



A Place To Call Home (Morefield Village)

Author: Megs Pritchard

Category: LGBT+

Description: Demonic Disasters and Afterlife Adventures features human men learning to deal with troublesome angels, meddlesome grandmothers, or awful exes while finding love with the demons who are destined to be their soulmates. These characters might face an annoyingly corporate afterlife, but there's plenty of snark, humor, and sweetness to deal with it (and don't forget the spice—these demons have tails, and they know how to use them)

Can they find a way to make their mating work before it's too late?

Manu couldn't stand Preston. He despised everything about the human, but somehow he was Manu's mate, the one meant just for him. Something had gone very wrong and Manu was paying the price.

Preston loved nothing better than annoying Manu. Seeing the way his eyes narrowed and glowed, the way he growled whenever they were near to each other. Yep, it filled him with joy and aroused him to the point of pain.

Having hot, angry sex was one thing, but mating was a whole other thing, until Manu did, in fact, mate him. Now they both had to live with it while dealing with an enemy who thought Preston would be easy to capture.

Would Manu save his mate in time, or would Preston suffer the consequences?

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Why?

Why him?

Why this human?

Manu Agarwal glared at the human who was sitting next to him, nonchalantly chewing gum. Preston Fulwood. Manu's current annoyance and one he was stuck with. Preston had been captured by Morefield Village security when attempting to steal information about the village and its occupants.

Not that being captured seemed to bother Preston. He'd been so laid back about it, he might as well be sleeping flat on the floor. No doubt, knowing their head of security had allowed Preston to behave so relaxed. Elliot Young and Preston had worked together as SEALs, not that Manu or anyone else had been given the exact details, and that was to be expected.

Manu had been given the task of escorting Preston to his drop off point where he was to leave all the information he had stolen for this mysterious A. S. to collect. Names, ages, what shifter they were, where they had come from, blood types, and so on. All the information medical had on them would be passed on. Except additional information was included: a virus that would allow the shifters to track where the stolen information was being uploaded.

They had been careful about what information they had allowed the humans to see. Just enough to convince them that Preston had come through, but not enough to do anything with. Deacon Morrison, the man in charge of Morefield Village, had gone

over the information with Elliot and between them decided what wouldn't cause them problems.

They'd figured whoever these people were who were kidnapping and experimenting on them, had certain information about them so had ignored details about names, ages, and the types of shifters within Morefield. Blood groups, too, but other information was removed. Mated couples, children.

It was a risk, but one they were willing to take.

Preston had dropped the USB in a safe deposit box, and now it was a waiting game. Once the information checked out, Preston would be wired the money he was owed, then they had to wait again for the USB to be used in case it moved to another location. Just because the USB and the information it contained had been checked didn't mean that place was its final destination. They would scope that location out but wanted to know where the information would ultimately end up. It was a guessing game, but there was too much at stake to let any detail slip past them.

This was the part Manu was used to. Waiting and watching.

During the time Manu had been stuck with Preston, a medical team had been sent to collect Preston's father and relocate him to Saludem. Saludem had a home for individuals suffering from age-related illnesses, and Preston's father had dementia. It had been part of the deal to have Preston help them, not that they needed one, but with Preston's relationship to Eli, it had helped.

Manu did feel sorry for Preston in that regard, but other than that, he found the human extremely annoying, which pissed him off even more when he felt the pull. His mate. This man who the enemy hired to find out anything and everything he could was Manu's mate.

The pull. The constant need to be close to Preston pissed Manu off all the time. He wanted to scream at his mate, punch him for what he'd done, and at the same time, fuck the guy into the mattress. The conflicting emotions were driving him insane, and he needed a timeout, which wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Preston was gorgeous, too, with his blue eyes and blond hair and pale skin. The complete opposite of Manu. Why this human? The alluring scent Preston gave off had Manu fighting his instincts to take what was his. It wasn't that he had a problem that his mate was human; it was that his mate was this human.

All shifters had mates, and as a wolf shifter, Manu knew he would have one. It was a question of being fortunate enough to meet his mate, something that still didn't happen that often, and Manu knew he was lucky. Lucky to have crossed paths with his mate, but why this mate?

Growling softly, Manu glanced over at Preston and resisted the urge to grab him by the hair, haul him close, and kiss the fuck out of him. Preston's full lips had Manu wanting to kiss and bite and shove his dick... He really needed to stop thinking about Preston. He needed to focus on the job at hand and not about shoving his dick... And there he went again.

Capturing Preston had confirmed what they had suspected. They had a mole. Saludem had had moles, too, and been successful in ferreting them out, but it weighed Manu down knowing they had one. Was it someone Manu knew and thought he could trust? Everyone living in Morefield had had a thorough background check, but clearly not thorough enough.

Who was it, and why were they selling them out?

"I have the money." Preston stared at his phone, then switched it off.

Manu nodded and sent a message to the team, then waited. A minute later, he had one back.

Hunter is on it now

Hunter, a vampire, helped Saludem with security, especially IT security, alongside his human mate, Carter. They'd met when the vampires had been dealing with a king who wanted to kill all humans and rule the world. Fortunately, Jacques had replaced the former king and now helped Saludem and Morefield Village whenever they needed it.

Manu showed Preston the message, who nodded, then popped a bubble. Biting the inside of his cheek, Manu turned his back to Preston and glared out the window of the car they sat in. Resisting the urge not to punch or fuck his mate was becoming harder with every passing minute.

His phone vibrated, and Manu read the message. The data was accessed briefly. We have a location now and have a team moving in. We'll remain out of sight until the order to move in.

Does Hunter think it will be accessed again?

Yes. The hit was brief. Enough to validate the data and just long enough for us to trace. It will probably go to a secondary location for a thorough analysis. As we suspected.

Where do you want us? It had been agreed they'd go to the first location as it would be closest to the initial drop off point, but plans could change.

I'm sending coordinates now. Meet the team there.

On it.

Seconds later, the information arrived, and Manu sat up straight. “We’re going to the first location now.”

Preston straightened and nodded as he put his seat belt on. “How far out are we?”

Manu put the details into his GPS. “Ten clicks due east.”

Preston stared at the screen. “Let’s go.”

Manu drove to the location, ignoring Preston as much as he could, which wasn’t as easy as it should be for a former military man like him. Preston’s scent permeated the air, and Manu wanted to roll in it, which frustrated him. Now wasn’t the time, but the big bad wolf inside had other ideas and didn’t want to wait around to claim Preston.

Gritting his teeth, Manu forced those feelings aside and concentrated on the task at hand—meeting the team and waiting for the word to hit the target. Preston moved, and Manu watched him from the corner of his eye as Preston checked his weapons. He didn’t want to admit it, but Manu was impressed with the speed and professionalism Preston used. As a former SEAL, it was clear Preston knew his weapons.

Remaining silent, Manu drove, his eyes finding the road easily once he neared their destination and cut the lights. If anyone was there, Manu didn’t want the lights to give them away. Around a mile away, Manu found a place to hide the car, and they both got out.

Manu grabbed his weapons, then murmured, “I’ll lead.”

Preston nodded and waited, which impressed Manu. He had half expected Preston to

question him, but all he'd done was nod. Preston pointed to his eyes, and Manu understood. Manu would be able to see better, and Preston didn't have night goggles with him.

Manu double checked his weapons, noting Preston doing the same, then headed into the woods toward the house where the data had been accessed. He barely heard Preston behind him, which proved how good the man was when it came to tracking. Again, Manu was impressed, but kept it to himself. Now wasn't the time or place to have a discussion on his mate's skills.

It didn't take them long to reach the coordinates provided, and Manu crouched, searching the area until he spotted a slight movement off to his left. Nodding in that direction, he and Preston moved closer and met the other team.

Cyan Dubois crouched near a tree, his eyes on what appeared to be a derelict building in front. "No movement."

The words were so quiet, Manu barely heard them. Nodding, he waited along with the others, and when the signal came, they ran forward as one, staying low to the ground until they circled the building. Cyan lifted his hand and counted down. Then they all entered.

Manu entered via a kitchen and performed a quick search and, as he did, murmurs of 'clear' could be heard. It didn't take long before the building was given the all clear, then the real search began. From what Manu could tell, the property had been abandoned for some time, dust and rubbish everywhere.

"Been empty for a while," Cyan muttered. He walked over to the only clear area and squatted. "They accessed the data here. I can barely pick up any scent at all, so they're using that shit to cover themselves."

“I’d say in and out. No waiting around.” Manu inhaled deeply and grimaced. “Can’t pick up anything either.”

Viridian Dubois, Cyan’s brother, grunted. “Can’t smell shit. I’ll let Indy know.”

Indy—or Indigo—was mayor of Saludem and another brother to Cyan and Viridian. Jim Malveaux, the other person present, grunted. “As much as I hate to admit it, that spray is good. We need to find something to stop its effectiveness.”

“Camouflage spray. I saw something about that once when I had to go to one of their labs. You hit the lab not long after.”

“We found nothing about the spray.” Manu watched Preston, who furrowed his brow. “Can you remember anything about it?”

“I wasn’t given access, but I remember them working on perfecting it. Something about it worked well, but they wanted it so that you wouldn’t be able to pick anything up.”

Jim grunted. “Bastards. We all know how they perfected it.”

Manu growled low and deep. Their people experimented on to help that group make better weapons to hunt them with. “I want to kill them all.”

“We’ll get them.” Cyan pulled his phone free. “Empty.” He nodded, then hung up. “We’ll place cameras to keep an eye on this place, but I doubt they’ll come back. This was just a location to check the data.”

“Make sure it was legit.” Vir exhaled deeply and rubbed a hand over his face. “I’ll be glad when this is finally over.”

“Ever thought about coming out?” Preston asked quietly. “Let the world know of your existence and what has been done to you and your kind.”

“We have, but it’s not as simple as it sounds. There are many types of shifters, and we’d all have to agree, and we’re not all in contact. It’s a long story.”

“I’m sure Manu can fill me in on the drive back.”

Manu gritted his teeth as he glared at his mate. There was no way he was going to be stuck in the car explaining his history to that man. No way in hell.

“Good. Make sure to do that, Manu.” Vir walked over to the door and stepped outside, the others following, leaving Manu alone with Preston. Why him?

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What was it about Manu that had Preston questioning himself? He'd have normally done what was needed and gotten out of there, but for some reason, he kept finding excuses to stay and help. Sure, his dad, Albert, was a part of that. Having a good place for him to live was what had pushed Preston into this line of work, but there was just something about the shifter that made Preston stick around. Plus, he got a kick out of seeing Manu try to keep his cool.

The shifter had a great grip on his temper, and Preston loved to prod at him to see how far he could push Manu. There was something about the shifter clenching his jaw or gritting his teeth that had Preston wanting to see just how far he could push until he exploded.

Childish but fun too.

The drive back was long and tedious, and Manu spoke the fewest number of words possible. Considering he was supposed to bring Preston up to date on the situation surrounding shifters, Preston found he knew almost as much when they reached Morefield Village than he did when they'd left the abandoned house.

Manu didn't want him around and it amused Preston, just like he knew chewing gum annoyed Manu, which was why Preston did it. He loved winding the shifter up. Seeing the way Manu's eyes glowed before Manu got a grip of his temper had Preston fighting the urge to laugh. It was fun, and he enjoyed it.

When they arrived in Morefield Village, Manu dropped Preston off outside the small apartment complex he was staying in and sped off without so much as a goodbye. That made Preston laugh as he headed to his little apartment.

He'd only been there a day. Not even a full one either. Manu had found him this place, let him drop what few belongings he had, then he was out in the field. News Albert had been moved to Salutem had helped and then another message that his old place had been cleaned and his belongings brought here. Preston admired their speed and efficiency, but wasn't sure how he felt about unknown individuals going through his things. It was to be expected, though. He was an unknown entity, and they had to keep everyone who lived here safe.

They hadn't seen everything though, as Preston kept items that needed to be secured in a separate location under a different name. He'd have to find time to retrieve those later, but for now, he wanted a shower, food, and bed. Then maybe jerk off thinking about seeing Manu explode in a rage.

That shifter made him want to hit him and fuck him, and Preston wasn't picky about the order. Maybe beat him, then fuck him or whatever. Just watching Manu glare at him was enough to give Preston a semi. Wouldn't take much to have him hard and horny either.

Finding the apartment, Preston checked the area, then let himself in. Pausing at the threshold, Preston waited, letting his senses search the place for him. He couldn't hear anything, and it felt like the place had been empty for a while.

Closing the door and locking it, Preston walked through the apartment, seeing it was a one bedroom. It was open concept, and the bathroom was off a short hallway. Nice and small and just what Preston needed. He didn't need some fancy place with fifty bedrooms and ten bathrooms. This would do him fine.

The bathroom was all white with a shower/tub combo, and Preston stripped, then grabbed his toiletry bag that had been left by the sink. Opening it, he found everything he needed and, turning the water on, Preston brushed his teeth as he waited for it to heat up. Once it was warm enough, he got in and groaned.

Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back and let the water run down his face. After a few minutes just to relax, Preston washed his hair and body, then grinned. Time to think of Manu doing all sorts of shit Preston knew the shifter wouldn't want to do.

Grabbing his dick, Preston stroked, biting his bottom lip as thoughts of Manu passed through his mind. Manu naked on his hands and knees as Preston fucked him from behind. Manu stretched out on his bed, naked and bound, so Preston could do whatever he wanted. Manu against the wall, Manu on the floor, Just Manu.

Yeah, Preston wanted Manu.

It didn't take long before Preston grunted and came, and with a smile, he cleaned up, then switched the shower off. Climbing out, he wrapped a towel around his waist, then padded to the bedroom and opened his bags. He found what he wanted in the second one and pulled a soft, long-sleeved shirt on, followed by a sweater.

In the kitchen, he checked the fridge and cupboards, finding them stocked with food. Someone had left a plate with sandwiches on it, and Preston took it out of the fridge. A mix of different meats that looked good and some orange juice, and Preston was set.

It was late, and he didn't fancy cooking, so the sandwiches would do. As he sat to eat them, his phone beeped, and he read the message from Deacon. Meeting tomorrow 10. My office.

That meant spending time with Manu, and Preston was already thinking of ways to get the shifter agitated. Yeah, he was a bastard, but there was nothing better than annoying Manu, knowing he could do nothing about it.

Finishing off his food and juice, Preston put his dishes in the sink, switched the lights off, brushed his teeth again, then went to bed. Tomorrow would come soon enough.

Walking into the coffee shop, Preston saw the looks coming his way and ignored them. The aroma of coffee was too powerful to ignore and the crap at his was just that. Crap. He needed a decent cup to get him going in the morning and not the shit he had at his apartment.

Those freeze-dried balls of shit were not coffee, and no one was going to change his mind about it. Coffee needed to come from the finest beans, be ground to perfection, and then hot water to make a perfect cup. Yes, he was a coffee snob and proud of it. Too many years in the military drinking swill had him needing only the good stuff.

Waiting in line, he had the chance to people watch. Couples, families, loners. Mostly shifters too. He'd known about vampires. Everyone knew about vampires and after all the shit had happened, King Jacques had done an exemplary job of turning the negative public opinion around. Being open and honest and accepting of human scrutiny had helped. It also helped that Jacques was gorgeous, and when he smiled, most people couldn't help but smile in return.

When he'd stood in front of Congress and told them what he'd endured as a slave had helped, but also the point he made that no one, human or vampire, would be a slave again and how he would eviscerate his own species before he would let that happen had been the turning point. No one walked away from that hearing without knowing that Jacques meant every word he said.

Preston had been impressed, and he knew many humans had also been. Now the king had his own fan club.

When it was his time to be served, he ordered a muffin and a large black coffee to go and paid. He stood to one side, waiting for his order, and watched Manu head toward Deacon's office. The long-legged stride eating up the ground and the serious look on his face had Preston smiling. He couldn't wait to knock that look off his face. Probably replace it with a scowl or glare aimed at him.

“Here’s your order.”

Preston grabbed his drink and sipped it, the strong bitter taste coating his tongue and making him sigh. “Thanks.”

“You’re new.”

Preston glanced at the woman and nodded. “Just arrived.”

“I see.” She looked him up and down. “I guess welcome to Morefield Village.”

“Thanks. I think I’m going to like it here.”

He winked and chuckled as she blushed, then left the coffee shop. “Hey!”

Turning, Preston watched a young man jog over to him, then look him up and down. Slim, with dark hair, and—what looked like—silver eyes, watched him. “Yeah.”

“I’m Saxon. Sax. Mated to Jim. You’re going to be working with him along with his brother, Rand. And me! I help in security, just not patrol.”

“You’re small.”

“Really? I never noticed what with everyone being taller than me. Must have escaped my notice.” Sax stared at Preston. “Great way to make friends, dickwad.”

“Dickwad?”

“I’m feeling generous, so dickwad.”

“Preston, by the way, and thanks for the generosity.”

Sax snorted. "I am generous. Ask Jim. I only kicked him out naked once." Sax waved and walked back the way he came. Shaking his head, Preston saw Elliot standing outside his office, watching a man with three kids head toward the school.

"Elliot." Preston glanced back at the man and kids. "Nice family."

"Alvin and his brother and sisters. Parents left him to raise them."

"That was nice of them and for you to keep an eye on him."

Elliot's jaw hardened. "I tend to stay away from him. Don't need the complication."

"Complication?" Preston heard the man shout, "Slater" as a little boy ran off, then looked back at Elliot, but the shifter had disappeared inside. Why would this Alvin and his family be a complication to Elliot?

With a shrug, Preston followed Elliot inside and entered the room the meeting would be held in. He knew Deacon and most of the people or shifters or whatever already there and nodded, then grabbed a chair and sat. Manu wasn't in the room yet, and Preston lounged back in his chair, his legs spread out in front of him.

He wanted to see Manu's face when he realized Preston was there, ready and waiting. There was nothing better than making Manu bite back whatever it was he wanted to say.

"You find everything?"

"Yeah." Preston arched an eyebrow. "You searched my things, so you'll know not everything is there."

Elliot chuckled. "You knew we'd search your belongings. You're ex-military, like

most of us. We're used to having less than no privacy."

"I need you to go to Costas so he can do a physical on you." Preston tilted his head, eyes on Deacon who had spoken. "We know you worked for them. We want to make sure they aren't tracking you."

"Should have done that before letting me in."

"Eli vouched for you, and I trust him," Deac told him. "You might not know they have something on you. Maybe under your skin where you wouldn't feel it."

