



Alphas on the Rocks

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: Two rejected alphas. Desperate for Connection. Longing for acceptance. Fighting for survival.

Ever since a hook-up infected Avery Smith with the werevirus, turning him into a were-ursine imbued with alpha magic, he's been on the run. No established pack leader wants a rival in their territory, but he can't start his own pack because few are willing to entrust their safety to a small-statured trans man. Lacking options, Avery joins a work farm where packless werecreatures labor in exchange for room and board. Then another potential hook-up lands him in the arms of the most dangerous man he could pick:

A shifter.

As an alpha, taking over his family-led cougar shifter pack is Sascha Madison's birthright, but lifelong chronic illness has compromised his standing. Getting caught with a werecreature will ruin his slim chances of inheriting the pack, and could result in him being disowned by his father.

Despite everything that could go wrong, Sascha and Avery connect, discovering much more than casual relief. The rare flicker of belonging is threatened by the bitter conflict between their species. Shifters believe the monstrous transformations forced by the werevirus make a mockery of their existence, and the recent explosion of infections has put all packs on high alert.

While Avery endures harassment at the farm, Sascha struggles to protect him without revealing their intimate connection. When a predatory supervisor forces Sascha's hand, Avery has to flee yet again... This time, with Sascha by his side.

Too quickly, they're caught. Sascha's father gives them an ultimatum: Separate permanently, or Avery dies. But there's more to being a leader than oppressive dominance, and Sascha and Avery are determined to shatter the walls separating their species and find a pack that will accept them both.

Alphas on the Rocks is a 77,000 word trans M/M paranormal romance featuring forbidden lovers on the run, mysterious mating magic, an awful dating app, and multiple open-door intimate scenes. Happy ending guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 73

CHAPTER

ONE

Sascha

It's been twenty seconds since Sascha opened PROWL, the shifter dating app, and he already wants to give up, climb under the bedcovers, and never emerge. He wouldn't need an app if he didn't live in Bliss Township, a Michigan dust speck with a population of six hundred. Feels more like six when you're the only gay shifter on this side of the Mackinac Bridge.

Despite his best efforts, PROWL has remained a curse he can't break. Whether he's looking for a hookup or simply a few hours in the company of someone who understands him, the app is the only reliable method Sascha has for finding other queer shifters. Most of the time, he's stuck driving for at least an hour to meet complete strangers in a desperate bid for intimacy.

Heaving an anguished sigh, Sascha throws his phone across his queen-sized mattress and flops onto his pillow hoard. Without them, he'd feel too alone in this bed. Why have such a big space when he can't bring outsiders onto the pack lands? Instead of hanging out in the comfort of his own bedroom, Sascha has been stuck fucking on old couches and floor futons. Once, he drove hours to celebrate Pride at a gay club in Detroit, where he very glamorously sucked a guy off in a bathroom stall. Never again.

Not even five minutes after deciding to give up for the night, Sascha's phone spits out

the PROWLRL notification sound. A message! Sascha hates himself for how quickly he snatches up the device.

He uses his thumbprint to unlock his phone, bracing for a dick pic. That's usually how it goes. Sometimes it's fun to weigh the distance he'd have to travel against how attractive he finds the guy's cock, but right now, all Sascha wants is some normal company. It's fortuitous, then, when the message loads and Sascha sees... words. Nary a dick in sight.

Not only did this guy ask how Sascha's night is going without being a sex pest, but his location is a mere fifteen miles away.

Sascha says, "Holyshit," under his breath. Living in a compound of cougar shifters, nearly all with excellent hearing, means Sascha rarely gets privacy. He's gotten in the habit of keeping noise to a minimum, even while alone in his room. His younger twin cousins have rooms flanking either side of Sascha's, and they love to pound on his door and heckle him.

Once he's sure neither Jakob nor Garrett are going to interrupt, Sascha shoves his phone right up to his nose and clicks the guy's profile. He needs to do some research.

The username is simply: New 2 Town. Sascha checks his bio questionnaire first. Twenty-eight years old, four older than Sascha. Bisexual, FTM trans, he/him pronouns. His profile picture is a dramatically lit selfie showing off a mess of dark curls, the lower locks bleached to a brassy blond. There's a smattering of large brown freckles embracing the bridge of his nose, one of which has strayed to become a beauty mark on the very corner of his bottom lip. The black-on-black punk outfit isn't Sascha's usual type, but the longer he spends studying this guy's seafoam-green irises, the hotter he gets.

Closing the profile pic, Sascha returns to the message.

New 2 Town

Hey, what's up?

Sascha fires off a generic 'Not much, you?' response, which he immediately regrets because it makes him sound horribly boring and uninvested. Double-texting is typically a no-no, but he justifies it to himself just this once.

Sascha

How long have you been in Bliss?

New 2 Town responds immediately.

New 2 Town

Just over a week. Trying to settle in.

Sascha

I've lived here my whole life. Maybe I could show you around?

New 2 Town

Really? That'd be cool. I'm free all night, if you're interested in meeting up.

Sascha practically bounces to his closet to put on something that isn't baggy gym shorts. Halfway through getting dressed, a notif pops up on the phone's dark screen.

New 2 Town

Are you a shifter?

Sascha

Yeah, I'm a cougar.

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Unnerved by the question—shouldn't that be obvious?—Sascha hops back to the guy's profile.

New 2 Town hasn't filled out the Species category. Usually, that's where a shifter would put their animal affinity, but there are human chasers who use PROWL, too, and normally leave that spot blank.

Unless...

It's accurate to say PROWL was designed for shifters, but recently, there's been another group making their own space on the app. Most of the time, though, they have the good sense not to approach shifters.

Sascha's fingers shake as he types.

Sascha

What are you?

Waiting the handful of minutes it takes New 2 Town to respond is agonizing, and when the message finally arrives, Sascha's heart drops into his stomach.

New 2 Town

I'm a werecreature. Ursine.

Numb, Sascha pops 'ursine' into a search engine and pales at the definition.

Switching to images, Sascha stares at the page of very big and very,verybig bears.

New 2 Town

I should've led with that. Sorry. I'll understand if you don't want to meet up anymore.

Sascha bites his lip, deliberating. Hewantsto meet up, but...

If Sascha gets caught hanging out with a werereature, his dad, lead alpha of the Madison cougar shifter pack, is guaranteed to take a massive chunk out of his hide. That's just association. If Sascha were to get caught havingsexwitha werereature, Samuel Madison might actually kill his only child.

To say shifters and werereatures don't get along would be an understatement. Shifters are born sophisticated, magic-infused beings, always in control of their shifts, and when shifted they retain intelligence and self-control despite their fully animal appearances.

Werereatures... aren't. Don't. Victims of the weravirus become tied to the fickle moon, forced to shift into violent beasts that barely resemble their animal affinities.

It's theorized that the weravirus has existed for a long time, but about forty years ago, the number of infections exploded globally. No one knows why, only that it threw the balance between humans and shifters into full chaos. The effects of the weravirus degraded the lines separating shifters from the much greater human population, turning infected humans into warped mimics. Methods of managing the spread have been developed since, but by the time education became widely available, the damage had already been done.

His whole life, Sascha has been taught that werereatures make a mockery of the

shifter lifestyle and sully their reputation. They're dangerous plague-bringers, like rats ferrying parasites onto foreign lands. A were-bear—ursine—could easily kill Sascha, even as an alpha cougar.

And yet...

Sascha

No, it's fine. I'll get a hotel room so we can shower after.

New 2 Town

Okay. Cool. My name's Avery, btw.

It's not until Sascha is finished dressing that he realizes the implication of his words and how they could come across. Is this meet-up just going to be hanging out in the hotel room, or did he just signal intention to have sex? All he'd meant was that showering after they were in proximity reduced their chances of getting caught, but it'd be awkward if Avery took his words as innuendo and Sascha showed up unprepared.

Should he bring condoms, just in case? Alcohol, maybe? Reason tells him he could simply ask, but Sascha would wither away from the humiliation.

So, he makes an online reservation at the nearest hotel that is the least likely to have bedbugs and sends Avery the address and information on check-in.

Then he sits on his bed and has a panic attack, because what the fuck is he doing?

Every time Sascha thinks of turning his car around, he looks at the phone mount on his dashboard. It's a critical strategy because without Avery's picture up on his

unlocked screen, he might never make it to the hotel. When his resolve starts to wobble, Sascha's gaze shifts to Avery's flat, seaglass stare, smudged eye makeup and model-worthy pout so void of feeling Sascha wants—needs—to know what Avery looks like in motion.

Behind those closed lips, are his teeth crooked or straight? Does that freckled nose wrinkle when he smiles? Does he laugh easily, or is prying free the slightest chuckle a hard-won victory?

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Fucking hell, Sascha hasn't even heard his voice yet and he's already worthless for this guy. Maybe that's why he stops by the gas station to pick up condoms and wine coolers on his way to the hotel. Just in case.

When Sascha pulls into the parking lot, his hands are almost as sweaty as the cold surface of the wine coolers, condensation dampening the bag and withering the box of condoms. He parks, takes a moment to brace himself, then grabs the slippery plastic handles in his too-warm fingers and marches bravely forward to the hotel entrance. He continues through the doors, still bravely, until his eyes do a reflexive sweep of the lobby, and one dark figure stops him dead in his tracks.

Avery is shorter than Sascha envisioned. His build is slender, black cutoff shorts revealing muscular calves. The overstuffed chair he's propped his butt against is behind a column that casts shadow over the man's face, but Sascha couldn't mistake those wild bicolored curls.

As if sensing Sascha's stare, Avery turns his head, then pushes off the chair. One step and the overly bright lights scouring the lobby carve his blue-green eyes into fluorescent relief.

Sascha swallows hard, takes a step toward him, then pauses to shake his head. Best he get the room key first, so he tries to look casual as he approaches the desk, even though his heart is doing flips inside his chest. Fortunately, the bored concierge is human. He's not sure what he'd do if there were shifters around to witness him going into a hotel room with a werereature.

Humans, of course, can't tell shifters or werereatures from any other person. Not

unless they have magic. However, shifters can smell a werereature. The magic fueling shifters is different from the twisted virus lurking in the werereature's cells, and its scent is sharp and bitter.

That's what he's been told, anyway. Sascha has been sheltered all his life, homeschooled and kept on pack lands for as long as his father could justify. He doesn't care to listen when Sascha explains, so patiently, that being chronically ill doesn't mean he can't work a job or go to college, but it has never landed. As a result, Sascha has not, to the best of his knowledge, ever met a werereature.

Will Avery smell bitter? Sascha doesn't smell anything odd from where he stands, but maybe it'll be more obvious closer-up.

The plastic key card feels weighted, like he might fumble and drop it at any second. Sascha squeezes it in his fist until the rounded corners are pressing into his skin, then makes eye contact with Avery again and tilts his head toward the hallway leading to their room. He walks several paces alone, but when the air shifts and faded Converse squeak on the linoleum floor, a shiver runs down his spine.

Sascha is being followed by a werereature. A man capable of turning into a mutant bear monster who could rip Sascha limb-from-limb if he made the wrong move. And Sascha is leading him to a private room, carrying a box of condoms.

At least if he dies, his dad won't be able to kill him for his stupidity.

The walk is silent except for Sascha's breathing. He reaches the correct number, swipes the key card without acknowledging the red divots in his skin, and opens the door, before freezing. He looks down the hall with wide eyes, watching Avery amble along like he's not in any hurry at all. Every nerve in Sascha's body is alert, and when Avery is finally standing in front of him, the hair on his arms and the back of his neck have raised into irritating little prickles.

“Um. Hi,” Sascha says, forcing sound from his dry throat.

A funny curve tilts the corner of Avery’s mouth. He’s looking at Sascha through those damn curls, which in the dim vestibule completely shadow his eyes. Should Sascha want to kiss him so soon? Because he does.

“I’m Sascha,” he says when Avery doesn’t move or reply.

“Okay,” Avery says. “I’m getting out of the hallway.”

As Avery squeezes past him, Sascha can’t help but notice the care Avery takes to keep their bodies from brushing. His thigh disturbs the bag in Sascha’s hand, crinkling the filmy plastic, and though it’s brief, Avery’s shoulders tighten, and he cringes against the wall, dragging his arm against the off-white paint until he pops into the main space. Sascha feels Avery’s sigh, not quite covered by the sound of the door squeaking shut.

In the middle of the small room there is a single king-sized bed.

There is also a chair, a small round table, and a nightstand on either side of the bed, which is across from a chipped wardrobe with an ancient flat-screen TV atop it. Standard hotel fare. But that bed—the way it both beckons and threatens—leaves Sascha standing where the mouth of the vestibule hangs open.

He stares until Avery shifts with visible discomfort. “You didn’t have to come, y’know.”

The defensiveness in his voice breaks the spell. Sascha cracks through the invisible barrier, moving to set his bag on the wardrobe with more enthusiasm than necessary. “It’s fine,” he says, not looking at Avery at first. Then, just to make sure his decision is clear, he issues his next words directly to the slender man in front of him:

“I wanted to come.” Experiencing nervousness over an app hookup is normal, even if that’s not the decision they’re dancing around.

Avery raises one dark eyebrow in a perfect arch. Sascha can’t raise just one eyebrow, though he’s tried in the mirror before. The CGI characters posing on DreamWorks ads make it look so easy.

“You want to come?” Avery repeats, putting the emphasis on a different word.

Instantly, heat rushes to Sascha’s cheeks. He’s pale, and his blond, upswept hair offers nothing to hide his blush, not like Avery’s curtain of dark curls. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

Avery laughs. Scratchy, quiet, and brief. “I know.” He scopes out the room from behind those nose-length curls, giving Sascha only peeks of his light green eyes as he moves. “How do you want this to start?”

Sascha inhales sharply. “I don’t— I, uh.” He turns toward the bag. “I brought wine coolers?”

“Is that a question?”

“No,” he says, tugging the flimsy cardboard four-pack out of the bag. Unfortunately, Sascha pulls with such enthusiasm, he sends the box of condoms tumbling onto the floor. He doesn’t have to turn around to sense how rigid Avery goes.

Fuck.

Abandoning the wine coolers, Sascha jerks his hands up, palms out in a gentling motion. “I got them just in case! I’m not demanding anything. Or expecting anything. To be honest, I didn’t know what to expect. Still don’t.”

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It feels like a victory when Avery pushes back a few dark locks, tucking them behind his ear. They fall almost immediately, but a few catch on his cheeks, leaving more of his face visible. He cocks his head. "What flavor?"

What? Sascha almost asks, before realizing Avery is referring to the drinks, not the condoms. "Exotic wildberry."

Avery extends his hand so Sascha can hand one over, then immediately cracks it open to take a sip. "Surprisingly good," he says with a nod.

Even though it's nothing, or at least not much of anything, a big grin pulls at Sascha's mouth. He did nothing but pick an appealing flavor of alcohol, but it seems to help Avery relax in his presence. Sascha grabs his own wine cooler, pausing to pick up the box of condoms and toss it on the dresser. In his periphery, Avery tracks that movement.

Their eyes meet. Without breaking the stare, Sascha uncaps his wine cooler and takes two big swallows before realizing his constitution will only allow him to drink one, so he slows.

"Do you wanna sit down?" Sascha tips his head toward the bed, then makes a point to seat himself in the corner chair. It's so small, he has to turn away from the short table to avoid hitting his knees. Sascha is five feet and eleven-point-five inches tall, coming so shy of six feet he resents his taller cousins, who aren't even alphas. There are so many ways Sascha fails in being the alpha his father wanted to inherit the pack?—

But no. He can't go down that spiraling mental storm drain with a stranger and potential hookup in front of him.

He swallows the angst back as Avery gingerly seats himself on the side of the bed. Then he goes back to staring, wondering what Avery sees in him when he stares right back.

Avery breaks the silence. "You want to fuck."

Sascha chokes on his drink. Avery arches his eyebrow again, while Sascha sputters. "I don't want to fuck," he manages. "But you don't have to. I'd never pressure anyone like that."

Avery considers him; he must find what he's looking for because he nods decisively. "Okay."

"Do you want to talk first?"

Avery shakes his head, which catches Sascha off-guard and fills him with odd disappointment. Maybe he does want to know all about this man before, during, or after they fuck. Or if they don't fuck at all. Sascha wants to know more about him than a PROWLER bio can convey.

But if Avery doesn't want to talk, then they won't. Sascha sets his drink on the table and uncurls from the chair, careful as he crosses the handful of paces separating him from Avery. He sits on his heels, not touching yet. Just looking. Observing.

Contrary to superstition, Avery doesn't smell bitter at all. He smells like a barn, actually, but Sascha is more preoccupied with the fear in his eyes. Sascha doesn't know how to process a werereature looking at him, the most worthless alpha in the Madison cougar pack, with such trepidation. It leaves him out of sorts.

Figuring something gentle and slow could ease them both into the moment, Sascha leans in for a kiss. The cougar in him wants to nip that freckle on Avery's bottom lip, but before he gets close, those seaglass eyes widen and, to Sascha's horror, he flinches.

Sascha is on his feet and pressed against the window in the span of a blink, but Avery launches off the bed and moves toward him instead of away. "I'm sorry," he says, holding his palms out until they're nearly brushing Sascha's chest. "I'm just, I haven't—" He sucks in a deep breath. "It's been a while."

"Since you've hooked up with someone?"

A smile twists Avery's lips, but it isn't a happy one. "Since I've touched anyone."

"What?!"

"I told you I only just moved here," Avery says quietly.

"Where were you before?" Sascha wonders. Finding safe space as a trans werecreature must be brutal, no matter where one looks.

Avery's lips part, but then he closes them and shakes his head. "I don't wanna talk about it. I just want to..." Avery licks his lips. This close, Sascha can see how dry those lips are, sticky skin pulling as he tries unsuccessfully to speak. To avoid the overwhelming desire to kiss him again, Sascha grabs Avery's drink and offers it to him. His murmur of thanks sounds utterly helpless. He takes a long swig before setting the bottle on the nightstand.

"Can I hug you?" Sascha asks, smiling faintly when Avery's shocked gaze snaps up.

"Seriously?"

“Yes, I’m being serious. Why would I lie about a hug?”

Avery grumbles, “It’s not like I know you.”

“It’s you who didn’t want to talk first,” Sascha reminds him, then spreads his arms wide. “But we can start here.”

CHAPTER

TWO

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Avery

By cinematic standards, Avery's first eight months spent being a werereature have been pretty goddamn boring. Not fun, not enjoyable, but they included surprisingly few life-or-death encounters, none of which involved any form of silver weaponry.

Sure, leaving Indiana on such short notice sucked, but it was either that or be mauled by a fully-loaded pack of much older, more experienced werereatures. So what if they'd sworn to protect and accept him after one of their own made a little oops and infected him during a time when she emphatically should not have been getting close with a human? That contract was overwritten the night of Avery's first full moon.

The horror of that shift, bloody and broken and feral, is the last thing he wants to think about right now. Especially since he hasn't had sex since the Friends With Benefits hook-up that brought him here.

Sascha might be a shifter—and easily stalked on social media, thanks to using his real name on his PROWLRL bio—but he's also the single nicest person Avery's met since getting runout of the only home he's ever known. So many things can change with one mistake made in a moment of passion, and fucking a shifter is no exception to that rule, but...God. It's been too fucking long since anyone has been willing to touch him. The loneliness got so bad his choices were either download that stupid app or give in, give up, and go die alone in a storm ditch.

Avery wasn't quite ready to meet his end face down in shallow water next to an impassively croaking bullfrog, so he got drunk enough to fill out the PROWLRL bio without crying, and now he's here.

Bewildered, he stares at Sascha's outstretched arms. While lurking Sascha's public posts, he discovered that, like himself, Sascha is an alpha. By then it was—by his standards of decency—too late to cancel. Avery can faintly smell Sascha's alpha magic on him but doesn't think Sascha has caught on to the inverse yet. Which is good because alphas outside of family hierarchies get along almost as poorly as shifters and werecreatures in general.

Cougars might not be big compared to Avery's ursine form, but defending himself would require having control over his shift... which he does not.

Is one hug worth being torn apart by another alpha?

Avery can't answer his own question, so instead he steps forward into Sascha's open arms, heaving a sigh of bone-deep relief when Sascha cocoons him in a firm embrace. His eyes flutter closed, impossible to keep open as his body hungrily absorbs Sascha's warmth.

"Feel better?" Sascha asks, a smile in his voice.

Avery grunts and squeezes his arms around Sascha's back. Yes, this hug is worth it. He could die now and be content. An awkward amount of time passes, during which death starts to sound like a mercy, but even though Avery's embarrassment is mounting, he can't make himself let go. It's as if he has a bone-dry intimacy well that is doing its best to siphon enough excess to comfort him when he returns to his scratchy bunk at the work farm.

Eventually, Sascha laughs, briefly drawing his arms so tight Avery can't breathe in, which is more okay than he'd expect. "We could move to the bed?" he suggests.

Though he doesn't want to be let go, Avery relaxes his hold but leaves his forehead pressed against Sascha's chest. He keeps his eyes closed, murmuring, "Whatever

works.”As long as the touching doesn’t stop.

Rather than release him entirely, Sascha winds behind Avery, then nudges the bridge of his nose against the back of Avery’s head. Before his parents kicked him out of his condo, Avery had fed a local stray cat. While tragically unfamiliar with his own instincts, Avery is well versed in recognizing feline behavior. The gentle, guiding affection from a man he’s known less than ten minutes—not to mention one who has been taught since birth to hate the creature Avery has become—almost drives him to tears.

Swallowing the emotions, Avery distracts himself by toeing out of his shoes, then crawls onto the bed. He has to fight the urge to look back at Sascha for approval, because he’s a fucking adult and doesn’t need to be told twice to get on a bed.

Once Avery is settled, the mattress dips as Sascha climbs on after him. He flops onto his back, then spends several seconds writhing to get comfortable, during which Avery wishes the bed wasn’t so damnuncomfortable, because this could take all night. All Avery wants to do is pillow into Sascha’s chest, already addicted to the man’s warmth and the strength of his embrace. Sascha is very classically attractive—tall, blond, with a toned chest underneath that navy blue Henley—but sex is the furthest thing from Avery’s mind right now.

Not that he isn’t down if Sascha initiates something, which, judging by that box of condoms, is more than likely. Avery just wants to be held a bit longer first.

Settled, Sascha carefully weaves his fingers into Avery’s long bangs, selecting one dark curl to tug gently. Avery can’t breathe, and it gets worse when Sascha asks, “This okay?” His smile is soft and fond, like he’s known Avery for years rather than a paltry handful of minutes.

Before the werevirus, Avery was a confident lover. The one to coax nervous partners

into action, though his method relied on whispering filthy things against their skin rather than hugs and gentle smiles. He preferred casual arrangements. Nurturing intimacy and deep connections took work he wasn't willing to put in just to get off.

Eight months of touch-starvation later, Avery regrets leaving all those people in the lurch, because he needs that intimacy more than oxygen right now.

“Breathe,” Sascha says, nudging his knuckle against Avery's hung-open jaw.

Avery sucks in a gasp, then snaps his jaw shut, feeling the pink flush of embarrassment crawling down his ears. “Sorry.”

“You don't strike me as the kind of person who over-apologizes,” Sascha muses before shaking his head. “Forget I said that. C'mere.” He gives the collar of Avery's baggy t-shirt a little tug—an unnecessary one, as Avery would have followed even if he said, ‘climb on my dick, fucker.’

Avery pours himself onto Sascha's chest with a graceless plop. He stretches his tense limbs, only relaxing when he's splayed every inch of his sub-average height over the length of Sascha's body. His chest is firm, not broad but just wide enough for Avery to sprawl without any part of him slumping onto the cheap mattress. He wraps his arms around Sascha's neck, forgetting the risk of approaching an alpha's throat, and buries his face in the crook of his neck. Only then does his breathing even out, aided further when Sascha hums and wraps one arm around the small of Avery's back, leaving his right hand to play amongst his curls.

“So, how long has it been, then?” Sascha's question enters Avery's ears and nests between them, a pattern of sounds with no discernible meaning. He doesn't answer, even when Sascha's chest twitches in laughter beneath him. “Okay. I'll leave you alone.”

In response, Avery can only grunt. It's early summer, but despite the muggy air that perpetually chokes his bunk at the work farm, he hasn't been able to shake off the chill he picked up wintering homeless downstate. This is the closest he's felt to normal since that fateful fuck last October.

Avery's eyes drift closed, eyelashes brushing Sascha's skin. He blinks a few times to savor the sensation before the heaviness pulls them down with finality, leaving him in soul-soothing darkness.

When Avery blinks again, there's a palm resting skin-to-skin between his shoulder blades, and dim morning light is slipping from the corners of the wall-spanning curtain. He gasps, tensing, then gasps again when the body he's sprawled over moans and squirms beneath him.

Oh, fuck. Sascha.

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They're both fully dressed, and other than the thumb hooked through one of his belt loops, keeping Sascha's hand at rest on Avery's ass, the press of their bodies is damn near virginal.

Horror creeps through Avery's pores, reviving that perpetual cold plaguing his core. They clearly didn't end up having sex... because Avery fell asleep. He fell asleep fifteen minutes into what was supposed to be a hook-up, leaving Sascha stuck as a glorified pillow.

Swearing loudly, Avery flails, flipping off of Sascha with such little grace he rolls off the bed and crashes to the floor.

"Are you okay?" Sascha's voice is thick with sleep, but when he leans over the edge of the mattress to stare at Avery, his eyes are alert.

"I'm fine," Avery says, scrambling to his feet. "Sorry."

"For what?"

If Sascha wants Avery to walk him through why this is humiliating, he's going to be disappointed because Avery needs to get the fuck out of this hotel. For multiple reasons.

"Where are you going?"

Double fuck.

Avery looks over his shoulder while he's shoving his foot into a worn high-top, wiggling until the fit is right. "I have somewhere I need to be. I shouldn't have fallen asleep."

"It's okay that you did," Sascha says. "I don't mind."

Flashing him a brief smile, Avery says, "I'm sorry anyway, but I really gotta get going now. I'll, uh..." See you around? Not if Avery can help it. Unfortunately, Bliss is a small fucking township, and unless Avery stays on the farm, it's likely they'll run into each other again. At least Avery slept for hours with Sascha's scent in his nose; he'll be able to smell that potent shifter magic and escape before any potential reunions.

If Sascha would even want to catch him after this. Avery would have shut down on anyone who fell asleep on him during a dick appointment, and certainly wouldn't have let them be his nightlong meat-blanket.

Another horrified shudder runs down Avery's spine. "Don't forget to take a shower," he advises Sascha, knowing without being told that his werecreature stink will give them away to any shifter familiar enough with their scent. Before Sascha can distract Avery with a response, Avery books it.

It's past seven AM when Avery trudges under the wooden archway announcing his arrival at Dennings Farm. Exactly nine days ago, Avery followed this rocky dirt road to the chipped-paint office of Farmer Howard Dennings, who greeted him with a grunt and a fifteen-page contract detailing the terms of his stay. He left the building wishing he could flag down the rickety stoner bus he rode up here in and beg them to take him back to Pontiac.

Not that he can go back. Last month's incident came way, way too close. He's lucky the Parahuman Civil Compliance officer who caught him didn't demand a blowjob

before connecting him with Dennings' work farm for packless werecreatures. Fuck Dennings for profiting off people's desperation, but at least the job included food and shelter.

Depending on one's definition of 'food' and 'shelter,' anyway.

Avery should have stopped to ask if the hotel stay included breakfast, because on the farm, plates are handed out at six AM on the dot. Anyone who doesn't make it to the second floor above the stables before that gets locked downstairs, with the expectation that they get right to work mucking stalls. Now he's too late to even do that.

He manages to slip into the schedule room to check the task list without being caught. Fortunately, there's no punch system, as they don't technically clock in or out. Living on Dennings Farm is an around-the-clock arrangement. Workers have precisely scheduled breaks for meals and one assigned day off per week. Last night was Avery's, but he's fairly sure he read somewhere that breaking curfew may result in losing free hours. Because of course.

As of twenty minutes ago, Avery was supposed to be feeding animals. If he can get to the chicken coop safely, he's sure they'll be too happy about getting their seed mix to rat him out for being late.

Unfortunately, if wishes came true, he wouldn't be a werecreature in bumfuck 'up north' Michigan.

Avery rushes through coops full of chickens, geese, ducks, and quail, scattering additional seed for the free-roaming peafowl. None of the supervisors bother him during this process, which is a major relief after this morning's humiliation. Good things don't last at Dennings Farm, though, and when Avery shows up to the store to help stock, he's a whole five minutes behind schedule. Shit, make that six.

The bored-looking clerk perks up when Avery rushes in with a box of freshly packaged greens to put in one of the fridges lining the wall. He's a meaty-looking guy with a smarmy expression and greasy demeanor, and when his swollen red eyes settle on Avery, he can feel the target as it's taped to his chest.

"You're late." His nametag reads 'Atwood,' and his clothes reek of a strong cologne which fails miserably at masking the lingering weed odor.

"You're..." Probably not supposed to be smoking on the job, Avery wants to say, but he bites his tongue. Farmer Dennings is a human but hires shifters as supervisors to keep the werecreature laborers in line. "I'm sorry. I got cornered by an angry goose and barely escaped with my life. At least I made it here at all."

In retrospect, that answer was probably worse.

Atwood doesn't react at first. He narrows his eyes into slits, a deep furrow forming between his eyebrows. Then he says only, "Get to work, noob," and pulls out his phone. While the store hasn't opened yet, the uncaring way he plops it on the counter suggests he isn't concerned about keeping it out of sight.

At eight-thirty, the store opens, and Avery still isn't finished stocking. The schedule said he was supposed to have a trainer, since this is his first time in the store after the initial tour, but no one shows up, and he's too afraid to ask. Atwood offers no assistance other than to snort when Avery struggles with customer questions.

Nothing continues to happen, but with every passing minute, Avery feels more and more exposed. Whenever he digs into the freezers, he feels Atwood's eyes on his back, but by the time he turns around, the shifter is back to staring at his phone.

When the crates in the back are finally empty, Avery is not only mentally exhausted, but starving. His body feels fine other than that—thanks to the werevirus, all the aches

and pains he accrued on his way to thirty went away. Less favorable is the appetite required to sustain a supernatural metabolism. He hasn't eaten since dinner yesterday, well over twelve hours ago.

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He'd rather eat his own foot than engage directly with Atwood, but the only option for getting food outside of mealtimes is buying from the store. Anxiety courses through him as he grabs a turkey sandwich and cup of cut vegetables from the fridge, figuring they'll be the easiest to eat while walking to his next scheduled task. Though he tries to calm down, Avery knows he's projecting fear pheromones, and there's no way a shifter won't pick up on it. Damn them and their heightened perception.

Avery ignores the fact that he also has heightened perception, focusing on begging his hands to not shake when he sets his selection on the counter in front of Atwood. "Can I buy this?"

It's a moment before Atwood looks away from his phone. He considers the food, raises his eyebrows, then flicks an unimpressed look at Avery. The silence stretches, making it more and more difficult for Avery to hold still instead of squirming.

"You got money?" Atwood finally asks.

"Yeah." Avery tugs his wallet out of the shorts he didn't have time to change out of, even though full-length pants are recommended. It was legally required for a pamphlet on safety protocol to be made available, but nothing from it is enforced. Farmer Dennings already said medical emergencies are none of his business, even work injuries.

Avery waits for Atwood to scan the items to retrieve his total, but all Atwood offers is more of that damn staring. Becoming impatient, Avery asks, "How much do I owe?"

“Twenty dollars.”

Jaw dropping, Avery looks down at the prices on both items. The sandwich is nine, and the vegetables are four. “These only say?—”

“I know what they say,” Atwood snaps. “I’ve had to watch your incompetent ass all morning. You’ll pay what I say you’ll pay.”

Avery already knows he doesn’t have twenty dollars in his wallet, so he grits his teeth and says, “Just the sandwich, then.”

“Twenty dollars.”

This isn’t the first time a shifter has tried to take advantage of him, and it’ll be far from the last, but at this point Avery ishangry, so he doesn’t consider the consequences before smacking his palm against the counter. “The sandwich is nine fucking dollars. You can’t just demand?—”

Atwood’s hand shoots out faster than Avery can react. His enhanced senses allow him to see every inch of the gesture in slow motion frames, but his reflexes aren’t there yet, so he doesn’t manage to dodge before Atwood snatches the collar of his t-shirt and drags Avery half over the counter. “I’ll demand you do whatever the fuck I want, you pitiful shit. You’re here, you do what you’re fuckin’ told,were-bitch.” He holds on a second longer before shoving Avery back. “Get out of my sight.”

This time, Avery is more than willing to comply.

CHAPTER

THREE

Avery

The door leading upstairs to the mess hall opens at 11:30 AM. By then, Avery's physical form has burned through the last of his endurance. He trudges to the horse barn, dragging his feet. Fortunately, lunch shifts are staggered, so unlike with breakfast, there's no threat of being locked out.

The food is just as disgusting as it was the first day he arrived, and the store sandwich he had to abandon would have tasted miles better, but he's too desperate to even taste the slimy green beans as they go down. The only good thing about meals here is that they give large portions and additional helpings—not out of charity, but because werecreatures can't work without enough calories to fuel them. Avery, fittingly, eats like a bear ripping apart a minivan to get to a box of fruit snacks. He takes a second plate and is eyeballing a third when the cooks begin to clean up the long table, and shifters move to hover in an intimidating fashion.

From that moment on, the drudgery of farm work takes over his higher brain functions. The only time Avery feels somewhat aware is when he's interacting with the animals, but 'giving cows nose scratches' isn't a task he's been assigned, so he spends hours numb, mechanically weeding in the vegetable gardens. At least this time, others were there to educate him on unwanted plants, so he didn't ignorantly rip out any important sprouts.

Avery takes the eight PM meal with much less enthusiasm than lunch. Now that he's not starving, the food is back to tasting like cardboard and mush, and he has trouble swallowing some of it.

He snags two water bottles on the way out, shoving one in the pocket of his baggy shorts. Curfew is technically at midnight but isn't enforced until two AM because time can be difficult to keep track of when you're shifted. After that, you risk a write-up. The only reason Avery didn't get caught by a door monitor today is because he

was gone overnight—otherwise, he would have been targeted when he tried to return to his bunk. Escaping punishment other than Atwood's power trip was pure luck, and Avery isn't keen to risk it again.

But he's frustrated. All the emotions he suppressed during repetitive assignments are coming out to hiss at him.

If it hadn't been for that ill-timed hook-up, he'd still be in his cozy condo, within walking distance from his parents. They were free-spirited pagans who'd accepted their only child coming out as a transgender man, but turning into a werecreature was too much. Their new-age spiritual practices led them to believe Avery had surrendered himself to dark magic, and they kicked his ass to the curb. Nothing would convince them that he hadn't gotten infected due to individual fault. It was deeply cruel, considering Avery didn't choose to get fucked by parahuman magic.

Then again... maybe he had. He'd known Melissa was a werecreature from the start, but trusted her safety precautions.

She was a good fuckbuddy. Cute, only a little bit taller than him, skilled with her mouth. They used barriers to avoid contact between skin and saliva, and didn't kiss. Except that night when she propositioned him, Avery didn't know Melissa wasn't herself. She was under the influence of some delirium caused by the werevirus, compelling its host to spread it to more victims. Maybe if Avery hadn't had his eyes closed he would have noticed the fangs she was about to sink into his neck, but again. Good with her mouth.

Melissa had been beside herself. She'd taken care of him while he turned and promised over and over again that her were-pack would accept and protect him—and, at first, they did. The pack alpha, a were-vulpine, had even let Avery stay in their pack house while he recovered from the initial infection.

Then, the night of his first full moon arrived.

Avery screamed through his first shift, bones breaking as they lengthened, his face extending into a fanged snout, dark hair bursting from his follicles until his stretching skin felt like it was on fire. Before he'd even caught his bearings, the alpha had looked up at Avery, a seven-foot-something bear monstrosity and smelled the alpha on him.

At the time, he hadn't known what it meant to have alpha magic. He didn't understand why the hideously mutated fox went for his neck when he stumbled, unused to operating such weight. No one told him that a lone alpha wasn't welcome on a were-pack's established territory.

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Melissa's promise of protection was shattered. Avery was run out of not just the city, but the entire state.

He learned a lot after that. He learned about alpha magic deriving from a stronger grade of the werevirus, mutating to mimic shifter dynamics. He learned that, unlike shifter family groups, where having multiple alphas born into the pack wasn't uncommon, the patchwork were-packs often had unstable politics, and two alphas in one territory opened the werereature in power up to threats for control.

Avery didn't want to be a werereature, and he didn't choose to be an alpha. He had no desire to control a pack, but that didn't matter. None of it fucking mattered—a lesson he learned in city after city as he worked his way through Ohio to Michigan. He was debating drowning himself in the greatness of Lake Erie until he found a ramshackle building in Pontiac where chronically packless werereatures had an uneasy truce.

Having a pack to provide safety in numbers is critical for a werereature who wants to survive, but no existing pack would take an alpha who'd sprout into a giant mutant bear every time the moon turned into a dinner plate. That left starting his own pack, but no one wanted to be deferential to a five-foot-four punk for the rest of each lunar cycle.

Hulking out and nearly killing a human who tried to mug him before getting nailed by Parahuman Civil Compliance was the worst and best way to get him out of that reclaimed building in Pontiac. It won him that ticket to Dennings Farm, which wasn't much better in terms of security, but a real bed, consistent access to food, and an escape from endless territory battles was too good to refuse.

So, while he made it here, those eight months of misery have caught up to him. Last night, Avery unwittingly messaged an alpha shifter on a hookup app only to discover him to be the nicest person he's ever met. And then Avery rewarded the guy's kindness by passing the fuck out and dipping without even a morning handy to take the edge off.

Avery needs to run.

Not, like, away. Just run until the numbness comes back, until he's breathing too hard from exertion to let the anger tighten his chest.

In addition to being home for an impressive six-hundred people, Bliss Township is snuggled up with the Wilderness State Park, which isn't too far from Dennings'. He'll run there until he's so tired he has to drag himself back, which will hopefully happen before two.

That decided, Avery hops a fence, ignoring the little shock he gets when he bumps one of the electrified wires installed to keep animals from escaping. He starts at a casual jog, looking around and straining his enhanced senses to make sure he doesn't cross paths with anyone who'd be keen to start shit. Once he's far enough from the farmland, he breaks into a full-out run. He powers down a field, weaving between sparse trees, and even though he knows this is far from testing his endurance, it still amazes him.

Before turning, Avery couldn't last more than a couple minutes at a normal run. He was a typical nerd, preferring to stay inside and read or watch shows when he wasn't working shifts as a receptionist at a behavioral health clinic. His trim figure was more metabolism than exercise, and he was far from having any muscle mass to brag about.

Now, ten minutes into the attempt to clear his mind, Avery isn't even winded. Being on his feet so often has toned his legs considerably, and he's already started to notice

his arms and torso developing faster than a human's would, even with aggressive strength-training.

A sudden urge to shift brings Avery to an abrupt halt, his stomach sloshing. The flare of instinct is so intense he briefly thinks he'll vomit, and it takes a moment for the motion sickness to ease.

Avery doesn't know how to control his shift. He's been told it hurts less when you lean into it, but without the mentorship of Melissa's pack, he's never been taught what that means. It's horrible every single time, painfully transforming into a huge, clumsy mutant. Full moons are the only times when every werecreature on the farm is left to their own devices after tying up loose ends after lunch. For obvious reasons, Farmer Dennings doesn't want a horde of balls-out werecreatures prowling around his farm.

While Avery has heard that learning to partial shift allows greater control during a full moon, he couldn't begin to guess how he'd initiate the transformation, much less halt it partway through.

He looks around the field, scenting the air in case there's something there he can't see. Nothing comes back other than a few wild animals, all of whom will hopefully run for cover when toxic magic from the werewolf virus begins to leak into a dangerous aura. Avery has never meant to harm or kill anything, but one time he came back to himself at dawn naked, covered in blood, and staring at a half-eaten moose carcass.

Learning to control those violent instincts would be a relief, but it all comes down to Avery being strong enough to stop the warped ursine from taking over.

Sucking in a breath, Avery tries to focus on that inner beast, approaching it in his mind the way he would an actual bear. Awkward, since he's never been stupid enough to approach an actual bear. Getting mauled doesn't sound fun, and being the

one doing the mauling isn't that much better.

He's flying blind, hoping to cajole the monster out just enough to negotiate before losing his mind to the beast. It feels weird, trying to convince something that wants out that they should play a new game called 'self-restraint.' Just long enough to see what would happen. Right?

But the ursine doesn't emerge, unconvinced by incomplete promises. Before Avery can firm his argument, he hears a piercing howl in the distance. It throws him entirely out of the moment, and that's when the ursine pounces.

Foreign impulses seize Avery by the throat, fighting his mind for control. A single wolf is no threat. Turning the apex predator into prey is a game much more fun than Avery's pitiful attempts at restraint. Warm saliva floods Avery's mouth and rolls over his lips, triggered by the ursine's lust to be untethered—a beast of pure, indulgent instinct.

The wolf howls again, and this time, a chorus of answering howls bursts from the trees. Where the fuck did they come from? Avery didn't sense any wild animals a moment ago, but now, there must be at least a dozen.

A surge of fear forces the enraged ursine down. Avery's head clears, but by then he's been surrounded, and in his experience, running will trigger a shifter's killing instinct faster than holding ground and appealing to the more human logic. Human-like, because no shifter considers themselves human, as opposed to werecreatures who clutch their shredded humanity like a comfort blanket. But the werevirus is incurable, and you can never go back.

So he calls out instead, going for what he knows. "I'm a worker from Dennings Farm, which is nearby. Not trying to take anyone's land or anything. I just wanted room to run, but I can leave now."

A number of canine yips follow, but no voice answers him, and none of the wolves advance.

Avery turns, then staggers back with a gasp. He didn't feel a flare of shift magic, but far too few feet away stands a tall woman with shorn hair dressed only in a ghostly white gown, half-shredded and barely clinging to her tanned shoulders. Barefoot, she smells of wolf and loam, her eyes a bright, inhuman gold. Her pupils are pinpricks fixed upon him, and she doesn't blink until he swallows hard, dry throat sticking.

Then she smiles. With teeth.

“You're not welcome here, werecreature.”

“I'm just a worker at the Dennings Farm,” he explains again, holding onto the hope that he can exit this encounter without killing or being killed. “We're all werecreatures there.”

The wolf shifter takes a step toward him. Avery responds by retreating several steps, knowing he's backing into the collective maw of her pack and, even worse, showing weakness by giving up ground.

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“Werereatures, yes,” the shifter says. “Notalphawerereatures.”

Fuck. It always comes down to that.

Avery squares his shoulders and straightens his spine, knowing nothing is going to make him look impressive while wearing last night’s sweaty cutoffs, smelling like terror, and being nearly a foot shorter than her. The clouds shift, unobstructed moonlight exposing her impressive musculature. Even if Avery lets the ursine free, he might not be fast enough to avoid getting his throat ripped out mid-shift.

“I know you don’t think I’m a threat to your pack,” he tells her, going for candid over useless posturing. He doesn’t expect the shifter to laugh, the sound rasping like a cheese grater in her throat.

“We’re on the same page, then.” The shifter glances up at the moon, far from full, then back down at Avery. “Celeste Fuller. Alpha of the Wilderness wolf pack. This is my land.”

“I had no idea, but thanks for telling me. I’ll get out of your hair—uh.” His eyes flick to the curve of her nearly bald scalp. “Your... fur?”

Celeste begins to prowl, maintaining the same distance as she circles him, gold irises glowing in the dark. “Stay. I’m not done with you, werereature.” Her thighs flex underneath the torn gown, warning she’s preparing to pounce.

Knowing he doesn’t have a chance of fighting back, Avery stills. “I’m not sure I’ll like whatever you’re planning,” he says.

One side of Celeste's smile pulls wider than the other, exposing a sharp lupine fang. "Who are you, little alpha?"

"My name's Avery. Smith, I guess." Though he doesn't use his parents' surname anymore.

Celeste's eyes flare. "Avery of no pack," she muses. "Yet trespassing on someone else's lands."

"I told you I didn't know. I'm new at this."

"That much is obvious." Celeste surveys him a moment more. Then she snaps, "Beryl. Approach."

Illumination from the moon traces the broad shoulders of Celeste's pack member. Avery notes thick, wavy hair and olive-toned skin, a muscular frame, and the confident gait of a?—

Wait.

Nostrils flaring, Avery studies the approaching person with more care and is startled upon realizing Beryl isn't a shifter, but anotherwerecreature. "That's not a..." Words abandon him.

"Your nose isn't entirely useless, at least. Good to know." Celeste juts her chin at the werecreature. "Beryl is an honorary member of the Wilderness wolf pack, an opportunity I offered them from the goodness of my heart. I know how hard it is for lone werecreatures. It's a dangerous lifestyle."

"Lifestyle?" Avery snaps, incredulous. "Getting turned into a rabid animal against your will isn't a fucking hobby. I had areallife before this."

If Celeste is offended by his outburst, she doesn't show it. "You're lucky it's me you ran into, Avery. Most alphas would have disemboweled you by now."

Deciding not to push his luck, Avery withholds further backtalk.

"You being an alpha makes this tricky. What poor species did your mutated genes bastardize?"

"Ursine," he informs her begrudgingly.

Celeste's brows arch. "That's quite the affiliation."

Resentful, Avery mutters, "It's not like I got to choose."

"An alpha were-ursine. Risky, but tempting. Beryl," she says, drawing the werecreature's gaze immediately. "Can you keep him in line, do you think?"

Avery bristles at the insinuation, and when Beryl responds, "With ease, Alpha," the path down his spine where an animal's hackles would be begins to tingle.

"Alright," Celeste says, nodding thoughtfully. "I'll allow you to join my pack, as Beryl has. There are others, as well. Werereatures that could be of use to me. You'll be granted protection while acting on my orders. Unlike the slop at the farm, within my pack you'll eat good meat and serve a purpose as more than a too-autonomous parasite. This is the best offer of protection you'll ever get."

The offer has Avery frozen where he stands, as if it was mid-December rather than muggy June. A pack? Not just any pack, but a shifterpack? That's almost as unheard of as a cougar alpha meeting him in a hotel room to fuck. Except no, he can't think about Sascha right now. This conversation is too important for him to be distracted by wistfulness.

“What’s the catch?”

“You’ll belong to me.” She says it matter-of-factly, like it should be a given. “Every breath you take will be under my control. My rules are the only things that matter, and you will eat, sleep, and shit in accordance with my schedule. Disobedience will be punished. Questioning my orders will be punished. Defiance of any kind will end with your trachea between my teeth. It might sound unreasonable now, but you’ll come to understand. My authority is the only thing that will keep you safe.”

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The worst thing about her speech is... she's not wrong. Avery has spent months looking for a pack only to be told that if he doesn't start one of his own, it'll never happen. And yet no self-respecting werecreature would submit to an alpha who looks like an underfed teenager, much less enough of them to form a pack.

Avery chews the inside of his lip, thoughts racing. The idea of better food is tempting. He'll be monitored by shifters regardless of what he chooses, and the farm is exhausting. So many rules, tasks he can fuck up. Would it be the same with Celeste?

In the end, there are too many questions running through his mind. Unwilling to dig through them, Avery makes his decision: "No, thank you."

