



PROTECTING

PETER

THE BODYGUARD PACK 2

CASEY DRAKE

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Hawk Connolly knows Joshua Thornston is their bad guy, but his pack needs an in to get the proof they need. Enter Peter Thornston and his celebante siblings—pretty faces whose only talents are wearing clothes and being seen. Taking a shot at them in public is the quickest way to get in the door, and Hawk is prepared for everything... except discovering Peter is his mate.

Peter Thornston lives in the shadow of his brother and sister. They are the ones everyone loves, the ones everyone wants to be close to. And he knows his father isn't exactly a good guy, but Peter never suspects that he is the actual bad guy. When he lands in Hawk's crosshairs, he starts reevaluating exactly who his father is and whether he can live with it.

When he finds out just how deep the conspiracy goes, he has to choose: his father, or the wolf who pulled the trigger.

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ONE

FUCK, it was bright. Peter held a hand up over his eyes and squinted, but it still didn't block the blazing sunlight from searing his eyeballs.

“Oh, stop being such a drama queen,” Penelope said next to him. “I said I'm sorry.”

“They were my favorite pair.”

“I'm replacing them.”

“I had them for six years, Penny. Do you know how long that is in sunglass years?” He held the door open for her to enter the shop.

“Fuck, you're an asshole.”

Peter glared at her. Just for that, he was going to pick out the gaudiest, most expensive pair of sunglasses he would never wear. And then he'd keep them at home on the table next to the front door so she would see them every time she left the house.

“Here,” she said, handing him a pair identical to the ones she'd “accidentally” knocked off the pier. He wrinkled his nose at them and shook his head. He fully intended to sneak back and buy them after dinner that evening. But for now...

“What about these?” he asked. The oversized hexagon lenses were coated with gold to match the frames. They weren't even polarized. Ugly “fashion” glasses that cost over two hundred dollars. He suppressed the urge to shake his head and drop them.

“Really,” she said flatly. It wasn’t a question—she was judging him.

“You don’t like them?”

“*You* don’t like them. I can tell you’re trying not to cringe away from them.”

He couldn’t deny her words.

“Look, I’ll buy you two pairs of these”—she indicated the sunglasses like his old pair—“to replace the sentimental value of the other ones, okay?”

“Three.”

“Three?”

“What? One for wearing, one spare for home, and one for the car?”

Penny shook her head. “And you call me a diva.” She sighed and flagged down the salesman to make her purchase. Peter didn’t bother to join her. He knew the drill. The clerk would instantly fall all over himself to get her anything her heart desired. He would be in love with her—and that was before she pulled out her credit card. Peter had seen it a thousand times.

“Thank you, thank you. Please come again. Anytime,” the clerk was rambling as Penny joined Peter by the door.

He shook his head and accepted the bag she held out. “Leaving another broken heart in your wake,” he said.

“It’s not like I encourage them.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a half-hug. Mere mortals had no chance against the power of Penelope Thornston. She knew it, and she wasn’t afraid to weaponize it if necessary. But most of the time, it was merely annoying. He pressed a kiss to her temple and led her back onto the sidewalk.

“You’re wearing these,” she said, holding out the awful gold sunglasses. He couldn’t believe she actually bought them,

but he wore them for her. She shook her head. “They really are horrible.”

He didn’t know if she meant the glasses or the never-ending trail of admirers who fawned over her.

“Come on, let’s go in here.” He led her into the jewelry shop. Sparkly things always cheered her up.

“Ah, Miss Thornston. Welcome back. Let me show you our newest offerings,” the manager said excitedly.

Both Peter and Penny rolled their eyes, but she mustered a smile and followed the manager to the back counter. Peter tuned them out as the man arranged a few different pieces on a piece of velvet for Penny to inspect. Another clerk appeared in front of Peter, but he shook his head. The woman left him alone and went to assist the manager—or compete with him for Penny’s attention. Peter could never tell which. He was glad to be left alone for a few minutes. If it got to be too much, he’d step in and whisk Penny away from them with some trumped-up excuse. In the meantime, she was enjoying the show.

Peter occupied himself with checking out the watches and cuff links. He already had several pairs of cuff links, but he wasn’t immune to the power of the shiny. One day, he’d have to update his wardrobe so he could actually wear them. The watches were impressive when lined up next to one another, but seriously, was any watch worth the five-figure price tag they wanted?

He shook his head. Paul and Penny always teased him about being a terrible trust-fund baby. Never picking the biggest, the flashiest. Hell, his car was a hybrid sedan. What did he need a flashy sports car for, anyway? No one ever fit in them, so he couldn’t take his friends anywhere. They brought more attention than anything. He wasn’t going to do any street racing anytime soon. He wasn’t a clotheshorse either. Give him some soft, comfortable T-shirts and well-worn jeans, and he was happy. Penny’s closet was full of designer clothes, with enormous price tags for the amount of fabric. Paul’s closet

looked more like a high-end store than someone's personal things.

Movement outside the window caught Peter's attention, and he turned to people-watch. A handsome couple stood on the other side of the glass, admiring the earrings. And they were a couple, that much was evident. The taller one smiled as his partner pointed out things. They took a few more steps, and Peter noticed the other man was using a bright red cane with flames painted along it.

The big guy moved to the other window and said something. Cane Guy—and Jesus, he hated calling him that in his head, but he didn't have a better way to refer to him—joined him. Big Guy pointed at the window, and Cane Guy's eyes went wide when he noticed. Big Guy was saying something, but Cane Guy interrupted. Now invested, Peter glanced at the display case.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled when he realized he'd probably witnessed a proposal.

Cane Guy stumbled, and Big Guy caught him and held his arm until he was sure he had his footing. Then he backed off, though not all the way. He kept an arm around Cane Guy's waist, but he did step away enough to let him stand on his own.

Peter wondered what that must be like, to be wrapped up so completely in love. To have a partner there when you needed him, but also secure enough with you to let you stand on your own. Every relationship he'd been in had become borderline obsessive as his boyfriends eventually wound up smothering him with their need to take care of him.

When the couple started kissing, Peter turned away to give them privacy. Of course, that didn't matter seconds later when Penny wrapped up her purchase and joined him.

“Damn, that's hot. Look at them,” she said.

“I saw. Ready to go?”

“Yeah. Let's go get some lunch.”

He held the door open and immediately regretted it when Penny let out a loud wolf whistle. The couple broke apart and looked over at them as Peter tried to drag Penny away.

“Get it, boy,” she called out.

“Penny,” he warned. “Sorry about that,” he apologized for her and could feel the blush burning his face as he tried to leave them alone.

“No problem,” Big Guy said. He smiled at them as Cane Guy buried his face against his shoulder and chuckled. Big Guy wrapped an arm around him. “Have a great day.”

“I bet yours will be better,” Penny called as they walked away.

“Penny!” Peter groaned and rolled his eyes.

“What? Do you know them?”

“No, but you don’t either. And you don’t know what’s happening in their lives.”

“I know one thing. There’s no way they’re going home and not boning. Did you see that?”

“He proposed!”

“What? Let’s go congratulate them!” She started to head back, but Peter held her arm.

“How about we let them have their moment? Alone.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Spoiling your fun so the couple can keep a private, intimate moment to themselves.”

“Fine.” They waited on the corner for their ride. Usually their driver had impeccable timing, pulling up seconds after they were ready.

After a minute, Peter started to worry. “Where’s Marvin?”

“Oh, the poor baby has to wait a full minute and a half for his ride? Whatever will you do?” Penny asked, dramatically wiping her forehead with the back of her wrist and swooning. Her theatrics burned another minute, but Marvin still hadn’t

shown up. It was prickling at Peter's senses, telling him something was wrong.

"We should go back inside," he said. He scanned the street, looking for anything out of place. The door opened behind him, and the couple stepped out, smiles on their faces. A second later, the planter box on the corner exploded. The couple dropped to the ground, and Peter turned to pull Penny down too.

"What the fuck?" she shouted. A second shot hit the pavement near the destroyed plants.

"Are you crazy? Get down!" He dragged her along with him. She struggled in his grasp as she tried to get back up and find where the shots were coming from. "Let's fucking go!"

He didn't let her out of his grip as he pulled her back into the store nearest them. The other couple was there too.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Cane Guy asked.

"Fucking come in here, bastard!" Penny shouted as she paced near the windows.

"Get the fuck back here," Peter growled as he pulled her farther into the store. He got her situated on one of the couches in the shoe department before he was finally able to get a breath.

"Are you all right?" Cane Guy asked. Big Guy stayed behind him, between them and the windows.

"Yeah, we're okay. Nothing hit," Peter said.

"And fucking pissed," Penny added.

"Well, try to relax. The police are on their way," Cane Guy said.

"What? We don't need the police. Let's go get this bastard."

"Penny, calm down. There's nothing we can do. The guy is probably long gone. And shots were fired. It'll be a police matter," Peter said.

"Damn. Dad will be fucking irate."

“Yeah.” Peter was not looking forward to their father’s reaction. He was overprotective on a good day. Given what happened, well, their freedom was about to be toast. “He won’t let us out of his sight for a year.”

“He’ll bring that creepy security company out again,” Penny said.

“Gods, I hope not. That last guy...” Peter shuddered. The last team gave them zero privacy. He’d tried to push back, but his detail even followed him into the bathroom, offering to hold it for him. When Peter told his father about the looks he’d gotten, his dad blew his top and fired the security. Then he confined Peter and his siblings to the house for a month.

“Does this happen a lot?” Cane Guy asked.

“Enough,” Penny complained.

“Well, not getting shot at,” Peter added. “But yeah. Sometimes.” He shook his head.

“Sorry.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault. It’s usually Dad’s.”

“Well, it still sucks. And I don’t mean to overstep, but I know of a security company. My nephews, they were having a problem with their dad, and this agency handled it for my sister. Maybe your dad could talk to them? I mean...” Cane Guy shrugged. “They won’t creep on you, at least.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Penny asked.

“My name is Conrad Stokes, and this is my, uh, boyfriend, Ryder Weller.”

“Nice to meet you,” Peter said with a smile. He offered his hand for Conrad to shake. “I’m Peter, and this is my sister, Penny.”

“Penelope Thornston,” she corrected.

“I tell you what. Let me call my friend, and he can come down here to meet you. Then you can decide if he’s worth introducing to your father,” Conrad offered as he pulled out his phone.

“It can’t hurt,” Peter said. Penny narrowed her eyes but nodded. Peter resisted rolling his eyes. If she wanted to play tough guy, then fine. But Peter let his instincts take over. He trusted Conrad and Ryder for some reason. He couldn’t put a finger on it, but he’d always had a keen sense of people.

“Okay, good,” Conrad said. He stepped away to make his call, leaving them with Ryder.

“Congratulations,” Peter offered.

“What?” Ryder asked.

“I, uh, saw you. Outside the jewelry store.”

The tips of Ryder’s ears flushed a dull pink. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

“What’d I miss?” Conrad asked when he came back to find his fiancé blushing and rubbing a hand over his mouth.

“I was congratulating you. I saw you outside the store earlier.”

“Oh, that.” Conrad’s smile was blinding. “It’s new. Gonna take some getting used to.”

“Where’s the ring?” Penny asked.

“We haven’t picked any up yet. It was a bit... spontaneous?” Conrad looked at Ryder, who nodded.

“I didn’t know I was going to bring it up yet, but...” He shrugged.

“God, that’s sickening,” Penny groused.

Peter elbowed her. She exhaled and started browsing. “Don’t mind her. It’s sweet.”

“Uh, thanks.” Conrad’s blush was even cuter than Ryder’s, and Peter was almost dying from it. Or maybe it was jealousy. One of the two.

“So, your friend?”

“He’ll be here in about a half hour.”

“That long?” Penny whined. Most of her attention was on the row of heels in front of her. Peter could see the clerks

huddled together on the other side of the department. Probably arguing over who would get her eventual sale.

“Well, we’ll probably be tied up for a while anyway,” Ryder said, nodding toward the entrance, where a couple of uniformed officers were heading their way.

Peter gulped. “This is gonna suck,” he said.

TWO

HAWK COULDN'T BELIEVE Ryder had proposed to Conrad—on their mission. Talk about shitty timing. *Let's go terrorize a couple of people, but first...* Seriously? Who the fuck did that? Hawk shook his head to clear the chatter and get his mind back on task.

First, wind conditions. Check. The slight breeze had died down, leaving the air still.

Second, collateral damage. Negative. No bystanders in the danger zone. No one would be injured by flying debris.

Third, objectives in sight. Check. Peter and Penelope Thornston, age twenty-three and twenty-six, respectively, front and center as they waited for their ride. Peter was laden down with bags, and what the fuck was on his face? Those had to be the most ridiculous sunglasses Hawk had ever seen. He shook his head again. Rich people. No accounting for taste, he supposed.

Additional points: Conrad and Ryder were present. Close enough to act as concerned witnesses, but not close enough to draw the targets into the danger zone.

Assessment: go.

He exhaled and rested his finger on the trigger.

“Showtime,” he whispered. No one spoke as he slowly squeezed. The shot hit the mark, on the far corner of the planter box, but the reaction was bigger than expected. The box shattered, and the poor plant practically exploded.

“Fuck,” Bianca whispered over the comms. She and Phoebe were on witness duty at the scene, and Holly was at the precinct, coordinating the response. That had been Mason’s first objective: collaborate with the police. Make sure they were on board with the full plan. Opening fire on a public street was generally frowned upon. It was imperative they cooperated with law enforcement on this step. A full-scale, balls-out investigation into a shooting would not end well, for anyone. And Hawk sincerely did not want to face a jury of his peers. Luckily, they were able to link this case to a couple of missing shifters. Well, not lucky, but convenient. Shit. That’s not what he meant. Hawk closed his eyes and shook his head. It wasn’t lucky or convenient for the victims at all. At any rate, the pack had been consulting with one of the detectives, and he managed to convince the chief to sign off on their long game. Shifter cases almost always became cold cases due to lack of evidence—the kind that can be presented in a human court, anyway. The chief was all for anything that could help increase his close rate.

“Putting one more across the bow,” he said. “For effect.”

“Carefully,” Mason answered.

Hawk understood his concern. People were starting to notice. A couple of people had their phones up to film the chaos. He fired one more shot into the pavement, which ricocheted harmlessly into the concrete building. He watched as Peter dragged Penelope down to the ground as they made their way into the closest store. “Packing up.”

“Three nine-one-one calls have gone out. Police ETA of six minutes. Luckily, they’re friendlies,” Holly said.

“I’ll be down in one.” Hawk efficiently disassembled the rifle and packed it away into his backpack. Then he took the stairs two at a time until he reached the exit door. Once there, he paused, took a few breaths, and calmly opened the door. He stepped out a street away from the commotion. Tonya pulled up in the van a few seconds later.

“Thank Goddess we didn’t need plan B. You are truly an artist, Hawk,” she said as he climbed into the passenger seat.

Grady sat at the workstation in the back. With the two of them, they would have had to count on Ryder and Conrad stepping up to help with the pseudo-kidnapping while Tonya drove. Plan A allowed Grady to stay in the back, monitoring the police traffic to make sure they avoided attracting any attention during their escape.

“Where are they now?” Hawk asked.

“Conrad and Ryder have them isolated in the store,” Tonya said as she turned up the next street. Grady reached over and turned a knob. Their packmates’ voices came over the speakers a second later.

“Damn, Conrad is a smooth liar,” Tonya said, a smile tugging her lips as they listened to him suggesting their agency to the shaken targets. “I didn’t know he had it in him.”

Hawk had to agree. Slipping in that bit about his nephews, that was genius. It showed vulnerability and laid a foundation of trust with them. That it was bullshit didn’t matter; his earnest sincerity sold it. He doubted any of them would have been able to sell it so convincingly. Conrad’s voice trailed off as he stepped away to call Mason. They both must have removed their buds to keep extraneous chatter to a minimum.

“Oh, congratulations,” they heard Peter say. Ryder’s confused “What?” echoed in the van, and Grady snickered.

“Can you believe that fucker?” Hawk asked.

“Who wins the pool?” Tonya asked.

“Yeah. Who had ‘Ryder will fuck up a mission with an impromptu proposal’?”

“Aw, come on, Hawk. Can’t you be happy for them?” Grady asked.

“Not at the expense of the mission.”

Tonya shrugged. “It was sweet. And totally unexpected from our Ryder.”

“No shit.”

“Did it ruin your shot?”

“No.”

“And they’re teed up, like we want them?”

“Yeah,” he grumbled.

“Then what’s got you so twisted up about it?”

Hawk shook his head. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was so torn up about Ryder’s proposal. Maybe because it acknowledged that things truly were changing. Maybe he was afraid of losing his hanging time with Ryder, although he hadn’t so far. No, Conrad had slipped into their world, and everything shifted to include him without displacing anyone else.

Hawk sighed. Maybe he was jealous. Maybe he wanted that for himself. Tonya and Grady let him stew in his feelings all the way back to the office. Tonya pulled into the garage under their building and parked the van.

“I’ll go check in with Fall and Connie,” Grady said, picking up his laptop and heading to the stairs. Hawk reached out to grab his arm before letting him go.

“Look, I’m—”

“We all get it, man. Fucking mates.” Grady shrugged, as if that said it all. In a way, Hawk guessed it did. Their own individual jealousies didn’t mean they weren’t beyond thrilled for their packmate. But it did tinge their emotions a little. Or a lot, given the day. Week. Hour.

“I’ve got to put my gear away and get ready for phase two. I’ll meet you up there.”

“See you in the command center,” Tonya said.

Hawk took the elevator up to the fourth floor. The pack owned their whole building, using the first two floors for offices and conference rooms. The rest of the building served as apartments for the whole pack. Mason’s was biggest, taking up the whole top floor, and the floor below that was their training facility. Had it really been only a few months ago he took Ryder up there to help him get himself under control after

Conrad had been taken? And now the asshole had gone and proposed?

He kept his weapons locked away behind a false wall in his apartment. Once he'd cleaned and reassembled the rifle, he placed it in its spot and closed the wall off. He used to keep them downstairs, but since Conrad's sister, Connie, and her twins moved in across the hall, it was better to keep them away from tiny hands. Ryder gave him shit about his James Bond setup, but everyone had agreed—better safe than sorry.

As he changed his clothes, Hawk wondered what it must be like, having a mate. Could you feel another part of yourself slot into place? Did you know something was missing? He didn't think so—he'd never felt like part of him wasn't there. And what in the fuck was he thinking?

He coughed out a laugh and forced his head back in the game. There was a case at hand, and pondering the miracle of mates didn't factor into it. He quickly combed out his hair and went back down to the command center. Tonya was there, along with Connie and Faolan.

"Uncle Hawk!" Tristan shouted as he entered the room.

Hawk smiled and lifted him onto his hip. "You helping out down here?"

"Yep." Tristan nodded definitively, as only a four-year-old can. Hawk chuckled and set him down at the table next to his brother, who was coloring, then ran a hand over each of their heads before continuing into the room.

"Where are we?" he asked Tonya.

"Mason's getting there now. Conrad has completely taken over the scene," Connie said, obviously proud of how her twin brother was handling the situation. They listened in for a while longer as Conrad deftly directed the conversation toward the benefits of working with their agency.

"We should put him in charge of our intake screening," Tonya said.

Hawk agreed. Conrad seemed to have a way about him that set people at ease. That was part of what made him such a

good partner for Ryder. And there Hawk was, thinking about mates again. He mentally growled at himself. “Do we have any eyes in there?” he asked.

Grady shook his head. “Didn’t think there was really any need with bossman there.”

Hawk supposed he was right. Mason could handle anything that went down, and he had Ryder at his back if anything did happen.

“You’d better get down there. He’ll be calling you in soon,” Tonya said.

“Yeah,” Hawk sighed.

Connie gave him a slow once-over before grinning. “You clean up kinda good,” she said.

“Gee, thanks.” He smoothed down his tie. He hated wearing suits, but for the next step, he had to sell himself as a competent bodyguard and driver. That meant dressing the part, down to dark sunglasses and comm earpiece. They had standard-issue earbuds, complete with coiled wire that would run down under their collar for show. He grabbed the keys to the Town Car and went out to the garage. Once he was in the car, he resisted the urge to look in the rearview mirror to check his hair.

“Fucking hell,” he grumbled as he put the car in gear and started back toward the mall. It was only ten minutes away, and the police were still on the scene when he got there. He pulled into one of the closest spots he could. The valet was a werewolf who they’d helped on a case a few months ago. Someone had been stealing from the cars they parked, and he’d been blamed. They cleared his name. Todd gave him a nod as he walked by. Hawk returned it before slipping into the store and hovering near the entrance, where he would wait for Mason’s signal.

THREE

“LOOK, I already told you everything I know,” Peter growled. He understood the officers were doing their jobs, but damn. How many times did he have to say it? No, he didn’t know of anyone who would want to hurt them. No, he didn’t have any enemies—that he knew of, anyway. It was exhausting. And infuriating. And Penny, the traitor, had left him to handle everything a half hour ago. Any fear he might have been feeling after the initial attack had burned off and left nothing but frustration in its wake. He was about to go off on them, but Conrad smiled and put a comforting hand on his forearm.

“I get it,” Conrad said before turning back to the police officers. “Officer Haynes, I really don’t think he has any more to offer. At least not right now. Could they come down to the station later in the week and revisit this? Maybe something will have come back to them by then? After the shock has worn off?”

Officer Haynes gave them a long look, then sighed and snapped his notebook closed. “I suppose that would be all right. No later than Thursday. Got it?” he asked sternly.

Peter pushed down the urge to snarl. “Wednesday’s clear for me,” he bit out through clenched teeth. It didn’t fucking matter—he had nothing else to say.

“I’ll call your captain and set it up, all right?” Mason said, smoothly defusing the situation. With one last nod, the officers finally left them alone.

“Jesus,” Peter groaned, and Conrad chuckled.

“I feel your pain, man.”

“Why was it so hard for them to understand?”

“They’re trying to make sure. I mean, if it was an ex-girlfriend—or boyfriend,” Conrad tacked on, glancing over at Ryder with a soft look in his eyes. “Well, they want to make sure there isn’t anyone who could be holding a grudge.”

“Then why did I have to tell him that there wasn’t six times?”

“An abundance of assurance?”

Peter could tell by the look on Conrad’s face that he didn’t buy that excuse either. It was enough to make him laugh.

Conrad nudged their shoulders together. “Look, we gotta go, but you’re in good hands with Mason here.”

“Wait, let me get your number. Maybe we can hang out sometime.”

“Oh, uh...” Conrad looked at Ryder and Mason before nodding. “Yeah, I’d like that. Text me an update later? If you’re not on lockdown, that is,” he said with a wink.

Peter took Conrad’s phone and programmed his number, then sent himself a message. After his phone pinged, he handed Conrad’s phone back to him. “Thanks. For, you know.” He motioned at the entire area with his hand. “You’ve been very nice, considering you were nearly collateral damage in our father’s nefarious business.”

“Oh, double word score with that one,” Conrad teased before taking Ryder’s hand and leaving.

“I like them,” he said to Penny, who’d finally dragged herself away from the purse section. The look she turned to Mason was downright predatory. Peter considered telling her to knock it off—he really wanted Mason’s agency to take over their security, if only to keep Creepers Incorporated away from them.

“May I have one of my men drive you home?” Mason asked, completely failing to fall under Penny’s spell.

Peter had to cover a smile at her shocked gasp.

“I...” she said.

“Well, because your driver was incapacitated earlier. That seems to be what opened the window for the sniper to attack.”

“Sniper attack?” Peter exclaimed. When Mason put it that way, it sounded, well, it sounded serious. With a capital S. Not merely a situation, but an actual, targeted, calculated, out-to-get-them attack.

Mason gave him a look that brokered no bullshit. “I assure you, this is a very dangerous situation. I realize you’ve only met me, and your father hasn’t had a chance to vet my team. If you would prefer to call him and have him assign you another driver, we would be happy to wait with you. I’m sure it won’t take too long.”

“I’m bored. I want to go home now.” Penny pouted. More likely she was upset she wasn’t getting the attention from Mason she wanted.

“You realize Dad’s going to kill us, right?”

“Duh. Might as well take advantage of our last few moments of freedom, then.” She moved over to Mason and ran a hand down his biceps. “Will you come home with us?” she asked coyly.

“It would be my honor to escort you two home.” He turned to motion to a man standing by the door. Peter was surprised he hadn’t noticed him earlier. The guy was tall, his hair pulled back and tied into a low ponytail. Peter would bet manbuns were a thing with this guy. The key difference being he could actually pull it off, even in the well-fitted black suit he was wearing. The guy nodded at them and then disappeared from the store.

“Where’s he going?”

“To get the car. Now stay behind me when we walk out, okay?”

“Whatever,” Penny said as she flounced toward the doors. At least she stopped inside, away from the giant glass

entrance.

Peter scrambled to pick up the bags, but Mason had already gotten them.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got this,” he said.

“Okay,” he conceded, but he didn’t like it. He hated making people think they had to act like servants around them. Penny and Paul had no qualms about it. Then again, they both seemed to have some kind of magic that charmed everyone so much they wound up thinking it was their idea to wait on them. If Peter didn’t know better, he’d think they had the power to put people under a love spell.

“Don’t think too much about it. Your job is to go about with your life. Ours is to make sure you get the opportunity to do that.”

“I don’t want to put anyone out.”

“Believe me, you won’t be,” Mason said, cutting a glance at Penny.

Peter snorted. “Yeah, you’ll have your hands full with her. And with Paul. I hope your team is ready for a challenge.”

“Oh, I think we can handle it,” Mason said with a wink. His guy had pulled up to the curb and was standing by the open rear passenger door, waiting on them to come out. He looked up at the buildings surrounding them, like he was scanning for trouble. Peter supposed he was. A second later, he turned their way and nodded at Mason.

“Okay, ready? Remember, stay behind me.” He led them outside and quickly ushered them into the car. Once the door was closed, Mason and his driver met at the rear of the car to deposit their packages in the trunk and have a few words. Next to him, Penny tried to open the opposite door but found it locked.

“What the fuck?” she asked, getting irritated.

“Sorry, ma’am. It’s for your protection as well as ours,” the driver said as he got back in behind the wheel. Mason took the passenger seat, and they pulled out onto the street. Mason

looked out at the rooftops as they made their way out of downtown.

“I don’t like it,” Penny grumbled. Peter knew she hated to be confined. Locking the doors and preventing her from rolling down the windows put her on edge.

“Yeah, well, it beats getting shot when you sneak out, doesn’t it?” Peter asked, trying to get her to see reason. The driver snorted but schooled his features quickly.

“We want you to be safe,” Mason said. “I promise we can talk about your needs and work out a reasonable compromise later.”

“*If* Daddy hires you, that is.” She crossed her arms and leaned back against the seat.

“It definitely wouldn’t help our cause if something happened to you after you opened that door.”

Penny didn’t say anything else for a while. That was all right by Peter. She was still processing what had happened. He knew they’d be huddled together in one of their rooms later, holding each other until the shaking stopped. It had been scary, but... he wasn’t sure what he was actually feeling. Sure, they’d almost been killed this morning, but he felt completely calm. The shots missed by a mile. This might have been a warning shot, as it were. An opening salvo in some battle against their father. But he didn’t think they would be collateral damage. And RIP to anyone who went after their father through them. There’d been an incident with a kidnapper when they were kids. *That* one turned out ugly. They hadn’t been hurt. Much, anyway. Bumps and bruises from being jostled about. One of the kidnappers had backhanded him when he screamed for help. But the wrath brought down by Joshua Thornston had been biblical.

Peter was startled out of his thoughts when he felt a hand on his. He looked over, and Penny offered him a tiny smile. He squeezed her hand.

“It’ll be fine. Probably not even after us. Hell, they could have been there for Conrad.”

Penny snorted. “That guy? No way. If they wanted anyone, it was Ryder.”

Mason glanced over his shoulder at them but didn’t interrupt. Their driver huffed out a laugh he tried to smother under his breath.

“Sorry. We don’t mean to talk about your other clients,” Peter said. He raised his eyebrows at Penny and nodded toward the front. Penny rolled her eyes and turned toward the window.

“No problem. We don’t discuss other clients. We adhere to strict confidentiality guidelines when we take on a case...” Mason shook his head. “You never know who will be triggered to violence or by what. The most mundane man may have the most vicious enemies.”

The driver nodded grimly, and Peter reconsidered what he’d assumed about Conrad. It made him wonder how he came to need that flashy cane he was using.

“Wow, that’s not depressing or anything,” Penny said. Luckily, they were pulling up to the security gate at the entrance of their property. The driver, and damn, he really needed to learn the guy’s name, rolled down both his window and Penny’s.

“Let us in, Carlo,” she said, already bored with their adventure.

“Ma’am,” he said, tipping his hat down, then turned to the front seats. “IDs, gentlemen?”

“Of course.” The driver was ready with both his and Mason’s ID. He handed them over without protest. Carlo took them into the booth to check them out. Peter didn’t know a lot about their security system, but he knew they had access to all kinds of information they shouldn’t. He remembered his father hiring a hacker once. Peter had followed him around the entire week he’d been there. He’d been nine and enthralled with that old *Matrix* movie. He pretended he lived in the computer and had instant access to everything he ever wanted.

Now that he looked back on it, he should have been more wary of a man who called himself Destroyer. Anything his father wanted the guy to access couldn't have been good.

Carlo came out and handed the licenses back. "Take them to the front. Get out and wait next to the car to be escorted in. Do not try to enter the house on your own. Any attempt will be viewed as a hostile act and you will be dealt with accordingly."

"Jesus, Carlo," Penny said with another epic eye roll. He cut a narrowed glance at her, but she'd already started trying to roll up her window. "Uh, driver guy? Can you please roll this up?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, giving her a salute before following her order.

"Can you believe that macho bullshit?"

Peter declined to comment. He'd always been leery of Carlo and his entire crew. He understood their job was to keep them safe, but he felt some of them were more invested in escalating a situation than evaluating what was happening.

"He's charged with your safety. It makes sense that they don't want strangers roaming the grounds, given what happened this morning," the driver said as he brought the car to a stop under the portico by the front door. After putting the vehicle in Park, he got out and opened the rear door. Peter reached out to accept the offered hand, and something sizzled in the air. He stared at the driver for a minute and was going to ask his name any second now. The moment dragged on until he felt a kick to his leg.

"Some other people want to get out too, you know," Penny said.

"Of course," the driver said. He gently tugged Peter forward and let go to assist Penny. She didn't react to his touch at all, and Peter thought he might have imagined it, but the look on the driver's face when he turned back to him told him he hadn't. Something had happened between them. He didn't have long to think about it, because Penny grabbed his hand

and dragged him up the steps into the house, calling out her thanks over her shoulder.

“Leave it to you two to cause a scene,” Paul said from where he waited at the top of the stairs once they were inside. Penny hooked her arm with Paul’s, hauling them both toward her room at the end of the hall.

“What the fuck?” Paul asked.

“Where’s Daddy?” she asked quietly.

Paul’s look softened, and he pulled her into a hug. He met Peter’s eyes over her head. “It’s okay. It’s over now,” he soothed as he rocked her.

“I’m not scared,” she insisted, shoving her way out of his arms. “I’m fucking pissed.”

“Okay,” Paul said slowly.

“If whoever shot at us really wanted to kill us, we’d be dead,” she explained with a roll of her eyes. She started pacing in front of her bed. “Think about it. They took out Marvin. We were sitting ducks.”

Paul shot a questioning look at Peter.

“I had that thought too. That this was a warning,” Peter said with a shrug.

“And whatever it is, it’s all on Daddy.”

“We don’t know that for sure, Pen.”

“What the fuck else would it be?” she demanded. “You haven’t pissed anyone off. Not like that. And I sure as fuck haven’t.”

Paul groaned and fell back onto the bed. Peter bit his tongue to prevent what was on his mind from spilling out—that it was possible one of Penny’s admirers had had enough. And maybe they were in worse trouble than they could imagine.

FOUR

“FUCKING HELL,” Hawk whispered under his breath. The estate was massive. Pillars ran around the house, supporting a second-story wrap-around patio. The manicured lawn seemed to roll on forever, broken up with sections of bushes trimmed into ornamental shapes. He had no doubt there was probably an Olympic-sized pool out back, next to some tennis courts or something. But what really pushed it over the top was the armed guards patrolling the grounds and the three guys perched on the top of the house, like they were some kind of White House snipers.

“A bit much,” Mason nodded.

“Well, you do dirty, you need more cleaners, I guess.” Mason elbowed him in the side, and he shut up. Concentrating on his surroundings, he tried to put their charges out of his mind. He wasn’t very successful at it. “There’s something off about them,” he said quietly.

“Agreed.”

Mason didn’t say anything else, and Hawk supposed there wasn’t much else to say. Instead, he busied himself with unloading bags from the trunk. He left them on the steps, and a goon appeared from inside to whisk the packages away. They waited another five minutes before a tall, handsome man in an impeccably tailored suit exited the double doors.

“Alpha Vargar, welcome to my home.”

Mason bristled next to him, and Hawk could understand why. In all their research, they’d somehow missed the fact that

Joshua Thornston, in addition to being a crooked businessman, was an alpha. Hawk couldn't tell what species he was, but the cloak of power was undeniable. Probably how he did so well in his business deals. Hawk stood up straighter next to Mason and prepared for the worst.

"Alpha Thornston, a pleasure to meet you." Mason nodded. "May I present my beta, Hawk Connolly." Hawk inclined his head to bare his neck in customary greeting.

"Please, call me Joshua. I understand I have you two to thank for getting my children home."

"Yes. We wanted to make sure they made it back safely, given their regular driver was indisposed."

"Of course," he conceded. "Come, let's discuss business." He led them into the house.

Hawk stayed a half-step behind his alpha, watching his back and taking note of the various rooms they passed and any occupants who might be in them. For all the security outside, the house was devoid of armed guards inside. Then again, he'd felt the telltale uneasiness of various levels of wards as he followed the alphas. He was surprised that the weakest one had been on the front door, but then again, maybe he wasn't. After all, if you planned to bide your time with an attack, it would be more advantageous to strike inside and get out quick, before you were discovered. Concentrically tighter, stronger wards protecting the family made sense. There was a very clear "get the fuck away" feeling as they passed the stairs. And another "you have no business here" vibe outside Thornston's office. He watched the man reach up to place a palm over a rune carved into the doorway and the uneasiness abated.

"Can't be too careful," Thornston said as he walked around the desk. "Please, sit." He motioned to the two chairs facing him. Mason sat on the edge of one, but Hawk remained standing at his shoulder. Thornston smiled and nodded. "Your appearance today was a bit of fortuitous luck."

"A former client called me in after he witnessed the incident. Although we can't rule out him as the ultimate target, we felt it prudent to escort your pack back to you."

“Convenient for you.”

Mason shrugged. “Given our particular, uh, ‘extra abilities,’ we couldn’t in good conscience leave them unprotected after that.”

Hawk could almost hear the air quotes around the “extra abilities” as Mason talked.

Thornston surprised him by barking out a laugh. “I suppose that’s true. Alphahood does tend to bring out a certain paternal responsibility for everyone close, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, it does. Well, I’m glad your children are safe,” Mason said as he stood up. He started to turn to leave, but Thornston stopped him.

“Wait. I think we could benefit from your... extra abilities, I believe you called them. Yours and your pack.”

“We’d be happy to review your security, make sure you have all the protection you need.”

“No need for that.” He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “The grounds are covered. No, what I need now is someone to watch my children. If this attack really was targeted at them, if there’s any risk they could be killed or taken hostage, I want them to have round-the-clock protection.”

“I could probably spare a man,” Mason said.

“No.”

“No? But you said—”

“No, I want to hire your entire pack. I have three children. I need at least three of your wolves around twenty-four-seven to make sure each one of them is safe.”

“Well, we do have other cases, but I think I can assign some people to your detail.”

“Including yourself,” Thornston insisted. Hawk resisted rolling his eyes. Every single big-shot CEO they’d worked with had tried to wrangle Mason into being on their direct

team. As if having him around would change how they did their jobs.

“I have to be available to my entire pack. I’m sure you understand. But my team is highly capable. Hawk here would be the point man while on site,” Mason countered.

Thornston narrowed his eyes and stared at Mason for a moment. “Agreed,” he said with a nod and then sat back in his chair as if that concluded their business.

Mason was a stickler for details if nothing else. He leaned forward and appeared thoughtful. “What exactly do you expect of this detail?”

“As I said before, twenty-four-seven service.”

“You’ll be providing room and board for my pack?”

Thornston nodded. “We can set up a room upstairs, and they can take meals in the kitchen.” Hawk struggled to keep his opinion to himself. Of course they would be treated as servants.

“And how long would you expect this service to last?”

“Until this threat is neutralized.” Thornston’s eyes glowed a sickly red, and it took everything in Hawk not to react.

“Well then, I’ll have my staff draw up a bid and messenger it to you by end of day.”

“Very well. Do consider my request. Carefully.”

Mason nodded and led Hawk out of the room and back to the front door. Hawk felt a tingling in his spine and looked up the stairs to see Peter watching them. He tipped his head and followed his alpha outside. The car had been turned around while they were inside.

Even though Hawk was dying to talk about the fact that Thornston was some kind of alpha, probably a made one at that, he buried the urge while in the car. There was no telling what the security team had done to the vehicle while it was in their possession. It had undoubtedly been searched. Chances were they also bugged it and outfitted it with a GPS tracker. If

they didn't hack the car's electronics to listen to them over the Bluetooth. Hell, Hawk would be disappointed if they hadn't.

"I'm texting Holly the details and ask her to begin a quote."

Hawk nodded. "What are the chances the strike was directed at them?"

"Well, Conrad had been there too, but I seriously doubt Warren's escalated to murdering the boys' uncle."

"He was scared shitless after our last meeting with him," Hawk added. In truth, they had no idea who the boys' father was, no matter how often they asked. Connie was tight-lipped about it, saying he was a one-night stand who left her with the bonus plan. "So that means it's probable the Thornstons were the target."

"Yeah. Hopefully, it's just a low-level player trying to scare them. Some idiot who thinks they're a quick payoff. Whoever it is, they'll make a mistake."

"And then we take them," Hawk growled. Mason smiled and shook his head. They didn't talk the rest of the ride. Mason typed away on his phone as Hawk took them to a storage facility on the other side of town. There, he parked in an extra-wide unit. He and Grady had spent one weekend building a Faraday cage inside it for cases like this. Once the gate was closed, no electronic signals could get out. They both exited and stripped, then changed into the coveralls Holly and Phoebe had left inside for them. They put their phones in a steel box on the shelf. Then they left and closed the gate, locking the car inside, before climbing into the back of Bianca's waiting car.

"Hey, bossman," Bianca said.

Mason reached forward to squeeze the back of her neck, then moved to grip Holly's shoulder.

"Good meeting?" she asked.

"Potential new clients. Joshua Thornston wants to hire us."

“Noted,” she said with a nod. They waited until they were safely back in their warded building to discuss the case any further. The entire pack, including Conrad and Ryder, were gathered around the table in their biggest conference room.

“Do you really think they bugged the car?” Grady asked. He squinted at them as if he’d be able to see listening devices on them if he stared hard enough.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Can you go by tomorrow and check it out for us? Don’t do anything; make a note of it.”

“You got it.”

“Thank you. Now, on to the more...” Mason looked over at Hawk. Yeah, he’d seen it too. This was going to get ugly real quick. Hawk nodded, and Mason continued, “The more... challenging part of this mission.”

“We’ll be saddled with putting up with high-dollar brats for the foreseeable future?” Grady guessed.

“Three high-dollar brats who are not one hundred percent human, if our senses are right,” Mason clarified, and several voices cried out at once. He put his hands up to stave off their responses. “We don’t know what they are, but there’s something about them. I watched Penelope enchant three different store clerks and two police officers while I was there.”

“I don’t think she knew what she was doing, though,” Hawk added, with a shake of his head. “She seems to genuinely believe it’s her beauty that’s getting her what she wants. But I did feel something brushing my consciousness when she turned it on me. Peter has something too. Different, but still some kind of power.”

“I think you’re right. I felt it too,” Ryder added.

“We were both able to resist, but be aware of it. We have to assume all three may have some kind of magical abilities, however impossible it seems. Keep an eye out for each other. By the time you notice it yourself, you may already be under their thrall. If you see anyone acting out of the ordinary, let me know,” Mason ordered.

“So who are you sending?” Tonya asked.

“I would have preferred to send Ryder, but your cover is blown.”

“Sorry about that, boss.”

Mason shook his head. “Couldn’t be helped.”

“Well, we could have probably used more stealth about herding them to the exit,” Conrad added, tilting his head and exposing his throat to Mason.

Mason smiled and cupped a hand around his neck. “You proved to be more valuable in the hook. The way you sold us was far less suspicious than what we had planned, so thank you for saving the entire plan.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Conrad said quietly, blushing at the praise. Ryder beamed, obviously proud of his mate.

“So who will you send instead?” Ryder asked.

“I was thinking Tonya and Faolan. In addition to Hawk, since they’ve already met him.”

“Makes sense,” Hawk nodded. He knew part of the reason Mason wanted to send Ryder was because he was already mated. Given what he felt meeting Penelope, it made sense. Anyone mated would never fall for their charms. That was part of what made both Tonya and Faolan good choices. Tonya was committed to Holly, and Faolan was so deeply attached to Connie there was no doubt they were fated. Except mates weren’t supposed to exist anymore. Conrad and Ryder were a one-off miracle. And Faolan refused to acknowledge his attraction to Connie. One day, though, he would have to stop with all the denials and fucking talk to her.

“Anything else we should know?” Holly asked.

“Well, there is one—tiny—thing we may have left out,” Mason said. He shared a look with Hawk. Now was where the bottom would drop out on everyone.

“Well?” Faolan asked. He knew better than to demand his alpha start talking, but Hawk could tell he was dying with curiosity.

“Remember how we dealt with those wolves who had Conrad?”

Everyone nodded. Conrad paled and swallowed thickly.

“What about them? They’re all dead, aren’t they?” Holly asked cautiously.

Mason looked at Hawk, but Hawk stayed quiet. This kind of news was better coming from their alpha.

“We still don’t know how they were made into wolves.” Mason glanced at him again. Hawk nodded at his alpha in encouragement.

“Fucking spill it already,” Ryder snapped as he grabbed Conrad’s hand. “What are we dealing with?”

“Thornston is an alpha. Some kind of made shifter.”

“Are you sure?” Holly asked.

“Yeah. His eyes glowed reddish orange,” Hawk said. He looked over at Conrad, whose face went blank as he started to shiver.

“Fucking hell,” Ryder said as he wrapped Conrad up in a hug.

FIVE

“DID YOU SEE THAT?” Peter asked after the bodyguards left.

Paul was busy studying his phone. “No, bro. What’s up?” he asked without taking his eyes off his Instagram feed.

Peter sighed. “Nothing.”

Something was weird about them, and Peter hated mysteries. His instincts told him they were good guys, but they were hiding something too. Something big. He’d always been good at that sort of thing. When they were young, their father would take him into meetings, holding him on his lap. Peter loved being singled out to spend time with their father, even if there were a bunch of strangers around. He’d scribble on paper, and then show off whatever masterpiece he’d created. Of course, they would all coo over it.

Every time, before the meeting was over, his father would turn to him and ask what he thought of everyone. They would all laugh at his childish honesty, but there were some people who set off his senses from time to time. Those people were never allowed back into the house. He used to be so proud his father trusted his judgment to the point where he wouldn’t do business with them if Peter didn’t like them. He learned that wasn’t exactly true when he was a teenager. They had crashed a party on his father’s yacht. Paul and Penny flirted with one of the security, and they walked right on board. Once there, they quickly made a beeline for the bar. While his siblings started downing glasses of pilfered champagne, Peter had taken the time to look around. There were several businessmen

gathered, including ones he'd warned his father about. One of the worst of them grabbed his arm and pulled him close. The man's intention was clear, but Peter was ripped away before the businessman could lay another hand on him.

"You know, Bert, this partnership has been beneficial for both of us for a long time. It's a shame it's going to have to end now," his father had said as two of his goons dragged the businessman outside. Then he addressed the room at large. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I need to talk to my children privately."

They all nodded and all but disappeared into thin air. His father rubbed a hand along his arm over and over before cupping his hands tightly at the back of Paul's and Penelope's necks.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a voice that made the hair on the back of Peter's neck stand up. He'd never heard that tone from the man. "You know this is off-limits to you three. Always," he finished with a growl.

"We, uh..." Peter started.

"Not you. I know you wouldn't disobey me without these two encouraging it. Now, explain."

"We were bored waiting at the hotel," Penelope whined.

"I don't care," their father roared. And Peter could have sworn his eyes glowed a bright red, but that had to be a trick of the light. "You are not allowed here." He was breathing heavily through his nose, like he was having trouble controlling himself. He started to frog-march Paul and Penny off the boat. Peter followed along, his head down. He heard a pained shout from somewhere ahead of them, but he was too afraid to look up.

"Raymond!" their father shouted once they were back on the dock. The man appeared out of nowhere. He looked as timid as Peter felt right then. "Did you allow my children on board?"

Raymond gulped. "Uh, no. That was Wes."

His father took a deep breath, and his head shook on the exhale. “Please escort these three back to the hotel immediately. Do not allow them to leave the room again. And tell Wes I want to see him. Right. Fucking. Now.”

He pushed Paul and Penny forward, making them stumble. Peter rushed forward to help them keep their balance. Their father was already stalking back to the boat. They’d all been too scared to speak on the way back, and they cuddled close together on the bed for the rest of the afternoon.

That was the day Peter understood he didn’t know a thing about his father. It wasn’t until later he realized he never saw Wes or Bert again.

He shook off the memory and followed Paul back to Penny’s room.

“Do you think he’ll hire them?” he asked.

“Probably.” Penny heaved a sigh. Peter didn’t know if she was more put out because she was about to have a babysitter or because neither of them had reacted to her flirting.

“Whatever. It’s not like we can’t get away from them,” Paul said.

“I don’t know.” Peter shook his head. “They didn’t even blink when Penny smiled at them.”

“Eh, no big deal. We’ll loosen them up once they’re here full-time,” Paul said.

“And we’ll have plenty of opportunity to ditch them. There’s that concert next week, and don’t forget the benefit this weekend,” Penny said, suddenly much more engaged. She was probably already thinking about the designer dresses Milo had sent over for her to choose from.

“Dad’s going to be pissed,” Peter hedged.

Penny shrugged. “He’ll get over it. He always does.”

“Now, tell me about these bodyguards,” Paul said.

“What’s there to tell? They acted professional. The boss showed up, talked to us for a while, then called in someone

else to drive us home. End of story.”

“And that’s it?” Paul asked before turning to Penny, who rolled her eyes.

“Bossman, Mason, was tall, blond. Hot. Strong jaw, built like a brick wall but carried it well. Not like a bodybuilder who can barely move. You could tell he’s always in charge of every situation. You know how Daddy is when he’s in business mode? Yeah, that. Didn’t react, no matter how much I turned it up.”

“And the other one?”

“Tall, but more of a skinny guy. Black hair—”

“Reddish brown. And he wasn’t skinny. He was lean. Lanky, more of a swimmer’s build. Long fingers. With callouses. He must use them a lot.” The looks Penny and Paul shared as they stalked toward him made Peter very nervous. “What?”

