



Witchwolf

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: Dakota Morris has decided it's time he lost that pesky virginity.

He's a college graduate, and he's tired of being a virgin. So he goes out to a club his friends don't frequent, and picks up the hottest man he's ever seen. It's truly a night to remember . . . until he walks into the boardroom for his new job the next morning and wishes he could forget it, because his hot pick-up is also his new boss and CEO, Ajax Fyse.

The fact that he unknowingly slept with his newest employee is the least of Jax's problems right now. Not only is he trying to navigate a merger with a mage family who disdains werewolves as beasts, it turns out the mage he took home last night didn't even believe magic existed till this morning.

This morning, when his magic abilities manifested.

Now, Dakota's stapler is flying across the room, and Jax has landed himself in the position of ushering his gorgeous new hire into the realm of magic. If only sleeping with a werewolf wouldn't ruin Dakota's reputation among other mages . . .

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Dakota

Eyeliner actually looked... pretty good on me.

At least, I thought it did. I'd watched a hundred video tutorials before trying it, and it seemed to look just like them.

The giggling outside my bedroom snatched my attention, and I ended up with a jagged line on the second eye, making me sigh and wipe it off to start again.

I'd just finished when there was a knock on my bedroom door.

"Not dressed," I called to keep Donnie from barging in and seeing me trying to put on eyeliner. Not to mention the ridiculously tight black skinny jeans and tank that showed off the definition of my arms and chest.

I'd been working hard at the gym for that muscle, so I thought I deserved to show it off.

"We're heading out," he called through the door. "Don't wait up. Good luck with the first day tomorrow. Get to bed nice and early!"

There was another giggle, no doubt his already-pregaming friends amused that a person would choose to go to bed early and have a job, rather than go clubbing and get laid. Frankly, I had no idea how any of them afforded living in San Francisco

without jobs. It was a ridiculously expensive city to live in, and they weren't all independently wealthy. Donnie certainly wasn't. His parents lived in a trailer in Bakersfield, and I didn't think he'd replaced his job yet, after getting fired from his waitstaff position last month.

But he'd paid his half of the rent, and he didn't seem worried, so I wasn't going to worry for him.

"Thanks," I answered. "Have a fun time."

"We will," he singsonged as he headed for the door.

I waited.

Well, no, I checked and perfected my eyeliner, then my outfit, and then I grabbed my boots, pulling them on and lacing them up, listening as Donnie and his friends cleared out of the apartment, down the hall.

The distant ding of the elevator indicated they were truly gone.

I waited another ten minutes in my room.

It wasn't that I didn't like Donnie. He was my best friend. We'd met in college, and he'd changed my life. Taught me to take things a little less seriously, stop thinking my perfect GPA was going to do anything for me after I graduated college, and start living just a little bit.

The problem was that Donnie was a butterfly. He was beautiful and... flighty. Every time we went out to a club together, every man we met hit on him. On the unusual occasion someone actually showed interest in me, for some reason, Donnie's carefree attitude about grades and school disappeared. Every time I'd gotten even close to a

guy, he'd managed to chase him off.

This one wasn't hot enough, and that one wasn't smart enough, and the other one "looked poor." I'd pointed out that I didn't care about any of that and just wanted to get laid, but he'd been adamant. I shouldn't settle, especially not for my first time.

So when he'd said he and his friends were going out tonight and invited me to go with them as a sort of celebration for my brand-new job starting tomorrow, I'd told them that I planned to go to bed early so I wouldn't be tired on my first day.

Which was precisely what I should be doing.

I should go to bed early, so I'd be bright-eyed and ready for anything on my first day of work. It was an amazing job that one of my professors had helped me to get, a company looking for something like a Japanese translator and interpreter. It wasn't precisely what I'd studied for—I didn't have a background in interpreting at all—but I'd double-majored in Japanese and communication, so I could totally do this. After all, they needed more than an interpreter, or they'd have just contacted an interpreting agency. They needed a go-between who knew about the culture and the language, to help them navigate a merger with a Japanese company. It was a huge job, and a massive score for me, since I'd literally graduated college last month.

That, I'd told Donnie, was why I'd worked hard to keep my GPA high. My professors had been invested in me, so when one had heard about the job opening, she'd thought of me.

So yeah, I should be going to bed.

But I had a year-long contract that was going to eat up my whole life starting tomorrow, and right now I was a twenty-two-year-old virgin. I was fucking sick of that.

Since I could never attract and keep a man's attention with Donnie there, I'd decided I needed to take drastic measures.

I needed to pick a night Donnie was going out, wait for him to go, and then go myself, separately. I had even searched for gay bars in town that Donnie didn't go to, which had been an undertaking in itself, because Donnie lived for clubbing.

I'd managed, though, finding a place I'd never even heard of before, Howl. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one that I'd never heard of them, but their website had been great, with pictures of the club and dance floor that made it look head and shoulders over most of the places I'd been with Donnie and his friends. They even had a great menu, including steaks and burgers, which wasn't the norm for places Donnie took me.

They had this whole wolf schtick going on that was a little funny, like silly drink names, "private rooms designated for pack alphas" and stuff like that, but it fit the name, and it wasn't the strangest thing I'd ever seen in a business. Donnie favored this little coffee house that liked to pretend they were a fairy garden, and their single gender-neutral bathroom had a picture of a person with wings on it instead of the usual silly dress-or-pants-wearing stick figures.

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So as soon as I was certain Donnie and his friends were gone for the night and hadn't forgotten anything, I turned out the lights to make it look like I was asleep, locked my room before closing the door—it was one of those ones you could open on the outside with a screwdriver or a butterknife, but it should be enough to convince Donnie I was still there—and headed for the street.

The place was only a few miles away, but I'd ordered an Uber anyway, just to leave a trail in case anything happened to me. The guy wasn't too interested in me, but he squinted at the front of the club as he pulled up. "This place new? I don't think anyone's ever asked me to take them here before."

"Maybe," I answered with a shrug, sliding out of the car even as I hit the button to tip him generously. Again, to lay a trail, just in case something happened to me. He'd remember me for sure if I disappeared and anyone asked about the weird kid he'd taken to the club he'd never seen before.

Maybe that was why Donnie had never taken me there. My stomach plummeted at the thought that maybe I'd walk in and there they'd be, checking out the new place, completely ruining my whole plan. Donnie would be annoyed I'd lied to him, and I still wouldn't get laid because perfect Donnie would continue to get the attention of all the hot men in the damn place.

Only one way to find out. I straightened, drawing myself up to my full height and marching toward the door.

There wasn't a line to get in, but there was a velvet rope, as though they had nights when there was a line. The bouncer at the door gave me a dubious look, but he only

glanced at my ID when I held it up, and motioned me toward the door. It was weird; he watched me way closer as I walked toward the huge black door than he'd looked at my ID. Like he expected me to suddenly change my mind, or maybe for someone from inside to come shove me back and tell me I didn't belong.

Hell, I wondered if maybe... maybe I didn't? Maybe I wasn't the kind of clientele they wanted. Maybe weird Japanese virgins wearing eyeliner weren't their thing.

But no one shoved me out. There was no one in the entryway at all, and I just... stepped inside. It was a little odd, like there was a big fan over the door, because there was the feeling of pressure as I walked through and my ears popped as I crossed the threshold. I looked back at the bouncer. His eyebrows were high on his forehead, mouth pursed in something that looked like surprise. He gave a shrug, said "have a good night," and turned back to his job watching for people coming in.

Weird.

Inside, the club was... well, it was almost exactly like every other club I'd ever been in, except for one thing. I walked in the door, and a guy nearby turned and looked at me. Then he stopped and looked at me again. Slowly. Lasciviously.

My whole body tingled at the feeling of it. The sheer fucking power of having someone actually be attracted to me.

Yeah, going out without Donnie had been a good idea.

The guy standing next to him elbowed him in the ribs and leaned in to whisper something in his ear, then dragged him away. He paused long enough to smile at me and mouth out "sorry," before they disappeared into the crowd. Too bad. They'd both been pretty cute. I'd have taken either.

Come to think of it, as I looked out at the crowd of bodies writhing on the dance floor, the guys milling around, the ones sitting at the bar... hell, even the bartender was hot. It was like I'd accidentally stumbled onto a movie set. The dancers were doing improbably athletic things—those that weren't practically fucking each other there on the dance floor. Everyone was immaculate, wearing club clothes that would have made Donnie jealous of the designer labels.

I felt a little... small and underdressed.

I was a foot shorter than most of them, which I was used to on some level—at not quite five and a half feet tall, I was never going to be that giant underwear model guy, but I'd always been okay with that. Sometimes it was useful to be short. I never banged my head on things. I could pull off “twink,” and that was all I needed, right? Not that I really knew what a twink was, other than people called me that sometimes when I was out with Donnie.

The people around me were wearing things I recognized from Donnie and his friends as expensive and designer, while my clothes were from the big blue superstore, but no one seemed to be sneering at my fashion choices.

In fact, every time I turned to look in a new direction, there was a guy checking me out.

Me.

Dakota Morris, shy little virginal college graduate.

My heart thumped in time with the music, and I wondered if maybe I was dreaming. This couldn't be real. Maybe I'd accidentally stumbled into a mobster club and they knew I didn't belong, so they were staring in shock that I was ignorant enough to come inside at all.

I slid up to the bar, breathing hard and fast even though I hadn't set foot on the dance floor yet, and that was where my heart almost stopped.

What had I just been thinking about underwear models?

This guy...

Guy wasn't even the right word. Adonis, maybe. He was exquisite. Not like a model I was seeing in real life, but like the ad itself. His hair was messy in that way where you knew every strand was exactly where he wanted it, and he had just enough scruff to look sexy but not unkempt. The suit he wore had to be worth more than every single thing I owned, the jacket falling open elegantly as he turned on his stool to face me, looking like that moment in an ad when the actor turned to give you that look. The superior one that said, "If you don't buy this product, you'll never be as cool as me."

I had news for him, I'd never be that cool no matter what I bought.

His jawline was so sharp it could cut glass, his cheekbones high and chiseled and just... just looking at him made me want to fall into his lap. When he stopped his turn and looked me over, I was afraid my underwear were going to melt. His deep brown gaze was intense as he took me apart with his eyes, that look almost a physical thing as it slid down to my toes, then back up, lingering here and there as he went. When he got back up to my eyes, he smiled, showing two perfect gleaming white rows of teeth.

It was odd, but somehow they were less toothpaste ad and more... more my heart started thumping harder, because it felt like we were in the presence of a predator, and he was going to fucking lean over and bite me.

I didn't even think I would object.

“What brings a nice boy like you to a place like Howl?” he asked, and his voice was just as smooth and perfect as the rest of him.

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Now, I knew this trap. The minute you denied being a boy, it proved that you were, in fact, too damned young. So I just lifted a brow at him. “What does it look like I’m doing here?”

His grin sharpened and he leaned forward, taking a deep breath, almost like... almost like he was sniffing me. “You look... like you’re on the prowl. Hunting for something in particular?”

I pulled myself up onto the stool next to his, smiling at him and hoping I looked smooth and sexy, rather than awkward as fuck. “Yeah. And I think maybe I’ve found it.”

He leaned in, pressing two fingers to the bottom of my chin and tilting my face up toward his. I could almost feel his warm breath, we were so close.

Behind me, someone sighed and muttered something that sounded like “should have known.”

The man’s electric gaze drifted to a spot behind me, and for just a second, the lights from the dance floor were reflected in them, making it look like his eyes flashed bright red. “Yes,” he said. “You should have.” Then he turned back to me with that same predatory smile that made my stomach flip with both lust and terror. “Do you want a drink, or do you want to come home with me?”

I gave an unintentional little whine in the back of my throat and leaned closer. Was this what it felt like to be Donnie? To have all the men want you? I could so get used to this. Still, I was going to try not to act as desperate as I definitely was. “What, I’m

not worth both?”

He made a sound almost like a growl and flicked his hand at the bartender, who appeared instantly next to us, as though by magic. “What can I get you, sir?”

He didn’t take his eyes off me even for a second. He lifted a brow. “Whatever my new friend...”

“Dakota.”

“Whatever Dakota wants.”

I tried to look at the bartender, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t tear my eyes off this man, and I didn’t even know his name. I did, however, realize that I didn’t know a damned thing about drinks. I’d always just had the same thing Donnie or his friends were ordering, and a cosmopolitan was not going to impress this man. My brain ran back through the drink menu they’d listed online, with the quirky little wolfish names. I didn’t remember what was in any of them, but I at least remembered the names.

“How about a dark and knotty?” I asked. It felt like a play on words with naughty, though I wasn’t entirely sure how it related to wolves, but it sounded at least a little sexy, and not like something a kid would order.

Behind me, there was a loud wolf whistle, and the fucking gorgeous man in front of me seemed pleased with the suggestion. Once more, his eyes flashed red in the lights reflected from the dance floor. “I think we can oblige that. A drink, a dance, and then?—”

“Then your place,” I said, trying to inject the words with confidence I didn’t quite feel. “Though I should probably ask your name first.”

Another smile flashed his gleaming teeth. “Jax.”

The bartender set a glass in front of me that looked rather like a mug of dark beer, and while I’d never been a huge fan of any beer, I took a drink and found myself pleasantly surprised. Was that ginger? Not bad at all.

“Well then, Jax,” I said, turning to him with my drink. “It sounds like we have a plan.”

2

Jax

Wasn’t every day a mage walked into Howl.

They were welcome. Hell, Howl accepted any supernatural being who wanted to consort with werewolves. It just so happened that mages rarely counted in that number.

After all, they controlled magic. They didn’t lower themselves to socialize with anyone controlled by it.

But there Dakota was, a little miracle in skinny jeans. He’d turned every head in the place, but that night, he was mine. Being alpha had its perks, and if I couldn’t leverage the responsibility to get first taste of this treat’s tight ass, what was the fucking point?

A drink in, and Dakota slipped off the stool. He reached out, his fingers tangling with my own, and I wasn’t too proud to say I followed him like a pet.

The others made space for us, the music a low thrum that had Dakota’s hips swaying.

When I pressed into him, the curves of his ass grazed my thigh. He spun, and I caught him.

For a second, everything was still, the bass turning to background noise that thudded through my chest, and I just held his eyes.

Then, I bent to kiss him. The sound he let out was the cry of relief a man in the desert might give at his first drink of water in days. His hand fisted in my shirt, and he pushed up on the balls of his feet.

We danced like that, hip to hip, kissing as often as we weren't. Each time his body moved against mine, I lost a little more of my senses to the pleasure the night promised—his lithe body, the round of his bare shoulder where I could drag my lips and taste his sweat?—

Why were we here? I needed him alone, naked, sobbing for my cock.

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“Should I call my driver?” I mumbled against his neck.

Dakota’s brow wrinkled. “You have... a driver?”

Laughing, I shrugged. “Parking’s a hassle. Do you want to come home with me?”

The way his cheeks flooded with color was the cutest damn thing I’d ever seen, at odds with the tight clinging of his tank top, the sinful dip of his collar and that little divot between his pectorals that I wanted to kiss.

“Yeah.”

I shot Charles a message and within minutes, I was holding Dakota’s hand so we didn’t lose each other as I dragged him away. It wouldn’t have mattered—the wolves in the club backed off when I moved through the crowd, making way for us to get out, but I liked the feel of his soft hand in mine.

On the sidewalk, Charles was ready to open the car door for us. I let Dakota climb in first, and caught Charles’s smirk from the corner of my eye.

“Home, sir?”

I scowled at him. Charles had been my friend longer than he’d been my driver, despite being older than my father—hell, maybe older than my grandfather. Or his grandfather. It was hard to tell with fae.

He’d simply needed a job, and I needed someone to cart my ass around while I did

conference calls in the back seat.

He knew Jillian had sent me out to blow off some steam, but usually, going to Howl meant getting a drink, maybe slipping into one of the back rooms if I was feeling relaxed enough to let someone close.

That wasn't an option here. I wasn't parading a well-fucked mage through a club full of wolves when I was done with him. He wouldn't make it to the door before someone else was pawing at him.

I didn't bring men home.

Except tonight.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Charles shut the door after me. By the time he got into the front, I'd put up the privacy screen. Us wolves weren't exactly wilting and demure, but I thought Dakota might appreciate the privacy, given what I wanted from him.

Before the car even rumbled, I slipped my arm behind him and dragged him in. His lips were just as sweet as they'd been in the club, and the way he responded, wiggling closer to me, was just fucking perfect.

Dakota caught his breath, and I pressed my advantage, losing myself in the taste of him.

The denim squeezing his legs was rough, but his leg beneath was firm. I slid my hand up from his knee, inside his thigh, grinning into our kiss when I cupped his groin to find his dick already hard and straining.

“Can’t wait to get you home and taste this,” I said with a squeeze.

Dakota moaned, coming off the seat. I caught him, slid my arm behind his arched back, and pulled him into my lap. As we kissed, he rocked against me, and I wondered if I could strip him bare and get him off before the journey ended.

I didn’t realize we’d arrived home until Charles was opening the car door for us. Cool spring air filled the car, and if it weren’t for the promise of spreading Dakota out over my glorious bed upstairs, I’d have jerked the door shut and filled the back of the car with the scent of his overheated skin.

One brief walk to the door and upstairs was all that remained between me and peeling those skin-tight black jeans from Dakota’s lithe legs. I could hold it together a few more minutes.

And sure, part of me wanted to show off my house to the little mage. We weren’t all beasts who lived in the woods murdering innocent bunnies with a snap of our fangs and swallowing them raw.

I hadn’t always had wealth like this, but now that I did, yes, I wanted to flaunt it to the kind of person who would doubt it most.

When I got out of the car, I held out a hand to help Dakota up. Even as he took it, he was blinking dazedly at my house. “You live here?”

A slow smile spread across my face. “Want to come inside?”

For a second, he caught his lips between his teeth. They disappeared in a thin line, but when I swiped my thumb over the back of his hand, he pulled himself out of it.

“Yeah.”

“Will you need anything else, sir?” Charles asked.

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“No, thank you.”

As we approached the house, Luna, my virtual assistant, automatically turned on the lights. The interior lit up before I opened the door, inviting Dakota inside.

Truth told, the house was too big for me alone. When I’d first bought it, Jillian lived here full time too, but as the company had taken off, she’d gotten a place of her own. Balancing the business with pack dynamics meant a lot of us valued our alone time more than the packs we’d grown up with. Nothing about listening to a man drone on in a business meeting made anyone want to cuddle up with him in a giant puppy pile.

“This is... nice,” Dakota said, his voice a little strained as he looked around the open living area.

“Thanks. Can’t really take credit for it myself, but I think it’s comfortable.” The interior designer had gone for something between clean modern lines and an old hunting lodge. Exposed wooden beams crisscrossed the high ceilings and framed the full-wall windows. Turned out, no wolf could really escape a love for fur pelts, even on two legs.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“That’d be great,” Dakota said.

I turned into the open kitchen, but by the time I turned back around, he was gone.

“Dakota?”

Nothing.

I found him in my bedroom, standing just inside the door, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed in.

“One-track mind, huh?”

Dakota started and looked at me, eyes wide enough that I could see the whites all around for a split second before his gaze softened and he accepted the glass of water.

He took a tiny sip. “You don't want me looking around?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Please, look all you'd like.” I tugged open the buttons of my shirt one by one, letting my shirt spread wide over my chest as I followed the trail down and down.

Dakota's gaze dropped with the motion of my hand, and a satisfied smile crept onto my face.

“I'm just happy to find you in such convenient proximity to my bed.”

He made a tight sound in his throat. One step closed the gap between us. I took his glass, set it on the dresser, and kissed him hungrily, gratified when he rushed to slip his hands beneath my shirt and feel my chest.

Werewolves ran hot, so his hands were almost cool against my overheated skin. I growled, wrapping an arm around the small of his back and drawing him up on his toes. When I tilted him back, he opened for me, going slack in my grip, but for those questing hands that shoved my shirt and jacket onto the floor.

When I straightened and pulled him up, Dakota took the chance to hop up, and I

caught his firm ass in one hand while he wrapped his legs around my hips. Goddamn those jeans had to have some kind of stretch to let him do this, but I felt good with him in my arms, his full weight in my care already.

I carried him over to the bed—made up by the wolf I’d hired to clean during the day when I was gone—and tipped him back onto the cashmere throw draped oh-so carefully across the end.

Though I held myself above him, I slipped an arm behind his head and leaned in to press down on him, his chest to mine, his tank not enough to keep me from feeling his body. His soft black hair tickled my forearm, and I grinned against his lips. Maybe Jillian had been right—I needed this before the harried bullshit of the next few weeks. For the first time in days, I felt relaxed. Happy, even.

“What?” he asked, blinking up at me, flushed and beautiful.

“Nothing.” I kissed him again and drew myself back. “I need you naked.”

Dakota’s breath caught, but he nodded, already squirming and pulling up the hem of his shirt.

That left me with his pants, his boots, and—well, the wolf got distracted.

I’d unbuckled his jeans and spread them wide, and the scent of his skin and the wet spot on his silky briefs sent me spinning. With a moan, I leaned down and pressed a kiss beneath his bellybutton, breathing in deep.

Had anyone ever smelled so good? It didn’t seem possible.

He was all ginger from his earlier drink, and the vanillin of old books, and the undeniable scent of man. Combined, it was intoxicating.

Nuzzling his stomach and the dip just inside his hip bone made pulling off his boots clumsier than I'd intended, but it wasn't long before I had them off and could tug his jeans and briefs down all at once.

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A gorgeous expanse of golden skin lay before me, his cock standing out of a thatch of short-trimmed black curls. I groaned as I took him in. “I want to fucking devour you.”

Dakota was breathing hard, even before I kicked off my Oxfords, shed my trousers and left them in a heap on the floor. Between one moment and the next, I bore myself to him and pressed my knee onto the mattress between his legs.

He wiggled farther up the bed, but he wasn’t trying to get away. He reached for me desperately, and I was all too eager to follow. The way up gave me the chance to drag my lips across his skin. I kissed across his ribcage, sucked one pert brown nipple into my mouth, and teased his neck before I found his mouth again.

I could spend all night tasting every inch of him.

But the longer we kissed, the more obvious it became that something was the matter.

Dakota’s hitched breaths turned desperate. He wouldn’t look directly at me. His scent was aroused, sure, but there was more to it—a wrongness.

A sour, heavy stone dropped in my stomach as I leaned back. Was he regretting coming home with me already? I’d thought things were going... well, they were certainly going in the direction I wanted them to.

Leave it to a mage to get cold feet.

“You’re nervous.”

He gulped. “I’m not nervous.”

If I rolled my eyes at him, this was going to end before we got to the good part, but damn it, it took every ounce of self-control I had. What was the goddamn point in pretending a werewolf couldn’t tell you were nervous? Even if they weren’t acting like it, a person’s scent turned slightly acrid. We could hear when their pulse began to race.

Even a mage would know that, especially one bold enough to march into Howl.

“You are.” I knew what they said about us—we were beasts, untrustworthy and ungovernable, wild and dangerous. I... would have to try not to take it personally, if he’d heard those things, but already, my armor was creeping up. “Dakota, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know that.”

But the spike in his anxiety was coming from somewhere. If he wasn’t sure, we couldn’t do this. I wouldn’t.

“You say the word, and I’ll stop, no questions.”

Another rush of panic from him, this one stronger than the last.

“Don’t stop!” He gripped my shoulders hard and pulled me down. He... wanted me?

I frowned, bracing to hold my weight off him even as he tried to drag me into another kiss. Obviously, I was missing something. He’d clearly come to Howl with one thing on his mind.

“Okay.” I set my palm against his cheek, felt his smooth skin beneath my fingers, and

held there. After a shaky breath, he pressed into my hand, and I felt a little better. If nothing else, my touch seemed to comfort him. I wanted that. Being an alpha meant being a source of safety for the people around you. Dakota might be a mage, but I wanted to make him comfortable. “Can you just... tell me what’s going on? I want to understand.”

More importantly, my wolf didn’t like the thought of forcing anybody, mistreating pack.

No, he wasn’t actually pack, but while Dakota was in my bed, he was still under my care. The same rules applied.

The tip of his tongue ran across his teeth. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Had sex with someone like me?” That wasn’t all that surprising. I’d never been with a mage either. It wasn’t something commonly done, and not as brazenly as Dakota had been, walking into Howl that night.

Disappointment still twisted in my gut. He’d wanted one of us, and while it wasn’t that surprising that he’d hesitate at the finish line, I would’ve hoped to win him over enough that my species factor.

An edgy laugh escaped him. “More like... had sex.”

That—

What?

He was a virgin, sure, but that didn’t matter to me. We’d all been virgins once, and I wasn’t about to judge someone on how much experience they had or didn’t have.

It was just...

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Fuck, mages were weird about this kind of thing. For a human of magical descent, coming of age, their first sexual encounter, constituted an awakening.

That was literally what they called it—their Awakening.

From what I'd heard, a young mage's Awakening was usually negotiated by their families—akin to an arranged marriage, if only on a temporary basis. It bound allegiances, agreements, gave families a sense of debt to one another.

It was stiff, bordering on cruel from where I sat, but in the old families, the goal was to negotiate the strongest possible mage to take their progeny's virginities. Perhaps the idea was to Awaken the strongest magic.

Allowing a werewolf to serve as the catalyst to a mage's Awakening? It wasn't done.

I drew back. "Why me?"

Had his family arranged something terrible for him? Offered him up to someone he didn't want? Maybe this was his way of getting back at them, and I'd be hard pressed not to stick it to a bunch of uppity mages.

Dakota laughed again, still thready and nervous. "Whynotyou? You're gorgeous. Hot as fuck. I can honestly say I can't think of anybody I want more than I want you right now."

A satisfied, buzzing feeling played at the back of my skull, like the wolf inside was proud to hear it.

“So, yeah,” he went on, “I’m kind of nervous. I just... expected to get laid? Not, like, go home with a guy in a freaking mansion who looks like somebody peeled him off the cover of GQ or something.”

“This isn’t a mansion.”

I didn’t know what I would call it, given that it was over four thousand square feet and more space than I’d ever needed on my own. But it was, like, on the line between a big house and something that over the top, right?

Disbelieving, Dakota arched a brow at me. “Okay, well, given the cost of a crappy apartment in San Francisco, I think you can understand why this might look kind of mansion-y.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t like I’d picked out the biggest, nicest house I could afford and arranged it to show off. Genuinely, I needed enough space for the pack. That meant extra bedrooms and enormous sofas and—well, it didn’t matter. “Fair enough, but it’s not the size of my house that’s got you on edge.”

Dakota bit his lip. His deep, dark eyes searched my own, and I stared back. I wasn’t afraid to fall into them, not when he looked at me like that.

After a few breaths of silent staring, he flinched. “I don’t want to, I don’t know, seem... like a virgin? Or make this a chore.”

I hummed. His cringe softened something in my chest, and I bent over him for another kiss, this one soft and lingering.

“Don’t worry about that.” I dragged the tip of my tongue across his jaw toward the very corner. Dakota gasped when I sucked his earlobe into my mouth. “You’re so sexy,” I growled in his ear. Burying my nose in his hair and breathing deep was an

indulgence I was all too happy to give myself. “And you smell fucking incredible. You could’ve slept with zero men or a hundred, and it wouldn’t change how much I want to bury my cock in that sweet ass and make you mine.”

Dakota whimpered, throwing his head back into the pillows, exposing the smooth, golden-brown column of his neck to me.

The sight of it went straight to my cock. My teeth felt sharp and overlarge in my mouth.

Bite him. Mark him. Ours.

My wolf was a demanding little fucker, and I wasn’t a perfect man. I was just a good enough one not to take more than what was offered to me.

Still, my balls drew tight when I grazed my teeth harmlessly across his flawless skin. I thrust against his cock hard, desperate to get inside him already.

Under me, he shivered.

“Are you sure you want this?”

Dakota bit his bottom lip. It was a dusky rose color and so goddamn plush that all I could think about was sucking it into my mouth. I’d treat him like my own personal chew toy, bite every inch of his soft, smooth body.

“Yes,” he rasped. “A lot.”

He squirmed. An unbidden growl rumbled low in my throat, even before he shifted his legs apart. The warm inside of his thigh pressed against my hip, and I hitched my leg to spread him wider.

“Fuck me.”

His words shot through me like an alpha’s command, leaving me no choice but to obey him.

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I dove into his parted lips, thrusting my tongue into his mouth as he opened beneath me. His whine was trapped between our mouths, his hands flying to claw at my shoulder blades.

“I’m gonna take care of you,” I promised against the corner of his mouth. My nose nudged his cheek, the scent of his pulse point just beneath his ear so goddamn sweet my mouth watered. “Make you feel so fucking good.”

Dakota let out a needy sob and rolled his hips, pressing his dick against my skin, chasing friction I wasn’t ready to give him yet.

When he came with a man for the first time, I wanted him to feel my cock buried in his ass, dragging against his prostate, stretching him to his limit. I wanted him to come apart, knowing he belonged to me.

Maybe it was only for a night, but for that long, I could make him mine.

Ignoring his squirming protests, I held his hip down with one hand, pressed his chest with the other, pinning him to the bed, and kissed my way down his stomach to his tempting cock.

The head was flushed and swollen, slick from precome that tasted bitter against the flat of my tongue. One lave of it, and Dakota arched off the bed. I pressed him down harder, a quiet growl in the back of my throat.

“Be a good boy,” I rumbled, “and let me prepare you.”

I sucked my middle finger in my mouth to wet it, then turned back to his pretty dick, laying straight on his lower stomach. With just my lips, I teased it into my mouth. With my fingers, I explored the shape of his ass, slipped between his cheeks, and traced around his puckered rim.

His whimper turned into a whine when I pressed the tip of my finger inside him. Moon above, he was so responsive already. This was going to be fun.

If I had my way, I was going to awaken more than magic in the man pinned under me.

3

Dakota

Jax was... fuck, but he was everything I hadn't even thought existed in a man.

Donnie was always going on about how men were dogs who only wanted one thing, and they wanted it as fast as they could get it, so taking care wasn't something they did.

Jax?

Care seemed to be all he fucking did.

I mean, starting out by worrying about me being nervous was the last thing I'd expected, and almost inconvenient. But also, sweet.

When he had me stripped naked on his bed and knelt between my legs, well... that was the last thing I'd expected.

Then, he defied expectation again. Oh, he paid cursory attention to my cock, licking a stripe from base to tip, pressing his stubbled cheek into the sensitive skin there and making me shiver with the feeling of it. But then he hoisted my legs up onto his shoulders and he...

Holy fuck.

He spread my asscheeks and just...fuck fuck fuck, with his tongue. On my ass.

The slick feeling of his tongue pressing into the tight ring of my ass was strange and foreign, but my whole body thrummed with electricity at the sensation of it. Warm and wet and other, and fuck, but it was incredible. I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the sensation of his tongue opening me up, fucking into me like he couldn't possibly get close enough to me.

Devour me, he'd said, and fuck me, but in that moment, it sounded sexy as hell, even if he meant it in a Hannibal kind of way.

By the time he lowered me back onto the bed, I was lax and loose, limbs pliant.

He slid from beneath my thighs and off the bed, but before I could so much as whine out a complaint, he was reaching in from the side, holding me up like I was as light as a feather and slipping a pillow beneath my hips. He held something to my lips, and I finally had to open my eyes, not even having realized I'd closed them.

The glass of water. Was he trying to make sure I stayed hydrated while he fucked me into his mattress?

Either Donnie had been completely wrong, or I'd gotten unbelievably lucky.

He came back a moment later, spreading my legs and staring down into my eyes, his

gaze intense, boring into me like he could see my thoughts if he looked hard enough. When he knelt once more between my legs, his body a hard line over me, it almost took my breath away. I lifted a leg and wrapped it around his hips, almost instinct, and he smiled that predator smile at me, his teeth bright and almost sharp looking in the low light.

He moved into position, his hips nestling between my legs like he belonged there, but instead of just pushing inside me, he paused. “You doing okay?”

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Breathless, all I could do was nod. Fuck, but he was beautiful and thoughtful and just... I almost wished I'd gone into this looking for more than one night. He seemed like the kind of guy who would make an amazing... something. Boyfriend? Lover? Husband?

Everything.

But that was romantic crap, and one-night stands did not turn into forever.

Slowly, he pressed forward, making me gasp as the fat head of his cock slid inside me. It didn't hurt at all; he'd relaxed me so much, and the slide was so slick. I'd never managed to make it so seamless and easy by myself, with my dildo. Clearly, having a partner was superior in multiple ways.

I was still breathless and panting when suddenly his hips were flush against me, his whole cock inside me. It was fucking magical. Hewas magical. I could have come right then if there'd been so much as a stiff breeze on my cock, but he held there, letting me get acclimated before moving.

And that... was...fuck.

I wasn't even ashamed at the high whine that came out of me. I didn't have the higher brain function to be ashamed. There was only me and him and that fucking sensation, his cock sliding out of me, and then slowly once again in.

I opened my eyes when I realized I had closed them, and found him grinning down at me, looking downright charmed by my lack of control over any part of my body. I

wanted to apologize, but the words just weren't in me, in that moment.

So instead I whined again, pressing up against him with my ass. He took that cue beautifully and pulled out again, this time thrusting in with some force, a little slap sounding through the room as his thighs met my ass.

I gasped, and this time managed to gather my wits enough to speak up, if just barely. "More."

And fuck, but did he give me exactly what I'd asked for. He pulled out and drove back in, his hips taut with the tension of it, thrusting forward over and over, like he was a fucking machine and not a man.

Heh, fucking machine.