Beryl snorts quietly. Celeste doesn't make a noise, but her gold eyes narrow. "My hearing is flawless," she says coolly, "but I'll allow you to repeat yourself, just in case I made a rare mistake."

Avery groans and rubs his eyes. "I'm so tired, dude. I appreciate the, uh, offer, but... seriously, no thanks. I'm gonna stay at the farm."

"You don't need me to tell you how much you'll regret this. Beryl, if you would."

Perfectly obedient, Beryl steps forward. "Our Alpha's generosity should not be overlooked," they inform him.

Avery shakes his head. "I have a curfew to meet." In the gutsiest move he's ever made, Avery turns away from Celeste and begins trudging through the field at a sluggish pace. It's probably an insult to turn his back on a 'rival' alpha, but Avery is

simply too exhausted to care.

Five steps in, no one moves to attack him. At five more steps, he begins to wonder if Celeste prefers to make the kill herself, or if she lets her pets play with their food before eating it.

But Avery keeps walking, and walking, and walking, and eventually, the night stills except for the sound of nocturnal critters rustling through the tall grasses.

The wolves allowed Avery to retreat. He doesn't know why, but he's not foolish enough for relief. Instead, a feeling of dread settles heavily on his shoulders, whispering that Celeste knows where to find him. Just because she didn't kill him this time doesn't mean the target Atwood pinned to him earlier hasn't been joined by a second, much more deadly one.

CHAPTER

FOUR

Sascha

Time moves at a crawl. Sascha spends every hour pining, lying awake at night thinking about Avery's warmth on his chest, sorely missing the weight, the whisper of breath against his neck.

Why can't he let this guy go?

It's not the fact that Avery left before they could fuck. Sascha would have liked to see more of him, wondering if he was wearing a binder or had top surgery, or if he has freckles anywhere other than the bridge of his nose. He wonders if Avery would have grown more tense, or if he would have clung like a limpet, desperate for all Sascha

had to give him. Their waking interaction was brief, but supporting Avery as he slept was transcendent. Sascha had barely slept beyond a comfortable haze, too busy burying his nose into the waterfall of loosely coiled dark hair.

With the entire line of that lithe body pressed from his neck past his hips, Sascha felt the beginning of a tether forming between them, only to be tugged apart when Avery hurried out far too early in the morning.

That tether remains bound to Sascha's core, but the other end is limp and lost.

A rhythmic thumping against the room's right wall distracts Sascha from, once again, wondering if he could hunt Avery down. He's had this thought hundreds of times in the last two days, debating whether it would count as stalking if he just happened to scour every inch of Bliss until he caught a whiff of Avery's scent. He already tried messaging him on PROWL, but Avery deactivated his account the same day he ran off.

The banging continues, dragging a long groan from Sascha's chest. Garrett must be 'on' with his ex-girlfriend again. They can't stay away from each other, which Sascha sympathizes with—especially in his current situation—but he doesn't appreciate Garrett putting his bed against the wall they share. At least Jakob, on the left, hasn't shown any interest in dating. No beds abusing the wall from that side.

The twins are the closest family Sascha has from his mother's line, but their relationship has been soured by how they supersede Sascha within pack politics. His dad favors them as enforcers, but Sascha knows they're being groomed in the ways of a pack leader. Denise Madison, Sascha's mother, wouldn't have liked it, but she's busy being dead. No time to defend her son from his father's disappointment.

The twins' father, Denise's only sibling, was an asshole drunk. Sascha doesn't remember much of him because he abandoned the boys when they were still toddling.

Ever since, Samuel has treated Jakob and Garrett like his own sons. Treated them better than his actual son.

Taking on the responsibility of leading the Madison cougar pack is something Sascha has wanted all his life. His mother insisted Sascha would be a wonderful alpha, but there were reasons his dad rarely echoed the sentiment. While the position is, by family hierarchy, rightfully Sascha's, he suspects Samuel plans to keep the role for as long as possible, using the twins as his right and left hands. This would leave Sascha to wither uselessly until his father takes his final breath, at which point...

Sascha doesn't know, but he suspects the pack would mutiny to keep him from taking over as the pack alpha. There are young alphas who would be grown enough to lead by that time. Keeping Jakob and Garrett as supervisors of the fresh-faced leader would be a much more appealing option than letting an inexperienced, chronically ill alpha put the pack's survival at risk.

Denise had been the ideal mate for an alpha leader before she contracted the spinning sickness. What started as migraines progressed to fits of vertigo and fainting spells. She did her best to keep up with the pack despite it, and it wasn't her fault when the infant boy she delivered was a carrier of both strong alpha magic and the same spinning sickness that plagued her every day.

Denial of the position he was born to fill became Sascha's inevitable fate from the moment of his birth, and nothing he's attempted to prove himself with has made any difference.

It's not that they don't love him. Sascha knows that, despite everything, his cousins try to bond with him, and his dad works hard to keep him safe, and his mom... Well, she wanted him to have everything he was owed.

It's good the walls here are hard plaster. A woman's escalating cries join the noise,

slightly off beat from each impact, and that's what ends up busting the meter of Sascha's tolerance.

Sascha storms out of his room to glare at Garrett's door, then tests the knob, becoming incredulous when he finds Garrett didn't even lock it. He pounds on the doorjamb, then flings the door open. "Hey, Gare! Your last hookup just posted a pic of her baby bump on Insta. You should probably deal with that before planting another one." He stalks down the hallway, smiling to himself at Garrett's enraged squawk.

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After that, Sascha gets it in his head to grab some food and go to the exercise grounds. In between vertigo spells, he's actually quite skilled, and keeping in shape is one way Sascha can exert control over his body. The major problem is that he can neither predict nor prevent the spells, so if one takes him out, he's fucked. It's kept him back from many pack runs over the years—something Sascha initially resented, but as of late, has been more relieved by.

The exercise ground is behind the main pack house. Sascha lives there with his immediate family, but the building also includes a huge kitchen, a meeting space, and a den for the cubs to play in.

Sascha swings by the kitchen to grab some of the pre-prepared food. Shifter metabolisms need supplements throughout the day, so outside of regular mealtimes, the cooks throw together sandwiches, salads, and other health-conscious dishes that can be grabbed while on the go. Armed with sustenance, Sascha weaves through the hallways toward the back of the house, taking the narrow corridors built to allow the cooks and cleaners quick passage around the house's active main halls. He comes to the door leading out of the last corridor, preparing to make a break for it because this is where his father's greeting office is located.

Guests are brought through a special entrance separating this hall from the domestic part of the house. Right now, Sascha can smell people standing in that hallway, and if he holds his breath to listen very carefully, he can make out the cadence of his father's voice from inside the office.

Sascha easily identifies their guest: Celeste Fuller, alpha of the Wilderness wolf pack. Celeste and Sascha's father are on good terms. Both are equally ready to defend the

other's territory, and together, their packs are dominant over Bliss Township and much of its surrounding areas.

In the hall stands three of Celeste's enforcers—two wolf shifters, and Beryl, a tiger were-felid who's more often than not a silent presence at Celeste's side. Samuel hates having a werecreature on Madison territory, but Celeste has reassured him that Beryl is entirely under her control. Regardless, Sascha's father has strict rules against pack members—Sascha included—being nearby when any of Celeste's werecreature pets are around. In fact, the only ones not affected by the order are, unsurprisingly, the twins. Another sniff tells Sascha that Jakob is in the office with his dad while Garrett is (ideally) stuck with blue-balls upstairs. That's not as funny as it was a handful of minutes ago.

Grumpier than usual about being left out, Sascha makes the impulsive decision to do something that's not necessarily smart, but will work well enough.

Shifter magic is fluid. Changing bodies isn't so much a transformation as it is a flicker through the aether. An individual's biped form passes through whorls of pure magic, and they return as their animal, whole and painless.

Unlike most shifters, Sascha has to be careful when interacting with the aether. The spinning sickness keeps him vulnerable to magic's natural current, leaving him at risk of the same flare-ups that contributed to his mother's death. Episodes are unpredictable and can range in severity, which means Sascha has to be choosy about when and where he decides to shift.

Right now seems a fine time, since he's on his way to the exercise grounds anyway, so Sascha eases himself into the aether, communing with the part of him that is cougar. Bringing that self forth.

When Sascha exits the aether, his clothes are in a heap below his paws. His round

ears swivel, adjusting to the vibrations of the world around him. In this form, Sascha can eavesdrop on his father's conversation with greater accuracy.

Celeste's voice is, as always, loud and brassy. While Samuel tends to be soft-spoken, making it harder to decipher his speech from a distance, Sascha doesn't have to strain to hear what Celeste is saying.

"—don't think he's a threat. I would have killed him if I did."

"You shouldn't have risked it," Samuel says. "Another alpha in our territory? And a werecreature, at that? Celeste, I'm appalled."

If Sascha had been in biped form, he'd have rolled his eyes. His dad would never say something as crass as 'pissed as hell,' but if he thinks Celeste cares a single burning blue fuck if someone is appalled by her decisions, he's got to work on his judgement of character. He should work on that anyway because Sascha doesn't like Celeste and never has.

Jakob speaks without subtlety. "Where is he? It won't be hard to take out a lone werecreature. Give us his location."

"He works on the Dennings Farm, but you won't lay a hand on him. I have an agreement with Howard Dennings, and interfering with his business won't do if we want to keep the peace."

"Since when have you cared about keeping peace, Celeste?" Samuel asks with a sigh. At least he's realistic about that part of her personality. "I am familiar with Howard's agreement with the werecreatures who work on his land, and while I don't approve, I would hesitate to disrespect him and how he chooses to run his business."

"I think he's brilliant," Celeste says. Sascha can hear the shrug in her voice. "Try as

we might, shifters won't ever be able to stop the werevirus spread. Even if we could convince other shifters to stop reproducing with humans?—"

"That's a myth," Jakob protests. "Shifters aren't responsible for the werevirus."

Samuel says Jakob's name quietly, silencing him.

Laughing, Celeste continues, "It's a valid theory, whether you like it or not. Shifters were not meant to procreate outside our species. The mutation of our genes when introduced to human physiology is divine punishment for those of us who lack self-control. The werevirus is an albatross around our neck, and it is our cosmic duty to invert the narrative."

"I didn't know you were spiritual," Samuel says dryly.

Celeste huffs. "The point is, wercreatures are not going away, so why not harness them? The only good wercreature is a controlled one. Howard Dennings has the right idea."

"And do you have control over this new alpha who now lives on the cusp of our territory?"

There's a pause before Celeste admits, "He walked away from my offer."

The silence settles, then stretches so thin, Sascha can feel the tension through the wall.

"So he's not a controlled wercreature," Jakob says carefully.

"It sounds that way, yes," agrees Samuel.

“Why aren’t we hunting him down and killing him, then? Fuck what that old farmer has to say about it.”

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Sascha grits his teeth so hard, he almost misses Celeste saying, “I think he could be an asset. He just needs to be worn down until he sees what he’s missing by refusing to join my pack.”

“This is a matter of pride for you, isn’t it, Celeste?” Sascha can’t help but admire the calm in his father’s voice, when both Jakob and Sascha himself are growing frustrated with the alpha wolf’s arrogance. “What does he have that you lack?”

“I don’t lack anything,” snaps Celeste.

Sascha clearly pictures the scowl on his father’s face. “I’m getting tired of your games. Say what you want from me or go.”

“Did I say I wanted something from you? I came here to warn you and your pack to stay away from the alpha because I already have him in my sights.”

Samuel hums. “Consider me warned. Anything else?”

In lieu of answering, Celeste stomps from the office, and with a few hissed words, she collects her enforcers, and is gone. Sascha holds still for a handful of additional seconds, not wanting to expose his childish eavesdropping. If his dad and Jakob leave the office he’ll be caught anyway—still in cat form, standing on his own wrinkled jeans—but mercifully, they don’t.

“Are you really going to listen to her, Uncle? An alpha werecreature in our city is a huge risk. What happens on the full moon? I don’t trust someone like Celeste to be realistic about what her wolves can control. What did she say his beast was, again?”

Clicking his tongue, Samuel says, “Some kind of bear. It doesn’t matter because we?—”

Sascha doesn’t hear what his father says next because sudden realization has his heart plummeting through the floor. They were talking about Avery. If his brain was able to slow down, Sascha might have felt a bit embarrassed for not having noticed that Avery was also an alpha, but he’s already snapping up his clothes in his mouth and bounding down the corridor until he’s far enough away from the back hall that he can shift back to bipedal and pull his pants on. Yeah, he did notice Avery had a particularly intense aura, but he was distracted by his smell and how small he felt pressed so closely?—

No, Sascha can’t get lost in those thoughts again. He needs to focus on getting his ass to Dennings Farm.

The drive to the farm is worse than the drive to the hotel where Sascha first met Avery. This time, he doesn’t look at a picture to keep him moving—all Sascha needs is the memory of Avery’s narrow frame crushed in his embrace. If he focuses hard enough, he can still feel the cool skin at the small of Avery’s back, but recalling the knobs of his spine nearly has Sascha missing his exit.

He pays attention to the road after that.

Pulling right up to the farm store would be too conspicuous, so Sascha follows the dirt road around the farmland until he finds a small drive with wood planks for parking blocks. There’s a beat-up truck in one of the spaces, but Sascha can’t smell the owner nearby, so he takes the risk and parks on the other side of the lot.

Getting out of the car, Sascha studies the farm border. There’s a chained-up metal gate, large enough for livestock or a tractor to pass through, and the surrounding fence is strung with electric wire.

Sascha doesn't shift more than once in the same day if he can help it. Shifting back and forth takes a lot out of him, and over-exertion makes a vertigo episode much more likely. Unfortunately, he doesn't see tromping along the farm in biped form going well if he's caught, so he strips and shoves his clothing into a backpack, which he hides in the wheel-well of his car.

The evening sky is bruise-colored, purple and blue with the yellow hint of sun as it sinks below the horizon. It won't be fully dark for a few hours still, but Sascha can't wait. He lunges over the gate, naked and nervous, and when he lands, it's on four paws.

It's dangerous, risking discovery in cougar form. Farm security might shoot a predator to keep them from harming the livestock. That, or they might identify him as a shifter, but Sascha would prefer a bullet wound to getting caught trespassing and reported to his dad. At least he has a chance of surviving the first one.

Once he's sure he won't be spotted immediately, Sascha trots along the boundary fence, trying to sniff out anything of use. It won't be easy to track Avery's scent on a populated plot of land, but Avery has the greatest chance of being found among the other workers. Sascha has never been to Dennings Farm before, so he's relieved when he comes across a post with signage. Labeled arrows of rough wood point down an intersection of dirt roads. Sascha debates for a moment before heading toward the housing area.

Two large buildings that look like repurposed barns face each other across a wide, dusty expanse. Faded red paint labels one as A, the other as B. Sascha wonders if he should have kept his clothes and tried his luck joining the group milling between the two buildings because his only option for not being immediately spotted is a large crab-apple tree surrounded by thick bushes.

Sascha wiggles underneath the tree, flattening himself so he can watch from under the

bushes. Past-Sascha would never have believed he'd risk being so close to a huge group of werereatures just to see a boy again, but in his defense, that boy is gorgeous, and Sascha wants him. Needs to warn him of the danger, too.

The werereatures begin walking in a common direction, and the sour smell of canned vegetables in the distance has Sascha assuming it's mealtime. If he stays here, Avery should eventually come out of housing or return to it after eating. Waiting that long sounds torturous, which is why he's very lucky to spot a familiar mop of curls emerging from Building A, just barely visible behind a taller someone's shoulder.

It takes all Sascha's restraint not to spring up and run to him immediately. Avery follows the staggered crowd toward the gross vegetable smell, too close for Sascha to catch his attention without alerting anyone else.

Jagged twigs and branches scrape against Sascha's fur as he scrambles from underneath the foliage, desperate to not lose sight of Avery. He runs behind Building B, hoping to catch the slender werereature on the other side. He does see him, but not far enough away from the others. Damn it.

Sascha stalks Avery to a large, two-story barn. There are horses in stables visible through the wide-open wall, and everyone seems to be heading up a staircase, down which Sascha now smells cheap ground meat and sweet tomato sauce. It's all he can do not to gag.

Just as Sascha begins to truly worry he'll have to go back to his car to retrieve his clothes and hope he can make it back to the housing area in time to catch Avery before he returns, the man stops. He tilts his chin skyward and sniffs the air.

Sascha holds his breath.

So casually Sascha almost believes it's incidental, Avery grabs his phone and puts it

up to his ear, breaking from the others on their way up the staircase. He turns the corner of the barn, where there's shadow and long grasses that nearly reach his knees. Yellow shoots fold under his boots.

By now, the werecreatures have slowed to a trickle. Avery scans his surroundings until his clever seaglass eyes stop right by the rusted pile of machinery where Sascha's hiding. He says, phone still at his ear, "What the fuck are you doing?"

A thrill runs down Sascha's spine. Avery recognizes him! He hasn't forgotten Sascha's scent any more than Sascha has forgotten his. Sascha leaves his hiding place to take a roundabout path to the patch of grass where Avery is tapping his foot, taking only a slight bit of care not to be seen. What's most important is getting to Avery.

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Then he's there, looking up at the werecreature as he frowns down at him. Sascha really should have brought clothes because he can't explain a word in this form. Instead, Sascha purrs and rubs his cheek across Avery's thigh, pressing his scent into the dirty jeans.

Avery blinks, then looks at his phone and sighs. "You're gonna make me miss dinner. Lead the way."

I'll buy you dinner, Sascha tries to communicate telepathically. It doesn't work, so he winds around the back of Avery's calves, body leaning into him, then proceeds to guide him toward his car. Avery is quiet most of the way, only acknowledging him with long, silent stares.

They make it to the fence without incident, enrobed in the gauzy darkness of creeping night. Still not star-studded pitch black, but soon. It might be, by the time Sascha figures out how to get past the gate.

The bottom rung is too low for him to walk beneath; he'd have to get on his belly and creep, which is not a dignified look. Less dignified would be the alternative: Shifting to biped and climbing over as he did before, this time with an audience. Sascha glances at Avery, not wanting to take either option. He doesn't want to be embarrassed in front of Avery, whether that be by scrambling in the dirt or scaling a fence with his bits out.

A small smile tugs at the corner of Avery's mouth. He strides forward, takes the padlocked chain in his hand, and simply unclips it. His smile grows wider when Sascha realizes the lock wasn't actually engaged. Whatever expression he's wearing

must be hilarious on the face of a cougar, because Avery laughs before pushing the gate open enough for Sascha to walk through.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Avery

The cougar is cute. Like, really cute. Cuter still is that the cougar is Sascha, who Avery swore he'd never see again...

Yet here they are.

Sascha veers to rub against Avery's legs as he saunters through the open gate, heading toward a gravel-covered lot with a single car parked within. Avery latches the gate before following him, stopping to watch Sascha scratch at the wheel well. A soft sound of feline frustration leaves him when whatever he's doing produces no visible results.

"Do you, um, need help?" Avery isn't sure about proper etiquette for interacting with shifters in their animal forms. He's never had a good, or even neutral, interaction with one before.

One of Sascha's ears twitches, then he pauses to consider Avery. His eyes are so pretty—dilated pupils sitting in blue irises that melt into gold, like sunlight on a lakeshore. Avery gets lost trying to remember the color of Sascha's eyes in biped form, but then the space around Sascha ripples, distorting the view behind him. Avery blinks twice—first at Sascha's disappearance, then at his reappearance, tall and pale and very, very naked.

Avery steps back, alarmed and preparing to cover his eyes, but it occurs to him that Sascha had been prepared to fuck him in that hotel room. Had Avery not fallen asleep, he'd have seen a lot more. Sascha doesn't make any attempt to hide himself, so Avery doesn't look away.

Damn, he's sexy. Toned but not ripped, with a masculine jaw and a strong, dimpled chin. There's a trail down from his navel that's only a few shades darker than his upswept blond hair.

And, god, his eyes are the same bright blue, limned in gold.

Sascha should be on the cover of a magazine—where he can't look back at Avery while he gawks, as Sascha is doing now.

Lips curving into a teasing smile, Sascha reaches under the wheel well and withdraws a backpack. He removes a bundle of clothing, at which point Avery does look away, because watching someone dress feels too intimate. After his usual one-night stands, Avery would put himself together in the bathroom, leaving his date to tend their own business.

Not that it matters. Falling asleep on Sascha's chest, still fully clothed, is the most intimate thing Avery has done in years.

"Sorry for crashing your party," Sascha says once he's dressed.

"You didn't. Food here sucks."

Sascha laughs and scratches the back of his head. "I could get you something better."

Raising his eyebrows, Avery can't help but ask, "You'd risk someone you know seeing you buy food for a werecreature?"

The laugh melts into a frown. “There’s always drive-thru.”

Now Avery can’t help his own laugh, one that grows into a grin at Sascha’s surprised expression. “Isn’t the closest fast-food restaurant, like, two cities over?”

“I have a car,” Sascha says, gesturing to it.

“I can see that.”

“Get in, then.”

Avery allows himself approximately three seconds of hesitation. He should think about this before jumping into a stranger’s car. It could be a set-up. Could be a trick.

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Or, it could be the nicest person Avery's met in eight months sneaking onto some asshole's farm to find him and whisk him away to the closest McDonald's. If that ends with Avery's body decomposing in a ditch, the McChicken would be worth it.

Having made his peace with any possible outcome, Avery jogs to the passenger door and slides in. A wave of cool air from the vents hits him at full blast, and he slumps against the seat with a groan of relief. Unyielding heat has become a constant of Avery's days, and this is the first time he's felt air conditioning since the hotel, a whole week ago. Feels like longer. Avery slams the door to keep the blessed cold in and the oppressive heat out, then rubs his sweaty hands together.

"Where to?"

Sascha taps his fingers on the steering wheel. "There's a Dairy Queen in Mackinac City, about twenty minutes north. Or, a Wendy's in Petoskey, forty minutes south. Your pick."

Avery doesn't know much about either city, so he goes with what will get him fed the fastest: "Let's do DQ."

With an agreeable hum, Sascha curls his long fingers around the handle of the gear shift. He has beautiful hands. Avery's never been attracted to something like that before.

Despite wanting to fill the drive with conversation, Avery can't think of anything to say. He spends every minute wracking his brain, begging for a question that won't sound awkward or embarrassing. By the time Sascha pulls into the drive-thru, not a

single word has passed Avery's lips.

He's forced to speak then, ordering the cheapest items possible so as to not impose on Sascha, who orders a large combo for himself along with a handful of other sides and desserts.

"You hungry?" Avery asks as they pull up to the first window, trying to make it a joke.

Sascha hands the worker his card with a brief smile, which widens when he looks back to Avery. "Yeah, and I bet you are, too."

Manic butterflies join the knot of nerves and hunger that has been settled in Avery's stomach. It's so intense, he might actually throw up before the food even makes it into the car.

At the second window, Sascha accepts several full bags, the first two of which he hands to Avery before having to put the third in the back so he can wrangle three drinks and a Reese's cup blizzard. He tips the worker twenty dollars cash and, with a cheerful goodbye, pulls back onto the road.

Avery sits still, hot food burning his legs through the bag, too stunned for speech. The nighttime city passes by as Sascha drives, visible only as dark blurs.

"Where are we going?" Avery finally asks.

"Somewhere we can eat without being bothered. Do you like movies?"

Avery's 'yes' brings him to the entrance of a drive-in theater, where Sascha exchanges pleasantries with the booth worker as he pays for admission. Bewildered, Avery stares at the massive screens illuminating several lots around the vast property.

Sascha checked the double-feature action and horror showing with Avery before entering, but Avery can't remember either of the titles. He stays silent until Sascha backs into a first-row parking space and opens the trunk. His car is a little hatchback with just enough room for them to sit when he flattens the back seats.

Their eyes meet while Sascha is halfway through unfolding a musty blanket to spread over the mostly flat expanse.

"Um," Sascha says, "is this okay?"

A hard swallow hurts Avery's throat and does very little to wet his dry mouth. "Yeah. I'm just..."

"Nervous?"

"Trying to adjust."

"You don't have to sit with?—"

"No, it's fine!" Avery barely avoids spilling one of the fast-food bags as he jumps out of the car. He catches it just in time to avoid the contents tumbling to the gravel beneath his boots. Sascha doesn't scold Avery for being careless; he simply helps settle the packaged food, then fetches the speaker.

With everything ready, that leaves nothing left to do except crawling into the nest together. Avery stares at Sascha, captivated by how his blue eyes are identical to the wide, imploring ones of his cougar form.

It's too much. Unable to maintain the prolonged stare, Avery shimmies into the farthest corner, sitting at a slight angle on the folded seats with his back against the passenger seat. He pulls his legs to his chest, giving Sascha a clear space to settle

within. Sascha ducks under the hood, then scrunches his long limbs in so he can crawl deeper inside. At last, he manages to straighten, snagging his backpack to use as a pillow.

The movie hasn't started yet, so Avery can't justify staring at the screen instead of meeting Sascha's questioning gaze. He smiles weakly, unsure why he feels so nervous.

"Hungry?" Sascha asks, lifting a wrapped burger without looking to see what it is.

Avery nods, smile becoming more genuine, and accepts the offering. It isn't what he ordered, but he chomps down anyway. Wordlessly, Sascha pushes a large container of fries and a drink toward him, along with a handful of different sauce cups. He remains quiet while digging into a box of chicken tenders.

Previews play while they eat. Avery doesn't ask for anything else when he finishes his burger, but more food appears anyway. Sascha feeds him a steady stream of assorted items—a fish sandwich, onion rings, a baked pie, before he finally offers Avery a second spoon for the tall cup of ice cream.

Sharing food isn't a big deal. Rather, it shouldn't be, not any more than watching someone get dressed or a night of extremely chaste cuddling, but Avery's intimacy meter got warped somewhere along the timeline, leading him to hesitate before he accepts the slender red spoon. It's worth it when he does, for the look of relief that lights up Sascha's face.

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Two spoonfuls in, the screen goes dark, and the opening notes of the movie soundtrack play.

It's the action film first. Avery stays wedged in the corner for the first ten minutes, reaching to dig his spoon into their shared dessert. When the ice cream gets low, he finds himself inching into the space between himself and Sascha, using the excuse of getting a better angle. By the time the last bits of candy are scraped from the bottom of the waxy paper, Avery's shoulder is nearly in contact with Sascha's elbow.

Sascha tosses the empty cup into the bag stuffed with discarded wrappers. It nearly tips on its side, leaving him muttering curses as he crushes the trash to fit better. Avery smothers a laugh behind his hand, but it cuts off abruptly when Sascha settles back in his place—except his forearm is now pressed against the wrist Avery's propped himself up with. Avery's awareness of the movie implodes, but he pretends he's still watching. The sensation of fine blond hairs tickling his nerve endings leaves his tongue leaden in his mouth, and even though the warm summer air isn't as humid as the past few nights, Avery breaks into a sweat.

Not long after, Sascha asks, "Are you okay?" His voice is hesitant, as if he's worried about the answer.

Too embarrassed to admit how aggressively his body is responding to even the slightest hint of skin-on-skin, Avery tries to blow it off. "I'm fine," he says, but Sascha's brows knit. Of course he'd be able to spot the weak lie. Avery makes a more honest attempt: "I don't want to make things awkward."

Sascha elbows him gently. "You aren't. I'm not... expecting anything. You know

that, right?”

Avery can't imagine Sascha pressuring him past his boundaries. Despite—and because of—the fireworks in his stomach, he really, really doesn't want Sascha to think more than brushing arms is off the table. “I'm not worried about that.”

“Are you worried about something else?”

“Define ‘worry.’” Avery can't help but laugh when Sascha rolls his eyes.

“If there's nothing you're worried about,” Sascha begins, turning onto his side and leaning further into Avery's space, “then you won't mind me pulling you closer, will you?”

At first, Avery freezes, a shock of cold racing down his spine, stark against the summer heat. As his brain reboots, Avery realizes the brief paralysis is anticipation, not fear. So he allows Sascha to draw him in, an asteroid being coaxed into the atmosphere of a foreign celestial body. When Sascha encourages Avery's cheek to rest against the warmth of his shoulder, it feels like breath rushing back into his lifeless body.

This isn't an anonymous fuck he can hide behind. Sascha chose to seek him out even knowing what he is, despite his unglamorous circumstances. It's the first time someone has genuinely wanted to be around Avery since he fled Indiana, and for a terrible moment, he's seized by emotion. Tears threaten what's left of Avery's composure, but a deep inhale calms the urge, allowing him to relax—for the second time—against Sascha's firm chest.

“Why are you so fuckin' comfortable?” Avery mutters. Sascha merely laughs and gets his arm around Avery's back, thumb teasing the sliver of skin between his t-shirt and jeans.

Sascha doesn't stop touching him during the movie. Tinny gunfire spits from the speaker, but Avery can barely focus on the fight choreography with the way Sascha's middle finger is circling the protrusion of his hipbone. He swallows hard, keeping his eyes on the screen through the climactic final fight despite the long fingers that have shifted to pluck at his curls.

The credits creep up the screen, white text washed out by the lights that come up around the lot. Sascha finally moves, sliding out from under Avery to stretch his arms and roll his back. Avery cracks his knuckles idly, joining the pops of Sascha's spine. There are dimples at the small of his back, exposed when Sascha extends from his toes to his fingers, interlocked and reaching skyward. Avery watches him, smiling faintly when Sascha relaxes with a loud exhale.

"I get stiff being still for so long," he informs Avery. "Movies should have intermissions. Hey, I gotta run to the bathroom. It's right by the concession stand—do you want anything?"

Avery barks a surprised laugh. "All that DQ wasn't enough for you?"

A grin spreads Sascha's mouth, which started looking really goddamn appealing about two thirds into the movie. "I've shifted twice today. Puts a lot of pressure on my body, so I need to keep up with my metabolism."

"I see. Well, get your snacks. I'll be fine."

Sascha spreads his hands in acknowledgement, then turns toward the footpath leading toward the concession stand and bathroom. He only pauses once, looking over his shoulder to send Avery a wink that steals all the moisture in his mouth.

Fuck. He should have asked Sascha to bring back a water bottle. The best he's got is melted ice at the bottom of one remaining drink cup. The faint taste of leftover pop is

nasty, but at least he can swallow without his tongue sticking to his upper palate.

Avery grabs the bag stuffed with trash and carries it to a nearby bin, but sudden understanding stops him dead with his hands hovering over the refuse.

This is a date.

How in fuck's name did Avery get halfway through a date without realizing what it was? Like it's normal for handsome guys to hunt down failed hookups, buy them food, and take them to the movies. And cuddle. They cuddled, and Avery didn't even freak out. Not enough to extricate himself from Sascha's easy embrace, much less ask to be taken home before even finishing the first film. God, that would be mortifying. It's too far to walk, and Avery doesn't know the way besides.

A shudder chases the thought from his shaggy curls downward, like ice dropped under his collar. Avery scratches at the prickling sensation on his scalp, which only makes it worse. There's a hive of hornets under his skin, building a nest inside his ribcage. Trying to shake it loose only angers them further.

When Sascha returns, he's carrying a shopping bag full of junk food. His goofy wave when he sees Avery peering through the windshield sets the hornets off again, and by the time Sascha parks his ass on the blanket next to Avery, the buzzing has become unbearable.

"Looks like you got enough snacks to last you the ride home," Avery notes, rubbing at his chest.

"We'll see," Sascha says.

The fabric of Avery's cheap t-shirt scrapes over his top surgery scars, leftover from the incisions that took a bunch of unwanted stuff off his chest. He's lucky he had it

done long before turning into a werereature because dealing with farmwork in a binder would be such miserable hell, he'd opt for the 'death in a drainage ditch' any day. The scars don't hurt anymore, but the rough texture doesn't feel great.

Unlike Sascha's shirt. A tank-top of soft, breathable cotton. Probably brand name, not bought from a bargain pack at Wal-Mart. Avery wouldn't mind removing his uncomfortable shirt from the equation entirely. As nice as it is, Sascha's tank is welcome to take a hike as well.

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Sascha reaches into the snack bag, withdrawing a candy bar at random and tearing it open. He reclines propped up on one elbow, eating quietly until he pauses to check his phone.

Avery feels every fraction of Sascha's movements like gusts from a hurricane. He's never been so attuned to someone, and it feels weird, but also...

Bracing himself, Avery reclines against the musty blanket, mirroring Sascha so that when he lowers his phone, Avery's face is only a short distance away. Far enough to not be invasive, but close enough that if they were to lean forward at the same time, something important might happen.

Without breaking eye contact, Sascha slowly returns his phone to his pocket. Or, he tries. He misses the opening, and Avery has to bite his lip against the smile when Sascha gives up and throws the device behind him.

Avery licks over the impression his teeth left in his bottom lip. "So," he says.

Sascha smiles, playful but not condescending. "So?"

"I... We, um." The words get stuck. "I thought..."

With that gentle curve still shaping his mouth, Sascha thumbs a wayward curl off Avery's forehead. "Remember back in the hotel room, when I first asked if I could kiss you?"

Suddenly, Avery's heart is pounding so hard he can feel it in his teeth. "Yeah, I do."

“I’m gonna do it again, okay?”

“You don’t need to ask,” Avery breathes, and crosses the distance to press his lips lightly against Sascha’s.

CHAPTER

SIX

Avery

All Avery knows is seconds, inhales, heartbeats. Sascha’s hand resting at the small of Avery’s back. Just there, setting fire to those nerves. Fire that matches the heat in his mouth, which Sascha is exploring without invading. Avery could map out the ridges of Sascha’s bottom lip just from how painstakingly he brushes against him, letting the skin catch before falling apart.

Then he comes back, again and again and again, until Avery is whimpering for him to open up. He flicks his tongue over Sascha’s philtrum, feels the answering smile. Just when he thinks Sascha is ready to deepen the kiss, a ghost of a laugh warms his skin. Sascha noses the underside of his jaw, drops chaste kisses up his chin, worries the corner of his mouth with his teeth until Avery keens with need.

Opening dialogue of the horror film filters through the speaker. The sound crackles over old wires, electricity charging the air until a spark lights inside him, setting that nest of furious hornets aflame. If Avery opens his mouth, his tongue might scorch Sascha’s, but he tries anyway.

Another laugh, and Avery thinks Sascha’s going to further deny what he needs, until Sascha darts in with firm, claiming pressure. Avery gasps, pliant and willing to be rolled onto his back with the hard plastic seat digging into his spine. Finally, his chest

a tight line against Avery's, Sascha meets Avery's tongue in the threshold between their mouths, curling around it in invitation.

Avery shudders—once, twice. On the third, he pries himself open to take whatever Sascha has to offer.

Cradling Sascha's face, Avery takes and takes, arching his hips into the empty space above him. Sascha hasn't fully covered him, but Avery wants it, wants to be stripped of his dirty jeans and fucked in the back of a tiny hatchback while some ghost or demon terrorizes its onscreen victims. Don't even need to put the speaker back. The screams are more than welcome to drown out his own.

Anything to make him feel human again. Just for a few minutes. At least let him be enough of a human for someone to willingly come inside him.

Before Avery can meditate on the way touch starvation and isolation have eroded his self-respect, he's distracted by Sascha pulling away to curse under his breath. Confused, Avery opens his eyes just in time to see Sascha grab his head with a soft moan. Blood spurts in a wide arc behind him, an unrealistic, graphic red upon the theater screen.

Then Sascha goes limp.

For a horrified moment, Avery thinks the blood came from Sascha. He doesn't have time to feel foolish when the shot changes on the screen, revealing an uninspiring slasher villain. More concerning is the very real, very heavy man on top of him, who is not responding to his name or being shaken.

Time was, Avery wouldn't have been able to do much about being crushed by a body much bigger than him, but the grace of enhanced wered creature strength allows him to heave Sascha onto his side. He tries to be careful as he squirms out from under

Sascha's dead weight, taking pains not to let him flop on his stomach or back. Could he be having a seizure? An aneurysm? Avery desperately tries to recall the acronym to help identify a stroke, but just when F.A.S.T. pops into his brain, Sascha moans softly and blinks his eyes open.

Unsure if touch will confuse or startle him but unable to suppress the desire, Avery brushes his fingertips against Sascha's cheek. "Hey," he says quietly. "Are you okay?"

At first, Sascha only blinks at him, pupils dilated and eyes unfocused. Maybe Avery should have spoken louder? A sudden ear-splitting shriek ejected from the speaker grates at Avery's frazzled nerves. It can't be good for Sascha's recovery, either, prompting Avery to hurl the speaker out of the car, leaving it to hang miserably from its coiled wire.

"Sascha, can you hear me? Do you understand?" Avery frets, pawing at his shoulder. "Do I need to call a?—"

"No," Sascha wheezes. "I'm fine. Sorry. No doctor. Fuck." He grabs his face, moaning.

"Should I get an ice pack or something?"

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“No,” Sascha says again. “Please, I just need a second.”

Avery withers against the side of the car, voice small as he acknowledges Sascha’s request. He watches Sascha slowly circle his head, bending his neck to either side and then back before flexing his hands and sitting up. Something pops between his shoulder blades, prompting a hiss of discomfort. Avery swallows the desire to ask once more if he’s okay.

Slowly, Sascha works each of his limbs, still blinking rapidly. He massages his temples, then slumps onto his back with a great sigh. The heels of his hands push hard against his closed eyes. When he removes them, he frowns at the ceiling, then turns toward Avery. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“What was it?”

Sascha winces. “Just... vertigo. I’ll be fine.”

Less afraid and more annoyed, Avery arches an eyebrow. “You passed out on top of me.”

“Sometimes I lose consciousness, yeah,” Sascha says, a hint of edge in his voice.

If Avery weren’t already pressed against the side of the car, he’d have inched back farther. The warning in Sascha’s tone isn’t unlike the threats he’s received from other alphas, defending their territory or mate or, sometimes, merely their pride. As if Avery knew how to steal someone’s mate or fight an established alpha with a dedicated pack. He can’t even control his fucking shift.

Alpha or not, Sascha could kill him right now if he wanted to, and Avery wouldn't be able to do a damn thing to defend himself.

Instead of unleashing the predatory growl Avery has come to expect, Sascha furrows his brow. He scans Avery up and down, then reaches for him, fingernails still blunt, canines hidden behind his lips. Despite the lack of visible threat, Avery flinches.

Sascha jerks his hand back, moving so quickly the gesture bowls him over, causing his head to glance off the driver's seat headrest. Avery squeaks and crawls to him, no longer caring for his own safety. He cradles Sascha's head in his hands, holding him steady as he sinks downward. On impulse, Avery guides Sascha to rest his cheek upon his thigh. The work jeans are covered in farm gunk, but Avery's lap is softer than plastic. Trying to be soothing, he combs his fingers through Sascha's blond hair, taking care not to touch his scalp.

Avery freezes when Sascha catches his hand. Fear gathers in his throat, though he doesn't try to resist when Sascha draws him in to...

Place a delicate kiss across his knuckles.

"I'm sorry," Sascha says, lips brushing Avery's trembling fingers. "Irritability is... a symptom, after episodes. I should have warned you."

Still faint, Avery asks, "What would you have warned me about?"

"I was born with a condition called the spinning sickness. It's a disease that can be disabling to shifters." Sascha doesn't look at him while he speaks. "I have episodes where I lose coordination or consciousness. Shouldn't have shifted twice today, I guess." He snorts, hot breath puffing against Avery's hand. "I'm sorry."

Avery has never received an apology from a shifter before, nor a werereature alpha

of any shape. He's briefly compelled to thank Sascha, but that would be weird and complicated to explain, so he merely says, "It's okay. I'm fine."

It's mostly not a lie. The adrenaline is slow to dissipate, even with Sascha resting docile in his lap. Avery still feels the ache of panic, but it is easing its grip.

"I can feel your heart pounding," Sascha rebuts. "I scared you."

"Only a little."

"Shouldn't have done it at all." Finally, Sascha meets Avery's eyes, brows knotted in pain and, possibly, concern. "You thought I'd hurt you?"

Uncomfortable with the direct question, Avery shrugs. "Sorry, I guess."

"No." Sascha grips his hand tighter. "Me. It's Sascha's time to be sorry. Avery didn't do anything wrong."

The use of third person brings a smile to Avery's lips. "Thank you."

"Thankyou." Groaning, he rubs at his eyes. "I'm sorry. You probably want to go home, but I don't think I can drive us back to Bliss."

"That stupid farm isn't my home," Avery says bitterly. "But, um. I know how to drive." He looks around the nicely kept hatchback. "If you'd trust me with your car." Hewouldn't blame Sascha for not trusting him, considering he hasn't had access to a car in over eight months. There's no guarantee he won't fuck up.

But Sascha says, "Okay," and tries to rise from Avery's lap. He sways, but Avery catches him before he can knock into anything again.

“Let’s go slow.”

They make a painstaking trip from the trunk to the passenger seat, into which Sascha drops with a sigh of relief. Avery returns the speaker to its post, then neatens the remaining mess from their little nest before slamming the back door and crossing to the driver’s seat. He offers Sascha his backpack, stuffed with the bag of snacks.

“I could swing by to get you a water bottle,” Avery offers.

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Sascha flaps his hand weakly. “No, I’d rather just... get home. Sorry.”

Though Avery wants to tell him to stop apologizing, and thinks maybe he should, he doesn’t. It’s probably wicked to relish each moment of Sascha treating him like a person with feelings, but Avery can’t help it. This is his price for being fainted on instead of fucked.

After pulling out of the theater, Avery swings by a gas station to use the bathroom and put gas in the car. On his way out, he buys the biggest water bottle they carry. Sascha hadn’t hesitated before handing him two twenty-dollar bills to cover the errand. The trust makes Avery itch.

Sascha chugs the water like a dying man. He pulls away the bottle, now half-full, and gasps for air. The bashful smile he sends Avery, the way it communicates ‘Okay, you were right,’ is what finally gets Avery to unwind.

Once they’re on the road with a full gas tank, Sascha puts up the GPS to guide Avery back to Bliss, then slumps against the passenger door with his eyes closed.

No music, no conversation—nothing but Avery’s thoughts for the first leg of the drive. When he coasts to a stop in front of a red light, going easy on the brake to avoid a rough halt, Sascha breaks the silence.

“Can I ask you something?”

Avery grunts, drumming his fingers nervously on the wheel.

“Why didn’t you shift to defend yourself?”

Mouth falling open, Avery misses the green light until the car behind him honks to get his attention. Frazzled, he hits the gas a bit too hard, jerking the hatchback into motion. “Oops,” he says with a wince.

Sascha waves the mistake away, his blue eyes fixed on Avery, the gold ring visible even in the darkness.

“I...” Should he be admitting this? “I can’t.”

Clearly confused, Sascha further prods the bruise. “You can’t? How does that work?”

“I can only shift on the full moon,” Avery says around clenched teeth. “And sometimes when I’m... scared. But I try not to.” Because the only time Avery shifted in self-defense, that mugger nearly died. Had that happened, he’d have been disappeared by Parahuman Civil Compliance, not sent up north.

Sascha is quiet for a minute or two. “You can stop from shifting?”

“Not during the full moon.”

“So you can control it even when you’re scared?”

“Why is this surprising to you?” There’s a bit of edge in Avery’s voice this time, though he doesn’t know if the alpha magic he can feel in others resonates in his own words.

“I was just told...” Sascha hesitates. “Werereatures can’t control transformations, if doing so would benefit their inner... beast. That’s what makes them so dangerous.”

“Them?”

“Shit. Is that speciesist?”

Avery barks out a laugh. “Everything about our interactions is speciesist. This whole...” He takes one hand off the wheel to gesture broadly between Sascha and himself. “All of it. Werereatures don’t trust or like shifters, and shiftersreallydon’t trust or like werereatures.”

“Because werereatures weren’t supposed to exist, but—” Sascha cuts himself off with a gasp and claps his hand over his mouth, the reality of his words apparently biting his tongue.

“I wasn’t supposed to exist,” Avery agrees, oddly calm. “I was bitten by a werereature who didn’t warn me about the risks of fucking her in an altered state. My whole family rejected me when I was confirmed to be infected, and the person who... bit me... She promised her pack would take care of me, until their alpha realized I wasalsoan alpha. Whatever the fuck that means. So they ran me out of the state. No one thinks I can control myself, which is hilarious because they’re right, just in the opposite direction.”

At first Sascha works his jaw, no sound coming out. He hums, visibly troubled, before saying, “I’ll bet you’re sick of hearing me apologize.”

“Maybe.” No, not at all. “You gonna do it again?”

“Isn’t it implied at this point?”

Avery shrugs.

“You guys can...” Sascha hesitates, and in the corner of his eye, Avery sees Sascha’s

imploring look, but he doesn't acknowledge it for so long that Sascha turns instead toward the window. "I thought werereatures could partial shift."

"Those who can control their transformation, yeah. Probably."

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“Gotcha. Why, um. Why can’t you control yours?”

Avery slams on the brake, not caring that they’re in the middle of a two-lane, no-passing road with precious few working streetlights. “Because I fucking can’t, okay? I can’t, and I don’t know why, but no one is willing to help me, so I’m fuckingstuck like this!”

Infuriated, overwhelmed by months of frustration andgrief, Avery slams closed fists against the steering wheel, making the inner mechanics groan from his strength.

A car driving above the speed limit pulls out from a side road, swerving around the hatchback without hesitation. The headlights come and go, illuminating Sascha’s concerned expression before leaving them in the darkness once more. Though his joints feel rusted in place, Avery grips the wheel and taps the gas, easing the car back into motion.

“Maybe I could help you,” Sascha says in a soft, hesitant voice, and Avery almost stomps the brake again—from surprise.

“Help me?”

“Yeah, like... Okay, shifters don’t really transform. We just change one-hundred-percent from biped to animal. So, I don’t know what it’s like for you, and I’ve never even seen what a werecreature looks like shifting before, which... Whatever, it’s whatever. But I could at least give you some pointers about growing claws and dropping fangs, maybe?”

Avery tries to swallow past his suddenly restricted throat, eyes prickling even more dangerously than before. “You’d do that? Help me?”

“You just helped me, didn’t you? Even though I scared you.”

“I guess.”

Sascha reaches across the center console, moving slow enough to give Avery time to dodge, should he want to. He doesn’t want to, so Sascha’s hand succeeds in cupping the back of his skull. “I owe you that much, seeing as I royally fucked up your night.”

Avery thinks on that. “No, I don’t think you did. It probably would have been worse at the farm.” Sascha murmurs acknowledgement and doesn’t remove his fingers from where they’ve twisted into Avery’s hair until the GPS announces having reached their location. Avery parks, but scanning the surroundings reveals nothing that could be the Madison pack house. “You guys live underground or something?”

Snorting, Sascha says, “No. I just can’t bring you close to the pack lands, or they’ll...” He leaves the statement hanging because elaboration isn’t necessary. Sascha’s pack would rip Avery to shreds in seconds if he so much as approached the pack land border.

“Are you sure you’re good to drive home?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” Sascha rolls his shoulders, then hops out of the car and walks around to the driver’s side. He asks, “Willyoube okay? You can get back to the farm from here?”

“I’ll figure it out.” When Sascha’s forehead creases, Avery flaps a hand to dismiss his concerns. “I have much better sense of direction and endurance now. I’ll be fine.”

Sascha catches Avery's waving hand in both of his, his large palms smothering every one of Avery's knuckles and squeezing. "Do you want my number? You can call me if you need anything. Anything." In response to Avery's unsure expression, Sascha flattens Avery's palm against his chest, over his rapidly beating heart. "I want to see you again. Let me help you with your shift. Transformation. Whatever you want to call it. I can help. Please?"

