I should probably make myself work out to give my inner wolf some endorphins to munch on, but I just didn't have it in me.

Instead, faced with an evening to myself, I decided to do some skincare. While I always tried to make time for self-care, I often skipped it, as pack obligations and working double duty took up way more hours than I'd have liked.

When my phone rang, I was so certain that it was Jacobian that I picked up my phone with the intent to read him the riot act. Thankfully, I had the good sense to check the screen, and I realized it was Savvy.

Oh, Savvy, jeez! I hadn't talked to her in several days and we hadn't really texted since the last time we'd been discussing work stuff. I was definitely being a bad friend.

"Hey there," I said, answering with what I hoped was a friendly tone without any leftover aggravation from Jacobian. "What's up?"

"Got sent home early. Never thought that would happen, so I just wanted to touch base."

“What? You, out of work early? Do I need to look out of the window and check if pigs are flying?”

A gentle chuckle sounded from our Alma, but my heart ached from hearing how weary she sounded. Between what was going on with the witches and her work, she had an awful lot of responsibility.

“Maybe. It certainly doesn’t happen very often.”

“You ever think maybe you need a vacation?”

“Girl, I *know* I need a vacation, but I’m certainly not getting one while these damned witches are mysteriously kidnapping shifters.”

I sighed because she was so right. None of us were going anywhere or doing anything fun for a good long while. Especially with Emma under some mysterious curse that we couldn’t quite identify. Goodness, Lyssa had *just* broken hers.

“Fair enough,” I said. “I was just about to do an in-home spa day. Wanna join in?”

“Ooooh,” Savannah practically cooed. She could be so cute sometimes. I was pretty sure that a lot of our pack just saw her as a mysterious and slightly stern Alma, but she was so much more. But that was the plight of her kind, I supposed—vital to a pack, but not a shifter themselves. “You know what, I have a green tea mask I’ve been meaning to use. I’m in!”

“Hell, yeah!”

The two of us “got ready” as it were, which mostly involved Savvy getting into her own fluffy robe and both of us setting ourselves up at our vanities. It was one of the few large pieces of furniture I had, as I’d invested in it when I’d gone to college. Would having a quality couch be nice? Sure. But I valued having a well-lit, comfortable place to do my makeup every morning.

“So, tell me about your work,” I said as we got started, my face nice and clean from both my bath and washing my face again with cool water.

“Ugh, do I have to?”

We shared a laugh. Despite her reticence, Savvy went into her hospital’s interpersonal politics, which were quite involved. After about a half hour or so, I realized that nurses were a bit like a wolf pack. They had hierarchy, defined roles, and when people decided to break them, it was chaos.

Also, they had the barely restrained desire to rip the throats out of people who irritated them.

“So, what’s going on with you?”

I shrugged, unable to stop the frown that wrinkled my forehead, making the mask I was applying crease. Drat.

“That bad, huh?” Savvy asked when I didn’t answer for a long moment.

“It’s fine, I guess. Jacobian’s just driving me insane.”

“That still going on, huh?”

“Yeah.” I left out how I’d had his fingers inside me, pulling off a climax that had literally made my eyes cross. “I don’t know, I get the feeling that he wants to fire me.”

“Fire you?!”

“I think so.”

“I don’t think he’d do that. He’s only ever fired one intern before, and that was for stealing from another employee.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Guy left the pack after that, right?”

“I believe so. There was a history, apparently.”

I nodded. I didn’t know all the details, either, but I’d heard vague references to it several times. Someday, I’d have to ask him and hear the full story.

“Unless you’re swiping from people’s purses, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

I wanted to tell her the truth, the *whole* truth, but I also knew that would start a shit-show that I didn’t want to bother

with. So I just nodded and went about some more skincare steps.

But even if I was ignoring the elephant in the room, it was nice to just gab with Savvy. Soon I was going to need to get her, Emma, and Lyssa all together for a girl's night, no boys allowed.

“Did you hear that Samson might have a breakthrough with Emma's curse?”

“Pardon?” I blinked, setting down the soft towel I'd been gently patting my face with. My rollers were currently chilling in the freezer, as I was waiting for them to get ridiculously cold. Much colder than was recommended, but I was a shifter, and I needed the more extreme temperature to reduce my puffiness.

“Yeah, nothing solid left, but he seemed pretty encouraged the last time I talked to him.”

“You talk to him on a regular basis?” Maybe it was strange to me, but I'd exchanged maybe ten words with the guy. It wasn't that I didn't trust witches, given our situation, it was just that...I didn't trust witches, given our situation. But as much as I worried Samson might be some double agent, he had helped our pack a lot. In fact, he'd been downright instrumental in finding that Sarah witch who'd been reinforcing the curse on Lyssa.

“I wouldn't say regularly, but more now since he's been busting his ass to try to free Emma from her curse. We're really lucky he's on our side.”

“For sure.”

“Do you—”

I was cut off as someone pounded on my door loud enough for Savvy to hear even on the phone.

“You expecting someone?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “But I have a feeling I know who it is.”

Grabbing my phone, I got up and went to my door. I didn't even need to open it to smell Jacobian there, his scent irritated and full of pepper.

Great. So much for a relaxing spa day.

“Hold on, Savvy. I'll try to deal with this fast.”

“Sure, it's no problem.”

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door just for Jacobian to push past me. “What did I tell you about answering the door in that robe?” he said tersely.

“Okay, hello to you too,” I shot back, shutting the door behind him. “Is there a reason you're here?”

There was plenty of bite in my tone, but hey, he deserved it. He'd become a giant pain in my ass.

“You weren't answering your phone and I was worried,” he answered honestly. And hey, as much as I didn't like to be mother-henned, I couldn't entirely blame him. “Especially after the last attack on Emma's shop.”

“Sorry, I was on the phone with Savvy, see?”

I held up my phone screen towards Jacobian, and I had to admit that his shocked expression was pretty hilarious. I don't know how I refrained from breaking out in laughter, but somehow I kept it to a slight chuckle. It was just so rare for Jacobian to be ruffled that I had to take my victories where I could.

“Oh, hello there, Savannah,” he said, voice going flat. The transition surprised me for a moment, and then I remembered that he used to sound that way around me. Huh, I hadn't even noticed it had changed. Did...did that mean I got to see some special part of him, or was I just flattering my ego? “How are you?”

“You know, busy as always.”

It was so awkward, and I probably shouldn't have reveled in it, but I totally did. What could I say? It was nice to see Jacobian be off-kilter like the rest of us lowly shifters. But I

didn't need to exacerbate the situation any further, so I just cleared my throat.

"I'll talk to you later, Sav."

"Okay, be safe now, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. See you later."

I ended the call, then crossed my arms, giving Jacobian what I hoped was a scathing look. If he was here for part two of our argument, he was about to have a bad time.

"You know you can't just barge into my house whenever you want to, right?"

Sure, he was in the inner circle of our pack's alpha, but that didn't mean he had *carte blanche* access to my home.

"I know. I just..." He ran a hand through that thick hair of his and started to pace. "It's just I realize that my actions of late have been...erratic."

"That's certainly one way to put it, yeah."

"Look, I don't want there to be tension between us."

I thought back to his fingers sliding across my swollen lips as he made me cum, filthy words spilling from his mouth between our torrid kisses. "A little late for that."

Several expressions went across his face before he finally settled on a steely one. "What you said earlier today made me think."

"I said a lot of things earlier today," I groused, in no mood to be amenable.

"That's certainly true." He let out a sigh that was very much not like him. "Look, I'm not firing you, I'm just here to give you the option to work for someone else. Mahlan, Theo, whoever. They'll take care of you and treat you as a professional."

"Ugh, *this* again!?" Seriously, we were like a couple who broke up every other week, and we weren't even dating. How annoying.

“It’s not *this* again. You deserve to be treated with the utmost respect, and I haven’t been doing that.”

“No you haven’t,” I agreed, feeling hot under the collar despite the fact that I most certainly wasn’t wearing a collar at all. In fact, I was acutely aware that I was naked under my fluffy layer of terrycloth. “I get that you’ve got some moral dilemma going on in your head, but I’m not interested. The position I’m in is irreplaceable, as is the info I’ve gotten. So just let me do my job, or try to replace me!” I let even more teeth get into my words. “Seriously, just *try*.”

Maybe that was an overstep, but I meant it. No other intern could match what I was doing.

“Why do you have to make everything so difficult?” Jacobian said through gritted teeth.

“Why do you have to be such an ass?” I hissed right back. I was playing with fire, but it was what he brought out of me.

He took a step forward, towering over me, and it was like we were back in the bathroom again, both of us beginning to breathe hard, our intake of oxygen harsher and harsher. What was it about Jacobian that made me lose my damn mind?

“You know, sometimes I think you hate me,” he said.

“You know, sometimes I think I do.”

Our teeth were now bared, and if either of us had been in wolf form, our hackles would have been raised. We were two apex predators staring each other down, each daring but also longing for the other to submit. To yield.

That was the crux, wasn’t it? Thrilled by the challenge, enraged by the defiance. The constant pull between extreme emotions that always seemed to get the both of us going.

But Jacobian pulled himself out of it, which made me feel a bit of emotional whiplash. I’d sworn I’d felt something building between us, something deliciously heated and sinful, but it all fizzled as he stepped away.

“Like I said, stop answering the door in that robe. It isn’t safe.” With that, he straightened, like he hadn’t been invading

my apartment and hadn't had his fingers inside me the day before.

"Oh, you don't like my robe?" I hissed back, my wolf whispering all sorts of things to me. Because the truth was, I was a brat underneath everything, and I *had* to get the final word in. Or in this case, the final act. "Let me fix that then."

I didn't know where I got the balls, but I untied the waistband and shrugged it off onto the floor, leaving me fully naked in front of Jacobian.

The cool air of my apartment made my heated shifter skin prickle as a thrill rushed through my veins. I'd never been a prude, yet I'd also never been quite so *daring* before. I was challenging Jacobian, and we both knew it.

But at the same time, how he looked at me was like an incredible drug. I watched his eyes burn as they moved along my body, traveling ravenously from curve to curve. I didn't know if he was aware of the undiluted desire that traveled across his face, but I was caught up in the minutiae of it all.

"Good night then, Jacobian. I'm sure you can see yourself out."

I was acting like some sort of femme fatale, but I *liked* it. This was entirely unlike me. I was bright Hannah. Reliable Hannah. Dependable, dedicated Hannah. Chubby, girl-next-door Hannah. Not stand-naked-in-front-of-my-boss-and-challenge-him-directly Hannah.

And yet I felt reawakened in a way I never thought I could be, a goddess who was meant to be fought or worshipped, with nothing in between. And it was *Jacobian* who brought that out in me. No one else.

Never anybody else.

I sashayed past him like he wasn't even there, cocksure and graceful in a way I'd rarely felt before. I could feel his pressure mounting, his pheromones flooding the little hallway that led to my front door, but right before I was out of range, his hand grasped my arm.

I halted, but only for a pregnant moment, staring straight ahead to let the tension ramp up that much higher. And when I finally, laconically turned my head to look at Jacobian, what I saw there made it all worth it.

He looked feral with desire, his eyes shifting to an amber color while his fangs had grown. The idea that I had made him lose control over his inner wolf was intoxicating, and I felt my own body respond in kind. We were twin flames, he and I, burning brighter and hotter when we were together.

But what if we burned ourselves to nothing? Ended up as little more than ash and ruined wax on the altar of our lust?

What if, what if, what if...

I was certainly willing to risk it.

And it appeared Jacobian was, too, because suddenly his lips were crashing onto mine and I was backed up against the wall. His muscled, incredibly strong body pinned me down, making adrenaline shoot through my veins, amplifying everything else already burning through me.

Oh, but I wanted to burn. I wanted to be an inferno, all-consuming and all-changing, feeling anything and everything with enough intensity to cry until it was all gone. I wanted to be lost in my lust and desire. No office politics. Nothing as silly as money to distract us. Just skin on skin and wolf on wolf.

What a wicked idea. A wicked, lovely idea.

My arms went to Jacobian's shoulders as my nails dug into the back of his neck, a sharp contrast to the pleasure of our embrace. And by the wolf-gods, if the shiver that went through him didn't make me nearly delirious with power. With *desire*. I wanted to rip him apart, ride him, and kiss his lips all at the same time. Thankfully, two of those acts were compatible.

We were grinding against each other, kissing, biting, licking. The situation was escalating rapidly, but I had no desire to stop it. It was like all the resentment and irritation had converted itself into sheer arousal, and I wasn't complaining.

“Fuck, you drive me mad,” Jacobian growled, his hands going around to my bare ass. I could tell that he was about to haul me up again, and as much fun as the restaurant bathroom had been, I wanted a different experience.

“Hold on,” I said, shoving him away. Jacobian recoiled instantly, and I had to admire that as hard up as he obviously was, he still respected my consent. Sign of a good man, even if we were clashing a lot.

“Do you want to stop?” he said, his hands shaking. And I didn’t miss that his fingernails had turned darker and thick, a sure sign that his wolf was close to the front.

“No,” I answered, breath ragged. “Just thought we could do a little...relocation.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

I offered my hand, and although the gesture was relatively benign, considering everything else we’d done, the gesture had a weight to it I hadn’t expected.

Maybe it was because it was normal contact, something Jacobian and I didn’t really have. Maybe it was because while most of what we did could be called hate-fucking, hand-holding didn’t fit anywhere on that spectrum. Maybe, maybe, maybe. But whatever the reason, Jacobian took my hand and let me lead him into my bedroom.

For a fleeting moment, I worried that he was going to insult my tiny shoebox of a place, because I could think of nothing that would dry me up faster. But every time I glanced back at him, he was staring at me like I was the center of the world. Perhaps even the universe.

Jacobian certainly knew how to make a woman feel beautiful.

When we were finally inside, I let go of his hand and turned to him. I expected ravenous heat, or for him to tackle me to the bed, but instead, he stepped forward and gently cupped my face in his large, calloused hands.

It was about the last thing I expected, and I nearly flinched away from it. Thankfully, I was able to cut off that instinct, and I just stared up at him, still taking in the myriad of emotions that marched across his handsome features.

“Finally have you all to myself, as long as we want.”

He did, didn't he? Our first coupling had been so furtive and fleeting. The spontaneity of it all had been thrilling, but it had been cut so short. But now, we didn't have my fake date waiting outside the door, or my security detail warning us that they'd be coming in less than a minute.

“Will you let me worship you, like you deserve?”

Oh.

Oh.

I couldn't speak for a moment, couldn't even breathe, not with the low rumble that went through Jacobian's voice. From anyone else, I would assume he was mocking me. Or even laugh at the cheesy line. But from my boss, from him, it seemed so damn *earnest*.

I swallowed hard once, twice, three times before I could finally gather enough wits to get any words out. “Worship away.”

Worship away? Brilliant. I was just so smooth.

But my self-loathing faded rapidly when Jacobian kissed me so softly, so tenderly, like I was something delicate and precious in his hands. I would have thought that my inner wolf would hate such a thing, but no, she seemed assured. Even a little intrigued.

But worship was exactly what it was. Jacobian's lips moved against me as if in a prayer, promising things that I probably shouldn't be promised. It didn't take me long to get lost in the haze of it, holding onto him for dear life.

I...I'd never experienced anything like it. Not with any other fling, date, or relationship. It really did seem holy, in a way.

But then Jacobian was dipping me, and the next thing I knew, I was laid out on the bed. My hair spread out below me, my body so taut, I felt like a bow string. Jacobian was hovering over me, and for a moment, I felt almost virginal.

What was Jacobian Helton doing to me?

I didn't know, but I didn't let myself waste my energy questioning it. I kissed him back when he kissed me, pouring so much of what I was feeling into it.

He was entirely too clothed for my taste, his shirt scratching my bare front. But before my fingers could go to his buttons, he began to slid down my body, his lips leaving a blazing trail in their wake.

Every single press of his mouth to my flesh was a revelation, a little point of electricity bound to all the other ones, until I crackled with lighting. So naturally, when those broad, strong hands of his finally gripped my thighs, I nearly jack-knifed off the bed.

“Easy, baby girl,” he growled in that low, low way of his that never failed to make me shiver. Tremble even. “I’ve got you.”

And he most certainly did. He parted my thighs, raising one of my legs onto his shoulder, and then the other leg on the opposite. I felt myself blush, spread apart as I was, but the way Jacobian was looking at me made the part of my brain—the one that would normally urge me to cover myself up—surrender.

Goodness, his pupils had gone wolf, too—deep black points surrounded by a warm, luscious amber. I could see flecks of gold in it, and lightning yellow, staring through to my soul.

“God, the way you smell. It’s impossible, and yet...” he dragged his tongue along the inside of my thigh, and I could hear him scent me with the entire movement. Fuck, did he have any idea how utterly hot he was?! “Here you are.”

“Here I am,” I murmured, my heart thundering in my chest. “Right here for you.”

“For me,” he answered back like a man possessed.

I didn't understand how he could go from grating on my nerves to being so reverent. I guess he wasn't the only hot and cold one, because as mad as I'd been at him earlier, now I desperately desired him, wanting him to do whatever he wanted with me.

Whatever he wanted.

And that was when he pressed a kiss to my lower lips, incredibly light at first, barely enough of a touch to feel. But despite its feather-soft pressure, my spine lit up like a Las Vegas street, the brilliant illumination of it spreading into my vision.

As the seconds passed, however, his tongue entered the play, applying more pressure. And then one of his hands came up to part me, allowing him a completely unhindered view.

“Look at you. So pink, so wet for me already.”

I'd never heard dirty talk that sounded so much like a prayer, and I heard myself moan in response. That just seemed to encourage Jacobian further, and he *really* got to work.

Oh God, oh God, *oh God!*

If I thought his fingers felt good, his mouth was *so* much better. His tongue traveled along my curves, giving me a warm feeling, while his lips would occasionally close around different areas to provide *just* the right amount of suction. Then, once I was whining and writhing, his fingers would slide right back into me.

Two insane counterpoints of pleasure, both building upon each other in a glorious crescendo. But just when I felt like my senses were reaching their brink, his *other* hand slid up my body to play with one of my hard nipples.

“Fuck!” I gasped, eloquent as always. I swore that I didn't normally just loudly curse during sex, but Jacobian was turning my brain into oh-so-pleasant mush.

“That's right, baby,” he said, lifting his mouth away from me for just a moment. “Make noise for me.”

Surely he had to understand that he was playing incredibly unfair...right? That he was pulling out moves that no woman had a defense against, not just me and my unruly wolf? Not that I was complaining. I just wanted him to know that I wasn't typically so helpless.

Actually, "helpless" wasn't the right word. That had such a negative connotation to it. But what was shorthand for being so drowned in pleasure, I would die to stay submerged in it?

I had a theory that a thesaurus wasn't going to be much use on that front.

Normally, I would have at least chuckled at my own mental joke, but then Jacobian changed the angle of his fingers, crooking them just right so they stroked that spongy sort of wall within me. I swore I saw stars, colors, and lights bursting behind my eyes in a brilliant show that would rival the fourth of July.

"Oh, I'm gonna...I'm gonna..."

In a shocking turn of events, he pulled away from me. I swore, a piece of my soul withered, and I gave him a certified *look*. But Jacobian, that bastard, just smirked at me.

"What?" he asked like he hadn't just committed an act of war.

"Why'd you stop?"

"Don't you remember?" My scathing look turned into confusion, and he leaned in, his lips nearly against mine. "I said I was going to ruin you."

And then his fingers were back inside of me while he slid down my body. He moved within me so quickly, hot, and full of expertise. Once more, I was quickly overtaken by the searing wave that always proceeded my climax, but right when my thighs began to shake, Jacobian stopped.

"I swear to God!" I cried.

And once more, Jacobian leaned forward over my body to kiss me, then spoke, dripping in pure, utter, delicious poison. "He can't help you here. You're *mine*."

“Yours,” I whispered back, so caught up in how utterly *hot* that was. I liked that he was laying claim to me in some weird, instinctual way.

Time got a little wobbly after that as he made me edge over and over again. I could feel that nearly all of my front teeth had sharpened into large fangs and my nails were all claws. I wouldn't have been surprised if my eyes were a bright copper and my pupils now dark pinpricks.

All I knew was that I was sweaty, unhinged, and so keyed up that I was barely human. It was when Jacobian edged me for perhaps the tenth time that I snarled in his face as he straightened to kiss me yet again, my wolf voice echoing through our minds rather than any actual words escaping my mouth.

If you don't let me come, I'll rip your throat out.

“Is that so?” he challenged, and I had no idea how he still had the wherewithal to speak. I certainly didn't.

Don't tease me, you—

I was cut off as suddenly I was flipped over, face down, ass up, and completely bent over the bed. I let out a whine, and my inner wolf was practically having her own celebratory rave. Of course she would love a position that was so close to literally presenting.

“So damn beautiful,” Jacobian whispered before planting a warm kiss on one of my cheeks. I would have rolled my eyes, but then his teeth hit my skin and I realized he was making a hickey right on my ass!

Fuck, it shouldn't have been so hot. It should have been borderline silly. But he was marking me, and even if the remainder faded quickly because of my natural shifter healing, I would remember it every time I sat down for the next few days.

“You want me, baby girl?”

“*Yes!*” I managed to snarl with my actual vocal cords, which was far more of a feat than it should have been.

“Now now.” His nose slid up my spine and his hot breath across my skin nearly sent my brain all the way offline. “Ask *nicely*.”

Nicely? *Nicely*? My soul and body were lost in a deluge of ecstasy and my mind was inverting itself, but he wanted me to compose a polite request to be fucked down good in a way only a shifter could do?

“Please?” I managed after a beat.

“Good girl.”

And those words did something for me. I could smell my own pheromones spike, thick and heady. If Jacobian wanted anything more, he wasn't going to get it, because I could feel myself sliding into complete nonverbal mode.

But thankfully, that seemed to be enough, because I felt the blunt head of Jacobian's manhood against my dripping entrance. I wished that I could see him, could let my hands explore his chest, but I also knew that wasn't in the cards for the moment. No, the only thing I had to worry about was holding on and experiencing everything Jacobian was about to give me. And why did I get the feeling that he was about to give me a whole lot?

“Fuck, you're so hot for me, baby girl,” Jacobian whispered, another missive of worship that made my brain light up in all sorts of pleasant ways.

And then he was sliding home, filling me up in one warm, delicious stretch. It was everything my body wanted and more, sending the last of my conscious thoughts running from my mind and leaving just the bare bones of who I was.

One thrust, two thrusts, a third deep, bruising thrust, and then I was coming, my body worked up to the absolute limit by all the edging he'd done. I let out a whine, and it felt like my soul was physically thrown from my body into another dimension, pushed out by the sheer amount of pleasure coursing through every cell I had.

It was the orgasm to end all orgasms, my inner wolf and I both beside ourselves, lost and uncomplaining in the sauce.

I was fully aware that I was making a terrible decision, that with every thrust, the issues between Jacobian and I were growing that much more complicated, but I didn't care.

The only thing that mattered was the feelings we brought out in each other, a celebration of what our bodies could do, could create. All I had to do was close my eyes and let go.

So I let go.

JACOBIAN

Hannah was clamping down so hard on me, I was surprised she didn't break my dick off. And yet, it felt amazing at the same time, making every sensation that much sharper. I pumped her through the rest of her orgasm, which seemed to last forever. Not that I was complaining. Not at all.

Between her scent on my face and the pheromones pumping out of her, it was like she was my entire world. The only thing that existed was her beauty, her body, and the pleasure I was pulling out of it.

Her climax seemed to end after an eon, and I slowed. Or at least tried to. But the moment I dared to ease up on my thrusting, Hannah let out a snarl.

"Don't forget your manners, baby girl," I teased, loving the way she challenged me. The way there was always a fire in her that seemed one step away from wanting to set me alight or to submit.

But then her head whipped back and she glared at me over her shoulder, a near-rabid snarl escaping her lips. I knew that she'd been close to transforming before, her teeth sharp and her wolf-voice echoing in my head, but it was clear that she'd gone beyond that point. Her eyes were a bright copper, all of her teeth were fangs, and the bridge of her nose was starting to expand and warp in a way that I was all too familiar with.

To some, she would look like a monster, I was sure. But to me, she looked *beautiful*. Like a nature spirit that was finally

revealing herself, shucking off all the trappings of civility and leaving just pure emotion, pure sensory joy.

The thought that I was the one who did that to her, who gave her so much pleasure that even the intelligent, composed Hannah could lose her composure, was certainly a blessing to my ego, and I picked up the pace with my thrusting once again.

Gods, she felt so good, hot, and velvety soft along my length, her slick walls massaging me rhythmically. She was better than I ever imagined, which was impressive considering that I had a pretty active imagination.

“Don’t worry,” I soothed, stroking up her back. “I got you, I know what you need.”

I had no idea how I was keeping so composed considering it felt like my body was going to shake into a million pieces, but I wasn’t going to question it. Somehow, I’d been granted the privilege of lying with the goddess below me, and I wasn’t about to ruin it.

No, instead I wanted to show her every pleasure in the world until she could never forget about me. I wanted every other lover, every hook-up, to pale in comparison to my memory.

Granted, the thought of her being with anyone else made me snarl, and she responded in kind, both of us speaking in a primal way that I’d never really tapped into before. I felt more connected to my inner wolf than ever before, wild and free to indulge in every sensation we had together.

Gripping one of her legs, I leaned back and managed to flip her over without fully pulling out of her. Her front revealed to me, and I watched those perfect, full breasts of hers bounce as I pistoned into her again, reveling in every movement, every undulation of her voluptuous form. She was just so *much*. She was bounty. She was plenty. She was a cornucopia, overflowing in a way that most people didn’t understand or appreciate.

But I did.

No, I did more than *appreciate*. I lusted, I desired, I was nearly mad from my sheer adoration. And the fact that her beautiful, soft body was spread out below me just made everything that much sweeter.

I let my hands glide up her body yet again, feeling how soft her skin was. It seemed impossible that something so silken could exist on a body that could also explode into a mythical direwolf, yet it was true.

I couldn't resist any longer. I bent down and let my tongue travel from the top of her stomach, up through her cleavage, until my lips could finally settle around one of those pert, pink nipples of hers.

And God, the sound she made at that was *amazing*. I'd been well-aware that basically everything about Hannah was a trigger to me being hot and bothered, and yet I'd never expected a sound quite like *that*. It was somewhere between a whine for more, a snarl of dominance, and a mewl of submission. It shouldn't have worked, but it did, and I felt my grip on sanity slip a little more.

But what was sanity compared to undiluted ecstasy? Clearly, it didn't compare even remotely.

"That's my girl," I hissed once I let her nipple go with a pop. "I love hearing what you like. Don't hold back."

Oh, she didn't. Not even remotely. Instead, one of her hands scrambled to the back of my neck and pulled me back down to her breast.

Don't mind if I do. I smirked to myself, drawing the blushed bud back into my mouth, my tongue circling around it before sliding against the top.

I was drunk on pleasure, but I still felt at least slightly in control of that devotion. But then her hand at the back of my neck tightened its hold, and her nails dug into my skin.

Fuck.

Oh *fuck*.

Those five pinpricks of pain shot through me like bullets, calling on instincts long since buried. Hannah didn't know it, but her pinky was right on the edge of my mating gland, flooding my body with chemicals that it really didn't need.

I squeezed my eyes, trying to pull back, but my movement just made her grip me harder.

More. A feral plead came across our pack tether. Please, more!

I knew I needed to move her hand, or at least warn her about the type of game she was playing. But then the increased grip made her pinky slide right on top of my mating gland, and her nail bit right into it.

Oh! Oh!

I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. It was like every single drug imaginable flooded my body at once, sending me into another reality. There was no logic in my mind, and I felt my inner wolf take the forefront of my body.

That was something that rarely happened, even in my wolf form, and it was almost like I was floating above myself, observing what was happening between Hannah and me.

A snarl that was more animal than human punched its way out of my throat, and my body suddenly started going harder, my clawed hands gripping Hannah's hips and sinking in as I thrust wildy. I vaguely knew I needed to get control again, but it was only the faintest sigh of an idea right now. Instead, my mind was filled with my inner wolf's prehistoric inner monologue.

Mate. Breed. Protect. Feed. Pups. Mate. Breed. Mate, mate, mate, matematemate!

No, this wasn't mating, this was sex. There was a difference for shifters, and a vital one. While once, thousands of years ago, wolf shifters could only mate when one was in heat and one was in rut, that had long since changed. A fertile female shifter could get pregnant at any time, even during casual sex. Granted, chances were much higher with the old conditions, but it wasn't necessary.

Beyond that, *mating* was a huge deal. It wasn't like a human marriage, which was plenty serious itself. It was a magical bond that fully bonded two shifters, both chemically and metaphysically. She could feel my emotions if they were strong enough, and I would feel hers. While I didn't have an alpha voice to command her, we both had a mate's voice to soothe and comfort the other.

Casual sex was one thing, even if it was a religious experience, and mating was another. But it was hard to find that boundary when her pinky claw was *digging into my fucking mating gland*.

It was a tiny little piece of shifter evolution, but once damaged, it often released a flood of feel-good bonding chemicals at its mildest—and the strongest fuck-me chemicals in existence for those who were more sensitive. And apparently, my wolf and I were in the latter category.

It figured.

The faintest part of my mind was aware that it was just a claw, that it would be so much worse if it was her teeth because of the enzymes in our shifter saliva. But that didn't matter. All that mattered was me pounding into Hannah.

Because I needed her to come. I needed her to orgasm right on my dick so I could fill her with everything I had to offer. Thinking wildly, I couldn't help but think of how utterly gorgeous she'd look pregnant. Belly even fatter, her face all flushed from the pups growing inside of her.

I could see it so clearly that I was practically in the moment. Her long blond hair down around her shoulders, maybe even dyed some of those bright colors she liked so much. It was a shame that she'd had to get rid of her eccentric shades so she wouldn't stand out in Bronson's company, but once things went back to normal, she was more than welcome to have her vibrant hair back.

I would come home to my apartment and she would be sitting on the couch, swollen feet propped up and empty snacks around her. She'd greet me, struggling to get up, just for me to assure her to stay seated.

It wasn't anything I'd talked about before, but the natural shifter instinct to provide for a mate had always been strong within me. In my perfect scenario, I'd cut her up her favorite fruits, pour her favorite drink into her favorite cup, and sit next to her on that couch. While she ate, I'd rub her feet, taking in the scent of her contentedness and our pups growing inside her.

Holy shit, that image bloomed in my mind like an artistic masterpiece, and I wanted it. My wolf and I wanted it so *badly*. To protect her, provide for her, give her everything she wanted, and then some. Because she deserved it, in every sense of the word. She worked so hard, and I knew without a doubt that she would be an excellent, strong mother who treated her children with compassion.

And then her pinky claw sank in harder.

The last vestige of restraint I had faded from my mind. I was wild and unhinged, plowing into Hannah. She was moaning in return, mewling every time I managed to hit that sensitive wall within her.

Hannah was close, I could feel it, and my entire being became dedicated to getting her over that edge. Leaning over her, I recaptured her nipple in my mouth, teasing it as my fingers continued to grip her hips with a bruising strength.

I felt it the moment she hit her climax. She bent nearly in a perfect arch, a wanton mewl punching its way out of her throat. And the way she gripped me—*fuck*, it was even better than the first time.

I was lost in it, devoured, and I felt my own orgasm slam into me like a sledgehammer. It consumed everything, flooding me with pure, unadulterated ecstasy.

It was all heat, sweat, and euphoria. Too much for any man to endure. Thankfully, I was more than a man; I was a wolf. So I slammed into her, pouring everything I had into her still-quivering opening.

There were no rational words for it, only fragmented ideas still pouring from my inner wolf. *Mate! Breed! Provide!*

Protect! Mate! Breed! Provide! Protect!

It repeated itself as a never-ending mantra in my head. An unrepentant conga line of things that I'd never known I'd been yearning for. So naturally, I did the only thing a wolf could be expected to do in that situation.

I leaned forward and bit her.

HANNAH

I was lost in a sea of bliss, completely detached of all the troubles and entanglements of the modern world. There were no thoughts; only sinful, delicious gratification flowing through every cell of me.

I thought I was at the pinnacle of pleasure. That it couldn't get any better than that.

But then teeth buried themselves into the side of my neck, and my entire world rewrote itself. I thought I knew what good sex was. I had been sure that I knew what my limit was, and just how much a shifter could feel.

I was wrong.

Everything was so much more. Suddenly all those older, more traditional shifters in our pack who used to go on and on about their mating bites made sense. The idea had always been somewhat hot to me, but I'd thought that the stories had been slightly exaggerated.

But no. Not even an ounce. If anything, they'd underplayed it, because it was unlike any other thing I had ever anticipated or imagined.