That was my last semi-rational thought as he fucked me, rough and hard and my mind just slipped away into the sensation of a cock pounding into me. This was why some of the guys I knew called themselves cocksluts. Because after having this, who would ever want to go a night without it?

He pounded into me, and I wrapped my legs around him, trying to pull him even deeper, moving with him and arching into it every time he buried himself deep in my ass. I couldn't breathe, but it didn't seem to matter, and there were fireworks exploding behind my eyelids, which had once again slipped closed without my permission or knowledge. Quite literally, the bursts of color were far more dramatic than when I rubbed my closed eyes after a long day.

Almost... real.

It continued when I opened my eyes to meet his, and they seemed to flash bright crimson like in the club lights, but a moment later, my whole body was seizing with

the power of the strongest orgasm I'd had in my entire fucking life. My whole body jerked up into him, core straining and arms going limp. I almost screamed at the feeling of electricity coursing through me, but I didn't have the breath to make a sound, gasping for deep lungfuls of air as though I was underwater and couldn't quite reach it.

Above me, he groaned and tensed, and I knew it wasn't possible, but I could have sworn I could feel him coming inside me. Shit. Inside me. I hadn't asked him to wear a condom. Rookie fucking mistake.

Since I was, in fact, a rookie, I tried to let it go. No reason to let worry ruin my night now. Not when it had been so fucking perfect so far.

So instead of worrying or freaking out, I let myself bask in the afterglow for a moment. But then he pulled himself up, smiling at me, and shook out his now-shaggy hair. "Shower, something to eat, and go again?"

Fuck me.

Well yeah, literally. But also, it was a fucking tragedy I wasn't going to keep him.

* * *

It was three in the morning when I finally ordered a ride home.

Jax suggested I could stay the night, but given how shocked he seemed at having made the offer, I just shook my head. "I have work early in the morning, and my clothes are at home. Thank you, though. Thank you for... everything."

It felt a little odd, thanking a guy for fucking me into his mattress for half the night, but also, it had been better than a thank you could even answer for. It had been

perfect.

I leaned in to kiss him one more time, where he stood, indolently naked in his kitchen doorway while I'd completely dressed again before ordering a ride.

Both of us opened our mouths as though to speak, but neither managed to say whatever it was we were thinking aloud.

When I heard the car pull up, I leaned in and kissed him again, then ripped off the Band-Aid and ran out into the night.

I was sore as hell in the morning, and my ass was dragging from lack of sleep as I showered and pulled on my suit, but it had been entirely worth it.

Jax had been perfect and beautiful and gentle—and then not gentle—and exactly what I'd always imagined a great lover would be. The night had been precisely what I'd wanted. Jax had been precisely what I wanted, in every way.

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Donnie was still in bed when I left, snoring away in his room as I grabbed a granola bar and my to-go coffee cup and headed out. I'd have stopped at a coffee shop, but I wanted to make sure I was on time for my first day. Maybe it was only a year-long contract and not a permanent job, but it was my first job out of college, and a fucking important one. A major corporation and a merger with a Japanese company, and me at the center of it. If I did well, it could make my whole career.

I was tired, sure, but I was in an excellent mood as I went into the building for my first day, Maia from HR meeting me at the security desk to hand me my brand-new security badge and escort me up to the top floor.

“There’s a meeting of all the top brass this morning for prep, and then the meeting with the people from Igarashi,” she told me as she led me to the elevator bank. “I’ll be there with you for the first, and introduce you around. Then you’ll be on your own.”

I swallowed hard at the thought of being cut loose among a bunch of corporate bigwigs, but... that was the job. So I nodded to her. “I appreciate the introductions.”

She smiled at me, knowing and friendly, and nodded. “Of course. But we picked you for this job for a reason, Dakota. You’re smart, you have the right skills, and you’re up for a challenge. You’ll do just fine.”

I said a little prayer to the universe that she was right, and I wasn’t just one of those people who interviewed well and then sucked at the job. But no. I had a whole ass degree in communication. I spoke fluent Japanese. I was good at people.

So again, I nodded, drawing myself up and standing straight as she led me into the elevator. The security badge was necessary for accessing the top three floors of the building, where most of the corporate officers spent their days. “I think Jillian said she was arranging you an office on the top floor,” she told me, voice conversational, as the elevator moved, so fast that it made my stomach swoop. Not for the first time, I wondered how this company was so huge, when I’d never even seen their website.

Hell, I’d tried to look for it and failed. And maybe I was no tech whiz, but I could find a website. I had almost asked Maia for help, but hadn’t wanted to look ignorant in front of the seriously rich important people who were giving me a shot.

Surely, though, someone today would mention the web address, and I’d figure out I was just looking for the wrong site or something simple like that.

I had my degree, and I’d gotten some of the best grades in my class.

I was going to have an office on the top floor.

Maia trusted me.

I could do this.

It was a conviction that followed me all the way up in the elevator, down the hallway, and into the conference room. Right up until I saw who was sitting at the head of that conference table.

Jax.

Fuck.

My.

Life.

4

Jax

When I arrived at the office, Seth was sitting at the security desk as usual. He always dressed crisply, though I thought a button-up was overkill when his job was to be spry and ready for action.

Which, okay, wasn't all that necessary. Back in Idaho, it'd been a goddamn comfort to have someone as big as Seth as my second, to know that if anything happened to me when I stood up to our alpha, he'd take care of Jill. But I couldn't remember the last time he'd torn off his shirt and wolfed out to protect any of us.

When I approached the counter to swipe my badge, he his black brow shot up high. "You know I can just let you in."

I shrugged. "Protocol."

And, well, it gave me a chance to see a normal, friendly face before I went up and started playing boss. Since we'd known each other forever, Seth was never going to see me as someone especially intimidating.

Fuck, he could probably hand me my ass if given a mind to.

Seth scoffed. Normally, he was a stickler for this kind of thing, but I supposed I had privileges. The nice thing was, they were friend privileges, not boss ones.

"Heard you had a good night last night," Seth mused innocently, but I caught his smirk when he glanced down at the security feeds.

I puffed out my cheeks and let out a slow breath. “Like you wouldn’t fucking believe.”

Even Seth looked startled. “That good, huh? I heard he was a...”

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He broke off with a grimace. What did I expect? Seth kept the pack safe, and bedding down with a mage opened us up to a ton of uncertainty.

Crescent relied on the business of mages who, quite frankly, wouldn't look too kindly on us sniffing around their own, but that was the least of it. If I'd hurt Dakota—even just a graze of teeth that went too deep—it could be the end of us.

Well, the end of me, at least.

But I hadn't. Dakota was well, and the night had been so damned perfect that I was half convinced there was something special about mages.

I gripped the edge of the counter and leaned over, my grin sharp and toothy. "A mage? Yeah. The night was downright magical."

Seth groaned, shoving me back. "Go do your job, bossman."

I shuffled back a step or two and spun toward the elevator, waving over my shoulder as I headed toward the sleek metal doors.

Upstairs, where Jillian was already waiting for me in my office. She leaned against the edge of my desk with her legs crossed. The heels she wore made me glad men's shoes were simpler—I wouldn't have known how to put them on, much less walk in them

Of course, my twin sister wasn't afraid of anything, even intimidatingly pointy shoes. If I didn't know she was there in her capacity as my sister and not the Chief

Operations Officer of Crescent, she'd have downright terrified me.

Luckily for me, I knew I wasn't in for anything more serious than some sisterly ribbing.

"Good night?" Jillian asked, her dark brown eyebrow arched high.

The left corner of my mouth tugged upward as I walked around my enormous desk and dumped my leather messenger bag.

Even as her chestnut eyes glittered teasingly, I couldn't help grinning at her.

"What can I say? You were right. I needed to let off some steam."

I'd woken up that morning feeling more present in my body than I had in weeks. Yes, I was a little sore from the night's exertions—a little used—but only in the best way.

Dakota had been a delight. Sweet and needy, delicious and responsive. The way he'd reached for me had made me feel capable again. Watching his eyelids flutter and his eyes roll back when it was all too much? Knowing I held his pleasure as firm as I held his hips? Wonderful.

I had wanted him to stay.

It was a strange feeling, overly serious considering the situation. Just... if I could've buried my nose against the nape of his neck and breathed in his sweet scent all night, deep down, I knew that would've settled me like nothing else.

But that wasn't in the cards for mages and werewolves. Rare enough for one of them to seek out one of us for anything they could manage on their own.

So I hadn't pressed, and even the prick of disappointment watching him jog over to his rideshare wasn't enough to ruin my satisfaction after a night that'd gone off so much better than expected.

Truth told, when Jillian had suggested I spend the night before our meeting out at Howl instead of brooding at home, I'd only thought about getting her off my back. If I was home and twisted myself up, then the meeting went poorly, she'd give me that "I know everything" look and offer platitudes about how it'd go better next time. I'd just gotten into my own head. No big deal.

Except this was a big deal. Huge. If we signed with Igarashi, Crescent would go from America's premier supplier of magical texts and necessities to a worldwide name in the paranormal underground.

In this day and age, you had to be the biggest fish out there, or you'd get eaten by someone bigger. Jill and I had gotten lucky—started right out of college in a fit of desperation at the beginning of the tech boom. If we'd risen, it felt like an effect of the tide rather than anything we could control, but this deal? This would secure us for decades. Whatever happened to me next, my pack would be safe and provided for, and maybe—just maybe—the demanding alpha in my head would calm the fuck down, knowing I'd carved a place for us and proven to be the leader I'd always promised them I would be.

They'd followed me, not knowing what our future held. I owed them the best one I could build.

Once I had it, I could figure out what I wanted next. It'd been impossible to take care of the pack long enough to figure out what would make me happy, but... one day. Just one more project, one more deal, one more billion, and I wouldn't have to worry anymore.

Jillian pushed off the desk and rounded on me. From the tilt of her head, I should've known I'd stepped into trouble, even before she opened her mouth.

“I heard there was a mage involved.”

The first prickle of annoyance had my nose flaring. “Word travels that fast, huh?”

She snorted. “Half the wolves at Howl last night were in our break room this morning, Jax. You should know better than to think there's privacy in the pack.”

Moon above, it wasn't like I had any shame about this kind of thing—with our heightened senses, werewolves couldn't afford to be shy—but trust Jillian to realize it meant more than nothing for me to take a mage home the night before we met with Igarashi.

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“Heard he was pretty,” she said when I gave her nothing.

I grinned. It felt sharp on my face. “Gorgeous.”

“And of everyone there, he’s the one you wanted? The most dangerous one? The one most likely to insult our would-be business partners?”

“Why would they care?”

“How would I know how mages think? Just, if theywereto find out?—”

“They won’t.”

She arched her brows again. “Was he Japanese?”

Truth told, I didn’t know. His accent had been flawlessly American, plain and smooth. He was clearly Asian, but I hadn’t thought to ask for specificity.

Hadn’t even considered?—

It was insane to think he had anything to do with Igarashi. Right?

I sighed, waving her off. “No mage is going to admit to?—”

“Something that’d throw a wrench in our plans?”

I hissed through my teeth. “He wasn’t like that. He was?—”

“Sweet as freshly whipped cream?”

It took everything I had in me not to growl at her. “He came looking for something. I give it to him. That’s it.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Moon knows you’re full of something.”

“Seriously. No one recognized him. You don’t need to worry about this. It was one night.”

“And you’re sure there are no ulterior motives?”

“We’ve kept word of this deal quiet. All involved parties signed the NDA. We’d know if they broke it.” I shrugged. The spells that bound our word would break. The ink on the agreements would glow, and they’d need to be redrawn.

Yes, all that required magic, but we weren’t naïve enough to trust Igarashi to work that magic. A neutral firm had written and consecrated the NDA and would oversee our final agreement, once we settled on terms.

“Well, we know the families. If any of them try to get involved?—”

She had a point. Maybe mages didn’t mix with shifters, thought we were beneath them, but they sure did like the convenience of having grimoires and potion supplies shipped directly to their door.

One-day shipping, baby.

Because we were so much more convenient than hunting down spells and ingredients themselves, we knew more about the big American mage families than they could stand to think about.

“It’s not going to be an issue.”

“We could do a background check,” Jillian said, “just to be sure.”

Absolutely not. My wolf bristled at the very idea of handing Dakota over for that kind of inspection, but the last thing I needed was to admit to Jillian that my instincts were that off. “He didn’t tell me his last name.”

“Wise of him.”

She didn’t mean it the way I heard it—Iknewshe didn’t mean it—but my jaw ached painfully. “Indeed. Wouldn’t want word of his exploits getting out. How scandalous—taking a werewolf home.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “No mage walks into Howl without knowing what they’re getting into. And don’t pretend you were all that interested in swapping surnames last night, hm?”

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I wasn't going to tell her that the scandal was so much worse than she realized. I'd been the catalyst of Dakota's Awakening, and surely, the aftermath of such a thing didn't usually include letting the fresh mage go home in a Lyft he'd ordered himself.

But, thinking about it, there was no way a mage would trade his Awakening to get information about a business deal negotiated with werewolves. It simply wouldn't happen.

Sighing, I dropped into my office chair and opened the top left drawer. I usually left my nicer watch in there—it wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to wear out. Too flashy. Ostentatious. When I wore it, I was acutely aware of the place I'd come from and how little this sort of indulgence really fit the pup who'd fought in the mud just to escape our oppressive, backwoods pack of origin.

But if I didn't put it on before the meeting, I'd forget entirely. What was the point of an expensive watch if you didn't wear it to important business meetings?

As I closed the clasp, I stared at Jill. "Did you come to take me down a peg before we meet with Igarashi?"

Jillian scoffed. "Nope. Just to make sure your mage didn't singe your dick off before the big meeting. You ready?"

I'd barely sat down, and it was already time to start this marathon. "Ready as I'll ever be."

The day ahead of us promised to be a long one, but as we left my office, Jillian

reminded me we were meeting with the team before Igarashi arrived to go over the plan and meet the new translator.

When we got to the conference room, I sat at the head of the table, not because I was already too exhausted by what was coming to stand. I was nervous. I didn't want to make everyone nervous, pacing along the wall of windows.

From that seat, I had a perfect view of the door opening on Maia and?—

My whole world froze when my eyes met Dakota's.

I was ashamed my first thought was that he looked a little sleepy, and that I ought to wrap him up in a blanket that smelled like me and make sure he got a good day's rest.

More shameful, my second thought was how he looked in my bed, his eyes shut and mouth gaped so temptingly and?—

“This is Kent Medson,” Maia said as I stared. “Kent, Dakota Morris. He'll be assisting with this deal.”

She was introducing Dakota around the room, but when Kent reached out to shake Dakota's hand, and Dakotasmiledat him, a soft growl rumbled in my throat.

Every wolf in the room snapped their head toward me. Kent looked confused, Jillian shrewd, and I—I cleared my throat.

“Nice to meet you,” Dakota said.

Kent's eyes flashed my way, and when he realized I wasn't going to turn into a beast at the very idea of him being reasonably polite to the new hire, he offered similar platitudes.

I stood from my seat, and Jillian was at my side in a second, pushing against my arm, her gaze cutting into me. I could practically hear her asking, Are you all right?

I dipped my chin in the tiniest of nods as Maia led Dakota over to us. “And Ms. Fyse is our COO.”

“Jillian,” my sister said, shoving her hand out to shake Dakota’s. “So nice to meet you.”

Even I could hear the sharpness in her voice. She knew how to act, but her defenses were up. She knew something was off here.

“And last, Mr. Fyse.”

Dakota flushed. He only managed to meet my gaze for a split second. “Your...” He stared at Jill pointedly.

I almost choked when I realized what he was worried about.

“My sister,” I spat out. “Twin. We started Crescent together. You can call me Jax. So nice to meet you.”

I shook his hand, ignoring the lightning that shot up my arm with his palm pressed against mine.

With Dakota close enough for Jillian to catch the scent of his magic, her nose flared. She stared at me, her eyes wide enough to see her full irises, her pupils red when they caught the fluorescent lighting above, and she—sheknew.

Even if the way I looked at Dakota didn’t give me away, there was no keeping her in the dark now. I’d showered, but I was sure she could smell him on me if she tried

hard enough.

My jaw flexed as I avoided her demanding glare. “I would love to have a moment with Mr. Morris, to, ah, discuss strategy. If you would—” I held my hand to the door, and Maia smiled at Dakota—yes, a bit nervously.

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Jillian looked like she was considering planting her feet and refusing to leave, but Kent snorted on the way out. “I’ll get everyone coffee,” he called. “Requests, bossman?”

“Don’t care.”

“New guy?” Kent asked.

“Anything’s fine,” Dakota said. His voice broke a little. He was nervous—smelled like it, too. Sharp and worried and... was he embarrassed?

Okay, that didn’t seem like a guy with a grand master plan. But how could this be pure coincidence?

“Got it,” Kent said. “Two mega big cup soy mocha choka lattes or something.”

Jillian spared me one more worried look before she sighed. “I’ll make sure he gets you something normal.”

She left, shutting the door behind everyone, and I still waited until I knew they were out of earshot. For werewolves, that meant a long and awkward silence stretched between Dakota and me while he went pale, his heart rate sped, and my jaw started aching again.

“Last night,” I snipped when we were well and truly alone, “did you know who I was?”

“What?” Dakota started. “How the hell would I have known who you are?”

“Well, you showed up at Howl the night before starting here. Seems like a hell of a coincidence.”

“Right, sure. I totally knew who you were and where you’d be.” Dakota crossed his arms, leaning back enough that my wolf whined high in my head. Wrong direction. We were fucking this up.

“You could’ve.”

“Are you accusing me of something?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” I shot back. “Should I?”

5

Dakota

My eyes narrowed at the man before me. My boss. No, more like my boss’s boss. But also, a man accusing me of something fishy on my very first day on the job, just because I’d gone to a random club and... picked him up, of all the people in there, the day before I started working for him.

Okay, I could see where that looked weird.

But dammit, I hadn’t done anything wrong, and I wasn’t going to be accused of it, either.

“Just what am I supposed to have done, then? Is sleeping with a hot guy I met at a club a crime now? What, do you think I’m going to demand a raise because I know

you've not-so-secretly got a big dick?" My cheeks flushed even as I said the words, and I couldn't believe my own fucking audacity, but dammit, I hadn't done anything wrong.

I sure as hell wasn't going to let the first time I'd done anything for myself in my whole fucking life turn into a bad thing.

No. That wasn't allowed. It had all been so very good right up until I'd walked into the conference room. Even the ache in every step had been a delicious reminder of the night I'd had.

He frowned at me, like I was being deliberately obtuse. "Well, do you work for Igarashi? Are you?—"

I barked out a laugh. "What, just because I look Japanese? Newsflash, I grew up right here in the bay. My adoptive parents are whiter than you, and I've never even met anyone named Igarashi. My last name is Morris, for fuck's sake. I learned Japanese in college, not because I lived there." I threw my hands up. "Are you honestly expecting... what, corporate espionage? The world's clumsiest corporate espionage ever? You've met me. You know my name and control my future employment. What underhanded thing do you think I'm up to?"

Oh hell, he controlled my future employment.

The single man I'd ever had sex with in my life controlled my future employment.

I was fucked and a half.

He stopped and cocked his head at me, mildly confused, but didn't explain what it was he thought I was up to by having slept with him and then showing up to work.

I spread my arms wide as though to offer myself up as a target. “Well?”

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He opened his mouth and then closed it again, apparently dumbfounded by me. Or maybe by my being so confrontational. A lot of people were surprised by that, but if there was one thing my adopted father had taught me—and there probably was just the one, since he'd never been all that interested in me—it was that if someone punches you, you should always punch back. Letting someone strike out at you and doing nothing in return was just letting them know they could do it again whenever they wanted. That wasn't the life I wanted to live, so I never let a blow go unanswered.

When he continued to hesitate, I scoffed and shook my head. "Of course. Assuming the worst, but with nothing resembling an actual reason for it. Are we done, then?"

He gave a little nod, letting himself fall into his chair, and I turned and marched out.

Only, when I got to the hallway I realized that I didn't know what the fuck I was supposed to do next.

Had I just quit?

No, that wasn't a thing. I'd signed a contract, so unless someone from Crescent told me they were breaking my contract, I was fucking staying. Because I hadn't done a single damned thing wrong.

Well, maybe except that I'd berated the CEO of the company, but damn it, he'd had it coming. Accusing me of doing something wrong. Hell, I wasn't the one who'd slept with someone who was technically my work inferior; he was. Not that he'd done anything wrong either, since neither of us had known, but if one of us was in a more

tenuous position because of it, it was me, not him.

I turned a corner, still drifting aimlessly down the hall, and almost ran right into Maia and... and she was standing with Jax's twin sister, the COO. Fuck me entirely.

They both looked up at me, and Maia, bless her, smiled at me. "Hey, Dakota. I was just talking to Jillian about you. She's got an office set aside, and we'll figure out if it's the right spot pretty quickly. Crescent hasn't hired someone like you before, so this is all new territory, and we'll have to learn it together. You might end up in HR at some point, since a lot of the inter-company work with Igarashi will be done there, but you know how it is."

Her sunny smile made the pit in my stomach quiver. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to work with them. I wanted to be here. I wanted this job.

"That makes sense," I agreed, trying not to wince at the shake in my voice. I wasn't sure if it was remaining anger causing it, or terror that I was about to get fired on my first day, but either way it was weakness, and I hated showing my weaknesses to people.

Jillian sighed. "Whatever Jax said, ignore him. He's an ass."

Maia gave a nervous giggle, like the notion of calling her boss an ass both amused and terrified her, and then lowered her voice to a bare whisper. "He tries hard, he does. And he's great. He's just still... I mean, we all grew up with that 'I'm the alpha' bullshit. It's hard to just get past it. I'll bet especially for him."

The way she said it was almost like... like they had literally grown up together, the lot of them. I supposed it would explain some things, if the upper echelons of the company were made up of people who'd known each other all their lives.

Instead of demanding more information, which would be suspicious behavior, I just went along with it, nodding. “That does make sense. But he’s going to have to get over it with me. He might be my boss, but he’s not the boss of me.”

Jillian laughed aloud, a bright, brassy noise that made me fall instantly in love with her. This was a woman who had zero fear of being noticed and judged. I wanted to be just like that when I grew up. She leaned around to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leading me off in another direction. “I like you, Dakota. I think you’re going to do just fine around here. Let me show you the office we’ve set up. It’s a little pitiful since it smells like cleaning fluid and has as much personality as a gym sock, but I guess it’s your job to change that, not ours.”

The office was indeed empty and sort of lifeless, but it was also enormous. It was bigger than my bedroom in the apartment I shared with Donnie, and it had a window that overlooked the city. A window.

I stared at that for a moment, and Jillian just stood next to me, looking out the window as well. “Gorgeous, isn’t it?” When I looked over at her, she smiled. “I know, I know, we’re not supposed to like the city. Blah blah unnatural, blah blah bad smells and too many people. Well screw that. I fucking love it. This city is my freedom. We got out of Idaho. We escaped the woods, and now we get to decide our own fates. No asshole alpha telling us who to love and how to live. Just Jax, and he’s usually good about keeping his nose out of our personal lives, even if he does tend to be a little overprotective.”

And that... well, that just might explain a whole lot. Had they been a part of one of those doomsday prepper cults, living in a rural area with some guy telling them every single thing they had to do? That sounded like a nightmare. But it made sense that she would love the city as much as I did. Not that I’d ever seen a reason to favor the woods, but there was just something magnificent about concrete and stone and glass piercing the sky like a knife pointed at everything old and backward. Human

ingenuity was something to be proud of, even with all its faults and issues.

“I wouldn’t give it up for anything,” I agreed. “My parents moved out to the country when I graduated high school, but I never want to leave the city. Even if I end up broke, couch-surfing, and living on the sufferance of friends.”

She turned to grin at me. “Right? When we first got here, we shared apartments like we were the rats and encroaching on their territory. Four or five to a bedroom, everyone working or in school constantly, trading in and out of bedrooms whenever a spot was open to grab a nap. It was hell. And perfect, too.”

Wow. That was... I returned the smile and thought that maybe, just maybe, if I could convince Jax that I wasn’t a spy working for Igarashi, this was a place I could belong.

“Okay, let’s talk schedule,” she said, marching over to the desk and flipping open a laptop I hadn’t noticed before. “I made sure they connected you to my calendar and Maia’s, as well as the main Igarashi calendar, so all that is in here. You’ll want to connect it to your phone—do you need a company phone? If you don’t have unlimited data, you might want to get us to foot the bill for that. I’ll show you where tech is, and you can get anything you need from them.”

The next hour was a whirlwind of being shown around the building, introduced to people, and given so much information I was overwhelmed with just the idea of it all.

And I hadn’t even started my actual job yet.

We scarfed down some fabulous pho from a place on the corner next door, and by the time she started heading back to the conference room when we got back, I’d entirely forgotten that the first meeting with the people from Igarashi was that afternoon.

I was reminded of it with a vengeance when we walked into a silent room, and half

the conference table was filled with the most uncomfortable looking Japanese people I'd ever seen in my life. They looked like something out of a Matrix movie, all dressed alike in black suits with white shirts, looking starched and perfect. Not a single back touched a chair, even as comfy as those chairs looked. No, they were all sitting at attention, like they were going to have to leave at any moment.

The people I'd met that morning populated the other side of the table, Jax at one end, and at the other... a single Japanese man who actually looked comfortable with the situation.

“—a translator,” Jax was saying as we walked in, but he only barely glanced at us, keeping eye contact with the man at the other end of the table.

The man in question gave a personable smile and waved Jax away. “Oh, you don't need to hire a translator. We all read English well enough to follow the paperwork.”

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It seemed Igarashi, at least, knew the difference between a translator and an interpreter, but that wasn't going to help here, since I thought Jax was probably talking about having already hired me. And heck, I technically wasn't either of those things, even if I was capable of serving as either on a small scale.

The man smiled at us, and Jax introduced Jillian and then looked at me for a second, like maybe I was to introduce myself. Or maybe like he thought the people from Igarashi already knew me.

“And this is my assistant, Dakota Morris,” Jillian said, smiling and holding her hand out to Igarashi.

Interesting. Assistant? My office was right next to hers, but assistant was definitely not my job title. Still, the man had said he didn't want a translator, and he clearly didn't need an interpreter, so I simply smiled and stuck my hand out to shake with him.

“Igarashi Jiro,” he introduced himself.

When our hands touched, I had the momentary urge to leap back, because every part of me felt as though he were lunging toward me, but... he wasn't moving at all. So I covered it up, smiling and shaking his hand, burying my discomfort deep and ignoring it.

He seemed satisfied enough, so I assumed I hadn't done anything outwardly strange. Jillian, on the other hand, gave me a mildly concerned expression when she turned her back on him and took me down next to Jax to take our seats. I gave her a smile

and tried to pretend nothing was wrong.

But... nothing was wrong. Right? She let it go, thankfully, so I just sat in the chair she pointed me at and waited.

Jiro was the only person on Igarashi's side who spoke up as they began, the others continuing to sit there, stiff and formal and uncomfortable, staring at their counterparts. A few of the Crescent people were uncomfortable with this, like that fellow Kent, who'd gone for coffee, but Jax took it in stride.

He was actually... well, he was back to the smoothly confident sexy bastard he'd been last night. Like he was in charge of the room and he fucking knew it.

When they truly got down to business and started trading papers around the table, the people from Igarashi only spoke among themselves. And only in Japanese, not a single word of English.

That was... frankly, I didn't think insulting covered it. From a people who were usually quite concerned with good manners, as my experience with the Japanese told me they were, this was downright rude. I tried not to look at them, because the moment I did, the game would be up. It helped that initially, there was a lot of "this is the file you need," and "no, it's that one."

But then, when Jax asked Igarashi a question about an alteration they had made to one paper, one of them made a sour face and whispered, "This is what happens when you try to make a deal with beasts."

Beneath the table, I clenched my hands into fists, while trying to stay entirely impassive. The woman sitting next to Igarashi, perhaps the most starched and proper of the lot, turned and stared at the man who'd said it until he ducked his head, muttering, "Sorry, Ms. Igarashi."

Ahh, so she was also a member of the family that owned the company. At least she was against outright insulting people, even if she didn't seem to care about plain old rudeness.

Still, the others looked more amused than bothered, and the man who'd been speaking was just smiling as though nothing untoward had happened at all. He was explaining the rationale behind the change to Jax, something I couldn't begin to follow, but that I suspected was entirely bullshit anyway.

These people had no respect for Crescent at all, and the entire merger needed to be rethought, in my humble opinion. You should never work this closely with people who didn't respect you simply as human beings.

The meeting wrapped up after long, interminable hours that turned out to be only forty-five minutes, and the Igarashi people stood as one, turning and marching out as though they were a military formation, their leader stopping long enough to shake Jax's hand and say that he looked forward to the next few weeks of negotiations.

For a long, awkward moment after they left, the room was silent.

Then of course, as I was prone to doing, I stuck my ass right in the middle of things. "They're assholes and you should reconsider working with them."

Everyone turned and stared at me, a few of them open-mouthed.

I scowled. "Oh, come on. They wouldn't even deign to speak to you. Every one of them knew English. They were responding to what you said to each other." I pointed to a seat in the middle. "And that one called you all beasts. Beasts. Seriously, guys, that's fucked up."

Jax

Well, the day wasn't going how I'd envisioned it.

When I'd woken up that morning, I'd have been pretty damn eager to meet up with Dakota again. It wasn't possible, given how unlikely a mage was to walk into Howl twice, and how I hadn't asked for his phone number. I half suspected that if our paths ever did cross, he'd shrink and make a hasty escape. It was one thing for a mage to use a wolf; an entirely different thing to become friends. Rare was the mage who cared so little for their people's conventions that they were willing to get close to us.

There was only one mage I'd consider a friend, and the idea of crossing her scared the hell out of me.

So there I was, in a room full of mages, entirely out of my depth, and rendered even less competent by Dakota—though I wasn't entirely sure if he'd left me unbalanced by putting me in my place, or simply by showing up in the conference room that morning.

In either case, I managed to hold my shit together long enough to get through the meeting, and I didn't think it was a complete disaster. It'd been awkward, but what else had I expected?

Then, Dakota told us what we missed.

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I should've tried to learn more Japanese.

My university had required us to take four semesters of a foreign language, but I'd never beengood. In some of the more rural packs, like the one Jill and I grew up in, you were lucky if everybody spoke decent English, much less another language. As often as not, we'd gotten the point across with a snarl.

My brain didn't work with languages, but... on second thought, maybe that was a good thing. Now, I could decide how to deal with the information logically, instead of losing myself to instinct in the heat of the moment.

Already, Jillian was pursing her lips. While I might burn hot when insulted, she burned much, much longer.

"We don't need this," she said, meeting my eyes steadily. "Crescent's doing fine. We're doing fine."

But fine wasn't enough. I'd dragged our pack away from our home in Idaho, been unable to provide the life they deserved for so long, and damn it all, it wasn't happening again. I knew how fast the field could change, how quickly we could get swallowed up by some other tech firm. The second the American mage families figured out how to program, they'd try and overtake us. The only thing that'd kept us afloat this long was that the supernatural denizens of the world didn't usually innovate in tech fields. Who knew how long that'd hold?

We had to innovate. Continue to grow. Protect the pack.

Kent scoffed, rounding on me. “What’d you expect from this? You didn’t bring in Igarashi with the assumption that they’d put aside eons of bullshit for a business deal. Whocareswhat they think of us, if we get their money?”

“Their infrastructure,” I corrected.

“You could make your own,” Dakota suggested.

But that’d take longer than we had, and working worldwide would be smoother if we showed we could collaborate globally. We weren’t just animals hiding out in the woods. We had manners.

We were respectable, damn it.

I sighed. “Kent’s right.”

Jillian’s eyebrows shot up. Maia chewed her lip. Even Dakota was looking at me like I’d lost my damn mind.

I folded my hands on the table in front of me and leaned against it until the top edge bit into my forearms. “They may not respectus, but Igarashi wouldn’t be here if they didn’t respect our business. We don’t need them to like us; we need them to help us tap a new marketplace. It won’t be the first time we’ve had to prove our value to move another step up the ladder. We can and have done it before.”

Still, no one seemed swayed by the case I made. Maia shrank, Jillian and Dakota looked incredulous, and Kent looked smugger than he had before. I hadn’t changed any minds.

But I had the final say.

“We move ahead with this deal in good faith, and hope they’ll meet us there. That’s all.”

“Fine,” Jillian snipped. She shoved out of her chair, and Dakota scrambled out behind her.

When Kent got up, he came over to clap me on the shoulder. “You’re making the right call, boss.”

I hoped so, but at the end of the day, I didn’t give a single damn what the Igarashi mages thought of us if working with them made my pack more secure.

When I left the conference room, there was one more matter I needed to settle for the day. Sure, I was exhausted, but... well, clearly, Dakota wouldn’t tell us the truth of what Igarashi had been saying if he were working for them. All he’d had to do to take advantage of us was keep his mouth shut.

Instead, he hadn’t hesitated to throw them under the bus to make sure we knew the truth. He’d even suggested rethinking whether we wanted to work with them. No ally of the Igarashi Corporation would have done that.

Tail between my legs, I walked past Jillian’s office to find Dakota’s door wide open.

I knocked anyway, and Dakota’s head popped up from behind his desk, littered with boxes of tech and supplies he hadn’t had a chance to sort out yet.

I hated how he looked at me then, his face paling, his eyes wide. Was he afraid of me? Now? The night before, he hadn’t been too scared to go home with me, to spend hours stretched out in my bed.

It couldn’t be now that he got scared. Ashamed of letting a werewolf so close? Sure,

I'd buy that, but not fearful.