“Uh-huh. I knew it,” Penny said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Peter turned to run, but he was caught before he could make it more than a few steps.

“Baby bro’s got a crush!” Paul crooned.

“What! No, I don’t!”

“Oh yes, you do. I even noticed it in the car,” Penny said.

“We’ll have to make sure they’re paired together,” Paul said. Penny nodded, and they both stood up. They looked Peter over, then pulled out their phones, and Peter had a sinking feeling.

“Look, whatever you’re planning, stop.”

“We’re not doing anything, baby brother,” Paul said.

“Sure. I believe that.”

Penny smiled and put her arm around his shoulders. “Will you trust us?”

“Whatever.” He shook his head and stepped out of the room, leaving them alone to their plotting. He knew there was no stopping them once they latched on to an idea. Unfortunately, their current agenda involved him, and that was more than enough to send him running for the hills.

They’d be at it for hours, and his nerves would be a wreck by the time they were finished. He sighed and went into the upstairs office. He loved it there. The walls were lined with bookshelves. They were about half-filled with books, and the other half with random pieces of art—most of it cheap souvenirs from tourist traps. His father hated them, forbade them from the downstairs, but Peter didn’t care. These, to him, were the real treasures of their collection. Sure, some of the originals they had hanging downstairs were beautiful, but they didn’t mean anything to him. What did he care about overpriced swirls of paint some guy did a few hundred years ago? He dropped into one of the leather chairs and let his gaze wander around the room. He stopped at the paper-clip replica of *The Thinker* sitting on the end of the desk. Smiling, he picked it up. They’d been in Barcelona for a week while their father had business. Of course, they didn’t get to see much. Most of the time, they were sequestered in the hotel. They had a couple of meals out and one night of being shuffled from a club to a boat and then right back to their rooms.

Peter had wandered the halls while Paul and Penny took advantage of the spa. The gift shop had a corner of work by local artists. He’d been so proud to find something he thought his father would appreciate, that he immediately bought it, already planning on showing it to him over dinner. But his father had been late that night. Again. And the next day, Raymond told them he’d been called away, and they were to return home. By the time Peter remembered about it, most of the excitement had passed. He left it on his father’s desk with a note that he had been *thinking* about him. His father mumbled a thanks at dinner, and that night, it appeared in the upstairs office.

Peter frowned at the memory. Surely there had to be more to it than that? A note, a grumbled response, and then a dismissal? He tried to remember any time his father had spent

with them on that trip, but he came up short. He clearly remembered Raymond driving them around, the windows tinted so dark Peter couldn't make out the scenery whizzing by. But where was his father? Working obviously. He thought about other trips and realized they were all the same. He had these tchotchkes from all over the world, but no real stories to go with them. He could name the place he got them, which hotel gift shop, but that was it.

"Peter," his sister called from the doorway. From her tone of voice, she'd been there a while.

"Oh, sorry." He looked over and raised his eyebrows.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Thinking. Remembering some of the trips we've taken."

She shuffled into the room and plopped on top of him, then took the sculpture from his hand.

"Barcelona, right?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, get used to only having these for company for a while. I heard Daddy on the phone. He's hiring those guys from today."

"Not that it matters," Paul said from the door. He picked up a nail art picture of wildflowers Peter remembered getting someplace in Texas. "We're back in lockdown anyway."

"Aren't we always?" Peter grumbled. "I mean, can either of you remember anything *about* any of these places?" he asked, motioning around the room.

Paul held up the picture. "I remember you sneaking around that souvenir shop and ducking under the shelves to hide from that one bodyguard. And him freaking out when you hid under that pile of blankets and he couldn't find you for ten minutes."

Penny snickered. "Dad was so pissed. 'How could you lose one child in this craphole?'" she asked, lowering her voice to imitate his tone.

“And then you snuck out behind him and popped up near the registers like ‘what’s happening?’” Paul added with a laugh of his own.

“And this one, you looked Raymond square in the eye as you plopped it down at the register and demanded he whip out the credit card.” Penny was holding up a truly offensive, and graphic, wire sculpture of a couple engaged in sexy times. Peter must have been about sixteen when he did that.

“He was so uncomfortable. The clerk kept staring at him with wide eyes,” Paul added.

“Sir, are you *sure* that is appropriate for your, uh, son?” Penny asked. “And the way that muscle in his jaw twitched when you said, ‘Please, Daddy?’”

Paul lost it and doubled over with laughter, tears running down his face. “Jesus, you were a menace.”

Peter couldn’t help but smile along with them. He’d forgotten some of the antics that went with most of things in that room. It was a shrine to edging that line between good kid and holy terror. Penny leaned her head on his shoulder.

“I wish I was as brave as you,” she said quietly.

“What are you talking about? You and Paul sneak out all the time.”

Paul snorted and tried to wiggle his way into the chair as well. Peter shoved his hips, and he settled on the arm, draping his legs across both of them. “Yeah, big rebels here. We sneak out with Daddy’s credit card down to the spa, knowing there is always someone following us.”

“You’re the one who squirrels away his allowance and then actually goes out of his way to meet people,” Penny said.

“Do you think we didn’t know about the donations you make behind Daddy’s back?” Paul added.

Peter blushed. He thought his anonymous donations had gone unnoticed. He took the sculpture from Penny. “Well, true art needs to be encouraged and shared.”

“Children! Downstairs!” their father shouted. They shared a look, and Peter rolled his eyes before he pulled them both in for a hug.

“Whatever happens, we’re in this together, right?” he asked.

Paul cupped the back of his neck and stared into his eyes. “Always, baby brother. Always.”

SIX

AFTER THEY MANAGED to calm everyone down, Hawk and Mason told them everything they knew about the house and the grounds. The wards in particular were troubling. That meant Thornston had access to a magic user. It opened up a whole new line of questioning. Had he hired someone to put them in place? Was it a close ally? Or worse... someone he'd kidnapped and compelled to work for him by force? That was a complete wild card. And Hawk hated not knowing all the parameters. He left the conference room to grab a cup of coffee when Holly and Mason started to work up their quote. He doubted their fees would be too high for the millionaire, giving him a reason to back out of this case. It was his children's safety after all. And Hawk had a feeling Thornston would get off on the power of having Mason under his thumb.

Conrad cornered him in their break room. "Are you sure? About Thornston?"

Hawk sighed. "Yeah. I saw it myself."

Conrad backed off and started pacing, his cane clicking as he worked his way from one end of the room to the other.

"Look, you don't have to go anywhere near him," Hawk said.

"That doesn't matter. The fact that he's out there. Unchecked. It's not good." Conrad shook his head as he rambled.

"No, it's not. But we know about him now. We'll keep an eye on him."

“That’s not good enough,” Conrad growled. Hawk had to hand it to him. It was impressive coming from a human. “How long has he been out there, doing whatever he wants? And getting away with it?”

“Con,” Ryder said quietly. He reached out to take Conrad’s arm, but Conrad moved away from him. Ryder nodded and kept his hands to himself. “Thanks to you, we know about this conspiracy. We *wouldn’t* know about him if it wasn’t for you. *You* made the connections.” Conrad stopped pacing and dropped his head to Ryder’s chest. Ryder didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around him. “You made the difference.”

Hawk smiled at Ryder over Conrad’s head. It was Conrad’s discovery of his boss’s embezzlement that started this whole case to begin with. Without his data, they would still be in the dark about these made wolves and Thornston’s role in it, whatever that might be. Their hellhound contact wasn’t able to relay any information after they took away Conrad’s abductors. At least, there wasn’t anything they were willing to share.

“Okay, he’s got to be the one who made Alex into... whatever he was at the end. He had to have been Alex’s alpha, right? Along with the others at the warehouse?” Conrad asked.

“That’s probably a safe assumption.” Hawk nodded. “Look, we’ll be surveilling him while we’re at the house. We’ll snoop around as much as we can.”

“And how do you expect to manage that? With all those wards in place?” Conrad asked. His voice was muffled by Ryder’s chest.

“Fuck if I know,” Hawk said before he took a drink. Conrad chuckled and moved to Ryder’s side so he could face Hawk.

“Okay. While you do that, I can follow the money trail. See if it leads to any other rich assholes. For all we know, there could be a whole secret society operating under our noses.”

“If he’s linked to anyone else, I’m sure you’ll find it,” Ryder said, pulling Conrad close to kiss his temple.

“And about those wards, Mason does have contacts with that coven. We’ll get feelers out for any missing mages. Maybe the griffins know something. Oh. And Anodo. He could help, right? Because they might be fae? Yeah.” Conrad nodded and started for his office, his mind already whirling, Hawk was sure. But he stopped in the doorway and spun around to rush back to Ryder. “Thanks, babe,” he said with a quick peck to his lips. Then he was gone.

“My mate, everyone,” Ryder said, shaking his head. The fond smile on his face betrayed his annoyance.

“I can’t believe you proposed, you fucker.”

“I can’t either. I was staring in the window, and the rings were there, and…” Ryder shook his head and shrugged, but he had a giddy look on his face. “I don’t regret it, though.”

“Well, he still hasn’t said yes, has he?” So Hawk was still sore about it. He felt he had reason, given the level of precision his shot had to be.

Ryder’s eyes widened, and he looked so scared for a moment that Hawk took pity on him. He wrapped him up in a playful headlock and led him back to the conference room.

“Dude, you know he’ll say yes, whenever you get around to asking him properly. And then we’ll have to deal with months of wedding planning. I swear, if you go all groomzilla on me, I’m walking.”

Ryder chuckled and shoved him away. “Thanks. I think I’ll go check on him.”

“Anything to get out of this case, huh?”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you,” he called as he walked away.

Hawk smiled and turned back to his alpha. “What now, boss?”

“Go pack. Thornston’s already called me and demanded I bring the body detail over as soon as possible. He wants to

meet with each of you personally.”

“Do you think he’ll bring someone in to adjust the wards?” Faolan asked.

“Someone will have to. The ones on the stairs were practically chanting ‘get out’ when we walked near them. There’s no way we’d be able to go up to the upper floors with them in place,” Hawk said.

“That’s my thought too. Pay attention to everything. I want as much detail as you can get. Do the wards feel familiar to any of you. Look for any affiliations they may reveal. Where they may have come from. Anything you can get, got it? We’ll compare notes when we regroup here.”

They all nodded before breaking away to go to their own apartments. Holly wrapped an arm around Tonya’s waist, and they took off together. Faolan went for the stairs, no doubt heading for their offices on the first floor. Connie would be working the front desk, so he was probably going to fill her in on the details.

“Weapons?” Hawk asked Mason once they were alone.

“I think minimal. He’ll probably be expecting you to bring your personal sidearms. I doubt you’ll need much more than that. You saw all the firepower the guards were carrying.”

“Yeah, but what if it’s those guards I’m up against?”

“Improvise,” Mason said with a glint in his eye.

“Sir, yes, sir.”

Hawk took the stairs up to his apartment. The first thing he did was go to his James Bond wall and stare at the arsenal he had carefully cataloged there. *Personal sidearm*, Mason had said. He grabbed his Glock and two magazines for it, as well as two boxes of bullets. He debated grabbing more, but Mason was right. Given that *Hawk* was the threat they were ostensibly there to protect against, a repeat attack was unlikely.

He checked his watch and made a face. There wasn’t enough time to take a quick shower, no matter how dirty Thornston’s place had made him feel. He wished he could

burn the suit and take a scalding hot shower. And now he was headed back there. Instead, he threw some clothes into the bag with his weapons and after a second thought, decided to grab his art bag. He didn't know if they would be coming back after they reported to the mansion. And there were some nice museum-quality works he'd seen that he wouldn't mind sketching in his downtime. If he had any. That thought almost had him putting his bag back, but he held on to it anyway. He could always leave it in their room. With a sigh, he went back down to their offices to meet with the rest of the team.

He studied the photos of the Thornston kids while he waited. Now that he knew they were *something* other, he could almost see it in their images. Both Paul and Penelope had an ethereal quality to their looks. Preternaturally beautiful in that "how can you possibly be real, photoshopped underwear model Grindr photo" kind of way. And that was before getting hit with Penelope's love whammy or whatever she had. He assumed Paul would have the same ability. They were both inhumanly gorgeous.

Peter was insanely hot too. Every bit as good-looking as his siblings, but there was a different edge to it, to Hawk's eye. Where Paul and Penelope had a "can't look directly at it" quality to their beauty, Peter was more approachable. You wanted to hang out with him, be his friend, with or without benefits. Penelope put out a "worship me" kind of vibe that, he had to admit, most people fell into. The people at the store certainly had. Peter, on the other hand, was more watchful. He paid attention to everyone and made them feel at ease.

"What do you think?" Faolan asked as he leaned against the table next to him.

"Shit job."

"Yeah."

They stood there in silence, settling into their pregame thoughts.

"You ready to roll?" Tonya asked from behind them after a few minutes.

“Tell me again why we can’t grab this fucker and beat it out of him?” Faolan asked.

Hawk barked out a laugh. Usually he was the one who chafed under the minutiae of their planning, even as he shot holes in all their ideas. If Faolan was ready to jump to the end and kidnap their mark, then this really was a shit job.

Mason smiled. “Believe me, I wish it were that easy. But we don’t know how Thornston fits into all this. A snatch-and-grab would alert his partners to go to ground. Once we lose them, it’s all over.”

“So no pressure, then,” Hawk said, picking up his bags and getting ready to leave.

“None at all,” Mason said cheerfully before sobering. He turned to the pack. “Remember, you’re not there to take him down. This is strictly an intelligence-gathering mission. I doubt you’ll get anywhere near his office. His wards are too strong for that. But watch for visitors. Who he takes meetings with. That kind of thing.”

“Conrad said he’d be searching for more money trails while we’re there,” Hawk said.

Mason nodded. “The rest of the team will follow up on any leads he finds. I’ll come out in a few days and meet with Thornston. I’ll dig for anything I can while I’m there. Another two or three days after that, we’ll call the threat a false alarm and pull out.”

“Sounds good,” Hawk said.

Faolan barked out a laugh. “Liar.”

“Fine. It sounds like shit, but it’s the best we got, since we ruled out straight-up abduction.”

“It’s only a week,” Mason offered as he cupped the back of Hawk’s neck with one hand. “Everyone ready?”

“Let’s get this over with,” Tonya said, shouldering her bag.

They took the elevator down to the underground parking garage and loaded the car. The plan was to go to the storage facility and return in the same car they’d used earlier, but

Mason noticed a detail waiting across the street from their building as they pulled out.

“That’s not a red flag or anything,” Faolan mumbled, tapping his ear to indicate they should behave as though their conversation was being monitored. Hawk didn’t know how that would be possible, given this car had been in their garage the entire time. Then again, he was in a carload of werewolves, so there was no telling what supernatural enhancements the occupants of the other car had.

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Mason said quietly.

That was true, but Hawk still hated it. They didn’t advertise anywhere—they worked exclusively by referral. It kept random drop-ins to a minimum. And with the cubs back at the office, Faolan was going to be on edge the entire mission. He glanced his brother’s way, and Faolan shook his head.

“I’m good. They’ve got the others there to protect them. They’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s wrap this up as soon as possible, all right?”

“That’s the plan,” Mason said. “We need to resolve this threat against Thornston’s kids so we can let the man rest at ease.”

“Agreed, boss,” Hawk said to play along. He risked a glance at the car behind them, and his skin crawled.

SEVEN

PETER FOLLOWED his family into his father's office. The familiar tingling as he crossed the threshold never failed to make the hair on his neck stand up. He didn't know what his father had in place for protection, but it gave him the willies. He assumed it was some sort of electric fence or laser grid system. Something that disabled cell phones and listening devices. Whatever it was, he wondered why his father never disarmed it when they were alone. Then again, maybe he didn't realize how powerful it was. It never seemed to bother Penny or Paul.

"You three are getting personal bodyguards," their father said without preamble. "You are not confined to the grounds at this time, but if the threat escalates, you will be. For now, you will only be allowed to frequent approved venues." He held up a hand when Penny started to say something. "Shopping is an approved activity, provided you remain in sight the entire time."

"Do you expect them to follow me into the dressing rooms?" Penny asked.

"If need be, yes. Otherwise, no shopping," Dad said. Penny sputtered to say something, but their father continued, "You will be in this house every night before midnight."

"A curfew? Really?" Paul complained. "We have that club opening this week! We won't get there until ten. The contract has us there until closing."

"And that's not until two in the morning," Penny added.

Their dad finally looked up from his desk. “Fine. But you will take no more contracts for the time being.”

“But Daddy—”

“Enough! No buts!” he snarled at them, and Peter saw his eyes glow a reddish orange. It made his arms break out in gooseflesh. He remembered the last time he’d seen his father’s eyes glow and realized now it hadn’t been a trick of the light at all. They were glowing, changing from their normal brown color as if lit up from the inside. But this time, it was different. Duller, weaker. His father closed his eyes and growled quietly before visibly forcing himself to relax. “You will follow my rules, or you can leave. But if you take that option, you will have nothing.”

He’d threatened to cut them off previously, but something in his tone made Peter believe he meant it this time. Peter took Penny’s arm and pulled her closer.

“I need to make some calls. Mason and his pack will be here within the hour. I will summon you when you are needed. In the meantime, I suggest you make yourselves presentable.”

With one last sneer, he turned his attention back to the stack of papers in front of him. His own protection detail closed ranks and herded them out before closing the door in their faces.

“Wow,” Paul said, shaking his head. He turned and walked toward the kitchen. Peter followed along with Penny. Paul pulled out three bottles of beer and passed them around. Penny grabbed hers and took a long drink.

“What the hell?” she demanded after taking a breath. “Who does he think he is?”

“Uh, our father?” Peter asked. He didn’t like it either, but he could also tell there was more here, beyond attempted murder. Something else was happening that was putting their father on edge.

“Well, he can’t lock us in here. We’re grown-ups, for God’s sake,” Paul said.

“Yeah, they’ve never been able to keep us from sneaking out before,” Penny smirked. Peter watched them rant and plot to escape.

“Did you not see his eyes?” he finally asked.

Paul turned to him, his forehead creased in confusion. “What? What about them?”

“Uh, am I the only one who saw them turn red?”

“What are you talking about?” Penny asked.

“His eyes! They were glowing!” Peter motioned to his own. Their blank stares were making him feel crazy.

“Maybe you should sit down,” Penny suggested, steering him toward one of the counter stools.

“Yeah, is all the excitement from this morning finally hitting you?” Paul put the back of his hand to his forehead to check his temperature.

Peter slapped his hand away. “You two really didn’t see it?”

Paul shook his head. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

Groaning, he dropped his head onto his crossed arms on the breakfast bar. How could they not have seen it? They were right there! He sat up and rolled the beer bottle over his forehead. The shock of the coolness helped calm him. But still...

“What do you think he meant by *pack*?” he asked.

“Huh?” Paul asked.

“He said ‘Mason and his pack’ were coming. What the heck is that about?”

“I figured his pack of bodyguards.” Paul shrugged.

“Are you sure you’re feeling all right?” Penny asked. “Delayed shock or something? Should we call in what’s her name? Get you some food?”

Peter stared at his sister. What the fuck was happening here? Did his sister not know Laurel’s name? Laurel was

amazing; she'd been with them for more than a decade. He'd spent so much time in here with her, he could probably replicate most of her recipes from memory.

"Nah, we don't need Laurel," Paul said, and Peter was glad Paul at least paid attention to others. He watched Paul rummage in the fridge again before moving to the cabinets. Not long after, he set a plate down in front of Peter. It was a simple grilled cheese, cut in half, and chips, but it looked delicious.

Peter smiled at him as he took a bite.

"You're not the only one who's picked up a few tricks," Paul said with a wink. He grabbed the other half of the sandwich.

"It's not delayed shock. There's something weird going on with Dad," Peter said after the dishes were cleaned and the counters wiped down. Laurel might not mind them sneaking around in the kitchen to make a snack, but heaven help them if they left it a mess when they did.

"Okay." Penny shrugged and sat down next to him.

"Okay? That's it?"

"You'd know better than we would. You have those Spidey senses or whatever it is. So? Tell us."

Peter took a minute to think about it. What exactly was off? He inhaled and held it a second before exhaling deeply.

"I think something's happening. Something big."

"Bigger than someone taking a shot at you two?" Paul asked.

Was it? Peter thought about it some more, then nodded. "Yeah. It is. I can't explain it, though."

"You think they were shooting at us?" Penny asked.

"Absolutely. But why? I keep thinking about it. I mean, they missed by a mile. Both shots."

"And you think it has something to do with Daddy?"

“Well, at first, I wondered if maybe it...” Peter shook his head.

“If maybe what?”

Peter smiled sadly and took her hand. “At first I was afraid it was some kind of stalker, coming after you.”

“Me? Why would anyone do that?”

“Penny,” Paul said sadly. “You have to know that there are men out there who, well, some of them don’t enjoy being toyed with, and they react violently.”

“But to shoot at me?”

“Yes.” Peter hated to remind her there were some bad people in the world. It was strange how naive she could be. When she was out in the clubs, she was the prototypical party-girl sexpot. Men followed her around like ducklings, hoping for some of her attention. And sure, she loved being the center of the party, but she never flaunted her sexuality that way; it was a by-product of who she was. Paul had that too, to a certain extent. Always attracting people like flies to honey.

Penny shook her head. “No. No one would do that to me.”

Peter and Paul shared a look but let it drop. “I think you’re right. About this one, anyway. I think someone is after Dad, and they came after us to get to him.”

“Who do you think it is?” Paul asked.

“No clue. But maybe we should lie low for a while? Stay out of it and let him take care of it.”

“While we stay locked up here, like some kind of, what? Prisoners? In our own house?”

“I don’t see any other way around it, Penny.” Peter squeezed her hand. “I don’t like it either, but I sure as fuck don’t want to become some kind of collateral damage in one of Dad’s wars.”

“Whatever.” She heaved a put-upon sigh as if the weight of the world was crushing her chest.

“Agreed. We let Dad handle it,” Paul said. “But in the meantime...” Peter did not like the glint in his eye, or the way Penny’s hand tightened on his, keeping him in place. “Let’s talk about this driver you have the hots for.”

“Daddy did say to make ourselves presentable,” Penny added.

“Oh, no. Whatever you two have planned—” Anything else he was going to say died as Paul and Penny took off. He followed their voices back to his room. They were already deep in his closet by the time he joined them. He groaned as clothes flew out the doorway. He could hear them talking as they searched through his clothes.

“Ryan can’t fit him in until tomorrow afternoon,” Paul said, disappointment coloring his voice. “At least he’ll be presentable for the club.”

“Oh well. We probably didn’t have time for his magic right now anyway. Those bodyguards are on their way. We’ll have to find... something... in here that isn’t completely awful,” Penny added. Her voice was muffled from being at the back of the closet.

“Come on. I like my clothes.”

“And they’re fine. For you. But you could look so much better,” Paul said. Penny slid another section of hangers along the bar and shook her head.

“We’ll go to Milo’s in the morning. We can stop by there before Ryan’s.”

“You’re right,” Paul said. “Everything’s awful in here.”

“Maybe there’s something that might fit him in your closet?” They both turned a critical eye on him. He could feel they were measuring him as they stared. Finally, he shook his head. No way he’d be able to wear something of Paul’s. Paul had the build of a supermodel—tall and thin, the kind of build that could pull off any type of clothing. Peter... was not. He was the shorter, stockier version of them. Sometimes he wondered how they were related. He didn’t look anything like them, or their father, for that matter.

“I suppose you’re right,” Penny said with a sigh. She disappeared to the farthest corner of the closet before coming back out again. She shoved some clothes into his arms. “Here, go put these on.”

He looked at her choices and grimaced. “Come on, Pen. These are too small. That’s why I don’t wear them anymore.”

“Humor us?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, we want to see how they fit,” Penny added.

“Fine.” He’d put the clothes on, show them how ridiculous they looked, and then he’d be able to change back. He went into the bathroom and laid out all the clothes on the counter. They’d even picked out underwear for him. He shook his head as he stripped. Everything was tight. He grunted as he tried to wriggle into the jeans. They got stuck on his hips and he had to jump up and down to get them all the way up. Once they were zipped, he tried to take a deep breath, but couldn’t. The T-shirt wasn’t much better. It fit like a second skin. He looked in the mirror and groaned. He felt like a fool. “Ready or not,” he mumbled as he opened the door to two expectant faces.

“Perfect.” Penny beamed.

“Yeah, bro. You look great.” Paul was about to say something else, but their father’s shout interrupted.

Peter groaned as he dropped his head back. That meant he had to stand there for however long his father wanted to take to explain the situation and make the introductions. Then the inevitable house tour, and then probably getting the rest of the staff together and showing them to their room. He tried pulling his shirt away to stretch it out, but it molded itself to his chest again.

“Fuck,” he whined. Paul chuckled and Penny smiled brightly. This must have been their plan all along.

They put him between them as they walked to their father’s office. The room was full of people. Mason and the driver from this morning were there, along with two other people—a man who looked similar to the driver, and a beautiful woman. Peter guessed the dressing room issue would

be a moot point. Penny pouted at them before pasting an innocent expression on her face.

“Yes, Daddy?” She blinked wide eyes at them.

“Children, these are your bodyguards. Do not antagonize them.”

Peter elbowed Penny to keep her from rolling her eyes like she always did when he called them *children*.

Mason glanced at their father, who didn't say anything else, so he stepped forward with his hand out. Peter glanced at Paul and Penny, then walked over to shake Mason's hand. Instantly, he felt at ease.

“Let me introduce my partners, Tonya, Faolan, and Hawk,” he said, indicating each of them in turn. “You'll be safe with them.”

Peter nodded at each and smiled, but faltered when he got to the driver—Hawk, apparently. He knew the man was good-looking, but the few glimpses he'd gotten of him that morning hadn't prepared him for seeing Hawk now. Or Peter had been riding the adrenaline high earlier. Now, without the crash of emotions, he was able to get a good look at him. And damn. He could practically feel the thought bubble popping up over his head, saying, *Oh no, he's hot*.

EIGHT

WHEN THEY'D PULLED up in front of the house, the other car went around to the back, where Hawk assumed the garage was. This time they were ushered straight into the house to Thornston's office. The wards tickled the edges of Hawk's senses as they entered, and he was sure the others felt it as well. Faolan's tiny shudder all but confirmed it. Thornston waited inside, along with two more goons.

"Ah, Alpha Vargar," Thornston said. "Good of you to bring your pack so quickly. I'm afraid I have many other obligations this afternoon that could not be rescheduled. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course. But there is some paperwork for us to complete before we continue."

"Yes, yes." Thornston waved his hand impatiently, and Mason handed over the contract. It was their standard personal protection statement with a few inclusions allowing them free rein over the house and the grounds.

Hawk expected Thornston to balk at the extended allowances, but he signed them immediately, with barely a cursory glance at the language. If he glossed over the finer details, then that was on him. He was probably arrogant enough to think he'd be able to outsmart them. Or maybe he was hoping for a reason to test Mason's resolve. Hawk wouldn't put either past the man.

"I have some charms for you that will allow you to pass the wards—" he started, but Mason put up a hand to interrupt.

“Is there another way? I’m sure you can understand our caution, Alpha Thornston, but we are not in the habit of accepting unvetted charms from unknown sources,” he said.

Thornston narrowed his eyes but nodded.

Hawk let out the breath he’d been holding. Charms were good in theory, hell in practice too. Sometimes. Except... they left a piece of the magic user on you. Charms could be used for anything. Protection? No problem. Override your consciousness and attack your packmates? *Big* problem. Unexpected charms from unknown players? Recipe for disaster. And Hawk didn’t trust this man past his own fingertips.

“Yes, I can see where you wouldn’t want to open your packmates to the possibility of coming under any undue influences. Come with me.” Thornston pushed away from the desk and left the office.

Mason nodded, and the pack followed Thornston into the hallway. He stopped at the foot of the staircase, then waved a hand in the air and mumbled a few words. Hawk felt the wards bubble against his arms, and he hoped to fuck the magic was getting worked on the wards and not on them. But there was no way of telling, and no way to stop it now. After a second, his ears popped, and the ward protecting the stairs settled to a dull warm sensation at his side rather than the hostile shouting it had been earlier. Hawk glanced at Mason, willing him to hear his thoughts.

“Better?” Thornston asked, and Mason nodded. “Good. Now that is complete, let us discuss the particulars. Your pack will have all the access you need. If you find yourselves needing to go in any area that is blocked to you, please let one of my men know, and we’ll assist you, within reason,” he said as he led the way back to his office. They filed in, Thornston taking his seat behind the massive desk.

“Of course, but you do understand that not allowing my team complete access could impact their ability to fully do their jobs. Your driver had been compromised, after all. There is still the possibility this was the work of an inside man, or at

the very least indicates a potential accomplice,” Mason said conversationally.

Thornston shrugged as if it didn't matter. “The house is heavily warded. No one with negative intentions is allowed in, so I am not concerned about anything happening within these walls.”

It was an interesting thought. Hawk wondered how the wards judged intent. Generally speaking, the pack had nothing but good intentions. Every step they'd taken to get there was for the greater good. And they certainly wished no harm to Thornston's kids. The man himself, however, that was a different story. They had no problem with taking him down once they knew whether he was acting alone or not. He was glad Ryder wasn't here, because Hawk was sure he'd take the opportunity to attack the man in retaliation for Conrad's injuries.

Hawk held his smirk inside, but Thornston caught it and narrowed his eyes at him. Although Hawk schooled his thoughts, the damage had been done.

“Do you have a comment, *wolf*?” Thornston sneered on the word as if they were below him, even though he was probably one himself. His scent was suppressed somehow, but it made sense. After all, they'd never heard of made were-poodles, or were-mice.

Mason looked up and nodded at Hawk.

“No, sir. In our line, we have seen any number of misplaced loyalties, and we would hate for anything untoward to happen to your children, or to you, sir,” Hawk lied smoothly.

“Well, those who are careless with their affairs get what's coming to them. I have taken great strides to ensure absolute fealty in every single person brought into our employ.” His eyes glowed by the end of his declaration, and his scent filled the room, answering the question of whether Thornston was a wolf or not.

Hawk noticed his eyes glowed a shade deeper than they had been that morning, more red than orange. He wondered where Thornston had found the magic to replenish his powers. And how he managed it before they arrived.

He listed the things he knew in his mind. Thornston was a made wolf. There was no such thing as a changing bite, so Thornston had to have stolen the power from other shifters.

Working on Conrad's case, they'd learned that made wolves only held on to the power for a limited time. Sort of like a parasite living inside them, consuming their resources until the power was exhausted, or the host died. After that, no trace of the wolf was left behind in the corpse. At least, that's what had happened to the ones who had kidnapped and beaten Conrad.

Apparently, Thornston had found a way to extend those powers beyond their natural termination. He was exactly the type of person who would be part of a conspiracy to hold on to that power. Puzzle pieces were clicking into place in Hawk's mind as Mason and Thornston continued discussing their business. But was the picture it revealed the right answer?

He wondered how long Thornston had been a wolf. Years? Decades? He wondered if that was where the money Atkins was funneling him went to. Had Atkins been a wolf too? Only he got skittish and called too much attention to their operation? Did Thornston recruit him? The amount he'd stolen was nothing compared to Thornston's bank balance. Was Atkins's embezzling for some sort of buy-in Thornston had demanded? And if that was the case, how many other businesses did he have his hands in?

Hawk filed those thoughts away for a time when he could speak freely and turned his attention to the others in the room. Two standard-issue protection goons. Big, brawny men with bulging muscles who could barely move their arms. No threats there, even if they were armed. Thornston, on the other hand, he was trouble. Not only was he some kind of wolf, but was he a magic user too? Was he powerful enough to make these wards? Or were they attuned to him so he could manipulate them at his will?

All magic users were powerful, including shifters. It was magic that allowed them to change forms, after all. But conjuring wards was usually beyond their capabilities. The Goddess's way of protecting them from themselves. Keeping the balance to prevent any one group from wiping out any other.

Thornston had a tinge of malevolence that set Hawk on edge. No doubt he recognized Mason's power and had probably sized him up as a threat. Having more of the pack around helped shore up that image.

But was he the mastermind? It was obvious he was invested in expanding his small universe of power, but he didn't seem to be attempting to amass much more, beyond the financial gains he had been getting from at least one firm.

So. Fucking. Many. Unknowns.

"Children!" Thornston shouted, snapping Hawk out of his thoughts. A few minutes later, their new charges walked in.

"Yes, Daddy?" Penny blinked wide eyes at them. Hawk didn't buy her faux innocence for a second.

"Children, these are your bodyguards. Do not antagonize them." He made no move or effort to elaborate on their responsibilities. After a moment, Mason stood up and smiled as he held a hand out to make their introductions.

Hawk took the opportunity to study their targets. Their reactions were subtle, but he could tell the moment when their mojo hit Faolan and Tonya. Penelope had been a force of nature on her own. Hawk had felt the tug of it at the store and seen the effects firsthand. But with Paul next to her, their combined charm was almost tangible. Hawk struggled to define the feeling as it slid over him. It wasn't unpleasant. Quite the contrary, if he was being honest. He'd never act on it, of course. But it was there. Lurking in the back of his mind. Hinting. Maybe that's why Peter nearly took his breath away as he stood in between his siblings.

He had changed since they'd dropped him off that morning. The tight shirt showed off his build. He was more

muscular than Hawk had thought, given the pictures they had of him. And the jeans framed his crotch in a way Hawk should *not* be thinking about right now. Or ever. He was a *client*. Actually, he was a *mark*. Hawk shifted his stance and tried to get his thoughts back on task, but Peter chose that moment to turn his attention back to his father, and damn. That ass. In those jeans. Hawk was nearly done for, except Faolan subtly elbow-checked him. He turned on his brother and almost snarled. Faolan raised an eyebrow, and Hawk managed to get back under control. He exhaled and dropped his eyes to the floor.

Once he could breathe easier again, he looked up and found Peter staring at him, a blush starting to pinken his face. It was adorable, and Hawk wanted nothing more than to whisk him away from everyone right at that moment. Peter blinked and looked down at the desk in front of him, and Hawk turned back to find his pack staring at him.

Fuck. He was fucked.

NINE

HE COULDN'T STOP STARING at Hawk. He'd thought maybe the glances earlier were his mind playing with his recall. But no, the man really was that gorgeous. And that suit was killing him. He was suddenly grateful for the tight pants. If he had any more room, his cock would be tenting them. He could feel the heat blooming across his neck and chest, and even then, he could not stop staring.

“So you're supposed to be keeping us safe?” Paul asked, snapping Peter out of his stupor. He quickly turned around to study something on his father's desk.

“Well, that's our goal,” Mason answered. “You won't know that we're around.”

Peter seriously doubted that—given that Hawk was so much bigger than he'd thought, now that he saw him up close. He could probably throw Peter over his shoulder to carry him away—and Peter would let him.

“I suppose you're the one who's going to follow me?” Penny was looking Tonya over, and Peter could tell she was about to say something rude. He nudged her with his elbow, but he wasn't in time. “You'll have to do better than that to blend into my world.”

“If it comes to that, I assure you, you will not be disappointed.” Tonya gave her a smile.

“We'll see.”

“Why don't you three show our guests the grounds?” their father suggested. “I have more business to discuss with Alpha

Vargar.” He made a motion to dismiss them, obviously expecting them to follow his order.

Peter wanted to ask why he called him *alpha*, but Mason spoke up before he could say anything.

“You will be in good hands. I promise,” Mason said. He nodded to his people, and they returned his nod, then filed out of the office.

Paul rolled his eyes but started walking. “Might as well get this over with.” He led them to the back patio. Once outside, he pointed. “Pool. Garage. Tennis courts. There, you’ve seen the grounds.”

“Is this where you’ll be spending most of your time?” Faolan asked, and Penny snorted.

“You might, but I won’t be here. Later.” She gave a wave over her shoulder as she flounced off. They went back inside in time to see her go out the front door. Tonya shared a look with the men before trailing after her.

“Good luck,” Paul said, heading outside again and disappearing out of sight, Faolan following him.

Peter shook his head. “You will have your work cut out for you.”

“I think we can handle it.” Hawk shrugged and turned back to look at Peter. “So what kind of trouble can I expect from you?”

“Me?” His voice didn’t squeak. It did not. He cleared his throat before speaking. “I, uh... Nothing. I’m more of a homebody, I guess.”

“We didn’t interrupt your plans?”

“No. We weren’t doing much.”

“Oh.” Hawk didn’t say anything else. He fell into step with Peter as they walked through the house.

“What oh?”

“You look dressed to go out, that’s all,” he said, motioning at Peter.

Peter glanced down at his clothes. He couldn't imagine what Hawk must be thinking. "They, uh... Yeah. They decided it was makeover time." Hawk hummed, putting Peter on the defensive. "What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head innocently, and Peter stopped to turn to him.

"What nothing?"

"Shall we?" Hawk motioned forward.

But something in Peter wouldn't let him drop it. "It sounds like you have a comment. Go on, say it."

"It's not my place."

"Spit it out," Peter growled. Why was he letting this guy get under his skin?

Hawk stared at him for a moment before exhaling deeply. "At the risk of sounding unprofessional, I think you look fantastic, but you don't seem to be enjoying it."

Peter crossed his arms over his chest and tried to fight his blushing. "It's not my style."

Hawk chuckled. "I figured. Would you like to change?"

"You have no idea, but they'd kill me."

"It's not their call, though, is it?"

Peter snorted. As if it was that simple.

"I'll wait out here."

They came to a stop, and Peter was surprised to notice they were standing outside his bedroom. He glanced around, wondering how they had managed to get there without him noticing.

"Uh, thank you?" He ducked into his room and shut the door before leaning back against it. He panted and tried to stop from hyperventilating. "How the fuck did we get up here?" He screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. After a couple of deep breaths, he managed to pull himself away from the door. He groaned when he opened his eyes and looked around. He'd

been there while Penny and Paul had been trying to find something for him to wear, but somehow he'd missed the mess they'd made of it. They had trashed the place. All his clothes were in piles around the room from where they dropped them during their rummaging. A soft knock on the door startled him.

"Everything all right, sir?" Hawk asked.

"Yeah. You can... whatever." He motioned with a hanger he'd picked up. The door opened and Hawk entered.

"Woah."

"Yeah. You got any brothers? Sisters?"

Hawk smiled, and it did things to Peter.

"Two brothers. Faolan is one," he said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder. He started picking up the T-shirts from the floor and folding them into neat piles on the bed.

"You don't have to," Peter said. He couldn't stop his gaze from going to the pile of underwear they'd left next to the dresser. Luckily, Hawk had steered clear of that.

"I don't mind if it will help put you at ease. And I somehow doubt they would help." He motioned over his shoulder in a move, and Peter understood he meant Paul and Penny.

Peter laughed. "Yeah. Housework is not one of their specialties."

He hated to use the term high-maintenance, but some of his siblings' habits were, well, high-maintenance. Hawk had moved on to the pile of pants closer to the closet, and Peter breathed a sigh of relief. He scooped up the pile of underwear and stuffed it into the drawer. He didn't know why the idea of Hawk touching them made him so uneasy. It probably had something to do with the fact that his dick throbbed painfully against his zipper every time he thought of Hawk putting his hands on them. While they were still on. Those big, rough hands sliding over the smooth silk covering his ass. He had to lean against the dresser and take a couple of breaths to will himself back under control. By the time he'd turned around,

Hawk had made quick work of most of the shirts too. He had stacked them all on the bed.

“Wow.”

Hawk shrugged. “I can wait outside while you finish up.”

“Uh, yeah. That’d be...” Peter nodded, grabbing an armload of clothes to take back to his closet. When he came back out for a second load, Hawk was already outside and the door was closed. He put the rest of his things away and grabbed a T-shirt and jeans at random before going into his bathroom. He leaned heavily on the sink and stared at his reflection. When he blinked, he saw Hawk again, and then his brain circled back to that image of them together. Hawk shirtless, sitting up on the bed, Peter straddling his hips. Hawk’s hands gliding over his skin, his long fingers kneading the flesh of his ass.

“Fuck,” he panted, tearing at his fly, trying to rip his pants open and get them down. He couldn’t remember ever being so fucking hard in his life. Something tickled in the back of his mind that he shouldn’t be doing this, that it was wrong. That you don’t go jerking-off to someone you *just met*. It was inappropriate. And really fucking creepy.

But he wasn’t thinking with the bigger head. He sighed in relief once he finally managed to get his cock out.

“Oh yeah,” he whispered once he had his hands on it. He didn’t bother trying to shove his pants down any farther. The pressure from where they were stuck around his ass helped fuel his fantasy. He reached a hand lower and tugged his balls out, tucking the fly under them. The teeth of the zipper dug into his skin, but it wasn’t painful. It added another layer of sensation. He knew it wouldn’t take long. A few tugs while he pictured Hawk’s face looking up at him, imagining it was Hawk’s hands wrapped around his cock.

“Fuck,” he whisper-shouted as he came. He kept stroking himself, his entire body jerking until it was too much on his oversensitive cock. Would Hawk have stopped, he wondered. Or would he keep teasing Peter until he begged to him to stop. His cock twitched as he thought about it, being at Hawk’s

mercy. He ran a hand through the cooling puddle on the countertop. It stuck to his fingers as he pulled them apart, and chilly when he wrapped that hand around his cock. It gave one last weak spurt, triggering a full-body shudder before his knees buckled.

“Fuck,” he repeated. He stood there, holding himself up with one hand braced against the counter as his breath returned in increments. Once he felt under control, he looked at himself in the mirror. He looked wrecked. His hair was standing up all over the place, though he didn’t remember running his hand through it. His shirt was rucked up to his armpit on one side, exposing one hard nipple. His pants were shoved down a couple of inches, and his cock and balls were nestled in the deep V of the opened fly. He couldn’t open his eyes all the way. He was almost tempted to take a photo of it to have to send to someone—*Hawk*, his brain suggested—later. Paul would be proud of his level of debauchery. That thought, more than anything, brought his brain back online. He looked around guiltily, even though he knew he was alone. What the fuck was he thinking? He went to scrub a hand down his face but noticed it was covered with cum at the last second. He hastily turned the water on to rinse his hands, then stepped back to strip his shirt off. After washing his hands, he splashed his face with cold water.

“Get it together, man,” he mumbled. He sighed and shoved the pants down, having to pull them inside-out to free his legs. Once he’d completely stripped, he used a wet washcloth to wipe himself. Then he got dressed again, feeling much better in his regular clothes. He took an extra minute to clean up the bathroom and rinse out the washcloth before hanging it up in the shower to dry out. A knock on the bedroom door startled him.

“You all right in there?” Hawk asked, and Peter’s heart nearly stopped. Did he know? Had he heard him in here, jerking off to a fantasy version of him?

“Uh, fine?” Peter rushed back to the bathroom to make sure it was cleaned up, then stuffed his old outfit into the

hamper and rushed to the door. "I'm good," he said after he opened it up. He couldn't meet Hawk's eyes, though.

"Okay," Hawk said softly. "Did you get everything put away in there?"

"Oh, uh... Yeah. Shipshape." Peter wanted to slap himself. Well, in a way, he supposed he just did. He blushed when he thought about his jerk-off session again. "Why don't we go see what the others are up to?"

"Certainly." Hawk nodded and started back to the stairs. "You look relaxed now," he said, and Peter tripped on the stairs. Hawk reached out to catch him, and his nostrils flared. Peter had a moment of panic.

Oh shit! Can he smell it on me? No, that was crazy. People can't do that.

Like they didn't jerk off to people they just met, while they were waiting outside the door for them.

He cleared his throat and tried to control his heartbeat. "Uh, yeah. More comfortable now," he finished lamely.

"Suits you better," Hawk said, continuing down the stairs and leaving a gaping Peter in his wake.

"There you are. Daddy has decided we're having dinner together," Penny said with a pout. Peter guessed that meant she hadn't made it very far in her bolt for freedom from Tonya.

"I'll leave you to it," Hawk said before turning and leaving. Peter watched him walk away, and Penny nudged his shoulder.

"Jump him yet?"

"Penny!"

"What? You two were gone a long time. And you've changed your clothes."

"Let's just... dinner."

Penny smirked at him, like she knew more than he did.

Who was he kidding? Of course she did.

TEN

FUCKING-HELL-SHIT, this was going to be hard—*tough*. It would be a tough assignment, Hawk thought as he stood outside Peter's door, waiting for him to finish changing. Then he heard the tiny telltale moan from inside. Hawk's breath caught in his throat as he thought about Peter in there, jerking off as quietly as he could because he simply couldn't hold out any longer. Hawk knew the feeling—hell, it was growing by the second. He looked down to where the front of his pants was starting to tent. He closed his eyes to meditate, willing his erection to behave. He was on duty, for Goddess's sake!

When he felt a tingling at the base of his cock, he reached into his pocket to pop a claw and used it to poke himself in the leg. A reminder to get back under control. He paced down the long hallway four times before he heard the water running in Peter's bathroom. He jabbed himself one more time and took a deep breath. By the time he knocked on Peter's door, he was finally himself again. Then the door opened, and he got hit with the scent of Peter and cum, and Peter's cum, and he nearly lost it. He could feel his eyes shining, so he shut them quickly and turned to lead Peter back downstairs.

When Peter stumbled, Hawk reached out to catch him, and he caught the scent of his cum again. He could feel his nostrils flaring as he took in as much of the smell as he could. Peter stared up at him with startled eyes, then blushed and studied the stairs again.

He hid a grin as he left Peter with his sister, pretending not to hear their conversation.

Mason found him near Thornston's office. "Hawk, got a minute?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Faolan, Tonya, keep watch?"

"You got it," Tonya said, and Mason led him out the back door. They made their way down to the tennis courts and walked around them, ostensibly to check on their security but really looking for any surveillance cameras. There were two, one on each side of the court. Hawk shook his head and kept walking toward the edge of the property.

"I don't know what Paul and Penelope are up to, but Peter, uh, released some tension," Hawk said.

Mason snorted. "He seems a bit taken with you. Is that going to be a problem?"

Hawk thought about it for a minute. He'd never been compromised in the field before, and he didn't think this time would be different. But still. He shook his head. "Too early to tell?" he hedged.

"Fair enough. You'll tell me if it becomes an issue?"

"Of course."

Mason nodded and let it drop.

"Did you see his eyes?" Hawk asked. Because Mason had to have. He wasn't seeing things, was he?

"Yeah."

"That has to be his magic user's doing, right? He's not some kind of mage-wolf or anything, is he?"

"I wouldn't think he'd be capable, but he did manipulate the wards."

"Yeah, he did. But is it him? Or are they, I don't know, tweaked so he can modify them himself? I can't see him waiting for someone to come all the way out here on his whim. So unless he's got someone locked in a basement, I don't see any way he's not doing it himself."

“That’s the only conclusion I can come to as well. Because as far as I know, no one has mastered teleportation yet, outside of Anodo. And there’s no way he’s got a hellhound helping out on transportation.” Mason shook his head. “But you can search for a hidden dungeon while you’re here.”

Hawk snorted and followed his alpha back to the house. “Sure would have been easier if there had been a room labeled ‘secret torture chamber’ on the blueprints.”

“It also would have helped if we could have gotten a full set.”