I cried out, my throat constricting at the deluge of it all. Every muscle in my body tensed, coiling tighter than the world's most reinforced rubber band, and then relaxed all at once.

Was this what was being high was supposed to feel like? If so, I never wanted to be sober again. I just wanted to float in

the feeling and never come down. I was addicted to it down to my core, bliss rewriting me from the DNA out.

Amazing.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I started to come down from the high. But it wasn't like a drop or anything like that. Instead it was slowly sinking into a warm bath, except turned up to the highest exponent. Contented, hazy, more than a bit inebriated. If they could bottle that, I would make sure I had a lifetime supply.

There was movement, and I was vaguely aware of the teeth in my neck leaving. I whined, trying to haul it back for that delicious pressure combined with the flint-sharp sting of pain, but instead I was turned on my side.

Oh, that was actually pretty nice.

A warm, strong body curled up against my back, and my inner wolf practically cooed. *Mate. Protected. Bred.*

Silly things, naturally, and they didn't make much sense. All I could think of was how comfortable I felt and the muscled arms that wrapped around my middle to pull me up against that warm chest behind me.

Bliss. Pure bliss. And it was with soft lips brushing the back of my neck that I drifted into sleep, sure I would wake up just as happy as I slipped into unconsciousness.



“YOU FUCKING MATED ME?!”

I threw the lamp on my bedside table where Jacobian was standing, but naturally the fucker caught it and set it down.

“Hannah, I realize this isn't an ideal situation, but I can explain!”

“Explain what, you fucknut?!”

I reached for something else to throw, my mind spinning with the shock of it all. I'd woken up from the deepest sleep I

had in a while, feeling *amazing*. Far better than I had any right to. And then I'd smelled something truly delicious. Woodsy, a bit musky, and full of a virile power that beckoned me to consciousness.

Blinking, I'd tried to sit up, only to realize that my limbs were far too heavy, like I was a marionette with all my strings cut, leaving me unable to move. But I wasn't panicked about it. Instead, it seemed right, a syrupy sort of relaxation that I wasn't used to.

And then my neck had twinged.

That was when the events of the night had rapidly oame flooding back. Jacobian and I had had sex. World-changing, mind-boggling, insane sex.

And then he'd bitten me.

He'd *bitten* me!

That fucker had *mated me without consent!*

To say I was angry was potentially the understatement of a lifetime. I was furious. I was beyond furious. I was at an level of anger that I didn't even think was possible.

This time, Jacobian dodged as I threw my entire nightstand at him. "Look, Hannah, I'm sorry, but you marked me first!"

I froze in the middle of picking up the next closest piece of furniture, my hands shaking. "W-what?" He was lying! He had to be lying! Surely I would remember if I'd mated someone! I wasn't some unethical heathen who went around mating people just because they were incredible lays.

"Look!" He turned his head and pointed to his neck, where I did indeed see a puncture mark and bruise. For it to still be there after we'd slept...

"That's not a bite," I whispered, horrified at myself.

"No, it's from your claw. You wouldn't let go of my neck. But when you punctured my gland..." he trailed off, sounding absolutely miserable, and the guilt began to rapidly set in.

I'd punctured Jacobian's mating gland? While that wasn't consent, it wasn't exactly nice, either. Damaging a gland like that released a huge rush of endorphins and other happy chemicals in shifters. No, he hadn't had permission to bite me, but I'd basically dosed him with the equivalent of about a couple of cases of beers.

It was my fault, but I hadn't meant to! I hadn't even realized I was doing it! So much of the sex we'd had together was a strange wash between me and my wolf. Had I really lost so much control?

"I'm sorry," Jacobian said, setting my lamp to the side and approaching me carefully. "I normally would never, ever cross such a line. I hope you know I mean that."

I nodded, desperation swamping through me so thickly that it was getting hard to breathe. Was I having a panic attack? I was pretty sure this was what a panic attack felt like.

"I know," I whispered, feeling tears well up. "I didn't mean to, either. *Really!* I swear I would never do something like that!"

God, what if he thought I was some gold-digger who's cooked the whole thing up to get at his considerable money? It wasn't the craziest idea out there, and I was sure there were plenty of people who'd done worse. But even if Jacobian pissed me off half the time, I didn't want him thinking that I could use him or hurt him like that!

To my immense relief, he sat down beside me on the bed and gently took me into his arms. Funny how we could go from fighting so bitterly to being a source of comfort for each other. I was pretty sure that dynamic was unhealthy, but considering we were now mated, our relationship was about to get a whole lot more dysfunctional.

I couldn't believe it. We were mated, and I hadn't even graduated college yet. That was completely against everything that I'd planned! Jacobian and I weren't even dating! We'd hooked up twice, if one counted heavy petting, and that was it.

But I could feel his regret pumping through our bond, bitter and flaked with melancholy. Great. Just great. And the thought that it was all my fault made me wanna ralph right then and there.

“I know you wouldn’t, Hannah. This was an accident. And one I am deeply sorry for. We can look into how to get this removed.”

Removed? I heard that was an incredibly painful process that took a whole lot of time and usually wasn’t very successful. “I thought that didn’t work.” God, my voice sounded plaintive even to myself. But given the situation, maybe I deserved to sound a little whiny.

“It doesn’t, most of the time. That’s why Theo and Emma are still together and not fighting it.”

Ugh, and wasn’t that a whole situation? At least the reason they were mated was to save Emma’s life after she’d been nearly lethally cursed by a witch. Ours was just because I had a slippery pinky finger.

How humiliating.

I put my head in my hands, and in a move very unlike myself, I felt myself start to choke back sobs. God, I’d fucked up royally.

“Hey, hey, it’s gonna be okay, I swear. I’m not gonna force you into anything. We’ll figure out how to undo this, whatever it takes.”

Strange, I didn’t think that I’d ever seen such a sweet side to Jacobian. It was far more comforting than I thought it would be, taking the edge away from the vicious dagger cutting through me. I was pretty sure that a real dagger would hurt less.

“What will people think?” I whispered, terrified that I’d ruined my position in the pack that I’d *just* returned to. “What will *Mahlan* think?”

He was our alpha, and I was sure that he’d have opinions on one of his inner circle mating with an employee. I didn’t think that he’d do anything violent about it, but he likely

wouldn't approve, either. And if he didn't approve, they wouldn't pick me up after my internship. And if they didn't pick me up after my internship, everything I'd worked for over the past few years since hearing Jacobian's speech would all be gone.

All because of my stupid *pinky finger!*

"We don't have to tell him."

I knew that he was trying to be helpful, but I couldn't help but give him a mild glare. "Jacobian, everyone will be able to *smell* it on us. Even if they don't spot my bite mark."

My hand went up to my neck to feel that burning spot on the side of my neck. I hadn't seen it yet, but that didn't mean that I wasn't acutely aware of its presence. But Jacobian caught my wrist before I could actually make contact, his eyebrows up towards his hairline.

"Sorry," he said, quickly releasing me. "I just...I wouldn't recommend touching that right now."

Oh. Right. He had a point there. Last thing I wanted to do was get all jaggy with mating emotions. "Thanks. I didn't think."

"It's alright." He took a deep breath, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Suppressants."

"Pardon?"

"Suppressants. We'll find some industrial-grade ones and take them. And we'll use all your scent-masking products too."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Sure, I used scent-hiding stuff every day, but it was because my personal scent was so strong, and I hated that everyone could smell what I was thinking. But most shifters hated being masked in such a way. I'd heard a lot of different opinions on it, but the unifying thought seemed to be that it felt *wrong*.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course. I made this mess. I better do whatever I need to fix it."

I was able to give him a somewhat watery smile. “I’m pretty sure at this point it was a group effort.”

“Yeah...I guess it is.”

We both sat there in silence for a while, just looking at each other or the wall. Eventually, it was Jacobian who moved first.

“What time is it?”

I looked over at my alarm clock and paled. “It’s three in the morning.” It was both incredibly early and incredibly late. And it certainly figured that everything had come to light during the witching hour.

Seriously, fuck witches.

“I think Savvy should be up.”

I squinted at him, trying to follow his line of thought. “What does Savvy have to do with this?”

“She’s got industrial-grade suppressants. You know, for if a shifter in the hospital needs them.”

Ah, that made sense. While our healing abilities usually kept us out of human medical facilities, there were always exceptions, usually if a shifter was older, *seriously* hurt, or potentially harmed by another fae. I’d heard of even the hardiest bear shifters going septic after a bite from an arachne and needing antibiotics, a couple of dryads with severe burns from forest fires. Just random horror stories to keep you up at night.

And with those exceptions came a poor, sick fae who was stuck in a place full of humans and terrible noises. It made sense that Savvy would sneak them suppressants, as the medicines helped fae appear more human to the senses.

Granted, it wasn’t to fool the nurses and doctors. Most of them didn’t go around expecting patients to be fae. No, it was for the machines, which liked to tattle about all the things that weren’t quite human about the patient.

Sure, most of us strove for peace, but that didn’t mean it always happened. So I could understand why maybe an oni

wouldn't want a seriph who was also in the hospital to know that they were there.

"You think she'd give them to us?"

"I can't imagine why she wouldn't. Unless she decides to kill me first."

That startled a laugh out of me. While Savvy was the tallest out of all of us, we weren't even close to the average size of the inner circle. They simply towered over us. The idea of her not only telling Jacobian off, but drop-kicking him into the next dimension for mating me without permission was a pretty hilarious one.

"She wouldn't do that," I said, while simultaneously imagining her doing exactly that. Or maybe she'd just get an industrial-powered *chancla* and destroy Jacobian that way? Or was that me playing on a stereotype since she was Latina?

"Oh, she might," Jacobian said, pulling me out of my stray thoughts. "She cares about you very much."

Well, didn't that just make me feel all warm and fuzzy? "You really think so?"

"I think it's certainly a risk. If I don't make it through the night, write on my tombstone that I at least tried, but hell hath no fury like a *Mexicana* whose friend you've hurt."

"Wait, Savvy was born in Mexico?"

Jacobian looked at me like that was the strangest question to ask. "Yeah, she moved here when she was young. She never told you that?"

I shook my head, marveling that there was so much more about my friend to know. There was a story there for sure, one I would love to hear, but it would have to wait until later. Like when my life wasn't breaking down because of a terrible mistake caused by an errant finger with far too long a claw.

"I'll go call her now. Can I get you anything to drink while I'm up? Food?"

My first instinct was to say no, but I realized how run down I felt. "I wouldn't say no to a glass of ice water."

“Sure. You got a pitcher in your fridge or should I get it from the sink?”

“I’ve got a Brita filter in there, yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

Jacobian got up, and I immediately noticed his absence. I tried to tell myself that it was just my bond influencing me, but that didn’t exactly help me feel better. I was drenched in melancholy and loneliness, which mixed super well with the guilt also percolating within me. My entire life was radically changed, and I had no idea what to do about it.

I could hear Jacobian making the call while he pattered around in my kitchen, my heart thundering surprisingly hard for something relatively simple. But I couldn’t help but wonder what Savvy would think. Would she judge me? I hadn’t told her much about Jacobian outside of the bad.

“Jacobian? Is something wrong?” Savvy asked.

“Mildly,” he answered, sounding surprisingly calm. I felt like anyone I talked to for the next few hours would be able to hear just how panicked I was. “I need two month’s supply of suppressants.”

“Suppressants?” Savvy’s voice was faint, even to my enhanced hearing. “Those are quite intense. What do you need those for?”

“I can’t tell you the exactly details right now, ma’am, but it’s for operatives who need discretion out in the field. Especially with their scent.”

Bless our Alma, she didn’t press it beyond that. “Okay, I only have a month’s right now, but I can get the rest in a week or so.”

“That’s perfect. Are you home? I can drive by now.”

“No, I’ve still got another hour of my shift at the hospital. I usually get home about five. Does that work for you?”

“Of course. Thank you again, Savannah. This will help keep them safe.”

“That’s my job, isn’t it?” Despite the suspicion in her tone, there was a warmth there, too. Although she was relatively new to the pack, Savvy really was amazing at her job. “In these times, we need to do everything we can to keep our people safe.”

“That’s for certain,” Jacobian agreed. “I’ll see you soon then.”

“See you.”

I heard the call end, and a few moments later, Jacobian returned with a glass of water. Handing it to me, he sat next to me while I sipped at it, my mind spinning.

“Are you going to be alright alone?” he asked, his voice back to that gentle timbre.

I nodded, although the truth was that I didn’t have a clue. Something inside me felt twisted and broken at the thought of being separated, yet another part of me desperately wanted to be alone so I could come to terms with everything that had happened.

Because *boy*, had a lot happened, and in a very short amount of time.

“Okay, how about I get you something calorie-dense, then I’ll head out?”

“I don’t really have many groceries right now,” I admitted, realizing just how bare my fridge was. “I haven’t had time to go shopping.”

“That’s alright. I’ll just order something. What do you like?”

“I’m game for anything,” I said dully. While I knew he was right and I most certainly should eat, I couldn’t quite get my stomach on board. Probably because it was busy acting out its impression of a particularly spiky grinder.

“How about a sloppy plate?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

He went on to ask what condiments I wanted on it, and I answered politely, but I forgot what I'd even ordered immediately afterward. I didn't have a lot to say, as my mind was remapping my entire life, and all the consequences I was going to have to deal with for my actions.

School, work, my place in the pack—all were subject to change. And yeah, Jacobian was being encouraging about breaking it, but I didn't know anybody who'd ever succeeded. Granted, I didn't know anyone who'd been forcibly mated either. That was kind of a relic of the past.

Well, except for Lyssa.

And Emma.

Huh...that seemed like a pattern in the pack, didn't it? And look at me, continuing the trend by puncturing Jacobian's gland.

I appreciated that he was taking responsibility, too. There were plenty of people who would claim they'd been completely helpless in such a situation. But Jacobian *could* have stopped himself, could have resisted. It was just so difficult to do while under the influence of all those happy chemicals the mating gland loved to release.

So it was both our faults, there was no doubt about that, although I definitely was the one who started it. But would people care about that distinction? Did it matter?

I didn't know. Such things were so complicated, and I wasn't anywhere close to being ready for mating. Except now I *was* mated. And while it was nice that Jacobian believed we could break it, I needed to deal with reality.

It didn't take long for my food to arrive. Jacobian was right, it did make me feel better. I hadn't realized how hard my head was pounding and my limbs were trembling until I got something solid to me. After the first bite, I was absolutely ravenous, and I quickly vacuumed it all down.

But while I inhaled my food, something strange grew in my chest. Wolves didn't purr, but my inner wolf was doing something similar at the idea of her mate already providing for

her so well. Which kind of hit me sideways. I was never the girl who needed to be provided for, never the girl who needed some big, strong mate to save her. But now that I did have a handsome, wealthy, and powerful mate...well, some part of me definitely liked it.

“Don’t you want food?” I asked when I was halfway through my meal. It was a little embarrassing that it had taken me so long to notice, but hey, I figured I deserved a bit of grace.

“No, I’ll eat later. I raided all of your Hot Pockets when I woke up first.”

For some reason thinking of Jacobian eating something as cheap and as processed as a Hot Pocket amused me. They just seemed so below him.

“Alright then.”

I managed to slow down so I didn’t make myself sick, and when I finished, Jacobian took my empty to-go container and got me another glass of water. I drained that, too, then, while washing my hands, Jacobian started to head to the door.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” he asked, staring at me pensively.

“Yeah. You’ll be back soon, right?”

“Within the hour.”

I nodded absently yet again. Where was my fire? Where were my quips? Somewhere else, apparently. “Yeah, that’ll be fine.”

“Okay, you call me if you need anything, alright?”

“I will, I promise.”

With one last nod and a lingering look, Jacobian headed out, leaving me alone again.

I lasted maybe a moment before I was hit with such crushing longing that I almost ran out to him. But my pride wouldn’t let me, and instead, I focused on something I *could* do.

That meant getting clean. I was still sticky, and I could feel dried blood on my neck, which certainly wasn't going to add to my mood in a positive way.

A shower I could handle. A shower would be a good reset, and maybe after I got out, the world wouldn't seem so impossible.

I headed into my bathroom, but before I could turn my shower on, I caught my reflection in the mirror.

“Shit.”

In addition to having the most sexed-up hair in my life and dark circles under my eyes, I finally saw my mating bite.

It was red and angry, far more than any other I'd seen before. There was bruising spreading out from it, which was certainly strange to see. While our most battle-tested warriors occasionally were so grievously wounded that they carried around bruises for a week or so, I hadn't really lived that life before. I was used to any injury healing within a few hours at most.

“I've really stepped into it now, haven't I?” I murmured to myself, grabbing one of my washcloths and putting warm water on it.

Gently, I dabbed at the bite, trying to get the dried blood off it. I winced, expecting pain, but instead a warm, bubbling stream of happiness and pleasure slid through me.

Oh.

I yanked the cloth away from my neck like it was on fire, staring at it. Right, of course. I'd heard a couple of times that pressure on a mating bite could feel good, especially a new one. I just hadn't expected it to be so *sensitive*.

“Maybe we'll do that later,” I continued to mutter to just me and my lonesome.

I wasn't normally a self-talker, but I needed something to ground myself, and at the moment, my own voice was all I had. I supposed I could call my mother, or Savvy, or even

Emma and Lyssa, but I didn't want any of them to know my shame.

It seemed that Jacobian didn't think I'd purposefully trapped him, but what if *they* did? I'd just built up a friendship with them. I didn't want to ruin it because I'd lost control of my incredibly horny inner wolf. Also, considering both of them had been forcibly mated, I didn't want to become an unpleasant trigger for them.

So yeah, I just needed to keep it to myself until Jacobian and I got over our shock and figured out what to do. Together.

Taking a deep breath to focus and calm myself, I looked at the mirror once more. It was still just as hard to make eye contact with my reflection, the woman I was seeing looking nothing like I was supposed to. How I should.

"Fuck it," I said, crouching down to open the cabinet under the sink. Rooting around for a moment, I grabbed my neglected jar of green hair dye. The one I'd had to abandon since working at Mr. Bronson's company.

I still shouldn't have brightly colored hair for that job, but that's what wigs were for. And I just so happened to have two from my interviewing days—one a shoulder-length brunette, and one a blond number that was very similar to my own hair.

Emboldened, I also grabbed my scent-canceling conditioner and mixed it into my dye. I figured anything I could do to dull how I smelled would help our little mating snafu stay under the radar. It wasn't a permanent solution, but it would hopefully help until Jacobian could find a way for us to break out bond. If that was even possible.

Making sure the two mixtures were fully blended, I started working the dye through my hair. I didn't have gloves—I didn't even Vaseline my hairline—I just went for it. And the more my blond hair turned into a deep, dark green that I knew would wash out to a brilliant emerald, the more I felt like myself.

"You can get through this, Hannah. You've been through worse. This will not be the end of your story."

I repeated that mantra over and over to myself until my entire head was saturated. Then I tied a shopping bag over my hair and focused on stripping all my sheets off the bed and piling them by the door. Normally I'd just waltz over to the 24-hour laundromat that was in the apartment complex, but I just wasn't in the mood to get dressed or be seen by anyone. Grocery bag over my head or not.

Normally, dyes didn't fully permeate the hair follicle any further after thirty minutes, I usually liked to leave it on for a couple of hours. I figured since it was a semi-permanent dye that worked as a deep conditioner, I could use some extra time working on my thick shifter hair. But I wanted it to be washed out by the time Jacobian came back, which would hopefully be relatively soon.

Part of me still craved a boiling hot shower, but steaming water and hair dye didn't mix. So I washed my hair until it ran clear, then put on a shower cap so I could really turn the heat up.

I was once more tempted to stay in there forever, to just never leave the comfort of my nice, hot bathtub. But real life didn't work that way, so eventually I hauled myself out.

And just in time, too, because as I was getting dressed in a comfy sweat set, Jacobian knocked on the door and let himself in.

"Did you get them?" I asked. He nodded, his expression solemn.

"Savvy listed off some pretty serious side effects." I couldn't help but notice how his eyes flicked to my electric green hair, but he didn't say anything.

"I know."

"You know?"

He raised his eyebrow at that, and it was good to see a little bit of the old Jacobian back. The sassy one, not the asshole.

"A while back, I looked into them when I was having a real hard time during puberty," I said. "But our doctor

wouldn't let me have them until I was out of it. Said it could mess up my entire maturing cycle.”

Jacobian nodded. “They're not like puberty blockers, which I thought they would be.”

“Nah, they're completely different.” Puberty blockers were amazing for delaying a shifter who wasn't ready or safe to have their first shift yet, but suppressants were an entirely separate animal, so to speak. They dulled shifter instinct, pheromones, and some other things. Thankfully, it didn't *stop* shifting from being possible, but it did make it slower, and it hurt more.

“You want to take these now?”

It was my turn to nod. “Yeah, best to do it while my stomach is full.”

“Makes sense to me.”

I headed to the kitchen to pour us two glasses of cold water, then we both sat in my living room on opposite sides of my couch while facing each other. It might as well have been the entire void of outer space with how impossible it felt to cross.

“You can just say it,” I said.

“Say what?” Jacobian asked, sounding quite tired. When was the last time he'd even had a full night's rest?

“What you think of my hair.”

“Oh, that.” I expected him to lecture me on professionalism, or how it would make me too noticeable, or how it was irresponsible. But he just nodded. “It's nice to see you be more yourself.”

Huh. That hadn't been what I was expecting. “You don't mind?” I asked, voice uncertain.

“No. Might make your work more complicated, but fuck it.”

Maybe I needed to give Jacobian more credit. “I have a wig, a pretty good one. Fooled lots of people in the past.”

“Ah, well there you go. Sounds like the best of both worlds.”

He was being so kind, and I wasn't sure what to do about it. Why was my first assumption that everything had to be a fight?

“Well, bottoms up!” I tried to force cheerfulness into my voice, but it just made me grimace. Thankfully, Jacobian chuckled at the awkwardness, and the little blip of levity helped lighten the mood.

The pill was somehow both dry and sticky as it went down, making me quite happy that I'd gotten a full glass of water to drown it in. When it finally made its way to my stomach, Jacobian and I looked at each other.

Silence.

Neither of us said anything for a long while, maybe five minutes, maybe more. I just didn't know how to start. Thankfully, Jacobian was the one to open his mouth first and break the ice.

Only for his phone to ring.

“Who's calling you at God knows when in the morning?” I asked. I was certainly swearing a lot more than I did usually, but I was in a pretty swear-worthy situation.

“It's Mahlan,” he answered, and my stomach dropped.

Had he somehow found out? I didn't want to think about our alpha knowing just how badly I'd messed up. I swallowed hard, trying not to panic.

“You better answer then, I guess.”

“Yeah, guess I better.”

And yet, he didn't move. Not until the third ring, when he hurriedly answered it. Usually, I would have been able to hear both sides of the conversation, but my ears were ringing so hard, I was lucky to hear even Jacobian. The spoken word just turned into a mishmash of random noises right up until Jacobian hung up the phone.

“What did he say?”

“We’re going on a road trip, apparently.”

“What?! Really? Right now?”

“He wants me to be ready by sun-up, which is...yeah, almost here. I need to run home and get a change of clothes.”

My heart was right back to thundering in my chest. I felt like I was going to be sick. “Is there any way you can skip this one?”

“Fraid not. We’re going to interview Lyssa’s family.”

“Lyssa’s family?!” I knew I was yelling, but who could blame me? “Wait, we know who and where they are?”

“We’re pretty certain, yeah. It’s one of the things I’ve been doing behind the scenes along with Sam.”

Wow, how out of the loop was I? Perhaps it was better if I didn’t think about it. “So...so you have to go?”

I hated how petulant I was being, but my inner wolf was full of panic. I’d been mated but she hadn’t bitten back, meaning our bond was only half-sealed. While that would work for us if we did manage to find a reliable way to break it, my wolf side of me wasn’t happy with it. Not at all.

“I’m sorry, I do. If I stay behind now, they’ll know something’s up, and I have a feeling that’s the last thing you want.”

He was right. But at the same time the thought of being so far away from him was like nails on a chalkboard. Ugh. I hated it. I hated it all.

“I know. I just...be safe, please?”

At that, Jacobian reached over to me, gently caressing the side of my face. “I promise I will be.”

Closing my eyes, I took another deep breath to edify myself. “Okay. See you soon then.”

“See you soon.”



WORK WAS MISERABLE.

I was miserable. I went through my day in a haze of abject misery, barely able to be pleasant during the lunch I had with Tate and his department friends. But even *that* was a strain, and when Tate approached me after in my office, I explained to him that I was incredibly stressed about a project and on my period, so I would like some downtime on my own. Thankfully, he accepted it without fuss.

Granted, he did show up later with some chocolates, Midol, and an energy drink. Once more, I felt a bit guilty for how much I was tricking him.

If I could just like him instead of Jacobian, I wouldn't be mated. I wouldn't have ruined my life. But no—I had to be attracted to the power, strength, and poise of one of our pack's leaders.

And to top it all off, even the thought of going back to my apartment didn't help. Not even soaking in the tub. I was normally perfectly fine with being alone, but at the moment, solitude seemed like one of the worst things that someone could ask of me. I wanted *Jacobian*, but that fact just pissed me off even more. Because it was annoying to need someone, to want someone. To be unhappy without their presence. That was quite a 180-degree turn from me hardly being able to stand him, then wanting to deck him.

I was so caught up in my own misery that I forgot to check my phone until well after lunch. Grabbing it, I opened the screen to see I had a message. I couldn't help but hope that it was a text from Jacobian, but no, it was someone else entirely.

“Why is Lyssa messaging me?” I asked myself.

She'd sent it about twenty minutes earlier, so it wasn't like I'd just left her hanging for hours. But I couldn't think of what we'd have to talk about.

Not that there was anything wrong with her texting me, of course. I'd given the girl my number for a reason. But we rarely talked outside of family dinners, so it was a bit odd to hear from her.

More than a bit curious, I opened the message.

HEY, wanna go out grab food?

None of us wanna go home with the boys gone.

OH, that was right. Mahlan and Theo were gone, too. All of the inner circle minus Ellibie were off talking to Lyssa's family. I still wasn't sure why they hadn't taken the girl herself with them, but hey, I wasn't one of our pack leaders.

My thumbs flew across my phone's screen, relief seeping up to fight against the discontent that had been brewing in my belly.

YEAH, totes

What were you thinking?

SHE DIDN'T ANSWER RIGHT AWAY but for once, I didn't worry about it. I knew she was working retail in Emma's boutique, so a customer had probably just come in and she'd had to tend to them.

Sure enough, about three minutes later, my phone buzzed again.

IDK, but I think Emma does

*btw she says that Savvy will be free in two hours
that work for you?*

YEAH, absolutely. Just text me the address once you know where it is.

WILL DO!

THANK GOD. Now I had something to look forward to that didn't involve me going home and sitting alone in my feelings. Beside, Emma had great taste in restaurants. It was probably one of the many that the pack owned, but that didn't mean I wouldn't enjoy it.

The remaining hour and a half went surprisingly quickly, considering what a slog the rest of the day had been, and I hurriedly went through packing up my stuff and heading to my car. Checking my phone, I saw Lyssa had indeed texted me the address, and I plugged it into my GPS.

It turned out it was one of the places our pack owned, but it was a bistro we didn't go to very often. Sounded good to me. I actually turned on the radio and sang to myself a bit as we drove, looking forward to drinks with the girls.

Funny, how the last thing I'd ever expected was a stereotypical girls night to make me feel better, but I was most definitely looking forward to it. I just had to hope that the girls wouldn't notice anything strange in my scent.

Oh...right. I was trying to hide what happened, and yet I was going to be in close quarters with two other shifters and Savvy, who had just given Jacobian suppressants.

Gulp.

I'd worn a turtleneck, of course. And below that I had applied a broad Band-Aid. And put makeup over the bandage, and finally sealed it with enough setting spray so the makeup wouldn't go anywhere. With the suppressants, my scent-suppressing perfume, body wash, conditioner, shampoo, and detergent, I was fairly certain I would be safe.

Oh well. Fingers crossed.

When I arrived, Savvy was already there, sitting in her car and jamming out to what sounded like a metal band with the world's most wicked violin. It was funny how such a sweet girl listened to such hardcore stuff, but I kind of liked the juxtaposition.

The spot next to her was open, so I pulled right up and put my car into park. Rolling down my window, I waved over to her.

“Hey girl!” I said, grinning broadly. Although Savvy wasn't a shifter who had enhanced senses, she was still incredibly observant.

“Hey there! I'm surprised to see that you actually escaped that office.”

“I could say the same about you and the hospital.”

She laughed at that, her smile wide and her head tilted back. I had no idea how the girl was single, because not only was she nice, she was also drop-dead gorgeous.

“Okay, yeah, I'm surprised too. I was gonna go home and pass out, but then Emma texted me and I realized I *really* didn't want to cook.”

“I feel you there,” I said, huffing. I *could* cook, sure, but I didn't enjoy it. Especially after a long day of work. I would save tons of money if I didn't order take-out so much, but ordering out meant no cooking, no dishes, and maybe even leftovers the next day. That was a pretty appealing list, all things considered. “They should be here soon, right?”

“Yeah, they probably just got a last-minute customer at the shop. Emma and Lyssa both seem pretty punctual. I mean, as far as I could tell. It's not like we hang out all the time.”

I could tell that Savvy meant to say that flippantly, an errant smile on her face, but I could hear the pain underneath. While we'd become closer than ever, I knew she wasn't usually included in pack plans unless they were directly related to her status as an Alma. Which...well, it sucked, point blank. And I wasn't that great of a friend, because I kept

meaning to say something about it, but life just kept going so fast.

I really needed to step up my game.

Maybe after I handled the whole being mated, working two full-time jobs—one of which was corporate sabotage where I worked as a plant—and our pack being slowly picked off by witches.

Yeah, after all that.

“I’m sure once things are settled, we’ll be able to have a lot more girls nights.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun? It would be nice if we could go a week without anybody being kidnapped, murdered, or otherwise cursed.”

I chuckled at that. Savvy usually had a pretty punny sense of humor, but occasionally she would whip out a dry comment that always struck me sideways. “But then we’d actually be able to sleep in and not live our lives in terror.”

“Ew, who would want that?”

This time, we both chuckled until I spotted Emma’s car pulling in. “Ooh, looks like they’re here.”

“They are?” Savvy’s head whipped towards the entrance of the parking lot and a broad grin spread across her pretty features. “Oh, look at that! They are!” Quickly, she rolled up her window. As soon as the two parked, she was out of her car and hurrying towards them.

“Hey there!” she said as I got out of my own car. “I’ve been wanting to go here for ages, but I never had anyone to go with!”

Oof, okay, maybe the whole “including Savvy” thing couldn’t wait. I made a mental note to have a private chat with Lyssa and Emma where we could talk things out.

I didn’t want Savvy’s unintentionally melancholy statement to linger awkwardly, so I hurried forward.

“Likewise over here,” I said as I approached. But that just didn’t seem to be enough of a distraction to me, so I quickly thought of something that would *really* change the course of the conversation.

Without missing a beat, I reached towards my head and pulled my wig off, while my other hand ruffled my green hair, letting it fall down to my shoulders.

“Oh my God!” Lyssa cried, and I did my best not to grin. Looked like my tactic had most worked.

Except now I was in the position of needing to explain why I’d dyed my hair after being blond for so long. It wasn’t like I could say that I was emotionally shell-shocked from being mated, and having colored hair again made me feel a little more in control.

So I lied.

Was...was I a bad friend? I was beginning to feel like a bad friend.

“Relax, it’s temporary dye that’ll be out in a week. I just wanted something to help me de-stress considering how intense this subterfuge position is.” I finished with a wink. As far as I could tell, they bought it. Thank God. I just wanted to have a good night together. “A girl’s gotta have some tricks up her sleeve.”

“Girl, I cannot believe you just did that!” Emma practically bleated, clapping my shoulder. Surprisingly hard, too, given her smaller frame. “I totally thought you just scalped yourself!”

I relaxed at that. Joking I could deal with. Banter and complaining were all social norms that I was used to. It was pity or judgement that I couldn’t stand. “Ha! If Jacobian doesn’t get off my back, I just might.”

Laughing with my friends felt good. I’d been so sure that I’d have been caught out right away and they’d all ask who I thought I was fooling, but nope. No one said a peep. Not even as we headed in and were seated.

“Shall I start you with any appetizers today?” the waitress asked, no doubt expecting refusals all around. But shifters weren’t like that. We liked food, and we liked it unabashedly.

One by one, the four of us ordered drinks, appetizers, and said we’d want entrées later. Granted, Savvy didn’t order as much as the rest of us, but that was because she didn’t spontaneously turn into a giant wolf.

By the time the waitress left, she looked pretty shaken by the sheer quantity of food us ladies ordered. We all shared a chuckle.