Avery chews his lip. "Will you promise not to faint on me again?"

The smile that explodes across Sascha's face is brilliant. He laughs and rakes his fingers through his hair bashfully. "I'll do my best." He gives Avery's wrist a short tug. "Does this mean I get a goodnight kiss?"

Breath catching, all Avery can do is nod. He doesn't know what to expect—will Sascha invade him, as he didn't get a chance to do during the movie? Or will he be just as chaste and teasing as he was while driving Avery to madness?

The truth hovers somewhere in-between, with Sascha drawing Avery out of the car and clutching him close, kissing him with needy pressure and a respectful tongue. As they pull away, he flicks the tip of his tongue over Avery's philtrum, as Avery did to him before. It coaxes the corners of Avery's mouth upward into a smile he can't fight. Sascha drops one more quick kiss on that smile, causing it to widen.

Then his eyes shutter and he sways, a faint sound in his throat.

Avery stabilizes him, chiding, "You need to get home. Sure you can avoid crashing your car?"

"Yeah, you're just doing this thing. Taking my breath away, or something." Sascha's eyes are so earnest, a spectrum of complementary color reflecting in the waxing moon's light.

Avery has to look away. He scuffs his boot on the grass. “Just put your number in my phone already.”

They exchange texts, then Avery takes a step back before Sascha can kiss him again. “Goodnight. Get home safe and go to sleep.”

“You’re not my boss,” Sascha protests, closing the extra space.

Avery matches it, shaking his head. “We can schedule something, okay? The gibbous moon is coming, which means full moon fun-time isn’t far away.”

“My schedule is always open.”

“I’ll let you know my next day off.”

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Sascha licks his lips. “Okay. Goodnight.”

Dipping his head, a smile revisiting lips that remember too well the ridges of Sascha’s, Avery says, “Goodnight, Sascha. I’ll see you soon.” He turns and breaks into a run, hoping his internal compass is correct. Even if it’s not, getting away from the man who doesn’t want to stop kissing him is more important.

Avery counts the days several times, cross-referencing the photo he snapped of his schedule from the operations room to ensure he doesn’t make any mistakes.

The full moon is in exactly a week. Everyone has that day off, for obvious reasons, making it the only day every lunar cycle where the shifter employees actually have to work. Avery’s only day off before then is in three days, on a Wednesday. It’s hardly enough time to prepare physically, nowhere near enough time to prepare mentally, and he has no choice.

Sascha, whom Avery still has not fucked, is going to see him shift. Going to coax him into doing it partway, somehow, stopping before the seven-foot-tall (and then some) mutant ursine comes fully out to play. What if Avery can’t control it? What if he hurts Sascha, or—god for-fucking-bid—fucks up so bad he seriously harms or kills him? It would be a death sentence for Avery, one he’d accept willingly. There’d be no option other than to return Sascha’s body to the Madison alpha and request a quick execution.

But that’s catastrophizing. It won’t happen that way. Sascha is an experienced shifter who’d be able to evade a clumsy half-transformed monstrosity with ease. Even with that spinning sickness he’d mentioned.

Avery scrubs his hands through his curls. No, no, no. He can't think like this. It's going to be fine.

Three days until Wednesday. Then four more until Sunday's full moon. Maybe practicing with Sascha will make that one go more smoothly because Avery has no idea where he can safely spend the night. Not having control of his giant transformed body is dangerous for any nearby living thing, but here, with dozens of other werecreatures competing for land to ride out the shift on, the risk of sustaining his own bodily harm is high. Avery doesn't know which scares him more.

Before leaving his bunk, Avery texts the details to Sascha. He receives a reply before making it out of the housing block, and can't help the smile that blooms across his face.

Sascha

What time? I'll meet you by the farm and take you somewhere safe for us to practice. I know a place.

Avery can barely smother his laugh. 'I know a place.' Like this is a cheesy teen romance film, not the summer vacation horror flick that's turned into his autobiography. He goes to text a reply, but while his head is ducked, he misses the shadow approaching him until it's too late.

Even with the muscle Avery has built from increased physical activity, he's still short and trim, which means he goes flying way too easily when suddenly hip-checked against the wall. Avery's phone clatters to the floor, coming to a stop under the boot of a total stranger.

Except, wait. No. Avery recognizes them, gasping when the recollection hits.

The werereature enforcer from the Wilderness Wolf pack. Avery doesn't remember their name, but he remembers the viciousness with which they demanded respect for their alpha. What the fuck are they doing here, if they have a pack?

Yellow eyes flash in warning, the werereature staring Avery down while he tries to steady himself without acknowledging the pain in his shoulder. It'll heal. He won't even feel it in ten minutes—something that can't be said for his phone, its newly cracked screen visible beneath the aggressor's boot.

“Can I fucking help you?” Avery demands, an unfamiliar growl rumbling in his throat. He's not used to making sounds like that, so it startles him more than it intimidates his harasser.

In fact, they laugh, before kicking his broken phone back toward him. Avery stoops to catch it before it hits the wall, potentially doing even more damage. He nearly collides with another worker who keeps their eyes straight ahead while weaving around him.

Avery flushes, now angry enough to step into the Wilderness enforcer's space. “Why are you here? You aren't packless.”

“Good to know you remember me, considering I didn't introduce myself directly,” they say, casually removing a piece of gum from their pocket and tossing it between their sharp teeth. “My name's Beryl, and I'm here because I want to be. The why isn't any of your business.”

“Stay out of my way, then,” he snaps.

Beryl's lips turn up, but their eyes reflect no amusement. “Make me, ursine. I'll be ready if you try, but I won't hold my breath.”

Not bothering to let the sentiment linger, they turn to shove through the door,

bumping into more than one other person on their way out.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Sascha

Wednesday comes before Sascha is ready. Every hour since Avery left him on the street at near-midnight has been full of longing. He can't wait to see Avery again. Wanted to do it sooner, to steal Avery from that shitty exploitative farm every night. Sascha isn't unobservant—he can see clearly how much of Avery's humanity has been stolen, and he's desperate to give back what he can.

Maybe that's why he didn't try to fuck him. That, and the whole vertigo episodething. Had he given in, he'd have fainted with his pants half-off, and that would have been twice as humiliating.

Sascha drums his fingers on the steering wheel. Avery texted exactly eight minutes ago that he was on his way. It's only ten AM, but Sascha feels as if they have no time at all. He doesn't know what to expect, or even how to follow through on helping Avery through a partial transformation, considering Sascha has never experienced one. In truth, he's never witnessed a werecreature transformation before, something he might have forgotten to mention to Avery.

No doing anything about it now. Avery will show up soon, and Sascha will invite him into his car and try not to kiss him stupid before they even make it off the property. Maybe they'll kiss later—Sascha hopes, at least—but for now, he has to focus on not breaking Avery's trust. A lot of people have done that up to this point in Avery's life, and Sascha has no intention of joining them.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

The grim worry evaporates when Sascha catches movement outside the car and immediately identifies it as Avery hopping the fence, going over the electric wire like he doesn't feel any shock. A bright grin takes over Sascha's face, hurting his cheeks. He rolls down the passenger window and ducks to better see Avery's approach.

Avery is wearing a loose tank-top and shorts that stop just above his knees, along with his boots. His curls bounce with every step, freckles dark across his nose, the rest of his skin rosy and glowing in the morning sunlight.

"Hey, gorgeous," Sascha calls through the open window, laughing when Avery makes a show of stopping in his tracks and looking around. There's nothing but swaying grass and trees, no one else to pin the accusation on. "Yes, I do mean you. Get in." Sascha stretches to unlatch the door, which Avery easily could have done without help. It's worth it to see the sunniness of his smile. Avery hops inside, so short he doesn't even have to bow his head to avoid hitting it on the roof of the car.

Before Sascha can decide what to say next, Avery leans across the center console to drop a kiss on his cheek. Then he draws back like nothing happened, leaving Sascha gawping like a teenager while Avery adjusts in his seat, closes the door, and buckles in.

When finished, the smile Avery throws his way is shameless. "Where're we headed?"

Sascha snorts belatedly, then puts the car in drive, getting off Dennings Farm property as fast as he can before he hits the road and slows down enough to answer. "There's a lake by my home."

Avery stiffens. “By your... On your pack land?”

Wincing, Sascha realizes that was another thing he should have mentioned sooner. “It is, but it’s... secret. No one goes there but me. For reasons.”

“Reasons,” Avery repeats, deadpan.

“Yes. I call it ‘Forgotten Lake.’ It’s named something else, I’m sure, but no one else goes near it, so I... forgotten. By everyone but me. Yeah.”

A hesitant smile triumphs over the nervous purse of Avery’s lips. “It’s a good name. Straight to the point.”

“Ah, shut up.”

Avery laughs, the tension bleeding out of him. “How can you guarantee no one will come down to your lake?”

“It’s hard as hell to get to, first of all,” Sascha says with a grin. “It’s good you wore boots. But also, everyone believes it’s cursed.” Sascha doesn’t know how Avery will react to that admission, and is relieved when it’s a burst of laughter.

“You’re telling me the dominant shifter pack in this county is afraid of a cursed lake?”

Now Sascha’s lips are pursed as he tries to put the words together. “My mom loved the water, so she visited the lake often. She was swimming the day she had her first episode.”

“Episode? What, like your spinning sickness?”

Sascha nods. “She almost drowned. Dad had to dive under and drag her back to shore. She never stopped going to the lake, and then she had me, and... Everyone was so excited about a new alpha, future pack leader, but then...”

“You got it from her,” Avery concludes without Sascha having to say it.

“Yeah. So no one goes there anymore, not since she died. I don’t think the lake area had anything to do with her getting sick, but a few of the pack elders are really superstitious. Shifting is a sacred tether between us and the aether, which takes our energy and converts it into a different whole. It connects our shifted forms and keeps us balanced. A disturbance in that aether could, in theory, taint that balance. The spinning sickness throws off an individual’s ability to pass through the aether safely.”

“Stuff about magic and aether is all new to me,” Avery says, “But I’ve read enough fantasy fiction to get a basic idea. I can’t help but wonder what could even happen to corrupt such a nebulous thing.”

Sascha scratches the back of his neck. “One of the elders suggested there was a rogue werecreature who used magic to make the water toxic, even though there are perimeter wards to keep werecreatures off the pack land. It caused so much panic that Dad finally put a fence up around the entire area, hoping that sealing it off would stop the hysteria.”

“Did it?”

“No.”

Avery muses for a moment, humming. “If there are wards against werecreatures, how will you get me in there?”

With a smug grin, Sascha launches into the explanation: “Our pack shamans got

sloppy about replacing wards around the perimeter near the lake. I moved the markers to the other side of the fence, so the way we're approaching, there's nothing to trigger. The shamans haven't noticed because they recharge those wards from a distance, and there's no reason for them to check one little corner for correctly placed markers."

"That is diabolical," Avery says with a matching grin. "Have you ever brought anyone else here?"

Unsure why the question brings heat to his face, Sascha says, "No. Never."

Avery clears his throat and settles deeper into his seat. He looks out the window, and when Sascha spares a quick glance away from the road, he sees color in Avery's cheeks to match Sascha's own. The tips of his ears are sore.

Giddy elation settles in Sascha's chest, lodging in his throat and making it hard to swallow. Once he can convince his dry tongue to work again, he says, "Anyway, no one knows I still come here. Not even Dad. I want to believe he'd understand, but he's already ignored Mom's most important dying wish, so I can't risk it." Sascha expects Avery to ask about the wish and prepares himself for a conversation about his uncertain future about the Madison pack's future alpha.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

Avery doesn't, though. Instead, he mumbles, "If my mom hadn't disowned me, and also had died young, I'd probably fight tooth and nail to keep whatever of her I could." A moment later, he lowers his phone and looks at Sascha with an expression Sascha can't decipher. "Thank you for inviting me to share such an important part of your connection with her."

Sudden guilt curls in Sascha's gut. He intentionally hasn't mentioned that his mother hated werereatures and would be pinwheeling in her grave if she knew Sascha was bringing one to their spot. It's best Avery doesn't know.

Trying to sound casual, Sascha makes a move to close the conversation. "So yeah, even if the lake is cursed for real, I already have the damn sickness, so it can't ruin my life any more than it already has."

"Problem solved," Avery says, his smile weak but genuine.

After that, Sascha tries to lighten the mood, but none of his non-sequiturs net him more than a soft noise in response. Maybe Avery's sensed there's stuff Sascha isn't saying. Maybe they're both just nervous.

The drive to the lake symbolizes a decision, after all.

Sascha isn't interested in simply fucking Avery; if he's being honest, the moment he saw the distant look in Avery's seaglass eyes, staring impassively from his PROWL bio, Sascha's interest in the werereature grew far beyond sexual conquest. He wants more of Avery, and he's ready to prove it, even if continued proximity will open doors never meant to be disturbed. Doors with secrets behind them—ones he'll have to

keep from both Avery and his pack. So much could go wrong, but with every mile he crosses, the choice cements itself further into Sascha's cells, taking over his being.

Sascha isn't close with his pack. The love might be there, but it's not a well-guarded secret that no one believes Sascha could be a suitable pack alpha. It has driven a wedge between them and Sascha's pride, one he has neither the energy nor the incentive to mend.

But Avery. Avery believes in him. Avery, who has been vulnerable but brave, who has trusted Sascha with his safety twice now, and is about to take it much further. Sascha has no idea how to teach a werereature to do something Sascha's species is incapable of doing, but he's willing to try, and Avery is willing to let him.

It's the most responsibility Sascha has ever been allowed, and he'll do anything to prove himself worthy.

Reflex has him turning off the road at the exact spot he always does, pulling his little hatchback behind a large row of bushes. Tire tracks have beaten down the foliage, out of sight from the road that continues to the compound where the pack's extended families live. He parks, then shifts in his seat to consider Avery.

"You ready?"

Avery scoffs. "No, but the full moon is in four days, so I don't exactly have time to warm up to the idea."

"Noted." Sascha claps him on the shoulder without thinking. A moment later, the full impact of the gesture hits him, and Sascha scrambles out of the car, his face burning.

Did he just bro slap a fellow queer guy like he would one of his cousins? As if Avery's fear deserves the same dismissive type of reassurance afforded to Sascha by

his family when he expresses emotions about being gay, or being disabled, or simply being.

He might be overthinking this, but even if he is, Sascha makes a point to approach Avery with more care when they meet in front of the car. He sets his other hand on Avery's other shoulder, like that side can project more empathy, and squeezes.

"It's gonna be okay. You have a few more minutes to freak out before we get there, 'cause I wasn't joking about the fence, and there's no gate."

"Climbing's fine with me," Avery says, leaning just slightly into Sascha's touch.

Sascha can't help himself after that. He slides his hand to Avery's upper back, thumb stroking just above Avery's collar. The action needs no accompanying words. Avery appears to feel the same, letting his head hang while Sascha rubs the nape of his neck. He doesn't want to pull away, but they aren't technically safe from prying eyes until they're on the other side of the fence, so Sascha reluctantly lets go. Avery's smile is less tense when he straightens, and Sascha, emboldened, nudges his knuckles against Avery's as he takes the lead.

Fingers twine together. Avery clutches Sascha's hand so tightly it makes Sascha's pulse pound. Has holding hands ever been like this, before Avery?

They reach the fence, several feet tall and thick with shrubs and vines, grown wild around the chain links. Avery doesn't wait for Sascha to prompt him before scaling the links like a confident little squirrel. A half-grin tugs Sascha's mouth as he watches Avery hoist himself over the barbs at the top, disappearing behind the foliage. The fence groans when he releases it, jumping to the ground below with a soft 'oof!'

Sascha follows, climbing down carefully rather than jumping. Hard impacts are

potential triggers, and he doesn't want to have another episode in front of Avery. Not only for his pride, but because today he's meant to focus on Avery's struggles, not his own. Still, as Sascha is lowering his sneakered foot to the uneven ground, Avery comes up from behind to catch Sascha around the waist, steadying him. Sascha's feet find purchase with Avery warm and solid at his back.

It takes every ounce of self-control for Sascha to not spin Avery around, press him against the vine-laced fence, and kiss him hard, taking everything he hadn't allowed himself before. But no. Again. It's still not the time.

Taking a deep, bracing inhale, Sascha turns, catching Avery's hand and hoping he looks more composed than he feels.

He should have brought a blanket. Or food. He was so anxious this morning, he didn't think of either. They'll have to find somewhere on the way back.

Sascha stops at the clearing by the lake, where he and his mom used to have picnics. The water laps gently against the sandy shore, helping him fumble with the inner peace that's been denying him since he woke up just after six AM. The smell of the breeze off the water and the trees framing the open space allows him a sense of security.

Releasing Avery's hand, Sascha shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks on his heels. "Do you have any idea of how you want to start?"

"No. Not a clue."

With a ruffle to Avery's curls, Sascha says, "Let's start simple. Something we have in common."

"We have stuff in common?" Avery's tone suggests genuine surprise.

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In lieu of a verbal response, Sascha smiles as broadly as he can, upper lip twitching slightly as he drops his fangs. Avery's eyes widen. Then he takes a step closer to study the inside of Sascha's mouth, which is so odd Sascha can't help but laugh.

"I'm supposed to just...dothat?"

"It's one of the first things shifter younglings learn once their adult teeth come in. Dropping fangs and growing claws." He demonstrates that, too, holding a hand up so Avery can see how his blunt fingernails lengthen, the center of the keratin stretching further, forming a deadly point.

"Christ," Avery says. He takes Sascha's hand, stroking his palm, then prodding at the newly grown claws. "It doesn't happen like this with me. Everything just kinda takes over at once, and it's awful from start to finish."

"Does it hurt?"

Avery's gaze drops, long curls flopping over his forehead to obscure his expression. "Yeah, it does. It hurts a lot."

I wish I could stop it from hurting you, Sascha doesn't say. "Okay. Let's start with your teeth. Try to feel the flesh around your canines, how it's holding the bones inside. Then visualize... Think of flexing and relaxing a muscle. You clench to feel where your fangs are, then you let them slip out naturally."

Screwing up his face, Avery appears to concentrate overly hard, before scowling. "I don't know how to feel myteeth. You can't feel teeth."

“You aren’t trying to feel your teeth, just the gums around your canines.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Avery says flatly.

Sascha almost frowns, but resists. This will take time, and getting frustrated with Avery for being discouraged won’t help. “Let’s try something else, then. Something you’ll like better.” Before he can second-guess himself, Sascha bends to take Avery’s mouth.

Their lips catch, pressure increasing when Avery lifts his chin and pushes onto the balls of his feet to even his height with Sascha’s bent posture. He laughs against Avery’s skin, smile growing when Avery chuckles as well.

Sascha eases his tongue between Avery’s lips and is met with hungry enthusiasm. Too much, almost—the kind of eagerness that leaves Sascha’s mouth wet and gasping, breath mingling with Avery’s. He almost forgets what he means to do until Avery smothers a tiny moan. Brought back to the present, Sascha takes Avery’s jaw, encouraging his mouth to hang open. He redirects, tongue withdrawing enough for him to curl the tip around the point of Avery’s left canine. His tongue grazes the roof of Avery’s mouth, worrying the skin behind his would-be fang.

Before Sascha can move to the other side, Avery fists the front of Sascha’s shirt, holding him in place so he feels the low rumble that rises in Avery’s throat. The unexpected sound has him hardening on the spot, flexing his hips to press himself against Avery’s belly. They’ve trapped each other in an embrace neither man wants to escape, Avery rocking forward to pin Sascha’s erection as Sascha chases that growl as deep into Avery’s mouth as he can reach.

On the back of his tongue, Sascha feels something shift. They celebrate with twin moans as Avery’s fangs ease out of his gums, descending perfectly. Sascha licks them again.

“Did I do it right?” Avery asks, his own tongue probing at the extended points.

“Perfectly,” Sascha purrs, nuzzling Avery’s throat. “Claws, now. You’re doing great.”

“I don’t even know how to imaginethat.”

Sascha nips the skin under his ear. “I could lick those, too.”

Avery shudders. “Probably not the best idea, though it sounds like it’d be a nice attempt.”

“Doing my best here.” Reluctantly, Sascha clears his throat and gives Avery some space. From the look on Avery’s face, he likes the distance just as much as Sascha—which is not at all. “When I extend my claws, I flex my fingers and... push, I guess. Like, from inside. And it’s a bit itchy, waiting for them to start growing. I feel like my fingers are going to explode, but when my nails finally start growing, it’s... peaceful. Like I’m becoming something I’m supposed to be. I guess it’s a type of adrenaline rush.”

“Sounds pretty idealistic,” Avery mutters. “I’d kill for anything about my transformation to feel peaceful.”

“Dropping your fangs wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“Ugh.” Crossing his arms, Avery balls in on himself, holding the pose for several seconds before relaxing with a sigh. “Okay. So I start by flexing my hands and just push? How do you know what to push?”

Sascha shrugs, unable to generate better words but smiling regardless. “I know you’ll figure it out.”

Scowling, Avery first sticks his tongue out at Sascha, then spreads his fingers and studies the back, then the front. He thumbs the knuckles of his left hand, frowning at them. One by one, he bends each finger, tendons popping out as he flexes the way Sascha told him. He repeats it a few times, then his brow furrows. “Are my hands supposed to feel hot?”

“I... I don’t know,” Sascha admits. “I learned this when I was still toddling.”

“Right.” Avery wiggles his fingers, still looking displeased. “Maybe I should just try something el—” Suddenly, he goes rigid, both hands curling so severely it looks painful. His arms begin to shake. Concerned, Sascha reaches for Avery, hoping to soothe what he assumes to be a cramp resulting from pushing too hard. Except Avery gasps and jerks, putting space between himself and Sascha.

Sascha takes a step back, hands raised in an open, non-threatening gesture. Despite talking about his own shifts, Sascha has asked few questions about Avery’s own transformation. What he does know is that crowding any panicking person is usually a bad idea.

“Are you okay?”

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In place of a response, Avery cries out in pain. Something in his wrist cracks, followed by the other. His trembling hands swell, knuckles popping and bulging. It looks as if Avery's fingernails have begun to lengthen, but then Sascha is nauseated when he realizes that the slender bones of each digit are shifting beneath his skin. Sascha's horrified noise clashes with Avery's when the tips of his fingers burst open, blood leaking down his palms as his skeleton forces through the too-tight skin.

Avery's cuticles swell, the knucklebone repositioning itself where his fingers once ended. There's a sucking sound, and Sascha doesn't have time to look away before, one by one, Avery's existing nails pop off under the pressure. The exposed skin splits, blood spattering so far several droplets cut a slice across Sascha's blue tank-top.

Paralyzed, Sascha watches thick claws ease through the torn gaps, raw, red tissue following, wrapping around the naked bone. Skin comes next, darker than Avery's normal complexion, sewing itself to the bloodied mess of his hands just in time for dark hair to sprout from the back of his wrists and knuckles.

Then it stops. Avery falls to his knees with a moan, smearing blood across his shirt when he cradles his hands against his chest.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Sascha

“Holy shit,” Sascha whispers, only peripherally aware of his body shaking like a sparrow in a hailstorm. “Avery... Avery, fuck. Are you okay?”

When Avery doesn’t respond, Sascha makes peace with potentially losing some blood or intestines if he startles the distressed werecreature in front of him into attacking. He eases forward, knowing Avery wouldn’t hurt him on purpose, but werecreatures aren’t known for being stable at the best of times, and Avery himself admitted to not having control over his transformation.

The thought makes Sascha slow, still a few feet away from Avery’s crouched form. If Avery didn’t have control over himself, why would only his hands have changed? And yes, the change was horrible to witness, but he’s neither gone wild with violent rage, nor has he continued to transform past what he intended to do. Sudden excitement—andpride—prickles the back of Sascha’s neck.

“Avery,” he says, repeating his name to keep him grounded. “You did it.” Sascha lowers himself beside Avery, no longer worried about a wild attack.

A soft, weepy sound escapes Avery’s throat, but he doesn’t fight when Sascha pulls his balled-up form into his arms. His eyes stay closed, hands turned inward and fisted against his chest.

Sascha strokes Avery’s hair, letting him adjust at his own pace. The loose ringlets shudder around his fingers. “I didn’t know how bad transforming was for you. This is the first time I’ve ever seen a werecreature shift, and I’m sorry I wasn’t more prepared. I should’ve watched a video or something. Fuck, but you did it. Maybe partial shifting won’t be as easy for you as we hoped, but you kept your head on your shoulders. That’s good to know, right? I’m proud of you, Avery.”

The last bit is when he finally stirs. Avery tucks his hands, now almost too big for his slender arms, into his armpits. He remains hunched, but tentatively meets Sascha’s

eyes. “How can you be proud of this?”

“Because none of the scary parts were your fault,” Sascha says, wiping sweat from Avery’s brow. “And you did what we set out to do. Do you want to try more?”

Avery’s jaw drops. “More?After that?!”

“I mean, we only covered your hands and teeth. Doesn’t turning into a bear take up just a bit more than that?”

“Yeah, but...”

With a quick dip, Sascha presses his lips to one of Avery’s temples, then the other. He studies his face afterward, smiling to see familiar color rising in Avery’s cheeks.

Avery rubs the ball of his hand against his eye, which has gone glassy. “Goddamnit, Sascha.”

“Let’s try your feet,” Sascha says, sparing Avery the threat of a heavy emotional moment. “You have claws and teeth, but that won’t be enough to defend yourself from an attack.”

“I guess.” Avery’s voice is thick and choked, but he swallows hard and blinks several times.

Sascha moves without calling attention to it. “Let’s do itlike this.” He adjusts so he’s sitting on his heels, then positions Avery in front of him, back snug against Sascha’s chest. “Might wanna take off your shoes.”

“Like this? Sascha, are you trying to get me to rip your face off?” Avery reaches for the laces of his boots all the same, only hesitating a moment when he sees his

transformed hands.

“You won’t do that,” Sascha says with full confidence.

“I can’t promise anything.”

“Technically, no. But I don’t believe you’ll hurt me. In fact, I think it’ll be easier if you have someone here, with you, so you aren’t...”Scared. Hurting. Alone. “Unbalanced.”

Avery tosses one boot to the side, then works on the next. Sascha blinks down at his foot, appalled to see he isn’t wearing socks. “You’re in leather bootsbarefoot?”

“Yeah,” Avery says, brow furrowing as he fights the knotted laces.

“How do you not have hundreds of blisters?”

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Avery produces a soft sound of triumph when his oversized hands finally undo the knot. Then he turns a wry smile to Sascha. “Just lucky, I guess.”

Sascha makes a mental note to buy Avery some socks, but he keeps the resolution to himself. He offers his hand, now slightly smaller than Avery’s transformed one. Avery accepts it gingerly, looking away when Sascha entwines their fingers. Sascha gives his hand a reassuring squeeze, then wraps his free arm around Avery’s ribs, hauling him into a secure embrace. “Visualize what you did with your hands and try it again with your feet. Any way of making the actual... process... a bit easier on yourself?”

“No. It’s always like that.” Avery shudders. “Maybe it got a little faster after the first few times.”

“Well, let’s aim for precision this time. Try focusing on the changes that need to happen, rather than everything that could happen. Sometimes, I wish I could adapt my legs into a partial shift that would make running easier. I hate running in biped form; it’s so uncoordinated! But no, it’s either ‘four paws and no pants’ or ‘run like a clumsy oaf.’ Can’t win.”

The prattle draws a laugh from Avery, who relaxes slightly against Sascha’s chest. “I don’t think you’re right to be envious of someone else’s partial shift, considering you get to delicately flutter out of existence and return a majestic beast.”

“Yeah, a majestic beast tangled in his own pants. Let’s go, bud.” Sascha nuzzles behind Avery’s ear. “The faster you get this over with, the sooner we’ll be able to get to other things.” He doesn’t elaborate, but judging from the shudder that runs down

Avery's spine when Sascha teases the shell of his ear with his fangs, they're both on the same page.

If nothing else, it does go faster. That doesn't stop the transformation from being just as awful as his hands.

Avery whimpers in Sascha's arms, clutching his fingers so tight Sascha's bones grind. Determined not to distract Avery or give him cause for worry, Sascha holds his breath and doesn't make a sound. Despite his disability, Sascha is still an alpha shifter. He isn't breakable, even if people treat him like he is.

Sascha kisses Avery's temple while his feet fracture and bleed. Soft, nonsensical words spill from him, reassurance pressed into Avery's skin. I'm here. You're not alone. His lips come away salty with cold sweat.

Finally, it's over. From the knee down, Avery's legs have warped, his foot lengthening so his ankles sit higher; it's probably made him a few inches taller.

Analyzing the whole set of changes—hands, feet, fangs—Sascha nods in satisfaction. Yes, this should make Avery more durable while allowing him to keep control of his thoughts and instincts.

The full moon shift is only four days away. Sascha doesn't know if this practice will help Avery ride out the night, but he hopes so. Any amount of added comfort will be worth the risk of taking Avery to his mom's safe space.

Avery pants, face gone white as a sheet, freckles standing out starkly on his sweat-sheened cheeks. Without thinking, Sascha licks the hollow just below his cheekbone. He might have been embarrassed if Avery didn't turn into Sascha's touch. For a fragile moment, the only sound is heavy breath and the lake gently lapping at its shore. They nuzzle each other, noses bumping, until Sascha breaks away with a

small, relieved smile.

“I’m so proud of you,” he repeats.

This time, Avery doesn’t argue.

Sascha pats his flank twice, then says, “Okay, practice time’s over. Let’s get you cleaned up.” He stands, taking Avery with him.

Avery is initially clumsy on his padded toes, unused to his ankles being so high off the ground. Sascha is delighted to see that Averydidget taller, carving away the inches between them so he doesn’t have to bend as far to drop a kiss on Avery’s lips, the bottom split and red with crusted blood. It’ll heal, but Sascha thumbs at it anyway.

Avery runs a hand through his damp curls, attention drawn to the water. “You want me to wash in the lake?”

“I want you to get in the lake, yeah.” Sascha steps back, waits for Avery to catch his balance, then pulls his blood-spattered tank-top over his head. “It’ll be a good temperature today. Nice way to cool off without being frigid.” Where they’re standing, the ground is shadowed by sprawling branches from the nearby trees, but farther onto the water, the sun’s light plays with the gentle tide.

Sascha toes off his shoes and unfastens his shorts, but stops with them half down his hips when a glance reveals Avery watching him. Trying to smother a teasing grin, Sascha hooks his thumbs under the waistband of his boxer briefs, keeping Avery in his sights as he slides them both down. Avery meets Sascha’s eyes only briefly. The rest of his attention is riveted to Sascha’s naked body. Sascha kicks his discarded clothing away, then folds his arms across his chest.

“My turn, now?” Avery guesses. He doesn’t wait for an answer before stripping his shirt. Sascha never felt a binder under Avery’s shirts, so he’s not surprised to see a flat chest and pale, curved scars.

It’s impossible to miss that Avery is short—only five-foot-four, Sascha remembers from his PROWL profile. In his baggy farm clothes, it’s easy to forget Avery is also sliver-thin, so slender Sascha doesn’t know how his organs fit inside that narrow ribcage. He looks breakable, like a resin doll with knobby knees and elbows. Sascha knows that Avery is stronger than he looks; he’d have to be to survive a full were-transformation when just a partial change was that violent. Still, seeing his bird bones fills Sascha with the desperate urge to protect him. From anything and everything.

He gets the perfect chance when Avery tries to fight his shorts off, only for them to get caught on his large, clawed feet. Sascha is by his side before Avery loses his balance, extending an arm so Avery can hold on while shuffling the shorts off one leg at a time. The boxer-briefs still clinging to Avery’s thighs reduce him to exasperated laughter.

An itch makes itself known at the back of Sascha’s throat. He clears it, trying not to start coughing in Avery’s face while he’s still clinging to Sascha’s arm. Before Avery can ask if he’s alright, Sascha bends down to gently tug Avery’s underwear down his thighs. He can feel his heartbeat in his ears, and his mouth feels so dry that when he straightens, still holding Avery’s boxer-briefs, he has to turn away to cough for real.

Should he have asked before doing that? Too late now.

When Sascha turns back, Avery is staring at him, a flush high in his cheeks. The large hands and feet look like old horror prostheses glued onto slender wrists and ankles, but the result is oddly adorable.

Forget the damn swim. Sascha wants to touch Avery so badly, but he holds back,

merely tilting his head toward the lake. The sun shimmers on the surface, and Sascha follows it, walking until the water covers his knees before cutting under in a smooth dive.

When Sascha surfaces, he's greeted by Avery clomping awkwardly through the shallows, lifting each clawed foot before plunking it back into the water. He has his arms spread for balance and his freckled nose scrunched in concentration. Sascha doesn't want to laugh, but he can't help it. He smothers it underwater, kicking at the sandy ground to propel him to Avery's side. When he surfaces, Avery blinks surprised, wide eyes, their pale green color turned crystalline in the sunlight. His pupils have contracted to dots, and the effect is so striking it momentarily renders Sascha mute.

There's still dried blood on Avery's wrists. Sascha takes one after the other, running wet hands over the spots until the red is gone, leaving only skin that looks modeled from clay, grayish and dusted with black hairs, darker than Avery's natural brown curls. Compared to Sascha's lengthened nails, the sharp points at the ends of Avery's fingers are talons built into his skeleton. Flexing would easily turn them deadly—enough to gut a shifter after a shift, if Avery could move fast enough. If nothing else, Avery should be able to defend himself from Celeste and her pack.

"Thank you," Avery says quietly, and Sascha knows he's referring to more than clean hands.

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Sascha links their fingers, kissing Avery briefly on the nose. Avery goes in for a deeper kiss, but Sascha ducks out of the way, enjoying his pout. Serves him right after dodging Sascha the other night, when all he wanted was to crawl into the back of his car again and taste Avery until his tongue knew nothing else.

He catches Avery's wrists again, this time puppeting them to wrap around the back of his neck. All it takes is shifting his weight before they're gliding easily through the water, Avery clinging while Sascha propels them deeper, until his feet no longer touch the bottom.

They swim together this way, Avery relaxed against Sascha's chest like his own personal raft. Sascha steers them to the deepest part of the water and floats on his back, clutching Avery close as the sun beats down. It's nearing noon, judging from the angle of the beams he sees even through his eyelids. He'd be perfectly content staying like this for the entire afternoon, but then Avery makes a quiet noise of discomfort.

Sascha opens his eyes in time to catch Avery's right hand putting itself back together, and is alarmed when the skin and hair don't simply disappear. Instead, the skin peels and dries, sloughing off when Avery rubs at it, dislodging the detached layer. After a rinse, Avery's human hand emerges fresh and pink.

Catching Avery around the stomach, Sascha drags them to shallower water so he can stand. By the time his feet meet the lake bottom, Avery is shaking pulpy skin off his left hand, whole and just as raw as the right.

"Let's get your feet taken care of," Sascha says, trying not to give in to the sheer

whatthefuck-ery of this discovery.

Avery accepts Sascha's fingers between tender, reformed digits, and Sascha is as gentle as possible while towing Avery to a large, flat boulder lying at an angle on the shore. Sascha's sunned himself on this rock more times than he can count, and he helps Avery settle there now, squeezing his knee while Avery sheds the remains of his transformed feet. His bones shrink back into place, claws growing brittle enough for Avery to snap each one off, then toss the crumbling remains back into the water.

"You have to do that every time?" At Avery's questioning look, Sascha gestures to the last claw on Avery's little toe. "All the skin, and...?"

Wiggling his toes at Sascha, Avery nods. "You donotwant to see how much hair I have to brush off myself when I shift back too quickly. If I take my time, most of it dries up and falls away on its own, but if I get impatient..." He sucks his teeth.

No longer able to deal with looking at Avery's one clawed toe, Sascha takes it upon himself to remove it. With the magic drained, it's reduced to fine dust smeared across his index. The tiny gap resolves into a proper toenail, as if the transformation had never happened. Sascha rinses his hand before pressing his thumb up the arch of Avery's foot. He smiles at the drawn-out moan it wins him, turning into a grin when Avery sprawls back against the rock.

"I want to be a lizard," Avery says, eyes closing as he squirms under the hot sun.

"Would that be a better or a worse transformation?"

Avery laughs. "I could turn into a dinosaur. That'd be cool."

"You'd have to shed the skin on your eyeballs," Sascha points out, halting Avery's laughter.

After a few moments of contemplation, Avery says, “That’d be weird, but don’t some reptiles have two dicks?”

Chuckling, Sascha hoists himself onto the rock next to Avery. He props himself up on one elbow so he can study him, admiring the glossy corkscrews of wet hair in the sunlight. Brassy blond curls frame his neck, frizzing as they dry. Sascha follows the contours of Avery’s throat down his chest, the center of his sternum a visible shadow beneath his skin, no fat to hide behind. Hard work has strengthened Avery’s limbs, but his belly is still soft, a gentle swell greeting the patch of dark hair between Avery’s legs.

Before, Sascha hadn’t allowed himself too close of a look. He wanted Avery to relax before being ogled, but now, baking on the boulder at high-noon, Avery shamelessly parts his thighs under Sascha’s attention.

Untrimmed pubic hair covered most of what Avery is packing, but spreading exposes a phallus of significant length, thick even at rest. Sascha slept with a trans man once. Beyond that, he’s only seen vulvas in porn, and none of them looked like Avery’s, leaving him with no idea what to make of the anatomical difference.

Surprise must show on Sascha’s face because Avery comments lazily, “Surgery can do amazing things nowadays. This is my dick. Wanna touch it?”

The easy way he says it makes Sascha laugh. He brings his hand to Avery’s lips because he doesn’t need a second invitation; his cock stirs when Avery sucks two digits into his mouth. Tongue swirling, Avery slicks Sascha’s fingers with hot saliva, crystalline eyes never breaking Sascha’s heated gaze. Sascha withdraws his fingers, shuddering as Avery lets them slide suggestively off his tongue. He wants that tongue on him and in him, but first, he wants to touch Avery’s dick, to circle the head and feel it begin to pulse.

It's bigger than a clit, with a faint scar running down the underside of the shaft. Sascha follows it, gasping quietly when he discovers Avery still has an entrance. He dips his fingertips the barest amount inside, gathering the natural wetness blooming deeper between Avery's thighs. Then Sascha scissors the thickening flesh between slick fingers, making Avery suck in a shaky breath. When Avery is fully erect, Sascha withdraws to suck Avery's taste off his skin.

Like a spark jumping from flint, Avery tackles Sascha, nearly spilling them both off the boulder. Balancing at the last second, Sascha rolls onto his back, securing Avery to his chest as their mouths crash together.

They kiss with incoherent abandon, but soon Avery gets his wild limbs in order, arranging himself astride Sascha's hips with his smaller length aligned with Sascha's fully hardened cock. It twitches with anticipation before the first arch of Avery's pelvis, driving their erections together, wet heat from Avery's apex easing the friction of the next agonizing slide.

Precision dissolves quickly when Avery braces himself above Sascha, close enough for a teasing lick, a nip, before they surge together. Avery doesn't complain when Sascha takes two handfuls of his ass, squeezing what little padding he has on his slender frame. He holds on but doesn't steer, letting Avery propel his own strokes while Sascha lies back and enjoys being ridden. He bucks, gasping when Avery gives one of his nipples an unexpected pinch, then rewards the soft, guileless chuckle with blunt nails scratching from the curve of his buttock upward, ending with a tight grasp on his hip.

Avery responds to the pressure with high keening. Interested in hearing more, Sascha presses both thumbs into the hollows under Avery's hipbones, delighted when Avery bears down harder, panting raggedly against Sascha's mouth.

Sascha makes the mistake of imagining Avery on his hands and knees, Sascha's grip

punishing and unbreakable around his hips, holding him still while slowly, slowly sliding into him. The thought of incoherent begging, thrashing for freedom with true release as the only goal, drags Sascha over the edge far sooner than he'd intended.

Hot come spurts between them, spreading between their bellies as Avery bears down, increasing his pace until desperation is raw on his features. Sascha is too blitzed to do anything but watch, orbs of dazzling sun in his eyes as Avery uses Sascha's come-smeared body to drive himself toward climax. When Avery's thighs start to tremble, Sascha summons enough strength to grab the bleached curls at Avery's nape, jerking his head back to bare his throat.

"You can do it, sweetheart," Sascha purrs. "Use me. Make yourself come."

He maintains the hold so Avery has no choice but to cry out when the wave of pleasure slams into him, tightening every muscle in his body while he spasms.

Continued praise spills from Sascha's lips, telling Avery, 'that's it, good boy' and 'you're so sexy, using me like this,' until his frantic jerks slow to hiccuppy aftershocks.

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They sprawl as one until their breathing slows, until Sascha says, “You’re gonna get a sunburn,” and Avery says, “I think your jizz has crusted our pubes together.”

He’s not wrong about the stuff between them, so Sascha gets a good hold on Avery and dumps them both in the water to clean up, laughing at Avery’s surprised squeak. Returning to the rock, they dry off in the sun, holding hands and talking, talking, talking. About nothing and about things Sascha normally has no one interested in hearing, about bits of Avery’s past leading him to a work farm for werecreatures in a microscopic township.

Sascha mumbles, in a brain-fried sort of way, that it all seems terribly unfair. Avery laughs and laughs at the idea of fairness, not stopping until Sascha threatens to push him back into the lake.

There’s a lot more kissing, but eventually clothes come back on and suddenly they’re standing by the car, smiling awkwardly. The paper-white moon slips from behind a cloud, a distant threat in the muddled sky.

“I’ll pick you up before eight Sunday night,” Sascha murmurs as if they might be overheard. He pushes wayward curls off Avery’s forehead, then kisses it. “We’ll come back here. There’s a cave further down the water where you’ll be safe for the night.”

“Okay,” Avery says, wobbly on his feet. His phone pings, and he pulls it out to glance at the notification on the screen.

Sascha is surprised to see the screen badly shattered. “What happened to your

phone?”

Avery grimaces. “Just some assholes fucking with me on the farm. I’ll deal with it.”

A surge of protective anger heats Sascha’s organs to boiling. “I’ll kill them,” he says, fangs dropping on instinct.

Avery only looks amused. He pats Sascha’s cheek. “That won’t be necessary, tough guy. Have you ever killed anyone in your life?”

Sascha falters before answering honestly: “No, but I would. For you.”

The smile falls from Avery’s face, leaving him small and scared in the creeping moonlight. “Why?”

“Because you deserve to be protected for once.”

When they climb into the car, Sascha pretends not to notice how choked up Avery becomes after his declaration. Every time he tries to speak, his fist ends up pressed against his mouth, seaglass eyes glittering. But no tears fall, and eventually he chokes out a thanks to Sascha for taking him to his “so-called” forgotten lake.

Sascha can only toss him a brief grin, forced for Avery’s sake, though he doesn’t think Avery buys it.

Sunday. Four days. Three and a half, really.

And it arrives before he can blink.

CHAPTER

NINE

Avery

Avery should have prepared for this. Celeste said she wasn't giving up on roping him into her pack, and she hasn't.

That must be why Beryl has been watching him like prey. Unlike the rest of the werecreatures, they don't do any work on the farm. They simply hover, just far enough away to preserve plausible deniability, and stare at him with yellow eyes that barely blink.

The shifter supervisors haven't bothered Beryl, either, which shocked him. Every time Avery sent a panicked look at one of them, afraid of being punished for Beryl's antagonism, the supervisors averted their eyes. During work hours, the farm is overseen with vicious efficiency. Any conflict that could interfere with productivity is punished harshly. Off hours, squabbles between the werecreatures are inevitable, but as long as they don't escalate to full-out fights, the shifters only nudge each other and laugh while they watch.

Getting put back in one's place by a shifter is humiliating, but even they don't get too rowdy because they aren't at the top of the chain. No, the highest level of command lies with the humans and their big fuckoff guns, primed to open fire on anyone who becomes a threat—werecreature or shifter.

The lack of PCC presence in Bliss is odd compared to the bigger cities where they patrol endlessly. Avery doesn't mind. Being riddled with bullets by a redneck with a superiority complex sounds like a faster death than the ominous unknown of a PCC arrest.

It wasn't until evening the second day that Avery figured it out. He was on his way to

the main office to grab something from his locker and caught sight of Celeste talking to Beryl outside. Celeste had claimed her pack was well-established around Wilderness Park; she must have some connection with Farmer Dennings for her subordinate to be allowed to lurk around intimidating one of the workers.

Avery's suspicions are confirmed when Beryl slides onto the bench across from him during breakfast the day before the full moon. They keep their eyes down while eating silently, but as soon as Avery drops his gaze to his own plate, he feels their dangerous yellow eyes fixed on him.

"What the fuck do you want?" he finally demands, slamming his plastic spork to the worn table.

Beryl leans forward onto their elbows, a smirk shaping their lips. "You're smart, Avery," they say in a mocking lilt. "What do you think I want?"

"What your alpha wants?" he guesses.

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They blink at him slowly, serenely. “Well?”

“Well, what? Are you still expecting me to change my mind about her offer?”

“No,” Beryl responds. “I don’t think you’re desperate enough yet. But you’ll get there. I’ll be here, waiting for that moment... Unless you’re too stubborn. Your time will run out eventually, Avery.”

Avery bares his teeth weakly, and anger floods his senses when Beryl only laughs.

“You can do better than that, bearcub,” they say.

“Sorry, I’m not getting in trouble over the likes of you.”

Beryl laughs again. “Okay.” They stand, leaving their half-eaten plate. “Throw that away for me, will you? Talk soon.”

Avery clenches his jaw, looking away from Beryl’s carefree swagger. He grinds his teeth and seethes until the ten minute bell goes off, warning workers of the impending start of their shifts. Eating isn’t optional, so Avery shoves a sporkful of unseasoned scrambled eggs into his mouth and chews bitterly. Working in this shit-assed place is already demoralizing enough without being stalked by someone who wants to turn him into some arrogant bitch’s puppet.

Still, when one of the supervisors bellows that it’s work time, Avery grabs Beryl’s plate and throws it away with the remainder of the pancakes he’s too nauseated to finish.

Avery runs. His feet beat the road like he's trying to bruise it, hoping Sascha's car is at the rendezvous point just off the Dennings property. Behind, the twisted imitation of a tiger bounds lazily.

Beryl could overtake him easily, but they don't.

Avery was slipping out the back to meet with Sascha when they appeared in front of him, wearing nothing but a thin shirt that only just reached their mid-thigh. The full moon isn't out yet, so he was taken by surprise when their bones began to crack in a precocious transformation. Their spine had extended hideously, putting an arch in their shoulders until thick, bloody vertebrae burst through the skin of their back, tearing the shirt down the middle.

There had been just enough time to wind around them during the rest of their shift and get a slight head start before Beryl stabilized enough to give chase.

If Beryl had wanted to kill him, they could have done so easily. Avery doesn't have time to shift. Even if the ursine freed itself enough to force his own early transformation, Beryl could have easily taken advantage of the seconds in which Avery's skin was thinned and stretched over his bloating organs before the mutant tissue and hair filled in. Gutting him in seconds would be as simple as a swipe of their massive paw.

But they don't want to kill him—only terrify. A cheap attempt to smoke him out, make him desperate enough to accept Celeste's offer.

He won't. Avery isn't anyone's pet, not even Sascha's. Though if he had to pick...