"Never met them in person, but I'll go."

Deac nodded. "We're just waiting for Rand, Jim, and Manu."

"Manu and Jim will be coming off patrol and coming straight here. Manu is on his way now but had to do something first."

"Once they're here, we'll get started."

Preston closed his eyes and sipped his coffee, but he knew the moment Manu entered the room. His body came alive in a way he hadn't quite been able to figure out. He knew where Manu stood, and he opened his eyes just as the shifter sat.

Their eyes met and held, then Manu looked away, answering a question Eli asked. The sensation in his body, this hyperawareness where Manu was concerned, had Preston trying to figure out what was going on. Sure, he wanted to fuck Manu, wanted to make him scream—in rage or passion, Preston didn't care—wanted to make Manu...

"Right. Let's get started."

Preston grinned and sat up. Let the fun begin.

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Of course, he was there, and of course, he looked fucking edible in those tight blue jeans and equally tight black T-shirt. The way he lounged on the chair like he owned the place had Manu growling. He wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. He wasn't sure how, though. His fist or his lips and that had him growling even more.

Eli arched an eyebrow at him and pointed to the one empty chair. "Manu. Glad you could join us."

"I had to go to Saludem."

"Updates?"

"Nothing yet, but they're tracking. It's only a question of when. We know they'll want to access the data at some point."

Deacon sighed. "I would like just one day to have with my family where this isn't hanging over us."

"You need to come out." Preston sipped his coffee. "Cut them off. Once you're out in the open and the public knows about you and, more importantly, knows what is happening to you, things will change."

"Don't you think we haven't thought about that?" Manu snapped.

Preston grinned. "Noooo. It never once occurred to me that you'd have that conversation. I thought you were all too stupid, and I had to come here and tell you how to not be stupid."

“You sarcastic fucking?—”

“Stop. Now.” Eli rubbed his forehead. “Coming out isn’t as simple as you would think.”

“I know it isn’t.” Preston sat up and leaned forward. “I can only imagine how complicated it would be, but you’re exposed as you are. Easy to pick off, easy to take and kill. You have small villages dotted around that aren’t connected. You don’t have an effective communication network that links you all together. A village and all its occupants can disappear in a blink of an eye, and you would never know. I’ve seen it happen.”

“Where?” Deac snapped. “When?”

“I was paid to transport some confidential material and other things that they didn’t want the authorities to know about. I made a stop at this little village in the middle of nowhere. Nice place. Only about a hundred people. Not even sure if that’s a village. Noticed something was off and realized what they were. Kept my mouth shut.

“A few days later, on my way back, the place was burned to the ground, and everyone was gone. If I hadn’t had known better, I would have thought the place had been deserted for years, but I did know better. There are hundreds of places like that around the country, little villages here and there but they are left alone until they can take them. They lack the space to take more.”

“So they wait until they’ve finished with the shifters they have, then grab the next.” Deac’s voice had grown weary by the end of the sentence.

“Perfect set up. That’s why I’m telling you to go public. You won’t get to all those small places, and those shifters will disappear and no one will miss them, or if they do, something will happen to them too.”

“You being there led them straight to those shifters.” Manu glared at him and Preston shook his head.

“No way they had the time to do what they did. They knew about that place before I traveled through it. You don’t make a place like that disappear with only a couple of days of planning. They had staked it out for at least a month, so they knew everyone, knew their habits, knew their security.”

“And somehow you just happened to stop at the same place A. S. intended to hit.”

“Yeah, which is fortunate for you, because I have the information on the place, occupants, and current location of said occupants. Those alive, at least. They’re all held in one facility. Easier to threaten them to do what they want if they think someone they know will be tortured or killed.”

“Where?”

“Bermac. Three hundred miles from here. There is a large shifter community around a hundred miles out from there. Too large to be targeted. Larger than here and a mix of inhabitants but mainly shifter. They have a vampire group there, too, which is probably why they haven’t been targeted.”

“What’s the name of this community?”

“Sandbach.”

Elliot furrowed his brow. “I’ve heard of it. I think it’s on our list of places to check out.”

“You want to speak to a man called Denison. He’s the local sheriff.”

“When we captured you”—Eli leaned forward, staring at Preston—“you gave the impression you didn’t know about us.”

“Never play your full hand.”

Eli hissed. “I should pound you into the ground for this.”

“You have my tech, my laptop, computer. It’s all on there. I didn’t know who I was working for, and I never asked questions.”

“You saw the labs?—”

“I never had access to the labs or the restricted areas. I wasn’t aware of the extent of what they were doing. I put two and two together but didn’t actually know. Once I came here and we had our little catch-up, a few things began to make sense. The village that disappeared had to have been them, but I didn’t know for sure.”

“You just told us they lack space?—”

“Let me make this clear. I knew shit, but I didn’t know what I knew. It’s easy to analyze and realize what was going on with hindsight. I’ve had a few days to figure it out. Bermac and Sandbach I know about because of that village I stayed in. I wasn’t even sure why I had to know, and once I did, I had no idea how I was going to help them or what the fuck I was mixed up in. The intel I was to grab from here was going to be my last job for them.”

“You expect us to believe you?” Manu spat.

“I really don’t care if you do or don’t. I didn’t tell you everything because I don’t know you, and I don’t know if I can trust you.”

Eli grunted. “Thanks.”

“Tell us what you know and how long you have known it.”

Preston watched Deac for a few seconds, then nodded. “I only knew for certain at the village. Saw a kid shift in front of me. The kid freaked out when he realized I was there, but I told him he would be fine. When I went back and the place had been torched, it made me wonder. Where could they have all gone and why?

“I made it back to the building, which turned out to be a lab, and saw some paperwork on a desk. Saw a couple of names I knew, so I made it a point to access their systems to find out if the boy was there, and he was.”

“When was that?” Jim, a shifter with gray hair and a deadly air to him, asked quietly. This man had seen things.

“Around six months ago. Everything I know is on my computer.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know what you were, Eli? Can you imagine what would happen if I did and you weren’t a shifter? You’d think I was tapped.” Preston tapped the side of his head. “I didn’t say anything because the Eli I worked with didn’t seem to be the same Eli standing in front of me. We’ve been through some shit together, survived things we shouldn’t have, and at no time, did I know what you were. Why would I immediately trust you after that?”

“Do you now?” he asked quietly, and Preston paused before answering. Did he trust Eli now he knew the truth?

“Yeah.”

“Sandbach. How did you find out about them?”

“The vampires are registered, as are the humans, but I stayed there when I was checking Bermac out. Noticed the same thing with some people there that I did in the village I stayed in. Figured them and the vampires would keep this organization away. Too much trouble if caught.”

“You’re probably right. Jacques has done a lot in recent years to help ease tensions between humans and vampires,” Deac murmured.

“Yeah, and they’d know that, so go for easy targets. I have a list of places they keep shifters.” Preston shrugged. “Not sure if it’s the full list.”

“We have a list too. We can compare. How long have you worked for them?”

Preston tapped his chin with his finger. “Two years, I guess. On and off. I wasn’t sure if it was the same company, at first, but I track every job I do, and a pattern emerged.”

“You were always good at seeing patterns,” Eli murmured. “Anything useful to us?”

“I only moved intel every other month, and I’ve only had to access information four times in those two years. Six months. My guess would be they select a target, acquire the info, then hit. Six months later, they do it again.”

“Six months.” Rand stared at the floor. “You hit a place and remove those who will cause a problem, those you can’t control. Male shifters more than likely or those with military experience. Leaves the others weak and easier to control.”

“They had the Dubois’ sister for months.” Deac glanced at Rand, who nodded.

“I met a couple of them. I wouldn’t want to cross them.” Preston had seen them in action and didn’t want to have to fight one of them.

“The ones who had their sister found that out as well.” Deac sighed heavily. “Some days it gets too much.”

“We’re here,” Eli murmured.

“I know.” Deac gave him a close-lipped smile, then stood. “I need to speak to Indy. We should hold a meeting for us all, but I wanted to let the dust settle in Salutem first.”

Indy had ended the Council and found out who their traitor was. The repercussions had been long lasting, and only now was Salutem coming to terms with what had happened. During that same time, Indy had mated a demon and that had caused more than a few raised eyebrows.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a day without something happening.” Deac stood and arched his back. “Getting older sucks. Right, let me call Indy and arrange a meeting. Eli, update the schedule to include Preston, and Preston, if I find out you have betrayed us, I’ll tear you apart limb from limb, which is something I can do.”

Preston saluted Deac, not the least surprised at the warning. “I won’t betray you. My dad finally has a decent place to live. Don’t wanna risk that.”

Deac furrowed his brow. “We’d never do anything to him.” Turning to Eli, Deac added, “Get all the info from Preston and his computer and we’ll go over it with Salutem and then plan.”

Deac left, and Eli stood. “Let’s get out of here. Preston, head over to the main security office and help out there with your security set up. You have some

impressive security. Both Hunter and Carter have had a few issues getting past it.”

Everyone began to leave, and Preston made a point of pushing in front of Manu, grinning when he heard the shifter mutter something under his breath. Outside, he saw Eli stop and stare at the man who they’d seen earlier. The man saw them and stopped a couple of steps away.

“You,” he murmured softly.

Eli pushed past him, but the man grabbed his arm. “Let go.”

“I’m Alvin.”

“I know who you are.” Eli shook Alvin’s hand off. “Never going to happen.”

Alvin shook his head. “What?”

Eli walked away, leaving Alvin staring after him. “He’s had a bad morning. Give him a few hours.” Preston rocked on his feet.

Alvin didn’t glance at him. “He doesn’t want me,” he whispered.

“He doesn’t know you. Give him time?—”

“Shut up, Preston.” Manu pushed him out of the way and took Alvin’s arm. “He’s surprised.”

“No.” Alvin shook his head. “I always wonder why he avoided me. It’s because he doesn’t want me as his mate.” He nodded slowly and ducked his head. “I get it.”

Turning, Alvin slowly walked away. “I thought mating was important,” Preston

mused.

Next thing he knew, his back was slammed into the wall, and Manu was growling in his face. Now this was going to be fun!

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Manu had his forearm across Preston's throat, and the fucker just grinned at him. Applying pressure, Manu growled, but all that did was make the fuckers smile widen. Shoving away, Manu ran a hand over his face.

"And here I was thinking it was going to be my lucky day." Preston liked his lips. "Maybe I should help that Alvin out."

Manu shoved Preston back into the wall. "You leave him alone, because if Eli catches you sniffing around?—"

"He'd do what? It's clear he doesn't want his mate, which is strange to me, considering you're all about mates and shit. Why walk away from yours?"

"It's none of your fucking business what Eli does."

Preston pushed Manu back. "I've known that fucker for years. Never known him to walk away from something unless he had no choice. Why would he do that now? Does this Alvin come with strings attached? Like the kids I saw he had earlier? Bit young to be a parent, but he could be older than he looks. No, wait. Eli said they were his siblings, and his parents had done a runner, leaving him to raise them alone. Eli's walking away from that?"

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about!"

"I don't? Then explain it to me."

Manu grunted. "No."

“Okay, then.” Preston shrugged. “I’ll ask the man himself.”

Manu shoved Preston again, then suddenly ended up with his back against the wall.

“Get off me.”

“Says the shifter who likes to push me around. I’m not sure what your problem is, and I admit I like to see you get all worked up, but we have to get along now. We’ll be working together.” Preston stepped back, and Manu closed the distance between them.

“Get a fucking room,” Jim told them as he walked past.

Manu glared at Jim as he walked away, then at Preston, who chuckled. “A room sounds good, don’t ya think?”

“No. Why the fuck would I want you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve seen myself in the mirror. I know what I look like.”

“You have an ego the size of this place.” Manu crossed his arms over his chest, hating the fact that Preston was gorgeous, and he did want to fuck the man who irritated the shit out of him. Worse, Preston probably knew it as well. “You wanna fuck?” Manu watched Preston, who only smiled in response to Manu’s question.

“Could pass some time.”

“I… What?” Could pass some time? What the actual fuck?

“You know I don’t know too many people here, so if you’re available, I’m easy.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh no, I’ll be fucking you. I don’t bend over for any man.”

“Like I do?” Manu clenched his hands into fists at the easy way Preston had about him. How many men had the human slept with?

Preston looked him up and down, then quirked a lip up to the side. “Yep. Bet you love it too.”

Manu shoved Preston into the building, and Preston rolled his eyes. “This all you got? Might need to go looking elsewhere?—”

Manu slammed his lips over Preston’s, then pushed away, wiping them with the back of his hands. Preston licked his own, then grinned, which made Manu kiss him again to stop him from talking. That was Manu’s excuse, and he was sticking to it.

“You drive me fucking insane!” Manu pushed away and paced the sidewalk, ignoring the happy, smiling Preston.

“I make you hard. Let’s fuck.”

“Let’s not,” Manu spat. “You’re seriously pissing me off. Why you?”

Preston’s smile slid from his face and stared hard. “Why me?” he whispered.

Manu stopped pacing and slowly turned his head to watch Preston. “Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Preston murmured. “I’ve heard those words before. Want me to tell you where?”

“No. Not interested.”

Preston moved away from the wall and watched Manu pace. Manu ignored him and hoped Preston wasn't figuring out why he'd said that, but he had a feeling Preston was putting two and two together and getting the correct answer. "Are we mates?"

Manu didn't like lying, but right then, he wasn't ready for Preston to know the truth, not when he himself wasn't ready for it. "No."

"Liar," Preston muttered. Spinning on his heel, Preston flipped Manu off. "You don't want me, then fine. I know plenty of men who will."

Manu growled and ran after Preston, grabbing his arm and pulling him around. "Stop."

"You're just like Eli. You get handed something every shifter wants, and you throw it away. Well fine, but if I'm trash to you, I'll be gold to someone else." Preston stared at Manu's hand on his arm. "Get the fuck off me."

"I'm not ready," Manu blurted out. "I don't like you."

"I got that loud and clear." Preston yanked his arm free and walked away, but Manu couldn't let him go, which annoyed him because the human was annoying.

"Preston. Wait."

Preston turned but walked backward, taking him farther away. "Why should I? If we're not mates, it doesn't matter what I do, does it? It doesn't matter who I do." With that infuriating grin, Preston spun back around and walked away, and Manu let him.

Things were fucked up, and Manu still hated the fact this man was his mate. The infuriating, irritating bastard and he was Manu's. Growling, Manu stormed off,

ignoring the looks thrown his way. He didn't want to talk to anyone at all. He had shit to sort out, and that shit was Preston.

Now he knew how Eli felt about Alvin, though that had been a surprise and a shock to Alvin as well. Appeared Eli knew they were mates and had stayed away so Alvin wouldn't find out. That had to hurt Alvin, and Manu slowed. He'd probably hurt Preston, too, not that the man would admit it, but his anger had been an admittance.

Sighing, Manu changed direction and headed to the one person who would help him handle his shit.

Preston slowed as he approached Alvin, hearing the quiet whimpers as the younger man cried softly. He knew how it felt to be rejected, but he was human, so it probably didn't affect him as much as it would Alvin, who was a shifter.

He hadn't been told Alvin was a shifter, but the way he'd responded when he'd scented Eli was enough for Preston to figure it out, plus he had that thing about him that Preston put down to shifters.

Sitting next to him on the bench, Preston waited until Alvin became aware he was there. The teats and sniffing stop, and Alvin's back stiffened. "My mate doesn't want me either, not that he's admitted we're mates."

"You're human," Alvin mumbled.

"Name's Preston and yeah, it won't hit me as hard as it's hit you. Want to talk? I can grab us some coffee and call all men a bunch of shits."

Alvin snorted, then coughed. "Alvin. We'll be like them."

"Them?" Preston grinned. "You mean women? Yeah, but sometimes I wonder if they

don't have the right idea. Coffee and a bitch puts the world right."

Alvin twisted around and wiped his face. "I have to work and then pick up the kids."

"I heard you looked after your siblings. Big responsibility."

"Family."

"Yeah. I have my dad. He's in Saludem. Once he's settled, I'll go and see him."

"Why not now? Won't he want you to help him?" Alvin's frown was cute, and Preston resisted the urge to stroke it.

"He has dementia. Some days he remembers me, and some days he thinks I'm his younger brother."

"That must be hard. I've heard people describe it as two deaths. The mind goes first, then the body."

"It is. When he's there, he's there, you know, and when he isn't..." Preston wiped a hand over his face. "I hate the days where he's confused and doesn't know what's going on. Those days are tough, especially when he's scared because he doesn't know where he is or anyone around him."

"I can't imagine how hard that must be for you."

Preston nodded, then asked, "How long have you known Eli?"

"I've seen him from a distance, heard him occasionally in the shop, but never scented him or been close to him to scent him. He knew and avoided me. It's because of the kids, but I'm not giving them up. They're my family, and if he doesn't want us, then

screw him.” Alvin hiccupped and covered his mouth with his hand.

“His loss. When do you need to be at work?”

“About ten minutes ago.”

“Come on.” Preston stood and held his hand out. “I’ll walk you there, and we can have a ‘who has the worst mate’ competition.”

Alvin gave him a small smile and put his hand in Preston’s. Preston pulled him up, then let his hand go. He could feel eyes on him, and they didn’t feel friendly. Maybe a stubborn former SEAL was watching his mate.

“How old are the kids?”

“The gruesome twosome are four, and my sister is eight.”

“And you are?”

“I’ll be twenty-four soon. I’d just turned twenty when my parents left a note and fucked off.”

“That’s a huge amount of responsibility to take on, but family right.”

“Like you and your dad. You want the best for him.”

“Family.” Preston smiled. He liked the kid who wasn’t an actual kid. He’d had to grow up quick. “Who is there for you?”

“I’m actually lucky there. Sax and his mate, Jim, and their family help. Emilio, who owns the shop I work in, has been great. He lets me work the hours I can and

understands if I'm late. It helps he has five kids and five dogs."

"Five dogs?"

Alvin chuckled. "All named after Star Wars characters."

"No way. Star Trek The Next Gen for me. Picard. Or Sisko from Deep Space Nine."

"I know! There is something about him and as Prof. in The X-Men. I'd wheel him anywhere. And Sisko. I wouldn't kick him out of bed for farting."

Preston laughed. "Fave Star Wars movie?"

Alvin scoffed. "The only correct answer to that is The Empire Strikes Back. None of the other are close to being as good as that one and don't even get me started on the new ones."

"Awful." Preston had yet to meet someone who thought the latest trilogy was a match on the original.