"Listen," he started, edging toward the front of his office chair, "I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn or?—"

When I held up a hand, Dakota's mouth snapped shut.

"Do you mind if I go first?"

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He shook his head. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he looked like a guy who thought he was about to get fired.

Of course he did. I was his superior—okay, only on paper and only at Crescent, but still. What CEO wouldn't at least consider getting rid of the guy he'd inadvertently banged, if only to avoid drama and distraction?

The answer was... this kind of CEO. A werewolf one. Blurred lines were kind of a thing when animal instinct warred with modern ethics for supremacy in the same brain.

With a sigh, I scratched the back of my neck. This was... not my favorite thing in the world to do, but who liked apologizing? Maybe alphas least of all, but we were the ones who most needed to take accountability when we fucked up. I'd seen firsthand what happened when we weren't able to, and I'd sworn to myself that I was never going to be like that, even before we left Idaho.

"I'm genuinely sorry for the way I acted toward you this morning. I haven't been at my best—honestly? In a while. Last night, Jillian suggested I go out and blow off some steam, because I've been twisted up about this meeting with Igarashi. And I guess I just had a hard time believing you'd shown up at Howl on your own, that you'd go home with me, trust me with—" I looked significantly at him. I didn't want to say it was wrong for him to have an Awakening with a werewolf; he'd get enough of that from his own people, and really, I'd been honored. And sure, confused.

At least Dakota was no longer looking at me like I was about to toss him out on his ass. Instead, his brow was furrowed, his lips were twisted up in a frown. Were his lips

always so luscious, or were they slightly bruised?

This was not the moment to think about kissing him, but my eyes dropped to his mouth and my thoughts drifted.

I shook myself out of it when color returned to his cheeks.

“Sorry—you’re surprised I went home with you?” Dakota gave me an incredulous once-over that practically had me wagging my tail.

“A little,” I admitted with a grimace.

“Uhhuh.”

“Yeah, so point is, I’d already been anxious about this meeting for a while, and seeing you this morning, in this context, triggered a lot of my own insecurities that have nothing whatsoever to do with you. It wasn’t fair for me to heap them on you like that. I was wrong. I hope that we can move past it, and I’d love for you to?”

Stay? In the office?

Strangely enough, yes. Just being able to keep an eye on him satisfied the wolfish part of my brain that already said he was mine. Didn’t matter that he couldn’t be; I’d take what I could get.

“If you stay, I won’t?”

Dakota pushed out of his chair and walked around the far side of his desk. I stared as he went for his door, and I half expected him to tell me to get the fuck out, so I had only seconds to make my case.

“I won’t make the same mistake twice,” I promised, just as he pushed the door. It shut with a click.

When he turned toward me, he was biting his lip. He took a halting step my way.

“I really am sorry.” Now that he was closer, I was practically whispering.

He looked up at me for a second, and I couldn’t tell if it was frustration or amusement that sparkled in his brown eyes until he?—

He pushed himself up on the balls of his feet, dragged me down by my collar, and kissed me.

7

Dakota

How was apologizing hot?

Maybe it was just that no one had ever seriously apologized to me before. Oh sure, everyone gets that everyday “oops, sorry” when someone bumps into them, but no one I’d ever been close to had apologized to me. Not my parents or Donnie or... well, it wasn’t as though I’d had any other friends or family, not really.

And here was this gorgeous, perfect, intelligent man telling me he had been wrong, and he was sorry. An alpha male, as his sister and Maia had called it. I didn’t really like the term, since every guy I’d ever known who’d called himself an alpha male had mostly just been a jerk, but somehow Jax wasn’t that. Alpha seemed to mean something different here, to these people, than I was used to.

Jax was most concerned about taking care of his people. That was why he’d accepted

the Igarashi employees being complete fucking assholes to him. Because he wanted to take care of his own people, to make the merger happen and make the company as successful as he could. He'd been as insulted as anyone else at the table when I'd explained what had happened—I'd seen the momentary flash of rage in his eyes. But he'd swallowed it down and made the decision he'd thought was best for his business, rather than for his pride.

I disagreed with him, yes, but it was still an admirable position.

And now, there he was in my office apologizing to me, admitting that he'd been wrong when he'd assumed the worst of me.

If he got any more perfect, I'd be convinced he was a figment of my imagination.

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Especially when I tugged him against me and he didn't hesitate. He kissed me back like he was starved and I was a steak dinner, his whole body curling around me, pulling me tight against him, and holding me there as his tongue plunged into my mouth, exploring me as thoroughly as he'd done the night before. He kissed me until I couldn't breathe, leaning us both back against my desk and just... fuck, but he was perfect.

Without even thinking about it, I pushed back and dropped to my knees, my hands falling naturally to the zipper of his pants. It was ridiculous. It was a terrible idea. It had almost gotten us into a fight that very morning, the fact that we'd had sex.

But there I was, opening his fly and reaching into his black boxer briefs to pull out his already straining erection. Fuck, but that was huge.

It probably wasn't a good idea to demand that he bend me over my own desk and fuck me till I forgot my own name, but damn if I didn't want to do exactly that.

But no. I'd wanted the chance to suck his cock last night, and here was my opportunity. I could see if I was any good at it.

I hadn't even touched it with more than my hand yet, and he was looking at me like I was the answer to the riddle of the sphinx or something, so that was pretty fucking gratifying. Tentatively, I wet my lips and leaned in. Kissing it was probably a little... well screw it. I wasn't in the mood to be self-conscious.

I let my tongue reach out and licked just the tip. Salty. A little bitter. Nothing strange. Just skin. Soft, velvety skin over a hard cock, and for some reason, it was the most

interesting texture I'd ever had near my lips.

I'd always been one of those guys who chewed on anything in my hands, from pens to fingernails, so exploring a cock with my mouth? That was no kind of hardship at all.

Slowly, I swallowed him down, just a little at a time, exploring the taste and texture of him with my tongue.

Above me, Jax let his head fall back, gasping for breath. "Jill's going to fucking murder me," he whispered, but he didn't try to stop me. When his head came forward and he met my eye, he flashed that toothy smile of his. "Totally worth it."

So I went right on, exploring his cock like I owned it. Testing what made him gasp, and what made him clench his fists tight and most importantly, what finally made him break and grab my hair with a hand, his hips bucking helplessly forward as he fucked into my mouth, muttering my name.

Oh hell yes. I sucked my cheeks in, giving an experimental pull like he was a straw, and it drew another quiet groan. "Dakota. Fuck, yes."

Yes indeed. I dove down all the way, holding my breath and trying to take him all the way in, but of course, almost choked instead, because I wasn't like, the cocksucking savant or something. That would have been nice, but this was okay. I just had to cough a second, blinking away tears, before swallowing him back down and trying again. I'd never been one of those people to whom skills came easy. I'd have to work at learning this.

That was okay, because Jax, it turned out, was a pretty fucking patient subject. He loosened his grip on my hair, still panting, mumbling yet another apology, this time for in case he'd hurt me. I looked back up at him and, since my mouth was full and I

couldn't tell him I was fine, winked.

That seemed to work well enough, as he relaxed back into his lean against my desk and let me continue. It only took a few more tries before I figured out that holding my breath was the problem, and I had to—slowly—breathe through my nose while I worked his dick.

Before long, he was back to making these tiny, aborted movements with his hips, like he so badly wanted to thrust into my mouth, fuck me mercilessly, but was holding himself back.

There was a quiet gasp, and I wondered if that was going to be it, but no. “Dakota,” he whispered, tapping my shoulder, pushing me back slightly.

As much as I wanted to stubborn it out and see if I could manage, I let him push me back instead. He looked down at me, his eyes flashing in the office lights—always red, so weird—and grabbed his cock in his own hand, jerking it roughly. It only took three strokes before he was coming, all over my face.

Fuck, why was that hot? Porn, probably, but who cared? Still hot.

He tried to be quiet as he came on me, then cupped my face in one hand. “Fuck,” he whispered. “I am so screwed.”

I grabbed a couple of tissues from the dispenser Jillian had been nice enough to leave on my desk, cleaning myself up and smiling at him. “I mean, you could just not tell her.”

He gave me an odd look, like I was being naive, and maybe I was. Maybe the office walls were paper-thin, and everyone in the whole place had heard what we'd just done.

Oops.

I smiled up at him, tossing the tissues into the trash bin and shrugging. “Worth it.”

He sighed, as though admitting defeat, and nodded. “Worth it.”

8

Jax

Once was an act of rebellion by a mage sick of his own people’s nonsense.

Twice, and I was beginning to think Dakota liked me.

It was a far cry from how I’d imagined my day would go, especially that morning, but watching Dakota spread his sweet lips around the head of my cock had wiped the record clean of all the day’s missteps and disappointments.

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With my come on his face, I wanted to lick him clean myself, press my scent into his skin with my tongue, claim him as mine. But those were the instincts that had convinced mages that we were beasts in the first place, governed by the wolves inside us rather than logic or any kind of modern decency.

Yes, Jillian was going to kill me and make my pelt into a rug. I was crossing every fucking line that existed.

Problem was, I wasn't about to stop.

"Come here." I helped Dakota to his feet and kissed him, hard, plunging into his mouth and licking the taste of my cock off his tongue. When I nudged his cheek with my nose, he smelled like me, and my hair stood on end.

"You did so fucking good," I growled against his lips. He whined, and when he opened his eyes, his pupils were blown wide and dark.

I reached for his belt, giving it a tug before pausing. "Can I?"

Dakota bit his lip, looking tempting as a cream-filled donut, and nodded. With his belt open, his pants spread wide, I slipped my hand down the back, over his briefs, dragging the tip of my middle finger between his cheeks. He whined when I found the dip of his ass and circled my finger.

"Loved being inside you last night," I whispered in his ear, licking a stripe up his neck to nibble his ear at the top. "You felt so fucking good for me."

I turned him around, keeping one hand down the back of his pants as I caged him in against his desk. I reached with the other to ease his cock out of his trousers, and it stood ramrod straight over the dark wood tabletop.

“I want to make you come again.” Fuck, I could lose myself in the sweet scent of his shampoo just behind his ear when I nuzzled in close. “Think you can do that for me?”

“Y–Yes,” he rasped, rocking his hips between my hands, shoving against the finger teasing his ass and my loose grip around his dick.

It wasn’t enough, and if we weren’t in the office, I’d hold him there at the edge and tease him for hours.

Right then, that... wasn’t the best idea. Almost tempting enough that it didn’t matter, but even if I didn’t worry I’d get in trouble at my own company—no. Dakota didn’t need that much attention. Already, every wolf in the place was going to smell my scent all over him.

I curled my fingers tighter, let the side of my pointer drag across the ridge of his sensitive head. He moaned when I brushed my fingertip over his slit to spread the drop that’d pearled there.

Every stroke, his breathing got more ragged, the movements of his body tighter and less controlled. I could smell in the warm cloud of his scent how close he was, hear it in his racing heartbeat.

Again, that feeling—almost like the magic of a shift—squeezed in my chest and tugged. Was that something with all mages, or just Dakota?

I growled against his cheek, and he turned toward me so easily, seeking out my lips. Before I knew it, I was kissing him, sloppy and rough, while I jerked him faster.

“Bite me,” I rasped.

“What?”

“I want you to bite me when you come.”

Dakota’s eyes darkened before I could even worry that I was asking him for too much. Wasn’t like I was asking for a mating mark—wasn’t like he could even give me one. But yeah, I wanted his teeth against my skin, his moan cried out against my flesh, when he came apart.

His breath caught, and I felt his cock flex in my grip. Catching a whimper, he pressed it into my neck with his lips first, then teeth. The world sparked white for a second, and I cursed, even as his dick pulsed, pleasure working through him and streaking his desk with white.

“Good boy,” I rumbled, nuzzling his temple with the ridge of my nose.

Dakota was panting, gripping the edge of his desk, and as he came down, I slipped a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped his desk clean before tucking it back away.

Carefully, I turned him around and picked him up by the waist. He gave a tiny effort to hop onto the edge of it, but I was there to make sure he made it.

“You okay?” I asked, dipping my head to search his deep brown eyes while I fastened his belt again.

Dakota’s smile was dizzy and sweet. “Yup. Good.Su-oo-pergood.”

“Mmm,” I hummed, pleased, raking my fingers through his hair. It was only a little disheveled, but I liked it this way. A warm kind of fondness suffused my chest when I

saw him messy.

“Let me take you out to dinner tonight.”

His brow furrowed and he blinked at me. “What?”

“Dinner? Food?”

More owlsh blinking from the most darling mage this side of anywhere.

“You can say no,” I promised. “Any time. For any reason or none at all. I know this is... complicated, and I don’t want to pressure you into anything you don’t want to do. Say the word, and you won’t have to deal with me at all here. But I’d like to go to dinner with you, so if that’s something you’d want?—”

“Yeah,” Dakota said, smiling. “That sounds great. Let’s do it. Dinner. Yum.”

I laughed, which was about the last thing I’d expected to do when I’d knocked on his open door, but it was all the sweeter for it.

9

Dakota

Just a few minutes after Jax left me on my own—a short enough time for me to still have a ridiculous, goofy smile on my face—Jillian came into my office with a stack of papers.

She paused in the doorway, her nostrils flaring, and sighed, her eyes slipping shut for a moment.

“I don’t want to know,” she said, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “But two things. First of all, this is a dangerous game, so be careful. Second, he may

be an alpha asshole, but he's my brother, so he's my alpha asshole. Don't mess with him. You have the power in this situation. Please don't abuse it."

For a moment, all I could do was sit there and blink at her.

I had the power? But he way outranked me; he could fire me if I pissed him off. Except, of course, that had the potential to be a PR nightmare, both within the company and then in the press, if it came out that the CEO had slept with an employee and then fired them. I still thought she was exaggerating my power in this a little, but that did bring things into sharper focus. I wasn't some innocent little red riding hood being pursued through the woods by the big bad wolf.

We were both adults, and this was a dangerous thing to do.

But Jax was... He was big and gorgeous and rich, yes. All the things Donnie said one should look for in a boyfriend. But what was really sitting in my head rent-free was how he'd come to me, head bowed, and apologized. He'd been sorry for reacting before thinking, and believing ill of me without proof. More importantly, he'd said it. He'd put himself in that position.

Somehow, that was the sexiest thing of all.

Okay, no, the sexiest thing of all had been when he'd called me a good boy in that gruff post-sex growly voice of his. I shivered, then remembered I was in the room with his sister. Oops.

"I like him," I told her earnestly. "He asked me to have dinner with him, and I... your brother is a good guy, and I want to get to know him better."

For a second, she looked at me, the folders in her hands hanging limp and her eyes wide, as though I'd said I planned on taking her brother out for a motor-oil smoothie

and garbage burgers, rather than saying that I liked him and wanted to date him. Was it really such an impossible thought?

Surely, she'd dated before, and knew what a catch her brother was.

She finally shook off her surprise and came to sit in the chair in front of my desk, laying out the folders in front of me. "I... I'm going to trust you on this. Both of you. Him because I don't have a choice and you... I like you, Dakota. I want to keep liking you. It's good to have someone else in the company who isn't willing to sacrifice their dignity for a business deal. Jax is... when we left Idaho, he promised he'd take care of us. He still takes full personal responsibility for that promise, so even when it puts him in a bad position, he'll do whatever he has to, to make sure the company thrives."

That fit with what I'd seen, and with his acceptance of the attitude of the Igarashi employees, but it also seemed strange. Why would such a powerful man accept that kind of situation? Yes, she was explaining it with a promise he'd made, but it was still odd. Most people would have still put their egos... somewhere on the list of importance. Jax seemed to have deleted his from the equation entirely.

"I'm not here to take advantage of him or this situation," I promised her. "I like him. He seems to be a good guy, and you might be his sister, but you can see. You know he's objectively gorgeous."

She scrunched her nose up at me, as if they didn't share the same classically straight bone structure, deep brown hair so thick you had to sink your hands into it, or glistening green eyes. "I guess."

We both laughed, and the tension in the room broke. I could finally take a real breath.

"Okay," she said with a sigh, then waved a hand like she could dispel the previous

conversation altogether. “So these are printed copies of the Igarashi documents, along with our translations of them. After this morning, I think you’ll understand why I’m a little dubious about their good intentions. I’d like you to go through them and note anywhere you think the translations are off.”

“Sure, no problem at all.” A sensible choice, too, after the way they had acted. She didn’t need me to tell her that, though. Jillian Fyse clearly knew just what she was doing. I flipped through the pages, taking them all in, frowning. “It’s going to take me a few days to get through it all. Do you have a time frame in mind?”

“A few days is just fine, Dakota. We’re not signing anything this week. We’re supposed to be hammering out details with them now, so this is perfect timing for a thorough review. And thank you. I know Jax isn’t taking your input into account like we both think he should, but there’s still time. You and I have seen the issues. So you and I need to keep an eye on Igarashi, and see if they try to pull any slick moves with the contracts.” She pushed herself out of the chair with a deep, meaningful sigh, shaking her head. “I’m not going to let them take advantage of my brother’s need to care for us.”

I gave her a decisive nod. “We won’t let that happen. I won’t let anything slide. Be prepared for pages of notes.”

She grinned at me, nodding. When she got to the door, she paused, leaning in the frame. “When, um. When we get to the signing. Maybe you’d consider being on the lookout for any... you know.” She wiggled her fingers in what looked like an approximation of stealthy jazz hands.

I had no idea what the hell stealth jazz hands meant, but before I could ask, she ducked her head, not meeting my eye, and practically ran away.

What the heck?

I shook off the confusion, making up my mind to ask her what she'd been talking about next time I saw her, but for now, I had work to do. Lots and lots of work. Which, it turned out, was a good thing, because whomever they had gotten to translate the contracts had done a poor job of it. They weren't outright wrong that I saw, but a lot of the subtleties of the language had been lost in the translation.

Also, I'd never in my life seen anything like them.

Instant delivery systems? What was that?

In part, this was an issue because I still had no idea what the hell Crescent did. The contracts implied that they were sort of like that company named for a river in South America that everyone used. But I'd never even heard of them and couldn't find a website. If they were so diversified, how was that possible? Because the contracts had sections involving every aspect of a business like that. Acquisitions, warehousing and storage, sales, taxes and tariffs of all kinds in various countries, shipping... and the shipping was the weirdest. They named companies I'd never heard of doing deliveries. What the heck was UFD? I even tried to Google it, but found nothing useful.

Still, the work took all my concentration, and I was madly scribbling notes on my tenth sheet of paper when motion in the corner of my eye caught my attention. The door hadn't opened. How had...

I blinked in shock, staring at... at the stapler on my desk.

Okay, no, at the stapler that should be on my desk, but which was instead hovering three inches above my desk.

I snatched it out of the air, opening it up, looking it over, trying to find whatever mechanism had allowed that to happen, but there was nothing. It was just a stapler. I was still staring at it when on the desk, the pen I'd dropped slowly lifted into the air.

I dropped the stapler and shoved the pen onto the desk.

There was no way. That wasn't...

It was just a pen. It was my pen, one I'd brought with me, because I was picky about pens. It wasn't able to hover on its own.

Wildly, I looked around for a fan, or maybe an air vent, that could explain this. Could a fan or an air vent explain it? Almost certainly not, especially since I couldn't feel any movement in the air around me.

As I sat there holding my pen against the desk, the damned stapler started to hover again. And then the papers. Not like they were being blown upward, but more like they were being lifted on strings. No blowing. No bending. Just lifting.

What in the actual fuck?

I wasn't breathing, couldn't drag air into my lungs.

What was happening?

A voice sounded right outside the door—Jax's voice, talking to someone about... about quitting time. I looked down at my watch, which did indeed say it was a minute to five. As the doorknob of my office started to turn, I grabbed the stapler out of the

air, and then shoved at the papers wildly with both hands, trying to force them back onto the desk.

And then Jax walked in.

10

Jax

I opened the door to a maelstrom.

A whole stack of papers flew into the air with a rustle like a shuffled card deck. A stapler shot up and hit the ceiling before clattering back onto Dakota's desk.

Then a pen shot through the air and stuck in the drywall by the door like a dart.

Dakota had jumped out of his desk chair and was standing there, bent over it, hands pinning down his keyboard and the box of tissues. He was staring at me with wide, terrified eyes.

Fair enough. He could've taken out somebody's eye with that pen trick.

But there was no reason for us to lose our heads. He didn't mean it, or he wouldn't have looked so horrified. I shut the door behind me so nobody else would see him lose control. It wasn't like every wolf's first shift went easy. Why should mages be any different?

"You okay?"

All right, I was man enough to admit that I was keeping more distance than I strictly needed to, but Dakota looked like he was about to come apart, and mages were?—

Well, the whole reason they had such disdain for us was that we were governed by natural magic, not in charge of it ourselves. I couldn't imagine a mage who'd lost control would be particularly happy about it.

“Am I okay?” Dakota’s voice was high and choked.

Clearly, I’d asked the wrong thing.

“I mean... I’m sorry. I don’t really know how this usually goes. Can you call your guardian?” Maybe this had been too early to talk about dinner. I didn’t know if it took a couple hours or a couple weeks for a mage to come into their power after their Awakening, but it clearly wasn’t going as smoothly as one might hope.

“My what?”

“Isn’t that what you all call the, I don’t know”—I circled my hand in the air—“the person who helps you learn to manage your magic?”

“Mymagic?”

“I mean”—I glanced significantly at the pen in the wall—“yes?”

With a hard thump, his elbows hit his desk as he bent in half over it.

“What the fuck is happening?” Dakota pushed his fingers through his thick, dark hair. The heels of his palms pressed against his eyes, and he groaned like he was in physical pain. That wasn’t a thing, right? Surely his own magic couldn’t hurt him.

Plus or minus getting impaled by the sharp nib of an ink pin.

Okay, I didn’t actually know if his magic could hurt him, burn through him as easily

as it burned through his enemies. But surely not so soon after his Awakening.

“I assume you mean that in some kind of... of non-literal way?” I wasn’t really sure how to ask what I thought I was asking because—because that was ridiculous, right? He was overwhelmed because he didn’t have as much control as he expected, not because he didn’t know what was going on.

He blinked his enormous dark eyes at me, looking almost desperate. The stapler started to lift off the desk again, and he snatched it and shoved it back down. “No, I do not. I definitely do not mean it in a non-literal way. What the fuck is going on? Is this some kind of new technology? Levitating office supplies? Is that what Crescent makes? I can’t find our website, you know. Like it doesn’t even exist. But it can’t be levitating office supplies, because that’s my pen.” He motioned toward the pen in the wall with his stapler. He turned back to me, panting, panicked, and almost ready to bolt.

Fuck.

He had no idea.

“Well, going out tonight seems like not the best plan,” I said, trying to sound cheerful, trying to sound like I knew exactly what I was doing, but really trying to figure out what the fuck came next.

He didn’t know.

How the fuck could he not know?

Mages were notoriously power hungry. They didn’t just abandon one of their own when they could instead use them to grow their own influence.

It didn't happen. No way had Dakota wandered into Howl, with all its protections, accidentally.

Except—if he had latent magic of his own, the wards wouldn't keep him out.

I had Awakened a mage who didn't even know what he was giving up when we?—

Oh fuck.

“What if we order in?” I suggested, fighting hard to keep the gut-churning panic out of my voice.

Dakota looked up at me like I'd gone crazy, his brows forming little “u”s of concern.

“For dinner,” I clarified.

He still looked pale, but he'd feel better after eating. Everybody felt better after eating.

“Okay,” he said, still looking rather ill.

I opened a delivery app on my phone and handed it to him. “Pick whatever you want.”

For a whole minute, he just stared at the screen. His thumb flicked across the glass, but he didn't pick anything.

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“I could really go for a burger,” I suggested. Which had absolutely nothing to do with me wanting to eat a whole motherfucking cow so I could stop thinking about how badly I’d fucked up.

“Burger,” Dakota echoed. “Burger sounds good.”

He put his in the cart, handed it back to me, and I got the biggest, most double-down deluxe monstrosity I could find before putting the order in and leading him over to the couch against the wall. I turned around one of the chairs in front of the desk and sat there.

Dakota gave me a haunted stare.

For a few long, deep breaths, I couldn’t speak.

I didn’t want to do this, didn’t want to be his entry point to the supernatural world, but I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t leave him in the dark when I’d been the one dragging him into all of this. “What do you think I am?”

“A... guy?” Dakota grimaced. “CEO of Crescent? What are you talking about?”

“I’m a werewolf.”

Dakota snorted. It sounded a little wet. His eyes were suspiciously red. “Shut up.”

I held his eye, leaning forward, elbows on my knees. “I’m a werewolf.”

In my head, the wolf that was always prowling rushed forward as I pulled back the cover on him. My teeth sharpened. My eyes flashed red and held.

“Fuck!” Dakota scrambled back on the couch, pulling his feet off the floor.

That was more like the reaction I’d expected from a mage, but when the wolf shrank back from his fear, slipping beneath the human mask I wore most of the time, Dakota’s brow furrowed. He sank back into the couch. His feet returned to the floor, and he leaned in to get a better look at me.

“Werewolves—that’s a thing. A real thing.” Tentatively, he reached out and touched my face. Maybe he was searching for the sharper features of a predator, but his fingers were still gentle. They lingered against my cheek, and it felt a little less like the world was ending.

I smiled. “Werewolves are definitely real.”

“And so is magic.” He still sounded like he didn’t entirely believe it, but he couldn’t think I was playing a joke on him. Honestly, I wasn’t that clever.

In fact, what I most wanted to do was call Jillian and tell her I’d fucked up and needed her to fix it. She’d sort everything out, make up for my fuckery.

She was the smart one.

The only thing that kept me from dragging her in to help was staring into Dakota’s eyes and knowing that, well, at least I was familiar. Kind of. “Yeah. It’s real.”

And he had it. Magic. Enough to turn his writing instruments into lethal weapons.

I’d been a fucking fool to assume he’d been at Howl of his own free will, knowing

fully what he was about.

I sighed, my shoulders sinking deep. “I... I really thought you knew. Regular humans can’t get into Howl, can’t find its website, let alone get in the door, so I figured, if you were there, you knew what you were doing.”

He blinked. “How the hell would I know about werewolves and magic?”

I shrugged, the feeling heavy, like I was a garbage can absolutely full to the brim of trash. “Most mages do. I’ve never heard of a magic family letting go of one of their own. They like to keep a firm grasp of whatever power is born to their line. But you said you’re...”

“Adopted?”

“Yeah. Your parents aren’t?—”

“Magic?” Dakota laughed. “No. They aredefinitelynot magic.”

Dakota was impossible. Not his demeanor—no, that seemed sad and lost—just that he was a mage who’d wandered into Howl without even realizing what he’d done, that he’d been hired by our company without realizing we weren’t human, that he was there in his office instead of tucked away in some faux French chateau hidden behind a hundred different wards with a dozen other mages who’d all, invariably, look down their noses at him for—for me. For letting a “beast” be there for his Awakening. All that was impossible.

Yet there we were, trapped in agonized silence, when my phone buzzed to let me know our burgers had arrived.

I pulled it out of my pocket and waved it in the air. “I’ll go grab our food. Sit tight.”

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I took the elevator, and it still wasn't fast enough for my liking, but in just a couple minutes, I was back with a paper bag stuffed with burgers and fries, a tray of sodas in the other hand.

I pressed the bag into his hands before sitting beside him on the couch. One leg, I bent so I could twist all the way around to face him. He was only picking at fries, too nervous to dive in, but I'd never been hungrier in my life. I went for the container with my burger and balanced it in my lap.

"Give me tonight," I said, setting it down on my thighs.

"What for?" Finally, he looked at me.

He didn't glare. He should've been glaring.

I'd have been angry, in his shoes.

"I'll... figure this out," I promised. "I can't help you control magic. Mine doesn't work like that, and I don't know shit all about spells or anything, but I know more than nothing. Newly Awakened mages will usually have a guardian, often an older member of their family, to help them. I'll make some calls, see if anyone can help."

Dakota sucked in his cheeks and stared at his lap. "You don't have to do that."

I flinched, looking down. "It's not a have to thing." That burger was calling me when I flipped back the cardboard lid. It was wrapped in paper, translucent with grease, and right then, I wanted nothing more than to shove the whole thing in my mouth.

Glutting myself on a chargrilled patty would be less devastating than what I had to say next.

“You wouldn’t be in this position if not for me,” I admitted with a sigh. “I let my ego get the better of me last night. I thought—I don’t know. I thought you knew what you were doing. Maybe you were feeling rebellious, or your family had set their sights on someone old and unappealing for your Awakening.”

“My what?”

Despite the mess I’d made, I smiled at the dissatisfied wrinkle on his nose. “When a mage loses their virginity, it awakens their magic. So, it’s your Awakening.”

“Ew?”

I shrugged. “Mages aren’t always as clever as they think.”

“You can say that again.” Dakota was back to turning over an especially soggy fry in his fingers.

“Listen”—I scooted closer and bumped his knee with mine—“if I’d realized you were in the dark, I wouldn’t have—well, I’d have done a lot of things differently. You should’ve been well informed about your Awakening before it happened, been able to make clear decisions about it and who you wanted there.”

Dakota huffed. “Iwantedyou.”

In that moment, glaring at me, he was petulant and perfect. I wanted to believe him, but it wasn’t that simple and he couldn’t let me off the hook so easily.

“And I want you, Dakota. But what I’m trying to say is—I’ve never been with a

mage, much less Awakened one of you. I was flattered and got ahead of myself, but just because I'm not the best prepared to help you now doesn't mean I'll leave you to navigate it on your own. We'll figure it out."

He let out a heavy sigh. "Okay."

Good. At least he'd let me try and make amends for being so fucking dense when it mattered. Of course a mage hadn't knowingly picked me for his Awakening, and worrying about how I'd pressed advantages I didn't even realize I'd had was going to keep me up late into the night.

Once I finished my burger, Dakota folded his bag without ever taking his out. "I'm not actually hungry right now. I'll, uh, take this home."

"How about I have Charles drive you?"

He arched a brow. "Why?"

"To avoid any magical mishaps on public transportation."

"And what if I have a magical mishap and flip your car?"

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you tried not to flip my car, but if you do, it's okay. Charles is pretty hardy. He's a fae. They're difficult to pin down." In fact, I was pretty sure that, in the event of an accident, we'd find Charles mysteriously safe, standing on the sidewalk nearby, not a scratch on him. Fae were strange, and their rules didn't work within the strict confines of what most of us considered reality.

"Fuck me," Dakota breathed. "A fae? He looks..."

"Human? Most of us do."

Dakota sighed, sinking into the couch and throwing his head back. He looked young like that—young and overwhelmed—but when I held my hand out to help him up, he took it.

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“Just don’t kill my driver.”

Dakota’s face screwed up like he was caught between laughing and being ill. “I’ll do my best.”

11

Dakota

Magic.

I was magic.

Jax was a werewolf. I’d have still been laughing about the very idea, but he’d fucking changed, right there in front of my eyes. I hadn’t been popping hallucinogens, so there was no reason for me to have seen a werewolf who wasn’t there.

But that meant that Jillian was a werewolf too.

Alpha. Maia and Jillian had been going on about Jax being an alpha. They hadn’t been talking about some chinless brony red-pill crap. They’d been talking about a real-life alpha wolf. Were werewolf packs actually organized like that? I seemed to remember hearing that real wolf packs didn’t have an alpha and all that, but what the hell did I know? I hadn’t even known werewolves were real six hours earlier.

I dutifully stuffed all the paperwork and my notes into my attaché case before heading down to meet Charles at the car. He gave me a game smile, nodding as he

opened the door for me.

The divider in the back of the limo was down, so when he got into the driver's seat, I moved up near him. "So. Not to be nosy, but... you're really a fae?"

He looked back at me, eyes twinkling with something that looked like mirth. "Yup. Not like one of those fancy court fae or anything. I'm just a delivery boy. Me and Jax hammered out the deal for my people to work for his, because we've known each other forever."

"Your... people? Work for Crescent?"

His smile turned into a grin. "Universal Fairy Delivery, you know? The whole business was my sister's idea. She's a genius. An entrepreneur. The high courts always said we were useless, we lesser fae. But you know what we're bloody good at? Running the hell away from those overpowered bastards. We're fucking fast. So if you want something delivered ten minutes ago, we're your people."

He was so proud, I couldn't tell him that I didn't know a thing about fae hierarchy. I hadn't even known fae existed until Jax had said Charles was fae, and I wouldn't have believed it if Jax hadn't proven beyond all doubt that werewolves were real already.

To say nothing of the disaster of my office supplies deciding to take flight. My poor pen was ruined, and I could only hope I didn't end up with a replay of the same disaster at home. I could have hurt someone with a projectile like that, since it had gone all the way into the drywall in my office, leaving a neat round hole in the wall next to my door.

"It sounds like you getting together with the werewolves worked out well for both of your people," I said.

He rolled his eyes, nodding. “Yep. They’re just like us among the earth-native magic folk. Treated like rubbish just because they are magic, rather than controlling magic.” He leaned toward me, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “I think it’s because the others are afraid of them, personally. Not like us fae. The high fae could kill us dead. They’re more powerful than us, period. But the wolves? One good bite and any mage isn’t a mage anymore. Scares the hell out of them. Most of them won’t even look at a wolf, let alone get any closer.” He stopped, cocked his head, then nodded to me. “Yourself excepted, of course, Mr. Morris. You must have nerves of steel, compared to other mages.”

Nerves of steel.

Because being bitten by a werewolf would make me... make me a werewolf. And this “controlling magic versus controlled by magic” thing seemed to be a big deal to everyone. Well, maybe not Charles, but it sounded like he knew class power struggles all too well and didn’t have a lot of patience for people who held themselves above others.