A few paces later, Avery scents something familiar, and then a smudge in the distance resolves into the shape of a tall blond leaning against a tiny hatchback.

Sascha is already on alert, surveying the tree line next to him. Avery's lungs are too tight to call out, but Sascha spots him a moment later. When he registers the mutant anthro-tiger loping after him, the change in his demeanor is instantaneous. He drops his phone, rips off his shirt, and shifts right there on the anemic weeds beside the road.

Sascha's shifted form is big for a cougar, but nothing compared to Beryl's mass. All the same, Sacha bounds toward them, teeth bared and hackles raised. Avery keeps running, but Beryl stops. They rise up onto their back legs, hunched and snarling. Sascha inserts himself between Avery and the larger, scarier feline and hisses like a wild mother with cubs.

Avery banks, sliding in the dry dirt as he turns to face them. He's ready to rip off his own clothes and start that full moon transformation after all.

A grating feline scream bursts from Sascha's throat. It hurts Avery's ears and, oddly, makes him want to roll over in... fear? No. Avery isn't afraid of Sascha, but he doesn't know how else to describe the sensation.

Sascha's eyes take on a pale yellow glow, and he screams again, the sound holding a different weight.

A shudder runs down Beryl's unnaturally long spine. They take a step back, ears flattening, and spend several moments considering Sascha, as if unsure whether to back down or push through. Finally, a very human snort puffs from their nostrils. With a shake of their heavy, striped head, Beryl turns and stalks into the forest, twisting like a snake through the dense trees.

The sudden stillness leaves Avery panting, brow furrowed as he tries to make sense of whatever influence Sascha is wielding. His fingers prickle, and when Sascha turns his gaze to Avery, the sensation grows into something desperate. Avery still can't put

it into words, but the image of him on his back with Sascha hovering above becomes sharp in his mind.

Like the difference between sunset and sunrise, the large cougar's expression shifts. His ears perk up, and his eyes go wide, complementary blue-gold catching what's left of the sky's light. Sascha pads toward Avery, purring loudly, and rubs himself against the leg of his jeans. Avery strokes his smooth head, shivering. The mental image of being beneath Sascha ripens into a velvety warmth that leaves Avery feeling so unbelievably safe.

Understanding washes over him.

This is a taste of alpha magic—the kind he allegedly has but can't fathom wielding. How could someone like Avery, small and unsure, ever make another person feel this protected? Not to mention command the retreat of a beast like Beryl.

Avery's phone pings. It's his eight o'clock alarm, which will give them just enough time to get to the section of Forgotten Lake where Avery will post up for the night, contained during his involuntary shift. The location should keep him safe from other wandering werecreatures, and all other people and animals safe from Avery himself.

"We gotta go," he says to Sascha, scratching behind his ears. "I don't have much time."

Sascha doesn't shift back. He merely paws at the car door, waiting for Avery to open it for him. Then he jumps into the passenger seat, sitting like he's still a person. Avery chuckles quietly as he gathers Sascha's clothes and tosses them on the back seat. He has to adjust the seat to accommodate his short stature from Sascha's long legs, and when he's done, he pauses.

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“How am I gonna find that damn lake while you can’t talk, Sascha?”

The cougar wiggles in his seat, adjusting so he can paw at the window, leaving giant bean-prints on the glass as he indicates the direction in which Avery should turn. Avery dissolves into damn near hysterical laughter.

“Taking driving instructions from a cat. Alright, let’s go.” He laughs even more when Sascha nips at his sleeve, then puts the car in drive and eases onto the road.

Not too long later, the thatch of growth concealing the path to Forgotten Lake appears in the distance. When Avery gets close, Sascha jumps out of the car and guides him toward the obscured area into which he jams the little hatchback. Avery climbs the fence, but Sascha goes several meters down to dig under the base of it. He kicks dirt back into the divot once he’s on the other side.

As they walk, Avery strokes Sascha’s obscenely soft ears, enjoying the way he chirrups and purrs before nudging him to hurry. The full moon is almost out, and there’s no time left to waste.

Sascha plunges into the cool lake water without hesitation. Avery looks at his phone and its splintered screen, then takes off his boots and carefully slides it inside one of them. He tucks the boots between two of the boulders where he and Sascha first fucked, only four days ago. Avery spares just a second to smile, brushing his fingers over the smooth surface. He cannot believe they had sex on a rock. The peaceful memory dissolves as he turns, following Sascha into the water.

Sodden denim, heavy on Avery’s legs, makes it hard to swim, but he manages. It’s

not terribly far before they make it to the mouth of a cave, so narrow they both have to crawl. Avery makes it inside without issue, but Sascha's cougar form is easily twice his size, so he has to maneuver with much more care.

Within the cave, Avery can stand. The ceiling is high, extending several feet above his head. It'll be tall enough, but there's no way his fully transformed ursine body will be able to exit the small opening. There will be just enough width for Avery to irritably pace the night away, trapped inside thick walls of rock and earth.

He doesn't actually know how smart he is when the ursine takes over, as his memories are always blurry when he wakes up after a full moon. He's undergone the full transformation only ten times, plus one half if the partial transformation counts. Eight full moons, tonight's being the ninth. Twice on accident, the second being when he nearly killed the mugger in Pontiac.

"You should leave now," Avery says, fighting his way out of the soaked t-shirt sucking itself to his skin. He kicks off the wet jeans next, dismissing both to the side of the cave. He keeps his boxer-briefs on only because he doesn't want to sit his bare ass on the cave floor. When Sascha approaches, agony from the farewell visible even on the face of an animal, Avery drops to his knees, ignoring the grit stinging his skin. "Thank you for your help. I'll be fine. You promised I'd be safe here."

Sascha nods, then presses his cold nose to Avery's cheek, licking with a large, rough tongue. Avery hugs him around the neck, then gestures toward the cave's waiting mouth, swatting him playfully on the flank when he hesitates for too long. With an irritable yowl of displeasure, Sascha departs—and not a moment too soon.

Avery sprawls on his stomach to watch Sascha swim to the other side of the lake, warmth blooming in his chest when he realizes Sascha plans on watching over him. Then again, maybe the sensation is from the sharp rocks pressing into his vulnerable torso.

The discomfort becomes inconsequential when a different flavor of pain starts at the top of his spine, then creeps downward. Avery gags, only barely able to keep the contents of his stomach. The first two shifts, he wasn't so lucky.

Bones begin to crack and shift underneath his skin, lengthening until Avery feels like he might burst.

And then, he does.

Avery screams when his skin tears, the bloody gaps making space for new mutant tissue to burst in its place, knitting Avery back together as his body convulses and grows. His mind is the only thing that doesn't swell; in fact, it feels like it gets smaller and smaller, pulling his consciousness under the surface, away from the agony of being torn apart. By the time thick black hair begins to sprout from Avery's screaming follicles, numbness takes over. It stings, but the deeper his mind sinks, the calmer Avery becomes.

The last thing he thinks about is Sascha, keeping watch on the other side of the lake.

When Avery staggers out of the cave the next morning, nearly knocking himself unconscious on the low rock, it's to find a bright-eyed cougar sitting on the bank waiting for him. Avery's clothes are still wet, the humid cave air not having allowed them to dry completely, but they'll have to swim back anyway. He gives Sascha a quick hug and drops a kiss on his satiny forehead, then plunges into the lake, shivering from the cooler morning temperature.

They swim silently. This trip, the denim is even heavier on Avery's tired legs, but his underwear was ripped to shreds during the transformation, and the jeans are all he has. Should've brought a change of clothes, but he didn't know they'd be swimming. He's exhausted when he crawls up on the shore, barely regaining his balance so he can fetch his boots and phone. The device has died, but at least it's still there. Avery

ties the shoelaces together and throws them over his shoulder, staggering to the ivy-woven fence and climbing it barefoot. As he navigates to the other side, his foot catches on one of the prongs, worn down by weather but still sharp enough to scrape the skin to bleeding.

Hissing, Avery loses his grip on the fence. His other foot fails to find purchase, damp skin tangling in the foliage. Avery claws for the chain link as he falls, expecting to break something one way or another, but instead of hard ground, he hits a warm body that makes anoof!when his weight settles.

Sprawling onto the grass, Avery ends up tangled in a pair of very human arms. Sascha, once again biped, wheezes with laughter.

“Are you okay?” they ask at the same time.

Neither of them reply, as their laughing mouths become occupied with each other.

Avery’s wet clothes drip on Sascha’s naked skin, fresh and dry after his shift. Envious, wishing he could look so handsome and bright-eyed after a transformation, Avery delivers a punishing bite to Sascha’s clavicle, then drops his fangs to threaten Sascha’s left nipple.

Sascha yelps and covers his chest with one arm, shoving Avery away but only so he can roll him onto his back on the grass and suck hard on his neck, leaving strawberry blotches and swollen red rings of teeth imprints. Caught in the thrill,the pleasure of the moment, Avery fails to think of any downside to allowing Sascha to mark him.

“I want to get you out of these clothes,” Sascha grumbles. “I want to suck on every part of you.” He tugs the belt loop on Avery’s shorts, fingers going right for his wildly sensitive hipbone, but Avery bats his hand away.

“I don’t know what time it is,” he says, putting a finger over Sascha’s pursed lips. “But I have to get back to the farm so I can shower and get new clothes. Breakfast after a full moon is later in the morning, but I’m not gonna push my luck.” Especially not with Beryl around.

Sascha lets out a miserable whine, its similarity to his cougar noises so pointed Avery can’t help but laugh. He smothers the sound with kisses, tonguing shamelessly into Sascha’s mouth so he can swallow every desperate gasp and groan. Lying under Sascha at last, after wanting it so badly last night, feels like coming home.

Finally they withdraw, both panting, one smiling (Avery), and one pouting (Sascha).

Sascha mutters curses against Farmer Dennings as he helps Avery up from the grass, then insists on wiping leaves and dirt off his wet clothes. It mostly smears them even worse, but Avery kisses him in gratitude regardless, before telling Sascha to put on his own clothing.

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The musty car blanket, upon which they had their first date, provides a barrier between Avery's ass and the car's leather seat. He keeps the window open so his hair dries in the wind. Sascha keeps taking his eyes off the road to send Avery imploring looks until Avery flicks him in the temple as a reprimand. Then, in a truly hypocritical move, he takes Sascha's hand off the steering wheel to kiss his knuckles. He gives it back eventually, just in time for the sign indicating Dennings Farm to become visible over the hill.

Before getting out of the car, Avery kisses Sascha, clutching hard and refusing to be dislodged until Sascha reminds him of the time. Avery winces upon hearing how late it is, then hurries off so he can take care of the morning's tasks before his shift stocking the farm store begins. He's gotten reasonably good at operating the space since that first day of fumbling around without any help or training. It's not that herculean a task anymore.

The only thing that makes it awful is the bad attitude of one particular shifter clerk who has it out for him.

Shifter employees get their schedules elsewhere, so Avery won't know until he walks inside if Atwood is working the check-out today. It's Monday, and he usually works every Tuesday and Wednesday, with random intervals in between, enough to startle Avery when he arrives. He makes an effort to stay on his guard whenever stocking the store, so he'll be ready for Atwood if he's there and able to relax a bit if he's not.

Monday could have chosen to be kind—this, the day after a full moon shift, and having had to leave a man who wanted to, quote, 'suck on every part' of him. A shiver runs down Avery's spine as he contemplates things Sascha could suck on, followed

by a much less pleasant shiver when he walks into the store and Atwood's head swivels toward him like a gatling gun latching onto a target. Rather than the usual marijuana fog, Atwood's eyes are clear and bright, pupils contracted into pinpricks.

"Hey, Atwood," Avery says weakly, not willing to be cowed into looking away first. "How's it?—"

"I figured something out," Atwood interrupts. "I smelled something on you when we snuggled last week. Remember that?"

The encounter Atwood is referring to surges to the forefront of Avery's mind. Far from snuggling, the shifter had abruptly gotten up in Avery's face, so close the weed stink on his clothes had itched Avery's nostrils. Then Atwood spoke, and his breath had been worse. Avery had turned away, eyes squeezing closed as he hoped desperately that Atwood wouldn't go so far as to touch him.

"See," Atwood continues, "I thought I was imagining things, but I'm not. You've been real personal with a shifter recently."

This alarms Avery into stepping back. Every time he's returned from a meeting with Sascha, he's showered well and assumed the farm's animal stink would mask any lingering traces. Avery himself can't figure out what he smells like before or after rubbing against Sascha. In general, the variation in shifter physiology makes it hard for him to identify them with precision, but in Sascha's case, it's more that everything about him feels so right it's hard to imagine what life looks or smells like without him.

So how the fuck can Atwood tell?

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Avery doesn't say. 'That's none of your business' would be even worse than simply denying it. 'Fuck off' is probably the worst

option, which sucks because that's what Avery goes with.

"Leave me the fuck alone." Avery tries to scowl, he really does, but what happens instead is his inner ursine snarls in rage, baring Avery's teeth with his fangs already dropped. "I'm just here to do my fucking job, so you can?—"

Atwood cuts Avery off, not by interrupting him again, but by simply taking a step out from behind the counter. Avery backs up until he nearly hits a vegetable display, then realizes he won't be able to defend anything in this cramped little store and lunges for the exit. Atwood reaches it first, his much larger body blocking the door. He's shorter than Sascha, but broader. Comparatively, Avery is a toothpick, and when Atwood wraps a meaty hand around his throat, Avery worries he's about to be snapped like one.

"I see those marks on your neck, you know. Is your job sucking shifter dick? You'll put out for this mystery faggot, but not for me?"

Panic surges in Avery's chest. He'd told himself Atwood's words last week had just been him tormenting Avery for fun, not that the guy actually meant when he called Avery a "pretty lil' fuck" with a mouth that'd look better stuffed, then volunteered to demonstrate.

Avery had repeated to himself that it wouldn't happen again. He'd focused on his conflict with Beryl and put Atwood's disgusting words out of his mind, because what other choice did he have?

It's not like he has anywhere else to go.

Atwood tightens his fingers and presses Avery against the door, which he locks with his other hand. "You think you're too good for me? Like you were-bitches aren't here just to clean up animal shit, since that's all you're worth anyway? You should feel

lucky I'm even touching you. I'm only doing it because I know your little fucking secret."

No longer concerned about the restricting pressure on his windpipe, Avery begins to thrash. If Atwood already guessed correctly about Sascha, that leaves only one other secret that would be of any interest to a bastard like him.

"You think just because some stupid fuckers in legal offices changed your paperwork, that changes who you are? What you were born as?" Atwood laughs, then spits directly in Avery's face. "You'll bend over for me, or Uncle Howard might hear a few things about your performance in the store."

Avery writhes, pained noises catching in his aching throat when Atwood lifts him onto his toes.

"What's it gonna be, you were-bitch whore?"

Being unable to vocalize works in Avery's favor because when Atwood yanks at the bottom of Avery's shirt, he's unprepared for the drop of warm fluid that lands on his wrist. He looks down at the blood dripping from Avery's left hand, attention diverting just enough that he's entirely unprepared when the bony knuckles of Avery's right collide with his jaw.

Atwood wails in fury, dropping Avery. Before he can get his bearings, Avery knees Atwood in the crotch as hard as he can, then ducks under his arm and makes a break for the customer entrance at the front of the store. He doesn't even wipe the spit off his cheek.

Bursting outside, Avery starts to run, but something makes him skid to a stop. His feet...

They're burning.

"Oh, fuck, oh no," Avery hisses. He jumps behind the large wooden sign identifying the store, crying out when his ankle cracks loudly. Shaking hard, Avery tears through his bootlaces, trying to get them untied. Despite only meaning to shift his hands, Avery is horrified to confirm his feet have begun to transform as well. They swell in his boots, and he only barely rips them off before his foot grows too large for the thick leather.

Blood gushes from his toes as the claws force their way through, soaking into the gravel surrounding the store display. The crusted-over scrape from the fence earlier tears apart, leaving an open gash that shortly after fills in with the claylike mutant tissue.

The moment Avery's bones still, he lurches forward, intending to keep running. Instead, the first few halting steps across the gravel cause pain to radiate up Avery's legs. Blood has made the small rocks slippery, keeping him off-balance.

The front door to the store flies open. Avery is out of time.

CHAPTER

TEN

Avery

A look over his shoulder is what propels Avery into moving despite the ache. Instead of Atwood's biped form, Avery finds himself stared down by the wild eyes of a motherfuckingcassowary. Of course. Of fucking course! The bird honks at him, the sound like rattling rocks in a tub of foul water, deep and guttural and menacing. Avery takes off, not remembering how fast the landbird can move, but hoping it's slow enough to outrun.

Avery staggers, yelping at the pain. When he lifts his head, the cassowary-shaped douchebag is in front of him, more of those gulping threat noises offending Avery's ears. Without being able to run, the only option he has is fully transforming to fight back... if he wants to get shot through the brain by Howard Dennings himself.

By his own admission, Farmer Dennings is a great shot. Avery doesn't want to test it because he's pretty sure this man wouldn't be so cocky around a farm of werecreatures if it wasn't true.

Freeing the ursine to numb his pain responses would be a terminally bad idea, and as ready as he was to die in adrainage ditch when he got here, Avery can't stand the thought of never seeing Sascha again.

So he chokes back the pain and forces himself into motion. Though painful, friction helps the pads harden, blood drying and flaking off. Despite this, Avery still doesn't get very far before being overtaken by Atwood, who delivers the first punishing jab of his beak to Avery's arm.

They're smack in the middle of the farm, right at the front, where customers drive in to visit the store. Avery can't make it into the forest from here, but if he can cross under the archway leading to the main road and get off the property entirely, maybe Atwood will give up the chase. Maybe he'll even get hit by a car. Avery can hope.

That hope dies quickly when Avery sees exactly how fast a cassowary can run. If this particular chicken tried to cross the road, the car itself might lose, which doesn't bode well for Avery.

No evasive maneuver Avery can think of, much less execute, seems good enough to evade Atwood's quick, aggressive strikes. Avery ducks and darts, slips, hobbles, and in one case, falls on his ass and yelps, but the massive bird doesn't seem the least bit inconvenienced. In fact, Avery suspects Atwood is playing with him. Tormenting his prey before taking it out with those huge talons on his reptilian feet.

Avery becomes intimately acquainted with those talons when he attempts another dash, aiming to put a pallet heavy with hay bales between them. With a surprising amount of grace, the cassowary jumps onto the hay bales and crosses over them. He lands in front of Avery, cutting him off before delivering a kick to Avery's leg. It leaves a deep slice through his calf.

Inside him, the ursine awakens, enraged by the pain. Such a sensation should only herald its freedom: A ritual of agony in exchange for growth and strength.

Avery doesn't feel strong or big right now. Sprawled on the ground, he tries to move his leg, fighting through the acid sting and gushing blood.

Behind Atwood, there's a bright flicker that yanks Avery's attention away. A pair of yellow eyes stares back at him, thick brows furrowed above them.

Beryl frowns. They don't look happy to see Avery getting his ass kicked—maybe because it's not by them? Maybe because Celeste won't appreciate damaged goods? Fuck if he knows.

The cassowary flaps its wings, demanding Avery forget about Beryl if he means to live long enough to reject them again. A hollow note escapes the bird, one that almost sounds like amusement.

The ursine rages, demanding to be loosed, commanding that Avery cease playing the victim in a cruel game of predators. Especially in front of Beryl. For some reason, having them as a witness makes the humiliation sting worse. He wants Beryl to know he's strong enough to refuse scraping the bottom of the barrel alongside them.

Avery almost gives in. It'd be easy to surrender to the haze, toxic microbes sailing through his blood, taking away his weakness and awareness with it. What could one bullet do? Or ten? Against a werereature such as himself, even the violent fossil of a bird would make itself scarce, much less the posturing tools of a simple man?—

No. He can't take the risk.

If he can get to his lover, he'll be safe. He just needs to keep going until he can find Sascha, or until Sascha can find him. Surely hurt like this cannot fester if they're together.

Refusing the ursine infuriates it. Holding it back distracts Avery from dodging another blow, earning him a long scrape along his forearm.

A creeping itch on the back of his neck, right where his hackles would rise if he had

them, alerts him of a few shifters supervising the attack. Waiting for Avery to do more to defend himself so they can justify pouncing. He'd never survive.

There are other werecreatures, too. Some stare openly, while others keep their heads down and hurry past.

One of the supervisors nudges the man standing next to him—a human with a gun. The shifter chuckles, but the man only stares.

No one twitches in his direction, not to help him. Not to stop it.

Sascha said he'd kill for him. Maybe that's true, or maybe it's not, but Sascha would protect him. He was ready to fight Beryl, three times his size and twice as deadly. This fucked up murder bird wouldn't stand a chance.

Thinking of Sascha angers the ursine further, triggering a primal sensation Avery doesn't have a name for. Companion. Ally, maybe. Someone who wouldn't let this happen, unlike the chuckling onlookers doing nothing while Avery thrashes in a puddle of his own blood.

If he lets the ursine free, it'll get him to Sascha. They'll be together again.

No, no, no. He can't risk it. He can't.

When Avery tries to stand, Atwood kicks him in the chest, tearing his shirt and sending him flying into the side of a truck. Avery hits hard and goes down harder, a sob catching in his throat when his palms hit the gravel.

Atwood's honks become louder as he approaches, the frequency so low it pounds in Avery's head alongside the ursine's furious roars.

The archway leading to the main street is in sight, and Avery has to believe that if he gets off the farm property, Atwood will let him go. He begs for the ursine's strength, imploring it not to take over. He can't lose his ability to reason. The curse of the werevirus is trading control for power. If only Avery could just have a bit of both.

All or nothing, the inner beast insists.

Unwilling to give up, Avery puts that primal sensation at the forefront of his mind—companion, ally, mate—and asks only for what he needs to see Sascha's smile again, to gaze into those bright blue-gold eyes.

The moment the ursine yields, it's as if a chemical reaction explodes into being. Where before there was nothing but the sick beat of pain rending his core, now unbelievable strength surges through Avery's wounded limbs. Melding with the ursine instincts first results in a woozy double-vision, but their minds settle into place with crisp finality, an ear-popping release of pressure. The chemical reaction fizzles out, a steaming-but-peaceful whole left where two separate elements once lay. Determined to live long enough to meditate on this later, Avery pushes himself to his

bleeding feet, and he runs.

This time, he puts the furious cassowary at his back, feeling his blood vessels constrict to stem the flow of blood from his injuries. His muscles flex and harden as if he's been laboring for months instead of weeks.

Gasps from the watching crowd make his ears twitch, but he doesn't pause. He takes the final handful of strides toward the wooden sign bidding him a good rest of his day, Thank you for visiting Dennings Farm?—

Pain explodes low in Avery's back.

Leaving the ground entirely, Avery's body goes sailing, hitting the road so hard it knocks the breath from his lungs. He rolls almost to the drainage ditch beside the shoulder—one of many he'd fantasized about dying within. Too close, now. Avery digs his claws into the asphalt, feeling his skin peel as he drags himself farther onto the road, away from the sloping ground.

In the near distance, a truck turns the corner. One of those old ones, rusty and choking as it drives, too fast, down the road directly toward Avery. Maybe he should have given in to the drainage ditch after all.

Avery is bracing himself when the driver looks up from his phone just in time to swerve, narrowly avoiding crushing Avery's hand with large, threadbare tires. The truck speeds off into the distance as if Avery was roadkill rather than a living, injured person. He's used to that by now. The entire shifter population in this country would prefer everyone affected by the werevirus be reduced to squished intestines and flat, sun-baked fur, torn skin fused to the cracks in the road.

As it is, Avery's blood has left uneven smears where he hit and rolled. His breath comes harsh, wheezing gasps that stretch and pull the laceration on his lower back.

The ursine has retreated, leaving Avery to feel every nanosecond of agony radiating from his injuries like mini earthquakes.

Then, much to his horror, Avery watches as Atwood passes under the cheerful wooden archway. He makes that gulping sound again, but before he reaches the road, Howard Dennings comes up behind him and grabs a handful of feathers.

“Boy, what in God’s name do you think you’re doing?” Farmer Dennings demands. “You can’t be out here spoilin’ my investments. I can’t keep you on the schedule if you won’t keep your hands off the workers, no matter what your mama says.”

Atwood’s shift dissolves into a brief mirage, the sun hot and watery over the pavement, before he reappears, fully naked and scowling. “That whore started it. Keeping secrets. Why’d you even hire it?”

After all the humiliation, Avery barely feels the prick of being called an ‘it’ rather than a man. He’s long known these people don’t see him as a person, not even enough to misgender him.

Farmer Dennings shoves his nephew by the back of his neck away from the road, ignoring when he whines, “But Uncle Howard!” in protest. He watches Atwood retreat for a few moments before turning his attention back to Avery. His hand lands at his hip, where the telltale bulge of a gun rests ominously.

“You,” Farmer Dennings says. “Don’t come ‘round if you’re just gonna make a damn mess. I don’t feed shit like you just to have y’all causing problems for my business.”

Farmer Dennings seems to wait for a response, but when Avery provides none, he sighs in an aggrieved fashion. Then he crosses the road in several quick strides and, without prelude, kicks Avery hard in the ribs.

Avery spills down the mushy grass he tried so ardently to avoid, whimpering in disgust when he lands face-first in the muck. His hands claw for purchase, but they're weak human hands again, scrabbling at a slippery incline, and he can't even summon enough strength to lift his own weight. Defeated and dizzy from losing so much blood, Avery closes his eyes and succumbs to the sick realization that he's not going to see Sascha again.

Out of everything, that's what hurts the most.

Nearly an hour later, Avery still isn't dead.

He'd been waiting for it, apologizing to Sascha in his head, cursing Farmer Dennings, Celeste, and Avery's whole damn estranged family. Everyone who's ever held power over him, including Melissa's fucking were-fox alpha who refused him entry into the pack, punishing him for a crime he'd never even thought of committing.

All he'd ever wanted, from the moment the werevirus took hold of his system, was to be sheltered from the horrific new reality. Instead, he was spit on, kicked out, forced to run and run and run to place after place. All unwilling to welcome the alpha Avery didn't ask to be, none open to trusting his unexplored strength to protect them. The alpha's Catch-22: Powerful enough to violate an existing pack but too weak to care for one of his own.

Avery lifts a shaking hand to scrub at his cheek where Atwood spit on him. It's probably gone now, washed away by tears and filthy water, but Avery scratches the spot anyway, begging his body to forget the sensation. When his arm grows too tired to continue tearing at the raw skin, Avery slumps back into the mud.

In a brief moment of clarity, Avery gets it in his head to call Sascha before remembering that his phone died overnight. He didn't bring his wallet to the lake, choosing instead to leave it in his locker at the office, where everyone keeps their

valuables if they prefer they not be stolen during work hours. He obviously can't fetch a charger or clean clothes from his bunk. Farmer Dennings didn't say Avery couldn't go back to fetch his things, but in this condition, he'd be a walking target. Best to give it a while for the excitement to die down.

Without his wallet or phone, Avery has no way to contact Sascha, and though he vaguely remembers how to get to the Madison pack lands, he doesn't trust himself to find the Forgotten Lake entrance without Sascha to guide him.

Shock from the attack eases enough for other emotions to sink in—shame and fear and regret and sorrow and shame, twice as strong once he reviews the circumstances up close. Maybe he could have just sucked Atwood's dick. Lowered his pride, lowered to his knees, gave the shifter what he wanted while the marks Sascha put on his neck burned. Sascha wouldn't have blamed him, but Avery sure as fuck would have blamed himself.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

Quiet footsteps making their way across the asphalt snag Avery's attention. It's weird because he's only known them a short time, but Avery recognizes Beryl's scent. Even weirder is that he isn't afraid. Maybe they're coming to bodily drag him away to throw into Celeste's waiting maw. Maybe he's so pathetic they're rescinding the offer.

Either way, he can't bring himself to care.

What Avery doesn't expect is Beryl picking their way down the incline into the drainage ditch, their boots squelching in the mud. They crouch beside him, frowning, then hover their fingers over the injury on Avery's back. Just the proximity makes him clench, and they haven't even touched him.

"You should be healing faster," Beryl mutters. "Why are you still this fucked up?"

"Dunno," Avery slurs.

Beryl clicks their tongue. "I don't want to hurt you, but you gotta get up. You need to get away from here." When Avery doesn't respond, Beryl continues. "Some of the supervisors were talking about coming back out to teach you a lesson."

Avery closes his eyes. Beryl knuckles him in the shoulder.

"I'm not joking, Avery. They'll fuck you up." A pause follows before Beryl adds, their reluctance palpable, "Atwood told them that you're trans, okay? I don't..."

Sudden tension makes Avery's wounds ache. He leans into the pain, trying to get the

ursine to wake up and give him strength again. The beast stays dormant, but Avery ends up not needing it because Beryl gently catches him under the shoulder. Prying his heavy limbs and disgusting clothes out of the muck hurts beyond his capacity for words, but Beryl is there to slowly ease him upright, saying nothing about his miserable whimpers. When he's no longer horizontal, they settle him in a reclining position on the side of the ditch.

"Do you have anyone you can call?" Beryl pulls out their phone and looks at him expectantly.

Avery presses his lips together, then admits, "My phone is dead."

"I have a power supply, but you still can't stay here. Can you walk?"

Dying in the sun sounds preferable. Avery nods anyway, even though doubt fills him. "I can try, at least."

"All we can do," Beryl says quietly, then proceeds with the arduous process of helping Avery out of the ditch without injuring him more.

When they reach the road, Avery examines his physical state. The lacerations have mostly stopped bleeding, but his skin aches, especially where the morning sun beat down on his exposed back. Each step burns, but with Beryl's hand a surprisingly gentle support, Avery limps along until the farm's welcome sign is no longer in sight.

The trek feels like it takes hours. Avery's energy stores are empty, reducing the ursine to chewing on the only thing Avery has left: His will to live, rapidly dwindling.

They finally stop when they reach a railing on the side of the road, protecting drivers from the consequences of taking the curve too fast. Unable to think of anything but

the bruised and burned soles of his feet, Avery plants his ass on the thin metal edge and buries his face in his hands.

Beryl takes his phone out of their pocket. They've had it on their portable charger, but when Avery peeks through his fingers, he sees the low battery icon on the shattered screen. It won't turn on.

"It hasn't been charging all that great since..." Avery trails off.

Beryl winces, but doesn't apologize, which Avery appreciates because he doesn't wanna hear it.

Instead, they ask, "Do you have any numbers memorized? I can't stay here too much longer." Hesitantly, they add, "Could you ask that shifter who was with you? The other alpha."

"I don't..." It feels like a violation, having the undistilled joy of his relationship with Sascha out in the open. All the assumptions that will be made about them. But Avery gives in, mumbles, "I can try to remember," and returns to the darkness behind his palms. He tries to envision Sascha's number, all the times he's stared at the contact on his screen, zooming in on Sascha's photos to memorize every pixel of his lovely face. Finally, Avery extends his hand for the phone. "Let me see."

Beryl surrenders their phone and watches intently as Avery tries to piece together Sascha's phone number. He isn't great with remembering numbers, but after spending months trying to adjust to his enhanced sensory profile, Avery's begun to make sense of it. Along with sight and smell, his memory sharpened. He just has to relax.

Taking a deep breath, Avery calls the number he's input. It goes straight to voicemail, and the auto-responder is for Kathy-someone. He shudders, but makes another

attempt, ignoring the crease in Beryl's brow and the way they keep looking nervously down the road and into the tree line behind him.

This time, the phone rings. It rings and rings, each one stealing a bit of Avery's hope. Avery's heart sinks when the auto-responder picks up, before it nearly bursts out of his chest.

You have reached the voicemail box of Sascha Madison. The automated message continues to drone, but just the flicker of Sascha's voice has tears of relief gathering in Avery's eyes. He flicks his gaze to Beryl, who has perked up at the sign of success.

Please leave a message after the tone.

"Um, hi, Sascha," Avery begins, trying to talk evenly past the knot in his throat. "I kinda got in some trouble, and I'm injured. I need you to pick me up. I'm on, uh..." Avery looks around for a road sign. Beryl murmurs the name of the intersection, and Avery repeats it. "My phone is dead and I'm borrowing someone else's, so don't try calling this number back. I'm just gonna... stay here. Okay? Thanks."

Avery terminates the call, leaving his fate in the unknown realm of 'Does Sascha check his voicemail?'

Officially too exhausted to keep standing, Avery limps to the other side of the guard rail and sits down, his ass halfway on dusty gravel and feet sunk into cool, shadowed grass. He wraps his arms around his knees, huddling for safety in his own embrace.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

Beryl unplugs his phone from their charger; the battery symbol disappears, leaving only a fragmented reflection of the sky. “Sorry I can’t charge it more.”

Avery waves a hand. “S’fine. Thank you for... getting me here.” He squints at them through the piercing morning sunbeams. “Why did you bother?”

Their eyes lock for a scant second before Beryl returns to watching the trees. “You’ve held onto your pride up ‘til now. I didn’t like seeing it crushed by some shifter bastards.”

A slow nod is the only response Avery can think to offer. Anything else would feel arrogant, maybe even insulting, comparing his refusal to crack with whatever compelled Beryl to submit to Celeste’s control.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Beryl says, before giving him a brisk nod. “Good luck. Hope your friend comes. ...Friend?” they repeat after a pause.

Avery’s cheeks warm. “Uhm.”

“Gotcha.” What might be a genuine smile tugs at Beryl’s mouth, exposing a sharp canine. Their yellow eyes flash. “Have fun, I guess. And don’t try shifting out of those injuries. If you’re already healing this slow, that means your reserves are almost burned out.” That said, Beryl shoves their hands in their pockets and walks briskly into the forest. Avery is only able to track their steps for a handful of seconds before all trace of them disappears.

So Avery waits.

Once in a while, a car drives by, wheels crunching on the rough pavement, but Avery makes sure to stay huddled behind the guard rail, hopefully out of sight. He rests his forehead on his knees, hissing when the laceration on his back twinges.

Sascha will come. He hasn't yet let Avery down, and even if he doesn't usually check his voicemail, the lack of response from Avery's number should make the unknown call a necessary clue.

While Avery waits, exhaustion gnaws at his bones, slowly sipping his consciousness until he's a drop away from passing out. Avery ignores how his body shakes, begging for rest, and focuses only on gripping his damaged phone so tightly, shards from the broken screen dig into his palm.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Sascha

"Alexander."

The sound of his father's voice has Sascha cringing against his bedroom door, regretting that he didn't listen for anyone in the hallway before exiting. "Hey, Dad," says Sascha, turning to regard Samuel Madison's typical calm demeanor. "What's up?"

"You were out all night, Alexander. The others had planned a bonfire."

There is no bonfire his cousins could plan in this life or the next that could have

persuaded Sascha to abandon Avery during his full moon shift. Sascha stayed a cougar all night, crouched on the opposite bank, watching through the low cave opening while Avery's were-ursine form paced and grumbled. That was all it did. The creature wasn't rabid, didn't fight to escape or attack any animals that walked past the entrance. Every cautionary tale about werecreatures during their forced full moon transformations fell completely flat before Avery's large, fur-covered feet.

"I was visiting a friend out of town," Sascha explains, purposefully vague. The less information he gives his father to latch on to, the easier the conversation will go.

"I'd prefer if you'd keep your schedule open for gatherings with the pack," Samuel says, voice mild enough to communicate his disapproval without bashing Sascha over the head with it. "You become distant at times."

"Sometimes I need more space than others." Sascha does his best to keep any defensiveness out of his tone, adding, "Even if I take some time to myself, pack is the most important part of my life." It's what his dad would want to hear, while his mother would have pushed him to be honest about the reason for his distance. Not that she'd approve of this instance.

Samuel seems pacified by the reassurance, as Sascha thought he'd be. He opens his mouth to respond, but Sascha's phone buzzes in his pocket, blasting out the first few nonsensical lines of Lady Gaga's 'Bad Romance.' Rah, rah, rah-ah-ah?—

Sascha slides his phone out enough to glance at the number. Seeing one he doesn't recognize has him refusing the call, cutting Gaga off in the middle of 'want your bad romance.'

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Sascha mumbles a quick, "Sorry."

"Your cousins were asking after you," Samuel says, giving Sascha another discerning

look. “I suggested we go on a run tonight.”

It's all Sascha can do not to groan and knock his head against the bedroom door.

Of all the things he wants to do tonight, shifting and running around with Garrett and Jakob isn't one of them. He had actually been on his way to the kitchen to get something to eat for lunch since he fell asleep as soon as he got home after dropping Avery off. Sprawling in his bed alone, Sascha had felt cold. Not just from the blasting air conditioning, but knowing Avery was stuck laboring after hours of restless pacing inside the cave sent an unpleasant chill down Sascha's spine. All he could think of was how Avery should have been next to him, bare skin plastered close enough to make them both sweat.

They haven't slept together in a bed since the night they met. Haven't fucked properly, either, on a bed or otherwise. It'd be so much easier if Sascha could just introduce Avery to his dad, to his obnoxious cousins and the rest of the pack, then make all the pleasantries needed before dragging Avery to his too-empty bed to ravish him. If-fucking-only.

Samuel subtly suggesting Sascha prove the whole ‘pack is the most important part of my life’ thing is part of what makes him a great pack leader. Testing boundaries without setting off tempers, answering unspoken questions with careful observation. Sascha would go about things differently if he led a pack, but he thinks his way would be good, too.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

“I’m tired,” Sascha lies. He’s actually wide awake, planning on texting Avery to see how he’s holding up after his kitchen run. “But I’ll see how I feel later tonight, okay?”

A frown creeps over Samuel’s mouth. “How has your health been this past week, Alexander? I feel as if you don’t talk to me anymore.”

Sascha doesn’t know how to respond to that. “It’s been okay. No episodes recently. I’ve been taking it easy.” This one is only a half-lie. He’d have been going to Forgotten Lake on his own even if Avery wasn’t there to squirm in his arms, seek comfort, and cling to him in the water. The extra energy he’s invested in keeping Avery safe barely feels like an expenditure—at least, not one that isn’t worthwhile.

Samuel continues to frown. Sascha scrambles for more bland, appeasing statements, but none come to mind.

“I was on my way to the kitchen,” Sascha says finally. If nothing else, his dad is always on his ass about eating healthy and staying in shape. “I heard the cooks made a wonderful, uh, salad last night.” He’d heard no such thing, but despite cats being obligate carnivores, Samuel insists on including vegetables in everyone’s diets. We are not animals, his father always said. Our bodies have nuanced needs.

From his expression, Samuel doesn’t believe Sascha’s interest in salad—correctly so, because Sascha has none. He doesn’t call Sascha on it, though, simply nods and steps out of the way. “Enjoy your lunch. I will have your cousins find you later for the run tonight.”

Sascha hurries past, desperate to put his back to his father so he can't see the deep, frustrated scowl that's overtaken Sascha's face. He feels Samuel's stare all the way down the hall, until he turns toward the kitchen, unable to scratch the sensation of being watched from his nape.

In the kitchen, Sascha asks for a bag, which he stuffs with food not just for himself but for Avery as well. Avery doesn't get quality food on the farm, and he doesn't eat as much as he should because of it. Last time Sascha provided food for him, it was fast food and snacks, so this time, he makes up for it, even grabbing the salad in case Samuel asks the cooks about it later. Sascha wouldn't put it past him.

"Hungry today?" asks Aunt Marty, who is the head cook.

Sascha forces a smile, trying for charming. It feels more like a wince. "Dad wants me to go on a run with Jakob and Garrett tonight, so I'm fueling up. Just in case, you know."

In case he faints.

In case he can't handle a simple night of shifting and enjoying the woods.

In case the rift between him and his pack grows ever deeper, until the chasm is dark and insurmountable.

Marty is a distant cousin from the Madison maternal line, and has Sascha's mother's shrewd features. She was Denise's best friend, so Sascha has always called her his aunt. Just as perceptive as his father, Marty tracks pack members' habits and nutritional needs, with especial focus on Sascha. The responsibility of keeping the pack healthy and fueled up suits her. Everyone in the Madison pack, it seems, has a role that emphasizes their skillset—makes them an asset rather than a burden.

Everyone except Sascha.

After thanking Marty, Sascha takes off, intent on finding a quiet place to eat before texting Avery about meeting up later. When he gets to a room with no one in it, however, the food never makes it out of the bag. He glances at his phone to check the time and is surprised by the notification for a voicemail. The unfamiliar number he'd assumed to be a spam caller must have left a message. Sascha almost ignores it, wanting to prioritize eating and checking on Avery, but a vague sense of unease has him clicking the visual inbox rather than dismissing the notif. When Sascha sees the transcript, all the breath leaves his lungs.

Sascha punches the button to play the voicemail, heart pounding so hard he can hear the blood pulsing between his ears, nearly drowning out Avery's broken voice. Without specifics, a host of horrible possibilities arises in Sascha's mind like a wave, threatening to crush him. He listens to the voicemail a second time so he can write down the location, then bolts out of the room, only to return for the forgotten bag of food.

In his car before he knows it, Sascha guns it down the street leading farther into the pack compound, seeking out the small clinic where he's spent more time than he'd like over the years. Sascha nearly forgets to turn off the vehicle before running inside, and though he knows panic is making him sloppy and irrational, he can't stop.

The waiting room is empty, so Sascha stomps into the back, pounding hard on the healer's door. "Petra? Petra, please, it's Sascha. I need help. Like, right now."

Upstairs, he hears Petra's light footsteps on the old building's creaking floors. She descends the stairs at a regal pace, and it's all Sascha can do not to holler for her to speed the fuck up. Finally, Petra opens the door, peeking out. Sascha seizes her by the shoulders and pulls her into the hall, then into a tight embrace. "Petra," he says when he's holding her at a distance again, "I need you to come with me."

Petra scans him with knowing brown eyes, searching for any sign of injury or madness.

“Someone I know is hurt badly,” Sascha explains. “He needs my help.”

“Ah,” she intones, a soft, thoughtful note. “Who is this person?”

A knot catches in Sascha’s throat. “One of my friends,” he chokes. Sascha is terrified of revealing his relationship with Avery to a member of his pack, but without knowing the extent of Avery’s injuries or how quickly his magic can heal them, he doesn’t have a choice. “Please, Petra. He’s so important to me.”

“That’s vague,” Petra says, cutting cleanly through his bullshit.

“I know. I just need you to trust me. I’m begging.”

Petra sighs. “I only now got to sit down and do my hair after setting a broken bone earlier. Let me fetch my supplies.”

Sascha nearly crushes her in his arms again but holds back because doing so will only slow her down. Instead, he hovers a few feet away, watching anxiously as Petra collects her medical bag: A large, bulky duffel with two compartments, one for traditional medicine and one for supernatural medicine, when human tools prove to be not enough. She then secures her waist-length Afro-textured hair into two twists and ties them back with a scarf.

Once prepared, Petra carefully locks up the clinic, leaving a note about her departure on the door. There are other healers in the pack—her assistants—but Petra is the only one who’s cared for Sascha through twenty-four years of suffering from the spinning sickness. Sascha trusts no one more than her, and is relieved to have such a person in his corner. He wishes she’d move just a little bit faster, though.

With Petra in the car and buckled up, Sascha hits the gas pedal, already having punched the intersection into his GPS. Hopefully, Avery is still there and hasn't encountered any more trouble.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

The ride feels like forever, when it's barely fifteen minutes. Every second drags, manifesting in Sascha fidgeting in his seat and impatiently tapping his fingers on the steering wheel at every red light.

"I have something for anxiety," Petra says. Sascha is so focused he almost doesn't respond, only remembering to politely decline at the last second before a light turns green, and he floors it. Petra grabs the 'oh shit' handle above the door and huffs.

At first, coming up on the intersection, Sascha doesn't see anything. Then he sees the guard rail, a thin body balled up behind it, and lank, dark curls peeking over the edge of the curved sheet metal.

Avery.

Sascha nearly flings his car off the road, pulling onto the shoulder, breath caught in his throat. "Avery!" he calls, skidding, nearly tripping on the rumble strip on the edge of the curving road. Behind him, Petra exits the car, and though Sascha isn't looking at her—too busy flinging himself on the ground before Avery—he feels when every muscle in her body locks up.

"Sascha," Petra says, unusual fear in her voice. "That's a?—"

"I know what he is," Sascha snaps. "Just come help him. Please."

Avery seems disoriented when Sascha tugs his arms away from his knees, gasping at the uncovered wounds and the dried blood. His fingers flutter over Avery's arms, avoiding the deep scratch in his left forearm. There's another one on his right calf, and

when Sascha pulls Avery into a timid embrace, he feels how Avery's shirt is stiff from being soaked with blood and then baked in the high noon sun. Delicately, Sascha ghosts his fingers downward until he encounters the alarming width of a gash across his lower back, dangerously close to his spinal column.

"Avery, babe," murmurs Sascha, stroking his dirty hair off his forehead. He thumbs the arch of Avery's eyebrow, trying to rouse him from his near-comatose state. Avery blinks blearily, then again when Sascha presses his lips to Avery's cheek. This time he looks more aware, enough to whimper when Sascha kisses all over his face, avoiding one spot over his other cheekbone that's been scratched raw.

Slowly, Sascha's small, injured werecreature comes back to himself. He shifts in Sascha's grasp, hissing from the pain, and makes disbelieving noises when Sascha assures him, over and over again, that he's here to save him. Finally, Avery is aware enough to press his lips against the corner of Sascha's mouth, hands fisted in Sascha's shirt.

Petra's gasp draws Sascha's attention. She hasn't moved from the car's open door, her copper skin paled and lips parted in disbelief. She shouldn't be that surprised, really. If anyone was going to run off and fraternize with forbidden creatures, it would be Sascha, as useless as he is to the rest of the pack.

But he stares at Petra anyway, imploring her to look beyond the scent of a werecreature—not bitter at all, not like all the exaggerated stories claimed—and instead see a seriously injured man who did nothing to deserve this reality.

A war fights its way across Petra's features, but when Sascha sees the healer emerge, a relieved sob shakes him.

"Sascha," Avery mumbles, pawing at his face. "It's okay, Sascha."

Nodding and snuffling so hard he has to wipe his nose on his sleeve, Sascha presses a hard kiss to Avery's forehead, holding him as tight as he dares.

With her jaw set and medical bag in hand, Petra makes her way over. She digs into her bag, withdrawing tools Sascha can't name. He makes himself as useful as he can, gently puppeting Avery so Petra can take stock of all his injuries and get his vitals. Finally, after several minutes of silent work, Petra clicks her tongue. "He doesn't look good, but I don't think these will be life-threatening, if treated properly. I'm going to need a clean, quiet place to work."

The unspoken message is clear: Not on pack lands. Like Sascha is foolish enough to hope the rest of his pack would be as understanding as Petra, who seems not so much understanding as swayed by her medical ethics, which is what Sascha was betting on.

"I'll book a hotel room," Sascha says without hesitation. "Let's get him to the car first." He waits for Petra to determine the best way to move Avery. Sascha would have carried him, except for the laceration on his back. In the end, Sascha provides support as Avery limps to the car and flops across the back seat like a man who's already preparing to become a corpse. He squeezes Avery's bare foot, wincing to see how scraped the soles are. "Keep yourself awake, Avery. C'mon, eyes open."

"No concussion," Avery bitches, but he blinks open bloodshot green eyes and offers Sascha a tiny smile. "Thank you. For coming."