"This is the place. The local supermarket that carries everything."

"Thanks. I needed to know now that I live here." Preston walked inside and held the door open for Alvin.

"Alvin! Where have you been?"

"You gonna tell him?" Preston watched the man approach Alvin and when he saw Alvin's face, he stopped.

"What's wrong?"

Alvin shrugged, but even Preston could feel the sadness emanating from Alvin. “I met my mate.” The words were spoken so low that Preston struggled to hear them.

“But that’s a good thing, Alvin. You’ve wanted to meet yours for a long time.”

“It’s Elliot, and he doesn’t want me.” Alvin blinked rapidly, and Preston paused, unsure what to do. Emilio stepped up and hauled Alvin in for a hug. “He said no.”

“Stupid idiot. When I see him, I’m going to tear him a new one!”

“Don’t. Please. I don’t want anyone to know yet. I need to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“Okay. Take five minutes to sort yourself out unless you want to go home.” Emilio wiped the tears from under Alvin’s eyes.

“I need to work. It will help.”

“Get a drink and take five minutes.”

“Preston, thank you.”

“Take care, Alvin.” Preston left the shop, knowing Emilio would take care of Alvin. Nice kid with a lot on his shoulders, but it sounded like he had a great support system in place. Maybe it was a nice day to sort his apartment out. Maybe not. He had to go to security, which was in the opposite direction from where he was going.

Chuckling, Preston spun around and headed toward the security building, whistling. Manu. He had to work on annoying the ever-loving shit out of Manu. Fun times ahead!

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Manu walked into his brother's house and shouted his name. Mintu glanced up from the drawing in front of him and furrowed his brow. "Thought you were in a meeting?"

"What are you doing?"

"Blue prints for a new block of apartments that will be constructed here. Meeting?"

Manu flung himself in the chair next to Mintu's desk and closed his eyes. "I've found my mate."

"And?"

Opening one eye, Manu stared at his brother. "That's it?"

"Knowing you and the way you barged in here, there is an and."

"It's Preston."

"The man hired to copy our records. You've known for a while, then, and you've kept it quiet. Does he know?"

"He asked, and I said no. Called me a liar."

"So that's a yes, then. Are you going to mate him?" Mintu went back to the prints in front of him.

“You know the pull.” Manu crossed his arms over his chest, watching his brother act not at all impressed by Manu’s news.

“No, having never found my mate.” Mintu coughed and ducked his head.

“It’s annoying.” Manu huffed out a breath. “Really fucking annoying. I don’t know if I want to punch the bastard or fuck him.”

Mintu snorted, then laughed. “Only you could have a mate that would annoy the shit out of you.”

“He is, and he came here to steal our information! Why him? Of all the people on this planet, why did it have to be him?”

“I need popcorn.”

“Huh? What the... What?”

“This is gonna be fun to watch. Beer and popcorn at the ready.” Mintu grinned, and Manu contemplated punching him in the face. “Nah ah! No hitting your brother. We’re adults now.”

“Fuck off.”

“You’d miss me too much, and I have too much work to do.” Mintu leaned back in his chair and stretched. “Fuck, I’m tired, but we have another group of shifters planning to move here in the next few months, plus all the new buildings, homes, outposts... I’ve never been so busy.”

“You’d think we’d begin to catch up at some point. We’ve been here a couple of years now.”

“Once the word got out about here and Saludem, we had a flood of requests. Security at Saludem now has a dedicated team just for background checks on anyone who wants to move here and there.” Mintu dropped his arms. “It’s good that more people are moving here, but the increased pressure on the local infrastructure...” Mintu shook his head. “I was out surveying a new sewage system for the houses we’re building. Jake and Kris are working so many hours, and they’ve doubled the number of people they employee.”

Jake and Kris Crocker, who owned Crocker Construction Company, had become partners with Mintu’s company when he’d moved to Morefield Village. Between them, they were responsible for all construction and feeling the pressure. They were rightly cautious in bringing outside help, considering the threat they all lived under, but it might be something they’d have to consider.

“What has Indy said about all the work?”

“He has his hands full with the fallout from the Council, plus everything with your mate and the new locations, plus the existing ones under watch.” Mintu closed his eyes. “Sometimes, I think we should reveal ourselves.” Opening his eyes, he gave Manu a small smile. “Maybe when we can better protect ourselves from that fallout.”

“You know the king would vouch for us.”

“King Jacques is a good vampire. He’s done a lot to show the world vampires can be trusted after the previous king all but destroyed it.” Mintu ran his fingers over the specs in front of him. “Might have to look into hiring more staff. Apprenticeships.” Sighing softly, Mintu asked, “Tell me about your mate.”

“He annoys me.”

“I gathered that.” Mintu grinned, his eyes crinkling at the sides. He was a couple of

years younger than Manu, but they'd always been close. Yes, they argued like brothers do, but they'd stuck to each other through the hard times. "Is there anything you like about him other than his ass? You've always been as ass man."

Manu grunted and pouted. "Yeah, the fucker has a great ass, which only makes this worse."

"So fuck him from behind. Won't have to see him then."

"But I'll hear him." Groaning, Manu dropped his head into his hands. "I kissed him." The words were muffled, so when Mintu asked him to repeat what he'd said, he lifted his head and groaned. "I might have kissed him."

Mintu stared at him, then threw his head back as he laughed. "Oh, that's good. That's really good."

"No, because he can kiss, and that's even more annoying."

"Let me get this straight. He's hot, he can kiss, he has a great ass, and he drives you nuts. So he's perfect then."

"Fuck off," Manu muttered, with no real heat behind the words. Mintu laughed even more and Manu exhaled heavily. "He might be okay," he admitted grudgingly, which only made Mintu laugh more. Why had he come here?

"As fun as this is, I have a shit ton of work to do and not nearly enough hours to do it in."

"When did you last eat?" Looking at Mintu, Manu could see the shadows under his eyes, and his cheekbones appeared sharper.

Mintu furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Yesterday?”

“If you don’t know for sure, then that’s a problem. Let me cook something, and you can eat and work. I’ll leave some in the fridge for you to heat up later.”

“Thanks. Time keeps getting away from me.”

“When was the last time you shifted and ran?” Being a shifter meant actually shifting and letting the wolf run free. Not doing it enough could lead to increased anxiety and restlessness until the wolf inside forced the shift. Not what you want if you’re in a diner full of humans.

“I did do that a couple of days ago. I could see my wolf crawling under my skin. I know I ate then. Caught a fat rabbit.”

“Good. If you need help, call me.”

“I know, but I also know how busy you guys are, which makes me think about the big world reveal again.”

“I think it will be a question of time. Technology is improving all the time. We won’t have the luxury of remaining hidden for much longer. Every phone has a camera now, and CCTV is prevalent. Amazed we haven’t had an incident yet.”

“Yeah, it’s a matter of time now, isn’t it? We need to be prepared, because once the cat’s out of the bag, there is no way we can go back.”

“Protect as many as we can.” Manu sighed. “I’m worried.”

“Me, too, but we have a great team here and in Saludem. It’s the other shifters out there I’m worried about.”

“There’s another town a couple hundred miles away. Preston’s giving details to security so we can contact them. They have one of those labs near there, and according to Preston, a village disappeared, and he thinks they were taken to this place.”

“Those bastards need eradicating.” Mintu yawned, and Manu shook his head. They were both burning the candle at both ends.

“I’ll see what you have in and cook something.”

“Thanks, bro.”

Manu went into Mintu’s kitchen and stopped. The place looked like a disaster had hit in. He needed someone to come in and keep the place clean and tidy. Opening the fridge, Manu gagged when the smell hit him. He’d need to clean the fridge, then do some shopping, then cook.

Cleaning the fridge, then tackling the dishes that lay scattered on the counters took Manu almost an hour. “I need to do some shopping for you.”

“I ain’t going anywhere!”

Manu grunted, and left Mintu’s apartment, walking to the shop. Inside, he saw Alvin, who gave him a nod, then disappeared. Sucking in his breath, Manu found Alvin and asked how he was. Alvin shrugged and walked off, leaving Manu alone.

“Eli’s a fucking idiot.”

Grabbing what he needed, which was pretty much everything, Manu paid and carried the bags back to Mintu, who was still bent over his desk, muttering to himself. Manu put the food away and cooked something easy that Mintu could reheat. Once he was

done, he plated it up and went into Mintu's office.

"Here."

Mintu barely looked at the plate before stuffing some ham into his mouth. Shaking his head, Manu put everything away, shouted good bye, and went to his own apartment, which was on the floor above Mintu's. Fuck, he was tired, and he had to work later and probably speak to Preston. No, his mate could wait until Manu was ready to face him—whenever that was.

Lying face down on the bed, Manu sighed and closed his eyes. He needed to sleep, and he didn't want to dream about the man who annoyed him more than his brother.

The phone ringing woke Manu, and he scrambled to find it. Sitting up, he found his phone near his pillow and grabbed it. "Hello," he murmured, his voice gravelly.

"We have a situation."

All sleep disappeared, and Manu focused on Eli. "Details."

"Fabien is tracking someone or something on our east side. They're doing a good job of avoiding our cameras, but they slipped up, and we caught them. Rand is on his way out there now, but I want you to go as well."

"On it."

"Good."

Manu quickly freshened up as he called Rand. "I'm on route. Where are you?"

"Near the old well, past the Cavendish estate."

“Yeah, I know where. I’ll be there soon.”

Manu stripped, then packed his clothes in a bag. He left his apartment, after making sure no one was around, and shifted into his wolf form, then picked up his bag. Running, Manu quickly covered the ground, and ten minutes later, he saw Rand and ducked behind a hedge.

Dropping the bag, Manu shifted, then dressed. “Anything?”

“No. See the well?” Manu nodded. “Just to the left, inside the tree line. Flashes of movement.”

Manu concentrated, then saw what had caught Rand’s attention. After a few minutes of watching, he shook his head. “It’s like whoever it is, is trying to hide, but not at the same time.”

“They want to appear as if they are hiding, but they want us to see them. Distraction?”

Manu hissed. “Feels like it.”

“I’ll call it in.” Rand made the call as Manu watched. “Monitor, but don’t engage. They’ll increase patrols elsewhere.”

Nodding, Manu got comfortable. “Could be here for a while then.”

“Let them think they have our undivided attention.” Rand grinned. “I haven’t hurt anyone in a while.”

“Been good for too long.”

“People get what they deserve,” Rand muttered flatly. Rand and his brother Jim had lost their younger sister after she had been kidnapped and abused, then murdered. The men responsible had gotten off on a technicality, so they’d hunted them down and dealt with them. Yes, they’d broken the law, but Manu couldn’t find any reason why Rand and Jim should be reported. Those men had deserved everything they’d suffered at the brothers’ hands, all except Smith, the last man they’d gone after.

Turned out Smith was as much a victim as their sister, so the brothers had brought him to Morefield Village, where he’d met his mate in Ray, one of Manu’s colleagues. Both had gone through their own versions of hell, but were now happily mated.

Ray handed Manu a chocolate bar, then leaned back against the hedge. “Should help to pass the time.”

Opening the wrapper, Manu sat. “I cooked for my brother earlier and forgot to eat.”

“You know he found his mate?”

Manu paused, the chocolate bar suspended in mid-air. “Mintu?”

“Yeah.” Rand grinned. “Guess he never said anything.”

“Mintu?” Mintu, as in his brother, Mintu?

“Mated to the new guy who runs the bar.”

“He’s your friend, right? What’s his name? Jun Sang?” Manu had some vague recollection of meeting Rand’s friend when he’d moved to the village.

Chuckling, Rand nodded. “And they don’t want to mate.”

“Er, they’re both shifters. We tend to mate as soon as we know we have a mate.”

“Neither of them want it. They fuck.” Rand shrugged.

“He told me before he hadn’t found his mate. No wonder he couldn’t look at me.”

“They’re happy. They fuck and live their lives the way they want to.”

“They could still be mates and live the way they want to.”

“How’s Preston?” Rand grinned and bit into his chocolate.

“Your friend has told you already?”

“Yep. Mintu told Jun Sang, and he told me.”

Mintu was quick because Manu had just told him. “They are the strangest shifters I know.” He thought about Eli and then himself. “Okay, maybe not. Seems to be a bit of not mating our mates going around.”

“Maybe one day they’ll mate, but for now they don’t need to.” Rand moved forward, eyes focused. “Movement.”

“Wanna play hide and go seek?” Manu grinned, and Rand did the same thing.

Time to have some fun.

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Fuck, he was tired. Albert had taken a while to recognize him, and Preston hated to admit that it was taking longer and longer for that to happen. He knew one day far too soon, Albert wouldn't recognize him at all, and Preston dreaded that day. Watching the man who had raised him slowly disappear but remain alive in front of him was devastating to see.

Part of him wanted to run away and not watch it happen, but this was his father, the man who had been there for him when he needed him, the man who had held them together when his mom had passed. How could he stay away now?

Sitting in his car, Preston closed his eyes and let a few tears fall. It wasn't a sign of weakness to cry over the loss of Albert. It hurt so fucking much to see him like this. How the fuck did people do this? How was he going to do this?

This was the toughest thing Preston had ever gone through, and he'd survived some of the worst war zones and terrorist attempts possible. The things he'd seen humans do to each other had left him with scars that would never go, but this with his dad... Fuck.

Wiping his eyes, Preston took several deep breaths, then started his car, but didn't move. He needed another couple of minutes before he felt like he was in any condition to drive. His hands shook, and his chest was tight. He ignored the ache in his throat and the gritty, itchy eyes. There would be a time to cry, and shut out the world to let his grief run its course. Not yet. Soon going by Albert's decline, but not yet.

Pulling away, Preston drove through Salutem until he found the road that led to

Morefield Village. He would be home soon. His temporary home, that is. He wasn't sure if he would stay once Albert had passed. There was nothing holding him there, and that included Manu, his mate who wasn't his mate.

The drive was slow. There was little light in this area, so Preston made sure to remain focused and that was how he became aware of something in the trees to his left. It was keeping track of him, and at first, he assumed it was one of the security in the area, patrolling in animal form.

Smiling, Preston waved to let them know he'd seen them, then chuckled when the figure disappeared. A few minutes later, it was back, and Preston sped up a little, thinking of giving the shifter a run for his money. When it kept up, Preston's smile fell. Checking his speed, he knew whoever it was should have stopped tracking him a good couple of clicks back.

Putting his foot down, Preston sped away, and when he figured there was enough distance between them, he found a side road to pull onto and parked. Turning the engine off, he grabbed his gun and got out. The area was quiet. Too quiet. Preston was in a wooded area, so the sounds of wildlife should be all around him, but there were none.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he crouched as he made his way to the rear of the car. He paused and listened, not hearing anything, but the way his skin pebbled told him something was there. Something not pleasant.

Preston began a search of the area, moving in a circle to keep the car in the center. He didn't know the area, and he didn't want to get lost and lose his only way out. A twig snapping to his left had him crouching low and holding his breath, waiting to hear another sound, but there was none.

He moved cautiously, and when another twig snapping reached his ear, he paused

again. That was closer. Whoever or whatever it was had his scent and was tracking him. Preston knew he only had his weapon to rely on, and he wasn't sure how much that would help. He'd seen shifters up close and personal and knew the damage they could inflict.

Moving back to the car, Preston paused after several steps, checking his surroundings. The unnatural silence made his body tense, and he tightened his grip on his gun. When he reached the car, he checked before getting inside, making sure no one could jump him when he had his back turned and nothing had been placed on it or near it.

Once inside, he called Eli. "We have trouble."

"Where?"

"Eastbourne Road. Near the turnoff to the old Miller place. I'm on that road. Something tracking me. Kept up while I was driving too. Woods silent."

"Completely silent?"

"Yeah. Made my skin crawl."

"Stay in your car. Team on route now."

Preston hung up and waited. He cranked the window down a sliver so he could hear what was happening outside, but all he heard was nothing. Absolutely nothing and that made him shiver. The only time he'd encountered this type of silence was when he'd been on a mission with Eli. The silence had descended, and they'd froze. Less than a minute later, they'd been attacked. They'd lost good men that day, and the rest of them had barely made it out alive.

Here now had that same feeling.

His phone lit up, and Preston glanced at it, then shoved it away. ETA Ten Minutes.

Ten minutes until a team arrived. Preston wasn't one to hide from trouble, but this unsettled feeling building inside, along with the silence, had him staying where he was. He was in unfamiliar territory and something or someone was outside and whatever it was, had the natural wildlife shutting the fuck up.

Lights cut through the dark, and Preston shielded his eyes until they cut off. Stepping out, he jogged over to the vehicle, seeing Albie inside. He'd only met the human a couple of days ago, but he'd read his report and knew the man would be good in a fight.

"I was close so headed over," Albie explained when Preston got in the truck. "I don't like how this feels. I've lived here for a few years now and never experienced this. How long has it been this quiet?"

"A good twenty minutes."

"Hmm. Not good. Whoever or whatever feels comfortable enough to stay near. That gives me cause for concern." Albie twisted in his seat and grabbed a box from the rear of the vehicle. "You have a Glock. Only one?"

"Yeah. Visiting my old man. Didn't expect to encounter whatever is out there."

Albie opened the box, and Preston nodded when Albie handed him a PN 90. A personal defense weapon that could be considered as a submachine gun or assault rifle and one Preston had used before. Checking the weapon, he nodded to Albie.

"Let's sweep the area where you last heard movement."

Stepping out of the truck, Preston nodded in the direction he'd last heard the sounds. Albie nodded once, and they moved in that general direction. Preston took the lead, moving slowly and carefully so as not to make any sound. The continued silence around him had Preston on edge, a feeling he didn't like. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd felt this way and none of them good.

Another twig breaking had Preston snapping his head in that direction, and he went to move toward it, but Albie grabbed his arm and shook his head. He pointed to his ear, then nodded his head in the other direction of the sound. He'd picked up something Preston hadn't. He held up two fingers, and Preston nodded once. A series of sounds, like thumps, along with the ominous silence had both men making their back the way they'd come.

A scream filled the air, and both men dropped. Albie's wide eyes glanced at Preston, and he knew he looked the same. What the fuck had made that sound? Albie moved again, quicker this time, and Preston followed. If whatever that was made Albie pick up speed, then that meant it was something unusual.

They made it back to the truck, and Preston saw the slashed tires. Albie locked the doors as soon as they were both inside. He grabbed the phone. "Eli."

"Update."

