



# A Queen and Her Knight: Short Stories from the Being(s) in Love Universe

**Author:** *R. Cooper*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A collection of previously posted side stories from the world of the Beings, featuring familiar beloved characters alongside some bright new faces. Watch Rennet the Imp and Little Wolf fret over their happily-ever-afters. Visit with smitten fairies, yearning dragons, and awkwardly pining werewolves. Or enjoy the start of a mischievous courtship, the devotion and longing of an older werewolf for his shy younger mate, and a cranky human surprising himself by doing the right thing.

Stories will include: general fiction and romance with m/f, m/m, f/f pairings

The Being(s) in Love Series

Magical creatures known as beings emerged from hiding amid the destruction of the First World War. Since then, they've lived on the margins of the human world as misunderstood objects of fear and desire. Some are beautiful, others fearsome and powerful. Yet for all their magic and strength, they are as vulnerable as anyone when it comes to matters of the heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted, probably on Livejournal, circa 2013.

Set far before the events of Some Kind of Magic

Summary: A gay teenage werewolf in a heteronormative human world. (Ray likes a boy.) Gen.

Baseball practice after school meant Ray got home just after sunset, but he was still surprised to see his mom at home too. Working in the law office meant she kept whatever hours her boss kept, but they must not have had a pressing case tonight because his mom's car was in the driveway and he could see lights on in the kitchen.

Ray didn't swear out loud, not with her sharp hearing, but he picked up his backpack and his gym bag and moved as quickly as he could through the back door and past the kitchen.

"Raymond."

Ray froze at the single word, then heaved a sigh.

"Hey, mom,"

he started as he turned around. He dropped his bags and came forward into the kitchen to kiss her cheek. He didn't have to stoop, but she turned her cheek up anyway, so Ray tried to keep himself angled sideways so she wouldn't see.

He still didn't know if it was a mother thing or her greater experience with filtering

out smells letting her detect hurt/pain/wound , but she inhaled sharply and then grabbed his arm with one hand. She used the other to turn his face toward her.

Ray could have shaken her off—he was stronger now and still growing—but at her soft growl, he ducked his head and held still.

He'd been planning on running out into the woods behind their house tonight and shifting for a hunt so the extra strength would make him heal faster. A hunt where he could stretch and be himself, not hunch his shoulders to fit in small high school doorways, where he didn't have to hold back. Just the wolf and the scents of wild and free . That was the only time Ray felt normal anymore.

Now his mom was gently touching the tender skin around his left eye. He half expected her to put some of the raw meat out on the counter in front of her on his face, but instead she took a piece of the bloody steak and popped it in his mouth.

Then she let go of him and went back to preparing dinner.

Ray was actually starving. He always seemed to be starving these days. He'd wake up bigger and taller, with more hair all over him, and be hungrier than he'd ever been in his life. So he chewed and swallowed before looking at her again.

“I was going to ask if you'd thought about what we talked about on Saturday, but I guess now I'll just ask, was anyone else hurt?”

She meant: had he hurt any humans ?

Ray shook his head. Not much. Just what it had taken to push the other guy off and let him know it would be a mistake to try that again. One slight push of Ray's paw—hand—and the guy had been on his ass on the dirt in front of everyone, eyes wide with real fear before he'd hidden it.

Ray had had to stop himself from shaking, or shifting, or following the action with another, like going for the throat.

He realized he was snarling and stopped, flushing hot. His mother wouldn't blame him for that; she was always telling him and his sister that puberty was a hard time for werewolf, saying it so often it was embarrassing. But she was right. Everything made him want to shift or pounce. He was always too hot.

"They are weaker than we are and don't know any better. But for this to work, they can't fear us."

She took a sip of her white wine. Ray didn't know why his mom liked wine, except to flavor her cooking. He didn't know why anyone liked it, honestly. He would have tolerated the taste the way he tolerated stolen beer at house parties, to fit in without making a scene, but he wouldn't drink it on his own. She might have gotten into the habit from doing the same thing. It was always about appeasing humans. Even....

Ray sighed and kicked the fridge, lightly, with his cleat. "I know they're weaker. But he said..."

He shut his mouth and clenched his jaw.

Senior prom was coming up. Everyone was supposed to go—with a date. Even the were people wanted on their team because he swung the bat harder than anyone else but didn't really want to hang out with because he didn't like beer, or couldn't get drunk, or because he didn't want to date a cheerleader.

"It doesn't matter,"

Ray finally rumbled, barely suppressing a growl. "He was right."

“ Raymond .”

Ray looked over at his mother through his loose, falling hair. She stood tall and straight, her hair without a touch of gray, her arms toned as she sliced up more steak. She smelled like perfume and wine and blood, a weird mix like iron/strength and soft/warm .

He looked at the floor. “No one is going to go with me,”

he muttered. Not who he wanted anyway.

His mother made a noise.

“Didn’t I tell you on Saturday that Cici next door said she’d go with you?”

Ray hadn’t forgotten. How could he when the humiliation of being found a date by his mother made him squirm? Cici’s family lived on the next property over, just on the outskirts of town, and had gotten used to their werewolf neighbors years ago.

Cici was fifteen and pimply and very sweet but....

“She isn’t who... She’s not....”

Ray bit back the rest and turned. He opened the fridge and rooted around so he wouldn’t have to turn back, finally taking out the milk carton to have a long drink from it. Any other time, his mother would have lightly smacked the back of his head for that. Now she just waited, patient.

“Raymond.”

Worry/worry/worry radiated from her. He had to turn back. “Have you asked

anyone?”

“No.”

That made it worse. Ray closed his eyes, but suddenly all he could see was himself trying to ask that question, how his voice would change, subtly drop into a growl the longer he talked. As close as he'd have to be to ask, his instincts would be so much stronger, overpowering, and he wanted... he wanted....

The growl emerged despite his struggling. He opened his eyes to stare at his mother, absolutely mortified. Her eyes were so wide, he couldn't help himself—he howled.

“I don't want to go with a girl, all right? I want to take Bradley Carmichael!”

Take him. That was exactly right. Ray had barely ever spoken to him, didn't dare, but he didn't care about the dance, he wanted to take him, to get Bradley in his dad's old truck, and pin him down, and just bury himself in him. Find out his scent, his up-close, turned-on scent, and lick it up. He wanted to taste him, and Ray still wasn't sure about anything, what to do outside of pictures and porn, but he wanted that, again and again.

With someone he'd never even spoken to since grade school. He wasn't even sure when it had happened. The feelings weren't new—when he'd been about thirteen, any pleasant scent had set him off to the point where he'd had to take time off from school and disappear into the woods until he could control himself in public—but they were so much stronger now. Nearly unbearable.

He liked Bradley, liked his shiny blond hair, his loud, sassy way of talking and commanding attention, how funny he was in the school plays, the way he sang. He liked how he looked back at Ray sometimes, like he'd never seen anyone so fascinating.

But Ray was already enough of a freak at school. People should have been used to beings by now, but the old lies and prejudices remained, and this.... Even if Ray did ask, he was sure Bradley would say no.

And his mom, what was she going to think? It wasn't hated among his kind, but their pack was so small, just the three of them, and Ray was supposed to be....

He jumped as his mom came forward and took his face in her hands.

“Raymond,”

she said, and her gaze, her smell, were so much calmer now, even amused. He glared at her, but there wasn't much force in it. She spoke as if she didn't even see it. “You have been spending too much time with the humans. They forget things they once knew. There was this fairy once....”

The idea of his mother talking to a fairy at all was distracting, but Ray didn't get a chance to ask.

“What I'm saying is, ask this boy, Raymond. If you think our people would care, then you've forgotten everything I've taught you. And most humans have long ago stopped bothering about that when they have bigger things to be afraid of.”

She smiled, her canines very obvious.

Ray couldn't speak. Which was probably for the best when his mom stepped away and went back to her steak and wine.

“Don't act so surprised,”

she went on smoothly. “Your father and I could smell the infatuation all over you

every time you met a new little boy. It isn't like we didn't know. Now go get cleaned up for dinner."

Ray stared at her for another moment, his face burning so much he forgot about his eye, and then turned to leave the room and go clean up.

The End

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted as part of a charity event in 2023

Set long before the events of Treasure for Treasure or His Mossy Boy

Summary: Azar Xu comes home for the summer intent on finally getting her treasure to notice her. She is a teenager, so this does not go well. m/f

Tags: Age difference (but the feelings are one-sided. Think teen with a crush.) Body issues.

“There you are, my gorgeous queen. You only had to ask.”

Bernard’s low, warm voice was audible even on the landing where Azar stopped to listen and quickly check to make sure the hair around her bun was smooth.

She took a step to peer down the stairs at Bernard, who was dusting and speaking to the house. Of course, it was the house. Azar didn’t know why she’d thought anything else, no matter how briefly. Bernard loved the house. Azar’s family had a claim on it, stronger than anyone’s except the one who had built it, but to Bernard it was his .

He never said that, not to them, anyway. But he said it to the house all the time.

Azar put a hand to the banister, which was well-polished wood that gleamed in the morning light. Probably preening for Bernard. If any house could preen, it would be this one, and it certainly wouldn’t do it for Azar.

“Going to have you looking exquisite.”

Bernard was practically cooing. “There will be no complaints.”

Bernard didn't use a feather duster. He said a duster only spread the dust around. He used soft, clean cloths and went through the house room by room on a regular schedule even when he was the only one there. He didn't wear a uniform; he wore jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers, and after only one attempt, her parents had given up trying to make him wear anything else. Azar wished she knew how he'd managed that.

He had somewhat wild hair at the moment, shining like the banister, and metal in his ears and leather cuffs at his wrists. Those were new or he didn't normally wear them where Azar or Zarrin would see.

Azar continued down the stairs before he could look up and find her watching him, tugging one last time on the hem of her red shorts when it felt like they were riding higher than she would have preferred. After the disaster of her arrival last night, she'd wanted to look better—more put together.

She didn't like flying.

Thankfully, no one in her family had caught on to that, but her fears plus turbulence had left Azar shaken.

She'd had days of exams and studying before then, which she'd been grateful for at the time since they'd meant she'd had that to focus on and not her impending summer at the mansion.

She never knew what to feel about the place where her parents sent her and Zarrin when they didn't want to deal with them.

She loved the woods.

She liked the house. She loved her brother. She hated that she was sent there because her parents were not proud of her.

And Bernard was there.

She'd seen him first thing as she'd gotten out of the car. Bernard had been on the porch with Zarrin, already home. Well... home was what the mansion was to Zarrin, like with Bernard. Azar was merely in a familiar house, but the two of them were home .

She had been a sleepless disaster: hair in a drooping ponytail, tired eyes, hungry because she hadn't eaten on the plane, her study materials in her arms while the hired driver got her bags. Bernard came forward to take them in a band shirt with rolled-up short sleeves that clung to his biceps.

The driver had been trying not to show his fear of dragons but Azar had smelled it most of the way, distracting and uncomfortable and made worse when the driver stepped away from her before she could thank him.

Then Bernard had said, "Studying already?"

with a disapproving glance over Azar. "It's your summer vacation."

A cloud of something had taken over Azar for those to be his first words to her in months. She'd walked past Bernard to greet Zarrin, and told him she was tired and wanted to go to bed, then left them both there, staring after her.

Azar was no kind of valedictorian. Of course, she wasn't, no matter how hard she worked. But she didn't want to disappoint her parents even more, so she studied in her spare moments. Bernard had probably just been worried, and instead of recognizing that, Azar had been rude and stupid because she was tired and Bernard

had.... It didn't matter. She was determined to do better now, anyway.

She kept her book in one hand at her hip, because she did need to study to get a jump on next year and stay ahead, but she kept the title facing out in case Bernard happened to have read *The Cherry Orchard* and might want to talk about it.

She had a pencil case with her highlighters in her other hand, and tapped her rose-red fingernail on it before she controlled her nerves.

Her nails were already red, but she'd painted them to match her lipstick.

She'd only done a hint of eye makeup, not wanting to seem too obvious, and chosen a simple necklace of small gold chain for the same reason.

Her earrings—hoops as large as she dared—were less subtle but she thought they went with the twist of her bun.

Without her parents around to see, she'd put on clothes borrowed from her roommate, red shorts that rested high on her thighs, but her roommate insisted Azar had the legs for them.

Azar had almost put on a tank top, but then worried about her chest.

Flat was fine for a dragon, but might not appeal to others, so she'd thrown on a loose, long-sleeved shirt with thumb holes at the cuffs that she'd cut in herself—another piece of clothing she never wore around her parents.

She was casual and comfortable and elegant.

Last night might not ever have happened.

The staircase gave her away and creaked beneath her tennis shoes.

Bernard looked up.

Azar's heart pushed against her ribs and was nearly consumed by the fire inside her. A shock went all the way down to her toes and she worried she might trip, and then that she might blush. She could never seem to be cold-blooded how she was supposed to be, and wouldn't forgive herself if it happened to her now, with Bernard gazing up at her as she came down the stairs.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Azar,"

he said. Azar felt herself slow and then stop. Bernard hadn't put down his dusting cloth. "I was expecting Zarrin to wake up first,"

he went on. "He mentioned wanting to go on an early hike." Bernard glanced over Azar much as he had done the night before. He frowned and then possibly smiled, but it was so quick Azar might have imagined it. "There's no way your mother approved of those shorts."

Azar glanced down without thinking. All of her tugging had not lowered the hem any. "I'm nearly eighteen,"

she answered without thinking, louder than she'd meant to speak. "She doesn't dress me."

"Okay,"

Bernard said, lifting his hands in a placating sort of way that he had no business using. "I take it from that you could use some breakfast."

“Take it from what?”

Azar asked in return, even louder before she caught herself and looked away from Bernard’s incredulous face. She realized a little too late what he meant and her voice crept higher again. “You think I’m upset because I haven’t eaten?”

“Don’t worry.”

Bernard gave her a warm, crooked smile to go with his warm, friendly voice. Warm and friendly because he thought Azar was being irrational and ridiculous because she was hungry. “When I heard you were coming back this summer as well...”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Azar clutched her pencil case so hard it should have broken in two. “It’s as much my house as Zarrin’s.”

“Of course, it is.”

Bernard’s eyebrows came together. Then he bent down to set his dusting cloth aside before he straightened back up. He cleared his throat. “I was just letting you know that I made some brioche for your french toast.”

Her french toast meant the recipe with brioche, orange peel, honey, and cinnamon that Bernard had discovered in his first years of figuring out how to be a housekeeper. Zarrin liked it but Azar loved it. Bernard directed another brief smile her way, sending more lightning through Azar’s nervous system. “I got berries and cream too. I can make simple pancakes to satisfy Zarrin but you always did have a sweeter sweet tooth.”

Azar stared at him with eyes that almost felt like they were burning. “Yes, when I

was a child.”

She was only one or two steps from the bottom of the stairs. One or two steps above him, and then another one or two steps from where he was standing. Close enough for her to see the quirk of his eyebrow and the way he pursed his lips.

Because he thought she still was a child. Or just childish.

Azar drew herself up, although she was not a large dragon. “I don’t eat that anymore. I’ll have oatmeal.”

“Oatmeal?”

Bernard was absolutely astonished. “You loathe oatmeal.”

“No, I don’t,”

Azar insisted. Then, uncomfortable with the lie, added, “I have it every day at school.”

“Because that’s what they serve.”

Bernard stared at her while his eyebrows came together again. “That’s why you hate it. You said so last year.”

“I’m surprised you remember,”

Azar returned immediately, crossing her arms and then uncrossing them because the pose gave away too much.

“Oh, yes?”

Bernard answered with a hint of the attitude that he gave to rude delivery people, or to anyone in town who stared at him, or, occasionally, to Azar's parents. But Azar barely had time to notice it before Bernard sighed and gestured loosely at something. "Is this how it's going to be this summer, Miss Azar? Just like winter break?"

Miss Azar . He never called Zarrin Mr. Zarrin . Azar was the only one who got that nickname. She'd used to think it was done out of fondness, but it clearly wasn't. Bernard was mocking her.

And why shouldn't he? Zarrin had hobbies and interests.

Azar didn't have anything but a room full of books hidden in the closet and in her bureau under her clothes so her parents wouldn't worry about her wasting her time on novels.

She didn't know what Bernard thought of them, but he definitely knew about them.

She shied away from the memory from a few years ago, and how she'd been heading outside to hike and read, and a novel had fallen from her bag and Bernard had been the one to pick it up; a thick paperback from the library, the cover red and pink, with a human woman with large, heaving breasts in the arms of a tall, dark-haired human man.

The title had been A Rake for the Duchess .

Azar would have to study all summer to stay near the top of her class.

She wouldn't go anywhere or do anything.

She wasn't permitted to travel during school breaks, and she had no license, so she couldn't even drive into Everlasting.

She'd half hoped Bernard might teach her if she could get a permit in time.

But now she decided bitterly that he would probably think she'd needed a car seat.

"Is what how it's going to be?"

she demanded with all of that on her mind. "I can't imagine we'll have much interaction."

She raised her chin. "I don't mingle with staff."

Bernard's mouth fell open as he took a step back. He swallowed, then narrowed his eyes. "Is that what you've learned at that boarding school they made you go to?"

"What do you care?"

Azar nearly hissed it, and shook to think of what she must look and sound like. Probably flushed and loud enough to wake Zarrin. She was nearly eighteen. Her parents had already started to introduce her to other dragons, hoping for a match because they didn't yet realize.... Azar took a deep breath and made herself quiet and haughty the way that other dragons liked. "Never mind. I won't bother with breakfast. I'll just have coffee."

Bernard's voice went flat. "You hate coffee."

"Coffee is perfectly fine,"

Azar the dragon said and descended the rest of the stairs. She went past Bernard without looking at him, although there was frustration in the air. She could taste it.

"I have the kitchen set up for your tea,"

Bernard said, not evenly. “You want your tea.”

He didn’t ask. He got that way sometimes. Certain. It was probably elf magic.

Azar briefly stopped but still could not look at him. “You don’t know me as well as you think you do. No coffee either, then?”

She raised her head but didn’t meet his stare. “I’ll prepare it myself.”

“That is my kitchen.”

Bernard had no problem facing her, or snapping at her, dragon or not.

But Azar wasn’t much of one. So she said what her mother would have said. “Then do your job.”

Of course, Bernard wasn’t intimidated by Azar’s mother. What he could be was hurt, and Azar had hurt him. She could not have done this worse.

She brought her gaze up to Bernard’s eyes, as warm as the rest of him, though a gentler heat than the fire inside Azar. “Sorry,”

she said quietly and pulled her book to her chest. “I’m going out. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

She had hurt him, but Bernard stopped her again in concern. “You need to eat. You had no dinner either.”

Azar almost pulled her lower lip in between her teeth, but then remembered the rose-red she’d stupidly put on her mouth. A blush did nothing for the feeling in her chest. “You don’t tell me what I need.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,”

Bernard said, tricking Azar’s heart into pounding even though Bernard had to be talking to the house. “If Miss Azar wants oatmeal, then I will prepare oatmeal.”

Azar was so hot she shivered.

He didn’t mean it. He was being condescending because he knew Azar really did loathe oatmeal.

“I’m not hungry,”

she answered at last, as frostily as she could with her fire like this.

“Azar,”

Bernard began, taking a moment before speaking again, “did you not want to come home?”

“Home?”

Azar echoed softly, barely audible even to herself.

“Maybe,”

Bernard was still halting, finally uncertain, “you got a boyfriend and didn’t want to leave him? A girlfriend? I suppose it’s about time you started doing that. I guess I just don’t think of you as old enough.”

He laughed a little.

Azar looked up.

Bernard stared back at her, stunned silent. By what, Azar didn't immediately understand. She gazed back, wishing she'd never come here. Then she saw why Bernard was staring.

There was gray smoke around her.

Gray, as if Azar hadn't given enough away already.

"Azar,"

Bernard tried, "did I... do something?"

"No."

Azar was beyond blushing, beyond hot. She was about to explode, nearly out of control. Like a disappointment. Like a child. "No, it's nothing. Never mind."

Bernard only stared, a frown forming as he considered Azar's display.

If it would have made a difference, Azar would have apologized, but there was no way to do that without telling him everything. How very silly he would find it. He would be embarrassed for her, the rude child. The dragon who could not even.... Her parents were right.

"I have to study,"

she muttered, not allowing the word she wanted most to say to pass her rose-red lips. Then she turned and was out the front door and running for the safety of the trees.

The End

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2013

Set before A Dandelion for Tulip or Sweet Clematis

Summary: Frangipani is a beautiful, hot fairy who nonetheless can't seem to get the attention of one particular, fascinating human. m/m

“Hey there,”

Frangipani began, only to immediately fall silent, because wow, way to sound like an idiot. Thankfully, there wasn't so much as a twitch from the boy he'd been trying to talk to, the impossibly cute human boy deeply engrossed in his book, so if Frangi wanted, he could slip away right now in a flutter of wings and humiliation.

He would have, if that hadn't been what he'd done last time, and the time before that, and the time before that . Just thinking of it made Frangi let out a small whimper and slink back to the wrought-iron table in the café's patio area, where his vanilla-caramel mocha with a dash of praline syrup was waiting for him. It was his sixth of the morning, and at this rate, he was going to burn through his college money in coffee alone.

Maybe if the shiniest human he had ever laid eyes on didn't come to this coffee shop every day for what must be his downtime between classes, and maybe if that human didn't sit outside so the breeze could stir his light hair and make it fall in front of his eyes so he would absently brush it away as he kept reading, and maybe if he didn't always get the cheapest drip coffee to save money but then drop a quarter in the tip jar, then Frangi could give up and fly away and get his sugar somewhere else.

But he wasn't so lucky. In fact, Frangi would swear he'd been cursed with this. This... this condition, as he was starting to call it. The stuttering tongue, the cold uncertainty in his stomach, the heat in his cheeks. He knew what humans called this, but he wasn't human, and he knew that couldn't be the case. The human was simply very shiny, so shiny that Frangi was kind of amazed that every other being on campus wasn't as drawn to him as he was. It was strange enough to him that the other humans didn't seem to see anything special about this boy.

Frangi thought him beautiful. Handsome, yeah, but Frangi had always had a weakness for a human male with a strong jaw. He fluttered a little closer at the thought, trying to display his body as best he could despite shivering every few moments. The fall days were colder than he liked. Most fairies did not take well to cold, and Frangi's kind, used to tropical climates, suffered more than most. Winter was on its way, but he didn't want to think of that now, and stretched in the open air to feel the sun soak into his skin.

The sun perked him up more than his morning's intake of sugar and he raised his face toward it, stilling his wings and then extending them to absorb the heat. His wings were sheer white, tipped with a yellow-gold, the same yellow-gold that swirled through his brown eyes and tinted his black hair. He had tucked a white flower behind his ear that morning, full of hope and determination that today would be the day he got this human's attention.

Sure, okay, he'd swiped the flower from a professor's garden, but if the humans didn't want fairies taking their flowers, they should allow gardens in the on-campus housing. And the flower made him look good.

Better. It made him look better. Fairies already looked good, especially to humans, and Frangipani was no exception. If past experience was anything to go by, Frangipani was even more of a draw to these mainland humans with his warm brown skin and sunny smile. Humans, all humans, liked him.

Except this one. The shiniest one. The one who did not smile, but wore ragged, thin jeans, ratty sneakers, and thick glasses with a scratch in the lens. The one who had a pink mouth and kind eyes, and skin that burned in the sun, and who shined —so brightly that silver lights streaked around him when he moved. He was different , that shine said, he was special , and Frangipani wanted him.

He wanted him so much he had accepted this daily shame of coming here to stare at him, which was something fairies did not do, because they did not have to do it. They were beautiful, and the beautiful did not pine.

His sister, the Lit major at the University of Hawai'i might disagree and quote a fairy poem of longing at him, but he could never tell her about this. She would never let him hear the end of it.

Frangi let out a sigh and dropped his head. The boy, his boy, looked up, giving him one startled, blue-eyed glance that clearly said he thought he'd been alone out on the chilly patio, then swept a look over Frangi's bare chest before quickly ducking back down over his book.

Frangipani sighed again and flopped down in the nearest chair. He put his chin in his hands and stared morosely at the rosy color painting the human's cheeks, which was a positively lovely sight. Frangi must have embarrassed him. Yes, it was a little cold to be walking around bare-chested, but anyone who had been around fairies before should be used to that, and Frangi had a very pleasing chest.

A sweatshirt would have been nice, though. The one his boy was wearing seemed especially comfortable. Frangi wanted to sit on his lap and slide his hands underneath it to feel bare skin. He could apologize for his cold fingers with a kiss, something soft, just there , under the human's ear, and laugh if it tickled and he finally got the boy to smile. The boy rarely smiled. Obviously, he was working hard at school, but if he had friends, Frangi never saw them. He'd pulled out a phone a few times and

texted back and forth, but Frangi had never heard it ring, or overheard him make plans on a Friday night. He'd never even heard him laugh out loud.

"I bet your laugh is amazing,"

Frangipani told him softly, unsurprised when that got no response. The boy continued to frown down at a gigantic Chem text. Frangi was half a second away from doing the Bend and Snap out of desperation, and wouldn't his roommates think that was hilarious? Rooming with other beings had its downside, even if they did understand his lack of a sleep schedule and inability to stay dressed for the periods of time that humans seemed to need to stay dressed.

Clothing wasn't natural; there was no way around it. But Frangi looked at the boy's university sweatshirt again and imagined it draped over him in the library while he waited for the boy to finish his studying so they could go out.

Which was a thought that made him pause, because Frangi wanted to roll around naked with this human. He didn't want to date him. Frangi didn't even know him, and anyway, he was too young to be settling down. Frangi had decades before he had to start considering settling down, especially with a human. But then he wondered if the boy liked flowers, or boys, or fairies.

"Can't you just look up, and see me, and drag me away for sex?"

Frangipani asked, though there was no one around to object if they were to have sex right there. If the boy was shy, as humans tended to be when it came to things like public fucking, then they could go somewhere else, but Frangi would have been fine out here on the patio, slipping down to suck him off under the table, or straddling his lap to kiss him, or bending him over a table to trust between his pale thighs until they were rosy too. Maybe the boy liked to top, maybe he was fierce and strong, and he'd kiss back hard and tug Frangi close by his hair. Maybe....

What was the use of dreaming of it? Frangi morosely cut himself off before he could get too excited. He stood up, loudly scraping his chair against the cement and stalking back over to his coffee, which he drained in a gulp while wishing he could get drunk and forget everything the way humans did.

He gathered up his things and slung his bag over one shoulder, then decided that no matter how tempted he was, tomorrow he'd get his coffee somewhere else. The pastries weren't even that good here. He had to pour sugar on top of his donuts to make them edible.

Of course, feeling so resolved didn't keep him from turning around to get one last look at the shiny boy—or from jumping in surprise to find the shiny boy standing a foot away and looking right at him.

Frangi made an embarrassingly squeaky noise and flew backwards into the table, knocking his paper cup to the ground, though he didn't risk bending over to get it. At this rate, he'd probably fall on his ass.

His wings were racing faster than the rush of his heart, but he did his best to lean against his wobbling table and look like a graceful fairy of legend, or at least like a sexy potential hookup at a bar. His stomach flipped uncontrollably, but he ignored it and smiled widely.

The boy's lips parted at his smile, but he frowned without smiling back. He focused on Frangipani's mouth for a moment, his eyebrows in a tight line, and then he raised a hand. Between two of his fingers was the flower Frangi had tucked behind his ear that morning. Frangi reached up automatically to feel for it at his ear, but it was gone. He hadn't really expected a haole from the mainland to understand what he was trying to say with that flower, but he still felt stupid to know that it must have fallen to the ground sometime during today's attempt to get the guy's attention.

“Sorry,”

he mumbled, feeling even more like a dumbass when the guy frowned harder. But he accepted the flower with the lightest, most careful touch he could manage with the boy this close. Despite his efforts, their fingers touched. Frangi shivered, and thought it was his imagination that the silver, shining light around the boy seemed to flare brighter.

That was the sun playing with his aura of fairy glitter, Frangi told himself, but held his breath when the boy didn't move away. There was still that pink blush in his cheeks, slowly spreading to his ears the longer he stood there. Frangipani hesitated with the flower in his hand, then slipped it over his ear, only to be completely taken aback when the boy stared at it with wide eyes and then at Frangi's mouth a second before he dropped his head. His blush went from pink to red, and he was so close he felt like sunlight. Frangi cupped the boy's cheek without thinking, then remembered he was dealing with a human, and humans tended to be awkward about that kind of thing, the way they were about clothes, and sugar, and the natural beauty that fairies had to offer. He pulled his hand away and stood there, waiting for the boy look back at him.

He could do this. He could speak.

“Howzit? I mean, hi! I mean, nice day,”

he blurted, and briefly closed his eyes at his own stupidity. “I sound like an idiot,”

he complained a second later. “Talking isn't something I have much practice with. I mean, not to get someone to sleep with me. That makes me sound like a jerk, doesn't it?” He pushed out a breath and wondered why his human was glancing from his mouth to his eyes with startled intensity. “Maybe you just don't like fairies, huh?” Frangi pondered aloud, more to himself since the guy still hadn't answered him. “Or

maybe you want a fairy who is less of a dork. My sister always calls me a dork. So did the kids in high school. Maybe it's true." Frangipani huffed at the memory and got his wings under control at last. He looked deep into ocean blue eyes, past the scratch in the right lens of the guy's glasses. "I still talk plenty though, eh? Sorry."

"No!"

The human burst out, almost too loud for just the two of them, and frowned so deeply that Frangipani wanted to apologize again. He must have had a weird look on his face anyway, because the boy shook his head and wet his lips before speaking again. "No, but please speak slower,"

he enunciated, still loud, and watched Frangi's mouth.

The frown on the boy's face wasn't going anywhere. Frangi studied him, totally confused, until he realized what was going on.

His smile returned and he bounced back to life, extending his wings with a flash of gold glitter.

"Thank you for my flower,"

he said, as slowly as he could, making sure the boy could read his lips as well as his sincerity, and was warmed all over by the boy's answering grin.

The human ducked his head, like he was shy and delicious after all, but when his gaze came up it was bold and bright. "You haven't worn it before."

This time he moved his hands as he spoke, using ASL, which Frangi could only wish he understood.

Frangipani reached up to touch the petals. His wings were creating a breeze of their own, stirring the boy's hair and sending it into his eyes.

“You noticed?”

Frangi nearly panted it, a dork to the core. “I mean,”

he belatedly tried to stay cool, “I mean, my name is....” Hesitant over the unusual word, he paused, then leaned in, “Frangipani.” They were close enough to kiss. He wondered if the boy would mind, and flicked a look up into his eyes, which were wide and stunned and really pretty. For a human. For anyone.

The boy's hands curled, skittering out like he had a thought he didn't share, so Frangi said it again. “Frangipani,”

he pronounced, then shrugged, “or just Frangi.”

“Adam,”

the boy volunteered and brushed his hair impatiently from his eyes. Frangipani had wanted to do that for him, but only sighed and inched in closer.

“Adam,”

Frangi repeated, liking the quick, happy grin that appeared on Adam's serious face, “Hey there.”

The End

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2016

Set before the events of Little Wolf

Summary: Graham knows something is up with Albert but no one will tell him what it is. m/m

Graham wasn't certain what was wrong with Albert. He wasn't—he didn't mean to be—so attuned to Albert's moods. It was more that Albert was usually so easy to be around that when he wasn't, when his scent was sour with agitation and worry and he couldn't be still, Graham noticed.