“Yeah.” It sucked. Hawk scowled at the house. The plans they’d found online were incomplete. The second floor seemed to match the documents filed with the plumbing inspector’s offices. They hadn’t been up to the third floor yet, but Hawk suspected it matched as well. But the first floor was way off. The blueprints seemed to be for a completely different house.

“It was a remodel. Looks like all he did was add the upper floors,” the inspector had said.

There was no reason for them to doubt his sincerity—in public, anyway. They all knew it was bullshit.

Hawk tensed up as they got back inside and he picked out Peter’s scent. Mason reached out and squeezed his shoulder, pushing calm down their pack bonds. Hawk breathed normally and relaxed into it. They’d figure it out. If it came down to it, he’d switch places with Faolan. Or Tonya. He’d take Paul or Penny’s love whammy over whatever it was Peter had packing. Powers. Whatever powers he was packing. Wielding.

Fuck, he was in trouble.

“I’ll call Anodo when I get back to the office. Maybe he will have an answer,” Mason said. One of the guards approached them, and Mason nodded. “My ride is here.”

“Right.” Hawk nodded and followed him out. They met Tonya and Faolan on the front steps, where Grady was waiting. Hawk could tell Grady wanted to say something, probably some snide comment about the opulence of the

house, but thankfully, his little brother managed to keep his mouth shut.

Mason reached out to cup a hand behind each of their necks before turning to the car. "I'll be in touch."

Grady gave Hawk a shit-eating grin as he climbed behind the wheel. "Later, bro," he said with a wave.

"Now what?" Tonya asked after they drove away.

"Now we get to work," Hawk answered. Faolan nodded and walked down the steps to make a lap around the house. If anyone caught him, he'd claim it was a perimeter check. Hawk and Tonya went inside.

"This place is huge," she said as they wandered around the first floor. They passed the dining room and found the kitchen down the hall. There was a chef bustling around the room, bouncing from the fridge to the stove and back to the wall ovens.

"You must be the new bodyguards. I'm Laurel," she said, waving them over. Once he was close enough, she shoved a spoon in Hawk's face. "Taste this."

Hawk obeyed. It was delicious, but he thought it was missing something. He wasn't an idiot, though. "It's perfect." Laurel narrowed her eyes at him, and he held up his hands in surrender. "Needs salt. And maybe a touch of garlic."

"Better." She added the spices and then offered Tonya a spoon of her own.

"Now it's perfect," Tonya said.

"I like her," Laurel said. "Now sit." She shooed them over to a table in the corner of the room. They sat down while she floated around the room, plating some of the food. After a few minutes, she set three full plates on the table in front of them. Hawk wasn't sure if he was surprised or not when Faolan walked in the back door a few seconds later.

"Eat up," Laurel said. She shoved Faolan toward the open spot next to Tonya.

“Thanks?” Faolan said. He looked at Hawk, but Hawk shook his head. He didn’t have any answers for him anyway.

They ate quietly. They knew they couldn’t speak openly around the house. Hawk suspected more than one goon was a wolf. It seemed at least one of the kitchen staff might be Other as well. They had finished the main course when Laurel dragged a stool to the end of the table. Hawk looked up as she perched on the seat.

“You’re going to keep my kids safe, right?”

“Of course, ma’am. It’s why we’re here,” Faolan said.

“Have you been with them long?” Tonya asked.

Laurel nodded. “Over half their lives. Seen them through a lot.” She exhaled and closed her eyes. “Never expected it to end like this, though.”

“We, uh…” Hawk said, alarmed.

She couldn’t possibly know the real reason they were there. She smiled and reached out to cup his cheek as she looked into his soul. Well, she stared at his eyes, but he felt her gauging the depth of his soul. After an eternity, she nodded.

“He will need you. After,” she said cryptically.

“Excuse me?” Hawk asked. He glanced across the table, but both Faolan and Tonya only blinked shocked eyes at them.

Laurel gently turned his head to face her. “We’ve been waiting for you to show yourself for years. Be good to him.”

“Of course,” Hawk answered instead of asking what the fuck she was talking about.

“Good. Now, try these cookies.” She patted his cheek before getting up and retrieving a baking rack from the counter. She cocked an eyebrow and smirked at Hawk. “He loves these. I’ll write down the recipe.”

“Thanks?” Hawk’s head was spinning, and the looks he got from Tonya and Faolan weren’t helping. He was still trying to regain his composure when Peter came in.

“Oh, are those ranger cookies?” he asked. He made grabby hands at them as Laurel held them out of reach. “Please?”

Laurel laughed and relented. “Just for you.”

“Thanks, Laurel. You’re the best.” Peter hugged her close.

“Remember that after you leave the nest.”

Peter laughed. “I’m never leaving you.”

Hawk tried not to flinch at that. They hadn’t thought much about what came next. The “after” Laurel had mentioned earlier. If the plan worked, their world would crash down around them.

“Have you had one of these?” Peter asked excitedly, breaking into Hawk’s thoughts.

“Not yet.”

“Oh, you gotta.” Peter shoved it at Hawk’s face.

Hawk leaned back and took the cookie from Peter’s hand. He made eye contact as he tried it. “Delicious,” he said.

Peter blushed beautifully. He blinked and looked away when Laurel cleared her throat.

“Did you come in here for a reason, or did you just want to steal more cookies?” she asked.

“Right.” Peter took a step closer to the door and nodded. “Dad told me to show you to your rooms.”

Hawk stood up and held an arm out.

“After you.”

ELEVEN

“THIS WAY,” Peter said as they got to the stairs, then tried not to groan as he led them. Of course it was this way; how else would they get upstairs? He stopped halfway up—“Oh, your bags!”—and went back down to the front door. As the others came down the stairs, Peter grabbed one of the bags but managed to spill the contents on the floor.

“Shit. Sorry.” He knelt on to pick up the mess. “Wow,” Peter said as he helped collect the pages of artwork that had slipped out of one of the folders. He looked up at Faolan, who had taken a step closer. “Are these yours?”

Faolan shared a look with his teammates before shaking his head. “They’re Hawk’s.”

“These are fantastic.” Peter flipped through a few of the drawings. The images were an eclectic mix of portraits, landscapes, and copies of works by the masters.

“Yeah, he’s good.” Faolan was smiling as he looked at some of the pages, but then he hastily shoved them back into the folder and put the folder into the bag. “He doesn’t like people seeing his work,” he whispered before he handed the bag to Hawk.

Peter turned to Hawk, who was standing stock-still and avoiding all eye contact. “Why not? If I could do this, I’d hang them up everywhere.” He handed the picture he was holding back.

“It’s not a good story,” Hawk said quietly.

“Oh,” Peter gasped. He could feel a blush forming, and he reached up to rub a hand on the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. It’s that... You’re good.” They stood in stilted silence for a few moments, but Peter had no idea how to break it.

“So, you were showing us to our quarters?” Tonya asked.

“Right. Grab your things.” Peter led them up to the third floor and opened a door to the left. He nodded at Hawk and Faolan. “You two are over here. There’s a Jack-and-Jill. I hope you don’t mind sharing a bathroom with your brother.”

“That’s fine,” Hawk said as he walked into the room and set his bag on the bed.

Peter nodded and turned toward the door. “Tonya, you’re across the hall.”

“Thanks. We appreciate having the space,” she said.

“You should have seen the room he was planning to put you in. It had bunk beds. Seriously. I took one look at it and said nope. It didn’t have a closet.” Peter shook his head. “I swear, I have no idea what he was thinking. But the second you showed up with a wrinkle, Penny would have thrown a fit.”

“I’m not that bad,” Penny said as she joined them in Hawk’s room. She made a face at Tonya. “I hope you have something acceptable in that bag.”

“You’re welcome to look through it,” Tonya said, allowing Penny to take it from her hand.

“Penny,” Peter choked out when she dumped the contents onto Hawk’s bed.

“What? She said I can look.” She made a face as she pawed through Tonya’s things, and Peter’s face heated in mortification. A second later, Penny’s eyes went wide, and she gasped in shock. “Is this a...?” She started to ask but no other words came out.

“A what?” Paul asked as he made his way into the room. “Holy shit,” he said as he took the dress from Penny’s hands

and held it up gingerly.

“That is a Bebe,” Penny whispered. Then she held up another piece of material in her fist. “This blouse is too. You have Bebe originals wadded up in your bag like they’re nothing.”

“He designed them for packing. He knows what our jobs can be like,” Tonya explained, but that only seemed to wind Penny and Paul up more.

“They... He... What?” Paul managed to sputter.

“I have no idea what’s happening,” Peter said as he turned a puzzled look at Hawk.

“Bebe’s a friend,” Faolan supplied.

Peter shook his head. He had no idea who this Bebe was, but he must be a big deal if both Paul and Penny reacted that way.

“Why don’t you let her go hang those up?” Peter asked as he started pushing Tonya’s clothes into her bag. Then he handed it to Paul and encouraged them to leave. Tonya took the hint and headed to her room.

“How many pieces of his do you have?” Paul asked as he followed Tonya. Penny went along with them, the shirt still in her hand.

“I’ll go get settled,” Faolan said, walking through the bathroom and leaving Peter alone with Hawk.

Hawk fiddled with the strap of the art bag, and Peter desperately wanted to draw Hawk out of the shell he had withdrawn into, but he didn’t know where to start.

Paul came back in, shaking his head. “She’s... Wow.” He took in their awkward silence and wrapped an arm around Peter’s shoulders.

“I, uh, meant what I said about your art. You’re really good,” Peter lamely said. He wanted to go into detail about Hawk’s use of shadows to convey emotion, or explain how his choice of colors in one of them made him feel happy, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Thanks.”

Paul stepped in to help him dig his foot out of his mouth. He pulled Peter close in a one-armed hug. “Oh, you’re an artist? Peter here loves art. The local kind. Not the big museum type. You should see his office downstairs. He’s got quite the collection.”

Did Peter say he was rescuing him? No, he meant Paul stepped up to throw him under the bus.

“We’ll go. Now.” Peter motioned over his shoulder as he made his escape.

“Peter,” Hawk said, stopping them. “Thank you. I do appreciate it. It’s been a while since anyone’s seen my work.”

Peter could definitely feel his blush spreading, and he had to get out of there before he caught fire. “No problem. Have a good night,” he mumbled as he rushed down the one flight of stairs to get to his room.

As he lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, he realized he’d put Faolan and Hawk directly above his room. The thought of Hawk lying up there, practically on top of him, made his dick twitch.

The peace and quiet he’d found didn’t last long. Penny and Paul came into his room and piled on the bed next to him.

“You’ve got it bad, bro,” Penny said.

“What?”

“Your art is really good?” Paul said, repeating his words in a dreamy tone.

“I hope these rooms are okay,” Penny joined in, mocking him.

“Is there something wrong with making sure our guests are happy?” Peter defended.

Paul snorted at that. “You know they’re not really guests, right? I mean, Dad’s paying them to be here.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing, man. Just don’t get too attached. You know Dad likes to fire people on a whim.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be nice to them in the meantime.”

“Okay,” Penny said.

“That’s it? No jokes? No comments?”

“Can we stop you?” Paul asked.

“No.”

“Then good luck.”

“Good luck with what?”

Paul shook his head. They were quiet for a few minutes before Paul spoke up again. “I can’t believe they know *Bebe*. Did you know that his designer line sold out hours after he launched? And she just had it balled up in her bag,” he said, shaking his head.

“*I know*,” Penny said. “I was all set to text Milo to have something presentable for her to wear to the club when we go there tomorrow for your new wardrobe.”

“Wardrobe! You never said anything about a wardrobe!” He figured she would get one or two shirts and maybe a pair of pants for him. He’d wear them once and then relegate them to the back of the closet.

Penny rolled her eyes. “You need some decent clothes.”

“You know what?” Peter started, but he snapped his mouth shut. “Never mind. My clothes had better still be in my room when we get back.”

“Would we do something with those wretched things?” Paul asked.

“Yes, you would. In a heartbeat.”

“You know us so well,” Penny singsonged before she snuggled into his side and stole his pillow. Paul stretched out on his other side and closed his eyes.

“You both suck,” he mumbled as he relaxed.

TWELVE

HAWK STOOD THERE for a few minutes after everyone left, processing what had happened downstairs. He'd frozen when his bag fell and his drawings spilled out. And then Peter's hands were all over them. For a split second, he'd thought about showing them all to him. Then Faolan was there, helping Peter pick them all up and exposing Hawk's deepest fear in the process. Hawk had panicked and stood there, paralyzed.

He closed his eyes and exhaled. A knock had him glancing up.

Faolan stood in the doorway, looking sheepish. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. For earlier, with your bag."

"Don't worry about it."

"I do. I know how you feel about people seeing..."

"Yeah, well. Shit happens." Hawk shrugged.

Faolan made his way over and put a hand on Hawk's shoulder. "Still. We may give you crap over it, but we all respect your feelings about it. We'd never go into your bag to check out your work. And I should have gotten your pages out of his hands quicker."

"Seriously, it's okay." Hawk smiled. "I think I'm... okay with him seeing it."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Hawk nodded, and Faolan stared at him in shock. "What? It's not that big of a deal."

Faolan looked skeptical, but he let it drop. Instead, he turned around in a circle to take in the room. “So those cookies were good, weren’t they?”

Hawk latched on to the change in subject. “Delicious.”

“I already texted Ryder. He said to make sure you get that recipe. None of the ones he’s found have cornflakes.”

“Knowing Conrad’s sweet tooth, Ryder will substitute Frosted Flakes.”

“No doubt,” Faolan chuckled. It was a match made in heaven—Conrad loved sweets, and Ryder loved to indulge Conrad.

Hawk sighed and tried to pack away his envy. They stood there another minute, not saying anything. They didn’t have to. Hawk knew Faolan well enough to read what was on his mind. Searching the house might not turn up anything, but if they could get Laurel alone, maybe... Hawk shook his head. He knew they’d never find a way to get any of Thornston’s stuff alone. And if they managed to, they’d never spill any of the man’s secrets.

“Yeah,” Hawk said.

“I’m off to bed.”

“Don’t stay up too late sexting with Connie.”

Faolan blushed and shook his head.

“I’m yanking your chain, bro. But seriously, one day, you’re going to have to talk to her.”

“And one day, you’re going to have to show off your art.”

Hawk held his hands up in surrender. “Point taken.”

Faolan pulled him into a hug. “I really am sorry,” he whispered.

After Faolan left for his own room, Hawk unpacked his bags. He shook out his clothes before hanging them up in the closet. Then he texted the others to let them know he was taking the first shift on lookout duty. He knew they didn’t have anything to worry about in the house, but it would make a

good impression and hopefully, provide them prime snooping time.

He also texted Mason to let him know about their plans for the morning. Mason replied that he would drop by to check in.

As Hawk wandered the third floor, he found the room Peter had mentioned earlier. It was... kind of bad, yeah. Completely cold and impersonal. Two sets of bunk beds and two small desks. It had probably been a storage room before being hastily cleaned out to create a makeshift bedroom. There was a tiny bathroom in the hallway with an equally small shower stall. Faolan would have had to duck to fit in it.

Hawk wondered if Thornston had set it up that way as some kind of power play. A way to remind them he was the alpha here and they were the visiting pack.

Hawk sighed. That kind of shit made him glad he didn't have to play the political games. He'd had enough of that to last a lifetime. He also knew, without a doubt, that Mason would never use him as a pawn in a power grab. And if he tried, Hawk would leave. Pack his shit, grab Grady, and put them all in his taillights. It would be hard as fuck and would hurt like hell, but he'd do it. He'd have to leave Faolan behind, though. With Conrad joining the pack, he'd never get Connie to leave. And no Connie? That would be a deal breaker.

"Shake it off, man," he told himself. Mason was the complete opposite of his last pack. Namely, he wasn't a power-hungry asshole who would leverage his whole family if it brought him a morsel of recognition.

Secondly, Mason had the respect of the hellhound pack alphas. And the trust of the griffins, which extended to their entire pack. Hawk's parents would kill for an audience with the griffins. Hawk had caught wind of them trying to trade on Mason's name.

"All *three* of our sons are members of the Vargar pack," Hawk mumbled in a mocking tone. Holly had paid them a visit and shut that shit down. Hawk had found out after the fact. He'd been pissed—downright irate. He had been packing when Mason stopped him. Mason had already called Hamish,

their alpha. His parents were put on notice. Any further breaches and they'd be permanently exiled and blacklisted for any other packs.

Hawk took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Thinking about his parents didn't do anyone any good. He was out from under their control. They couldn't hurt him or his brothers anymore. He turned his attention back to the task at hand—snooping.

The third floor was a bust. Nothing but guest rooms and the barracks. He headed down the stairs to the second floor, made a cursory pass down the hallway, and stopped in front of Peter's room. He could hear three heartbeats inside, and he was sure the loud snores were coming from Penny.

He left them and made his way across the stairs. The first room he found was a small office. There weren't any wards blocking him, so he took a step inside. Peter's scent nearly overwhelmed him as he crossed the threshold. This was obviously a space he used a lot. Hawk could understand that. The room felt comfortable. Not in a spelled "everything's okay" kind of way. More of a "welcome to the home I made." From the cluttered desk to the overstuffed armchairs, everything about the room was soothing. Looking around, Hawk understood what Paul meant by Peter loving local art. The room was a hodgepodge of styles. Paintings shared the space with sculptures, along with misshapen pottery and mixed-media pieces. Hawk could imagine Peter's eyes as he found these treasures. It was probably something like the look he'd given Hawk earlier.

"Right," Hawk whispered, forcing himself to move along. Reluctantly, he left the room behind and continued his search.

The hairs on Hawk's arms stood up when he got near the far wall. He figured he was above Thornston's office, but something else was off. He turned around and looked down the hallway. Then he walked it again. When he got to the west end of the building, he was sure it was smaller than the floor above. The bad-vibes wall was easily ten feet closer than it should be. He reached out to touch it, and he felt a tingling in

his fingertips. He jerked his hand away and stared at the wall. Then he shook his head.

“You’re not Superman,” he mumbled. No matter how hard he looked, he’d never be able to see through the wall. Instead, he used his brain and went downstairs to case the first floor. Thornston’s office was putting off the same vibes but to a lesser extent. There wasn’t much to the hallway next to it. Maybe fifteen feet of blank walls and bare floor before it dead-ended. He looked up at the ceiling and realized he was standing directly below the mysterious room above. When he tried to take a step closer, the ward protecting it was almost alive. It slithered over his arms and pushed him away.

“Right.” Thornston’s personal space, he figured. He continued on toward the back doors, trying to gauge how big the suite of rooms must be, but the shape of the house prevented him from determining it. He was about to try walking it again, but Tonya joined him.

“Find anything?”

Hawk shook his head. Even if he had found a super-secret room, he couldn’t talk about it. “Getting a lay of the land.” He looked at Thornston’s private hallway and then up at the ceiling.

Tonya nodded, catching his meaning. “Why don’t you go on up to bed. We have an early late-morning call tomorrow.”

“Right.” Hawk chuckled. Penelope had complained Milo didn’t have time available in the afternoon and warned them she would be knocking on their doors at the crack of dawn. Apparently, the sun would be rising at nine the next day. “See you then.”

THIRTEEN

“I’M SURPRISED you wanted to go shopping so soon,” Hawk said to Peter as they followed the others. The building in front of them had been a warehouse in another life, but nothing like the industrial shipping centers near the docks where Conrad had been held. These were downtown, and the whole area had undergone a reclamation recently. Investors had bought up all the properties and converted them into high-end shops and specialty boutiques, with expensive condos on the upper floors.

“That’s all on them,” Peter said, motioning to where his siblings were walking through a pair of double-doors Faolan held open. Tonya had gone in first to scope out the place. The space had a waiting room at the front, with uncomfortable-looking couches. The rear of the building was all white walls and shelves. Three racks of clothes were set up in front of a small podium. Bright spotlights and a three-way mirror completed the room.

“Milo,” Penny called out as she barreled past Tonya to engulf the man in a hug. She air-kissed each of his cheeks before stepping back.

Peter caught Hawk rolling his eyes next to him.

“Sorry,” Hawk said.

Peter shrugged. “She does that.”

He didn’t get a chance to say anything else before Paul grabbed Peter’s wrist to drag him across the room. Faolan fell back and knocked shoulders with Hawk. They stood next to

each other, facing opposite directions—Faolan keeping an eye on the front doors and Hawk watching the back. Faolan kept shooting glances over his shoulder as Tonya was escorted up onto the podium.

“See what I mean?” Penny asked. Hawk wasn’t sure she meant it as snotty as it came out. She just seemed to lack a filter.

“Dreadful,” Milo said. Tonya’s look of outrage had Hawk biting the inside of his cheek.

“I’m on duty,” Tonya said defensively.

“Yes, well, that’s no excuse. And you only have the one Bebe dress with you. You’ll need at least two more outfits,” Penny said. “I see you two laughing back there. Don’t worry. We’ll get to you.”

“Us?” Hawk asked as Milo turned a critical eye on them.

“Duh. You need something presentable,” Penny said.

“For the club opening,” Paul added. “If you’re near us, you’re going to be photographed. You’ll need to be”—he waved at them—“not that.”

The morning dragged on as Milo brought out more things for them to try. Hawk tuned them out as he did a lap around the room. Anything to keep from watching Peter squeeze himself into another pair of pants. Hawk didn’t see any difference between these and the last ones, but Penny had found fault with the other pair. As she had the last ten. She’d finally stormed to the back to search the stock herself. Paul had joined her ten minutes ago.

These kids were amateurs if they thought they were being sneaky. As if Hawk and Faolan hadn’t let them go. They wouldn’t get very far. In fact... Hawk checked his watch.

Right on time, the front door opened, and Mason escorted the twins back in.

“We weren’t *going* anywhere,” Penny said.

“Of course not,” Mason agreed.

“Did you know they were gone?” Peter asked as he joined Hawk. Hawk shot him a look, and Peter rolled his eyes. “Why am I asking? You probably timed Mason arriving to catch them.”

“Why did you let them use you as cover?”

Peter shrugged. “What do I care? They’re the ones who need to get out. I’d be fine sitting at home.”

“You don’t get to meet many new people that way.”

“Well, it did bring you to my bedroom, didn’t it?” Peter’s eyes went wide as he gasped. “I didn’t mean it like that. Shit. Forget I said anything.” He rushed off. If he was willing to put up with more of Milo’s critiques, then he must have been truly mortified.

Hawk bit back a smile as he followed Mason outside. “How far did you let them make it?”

“Two blocks. They tried to backtrack and pretend I wasn’t there. They said they were bored.”

“Don’t let Faolan know that. He’ll start packing them up. And then they’ll dig their heels in, and we’ll be here all day.”

Mason chuckled. He didn’t say anything else until they met Ryder at the next corner.

Ryder pulled him into a quick hug. “Anything to report?” he asked.

“A couple of things. There’s an extra room on the second floor, right above Thornston’s office. It could be that his private quarters has a loft or high ceilings. But there was definitely a wall that wasn’t there on the plans. The wards extended up to the third floor.”

“There’s no way to get in there?” Ryder asked.

Mason shook his head. “I doubt it. You didn’t feel those wards. They’re strong.”

“Think we can sneak Anodo in?” Hawk asked. “He got through the wards at the warehouse.”

“Probably not,” Mason said. “Not with Thornston around. I doubt he’d allow Anodo through the gate. But I can call him. Maybe he’ll have some ideas. What else did you find?”

“The cook is...” Hawk shook his head. “Something. She made some comments.”

“Like?” Mason asked.

“She wanted assurances we’d keep her kids safe. And then she said Peter would need me *after*. She knows, Mason. She commented on how it’s ending.”

“That complicates things. Is she working with Thornston? Beyond, you know.”

Hawk thought about it. Of course, she worked *for* Thornston, but *with*? He shook his head after a minute. “No. She’s there for the kids, not him. I think she sees herself as their protector.”

“We’ll take care of them in the aftermath. Anyone who wants our help will have it.” Mason reached out to squeeze the back of Hawk’s neck. Hawk marveled at Mason’s ability to see right through the bullshit to get to the heart of the matter.

“Thanks.”

Mason pulled him into a hug before stepping back. “We should get back,” he said.

“Right.” Hawk gave Ryder a shoulder-bump before leading Mason back to the store. Faolan gave them a relieved look when they came back in. “Mason said the escape attempt was because of boredom.”

“Well then, why are we still here?” Faolan asked. “We should head back.”

Hawk put his hands up. “I’m not telling them that.”

They both turned to Mason, who shook his head.

“All right.” Mason met their charges at the back of the building. “How are things going here?”

“Terrible.” Penny crossed her arms in front of her and pouted.

Peter glared at her, then turned to Mason. “I think we’re done here. Maybe we could go get lunch and then go back to the house?” he suggested.

Penny rolled her eyes and picked up her purse.

“I’ll send these over tomorrow,” Milo said. “Along with a few surprises for you, my dear.” He kissed Penny’s hand and nodded at Paul.

Hawk had to give it to the guy—he knew who to fawn over.

Penny gave him a curt nod and started for the door. “Are we leaving?”

Mason followed her out to the curb. There were two cars waiting for them. Hawk saw Ryder lurking on the corner the next block up.

Peter followed his gaze.

“Was that...?” he asked, but Ryder disappeared around the building.

“Pardon?” Hawk asked.

“I thought that was... Never mind. How are we splitting up?”

Penny shoved him toward Hawk before climbing into the other car. Paul followed, and Tonya took the passenger seat as Faolan took the wheel. Mason closed the door behind her and gave Hawk a nod. Then he turned and walked down the block.

“I guess you’re stuck with me,” Peter mumbled as he got into the car.

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Hawk said.

Peter blushed and turned to stare out the window. “So... uh... he isn’t coming with us?”

“He’s got some things to do back at the office.” Some things that now included attempting to find a way around Thornston’s wards and trying to find out more about the staff.

“Oh. So where are you taking me?”

Peter's disappointment wasn't personal, Hawk reminded himself. Mason was the face of their company, and boy, did he have the face for it. They'd had more than one case of hero worship during their years. Mason always handled it with good grace, letting them down gently enough that the person usually thought they'd overcome it on their own.

Hawk cleared his throat. "Élémentaire," he answered.

"Yuck." Peter wrinkled his nose.

"Not one for fine dining?" Hawk asked.

"No. I don't need anyone putting a napkin on my lap. And when they come through with that squeegee thing to clean off the tablecloth between courses..." Peter shuddered.

Hawk turned to look at him during the stoplight.

"What?"

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Of course." Peter blinked, then shrugged.

Hawk grinned and tapped his earpiece. "We're deviating from the plan."

"Copy that. Have fun," Tonya said. "Squawk if you need assistance."

"Roger. You too."

"What's all that about?" Peter asked.

"Nothing." Hawk smirked when Peter gasped as he turned right after Faolan's car went straight at the light.

"Are you kidnapping me?" Peter asked.

"Think of it as taking an excursion. If you're all right with that. Otherwise, we can go right back to the mansion." Hawk waited in silence as he headed to their destination.

Peter was quiet for a minute before nodding. "I trust you."

Hawk's chest warmed with pride when Peter smiled at him. He hoped Peter was a burger-and-shake kind of guy.

When Peter saw the fifties-style drive-in ahead of them, he laughed delightedly. “This is awesome,” he said as Hawk pulled in to one of the stalls. Peter looked around as he tried to take everything in at once.

Hawk rolled down the windows and shut the engine off. Oldies music filled the car, and Peter squirmed in his seat, dancing along.

“Wow,” he said.

Hawk waved at Kandi as she skated, channeling all the grace of her panther shifter. She looked at him as she twirled around. Her poodle skirt floated in a wide circle around her as she spun. She held out her hand, and Peter turned to Hawk. “Is she meaning me?”

“Yeah. If you want.”

“Hell yeah,” Peter said. His grin was almost splitting his face, and Hawk was intensely proud of putting that look on his face. Peter jumped out of the car and grabbed Kandi’s hand. She pulled him in close, then pushed away to spin a few times. Peter laughed loudly and tried to dance along with her. People in the next car over shouted encouragement at them. Peter took the lead and sped up the dance. Kandi smiled and threw her head back to laugh.

Hawk thought Peter looked beautiful, smiling so big it had to hurt, face flushed, probably from both exertion and embarrassment.

When the song ended, Peter stepped back and bowed deeply to his partner. She curtsied, and the cars near them honked their horns and flashed their lights. They both turned to their audience and bowed. Peter kissed her knuckles and stepped back to clap at her. She nodded in response before leaning forward to kiss his cheek. Then she skated off to take an order, and Peter climbed back into the car.

“This is awesome,” he said. He was practically glowing in his happiness. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I love it. We never come to any place like this.”

They ordered, and the food arrived quickly. Hawk rolled up the window on Peter's side halfway so Kandi could hook the tray on it. Peter thanked her and passed Hawk his food.

"Eating in the car. How gauche," Peter said, putting on a scandalized tone.

"And a shake to drink. Milk products do not accompany entrees," Hawk added loftily.

"Oh, never." Peter shook his head. They ate in comfortable silence, and then Peter ordered a banana split for desert. He'd eaten most of it before turning to Hawk.

"Sorry. Would you like some?" he offered.

"No. You enjoy it." Hawk could smell that the bananas weren't quite ripe enough for him, although they didn't seem to slow Peter down at all. He finished the last bite and set the dish on the tray. Then he leaned back and put his hand on his stomach with a satisfied sigh. Hawk couldn't take his eyes away from him. Peter had his eyes closed and his lips curved in a smile.

As Kandi slipped by quietly to take the tray, she leaned in and gave Hawk a thumbs-up sign. Hawk sat there, listening to the music and watching Peter for another few minutes.

When Peter blinked and glanced over at him, that one look took Hawk's breath away, and he wanted to have it directed at him every day. He had to turn away from the intensity of it.

"Ready to go home?" he asked, hoping it covered his sappiness.

Peter sat up straight and nodded. "Yeah. This was great."

"Maybe we can slip out and do it again sometime."

"I'd like that."

Hawk started the car and pointed it toward Peter's home.

"Oh! Can we stop there?" Peter asked. He pointed at a tiny gallery a block down. It wasn't much, a hole in the wall co-op a group of local artists used as a base.

“Okay.” He wasn’t sure it would be Peter’s kind of place, but Hawk would take any extra time with him he could get. He parked in the tiny lot behind the building and led Peter in through the back door.

“Hawk! What are you doing here? And who is this?” Trixie asked as they got to the front.

“Trix, this is Peter. He saw the sign and wanted to stop.”

“Well then, let me show you around,” she said, taking Peter’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of him.”

Hawk watched her whisk Peter away, down a hallway to the left. He heard her explaining who the artists were, and how long they’d been working on their projects. Peter paid rapt attention to everything Trix was saying.

Hawk closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He was so fucked.

FOURTEEN

“ARE YOU A COLLECTOR?” Trix asked.

“I pick things up here and there,” Peter answered. He was glad for the distraction she provided. When Hawk asked him if he trusted him, Peter’s stomach had fluttered. He did trust Hawk. One hundred percent, completely and implicitly. It was unnerving how much he trusted Hawk.

It was a side effect of the adrenaline. He’d been through a traumatic event, and Hawk was there to sweep him off to safety. Of course it made sense for Peter to transfer his relief into attraction to the man who gave him that security.

That was it. Nothing more.

Then Hawk took him to that diner, and all his rationalization went out the window. He’d never had anyone take him to that kind of place. It was bright and fun, and when the waitress invited him to dance, Peter went with it. He was still riding that high when he asked Hawk to stop at the gallery. He’d almost taken it back when Hawk changed lanes and pulled around the building to park.

“Hawk’s never brought anyone here before,” Trix said as she led him to another exhibit.

“Does he show anything here? He’s talented enough.” Hell, Hawk was better than some of the artists whose paintings he saw hanging in the small space.

Trix stopped and stared at him in shock. “You know about his work?”

“Uh, yeah. I saw some of it,” Peter said quickly. “I didn’t mean to look at it. It slipped out of his bag, and it was there.”

“What did you think of it?”

“It was... amazing. Breathtaking,” he said honestly. Sure, he hadn’t seen much, but what he had seen blew him away. There were a couple of sketches of famous statues Peter recognized, but there were also some original pieces in the stack Peter had picked up. They evoked all kinds of emotions as he looked longer. Hawk managed to convey exactly what he wanted through his art; Peter was sure of it. He thought about the charcoal sketch of two children. The softness of their faces while they slept projected an innocence and hope Peter felt wash over him. There were no scary monsters waiting in the dark corners of their room. There was another one of the kids playing, but done in color. It didn’t have any of the roughness or brushstrokes of a painting, so he must have used pastels. Peter imagined it as he thought about it. Hawk’s rough fingers curled around the short crayons, fingertips tinted in bright hues after smudging the edges.

Speaking of blurring the lines... Peter closed his eyes and exhaled.

Trix squeezed his arm and gave him a serene smile. “We keep telling him he should share more of himself, but...” She didn’t finish, and Peter couldn’t leave it hanging.

He stopped and turned to look directly at her. “But what?”

“It’s not my story to tell. But perhaps he will let you in. If you show him you are sincere.” She didn’t say anything else about Hawk as she continued showing him around the space. They finished at a wall of pottery back near the front. Hawk stood near the counter, looking pensive.

Peter gave him a nod before turning back to the items in front of him. He picked up a dish that had been sculpted to look like a ballet shoe, complete with ribbons that floated up from the base structure. It was painted in muted pinks and blues. The colors blended together like a watercolor. He thought it would look good in Penny’s room, so he bought it.

“Ready?” he asked after Trix had carefully boxed up his purchase.

“Yeah. They’re probably wondering what happened to us. Trix, thanks,” Hawk said, shooting a glare at her. Peter didn’t understand what that was all about, but he followed Hawk out. “Did you have fun?” he asked after they were heading back to the house.

“Yeah. This was great.” The ride back was subdued. Peter didn’t know what had changed. “Did something happen to the others?”

“What? No. Tonya checked in when they got there.”

“That’s good.” Peter nodded. If everyone was safe, then what else could be bothering Hawk? His stomach dropped when he remembered the conversation he’d had with Trix. “Did you hear us? Back there.”

Hawk cleared his throat and nodded.

“Hey. I’m sorry. I was trying to help, and then they were there, on the floor.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Hawk shook his head.

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s all right. She asked.”

Somehow Peter didn’t think it was. “Still. I’m sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

“It’s stupid. Don’t worry about it, all right?” Hawk repeated.

“All right.” Peter would let it drop if that was what Hawk wanted. “But thank you. For today.”

“Next time, I’ll show you a real dive,” Hawk promised.

“That’d be awesome.”

They pulled up to the house, and Peter rode with him to the back rather than get out at the front door. They walked in the side door together.

He wasn't hiding from Penny and Paul. It was, well... Okay, Peter had hoped that by sneaking in the side door, he could postpone the inevitable ambush. His luck did not hold, though. They were waiting, ready to pounce on him and sweep him away as soon as he set foot inside.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Hawk smile as Penny dragged him toward the stairs.

"What the hell happened?" she demanded as soon as they were locked away in her room.

"We went to lunch. And I got you this," Peter said, holding the box out as a peace offering.

"What is it?" she asked dubiously. She started to shake the box, but Peter stopped her.

"Careful. It's fragile."

She rolled her eyes and opened it. Her look went soft when she saw the sculpture inside.

Paul smiled when she pulled it out. "Ms. Locke hated you," he said.

"Yeah." Penny grinned, probably remembering the same thing Peter was.

Penny had hated the private ballet classes their father had signed her up for. She chafed under the strict rules and repetition involved. She didn't want to *learn* ballet—she just wanted to move as gracefully as the dancers did. So she acted up until the teacher finally quit. And then she started learning on her own. Penny would never be a professional dancer, but she would always be a diva.

"Thanks," she said. She placed it carefully on the top of her dresser. It could have been custom-made, with the way it seemed to belong there, and Peter was pleased to have given her something she actually liked.

"How did you find that?" Paul asked, flopping onto Penny's bed and dragging Peter along with him. Penny sat much more delicately on the edge.

"There was a gallery on the way back from the diner."

“Diner? One of those greasy-spoon-type places you see in the movies?” Penny made a face, and Peter grinned.

“More ‘sit in your car and they bring it to you on paper plates.’”

“Ugh.” Paul shuddered.

Peter smacked him with a pillow, and they laughed. He told them about dancing with the waitress and trying to eat the banana split before it melted and flowed over the edge of the dish. Penny had a smile on her face the whole time. He couldn’t see Paul, but he could feel him staring.

“What?”

“You had fun. Your kind of fun,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad. You deserve some happiness.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “He’s just doing his job, Pen. It didn’t mean anything.”

“No. If he were only doing his job, he would have followed us to the restaurant. He would have stood at attention in the back of the room with the other two,” Penny said.

“He knew you would hate that place,” Paul added. “Hell, I kind of hated it.”

“Then why did you go there?” Peter asked.

“It’s the place Milo set up for us.” Paul shrugged.

Peter didn’t understand it, but then again, he didn’t have the same aspirations as his siblings. Not that he knew what it was they really wanted. They wore the clothes people gave them, went to the places they were sent, posed for the photographers that magically appeared wherever they went. They loved the limelight. Or they seemed to, at least. Peter couldn’t tell sometimes.

Or he could have been projecting his own hatred of it onto them. He shied away from all the attention. They were always mobbed with people every time they all went out together.

Penny and Paul ate it up, wrapping their arms around Peter to make sure he didn't bolt.

"How packed was it?"

"Not very. We got right in," Paul said.

"And we saw your friend there. He didn't want to join us, though. He was taking something to go."

"My friend?" Peter had no idea who she could be talking about.

"The guy you met yesterday. The one with the cane."

"Conrad was there?" He couldn't picture Conrad hanging out there. He seemed more of a diner kind of guy. But then again, he didn't know much about him.

"He seemed to know Lizzie, so." Penny shrugged.

"Huh." Peter pulled out his phone and texted Conrad. *Heard you blew off my sister.*

A second later, Conrad texted back, *She scares me!* along with the hair-raised emoji. Peter chuckled and slipped the phone back in his pocket.

"What will we do with you?" Penny asked. She was looking at her present and she let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Sorry I'm such a disappointment," he said, knocking his shoulder against Paul.

"Terrible. Awful. You can't be reformed," Paul added dramatically. Peter hit him with the pillow again, and they all broke out laughing.

He might not understand their ways, but they were his family. He supposed he'd keep them.

Penny rolled over onto her stomach and turned to him.

"Now, tell me everything. Did you watch him as he licked the grease off his fingers?" she asked.

He glared at her. Because he had, in fact, watched that. And his dick twitched at the memory. He couldn't let her know

that, though. It didn't matter. They could tell how much Hawk was affecting him.

“Knew it,” she said smugly.

Did he say he'd keep them? He lied. He wanted a refund.

FIFTEEN

HAWK WANDERED THE HOUSE, bored out of his mind. He knew they were there to spy on Thornston, but damn. The man kept tight ranks around himself, and even tighter wards around his office. He had soundproofing strong enough to prevent werewolf ears from listening in. They'd tried.

Faolan and Tonya were tied up with Paul and Penelope. Hawk had taken Peter to the police station to follow up with the shooting investigation while the others sat down to breakfast. Peter had wanted to get it over with. Haynes seemed annoyed that they couldn't tell them anything new, but truthfully, Peter didn't know anything. Hawk had left them alone to check in with the chief, and caught some shit for taking two shots instead of one, but he shrugged it off.

Sometime after they got back, a panel truck full of clothes showed up. Now they were sequestered in one of the rooms on the first floor. An honest-to-Goddess, no-shit, real fucking *ballroom*. Who the fuck needed a ballroom in their house? Did Thornston believe he was some kind of nineteenth century earl or something?

Whatever. He was currently Mason's problem. Mason had managed to get some time with the man, under the guise of reviewing his enemies to see who would have dared to take a shot at his precious children, of course.

That left Hawk with nothing to do but explore. And try not to dwell on the not-date he'd had with Peter yesterday. He didn't know what had compelled him to bypass the restaurant and take off with Peter the way he had, but he wouldn't take it

back. Not when he'd seen the way Peter had smiled when dancing. And then at the gallery, hearing Peter and Trix talk about his art, Hawk had panicked. Thankfully, Trix didn't tell Peter the reason why he hated people seeing his work. Hawk shook his head and put his mind back on the task at hand.

He'd already prowled around the rest of the open rooms, and so far he hadn't found anything. Nothing that said, "I'm part of an elaborate evil plot against the supernatural world." Of course, he'd stayed away from Thornston's office and the master suite. There was no way he'd get away with looking in there. If the wards let him pass, most people had a good grasp on their own personal spaces.

Add to that the fact Thornston had made himself a werewolf, well... Hawk wasn't *stupid*. He stayed far away from the Hallway of Doom.

With a sigh, he made his way toward the dining room.

"You!" Laurel called out as he passed the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Don't mock me. Here," she said. She shoved a sheet of paper at him, and Hawk grabbed it without a second thought. "Recipe."

"My friend thanks you," he said as he read it over.

"Right. Friend," she snorted.

Hawk watched Laurel moving around the room, bouncing between the stove and the island. He noticed pots simmering on every one of the burners. All the counters were full. He counted three trays of lasagna, four bowls of some kind of pasta salad, and six other covered dishes. Along with stacked racks of cookies and brownies.

"Are they having a party?" he asked.

"No. Stocking up." She stopped and stared at Hawk. "I'll be taking some time off."

"Really?" Hawk schooled his features, but not soon enough.

“Not long now,” she said. Hawk blinked, and she came around the counter and put a hand on his cheek. He struggled for something to say, but she shook her head. “Everything will work out. You’ll see.”

“What are you?” he whispered.

She laughed brightly. “Not a woman to be interrupted. Go. Shoo,” she said, putting a cookie in his hand and nudging him out the door.

Numbly, he made his way back to the office he’d found on the second floor. He was surprised to find Peter in there, sitting behind the desk and staring at a wire sculpture of some sort. Hawk watched him for a minute. Peter was a million miles away, lost in whatever memory had gripped him. Hawk was about to turn back when Peter looked up and jumped in surprise.

“Oh, hey. Sorry.”

Hawk chuckled. “What are you sorry for? I’m the one that was lurking here.”

Peter shook his head. Hawk motioned to one of the chairs, and Peter nodded. “Not much to do around here, huh?”

“Haven’t you had enough excitement this week?” Hawk asked, making Peter snort out a laugh.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Has that kind of thing happened to you before?”

“No. I usually go wherever Paul and Penny want to go.”

Hawk hid a smile as Peter backtracked.

“Oh. You meant that thing the other day? Yeah. No. Some of Dad’s... adversaries? I guess? Is that the right word?” He squinted at Hawk, looking for something. Confirmation, probably. Hawk nodded. “Yeah. I guess that’s the best way to put it. Some of his adversaries have tried. Things. In the past. But shooting at us? Yeah. That’s new.”

Hawk suddenly felt cold. And really shitty for bringing this down on Peter.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. Peter shook his head.

“It’s not your fault.”

If you only knew...

“Anyway. Thank you for lunch yesterday. I had fun. And Trix seemed nice.”

“She can be.”

“And she can be a nightmare?” Peter asked.

Hawk laughed. “Sometimes.”

Peter got quiet again. Hawk could tell there was something more going on here. He reached out and put a hand over Peter’s where it rested on the desk. Peter let out a tiny gasp, and Hawk felt a tingling where their skin met. Or maybe he imagined it. Wished it? He shook his head.

“Is everything all right? You look like you have something else you want to say.” He got lost looking at Peter, there, warm, staring back at him with an openness that took his breath away. He wanted to—

“I’m sorry,” Peter said, pulling his hand away. Hawk didn’t whine at the loss. “Again. About your art. They were right *there*. And now that I know how you feel.” He motioned at the floor before looking back up. “But they were amazing. Incredible. You’re...” He shook his head and shrugged.

“Thanks,” Hawk said, brushing off the compliment. “No. I mean...” Fuck. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thank you.”

Peter nodded, and they both sat back in their chairs. It was awkward. He knew Peter wanted to ask more, but he didn’t want to get into it. So he did what he always did—deflected.

“This is a nice piece,” he said, pointing at something that could have been an octopus. A very loose, highly artistic representation of one. Maybe. If you turned it to the right angle.

“Oh, yeah.” Peter smiled, and Hawk ignored the tugging he felt in his chest. “I got that one in Majorca. There was a

tiny gallery right off the beach. Everyone was walking right past it. I think I was their first sale all week.”

“And that one?” Hawk motioned at the wire sculpture in Peter’s hand. Peter glanced down at it and blushed. Now that he’d gotten a good look at it, Hawk realized it was rather... explicit.

“Yeah. Uh. Good art should be appreciated?”

Hawk chuckled. “Is there a story for every piece in here?”

Peter looked around, eyeing the artwork critically, pausing longer here and there before finally nodding. “Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Comfortable silence, Hawk supposed it would be called. He watched Peter get lost in his memories as he studied one work and then another. He was the opposite of what Hawk had expected. The photos, the portfolio of information they’d collected, painted a very different picture of Peter than the real man sitting across from him. They presumed they’d meet three spoiled, rich kids. Ones who threw money around and expected the world to fawn all over them. Well, they got two of those, at least. Penelope and Paul certainly were a handful. But Peter... he wasn’t like that. He was caring. He remembered people’s names. He showed empathy. And he, apparently, was an art lover. That’s the thought Hawk clung to when he spoke up again.

“I’ve had people. In the past.” He shook his head. “They weren’t so encouraging about my drawings. That’s why I don’t show them to anyone.”

“Oh, sorry. That sucks. Them, I mean. They suck. Whoever made you think you weren’t good.”

“Thanks. He wasn’t...” Hawk shook his head. He’d never told anyone about it. Not even the pack. Faolan and Grady knew some of what happened, and of course Mason, but the others didn’t. “It was before.”

Peter nodded but didn’t say anything. Hawk was glad. It made it easier explain without interruptions.

“My parents knew his family. They set us up as kids. They thought we’d be good together.” Good for forming a pack

alliance, that is. They didn't care that he was an abusive, controlling jerk. They wanted the prestige a treaty with the Rimasetra pack would bring. They had pledged their firstborn to the Rimasetra firstborn before Hawk had been conceived. He was raised knowing he belonged to Caleb Rimasetra. He escaped into his art to avoid interacting with his family.

“When I was old enough, they sent me to him. He was a few years older, and he had money and power behind his name.” Hawk snorted. *A few years older.* In truth, it was more than ten years, and Hawk had still been in his teens at the time.

Peter hissed. “Your parents forced you into an arranged marriage?”

“I was young. What did I know? I thought I was in love with him.” Hawk shrugged. “And when he told me my art was shit, that he didn't want me to waste his money on it, I let it go.”

“That asshole,” Peter said harshly.

Hawk smiled. It had been a while since anyone felt outrage on his behalf.

“Trix knows, doesn't she?” Hawk's surprise must have shown on his face. “The way she acted yesterday. She's very protective of you, you know.”

“Yeah.” They'd grown up together. She'd been instrumental in getting him out. It had been one of their first cases, actually. Before there was an agency. The brainwashing had worn off pretty quickly, and Hawk realized the reputation the Rimasetras had was nothing but lies. The pack was broke, leveraged up to their eyeballs, and very close to bankruptcy.