"Some weird shit. Silent and skin's crawling shit. Sounds like an animal, but not one I've ever encountered. Two circling us."

"Cat and mouse," Preston murmured to which Albie nodded.

"Fabian is ten minutes away. Mark the area, then leave."

"Tires have been slashed." Preston's head was on a swivel as he kept an eye outside.

“Ten minutes. Stay inside the vehicle.”

The line went dead, and Albie shoved the phone in his pocket. “They drew us away then, incapacitated our vehicles. We’re not dealing with an ordinary animal.” Albie licked his lips, glanced at Preston, then muttered, “They’ve been trying to mix species.”

Preston sucked in a breath. “Think they’ve been successful?”

“Viridian and his mate Ishmael’s son is a hybrid, but he’s the only one we know of who has survived. Until now.”

“Whatever is out there doesn’t feel or sound?—”

The vehicle lurched to one side, and Preston slammed into the door. “Fuck!” Albie scrambled to get the truck started as they were hit again. “Fuck the tires. We’re out.” The vehicle whined as Albie moved forward, then they were hit again.

“I can’t see shit.” Preston remained calm as Albie attempted to drive, but every time they managed to move a couple of feet forward, they were slammed to the side.

“Call Fabien!” Albie snapped, both hands on the steering wheel as he gripped it tight, focused on the road ahead. Beams on full, Preston still couldn’t see what was attacking their truck.

“Fabian. Under attack. Number and species unknown. Suspect two.”

“Two mins.” The line went dead, and Preston bounced around in his seat as Albie drove. The road was rough, and slashed tires made for a bumpy ride. Albie concentrated fully on the road ahead, and Preston had his weapon ready.

A truck ahead had Preston releasing the breath he hadn't been aware he was holding. They pulled up, and Albie jumped out, meeting Fabien and Manu. Preston was actually relieved to see Manu, not that he was going to tell him that anytime soon.

“Update.”

Preston filled them in on what had happened—Albie taking over from when he'd arrived. Fabien shook his head. “Strange.” He lifted his head and sniffed the air, then shook his head again. “I'm not picking anything up at all. It's like they've used that spray on the entire area.”

“No sound.” Manu shifted his weight as he moved, scanning the surrounding area. “Whatever it is, it's still here. Tells me it's comfortable in this area and comfortable in its abilities to take four of us on.”

“We suspect there are two of them. Sounded like they wanted us to move to a specific location.” Albie stopped and watched a hare jump into the middle of the road. It stopped, sniffed the air, then turned to look down the road before running away in the opposite direction.

A rumble in the distance followed by a second had Preston moving his weapon. “They're still here. Watching and waiting to see what we'll do.”

“I don't like this.” Manu moved closer to Preston. He glanced around the area. “We need to investigate. Two teams. One shifter, one human.”

“Albie.” Fabien moved away, and Albie followed. Manu took the opposite side, nodding at Preston as he passed.

“I don't like how quiet it is.”

“Been like this for a good thirty minutes now. Whatever they are, they’re not afraid of us, but everything around them is.”

Manu nodded. “Keep eyes and ears open.”

Nodding, Preston followed Manu. They’d find whatever was out there—or it would find them.

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His skin crawled, and the urge to shift and duck his tail was strong, but Manu resisted. He'd never had that experience before, his wolf wanting to leave, and that had him hesitating. If his wolf wanted away, then they were heading toward something dark and dangerous.

Preston had his back. Manu was certain of that. He'd worked with Eli, and Eli had vouched for him. Manu might not be able to trust his mate in some instances, but this wasn't one of them. Preston was military, and they were a team.

"Would you think less of me if I said I kinda wanted to leave?"

"My wolf wants to run away." Manu saw Preston's eyes widen. "Yeah. That concerns me."

"Ever had that happen before?"

"Never. Not even when I was trapped inside a dugout and being shot at by militia. We've always been on the same side, but right now, I'm going where he doesn't want to go. It's a fight."

"I have your back."

Manu nodded, appreciating what Preston said. Between one step and the next, the sound returned, and they both paused. Manu closed his eyes and even though his wolf was still restless and agitated, it wasn't anywhere near as bad as it had been.

"Atmosphere feels lighter." Preston shifted his hold on his weapon. "I still don't like

it though. Feels like whatever is out there is toying with us. Testing us.”

“Let’s check the area out and see what we can find.” Manu moved forward, his eyes constantly searching the area. Nothing stood out. No scent, no tracks. Nothing. Until he found a broken twig.

As he crouched next to it, Preston murmured, “Whatever it was broke those on purpose. I’m certain of it. It felt like it was letting me know it was there.”

“Taunting you.”

“Yeah, and then we figured out there were two, and they were trying to move us away from the vehicles.”

“You had two surrounding you, yet your tires were slashed.” Manu stared at the twig, then back at Preston. “Potentially three.”

Preston hissed, but nodded. “Or more, but yeah, three at least. Playing with us as well. Knew where we were at all times and kept us distracted while another dealt with the vehicles.”

A shot rang out in the darkness, and Manu growled. They both waited, and Manu glanced at Preston, whose narrowed eyes searched the area. Another shot followed by more silence. And silence truly descended. No sound at all. Everything stopped, and Manu’s wolf whined. It wanted out, to be gone, to run away, and Manu had to grit his teeth to stop a shift occurring.

“Manu.”

Manu glanced at Preston, who was frowning at him, and then he pointed to his eyes. Yeah, Manu’s eyes glowed, but only because he was fighting his instinct to run. A

twig snapped to their left, then a low dark chuckle whispered through the air.

Preston hissed and shouldered his weapon as Manu moved closer to where the sound came from. Preston followed, and they moved quietly. Another low chuckle and another snapped twig, but this time behind them, and Manu had the feeling they were being circled.

Preston bumped into him, and Manu glanced over his shoulder, noticing they were now back-to-back. “Truck.”

Manu nodded, and they moved back toward the car, staying low to the ground. A cry filled the air, a scream, and several shots. “Run.”

Preston took off, and Manu followed, hearing the sounds of pursuit. “Following us.” Preston carried on, and Manu heard a shot, then went down. Pain exploded in his leg, and he gritted his teeth, rolling onto his back with his gun up, ready to face whatever was heading toward them.

Preston grabbed his shoulders and pulled him up. “Not far.”

“Fuck, I need to shift. The bullet burns.”

“We’ll make it.”

Manu pulled out the panic button and pressed it. They needed back up and now. He should have used it earlier. Fuck. “The truck I came in. It’s security, so has all the shit it needs to keep us safe.”

“I’ll get you inside, then I need to find Albie and Fabien. You call for back up.”

That wasn’t what Manu wanted to hear, but it was expected of a military man. You

left no one behind. “Be careful.”

Preston grunted as he moved Manu, causing Manu to growl in pain. “You be careful. Anyone would think you cared for me.”

“I can change my mind about that. How about you get found and eviscerated?”

“Now that’s more like it.” Preston suddenly stopped and lowered Manu to the ground. Ahead of them lay a body. Albie. Alone. In a clearing. “Trap.” Manu tended to agree with Preston’s assessment. Albie was still alive, but he wouldn’t be for long.

Manu could scent the blood on the air, and there was plenty of it too. Focusing on the movement of Albie’s chest, Manu could see how quickly he was breathing. Alive and awake. The air filled with the scent of fear and death. If Albie wasn’t dead...

“Fabien. Can you see him?”

“No.” Preston inched forward, checking the ground, then looking up. As soon as he did, he stopped and hissed. “Above.”

Manu looked up, too, and saw what had made Preston pause. One of the branches on a tree on the opposite side of the clearing was low, too low, bowing down as if a heavy weight sat upon it. A sound behind them had Manu tensing, the pain in his leg pulsing. They were being circled.

“I need to shift, but as soon as I start the process, we’ll be vulnerable.”

“How long?”

“Only a few seconds, but enough if they rush us.”

Preston stared at him for a couple of seconds, shouldered his gun, then nodded. “Do it.”

Kicking his sneakers off, Manu shifted, his clothes tearing. His sense became heightened, and in doing so, he became aware of four individuals all moving. Gun shots rang out, and he shook his head, then charged the nearest thing.

It looked like a cross between a bear and something and Manu attacked, claws raking the thing’s side but doing little to no damage. The fur covering it was so thick, his claws almost became entangled, and Manu faced it, watching it, and it chuckled. How the mouth on that thing could make that sound made his wolf whimper.

Manu reached out with his senses, but there was nothing. Nothing at all coming from it. In fact, it was hard to detect a heartbeat, and there was no scent at all. The fur rippled, and the thing disappeared, replaced by what could only be described as something from a horror movie. It looked similar to a cat, but instead of fur, it had sharp spikes that moved. Manu jumped out of the way as those spikes shot at him, and he ran back to Preston. They needed to get out of there and now.

Preston knelt next to Albie, gun up and firing. Manu skidded next to him and spun so they were back-to-back. He howled long and loud and waited. A second later, several other howls came to him, and he knew back-up was closing in, but would it get there in time?

“What the fuck are those things?” Preston fired again as one of the spiked cats ran at them. The bullets appeared to do nothing as it kept charging them. Preston didn’t stop firing even as the distance between them and the thing shortened. “Fucking die!” Preston screamed. A boom deafened Manu, his ears lying flat, and the thing flung to the side. It lay there for a few seconds, then slowly got to its feet, shaking its head. It lifted its snout and sniffed the air, then shimmered into the bear thing and chuckled before disappearing into the trees.

A second boom filled the air, and Manu stood guarding Preston as he checked Albie's body. "Alive but barely. He needs emergency surgery to survive this."

Manu padded next to Albie and whimpered. Albie's chest was wide open, ribs exposed. How the fuck he was still alive amazed him, but he knew Albie was a fighter. If anyone could survive this, it would be him. Shifting, Manu tested his leg and even though it hurt, he crouched next to Preston. "Fabien?"

"Not found him, but not had a chance. As soon as the one in the tree attacked, I moved to cover Albie and stayed here." Preston panted and stared at Manu, eyes wide. "What the fuck were those?"

"Manu!" Eli came running over, a rifle in his hands. He saw Albie and assessed him. "Fuck."

"Fabien is missing, presumed dead."

"Costas is here, but we had to make sure the area was safe."

"He needs a hospital and now if we're going to save him." Manu stood, ignoring his nakedness. "I've never seen anything like that before. My wolf wanted gone."

"Costas came in the ambulance. We'll stabilize then move him to Saludem. They have the experienced staff there."

Manu grabbed the bag Rand threw at him and dressed as he watched security secure the area. Minutes later, Costas was treating Albie and on the phone to Saludem General. Once he had sweaters and a long-sleeved top on, he pulled on some sneakers that were too big, but he didn't give a shit.

"Albie?"

Costas didn't say a word but shot a look at Eli. Eli closed his eyes and blew out his breath. "He doesn't know. It's touch and go."

"Fabien? Anyone found him?"

"Still searching, but we found a pool of blood. A large pool of blood."

Manu ran his hands through his hair. "Shit."

He didn't know how long they stayed there while Costas worked on stabilizing Albie, but at some point, Costas nodded. "Let's go. He's stable for now."

Manu dropped his head, hands on hips, closing his eyes. He was certain Albie was going to die. The wounds inflicted on his body were horrific. As Albie was carried away, Rand appeared. The look on his face said all it needed to.

"Where?" Eli asked, his voice quiet.

"Up a tree, stashed in the branches. Guttled, and he had these spikes embedded in him too. No scent at all on him or the surrounding area." Rand glanced at his brother, Jim. "I've left him where he is so forensics can do what they need to. They have my prints on file, so I can be eliminated."

Manu rubbed a hand over his face. He liked Fabien, and now, he was gone in a way none of them had foreseen. "What the fuck were those things? I've never seen anything like that before."

"I didn't get a good look at them. Saw one and fired as it charged you. The light appeared to shimmer off it." Eli pulled his phone out and sighed heavily. "Deac. Yeah. Costas is with him. It's about Fabien." Eli's voice trailed off as he moved away, and Manu didn't want to hear what he had to say, anyway.

Preston turned and walked away, and Manu followed. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to my car, and then I’m going to change. I’m going to bag my clothes for forensics and then head to Deac’s office, so I can give them my statement. After that, I’m going home and getting drunk.”

Manu licked his lips and nodded. “Thanks for helping me back there.”

“Never leave a man behind,” Preston murmured.

“Yeah.” That stung a little. Manu had thought Preston had helped him because they were mates.

“What? You thought because we’re mates I would save you? You said we weren’t mates, so I saved a team member.” Preston turned and walked away, and Manu let him. He wasn’t in the mood to argue with him, though he did agree getting blind drunk would help. Today had been bad.

Today, they’d lost one of their own.

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Preston changed by his car and left everything in the bag some guy from forensics provided. They took pictures and samples from his body, then Preston was given permission to leave, but he sat in his car instead. Thankfully, the tires on his vehicle were fine, but Albie's...

Fuck.

He didn't know either man well, but shit.

Parking by the Deac's office building, Preston's body protested when he got out of his car. There was a light on, and he knew Deac would be inside. Any good leader would be when their men were in danger.

Knocking on the door, he waited, and a minute later, he heard the locks disengage and a tired, weary looking Deac opened the door. He nodded Preston inside, then shut and locked the door behind him. He entered Deac's office and saw a woman sitting, waiting.

Younger than him, she stood and held her hand out. "I'm Serenity. We haven't met yet. I help to run things around here."

Preston sat and slouched in the chair, fatigue running through him. "Ask away," he murmured in a voice that sounded tired to his own ears.

"Been a long night."

"You'll let me know about Albie? He didn't look..." He paused and glanced at

Serenity, who blinked rapidly. “I’m sorry.”

“He’s my mate,” Serenity whispered.

Preston somehow managed to not show his surprise. “Why are you here?” he asked quietly.

“What good would I be there? At least here I can help to find the bastards who did this to him and who took Fabien from us.” She straightened, and Preston had to admire the strength she carried.

“Tell us everything from the top.”

Preston began. He went over his statement numerous times, including how he felt, how his body reacted, anything he scented on the air. The description of the things they’d run into. “They’re smart, intelligent. They knew how we operated as well. Not just how shifters operate, but military people as well. They hid in the trees. How many shifters without a military background would look up?”

“Not many.” Deac rubbed a hand over his face, then paused when Serenity’s phone rang. She looked at Deac, the fear and anxiety written all over her face. “Answer it,” Deac told her gently. “It’s going to be good news.”

“Costas.” Serenity bit her lip, then cried out, her head dropping low as she covered her hand with her mouth. “He’s alive.” She handed her phone to Deac, who took it and had a brief conversation with his mate, then hung up.

“The next twenty-four hours are going to be crucial. Go and get a bag ready. I’ll have someone drive you to Saludem. I don’t want you driving alone right now.”

Serenity stood, then gave Preston a wobbly smile before handing her pad and pen

over to Deac. He put them to one side and walked her out, leaving Preston alone. The relief he felt for a man he barely knew had him sagging in his chair. Albie had come across as a good, solid, dependable man.

A few minutes later, Deac re-entered the office and shut the door. “We needed some good news.”

“How bad?”

“Bad.” Deac sat and slumped in his chair. “He’ll need surgery to fix all the damage to his chest, and he won’t be able to help out on the ground for some time. If ever. If he wants to return, that is.”

“Move him to the main security building. He’ll still feel useful that way. When he’s ready.”

“I just want this to be all over and fucking done with. These things have to have come from A.S. We saw some of the shit they were trying to do, mixing species to create some super soldier hybrid.”

“Looks like they succeeded, and I’m not scared to admit I don’t want to run across one of them again. They were a team. Worked as a team. Picked us off. They must have had one tailing me and Manu while the other three took out Albie and Fabien. They made sure Albie was alive and left him as bait. It was a trap, and they almost succeeded in taking us all out.”

“They used military tactics. We considered what they would do if they were able to create a hybrid that they could control. The potential that would bring.”

“Control them and have them pick off your enemy for you. If you had an army of those things, you would be virtually unstoppable. Having seen them in action...”

Preston rubbed his mouth with his fingers. “With these creatures, whoever created them would have the potential to control governments.”

“I need to pass all over this on to Indy and his brothers, plus their security. Can you work with an artist to do an impression of what one of them looked like?”

“It had two different forms that I saw. Shifted between them easily too. Both forms appeared as equally dangerous.”

Deac closed his eyes and kept them closed for a few minutes. A small smile covered his lips, then he opened his eyes. “Go home. Get some sleep. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

Preston nodded and stood. “If I recall anything else, I’ll let you know.”

Deac nodded, but Preston could tell his mind was on something else, and he knew exactly what that was. This new discovery meant increased danger to everyone here and Saludem. Leaving his office, Preston made sure the door was shut behind him and leaned against his car when he reached it.

He almost closed his eyes when he heard hushed voices nearby. Two. Both men. He leaned forward and hummed when he saw Eli looking like shit, gesturing at Alvin. It appeared that even if Eli didn’t want a mate, he was going to protect him, anyway.

“I won’t hide.”

“I saw one of those things. Please do this for me.”

Alvin jutted his jaw out and shook his head. “No, and you have no right to ask me to. We might be mates, but you’re not willing to do anything about it, so fuck off. I have a family to raise, and I want someone who isn’t afraid to be my man and help. That

isn't you, so stay away just like you have been doing, and I'll find a man who is willing to be with me."

"Fine," Eli spat. "You want to find someone who will help you raise those brats, then do it, but I'm your mate, and you will do as I order."

"I'm not one of your men, Eli. I'm nothing to you. You don't want us to be mates, then fine. I'll live with it, but you don't get to order me around. You said no to us mating, so that means you have no right to tell me to do anything."

"Alvin. I'm doing this to help you. You wouldn't survive?—"

"Oh, I forgot, the big hard military man knows so much more about this than poor little old me." Alvin jabbed his finger at Eli. "I won't do a thing?—"

"None of my business, but you need to listen to him." Preston stood and faced them. "I had an up close and personal experience with them, and it isn't something I want to repeat. Albie almost died, and Fabien did. Do as your mate asks. It's for you and your siblings' welfare. If you don't want to do it for you, then do it for them."

"Preston," Alvin murmured. "You saw them?"

"Albie's alive?" Eli asked his question at the same time Alvin did.

"I was with Deac when the call came through. I'm going home. I'm exhausted and I..." Preston shook his head. "I'll be here tomorrow."