Of everyone else in town, Albert was always the easiest to be around. Albert never pestered Graham for reading too much instead of playing or going up to the Meadows with the other weres his age. Albert didn't sniff around him in confusion or make comments about “late bloomers”

in a consoling voice, as if Graham needed to be consoled about something.

Graham knew what they meant, of course. They meant the surge of hormones associated with puberty. He could hardly miss it. He was were too, despite how they treated him. He had a body, and it reacted to the constant hot/salt/iron scent of arousal in all his classmates even when he wished it wouldn't.

But Graham didn't smell like that for anyone. He didn't glance around his class and see anyone who made him want to frolic, or howl, or do something equally silly. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

But then, at other times, when he raised his head from his studies and found Albert pacing, or staring out the windows, and it was more obvious that Graham was missing something, he felt a spike of anger. Albert felt everything the other weres did. That was why the other weres would understand what was bothering Albert now, but all Graham could do was watch Albert look out at the snow.

Albert was supposed to be studying with him, although they were in different classes and Albert didn't care much about most schoolwork. He did well enough to graduate, but when adults mentioned college, he shrugged and glanced away.

The adults would turn to Graham then, as if something was wrong. Again .

Graham wrinkled his nose in annoyance, then inhaled, leaving his mouth open to catch more scent. His bedroom smelled like books and some dust and the lingering scent of semen from the times he masturbated. But that was all distant and already fading compared to the steady warmth of Albert . Albert-scent was forever a muddle even though Graham knew it intimately and would recognize it anywhere. Albert was grass, and sharp wind, and something else, as familiar as Graham's old blanket.

Usually, Graham could breathe easier, study with more focus when Albert was in his room. But Albert's scent today was colder and nearly painful, like ice or grated lemon peel, and Albert wasn't on his bed with him, curled up with a textbook. Albert was in Graham's desk chair, staring out at the moon over the snow.

The silvery light made him appear sad, as if he wanted to be out beneath the moon and not with Graham.

Graham took a breath and only then noticed the heavy quiet in the room. "Albert."

He was surprised at how soft his voice was.

But Albert turned, and his long hair streamed across his face. His eyes were bright until he blinked. “Yeah?”

He gave Graham a smile—and that was almost unthinkable. It was almost a lie.

Graham considered the facts, ignoring the knowledge he was always missing because until he knew what that was, he couldn’t do anything about it.

“Are you going to stay here when you graduate in the spring?”

Lots of kids left. Some went to college. Others went out to slightly bigger towns. A few even went to cities, although most weres didn’t care for cities for very long.

Albert moved his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

His scent became more of a muddle, with shards of worry at the center.

The weres who graduated and left town were the ones who wanted a life outside of Wolf’s Paw, or who hadn’t found anyone to run around with in the Meadows. Like Albert.

Graham dropped his gaze to his books and stared hard at the words. “I’m going to college. Next year, they think.”

He was sixteen, but the exams he’d been given had been easy.

He glanced up. Albert was staring out the window again.

“I know,”

Albert said, in the soothing voice he used sometimes around Graham. In Graham’s

experience, most seventeen-year-olds did not speak that way to others their age, or close to their age. But Albert was always different.

It's part of why Graham liked him, but also why he was so confusing.

"Across the country, probably,"

Graham added, and Albert drew his shoulders in.

But he nodded. "Yeah. You're going to do great things. Convince everyone who doubts beings and weres that we have geniuses too."

He meant it, but he wouldn't look away from the window.

"You'll miss me?"

Graham wondered, then flushed at his own stupidity and lowered his head.

"Yeah,"

Albert answered immediately, as if Graham were stupid for worrying, when he hadn't been worried.

He just knew something was wrong, and there was no evidence, no hint of what it was.

Only Albert, who smelled upset more and more often lately, and who wasn't sitting next to him, and kept staring at the snow instead of—

Albert crawled onto the bed with him, ending that train of thought there.

He curled up at the foot with the assigned English reading he'd abandoned, and pulled in his long limbs to keep from crowding Graham.

That was wrong, too.

Weres touched each other all the time.

But Graham had Albert back where he belonged, and when he thought about asking Albert to touch him, it felt... strange.

As if there was some reason he shouldn't, or some reason he should. Or as if Graham ought to apologize for wanting it no matter how natural it was.

He frowned, and Albert laughed, a real laugh, but kind and not mean.

"Come on, genius,"

Albert sighed, then leaned forward to brush Graham's bangs from his eyes. "Finish this chapter and we'll watch a movie or something, okay?"

He took his hand away before Graham could shut his eyes and fall into it. But his scent was warmer up close, and the chill in his skin from being close to the window wouldn't last long. So Graham gave him a smile, and went back to studying.

The End

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2015. Published in the Being(s) in Love 1-5 boxset as a bonus story in 2022

Set after the events of Little Wolf

Summary: Zoe meets (and woos) her mate. Or, really, her mate woos her . f/f

Tags: on-page sex, some wolf-on-wolf violence

Zoe didn't bother to turn around and head home when her run led her into town.

Lately her runs had brought her into town more often than not, and she'd anticipated that today by choosing to run as a human.

It meant sweat, but it also meant clothing, which was good for when she found herself jogging down Main Street at midmorning.

She assumed the restlessness pulling her into town was due to sharing the same house as two mated idiots still in their honeymoon phase.

It didn't matter that Nathaniel and Tim weren't home at the moment; their happiness scent was everywhere.

She was pretty sure it was even in her work uniform, which she had kind of resigned herself to for the time being.

As she slowed her steps and took a left to make a small, short loop around some side

streets, it occurred to her once again that she could move out.

She was old enough, she'd paid off the last of her student loan debt from her classes in Carson, she could manage rent at Wolf's Paw prices.

But something stopped her from glancing at the houses converted into the single apartments humans usually rented.

It wasn't that weres couldn't live alone.

It was that many didn't want to.

Zoe had lived alone even in houses filled with foster kids.

She had always been alone until she'd come to this town.

She had no desire to live that way again. She had her room, her very own space, and a tiny pack of her own. She wasn't ready to give that up for a life with no closeness, no pack touches.

Of course, the pack touches were probably how Nathaniel and Tim's sex-and-love scent had ended up in her uniform.

She wrinkled her nose and slowed more as she passed the Flores.

Then she circled back around toward Main Street.

Her shift didn't start for another hour or so, but she saw no point in heading home now.

She could shower and change at the station—something else she'd started doing more

and more lately when she knew those two would be home at the same time.

Little Wolf honestly had no shame and Nathaniel only encouraged him.

But thinking of her favorite awkward pack brother made her head to Robin's Egg's.

Calling Tim brother , even in her own mind, made her warmer than the run had.

It helped that she knew Tim would squirm in embarrassment in exactly the same way if he knew.

Nathaniel would just smile, and his pleasure was nearly as blush-inducing.

He'd be so touched, but he wouldn't comment that it had taken years for Zoe to admit how close she was to him, or say how happy he was to know she loved his mate.

He knew anyway. Thankfully, weres, unlike humans, did not need to discuss these things out loud.

Well, Tim did. But Tim had basically been raised by humans and hardly counted.

Zoe paused outside the door to the café, letting the air cool her skin as much as it could.

September in Wolf's Paw was much like August, at least for the first half of the month.

Hot, with only slightly fewer tourists now that the main festivals were over.

But she detected a noticeable change in the air, like distant snow, and grinned as she stepped into the café.

She asked for a coffee at the counter, with lots of milk, and watched as the new elf hire, Sampson or something like that, went to work at the espresso machine over by the kitchen door.

Sampson's skill brought in more customers, Robin's Egg claimed.

Zoe wasn't sure about that, but the coffee did smell amazing when he handed it to her.

She ducked her face over it while he added it to her tab.

Rich whole milk from a local dairy, freshly roasted coffee beans, and no sugar, although something in it smelled sweet, almost like real vanilla.

Zoe inhaled the steam, which was definitely sweet, and then took a sip without waiting for the drink to cool.

Even ignoring her burned tongue, which would heal, the coffee was good.

It was very good in fact, but it wasn't the source of the scent.

Zoe sniffed around the counter as discreetly as she could, finding the usual grease and donuts and gravy that meant food and Cosmo in the kitchen .

The humans smelled like humans: deodorant they didn't need, aftershave they usually had the sense not to wear in Wolf's Paw, and toothpaste.

A sex scent hung over a few of them, a cloud of sweat/sated/musk that, quite unexpectedly, made Zoe's skin tingle.

Embarrassed, she hurried away from the counter, although the scent seemed to

intensify.

Tourists must be sowing their last wild oats before they left town.

The air in the café was warm and getting warmer despite the constantly opening door.

She took another gulp of too-hot coffee to fill her senses with something other than salty-sweet satisfaction and blissful contentment, and made a beeline for Tim and the relative safety of the gift shop.

She expected a few customers, but for some reason, seeing one leaning against the display counter while deep in conversation with Tim threw her.

She stopped in the doorway, frowning at how close they were standing.

Tim was very, very happily mated, something Zoe knew for a fact.

Also, he tended to like men only as far as she knew.

Seeing a woman in his space shouldn't bother her, not even on behalf of pack brother Nathaniel.

Zoe studied the woman in confusion.

She was human, judging from her height.

She was a head shorter than Tim, which meant Zoe would tower over her.

Zoe felt like a hulking giant at the knowledge.

Some humans claimed they didn't mind so much, or were already tall, like Tiff. But

Zoe was very tall, even for a were female. She was height and strength, and had been since fifteen.

She hunched her shoulders while the human laughed at something Tim said.

The human was holding a paper cup of coffee much like Zoe's, but Zoe could smell the sugar syrup in hers from where she stood.

Vanilla, with low-fat milk and strong, bitter espresso, stirred with a birch stick.

The human herself must have been more than a tourist, because Zoe couldn't detect a trace of perfume about her, although something sensual drifted across the room, like oils made from flowers.

Her thick, bouncy black curls were held in place with a pink scarf, and Zoe thought the woman might have been around fresh lavender sometime in the past few days.

Her lipstick smelled waxy, but not bad, and the purple-pink shade of it made Zoe wish she knew more about things like makeup.

The human's mouth was full and inviting.

Her eyeliner was sharp and defined.

There was a glisten to her dark skin, as if the heat had made her perspire a little, and Zoe felt her attention fall to her chest, the hint of shadow at the top of her breasts before her shirt hid them from view.

She was built like a tiny, exquisite hourglass, with thighs that looked as soft as the plump outline of her upper arms.

She had muscle in those arms, in those legs, like someone who worked hard, but she was so yielding too, curvy and delicate.

She smiled at Tim again, a beautiful smile, and leaned closer to him with her tank top showing much of her smooth skin, and her jeans tight over her backside, and the air was warmed milk and vanilla, like cream, and Zoe took another stumbling step forward.

Tim looked over first.

He grinned at her like the bloodthirsty wolf he was, teeth always showing even when he meant well, and then blinked when Zoe couldn't make herself respond.

Taking her eyes off the human woman seemed an impossible task.

Zoe wanted more coffee to wake herself up, but couldn't remember how to move the cup to her mouth.

“Zoe?”

Tim asked slowly, while the human who smelled like cream and flowers turned to look at her. Her eyes were deep, dark brown, like tree bark or earth. She had a piercing at her eyebrow, and another at the side of her nose. Little silver hoops Zoe stared at in fascination.

“Zoe?”

The human woman repeated. Her voice was soft too. Her gaze was not. It traveled over Zoe from her head to her toes.

“Zoe, did you leave the house in that?”

Tim pressed, which at least allowed Zoe to move her head to glance at herself. She saw running shoes, because human feet did not have pads like the wolf. Gray sweatpants that had once been Nathaniel's, rolled down at the waist so they hung low on her hips. She paused at the pale but flushed skin of her abs, then stared at her black top for a moment before she remembered that it was, in fact, not a top but a sports bra.

Werewolves, at least, the wolves in this town, didn't care about such things, but humans did. Zoe was basically half naked in their eyes. She flung an anxious glance toward the human. The human stared at Zoe's stomach for another moment while Zoe could feel beads of sweat inching slowly down toward her belly button. Then the human lifted her gaze and seemed to focus on Zoe's arms.

Zoe's arms were equally sweaty and flushed, only with the added bonus of freckles across the biceps. She wondered if her muscles were too big to human eyes. They'd used to say that when Zoe was growing up. Tiff hadn't minded, though. She'd even seemed to like them. Zoe missed her, even if they'd only gone out for a few months. But Tiff had left for school and Zoe would never have stopped her.

Tim froze in the middle of gesturing at her bra, which Zoe barely needed anyway, although perhaps the human did not think so, judging from her stares. Zoe should have put on more clothing. She didn't own anything light or pretty or pink. Her dark red hair was short, shorter than it wanted to be, but she cut it regularly to keep the curls close to her head in a bob. She didn't understand makeup, although it was lovely on this human.

Zoe inhaled again, vanilla pudding scent this time. Chocolate milk. Cinnamon rolls, the real kind, not the ones from the can she and Tim made. No one around them had any of those things, and yet Zoe thought of them with every breath. Lilies too. Lilies and lavender and lilac. Spring scents in the fall didn't make sense. Herbs and oils and healing mingled with comfort and sugar, forming textures and layers of good things

and happy scent.

Zoe sank her teeth into her lower lip. The human's eyes seemed to get darker and wider. Her heart was a quick, rabbit thing, excited. Zoe's pulse was hot and heavy.

Tim was glancing between them. Zoe could see his head moving back and forth but couldn't demand to know what the hell he was staring at. Maybe he smelled her confusion, because he spoke—carefully, like how people spoke to feral weres and scared children. “Zoe, have you met my new friend here?”

The human suddenly smiled, bright and friendly. “I'm here every morning for coffee, and this is the first time I've caught you in here. I didn't know you were the Zoe he's mentioned before.”

Something in that statement made Zoe straighten, but for the life of her, she couldn't have said what. She took a deep breath while the human glanced at Little Wolf, who had an astonished look on his face, one he leaned over to share with someone else, probably Carl.

Zoe had forgotten all about Carl. She'd also forgotten words. “How...?”

she tried, although she had no idea what she was trying to say.

“Oh my God,”

Tim exclaimed, but in nowhere near his usual tone of exasperation. “Zoe, oh my God!”

He said it with wonder, and then a smile that lit up his face. Zoe frowned at him, more lost than ever until she turned to the human.

She was so little and pretty and breakable, soft and rounded and strong. Zoe smiled at her without thinking.

The human smiled back. “You always seem busy. This is actually the first time I’ve ever seen you not in uniform. I’m Cleo, by the way. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

She paused there, then swallowed and held out her hand. Her short, rounded fingernails were painted clear and shiny. She had on jangling silver bracelets that fell against the delicate skin of her inner wrist. Zoe wanted to push them up and bite beneath them. She would very much like those fingers inside her. She needed that mouth on her, and her tongue pressed just there, at the human’s pulse point.

Zoe had the horrifying suspicion she was growling. She couldn’t hear it, but it would explain why the human’s heart was pounding.

Zoe’s attention fell, obviously, too obviously, to the thin tank top and that portion of bared skin, the hint of curving breasts and sweat. Zoe could feel the heat from that spot as surely as she could now hear her own heavy breathing. The warm, intimate place with the throb of blood beneath the surface smelled heavenly, which she was happy to know, at last. This was the source of the scent that had called to Zoe across the café and brought her here. She ought to be fine now that she’d identified it, but she was silent and tense except for her growl. She wondered if her eyes were brown or glinting yellow, and why she was so conscious of the fang now pressed hard into her lower lip.

Tim said something, her name maybe, trying to be calming, but Zoe shook her head to make him go away. She inhaled and dragged her gaze slowly up to the lovely throat and the wide, warm, prettily made-up eyes, and then down to Cleo’s crushed-berry mouth, and back to her throat and that bare skin. If Zoe put her face there, it would probably smell like home .

Home home home , her mind repeated, joyous and wild, and then finished her off with one shocking thought.

Mate.

“Oh, you... you’re....”

She tripped over her own words and ended in a soft whine that brought Tim rushing forward. Pack brother would save her. He’d keep her from ruining this. He was smart wolf. Crafty wolf. A wolf among the humans. He’d know what to do while Zoe stumbled backwards in panic and Mate’s eyes went wide with fear or disappointment.

“Nathaniel,”

Tim said, saving her with one word. Zoe listened, fleeing before her mate could lose all faith in her.

~~

Zoe managed to keep from tearing through the station to get to Nathaniel, but once she realized he was alone in his office, she burst through the door with enough energy to nearly take it off the hinges. She hadn’t done that since puberty, something that made her stop and try to act calm.

Obviously, that wouldn’t work around Nathaniel. Even if the door hadn’t tipped him off, Zoe’s appearance and scent would have given away her agitation. Nathaniel looked up from glaring at piles of paperwork that had built up during the busy time around the Full Moon Festival, then went very, very still.

“Zoe,”

he greeted her, cautiously, as though she was Little Wolf in a fit of temper and he had to watch his step. “Can I help you?”

“I met my mate,”

Zoe blurted, then gasped. Hearing the word was so different from thinking it.

Someone outside agreed, because they gasped too.

Zoe continued to stare anxiously at Nathaniel.

Nathaniel’s smile was slow, but as bright as Tim’s had been.

Oh God. Tim had known. Zoe’s face or her scent or something had given her away, so Tim had known before she had. That wasn’t fair. Someone who’d taken so long to recognize his own mate shouldn’t be so quick to identify hers.

But Zoe stared at Nathaniel’s smile and felt some of the tightness in her chest ease. This was good, then. He wasn’t alarmed or worried.

She felt her mouth curve. Then she remembered the rest. “I left her there.”

She opened her eyes wide and put a hand over her racing heart. “I left her there!”

Zoe could still see the surprise on her mate’s face as Zoe had bolted from the café. “Oh God, I didn’t even speak to her. I just ran. I stared at her and I growled and then I ran. Oh shit. She’s going to think I’m a freak.”

Nathaniel considered her for several seconds, probably weighing how badly Zoe had fucked it up. But then he inclined his head, as if he wasn’t going to say she hadn’t fucked it up, but it wasn’t as bad as she thought. “She’s your mate, Zoe. That’s the

most amazing thing about it. If anyone in the entire world will understand why you'd be afraid in that moment, it's her. You only have to tell her."

"Tell her?"

Zoe pulled in a painful breath. "She's not going to want to see me again."

Zoe wasn't wheezing, but she was close to it.

Nathaniel pushed away from his desk so he could come over to her and wrap his arm around her shoulders. Zoe didn't know what was more astonishing, that he would hug her without asking first, or that she let him. He smelled so nice. Nathaniel always smelled nice, like family and dinner and man-smells—the good kind, like how Zoe imagined fathers on old human TV shows would smell. Tim said Nathaniel was like pine and smoke. That was close to what he was, but he didn't remind Zoe of fire. Nathaniel had strength and heat, but he combed his fingers gently through her hair and let her feel small for a few moments.

He breathed in and out slowly, getting her to do the same, and then he lightly, just once, ran his fingertips down her cheek until she shuddered and calmed.

She was immediately embarrassed to realize she was being coddled. She was not Little Wolf with a nightmare.

She pulled away and stalked over to the couch. After a small pause, she sat. Then she clasped her hands in front of her and stared at him.

Nathaniel stared back, his expression almost worried. But he walked to his desk and sat down again without saying a word. He steepled his fingers as if he intended to wait her out. The horrible thing was, it would work. When Zoe had first arrived in town, eighteen, defensive about everything, and reluctant to talk about even the most

harmless of subjects, Nathaniel had done the same thing until Zoe had given in and told him her favorite food.

Tim joked, or didn't joke, that Nathaniel was evil. Zoe just thought he was very, very patient, which could feel like the same thing when someone's insides were twisted and they didn't know what to do or how to do it.

The phone lit up before Zoe could cave and tell him everything.

Her gaze went to it in horrified embarrassment. A call sent directly to Nathaniel's office with no warning from the dispatcher usually meant Little Wolf, so of course Nathaniel picked up the phone.

Zoe closed her eyes.

"Yes, she's here,"

Nathaniel answered before Tim could say a word. Tim was talking about her. He probably wouldn't do that if Zoe's mate was still with him, but Zoe tensed anyway. Tim and her mate had already become friends. Zoe imagined her mate's face, her smiles for Tim, her wide, blown pupils when she'd turned to Zoe, and how she'd stared, her plush lips parted.

Zoe's mouth fell open. "Oh."

She looked to Nathaniel. He was still smiling at her, because he was... well, she hesitated to call her pack leader evil, but he was definitely pleased with the situation. "My mate desires me."

Already. Zoe hadn't even had to try. She hadn't known mating would be this wondrous and yet still terrifying.

“Is she breathing?”

Tim asked, clearly audible to her ears even at a distance.

“Shut up!”

Zoe barked at him.

Tim laughed softly. “Wow. Nathaniel, you don’t know how amazing that was. I’ve seen it happen before, but not to someone I know. I’m not an expert, but I think it well.”

“By your standards?”

Nathaniel wondered, not without a hint of bitterness.

Whatever Tim had been about to say became a sort of a squawking sound mixed with sputtering. Zoe suddenly became aware of the very real possibility that she might end up pining for her mate for months like Nathaniel had done, and that was one of the better possible outcomes. One of the outcomes that wasn’t madness, or depression, or a long, lonely, gray life. It didn’t matter that she’d never let herself dream of a forever after with someone the way Nathaniel always had. She had a chance at one with someone amazing, and it might not happen.

She dropped down and put her head between her knees. They told anxious humans to do this all the time in First Aid Training. It had to do something good.

“Zoe?”

Nathaniel’s chair squeaked as if he’d leaned toward her.

“Aw, Zoe, don’t freak out.”

Tim’s words, part command, part plea, carried through the silence. “Come on. We’ve got this. Because trust me, this town’s rules make some sense, but they aren’t set in stone. I can handle everything for you, just say the word.”

Zoe tried to make herself take in air while imagining what kind of destruction Little Wolf might wreak upon the town in the name of her love life. He’d do it, that was the thing. At some point in the past few months, he’d become this person she’d find sleeping next to her on the couch and sliding cups of coffee toward her in the morning. Zoe didn’t have a lot of friends. Neither did Tim. Maybe that was why he was so earnest about this. The problem was that he was Timothy Dirus. He was nearly unstoppable.

Zoe made a gurgling sound, like worried, hysterical laughter might burst out of her, then almost choked when Nathaniel growled.

This growl was not friendly, or playful. The sound, loud and forceful, was not meant to communicate anything but authority.

Zoe sat up straight and swallowed any noises she might have been making. Tim shut up. People in the outer room went so silent it was like they were frozen.

Nathaniel let out another sound, huffing in satisfaction to have the world quiet at last, before he focused back on Zoe.

Zoe met his serious, steady gaze. The sheriff’s gaze. Pack brother was town leader alpha.

“Breathe, Zoe,”

he ordered, voice rough like wolf , and Zoe breathed.

“Holy crap...”

Tim panted brokenly on the other end of the line, probably turned on. Not that it took much with him.

“Now go on,”

Nathaniel continued after Zoe had taken several breaths. He was still mostly growling.

Tim sighed heavily for it. “Not fair, Nathaniel. Not fair at all,”

he complained, longing and sweet enough to make Zoe blush if she hadn’t used up her blushes earlier. Then he let out a longer sigh and seemed to focus. “Zoe, listen. It’s okay. It’s better than you think anyway. It went really well. Even Carl thinks so. What?”

Zoe couldn’t make out what Carl must have said in reply. Whatever it was made Tim snort. “Not on the floor in here! Aw, gross. Zoe you’d better not.”

“Little. Wolf.”

Nathaniel rubbed his neck as if his mate was killing him. The sounds of work resuming came from the outer room.

“No, really,”

Tim carried on smoothly. “Really, Zoe. It’s okay. It really is. I took care of it. I’ll take care of anything you want me to.”

“Run while you can,”

Nathaniel told Zoe immediately. His tone was earnest, but he had that I love my Little Wolf light in his eye.

“Hey,”

Tim protested quietly, but went silent while Nathaniel rumbled softly at him for a moment in an apology that some others might have been shocked to witness.

Normally Zoe would look away during an intimate moment like that, but it was strangely fascinating to watch them and realize that might be her cooing at someone someday. She’d never cooed in her life. She didn’t even think most humans would count growling as cooing.

But her mate would. That’s what mate meant. Of all the people in the world, this one would most understand Zoe. And Zoe would most understand her.

If they ever got to know one another.

“She’s going to think I’m weird,”

Zoe confessed in quiet despair, and lowered her gaze to the floor. “I’m tall, and were, and I ran out on her without even saying hello. She was looking at me, like maybe she could like me, and she was”

—Zoe licked sweat from her upper lip— “pretty. She was lovely and smelled good, and I ran.”

“Okay.”

Tim cleared his throat like an old general about to give a speech. “First things first. Her name, in case you missed it while you were panting at her—which is all right, Zoe, because she was practically panting too—is Cleo. Everything is all right, Zoe. Better even. Because she didn’t yell in your face, right? Or run away from you. And she lives here now, which is great, because you won’t have to worry about her leaving. Like some wolves do.”

Nathaniel eased back in his seat but didn’t say a word. His gaze went to the ceiling. Zoe had a strange urge to get up and hold his hand. Mating was a fearful business.

“But I ran. And....”

Zoe waved at herself. Tim had been right to question her choices. There was no reason for her to be so distracted and eager to run into town that she’d forget to put on clothes—unless she considered that her mate had been in town for weeks, leaving traces of herself everywhere. “I finally found her and I left her there. She’s going to think...”

“That you are charming and wonderful and great,”

Tim interrupted. “Here I am, entertaining the new girl in town with stories about life among the weres, because, you know, I figured she could use some warning, and living here does take some getting used to, and this whole time it turns out I’ve been describing Zoe to her mate. It’s enough to make me even more curious about human magic. I really wish the wizard was more forthcoming about the subject, instead of telling me to study. Humans. I’ve been studying. But I think human magic requires thinking like a human, and I’m not exactly that, am I? Or were enough for this town’s rules to make perfect sense either.”

“Timothy Dirus.”

Nathaniel closed his eyes. Zoe couldn't tell if he was exasperated with his mate's rambling or soothed by his voice. Likely both.

Zoe was not soothed. Not at all. "What did you tell her about me?"

"Um."

Tim hummed. "I told her you had to go because you are a deputy and you heard a disturbance somewhere with your werewolf hearing."

Tim was such a liar. His time with the humans had taught him that.

Zoe sighed for it, though. "Thank you."

She was going to have to tell her mate the truth eventually, but for now, it was good to know her mate didn't think Zoe was a complete freak.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

“Pfft.”

Tim dealt with sincere gratitude the way he dealt with all real emotions, by ignoring them as long as he could, something Zoe normally approved of. “She asked about you,”

Tim went on, sly and pleased. Despite how he claimed to only be good at sarcasm, Tim could be genuinely kind at the strangest, but best, moments. “Did you hear her say she’d noticed you around? You are so in. All you have to do is actually talk to her, and then you can spring the mate stuff on her later. Don’t wait for that ‘recognizing the mate bond’ bullshit this town loves so much. The bond is there whether you know it is or not, and the effects are going to be just as strong, even if you might feel them in a different way. Without ever knowing the name for it, I would have been drawn to him, Zoe.” For one moment, for one small moment, Tim’s voice was quiet and hurt, and Nathaniel’s silence was almost raw. Then Tim perked up again. “Talk to her, get to know each other, acknowledge the bond as soon as it’s safe, and then pounce. Hmm.” He hesitated. “Humans take a while to even feel the bond, at least according to the wizard. So how did the weres in this town used to handle it when their mate was human?”

“Claim first, ask questions later,”

Nathaniel commented, eyes still shut. “It led to... problems. There is a reason the rules are there, Little Wolf.”

“Rules always have exceptions, Sheriff Big Dick,”

Tim replied crisply. Zoe would have been shocked at his tone if she hadn't gotten used to his casual insolence these past few months. "Informed decisions are better than instinctual pounce-and-fucks. Carl, I swear to God...."

Tim began to mutter something, probably at a cackling old man.

If Zoe's mate had been were, that might have happened, that pounce-and-fuck, as Tim put it. They might have leapt at each other right there in the café, like something out of a story. Zoe put her hand over her mouth, trying not to lick or bite in frustrated arousal at the idea of a claim like that. But her mate was human. That meant Zoe had to take care. That's what it had to mean. Humans didn't understand. They had to be calmed, and wooed, and then claimed.

Zoe wanted to learn everything about her mate. She could be patient. She could listen, if not talk. She could put on clothes, and remember to eat with manners, and not bite or lick until she was given permission to.

She could, for her mate.

"Cleo,"

Zoe sighed the name.

"Cleo,"

Tim repeated brightly as though no subject change had occurred. "She works as a masseuse at the Flores—don't growl."

Zoe bit her lip to keep from letting the sound escape. She was a modern werewolf. She shouldn't be upset that her mate touched others intimately for a living. But perhaps if Zoe claimed her, perhaps if Zoe bit at her neck and the soft skin of her

thigh, perhaps if Zoe rubbed her scent at her arms and between her breasts, then it would be tolerable to have the scent of others near her too.

“She got into town a few weeks ago,”

Tim carried on. “She’s not seeing anyone and she’s into you. All you have to do is go to her. Bring her something she likes. Ask her to go get food with you. You can do this.”

“Shut up,”

Zoe told him again, because Little Wolf’s gentle encouragement might kill her.

Nathaniel startled her by putting a hand to the back of her neck. She hadn’t heard him move. He always had been able to move fast, and be deadly quiet when he chose to be. But his intent was calming support, and after a pause, Zoe let herself lean into it.

“Come on, Zo’.”

Nathaniel’s voice was low, and gentle. “I’ll get you home. You can shower and get ready for work, and give yourself time to adjust to the thought. She’s not going anywhere.”

“Work?”

Oh right. Zoe had a shift starting soon. But Nathaniel was right. As much as the idea of finding her mate appealed to her, Zoe was in no state to woo anyone. She wasn’t panicking anymore, but she wasn’t ready to face her again yet without risking another incident.

“Work,”

Nathaniel repeated firmly. “A nice long workday to keep you occupied while your senses calm down, and maybe give you an excuse to be out and about if you should find yourself wandering through town unconsciously tracking bits of her scent.”

“You—”

Tim drew in a sharp breath, making Zoe glance toward the phone resting on the desk. “You did that?”

Nathaniel ignored him. “And if you also find yourself staring up at their window in the middle of the night, trying not to howl, it’s okay. We’ve all been there.”

Nathaniel was just being kind, but Zoe nodded anyway, and turned for a moment to rub her cheek against his hand.

“I didn’t.... You....”

Tim was sputtering again, but softly, in almost a whine. “Big Wolf, you didn’t.”

“It’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

Nathaniel reassured Zoe, although he had to hear Tim’s distress on the other end of the line. “Your mate already likes you. And everyone panics in those first moments.”

“You did not.”

Tim’s objection barely carried through the phone.

“Yes, I did.”

Nathaniel petted Zoe while finally acknowledging his mate. “And so did you. And so

did Zoe. So don't overthink it, Zo'."

Nathaniel paused. "That's Little Wolf's job."

"Hey!"

Tim raised his voice again for the protest and Nathaniel reached over to hang up the phone.

"Honeymoon already over?"

Zoe wondered, the words thick and wet, as if she'd been crying when she hadn't. Nathaniel hadn't meant that stuff about sitting beneath Tim's window, right? That had to have been that weird way he had of teasing Tim until they were both wound up. It had to be.

Nathaniel clucked his tongue, and Zoe realized he was smiling again. She lifted her head in surprise.