“Trix called Mason, and his... family... helped get Grady and Faolan out of my parents' house. I didn't care so much about myself, but I wanted to make damn sure my brothers wouldn't become bargaining chips. Then Mason came to me, and we worked together to expose the Rimasetras for the frauds they were. That was enough to render the arrangement void. We've been with Mason ever since.”

“Fuck, Hawk. That's awful.”

Hawk shrugged. He'd put it behind him a long time ago. "Our parents slunk back to Ireland, and I haven't seen them since. I call them a few times a year to check in."

"I don't know if I could forgive that. How can you still talk to your parents?"

"It is what it is. It's in the past. It can't hurt me anymore." Grady and Faolan still hadn't forgiven them for sending Hawk away in the first place. Hawk heard Paul coming up the stairs, so he stood up to leave.

Peter reached out to grab his arm. "I meant what I said. Your stuff is really good. If you ever want to show it to me, I'd love to see more of it."

"Thanks," Hawk said quietly. Paul came into the room and thrust some clothes at him, breaking the somber mood.

"Here. These are for tomorrow night."

"Thank you," Hawk said. He gave Paul a nod and left with the bundle in his hands.

"Peter, we need you downstairs to pick yours out." Hawk chuckled when he heard a smack behind him. "Ow. What was that for?" Paul pouted.

Hawk knew he'd wind up showing Peter his whole portfolio eventually. And for some reason, that thought didn't scare him one bit.

SIXTEEN

GOD, this sucked. It really, really, sucked. The music was too loud, the place was too crowded, and worse, there was no escape. At least not for another—Peter checked his watch—fuck. Three hours. At least, that’s what Penny told him. Something about agreements and full versus partial compensation and wardrobe changes. Fuck, it was exhausting.

“Look, they’re paying *double* their normal for you being here,” Penny said.

“Double? What? Why?”

“Because they think they’ve managed to lure the elusive Third Thornston out of hiding.”

“I don’t hide,” he mumbled as he adjusted his shirt hem before reaching up to run his fingers through his hair again. Penny stopped him by swatting at his arm. He felt ridiculous. And uncomfortable. This pair of pants was tighter than the last ones Penny had shoved in his direction. If this Lymon guy thought Peter was a good spokesmodel for him, well... He grimaced, and Penny shoved his shoulder.

“You just have to stand there and look pretty,” Penny said, then flounced off in her—third? fourth?—outfit of the night. The bottle in her hand was strategically held to get the best view of the label. Peter watched her as she wormed her way through the crowd, crossing paths with Paul and stopping to take photos.

It boggled his mind as he watched her work. Because, apparently, this was actually a real *job*. Like, who paid for

someone to show up at a club or to wear clothes? She had snagged a bonus by insisting Tonya put on one of the dresses that had been sent to the house. Peter would never admit this out loud—he needed his balls where they were, thank you—but Tonya very nearly upstaged Penny in the Bebe dress she'd brought. Luckily, she claimed the cut of it was wrong for her, so she changed into something else, and a crisis had been averted. He shook his head and took another swig of his drink. He had no idea what was in it, but it tasted good. And it was in a glass, so he didn't have to worry about holding it at the optimal angle for photographers to get the perfect advertising shot.

He let his gaze wander around the room, taking it all in, but not focusing on anything in particular. Tonya and Faolan were floating around the room with an air of careless nonchalance. He watched as Tonya threw her head back and laughed at something someone said to her. It was an act, of course. She might be playing at being a party girl, but the truth was right there, should anyone care to notice. The sharpness in her eyes, the tightness in the lines of her body—she was ready to pounce at any moment. Most people would think she was just dancing. She noticed him watching and gave him a wink. He shook his head and chuckled as he turned to look at another group of people. All gorgeous. Dripping in designer clothes and jewels. And all of them clamoring for a sliver of Penny's attention. Paul was holding his own court on the other side of the room. Faolan drifted through the crowd seamlessly.

Hawk was there, somewhere. Peter hadn't seen him in a while, though. Not since they first walked in and got mobbed, actually. Photographers crowded around them the second they opened the car doors. Faolan and Hawk cleared them out, made enough space for them to get to the door, anyway. Once inside, they'd separated and blended in with the crowd. He closed his eyes and shook his head. What was he doing here? This wasn't his scene. He felt someone coming close and braced himself for more inane conversation.

“See anything you like?” a man asked. He was standing far too close. Peter shuffled back a step, and the man followed. “I mean, I haven't seen you out at one of these before.”

“I’m more of a homebody.”

The man looked him up and down, then opened his mouth to say something, but Hawk swooped in and cut him off.

“Here’s your refill,” Hawk said, passing him another glass and taking the almost full one from his hand.

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

“But...” the man said, inching closer. A look from Hawk had him holding up his hands in surrender and backing off. He disappeared into the crowd, and Peter relaxed with a sigh.

“Thanks for that.”

“No problem.”

Peter wanted to say more, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. The awkward silence grew between them until he couldn’t take it anymore.

“I don’t usually come to these things.”

“So why did you come tonight?”

“I don’t know? Solidarity or something? I’d hate for something to happen while they were out and not be there?”

“No one will try anything here.”

Peter snorted. “They weren’t shooting at you,” he said. Maybe he was still shaken about it. Hawk flinched when he said that. “But we’re okay. Penny thinks they didn’t actually want us dead or anything.”

“No. You were always safe.”

Somehow, Peter believed him. Something in his tone reassured him that no, they were not the targets. He smiled, but Hawk didn’t return it.

“Thanks. I think I needed to hear that. From someone else, you know?”

Hawk nodded but kept his gaze on the crowd, and Peter followed his lead. More people had showed up in the last half hour. They were dancing shoulder to shoulder. It was a living, breathing mass of bodies. Peter shuddered at the thought of

being down there, in the middle of it. As he watched, one person broke through the wall of limbs and started his way. When he got closer, Peter recognized him. “Oh shit. Who invited him?”

“Who?” Hawk asked, instantly alert.

Peter was too flustered to say anything. He panicked and did the only thing he could think of. “Play along?” he asked as he draped himself over Hawk. Hawk stiffened against him when he buried his face against Hawk’s neck. “Please?”

He relaxed when one of Hawk’s arms came around his waist. He grabbed Peter’s drink with his other hand and set it on the ledge behind them. Then both his hands were hot where they rested on Peter’s hips.

“Peter? I thought that was you.”

“Huh?” Peter looked up and was glad to see Hawk wasn’t unaffected by the closeness. Or he was an incredible actor. Either way, his eyes were half-lidded as he stared down at him. Peter could close the distance between their mouths. Another inch and they would be—

“Peter?”

Hawk’s hands tightened on his waist, and he cut a narrow-eyed gaze at the intruder.

Peter blinked slowly and turned to his ex. “Kurt.”

“Are you all right? I mean, what’s gotten into you?”

Peter sighed and turned around, pleased that Hawk didn’t let him go. Instead, he wrapped both arms around him from behind and pulled him back against his body. His long, lean body. Of solid muscle. And there was his hard-on, pressing against Peter’s ass where it rested in the groove of Hawk’s groin. Fuck, it felt amazing. He closed his eyes and pressed back more. Hawk took his weight easily, and the noise he made went straight to Peter’s cock.

“Peter?” Kurt asked again, but he was far away. More like a memory than an actual conversation. “Is he bothering you?”

Peter smiled and spun back around to face Hawk.

“Yeah,” he said, pushing closer. He hissed as his erection brushed against Hawk’s and he lost it. He shoved Hawk back until he could pin him to the wall. Peter’s breath was coming in gasps as he stared, letting his eyes wander down to Hawk’s crotch and moving back up again. Hawk pulled his hips closer, causing more of that friction, and Peter leaned in to kiss him. Their teeth clashed, and it was a little painful, but then Hawk reached both hands up to cup Peter’s cheeks. He pulled back and studied Peter.

Peter licked his lips and nodded. He wanted this. He didn’t think he’d ever wanted anything more than he wanted—*needed*—to be wrapped up in Hawk right that moment. He wanted to crawl into Hawk’s skin, and it wouldn’t be close enough. Hawk gave him a tiny smile before leaning in to kiss him gently. That one kiss was better than any he’d ever had. Then Hawk gave him another. And another. And then he tilted his head and opened his mouth, running his tongue along the seam of Peter’s mouth, and oh!

Peter never took anything for himself. He always stayed in the background while everyone else got what they wanted. But this. This was his. He lost himself in the sensations. His hips ground against Hawk’s, almost without his permission. Hawk moved, and then, damn, one of Hawk’s thighs was between Peter’s legs. That was what he needed. He rubbed himself all over Hawk, practically humped his thigh as they kissed. He was almost there—

“Peter!” Kurt shouted, making him jump. He came to his senses and looked around. There were a few people watching them. Penny had a proud look on her face, and Paul gave him a thumbs-up. He looked over at Hawk in horror.

Hawk looked as close to coming as he had been. His cock tented his pants, and there was a wet spot from his precum. It was almost enough for Peter to dive in and finish the job, but instead, he stepped away. He covered his mouth with a hand as he gasped for air.

“Sorry,” he mumbled in embarrassment as he stumbled to the back door. Hawk followed quickly, trying to stop him, but he flailed his arms out wildly. “I am so sorry.”

“Hey,” Hawk said softly, and damn, that made it worse. He reached out again, and Peter shied away. He took a deep breath. The cool air smelled awful, but the noise was reduced to a quiet thumping in the dark alley behind the club. Peter moved closer to the building on the opposite side and started pacing. Hawk took the hint and leaned against the wall of the club and waited.

“I... I shouldn't have forced myself on you.”

“You didn't,” Hawk reassured him.

“No. I... I wanted to prove something, and then I...” He shook his head.

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not. This isn't me!”

Hawk pointedly kept his mouth shut, and Peter was grateful. He took a few more laps to clear his head. By his fourth turn, the door opened again, and Penny was there.

“All right, baby brother! You finally made your move!”

“Penny,” Paul said from behind her. She spun around to face him.

“What?”

Paul shook his head, and Penny finally noticed Hawk was standing right there. She was about to say something else when an SUV turned up the alley at the same time Tonya came out of the club door.

“I think it's time we called it a night,” she said.

Penny glanced at Hawk before crossing over to Peter to wrap him up in a hug.

“What about your contract?” he asked.

“They'll deal,” Penny said with a shrug. “I'm tired. Let's go home.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Tonya said. She opened the back door and climbed in. Paul followed, dragging Peter in behind him. Peter noticed the glare Penny sent at Hawk while he closed the door

behind them, but he couldn't bring himself to call her on it. Maybe later, after he died of mortification. After that, his corpse could tell her to knock it off. Hawk climbed in the passenger seat.

"No photos of it," Paul was saying into his phone. "Kill every copy, got it?"

"Who's that?" Peter asked. He was still in a daze.

"Destroyer. Don't worry. We got you covered," he said. He rested a hand on Peter's leg and gave it a squeeze. "He scrubs unauthorized news items from the web for us sometimes."

Penny patted his other leg and gave him a vicious grin. "And if they try to leak it after that? We'll tear their balls off."

SEVENTEEN

HAWK WAITED outside Thornston's office, pacing up and down the long hallway. Back and forth. Back and forth. At one o'clock in the morning. Mason had gone in there a half an hour ago, right after they'd gotten back from the club opening. He wondered what he was telling Thornston. Their client. Shit.

Faolan and Tonya had disappeared upstairs to change. They came back down ten minutes later, carrying their bags with them. Hawk looked at them in surprise, and Tonya rubbed a hand down his arm.

"In case we need to bug out."

"Right." Fuck. He'd fucked up royally. He'd compromised their entire mission. Of course they should be ready to bug out. All because... What? He couldn't control himself?

Peter was the one who kissed him, shoved him against the wall. Who shoved his thigh between Hawk's legs and...

"Fuck," Hawk growled at himself as he turned again. He had to clench his hands into tight fists to keep from storming in there to... what, he didn't know. Defend Peter's honor? Throw himself on Thornston's mercy? Demand he give himself up so they could finish this shit and live happily ever after? He growled in frustration as he completed another lap.

Finally, after an ice age, the door opened and Mason stepped out, face blank. Mason nodded at them, and Hawk followed him out the front door, Faolan and Tonya behind with their things. Their car was still where Faolan had left it when they got back. Paul and Penny had whisked Peter off to their

rooms without a single backward glance after twenty minutes in their father's office.

"I'm sorry, boss," he said, tilting his head in submission.

Mason sighed and cupped the side of his neck with one large hand. "There's..." He shook his head. "Let's go back to the office."

"Right."

They got in the car. Hawk drove them back to the office as fast as he dared. He was ready to fly out of his skin by the time they were safely ensconced in Mason's office. He was glad Mason had dismissed Faolan and Tonya.

"I'm sorry, boss. I know I fucked up."

"Well, that's not the way Thornston sees it."

"No?"

Mason smiled sadly. "No. He thinks you were *enchanted*."

"But I wasn't. I knew what I was doing, boss. He... he kissed me first, but I... I wanted..." He shook his head.

"Well, that's not the way Peter's explaining it. He insists he's the one who came on to you. That however you behaved, it was because he coerced you into it."

"That's not true at all." Hawk started to stand, but Mason held up a hand to stop him.

"Whether it's true or not, that's the way Thornston's seeing it. If anything, he's proud of Peter for finally using his powers."

"What?"

"He said, 'I guess that fae bitch wasn't used up after all.'"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I have no idea, but I heard him laughing with his bodyguards before I went into his office. Something about the difficulty of keeping that 'broodmare' being worth it."

"Holy shit." The implications of what Mason had overheard were... Fucking hell, that's what. The possibility

that Thornston was behind some of the kidnappings, some of the forced pregnancies, maybe even Connie's...Hawk's wolf snarled in his chest and demanded action. "*Goddess.*"

Hawk was having trouble controlling his shift, even with his alpha's hand on his neck. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to run back to the mansion and rend the man limb from limb.

"Why didn't you kill him right then?"

"Because we're not prepared for a war. Especially on his turf, with those innocent kids on site. He would not have hesitated to turn it into a bloodbath. And once he'd finished us off there, he'd come here, razing the building to take the rest of us out. If he didn't kidnap Holly and Bianca."

"Fuck. Along with Connie and the kids. Fuck." Hawk felt his eyes flash, and he took a deep breath.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Alpha," Hawk said when he couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"Maybe you really were enchanted. We knew about Paul and Penny, but only suspected about Peter."

"I—" Hawk started, but Mason put up a hand to stop him.

"Go on up to bed. It's been a long fucking day, and tomorrow will be longer."

"Sorry I fucked up so badly," Hawk said quietly.

Mason gripped his shoulder tight. "Nothing's over yet. We have to plan how to move forward with this. I have some calls to make. Maybe we'll have some answers in the morning."

Hawk nodded and left him. The elevator ride to the fourth floor seemed to take forever. He found his bags right inside the door. Faolan must have brought them up for him. He was glad they had packed for him. For one thing, he didn't want Thornston to get the idea he was skulking around the place, prowling after Peter. Also, he didn't want to give in to the urge to go prowling after Peter. His wolf was howling at him to go, to find him, to bring him home with them.

He ignored it for now, instead going straight into the bedroom. His mind was reeling with what Mason had said. If the kids were half-fae, it would explain so much. Like how Thornston managed to manipulate the wards. It would be possible if he was siphoning fairy magic from his kids.

Hawk paced around the entire apartment before making his way back to the bedroom. The clock next to the bed showed it was four forty, but Hawk was too keyed up to sleep. He needed a shower after spending so much time at the mansion. Thornston was one of those kinds of guys. So dirty and slimy, it almost spread to everything he touched. He went into the bathroom and started the shower. While he waited for it to warm up, he stripped out of his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. He scratched his stomach as he considered what to do with them. Burning them might be too extreme, but washing them might not be enough.

He knew it was unreasonable, that the uneasiness he was feeling was all in his head, but that didn't matter.

The water slid over his body, taking some of his stress away with it. Then he grabbed the soap and scrubbed until his skin was pink, washing the day off. Everything about it had been a clusterfuck.

Everything since he'd sighted Peter in his scope four days ago.

Fuck, was that all it had been? It felt like it had been weeks since he'd first laid eyes on Peter and Penelope through the scope on his rifle. They'd been back and forth to the mansion so much it seemed impossible that they'd only spent a few days together. Already he was sure Peter belonged there with him.

He smiled when he remembered those ridiculous sunglasses Peter had been wearing when he first lined up the shot. Hawk didn't know how anyone could make them look, well, maybe not *good*, but they certainly didn't make Peter look bad. No, Peter still looked every bit as gorgeous as the photos of him they had pinned up downstairs. Hawk's cock started to thicken as he remembered that first meeting at the

mansion. It'd been hard to focus for a few minutes after looking at Peter, wearing that skintight shirt and painted-on jeans. And then later, when Hawk convinced him to change... It had been pure torture listening to Peter jack off.

He dropped a hand to stroke himself as he replayed the scene in his mind. Peter's moans as he stroked himself. The thwap-thwap he could hear from his post outside the room. Peter wasn't as quiet as he thought he was. Or maybe Hawk was cheating with his werewolf hearing. The grunts as he hit the right tempo, fuck. Hawk groaned as he pumped his hard cock in time with the memory of Peter's stroking. His breath was coming in short pants as he got closer. He imagined how Peter looked in that moment. His beautiful face twisted in pleasure. His mouth dropped open, his pink lips in an O as his breath came in big, needy gasps.

His expression when he was impaled on Hawk's cock, taking his knot as he pumped load after load into that sweet ass.

"Fuck," Hawk shouted as he came, harder than he'd ever come before. Thick ropes of cum painted the shower walls, and the base of his cock tingled as it swelled in his hand. His cock stood straight up from his body, still rock-hard as he shot another load against the tile. He took great big, gasping breaths as his knot fully formed and his cock continued to spill. His hips twitched forward, seeking any kind of friction. He squeezed a hand around the knot and groaned as his knees buckled. He slid down the wall through his cum and sat on the floor, panting. And staring at his crotch, where his cock was still hard, still pulsing cum. He felt dizzy and his knot was throbbing, seeking his mate. It stayed that way for what felt like hours, images of Peter coming unbidden to his mind, making it jerk and spill more cum down his hard shaft.

When he felt it starting to subside, he sighed. The knot was still there, although it had deflated some. He stared at it, disbelieving. Forming a knot didn't just happen. It meant only one thing...

Peter was his mate.

Hawk's mind reeled at the implications, and his wolf howled at the idea. He could almost feel the wolf inside him pacing, snarling, insisting they go back and claim their mate.

He'd never felt anything like it before. He was always in tune with his wolf. It was as natural to him as breathing. He'd never felt it was a different entity inside him, spurring him to action. But now, it wanted to take off, with or without him. He wanted—no, he *needed*—to get his mate, to make sure he was safe.

Resolved, he stood up and rinsed off quickly, taking a moment to spray down the shower walls before he got out. His oversensitive cock tingled when he passed the towel over it, but he didn't slow down. He kicked the pile of clothes to one corner of the room, and Peter's scent hit him. His eyes flashed and his knot throbbed again.

He rushed out and threw on some clothes, then ran out of the apartment and down the stairs.

"Hey, man, where's the fire?" Ryder asked as Hawk passed him in the lobby. He held a drink carrier in one hand.

Hawk had no idea how long he'd been in the shower, but he noticed the sky outside was turning a pinkish-purple. Ryder must have been returning from an early-morning coffee run for Conrad.

"Not now," he growled.

Ryder grabbed his arm and shoved him against the wall. "What's wrong?"

"He's out there. I need to save him."

"Not looking like that," Ryder said, throwing the coffee into the trash can near the door. Then he took Hawk by the shoulders and shook him. He turned them so Hawk could see his reflection in the glass doors. His eyes were glowing bright blue.

"Don't care." He started to leave, but Ryder was stronger.

"What's going on?"

"He's not *safe*."

“Who?”

“My mate!”

Ryder’s eyes went wide. “Oh fuck.”

Hawk growled at him, but Ryder pulled him back into the stairwell.

“Snap out of it!” he shouted. The door opened above them, and Hawk turned his head to growl at the intruder. Ryder gave him a shake, knocking his head against the wall.

“Hawk? You all right?” Conrad asked from the safety of the landing above them.

Hawk breathed in through his nose, taking in the scent of his packmates, and relaxed incrementally.

“Yeah. He’s fine,” Ryder said, staring Hawk down. Hawk took another breath and nodded. They took the stairs, and Conrad held the door open for them. Ryder pulled Conrad into a hug and nuzzled his nose along his temple.

Hawk whined, wanting that with his own mate, and Ryder pulled back.

“We’re going upstairs for a bit. You good?” he asked, and Conrad nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll see you later.” Conrad kissed Ryder’s cheek and reached out to squeeze Hawk’s arm before heading to his office.

Ryder waited for him to disappear through the doorway, then led Hawk back to the stairs and up into their training facility. He didn’t say anything, opting to let Hawk take it at his own pace. Hawk stalked around the room, running his hands through his hair and tugging hard. After nearly thirty laps, he felt in control again. Ryder waited for him on the bench in front of the sparring ring. Hawk dropped down next to him with an exhausted exhale.

“Wanna talk about it?” Ryder asked.

“Not really.”

“Okay.” They sat there in silence for a few minutes.

“He’s my mate.”

“Are you sure?” Ryder wasn’t judging him, simply asking for clarification.

“Popped a knot jerking off thinking about him.”

“Well, that’s inconvenient.”

“Yeah,” Hawk said miserably. There wasn’t a lot to say after that. Their case led them to a real scumbag, and surprise! One of his kids is Hawk’s mate.

Ryder put a hand on his shoulder. “It’ll all work out.”

“How the fuck is that helpful? He’s out there. With *him*. And I’m cut off. So tell me. How the fuck is this going to work out?”

“The Goddesses wouldn’t be so cruel to give you your mate and not let you be with him.”

Hawk growled and started pacing again. “Like they could fucking stop it!”

He knew he was being unreasonable. But this was his mate they were talking about.

“It’ll be okay,” Ryder said. “He’s not lost to you yet. And he’s with his family. They won’t let anything happen to him.”

“You haven’t been there. You didn’t see Thornston, man. He’s...” Hawk shook his head. The thought of Peter staying another night in that house, Hawk didn’t think he could handle it. He started prowling again. He felt so useless to Peter right now, knowing what his father was, what he was capable of. Every interaction Hawk had seen between him and his kids was... cold. They were commodities to him. Something to make him seem normal from the outside.

It was the exact same way Hawk’s parents had looked at him and his brothers.

He paced until he finally wore himself out, and then he sat on the floor, his back up against the side of the ring.

“What am I gonna do, man?”

Ryder moved to sit next to him. He knocked their shoulders together and smiled. “We’ll figure it out. It’s what we do.”

Hawk wished he had Ryder’s optimism.

EIGHTEEN

MASON JOINED them in the gym an hour later. There was something off about him. Something bugging him. He sparred with both Ryder and Hawk for a half hour, not taking it easy on either of them. The three of them were a bloody mess by the time Mason had blown off enough steam.

“You two go shower. Clean up. Meet me in the conference room in ten minutes.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Hawk couldn’t help the formal response. He still felt it was his fault his alpha was so out of sorts.

Mason cupped a hand around his neck. “You’re not in trouble. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Peter’s my mate,” Hawk blurted out. Mason’s eyes widened and his hand tightened. Hawk’s eyes stung as he tried to explain it. “I’m sure of it. He’s mine.”

Mason exhaled through his nose. “We’ll figure this out.”

Hawk nodded and followed Ryder down the stairwell. He rushed through a shower and carefully avoided the clothes he’d worn last night. He wouldn’t be able to handle Peter’s scent right then. He met the rest of the pack downstairs in the conference room. A second later, a flaming portal opened, signaling the arrival of a hellhound. Viceroy stepped through, along with Anodo.

Hawk closed his eyes. If the hellhound was here, then shit must really be going sideways. “Fuck.”

“Are you all right?” Grady asked as soon as he saw Hawk, gripping his shoulder tight and checking his bruises.

“Fine,” Hawk lied and slapped his hand away as he backed up.

“Is this the one?” Anodo asked.

“Yes,” Mason said.

Anodo nodded and walked in a slow circle around Hawk, studying him with glowing, narrowed eyes. After he made a complete lap, he shook his head.

“I sense no enchantments on him.”

“I told you,” Hawk said.

Mason put up a hand. “We had to verify.”

“Okay. If he wasn’t enchanted, then how did Peter get Hawk to kiss him back?” Grady asked. “He had to spell him or something. Hawk wouldn’t do something like that. Let’s go grab them and make him tell us.”

Hawk snarled at him, flashing his eyes.

“What the fuck?” Grady asked as he backed away.

“Take it down a notch, okay?” Ryder said, stepping between them.

Hawk prowled around the room, breathing heavily through his mouth.

“Hawk?” Grady asked.

“Peter’s his mate,” Mason said quietly when it became evident Hawk wasn’t going to talk.

“Well, that presents a problem,” Viceroy said.

“No shit,” Hawk said. He refused to back down, even when the hellhound flashed his eyes at him.

“Hawk,” Mason said sharply. The alpha tone helped pull him from the edge of shifting. He deflated and slumped into a chair. Conrad reached out and put a hand on his knee to help ground him. Once he calmed down, Mason continued. “Peter’s

safe at the moment. His father isn't going to punish him. Not for this. Not when he thinks Peter's manifesting."

"What?" Bianca asked.

"He seemed to think this was a sign of Peter embracing his powers." Mason moved behind Grady and put a hand on his neck.

"What?" Grady tried to stand up again, but Mason held him steady.

"We believe their mother may have been fae. That's why I've invited Anodo."

"Why do you think that?" Viceroy asked.

"I overheard Thornston laughing about it with his guards. He thinks this was one of the powers Peter inherited from his mother. Combined with the fact that Thornston can somehow manipulate wards, it makes a compelling argument."

The room erupted in growls. Mason put a hand up to quiet them. He turned to Anodo.

"Do you know of any missing fae women?"

"Mason, that would have been, what? Almost thirty years ago," Holly said.

"What is time to the fae?" Anodo said. His face was somber as he stared at the photos of Paul and Penny. Finally, he nodded. "My clan sister. She was visiting this realm when she vanished. We have long suspected she met with foul play. These two bear a startling resemblance to her."

Conrad put a hand on Amado's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." Anodo took a minute to compose himself. "This is good. To have confirmation. Rather than continue to wonder."

Hawk walked around the table to squeeze Anodo's shoulder. "We don't know that she's dead. His quarters have really strong wards in place. It's possible he's keeping her locked up in there. We just don't know."

Anodo nodded, but his eyes were glassy.

“So? Can we grab this fucker already?” Grady asked.

Mason shook his head. “We’ll never get past the gate.”

“So we portal in. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Regrettably, no. It would call too much attention, not to mention putting the others at risk,” Viceroy answered.

“And before you ask, the same applies to my abilities,” Anodo said. “Believe me when I say I would already be there if it were possible. I can sense a pocket of magic, but the wards prevent me from accessing the property.”

“How do we get to him, then? This is Hawk’s mate. We have to bring him home,” Ryder said. Hawk appreciated his pack standing up for him.

“We need to come up with a plan,” Mason said.

“There doesn’t seem to be much we can do,” Tonya said. Hawk sneered at her, and she held up her hands. “Look, I get it. But we’re low on options here. We can’t go in, and any moves we make on the street would be disastrous for the bigger picture. Don’t look at me like that. I know what you were thinking.”

“I wasn’t,” Hawk tried, but Grady snorted behind him.

“Yes, you were.”

Hawk scowled at him, but Grady raised his eyebrows. Hawk sighed and relented. He slouched further into his chair.

Tonya reached out to squeeze his forearm. “If it’s any consolation, I saw the way he looked at you. The feeling is mutual.”

Hawk exhaled and shook his head. “Thanks, but it doesn’t help. Not when there’s fuck-all I can do about it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Mason said. He still looked troubled. Hawk wondered if something else had happened.

“What else is there?” Hawk ventured. Mason shook his head and swallowed thickly. “That bad?”

Mason made his way toward the door and looked at Ryder and then Conrad. Ryder moved to position himself in front of Conrad, standing between his mate and his alpha.

“He... Fuck.” Mason shook his head.

“What is it?” Conrad asked shakily. “You’re freaking me out here...”

“I got an email this morning.”

“From who?” Ryder asked.

“It was anonymous, but I suspect it’s Thornston,” Mason said.

“Okay. What’d it say?” Conrad asked.

“Nothing.” Mason shook his head and raised a hand to stop any outbursts. “There was no text. Only a web link. It was full of photos. Of us. And the twins. There were some videos of them at school, at the park. Taken this week.”

“He’s stalking T ’n’ T?” Conrad asked breathlessly.

“It gets worse, doesn’t it?” Hawk asked. He knew his alpha well enough to know he hadn’t hit the worst of it yet.

“Given what we know, or at least suspect, about Thornston’s kids, I think it’s possible he might have had something to do with Connie’s pregnancy.”

“What makes you say that?” Faolan asked. He was looking as agitated as Conrad.

“At the end of one of the videos, it said, ‘Give me back what’s rightfully mine.’”

The color drained from Conrad’s face, then flooded back in force. He went from white to nearly purple with rage in a second. He grabbed his cane and levered himself out of his seat. Ryder wrapped him up in a hug to stop him, but Conrad still managed to move them a few paces before Mason joined the hug. Conrad growled and tried to shove them away, but they held on tight. He eventually stopped trying to get away, but Hawk could see the tremors running through his body where he stood.

Faolan wasn't any better. His face had shifted, and Hawk could tell he was about two seconds from bolting out the door. "That fucker dies. I don't give a fuck about anything else. He dies," Faolan ground out through teeth clenched so tight, it hurt Hawk to look at him.

"He can't have them," Conrad snarled. He shoved at Ryder, who was struggling to hold him. Anodo stepped up to blow some dust in Conrad's face. He stopped struggling and collapsed into his chair. Ryder's eyes flashed blue, and he grabbed Anodo's shirt to shove him hard into the wall.

"I will rip your fucking wings off!" he shouted. Mason and Grady had to pull him off the fairy.

"Ryder," Conrad said quietly, and Ryder immediately fell to his knees in front of his mate. His eyes were wild as he studied Conrad's face. Conrad put a hand on his cheek. "I'm okay."

"See? The human is fine." Anodo stood up straight and fluttered his wings once before folding them back against his body and covering them with his glamour.

"Fine? You fucking drugged him!" Ryder was still growling. Hawk could imagine what he was feeling. If anyone had tried that with Peter, Hawk would have dropped them on the spot. It didn't matter who it was.

"Yes. I'm fine," Conrad said, then turned back to the fairy. "But Anodo?"

"Yes, my friend?"

"Do that again, and I'll feed you to the fucking pixies."

Anodo blanched and nodded. He crossed his arm in front of himself in pledge. "No offense intended, my liege. I simply wished to lessen your distress."

Conrad stared him down, and Anodo blinked.

"Fine. I won't do it again, all right? I'll let you spin yourself up into a stroke. How about that? Would that be better for you?"

"And?"

Anodo narrowed his eyes. “I won’t do it to him again.”

“You won’t do it to anyone, or I’ll pay you a visit,” Viceroy said. Anodo turned to face the hellhound, but Viceroy wasn’t finished. “And then I’ll deliver you to Conrad myself.”

Conrad smiled smugly and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Hawk chuckled. The Stokes kids really had done a number on their pack. Conrad’s sister was their pack mom. She could keep you in line with a simple Angry Mom stare, while Conrad was more prone to unleash the Hurt Little Brother look. You didn’t want to be on the receiving end of either.

Anodo pouted and took a seat at the far end of the table. Ryder and Conrad never moved their glare away from him.

“What the fuck did you give him anyway?” Ryder growled.

“Fairy dust,” Anodo said with a shrug.

“Fuck you,” Ryder spit. “There’s no such thing.”

“Maybe we want to keep it a secret. Maybe we don’t want everyone hitting us up for some.”

“Anodo,” Mason warned.

“It really is just dirt. But from the beach of a lake in my realm.” Viceroy’s gasp shocked everyone in the room. Anodo sighed and rolled his eyes. “No, not the Clodagh. The Lady would never approve. My clan is beholden to the Erandagh.”

Hawk had never heard of it, but whatever it was, it calmed Viceroy down, so Hawk would accept it.

Conrad, however, didn’t accept his explanation. “And you’re using it all willy-nilly? On unsuspecting humans?” he demanded.

“The Erandagh provides simple relaxation. He’s not as powerful, or as healing, as the Lady. His magic would never hurt you.”

“How do you know? Human, remember?” Conrad closed his eyes and exhaled harshly. “You know what? Fuck it. That’s

not what's important right now. How do we tell Connie?"

Mason nodded. "How do you want to handle this?" he asked.

"Let me talk to her first. She's going to..." Conrad shook his head. "She's going to be fucking devastated. And she'll want to know why we haven't gone and grabbed that fucker."

"The wards," Viceroy said.

"Yeah, yeah. I remember. You know, just once, I would like the answer to not be fucking magic." Conrad groused. He pushed up from the table and left, pulling his phone out as he went. That was one conversation Hawk did not want to witness.

Everyone else filed out of the room to go about their day. Hawk stayed behind with Mason, Viceroy, and Anodo. "Now what?" he asked quietly.

"We tread carefully. Peter's still in that house," Mason said.

"Be aware: extricating your mate from his father's control could be a dangerous undertaking," Viceroy added.

"But we're going to do it, right? We can't leave him there. We'll get all three of them out." Hawk needed Peter close to him, where he'd be safe. And Peter needed his family with him.

"They may not want to leave," Mason added. His tone was gentle, but it cut Hawk deep. He had to end up with Peter. The Goddess wouldn't toy with them like that.

Viceroy stood up and clasped Hawk's shoulder. "We'll do what we can. But you have to let him decide."

"I know that," Hawk roared. He tried to knock Viceroy's hand off, but the hellhound gripped tighter. Hawk took a breath and forced his anger down. "I know," he repeated, calmer. "I will accept whatever he chooses. As long as it's *his* choice, and not his father's."

And he would. Hawk would abide by any decision Peter made.

He didn't know if he'd be able to live with it.

NINETEEN

PETER WAS on his third lap around the property, and he was still a nervous wreck. It had been two days since the club opening. Since the kiss. Since Hawk left. He didn't have anyone to blame but himself for that. He had gotten Hawk fired. If he hadn't given in to his impulses, they'd still be around, and Peter wouldn't feel so lost, like he couldn't catch a full breath without Hawk nearby.

He needed to see Hawk. Apologize again. Beg his forgiveness. Maybe beg his father to bring them back. His father might do it; he wasn't mad at Peter for kissing Hawk. He'd seemed kind of... proud? Which didn't make any sense. But if it brought Hawk back to him...

Peter screamed. An angry, guttural growl that felt good as it rumbled in his chest.

"There you are," Penny said. "Daddy's calling us for dinner."

"What?" Peter checked his watch and was surprised to see he'd burned hours jogging around the tennis court, trying to calm down.

Penny looked at him with sad eyes, but whatever she was about to say was cut off by their father's bellow.

"Children!"

Something in his voice set Peter's nerves on edge.

"Coming, Daddy," Penny shouted brightly. She looped an arm through Peter's and led him toward the house. "Ugh. You

need a shower. You're all sweaty."

"Sorry," Peter said, pulling her closer. She made a face and shoved him away before skipping ahead of him. Paul was waiting for them at the back door.

"Ah. There you are." Their father strode away purposefully, toward the dining room.

"Into the breach?" Peter asked, unsure if he wanted to follow.

Penny snorted. "What?"

"Nothing." Peter shook his head and took a breath to steady his nerves.

Their father took the spot at the head of the table, as he usually did. Penny sat to his left, and Paul on his right. Peter couldn't help but see parallels to *The Godfather* movies. All the rest of the spots were empty.

"Children, I have decided to terminate my agreement with Alpha Vargar and his pack," he started without preamble.

"What?" Penny asked.

"I have decided the threat against you three is not credible, and therefore, Alpha Vargar's services are no longer necessary."

Shit. Did he know how Peter felt about Hawk? How he'd been pining for the man? Peter opened his mouth to say something, but Penny spoke up.

"Okay, Daddy," she said, blinking deliberately, playing innocent.

His father went on about some business trip he was leaving for in the morning. It wasn't until dessert that the shit hit the fan.

"Does that mean we're off lockdown?" Paul asked.

"No."

"But you said there wasn't any threat," Penny whined.

"And?"

“Then why do we have to be stuck here?” Paul asked.

“Because I said so,” their father growled. Peter noticed his eyes glowing a dull red. “I cannot afford you being out there at a time like this. You’re far too valuable to me to allow to risk you falling into someone else’s hands.”

“Someone else’s hands?” Peter repeated numbly.

His father shook his head and waved him off. “If you are contacted by Alpha Vargar or any of his pack, you are to notify Mark or his team immediately.”

“Whatever, Daddy,” Penny said glumly.

“Why do you keep calling him Alpha Vargar?” Peter asked.

“Because he’s the alpha of his pack,” his father said as if that meant something.

“Like team leader?” Peter was having trouble following what his father meant. Something turned dark in his father’s... presence? Whatever it was that told Peter when someone was bad news—his internal warning buzzer was getting louder the longer he listened to his father.

“No, not merely a team. He is the leader of his *pack*.” His father emphasized the word, and Peter’s brain went offline. “The animals that make up his group. You think everyone you meet is human?” he growled. Peter’s eyes went wide, but Penny wasn’t cowed by his outburst.

“Yes, some humans are monsters. We get that,” she said sarcastically.

“And some monsters are human,” Thornston countered, his eyes glowing bright red. Penny’s face finally started to show fear. “Oh, you see it now, don’t you?”

His father sighed, and two guards filed in behind him after he snapped his fingers.

“I can see I’ve sheltered you too much. It’s time you learned. There are things that go bump in the night. And they’re all real,” he said.

“Real? Dad what are you talking about?” Peter asked. His voice was shaky, on the edge of breaking down.

“Werewolves, boy. At this very table, in fact. Don’t tell me you don’t feel it. With your gifts?”

“Dad, you’re scaring me,” Paul said.

“You’re a bunch of spoiled brats.” His eyes flashed red again before changing back to their normal brown, and Peter started to cower away from him. “You don’t know anything about what’s out there.” He shook his head and continued eating.

Peter’s head was spinning. Something inside him felt lost. Like a piece of him had broken off.

“Finish your dinner,” his father ordered.

“I’m not hungry,” Peter mumbled as he started pushing his food around his plate.

“Suit yourself.”

“What do you mean, werewolves are real? What the fuck, Dad?” Paul asked.

Their father put down his fork and stared at Paul with glowing red eyes. “What are you having trouble with?”

Paul gulped.

“Perhaps a demonstration would help. Randall!”

Peter jumped when the guard seemed to appear out of nowhere to stand next to his father, who stared at Randall with glowing eyes.

“Shift,” he commanded. The guard nodded before pulling his shirt off over his head. Then his body started to quiver and change. The bones shifted around, and hair sprouted out of the exposed skin. He whined a couple of times, but after a few minutes, a wolf stood in his place. The pants were hanging awkwardly off the narrower hips of the animal, and one sock was stuck to the heel of his back paw. He sat down and stared at Peter. His eyes were more calculating than any animal Peter

had ever seen. He licked his chops and took a step toward them.

Peter yelped and pushed away from the table, trying to shield Penny as he stood up.

“Believe me now?” their father asked.

Penny’s face had turned white, and Paul’s eyes were bugging out of his head. Peter didn’t dare take his eyes off the wolf as they started to back out of the room.

“Randall, stand down.”

The wolf sat down and watched them as they left. He howled as they rushed upstairs to Peter’s room and slammed the door shut behind them.

TWENTY

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” Paul asked. He was breathing heavily, and Peter could tell he was about a minute away from a full-blown panic attack. Penny, on the other hand, was nearly catatonic.

Peter took a deep breath and guided them to sit on the bed. “Okay. Let’s calm down.”

“Calm down! How the fuck are we supposed to do that?” Paul was shouting as he stood back up and started pacing.

“Come on. It’s still Dad.” Peter tried reasoning, hoping it would get through Paul’s fright. Although he wasn’t sure he believed it himself.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Dad is a psychopath,” Paul whisper-shouted. Then he ducked his head and looked around as if their father was standing right behind him. “Some kind of demon or something,” he whispered.

“He wouldn’t hurt us.” Peter had to believe that. No matter what, above all, he was their father. That had to mean something.

Paul shook his head and scrubbed his hands over his face. “We have to get out of here.”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere. Away from here.”

“He’s never going to let us go,” Penny said quietly. She lifted her face and blinked slowly.

Peter was worried about her reaction. Then again, it wasn't every day that you learned the monsters of legends were real, or that your father apparently commanded a personal army of them.

"Maybe Mason could help us. He obviously wasn't a fan of Dad's," Paul said, ignoring Penny's comment.

She stood up and grabbed Paul's arm. "And how are we supposed to get there? Ask Daddy for one of his drivers? Because he's made it clear they're not welcome. It's not like they can come pick us up. We're trapped here."

"I can take a car from the garage."

Penny scoffed. "You can't even drive."

"No. But Peter can," Paul said, and they both turned to him.

"What?" Peter squawked.

"Yeah, you could go. Get them to help us," Paul said.

"Help us what? This is Dad we're talking about." Peter wasn't sure what they thought he would do to them. He wasn't dangerous. At least, not to them. *Yet*. He buried that niggling of doubt that tickled the back of his mind.

"Do you really believe he wouldn't hurt us?" Penny asked.

"You're the one who knows what people are like," Paul added.

Peter considered it for a minute. *Valuable*, his father had said. Not important. Valuable. Like they were nothing more than possessions. The thought made him sick to his stomach. He sat there, stewing in his emotions, with no idea how to make things better.

All his life, it was "tell Dad." His father took care of anything that made him feel uneasy. Anyone who tripped his senses. What was he supposed to do when his father was the one giving him a bad vibe?

They needed help. Mason and his... pack... were good people. Werewolves. Whatever. Deep down, Peter knew the

pack would help them. His gut instincts had never been wrong, which is why his father had trusted them for so long. Now, they were telling him his father was the one he needed to be wary of.

“Everyone around here is too afraid of Dad to go against him,” Paul added. “He’s surrounded himself with these... I don’t know what.”

Peter hated to admit he’d seen it too. He’d been getting increasingly bad feelings around their father. He didn’t know what it meant, but whatever was happening with him was escalating. He wondered how far his father was willing to go to reach his goals.

At times like this, he wondered about his mother. Where she was. Why he’d never met her. If his father had done something to her. Suddenly, he felt very lonely, even though he was surrounded by people.

“Look, I think we need to calm down. Nothing’s changed, has it?” he tried deflecting, but Paul wasn’t having it.

“Nothing’s changed? Everything has changed! Our father is a fucking werewolf, Peter. Or did you not notice the glowing eyes?” Paul was spinning himself back up.

“I saw it, but what do you want me to do?” Peter shouted. Paul recoiled at his response. He never blew his top, but if there was ever a situation for it, this was it. “I... What can we do? The fact he’s not... completely human doesn’t mean shit right now,” he finished miserably.

Peter closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was as scared as his siblings, but he had to will himself to calm down. For them. Getting frustrated with Paul wasn’t going to fix the situation. He forced himself to relax, but Paul was still pacing.

Peter shook his head. He didn’t want to believe it. He couldn’t allow himself to even consider that their father would hurt them.

“Do you have any way to contact Mason?” Penny asked.

Peter shrugged. “I suppose I could text Conrad. Ask him if he will get ahold of Mason for us,” he said quietly. “Even if he

does, how do you know they'd help us?" Peter asked.

"They'll help. If Mason won't, then Hawk will," Penny said.

"Why would he do that?"

"Because I saw how he looked at you," she said, and Paul nodded along with her.

"How'd he look at me?"

"Like he was drowning and you were the only life preserver in the ocean," Penny said seriously.

"What?"

"Like a shoe store manager looks at Penny," Paul clarified. She stared at him for a minute before giving in and cracking up.

Paul joined her, and Peter smiled and shook his head. "You two are stupid."

"Good thing we have your brains to bail us out, then," Paul said.

Penny went to his dresser and dug out some basketball shorts and a T-shirt. She disappeared into the bathroom. Paul took the opportunity to find a pair of pajama pants and put them on. Penny came out, his clothes swimming on her small frame, and crawled into his bed. Paul joined her a minute later. Peter couldn't deny that he craved the comfort of their closeness. He changed and turned out the light before he hopped up on the bed and lay across the foot of it. Paul sighed and tugged him up between them.

For some reason, he felt safer in the dark, with his siblings close.

"Been one fuck of a day," Paul mumbled.

"You can say that again," Peter whispered.

"What do you think Daddy's really up to?" Penny asked timidly after a few minutes. He shook his head, and she grumbled at getting displaced.

“And what do we have to do with it?” Paul added.

“Fucking hell, guys.” Peter sighed.

“Whatever.” Paul shrugged. “Daddy pissed someone off. For all we know, it was some kind of rival werewolf pack. Probably Mason and his pack.”

Penny snorted. “You think they would have shot at us to get to Daddy?”

Peter’s blood ran cold. Was it possible?

“They seem kind of goody-two-shoes for that kind of shit,” Paul said, laughing hard.

“You never know how far someone is willing to go until you’re there,” Peter said seriously. Mason had said that himself the day they met. He thought about the evil he’d felt in some of Dad’s business partners. How far would his father go in order to stop them? So, yeah, maybe Mason would take a potshot at them to get to their father. If they were backed into a corner. He shook his head and discounted the idea. The pack was too honest for that.

“Damn, that’s some deep shit,” Paul said with a laugh.

“I’m just saying,” Peter said.

Paul’s face went sober. “I know.”

PETER DIDN’T KNOW when he fell asleep, but he woke up bracketed by Paul and Penny. They’d left the curtains open, and the room was bathed in light. For a few seconds, he felt safe and content before the events of the day before came crashing back. He pushed his way out from between them and headed to the bathroom.

He wondered what Hawk was doing right then. Still sleeping? Probably starfished out on his bed, taking up all the space he could. Or was he the kind of sleeper who could tuck in at night and still be in the same position the next morning? If he was, what would it take for Peter to coax him out of that into a different position? Or several positions.

He shook his head to stop that train of thought. Hawk wasn't there, wouldn't ever be back, so no use thinking about what could have been. There were more important issues to deal with first. He used the bathroom and then wandered back into his room. Penny and Paul were up, but barely.

"So what's the plan?" Paul asked sleepily.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you're the smart one."

Peter rolled his eyes.

"But seriously," Penny said. "We need to do something."

"Yeah. I mean, he's always been like this, hasn't he? But we were too spoiled to rock the boat. Too caught in all this." Paul motioned around the room.

"You know we won't have anything. We'll be out in the cold," Peter said quietly.

Penny nodded sadly. Peter knew he was as guilty as they were of growing too comfortable with their situation, of being too scared to try to step out on his own. He might not milk the limelight the way Paul and Penny did, but that didn't mean he shied away from the lavish lifestyle their father afforded. He'd been too selfish to ever question where it came from. What their father had done to amass his wealth.