"I'll see you in the morning, then. Get some sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Preston nodded, got in his car, and started the engine. As he drove away, he saw Eli take Alvin's hand in his. Maybe Eli wasn't as distant as he wanted to be, even if he

was going about it the wrong way. Reminded Preston of him and Manu.

He'd barely been home a couple of minutes when there was someone banging on his door. Dropping his coat on the sofa, Preston trudged to the door and opened it, groaning when he saw Manu standing there. Manu didn't wait for Preston to ask him to come inside. No, he just barged right past him and walked into the small apartment.

"Did you give your statement?"

"Hi, Manu. I'm fine, thanks. How are you? How's the leg? You know where you were shot."

"I shifted, so it's almost back to normal."

Preston nodded, then dropped onto the sofa and closed his eye. "I gave my statement. I'm tired, so you can leave now."

He felt the sofa move as Manu sat and sighed. He didn't want to deal with his mate, who claimed he wasn't his mate. He wanted a shower and sleep. He'd been dragging his body around since the attack, and now he was spent.

"How are you?"

The softly asked question had Preston opening his eyes and rolling his head to the side to search Manu's face. He appeared to be asking from a place of genuine concern. "I'm good. Just tired."

"Did you hear about Albie?"

"Yeah. I didn't think he would make it, but he has someone to live for."

“You met Serenity.” Manu smiled slightly. “They kept it quiet for a long time. He wanted to go slow because he’s older than she is, and she’d just began working with Deac after coming back from university. They’re good together.”

“She took my statement. I thought she would be in Salutem, but she told me she would be more useful there.”

“She’s mated to an ex-military man.”

Preston didn’t respond. His eyes wanted to close and stay that way. “Was that all you wanted to know? I want to go to bed, so you can leave now.” When Manu didn’t move, Preston got up and walked over to the front door. “Just go. I’m too tired to deal with you tonight.”

“We need to talk at some point.”

“Can’t see why? We’re not mates. We’re just work colleagues. You told me so when I asked.”

Manu stood and walked over to Preston, causing him to look up. He hadn’t even noticed Manu was slightly taller than he was. Not that it mattered. Preston wasn’t his mate, even though they both knew that was a lie. Preston could feel a connection to the shifter, one he didn’t have with the others.

Preston opened the door and pointed outside. “Let me stay,” Manu said quietly.

“Why?” Preston stared into Manu’s dark eyes, seeing them close.

When they opened, Manu watched him. “Please.”

“No. When you can be honest with me, then I’ll think about it.”

He saw Manu work his jaw from side to side, the way he narrowed his eyes and pointed back outside again. Yeah, the shifter was stubborn and so was he. “Preston...”

“That’s the name. Now leave.”

Manu fidgeted on the spot, then muttered, “I can’t.”

“And why is that?” Was Manu going to actually admit the truth? Preston crossed his arms over his chest and waited, watching Manu stare—or should he say glare—at him. Because it was clearly Preston’s fault that Manu couldn’t admit the truth.

“You know why.”

“Not good enough. You want to stay here with me tonight? You tell me the truth. From your own lips.”

“Why do you have to be so fucking annoying?”

“Hmm. Perfect for you, then. Get out.” He was so done with Manu. Why this shifter? If he was meant to have a mate, why this one? Stubborn fucking idiot was wasting both their time.

Manu hissed long and low, then moved. Preston didn’t have time to even blink his eyes before Manu slammed their lips together at the same time as shoving the front door shut. Breaking the kiss, Manu growled, “Mine,” then kissed him again.

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The man was so fucking annoying, but damn, could he kiss. Manu licked Preston's lips, then bit the bottom one. Preston moaned, then let Manu's tongue inside. Manu gripped Preston's shoulders as their tongues tangled.

"I want to fuck you." Manu bit Preston's lip again.

"I want to fuck you."

Manu moved his head back. "I don't catch."

"Neither do I." Preston pushed Manu back and pointed at the door. "You should go. I have a hand, so I'll take care of my dick."

Manu wasn't having that at all. He grabbed Preston and pushed him up against the door, biting his jaw. Preston tried to push him away again, but Manu stayed where he was. Biting Preston's jaw, he moved his hands under Preston's shirt and tweaked his nipples.

Preston gasped and arched into Manu's touch, and Manu moved his lips over Preston's jaw to take his lips in a hard, hot kiss. Moaning, Manu tugged on Preston's shirt until Preston lifted his arms so Manu could take it off. Once it was dropped to the floor, Manu took one of Preston's nipples in his mouth and sucked.

"Fuck."

Manu didn't respond. He was too busy playing with Preston's nipples, which were growing hard under his touch. Preston's hand grabbed his hair and tugged his head

up. “I need a shower.”

Manu nodded and let Preston move. He followed him to the small bathroom and wondered how they would both fit. Preston turned the water on, then faced him as he stripped his jeans and kicked them off, along with his underwear.

Manu swallowed when he caught sight of Preston’s dick. It wasn’t as long as his, but it was thick, and Manu could see himself riding it. Not like that would ever happen because he was a top through and through. Except he might make an exception for Preston, but he would never tell him.

Preston arched an eyebrow, then stepped into the bath and stood under the spray. Watching the water run down Preston’s hard ripped body had Manu stripping off his own clothes. As he stepped into the bath, his foot slipped. “You need a better shower.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that. Make a complaint and ask for a 5-star hotel one instead. I’m sure they’ll get straight on it.”

Taking his mouth again, Manu kissed him, his hands sliding over smooth lean muscle. Preston felt better than he looked. Supple and strong. Manu gripped Preston’s firm ass and let a finger trail over the crack.

“Don’t get any ideas. My ass isn’t open to any offers your dick might have.”

There was one way he’d make the man shut the fuck up. Dropping to his knees, he looked up at Preston, then grinned. Holding his dick, Manu licked along the length, then suckled the head. The salty, bitter taste coated his tongue, and Manu moaned. Preston’s hips surged forward, and Manu held them with one hand, keeping them in place.

“Turn around.”

Preston groaned and turned around as best he could in the tiny shower and bent over. He spread Preston’s cheeks wide with his thumbs before he dipped down and licked the tight ring of muscle.

“Fuck yeah.”

Manu squeezed the firm flesh in his hands and continued to lick Preston’s wrinkled hole, hearing Preston moan, the sound echoing around the room. He flicked his hole, then used the flat of his tongue to lick across. At the same time, he slid a hand around Preston so he could stroke his dick. It jerked in his hand as Manu slid his hand over the firm flesh at the same time as he licked Preston’s ass.

Preston groaned. “Fuck.”

Manu lapped at Preston’s hole, then slid his tongue inside. Preston cried out and shoved his ass into Manu’s face. Manu grinned, then fucked Preston’s ass with his tongue. He could tell Preston liked what he was doing, could hear it from the sounds the man made, and he slid more and more of his tongue inside Preston’s ass, twirling it around, then slipping it out to flick over his relaxed flesh.

Manu loved rimming, loved eating a man out, and Preston clearly enjoyed it too. He pushed inside again, and this time, he slid a finger in alongside, twisting and searching till he found that raised bump. He rubbed it with his finger as he fucked Preston with his tongue.

“Ah fuck, Manu. Close.”

A second finger pushed inside, and Manu groaned at the hot, tight feel. He wanted to slide his dick inside, fuck Preston until he was begging for mercy, then make him

wait. He would keep him on the edge until Manu was ready to let the human fall.

Manu kept stroking Preston's dick, kept fucking his ass with his tongue, then he stopped and moved away. Preston took a second to process Manu wasn't touching him and looked over his shoulder at him.

"Why did you stop?"

"I want to fuck you."

Preston stood, turned and glared at him. He leaned back on the wall, then smirked as he took his own dick in hand and stroked. "No."

"Stubborn human." Preston didn't respond. He bit his lip and pounded his dick. Manu glared at him, then shoved his hand out of the way. "You're so fucking annoying," he muttered before taking Preston's dick in his mouth and sliding the firm, thick flesh down his throat.

"Yeah." Preston gripped Manu's hair tight. "Suck me hard."

Manu bobbed his head, taking all of Preston down his throat, then slid a couple of fingers between Preston's cheeks and pushed them inside Preston's ass. Preston cried out, and Manu's mouth flooded with come. He pulled back and swallowed everything he was given. His mate tasted fucking amazing. And he did not just use his mate when thinking of Preston.

When Preston pushed him away, Manu turned and rinsed his face and fingers. "No, 'that was a good blowjob'?"

"You want thanking now?"

Manu gritted his teeth. “I am so going to fucking kill you.”

“Can it wait until after I fuck you?”

Manu growled and grabbed Preston, pushing him out of the shower. “My turn.”

Somehow, he remembered to turn the shower off, then he picked Preston up and hauled him over his shoulder. Preston laughed, so Manu slapped his ass, which got him a ‘kinky bastard’, so he did it again.

He found the bedroom—it wasn’t that hard in such a tiny place—and dumped Preston on the unmade bed and crawled up his body. When he moved over him, Manu swooped down and took Preston’s mouth in a hard, demanding kiss.

Preston smiled into the kiss, then suddenly rolled them over so he was on top. Manu stared up and glared. “My turn.”

“Nah ah. You made me come, so now it’s my turn.” Before Manu could object, Preston was kissing him, his hands moving all over Manu’s body, and Manu decided to let him have this. He would switch things up before Preston’s dick got anywhere near his ass.

Preston kept kissing him, slow and languid, sensual and sexy, and Manu moaned. Yeah, Preston knew how to kiss, and when he moved away from Manu’s lips, Manu actually wanted him back so he could have more. Preston licked down his neck, then bit one of Manu’s nipples.

“Hey! I’m sensitive.”

Preston bit him again, then licked the nipple. “Nothing like a bit of pain with the pleasure.”

“Maybe for you—” Manu moaned as Preston flicked his hard nipple with the tip of his tongue. When he bit it again, Manu barely had time to protest because Preston was sucking it like it was his favorite lolly.

“Hold your legs up. Let me lick that ass.” Manu lifted his legs, spread them wide, and grabbed them behind the knees. “Fuck yeah. Can’t wait to sink in deep.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“We’ll see.”

Manu snorted. “No, we won’t.”

“When I have you dripping and riding my hand, you’ll beg me to fuck you.”

“Will you just shut the fuck up and lick my ass? A man can get bored up here.”

A dark chuckle, then Manu’s eyes rolled back in his head. Preston didn’t go slow. He shoved his tongue into Manu’s ass and fucked him with it. The smooth slide in and out had Manu trying to spread his legs wider than they already were.

Preston didn’t stay where he was for long. He moved up and sucked one of Manu’s balls into his mouth, his tongue rolling over the skin before letting it pop out. Licking up Manu’s shaft, he moved up the bed and kissed Manu hard, then grinned before moving down and sucking Manu’s dick.

Manu moaned and arched up as a finger pushed inside him, and Preston’s tongue twirled around the head of his dick. The tight suction on his dick and the finger targeting his prostate had Manu shuddering. He normally fucked and left. He never did shit like this, and now that he was letting Preston touch him, he realized what he had been missing out on. Manu was always in charge, but this time he wasn’t, and he

liked it.

Preston hummed as he took Manu down his throat, and Manu gasped. A second finger slid inside, and Manu gasped again. It hurt. Not too much, but he felt it. Then the pain morphed into pleasure when Preston found that spot inside his ass and rubbed it.

Two fingers in his ass and his dick down Preston's throat and he wanted to come, then he wanted to throw his mate over and bury himself so deep inside Preston and mark the human as his. Manu's eyes shot open. Nope. Not happening.

He pushed those instincts back. They were not mating. Fucking was fine, but the other stuff? No chance.

Another finger in his ass, and the burn was back, but again disappeared. Preston let Manu's dick slide free and moved down to lick around his fingers. He pulled them out and replaced them with his tongue, and Manu saw stars.

"Can't wait to watch my dick slide in deep. Gonna come so hard."

"Nope. It will be you riding my dick."

Preston chuckled again. "Your ass was made to be fucked."

Manu went to answer, but groaned. Preston's tongue was back in his ass, and Manu had lost the power of speech. When two fingers slipped inside, he whimpered and almost let go of his legs. His hotspot was being tortured, rubbed, tapped, and pressed, and Preston's mouth was back on his dick, licking and sucking and slurping.

Manu's legs shook. Hell, his whole body shook, and his balls pulled up as his orgasm built. He whined when Preston stopped paying attention to his dick, then keened

when his tongue went back to his ass. A hand wrapped around his dick, the pressure firm as it stroked. Just how Manu liked it.

That and the fingers and tongue in his ass had Manu crying out, his body bowing. His orgasm exploded over him, his body shuddering and trembling as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over him. The roar in ears, the pounding of his heart, the heat that covered him had him panting and crying and shaking.

When he slumped back on the bed, he lay there heaving, his breath sawing in and out of his body, his skin damp from sweat. He opened his eyes to see Preston licking his dick and abs, moaning softly. Seeing his come on Preston's lips had his dick trying to perk up, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

Maybe not for quite some time.

"Now that sounded like a good one." Preston looked smug, and all the orgasmic glow flowed away. Manu wanted to smack the look off his face.

"Don't get a big head."

"I have one." Preston moved so he was kneeling and stroked his dick. "See? Nice and fat too. Gonna stretch you so good."

Manu rolled his eyes. "You can ride my dick when I'm ready."

"I hope it isn't too long. I know you old guys take time to recover."

Manu shot up, grabbed Preston, and rolled on top of him. Yes, it did give him pleasure to hear Preston grunt in surprise. "I think I like you just like this. Under me. Ready for more?"

Preston smirked. “Are you?”

This was fun.

Fun watching Manu lose his shit and then fun, letting Manu think he had the upper hand. Sure, he was stronger than Preston—he was a shifter, but Preston had extensive training, so he knew there weren't many situations he couldn't handle, and Manu was one he could handle.

First, he'd let Manu have his fun because he knew he would have fun too. Manu took his lips in a punishing kiss that made Preston's dick twitch. He loved a good hard fuck and everything that came with it, and he knew Manu could take what Preston could give.

Preston let Manu's tongue in and dominated the kiss by pushing Manu's tongue back into his mouth. Manu chuckled and moved the kiss back into Preston's mouth, and the battle was on. Not that it lasted long. They found a rhythm they both liked, and Preston let Manu settle between his legs.

The feel of the shifter's hard body on his own had Preston arching up, rubbing his dick along Manu's. He closed his eyes as they kissed, then softly moaned when Manu's lips moved away. Nibbling his neck, Manu moved down Preston's body, and Preston opened his eyes to watch. He didn't spend long on Preston's nipples but headed to his dick, which jerked in anticipation of Manu's mouth.

He wasn't disappointed, either. Manu tongued the slit, then licked across it, before sucking it down deep. Preston moaned and thrust up into Manu's mouth as he swallowed. Preston felt every muscle squeeze his dick and trembled. Fuck, that was good.

“Legs up.”

Preston grinned and lifted them up. Manu’s tongue and his ass were a match made in heaven. Shame the tongue came attached to this particular shifter. Oh well. You didn’t get everything you wanted, but if Manu spent more of his time licking Preston’s ass than annoying him, they’d manage.

Manu ate his ass, licking and slurping and fucking it with his tongue. Preston writhed in pleasure. “Yeah. Just like that.” Manu grunted in response but didn’t stop. A finger pushed in deep, and Preston rode it, then groaned when it tapped and rubbed his hot spot. “Fuck yeah.”

A second finger shoved inside, and Preston winced. Lifting his head, he muttered, “Take it easy.”

Manu grunted again and massaged Preston’s spot, causing Preston to cry out. His legs trembled where he held them up, and when a third finger slid in deep, Preston barely noticed. In and out they moved, hitting his spot continuously, causing Preston to see stars and then they disappeared.

When the blunt head of Manu’s dick stretched his asshole, Preston’s eyes widened. He opened his mouth to say something, but Manu was there, thrusting his tongue in deep, and Preston shivered, his body breaking out in a sweat.

Manu didn’t stop until he was fully inside, then he pulled out slowly before sliding back inside. Nice and slow, not too deep, changing the angle, until Preston arched up. “There!”

Manu picked up speed, making sure to keep the angle, and Preston gripped Manu by the back of his neck, keeping their lips fused together. His other hand grabbed Manu’s ass, his legs wrapped around Manu’s waist. He arched up, meeting every

thrust, the pleasure rippling through him, and he couldn't wait to own Manu's ass in return.

His balls pulled up, and he felt his body rushing toward its goal, his orgasm building and building, and he hadn't even touched his dick. He let go of Manu's ass, and shoved his hand between their bodies and grabbed his dick, rapidly stroking it.

"Close," he gasped.

"Yeah. Come on my dick. Squeeze me."

Preston groaned, his body shuddering, and then he was there. He cried out, arching up, then he felt a searing pain on his shoulder and neck, but that was gone an instant later then pleasure so deep, so intense, destroyed all rational thought. Preston shuddered, his body on fire, pleasure burning him from the inside. Then the world disappeared.

When he came back, he lay panting on the bed, his mind a mess of words and emotions, and they weren't his own. He furrowed his brow, trying to understand what was going on, when a dull ache in his neck pulsed. Then he knew exactly what had happened.

"You fucking bit me." Preston surged up and pushed Manu off him. He put his hand over the junction between his shoulder and neck and felt the puncture wounds and the blood. "What the fuck did I say? No. Which part of no don't you understand? The N or the O?"

"Look, I didn't want to be mated to you?—"

"Oh really? Then why did you bite me? Why does it feel like you're crawling inside my head?" Preston jumped off the bed and went to his small bathroom, switching the

light on and staring at his neck. It was there for all to see. There was no way to hide it. The bite was so fucking big. “Did you dislocate your jaw when you bit me so everyone would see it like some fucking ownership? The mark is fucking huge! No way I’m covering that shit up.”

Manu appeared in the doorway, fully dressed. “It was a mistake that we’re stuck with. I’m going. I’m not listening to this bullshit from you.” Manu disappeared from sight, and Preston followed.

He caught up with Manu and pushed him face first into the wall. “We’re not finished.” Not by a long shot. If Manu could fuck him, then it was his turn.

Manu grunted and pushed back, but Preston wasn’t going to let him move. “Let me go.”

“Which part of no don’t you understand?”

“I didn’t mean to. Do you think I want to be mated to you? Now I’m stuck with you.”

“Yeah? Now my days of fucking nameless men to get off are over. I’m stuck with you.” Preston ground his dick into Manu’s ass. “My turn.”

Preston gripped Manu’s jeans and yanked them down, exposing his ass. Manu pushed back, snapping, “Stop.”