"Still discovering things,"

he explained, as if he knew what she'd really been asking. "Still thinking he's the strangest person I've ever met. Still drawn to him and fascinated by the way he thinks, and calmed by the way he presses close. More in love than I thought I would ever be. upset with myself for hurting him a moment ago. Pleased that now he knows what I felt. It's... complicated. It's mating, Zoe, marriage."

"Oh,"

Zoe repeated herself.

“Oh,”

Nathaniel echoed back at her, with an expression so pleased it made her chest ache.

“You can take it.”

This growl was warmer, but it still demanded her attention. “You can handle it,” he insisted, then grinned at her like Tim’s visiting imp friend had. “And you have a Dirus on your side.”

Zoe swallowed. “You know that’s actually horrifying, right?”

“Your mate won’t stand a chance,”

Nathaniel agreed. “Luckily there are ways to distract him.”

That probably meant Nathaniel’s dick, but thankfully, Nathaniel didn’t say it. “And Tim does mean well.”

“Yeah?”

Zoe didn’t mean to sound so surprised, and it got her a serious, dark-eyed look from the sheriff.

“He loves you. And he wants you to be happy.”

Nathaniel stroked her cheek again. “So do I,”

he added, fully aware she wanted to squirm at the emotion in his voice. “So will she,” Nathaniel finished, soft and deadly and exactly as evil as Tim always insisted he was. Zoe hadn’t understood before. Perhaps it took a mate’s eyes to see the real person, and know them, and love them anyway.

“Oh,”

she said for what felt like the thousandth time, and let Nathaniel calm her.

~~

Being a fancy hotel, the Flores had discreet parking in the rear so nothing blocked the entrance, although a driveway did lead almost all the way up to the doors. But only people like Silas Dirus, who had a driver to park his car for him, ever pulled up to the front. Inside the two huge doors was the great hall, built by some timber baron back in the day, who'd bought—or taken—the rest of the house from the original Spanish owner. The timber baron, mysteriously, had left town not long after that.

Zoe had always figured he'd been run off by the early werewolf occupants of the forest he'd been intent on stripping away, since he seemed like he must have been a massive asshole. His great hall looked like someplace Teddy Roosevelt would have hung out in, all human and macho and stinking of money.

Of course, even if Zoe had loved the hall, she wouldn't have felt like stepping inside tonight. She stared at the entrance, the large doors, the ornate carvings, the lights flaring to life along the walkway. Night came early in the mountains, once the sun fell behind the trees. Lights were on in many of the hotel's rooms. While Zoe had been waiting, several guests had walked out all dressed up, on their way to try to hook a werewolf before their vacation was over.

Zoe felt very obvious in her uniform. She was off-duty, which meant she'd removed the gun she was required to carry but had never used, although a detail like that wasn't very noticeable to the tourists. From them, she got a leer, a respectful nod, and a tipsy salute.

Thankfully, none of them stopped to talk to her or ask why she'd parked her truck

directly across from the Flores. Not her brightest move, but then she'd never intended to wait here this long.

She should have just gone inside the hotel. She should have walked up, asked Greg or whoever was working the front desk where the spa was, and then she should have marched right in there and spoken to her mate.

Except she had no reason to charge in there, and anyway, storming in to see one's mate to win their affection did not sound like a good plan.

Neither did leaning against the door of her truck and staring forlornly at the hotel. She'd been kind of hoping a reason to go inside would occur to her now that she'd decided to formally introduce herself. Two whole days to think about it, and in the end, the desire to see Cleo again had outweighed her common sense.

Zoe sighed and lowered her head. Her skin itched. The moon wasn't close to full, but she could feel it rising, pulling at her. If she stayed here any longer, she was going to end up on all fours, pining for her mate in the street the way that Greenleaf had rather notoriously done a few months ago.

Although, the witch had relented and let him up and into his apartment, and now the two of them were almost inseparable, so maybe there was something to be said for shifting in the street. Nathaniel had done his share of sad howling too, but that had been during the full moon, and anyway, his situation had been special. Zoe wasn't special; she was just too awkward to go say hello.

"Oh! Hey!"

The familiar voice came from some distance away. Zoe raised her head to track the sound and felt like a deer catching the scent of a predator in the wind when she saw Cleo coming around from the side of the hotel.

Cleo had on black pants and a black top, and long, open coat or shirt of some thin material. She had a small duffel bag in one hand and the other was held up in a small wave.

Zoe waved back, then felt like a dork. “Hey.”

At least she’d remembered to speak this time, even if she had to clear her throat to do it.

As if that had been an invitation, Cleo slightly altered her course to head in Zoe’s direction. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around the hotel before.”

She was all in pink where she wasn’t in the hotel’s required black, a pretty shade Zoe didn’t know the name of. Her springy curls were arranged in two bunches near the top of her head, and she wore big pink plastic hoops at her ears. Pink and black eyeliner made her eyes especially large and captivating. To complete the lovely picture she made, she was smiling.

Up close she smelled like lavender soap and sea salt and clay, like how the inside of a spa might smell. Beneath that she was flour and coffee and kitchen staples, warm sex and mate. Zoe nearly closed her eyes. As it was, her mouth fell open as she got hot all over.

“I...”

Zoe opened her eyes, and found her mate close and patiently waiting for her to speak. She recalled that she’d been asked a question, but couldn’t seem to untangle her tongue enough to explain her presence here tonight. She had no reason to wander into the Flores. Admitting to wooing a mate held no shame, but humans wanted something first, didn’t they? Something less permanent than an announcement about forever. Cleo wouldn’t want Zoe barely saying hello before she announced they were,

maybe, meant to be.

Zoe knew she wasn't the too-tall, too-strong, too-fierce girl she'd been in her teenage years among the humans. But the wolf remembered being unwanted and unclaimed. It remembered no touches, no pack. No one took in werewolf children except the desperate. Weres were uncontrollable, violent, they said. As if Zoe had ever picked fights. She'd only kicked the asses that had needed kicking.

She tried to make herself seem less imposing. She moved her shoulders in an almost casual shrug. "It's a nice night."

Cleo's work shirt was a tight black tee with a scooped neckline. Somehow the small amount of exposed skin was tantalizing. The outline of her clavicle made Zoe bite down on her lower lip. Cleo's neck was smooth and enticing next to the blushing pink of her earrings.

Zoe dragged her gaze away, but she didn't think she was fooling anyone. Cleo was still smiling, a knowing smile, happy and hot. Making her react like that was the most satisfying moment of the past several days, and Zoe had spent a considerable amount of time in the shower dreaming about her mate and making herself come.

She straightened her shoulders and tried not to whimper.

"You're back in uniform."

Cleo made a small noise in her throat, not quite a hum, that slid through Zoe like liquid heat. Zoe had an urge to cross her legs the way she had when she'd first seen Charlie's Angels as a teenager and hadn't been able to sit still. She felt noticed in a peculiar way, appreciated without being scrutinized.

She smoothed a hand down the side of her shirt, free of Tim and Nathaniel's love

scents for once, drenched only in her own anxious longing. She tilted her head to the side and smiled without showing her teeth.

“So are you,”

she answered, aware the words didn’t exactly make sense, although her body language would have, to a were. Offering her throat, even a little, had her breathing harder.

“This?”

Cleo wasn’t a were, so Zoe tried not to take it personally that Cleo didn’t respond to the small, nonverbal attempt at flirtation. Zoe had known going into this that she’d have to use words. Humans were picky like that.

Cleo pulled at her shirt. “I like that they provide a wardrobe that’s not awful, and one that’s easy to clean. But it can get boring. Normally, I would have showered and changed into my own clothes before leaving, but I was hungry and wanted to get home, so I figured I’d bring them back tomorrow and toss ‘em in the laundry.”

She paused. “Oh right, your nose. I bet I stink like sweat and essential oils to you.”

Zoe quickly shook her head. “No, that’s good. I mean, you’re good.”

She took a breath filled with metallic salts and ripe apricots. “You smell good,”

she summed up, still breathless, and then flung out a hand in near panic. “There is... I should explain. The thing is nothing smells bad, especially not you. I mean, I’m a wolf.”

She shut herself up, hard.

Cleo tugged at one earring in what Zoe hoped wasn't a nervous gesture. "So I smell, but I don't smell bad?"

Cleo summed up, with a question in her voice. "Okay."

That was a little more doubtful, but not repulsed. "What do you smell?"

"Um."

Zoe was torn between discretion and honesty. "Everything?"

Cleo's eyes widened. Zoe called it back. "Not everything. A lot of things. I can't tell what you're thinking, but some people broadcast a lot of what they're feeling through their scent." And body language, but that was probably something Zoe should wait to mention, like how next to fear, arousal was the strongest and easiest scent to identify. "It's different for everyone. Some weres are more factual, others get poetic."

Cleo tugged at her earring again. Zoe belatedly realized Cleo hadn't been asking to learn all about weres, she'd been curious about what she smelled like to Zoe. Zoe leaned forward about an inch and deliberately inhaled. She let her eyes fall closed to filter out everything that wasn't Cleo. "The spa. Herbs and oils. Sweet almond. Cucumber and water. Something on your hands, like soap but more... gentle? Then... perspiration: clean, salty, hint of coffee. Skin, flushed with health, natural as pollen. Your scent is orange, yellow, and pink. Nasturtium, the flowers. Not on you, but you remind me of them. They're..."

Zoe cut herself off before she could say edible out loud and opened her eyes.

Cleo paused to lick her lower lip. "I guess I don't need to ask if I smell bad, then."

Her heart beat hard for a few moments when she met Zoe's gaze.

Zoe slowly shook her head. “You smell very good.”

Her voice was husky.

Cleo’s stare was difficult to read, although Zoe couldn’t look away. She thought, maybe, Cleo was pleased, but embarrassed.

After a while she gave a small laugh. “There’s a whole industry built around perfumes, and then you say something so....”

Cleo trailed off and regarded Zoe curiously. “Tim says scent is a large part of how you all communicate. He also said sometimes I’ll have to prompt weres to speak. I just wasn’t expecting....”

Again, she left her thought unfinished. “It feels rude though, constantly asking people to explain what they mean. But if it isn’t, I should do it more.”

Zoe wrinkled her nose, more at her own failures than anything Cleo had said. “I know I don’t talk very much by human standards?”

It came out as a question.

“Oh no, it’s fine.”

Zoe stepped closer, as if she needed Zoe to know she didn’t mind how Zoe smelled her. God, Zoe hoped that was true. “It’s going to take some getting used to, truth be told. Let me know if I ever bother you.”

“As if you could,”

Zoe immediately replied, then winced. That was too eager. She wiped her palms

down her shirt and then crossed her arms. Except that was not a good attitude to take with her potential mate, so she had to uncross them. “Um.”

She cast about for a safer topic. “Do you normally leave work this way?”

“There is a back entrance for the employees.”

Zoe waved toward the hotel without taking her eyes from Zoe. “You look like you’re staking out the place. Are you?”

“Um.”

Oh shit, Zoe was bad at this. “Kind of?”

Sitting and mooning over a mate was acceptable, according to Nathaniel. And Zoe hadn’t been spying on her or anything weird. But on the other hand, Tim had not been pleased to learn he’d made Nathaniel so sad and dejected he’d resorted to staking out Tim’s boarding house to be nearer to him.

She scratched the back of her neck. She still had no answer. “Uh.”

“Are you okay?”

Cleo, to Zoe’s total confusion, came even closer. She seemed concerned. “Is this a body language thing? Tim warned me about those too.”

Little Wolf had told her almost everything. Zoe didn’t know whether to growl at him for it or sigh in relief. At least the presence of her mate was as calming as it was exciting. A few deep breaths and Zoe felt more forgiving. She cleared her throat. “Yeah. I’m fine. I just... I wasn’t expecting a direct question.”

Cleo grinned unexpectedly. “Well, when I moved here, they told me this town was full of werewolves sniffing the truth. It sounded great, to be honest. An entire town of people uninterested in deception of any kind. You guys don’t even respect deodorant. That’s commitment.”

She ended with a small shrug. “I kind of expected to see a pamphlet about it.”

“Ah.”

Zoe lowered her head to mumble. “Yeah. Little Wolf is working on that. He said we weren’t clear to humans. He... kind of took over the city council. He does that. Takes over things. But he’s right, about some things anyway. We don’t lie, and we expect the same in return, if you can. It’s, um, we aren’t offended by lies as much as... annoyed? That someone would try with so many of us around.”

The concept was difficult to explain without reminding humans that they were surrounded by creatures who could hear their every heartbeat. Living in Wolf’s Paw involved a delicate balance of being exactly the wolf one was born to be without regard to the rest of the human-run world, and yet carefully not drawing too much attention from those humans. “Wolves don’t really lie—not that we can’t, it’s that we tend to be bad at it, so we don’t bother.” Having said that much, Zoe ventured a little more. “I always thought that would make it easier if humans knew that. But tourists can still be nervous about things.”

“You mean sex,”

Cleo agreed warmly, with a nod. “This town’s whole ‘sex etiquette’ thing. That does help, actually. Wolves might not speak much, but they don’t lie.”

If she wanted an intelligent response, Zoe didn’t have one. Her brain had momentarily frozen at hearing her mate talk about sex.

“The uh, sex etiquette thing?”

she got out at last, in a higher voice than usual.

The expression that crossed Cleo’s face was wicked. Her heart was faster again too, as if she knew what she’d done to Zoe. Zoe’s eyes had probably glazed over and her skin had likely flushed red.

“The sex thing,”

Cleo repeated, with an alluring shiver. “I know it’s why the town is famous, and a lot of people come here for that, but have you seen yourselves? It’s a bit intimidating to know we have to ask you guys out.”

“Only the first time,”

Zoe answered blankly, then shook away some of her mental fog. “But you know the traditions aren’t only about... that, right?”

Self-preservation meant Zoe stopped herself from saying sex in close proximity to an interested Cleo. Zoe’s instincts were already urging her to bare her throat again and whimper.

“Sex?”

Cleo rocked the ground beneath Zoe’s feet with another delicate, flirtatious wriggle, this one accompanied by a cute wrinkling of her nose. “I didn’t expect you to be so shy about it, considering the town’s reputation. But it’s kind of sweet to see you looking less fierce because I said one tiny word.”

She inclined her head toward Zoe and lowered her voice. “Should I say it again?”

“So you and Tim seem friendly!”

Zoe desperately moved away from the subject of sex before she fell back against the truck and whined for whatever kisses her mate might give her.

“So odd.”

Cleo let out a noisy sigh. “You aren’t at all what I thought you’d be.”

Zoe wondered if she looked as hurt as that as she was, because Cleo shook her head and went on. “You, well, cops in general are people I avoid. And you always seemed very serious when I saw you around town. But you’re a marshmallow, aren’t you?”

“I am not!”

Zoe nearly howled indignantly. She straightened from her slouch against the truck. “Nathaniel Neri relies on me and calls me pack mate. Deputy. Friend.”

She pushed out a breath and lifted her chin to make it clear she would stand her ground.

From Zoe’s full height, Cleo seemed even tinier. But though Cleo’s heart was pounding and she had to tilt her head up to stare at Zoe, she didn’t take a step back.

Zoe could have scared her. The realization had Zoe ducking her head down, although the wolf in her was thrumming with pride to note her mate hadn’t run away.

She peeked over. “You’re not afraid?”

Every human in her high school had been happy to taunt Zoe until the moment she’d let her eyes flash, delighted to call her names when they were in groups, but they had

all tried to run away the moment they were alone with her. “That’s why Wolf’s Paw has the rules. It’s why so many wolves live here. But you aren’t scared?”

Her voice went soft. “Really?”

“I’m small. Pretty much anyone could take me in a fight. I can’t be afraid of everyone.”

Cleo spoke slowly, with her gaze intent on Zoe. “Besides, Tim said baring the throat was important, and you’ve been baring yours to me since I came over here.”

Zoe stopped moving. Oh, her mate was smart, so smart, and Tim hadn’t warned her. “Yes,”

she admitted, and clenched her jaw. Apparently, Zoe was going to act as petulant as Little Wolf, and not even her mate’s presence could stop her. “So?”

Cleo lifted both eyebrows, and then cracked a wide, wide smile.

Zoe raised her head again. It was humiliating enough that her attempts at flirting had been noticed and it hadn’t mattered. Of course, something else was probably wrong as well. Zoe had probably misbuttoned her uniform, or looked as awkward around someone so delicate and fairy-like as she always did. Cleo continued to stare, so Zoe wiped at her mouth and cheeks. She’d eaten dinner not too long ago and she was a famously messy eater. “What? Do I have something on my face?”

“Just those cute freckles,”

Cleo answered without hesitation. “You have some all over the rest of you too. I noticed that the other day. It was another nice surprise after getting to see you close up with your shirt off. Very nice.”

Zoe opened her mouth, then closed it. She thought she might burst into flames.

Cleo stepped closer, surrounding Zoe with her healing/warmth/allure scent and flower softness. “I figure, since you’ve been letting me know it’s okay if I ask, that I should go for it.”

“Go for it?”

Zoe repeated blankly and bumped into the truck. Somehow, even with the town’s rules, she’d thought more wooing would be required before this might happen.

She stayed flustered the longer Cleo considered her. “Zoe,”

Cleo pronounced her name carefully, “this is me expressing interest first.”

She paused there. “That is how it’s done here? I’m not being too formal or anything? I don’t want to get my sex etiquette confused.”

Zoe’s heart kicked against her ribs. For one moment she’d been soaring. Hitting the ground hurt. She swallowed and looked away. ““Sex etiquette,””

she echoed quietly.

“Oh.”

The fall of Cleo’s shoulders made Zoe turn to her again. “You aren’t answering. Did I do it wrong? Or maybe you don’t like humans? Or girls? Or...?”

“I like girls,”

Zoe interrupted. She was an idiot, but she couldn’t allow her mate to go on without at

least knowing Zoe desired her. “I like you,”

she added, although even her feelings for Tiff hadn’t matched the up-and-down storm of emotions from merely speaking to her potential mate. “I like you a lot. But you didn’t say.” She had to clench her hands into fists to keep going. “I’ll say yes. But you didn’t tell me what you were asking for. Sex, or... more.”

She didn’t quite plead for Cleo to ask for more, but her softly hopeful tone made her feel as small and delicate as the human in front of her.

Cleo’s smile returned, big and bright. Zoe stood up to bask in it like it was moonlight.

“A date?”

Cleo offered. “Dinner?”

“Yes.”

Zoe had the word out before Cleo’s second question was finished.

“Great!”

Cleo was so happy. Zoe would do anything to keep her that way. Which, at least for the moment, involved standing there while Cleo dug a cellphone from her bag. “Did I ever introduce myself to you?”

She stopped. “Please don’t think I have no skills. I’m not usually like this.”

Zoe nearly asked if Cleo was magic, but held it back. Humans touched by magic were supposed to be able to feel the mating bond faster, but Zoe remembered a lot of humans could be touchy about that subject. Anyway, nothing about Cleo made her

nose itch. “Are you a healer?”

she wondered instead, because many of the human “natural”

healers used magic in their practices, even if some called it by other names. “I don’t need an introduction,” she changed the subject quickly. “Tim told me your name.”

“Well, he didn’t tell me yours. What’s your last name?”

Cleo typed something into her phone, then waited.

“Browne,”

Zoe filled in obediently. “With an ‘e’ on the end.”

“Deputy Zoe Browne.”

Cleo flashed a mischievous smile. “Can I get your number?”

“I don’t... own a cell phone.”

Like that, Zoe was reminded that she was the sort of person who had stuck two bobby pins in her hair that morning to keep it out of her face and hadn’t checked a mirror since.

But again, Cleo didn’t seem to mind how awkward, or how non-human, Zoe was. She did stop briefly, as if anyone not owning a phone had thrown her. But Zoe could actually see her reasoning why a werewolf might not require one.

“Whenever you want, I’ll be free.”

Zoe was desperate and eager and her mate already knew it. Zoe had come out here to see her and bared her throat. Zoe had told her she smelled like flowers . She'd already said yes. She saw no point in trying to play it cool. Her mate ought to know that.

Cleo parted her lips, although for a second no sound emerged. "Okay. Wolves are honest. I don't think I fully grasped the concept until now."

Zoe thought about repeating that she liked Cleo. But it was simpler to lift her chin. With the top two buttons of her uniform undone, she wasn't showing much skin beyond the top of her throat, but she was showing enough.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

“Friday.”

Cleo was out of breath. “Friday is good. With my schedule. We can get dinner, or whatever you want.”

When Zoe stared and nodded, she went on. She still hadn’t caught her breath. “We can meet at the café, if you like. Around seven? And we can decide on a place to eat then.”

Zoe nodded again. Her mouth was too dry to speak. She belatedly realized she had just agreed to eat food in front of her tiny, perfect mate, but she couldn’t call it back to suggest a movie or something instead.

Cleo was bouncing into motion and talking excitedly about their dinner. “I can look up places. Or you can tell me best local spots.”

She tucked her phone into her bag and went on with a nervous energy Zoe completely understood. “I want to say, forget it, let’s go to dinner now, but I don’t know if I can without making a fool of myself. Also, I want to dress up for you.”

She put a hand to her mouth as if she’d surprised herself. “I can’t believe I told you that.”

“I don’t know how to dress up,”

Zoe confessed in a rush. “But I want to look good for you too.”

What would she even wear? Her one good vest? Tim would have so much to say about that. Zoe shook her head. “I don’t really care about clothes. How you look right now is fine with me. More than fine.”

“Yeah?”

Cleo’s duffel bag fell to the ground. “Then why are we waiting?”

Zoe was at a loss. “I thought humans wanted to.”

“We have to. We’re liars.”

Cleo’s gaze made Zoe feel like the moon itself. “We need the time to be sure. But wolves don’t. You know . And you want . And you can tell when we do.”

Zoe nodded. She had never seen a human grasp this so quickly. Her mate was smart, and adaptable, and brave. Zoe was going to love her in no time at all.

Cleo nodded too. “Then let’s go.”

~~

“I thought weres had to eat all the time.”

Cleo’s comment caught Zoe in the middle of tearing a roll into miniscule pieces and slowly nibbling each one. The rolls were good, but Zoe desperately wanted to cover them in butter and shove them in her mouth. She also wanted the meatballs, red sauce, and spaghetti on Cleo’s plate, and not the soup she’d ordered.

Zoe froze guiltily the way she had when she’d opened the door to the restaurant for Cleo and Cleo had turned to thank her in time to see Zoe trying to discreetly inhale

more of her scent. The opening doors thing was embarrassing enough, an instinctual need to show her mate she'd be good for her, but the sniffing thing was mostly because Zoe had hoped it would calm her down. She didn't want to do anything too stupid on their date.

Their date . She still couldn't quite believe it was happening. She hadn't had days to worry over it. It didn't seem real.

But Cleo was sitting across from her in Giorgio's, a restaurant known for its lowkey romantic atmosphere as much as its garlic bread and chicken parm. Cleo had a glass of wine, and the smell of the chianti combined with Cleo's nervous excitement was making Zoe lightheaded.

"Are you not hungry? Did I choose a bad place?"

Cleo put down her fork and didn't seem inclined to finish her story about her first college roommate.

"I ate earlier."

This wasn't a lie, but it felt like one. Zoe immediately sighed at herself and lowered her gaze to her plate of bread pieces and her nearly untouched soup. "I'm a messy eater. I was trying to be neat."

"But you're hungry?"

Cleo pressed. Her eyes widened when Zoe still hesitated. "There are other weres here, and they're eating."

She glanced at the tables around them, filled with beings and humans alike on dates or grabbing a casual meal. "With enthusiasm," she added. "It's nice that you want me

to think well of you, but I'd rather you were comfortable with me." She gave Zoe a gentle smile. She probably used that smile and that even, soft voice when dealing with her clients to help them relax.

Zoe gave her a smile in return, but then tore another chunk of bread. "I grew up among humans,"

she admitted as quietly as she could, although it still drew the attention of some of the weres in their immediate area. She fought the urge to hunch down and raised her head instead. She lifted her lip in a silent snarl at them, then remembered Cleo and ducked down again.

"I don't understand."

Cleo startled Zoe completely by taking her hand across the table.

Zoe let the bread fall to the tablecloth and stared at her in amazement. "I was in the system,"

she heard herself explaining, just like that, focused entirely on her mate and not on the words she rarely said aloud. "Weres burn a lot of energy, especially as teenagers. So we eat a lot, anything, but protein is what we need the most. Most human foster homes don't want the expense or trouble of a were. We grow fast and eat too much. We need touch most of the time, as well, and plenty of space around the full moon."

She didn't mention the nightmare of puberty on werewolf senses. "Money was limited for food as it was. No one believed, or wanted to believe, how much we'd need. So when I'd get food, I'd eat as much as I could, as fast as I could. I've never quite broken the habit. It's... not attractive."

Cleo squeezed her hand. "That's a fucking crime. Excuse my language. But it is."

She frowned. “How did you end up in the system, if you don’t mind me asking? I thought the sheriff was your brother. You don’t look alike, but I thought, that happens, you know?”

Cleo’s hand was warm and very soft. Her thumb at Zoe’s wrist was distracting. Her voice and scent were so soothing.

“My brother?”

Zoe’s strength left her. She would answer any questions Cleo had, not that she’d been resisting in the first place. “Nathaniel is... he is.... I never had a home, and he knew it, and he made sure I had one, that I will always have one. When I came here, I’d never had a room of my own, space of my own, and I kept all my stuff in a bag for a whole year. Then he asked me if I’d like shelves.”

The memory was a good one. “Out of nowhere, he says he wants to try carpentry. With shelves. I said yes to make him happy, and we built shelves together in my room. I ended up doing most of it, and then hated how empty they were when I was done. I didn’t realize he was tricking me into decorating my den. My space. I...” Nathaniel was more than brother, but the term would do. “Yes, brother, if you want.”

“Oh.”

Cleo’s gaze was soft too. “Well, I’m glad he was there for you. And that you aren’t, um, into him, if you don’t mind me saying so. You said you like girls, but he’s... I mean. Damn . You know.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “I know.”

How Nathaniel had the patience to deal with his admirers all the time was beyond her.

“But you guys aren’t like that,”

Cleo reiterated, her voice a little firmer. The hint of jealousy sent a zing down Zoe’s spine.

“No, he’s family.”

Zoe calmed her mate’s insecurity, and then blinked in surprise at how easily she’d said that sentence. “Nathaniel is family,”

she said again, boldly, and then perked up. Zoe had family, and a potential mate who had narrowed eyes when she thought of Zoe with someone else. She repeated herself in amazement. “He’s family and he’s mated.”

“Mated?”

Cleo took her hand away, but only to pick up her fork. She glanced pointedly down, and didn’t resume eating until Zoe—delicately, with restraint—had some of her soup. Cleo twirled some noodles, popped them in her mouth, and ate them. Then she stabbed half a meatball before holding it out for Zoe. “You’ve been staring,”

she explained, although her breathing changed when Zoe leaned forward to eat it. Too late, Zoe realized she had let her mate feed her in front of anyone who cared to look. She didn’t feel sorry for it. though, not even a little bit. The meat was good, but not nearly as satisfying as the sound Cleo made. “Oh,” she exhaled, as her scent grew sharp and hot.

A moment later she held out her fork again, offering the other half.

“I’ve, ahem, been curious about that subject. Mating.”

Cleo looked everywhere but at Zoe's mouth for a moment, as if she was still used to the human world where some might object to two women together, but then her gaze came back when Zoe licked her lips.

"Mate,"

Zoe replied dreamily, then heard a snicker from a wolf at her right, which brought her to her senses. She sat up. "Yes, mating,"

she said, self-consciously, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "Did you have questions about that?"

"Yes."

But Cleo didn't ask anything about the bond, or wooing, or feeding one's potential mate to show you could provide for them. "Do you still only have your room? No place of your own?"

Most American humans looked upon adults living with families as something disgraceful. Zoe hadn't forgotten. "Most weres prefer not to live alone if we can help it. Some can, and do. But mostly it's not good for us. A room of my own is enough, for now anyway."

"A room of one's own."

Cleo seemed to enjoy the sound of that. "I think I like how close you are with your family. I miss my mom, but this change of scene was good for me. I will admit, I'm used to the city where you have to have a roommate or two to afford anything, and having my own little place can be quiet."

"It must be very different here."

It was as close to asking how long Cleo was planning to stay that Zoe could make herself get.

“Ha. Different is the word for it. I don’t mean that in a bad way!”

Cleo took a moment to reassure her when Zoe dropped her spoon into her soup. “Despite how people think of the city, you spend a lot of time within the same circle, at the same places, and everybody knows your business.”

“You know this is a small town full of nosy werewolves, right?”

Zoe gestured at the diners around them. Most weren’t paying attention that she could tell, but some were. They, naturally, knew all about Zoe’s mate already, from Carl or one of the other deputies. The human tourists, at least, were minding their own business. Being too loud when talking to weres, or drinking too much to cover their nerves, as usual, but minding their own business. Most of them were obeying the rules. The more serious incidents tended to involve aggressive weres, who thought in a Dirus, ‘might makes right’ sort of way.

“Everyone pays attention to everyone else, even if they don’t remark on it.”

Zoe was a nosy werewolf too. She was monitoring more than one conversation around them, even if only absently. It was normal. Especially when some of the other diners were new to her, or seemed agitated. “Weres don’t exactly have human boundaries.”

Cleo took a sip of her wine, but maybe she wasn’t as nervous anymore, because she stopped there. “True,”

she agreed. “Tim and Carl were smirking at me yesterday. But they’ve also been helpful. Tim especially has filled me in on a lot of things. In fact, he mentioned

something about that being the point. Packs help each other, or something.”

Zoe released a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. Cleo wasn’t too freaked out about how the town worked. She liked it here. “That’s good,”

she explained, at Cleo’s quizzical look. “I’m glad he’s been helping you. Everyone deserves a chance and a home of their own.”

“ That .”

Cleo grinned, this time like a pleased cat with cream, and took another sip. “That attitude is all over the place here. You guys truly believe it.”

As if to prove her wrong, a group at another table began to snap at each other. Their voices were reaching annoying-even-to-human-ears levels.

“Tourists.”

Zoe sighed. “Worse than blizzards. Not that blizzards happen a lot. Plenty of people will help you when one does, though,”

she hurried to add. “Like me. I’ll help you.”

The tourists at the other table were getting louder. Cleo glanced at them, frowning.

It took Zoe effort not to grunt as she explained. “They’re fighting over someone’s attention. The waiter’s, I think.”

Mostly they were grumbling, while the weres and humans and one fairy at the other tables kept shooting them glances.

Zoe sighed again.

“What?”

Cleo appeared fascinated, but she must have caught the mood of the restaurant, because she was whispering.

“Instincts can be a pain in the butt.”

Zoe pushed away her soup and noticed yet another customer looking her way. She was still in uniform. And to be honest, she would have considered intervening anyway. Nathaniel had trained her, after all. “There is discord in the room. My instincts are screaming at me that it’s discord within the pack and it needs to be resolved.”

Cleo’s lips formed a small circle. She studied the bickering tourists, then Zoe. “Should I be worried?”

“I doubt it.”

Zoe sighed again. “But keep your distance, just in case. I’m...”

She put her hands on the table. “I’m sorry about this.”

She got to her feet and turned toward the oblivious tourists before Cleo could respond. Those tourists had messed up her date, and Zoe was in no mood to be nice.

She slapped her napkin on the table and then shot a look at the waiter in question as she crossed the room. He was slim and striking, with dark black skin and short reddish hair. Fairly new in town. She thought his name was Abay. He was pissed enough to have glowing eyes, but wasn’t willing to make a scene yet. She gave him a

nod as she approached to let him know she would handle it, then inclined her head toward the kitchen, and hopefully, a phone. She didn't have her radio, and she didn't feel like howling for backup. Interrupting her date was bad enough.