“So, how’s the store going?” I asked once our drinks were all in front of us. “I’m so sorry I’m behind on everything, but Jacobian has been riding me nonstop.”

The whole table paused, and for a split second, I didn’t understand why they were staring. I mentally repeated my words back to myself and quickly realized my Freudian slip.

Shit!

But the moment the realization came over my face, instead of judging me and declaring me a whore, the other three broke into hysterics.

Oh.

They thought it was just funny. A slip of the tongue instead of an erstwhile confession. I laughed along with them, though my tittering was a bit more nervous than theirs.

It took a few moments for them to calm down, and after Emma wiped an imaginary tear from her eye, she answered my questions and thankfully took the attention off of me.

“The contractors are almost done, so I’m definitely looking forward to being able to merge both of the storefronts.”

“Whoa, you’re combining both?” I blurted. Just *how* far out of the loop was I? I knew that Emma had been attacked in her shop, which had resulted in Theo having to mate her to save her life, but I thought her original shop was just being renovated.

It was crazy how wealthy the Reeses were. When I was younger, I was pretty sure that was one of the things that had alienated me from them. I'd been so poor growing up, I'd felt detached from his family and the rest of his circle.

And now I was mated to one of them.

Wait, I was in the middle of a conversation. Quickly, I got back on track and continued. "Didn't you just finish setting up the one you have now?"

"Well, I set it up knowing that I would need to combine with my old space once it was fixed up, so I won't have to do much rearranging. I'll probably have to shut down for a few days when they knock down the wall between the two in the floor area, though."

Huh, was it strange that I knew so little about her business? I considered Emma to be a friend, but I hadn't even known that her brother owned the empty storefront next to her.

I needed to get my head out of my own ass.

"I've always admired your business skill and planning," Savvy said, drawing me back to the conversation. My mind was so scattered! I really needed to buckle down and concentrate. "I certainly don't have that talent."

"That may be, but your blood can help heal people and I can't do anything like that."

"Ha! Fair enough. And you better not start because then I'll be out of a job."

"We wouldn't want that."

Despite all the negative things I'd been thinking about, my heart glowed at the easy banter between Emma and Savvy. I hadn't really seen them interact that much, and it was so good to see them vibing.

I loved it, I really did, and it helped pull me out of my wallowing. After all, would it kill me to look on the bright side? My situation wasn't ideal. But Jacobian wasn't trying to force me to stay with him, my friends didn't seem to notice anything off with my scent, and I was getting to eat out at a

fancy restaurant that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to afford before working two jobs.

"You're welcome to spontaneously develop skills and take over my job whenever you want," I said, taking a generous swig of the wine I'd been served. I wasn't really supposed to mix suppressants and alcohol, but I needed *something*.

"Geez, is it that bad?" Lyssa asked with that doe-eyed look of hers. Goodness, sometimes it was easy to forget how young she was, but not when she made a face like *that*. She'd lived a lot of life for still being a teenager, that was for sure. If I was a few years younger, I could see us being pretty similar.

Except for her being homeless, being hunted down by witches, and having her inner wolf locked away. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. There were just some things in life that weren't right.

But when she continued to stare at me, I realized that yet again, someone was waiting for me to answer a direct question. Batting a thousand, clearly.

"It is and isn't. It's pretty obvious to me that this whole company is a front, but I'm still there in the trenches, trying to figure out how and if they're connected to our moonstones."

"But they have to be, right?" Lyssa asked.

At first, I interpreted that as a casual question, but then I saw how tightly she was gripping her soda. Oh...it was hard to tell with her sometimes, but she was genuinely afraid, wasn't she? Or was she angry? I couldn't blame her either way, considering how she'd basically been drop-kicked into our world. "Isn't that the whole reason why this started?"

"We got a reliable tip that they were involved," I said in what I hoped was a soothing way. "Or at least, that's what I was told. And I'm supposed to figure out why, how, and find some connections to who they're working with. But it doesn't seem to be going anywhere."

Despite my initial goal being to comfort Lyssa, I felt myself getting carried away with my explanation. I supposed it was because I had so few people to talk to and be honest about

it. It certainly sucked. I wanted to tell them everything, I did, but I also realized that I needed to fudge some of the facts for the sake of me, Jacobian, and our mission.

So I launched into a series of mostly truths, with little tweaks to the numbers and amount of dates. The smartest thing would be to not tell them at all, but I guessed I just wasn't that smart.

“And get this—I've been asked out three different times and gone on three different dates with these dudes to see if I can suss anything out, and I swear to Werewolf-Jesus on High, they've been the dullest dates of my *life*. And with every date, Jacobian gets even more unbearable. Like, dude, I can't help it if each of these guys are worthless on the intel front!”

Emma was the one who responded first, a knowing expression across her gorgeous features. God, it felt good to commiserate. “Sounds like you need another drink.”

“You bet your ass I do. If we don't leave here with the server judging me, then I've held back too much.”

Emma laughed, shaking her head. But it didn't come off as condescending. Just wryly amused. “She's gonna cut you off.”

“That's a problem for future Hannah to care about. I never liked her much, anyway.”

I was pretty sure that they didn't know I was telling the truth and not just quipping because everyone laughed.

“Why didn't I know you were so funny?” she said, reaching across the table to slap my arm.

Apparently, so much time carefully constructing the details around what I could and couldn't tell them had worn me out because nothing but the truth exited my mouth. Unfiltered, at that. “Probably because I had to be such a hard-ass to get through school and into Jacobian's intern program. Like, it's no secret that the company has incredibly high standards, but I was determined to get in.”

Another beat where no one seemed quite sure what to say. Apparently, I was good at making those little awkward

moments. I was lucky I was hot, otherwise probably no one would be willing to talk to me.

Savannah cleared her throat. “Well, I, for one, am glad you did.”

“Me too,” I said, feeling myself flush. I must have sounded so ungrateful to them! And I wasn’t, I swore I wasn’t. My head was just a scattered mess of stress and bonding chemicals, leaving me feeling jagged, irritable, and a little bit desperate. “Despite my bitching. But hey, who wants a sampler? I’m feeling like stuffing myself silly on a broad variety of foods.”

There was a chorus of agreement from the lot of us, and when the waitress arrived with our first wave of apps, we added the sampler and several other items.

Despite my foibles in the earlier part of our dinner, I managed to keep my foot firmly out of my mouth for the rest of it. We drank, ate, laughed, and gossiped. Except we didn’t have much pack gossip that wasn’t outright depressing, so we mostly talked about celebrities and shows.

It was cheesecake. Light, trashy conversation that added nothing to the word. But I *loved* it. Savvy, Emma, and Lyssa were all so hilarious in their own ways and always had great opinions. Even when the conversation shifted to outright memes and showing each other funny clips on our phone, it felt so wonderful.

By the time the meal ended, I was feeling *much* more encouraged than I had before. The world wasn’t nearly so bleak and dismal, and I wasn’t so alone. I knew that if it came out that I was mated, none of the wonderful women I’d dined with would disown me.

But that didn’t mean I wanted it to come out.

At least not yet. I needed time to think. Time to talk to Jacobian. And we both clearly wanted to try to break the bond, so what was the point in letting people know, if it was only a temporary situation? Albeit a very *stressful* temporary situation.

Sighing to myself as I walked to my car, warm and full, I decided that I needed to stop worrying until Jacobian got back. As I drove to my tiny apartment, I just hoped that he was having as good a time as I was.

JACOBIAN

I hated road trips.

For some reason everyone in our friend circle seemed to be under the misguided impression that I enjoyed them, but that wasn't the case. I enjoyed *driving*, and was relatively good at it. But when I set out for somewhere, my goal was to get there as quickly and safely as I could. Not to enjoy some leisurely road-bonding session with too much noise and far too many scents.

And given the circumstances around the last twenty four hours of my life, my scent was a particularly volatile subject.

I'd practically doused myself in every scent-blocking product that Hannah had. I'd nearly been driven mad by how potent her scent was fresh out of the bath. Fortunately, Savvy had some high-quality stuff. Between that and the suppressants, I was hoping that I just smelled like a particularly faint version of myself. It helped that Hannah hadn't bitten me back. There was just a slight red mark from where her nail had punctured me, and that was that. Easy enough to hide with a high-collared shirt and my traditionally long hair.

Thankfully, I'd been largely left alone the entire drive, me at the wheel so Mahlan and Theo could talk. That wasn't always the arrangement we went with, as Mahlan enjoyed driving as well, but everyone could tell that his mind was occupied.

And who could blame him? He was potentially about to meet the family of his mate. A family who most likely didn't know if she was alive or dead. Potent stuff, that.

While I wasn't the most talkative of the group usually, we were all pretty silent for the long drive. Except for Samson, of course, who managed to carry on a conversation with pretty much each of us at least once on the long drive over. He was a funny guy, that witch, and even managed to get a few sentences out of me, even though my mind was basically permanently affixed to Hannah.

Was she alright? I could feel faint emotions coming through our bond: stress, loneliness, worry at first. But as the day went on, there was a happy tilt to it. She seemed genuinely relieved and amused, which was a lovely change.

But that vicious voice in the back of my head whispered that it was Tate who was making her happy. Or it was my absence. That I had violated her freedoms down to their very core, and she was just relieved that I was gone.

Yeah, not the most pleasant train of thought.

I wasn't quite sure how to avoid it, either. When I'd woken up beside Hannah, blissfully boneless after the best sex I'd had in years, I'd rolled over and been shocked by what I found. A deep bite on Hannah's neck, one with a delicious, bonded scent coming from it.

I was bonded. I was *mated!* She hadn't bitten me back, so it wasn't fully sealed, but the beginning of it was already tied to my soul. Those vaguely protective and territorial feelings I had for her were suddenly visceral, and my whole world had been rocked in that moment.

When she'd woken up, I'd done my best to help her. I knew that it was going to be a jolt. And I couldn't help but feel incredibly guilty. I hadn't meant to, I *really* hadn't, but how could she believe that? *I* was the one who bit her. *I* was the one who went past a boundary that should never be crossed without permission.

The moment her claw had started stimulating my mating gland, I should have pulled out and gotten space. Should have. Would have. Could have. I didn't, I'd let myself drown in temptation, and now the two of us were sinking into the consequences.

I'd really fucked up.

But at the same time, part of me didn't feel all that bad. It *liked* that we were mated to Hannah. That we could feel her, that we would smell a little like her if we weren't lathered in every scent blocker known to man. That I was able to care for her and protect her. I kept trying to shove that side of myself down, to believe that it was wrong and wicked, but it didn't care. Not in the slightest.

That was always the complicated part in the dichotomy of a shifter. There was our modern, more civilized side, and then there was our baser instinct. The one that helped us survive in battle, but didn't fare so well with day-to-day niceties and diplomacy.

Ugh, if my head was messy before, it was even worse now, and I was quickly growing exhausted. I never thought I would be at a point where I wanted my only issue to be evil witches and mysterious brothers terrorizing every pack in our state area. Right now, though, that sounded nice.

Naturally, when we finally arrived, I was more than a little relieved. Sure, I was nervous just like everyone else, but getting out of the van meant getting out of my own head. Which I sorely needed before all my stress ketones broke through my scent blockers and everyone started to wonder why I made the van smell like sulfur and unwashed gym socks.

I looked around as I exited the vehicle, taking in the small town around us. This really was classic Americana, with a strong dash of ghost-town added to the mix. I sensed that there had once been much more of a population here, which made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. What had happened to them? Sure, there were more and more shifters leaving for city life, considering how impoverished many county areas

were, but not enough to explain all the closed storefronts and empty houses I'd spied.

"Their alpha said to meet them at the bar, yes?" Theo asked, even though he most definitely knew the answer. Our future beta was incredibly jumpy, more so than I, and I was guessing it was because he'd had to leave Emma behind.

She was safe, of course. On top of being a capable fighter, she had a bevy of trained guards around her, and so did Lyssa. But I still understood the persistent and itchy feeling that even those defenses weren't quite enough.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Mahlan said as soon as we strode into the empty bar Lyssa's old alpha had directed us to. Much like the rest of the town, it was barely occupied, with fewer than a dozen patrons. Granted, it was fairly early, so a few regulars were likely to trickle in throughout the rest of the day.

As Mahlan and the other alpha began to talk, I slowly walked around the perimeter of the place. While I wasn't the best physical security guy, I knew a thing or two about fortifications, and the bar was honestly a terrible place to hole up if there was going to be a fight.

At the moment, we were just hoping there wouldn't be one.

"I'm sorry I don't have much firsthand information. I'm still catching up after the last alpha died. Never dreamed that I'd end up in a leadership position when I married into this pack. But I try to do my best by her."

Oh? I didn't remember hearing that part during our short debrief in the car. Had I missed it, or was this a new fact being relayed? Probably the former, if I had to guess. As much as I was torn over the Hannah situation, I needed to pay attention. For the health of our pack.

I finished my stroll, noting that the easiest spots to attack were the upper floor, the rear exit, and the front entrance. I turned back to the conversation just in time for the other alpha's phone to shrilly ring.

“Whoops, sorry, this is my beta. Need to take this.”

With that, he walked out, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was calling in some sort of ambush on us. But that was ridiculous. There was a line between being prepared and being paranoid, and I was decidedly leaning towards the latter. I needed to get that under control, or I'd be useless.

Without another word, the alpha, Landon, hurriedly exited the bar. Our group exchanged looks, all of us with varying expressions somewhere between anxious and outright uncomfortable.

“Drinks, anybody?” Sam asked. “So we're not just sitting here with our thumbs up our asses?”

How decidedly Sam to say that. He was right, even if he was being glib. I wanted to pour an entire bottle of bourbon down my throat.

“Absolutely,” Kaleb said, joining him. It didn't take the rest of us to order as well. At least taking a couple of drinks every few minutes would keep us from pacing like wolves captive in a low-enrichment zoo.

Technically, Sam was the only one of us who could get drunk, and it took a bit more than a bottle to get me tipsy. I still appreciated the burn of it, nevertheless. It slid down my throat in a heated trickle, spreading through the rest of my chest.

Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to be truly drunk, to not have to think so hard and hold myself to the strict standards of my position. Except the moment when I'd gotten a slight bit of that unencumbered experience, I'd mated my employee without consent.

Ugh. I ordered another drink, and a double at that.

“I know I'm not a wolfie like the rest of you,” Sam said, nursing his beer. “But isn't this pack kind of, ya know, *small*?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Theo answered first. “According to the file Landon gave me, they only have about fifty registered members and no pups at all.”

So that confirmed my suspicions. That was an *extremely* small pack, and it would be understandable if they just didn't have the resources. But it was clear to me that they did.

No, something else entirely had taken out their population.

So the question was what had.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Parker whistled. "Not a single little one? That's really not good."

"When did you have time to read that?" Mahlan asked. His drink was gone, and I wasn't surprised when he lasted about twenty seconds before giving into the urge to pace. It was a wolf thing. When we were stressed, we walked back and forth until we felt better. Not the best coping mechanism, but it certainly created a strong burst of energy. "He gave that to us maybe twenty minutes ago."

"I read it on our drive over here."

"Oooh, love a man who can multi-task," Sam teased. Always looking for an opportunity to quip, that one. I swore, if he didn't make a joke every two minutes, he would spontaneously wither and turn to ash.

"I've always been a good multi-tasker," Parker remarked before downing his beer in an impressive chug.

Wait.

What?

I tried my best to regard the youngest of our circle without making it obvious that I was staring. I wasn't the most perceptive at such things, but...but was he *flirting* with Sam?

Interesting. I wasn't aware that our youngest had the gumption, but apparently he could pull off a move or two.

"What was that?" Sam said, because he'd heard it, too. He was sitting right next to Parker, and as flippant as he tried to appear, he was fairly observant. No doubt a result of years providing for himself on the street. And I had to admit, it was fairly hilarious to watch as the tips of the shifter's ears turn a brilliant red.

“Huh? Nothing, I didn’t say anything,” Parker sputtered.

That made me smirk. I debated teasing him further, but it was Kaleb who piped up, which certainly wasn’t usual. He was the one person in our group who was known as being more taciturn than me. People just didn’t usually make fun of him for it because of his mother.

We all understood there were certain things that shouldn’t be mocked.

“Parker has always been an excellent multi-tasker and plant dad. You two should talk about it.” He physically nudged his best friend towards Sam. “Gotta piss,” he said shortly before walking on.

Was Kaleb wing-manning for his best friend? It seemed like he most certainly was, which was a change as well. Was there a little romance going on here? I’d always assumed that Parker was straight, but if he wasn’t...well, he could do a lot worse than Sam.

“Anyway,” Theo said, drawing us back to the matter at hand, which was the egregious lack of a population all around us. “While it’s common for packs to lose members due to marriages into other packs, it’s really, really unlikely they went from over three hundred members to barely enough for a track and field team.”

“Ew, sports.”

I closed my eyes. Sam was funny, but he never shut up.

“Thank you for your input, Sam. But what I’m getting at here is that Lyssa’s case isn’t likely to be the only thing to shake things up around here.”

Yeah, that was probably true. And if I had to guess, it was probably those damn brothers we’d heard whispers about.

“Huh,” was our alpha’s reply. It seemed like he was going to say more, but then Landon returned, looking appropriately chagrined.

“Sorry about that. Important stuff. You know how it is, Alpha Reese.”

Mahlan nodded, before continuing their prior conversation. “Landon, have there been cases of stolen pack members other than Lyssa and her family?”

He didn’t use the man’s title at all. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was upset, or establishing a hierarchy. Technically, since Mahlan’s defeat of Cyprus, he was the head alpha of the entire city, and that, no doubt, came with a lot of clout.

Eventually, once all the dust with the witches settled, our pack was going to have to deal with all the new responsibilities that came with that. But for the moment, everyone was trying to buckle down and weather the storm.

But if Landon was offended by the lack of honorific, he didn’t show it, instead sighing and sitting down. “I wasn’t there for it, but yeah. A while back, there were. Why? Is this about more than that girl who was kidnapped about thirteen years ago?”

“You could say that,” Theo said.

Whew, I was beginning to think that I could have not used a single scent-blocking item at all, and no one would be able to smell me over the stress ketones our soon-to-be beta was pouring out. Was that how I would be if Hannah was in the same kind of danger Emma was in? The thought of her being cursed and having witches directly after her made my heart squeeze painfully tight.

“There’s been a rash of shifters disappearing in our parts,” Theo continued. “And we caught a combative witch who was a part of the thefts of our moonstones. She confessed that it was a pair of brothers who were behind a lot of this.”

“Brothers, huh? Yeah, that lines up with rumors and ghost stories I’ve heard.”

I appreciated that this Landon fellow wasn’t questioning us. While I was naturally suspicious, he genuinely seemed interest in doing right by us and his pack. How refreshing.

“Oh?” That was Mahlan, of course, who was giving complete neutral.

“Yeah. Like I said, I wasn’t a part of the pack then, but ya hear things as an alpha, ya know? These brothers rolled into town, killed your mate’s parents, and rolled out with her in tow. For a while, people thought it was a random tragedy, but then...*things* started to happen.”

“Things?” And that was Theo, doing his beta thing.

I still listened closely, but I decided walking the perimeter again wouldn’t hurt. Just in case.

“Don’t get me wrong, I know that we shifters tend to be suspicious types, but this is something different. People started to leave. Sure, some went on to other packs, but most just... disappeared. And the more that disappeared, the more rumors there were that the pack was cursed. And once that became a sort of common knowledge, well, you can guess how that went.”

“But there weren’t any other bodies that showed up?”

“No, just, uh...what was her name?”

“Lyssa.”

“Right, just Lyssa’s parents.”

“Hmm...” I wondered if Mahlan had taken a page out of my book. Not that I wrote the book on being the opposite of verbose, but he was certainly using several of my catchphrases. “And are there any of Lyssa’s kin left that we can speak to?”

“Actually, yeah. That’s what my beta was calling about actually. Her grandparents are still kicking, I believe.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah. I can’t say how they’ll receive you, though. From what I’ve been told, they don’t exactly enjoy talking about how they lost their kids. They had plenty of heartache right after it happened, especially since the murders were grisly enough to spread to the human police.”

Theo whistled, a low, low sound, and I couldn’t help but echo the sentiment. It was easy to forget just how tragic Lyssa’s backstory was, considering how cheery and lovely she

was, but goodness, her history was intense. Murdered parents, abandoned by adopted parents, living on the streets, cursed and betrayed by her best friend. It was a lot.

I was beginning to think that my life was downright cushy in comparison.

“Sounds like a mess.” Theo said.

“It really was. I mean, if I heard about it after becoming their alpha about a decade later, then you know that it left an impression on the pack.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did her grandparents stick around when so many others left? I figure that they would be the first ones to forge a new crossroads with a new pack.”

Theo was admittedly doing a good job. He was a details person in a way that I couldn’t be. While I could put together an entire security system and web outline connecting multiple online identities, there were certain social and para-social configurations that eluded me. But Theo seemed to be able to log them in his mind like a perfectly formed map. There was a reason he was such an excellent beta-to-be.

“I can’t speak for certain to their reasoning, but if I had to guess, I would say they were probably holding onto the hope that one day, maybe they’d have their granddaughter back. After all, her body was never found.”

“And now we’re bringing her right to their doorstep,” That was Kaleb again. Speaking two times in one conversation with strangers was pretty unusual for him. And his voice was thick with emotion. He was no doubt thinking back to when his mother had disappeared for a week. It was relatively more common now for our kind to go missing; it had been shocking when his mother had done it. I remembered how our pack had been on high alert, searching everywhere.

It had taken a week for her body to be found and to discover the goodbye letter she’d written. I never read it. Only Sawyer, our old alpha, and Kaleb had, but I had a feeling that Kaleb had never forgotten a single word of that missive.

“Wait, she’s with you?” Landon sat up sharply at that, his eyebrows up by his hairline.

“I think he means metaphorically,” Parker said, no doubt to the rescue so Kaleb wouldn’t have to speak a third time. Oh, the horror. “Like, we could get her, but she’s sort of somewhere safe now.”

“That’s good, if half of what you’re telling me is true,” Landon said. “Although I do really hope that y’all are exaggerating the situation.”

“I wish we were,” Mahlan answered. “That would be quite the relief.”

“I’d imagine. But yeah, I’ll give you the grandparents’ info, but don’t be shocked if they don’t want to talk to you and only want their grandkid.”

“Good to know.”

“So, these disappearances, was there anything the victims had in common?”

“I wouldn’t know about that. Like I said—”

“You weren’t here at the time. Yes, we know.”

Oof, I wasn’t the best at tone, but even I could tell that Mahlan was getting annoyed. I couldn’t blame him, considering everything that was happening.

But thankfully, our alpha moved on. “What about your moonstone?”

“What about what?” Landon shot right back. While he was still open, he seemed somewhat irritated, too.

“Your moonstone. Surely I don’t have to explain what that is to you.”

“I know you city shifters are all high-ranking and that, but I could do without the condescension.”

Uh oh, we were beginning to piss him off. We still had so much more to learn. Why wasn’t Theo doing what betas needed to do and settling things?

But again, we lucked out, because Landon settled and continued. We were most certainly pushing it, though.

“I was attempting at humor. But to answer your question, we ain’t had a moonstone since before I married into this place. It’s another reason people left. You know how it is—without that rock to swear on, people just don’t feel as protected by their pack or obligated to help it out.”

“I actually understand that exactly,” Mahlan answered. “The same thing happened right when I was taking over as alpha.”

Yeah, that was most certainly putting it lightly.

“What did you do?”

“We took a blood oath instead.” That was Theo, finally coming back to earth to do what he was supposed to. “Quite effective in a pinch.”

“A blood oath, huh?”

That was a whole can of worms within itself, and I winced at the no doubt lengthy explanation that was incoming. But before anyone had to launch into that, Sam cut in.

I owed him another drink.

“Hey, so, um, what if I had your moonstone?”

Landon’s reaction to that was intense. I watched nearly a dozen emotions march across his face, and for a moment, I was certain that he was about to lose his cool. Which was just about the last thing we needed, all things considered.

“You what now?”

“I, uh, may or may not have two moonstones that clearly belonged to a pack, but we haven’t been able to find out who.”

“You brought those here?” Mahlan asked, and I couldn’t blame him for the furious tone in his voice. Those were incredibly important to our investigation, and we still didn’t know who they belonged to. “I did not give you permission for that. It’s not safe to just go traipsing around with those!”

“First of all, I do not *traipse*; I sashay.”

I probably shouldn't have been surprised at him back-talking our leader, and yet I still was. Was he insane, or did he just have the world's biggest *cojones*?

“And secondly, I don't just take these beauties to the mall and get my rocks off—ha, pun fully intended. I brought them because I thought it might actually be useful. And here we are, with them being useful. I know I shouldn't say I told you so, but I totally told you so.”

I froze in my walking of the perimeter, sure that I was about to see the witch get murdered, but Mahlan just took a deep breath and motioned for Sam to continue. The witch did so, handing Landon the moonstones one by one.

That would certainly help the withering pack. Hope for them bloomed mildly in my chest, only to be squashed a bit later when Landon shook his head and sighed.

“I'm not feeling any allegiance to either of these.”

“Really?” Sam said, sounding disappointed, and we certainly shared the sentiment.

“Not a drop.”

“But that doesn't mean it's not yours though,” Kaleb said, and boom, we had a triple hat of replies. Apparently, family trauma really brought it out of him. Or maybe he was realizing that his inability to hold a conversation with anyone outside of our circle had torpedoed his chances with Emma.

It had been pretty clear to me that she'd been pining for him for quite a while, at least a couple of years, but he'd never seemed to notice. For a while, I'd thought that he was purposefully annoying her, but no, that was just Kaleb and the tight little bubble he kept around himself. He was a good friend, but not really a good romantic candidate.

“Yeah, I know. When evil is done upon a moonstone, it can possibly turn itself away from its pack to try to save them. So our stone could have done the same. By abandoning us, it couldn't be used to track us down or hurt the members who swore fealty to it.”

“I didn’t know that could happen,” Mahlan muttered, sounding somewhere between irritated and intrigued as he rubbed his chin. “How did you know, Kaleb?”

I could practically see the second youngest member retreat into himself. “Read it once. Don’t remember where.”

“Huh.”

As if that concluded the conversation, Sam began to put the stones back into his bag before adding his own thoughts. “But it makes sense. There’s some complicated magic in these—magic way older than anything I’ve ever studied—so I would totally believe there was some sort of...I dunno, *awareness* to it whose whole purpose is to protect the members devoted to it.”

“Sam, what aren’t you telling us?” Theo asked.

I had to blink. Samson was hiding things from us? How could our beta tell? I certainly couldn’t. I guessed that was why he was a beta and I was the tech guy.

The witch shot Theo a look that might have gotten him killed just fifty years earlier. “You’re learning way too much about me without taking me to dinner.”

“Could you be serious for once?”

Oh, I recognized when Theo was losing his cool. It didn’t happen very often, but it wasn’t like the guy was sleeping or resting enough.

“I’m always serious when it comes to getting a moneybags to buy me food.”

Yikes, the witch was pushing it. He needed to realize how far was too far.

“*Sam.*”

“Fiiiiine.” And yet, he still hesitated for a solid moment. “Okay, so maybe the pack ties in these stones were stronger before Savannah and I began using them to heal some hurt shifters, and help seal the bond between Mahlan and Lyssa.”

Thankfully, Landon took that pretty well. He really was a chill guy. No wonder he'd been selected to be an alpha for a pack that clearly needed all the help it could get.

“What happened there?”

“It was a complicated situation, but Lyssa and I are fated mates.”

“And by complicated, he means betrayal, witches, curses, and Lyssa's inner wolf being magically trapped within her. You know, a usual Tuesday night.”

Of course Sam felt the need to add on. He wouldn't be Sam, otherwise.

“You're fated mates?” Landon repeated, sounding completely shocked.

“Yes, we believe so.”

“Why didn't you mention it earlier?”

“I did.”

“No, you said you were *mates*, not *fated* mates. That's a significant difference.”

But why was that? I didn't see how it was relevant to our situation.

“I apologize. I didn't mean to withhold important information. I didn't know it would affect the situation.”

“Yeah, I get that. But it does change things. Given this new information, I'm going to call the grandparents and summon them here. That way, they will be disinclined to refuse.”

From there, the alpha called up Lyssa's family, and less than an hour later, we were meeting them.

That was certainly an experience. Melancholy, joyous, sorrowful, angry, relieved. There was a myriad of emotions now that all weighed heavily on me. Not that they didn't have the right to their feelings; they absolutely did. It was just... well, it was a situation I never thought I'd have to deal with.

And in reality, I wasn't really "dealing" with it. Theo, Mahlan, Lyssa, and Emma were. I was just on the periphery, watching two of my closest friends and their mates all ache. How could I burden them with my own incompetent mistake when they already were going through so much? And not because any of them had just gotten carried away. Both Mahlan and Theo had saved their mates with their bites. I'd... I'd just made Hannah's life significantly worse.

My inner wolf snarled at that, but it was true. She was a young, beautiful, independent, and intelligent woman who no doubt had her pick of mates—if she ever even wanted to be mated. And I'd taken all of that from her. Not to rescue her. Not to save her life. But because I'd been so blindsided by the bonding chemicals from my gland that I'd gotten carried away.

How was I ever going to live down such a violation?

While I wasn't the most personable member of our pack, I'd always prided myself on being a protector. On being safe. No man, woman, or child would ever have to live in fear if I was around. I would provide food, shelter, education, support—whatever they needed—and then they would go along their way feeling better.

But I hadn't done that for Hannah. Which figured, because I felt more drawn to her than I had anybody else in my entire life. If I had to fuck up with anybody, why did it have to be her?

I could only imagine how it would go down when I returned home, her face a grim expression and her mood sour. And she would be right to do so. I'd basically mated with her, then dipped. And while I was only feeling forlorn because of my own actions, she'd had to deal with the withdrawal from having a new mate so far.

I guessed I was lucky that she hadn't bitten me back, but I found myself wishing she would. That way, I could at least share her pain, and things would be fairer.

Oh well, what was that phrase Lyssa said? About wishes being fishes? I couldn't quite remember, so I'd have to ask her once we were home.

Except it appeared that wasn't in the cards for us just yet.

"What do you mean we're not going home tonight?" I asked as we all piled into the car and Mahlan told me an address that very much was *not* our city.

"There's a school nearby we're going to break into," Theo answered calmly, which was rich because I knew he had to be feeling anything but. "They might have information on the brothers."

"Is it really wise of us to leave our mates alone so long?"

Fuck! Our mates? I internally cursed myself out at the slip of my tongue that revealed everything, but somehow, no one noticed. Never thought I'd be so grateful for how into their own heads they were.

"Probably not," Mahlan admitted. "But we need to try. The longer these brothers remain ghosts, the more dangerous we are."

"Alright then," I said flatly. Because what else was I supposed to do? Argue with my alpha and a car full of our circle? No, the decision had been made, and the best thing for me to do was help to the best of my ability so we could get home faster.

So I drove, chewing on my cheek the whole time. If I was a human, I had no doubt it would be a gnawed up mess of flesh, but since I was a shifter, it would heal after a few minutes, and then I'd do it all over again.

Thankfully, the school wasn't too far out of the way, adding only about an hour and a half to the journey. We arrived as the sun was just barely beginning to set, its tendrils retreating from the sky in swirling paths of vermilion and pale coral. I'd always liked sunsets before, but I couldn't help but feel leery as we pulled up outside of the school.

"Is this really it?" I asked, scanning it through the front windshield, looking for any possible sign of a threat.

"Seems so," Mahlan answered. "We should wait until it's a bit darker then go in."

“Alright then.”

So we waited. It was easy enough to sneak in considering my gear. As far as I was concerned, we were in for a simple pump and dump. I’d walk in, bypass their security, download their entire record system, then we’d go home and run it through my algorithms for different key words while I also manually parsed it, and we went from there.

But that plan came to a screeching halt when we entered their administrative office, only to see nearly two dozen filing cabinets.

“Are...are you serious?” I heard myself gasp. “Please tell me these are not all physical records.”

It was Parker who went to the closest one, opening up the drawer and closing it again with a sigh. “What are my chances of being horribly murdered if I answer that question honestly?”

“Who the hell keeps paper records anymore?” I asked, going over to another one and yanking open a drawer like it would magically hold something other than manila folder after manila folder. But no, it was much the same.

It was then that I realized there was no going around it. We were going to have to manually check every single file we could in the short hours we had. I looked at Mahlan with a mournful stare.

“Is there any other way?” I asked, internally bemoaning how all my skills, all my tech was going to waste.

“Unless you can come up with a way for us to speed-read all of this,” Mahlan answered, sounding equally chagrined, “I don’t think so.”

“Read it?” I repeated, incredulous. “We’re not *that* hard up.”