What might be the beginning of tears stings the back of Sascha's nose. He brushes his thumb over a patch of uninjured skin on Avery's ankle, chokes out, "Anytime. Always," then gently closes the car door. After looking up the closest semi-passable hotel, Sascha calls to make a reservation, putting the concierge on speakerphone while he drives toward Mackinac City. He'll be passing the drive-in theater where they had their first date, which makes it even harder to breathe while he's booking the

room.

Sascha speeds. He's usually not that type of driver, since he has so little to do without being allowed to keep a job or go to college outside of online classes. Now, with Avery moaning in the back, Sascha goes as fast as he can justify, arriving at the hotel three minutes before the GPS estimate. Petra sends him inside to pay and retrieve the keycards, and then, together, they wrap Avery in a medical blanket to hide his wounds and walk him inside. Sascha tries to look calm, like this is a completely normal situation, even though Avery is barefoot and staggering between them. It probably doesn't work, but no one stops them.

Petra strips the comforter of one queen-sized bed and spreads the medical blanket on the sheets, then helps Sascha settle a barely conscious Avery on the mattress. After a tense visual examination, she says, "As much as it galls me to admit this, I'm not sure where to begin. This is my first time examining a werereature, and I can already tell his magic pathways are different from ours. Can he not simply shift?"

Sascha would have told her to ask Avery himself about how his body heals, except he doesn't think Avery knows, either. That makes three of them.

"I have no idea, but Avery doesn't..." Sascha frowns, not wanting to expose Avery's weaknesses without his consent, but Avery is barely conscious. "He doesn't have full control over his shift. We've been working on it."

Needles might as well be shooting from Petra's eyes when she levels Sascha with an incredulous stare. He avoids meeting her gaze because admitting that he's hanging around an unstable werereature is not going to inspire much confidence.

"His shifted form is also, um, huge."

That sends Petra's brows higher on her forehead. She considers Avery, who looks

rather tiny and pitiful, with a skeptical expression.

“I know it sounds wild, but I’ve seen it. He’s massive. For all I know, the transformation could seriously hurt him while he’s in this condition.”

Lips forming a grim line, Petra nods. “I see. I’ll do what I can, and what I can’t... Well. That’s what the internet is for. There’s a lot of information about werecreatures on Reddit,” she adds, in response to Sascha’s questioning look.

“You read about werecreatures on Reddit?”

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“A doctor is allowed to have questions.”

It seems hypocritical to spend time learning how to care for people one doesn't respect, but Sascha doesn't say that. “So you think you can figure it out?”

Petra scoffs. “Of course I do. Don't bring me places if you're going to insult me.”

Collapsing onto the opposite bed, Sascha breathes a heavy sigh of relief. Petra has taken Sascha's life in her hands many times over the years, and he's confident that if anyone can put Avery back together, it's going to be her.

The run he'll be missing tonight pokes at the back of his thoughts. Saschashouldtext his dad that something came up, but he doesn't want to. In fact, he turns off his phone entirely, allowing his attention to slip across the space between the beds, watching Petra's deft, brown hands drag supplies from her bulky black bag.

Once she relaxes, Petra goes from stiff and professional to fascinated, and her steady, patient demeanor becomes flavored with enthusiasm.

The severity of Avery's injuries requires traditional medicine, so Petra begins by cleaning, stitching, and dressing the wounds. While she's doing that, Sascha uses her laptop to perform endless searches, pulling up dozens of threads and blogs exploring werecreature biology.

The Parahuman Resource Agency—a government branch designed to monitor shifter affairs within their mostly human society—has recently begun releasing more information on werecreatures, but there isn't much publicly available beyond the

longstanding advisory from the CDC on how to avoid exposure to the werevirus. With the lack of concrete studies, they're left with other people's trial and error DIY.

Once Avery's external wounds have been tended, Petra reclaims her laptop to peruse Sascha's research on the interaction between magic and werecreature physiology.

Years of treating the symptoms of Sascha's spinning sickness required Petra to get creative. Moving through the aether as a normal shifter would risk vertigo episodes, limiting Sascha's options for shifting at will. To prevent triggering these episodes with normal sweeps of healing magic, Petra developed a technique to propel her magic in small, circular currents, targeting problem areas with precision. It prevented the worsening of serious flare-ups and greatly decreased the amount of episodes Sascha experienced on a weekly and monthly basis.

These established techniques prove unexpectedly easy to modify for a werecreature patient.

Rather than passing through the aether to complete a shift, werecreatures are controlled by the magic carried within the werevirus itself, which travels through the infected host's circulatory system. By Petra's estimation, the amount of energy it takes for a man of Avery's size to undergo a transformation as drastic as the were-ursine depletes his magic reserves quickly, leaving too little to support the rapid healing parahumans typically benefit from. Her solution is to target the areas that have suffered the most damage and repair the magic pathways, allowing Avery's circulatory system to naturally carry the werevirus' magic into those critical locations.

For the most part, Avery sleeps. Petra administers hourly treatments, moving in increments as she would with Sascha. As she works, she explains her process. Throughout the lectures, Sascha listens attentively. He doesn't understand 90% of what she's saying, but appreciates being included nonetheless.

Eventually, the sessions take their toll. After ten hours of tireless work, Petra is so drained she only protests lightly when Sascha insists on putting her to bed. Getting her to rest allows Sascha to finally close the gap between himself and Avery, as he's been aching to do since they arrived.

Ever-so-carefully, he eases onto the bed beside Avery's unconscious body. Even though Sascha is physically exhausted, his mind is wide awake. He ghosts his thumb over the knob of Avery's wristbone, one of few spots on his body that lacks stitches or bandages.

As the next several hours pass, Sascha feels capable for the first time in... forever. Most of his life has been spent trapped behind layers of protective insulation, rendering him useless in so many situations it became his native state. In this hotel room, though, Sascha attends to both of his companions, supporting Petra in doing her job without allowing her to work herself to death while keeping up with Avery's needs outside of Petra's medical guidance.

He shoves his salad at Petra, glad for an excuse to not eat it himself, and when Avery can't manage to swallow even small bites of a sandwich, he orders a smoothie with a billion added supplements and patiently forces Avery to choke it down.

In addition to having other miscellany delivered, including a charger for Avery's broken phone, Sascha helps Avery to the bathroom with a surprising lack of awkwardness. He allows him what privacy he can, but remains outside the door in case his adorably pitiful patient calls out. Once, in the middle of easing Avery into bed, Sascha looks up to see Petra smiling at him, though she merely shakes her head when he asks why.

After a full twenty-four hours, Petra has to leave.

"I need to get back to the clinic before your father flips his lid," she says, a wry smile

tilting her full lips.

“What did he say?” Sascha hasn’t turned on his phone, avoiding the inevitable storm that will arise when he returns to the pack house after disappearing without a word. Petra reassured Samuel that Sascha was safe, but kept her distance from being implicated in his absence. A fair compromise.

“He wants to know where I’ve been, since someone mentioned they’ve only seen the assistant medics in the clinic.” Huffing through her nostrils, she adds, “I have no excuses. My whole life is on the pack lands. I told him I had to drive out of town to retrieve a certain ingredient and was grateful he didn’t ask additional questions. All I said about you is that you asked me to let him know you were visiting an old friend farther south.”

“I don’t have any old friends,” Sascha mutters. Only an endless cycle of new ones, hookups and chat windows active for five months, six tops, before the messages petered out into nothing. So many group chats gone dusty until Sascha had no choice but to leave them to preserve his sanity. Sometimes, he wonders what they did with the notification of his departure, if they even cared.

Petra doesn’t respond. She hugs him, then departs, leaving him with instructions to turn on his phone, deal with his father, and text or call her if Avery’s condition worsens. Anxious, Sascha tails Petra to the parking lot so he can stand next to her when he powers up the device. They both wince as a slew of notification sounds bursts from the speaker, alerting him to angry messages from not only Sascha’s father, but also his cousins and Aunt Marty. When Petra’s rideshare arrives, Sascha barely restrains himself from clutching at her like a cub.

Sascha lingers outside until the car turns onto the street with Petra inside, and only when it’s no longer in his sight line does Sascha return to the hotel lobby. He can’t make himself call his father, so instead, he shoots off a brief text explaining the signal

where his ‘friend’ lives is perpetually shitty. He offers a lukewarm apology for the lack of communication and snaps a selfie with a thumbs-up to prove he hasn’t been kidnapped. Afterward, he hurriedly mutes the contact before Samuel can respond.

The next day, Avery feels better. He eats, lets Sascha change his bandages, laughs a few times, wheezes with pain, accepts painkillers, and rests his head on Sascha’s shoulder while he dozes. He watches videos on Sascha’s phone and kisses him with careful, dry lips, still so weak and fragile.

The day after that, Avery’s forehead feels warm. He insists he’s fine, that he feels better, and eats with much more enthusiasm. He even walks his own ass to the bathroom without Sascha’s support. By that evening, though, his skin is burning. Sascha pulls the noncontact thermometer from Avery’s brow, startles at the high reading, and nearly drops his phone in his hurry to call Petra, begging her to return.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Avery

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Other than the fever escalating Sascha's panic, Avery truly does feel fine. Restless, though. He knows he's healing, but it would feel better if he could hold still.

"You didn't have to disturb Petra," Avery says, sitting cross-legged on the bed while watching Sascha pace.

Sascha slows, rerouting to the side of the bed so he can take Avery's hands. "You're running a fever. Maybe you have an infection or something."

"You just checked and redid all the bandages," Avery points out, gesturing at the wrapping on his arm. "They all looked good. Petra said the shifter magic might affect my biology differently; that's probably all it is. I feel fine."

"I'd rather she make that call after performing an exam."

Avery opens his mouth to retort, but Sascha squishes his cheeks together to silence him, then kisses his puckered lips. Whatever Avery had planned on saying flies out of his head, making way for the pleasant fog he feels whenever Sascha touches him. His pulse quickens, sparks from the center of his chest crawling up his throat?—

When Sascha leans back, he uses his grip on Avery's face to stop him from following. Avery pouts, which probably looks ridiculous, but it makes Sascha smile.

"If you behave and let Petra look you over without complaining, we can make out after she leaves."

Avery's spine straightens, and Sascha smirks as he releases Avery's cheeks and steps

back. In the interest of ‘helping him heal by not disturbing or reopening any of his wounds,’ Sascha has refused any contact more intimate than cuddling or a brief kiss. It’s infuriating, especially when Sascha laughs at Avery’s sulking. The worst thing, though, is that Avery actually appreciates Sascha’s restraint. No one has ever valued Avery’s safety over the pleasure of fucking him before. That’s why he’s here: Because a person he thought he could trust prioritized her arousal over his autonomy.

So Avery drags in a shuddery inhale, then nods. “I’m holding you to that,” he says, voice dark with warning because, despite feeling sentimental about Sascha’s boundaries, Avery is about ready to jump him.

Sascha pets Avery’s hair, his smile fond. Then he goes back to pacing, while Avery goes back to feeling restless.

Suddenly light-headed, Avery unfolds and rolls onto his side. He closes his eyes, hoping to regain his equilibrium, but that makes his head spin even worse. Is this how Sascha feels during his episodes? Unpleasant, if so, but Avery is certain it’ll pass. Maybe just another side effect of Petra’s modified healing magic.

But by the time Sascha opens the door for Petra, Avery is on the bed squirming and sweating in the lightweight pajamas Sascha bought to replace his ruined shirt and disgusting jeans. Damp fabric sticks to his skin, and the sensation is so awful he nearly yanks the tank over his head.

“Oh,” Petra says when she sees him twisting in the sheets. Clearly, she didn’t believe Sascha when he insisted something was wrong. Neither did Avery.

Petra performs a quick examination, then reports the healing is progressing as expected. She doesn’t sense any signs of Avery’s body rejecting her magic. That ruled out, she shoves a cup into Avery’s hand and tells him to pee in it so she can check his kidney values.

Sascha offers to help, but Avery would rather go back to the ditch than let someone help him piss into a cup, especially when he wants that person to still find him sexy. Getting the sample is grosser than Avery told himself it would be, but he manages. After Petra states his urine is clear, Avery flops onto the shitty hotel mattress and tries to forget it happened.

While he's there, Petra announces that she's going to remove the stitches on Avery's back. He rolls onto his stomach and buries his face in a pillow, not expecting much from the procedure. Then Petra's hand lands on his back, and Avery moans quietly. She yanks her hand away.

"Did that hurt?"

Avery shakes his head, equally confused. The brush of her fingertips against his skin was... overwhelming. She uses a magic barrier in place of latex gloves, but Avery swears he felt the map of her fingerprints like a file rasping against his nerve endings. Despite that, he insists, "I'm fine," and chews at a piece of skin on his lip to distract from Petra's quick, professional gestures.

Petra administers another burst of healing magic to each of the wounds just to be safe. After that, she taps her chin and stares at him. Avery closes his eyes, but he still feels the weight of her consideration like a thick blanket over his inflamed skin.

"The lacerations will be fully recovered within the next day or two. They'll be tender, but everything is on the right track." What Petra doesn't say speaks louder: She can't figure out what's happening to him. Petra steps away, and Avery hears water running in the bathroom. When Petra returns, Avery peeks an eye open, taking note of her damp face and hands, eyelashes clumped together. She runs her fingers over the long twists of her black hair, watching Avery as she does.

Avery studies her in return, an odd sensation curling in his belly. During her care,

he'd never looked at her closely. Taller than him but shorter than Sascha, with high cheekbones, brown eyes, and rich copper skin. Petra cocks her head, not breaking their locked gaze, and just as Avery is opening his mouth to tell Petra he just realized how gorgeous she is, Sascha bursts out with, "What do we donow?"

When Avery looks in his direction, the twisting in his abdomen intensifies until it's nearly painful.

"I'm going to do some research," Petra announces, plucking her laptop from her medical bag and whisking it over to the small table in the corner, long skirt fluttering behind her.

Whimpering, Avery reaches a hand toward Sascha because whatever fever has taken over his head just told him he needs nothing more than Sascha's skin against his. Right now. The severe set of Sascha's jaw relaxes, his whole expression softening as he hurries to Avery's side, entwining their fingers.

"We'll figure out what's wrong," he promises.

Content for now, heart full of trust, Avery merely nods and drags Sascha closer so he can rest his warm cheek against the coolness of Sascha's inner wrist. Sascha allows Avery to keep his hand. He makes himself comfortable on the floor with a pillow under his ass, phone in his right hand while Avery refuses to relinquish the left.

Avery doesn't know how long it is before Petra clears her throat. Sascha jerks, and Avery clutches his wrist tighter so Sascha can't pull away.

"I think I've identified the problem, but it might sound weird."

Though unease makes Avery's oversensitive skin prickle, he doesn't open his eyes.

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“I searched a number of things, but ‘summer fever in werecreatures’ pulled up the answer. Avery is about to go into...” She hesitates, which is unusual considering her normal crisp confidence. “Avery is starting his heat cycle.”

That gets Avery to bolt upright in bed. “I’m what?!”

Petra grimaces. “The werevirus influences the host’s endocrine system to force them into a state of intense, often unbearable arousal. Symptoms include fever, cramps, disorientation, poor impulse control, et cetera. The goal is to enable the spread of the virus, as heat and humidity increase the chances of successfully infecting a victim. There’s no cure, and relief from symptoms can only be achieved by a significant spike in the host’s oxytocin and dopamine levels.” She clears her throat. “This is best achieved through sex. Which is to say, inhibitions are reduced enough to incite behavior with a higher chance of transmitting the werevirus.”

All pleasant sensation flees Avery, leaving him feeling scared and hollow. “Are you sure?” he croaks, pretending his voice is rough due to disuse, not because of the lump forming in his throat.

“Of course I’m sure.” There’s an edge to Petra’s tone. “I wouldn’t have said it otherwise.”

Avery rubs his chest absently, vision going blurry. “I don’t want to... Notthat.”

Because something just clicked.

Melissa’s inhibitions had been lowered at the summer party that would change his

life forever. She'd explained it was due to the werevirus, but the full details had slid over Avery like a splash of oily parking lot water. Trying to spread when the infection rate was highest, via direct bodily contact. All that squirming and sweating...

He and Melissa had been careful. No kissing, and they didn't touch without barriers. Latex gloves for fingering, dental dams for oral, and Avery put condoms on his dildos when using a strap. He hadn't worried about her being awarecreature because Melissa had been so adamant about safety.

Until she wasn't.

Melissa shouldn't have been fucking a human while her inhibitions were lowered, but Avery couldn't have known that. He had thought she'd taken ecstasy, since he'd turned down his own offer. Fitting a condom over his fingers, Avery had gotten to work, enjoying her moaning beneath him. That's when things went quickly sideways. Melissa came, clutching Avery's shoulders, and before he could ease away, a hot, sharp pain exploded in the crook of his neck. Melissa's teeth. She'd bitten him.

Confirming the werevirus infection at the hospital. Losing his job and being thrown out by his superstitious family. Melissa's pointless apologies, during which she promised he could join her pack. His first full moon shift, so painful and terrifying he begged any deity capable of listening to remove him from the mortal coil.

For a moment, lying on the pavement covered in his own blood, body huge and unfamiliar, Avery thought they were going to answer him. But he didn't die. He'd still been there in the morning, naked and sprinkled with dark hair—the only thing left to confirm his shift wasn't just a drug-induced hallucination.

Sascha murmurs Avery's name, drawing him out of the memory. He attempts to stroke his shoulder, but Avery flinches away.

“I can’t do this,” he grits out through clenched teeth. “There has to be another reason.”

Petra’s voice remains neutral, professional, but her expression is pained when she says, “I’m sorry, Avery. Maybe future research on the werevirus will reveal ways to manage or suppress the symptoms, but for now, nothing can be done.”

Avery rakes his hands down his face. “So I’ll just lose the ability to use reason for anything but sex? I won’t care about who might be affected?” He’s not going to break down. He’s not. “Seriously, I can’t. I refuse to hurt anyone that way. I’d never do what... what she did to...” Me, he can’t finish saying. Just like that, his eyes are brimming with tears.

It takes a beat longer for Sascha to figure it out, realization hitting him just after Petra.

“Avery,” he whispers, painfully gentle. “Is that what happened to you?”

Pawing at his eyes, Avery shakes his head to deny it, but the confirmation comes out anyway, as if he’s being puppeted by a second, stronger will. “Melissa. She... didn’t tell me. We were at a party; I just thought she was rolling. Then we... And she bit me, right at the end.” Fat tears spill down Avery’s cheeks.

“Did you know she was a werecreature?” asks Petra.

Avery nods. “She was adamant about proper prophylactic use, so I trusted her.”

“Why did you risk it, though?”

Even though Sascha probably doesn’t mean harm by the question, angry fire takes up residence in Avery’s throat, burning away the pressure that had been choking him.

“I risked it because werecreatures are fucking people, not walking plague-spreaders. I’m not angry at Melissa for being a werecreature. I’m angry because I treated her like a person, and she treated me like an acceptable casualty. And then... My parents kicked me out. Melissa promised her were-pack would take me in, but when that fucking piece of shit were-fox saw I was also an alpha, he ran me out of the goddamn state.”

“Way to give foxes a bad name,” Petra mutters.

Seeing Avery’s briefly confused look, Sascha explains, “Petra’s a fox shifter.”

“I don’t give a single rotten fuck what kind of shifter Petra is. No offense,” he adds, glancing in her direction. “This fox was threatened by me, even though I never wanted to take over anyone’s pack. I didn’t even know how to want that back then. I only ever—” A sob breaks through, grief splintering in all directions, and even folding his hands over his face fails to conceal the jagged edges. “I only ever wanted to not be alone.”

This time, when Sascha reaches out, Avery leans into his warmth, still trying to smother the mortifying noises he can’t hold back. Sascha nuzzles his cheek and rubs his back, murmuring, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I’m so sorry.” Lips moving to Avery’s temple, he presses his next words against Avery’s fevered skin. “Being with you isn’t a risk. What happened wasn’t your fault. I know you’d never do something like that to anyone else, and I’ll be here to help you through it. Okay? You won’t be alone.”

Unable to reply, Avery rubs his cheek against Sascha’s more aggressively, smiling through his tears at the sound of Sascha’s laughter.

For the second time tonight, Petra interrupts them by clearing her throat. When Avery blinks his wet lashes and looks at her, halfway worried she’s going to come up with

something even worse to tell him, he sees that she's already packed her duffel and has it slung over her shoulder. "I've done all I can for Avery's injuries," she announces, then tips her head toward the dresser. "I've left more bandages over there, but the wounds were closed when I took the stitches out, and I applied more magic. Since you're healing at a more appropriate rate, I expect you to feel nothing but tenderness by tomorrow morning. I've also left a salve you can rub onto the healing area to reduce the appearance of scarring."

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“Sounds good, Petra,” Sascha says without moving from Avery’s side. “Thank you.”

Avery chokes out his own soft ‘thanks,’ but rather than walking away afterward, Petra hesitates the way she did when Sascha first introduced them and she was deciding whether to help or run.

“You two might want to have a conversation about consent at some point within the next eight hours,” Petra says finally, eyes skating away from them and landing on the floor.

Avery follows her gaze to a stained spot on the carpet, which he also stares at, hoping the horrid blush heating his face isn’t too obvious. Except he’s in a room with two shifters who can taste heartbeats and smell fear, so even if they don’t notice his reddening cheeks—which they definitely will—the rest of his anatomy is broadcasting how Petra’s implication is affecting him.

Because if he’s going to be afflicted by a surge of inescapable horniness and Sascha plans on staying with him...

“Thanks for the suggestion,” Sascha says, not looking at either of them.

Avery squeezes his eyes shut and is appalled to note that he can also sense the warmth rising in Sascha’s face, how his pulse is suddenly pounding. He’s vaguely aware of Sascha bidding Petra goodnight, and Petra bidding Avery goodnight, but beyond a little wave, Avery finds himself unable to focus on anything but the images currently assaulting his brain.

Terror, even though shifters are immune to the werevirus. Anxiety, because he doesn't know what compulsions the heat would enable. Does he have anything dark enough, a want so filthy he's repressed it? None he can think of, but maybe that's the point.

But more than the fear and nerves, the overwhelming sensation curling in Avery's gut is anticipation.

It's been over a week since their practice session at the lake, where they swam and sprawled before Avery rubbed himself off against Sascha while the sun drenched them with warm rays. Then they basked on the large, smooth boulderlike drunken lizards until Avery's skin turned pink and stung. He jacked off to the memory every night before the full moon, hungry for more and frustrated by the barriers separating them.

They're currently in a hotel room with no disapproving pack members or ruthless farmers to keep them from ravishing each other—and the virus that took over Avery's body has rewired his biological imperatives to make damn sure neither of them leave this room untouched.

The only thing they have left to do is talk about it. Fuck.

Silence descends upon the room as Sascha gets himself ready for bed, then ushers Avery to do the same, peeling him from the sweaty sheets and herding him toward the bathroom. Avery grumbles, pretending not to love how Sascha dotes upon him, and obediently turns on the shower. As the water heats, Avery brushes his teeth, listening to Sascha stripping the bed around the corner.

Avery slips into the shower only as long as it takes to scrub away the sweat and wash his greasy hair. True to Petra's word, when he ghosts his fingers over the depressions in his skin where Atwood's claws slashed, he feels nothing more than fragile new

skin holding him together with the aid of Petra's magic.

He doesn't linger. Once clean, Avery pops out and dries himself with the dinky towel, small even for him, then smears some of the complimentary lotion on his face, rubbing it into his skin while frowning at himself in the mirror. He looks... okay. Not half-dead anymore, but still displaying the evidence of stress and fever written in the lines of his face. Under his eyes, framed with damp lashes, the skin is swollen and purple. Hot water has left his skin rosy, the thin layer of lotion catching light from the bright fixtures above the sink, creating a sheen over his dark freckles.

Unable to take any more, Avery scrubs his hair with a drytowel, leaving the curls a shaggy mess, which he finger-combs as he returns to the main area.

Sascha has finished fitting the bed with new sheets, which he's insisted on doing himself every night, rather than allowing housekeeping inside the room. When Avery steps around the corner, he's met with the intensity of Sascha's gaze. Even though Sascha has already seen and touched Avery's body, a sudden wave of insecurity has him holding the towel in front of his crotch.

Sascha thankfully doesn't call attention to it; he merely smiles. "Ready for bed?"

The covers are pulled back, thermostat set to keep the room cool, and aside from asking for a cup of water like a child, there's no excuse to stall. So Avery nods, keeping the towel clenched in his fist until he can slither under the blankets, at which point he drops it to the floor. Sascha clicks his tongue, picks up the towel, and kisses Avery on the forehead before disappearing into the bathroom to take care of his own night routine.

Nerves fistfight under Avery's skin. He trembles and fidgets, once again unable to get comfortable. Further worry subsumes him—how much of himself will he lose when the fever takes over? What will the heat feel like once it's in full swing? How is he

meant to initiate a conversation about an incoming storm of arousal so painful Sascha will feel obligated to... tofuck himthrough it? Where's the consent in that?

"You're nervous," Sascha says when he comes back, wiping lingering moisture from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'm... I mean, why wouldn't I be nervous?"

Sascha climbs under the covers next to Avery and flicks off the table light, enrobing the room in darkness except for a faint glow from the bathroom area. A soft tug is all Avery needs to squirm to Sascha's side, head falling to his shoulder. Sascha doesn't complain about the damp curls—rather, he buries his face in them, inhaling deeply before pressing his lips against Avery's scalp.

In the dark, it feels easier. Sascha is wearing only a pair of boxers, the material soft against Avery's thighs, one of which he's slung across Sascha's hips.

Rubbing his back, careful to avoid the not-quite-healed area, Sascha says, "It makes sense to be nervous, but you'll be okay. I'll look after you."

"By 'look after,' do you mean you're gonna fuck me for god knows how long?"

"Well. Yeah, if that's what you want."

Avery snorts bitterly. "I don't think I'll get a say in what I want."

Instead of reacting to Avery's negative energy, Sascha tightens his arm around him. "That's why we're talking about it now. So I can look after you."

"So you said." Avery is quiet for several minutes, thinking hard. "I don't like being slapped," he tells the darkness, eyelashes brushing Sascha's shoulder when he

squeezes them shut. “Or spit on,” he adds, shuddering at the reminder of Atwood’s assault.

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“I don’t think I’ve ever spit on someone in my life, for any reason,” Sascha says, thoughtful. “And the first time I slapped someone in bed, I was the one who almost cried. That was also the last time, so I think we’ll be okay.”

Thinking about Sascha weakly slapping a sex partner in the face, trying to give them what they want only to break down afterward, brings a reluctant smile to Avery’s lips. That must have been a major boner-kill for both of them. “Anything you don’t like?” he wonders.

“Don’t worry about me. I will say ‘no’ to anything I’m not comfortable with.” Sascha’s tone brooks no argument, so Avery moves on.

“I got a hysterectomy during bottom surgery,” he says next, letting the implication hang. Sascha’s breath catches, chest twitching beneath Avery’s arm. He pets gently over Sascha’s heart, feeling it pound. “Were creatures supposedly can’t contract human diseases, but everyone is tested for drugs and STIs before getting hired at the farm, just in case. And I’ve never not-used protection.” With all his casual encounters Avery hasn’t ever been fucked raw, but mentioning that feels crass.

Imagining going that far with Sascha—the hot, slick glide of skin-on-skin—sends a pulse of arousal straight to his core. Nothing between them. Just this beautiful man easing every velvet-soft inch inside him.

Avery gets lost in his head imagining it, and the way Sascha squirms suggests he’s going through the same. In other circumstances, Avery would have climbed on top of him immediately, but he exercises restraint. He doesn’t know how long the heat will last, or how intense it’ll be. Even with Sascha seeming fine right now, he’s been

running around for days, and his illness could flare up at any time. Speaking of which.

“What if you pass out?”

“Like, on top of you? Again?” Sascha sounds amused. “If I have an episode, I assume we’ll just stop fucking until I’m better. I’ll give you Petra’s number if it seems like an emergency.”

“I am somehow not reassured,” Avery says dryly, but he lets it go. Sascha seems adamant it’s going to be okay, and has thus far refused to bite the hook Avery’s been casting, in which he manages to convince Sascha to fear this as much as he does.

Sascha presses his lips to the top of Avery’s head again, leaving them there to kiss and nuzzle him over and over. “Go to sleep, Avery. I’ll be here when you wake up, and I’m not leaving your side until you’ve gotten through this. Don’t be afraid.”

Avery wants to be afraid, but as Sascha begins to rock him gently, he loses the will to keep fighting. He settles into an uneasy rest, dragged further down when Sascha begins to hum sweetly. The soft, soothing rumble under Avery’s ear lulls him into unconsciousness. Peacefully drifting?—

—until the moment he bolts upright in bed, panting and soaked in sweat.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Avery

At first, Avery has no awareness of what is happening to his body, or why. His

immediate instinct is to think he's on fire, but when he flings himself out of bed, the flames are only inside. Distantly, he's aware of Sascha calling his name, shifting from sleep to wakefulness in response to Avery's distress. Sascha climbs out of bed, talking to him, but Avery can't process the words.

Burning in a way he's never felt before, Avery staggers naked to the bathroom cubby, catching sight of himself in the mirror under the low light Sascha left on. He doesn't look different, which seems almost impossible because he feels as if he's being ripped apart by hooks. Is this supposed to be arousing? He can't imagine how.

In an act of pure desperation, Avery turns on the shower, sets it to blast cold water at full strength, and jumps into the tub. His mostly healed wound sites twinge, but it's buried by other sensations, so he doesn't slow.

Sascha hurries in a moment later. He feels the water, then sighs. "Avery, you're going to get yourself sick."

"I'm already fucking sick!" Avery says, way too loudly. He grasps his face and moans, swooning directly into the spray. The freezing water does nothing to alleviate the inner flames, so he doesn't protest when the cascade stops.

Avery doesn't uncover his face when Sascha climbs into the tub and crowds him against the tiled wall, his body still warm from sleep. After a few moments in Sascha's solid arms, the fire within Avery steadies into an even crackle.

Sascha noses at Avery's neck, brushing his lips under his ear and whispering, "Tell me how I can help."

A broken sound escapes him. "I don't know. I don't know!"

"Shhhh." Sascha strokes Avery's shoulders, his hips, his cheeks. He continues

making sweet, soft sounds, lips tracing the shell of Avery's ear until he shivers.

Then he's shivering everywhere, tipping forward to bury himself in Sascha's warmth, colder than he's ever been. Colder than roughing it all winter in Southern Michigan. Colder than not being touched for eight months. Now he's here, early summer, moaning Sascha's name and doing his best to thaw. He realizes in that moment that the burning within him wasn't from flames, but skin-searing ice.

"Bring me down," he whispers, stretching to clutch Sascha's short, blond hair. "Take me to wherever you are."

A faint smile flits over Sascha's lips, which drop a kiss on the tip of Avery's nose. "Gladly," he says, then carefully scoops Avery into his arms and steps out of the tub. Avery clings, refusing to let go even when Sascha sets him on the counter next to the sink and grabs a hand towel. Laughing, he wipes away the cold water gathering on Avery's skin.

Before Sascha finishes drying him, Avery's body is wet again, this time from nervous sweat. Just as he's about to have a tantrum over all the fussing when he's going to be a wreck regardless, Sascha takes him by the jaw and claims his mouth. It's the most direct kiss he's ever received, lips and tongue taking him apart right there on the counter, like Sascha's made it his mission to streamline the chaos taking over Avery's body. Sascha bites at the corner of Avery's mouth, then puts his hand on either of Avery's knees, slowly spreading them to make room for his hips.

Avery digs his nails into Sascha's shoulders, thankful he can't pop claws as easily as a shifter would. The marks Sascha bestowed upon him the morning after the full moon faded, but Sascha recreates them now, mindful to keep his fangs tucked away. He pushes Avery's legs higher, forcing him to lean against the large mirror, and drops to his knees.

Scrambling to get a grip on the edge of the counter, Avery stares into Sascha's eyes, pupils blown until his irises are only rings of piercing gold. Expression shifting to a mischievous smile, Sascha brushes a faint kiss against Avery's knee, then drags his tongue a few torturous inches up the inside of his thigh. Avery makes a high, frustrated sound, which grows even more petulant when Sascha laughs, only to die entirely when that breath ghosts over Avery's center.

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“You’re doing this on purpose,” Avery moans, writhing even though Sascha hasn’t touched him yet.

“Yep, I am.”

“Why?” he demands.

“Because you haven’t asked for it.”

A desperate keen tears its way up Avery’s throat. “Sascha Madison, if you don’t get your ass in gear and fuckingfuck mealready?—!”

“Wow, using my last name? That’s bold for someone so desperate to get his cock sucked.”

Demonstrating, Sascha flicks his tongue over the tip of Avery’s engorged cock, and the fact that he remembered what Avery prefers to call it almost feels better than the brief contact itself. Years of needles, hormone therapy, and surgery recovery never took away Avery’s fear of the small thing between his legs never being seen as masculine enough. It fills Avery’s chest with giddiness, enhanced when Sascha repeats the gesture. Then he stops. Avery tries to wait him out, hands tightening on the edge of the counter to not-quite-hide how they shake.

“If you want to do it right,” Sascha says, pausing to kiss all the way around his mons, taking care to avoid the most sensitive parts of Avery’s cunt. He continues: “You’ll have to use my middle name, too.”

Avery barely manages to squeak out, “What’s your middle name, Sascha?”

Sascha bites so high up on Avery’s thigh it makes him jump, delicious pain radiating into his cunt, already pulsing with anticipation to the point of agony by itself. Then he gently brushes back the dark hair on his mons, spreading Avery open and leaving him vulnerable to every puff of his breath. “It’s Nikolai. Now beg me.”

Though he’s breathing too fast, squirming wildly on the counter, Avery inhales deeply and raises his voice as loud as he can: “Sascha Nikolai Madison, please fuck me!” The words come out on a moan as Sascha finally leans in, mouth opening wide so he can fit his lips around all that sensitive skin, tongue stroking right up Avery’s center. When the lick turns into blissful suction, Avery twists his hands in Sascha’s hair and feels his soul leave his body.

After so long building his anticipation, Sascha stops teasing. He holds Avery’s knees up and apart, leaving Avery folded in a useless heap on the counter, head pressed against the mirror. Oral has never felt this good before—of this, he’s certain. Maybe because of the heat, the relief, or maybe because it’s Sascha who’s taking him apart. There’s nothing casual about this, and that ramps Avery up high, higher, such that he keens when Sascha works a gentle finger inside him.

“More, please,” Avery pleads, clenching Sascha’s hair tighter with one hand while the other goes to brace himself so he doesn’t slump off the counter. “Please, Sascha, I need?—”

Sascha shushes him, adding another finger as he bobs his head on Avery’s cock, sucking expertly.

“Have you done this before?” Avery asks, more than halfway delirious. “Eaten someone out.”

Laughing, Sascha adds a third finger, crooking them up to seek out Avery's internal P-spot. He laughs harder when he finds it, rubbing so firmly Avery's whole body arches. Not letting up, he answers, "Once. Another trans guy, at a party. He wasn't as hot as you." He says the last bit with his mouth already around the head of Avery's cock, and kills any response Avery might have had by closing his lips around it. When he breaks away to breathe, Sascha murmurs, "You're so fucking sexy, Avery." Then he withdraws his dripping fingers from Avery's cunt and dives in, spearing his tongue inside to curl against his walls like the cat he is.

It feels amazing, but not what his body wants. Sudden panic swells in Avery's throat, bringing him to gasp out, "Wait!"

Sascha pulls away immediately, eyes wide with concern.

"It's— No, hush." Avery pets his hair clumsily, mumbling, "I need more."

Sascha's breath catches, but the moment is ruined when, on impulse, Avery moves to jump off the counter. Sascha scrabbles to catch him before he lands, then eases him down.

The moment Avery's feet touch the floor, he clasps Sascha's face and kisses him hard, without finesse. "I need you to fuck me. Can you do that?"

In response, Sascha drops to catch the back of Avery's thighs, lifting him into his arms without separating their mouths. He carries Avery to the freshly made bed, gasping when Avery squirms against his hard cock, so eager he can barely stomach the seconds separating them.

"Fast or slow?" Sascha asks, lowering Avery tenderly to the mattress. He wastes no time stripping his boxers.

Avery groans, then grabs the back of his knees so he can open as wide as possible under Sascha's hungry stare.

Sascha laughs, the sound hitching when he positions himself on the bed. "We'll feel it out then." He drives into Avery in one sharp jab of his hips, and Avery cries out like he's being murdered, but like, in a good way.

"Acceptable?" Sascha checks in, lip quirking. At Avery's frantic nod, Sascha takes up a merciless pace, leaving Avery hanging on for dear life, his blunt nails digging into Sascha's shoulders.

Time melts, seconds sticking to the minutes. Avery can't put a coherent thought together, not even when his back starts to ache from holding his knees so high.

The moment Avery hiccups in discomfort, Sascha halts.

"Is this still okay?"

Something inflates under Avery's ribs, a fragile bubble of emotion responding to the care in Sascha's voice. He chokes in complaint when Sascha pulls out, but it's just as well because he ends up shaking his head.

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“No, no. It’s not right. I need...” Now he’s fully delirious, so far out of his mind he doesn’t think better of shoving Sascha off him. Avery turns onto his knees and braces a hand against the headboard for balance. “Like this, Sascha. Please.”

Sascha swallows hard, his eyes riveted on Avery’s exposed cunt. Avery arches his back further to emphasize his need, prompting Sascha to adjust to the new position. He takes his time, leaving Avery shaking like a leaf at the sensation of Sascha stroking two fingers through the sweat down his spine. Before Avery can beg more, Sascha pushes his cock through his slick, stroking the bottom of Avery’s shaft with his own. When he pulls back, the flared head catches the tip of Avery’s cock; he does it again, leaving Avery whimpering, seconds away from debasing himself in a desperate plea.

When Sascha finally mounts Avery properly, invading him in a smooth, effortless glide, it steals Avery’s breath. For a moment, he can’t even moan. Sascha doesn’t continue the brisk earlier pace, but his measured thrusts are more purposeful, fingers tight on Avery’s hips. Like this, he catches Avery’s P-spot every time he bottoms out, sending nearly unbearable pulses up from his center, radiating outward into the rest of his extremities. His arms shake with it, until he has to slump forward onto his face, back arched as he buries a moan into the pillow.

Sascha yanks the pillow from Avery’s grasp a moment later. “None of that. Let me hear you.”

So Avery does, head turned so his temple is pressed against the mattress, every note bursting from him into the open air. It must not be enough because Sascha adjusts enough to hook two fingers inside Avery’s cheek, holding his mouth open as he fucks

him. Avery sucks clumsily, his sounds becoming garbled as saliva drips down his chin.

He takes it, giving in to the wild, animalistic demands of the beast growing within his mind. The part of him that is now creature, no longer wholly human, grabs hold of his brain stem, forcing growls from his throat. It'd concern him more if Sascha wasn't growling too, driving forward like he's claiming more of Avery's being with every beat.

A swoop of endorphins nearly knocks Avery flat, sending his head spinning across the floor. He reaches between his legs, only to freeze when Sascha says, "Don't you dare," voice resonating with alpha dominance.

Normally it wouldn't affect him, but while getting pounded into the mattress like Sascha's bitch, worthless for anything else, Avery curls his trembling hand into a fist and obediently draws away from his aching cunt.

"I need to come," he pleads, sloppy around Sascha's fingers.

"You will," Sascha says. "Just like this. From me. Because I told you I'd take care of you."

Never in his life has Avery come just from penetration, but the command in Sascha's voice hits him so deep in his marrow he already finds himself almost there. Sascha adjusts his rhythm, driving punishingly hard, sliding Avery up the rumpled sheets until he has to slam his palm against the headboard. The bedframe creaks in warning, but Avery would die before telling Sascha to stop now. Let the damn thing break, if it must.

This. This is what he needs, the snarling beast he's become, desperate to come just from being mounted by an alpha determined to keep him safe through any means

necessary.

Sascha's claws sharpen, sinking into Avery's ass as he jerks Avery's hips back to meet his thrusts. They don't break skin, and Avery knows it's not incidental. Sascha wouldn't risk triggering him.

As Avery's muscles begin to clench, body shaking uncontrollably as he reaches for climax, Sascha puts forth the final burst of power necessary to topple him over the edge. Avery bites down on Sascha's fingers, unable to hold back a howl of pure, untethered instinct. Sascha fucks him through it, not stopping even when copper blooms hot on Avery's tongue. He keeps going as Avery descends, chasing a peak of his own.

With Sascha's blood still slicking his lips, Avery twists, wrenching out of Sascha's grasp. Not to escape, no, but so he has leverage to force Sascha onto his back. Sascha sprawls on the mattress, expression raw with shock. A confused sound dissolves into a moan when Avery straddles him, taking his cock again despite the ongoing spasms. He rides Sascha hard, the tenderness from earlier a distant memory. Similarly affected, Sascha takes Avery by the throat, dragging him down so he can lick his own blood from Avery's skin. Avery opens his mouth to accept Sascha's tongue, nearly weeping as it invades him.

Sascha's grip tightens as he grows closer, blue-gold eyes lit up with alpha magic, casting a glow over his flushed cheeks. He jerks up two, three times, before his spine arches and he sucks in a ragged breath, the first pulse of his orgasm hot against the walls of Avery's cunt.

Overwhelmed by the sparks firing behind his eyes, Avery's body gives in a second time, clenching as Sascha's cock empties inside. Satisfaction throbs in his core. This is the first time Avery's allowed anyone this close, and the intimacy damn near destroys him.

“Fuck,” Sascha gasps when Avery collapses over his chest, drawing deep gulps of air like he’s dying for it. Sascha clutches Avery close, only leaving enough room for him to settle his body’s frantic need for oxygen. Avery clings right back, almost wishing Sascha’s hand was still at his neck.

When his breathing evens out, Avery whispers, “Holy shit.”

Sascha’s eyes are closed, and his throat flexes with a hard swallow. “That... was the most intense thing I’ve ever done, like, my entire life.”

A rasping laugh escapes Avery’s sore throat. “Yeah. I... yeah.” He nuzzles Sascha’s collarbone, licking sweat off the dips in his skin. “How’s your, uh, hand?” Sascha lifts it without opening his eyes. “Oh,” Avery says, surprised to see the bite wounds already closed, leaving nothing but a smudge of dried blood. He snags Sascha’s hand out of the air, kissing the spot where his teeth had sunk.

Sascha runs his thumb along Avery’s bottom lip, his chest vibrating with an amused hum. He gentles Avery with a hand in his hair, massaging his scalp, rocking him.

It’s soothing, but as the minutes creep by, an ache once again fires up Avery’s lower body and quickly becomes uncontainable. Heat floods between his legs, swollen skin pulsing an angry reminder of the hormones within—the virus that won’t be settled by a single bout, no matter how incredible. Avery reaches down, fingers drawing through the slick mess of his orgasm combined with Sascha’s come leaking out of him. It sends a soft growl rolling through him, prompting Sascha to open his eyes just in time to see Avery suck his wet fingers into his mouth.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Like you need to fuck me again,” Avery mutters around his fingers.

“Already?” Sascha breathes an incredulous laugh. He props himself up on one elbow, then catches Avery by the wrist, keeping him from taking his fingers out of his mouth. He teases, “Bite your own hand this time.”

Arousal already ramping back up, Avery moans as Sascha probes in his mouth, thumbing the fangs he doesn’t remember dropping.

“You’re a mess,” Sascha says while Avery makes an agreeable sound, drool spilling over his lips. “My dick is out of commission for at least the next ten, probably fifteen minutes. But I still got you, don’t worry.” That said, he rolls them over.

Now on his back, Avery clumsily and unsexily struggles to prevent saliva from going up his nose. Sascha hides a chuckle in the crook of Avery’s shoulder, then yelps when Avery flicks him in the ear with gross fingers. He doesn’t fuss, though; he bats Avery’s arm out of the way, moving fluidly to kiss down his chest, then stomach, without lingering. When he comes to the apex of Avery’s thighs, he buries his nose in the crease of his hip and inhales deeply.

“That’s gross,” Avery comments, even as his breath hitches.

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“Get used to it,” is all Sascha says. His lips find the bite mark he put inside Avery’s thigh while tormenting him earlier, fluttering over it as he gently brushes Avery’s damp pubic hair away from his cunt.

“I have to shave,” Avery mutters, self-conscious.

Sascha snorts. “Don’t worry about it. Mammals are supposed to be hairy.”

Avery pauses, about to argue because he had trimmed his body hair before, but decides against it. As a literal cat, getting hair in his mouth probably bothers Sascha far less than the average person. Not having to critically examine his body is unusual for Avery. His whole life up to now was spent being small and weak: Dual failures with his transness keeping him from being a real man.

The same way no one will ever see him as a good enough alpha.

But Sascha moves his mouth closer to blow teasingly over Avery’s cock, the cool sensation distracting him, making his lower body tense with anticipation. “Eyes on me,” Sascha says, smile crooked but fond in a way that wrenches at Avery’s heart. “I’ve got you, for as long as you need me.”

Forever, Avery thinks wildly. He wants to say so, but Sascha winks and goes down, tongue dragging through the come slicking Avery’s cunt. All thoughts scatter, leaving Avery writhing on a tangled sheet, outside himself and yet, for the first time in ages, entirely safe.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Sascha

Thirty. Six. Fucking.Hours.

That's how long it's been.

Between bouts, Avery sleeps fitfully before thrashing awake without warning, desperate for Sascha to touch him again. Sascha's not entirely sure how much of it is the heat and how much is general panic, residual trauma seeping out through cracks Avery has no choice in revealing. He keeps Avery fed and drinking water, also monitoring the wide, tender scars where his small body has healed from that sick bastard's attack.

That brittle routine is the only thing tethering Sascha to reality, as the rest of the time passes in a haze of pure carnality.

With Avery's arms pinned above his head, both thin wrists fitting easily in one of Sascha's hands, Sascha spears into him as hard as his exhausted body can manage. "I'm going to get you a vibrator," he gasps, thrusting again, keeping his pace torturously slow. "A big one. The industrial kind"—he grunts with exertion—"like they use in porn."

Avery hiccups, glassy eyes shifting to focus on Sascha's face. "Industrial—fuck!" He tries again: "What the hell kind of porn are you watching?"

Sascha snaps his hips forward, smiling at how Avery's gaze rolls back up toward the ceiling. "I'll have to show you."

"Right now?"

“Fuck no,” Sascha says on a breathless laugh. “Why would I need porn when— when I’ve got you right in front of me? You’re the sexiest, ngh, most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Razor focus cuts through Avery’s blissful expression. He puts a hand on Sascha’s chest, stilling him. Being pushed around stopped surprising Sascha after the first couple times, so he merely laughs as Avery lurches into motion, flipping him onto his back. Avery rubs against him, bruised lips working hungrily.

But then Avery leans back, expression serious, and says, “I’m going to blow you every morning for the rest of my life.” If he notices the way Sascha’s jaw goes slack, Avery doesn’t acknowledge it. He drops a kiss on Sascha’s chin and proceeds down the rest of his body, his destination obvious.

Sascha’s lips part in a quiet gasp when Avery fits his mouth around him, but his mind strays elsewhere, lingering on the sincerity with which Avery said, ‘for the rest of my life.’ It was a joke, probably. Definitely. Yet it cycles through Sascha’s thoughts, spinning into a whirlwind of emotion. Maybe it’s just because he’s never before met anyone he’d be willing to fuck for a full day and a half without getting bored. Maybe it’s because he’s never been wanted the way Avery clings and calls for him.