“Is that why we came to this town, so you could try to trick me into your threesome fantasy?”

The man didn't bother to lower his voice, although he did lean his head back to make eye contact with Zoe when she came to a stop at their table.

The other weres with them had gone silent a few seconds before. Maybe they were tired of this argument. They all noticed Zoe, then lowered their gazes in either embarrassment or shame, so she dismissed them without taking her all of attention from them. Getting careless about how strongly someone might feel a pack tie, even to someone this obnoxious, had almost gotten her clawed across the face once.

She crossed her arms and waited for the snarling woman to notice her too.

When she did, Zoe met her stare and she didn't blink.

“All I want is just once for you to act like the virile alpha male you pretend to be,”

the woman finished snarling at her male companion, then stopped to bark at Zoe. “What?”

The woman, definitely a tourist, looked ready to stand up. She was possibly eager to fight. Her argument had gotten her riled up and now Zoe was here to challenge her.

Zoe raised her eyebrows. She glanced at the boyfriend or husband, then back toward where the waiter had gone, although anyone could have set this woman off. If this woman was really going to fight her over this, in this town, she must be dumber than

she looked.

That was conveyed in Zoe's expression, judging from the man's narrowed eyes. At least they weren't a mated pair. They probably wouldn't fight to the death for each other, then. Not that Zoe wanted any kind of fight, to the death or otherwise. She was supposed to be wooing her mate.

She uncrossed her arms to jab her finger at the couple, who seemed so surprised they both sat back. "You're disturbing the other patrons. I suggest you be quiet and enjoy the rest of your meal, or I'll have to intervene. On any other night, I would have already."

The woman had a glint in her eye Zoe didn't like the look of. "We're on vacation."

Honestly, the number of times Zoe heard that, and always in the same tone. She was going to have to explain things. She hated explaining things that should have been obvious, especially to people that didn't listen.

"You're breaking the rules,"

she responded, blank-faced and serious. "You've made your waiter uncomfortable. That isn't tolerated here."

She grunted to give them their last warning.

"He can defend himself!"

The man piped up. "He's a were, he knows how we are."

"You aren't going to listen, are you?"

Zoe asked, not really expecting an answer. She locked eyes with some of the people sitting with them, and angled her head slightly in question. Two of them immediately stood up and stepped back. The other stayed in her seat, but kept her head down.

The woman growled at them, aggressive. She could not have been in town for long or someone else would have corrected her behavior by now. Warnings weren't going to work on wolves like this one. They still thought the meanest wolf won.

Zoe focused back on her. She had no doubt her eyes were yellow as she tried to convey how she would leave the woman gutted and bleeding in the street outside if she had to. Nathaniel could do that with just a look, but Zoe still had to use words. "This town is not for you. Behave or leave."

She didn't have to say more than that. Some of the other patrons stood up behind her. The werewolf citizens, maybe some humans, signaling they'd help if necessary.

Both the woman and the man appeared startled, although she was the only one to slam a palm onto the table and let Zoe see her emerging claws. She snarled as she got to her feet, showing off her height and size in challenge, then dragged her claws across the table. Dishes crashed to the floor. The display was familiar. At least once a month during tourist season some deputy had to deal with this sort of posturing.

Unfortunately for this woman, she'd picked a night when Zoe hadn't wanted to frighten her potential mate away and now had no choice.

Zoe kicked the table forward with all of her strength—Nathaniel had taught her that bullying wolves never expected other wolves to fight like humans, and it surprised them, every time.

The table slammed into both of them, hitting the man hard in the chest and nearly knocking the woman off her feet. Zoe moved while the woman was stumbling for

balance. She darted to the side and then forward, took hold of one furry arm and twisted it behind the woman's back. She shoved her body down onto the table in the time it took her to inhale. Then she snapped a warning to the stunned man still in his seat. "Stay there."

Zoe shoved down harder on the woman, who was going to break her arm if she kept struggling while in this position. The break would heal quickly, but Zoe didn't want the paperwork.

She showed a mouthful of fangs to the asshole who wasn't bothering to defend his girlfriend, then leaned down to let her teeth graze the woman's ear. It took her a moment to breathe and then shift back enough to speak normally. "You have an hour to pack and leave. Him, too."

When she looked up, Pema was gazing at her with mild interest. Zoe blinked at the other deputy, and Pema started to say something, but then narrowed her pale amber eyes at the man for a moment, as if he'd twitched or tried to get up. "The hell is his problem?"

"Romance,"

Zoe grumbled. She belatedly realized the woman beneath her was still snarling.

"Speaking of,"

Pema changed subject with an eyebrow waggle. "Weren't you on a date?"

Zoe huffed. She couldn't look over at Cleo yet. After a while she spoke again. "I was ."

She was very conscious of the quiet, watching restaurant patrons.

“Did you follow the rules?”

the woman beneath her sneered, but shut up when Zoe growled at her, deep and low and threatening.

Zoe took a moment to breathe. “I don’t think this one is going to leave peacefully,”

she commented to Pema, who nodded and spoke into her radio. Two deputies appeared in the entrance almost immediately, with all the handcuffs required to keep even a rabid wolf locked up for a while.

When they took the annoying tourist and her charming companion away, Zoe was left in the middle of a mess of broken dishes and awkward silence.

“Aaannyway.”

Pema grinned at her. “We’ll leave you to it then. This was nothing. I’ve got the paperwork, if you want. Just come in tomorrow.”

“Thanks, but...”

Zoe trailed off there rather than admit her date was probably over. Some of Cleo’s scent clung to her, wonderful and awful because it couldn’t last. She smoothed her hands over her uniform—splashed with marinara but not blood, and let out a breath.

Pema clucked her tongue at her, added a wink, then shook her head as if Zoe was being ridiculous.

She jerked her thumb to the side, in the direction of Zoe’s table.

Cleo was there. On her feet, and frowning, but there.

Zoe swallowed, then nodded to Pema, who left to follow the other two deputies.

Giorgio himself came out of the kitchen to scowl at the mess and curse dramatically. He offered free slices of tiramisu to everyone to apologize for the disturbance, and Abay came out to help some of the other staff with the cleanup.

The rest of the weres at that particular table took off, probably to pack and leave town.

Zoe didn't really care about any of it, not even when Giorgio shook her hand and waved off even the idea of Zoe paying for anything tonight. That was great, but Zoe didn't care.

Cleo's eyes were huge.

Zoe crossed to her, but couldn't maintain eye contact for longer than a second. She had to use words. "I know that looked bad. I know we're scary, especially weres like that with more fur than sense. But I didn't lose it, not then, not ever."

She needed Cleo to know that, whatever else happened. "I wouldn't hurt you. But I understand. If you want to go. If you saw my teeth and thought I was a monster."

Someone else in the room hissed in displeasure at the term. Sometimes, Zoe didn't like that everyone knew she was as awkward as Little Wolf, that they were all watching now, concerned that she'd fucked up her chance at keeping her mate. Zoe had been supposed to dress nicer, maybe take Cleo into Carson. Show her she could provide, and that there were places she could go outside of Wolf's Paw if Cleo felt the town was too small. That was without getting to the part where Zoe might hopefully be allowed to woo her in other ways, to please her in bed and out of it.

"Zoe,"

Cleo whispered her name. She cleared her throat and raised her voice when Zoe lifted her head. “First of all, I’m from the city. I’ve seen a fight or two. And secondly…”

She gestured at Zoe in a way Zoe didn’t understand.

Zoe peered down at the stains in her uniform. “It’s just red sauce. It’s not blood,”

she explained, only to abruptly shut up when Cleo reached out and grabbed a handful of her shirt. She tugged Zoe down, gently, slowly, while Zoe was blinking at her, and then her parted lips were against Zoe’s.

She offered one kiss, short and soft, and then licked across Zoe’s bottom lip before releasing her.

Zoe stared at her in dazed arousal, flowers and wine her new scent for happiness. “Cleo?”

she asked, sort of stupidly, sort of not caring how stupid she seemed. She wanted to touch, so the world would know this was her mate.

“And secondly,”

Cleo finished, a bit out of breath, “you are on a date.”

She looked around them as if worried, but then gave everyone an embarrassed smile when someone whistled and no one interfered or called them names. “And thirdly” —she reached out and took Zoe’s hand— “I wouldn’t ask a monster to walk me home… unless you were still hungry?”

Zoe mutely shook her head. This could not be happening. Zoe was not the girl who got people like this, a mate like this, for her own. Cleo was too wonderful for just her.

But Zoe held her hand tightly as Cleo led her from the restaurant.

~~

“People think it’s short for Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. They’re always surprised when they find out my mother loves Blaxploitation films.”

Cleo’s voice would have drawn Zoe after her even if their hands hadn’t been linked.

They could have walked all the way to Carson and Zoe wouldn’t have noticed, although she thought they had gone from the center of town to the quieter residential area. Her truck was several blocks in the opposite direction. She could not have cared less.

She shook her head. “I don’t know those. Unless we make a trip into Carson to see something new, the only films at the cabin are the romantic kind, the human ones.”

Romantic comedies were considered fluffy and silly. Zoe swallowed. “They aren’t mine. I mean, I watch them, I like them, but they weren’t really made for me, were they?”

Cleo stopped and gave her a nudge. “You don’t see anyone like me in them either, do you?”

“Maybe....”

Zoe took a deep breath and focused on that hand in hers to give her strength. “Maybe you can show me the ones you were talking about, sometime.”

Cleo turned to her, studying Zoe in the glow from the streetlamp and the dim light from several windows in the homes around them. “It’s your turn to ask me out?”

she guessed, but then tugged Zoe closer. “So, this went well?”

she wondered, a trace of huskiness in her voice when Zoe leaned down so she wouldn’t tower over her.

Zoe’s chest was tight. “It could have gone better. I didn’t do the things I was supposed to. But you... you kissed me anyway.”

The amazement in her tone was embarrassing, although it didn’t make her step back.

“Yes, I did.”

Cleo smiled, but then scrunched up her face while she considered Zoe. “What were you supposed to do?”

This part was definitely embarrassing. Zoe cleared her throat and focused on Cleo’s earring to avoid meeting her eyes. “I should have showed you how I could provide for you. In the old days, or if you were wolf, I would hunt for you, feed you. And give you things you like, although I don’t know much yet, except for your coffee order.”

She flinched a little, in case that sounded stalkery to human ears, although it was based on smelling Cleo’s latte, not following her around. “I’m supposed to demonstrate any skills I have to you, to make you want me. It’s how we, um, woo.”

“You’re wooing me?”

Cleo seemed about to laugh, and Zoe tensed although she knew Cleo was likely amused at the idea of wooing, which was old-fashioned to humans, and hopefully not the idea of Zoe wooing her.

“Not well,”

Zoe grumbled. “The only thing I’ve done right is display myself for you and that was an accident.”

Cleo made a strangled noise, but shook her head when Zoe looked at her in concern. “This town,”

she said, then lowered her voice. “I liked it when you displayed yourself, accidentally or not,”

she pointed out, making Zoe jolt. “Doesn’t that count? And I think you demonstrated your skills just fine with that rude woman. Unless that wasn’t what you meant.”

“That impressed you?”

Zoe straightened for a second, pleased with herself. She hadn’t even done much. Then she processed the rest of what Cleo had said and went hot all over, which hopefully Cleo couldn’t see. “Um... not exactly. The rules. They say I can.... If you desire me, I can use that.”

“To woo me?”

Cleo repeated, softly, warmly. “For what, exactly?”

“To stay,”

Zoe answered, stumbling. “To... to be my...”

“Girlfriend?”

Cleo finished. “That seems fast.”

“Wooing is supposed to take time,”

Zoe justified it and let the matter rest at ‘girlfriend’ for now. “Humans usually need time. But you....”

Cleo had understood so quickly, and leapt forward. “You wanted . And you smell good, to me.”

Cleo was silent a few moments, possibly confused or ashamed or embarrassed or some other mostly human emotion. Zoe tried not to fidget or growl. Cleo was still holding her hand. That meant something.

“Weres don’t need time?”

Cleo questioned at last, but didn’t wait for an answer. “Because of how we smell?”

Zoe nodded eagerly, grateful she wasn’t going to have to talk about it. “You don’t have to decide now, or even soon. Just know that I want you.”

She exhaled that part shakily, but stood in place while Cleo stared at her without blinking. “So,”

Zoe made herself go on, “if you want to do this again, I am... I would be... happy.”

Cleo was silent for another moment and then released Zoe’s hand. Zoe staggered back, adrift in the middle of the street while Cleo turned and walked up the sidewalk. She headed up a stoop to a small, well-lit porch, and then pulled a set of keys from her duffel bag.

“Zoe,”

she called without turning around, wavering and uncertain. “I want to invite you in for tea, but it seems dishonest after all that.”

“Tea?”

Zoe echoed blankly. “Dishonest?”

As if that proved something, Cleo put a hand to the door and then twisted around to study her. She put her shoulders back before she spoke. “Would you like to come in?”

Her voice was soothing and stirring, carrying clearly over the distance between them. “For tea, or, for something other than tea?”

She smiled, almost shyly. “I’m not ready for this date to end.”

“Yeah?”

Zoe wondered breathlessly, probably to the amusement of anyone listening in. Not that she gave a shit. She tripped into motion, following the same path Cleo had taken, trailing after her with a few respectable feet between them when Cleo opened the door and stood aside to let her in.

She turned on lights Zoe didn’t really need, and closed the door, and shoved her bag on a chair in the small living area that served as her entranceway. Zoe noted a kitchen on her other side, in soft yellows and blues, and an opened door revealing a bedroom decorated in the colors of spring. Everything smelled of Cleo.

“Is it true what they say about werewolves?”

Cleo asked from behind her, then moved past her little dining table into her kitchen with restless energy and a hammering heart. “You claim each other?”

On the verge of complaining about the ‘werewolves can go all night’ legends, true though they might be, Zoe shut her mouth. After a moment, she nodded.

Cleo’s kitchen cabinets had no doors. She pulled out two pale blue mugs and put them on the table. “Humans too?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

She went to a clay jar labeled 'Tea' but stopped with her hands wrapped around it.

"If they agree."

Zoe watched her carefully, the splay of her fingers, the quickening pace of her breathing. "We want others to know."

"So, if someone claimed you as their girlfriend, everyone in town would know about it?"

Cleo was very still.

"No one's ever claimed me,"

Zoe confessed, shivering at the idea. "But, yeah. If I—"

She swallowed dryly and tried again. "If I claimed someone, I'd be faithful. We're possessive, but we're not animals. It goes both ways."

Cleo gave a small shudder. "I'm trying very hard to be sensible, but you're making it difficult."

She held out her hand without turning around. She was quiet. "Tell me again how I smell to you. Please."

Zoe had once seen Tim offer his hand to Nathaniel and Nathaniel take it with a careful, reverent sort of joy Zoe had been uncomfortable to witness at the time. But

she thought of it now as she came forward to curl her hands around her mate's fragile wrist. She raised it nearly to her mouth, and inhaled over the thin skin, although she already knew the scent better than any other.

“Bright. Warm,”

she answered, and wanted, needed, to kiss that skin the way Nathaniel had done. “Spring and flowers. Nectar,”

she added, and made a rough noise when her lips brushed Cleo's skin.

Cleo turned. She pulled her hand from Zoe's in the same moment, but only to slide it to Zoe's shoulder. She tilted her face up before curling her fingers greedily into Zoe's collar. “I need you to kiss me, Zoe,”

she whispered, soft and brave.

Zoe kissed her, trying to be gentle and failing when Cleo parted her lips and pushed forward for it. Cleo was trembling, and Zoe pulled back to press lighter, careful, kisses at the edge of her mouth. Her mate was sweet as well as fierce, one hand wrapped tight in Zoe's shirt, her body hot and shivering. Kisses at the corner of her lips became kisses at her jaw, kisses down her throat, where the scent made Zoe growl.

Cleo clutched at her, her pulse delicious beneath Zoe's mouth. Warm skin, with the hint of salt and lavender from the spa, mate's skin, flushed and ripe. Zoe nosed at the orange-and-pink scent and grunted in approval. She followed it down, licking at the collarbone that had tempted her all night long, and Cleo made a small, choked sound.

It brought Zoe out of her daze enough to raise her head. Cleo stared at her with wide, dark eyes, her lips wet from Zoe's mouth. Zoe came closer, uncertain for another

moment, until Cleo's fingers curled at the nape of her neck to bring her in for another kiss. It was so hungry Zoe felt it between her legs. Her knees went weak at the hot throb there, the instant ache for her mate's fingers, her mate's tongue.

She slapped a hand to the counter, but the other went to Cleo's waist, to Mate , to keep her on her feet even if Zoe fell. Cleo barely paused in her exploration of Zoe's mouth. She tightened her hold on Zoe's neck and leaned forward to pull at Zoe's shirt buttons. Her arousal was a wet, orange-blossom honeyed scent that had Zoe growling again, licking desperately into her mate's mouth for more. She remembered vaguely, distantly, that first times between mates could be like this, overwhelming. She felt her uniform shirt pushed from her shoulders, the t-shirt beneath that lifted up, and then her mate's palm over her breast, hot even through Zoe's plain bra.

"Zoe,"

Cleo begged against Zoe's cheek, as if she wasn't the one creating this ache with the slow friction of her hand over Zoe's nipple. Zoe whined in answer and bared her throat. Cleo dragged her mouth over the offered skin but didn't bite, so Zoe whined again.

"Zoe ,"

Cleo repeated herself, husky and impatient, telling Zoe that Zoe was failing to give her what she needed, which Zoe could not allow. Zoe lifted her to the counter and slid her hands to Cleo's hips as she stepped between her legs. Cleo gasped. This was right , Mate's scent told her. This was good . Their bodies closer, thighs warm around Zoe, her mate free to run her hands up Zoe's arms and back, and down over her stomach. "I don't normally..."

Cleo started, but left the thought unfinished as she unclasped Zoe's bra enough to push it up. "Oh my God."

Zoe stilled in embarrassment, but with a sweet sound of pleasure, Cleo continued to touch her. She put her mouth to Zoe's bicep as her fingers trailed over Zoe's exposed nipples. It was only for the few moments before she leaned back to look at her. Cleo watched Zoe's face while she ran her thumb across the peaked, sensitive skin, and when Zoe bit back a cry, she slid her other hand down, past Zoe's belly button to the waist of her pants. She was breathing raggedly. Zoe was too. She was wet, as swollen as Cleo's mouth, and all she could do was shiver for the press of Cleo's fingers, over her underwear, then inside them, cool where Zoe was so hot.

She closed her eyes, knowing she didn't wear anything pretty or pink, although Cleo didn't seem to mind boring white cotton-and-elastic. Cleo hummed for how wet Zoe was, and finally scraped her teeth across Zoe's throat as she spread Zoe open. She began to smell of sharper arousal, the scent enough to make Zoe weak. Zoe wanted to taste her and couldn't, not like this. She moved her hips instead, rocking forward into the tease of her mate's fingertips, and then gasped for the heat of Cleo's mouth on her skin, her teeth pressing not quite hard enough, the suction going straight down to her clit.

"Mate,"

Zoe pleaded, after a long time of heavy breathing, and tentative, bruising hickey, and spiraling, building hot need beneath the push of Cleo's fingers. She grasped at Cleo's hips and shuddered for Cleo's breath over her damp skin.

Cleo dropped her mouth to Zoe's chest, kissing as she whispered fragments of sentences. "I've never.... But you need.... I want.... Oh, good, Zoe. So good."

Her mouth went everywhere, Zoe's shoulders, her arms, dragging across her nipples in slow approval when Zoe squeezed her harder. Cleo's edged, honeysuckle desire was nearly on Zoe's tongue. Her mate was aroused by her arousal. Zoe wanted her to have it, and begged for her, rough, panting sounds that grew louder and louder until

Cleo finally let her come, left her shocked and trembling and weak-kneed.

Zoe leaned onto her while lightning flashed behind her eyes. Cleo wrapped herself tighter around her, one hand curled lightly to the back of Zoe's neck. "So good,"

she murmured again, while Zoe caught her breath. "So good it hurts, Zoe."

Zoe found Cleo's mouth, blindly, and licked at her parted lips, her tongue. Even with her underwear soaked and her mate's fingers stroking smaller bursts of pleasure from her, Zoe needed more. "Taste. I need to."

She wondered if Cleo knew about weres, how they couldn't get sick, that they couldn't spread sickness either. They barely got tired. She put her face to Cleo's shoulder and inhaled. "Let me taste you."

Desire was rich at her mate's skin now, blood-heavy, like the pulse Zoe could hear, like the hungry gasp of her name when Cleo heard Zoe's request.

Zoe followed the sound, nosing at the damp valley between Cleo's breasts and moaning in gratitude when Cleo pulled her own shirt away. Zoe felt empty with Cleo's hand gone, but nuzzled at the swell of cleavage and the light, blushing lace of Cleo's bra. The taste was closer there, but it still wasn't enough. Zoe whined. For a moment her thinking wasn't entirely human. She gathered sweat with the flat of her tongue and whined again.

Cleo curved her body forward for Zoe's mouth, and twined her hands into Zoe's short curls. She displaced the bobby pins and tugged until Zoe lifted her head. Cleo forced Zoe to look at her. She used words. "You want to taste me?"

she demanded, tone muzzy, eyes dazed. She hitched a loud breath when Zoe considered the words and gave a human response; she nodded. Cleo immediately

knotted her fingers in Zoe's hair and urged her closer. "Then eat me out already,"

she whispered, her breath light and damp at Zoe's mouth. Whatever look crossed Zoe's face made her shiver.

Her mate knew about weres. Knew enough to give Zoe what she, what they both, wanted. Zoe picked her up, arms careful under her thighs, and carried her to the bedroom. Cleo's pulse jumped. She slid her mouth over Zoe's, a kiss of surprise and delight that tormented Zoe's instincts. She wanted to kiss back, harder, leave marks. She wanted to protect and please. That last instinct won. Mate would be comfortable. Zoe would please her.

She placed Cleo on the bed, gently, controlling her strength now, and liked how eagerly Cleo kicked off her shoes, how she arched up to help Zoe remove her pants. "Zoe,"

she kept saying, "Zoe,"

calling Zoe back to humanity, and words. "Zoe," as Zoe undressed her.

If Zoe wore underwear, Cleo wore panties, fragile, soft, and thin, lace Zoe wanted to tear with her teeth. But the scent brought her to her knees first, made her collapse at the edge of the bed, breathing hard, and then she leaned forward to put her mouth against the soaked fabric.

Cleo bucked up, but Zoe didn't mind. It was easy to glide her hands along Cleo's thighs to hold them apart, and then lick in again, mate/home/mate heady in her mouth. She pushed the panties aside at first, impatient for slick, throbbing heat against her fingers, then her tongue.

The sounds from her mate were beautiful, starving little cries that the whole town

could hear for all Zoe cared. She understood it now, the need that made Little Wolf demand this in public, and why Nathaniel had let him. She lapped up concentrated flower scent and musky, metallic warmth and slipped her fingers inside, deep enough to make Cleo tangle her hands into Zoe's hair to make sure she wouldn't stop. Her body jerked when Zoe sucked at her clit, but then she was gasping at the ceiling. She said Zoe's name again, as though it meant something. Zoe growled in pleasure, right where she was, and Cleo arched up again with a choked noise, coming.

Surprised, but not unhappy, Zoe coaxed more shocks from her with her mouth at her clit and fingers sliding free, loving the following rush of more honeyed arousal. Zoe kissed her trembling thighs for a few moments, trying to remember to be gentle with the human, to wait a moment before continuing. The growl was in the back of her throat. Her breathing was heavy, wild. Her face was wet and hot. She smoothed her hands up over Cleo's hips to her stomach, petting, soothing, mouthing at Cleo's pretty skin distractedly while she waited to be allowed to make her come again.

When Cleo exhaled with a shudder and shifted her hips, Zoe grunted happily and went back to get more of her mate on her tongue. The lace of Cleo's panties was drenched in mate-scent, pleasure-scent, burning desire for Zoe. Zoe bit at it to get at the source of that smell.

"Just take them off."

Cleo's throaty command made Zoe pause. She withdrew her teeth and pushed the panties from Cleo's hips. When they were past her ankles, already forgotten, Cleo wrapped a leg around Zoe's shoulders, without letting go of Zoe's hair. "That's better,"

she decided, in a slow, slurring voice that made Zoe's toes curl. She rolled her hips up, hinting, or giving Zoe what she still needed.

Zoe didn't need any other encouragement. She buried her face in the thatch of her mate's short curls and lost herself in the feel and scent and the sound of her mate's pleasure.

~~

Zoe woke to the smell of her mate's bed and her mate's pleasure, but not her mate herself. Some light peeked through the bedroom curtains, indicating it was morning, which meant Cleo had likely gotten up to get ready for work.

Zoe tracked the sound of movement in the kitchen, then gave herself a few minutes to bury her face in the pillows and breathe in the best scents in the world. She stretched out, for once not feeling too tall. Her limbs felt strong, put to their proper use. She almost wished she could experience lingering soreness from exertion the way humans did. But sleeping next to her mate, even for only a few hours, was invigorating.

She stretched again, taking up the entire bed for one greedy, giggling moment. She was naked under the covers, which was vaguely concerning until she remembered losing her belt and pants... and shoes... after making Cleo come for the third time, and before Cleo had sleepily curled up next to her and fingered her beneath the blankets.

Zoe put a hand to her neck, but of course, even her whispered requests for bites and hickeys wouldn't matter now. They'd already healed.

She turned to stretch over the soft sheets, proof of her mate's good taste, and sniff out more traces of damp spots. Her cheeks were burning, but she hid her grin in a pillow. She had been permitted to touch her mate, and made her gasp her name. That was good. That had to be good.

Tim would tease her, but whatever. It was worth it.

But since she had no idea what time it was other than early morning with the sun rising steadily higher, she rolled to the edge of the bed to look for a clock, or at least her clothes.

She didn't see an alarm clock on the nightstand, only a charger for Cleo's phone, which was missing.

So were Zoe's clothes, although she identified the lacy bundle on the floor as her mate's underwear. She still saw no sign of her own clothes, not even her shoes. That made her smile dip somewhat, because being naked alone in the woods was different from being naked in front of someone important.

Zoe flung an arm across her chest and sat up. She cocked her head toward the sound of Cleo's voice again, wondering if Cleo was doing laundry, and if, in her animal, lustful fog last night, Zoe had failed to notice a washer and dryer in the kitchen. Then she remembered the small washer and dryer unit by the bathroom.

"You realize what time it is? I could have been sleeping,"

Cleo was saying, faint exasperation in her tone. There was a quiet bang, like a pot or a pan hitting something else. Cleo hissed at the sound, then spoke again. "Well, no, I wasn't asleep, luckily."

Zoe became aware that Cleo was whispering. All her movements were muffled, in fact.

She reached out, finding the top blanket and dragging it around her shoulders as she put her feet on the floor.

"I was going to make breakfast,"

Cleo went on. This time, Zoe just made out the mumble of someone else on the other end of the call. Either the connection was bad, or Cleo's walls were more solid than they looked. In an apartment intended for humans, in a town constructed for werewolves, that was a real possibility.

"I make breakfast for myself all the time, Mom!"

Cleo's volume ticked up for a moment before she lowered it again. "Okay, not usually on workdays, but it doesn't automatically mean I'm seeing someone because I'm making a real breakfast."

Zoe stopped breathing.

"You always assume everything is serious,"

Cleo told her mother. "I wanted French toast. That's all. I'm not seeing anyone."

Their sex smells were overpowering, undeniable. Zoe swallowed, but the taste she'd reveled in last night was inescapable now. This was Rejection, she realized, and got to her feet in a panic to avoid the moment Cleo would tell her this had been nice but she wasn't looking for more. She didn't want serious, she didn't want girlfriend, and she didn't want mate. She wasn't seeing anyone, certainly not Zoe with her white cotton underwear and her stupid hair.

Zoe scraped her curls from her face, but her pins were long gone, like the rest of her uniform. She couldn't bear trying to find it now. She had to go. She'd flee into the woods. She'd escape to parts unknown, like Albert, broken and alone, anything rather than hear her mate say the words, No, I don't want you.

She fell to the floor on shaky legs, the blanket slowing her down enough for her to remember she was naked. Then she was wolf before she had time to consciously

think about it. She could go far on wolf legs, wouldn't have to think of anything unless she wanted to.

But the scents made her dizzy and had her whimpering the moment she'd nosed open the bedroom door: mate in the carpet, mate at the couch, mate in the kitchen.

"Mom, I have to get ready for work. I'll call you later, I promise,"

Mate said, Spring-mate, Flower-human, who still smelled of Zoe. She ended her call, and Zoe froze to see her. She had her back to her living room and Zoe as she fussed with her stove.

Zoe hunched down, fully prepared to slink away as long as she could get the front door open, but then Mate spun around with a happy humming sound. She was wearing an oversize t-shirt and long bathrobe with a pale pattern lining the inside. Her t-shirt had a large lightning bolt down the middle. Her hairstyle was a wreck from either the pillows or Zoe's hands.

"Oh my God!"

She half shrieked when she saw Zoe and slapped a hand over her heart. She dropped the bag of coffee that had been in her other hand, but it hit the floor without spilling open. She panted for several seconds, her eyes wide, then shook her head. She shook it again when Zoe didn't move. "Zoe?"

she questioned, and took a step forward for a longer, better look at the giant wolf in her living room.

People had seen Zoe as a wolf before. Her packmates, but also others from town when they caught glimpses of each other out in the woods. But never a human in a house like this, never mate.

Zoe stayed a wolf despite that. She didn't want to shift to human right now. But she didn't want Mate afraid of her either, so she sat on her haunches and lowered her head.

"You did not look like that when I left you in bed,"

Spring-mate burst out excitedly and met Zoe's stare. She made a noise of confusion when Zoe turned her head away, toward the door. "Oh,"

she said a moment later. "Were you trying to sneak out?"

The throb in her voice had Zoe whining before she could control herself. She pushed forward to place her muzzle into her mate's palm and then licked it. She hated how easy it was to do and how she wanted to do it again. Mate let out a shaky breath and twisted her arm to offer Zoe her wrist like she'd done the night before, but yanked her arm back before Zoe could sniff her. "Last night you said..."

Mate cut herself off and turned around to pick up the coffee. "If you want to go, I won't stop you."

The waver in her voice made Zoe whine again. She got up in indecision, stared at her paws and then the tense line of her mate's back, and knew she couldn't do it. This was why Pack-brother had let Big-mouth stay, even with the pain he must have been in.

She shifted, grunting a little—it expended energy and she'd used up a lot last night, and had never really gotten to eat her soup. She stayed on the floor for another few moments, breathing hard and trying to work up the nerve to speak.

"I couldn't find my clothes,"

she explained hoarsely, and darted a glance to Cleo. Cleo jumped at the sound of Zoe's voice, but spun around to face her. She'd put the bag of coffee on the counter, in the same spot where Zoe had picked her up and kissed her.

Zoe looked away, face hot, and then got to her feet. She crossed her arms over her chest, even though it felt stupid after everything.

"You want them?"

Cleo wondered softly. She might have been staring at the awkward picture Zoe made, but Zoe couldn't be sure without checking. "You haven't even showered."

Zoe lifted one arm to sniff herself, then gave a distracted, embarrassed shrug. "Werewolves have a different view of these things. I liked... I liked how I smell of us."

She lowered her head like the eager, instinctual creature she was.

"There's a lot to unpack in that statement. And I haven't had any caffeine yet."