“I don’t think so. You had your fun, and now it’s my turn, or are you going to fuck and run like the pathetic mate you are?”

Preston rubbed his dick along Manu’s crack and bit his lip. He ran a finger over Manu’s hole, then slid it in, searching for and finding his hot spot. He rubbed it, tapped it, made sure to have Manu panting hard, then pushed a second inside. Manu

bent over, and Preston pushed a third finger inside, scissoring them but making sure he always hit Manu's prostate.

When he was relaxed, Preston took them out and lined the head of his dick with Manu's ass. "Tell me no," he whispered into Manu's ear. No matter what happened now, Manu would never be able to say he hadn't been given a choice.

Manu whimpered. "Do it."

Preston didn't waste a second. He pushed the head inside and squeezed his eyes shut as a tight heat covered him. He clenched his jaw when Manu tightened around, hearing the man pant until he slowly relaxed. When Preston could move, he slid in slowly until his balls touched Manu.

"God, you're so tight."

"Just do it. Only time you're fucking me."

Preston pulled out, then slammed inside. "Only time tonight. Mate."

Manu gasped and began to move with Preston as he moved inside Manu's body. "One time only."

"Nah. You know I'm good, and you'll want me to fill your ass time and time again." Preston leaned his body against Manu. "Just like I'm going to let you do the same to me."

Manu groaned, his body shuddering. "You don't mean that."

"If you are the only man I can fuck, then I'll do it."

“That makes me feel... Just there!”

Preston changed the angle and hammered into Manu. One hand gripped his hip, and the other had his shoulder. He didn't slow down. He fucked his mate hard and deep, grunting every time he slammed inside his ass. Manu was making similar noises, his ass pushed out so Preston could fuck deeper.

“One time,” Manu gasped as Preston bit his neck. “One time only.”

“I don't think so.”

“One time. This is it, so enjoy while you can because I won't let you fuck me again.” Manu grunted, then added, “Can't believe you're my mate.”

Preston growled but didn't respond. He wanted to come, shoot deep in his mate and make him wear his scent. Let everyone know he'd been fucked good and hard. Manu keened and arched back, then bucked as he cried out.

Gritting his teeth, Preston continued to fuck Manu as he come. His dick was in a tight grip, but Preston wasn't about to let that stop him. He made sure to hit that spot in Manu, made sure to prolong his orgasm, and when he fell over the edge, he slammed in deep and ground his hips on Manu's ass. Sliding out an inch or so, he pushed inside again, then dropped his head on Manu's back.

Less than a minute later, he pulled out and stepped back, watching his come trail down Manu's thighs. He was pissed, even though he'd just come. Pissed at how Manu treated him and their mating, and right now he wanted nothing to do with the shifter.

“I've come, so you can get the fuck out.”

Why?

Why him?

Why that human?

Preston. Manu wanted to punch the fucker in the face. Punch him hard. Maybe a few times. He glanced up at the lightening sky and realized he'd been up for close to twenty-four hours. He needed to grab a few hours sleep, then head in for the meeting to go over last night's events. That meant sitting in a room with Preston.

That wasn't the worst part. No, the worst part was everyone would know they'd mated. There was no way to disguise his scent, and Preston, being the little shit he was, would probably give them a full account of what happened.

Grinding his teeth together, Manu hopped into his truck and drove to his apartment, pulling up into his place in the parking lot and getting out. Slamming the door shut was not nearly as satisfying as he wanted it to be, and he stomped up the stairs to his apartment.

Once inside, he stomped around his apartment, then decided he needed to wash the man from his body. Stripping, Manu shoved his clothes in the washing machine, then walked naked to the bathroom. He turned the shower on and stepped under the cold spray, flinching when it touched his skin. He didn't care. He wanted that man gone, but he would never be gone for long.

Growling, Manu scrubbed his skin, and when he touched his ass, he winced at the

ache. He'd never, not once, let someone fuck him, yet he let Preston. Could be because they were mates that he had willingly let Preston do it, and he couldn't claim it was against his will because Preston had asked, and he'd agreed.

Growling louder, Manu switched the shower off and stepped out. Grabbing a towel, he roughly dried himself, then threw the towel on the floor. Stomping into his bedroom, Manu slid between the cool sheets and closed his eyes. He needed to sleep before the meeting, but sleep was giving him the finger.

Snapping his eyes open, he reached out to Preston. Preston.

What the fuck?

Yeah, we can talk like this.

Huh. So I can piss you off when I'm not even in the room with you. How is your ass?

Manu scowled. Bastard.

Manu cut off contact and now wondered why he had reached out in the first place. The man was so annoying, and now, Manu was stuck with him. Forever. Stuck with him forever and he wouldn't be able to sleep with another man again. All those men were off the list now.

Not that Manu had been sleeping around since moving to Morefield Village. Keeping the residents safe, making sure security ran smoothly, had kept Manu busy. His down time was usually spent with his brother, having a drink, or sleeping. Usually all at his brother's place.

Having Mintu here helped. He had someone he could talk to about the Village and life, and it helped to have family here. Their parents were more nomadic in nature,

rarely staying in one place. He and Mintu were the opposite. After Manu had finished his service, they'd moved to the Village and settled.

Mintu had his construction business, and he worked with Crocker construction. Even with both their teams working together, they had far too much work. It would take years to get Saludem and Morefield Village where they wanted, but it was a task Manu knew Mintu could handle.

Thinking of his brother had Manu reaching for his phone, and he dialed his number, not the least surprised when he answered. "What's up?"

"Why are you up?"

"Finishing some specs. Once these are done, I'll head out to check the construction sites with Kris."

"You need some sleep."

"So do you. Why are you up?"

Manu remembered what had happened. "We lost Fabien tonight."

"What? How?"

"I have no idea. The things we fought... I don't know what the fuck they were, and I don't want to run across them again. My wolf was scared."

"Your wolf?" Manu heard the paper being moved. "When was the last time your wolf wanted to leave a situation?"

"Never," he whispered. "We've had some close calls in the past, but the way he

reacted... He was scared.”

“That’s...concerning. Do you need more help with security? I can help in one of the buildings.”

“We need you where you are. We’re having a meeting in a few hours. I think Saludem will be there as well. This is bad. They laid a trap. Used Albie’s body?—”

“Albie’s dead? How is Serenity?”

“He isn’t dead. Somehow, he survived, and I have no idea how. The injuries...”

“How is your mate? Does he know?”

“He was out there when it happened. He spotted something, called it in, and I went.”
Manu rubbed his face with his hand. “I mated him.”

“You what?” Manu closed his eyes when he heard Mintu’s chuckle become full-out laughter. “That’s funny.”

“He kicked me out, or I left. I’m not too sure about that.”

“He is perfect for you, and I haven’t even met him yet. Oh, and the folks are thinking of visiting.” Mintu laughed again as Manu groaned. How was he going to explain Preston to his parents?

“That’s great. I’m so looking forward to it.”

“I can’t wait for them to meet him. Hey! When am I going to meet him? He’s like my brother-in-law now.”

“Never. I don’t want to see him again.”

“Yeah, right. That won’t last long. You’ll have blue balls.”

“And that’s another thing that’s pissed me off. I can’t have sex with any other man now.”

“Tell me he’s good, though. At least, he should be good in bed if he’s the only lay you’re going to have now until death do you part.”

“You’re enjoying this far too much, and I’m going to try to get some sleep.” Manu remembered what he’d been told before the night went to shit. “Oh, and what’s this about you having a mate?”

“I do, and we’re both happy not mating. Maybe one day in the future.”

Manu shook his head. “Shifters mate when they find their mate.”

“Yeah, they do, but we don’t want to do that. We both agreed. If it changes in the future, then we’ll look at it again. Not all shifters are the same.” Manu heard papers moving around again. “Get some sleep, Manu.”

“Too busy to sleep. Speak later.”

Manu put his phone on the side, punched his pillow a couple of times, and settled down to try to sleep. He had a feeling that it wouldn’t be easy.

Manu buried his head in his cup of coffee and tried to ignore everyone in the room. He’d been right when he’d assumed Saludem would be there. Several of their security team had come over, and the atmosphere was somber.

Manu had heard Albie had survived the night but was still in critical condition. Fabien's family was on route, and Costas was performing an autopsy. Serenity was missing, but that was to be expected. She'd packed a bag and was staying at the hospital.

Slumping in his chair, Manu people watched, growing more anxious as time passed and his mate didn't appear. Nothing had been said to him, but there had been more than a few eyebrows raised when they'd caught his scent. Yep, he was mated, and they would all know to who as well.

Deac walked into the room and stood with Indy, heads bowed together, bodies tense, and for once Manu was glad he wasn't in charge. The pressure they must be under was intense and not getting any easier. If anything, it was getting harder.

"Sit please."

Indy took a chair next to Deac and sighed heavily. "As you might be aware, Albie survived the night and is hanging on."

"Costas said the wounds look like claw marks, but he said whoever hit Albie had to be strong to inflict that kind of damage. How he survived is a mystery."

"Maybe they wanted him to." Vir looked around the room. "I wonder if him being left alive is a message. We can get to you whenever we want. Fabien..." Vir coughed, and in a quieter voice said, "Fabien was ripped apart. He would have been harder to kill as a shifter, so they took him out. Left Albie alive as bait. Take the stronger member out first, then go after the weaker one." Vir looked over at Manu. "You were shot first. You would have been the one to go to Albie first."

Manu snorted. "You don't know Preston. We would have argued about who went in first."

Someone laughed, then smothered it. “You smell good.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Manu sipped his coffee and ignored several other people who laughed.

“You think he would have gone first and not you?” Vir asked.

Manu thought about it, then shook his head. “No. He would have watched my back, but he spotted the trap, and I didn’t.” Manu furrowed his brow. “I would have walked into it.”

Vir nodded. “As I said, and we all know, take the strongest members out first. They must have been watching the road for some time. Watching us and how we work. We change things up so there isn’t a pattern, but they found something.”

“They watched the roads. Wasn’t that what Preston said? Something was tracking him as he drove from Salutem to Morefield?”

“Yeah. That was the call.”

“Listen.” Manu straightened. “I don’t know about any of the others who were there last night, but my wolf wanted to leave. He was scared. I’ve been in some hairy shit, but this was the first time I have had to force my wolf to keep going.” He ignored the murmurs he heard and carried on. “The silence went on and on. We’ve all been in situations when the surrounding area goes quiet, but this was something else. Nothing moved. Nothing made a sound at all. For at least thirty minutes.

“They weren’t scared of us at all. They taunted us. Moved us where they wanted us to go. If it wasn’t for our expertise, we would have been dead a lot sooner. We recognized what they were doing, and that probably saved us. Preston emptied an entire clip into one of those things, and it kept going. If Eli hadn’t shown up when he

had..." He trailed off. He had nothing more to say right then.

"It was something I've never seen before," Eli murmured. "Like a bear crossed with something else. It shifted so fast into a catlike creature that had spikes or quills. It could aim and shoot them too. It locked eyes with me and aimed. Lucky I was able to get a shot off. I hit it twice, and it got up and ran away."

"Something they've created." Cyan messed with the pen in front of him.

"We know they've been trying." Ray stood and went to the window, staring outside. "We're vulnerable. They tested us and walked away." Turning, he leaned on the ledge and looked at them. "We're in trouble."

Deac nodded, as did Indy. "We are. I've put an order in for armor-piercing ammo. I have a feeling we're going to need it."

Indy agreed. "We've asked Jake, Kris, and Mintu to move construction to the outposts that haven't been completed. Those are our priority. We're also going to have to look at security again."

"Not sure what more we can do," Eli muttered. "We alter routes, alter times, alter team members. Maybe increase from two men teams to three men teams but that means we'll need more people. That in itself can leave us exposed."

"Where is Preston?" Deac asked. Coughing, he shrugged. "He's your mate. Where is he?"

"How should I know?" He knew how he sounded, but he didn't care. "I'm not his keeper."

"Ohhhh reminds me of mine and Sax's mating. Did he kick you out?"

“I left voluntarily.” That got him more chuckles, and he glared at everyone. “We’re working on things.”

“That doesn’t tell me where he is. Have you been in contact?”

“Not since he slammed the door shut in my face.” Concentrating, he reached out to Preston.

You there?

When there was no reply, he shrugged at Deac. “Nothing. Could still be sleeping.”

“Not Preston. He’s never been late for anything.” Eli pulled his phone out and dialed. “Voicemail.”

Manu hated to admit it, but he was growing concerned. Reaching out again, he tried to get Preston to respond, but there was nothing. Nothing at all. Not even the subtle presence in the back of his head.

“I can’t feel him. There’s nothing.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:44 pm

Preston's head hurt. His mouth was full of cotton. His limbs heavy.

He knew what the signs meant and kept his eyes closed, listening for any sound of movement. When there was none, he opened his eyes a crack and saw the bare room he was in. A cell. Sitting up and ignoring every ache in his body, Preston did a quick assessment. Nothing appeared broken, and there wasn't a particular area that hurt more than another.

Checking the room out, Preston didn't make a sound. A single metal door. No handle on the inside. Four bare brick walls. A tiled floor. A grid in the middle where he sat on the metal chair that appeared to be screwed to the floor.

The chains used to keep him immobile were thick, each link wide and strong. Inhaling, Preston couldn't scent anything other than disinfectant. He knew what this room was for, and he knew why he was in it. He'd had training to handle these types of situations, and he knew he would have to rely on it now.

There was no way for Preston to know how much time had passed, but he figured it was late morning or early afternoon. He had a good internal clock and over the years had learned to trust it.

He'd gone to sleep not long after Manu left, so between then and now he'd been taken—obviously. But how? Morefield had great security and no doubt that security was being updated as he sat there.

The door opened, and a man in a white lab coat walked in with one of those creatures Preston had encountered the night before behind him. Preston kept an eye on it more

than on the man in the lab coat. That thing had the power to eviscerate him with one swipe of the claws.

Up close, it did look like a bear, dark in color, but its movements were more agile, more fluid. It wasn't as wide as a bear, looking slimmer with long claws that were there one second, then gone the next. Retractable. Interesting. The eyes were something else. The color changed, swirled, and Preston had the feeling the animal could see him through different methods.

"Preston Fulwood. Recently working for us, then you disappeared."

"Did I or did I go undercover?"

"I know everything there is to know about you."

"Clearly not." Preston smiled. Now that he knew who had him, he could make them think he was doing as ordered.

"Single, parents deceased?—"

"Wrong."

The man frowned. "We have performed a thorough background search on you."

"Clearly not."

The bear thing shifted into the cat thing and flicked a quill at Preston. It embedded into his shoulder, but Preston didn't react. It hurt like a bitch, but years of training had taught him to hide his emotions.

"Single, parents deceased, only child. You have worked for us until recently, when

you disappeared.”

“I gathered intel from Morefield Village literally days ago. Check your records.”

Another quill embedded in the same shoulder, and Preston stared at the cat thing as the man flicked the paper in his hand. “Incorrect.”

“Check my account. I received fifty thousand a few days ago. The second half of my payment for work completed.”

“We have your bank records, and there isn’t any payment.”

“Then you have the wrong account. I gathered intel on the shifters living in Morefield Village and dropped it off as requested.”

“Contact?”

“Sillian. The only name given to me.” He saw the man recognized the name, then he turned and left the room, the bear/cat thing following. Even with the room now empty, Preston hid the pain. He knew there would be at least one camera watching him, even if he couldn’t see it.

He did wince when there was a loud buzzing in his head. Preston.

Oh yeah. Telepathy. Manu.

Where are you? We’re in a meeting, and you’re not here. I’m having to deal with all the shit about us being mates.

The door opened again, and the lab man and creature thing were back, along with some huge man who walked up to Preston and punched him in the face. Preston

licked the blood from his lip as he slowly rolled his head.

“I have some questions, and you’re going to answer them.”

“Fire away.”

“How many people are involved in Morefield security?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t met them all. I’ve been there for a few days. They don’t know me, and they don’t trust me.”

The man stepped forward and punched Preston again, pain exploding over his chin and cheek. He felt that one, but again didn’t show it.

“You expect me to believe you?”

“When someone new starts here do you give them sensitive information on their first day?”

The man frowned and nodded to the puncher again. Two more punches to the face and Preston let his head hang down, waiting for the pain to recede. Lifting his head, Preston noticed he couldn’t see out of his left eye.

“Names, ages, locations, position.” Lab man held a picture of Fabian up.

“Fabien and that’s all I know. He’s dead. One of your toys here killed him.”

The man smiled. “Correct. He died easily. A poor test subject for my army.” He held out another photo. This time Eli. “Elliot Young. Head of security. Don’t know where he lives yet.”

The man held up another photo, this time Deac. “Deacon Morrison. Mayor of Morefield Village. Mate to Costas. Don’t know his surname. They have two kids.”

“See how easy this is when you cooperate?” Another photo but of someone Preston hadn’t met.

“No idea.”

Puncher leaped forward and punched Preston in the ribs several times, leaving him coughing and wheezing, bent over as much as possible. Before he even caught his breath, three quills embedded themselves across his chest, and Preston now arched back, body straining as pain lanced through it.

It took him several minutes before he was able to lift his head. The lab man smiled and held the photo up again. “Who is he?”

Preston!

“Still nothing?” Deac watched Manu.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t like this. He doesn’t have the best past.”

Eli grunted and stared at Deac. “I fought beside him. He’s not going to turn on us.”

“Then where is he?” To Manu he ordered, “Call him.”

Manu felt his skin heat up. “Yeah, I’ll get on that when I have his number.”

“He’s your mate, and you don’t have his number?”

Manu.

“Wait!” Manu tapped his head. Where the fuck are you?

Not sure how long I have before I pass out. They took me. Being tortured for info on you guys. Don’t know where I am, but I’m having an up close and personal meet with one of those things.

“They have him. Torturing him for information on us.”

Do you recognize anything? I need something so we can pinpoint your location.

I don’t even know how they got to me. How did they get past security? I’m in a cell. One way in and out. No windows. No distinguishing marks or scents.

Manu passed the info on. “I’ll check CCTV. We have the entire village covered. We’ll find something.”

“I left him early this morning. It was already getting light.”

“They must have hit him soon after then.”

“Why risk it? It was almost morning.” Vir tapped his knuckles on the table. “Unless they think he has something of value.”

Is there anything else?

They think I disappeared. They don’t know about the Morefield job I did, and the payment has been erased.

A setup?