Maybe, Sascha thinks, as Avery wrenches a near-painfully dry orgasm out of him, he’d be happy to wake up with Avery every day for the rest of his life, whether or not blowjobs were involved.

The moment he can move his arms again, Sascha drags Avery on top of him, inserts his thigh between Avery’s legs, and kisses him like he has the antidote for every drop of self-deprecating poison Sascha has ever ingested. Avery whimpers and grinds down, riding Sascha’s thigh until he comes with a soft cry buried in Sascha’s mouth. Before drawing away, Avery flicks his tongue over Sascha’s philtrum, winning him a soft chuckle. He smiles weakly, then collapses against Sascha’s chest.

They don't move for so long, Sascha wonders if Avery fell asleep, but before he can decide what to do about it, Avery uncurls, flopping sideways and stretching his wiry limbs. "I think..." He clears his throat. "I think it might be over."

"Don't jinx it."

Avery smacks Sascha on the thigh. "No, I feel different now. Finally. Like you wrung the last bit out of me."

"Really?" Sascha reaches his arms over his head, arching his back. "That's great. I don't think my dick could take anymore, even if you weren't done. That last one was rough."

When Avery doesn't respond, Sascha turns to see his eyes closed, lips curved in a tiny smile. He strokes a few sticky curls back from Avery's forehead, prompting him to roll, nestling into Sascha's side. At last, Avery's breath evens out, leaving Sascha to hold him while he sleeps.

They wake up dehydrated and sore.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

“My mouth tastes like ass,” is the first thing Avery says.

Sascha turns on the sink, forgoing civility in lieu of sticking his head under the faucet to suck water directly from the stream. He sputters, then says, “Probably from all the ass you’ve been eating.”

Avery laughs, then shoves Sascha out of the way so he can run water into an actual glass. He drains half of it, then offers the rest to Sascha.

“I’m starving,” Sascha says on a gasp the moment the cup leaves his mouth. “Like, I could probably eat a bear.”

“Not again,” Avery whispers, then laughs when Sascha hip-checks him.

“We’re ordering room service.”

Despite the room reeking of sex and sweat, there’s a current of relief that goes a long way in clearing the air. Avery does more than pick at his lunch, which helps Sascha unclench enough to refuel properly. By the time evening arrives without Avery flying into another panic, Sascha texts Petra to let her know they’ve survived. He’s about to suggest they order more food for dinner, only to see Avery pursing his lips at his phone.

“What’s wrong?” Sascha asks immediately.

Avery winces. “You’re not going to like this.”

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Sascha mentally braces himself, then says, “Okay, tell me.”

“I have to go back to the farm.”

Sascha’s eyes fly open. “No.”

“Sascha—”

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s important!”

“You not being fileted like a fish is also important.”

“I just have to go to the main office.” Avery worries his bottom lip with his teeth, biting so hard Sascha almost reaches to pull it free. “I just got a text that tomorrow they’re going to open my locker and trash everything inside. My wallet’s in there, plus all my documentation. I can’t go back to Indiana to replace my birth certificate if I lose it—that were-pack will, quite literally, kill me. At least it’ll make it easy for my parents to identify my body, right? If they even want to.” A hysterical laugh bubbles in his chest, emerging as a distressed hiccup.

Sascha swoops in, switching to ‘damage control.’ “Okay, okay. Breathe. I get it. I’ll go with you, okay? Tonight, after you’ve eaten more.” He puts a finger over Avery’s mouth when he starts to protest. “I will hogtie you in the bathroom before I let you go back to that fucking place alone, so don’t argue. We’ll go, get your shit, and make ourselves scarce.”

They haven’t talked about what happens after they leave the hotel room. Avery won’t have anywhere to go, and Sascha certainly can’t help him. Wedged so far under his

father's thumb, he doesn't have his own income, as he was never allowed to get a job due to his health. The closer the conversation gets, the more anxiety builds in the back of Sascha's mind, in his gut, choking his veins so his blood stutters every time his heart tries to beat.

He doesn't want Avery to leave, but doesn't know what other options they have. Not for a lone werecreature with no friends, no allies other than a broken cougar shifter who isn't strong enough to lead his own pack.

Well aware he's trembling but not wanting to acknowledge it, Sascha kisses Avery quickly. "Go shower. I'm gonna order more food, then we can... get ready."

"Alright," Avery says softly, kissing him back before drifting toward the bathroom. He's dressed in nothing but the filthy t-shirt Sascha was wearing when he first found Avery on the side of the road, and Sascha watches him pull it over his head, pausing to yawn when it's only halfway off. His narrow hips have been darkened by hickeys and bruises shaped like Sascha's fingers, and there's a fading bite mark on his asscheek.

Then Avery disappears behind the bathroom door, closing it behind him with a click of the latch that sounds a bit too final.

Crouched outside the admin office on Dennings' property, Sascha begs his heart to stop pounding. Cougars aren't small animals, and even with his sleek body enrobed in darkness, he feels terribly exposed. On a farm patrolled by other shifters, none of them alphas to his knowledge, he's safer than a rogue werecreature, but any enforcer worth their salt would be naturally suspicious in the presence of such potent fear.

It's only been a couple minutes since Avery walked inside the otherwise empty building, but every passing second ratchets Sascha's tension higher until he's panting from nerves... which makes his anxiety more noticeable. In the distance, he smells

another shifter prowling about, but despite Sascha's worries, whoever it is doesn't seem to find his presence noteworthy. Their presence fades from his awareness shortly after.

Familiar footsteps have Sascha's ears perking, and he huffs in relief when Avery makes it outside, intact and unruffled. Sascha rushes to his side, sniffing the fabric of the cheap t-shirt they bought from a drug store on the way back into Bliss. There's no scent other than factory chemicals, so Sascha bumps his forehead against the back of Avery's knee, herding him in the direction of the car.

Suddenly, Sascha's ears prick at the sound of someone approaching, the scent he caught earlier growing stronger.

A pale, mushy-looking man steps from a door at the side of the office building. His gaze immediately descends upon Sascha, full of hostility and derision. Sascha flattens his ears and crouches, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Avery, gone stiff as a board, pats Sascha's hunched shoulders. "It's okay," he whispers.

"Is this that shifter you're fucking? Gotta be," says the man, voice slimy and grating.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

“What do you want, Atwood?” Avery demands.

The name sends tension shooting down Sascha’s spine. This is the bastard who nearly killed Avery.

In biped form, Sascha would be able to examine this information logically. He’d be able to calculate the best way to handle this situation. Talking to Avery has taught Sascha that werereatures do not process their animal affinities the same way as shifters. Avery views his ursine as a separate being invading his mind, while Sascha, in this form, simply becomes a cougar because that’s who he is. No second presence, no asynchronous instincts.

“I hoped you’d be stupid enough to come when you got that text,” Atwood says, wiggling his phone in a meaty hand.

Avery scoffs, though Sascha can see how his hands are trembling, and he pushes his forehead into Avery’s palm. “That’s smarter than I thought you were capable of. Thanks, though. I got everything.” He casually waves his chunky wallet in Atwood’s direction, the worn leather stuffed with all that’s left of Avery’s life.

Atwood’s smug expression turns stormy. “You’re a little shit,” he spits. “You’ve been a little shit since you started working here, and you’ll continue being a little shit wherever you go after this, so someone should really spare the rest of the world your continued existence.”

“Yeah? Are you gonna turn into a stupid-looking death bird to punish me for not fucking you again?” Avery’s fingers tighten around Sascha’s scruff, though not to

hold Sascha back. Not that he could, but Sascha can tell it's to ground himself. He's more afraid than he's letting on.

"I could have had Uncle Howard shoot you. He said he would," Atwood snarls, voice raising above the snarl in Sascha's own throat. "But I'd rather kill you myself, you fucking freak."

Avery staggers back, Atwood steps forward, and Sascha, who is an enraged wild animal, lunges to take the bastard's throat in his powerful jaws and jerks his head sharply. The sound of Atwood's neck cracking isn't enough, so Sascha sinks his teeth in with more force, presses a paw on the limp man's chest, and yanks. Atwood's larynx comes free in Sascha's mouth; he quickly spits it out, gagging at the foul taste of his blood.

Now Sascha's soaked in it: The blood of a man who would have murdered Avery. Operating with the straightforward logic of an animal, Sascha has no regrets about killing Atwood before he could make good on his threat to once again harm the person Sascha loves. In this form, this mind, there's no space for fretting over implications or consequences. Maybe later, what he was willing to sacrifice for a werereature he's known only a few weeks will affect him.

For now, he has to get Avery to the car.

They run together, Avery aiming for the handle of the back seat door so Sascha can jump inside, allowing Avery to take the wheel without waiting for Sascha to shift. He wonders if anyone will shoot before they reach the vehicle because Sascha has it on good authority that Farmer Dennings is a gun-toting redneck who won't hesitate to put down a werereature or a shifter if he finds either a threat.

No guns fire, though. What happens instead is much worse.

A cloaking spell releases, filling Sascha with horror to see his car surrounded by snarling wolves, with a biped woman crouched on the roof. Celeste's eyes are bright and cold, bathing her cheeks amber where she stands just outside the office's shitty fluorescent lighting.

"Sascha Madison," she says, and clicks her tongue.

Beryl, in their were-tiger form, whips around the side of the car. Growling, Sascha crouches, preparing be wiped out in a rematch now that they don't have to face alpha magic without backup, but Beryl swerves around him, heading for Avery.

The growl catches in Sascha's throat as one of Celeste's other werecreatures, the one who controls the magic she relies on, lunges forward and?—

And Sascha's muscles freeze.

The werecreature is a large woman, biped form shorter than Sascha's but bulkier. She scruffs him like a kitten, getting her other arm around his neck to secure him in a chokehold. Her paralysis spell breaks but no matter how Sascha thrashes, he's incapable of bucking her hold. A current of alpha dominance surges to the forefront, demanding she release him, but it's too late. His brain is going fuzzy, and Celeste's uninhibited alpha magic is smothering his, commanding submission.

The last thing Sascha is aware of is looking over his shoulder, desperately seeking out Avery's small, blurry form trapped behind the wall of snarling wolves and werecreatures. Avery calls out once, then Sascha knows nothing else.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Sascha

When Sascha comes to, he's dressed and lying on a bed that is not his own. He's used to that mostly—when he has a particularly bad episode, he often ends up in Petra's clinic—but this isn't there, either. Outside the room he hears voices, and inside the room, there are two members of his pack, watching him with unhappy expressions.

“What's going on?” he asks, pushing himself upright. Liam, an enforcer Sascha never liked, snorts. Sascha dismisses him, turning instead to Garrett, the younger of the twins. “What is going on?” he repeats.

“You're in deep shit, is what's going on.” Garrett has his arms crossed over his chest and shifts into Sascha's space when he tries to get out of bed. “I don't know where you think you're going, but you're not.”

Sascha massages his temples, his head aching. “Get the fuck out of my way, Gare.”

“Can't. You're on house arrest.”

Head jerking up, Sascha snaps, “On what fucking grounds?” Then, the events from before he passed out come back to him in a sudden wave, and Sascha braces himself to be raked across the coals for killing Atwood Dennings.

Instead of telling Sascha he just triggered a pack war, Garrett snaps back, “On ‘fucking-a-werecreature’ grounds.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

Sascha goes mute, horror curling inside his chest, great black coils of it that wrap around his heart and squeeze. Is this worse than the threat of war between the Madisons and whatever shit ass line Atwood came from? Definitely, because now it's Avery under the microscope. Sascha might never have felt this much raw terror—this deep, suffocating dread—not his entire life.

“What do you think you’re fuckin’ doing, Sascha?”

“It’s none of your business,” Sascha replies, lips numb. It’s useless, though. Of course it’s his pack’s business. His cousins have always made his private life their fucking business, whether due to misplaced ‘big brother’ worship or just because they’re annoying little shits.

Garrett snorts. “Tell that to your dad.”

“No.” The horrified whisper sticks on its way up, blocking his airway despite being such a small sound. Tears prick the back of his eyes, which drags him down even further, compounded by the surprise on Garrett’s face. Sascha isn’t the crying sort.

“What the fuck?” Garrett says in his own horrified whisper before turning to the door and banging on it. “Uncle Samuel! He’s awake.”

Sascha presses the balls of his hands against his eyes, breaths speeding up even as he begs the hysteria to go away. He needs a clear head to negotiate this.

Avery. Is Avery okay? Did Celeste’s pack?—

“Did they kill him?” Sascha demands the moment his father storms into the room.

Samuel’s expression hardens. “That’s your first question, Alexander?”

“Yeah,” Sascha responds, barely able to swallow past the lump in his throat. “It is. Did they kill him?”

Celeste elbows her way inside, and Sascha scowls. There is literally no one he’d rather see less right now. “He got away,” she says curtly, which does take some of the edge off, though it awakens another form of doubt. Celeste’s wolfpack are expert hunters, and he doesn’t believe Avery simply getting away is the full truth.

Still, a soft sigh of relief eases some of the pressure in his chest.

“Alexander. Explain yourself.”

“What do you want me to explain?”

It’s alarming to see the rage that crosses Sascha’s father’s face. Samuel is normally so composed, but right now, he looks more wild than Celeste, who’s watching Sascha with an oddly cool satisfaction. “You fraternizing with that creature.”

“Avery’s a person,” Sascha corrects, voice robotic. Like he’s been saying the words to himself every day, every hour, since the minute they exchanged their first DMs on PROWL. They’ve been waiting for the chance to come out, but as they do, they’re duller than they should be.

“A werecreature,” Samuel says, inflexible. “That thing could have killed you.”

More forcefully, Sascha repeats, “Avery is a person. Not a thing.”

“He’s a parasite, is what he is,” Liam snaps, but Samuel holds a hand up to halt him.

Celeste takes advantage of the pause to interject. “My enforcers have it on good authority that Sascha has been interacting with the werecreature for weeks. When he disappeared from Dennings farm at the same time Sascha did, I feared the worst.” There’s not even a shadow of concern in Celeste’s tone.

“You should have told me sooner.” Samuel’s voice is gruff, but he doesn’t push when Celeste fails to respond. “Alexander, I’m... Horrified doesn’t describe it. I’m disappointed. I’m angry. What possessed you to do this?”

All words abandon Sascha’s tongue, leaving it dry and heavy in his mouth. He swallows thickly, trying to summon enough spit to formulate a response. “I liked him,” is the only thing he comes up with. I love him, he doesn’t add.

“That shouldn’t have— You never should have spoken to him in the first place.”

“Why not?”

Samuel growls, his control visibly slipping. “Don’t play dumb with me, Alexander. You weren’t brought up to be obtuse. Werecreatures have caused irreparable damage to the shifter way of life. They’re dangerous, unstable monsters, and they treat our legacy—the centuries spent establishing harmony with humans—like it’s worth nothing.”

“And why the fuck wouldn’t they treat our legacy like it’s worth nothing when you treat them like they’re worth nothing?”

“I’m not arguing history with you.”

“Good, because I don’t fucking want to. Avery’s just a person who I met, and he’s—”

Wonderful. Adorable. Sensitive and sexy and sweet. “—he’s a good person. He’s not anything you’ve said werecreatures are.”

The werevirus had allegedly existed for a long time before it exploded across the globe, but Sascha was born after that explosion. Prejudice against this new breed of magic-infected humans had already solidified before Sascha even entered the world. Perpetually sheltered, he spent all his life being told he could tell a werecreature from a proper human because they smelled bitter.

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But Avery smelled like a barn before he took a shower, and afterward, he only smelled like any other person. Like summertime sweat, like the lake, like antiseptic, like the pheromones Sascha rubs on him enthusiastically and often. Like himself, a scent Sascha's obsessed with but can't name because he's not a fucking perfume expert.

"No one said they can't be persuasive," Samuel argues.

"Avery is probably the least persuasive person ever." Which isn't true, but Sascha can't get into how Avery is awkward but genuine in a way that makes Sascha want to give him everything he's ever needed. "He didn't trick me, Dad. I don't know why you're so scared."

"It's precedent. We keep ourselves away from them. You don't know how he might affect your illness or if he'll lash out unexpectedly. That's the point."

"Screw that." Sascha has never spoken to his father this way before, but he's tired, and he wants to see if Avery is okay with his own eyes. "The spinning sickness has existed longer than the werevirus, and they have nothing to do with each other. Don't pretend otherwise."

"Watch your tone, Alexander. You don't have any proof of these claims."

"No one does. I'm already sick. Now you want me to be miserable, too? More miserable than you've spent my whole life ensuring I am?"

"Why would you be miserable?"

Sascha's face screws up, and he steps into his father's space, a scant inch shorter than him. "You don't get to pretend you don't know. My existence is embarrassing to you. You'll never let me take over the pack, so your legacy is worthless to me. Why would I care anymore than the werereatures do?"

In his right mind, Sascha would have thought better of challenging the pack alpha with his own magic. It's not done. The drama Avery faces from unhinged werereature alphas doesn't exist in most shifter packs, based on family hierarchy rather than desperate posturing. Most alphas within family packs know that raising their magic to threaten the leader would result in their swift extermination by the pack enforcers.

But Sascha is his father's only child, his heir even if not his successor, and Samuel loves his son enough to not backhand him where he stands. Sascha suspects it's a near thing, though.

Samuel's alpha magic surges to meet Sascha's. "You'd spit on your mother's grave like this?"

"Would you? Mom wanted me to inherit the pack." When Samuel doesn't take the bait, Sascha steamrolls on. "I can love her memory without excusing the bigotry. Don't you hear yourselves? Calling human beings things?"

"Werereatures stop being human when the wererevirus?—"

"Garrett," Samuel interrupts harshly. "I'll thank you to stop interjecting when I'm trying to handle my son."

"I don't need to be handled."

Samuel's expression darkens. "Alright, Alexander. I understand."

An alarm blares within Sascha's skull. He opens his mouth to do damage control, but Samuel continues.

"Celeste, what is the current status of the werereature?"

"Unknown," she replies. "He escaped my pack, and we lost his trail."

Sascha doesn't believe that. How would one tender-footed werereature evade a whole pack of wolves? She's up to something.

Samuel isn't fooled, either. "Are you still aspiring to add him to your pack?"

"It wouldn't be any of your concern if I was." Her response is a bit too quick, a bit too sharp.

"I disagree. He's affected my son, so it's become my business."

"We'll discuss it when he's found," Celeste allows smoothly.

Sascha eases out of his father's space, clenching his jaw in an attempt to smother another wave of dread. "Why do you have to find him?"

"He can't be allowed to remain in Bliss." Samuel's tone brooks no argument, but both Sascha and Celeste swell with aborted responses anyway. "I don't trust you or my son to keep away from him, nor do I trust the werereature to stay away from us. Who's to say he won't seek revenge against our pack?"

Sascha's jaw hangs. "Revenge? Do you think this is a goddamn superhero movie?"

"Alexander, I'll forgive your prior language, as I realize I haven't told you 'no' enough up until now. That will change today. You'll speak to your father with

respect, and you will obey my instructions to cut contact with the werereature.”

‘You can eat my ass,’ Avery would probably respond. Sascha isn’t quite that brave.

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“I’ll think about it,” he grumbles instead, then makes a point of weaving around Samuel and Garrett, neither of whom moves to stop him. “I gotta piss. Little privacy would be great.” That will hopefully deter them from changing their minds about letting him leave freely.

Sascha does go to the bathroom, after which he returns to his room like a normal person. A huge breath of relief escapes him when he sees his phone sitting on his pillow, plugged into a charger. When he gets closer, though, he also sees a car key, but not his own, because Avery was holding onto it while Sascha was in cougar form. He scents the air, frowns, then crosses the room to open his window.

Outside, Petra is leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette.

“You?” Sascha demands because the first time she caught him smoking a cigarette was also the last time, considering she smacked him with her purse until he swore never to do it again, under penalty of her threatening to remove his lungs before he could ruin them.

“Shush,” Petra says. “Listen. He’s at your lake.” In response to Sascha’s confused expression, she wiggles her phone, reminding him that he’d given Avery her number before they... Yeah. “They retrieved your car from the farm, but your dad still has the keys. Don’t fuck mine up, or you’ll owe me.”

“I owe you anyway.” Sascha lunges out the window, dipping to kiss her forehead, then ducks back inside to pack. Sascha is much bigger than Avery, but he throws anything that could be useful into a duffel bag, assuming Petra already has first aid supplies in her car. He doesn’t know what state Avery will be in when he arrives at

the lake, so he figures it's best to be prepared. Sweatpants and a few shirts that ran small on Sascha's larger frame, some toiletries, an extra phone charger... Fuck, how's he going to charge his phone on alake?

Getting food would be a smart decision, but Sascha can't risk going to the kitchen. He swipes his emergency credit card since his wallet is in his car, and he doesn't know where his father parked it. Furthermore, Samuel is probably keeping it monitored in case Sascha tries to leave—he didn't anticipate Sascha having a sympathetic ally, which Sascha admittedly didn't anticipate either. Petra feeling an ethical obligation to heal a dying person is different from going against her alpha's orders to facilitate his son's forbidden, star-crossed romance.

Armed with only a bag of semi-useful things and Petra's car key, Sascha struggles to wedge his too-large body through the window and only barely succeeds. He closes the window behind him, then takes off at a run, paranoid he'll be spotted before reaching the car Petra parked close by.

He'll need to acquire actual survival gear if Avery is going to be camping on the side of the lake. There's nowhere else either of them can go right now, and the helplessness almost freezes Sascha in place as the car's engine turns over. Forcing himself into action, Sascha steadies his mind enough to drive calmly and carefully off the Madison pack lands, heading toward the nearest camping supply store.

Determined to make it back to Avery's side, the many looming consequences be damned.

Beyond exhausted but not yet able to stop, Sascha tows the raft down the bank of the lake, paddling as hard as he's able. He had to debate before deciding how to best swim but reasoned the practical, driven mindset of an animal fighting for survival would get his tired muscles to the cave faster. It also keeps his clothes from getting wet, as everything has been packed into a water-tight tub he precariously balanced on

the raft before grabbing the rope in his mouth and starting to paddle.

Avery crawls out of the cave before Sascha reaches shore, his green eyes wild. Sascha almost abandons the raft to run into Avery's arms, but his cougar's sensibility keeps him functioning long enough to reach shore. Avery ties off the raft and, using strength that seems so jarring from his slender body, lifts the tub above the water and drags it into the cave. Then, before Sascha can stumble through the underbrush on his own, Avery grabshim, too.

Though he didn't fully realize how much he needed the support before Avery offered it, Sascha goes near-deadweight in Avery's arms. He flops on his side, purrs weakly when Avery kisses his wet cheek, and allows his eyes to slip closed.

Sascha doesn't wake up until so late it's early, the birds already twittering. Avery somehow got his cougar form onto a bedroll without waking him, and his tiny body is curled up at Sascha's back, forehead pressed against his fur. With a sigh, Sascha releases his shift, unfolding from the aether to tangle his limbs with Avery's. It's not cold, but he shivers anyway, naked and exposed in this little cave where he and his mom used to huddle together and tell stories.

While Sascha was out, Avery set up a pathetic little camp. Sascha wasn't able to outfit it the way his mom used to, but he got somewhere for Avery to sleep, a crank generator, a solar phone charger, fresh water, and a bottle to filter more from the lake, along with what food rations he could acquire.

"Are you okay?" Sascha's voice creaks.

"You killed him," Avery says instead of answering. "You really just killed that guy."

"Not 'that guy.' A piece of shit bastard who would've killed you."

“You killed someone for me.” His seaglass eyes shimmer with unshed tears, so Sascha takes him by the face and drags him into a hard kiss.

When Sascha draws back, it’s only far enough so he can murmur, “I said I would, didn’t I? You deserve to be protected by someone who loves you.”

“You... Sascha, what?”

“I love you, Avery.” Weaving his hands into Avery’s sweaty curls, Sascha holds him close. “I thought it earlier, when I was still a cougar, and it just made sense, and I know this isn’t romantic, but you deserve to know.” He sucks in a shuddering inhale before adding, “Just in case.”

“In case of what?” Avery asks as if he needs Sascha to vocalize his fears.

Sascha shakes his head, refusing to give him something more to worry about. “You deserve better than this. A half-asleep confession in a cave. If I could, I’d give you candles and fancy food we’d have to drive at least an hour to find. I’d drive you so far out of Bliss Township they wouldn’t recognize either of us and take you to a restaurant in nice clothes and tell you I loved you like a proper boyfriend. And maybe I shouldn’t assume that I’m your boyfriend, but after saving your life and fucking you for nearly two days straight, I think I get at least the chance to be wrong.”

A wet-sounding laugh bursts from Avery’s chest. “You aren’t wrong. At all.” He paws at his eyes, mumbling, “Can’t believe this all happened because of that stupid app. I deactivated my profile after we met, I was so freaked out.”

“I know you were,” Sascha says, pulling Avery to rest his cheek on chest. “I looked for your account before I decided to stalk you.”

Avery snuffles against Sascha’s skin. “I’m glad you decided to stalk me.”

After that, they're quiet. Sascha holds Avery as long as he can, rocking him and stroking under his shirt, up and down his knobby spine. Finally, he buries a kiss in Avery's hair, followed by about ten more, until Avery laughs in his arms and nips at his neck. He must know what to expect, though, because he doesn't cling when Sascha pushes himself upright.

"I wish I could stay longer."

Sascha cuts to the chase because he can't bear to say goodbye otherwise. If Avery cries in earnest, Sascha doesn't know what he'll do. It'll be twice as hard to leave, though they both know he needs to. His dad might not assume Sascha's at the lakeright now, but if Sascha stays gone too long, it'll definitely be one of the places Samuel searches. Fear of the spinning sickness won't keep the pack away from his little Forgotten Lake, and Avery's scent will give the cave away immediately. He can't risk that.

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But Avery doesn't cry because he's strong and brave and wonderful. His lips twitch into a pained-yet-understanding smile, and he says, "I wish you could, too. But you'd better get going, yeah."

"Sleep," Sascha insists before he rolls off the bed. He crouches to kiss Avery one more time, then unfolds a light blanket to cover him with. Avery doesn't seem tired at all, but it makes Sascha feel better to go through the motions.

Shifting again is not a good idea. It's an actively bad idea, what with how tired Sascha already is and how he'll have to shift back in order to drive. He'd have no problems leaving his own car, but he can't abandon Petra's.

Still, Sascha doesn't want to swim as a biped, and he doesn't want to climb the fence afterward either, so he breathes a worn sigh and shifts as he slips into the water, then begins to sluggishly paddle.

Sascha doesn't remember getting back to the car, but he does so successfully, robotically dressing in the spare clothes he keeps in the back. He even gets the engine started and drives out of his usual hiding place, easing Petra's car onto the road and heading in what the most primal part of him knows is the direction of his home, despite that same primal part screaming about leaving his boyfriend behind.

As his awareness of Avery fades, Sascha's awareness of everything else fades alongside it until the car stops moving. Or maybe it just stops moving in a way that's under his control. There's an impact—a very not-good one that makes Sascha's neck and chest scream, but he doesn't know what to make of it.

He parks the car, which wasn't going anywhere anyway.

He gets out of the car.

He takes several heavy steps, no longer knowing where home is: Before him, or behind.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Avery

Three days pass without any word from Sascha.

The first day, Avery received a text from Petra telling him Sascha had crashed her car due to a vertigo episode. She also informed him that Sascha's phone was taken away by his dad like he's some unruly teenager, but that she'd keep Avery updated on Sascha's healing.

It wasn't that bad, she'd written, seeming completely blasé about the fact that Avery's boyfriend was so exhausted from tending to him that he got into a fucking car accident. Hit a goddamn tree when he could have been safe at home instead. Could've died. The only person in the world who loves Avery, wrapped around a fucking tree trunk.

But he didn't die, and is healing quickly from the crash. Mostly bruises, Petra said, sending him a few pictures of Sascha's bare chest, painted purple and yellow from the airbag impact. No trace of the bite marks Avery covered him with before they'd left the hotel a day earlier. The memory had felt like so far in the past, when it'd only been a little over twenty-four hours.

Now, it feels like the hotel was an eternity away, and Avery has run out of the food rations Sascha bought for him. Sascha had left his emergency credit card so Avery could buy whatever he needed, but that would require getting to a store, and Avery has been too scared to leave the cave.

Last night, while trying to charge his phone with the solar battery, it sustained some water damage that quickly infiltrated through its shattered screen. The device had already been on rocky ground after his time in the drainage ditch. Avery prayed that leaving it alone would dry it enough to turn back on, but it didn't.

While Avery doesn't want Sascha to leave his safe bed in his safe house where he's recovering from injuries sustained while protecting Avery, being alone in a cave for three days is starting to get to him. If Petra texts him any further updates, he won't see them, nor will he be able to answer any calls if Sascha gets his phone back. Because Sascha would call—a text wouldn't be enough. The thought of hearing his voice is almost enough to make Avery smile, but his stomach is a heavy, hollow pit that's keeping him from feeling much other than emptiness. Were creature bodies weren't built to survive on so few calories, and Avery hasn't had any in... he doesn't know how long it's been anymore, not without his phone to track the hours.

By nightfall, desperation sets in.

Avery doesn't know where to go and doesn't have a car, and if he even partially transforms, things could get ugly really fast. He could lose control and shift fully. Not to mention the Madisons, along with any Wilderness wolves lurking on Madison land, would know Avery's scent immediately because it was all over Sascha when he was dragged away from Avery on Dennings Farm.

The memory gives Avery nightmares. Even when he's not asleep, the sight of the stocky woman choking Sascha outplays over and over again behind his eyelids. Trapped behind a wall thick with wolves and werecreatures, there was no way Avery

could have reached him.

So Avery had run, only to feel deeply suspicious when no one followed on his heels—not even Beryl.

By now, Avery's choices have dwindled. He needs to get off Madison pack lands to find food, but even without the wards immediately giving him away when he hops the fence, he's certain there will be enforcers patrolling the perimeter. He might be spotted before he can reach the road. It's not likely they'd let him escape as easily as Celeste's wolves did. Would they kill him on the spot, or capture him, drag him to their alpha, and execute him in front of Sascha to make a point?

Avery stuffs a water-resistant backpack with everything he can fit. Sascha also bought waterproof storage envelopes much more secure than the layered freezer bags Avery used to get his phone and wallet into the cave unscathed. Not that it made a big difference for the phone, but he packs it anyway, in case his SIM card can be salvaged.

Once packed, Avery takes the raft and its weak little oar, paddling until he can stagger onto the sloping shore. He ties off the raft and mechanically climbs the fence, wheezing under the backpack's weight. Not a good sign for basic survival supplies to tire out a whole werecreature. The ursine is unnervingly dormant within him.

Once on the other side of the fence, he stares through trees he has no idea how to navigate. Avery is so fucking tired of not knowing where he is or where to go.

A few steps toward the road, an abrupt yank stops Avery in his tracks.

It feels as if there's thorns wrapped around his heart, and they tighten when he attempts walking again, only easing when he shifts differently. Suddenly the ursine rouses, wasting no time unleashing a bellow that makes Avery's eyes ache. There's

something tugging him away from the road, deeper into Madison territory. The ursine demands Avery follow that trail, filling him with a familiar sensation. Exactly how he felt when he had no choice but to leave his boyfriend in the grasp of an unknown threat.

Is this punishment for that abandonment? Does Sascha need him?

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Despite the urge otherwise, Avery knows that looking for Sascha on pack land will endanger them both, harming more than helping. So with the absolute last of his self-control, Avery painfully continues dragging his feet toward what he hopes will be a clean escape.

Hopes of that evaporate a second after the thought completes.

After so long trying to navigate his inconsistent senses, Avery's mad fight for survival must have improved. He senses the feather-soft footsteps before they break the line of forest in which they were stalking him, and unless the cloaking spell is in effect, they're alone.

"I'm so tired, Beryl," Avery tells the trees. "Don't you ever get tired?"

Beryl creeps into sight, head tilted so deep brown waves of hair fall over their piercing eyes. "Everyone gets tired."

"In your bones, though. Where every joint cries when you use it." Avery sighs. "I feel like I could sit down and never move again, and my body would thank me regardless of the consequences."

"Don't..." Beryl shifts, discomfort visible in every line of their body. "Don't do that."

Avery doesn't say anything in response; he just stands there, staring into the distance with unfocused eyes. Past Beryl, along the weird aetheric thread pulling him toward what can only be Sascha.

Beryl steps into his field of vision. “If you’re really that tired, this is your last chance for protection against the Madison pack. Celeste is still willing to take you.”

“It’s not the life I want to live,” Avery says quietly. Since he can’t see past Beryl, he closes his eyes and tries to feel through the unknown distance. Has Sascha healed yet? Does he sense Avery, too?

“You prefer being hunted?”

“It’s not an issue of preference. I wouldn’t survive the way you would.”

“Is that an insult?”

“No, it’s a compliment.” Avery finally fights to focus his attention on Beryl, ignoring the way he yearns for nothing but Sascha. “You do what you have to do. That bitch tells you to sit, to fight, and you do it, and you do it well. I wouldn’t be able to force compliance, even if it was in my better interest. Celeste would probably kill me while I’m at my lowest because even that wouldn’t be low enough for her.”

Beryl considers him. “How long have you been a werereature?”

“Nine months, give or take.”

“Ah. Fresh meat.” They suck their teeth. “I was born one.”

That grabs Avery’s attention. “How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-two,” Beryl says with a grim chuckle. “My dad was unfaithful and fucked the wrong bitch. He hid it because who wouldn’t? But it didn’t stop him from fucking my mom, too. The virus didn’t infect her, but it transferred to the baby. Surprising no one, she didn’t want it. Neither did he.” A pause follows, during which genuine

resentment flashes across Beryl's expression. "I hate Celeste almost as much as I need her. Since neither of my parents would care for me, I was raised within a government facility—part of a research program studying how the werevirus affects puberty and adolescence. She nabbed me when I was eighteen and had just aged out of the program. Don't know if I'd have survived otherwise. It was a good move for a new alpha because her rivals were intimidated by the presence of a shifter who could 'tame' a wild animal like me. Celeste might be an opportunistic bitch, but she's clever about it. Usually. Sometimes, she doesn't know when to pull out."

Avery snort-laughs, then claps a hand over his mouth. Beryl smirks, and when he narrows his eyes at them, they snort a laugh of their own.

"So, what're we doing now?" he asks. "I wouldn't want you to get in trouble on my account."

As if summoned, a howl pierces the night sky. Beryl purses their lips. "We're out of time. Since you can't give me a 'yes,' you should prioritize getting the fuck out of here. But I hope you understand I can't just let you run." They heave an irritated sigh, then begin to undress. Scars—faint, but visible—stripe their belly, muscular chest, and shoulders, all from a life of being used as a glorified guard dog. Avery lets his gaze continue down, curious only about the wounds too deep for Beryl's strain of werevirus to fully repair, only for his face to burst into flames when he catches a glance at their dick.

Averting his eyes, Avery asks, "What's happening now?"

Beryl cracks their neck one way, then the other. "We gotta fight, obviously. A few good hits should be sufficient. You're gonna have to transform fully, though, or they won't believe it."

His brow furrows. "What are you saying?"

“I’m going to let you beat me,” Beryl says slowly, a bit exasperated. “You have to make it convincing, though. You’re an alpha, so I can make a good argument for your escape if you don’t hold back. I’ll make sure you don’t catch me anywhere lethal.”

“I can’t hurt you,” Avery says, so thrown off his hands feel cold and clammy in the humid air.

Not wavering, Beryl crosses their arms over their naked chest. “This is your only out. Take it, or I’ll have no choice but to drag you back to Celeste, screaming and bleeding. It’s too late for anything else.”

With that said, they begin to shift.

Avery tugs weakly at his shirt, but most of his attention is fixed on Beryl. The first time he saw them shift, it was dark. This time, there’s still light in the sky, hiding nothing about their gory transformation. It both horrifies and fascinates him.

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Beryl's jaw fractures, deforming until it unhinges entirely before cracking back into place. Their fingernails split as cat claws pierce through, the shriek of a wounded feline warping in their throat as the voicebox changes shape. Beryl grows the way Avery does, their skin splitting open to make way for black mutant tissue, around which orange fur begins to sprout in jagged stripes.

Halfway through the shift, Beryl's neck snaps up, their eyes piercing as blood runs down their cheeks. Wheezing from the effort, they step forward, their spine crunching as more vertebrae force themselves into line, lengthening Beryl's back. Lifting one hand—a paw, now, with thick pads and black toe beans Avery, for an irrational split-second, thinks of ascute—Beryl reaches forward and smacks him in the chest.

“Hurry.”

Avery hurries.

He drops his backpack, yanks at his clothes, and calls forth the ursine, despite still being unsure how to maintain enough control during his transformation to not attack Beryl in earnest. With all the frantic running, healing, and fucking, Avery hasn't had time to practice with his shifts. Nothing more than two partial shifts and the most peaceful full moon shift he's ever experienced, the ursine calmed by Sascha's presence across the lake.

Hoping to channel that same peace, Avery focuses on getting through the staged fight, telling himself he'll find somewhere new to hide until he and Sascha can find their way back to each other. The tether—whatever it is—will keep them from getting lost, even without the ease of technical communication.

Nothing will be easy for Avery or Sascha—not ever again.

The agony of transforming is warped by his panic, mounting as every one of his molecules begins to scream. It feels the same but also different. Avery's mind doesn't get smaller as it normally would, and so he feels the pain even sharper when thick black hairs burst free of his follicles. His new skeleton shudders, all his joints sliding into place, and for a moment, Avery feels snapped like a rubber band.

Then it's over, leaving him standing there, staring at Beryl with the glow from his eyes lighting the short length of his snout.

“Move, damn you!” Beryl bellows with considerable effort.

Avery didn't know they were able to talk in these forms, and he's not sure how to make his own throat replicate the sound, so he doesn't try. He also doesn't move until Beryl lunges forward to swat him on the flank.

With a wounded yelp, Avery staggers back. The attack was basically a love-tap, and it makes him even more reluctant to lash out. Beryl owes him nothing. Even after breaking his phone and antagonizing him for days, they've shown a shade of mercy Avery deeply needed.

How can he bring himself to hurt them?

The ursine makes the decision for him when Beryl roars and strikes again in earnest, catching Avery in the jaw. He can't help but notice they keep their claws folded back, even while the blow has enough force to snap his head to the side. His instincts aren't pleased by the impact, though, and with an answering roar, Avery backhands Beryl across the face. Then he gasps in horror and staggers back, a visual that must look so ridiculous it startles Beryl's were-tiger form into a hacking laugh.

With no idea how he's going to convince himself to actually bleed Beryl, Avery tries to poke the ursine just enough to get it to flex its claws without trying to open up Beryl's intestines. He shouldn't have worried because when the ursine overshoots Avery's nudge, Beryl squirms aside fluidly, their too-long spine slithering like a snake.

Before Avery can once again jerk back without landing a single scratch, Beryl throws themselves forward, twisting just enough to catch his claws against their ribcage. The wounds are shallow, but blood wells up all the same, staining their orange fur. They don't give Avery a moment to recover before pouncing on his chest, sending him sprawling on his back. Reflex has him kicking defensively, back leg striking Beryl in their soft abdomen. Even knowing Beryl deliberately created the opening, the sound they make upon impact makes Avery's eyes prickle. He doesn't know if this form can actually cry, just like he doesn't know how to talk or properly fight without Beryl literally throwing themselves onto his metaphorical sword.

Frustrated with his fragile emotions, the ursine takes over, and for the first time, Avery welcomes it. He allows his limbs to be worked, leaning into the instinct rather than fighting. Minutes slip through his consciousness while his inner beast does its level best to harm a much more competent fighter.

When Beryl goes still, the ursine comes to an abrupt halt. Jarred, Avery waits while they sniff one of their injuries, then rumble in satisfaction. Settling on all four paws, Beryl tilts their head in the direction Avery had been moving. "Go," they grate out.

Avery releases his shift, fur and skin flaking off as he shrinks. Once put back together, he collects his discarded clothing and dresses, aware of Beryl watching him patiently. The wounds he inflicted are already beginning to heal.

When Avery moves to leave them behind, a spike of pain stills him—the tug in Sascha's direction going razor-sharp. Sacha's trying to find him, drawing Avery's

gaze deeper into Madison territory. Avery stares as long as he can justify before Beryl snarls, “Run, idiot!”

Then Avery breaks into a panicked sprint, headed farther from Sascha. It feels as if hooks have been embedded in his heart, brutally tearing through his meat as he runs into the darkness of an unknown fate.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Sascha

“No. Absolutely not.”

Sascha rakes his hands down his face, growling in frustration. “It’s been days. I feel fine.”

Petra turns from the sink to wave a tongue depressor at him. “You are not a reliable witness, first of all. Second of all, three days is not enough for you to have fully recovered from the past week.”

“How am I not a reliable witness? It’s my body.”

“I’m your doctor.” Petra throws away the tongue depressor, the sheen of magic dissipating from her hands. She flips on the faucet while aggressively pumping soap into her palm. “I will decide when you’re healthy enough to leave the clinic.”

Spending three days unable to contact Avery has been torturous. Sascha has been trapped in the high-risk room in Petra’s apartment, above the regular clinic. The medical space was more or less made for him, and it doesn’t always feel like a prison,

but right now, it very much does—especially with the cruel addition of his dad taking away his phone, cutting off forbidden contact with ‘that creature.’

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In order to get Sascha to rest, Petra has been using every technique she knows short of horse tranquilizers, and even then, Sascha has woken up numerous times, gasping from nightmares he can't describe. Every night, Petra gives him herbs to numb his mind, weaving calming magic with her fingers stroking through his hair.

This morning, Sascha woke up feeling stable at last, but Petra has thus far refused to be convinced of his wellness.

"I'm going crazy, Petra. I'm an adult, and?—"

She snorts. "Oh, are you? You're not acting like one."

"I— Please, just listen to me. I need to know if Avery's okay." For a second, Sascha thinks Petra stills, but a blink later she looks unaffected, calmly washing her hands.

"He texted me that he's fine," she says, turning off the water and reaching for a paper towel.

"When was that?" Petra meticulously dries her hands and doesn't respond, so Sascha raises his voice. "When did Avery last text you?"

"I'll check my phone in a moment, but regardless of what I find, my instructions will not change."

Sascha grits his teeth, watching her flip absently through the same stack of papers she was perusing before she insisted on checking his vitals for the third time today. "I know there's something bad you aren't telling me. You're stalling because you know

if I find out, I'll try to leave."

"If that's what you want to believe," Petra responds, sounding distant and disinterested.

"Will you stop fucking bullshitting me?"

Without warning, Petra slams the dossier onto the counter beside the sink, voice rising to the loudest he's ever heard from her. "Sascha Nikolai Madison, you are not getting out of that bed!"

Stunned into silence, Sascha frowns at his hands where they rest in his lap. He needs to keep his wits, even if his brain is full of misfiring distress signals. Though his heart is pounding frantically, he feigns calm and says, "The last time someone full-named me, it was Avery begging me to fuck him."

Petra makes a scandalized sound, which brings Sascha great satisfaction. "You didn't have to tell me that."

"You were the one who told me I had to fuck him in the first place."

"I didn't— Goddamn it, Sascha. You're staying here. That's final."

"Petra!"

"No. Last time you went out, you crashed my car."

"You can't hold that against me when you gave me the car in the first place," he protests.

Petra pinches the bridge of her nose. "I'm not holding it against you, and your dad

has already assured me he's going to replace it. That's not the problem. My issue is that you've burned yourself out so severely I thought I was going to have to do a magic infusion, and in case you forgot, those are extremely dangerous for you."

Most shifters can be healed and rejuvenated by aetheric energy movement, but the spinning sickness leaves Sascha uniquely vulnerable to burn-out. It's not that Sascha doesn't understand Petra's concern. His health is important to his pack, and the few freedoms Sascha is allowed right now will be affected if he is continuously reckless. Taking care of oneself is sensible, even in the abstract.

But Sascha's own safety can't be his priority. Not now.

"When was the last time Avery texted you, Petra? Please."

Just when Sascha is certain she won't answer, Petra sighs heavily. "I have not heard from Avery since yesterday evening."

A jolt of fear electrifies the length of Sascha's spine, making his head spin and his lungs ache. Before his phone got damaged, Avery was a frequent texter and prompt about updates. It's not like him to go silent for so long.

Heart pounding, Sascha throws back the blanket draped over his lap and leaps out of the medical bed. The moment his feet touch the floor his knees buckle, weakness radiating through his bones. He lands in a panicked heap, only barely aware of Petra's gasp over his own hyperventilation.

By the time Petra makes it to his side, Sascha has gotten his arms around his knees, folding them against his chest so he can bury his face against them. Breath scrapes in and out of him, none of it seeming enough.

"Maybe something happened to his phone," Petra says instead of asking if Sascha is

okay, which he appreciates. Because no, Sascha is not okay. He won't be until he sees Avery, knows he's safe.

Sascha shakes as if the air conditioning in Petra's apartment is Arctic wind. "I need to find him. Don't tell me I can't."

Petra makes a helpless sound. "I promised to take care of you. I can't let you leave in this condition."

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Grabbing her shoulder, Sascha stares imploringly into her dark eyes. “Do everything you can to improve it, then.” The magic infusion is dangerous, but Sascha doesn’t care. If it hobbles him, that’ll be an acceptable casualty. He can’t let go without trying. Even if it doesn’t work, Petra would have to tie Sascha to the bed to keep him away. No risk is too great if Avery’s safety is on the line.

“Your father will kill me,” Petra says quietly.

Sascha works his jaw, then casts his eyes to the floor. Samuel is so angry, who knows what degree of that he would take out on Petra for enabling Sascha and letting him run into danger? He can’t put someone else he cares about at risk; that wouldn’t be fair. Swallowing hard, Sascha releases Petra’s shoulder and says, “I understand. Just help me get up, and I’ll... figure something out myself. Just say I ran when you went to the bathroom or something. Maybe I can shift?—”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Without pausing, Petra gets a solid grip on Sascha and pulls him to his feet. She sets him on the side of the bed, holding him steady until he’s seated and not at risk of swooning onto the floor again. Then she pats his shoulder once and leaves the room.

Alone and confused, Sascha waits, but he’s not sure for what. His head is spinning, which isn’t a good sign. Shifting would likely debilitate him for much longer than whatever time he needs to feel better now, which means there’ll be no getting to Avery without a magic infusion. Petra is right that his stores are too low—his stomach feels hollow as if he hasn’t eaten, though she has kept him well-fed and properly supplemented.

Petra moving aetheric magic into Sascha's body to restore his depleted energy could either improve his stability, or trigger a vertigo episode and make it much worse. Bedrest and incremental treatments would be a much safer option long-term. Except that isn't an option.

Sascha feels helpless and angry—not for the first, or even the hundredth time. This disability stole his entire birthright, but now, unsatisfied, it's threatening to keep him from the man he loves. The man he desperately needs to protect.

As if merely considering his feelings for Avery flipped a switch, Sascha feels something sharp in his chest. Not painful, just insistent. Waiting, wailing. He nearly falls again just from the intensity, how it demands he move toward him at any cost. Sascha fights the irrational urge, knowing he'll only collapse again if he tries to stand, and he's focusing so hard on resisting he doesn't notice Petra's return until she's standing in front of him, giving him an odd look.

“What's wrong?” they both ask at the same time.