But Cleo didn't move to prepare any. "I hid your clothes so you couldn't leave,"

she added.

Zoe raised her head in surprise. "Really?"

"No."

Cleo leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. Her mouth looked bruised from so many kisses, but the corners were turned down. "But I should have. I folded them and put them on the couch for you. The stains in your uniform shirt look set. I don't

know if you can get them out. Why am I still talking?"

She sighed heavily. "Maybe you weren't lying last night about wanting something serious, and you just changed your mind this morning. It isn't like you're the first to skip out before I can make you breakfast."

Zoe was very, very bad at this. She swung a look to the couch, where her clothes were neatly stacked and waiting. She turned back toward Cleo, who watched her with an expression Zoe couldn't read. Zoe's other senses were too distracted by sex scents to tell her anything useful. Nathaniel always said werewolves, shifters in general, were too quick to forget they could use words, think like humans. As usual, he was probably right.

"You wanted me to stay?"

Zoe asked, because that's what it was beginning to sound like, despite what she'd heard earlier. "This is why we're supposed to take our time with non-weres,"

she realized out loud.

"What?"

Cleo was capable of stubborn silence. Zoe wished she'd known that before.

She reached for her t-shirt and yanked that over her head to help her feel slightly less naked, although it barely reached the top of her thighs, and that only when she pulled on it, which made her nipples stick out.

Cleo released a harsh breath, and Zoe lifted her head guiltily. "I thought you were sneaking out,"

Cleo accused, although her gaze tripped down over Zoe's body before she met Zoe's stare.

"You want to make me breakfast?"

Zoe asked in return, totally confused. "You told your mom you weren't seeing anyone."

Cleo's eyes widened. After a pause, she nodded. "I thought you were sleeping, but of course you heard that. You slept through me getting up without even twitching, but apparently the sound of my voice woke you right up. How much of that call did you hear? Because you don't know my mother. I had to... oh . Is that...?"

Her sudden smile was like the absence of pain when healing was done. "Is that why you were sneaking out? You thought I wasn't serious about you?"

"You said—"

Zoe shrugged, although she could hear the hurt in her tone and knew Cleo could too "—what you said. And I couldn't smell you."

"So you didn't know I was lying,"

Cleo interpreted, and nodded again. "No wonder you all hate lying so much. I'm sorry. Humans lie as routine, and my mother is... determined. If I told her I was seeing someone, she'd have questions. And once she found out I'd slept with you so fast—and she would have, she's like that—she'd have been worried. I just... didn't want to deal with that. Not this morning."

Zoe pressed her thighs together. It did not make her feel any more dressed. "Is she...? Would she be unhappy to know about me?"

“My mother is protective.”

The way Cleo said it made Zoe think of Cleo saying other people had left her before she could even make them breakfast.

“Have you made a lot of people breakfast?”

Zoe wondered, and nearly bit her tongue. “That’s not my business. I meant that I don’t understand why anyone would leave you, before, um, before breakfast.”

“I don’t have a lot of one-night stands, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Cleo tapped the countertop for a second. “But I have dated people who, metaphorically anyway, left before things really began. I think... what did you say last night? You have to show you can provide? You feed the person you like, to show you’re ready for more?”

Zoe nodded, not following, and Cleo glanced at her small kitchen table. “I think I’ve been offering that to other people without realizing I was. Did you want to borrow some underwear?” She changed the subject so suddenly Zoe only blinked at her. Then she lost herself for a moment while imagining herself in her mate’s panties.

Cleo must have had a similar thought, because she bit her lip and gave Zoe a heavy look. “Or,”

she went on, “I might find a pair of sweatpants that’ll fit you, for you to wear while you eat.”

The corners of her mouth curved up this time. “I like you in sweatpants.”

If Zoe’s stomach hadn’t been rumbling, she would have forgotten about breakfast

entirely. “You’re flirting with me?”

she asked, puzzled. “And you’re going to make food for me?”

Something important was eluding her, but she couldn’t focus to pinpoint what it was. “Do you want help? I can cook. Or you don’t need to make anything fancy. Weres will eat anything.”

“You can say that again.”

Cleo stuck out her tongue at her.

“You are flirting with me!”

Zoe stopped in astonishment, then put her hands to her cheeks. Her t-shirt immediately rode up again, causing Cleo’s eyes to drop.

She hummed. “You’re a constant surprise, Deputy Zoe Browne.”

Cleo met Zoe’s startled gaze. “With that rude woman in the restaurant, you were exactly how you seemed whenever I saw you in town, fierce and serious, short with words. Then, right now, I don’t know whether to pet you or fuck you.”

Zoe gave a start. But Cleo wasn’t quite done. “Or just feed you.”

For several seconds, Zoe felt like one of those people who sat at the library bookshop to watch the firefighters wash the trucks. The firefighters flirted the way Cleo did, especially when someone they wanted was in the audience.

Zoe had never understood it, teasing someone who obviously wanted you desperately, making them desire you so much they could barely think. If she were

watching Cleo like that, she'd probably stare until her eyes were stinging and her cheeks were tomato red, and she'd agree to anything Cleo asked.

"I like you,"

Zoe admitted quietly. "I really like you, in a way I can't help. And I want you to like me. It's making me... awkward. More than usual."

Her mate took a long, long breath and then let it out with a satisfied sound. Then she patted the table. "Then come sit down, so I can cook you all the food."

Zoe gave her shirt another useless tug, and then walked slowly into the kitchen. She sat, studying her mate in absolute wonder when Cleo grinned to see Zoe at her table. She showed teeth, like a pleased wolf, and then everything finally clicked.

Her mate was wooing her. The teasing, the offer of clothing, of breakfast. These were to convince Zoe to stay. As if Zoe would be going anywhere.

Zoe sat up straight. "You don't have to go into work?"

"Not until later."

Cleo seemed unconcerned with time as she swayed to her refrigerator to pull out milk and eggs.

"And you don't want my help?"

Zoe asked again, which made Cleo pause.

She put the food down and then approached the table. "Well, I did forget something,"

she remarked innocently, before bending down to give Zoe an unexpected kiss. She pulled away several moments later, breathing harder, and beamed at the expression on Zoe's face, and Zoe's soft whisper for more. Then, as though nothing had occurred, when everything had just happened, she went to start the coffee.

Hot all over, Zoe stared unabashedly as her almost-mate made her breakfast.

~~

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

Zoe made it to Robin's Egg's sometime around ten, although she wasn't really certain of the exact minute.

She knew the sun was out, she knew the approaching fall-scent was getting stronger, and she knew her mate put strawberries on her French toast when strawberries were in season.

They weren't now, but next year Zoe would get her some.

A whole bushel, or whatever it was strawberries came in.

There might be a next year.

The idea was so heady Zoe had nearly walked into a stop sign on her way over.

Zoe had been wooed.

By a non-were, who hadn't even had to be told about the traditions first.

She had eaten breakfast as neatly as she could, although syrup was probably in her hair, and felt ridiculously proud of herself for bringing so many smiles to her mate's face simply by accepting her food and staying.

She had learned that her mate normally took long showers but couldn't that morning because of the time she'd spent cooking and then crowding Zoe against her sink when Zoe had offered to do the dishes and gotten her t-shirt wet.

Her mate only ever loosely made the bed, but couldn't leave for work if her kitchen was a mess.

She spent ten minutes applying her makeup in smooth, practiced motions, but took longer when she noticed Zoe watching her put on lipstick with hot fascination.

Zoe had put on her wrinkled uniform with a new shirt underneath and a borrowed pair of underwear that she blushed to think about, and then walked alongside her mate in the morning sunlight after remembering she'd left her truck by the Flores.

Then Cleo had kissed her outside the hotel, with people around, looking , her hands urgent on Zoe's clothes.

Zoe had been too stunned to object, not that she would have.

She felt about as shameless as Little Wolf, although it had only been kissing.

Of course, to any wolf noses, she reeked of sex, which was as close to publicly declaring herself mated as she could dare come yet.

But she came through the gift shop entrance to the café and felt something like fear when she saw Nathaniel with Tim at the counter and then Carl in his usual spot. They all looked up. Nathaniel immediately rubbed his nose.

Zoe gulped a breath, then reminded herself of the months Tim and Nathaniel's sex smells in her clothes just from being near them. They could deal with a little of her mate's bloom-scent wafting in the air.

Robin's Egg floated over to greet her and ask if she had an order, then smiled beatifically at her in a way Zoe didn't understand.

Although to be honest, fairies always made her nervous.

Creatures who saw the truth when they looked at Zoe and then smiled must know something she didn't.

But she ordered her coffee, then remembered the vanilla her mate put in her French toast too and changed her mind.

She ordered a latte with low-fat milk and strong, bitter espresso, with a hint of vanilla syrup, like Cleo did.

Robin's Egg dashed off before Zoe could rethink it.

"Look who didn't come home last night,"

Little Wolf chirped the moment Egg was gone, a wicked grin on his face. Then he took a breath and wrinkled his nose. "Aw, Zoe. Gross. You smell like girls."

Nathaniel casually leaned down to whisper something in his mate's ear. Zoe couldn't make it out, but it made Tim meet her gaze. "Which is great,"

he added, and briefly closed his eyes in pleasure when Nathaniel gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Well, well,"

Carl commented. He always had been a nosy old man. "I take it you haven't been home."

Zoe stopped. She glanced to Nathaniel, who had such a warm look on his face Zoe had to resort to checking with Little Wolf to get some clarity.

His eyes were ferociously blue for a moment. “Tell us about last night, Zoe.”

He might have meant it as a question, but it didn’t come out that way.

Zoe bristled. “No.”

“Then this morning. Tell us about this morning,”

Tim pressed. He was being very Dirus right now, and, unusually, Nathaniel wasn’t reining him in. He wasn’t even trying.

Nathaniel’s eyes were gold. Zoe blinked at him and nearly took a step back as she tried to determine what was going on. “I’m going to go home and shower and change. I know about the marinara on my uniform, and... everything else.”

“Anything else you want to tell us.”

Tim waved off the stains, or stink of girls , as if they’d never really bothered him. He crossed his arms. Zoe crossed hers right back at him. At least until Robin’s Egg came over with her coffee. Then Zoe stood there, inhaling milk and sugar and vanilla and thinking of Cleo.

After a few minutes of a standoff she knew she’d lose, she huffed. “Nothing bad happened. We talked. She wanted me and asked me to stay. She made me breakfast.”

A smile was slowly growing on Nathaniel’s face. “That sounds like wooing to me.”

“Oh my God!”

Tim almost howled. “Not fair. I had to catch this one a rabbit!”

“Yes. That’s what won me over. The rabbit.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes, but with affection. Hearing him joke like that was still so strange. His tone was mean but kind; Zoe had never understood it, although Tim seemed to.

But Tim pooh-poohed Nathaniel as well for the moment. “It was my very first rabbit. It was special , and he loved it.”

He turned to Zoe. “What did she make you for breakfast?”

“French toast,”

Zoe revealed, hating Tim a lot for how he could ask simple questions and still have her flustered. She hadn’t said anything weird or suggestive, but now he was grinning at her. “And then...”

“Spare me the and then ,”

he interrupted, then glanced to Carl with an offended expression on his face.

So did Nathaniel. He outright scowled. “Not a word, Carl.”

Carl grumbled at him, fearless before that scowl in a way most others weren’t, but didn’t say whatever he’d been planning on saying. He pretended to be reading his paper again.

“But you didn’t tell her?”

Having dealt with the dirty old man, Nathaniel focused on Zoe once more.

Little Wolf snorted. “I keep telling you, the traditions are nice and everything, but waiting for the other person to recognize the bond is a waste of time. It’s already there. She clearly feels it if she’s wooing you.”

“It doesn’t matter if I say it or not, then.”

Zoe stared at Tim as this idea occurred to her, which was right, by his own logic, but which felt wrong, instinctually. She could tell he thought so too, because instead of arguing, he opened his mouth, then closed it. It felt like a lie to keep it from Cleo when there was no reason to. Cleo was the opposite of Little Wolf. She wasn’t afraid.

She had implied she wanted permanent, had sought it with others.

Zoe bit her lip to hold in her growls at the thought. Her instincts, on edge with things still unsettled between them, were somewhat soothed by the realization that Cleo wanted it with Zoe as well, and that Zoe had already done what the others hadn’t.

“I have to tell her before we go any further,”

she announced with a sigh. “She— we do better with truth between us.”

“Truth.”

Nathaniel was dry, the way he usually only was with Tim. “What else have you told her, Zo’? Because she’s telling you something.”

“Huh?”

Zoe frowned, well-fed and semi-caffeinated, but still needing sleep and a shower and another visit from her mate to wake her up.

Clearly enjoying himself, Tim swung a hand dramatically toward the rack of touristy souvenir t-shirts, which had a small mirror at the top. Zoe twisted around to see what he was gesturing to and caught sight of her reflection.

The hickies at her neck had healed, but Cleo must have remembered Zoe asking for them, just like she'd noticed Zoe drooling over how she put on lipstick. Zoe had been so happy to be kissed outside the hotel she hadn't thought about what that might mean. No one she'd been with had ever really worn make up or lipstick like Cleo did.

The shape of Cleo's mouth decorated Zoe's throat. Pink lips, pink smears, wet and shiny where she'd put each kiss on Zoe, deliberately marked Zoe, in a way even a human would understand. She wanted everyone to know she was allowed to kiss Zoe, maybe because Zoe had told her about claiming, told her it went both ways, and promised to be faithful.

"Oh,"

Zoe said breathlessly, studying the line of kisses along her neck, the stain of pink at her collar, the filthy smudge of it at her mouth. "Oh, she claimed me. She...."

She'd asked Zoe about claiming. She'd hinted this morning about what she wanted. "My mate is brave and magic." Zoe exhaled shakily. She wanted to touch the marks, but wouldn't risk smearing them for anything.

Cleo had stopped Zoe by the side of her truck and turned to her in the full light of day and painted a mark on her to show the world Zoe was taken. "Nathaniel, she's wonderful."

"Of course she is, Zo'."

Nathaniel was wonderful too. "She's your mate."

“I am?”

In that moment, Cleo’s soft voice was not soothing.

Zoe had been tricked by the vanilla coffee in her hand and too distracted by the bright marks at her throat to notice her mate’s presence behind her.

She went still and stared at Nathaniel in betrayal before she understood what he’d done for her. Then she turned.

Cleo was dressed for work, black pants, black shirt, white and pastel green scarf in her hair. She had reapplied her lipstick, but her gaze went right to Zoe’s neck.

“What are you doing here?”

Zoe didn’t know why she bothered asking. “I thought you were at work.”

“I don’t work the mid-shift today. I go in a little later, which I forgot this morning. I suppose I was distracted.”

Cleo wet the corner of her mouth and reached up, maybe to fiddle with an earring that she wasn’t wearing. “What were you saying as I walked in? What was that?”

She looked Zoe in the eye, but only briefly, and then her attention was back on the lipstick marks on Zoe’s skin.

“You claimed me.”

Zoe wasn’t sure if she was complaining, or asking a question.

“I’m your mate?”

Cleo responded. She brought her gaze up to Zoe's face and kept it there. "Your mate?"

she repeated, in a high voice.

"If you want to be."

That wasn't exactly right. Zoe looked down at the latte she probably shouldn't have ordered. "You are ,"

she corrected. "But you don't have to be, if you don't want to. People don't usually want me. I'd understand."

Cleo didn't move away. Zoe lifted her head in time to watch her glance from Carl to Tim to Nathaniel and then back to Carl. Carl smiled warmly at her.

"Okay,"

she agreed cautiously, as if that had reassured her. She sounded calmer than her heartbeat said she was. Zoe peered up again. Cleo was watching her now. "I've seen the movies..."

Nathaniel made that scornful noise he made whenever someone mentioned the human pop culture depictions of mating.

"But I don't think I really grasp—were you trying to tell me this last night?"

Cleo studied Zoe intently.

"Yes."

Zoe stared back. “You marked me.”

Her voice was embarrassingly quiet.

“I” –Cleo swallowed— “thought you wanted to be girlfriends.”

“You said that was fast.”

Zoe was practically whispering. She didn’t know why. Cleo wasn’t.

“Because it is!”

Cleo raised her voice, then glanced toward Nathaniel again before refocusing on Zoe.

“But also, it isn’t.”

She went quiet too. “I marked you. You asked me to last night, and you’re so incredible, Zoe. I didn’t want anyone else moving in on you.”

Mate . Zoe felt her lips part. “We can be girlfriends.”

“I thought we were mates.”

Cleo shook her head. Her entire posture screamed confused and embarrassed. Zoe didn’t have to smell her, although she did anyway. The rightness of her was breathtaking.

“We can be girlfriends first,”

Zoe assured her. “I didn’t shower so that every were in town would know you’d touched me.”

Somewhere where she didn't care to look, Tim was making eager gestures, the kind he did when his soap opera was on and he couldn't contain his excitement.

Cleo's mouth, shiny and pink again, formed a small 'O'. "You marked yourself before I could. What if I... what if I hadn't? Is this like this morning when you thought I wasn't serious about you, but came up to lick my hand anyway? Is that what it means, mates? I meant to ask you last night, when you asked if I had questions. Oh God, at dinner you asked if I had questions. Zoe."

Her eyebrows came together. "And you were going to leave?"

She stopped, then swallowed. "Girlfriends?" She hesitated. "Really?"

Zoe thrust the latte at her. "I can provide for you. If you let me, I'll show you. I'm allowed to try, as we get to know one another. It's exactly as I told you. I just... left a word out. If you like, we can continue as we were."

"You were doing a bang-up job so far,"

Tim interjected. Carl actually hissed at him to shut up. Tim was undeterred. "No, really. I think she's magic, Zoe."

Nathaniel calmly placed a hand over his mate's mouth.

Cleo stared at them in wonder. "Magic?"

"I think you're magic, too,"

Zoe confessed. "You're wonderful."

Her mate's honest, sunshiny pleasure was lighter than the vanilla in her latte. She still

hadn't taken it, but she looked down at the cup as though it held the key to all life's mysteries.

"I like you, Zoe. Very much."

She finally took the cup in both hands although she didn't drink from it. She flicked the plastic lid in a nervous gesture.

"I moved in with my last girlfriend after knowing her a month, and it did not end well. She was... not the settle-down type. You know, I think I was...."

Cleo's gaze sharpened.

Zoe tried not to look too obviously upset to think of her mate's broken heart, or of someone touching her who hadn't appreciated her.

Whoever she was, she had better not ever step foot in Wolf's Paw.

"I think was treating them—her—like you.

Like I was searching for you with them, and—are you growling?" Cleo came forward, as if a frustrated predator wasn't in front of her. She put one hand on Zoe's cheek. Her skin was warm from the coffee and silenced Zoe immediately.

"Maaaybe don't mention your exes around her until things are settled between you,"

Tim warned from behind Nathaniel's palm. "Also, I know you touch people for a living, but until you decide, um, she's going to be sensitive about it. Growly, you might say."

"Shut up, Little Wolf."

Zoe growled again, unintentionally proving him right.

Cleo petted her. “I’ve never slept with anyone after one date, Zoe. Or felt so strong of a need to make sure they knew I wanted them.”

She gently angled Zoe’s head to the side to study her handiwork. Her smile made Zoe want. Her scent was sticky and familiar. “Do you mind them?”

Zoe stared at her with open hunger.

Cleo’s eyes went wide. “But I don’t really know what mate means to you.”

She sighed and let Zoe go. “What happens if I say no? Are you going to sneak away on all fours again?”

“Yes.”

Zoe didn’t explain. The stark silence around her said enough as it was. She wasn’t going to pressure Cleo into staying by mentioning the fate of the Rejected.

“Will I feel it, what you’re saying we are?”

Her mate was so smart, always with direct questions Zoe didn’t have the answer for.

“They say humans do. Magic humans most of all,”

she responded at last.

“You don’t get to take it back, Cleo. You fucking claimed her.”

Tim’s muffled snarl was oddly comforting. “You feel it and you know it.”

“Shut up, Little Wolf,”

Zoe told him a second time, but weaker, softer. He meant well. He was worried. He loved her.

And he was right. Zoe finally believed him. The bond was there no matter what else happened, and they both felt it, even if Cleo felt it differently than Zoe did.

Cleo made a little noise, a gasping, surprised sound Zoe had last heard in her bedroom. She put a hand over her heart. The beat of it was quick, excited. “I felt like I was waiting to meet you,”

she revealed, on a panting, puffing exhale that made Zoe stand up straight. “Every time I saw you, I was waiting for you to look at me. I think I do feel it, and I don’t even know what it means.”

She met Zoe’s eyes. “What does it mean, Zoe?”

Zoe took a deep breath, trying to put into words how Cleo could physically smell like sweat, or detergent, or the coffee in her hand, and yet to Zoe she was a garden.

Weres never had been able to explain it, not even to each other.

To Tim, Nathaniel was a hearth fire—burning, passionate, potentially dangerous, but warmth-giving, life-giving, home.

To Zoe, Nathaniel smelled like home as well, though she had never once thought of his scent as fire-like.

Cleo was freshly tilled earth and pollen, the bright blooms outside the cabin that Zoe had planted. She was spring and sex and life, and meant for Zoe.

Zoe tried to say that, for the third time, and thought Cleo was beginning to understand what Zoe had been trying to express. Cleo was the right one. She was mate. She was....

“Home,”

Zoe murmured, and closed her eyes when even that term didn't seem enough.

But then Spring-mate's scent was at her mouth, and her soft skin, and Zoe raised her hands to delicately encircle her mate's wrist. She opened her eyes to find Cleo smiling at her.

“Home?”

Cleo whispered, over the sound of Little Wolf's jubilant shouting. “Doesn't everyone deserve a chance at that?”

## Epilogue

Cleo hummed a bit and pressed her face to the back of Zoe's neck. She was supposed to be holding on to Zoe's shoulders, but one of her hands kept finding its way to the collar of Zoe's shirt to tug at it.

Zoe focused on the ground in front of her with determination. Hiking up the old trail had been Cleo's suggestion, a way for her to learn more about the area around Wolf's Paw while also getting to know Zoe better.

After several weeks of dating, Zoe wasn't sure what about her Cleo hoped to learn by walking up a mountain, but she hadn't been about to turn down the chance to spend more time with her mate either.

Now here they were, almost to the summit, on the first real nippy day of the season. Cleo was wearing an oversized sweatshirt, and Zoe had chosen flannel to keep out the chill. Of course, she hadn't realized she would be doing most of the work and end up too heated to feel any cold at all. She also hadn't expected Cleo to be so interested in her choice of shirts.

"Is this Nathaniel's?"

Cleo nuzzled at the worn fabric in a way practically guaranteed to make Zoe miss a step. She came down hard on her right foot but didn't lose her balance, thankfully. She would never forgive herself if she dropped her bundle of beloved human.

Cleo was curled around her, piggyback-style, and had been since about halfway up the trail.

"I don't remember hiking being this exhausting,"

she'd grumbled after collapsing on a log to rest. Zoe had stood there, a touch guilty about the strength that allowed her to keep going without the breaks that humans needed. So she'd made the offer and bent down, and flushed at the delighted laughter from her mate at being carried.

Zoe was, to be honest, finally starting to feel tired, but she wasn't going to put Cleo down. Not for anything.

Cleo kissed her shoulder. "Zoe? Is this shirt Nathaniel's?"

"So?"

Zoe answered after a while. She was wearing his old plaid shirt. He'd never worn it more than once, and it was comfortable, even if she had to roll up the sleeves.

“I like you in it.”

Cleo apparently accurately interpreted how defensive Zoe was about it, because she kissed Zoe’s shoulder again. “Of course, you’re one of those redheads who can wear red.”

Her fingertips traced circles at Zoe’s nape, making Zoe shiver. “But did you ever think of buying your own clothes?” She pressed closer when Zoe stiffened. “Buy all the flannel you want,” she whispered soothingly. “Be my comfortable werewolf lumberjack fantasy.” Her kisses felt like smiles. “I just worried, I guess, that you don’t seem to think of those things for yourself.”

She touched on subjects Zoe had never talked about with anyone else. But she wasn’t anyone else. She was Cleopatra Jones Goodwin, and in two days, Zoe was going to meet her mother.

Zoe frowned at the rough ground of the trail. “I’m not good at those things. Shopping for clothes. That stuff. Whatever fits is fine. Unless you think...”

“I like you.”

Cleo kissed her ear. “And I like how you have no idea how well you fill out your clothing, even your hand-me-downs.”

She was making it hard for Zoe to think. “But if you want me to help you ever, for anything, just ask, okay?”

“Okay,”

Zoe agreed with a small breath of relief and surprise, and continued up higher. The trail was steep, but she held tight to Cleo’s legs.

Cleo squirmed a bit and took one hand from Zoe's shoulders. Zoe heard the zipper of Cleo's small backpack and then crinkling foil. A moment later a piece of a granola bar was held out for her. Zoe bent her head to take it from her mate's fingers and eat it, although she was not a dog and it was not a treat. When she swallowed, Cleo offered her more, as if she'd noticed Zoe's energy was finally flagging.

She put her face to Zoe's neck. "You could always put me down,"

she pointed out, her tone soft and sweet.

Zoe stubbornly shook her head, which earned her a laugh and another piece of granola. Now her mouth was dry. As if she knew that too, Cleo held out the water bottle next. Zoe had to stop to take a drink, but then she was right back at it a minute later. The summit was in sight.

"You know,"

Cleo mused, so much contentment in her tone Zoe didn't need to smell it. "You're carrying me up a mountain. I think that says all that needs to be said."

Zoe considered that. Maybe it was all the hiking, or the growing crispness in the air, but she didn't follow. "What do you mean?"

Cleo tugged the flannel shirt away again, this time pressing a long, lingering kiss to Zoe's nape that made Zoe gasp. Her mate had to be testing her. Why else would she do this when Zoe was trying to hold her up?

Zoe growled, not amused, but she must have been wrong about Cleo's motives, because Cleo kissed her again. Zoe was going to smell like her lip balm for the rest of the day.

“Zoe,”

Cleo spoke slowly, with fondness. “I’m telling you I’m very happy you’re my mate.”

My mate . Hearing the words aloud for the first time made Zoe stop dead in her tracks.

She swallowed. “Yeah?”

Cleo nodded against her skin, although for a moment her hold on Zoe was alarmingly tight, as if she was more nervous than she seemed.

She’d acknowledged the bond. Of course she was nervous. There was no going back now. This was them, forever.

“I’m happy too,”

Zoe told her. She was quiet, which was strange when the rest of her wanted to howl to share her joy.

Cleo released a pleased sigh. “Then wanna step off the trail and go make out in the woods for a while? Your display of strength is doing things to my ability to think rationally.”

Her kisses had Zoe shivering. “Come on, Zoe. It’s my turn to take care of you.”

“I, uh....”

Zoe couldn’t think anymore either. “The summit is right there.”

She did not care about the summit. Yet she heard herself saying that, of all the dumb

things.

Cleo nibbled at her ear. “It will still be there when we’re done,”

she pointed out. And she was right. Zoe’s mate was very smart.

Zoe took them off the trail without another word.

Cleo hummed happily in approval.

The End

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2018

Set after the events of Little Wolf and A Mate of One's Own

Summary: Little Wolf in therapy. Gen. m/m

Tags: Therapy, some references to Tim's past, including Luca and Silas.

Tim crossed his arms. Then he immediately uncrossed them, because crossed arms displayed fear and weakness for anyone to see. Arms locked across the chest and belly meant someone trying to hide their soft spots. Dr. Finch might be human, but he was good at reading body language—better, in a lot of ways, than Tim was. Which wasn't surprising, since Tim was half a were at best.

The thought turned his stomach, made it roil unpleasantly with the reminder that he hadn't eaten since breakfast: a granola bar. He'd been helping out all over the place and didn't have time to eat, which meant he definitely didn't have time to come all the way out to Carson for these ridiculous therapy sessions. Nobody had time to drive him, either. These weren't that important, or at least, they weren't worth inconveniencing everyone for. The sessions didn't do anything to make Tim better, or stronger. Mostly, they made him feel like a small, shaky, frightened, whiny baby, and he hated them.

He bit down hard to keep from saying any of that and stared across the room at Dr. Finch. Tim had read all the man's credentials of course. Dr. Finch was educated and had good reviews, even if he was human, but none of that mattered. He was Tim's shrink because he was the only one in Carson. Wolf's Paw, of course, didn't have

one.

Real weres didn't need them. No one had said that, but it was plenty implied by the mere fact that no one had ever even heard of a mental health professional who specialized in weres.

Tim knew, deep down, that this was bullshit. He personally had met weres who could use a little help, more than him maybe. Weres who had lost their mates, or been Rejected-with a capital R, or been rejected-lowercase r by human packs, like Zoe had been. But knowing and feeling were different things, according to Dr. Finch.

God, Tim hated therapy.

And no doctor should wear track pants to therapy sessions.

Tim glared at the human curled up in the big squishy chair across from him while sinking further into his own big squishy chair. Dr. Finch wasn't speaking. That was a ploy to get Tim to talk. Tim knew it well, and had stayed silent for the whole hour—fifty minutes—more than once out of spite. The money was nothing.

But Nathaniel seemed to think these sessions were a good idea, worthwhile enough to rearrange his schedule to drive Tim out here once a week, or to ask Zoe to do it when he couldn't.

So Tim stayed, and crossed his arms. He was more comfortable that way. And, whatever—he was a weak wolf. That wasn't news.

Dr. Finch stared down at the notepad in his lap. "I'm content to get paid to doodle, if you don't want to talk today,"

he remarked in that easy tone that drove Tim nuts, because it was a lie. Dr. Finch was

alert and attentive and waiting. Tim knew it and Dr. Finch knew that Tim knew it. “Of course,”

Dr. Finch continued, “it seemed as if something was bothering you when you stormed in—sorry, came in so calmly and sedately.”

Tim lifted his lip and growled. Then he jumped. “I’m not supposed to do that to humans who don’t deserve it.”

God, why was he even apologizing? “Not that I’m scary. At all.”

He really wanted to pull his legs up into the chair and wrap his arms around his knees. “That was barely even a growl. It was absolutely pathetic compared to—”

He stopped and Dr. Finch looked up.

Tim’s stomach turned again, but he refused to glance away first. He was weak, but he was still a Dirus.

Dr. Finch had no expression. “Compared to other weres?”

he prompted easily. “Or to—”

“Don’t.”

Tim flinched, tightening his arms around his chest.

“Or to Nathaniel?”

Dr. Finch continued as if Tim hadn’t spoken.

Tim hated that, hated that Dr. Finch knew about it, because Tim had given it away somehow. Tim hadn't even known it was there. But that was standard for him, wasn't it? Tim was out of touch with his instincts, with himself, with the amount of damage he had that other people didn't seem to have. He hated that, too. That he was damaged and that he never even saw the cracks until he tripped over them.

He realized he was breathing hard. Other than that, the room was quiet.

Dr. Finch regarded Tim with interest that was probably meant to be gentle and nonthreatening. Not that he had ever seemed especially worried about upsetting the were in his office. "Have you worked on what we talked about?"

"You ask that every week."

Tim's evasion was clumsy and obvious. Silas would have sneered. Silas, Tim thought, could fuck right off. This wasn't a chess match. This was strange medicine that a real were shouldn't need, but Tim apparently did, and some days were better than others, and today Tim hadn't decided whether to talk or wait out the clock.

Thing was, he could sit in silence the whole time, but he'd be back next week. If not to talk about this, then something else.