So I nodded to him. Then I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, what’s the worst thing that happens? I end up a werewolf? Oh how awful, what with the fangs and flashing eyes and the fact that they’re all incredibly hot.”

He laughed at that, nodding. “Well said. Seen a fair few ugly mages in my life, but never an ugly wolf. That super-fast healing of theirs means no acne, no scars, no diseases. Plus they live halfway to forever, and they’ve got strength. Most are so damn fast they could give me a run for my money. Pretty sweet life for a near-human if you ask me.”

It sounded like a lot of classism, pure and simple. I was sure there were other reasons for the attitudes that I didn’t know yet, but that didn’t mean any of them were valid. After all, I’d spent my entire life with everyone assuming I was good at math just

because I was Asian, and I'd barely managed to get through college calculus, and that only because I had to do it to graduate. Plus a tutor had helped. Stereotypes were obnoxious, and I wasn't going to fall for them in this new universe I'd stumbled into.

Charles got me home in record time, which I supposed wasn't a surprise. Fae.

And he'd called himself a lesser fae, but that was... well, it was kind of a shitty thing to call a whole race, wasn't it? Lesser? I was going to have to learn more about that situation before I made any decisions, but I suspected I was never going to be comfortable calling a whole people "lesser."

"Thanks for the ride, Charles. I appreciate it."

His eyes widened minutely at the thanks, but then he smiled at me. "Anytime, Mr. Morris. Happy to help out. Though I must say, I've never met a mage with good manners before. It's nice to know they can do that."

"There's never an excuse not to have good manners," I answered. It was something my childhood nanny had said all the time, and I quite agreed with her even now. There had also been comments about how strangers hadn't created your bad mood, so they shouldn't be subjected to it, and well... Sato-san had practically raised me. She'd been the only Japanese influence in my early life, and while she hadn't taught me Japanese or anything about active culture, I thought maybe I'd learned subtler things about what it meant to be Japanese from her. Or maybe just about what it meant to be Sato Akari. Either way, I thought she'd taught me well, and I was comfortable with who I'd become under her influence.

She'd died in a car accident when I was twelve, and I still missed her constantly. More than I'd ever missed my parents after moving out of the house.

When I finally got up to the apartment, Donnie was sitting at the dining room table

eating something from a foil container. It smelled of tomato sauce, so I assumed it was from his favorite Italian restaurant. I'd only been there once, and it was out of my budget, so I never ordered it with him.

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“Hey Kody,” he said, smiling up at me. Then he scrunched his nose. “You look like death warmed over. What’s up?”

I almost laughed. Or maybe cried.

Of all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, what was I supposed to bring up? Losing my virginity, the fact that he’d turned out to be my boss, the fact that I worked for a bunch of werewolves, or worst of all, that apparently, I was a mage. A mage who had no idea how to magic. Frankly, I wanted to collapse and maybe cry some.

But Donnie was wearing his club clothes, so clearly he was planning on going out. Again.

I didn’t know where he got the stamina for it, other than the fact that he didn’t have a job, so he didn’t have to do anything other than dance all night and sleep the day away. I was a little envious, but also... I wasn’t. Dancing was fine, but I’d never enjoyed it all that much. I liked things that engaged my mind, not just my body.

“Started the new job today,” I reminded him, plopping down at the table and pulling out the bag with my burger in it. It was one of those ridiculously huge burgers, this one with caramelized onions and blue cheese, my favorite. I just hadn’t been able to think about it while sitting across from Jax. A real live werewolf.

I took a bite, and once I’d done that, I realized I was ravenous, scarfing the whole damn thing down in no time flat.

When I was licking the juice off my fingers, I looked up to see Donnie giving me a mildly horrified look.

“I forgot to eat lunch,” I lied. I’d had a perfectly respectable lunch. But I was still hungry, now, and I doubted the fries had traveled as well as the burger.

He shook his head. “Well don’t let them overwork you. You’re entitled to a lunch break and all that jazz.”

The fries were indeed mushy and cold and gross. So I got up and went to the fridge. Mostly empty, of course. Donnie only ever ordered in, so the most I could expect from him was leftover takeout containers. Well, and some cocktail onions for his disgusting not-martini drink I’d only made the mistake of trying once. For myself I had half a jar of olives, some pickles, and a bunch of sauces and condiments. Somehow, I didn’t think a nice bowl of gochujang and green olives was going to hit the spot. I sighed and sat down, pulling out my phone. I was too tired to order groceries and then cook. I didn’t have money for a lot of delivery meals until I got my first paycheck from Crescent, but for tonight, it would have to be enough.

I could order tacos from the place on the corner. That wasn’t too expensive. Normally, I’d even go down and pick them up myself, but tonight, that sounded like far too much effort. I was exhausted and starving and... just entirely drained of all things. Energy, emotion, the will to stand up again... whatever.

Donnie heaved a sigh. “Well, I’m headed out. I’d invite you along, but you’re a total downer tonight. Can’t have you rubbing that off on the whole club.”

I mumbled something about him having a good time as he dropped his empty containers in the trash and headed out, locking the door behind him. Next thing I knew, someone was knocking on the door, and my tacos were there. I’d over-ordered, easily dinner for two, but somehow, I ate every single bite and still found myself

disappointed when I reached into the bag and found it empty.

I wanted to pull the papers out of my case and get back to work, because it had been seriously interesting, going over the nuance of the language and... well hell, now I realized that some of it was because magic fucking existed, and I was going to have to go back over all I'd done that afternoon to figure out if I'd missed anything in my ignorance. Heck, maybe I should wait until I knew more about magic and werewolves and... mages.

The Igarashi were mages.

That was why they had been assholes and Jax had been so willing to accept it. Probably also why the woman who had seemed to be second-in-command had given me a few confused looks during the meeting. Because I was a super special mage, and I was supposed to think myself better than Jax and his people.

Ridiculous. Jillian and Maia and Jax and... they had all been amazing, and I'd rather work for Crescent for free than deal with the Igarashi douchebags for a million dollars.

I just hoped they still wanted me back when they realized I was the worst mage ever, who didn't even know what the hell he was.

12

Jax

I could've gone home with Dakota. Probably should have.

Hell, the wolf in my head was snarling that I hadn't tossed him over my shoulder and dragged him back to my place so I could keep an eye on him. If it'd just been to keep

him safe, that would've been one thing, and maybe it wasn't even the worst impulse, but I'd gotten in over my head, and I wasn't sure I trusted my instincts anymore. Maybe I just wanted to pin him down in my bed again, and that wasn't going to solve anything.

Well, nothing magical.

He'd be all right for a few hours.

Wouldn't he?

I thought about nabbing his phone number out of the company directory and calling him, even picked up my phone to do it, but this was—fucking crazy, wasn't it?

I was losing my fucking mind.

So instead of searching the directory for a personal number that he hadn't given me, I called my sister.

“What's up?” she answered, sounding curt, like she was on her way somewhere.

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“Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Sure.” Her voice was muffled like she’d pinched her phone between her ear and shoulder. I heard the rustle of paper. “You okay?”

“I’m—”

With a heaving sigh, I got up from my desk and paced along the wall of windows that looked out over the hills around our building. The streets tilted in sharp angles, buildings jutting toward the sky like they were vying for sunlight.

“I’m in trouble.”

“You’re not in trouble,” Jillian said. “We’re fine. Everything’s fine. Tell me what’s going on.”

Right then, I realized I was hearing an echo of her voice.

“Jill, are you still in the office?”

“Hold on.”

I heard the rustle of papers, the snap of a door shutting, the pad of her heels across the carpet. A second later, she appeared in the open door of my office.

Jillian hung up her phone and slipped it in her pocket. “Why are you still here?”

I could ask her the same damn thing, but we knew each other well enough we didn't have to bother. We were on edge, and for me, the Igarashi meeting wasn't even the worst of it.

I sighed, dropping onto my couch. "Because here, I'm in charge."

Jillian's brow rose. "You're not in charge everywhere, Alpha?"

My next exhale flared my nostrils. "If I go home, I'm going to devolve into a—a..."

"A lost pup?" Her expression softened. Better than anyone else, she knew what it was like to feel powerless and afraid. We'd been there together, but our last alpha had given me freedom and opportunities he'd tried to deny her. It was why we fought—I wasn't going to live in a world where half my heart couldn't have everything she deserved based on something as nonsensical as gender.

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair, unable to admit how small I felt, even now.

"Tell me what happened," she said gently.

My breath hissed through my teeth as I dropped my head forward. "I fucked up."

I could almost hear the eye roll in her voice as she came in and sat on the chair opposite me. "If you're talking about messing around in Dakota's office, no, I don't think that was a great call. But most of us are werewolves and used to worse. Nobody even noticed."

I stared at the light reflecting off my black oxfords. "You did."

"And I'm... letting you off the hook for it. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who's trying to trap you in a civil suit or anything, so as long as he's consenting and

you're not being a fuckhead?—”

I flinched, and she broke off at once.

“You're not pressuring him, are you?”

I hissed. “No! No. I wouldn't—every time I've touched him, he's... he's been there of his own volition. I'm not stupid enough to?—”

“Force yourself on a mage?”

“On anyone. Fuck, Jillian, you can't think?—”

I raised my head only to see her smirking at me. “I don't,” she said. “But you haven't told me what the issue is yet.”

“He... has been with me of his own volition, but he didn't—he didn't know what he was doing.”

Jillian grimaced, holding out a hand. “Okay, no. You stop right there, Ajax Fyse. He's a grown man, and we're not fucking doing that. You're not so awful that it's incomprehensible to him that he might be attracted to you. He...” Her nose wrinkled. “He thinks you're hot.”

“No, I mean he didn’t know.”

She was looking at me like I was crazy. How could I blame her for that? I wasn’t being clear at all, but it was hard to admit a misstep of this magnitude.

I blew out a breath, uncrossed and recrossed my legs, and fidgeted before I tried again. “Like he didn’t know about magic. Didn’t know about us. He had no idea we’re werewolves. I just told him, half an hour ago, that he’s a fucking mage. He had no idea.”

“Shit.” Jillian blinked. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea who his family is, where he came from.”

“But you went to Howl last night, right? He found Howl.”

“Yeah, but the wards just keep out humans. He got in. Why would he think anything of it?”

“Other than the room full of werewolves?”

“Yup. That he didn’t know were werewolves.”

“Fuck,” Jillian hissed.

I sighed. “It’s worse.”

“Worse how?”

“I, uh, Awakened him?”

Jillian’s mouth dropped open. “He was a virgin?”

I flinched, nodding.

“Did you know?” she demanded.

Another nod. “He said he wanted me. Seemed so firm about it. I thought it was, I don’t know, an act of rebellion against an uptight mage family or—or something like that. Then I saw him this morning and I thought, well, maybe it was something more insidious. Like... a trap somehow. With Igarashi.”

Jillian’s face screwed up in distaste. “Jax, did you really accuse him of that? And he didn’t even know?”

“I know. I know, Jill. I fucked up, and I apologized in his office, then he—he seemed to forgive me, which, you know, great.”

She scoffed. “That’s a hell of a way to forgive you.”

“Yeah, so I asked him to dinner.”

She arched a brow. “Just to dig yourself in deeper.”

I rolled my eyes. “So I’m not as good at one-night stands as I was in my twenties.”

“Or you’re bad at them when you’ve freaking Awakened a darling little virgin mage who tells you how much he wants you, big strong alpha man.”

“It’s not like that.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Isn’t it?”

I sighed. “It’s a little like that. But I like him, okay?” I liked the way he looked at me, how his eyes darkened and the way he felt when he reached for me—all warm and supple. “And if I’d known he was going to be working here, I wouldn’t have risked taking him home in the first place, but what would you have had me do, escort him out of Howl and send him home in an Uber? That’s as shitty and condescending as any other ridiculous alpha impulse I’ve had.”

Jillian sighed, deflating until her arms hung limp against the cushion on either side of her. “Okay, fair enough. If he was going to go home with someone from Howl, it’s probably good it was you.”

“That sounds so unconvincing.”

“No, it’s just—” She shook her head, twirling her hand in the air before dropping it back onto her seat with a thump. “Who the hell would go to Howl to lose their virginity? And as a mage? It’s asking to get eaten alive.”

“He didn’t know.”

She held up her hands. “I know. I know. But... shit. That could’ve gone bad.”

I swallowed hard. Didn’t want to think about it. “It didn’t.”

She heaved another sigh. “No... it didn’t go bad. What are you going to do now though?”

“His magic’s going crazy. I said I’d help him. But I don’t know what the fuck I can do for a mage. I just know—” I waved at my desk, my laptop, my oh-so-imposing office chair—all the trappings of having my shit together.

It was all crap.

“What about Prudence?” she said.

I paused. “Do you think she would help him? She’s not big on other mages...”

Jillian shrugged. “You could ask if she has any insight. Maybe she’d be willing to come by the office and give him some advice. It doesn’t sound like he has anyone else, and she of all people would understand that.”

I shook my head. “He said he was adopted. Normal human parents.”

Prudence was one of the first mages who’d agreed to work with us. She was selling copies of grimoires, reproduced from her impressive library and much in demand.

The mage families were a lot more willing to deal with us when we had her books on our homepage.

Not that that had impressed her any. Prue seemed generally displeased with everyone, but liked us better than she liked her magical peers.

“It’s worth a shot,” I admitted.

Jillian held her hand out at my desk in silent order to make the damn call. I got up, and my heart was only racing a little when I dialed Prudence’s number.

She answered on the second ring. “What?”

My lips twitched. I’d liked her abruptness. It seemed so real compared to how other mages carried themselves.

“Hey there, Prudence. I was wondering if you’re in town right now. I’ve, um...” I glanced over at Jill, and she nodded me on. “I’ve got a new employee. Freshly Awakened mage. He’s new to the whole thing, and his magic’s getting the better of him. Do you think you could maybe come, I don’t know, check him out?”

“You want me to make sure he’s not going to blow up the building?”

I grimaced. “Or give him some pointers.”

She sniffed on the other end. “What’s his name?”

“Dakota Morris.”

“Don’t know any Morrisises,” she grumbled. “Who’s his guardian?”

That gave me pause, but there was nothing for it but to tell the truth. “I—I don’t think he has one.”

She was silent a moment, but when she spoke again, her tone was filled with interest. “Well, all right then. I’ll come by tomorrow.”

I grinned, and Jillian high-fived the air. “That’s great, Prudence. Really. I’ll treat you to lunch. Thank you so much.”

She hummed. “Tomorrow then.”

And the other side of the line went quiet.

13

Dakota

It was my imagination, I kept telling myself. All my coworkers weren’t staring at me as I arrived the next morning.

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Except, even if Jax hadn't told them about me apparently being some kind of dunce who didn't know he had magic, they were werewolves.

Were all of them werewolves?

Every bit of media I'd ever seen on the subject said that werewolves were people who turned into either wolves or some cross between wolf and human, had superfast healing, and most important, incredibly strong senses.

I had no idea how true it was—how could I know? Until last night I'd believed they were fictional. I didn't think dogs had particularly good eyesight, but everyone knew they had outstanding noses. Otherwise how would they sniff out bombs and drugs?

So all of that to say that probably every single person in the office had fucking smelled Jax and I... well, fucking, the day before.

Way to make an impression on the new office.

I tried to ignore the looks, using the method I'd used throughout high school as the outcast weirdo: I pretended I was above it all. Like it didn't matter if they all hated me, because nothing mattered to me.

It was a ridiculous lie, and I didn't think there was a person alive who actually was immune to the loathing of their peers, but it had always seemed to convince them anyway.

I might have spent all my primary school years alone, but at least by the end of it, my

reputation had been arrogant asshole instead of weird loser.

At least here, there were no whispers and glares, at least none I noticed.

Heck, maybe the whole thing was my imagination.

Maia even dropped by with a cup of coffee for me around ten, to ask how I was doing. When I took a sip, it was just how I took my coffee. Sugar no cream, since I was lactose intolerant.

I lifted a brow at her and she shrugged. “Wolf nose, you know. I could smell how you took it yesterday.”

Wolf nose.

Just like that, she was treating me like I was in with the in crowd.

Except... they’d all done that yesterday too, especially Jillian and Maia, with all the talk of alphas. No one had treated me like I was an ignorant child or an outsider, even though they were wolves and thought I was a mage. Witch? Warlock?

Was there a right word? Worse, were there words that would out me as ignorant? Surely there were, but how was I supposed to know which ones they were?

Maia, oblivious to my inner turmoil, looked over the work I’d been doing on the contracts, whistling. “Oh this is perfect, Dakota. This is exactly what we needed.”

I couldn’t help it, I beamed.

Sure, teachers and then professors had always given me praise, but somehow, it had always felt just a little bit hollow. Like yes, sure, I was a better student than a bunch

of jerks who didn't even want to be there.

Hell if I knew why people who didn't want to be in college went there, considering how much it freaking cost, but I wasn't in their heads, so I couldn't guess at their motives.

Maia, on the other hand, had every reason to demand I did my job well, rather than just pay lip service to the slightest effort I bothered to put in.

"I think most of it is just subtleties of language, but this clause has been bothering me," I told her, flipping back through the main contract to a page I'd worked on the night before. "The language feels too intentionally vague about ownership of current intellectual property. Is there a reason Igarashi would want to muddle that?"

Her eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, and I couldn't tell if it was concentration or anger.

"There is," a brassy voice announced from the doorway.

Both our heads snapped up. Maia gasped, and honestly, I wasn't far off. The woman standing in my office doorway was like an aging starlet, and every line of her read strong, powerful, and important. I felt like I was looking at eighty-year-old Bette Davis, and for a moment, wondered where her fur coat was, and if she was about to whip out a cigarette holder.

She was wearing an elegantly cut black dress that reminded me of the forties with a high neck and a triple strand of pink pearls probably worth more than my education. Her gray-white hair was tied into an intricate knot atop her head, and the way she stood, straight and confident, made me immediately envious. I'd never been that lacking in self-doubt in my life, and there was little I wanted more.

Next to her, Jax was looking at me with narrowed eyes. Or maybe past me, since the anger didn't seem to be focused on me. He turned to the woman. "I'm so sorry this is even coming up, Prudence. Rest assured I'll make it clear to Igarashi that they will not hold any ownership over your family's work. And Dakota will work with our lawyers to make sure the language is completely unambiguous about it."

She gave him an indulgent, grandmotherly smile, and reached out to pat his shoulder. "Of course, dear. I expect nothing less of you. This is why I've trusted you with so much." Her nose scrunched as though the smell of dogshit had invaded the room, and it made me want to check the bottom of my shoes. "The Igarashi family, on the other hand... well, I can't say this kind of amoral ambition surprises me from them."

And that, well... that was fucking awesome. Not that the Igarashi sucked, but that someone else was agreeing with my poor impression of them.

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She marched into my office then, her green eyes boring into my soul as she held out her hand to shake.

I stood and shook her hand, and for a second, had the same feeling I had when I'd shaken hands with the head of Igarashi, like she was going to leap at me. It wasn't as bad, but it was still disconcerting.

She blinked at me a moment, cocking her head, then her red lips split in a grin. "Oh, you're just brand new, aren't you? Barely even Awakened."

Jax cleared his throat, but his eyes were trained entirely on the floor.

She turned back to him, rolling her eyes. "Oh stop it with the kicked puppy act, kiddo. You did fine. This is unheard of because it's unheard of, not because you've done something hideously wrong." She turned back to me, shaking her head. "When a magical child is orphaned, we always arrange for our own to adopt them. Always."

"Because otherwise someone becomes magical without knowing magic exists?" I asked.

Her smile in return was oddly sad, and she shook her head. "No, sweetheart. I'd love to say yes, but it's nothing so kind or well-intentioned. It's because you represent power. You're a baby, and with the right training, you could become anything. Everything. Letting you be adopted by random mundane humans is like seeing a million dollars sitting on the sidewalk and just walking off and leaving it there."

Maia squinted at her, then looked at me. "Adopted by random mundane humans?"

That's... that's crazy. How did they deal with your Awakening?"

I flushed bright red, realizing that every person who ever found out about me in the future was going to know exactly when I first had sex. That was messed up. "They, um, they didn't," was all I managed to choke out.

"That's my job now," the woman agreed. "I'm Prudence, by the way. Prudence McCallan. And I may have plenty of money, but I've never been one to leave a million dollars sitting on the sidewalk. I always wanted an apprentice. Come on, little sparrow. Lunch time. Jax is buying, and you have a lot to learn."

14

Jax

Moon above, it was disgraceful how relieved I was to hand Dakota over to Prudence's care, but I was glad someone was there who knew what the hell they were doing. No, we hadn't arranged in Dakota's training time to also learn magic, but this whole situation was my responsibility now.

I'd caused his Awakening, so I couldn't leave him alone to figure out his new power.

And wasn't working through this while he was on the clock better than him having to figure everything out on his own? Hell, if he'd come across the wrong group of mages, they might've used his inexperience to manipulate him.

Maybe I was just trying to make myself feel better, but I needed to not see myself as the villain in all of this. Of course, that my concern wasn't first and foremost the well-being of a man we'd hired to work with us, and was instead that he continued to like me, probably meant that I was.

But damn it, I wanted him to like me still. Even if we couldn't—

Well, I just wanted to be a bright spot in his memory and someone that he could continue to rely on. Thinking I'd taken advantage of him reminded me too much of the asshole alpha Jillian and I had escaped. I rubbed my hand beneath my collarbone—where my shirt covered the perfectly unblemished skin beneath. My wounds had been terrible—deadly, if I were human—but because I was a wolf, every mark that bastard had put on me had healed. We wolves didn't often scar, and even our fight hadn't been vicious enough to leave its marks except on my psyche.

I could still see Jillian's white, terrified face. We'd been eighteen, and she'd been convinced I was going to lose the eye.

Maybe I would've, if I hadn't been a werewolf. Fuck if I knew. But even one eye down, I'd fought for my life—for all our lives. I'd taken him down, and we left Idaho forever.

I'd sworn to myself that I'd never be anything like him, and by my pack, at least, I thought I'd done all right. By Dakota? I wasn't so convinced.

So while I normally spent my days walking the halls of Crescent, too impatient to stay stuck behind my desk when I could keep an eye on my people and the day-to-day operations of the company, I hid out, sunk deep in my office chair, for the rest of the day. Nobody even bothered me for long, so I must've been putting off some “fuck the hell off” vibes without meaning to.

But Dakota? He wasn't as sensitive to scents and the subtle body language that shifters relied on as most Crescent employees—who, by and large, were shifters too, even if they weren't wolves.

Toward the end of the day, he showed up in my office doorway and knocked. “You

busy?”

I stared at him, wide eyed and dull after—what had I been doing? Our contract with Prudence was open on my desk. We hadn’t touched it in years, but I’d had the thought of possibly amending it to limit her risk in this deal. She’d signed with us, not Igarashi, and I couldn’t have any growth in Crescent negatively impacting our partners. If we were moving forward, the risk had to be on my shoulders.

Honestly, though? I’d spent most of the afternoon glancing out the window, wondering what Prudence was telling him. She had always been open to working with us, treated us more than decently—more personally and professionally than other mages, but—well, there was a difference between that and knowing that I’d Awakened a mage, wasn’t there?

I was bracing for Dakota to withdraw, to return to the office and look at me with mistrust next time our paths crossed.

Instead, when I stared at him, he smiled. Yeah, he looked a little uncomfortable, but I probably looked wild-eyed and fucking crazy, so that... might not have anything to do with mistrusting me now.

That didn’t make answering him any easier. “Um?—”

I wasn’t busy, actually. Or, if I should have been, I wasn’t managing it.

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Dakota shut the door behind him and came over to look across my desk at the open manilla folder with the first sheet of the contract still on top. I hadn't even delved into it.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Uh huh." I shut the folder, less because I didn't want him seeing it than that I needed something to do with my hands other than, well, everything I wanted to do to him.

Even still, I caught his grimace from the corner of my eye. "The kicked puppy thing?—"

"I'm not."

Dakota's lips twisted, the left corner lifting wryly. He went on, completely ignoring my feeble protest. "Is that why you're hiding out in here?"

I sighed, slumping in the world's most ergonomic office chair enough that the lumbar support dug into the middle of my back. "I'm nothiding."

He raised his eyebrows high.

"Okay, I'm kind of hiding." I sighed, pushing my chair away from my desk so I could look up at him easier. "I just don't know what to do. I don't want to force myself on you."

"So your solution is to avoid me forever?"

“No!” I sat up again, couldn’t stay still. “You don’t have to keep your distance, but I don’t want to get in your way while you’re figuring this all out. And you, ah, might want to keep your distance. You should have that option.”

“I don’t want to keep my distance.” He came around my desk, and I turned my chair to face him. Then, his knee was sliding up the leather beside me, and I didn’t stop him. I was too weak to, when he was there and warm and looking at me like that.

“You don’t know that.” There was so much he didn’t know yet.

Still, Dakota rolled his eyes, and his other leg slipped up. He lowered himself until he was sitting in my lap, and my hands fell instinctively to his hips. I tugged him closer, and he rolled his body, and this—this was dangerous.

“I do,” he said, dragging his hand through my hair before he made a fist. He tugged my head back and kissed me clumsily. Even when he pulled away, I left my eyes shut and just enjoyed the scent of him, the feel of having him so close again.

This was a mess. I wasn’t this quick to fall for anyone, but something about him drew me in, made it impossible to push him back.

“I do,” he repeated, nuzzling the bridge of his nose along my jawline in a move that was way too close to scent marking for my wolfish brain to handle. “Prudence said it might help if I—well, sex, in the aftermath of Awakening, can, uh, stabilize things a little. And I thought you might want to help me.”

My jaw flexed as I swallowed. “You want me to help you?”

I opened my eyes—needed to gauge the truth of his words for myself.

There was nothing but sweetness in his smile. “Yeah. That okay?”

The wolf in my head was practically howling. Dakota wanted me. Not only that, but he'd asked me to help him. Pride swelled in my chest and before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in.

I claimed his lips, parting them with my tongue, and his moan sounded in his chest and resonated in mine and my head swam with need for him and?—

Fuck.

“Proposition,” I rasped against his lips.

“What?”

“Come home with me. I want to fuck you again, feel you from the inside. Make it good.”

He bit his lip, already nodding.

“I'll buy you pizza,” I promised.

Dakota snorted. “You don't have to bribe me.”

I shook my head. “No, but let me provide. Alphas like that kind of thing, and Prudence said you'd need to keep your energy up while you adjust to your new magic.”

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Plus, I meant to wear him out.

“That’s fucking crazy.” Still, his stomach rumbled even as he ground his hips on my lap. “What kind of pizza?”

I thought that was a spark of interest in his eyes, and even my wolf was pleased that it was for more than just my cock. He’d let us take care of him, just like we should.

“Any kind you want.”

“Pineapple,” he said.

I laughed. “Done.”

His brow puckered for a moment. “No, veggie supreme.”

“We’re getting both.”

His little smile at that was worth buying a whole damn pizza chain. He looped his arms around my neck and leaned in for another clumsy kiss. When he broke it, he sighed and looked down between us.

“Are you telling me I’ve got to walk out of here like this?” His cock strained beneath his sleek gray pants.

“Hell no. I wouldn’t dream of leaving you wanting.” I rubbed him through his pants while he bucked into the touch, and his moans turned sharp and needy before I undid

his belt and slipped my hand down his briefs.

The warm, musky scent of him washed over me as I jerked him off. He clung to me, his elbows on my shoulders, his breath ragged against my ear.

When his dick pulsed, I tilted my palm against the tip so he shot into my hand. I withdrew it, and he shook while he watched me open my palm and drag the flat of my tongue through his spend, flaring my nose as I breathed in deep.

“You’re weird,” he whispered, his face bright red.

I grinned, a predatory curve of my lips. “I can’t get enough of you.”

For my own part, I didn’t mind waiting till we got home. When I came, I wanted to be buried balls deep in his hole, driving him wild.

I ordered pizza on the way back to my place, and it was waiting there on the porch when we arrived. Though I brought it inside, Dakota was the first to snatch it out of my hands and put it on the counter.

“Bed,” he demanded, reaching for me. When I wrapped my arms around the small of his back, he hopped up and wrapped his thighs around my waist.

I carried him to my room, kissing his neck the whole time. Against my front, he stretched and squirmed and fumbled with the buttons of my shirt.

No sooner than I’d tipped him onto the bed did he crawl back to me, tugging at my clothes and casting them aside until we were both naked. His skin stretched over his muscles, beautiful and golden, his lashes dark against his cheeks when he glanced up at me through them.

My breath caught. His hands wrapped around my hips, and my cock jerked.

I wasn't going to make it like this, not with his eyes on me like he was a starving man and I was a wagyu steak.

“Face down, ass up,” I commanded.

Dakota drew in a sharp, short breath. His eyes widened, pupils large and dark as he stared up at me. There were dusty pink spots high on his perfect cheekbones. Then, he turned, and I watched the graceful curve of his back as he crawled languorously up my bed.

He was deceptively tall—his youth and liveness made him appear smaller than he was, but his skin stretched on for miles, perfect. He tucked his knees up, his thighs spread beautifully. His skin darkened around his balls, and fuck I wanted to suck them in my mouth, leaving him hanging like this all night while I played with every part of him.

I poured lube down his crack while my fingers swirled his entrance, and he arched his back in response. So needy and gorgeous, my Dakota.

“Can I use a toy on you?”

I sank a finger into him, and he keened before he managed an answer. When I pulled out, he shivered.

His cheek pressed the mattress so he could look back at me, and I'd swear his eyes went even darker. “Like a plug?”

I laughed, swiping the tip of my middle finger across his ass in a way that made his breath catch again. “No, baby. The only thing going in this hole tonight is me. But it's

magic.” I gripped his hips and leaned over to kiss his ass cheek, firm and round with the sweetest give beneath my soft bite. “I’ll show you how good it can be.”

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“Nothing that’ll hurt?”

I shook my head. “Never wanna hurt you.”

His next inhale shook. “Okay.”

I went for the fleshlight in my bedside table—something we sold on the adult section of the site. I wasn’t a product tester, but I’d been curious, and yeah, maybe wanted a piece of magic for myself.

I held it before his mouth. “Breathe on this.”

That was how it worked. It’d take the shape of the last person to breathe directly on it.

So yeah, I’d fucked my own ass, and I was happy to say it stacked up.

But Dakota? He was so much better.

He pulled away after he breathed on it, frowning in confusion.

“It’s shaped like you now,” I whispered in his ear. “I want you to feel how perfect you are, how good you make me feel.”

With plenty of lube, I put the toy against the tip of his leaky cock and lined mine up with his asshole. He shook, the heels of his palms pressing into the mattress to wiggle himself back.

As I worked my cock into him, his hips pressed forward, sinking deeper, inch by inch, into the fleshlight. Dakota was stuck there, pinned between my cock and his own hole, and he whined into a wet spot on the bed beneath his cheek.

“Okay, baby?”

With a whimper, he nodded. “It’s so tight.”

I grinned, feral and sharp. “I know. You feel so fucking good.”

I pulled back, and when I thrust in again, he cried out. His asshole clenched, and I leaned over him, pressing my teeth against the back of his shoulder. Couldn’t bite him, wouldn’t, but damn did I want to.

With deep, long thrusts, I drove him toward the edge, pulling the light back in time with my movements until his thighs trembled against mine. He arched his back, and when he came, his perfect ass squeezed me hard, he flexed his hips, driving into the light, and just the sound of his broken moan sent me over the edge.

Each breath shaky, he stretched out under me, and I couldn’t help it—his legs were splayed, stretched out, and I pressed my weight forward to stay buried in his ass. I liked the thought of making him mine, my come filling his wanton body, feeding the magic within him.

Nuzzling him, I licked his shoulder. I hadn’t broken his skin, but my teeth left little indents against his flesh that my wolf needed to soothe.

And when I glanced up, I saw the corner of Dakota’s lips twitch into a smile, and my heart soared.

Dakota

l lay there in Jax's arms, feeling like...

Well, I couldn't even name the feeling, it was all so foreign to my mind. Less than a week ago, I'd been meek little Dakota, the guy who'd never had a real job, or had sex, and certainly didn't go around demanding things.

Magic wasn't even real.

And here I was, in my fucking boss's bed, in his home, trying to figure out how to make him keep me. Not, like, with magic. I didn't want to force him to keep me. I wanted to make him want to keep me. No magic. No coercion. Just someone actually wanting me for a change.

Even my best friend didn't want me around half the time, so why would a beautiful, rich, successful man be holding me tight against him, like he wanted to keep me there forever?

"Mages don't respect werewolves," he finally said, and his tone was heavy, miserable, like I'd been pressing and dragged the words out of him. "You control magic and we're just made of it. It's like asking the chef to respect a steak."

That sounded kind of... actually, no, that sounded ridiculous. "But any decent chef would tell you that you should respect the steak. That acting like you're the end-all be-all of the kitchen only results in terrible food, because you have to respect your ingredients."

I'd spent enough free time watching cooking shows to know that. After all, I hadn't had a clue how to cook when I got out on my own, and it had been a rude awakening.

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He huffed a sigh and shook his head. “But there’s always another steak. Thousands of steaks. Not so many chefs. And it’s not like the steak can cook the chef.”

Comparing Jax to a steak wasn’t even a good metaphor here. It was just insulting to werewolves.

“No, this steak has teeth. It can rip the chef’s throat out if he’s a big enough asshole.” I turned to look at him, grabbing his face in my hands and leaning up to meet his eye steadily. “Jax, you’ve got to stop this. Werewolves aren’t, like, second-class citizens. We’re all people, and no person is more or less important than another person. Me being able to make my stapler float by an accident of birth isn’t some great amazing fucking accomplishment.”