“What do you mean?” Theo asked, his voice terse. Not that I blamed him. He’d thought he’d be back in bed with Emma by now, much as I thought I’d be at Hannah’s side. Neither of us were going to be anywhere close to back soon, however. That much was obvious.

“Take a picture with your cell phone and upload it to a folder I’m creating on one of our drives. I have a program that can scan each page for keywords. I’m thinking we’ll only need to do the first page of each student and personnel file, as it’ll be pretty easy to spot siblings that way. It’ll be faster than reading every single page.”

“Thank God for technology,” Parker said, whipping out his phone. “Let’s get going while the getting is good!”

I didn’t think any of this was good, not at all, especially since we were suddenly in for hours and hours of work instead of minutes. But hey, if Parker could look on the bright side, so could I. If we managed to actually find the brothers in all the records, we would be one step closer to peace.

And with peace, Hannah and I could focus on breaking our whole mating situation. Or even perhaps—

No. I couldn’t allow myself to even think that. There was no future for Hannah and me as mates. I’d bitten her without permission, and she would never return my affection. I couldn’t hold onto the hope that someday, somehow we’d work out. That would be like swallowing poison.

Although I’d happily swallow poison for Hannah...

Enough. I had pictures to take. Shoving my thoughts of love from my mind, I focused and got to work.

JACOBIAN

I was pretty sure that I never wanted to look at a manila folder again. Even with all of us spreading out and individually uploading to the drive fairly quickly, we were there nearly until sun-up. And while shifters could go quite a while without sleep, there was only so much mindless drudgery that we could tolerate without exploding.

Besides, as much as we all were businesspeople, wolves were just not made for paperwork. We all had our limits, and I was pretty sure all of us had reached them. And even if the endless march of “paper, picture, paper, picture, paper, picture” hadn’t been insanity-inducing, the amount of dust we’d inhaled was borderline nauseating. By the time we soullessly trudged back to our van, all of us were red-eyed and sniffing.

Which in any other situation probably would have been hilarious. But we were all too tired to find the humor. Instead, we punched the nearest hotel address into the GPS and drove there silently.

But the real kicker was that it was all wasted effort. We didn’t find a single match brother-wise. There were plenty of pairs of siblings who had come through there, but none of them matched the timeline we had. This seemed particularly impossible. Even if the brothers hadn’t gone to that school, there should have been at least a few half matches that I needed to investigate further. It was just simple statistics. Which made me wonder if perhaps the files had been tampered with.

Except there was no way for me to know because it was all *physical*. One of the brothers or their lackeys just had to roll in like we did, take the paperwork, then roll right back out. Or, since they had witches on their side, they probably didn't even have to go in. They could just summon the files to them, or even rewrite them with magic.

Ugh.

I went to sleep irritated and woke up the same way. I wanted to get back home. I wanted to get back to *Hannah*. I could feel the normal stress of her work at Mr. Bronson's company, and while that wasn't world-ending, I wanted to be there to comfort her. I also wanted to talk. We had *so* much to talk about. To plan. To apologize for.

Well, most of the apologizing was on my end, but still, it needed to happen.

But instead of being with my mate, instead of working things out, I was crammed into a hotel room with five other men.

Fantastic.

"I brewed some coffee," Parker said, still his ever-chipper self.

I looked up from my screen where I'd been staring at the data we'd gathered the night before, hoping somehow that we'd just missed something and all the work would be worth something.

But while I felt haggard and exhausted, Parker was smiling brightly while holding an ice bucket. His ability to always be optimistic was admirable, even if I didn't share his pep at the moment.

"How are you up so early?" Theo grumbled, and I couldn't help but agree with the sentiment. We'd barely gotten four full hours of sleep, only rising when the sun was nearly blinding through the curtains.

"Uh, I dunno. Slept well, I guess."

Unsurprisingly, it was Sam who chimed in next. “It was probably the cuddles. I don’t think I’ve slept that deep in a year.”

Parker turned bright red at that, and I was absolutely certain of it now. There was definitely something going on between the little brother of the group and the green witch. Which was...surprising, but cute. Granted, it was strange to think of Parker in any sort of romantic situation, and maybe that was my issue. He was a grown man, so I shouldn’t infantilize him, but he’d never really shown romantic interest in anybo—

Oh.

Wait a minute.

If he was indeed into men, maybe he’d had various hook-ups, relationships, and dalliances that none of us knew about. I hoped he knew he could talk to us about anything, that he would be safe coming out of the closet. But everyone’s journey was their own, and maybe he wasn’t ready yet. Or maybe he was just realizing it himself.

After everything calmed down a little, he and I could have a heart to heart. He didn’t have to hide if he didn’t want to. And he also didn’t have to say a thing, either.

But first, we had to find the brothers.

“I got ice for your coffee,” Parker said, holding the bucket out. “F-for your coffee.”

Still shouldn’t infantilize a grown man, but he was hilariously adorable when he did stuff like that. He was just so earnest in a way I hadn’t been since I was far younger than him. Maybe there was something to how he held onto his *joie de vivre* long after the rest of us had become far too jaded.

“Awww, aren’t you just a sweetie pie,” Sam cooed, sliding out of bed. And then, like he was a fucking fairy godmother, he snapped his fingers and his ruffled, slept-in clothing magically sorted itself out, leaving him looking and smelling as fresh as if he’d never gone on a road trip at all.

Witches really were unfair.

There was a slight bit of discussion about Sam's fashion shortcuts, but I dismissed myself so I could head into the bathroom. There, I lathered on some scent-blocking lotion, as well as sprayed the perfume Hannah had given me. I really should have brought a change of clothes, but no one had even hinted that our little road trip might go overnight.

Still, I was a grown man. I should have known better.

"So, what are we doing for breakfast?" Sam asked as I stepped back into the room. Part of me very much wanted to confess to my friends how I had messed up and exactly what was going on with me internally, but another part didn't want them to be ashamed by my actions.

Then again, considering that both Mahlan and Theo had mated with their partners without permission, maybe they would get it.

But then again, *again*, Emma hadn't talked to Theo much since, and as far as I knew, things were pretty frigid between them.

So yeah, I kept my mouth shut and listened as Theo and the green witch bantered.

"You don't eat breakfast," our beta said calmly without missing a beat. "You exist on the calories from your caffeine milkshake and on other people's misery."

"*Normally*, yes. But this is a road trip! There are certain traditions!"

"This isn't a road trip," Mahlan said, his voice grave as he joined us from the other bedroom. "This is a fact-finding mission to try to save my mate and our pack."

He had a point there, and I wished Sam would realize that, but the green witch clearly chose to deal with stress and trauma by being a wise-ass. And while I appreciated well-timed quips, this wasn't always appropriate.

"Well, if you wanna be *literal*, sure. But excuse me for wanting to inject a little life into things."

“We don’t need you to inject life. We need you to keep your magical senses on alert and tell us anything amiss that you sense.”

An expression crossed Sam’s young features that I knew was going to cause trouble, but Theo shook his head ever so slightly. Honestly, I didn’t expect the witch to catch it, but by some miracle, he did. The snarky expression left his face and he just shrugged, saying nothing instead.

Was it a Christmas miracle? Pretty impressive, given that we were nowhere near the holiday.

It wasn’t that Mahlan was some sort of raging, out-of-control alpha, but he was on edge. Between the thing with Landon and the waste of time at the school, I could tell that his hackles were up. No doubt he wanted to get to Lyssa even more than Theo, and I wanted to get to my mate as well. Because, unlike us, he’d been bitten, too, meaning his bond went both ways and was twice as powerful.

Whew, I couldn’t imagine it.

As in, I *literally* could not allow myself to imagine it, because then my mind would wander down the road of what that would be like for Hannah and I. Which would only be torturing myself because that would never happen. My actions had made sure of that.

Thankfully, Theo did his beta thing and defused the situation, clearing his throat to draw attention to himself. “I saw a small diner when we came in. Why don’t we load up there, then set out on the interviews?”

Mahlan nodded. “Let’s. Hopefully they’ll have enough food for us.”

“Yeah, let’s hope.”

I snorted as everyone started to mobilize. We were five shifters and one caffeinated witch. There was no way on God’s green earth that there would be enough food to satiate all of us.

But who knows? Stranger things had happened.



THE DINER HAD RUN out of bacon.

The diner had run out of bacon.

Not that I could blame them. They were a small-town place with maybe room for twenty customers at a time, so they probably had to be pretty specific with their orders. It wasn't like a squad of ravenous fae normally rolled through their parts with enough money to match their appetites.

But then they'd run out of sausage. And then grits. I could tell that our waitress and the two line cooks there were getting exasperated, but their attitudes cleared right up when each of us tipped \$100. Except for Sam, who looked at us with wide eyes. When he started to reach for his wallet with a trembling hand, Mahlan just shook his head and told him his meal was covered and he didn't have to worry.

That was a nice way to end the tasty if insufficient meal. While I wasn't overly attached to my money in the way some wealthy people were, that particular trick never got old. I loved the way people's faces would light up. It was like I was seeing them mentally calculate all the way their lives could improve from the extra funds. It was a small slice of happiness, and while giving a waitress an extra five hundred wasn't going to save the world, it could certainly help to make it a slightly better place.

But our respite was short-lived.

“Jacobian, you and Theo should take the first five on the list that Landon gave to us.”

List? Oh, right. We had several names of families that had been affected by the brothers, either through missing people or supposed encounters. If meeting them was anything like talking to Lyssa's family, we were in for a long day. Our second one in a row.

“Kaleb and I will take the next five. Sam, Parker, can I trust you to be responsible for the last three?”

“I’m not a child, sir,” Parker countered as respectfully as one could counter while saying those exact words. “We’ll be fine.”

“These are traumatized people. We need to act with a certain amount of tact and not turn their grief into a comedy special.”

Our alpha’s eyes flicked to Sam, who just held up his hands in what I recognized as one of his gestures for when he wasn’t going to fight.

“Hey, just because I like to deal with my trauma that way doesn’t mean I expect everyone else to. I’ll be respectful.”

“Thank you, Sam. I appreciate that. Let’s keep in contact with each other, folks, and don’t forget to write down anything useful you glean.”

It was all instruction that we didn’t need, but I figured if it made Mahlan feel better, than I could sit there and politely listen. Besides, there was nothing wrong with making sure we were all on the same page.

“Yes, sir,” I said, and the others affirmed. Then Theo and I were off, heading to the people on our list.

We made a particularly good team, Theo and me. People tended to interpret us as cold, but we were both observers. We liked to remain quiet and take everything in, learning as much as we could about situations without being noticed.

The truth was, Theo was witty and quite warm. In fact, I would venture to say he was a bit of a softie, especially when it came to people he loved. And puppies. And kittens. Well, the guy just liked animals.

So when I was with Theo, no one badgered me about talking or tried to fish conversation out of me just to feel the silence. I would speak when I felt the need to, and that was all that was expected of me.

The downside was that there was a lot of speaking during our interviews.

The first on our list was an older couple whose twins had disappeared. Clearly, we were not starting things off easy. Nevertheless, Theo called them while I drove our group back to town and we set up an appointment for just a little later.

Once we were in town, all of us split up according to our group, shifting into wolves for a run. At least that part was most definitely a relief. It was good to be in my wolf body and stretch my bones, so to speak. To run free with the wind in my fur and the damp earth beneath my feet.

We arrived at the rather rundown house quickly and were greeted by shifters who had to be in their nineties. Another perk of being a wolf—while many of us died early in battle, if we managed not to get murdered, we could live to be quite old. And not in decrepitude, where we were wheelchair-bound and swaddled in diapers. But no, actually living.

“You from that city pack that called?” The woman asked, holding a tray with a full pitcher of lemonade. Small-town hospitality—I’d missed it. It reminded me of the reservation, where community was so much stronger than in the city.

“We are,” Theo said, approaching. “We’d like to talk to you about your missing family members, if you can.”

I wasn’t expecting a pleasant time, hearing about what was likely these people’s worst traumas, but it was so much worse than I imagined. Their words echoed around in my head even as we walked away, as Theo tucked his notebook back into his pocket.

“We searched for weeks, but couldn’t find them.”

“We hoped that they were at least dead, so they could move on.”

“But we fear they tortured our boys. Humans are so depraved, you know?”

At least they didn’t ask us to assure them there was a chance their twins were alive. Or ask what could have happened. They just sorrowfully recounted their tale, then wished us success on our path. But even with my limited

social skills, I could tell that they didn't have an ounce of hope that we would bring them peace.

And that just steeled my resolve.

The second house wasn't any better. It was a large family, seven children total, but their mother had been the one who vanished. Somehow, that was even worse, as the kids were full of so many emotions ranging from hate, to hope, to mourning.

"Nowhere was safe."

"We needed her and they took her!"

"It felt like we were being hunted."

"She was my mom, ya know? She was my whole world."

"It hasn't been easy losing my wife, but it hurts so much worse that I've never been able to lay her to rest with her family."

Ugh.

The third house was no better.

"I don't want to talk about that. No, I can't talk about it."

And on and on it went, a macabre parade of pain and longing. I did my best to keep my emotions in check, yet I found myself angrier by the minute.

How dare these brothers reach into so many lives and completely ruin them? What gave them the right to take whatever and whoever they wanted, leaving broken hearts and interrupted stories in their wake? They were beyond cruel—they were evil incarnate, and I would take pleasure in finding them. In meting out justice via their throats.

Not surprisingly, by the time we finished and ran back to town, I was emotionally exhausted. And the rest of our team didn't seem to be doing much better, their ketones radiating anger, misery, and disappointment.

"Let's go home," Mahlan said flatly once we were all assembled. I wished I could comfort him, I did, but there was nothing I could say. He no doubt just needed to hold his mate

and have a good lie-in, letting himself process everything we'd experienced.

Even Sam was quiet as we all got into the car. I took over driving since no one else seemed inclined to, but surprisingly, I felt the need to check in with everyone while I slid behind the wheel.

"That was less productive than I hoped," I said.

It was a simple statement, hopefully one that wouldn't trigger anyone, but it was open enough that if someone did want to talk, they had an opening. Yeah, maybe I wasn't the best at social cues, but I knew how to be there for my brothers. I loved them and I wanted to make sure they were okay, even if they were capable of doing that on their own.

There was a long pause before Parker spoke first, his tone more defeated than I'd ever heard him.

"Did we find out anything?"

"We found pain," Mahlan answered, and God, if he wasn't right by a country mile. But that didn't give me any catharsis; it just made me even angrier. "So much pain."

Theo reached over to comfort our alpha, which he did the best out of anyone in our circle. While we were all close, Theo and Mahlan shared a special bond. They'd been friends almost since birth, and nothing was going to change that.

"We're gonna figure this out. I promise," Theo said.

"From your mouth to the council's ears," Mahlan said.

The silence set back in, leaving me to my thoughts.

I reached out through my bond as I drove, feeling along the shaky tether to see how Hannah was. If she sensed my intrusion, I couldn't tell. But as far as I was able to make out, everything was relatively normal on her end.

I took comfort in that, in knowing that she was safe and no one was hurting her. But at the same time, some smaller, pettier part of me wished that I could feel it when she was a *little* sad.

That was selfish, yes, but I couldn't help it. My inner wolf was forlorn that his mate didn't miss him. Didn't feel some form of melancholy at our overly long absence. But what could I expect? The only thing between Hannah and I was her internship, and I'd been actively trying to pawn her off onto someone else right before we'd slept together.

Would things have been any different if I had managed to get her into Theo's employ, so I could date her without any fraternization issues? Perhaps. But that wasn't the real issue. The real problem was mating without permission, which was a pretty serious issue at that.

How could I ever live that down?

I didn't get an answer then, nor did I find one when we stopped for gas, or even when Mahlan took over driving. I wanted to doze lightly in the backseat, but the most I managed was a listless sort of drifting. Certainly not ideal.

It was a long drive, and the minutes got kind of wobbly, as they often did with road trips. I couldn't say quite what I was thinking, just that I was stewing in my own emotions right up until Theo's ketones suddenly spiked. Sharp and acrid, our van suddenly smelled like a battlefield. I looked at him in concern, but before I could ask a question, his phone was ringing.

He answered immediately, and I swore I saw his skin rippling, a sign that he was losing control of his form. "Emma, what's wrong? I can feel you panicking through our bond!"

Wait, what? I sat bolt upright in my seat, listening hard for the other side of the line. Normally, that wouldn't be difficult, especially since I was so close, but there was an unnatural sort of crackling through the phone. Magic, perhaps?

"Witches...the shop! And...of...human...here!"

"They what? Who is there?!"

"...witches...humans! ...home...need you!"

"We're on our way! Whatever you do, don't let those humans leave until one of our witches gets there. We'll need to wipe their minds."

“Don’t worry...won’t!”

With that, Theo hung up, and it was like someone had channeled lightning through our van.

“What the hell is going on?” Mahlan asked from where he was sitting upfront, his own ketones filling and piling up on top of Theo’s.

“There’s an attack on Emma’s shop. Three witches,” Theo said, and I didn’t know how he was even able to speak. Emma and Lyssa were both there, and sure, they had their entire guard, but they didn’t have *us*.

“*What?*” Mahlan said. “That...we can’t...*they can’t*...” He cut himself off finally and shook his head. “Hold on.”

Oh boy, did I. As quickly as I could, I grabbed the seatbelt and held on for dear life as the van launched forward. We were going at least double the speed we were before, but I certainly wasn’t complaining. Hannah wasn’t there, but that didn’t matter. My *friends* were there, my *pack*, and I would do anything to protect them.

“Wait, so do we have a plan here?” Samson helped out from where he was buckled in. As the only member of our group who didn’t have an accelerated healing factor, he was the only one who’d used the harness from the moment he got into the car.

“What do you think the plan is?” I growled back. Theo and Mahlan were both so intent on where we were going at top speeds that I was pretty sure they’d completely tuned the green witch out.

While I wasn’t psychic, I was pretty sure that we were going to race to the edge of the city, then pile out and run the rest of the way. We could try driving, but there was no way we’d be able to speed through the city as much, especially since we were coming up on rush hour traffic.

Granted, it was a tenuous situation. As five wolves, we were a lot more likely to be spotted, but I’d rather be spotted and have to file a report with the council than have Emma or Lyssa come to harm.

Thank God Mahlan had put such a security detail on them. Should I put one on Hannah? I couldn't help but feel like that would be prudent. Maybe that was something I should look into.

After our upcoming fight with the witches, of course.

"The guards are with her, I could hear them fighting over the phone." Sam surprised me as he replied to something Mahlan said.

"Did she say if anyone was hurt?" I asked, pulling my hair back and quickly plaiting it into a warrior's braid. I'd had it loose since I didn't have my normal brush and hair oil with me to properly train it back. It didn't matter in my wolf form if my hair was flowing or not, but it helped me get into the mindset. It focused me, allowing me to lock out all the distractions that could come from fighting with witches.

"She didn't. Just that she had two humans there as well. Her new hires."

Parker whistled lowly from the back seat. "Wow, that's one hell of a first day."

"You're telling me," Kaleb said, the first time he'd spoken that day.

"Just get ready for a fight, everyone. Hopefully, by the time we arrive, they'll have already subdued or killed the witches, but we should be prepared for anything."

"Exactly."

"Should...should we call the council about this?" Parker asked, his voice fairly calm for all the nerves I could smell coming off of him. "I know we shouldn't bother them with petty grievances, but this seems to be escalating."

I waited for Theo or Mahlan to say something, and the silence lasted for a truly impressive amount considering how fast we were going. I knew that speeding didn't technically make time go any faster, but it certainly felt like it did.

I looked between the two of them, waiting for someone to say something. I didn't think that it would be such a big deal,

that it would be a matter of course that we needed to talk to the one government body that was supposed to unify all fae. The ones who handled inner conflicts between different species, packs, or really anything else.

It didn't exist for some time, not until a couple of years ago. The continental landmass that comprised Canada, America, and Mexico had all had their own natural balance. But once Europeans came over, they'd brought their own fae with them—beleaguered creatures who were looking for a land with fewer witch hunts and innocents burned at the stake.

But they had too many ideals that their human counterparts had, and didn't really gel with the indigenous fae there. There were wars, conflict, and too much blood was spilled for far too long.

And that was the council was for, to make sure it never happened again. And so far, it was doing a pretty bang-up job.

“Not yet,” Mahlan finally answered after about two intergalactic ages. “It's not the right time yet.”

The right time? What could that possibly mean? I wasn't sure, but it wasn't my place to question him. Maybe he just meant after the upcoming battle. After we saved his and Theo's mates.

Quiet fell once again until the city loomed into sight. The tension was ramping up within the car. I could feel my own energy swirling inside of me, building up into a churning maw of violence.

I was ready to fight. I was ready to protect. To rip and shred until anyone who dared to hurt my family was lying in a puddle of their own blood.

When Mahlan finally jerked the wheel to the side and allowed us to pull up on the shoulder of the road, Sam sounded much more panicked. “Wait, what's happening?”

“We're shifting to get there faster,” Theo answered. “City traffic and speed limits will slow us down way too much.”

“But what about me?”

Oh, right. Sam couldn't run like we could. I suppose we should've thought of that, but I guessed he could just sit in the van and wait for one of us to fetch him?

Except that didn't happen. Instead, Mahlan tossed him the keys. "Ride's all yours."

I suppose that worked too.

"What?! I haven't driven a car in like...ever!"

"Best time to start is now."

"That's absolutely not true at all! The best time would have been at least a week ago!"

Mahlan shrugged. I gave the green witch a pat on the shoulder. "You'll kill it."

"I don't want to kill *anything* while driving!"

"You'll be fine."

If it were any other situation, it probably would have been pretty amusing. But at the moment, I was exploding out of my human form while launching my physical body out of the open side door. By the time I hit the ground, I was on four paws and racing away.

I wasn't alone, either. Our entire pack was now running together with Mahlan at the head, leading us into battle.

It wasn't that I craved violence on a regular basis. In fact, I liked to think I was one of the most peaceable guys in our group sans Parker. It was just that I couldn't abide anyone harming the innocent, or the people I loved. And these goddamned witches were doing both.

Well, we'd see what kind of spells they could cast after I ripped their arms off with my very teeth. We needed to go on the offense and show these witches that harassing with shifters was not a viable strategy.

And yet, they'd been running circles around us so far. The only witch we'd really handled was Sarah, Lyssa's long-term friend cum evil spy. She'd just been a young woman, barely an

adult, and used by the people around her for their own nefarious goals.

The whole thing just made me burn hotter. I was done being gracious. I was ready to *attack*.

We ran faster than we ever had together before, sticking to formation as we cut the most direct line we could to Emma's place. It wasn't like we could just go down Main Street, but there were enough parks and alleys that we definitely made it there faster than any vehicle could have.

When Emma's shop came into view, my stomach dropped at the sight and scent of it. I smelled brimstone and blood, an insidious scent that burned the inside of my sensitive nose. The windows were all shattered, ruining all of Emma and Lyssa's efforts to set up their renovated shop after the first attack. I knew in the grand scheme of things, it was so much less important than their lives, but it just seemed like an extra knife in the gut.

We all raced forward, ready for war, but we shifted back into our human forms as we crossed the busy street. At least it was easy for all of us to jump into the shop at once rather than trying to go through the front door. It sucked that we had to shift, but I was certain that someone would record an entire group of wolves ambushing a shop that was in the middle of being robbed.

Besides, we were all so hopped up on adrenaline that I was sure we could instantly shift back into our wolf forms again. It would hurt, sure, but what did that matter when it came to protecting our people?

We all came to a stop inside the door, where we were practically slammed in the face with the silence of it all. The unnatural stillness made my ears ring, an awful compliment to my harsh breathing.

I'd expected spells being screamed, snarls, people crying. A real battle, but it seemed...

It seemed we might have missed the fireworks.

And that was when my bloodlust faded enough to take evaluation of the situation.

There was a fair bit of movement around the shop, but it was subtle. Mostly because it was the security guards silently cleaning up. And there, sitting in the only piece of furniture that wasn't shattered, was Emma. She was crying quietly, barely audible over our own panting, and my heart broke for her and Theo.

Naturally, he raced towards her, but he was halfway there when she leapt off the stool with impossible speed.

The two hugged, and I turned my back, giving them at least some privacy with their reunion. As relieved as I was, everything just seemed far too easy. Was that me being paranoid? Or were our guards able to get a jump on our enemies and fight them off? If so, I was personally making sure that every single one of them got a raise.

The two hugged for a long, long moment, and when Emma finally let Theo go, she looked so happy. A spike of jealousy shot through me and I did my best to drop it. But as much as I tried to clamp down on unhealthy thoughts, I couldn't help but wish that Hannah would look at me like that. Like she was relieved and comforted by my presence. But I had truly ruined that, hadn't I?

"You're here!" she declared, which just made the sensation deepen. It was not the time to make everything about myself, and I internally scolded myself over it.

"Of course I am." Theo answered, his voice full of such *relief*. "But where's Lyssa? And the Alma?"

"Savannah treated everyone, then went back home for her own safety," Emma answered, her happy expression quickly fading as she no doubt sank back into reality. Not that I could blame her. I was itching all over my body to go see Hannah, but I knew that I couldn't until I saw everything through here.

Because as much as I wanted to be selfish, wanted to check in with the woman I had mated, I knew that I couldn't.

The pack always came first, and if I left now, I would be putting Hannah in danger.

“As for Lyssa, she went home and wanted to call Ashlee to make sure she was okay.”

Mahlan drew in a sharp breath, and I was surprised he didn't combust right there. The thought of his mate going off on her own after an attack had to feel like a shotgun to the heart.

Thankfully, Emma seemed to get it. “Don't worry, she has her own security detail. Ricky made sure to call some reinforcements, including some of our guys on the police force.”

“Thank you,” Mahlan breathed, but he didn't relax at all. He was only standing in place because Emma was his sister. Anyone else, and he'd probably already be gone. “Are you alright?”

Emma chuckled, but it was a weak sound, like someone reaching for levity, but far too exhausted to get there. “I'm fine. You don't have to stick around if you want to go to her. I'm sure she'd be relieved to see you.”

That was classic Emma, of course. Thoughtful and able to read her brother even better than Theo. Honestly, I'd been surprised when we were younger that she was never interested in being a beta, but as we'd grown, I realized that she had always wanted to forge her own path and was better as a loving family member, not a right hand to the alpha.

“Thanks again,” Mahlan said, stepping forward to kiss the top of his sister's head. “We'll talk tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Nodding to Theo, Mahlan quickly hurried out. Awkwardness started to gnaw at me now, as I wasn't quite sure what to do.

That was when my wandering eyes landed on a camera hanging from a single wire in the corner. Huh.

“The security feed is set up here, right?” I asked, all of my focus suddenly turning onto a task, which was just what I needed. Feeling useless and listless was just about the worst thing when coming down from unresolved battle furor.

“Yeah, they finished it up yesterday,” Emma answered.

Finally, a way I could actually help. No, it wasn't the same as a battle, but being productive would give me a way to channel my fizzed-out energy. “I'm going to check that out.”

I went straight to the back, walking through the mess as I headed to where the security room would be. Although I hadn't been there yet, I assumed it would be in the same position that it had been in the other shop, just mirrored.

It turned out I was right, and I sat down to copy the feeds onto my ever-present ghost drive and review them myself.

There was no sound on the feeds, naturally, which was a shame. But it did allow me to hear the conversation happening out front. And yeah, maybe I was being a bit nosy, but surely it wasn't a bad thing to half-tune in while I did my first watch of the feed.

“Is Sam almost here?” That sounded like Kaleb, although he was moving around in a strange way. Maybe he was helping clean? Awful kind of him. “We should have him scan this place?”

“Oh, Sam!” Emma said with far more concern in her voice than I was expecting. Were the two closer than I'd thought? It certainly seemed so. Not that it was a big deal but...my whole obsession with Hannah may have caused me to become a little out of touch with my own pack. “Where is he? You didn't leave him in the backwaters, did you?”

“No, he's driving our van here after we all bailed at the city limits. He should be here soon.”

“Okay, that's good.” She sounded truly relieved. Honestly, I had no idea how she was still up on her two feet. From the moment we'd stepped in the door, I kind of expected Theo to whisk her away to safety. Sometimes the territorial urge to

protect could be so strong, especially in dire situations. “I have something to tell you. It’s not good.”

Of course, because when was the last time we had good news? I tried not to be bitter, but I couldn’t help but snort to myself as I watched the recording of the witches trouncing the shop. For what it was worth, Emma and Lyssa had done an excellent job fighting, especially Emma. For as much as she was a peaceable person, she could throw down when it was necessary.

“We lost one of the guards,” Emma continued, her shame quite apparent even through the walls and all the way back to me. Really, she’d done the best anyone could ever expect her to, and a little beyond that.

“I’m so sorry,” I heard Theo murmur, his voice thick with emotion.

I wasn’t used to him emoting outright, as he tended to be very guarded. That didn’t mean he didn’t have them at all, he just...kept them bottled up. Perhaps it was ironic, but I thought that was a pretty unhealthy habit of his. If Emma was helping to pull him out of that, well, maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing they’d been forced into mating. “We’ll make sure his final arrangements—”

“No, he’s not dead. The witches took him.”

What?

I sat bolt upright at that, my stomach churning. They’d made off with another of our pack? And right in the midst of battle? Their audacity really knew no bounds.

“They had time to do that?” Theo asked, echoing my own thoughts.

“He was knocked unconscious earlier in the fight. We think they snagged his unconscious body on their way out.”

“How did they escape, by the way?”

“Some sort of teleportation spell. It was instantaneous. I’d never heard or seen anything like that.”

I hit play on the footage again, trying to catch the moment the guard had been taken. The battle went on surprisingly long, and I felt a small stir of pride for our pack members. I had no doubt that plenty of other groups would have been wiped out within five minutes of a witch attack, especially with three of the blighters going fully on the offensive.

“Wait, you’re all here! That means that there’s enough wolf power to spare to try and find the missing guard!”

“I can help with that,” Parker said, and I wasn’t surprised. He did about as well with standing still in a crisis as I did. “I don’t think I’ll be of much use here.”

“Thank you,” Theo said, and I could sense the conversation was coming to an end. “And I’m going to escort Emma home. Ricky, if you want to delegate your men to go with Parker and Kaleb, I’ll take about half of your men to Emma’s home. I also would like you to double the overnight shift that’s set to replace them.”

“Yes sir. I’ll get right on that.”

“Emma, I’m going to go talk to Jacobian since he’s the one who’s gonna be here when Sam arrives, then we can go home. Is there anything you want to bring?”

“Uh...my laptop.”

“Alright, you go get that and we’ll meet back here.”

“I can do that.”

Knowing that Theo was heading towards me, I paused the feed and turned to the door. Sure enough, a moment later, Theo opened the door to the back and headed over to where I was sitting by the security feed.

“Hey,” he said, his expression both stern and worried. Not that I was surprised by that. As basically the de facto beta of our pack after John had retired, he carried so much responsibility on those shoulders.

“I heard you,” I said, saving him from having to repeat himself. “I’ll make sure I’m here until Sam arrives and have him scan for magical signatures.”

I was sure that Sam would be either frayed or in a huff when he arrived from having a sort of extreme crash course in driving, so I'd probably have to calm him down on top of bribing him with iced coffee, but there were worse things in life.

"Thanks. Do you need me to send anything else your way?"

I thought about it for a moment. I couldn't very well say "Please let me go check on my employee that I forcibly mated," even if that was what my inner wolf was screaming. That would go over as well as a surprise birthday party hosted by the witches who were hunting us.

"Uh, yeah. I could use Brayden and Philip to watch my back while I concentrate, and maybe some food from Del Mergio's." A much more normal request. And sure, maybe I was asking for that food so I could take it to Hannah, but so what if I was?

"Alright, I'll get all that set up for you. Do you want us to stick around until those two can show up?"

The offer was certainly tempting. It felt like things were escalating more and more. It would no doubt be easy for a witch to sneak up behind me while I was engrossed in the security feed, scouring it for clues. But while I knew Theo would agree if I asked him to, I didn't really want him to be away from his mate that long.

"No, just leave a single guard. That should suffice to make sure that no one gets the drop on me. This security system is good, so all the files will take a while to download and archive."

"Understood. I'll make the calls before we leave."

I nodded, satisfied with our agreement. But as Theo left, I realized that maybe, just maybe, Emma wasn't the only person who needed comfort. Especially after the long road trip us guys had had.

I called out to him right before he could exit. "Theo?"

"Yeah?"

“You’re gonna make an excellent beta.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

I nodded again, trusting that he knew to see his way out. While I wouldn’t be able to see Hannah for several more hours, it would be worth it to make sure the pack was safe.

An increasingly difficult thing to ensure lately.