Talking about everyday stuff should have been easier than telling Dr. Finch about Silas... or Luca. But sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes Luca was easier, for whatever reason. Maybe because Luca was an obvious bad thing and Tim could prepare. He could walk in here knowing that he was going to bring up a memory and it would be messy. He couldn't prepare for days like today.

Anyway, the bad stuff, the Luca stuff, he could talk about at home, with Carl or Robin's Egg or Zoe. He could call Albert, if he needed to.

This stuff.... He couldn't tell them about this.

"But did you?"

Dr. Finch pressed.

Tim gave a tight shake of his head, then mumbled, "The pressures of leadership."

Dr. Finch glanced to him again. "What was that?"

"The pressures of leadership,"

Tim repeated stiffly. Sometimes he wished his psychiatrist had been educated in management or warfare, anything to make it so Tim didn't have to explain so much. "You have people. You are always surrounded by people, but you aren't ever really one of them. They look to you for strength. So, if you have fe... if you're sca.... So you're on your own."

"Is that how you feel? On your own?"

"Ugh, fuck off."

Tim scowled and looked away. That 'How do you feel?' shit got on his nerves every time. "I have a pack. I have friends."

The churning his stomach briefly gave way to a rising warmth at getting to say that. "I have a town ," he added, because he did. "But that town includes my friends, so I can't show them this ." He uncrossed his arms to wave at his chest, his exposed underbelly in all its patheticness. " Obviously ," he went on a few moments later, "they already knew there are things I don't know. How to be a proper were, for example. But it's different when they look to me for answers on stuff, or when

something happens and they look to see what I will do. I can't turn around and ask them, can I? And there's no one else to ask."

There was, in fact, one very obvious person to ask. He and Dr. Finch had spent two whole sessions discussing the concept of mate , because no way could these sessions go forward if Dr. Finch didn't understand what mate meant.

Which meant Dr. Finch now knew the source of Tim's mood. Tim hated everything, especially the steady look from his shrink. At least the man wasn't making notes. The scratch of the pen grated on Tim's senses on the really bad days.

Dr. Finch's heart rate picked up a little, a sign he was about to say something Tim wasn't going to like. "The very idea of mate would suggest you don't have to be alone if you don't want to. But most long-term couples will tell you that even in healthy relationships, it's possible to feel lonely."

"I'm not lonely!"

Tim shouted, leaning forward in his chair. He stopped to pull in a breath. "A real wolf wouldn't have to yell. They can convey meaning and communicate without words. Look, I failed again,"

he said sourly. "Surprise."

"Words work fine for humans."

Dr. Finch made a note.

"Do they?"

Tim questioned between gritted teeth. "Do they really? Because humans seem to

misunderstand each other a lot.”

That got another note. Sometimes Dr. Finch did that on purpose whenever Tim was sarcastic. Sarcasm was apparently a deflection and Tim relied on it too much. That was something Silas would have said, and Tim had told Dr. Finch that. Dr. Finch hadn’t said it again.

It didn’t make Tim stop hearing it, though. And imagining Dr. Finch making notes on it to irk him, when, really, the man wasn’t a master chess player, and was probably honestly making notes on Tim’s mental state.

Tim held onto his anger for another moment, then sighed heavily and pulled his legs up into the chair so he could wrap his arms around his knees.

“You’re communicating your defensiveness just fine, if you were curious,”

Dr. Finch remarked, with a faint smile with no teeth. “Even a human can see it. You walked in like that, as I implied before. I’m merely here to help.”

Tim heard himself growling and went hot with embarrassment.

Dr. Finch wasn’t done. “You know I’ve offered for you to invite Nathaniel in here for a session or two with you—”

“No!”

Tim barely kept from yelling this time.

Another faint smile, possibly meant to be kind. “You don’t want him to know, even though he’s your mate?”

There was no point in lying. Tim sighed and looked away. “He already knows.”

“He does?”

Dr. Finch’s surprise seemed genuine.

Tim, who wasn’t exactly forthcoming and knew it, chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. He hid his face in his knees. “Probably,”

he amended. “But he knows everything. He’s perfect.”

“Timothy.”

“Nathaniel’s not perfect,”

Tim obediently recited, then growled again—but quietly. “I know he’s not perfect. I live with him. It’s hard to find the flaws at first, but trust me”

—he snorted— “they’re there. It’s....” He closed his eyes. “Being nearly perfect kind of is his flaw. How am I...? I mean, I know what we are to each other. I know that. But sometimes people come into town, humans, weres, fairies, this troll one time, and it’s like he’s all they can see.”

Tim was a tiny, pathetic excuse for a mate.

Dr. Finch was soft. “Do you think he wants any of them?”

Tim’s voice was rough. “No.”

“Do you think he wants their attention?”

“No.”

Tim huffed. “But he uses it, sometimes. He’s clever like that, and mean, when he has to be.”

“So, do you want them to look at you?”

“No!”

Tim raised his head. “Or, not like that. I’m practically human to them. I’m nothing—er, no offense. It’s a town of werewolves.”

“I know.”

Dr. Finch did seem to know that and not be offended. He rolled his wrist. “Go on. Did something happen on the way here? Something with someone else noticing Nathaniel?”

“Nathaniel didn’t drive me today.”

Tim sensed the raised eyebrow before he saw it. “Zoe did,”

he explained. “Nathaniel was—is—was breaking up a fight between some weres. Fighting over him.” Goddamn it, Tim wanted to claw something. “Nathaniel didn’t even have to get physical. He just... was there, you know? A presence.”

Trying to explain Nathaniel had been impossible. Tim had finally just introduced them one day, made Dr. Finch go out into the waiting room to properly experience Nathaniel Neri in all his glory.

“He had to remind them,”

Tim continued, a howl locked inside of him. “Nathaniel had to remind these weres about me. They were tourists, but still, I’m barely a real were and I can tell if someone’s mated.”

Now . Tim could tell that now , and it had taken a lot of work. “Which means those weres could tell he was taken and they didn’t even fucking care. They saw me around town and they—” Tim swallowed, although his pain stayed trapped in his throat. “I can’t complain to him. I can’t just remind him of what a skinny little half-were I am. I can’t say, ‘too bad you’re stuck with me’ because he hates that. He hates when I say that, and I’m tired of him having to reassure me. He shouldn’t have to do that. He has enough to do. Being a leader is...”

“Lonely, you said.”

Tim dropped his head back to his knees. “There’s no one in town at his level. Being at home is his time to not be the king. He gets to relax and be a dork, and not take care of people for once.”

Dr. Finch was so, so quiet. Even his heartbeat seemed muted and far away as long as Tim didn’t look. “What about you?”

Tim shrugged. “He spends enough time taking care of me.”

The pen scratched against the paper. “So, you—his mate—are not at his level?”

“I’m a Dirus!”

Tim snarled and jerked his head up. Dr. Finch opened his eyes wide but didn’t say anything. Since staring down the psychiatrist he was paying for was ridiculous, Tim finally went on with a small huff. “I asked Zoe to drive me. She was off today, so I asked her instead. Nathaniel was...”

confused, probably hurt. “But he’ll have me all figured out by the time I get back. He’s going to make a big deal out of letting me know he loves me, and we’re mated, and it’s okay. And I hate it and I can’t tell him that either.”

“Because?”

The gentle prompting was really annoying.

“Because that’s what he does?”

Tim waved his arms furiously. “He takes care of me and I like it but fuck! It’s no wonder I—look, it’s fine. He’s not going to leave me. He can’t.”

Sometimes, Tim wished Nathaniel could leave him. If it was a possibility but he stayed, then maybe Tim wouldn’t feel like this sometimes, like he was an obligation, or useless, or a failure of a mate.

Dr. Finch leaned forward. “Do you think he wants to leave you? You’ve never said that before. Did you talk to him about this?”

“Are you not listening?”

Tim dropped his feet back to the ground with a thump. “Even human ears should get this. I can’t talk to him about it. It’s a werewolf thing and it’s a Nathaniel thing! All that will happen is he’ll end up reassuring me, which is some bullshit.”

“Bullshit?”

Dr. Finch echoed. “You think he’d be lying?”

“No.”

Tim scowled at him in all his humanity, because the man didn't understand. "Nathaniel will mean every word. Because he's perfect . Because he doesn't understand flaws, and I am one giant flaw, and as frustrated as I make him sometimes, he fucking believes in stupid romantic movies where love cures this stuff. I might be new to dealing with my emotions, but I know that's not true. If it did, there wouldn't be broken matings or even broken hearts."

Broken matings. Oh, shit. Oh, God, Tim had said it. He'd said those words and that was how magic worked—he'd made the possibility real. He stared down at his lap, at his shaking hands, and sucked in a breath.

He waited. He waited for Dr. Finch to call him out for those words, and his real—so fucking obvious now—fears. But there was silence for what felt like hours.

Then Dr. Finch spoke, voice level and calm. "Whose idea was this therapy?"

Caught off guard, Tim glanced over. "His."

Dr. Finch had closed his notebook. His heart was steady. "Why?"

"Because I'm damaged ."

Tim dragged out the stupid word, because duh.

Dr. Finch smiled, still with no teeth. "So, he didn't think his love could fix that ."

He wasn't asking, but Tim answered, slowly. "No. No, I suppose not. But—but he didn't mean it for this stuff. He meant it for the other stuff."

The silence from Dr. Finch was incredibly annoying. Pointed silence meant Tim was supposed to draw his own conclusions. Like how Dr. Finch always said that this stuff

and the other stuff were related. That what happened with his uncle, and Luca, and Tim's years on his own, had made him into this person. That the past was present, and all that shit.

"Timothy,"

Dr. Finch prompted quietly. Tim pulled his lower lip between his teeth just to bite something, but looked over. Dr. Finch smiled, a real one, with a hint of canines. "Since someone sat in silence for the first twenty minutes of his session, our time is up for today. But I have no one else this afternoon, if you'd like to sit a while longer."

"Zoe's waiting."

Tim stopped biting his lip in order to speak. "I shouldn't have made her drive me out here. I shouldn't make her stand around."

But he didn't move. "The weres," he said.

"The weres?"

Tim cleared his throat. "Those weres fighting over him, over Nathaniel, I mean. They were annoying. He was really pissed about them, actually. They, um, you know, even a were can get out of their senses if they take enough of something, and I guess they were on vacation and being entitled dicks like any other tourists. I know he didn't like them. It's not about that. In fact, he really doesn't like—he doesn't like it when people look at him and think he's perfect. He was probably considering murder when one of them dismissed the idea of him having a mate."

That had happened right as Tim had walked out into the street and seen the fight being broken up.

“These idiots apparently thought that just because they fought over him, he was going to fuck the winner.

Like he wanted the strongest or the biggest badass or something.

They shouldn’t think that about him, or anyone, and by the way, even if that were actually a thing, Nathaniel could take both of them in a fight, easily.

So what makes them good enough for him? Nothing.

Nathaniel’s not their goddamn prize.

He’s difficult, and irritating sometimes, and sensitive but he’s better than them.

He’s so good.

He’s so... he’s not perfect but he’s amazing, and he’s mine, but, of course, no one thinks he belongs with me, because I’m scared, and weak, and selfish, and fucked up. Ugh. Fuck.”

The look in Nathaniel’s eyes when Tim had turned and left without speaking to him... “He’s going to be upset that I left like that, but he won’t talk about it if I don’t want to.”

“That seems reasonable. But you’re angry.”

That one felt like a question.

“I’m not!”

Tim clenched his hands, then forcibly unclenched them. “I’m not. I’m not, I’m—you

said anger was usually a secondary emotion, anyway.”

“So, you are scared about it?”

Dr. Finch went right to fear, of course he did.

“I’m scared all the time.”

Tim was quiet. “He knows that. Everyone probably knows that. I don’t know why I care.”

Except he did know, and the reason was named Silas Dirus.

“Well.”

Dr. Finch sat up. “If you’re asking, in your unique way, what you should do, I can make a suggestion—aside from the obvious, which is for you to talk to Nathaniel about this. In here, if you’d like. We can arrange that.”

Tim’s mouth was suddenly so dry. “I don’t want to hurt him. He’s mine to protect. But I... I’m hurting him anyway, aren’t I? Running away like I did. What, um, what’s your other suggestion?”

“Talk to someone else about it.”

Dr. Finch lifted a hand to forestall any arguments. “Not everything. But some of these issues.... Are there no mated weres who could answer questions for you? Mated weres who are not your mate? Because I will venture a guess that the nature of matings means a lot of werewolves have similar worries and doubts.”

“There is only one Nathaniel Neri,”

Tim told him seriously, eyes narrowed.

“Yes, thankfully.”

Dr. Finch made a pained face. “No offense, but my receptionist almost fainted.”

Tim showed him his teeth. “I don’t think he noticed her.”

“No. He was far too concerned about you, Timothy.”

Dr. Finch sat back again and steeped his fingers. “You don’t want him to be concerned?”

Tim grimaced. “I’m tired of.... Some days are harder than others. That’s all. Some days I’m Littlewolf the loser, and being around him.... Look. Aw, fuck.”

He growled. “What do I say to him?”

He hated having to ask that.

Dr. Finch was an irritating, smug bastard. “According to you, he knows everything anyway, so why not the truth?”

To his credit, he gave no sign that Tim’s lowkey growling was bothering him. “Maybe try to tell him that you have a hard time during moments like those, and it’s not his fault, and you know he loves you, but it’s still hard for you, especially when you’re learning, and he’s so, um...”

“Nathaniel Neri?”

Tim filled in for him.

Dr. Finch cleared his throat. “Yes. That. You’re only just learning to navigate the werewolf world and a relationship. You’re allowed to struggle. To have bad days.”

Tim paused and considered. He heaved a breath. “He’ll want to help.”

“He sounds strong enough to know that there are times when he can’t.”

Dr. Finch stood up and put his notepad on his desk. “He did send you here, after all.”

“He didn’t send me!”

Tim rose to his feet, although to be honest, Nathaniel had nearly begged Tim to consider therapy after one night of especially bad nightmares. Tim wobbled, abruptly aware that his legs were shaky, his muscles sore as though they had been locked and tense for hours. He held onto the arm of the chair and tried to seem as though he didn’t need it to stand. “You know,”

he offered, somewhat quieter, “if I could fight those weres to show him I’m good enough, I would. Which is stupid. He’d hate that too. And anyway, I could just find out their names and destroy them financially.” He paused when Dr. Finch’s heart rate suddenly doubled. “I’m kidding.”

He wasn’t kidding, which was why Nathaniel and all the deputies would hide all that information from him.

“Mmm hmm.”

There was a bit of tension in Dr. Finch’s voice now.

“I’m gonna go,”

Tim told him, unnecessarily, but he thought it might help him actually start to move. He swayed with the first step, lightheaded, but turned quickly toward the door and didn't look back.

“See you next week?”

Dr. Finch called after him.

Tim just waved. “Yeah yeah.”

The waiting room was empty, because Nathaniel wasn't there, of course. Even if he had driven Tim today, he wouldn't be there. He could hear through the walls, and had voluntarily decided to wait for Tim outside every time, rain or snow or shine.

Dr. Finch's fainting receptionist was nowhere to be found, either, which was fine. Tim wasn't in the mood to scare her off right now. He took the stairs and not the elevator to give himself time to feel less shaky, but it didn't matter, since one step outside into the sunlight and Zoe was suddenly at his side.

She frowned, considering him, and then tossed her head. “Bad one?”

She didn't pull Tim in, but a second later he had his face on her shoulder.

“Not really.”

Tim swallowed and wondered if he could close his eyes. They were in public, but Zoe smelled safe, and she rubbed his back in cute, tentative circles. He was so tired and he liked her familiar heartbeat. He probably stank of nerves and exhaustion, but she petted him anyway. “On the scale of therapy sessions, this was okay, I guess.”

He might take a nap in the truck. Or throw up. “Is he mad at me?”

“Don’t be dumb.”

Zoe flicked Tim’s ear, then dropped her head to nuzzle his hair.

Tim’s throat tightened like he was going to cry, and he grasped her arm in warning or some sort of stupid plea not to stop, and after a small moment of shock that he could feel, Zoe kept scent-marking him.

“Zoe.”

His voice was trembling so he kept his face hidden. “Zoe, can I talk to you sometime? About Cleo? About mates?”

Zoe made a funny little sound, startled maybe. Tim didn’t usually ask her for advice. But she nodded, then resumed rubbing her scent all over him. It was reassuring and easy and were. She wasn’t Nathaniel, but she was pack, Tim’s pack.

Tim burrowed in closer to her. “You won’t laugh?”

Zoe did not hold back her growl. “If it’s serious enough to scare you, Little Wolf, then no one should be laughing at it.”

Tim raised his head to look her in the eye. She was blushing and scowling, and she smelled like home and Nathaniel a little bit, even though she spent more time at Cleo’s than at the cabin. She smelled mated and settled, but she didn’t live with Cleo yet, and that was probably important. Tim exhaled deeply, but didn’t let her go. “Zoe,”

he pronounced, very, very carefully, even though they were on the sidewalk with humans all around them. “I want to tell you something.”

The End

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2017

Set after Little Wolf

Summary: A glimpse of the fairy on Tim's favorite soap who was clearly sparkling for his co-star. m/m

Spring could do this. He could absolutely do this. He was an actor, after all.

Admittedly, not a great actor, but since he'd never intended to be an actor, then it was all peachy keen that he was now. He got paid well, and other fairies were ever so happy to see him onscreen, even on a soap, and he got to... he got to....

He hunched his shoulders and felt his wings slow—the tell-tale giveaway a fairy was upset, even before it showed in their glitter. His wings always gave him away onscreen. If it weren't for his wings and glitter, he might do all right speaking the ridiculous dialogue, since acting was pretending, not lying.

Problem was, he couldn't pretend when he was in the same room as Roman Grenville, billionaire industrialist and de facto owner of the small town of Harper's Cove, where Diedre's Secret was set, or when around Nicholas Manton, the actor who played Roman Grenville. So Spring's limited acting abilities were not going to get him through this situation.

He regretted ever attending a Hollywood party, splashing around in the pool, and drawing the attention of the lonely, socially awkward soap opera writer outside. He did. He was going to quit right now and leave, and fairykind would just have to find

some other fairy to be their role model.

Except... Spring couldn't regret it, because it had still brought him here, to this set, to this room, where the human he loved was not very far away.

The room was tense and still quiet, as if Spring's foolish words had left everyone stunned. He didn't see how—he was quite obvious on the show. Even a glimpse of him onscreen should have left no doubt in anyone watching as to the object of his affection.

Only human ignorance explained their shock now. Perhaps there was some value in Spring staying on television a little longer; it would help humans learn about the fairy.

He tried to smile as he looked over at Beth Maurice, the interviewer from Soaps Daily . He couldn't look at Nicholas, but that was probably just as well. "I didn't think..."

"Are you saying that you're in love with your costar on Diedre's Secret , Nicholas Manton?"

The glee in their interviewer's face was unmistakable, like the thread of ambition in her shine. "Is that what you're saying?"

"The upcoming plotlines are going to be incredible,"

Alice said weakly from Spring's side. Alice played Bianca, Spring's nemesis on the show, but she was a lovely, supportive human. She did seem a bit gobsmacked, though. Apparently, actors did not proclaim their love for their costars in front of reporters.

Spring supposed that made sense, in a way. Especially if your costar didn't love you back. Could not even manage a word, in fact.

He darted a look around Alice to where Nicholas sat, frozen.

Then the interviewer turned to him and Nicholas unfroze enough to face her. A scant moment later, he did the thing—one of the many things that had drawn Spring to him so quickly, but this one was the most special—he took a breath and lifted his chin, and like that!—he was Roman Grenville, and even Beth was briefly cowed.

Roman was not nice. He was a handsome, older human, dark of hair and eye. He was strong, and fearless, and... really sort of brute, so Spring should not like him at all, but he was by far the most fascinating character on the show. Far better than a clueless werewolf.

Nicholas was extremely nice. His smile had dimples. He sat bent over an e-reader between takes, and loved theater, and could sing and dance. He was polite to the crew and the craft services people. He hated when he messed up his lines, and he did small roles in serious movies whenever he got the chance, and he called Spring by his full name, always, unless he was tired and the shooting day had been long.

All of which was very appealing, but not nearly as much as knowing that this man could play that one.

Spring really could not be blamed for blazing with happy, aroused, in-love glitter every time Roman Grenville quietly threatened him for interfering in his plans by hiding the baby that the witch predicted would be his downfall.

What Spring could be blamed for, apparently, was talking about it.

“Honestly, I assumed everyone knew,”

he whispered, which at least took Beth's attention off Nicholas. "He's the shiniest human in the world to me,"

he told her earnestly. "But this really isn't a big deal. It's not as if it was a secret."

"Excuse me,"

Nicholas said—Roman at his coldest. "Did you have a question about the show? Because as Farewell-to-Spring just said, none of this was a secret."

"Yes, well, but,"

Beth sputtered, trying to recover some of her composure in the face of one shocking revelation and the icy glare of the best villain on daytime TV, "this is new to your audience, and..."

Spring snorted. "The fairies in the audience already knew. And anyone who has ever known a fairy."

Nicholas snapped his head around, staring hard at Spring before returning his attention to the one recording everything.

Beth cleared her throat. "You have to admit, a same-sex relationship on the air isn't that unusual anymore, but a human-fairy relationship behind the scenes... what's that like?"

"The same as any other relationship?"

Spring frowned at her in confusion. "Private? How else would it be?"

"You should have seen the betting pools around set,"

Alice remarked, and Nicholas flinched in a way that was really very fascinating. “They have their own little book club, these two. Though mostly it consists of Nicholas talking about books he’s read and Spring here making him laugh.”

“It sounds romantic,”

their interviewer said, as if reading was somehow more romantic with a fairy involved.

Spring opened his mouth.

“It was,”

Nicholas cut Spring off in the bold, authoritative voice of Roman Grenville. “Naturally, it didn’t take me long to fall for him. And it was a big deal.”

That seemed pointed. Spring met Nicholas’s gaze, then dropped his to the floor and his bare feet. He had forgotten to put on his shoes in his rush to get down here on time. Also pants, but no one had seemed surprised by that.

“Is this your way of coming out?”

Beth gushed, ambition like lightning in the colors around her.

“If you say so.”

Nicholas-as-Roman was icy. Spring could not have handled bearing the brunt of that much Grenvillian disapproval. “It was not a secret.”

Beth hardly seemed to care. “Are you worried, since you weren’t openly out before, that some will think Spring seduced you?”

Spring's wings stopped altogether.

Alice gasped. "Now just a minute...."

"I think we're done here."

Nicholas stood up, ending the interview without any more fuss. "Alice? Spring?"

He must be angry to use the nickname. But Spring bounced to his feet. He turned sharply, his lavender and black wings nearly hitting Beth in the face, which normally he would have apologized for. But Alice took his arm while politely thanking Beth for the interview, and Nicholas opened the door for them, so Spring didn't waste his time.

He blindly followed them both down the hall toward the elevators. They had to go back up to the production offices now and explain what was about to happen. Spring wasn't sure what that was, but he didn't think it would be good.

If they fired him... if they fired him, he might never see Nicholas again.

Nicholas might prefer that. Spring must have made him very uncomfortable just now, spilling his feelings all over the place.

They reached the bank of elevators and stopped. Everything seemed quiet, unnaturally still, but Spring slowly realized Alice was speaking.

"Not kidding about the pools. You guys cost me twenty bucks, and I didn't even know about the glitter thing. That's what that means? We all just thought you loved your job, Spring. Wow. But really, I don't think it's a big deal. They might run it by a few test audiences, but if they like it? Somehow, it's going to wind up on the show and you're both set for years, I'm telling you. Oh look."

The doors opened for them, revealing an empty elevator car. “You two take this one,” she added, and smiled at Spring before shoving him inside. Nicholas gave her a murderous glare before she could try it with him but stepped inside anyway, on all his own.

Alice beamed at them from the safety of the hallway and then the metal doors closed.

“I’m sorry,”

Spring said immediately. He could do this. “I thought you knew and were being kind about it.”

“Farewell-to-Spring.”

Nicholas watched him carefully in their reflection in the doors. “If I’d known, I would have kissed you months ago.”

The colors around him were... they were... the same as ever, but so, so much warmer.

Spring’s wings fluttered against his back. “Oh,”

he said softly, as pink and purple sparkles fell between them and a glowing Nicholas reached for his hand. “Then what’s stopping you now?”

The End

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First published as part of a charity event in 2017

Set before the events of *The Imp and Mr. Sunshine* / *The Firebird and Other Stories*

Summary: The life and love of one John Summers. Gen. m/m

Tags: glimpses of John's Army life, mentions of queerphobia, mention of the AIDS epidemic

Despite his fondness for small explosions, John had never thought of himself as a troublemaker.

He didn't cause mischief for the sake of maliciousness, he did it for a reason, even if other people didn't yet understand why.

Although, he could admit, sometimes the reactions amused the shit out of him.

The world he grew up in had a lot of rigid, stupid, pointless rules and he thought someone should test them, and bend them—and eventually break them, where necessary.

His teachers had noted it.

John had ambition and a good mind, but no respect and a disregard for detentions.

John was considered unusual in a way that wasn't welcomed in a small town.

He'd stood out in the Army too, as much as anyone could.

He asked questions.

He read too much.

He apparently insulted people by using words they didn't know.

His COs had also noted that.

John had never understood why he was singled out, although he'd never minded much either, which might have been why.

He was a B student with no money for university and no desire to go to the state college, so he'd joined the Army.

That wasn't special.

John even looked unexceptional, a balding white man in a suit, approaching middle age.

He had always looked that way, except for the balding part, and hated it as a teenager only to embrace it by twenty-seven.

He had never been striking or handsome, not even in his more physically impressive youth.

None of which had ever stopped him from getting laid.

Not after school with other scared boys, not in the Army, and not afterward.

Although a lot of that time was a blur to him now—the closeted Army days and the slutty era afterward when in college due to the GI Bill.

He'd been free and aimless and finally found a place full of people like him.

His parents had raised him to be his own person, but nonetheless had no idea what to do with him when he'd driven back for a visit and told them he liked men, he'd only ever liked men, and he didn't see anything wrong with it.

After years in uniform, and the fucked-up, ugly reality of service in the name of US interests while seeing way too many men like him, boys, really, destroy themselves out of fear of discovery, John had not been inclined to hide that part of himself anymore.

His father had mumbled something about the Greeks.

His mother had swallowed her words and told John to clean his plate.

They hadn't talked much since.

John had never stopped feeling that wound, but he'd done what they had raised him to do; been a scholar and a soldier, been his own man, never stopped learning, or fighting.

In their way, he thought they were proud.

After that, John read a lot, and drank too much, and held any job that would teach him something.

He lived in a shitty apartment on the border of the fairy village and old town Los Cerros, where queer humans had carved out a sort of refuge between outcast beings

and elderly, usually poor, Latinos.

Fairies liked him.

He learned about shine, and glitter, and the dark shivering fear inside every fairy that they had no soul.

They danced and fucked and stayed beautiful and hated themselves while the humans like them, the humans they loved, wasted away and died by the dozens and then the hundreds.

In a city the size of theirs, the loss had been shattering.

Across the country, the death toll reached the hundreds of thousands by the end of the decade, people scorned, feared, shunned, and left to die by the government John had risked his fucking life for.

Running for office to fight for the rights of their small portion of the city had been an act of defiance.

He wasn't in the mood for any more lies, delays, or bullshit, and neither were the outcasts in his district who had voted him into office and then kept him there.

The framed photo of him in Los Cerros City Hall as he'd been sworn into office while wearing jeans, a sleeveless shirt, and a feather boa someone had thrown on his shoulders as he'd marched into the building, was, according to Rennet, the sexiest picture ever taken.

John supposed the younger body and slimmer build had something to do with that, even if he had been losing his hair by then.

The first year on the council had been difficult. The next year worse as the backlash truly began.

Funny thing about that though. He'd loved it.

The drinking all but stopped.

The fucking too, because he'd had no time.

John had gotten into actual, physical fights with council members he'd later watched lose their seats, absorbed information and procedure, and with it who was who and what they really wanted no matter what their public posturing—cruising as practical experience for sizing up politicians.

John sometimes thought that a lifetime of reading and fighting and fucking had prepared him for politics in a way nothing else could have, no offense to poli-sci majors.

He knew a lot, and what he didn't know, he could learn quickly.

He wasn't afraid of blood and dirt.

He was adaptable.

And there was very, very little that shocked him.

He got a nickname and it stuck.

Times changed.

He was joined on the council by more women and people of color.

No one lisped at him—to his face at least.

He was invited to lots of parties out on the bluffs and approached by old school, genteel, semi-closeted gays, the kind who would consider the fairy village a place to go slumming but now kissed his ass.

He wore a suit to work and bought a pretty house in a neighborhood full of respectable citizens who didn't know what to do with him.

He expanded his library, and became more than just the outspoken queer on the city council, which he honestly thought was a shame.

He had gotten away with so much when he'd been so consistently underestimated.

He was alone more and more, if he didn't count colleagues.

The queer humans of the village were wary of the limelight or disliked what they viewed as the soul-prostitution of politics.

The fairies had left him long ago—they admired him, voted for him, but the attention he received made them nervous.

They'd seen what happened to one of their kind when on the wrong side of a scandal.

John missed them.

He missed all of them, human and being.

The sex, yes, but his human friends from that time in his life were mostly gone.

It was the fairies and the occasional troll who remained, who would live on—who

could live on.

And then there was Rennet.

John had a house now, and a busy job, which meant he had to hire people to do things he couldn't manage alone anymore.

So, he'd called a number on a card for a handyman, and Rennet had appeared at his doorstep, the strangest combination of clumsy and graceful John had ever seen.

Rennet, with a body for sin, as the expression went, and a sense of humor best described as wicked, and hands that could carve and build like an artist but could also efficiently wrap detonator cord around a bundle of explosives.

Someone else with a more conventional life, might have beheld Rennet and thought to themselves, I'm going to marry that imp , or, So this is love at first sight .

John did not make plans with definite outcomes because definite outcomes were impossible, and he had never once considered love at first sight to be real.

So he had watched Rennet move around his house and comment on the things he liked—the books and records—and the things he was certain were going to break or fail—the hinges in the back door, the corner of the roof over the garage, and thought how incredible it would be to see Rennet more.

The Incredible Unflappable Mr.

Sunshine hadn't a clue of what he'd been in for.

Thankfully, no one in John's life except for his secretary had been close enough to notice him floundering.

John didn't make plans, he set goals.

Yet he'd had no idea how to achieve them, or even what they were for the longest time.

Only that he liked Rennet in his life and there had to be a way to keep him there somehow.

John wasn't beautiful.

He was an over-forty politician in a small city, who lived alone, slept alone, and whose hobby was reading.

Rennet was—not too good for him, but too much, too interesting, too different, to want that sort of life.

He had a punk's sensibilities but a faint aura of sadness, age that had come with wisdom but also the eyes of a killer.

He knew random facts that could never be learned in books.

A dozen languages could trip off his tongue in between references to legends Rennet had known personally.

He loved children. Of all the facts about Rennet that would have surprised those who feared him, that was the biggest. Rennet adored children and they loved him enough to spark something in John he hadn't realized was there. Or maybe he had, but had never once allowed himself to think of it because he couldn't have it.

It didn't matter anyway.

He was gay, and a workaholic who drank too much coffee, and two men couldn't get married in his state, and human and being marriages were illegal too, and for a million other reasons, it didn't matter.

But that didn't stop him from wondering and dreaming while Rennet allowed small humans to tackle him to the ground and came up grinning.

Rennet absolutely had a soul, but tried to convince the world he didn't.

"I grew up around a lot of other kids ,"

Rennet said once, and then went quiet, the way he only ever did when something reminded him of his childhood.