"Are you sure you're ready to deal with that? We've never had to worry about anything. I mean, do you know how to live on a budget?" He had to ask. He hated to doubt them, but he was also skeptical of their ability to live without the security of their father's money. "And what about jobs? Are you prepared to start flipping burgers for a living? Riding the bus?"

The more he thought about it, the more out of reach it seemed. They were so unprepared for the real world, it wasn't funny. Their entire existence was being rich and beautiful. How the fuck could that ever pay the rent?

"We'll figure it out," Paul said.

"Yeah. I'll talk to Milo. He's always been after us to model for him. He's got some financial guy handling the money we

get paid from the club openings,” Penny said.

Peter was impressed with her practical approach to the matter. He looked out the window and saw three armed guards milling around. This was going to end badly. He knew it, could almost see the train wreck happening in front of him.

He didn't know how to stop it. The only thing he could do was plow forward.

“Okay,” he nodded.

TWENTY-ONE

“YOU PLANNING to stay down here all night?” Mason asked from the doorway.

Hawk took a step back and turned to his alpha. He had no idea what time it was. He had sequestered himself in the tiny office next to their big conference room. It had four plain walls and a couch. Usually they only used it for crashing when they were doing long-term missions. Grady sometimes slept on the couch when he needed to step away from the video feeds for a while. It was close enough that if something happened, he'd be able to hear it over their comms and come running in seconds. Hawk had added a folding table and a lamp after their debriefing. Then he pulled out his paints and started working. He'd gotten pretty far on the mural, so he supposed it must have been at least a day. After he finished, he'd take pictures and then paint over it, like he had the last three times Mason let him work out his frustrations on the office wall.

Mason held two cups in his hands and offered one to Hawk. He took it and drank without tasting the first swallow. The second sip was terrible, though. Bitter lukewarm sludge, with a dirt aftertaste. He made a face, and Mason chuckled.

“Anodo thought you needed some of his tea.”

“Should have known.” Hawk shook his head and set the cup down on the table. He leaned against the arm of the couch as Mason took a seat.

“You've been down here a full day now.”

Hawk nodded. There wasn't anything to say, really. Still, he felt the need to apologize again. "I'm sorry I fucked up so badly."

"You didn't fuck anything up."

"Then why are we here, instead of scoping out Thornston's house? I pissed away any chance of finding out how deep this shit goes."

"It was always a long shot. We knew there'd be a chance we'd wind up with nothing at the end of this."

"Then why the fuck did we do it?"

"Because we thought it was the best play at the time."

"And how'd that work out for us?" Hawk ranted. "I couldn't control myself, and now we're shut out. And he's there. So tell me. How'd we do?" He ran his fingers through his hair and pulled hard before turning wild eyes to Mason.

Mason simply watched him as he took a sip of his coffee. "We'll get him back," Mason assured him, but Hawk wasn't so certain.

Still, he appreciated the optimism. Hawk deflated and dropped onto the other end of the couch.

"I'm sorry I made such a mess of this. I know you think relationships can disrupt the pack. Especially on the job," Hawk said.

Mason shook his head. "I won't let anyone play power games with my pack. You know better than anyone how fucked-up things can get when it's more about politics than about love."

No shit, Hawk thought. He had been a political pawn, and he had the scars to show for it. He knew things had gone bad in Mason's previous pack, but he'd never heard the details. Maybe it was the late hour or the fact that he'd been painting all day, but his curiosity made him ask the question he'd never dared to.

"Is that what happened with yours?"

“Something like that. It wasn’t Darcy’s fault. I realize that now. She was being used as much as Alan was.”

Now that it was out there, Hawk couldn’t let it drop. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“Alan was a good alpha. Maybe a bit too lenient for some people’s taste.”

Hawk smiled. The same had been said about Mason. Hawk heard it every time he talked to his parents. “*Mason’s weak. He’s not the kind to be an alpha.*” Of course in the next breath, it was “*Can Mason introduce us to the griffinss? We would love to meet the rest of your pack. Are you still working with that hellhound?*”

“I can tell what you’re thinking,” Mason said.

“Yeah, well, assholes are going to asshole. What can you do?”

Mason shrugged along with him. “Darcy’s parents decided they knew how to run a pack better than Alan. They pushed Darcy into making a play for him, and Alan, I guess he was lonely. And somehow they brainwashed him. He proclaimed her as his mate a month later. We all knew better, but how could any of us argue against it?” He shook his head.

“And her family played up the miracle,” Hawk guessed. He recognized the machinations at work.

“Yeah. After that, it was easy for her family and their cronies to take over. It tore the pack in half before they ran off some of his strongest allies. Some of us stayed, but the rift was too big. It couldn’t remain stable. Then we found the potion they were using to control him. We managed to detox him, and that’s when the shit really hit the fan. He turned on her family, and Darcy sided with them. By that time, there wasn’t much of a pack anymore.”

“Fucking hell. No wonder you never wanted us dating each other. And here we are, finding mates left and right. First it was Ryder, now I’ve found Peter. I’m sorry, Mason.”

“Don’t be.” Mason turned to smile at him. “Look, I’ll admit it. When Ryder told me Conrad was his mate, my heart

sank.” Hawk opened his mouth, but Mason held up a hand to stop him. “My gut reaction was distorted by my past. But this is so completely opposite of that. What Ryder and Conrad have is so different. So much more than anything I’ve ever seen. It’s what mates are supposed to be, not some bastardized relationship bent for their own gain. The connection is…” He trailed off.

Hawk got it. He thought he’d been mates with Caleb, but that was nothing more than delusions of grandeur fed to him by power-hungry jerks. It didn’t compare to what he felt when he was near Peter.

“Anyway,” Mason said, bringing him back to the present. “I’m glad you’ve found your mate.”

Hawk’s throat was tight, and his eyes burned with unshed tears. “Thanks,” he croaked out.

“You’ll find each other again. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure of that.”

“I appreciate that, but I think it’s a lost cause.” Hawk had held happiness for one brief, shining moment. And then he fucked it all up. Like usual. “I doubt I’ll ever see him again,” he said with a sigh.

“Nothing is ever lost.”

TWENTY-TWO

“I HOPE YOU HAVE A PLAN,” Peter whispered as he watched the two guards pass each other on their rounds in front of the garage. They’d tried to go out first thing that morning, after their father left for the airport. The guards had stopped Peter before he made it to his car and escorted him back to the house. Apparently, the whole place was on lockdown.

After their father’s proclamation, he’d called in his key security personnel and laid down the law: his kids were to stay put. No leaving the estate for any reason until he returned. And now there were extra guards patrolling their escape path. They could barely leave the house before a guard was on them. To make matters worse, all the new guards were werewolves, according to their father. And they were all on edge. Peter had seen more than one fight break out among them.

“I got this,” Penny said. She stood up straight and adjusted her top. Then she sauntered up to the guard and pasted a bored look her face. “Don. I need to go into town. Would you mind getting the car?” she asked as she blinked at him.

“No.”

“Please?” she asked, running her hand down his arm.

“Come on, Don. Are you sure we can’t just go out for a little while?” Paul tried. He moved close to Penny, and they aimed identical innocent looks at the guard. Peter had seen them topple the most stringent men with that expression. But

the guy shook his head. “Bossman said no. And the name’s Dan,” he said as he turned and walked away.

Paul’s face went slack, but Penny looked outraged.

Peter bit back a laugh and pulled them into a hug. “Maybe we can text Dad and ask?”

Paul huffed. “Yeah, that’ll work.”

“It was only a suggestion.”

“Sorry. I’m... I don’t know what I am.” Paul shook his head.

“I get it. We’ll try something else,” Peter said. What, he had no clue. If all the guards had been ordered not to let them leave, they were screwed.

They went back inside and made their way to the kitchen. They’d barely cleared the doorway when Laurel appeared and urged them to sit down at the table. Her staff had been augmented as well. There were four new people in the kitchen who Peter had never seen before. She held two glasses, and Paul and Penny lit up and grabbed for them as soon as she got close, but Laurel moved them out of their reach.

“Peter, would you be a dear? Don and Dan look thirsty out there.”

“Uh. Sure?” He took the drinks and went back outside. He found Don standing near the garage with Dan. Peter had to admit, they did look similar. And their names were close enough to mix up. With the revolving door of guards they’d had in the last few years, he didn’t blame his siblings for confusing them.

“What do you want, kid? You ain’t leaving the grounds,” Dan said.

“Huh? No. That’s not... I wasn’t.” He shook his head and held out the drinks. “Laurel sent these. Said you might want them?”

“Sweet!” Don grabbed one of them and took a big gulp from it. Peter handed the other off to Dan and raced back.

He was barely inside before Laurel was thrusting a container into his arms. "Thank you. Now take this." Laurel looked around and motioned at one of the men helping her. "Harrison, would you mind?" She pointed at some boxes, and Harrison nodded. He picked up the stack and left with them. "Well? Come along." She pulled some keys out of her pocket as she headed toward the door.

Peter scrambled to keep up, and Penny and Paul followed. Harrison had already loaded his parcels into Laurel's van. Peter leaned in to put his container down as well. When he stepped back, she looked at him expectantly.

"Laurel?" Peter asked.

"Ready?" she asked as she handed the keys to Harrison. He nodded and went around to climb into the driver's seat.

"Ready for what? Laurel, you're not making any sense," Peter said. He shared a look with Penny and Paul, but they didn't seem to know what she was talking about either.

Laurel gave them an enigmatic smile and held up her hand. She used her fingers to silently count down. Three, two, one.

"Time to go." She waved at Don and Dan as they walked by. Then she nodded toward the open van door.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Peter said as he caught on. He peeked around the end of the van, but the guards weren't paying attention to them.

"Peter, my love." Laurel reached out to stroke a finger down his cheek. "Get in the van."

"Yes, ma'am." He crawled into the back and then turned around. Laurel leaned in and kissed his forehead.

"Go to him. Forgive him."

"What? Laurel, what are you talking about?"

"Trust the pack. You're going to need them. And they will help."

"Okay." Peter dragged the word out, feeling even more confused.

She smiled sadly and patted his cheek gently. “Good boy. Now get down and keep your mouth shut.” He wiggled back and flattened himself against the floorboard. It was a tight fit for him with the rest of the boxes packed in, and Peter turned a panicked look at Laurel. She gave him a reassuring wink as she hooked a thumb over her shoulder at his siblings. “We’ll cover for you. Between the three of us, they’ll never know you’re missing.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of them until you get back,” Laurel said right before she slid the door shut, plunging the back of the van into darkness. Harrison started the engine and pulled away.

“What are you doing?” Peter hissed.

“Quiet.” Harrison drove down the long driveway and slowed to a stop at the gate.

“Little early to be leaving, isn’t it?” Carlo asked after Harrison rolled down the window.

“Have some deliveries to make to some muckety-mucks. Laurel’s sending me.”

“Lucky them,” he grumbled as he made a pass around the van, peeking in the windows. Peter held his breath and tried not to move, praying Carlo didn’t decide to open the door for closer inspection.

“She didn’t forget about you.” Harrison picked up a plate from the passenger seat and Carlo quickly walked back to the driver’s window.

“She’s the best,” Carlo said, already stuffing a cookie into his mouth. He hit a button on his console, and the gate swung open.

“She really is,” Harrison agreed as he pulled out and turned onto the road. Peter watched the estate disappear through the tinted back window. Even after the coast was clear, he kept glancing around like someone was going to jump out and stop them any moment.

“What the hell was that?” Peter asked.

“There might have been a few pharmaceuticals in their drinks that put them in a relaxed state of mind.”

“Who are you?”

Harrison smiled. “I work with Laurel when she needs extra help.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“This was my first time at the house. Is it always that intense?”

Peter shook his head and moved to the front. “Not usually. I think something big is happening,” he said as he settled into the passenger seat.

“Makes sense.” Harrison nodded. “A lot of things are going to change,” he said seriously.

“What things?”

“Everything.” He leaned forward and squinted up at the sky before relaxing back again. “Your father’s misdeeds will come to light.”

“I figured.” His father wouldn’t have dropped the bombshell he had last night if he didn’t have to.

“He’s done some despicable things.” Harrison squinted at the road but didn’t elaborate.

Peter didn’t know what to say to that, so he left it alone. They drove for a while, lost in their own thoughts. “Will they be okay back there?” Peter asked when they got close to town, keeping his voice low.

“Yep. Laurel will make sure of it.”

“How?”

Harrison smiled. “Magic,” he said, wiggling his fingers.

“Magic?” Peter exclaimed.

Harrison gave him a one-shouldered shrug.

“I have no idea what to believe anymore,” Peter grumbled.

“Believe in the pack. That’s why they found you.”

It was the same thing Laurel had said, but Peter still didn’t understand. “I haven’t known them a week yet.” Holy fuck, had that near-shooting only been a week ago? So much had happened, it seemed longer.

After another ten minutes, Harrison pulled over and put the van into Park.

“Where are we?” Peter asked as he looked up at the building next to them.

“He’s in there,” Harrison said with a nod.

“Who?” Peter’s stomach dropped. Surely Laurel wouldn’t have helped him escape if Harrison was just going to take him right back to his father.

“Your future.”

Peter was about to ask him what the fuck that meant, but Harrison nodded toward the door. He hit a button on the console, and the locks disengaged. Peter opened his door with numb fingers. His head was spinning as he stepped onto the sidewalk. He used the door to steady himself for a few seconds. “Hey, Peter?”

“Yeah?” he asked, leaning in.

“The others will be fine until you come back,” Harrison said. He met Peter’s serious stare. “We promise.”

The knot between Peter’s shoulders loosened a little with the pledge. “Thanks.”

“Now go on. I have deliveries to make.”

He closed the door and stepped back. The brake lights flashed as Harrison left, and Peter felt like a chapter of his life was officially ending. After the van left his view, he turned around and looked up at the building in front of him.

TWENTY-THREE

“THIS IS CRAZY,” Peter muttered under his breath, ignoring the looks from people on the street. He stared at the double doors that led into the building, but they were so heavily tinted he couldn’t see anything inside. It didn’t matter; he could feel this was the right place.

Now he was here, on his own, Peter’s confidence was dropping. His father was going to kill him. They’d been specifically forbidden from talking to Mason or any of his team. And now here Peter was, trying to muster the courage to walk into the lion’s den. Or werewolf’s den, as it were.

Peter shook his head. It was all too crazy to believe. But then again, he’d seen it with his own eyes. Werewolves were real.

He was confident his father hadn’t killed Mason’s team, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t hurt Hawk. It was pure concern for his well-being. That was it. It wasn’t Laurel planting ideas in his head. And he didn’t miss Hawk. Not at all.

“Fuck,” he mumbled. He did miss Hawk, and he couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t like he knew the guy. Because Hawk treated him like a person and not like he was only an assignment didn’t mean he felt something for Peter. It meant he was good at his job. So what if Faolan had gasped when Hawk had handed his sketchbook over to Peter after breakfast the morning of the club opening? And then Tonya had given him a look. Well, not just a look, but *A Look*. So what if his own team had never seen most of his work? None of that meant Peter was special.

So what the fuck was Peter doing here, pacing outside his offices, like some kind of stalker?

“Ah fuck it. No time like the present.”

Decision made, he opened the door and stepped into the lobby. No one was at the front desk, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He took a few moments to take in the area as he screwed up his courage again. It was a stark difference to the glass and chrome of the outside. Comfortable-looking couches lined two of the walls, and a giant shaggy rug covered most of the marbled tile floor. The desk was as large and imposing as his father’s, but this one felt more welcoming. Everything about the space said, “It’s okay; you’re safe now.”

He shook his head. What the fuck kind of thinking was that? A laugh down the hallway drew his attention before he could get too lost in his head. He glanced up, and his breath caught. Conrad was walking toward him, but what had Peter’s throat closing were the men behind him. Ryder was there, his arm wrapped around Hawk’s neck as he dragged Hawk along with him. They were obviously close. Suddenly, everything clicked into place.

“What the fuck?” Peter asked out loud.

Conrad’s head shot up, and Ryder and Hawk stopped in their tracks.

“Oh shit,” Conrad said. “Look, Peter...” he started, but Peter shook his head.

“What’s going on here? Who are you people?” he demanded as he paced around the lobby.

“I know this is a shock. God, do I know, but please hear me out,” Conrad said—practically begged. He turned wide eyes to Ryder, who nodded and ran back down the hallway. Peter heard a door open and click shut.

Hawk hadn’t moved. He stood there, staring back at Peter.

“I can’t.” Peter shook his head, then shoved open the door and stomped out onto the sidewalk. If Conrad and Ryder were here, they must work with Hawk. That meant they hadn’t met by accident. He vaguely heard clicking behind him as he

looked around, trying to get his bearings, but his head was swimming. He blinked and saw Conrad standing there, staring back at him.

“Peter! Wait! Please.” Peter shook his head and started walking. He didn’t know where the hell he was going, but it didn’t matter. He needed to get away. He couldn’t believe he’d been so stupid. Of course they wanted to get close to him. They wanted in his father’s business. What better way to ingratiate themselves but to hit him where he hurt—his children. A tiny voice in the back of his head snorted. *You know he doesn’t care about you that much*, it insisted, but he viciously buried the thought.

“Are you really going to make me chase you?” Conrad asked from behind him. The clacking of his cane on the sidewalk seemed louder than it had inside, even though it should have been drowned out by the noise of the street.

Peter growled and stopped. Conrad closed the distance between them and reached out to put a hand on Peter’s forearm. Peter almost shook it off, but he didn’t. Something about it comforted him. He was so fucking pissed and hurt beyond belief, but he couldn’t deny that Conrad’s presence calmed the storm inside him. He opened his eyes and was taken aback by the care he saw in Conrad’s face.

“I can only imagine what you think of us right now, but please. Hear us out? Then you can decide what you want to do about it. Sound fair?”

“Fuck, Conrad.” Peter shook his head.

“Yeah. That about sums it up.” Conrad took his arm and led him back into the building. Hawk was still standing in the lobby. Peter noticed his clothes were covered in paint. He had a smear of it on his cheek, and it was streaked through his hair. Peter’s fingers twitched with the urge to reach out for him, but he managed to squash it. Hawk had lied to him—they all had. Why the fuck was he going along with Conrad’s gentle leading?

Because you know you can trust them.

He closed his eyes and exhaled. When he opened them, Conrad was standing there, a somber expression on his face. “Will you please give us the benefit of the doubt? At least until you hear everything.”

Peter nodded, not trusting his words. Then again, he wasn't exactly sure what those words would be. *Fuck you? I don't believe you? How dare you?*

“Thank you.” Conrad pursed his lips for a second, obviously thinking about what he wanted to say. He led Peter back into the building and onto the elevator.

He was lost in his thoughts when the elevator pinged, and they got out on the second floor. Peter looked around and saw Hawk standing near the stairwell door. He looked back at Conrad, who shrugged. “Stairs are a little tough sometimes.” He held up the cane.

“Right.”

“Come on.”

Peter followed him down the hallway to a huge conference room. Mason stood there, along with Ryder.

“Peter. Come in,” Mason said. He stepped back and allowed Peter to walk past him.

“Thanks,” Peter mumbled. He felt a chill go over the back of his neck as he looked around the room. One wall was covered in pictures—his family, the mall where Penny preferred to shop, his father at a lunch meeting—notes with their schedules scribbled on them. Their whole lives were laid out on that board. There was a street view of the mall entrance, showing the building across the street, with angles drawn over it. Schematics for the sniper shot, Peter realized with a gasp. He looked around in horror.

“You did this?” he whispered. “Which one of you did it?”

Hawk nodded sadly. “I took the shot.”

“Why?”

Hawk looked devastated, but he didn't turn away. “We needed to get to your father.”

“So you set all this up?” Peter motioned around the room. They’d used him and his sister to... to what? Infiltrate his family for some reason? What did they want from them? And why the fuck would they try to kill them? “Why would you do this?”

He felt light-headed, and he started to stumble. Hawk was there before he could blink, leading him to a chair at the table. He helped Peter sit, and then he knelt on the floor next to him. Peter stared at him, and he realized he knew the answer.

“He did something, didn’t he? Something awful.” Peter wasn’t sure if he wanted an answer, but he needed to know.

Hawk turned to Mason, who nodded. Hawk opened his mouth but closed it again with a shake of his head. No one said anything for a minute. Ryder moved close to Conrad. Peter watched them bump foreheads together before Conrad pushed back and made his way to his own seat.

“Just tell me.”

“Okay, so I’m an accountant,” Conrad started. “I was working as an intern at a mega-corporation. I thought I was on my way, you know? Get in with a big company, prove my worth, and work my way up, and my career would make itself. But then...” He glanced at his cane.

“What happened?” Peter asked quietly, intrigued despite himself.

“I stumbled onto something I shouldn’t have.” Conrad shrugged as if that told the entire story. Peter leveled a look at him. If he was going to hear Conrad out, he at least wanted the whole goddamn story. “Okay. But you might not like how this story ends.”

“I already don’t like where it begins,” Peter snapped. “Now tell me. And it had better be good,” he warned.

“All right.” Conrad sighed, and Peter could tell whatever he was about to say wouldn’t be pleasant. “I found some wonky invoices one day. My boss, he’d been embezzling. But before I could confront him about it, or report it to the higher-ups, he died.” He let out a dark chuckle. “Well, actually, he

was murdered. On the night I saw some people ransacking his office. And then my apartment was trashed. I mean, everything was destroyed. I had nothing.”

“Jesus,” Peter whispered, hooked on Conrad’s story. He looked up at Ryder. “Was it... werewolves?” he asked breathlessly.

“Uh, werewolves?” Ryder cut a quick look at Mason.

Peter stared at Mason. “Dad told us everything. He said you’re an alpha, and you’re all his werewolf pack.”

“I’m not a werewolf,” Conrad said. Peter glared at him, and Conrad rolled his eyes. “Okay. Fine. They are werewolves. But my sister and I are completely human.”

“Conrad,” Mason said warningly.

“Mason, we’re busted,” Conrad said. “He knows. Or at least, he thinks he does. We might as well come clean, about everything, so he can decide for himself. We owe him that much.”

“You’re right,” Mason conceded. He turned to Peter. “Your father is a bad man.”

“He’s a werewolf. Like you. So what makes you any better? I mean...” Peter scoffed and waved his hands at the wall.

“You’re right. It doesn’t look good,” Mason said.

Peter was exhausted. He put his head down on the table and closed his eyes. He felt hands on his shoulders, and he knew Hawk was there, trying to offer any comfort he could. Peter was torn between relaxing into it and pushing him away. He settled for leaning back in his chair so Hawk had to take a step away. “Look. We’re getting off track.”

“What would you like to know?” Hawk asked.

“What does Conrad working for a crook have to do with my father?”

“After I was kidnapped, they followed the money.”

“Kidnapped?” Peter exclaimed. He stared at Conrad in shock, but Conrad gave him a sad smile as he rubbed his cane. Peter had a bad feeling about the rest of the story. Peter couldn’t imagine someone deliberately hurting Conrad like that. He was so likable. “Did my father do that?”

Conrad shook his head. “No. He wasn’t there. One of my friends was part of the embezzling ring. And he was the one behind my kidnapping and the beatings.”

“Fuck, Conrad. I’m sorry.” Maybe Conrad did have an inkling about the betrayal Peter was feeling after all.

“It sucks, but it happened. Anyway, I had traced the invoices back to one company. That’s how Ryder and the gang found me. They searched for properties owned by the same company and managed to rescue me from one of them.” He paused to squeeze Ryder’s hand. “And that’s where you come in,” Conrad said quietly.

“Me?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Hawk said. “That company was one of your father’s shell companies. He’s the one who was getting the money, and he’s the one who put Conrad’s friend in place to set it all up.”

Peter’s stomach was sinking. Peter shook his head. There was no way. His father couldn’t—but then again, he really could, couldn’t he. That was the problem.

“Look, we don’t expect you to believe us,” Mason said. “It’s your family, your *father*, for Goddess’s sake. You have to make your own decisions about who you believe, who you *trust*. And you’ve known him your whole life. You just found out you met us under duplicitous circumstances. But please...” He shook his head. “Think about it. And then if you want to go back to him, we won’t stop you.”

Peter could feel tears burning his eyes. He hated to admit it, but he believed them. He knew his father was dirty, skirting the law and making illegal deals. But to make the leap from unscrupulous businessman—well, business *werewolf*—to actual evil mastermind... Peter thought about the look on his

face the previous night at dinner. How he hardly looked human anymore. And how he'd turned them into prisoners in their own house.

His eyes strayed to the cane again. Had his father really been involved in maiming Conrad? Had he ordered an innocent man to be fucking *tortured*? And then blithely went about his day?

He tried to cling to his denial: his father couldn't be capable of such a thing. Except he could, couldn't he? And that turned his stomach. The utter disregard for other people. How could he live with what he'd done? How could he simply not care that he hurt someone that badly?

"I think I'm going to be—" He pushed up from his seat and rushed back to the small break room he'd seen on his way in. He leaned over the sink as he took a few deep breaths. In for one, out for two. In for two, out for four. He kept the pattern up for a few minutes, and somehow managed to keep his breakfast down. He didn't know how long he'd been in there before he felt another presence.

"I know it's a lot," Hawk said quietly.

"I... I need to think."

"Come with me?" Hawk asked. His voice was timid, like he was afraid of Peter telling him no.

Peter nodded and Hawk turned around to lead him to another, smaller room down the hall. There was a couch along one wall and a small table set up on the opposite. The only light was from a lamp set on the table. It was pointed at the wall. Hawk urged him to sit down.

"No one will bother you in here. Take some time. Think about what you want to do next. We'll be here for you. No matter what. Even if it's to cuss us out and make us take you home." Hawk squeezed his hand and left, closing the door behind him.

Fuck, he had a lot to think about. And no clue what to do. He *needed* to get Penny and Paul out of the house. That was the whole reason he was there. But could he trust them?

Mason and his... pack? He already knew his father's pack or whatever wouldn't be any help. It was too much to take in. He closed his eyes and tried to push down the hopelessness he felt.

TWENTY-FOUR

“HOW IS HE?” Mason asked when Hawk got back to the conference room.

Hawk shrugged. “How would you be?”

“Pretty fucked-up,” Ryder answered.

Hawk knew he was only trying to lighten the mood, but that didn’t stop him from glaring at Ryder.

“But he’s here, Hawk. That has to mean something, right?” Conrad asked. “I mean, he came here to ask you for help.”

Mason nodded reassuringly. They were right. It meant something that Peter came to them. Of course, it could boil down to the likelihood he had no other options. If there was anyone else he could have turned to, he probably would have. Or he would, now that he knew the truth. Hawk had never felt so shitty about following orders in his life.

They were each lost in their own thoughts for a few minutes before Conrad broke the silence. “He knew about werewolves,” he said. “His father told him. Why would he do that?”

“And why didn’t the hellhounds swoop in?” Ryder asked.

Mason shrugged. “Hellhounds come in when humans are told about us. Because they didn’t, it confirms they are part fae.”

“Maybe we should call them?” Conrad suggested. Hawk growled, but Conrad held up his hands. “Look, if his father

spilled the beans to them, what's to stop him from doing a full-scale reveal out there to the public?"

Hawk closed his eyes. He didn't like the idea, but he knew they couldn't hide it. "Fine."

He felt Mason's hand on the back of his neck. "We'll take care of him," he said before stepping out. He was only gone for a few minutes before he was back, shoving his phone back into his pocket as he walked in. "Viceroy will be here this afternoon. I texted Anodo too."

"Great," Hawk mumbled.

"We have to introduce them," Mason said.

"Yeah, I know, I know. I just wish..." Hawk shook his head. Logically, he knew they had to tell Peter about Anodo. If their suspicions were correct, then Peter and Anodo were related. And he couldn't keep family separated, not when Thornston had already orchestrated so much damage in his quest for power.

Every instinct Hawk had was to drag Peter away and shield him from everyone and everything in the world.

"Fuck," he sighed.

They left Hawk alone to stew for a while before Ryder came back in. "You do realize you left him alone in there with your art?"

"Oh shit." Hawk's heartbeat thudded in his chest as he rushed out of the conference room. He hesitated in front of the door that separated him from Peter. Hawk was sure Peter was checking out the mural he'd been working on. He probably would have stood there all day if Ryder hadn't leaned in to knock on the door as he walked by. Hawk glared at him, but Ryder gave him a grin.

"It's for your own good," Ryder whispered before heading to the stairwell.

Hawk waited for a minute, but Peter didn't answer. He closed his eyes and sent a quick prayer to the Goddess before turning the knob and opening the door. He held his breath as

he stepped in, but Peter didn't seem to notice him. He was staring at the wall, transfixed. Hawk watched as he reached out to run his fingers over the wolf at the bottom corner.

"He's you, isn't he?" Peter asked. His voice was soft, as if he was lost in thought. "And that's me."

Peter wasn't asking that time; he knew. There was no doubt. Hawk had been faithful in his adaptation of his mate. Peter turned to him, his eyes shining in the low light. He was as beautiful as the angel Hawk had painted. He didn't want to break the mood, so he just nodded. He wasn't sure what Peter was thinking, so he kept his distance. It killed him being so near him.

PETER DIDN'T KNOW why he stayed. After Hawk left him, he could have easily walked out. Hell, he *should* have fled the first chance he got.

But he didn't. He'd stayed. Because that little voice inside his head told him "*you're home now.*"

He groaned and rubbed his eyes. Sometimes he hated that voice. Because it was always right. No matter how hurt he was by the pack's betrayal, he needed them.

First things first: he needed them to mount a rescue mission to free Penny and Paul.

"Rescue mission?" he mocked himself.

Right. He would go ask Mason to go out there, fight a pack of crazed wolves, and liberate the others. They'd go for that. He opened his eyes and shook his head. He stared at the wall, hoping it held some answers. It took him a moment to realize that it did. He stood up and moved closer.

It was obviously Hawk's work. He'd recognized the style, but this was so much more substantial than the sketches he'd already seen. It took his breath away.

The entire wall was covered. He smiled at the tiny handprints splattered over the bottom section. Peter assumed they belonged to the children he'd seen in Hawk's other

works. He held his hand up over one of them to compare. Hawk had turned a few of them into animals. Peter could feel the love and care Hawk had poured into them. He could imagine the kids laughing as their handiwork transformed into birds and dogs. No, not dogs. *Wolves*, he reminded himself.

Like the miserable one in the left corner. His head was thrown back in a howl. The sky around it was murky-gray, and the full moon was half-covered by muddy clouds. The brushstrokes stood out against the flat wall. Peter traced a finger along one of the bare trees, then over the matted fur of the wolf. Peter could feel his pain through the work.

He heard a knock on the door, but he was too intent on studying the painting in front of him to answer. Hawk came into the room, but he stayed behind Peter and waited. Peter appreciated his patience as Peter continued staring.

The other side of the mural was brighter, bathed in glowing sunlight. The strokes were smoother here, blending together to create a seamless image. Peter recognized himself. Or an idealized version of him. He wasn't anywhere near as beautiful as this presented him.

Hawk had painted him as an angel, with bright white wings. He was midflight above the gloomy scene. He didn't need Hawk to confirm it was them. It was obvious. And the intent was clear—the angel was rejecting the wolf, causing the darkness to close in with the flap of his wings.

Peter moved closer to him, and Hawk let out a breath that was nearly a sob when Peter took his hand.

“I don't see it this way,” Peter said. “I know you do, but that's not the way it is.”

“I'm sorry.” Hawk started to pull away, but Peter held tight.

“Want to know what I see?”

Hawk squeezed his hand and nodded.

“I see the angel coming in and sweeping *away* the pain. Not causing it.”

“Peter,” Hawk whispered.

“Shut up,” Peter said. He chuckled and shoved at Hawk’s shoulder.

Hawk turned to him and brought his hands up, stopping an inch away from touching him. Peter nodded and reached up to press Hawk’s palms against his face. Then he leaned forward to press his forehead against Hawk’s.

“I don’t know what I’m feeling, but I know I can’t walk away. But I need some time to think.”

“I’ll give you all the time you want.”

Peter smiled and pulled back. “I know that. But there is something else I need from you and your pack.”

“Name it.”

“It might be dangerous, though.”

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever you need, I’ll do it.”

Peter let out a breath. “I need my family here with me. I need Paul and Penny.”

“We’ll go get them.”

“It’s not that easy. There are guards. And they’re wolves. You’ll probably have to fight your way in.”

Hawk’s eyes glowed bright blue. “I hope we do.”

Peter knew it shouldn’t turn him on, but fuck, if his dick didn’t twitch at that.

TWENTY-FIVE

“ARE YOU SURE THEY’LL HELP?” Peter asked.

Hawk snorted. “Positive.” He stepped back and led Peter to the conference room. Mason and Viceroy were there, waiting for them. Peter paused in the doorway, but Hawk tugged on his hand. “I take it you heard?”

“Yes. I’ve already called everyone down for a team meeting,” Mason said. He was about to say something else when Anodo popped into the room, making Peter jump.

Anodo’s eyes went wide when he saw Peter. “Goddess,” he said before rushing over to take Peter’s arms in his hands. “You have her essence.”

“I, uh... What?”

“Peter, this is Anodo. He’s a friend of the pack,” Mason said. “We believe he may have known your mother,” he added quietly.

“What?” Peter turned to Anodo.

“Where are the others?” Anodo demanded.

“That’s why you’re here. We need to rescue them. And we need your help to do it,” Mason explained.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

“A plan?” Conrad suggested as he came into the room. The rest of the pack followed behind him.

Peter looked around with wide eyes, and Hawk pulled him away from Anodo’s grasp. Anodo glared, but Hawk shook his

head. “Can everyone just relax for a minute? You’re freaking him out.”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a while since I felt her presence,” Anodo said, taking the chair closest to where Peter stood.

Mason cleared his throat, and everyone took their places around the table. Then he made the introductions. Peter nodded at each person in turn, but Hawk was sure he’d be asking their names again later. Mason left Viceroy for last. The hellhound’s eyes glowed orange, and Peter gulped, but he remained calm. Mostly calm, anyway.

“Okay. Peter would like us to bring his siblings here,” Mason explained.

“Are they being held at the house? Or someplace else?” Grady asked. He was typing away on his computer, and a second later, a survey drawing of the property was projected on their big screen.

“At the house,” Peter said. “Before Dad left, he told the guards we weren’t allowed to go anywhere.”

“How did you get out?” Conrad asked.

“Laurel drugged the guards and had someone working with her, Harrison, sneak me out in a catering van.”

Grady laughed. “Holy shit. I like her.”

Peter smiled. “She told me to trust you guys.”

“I’m sorry if you feel like that’s a monumental task, given what you’ve learned,” Mason said. “But please believe we only had the best intentions.”

Peter nodded, and Hawk squeezed his hand in support.

“All right. So Thornston’s not there. What about guards?” Faolan asked.

“I’m not sure how many there are. It seemed like dozens, but that could be my imagination. I do know they’re wolves.”

“What?” Holly asked, and Hawk could tell the standard denial was on the tip of her tongue.

“He knows,” Hawk said. Holly turned to Viceroy with a scared look on her face.

“It’s not a problem,” Viceroy explained, sending Holly a significant look. “Now we have other matters of importance.”

“Right.” Mason nodded. “I doubt you know anything about wards?” he asked, and Peter shook his head.

“If it helps, his might be the fae magic I felt at the warehouse where Conrad was held,” Anodo said.

“Really? That’s great,” Grady asked. Everyone turned to him. “Well, I mean not great that he stole fae magic or whatever. But Anodo broke those wards at the warehouse. So if this is the same, then Anodo could help get us in. After that, it’s a matter of dispatching a bunch of made wolves. Easy-peasy.”

“Right. Easy.” Peter looked at them uncertainly.

“That’s the basic plan. Of course, there are a lot more variables to consider,” Mason said, cutting off any other comments.

“Okay.” Peter took a deep breath and let it out. “What do you need from me?”

“You said your father isn’t there? Who’s in charge in his absence?” Holly asked.

“Probably Mark? He’s the head of security. He’s got an office at the back of the house. He monitors all the camera feeds there.”

“Okay. That helps.” Grady marked a red dot on the plans. “Anyone else?”

“Laurel’s in there with Penny and Paul. She said she’d keep them safe.”

“That makes three friendlies inside. Anyone else?”

Peter shook his head. “Not that I know of. Maybe Harrison, the one who helped me escape? Except today was the first time I’ve seen him, so I doubt he would have gone back out there after that.”

“We should assume they’re more made wolves,” Ryder said. He stood up to study the plans. After a minute, he shook his head. “I think we’ll have to mount a frontal assault. I don’t see any other way.”

“What are you going to do? Walk up to the gate and say ‘we’re here for the others, let us in?’” Peter asked.

“Pretty much,” Mason said with a shrug. “If there was another way, we’d use it. But with the wards in place, we have to get Anodo onsite to break them. Viceroy can’t drop us inside the gate. So we have to knock on the door.”

Peter shook his head. Hawk was about to ask him to trust them, but that was a joke. After what they’d done, it was amazing Peter was listening to them. “We can do this,” he said.

“You can wait in Hawk’s apartment while we go,” Grady suggested, and Peter rounded on him.

“Oh hell no,” Peter said fiercely. “I am going with you.”

“It might be safer for you to—”

“No.” Peter crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared at Grady. After a minute, Grady shook his head and looked away.

“Fine. Have it your way. But you stay in the back.”

“I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Hawk said. “We are talking about going in blind.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t see another way,” Mason said.

“It’s not like we can send a scouting mission in. They’d be discovered in no time. Especially with those wards,” Holly added.

“You saw it for yourself,” Tonya added.

“Then what do we do?” Hawk asked.

“We go as smart as we can. I’ll go in first with Hawk, Anodo, and Viceroy. If we can’t break the wards, this will be over before it can begin,” Mason said. “Holly, you stay in the van with Peter. You’re the last line of defense.” He held up his

hand when Peter started to balk at the idea of being left behind. “We’ll get you in, after the fighting is over. There’s no way I am risking putting you back in their hands.”

“But what about Penny and Paul? We can’t leave them out there.”

“There’s only one way that will happen,” Hawk said. Peter turned to him, and the question was clear on his face. “Over my dead body,” Hawk said solemnly.

Peter’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head. “That’s not what I want.”

“It’s the way it has to be,” Hawk said. He wished he could soften it for Peter, reassure him that everything would be fine. But that wasn’t the truth. He took a breath and turned back to Mason. “So it’s settled, then.”

Mason nodded. “Everyone, go gear up. Meet at the van in five.”

“Wait,” Peter started, but everyone dispersed.

“Don’t worry. We’re pretty good at this,” Grady said, throwing a wink his way as he left.

Peter was still trying to argue when they regrouped and divided into the cars. Grady had pulled Peter into the back of the van while Holly took the wheel, and Hawk climbed into the lead car with Mason, Viceroy, and Anodo. Ryder and Tonya followed behind in the SUV. Faolan and Bianca were in the Town Car. Grady had searched it and only found a GPS tracker and remote cameras on the rearview mirror and overhead light. Phoebe stayed behind at the office with Conrad, Connie, and the twins.

It felt like no time at all had passed before they got to their destination. Faolan parked the van on the shoulder, and Holly pulled over next to him. Mason nodded and turned into the drive.

“Eight,” Hawk said, calling out the number of guards he counted. Mason nodded as he pulled to a stop next to the guard station.

“Copy and agreed,” Grady answered through their comms.

“No entry,” Carlo said.

Anodo rolled down his window and leaned out. Carlo looked at him and got a face full of fairy dust for his trouble.

“You fucking—” he said before his eyes rolled up and he fell like a sack of bricks.

“What the hell was that?” Ryder demanded. He had to be remembering Anodo doing the same thing to Conrad.

“It’s all about the intent. Now shut up. I need to concentrate,” Anodo said as he got out of the car. He spread his arms wide and his eyes glowed as he chanted. The wolves on the grounds turned their way and began shifting.

“I guess it’s showtime,” Hawk said, getting out of the car and shifting his hands into claws. He ran for the first one and took him out easily. After that, it was chaos. The others were tied up in clashes all around him. The made wolves were shitty fighters. They dropped their weapons and relied on their augmented strength, swinging their fists wildly and hoping they landed. The pack had been wolves all their lives, so they fought seamlessly in both their wolf and human forms.

Thornston’s army did have numbers on their side. The eight in front were quickly joined by a dozen more who had poured in from all directions. Hawk left his pack to handle them and followed Viceroy and Anodo into the house. Anodo stopped in his tracks as he took in the wards.

“Can you break them?” Hawk demanded. Mark came running at them from one of the back rooms, and Hawk met him halfway. He put up a fight, but after a few minutes, Hawk managed to snap his neck. Two more guards were rushing in behind them. Viceroy stepped up to take one of them on while Hawk faced the other. “Anodo!”

“Right. Yes.” Anodo threw his hands up in the air. His wings fluttered and his eyes glowed brighter than Hawk had ever seen before. Then he slammed his hands back down to his sides, and Hawk felt the wards explode. It knocked both Hawk

and Viceroy off their feet, along with their opponents. The reverberation killed the wolves they were fighting.

Hawk heard footsteps coming their way, so he got up, shaking his head. He'd braced for another fight, but then he saw Laurel leading Penny and Paul their way.

Anodo gasped behind them, and Hawk turned to see tears falling from his eyes. The fight had died down outside. Hawk guessed breaking the wards also disrupted whatever magic turned the guards into wolves. Without that extra boost, they were no match. Mason entered first, followed by the others. Peter shoved his way through the pack as they came in through the front door. He shouted for Penny and Paul, and they met him halfway.

"You did it!" Paul said, pulling Peter into his arms and holding him tight. Penny joined from the other side, and neither of them looked to be letting go any time soon.

"It's about time you made it," Laurel said from next to him.

"We got here as soon as we could."

"And brought reinforcements, I see." She stepped up to Anodo, who still hadn't taken his eyes off the Thornstons. She cleared her throat, and Anodo looked down at her. Then his eyes went wide, and he engulfed her in a hug.

"Laurel," he whispered reverently, and Hawk felt like he was intruding. Anodo pulled back and cupped her cheeks in his palms. Her appearance shimmered for a moment, and Hawk noticed both of them were crying. "So it's true, then."

"I'm afraid so. I only found them a decade ago. I've done what I can, but I'm weakening."

"I'll take it from here," Anodo pledged.

"Thank you, cousin." She leaned forward to kiss his cheek. By the time she pulled back, she was the no-nonsense chef Hawk had met earlier. "It's time to go," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear. Peter broke from his siblings to sweep her up in his arms and spin her around. She laughed brightly and gently smacked his arms. "Put me down."

Peter obeyed, and he mouthed a thank-you to Hawk over her shoulder. Hawk smiled and nodded. Laurel steered Peter back to his siblings, and Hawk turned to Mason.

“What about the house?” Hawk asked. He felt like they should at least search it. And maybe burn it down on their way out.

Anodo shook his head. “We have to leave. Now.”

“This will have attracted his attention. We must get them to safety before he returns,” Laurel said.

“All right, then,” Hawk said. “Let’s bug out.”

Peter held tight to his siblings, and Anodo and Laurel flanked them all the way back to the SUV. Hawk followed the rest of the pack outside, and he got his first glance at the carnage in the yard. Yeah. Thornston would definitely notice this. There were bodies scattered around the front yard. Some of them were bloody from the fight, but others were unmarked, like they had simply died where they stood. And the ground around the house was scorched. There were circles burned farther out, littering the grass all the way to the fence.

“Holy shit,” Grady said.

“Looks like we’ve declared war,” Mason said.

Hawk had to agree. Thornston would be forced to retaliate. He had to hope they’d be enough when the time came. Because this was just the beginning. It was going to get a lot worse before it was over. His eyes strayed back to Peter.

They’d saved the siblings. That was what mattered. Now he hoped he survived to earn their forgiveness.

TWENTY-SIX

HAWK PROWLED RESTLESSLY around the conference room. Ever since he'd gotten back from the Thornston compound, Hawk had felt defeated. Peter had climbed into the SUV with Penny and Paul, and they still weren't back. Viceroy assured him they were fine, but Hawk wouldn't believe it until they were safely inside the pack's building.

"Holly called and said Anodo wanted to stop by his place so he could help Laurel get home," Mason said as Hawk made another pass by him.

"What if he keeps them there? Or disappears with them completely? Takes them into the fae realm or whatever?"

"Then we have to wait for them to come back to us."

"Fucking—" Hawk started, but noise in the hallway stopped him. "Finally." He rushed out of the room to catch Peter. He held Peter at arms' length to check him over. "Are you all right? Did he do anything?"

Peter pushed him away. "We're fine. But—"

"What the fuck?" Penny demanded as she stormed to the wall where they'd taped up all their information. Paul followed her. They both studied the details carefully, getting increasingly agitated as they took in more details. "You shot at us?"

Peter moved to the end of the table, as far away from Hawk as he could get.

"Yeah, Pen. They did," he said.

“You knew?” Paul whirled on his brother with a betrayed look on his face.

“I just found out this morning. Before we came to get you.”

Paul winced, but Penny looked outraged. She stomped to the table and slapped both hands down on it. “You have three seconds to explain yourselves.” No one said anything, so Penny turned her glare at Mason. “Well?”

“Okay.” Mason took a deep breath and started talking. “Six months ago, Conrad here was working as an intern at an accounting firm...”

Hawk was impressed with how thoroughly he explained the situation. He touched on Thornston stalking Connie’s twins and demanding their return, but he skimmed over some of the details when he talked about them. Faolan pulled Connie in close when her eyes watered. She visibly relaxed against him. Small miracles, Hawk thought. If them finally getting together was the only thing that came out of this shitstorm, it would still be worth it.

“Wait. So you think our dad did all of this?” Penny asked. Her voice was small, subdued. Hawk’s heart broke for her. It wasn’t easy to hear someone you loved was capable of such horror.

“We know he did. At least some of it. We have evidence for most it,” Mason said.

“Then why haven’t you picked him up, or whatever it is you do?” Paul asked.

“For one thing, we were concerned about you three getting hurt. Your father has proven to have little concern for other people’s wellbeing. We wanted to make sure you were safe before we made a move,” Mason said.

“What happens now?” Peter asked. He seemed shocked, and Hawk longed to comfort him. Peter had known some of the story, but there was so much more to it. He had stared, slack-jawed, at Connie when Mason brought her up. “I mean, Dad’s going to know something happened there.”

“Now we keep you safe so we can finish this.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Paul asked.

“Paul,” Peter said quietly. He shook his head, and Paul took a deep breath. “You know.”

“It means they’re going to kill Daddy,” Penny said bluntly.

Hawk winced. Because, yeah. But it didn’t mean they would enjoy it. He wished it hadn’t come to this, but Thornston was evil. He couldn’t be allowed to live after all he had done.

“You can’t be serious,” Paul said. “Can’t you go arrest him or something?”

“No,” Peter whispered. “He’s done something. To make him a werewolf.”

“He got someone to bite him. Big deal,” Paul answered. “I mean... Come on.”

“That’s now how it works, is it?” Peter asked.

“No. He’s stolen the power. There is no magic bite,” Conrad explained. Hawk didn’t care if it made him a coward; he was glad to let Conrad handle it. “And the lengths we think he’s gone to get it... All those women. The kids. A lot of them died. We’re still rescuing children...” He trailed off.