HANNAH

I paced back and forth in my apartment, alternating between feeling annoyed and like I might actually chew the walls themselves out of worry. But I knew my neighbors wouldn't enjoy that, so I held onto my human form and kept my teeth to themselves.

But it was quite difficult given the situation. I was newly bitten, and yet my mate had been gone for *two days*. At first, I'd enjoyed the respite. It was nice to know that Jacobian wasn't hovering over me at work or spying on the feeds. But there was a gnawing sort of loneliness in me that desperately longed for his company.

It was pretty fucking annoying.

I hated being dependent on people, and I hated that it had just taken a single bite to make me feel like I was lacking when I was apart from my boss. That certainly wasn't healthy and it wasn't the relationship I wanted to be in.

But the chewing on the walls part? Well, that came from Lyssa texting me on the afternoon of the second day that everything was alright, and mostly everyone was safe, but there had been an attack on Emma's shop.

Instantly, I'd shot into high alert mode. I'd texted her back about a dozen and one questions, but she'd told me the guys were on their way, and that was that.

Except that clearly *wasn't* because then I spent the next three hours waiting for some sort of update from Jacobian or from anybody else.

Again, I was split on such a thing. On one hand, I knew that everyone was likely either chasing down the witches, dealing with the wounded, or with other important things. As I was not truly a part of the inner circle, what reason would they have to contact me? But on the other hand, I wished that someone would freaking *talk to me* and let me know what was going on.

Finally, just when I felt like my skull was going to invert itself, my phone buzzed with a text.

ARE YOU ALRIGHT?

WAS I ALRIGHT? Was I alright!? The man had left on a two day trip with no contact, I'd been stewing in anticipation, and he wanted to know if I was alright?

JACOBIAN, I heard about the attack!!!!

Are YOU alright?

THERE WASN'T an answer for a long, long moment and I wanted to reach through the phone and throttle him.

I'M SORRY, I'm alright. I've been handling the security stuff so Theo and Mahlan can be with Lyssa and Emma. I should have texted you, but I knew if I tried to contact you, I'd just want to run to you immediately.

OH.

Well, that was a whole lot to unpack.

It was quite understanding and kind of him to stay later at the battle scene than anybody else, just so his friends could go be with their attacked mates. That was the sweeter, more

charitable side of Jacobian that I was more used to. How he had always been before the whole Tate situation. He was considerate. Thoughtful.

I wasn't thrilled that he'd been out of contact for so long, but I couldn't entirely blame him. When it came to protecting our pack, that came first.

But then there was that last part.

If he texted me, he'd just want to run to me immediately. As in, it was only by keeping a tight grip on his instincts that he wasn't already at my door. That made me flush, my cheeks burning at the idea that I was so in his thoughts. It helped me feel better about how much I'd missed him. Longed for him, even.

ARE YOU DONE NOW? I hurriedly texted back, stopping my pacing movements only to fling myself on my couch. Which wasn't exactly the best idea.

Kinda

KINDA?

I NEED to upload all this footage to my computer and run it through the program, as well as do some internet scrubbing. Some people were bound to have seen things they shouldn't and leaked them online.

HE HAD A POINT, he absolutely did, but it still made my heart crumple in my chest. I wasn't going to get to see him, was I? Funny, how I'd always admired how dedicated he was to his work, but now it was definitely working against me.

BUT I'D LIKE to stop by. I've got some food I think you'd like.

Besides, my wolf won't shut up if I don't at least see that you're okay.

THOSE WORDS SHOULDN'T HAVE MADE my heart go pitter-patter, but they absolutely did. There was that flush through my mating bond again, too. God, it was so mortifying that Jacobian could probably feel everything I was emoting. Texting was supposed to stop that in a way a phone call couldn't, but with me being bitten, it was like he had a constant connection to how I was feeling.

Was that usually a very handy thing for shifters to have? Yes. Being able to sense if a mate was hurt, upset, or even particularly happy over long distances could be incredibly helpful. But it kind of felt like I was being spied on, even if Jacobian couldn't help it.

I must have gone too long without answering because he was texting again before I'd even thought of what to say.

THAT IS, if that's alright with you?

ONCE AGAIN, warmth bloomed in my chest. He was being so considerate. Where was the asshole who'd been driving me up the wall for the past month? Maybe we should have been attacked by witches earlier.

No, I didn't mean that.

YEAH, that's totally fine!

OKAY, I'll be there soon. But I can't stay long.

I GOTCHU

WHEW, Jacobian was on his way! I was going to be able to see my mate, even if it was only for a few short minutes. And honestly, that was probably for the best, so I could collect my thoughts without the sharp longing for him that kept building up in my chest.

Just seeing him for a few minutes would be perfect. Especially if he had food, because now that I wasn't being eaten from the inside out by anxiety, I realized I was very hungry.

I was also still in my office clothes, looking ruffled and slightly sweaty from all my pacing and fidgeting. That wouldn't do at all.

I rushed to the shower, doing a quick rinse off. As I started to soap up, I automatically reached for my scent-blocking body wash, but I thought better of it. Maybe it was a bad idea, but I kind of wanted to smell like myself when I saw my mate for the first time.

Wait...since when had I started internally calling him my mate? He'd bitten me, but that didn't make him my *mate*. After all, we were planning on breaking the connection.

My head spun for a moment at the thought, like I was physically sick from the idea of losing Jacobian. Which was incredibly stupid, because I'd never wanted to be mated. Had never asked to be.

Shaking my head, I let it go and hurried into my shower. The last thing I wanted was for Jacobian to be stuck outside my door, calling me while I stood in a stream of boiling hot water.

Thankfully, he didn't arrive before I was out of the bathroom and in my pjs. While I was tempted to get into one of my comfortingly fluffy robes, I figured after the last two times, it wasn't the appropriate moment for it.

He arrived shortly after, knocking at my door. I could smell him through the panel despite all the scent-blocking

things I'd given him, and the weariness under his pheromones were nearly choking me.

"Hey there," I said, opening the door, but he didn't step in. Instead, he held up a bag that looked to be quite heavy. "I know it doesn't entirely make up for it, but this is from Del Mergio's. That's one of your favorite places, right?"

How did he know that? I didn't recall ever saying that out loud. "Yeah, I love their fettuccine."

"I thought so. There should be some good stuff in there for you."

"Thank you," I said, hating how soft and uncertain I sounded. I wasn't a meek or mild kind of girl; I was direct and confident. Granted, I'd been through a whole lot lately that had me pretty shaken. "Are you going to come in?"

"No," he said with a truly exhausted sigh. "If I do...I can see myself never getting home, and I have to get this done. If I can find out the identity of even one of these witches, I might be able to find their coven."

I nodded, trying to understand despite the melancholy bubbling up in me. "Yeah, you did mention that."

"Tomorrow."

"Hmm?" I asked, not sure what he meant.

"Come into the office tomorrow. We have a lot to talk about, I know."

"What about my work with Mr. Bronson?"

"Call it off. I'm sure you'll need to decompress anyway."

"Yeah, I'm sure I will."

"Alright then...I suppose I should go." He sounded like he didn't want to.

"Yeah, I suppose you should." I sounded like I didn't want him to.

We stood there in the open door, me holding the bag of delicious and expensive food, Jacobian leaning forward

slightly.

“This is stupid,” he said finally before tilting further in and planting a kiss on my cheek. It was so soft, so tender, that it nearly startled a gasp from me. “There. Goodnight, Hannah.”

Well, if I wasn't turning pink from the soles of my feet up to my cheeks. “Goodnight, Jacobian.”

With a tilt of his head, he turned and walked off. I watched him go before shutting the door. Normally, I would be excited for food from Del Mergio's, but I could hardly bring myself to care. There was just so much on my mind.

Tomorrow, I thought to myself. Just make it to tomorrow.



I HURRIED into our pack's office building, dressed to impress. While I always prided myself on my appearance, I'd gone to the nines today. I was wearing a red and black houndstooth trumpet skirt with a sheer black blouse over it. It had subdued ruffles at the collar and wrists, just enough to give it character. Below it, I wore a simple black camisole, then a red vest over it. I accentuated the whole outfit with a silver pocket watch and hair pin, which made me feel like I'd walked straight out of a fashion magazine. Naturally, I had one of those thick, velvet chokers that blocked a good part of my neck. That, with the thick ruffles around the Peter Pan collar at my throat, made doubly sure no one could see the bandage I wore over my mating bond, let alone the bite itself.

Because as much as I was a wolf and found solace in dirt and running, in the hunt and the blood between my teeth, I also loved fashion. A good outfit was like armor to me, making me feel confident in a way that sweats wouldn't. Not that I didn't love my sweatpants, but they were comfy home clothes.

Maybe part of my compulsion to always look presentable in public had to do with being plus-sized and how people tended to judge fat people, but whatever. I looked fresh and I

was going to walk into Jacobian's office with my head held high.

As I went to the elevator that would take me up to his floor, I couldn't help but wish that we were meeting in my apartment instead of in his office. I knew that we needed to talk, but a certain urge was building in my belly, spreading out to the rest of me.

After all, we were already mated. Surely sleeping together again couldn't hurt anything. I was on the pill, and I wasn't in heat, so it wasn't like I could have pups. But I also knew that we couldn't. Or at least that we shouldn't. Not until we talked it out like adults.

Because being mated or not mated would determine the course of both our lives. Whatever we decided, which naturally would be to break the bond, the less hanky-panky we should use to blur the lines.

Too bad my pussy was throbbing with need for him. Was this what being mated was like? 0/10, didn't approve. Or maybe it was me. I had always enjoyed sex, and stress seemed to bring it out of me even more.

"Hey there," I said, greeting the assistant as I stepped into the greeting area of Jacobian's office space. I liked how he had it set up, with a table and chairs in a nice sitting area, then his receptionist's desk, with a door at the far end that led to his office. There were tall, tall windows in his space that I loved to look out of, showing the city below. "How are things going?"

The receptionist let out a breathy sigh, angling her lips so the breath blew the bangs out of her face.

"Like that, huh?"

"Yeah, seems like it." She grinned, though, the two of us sharing a moment of understanding about how crazy things were for our pack at the moment. "I see you're scheduled for Jacobian. I'll buzz him to let him know you're here."

She did just that, and a few moments later, I was stepping inside, closing the door behind me. I wasn't sure what I was

expecting, but it wasn't for him to be on the phone, an irritated expression on his face.

I sat down across from him, waiting anxiously. Normally, I would be a bit miffed that he'd had me come in so early when I could have slept in, but I got the feeling the phone call he was on wasn't exactly scheduled.

When he finally hung up, he didn't look at me. Instead, he rested his head in his hands and let out a long, long sigh. I didn't think I'd ever seen him so vulnerable, and a small part of me flushed at the thought that he trusted me with his delicate state.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Samson."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "He's awake already?"

"Yeah, he's been having trouble sleeping, apparently. He said after his seventh iced coffee of the night-slash-morning, he's almost done with a project he's been working on and he wants us to test it out."

"A project?"

"Anti-warding bracelets. Supposed to let us go undetected through the wards and shields of the coven that's attacking us."

I leaned forward, licking my lips in interest. If the young green witch could pull such a thing off...well, it would be a real boon to our pack.

"He can do that?"

"He thinks he might be able to. But first he's gotta crack Emma's curse. He thinks that doing this will help him add the final bindings and enchantments to make his little anti-ward spell work."

I whistled, my mind reeling at the idea that we had something that would really put the drop on these witches.

"You want to see the specs he sent me?"

“Specs?” I repeated, feeling like I was a step behind everything. “Spells can have specs?”

“Apparently. I don’t get most of his notes, but it’s pretty fascinating.” A little bit of a smirk crossed Jacobian’s strong features, and I was grateful for that spark of levity. Ever since our alpha Sawyer had died, it seemed like things were getting worse and worse for our pack. “It’s kind of amazing how technology is affecting even the most ancient magics.”

“Adapt or die,” I said, standing. “But yeah, I’d love to see.”

He slid a bit back from his desk, giving me a welcome gesture to look. I circled around, and sure enough, Jacobian had pulled up what looked like a schematic of a twine bracelet.

“That’s it?” I asked, a bit confused as I studied the different colors of thread that made what looked like a middle school art project.

“No, that’s just the grid view of it. You see all those different colors? That’s a legend for what’s on the second page.”

Sure enough, Jacobian scrolled down and I was treated to a color-coordinated list of different...types of thread?

“What’s moon string? Or fate gossamer?” I asked, picking out the top two. Witch magic had always mystified me, with all its variants and different practices, so it was fascinating to see it listed off so scientifically.

“Funny you should ask,” Jacobian said, scrolling down yet again. And on the new page were several long, long paragraphs with headers in bold. Squinting, I saw that it was describing what ingredients and rituals were needed to make each thread.

“So moon string is twine made from hemp that’s been soaked in a bowl of water that’s reflecting a full moon. Huh.” That was a bit straightforward, but others most certainly were not. Fate gossamer was apparently spider silk gifted willingly from one of the creatures combined with a hair from the spell caster, twisted together over a sage candle. Not only did that

sound pretty complicated, it was also pretty amusing to imagine Sam politely asking a spider in his apartment for some of her silk.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I said, leaning over even more so I was nearly bent in two. “Could you send this to me sometime? I’d love to read it.”

“Of course,” Jacobian answered, but there was something strange about his voice, so I turned to see what was up. I probably should have known better considering the position I was in, but I was so wrapped up in Sam’s schematics that I hadn’t realized I’d basically pointed my ass at Jacobian’s face.

Whoops.

“Sorr—” I started, but one of his broad, warm hands was sliding down my back.

“God, you smell amazing. I know what kind of scent-blocking stuff you use, so how can I smell you at all?”

I swallowed hard, unable to move as my lust from the morning shot through me once again, only three times stronger than it had been before. “P-probably has to do with being mated.”

“Right, right,” he rasped, closing his eyes. I wasn’t going to lie—seeing him so shaken by me made me feel...powerful, in a way. Jacobian was a formidable shifter, one who intimidated plenty of people with just a look. But just being me, just scenting me in my natural state, seemed to be enough to make him struggle. “Maybe we should...we should...”

I stopped listening. And I stopped because I’d straightened and turned towards him, closing in on where he was sitting in his large, no doubt expensive office chair. I moved slowly, giving him plenty of time to move, to tell me to stop, but he didn’t.

So then I slowly, carefully leaned in and placed a single kiss on his lips.

Oh *goodness*.

We'd kissed plenty of times before, and all of them had been hot. Like fire-licking along my lips in the most delicious way. But kissing while bonded was a *completely* different experience.

My entire body rushed with an extraordinary sort of elation, and it was full of life and energy, fizzing through my every limb in a bubbly rush.

I liked it. Oh I *liked* it!

I might have moaned. Except I most *definitely* moaned, my mouth opening against Jacobian's as his scent filled all my senses. Once more, I was dizzy with him, borderline drunk, but it was different than before. I didn't feel drugged and out of control of myself. I felt happy, thrilled even, but also fully in control of my body and what I was doing.

"*Fuck*, I need you," Jacobian hissed against my lips, his broad, strong hands now moving to my waist. I loved the way his fingers sank into my soft flesh, like he wanted to grab me and never let go.

We shouldn't do this. We were both playing with fire, and we knew it. He was my boss, first of all, and we'd both agreed that we wanted to break our bond if we could. Sleeping together would make everything so much messier.

But maybe I wanted to get messy.

"You have me," I said, looping my arms around his shoulders and kissing him again.

It was harder, demanding, bruising. I was claiming what I wanted, and I didn't care that I was already dripping for him. I was sure that he could smell just how aroused I was, and I desperately wanted to reach down and feel if his body was reacting as sharply as mine. But doing that would mean letting go of where my hands were now, which just so happened to be buried in his long, thick hair, holding on for dear life as he kissed the soul out of me.

I was flying, actually flying, forgetting about our jobs, forgetting about the witches, just loving everything I was feeling.

Was this what being mated was all about? Because it felt so nice. Unfettered. If only I could feel like that all the time, I'd be a lot less stressed.

My words seemed to stir something within Jacobian because suddenly I was being lifted up and placed on his desk, my ass landing right next to his computer. I gasped again, and he deepened the kiss, the heat between us ratcheting a step further.

I parted my legs, allowing him to step between them, and then I felt just how hard he was, straining for me like he was going to rip out of his own pants. The heated length of him was like a brand against the seam of my panties, which were basically water-logged at this point.

“We shouldn't,” he said, breaking away from me just long enough to utter those same words that I'd thought of moments earlier.

“I know,” I answered before kissing him again.

His hands roved over me as excitement coursed through every cell of my body. Were we really about to go at it in his office? The idea made me heat up even further, the arousal in my body ratcheting up about ten levels all at once.

God, I wanted him to feel me—*all* of me. Memories of our past two times together and just how *good* they were. I wanted it again, that was absolutely true.

But right when one of his warm, wonderful palms finally reached my breast, the intercom buzzed.

“You've gotta be kidding me,” I breathed as Jacobian let an outright growl. “You planning a call?”

“Nope,” he answered before leaning around me and pressing the intercom button. “Yes?”

“I'm sorry to disturb you, but we just had three investors arrive on an impromptu visit and they'd like to visit.”

“Visit?” Jacobian asked, and I closed my eyes. Of fucking course.

Maybe it was the mating bond in me, maybe it was just that I was hard up, but I was ready to rip off the heads of whoever these three investors were.

“Yes. I explained that your schedule was full, so Mr. Parker offered to take over, but sent over his assistant to collect any relevant documents.”

“His assistant? Isn’t that the deaf kid?”

Oof, probably not the best way to refer to him, but it wasn’t like I could entirely blame him. It wasn’t often that a deaf shifter was born, nor a blind one, so they tended to stick out.

“Valentine, yes. He’s on his way. Should I buzz him in once he’s here?”

I wished desperately that Jacobian would tell her no, but I also knew that he was far too responsible for that.

“Yeah, send him in.” With that, he let go of the intercom and gave me a remorseful look. “Sorry about that.”

“He’s deaf, right?” I repeated, my mind slowly churning in a wicked, wicked way.

“Yeah, why?”

Grinning like a madwoman, I reached into my purse and pulled out my heaviest scent-blocking spray. Quickly, I misted it all over my body. That, along with my suppressant pill, was going to leave me practically undetectable.

“What...what are you doing?” Jacobian asked, looking utterly confused. Which frankly, was pretty cute.

“Something risky and stupid.”

I didn’t know what had gotten into me, but I sent him a flirty wink, then *crawled under his desk*.

“What the hell! What are you doing down there?!”

“You better take a seat,” I teased. “Before your guest arrives and sees that log you’ve got between your legs.”

Wow, that was ballsy, even for me. And yet there was a giddy sort of effervescence simmering through me. I felt young and foolish in a lovely way, full of mischief and sex.

Jacobian quickly leaned over towards one of the few filing cabinets he had in the office—he was a digital man through and through—and grabbed a couple of folders. It seemed a bit implausible that he had his system so memorized that he could grab the right files without looking. But then again, it was *Jacobian*, so if anyone would do it, it was him.

“You need to get out of there,” he hissed, looking delightfully panicked.

Was I a brat? I was pretty sure that I was. That was the only explanation for how much joy I was getting by how perplexed he looked.

“What are you talking about?” I murmured. “I’m not even here.”

I reached up to his thighs, just resting my hands there. He jolted, but before he could say anything else, the door opened.

I stilled, not wanting to give myself away right off the bat. I knew that Valentine was profoundly deaf, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t observant.

“Morning, Mr. Helton. I was told you had files for me to run to my boss?”

His voice was thick, but perfectly understandable. My concentration on Jacobian faltered a little as I realized I really should have kept up with my ASL classes in college. Maybe I could sign up for some online courses once the pack wasn’t so fraught from kidnapping, murder, and everything else. It was my opinion that I should be able to communicate with every member of our pack, in or out of wolf form.

“That I do,” Jacobian said. Interestingly enough, his hands moved from where they had been resting over mine. Peeking ever so slightly from under the desk, I saw them making particular patterns.

Wait, Jacobian could *sign*? I never knew that. But it was certainly a skill I was interested in. I felt like I was rapidly

learning so much about him, and it was entirely unintentional. Maybe we should hang out when we weren't arguing or boinking each other's brains out.

Except we didn't need to do that, did we? It wasn't like we were in a relationship. And we would never be. Because he was my boss, and he hadn't even meant to mate me. It was all just an accident from digging my nails into him.

"Thank you," Valentino said, and I heard the files being handed over. Deciding to be a bit spicy, I let my hands slide up a little higher. Still under the desk, naturally, but just enough to tease at what my ultimate goal was.

The muscles in Jacobian's thighs jumped, and I was impressed the force of them didn't rocket him out of his chair. But somehow, his upper body remained still and he continued talking like nothing was amiss.

"No problem. Please tell Parker that I really appreciate him taking over today. I owe him one."

"Of course, sir. Have a good day!"

"You too!"

I heard Valentine turn and walk out. I took advantage of his back being to Jacobian and reached for his zipper, slowly pulling it down. Honestly, he deserved a gold star for how hard he'd clamped down on his pheromones because the moment the door was shut, Jacobian's scent practically soared within my nose.

I was playing a risky game. I knew that. But I figured if Jacobian really was against it, he would either say no, cross his legs, or kick me out. I still didn't know Jacobian that well, but I got the feeling he liked the thrill as much as I did.

Because I was most *certainly* digging it. It made me feel so alive! The apprehension was a delicious slide of heated honey that only amplified my adrenaline, coaxing me to go further and further.

I swore, there was going to be a puddle of arousal under his desk when I was done. Or maybe even halfway through, because I was nowhere near done.

Jacobian hissed, but didn't say a single word. I licked my lips and reached into his pants, pulling his hard, heated length from his boxers. I admired the control he felt as the door opened, but I didn't push further until it fully closed.

"*Hannah,*" he hissed as I flicked one of my fingers over his head. He was dripping, too, pretty little beads of liquid now at his tip. We were messy in more ways than one, it seemed.

"What?" I murmured in a sing-song tone, my voice low. Yes, we were alone, and I knew most offices were sound-proofed for shifter reasons, but I didn't want to risk his secretary overhearing. Because I had a plan, and the plan was very much "not safe for work."

"What are you doing?"

"I think that part would be obvious," I said as I lowered my head and licked a long stripe up Jacobian's length.

God, the way he jolted at that, one of his hands going to my hair to grip it down by the roots. I paused, waiting to see if he would yank me off, but it just rested there. Like he needed a tether to earth. Who was I to deny him a handhold? Especially since I fully intended to send him to outer space.

His breath was already harsh from just a single lick, and I swore power crackled through my veins. I was an unstoppable goddess, able to bring a virile leader to his knees with a single stroke of my tongue.

Emboldened, I licked again, spreading wetness along his side. I genuinely enjoyed giving head, but my enjoyment was directly related to how much of a good time my partner was having. And judging by the pheromones flooding the room, Jacobian was definitely having a grand old time.

I couldn't wait until I got my whole mouth around him.

But I had to work my way up to that, making sure his length was sloppy and wet before I took it into my mouth, one of my hands coming up to work his base. While I did love head, I couldn't deep-throat the impressive length that

Jacobian had to offer. But that was alright. I knew how to use them in tandem.

So I swallowed him down, swirling my tongue around his head before delving down, my curled fist meeting my lips every time I reached my limit. Little pants and growls escaped from Jacobian every few seconds, stroking my ego as much as I was stroking him.

My inner wolf was practically howling with pleasure. She loved what we were doing and wanted more, more, *more*. Because of course she did. She was excess and opulence. She hated the office and the concrete bars of city life.

She also was really, really horny.

I kind of got lost in it, the rest of the world fading away outside of the two of us. That was a repeating pattern between the two of us. Everything else didn't matter compared to the scent, the sight, the very presence of Jacobian.

His thighs were so thick and strong. I knew that he could bring them together and squeeze me in an impossible vice. But he wouldn't, because I was the one in control. I was the one giving *him* pleasure exactly how I wanted to.

It felt like all the happiness, all the sensation, was building up to an impossible level, so I slid my hand down my front. My own touch felt electric in a way that I couldn't verbalize, and not just because my mouth was very full.

At last, my hand simply plunged into my panties, sliding beneath my underwear to toy with my own dripping desire. I had no tact with myself, just going straight for the gold to send myself rushing right over the edge with Jacobian.

Except we never quite got there. I felt him throb in my mouth, surely a sign that he was close, and I began to aggressively pursue it. But before I could get him close to popping, he snarled and yanked me off of him.

“Wha—”

The next thing I knew, I was whirled around and bent over the desk, Jacobian's hand hot like a brand on the small of my

back. The force of it wasn't painful, but it was firm, telling me that there would be no quarter.

“You want to play, baby girl?” He growled, his voice sending chills down the very spine he was touching. “Then let's play.”

JACOBIAN

I was pretty sure that I had died and gone to heaven. Except I wasn't sure if they had blow jobs in heaven. Then again, how could any place be an eternal paradise without sloppy head?

Either way, Hannah was sucking my soul out from between my legs, kneeling between my desk and working me over as if she had the manual. Don't get me wrong—I liked great head as much as any guy—but it felt like Hannah had skipped right over great head and was offering life-changing oral.

I was holding onto her hair for dear life, trying not to be flung into the sun. It felt like every muscle in my body was locked up tight, vibrating at some cosmic level from the sheer skill Hannah had.

My end started to barrel towards me far too soon, and Hannah must have sensed it, because she went in for the kill, her tongue swirling, head bobbing, hand twisting. Somehow I managed to open my eyes and look down, only to see her hand between her own legs, furiously working herself over.

I have no idea how I didn't explode then and there, but I knew that I needed to be inside her right now. My inner wolf wanted to be buried so deep inside of her tight, wet heat that we would be united as one.

It was like my body took over for a moment, pulling Hannah off me and to her feet. I was rough with her, but I

could smell and feel through our bond that she loved it, her pheromones swelling with a burnt honey and sugar scent.

Gods, she was intoxicating on every level. Beautifully plush, perfectly scented, and just my type of kinky. The very idea that she was going to walk out of my office with my cum dripping out of her made something very primal rise out of me.

I bent her over my desk, heat racing. Without thinking, words slipped from me. But they were barely words. They were more like a growled threat. Or perhaps a promise.

“You want to play, baby girl? Then let’s play.”

Hannah, the minx that she was, pushed that perfect ass of hers back into my length, which was still slick from her spit. The roughness of the fabric of her skirt ricocheted through me like a rocket, and it was like my brain went offline.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Hannah asked, looking over her shoulder at me.

She always knew how to bring out the wildest parts of me, and it took all of my control not to rip her outfit in two. But instead, I forced her skirt up, ruffles bunching around her waist, and tore her panties clean off.

“Hey!” she objected, but that was about all she got out before I was sliding home, that velvet heat of hers swallowing me entirely.

“*Fuck!*” we cried in unison, and not for the first time, I was incredibly grateful that our office was sound-proofed. Although I’d never envisioned bedding my mate in my workspace before, I couldn’t deny how hot the idea was.

Except this was actively happening in real time.

And it was a stupid idea. A downright bad one, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care that we were trying to break our bond, I didn’t care that we were breaking about a million and one work rules. All I cared about was Hannah. That she was safe. That she was cared for. That she was happy.

And how she felt on my cock.

That last one was less altruistic than the others, but I couldn't deny how amazing she felt. I knew that anyone else I tried to sleep with in the future wouldn't compare, but then thinking about possibly sleeping with anyone else but Hannah simply made me feel sick.

And as much as I wanted to blame it all on the bond, I knew it wasn't that. Or at least not just that. Because the truth was that I was falling in love with Hannah. Not just because we had mind-blowing sex, although that certainly didn't hurt, but because she was just so... so...

Hannah.

She was beautiful. She was headstrong. She was incredibly smart and driven. She was wild in all the ways that I forced myself to suppress, but she was also composed when she needed to be. Well, most of the time.

I should have known better than to admit my feelings, even to myself. Because once I let that door open, I could feel myself losing control. I pistoned in and out of Hannah, drunk on every pleased sounds and mewl she made. She was a hedonistic orchestra that I could not get enough of.

"Gods, I'm almost there, Jacobian," she whined, holding onto my desk as it threatened to rock across the floor. Her words fueled me, and one of my hands let go of her hips to reach around below her.

I was aiming for her clit, that sensitive nerve that I knew would send her tumbling over the edge, but I couldn't help but reach a little further to feel where I was splitting her open. She was so wet, and now she was stretched tightly around me.

"Fuck, that's so hot," I growled, my teeth grazing Hannah's shoulder. There was too much fabric in the way to allow a bite, but I desperately wanted to. I wanted to mark her up, for her to wear evidence of me as long as her body would allow it, a testament to how she made me feel and the pleasure I brought out in her.

"*Please,*" she mewled, her request breathless. And like before, I couldn't refuse a request like that. As much as I liked

to tease, I wanted to feel her fall apart on my cock, to squeeze me in that velvet heat until anything outside of ourselves was erased from memory.

“Don’t worry, I got you, baby girl.”

My fingers moved up from where I was impaling her to the apex of her womanhood, where they brushed gentle circles over the engorged nerve. It didn’t take long, less than thirty seconds, which was good because I could feel my own end quickly coming.

The moment she climaxed, she clamped down on me so hard, it was almost painful. Except it wasn’t really at all. It was the most delicious sort of pleasure that I could imagine, lighting up every nerve in my body and rewriting what I could feel.

I came with a roar, completely forgetting about my secretary in the next room and the fact that we were in a building full of shifters. I was really hoping that our soundproofing held up, otherwise everyone was going to know what I sounded like when I came undone.

And I was most certainly was. I poured everything I had into Hannah, clamping down on her hips and pulling her flush into me. It always amazed me just how long a woman’s orgasm could last, and her walls massaged me rhythmically for what seemed like an eternity, though it was probably only a little longer than a minute.

By the time we finished, my legs had turned to jelly. I sat back, pulling Hannah with me so that she was in my lap, my manhood still inside her.

“Wow,” she murmured, leaning back into me. “That...that was amazing.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” I admitted, my hands moving up from her hips to hold that deliciously soft waist of hers.

“But it was stupid.”

She was right, sure, but I couldn’t help but frown at her words. “Was it?”

“You know that it was,” she said, and I could practically hear her rolling her eyes. Always the snarky one, my Hannah.

My Hannah, huh? Clearly I wasn't hiding anything from myself anymore. I had better things to waste my mental energy on, ultimately.

“Perhaps,” I admitted, feeling heat starting to build in my middle again. Could I possibly go again? The idea was appealing, if not a little far-fetched. It wasn't like I was a one-and-done fellow, but I wasn't sure if I could survive my world being rocked twice.

But maybe it wouldn't hurt to try?

My hands moved from her waist up to her breasts, sliding over her clothes the entire way. She was just so *much!* Hannah made me feel desire in ways I didn't think were possible. Like a man starved, I was ravenous for her, and I felt like I could never be full.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I flicked open the button of her pretty vest, the one that nipped in at her waist to emphasize that perfect hourglass figure of hers. Although I was soft within her, I could feel the flutter of interest within her walls, coaxing my little guy back to life.

Yeah, I could definitely see a round two in our future.

Our *immediate* future.

“I think that part would be obvious,” I said, exactly echoing what she'd told me earlier when teasing me under my desk.

I still couldn't believe that she'd done that, and I knew that whole scene was going into my permanent spank bank for the rest of my life. No matter what happened between Hannah and I, I would always have the image of her on her knees, her cheeks flushed with my dick in her mouth.

I was pretty sure that I was one of the luckiest shifters on earth. And maybe every other planet, too.

“But you just came,” she said as my fingers deftly moved over the frilly, translucent shirt that she was wearing. Because

there were still far too many clothes between her and my seeking hands. I just wanted to *feel* her, to tease her until she was so thoroughly ruined that it would take a bottle of her scent-blocking body wash to erase me.

“Excellent powers of observation.”

“You’re getting awfully saucy for someone whose dick is still inside me.”

“I realize that you’re trying to say that as a threat, but I don’t see how there could be anything negative about that.” I shifted my hips ever so slightly, and I could feel the combined efforts of our first coupling leak down. Like everything else, it was way hotter than it should have been, and I hardened even further.

“Wait...am I feeling what I think I’m feeling?” Hannah said. And her surprise was both amusing and really healthy for my ego.

“And if you were?”

“There’s no way you’re hard already! It’s been like...three minutes!”

“I guess you just bring out the best in me.” Finally, I had her shirt open enough to slide under it, only to find she had *more* clothing on underneath. I was beginning to think that I hated fashion.

“If this is the best in you, I’m not sure I want to see the worst.”

I pulled her thinner shirt down—was it called a camisole, perhaps? Finally, I reached her bra. At first, I’d been sure that she would have on something practical and office-friendly, but no, it seemed to be a black push-up bra with a clasp in the front.