John had done the math and made some guesses about Rennet's past, but he watched and waited and didn't push.

In the meantime, Rennet begged John to fuck him, and ate his food, and cared for his house without charge like it was a pet project, and visited him at work, and never slept through the night in John's bed.

He said not a word about what they were to each other, and could go days without contact before he'd reappear, and then smile tensely and disappear again whenever John would attend an event in the fairy village.

None of it made John want him less. Someone who didn't try for the impossible every day might have given up and ended what they had the first time Rennet flirted with someone else in front of them.

John, in his darker moments, had thought that fighting against ridiculous odds was too ingrained in him to quit now.

But the truth was he'd never been in love before.

The truth was Rennet throwing himself with fists and teeth and a lashing tail at a racist drunk in a holding cell with him, or singing in soft French under his breath as he worked, or never, ever staying over despite how much John wished he would.

The truth was Rennet had been alive for decades before John was even born, and there were years of trauma in him that he didn't talk about, and probably a trail of lost loves and broken hearts in his wake.

The truth was, Rennet must have been in love before, and if he wanted to hold John close and brush his teeth next to him in the bathroom in the morning and fall asleep on the couch at his side with the TV on, or hell, even go out to dinner with John, he would have done so.

And he hadn't.

A lifetime of reading and fighting and fucking hadn't equipped John for the world of romance. Dating was such an unknown concept that he relied too much on popular media when he'd asked Rennet out, and it had taken him months of teasing, banter, and fucking to realize that once the sex was over, Rennet was out the door.

He came back, swaggering into City Hall and John's office as though he owned the place, visiting John for reasons of his own, only to tiptoe out without even a stolen kiss.

John was known as a miracle worker, but even he couldn't make someone love him. So, he'd ignored the knowing looks from Margery as he stayed at work longer and longer, and he didn't allow himself to call Rennet, and when he went to the fairy village and a fairy he'd never met before complimented his shine, John asked him to dinner.

He wouldn't call it a mistake. He'd prefer tactical maneuver . Or more realistically, throwing a cat among the pigeons.

Or, even more realistically, waving a red flag in front of a stubborn, defiant, childish, irksome, hilarious, sweet, sexy bull with wings and a penchant for black eyeliner.

Margery had been right; John had been stupid and Rennet had been scared.

He spent his first night with John on a mattress on the floor, tail slung over John's hips, his face at the back of John's neck. He walked into City Hall the next day and came straight to John, like he always did, but this time his red eyes sparkled more than a fairy when he looked up. And he said, “ ...This human, this human and no other ,”

to stop John's heart and replace it with heat and flashes of lit gunpowder.

Rennet loved him.

Him, an ordinary man with an absorbing job and a tendency to light fires, but only under people who needed to get off their asses and do something.

Maybe that was what Rennet liked— loved —about him.

The fucking was good, great, but there was no fighting, and no need for it, and still John couldn't get enough of him and Rennet couldn't seem to stop climbing onto him the moment they were alone.

He didn't want John for anything anyone else had ever wanted John for, and he worried for John like no one ever had, and confessed, in stops and starts, that he'd never stop worrying for John, and why that was.

His reasons were good ones. John could admit that, despite a passing moment of jealousy for the childish crush Rennet had had for someone long dead, who had left him with a burning devotion to bookish and rebellious soldiers.

Honestly, knowing Rennet thought of him that way had robbed John of speech for a while. Rennet had startled out of his reverie, then wriggled closer beside him in their brand-new bed. He'd had purred, teasing John even while folding John protectively within his wings. "Sunshine, don't you know what you are? Don't you know what you could do?"

Rennet stared at John with wonder, as if Rennet wasn't the most remarkable person John had ever met, beautiful and not beautiful, the wicked and caring love of John's life. He loved John, and thought John was the exceptional one of the two of them.

So John, who could not and would not hide, looked at him and said what he should have said the day he'd met Rennet. "I could marry you."

He could admit to some amusement at the disbelief in Rennet's expression, the shocked blinking and the utter stillness of his tail. But John hadn't said it to be funny or cruel, and when he waited, watching, needing to know what Rennet would say before he could do anything else, Rennet gave him a reckless grin that meant John could ask again, ask him seriously, sometime in the future.

It was the most remarkable thing. Enough that could shifted to will in John's mind and gave him a goal.

John was going to marry Rennet, and he would test, bend, and break every law standing in his way. Almost as if he'd been born to do it.

The End

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

Also posted as part of a charity event in 2017

Set after the events of The Imp and Mr. Sunshine but before The Wolf in the Garden or The Dragon's Egg . It's really a part two to the previous story.

Summary: Rennet is feeling anxious. And a bit horny. But mostly anxious. m/m

“Rennet.”

John's tone was oh-so-careful. Not mad, but careful . “Rennet, is the water not working, or is the sink broken?”

Rennet poked his head around the dividing wall between the kitchen and the living room. John was at the entrance to his bedroom, wearing a towel around his waist and nothing else. He'd bothered with the towel possibly on the off chance that they weren't alone, which had happened once or twice. Daphne hadn't minded the view, but the mailman had just been uptight. Everyone else usually worked for John and made scandalized noises before averting their eyes.

Averting their eyes was a crime, as far as Rennet was concerned. His human was a fine figure of a man at almost fifty. Rennet took a moment to appreciate the body on display, but stopped when John sighed. “Rennet.”

“What?”

Rennet gave him the most innocent look he could muster. “I can't help it.”

“I’m almost fifty years old,”

John complained, albeit mildly. “I know that’s nothing to you, but it’s a lot to us humans.”

“Please. Humans live to be a hundred these days. I think it’s the city sewage systems, honestly. Everyone takes them for granted, but they wouldn’t if their toilet was the river that was also their source of drinking water. Shit is a serious issue.”

John studied him for a moment. Then he somehow got even more mild, which was his best talent after intimidating people through quiet cleverness, and the way he gave head. He leaned on the doorjamb, with one hand lazily holding up his towel. “First of all, I was in the Army. I’m fully aware that shit is a serious issue. Secondly, is this your way of telling me the toilets aren’t working either?”

“They would be,”

Rennet shrugged, “if the water wasn’t shut off to the entire house.”

John didn’t even blink. “ETA on the water being back on?”

“Ten minutes or so, if I can fix the kitchen sink by then. Something is blocking it.”

Rennet hummed. He was totally innocent. Totally. He was a babe in the woods. A lamb in the springtime. A virgin in a whorehouse.

Which... probably wasn’t the model he should go with here.

“I’ll call Margery, tell her I’ll be a little late.”

Unaware of Rennet’s internal idiom debate, John answered him with a similar shrug,

then disappeared into the bedroom, probably to get his cell phone.

Rennet watched him go before swinging around to face the sink. He cracked his knuckles and then his neck before opening his toolbox. Then, wrench in hand, he got down beneath the sink. He'd already removed the boxes of trash bags as well as the jars of vinegar and furniture oil that Yvonne used to clean the house. The sink trap was the most likely culprit for whatever was going on. Hopefully, Rennet could take care of it before anyone could question why the sink would suddenly get blocked.

“Why did the sink suddenly get blocked?”

John inquired smoothly from much closer than he'd been before.

Rennet flinched and bumped his head on a pipe. It didn't really hurt, but some sympathy would have been nice. Not John's silence... which meant John was suspicious. Possibly because Rennet was jumpy.

He looked over, saw John—well, a towel and John's legs—in the doorway, and his tail thumped against the floor, not at all like a guilty dog's.

“Um.”

Rennet focused on loosening the nuts on the pipe while internally sighing over the jokes he would have made about this back in the day when he'd first met John. Getting ogled by a client while doing jobs around the house had been surprisingly nice, a first for Rennet in all his years. He wouldn't have minded some porn dialogue to go with it. “I'm hurt, John. Hurt. Here I am, in my underwear, performing manual labor on my back for you, and you didn't even notice.”

“Those are my boxers you're wearing.”

John's voice was steady. "That tear near the bottom is from your teeth."

"Also, my underwear comes in colors, and sometimes has pictures on it."

Sometimes it had lace on it too, but only if Rennet was feeling it and if John had done something to deserve it. Really, Rennet would wear panties for him any day, and dance for him too with all the moves Destiny had taught him, but Rennet liked to keep things lively. And possibly in the back of his mind was a small fear that John would someday get bored with him if he did those things too often.

"Are you implying my underwear choices are dull?"

It was impossible to tell what John was thinking from his voice, or his legs.

"Oh, I'm saying it."

Rennet had put a bowl on the floor earlier, and he held it under the trap to catch any leftover water as he pulled the pipe away. "I don't mind the plain colors, but cotton? If there was ever a man who could pull off silk shorts outside of the 1920s, it's you."

"Rennet, you're the only one pulling off my shorts. If you think they're boring, I'll get new ones."

"I didn't say that."

Rennet stopped, then wriggled out from under the sink without using his hands, which were currently holding the bowl and the P pipe. He stared up at John. "I don't think they're boring. You could wear polyester pants to bed and I'd still want to pull them off you."

"Thank you for that."

John seemed uncertain at that answer, but smiled anyway. “At least you wouldn’t steal polyester pants.”

“Ha.”

Rennet fake-laughed at him. “Clearly you haven’t seen pictures of me from the 1970s.”

The delight that took over John’s expression was positively evil. “Where are they? Does Kaz have them? I’m going to call him later.”

Rennet narrowed his eyes. “ Anyway ,”

he moved on, loudly. “We can’t all be a hot piece like you in all our old pictures.”

“Your look in the ‘50s was better than you think. We should get you another leather jacket.”

John licked the side of his mouth. “And I always like you in uniform.”

“I’ll wear that the day I get you in silk shorts.”

Rennet considered. “In your office,”

he added, to make it more interesting.

“We got caught in my office last time.”

John was not objecting.

“By Margery. That doesn’t even count.”

She'd known they were in there and what they'd been up to. She'd just been pissed that John was ignoring the buzz of the intercom. Cockblocking wench. Rennet had gotten her back by not stopping what he'd been doing. "Also, you were being loud."

John was unfazed. "You were grinding your panty-clad ass on my lap, in my new chair, in my new office. Of course I was being loud."

"You deserved a reward, Mr. Mayor."

Rennet hummed. People had elected John as their mayor despite him living with Rennet... being engaged to Rennet, although most people ignored that. Including Rennet, because it made his tail whip around whenever he thought of it. Kaz, of course, thought it was fucking hilarious that Rennet would be nervous. As if human-being, male-male weddings happened all the time, and they happened to Rennet. John was incredible and he wanted Rennet, even with all the trouble, maybe because of the trouble too, and it was so... it was just.... Looking at John was like.... "Fuck."

Rennet closed his eyes. He was too old for this.

"Your boxers are tenting,"

John remarked evenly. "Sorry, my boxers are tenting. My dull, boring, plain, cotton boxers."

"You aren't boring!"

Rennet snapped and opened his eyes. John blinked, a sign that Sunshine was startled. Rennet took a breath, but didn't lower his voice. "You aren't boring. Not to me. Not ever. I'm half dressed, fucking fixing the sink in your underwear, making you late for your very important job, and you haven't batted an eye. You aren't boring. You're... kind of the best."

“Half dressed is a little optimistic, don’t you think?”

John took a step closer to him. “Half-naked seems more accurate. Those boxers are getting thin.”

Rennet huffed and sat up. “I noticed, Rennet,” John went on. “I always notice. You look like a porn star on a normal day when you’re fixing something. In just boxers under a sink, I expected you to make a comment about laying some pipe.”

“I was thinking something involving nuts, actually.”

Rennet grinned crookedly and tipped his head back to make it easier to look at John. “I could get my tool belt.”

“Or, you could finish that and we could go back to bed, since I’m going to be late anyway.”

The purring quality to John’s voice wasn’t like the sound a cat shifter made, but it was still animal. Sunshine was a little wild beneath the surface, but Rennet already knew that and knew it well.

“Really?”

Rennet shouldn’t have asked, but it slipped out.

John lifted an eyebrow. “‘Really,’ what? Do you not want to? That’s fine. But you’re half hard and on your back for me, and I’m practically fifty, but my dick isn’t feeling fifty this morning, so, if you wanted to mess around....”

“Yes. I, uh, yeah.”

Rennet wasn't in his youth anymore either, but aging was different for humans. "Yes, but, really? I mean, I know you liked it when I fixed things, but we've done handyman stuff. We could do plumber stuff if you want."

"Rennet..."

John started, then stopped. He tried again. "Have you been worrying that I'm bored with you?"

He didn't wait for an answer. "I should have known. That explains your obsession with getting me to wear silk—you're deflecting."

Rennet squirmed. "What? So? No. What's deflecting?"

John came over to kneel down next to him. "You aren't a handyman I'm screwing on the side. You're my husband, Rennet, or you will be as soon as I get them to change that stupid law—where's your ring?"

And now there was concern in Sunshine's voice.

Wordlessly, Rennet upended the P pipe over the bowl. Water splashed out, followed by a small circle of gold.

John nodded slowly. "I see."

"I was going to make coffee."

Rennet heaved a breath. "Then we were out of grounds, so I went to get the grinder and the beans, but I needed a spoon. So I opened the silverware drawer and a butter knife was stuck in there wrong or something, and it popped out. Which scared me—uh, startled me. I wasn't scared. But I, uh, spilled beans all over the counter,

which I had to clean up, right? Long story short, we're out of half and half, I found leftovers from three weeks ago at the back of the fridge, gross, but the counter is all clean. Then I had to wash my hands."

"Rennet."

John's shoulders were shaking. He was laughing, the asshole. "Rennet, what happened?"

"The top came off the soap dispenser, and my hand got too slippery. And when I rinsed it off, the ring just... went right in the drain,"

Rennet finished, and put the pipe down with a grunt of displeasure.

"There are two of those rings in my bureau."

He could feel John watching him as he spoke. Then John took the bowl from him and poked around until he got the ring on the tip of his finger. "You lost two, then found them, so we saved them. You didn't need to panic over losing this one."

He studied the ring in question for a moment, then wiped it off on his towel and held out his hand. "Gimme."

Rennet raised his hand with a stupid feeling in his stomach and sizzling heat in his face. John slid the ring back into place but didn't let go of him. Sometimes, he made Renet feel like a kid again, but better. He tried to tease to cover up the fluttering in his chest. "You really like seeing me with that on, don't you? Kinky."

"There is absolutely nothing kinkier,"

John agreed. "Which is why I'd like my husband-to-be to finish up in here so I can

take him to bed, strip my boxers off him, and fuck his brains out. If he'd like that."

"Sunshine ."

Rennet stared as John got to his feet and the towel mysteriously did not go with him. "This is so respectable. It's like I don't even know you anymore."

His tail wrapped around John's ankle. "I thought you wanted me to fix the sink first."

"I wanted the water back on first. I don't care about the sink."

John paused, then frowned. "Wait, why did you shut off the water to whole house? Why not just the sink?"

"Well, I was.... That is...."

Rennet felt his wings droop. "I was worried something might happen."

As John had correctly guessed, Rennet had been anxious about John truly wanting to marry him and still desiring him. Not a huge amount, but enough that it would make more things happen than usual, more than his normal amount of chaos. If there was a normal amount; chaos might have its waves and fluctuations like everything else. "I don't know. It's not like I've never fixed a sink before. But I wanted to be sure. So I shut off everything."

"Well, something did happen,"

John corrected calmly. "You made me late for work. Margery won't be expecting me for at least another hour. Whatever will I do with all that time?"

Rennet peeked up, then gave him a coy glance. "Take your fiancé to bed and fuck his

brains out?”

he suggested.

“Water back on first,”

John reminded him, sensibly, then held out a hand to help pull Rennet to his feet.

“Are we sure this isn’t the sexy plumber fantasy?”

Rennet wondered, and got a smack on the ass for it as he walked away.

The End

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2016

Set after The Dragon's Egg

Summary: Newborns (er, the newly hatched) are exhausting and baby names are not to be taken lightly. Gen. m/m

According to Kate, who had watched small children for money when she'd been a teenager, when she'd been content and Arthur had been in school, some babies were naturally happy babies. They were calm and they smiled, and no one knew why. The same parents could have a happy baby and a fussy one, no matter what they did. And even then, a fussy child could grow up to be happy, calm, and friendly, and a happy baby could grow up to be shy or nervous. There was simply no way to know with children.

Once upon a time, Bertie had liked that notion. That infants were beyond magic. That they were all special.

But he could admit the idea dimmed somewhat after the end of long day, when he was exhausted, and worried, and reminded that all babies, special or not, were vulnerable and fragile. He walked in the front door and noticed that the fire in the fireplace had gone out. Of course it had died; Bertie had been gone for hours and poor Arthur was too tired to deal with it.

At the thought of his pearl, Bertie dropped his briefcase and his coat on the couch, making only a brief detour to light the fire again so their house would be comfortable for the baby. He skipped a stop in the kitchen for tea, and kicked off his shoes before

heading upstairs.

Hours without his darlings. They could have forgotten him. Or worse, needed him and he hadn't been here. And all for a lecture Bertie hadn't been able to get out of, and a long call with his publisher, who was sympathetic, truly, but had pointed out that Bertie had already been behind schedule before the baby.

His precious darling hadn't been planned. Bertie had tried to explain, but he knew when he told Arthur, Arthur would insist his publisher was right and would try to take on more to give Bertie the time to finish.

Arthur, wonderful, supreme being Arthur, who was so sleep deprived, because he worried, because this was all so new to both of them. New to the world, really. They had no one to rely on for this, as Arthur wouldn't hire a nanny. He wouldn't dream of it, not for their special girl.

For their first special girl, he had said, with pieces of shell strewn across the nursery floor and an iridescent bundle of joy in his arms. Although now that he had gone several days without real sleep, even Arthur might have changed his mind about that.

The child of a human and dragon was not fully any one creature, as Bertie and Arthur had discovered to their dismay when she'd opened her mouth to wail with hunger and they had realized that the formula human babies drank would not be suitable on its own.

But at the moment, Bertie could hear no wet screams or happy, well-fed chirps. He heard no sounds at all as he crept down the hall. Once in the doorway to their bedroom, he stopped as his fires raged with a sun's worth of passion.

His Arthur was utterly adorable and completely asleep, although he had undoubtedly not meant to pass out with his back to the headboard of their bed and their daughter in

his arms. Arthur was in a stained t-shirt and the same boxers he'd been in when Bertie had left that morning. He was unshowered and unshaven, and had been for a few days now, which meant even Arthur had stubble on his chin. The shadows beneath his eyes were pronounced, and his head was at an awkward angle that would hurt when he woke up.

He was beautiful, and only more so with the pearly white glow cast over him from the exquisite creature cradled in his arms.

Their lovely gem. Their sweetpea—or so Arthur had called her once in a moment of frustration when she wouldn't eat. That was before frantically calling a hundred doctors, before Arthur had fed her sugared milk in desperation, as though she was a fairy.

She had loved it. The formula worked, but apparently the taste did not agree with their little lovebird. Not until they sweetened it. Then she lit up with happiness.

She was lit up now, tinged pink as she woke. The color gave Arthur's skin a pleasant warmth. Bertie wanted to collapse next to them more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, excluding the first time he'd looked at Arthur and thought I could keep this human forever if this human would only say yes .

Bertie took in the pleased tint to her color and then smiled when her wide eyes met his.

“Shh, Boudica, let your father sleep,”

he whispered to her in his mother's tongue, the way he had spoken to her when she hadn't yet hatched.

Arthur snorted softly. “That isn't her name.”

He had either mysteriously learned Mandarin as Bertie's mother spoke it, or noted the odd word in that sentence and nothing else. He frowned as he blinked to wakefulness, still managing to look half asleep.

“Zenobia?”

Bertie suggested with a cluck of his tongue. He shrugged off his dress shirt and then knelt gently onto the bed, doing his best not to disturb either of them.

“She's not a warrior queen.”

Arthur might think he was stern and forbidding, but his sigh as Bertie stretched out on the bed was anything but angry. “There might be throw-up somewhere over there. On a towel, I think.”

He didn't specify where ‘over there’ meant, poor exhausted darling. Bertie stretched to kiss his warm cheek and Arthur's eyes fell closed again.

A chirp made him look down. His mighty princess stared back, mercifully peaceful—for the moment.

“Shi Yang?”

Bertie cooed at her, eyebrows up.

Arthur barely twitched. “Not a pirate queen either.”

Bertie shared a moment with the rarest of rare jewels as they silently discussed Arthur's stubbornness when it came to names. Names granted power. Obviously, a child like theirs, glowing with life and beauty, with a voice like no other—when she wasn't screaming—must have a name worthy of her.

She chirped, almost inquisitive. Bertie gazed at her and felt his fires build with the need to protect . “I would set worlds on fire for you, my darling,”

he told her, and she let out a bubbling laugh of delight.

According to Arthur’s parenting books, she was too young to laugh. But Arthur’s books didn’t account for a once-in-a-lifetime child like their luminous songbird.

“Pearl?”

Bertie sighed the question as his body grew heavy. He had to finish undressing before he fell asleep, or he’d wake up with four legs, a tail, and torn trousers. But he didn’t want to move. Their daughter, their glorious beautiful daughter, was awake and was calm, and Bertie had his two treasures together.

Arthur didn’t answer.

“Pearl?”

Bertie tried again, and glanced over to see Arthur, fast asleep. Bertie let out an envious breath and then looked back at the greatest gift his pearl had ever given him—a thought Arthur thankfully would never hear and tease him about.

“Margaret of Anjou?”

he suggested, but took her silence as a no. It was just as well. The name was a mouthful. And the Yorks had defeated her anyway.

He wriggled down to put his face to hers, reveling in the soft puff of her breath.  
“Sweetpea,”

he agreed—for the moment. She could be sweet, and a force to be reckoned with. She was special. She was theirs .

One nickname would not diminish her greatness.

The End

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2016

Set after *The Wolf in the Garden / The Firebird and Other Stories*

Summary: Miki doesn't grieve alone. Gen.

Tags: Grief, mourning rituals

Miki carefully set the beeswax candle in the windowsill and stared down through the glass to the garden below.

The garden seemed well and peaceful, although Miki hadn't spent much time at work today.

He'd gone in shortly after dawn to set things in order and write out instructions for the other employees on how to approach the plants themselves—but only if necessary.

The Dead Man's Garden was to be entered by Cassandra alone if Miki wasn't there.

He felt strange about it, cut off and far away.

It might have been because he'd never taken a day off before.

He could go down to the garden if he wanted, but he didn't move except to pull out the box of matches from his pocket to light the candle.

Kaz had not been religious that Miki was aware of, but when he had gone—not died, because someone like Kaz would never do something as ordinary as dying—when he had gone, Miki had whistled for a cab the way Kazimir always did and let it take him downtown to the Russian shops and the small Orthodox church.

They lit beeswax candles there, so Miki had asked Cassandra for one when he'd returned.

She understood ritual and hadn't asked any questions.

They had mourned together the first night, but not since then.

Rennet had appeared the next day, aware of the loss, somehow, but though Kaz had once had a name known the world over, they didn't arrange a public memorial.

They put a notice in the paper, if anyone even read that anymore, and Rennet brought vodka with a label Miki couldn't translate, and he and Miki and Cassandra drank it as they went through the boxes Kaz had stacked up in his bedroom.

When Rennet and Cassandra finally left, Miki had been alone on his couch, surrounded by boxes of things he didn't want and a small bag of golden feathers.

Alone again.

For an hour, he was alone and it was worse than it had been before, because Kaz was gone, and Miki loved him and he was gone, and he had been happy to go and that hurt in ways Miki wasn't used to feeling.

Then Cassandra let herself in, shepherding Diego in front of her before closing the door again, and Miki had curled up with him for hours.

Diego put a hand in Miki's hair, and exhaled when Miki buried his face in his neck, and held him so close that all Miki could hear was his heartbeat.

Then he'd picked Miki up and carried him downstairs, and put him in his car, and taken him home so Miki wouldn't be alone anymore.

Miki had already spent so many nights in Diego's apartment, this one shouldn't have been any different.

Except this time, he hadn't felt guilty for leaving Kaz behind.

That was supposed to be good.

Kaz hadn't wanted him to feel guilty; he'd wanted Miki to feel love, and be in love, and be happy without him.

Miki stared at the candle and the bright orange flame, nearly as bright as Kazimir himself.

He missed his voice.

But he couldn't play a record.

Rennet had taken those, and rightfully so.

Cassandra had the artwork, probably worth millions, all told, although she wouldn't sell it.

Miki had the rest: books and clothing and feathered fans and discarded costumes, all of it probably also worth quite a bit.

It had been placed in boxes, slowly, over the course of weeks, and now it was all downstairs in the moving van Diego had rented.

They would drive it across town to Diego's apartment, where it would all stay in storage until Miki decided what to do with it.

They would buy a house too, in the future.

Kazimir had told him to, and given him feathers to sell for a garden of his own, so Miki would do it.

And he would be happy there.

He was happy.

He was in love, and was loved, and Diego made him feel shaken up and on fire from the inside out.

Miki had experienced dark tendrils of jealousy at the realization that others found Diego attractive, and bubbly embarrassment when Diego had looked at him and known he was jealous.

He'd seduced Diego in Diego's bedroom, using his eyes and then his hands and then his mouth, and come back here the next morning radiant, according to Kaz.

Diego listened to him and touched him, light and gentle, and said nothing about the rows of plants already taking over his kitchen and living room.

To be honest, Diego had barely used the kitchen before Miki.

Miki stared at the candle and hummed to himself as he considered which of Kaz's

dishes he would unpack to use in what was really his kitchen, now.

Diego came up the inside stairs, then through from Kaz's now empty apartment.

He stopped, probably in the doorway, probably to stare at the tea set.

The couch and all the chairs were gone.

But Miki had pulled out the silver antique tea set and placed it on the floor on top of a towel.

"The tea should still be hot,"

he remarked as he turned around.

Diego was handsome and starkly serious as he considered the display, and the candle, and Miki. But then he nodded and went to the kitchen to wash up—as was proper for a real tea, even if he was a wolf who didn't mind dirty hands.

Miki's smile as he returned seemed to surprise him, but he kneeled down when Miki did, and allowed Miki to pour him a cup and to hand him a slice of thick bread slathered in butter. He didn't comment when Miki leaned against him or put down his cup in order to wrap his arms around him and hide his face. He kissed the crown of Miki's head and gazed at him with dark eyes when Miki finally looked up.

"You didn't have any,"

Diego chided him, and placed a hot cup in Miki's hands. He pushed them up until Miki had to drink. "Now the bread too, my Miklós. Please."

Diego knew what grief was. He held out a piece of the bread Kazimir had preferred,

and unwrapped a sugar cube before dropping it into Miki's tea, and stared, insistent, until Miki took a bite. Then he wiped the smudge of butter from Miki's lips and licked it from his thumb. His wolfish grin took Miki by surprise, enough to make him roll his eyes and huff.

But Miki took a bite, and then another, until the bread was gone, and he drank his tea, and poured them both another cup while the candle burned down. He might have cried, which would have pleased vain Kaz, but he smiled too, and wrapped himself around Diego, and that would have pleased Kaz more. And when the candle began to gutter, they cleaned up, and packed the tea things away, and carried the last of it all downstairs.

The End

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2018

Set sometime after The Wolf in the Garden

Summary: Miki has stars in his eyes and vodka on his breath. Diego adores him. m/m

Tags: alcohol

“Diego.”

Miki had stars in his eyes. His cheeks were ripe with color, and he had stars in his eyes, and he smelled of alcohol but Diego didn't mind. His Miki did not drink, not often, although he occasionally downed vodka with Rennet whenever the imp would appear.

Vodka, Diego had learned, was not Rennet's drink of choice, but if the imp was feeling nostalgic, he would show up with a bottle in one hand. The label was always in Russian. He and Miki drank it straight, although Miki still never had much.

Diego didn't understand how anyone could drink it, but wolves had different opinions about these things.

In any case, a few shots did nothing to Rennet, and left Miki sleepy as well as sad, then hungry for stinging kisses and Diego's arms around him.

Whatever was in the glass Miki's coworkers had ordered for him before dinner was not vodka, or at least, not vodka alone.

Diego had gotten a whiff and flinched from the sharp smell of alcohol, but Miki didn't seem to have noticed it. The drink was pretty and bright, and Miki finished it in moments, then sipped another, and perhaps another, if Diego had been distracted and hadn't seen the arrival of a replacement.

"Diego,"

Miki said again, leaning most of his weight against Diego's side and gazing up at him while too many of his coworkers smiled and cheered him on. "You are painfully handsome."

Miki told him this gravely, but then reached up to cup Diego's jaw. "You are much too handsome. I don't know what to do with a handsome man."

It was not an easy thing, making a werewolf of Diego's age blush, yet here he was, hot beneath his clothes and reveling in his Miki's admiration.

"You know exactly what to do with a handsome man, querido."

Diego liked the startled heat in Miki's expression, the slow burn of want in how he said Diego's name, and the tremble in his pretty bottom lip.

Miki's coworkers possibly liked it too. They probably didn't get to see Miki this way. Diego didn't mind sharing, a little, in that case, with people who would at most gently tease Miki for it on Monday. New couples were often teased, and right now, although they had been together for some time, Miki had honeymoons in his eyes.

"Diego,"

Miki breathed. The sting of alcohol was easier to ignore when Miki twined his arm around Diego's neck and pulled him closer. But then he shook his head, as if he were

arguing with Diego and not luring him in once again. “What is it you think I do?”

he demanded, quietly aristocratic. Beneath the liquor, he was warm and earthy and floral, but the sharpness of the alcohol clung to him like a warning.

His coworkers had gone strangely quiet. Diego didn’t think they had ever seen Miki with his chin up and his gaze bold, throat on display.

He was so dangerous.

Diego reached up to clasp Miki’s hand and pull it to his mouth. He kissed Miki’s scarred, rough palm before releasing it, letting Miki curl around him even tighter than before.

“You consume him,”

Diego answered at last, softly, for Miki and no one else.

Miki shook his head, a denial, but then regarded Diego heavily with half-closed eyes. “You’re too handsome to be mine. I must be dreaming.”

He scratched his fingers through Diego’s short hair.

“Oh,”

said one of Miki’s coworkers. Diego only vaguely concerned himself with whatever they were realizing.

“Shall I swear my devotion to you again?”

Diego pushed the last of Miki’s drink away. He supposed he should feel older or so

very inhuman around youthful, drinking humans like this. But his Miki was delighted and Diego didn't care about anything else. "Querido."

"Diego,"

Miki answered almost immediately, his brief moment of trained, seductive intensity gone and replaced once more with pink cheeks and shining eyes.

Diego tipped his head down to brush a kiss over Miki's parted, soft lips.

Miki stared at him, roses and blackberries and wisteria again, the Miki the others knew.

"You have stars in your eyes,"

Diego informed him. This was not the Miki of vodka and memories, but Diego did not think he would mind this one making an appearance from time to time.

Miki did not shake his head. He held Diego's gaze like a movie star or an ancient fae or even, perhaps, a firebird, before slowly sliding his arm down to offer Diego his hand.

Diego kissed it.

The End

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

Posted as part of a charity event in 2023

Set sometime after His Mossy Boy

Summary: Zarrin reaching for Ian with his grasping (loving) hands. Gen.

Ian had only just arrived home after work when he turned to face north and frowned. Martin would have said something about his “Spider sense,”

a reference Ian understood enough to roll his eyes at but not enough to argue over. Martin was trying to get him into comics, insisting that if Ian was going to have a secret identity, he should learn the lore.