He bit his lip and glanced away.

Fuck me, how bad did mages have to be, how giant did their egos have to be, to have made a fully grown badass werewolf man feel this way? The arrogant way the Igarashi people had acted seemed somehow even more sinister than before, and reminded me of the number of times in human history one group had decided another was lesser.

How often that decision had resulted in horrific atrocities.

He groaned and shook his head, grabbing my hands and pulling them against his chest. “I’m not saying I think werewolves aren’t worthwhile. I’m not saying I think you’re better than me. I’m just saying that mages don’t have a lot of respect for us, and you are a mage.”

“So I also have to be a bigoted asshole? There’s a requirement?”

“So they might think less of you if they found out you were fucking one. I don’t want to be responsible for you losing face in the magic community. You deserve?—”

“I deserve to make my own choices. Just like the mages do. And you know what the mages decided, Jax? They decided to fucking abandon me. I was adopted by people who don’t even know magic exists and raised not to believe in it.” I threw a leg over his hip and pulled us in closer to each other. “They didn’t choose me, so I don’t choose them. Crescent chose me. I’m allowed to choose you back. Everyone at Crescent has been amazing to me. Friendly and welcoming and great. And that’s what I want. I want people who chose me, regardless of magic or fangs and claws. Just because I was the right guy, and they wanted me.”

His body sank into the mattress, like his muscles had gone lax, and for a moment, I thought—hoped—that would be the end of it. But a few seconds later, he shook his head. “I’m your boss. I shouldn’t let?—”

“Are you going to fire me?” I demanded, and for a moment, it was like having an out-of-body experience.

Like I was looking down from the ceiling at this ballsy asshole who was staring at the gorgeous sexy guy and telling him what to do. Surely it couldn’t be me doing this. Not meek, shy little Dakota, who’d never defied his superiors in his whole fucking life.

It was the magic, I realized, and that alone made a tiny ball of ice form in my stomach. Was it changing me? Did becoming a mage make a guy into a different, worse person? Had it made me demanding and rude, and was I ignoring Jax’s needs?

He frowned at me, sighing and shaking his head. “Of course I don’t want to fire you.

This isn't about the job."

"Am I bothering you? My... my demands? Am I asking too much?" That was more like the me I knew.

It was his turn to draw me closer, shaking his head. "You're not. You're not... I'm not worried about me. I'm fine. But spending time with wolves will hurt your reputation."

"What about Prudence?" I asked back. "She seems like kind of a badass. Does she have a bad reputation because she works with you?"

His lips screwed up in an annoyed moue. "Not... exactly. I know she's gotten some trouble over it, but Prudence's reputation is solely of her own choosing. She just doesn't much care what the magical community thinks of her."

I raised both brows at him and waited for him to catch up with his own words.

After a moment, he sighed. "I understand. Really, I do. But Prudence is rich and immensely powerful. She can afford to make as many enemies as there are mages in the world. You're new. You can't even defend yourself from them if they attack you."

"And you introduced me to Prudence, who's teaching me how to deal with that. To deal with how to handle any mage who comes after me. Heck, the first thing she explained at lunch was this weird mage handshake pissing contest thing they all do upon meeting. You've given me everything I need to handle this, Jax. The rest is up to me."

The handshake thing had been weird. Apparently, it was something mages did when they met another person they knew to be a mage, sort of puffing up their feathers like

a peacock, pushing their magic to the surface of their skin, and waiting for the reaction of the other mage. They could gauge the other mage's magical power that way, as well as their inclination to be aggressive or not.

She'd followed by demonstrating a dozen different ways the handshake could go and how to achieve the effects she'd demonstrated. Looking back at it, it had made me dislike Igarashi Jiro even more. Unless I was much mistaken, he'd been trying to exert his power over me, testing and trying to intimidate me. Frankly, it reminded me of the way some beefy guys were prone to squeezing people's hands too tight, just to show them how impressive their muscles were. It seemed to me a symptom of douchebaggery more than a sign of actual power.

It also begged the question of how Igarashi had known I was a mage before we met. Could a person see it instantly? If so, then why had his inferiors not seemed to notice or care about me? Did he just do it to everyone he ever met? If so, even weirder.

Jax looked like he wanted to protest some more, but I shook my head, then leaned in to plant a kiss on the tip of his nose. "I swear. Prudence is a gift, Jax. The best gift anyone's ever given me in my life. I've never had a real mentor before, and she seems awesome."

"She is," he hedged. "I... I like her a lot. And she's helped to make Crescent what we are."

"The intellectual property thing." He didn't answer aloud, but his nod was enough for me. "Well then, all the more reason for me to dig deeper into these contracts. I can protect her and Crescent. This is... Jax, it's everything I need in the world and then some. More than I ever thought I'd end up with." Okay, that sounded pitiful, but I willed him to understand. Also, to not judge me for being pitiful.

"If you're sure..."

He was still hesitant, but I latched onto the acceptance. “I am. I’m completely sure. My job is great, and so is Prudence. I have all I need. I don’t need to go seeking out the approval of some stuffy asshole mages I don’t even know.”

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With that, I snuggled back into his chest and stayed there. Well, until I remembered the pizza, and went out to devour all of it.

16

Jax

Ihated phone calls.

I didn't often want to strip off my clothes and take off howling for the nearest forest, but phone calls made the drive to go wild near irresistible.

Doubly so when they were with Igarashi.

We were trying to schedule our next meeting. Our office needed more time to refine the wording on the contracts, and Igarashi Jiro didn't want to stay in the States any longer than necessary.

"Of course we don't want Ms. McCallan concerned over her legacy, but I'm sure this is a misunderstanding." Igarashi Jiro's voice was smooth and ingratiating, meant to put me at ease. Something about it had my hair on end instead. "I don't see what you're worried about here."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and pinned my phone between my ear and shoulder. "Our translation lacks clarity on the rights of our partners."

Igarashi sighed. "It's unnecessary for you to have a translator. We have people for

this. We'll draw up new contracts in English for you if that's a concern."

I hummed. "That'd be greatly appreciated. Nevertheless, we'll need a few more days to bring Ms. McCallan's contract and this new one in line with each other, so we'll meet next Tuesday."

Igarashi was too polite to sigh. I didn't even hear annoyance in his voice. "Delightful. We'll look forward to it."

I'd hardly hung up the phone when Jillian was at my door, arms crossed and smirk on her lips. "You okay?"

I leaned back in my chair and shrugged heavily. "Talking to Igarashi. I'm worried about Prudence's agreement with us. If they're trying to?"

Jill stepped into my office and shut the door softly behind her. "Dakota caught it. You're not barreling blindly ahead, Jax. This'll be fine. It's just going to take negotiation."

At the mere mention of Dakota, I flinched. "I should terminate his contract."

Jill huffed and crossed her arms. "You're not serious."

I sighed, scrubbing the heel of my palm over my closed eyelids. "No, I'm not." Of course I wasn't—Dakota had told me what he wanted already. I'd have to be a real piece of shit to deny us both when he'd been so clear. "I trust him. I don't trust Igarashi. We need him around."

And if I were a good leader of Crescent, or a good leader of my pack, that would be the main reason I wanted to keep him around.

It wasn't. I wanted him in the halls. I wanted him where I could smell him and know he felt safe, where I could hear his heartbeat if I got close enough, where he was mine.

Except he wasn't mine, couldn't ever be fully mine, and I needed to get a handle on myself if we were going to keep up this balancing act of working together and having him in my bed.

Dakota simply didn't understand what he was risking. It'd be one thing if he'd spent a life among mages and decided they were not worth his concern, like Prudence had. Instead, he knew even less about them than I'd assumed on first meeting, and the longer we kept this up, the more I could hurt him.

"Every werewolf in this building is going to know I'm sleeping with him," I admitted, dropping my hands. "They'll smell it."

And any one of them might decide to try and hold that fact over Igarashi the next time one of their people turned their nose up at one of mine. It'd put me in an awkward position, and it'd be worse for Dakota.

Jillian shrugged. "It's a big deal when the alpha takes a m?—"

I growled. "Don't say that."

She arched a dark brow at me, pursed her lips. "You've thought about it."

The terrible truth was that I had. Every time I held him close, every time I pressed into his body and felt that first full breath he took as he reshaped his world around me—yeah, I thought about it.

"If I bite him, he loses a lot of what he is."

My sister didn't say anything, but the sarcastic twist of her lips had disappeared behind a terse line.

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“He could die,” I said. “It’s not like I can keep him, so what would—what would be the point of him risking everything for... what? A few more nights with me?”

Jill looked at me with so much pity I couldn’t stand it, like she wanted to tell me that a few more nights with me was worth all that risk, even though we both knew that was bullshit.

The best thing for Dakota would be to pull away and get to know himself and his people before he committed to half measures with me.

“It doesn’t matter,” I mumbled. “I’m not terminating his contract or sending him away.”

I was too damn selfish for that.

Maybe we really were what the mages thought, us werewolves. Clearly, I was being led around by the nose, instinct ruling over good sense or genuine kindness.

No, before I’d known Dakota was ignorant of the whole magical world, I’d just felt a thrill of victory at taking him home from the club. I wasn’t a leader; I was a beast.

And the worst thing I could do in the aftermath was punish him for it.

Truth was, whatever Dakota needed, if he’d ask it of me, I’d do my very best to give it to him.

Just the thought had my lips twitching toward a smile. “You know something they

don't talk about with mages?"

Jillian lifted her head. "What?"

"They can really eat. Their magic burns through them fast. I've never seen anybody put food away like Dakota."

She snorted. "And you like that?"

A sound too like a purr rumbled in my chest. "Fuck yeah. It's crazy, but my wolf loves it. Last night, he was on his sixth piece of pizza before he realized I was watching, and he smiled kind of—like, you know, like he was embarrassed? But my wolf was just so goddamn proud we'd provided for him. I don't know." I groaned, dropping my head against her arm when she came over to squeeze my shoulder. "He'd fit so well if it weren't for?"

"All the shit that makes him fit so well meaning you can't actually keep him."

I couldn't say anything to that, just sigh.

I might be doomed, destined to get hurt, but for now at least, Dakota needed me. As long as that lasted, at least I could hold onto a piece of him.

17

Dakota

"No dear, just your mind," Prudence said. She was correcting me, but she was smiling. I'd never been taught so... benignly before. Whenever I was wrong she simply said "no" and "let's try again." Never any annoyance, never any impatient sighs, never any snide comments about how maybe this wasn't the skill for me.

On the contrary, she seemed to think I was catching on exceptionally quickly, because she said so at every turn.

She stalked across the room on her impressively high heels and slid gracefully into a velvet upholstered chair next to me, a smile on her face. “I know, it seems like there should be a physical component. All the books and movies say so, and... well, there just should, shouldn’t there?” She shook her head, almost as though it made her sad that it wasn’t the case. “But no. It’s all up here.” She tapped her temple. “And if you learn it with the motions, they become a crutch, and then you can’t do the magic without them.”

It made sense. I’d studied weeks for a calculus exam in high school with my music playing in the background, and then at the actual test, I’d been distracted by the fact that the testing room had been silent. So instead of questioning her, I tucked my hands under my thighs and tried again, focusing on the candle she’d set all the way across the room on a simple metal table.

Light the candle.

I envisioned a fire. The way it looked when one was dancing merrily away in a hearth or?—

There was a pop, and suddenly, the entire candle was ablaze, bits of flaming wax melting away and pooling on the table, still on fire, and the flames grew by the second.

I leapt to my feet, ready to rush across the room and throw my coat over the conflagration, but Prudence reached out and took one of my hands in hers, holding me steady. “With your mind, Dakota.”

I turned back to the fiery, waxy mess on the table and tried to focus. It was hard, with

a pool of wax spreading, threatening to drip onto her expensive patterned rug, but her training was helping. Well, that and years of language training. You had to learn to hyper focus, to be able to quickly parse sentences that weren't in your first language.

A second later, the fire didn't even sputter out, it was simply gone, as though it'd never been. No drifting smoke or scent of fire on the air, just nothing at all.

I turned to apologize to Prudence, but she was smiling broadly as she turned to look at me. "Well done! So quick, too. I panicked the first time and almost managed to start a real fire, despite the metal table."

Despite the...

I stood there, stunned for a moment, before speaking up. “You expected that.”

“Of course, dear. We all do something like it the first time, if we’ve got any kind of power. You’re supposed to start a fire, so you picture a fire. There’s a reason I told you to focus on the candle. My cousin almost burned down her family’s library because they just told her to start a fire.”

I slumped back into the chair, still watching her. “But then why not... I mean, how do I do it right? And why not tell me to do that?”

“Because this is a more important lesson. You have the magic. You can light the fire. There’s no doubt of that. Even the least powerful mage can light one tiny candle. If you’d just lit the candle, I would know your powers were on the weak side, and I’d never have to discuss that with you, just teach you what you’re capable of learning. But this way, since you aren’t a weak mage, you learn how important focus and control are. That’s a much more important lesson than being able to light a fire with magic.” She turned and waved at the mess of melted wax and burned wick. “You know that things can get out of control very quickly, and to start small. You focus on the wick. On a tiny flame.”

She pressed up, went over to the table, pulled another candle seemingly from nowhere, and planted it in the middle of the previous mess. “And now you know precisely how to do it.” She stood right behind the candle and motioned to me. “Light it.”

I blinked at her. Was she insane? I'd almost set the entire table on fire a moment earlier.

But no, this was part of it, too, wasn't it? Everything she did, every lesson she taught me, was planned and efficient. She knew precisely what she was doing. So I considered her words.

The wick.

A tiny flame.

Like a cartoon fire, just one drop of fire, surrounding only the candle wick. Controlled and safe.

And there it was. A single flame, only on the wick of the candle.

She smiled brightly at me and nodded. "There you are. Perfect. Precision is always our first goal. Power is lovely if you have it, but precision is what matters most. And you, my dear boy, were made for it." She leaned down and blew out the candle, then motioned for me to come over. "Let's go have a snack. Fire work always makes me hungry, and I'm sure you won't be any different."

As we were leaving the room, my phone rang. I checked the caller ID and frowned. Donnie. He was calling a lot lately. I started to slip it back into my pocket, ignored, but Prudence motioned to it. "Answer it, dear. I find that when ignored, people usually only get even more insistent."

I winced, but she wasn't wrong. Donnie was like that. He'd call four or five times in a row when I ignored him, as though to make sure I knew it was him, and important. Not that it was ever important.

I hit the answer button and put the phone to my ear. “Hi Donnie. What’s up?”

“Where are you?”

That boded well, when he didn’t even answer simple questions, but made demands. I shrugged and affected a nonchalant tone. “Work training.”

“You should be home by now,” he insisted. “They’re not paying you for all this overtime.”

That was... odd, as a statement. I hadn’t even brought home my first check yet. How would he know if they were paying me overtime for this? Of course they weren’t, this was all me, and it was forme, but he had no way of knowing that. Heck, if anything, I owed Crescent for all this. For finding Prudence and asking her to help me and now—and often—she was even feeding me.

“They’re paying me for every hour I work,” I informed him. It was true. This just wasn’t one of those hours. “This is important. I need to be able to do my job.”

Prudence lifted a brow at me, clearly recognizing the half-truths I was tossing around. Or at least my pointed avoidance.

He groaned. “This is ridiculous. You need a life outside of work, Kody. Whatever happened to work-life balance?”

“It’s still very important,” I agreed. “I’m sure I’ll have more time off once I’m trained up. It’s not like this is strenuous. Plus, they’re feeding me.”

“To who?” he muttered on the other end of the line, but it didn’t seem like he was talking to me. Before I could demand to know what the hell that was supposed to mean, he sighed, long and deep, and continued. “Okay, okay, fine, I guess. I was

going to introduce you to a guy, but I guess if you're too busy to have a social life, that's your call."

"It is, and I really am." I didn't mean to agree quite so instantly, but the very idea of being introduced to a man sounded terrible. I had already met the man I wanted. The only man I wanted.

Given how Jax kept telling me I shouldn't want him at all, that was probably unhealthy, but... telling me I shouldn't want him wasn't the same as telling me he didn't want me.

By the time I got off the phone, we were in Prudence's enormous kitchen, and she was looking into the double-wide fridge, stuffed with fruits and vegetables. She turned back to me as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. "Friend?" I nodded, biting my lip. "Mundane?"

I winced at the dismissal. Oh, she didn't say it like it was a dismissal, but I heard it all the same. Why wouldn't werewolves and mages dismiss plain old normal people like Donnie? Like I'd been, before?

"He's a good guy," I insisted.

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She hummed as she pulled a clear container out of the fridge, filled with packages of sliced meat and cheese. “He’s concerned you’re not getting enough time for yourself?”

Suddenly, it was my turn to think ill of Donnie. I frowned and cocked my head. “That’s... that’s what he said.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“He’s my best friend,” I defended instantly, like my knee jerking when a doctor thwacked it with that little hammer. Then I sighed. “It’s a little weird for him. I overworked myself all through college and he didn’t seem to mind all that much. But he’s worried now that I’m working too much. He offered to introduce me to a guy.”

She had turned to pull a fresh crusty loaf from the breadbox, and as she turned back, she lifted a brow at me. “I believe you already have a gentleman. Have you not informed him?”

I winced at that, watching her hands as she started to make a sandwich, rather than meeting her eye. After a moment, I couldn’t hold back. “I do. Except... Jax keeps telling me other mages will hate me for being with him. Like he’s actually an animal and not a person. Like there’s something wrong with me because... because he’s the one who Awakened me.”

She paused in spreading mustard on a slice of bread, considering. Then she nodded, before going back to work. “I suppose some would. Less because they don’t think of wolves as human than because they would be annoyed that you didn’t follow

traditions. It's like mundanes going home for the holidays with pink hair, tattoos, and piercings. Their mothers don't approve because it's simply not done, not because there's something inherently wrong with any of those things."

"So it doesn't... there's nothing wrong with my magic, just because it wasn't Awakened by another mage? I'm not... weaker, or wrong?"

At that, she scoffed. "Oh please. You're the candle, Dakota. It's an entity in and of itself; it's not created by the flame. It doesn't make a difference whether it's lit by a match, a lighter, or magic. It still has the same amount of wax and wick, no matter what."

I leaned on the counter, raising a brow at her. "So if an incompetent mage had done it, I might have exploded in a mess of burning wax?"

She laughed at that, then pointed the knife at me. "Clever, but not quite. The candle has no will of its own. No control over its own fate. You do. Exploding in a fiery mess would be a choice, for you to make. You have to allow the magic in. Like when someone gives you the mage handshake and presses their magic against you. If you don't react, they have no way of knowing anything other than that you're a mage. You control everything with yourself and your magic. The person who Awakens it just lends you a bit of fire to light your own wick. Everything past that is up to you."

She slid a plate across the kitchen island to me, covered with a huge turkey sandwich. My stomach grumbled, so I didn't hesitate, just grabbed the thing and dug in. The lady made a fabulous sandwich.

"That is why I don't put much stock in mage politics, though," she said, leaning her hip against the counter and making a disgusted face before shaking it off and setting to making another sandwich. "The lot of them, so arrogant. So self-important. You're the first decent one I've spoken to in decades. Since my cousin became a hermit off

in the Appalachians.”

And that? That seemed like one of the saddest things I’d ever heard. So I smiled at her as I swallowed my bite. “Well, I’ll be around as long as you want me here,” I promised.

Her answering smile was so bright it lit up the kitchen, and for the first time maybe ever, I felt accepted for precisely who I was. All it had taken was a werewolf pack and a mage who hated other mages.

18

Jax

Why the fuck had I decided to have this conversation in the office?

It wasn’t workplace appropriate, obviously.

Maybe I was just trying to regain some degree of professionalism. Or maybe I thought it’d be easier to explain things to him without the impulse to shove him down and cover his body with mine—to distract ourselves with lips and hands until none of my concerns mattered anymore.

I should’ve known better, because after messaging Dakota to come to my office, all I could think about was how he’d sucked me off in his.

But mine was neutral, unsexy ground, right? Nobody thought big imposing desks were hot. Nobody had ever imagined sweeping everything off one to bend someone over the top of it.

I hadn’t jacked Dakota off in this very chair.

And I certainly wasn't thinking about that when Dakota knocked softly at my open door and came inside.

"Shut the door," I requested.

He lifted one black brow at me, his cheeks turning subtly pink. When his heart rate sped, the scent of him spread through my office. I couldn't stop myself from drawing in a slow, deep breath. My shoulders raised with it, stretching the shirt I wore, tugging at the stiffer fabric of the vest I'd put over it, straining the buttons.

I didn't want to let that breath go. Didn't want to let Dakota go either.

But he needed the truth, as much as I could give him. If I wasn't going to send him away, he had to make this decision in full awareness of the risk—an equal partner.

I couldn't protect him from me, but I could give him reason enough to protect himself.

I waved to the chair across from my desk. Distance was good. "Did you see Prudence today?"

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As much affection as I had for Prudence, she was not someone I dared to think of naked. No naked thoughts.

None.

A smile bloomed on Dakota's face, open and pleasant and so relaxed. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him this relaxed before.

Well, not outside of those moments in my bed, when he settled against my side, tucked into the crook beneath my arm with a belly full of pizza.

So much for keeping my thoughts office appropriate.

"Yeah," he said. "Plus no floating staplers in days."

I couldn't help returning his smile. "I honestly can't imagine how hard it's been, having to learn all this so fast. Good work. I'm proud of you."

For the briefest moment, Dakota shrank into his seat, but when I held his eye, he shifted. Sat a little taller. I watched as confidence wrapped around him like a wool coat, keeping him safe and warm. His chin tipped up, and even when the color in his cheeks deepened, his voice didn't waver. "Thanks. And thanks for connecting me with her. She's helping a ton."

"Of course." It was so much less than he deserved.

"Is that what you wanted to talk about? Just... checking in on magic stuff?"

I sighed, dropping my gaze to my hands folded on my desk. For the moment, at least, they were well behaved.

“No. I wanted to talk about us.”

“Us?” The hopeful note in his voice pulled at my vocal cords. Stole my own voice while I could only nod at him.

“Yes. You’re still... interested in continuing”—I waved my hand between us—“this?”

Dakota’s laugh escaped in a single snort. “Yeah. Yes. Definitely. And, ah, you are?”

Already, my wolf was prancing around like we’d won something and weren’t damning Dakota with our selfishness. “I do, but there’s—before we continue, I need to tell you something.”

Dakota edged toward the front of his chair, eager and attentive and, fuck. If he weren’t a mage, everything about him would be just perfect.

A perfect mate. A partner who was honest and steadfast, keen and curious.

My wolf wanted him more than I’d ever wanted anyone, and that alone was a punch to the gut.

We weren’t safe.

“I’ve been upfront with you about the risks of our relationship damaging your reputation in your own community, but I’ve been—” I trailed off, grimacing. My wolf was whining in my skull, trapped there. He didn’t want me admitting to any wrongdoing or putting Dakota off the idea of being around us.

He was ours—ours to protect and keep and feed. We'd bring him back to our den and?—

And be honest with him. About everything.

I was putting my foot down. I might be alpha of my pack, and that meant having to make decisions that affected everyone without always asking permission or informing them of my way of thinking, but I'd seen firsthand what happened when an alpha presumed themselves to be without fault. I wasn't always right.

Fuck, I wasn't sure I even got in the ballpark of "right" half the time.

But if I was going to keep this going—and clearly I was, if I wouldn't even humor the idea of paying off the rest of Dakota's contract and sending him away—I had to be honest.

Completely honest.

Dakota deserved to know what he was getting himself into with me. He deserved to know what he risked each time he fell into my bed.

"I've been hesitant to admit that I'm a liability to you as well," I admitted. I didn't like it; hated the idea of hurting him.

Dakota's nose flared and he seemed just on the edge of rolling his eyes at me. Instead, he wrinkled his nose, and my chest clenched at the sight of his chagrined smile. "You've actually been pretty adamant about this being a bad idea."

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I shook my head. “That’s not what I mean.”

For one last, delusional second, I told myself that I could just keep this to myself. I’d leave him in the dark, because I’d never hurt Dakota, and he’d never know what it cost me.

Maybe that was how it should’ve been, but?—

Well, fuck.

We were whole-truthing it. If there were a chance in hell of me looking at Dakota as anything like a mate, he deserved nothing less.

“Werewolf bites,” I said, “they’re toxic for mages. We can turn humans, once in a while, but with mages? It causes some kind of reaction. I can’t say I understand it.” Truth was, I’d never looked into it. I couldn’t have imagined getting myself into a mess like this, much less finding a mage I was willing to risk trouble for.

Or, hell, a mage I would shove down my instincts for.

“The way your magic works... Most mages who are bitten by a werewolf lose their magic.” A magic that was new to Dakota, sure. Maybe he wasn’t that attached yet, but there was more than just power at risk here. “It’s not just that you could lose your magic. A werewolf’s bite could be terminal for a mage.”

Dakota’s brow furrowed. “So then don’t bite me.”

I stared at him, a laugh bubbling toward my lips that I barely managed to bite back.

As if my wolf hadn't already decided he was ours to claim and bite and mark. As if it didn't howl desperately each time that we were reminded that he wasn't ours and couldn't be.

We didn't have a future, and it ached more than I could've prepared for to admit that, even to myself.

Dakota? He didn't seem to understand.

"I trust you. I mean, I know you've sneaked in a nibble or two, but that feels nice, and I trust you. You're not going to hurt me." He smiled with full confidence, his dark eyes gleaming.

My howl sang through my bones, even as I swallowed it down.

My own smile must've wavered, and a line appeared between Dakota's brows.

But before he could press for more, the phone on my desk screamed shrilly.

It was from the reception desk.

Before I could even ask if Dakota minded me picking up, he nodded. "It's fine."

My stomach rolled as I picked up the receiver.

"Sir, Igarashi Minori is downstairs. There's no appointment on your calendar, but she's?—"

I could hear the strain in the receptionist's voice. Igarashi Minori was my future

business partner. She was allowed to show up unannounced.

“Send her up.”

“Yes, sir.”

When I hung up the phone, Dakota was staring at me curiously. “Everything okay?”

“Igarashi Minori’s here. The Igarashi second-in-command.” A prickle of anxiety crawled up the back of my neck. I didn’t know what she wanted, or why she’d show up without the rest of her team, but most of all, I wasn’t sure I was capable of figuring that out without help.

“Do you want me to stay?”

A wave of relief washed over me at Dakota’s question. I might not be capable of handling her, but I didn’t have the slightest doubt that he was.

“Please.”

The only problem was that I meant it for more than just one meeting. I wanted him to stay, and if I let him, it meant risking his very life.

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Dakota

There was something more to what Jax had been saying, that much was clear. It seemed obvious enough to me: if he couldn't bite me, he just... wouldn't bite me. Right?

But we were at work, and it wasn't time to think about him biting me. Especially because even as he talked about how it could kill me, a tiny part of me was remembering how it felt to have him nibbling on my neck, and I wanted him to bite me.

I didn't think I had a death wish or anything, it was just... it was sexy, wasn't it? Biting? Maybe he had a biting kink, and wouldn't be able to?—

The door to Jax's office opened then, letting in Igarashi Minori, the annoyed, overly starched woman from the meeting, and one of the members of Crescent I'd met before, but whose name I couldn't for the life of me remember. Ken? Kyle? He'd struck me as textbook confident business guy, but I didn't know any more than that about him.

Jax stood from his chair, smiling at them both, then bowing to Igarashi Minori. Heck, it didn't even look awkward or forced. Not too bad, in my own opinion. I did the same, and she returned the gesture, stiff and formal, but at least she was going to show some respect.

At the initial meeting, she'd given no indication that she knew English, but since she was alone, she had to at least know some, right?

"What can we do to help you today, Ms. Igarashi?" Jax asked. Also good. I didn't know why I might have expected anything else. Jax had never been anything other than perfectly professional... except with me.

"I wish to know more about how Crescent does business," she told him in flawless English with barely a hint of accent. Her tone was a bit clipped, but there was nothing outright disrespectful there.

Jax smiled at her. "That seems like a reasonable notion to me. If we're going to be partners, everyone in both companies should be comfortable with each other."

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't say anything shitty, or disagree, only nodded.

"What would you like to start with?" I asked her. Sure, it wasn't my meeting, and maybe it wasn't my place, but I thought what she cared about would say a lot about her.

She turned and looked at me, her eyes boring into my soul for a moment, before nodding. "Perhaps Human Resources."

Interesting. That wasn't remotely what I'd have expected, but also, it was one of the best things I could think of for her to care about: people. Also, I knew HR better than anywhere else in the building. I smiled at her. "That's perfect. I would be happy to take you down to HR right now. I'm sure Maia would be happy to help out."

I turned to Jax, raising a brow and waiting for his okay. If anything, he seemed a little relieved to leave it to me, nodding and holding a hand out toward the door. "Of course." He turned to look at her, slightly hesitant. "I'm sure Dakota can get you

anything you need, but if you'd like, I can come along."

"Not necessary," she said, holding up a hand and shaking her head. "Who would say anything against a company with their superior standing over them?"

It was a fair point.

Jax didn't reassure her that wouldn't happen, just once again bowed slightly, nodding. "Fair enough, Ms. Igarashi. I'll be here in my office if you need anything else. Dakota can show you anything you'd like to see in the building, and he can call me if you need me there."

A moment later, we were off toward the elevator banks to take us down to HR.

She looked at me from the corner of her eye for a moment, as though waiting for me to say something. Fair enough, as fast as I'd offered myself up to show her to HR, it was reasonable to assume I'd wanted to speak to her privately. I kind of did have something to say, too, I just didn't think I should say it, since it wasn't my place to point out that her employees' behavior at the meeting combined with the contract language had Igarashi skating on super fucking thin ice with me already.

I wasn't Jax.

I didn't get to make that call.

She seemed to have read me all too well, though, as she cocked her head consideringly. "You don't approve of the merger."

"The merger isn't my choice," I offered right back. "It isn't my place to approve or disapprove."

The elevator was already on the top floor waiting, so it opened as soon as we pressed the button, and in a moment, we were alone on the thing. I had a momentary terror that she'd press the emergency stop and the whole thing would turn into a sitcom episode, but she didn't move or say a word until the doors slid open once again.

“You're right. You don't have a say. But you have an opinion.”

I smiled and inclined my head to her, but I wasn't gonna fall into that trap. “Everyone has an opinion on most things, Igarashi-san. Most of our opinions are irrelevant, and don't need to be public.”

Her lips actually ticked up in one corner at that. Like I had amused her. But she turned to face forward, looking over the small bullpen of cubicles and offices beyond that made up the HR floor. Still, it seemed she'd decided to move on, because the next thing she said wasn't about my personal opinion. “American companies have a... reputation, about how they treat employees. Disallowing vacations and even restroom breaks. I would not wish to see Igarashi associated with people who are overworked and unhappy.”

There was a gasp from one side, and when we turned to look, Maia was standing there looking absolutely aghast. “Absolutely not,” she insisted, and a muscle in her jaw clenched and flexed.

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I had about half a second before she told Igarashi Minori to go fuck herself, I realized with some clarity.

I stepped between them. “That sounds reasonable to me,” I said. “You want Crescent to take care of their people, and wouldn’t want to be associated with a company that didn’t. I think Crescent rather feels the same way.” Turning back toward Minori, I lifted a brow. “Of course, Maia can help prove to you how we treat our employees. We’ll have to figure out how that will work the other way, don’t you think? How one treats one’s coworkers is very important.”

“I fired him,” she said, point blank and apparently changing the subject. But she wasn’t changing the subject. She was talking about the man in the meeting who’d called the Crescent people beasts.

I nodded to that. “Probably for the best. You wouldn’t want someone to bring shame on your company, and he was trying rather hard to do so.”

She made a face like she’d just bitten into a piece of wax fruit, and nodded. “Indeed.”

Maia, on the other hand, was flummoxed. “Um, who are we talking about?”

“The man who called us beasts at the meeting.”

Maia scowled at that, as did Minori, but not at each other, so that was a start. Also, neither of them denied that I’d been included in that particular “us,” so that seemed like a good sign to me. Maia was accepting me as part of Crescent, and Minori understood where my loyalties were.

I considered, then shrugged. “Maia, do you have time to go over the compensation package the company offers?” Even as she nodded, I swung my attention back to Minori. “Which I’d like to say is one of the most generous I’ve ever even heard of—and address everything else you want to know. And maybe while she gets that, you can tell me why the contracts you sent over are so vague on intellectual property?”

That, unlike anything before it, got Minori’s attention. “They what?”

I smiled like a shark. “I can’t tell you how glad I am that you decided to visit, Igarashi-san. Let me go get the contracts.”

I left them together, Maia explaining the paid-time-off system that Crescent had implemented, since as wolves, they apparently didn’t get the common cold, but as she said, still deserved time off for other things. Sometimes, she was explaining as the elevator closed behind me, a person just needs a day off.

For the first time since I’d met her, Igarashi Minori was smiling at something.

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Jax

Kent stayed behind to show me some contracts, smiling like the cat who’d gotten the cream. I didn’t think he particularly enjoyed spending time in HR, and I knew, thanks to no small amount of griping from Jillian, that the women in the pack found him irksome.

Apparently, he’d asked my sister out more than once. If he weren’t so personable, I might’ve thought he was vying for my place as alpha and trying to use my sister to get there, but Jillian and I had founded Crescent together. He wasn’t prying me out of

the CEO's suite, and Jillian was more than capable of handling any unwanted attention.