They all knew about the group homes where the kids were being... well, not exactly raised. Maybe reared. Kept alive as long as they still provided the juice to charge supernatural batteries for Thornston and others like him.

“Fuck,” Peter said.

“I wish there was an alternative resolution, but we have no options,” Viceroy said.

“Are you the one who’s going to do it?” Penny sniped.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“Who are you?” Paul asked.

“Sorry,” he said with a smile. “My name is Viceroy.”

“Right.” Peter nodded, even if he still looked confused. “What are you? Or is it rude to ask? There was so much I need to learn,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Not in this instance,” Viceroy said with a chuckle. It made him a touch more approachable, but face it—he was still over six feet tall and packed with massive muscles. Intimidating didn’t begin to describe him. “I am a hellhound.”

“A what?” Paul asked.

“A hellhound. We are chartered to maintain the secrecy of our kind. If any shifter shows themselves to the human world, we step in to deal with the fallout.”

“You’re the judge and jury,” Penny said. “And the executioners.”

“Sometimes,” Viceroy shrugged as if that was no big deal.

“How is that fair?” Penny continued.

“The Goddess has tasked us with this responsibility. All shifterkind is aware of the ramifications of exposing us.”

Penny narrowed her eyes, and Hawk suspected she was looking for holes in his theory. Eventually she nodded and let it go.

THE PACK MOVED in and out of the room, letting them process what they’d learned. After a while, Connie got up and offered to get them something to drink, but Paul shook his head.

Penny stared at her. “Where did you get that?” she asked, nodding at the necklace Connie was wearing.

Connie looked down and lifted it away from her chest before glancing around the room. “I think I got it at an estate sale I went to with my mom. Why?”

“Because it’s mine,” Penny spit.

“Oh.” Connie reached up to unclasp it, but Peter stopped her.

“Wait.” He studied the piece. “I remember that.”

“Yeah. You got it for me in Croatia. Or Corsica. Someplace over there.” Penny waved her hand.

“I wondered why you never wore it after we got back.”

“Because it disappeared from my room.”

“Huh,” Peter said.

“Huh, what?” Paul asked.

Peter shook his head. “I suspected Dad has been getting rid of some of the things I’ve picked up here and there. Things I remember buying that weren’t there when we got home.”

“It is a lovely piece, but why are you wearing it with that one?” Anodo asked, pointing at Connie’s wrist.

She lifted her arm, and a charm dangled from a thin bangle. It looked like a simple carved rock, but it glistened with some kind of iridescent flecks.

“This is the protection charm Mason told me to wear,” she said as if that explained everything.

Peter wondered if Mason would give them some too. Conrad and Ryder joined their group, interested in the conversation.

“I know that.” Anodo rolled his eyes. “But that one,” he said, pointing at the necklace, “that one is for nullification. Very powerful too. You’re completely canceling out the protection. I’m surprised you’re not taking out everyone else’s.”

“What?” Connie gasped and tried to paw at the necklace.

Peter helped her unhook it. “How long have you had this?”

“Probably five or six years?” She shrugged.

Conrad’s eyes went wide. “Connie, you used to wear it all the time back then,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“You probably would have been wearing it *that* night.”

“What night?” She narrowed her eyes before gasping in shock. “You’re right.”

“That must have been it.”

“Uh, care to translate for those of us without Wonder Twin communication powers?” Hawk asked. Peter nodded in agreement. He was glad he wasn’t the only one who had no idea what they were saying.

Conrad shook his head. “We were talking last night. We wondered how he did it. If, you know, he was behind Connie getting pregnant. How did he do it? Spells? Drugs?”

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me that my father also fathered your kids?” Penny asked, horrified.

“What? No. It definitely wasn’t him,” Connie said. She looked over at Thornston’s image and shuddered. “I definitely would have remembered that.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Positive. He left almost immediately after, and I haven’t seen him since,” Connie said.

“And we figured it was because he could tell that whatever magical whammy he tried failed, so he cut his losses with her,” Conrad continued. “If she was wearing a nullification charm at the time, that means she would have been immune to the spell, right?”

“Holy shit. That makes so much sense,” Grady said. He started clacking away on his keyboard. “Not just the compliance, but the kids too. That must be how he made sure they got pregnant to begin with.”

“Fucking hell,” Phoebe said.

“Okay. You seem to get it, but I’m still lost,” Paul said. Peter agreed as he looked around helplessly. It was like being on the outside of some pretty deep inside joke. One Anodo and Viceroy seemed to have caught on to, given the way their eyes were glowing. Viceroy’s a fierce orange like their father’s, Anodo’s a silvery green.

Conrad looked to Mason for approval, and he nodded.

“There have been problems in the supernatural world for a while now. Like centuries.”

“Okay.” Peter didn’t see where this was heading and what it had to do with them, or Connie’s kids.

“Kids are very rare these days,” Anodo added.

“Right. But that’s both true and not,” Conrad said.

“Jesus Christ, get to the point already.” Peter was starting to get angry at them talking around the subject.

“Fine. Your father used dark magic to defy the Goddesses and get women pregnant. Some of the women were shifters, some were humans forced to breed with shifter men. Then he used dark spells to suck the magic from the kids to increase his own power,” Ryder said.

Hawk and Conrad stared at him in disbelief, but Peter appreciated the bluntness. They’d glossed over the subject all evening. Peter was glad to have it spelled out in detail. Even if it made him sick to his stomach. He could see Paul and Penny were similarly affected.

“Jesus. It sounds so much worse when you lay it out like that,” Paul said.

“Go on,” Peter said after swallowing thickly.

“Sorry,” Ryder said.

“Don’t be,” Penny added. “I’d rather hear it straight than the way you danced around it earlier.”

“We were trying to spare you some of the worst of it,” Conrad said.

“Well, stop it. Level with us. We may be new here, but we’re not fucking babies,” Penny said. “What does this have to do with our amulet?”

“My boys are werewolves,” Connie said quietly.

“Oh fuck. I didn’t know,” Peter stammered. He looked around, for what, he didn’t know. He wanted to do something to make things right, but he was so far out of his depth.

“We’re sorry.” Paul stepped forward to squeeze her arm. Faolan stiffened behind her, but relaxed when Paul moved back.

“Don’t. It’s not on you. It was all on him. Besides...” She smiled and held up the charm. “It looks like you managed to protect me the whole time.”

“Fuck.” Peter’s eyes burned with tears. Connie pulled him into a hug. Peter felt Penny and Paul join in to surround Connie with their warmth.

Penny was the first to break from them. She looked up at the ceiling as she wiped a finger under her eye. Peter shot her a smile over Connie’s head. His siblings might be shallow airheads from time to time, but there was a lot more to them. They just didn’t let it out in public.

They sat down, holding on to one another’s hands. Anodo stood protectively behind them.

Paul turned around and looked at him. “Okay. They’re wolves; he’s a hellhound. What are you?”

“I’m a fairy.”

“A fairy,” Paul replied flatly. “Like woodland creature? Dances in the moonlight? Where are your wings?”

“Glamoured.” Anodo looked to Viceroy, who nodded. The air shimmered around him before a pair of wings unfolded behind him.

“Holy shit.” Paul sounded as shocked as Peter felt. It was too much. Peter squeezed Hawk’s hand tighter before he looked down and realized he’d been hanging on to him for dear life. He glanced at Hawk’s face, and Hawk gave him a slight nod.

“You two look so much like her,” Anodo said. Then he turned to Peter. “You all share her essence.”

“You said that earlier. Who did you mean?” Peter asked quietly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what Anodo was about to say.

“Your mother,” Anodo answered. “She was my clan sister. We suspected she met with foul play, but there’s no doubt now.”

“What? That’s not true. She left us. She never wanted the responsibility, so she took off,” Peter said. Penny and Paul seemed dumbstruck.

“I can only imagine what he told you, but I can sense her on you,” Anodo said sadly. “She visited this realm, and we lost her.”

“Okay. So what are you saying?” Penny asked.

Peter looked around the room, and his gaze stopped at Anodo, who looked stricken. Peter’s stomach fell.

“Our mother was one of those women too, wasn’t she? Like Connie?” he asked.

“We think so,” Conrad said quietly after a few seconds, like he didn’t want to be the one to say it.

“No. It can’t be.” Peter shook his head and backed away. Hawk wrapped his arms around him, and Peter broke down. Penny and Paul hugged him from the other side. Conrad moved in to sit awkwardly with the group, offering whatever support he could. Soon the rest of the pack joined in, holding them as they cried it out.

“We got you,” Hawk whispered over and over, kissing Peter’s temple and reaching out to stroke a hand down Paul’s arm. Finally, Penny sniffled and leaned back to wipe her face.

“Do whatever you need to do,” she said.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW? I mean, where do we go? Because we sure as fuck can’t go home again,” Penny asked.

“We’ll find a place for you. We have a lot of contacts,” Mason said.

“I have a suggestion,” Tonya said. “But it may take some time to set up.”

Mason nodded. “Do it.”

“Don’t worry. You’re going to love him,” Tonya said as she walked out of the room.

“You really think—” Penny started.

“We’d love to meet him,” Peter said, cutting her off with a light elbow nudge and a glare.

“We’d love to meet him,” she repeated sarcastically. She smiled, sickly sweet and completely fake.

“In the meantime, where will we stay?” Paul asked.

“We have guest quarters in the penthouse, if that’s all right with you,” Mason said.

Hawk stepped forward tentatively, and Peter reached out to him. He took Peter’s hand. “You’ll be safe there. They’ll have to go through all of us to get to you.”

“Is he our new uncle?” one of the most adorable kids Peter had ever seen whisper-shouted. He was sitting on Faolan’s hip. A mirror image of him nestled against Connie. Then he noticed the similarities between her and Conrad.

“I’m surrounded by twins,” he said. Peter didn’t know why it surprised him, but it did.

The pack laughed, and Penny hip-checked him. She was smiling at the boys. Peter thought she’d make a great mom someday. Once she was done with the spotlight, that was.

“You have random apartments open for visitors?” Penny asked.

“Well, the penthouse is Mason’s. That’s where he hosts guest packs. If you prefer your own space, I can put you in my apartment. I’ll move in with my brother,” Hawk offered.

“Aw, man. I just got rid of Fall. Now I’ll have to deal with you?” Grady said. Peter noticed he sort of looked like both Hawk and Faolan, although he was younger and stockier.

“At least you’re not triplets,” Peter said before his brain caught up to his mouth.

“Can it, Grady,” Hawk said before turning back to Peter. “I’ll take you up to Mason’s now?”

“That sounds good.” Penny looped her arm in Peter’s and looked at him expectantly. Peter was getting a little nervous about the glint in her eye.

“Come on,” Hawk said, leading him to the elevators.

“You all live here?” Peter asked once they were in the elevator.

Hawk nodded. “We own the building.

“Huh. Convenient.” They didn’t say anything else on the ride up. Peter appreciated it. He didn’t think he could handle much more tonight.

“Here we are.” The elevator opened into the foyer of a large apartment. Hawk showed them to a massive open floor plan on the corner. Floor-to-ceiling windows took up two walls. “Living room, kitchen. Mason’s back that way. Your rooms will be this way.” He led them down a hallway to the opposite corner. A second living area was set up, with three bedrooms, each with their own bath. “I’ll, uh, try to get you some clothes. There should be toiletries in each bathroom,

along with fresh towels and washcloths, that kind of thing. Be right back.”

He left before Peter could say anything else.

When Peter turned back around, Penny and Paul were watching him closely.

“Shame there’s not enough room for all of us here,” Paul said.

“What? This place is huge,” Peter said.

“We’re packed in here. You might have to bunk with the hot bodyguard,” Penny added.

“He did offer you his place,” Paul said.

“It would be rude not to take him up on it.” Penny nodded.

“You do remember they shot at us, right?” Peter had to cling to his anger. He was in serious danger of falling for Hawk. If he forgave him, then it would be over. “I mean, you have to be angry. Right?”

Penny sighed and sat down in one of the armchairs. “I don’t know. I want to be? But I knew something was off with this whole thing. And then I think about what Daddy’s done, and I sort of get it.”

“Maybe they took it to an extreme, but I don’t think anything else would have caught Dad’s attention,” Paul added. “I don’t *like* it. But it’s done.”

“And Laurel did say to trust them,” Penny said.

“Fucking hell.” He was going to say more, but the elevator pinged, and Hawk called out. They met him in the entryway. He carried several hangers and Faolan had a couple of bags.

“We raided everyone’s closets. Hopefully, there’s something that’s not too bad here,” Hawk said.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Peter said as Penny grunted in disgust.

“Whatever.” Paul took the hangers from Hawk and disappeared into one of the rooms. Faolan followed him and

returned quickly, empty-handed.

“I’ll get Milo to send some things over in the morning,” Penny said, already typing away on her phone.

“Well. Have a good night. There’s an intercom over here.” Hawk pointed to a panel on the wall. “Call if there’s anything else you need.”

Hawk started to leave, but Peter grabbed his hand. He didn’t know what compelled him to do it. He couldn’t watch Hawk leave. Something deep inside him needed to keep Hawk close. He was something solid Peter could hang on to while he was still processing everything.

“Please don’t go,” he whispered, not caring how desperate it sounded.

Hawk smiled and smoothed Peter’s hair back from his face and kissed his forehead.

“I’m going to make you something to drink. I’m not leaving. I promise.”

“Okay.” Peter closed his eyes and relaxed. When he opened them, he found Paul already holding out a pair of shorts. He changed into them. Then Penny shoved him into the big bed. Something settled inside him. Then they snuck out of the room. He rolled his eyes and let it go for now.

It was weird. He should be angry at Hawk. Hell, he should hate him for how he had lied to them.

But it wasn’t like that. Hawk felt... right.

Peter groaned and flopped back onto the bed. Hawk came in a minute later carrying a steaming mug.

“This is some tea Anodo gave me. He said it would help you.” Hawk shrugged.

Peter accepted it and took a tiny sip. And then he took a bigger drink. It was amazing. Slightly sweet, with an herbal flavor he couldn’t place. But it wasn’t bad. In fact, it felt like it was spreading over his entire body, filling in any gaps and making him feel whole.

He snorted at the thought. Hawk looked at him, eyebrows raised in question.

“Nothing. Being an idiot.”

“Oh. I do that all the time,” Hawk said as he turned and headed to the bathroom.

Peter heard the water running for a minute, then Hawk came back with a damp washcloth. He reached out slowly, and Peter nodded. Then he used the cloth to wipe Peter’s cheeks. Peter could feel the crusty tear tracks coming off. His eyes started drooping, and he snuggled deeper into the pillows.

Hawk took the cup and set it on the nightstand. “Get some rest,” he said.

“Thanks,” Peter whispered as he fell asleep.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“WHAT THE FUCK, ANODO,” Hawk hissed into the phone.

“What?”

“What the fuck was in that tea? He took like two sips and then passed out!”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah. That.” When Peter’s eyes slipped shut, Hawk panicked, thinking he’d poisoned him. Then Peter let out a snore. And Hawk, well, he didn’t calm down. He just shifted into anger.

“He needed the restoration,” Anodo said. “I suspect he will sleep for a long time. Don’t be too shocked if he does not wake up for a while.”

Hawk closed his eyes and exhaled some of his anger. “How long, Anodo?”

“I can’t say. But don’t panic if it takes days.”

“Days!”

“Healing auras takes a lot of work.”

“Healing his aura? What the fuck?”

“Someone has been stealing from him.”

Hawk could feel his eyes glowing. He was going to fucking *kill* Thornston. And if Peter hated him for it, so be it. But Peter would be free of the man’s grip.

“If I didn’t think he’d be safe with you, I would have insisted they come stay with me,” Anodo said seriously. “I know you will not fail him.”

Hawk didn’t know what to say. It was an incredible level of trust Anodo was showing him. After all, Peter was Anodo’s kin, even if Anodo had only just met him.

“Thanks, Anodo.”

“You’re welcome. Now, don’t prove me wrong.”

“If he’s not up by tomorrow, I’m siccing Conrad on you.”

Anodo chuckled. “The human has certainly acclimated well, hasn’t he?”

“You could say that.” Hawk snorted.

The first time they’d met, Anodo had passed himself off as a prim-and-proper healer. Ryder had wanted to smack him, but he couldn’t without breaking the glamour. Conrad hadn’t known about their world then. Since then, Anodo had allowed his true colors to show.

“Give your mate the time he needs to recover.”

“Yeah. Thanks, I guess.”

“Don’t sound so disgruntled about it,” Anodo said before hanging up.

Hawk stared at the phone for a minute before sighing and heading back into the bedroom. The whole place was quiet. Mason had soundproofed the bedrooms to allow guests their privacy.

It was going to be a long night. Hawk dragged a chair to the foot of the bed to sit vigil. He tried to close his eyes, but every time he did, he saw Peter leaving through a portal along with his siblings.

He decided to use the time to work on the drawing he’d started at Thornston’s. The man might be a complete shit heel, but his art collection was impressive. Hawk had committed several of the sculptures to memory and was halfway through recreating one of them. He’d shown it to Peter the day of the

party. Hawk smiled when he remembered the shocked looks Tonya and Faolan had thrown him.

Once he completed it, he started one of Peter as he slept. It took him three tries to get his eyes right, but he was pleased with the overall image, even if it wasn't quite right. He couldn't put his finger on what was missing, though.

Penny poked her head in around ten the next morning. Hawk walked with her to the kitchen and explained what Anodo had said before making Penny and Paul each a mug of tea. Neither of them passed out, so Hawk figured Thornston hadn't been taking so liberally from them. A few minutes later, Mason came in to tell them Ryder was making breakfast.

"You'll take care of him," Penny said. Hawk wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement, so he nodded.

It was midafternoon when Peter finally started moving again. Hawk let out a sigh of relief and quickly carried the chair back to the living room. He didn't want to get caught creeping on Peter while he slept.

"Hey, you," he said as he went back into the room.

"Time is it?" Peter asked around a yawn.

"About two thirty."

"Fucking hell."

"Anodo said you needed to recover your aura."

Peter snorted. "My aura? Fucking really?"

"That's what he said." Hawk sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed Peter's hair off his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Better? I think. Still a little tired."

"How about some lunch. Then you can go back to sleep if you want."

"Sounds good." Peter stumbled out of the bed and to the bathroom. Hawk heard the shower start, so he called Ryder to see if he had anything prepared that he could give Peter.

Conrad showed up a few minutes later with a baking pan and a bag. “Mason said he’d be working downstairs all day, and Penny and Paul are trying to convince Connie to let them give her a makeover,” he said.

“And how’s that working out for them?”

“Better than you think. They enlisted the twins, so it’s four against one.”

Hawk laughed. He could easily picture T ’n’ T cajoling their mother into it.

“So you guys can relax for a while,” Conrad said as he handed the dish over. “Lasagna. Three fifty, for ten minutes. You’ve been preheating, right?” he asked.

“Yes. Like Ryder told me to do.” The oven beeped right as Conrad handed the dish over. Conrad nodded and winked before turning around and disappearing into the elevator.

Hawk put the dish in the oven and started the timer. The bag held a loaf of garlic bread, along with instructions to stick under the broiler to brown. He was glad Mason wasn’t too territorial about his place. The whole pack was welcome in his apartment any time they needed it. Then again, they never went into his private quarters. Hawk didn’t remember a time he’d seen Mason’s bedroom since they’d helped move the furniture in. He heard the shower shut off down the hall, so he made his way back to the bedroom.

Peter came out of the bathroom a few minutes before the timer went off, hair wet and a fresh T-shirt sticking to him.

“Hope you don’t mind. I was kind of ripe.”

“No problem. Food is almost ready.”

“Great. I’m starving.” He followed Hawk to the kitchen. He took a seat at the breakfast bar.

Hawk dished up a plate, and Peter dug in, moaning at the first bite. Hawk’s chest puffed up, having provided for his mate. He might not have cooked it, but Hawk was the one who gave it to him.

After they finished eating, Peter helped him with the dishes. Hawk set the baking pan aside to return to Ryder. Goddess help him if he kept it. Ryder would search the building for it. Peter wandered around while Hawk put the rest of the dishes away. Hawk found him sitting in the big armchair in the main living room, Hawk's sketchbook on his lap.

"These are amazing," Peter said as he studied the one of him sleeping.

"Uh... thanks."

"I mean, it's kind of creepy, knowing you were watching me sleep," Peter said. He had a smile on his face as he said it, though, so Hawk didn't think he was too weirded out by it.

Hawk slipped onto the sofa, close enough to brush knees with Peter.

"There's nothing else worth looking at around here," he said.

Peter sucked in a breath, and his eyes widened a fraction. Hawk would have to paint that exact look one day. He was about to say more, but his phone went off with a new text message.

"Saved by the bell," Peter said as he leaned back in his chair. Hawk snorted next to him, and Peter turned a questioning look at him.

"It's Faolan. Looks like they're having fun." The text was a picture of Connie, looking miserable with half her face done up in makeup like some sort of before and after side-by-side comparison and her hair filled with rollers. There were clothes all over the floor, reminding Hawk of the way Paul and Penny had left Peter's room the day they met.

Peter laughed and took the phone from Hawk's hand. "That's awesome." The phone buzzed in his hand, and he nearly dropped it, but Hawk managed to catch it before it fell. Peter sucked in a shocked breath, and it took every ounce of his control not to close the distance and kiss him. Another two texts from Connie to the entire team came in quick succession, and broke Hawk out of his stupor.

“Code Red! Send help!” the first text said. The second was a picture of Faolan’s back as he ran away from Paul, who was holding a can of shaving cream in one hand and a razor in the other.

“Should we stage a rescue mission?” Hawk asked.

Peter giggled and shook his head. “Nope. They’re on their own.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Hawk was trying to think of something to say when Peter spoke up.

“I’d love to see more of your art,” he said.

“Is this your way of inviting yourself back to my apartment?”

“Maybe,” he whispered. Peter’s coy look was almost Hawk’s undoing. His cock throbbed painfully when Peter leaned in close.

Hawk swallowed thickly and nodded. “That can be arranged.”

He did not run to the elevator. But Peter stumbled trying to keep up with him. Too soon, they were on his floor. Faolan’s door was open, so Hawk turned to Peter and held a finger up against his lips. Then he tiptoed out into the hallway. Peter’s eyes widened, and he followed Hawk’s lead. They quietly crept toward Hawk’s door. He’d just gotten it unlocked when Connie’s voice drifted into the hallway.

“Not the beard!” she shouted.

Peter barked out a laugh and then covered his mouth quickly. Hawk shoved his door open and dragged Peter in behind him, then locked it as soon as he slammed it shut. Once inside Peter doubled over with laughter.

“I’m sorry. That was...” He shook his head.

Hawk grinned and moved farther into the apartment. He left his phone on the kitchen counter as he made his way into the living room. While Peter wandered around, Hawk sat and relaxed for a moment but then realized what Peter was about to find. He started to get up, but it was too late.

“Hawk,” Peter whispered reverently from where he stood in front of the easel, staring at a painting of himself. “I don’t look like this,” he said quietly. “I’m not...” He shook his head.

Hawk stepped up next to him as he studied the image. Just like in the mural, Peter seemed to glow against the canvas, like he was made of light. He was truly ethereal, all light and safety in a dark world.

“You are to me.”

Peter turned to him. His eyes were glassy, and his cheeks were flushed. His lips parted, and Hawk couldn’t stop himself from staring at Peter’s mouth. He vividly recalled the feel of them against his own, and the taste of Peter exploding on his tongue. Peter blinked slowly before surging forward and kissing Hawk, like he had done at the club. Hawk didn’t have time to react before Peter was moving, pushing Hawk toward the couch. He hit the arm and fell backward, and Peter followed him. He dragged his hands down and under Hawk’s shirt. Hawk nodded and pulled it off, and then Peter’s hands were on his belt.

Hawk reached down to still him, and Peter pulled back to look at him. They were both breathing heavily as they stared at each other. Then Peter nodded and Hawk wrapped his arms around Peter to reverse their positions. Peter pushed at Hawk’s chest to make room between them. Then he quickly stripped off his shirt before shoving at the waistband of his shorts. Hawk helped him out of his clothes and then leaned back to stare at the man in front of him.

He was breathtaking. Hawk’s imagination paled in comparison to the reality of Peter spread out under him. His cock throbbed in his jeans, but he ignored it. Instead, he focused on Peter. He tentatively reached for his cock but didn’t make contact. Peter whined and pumped his hips upward, but Hawk shook his head.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He licked his lips and nodded. “Yes. I want this. I want you.”

Hawk's heart swelled at that, and he dove forward to take Peter's cock in his mouth. Peter shouted and his hands raked through Hawk's hair. Hawk whined and turned his head into the touch.

"Fucking hell. This is going to be over so fast," Peter panted as Hawk bobbed his head. His body never stopped moving while Hawk sucked him deep into his throat. He felt Peter's cock getting impossibly harder in his mouth, and Peter pulled on his hair. "Fuck. I'm gonna," he warned, and Hawk pulled back enough to wrap one hand around the base of Peter's dick.

He kept his mouth over the head while he jerked him off. Hawk felt like he could do this forever and never get used to the weight of Peter hard and hot against his tongue as he came.

Hawk worked him through it until Peter became too sensitive and shoved his face away. Even then, he didn't go far. He turned his face and pressed gentle kisses to Peter's thigh. Peter took a few more heavy breaths before he cracked his eyes open.

"Beautiful," Hawk said as he ran a hand up and down Peter's chest. Peter's skin broke out in goose bumps. Hawk stood up, and Peter made a sleepy reach for him, but his eyes were barely open. Hawk grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch. He tucked it in around Peter before leaning down to kiss his forehead. "Rest, angel."

Peter drifted off, and Hawk went to the bathroom to take care of his own erection. It didn't take long with the taste of Peter on his tongue. His knot formed, and he closed his eyes as he tried to work it down as quickly as he could. He didn't know how long Peter would sleep, and Hawk wanted to be there when he woke up.

His worry was for nothing, because Peter was still snoring a half hour later when Hawk finally made it out of the bathroom. He carefully pulled the blanket off and eased Peter's shorts up and worked his shirt back on.

After covering Peter with the blanket again, Hawk settled in with his sketchbook.

TWENTY-NINE

BY THE TIME evening rolled around, Peter's eyelids were dropping again. But he didn't want to go to bed yet. He'd had the best day. He hadn't felt so safe in years. It's funny what you can get used to, he thought. He'd lived so long with his father that he hadn't noticed how uncomfortable he'd been until he wasn't there. He knew Hawk was a big part of that.

He'd woken up that morning—well, afternoon—with Hawk nearby. Since then, Hawk hadn't left Peter's side. Peter blushed when he remembered how quickly the blowjob was over. And for how long he'd slept afterward. But Hawk shook off his concerns. He simply took Peter's hand and kissed his knuckles before they made their way across the hall to Faolan's place.

Penny and Paul noticed the change between them and immediately whisked Peter away to Mason's apartment.

"Tell me everything," Paul said as he sat Peter down on the bed.

"No."

Penny narrowed her eyes, but Peter didn't relent. He wanted to keep this private for a while. It was his, and he wanted to hold on to that a little longer. Finally, she nodded.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

Peter thought about it. When you looked at all the facts, it seemed really fucked-up. He hadn't even known Hawk for week, and he'd lied to them. Used them to trick their father into allowing Hawk and his pack in. So yeah, logically, Peter

should be running for the hills. He should be angry, and he should hate Hawk.

But.

None of that mattered. Not when he felt this way. It was like he'd been waiting his whole life, never knowing something was missing until Hawk showed up. Then everything aligned. How they got there was inconsequential compared to what they had ahead of them. He shook his head and chuckled at his own stupidity.

"Yeah. I am," he admitted.

Penny reached out to take his hand. "I'm glad."

Paul groaned and flopped on the bed, breaking up their heavy moment. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"Tonya said it would take a couple of days before we know anything," Penny said.

Peter's heart stuttered. He'd been so caught up in Hawk, he hadn't thought of what would come next. Paul noticed something was off because he rolled over and pulled Peter down next to him.

"What are we going to do?" Peter asked.

"About what?" Penny asked.

"I mean, where are we going to live?"

Penny snorted and shook her head. "You're pretty dense for being the smart one," she said.

"Huh?"

She sighed and sat down to stare at him. "Peter. You're going to stay here. This is where you belong now."

Peter shook his head. "No. I can't."

"Don't worry. It's okay," Paul said.

"What is?" Peter asked.

"We'll be fine. So will you," Penny said with a nod. She had tears running down her face, and Paul's eyes were shiny.

“You don’t need to come with us,” Paul said.

“Guys.” The words were getting stuck in Peter’s throat. He couldn’t possibly consider leaving them. It was unthinkable. Peter had never traveled the same path as his siblings. Their destiny had always been the stars, and Peter’s was solidly on land. But they’d always done it *together*. Sky and earth, intertwined to take on the world. To think of separating them was inconceivable. Peter always believed that no matter what happened, as long as it was the three of them, they could handle it.

“You found your home,” Penny whispered hoarsely. She hugged him tightly. Paul pulled them both into his arms. They stood there forever, sniffing against one another. They didn’t talk; there wasn’t much else to say. “Besides, it’s not like we’re going anywhere right now. Not while Daddy’s still out there. There’s no way they’ll let any of us out of their sight until they take him down. So you have some time to get used to the idea.”

“And some time to get used to Hawk. In all *kinds* of ways,” Paul said with a leer.

Peter shook his head and swatted at his brother. They were in a full-on pillow fight when Mason knocked on the doorway. Penny squawked and tried to smooth down her hair, but Paul ran his hand over her head to mess it up again. Mason looked at the floor and covered a smile with his hand.

“We’re having a pack dinner, if you’d like to join us,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Peter asked.

Mason met his eyes. “Absolutely.”

“Good. I’m famished,” Penny said. She sashayed past Mason.

Peter shook his head and followed them to a massive dining room he’d overlooked that morning. Of course, he hadn’t felt comfortable sneaking around the alpha’s apartment. The pack was already there, sitting around the table. Paul and Penny quickly sat down, leaving the only open space next to

Hawk. Hawk bumped his shoulder and gave him a tiny smile before he put a plate down in front of Peter.

Dinner was what he expected. Loud, and messy with the two children at the table. Everything was delicious, especially the bright-blue ice cream Ryder served for desert. Cleanup went fast with the whole pack chipping in. Before long, Faolan and Connie had bundled the twins up in their arms, and Ryder had an armload of clean dishes to take back to his place. They all got into the elevator along with Tonya, Holly, and Bianca.

“Thanks for this,” Peter said to Mason once the doors closed.

Mason shook his head and reached out to cup a hand around the back of Peter’s neck. The contact settled something deep inside him. “You don’t have to thank us. You’re pack now.” He turned to look at Penny and Paul. “You all are.”

Penny’s eyes were shiny when she made an exaggerated fake yawn. “Wow. I’m tired. Time for bed.”

“Right.” Peter nodded and he started to follow but Paul blocked his way.

“Isn’t there someplace else you’d be more comfortable?”

“Uh.”

Paul rolled his eyes. He took Peter by the shoulders and turned him around. “What’s that? You had some questions about art?” he asked loudly before giving Peter a gentle shove in Hawk’s direction.

Hawk caught him. Peter looked up to see he was blushing.

“You don’t have to,” he mumbled.

That, more than anything, made Peter’s mind up. “I’d love to see anything you have to show me,” he said.

Phoebe snorted as she pushed by them to get to the elevator Grady was holding open. “Subtle.”

Both Peter and Hawk jumped.

“Well? Are you going down or not?” Grady asked, smirking at them.

Hawk ignored his comment and turned to Peter. “Would you like to come back to my place?”

“I would love to,” Peter said, taking Hawk’s hand. He turned around and saw Penny’s thumbs-up as the doors closed.

Peter had to admit, he felt a lot more comfortable in Hawk’s apartment. Even though nothing of his was here, everything he needed was.

He groaned and rolled his eyes at himself. He collapsed on the couch, and Hawk followed him. Peter wasn’t sure what to expect, but Hawk didn’t make a move on him. In fact, he sat on the other end of the couch. They spent hours talking, sharing stories about their antics growing up, comparing embarrassing stories about their siblings, how art made them feel. Everything but sex.

“Why don’t you go back to bed?” Hawk eventually asked.

Peter didn’t want to move. He’d been leaning closer and closer all night, until he was practically on top of Hawk.

“Okay,” Peter sighed. He didn’t move, and Hawk nudged him. Peter swatted at his hand. “Don’ wanna move.”

“I’ll carry you,” Hawk threatened.

“Kay.” Peter edged closer, and Hawk chuckled. Then he stood up and worked his arms under Peter’s body. “Hey,” Peter said when Hawk stood up and started walking.

“I said I’d do it.” Hawk set him back down carefully.

Peter looked round, blinking at the change in surroundings.

“Want something to drink? I have more of Anodo’s tea.”

“Nah. I’m good. Thanks for... you know.”

Peter drifted off to Hawk’s hand gently carding his hair back. He felt Hawk’s lips against his forehead and heard him whisper, “Night, angel.” At some point, Peter would have to ask him why he kept calling him that, but for now, Hawk’s bed was warm and comfortable, and sleep was waiting for him.

Something woke him up later. He listened, but the place was quiet. Then he heard it. A light whimper. He made his

way to the living room and found Hawk asleep on the couch. As he watched, Hawk's hands twitched, and he made another noise. Peter moved without thinking, crowding as close as he could get to Hawk. Even in his sleep, Hawk reached for him and pulled him into the safety of his arms. Peter snuggled his head against Hawk's chest and fell back asleep.

The sun streaming in the window woke him up in the morning. Hawk looked serene in his sleep. Peter hugged him tighter and dozed off again. About an hour later, he noticed Hawk beginning to stir. He was adorable, all soft and sleep-rumpled.

"Hey, you," Peter said with a smile. "I was wondering when you'd wake up."

"Time is it?" Hawk asked.

Peter snorted. "Isn't this the exact same conversation we had yesterday?"

Hawk laughed and wrapped his arms around Peter. "I don't want to leave here. Ever."

"Come on. Get up." Peter got off him and went to the kitchen. "I hope you're okay with leftovers for breakfast."

"Sounds great."

THIRTY

“ENOUGH OF THIS,” Connie said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Are you forgetting the part where we aren’t supposed to go anywhere?” Conrad asked.

“Are you forgetting the part where we’ve been cooped up for two days now?” Connie fired back.

Peter agreed. The forced closeness was getting to him. They’d been studying his father’s financial reports for a full day now. Every time he blinked, he had a spreadsheet permanently burned into his eyes.

“How about a round of shakes?” Mason suggested, closing his laptop.

“Are you serious?” Connie asked, already standing and pocketing her phone.

“I tell you what, I’ll buy.”

“Holy crap. Let’s go,” Conrad grabbed his cane. “You coming?” he asked.

“Yeah. We’ll come along,” Hawk said.

“Do we need to get everyone’s order?” Peter asked.

“Nope. They know us there. Do you know what Paul and Penny would want?”

“Depends on what they have. Do you have a menu? I can text them the options.”

Conrad snorted. “You just don’t want to go up there and get caught in their fun.”

“Fair.” Peter smiled. Penny and Paul were currently in... Bianca’s closet, Peter thought. Or maybe it was Phoebe’s. When they found out the pack was good friends with more than one designer, they wanted to check out everything. Of course, they went crazy over the outfits by that Bebe person. They’d already been through Holly’s and Tonya’s closets and were planning to hit Mason’s next. “No wonder you’re willing to get out of here,” Peter said, looking at Mason.

“I think we can use some fresh air. Wolves weren’t meant to be inside all the time. We can walk to the diner.”

“And if you’re not here, they’re less likely to raid your closet,” Hawk said.

Peter snorted. “Like that will stop them.”

The look on Mason’s face was priceless.

“Don’t worry. They do have *some* manners,” Peter said. “But seriously, I wouldn’t leave them too long.”

“Maybe we should forget about this for now.”

“Come on, boss. Now I’m craving a Nutella shake,” Conrad said.

“Nutella?” Peter shook his head. “I don’t even have to text them to know that’s what they would want.”

“Fine. I know when to cut my losses. Let’s go.” Mason led the way out of the building.

The sunlight felt good on Peter’s skin. He stood on the sidewalk and turned his face up to the sky to savor it. He could feel Hawk standing next to him. He reached out and laced his fingers with Hawk’s. Hawk turned to him and smiled. It was brighter than the sun.

Conrad and Connie were shoving each other around, and Mason was smiling indulgently. It was the most relaxed Peter had seen them.

“I could get used to this,” Peter said, jinxing them.

The words had barely left his mouth when Mason collapsed, then Hawk. Connie yelped in pain and Conrad reached for her. Then Peter felt a sting on his back. A second later, his vision went dark.

“FUCKING HELL,” Hawk said as he came to.

“Oh, thank God.” Peter had woken up a while ago and looked around, but he didn’t recognize the place. Mason was strapped to a chair in the center of the room. There were sigils carved into the wood floor all around him. Hawk had been tied up, with his hands behind his back, and dumped on the floor next to Mason. Connie and Conrad were in some kind of cage in the corner. Peter didn’t know why he’d been left on his own away from them. His hands were tied together in front of him by a length of rope.

Hawk squirmed along the floor until he was close to Peter. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“Tired. Sore. Confused.”

“Sounds about right.”

Peter shook his head. He couldn’t believe they’d been that careless. “I suppose this falls under the ‘too stupid to live’ category?”

Hawk snorted. “Nah. We planned this.” Peter laughed, and Hawk continued, “Pretend we let our guard down and let him scoop us up. Believe it or not, we have him right where we want him.”

“Yeah. Sure looks like it from here.” Peter held his hands up in front of him.

“Minor inconvenience. Bring them around here.” Hawk twisted and wiggled his fingers. Peter moved around, and Hawk managed to loosen the ropes enough for Peter to pull his hands free. He wanted to return the favor, but Hawk’s hands were secured with a length of chain and padlocked shut. “It’s okay. We’ll get out of this.”

Peter shook his head. “Is there a reason you didn’t let me in on the plan?” he asked, playing along.

“Plausible deniability.”

Peter chuckled and leaned into Hawk’s side. “I’m scared,” he admitted.

Hawk inched closer. “We’ll be fine.”

“How?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

The door opened, and Peter glanced up.

“Dad?”

His father’s smug look faltered when he saw Peter sitting next to Hawk, holding him tight.

“Figures,” he sneered.

“Dad. Let them go,” Peter said.

“Why?” His father moved over to Mason and slapped him hard across the face. Mason blinked up and snarled at him. His dad slapped Mason again. “You didn’t fulfill your side of the bargain.”

“We had no bargain,” Mason grunted.

He hit Mason again, and Peter lunged to his feet.

“I will have my prizes. Either with your cooperation or without.”

“They’re not prizes. They’re my nephews,” Conrad growled.

His father looked at Conrad and laughed. Peter thought he looked like a cheesy action-movie villain rather than his dad, but then he waved a hand and Peter was thrown back and landed hard on the floor. Hawk pushed himself in front of Peter, but Peter shook him off.

“Is this where all that money went? Buying off an army? Building a torture chamber?” Conrad asked.

His dad laughed again. “Buy an army? I didn’t need to buy them. I showed them the power they could have, and they clamored for it.” He reached a hand behind himself, and Mason screamed as the sigils on the floor lit up. Conrad and Connie were beating at the cage, and Hawk was roaring from where he lay on the ground. Peter watched as his father’s eyes glowed orange first, then increased in intensity until they burned bright red. He relaxed his hand, and Mason slumped forward, breathing heavily. “The money was just their buy-in, a payment for what I provided. And Atkins was more than willing to meet my price.”

“All that security.” Peter’s voice was harsh, and he was panting his words out. “It was never for our protection, was it? It was about keeping us close. Making sure we never went too far away, so you could drain our power. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes. You don’t recognize this room, do you? After all the times we brought you up here. Randall strapped you to that very chair.” He pointed to where Mason was sitting.

Peter’s stomach rolled, and his mouth filled with spit. He took a deep breath, then forced the air out of his lungs. “Is that where you kept our mother?” he asked hoarsely.

“Until she was used up. Then we disposed of her like the others.” He pretended to wipe something off his hands.

Peter lurched to the corner, where he dropped to his knees and dry-heaved. His father went over to Mason as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“If they want their alpha back, your pack will bring me those kids,” he hissed, his eyes burning bright.

“You can’t have them,” Connie said.

His father turned around and squatted in front of the cage as he regarded her.

“The one that got away. You know, Bennie had been a good soldier. It was a shame I had to put him down after he failed to bring you to heel. Not to worry. I’ll make sure you cooperate after I dispatch your alpha.”

“You won’t be able to,” Conrad said.

His father laughed, loudly. “You think you can stop me? I am invincible!” He waved a hand, and Conrad and Connie were thrown back against the cage again.

“Dad. No.” Peter shook his head as he stood up. He couldn’t let this go on.

“Mind your manners, son.”

“No. I’m not your son.” His father’s face turned red, but Peter wasn’t afraid. “You’ve never been my father.” He took a couple of steps forward. “You only see me as a tool. Something you can use. For what? To spread misery? To stroke your fucking ego? No! Not anymore.”

“You dare speak to me like that!” his father shouted as he bore down on Peter. “I will teach you a lesson.” He grabbed Peter by the arms and started to shake him. Hawk snarled and writhed on the floor in anger.

Peter felt something burning in his pocket. The nullification amulet, he realized. He’d forgotten he had it with him. That warmth spread up his arms and across his chest. He latched on to the feeling and pulled it into himself. He didn’t know what he was doing; he was following his instinct. “You can’t hurt me. And I won’t let you hurt anyone else.”

His father looked afraid as he tried to release Peter, but his hands wouldn’t cooperate. Peter stood up straight and stared him in the eyes.

“I reclaim my power,” he started quietly, but his voice grew as he went on. “I reclaim all our power. In the name of my brother and my sister. And in the name of our mother!”

The warmth burned for a second, and Peter watched a bright light surround them until they seemed to glow with it. His shoulder blades itched, and the amulet was a heavy weight against his leg. His father’s eyes were wide with fear, and as Peter watched, the red flare in his eyes dimmed until it was gone. Then the light flashed out, and his father backed up.

“What did you do?” he demanded. He flexed his hands, but nothing happened.

Connie rattled the cage again, and Peter rushed over to them. He growled in frustration and yanked hard on the lock securing the door. To his shock, it snapped apart, and the door fell open. Connie stared at him for a second before she stepped forward, passed Peter, and punched his father in the face. He fell to his knees, and Connie hit him again. She started swinging both arms wildly, but Peter grabbed her from behind and carried her away.

“He can’t touch you,” he said. He held her while she sobbed, and his heart broke for her, and for all the women his father had violated. For all the kids he’d tortured. “He can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

“You. You ungrateful brat. I’ll rebuild, and you’ll be sorry.” Thornston, and that’s how Peter’s brain referred to him—this... person... wasn’t his father. He was some *thing* that had been corrupted with power, who never deserved the title. Thornston backed away, raving about contacts as a portal opened up behind him. Viceroy and two other hellhounds, one of them bigger than Viceroy, stepped through to grab Thornston by the neck.

“Joshua Thornston. We have questions for you,” the hellhound on the right said.

Thornston’s face went white with terror, and he flailed about, trying to get out of the hellhounds’ grasp. “Peter! Help me, son. Please. We’ll fix this. With your magic and my connections, we can do this. Together.”

The hellhounds turned to Peter, and Peter shook his head. There was no fixing this. The man who fathered him was beyond redemption. Whatever judgment awaited him was deserved, and Peter hoped it was harsh.

The hellhounds nodded and turned back to the portal. Through the fire, Peter could see a dark forest. Viceroy rushed forward to have a quiet word with the others before they left. Then he released Mason from his bindings. Once Mason was free, they both went to work on unchaining Hawk. Peter leaned down to help him stand after the bindings were broken.

Hawk turned to stare at Peter.

In fact, everyone was staring at him.

“What?” he asked, feeling self-conscious.

“Your eyes,” Hawk whispered as he approached. “They’re glowing.”

“What the hell?” He looked around, but there was nothing in the room that showed his reflection.

Hawk held his hand tight. “Are you all right?”

Peter took a minute to consider it seriously. Was he okay? He’d just watched his father have a meltdown, somehow pulled his power away from him, and then watched him get taken away through a ring of fire—where Thornston would no doubt be tortured for his involvement in a massive conspiracy against his kind.

“Honestly? I’m more freaked-out about the eyes than I am about what happened here. That man. He may have donated the sperm, but he was never my father.”

THIRTY-ONE

“ANYONE KNOW where the hell we are?” Conrad asked.

“I don’t care. I need to see my babies. Now,” Connie said. She was pacing and wringing her hands. Hawk didn’t blame her after Thornston’s threats.

“Of course,” Viceroy said. He opened a portal and helped Mason through it. Hawk took Peter’s hand and walked with him, stepping over the edge and into their conference room. The twins shouted as soon as their mother came into sight. Faolan wrapped them all up in a hug as he herded them out of the room. Hawk heard the door to the room next door shut a few seconds later.

Ryder had Conrad engulfed in his arms in one corner of the room.

“He’s... naked,” Peter said.

“He’s been a wolf the whole time you were gone. He just shifted back a few minutes ago,” Penny said. Peter spun around and let out a sob as he pulled his siblings close. “Hey. It’s okay,” she soothed him.

“He’s gone,” Peter whispered.

“Oh, Peter.” Paul rocked Peter in his arms. They were all crying. Hawk hovered nearby, letting them have their moment. Anodo stood next to him and watched them sadly. After a few minutes, Peter pulled himself together.

“It wasn’t him. At the end. He was just a monster.”

Hawk didn't mention that he'd probably always been a monster. They'd had a filter over their minds to prevent them seeing it.

Anodo squeezed Peter's arm before turning to Mason.

"I told you to drink the potion," he yelled.

"I did drink it this morning," Mason said.

"Every time you leave, I said. Not once a day. But every time you walk out that door."

"What are you talking about?" Peter asked.

"Your idiot alpha here didn't drink my potion, so we couldn't find you," Anodo said.

"But you did," Mason said. "Viceroy showed up with Solomon and Teague."

"Wait. You really did have this planned?" Peter asked.

Hawk shrugged. "We had *a* plan in place. We figured he'd go for Mason, since he's the alpha."

"I didn't think he'd be able to grab all of us. I'm sorry I put you in danger. You were not supposed to be bait," Mason said seriously. "I promise you, I would never risk you or any of my pack that way."

Peter stared at him for a second before nodding. "I believe you."

"It all worked out anyway, right?" Hawk asked. "You found us pretty fast."

"How long do you think you've been gone?" Grady asked.

Hawk shook his head. "I don't know? A couple of hours?"

Grady snorted. "Try fifteen."

"Holy crap."

"Yeah. So what the fuck happened?" Grady demanded.

"We were out of it for most of the time," Hawk said. "They tranqed us outside. We don't even know where we were."

"At home," Penny said.

“What?” Peter exclaimed.

“You were at our house,” Paul said. “You didn’t know?”

“No. It wasn’t any room I’d ever seen before. Holy shit. He’s been doing it there? Where we lived?” Peter’s knees buckled, and Hawk rushed forward to help him sit down.