Looks like it... Fuck, that hurt. They shoot those fucking quill things, and the fuckers hurt.

We'll find out where you are. I left yours around five am, and it's ten now, so that gives us a five-hour window.

I woke up here and was chained, so I would say four.

Stay strong.

When there was no response, Manu knew Preston was dealing with something. He again passed on everything, and Deac brought up a map of the area on a large monitor on the wall.

"They got him out and into a vehicle. They need to travel to the location, get him out, set him up." Manu worked out that they had to work quick. They knew the area.

"Radius?"

"Can't be too far, and we know the area well. Between all of us here, we cover most, if not all, the area for a good twenty miles. They knew the area Preston lives as well."

"I agree." Cyan looked at the map. "They were in and out. No mistakes leaving the Village. They would know where they're going as well. Went straight there. A place kitted out from what you said Manu. Ready for them when they went there with Preston. That's how I would do it. Have a place ready for when I needed it. Not many places like that around here."

"You have a place in mind," Eli stated.

"Two." Cyan looked at Teal, who nodded. "Closer to us than here. Underground."

“The old basement near Rushholm. Forty miles out,” Teal added. “If they knew of that location, then they know the area extremely well.”

“They’ve been watching us for a long time now. They were bound to find these places out.”

“Downside.” Indy looked at everyone sat at the table. “One way in, one way out.”

“We would have to take them by surprise, hit them hard.” Eli rubbed a hand over his chin. “They have at least one of those creatures, so we need to have ammo and lots of it. The rifle I had barely scratched it.”

“Throw a grenade at the fucker.” Cyan rocked back in his chair. “We need to draw it out. Get it in a place where we can attack it from all sides.”

Deac blew out a breath. “How many men are we talking here?”

“We don’t know how many there are?”

“Let me ask Preston.” Manu reached out asking, You there?

No, I’m on the moon.

Remind me again why am I trying to help you?

You love my dick in your ass.

One time only. Manu muttered, “He’s so fucking annoying.” How many men have you seen?

Bit sexist that? Might have seen some women too.

Closing his eyes, Manu ignored the surrounding sniggers. Do you want our help?

Two, but I heard footsteps outside the cell, so there could be four and one of those creatures. Doubt the lab dude moved me, so at least five, including him

“From what he’s seen and heard, he believes at least five and one of those creatures.”

“I’d say six. The place isn’t big, and it would be tight in those hallways.” Vir glanced around the table.

“That thing would need room to maneuver as well,” Eli added. “Like Cyan said, we need to draw them out. Get them outside, then we can deal with them and that thing.”

Euan, who had remained silent up until then, spoke. “We need to record this as well. We need all the info on that thing we can get. How it moves, how it changes form, how it fights. Would be good if we could kill it then we can autopsy it, but you said they’re tough to kill. I don’t want anyone to be injured trying to take it down.”

“Someone needs to stay back and us shifters won’t be able to change forms. Not enough space and if we’re fighting it will lead us vulnerable as we shift. We’ll have to remain in whatever form we’re in.” Vir pursed his lips. “Twelve with at least an animal form to scout the area ahead of us.”

“I’ll go in wolf form. Sax can relay anything I need to say.” Jim stretched his neck from side to side.

“I can as well. Smith will communicate with me.”

“I’ll pick two from Salutem.” Indy sighed and dropped his head. “When will this be over? Balor will be with us as well.”

“Not like your mate to let you go out there on your own, you fully grown adult shifter.” Cyan grinned.

“He can be a little overprotective.” Indy looked at Deac. “Let’s get the teams sorted.”

“Tell him we’re on our way, Manu.”

Manu nodded at Deac, then furrowed his brow. “I’m getting nothing.”

There was nothing. Nothing at all.

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Okay. He could admit it, even if it was only to himself. He hurt. He really fucking hurt. All over. The man who liked to punch had worked him over good, and the addition of the fucking quill things were just the icing on the cake.

Preston honestly didn't know why they were asking all these questions about the residents of Morefield when he'd only been there a handful of days, but they sure liked to beat the shit out of him when he couldn't answer. He was certain they already knew everything but were testing him. Testing to see how much punishment he could take.

At least they were giving him a break, so he could count how many of those quill things had been fired into him. Eight going by the number he could see sticking out of his body. They fucking hurt too. If he had to guess, he thought they had barbs so they couldn't be removed. Wonderful.

We're getting ready to roll. Stay where you are.

Yeah, 'cause I have freedom here to go wherever I want

Do you want us to save you?

I'm chained to a chair with quill things sticking out of me. I ain't going anywhere. Wriggling his hands, Preston grimaced at the pins and needles in them. Twisting them, he felt warmth and looked down, seeing blood. At least he still had circulation in them.

The door to his cell opened, and he sighed when the lab guy, puncher, and the

creature came inside. “We have some more questions for you.”

“I’m sure you do. Maybe ask me some I know the answers to.”

Puncher came up and punched Preston in the nuts. Preston groaned and bent over, gasping for air. Fuck, that hurt. He couldn’t wait to work this guy over when he was free. Preston lifted his face and grinned, and that earned him a punch to the face.

“I think we need to move on to more persuasive measures.”

Preston knew what that meant. Now was the time for the fun to begin. He watched a table being set up and various instruments placed on top of it. Another man entered the room and grabbed Preston’s hand, forcing it still. When the puncher picked up the pliers, Preston blanked his face.

And the fun times are here

What?

Torture. Looks like they’ll start off slow and easy. Manicure.

We’re about to leave now.

I might have some nails left by the time you get here

We could just let you die?

Then who would you fuck?

Any man I want and I wouldn’t have to put up with your shit.

You'd miss my shit. He didn't get a response and grinned when they ripped one of his nails out. Fuck, that hurt, but Preston showed no reaction to it. "Aren't you supposed to ask me something first that I don't answer, then rip my nail out?"

"We don't play by the rules here."

"I guessed that what with the kidnapping and torture." Another nail ripped out, and Preston shrugged, ignoring the pain. "Fun times."

"Ex-military, so I guess you're used to the pain." Lab man smiled, but it looked anything but friendly. "Rip them all out."

"Great! Let's get this party going!"

Lab man frowned. "Get the scalpel, as he likes pain."

It's scalpel time. Preston sang through their connection to Manu.

What did you say to them?

What do you mean by that? I'm a model prisoner.

Why don't I believe that?

You insult me.

On route now. Keep your mouth shut.

You like it when I use my mouth.

Just...don't.

The scalpel caught the light, and Preston didn't react. He locked eyes with the man in charge, the lab man, and smiled. He wouldn't react, no matter what they did to him. He would smile and take it like he'd been trained to do.

The man sighed. "Don't. I think he gets off on this. Maybe some sensory deprivation."

"Ooohh. How exciting for me."

A phone beeped, and the lab man pulled one out of his pocket. Looking at the screen, he frowned. "Let's go."

They all left the room, and Preston reached out to Manu. I think they know you're here or will be soon. Lab guy got a message, and they all left.

We're outside now, trying to draw them out. Stay where you are.

Preston rolled his eyes. Staring at the chains, he shook his head. If Manu could see him, he wouldn't be telling him to stay where he was. He stretched his neck from side to side, ignoring the throbbing pain flooding his body. He hurt, but he wasn't reacting to it. He had to remain focused on the task at hand. Getting out of there. Alive.

Once the door to his cell closed, Preston struggled to hear anything outside. He looked around again and still couldn't find a way out. He wriggled his hands, moved his arms, but the chains didn't move. They had him locked down tight. Leaning forward, he checked the chains on his legs and tried to move, but they stayed where they were.

"Overkill," he mumbled to himself. He was locked in a room, so he couldn't go anywhere. They must have a good ten pounds of chains on him too. Maybe more. Lifting his head, he searched the room yet again and still came up with nothing.

Guess he was going to have to wait for his knight in shining armor to come and rescue him, after all. He already knew Manu would not let him live that down. “Great.” Licking his parched lips, Preston swallowed, but it did little to help the dry mouth he had. Thirst was a bitch, but he could ignore that too.

Stuck in the chair, in a cell, with the only way out closed to him. You here yet? Getting bored sitting here doing nothing.

I could turn around and fuck off?

Nah, you’d get bored without me in your life.

Bored or relieved?

Preston couldn’t help but laugh, then he suddenly stopped when the ground shook. Yep, looked like the rescue was here.

Manu did contemplate leaving Preston behind to sort himself out, but he’d be a shitty mate if he did that. Not that Manu was concerned about being a good mate, but he was Preston’s mate. Why him and how many times had he thought those words?

Someone was having a laugh at his expense, and he was not the fuck impressed.

They had ten men split into two teams. Manu, Cyan, Teal, Jim, and Rand would go inside while Eli, Balor, Hunter, Vir, and Ray would remain outside to ensure the others could get out.

“Drone footage in. We have surveillance as expected and one of those freaky motherfuckers patrolling. No humans.” Teal watched the screen in his hands. “Looks lovely. Might invite it round for a meal.”

“Yeah, I’m sure Tyler would love that.” Cyan grinned.

“My mate is a kind, gentle, and loving man.”

“He puts up with you, so you should add patient to that list.”

Teal smiled and nodded. “Yes, he is patient.”

“Everyone is in position. Wait for the signal.” Cyan chuckled. “The fun is about to begin.”

“What sig?—”

The blast rocked the ground, and Manu arched an eyebrow at Cyan. “I think I recognized the signal.”

“Let’s go get your man, and I want to see one of those ugly fuckers up close.”

“Not too close. They shoot those things at you.”

Coming inside. Just taking one of those things out.

Avoid the quills.

Will do.

Manu ran with Cyan and Teal, then skidded to a halt. Eli and Vir in wolf form and Balor, Indy’s demon mate, were attacking the thing. When there was an opening, Hunter, a vampire, ran in and attacked it with the two machetes he carried. Hunter had to be the fastest male Manu had ever seen. He was in and out in seconds, slashing and stabbing, then out before the thing could swipe at him. The thing, monster,

creature, whatever it was, took the hits and kept on going like it didn't feel the injuries being inflicted on it at all.

Ray wasn't in the fight with the creature. He watched the surrounding area, making sure no one snuck up on them while they were busy fighting. Guns ready, he continuously moved, watching the fight, then watching the surrounding area.

Manu stopped staring and ran toward the opening, heading down the stairs and along the corridor. Within seconds, he was being shot at and dropped, hearing a hiss behind.

"Fucker got me. Tyler's gonna be so pissed when he finds out about this. Damn, I like this T-shirt."

Inside.

Still waiting.

I can always turn around and leave.

Told you before you'd miss me.

Manu shot and hit a security guard in the back of the head. The man dropped, and he checked to make sure he was dead. A chuckle echoed down the corridor, halting Manu. He'd heard that sound before.

"There's another one of those things ahead."

Cyan jumped over the body of the guard and ran to the end of the corridor, looked both ways, then ran to the right. Manu and Teal followed, with Jim running past them in wolf form and Rand taking up the rear. Manu turned the corner and ducked as quills flew past him.

“What the fuck?” Teal shot past Manu and shot at the creature thing, but the bullets did nothing. Whatever security had been there was dead or dying. The creature wanted to get to them, and if one of its own was in the way, it didn’t care. As Manu watched, the thing’s claws ripped the back out of one of the security men trying to crawl away and jumped over the body. Jim narrowly avoided being hit, growled, and bit its leg.

Manu raised his gun and shot it in the face, but all it did was shake its head and chuckle. “Fuck.”

I can hear you outside my cell. Get me out, then blow this place up.

Manu glanced around and found a door. “He’s in here!” he shouted.

“Get him and get out,” Teal shouted as he shot at the creature, constantly moving to avoid quills and claws.

Manu shot the lock on the door and kicked it open. He saw the condition his mate was in but carried on moving. They would deal with his injuries once they were safely outside. “I need to shoot the locks off.”

Preston nodded and twisted away. Manu carefully aimed and fired once. The lock blew apart, and it took him far longer than he wanted to unwind the chains covering Preston. No wonder Preston hadn’t been able to move. The weight of the chains would have kept him in place.

“Bit overkill for me. If it was one of you guys, then yeah.” Manu went to help Preston stand, but he shook his head. “Quills are still embedded in my skin. I don’t want to risk further injury.”

Manu took stock of his mate. The bruises on his face, one eye swollen shut, split lips,

nails torn out from one hand, and quills. Those were what he could see. There would be others beneath his clothes.

“Can you walk? I don’t want to grab anywhere if it’ll cause problems.” He scanned Preston’s body again, seeing the quills everywhere.

As Preston started to answer, an explosion rocked the place, and Manu grabbed Preston. Preston grunted, and Manu quickly released him, seeing blood seeping through his clothes in several places. More gun shots followed, and Manu jogged to the door and quickly checked the corridor.

It was a mess.

The creature was still fighting, somehow appearing uninjured. Jim was down on the floor, not moving. Teal showed signs of injury, and Cyan was backing away, grabbing Jim by the scruff of the neck. Rand provided cover, shooting at the creature as it advanced.

“Move!”

Manu had the chance to see Ray shouldering a rocket launcher and grabbed Preston, ignoring his grunt of pain. Dragging him out of the room, he pulled him along the corridor past Ray and left, heading toward the exit. “Keep moving.”

“I’m trying, but you know being tortured kinda takes it out of you.”

An explosion had them falling to the floor, Manu’s ears ringing, and he couldn’t hear anything. Debris fell all around them, dust swirling in the air. Someone pulled him up, and he grabbed Preston, hauling him outside. In front, Cyan was with Jim carrying him over his shoulder and behind was Teal.

“Ray?”

“Dealing with that fucker.” Teal’s grimness had Manu concerned. Who had they lost?

Outside, Manu stared in shock and horror as Balor fought the creature, another two demons by his side. Hunter lay against a tree, holding his side, blood seeping through his fingers. Viridian stood next to him, panting harshly, a row of quills sticking out of his chest and down his stomach. Teal ran over to Hunter and dragged him up, pulling Hunter’s arm over his shoulder. Vir followed behind, slow but moving. Manu didn’t see Eli, but he knew the shifter would be fine. Or he hoped.

“They just won’t die,” Manu gasped, watching the thing take hit after hit.

“It’s like their skin is made of titanium or some shit.” Teal saw Vir and nodded.

“Time to retreat. We got what we came for.”

Manu ran and dragged Preston to their truck and shoved him inside, turning to help Teal with Hunter, then Vir. Cyan threw Jim in, then hopped in the front and started the engine. When Ray appeared, covered in dust and blood, and hobbled over to them, Teal dragged him inside, and Cyan got them out of there.

“Rand?” Cyan asked.

“Behind making sure the demons finish the job and to make sure we all get out.” Vir grunted and stayed as still as possible, his skin pale and covered in sweat.

As they drove away, Manu stared back. “Fuck.”

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Preston lay awake in the hospital bed, listening to the murmurs of nurses and beeps from various machines. Hunter was in the bed next to him, and he also lay awake.

“I need sharper blades,” he mused.

“Don’t let your mate hear that.” Preston had been there when Carter had barged in, hugged and kissed Hunter, then shouted at him.

Hunter smiled and stroked Carter’s hair where he slept next to him on the bed. “He’s a good mate. You have a good mate too.”

“Eh. He did come and save my ass. I’ll give him a second chance.”

Hunter snorted, then winced. “No idea what’s on those claws, but my wounds aren’t closing as fast as they normally do.”

“And you’re a vampire. Imagine how I, a lowly human, feels right now.” Fucked. Fucked was how he felt. His body was one huge throbbing pain, and his wounds still leaked fluid. They hadn’t even scabbed over properly yet.

Costas had taken blood and samples and left with orders to sleep. All Preston wanted to do was go home, but was that little apartment home? They knew about it so it wasn’t safe. He’d barely spent any time inside it, and now he was in hospital, deciding what he was going to do now. He had a target painted on his back. No doubt about that, so he was pretty sure Morefield and Salutem would want to keep tabs on him. That meant staying.

“Vir and Jim?” he asked, noticing they weren’t in the room with them.

“Vir went back to Saludem once they’d pulled those quills out. I would have gone as well, but this wound isn’t healing properly.” Frowning, Hunter stared at his side, then stroked Carter’s hair. “Jim is with his mate. Concussion—and Sax knows how to deal with those.”

Manu. His mate.

What the fuck did he do with him? Preston wouldn’t describe what he felt for Manu as love, but given time and plenty of Valium, he was sure it could go in that direction.

“They’ll figure it out.”

“Did they manage to kill or capture one of those things?” Preston’s last image had been the demons fighting one outside. He knew Ray had disabled one so they could escape, but he wasn’t sure he’d killed it. He hadn’t spoken to Ray on the journey back to Morefield. He’d been busy dealing with blood loss and pain.

“I haven’t been told anything. I’ll be debriefed tomorrow when they let me out.”

Preston arched an eyebrow. “They said they’d release you tomorrow?”

“Release voluntarily or me walking out. Both mean the same thing.”

Preston chuckled, then winced. “Shit, those things hurt.”

“They were barbed. They had to dig them out.” Hunter sighed. “It moved fast,” he murmured. “Faster than I had anticipated, especially for a thing that size.”

“I noticed and smart too. The way it used Albie as a trap and hid in the tree above.

Watching. Waiting.”

“Albie woke up last night.”

Now that was some good news. “I’m glad. He seemed like a good guy.”

“He is. I don’t work with him often, but when I have, he’s always been smart, attentive, easy to get on with, pays attention.”

Costas came into the room and frowned when he saw the two of them still awake. “You need more drugs.”

“I need to get out of here and go home.”

“Morning for both of you on the condition you sleep now and eat breakfast.” Costas checked both their files and grunted. “Shifters and ex-military men plus medical personnel make the absolute worst patients.”

Preston closed his eyes. “See? I’m sleeping. Can’t you hear me snoring?” Preston pretended to snore and heard another grunt.

“In the morning.”

Preston started to curl up on his side, then thought better of it when his body said ‘fuck off’. He was used to pain though, so he knew at some point he would sleep, and the sooner he slept, the sooner he could go home.

Manu waited outside for Preston. “Thought you might want a lift home.”

Preston arched an eyebrow but didn’t say anything for once. He ached, he hurt, and he wanted to sleep for a week. Following Manu to his truck, Preston yawned, feeling

the tiredness drag his body down. Still, watching his mate's ass had his dick coming to life.