Petra nudges his shoulder in an ‘I have authority here’ kind of way, so Sascha answers, “I feel this weird... tugging. I don't know how to explain it.” He looks toward the window, frowning.

Pressing her lips together, Petra hums, but doesn't comment. She puts her hands on either side of his neck. “Focus,” she says. “The situation you're in is exceptionally dangerous. You need to promise that if your condition does not improve, you won't keep fighting me on proper recovery protocol.”

Sascha blinks. “Are you?—”

“Yes; I'm going to do the infusion.”

Exhaustion renders the tug of his smile fragile, but immense relief is surging in his chest even if he's struggling to show it. "I can't thank you enough for?"

"Don't. Just lie back. We don't have much time."

Sascha obeys, closing his eyes as Petra carefully unties the side of his medical gown, pulling it open just enough to expose Sascha's chest.

"You remember what this will feel like?"

Due to Petra's reluctance to perform the risky procedure, Sascha has only received a handful of magic infusions in his life. Still, he nods. If nothing else, the discomfort—major understatement—will distract him from the weird lump that's migrated into his throat, a pulsing anxiety that doesn't feel like his own.

Petra rubs a conductor in a thin layer on his chest, the cool, oily substance not exactly pleasant. She doesn't say anything to prepare him before pressing the fingers of both hands over his heart, gathering all the force into one spot until Sascha can feel their pulses align. When the pressure comes just shy of pain, Petra inhales slowly.

Then the actual pain begins.

For the average shifter, a magic infusion is only meant to feel warm and expansive. Petra described the sensation as having a full bladder, which was funny to Sascha at the time. It stopped being funny when the spinning sickness warped what was supposed to happen, that warmth ratcheting up until it was a fire racing through Sascha's inner channels. He feels overstuffed, not just full. Like he might vomit up everything Petra's putting into him, a scorching trail through his system. But he never does, which is almost worse because it leaves the burning to fester in his stomach.

Sascha moans and writhes, distantly aware of Petra murmuring comforting words that

do nothing to soothe him. It'll be worth it, he tells himself despite the feverish haze. All he has to do is get through this, and he'll be able to find Avery. That alone makes it more bearable.

When the pressure finally eases, Sascha gags. His body is soaked with sweat, limbs shaking.

"Stay with me," Petra says, wiping a cool cloth over Sascha's brow before using it to clean the conductor off his skin. "You're fine; you did good. I'll get you water. Don't move. I swear I'll make that feel like a walk in the park if you budge an inch."

Sacha couldn't budge a damn fraction of that, even if he wanted to, which, at this point, he does not.

The next intervals of awareness are marked by glasses of water and regular checks of his temperature and blood pressure. Sascha doesn't know how much time passes before he wakes up enough to ask. Petra isn't even in the room, but the light from the window suggests early evening. It's been hours.

Sascha stirs, because this time he actually does have a full bladder, and does his best to call Petra with a sore throat.

Despite the summons being quiet and scratchy, she hurries in. "More water?"

"The opposite," Sascha croaks.

With a soft laugh, Petra eases Sascha out of bed and helps him to the bathroom. He assures her he can handle the next part, and is fortunate his limbs have unclenched enough that he doesn't have any accidents. By the time Sascha emerges, hands and face damp, he feels much steadier on his feet.

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“I think it worked,” he informs Petra with a weak smile.

Petra’s responding smile is equally anemic. “That’s good. I have bad news.”

Sascha swallows hard, trying not to immediately fear the worst. “What’s up?”

“Celeste is here. And something’s got her real, real heated.”

“Fuck. Well, I don’t need to go to the pack house, I can just?—”

“You misunderstand me,” Petra interrupts. “She’s here.”

“In the clinic?!”

“Yeah. Waiting for you to wake up. Your dad is on his way to... address it. She wants me to heal one of her enforcers, but I said I wouldn’t so much as touch a member of another pack without my alpha’s word.” Petra bites her lip. “There’s another problem. The enforcer Celeste wants me to heal is one of her werecreatures.”

Spine going ramrod straight, Sascha thinks immediately of Beryl. “Not the were-tiger, right?”

Petra shrugs. “I don’t know what their animal affinity is. Just that Celeste is claiming this enforcer was maimed by that... by Avery.”

If Beryl is here in rough condition, that means Avery won. Right?

Inhaling deeply, Sascha goes to get dressed. Petra gives him privacy, which she doesn't always, but he appreciates her trusting his ability to stand and put on pants without help.

“What should I prepare myself for?” he asks when he leaves the medical room.

Petra shrugs. “I really don't know, but we aren't going down until your dad gets here.”

For once, Sascha has no desire to argue. “Are you sure I can't just jump out the window and escape this confrontation entirely?”

That wins him a single short laugh before Petra shakes her head. “Unfortunately not. I wouldn't want to risk you having an episode on impact after such a risky procedure, but also, you wouldn't make it ten paces without either Celeste's enforcers or ours noticing you. We have to handle this the mature way.”

“Damn.”

They aren't left waiting very long. When he arrives, Samuel's barked orders resonate from outside, and Sascha hears the front door slam when his father enters the clinic to engage Celeste. Both Petra and Sascha sigh, then make their way down the stairs, Petra insisting on going first.

“—the disrespect of you showing up on my territory making demands of me and my son, who is ill?—”

Sascha grimaces. His father always talks about him like he's helpless. He'd open the door to protest, but Petra waves him back, holding a finger to her lips so they can listen to Celeste's reply.

“I demand information, Samuel. The alpha werecreature maimed my enforcer, and I’m seeking accountability.”

“Seek it from him, then. I won’t argue.”

“That’s my intention once I know his whereabouts. I’m certain that your son”—her tone is dangerously sarcastic—“will be able to give me what I need.”

“Over my dead fucking body,” Sascha hisses through gritted teeth.

It’s the wrong move, and he knows it even before Petra shoots him an annoyed look. The shifters in the waiting room go still, having heard Sascha’s voice, giving Petra no choice but to open the door to let them out. Even though Sascha couldn’t be safer with his father in the room, Petra keeps him behind her.

“Alexander,” Samuel says tightly. “How are you feeling?”

Just as tense, Sascha responds, “Better. I heard I was needed.”

Celeste spreads her stance so she looks larger than Samuel, but the attempted wave of her alpha magic is nothing compared to Sascha’s dad, standing calmly with his hands clasped in front of him. She takes Beryl by the shoulder and pushes them forward, the rough gesture in no way resembling genuine care for Beryl’s injuries. When Sascha squints and tilts his head, the splotches of blood on Beryl’s clothes don’t even look that bad. Celeste’s rabid indignation suggested much worse.

“The werecreature you’ve been fraternizing with did this to my enforcer.”

Without caring to consider his words, Sascha replies, “Your enforcer has been tormenting Avery, so I’m not surprised he fought back. Did you expect him to just, like, take it?”

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Neither Petra nor Samuel look pleased, but they also don't interrupt him.

"Tell me where he is," Celeste demands.

"I don't know." It's the truth, and Sascha is so overcome by the sickening realization that he has to press his palm to his stomach. The pull he noticed earlier is still there, now oriented differently. Does that mean Avery left the lake? He must've, if he was confronted by Beryl. Sascha's eyes slide to them, wondering if they'll say anything revealing, but they don't. They stand motionless, watching silently.

When Celeste growls, Samuel says, "My son says he doesn't know where the creature is."

"And you believe him?" Celeste snaps before Sascha can argue—again—about referring to Avery as something subhuman.

"Are you calling my son a liar?"

With an incredulous snort, Celeste responds, "His actions up to now haven't exactly inspired confidence, have they?"

Sascha's father pauses, then turns to him. "Alexander, do you know where the werecreature is?"

"Avery," Sascha corrects. When Samuel merely levels him with a patient stare, Sascha gives in and says, "No," begrudgingly.

“There’s your answer,” confirms Samuel.

Sascha would be pleased by his father’s trust, were it about any other topic. He’s glad he doesn’t have to lie, but the unknown keeps his stomach roiling. “I’ve been at the clinic recovering for several days.” He carefully doesn’t say what he was recovering from. “I don’t know where Avery is, and I haven’t spoken with him.”

Celeste inspects him for several seconds, but upon finding nothing she can argue with, turns to one of the werereatures behind her—the solid woman with nut brown skin, who choked Sascha out when they were attacked at Dennings farm. She gives Celeste a nod, black hair escaped from a messy bun bobbing in front of her eyes. Celeste frowns at Sascha, then looks at Samuel. “Sorry for my doubtfulness,” she says, not sounding sorry at all. “I’d like your help searching for the werereature alpha, Samuel.”

“Why can’t your wolves just track him?” Sascha blurts before thinking the better of it. He doesn’t believe Celeste can’t find Avery with her own resources, and confronting that head-on is the only way he can figure to get an answer.

It doesn’t seem a question Celeste wants asked, but Samuel prompts, “Yes, Celeste, I am also curious.”

Celeste pauses before saying, “I suspect he has some form of cloaking magic, like Zuhr.” She gestures to the same woman, clearly not realizing she just exposed her own magic-wielder. Celeste isn’t facing Zuhr, so she doesn’t see her face twitch.

Meanwhile, Beryl drops their gaze to the floor.

Sascha isn’t an expert at body language, but he can tell even Celeste’s own werereatures don’t appreciate her flat-out lies—hilariously, boldly put out despite accusing Sascha of being the liar. It’s all Sascha can do not to spit the truth back at

her, but Petra catches his eye, and he holds back. Avery doesn't have a scrap of magic he can use to hide from expert trackers, or even amateur ones. He barely knows how to properly wield alpha magic.

Even Samuel's disbelief is visible; everyone in the room knows Celeste's agenda to pressure Avery into submitting to her control. There's no point in escalating with her motivation clear.

After a prolonged silence that grows increasingly tense, Samuel says, "Well, Celeste. I wish you luck in finding the werecreature and seeking whatever accountability you need for your enforcer's... injuries." He waves dismissively in Beryl's direction. "My son needs to focus on healing, so I'd appreciate if your pack would vacate the clinic now."

It'd be prudent for Sascha to feign compliance before planning his next move. Regardless, he opens his mouth, probably to say something he'll regret, only for Petra to cut him off by stepping on his foot. Sascha has the good sense to smother his yelp.

"That's a good idea, alpha, thank you," Petra says, already ferrying Sascha toward the door to her apartment.

If his father responds, Sascha doesn't hear it. He lets Petra push him upstairs, and by the time they crest the landing, he's gone entirely numb.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Sascha

Neither Petra nor Sascha speak while Petra fills a backpack with supplies. A change

of clothes, first aid kit, two water bottles, and a handful of energy bars. She zips it closed, her expression grim, then hands the backpack to Sascha. He's already dressed and wearing shoes, so he slings the backpack over his shoulders and pulls Petra in for a hug. Although she allows his physical affection, she isn't especially keen on reciprocating, but this time her strong arms wrap around Sascha's back and squeeze.

"What's your plan?" she asks when they separate.

Sascha shrugs. "I don't know. I have to find him first."

"I'd lend you my car, but it had an accident."

A slight smile tugs Sascha's mouth. "I'm really sorry about that, but it means a lot that you'd offer to let me use it again if I hadn't, you know, totaled it."

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Petra gives a dismissive wave. “Be safe.”

“I’m just walking to the pack house.”

“You know what I meant.”

They hug once more, then Sascha takes his leave. Walking is his only option for getting to the pack house without alerting someone to his leaving the clinic. Petra forbade him from shifting, which isn’t unfair, so he’s left plodding down the road and hoping his body doesn’t give out before he can steal his car back, along with—hopefully—his phone. Petra plans to call it approximately when he should be arriving at the pack house, in case Samuel left the ringer on.

He’s only a quarter of the way into the walk, if that, when a car pulls off the road and stops next to him. Sascha swears under his breath, grimacing when he sees Aunt Marty, always way too perceptive, get out of the car.

“What’re you doing?” Marty asks, planting her hands on her hips.

“Um,” Sascha says.

Marty purses her lips. “Where are you going?”

That’s an easier answer. “The pack house.”

“And you’re walking, why...?”

“Um,” he says again. “Petra’s car is out of commission and I had to get something from my room. She cleared me to get some exercise.”

“Right,” Marty says slowly. Then she opens the passenger door. “I have to go to the pack house to take care of some business in the kitchen. I’ll give you a ride.”

Sascha almost wants to say ‘no’ but doesn’t have a good reason to do so. He glances at the dashboard clock. “Why this late?”

“Samuel didn’t say. Something about unexpected guests, though.”

Presumably, Celeste is still making a nuisance of herself. Sascha frowns but doesn’t have anything to say, and Marty doesn’t push him. The ride to the pack house is less than ten minutes, but it’s tense, and by the time they pull into the several-cars-deep drive, Sascha feels about ready to rip his skin off.

“Thanks, Marty.”

“Stop by the kitchen so I can give you something to eat,” is all she says before walking off.

The problem with getting a ride to the house is that Petra won’t be calling his phone for some time. Sascha rushes to catch up to Marty. “Hey, I kinda lost my phone in my room. When you get to the kitchen, could you, uh, call it? I haven’t had it since I’ve been in the clinic.”

Marty gives him a long look, then nods. “I’ll call twice, just in case.” Then with a wave of her hand, she turns down the hall toward the kitchen, leaving Sascha to break off toward the residential wing where he lives with his closest immediate relatives.

Sascha is already sweating when he gets to the hallway leading to the master

bedroom. Samuel doesn't lock his door, presumably because Sascha hasn't snuck in there since he was a kid, and no one else would dare. Finding the key to Sascha's car isn't difficult because Samuel leaves his own car keys and wallet in a dish on his dresser. Sascha pockets the fob, then waits for Marty's call, praying that his phone, wherever it is, is charged and has the ringer on.

Sure enough, Lady Gaga's muffled voice sings Rah, rah, rah-ah-ah from the top drawer of Samuel's bedside stand. Sascha's lucky as hell that his father is so organized. He quickly answers the call, muttering, "Found it. Thanks Marty," before hanging up and making a getaway as quickly as possible.

Samuel will smell that Sascha has been in his room, so Sascha has to get gone before his dad returns to their residential wing. He makes it out safely, and with a breath of relief, Sascha slips into one of the side passages so he has less chance of running into someone on the way to the kitchen. He'd normally beg off, but doesn't want to irritate Marty after she helped him.

After the first part of his plan went so smoothly, it figures that the final leg would produce unforeseen complications. Just around the corner, by the kitchen entrance, Sascha can hear Celeste's brash voice arguing with Samuel, who is finally starting to lose his composure.

"I don't share your grudge," he's saying. "I've offered you all I can. Once our cooks finish the food for your pack, I expect you to leave our land."

So that's why Marty returned to the kitchen. Celeste must have convinced Samuel he owed her, and he agreed to keep the peace.

Either Celeste doesn't know what she's about to uncover in Samuel, or she doesn't care, which is more likely. "I thought you wanted to get rid of any unwelcome alphas near your territory."

Sascha can't stop himself from popping around the corner. "Why don't you just leave Avery the fuck alone?" He regrets it immediately when Samuel's head snaps around, and he pins Sascha under the full force of an unexpected glare.

"Alexander, what are you doing here?"

"I... Marty gave me a ride to pick up some food for Petra. Since her, you know, her car's... out of commission."

It's not a bad explanation, but his father's expression doesn't soften. "Someone else could have done that. You're supposed to be recovering at the clinic."

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“Petra said I could get some exercise,” he says, falling back on his earlier lie with more confidence this time. “I was going to do some stretches with the equipment in the exercise grounds.”

Samuel doesn't waver. “You could have done stretches where you were.”

Everything in him wants to wither under his father's disapproval, but Sascha fights it. “I'll let Petra know when I get back. Sorry.”

“You're getting soft, Samuel,” Celeste says. “Can't even keep your own cub in line?”

Like a wire snapping, Samuel turns on her, growling and showing his fangs. Sascha can't remember the last time he saw his father drop fangs, but it terrifies him. Desperate to mitigate the unfolding rage, because Celeste's pack is far from weak, even on another pack's territory, Sascha says, “Can't you just get out of here? He said no.”

“I don't need your help, Alexander.”

“Why not? Because I'm not good enough to be an alpha, so I can't even support my own father?”

Even Celeste looks surprised by that. “Maybe you should get the cub to lead us to his were-bitch,” she says mildly.

Sascha snarls, his own fangs dropping. “I'd rather eat glass.”

“Even if your own alpha ordered you to?” Celeste asks, raising her eyebrows in mock surprise.

When Sascha doesn’t respond, Samuel turns to him, blinking away his rising anger.

“Alexander?” prompts his father.

Sascha’s heart pounds. This might be the most precarious exchange he’s faced this entire ordeal, and he has no idea what to say. It’s not until he sees Marty hovering in the kitchen doorway, watching him with a knowing expression. He can’t verbalize why or how it triggers the confession that bursts free. Maybe it’s just because Avery deserves someone who isn’t ashamed of him. Avery has been failed by everyone who was supposed to care about his wellbeing; Sascha won’t add himself to the list.

“I would never do anything to hurt Avery. I love him.”

At the admission, something twists in Samuel’s face. Sascha doesn’t have the chance to question it before Samuel turns to Celeste, the coolness returned to his voice when he says, “After some consideration, I think you’re right, Celeste. The werereature is too dangerous to be left alive. You have the support of my enforcers in your mission to hunt him down.”

The words are like hot coals dropping into Sascha’s stomach. He’s running before he’s aware of his legs moving, breathing without feeling the air enter or leave his lungs. His hands shake around the key fob to his car, just barely managing to unlock it and throw himself inside without dropping the fob like a horror film victim. This is Sascha’s personal nightmare come to life, and he refuses to let it reach Avery.

A squeal of car wheels announces Sascha’s departure from the drive, but he can’t risk slowing down enough to be quiet. He guns it, speeding off the pack lands like a man possessed.

When Sascha realizes Avery is headed toward Mackinac City, a vice tightens around his heart. He feels restless and eager and anxious, preparing himself for the relief of holding Avery again at last, while still looking over his shoulder every other minute, expecting to see someone in pursuit. He knows better than to feel safe, even in the absence of strange cars following him.

Sascha's car belongs to his dad, legally. If Samuel reports the hatchback stolen, police will be on the lookout. If they're pulled over, that'll be it, so Sascha plans on ditching the car in the Dairy Queen parking lot as soon as they get there. From there, it's not even a ten-minute walk to the Shepler's Ferry, and that will take them across the Straits of Mackinac to the island.

But first, he has to find Avery—which turns out easier than expected.

Avery isn't hiding. Rather, he's standing by the side of the road as if he knew to expect Sascha coming this way.

Pulling up, Sascha opens the passenger side door for Avery, who flings himself inside. Avery slams the door, and Sascha hits the gas before Avery gets his seatbelt on.

After he's thrown his backpack behind them and buckled up, Avery blurts, "I didn't tell you before you left that I'm pretty sure I love you, too."

Sascha glances away from the road to see Avery staring into his lap, cheeks bright red. A small smile tugs the corner of Sascha's mouth.

"I've never been in love before," Avery continues, "so I'm not sure what it feels like, but I have this... this weird sensation, like a string around my heart. I never believed that love actually felt like that, but I guess it does. Sorry, this isn't very romantic."

Laughing, Sascha says, “I told you I loved you when I was about to leave you alone in a cave. Now we’re on the run.”

“Maybe that’s more romantic than dinner.”

“I’d take dinner over this, actually.”

Avery laughs, and for the first time in days, Sascha grins with pure joy. He wants to stop driving so he can gather Avery in his arms, but there’s no time. They’ll have to wait until he reaches the Dairy Queen.

After a few moments of contemplation, Sascha says, “I feel it too. Like I was being pulled toward something, and I knew it had to be you. That’s how I found you so quickly.”

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“I would’ve called, but my phone got water damage and finally gave up.”

“It’s okay. Dad took away my phone. I only just stole it back.”

Avery snorts. “So brave.”

“Oh my god, shut up. It was brave. Celeste really had him pissed off, and he’s scary as fuck when he actually gets angry. Almost had me showing throat.”

Instead of laughing at the joke, Avery grimaces. “Celeste is coming after me,” he assumes correctly.

Sascha presses his lips in a grim line. “Fucking bitch doesn’t know when to quit.”

“Please tell me you have a plan.”

“I do, actually. Maybe for the first time in my life. I think it’s a good plan, too. Maybe. I hope it is.” He gives Avery the rundown of the first leg of their trip. “After we get to the island, we’ll hopefully have a chance to lie low. The hotels are expensive but manageable. Did you bring my credit card?”

Avery hooks his thumb toward the back. “In my wallet.”

“Good. I have a decent amount in my checking account, but I’d prefer to make that last as long as possible, and I don’t know how long we’ll...”

Be on the run.

Unlike Avery, Sascha can probably replace his documents, which he didn't have a chance to grab. They'd be with Samuel's records, in his study, along with the medical and legal documents for the rest of their immediate family. The documentation of Sascha's entire medical history is what he doesn't know how to replace. Without Petra, there'll be no way to access shifter healing, and Sascha's disability is a shifter illness that human hospitals wouldn't be able to treat. Even most shifter healers wouldn't know how to use Petra's techniques, and it's not like Sascha could describe them. His magic abilities are limited to flinging around his alpha magic like a middle schooler playing dodgeball.

Suddenly, the gravity of running away seems crushing, but Sascha doesn't have a choice. This is what Avery has had to deal with for almost a year now. But they'll be okay. Things will be better now that they're together.

Sascha doesn't let himself think about the challenges they'll face as a werecreature-shifter couple. If he does, he might break down before they reach the Dairy Queen. Avery seems equally unwilling to examine the full implications of their situation, so they fall into an uneasy silence until the bright red sign appears along the road.

After parking the hatchback in the farthest corner of the lot, Sascha and Avery grab their backpacks. Sascha removes his car charger and a few bits of junk before dropping the key on the seat and slamming the door with it inside.

"It won't lock," he informs Avery. "Hey, do you think we could pay someone to drive the car, like, ten miles from here and abandon it?"

Avery grins. "Maybe. Let's eat first."

Watching how desperately Avery eats fills Sascha with guilt, even though he did his best to provide as many supplies as possible. He should have brought more rations. Still, as Avery mows through the obscene amount of food Sascha ordered, the hollow

sensation that's been aching in Sascha's gut eases. Was their strange connection allowing Sascha to feel Avery's hunger? It's not the time to ask, so he waits until Avery has refueled enough to look up from his tray.

Sascha smiles, faint but genuine. "Had enough?"

"For now."

"Okay. Take care of the trash? I'll be right back." Because he just saw a guy cruise into the parking lot on a bike, and Sascha's not one to waste an opportunity. Avery only grins.

Even though they walk away from the Dairy Queen fifty dollars lighter, Sascha feels satisfied with his cobbled-together plan. Bike guy said he'd drive the hatchback out of Mackinac City and abandon it on the side of the highway near a wooded area. It occurred to him that the car would probably have a GPS tracker, which made it even more important to ditch it as far away as possible. While that's on his mind, he flips location services off on his phone, just in case.

Sascha can't resist taking Avery's hand as they walk toward the ferry station. Avery bumps his hip against Sascha's, though it hits more on his upper thigh due to their height difference. It makes him smile, and they continue silently until they reach the booth to buy their ferry tickets.

He's relieved to hear that they made it just in time to get on the last ferry of the evening. If anyone he hasn't noticed is following them, it'll be much harder to tail them if they can't hop on the next trip. Avery squeezes his hand when they board the boat and tuck themselves into a corner. When Avery's curly mop of hair lands on Sascha's shoulder, his narrow chest heaving with a sigh, Sascha finally allows himself to relax a tiny bit. For now, all they have to do is get away.

“We’ll stay the night on the island,” he murmurs, stroking Avery’s hair. “Then we’ll take a flight from the island to St. Ignace and go into the Upper Peninsula from there.”

“Are we gonna get a new car?” Avery sounds like he’s half asleep.

“Eventually. We’ll get a ride out of St. Ignace, somehow. Haven’t decided yet. Maybe I can get cash on the island, and we’ll find the nearest used car garage and buy a junker. Or look online for someone selling directly. I’ll figure it out,” he promises.

Avery nods, then yawns. Sascha doesn’t speak again until they reach the other side of the straits—too soon, judging by how groggy Avery seems when Sascha shakes him awake.

They disembark in a cloud of tourists, and when Sascha’s feet hit the dock, anxiety begins to build in his chest again. Avery is basically dead on his feet; he desperately needs to sleep.

As Sascha navigates to the cheapest place he can find, his eyes stray to the brightly colored shops dotting the street. He’s been to Mackinac Island before, and he wishes they had time for him to show Avery all the wonders of the little island. No cars, only bikes and horses. There’s fudge and taffy and everything from overpriced tourist food to overpriced fancy restaurants. He could take Avery to one, spend almost as much as they’re about to drop on the room, hold his hand across the table, and tell him how loved he is, again and again and?—

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Avery elbows him. “Stop that. Worrying. It’ll be okay, okay?”

“Okay,” Sascha agrees, then drops a kiss on Avery’s forehead before towing him through the front doors of a quaint little inn.

They make it to the room without Sascha having to carry Avery along with both their backpacks, but it’s a near thing. He dumps Avery on the king bed and helps him out of his shoes and pants. Avery is deep asleep by the time Sascha gets his t-shirt off.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Avery

When Avery wakes up, he’s curled against Sascha’s side, both of them in nothing but underwear. Sascha’s awake, poking at his phone. Avery smacks the device out of Sascha’s hand, knocking it to the mattress, and throws his leg over Sascha’s waist. His lips descend, and they kiss like they’ll die without it, Sascha squeezing Avery’s hips hard enough to make him gasp. He bucks down, finding Sascha already hard under his ass.

“We donot—” Sascha moans when Avery bites his neck. “—have time to fuck right now.”

“Do we have time to shower?”

“I don’t think showering is negotiable.”

Avery kisses him quickly, there and gone, then bounces backward on the bed. “I’ll blow you in the shower, then.”

Neither of them lasts very long, which Avery supposes is a good thing. He licks come from his lips as he climbs off his knees, only to be swept up by Sascha, kissed, and finger-fucked with his back pressed against the cold tiles. Then Avery washes Sascha, following the contours from his firm pectorals to his toned belly, then down to his well-muscled ass. Sascha ends up face-first against the tile, moaning while Avery, on his knees again, circles his tongue over Sascha’s hole.

It ends with Sascha massaging hotel conditioner into Avery’s hair, Avery’s cheek resting on Sascha’s chest, right above his heart. They rinse off and exit the shower to find half an hour has passed, but Avery doesn’t regret it, and Sascha doesn’t appear to either.

They dress, then go to the complimentary breakfast bar on the main level and try not to look like starved dingoes with how much food they eat, even if it’s an accurate descriptor. Then, heaving twin sighs of exhaustion, they shrug on their heavy backpacks and leave the hotel with a friendly wave to the concierge, as if nothing’s wrong. Just another couple on vacation.

“What’s the plan?” Avery asks tentatively, worried by the way Sascha is frowning at his phone.

“I can’t get same-day tickets for a flight off the island. They’re booked until tomorrow, so we’ll have to take the ferry to St. Ignace instead. I was hoping to avoid that obvious of a play, but I don’t want to stay here too long. We did our best to throw them off our trail, but they have numbers on their side, so they could easily spread out, cover more ground, and...”

Avery knows better than to express optimism, but he does so anyway. “The island is really busy, and it’s still early. We’ll get to the ferry and take a taxi north out of St. Ignace until we can get a car, like you said. It’ll work out, Sascha.” Sascha doesn’t reply, which means Avery’s attempt at reassuring him didn’t work. Without anything else to say, Avery grips Sascha’s hand, squeezes it once, and follows him into the street toward the docks.

Not wanting to look around and see what he’s missing, Avery stares at the road as they walk, allowing Sascha to tow him. Despite extra strength from the werevirus and building muscle on Dennings Farm, he’s beginning to wilt under the heavy backpack again. All Avery wants to do is get onto the boat and sit down, which makes it twice as bad when Sascha’s fingers tighten, and he stops abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Where?” Avery asks, because he doesn’t need any other signal to know they’ve been caught.

“Up ahead, by the ferry booth. One cougar and one wolf.”

“Have they seen us yet?”

Sascha pulls Avery behind a building. “Don’t know. Fuck.” He pulls out a tourist map of the island, frowning hard as he studies it. “Okay, if we go through here”—he indicates a courtyard advertising nearby bathrooms—“we can get to Market Street and hit Fort, and if we follow that to Huron, it’ll take us into the woods.”

“Wonderful,” Avery says, sarcasm thick. “Exactly what I wanted. More traipsing around through a bunch of fucking trees.”

A hysterical grin overtakes Sascha’s face as he stuffs the map into his backpack. “This time, I have no idea where the fuck we’re going either. I’ll try to take us in the

direction of the airport, though.”

“‘Try’ being the operative word?”

Sascha only laughs, and it’s not a happy one, but Avery laughs too. They must look unhinged, speed-walking down the road wearing equally manic grins, but not a single person seems to notice.

True to Sascha’s word, taking Fort Street to Huron Road brings them to a fork, both sides branching into different sections of a massive chunk of forest. Sascha frowns at the map again before saying, “The roads here are a fucking nightmare. Anyway, we’re going right.”

That’s the more heavily wooded road. Avery only sighs.

Sascha continues to mutter while they walk. “I’m thinking we can walk to the airport and maybe just... hang out inside until we can get a flight.”

“So, tomorrow?”

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Scowling, Sascha says, “I’m not sure what else we can do. This island is so fucking tiny it’ll only take an hour to cross. Where the hell are we gonna hide otherwise? We can’t just walk in circles around the shoreline hoping no one heads us off.”

“That’d be funny. Like that scene in *The Emperor’s New Groove*,” Avery says, throwing him a smile that’s easier than it should be. “Hey, Sascha.” Avery tugs Sascha to a stop, then gently pries the map out of his trembling hands.

“I can’t handle a speech right now, babe,” Sascha says, exhaustion clear in the lines of his face.

“That’s fine,” murmurs Avery, stroking his cheeks like he could erase every mark left by anything other than a smile. “I don’t have enough words for a speech, anyway. I just want you to know?—”

A howl pierces the air, sending birds fluttering from the surrounding trees into the painfully blue sky. It feels wrong to hear such a sound in the middle of the morning rather than while lost in the dark woods at night. Something about the mournful wail feels so at odds with the sunlight, Avery almost pities the wolf.

Then Sascha seizes his hand, and they break into a run.

Avery doesn’t know where they’re running, and he doesn’t think Sascha knows either. He’s dragging them away from the source of the howling, but then there’s another, and another, and another, until the woods around them convulse with the discordance of abused piano keys. Ahead, to the right, Avery sees the stone walls and iron bars making up St. Ann’s Cemetery, and Sascha yanks him to a stop.

“No,” Sascha says. “Not a fucking cemetery. Not today, goddamnit.”

“What’re you afraid of, zombies?”

Borderline hysterical, Avery finds the retort hilarious, but Sascha only hauls right to avoid the rows and rows of gravestones ahead. They run so hard their hands unlink, backpacks slamming into their spines with every stride. It’s not comfortable for Avery, but after what Sascha’s body has been through, it has to be even worse for him.

Eventually, Avery has to slow, desperate for more air. He braces his hands on his knees, gasping. Sascha, who, contrary to Avery’s assumptions, isn’t doing as poorly, fidgets but doesn’t rush him. As Avery is working up the will to resume, a cave to his right catches his eye. The opening is a horizontal slat in the stone, a gaping toothless mouth far too similar to the one he hid in beside Forgotten Lake. A sign nearby calls it Skull Cave, claiming the interior was once strewn with human bones. Avery wonders if they’re still in there.

When he tries to speak, Avery only manages a shaky whisper. “Are we gonna make it out of here, Sascha?”

Sascha stares down at him, brow knotted. Avery wonders if he’s trying to figure out how best to lie. Another chorus of howling rises like omens from the earth. A single feline scream heralds the cougars joining in the hunt. Avery meets Sascha’s eyes, his pale brows furrowed over blue-gold irises and pinprick pupils, contracted in the sunlight breaking through the trees.

In the end, Sascha doesn’t lie.

“We should shift,” he says instead.

“What’ll we do with our bags?”

Sascha tugs his shirt over his head, leaving his blond hair ruffled. “Can’t do much with them if we’re dead, can we? Put ‘em behind the fence.” He goes for his jeans, but Avery grabs his hand.

“We’re not getting naked out in the open, you braindead doofus. Let’s go farther into the trees.” Avery shoves Sascha to get him moving.

It’s painfully surreal. Avery rolls Sascha’s clothes, followed by his own, trying to make them take up as little room as possible. Sascha blinks in and out of the aether, then sits by the backpacks, watching Avery roll his neck. He feels played with, like one of those interactive pet toys, moaning on half-dead batteries while their operators watch and chuckle. The trees shudder, then silence falls across the little intersection just beyond Skull Cave, leaving it so still every crack of Avery’s joints feels like laughter before a gunshot.

Halfway through his transformation, the too-familiar, vastly unwelcome cloaking spell drops, and just like that, Avery and Sascha are surrounded. Frozen in place, exposed on the edge of a historical cave remembered only for its bones.

Sascha raises his hackles and puts himself at Avery’s back, but it doesn’t do much when there’s only two of them and Avery is still swollen and torn, his new build not yet finished assembling itself. One wolf darts in, meaning to hobble Avery before his shift can finish, which must have been their plan. Roaring, Sascha swats it away. He also pushes back the second wolf, but the third strike comes from a cougar and a wolf coming at Avery from different sides.

With his bloody palms on the ground, consumed by panic, Avery calls upon the ursine. It argues when he, once again, struggles to maintain control of his mind while allowing the beast to operate their body. The creature wants all of him, but Avery

can't allow it.

His internal battle costs Sascha a blow from a wolf's thick paw, leaving shallow scratches across his shoulder. Sascha lowers himself, ears back, hissing at the aggressor while he tries to push past the pain as the wounds immediately begin to heal.

The two of them won't be able to fight off both packs of apex predators. Not for long, not on their own.

A cougar snaps at the wolf that landed a blow on Sascha, yowling a reprimand. That's right—Sascha is still the alpha's son. They don't want to hurt him. Just Avery. He can use that, can't he? If the ursine will fucking cooperate.

Finally, Avery gets enough of a larynx to roar, sweeping a deformed hand to effortlessly bat the wolf into a tree. It hits the trunk with a yelp. The cougar who had defended Sascha snaps at Avery's wrist, and Avery backhands that one into an aggressing wolf.

It's like playing with animated stuffed animals. Even these dangerous, powerful beasts crumple when Avery uses his massive form—to defend, to hobble, to crush a wolf's hip beneath one clawed foot. The ursine lusts for their blood, and even though Avery doesn't particularly want to kill any of them, he almost lets the creature take control.

Wouldn't they deserve it?

Chaos erupts when a cluster of wolves target Sascha, healed and snarling at Avery's back. The cougars fold, going after the wolves instead of joining them. Seeing an opportunity, Avery wrenches his body away from the ursine's puppetry and snatches up both backpacks in one massive hand. He bellows at Sascha, not seeming to share

Beryl's ability to talk in their shifted form. Sascha yowls, swats one of his pack mates out of the way, and runs hot on Avery's heels.

At first, Avery tries to run on two feet, resulting in him clumsily hitting more than a few taller branches. Reminded of how difficult it was to escape with his feet partially shifted, Avery hesitates long enough to catch the backpack straps in his teeth, then brings his hands to the earth. Once on all fours, instinct takes over, allowing Avery to wind through the worst obstacles with ease. What he does hit, he barely feels as he crashes through.

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Their escape is cut off by a coalescence of wolves and cougars standing before them at the intersection of two roads. Pausing gives their pursuers a chance to fall upon them, nipping at their heels. Avery guards Sascha with one hand, snagging the backpacks from his mouth with the other; in doing so, he inadvertently leaves his chest exposed to an opportunistic cougar. There, Avery sustains his first injury, blood blooming along curved valleys.

Unlike the result of Atwood's attacks on Avery's human body, these scores begin to heal as readily as Sascha's did, knitting under the guidance of his alpha ursine magic. Still hurts like a motherfucker.

Another cougar goes for Avery's throat and is barely thwarted by Sascha jumping into its path. The cat yowls in surprise, scrambling to avoid injuring the alpha's son. Without hesitating, Avery snatches the cougar's tail and swings it into yet another body, the arc shaped by a prolonged shriek. Again, it leaves his hands occupied, and while Sascha guards Avery's front, a cougar leaps onto his back and digs in its claws, teeth sinking into the meat of Avery's left shoulder.

The points of pain are intense, agony like rusted railroad spikes supporting the heavy cat's weight. He clocks a second in the head with the full backpacks, not wanting to let go of their only survival supplies, but a wolf takes him by the elbow and yanks him off balance.

Avery figures this is the beginning of the end. His only comfort, as two cougars isolate Sascha from protecting Avery's throat so a wolf can lunge for it, is knowing the Madison pack won't let Sascha die. At least Avery has that.

He prepares for the punishment of jaws around his trachea, hoping Sascha will be properly corralled away from the impending fountain of blood.

A roar so deep it puts even Avery's ursine to shame rattles thousands of branches around them, and a tree bends under massive paws banking off its trunk, too-long spine slithering to avoid the cluster of cougars like an eel over slippery rocks. Before Avery can close his eyes in wait for the end, jagged orange stripes cut in front of his vision. Beryl takes the brunt of the collision, writhing just enough to avoid the lethal nature of the blow.

Avery wants to maul them in a hug, but seeing as they're currently fighting to his potential death, he opts to not. Furthermore, this time, he doesn't need Beryl to urge him into motion. He scoops Sascha under his arm, snaps at the cougars who try to stop him, and barrels through the line that had been preventing their continued flight.

Beryl takes care of the rest, hissing as they put their long body at Avery's back, creating a barrier most people would kiss a viper before crossing. All the shifters with sense hang back, and for the few without... Avery is pretty sure Beryl snaps one of their necks without a moment of hesitation.

It's the second time someone has taken a life specifically to protect Avery's. Beryl barely knows him. Beryl spent most of their brief acquaintance trying their level best to terrorize him into sharing their fucked-up situation.

Avery doesn't know what changed their mind. If it happened when they plucked him from the ditch or built slowly over time, watching what he and Sascha risked to be together. Maybe it was just his honesty when he admitted to not having the strength Beryl did to maintain their never-ending trudge toward survival. In their position, Avery would've welcomed Atwood to land the final blow. He got Sascha instead. Somehow, he ended up with Beryl, too.

Dropping Sascha onto all four paws, Avery hefts the backpacks that, in this form, weigh less than nothing. Even Sascha, a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound cougar, didn't feel like much of anything in his grasp.

From there, they run and run, part of Avery expecting to reach the shore of the island in not too long. That tourist map Sascha kept frowning at didn't paint an impressive geographical picture...

And then Avery's proven wrong. A great incline rises before them, wooden fences and staircases for tourists off to the side. They scramble up the brush and foliage, no option for turning back, and as they ascend the rocky hill, a white, craggy arch greets them at the top.

When there is nowhere left to climb, and the hollow of Arch Rock stands above them, a sun-sculpted network of judgmental shadows, Avery can see the water beyond. Blue-green and brilliant, boats with white sails like pock-marks. The other side of the hill is too steep to descend without care, and even if it wasn't, the wind over Mackinac's shoreline bellows: Where would you go?

Might as well have lay down in Skull Cave and kissed the old bones.

Beside him, Sascha makes a pained sound. Avery turns so abruptly he drops the backpacks, one of them tumbling down the steep rocks toward the wooden fence at the bottom. He wouldn't care if both of them had fallen into fire, not with Sascha's legs giving out beneath him. Avery catches Sascha before he hits the ground, wrapping long, double-jointed fingers around Sascha's body and cradling him like a kitten against his chest.

Unable to do more than vocalize, Avery makes helpless sounds, fretting and stroking Sascha's soft tawny fur.

A handful of wolves yip as they bound up the rocky outcropping, either fresh reinforcements or a lucky few who made it past Beryl. Bad news either way, with Sascha vulnerable, a dead weight gasping for breath, and their only ally nowhere in sight. Avery bares his teeth but doesn't budge. He tightens his hold on Sascha, only to be startled when the heavy cougar shudders once, then flickers. A moment later, there's a naked man in his grasp, Sascha's tall biped form even more exposed. His eyes are glassy, and his longer anatomy doesn't fold up quite so neatly as the cat did.

Avery settles Sascha on the most even patch of ground he spots, resting his head on the remaining backpack, then steps in front of him. Even knowing it's useless, he roars at the approaching wolves—not to intimidate, but to broadcast his refusal to give up, even while alone, distracted, and trapped.

They descend upon him, three at once. Avery takes hits, less concerned with defending his own body than he is protecting Sascha, who isn't unconscious, but is clearly lost in one of his vertigo episodes. The distant sensation of spinning, endless spinning, echoes in the back of Avery's mind. He chalks it up to his own dizziness, maybe from blood loss, and tightens his fingers around the throat of a wolf. The shifter makes a choked sound, thrashing its paws and clawing at Avery's hand as he lifts it from the ground. A cougar picks its way through the underbrush, so Avery hurls the limp wolf at the cat, counterbalancing for the kick he lands in the ribs of another, sending that wolf tumbling down the rocky hill. Its body slides to a stop, caught on a low bush.

All Avery can smell is blood, much of it his own. His body can't string together the wounds fast enough, teeth punctures oozing while the furrows from greedy claws drip in long streaks down his arms and back.

Then it happens. While Avery is fighting the bruised cougar from earlier away from the crook of his neck, dangerously close to his throat, a wolf makes it past him, crossing under the great stone arch. The cougar digs its claws into Avery's chest, but

Avery hardly feels the pain when he rips the shifter from his flesh and spins to see the wolf perched with a paw on Sascha's chest, bloody teeth bared.

Avery lunges, not doubting for a second that the Wilderness pack will not hesitate to harm Sascha in order to get to Avery. Maybe he shouldn't have thrown the cougar into the viewing platform's metal railing, as it might have helped defend Sascha, but it's currently lying still at the base of the stone wall.

Though Avery succeeds in snatching up the wolf before it can harm Sascha, something lands on his back, biting the same spot where the cougar had its teeth moments before. Avery yelps in pain, not so much casting the wolf away as dropping it off the edge of the hill, sending it tumbling down the steep, sharp rock face.

With all his accumulated injuries, this is the strike that breaks him. Avery can't even dislodge the cougar on his back before the ursine howls and retreats, fully defeated, leaving Avery screaming as his body begins to deconstruct itself.

The agony is indescribable. He doesn't have time to finish healing before his bones snap and crunch, shards embedding in his muscles. Extra skin sloughs off, opening half-closed wounds, and while he tries to free himself from the pulpy mix of blood and disintegrating flesh, coarse hair gets in his mouth and eyes. The cougar gets tangled in the same mess, but all too soon, it succeeds in tearing a pocket in the rapidly drying tissue. It seizes Avery by the arm and drags him, naked and staggering, out of the ursine's withering shell.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

Avery

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

Above them, the metal viewing platform creaks. Avery squints at the rock's high crest, eyes burning from drips of sweat, and sees the blurry outline of Beryl, crouched between the railing and Arch Rock itself.

The cougar doesn't have time to release Avery before Beryl pounces.

Despite whatever care Beryl puts into not landing on Avery's head, the cougar doesn't let go easily, and its teeth ripping through Avery's forearm sends him reeling back into the pile of leftover hair and skin cells. His freshly shortened bones snap into place, body reabsorbing whatever collagen it can as it mends everything the werewolf just warped and broke.

Gasping, Avery scrubs sweat from his eyes. His body aches and leftover hair has matted over sticky trails of blood, irritating wounds in various stages of healing. The alpha magic is running dry, leaving Avery barely able to keep up with everywhere he's been maimed. Taking a night to sleep off exhaustion in Sascha's arms was far from sufficient in restoring his depleted energy reserves; clearly, it wasn't enough for Sascha, either.

Though Avery wills himself to stand, his body refuses. He counts the seconds until shifters rip him apart, limb from limb, but the longer it goes without happening, the more of his wits return. Finally, he passes a hand through the brittle remains of his detransformation, reducing it to a pile of dust, over which he sees Petra hanging off the wrong side of the metal railing with her large medical bag slung over her shoulder. Avery yelps when she jumps, adrenaline finally giving him the strength to move.

Petra lands hard on her booted feet but doesn't appear bothered by the impact. Her eyes slide past Avery, to where Sascha is moaning behind him. Beryl turns from whomever they're growling at to glance at Petra, but fortunately doesn't mark her as a threat, instead going back to snarling straight ahead.

Avery sidesteps to let Petra pass, making a beeline toward Sascha. He then follows Beryl's gaze, and when his eyes land on their target, all the breath leaves his lungs.

Celeste, along with a man who Avery guesses must be Sascha's father, the Madison pack alpha, are standing on the viewing platform directly parallel to Arch Rock. Suddenly aware that he's naked and disgusting, Avery staggers back, covering his crotch with one hand. Most shifters are apathetic to nudity, but this isn't that—it's Sascha's dad seeing him for the first time, a scrawny, injured werereature standing defenseless between him and his son. Avery lacks even the nerve to growl or show fangs.

A visual standoff follows. Members of both packs watch their alphas, waiting for instructions. Avery stares at the alphas, too, unwilling to look away even when he hears Sascha mumble behind him. All Avery wants is to go to him, but knows enough about shifter posturing to be aware that averting his gaze first would be seen as a sign of submission.

"Beryl," Celeste snaps, breaking the silence. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Rather than speak or shift back to answer their alpha, Beryl hisses. They don't turn away either, but manage to inch backward and wrap their snakelike spine around Avery, wide back hiding the worst of his exposed body. As far as statements go, it's a clear indicator of transferred loyalty. Avery doesn't know what to do other than pet them in gratitude, stroking a jagged orange stripe as his gaze links with the Madison alpha's unwavering one.

The rage in Sascha's father's eyes speaks loud and clear, but Avery refuses to show any further weakness.

"You," the man says, pointing at Avery. "You will stand down." Oppressive weight from his alpha magic clogs the air, demanding Avery's submission.

Without enough magic to generate any matching display, pure stubbornness is all that keeps Avery upright. "You fuckers are the ones who started the fight. No one would've gotten hurt if you weren't stalking us."

"Tracking my son's location to ensure his safety isn't stalking."

Avery's mouth opens as he processes that. Tracking...?

Although they abandoned the car so the geolocation function wouldn't give away their position, Sascha's father had his phone for days. While Sascha turned off location permissions, that doesn't mean there aren't other ways to track a device. If that's the case, even getting the flight to St. Ignace wouldn't have kept them from discovery.

"Sascha is way less safe with a fucking wolfpack attacking him. Or did you not notice how many times they almost killed him while trying to take me down?"

"All the better reason for you to give yourself up now, without any more pointless fighting."

"Why, so you can kill me?"

"Yes."

His candor momentarily shocks Avery into silence. Beryl rumbles in displeasure, so

Avery pets them again. “Why would I let you kill me? Y’know, just wondering.”

Sascha’s father looks away first, his eyes flicking past Avery to where Petra is murmuring at Sascha. Avery doesn’t let himself look—he keeps his eyes trained on the Madison alpha, asserting control over the situation despite lacking any remaining alpha magic to bolster his display of confidence. It’s a bluff, but Avery does his best.