“I knew we should have burned it down when we got them out,” Hawk grumbled. He was on edge. The danger had passed, and everyone was fine. So why was he still so worked up? He looked around the room and noticed everyone else seemed as affected.

“So? Anyone wanna explain what happened? And why Peter’s eyes are glowing?” Grady asked.

“Holy crap, he’s right,” Paul said, pulling Peter up to stand as he stared at his brother in awe.

Anodo stepped forward. He crossed his arms in front of himself and dropped to his knees. Peter gasped when Anodo unfurled his wings behind him. They shimmered a light green, the same color as Peter’s eyes.

“*Nia*,” Anodo said.

“*Uncail*,” Peter responded, crossing his arms like Anodo had. Then he looked around in shock. “How did I know that?”

Anodo smiled and stood up to hug him. “You’ve reclaimed our magic.”

“Our?” Penny asked.

“It should have returned to the clan when your mother...” Anodo shook his head sadly. “Anyway. Your father stole it. Now Peter has become the custodian of it.”

“What? I don’t want it. How do I return it or pass it on or whatever?”

Anodo cupped his cheek. “You can’t. It’s not in you. It *is* you.”

“I...” Peter looked around helplessly. Hawk reached out, and Peter grabbed his hand tightly.

“I’ll help you,” Hawk said.

Anodo squeezed his shoulder. “You won’t be alone.”

“That must have been what dropped the wards,” Grady said. Everyone turned to him in confusion. “When Viceroy was finally able to portal in. We had no clue where you were. He was trying to concentrate on your magic or whatever, when suddenly he *whoomped* into a portal. Then you showed back up here.”

Hawk was about to say something else, but a loud smack echoed in the room.

“Uh, I’m going to take him upstairs, if that’s all right? We can debrief tomorrow?” Conrad asked. The collar of his shirt was ripped, and there was a line of love bites along his collarbone. Ryder was holding on to him and snuffling against his neck.

“That sounds good. I think we can all use a break,” Mason said. “Thornston’s been removed from this realm, so I think we’re okay for the time being.”

“Thanks,” Conrad said as he pushed Ryder toward the door. On his way out, he banged on the door where Faolan and Connie were. “See you tomorrow, Sis.”

Faolan opened the door with a snarl. When he came back into the conference room, his eyes were still glowing, and he stood between Connie and the rest of the room.

“Why don’t you take the cubs up to bed?” Mason suggested.

Faolan nodded. “Thanks.” He scooped up both boys and herded Connie toward the elevator.

“I’ll take them back to my place,” Anodo said, motioning at the Peter and his siblings. “I have some herbs that will help their healing.”

“That’s a good idea,” Hawk said, though he was loath to let Peter out of his sight. He clung tightly to Peter’s hand, unable to let go.

“I’ll see you in the morning?” Peter asked.

“Of course,” Hawk said. He pulled Peter in close and kissed him gently. “I’ll be here if you need me.”

“Okay.” Peter smiled briefly before he turned back to Anodo and nodded.

Anodo crossed his arms in front of his chest and bowed to Hawk. “I’ve got watch.”

“Thank you,” Hawk said.

Anodo took one of Penny’s hands, then one of Paul’s. He nodded to Peter, who took their hands and completed the circle. Then they were gone.

Hawk exhaled and dropped to the floor like a puppet with cut strings. Mason was there in an instant, cupping his neck and squeezing tight.

“He’ll be back.”

“I know.” Hawk wished he knew why he felt like his heart had shattered.

HAWK’S SKIN WAS CRAWLING. He’d been in his apartment trying to work on his latest Peter painting, but he couldn’t concentrate. He’d already gone to the bathroom to rub one out, hoping that would help alleviate some tension, but the feeling wouldn’t go away.

The tension continued to build in his system. He stared at the darkness outside the window for a while. It felt like a battle was raging out there. Magic ebbed and flowed as if caught in a tug-of-war between two Gods. He finally gave up and went over to Grady’s apartment. His brother offered him a beer as he turned on an action movie they’d seen about a thousand times before.

The weird tension came back with a vengeance as Hawk sat there staring at the TV. He could still smell Peter on his clothes. He groaned and made his way to the bathroom to jerk off again. He came quickly, but his cock remained hard, and the base swelled.

“Fuck,” he panted.

“Dude, you better not be flogging the dolphin in there,” Grady said, pounding on the door.

“Fuck off.”

Hawk stared at his knot as he breathed through the aftershocks and concentrated on getting himself back under control. His knot deflated a bit, but it was hypersensitive when he tried to wrangle it back into his jeans. He managed to get tucked away and leave the bathroom.

“Fucking knew it. Dude, use the bleach wipes.” Grady walked around spraying air freshener. The chemical smell made Hawk gag, but Grady didn’t stop. “It fucking reeks out here.”

Hawk paced back and forth across the apartment while Grady aimed the can into the bathroom and held the nozzle down for a long moment. He could feel Grady glaring at him from the hallway.

“What?” he growled.

“Nothing, man.”

“Can’t you feel it?”

Grady shrugged. “I mean... I feel something? But not an overwhelming need to have hand-to-gland combat. *Twice*. Goddess, Hawk. How many times have you yanked your crank tonight? Fuck, you look like you could paint the ceiling again already. What the actual fuck?”

“It’s...” Hawk panted through his fangs. He had to get to his mate. Mate. Mate wasn’t there. “It’s...” he tried again, but the words wouldn’t form.

“Dude,” Grady breathed.

Hawk wanted to say something, but his shift was coming over him. He felt his bones realigning almost against his will. Then he was on the ground, looking up at his brother.

“It’s okay,” Grady said as he stood up and walked away from Hawk. He was running his fingers through his hair and

mumbling something, but Hawk couldn't understand it. He scratched at the door that connected to Hawk's apartment, where Peter's scent still lingered from earlier. Hawk stuffed his nose against the gap at the bottom of the door and whined when the scent got stronger.

The front door flew open, and Faolan came in and slammed it shut again. He leaned heavily against it, like he planned on keeping a hellhound out by sheer will. His eyes were wild, glowing brightly.

Hawk lowered his chest to the floor and growled. How *dare* he come here and threaten him. Faolan half-shifted and growled back.

"Guys. Knock it off!" Grady shouted, but Hawk couldn't stand down.

The pressure inside Hawk built, twisting him up inside, and he vaguely heard Grady shouting for Mason through the intercom installed in the wall. He didn't know how long it took for his alpha to show up—he couldn't grasp the concept of time. All he knew was the unbearable tension building, building, *building*. He howled, and the air popped around him.

Mason tried to open the door, but Faolan shoved hard against it to keep him out. When Mason flashed his eyes and growled, Faolan fought back. That set Hawk off, and he launched himself at his brother. Grady grabbed Faolan and threw him into the living room, and Mason managed to get in the door. He roared, and Hawk looked up at him. His teeth were still wrapped around Faolan's ankle, and Faolan had a clawed hand wrapped around Hawk's neck.

"Stand. Down," Mason ordered.

Hawk had never felt the alpha so viscerally. Faolan let go, and Hawk tried to obey, he really did. But someone started knocking on the front door, and Faolan whined. Hawk couldn't let go.

"Fall? Are you okay?" Connie asked from the hallway. "Guys?" Connie started another round of knocking. "Fall? Please come back."

Faolan tried to take a step toward her voice, and Hawk took that as a declaration, growling and tightening his grip. Faolan roared and reared his arm back to strike, but Mason stepped forward and grabbed him. Grady popped Hawk on the head, and Hawk let go of Faolan to snap at his younger brother.

“I. Said. Stand. The fuck. Down!” Mason shouted.

Faolan nodded but kept his attention on the door. Hawk moved to the other side of the room and paced back and forth. He now knew what the term “caged animal” meant.

“What the fuck is happening here?” Mason demanded.

“Fuck if I know. Hawk’s been all worked up, and then Faolan came in here like that,” Grady said.

“Mate,” Faolan huffed out. Hawk whined and nodded from his place in the corner.

“The magic.” Mason closed his eyes and sighed. “It must be changing.”

“Then why aren’t we going apeshit?” Grady asked, rubbing his chest. “I felt something change, but nothing like this. It’s like they’re in heat or something.” Mason shot him a look, and Grady shrugged. “Maybe I read too much fan fiction.”

THIRTY-TWO

“I DON’T KNOW what the fuck is happening to them. But we need help.” Mason pulled out his phone, but Hawk couldn’t be bothered to keep up with the conversation. All he knew was the room suddenly got more crowded when Anodo popped in, along with Peter and... was that Cosmo? Hawk couldn’t be sure. He’d only met the faun once. It didn’t matter anyway. His *mate* was *right there*, and they were in his way. He whined and scratched at the wall next to him. Mason growled, and Hawk sat down.

“Isn’t it magical, Alpha?” Maybe-Cosmo asked in a singsong voice.

Hawk could almost see the words hovering in the air. He tried to paw at them as they floated by.

“Whatever it is, can you turn it off?” Mason asked.

Probably-Cosmo gasped. “Off? But the magic is healing. Can’t you feel it, Alpha? It’s wonderful! And your wolves. How fortunate they are to have had their mates nearby. They will be well-satisfied tonight.”

His voice was melodious, and Hawk could feel it wrapping around him. His heart was soaring in joy. He belly-crawled closer to them.

“Cosmo,” Mason growled.

“Fine,” Definitely-Cosmo huffed. A second later, Hawk felt whatever spell he’d been under lifting. His head felt clearer, but he still had to get to his mate.

“Can either one of you help us out here?” Mason asked.

“Aye,” Anodo said. Hawk growled when Anodo stepped closer to blow some pink dust in his face, making him sneeze. A second later, Hawk had shifted back to human. He was glad to have hands again, because it meant he could make a grab for Peter. A growl from Mason had him stepping back. When Mason pointed at the couch, Hawk followed his alpha’s order.

Grady threw a blanket at him before he could sit down. “I don’t want you rubbing your ballsac all over my sofa.”

Hawk rolled his eyes, but he wrapped the blanket around his waist before sitting down. Anodo dosed Faolan too, and he managed to reel back his shift as well. He took a spot on the other side of Grady.

“Sorry,” Faolan mumbled.

Hawk reached over to fist-bump him. “Me too, bro.”

“All right. Now that we’re all calm,” Mason started, only to be interrupted by Connie knocking on the door.

“Fall? What’s wrong?” Connie called, and Faolan rushed to the front door. He waited for Mason’s nod before opening it.

Hawk wanted to go to Peter, but Anodo was there first. He pulled Peter through the adjoining door to Hawk’s apartment. Hawk tried to listen, but Anodo must have cast a soundproofing spell. The lack of noise unnerved him. A few minutes later, the door opened again, and both Anodo and Peter came through. Peter rushed over and knelt in front of Hawk.

“I could feel you, all the way across town. When Mason called, I insisted Anodo bring me.”

He laid his head on Hawk’s knee, and Hawk ran his fingers through his hair.

“I felt it too. I wanted to call you, but I didn’t have hands,” he said.

Peter looked confused for a second before his face showed shock. “You mean...?”

“Yeah. Full shift. I couldn’t control it.” Hawk was still distressed about his lack of control, but with Peter there, he was starting to feel better.

“Speaking of, can you go get dressed? That blanket’s doing nothing to cover your smell,” Grady said. Mason nodded, and Hawk got up quickly. He rushed back to his apartment and grabbed the first thing he could find. He was still zipping up the jeans as he got back.

“This is all well and good, but can someone please tell me what the fuck is happening? Why did you leave?” Connie asked.

“Ah, the mother!” Cosmo cried. “It is an honor to meet you, my fair lady. Tales of your beauty have failed to provide an even adequate representation of your true magnificence.” He took a deep bow in front of her, and Faolan growled and stepped between them. Cosmo turned his attention to him. “You are very blessed with such an exquisite and fertile mate, wolf.”

“Uh. Thanks?” Connie asked, shooting a look at Mason.

“This is Cosmo. He tries to help sometimes,” Mason said with a shrug.

“My help is beyond contestation,” Cosmo said, raising his cup at the proclamation.

Peter edged closer to Hawk, who reached down to pull Peter up onto the couch with him. Peter went willingly, and Hawk tugged him closer, until Peter was sitting on his lap. It wasn’t close enough by far. Peter’s ass nestled against Hawk’s hard cock, and Hawk grabbed his hips to—

“Stop that,” Grady said, shoving at Hawk’s shoulder.

“Cosmo, you seem to know what’s happening to them. Care to share?” Mason asked.

“The Chosen One has succeeded!” Cosmo cried, lifting his glass again and sloshing his drink over the edge. “Balance is returning to our world once again.”

“So that’s what we felt. But why is it hitting them so hard? What’s wrong with Hawk and Faolan?”

“And do I need to worry about my boys?” Connie demanded, getting right in Cosmo’s face.

“They are not yet of age.” Cosmo blinked at her, like he couldn’t understand her question.

“Cosmo,” Mason warned.

“Your young have not yet reached maturity,” Cosmo explained. “These wolves”—he motioned at Faolan and Hawk—“they were blessed to have found their mates, although they have not yet consummated the bonds. It is no wonder they are in frenzy.”

“Wait. Are you saying?” Connie asked, inching closer to Faolan.

“Yes, lassie. You shall be well-sated on the morrow,” Cosmo said with a wink before turning to Anodo. “You should leave them some healing cream.”

“Aye. The human woman will be unprepared for the wolf’s knot,” Anodo said. He was already riffling through the pockets of his long overcoat.

Faolan turned to Connie in horror, but she seemed unafraid.

“Conrad already told me about it. Could be fun,” she said with a shrug. Faolan’s nostrils flared as he advanced on her, backing her into the wall. He leaned down to attack her neck, sucking bruises along her shoulder. Peter shifted his legs, grinding himself more firmly into Hawk’s groin as he watched their display. Hawk groaned and stared at Peter. He knew his eyes were flaring blue, but he didn’t want to stop it.

The frantic feeling of *mate-claim-mine-now-mate-claim* was starting to build again.

Mason cleared his throat to call attention to himself. Peter blushed, and Hawk tightened his grip on Peter’s hips. He knew he’d probably leave finger-shaped bruises, but he couldn’t bring himself to let go. And Peter made no move to get away.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Mason grumbled.

“It is, isn’t it?” Cosmo asked. He was beaming.

Mason sighed. “My pack is out of control.”

“Your pack has been touched by the Gods,” Cosmo said fiercely. “To have *four* sets of mated pairs in one place—truly astonishing. You, Alpha Mason, and your pack have proven yourselves worthy of such blessings.”

“My spell won’t last much longer, Alpha,” Anodo warned.

“What do you suggest? Do we separate them?” Mason asked.

Cosmo shouted in horror. “You can’t! You mustn’t interfere with the natural order.”

“I won’t be able to keep them separated here,” Grady shook his head. “Fucking *mates*, man.”

Mason closed his eyes as he considered his options. Finally, he nodded. “Grady, would you mind watching the cubs tonight and allowing Faolan and Connie to stay here?”

“Man. Their love stench is going to soak into everything,” Grady complained as he grabbed his go-bag. “I’ll need a new place after this.”

Mason nodded. “We’ll discuss it later. Call Bianca and Phoebe. Have them come down too. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“I swear, if you leave jizz everywhere, I am making you replace all my shit,” Grady warned as he went into Faolan’s apartment.

“I’m assuming the rest of my pack will be tied up all night?” Mason asked, pointedly looking at Cosmo.

“Yes, Alpha. Love is in the air. You will have many happy wolves when the new day breaks.” Cosmo grinned and took another sip from his cup.

“Okay then.” Mason stepped forward to cup Hawk’s throat. He took Faolan’s neck in his other hand. “Cosmo’s

right. Our pack has been truly blessed. Your mates are worthy additions to our family, and I welcome them with open arms.”

Both Hawk and Faolan slumped in relief. Hawk didn't realize how terrified he'd been. Having his alpha's formal approval meant everything to him.

Mason knelt in front of Connie. “Constance Stokes. I value your contributions to my pack and honor your place within your own. I hope our alliance will be long-lived and mutually beneficial.”

“Mason. You idiot.” She leaned forward to hug him. “Thanks for making sure my boys are okay. I'm guessing I won't be able to for...” She cut her eyes over to Faolan, giving him a heated look. “For a while?”

Faolan blushed, and Hawk laughed.

“Like you're any better? I see you trying to dry-hump Peter over there,” Connie said. Peter squeaked and inched farther away. Mason turned to him and smiled.

Hawk held his breath.

THIRTY-THREE

PETER GASPED when Mason turned to him. He wiggled closer to Hawk. Hawk immediately took his hand, and Peter calmed down. He had no idea what the fuck was happening, except that he needed to be as close to Hawk as possible. He looked over and licked his lips.

He intended to be as close as possible all night long, in many different positions. And did he hear something about knots? Mason cleared his throat again, and Peter jumped. He blinked and turned most of his attention back to Mason.

“Peter Thornston. I understand we may have come into your life under less than honest circumstances. For that, I must apologize.”

“Oh.” That was not what Peter had expected to hear. And judging by Hawk’s whine next to him, neither did Hawk. “Thank you.”

“If I had known then—” Hawk started, but Peter cut him off with a shake of his head.

“No. I get it. You needed an in.”

“We should have found another way.” Hawk shook his head and was about to say something else when Connie made a frustrated noise. Hawk looked over guiltily. “How about we take this next door. Let them finally get their freak on?”

“You know, I can’t argue with that. So if you don’t mind?” Connie asked, standing up. Everyone else did as well. Mason grabbed them each by the back of the neck and nodded. Then he turned to the connecting door.

Hawk grabbed Faolan's hand to reel him in close. He gave his brother a one-armed hug before stepping back and putting his hands on Connie's shoulders.

"You break him, you bought him," he said seriously.

"Oh, I'm gonna break him." She leered at Faolan. "Over and over."

Faolan blushed and Hawk laughed.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Mason said.

"Topical cream and healing tea. Instructions on the bag," Anodo said, leaving two tubs on the counter. He rifled through his pockets some more before coming out with a small container. "Lube. For the lady's comfort. And for her enhanced pleasure."

"Thanks," Connie said, taking the vial and studying it while Faolan looked equal parts horny and terrified.

Hawk laughed and took Peter's hand and led him back through the door into his place. Cosmo stayed behind and started singing as Anodo followed them into the apartment. He held a hand up next to the doorway and mumbled some words. Cosmo's words cut off right as Anodo finished.

"Soundproofing?" Hawk asked.

Anodo nodded. "Allowing some privacy. Perhaps they can preserve some of their dignity," he said.

"Good luck with that," Hawk said with a snort. "I don't think either of the Stokes kids has an ounce of shame."

"Wait until they begin comparing notes," Mason said.

"Oh shit," Hawk said. "I already know way too much about Ryder. I do not need that much information about my brother."

Peter laughed and sat down on the couch and watched Hawk continuing to pace around the room. The edge that had been so strong in Grady's place was backing off now that he was back in Hawk's home. The air in Hawk's apartment seemed more soothing.

“I think we should leave now,” Anodo said, breaking Peter’s stupor.

“What?” Hawk growled. His eyes flashed, and Peter imagined the thought distressed him as much as it had Peter.

“Surely you don’t expect him to stay.”

“But you let him stay yesterday. What’s changed?”

“Everything!”

Hawk shook his head and turned to Mason.

“He’s my pack,” Mason growled, positioning himself between Peter and Anodo.

“He’s my kin!”

“He’s also right fucking here,” Peter yelled.

Mason shook his head sadly and sat down across from Peter. “You’re right. We have no right to make decisions for you. Peter, what would you like to do?”

“I. Uh. I don’t know?” It sounded like Anodo didn’t want to leave him here with Hawk. But he really didn’t want to go. Not right now.

“He’s my mate,” Hawk snarled.

“But you aren’t his,” Anodo bellowed.

Hawk’s eyes went wide, and his whole body practically deflated. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the floor.

“But... He’s...” Hawk’s voice was so heartbroken, Peter couldn’t stop himself from getting up and rushing to his side. Hawk clung to him, maybe too tightly. Peter yelped in pain, but he wasn’t going to complain. Hawk started to hyperventilate, and Anodo stepped forward and dosed him with purple dust he took from one of his pockets. Hawk’s eyes glazed over, and he slumped to the side.

“Hawk!” Peter shouted, frantic. He shook his shoulders roughly, but Hawk didn’t move. Peter’s heart was beating a million miles an hour. “What did you do?” he demanded.

“He was clouding your judgment,” Anodo said.

The door opened and Cosmo came through.

“They will be spending the night in the service of Venus,” Cosmo said with a happy sigh. “Might I serenade this happy couple?” he asked before reading the room. “Oh my. What has happened in my absence?”

“Peter, we should go back to my place. Penny and Paul are waiting for me to finish my story about your mother,” Anodo said quietly.

Peter was torn. He loved his siblings, and he cherished every story Anodo shared about his family, but this was where he *needed* to be. Every fiber in his being was screaming at him to stay put. His eyes burned as they filled with tears.

“I can—” Cosmo started, but Anodo cut him off with a sharp shake of his head.

“You aren’t in a position to make this kind of decision right now. The magic is unstable, and it’s impacting your ability to think straight,” Anodo said. When Peter hesitated, Anodo knelt down to plead with him. “You don’t have to stay here with this pack. Remember how they came into your life. They *used* you.”

“Well, yeah.” Peter couldn’t argue with the facts, but then again, he didn’t feel used. He’d felt welcomed and appreciated. Hawk might have lied to meet him, but he’d never treated him like he was some kind of mark or anything. He’d talked to him, like he was a person. Peter had never had anyone treat him the way Hawk had. “But...” he started.

The air around them shimmered, and Anodo tried to pull him closer. Hawk whimpered, and Peter knew, without a doubt. He couldn’t, he *wouldn’t* leave Hawk. He shoved Anodo away and moved to Hawk.

“Peter. Please. Take a minute to think about it,” Anodo tried.

“I have. I want to stay here. With Hawk.”

“You heard the man,” Mason said, grabbing Anodo by the arm.

“Are you sure? Wolves mate for life,” Anodo warned.

Peter was stupidly happy to hear that. It must have shown on his face because Anodo sighed resignedly.

“If you ever change your mind, all you need to do is call me, all right?” Anodo said seriously. “I will get you out, and they will never find you.”

Peter closed his eyes and tried to bury his anger. After a few deep breaths, he opened his eyes. “I appreciate your offer,” he said through clenched teeth. “But I won’t need it.” Peter believed it one hundred percent.

“You’re sure about this,” Anodo said with wonder.

“Hawk is mine,” Peter said fiercely. “And I’m not letting anything stand in my way.”

Anodo held his hands up in surrender. “All right. You convinced me. I’ll go.”

“Hawk,” he breathed heavily, not hesitating to pull him into his arms. He grabbed Hawk by the hair to guide his face to his neck. Hawk’s whine broke Peter’s heart. He looked up to see Mason standing behind Anodo. He met the alpha’s stare. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Mason nodded back at him. Hawk’s eyes were still glazed, and he was unresponsive. Mason helped him get Hawk to his bedroom. They got him on the bed, and Hawk curled around himself awkwardly. Peter supposed it might have made sense if he was a wolf, but as a human, Hawk didn’t have the flexibility he needed. Hawk sniffed the air and moved his head around like he was looking for something, but he couldn’t see. He pawed at the air with listless hands.

Peter turned to Anodo. “How long is it supposed to last?”

“It shouldn’t be long,” Anodo said, but something in his voice made Peter doubt him.

“Are you sure?”

Anodo shrugged. “With the magic in the air, and the heightened emotions, there’s really no way to tell.”

“Don’t you have something to undo it?”

Anodo shook his head. “I can’t help him.”

“But you did this!”

“I thought it was for the best.”

“Fuck you! You don’t know shit. Hawk is my mate! Now fix him!”

“Peter,” Mason said quietly.

Peter whirled around on him. “No. Hawk is mine!” he shouted. Then he spun around to grab Hawk. He stared at Peter with blank eyes, and Peter put his hands on both sides of his face. “Do you hear that? You. Are. Mine!” He leaned forward to kiss Hawk roughly before he pulled back to stare into his eyes. “Come back to me. Right. Fucking. *Now!*”

Hawk blinked slowly, and some of the recognition came back with it. Then he was clutching Peter’s arms hard. Peter didn’t care that Hawk’s claws were tearing his shirt. He let out a sob and threw his arms around Hawk’s neck and held him tight.

“I’m not leaving. I won’t let you go.”

“Peter,” Hawk said.

Peter hated how broken Hawk sounded, and that he was the cause of it. He vowed to make it up to Hawk, if he’d let him. Hawk urged him to lean back so he could kiss him over and over.

“Hey, you,” Hawk said.

Peter heard Mason take a relieved breath.

“Now may I sing?” Cosmo asked, and Peter let out a watery chuckle.

“Yes, Cosmo. You may sing,” Mason said. He reached out to grip Peter’s neck. “Glad you stayed,” he said.

“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” Peter said truthfully. He gave Anodo a look. The fairy bowed his head in apology. Peter let it go. For now. He’d have words with him later, though.

Cosmo's voice rang out, clear and lyrical. Peter didn't recognize the song, nor did he understand any of the words, but it made him feel better. He looked around, and he could tell everyone was affected by the magic Cosmo was weaving.

"I will leave you alone," Anodo said.

Before he could take three steps, Mason grabbed him by the arm. "You're coming with me." His tone brooked no argument.

Anodo nodded. "Gentlemen, I bid you a good night," he said.

"Hey!" Hawk called. Anodo looked back to them, but Hawk never took his eyes off Peter. "How 'bout some more of that soundproofing on your way out?"

Peter laughed, and Anodo grumbled. Soon enough Mason and Anodo were gone, but for some reason, Cosmo was still there, standing at the end of Hawk's bed, singing a different song. He didn't look like he was inclined to leave any time soon.

"Cosmo," Hawk said warningly.

Cosmo finished his song with a nod. "May the Gods be with your mating," he said as he disappeared through the bedroom door. A few seconds later, Peter heard the front door shut, followed by the pop of the spell sealing them in.

"They truly have blessed us," Hawk said with a huge grin on his face. Peter matched it.

"Yeah. They did."

THIRTY-FOUR

PETER WAS CRYING AGAIN. Fucking hell. This night.

“Hey,” Hawk whispered. He brushed a soft touch over Peter’s cheeks. “It’s all right.”

Peter shook his head. “It almost wasn’t.”

“But it is now.” Hawk pushed on his shoulder, and Peter went with it. Lying down sounded good anyway.

He sank into the bed. It was comfortable. Hawk got up, and Peter panicked.

“You’re not leaving?”

“Absolutely not,” Hawk said with a smile.

He leaned forward to kiss Peter. It was soft and gentle, and not at all what Peter wanted. He wrapped his arms around Hawk’s neck to pull him in, but Hawk shook his head.

“Relax,” he said.

He stood up and Peter didn’t whine. He didn’t.

“Shhh,” Hawk whispered as he took Peter’s ankle in his hand. The contact settled something inside Peter.

He didn’t want to admit it, but he was terrified of Hawk leaving him. But Hawk was still there. Peter watched Hawk’s hands as he untied Peter’s shoes and eased them off. The only noise was the soft *thunk* as they hit the floor. His socks followed quickly, but Hawk’s hands wrapped around his feet to keep them from getting cold. Peter shivered anyway.

Peter moaned when Hawk dug his thumbs into his arches. He couldn't take his eyes off Hawk's hands as he massaged his feet. He was a sucker for long, strong fingers. And Hawk's were nearly pornographic. Hawk moved his hands up Peter's ankles, rotating them in both directions and rubbing along the Achilles tendon. He slowly slipped his hands higher with each pass.

He got close to the promised land, but he avoided Peter's cock completely. Peter made a noise, and Hawk shook his head. Instead, he hooked his hands in the waistband and waited.

Peter took a deep breath. He had a moment of trepidation—this was forever they were talking about, after all. What if they weren't good at this? Would Hawk still want him? But the heat in Hawk's eyes chased his fear away.

He licked his lips and nodded. Hawk dragged both his shorts and underwear down his legs. Peter's cock bounced free, and Hawk stared at it.

"I—" Peter started to say, but Hawk leaned up to silence him with a chaste kiss.

He ran his hands along Peter's sides, making him shudder. Then he pushed his T-shirt up. Peter sat up to help Hawk get it off. Hawk tossed it over his shoulder. His eyes never left Peter's face. The intensity was getting to him, and Peter pulled Hawk into another kiss, to break the tension.

"Roll over," Hawk whispered against Peter's lips.

"Yeah. Okay." Peter nodded and flipped over as quickly as he could. Hawk chuckled and stepped off the bed. He looked over his shoulder to find Hawk standing at the end of the bed, staring at him.

"Everything okay?" Peter asked. He hated that trickle of fear creeping in, but fuck. Hawk was... And he was... And...

"Perfect," Hawk breathed, and Peter relaxed. Then Hawk was lying over his back. He cupped one ass cheek in his hand, and Peter yelped. Then he moved his hand down to Peter's thigh, urging him to bend his leg. He felt open and exposed.

He could only imagine what it looked like, him completely naked, under Hawk's fully clothed body.

"I want to draw you. Like this," he whispered directly into Peter's ear, making Peter shiver as goose bumps broke out all over.

"Hawk," Peter whined.

Hawk chuckled and pressed a kiss to the back of Peter's neck. Then he dragged his tongue along the line of his shoulder blade.

"Oh fuck," Peter moaned.

"Like that?" Hawk whispered, blowing a breath over the wet trail. He followed that with his tongue again, pressing harder across the muscle. Peter shuddered, and his cock throbbed. He was dry-humping the bed by the time Hawk moved to the other side.

"Fuck," Peter moaned. "If you keep that up, I'm going to come."

Hawk moved one hand down to cup Peter's balls, and he could feel them tightening in Hawk's grip. Then the hand moved down to wrap around his cock.

"Good," Hawk said. His voice was barely more than a breath, and the puff of air across his back did it. Hawk stroked his cock while he shot against the comforter. Peter finally had to squirm and snap his legs shut when it became too much. "So good," Hawk whispered.

Peter turned his head to the side and closed his eyes. He registered Hawk getting up, but he wasn't gone long before he was back, massaging Peter's shoulders. His hands were firm as they moved farther down his body. Peter was pliant in his grip. He drifted as Hawk worked him into a puddle of jelly. He passed his shoulder blades quickly, moving to his lower back, then his legs, and finally his ass. Peter didn't think he could move under his own power if the Goddess commanded it.

"Sleep," Hawk ordered quietly. And really, who was Peter to argue?

FUCKING HELL.

Peter was so responsive to his touch. So trusting. Hawk sat in awe of his mate. He watched as Peter's breathing evened out. His wolf preened in his chest, proud of having satisfied their mate so thoroughly. The way he reacted to Hawk licking his shoulder blades. Gods damn.

Hawk's cock was so hard, he could pound nails.

He did his best to ignore it. He wasn't about to wake Peter up to get himself off. His mate needed his rest.

He closed his eyes and willed himself back under control. He got up and grabbed his sketchpad and charcoals. He needed the distraction. Peter snuffled in his sleep at the racket Hawk made as he moved an armchair into his bedroom, but he settled quickly.

Hawk's mind flickered to the day Conrad had been kidnapped. Not the heavy emotions of the day, but the state of Ryder's bedroom that morning. The way the mirrors had been set up on chairs around the bed. And the empty one at the end. Practically in the same spot Hawk was sitting.

Now, he got it. He never wanted to take his eyes off his mate.

Hawk wondered if he would ever get used to saying that. A giggle bubbled out of his chest at the thought. Peter shifted in his sleep, bringing one knee up and moving one arm straight down his side.

Hawk groaned and his cock throbbed, leaking precum and leaving a wet spot on his pants. He pressed the heel of his hand against his crotch. Peter was right there. And he wanted. Fuck, how he *wanted*.

Instead, he flipped to an empty page. Peter's form appeared quickly. Hawk started with an outline. He filled in the lines of his muscles and the play of the shadows along his body. He stared at Peter's cock and balls for a long time. His fingers itched to touch, to tease. And to taste. What would

Peter do if Hawk crawled up the bed and shoved his tongue against that pink hole?

He checked his sketch and was surprised at the amount of detail he'd managed to capture on autopilot. He used his fingertip to smudge his artwork. The top of Peter's ass was visible, but the rest of his groin was shrouded in shadows. He kept working on it until it looked like a soft blanket strategically draped to preserve Peter's modesty. He got so lost in his picture, he didn't notice Peter waking up until he stretched with a groan. He glanced up to find Peter smiling at him.

"Is this what I will have to wake up to all the time?"

"Sorry," Hawk said.

Peter moved off the bed to kneel next to the chair and peer over his arm at the drawing. He reached out to touch the page. "I can't believe this how you see me."

Hawk reached out to cup his cheek. "It's how you look."

Peter shook his head. He peeked at the drawing one more time before he surged forward to land in Hawk's lap. The pad was getting crushed under his weight, but Hawk didn't care. He wrapped his arms around Peter and held him tight.

"Bed. Now," Peter said, and Hawk nodded. He stood up and carried Peter the two steps before dropping him in the center of the bed. He bounced, and Hawk saw he'd gotten smudges all over his legs. He pushed Peter on to his stomach and tried to brush the splotches off before rolling him onto his back. He had another on his face, and one on his chest where Hawk's hands had been. He crawled up to cage Peter in with his arms. Peter grinned and raised his head to rub his nose with Hawk's.

Hawk laughed and wiped at the smudge on Peter's cheek. "We're covered in charcoal."

"I don't care," Peter said. He stared at Hawk as he spread his legs, causing Hawk to fall between them. His cock was starting to thicken against Hawk's hip, and Hawk's throbbed in

response. His eyes fell halfway shut and he pumped his hips against Hawk. “Are you going to get naked any time tonight?”

Hawk hissed at the touch.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I can.” His cock was so hard, and his knot had started to inflate. He wasn’t sure if he could get the zipper down.

“Is that a challenge?” Peter grinned and reached for Hawk’s waistband. He popped the button free, but the zipper was stuck. “What’s wrong with this?” he mumbled as he tried to force it down.

“Fuck! Stop!” Hawk cried out when the zipper bit into his knot. He hissed and backed away, tumbling off the end of the bed and hitting his head on the chair.

Peter peeked over the edge, his face stuck in pure shock before it turned red as he started laughing. He stumbled off the side, pulling the sheet off to wrap around his waist.

“Not funny,” Hawk growled. He curled up in a ball to protect his precious cargo.

“I’m sorry. Let me fix it,” Peter purred.

Hawk shook his head and took a deep breath. He got to his knees and shuffled backward.

Peter sobered and reached out. Hawk recoiled, but Peter was just going for his arm. He helped him up and started toward the bathroom. Inside, he turned the shower on cold and shoved Hawk under the spray.

Because this was Hawk’s day, he slipped and fell hard on his ass.

“Hawk!” Peter shouted. He dove forward to help, but the sheet got caught in the door, and he fell into the shower, right on top of Hawk. The cold water hit his back, and he tried to scramble away from it, kneeing Hawk right in the jewels.

Hawk grabbed his crotch and shrieked in pain.

Peter clambered away and managed to turn the water off.

“I am so sorry.” He slid down the wall and sat there, water dripping from half of his hair. The rest of it was dry and sticking out all over. The sheet had great big wet spots that stuck to him. He looked miserable, and that was the last straw for Hawk.

He broke out laughing. It took him a minute to catch his breath, but he finally got himself under control. He still had a smile on his face when he held out his hand.

“Come here,” he said.

“No. I could hurt you again,” Peter said. He pouted and crossed his arms in front of himself, so Hawk sat up and dragged him over. He curled up against Hawk’s chest. “Some wedding night this is.”

Hawk’s hands stilled where they were stroking Peter’s back. He put his hand under Peter’s chin and tilted his face up to look at him.

“Did you just propose to me?” Hawk asked.

Peter stared back with wide eyes. “I. Uh,” he stammered.

Hawk smiled. He leaned forward to give Peter a kiss.

“Uh. What if I am?” Peter asked.

Hawk understood Ryder’s impromptu proposal to Conrad so much better now. If Peter felt a fraction of the love Hawk did, it was no wonder he blurted it out.

“Let’s get through tonight first. We have all the time in the world.”

“Yeah. Tonight sounds good.”

THIRTY-FIVE

PETER COULD HANDLE TONIGHT. He nodded. Baby steps.

Step one. Get Hawk naked. Easier said than done, apparently. He ran a finger along the inside of his waistband.

“Think we can get these off now?”

Hawk laughed. “Yeah. I think they’ll cooperate now.”

He nudged Peter’s hip so he could stand up. Peter knelt in front of him. When Hawk shoved one hand down the front of his jeans, Peter’s fingers twitched.

Step two, he thought. He watched as Hawk tried to make the zipper work one-handed. He tugged at it a few times, but the fly wouldn’t open.

“Let me,” Peter whispered. He reached out and took the pants in both hands. He looked up to see Hawk staring at him with hooded eyes. And wow. That’s what they meant in the books. Fuck. That look alone caused Peter’s cock to start plumping up again. He gently worked the zipper down and then he worked the jeans down Hawk’s hips.

Hawk’s hand was still cupping his balls, his cock poking out between his fingers. Peter’s mouth watered.

“Fuck,” he breathed. He leaned forward to swipe his tongue across the slit. Hawk groaned and his hips stuttered in a short thrust.

Peter urged Hawk to move his hand so he could see him. He did, and Peter took his cock in his hand. Hawk’s muscles

tensed as his cock filled. There was a bright red zipper-shaped mark at the base.

“Shit, Hawk,” he said. He leaned forward to press tiny kisses along it. Hawk panted and ran his fingers through Peter’s hair. Then he tugged on it, urging Peter to stand. Once he was up, Hawk spun them around to press him against the wall. Peter hissed when the cold tile hit his back.

“You have no idea,” Hawk said. He shoved his nose against Peter’s neck and sniffed.

“I think I have some,” Peter said, pushing his hips forward. Their cocks brushed, and Hawk shuddered.

Hawk wrapped one hand around them both and started stroking. Peter clutched at the T-shirt Hawk still wore. He heard the fabric ripping as Hawk continued jerking them off. He was so close. He wanted. He was about to.

“No,” Peter whispered, pushing Hawk away before he could come.

Hawk immediately backed off and put his hands up.

“Not here. Let’s...” Peter licked his lips and nodded. He dropped the sheet and started for the bedroom, leaving Hawk behind in the shower. He flopped down face-first on the bed, but Hawk didn’t follow. “Are you coming or not?”

“You said no,” Hawk said.

Peter could hear him taking deep breaths, and he shook his head.

“I said not *there*. Now are you going to get in here and fuck me or not?” He was deeply satisfied by the snarl he got in return.

Hawk was next to the bed in seconds. He looked nearly feral again. His eyes were glowing, and his face was partially shifted. He was panting heavily through his fangs.

Peter should be afraid. Fuck, he should be terrified. But he wasn’t. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, Hawk would never hurt him.

Not to mention, he was supremely pleased with himself for working Hawk up so much. Hawk took another step forward, but Peter shook his head.

“Naked. Now.”

Hawk pouted but grabbed his shirt in both hands and ripped it apart. It was cheesy as fuck when the wrestlers did it, but god damn, watching Hawk was fucking hot. The jeans weren't quite as easy to remove. They were still wet, so they clung tight. Hawk was too far gone to make sense of it, so Peter moved to the end of the bed and helped him step out of them. Hawk put one hand on his head to steady himself. Peter didn't know why, but fuck, that did things to him. Once he had Hawk undressed, he scooted back and stared. Hawk was perfect. He was all sculpted muscle. Not like an overworked bodybuilder, but long, lean lines.

He looked up and saw Hawk's face was back to human. Except for the glowing blue eyes. Peter shivered and scooted up the bed. Hawk followed, prowling up the bed. He rested his elbows on either side of Peter's head, trapping him in place.

“Hey,” Peter said quietly.

“Hi,” Hawk said before leaning down to kiss him.

Peter kissed him back eagerly, opening his mouth when he felt Hawk's tongue tracing his lips. Peter tried to urge him on, but Hawk wouldn't rush it.

“Relax,” he whispered against his skin of Peter's neck before he moved down, leaving love bites along Peter's collarbone. Tiny patches of red that would fade quickly.

He worked his way down Peter's body, whispering quietly. Hawk's eyes flashed when Peter spread his legs.

“Fuck, Peter,” he said, letting out a breath that ghosted across his hole, and Peter jumped. Hawk put a flat hand against his hips to hold him steady as he kissed along the insides of Peter's thighs.

“Earlier.” Hawk shook his head and pressed his face directly against his balls.

“Hawk,” Peter whined.

“You rolled over and spread your legs.” He looked up. Those glowing eyes were going to be the death of Peter. “You have no idea how hard it was to control myself. How much I wanted to *taste* you.” Hawk punctuated the word with a long lick from Peter’s balls to his cock.

Peter clutched the sheets in tight fists. “Why didn’t you?”

Hawk shook his head. “You were sleeping.”

Peter pushed himself up to his elbows, making sure he looked Hawk in the eye. His higher reasoning wasn’t functioning very well right then, so he hoped he understood what Hawk wasn’t saying. “You should have. Any time you want to wake me up with your tongue in my ass, you have permission. Fuck.” The thought had his cock throbbing. “In fact, you should get to it. Right now.”

Hawk growled and flipped him over. Peter tucked his knees under himself so he could put his ass in the air.

Presenting, he thought.

Hawk’s rumble of approval had him spreading his legs wider.

“Fucking *perfect*,” Hawk said. His hands roamed over Peter’s ass. His fingers brushed closer and closer to his hole.

Peter wiggled his ass to get the party started. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Hawk staring, like he was savoring the moment. He smirked and reached back to spread his cheeks apart. Hawk’s eyes glowed and he buried his face against Peter’s hole.

Hawk moaned loudly, and Peter jumped at the first swipe of Hawk’s tongue.

“Fucking hell,” Hawk moaned. He leaned into it, like he wanted to crawl into Peter’s skin.

He started licking and sucking at Peter’s hole frantically, like he couldn’t get enough. Peter’s body was alive with sensation. He collapsed under Hawk’s weight, but he lifted his hips as much as he could, pressing back against Hawk. He was

writhing against the bed, humping the mattress and chanting Hawk's name.

Hawk reached down to pull Peter's cock between his legs and leaned down to suck as much of him into his mouth as he could. Peter yelled, and Hawk pulled away enough to lick his way to Peter's hole. He slipped one finger in, licking around the tender skin. Peter's cock was throbbing in Hawk's hand where he was awkwardly trying to jerk him off, and he spurted out some precum.

When he pressed a second finger in while he mouthed at Peter's cock, Peter screamed and came. Hawk licked at it eagerly as Peter jerked with aftershocks. His entire body was too sensitive, and he tried to push Hawk away, but Hawk growled and held him tight. He managed to roll onto his back while Hawk crawled up his body. Hawk took his mouth in a bruising kiss. Peter could taste himself on Hawk's lips, and that had his cock twitching. He licked into Hawk's mouth and pumped his hips against Hawk's hard cock.

"Fuck, Hawk," he whispered. He felt alive. His cock was getting hard again already, even though he'd already come twice. Hawk whined and humped his leg. "Yeah. Fuck me."

Peter knew he was babbling nonsense, but he couldn't stop the words flowing. Hawk wasn't much better. He could see Hawk's cock jutting straight out from his body. It was long and thick, and swelling at the base. Peter needed that inside him. Right. Fucking. Now.

Hawk looked up at him, and Peter nodded. "I need it. I need your cock."

Hawk leaned over to pull a vial out from between the mattress and box springs. He used an eyedropper to drizzle some oil on his cock, moaning as he slid his hand up and down his length. Then he spread some of the oil on Peter's hole. Peter shuddered as it started tingling, and his balls tightened at the feeling. Hawk thrust forward and slid right in, his hands never moving from where he gripped Peter's ankles. He hit Peter's prostate on the first thrust, and Peter shouted. Hawk pulled him closer as he sat back on his heels. He stared at

Peter's face as he fucked into him. Peter tilted his head to bare his neck as he wrapped a hand around his cock.

"Mine," Hawk said.

Peter clenched his muscles, tightening his channel around Hawk's cock. Hawk's eyes blazed and his hips stuttered.

"Mine," Peter growled. Hawk's nostrils flared, and he leaned forward to pound into Peter in earnest. "Fuck yeah."

Peter didn't know what he was saying, but whatever it was, he was working Hawk up. He kept rambling. He could feel Hawk's knot growing as it pressed harder against his rim. Hawk started to pull his hips out, but Peter wrapped his legs around Hawk's waist.

"Give it to me. Knot me. Make me your mate," he babbled. "Come on. Fuck me with it. I can take it."

Hawk whined and with one hard thrust, Peter felt a flare of agony as Hawk's knot popped through. Hawk gave a few more tiny jerks before he threw his head back and roared as he came.

"Fuck," Peter groaned. His erection had wilted at the pain, but it was short-lived. He was fully hard by the time Hawk came.

Hawk snuffled around Peter's neck for a few minutes. His hips never stopped pumping, and Peter was going out of his mind. He lost all track of time. He felt like he floated on the edge forever. The knot was hitting him right every time it pulsed; Peter was sure he'd never be soft again.

Hawk pumped into Peter a few more times before he pushed up on one hand to take Peter's cock in his other hand. Peter moaned and fucked into his fist, but it wasn't enough.

Hawk's knot went down enough to slip out of him, and Peter whined at the loss, but Hawk moved quickly between Peter's legs to suck his cock deep into his throat. The wet suction caused him to scream, and he started to come.

Hawk pulled his mouth away and pumped him through it, getting his cum all over his hand. Once Peter started to soften,

he reached down to wipe his hand through the mess. He collected a handful and smeared it over his cock and balls before doing the same to Peter.

“Gross,” Peter mumbled. Hawk looked up guiltily, but Peter grabbed Hawk’s hand to rub it into his chest. Hawk smiled widely and swiped the last of it across his own chest before he massaged Peter’s hips and thighs.

“Are you all right?” he asked, shifting them around to let Peter close his legs.

“Perfect.”

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Yeah, you did.” Peter couldn’t wipe the goofy grin off his face. “In all the best ways.”

THIRTY-SIX

“PLEASE,” Peter whined as Hawk pushed into him.

The needy tenor of his voice set something off inside Hawk. Every time Peter woke up, hard and leaking, begging Hawk to get him off again, Hawk was ready. With his mouth. His tongue. His cock. He’d knotted Peter three more times.

It still wasn’t enough. Hawk didn’t think he’d ever get enough of his mate.

“Yeah. Like that.” Peter sighed. His legs had gone out long ago, but that didn’t stop him from letting them flop open. He let Hawk manhandle him into whatever position he wanted.

Sometime in the middle of the night, he’d coaxed Peter onto his stomach and ate him out from behind again. Peter cursed and wiggled as he woke up. He wasn’t coherent enough to form words, but his stiff cock spoke volumes.

He reached down to take Peter in hand again. Peter moaned.

“I can’t wait for you to fuck me,” Hawk whispered, and Peter opened his eyes. His cock throbbed in Hawk’s hand, and Hawk smirked. “Yeah.”

Peter shoved at him with surprising strength. “Yeah. Let’s do that. I wanna.” He made grabby hands at him, and Hawk chuckled.