If she ever wasn't, she knew all she had to do was come to me. So far, whenever I brought it up, she waved it off and said Kent was fine—albeit with a rather dramatic eyeroll.

He was good in the office, good at handling people, charming with clients and partners alike, but he had those same wolfish instincts that made some alphas downright intolerable. I couldn't judge him too hard, though. Wasn't I prone to dig my heels in when I thought I knew right? I tried not to be that kind of alpha, but it took time and effort.

Mostly, I chalked Kent's posturing up to arrogance and leaning too hard on old pack dynamics to figure out where he belonged. If we tossed out every werewolf who'd gotten in their own head about hierarchy and strutted around trying to find a mate, we wouldn't have much of a pack left.

He was... well, he was better than when he'd joined us. He hadn't been there at my side when I fought the alpha like Seth had. He didn't know what we'd fought for and what we'd risked. He certainly hadn't been sleeping half a dozen to a room, scraping to get by.

But he'd chosen us, and he was willing to learn. That was what I wanted in my pack—people who hoped for something better and were willing to compromise to get it.

Overall, I thought Kent was a decent guy, an asset. He just needed a little more time to settle. We all had, at first. How many times had Seth grabbed me by the back of the neck and growled that I was being a fucking asshole before I learned how to say what I meant like a goddamn adult?

Though I tried to be patient, sometimes, he still got under my skin.

Like a while later, when he stretched, setting work aside, and leaned in conspiratorially.

“Man,” he said, flashing his gleaming white canines, “I’ve got to know—did twinkledee out there get the job before or after you started rubbing your scent all over him?”

Dakota. Kent was talking about Dakota.

When a low rumble sounded in my throat, he held up his hands. “No offense, but you can’t blame me for being curious. You don’t normally bring this stuff into the office.”

My nose flared.

He was right. I didn’t normally date at work.

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It got... complicated. There was no way not to take advantage—hell, no way not to get maneuvered into playing favorites, or at least appearing to. And while most of my pack might give me a pass on that one, no, it was easier to keep things separate, leave no one wondering where they stood.

Easier to settle for one-off encounters than risk complications like the situation I was currently in.

I sighed, shaking the tension out of my shoulders. Yeah, most alphas might not tolerate getting questioned, but I was never going to be like that.

Well, not on purpose.

“He came into Howl the night before he started here.”

Kent’s brows shot up.

A new flash of shame shot through me to see the direction of his thoughts and how they’d mirrored my own doubt. That hadn’t been fair of me, and it wasn’t fair of Kent now.

“Pure coincidence,” I insisted. “He was looking to blow off steam. He didn’t know who I was until?—”

“Until that first meeting? Shit. No wonder you both looked like you were gonna explode.” Kent snorted.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

No reason to tell Kent I’d Awakened him, that Dakota hadn’t even known who and what he was before he’d fallen into my bed. Yeah, it might get out in the office, but not because of me.

“Seems like you trust him, though, sending him off with Igarashi.”

“You brought her up here. I’m not trying to keep her away from anyone.” That’d just stir up trouble. If Igarashi wanted a look at our structure, fine. I wasn’t hiding anything.

Some packs took advantage of everyone’s labor, but those packs didn’t tend to have companies with magic trading options.

Kent shrugged. “I just mean, he’s awfully new to be showing her around.”

He... wasn’t wrong. I wanted Dakota at my side, trusted him with Igarashi and with Crescent as a whole. Why was that?

Well, for my wolf, it was simple. He was ours.

I could rely as much on him as he could rely on me.

But was I being naive? Even when I pressed myself to consider the possibility, I couldn’t help but immediately dismiss it. I trusted Dakota. He wouldn’t betray our pack.

We’d hired him specifically for this role—to liaise with Igarashi.

“He’ll do fine. He’s better at being frank with the Igarashi company than I am.”

Kent pursed his lips, lifted a brow. “If you’re sure.” He sucked in his cheeks. “Don’t know how I feel about letting her have free rein of the place though.”

I sank into my office chair. “We need this contract if we’re going to open up new markets. I’m not going to treat her like an outsider when we’re going to have to rely on each other moving forward.”

Kent hooked his thumbs in his pockets and shrugged. “Whatever,alpha. Let her stick those tiny little hands in all our confidential info.”

He kicked his foot out and turned to go, but came up short when Seth towered in the door to my office.

Seth was enormous, bigger than me. And if he had wanted to be in charge, we might’ve had problems. But he’d been my best friend since before we’d left the old pack, had my back at every turn.

In those early years, when I lamented how I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing and he’d make a better alpha, Seth had snorted, elbowed me, and assured me I knew as well as anybody ever did.

He wasn’t much for big speeches, but he was steadfast and loyal.

Now, he took care of security for all of Crescent.

And when he smiled at Kent, his teeth flashing and the light reflecting off his dark brown skin, I felt Kent flinch at the presence of a larger man.

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Maybe I should've been offended I didn't have the same effect on him.

Seth, for his part, snorted and stepped into the room, ignoring Kent entirely.

"Maia called down to the front desk. She wants an escort to a local karaoke place. I think they're planning on taking Igarashi Minori out tonight?"

Ah, yes. Perfect. Crescent was going to force prim and proper Igarashi Minori into a night on the town. That was going to go just perfectly.

And Dakota? Was he going too?

"I thought you'd want to know," Seth said, even as I was pushing out of my seat.

"This is too much, right?" I asked Seth. "They don't need to go out." Certainly not without me. Who knew what would happen?

Seth shrugged. "They haven't left yet, so..."

Maybe I could stop them.

Maybe I should stop them.

Or—I didn't know, but this felt like something spiraling out of my control, and I needed to get my ass down to HR and get a handle on it.

Dakota

It felt like a waking nightmare, at first.

Not doing my job, but trying to do my job and having Igarashi Minori make the world's weirdest demands. She wanted to discuss the pay scheme for all employees, and how benefits worked? Fine. Totally in line with what anyone might have expected. She wanted to order sushi for lunch and go to a karaoke club with other employees tonight? What. The. Fuck.

At the very least, it seemed like we should be getting lunch from a place that specialized in local food. Seafood, sure. Sushi? There was almost no chance that could go well.

But Maia seemed almost smug at the request, and left us alone going through the employee handbook so she could make a call for the food.

Half an hour later, a spread of sushi the likes of which I'd never even imagined showed up, delivered by a smiling pair of employees and laid out on the center table. Igarashi Minori had frowned, and I'd expected her to start demanding to know why they'd ordered so much that some would almost certainly go to waste, but then the whole HR department had come around, a few people at a time, and... well, it turned out werewolves could really put away the sushi, at least as much as mages, and they seemed to relish it.

When a quarter of it disappeared in less than five minutes, Igarashi Minori seemed to realize nothing would be going to waste, and also that if she wanted some at all, she'd better jump in.

Come to think of it, me too.

So we both picked through the options and sat back down with heavy plates of food. After a moment of picking it over and nibbling on a few pieces, she sat back staring at it as though it were somehow confusing.

I did not. It was fucking delicious, and I wanted to devour it all. And maybe get some more... except everyone in the department hadn't eaten yet, so that was rude.

She looked up at first me, then Maia. "This is... excellent."

I cocked my head at her. Why was that confusing?

Maia, on the other hand, beamed. "Werewolf-run shop on the corner. Her family immigrated from Japan fifteen years ago, and they run the shop together. It turns out that a werewolf nose is very good for picking out the freshest seafood."

Minori didn't even pause in chewing the bite she'd taken, but cocked her head, considering, then finally nodded. "That makes sense." Then for the first time since we'd met, she truly smiled, and it transformed her whole face. It turned out she was beautiful. "Delightful. I look forward to learning of your other food."

I couldn't stop myself from beaming, even though I probably looked ridiculous, with little chipmunk cheeks as I shoved more fish into my mouth. In my pocket, my phone rang out the text message tone.

Annoying, but I should check it, since it could be Jax.

Donnie: You need to come home for dinner tonight. You're working too much, you're gonna burn out.

What the heck? That was ridiculous. He knew I'd just started a new job, and he'd been the one to warn me how much work a corporate job was going to involve. He'd

painted a picture of long nights of overtime at the office, and how awful it would all be, boring and?—

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“Do you Americans have any worthy karaoke clubs?” Minori asked, looking at Maia innocently, and something about it felt like a challenge to me.

Maia clearly agreed, but it seemed she also thought she was up to the challenge, as a wicked smile bloomed on her face. “As it happens, we do. Want to go tonight?”

Karaoke. So, I knew the stereotypes. I knew that karaoke was in fact quite popular in Japan as an easy way to socialize, even with relative strangers. I just hadn’t in a million years expected to be involved with it. I’d never done it—had in fact thought of it as kind of a joke, and it wasn’t like Donnie had ever wanted to do it. He was all about dancing at clubs, mostly while looking for hookups.

“I, um, can’t really sing,” I said, getting both their attention and hedging. I didn’t want to humiliate myself unexpectedly, at least.

Minori waved me off. “It isn’t about that. Most people aren’t secretly great talents.”

Maia nodded at that. “It’s about letting loose and being allowed to not be good at something. You can’t be mediocre at work and not be in trouble, but you can at this. And we’re all equal because the boss is just as likely to stink as you. No one cares if you’re going to be a famous singer someday. Heck, it might be better if you’re not.”

Minori smiled and nodded, and she and Maia shared a moment like that, excited and pleased and on the same page. It was perfect, and unexpected, and for the first time, gave me hope that this merger could truly work.

I looked back down at my phone and Donnie’s demand that I get home for dinner.

To Donnie: Sorry, can't make it. Like you said, office job, long hours and lots of overtime. Got to keep the boss happy so I can pay my rent.

Then I silenced my phone and slid it back into my pocket. Sure, maybe I didn't especially want to humiliate myself by singing in front of strangers, but also, it didn't sound like much of a sacrifice. Going home and skipping it? That sounded terrible.

Maia and Minori were full into planning mode and the office had finished getting their lunch, so I took the opportunity to grab a second plate. Minori glanced up at me, her eyes twinkling. I ducked my head, but she waved me off. "I'm sure werewolves go through the same when they come of age." She turned and looked at Maia, interested. "Yes? The need to eat all things?"

Maia laughed aloud. "It's almost a rite of passage, eating everything in the house and then asking for more."

The elevators opened and Jax... well, stormed into the room was the right term, but almost immediately, the wind seemed taken out of his sails as he entered to find Igarashi Minori laughing and nodding. "I once caught my student eating dry noodles, and when I scolded him to cook them first, he said it took too long."

Jax stared at her, stunned, and I grinned at him. "So boss, you coming to karaoke with us?"

In my pocket, my phone vibrated, and I ignored it.

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Jax

They were... having fun.

Dakota had somehow put everyone at ease.

All right, Maia undoubtedly had a part in that. She was an exceptional employee, a fantastic packmate, and still, the swell of pride I felt looking at Dakota dwarfed everything else.

“Ah, yes. I’d love to. Karaoke, you said?”

Behind me, Seth snorted. “I’ll go call Charles.”

“For a ride,” I added when Igarashi arched her brow at me. “He’s my driver. I take it you haven’t found anything out of order?”

The smile she sent my way was full, her dark brown eyes twinkled merrily. Was this the same woman who’d marched into our office only a little while ago, wanting to see how we treated our employees?

Something in her seemed to have opened up, and even knowing Dakota only a short time, I understood why. When I glanced over at him, he gave me a tiny nod to let me know it was going well.

By the look of their empty sushi containers, I suspected so.

“We... haven’t,” Igarashi admitted, though when she spoke to me, she seemed less relaxed than she did around the others.

Well, maybe it wasn’t because I was a werewolf. Maia didn’t seem to offend her. We just couldn’t trust each other entirely while trying to look out for our own people’s best interests. I could understand that, even though I hoped, in time, this would get easier.

Seth returned when Charles pulled into the parking deck, and we piled tight in the back of the town car.

The karaoke place wasn't quite what I was expecting. When we got there, we were led to a private room for our party. It was cozy, almost intimate, with bench seating and comfortable chairs, and a QR code on the table for us to order drinks and snacks.

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When the waiter came in with the first round of drinks, I slipped him the company card for our tab and told everyone to order anything they liked.

Maia sang first. I got the impression everyone else was too on edge, maybe needed a couple of drinks in their system first.

Her voice was lovely and light, slipping over my nerves like warm honey. This was all going to be fine. One night out, show Igarashi a good time, don't act like a jackass.

I could handle it.

While she moved through the song, Seth watched intently, leaning over his knees. I knew that look too damn well.

Another sip of my IPA settled in my stomach.

"Care to order something to eat, or are you full?" I asked Dakota, holding out my phone. The menu was already pulled up, and something in me wanted Dakota to order from my phone. More alpha-impulse driven provider nonsense, sure, but he took the phone, and I felt a thrill at it, even imagined the way his fingers would warm the cool glass and leave an imprint there.

I stared, thinking about impossible things that weren't helped one bit by the way he bit his lip as he looked over the menu.

Dakota pressed against my side when he handed back my phone. He nudged my knee

with his. “Do you want to sing something?”

I stared at him, and while I didn’t shrink, I could still feel heat flood my face. “I’m not half as drunk as I’d need to be for that.”

He caught his tongue between his teeth, smiling.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I thought wolves liked to howl.”

I blew out a breath while my heart did a little skip in my chest. Igarashi Minori stepped to the front of the room, picked something on a tablet and music began to play, the screen behind her flickering through an absurd video of a woman in a flowing dress, clutching her hands melodramatically.

Igarashi, for her part, was the perfect amount of dramatic.

I watched, stunned, as she belted her way through *Total Eclipse of the Heart*.

How the fuck was this the same woman who’d tersely taken over our office for the day?

She finished, and we all clapped, Dakota even letting out a whoop.

When Igarashi Minori sat down beside us, the bench bounced and she grinned. “You’re not...” She narrowed her eyes at me as she searched for the word she wanted. “Uncouth.”

I snorted. “And you’re not uptight, so let’s just leave it at we’ve both surprised each other?”

She took another second to size me up. Igarashi wasn't a woman to make decisions on a whim, but when her expression softened, I almost let out a sigh of relief.

"To more opportunities to impress each other, then." She lifted her glass, and I did the same. We clinked them together and took a sip, and when she lowered hers, she narrowed her eyes at Dakota steadily.

Was she going to ask him to come and work for them?

He... could. He might've signed a contract with us, but I wasn't in the habit of forcing anyone to work for me who didn't want to. Still, it took everything I had not to put a possessive hand on Dakota's knee to keep him there.

Instead of a job offering issuing forth, a tiny frown puckered Igarashi's lips for a moment, before she sighed. "Your smile... it reminds me so much of my uncle's."

I scowled, confused, and Dakota laughed nervously. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No," Igarashi shook her head fast, taking a surprisingly large gulp of her drink. "No, not at all. I just haven't thought about him in years. I forgot what he looked like until you smiled and it... hit me."

"Oh," Dakota whispered. He ducked his head, and my wolf reared up when he shrank into the bench.

Maybe I couldn't protect him—maybe there was no reason to—but I could still jump in and give him a moment to process that. "Is he no longer with you?"

Igarashi shook her head again. "He died. In a car accident, when I was in college. It was terrible. His wife and baby—one day, they were all there and—and so lovely. And in one night, they were?—"

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She shivered, looking away like, right then, she couldn't quite bear to see Dakota's smile, or the haunted look that hollowed his cheeks and parted his lips.

After a tense, quiet moment, Igarashi shook herself. "He was meant to take over the company from our grandfather, but it didn't work out for him. Not for my father, either. He died shortly after, but we're—we're lucky Jiro was ready to step into such a significant role. And so young."

The tightness in her smile set my teeth on edge. Every werewolf in the room had heard this strangely heavy conversation, and no one wanted to belt out pop anthems while grief had wrapped around Igarashi like a veil. For too long no one seemed to know what to say.

And then, there was a knock on the door.

The waiter entered, and Seth clapped his hands. "Pizza's here!"

If melted cheese couldn't help us recover from the tension, we were doomed.

23

Dakota

Something about Minori's story set my teeth on edge. I looked like a dead man. Unless I was mistaken about the subtlety laced between the lines of her words, a dead man she had once worried her father had murdered.

Fucking yikes.

That wasn't just something you went around telling people. It was like saying you looked like their asshole ex or a famous murderer. Why would you do that, even if it were true?

Still, when Jax set a plate laden with pizza in front of me, it was eminently distracting. I never would have thought the pizza at a random karaoke bar would be amazing, but there it was. It was great. The crust was chewy and crusty, the cheese hot and gooey, and the tomato sauce that perfect level of acidity that a good pizza needed to counteract all the fat in the cheese.

I wished for a moment that Prudence were there, and that was... odd. I'd known Prudence for such a short time. If I were missing someone, shouldn't it be my family or best friend? Except frankly I didn't want them there. My parents were the worst buzzkill ever, such boring bland people, they reminded me of overcooked pasta. No flavor, no interest, no backbone, nothing at all to recommend them.

And Donnie?

I blinked repeatedly, because that was... it wasn't possible to summon someone just by thinking of them, was it? It couldn't be magic. I hadn't even been thinking that I wanted him there, but the opposite. The realization gave me a stab of shame, but also, I didn't want him there.

Yes, we were having fun, but I was with my coworkers. This wasn't a club. It wasn't time for Donnie to flirt with everyone in sight and go home with the hottest guy in the room.

He wasn't allowed to have Jax.

Jax was fucking mine.

But it was Donnie. Donnie was standing there in the doorway, smiling at the woman who'd been bringing our drinks with his flirtiest smile. He slipped her something, I assumed a tip, and then turned to the room at large, grinning that bright grin that always drew everyone in.

The smile that always got all attention on him, and even the guys who'd been flirting with me before his arrival always turned right to him.

I turned sharply to look at Jax, but his eyes weren't on Donnie. They were on me, and filled with concern. "Are you okay?"

What did he mean was I okay? Did I stink of jealousy or something? It wouldn't have been surprising, since Donnie was there. Donnie, who slept with every guy I'd ever been remotely attracted to in every club we went to together.

I was clutching Jax's arm so tight that his jacket was wrinkling under my grip. Shit.

I loosed my hold, but instead of pulling away with relief, Jax reached over and covered my hand, keeping me from withdrawing. "Who's that?"

My jaw hurt, I was clenching it so hard, and I had to pull it open through sheer force of will. "Donnie," I finally croaked out. "He's my... my roommate. I didn't invite him here. I didn't even tell him where I was going. But he's been obsessing over how I'm working too much and I'm going to burn out."

Jax raised that one perfect, smooth eyebrow that made him look like a model for Armani, and he sort of half-glanced at Donnie. "Want me to have him removed? Seth will do it."

Across from us, the very large security man was slightly tensed as though prepared to stand up, watching me and Jax, head cocked in my direction. Like it was all up to me, and he was prepared to either accept or eject Donnie based on my word.

Mine.

And neither of them were even looking at scruffy, model-perfect Donnie.

“Hey Kody,” Donnie said, grinning at me as he skirted his way around the table toward me. “You should have told me it wasn’t real work. I wouldn’t have worried so much.”

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He was effortlessly beautiful, as always. Looking somehow both like he'd just rolled out of bed and like he'd had a whole team of hair and makeup people to make him look that way.

"It's fine," I said, to no one in particular. "Everything's fine."

Jax squeezed my hand, bumping me with his shoulder. He still didn't look up at Donnie, who was standing over us.

Donnie, who was pressing in, as though he wanted to push his way onto the bench between me and Jax, even though there wasn't a bit of empty space there.

Behind me, Maia cleared her throat. I turned to look at her, and she was looking at Donnie. "I guess if you're crashing, you can sit down here, next to Jilly. She's good at keeping an eye on troublemakers."

It was a little playful, yes, but it wasn't... it wasn't entirely playful. There was some tension in her, and in the words, and she didn't let Donnie protest as she shooed him down the table toward Jillian. She put him in a chair she'd been inhabiting before, and stood there next to the table, between him and me. Like she was going to protect me from him.

Like everyone in the room wasn't instantly charmed by his very existence.

That was a first for my whole life. Everyone loved Donnie. Everyone wanted to be close to him.

My coworkers were friendly enough, leaning across the table and introducing themselves, shaking his hand, but—but Jax didn't even glance his way. He smiled down at me. "Are you going to sing?"

"Oh no, I?—"

"You don't want him to do that," Donnie interrupted from all the way down the table. "Kody sings like a cat in heat."

Jax didn't look away from me, and his smile only faltered for a second. "I haven't spent much time at this, but it doesn't seem to be about that. It's not like all of us are going to be stars."

"That's right," Maia agreed, and she came up on my other side, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the end of the table, right out of my seat and toward what looked a lot like a firing squad to me.

But somehow, when the music started, a cute poppy sixties song about "his kiss," it didn't seem quite as scary. Not with Maia standing there with me. Not with all my coworkers smiling at us. None of them cringed at my voice, and they applauded when we finished the song—Seth even stuck his fingers in his mouth and gave a wolf whistle. I knew that was for Maia, not me, but still.

It was... nice.

When I walked by Donnie on the way back to my seat, Jillian was leaning on his shoulder, as though she was holding him in his seat, even as he was staring down the table at Jax.

Jax, who was looking at me.

Just me.

I couldn't hold in my own smile in return. "Your turn?" I asked as I sat down, and everyone around me roared. It was seconds later that Seth was dragging him up to the front to pick their own song and just... fuck me, it was a work event, and I didn't think I'd ever had so much fun in my life.

I forgot all about Donnie.

24

Jax

Dakota's friend smelled wrong.

My hair stood on end at the confusion of scents. He and Dakota shared space, and Dakota's scent had become so dear to me that it was strange, how even their mingling struck me as something to be wary of.

But Dakota was safe, right there beside me, and I had nothing to worry about. Clearly, his friend was only human, and I needed to get a grip. This possessiveness was getting out of control.

Maybe it was just my instincts going haywire after Dakota's clear anxiety. I had to protect him from whatever had caused the upset, and that was the unexpected arrival of his... roommate.

But Dakota wouldn't live with someone who posed him a genuine threat. He'd just been taken off guard, and after he sang, he relaxed. He was having a good time, and Donnie's sudden appearance hadn't ruined everything after all.

His laugh was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard. His glittering eyes locked on me as I stumbled my way with Seth through a song about being love drunk. Thankfully, I was edging close enough to actually drunk that it didn't matter if I was terrible.

Seth was, without question, a better dancer than I was. He knew all the words and played them out dramatically, but his enthusiasm was infectious. Even if I was a disaster, I was out of breath by the time I fell into my seat beside Dakota.

His cheeks were flushed red, and he looked at me from the corners of his eyes. "You're pretty good," he mumbled.

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I snorted. “I’m a disaster, but any time you want me to get up and dance for you?—”

There, he went even redder, and my heartbeat skipped.

Minori watched us with pursed lips. She was eyeing my hand draped around Dakota’s shoulder.

And sure, to a mage, it was unreasonably forward, but my wolf growled in my head. I had every right to?—

Before I could get too twisted up about it, Minori rose from her seat and picked a song I didn’t recognize. Her voice was full and sweet, and by the time she sat back down, she wasn’t staring at Dakota and me anymore.

She might not like a werewolf putting his hands on a mage, but at least she’d kept from saying anything about it. That made her just about as decent as I could hope, and I’d have to check in with Dakota later to make sure that no one from Igarashi gave him shit behind my back.

It was... his choice.

I just had to keep telling myself that. It was his choice if he wanted to keep spending time with me, and telling him he couldn’t when deep down, I wanted him to, was just about as ridiculous and awful as telling him he had to go out with me.

Still, it was hard, not thinking I knew best for everyone around me. That was my purpose, dammit. But checking that impulse made me a better alpha.

And all of this? All of this was helped by whisky. For the night, all I needed to do was loosen up, show Igarashi Minori a good time (or not get in the way when other people managed to), and not growl too obviously at Dakota's friend and roommate.

Simple.

Before it got too late, it was time to head home. I was closing up our tab when Donnie saw an in. He struck.

Dakota had barely stood up before his roommate was right there in front of him, shoving his arm through Dakota's.

"I'll call a Lyft," Donnie announced, dragging Dakota along as I stared after them.

Minori drifted to my side as the server took back their tablet. "You're not going to say goodnight?"

If I weren't mistaken, that tilt of her mouth was positively teasing.

Maybe she wasn't as much of a stickler as I thought.

Still didn't like her pointing out that Dakota was being pulled away from me though.

Annoyed, I blew an exhale through my flared nostrils and went after them.

Out on the sidewalk, Dakota had extricated himself from Donnie and shoved his hands into his coat pockets. A muscle in his jaw was twitching, and he smelled a little sharp. Still good, but like he was angry and his blood was racing fast.

I put my arm around his waist, and his breath caught. For a moment, he blinked up at me, dazed and flushed. Then, he smiled.

My wolf was prancing at the idea that he wasn't mad at us—that we made things better for him.

Possessively, I curled my hand around his hip, and like Donnie could feel the touch himself, he spun around. His gaze dropped to my tight fingers. His mouth fell open.

Before he said anything, I pulled Dakota in and brushed a kiss across his soft smile.

He went lax in my arms, and I knew right then that there was no way I was letting him go anywhere with this stranger.

“I’m afraid Dakota and I have some paperwork to take care of back at the office,” I said, hardly lifting my head because the way his breath danced across my lips was so sweet. “But get home safely, Donnie. It was so nice to meet you.”

Donnie made some noise of protest, but Dakota was grinning when he said, “See you at home.”

I slipped my hand into Dakota’s and squeezed. This felt right. He was mine.

“Want to walk?” I asked.

He swallowed hard, but nodded a second later.

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“Is everything okay?” he croaked once we were out of earshot of the others. “There’s paperwork?”

I laughed, pressing my sharp canine into my bottom lip. “Not exactly. Nothing that couldn’t wait. I just wasn’t ready to let go of you yet.”

25

Dakota

I was in an alternate dimension. That was the only possible explanation.

I’d never been in any situation before where Donnie hadn’t become the center of everyone’s attention. Everyone loved Donnie, always.

Except my coworkers did not.

Was it a werewolf thing? Did he smell bad to them? Or was it because I smelled pitiful and jealous, so they’d gotten protective of me?

I had no idea how to react, other than the way I always instinctively reacted when Jax got close to me. I pulled him even closer.

Maybe it was me being inexperienced, or immature, or something else bad, but it didn’t feel bad. It felt like getting closer to Jax could only be right and good.

He tugged me up against him as we walked to the office, and I leaned into him.

It felt odd, going into the office after hours, when everything was dark and locked down. Not that the night security man stopped us—quite the contrary, he greeted Jax with a smile and a nod. It was just strange to even be there when all the lights were out, and the only noise was the whirring of a vacuum cleaner in one of the offices. Maybe mine.

Jax took me to his own office and started fiddling with his computer, so I glanced over his shoulder. An expense report about the karaoke bar. I tried not to swallow hard as he typed in the amount of money the company had spent on that private room and everyone's food and drinks, but it was more than I'd ever seen in one place, for sure.

"I should... Donnie isn't an employee. I can pay for?—"

"You didn't invite him," Jax said, smiling at me, then reaching over to squeeze my hand. "If I were annoyed with the expense of him, I'd be asking him to pay his way, not you."

It was a valid point, but if I hadn't been there, Donnie would never have thought to crash a random company's private party.

Come to think of it, I wasn't sure why he'd thought it appropriate to crash this private party. Just because I was there? What if my coworkers had been less accommodating? I could have gotten fired for this. How had he even found us?

Suddenly, I was angry. Donnie had basically been trying to sabotage my whole job, from which I was going to be paying half the damned rent. What would I have done if I'd gotten fired over this?

"You're not going to fire me because of what he did, are you?"

This time, Jax looked flummoxed. “Do what?”

“I... that is, it was incredibly inappropriate of him to show up. He interrupted work, and he could have put the whole Igarashi merger in danger, if Minori had turned out to be anything like what I thought she was. It was a real dick move on his part.”

“It was,” Jax agreed, nodding. “But I don’t see what that has to do with you, your roommate acting inappropriately.”

“He wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t work for you,” I pointed out, like maybe I wanted Jax to find fault. To fire me. “It’s a more rational reason to fire me than because I’m a mage.”

Jax winced at the point, then shook his head. “It’s really not.” He turned back to the report, then shook his head and turned to me, tugging me down to sit on his lap. I lifted a brow at the position, but didn’t say anything, so he just started talking. “I’m a wolf, Dakota. You’re a mage.”

“Yes, Tarzan, I was aware. You’re the one who told me all this to begin with, remember?” I patted him on the cheek, and if it was a little patronizing, well, he’d started that.

He sighed, like I was being particularly difficult. “I want to bite you. No, more than that. Every time I get near your skin, I have an instinct screaming at me to bite you. Make you irrevocably mine. Make you part of my pack. Keep you forever.”

Suddenly, the office was very dry. I needed a drink of water, badly.

“And that’s... I’m sorry, how is that not a good thing? It kind of sounds amazing to me.”

He groaned, dropping his head onto my shoulder. “You’re not helping, Dakota. You’re not—you can’t—Mages can’t be werewolves. If I bite you, and you do become a werewolf, you won’t have magic anymore. I’ll be taking your magic from you. If you don’t become a werewolf, well, you might just die.”

Oh.

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Well, that... that was not at all what I'd been expecting. It did make the concept of him biting me a touch less sexy. I hadn't wanted to be a mage, but having it taken away or maybe dying, well, that was another thing entirely, and not one I'd even considered here. I'd been dropped into a world where magic and werewolves and fairies were real. Death had seemed like an even more distant concept than it had been before, when I was just a regular college student.

I was going to have to talk to Prudence about this whole turning into a werewolf thing. After all... if that was what it took to be with Jax, then maybe... maybe I was willing to stop being a mage, for that. He was quickly becoming something very important to me, and I didn't want to go back to life without him.

How important was magic next to a future with Jax?

26

Jax

My cheekbone ached from pressing against Dakota's shoulder, but it was nice to have him so close. Sure, I still wanted to mark and claim him, but the only thing that could soothe that need to make him my mate was having him close.

It was an excuse. I knew it; I just didn't care.

Having him there felt too good to push him away. If I was playing with fire, so be it, as long as I could hold him a little while longer.

Too soon, Dakota started moving around. Did he want me to let him go? Why was that so hard?

Biting back a whine, I loosened my grip on him, but he only turned enough to brush his lips across my cheek.

“Hm?”

“You’re torturing yourself,” Dakota said, gripping my hair hard enough that he could pull my head up.

All I could do was sigh.

“It’s not your fault,” he whispered, dragging his thumb across my cheekbone when he touched my face.

“That my instinct is to kill you?”

He huffed. “That your instinct is to keep me.” His lips twitched toward a smile. His palm was so warm against my skin. “You’re going to have to be bigger, badder, and scarier than that if you want me to think you’re some kind of monster.”

While he held my face, he leaned in slow. I could feel how deep he took each breath as his chest rose and pressed against mine. When he kissed me, it was like a steady wave, warm and giving.

Dakota twisted in my lap. I’d meant to let him go, but now, my arm around his waist was too tight for him to move far, and it was an awkward press and shimmy for him to turn around. He straddled me in my office chair and as he kissed me, his hips started to move.

The man was sex incarnate—wild, given that he'd only just started having it. But the way he moved, the needy little sounds he made, wiped every other thought from my mind.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was gripping his hips and dragging him against me, my cock straining the front of my pants while he fought with my zipper.

Even seconds were too long before I felt his skin on mine, the steel heat of his cock rigid against my own. He gripped us both and moved, and right then, I'd have given him anything he wanted. Anything. Everything.

Just let me keep you.

I pressed my mouth against his shoulder, and just the pressure against my bared teeth made the buzzing desperation in my head blow apart. He was ours, ours, ours.

Even if I couldn't mark him, in that moment, riding on my thighs, he was mine.

He shivered. Was he afraid?

Fuck, of course he was. I'd just told him?—

"I won't," I hissed against his skin. "I won't hurt you."

"I know," he whispered. His voice was rough, like his throat was closed. His fist tightened in my hair, and I bucked against him as a tingle shot down my spine and I spent in a sticky mess that covered his fingers.

Perfect.

How was he so fucking perfect?

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His breathing got more ragged. His hand was tight around us both, moving faster and faster.

His expression as he came, his mouth hanging slack and his pupils blown wide, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I threw my head back against my office chair so I could stare. He took up my full field of vision. His lips were swollen and pink, a faint shine of sweat made his golden skin sparkle in the city lights peeking through the window.

How was I ever going to go without this?

It was impossible. My wolf already knew that.

We were doomed, and losing him was going to break me.

Only it couldn't. I had my pack to think about. Crescent, too.

Fuck.

I slipped my arm around his waist and pulled him tight against me. His breath caught, the sound sharp in my ear. His arms twined around my neck, his fingers sliding through my hair in the most delicious drag.

I whined and nuzzled against his chest hard enough to flatten my nose. I wanted to open my jaw and eat him whole, the beast inside demanding as much of him as I could get.

His chest shook with his ragged inhale. When I pressed my chin against it, he leaned back, so I caught his eye.

“Do you want to come home with me?” I asked.

Dakota bit his lip.

“Or I can take you to your place,” I rushed to offer.

No matter what my wolf wanted, we couldn’t keep Dakota with us every hour of every day. He wasn’t our mate. He wasn’t ours, even if he responded to the idea of a bite that could take everything from him by fisting my cock fast enough to make stars sparkle in my vision.

His expression softened. The sweetest affection shone in his eyes.

If I’d had a tail right then, it would’ve been thumping.

His fingers combed through my hair. “I was just thinking about whether or not I’m ready to talk to Donnie.”