I didn’t know what I’d done in a previous life to earn such a blessing, but I clearly needed to go save some orphans or something to make sure my luck continued.

“You sure you don’t want to?” I asked, my breath hot across the back of her neck. She shuddered and ground back

against me, which was impressive considering how her thighs were splayed wide over my own legs. “I think it might be fun.”

“Since when do you care about fun?” Hannah countered, and I could tell that she was fully transitioning into brat mode. While I knew plenty of people weren’t fans of such attitude, I liked it. It was challenging in a way I enjoyed, and I would most certainly never get bored. “Aren’t you afraid that you’ll burst if you don’t log an algorithm or compute something?”

I undid the clasp on the front of her bra, letting those gorgeous breasts of hers fall out. She gasped, a ragged sound that only increased in volume as I cupped them, playing with her nipples as I did.

“I think we’ve already both found out that bursting can be quite fun.”

“*You...*” She growled before trailing off, her head falling back to my shoulder. “Oh fuck, like that.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice. The sounds I was drawing out of her were the best encouragement I could ever ask for. I toyed with those pretty pink buds for quite a bit, rolling my fingers over them, making Hannah feel and feel until she was squirming in my lap. But I was more than grateful for her grinding as it brought my manhood back to life, fully hard and straining for her.

God, the things she did to me. I was never going to get over it.

But that was an issue for future Jacobian to worry about. Instead, I lifted my hips, sliding deeper into her. She groaned, holding onto me for dear life as she did so.

“You’re spoiling me,” she breathed as she pushed back down on me just as hard as I gave, meeting my slow thrust with the type of enthusiasm that I loved.

And wasn’t that a lovely idea? I could see it spreading out in front of me, buying her a beautiful place, filling it with all the best furniture and anything else she would want. Dressing her up in the finest clothes and taking her out on the best

nights on the town or vacations, assuming we ever got the witches and those damn brothers off our back.

But thinking about that made me think of her in my bed, of waking up every morning to see her face, all flushed from the coziness of sleep and blurry-eyed. She wouldn't have a lick of makeup on, and yet I knew that she would be breathlessly beautiful.

I swore that my heart swelled within my chest at that, and I redoubled my efforts, driving into Hannah like I could fuck the idea away. But it pretty much had the opposite reaction, and the more I plunged into her, the more the daydream bloomed.

If only I hadn't messed everything up by being an ass, then biting her without permission. But if she gave me a chance, I would make it up to her. I didn't know how, but I absolutely would.

“Fuck, Jacobian, I can't come again, I can't!”

I continued to roll her nipples between my fingers, adding a bit more pressure. As I did, I pressed my lips to her neck, right where the Band-Aid lay that covered her mating bite. “Yes, you can,” I breathed, putting gentle pressure there.

I was never going to doubt the power of a mating bite again. Hannah let out a keening cry and came around me, shaking and holding onto to me so tightly that I knew her nails were going to leave marks for at least a few hours.

And like every other time, she was able to drag me along with her, not that I was resisting. I happily plunged into my climax, letting it swallow me to completeness.

We both flew together, soaring together without argument, without any sort of complication. I wished that we could stay like that forever. But that wasn't how reality worked, and I slowly drifted into my own body.

For a long while, it was just Hannah and I breathing hard and sagging into the chair. My hands left her breasts to rest at her middle, my arms wrapped around her almost like a hug.

Had I ever hugged Hannah? I didn't think so. Strange, how we'd done some things that other couples never did, but we

hadn't done something so basic as hold hands or embrace.

I supposed that was because we weren't a couple at all.

Hannah must have sensed the change in my ketones because she stiffened and slowly pulled herself off of me. We both hissed at the sensation, but I recovered quickly, tucking myself into my pants.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice almost tenuous. My first instinct was to deny that anything was wrong at all. But if I wanted Hannah to trust me, I needed to give her reason to.

"Just wishing I had taken a different road with things."

"Oh?" she asked, tilting her head in a way that made me want her that much more. But not sexually. More... domestically? Platonically? Every way I could want a person. She made me feel like I could be better, be braver. She made me *want* to be.

"Yeah. I should have treated you with far more respect and professionalism," I said, the words heavy in my soul, but true. Boy, I was really rocking the pillow talk, wasn't I?

A myriad of emotions crossed her face, and I knew I was ruining the moment. How did we go from having incredibly hot sex to an emotional conversation regarding my past wrongs?

"Where is this coming from?" she asked finally.

"Just thinking, I guess. We're mated now, and I can feel what you feel, which makes me realize, well, how I've made you feel in general."

"I..." She let out a deep breath. "We haven't always been the kindest to each other. I understand why you wanted to keep me away from Tate, and out of the public considering what's happening with Emma, and I shouldn't have undermined you. But all in all, I appreciate your apology." She paused, quirked her head to the side. "That was an apology, right?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, it definitely was."

"Right. You might wanna work on your technique, but your heart is in the right place."

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Hannah finished arranging herself and I couldn’t help but watch her, my heart full of fondness. Honestly, I could just sit around and observe her all day and still be perfectly content. What had happened to me? I used to abhor any sort of unnecessary social interaction outside of our circle. But with Hannah, I could see myself sitting around and watching TV, or playing board games. Just spending time with her was so nice.

I really was lost in the sauce, wasn’t I? And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to be upset about it. I felt like I’d found my home. It just happened to be a person instead of a physical place.

It was while I was sitting there, observing, that I finally decided it. I didn’t care how much I’d messed it up, I was going to work on things until I won her over. I could be a good mate to her. I could.

Then again, that was only if she was willing. If she turned me down or said she wasn’t interested, I would have to come to terms with it.

I guess I just had to hope that she wasn’t entirely opposed to me wooing her. Once things calmed down, of course, and the threat of being randomly kidnapped passed.

Quietness settled over us, and I assumed that Hannah was lost in thought like I was. But that silence came to an end when her phone rang shrilly for about three seconds before cutting off.

I raised my eyebrow as Hannah hurried to where she’d left her purse, yanking her phone out of it. My curiosity was soon piqued when she unlocked the screen, her eyes flitting across it like she was reading something.

“What’s going on?” I asked once the pause lasted a hair too long. But my curiosity turned to dread when she turned to me with a sheepish sort of expression.

“Hey, so don’t be mad...”

HANNAH

“Are you ready to have your ass kicked?” Tate said, grinning at me as we walked into the bowling alley. I put on what I hoped was an enthusiastic grin, nodding along.

“Totally! I haven’t been bowling since I was a teenager, I think!”

Mostly because bowling was boring. I couldn’t even chase the ball, which was the true purpose of all spherical objects. Maybe that was just my inner wolf talking, but I couldn’t help but agree with her. Why use a human arm to throw a heavy, cement-like orb at some pins when I could be out in an open field, playing catch or keep away on all fours with my pack?

Honestly, I would have been much more excited if we were playing Frisbee. Now that was a sport I could get behind.

“Well, I am honored for the opportunity to take you out again. I wasn’t sure if it was going to happen, it’s been a hot minute since our last date.”

“Has it?” I deferred, pretending to busy myself with finding Chapstick in my purse as he held the door open for me. Because while a whole lot had happened, I didn’t think that a couple of weeks between dates was all that egregious. And to be quite frank, I was surprised that Jacobian had approved the mission at all.

I’d expected a whole lot more of a fight when Tate had texted, asking me out after Jacobian and my impromptu office tryst. But my boss had only needed to think for a bit and

calmly talk out my strategy before he approved it. Naturally, I still had my escort waiting in the wings, but Jacobian wasn't on site. Which...well, it was a really lovely sign of trust.

Something had shifted between us between when he'd mated me without permission and his return from Lyssa's old pack. Maybe it was yet another attack on Emma, maybe it was everything piled up on top of each other. But whatever it was that had caused his change of heart, I certainly approved.

And I would be lying if I didn't admit that my feelings towards him had changed as well. Not dramatically, but I saw him less as an impossibly hot asshole whose intelligence was only matched by his rudeness. He was now less of an untouchable leader of our pack who was so much older and wiser than me. I saw him more as another shifter who was just as fallible and flawed as I was. Sure, he was still brilliant, great at tech, and filthy rich, but he was so much more *real*.

Perhaps that was a strange thing to realize while he was plowing me in his office, but hey. I was just incredibly happy that things were going well between us, and it seemed like he truly respected me.

I couldn't help but remember his words when he'd been looking at me so sweetly, like I was something precious to him.

"Just wishing I had taken a different road with things."

Yeah, me too. I wished he hadn't been such a jerk. I wished that our pack wasn't being relentlessly attacked. I wished that my nail hadn't accidentally punctured his mating gland, and I wish he hadn't mated me without permission.

I wished, I wished, I *wished*. But wishes did little more than give birth to sighs, and I had a date to concentrate on.

"What's your shoe size?"

"Huh?"

Oh, right. I was in a bowling alley. I really needed to concentrate if I wanted to get into that secret department. It was still so weird that neither Jacobian and I could find a single thing on it, or get into it. Why was it locked up tighter

than the rest of the building? And why did the employees I ate lunch with every day act like it was normal? It made me feel like they didn't even know.

Maybe if I could just get a little closer with Tate, I could figure all of this out.

It would make an amazing addition to my resume when I completed the internship program. I could apply to work in another division of the company, perhaps prospecting or interpersonal communications with certain clients, or even a direct assistant of anyone but Jacobian.

— And if I wasn't directly working for him, maybe we could

“Hannah, your shoe size?”

Wow, I was dropping the ball hard. “Sorry! I was trying to remember my bowling size. I'm a size nine in sneakers usually.”

“Usually the workers know how the shoes tend to fit. I'll let them know if you wanna go stand in line for snacks?”

“Yeah, I can do that!”

I hurried off, grateful for the reprieve so I could get my head in the game—the game really being “dating” Tate, not bowling. Not even a bevy of witch covens could get me into caring about strikes or splits.

It didn't take very long for Tate to return with my shoes, but by the time he did, I'd mostly centered myself again. Time was running out and I needed to make every single moment count, no matter how insignificant it was.

“Got your shoes,” Tate said, holding up an insanely ugly pair that weren't quite sneakers but weren't quite flats. Right, bowling shoes. I'd forgotten how uncomfortable those things were. At least I'd remembered to put on socks before I went out the door. Usually I relied on stockings or thigh highs, but I couldn't imagine a more uncomfortable sensation in those hokey shoes.

“Aw, thanks!” I said, taking them and forcing myself not to react negatively. Besides, it wasn’t like bowling was the worst thing in the world—that would probably be doing taxes, or dumbass human men telling me to smile. “What were you thinking snack-wise?”

“How about we order a pizza, and definitely some pretzel bites?”

I nodded, knowing that I would need a lot more than that to be satiated, but I didn’t want to draw too much attention, so I could always just eat at home later. But maybe...maybe asking for a little more wouldn’t be too suspicious. I was a growing wolf lady, after all. Well, not really growing, but I did occasionally explode out of my own skin from time to time.

“What about the chili cheese fries? Are those any good?”

“Dunno, never had them. But I’m game to try as long as you accept the consequences of either of us eating beans that were cooked in a bowling alley.”

That surprised a laugh out of me. As much as I kept trying to dismiss Tate as just a target, he occasionally reminded me that he was a pleasant guy. Too bad we hadn’t met under different circumstances. Oh, and that he was a human. I didn’t have anything against cross-species romances when it came to dating non-fae, it was just they couldn’t be rough with me in the way I liked, and I most certainly couldn’t be rough with them, either.

And if I was being frank, he just wasn’t Jacobian. I shouldn’t want my boss. It was already complicating my life so much to be involved with him, but I found myself craving my mate and no one else.

Sigh.

“I guess I’m a gambling woman.”

“Ha! Alright, let’s be brave together then.”

We ordered our food and moved to one of the lanes that Tate had apparently reserved ahead of time. While I wasn’t into bowling, I enjoyed how much everyone around me had fun. It was a nice atmosphere, even if I wasn’t allowed to

chase after any of the stupid, rock-like bowling balls. I held a tiny little pennant on a stick in my hand, the number apparently matched to our order so one of the employees would know where to bring it. I wasn't aware that we would be served almost like a restaurant, but it made sense.

Not that we could actually eat in the lanes, of course. No, the girl behind the counter made sure to explain that to me at least three times. Apparently, I must have had a vibe that I wanted to have an entire picnic on the entirely too-slick floor. There were tables set about five or so feet behind each lane, and *those* were where we were allowed to eat. I didn't mind it. It made sense to me that the employees had enough to do and didn't want to have to clean up sticky soda off the floor before a customer complained about the clean-up ruining their mojo.

"Let's see if your skills are as good as you say they are," I said once we were all settled, picking out my own bowling ball. Naturally, I picked out the wrong one, because apparently there were different sizes and weights, and a woman of my side shouldn't be handed a twenty-five pound one. Not that I could tell the difference in any of them. With my shifter strength, they all felt like nothing, just surprisingly cool against my heated flesh.

And then we started bowling. I'd never been felt grateful for my fundamentals of acting classes when I was in college, but I was pretty sure I was able to convincingly pretend I was having a good time. It helped that Tate was pleasant and apparently had dozens of bowling jokes in his back pocket that were actually funny.

We took a break once our food came, and it was about as greasy yet tasty as one would expect bowling alley food to be, sitting heavily in my belly in a way that I appreciated. It would definitely keep me full until I could get home and get some real protein into myself, and a pre-natal vitamin-filled fruit smoothie. Thank God for easily digestible folic acid. I always noticed a difference in my coat when I remembered to actively take my vitamins.

But we didn't get a chance to finish before his phone rang. Not an entirely unusual occurrence, but his expression said

something else. It wasn't like he pulled some sort of anime exaggerated emotion, but I saw his pupils dilate and I could smell stress hormones swell within him.

“Oh, hey, I have to take this,” he said quickly. Too quickly. And was that his heartbeat I heard accelerating?

Suddenly, I was on high alert. Something was happening, even if I didn't know what it was. Instinctively, I reached inside my purse underneath the table, fishing around for some of the equipment that I still had from Jacobian.

“That's okay! I don't mind,” I said, grinning while I blindly tried to feel around for which little doodad was a camera, which was an audio bug, and which was one of those little EMP machines that Jacobian said were experimental and only to use during worst-case scenarios where I needed to knock out all tech in a ten-foot radius.

“Nah, I'm gonna go take this outside. You know, business stuff.”

Oh, something was most *definitely* up.

“You sure? You don't have to.”

“Yeah, sorry about it. It's just so loud in here.”

“I understand,” I said, smiling brightly as my fingers finally reached the tiny bug that I'd been keeping there for weeks. “But first...”

I leaned forward, my hand that hadn't been in my purse gripping the front of Tate's collar and pulling him down to meet me. Our lips touched in a kiss, and I used the moment to deftly slip the tiny tech into Tate's pocket.

When we parted, the man looked equal parts surprised and flushed, his eyes half-lidded. “What was that for?” he murmured, giving me a slow smile.

“Something to encourage you to come back,” I said with a wink.

“Well, consider me enticed.” He stood, giving me a little salute before hurrying off.

The moment he was out of sight, I practically ripped my spare pair of headphones from my purse and plugged it into my phone. *Please work, please work, please work!* I mentally repeated to myself over and over again as I booted up the program and searched for the signal that came from the itty-bitty bug I'd planted. I felt like a real spy, with Jacobian being my own personal Q.

After a long moment, an indicator did finally pop up. It looked like we were in business!

I clicked on it, and a moment later, Tate's voice came over the line loud and clear.

"—iddle of something right now!"

"Look, your stupid experiment needs to come to an end." I could only vaguely hear the voice on the other end, but it sounded both feminine and very irritated.

"It's not a stupid experiment! Look, I've got this wolf bitch practically on the hook! And once she's completely under my thumb, Dad won't be able to deny I'm ready for the field!"

Wait, what?

Rage bloomed in me like a forest fire, licking up my spine with pernicious tenacity. Was the guy I was faking a relationship with actually tricking *me*?! That couldn't be possible! This was the mission that was supposed to help save my pack!

"Why do you need to prove yourself, anyway? You can basically do whatever you want."

"What I want is for my dad to respect me!"

"He's not gonna do that if you don't get your ass down here and fix this. You're the one who set up this needless tech to log everything!"

"That 'needless tech' is what allowed us to figure out what was making a difference in the blood so your little witch friends didn't keep kidnapping so many duds!"

Holy shit.

I swore my world had inverted itself, a million and one different calculations running through my head all while my brain computed exactly what I was hearing.

One, Tate was conning me. Which meant all that time I'd spent feeling guilty for duping him had been wasted.

Two, Tate was working with witches.

Three, judging by the phone call, he was working with the specific witches who were kidnapping shifters.

Four, they were killing shifters for their *blood*.

I couldn't believe it, and I swore my own blood was rushing in my ears. I'd just had an insane truth bomb dropped into my lap and it was hard not to believe that I was dreaming.

I needed to tell my escort. I needed to tell Jacobian. I needed to do a whole lot of things, but mostly I needed to listen because the conversation kept right on going.

"I don't have time to argue with you. Get your ass to the warehouse now and deal with it."

"Fine, whatever. But I need to shake my date. The stupid cow just kissed me, so she'll freak if I just dip. All my hard work would be for nothing."

Cow? Cow?! I was a *wolf* through and through. I didn't care when people made fun of my weight because I knew I was both hot and able to remove their heads with my bare hands. But equating me to a prey animal? Completely uncalled for.

"Do what you gotta do. Just get here."

"Yeah, yeah, why don't you remove that broomstick from your ass in the meantime?"

The feed went dead, so I assumed that meant he'd hung up. I hurriedly took my headphones out, then switched over to some video-watching app or another. Not that it mattered. No, what was important was acting like everything was normal, which was quite the feat for me to pull off.

Because, as it turned out, I'd been made from the beginning. I hadn't been fooling Tate to sneak into the hidden department; Tate had been fooling me to try to get info from me on the pack and impress his father. And he was working with the witches.

So many questions flooded through my head, but I had to pretend I didn't have any. It was a huge task to perform in less than thirty seconds. But somehow, I managed to pull myself together enough to be at least somewhat presentable before he arrived, now looking harried.

"Hannah, I'm so, so sorry, but there's been a huge issue at work and they need me to come in."

"Really?" I asked, trying to sound saddened and not equal parts furious and curious. "Oh no! I hope everything is okay!"

"I dunno, it sounds like a real fuck-up. But we'll have a redo for this, alright? I was having a really great time."

"Of course. I was, too!"

This time, I was ready, my mini-tracker already in my hand. Standing up, I held my arms open in a hug. Naturally, Tate embraced me, and I used that opportunity to slip the tracker into his opposite pocket. I just had to hope that he didn't find either of them before I got the info I needed. Because Jacobian had thought ahead and all the little planting gadgets he gave me—from the bugs, to the trackers, to the cams—had a feature where I could make them self-destruct.

Nothing so dramatic as a mini-explosion or something, but apparently they leaked a small bit of battery acid through their workings that made them sort of crumble into a black, streaky mess. Still suspicious, but a lot less suspicious than finding actual spy equipment in his pockets.

"I'll talk to you later?" I said, stepping back.

"Yeah, of course. Thank you again for being so understanding!"

"Oh, don't worry. I get it. Life happens!"

"It certainly does."

He hurried off, and I waited until he was gone before letting out a long, long breath.

“Did that actually happen?”

The voice of my escort over my hidden earpiece made my heart practically leap into my throat. I’d forgotten that they were even there!

“Yeah, it did,” I said, wanting to run out of there, but knowing that I needed to give Tate time to leave.

“What should we do? Should we call Jacobian?”

“No need,” I said, feeling like I was going to explode. “I’ll go to him.”

JACOBIAN

My phone rang with a very specific ringtone that pulled me right out of my workout, mostly because it was Hannah. We hadn't talked since I'd agreed to her going on another date with Tate, and that had been several days earlier.

I didn't get the impression that the silence was due to any sort of negative emotion, but rather that the two of us were just giving the other space after the somewhat...complicated mess we were in.

Because it was clear to me that there was most certain a sort of...change since we'd hooked up together in my office. When I'd been honest about my mistakes and apologized then, Hannah had accepted it.

I was naturally happy to see her name lit up on my phone. Or at least I was until I realized that she was supposed to be on the very mission I'd approved for her.

Was something wrong?

I snatched it up faster than I could rattle off my socials, flicking my finger across the screen to answer.

"Jacobian!" Hannah blurted before I could even so much as greet her.

"What's happening? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she answered, but her voice was so breathless. "But you're not gonna believe the info I got!"

“Oh?” My workout forgotten, I wandered out of my small home gym to stand in the middle of my living room, thoroughly wrapped up in every single nuance of Hannah’s voice.

“Tate’s a spy. He’s trying to squeeze info from me and he’s definitely working with the witches!”

I had to blink at that, completely surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Heard it directly from his mouth.”

I felt like Hannah had just dropped an information bomb into my lap and my brain was still trying to catch up.

“How’d you manage that?” Normally, I would just assume that she’d overheard. Us shifters had learned a whole bunch of things from humans and some fae, taking advantage of our acute sense of hearing.

“I put one of your bugs on him.”

Did she? Be still, my heart. I was so proud of her. Especially since that meant both that she carried the tech I’d given her around, and that she’d thought of it on her feet.

“Holy shit, you did?”

“Yeah, and I got a tracker on him before he left.”

My eyes went wide at that. Clearly Hannah had been fully prepared to work in the field, and I was right to get my head out of my ass. “That’s incredible. What else have you learned?”

“Not much. He’s on his way there still. And I’m on my way to you, FYI.”

“Wait, to my office?”

“Uh, no, your place. Not to be presumptuous, but I figured this wasn’t something you’d want to wait on.”

“You’re right about that,” I said, so many things going through my head. “Okay, how far out are you?”

“About eleven minutes by the GPS.”

“Alright, I’ll make sure I’m down in the lobby to walk you up.”

“Heard, be there soon.”

With that, she hung up and I stood there a moment, trying to catch up on all the background computing my mind had done. Tate was working with the witches? And he was trying to get info on our pack through Hannah? There were a whole lot of other variables to process, but it would be better to wait until Hannah was with me to give me a full update before dedicating too much brain power to this.

But after a beat, I realized that I was just standing shirtless in my living room, covered in sweat and dressed only in spandex workout shorts. Definitely not what I wanted to wear down to the lobby. Technically, I could just buzz her up from my apartment, but I wanted to greet her in person.

So I quickly went to my room and changed into sweats along with a loose turtleneck. I couldn’t do anything about my sweaty state, but at least I wasn’t dripping or anything. Just a bit...damp.

Either way, I threw on a pair of house slippers and headed down the elevator, arriving in the lobby only a few minutes before Hannah hurried inside, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wide with excitement.

“He’s still driving,” she said, grinning from ear to ear. “I was driving so I couldn’t pull up where he was going on the app you made, but I think he was going south.”

“That’s alright. We can pull it up once we’re safe inside my apartment.”

“Yes, yes, let’s hurry!”

Her exuberance was palpable, not that I could blame her. If she was right, we were possibly about to bust the mystery plaguing our pack wide open. It was the first time we had easy access to someone with a direct alliance with the witches, and there were about a dozen and one ways we could exploit that.

The elevator wasn’t exactly speedy as we went up it, but we ended up on my floor without combusting from

anticipation. Once we were out, we hurried to my place and I let Hannah in.

It wasn't until I was closing the door behind me that I realized it was her first time inside my apartment. I never hosted family dinners at my own place, only at the restaurants I owned, and other than that, I didn't typically have visitors. I liked having my own space away from everything.

I knew that was a bit unusual, especially for a pack shifter such as myself, but as much as I truly loved my pack and everyone in it, sometimes I just needed space to myself. Sometimes to think, sometimes just to decompress, but most often to do my various tech work. I did better without an audience.

But space be damned, because Hannah was standing in my living room, looking around with interest.

I felt a bit self-conscious, which wasn't quite like me, but I'd come to terms with feeling not quite like myself around Hannah most of the time. I didn't know if it was because I was on edge or falling in love, but either way, there was a tingle of apprehension down my spine.

"Wow," she said after rotating in a full circle. "You have a nice place."

At least she gave me something to work with. The wry amusement in her voice was just bordering on insulting, at least in a teasing way.

"Did you expect otherwise?" I asked, an eyebrow raised.

"What? No! It's just I..." She trailed off, shaking her head with a chuckle. "Okay, maybe I expected something a bit more sci-fi gadgetry with tech everywhere. Or maybe a little like a nerd stuck in his mommy's basement."

I huffed at that. "We never grew up with a basement, but let me assure you, if I had, I definitely wouldn't remodel my adult home after it. Also, this isn't a spy movie. I don't have random wires and valuable tech just laying around in my living room."

"I dunno, I kinda could dig that aesthetic."

“Far too impractical,” I said with mock seriousness. “However, if you were looking for wires, let me show you to my office.”

With that, I strode past her, opening the darkly painted door that led to my workspace. Flicking on the light, I made a gesture for Hannah to step inside.

“Now *this* is that I’m talking about!” she said, sounding more than appreciative. “Oh, what’s that?”

“An info-scrambler I’ve been working on,” I answered, going to my work station and sitting in my large, comfy chair.

“Oooh, that sounds useful!”

“Well, it probably needs another year or two of work.”

“Really? That long?”

“Yeah. It’s not like I can work on it full-time. My job is in internet securities and networking, not gadgetry.”

“Huh, well, that’s a right shame. Seems like this stuff would be useful.”

“Oh, it is, but it’s our proficient use of the internet and strong securities that have allowed us to rise up the ranks in the city.”

“Less fun, but I suppose you have a point.” She walked over to where I was sitting and booted up the program I needed for her little spyware she’d managed to slip onto Tate.

“Let me see your phone,” I said, holding my hand out to her. She placed it there, and I went to her settings, connecting it to my PC rig. It only took a moment, and once it did, a plethora of information flooded my screen.

“Would you look at that,” Hannah said, leaning over my shoulder. “He’s by the docks.”

I nodded, several pieces clicking into place for me. “The shipping yard. We tried to get Sam into there, but...”

“Stuff got in the way,” Hannah said with a nod. “Yeah, finding Sarah plus multiple attacks on our alpha’s sister will do that.”

“Besides, it’s a waste of his talents,” I said. Sure, I wasn’t exactly prone to compliment the young witch all the time, but there was no denying he was good at what he did. “From what I know, he’s super close to tracking Emma’s curse.”

Hannah let out a low whistle. “He sure is talented. We’re really lucky he’s not our enemy.”

“We most certainly are.”

“Hey, the speedometer is slowing. Think he’s arrived at his destination?”

“Almost.”

We watched together as he did come to a stop, staying there for a moment or two before moving again, but much slower.

“Must be on foot,” Hannah remarked.

Normally, I didn’t like people in my workspace, talking into my ear, but I was enjoying her presence. It felt like we were on the verge of something vital, something that could possibly save our entire pack.

“I think so. Did you find out what this little impromptu trip was about, anyway?”

“Yeah, actually. The witch on the other end said that his tech had gone down, and from what I was able to figure out, it’s some sort of blood-screening machine?”

“Blood screening?” I echoed. “What the hell would they need that for?”

“Beats me.” Her grin grew toothy, and in that moment, she was incredibly attractive to me. “But I think we’re about to find out.”

It certainly felt that way, and the implication of it all wasn’t lost on me. Ever since Lyssa had arrived, we’d been plagued by a mysterious, malevolent force that was picking off shifters one by one. It started with other packs, but it quickly seemed to focus on ours, particularly with Lyssa’s curse and then Emma’s. Finally finding the missing clue that was supposed to link them to Mr. Bronson’s company would

unravel so much of that dark cloud that had been hovering over us.

And to be honest, Mahlan could use the good news. He'd been quiet since our trip to meet Lyssa's old pack. Not unhealthily so—he still had conversations at family meals and texted in our group chat, but he wasn't quite himself.

Not that I could blame him. He had quite a lot on his shoulders, and it had been that way ever since Alpha Sawyer was killed. Sure, Mahlan had been the one slated to take over once Sawyer's son died, but he was supposed to have had a couple of years to fully apprentice under our leader and integrate himself into our city's pack structure. Instead, he'd been thrust into the position and forced to fight Cyrus, the head honcho of our city, to defend his mate.

And that was the kicker, wasn't it? Even after we figured out this witch thing and managed peace, he had to deal with the city building itself back up into a cohesive unit of loosely collegiate packs. Not exactly the easiest situation.

But if anyone could do it, it was Mahlan. He had a great head on his shoulders. Some fae—the ones who weren't in packs and didn't understand how it worked—assumed that we would just blindly follow any alpha. And while some shifters did, putting themselves in dangerous situation, the vast majority of us didn't. We chose to follow our alpha when he treated the pack well, protected us, and proved to be a good leader. If he didn't, or the pack structure was no longer desirable, we just moved on. Like Lyssa's old pack.

"It's about time you got here," I heard a woman say, coming over my computer's speakers with so much disdain that it practically dripped onto my floor.

"Look, I drove over as fast as I could without getting in trouble. I doubt you want me having a record of a speeding ticket on my way."

"That's Tate," Hannah whispered as if we were at risk of being overheard. But I appreciated the discretion, considering I didn't want to miss anything, even if I did have it

automatically recording so I could run it through several different programs I had.

“Whatever, would you just come fix this thing?”

“Sure, what error are you getting?”

“It says Error Code 392, please contact admin.”

“You’re kidding me. What have you guys been doing to it while I’m gone?”

“What it’s supposed to do! Could you build something that works more than twice before throwing a hissy fit?”

It was strange; I knew that we were listening to the enemy talk, but the banter was so delightfully petty that it was almost like listening to a sitcom. It seemed that our enemies were definitely not one harmonious unit. Surely we could use that.

“I wish I could have gotten a camera on him somehow,” Hannah whispered. “I mean, the audio paints a picture, but I would love to see the witch bitch who’s reading him the riot act.”

“Me too,” I agreed. But in all honesty, I thought that would be far too risky.

“I don’t take criticism from someone who needed an hour tutorial on how to set up the wi-fi here. Get out of the tenth century when boil, boil, toil and trouble were the only passwords you needed to function.”

“You think you’re real clever, don’t you? Just get this functional before this weekend. Your father and his brother are visiting, and you know how your uncle reacts when something goes even slightly awry. And sometimes when it doesn’t.”

“Hey, don’t talk about my uncle. He’s been through enough, thanks to those fucking shifters.”

Wait.

Wait a goddamn minute.

The wheels suddenly began rapidly churning in my head. “Hannah?”

“Yeah?”

“What if Tate is the son of the brothers we’ve been looking for?”

I was making a huge logical leap, but something about the mention of his father, his uncle, and issues with shifters in the pack tickled my brain, just like when I was about to solve a riddle or puzzle.

Hannah’s eyes shot open wider than I was pretty sure I’d ever seen before and her jaw dropped considerably. “No way,” she whispered, staring at the screen like it would reveal Tate’s parentage. “*No way!*”

“I’m probably just getting ahead of myself.”

“But it’s certainly a theory with validity. It would explain why he, a human, has pull with the witches.”

“Whatever. Just make sure this stays up, alright? I’ve got enough on my plate, alright? We all do.”

“Hey, just because you witches keep fumbling your own plans with the shifters doesn’t mean you can put all that on me.”

“What do you mean by ‘you witches’?”

“You know exactly how I mean. But there, the problem’s fixed. So if you don’t mind, I’m gonna get in my car, go home, and wash the stench of that shifter off me. Capiche?”

“Yeah, go home and let the professionals work.”

“If by ‘work,’ you mean plan another attack that’s sure to fail, be my guest.”

With that, the conversation seemed to end, and Hannah and I were left staring at each other.

“If your hypothesis is true,” she began, “then the very brothers we’ve been searching for this whole time are going to be at this warehouse.”

I couldn’t believe it. *I couldn’t believe it.* I wanted to scream, cry, do a cartwheel, and go howl at the moon. Or maybe all of that at once and add a little bit of a dance to it.

Could it really be that we'd finally found the very people we'd been scouring the state for?

If we had, it was all because of Hannah!

Jumping out of my seat, I embraced Hannah with all I had, peppering her face with kisses. "You brilliant, brilliant woman! You realize that you may have saved us all?"

"Oh, I dunno about that," she said, flushing such a bright pink that I just had to kiss her again. I wasn't the most affectionate person, but it wasn't every day that my mate discovered the evil people who were tormenting us, hunting us.

"I do. Without a doubt!" It was like I felt too big for my own skin. I was bubbling with energy and hope like I hadn't in a long, long while. "I have to tell Mahlan!"

"Shouldn't we get more evidence first? Like, we don't actually know if it's the brothers or not."

"There's no time. If they're supposed to be here by this weekend, we need to make sure we're ready to raid that warehouse." I rubbed my chin, a plan rapidly reforming in my mind. "I wonder if Sam has anything that might help?"