He pulled out of Peter and allowed him to roll them over. Peter’s eyes traveled down his body before he nodded.

“First, I gotta...” He climbed onto Hawk’s lap and rode his cock for a few minutes.

“Gods,” Hawk moaned, grabbing Peter’s hips. He planted his feet on the bed and fucked up into Peter hard.

“Hawk!” Peter shouted as he came. His dick let out a little dribble of cum. He collapsed on top of Hawk.

Hawk didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around him and hold him steady. His own cock was too spent to come, so he allowed it to slip from Peter.

He rolled them to their sides and pulled the comforter over them. It was getting late—in the afternoon. Hawk had no idea what time it was, but it was bright in the room. Hell, it could have been the weekend, for all he knew.

Peter let out a little snore, and Hawk held him closer.

As much as he loved having his cock buried deep in Peter’s ass, this was nice too.

He heard a light knock on the door. He glared in that direction, feeling his face shifting. No one came in, though. His phone pinged instead. He ignored it. His mate needed rest, and that’s what he would provide.

He snuggled into the bed and fell asleep with his mate safe in his arms, Peter’s flavor still on his tongue.

It was dark again when he woke up. He was in bed alone, but he could hear the shower running in the other room. His phone chirped with a new text, so he checked it. He wasn’t surprised to find they’d been wrapped up in each other for more than a day.

He found Peter leaning against the wall while the shower pounded down on his back. Hawk slipped in behind him and licked along his shoulder blades.

“Don’t,” Peter hissed.

Hawk chuckled against his skin, and Peter squirmed. For some reason his whole upper back was extremely sensitive. All it took was Hawk breathing on it to get his cock responding.

“I mean it,” Peter said, squirming out of his grip until Hawk let him go. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Hawk lathered up a washcloth and offered it to Peter.

Peter smiled and stepped forward. “Think you can behave yourself if I let you do it?” he asked.

Hawk looked him up and down before shaking his head. “I doubt it,” he answered truthfully. He knew if he got his hands on his mate, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself. Not now that he was allowed to.

“I figured,” Peter said. He took the cloth and started to reach out toward Hawk. He pouted when Hawk moved away.

“If you touch me, it won’t be any better,” Hawk said, pulling one of Peter’s hands close to kiss his fingertips.

Peter’s stomach growled, and he chuckled in embarrassment. “What time is it?” he asked, wiping the cloth down his body in quick motions.

“About seven thirty.”

“Wow. It’s earlier than I thought.”

“In the evening.”

“What?”

“Thursday.”

“What! We’ve been here for... for...” Peter shook his head.

Hawk pulled him into his arms. “It’s okay.”

“We’ve been fucking for two days, and it’s okay?”

“Well, it was more than okay for me.” He kissed Peter gently. “Pretty amazing, actually. Incredible. Unforgettable.” He kept kissing Peter until his mate laughed and pushed him away.

“No wonder I’m starving.” He cut a look at Hawk. “Starving for *food*.”

“Finish up in here and meet me in the kitchen,” Hawk said. He quickly rinsed off before stepping out and leaving his mate alone. He searched his cabinets, but he didn’t keep much food here. With Ryder’s cooking skills, there wasn’t much point. He was staring into the empty fridge when Peter wrapped his arms around his chest.

“Not much there.”

“No. Ryder does most of our cooking.”

“Think we can convince him to deliver?”

Hawk shook his head. “Everyone’s up at his place. Pack dinner.”

Peter tilted his head and looked at him. “How the fuck do you know that?”

Hawk laughed. He picked up his phone from the counter.

“Group text.”

“Ah.” Peter nodded and went back to the bedroom. He looked a little lost. “Can I borrow some more clothes?”

“Of course.” Hawk motioned at the dresser. “Take anything you like.”

Peter pawed through the folded shirts and sweatpants. Hawk leaned around him to open another drawer and pulled out two pairs of basketball shorts. He handed one pair to Peter. Peter smiled his thanks and pulled them on. Once he was dressed, he moved out of Hawk’s way. He started straightening the sheets while Hawk put on some clothes. His stomach rumbled as he finished, and he stood up. “Feed me, mate.”

Hawk preened at the thought of providing for his mate. He led Peter to the elevator and pressed the Up button. He could hear the pack laughing and talking as soon as they got in. They got out on Ryder’s floor, and sure enough, his door was open.

“The lovers have emerged!” Cosmo sang, lifting his ever-present cup.

Peter blinked and blushed, but he wrapped an arm around Hawk’s waist.

Anodo met them in the hallway and looked closely at Peter. His eyes glowed silver-green for a moment before fading back to normal. Then he turned narrowed eyes to Hawk. Hawk wasn't ashamed to say he hid behind his mate. Especially when his mate was staring so fiercely at Anodo.

"Behave," Peter said, looking between his mate and his uncle before walking past them into Ryder's place. "*Both* of you."

"I didn't do anything. He's the one who tried to—" Hawk started, letting his fangs descend as he remembered Anodo trying to get Peter to leave.

"Making sure you didn't hurt my nephew," Anodo said. Sparks flickered around his fingertips. Hawk started toward the door, but Anodo grabbed his arm to stop him. He whirled around with a snarl on his lips, but Anodo shook his head. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. For the other day," he said quietly. "I had no right to intrude. But... I just found them. I didn't think I'd have to give him up so soon, and I handled it badly."

Hawk squeezed his arm in response. "It's okay."

Anodo's expression turned dark. "But if you hurt him, you will suffer for a thousand years."

"Will you two stop pissing on each other and get in here?" Peter shouted from the apartment.

Hawk held his hand out to Anodo, who took it but raised an eyebrow. Hawk smiled and nodded as they shook.

"Deal."

THIRTY-SEVEN

HAWK FELT MUCH BETTER ONCE he had Peter seated on the couch with a full plate of food.

“Here,” Peter said, holding up a slice of flatbread for him to try. Hawk was absurdly pleased about it. He took a bite, licking the bit of sauce that got on Peter’s fingers.

“Ugh. You guys suck,” Grady said.

“We weren’t that bad,” Conrad said as he plopped on the seat next to them.

“No, you were worse,” Grady retorted.

Conrad stuck his tongue out at him. Peter offered him some of his food, but Conrad declined.

“Nope. That’s from your mate,” he said. Hawk was glad Conrad understood their customs.

Peter nodded and went back to eating. “So. What’d we miss?” he asked after swallowing a big bite.

“Mason wants us upstairs,” Grady said.

“Oh.” Peter started to get up, but Conrad stopped him.

“You have time to eat. Gotta keep your energy up, am I right?” he asked.

Peter blushed, but he did smile. “Yeah.”

Conrad laughed. “Man, you got it bad.” Hawk shot him a glare, but Conrad shook his head in amusement. “Not that I blame you. The other night... Dude. It was intense.”

Ryder appeared behind his back and dropped a hand onto his shoulder.

“You could say that again,” Peter said.

“Ryder did this thing with his—” Ryder moved his hand to cover Conrad’s mouth and cut him off. Conrad glared, but Ryder leaned down to kiss him when he moved his hand away.

“Anyway. Everyone else is at Mason’s whenever you’re ready,” Conrad finished.

“Even Fall and Connie?” Hawk asked.

Conrad blanched. “Nope. Not talking about it.”

“What happened?” Peter asked.

Ryder shook his head. “They came up for air yesterday afternoon, but they weren’t ready. Conrad caught them in the bathroom. They were too far gone to notice.”

“Nope.” Conrad put his fingers in his ears. “La la la.”

“Aw. Aren’t you happy for her?” Hawk teased. He was beyond thrilled for his brother. So much, his heart ached a little for Grady. He wished this happiness on all his family. Except their parents, maybe. But that was another story.

“Ecstatic. But I don’t want it in my face!”

“Didn’t she catch you that time in the office?” Grady asked.

“That’s different!”

“How?”

“She’s my sister!” Everyone laughed, and Conrad shook his head. “I know it makes no sense. But wait until you walk in on them.”

Hawk chuckled. “Have you heard from Holly or Tonya?”

The room went quiet. “They’re upstairs.”

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“Things got a little rough between them,” Grady said.

“Oh shit,” Hawk said. He held Peter closer.

“I feel like I’m missing something,” Peter said.

“No. They’re okay. They’re mates too,” Conrad said.

“And?”

“Since they’re both wolves, everything was heightened. Mason went to check on them, but Tonya took it as a challenge. And Holly, being Mason’s second, responded. Which set Mason off, which triggered Tonya. It kept reverberating. They had to be restrained for a while,” Grady said quietly.

“Fuck,” Hawk said.

“They’re all cool now. I mean... Mostly. Anodo actually sent them to his realm. That way they could work out their aggression without outing us.”

“What?” Hawk was sure he hadn’t heard that correctly. It was one thing for Anodo to help them out here and there, but to actually take wolves to the fae realm? That didn’t happen.

“Aye. It took a fair bit of magic to bring them down again,” Anodo said. “But no fear. They were healed by the shores of the Erandagh,” he finished brightly.

“I’d like to see that someday,” Peter said.

“I’ll take you there. You and your wolf, when you are ready.”

“Thanks,” Peter said.

“Are you sure?” Hawk asked. He was astonished. He understood Anodo’s offer wasn’t made lightly.

“Why not?” Anodo replied.

“Because. Wolves? In fae?”

Anodo shrugged. “The Gentleman of the Lake has an affinity for your pack.”

“What does that mean?” Peter asked.

“It means whatever is important to you will be important to the Gentleman. You have claimed these wolves, and that makes it my responsibility to ensure no harm comes to them.”

“But why?” Peter shook his head. “I mean, it sounds like you’re saying you did it for me.”

“I did.” Anodo stared at him for a minute before rolling his eyes. He reached out to grab Peter’s shoulders. Hawk stifled a growl. “Take it as my apology for interfering with your mating.”

Peter narrowed his eyes but eventually nodded and allowed Hawk to pull him into a tight hug. “So fucking much to learn,” he mumbled against Hawk’s chest.

Hawk chuckled and met Anodo’s eyes over his head. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

Anodo nodded back.

“Anyway,” Peter said, pushing away from Hawk and standing up. “Mason’s waiting for us?”

Conrad nodded and joined him. “Let’s go.”

They crowded into the elevator up to the penthouse. Their alpha greeted them, cupping a hand around the back of their necks.

“Good to see you well,” he said to Peter.

“Uh... thanks.”

“How’s it going?” Hawk asked quietly. He cut a glance toward the corner of the living room where Tonya and Holly were sitting. They smiled at the where twins were playing on the floor in front of them but seemed somewhat subdued.

“We’re working on it,” Mason answered honestly.

Hawk appreciated his candor. Alpha challenges rarely worked out well for the pack. People had to choose sides, and eventually the rift tore the pack apart. Of course, challenges usually involved either an unfit alpha or an overly ambitious beta. Mason was a more than competent leader, and Tonya had no designs on his role. The fact that it also happened in relative privacy, during a period of heightened magic didn’t erase the nerves.

“What’s up, boss?” Grady asked as they entered the apartment.

“I’d like to talk to you, Peter.”

“Me?” Peter looked worried, and Hawk pulled him close to reassure him. Mason led them to the living room where Penny and Paul were already waiting.

Penny got up and held him at arm’s length for a second before pulling him into a hug. “Happy looks good on you.”

Paul looked more reserved.

“Do you know what this is all about?” Peter asked as he sat down between Penny and Paul.

“The house,” Paul said.

Peter reached over to hold his hand. “What about it?”

“They’ve officially declared him dead.”

Hawk leaned over the couch to put his hands on Peter’s shoulders. His mate—he’d never get used to that thought—relaxed immediately.

Penny squeezed Peter’s hand from his other side. “Good riddance.” Peter turned to her, and she shrugged. “What? Anodo told us all about him. Mason really undersold it when he said he was a bad man.”

Peter wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

“What happens now?” Peter asked.

“Did he have a will?” Conrad asked. “Not that you don’t have a claim to the estate, but he seems like the kind to leave it all to some lackey to carry on his dirty dealings.”

“There wasn’t a will on file, so everything should go to you three,” Mason said.

“We don’t want it,” Paul said before turning to Peter. “Unless you do.”

“No.” Peter shook his head. Hawk felt him shudder. “I would be happy never going back there.”

“Well, the state is compiling a list of creditors who will need to be repaid. Then it will need to go through probate court. You three will be able collect your things, but that’s all you can take out. Then the house and its contents will probably be put up for sale. Which leads us to the problem.”

“Which is?” Penny dragged out the question.

“We need to cleanse it before any other beings enter the house,” Anodo said.

“Cleanse?” Peter asked.

“Remove the evil. I spoke to Mason about the place where you were taken. We believe it was in your home, yes?” Peter nodded. “We think he may have used the room to hold some of the people he—”

Peter held up a hand to interrupt Anodo. “Okay. Got it.”

“Well, if any beings died in there, we should allow their souls rest.”

Peter gulped and looked between Paul and Penny. Eventually, they all nodded. “When do we leave?”

THIRTY-EIGHT

PETER'S STOMACH was churning when they pulled through the gates. He hadn't forgotten what the place looked like when they left last time. Well, the time before that, actually. Last time, he hadn't even known he'd been here. The wonders of portal travel. He wished they could have portaled in, but Viceroy said that was only for official duties.

It was too bad, because Peter imagined using portals made moving a lot easier. No hauling everything down the stairs, to the van, across town, then back upstairs... He figured it was a horrible way to spend a day. Not that he'd ever moved before. He'd spent his whole life in that house.

He closed his eyes as they drove through the gate. When they had pulled out after rescuing Penny and Paul, the place looked like a war zone. Bodies littered the ground, and parts of the yard were charred.

"How will we explain the mess?" he wondered out loud.

"What mess?" Penny asked.

"It's been taken care of," Hawk said from the front seat.

Peter hated that Hawk was so far away, but there wasn't room for him in the back seat with Peter and his siblings. "Really?" He leaned over and looked out the window. "Holy crap." He couldn't believe his eyes. The lawn was pristine, with lush green grass stretching all the way from the fence to the house. There was no sign of damage at all. "How?"

"Group effort," Hawk said. "The hellhounds collected the wolves, and Anodo worked with some fairies to heal the

earth.”

They parked next to the panel van Grady drove. Peter didn't know how much they would be taking with them—if anything. It wasn't like they had a place to move it into. Well, *he* did. But Penny and Paul were still staying with Anodo. He'd assured them they could take all the space they wanted, but Peter wasn't sure how long they'd be staying there. It was great learning about their heritage, and Anodo was a lot of fun to hang around with. But long-term, Anodo wasn't the right fit for them. They knew it, and Anodo did too.

Tonya was working with a friend of hers to take them in, but she didn't give any more details. She said it would be perfect for them, even though Peter had his doubts. Still, he had to trust she knew what she was doing.

They sat in the car for a few minutes, listening to the engine tick as it cooled. Peter appreciated Mason wasn't urging them along.

“Well? We doing this?” Penny asked. Her bravado was betrayed by the apprehensive look on her face.

Peter squeezed her hand. “Let's go.”

Mason led their group to the front stairs where Anodo was waiting with another tall blond man. They shook hands before sharing a one-armed hug. “Desmond, thanks for meeting us today.”

“Happy to help. Although this house...” Desmond looked up at the door and shuddered before visibly pulling himself together and turning to Peter, Penny, and Paul. “You must be the Thornstons. I am sorry for your loss,” he said solemnly.

“Not much of a loss,” Paul muttered.

“Still. He was your family, regardless of his crimes.”

Peter gave him a tight-lipped smile and nodded before accepting his handshake when he offered.

Desmond stepped back and motioned to the door. “I'm sure they explained the basics, but let me walk you through it. I've taken the liberty of having your rooms packed up, along

with the office on the second floor. I hope that's acceptable. Each box is clearly labeled with its contents, in case there's anything in particular you wanted."

"Thank you for that. We appreciate it." Peter breathed easier, knowing he wouldn't have to be there all day. The memories were already choking him, and they hadn't gone in yet.

Desmond led them inside and started explaining the steps that had to be followed to legally assume ownership of the property, provided there was anything left after the creditors took their cut. After that, they could decide if they wanted to keep it or sell it all. As far as Peter was concerned, it could stand empty and rot until the earth reclaimed it. He suspected Penny and Paul felt the same.

"Woah," Anodo said as they got near the staircase.

"What?" Peter asked.

"The magic here. It's still..." He shook his head and made a face.

They continued deeper into the house. Peter was surprised when they got to his father's office. It had been cleaned out. The furniture was still in place, but all the shelves were empty, and the desk wasn't covered in papers.

"We've got a team investigating him," Mason said.

"Oh." Peter didn't have anything else to say. He should have realized that.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Hawk said. He was a reassuring presence, standing next to Peter.

Noise from the kitchen caught his attention, and Peter left them to investigate.

"Laurel!" he shouted when he saw her in there. She was holding a rolling pin and threatening Ryder with it. Apparently, he'd found her recipe book. "What are you doing here?"

"Peter!" The pin landed with a loud clatter when she dropped it to hug him tight. "I came to help with the cleansing.

And to pick up a few things.”

“I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine, dear boy. And it looks like your wolf has treated you well.” Peter could feel the blush spreading across his cheeks, and Laurel laughed. “Never be ashamed of sharing your love with your mate.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hands off,” Laurel said sternly, and Peter turned to see Ryder snatch his hands away from her book again. “I’ll make you a copy of everything.”

“Thank you,” Ryder said, bowing his head toward her.

“There you are,” Anodo said as he joined them. “Good. You two made it. We just need our fourth, and we can get started.”

Peter looked up to find Harrison standing away from the crowd. He’d missed him in the commotion earlier. Peter went over and shook his hand. “I wanted to thank you. For the other day,” he said.

“It was no trouble at all. I’m glad you found your home.” Harrison looked over at the rest of the pack, his gaze lingering on Grady for a long second before moving on. Peter shared a look with Hawk, who shook his head.

“We’re going to...” Paul pointed to the stairs, and Peter nodded. He didn’t blame them. Penny hugged him before following Paul. Most of the pack left with them, with just Mason and Hawk staying behind with them.

“Have you found the room?” Mason asked, steering them back to the reason they were there.

“I think so, but we haven’t been able to open the door. You have to go through his room,” Laurel said. “It’s... not pleasant.”

“Then let’s get this over with,” Peter said as he turned toward his father’s personal quarters. He felt like the air was getting thicker as they traveled down the hallway. Everyone else felt it too, judging by the uneasy looks they shared. It was

almost too dense to breathe by the time they were in his father's room. Anodo did something that made his eyes glow as he waved his hands, and suddenly the air cleared.

Peter took a few minutes to look around. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but he was surprised at how normal it looked. A king-size bed dominated the space, with night tables on each side. The rest of the furniture was a matching bedroom set. It could have come from any furniture store in the world. The bed was made, and the comforter and pillows were covered with a floral pattern. It seemed so incongruous with what he knew about his father that it shocked a laugh out of him. "So this is where evil slept."

The bathroom and closet were as ordinary as the rest of the room.

"I don't understand," Peter said. Nothing in the room screamed *Villain's Lair*.

"There's a secret door," Laurel said quietly.

She went to the wall and pushed on the full-length mirror. It slid to one side, revealing a door. It had runes carved along the edge, and there were three locks that would have prevented anyone inside from leaving. She opened the locks, but the door wouldn't budge. She looked over at Anodo, and he stepped up to join her. They both laid a hand against the wood and began chanting in a language Peter didn't understand. The markings started to glow, along with their eyes. The hairs on Peter's arm stood up as the magic built, but it wasn't enough. He joined them, pressing his hand against the door. Light flashed when his palm hit the wood, and the engravings flared bright before the light disappeared and the door cracked. Peter stared at it in shock.

"Ah, you're in. Excellent," a voice Peter didn't recognize said from behind him. Then the strong scent of cologne surrounded him. "You must be Peter. I'm Bebe."

The name sounded familiar, but Peter couldn't place it. Before he could ask, Bebe had already disappeared through the doorway. Peter started to follow, but Hawk grabbed his shoulder.

“I always go through first.” He stepped over the threshold and was swallowed by the dark. Peter’s heart sped up, and he rushed to join them. Behind the wall was a narrow stairwell leading up to another door with more locks and etchings. Bebe seemed to have no problem getting that one open. He went in and flicked on a lamp inside.

Peter took a deep breath and held it as he entered the room. A sense of hopelessness washed over him as he crossed the first circle carved into the floor. Hawk was there to help alleviate it, but it was still overwhelming. Anodo followed, his eyes glowing in the dim room. Laurel and Harrison came in next, with Mason bringing up the rear.

“Okay,” Bebe said. His voice was barely above a whisper, but it seemed loud. “Let’s do this quickly. These souls deserve rest.”

“Aye,” Anodo said. “She’s waited long enough.”

“Is she here?” Peter looked around. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt like he should be able to see something at least.

Laurel shook her head. “It’s not like ghosts or spirits. It’s more...”

“Emotions. Their fear and despair. Hatred,” Harrison finished.

“Oh.”

“Peter, if you wouldn’t mind standing in the center?” Bebe asked, carefully maneuvering him where he wanted him. Peter drew the line at actually sitting in the chair bolted to the floor. Bebe nodded. “As his blood kin, it may prove uncomfortable for you.”

“Uncomfortable how?” Hawk asked, stepping between Peter and Bebe.

“Your father’s essence is thick here. It may try to cling to you. You must resist it.”

“Bebe,” Laurel said quietly. He turned to her, and she shook her head. Then she moved forward to lay a hand on

Peter's arm. "It shouldn't hurt you at all. You are merely a conduit."

"So I'm the battery you need to power the spell?" Peter asked.

Bebe nodded.

"And how is this different than what he did?"

"We're not stealing it from you. It will run from us through you to remove his influence."

"Like a filter?" Hawk asked.

"Precisely," Bebe said. He moved the others around the circle, giving Peter time to process everything.

Peter gulped, and Hawk pulled him close. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do." His father had done awful things here. He wanted to atone for that. He owed them that much.

Laurel stepped up to wind her arm around his waist. "You honor them," she said, cutting right into his insecurities.

He leaned over to kiss her temple before standing up and nodding. "Let's do this."

Bebe smiled. "All right." They started chanting, but nothing happened. "Something's blocking our energy." Bebe shook his head.

Peter looked around, confused.

"I don't know what's wrong," Anodo said. They tried again, chanting louder.

Peter could feel the magic swirl around him, and his hip started getting warm. "Oh!" he shouted, and they stopped. "Could this be it?" He pulled the nullification amulet out of his pocket. It pulsed with light, almost in time with Peter's heart.

Laurel reached out to stroke a finger down it. "Oh good. She returned it," she said, and Peter gasped.

"You?"

She shrugged. “It was needed elsewhere, but I always knew it would find its way back to you.”

Bebe took the amulet, and it glittered brightly in his touch. Then Anodo and Harrison each held it briefly before handing it back. Then Bebe fastened it around Peter’s neck.

“Now we begin,” Bebe said.

The amulet felt heavy around Peter’s neck, and he imagined his father’s evil filling it up, absorbing every bad intention he’d ever had in here.

“That’s it!” Bebe called. The chanting got quicker, and the sigils on the floor started flickering.

Peter kept concentrating on the thought of removing every trace of his father from the room, from the house. From the whole world. Finally, the chanting reached a peak before cutting off abruptly. The pendant was almost pulling Peter over with its new weight.

Bebe rushed forward and unhooked it before placing it in Peter’s hand and closing his fingers around it. It was hot to the touch, almost burning his palm.

“Now break it,” Bebe said.

“What?”

“Break it.” He mimed cracking something with his hands. Peter looked around in confusion, but Laurel nodded encouragement.

Peter met Hawk’s eyes, took a deep breath, and snapped the amulet in two.

THIRTY-NINE

NOTHING HAPPENED. Peter looked down at the two halves in confusion. “I thought—”

The amulet exploded in a flash of light, and Peter felt the blast travel through his body, starting at his chest and tugging hard against his shoulder blades. A burst of white-hot pain followed it, and he screamed as he fell to his knees.

“Peter!” Hawk shouted. He dropped to the floor to wrap Peter in his arms, and Peter felt like he could breathe again. He sobbed against Hawk’s shoulder. So much pain and anguish had been felt here, and Peter felt every bit of it. He felt hands on his shoulders and arms, and the feeling started to dissipate. Hope and happiness washed over him, along with... gratitude?

“You did it,” Bebe said.

“I’m so proud of you,” Laurel said.

Peter sniffled and started to sit up, but something pulled him backward. He landed hard on his butt. Hawk knelt up to help him but then stopped and stared.

“What?” Peter looked over to find Mason staring as well. In fact, everyone was staring at him. “Do I have something...” he asked as he wiped at his face, feeling self-conscious.

“Your eyes,” Hawk whispered as he reached out. “And your...” He flicked a glance between Peter’s eyes and a spot over Peter’s shoulder.

Peter felt a twitch in his shoulder blade and turned to look. He jumped when he saw something floating right on the edge

of his vision. He looked over the other side, and there was another one.

“What the hell?” He moved, and the shapes moved with him.

“Peter. You’re stunning,” Hawk said reverently. He reached out and ghosted a featherlight touch down Peter’s cheek.

Which was ironic, considering it appeared that Peter now had fucking wings? He turned around, starting to panic, and Anodo stepped forward. He crossed his arms in front of himself and dropped to his knees. But what took Peter’s breath away were the light-green wings shimmering in the shadows. Peter glanced over his shoulder and saw the same feathers behind himself.

“*Uncail*,” Peter said, crossing his arms like Anodo had. The word felt more natural to him than it had before.

Anodo stood up to hug him. Their wings fluttered behind them. Peter didn’t know how he was going to get used to the feeling. Hawk stood off to the side, watching with a look of awe on his face. Peter let go of his uncle and pulled Hawk in for a hug, and he somehow managed to wrap his wings around him as well. Peter laughed out loud, and then laughed harder when Hawk shot him a look.

“It’s...” Peter tried to get it under control, but he couldn’t hold it together. “You’re the one named after a bird.” Hawk raised an eyebrow, not getting it. “And I’m the one with wings,” Peter finished, snorting with laughter.

Hawk looked surprised, then shook his head before he sobered. “Are you all right?”

“I have wings,” he said, giggling.

“I can help you learn to glamour them,” Anodo offered.

“That’d be good, because I think they’ll draw attention.” Peter nodded, feeling a little bit better about the situation. “Wait. Glamour? Does that mean they’ll still be there?” He emphasized his question by lifting one wing in a shrug.

“You’ll get used to it,” Anodo said with a laugh.

He saw the way Hawk was looking at him. He concentrated on the feeling for a second, and then he managed to spread his wings. Hawk’s eyes widened, and Peter noticed his cock twitched in his pants as he stared.

Okay. Maybe he could get used to this.

“OUR WORK HERE IS DONE,” Bebe said.

Peter could feel it too. The bad vibes were gone, and the room seemed to glow in appreciation. Or maybe Peter was imagining things.

“I still think we should demolish it,” Hawk muttered.

“Agreed. We can’t let anyone else have access to this room,” Harrison said. Peter nodded. He shuddered to think what would happen if new owners happened across it. Its very existence seemed to feed bad intentions.

“Let’s talk to Desmond and see what we can do,” Mason suggested. Then he led them back down the stairs.

Once they made it into the living room, Peter started breathing easier. He spread his wings, surprised at how wide they were. Hawk stared at him in awe. Every so often, his fingers twitched like he wanted to touch them, but he kept stopping himself. Peter reached out and pulled him over. Then he took one of Hawk’s hands and set it on the edge of his left wing. Hawk gently ran a hand down the length of it, and Peter shivered in desire. He crowded into Hawk’s space before he wrapped both wings around them and leaned in to kiss his mate.

“You done?” Penny asked as they came down the stairs, and Peter jumped back, his wings spreading wide.

“Holy shit!” Paul exclaimed. He rushed into the room, past Peter, before coming to an abrupt stop, with Penny right by his side. “You’re Bebe,” he whispered.

“Oh, my sweet, summer children. Who has been *dressing* you?” Bebe cried as he put his hands on either side of Penny’s face to turn her head both ways. “It’s a travesty.”

Peter had never seen his siblings so in awe by anyone before, but here they were, jaws hanging open, bodies slack with shock. Penny recovered first.

“Bebe?” she whispered reverently. She turned to Tonya. “Your *friend* is *Bebe*?” she asked accusingly.

“We told you he was a friend.” Tonya shrugged from where she stood with the rest of the pack. Peter noticed Viceroy was with them. He must have shown up while they were upstairs. “Bebe, this is Penny and Paul Thornston. They’re the ones I was telling you about.”

“Yes. They will be perfect. Once we clean them up. Because this. Simply will. Not. Do,” Bebe said dramatically. Peter got the feeling everything Bebe did, he did it dramatically. Bebe turned his critical eye at Paul and pursed his lips. “It’s tragic. We have so much work to do. Come along.”

“Bebe, you can’t order them to go with you,” Mason said.

“Fine.” Bebe huffed and turned to them. “Would you like to come live with me, be the faces of my brand, and put *this* behind you?” He motioned with his hand, and Peter wasn’t sure if he meant the clusterfuck their lives had become or their appearance. He suspected it was the second.

“Are you kidding?” Paul asked.

“You really should do better.” Bebe was still sizing them up and shaking his head.

“Of course we do!” Penny said.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll leave from here.” Bebe nodded. “You can say your goodbyes.”

Penny and Paul turned to him, and Peter’s heart skipped. The way Penny had said his name, this Bebe was somebody significant to her.

“You have wings,” Penny said as if she had just noticed them.

Paul pulled him into a hug. “We always knew you would fly,” he whispered. Peter barked out a watery laugh. Penny joined them.

“Are you sure you want to go with him?” Peter asked. “We can find a spot for you with the pack.”

Penny stepped back and shook her head. “That’s your place, not ours.”

“I don’t know if I can let you go,” Peter whispered. It felt surreal to consider breaking up their squad. He didn’t know how to live without them.

Yet, here he was.

“You fit here. With them. With *him*,” Paul said. “It’s time to let us go.”

“And besides. It’s *Bebe*,” Penny said.

“Whatever that means.” Peter laughed at her shocked gasp. “Okay. We can do this,” he said.

“Are you ready?” Bebe asked, slightly subdued. For him, anyway, Peter thought. From most people, it would seem like they were impatient.

“What about our stuff?” Paul asked.

“If the clothes were anything like this, good riddance,” Bebe said with a sniff.

Yeah. They will fit in fine, Peter thought.

“But if you must, we can arrange to have your things sent,” Bebe sniffed.

“I’ll open a portal for you,” Viceroy said.

“Of course you will,” Bebe said. He made a series of faces that Peter interpreted as “as if it would be any other way?”

“I love you guys,” Peter said.

“Love you too, boo.” Penny stood on her toes to kiss Peter’s cheek, and Paul rubbed his nose along Peter’s temple.

“We’ll call you later,” he said.

Peter watched a ring of fire burst into existence. There was a brightly colored loft filled with racks upon racks of clothes on the other side. Penny’s eyes went wide, and Paul grinned. They both gave Peter a quick hug before nodding that they were ready.

“They’ll contact you later,” Bebe said as he stepped through the ring and pulled Penny and Paul along with him. It closed behind them with a snap.

Peter’s heart hurt a little as he watched them leave, but the pack closed around him. The looks they were sending his way made Peter feel better. It wasn’t breaking up the team; it was adding a lot of players to their roster. He had no doubt that every single person in the room would have their backs.

“Okay. Now what?” he asked.

“Now we live happily ever after,” Hawk said.

“I like the sound of that.”

FORTY

“HAWK,” Peter whined. He’d been standing still for hours already. Well, it felt like hours anyway. His back was getting sore, and he wanted to flex his wings. He glanced over his shoulder.

“A few more minutes,” Hawk whispered, never taking his eyes off his paper.

Ever since the cleansing, Hawk had been obsessed with his wings. He had half a sketchbook of them already. Full-body drawings, partial wings, close-ups of feathers... If anyone ever found them, they would think Hawk was working on an angel series. It seemed Peter’s default state had been naked, facing the wall. Well, if that’s the way Hawk wanted it...

He rolled his shoulders forward and flexed his wings. They spread wide across the bedroom wall. He planted his feet a little wider and arched his lower back. It wasn’t a comfortable position, but it was effective. He heard Hawk’s sudden inhale, so he turned his head over his shoulder.

“See something you want?” he asked, lowering his voice.

Hawk swallowed and nodded. Then he dropped his notebook, stalked forward, and buried his face between Peter’s wings, and Peter could feel Hawk’s cock against his ass. He was glad Hawk liked them because, fuck, it was hot. Hawk licked along the skin at the base of one wing, and Peter shivered. He did it again, and Peter was fully hard. It felt like there was a wire running directly from Peter’s wings to his

cock. He wondered what it would feel like if Hawk dragged his cock along that spot...

“Fuck,” he breathed as Hawk kissed his way down Peter’s back. Peter sighed and shifted his stance. Hawk used both hands to spread his cheeks before licking his way down his crack to tease his hole. The first swipe over it had Peter groaning. His wings twitched and rubbed against Hawk’s side. Hawk groaned as he pointed his tongue to lick into Peter’s hole.

He loved it when Hawk ate him out. He could come from Hawk’s tongue fucking into him. But that wasn’t what he wanted. He closed his eyes and pushed away from the wall. Hawk wobbled and landed flat on his ass. He stared up at Peter as he turned around.

“Stand up,” Peter ordered. Hawk nodded and obeyed. He pulled Hawk into a deep kiss. He tasted himself on Hawk’s tongue, and fuck. Peter’s cock twitched against Hawk’s hip, and he pushed until Hawk fell onto the bed. Peter stopped to flick off the lamp Hawk had been using to light his body up. He glanced at the wall and imagined himself spread wide against it, Hawk staring at him in reverence as he took in every inch of his body. He shook it off and stared at the body in front of him.

“I want to fuck you,” Peter said.

Hawk licked his lips and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s. Yeah.”

Peter reached into the nightstand and pulled out the vial Anodo had given him. He poured some oil on fingers, and Hawk’s eyes darkened.

“Yeah.” Hawk nodded, and Peter reached down to trace his hole. “Fuck,” he hissed.

“Is it all right?”

“Fuck yes.”

Peter smirked. The formula was designed to drive Hawk wild. So far, it was working, but Peter wanted him insane. He smiled as he pressed two fingers in. He flexed his wings at the same time, and Hawk keened.

“I think you liked that,” Peter said as he plunged his fingers in. He twisted his hand, and Hawk arched off the bed.

Hawk was always talking about how beautiful Peter was, but obviously he'd never seen a mirror. Because Hawk was stunning like this. Cock rock-hard, straining away from his groin, a deep purple color. His eyes were half-lidded and glowing blue in the dim light of the room. He knew his own were glowing silver-green in response.

Peter settled onto his knees, and he shifted his wings higher. Hawk reached down to stroke them gently, even with his claws out. Then he took Hawk's cock deep into his throat. Hawk snatched his hands away to grab at the sheets. Peter drew his head back slowly and then sucked him down again. He kept at it as he fingered Hawk roughly. Hawk panted and moaned. Peter tasted a few beads of precum on Hawk's cock and pulled off. Hawk whined and looked down.

“I want to be inside you when you come,” Peter said. He stood up and slathered his cock in the oil. Closing his eyes, he groaned and got impossibly harder; he *needed* to be in his mate. He looked down, and Hawk nodded, grabbing his knees and spreading his thighs as wide as he could. Peter lined up and slid all the way in with one stroke, stilling once he was fully seated. They both took a few deep breaths as they adjusted. Hawk wiggled under him, and Peter pulled out and shoved back in fast. He set up a teasing pace, slow on the way out, fast back in.

“Fucking hell,” Hawk moaned. He reached down to grab his cock, and Peter added a hand. Hawk intertwined their fingers around his cock and started stroking to match Peter's thrusts.

Peter sped up, and Hawk matched his movements.

“Fuck yes,” Hawk panted. Peter knew he was close, so he tightened his hand and changed his angle as he pounded into him. He fucked Hawk hard until his breath hitched and he stopped their hands as he came. Peter thrust into him lazily as he worked at Hawk's knot. Hawk's entire torso was slick with cum.

Peter scooped some up in his hand. He pulled completely out on his next stroke, and then he wrapped his hand around his cock to spread Hawk's cum on it. Then he fucked back in with long, hard strokes. He leaned forward, trapping Hawk's knot between them.

"Fuck fuck fuck," Hawk was chanting as his cock kept spurting.

"Yeah." Peter nodded. His back tingled, all the way down his spine to his balls. "Yes!" he shouted as he leaned back and came. He could feel his wings spreading wide across the room. Even with his eyes closed, he could see the glow coming from his body.

Hawk shouted once more, and then his knot started to go down.

Peter huffed out a couple of breaths before collapsing on top of him. He wrapped his wings around them, and Hawk shivered.

Hawk reached around him and stroked the top edge of his wings before moving his hands down in long strokes.

"I fucking love you," he said quietly.

Peter smiled. He pushed up to look Hawk in the face. "I love you too."

Hawk reached to cup his cheek. "I mean it. You're my angel."

"Does that make you my devil?"

"Maybe." Hawk leaned in to kiss him. "Whatever I am, I'm yours."

"Mine." Peter liked the sound of that. He liked it a lot.

EPILOGUE

THERE MONTHS later

“ROBERT DUVAL IS NEVER A WRONG ANSWER,” Faolan argued.

Hawk had to agree. Still. He couldn't let Faolan have the last word. “But they didn't *need* him in that role.”

“What the hell have I walked into?” Grady asked, plopping down on Faolan's couch.

“Nothing, man. The same old argument,” Faolan said.

“You guys need a life.”

Hawk chuckled. Their lives were drastically different than they'd been three short months ago. If anyone had predicted that both Hawk and Fall would have mates, Hawk would have punched them. He couldn't imagine any one of them finding their One. Not after Ryder had been the one in a billion. But now? Try to pry Peter away from Hawk. Wouldn't happen. Hawk would die before he let anyone come between him and Peter.

At the same time, it felt good that they could still fall into some of their same patterns from before. Hanging out with his brothers and fighting over movie casting was one of them.

“Where's your betters?” Grady asked.

“Pete's at Bebe's.” He'd been working with Anodo on all things fairy. After glamouring, teleportation was the one thing

Peter was chomping at the bit to learn. He'd tried all week, and then this morning, he'd finally managed to pop over to visit Paul and Penny. He called Hawk on his phone, excited and promising dirty, dirty celebrating once he got back.

"Connie's shopping," Faolan added.

"And you let her go?" Faolan gave Grady a dirty look, and Grady held his hands up. "Just sayin', man."

"Mason and Tonya went with her," Faolan grumbled. "They're looking at nursery furniture."

"Ah. That explains it," Grady nodded. Faolan lifted his lip in a silent snarl, but Grady shook his head. "You wouldn't have let her out of your sight if she wasn't with our alpha."

"I'm not that bad."

Grady barked out a laugh. "Dude. She's only a couple months along, and you're going nuts because she's not around."

Hawk smiled. Their pack was expanding. Apparently having heat-like sex during a cataclysmic shift in the magic, caused by the new God of Fertility ascending to his position, resulted in, well, pregnancy. The pack had gone into immediate nesting mode when they found out five weeks ago. The twins were beyond thrilled at the idea of becoming big brothers. It reminded Hawk of the excitement he'd felt when his mother was pregnant with Faolan. He stood next to her side protectively for months, growling at anyone who tried to rub her belly. His mother would laugh it off right until the person left, charmed by the expectant mother and her cute little guard dog of a son.

And then she would grab his arm and hiss at him to stop doing that. Did he *want* the hellhounds to come and steal her baby?

He shook off the memory and went for the fridge. After moving the juice boxes out of the way, he grabbed three beers and passed two along to his brothers, then took a deep swig of his.

“Don’t you have a date with Harrison?” he asked as he leaned back against the counter.

“Nah. He’s cool, but we just don’t...” Grady shook his head. Hawk rubbed his shoulder against Grady’s. “Not that we didn’t have a *lot* of fun.” Grady winked. “But that’s it.”

Hawk chuckled and drank his beer. Grady stared down at his for a long time. He started picking at the label, leaving bits of paper on the floor between his feet. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up at Hawk.

“Not to bring up shit, but...” he started.

“But what?”

“What happened? Between you and Mom and Dad. Why did you leave?”

“Fuck.”

“I mean, you don’t have to tell me. But I... always wondered.” Grady shrugged. He was slouched over himself, and Hawk moved to cup the back of his neck in one hand.

“I always wondered, myself,” Faolan added.

“Whatever the fuck they said, it had nothing to do with you,” Hawk said. “Hell, it didn’t even have anything to do with me. They sent me away. For a pack alliance. To boost their own image.”

“When you first left, they were so proud,” Faolan said, remembering. His eyes took on a faraway look. “They would tell everyone about their son who had wed into the Rimasetra pack. Then nothing. They refused to acknowledge that you existed.”

“It turns out Caleb Rimasetra wasn’t a very supportive partner.”

“What did he do?”

“That great reputation they had? It was all lies. They bullied and intimidated everyone around them into keeping quiet. Caleb didn’t want anyone with a mind of their own.” He’d never opened up about it, except to Peter. Maybe it was

time. “He wasn’t a nice person. He went to great lengths to try to keep me in line.”

“Is that why you hide your art?” Grady asked.

“Part of it.” Hawk rubbed at his hip, and of course Faolan caught the movement.

“He did that?” Faolan’s eyes glowed with anger. They’d all seen the scars.

“It was a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t fucking matter,” Grady said fiercely.

Hawk loved his brothers. He fucking loved them. He dropped onto the couch next to Grady.

“Look. They can’t hurt me anymore. It’s over, and their pack was dismantled by the hellhounds, anyways. Ivor was a fucking loudmouth asshole. He said the wrong thing to the wrong person.”

Hawk had been there the night the portal opened behind their alpha. Hawk couldn’t have gotten away if he’d tried; Caleb had broken his leg after he found out Hawk had been working with Mason to expose their lies. He would have beaten Hawk to death if the hellhounds hadn’t stepped in. Hawk was glad Mason had managed to rescue his brothers. He’d never shared with them the extent of what he had been through.

Viceroy had taken one look at Hawk, sprawled on the floor and covered in blood, and swept both Caleb and Ivor up. It had seemed like forever before the portal opened back up and Viceroy carefully lifted him off the floor to whisk him away to Dr. Jerrick’s care.

“Anyway. Mason got you out. That’s what I cared about. The rest is history. Ancient history.” He shook off the memory. He hated the helplessness it made him feel. Both his brothers reached out to squeeze his shoulders.

“Why us?” Grady’s voice cracked when he spoke again, like he was battling tears.

“What do you mean?” Hawk asked.

“Why were we even born? Why were we special?”

Hawk shared a look with Faolan.

“How could Mom and Dad have *three* kids when the rest of our world could barely manage a handful in a whole pack? I mean. Kids are a gift, right? So maybe they did something to deserve a reward? Something they never talked about?”

“Grady,” Faolan said.

“What? No. I know what you’re thinking. But just because Thornston was into dark magic doesn’t mean Mom and Dad were.”

“They would have done anything for the prestige,” Hawk said. He knew first-hand how far their parents would go to gain prominence.

“No. They wouldn’t do that. They wouldn’t have gone that far.”

“You know they had to have,” Faolan said.

“They disowned me for allowing Caleb to get taken by the hellhounds. They didn’t care how badly he treated me. They thought I should have coped with it so they could bask in the honor of me carrying his name.”

“But...” Grady shook his head in denial. “I mean... You two have mates. You’re having a *kid*. That’s something packs could only wish for. They have to be happy for us, right?”

“They don’t care,” Faolan said sadly.

“Do they know?”

“Yeah, they know,” Hawk said. Faolan turned to him in surprise. Hawk shrugged. “Mason got a congratulations message from Dad.”

“Did he say anything else?” Grady asked.

Hawk closed his eyes. He didn’t want to go into it, but he owed his brothers.

“He said he’s proud that the pack has mates, but that’s it. Nothing about us. Peter’s fae. The twins aren’t Fall’s, so they

won't acknowledge them. And Connie's human, so their baby isn't pureblood, so they don't recognize Nugget either."

"Good fucking riddance," Faolan growled. "I swear, if they even try..."

"Right there with you," Hawk said.

"But..." Grady stood up and started pacing. "There has to be something there, right? I mean, they're our parents. They have to love us."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Hawk said darkly. He was thankful he'd managed to get Grady out before he'd been too affected by their damage. "It wasn't ever about us. It was about the fact that they *had* us. That it made them special. And they did whatever it took to make it happen."

"Face it, man. Our parents are the worst kinds of shit out there," Faolan said.

"They can't have been that bad. I mean... What about the hellhounds?" Grady asked.

"I don't know." Hawk shook his head. It was a good question. Their parents had to have made some dark deals. He firmly believed there was no other way for them to have had not one, but *three* kids.

But why hadn't the hellhounds picked them up? As far as he knew, they were still back home. Of course, he never asked when he called. And they were more interested in what Hawk could do for them than how anyone was doing.

"I want to see them," Grady said quietly. Faolan started shouting, but Hawk simply reached out to grab Grady's arm.

"If that's what you think you need to do," he said.

"You can't. Hawk, he fucking can't!" Faolan yelled.

"Daddy?" Tristan said as he came into the room. Taylor was hot on his trail. Fall's shouting must have woken them up from their naps. They both climbed up into Faolan's lap. Faolan pulled them both in close and took a deep breath. Their scent calmed him. He leaned back and kissed each of their foreheads.

“I’m good. I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“What are you arguing about?” Taylor asked.

“We aren’t arguing. We were just talking,” Grady said.

“But Daddy was shouting,” Tristan said.

“Uncle Grady wants to do something stupid, and I don’t think he should.”

“If it’s stupid, then why do it?” Taylor asked, blinking big eyes at Grady.

“I don’t know,” Grady admitted.

“We can’t stop him,” Hawk said.

“I know. But I don’t want him to get hurt,” Faolan said.

“It would hurt you?” Tristan asked. He hopped off Faolan’s lap and climbed up into Grady’s lap. “I don’t want you hurt.”

“I know, buddy. But I feel like I have to do this,” Grady said. He sounded defeated.

“What is it?”

“I want to go visit our parents, and they don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Our grandma and grandpa?” Tristan asked.

“No,” Faolan said fiercely. “They’ll never be your grandparents.”

Hawk could tell the boys didn’t understand, but they went along with it anyway.

“Okay, Daddy.”

No one said anything about the puddle of goo Faolan turned into every time they called him Daddy. It had started after they got back from the showdown with Thornston, and Faolan preened every single time he heard it.

“Do what you have to do,” Hawk said, tugging Grady over for a one-armed hug. “We’ll be here for you, whatever you need. Just remember where home is.”

Hawk felt a warmth when he thought about it. This pack, these people. That was his family. They had been all along. He could practically feel the snap as he cut the rest of his bloodlines out of his heart.

He'd created a new, better family. And fuck anyone who would try to take that away from him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Casey Drake decided years ago to embrace her weirdness. It's been her way for nearly fifty years, and she figures if it ain't broke, don't fix it. She believes love comes in many forms—you just have to allow yourself to fall. Happily ever after is the icing on her cookies. When she's not writing, she's hanging out at home with her husband and cat.