“I don’t mind taking you there, really.” As long as I saw him to the door of his apartment, I could convince myself that he was safe, even if I didn’t particularly like Donnie.

I’d just caught him at a bad time. He’d put Dakota on edge and I was being overly protective.

I couldn’t help the thrill of victory when Dakota shook his head anyway. “I’ll just text him that I’m staying with you. I don’t want to deal with it tonight.”

He wrinkled his nose, and it was just about the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

I grinned up at him. "Perfect. I'll make breakfast."

As long as Dakota wanted to carve out a spot in my life, it was his.

At least while I could keep stamping down the instinct to make him mine.

27

Dakota

I stared at the back of my hand as it closed. Inch by inch, then slower, slower, until it was barely moving at all. I had a scratch across the back of my knuckles, and I wasn't sure where it had come from. It barely looked like a paper cut, but I didn't remember getting one of those. I should have remembered that, on the back of my hand, right?

Maybe I'd gotten it while I was sitting on Jax's lap the night before.

"Distracted, dear?" Prudence asked me after a moment.

I jerked so hard that I almost fell out of my chair, then came back to the moment. The fire. I was supposed to be putting the fire out by increments, and instead I'd gotten lost in thoughts of paper cuts and sex at Jax's desk.

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I wasn't supposed to be using physical movements to control the magic anyway.

I sighed and leaned back in the chair, easing up my control over the fire in the fireplace, letting it go back to dancing merrily.

"A little," I agreed. "Can you... would you tell me about being bitten?"

She lifted a brow at me. "Why do I suspect you're not talking about vampires?"

"Vampires? Vampires are real?" That made me sit up once again, because cool. Yes, yes, sparkly vampires were an embarrassment to high literature or whatever. Hadn't stopped me from devouring books about them as a teenager, and wasn't that what fiction was for? It didn't have to be classy and highbrow, as long as it told a good story.

She sighed, rolling her eyes at me but not moving from her spot, knitting something with a handful of thin, pointy wooden needles. Maybe they were to protect her from vampires...

"Yes, vampires are real," she finally said, looking up at me only momentarily, then back to her stitching. "They're nothing terribly impressive or unusual. Some are rich, though, and those will pay a pretty penny for mage blood, if you're ever hard up. Just be careful and bring someone you trust with you, like one of your wolves."

That was both good to know and terrifying, but it also hadn't been what I'd truly wanted to talk about. Though now I did want to know more. Why was mage blood worth buying? Did it make vampires magical? Was it just especially tasty?

Nope, didn't matter. Werewolves.

"The werewolf bite," I corrected. "I meant werewolf bites."

She flinched at the idea, so clearly she had the same notion as Jax. It was maybe the first time I'd ever seen her react like she thought something was a little scary. Usually she was the most unflappable person I knew.

Now? She seemed oddly... flapped.

For a moment, she bit her lip, staring at her knitting, then looked up to meet my eye. "You're not thinking about trying to become a wolf, are you? It's... you should know it's not likely. Magic and the wolf, they don't get along terribly well. They fight each other."

"Fight each other?" I asked back. "I don't—that is, I don't know what I'm thinking about. I don't know enough. That's why I'm asking."

Nodding, she set her knitting aside on a table and leaned forward, toward me. "The wolf and magic, they're... one is made of the other. There's not really room for both in one person. There are legends of wolves who learned to manipulate magic, or the witchwolf, who managed to survive the bite with his powers intact, but they're just that: legends. We don't have proof any such thing ever happened."

"So if I were bitten, it might not even work?" That was inexplicably disappointing.

"It's not that. It can work. One in four, perhaps one in five times, it works. The mage becomes a wolf, and their magic is gone." That was basically what Jax had been talking about, but the way her head was bowed made me think that wasn't the whole story, so I just sat there and waited. After a long time, she sighed and shook her head. "Most of the time, they kill each other."

“So no magic no wolf?” I asked, and yeah, that was a whine in my voice. “That’s disappointing.”

“No dear. No person. There’s no situation where the mage blood wins, or where nothing does. Everyone loses. If you got bitten, you might become a werewolf, but most probably, you would die.” She waved in my direction. “You’re not a weak mage, either. Usually the ones who survive and become werewolves are the ones with barely any magic, so the wolf easily defeats it. Your magic is too strong to go down without a fight.”

Death.

Well shit, that wasn’t what I’d been expecting at all. Jax had implied death was an option, but he hadn’t said it was the most likely option, by, like, a large margin. Then again, he didn’t seem to know all the intricacies of being a mage—it was why he’d known to bring me to Prudence.

I let myself fall back in the chair and stared at the fire again. “That’s why Jax is so worried. Why he keeps worrying about his instincts to bite me.”

“I would imagine so, dear. He’s an alpha werewolf. If you’re for him, then he wants a bond there. More than just promises and rings like humans get. I’ve heard tell it’s stronger than even the way that mages blood-bond when we marry. That wolves can feel their packs always, know they’re well and safe and healthy just on instinct, because they’re pack. He’d want that with everyone he cares about. If he thinks of you as more than pack? Well, not being able to feel that with you would be nearly maddening, I should think.” The way she said it all was ever so light, but the words themselves...

Frankly, fuck my life.

I'd finally found a great guy, one who liked me as much as I liked him. To call Jax a catch was frankly a massive understatement. But apparently being with me was going to be a giant fucking headache for him, at best. Constantly forcing his instincts away, not allowing himself to get as close as he wanted—needed—to.

Could I do that to Jax? Force him to live a whole life of pushing back on his instincts? I had feelings for him. They were growing every day. But we were a new thing, only a few weeks old, and if we were going to walk away, we should do it soon.

Twenty percent chance of being a werewolf, eighty percent chance of death. Only, Prudence thought it was more like a hundred percent.

Damn it all, what the hell was I supposed to do with that?

I couldn't ask Jax to take that chance even if I decided it was what I wanted, because if it didn't work, he was the one who'd be left alive, dealing with my death.

All because I'd been selfish.

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I could never do that to him, even if I decided to give up my magic, which was getting harder as a concept every day. The more I used it, the more it was instinctual. The more I wanted to use it. The more I couldn't imagine my life without it.

28

Jax

Ididn't even make it past the security desk before Seth whistled low. "You are some kinda down bad, bud."

Yeah, okay, so maybe I'd come into work with my tail between my legs that morning. The day before, Dakota had been... off.

Not entirely wrong. He still smiled at me, was still happy to lean against my arm when we were alone. But there was a wall there, something I couldn't quite explain but felt nonetheless.

It was like he'd finally listened to me, knew how much of a disaster we'd be to each other.

And I was starting to regret pushing that knowledge on him at all. Was it really so bad to fight down my instincts if he was safe and happy and mine?

I let out a slow breath that hissed between my teeth and turned on Seth. "That obvious?"

“Painfully obvious,” Seth said with a grimace. “Are you holding up okay?”

Knowing anybody else could see the cracks in me would’ve been a hard pill to swallow, but only Jillian knew me better than Seth. The biggest difference was my sister knew when to give me space. Seth was always pushing, but out of kindness. Nobody could fault him for it.

“I’ll be better after we get this deal with Igarashi finalized.”

Seth arched a brow. “I meant with Dakota. He pack?”

My mouth opened before I thought it through. No, he wasn’t pack.

But everything in me fought against saying so. To me, he was. He was ours.

I sighed, and Seth grimaced sympathetically.

“I mean,” he said, “he works here. He’s one of us. That’s enough.”

My smile wobbled onto my face. Sure, it was enough, but it wasn’t even half of what I wanted.

“Will you let me know if I start tilting?” I asked. The last thing our pack needed was for my distraction to get us in a bad spot.

Seth nodded. “Always. And Dakota—he’s not... overwhelmed?”

I shrugged. “He’s handling everything better than I would, and Prudence is keeping an eye on him. She’s not going to let him fall apart.”

He waved a hand, dismissing the very idea. “She wouldn’t. I was just... did he say

anything? After karaoke night.”

That brought me up short. “About what?”

A grimace twisted Seth’s features. He was worried he was about to get in trouble.

“Seth, what is it?” My voice turned lower, more serious. Alpha voice.

“Maia suggested I, uh—” Seth looked away sheepishly. That wasn’t like him. He’d been my best friend long before we’d ever come to the city. He was my second in the fight that’d freed us from the sharp heel of our last alpha.

We didn’t shrink away from each other.

“Well, she thought it was weird, how that guy showed up out of nowhere. And you smelled Dakota—he wasn’t exactly pleased to see his friend.”

“Her instinct said something was off.” We were wolves. We were less likely to tell ourselves to check our gut reactions than humans.

And I trusted my pack. Had to, if I expected them to trust me.

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Seth nodded. “She suggested I have someone look into him, and?—”

He opened something on his computer and jerked his head in invitation, so I came to stand behind his shoulder while he read the email.

Donnie was on Igarashi’s payroll.

He wasenormouslyon Igarashi’s payroll, by the looks of it, bringing in six figures consistently for the past five years, starting when he was a freshman in college.

That was longer than we’d been working on this deal with Igarashi. And Dakota?

“Do you think Dakota knows?” I asked Seth, doubt already rolling through my stomach.

Strangely enough, it wasn’t doubt about Dakota. More, I was worried he’d gotten into a situation he hadn’t realized he was in.

Seth scrolled down through the financial records, frowning. “Looks like Dakota pays the lion’s share of the rent. Hard to imagine he’d be okay with that if he knew Donnie was stacking this kind of cash. I...” Seth folded his hands on his stomach and leaned back in his chair to look up at me. “I don’t think this has anything to do with our deal.”

“But then... what the fuck does it have to do with?” I scowled. What interest did Igarashi have in Dakota’s roommate?

Igarashi Minori hadn't seemed particularly strange to me the night before. She'd been pleasant, open, and decent, even in a room mostly full of werewolves.

When she'd shown up in the office, I hadn't expected that.

But had she reacted strangely to seeing Donnie? I'd been so wrapped up in Dakota's reaction to him that I hadn't much thought of it, but if she knew what was going on, I'd damn well have answers.

Dakota deserved them too.

29

Dakota

It wouldn't leave me be after practice, even as I drifted my way home, walking the distance instead of getting a ride, or even a bus.

If Jax bit me the way he wanted to, the way I kind of wanted him to as well, I'd probably die.

We could never have that.

There would always be this wall between us, no matter what either of us wanted, just because he was a wolf and I was a mage. It was like some shitty star-crossed lovers story where the people pine for each other, and possibly die tragically, alone and miserable.

I did not want to be a character in gods-damned Wuthering Heights.

Should I quit my job, walk away, stop torturing us both?

Maybe if I read enough old magic books, I'd find a way to make myself immune to the werewolf bite. Or... something. There had to be a solution, didn't there?

Or I could spend a lifetime researching and find nothing, after forcing us both into a hell of my making, waiting in limbo for an answer that didn't exist.

I almost dropped the key to the front door twice before managing to get it unlocked and heading inside. I flipped the living room lights on, wondering if Donnie was already out clubbing for the night, only to find that he'd been sitting there alone in the dark.

And now he was blinking against the lights but staring right at me.

I cocked my head at him. "Are you sick?"

He shoved himself up to standing—a sudden, violent motion, and it startled me so much that I took a step back.

"Donnie?"

He was wearing the same outfit he'd been wearing at karaoke the night before, which was weird, because he was in our apartment. His clothes were all there. Even I'd changed, because I had an extra suit at the office, but he'd had no barrier to changing clothes, and yet had not.

"So you're fucking your boss," he said, artless and strangely annoyed by something that didn't even affect him.

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I blinked, staring at him for a moment. Why would he possibly care about that? Donnie slept with lots of guys. He'd never been especially picky about his bedmates, and I didn't see how this involved him. Maybe he was worried I would move out. He definitely couldn't pay rent on his own, from what little I knew of his finances, so maybe he was concerned that he'd be left high and dry with no way to keep the apartment.

"I'm not planning to move out," I promised.

He scowled at that. "So? What's that got to do with you fucking that dog?"

"Hey now, that's uncalled for. Jax is a great guy." Funny, how I'd have usually been the first person to agree that any boss who slept with an employee was a terrible asshole who was clearly taking advantage of his position. But that wasn't what was happening with Jax. He'd tried, repeatedly, to do the right thing for both of us. It wasn't his fault we'd slept together before we'd ever known.

Donnie wasn't having it, though. He scoffed. "Right. Great guys are always sniffing around virginal little employees. Have you fucked him already, or are you holding out?"

The question felt like a snide, rhetorical one, but after asking it, he paused. Waited. Looked at me.

Did he actually expect me to answer that?

What the fuck?

An odd feeling came over me, a bit like when I was focusing on my magic. Cold, clinical, and removed, like I could see the whole world by looking down at it, and pull strings on everything to make it be the way I wanted. Like I wasn't a part of the situation, but was instead looking at it from afar.

I heard my own voice say, "My sex life or lack thereof is none of your business, Donnie. Not any more than I go around sticking my nose in yours."

"Well I'm not the one going around fucking mutts," he shot back, and that slammed me back into myself.

Dog. Mutts. Initially I'd just dismissed the dog comment, the implications of it buried in the fact that Donnie was being an asshole, demanding information he had no place demanding. But Donnie didn't know about werewolves or magic.

If he knew, then he'd have known I was a mage, and more importantly, known that I had no idea what I was.

Have you fucked him already, he'd asked. Repeatedly, in different ways.

He didn't know I was a mage. He knew about the whole sex awakening thing, and he was trying to figure out if I'd been Awakened. If I knew.

I just stood there staring at him a moment, then shook my head. "Have you ever actually been my friend, or was it all bullshit? Are you... are you spying on me? Why?"

He scoffed and waved a hand at me. "I'm just trying to protect you from bad people, Kody. If you can't see that, it's not my fault."

"No. You're not. I don't need protecting from Jax, and if you were my friend, you'd

be able to see that. You sure as hell wouldn't be using bullshit slurs against him."

"So you have fucked him," he said, his eyes narrowing. His hand slid into his pocket gripped around his phone, like he was fighting the urge to pull it out right away.

To tell someone about me sleeping with Jax? Seriously?

"I'm leaving," I told him, and it came out in a whisper, but no less final for that. "I'll send movers for my things. I'll call the landlord and let him know I'm breaking the lease."

"Don't overreact," he said, pulling his hand back out of his pocket, empty, and motioned dismissively again. "There's no need for you to?—"

"You're spying on me for someone, Donnie. Tell me who, right now." That was it; the only thing that mattered now. It was the only thing I needed from him, and the only chance there was that our friendship could be salvaged.

He just rolled his eyes. "You're being ridiculous. Why would I?—"

"Leaving," I interrupted to reiterate. "Never call me again. Never talk to me again. Don't touch my stuff. If anything's gone, I'll send the cops after you."

And then I turned and walked out of my own apartment. A crash on the other side of the wall was the only reaction I got from Donnie as I walked away.

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Jax

I hadn't gone home for the night, and the reason why was downright embarrassing.

The office smelled more like Dakota. He'd been there most recently, and I was—I was waiting.

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For what? I didn't know, but the wolf said we had to wait. Couldn't go home. Absolutely couldn't relax.

So I was looking through the contracts our lawyers had written up for Prudence. At first, they'd offered compensation for any compromised intellectual property as a result of this merger, but I didn't think Prudence cared most about that.

She cared about magic. Her family's magic.

And she cared about the way it was made available to the public, and keeping hold of the reins.

So we were going to do both. Assurances and compensation, which meant putting a hell of a lot on the line to get this deal through with Igarashi.

Shoring up our agreement with them would be more important than ever.

I was starting to go cross-eyed when my phone buzzed on my desk.

Where are you? Dakota texted.

Still at the office. I sent back.

Given that he didn't respond in the millisecond afterward, I texted again.

Are you okay?

I can come get you.

I watched, jaw clenched, as the dots showed up. He was typing, then they'd disappear, and it felt like all the air had left the room.

It happened a few more times before I got a response.

No. I'll come there.

Waiting for him to show up was the worst thing in the world. If he were pack, I'd be able to feel him. Find him.

Hell, most of the pack shared their location with me and each other. We didn't have secrets. Having a sense of smell that let you know what everybody felt and got up to made shame pretty redundant.

But Dakota? I just had to wait for him, pacing by my desk, loosening the top button of my shirt because it was choking me.

I hated it. Felt so damned impotent.

And finally, after ten thousand hours, he was there in my office doorway.

I took a deep breath, instinctually.

He was sad—so fucking sad.

On cue, he took inhaled too. It jumped, like his chest was too tight to allow for any air.

A second later, I had my arm around his hips, my other hand on his cheek. It was

chilled.

Dazed, he blinked up at me, and a trembling smile turned up his lips. “Hey.”

“What happened?” I demanded, stroking his cheek like I could coax heat back into him.

His eyelids fluttered and he shook his head. “Nothing. Or, well, Donnie?—”

I bit down a growl, but I hadn’t done that good a job of it. Dakota frowned up at me.

I took a deep, slow breath. I didn’t need to be throwing out anger when he was clearly hurting. “What did he do?”

For a moment, Dakota just chewed his lip. He shrugged his shoulders while he avoided my eyes. “I think he’s been... I don’t know... watching me? Or something. He wouldn’t say for who, but I know he’s been lying.”

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I tightened my arm. I wanted to draw him in, hold him close, but his whole body had gone firm, and I wasn't going to force him. I just kept my thumb moving on his cheek. He didn't seem to mind that.

Once he started talking, it all tumbled out of him. "I shouldn't have been surprised, really. I mean, who actually sticks around? Not my bio parents. Not my adopted parents—not really. It's been almost five years, with Donnie, you know? That's a long time. I didn't think—I didn't think—" His next breath was a gasp, edging toward panic.

"I will," I blurted out.

Dakota flinched, scowling up at me.

"Will what?"

"Stick around."

His expression only got more pinched, but I pushed ahead before he could open his mouth and tell me what an impossible idiot I was being.

That was for Jillian to do. Later.

"I will," I reaffirmed. "I'll be here for you, with you, as long as you let me. I'll be whatever you need me to be."

His teeth dimpled his bottom lip, and something swam in his eyes—I didn't know if it

was need or sadness.

He might say no. I couldn't let him.

"I don't care if I never take a proper mate, Dakota. I don't. I want you." And he wanted me. I knew it from the way he leaned into me, the way his breathing steadied in my arms. "Dogs are nothing if not loyal, right?"

He huffed, rolling his eyes, and my heart skipped to see the corner of his lip twitch upward. "Don't say it like that," he whispered, hoarse and thick. "Don't ever say it that way."

Deflating, his shoulders slumped down and he tipped forward, falling into me. His face pressed into my chest, and now that he was close, I hugged him against me, both arms wrapped tight around him.

"You are though," he mumbled. "Loyal, I mean. Not a—" He went quiet, and I laughed softly, brushing my fingers through his hair.

"I know what you meant." I leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "What can I do?"

It took him a few seconds to lift his head. "Can I stay with you tonight?"

"Tonight," I agreed instantly. "As long as you need."

"Just until I find?—"

I squeezed his hand hard. "As long as you need. If you need space, my house is plenty big for that." It was big enough to host the pack. Dakota could take his pick of bedrooms. Even just having him there, hearing his footsteps through the walls—a

shiver ran down my spine.

I wanted that so fucking much.

His cheeks turned pink, and before he could respond, the elevator doors opened across the hall.

Scowling, Dakota turned in my arms to look across the reception area outside my office.

Igarashi Jiro was there. He was smiling.

“I’m sorry,” I said, stepping back from Dakota. I left my hand on his arm—no sense hiding what he was to me if we were going to move forward—but I didn’t need to cover him with my whole body in front of a work colleague, even if I wanted to. I didn’t know what Igarashi had to do with this mess with Donnie yet, but we’d damn well discuss it later, when Dakota wasn’t on the edge of tears and in need of a respite. “I haven’t had a chance to finalize terms with Ms. McCallan?—”

Igarashi wasn’t even looking my way. His dark brown eyes were locked on Dakota, and his smile was sharp.

“I’m actually here for him—my little. Lost. Cousin.”

And the bottom dropped out as a strange, crisp emptiness dragged the air from my lungs and forced me to my knees.

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The last few days played on fast forward through my mind as the air seemed to go out of the room, and Jax swayed and stumbled to his knees beside me.

Your smile... it reminds me so much of my uncle's.

His wife and baby—one day, they were all there and—and so lovely. And in one night, they were?—

We're lucky Jiro was ready to step into such a significant role.

Little lost cousin.

“Cat got your tongue, Dakota?” Igarashi Jiro asked me, the smile never faltering on his face. “Or should I call you Kosuke?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I knew, but still, I asked. What else could I do?

Casually, he leaned against the wall near the elevator bank, arms crossed over his chest. “Now cousin, you won't convince me any Igarashi is that stupid. Even little Minori knows, even if she doesn't want to.”

“You're wrong. Your sister has no idea. She told me your uncle died in a car accident.” I edged slightly in front of Jax, like I needed to protect him from this man. This smiling creature whom I was almost certain was saying that he'd... that he'd killed my parents.

Kosuke? Was that the name I'd been born to? Odd. I'd always thought if there was such a thing, it would fit me like a glove, feel like something long lost and retrieved, that was an intrinsic part of me.

It didn't.

Jax had only ever called me Dakota. It was the name I'd made my own, in a way.

Jiro cocked his head, considering, then shook it, as though it was incomprehensible that his sister thought him anything but a monster. "No. She's not that naive. Not when Father died so soon after them." He made a face, for the first time annoyed. "He found out I killed your father, and the fool was going to turn me in. Me, his own son. So I just pushed him out of the way too."

"Murdered him, you mean," I corrected. "You wanted control of your family business, so you murdered your uncle and his wife, and then your own father, all for standing in the way of your sick ambition."

He waved a hand airily, as though none of that mattered. "Whatever you want to call it. I was the right man for the job. The most loyal son. The cleverest. I was the one whodeservedthis."

For a moment, all I could do was stare, openmouthed. Loyal? The man had murdered multiple members of his family, murderedhis own father, and he called himself the most loyal?

"Loyal to who?" I shook my head. In a second, I created it all in my mind, what my life might have been like if he hadn't been a monster. I might have grown up in Japan. With parents, who maybe loved me. Fuck, I might be the one negotiating with Crescent right now. "No. You're not loyal. You're a traitor. You murdered your own father. There's no loyalty in that. No honor. You're a monster."

He scoffed, turning his face away, but something tightened in his shoulders, a coiled serpent wanting to strike out at a threat. “Don’t be a child. The only thing that matters is who the winner is, not how you win.” He motioned to Jax, who had reached up to grab the back of my leg, breathing hard and looking fucking terrified. “Besides, you’re one to talk about honor. You’re fucking a mutt. You were Awakened by fucking a mutt. It’s a wonder there’s even any magic in you, after such a pitiful thing. If your parents were alive, they would be ashamed.”

The words stabbed like a knife to the gut. I had never known my parents, but he had. Maybe he was right. Maybe they would have been ashamed of me. Maybe they... maybe they had been the kind of assholes who thought Jax was a lesser being just because he was made of magic rather than able to manipulate it.

If they were, did I give a single fuck about their opinion?

“If my parents were alive, I think they’d be a little more concerned about their murdering traitor of a nephew,” I said to him, trying to inject the same sneer into my voice that he was aiming at Jax. That was when it hit me, why he was there, and how he knew so much. “Donnie works for you. The asshole has spent the last five years trying to keep me from having sex.”

Jiro grinned at that. “He said it was easy. That you were awkward and pitiful, and all he had to do was imply he was willing, and every man ignored you in favor of him. All he had to do was show up.”

That, funnily enough, mattered so much less than the rest. Jax had chosen me. Had wanted me. Hadn’t paid any more attention to Donnie than a little light distaste. Any man who’d traded my interest for sex with Donnie hadn’t been worth my affection anyway.

“Oh fuck you,” I said—almost snarled—at him. “Just leave, you piece of human

excrement. I'm not playing your game anymore, and neither is Crescent. I doubt they want any part of a company run by a man who murdered half his own family."

His smile went sharp, then, and he shook his head. "Oh no. No little mongrel is going to come between me and what's rightfully mine." I stepped completely in front of Jax, shielding him from view, and for some reason, that made the asshole laugh. "Not your pet dog, little cousin. You. You're alive. You've been Awakened, if only barely. You're aware of your heritage. You could take my company away from me. I won't allow that."

"What, and I'm a mongrel just because I have sex with a werewolf? You're pathetic, you and your fucking nonsense bigotry. I don't even want Igarashi. I'm not interested. I am going to tell everyone you murdered your own family, though. I wonder what they'll think of that."

"Oh, but you're not," he said with a smile, uncrossing his arms. "No, you're not going to tell anyone anything at all."

32

Jax

Each breath squeaked down my throat. Every part of me was tight and heavy, like the gravity in the room had been turned up to eleven, and I couldn't move.

Fuckingimages.

Some wiser wolves than me would've said this was what I got, for letting them waltz through the front door.

But if I hadn't, I never would've met Dakota.

He never would've unwound the terrible truth of his existence.

Jiro spread his hands, and the gravity pressed harder. Jiro lashed out, and—and Dakota didn't even move, but he'd done something. The back of my skull was buzzing as whatever he'd released slashed through Jiro's magic and sent it skittering across the ceiling, rattling the drop tiles.

I had to get up, but Jiro's hold on me barely stuttered as they started to fight. It took all my strength to reach for my phone in my pocket, hit the center button and hope the touchscreen registered right. Seth was a favorite contact. A couple presses should be enough.

But damn it all, I couldn't even lift my phone to see if I was hitting the right buttons.

I could hardly make sense of Dakota's tiny movements, but Jiro's were horribly ostentatious. Invisible forces rushed back and forth across the room, blocked and thrown and?—

I didn't know, but I thought Dakota was doing well.

Really well, considering that he'd only had a few weeks to come to terms with being a mage at all.

He was a miracle. I'd never seen anything like it, Jiro slashing out wildly, fury contorting his features as Dakota matched him.

Admittedly, I'd never watched a mage practice magic before. I'd seen a couple small shows from Prudence over the years, but nothing like this.

Then, a blow too hard. From pure instinct, Dakota crossed his arms in front of his chest to block a rush of magic, and when he threw them out, all that he'd absorbed went out like a battering ram, throwing Jiro into the elevator's metal doors.

That finally broke his hold on me.

My whole body ached from fighting his magic, and I staggered to my feet, stumbling like I'd just stepped off a boat after a hurricane.

Jiro rounded on us. Then, the whole room filled with bright orange that made no sense to me until I registered the wave of heat, the way the flames caught on my shirt and burned my skin.

The magic within me surged, rushing to repair burns as they happened, as others danced across my skin.

I threw myself into the fire, even as Dakota's form disappeared in the blinding light of it.

I smelled my hair burning, my eyelashes, as I squinted against the flames.

And Dakota?—

He'd gone down. I felt him first with my foot, his body crumpled. But when Jiro closed his fist and the fires disappeared like he'd flipped a switch on the world's largest gas logs, I saw him there on the ground, and fell beside him.

His skin—it'd blistered and split in an instant, a terrifying slickness to his burnt flesh. Where there weren't blisters, his body was red and shining.

Each breath he took was rough and broken, like the fire had caught inside him too.

I bit back a desperate howl. I couldn't lose him like this, all at once and so violently. It wasn't possible.

"I'll kill you," I snarled between gritted teeth. It was a threat meant for Igarashi Jiro, but I couldn't—I couldn't do a damn thing.

Couldn't tear my gaze from Dakota's burnt skin.

Couldn't pull away from him long enough to attack Jiro.

I couldn't.

If I let go of Dakota?—

While I held him, he was still breathing. He was alive, if—if only.

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I couldn't just let him go.

Above me, Jiro scoffed. "You'll be lucky to make it off the floor, dog."

Dakota's lips were dry as a desert, cracked with deep red splits.

"You'll be all right," I whispered to him.

Seth would come. He'd—he'd bring Prudence. She'd know what to do.

"You just have to hold on."

Jiro's voice might've held an edge of annoyance at being ignored, but I couldn't look away from Dakota long enough to confirm.

"That's all right," he said, "it's where you belong. I don't need a goddamn dog at my side. We at Igarashi aren't quite so pathetic." A growl rumbled in my throat, but still...

Dakota.

If I kept watching him, he'd stay with me. He had to.

"I need your product and your network, and I can get access to both with those fae you've put your trust in. Duplicitous weaklings, every one of them, but you should've known that. Still, I'd rather work with a fae than a stinking mutt."

A panicked, manic laugh bubbled up inside me. Charles? He thought to take Charles and the fae?

Whether or not I made it off this floor, he'd already played himself. Mages like this always overplayed their hands, failed to see why anyone like us would ever deny them a damn thing.

Once Dakota was on his feet again, once Prudence arrived to save him, I'd deny Jiro the right to another free breath.

Quite possibly by tearing out his throat.

33

Dakota

I couldn't breathe properly, my very lungs burned by the massive fireball Jiro had thrown at me, and I couldn't open my eyes. They were almost certainly as ruined by the fire as my lungs, and for a moment, when someone bent down over me, I panicked, thinking it was Jiro, come to finish me off.

Not that he needed to.

I was dying.

I didn't need to have any particular medical knowledge to know that if I couldn't breathe, I wasn't going to live.

It wasn't Jiro's voice that drifted into my ears, though, but Jax's, like a soothing balm over my literally fried nerves. "You'll be all right."

I wondered if he believed it, or if he was just trying to give me comfort. If we had a pack bond, like Prudence and I had discussed, I would have likely known.

But that sparked something in my mind. Jax had been hit by the exact same fireball as I had, and he was fine. Werewolves, I'd been told, healed incredibly efficiently.

And I was dying.

So even though every movement hurt, I reached for Jax, curled my fingers into his rough and ruined lapel. "Bite," I managed to rasp out, even though I couldn't manage a full breath.

"What?" Jax asked, sounding initially horrified, but damn it all, I didn't have time for him to worry about things. I couldn't breathe. I wasn't going to last long enough to—"Oh."

For a moment, I worried he wasn't going to do it. That he was going to insist I'd be fine like a character in a movie holding his gut-shot beloved, telling him he'd be just fine if only he would hold out. I wasn't sure I had the breath to even ask again, let alone explain, and I very much didn't want to die because Jax didn't understand what I wanted. Or didn't understand that I was dying.

But he seemed to understand just fine, because a moment later another fire ripped through my veins, my left wrist torn open by his teeth. At least, I hoped it was his teeth.

It hurt more than anything before in my life, more than the fireball had, because unlike the fire, it wasn't gone in a moment, leaving only blessed cool office air behind. It felt as though my flesh was being flayed from my bones.

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It made sense, I thought, near hysteria. I'd been cooked, now someone was serving me up for dinner.

A moment later, laughter filled the air. "Perfection. I should have thought of it myself. It turns out that pompous, ridiculous American was worth hiring to keep an eye on you after all, little cousin. This has worked out as perfectly as I could have wanted."

Jax's teeth left my wrist, and he made a clicking sound, like he'd opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. Forced to swallow the blood in his mouth, maybe.

I hoped he didn't get in trouble if I died.

No, they'd just get rid of my body instead of turning it over to anyone. No one would have to explain the burns or torn wrist.

"Good luck, little cousin," Jiro's grating fucking voice continued. "I hope you do live. Become a dog. It's perfect for you. It isn't like a mutt can inherit the family legacy. Mages have standards."

As the elevator doors opened with a ding and I heard footsteps retreat into them, I started to feel... something. The burning in my wrist grew sharper, even though Jax had clearly removed his teeth from the wound, and my whole body went from burning up to ice cold.

I would probably die because my magic was powerful, Prudence had said, and I didn't doubt her in the least. I was sure it'd happened many times, all of them

essentially the same. Every mage bitten had tried to stave off the inevitable using their magic, trying to force the wolf away.

Trying to defeat it.

They all failed, because while I had no proof, I believed something that would have made the mages furious: the wolf was stronger than they were. However magical, if the wolf won every single time, it had to be true, and that said something about magic and wolves that I doubted the mages appreciated terribly much.

So believing that, all I had left was the one thing I doubted other mages had ever considered: I didn't try to fight the change at all.

Quite the opposite, in fact. I embraced it fully, welcoming the freezing bite of the wolf as it rushed through my body from the wound on my wrist.

I wanted that wolf.

I wanted to live.

I wanted Jax.

I wanted the family that came with being in a pack of wolves.

Hell, I'd almost wanted it more than the magic already, so this changed little. It was just that I'd only been left with this choice, so I reached out and latched onto it with my whole self.

The wolf.

The cold tang of snow in the air on a frozen night filled my head. Running through a

foot of white powder in an evergreen forest under a deep blue velvet sky, stopping only to take stock of the moon. Finding her full and bright like a fat drop of candle wax, I lifted my head and howled, singing to my sister in the sky.

But no.

It wasn't that all.

It was we.

I wasn't running alone. I was surrounded by other wolves. More than a dozen voices lifted to the sky beside me, because I wasn't one lonely mage anymore. I was wolf pack.

I was home.

And I was going to fucking live.

34

Jax

I wasn't a complete fool.

When Dakota asked me to bite him... what choice had I had? He was dying, the scent of burnt skin and hair so strong in the air that my stomach rolled.

The wolf knew that there was nothing else we could do for him. And when I'd pierced his burnt, shiny skin with my teeth, the shiver of how right it felt made me the worst, most selfish kind of monster.

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How often had we thought about this moment? Longed to make Dakota ours?

Now, we'd done it, and he was dying. How could any part of this feel right?

As soon as the bond locked in place, a cold agony gripped my chest. He was dying, and I would never know if it was the burns that killed him or my bite.