"I mean, he should, right? He's been working on other stuff besides Emma's curse, right?"

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure that's the priority, right?"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. But before I could so much as illuminate the screen, it was ringing. This time, with another familiar ringtone, although most certainly not Hannah's audio.

"Who's that?" Hannah asked, leaning in.

"It's Mahlan," I said, wondering what he could possibly want.

"What timing, huh?"

I nodded, excitement bubbling in my stomach. "Well, we're certainly about to improve his night."

“Yeah,” Hannah said, smiling broadly. “Just make sure you say that we’re not one hundred percent sure it’s the brothers.”

“Of course. I don’t over-promise. That just leads to disappointment.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

With that, I answered Mahlan’s call, making my tone as pleasant as I could without sounding too unusual. “Hey Mahlan,” I said. “It’s so funny you called.”

But it was like he wasn’t listening because he immediately cut me off. “Sam has found out how to break Emma’s curse.”

Oh, damn.



THE RITUAL TO break Emma’s curse was...interesting, to say the least. I could feel that things were happening, that there was a certain sort of shifting that was happening under the surface of everything, but I couldn’t see it. Which was disconcerting, to say the least.

But still, it worked, and suddenly we had a solid connection to the witches who had cursed Emma. That was a huge deal, and one I didn’t take lightly. However, the entire time, Hannah and I had been nearly bursting with what we had to say.

We waited until after the ritual was completed, when Theo and Emma retired to get her some rest. While I would have preferred for the beta to be with us, I understood that he needed to be with his mate.

“Mahlan?” I called as we followed him out to his car, his arm around Lyssa. She seemed a little rattled but hopeful, which was good. The girl deserved some cheer after all the peril she’d gone through.

“Jacobian,” he said, turning to us. “Did you need something?”

“Yeah, actually,” I said, stepping to the side as Hannah joined me. “Something that could change everything.”

Mahlan’s eyebrows went up to his thick hairline. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. You see, we think we found the brothers.”

At that, Lyssa’s entire body stiffened, her pupils shrinking down to pinpricks. “You did?”

“Well, Hannah did,” I said, putting my arm behind her back to herd her forward. “So you should hear it from her.”

“Wait,” Mahlan said, holding up a finger as he scanned our surroundings. “Not here. Let’s head to your place, Jacobian.”

“My place?” I asked, knowing it was silly for me to sound so surprised.

“Well, we could head to our new house, but that’s a bit of a drive.”

Right, they’d moved. I knew that much. I’d just forgotten with everything going on. “No, that’s fine. We can head to mine.”

“Alright then, lead the way.”

Swallowing, I nodded and headed to my car, Hannah in tow. She didn’t say anything, either, which I assumed was because she was just as nervous as me. Funny how we’d gone from so assured and excited to riddled with anxiety. Inviting our alpha into my home while explaining our theory was an entirely different situation.

It wasn’t the first time Mahlan had ever been in my place, but it was the first time he and his mate had been here while he was our full-fledged alpha. It just seemed different somehow.

“Jacobian, what if we’re wrong?” Hannah asked as I drove home, her voice warbling ever so slightly.

In another first for our “relationship,” I reached over and squeezed her hand. “Even if we’re wrong about the brothers, we know a huge location for these witches and part of their goal. They’re kidnapping and trafficking shifters for their

blood. If nothing else, we can destroy whatever machine they're using to scan for whatever kind of special plasmids they're looking for."

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It's just after breaking Emma's curse, it seems like everything is escalating."

"Because it is. Like Tate said, the witches keep bungling every attack they try, so they're getting desperate. The key is to make moves before they realize every advantage that we've created."

"It's just crazy that after so many weeks of trying to find some sort of leg up, we suddenly have two, and they're huge."

"They are," I agreed. "We just gotta make sure we use 'em right."

"Yeah, absolutely."

Feeling encouraged, the two of us drove the rest of the way in a hush, deep in our thoughts. We arrived a few moments before Mahlan, allowing me to park and settle myself.

I half-expected witches to somehow be waiting to swoop down on us, but no, our walk into my place was relatively uneventful. Once we were in my apartment, I grabbed everyone a sports drink and we all piled into my office.

My office wasn't really meant for a crowd, but I figured things would work better if I could replay everything we'd recorded for Mahlan. So that was exactly what I did, waiting with bated breath for what our alpha would think.

"So you think the father and uncle he's talking about are the brothers?"

"It's our running theory," I said, tone neutral.

"And this is that special covert assignment you suggested, right, Hannah?"

"Yes it is, sir."

Mahlan nodded. "Good job. This...this is..." He paused, seeming to think for the right word, and I was practically

holding my breath. “*Incredible*,” he finished finally. “Good job, Hannah. You really are a huge boon to our pack.”

Both of us physically relaxed, pleased at Mahlan’s praise. But then our alpha kept right on talking.

“These possible brothers, they’re coming in this weekend, right?”

“Right.”

“We need to get on this ASAP. It’s late tonight, but I’ll call a meeting for you, me, Parker, and Sam to set up a raid.”

“What about Theo?” I asked, surprised by how proactive Mahlan was being. Not that I disagreed, but I almost expected that after his sister’s curse was broken, he’d be all guns forward for that.

“Theo needs to focus on Emma’s situation and making sure she’s protected.”

“And Kaleb?”

“I have him on Alma duty. We can’t afford to lose her right now, and the witches know far too much about her guard. We needed a wild card and he survived getting attacked by them, three to one.”

I nodded, licking my lips. “You want me to spend tonight putting together a potential equipment list?”

“Yes, absolutely. Let’s all meet at the office tomorrow at... let’s say ten.”

“Ten,” Hannah and I agreed.

With another nod, Mahlan patted my shoulder while Lyssa hugged Hannah. “Thank you,” she said, voice thick with emotion. “I owe you so much for finding them.”

“It was nothing,” Hannah said, blushing deeply. “Just doing my job.”

“No, it’s not nothing. You’ve possibly found the men who killed my family and kidnapped me. I’ll never forget that.”

With another squeeze, Lyssa let go, and then it was good night. It felt strange to say our goodbyes like they'd just been over for a social visit, but we did it, anyway, and I walked them out to their car. We could all sense the heaviness in the air that came from all the possibilities hanging in the air, or at least that's what I assumed, considering the pressure I could feel on all parts of me.

But we were close, so incredibly close. Closer than we'd been since the first shifter was kidnapped. We couldn't afford to mess it up, not after everything we'd risked and lost.

Heading back inside, I went up to my apartment, where Hannah was sitting in my office reviewing the footage again. Yet again, I was struck by her beauty, and how natural she looked in my place. Like she belonged.

"Hey there," she said softly, taking my headphones off and quickly crossing the distance to us. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it certainly wasn't a hug.

"This is really happening, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is."

"We might finally be able to finish this."

"Yeah," I agreed, letting out a long breath. "It all comes down to our plan."

HANNAH

A few days wasn't exactly enough to bring together a full-proof plan on how to raid a witch stronghold, but we made impressive strides. I called out of work yet again for our first day of planning, where Mahlan, Lyssa, Parker, Jacobian, Sam and I put together the basework of what we needed.

Which was quite a lot. We needed to see if there were any public records on the warehouse. I was fairly certain that the witches would have done their best to magically erase them from existence, but like the woman in the recording we'd gotten, I hoped that most of them weren't exactly tech-based. We needed those bracelets that Sam had been working on, the ones I had seen those fascinating schematics for.

We also needed a plan of attack, as well as to pick and brief our operatives. And we had to do it all before the weekend.

It was impressive how much we managed to get done. Despite working nonstop, every time I went to bed, I was sure that there was no way we could get it all done in time.

And yet, the closer the weekend came, the more it seemed like we would actually make it.

I couldn't believe it, but it was true. My life had definitely changed significantly in such a short time. I'd gone from single and struggling to get along with my boss to being mated with him and given credit for possibly saving the pack.

Which was also a lot of pressure. I felt more eyes on me than ever, which was just about the last thing I wanted, considering that I was hiding a mating bite.

Because that was just a sub-plot in my life instead of being the main event. Which was pretty indicative of just how unhinged things had been. Being mated without consent to my boss should have been a cataclysmic event. And while it had shaken me to my core, lately it had been almost...

Comforting.

It was strange to admit that to myself, but it was true. Being connected to Jacobian's emotions, even if it was weakened because of our incomplete bond, let me feel just how proud he was of me. It really was what I'd always wanted—to be respected by him, to feel important.

And I could sense just how important I was to him. How whenever he looked at me, he'd be flooded with pleasant, powerful emotions. It was harder to fall into despair when I knew that such a powerful and intelligent shifter was happy just to be around me.

But that begged the question about what to do about the mark. The more time that passed, the less likely it was that we could break the bond. But the more time that passed, the more I kept wondering...would it be so bad if we *didn't* break it?

It was insanity, sure, but with so much on my plate, I didn't have the energy to kick these thoughts out of my mind. Occasionally, I would find myself watching Jacobian as he worked, wondering what his tanned neck would look like with my bite marks on it. I could picture it so easily, his mating gland hot and swollen under my tongue, my lips pressed to it to tease him until he was begging for the teeth.

I should have known better than to think such salacious things because every time I did, Jacobian would look at me, his eyebrows raised. No one could smell that I was getting turned on by the thought of mating him—truly mating him—thanks to all my scent-blocking, but he could sense it through our bond. It made me wish I could feel everything as acutely

as he did. Because while he had open access to everything I was feeling, my side was quite muted.

And the only way to change that was to bite him. To complete the bond and be mates.

But that would have its own set of complications, mostly having to do with fraternization. I needed to get out of his employment before we did anything else, but that wouldn't change until we handled the Tate situation.

So I did my best not to let myself be too distracted by my body or his, and focused on work.

Easier said than done. The more days that slipped by, the more I became a bundle of nerves. We were trying to launch our plan on Sunday, leaving us with little time to make sure everything was prepared. Sam was surprisingly a great help, even with how busy he was.

Because something was most definitely going on with him. He said he was trying new spells and magic, which I didn't really know much about, but I could definitely sense that *something* was different. Hopefully, whatever he was doing would be for the benefit of the pack and not a case of Icarus flying too close to the sun.

I guessed there was only one way to find that out.

It felt like so much was going to be up to chance, even with how much we were trying to prepare, which made my anxiety spike that much further. And the biggest jump was probably when Tate texted me somewhere around seven on Thursday night.

HEY, you haven't been in, are you okay?

YEAH, I've just been swamped with a new project at my home company. It's been hell.

GEEZ, are you done with your assignment here?

No, I don't think so. But Mr. Reese and Mr. Bronson apparently need to discuss some stuff?

Idk what. They're not really keeping me in the loop.

MAN, that sucks. But we should definitely cash in that rain check for our bowling date.

I ROLLED MY EYES. Now that I knew what he was really like, all the guilt I'd felt about using him evaporated. And it wasn't just because he'D insulted me and how I looked; It was because he was genuinely hurting people. *Killing* people.

And if he really was the son of the brothers we had been hunting...well, he owed me a blood debt. He owed my whole *pack*.

"What's wrong?" Jacobian said, returning from his kitchen with two heaping plates of fry bread, roasted squash, and what I was pretty sure was roasted venison.

"Nothing, now that you're bringing that here," I said, clapping my hands as he set it in front of me. We were in his office, mapping out what we could of the entire place. From what we found, it had rather standard tech, but the interesting thing is that it was all arranged to protect one particular stairwell. A stairwell that, according to the blueprints we found, was supposed to go to the basement.

"Just messaging Tate. Do you think it was too suspicious for me to disappear after our date? He knows I'm a shifter, so I can't really feign being sick."

"Does he seem suspicious?"

I chewed my lip, nervous as all get out. "No, but I can't help but be paranoid."

Jacobian leaned down and planted a kiss ON the top of my head. It was such a nonchalant action, but at the same time, it made my toes curl. It felt so...domestic, but in an entirely non-

threatening way. I didn't feel like Jacobian was trying to force me into anything, or manipulate me. He was just comforting me in a natural way.

“Hey, all of this is happening because you were brave enough to fight for what you knew was right, even when I was being an ass.”

I flushed at that. I didn't know what had changed his attitude, but I felt grateful for it.

“Thanks.”

His encouragement invigorated me, and we worked through the night. It was amazing how fast time flew when we were being productive. It helped that Sam was a bit of a night owl, and though he didn't ride his moped over every night, he was game for most video calls. And whenever we needed someone to meet up with him in person, Parker almost always volunteered, which was just fine with me.

I probably should have gone home and gotten a full night's sleep, but our Friday was set to be the full, final sit-down with our entire team, and I wanted to make sure everything was perfect. Especially since Mahlan and his mate were going to be with us. I wanted to impress both of them. Even if Lyssa was younger than me, I still admired her and respected her opinion.

So instead of going to my apartment, I just kept working. And working. And working, until suddenly I wasn't working anymore. I wasn't aware that it was physically possible to fall asleep on a keyboard, but that's apparently what I did. The next thing I knew, Jacobian was urgently shaking me awake.

“Hannah! Hannah, wake up. Something's happened!”

“Huh?” I asked, more than a little confused and maybe borderline delirious. I wasn't exactly an early riser. I hadn't even realized I'd fallen asleep.

“Emma and Theo were attacked on the way to her work.”

“What?!”

That had me up and out of my seat, claws rapidly extending from my nails. I was ready to *fight*, even if I wasn't quite awake.

"It's alright. The battle's already over. Apparently, Sam was a huge help. But they're both going to need a couple of days to heal, and Mahlan doesn't want to leave them alone. You know, in case the witches plan revenge."

I swallowed hard, a million things going through my mind. "Does that mean this weekend is off?"

"I don't know. We have to go speak with Mahlan. He's called a meeting at his own house, minus Theo, Emma, Lyssa, and Savvy."

"And Sam's up for that?" If I wasn't mistaken, Jacobian had just said that Sam had helped. I imagined he had to be pretty drained.

"He's up for planning, but he says he's magically tapped out. Probably won't be able to cast spells for several days."

"Does that mean he won't be on the raid with us?"

"Again, I don't know for sure, but that's what the meeting's for."

"Right, right," I rubbed my face. "Sorry, I'm just trying to catch up."

"It's okay. I'll make you a breakfast shake, then we need to rush over to Mahlan's, okay?"

I nodded. "I'm gonna go wash my face then."

"Sounds good."

I plodded to Jacobian's bathroom, and the cold water across my face helped me come to terms with reality. I was still a little hazy by the time I got to the kitchen, but I was conscious enough to take the shake that Jacobian gave me and say the appropriate thank you. It wasn't until we were in his car that I realized it was made of my favorite fruits: pineapple, passionfruit, and coconut. That wasn't the first time that he'd known exactly what I liked, and I couldn't figure out for the

life of me when I'd ever told him that. He must have just noticed on his own?

Wild.

I was feeling much more awake when we reached Mahlan's house, which was about twice as far as his old place used to be. I had to admit, I was impressed. The pond it sat by was peaceful, and the front was really charming. I'd heard Lyssa mention that she was excited to build a garden, but there wasn't anything like that yet, given that they'd just moved in.

It was strange for her to not be there once we walked in, but I heard she was with Ashlee, the young girl that I was surprised she hadn't just outright adopted yet. Those two were practically together at the hip whenever it was safe. Maybe she was just waiting for the violence to die down?

"Thank you all for being here," Mahlan said as we entered, leading us into what I could only call a war room. It was clear that it was still in the middle of being set up, but there was quite a lot in there. A projector was hanging from the ceiling, and a large table sat in the middle by what looked like a massive, interactive screen. There were also several chairs and laptops.

I'd normally whistle under my breath, but doing so in my alpha's home somehow seemed disrespectful, so I kept my noise to myself.

We were the first guests there, but Samson and Parker rolled in a few moments later, with Sam looking quite tired.

"You will not believe the morning I've had," he said with a sigh, sucking down what was truly the largest iced coffee I'd ever seen in my life. I didn't know they even sold cups in that size. "Sorry for being late!"

"You don't have to be sorry," Mahlan said. "Theo told me how you basically saved the day. If you need to rest, take all the time you need."

"Awww, don't you go getting soft on me," he said, batting his eyes. "No, I wanna be here, at least for a little bit. I want to give a full demonstration of how to use the bracelets and see if

I can get a good read on this warehouse. Besides,” he sent a soft, sappy look over to Parker, “your wolf boy here made this decadent helping of caffeine and sugar for me, so I should be good for at least a couple hours.”

“Alright. But let us know if that changes.”

Kaleb and Ellibie were the last to arrive. While the mechanic looked like her relatively spry self, there were most definitely dark circles under Kaleb’s eyes. I wondered what was going on with him, and why he wasn’t attached to Parker at the hip as usual, but this certainly wasn’t the time to ask.

Once everything was gathered, Mahlan took his position at the head of the table, drawing all our attention to him. It felt odd to have so many of our circle missing, but the witches had done a good job of dividing us with their attack.

That was part of the argument Tate and the witch were having. I’d listened to the recording enough that I almost had it memorized, and he definitely had intimated that they were plotting something. I just hadn’t thought it would happen so soon. But clearly, they’d wanted to get their licks in before the brothers showed up.

But they’d also suffered for their choices. While I wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, it seemed that Theo, Emma, Sam, and their guards had really showed the witches what for. I would have to get the full story later.

Everything was designated for “later,” it seemed. Our entire futures dangling on a precipice that we were trying to navigate while in the fog.

“I know I was supposed to lead you into this raid,” Mahlan said, his voice firm. He was young, but he really was a good leader. “But considering everything that’s happened, my attention is needed elsewhere. But I called you all here to officially hand over the reins to Jacobian and Hannah as the official heads of this particular operation.”

Wait, *what!*? I was still an intern, and I was being given an opportunity to lead my own mission? That was insane!

“Are you certain?” Jacobian asked. I was glad he could speak, because I most certainly couldn’t. I was too busy trying not to look like my eyes were about to bug out of my skull.

“I am,” Mahlan answered, his voice as grave as ever. “The only reason we know this information is because of you two. So I want all of us to go over everything so we’re on the same page, then you’ll debrief your crews this afternoon. I know this isn’t ideal, but I truly believe you’ll be able to do this without Theo, Samson, or me being on this mission with you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there in spirit,” the witch said between big sips of coffee. “And by spirit, I mostly mean the whole bracelet things. You’re gonna love being so stealthy.”

And just like that, Jacobian and I became mission leaders for one of the most important raids since Alpha Sawyer’s death. Incredible. It had been unexpected, but Jacobian and I were able to roll with it, ultimately recovering after ten minutes before diving right in.

Thankfully, since we’d already been working pretty much night and day before the attack, we had a really solid foundation to restructure. It didn’t take nearly as long as I thought it would, and we even had time to scarf some food down and re-hydrate before our team for the mission arrived.

Debriefing certainly took a lot longer, if only because Sam had to give his presentation on how to use the bracelets. Apparently, it wasn’t as simple as putting it on and going about our business. There was a certain way we had to tie the loop, and words we had to say to activate it. Magic was difficult stuff.

But, no doubt thanks to all the caffeine he’d ingested in a short period of time, Sam was able to get through it, although he was swaying on his feet by the end. Thankfully, he had Parker to steady him, then drive him home once his part was over.

I watched half-interested as Kaleb stayed seated, discussing transport options with Ellibie and some of our second team leaders. He wanted Savvy to be there in case there were any grievous injuries, but far enough away that she

couldn't get nabbed. But to make sure she couldn't be nabbed, there needed to be a quick enough getaway vehicle that was all-terrain for a quick escape.

Interesting. Usually Kaleb and Parker were inseparable. Was there something going on between them? I couldn't sense any anger or negative emotion, but that didn't mean there wasn't anything.

Yet again, it wasn't like I could stop and ask them. We all had far too much to do and not enough time.

It was late by the time Jacobian and I left, well past midnight and deep into the dangers of the witching hour. I wasn't too worried about us not getting enough rest, however, as our attack would be timed for late, late Saturday night going into Sunday morning. Originally, I'd thought that our raid would be taking place on Sunday proper, but once everything had gone topsy-turvy, Mahlan thought it was better to stage the raid earlier rather than risk the brothers already having shipped out Sunday evening.

As much as I hated losing even a drop of time, it was better to be certain, especially if it meant finally shutting the book on the brothers and witches for good.

"That was a day, huh?" Jacobian asked, pulling up to his condo's building, where I'd parked my car what seemed like ages ago. I knew what I should do—that I should excuse myself and head home, clean myself up, then go to bed.

But I didn't want to.

See, for as much planning and preparation as we'd put into our plan, there still was the very real possibility that we could suffer casualties. It could be me, it could be Jacobian, it could be any number of our team. We would be there one day, then laid into the earth, gone from the realm for the rest of eternity.

Morbid, perhaps, but as Jacobian pulled into his reserved spot in the garage, the yellow lights spilling over his features like the buttery light of dawn, I realized I didn't want to risk leaving things unsaid. Undone. If it was his or my time when we went on this raid, then I didn't want any regrets.

“I’m starving. Wanna come in and destroy the leftovers I had from earlier?” he asked, unbuckling so he could get out of the car.

I nodded, words too thick in my mouth. I could feel that my brain was rapidly spinning through an existential crisis, rapidly deciphering emotions because there just wasn’t enough *time*.

If things had been ideal, Jacobian and I would have never had our little mating snafu and would have taken our time to really get to know each other. I would have left his internship and worked under Theo or Mahlan, establishing myself in my own right, and then he could court me. We could have gone on dates, on runs together, even branched off on our own during a pack run to hunt or frolic under the stars, the quicksilver cloak of the moon illuminating our bonding.

We could have done a lot of things, but it hadn’t quite worked out that way. And with witches seeming to attack at every turn, with shifters being plucked right off the street, it felt like we had to adapt and do what we could with what he had.

And what I had was Jacobian.

Wait, no, that wasn’t quite right. I didn’t *have* Jacobian.

While it was obvious that the two of us were attracted to each other, while we got along and worked great together as a team once Jacobian got his head out of his ass, he wasn’t *mine*. I wore his bite, but his neck remained untouched. Bare. Skin smooth and unbroken in a way that made my fangs itch to come out.

Because as crazy as it was to think it, I felt so *safe* with him. I felt seen when I felt most people didn’t even look at me. And hoo boy, the way he looked at me sometimes threatened to make me want to implode right then and there.

So if one of us died in the raid, if the witches proved to be too wily a foe, where did I want to leave things ? Half-finished and in limbo, both of us tip-toeing around each other so

neither of us sent ripples across the metaphorical ocean that sometimes ran between us?

It just wasn't really my style.

I was on Jacobian almost from the moment he shut the door to his apartment, pressing my lips to his, hands gripping his arms like his biceps could anchor me to earth. And who knew? He was chiseled enough that they could.

Our mouths moved against each other, my tongue begging entrance to his so I could slide along his teeth. Satisfaction simmered within me when I felt that they were beginning to sharpen, a sign that his inner wolf was reacting too strongly for him to completely contain it.

When we broke apart, we were both breathing hard, our pupils blown out as we stared at each other.

“What was that about?” Jacobian asked, grinning ever so softly at me. I didn't know a single man who could gaze at me with that much affection while also looking like he wanted to swallow me whole, but Jacobian could pull it off.

“I want to mate you,” I said.

Whoops, the words were just out there, weren't they? Nothing I could do about it now. I could try to take them back, but the truth was...I didn't want to.

“What?” Jacobian blurted out, and honestly, I couldn't blame him. If I was in his position, I was sure I'd look just as shocked.

But since the words were already in the air, I decided to run with it. “I want to mate you,” I said, the words coming out in a rush. “I want to bite you, and I want to complete our bond.”

He continued to stare at me, only seeming to remember to blink after what felt like a solid minute. I tried to be brave for a while, but a girl could only stand so much silence before she got self-conscious, and I felt myself crumpling.

“I...*why?*”

“Whew, okay, I realize I didn’t bring it up in the most romantic way, but you’re making me feel embarrassed.”

I tried to take a step back, but Jacobian held firmly onto my arms. I wasn’t trapped—I could pull away at any point if I wanted to. But I didn’t.

“Look, I’m sorry, I just want to make sure we’re on the same page.” He drew in a deep breath and I followed his example. “Why do you want to complete our bond? I was under the impression you adamantly wanted to find a way to break it.”

“I did. At first at least,” I admitted. “But that’s changed. Between our talks, and spending more time together, and leading our mission together, I realized that I…” I swallowed hard, wanting to run and hide, and not listen to that scared, anxious part of myself. If Jacobian rejected me, then he rejected me. I wasn’t going to hide from the truth due to fear.

“I realized that I want to be mated to you. I know we didn’t get off to the best start, and I wished we’d had more time to take a whole romantic journey. But what’s done is done, and all we can control is our future.”

“And you want your future to be with me?” Jacobian still sounded so shocked, and I just wanted to take his face into my hands and assure him that he was most certainly worth it.

“I do. I’ve done things I never would have dared to because of you. And now that you’ve decided to trust me, I feel like I can truly do anything. So no matter what happens with the witches tomorrow—if we’re completely blindsided, or we win—I want all my cards on the table. No more hedging my bets.”

Jacobian didn’t say anything again for several long moments. Either he hated me and was thoroughly enjoying torturing me with his silence, or I truly had pulled the rug out from under his feet.

“Hey, but if you don’t want to, that’s okay,” I said hurriedly, trying to back out again. But Jacobian’s grip remained just as firm.

“No, that’s not it. I, uh, I just need a moment to think.”

I could feel the defensive part of me want to lash out. “Hey, you don’t need to personally debate this,” I started before shaking my head. “Sorry, sorry, that was inappropriate. Just, look, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. I just...it feels like tomorrow is going to be a new chapter for our whole pack, one way or the other, and I just want to move forward, well, *together.*”

Jacobian let out a long, shaky breath. “I want that, too. I just never expected to hear it from you.”

“You do?”

Now it was my turn to stare. After his first reaction had been shocked silence, I’d been steeling myself for rejection, so I felt like the rug had just been ripped out from under me. But not in a bad way

“I do,” he said, and then he kissed me again. But it wasn’t feral, like mine. It was gentle, tentative, almost like he was afraid I’d vanish entirely if he applied too much pressure. I had to admit, I wasn’t used to being so blatantly cherished in such a way, and I melted into it.

Inside, my mind was churning with elation. Jacobian wanted me. *Jacobian wanted me!* I was more than aware that we were probably rushing things and it was ill-advised, but what hadn’t been in our whirlwind relationship? We’d gone from boss and employee, to enemies, to lovers, to near mates. Of course, we were halfway to that last step, and I wanted to complete it.

“I just wanted to make sure that you were absolutely certain,” Jacobian continued, his voice soft and so full of emotion. “Because I’ve wanted nothing more since it happened. I just didn’t want you to think that I’d tricked or manipulated you to my own ends.”

“Oh no,” I said, shaking my head with all the fervor that I felt. Which made things borderline dizzy. “I don’t think that at all. It was an accident, but I’m beginning to think it was a happy one.”

Jacobian nodded, his two hands sliding up my body to hold my face. “If you truly mean it, I would love nothing more than to be your mate. Please, bite me Hannah. Complete our bond.”

I swore my heart swelled three sizes in my chest, practically lifting me from the ground. I didn’t think I’d ever heard anything so ardent, so pure and genuine.

“As you wish,” I whispered, just like one of my favorite romantic movies.

With that, we kissed again. But it wasn’t the feral, frenzied, and hungry kiss we sometimes slipped into, nor was it completely slow, sweet, and tender. No, we kissed somewhere between that boundary, our passion simmering beneath the surface, and yet, there was no desperation, no rush. It was clear as our hands slid across each other’s bodies that we both wanted to make every moment count.

Because if there was anything our journey had taught us, it was that no moment was promised. Tomorrow was not a guarantee, and either of us could vanish with no more than the smell of brimstone where we once stood.

My fingers traipsed up the front of his shirt, undoing buttons as I went. I broke away from our kiss only long enough to watch, and bit by bit, those washboard abs were revealed to me. Goodness, he was delicious. All sorts of dips and valleys brought about by his warrior prowess. He was all sharp angles and edges, the perfect counterpoint to me and my softness.

In movies and media, werewolves were always shown as completely ripped people with tons of muscle striations and figures that looked chiseled out of stone. But shifters weren’t like that. We came in all sorts of forms: tall, short, completely jacked, and nice and doughy. We were occasionally blind, or deaf, neurodivergent, even disabled, just not quite as often as humans. Physical perfection or ability weren’t guaranteed, meaning Jacobian had definitely worked for his body.

And boy, did I appreciate it.

With all his buttons undone, I threw open his shirt and let my nails slide up his skin, reveling in the goosebumps that rose in my wake. He always made me feel so powerful. Irresistible, like a fertility goddess of old.

But Jacobian didn't stay still for long, as his own hands moved to my shirt and pulled it up over my head. A chill crossed my body, but only for a moment. Then I was in Jacobian's arms, our mostly bare fronts pressed against each other.

Unlike the burning, heated rush we'd fallen into before, our embrace was more of a comforting warmth. It was a familiar, wonderful blanket that enshrouded the two of us, keeping our cheeks warm and the blood pleasantly rushing through our veins.

"I've been dreaming of this," Jacobian whispered against my lips, and goodness, if the reverence there didn't take my breath away.

"Have you?" I murmured, letting my palms journey down his rugged skin until I reached the waistband of his pants.

"Absolutely. I didn't want to let myself, but I couldn't help it." He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against mine. His breath was ragged once again, heavy with the emotion that was so thick between us. "There were different situation, different circumstances, but it always ended the same."

"The same how?"

"You with your teeth in my neck, wanting me as much as I wanted you."

Boy, he sure knew what to say. I was definitely going to need to replace my panties because *whew*, I was drenched.

"Well, I want you," I whispered. "I want you more than I've ever wanted anybody else in my life."

"Then the feeling's mutual."

"Seems so." The moment was serious, and yet my lips curled all the same. I was so utterly turned on, but something

about being so close to Jacobian, so on the same page, also left me feeling joyous.

And maybe that's what love was. It was too soon for me to drop that "I bomb," if only because I was still figuring out what that meant for myself. But I knew if I was going to feel it for anyone, it would be Jacobian.

But my smirk turned into an outright peal of laughter when Jacobian picked me up, carrying me backward through his apartment. I wrapped my legs around him, holding onto his head for dear life as we walked. This, of course, put my boobs right in his face, effectively blinding him. He didn't complain, though, and managed to get me to his bedroom without bumping into anything. It was pretty impressive, all things considered.

"Bpmf yrmsff!" That's all I heard of his muffled voice before I was sailing abruptly through the air.

"Jacobian!" I blurted, my voice somewhere between a schoolgirl giggle and a shriek. Adrenaline shot through me, enhancing everything else I was feeling, and by the time my back hit his soft mattress, I had dissolved into a mess of mirth.

"Jacobian, this is supposed to be sexy time!" I objected between chuckles. "You can't keep making me laugh."

"I dunno," Jacobian said, picking up one of my legs, then tickling his fingers behind my knee. I jolted, giving him a scathing look. "Aren't women supposed to find humor one of the sexiest things?"

"You're not wrong," I grouched. "But I'm trying to seduce you! You don't seem very seduced."

Jacobian sent me a *heated* gaze, then knelt onto the bed, leaning over so our faces were barely an inch apart. All the laughter was gone as my senses were filled with him. "Trust me, I am most definitely seduced."

"You better be," I retorted, still feeling a bit bratty as I stuck out my tongue. But Jacobian just bit it, the sharp shock of pain surprising me and making the soothing, syrupy warmth in me spike into something a bit stronger.

And then he was kissing me senseless again. I couldn't say how long we made out like that, his body over mine, his weight a comforting pressure against me. But we took our time, letting the desire, the tension build between us.

If I had my way, we would stay like that forever. Or maybe just until dawn. But as much as I wanted to savor each and every moment, we were on a time constraint. We needed to sleep before six in the morning to make sure we were fully rested and fresh for the raid the next day.

What a conflict. I felt my soul being pulled in two opposite poles. One part wanted to stretch every minute into another decade, the other wanted to give Jacobian all I had, and then some.

Eventually, however, the urgency won out, and I broke the kiss by nipping at Jacobian's lip. He looked down at me, hazy eyes and half-lidded, like I was a drug to him. God, he made me feel so beautiful.

And that surge of confidence, of being valued and treasured, made me get things going. Hooking one of my legs around Jacobian, I switched positions so I was on top, straddling his waist like it was my throne. And why couldn't it be? I certainly felt like a queen, ready to be served and worshipped.

"Oh, I could get used to this," Jacobian said, his fingers digging into my hips in a way that promised so much more.

"You like the view?" I asked, batting my eyes at him.

"I do."

He wasn't lying. I could feel his hard length between my thighs, separated by far too much clothing. Between our pants and underwear, there were four layers of torture.