Manu drove them to Preston's, saying nothing, which surprised Preston. But then again, if he was tired, then no doubt Manu was too. He'd heard from Hunter that Manu had pulled a double to provide cover for Morefield. With Albie out, Fabien deceased, and both Jim and Rand recovering, they were short of manpower.

They reached Preston's apartment, and Preston trudged up the stairs. Opening the door seemed like a military operation, and the short walk to his bedroom felt like a mile, but the moment Manu turned him around and kissed him, Preston forgot all about the aches and pains.

Preston tilted his head, deepening the kiss, and groaned as Manu's hands reached down and gripped his ass.

He could feel Manu move them around, and Preston went willingly. He walked backward until his calves hit the bed, and Manu leaned them over, toppling them both onto the bed. They didn't stop kissing, and Preston spread his legs, allowing Manu to lay between them, his hands pulling and tugging on Manu's hair. They ate at each other's mouths, the kiss all wet and messy, but Preston didn't want it to end. Manu surrounded him, and it in that moment, Preston was exactly where he wanted to be.

Later, their roles would be reversed, but for now, Preston would let Manu take the lead.

When Manu pulled at Preston's T-shirt, he broke the kiss and helped Manu pull it off, and then helped Manu pull his own free. Manu stared down at his body and then softly ran a finger over one of the cuts on his chest.

"I want to kill it," Manu growled.

“I might let you try, but I think I have more of a right to end the bastard’s life than you do.

“You do, do you?”

“I was the one used as target practice.”

Manu grunted. “I’ll give you that, but if you’re too slow, I’ll take over.”

“Manu. Less talk, more sex, or I’ll use my hand.”

As he talked, Preston’s hands roamed Manu’s chest, plucking at his nipples, and pulling him down over him. Manu placed a string of kisses down his neck and shoulder before sucking one of the nipples into his mouth.

“Preston,” Manu muttered. “You’re really annoying sometimes.” Manu’s tongue flicked across Preston’s nipple, and Preston arched up, gasping in pleasure and some pain.

“Only sometimes? I was aiming for all the time. I need to work harder.”

As Manu flicked one nipple, his finger and thumb tugged at the other, making Preston tremble. “You need to stop talking. You’re ruining the mood.”

Manu moved down Preston’s body, licking, sucking, and biting on the way, until he reached the button on Preston’s jeans. It didn’t take long before he had Preston naked, and Manu moaned before leaning down and licking up Preston’s shaft. Preston shuddered, moaning when Manu sucked the head into his mouth, his tongue dipping in and out of the slit, as if he was fucking it.

As he sucked on Preston’s dick, Manu pushed his own jeans and sneakers off, and

Preston sat up, leaning back on his elbows, watching Manu. Preston shivered, goosebumps breaking out on his skin when Manu took him all the way into his mouth, swallowing around the head of his dick.

Manu's fingers trailed over Preston's hole, and Preston was surprised to feel how wet they were. When Manu pushed a finger in, Preston fell back on the bed, arching his hips up, needing to feel more of Manu's penetration. He would never admit it, but he'd missed this. He might like to dominate in bed, but he did enjoy Manu topping him too.

One finger quickly became two, but Preston couldn't wait any more. He needed to feel Manu slide inside him and take him, not that he would ever admit that either.

"I'm ready; I can take it," Preston murmured, his body jerking when Manu's fingertips rubbed his prostate.

Manu sat up and pushed Preston's legs up and then lined his dick up with his hole before he pushed in, not stopping until his balls touched Preston's. Preston's head arched back into the pillow, and he moaned long and deep. "Manu," he breathed.

Manu threw Preston's legs over his shoulders and pulled his ass off the bed, leaning over him until Preston was virtually bent in two. Preston stared up into Manu's eyes, seeing the intensity in them. "Manu," he muttered again, his hand reaching up to palm his face.

He felt Manu pull out nice and slow before he suddenly pushed back in, and that was it. It was like his control had snapped. Manu's body moved rapidly in his, each thrust touching him in all the right places. Hard and deep, Manu owned his body. Preston could only hold on and go along for the ride, letting him do whatever he wanted.

He reached down, desperate to come, and stroked his dick in time with Manu's

thrusts. It didn't take long before he was shooting all over his stomach, with ropes of come splashing up over his chest.

"Aww, fuck," Manu muttered, watching Preston come. "Squeezing me so tight. Gonna fuck you all the time."

Preston panted, then glared. "Don't forget I fuck you too."

Manu leaned over Preston, his hand gripping Preston's hair and turning his head to one side, exposing his neck. He ran his fangs up and down Preston's neck, and Preston closed his eyes, waiting with bated breath for the moment Manu bit. He could already feel his balls pull up again, seconds after his first orgasm, and he was desperate to come again.

Manu's breath ghosted across his skin, and he heard Manu's stuttered breath seconds before he bit. Preston's body bowed as another orgasm barreled through it, and he heard Manu's deep grunts as he came. Preston felt heat in his ass, and he squeezed his muscles, wanting Manu to enjoy every second of their time together. Yeah, he was keeping that one quiet too. Didn't want to give Manu a big head.

Eventually, Manu moved back and licked the wound closed, laying slumped on top of Preston. Preston's heart beat rapidly in his chest, sweat cooling on his skin as he ran his hands up and down Manu's back, listening to him breathe.

After a minute or two, Preston wriggled his body. "You're heavy and I hurt. Get off."

Snorting, Manu rolled onto his side. "You're no lightweight yourself."

"You're a shifter. You can take my weight. I'm a lowly human, and your fat ass can squash me."

Manu sat up and glared down at Preston. “You calling me fat?”

Preston grinned and put his hands behind his head, being careful with his fingers. “You need a work out. Why don’t you get onboard and ride my dick?”

Scrambling off the bed, Manu grabbed his clothes. “I don’t know why I put up with you. How the fuck are we mated?”

“Because you fucked me and bit me. I told you not to, but you did it, anyway.” Preston sat up and looped his arms over his knees. “I know you love me. You can’t help it. Look at what I have to offer. How could you not love it?”

Manu’s eyes bugged. “How does your ego fit in this apartment?” Dressing roughly, Manu shook a finger at Preston. “I’m done.”

“I notice you didn’t deny loving me,” Preston shouted.

“I’ll love you with my fists in a minute!”

“Ohhh. Promises, promises. Nothing like a bit of pain with all the pleasure.” When the front door slammed, Preston fell back on the bed and laughed, ignoring the pain that lanced through his body. He could feel Manu’s anger through their bond and sighed.

Just so you know, I kinda have feelings for you too.

Like mine where I want to throw you off a bridge every time you open your mouth?

Here was me being all nice, and you ruined it. He could feel Manu’s anger build and grinned. I’ll suck your dick next time we see each other.

Now who's making promises? A few seconds passed then. I don't know why I care about you when you drive me insane.

Come back. There, olive branch extended. When there was no response, Preston added, please. There, he'd used the p word. What more did Manu want?

I need to go see Eli. I'll come after that.

Anything I can help with?

No... Thanks though. I'll see you later.

Preston lay on the bed and thought about what Manu needed to speak to Eli about. If he had to guess, he would put it down to two things: work and Alvin. Considering Manu had done nothing but talk about work since they'd pulled Preston's ass out of that room, he was leaning more toward Alvin.

Whatever it was, it was none of his business. Preston crawled under the covers and closed his eyes as a wave of fatigue rolled over him. Yeah, he needed to heal, and he needed sleep, and who knew? Maybe he wouldn't wake up alone. Now, that was strange. Preston wanting to wake up next to Manu.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:44 pm

“You know my mate died when I was a kid. How can Alvin be my mate?”

“Maybe someone somewhere decided you deserved a second chance?” It blew Manu’s mind that Eli had another mate. Eli was a loner. He had his place outside the village, liked to roam the woods in wolf form, and pretty much stayed away from people.

Being head of security was a role Eli was qualified for, and Manu couldn’t think of anyone better, but knowing Eli the way he did, he knew it made the shifter agitated on occasion.

Eli paced in front of him, and Manu waited him out. Eli’s silver eyes narrowed, and he stopped and dropped his head. “There has to be a mistake.”

“Why?” Manu asked softly. Yeah, he and his mate had an interesting road ahead of him, and even though Preston annoyed the fuck out of him, Manu actually couldn’t see his life without the human in it. They butted heads, but they worked well together when they needed to, and Manu knew Preston had his back. He’d proven that.

So yeah, they had a ways to go, and it might be the case that they always fought, but Manu actually enjoyed spending time with his mate, even when they argued. Not that he was ever going to admit that to Preston. The man had enough of an ego as it was, so Manu wasn’t helping it get any larger.

“I’m old enough to be his father for a start, and there are kids. Actual kids. I’ll have to do bedtime and homework and dealing with timeouts. I’m too old and cranky, and I want an easy life. This place and what’s going on is hard enough without a mate and

kids.”

“I have a mate.”

“Yeah, we all know how smoothly that’s going.” The sarcasm had Manu rolling his eyes. All true, of course. “You two spend more than five minutes in the same room and I need a timeout.” Eli rubbed his short blond hair and squinted at Manu. “You look freshly fucked.”

“And freshly out of there too. Said I was fat.”

Eli grinned. “Well, now that you mention it...”

“And back to you and Alvin.”

Eli threw himself in his chair, and Manu was surprised when it stayed upright. “I have to go back to avoiding him.”

“Back to avoiding him. How long have you known he was your mate?”

At least Eli had the grace to look away sheepishly, ducking his head and running his hand over his hair again. “A while.”

“And how long would that be?”

Straightening, Eli glared at Manu. “None of your fucking business.”

“You’re right, it isn’t, but it is Alvin’s. How long have you denied him his mate?” Manu stood and shook his head. “I’ve never once seen you run away from a fight, yet here you are.” Eli surged out of his chair, and Manu shouted, “No! When Alvin needed you the most, where were you? Hiding. Letting a kid—and that’s what he

was, a kid—deal with all the shit his parents left him with. And you knew? You knew he was your mate.”

“I would have stepped in if he needed me.” Eli lifted his chin and stared at Manu, but Manu remained unaffected.

“He needed you. You knew this, and you didn’t step in. You tucked tail and ran away. Hid.” Manu shook his head. “Pathetic, Eli. Pathetic.”

Manu left Eli’s office, ignoring him screaming his name. Standing outside, Manu huffed. “Idiot.” Seeing the sun beginning to set, Manu stared in the direction of Preston’s apartment. He had a mate too. Climbing into his truck, Manu started the engine and headed home. To Preston.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm

“Why the fuck do I put up with you?” Manu shouted as he threw a box out of the door. “You annoy me so much.”

“Please. You’d miss it if I didn’t annoy you at least once a day.”

“Miss it? It would mean I’d have a day of peace and quiet. A day to relax and unwind.”

“A day where we could fuck and fuck.” Preston grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “I’d love nothing better than spending the day in your ass.”

“You keep forgetting who is top dog here.”

Preston’s grin widened. “We both know who the dog is here, but he isn’t top dog.”

Manu growled and hurled himself over the bed and grabbed Preston, who laughed as he was thrown on the bed with Manu on top, holding him down. “I’m in charge.”

“You’d like to think so, but how do you know I didn’t say that so we would end up in this position?” Preston arched up and rubbed his hard dick on Manu’s ass. “Gonna ride me?”

“Why you?” Manu straightened, throwing his hands in the air. “Why? Haven’t I been a good shifter? I served my country, and now I protect my people. Why him?”

Preston fully burst out laughing, which only appeared to anger Manu more. Manu slammed their lips together, and Preston continued to laugh into their kiss. As they

both quickly stripped, Manu muttered, “So fucking annoying.”

“I think you like me,” Preston sang.

“On the odd day, I think I might like you too.”

A minute later and a lubed, stretched Manu was riding Preston’s dick. Exactly where Preston wanted him.

Life wasn’t perfect. Threats were circling around them, getting closer every day, but somehow Preston knew he and Manu were solid. Even if they did spend most of their time annoying each other. Maybe that was love. Maybe that was their kind of love.

The End

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm

What can I say about me? I have two boys who keep me on my toes and a cat who adopted us. She walked in one day and hasn't left. We might be getting a dog too. Who knows?

I love to read about men in love. Flawed, but strong men, who need some TLC and find their happy ending. I love to write about those same type of men too, sometimes with added kink! I also love to read horrors, thrillers and crime novels.

When I'm not trying to keep my boys in line, or writing about hot sexy men, I like to work on my allotment. I also like to read, to take walks in the countryside, and visit historical places. Recently, we went to Stonehenge and Avebury. It was an amazing experience.

Drop by website to find out information on what I'm working on, read my attempts at blogging, or to check out my back catalogue.

<http://www.megspritichardauthor.com>

Come and hang out with me at my facebook group, Megs Minions. I share news on upcoming books, freebies, sneak peaks, and so much more.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/MegsMinions/>

You can also sign up for my newsletter where you'll get first chance on freebies, updates and sales. I won't spam. I don't like it so I won't do it you.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm

Contemporary releases

Crossing Desires Series:

Raw, and emotional, the Crossing Desires series is full of self-discovery and acceptance. Awakening must be read first.

Awakening

Struggle

Second Chances Series:

Raw, and heart breaking, with some sweet sexy times, follow the lives of four former teenage rent boys who learn to love and trust. Books need to be read in order.

Take A Chance

(Angsty teenager, understanding older man.)

New Beginnings

(Guilt-ridden teenager, understanding, but dominant man. Mild BDSM.)

The Bonds Within

(A hidden relationship breaking all the rules.)

Breaking Free

(Mild BDSM with younger Dom and older sub.)

Sater's Creek Series:

With parents who like to know everything, Sater's creek is full of laughter, love and sweet hot loving. Each can be read as a standalone but better to be read in order.

Broken Promises

(Low angst, long distance relationship with best friends younger sibling.)

Open Hearts

(BFY, age-gap, with a sweet little boy thrown in.)

Healing Wounds

(Second chances, enemies to lovers, secret relationship.)

Building Bridges

(Enemies to lovers, age-gap, former bully meets his match.)

Hiscock Family Series:

This series has it all. Interfering family, sexual self-discovery, age-gap, leather and lace, funny kinky times and a Walter who says what he wants, when he wants.

Chasing Cain

(A vacation fling that becomes so much more. GFY, self-discovery, and Walter!)

Passionate Pearce

(A conference fling that leads to more with a Knox who is Walter's double. Nothing is left unsaid.)

Saucy Sullivan

(A chance meeting in a bar that leads to far more. GFY, age-gap and a snarky brother.)

Begging Beckett

(Coming home and facing memories. Age-gap, sassiness, secrets revealed, hurt/forgiveness, and Walter!)

Let Love In

A series where love is given the chance to grow and flourish. Has dogs and kids, age-gaps, and more!

Starting Over

(A man who needs love and care to overcome the obstacles he's faced. Age-gap, low angst, slow burn, and a dog!)

Five Dates

(A second chance at love novel. Low angst, with plenty of sexy times and HEA.)

Teach Me To Love

(A chance to love and learn and trust. A cute daughter, gorgeous dog, age-gap, and some fun sexy times.)

Paranormal releases

Rescue Inc Series:

A series about human/vampire relationships, with plenty of heat and action. Also, trying to save humans from a nefarious plot to take over the world. Books need to be read in order.

Mate of Mine

Forever Mine

Mine to Protect

Mine to Keep

Say You'll Be Mine

Please Be Mine

Mine for Eternity

Mine to Love

Mine to Save

Mine to Hold

Salutem Series:

If you love all things paranormal, then this series is for you. Shifters, vampires, and humans, finding love with lots of sexy times, all the feels, and danger around every corner.

What He Needs

The Best Mistake

A Cold Winter's Night

Fate's Way

To Breathe Again

Safe In Your Arms

Under My Skin

Wild At Heart

Color Of My Love

The Devil You Know

When Love Calls

Coming 2024

All Bed Things

Coming 2024

Morefield Village Series:

A spin of paranormal series from the Salutem series. Shifters, vampires, and humans, finding love. Lots of feels and sexy time, plus danger everywhere.

Waiting For You

Free To Breath

Safe At Last

A Time To Heal

A Place To Call Home

You're reading it now!

Following Fate

Coming June 2024

Reading Order for Salutem (S) and Morefield Village (MFV)

What He Needs(S)

The Best Mistake(S)

A Cold Winter's Night(S)

Fate's Way(S)

To Breathe Again(S)

Safe In Your Arms(S)

Under My Skin(S)

Waiting For You(MFV)

Free To Breath(MFV)

Safe At Last(MVF)

A Time To Heal(MFV)

Wild At Heart(S)

Color Of My Love(S)

The Devil You Know(S)

Coming 2024

A Place To Call Home

Following Fate

When Love Calls

All Bed Things

Live By Night Series – Coming 2024

In The Dark

All Night Long

By The Moon

With The Stars

Fly By Night

Darkness Takes Over

Daddy Kink

Daddy-licious Series:

Emotional, sweet and sexy, with a side order of kink. All the books can be read as standalone, but better if read in order.

Finding His Daddy

(A little finding his way and a Daddy moving on from a painful past.)

His Perfect Daddy

(A determined little and a stubborn Daddy learning to love, together)

Daddy's Boy

(A little in need of love and support, and a Daddy patient to help him. Plus, a younger sister determined to make her brother suffer!)

Daddy's Choice

(A shy older little and a younger caring Daddy. Age-gap, age-play, mild BDSM)

Club Electra

A place where you can go and have fun with your friends and become who you're truly meant to be. A Daddy and little club.

By Your Hand

(A little discovering the lifestyle and a Daddy more than willing to show him. Age-play, age-gap, mild BDSM)

Under Your Touch

(A hurt older little and a determined younger Daddy. Age-play, age-gap, ABDL, mild BDSM)

Touch Of Skin

(A hurt boy and a caring Daddy. Age-play, ABDL, mild D/s play)

Passion You Bring

(A younger boy and a caring older Daddy. With lots of patience, mild D/s play, age-play, age-gap)

Slide Of Skin

(A younger boy with and older daddy both learning their kinks. Age-play, age-gap, mild BDSM)

Yours To Touch

(A younger boy with a daughter, and an older man introducing him to a certain kind of kink. Age-play, cute little girl, mild BDSM)

Dark Romance

Twisted – Coming 2024

Ours

Taken

Held

Mine

Standalones

Terrible Twos

Red and Blue

Denim by Design

Part of the Model Love series

Beauty Bound

Dark Romance featuring themes some may find uncomfortable

Part of the Grim Delights series

Valentines Day

Growing Pains

A free short story provided when signing up for my newsletter

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