Whatever my part in this, it would always be my fault.

My fault for putting him in danger.

My fault for letting him close enough to risk his life.

My fault for not recognizing the danger Igarashi posed.

The door to the stairwell burst open.

It wasn't just Seth there, but Maia and Jillian too. They'd felt my terror and anguish, surely, or maybe Seth had grabbed them on his way up. To the side, the light above the elevator door went down and down.

"Fuck," Seth hissed when he took in the mess, the papers burning on the floor and singed carpet, my burnt clothes and—and Dakota.

"Igarashi Jiro," I whispered.

Maia was the first to growl.

“Where’d he go?” Seth demanded.

“Elevator,” I croaked.

Seth nodded sharply, jumping into action at once. He disappeared into the stairwell and?—

Fuck, I should’ve told him to be careful.

Igarashi Jiro had put me on my knees like it was nothing. It’d felt like he could break every bone in my body with nothing but a thought.

I should be the one taking him down, but I was frozen, listening to every one of Dakota’s shallow breaths and each quiet heartbeat in his chest. I couldn’t leave him.

No wolf could leave their mate, knowing these might be their final moments.

I wanted to touch him, to lay my head down on his chest and wait for him to get better, and I was terrified that even that would hurt him more.

“I’m calling Prudence,” Maia snapped. She was panicked, I could feel the buzz of it at the back of my skull, but she wasn’t the kind of woman to sit back and let the horror of the moment overcome her. She had to do something.

I should have done something.

Instead, I was stuck there, watching Dakota, afraid to touch him because even that could make his life worse.

And Jillian was just standing there, her shadow across his body. I could feel her, recognized her shoes, but I didn’t dare look into her eyes. I couldn’t stand to see the

truth in her eyes.

She turned and stared at a desk in front of my door that had been tossed backward and now sat on its side, the bottom singed black from the flames. The whole space around my office was a disaster.

For a moment, she just stood there. I heard Maia down the hall, talking in hushed, urgent tones to Prudence.

Then Jillian took a deep breath, gingerly stepped around Dakota, and knelt at my side. Her hand slipped into mine and she squeezed, hard as she could.

In that moment, I was thrown back to when we were kids, afraid of the alpha we'd later escape, walking on eggshells.

I remembered when she'd gotten into school, and her nervous, hopeful smile when she told me.

How I'd been willing to fight the whole world to give her the same chance I got, even when the alpha wanted to put his foot down and keep her in the pack, no college allowed, just because she was a girl.

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I wished there was something I could fight now, but it was Dakota, there in front of me, who had to fight.

My breath hitched.

Jillian's thumb swiped across my knuckles.

"I can take care of everything for now," she whispered.

It wasn't a demand. She wasn't doubting me. She was?—

She was carving space for me the way I'd tried to do for her. She might not be my alpha, but she was my sister, my pack, my family. I had to rely on her as much as she did me.

With a jaw clenched to keep my mouth from trembling, I nodded.

Finally, I reached out and placed my free hand right where I'd bitten Dakota, like it'd heal the spot. Heal all of him.

I prayed it would.

35

Dakota

"What do you mean with this, the negotiations are over?" were the first words my

mind processed. They were high and almost shrill, too loud in the quiet room. I thought it might be Igarashi Minori, but it was too loud, the reverberations of it distorting inside my ears. “We aren’t half finished, and the lawyers—what the hell happened in here?”

“What the hell happened in here,” came a voice that was definitely Jillian, softer, dry as dust and deeply unimpressed, “was your brother.”

“My... Jiro?”

“Jiro,” Jillian agreed. “He came here and attacked our CEO and my assistant, tried to murder them. You remember my assistant, Dakota? The adorable kid who figured out how to get us to work together? Your brother burned him down. He burned half this office.”

“Burned... I don’t understand.” This time, I was sure the voice was Minori, since her volume had lowered enough that it wasn’t ringing through my whole head. “Why would Jiro do this?”

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? The other night at karaoke? Dakota looks just like your dead uncle? Well apparently that’s because he’s your long lost cousin, and your brother wanted him dead.” There was a sudden breeze on my cheek, and it made me think someone had turned a fan on me. Perhaps more importantly, it didn’t hurt.

In fact... nothing hurt.

When last I’d been awake, every touch, every movement, even the air against my face, had been excruciating. Now, I felt like I was floating on a cushioned cloud. There was warmth around me, but I knew instinctively that it wasn’t anything like the fire that had burned me. It wasn’t even a blanket wrapped around a man they’d thought was dying.

It was Jax, his arms tight around me, holding me as close as he could get me, but at the same time, somehow soft in his grip. Not putting pressure on anything Jiro had burned to a crisp.

More than the simple awareness of his presence, I could feel him. Yes, yes, his arms around me, but more than that, his gentle presence inside my head. His quiet misery at the events of the night. His ongoing fear for my life.

It had worked.

That should have been obvious from the mere fact that I was still alive and even more, free of pain, but this entirely new sense of Jax was something else. Something completely fucking wonderful, if it hadn't been so sad in the moment.

On the other side of me, I realized, I could feel Jillian as well. Irritated and worried and just a little territorial because Crescent was theirs, and Minori was allied with someone who had attacked the pack.

Mage.

Monster.

My cousin.

Come to think of it, Minori was my cousin as well.

“You’re... you have to be wrong... that cannot...” Minori tried, but couldn’t seem to complete a thought.

It was up to me, I realized. Jillian was protecting the pack, and would not—could not—give an inch. Jax was wallowing in the pain of—well, even being able to feel it,

I wasn't entirely sure. They had to know by now that the bite had taken. That I had survived.

What else mattered?

I was alive, and now we could have what he'd wanted before.

I was pack.

It was fucking glorious. I could feel Jax, sad as he was in the moment. I could feel Jillian, proxy alpha while Jax wasn't able to fulfill his role. Seth, prowling the room, ready to attack and sink his teeth into any threat to the pack. Maia watching him, her inner wolf pacing right beside him even as she stood stock-still, waiting and watching rather than restless. There were others as well, all there in the back of my mind. Some I knew and some I hadn't met yet, but all there. All family.

For the first time in my life, I had a family.

And it wasn't the only blood relative I had standing in the room.

Pressing up, I expected my body to protest, but there was nothing. It was just like getting up in the morning, my body no more irritated than if I'd been laying still for eight hours.

"She's right," I told Minori. "Your brother said so when he came here to murder me. He called me Kosuke, and said he killed my parents." I stretched my body, and it was just as satisfying as if I'd had that eight hours of sleep, my back popping and muscles luxuriating in the sheer movement. Then I met Minori's eye. "He also said he murdered your father when he found out and insisted he had to do something about it."

She gave a little sound like a whimper and fell against one of the desks in the room, clearly horrified.

Behind me, I felt Jax sit up, but his misery didn't abate. What was going on? Was there something wrong with me? Was I a bad wolf? Were the burns still terrible? Maybe I was hideous now, and Jax wouldn't want me anymore.

But that didn't seem like Jax at all.

"But you—you're fine," Minori said, as though that made me wrong about everything. "If he came to kill you, he wouldn't have simply left you like this."

Jillian scowled at her as though her words were an implicit acceptance of her brother's behavior. It wasn't, though; I was sure it wasn't. With hardly a thought, I sent reassurance down my brand-new bond with Jillian.

To Minori, I said, "You're right. He didn't." I motioned around the room. "I should think it was obvious, what he did. He burned the office badly. We're lucky it didn't catch fire and kill even more people. He burned Jax too. And me."

I held my hand out in front of me, and it wasn't scarred. It looked exactly as it had the previous morning. Actually, it didn't. My paper cut was gone. I lifted it closer to my face and inspected the skin. The scar I'd gotten when I fell off my bike ten years earlier was gone too.

My skin was a blank canvas, completely untouched by life.

Minori seemed to finally understand what I was saying, and she started shaking her head, over and over. "Oh no. No."

I raised a brow at her. "Is it bad that I'm alive?"

“But your magic,” she said, her voice almost a whimper. “You’re... Kosuke. You’re the heir to the family. You own the Igarashi Corporation. But you—you can’t, if you’re not a mage.”

I scoffed at her. As if I had ever wanted any fucking thing to do with Igarashi. Hell, I had suggested from the start that Crescent shouldn’t be making a deal with them at all, given their shitty, bigoted ideas.

Sure, I’d been starting to enjoy being a mage, but I’d had that for such a short amount of time. I would learn to live without it.

So much more important, I would never again have to try to live without having a family. Without people I trusted at my side. If turning instead of dying had been a certainty, I’d have chosen it from the start.

Suddenly, though, it was hard to breathe. The misery that welled up inside me was like a fountain of sludge threatening to break through and spew forth onto everything, and?—

Jillian made a pained noise, and I turned to look at her. She looked how I felt.

No, she felt how I felt.

It was the bond. I wasn’t miserable.

With complete clarity, I realized where the misery was coming from. I whipped around, staring at Jax, who was sitting up on the couch looking as though the whole building had burned down with his pack inside.

Because I might not give a single fuck about Igarashi or my family legacy, but it seemed that he did.

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Prudence had gotten there before Dakota's skin had begun to repair itself. She'd sat across from me outside my office and watched.

And when his skin turned from red and blistered to faintly pink, she let out a sigh.

"He'll live," she muttered, the slightest hint of a smile turning up her lips. "He'll live."

All the air escaped me in a rushed exhale. That was?—

That was wonderful.

But it didn't change that I had stolen something from him, and even when I glanced at Prudence's pursed lips, I could tell.

"What?"

"I..." She hesitated, looking away as if she was ashamed of what she was about to say. "I'd hoped to leave him my estate. The law of mages—we can only leave it to?—"

Too fast, she shook her head.

"It doesn't matter," she insisted. "This is nothing but a good thing. You saved him."

I could hardly hear her from the ringing in my ears.

When Dakota was well enough, she and Jillian ushered me off the floor. I rose, carrying Dakota with me. It was a blessing that he was still unconscious, and just as much of one that he continued to breathe.

Jillian had the good sense to put me in a fresh shirt from the cabinet in my office before I sat down with him, but I hadn't managed to do the buttons properly. A couple of them held on loosely in the middle, and the end of the shirt was untucked, bunched around the belt I'd never taken off, the leather cracked from the fire.

Didn't matter. I'd lain down on the sofa in my office with Dakota on top of me, my arms wrapped carefully around him.

There, I could feel every one of his breaths, smell the scent of his skin beneath lingering smoke.

I couldn't sleep, but I closed my eyes and told myself that this was fine. All I had to do, at least that morning, was keep Dakota safe. Let the pack surround us until—until?—

He woke up and I had to look him in the eyes knowing what he'd lost because I wasn't strong enough to protect him.

For a long time that morning, Jillian sat at my desk. She spoke quietly as people filtered in and out with paperwork, and though I might've been able to figure out what she was doing, I didn't bother putting any real thought into following it.

Even when Minori had appeared, I didn't bother opening my eyes. Her voice was the first thing that caused Dakota to stir, and I willed her away, for all the good that did.

He pushed off of my chest, and it was like letting go of my own heart, letting it walk across the room. That—feeling so exposed, being afraid I'd see him hurt again—was

the only thing that prompted me to get up. Clearly, an adequate mage could take me down, but at the very least, if Minori meant him harm, she'd have to go through me first.

I just had to manage to sit up and face the truth, laid out so plainly by Igarashi Minori.

I hadn't only taken away Dakota's magic or Prudence's legacy, I'd denied Dakota his birthright, and the Igarashi family its true heir.

"You—" Minori rounded on me, red in the cheeks, her lips parted with fury. "You did this. You've been—you kept him this whole time?"

"I had no idea that Dakota was tied to this merger in any way before?—"

"Kosuke!" she shrieked.

I flinched, and the whole room went quiet.

Right. Dakota wasn't even the name he'd been born with. Perhaps he'd want to change it, honor his legacy even if he couldn't claim it.

When I fell silent, Jillian arched a sharp brow. "You can fuck all the way off with that," she said coolly, crossing her arms and edging into the space between Minori and me. "Jax didn't cause this. Jax did the only goddamn thing he could after your brother tried to kill them both. You're just lucky they're both still here to tell you the truth of it, unless you intend to keep a snake as the head of your business and the head of your family."

Minori hissed, looking away.

Igarashi could. They could back Jiro, and it was our word against theirs, and werewolves?—

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Most of us tended to be insular. Keep out of politics.

Bringing humans in on an issue between werewolves and mages was impossible, but I didn't think any council of mages, any old family, would side with us.

Hell, they wouldn't even side with Dakota, now that he was one of us.

The wasting of a mage's magic? That was a tragedy, certainly, but it was not cause to lose more magical talent.

If it came to mudslinging, we wouldn't win. And I—well, I had no will to fight for anything that Dakota didn't want. He could walk away from all of this, cut his losses. I wouldn't blame him.

“Of course not,” Minori hissed. “But this is a stain.”

“Not one we caused,” Jillian spat.

Minori's lips set firm. “There must be restitution, and?—”

Her eyes flashed to Dakota, and there was something like longing in her gaze. It only lasted a second before she was glaring at me hard enough to keep me in my seat as effectively as her brother's magic had pinned me down.

“You have made him other. A mage could have healed him, but you changed him. You must answer for it.”

The room erupted in shouting, the wolves practically snarling.

But she was right. I couldn't regret the choices I'd made, but I owed it to Dakota to face them. I held Minori's eye and nodded.

37

Dakota

"Oh fuck no," I said, but no one was listening to me.

Jillian was putting herself between Jax and Minori, and the other wolves were all looking at her, eyes narrowed, considering her flanks with tight, barely leashed emotions.

Why the hell was Jax agreeing to anything?

"The merger should continue as planned," Minori said, though her jaw was clenched and while I couldn't feel her emotions the way I could for the wolves, it wasn't hard to guess. She felt wronged.

She felt as though she had lost something.

Me.

Because despite the fact that I was there, was alive and well, I was nothing to a mage anymore.

The notion lanced through my gut like a sword, and without thought, my eyes sought out Prudence. I'd heard her voice in the fray, I was sure I had.

There she was. Arms crossed over her chest and eyes hard and colder than I'd ever seen them, she was...

Minori. She was glaring at Minori. Thank fuck there was at least one mage in the world who realized that werewolves weren't automatically at fault for everything. Fuck, we mages were?—

But no. Not we. They. I'd never properly become one of them, and now I never would, because Jiro had taken that from me.

Not Jax.

Never Jax.

But Jax was hanging his head like a puppy who'd just been caught going on the carpet, and I thought he was precisely as culpable as that—not at all. Puppies had no control over their bodies, and Jax hadn't been able to control Igarashi Fucking Jiro.

This all came back to him. If someone was going to pay restitution, it sure as fuck wasn't Jax. It was him.

“Now you listen—” Jillian was saying to Minori, being thoroughly ignored.

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Prudence huffed and shook her head. “Given what the Igarashi have done, I absolutely refuse to?—”

“I’m the one who bit him,” Jax said, trying to speak over the others, as though anyone truly gave a damn about that. “If there’s a price to be paid, then I’m the one who?—”

“All of you shut the fuck up,” I shouted.

At the same time, there was an enormous crashing noise all around us.

Half the werewolves ducked down and took cover, some of them growing claws and fangs in the process. Some put themselves in strategic positions. Seth, for instance, put himself next to Jillian between Minori and Jax.

Huh. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him look angry before, but he was definitely that.

Maia, too, was standing next to the elevator bank, positioned behind Minori and oddly... ready to attack.

The room had gone silent after the crash, though, everyone looking around, trying to find the source of the threat. Everyone including Minori, because apparently, it hadn’t been her.

Prudence...

Prudence started laughing uproariously.

Everyone in the room looked at her, but she... she turned to me.

“Something to say, dear?”

“I—” I paused, looking at her, wondering why she was so damned entertained. Also, maybe why she was looking around on the floor. She seemed to spot what it was that she’d wanted and turned to round one of the desks, leaning over and coming back up with her enormous bag. Still, she wasn’t speaking up, so I was going to say my piece.

“Jax isn’t paying anyone anything. If there’s restitution to be made, it’s by your brother, the murderer. He’s the one who put us all in this situation. Jax didn’t have time to wait for a mage healer. I was dying. Right that minute. He had to decide between wolf Dakota, and dead Dakota. Mage Kosuke didn’t come into it.”

The sound Jax made at that, a high whine, hurt my heart.

Still, I had to get it all out there.

“And even if there’s any restitution to be made for anything, it’s not to you or your family, it’s to me.” It felt incredibly rude, indulgent, even selfish to say the words, but dammit, this was my life. It wasn’t about a family who’d thought I was dead twenty years ago.

“Your brother killed my parents. Your brother stole my legacy. Your brother almost killed me and forced Jax to either turn me or watch me die. What would you have wanted him to do?”

I flung out a hand toward Jax, thinking to illustrate my point, and a framed poster of a cartoon meme that said “this is fine” went flying off the wall behind his head.

I froze, staring at it, and then finally started to take in the room around me.

Everyone's desk was empty, in the whole small bullpen on the top floor.

No computer monitors, no pencils, no keyboards. Nothing.

I turned in a perfect circle, looking at the mess around me. Had Jiro and I done this the night before? No, that had been over almost before it had started, him with decades more experience and skill than I had.

And even if it had been a mess from the fight, surely someone would have started picking up by now? I glanced out one of the huge window banks, and sure enough, it was at least nine, the sun up and skies clear outside.

The little dog comic had gone flying, though.

There was another motivational poster with a kitten, and I thought, what the hell?

I flipped my fingers up and around, not looking at Prudence for her disapproval of my using motion as a crutch, and that frame dropped off the wall as well. One of the assistants snatched this one before it landed on the floor, but it... it had done what I told it to.

Turning once more till I was facing Prudence, I stared at her. "I thought you said becoming a werewolf meant my magic would be gone?"

38

Jax

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Staring at Dakota, I couldn't breathe.

Had he just?—

Was that magic?

His hand lingered in the air, and I could practically feel the thrum of his power dancing around us.

I felt Jillian's eyes on me.

But me? All I could do was stare at Prudence, breathlessly waiting for her answer.

She was beaming at Dakota like he was her very own son. Like he'd just performed a godsdamned miracle.

He had.

"Can't say anything like this has happened in my lifetime," she said. "A shifter and a mage? Aren't you just full of surprises?"

He was still a mage.

I hadn't taken a damn thing from him with my bite. He still had his magic, and now?—

Ours, my wolf preened.

Dakota felt it too. His eyes met mine, and he bit his lip. I could feel the elation, pure victory, rippling between us.

A smile spread on my face, despite myself. Broad and full and in less than a second, I'd crossed the space between us.

Before I even reached him, Dakota pressed up on his toes and stretched out his arms, and it was so simple to bend down and slide in right where he wanted me.

My lips closed over his, and his mouth parted so sweetly beneath mine. His breath hitched. His arms tightened around my neck.

He stood so much on his toes that his weight fell into me, and moon above, there was nowhere I'd rather be. His fingers spread, scratching through my hair at the nape of my neck.

It was the best feeling in the world.

Not just kissing him, or having him there in my arms when only the night before, I'd thought I lost him. No, the best part was the bond that'd formed between us. I could feel him, and for the first time, I let myself fall into the sensation of his wholeness.

He was there, in my arms, and so fucking perfect.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered against his lips.

I'd never wanted to see him hurt. I didn't know if I was apologizing for letting him get injured, biting him, or even waiting so long to make him my mate.

It'd only been a handful of weeks, and even that amount of time felt way too long

now that I knew what it was to feel him in my head.

Before Jiro had come, I'd been willing to stay with Dakota even if he was never my mate. I could've given up this, and I never would've known.

It would've been fine. Even without the bond, he was worth it.

But this was perfect.

Dakota shook his head. His hands slipped down, and his fingertips left a warm, pleasant trail over my skin until he cupped both my cheeks. My stubbled beard bent under his palms.

"You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for," he said thickly.

Tears hung in his black lashes, glittering as the last few hours fell over him. Everything I'd almost lost, and Dakota had risked so much more.

I wanted to tear Igarashi Jiro limb from fucking limb.

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He'd taken Dakota's life, his family, a future he might've had.

And no fucking way was I surrendering the one he could build here, now, with us. He was pack and magic and miracle all wrapped up in one, and it didn't matter that half a dozen people were in there, waiting for some kind of answer about what was happening. I kissed him again, reveling in the sweetness of his every breath.

Even when we broke the kiss, I couldn't pull away from him. I shut my eyes and tipped my forehead against his.

"I chose you," he whispered into the space between us. "I'd choose you again. This feels..."

He reached up and traced my bottom lip with his fingertips.

He didn't have to say another word. I knew how it felt. The mating bond was as much a revelation to me as it was to him.

The rest? Being a wolf... Okay, maybe he was more overcome than me, but I was never going to let him face it on his own. Not now.

"I know," I whispered back.

He shook his head, like I couldn't possibly understand, even when I felt it now. He wanted this.

"I'd pick this over magic," he confirmed. "I'd pick this over anything. I fucking love

you, so no more torturing yourself, jerk.”

“I love you too,” I said. My heart flipped over in my chest.

“He’s... both? That’s impossible,” Minori was gasping behind us. “He can’t be?—”

Was she upset, or simply shocked? When I glanced at her, I couldn’t tell beyond the paleness of her face.

“Darling,” Prudence said, “you’ve not been around long enough to know what is and isn’t possible.”

She reached into her quilt bag and pulled out a book. It was old, bound in faded leather, the pages yellowed.

Dakota stepped back from me just enough to look at her, but even then, his arm stayed looped around my hips, his head on my shoulder.

Prudence offered the book to him. “It’s from my collection. When I heard what happened, I hoped...”

Her smile trembled. I wouldn’t have been the only one lost if Dakota had died, but I’d never seen Prudence’s emotions riding so close to the surface.

Dakota took the book. His brow puckered. “Tales of the Witchwolf?”

“An old legend about a mage who was bitten and kept her magic. No one in my family ever put much stock in it, but you—you prove it true.”

Dakota bit his lip, his fingers tightening on the book. “Thank you.”

Prudence nodded, patting his hand fondly.

Then, she rounded on Minori. “Crescent will be making no restitution, young lady. You can deal with your own family drama. Dakota is ours.”

Ours, my wolf echoed.

I dragged him in again and kissed his temple as he turned the book over in his hands.

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Dakota

Tokyo was beautiful, but I didn’t want to move there.

Jiro had been extradited to Japan, but thankfully, I didn’t have to deal with him, and my other cousin wasn’t so bad.

Once Minori had learned the truth, she’d helped bring her brother to justice. Since then, she was turning out to be a decent person after all, putting us up in her home and treating my wolves with the respect they deserved.

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The Igarashi council of elders?

Those guys could fuck right off.

They wanted me to move to Japan and take over the family and business because, in their words, “a mere woman shouldn’t be in charge of the family legacy.”

And Minori hadn’t even flinched when they said it right in front of her.

I turned to the asshole who’d said it and raised a brow. “You would prefer an American be in charge of the family legacy?”

“You’re not an American,” he denied. “You’re a Japanese citizen. You were born here. Your Japanese is flawless.”

I rolled my eyes, and if that disrespect hadn’t been enough indication he was wrong, I went on to obliterate any hope he’d had to get rid of the oh-so-uppity woman. “I learned Japanese in a classroom, starting in high school. I don’t know a single thing about your family, or their traditions, or what you want your legacy to look like. Minori-san has grown up here, with these expectations already on her. Not only am I not willing to uproot my entire pack to come to Japan and?—”

“We don’t require them,” he interrupted me, and that had been the fucking end.

For a moment, I stood there in the middle of the room, blinking at him. The other empty suits around him fidgeted in place, uncomfortable with my silence but uncertain of what to say to mitigate the damage.

“This is why you’re paying them restitution and not the other way around, Igarashi. This is why they’re going to get even richer expanding into Asia, and you’re not going to be a part of that.” I met his eye, hard, and then looked every member of the elder council in the eye afterward. One old lady had met my eye with a twinkle and a smile on her face, but the rest had seemed cowed by me.

Probably because I was a wolf and that was suddenly scary, because they couldn’t just magic me away.

“You’ve been underestimating wolves your whole lives. Your family did the same before you. You think there’s any chance I’ll leave my pack, my family, to lead you, a bunch of people I don’t know? All because you’ve decided that the clever, competent woman who’s already been leading you isn’t good enough? And why? Because she’s a woman? Because she’s not the correct son’s child? Or is it just because in this case, she’s not a creature of myth that none of you believed was real until your actual leader tried to murder me?”

“It is most certainly that one,” the smiling old lady said. “Oh, some of the others as well, and some further reasons beyond that you couldn’t possibly know because as you said, you haven’t been dealing with this your whole life as Minori has. You are wrong about one thing, though. As much as you’re right that you’ll need to spend a lot more time learning about us before you can take your rightful place on the family council, you are most certainly family.”

Next to me, Minori was trying to hide a smile, but she nodded to the woman.

“You see, my grandson,” the woman told me, leaning forward. “You could not be more like your father if you had known him and emulated him as sons tend to do. I seem to recall him giving this council precisely the same speech about treating other magical creatures as lesser, not a month before his murder.”

For a moment, all I could do was blink at her.

Grandson. This woman was... was my father's mother. Shouldn't she already be the one in charge of the family?

She sat back, leaning insouciantly in a way that I was pretty sure was the height of disrespect in this room. It certainly would have been in a Japanese boardroom, and while my college studies had focused on that, I suspected Japanese magical families weren't so different.

"You will come to my home for a meal before you return to San Francisco," she said, and while it wasn't worded as a question, she definitely asked it as one.

So I nodded. "I would be honored, Grandmother."

She beamed at me, nodding. "Now then. Shall we have a vote about extending Minori's role as interim head of family, or should we make it formal this time?"

They opted for the first, and I could tell Minori wasn't surprised at all.

"They're going to keep trying to convince you to come back to Japan," she told me as she led me out. "It's not just sexism. I wasn't the most responsible child, and have argued with some of them in the past for their outdated views."

"I just told them I think they're ignorant users," I pointed out.

She smiled and nodded. "True. But I was doing it as a disrespectful child. You're doing it from a position of power. They respect you. Even more, they fear you. None of them will ever fear me, even if I could defeat them in a fight."

And that, honestly, was enough for me. I couldn't be a part of this all the time. The

byzantine infighting and plotting were impossible to wrap my brain around.

“I like my family better,” I told her. “We don’t keep secrets from each other. Everyone knows how everyone feels, all the time. More than that, we take care of each other first. Rivalries always come after the pack.”

She leaned in, and I could see the resemblance between her and my grandmother, in the twinkle in her eye. “Can I tell you a secret?”

I raised a brow at her, but nodded. “Of course.”

“I like your family better too.” She ducked her head and gave a tiny giggle.

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I couldn't hold back a laugh at that. "Well, you're always welcome to come visit. You can tell the assholes on the council that you're trying to salvage the merger or something."

"They would like it better if I was trying to convince you to return permanently."

"I mean, you could try, but it's not gonna happen."

That was when we reached the atrium, where Jax was waiting for me, and everything else fell away. I stepped forward into his arms, enveloped there, safe and secure and loved.

Behind me, Minori sighed, and instead of frustration, her voice was filled with something else when she spoke. Something that sounded, to me, a lot like longing. "I know."

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Jax

I'd never been so far from pack before, but I trusted my people. Jillian, Seth, Maia, even Prudence, little as she was a werewolf herself, would keep everything on track until we returned.

It wasn't like I could stand sending my mate to the other side of the world. Not for any length of time. Not alone.

Strange enough to be so far from my pack, the subtle awareness of them dimmed by distance. Oh, they were still in my head, as ever, but without being able to see their faces? Take in their scents? No, traveling wouldn't ever be my favorite thing to do, but I couldn't deny that Japan was beautiful, Igarashi's property even more so.

Minori had more employees in her home than I could count, and they all moved effortlessly, providing for every need without drawing attention to themselves.

I wasn't used to this kind of luxury.

Sure, I had money.

Now.

But this was old money, and as much as they were trying to thrust it upon him, Dakota had no interest in it, because he had us.

Nothing had ever made me feel like such a successful alpha as that.

I still wasn't above enjoying the private bath off the room Dakota and I were sharing. I sat down first, and he lowered himself in front of me, allowing me to draw him back into the cradle of my legs.

With a content sigh, he leaned into me and shut his eyes, and for a long time, we soaked in the warm water. I rubbed his shoulders, drawing circles over the ridge at the base of his skull until he moaned.

When he smiled up at me, it was lazy and sleepy, and he turned. The water splashed against my chest gently, and he stretched up for an easy kiss.

"I think I'll miss this part," he said.

“I’ll get you an outdoor bath.”

He hummed. “And the food.”

“We can come back anytime you like.”

He snorted, but his smile was real, and all I wanted to do was wag my tail and give him anything he desired.

Right then, that was another kiss.

This one lingered, both of us falling into something more as tongues parted lips and my hand slid down the small of his back. I gripped his ass, and he rocked against me, his dick grinding against my thigh.

“Should we get out?”

He nodded, reaching for a towel as he rose, but he was none too fast in wrapping it around his hips, and I groaned at the sight of him on display for me.

He half turned back around, a smirk on his lips.

“Coming, Alpha?”

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I growled, following his damp footsteps into our private suite.

As soon as he was near the bed, I pounced, knocking him over and pressing him down. The towel fell open, and the whole world was his warm skin against mine, the way he moved against me, his needy little sounds as I coaxed a slow burning flame across his skin.

There were some nice things about Dakota's human family. They were magic, but they wouldn't know each and every time we had sex just by the change in our scents or the sounds drifting from our bedroom.

I'd never before known what real privacy felt like, and maybe it wasn't something I needed every day, but right then, damn was it nice to lose myself alone with Dakota for a little while.

I skimmed my hands up his narrow chest, and it jumped with nerves. I dragged them down, trailing over his belly button and lower, and he spread his legs and wiggled under me, pressing up into the touch while he whined and bit his pretty bottom lip.

"Can I fuck you?" My voice came out low and rough, and Dakota's eyes had gone pure black. His hips rocked when I traced my fingers up, then down his hips, stretching out just one thumb to drag down the bottom side of his cock, hard and straining against his belly.

His dick jerked, and I grinned, even before he scowled at me.

"I'll be annoyed if you don't."

That was all the permission I needed to suck my finger into my mouth, slip my hand beneath him, and trace around his hole with my slick fingertip. Dakota's breath hitched, his eyes fluttered shut, and he dug his heels into the bed to offer himself up to me.

I could stay like this all day, sinking my finger into his tight heat while he clenched around the intrusion. Could watch his small, aborted thrusts as he urged me faster with his body.

Fuck, he was perfect, and he was allmine.

But I couldn't just tease him. Not when his eyes fluttered open, his brow puckered, and he let out a petulant little, "Ja-ax."

I poured lube on my fingers, loosening him up, making him plenty slick to take me. Then, I slid my palm over my flushed, heavy cock and held it, the tip pressing against him.

His teeth pressed his lip, and he nodded, hooking his heel around my hip.

I sank into him, and I swear, I could feel his moan vibrate inside me too. Breathless and grinning, I let my weight fall on him, pressing him down into the soft white sheets.

He groaned, but I didn't think it was the pressure. Not in a bad way, at least, because he wrapped his arms around me and then his mouth was right there. I nibbled his swollen lip and let my tongue learn the shape of him while he adjusted to my cock.

I hardly moved, just flexing my hips little by little, sinking as deep into him as his body would allow. I needed every goddamn inch of him, and from the way he arched beneath me, the feeling was mutual.

When he finally whined, rolling his hips, I pulled back. Thrust deep inside.

Dakota let out a sharp exhale and rocked with me, his body's movements meeting mine like he could predict them, the rhythm between us fast and flawless and?—

Fuck, the way his pleasure zipped up my spine like lightning, dancing across our mating bond—it was the best thing in the world.

I ground down on him, letting my skin drag across his trapped cock.

He was my mate. I'd marked him and claimed him, but it'd been in a moment of terror.

It was supposed to be like this—fucking euphoric. Need took me over. I wanted to bite him again. Claim him again and again until the whole world knew he was mine.

“I know I've already marked you, but... could I?” I skimmed my teeth over the curve between his neck and shoulder, and Dakota stretched out beneath me, turning his head in open offering.

Grinning, I bit him.

His moan was loud and rough and his whole body went rigid under me. He was close, his lips parted, beautiful and round.

Then he grabbed me, yanking me down with a hard grip on the back of my neck. The sudden movement startled me, and I barely kept myself from crashing down onto him as he used the leverage to pull himself up.

And—

“Fuck!” I shouted.

His teeth sank into the same spot on my neck, possessive and territorial and needy, and my mind went blank and white as my cock pulsed inside of him.

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I was trapped there, and I worried I'd never stop coming. Not buried this deep inside him, with his sharp fangs in my skin and the satisfaction that radiated through him.

He claimed me.

And I? Well, I was there to take his mark, his time, his body, every promise he wanted to give me. Whatever he wanted, I'd give him in turn.

My perfect, beautiful miracle of a mate.

With a satisfied rumble, I kissed his temple. He eased his teeth from my skin slowly, cheeks flushed, a nervous smile tilting his lips.

There was a sticky white mess between his, his come smeared across us both, and if I had my way, I'd be cleaning him up with my tongue and having him again.

First though?—

“I love you.”

In response, his flush deepened. He gave a sweet little shimmy and tightened his legs around my hips. “Love you too.”

A trail of blood trickled down my shoulder, but the mark was already healing. I hoped it left a little scar, so the world knew I was his too.

Because more than the world, that was what mattered; that we belonged to each other.