"Let's get these off you, shall we?" I said, licking my lips. And when Jacobian gave a very appreciative shudder, I felt even more secure in my position.

It took a little rearranging, but I managed to slide down his thighs enough to finish undoing his pants and pull them down.

Ugh, jeans were the worst. Why couldn't men just wear leggings? They would allow so much more ease of access.

Granted, all the men of the world didn't matter. What mattered was Jacobian, and he was now right below me, spread out like a delicious buffet. Except I didn't have to share him. He was all mine, ready to have my teeth buried in the side of his neck.

But as eager as I was to get into his pants, that didn't mean I had to rush it. I guess I could be a bit cruel in how I teased, but hey, Jacobian seemed on board with it.

Slowly, I stripped his underwear off him, throwing it in the corner of the room along with his pants. The air was thick with the scent of his arousal, and I swore I could float away on it. Except I was tethered to Jacobian, especially when I finally took his erection into my hand.

"Oh *fuck*," he groaned as I shuttled my hand along it, spreading those pretty little beads of liquid at his tip down the length. I loved that he was already swollen and dripping for me. Having such an effect on someone known for being in such control of himself made me feel so powerful.

"You like that?" I teased, my grin impish as I continued to toy with him. Boy, did I enjoy every single squirm and gasp that came out of him.

Much like our kissing, I could have kept him like that, flushed and wanton below me, my thighs stretched across his hip. With a human, I might have to worry about my weight eventually hurting him, but Jacobian was no human. He was a shifter. A counterpoint to my inner wolf.

"Are you ready?" I asked, my heart fluttering in my own chest.

"Yeah," Jacobian murmured. "But are you sure you don't need a warm-up?"

As thoughtful as his offer of foreplay was, I was already so slick. "No, I'm good," I said, changing my grip on him and aligning him with my entrance.

We hissed as his blunt head entered me, and my thighs shook as I sank down onto him. The stretch of him was a delicious burn, just on the right side of painful, and promising me so *much*.

I let my body adjust, which didn't take long, and I placed my hands on his chest for support. Slowly, I began to rock, taking him down to the root before sliding nearly all the way off. It was a slick slide, the sound of our coupling filling the room.

But I was hardly aware of our surroundings; my world was just Jacobian. I listened to every sound that fell from his mouth, cherished every spike in his scent. They amplified my own pleasure, and I couldn't help but wonder how that felt to Jacobian, who could feel what I was experiencing through our bond.

Well, soon I wouldn't have to wonder. My teeth would be in his neck and I would be completing our bond. We would be paired together for the rest of our lives, connected as only shifters could be.

That idea fueled me, and as I picked up in speed, Jacobian met me in kind, still gripping my hips as he pistoned in and out of me.

Soon gasps and mewls were escaping my mouth, and I was receiving that hazy sort of delirium I felt whenever Jacobian was screwing my brains out.

It was perfect. It was everything I wanted and more. Every nerve in my body was electrified, honed in on what Jacobian and I were feeling together. I'd never been very interested in being mated or what it was like, but now it occupied all of my brain.

Because I knew that there couldn't be anything better than what I was feeling in that moment. Jacobian and I connected not just physically, but down to our souls. Walls down, defenses rested, just pure, raw trust. Appreciation.

Maybe even love.

“God, Hannah, I’m close,” Jacobian breathed, his teeth gritted together. I was impressed he could form full words, considering how hard he throbbed within me.

“Me too,” I admitted.

“Do it. It’s time.”

I slowed my rocking, locking eyes with Jacobian. This was it, a moment that would change both of our lives.

Permanently.

“Are you sure?” I asked, suddenly feeling a slight bit nervous.

And that was when Jacobian buried a hand in my hair, yanking me down into a biting, bruising kiss. It was heat and it was primal, but it was also so much more.

“If you don’t bite me right now, I might actually go insane.”

Well, that was an emphatic “yes” if I’d ever heard one. “As you wish,” I repeated.

I picked up my rocking again, going faster and harder. The bed creaked below us, slamming against the wall over and over again in a frantic crescendo. But before I tumbled over that edge into my orgasm, I leaned down and buried my teeth into Jacobian’s neck, right into that swollen mating gland.

Oh.

Oh.

Ooooooh!

I hadn’t expected to *feel* so much. I’d already had my bite, after all. But I was wrong. Suddenly, my emotions weren’t just my own. It was like a doorway had opened in my soul, and so much was pouring out.

Elation. Pleasure. Happiness. Contentment. Excitement. Worry. They all mixed together in a beautiful tapestry that could only come from one person.

Jacobian.

Finally, finally, I knew what it was like to be fully bonded. I was connected to him and he was connected to me. Our emotions flowed back and forth, not moving compulsorily, but freely. A gift from me to him, and vice versa.

I gasped, and my orgasm hit me with full force. But the strangest thing was I could feel Jacobian's climax, too, layering on my own, the two of them echoing together in a maelstrom of near-cataclysmic pleasure.

"Oh my God!" I gasped, my rocking desperate as I finally let go of Jacobian's neck. I was feral, frenzied, but in the best way possible. We were sealing something between us, something we could never have with anybody else. It was just him, and me, and blinding pleasure shared between us.

I could hardly breathe, hardly think, but I wasn't scared. I was embracing this whole-heartedly and let myself fall headfirst into the beauty of it all.

If I thought the orgasm I'd had when I was bitten had been good, the climax I'd had completing the bond was a revelation. It carried me for what seemed an impossibly long time before eventually depositing me back into my own body.

"Holy shit," Jacobian breathed raggedly as I nearly collapsed onto his chest. I wanted to agree, but I was too boneless, too brainless. "I...we're really mated."

His tone was soft again, showing his sensitive, vulnerable side that so few people got to see. Even though I was completely worn out, I pushed myself up enough so I could look at that handsome face of his.

"We are," I said, reaching up to stroke his sharp jawline. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, closing his eyes as he smiled broadly. "Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Better than good, even."

"Better than good?"

"Yeah, you could even say I might be perfect."

I let out a soft little chuckle, then pressed the lightest of kisses to the tip of his strong nose. "Perfect, huh? Careful."

Keep dishing out compliments like that, and they might go to my head.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we?” he asked, grinning oh-so-crookedly at me.

“I dunno, sounds kind of nice.”

We shared a chuckle before quiet fell between us, the two of us just observing each other. Both of our lives had changed, but I was okay with that. In fact, I was happier than I’d been in a long time.

“We should head to the bathroom and clean up,” Jacobian said finally, his hand sliding into mine. I nodded, and let him walk me to his very impressive washroom. He let me go to the bathroom first, which I appreciated, because while we were mated, I didn’t really want anybody observing my pissing habits. Then I let him go while I went and grabbed two bottles of ice-cold water from his fridge.

From there, we showered in steaming hot water, sudsing each other up, then rinsing with his removable shower head that had way too many pressures. Yet, it wasn’t sexy. It was... peaceful. Domestic.

Perfect.

By the time we exited the shower, it was nearing six o’clock. I didn’t think that was lost on us, though neither of us said anything as we wrapped ourselves in fluffy towels and headed back to bed.

“Hannah?” Jacobian said as we lowered ourselves back into his expensive, silky sheets.

“Yeah?” I asked, suppressing a yawn. I felt so content that I was sure I’d fall asleep in minutes.

“Thank you for choosing me.”

Well, that was enough to wake me up. Cuddling closer to Jacobian, I pressed kisses to each of his cheeks before finally landing on his full lips. “If I was given the chance to hop in a time machine and go back to that day in college,” I said,

putting all the genuine feeling into my voice that I could, “I’d do the same thing all over again.”

I watched the emotions play across Jacobian’s face, and goodness, I was just so fond of him. I really could see the two of us growing old together, learning and improving as shifters and as individuals.

“That means the world to me,” he whispered.

“Well, that’s good, because I’m pretty sure you mean the world to me.”

He flushed, and his arms wrapped around my middle, pulling me close to him. “We should go to sleep, my mate.”

“We should,” I said, smiling as I snuggled into him.

“Good night, Hannah.”

“Good night.”

“Just know, whatever happens tomorrow, you’ve made me a very happy wolf.”

I grinned to myself, believing every word he said. “I’m happy, too.”

With that, he kissed the top of my head and we slipped into slumber. Whatever came in the future, at least we would be facing it together.

JACOBIAN

I stood along the edge of the trees that surrounded the warehouse with what troops I had behind us. I was far more on edge than I would normally be, if only because our beta and his mate had just been attacked.

I'd been about to call off the whole thing, to turn tail and give them the support they needed, but apparently the entire situation was handled. I didn't know how that was possible, but Samson had been an invaluable asset. I got the feeling the green witch was a lot more powerful than he let on, but that was a theory I'd have to explore another day.

For the moment, I had my own mission at hand.

I knew that front line was waiting for my go-ahead while blended into the trees behind me. And even farther than that was Hannah and the rest of Savvy's guard. Savvy was close enough that she could heal if someone was grievously injured, but far enough away to not be absconded with if the enemy managed to flank us.

I could smell multiple bodies inside, which meant we were in for a fight. Not that I had ever expected for our night to go peacefully. Just some things weren't in the cards when it came to our enemies.

But as I stood there, taking it all in and making sure there were no observable threats that would throw off our plans, guilt started to sink in.

I knew that Hannah wanted to be on the front line. And shouldn't she be, considering that she was the one who had

found the place? I hadn't seen her fight, but I knew she was at least decent at it from the sparring our pack did during runs.

The desire to protect her, to wrap her in padding and ship her off somewhere where nothing could ever harm her, was pretty strong, yet I also respected her enough not to listen to that temptation. If she wasn't my mate, would I be exiling her to guard duty? Probably not. And if I wouldn't treat her that way as one of my mission team...well, that decided things, didn't it?

Hannah, I said, pitching my wolf's voice farther than normal. While it was possible to hear over great distances, it had a limit.

Area cleared, sir. The Alma is properly protected and ready for triage.

Good. Tell Matthew he's in charge. I want you here on the front line with me.

Really?

I could hear the shock and enthusiasm in her voice, and it made me grin.

Yes. Report immediately.

She didn't reply, but that was probably because she was in an all-out sprint towards me, if I had to put money on it.

Sure enough, she showed up a few moments later, panting as quietly as a wolf could, her tail wagging in a decidedly dog-like sort of way. I wasn't sure how she could be so adorable while in the form of an apex predator, and yet she most definitely was impossibly cute.

Reporting for the front line, sir!

Good. Prepare for the first wave.

With that, she drew closer to me, and I could hear her inner voice dip in a way that let me know that she was directly speaking to me and no one else could hear us. Sometimes communicating as a shifter was quite convenient.

What made you change your mind?

I debated not telling her, or maybe even teasing her for the eagerness in her voice. But there was a time for levity and joking, and we weren't in that moment.

Because we're partners, and it's about time I treated you as one.

Blushing as a wolf was quite different than blushing as a human, but I could tell that she was doing so, anyway. Her fur rippled a bit and her tail went straight up, pointing nearly to the sky before she recovered and muted her reaction.

Thank you, Jacobian.

Of course.

I would have loved to say more, I really would have, but it wasn't the time for that, either. After all, there was the mission at hand.

Alright, everyone to their places. Don't shift until my signal.

As tempting as it was to all rush in as wolves, that was what our second wave was for. The first wave required thumbs and a certain amount of stealth that paws couldn't give.

Our first-wave troops quickly spread out, each of us going to our position. Pitching my mental voice back to a private tone, I turned my shaggy head to Hannah.

You're with me. Watch my back and I'll watch yours.

Deal.

Quietly, as if we were shadows of the forest, we spread out to our pre-planned spots. I could feel my adrenaline start to pump, but I kept my call, making sure to continually scent things as we went along. As far as I could tell, there were no spells to trip, no alarms sounding inside. There were hardly any stress ketones, even from humans.

Not for the first time, I was incredibly grateful for the twine bracelets that Sam had given our entire team. He'd been working on them since he found Lyssa, apparently, and they were supposed to shield us from the witches' magic. They didn't make us immune to their spells, but we'd be able to pass

through their shielding and wards without tripping them, which was nearly as useful.

Because without it, our advance would certainly be a lot different. Less stealth and more all-out, toothy war.

But the bracelets must have held true because Hannah and I reached our spot without incident. I waited several more minutes before sending out a broad voice to hopefully everyone in our mission.

Is everyone in place?

There was a mental chorus of affirmatives but I still waited a moment longer for any stragglers. When there were no negative responses, I took a deep breath, centering myself.

It was time.

First wave, shift and advance.

I felt my wolf form ripple away, receding into my soul where he fueled and guided me. When I looked beside me, Hannah was also human, her curvy form glad in the dark outfits we'd all donned before leaving. I was once more grateful that whatever ancient magic it was that allowed shifters to exist didn't discriminate against our clothing. It certainly would be much harder to sneak in fully equipped as wolves otherwise.

It may have seemed strange to go in with our human forms, but I was sure that if the witches were prepared for an attack, they would be expecting our animal forms; not people armed with guns, stun batons, and blessed charms.

We advanced as one, our footsteps quick and quiet. Hannah and I reached a window at the same time as the rest of the team reached their own respective positions, and we pulled out our glass cutters.

The cutter was an odd tool that stuck to the glass with the suction cup at its center, then guided the arm in a circle. Apparently, there was an incredibly sharp diamond at the tip of the arm that slid through the glass, allowing me to pull away a circle large enough for my hand to fit through.

And that was how I fit a little magnetic device from one of my belt pouches onto the window lock. It also had a micro-EMP field on it that would make sure no electronic alarms would sound from our sabotage. They were a prototype I'd built and tested myself a year earlier, and then they'd sat in my home office collecting dust. Pretty convenient to have around for a mission breaking our way into a stronghold.

Sometimes, it was good to be the tech expert wolf.

With the locks disabled, I slid the window open high enough to slide in, with Hannah coming in after me. The other wolves did the same at their own safe windows, and although I couldn't see them, I knew each of them was in an empty utility or storage room. Or at least I was pretty sure they were. Our senses were keen enough that we could generally tell how far our targets were, but with witches, it always was harder to tell.

All in?

The reply was unanimous. *All in.*

Then advance. Take out as many as you can silently. If the alarm is sounded, we all call in the second wave.

A final chorus of affirming answers. Time to move forward.

Hannah and I crept to the door and I put my ear towards it. I could tell from the way ambient sound echoed that there was a hallway outside the door, then a guard at the end of it. I didn't need to be a security expert to figure they also probably had a camera by him, and had set up lots of powerful spells

Samson had hopefully taken care of the spells, so it was up to me to handle the rest.

Cracking the door open as quietly as possible, I rolled out one of my micro-EMP emitters, aiming it down the hall. It didn't need to get all the way to the camera to do the job, but it needed to be within about ten feet or so of it.

Thankfully, witches and humans didn't hear as precisely as shifters. So while I could pick up on the faint sound of metal rolling across metal, the guard was none the wiser.

When it finally came to a stop, I hit the bottom on my handheld detonator. Nothing dramatic happened, at least not at first, but then the camera behind the guard let out a hot crackling sound, and what had to be a walkie-talkie at his hip made a shrill whine.

“What the hell was that?” the man blurted out, whipping around to look at the malfunctioning camera.

And that was my opening. I burst out of the door as quietly as I could, then raced down the hall. By the time the man heard me, it was too late. I leapt at him, both of my feet slamming into his chest as he turned to face me.

He stumbled backwards, arms pinwheeling, and I lunged, grabbing the front of his protective gear and twisting him so I could get him in a rear choke. It was all over in less than thirty seconds, and his body lay still on the ground.

“One down,” Hannah whispered, her voice so quiet, I was pretty sure only a shifter could hear it. “Too many to go.”

I agreed, but we kept on moving, methodically checking room by room around the perimeter. Not all our adversaries were armed humans. There were at least two witches that we came upon, but thanks to my tools and Hannah’s help, we took them down without triggering an alarm. I supposed it helped that they weren’t used to anyone being able to sneak up on them, considering how many shields and wards they supposedly had. Oh well, their loss.

But we didn’t slow down, didn’t let ourselves indulge in our little victories. Instead, we kept going, as carefully as we could, until we met up with another group. It seemed that we’d worked our way through their outer defenses.

That was good, but there was still much to do. It wasn’t quite time for phase two, but we were rapidly getting there.

With our first group now in two mirroring halves across the warehouse, we worked our way towards the center. The closer we came to the staircase we were aiming for, the thicker the cluster of our enemies. With each assault, each stealthy takedown, I was sure that we would be made. But Hannah and

everyone else in the first wave proved to be at the top of their game, and by the time we arrived at the passage to the basement, we were surrounded by dead and unconscious bodies.

“Do you feel that?” I whispered to Hannah, who nodded. Below our feet were dozens upon dozens of heartbeats. And then there was the scent, warm blood, sweat, and brimstone.

Witches.

There would be no stealth killing this group. Grabbing my phone, I quickly texted the head of our second wave, still in human form.

ABOUT TO BREACH THE CELLAR, I texted rapidly.

IT WAS A FUNNY JUXTAPOSITION: me using an everyday phone to communicate during a war with witches and werewolves, but we figured it was the best way to send the alarm without being detected. To be honest, I had assumed we would get made well before we reached our target, and the plan was for all of us to call in the second wave with war cries.

ADVANCE to the perimeter and ready for the signal. You'll hear it.

AFFIRMATIVE.

AND THAT WAS IT. It was a do-or-die situation, after all. Reaching into my belt, I pulled out the last thing I'd packed into the utility pouches. It was innocuous to most, but I'd spent several years making the tiniest, small-grade explosive I could.

It was odorless, wouldn't trigger any human security measures, and would blast the heavily reinforced doors clear off their hinges. It wouldn't level a whole building, as I

couldn't pack that much power into something so small-scale. While I was adept at chemistry, I wasn't a mastermind at it. Now that Samson was on our side, I knew I should see if he had any input. A lot of our pack didn't realize it, but green witches understood many plants down to their chemical level, which made them a dangerous foe.

We needed to make sure he stayed on our side, that was for sure.

Setting the explosive, I waved for everyone to back away, then found cover myself. Pulling the separate detonator out, I hesitated as my finger hovered over the button.

"What is it?" Hannah asked, leaning in close. I looked at her face, really looked at it, taking in all her beauty. From those cherubic, upturned lips to that button of a nose. Her hair was hidden behind the black cap that she wore, but I knew that it was still that same brilliant green.

"I press this, there's no going back."

While I was confident in my abilities, things were different now. I had Hannah to worry about. I had Hannah to *live for*. I was no longer the somewhat distant, logical tech guy who didn't have much going for him personally. I was mated to one of the most beautiful and intelligent women I'd ever met.

Somehow, without saying a word, Hannah seemed to understand what I was thinking. Gently, her hand rested over mine.

"Then let's go forward together."

There she was, brave when I was afraid, supportive when I was wavering. I truly felt like a better man and wolf with her influence over me.

"Let's," I whispered, and then we pressed the button together.

The doors blew off their hinges, exploding outwards in heated bits of shrapnel. The noise it made was truly horrendous, and I had no doubts that our second wave heard it loud and clear.

Like we'd discussed before, my team all held their hiding places, limbs tucked in and breathing slowed. When the witches came pouring out from the hole we'd created, we wanted them to see nothing.

All they had to do was spread out to find us, but we were banking on them being disoriented from the explosion and dependent on their magic to sense us. That was where the bracelets came in, shielding us from their vision and letting us get the drop on them.

Just like we'd hoped, the witches came rushing into the room, spells ready. While I couldn't directly see them from our hiding positions, I could feel their power crackling through the air.

It was borderline comedic how they all skittered to a stop in the empty room, no doubt incredibly confused.

"What's going on here?" I heard one of them ask, sounding slightly farther away from the others. Maybe still on the stairwell that led up from the basement?

"There is no one."

"What do you mean there is no one? You saying our doors blew themselves off their hinges?"

"Don't you sense it? The room is empty."

The footsteps came closer until they were about even with the rest. "That's impossible. This has to be a trick, right?"

"Well, obviously, but what do we do about it?"

Before whoever was speaking could answer, howls cut through the air, loud and foreboding as they completely surrounded the warehouse. It was impossible to tell where they were coming from because they were everywhere, a cacophony of primal warning.

And that was our second team.

There was a long moment where the howl seemed to go on forever and I was drawn into the rush of it. It was a call to battle, to fight and protect. To stand together with my fellow wolf and rip our enemies apart.

That call rejuvenated me, steeling me against the worry within my soul. United, we were unstoppable. Our enemies may be powerful, yes, but witches were as divided as the continents, their own desires and machinations fueling them. They would never understand what it was like to be unified as one pack, one people, all striving towards the same goal.

And that was going to be their downfall.

The sound of shattered glass split the air, and I could hear the witches jolt.

“To the doors! Ward them before the animals get in!”

“How did they get past our shielding?!”

“That’s a question for later!”

I was quite proud of how seamlessly our plan was coming together. The witches all ran for the doors, casting their magicks, and that was when the rest of us attacked.

We leapt out of our hiding places at once, assaulting them from their rear.

There were more of them than there were of us, meaning we only took out about half, but when the remaining witches whirled around to face us, team two burst through the doors.

It was a massacre. Blood spilled as spells failed and fizzled out, their casters destroyed before they could finish their incantations. We didn’t have our own witch, our alpha, or our beta with us, but we were certainly taking names.

It wasn’t long before all lay dead on the floor, leaving the basement open to us. We rushed to it at once, wolf and human alike, our guards fully raised.

I expected more of an army. I expected dozens of more enemies to test our mettle.

But instead we were greeted with...an empty room?

What is this? Michael asked in his wolf voice, trotting up beside me. *Something isn’t right.*

Could we have been wrong? It wouldn’t have been the first time our plans had gone awry.

“Hold on,” Hannah said, her nose wrinkling. “I smell something.”

“You *smell* something?” Ricky repeated dubiously behind her.

But before I could lecture him to trust her, Hannah stepped forward, following her nose. I watched, curious as she went this way, then that, before turning and advancing on a flat wall.

I heard the click of a gun, and time stood still. While a gunshot was painful, it wasn't normally a lethal thing unless it went straight through our skulls.

Except we were working with witches, which meant a gun was always something more. It could be a mythical construct, or the bullets were laced with wolfsbane. And while it took quite a bit of the plant to kill a werewolf, the required amount significantly decreased if it was able to get into a vital organ.

“Hannah!” I cried without thinking, diving into her. I must have caught her off-guard because she stumbled to the side just in time for a bullet to bite into my shoulder.

“Fuck!”

It burned something fierce, making my whole body seize up, and I went to my knees. It was indeed wolfsbane, like I had feared, but I had lucked out that it didn't hit anything vital.

“Jacobian!”

Hannah dove forward, shifting in the middle of the air, and suddenly she was *bursting* through the wall itself!

Except it wasn't a wall at all. It shattered like glass, glass that turned to ash upon the floor. I gasped, partially in pain, and because three figures were standing behind what was clearly a magical shield. Tate, and two older men.

“What the—”

One of the men didn't even get his words out before Hannah's teeth were on his arm and she ripped him out of the shield. He tumbled after her, shrieking, but his gun skittered over to Tate, who quickly picked it up.

“How are they getting through our shield? I thought this was supposed to protect us?!”

“They must have some sort of anti-spell charm on them,” the other older man said. He was the calmest of the three, and when I made eye contact with him, I could tell that he had already come to terms with their loss.

Because they had. Without a doubt.

“Let go of me, you mangy beast! I’ve feasted on the blood of your people! I am a god!”

Now that was rude of him.

Hannah seemed to agree. As the man drew out a dagger from his belt, she sank her teeth in, ripping his arm off entirely. The man let out a shrill scream, his words turning into an unhinged mess.

“Your disgusting kind are nothing more than animals! Animals ready for the slaughter, and we are the butchers! We are the hand come to bring justice for all the crimes your people have committed against humanity!”

And that was all he got out before Hannah’s teeth clamped down around his throat. I was impressed with her, I wasn’t going to lie.

It wasn’t how I imagined the scene going, not at all, but the man gurgled, then finally lay still. I couldn’t believe it. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that he was one of the brothers, the unhinged one, and after hunting him for so long, he was lying there in a pool of his own blood.

Hannah shifted back in her human form, crimson spread across her face. She looked fierce, but also incredibly beautiful. Once everything was all said and done, I was going to spend a week just worshipping that body of hers and kissing every inch of it.

But we weren’t quite there yet.

“You killed him!” Tate cried. “Oh my God, you killed him!”

“And you were a part of trafficking! I thought you were a decent guy, Tate!”

“Oh, cut it with the self righteous talk! You were using me for intel to help that pathetic little pack of yours!”

“As if those are remotely the same!”

“Would both of you shut up?” the final one hissed, dropping the crystal he had in his hands.

“Father, what are you doing!? The witches—”

“The witches have tricked us,” he said, his voice full of turmoil. “They’ve been tricking us for years now, and I’m a fool for only just now realizing it.” He looked at me and the blood still trickling from my shoulder. My body kept trying to heal, but the wolfsbane just kept opening the wound over and over again. “My brother is dead. I don’t want my son to die, too. What is it you would want to know?”

“Why have you been going after our pack? Why have you been going after shifters? What could you have possibly wanted with our kind?” I asked, getting control of my breath and straightening up. It took some effort, but I could feel my system desperately working through the wolfsbane. Being poisoned sucked, but I would rather deal with it on an accelerated schedule than go through multiple days of searing pain.

Because I was in pain. I could feel it boiling through my veins and biting into my flesh, making my temperature rise to levels that were much hotter than I was used to. But it wasn’t the same as being stabbed with a wolfsbane dagger, or hit with a potion that managed to get into a wound. Still, being shot with a wolfsbane bullet was excruciating.

“Your blood.”

What?

“We thought your blood would cure the brother who lays below your feet. His insanity was worsening, but his moments closest to clarity were always right after ingesting shifter blood.”

“But if you were harvesting us for our blood,” Hannah cut in, “what’s with the slave trade you set up? And why go so hard after specific wolves, like Hannah and Lyssa?”

The man chuckled, but Tate was furious. “Why are you telling them everything?”

“To save your life, boy. Don’t you see? We’ve been played.”

Tate looked like he was about to have an apoplexy. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“What I’m talking about is the witches! They’ve been playing us for years now, and we’re fools for only just realizing it.”

The man looked back to us, looking so incredibly weary. “I just wanted to save my brother. That was it. And we thought that shifters who had some sort of magic in them, like Alma’s blood, would be that final crest we needed to cure my brother.

“But it was your Emma and the witch’s unrelenting hard-on for her that finally clued me in. You see, the witches have their own machinations. Puppet strings tied about their hearts that all lead to—”

Suddenly everything happened at once.

Tate raised his gun, screaming at the same time. “I’m not going to let you ruin everything!”

His father’s eyes went wide and he was shouting as well. “Tate, no!”

But it was too late. I could tell the gun was raised right at me, to finish off the job his uncle had started, but he should have known better. Three other wolves lunged through the shield along with Hannah, who exploded back into her wolf form. He was torn to pieces within seconds. Hell, he hardly had enough time to let out a death cry.

Dammit, it didn’t have to end like this!

The man, who had been willing to talk before, turned ashen and sank to his knees.

“He’s gone, my whole family gone,” he whispered, sounding completely soulless. “What was it even all for?”

It was a sad sight, but it was hard to feel sympathy for someone who’d terrorized our pack and led to the deaths of countless shifters.

“You said puppet strings?” I pressed, wanting to know more. Wanting to know the *reason* because something wasn’t adding up.

“What’s the point?” he repeated. “I have nothing here to live for. Over a decade of trying, wasted. Everything I loved is here in cold blood below your feet.”

I crouched down so that we were eye to eye, fearing no recourse from him. The man was thoroughly defeated. “Much like Lyssa felt when you murdered her entire family, yes?”

He didn’t react, but seemed to contemplate what I said. “Just end it now. I just want to be with my family. There’s nothing left for me here.”

As strange as it was, I didn’t want to execute him. He was a man already defeated, and I wasn’t one for killing a surrendered enemy.

“Please, *please*, just let me go. I’ve earned my ending.”

It was hard to argue with that, so I stood and nodded to the second team. Walking towards Hannah, I offered her my hand.

With our backs turned, we walked out, but the man made no sound as the rest of our pack brought him to justice. Finally, after so much hurt, after so much turmoil, our battle was done.

But why did I feel like another book was opening?

“This isn’t over, is it?” Hannah asked as we walked out of the building that she had uncovered.

“No, there’s something greater going on. A puppet master we haven’t considered yet.”

Hannah stopped, turning towards me. I mirrored her actions, and goodness, I was flooded with gratitude that

somehow, this beautiful woman had chosen to stay with *me*. After everything I'd done and how many times I'd fucked up.

“But we'll face it together?”

She grinned so sweetly, those round cheeks of hers growing pink. “Together. You're stuck with me now, that's for sure.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way.”

HANNAH

“**A**s your beta, I bless your union. You may now kiss your bride!”

Cheers erupted from all around us. I desperately tried to hold back my tears. I was wearing waterproof eyeliner, but I didn't want to risk it since I didn't know if that promise extended to shifters. But I failed miserably as Mahlan and Lyssa kissed, their happiness radiating out around them.

She just looked so *beautiful*, dressed in a brilliant white dress with emerald green accessories to match Mahlan's darker tux. While many shifters didn't celebrate marriages the way humans did, as we had our own mating ritual and traditions, our pack tended to do a blend of things. It truly helped with the legal documents that allowed us to pass in the human world.

To be honest, I liked it. Having both celebrations was so quintessentially shifter of us. Because we weren't one or the other—we were a blend of our inner wolves and our humanity, blending together into what made us special.

And goodness, the wedding certainly was that. It was pure joy watching Lyssa and Mahlan's kiss, then their walk down the aisle hand in hand while people threw bird and flower seeds at them. I knew that humans used rice, but that had never really made sense to us shifters.

Unlike some weddings I'd been to that made people wait a couple of hours while the bridal party did their shoot, Lyssa was wise beyond her years and had appetizers set out at the

reception while we took our photos. It made us feel less rushed, though my stomach was most certainly rumbling by the time we changed into our reception outfits and walked onto the scene.

From there, it was a beautiful celebration, full of so much happiness that my heart could have nearly burst. And it didn't hurt that I got to dance with Jacobian, who, it turned out, could cut a rug.

Now that I wasn't working for him, we didn't have to hide. Which was good, because I hated the idea of lying to my friends. Besides, I really liked working as a liaison with the intern program and adding colleges to our outreach program so other shifters could go farther if they wanted to.

So yeah, my life was going a lot better since my espionage days. It was also a lot less stressful, which I was more than grateful for.

"You want a drink?" Jacobian asked after our third dance together. I knew that I was breathless and a bit red-faced, but I was having so much fun. It certainly helped that all of our friends were going footloose around us: Mahlan and Lyssa, Theo and Emma, and...was that Savvy and Kaleb? How interesting!

"Hmmm, I wouldn't say no to some ice water."

"Whatever you want." He shot me a wink and headed off.

While we still occasionally butted heads, it was nowhere near the awful spats we'd gotten into before. Jacobian had largely dealt with his jealousy and I'd handled my insecurity. We still were proud people, so we were bound to have our bumps, but they were much more respectful. I didn't feel ordered around, and he didn't feel ignored.

We weren't quite at the point of marriage—that was another step in our future—but I was wholly loving being mated. I felt cherished, valued, and also a little drop-dead sexy on the side. Which was a pretty nice feeling.

"Your water, mademoiselle," Jacobian said, sweeping in with a deliciously cool glass. I took it, looping my arm through

his as I took a considerable drink.

“Thank you, thank you. You know, I think I’m ready to sit down. Maybe pick at the food I left on my plate.”

“Sounds good to me. These shoes keep rubbing the side of my big toe wrong, then it heals, then it rubs all over again and gets real itchy.”

“Did you break them in like I suggested?” I teased.

“This is a trap and I plead the fifth.”

I chuckled at that. I knew he hadn’t because work had just gotten so busy, but I wasn’t mad at him for it. In the grand scheme of things, forgetting to break in his shoes wasn’t that big of a deal.

“You know I love you, right?” I said as we sat down, our hands intertwining.

“I do. And I hope I know I love you with all my heart. Down to the deepest parts of me.”

“Oh, I know it, and I’ll never forget it.”

A smile bloomed across his features, resplendent amid the backdrop of all the people we loved, dancing their hearts out.

“Same here.”

With that, we kissed. It was a celebration of our love, of Theo and Emma’s love, and of our pack’s love. But it was also something else entirely. A promise, bright and shining, to each other.

Forever.

And I couldn’t wait to see where that forever would bring us.

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BITTEN BY THE ALPHA BOSS

Skye Wilson

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