“You just admitted that your presence is endangering Alexander, did you not?” Avery opens his mouth to argue, but Sascha’s father talks over him. “Alexander will never be safe with you. If you truly care for him, you’ll surrender and remove yourself from the equation. I don’t trust either of you to stay away from each other, so this is the only way to ensure Alexander’s continued safety.”

“Sascha is an adult who can make his own decisions,” Avery responds, not letting on to his amusement at Sascha not having mentioned his given name was actually Alexander. When they get out of this—and they will, Avery is now doubly determined to make it so—Avery is going to tease Sascha about it. Mercilessly and at length.

The Madison alpha frowns deeply. “Alexander’s disability makes him vulnerable. Not that you care to?”

“Disability doesn’t make anyone less of an adult,” Avery snaps.

“Don’t interrupt me.”

“Fuck off, how about that?”

The cougar alpha’s hands shake. “I’m giving you one chance to make this choice peacefully.”

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“My answer remains that you can go fuck yourself.”

“Samuel,” Celeste says, drawing her fellow alpha’s attention toward her. “Enough.”

Avery keeps his eyes on Sascha’s father—Samuel—for several seconds more, ensuring the arrogant shifter really feels it, before shifting his attention to Celeste.

Celeste looks back at Avery, her gold wolf eyes flashing. “Werereature. If you’d prefer to not die, this is your last chance to accept my offer. Otherwise, I’ll greatly enjoy having my wolves hold you down so I can rip you to shreds.”

“Celeste, you can’t trust a?—”

Head whipping toward Samuel, she growls, “I know what I’m doing. Don’t forget that I’m not subservient to you, cougar. You have no authority over me or my pack.”

Avery remains silent while the alphas bare their teeth at each other, scratching more forcefully against Beryl’s shoulder to keep himself from visibly shaking. They lean their weight against him briefly.

Celeste snaps her fingers. “Zuhr. Come forward.”

The stocky werereature moves out of the shadows where she and the rest of Celeste’s bitch pack were lurking. Memories of her hand around Sascha’s throat have Avery’s fangs dropping, and he curls his lip with a growl. Samuel takes a step aside, putting additional space between himself and the werereatures. Fucking coward. Avery opens his mouth to call Samuel a piece of shit bigot who bases his self-

superiority on irrational fear, but closes it when Celeste speaks first.

“As you can see by the actions of my former enforcer, I’m aware that loyalty can be bought and shifted. Thus, if the ursine makes the wise decision to submit to me, I’ll accept him only with insurance.”

“Are you gonna take out a State Farm policy?” Avery snarks.

Shockingly, Celeste laughs. “In a way. Zuhr is skilled in applied magic, as you might have noticed. There are techniques designed to subdue carriers of the werevirus.” Zuhr’s spine straightens, her eyes widening in alarm. “You’ll allow Zuhr to imprint her magic onto yours, tethering you to my control.”

Beryl’s entire body vibrates in a deafening snarl. Avery curls his fingers into their fur, lips parted wordlessly as he processes the implications of such magic existing.

“Alpha,” Zuhr says, her voice surprisingly timid despite her fierceness during physical conflict. “I wouldn’t—Can’t perform those techniques.”

“Nonsense. The magic can only be used by other werecreatures, and you’re more than capable. You’ll do it if I say you will.” When Zuhr hesitates, Celeste adds, “Think of your brother.”

Avery raises his voice to ensure Celeste’s attention diverts to him, away from the werecreature. “Weaponizing someone’s family to get them to obey you? Definitely seems like your pack follows you out of respect.”

“Limiting your power to respect is weak.”

“Is that why your strongest enforcer is currently protecting me, not you?”

Celeste slams her fist on the metal railing, the clanging sound running along the support rods. “You have thirty seconds to make your decision, werecreature.”

“I don’t need them. You both can drown, for all I care. Leave Sascha and me the fuck alone.”

“Fine.” Celeste bares her teeth, her voice grating when she says, “Samuel. Call your pack. We’ll end this.”

“Gladly,” Samuel says.

Finally giving in to the fear he’s been fighting, Avery takes a step back. He’s useless right now. Will Beryl be able to take on both packs indefinitely by themselves? He doesn’t want to risk their safety like that. “Beryl,” he whispers, preparing to tell them they should leave him to his fate. Before he can make any other decisions beyond giving Sascha his final goodbyes, the man himself cuts in front of Avery, wrapped in nothing but one of Petra’s medical blankets.

“Dad, don’t you dare!” he yells.

Avery grabs Sascha’s arm, shaking him. “Get out of the way!” Beryl rushes to threaten a few wolves advancing from the side, leaving nothing between Avery and Celeste’s claws other than his barely upright boyfriend.

Celeste’s dress flutters in the wind as she leaps from the overhead platform. The morning sun, rays beating down like a rainfall of punishing heat, reflects off the white fabric, briefly blinding. Despite Avery’s attempts to force Sascha out of the way, Sascha merely spreads his arms to hold him back without so much as a flinch.

“Cease your attack, Celeste, that’s my son!” Samuel’s voice echoes, but Celeste’s eyes are linked with Avery’s as she cuts through the foliage underfoot with single-

minded purpose.

Beryl snaps and misses. Petra screams, sharp and piercing. Celeste's claws—sharper, ready to rend—flex in preparation for a killing blow.

Seconds before impact, Samuel comes down, a booted foot colliding with the unguarded side of Celeste's head before she can connect with Sascha's exposed throat. She turns on him with a snarl, dodges a swipe of his claws. Sascha stumbles as he herds Avery several steps backward, and Petra grabs both of their shoulders from behind, all three of them clustering together with a chorus of gasps.

Under Arch Rock's shadow, sheltered from the judgment of the radiant sun, Avery watches Samuel kick Celeste square in the chest, flinging her directly into Beryl's waiting jaws. A sickening, wet crunch silences the small space as they all, both shifter and werecreature, hold their breath as one. Beryl thrashes their head, crushing Celeste's skull against the rock at the base of the arch, then flings her body across the sun-dappled ground. Celeste collides with the stone wall supporting the viewing platform, rolls a few feet, then catches the base of a sapling under her arm.

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She hangs there like a sacrifice, her only movement the dripping of gore.

Sascha lets out the first breath. As if given permission, Beryl roars at Celeste's corpse, teeth slick with their cruel former alpha's blood. Petra disappears, then reappears with another medical blanket, which she drapes over Avery's shoulders.

Avery thinks he hears Sascha begin to argue with his father, but his eyes are riveted on Celeste's limp remains. Was this the outcome the fox alpha feared from the beginning? Avery never wanted to overthrow another alpha—but it was irrelevant, because the already-tenuous state of leading a were-pack made the potential threat not worth the risk, even if it meant going back on a promise. Even if it meant throwing someone fresh and vulnerable onto the streets with no one and nothing.

Would this be Avery's fate if he'd ever succeeded in forming his own pack? His gaze shifts to Beryl, then the rest of the Wilderness werecreatures, clustered behind Zuhr on the platform. Could death be an inevitable future at the clawed hands of a pack who could turn on their alpha with the changing winds?

Or does the truth lie closer, somewhere within the shadows where Avery stands?

So much emphasis is placed on raw strength, the alpha's ability to control their pack, without enough light shed on the pack itself, without whom the alpha would be...

Nothing. No one.

Struck by fierce understanding, Avery takes Sascha's hand and drags him into the sunlight.

They can't look particularly intimidating, worn out and naked aside from blankets, but Avery levels Samuel with a stare full of genuine confidence rather than terrified bravado.

"Your ally is dead. She tried to kill your son, and I won't let you blame that on me." Samuel only stares, which is fine, because Avery has so much more to say. "You act like all an alpha should be is a bulletproof hand of authority with no visible flaws, no weakness to risk losing respect over. Yet you lead your pack into danger because you're afraid of us. Because you think werereatures will destroy you, one way or another. So your fear somehow makes us inferior. Don't tell me you can't see how fucked up that is."

"Take a good fucking look around you, Samuel. Celeste might have been strong, but she was domineering and vicious. She didn't give a shit about her pack, only her arrogance and ambition. And what did she do with that? She almost killed someone you love, because not a damn thing meant more than her pride. Dominating her pack was her only goal, and that's why she lost control—because being an alpha is more than dominance. You don't have anyone to dominate when your pack is tired of your never-ending bullshit."

"You don't want me around? You don't want to give Sascha a chance to lead your stupid fucking pack? Fine. We'll start our own, and we'll be better than Celeste and you put together."

Sascha inhales sharply, turning toward Avery. "What are you... Avery, are you serious?"

Avery swallows hard. "I am. If you want to."

There's pain in Sascha's eyes when he turns to his father, searching the alpha's face. Samuel's blank expression doesn't crack. Brow furrowing, Sascha says, "Yeah. I do."

“Who will you lead?” Samuel asks calmly. “Who will follow you?”

“I will.” Petra comes forward, stopping next to Sascha and slightly behind. “Any pack needs a healer. I’d recommend you find a new one, Samuel.”

Beryl produces an irritable yowl, then cuts through the narrow space between Samuel and the first stand of their fragile new pack. They deliberately bump into him, knocking him a few steps back. Then they wrap their long spine behind Petra and Sascha, settling beside Avery.

Avery shifts his attention to the shifter packs, then looks higher, toward the werereatures. “Any of you are welcome to join us. I swear, you’ll all be treated with the respect you deserve. I’m sorry you didn’t receive it before now.”

In the silence that follows, Avery worries he’s misjudged the situation. Though all eyes are on him, no one moves, even to consult those around them. It could, after all, be that despite mutual hatred, their individual species expect the same things from an alpha: Strength. Perfection. Not a small-statured trans man or a disabled man with unpredictable moments of weakness.

And then Zuhr steps toward the railing. She looks over her shoulder at the other werereatures, then jumps to land gracefully on the ground below. Her head sits high on her shoulders, chin raised as she weaves through the crowd of shifters, stopping next to Beryl.

A moment later, another of the werereatures, a young-looking Asian man, throws a leg over the railing and climbs down the wall. He approaches with trembling hands, jaw clenched, then tucks himself behind Zuhr’s shoulder. Immediately after, one of the larger wolf shifters shoves its way to the front of the crowd, ignoring the many surprised looks—including Avery’s own—until it stops next to Zuhr and the werereature whose taller head is visible behind hers.

Samuel grimly watches the proceedings. When no one else steps forward to join them, he tilts his head at Sascha and says, “Is this really your choice?”

Sascha’s fingers tighten around Avery’s. “Yeah, Dad. It is.”

“Fine, then.” Samuel rotates, considering the werereatures who elected to not join Avery and Sascha, then the members of his own pack and the Wilderness wolves, now in need of an alpha. Finally, he turns back to his son. “You will be permitted to return to the Madison pack lands once more to receive your belongings, which I will have packed for you. I’ll give you everything you’re entitled to from Denise’s will, and what you would have inherited from your grandparents. After you’ve collected what you own and are owed, you will leave Bliss Township and never return. You are no longer my son, and aren’t allowed in proximity to any member of the Madison pack. Anyone who is caught still associating with you should hope they’re welcome in your pack because they will no longer be part of mine.”

Avery nearly crushes Sascha’s hand in his own, and has to frown hard at the ground when Sascha responds, “Understood, sir.”

Samuel nods, then turns his back on the man who was once his only son. “We’re leaving,” he informs his pack.

The cougars follow him, and after a moment, so do the wolves. Avery wonders what will happen to the Wilderness pack now, but it’s not his concern. Never was, really. The only people who matter anymore are the defectors who’ve placed themselves beside himself and Sascha, accepting them as their new alphas.

Neither Avery nor Sascha budge until the last cougar and the last wolf are out of sight. The clearing is silent but for the wind, rustling leaves and twigs, causing Celeste’s gore-soaked dress to sway slightly as it bakes in the heat.

When Avery can't bear the tension any longer, he forces a smile, tightens the blanket around his waist, and tugs Sascha with him to greet the members of their new pack.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Sascha

Shortly after leaving Arch Rock, Sascha, Avery, and their pack are escorted off the island by local authorities. There were no tourists around during the long, brutal fight, but only because the warning howls of the Wilderness pack put the entire island into a state of emergency. The sheriff tuts as he supervises the seven of them boarding the boat, muttering “Fuckin’ animals” under his breath.

Neither Beryl nor the wolf shifter—Anise—have returned to their biped forms, and with their combined bulk, the rest of the pack barely fits on the vessel. In addition to Anise and Zuhr, the shy werecreature introduces himself as Sheridan, and Zuhr announces that she has a teenage brother, Charlie, who she’ll need to collect from the pack camp in Wilderness State Park.

While they’re sailing back to the mainland, lucky to have avoided handcuffs and criminal charges due only to the Parahuman Civil Compliance laws accommodating pack conflicts so long as no humans are hurt, Petra does her best to clean Avery’s injuries around the clothes he was fortunately able to climb into before the police arrived. Both backpacks were retrieved, along with Petra’s medical bag, before their dramatic exit parade.

Sascha winces when Petra picks bits of hair and debris from Avery’s left shoulder, which looks unsettlingly similar to raw hamburger. While most of Avery’s injuries

were repaired when he shifted back, the worst of them didn't heal fully. Aside from varying levels of exhaustion, everyone else is intact; it's only Avery who remains damaged.

"Avery," Petra says suddenly. "Are you still taking testosterone?"

At first, Avery blinks in surprise, but answers, "No. Haven't been able to afford any, and there aren't really endocrinologists who specialize in trans werecreatures."

Petra blows air past her lips. "No wonder you can't heal! Without your reproductive tract, your body isn't producing estrogen to replace the testosterone, and total sex hormone deficiency like that is destroying your body. Fucking goddess, Avery. You're lucky you aren't in even worse condition than this."

"That's on the list of things to take care of, then," Sascha says firmly.

Petra's eyes slide over to Sascha. She watches him intently while spraying disinfectant over Avery's mangled trapezius, then smiles when Sascha's hand goes to the same spot on his own arm to ease the sudden sting that erupts there right as Avery hisses.

"What do you know?" Sascha asks, wrinkling his nose at her.

"I was wondering if you two would notice on your own, but you're idiots," Petra sniffs.

The three werecreatures watch curiously, while Anise stares over the side of the boat, seemingly ignoring them.

"Notice what?" asks Avery.

Petra smiles wider, then grins, then throws her head back and shakes with laughter.

Before they can interrogate her more, the boat reaches the shore at Mackinac City, and Sascha has to apologize to the officer tasked with supervising their departure as they all disembark. The officer suggests they make themselves scarce, which Sascha agrees with.

There's only one problem.

"Fuck," he says quietly. Avery raises his eyebrows. "We have seven people and no car. Beryl, can you shift back, please? We have clothes." Sascha jostles the backpack over his shoulder; Zuhr has the other one.

Beryl produces a scratchy laugh, then trots off, presumably to find somewhere safe to detransform. Unsure what else to do, Sascha follows them, tailed by the rest of the pack.

"We need a pack name," Sascha says when they stop in a quiet alley.

Avery laughs. "You dork. Let's focus on getting back to Bliss first."

Sascha sends him a helpless grin, then dips to kiss him. It's only been a few hours since their last one, but he feels like it's been so much longer. Avery wraps his arms around Sascha and buries his face in the crook of Sascha's neck.

They disappear into each other, clinging and rocking gently, until Beryl says, "Are you two done?" They've shifted back and are fully dressed.

"No," Avery says, muffled in Sascha's shirt.

"Yes," Beryl insists. Sheridan hisses Beryl's name, and they raise their eyebrows.

“What?”

“You can’t—” He flicks his eyes to Sascha and Avery, then back to Beryl.

“Can’t what?” Beryl props their hands on their hips. “What do you think this is, another Wilderness? If either of these guys speak to us like Celeste did, I’ll bite them.”

Avery bursts into laughter, then cuts off with a pained moan. “Stop being funny,” he whines. “Laughing hurts.”

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Beryl peers at the lacerations Petra has only just begun to treat. “Sorry I couldn’t get there sooner.”

“You did great,” Avery says, flapping his hand dismissively, before wincing. “Don’t worry about it. I’d be fully dead without you.”

“Both of you would,” they snort. “Let’s go find somewhere to sit down for a bit while the healer puts you back together.”

Lacking any other options for transportation—especially after Zuhr explains that Anise, shifted back, will be too big for any of Sascha’s clothes—their pack walks. Most of them walk, anyway. Avery staggers. Sascha comes close to insisting on carrying him, but Petra says it’ll likely hurt even more, which Sascha doesn’t like but reluctantly accepts after receiving a stern look.

Just over twenty minutes away is a two-star hotel, where Sascha books an overnight stay for a room they’ll only get to use for a few hours, but they need the bathroom and the privacy. Not to mention food. Sascha bustles around, negotiating shower use and taking food orders, while Petra parks Avery on a chair in the corner, once again with nothing but a blanket to protect his modesty.

It takes longer than they’d hoped to patch Avery up. After showering, Beryl reluctantly submits to Petra’s examination. They grumble, but consent to a few short bursts of healing energy. Sheridan was not ordered into the fight, Zuhr’s magic use typically keeps her out of the central clash, and Anise only shakes his head when Petra asks if he needs medical attention. Sascha leaves the hotel, tailed by a quiet but insistent Zuhr, to retrieve food and buy clothes big enough to fit Anise.

They return to find Avery unconscious on the bed, and an exhausted-looking Petra slumped in the chair he'd occupied, watching over him. Sascha rubs his chest absently as he crosses the room, bending to brush a kiss over Avery's temple.

"Have you figured it out yet?" Petra asks.

Sascha groans. "Just tell me."

"You sure? I'm genuinely disappointed in your upbringing, you know. I thought someone would've taught you better than this."

"Oh my god, Petra."

"Fine." She smooths the long, thick braid she'd had pinned up during the fight, now draped over her shoulder. "Did you notice anything strange between yourself and Avery? Any sensations...?"

Frowning, Sascha asks, "What kind of sensations?" But it brings to mind the insistent tugging that led him and Avery together when they had no means of contact, the way he felt starving despite being well-fed, and the echo of pain whenever Avery took a hit during the fight. Petra raises her eyebrows, noting the realizations as they creep across Sascha's face. "Why... What happened?"

Beryl figures it out first. "Did you guys actually mate already?"

Sascha's head snaps around to look at them, the way their head is cocked and the amused smile playing on their lips, curled like those of a particularly smug cat. "No? I mean... No, we didn't." Laughter at his back makes Sascha stiffen.

"Somehow, you idiots managed to form a mate bond during Avery's..."

Sascha eyes Petra over his shoulder, blushing hot at the gesture she makes. “But there was none of the... what you have to do to form a mate bond. I’m not that ignorant. I know how a unification ritual works.” He looks back to Avery, deep asleep on top of the sheets, body curved like a half-moon. His heart pounds.

“Avery is a werecreature, and it’s not as if much exploration has been done into how shifter magic interacts with werecreature magic,” Petra says. “Over the course of however long you spent being intimate...”

“Like, a day and a half.”

Beryl snorts. Sascha shoots them a glare, but not a truly angry one. Mostly, he feels stupid, but also there is a sudden spinning in his gut. More vertigo? No, this is?—

Elation.

Sascha has to curl his fingers, nails biting his palms as he tenses to keep from bouncing on his toes.

“You must have created some magical process that served as a binding while you were taking care of him. You worked tirelessly, Sascha. I had to practically knock you out before you’d leave his side.” There’s a smile in Petra’s voice; Sascha hears it, even though he can’t manage to pry his eyes away from Avery again. “The bond didn’t need shifter rituals to establish itself. Seems the magic just decided for you guys.”

A slow smile spreads across Sascha’s lips when Avery snuffles in his sleep.

“When’re you gonna tell him?” Beryl wonders.

Sascha opens his mouth to say they should let him sleep a bit longer—he looks so

fucking tiny and vulnerable, his pale skin strung together by multiple rows of black stitches—when Zuhr pushes away from the wall, frowning at her phone.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we need to hurry to the Wilderness camp. Charlie’s not safe there. The other pack members have started trashing our tents.”

“How far away is it?” Sascha asks, and when Zuhr grimaces, worry pools in his stomach.

Anise, whose biped form is truly massive, carries Avery. The first hour’s walk takes them from the hotel to Mackinac Beach. From there, a deeply anxious Zuhr, accompanied by Beryl, hurries ahead to fetch her brother. They both shift, and Sascha is surprised to see Zuhr’s bones crunch into the shape of a stooped lizard that looks very much like a meaner, spikier Komodo dragon. Faster, too, judging by how she and Beryl take off down the road.

The walk from the beach is quiet. Sascha is restless, wishing he could be the one holding Avery despite Petra having forbidden it. All the walking has already put him at risk of triggering another flare-up, and even though Avery looks weightless in Anise’s arms, Sascha wouldn’t have the stamina to do the same.

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The fitness regimen he observed at the pack house kept Sascha in good enough shape to endure all the foot travel. He'd give credit to his father, but, well. Samuel disowned him. So he guesses he doesn't have one anymore.

Another hour and a half takes them to the North Country Trailhead, where they meet up with Beryl, Zuhr, and her younger brother, Charlie, whom she sharply calls 'Charlesh' when he fails to properly demonstrate submission protocol upon meeting their new alpha. The teenager has medium-length waves of black hair that partially cover his sullen expression. Uncomfortable, Sascha tries to beg off, but Beryl shakes their head. Explaining the way he and Avery plan to run the new pack can come later.

All three of the Wilderness pack defects are carrying heavy camping equipment. Petra scowls when Sascha relieves Charlie of his share but doesn't argue. This is no situation for a kid to be stuck in, but they have no choice. At the pace they're moving, it should take another two hours of walking to reach the Madison pack lands, and out here, there's no hope of finding transportation for eight people to spare them exhaustion.

When Avery wakes up, Petra takes one look at him and declares, with as much authority in her voice as any alpha, that they need to rest.

"There are no hotels out here," Sascha says, but a snort from Beryl reminds him that his new packmates have been living nomadic on these parklands for years. Fortunately, no one verbally calls him on it. They simply start setting up camp, with the Wilderness pack members taking the lead.

It's the first time Sascha has camped since his mom was alive, nights spent in the

cave where he'd eventually hide his werecreature lover and future mate.

Or... They were already mated by then, weren't they? They just didn't know it yet.

Warmth heats Sascha's chest while he helps set up a bare-bones camp. Across the way, Avery is squirming on a stump, having been ordered not to do anything physical under pain of death. When Sascha looks toward him, Avery is looking back with a curious expression, one hand pressed flat against his sternum. Sascha smiles briefly, then returns to work.

There are only three tents to eight people—seven, once Anise states he won't need his. Zuhr and Charlie take their own tent, while Beryl and Petra, who seem to be bonding quickly, plan to take Anise's. Should Sascha be worried about them becoming evil besties and taking over the pack? Probably not. Petra hates making decisions other than medical ones. Beryl drags Sheridan to share the larger tent with Petra and herself, though the way Sheridan's gaze lingers on Anise's wide back doesn't escape Sascha's notice.

God, he's going to have to pay attention to so many things from now on. Everything from food, to sleep schedules, to— Fuck, heat cycles? Making sure everyone's safe during full moons. Keeping conflicts to a minimum, internally and externally. They sure as hell can't be fielding mass assaults from rival packs every day, which means in addition to finding an affordable pack house, Sascha and Avery will have to ensure potential threats aren't unmanageable, complicated further by their pack's official mixed status. As far as Sascha knows, no pack truly inclusive of both shifters and werecreatures currently exists in the public eye. Celeste's predatory manipulation was off-record, but still wouldn't count. The Wilderness werecreatures weren't treated as equals—in this pack, they will be.

Sascha is still deep in thought when Petra pats him on the head and gently steers him toward the tent he's sharing with Avery, who's already tucked on a bedroll inside.

He hasn't had a chance to tell Avery they're mated.

It's not that Sascha is worried Avery will be mad, but maybe he'll be upset. Not at Sascha, but just in general. Maybe when he asked to start a pack, he didn't mean being permanently, irrevocably magically tethered to someone who might still be sitting in "guy I just met" territory. Maybe the absolutely fucking transcendent connection between them is a bit more sparkly on Sascha's side of the mate bond.

Or maybe Sascha's just being a fucking dumbass.

After giving Petra a quick hug and, in a fit of sentimental weakness, dropping a kiss on her forehead, Sascha disengages and crawls into the tent. Avery is curled up under a sheet, not taking up even half of the sleeping bag that's been fully unzipped and spread over a thin layer of foam padding. Sascha has never not-known that Avery is a small person—seven inches shorter than him and slender like a handful of dry spaghetti—but he seems even smaller now that Sascha has stood next to the hulking beast that tears itself out of him every full moon.

Hovering just beyond the edge of the sleeping bag, Sascha is briefly afraid. He wants nothing more than to gather Avery in his arms, but what if he hurts him? What if the pain goes deeper than what stitches can tie together?

Avery shifts so the sheet falls to his waist, exposing his bare chest. He opens his eyes, long dark lashes and seaglass irises that no longer look flat and empty like they were in the pictures Sascha saved on his phone. In the low evening light, only barely filtering through the tent's walls, Avery's eyes are red-rimmed but gentle, warmed by the small smile dancing over his lips.

"Take off your shoes and get over here," he mumbles, voice scratchy.

Sascha obeys, setting his shoes outside the tent before stripping down to his

underwear and squirming under the sheet next to Avery. He pauses on the edge of the sleeping bag, once again lost in the feeling of Avery being breakable and impermanent.

“What’re you getting all stuck in your head about?”

Blinking, Sascha reaches for his habitual denial without considering otherwise. “Nothing. I’m just tired.”

Avery’s smile turns into a weak-but-knowing smirk. “You do not get to bullshit me just because I’m on the ground half-dead for the second time in less than a fortnight.”

“Be less half-dead, then.”

“I’ll get right on that. C’mere.”

Again, Sascha obeys, putting aside his worry in exchange for the deep sigh of pure relief when he pulls Avery into his arms. Avery kisses the center of Sascha’s chest, then over his heart, before pressing his cheek against it. When he blinks, Sascha feels the flutter of lashes against his skin.

Sascha strokes down the length of Avery’s spine as delicately as possible, wincing when he comes across stiff thread and bandages. “I really let you get fucked up,” he says before he thinks the better of it.

“You had an episode you couldn’t control,” Avery replies immediately. “And you were already moving too soon, on so little energy.”

Even with the magic infusion, Sascha’s body could barely handle the excitement. He’s lucky he hasn’t needed another, given all the walking they’ve done and still have to do, followed by acquiring adequate transportation outside of Bliss Township.

“I wish I didn’t have the limitation at all. There isn’t an end in sight, you know. Having to navigate my needs makes this way harder.”

Avery shrugs. “I got ripped to shreds, but it wasn’t your fault, or even mine. Still sucks. It’s fucking awful watching everyone else do the work while I have to worry about Petra towel-whipping me if I so much as look like I’m gonna try helping out.”

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“Oh, ouch. She’s really good at it, too. Like a goddamn locker room bully.”

Laughing, Avery drags his lips up to Sascha’s throat. He kisses the hollow between his collarbones. “Don’t feel bad. Please. I’m just happy we survived this far. God, I’m tired, and this whole time, all I’ve wanted was to be close to you. It’s like I still feel your heart beating when there’s distance between us, and mine gets lonely if you’re too far away.” He pauses. “That sounds stupid, right? Forget I said that. The exhaustion’s making me sappy.”

“I love you so much,” Sascha whispers, throat tightening beneath Avery’s lips. “And I need to tell you something really important.”

Avery nuzzles his jaw, seeming entirely unconcerned. “Okay. Shoot.”

Sascha kisses his brow, then the side of his nose. Then he draws back enough to cradle Avery’s cheeks, trying to keep his breath steady while their eyes meet. He feels Avery’s thoughts entwine with his, somehow. Like he’s sending Sascha comfort through the mate bond he doesn’t yet know is there.

“Something happened while we were in the hotel, uh, taking care of your heat.” Avery smirks, but doesn’t interrupt. “I don’t know how, and didn’t even realize it had happened until Petra figured it out.”

“This is about what she was saying on the boat.”

“Yeah. We, uh... I don’t know how, like I said.” Sascha scratches the back of his neck, still not sure why he’s so nervous. Mating is just awfully permanent for a

touch-starved werecreature who hadn't heard a friendly voice in almost a year. Love forming out of desperation is different. "The magic, I guess...ourmagic... decided we should... bond."

Now Avery's brows are furrowed, and Sascha wants to die a little bit. But then he says, "Did you not want that? Is it my fault?" and Sascha's heart squeezes so fiercely he momentarily can't breathe.

"No. The opposite." Avery's seaglass eyes shimmer, so Sascha returns to holding his face, drawing him close until their lips brush. "I don't want you to feel trapped."

"I've never felt safer, or freer, than I do with you," Avery murmurs, breath a welcome tickle reminding Sascha he's alive.

They both are.

"Good. Because it's kinda permanent unless you want to spend a lot of time looking for someone who can untangle a lot of magic threads."

Instead of responding, Avery kisses him, desperate and hungry. Tears spill over their lips, and Sascha keeps kissing him, not dropping his hands lower than Avery's jaw, even though he wants to touch all of him. Avery makes the decision for him when he throws a leg over Sascha's hip and attempts to squirm closer. Then he hisses.

"Easy, easy," Sascha croons, stroking Avery's hair. The bleached curls at the back of his neck have grown out, leaving dark roots. Sascha tugs them gently to keep Avery from chasing his mouth. "We don't have to do anything. Shouldn't, actually, while you're in this condition."

"Fuck my condition," Avery says immediately. His mulish expression tells Sascha he's willing to fight any insinuation that he can't fuck after being mauled by several

apex predators.

In the interest of keeping him pacified, Sascha laughs and kisses the corner of his mouth. “Fine, we can make out. Just be careful, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

Avery mutters, “Better not be,” then swallows the next peal of Sascha’s laughter, chasing the rest of it with his tongue until it turns into a moan.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Sascha

Sascha stands with his pack on the edge of Madison land, squeezing Avery’s hand so hard both their knuckles creak. In the distance, a car drives slowly down the road, heading toward them.

Along the two-hour walk to the Madison pack lands, they swung by Forgotten Lake one last time. Sheridan and Beryl fetched the remaining camping supplies from the cave while Sascha stood on the shore, tears streaming down his cheeks as he whispered useless apologies to his mom. She’d be disappointed in him. So, so disappointed, and also angry and confused by how readily Sascha would abandon his pack for a scrawny werecreature. She couldn’t have known how hard things were going to be for Sascha without her there to stand up for him.

They left the raft next to the rock where Sascha and Avery first made love. After sorting the supplies, the eight of them, shaky but united, walked to the meeting point.

Three figures exit the car. Sascha instantly recognizes Garrett and Jakob, but is surprised to identify Marty as the third person. He swallows hard, wondering what

she thinks of the situation. With how much she reminds him of his mom, he expects the disapproval to sting extra deep.

When the twins stop, Marty keeps walking. Sascha looks to Avery, who nods, and they move forward to meet her together, hands still linked.

Marty stops to inspect where they're joined, then removes the large duffel bag from her shoulder and holds it out to him. "I packed whatever of your belongings seemed most important, including seasonal clothes and all of your legal and medical documents. If you have no way to transport the rest of your wardrobe, those and your larger possessions can be shipped when you have available space. Should that be necessary, Petra is welcome to reach out. Any questions?"

Sascha purses his lips, then shakes his head. He takes the duffel with a mumbled "Thanks." He expects sharp words now, but all Marty does is glance past him at the other six members of their pack.

After a moment, Marty nods and holds out her hand. "Garrett, please." Garrett picks up a suitcase Sascha hadn't noticed him towing, and presents the handle to Marty.

Though he tries not to, Sascha meets both his cousins' eyes. They had tried to get closer to him, even though resented them for how they were seen as more capable. There will be no resolving that now. Maybe they want to say something, but they don't, not even 'goodbye.' Avery tugs Sascha's hand, breaking his concentration from the guilt in the twins' eyes. Sascha turns to leave with him, then is surprised when Avery doesn't move.

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The implication of the suitcase in Marty's hand doesn't land until she says, "That's all, boys," to Garrett and Jakob, then walks past Sascha and Avery. Petra immediately goes to her side, and they embrace tightly.

Sascha is too scared to make an assumption, even though the visual is clear, but Avery picks up what he's unable to grasp.

He turns to Marty with a smile. "Welcome to our pack. I'm Avery, Sascha's mate and co-alpha. What's your name?"

Without hesitation, Marty smiles back. "You can call me Aunt Marty."

Sascha's brow furrows. "Aunt Marty, what are you doing? Dad won't let you come back if you leave like this."

She sniffs. "I refuse to follow an alpha who'd disown his own child over who he loves, so I need somewhere else to go. Conveniently, you'll be needing someone to keep an eye on your nutritional intake, so I'm asserting my authority upfront."

Avery, the traitor, laughs outright and doesn't look a bit sorry, even when Sascha elbows him. "So you're the one who makes him eat vegetables! Double welcome, then."

"Let's just go," Sascha grumbles, flicking him in the ear, then doing it again when he only laughs louder.

Petra breaks away to call out to the twins, who haven't moved despite being

dismissed. “Jakob, remind Samuel not to forget our agreement. He doesn’t get to renege on account of an entirely unrelated decision.”

“I’ll mention it,” Jakob says. “Goodbye, Petra. And good luck.”

Scoffing, Petra turns on her heel. “We’ve got one more place to go before we can get out of here,” she informs the pack, reaching to link one arm with Marty’s and the other with Beryl’s. “And then, I think, things will get a lot easier for us.”

“I sure hope so,” Avery says with a smile. This time, when Avery tugs Sascha’s hand, it’s a signal to leave.

Sascha walks away from the Madison pack lands, leaving behind his name and history, along with any wistfulness for the future he was never going to see. He’s found—and fought for—the promise of a much better one.

“Petra, what the fuck.”

Sascha has heard Petra cackle more today than he has all his previous years under her care. She does so now, just as full-bellied as when they were on the boat and she was taunting them by denying them knowledge of their mate bond. “I told you Samuel promised to replace my car.”

“This isn’t a car,” Sascha says, as if she doesn’t know. “This is a goddamn motorhome.”

“If it drives, it’s a car. Anyway, how else do you propose we get nine people out of here?”

“Does anyone actually know how to drive one of these things?” Avery asks, sounding curious rather than exasperated, unlike Sascha.

Zuhr raises her hand. “I used to be a trucker, before...”

“Yeah,” Sascha says quickly because no one needs to think of Celeste, her abusive leadership, or the way her shattered skull leaked gore down her vacant features while she hung like a white flag of surrender. “Okay, fine. Zuhr can drive the... vehicle.”

Avery snickers.

Sascha ignores him, continuing: “I still want to know how you found it in the first place.”

Petra unlocks the door, then tosses the keys to Zuhr. “It’s a wild story, but not a long one. A man whose sister mated into the pack and brought him along, he had a human girlfriend. They got in a fight, and she shot him right through the leg. While he was in the clinic getting patched up, he started sniveling about how she was selling the motorhome they had planned to move in together after they got married. That’s what they were yelling about, apparently. Anyway, I went to see if it was still in her possession. Then I sent Samuel a gentle suggestion about the replacement car I’d like. He must be feeling guilty because even used this cost twice what a new car would have.”

“Oh my god,” Charlie says as he climbs into the obscenelylarge vehicle that is, Sascha is forced to acknowledge, their new temporary home. “This thing is a piece of shit.”

“Charlesh!” Zuhr snaps, rushing up the stairs after him.

“Even this will be cramped for nine people,” Avery murmurs, watching the other pack members filter inside.

Sascha sucks in a long, deep inhale, then squeezes the back of Avery’s neck, tugging

at those long, bleached curls. “This is what we chose.”

“Yeah.” Avery knocks his hip into Sascha’s thigh. “It’s gonna be great.”

“Sharing a single tiny bathroom between nine people is not going to be great.”

“Too late to change your mind now!” Then Avery smacks Sascha’s ass and takes off like a firecracker, attempting to climb into the motorhome only to collide with Beryl on their way out.

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Sascha watches them fumble down the stairs, Beryl grumbling when Avery musses their hair before attempting another entry, successfully this time. A warm, satisfied weight settles in Sascha's stomach, grounding him in a way that's as unfamiliar as it is welcome.

Comforted by the tether connecting him to the people inside the motorhome, Sascha rocks back on his heels and finally allows himself to laugh.

The foreclosed old mansion is a falling-apart disaster zone. Even so, the mortgage down payment nearly wipes out Sascha's inheritance in one fell swoop. It's located in a terrifying corner of Detroit where most of the buildings around them are barred up and burned out, shattered windows and boards like broken teeth.

But it has ten rooms, three and a half mostly-functional bathrooms, and is within walking distance of a bus stop, even if the DDOT is competing for the most pathetic bus system in the state. Still an improvement considering Bliss Township didn't have any public transportation.

They'll all need to get jobs. Figuring out repairs is going to be hellish. Transportation to work so they can afford food and utilities and the aforementioned repairs and mortgage is going to be a persistent problem until they can afford one or two cars. The decrepit motorhome in which they lived for several months—cramped, bitchy, sweaty, and restless as they learned how to coexist—broke down, planting them permanently in Metro Detroit like Dorothy's house crash-landing in Oz.

It takes a week just to scrub all the surfaces, and Sascha doesn't try to count how long after that they spend sleeping on gross floor futons in echoing empty rooms with huge

centipedes on the walls and corner cobwebs full of woodlice corpses. They eat peanut butter and honey sandwiches, order hot-n-ready pizzas, and complain about how the price has gone up. After seeing the water that comes from their faucets, Marty splurges on Brita filters, because no.

Through the bedroom window, Sascha watches the wind bully an old tree, its branches speckled with new buds. Yesterday was the first day of spring, and while they don't yet have a bedframe, Zuhr and Anise surprised Sascha and Avery with a matching bedroom set they trash-picked. A lightly-abused dresser, bureau, and nightstand now line the walls, staring judgmentally down at the bags and boxes of half-unpacked belongings, along with the mattress that slides on the wood floor when they fuck. Instead of accepting the offer to have Sascha's bedroom furnishings shipped to them, they'd opted to sell everything. Why should he and Avery sleep in comfort while the rest of the pack was relegated to the ground?

Avery is finishing up a shower in the half bathroom attached to the master they share. Zuhr nearly cried with relief when she found out Charlie would be getting his own bedroom for the first time in their lives. Completely the opposite, Sascha was overjoyed beyond words for a living body to cuddle up to, rather than an impassive stack of pillows.

A stray dog barks outside, chasing a possum that probably ate fermented grapes and got lost on its way home. Poor thing shouldn't be waddling around this late in the morning.

When the dog quiets, Sascha stares at the ceiling and listens to the pipes shriek as the shower turns off. He has to focus to hear Avery pattering around because you don't easily forget survival skills that tell you to be as quiet and as invisible as possible. Sascha hopes one day he'll be comfortable enough to sing in the shower and curse out loud when he trips on the rumpled bath mat.

For some reason, waiting for Avery to exit the bathroom leaves Sascha in a state of contemplation. He looks at their barely-passable furniture and squirms on cheap memory foam, reflecting on having a cushy mattress atop the nice bed frame that matched the polished furniture set where he'd stored more clothes than he needed.

He remembers feeling loneliness so deep it left him cold in his marrow.

This leads to him turning on his phone, and as Avery saunters out of the bathroom in a cloud of fragrant steam, Sascha says, "I totally forgot to delete PROWLRL."

Avery stops halfway across the floor. His lips purse. "I haven't thought about that fucking app in ages."

"Yeah, me neither. Being mated will do that to you." Sascha stretches out on the bed, tucking one hand behind his head as he searches for PROWLRL in his app list.

Smirking, Avery crosses the rest of the way to the bed. "I dunno. You sure you don't want to have a threesome with any chasers?"

"Not since Betty," Sascha responds automatically, prompting Avery to burst into laughter.

"Don't be mean. She was at least polite when she propositioned us."

"Polite and very, very drunk."

"Lots of drunk people aren't polite at all."

"Fair enough. Will you stop standing over me like that?"

Avery laughs, drops the towel he'd strung around his waist, and deposits himself over

Sascha's chest, knees spread on either side of his ribcage. Sascha thumbs his hip, other hand keeping his phone in the air as he flips through the hookup app.

"I can't believe when we met, we were just going to pump 'n' dump and never see each other again."

"I did my best to make sure we never saw each other again anyway," Avery points out.

"Because you were embarrassed about the lack of pumping and dumping." Sascha pinches his cheek. "You and your adorable intimacy issues."

Avery smacks his hand away, but he's grinning. "Fuck off. What do you think would've happened if we'd actually fucked?"

"No clue. Maybe I wouldn't have had to stalk you. Hey, I feel like I should ritualistically delete my account. Do you think we could light a fire in the backyard?"

"And risk burning down the house?"

"Don't insult Sheridan's fire-building skills like that."

"It's not Sheridan I don't trust. There's no guarantee this old corpse building won't maliciously reach out and catch the flames on purpose."

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Sascha laughs. “Don’t call our pack house a corpse. You’ll hurt her feelings, and she’ll summon more termites.”

“Donotinvoke them,” Avery says sternly. “Can’t you just delete the goddamn app like a normal fucking person?”

“No, I can’t, because without this cesspool of an app, I’d have had to use Grindr, and if I’d used Grindr, I wouldn’t have met you.” Pausing, Sascha asks, “Did you ever use Grindr?”

“Oh, all the fucking time before I got turned.”

Sascha tilts his head. “Would you go back to it?”

“Back to what? Grindr? Fuck no.”

“No, like... Before.”

When Avery realizes what Sascha’s asking, his face slackens, eyes going unfocused. Sascha waits, anxiety mounting, and just as he’s about to apologize for asking a stupid, insensitive question, Avery says, “No. I wouldn’t go back. To before.” Then he swallows hard.

Sighing, Sascha sets his phone down and tilts Avery forward until his arms are braced on either side of Sascha’s head. He pushes up on his elbows to kiss Avery’s clavicle, lips ghosting over faded scars, impressions of thick claws and wide jaws. Overcome by protective affection, Sascha wraps himself around his mate, rumbling contentedly

when Avery rests more of his weight on Sascha's shoulders. They end up in a weird knot, with Avery half-curved around Sascha's head, running his fingers through his hair while Sascha tries his best not to squeeze his skinny-but-nicely-toned ass. Eventually, he loses the fight.

Avery makes a very not-averse sound, prompting Sascha to start kissing whatever of Avery's chest and abdomen he can reach. Then he nibbles the many hills of his narrow ribcage, and Avery hiccups a laugh and flops sideways in a bid at escape. Sascha doesn't let him go easily, but Avery stops fighting back when he ends up pinned against the mattress with Sascha licking down his stomach.

Sascha stops right next to Avery's navel and drums his fingers on Avery's hip.

"What're you waiting for?" Avery demands.

"I think you should be the one to delete it. PROWL, I mean."

"Oh my god.Sascha, I just want you to eat me out," he says, but it's an exercise in futility because Sascha is already reaching for his phone again.

"Look, it'll only take a second."

"I thought you were gonna delete your account first."

"No, I'm saving my login info so you have something to remember me by if I faint while trying to repair the roof."

"Sascha Nikolai Concorde, you are under no circumstances allowed to get on the fucking roof."

The use of their new pack name—the one that took them all months to agree

upon—puts a ridiculous, sappy grin on Sascha’s face. He’s still getting used to hearing Concorde instead of Madison, but every time Avery full-names him, everything goes wobbly and light in his chest.

Concorde: an agreement, harmony, or union. That or grapes, which Sascha is okay with too. Even Charlie thought it sounded fitting for a pack of nine strange people of different backgrounds and species coming together to form a family with no idea what they’re doing, and once the seventeen-year-old approved, that was that.

“I bought this house; I can climb on the roof if I want to.”

“Oh, really? I wonder what Petra and Aunt Marty will have to say about that.”

“Nevermind,” Sascha says quickly, and uses Avery’s descent into laughter to pull up the PROWLRL account settings screen. “Okay, here’s the delete account page, if you insist. All you gotta do is press the thing. Are you sure we can’t light a fire?”

“I’ll set your pubes on fire if you keep insisting,” Avery huffs, but he still steadies Sascha’s phone so he can artlessly hit the delete button, followed by the guilt-trippy ‘Are you sure?’ prompt. “There. It’s done.”

“Now you gotta uninstall the app.”

“I’m already on my way.”

Sascha watches with a smile as Avery hovers his thumb over the little app icon, almost seeming to have his own moment of reflection. Then, his face goes impassive, and after a long press, the app disappears from the list.

“There, it’s done. Are you gonna go downtown yet, or should I grab that vibrator you finally bought me instead?”

As Sascha promised during Avery's first heat—one of three over the course of the summer—he used Avery's twenty-ninth birthday as an excuse to drop over a hundred dollars on a brand-name magic wand that made Avery scream the moment he saw the box.

“If you threaten to leave me for a vibrator again, I'm gonna start calling it Betty. Think you'll still be able to use it then?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:55 am

“My relationship with Betty is none of your business, sir.” Avery barely gets the last word out before they both dissolve into huge, gasping bursts of laughter.

After several moments of barely breathing, Sascha can feel his face burning red, and his stomach hurts. Just as he’s coming down, he accidentally knocks his phone into Avery’s cheek. Avery smacks the phone out of his hand, then his mouth drops open in surprise when he misjudges his strength and sends the device skidding across the tired hardwood. Sascha laughs until he’s howling, laughs louder than the situation deserves, and Avery laughs at how hard he’s laughing, until they’re a wheezing lump of tangled limbs sprawled on a shitty old mattress.

Sascha smiles wider than he ever thought possible and informs Avery in the most serious voice he can manage, “I don't think I have the lung strength to go down on you after laughing like that.”

Avery lets out an exhausted, hysterical chuckle and pats Sascha’s thigh. “I'll give you ten minutes to recover.”

“You're a saint.”

“No, I'm your mate, and dealing with your dumb jokes is my job.”

Smiling, tired and fond, Sascha strokes Avery's cheek. “You're good at it.”

“Does that mean I get a pay raise?”

“Is oral sex a valid form of payment?”

“Maybe if you’d actually get around to it!”

It takes them so long to stop goofing around that Sascha hasn't been naked for more than two minutes when Beryl hollers for them all the way from the third floor, despite their bedroom being on the main level.

Grinning helplessly, Sascha says, “I owe you one,” and they both get dressed without complaint.

Leading a pack without the resources Sascha grew up taking for granted hasn't been easy, but learning to share the challenge with Avery has been Sascha's greatest accomplishment. He carries the weight of being a pack alpha with reverence, valuing it all the more because one wrong move, and he'd have never gotten the chance.

Until now, no one thought Sascha or Avery deserved packs of their own, but Avery was right. Being an alpha is about more than perfect, impenetrable strength. Most importantly, a pack shouldn't feel controlled by their alpha because no amount of alpha magic can force trust, and without trust, loyalty is brittle. Without the pack's loyalty, an alpha is never far from being abandoned.

On his own, Avery was lost, and though Sascha had his family in theory, he was no less alone. Beyond having slipped into a mate bond, beyond finding love, the two of them—outcast, imperfect—discovered purpose in leading as a team. Watching each other's backs, finding balance with their individual strengths and weaknesses. It means more than the sculpted, perfect image Sascha was raised to envy.

The Concorde pack is everything the world told Sascha and Avery they'd never have because alphas like them aren't good enough to lead.

Together, they're proving those fuckers wrong.