Although then Martin had stared into the distance for a moment before mumbling something about how he’d end up “fridged”

if Ian became a hero from a comic. Which was a reference Ian didn’t get even a little. When he’d tried dropping it into conversation, Schmittty had grimaced, so Ian resolved to look it up whenever he had the chance, which basically meant when he remembered and Martin wasn’t around.

Martin wasn’t around at the moment, but Ian was currently more interested in the presence in his territory.

All of the land around Everlasting, including the Preserve was Ian’s territory, in a sense. But Ian was concerned with the land in his name on all legal documents, land that butted up next to the state park, which meant lost or nosy hikers crossed over into

it all the time.

This was different. Not ‘Martin Dyer passed out beneath his tree, ready to propose marriage’ different, but remarkable enough to have Ian leaving the house without doing much more than removing his badge and gun and dropping them in the kitchen. Martin would make a face if he found them there later, but hopefully Ian wouldn’t be out long.

He moved toward the disturbance in a straight line, growing as large as he could in his clothes without ruining them, wanting to cover the distance quickly.

The trees were not alarmed. No fleeing deer crossed his path. But the birds sang and the wind whispered of... something . Not in words. Never in words. Hints and teases, excitement without the smug pleasure that had heralded Martin’s arrival into Ian’s world. Not He’s here .

Something new.

It’s time .

Ian didn’t hear as wolves did. It wasn’t a heartbeat that made him stop, it was the awareness of how close he was to the state park and then Zarrin’s gentle, husky voice addressing one of the trees.

“My, aren’t you handsome?”

Ian waited until he was his usual size and form before he continued forward.

Zarrin Xu stood several yards ahead, one hand resting lightly—not lightly—on a redwood only a few hundred years old. A baby, in redwood terms. Zarrin leaned in, lips moving in a whisper that Ian couldn’t hear but he knew what was said anyway.

Mine.

Zarrin wasn't wrong. He just also wasn't entirely right. Though the tree didn't mind, either way.

"There you are,"

Zarrin called out as Ian drew closer, as if they didn't see each other nearly every day, even if only in passing.

"Zarrin,"

Ian answered carefully, then realized Zarrin was keeping to that side of the redwood because he was staying on the state park side of the border separating it from Ian's property. He must have entered Ian's territory just a step or two to get Ian's attention and then returned to that spot to wait.

He'd knocked. Joe had probably told him to do that.

Ian crossed his arms. "Bit far from the mansion, aren't you?"

Zarrin rolled one wrist in a vague gesture. "I like a walk sometimes. Especially now. Is this why you walk so much?"

"Who says I walk?"

Ian asked it but knew the answer: Martin. Azar would have kept it to herself, more because that was her habit with things that she thought her parents would dislike. Martin would have spoken of it because he was Martin, open and soft and warm.

Zarrin gave Ian a knowing, surprisingly sharp, glance. "They don't speak, but I can

hear them,”

he said instead of bringing Martin into the moment. “Do they speak to you?”

Ian shrugged. “Not in words.”

Zarrin straightened, impossibly tiny next to that redwood and barely reaching Ian’s shoulder. “Are they talking about me? Are they... happy?”

The insecurity in his voice was starkly evident. Ian heaved a sigh and tried looking away, but even if the trees didn’t chide him, Joe or Martin would have. “ Happy is not an emotion for trees. But they aren’t un happy.”

Zarrin blinked his wide eyes at him, looking pleading and youthful until that look suddenly hardened. His chin came up. “I can’t help you care for them if you don’t tell me how, Ian Forrester.”

“You’re not the boss of me,”

Ian responded childishly, but uncrossed his arms. “Is that why you came here?”

“You won’t speak in the coffee shop.”

Zarrin paused, then tucked his hands into his coat pockets. “Perhaps understandably, with humans near. And you avoid the mansion. You don’t invite me here.”

Briefly, Zarrin stuck out his lower lip in a pout. “Only Zazzie.”

“Azar needs space away from the mansion.”

And her stubborn treasure . Ian pressed on when he could see Zarrin forming an

objection. “You don’t need my permission to be here, or an invitation for that matter. I couldn’t stop you.”

“Couldn’t you?”

Zarrin asked shrewdly. “I wonder.”

Ian’s heart began to pound. He crossed his arms again. “What is that supposed to mean? Don’t tell me you’ve decided I’m a superhero the way Martin has.”

The smooth question was a mistake.

Zarrin perked up to give Ian a sly grin. “Martin might have more reasons to think admiringly of you than I do, it’s true.”

Ian sighed loudly with annoyance as though he couldn’t feel the shiver in the wind. It’s time , it said again. A thorn in his heel and a voice in the dark. A longing to make Ian uncomfortable as nothing else could.

Zarrin might have felt it too. He studied Ian for a moment, his grin falling, then said, “I looked up more about you, you know. Or, creatures that might be like you. And had our antiques restorer stay out of Alfie’s things, so I could go through them.”

The shiver touched Ian’s skin. He never felt the cold, but he did now. “And?”

he asked as evenly as he could.

“You are not dragon, Ian Forrester. But, like the trees that speak but don’t use words, that are not happy but also not un happy, you are also not not a dragon. Alfie was given an egg, wasn’t he? An egg with a child that he raised. Dìzhèn wanted Everlasting protected and was most thorough about seeing it done. And...”

Zarrin briefly looked uncomfortable “an egg is often a gift of a great love, not always possible between a dragon and someone other. Even for the powerful.”

Ian let his heart pound and didn't try to calm it.

“You don't want to speak of those things,”

Zarrin continued after a while, in a mournful voice he had no call to use. “Joe said you might not.”

“Joe knows.”

Ian said it flatly. Of course, Joe knew. If Zarrin did, Joe did. “Look, we... I was raised not to speak with others.”

“But I'm not others.”

Zarrin was still mournful. “I'm... perhaps a cousin, and we're supposed to work together.”

“I know,”

Ian spoke through gritted teeth, then forced a breath in and out. “I know that,”

he said, marginally calmer. “I just... am not used to it. But, like I said, I can't stop you.”

Zarrin leaned toward Ian as though Ian was a redwood who needed whispering to. “Dragonfire did not slow you much, Ian Forrester. There is enough of us in your blood to make you a threat. It's no wonder the rest of the family chose to pretend Alfie had only been a secretary. They couldn't ignore his presence entirely, not with

this, not with her still so strong, but they could do their best to cloud the truth. Your magic,”

he gentled his voice when Ian tensed again, “hid you even from Bernard’s senses. Could I stop you? Perhaps, now that all this has responded to me. But am I meant to? I don’t think so. And would I want to?”

Hurt entered Zarrin’s liquid eyes. “No. I thought us friends, and if not friends, cousins.”

“Cousins?”

Ian’s brain finally caught up with that word, bringing him back a step. “I don’t have.... I’ve never....”

“I’ve met injured wolves less skittish than you,”

Zarrin observed, no pleasure in the statement.

“It’s not your job to take care of me,”

Ian insisted, feeling his chest tighten. That was how Martin described anxiety attacks. That wasn’t good. It couldn’t be.

“Oh, Ian.”

Zarrin shook his head. “I don’t know how to do this, either. It’s scary, isn’t it? Bernard says.... Well, he would say many things, but he’s just as scared as we are right now. You don’t... you don’t look well.”

His hands emerged from the pockets, grasping the air nervously. “Can I come in?”

Please? I can take you home or call Martin for you.”

Ian was distantly embarrassed by the longing to hear Martin’s voice that went through him when Zarrin said the name. He could hardly say he didn’t need help now. Zarrin, with whatever it was dragons felt, knew how much Ian wanted Martin. Martin found it hard to believe, but his presence was calming. At least, it was to Ian.

“Martin is allowed here,”

Ian said finally, breathing hard. “They welcomed him here.”

Zarrin nodded to accept that. “And me?”

The ground would rise up to meet him if it could. Zarrin might know that. Or might feel it but not understand what the feeling was. He was new to this and had no one to teach him anything.

A neat trick they’d pulled off, Dìzhèn and Alfie.

Ian put his head down and thought of Martin, and his comics, and all his excited talk of crossover events and unexpected team-ups. He thought of Marie, the injured wolf Zarrin had found, and her graphic novels.

Ian wasn’t a superhero, but he could read more than the creaking of tree branches and the sighs of the wind.

“They want you here,”

Ian admitted. But that wasn’t really what Zarrin was asking. “I don’t want you here,”

he answered honestly and hated that Zarrin flinched. “But I could. Maybe. I just....”

Did superheroes feel fear? Martin would say they did. Martin would say that's why he admired them. Ian braced himself. "It won't be easy for me."

He took another breath, closing his eyes to listen to the land for another moment before opening them again to meet Zarrin's intent stare. "Martin will be home soon. He's making potato soup, if you'd like some."

Zarrin practically wriggled with excitement as he stepped over a line only the two of them could feel.

The End

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2024

Set sometime after His Mossy Boy

Summary: Deputy Kyle just wants to go home after work, but gets stuck in line at the grocery store. Gen.

Tags: toxic parents, transphobia, homophobia, beings phobia, I guess?

Note: This is set like, 2017-18, so weed is legal in California but Kyle (and Ian) are still pissy about it and Martin being so high all the time, lol.

Sorry but Zarrin does seem like someone who would chat in the bathroom.

The grocery store—the regular grocery store, and not the smaller organic, independent one where Schmitt did most of his shopping—had been called Big Tom's when Kyle had been a kid.

Then it had been bought out by a chain, as if a corporation had thought the area around Everlasting was going to blow up into a boomtown again the way it had in the timber and fishing days.

And for some fucking reason, that chain had recently invested in one lane of two self-checkout machines.

Of those two machines, one seemed to always have Out-of-Service flashing across the screen, and the other currently had Deborah O'Hare standing in front of it with a

bewildered expression and a cart full of unchecked groceries.

Kyle personally kind of thought self-checkouts were meant to be more like the Express Lane, for quick in-and-out purchases, but nothing said a person couldn't bring a fully loaded cart to one.

But if Deborah had been trying to save herself time, it hadn't worked, since the machine was robotically complaining about unexpected items in the bagging area.

There was nothing in the bagging area.

Nothing but air anyway.

But that was not a problem Kyle could fix no matter what kind of big eyes Deborah gave him.

She needed a store manager or something.

At least an employee who gave a shit.

It was the kind of thing Kyle considered bringing up the next time Schmitty started talking about how automation was supposed to be benefitting humans, not replacing them in a world which didn't offer a laid-off store employee any sort of income to make up for the machine now doing their job.

To be fair to Schmitty, though he did read too much, Everlasting was not the kind of town where plenty of jobs were available.

A grocery clerk might expect to work in this store their whole lives, and be more or less okay with it if the cost of living in Everlasting didn't go up.

But since they still needed an employee to help out people at self-checkout, Kyle didn't think that job was in trouble.

At least not yet.

Maybe Kyle was thinking about it because he wasn't at all sure what was going on within the Sheriff's Department.

He didn't think most of the other deputies knew either.

The old sheriff left, there was no acting replacement, the town council wasn't saying anything, and some of the old guard deputies who had been fans of the sheriff had left too, or were planning on it.

The entire Department might get the axe, leaving the town in the hands of the Highway Patrol, or be downsized and defunded.

Maybe Kyle would end up working here too, or moving out of Everlasting like so many did.

All because the last sheriff was scared of a dragon.

Because all of them were—a tiny little fruit of a dragon at that.

Not that it was Kyle's business.

But he supposed that was what happened when the council had appointed some out-of-towner to the job, who had then hired his friends.

Schmittty liked that they were scared.

But Schmitty was a weird guy, always had been, even back in elementary school when he had been just Ellis who liked Ninja Turtles, and comics, and making friendship bracelets with the girls.

Had gotten him some girlfriends in middle and high school though, those bracelets.

And his taste in comics had been pretty good, Kyle could admit that now.

Kyle's ma still thought Schmitty was weird but also brought in cookies for him and the others when she brought some in for Kyle.

Yeah, so Schmitty was okay, and probably right that self-checkout might be meant to help people but it wasn't helping anyone as things were, because the way things were was shit.

Kyle just didn't see what they were supposed to do about.

Like how Kyle was in uniform because he'd gotten off work and hadn't wanted to linger at the station to change, so Deborah wanted him to help, but what he was supposed to do? He didn't work here.

There was only one employee he could even see.

And yeah, it was after the pre-dinner hour grocery store rush time, and hardly the height of tourist season where more employees would be needed, but still, there should have been somebody else in the store.

For safety reasons if nothing else, and maybe Schmitty was right on another point and the big chain had started cutting back on employee hours because of the self-checkout, and it really fucking sucked that Kyle couldn't even stop in the store after work without worrying about the politics of the working class now.

Damn it, Schmitty.

The store's single employee did not seem to give a shit about politics, or the waiting customer at the self-checkout lane, or Kyle standing there looking around with a basket full of groceries.

Although Kyle would bet she could hear the machine complaining even from two checkout lanes over.

Or maybe she would have if she and the customer in front of her would stop talking for a few seconds.

Thinking that made Kyle take another look toward the only open checkout lane and the employee and customer in question. Then he said, "Ah, shit,"

out loud—but under his breath—because he knew why Deborah had tried her luck at self-checkout.

He reconsidered the items in his basket: oranges, apples, yogurt, blueberries, bananas, and peanut butter for his various morning smoothies—and fuck Forrester for thinking it was funny that Kyle liked smoothies anyway—and then a frozen pizza Kyle could never tell his ma about, but he was not in the mood to cook right now. He reconsidered the organic store too, even if he thought half the employees were high or actively selling weed on the job and it took a lot of effort to pretend he didn't know that, but the organic place was probably closed by now.

Then he sighed and took his basket and got into the line, hoping that his presence would at least prod the cashier and chatty customer to finish up their conversation and then everyone in the store could get back to their lives and the shit they had to do.

The two talkers didn't so much as twitch in his direction, even though Kyle had to

reach near them to get the little divider to put between his stuff and what the bitch—what the lady was buying. Not to pry, but he felt like instant coffee, paper towels, and a bottle of wine should have been rung up by now.

“Terri Bonét had the same thing happen to her,”

the cashier said, holding the customer’s package of toothpaste without scanning it or putting it into a bag or anything. Annalee Wadowski had been working there for about a decade. Her sister was still a teacher at the high school. Her brother ran the gas station in Stapleton. She knew Kyle’s mom. She knew everybody. Everlasting was a small town and everyone had to get groceries.

“She said she came home one day and Kevin was gone. He’d packed up and left for the city, and not even for college, can you imagine? Terri says there was no way his grades were good enough for that, though she has no idea what he’s even doing there. Won’t take her calls, has her blocked all over the internet—her husband too, although what that man could have done to upset him is a mystery to me. He’s only known Kevin for a handful of years, honestly.”

“They get ideas from TV and social media,”

her friend remarked with her nose in the air. “Suddenly their parents are the cause of everything wrong in their lives. There’s no reasoning with them once that happens. It should be banned, I tell you.”

“Social media?”

Annalee wondered, finally scanning the toothpaste. She didn’t pick up another item. “I see my cousin’s kids on there. Well, I did until my cousin took the pictures down. Said she didn’t want her kids’ images being shared with strangers. Strangers! As if I don’t know every one of my friends.”

“That’s what I mean,”

Rachel Dyer continued. Kyle had never actually heard her talk, not like this, but wondered if her superior tone would have bugged him so much if he hadn’t encountered her before. Probably. Some people were just natural born Pains in the Ass.

He emptied his basket onto the conveyor belt and then dropped his basket onto the stack of them, where it fell into place with a loud, plasticky clack that made both women glance at him.

Rachel Dyer, the bitch of Tanglewood Drive, paused at the sight of his uniform, then looked into his face and exhaled in either relief or annoyance before turning away. He didn’t think she recognized him, but that wasn’t what had spooked her anyway; for a second there, she’d thought Kyle had been one of the other deputies. One specific deputy.

“People go online and they read things, and they find groups that reinforce all these wrong ideas they have,”

Rachel Dyer continued to Annalee, neither of them seeming to care that there was now a line. “The people on the forum I visited said that’s common. Kids and the young especially find these places online where everyone agrees with them and soon, they’re moving out or cutting their parents off so they can better fit in with their groups. Like cults.”

She hummed and leaned in closer to Annalee. “Though in Everlasting, they don’t even need the internet. Everyone knows where they go. They just won’t say it out loud because they’re intimidated by that “boy” dragon.”

Boy was in air quotes so heavy that even Kyle’s ma would have noticed, and she was

the kindhearted sort of lady who didn't get sarcasm. Schmitty would have said Rachel Dyer had made boy into a slur. Schmitty said a lot of things were slurs, or code for slurs.

Forrester would have just called Rachel Dyer an asshole.

Kyle was kind of with Forrester on that one. But either way, Kyle wasn't going to fuck the dragon, so why the fuck would he care if he was a boy or a girl? Though he wasn't sure he'd want to piss next to him in a men's room, not because of gender issues or whatever, but because that Zarrin Xu seemed like someone who'd wanna chat in there.

Maybe no one had ever told him you were supposed to go in, do your business, and leave, no talking and no eye contact. Boys were supposed to learn that early on. Maybe dragons didn't use public restrooms. Or maybe Zarrin's parents were like this bitch in front of Kyle and couldn't do basic parenting shit.

"Where did you find your group?"

Annalee asked. "Maybe I can tell Terri about it so they can help her figure out why Kevin won't talk to her."

"He really didn't say a word?"

Rachel Dyer tossed her head. "Isn't that typical? It's either fantasies and nonsense or nothing at all, because you live in the real world and they don't."

"Well, he wrote her a letter,"

Annalee admitted. "She said it was a pack of lies and things he exaggerated. She said now he won't speak to her just because she wouldn't pay for him to take trips up

north to Seattle when he was younger—that's where his grandparents live on his dad's side. Of all the trivial reasons to cut off a mother."

Kyle cleared his throat. Loudly.

Annalee gave him a single glance. Rachel Dyer shook her head—not at him, at this Kevin kid.

"See what I mean? One little mistake and now her son won't talk to her. His friends probably convinced him that it was abuse because of a train ticket."

"He can talk to his grandparents on the phone. That's what I told her. He probably just wanted to go on the trips to get out of babysitting. Kids always try to get out of their responsibilities like that. Claim it's... what's that word? Parentification,"

Annalee rolled the word around in her mouth like she was trying to keep it off her tongue, "to expect him to help out with his stepsiblings after school. We just called that being in a family when I was young."

"That's what they do now, on those sites, in certain coffee shops."

Rachel Dyer wasn't hissing like a snake but Kyle half expected her to. "They make up words to try to get people on their side. The people on my forum said it's so common, you wouldn't believe it. Suddenly the parents are the villains. If anyone is a villain here, it should be my useless ex-husband who didn't even teach Martin how to be man before he left. But no, somehow, I'm the one who deserves to be ignored."

Kyle looked over and met Deborah's eyes across the distance. He wondered how much she heard. Probably all of it since Kyle could still hear the self-checkout machine complaining. Her expression was pinched. She was older than Kyle by a few years, which meant older than Martin Dyer by even more, but nearly everyone in

town went into Everlasting Cuppa at some point, so everyone knew or knew of Martin Dyer.

He was an awkward, friendly nerd with his head in the clouds—of weed smoke, usually. That was how Kyle would have described him before all this. Maybe he would have noticed the red hair. Maybe he would have noticed the way the kid smiled at everyone. Maybe he would even have noticed the way the kid stared at the other barista. But that's all. Just a friendly kid who smiled when he saw you. Now, of course, people knew a lot more about Martin Dyer than that. But most of them still would have described him as friendly. Maybe even sweet.

“Well, you know,”

Annalee was suddenly, delicately, slowly, examining Rachel's items without managing to scan any of them, “he's still there, working in that shop. You could just go in.”

Kyle coughed into his hand. This was also ignored. But he personally would not walk into a coffee shop frequented by Ian Forrester, known prick. Not if he was someone Ian Forrester very clearly did not like. Especially not if an employee of said coffeeshop was the one person on God's green earth capable of making Ian Forrester stop pretending to be nice—which still wasn't all that nice—and look ready to commit murder with his bare hands for the chance to defend them.

Him. Not them. Him . A boy. A man, even if he dressed like a teenager. He'd said so, or something like that. Something about fairies and genders and Zarrin Xu.

But that really wasn't any of Kyle's business. Martin Dyer made Forrester less of a prick and that was all Kyle cared about.

That and his smoothies, and getting home at some point tonight, and maybe asking

around with his friends in Stapleton to make sure the problem with this Kevin kid had been shitty parenting and not criminal parenting. There were still kids in that house from the sound of it. Somebody had to.

“I wouldn’t step inside that shop if you paid me,”

Rachel Dyer insisted. “Nothing but,”

she lowered her voice, which was a small surprise, “queers and visiting beings now.”

Or that frowning barista had booted her ass out the last time she tried. Or the hot girl who worked in the afternoons had ripped her a new one. That girl would do it too. She had a mouth on her and she was Martin Dyer’s friend. A good friend. The kind to pick up a troubled kid in the rain and then chew out Kyle for no real reason except she was worried about her friend and mad at this bitch, and had nowhere else to direct her anger.

Pissed off and wet was a good look on her. Too bad she’d hated Kyle on sight. She’d probably like Schmitt’s type more. The read-books type.

Which reminded him, he had one of Schmitt’s mystery paperbacks in his locker and he needed to give it to Charlene, who was waiting for the next one in the series. Pretty solid mystery, but a lot of beings characters for some reason. Not the worst, but Kyle could have done with more werewolves and less fairies.

“No, they’ve thoroughly indoctrinated him. I just have to wait for him to come to his senses—not that he ever had much sense to begin with.”

Rachel Dyer made a tiny, huffy, sniffy sort of sound, like a snotty noble lady in a PBS drama. Kyle opened his mouth, then shut it and decided to read the label of a pack of gum. “Got that trait from his father.”

“Martin really didn’t say anything? I’ve tried to talk to him, but he goes through the self-checkout now when he comes in.”

Annalee clucked her tongue. “Same with his friends, except for the dragon. He comes through my line. He looks at me.”

She said that in a whisper.

“Oh, Martin said some things the last time I spoke to him.”

Rachel Dyer was suddenly very concerned with getting her wallet from her purse. “Everything I do is wrong now, let me see: he’s mad because I don’t trust the dragon and because I don’t approve of his choice of friends. He wasn’t making sense, believe you me. Drinking, and probably because of that Jessica Bartlett who has been trash her whole life. Almost nothing Martin said was clear. Started making accusations because I wouldn’t let him clean the gutters in the middle of a rainstorm, and—”

Kyle snorted a laugh so loud that Deborah let out a startled squeak.

“Excuse me?”

Rachel Dyer turned on him as if she’d noticed someone was in line behind her after all.

Kyle shook his head. “I was gonna stay out of it, really. No matter what a piece of work you are, but—you don’t remember me, do you? Maybe you’d already shut the door before I got out of the car. Maybe you blocked it out like you apparently blocked out all the stuff your kid did say to you. Who knows? But I was there when you left your son in the freezing winter-in-Everlasting rain like hypothermia isn’t a thing. Okay? If you want to make yourself the victim to Annalee here, it’s not my business, but I don’t like people lying to my face.”

“Who do you think you are?”

Rachel Dyer demanded, lifting her chin like she was about to call his manager. Kyle didn't have a manager at the moment, but if he did, it would be either Schmitt or Forrester and he wondered how that would turn out for her.

Nonetheless, he reminded himself of what his ma would say about trying to be respectful to his elders, which was to try to be... at least at first.

“Well, I'm the guy who's been in line behind you for way too long, first of all.”

Kyle gestured to his groceries and rapidly thawing frozen pizza. “And secondly, I'm the deputy your neighbors called to come help your son when you wouldn't.”

His voice might have gone low and a little rough, but he was tired and it had been a long day. “I'm the one who got him warm, and the one who had to hear him say that his mom didn't love him. Can you believe that?” Kyle turned to Annalee, who looked, to use an old expression, poleaxed. Kyle didn't think he was supposed to out people, according to, like, every online discussion and also Schmitt, but it was a small town and everyone knew anyway. These two hadn't said it but they'd been talking around it for the past ten minutes at least. “He tells me he came out to her and that she didn't love him. Those words exactly: My mom doesn't love me .”

It was inconvenient how clearly Kyle remembered those words. Out of the whole encounter, that's what stayed with him aside from Martin trying to stick up for Forrester, as if Forrester needed protecting. Forrester looked like he was carved from a fucking sequoia and yeah, okay, he had feelings like anybody else, but if someone hurt him, he would make damn sure they were bleeding too.

Maybe Kyle remembered those details because Forrester was like that, and Martin was a skinny kid who'd cried in the back of Kyle's car, and yet Martin had fought for

him.

That was love, maybe. A truer love than whatever Kyle's sister had gotten, or even Schmitt, for all his girlfriends in school.

Kyle pushed out a breath. "He said he told her about himself,"

and he'd been so fucking scared even saying it to Kyle. So drunk he'd fallen over and still he'd been terrified. "And she closed the door and left him there on the verge of passing out. He probably would have drowned in a blocked street drain or frozen to death on the sidewalk if her neighbors hadn't called me and then his friend hadn't come to get him. Un-fuckin'-believable."

That was loud. Kyle shook his head again. "My sister got pregnant at eighteen and dumped at nineteen, yet my extremely Catholic mother took her in and turned my room into a nursery for the kiddo." Kyle loved his niece but was also very happy that he'd already been out of the house by then. "My ma would never pull the shit that you did. Martin might be your kid but you sure as hell are not his mother."

The back of his neck itched.

Kyle turned from Rachel Dyer's reddening face to Annalee's round eyes before spinning around toward the self-checkout lane, where Deborah, the store's assistant manager, and—goddamn it—Schmitt, were standing together and staring at Kyle like he'd grown two heads and both of them were the Virgin Mary's.

"Fuck off, Schmitt,"

Kyle said preemptively. "I'm just trying to get my stuff and go home."

"Forrester is going to kiss you on the mouth,"

Schmitty called out, grinning like an elf—not a real elf. Like the ones in old movies who always seemed to be wearing tights and funny outfits.

“Forrester.”

Rachel Dyer hissed at last. Kyle felt vaguely as if snakes should be insulted. Nothing malicious there; they were just snakes. Rachel Dyer was a lying bitch.

Kyle looked at her, then at Annalee, who was scanning Rachel Dyer’s items without looking up. Kyle liked to think she was embarrassed at getting caught believing obvious lies but it was probably just that the assistant manager was there.

He looked back to Rachel Dyer. “Your total is up.”

It was. She turned toward the card reader with a distracted frown.

Kyle risked a glance to Schmitty, who, of course, hadn’t moved an inch even though Deborah was finally scanning her groceries.

“Forrester kisses me on the mouth, I’m gonna punch him.”

That was a shout directed at Schmitty. Kyle suspected hitting Forrester would be like punching granite, but he’d do it. He turned back to Rachel Dyer and Annalee, both of them hurriedly packing Rachel’s things into a canvas bag. “I’d leave him alone if I were you,”

he said, voice lower so only the two of them would hear. “Forrester. Or his boy.” He kind of enjoyed how Rachel Dyer flinched at that. “It wasn’t my business until you made it my business. Still isn’t, really. But I’d steer clear of Cuppa altogether. If your son wants to talk to you,” Kyle couldn’t imagine why, “he knows where you are. But if you go in to his workplace and cause a scene, they’d have every right to demand

you leave.”

Or have her removed.

He left it unsaid like one of Schmitt's paperback werewolf detectives would have.

Wer's apparently used body language instead of words sometimes, if the book author was correct, anyway.

There was a wolf in Everlasting now, but Kyle wasn't about to walk into Cuppa to ask him werewolf questions.

Zarrin Xu went in there.

Forrester went in there.

That scowling barista Joe was in there.

They weren't like whatever the hell Rachel Dyer was implying, but Kyle wasn't taking any chances. He'd walk in there and walk back out with a limp wrist or something.

And yeah, he wasn't even worried about what Schmitt's would say about that. It was what Forrester would say about that, which would be an ice-cool, “If all it takes to make you wanna fuck men is to walk into a coffee shop, then I don't think the coffee shop is the problem, Kyle.”

With his eyes bluer than the bay and his hair looking like Superman's.

Fuck that guy.

Kyle was about to blame every weird thought on Schmitt, his late night, and his hunger, when Annalee whispered something to Rachel Dyer and then came around to begin scanning Kyle's groceries.

Fucking finally.

He was gonna go home, eat his fucking pizza, wash his blueberries with lemon juice and water so they wouldn't get moldy, watch some porn—of fucking women, fuck off, Forrester—and then go to bed and forget all about this.

“Wait, Schmitt!”

he called out before Schmitt could head off to buy whatever it was he came in for. “Do you have the next book in the series on you? I wanna know who the killer is!”

The End

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2017

Set sometime after Treasure for Treasure and His Mossy Boy

Summary: Joe plants a garden. Zarrin takes note. m/m

“For a vegetarian you don’t really like vegetables much, do you?”

Zarrin stopped sniffing the carrot in his hands, wounded by the amusement in his Joseph’s tone. “It’s so... orange,”

he explained, not at all defensively, and took a moment to brush some of the dirt from the vegetable in question. Then he added it to the basket Joe’s mother had given them. They would deliver some of the produce from her garden to her tomorrow—since she insisted on keeping her place in town even though Zarrin’s mansion was big enough and she was more than welcome.

The only thing she had allowed Zarrin to give her was the plot of land for a kitchen garden, although it was Joseph who did most of the work there. Joseph didn’t seem to mind. If anything, the steady, regular work pleased him. Although he had been surprised to find he had a green thumb.

Ian had found this discovery very funny, for reasons he hadn’t explained. Martin had been delighted, and soon enough he and Joe and Mrs. Andres were discussing seeds, and fertilizers, and soil, and sunlight, and crop yields with an intensity Zarrin had tried to share, but couldn’t.

Azar had cruelly and without sympathy told him he couldn't be an expert at everything, before she'd commented on grafting the fruit trees and increasing the size of the orchard. Zarrin had been left to huff in irritated silence until Joseph had come to him and whispered promises of sweet fruit, with Martin in the background flushed pink with excitement at the thought of making jam.

"They weren't always orange."

Joseph's attention was on the row of peas—or zucchini—or something similar—he was weeding. His hands were dirty with dark soil, and his arms were bare and probably warm to the touch from the work and the afternoon sun. "Humans bred them to be that way. There are other varieties."

He glanced up, meeting Zarrin's gaze as if fully aware Zarrin had been watching him. If he was embarrassed, Zarrin couldn't tell. He gave Zarrin a slight grin. "There are purple carrots too. I think they were originally that color."

"Purple?"

Zarrin sat up in delight.

"So you want some purple ones too, then?"

Joe did not seem surprised. "Okay. Next year."

If Joe knew what it did to Zarrin to hear him speak so casually of their future, he might choose other words. Then again, he might not. His eyes were steady on Zarrin as he said that, and his hands were still.

Zarrin licked the corner of his mouth, just to be sure, then nodded so Joseph would never doubt his happiness. "Next year,"

he agreed. “I will even eat them.”

He had done well by his treasure to get a soft laugh from him. “I wouldn’t make you suffer. That’s Bernard’s job.”

It wasn’t suffering. Vegetables were not unpleasant, just... boring. Cheese was better. Zarrin clucked his tongue. “I can stand a few carrots to make you laugh again.”

Joe blinked, startled for some reason. His faint smile didn’t fade, precisely, but it changed, or perhaps that was the look in his eyes. “What won’t you do for me?”

he wondered, too quiet, with no one else around to hear. Maybe he thought he was teasing, but Zarrin answered him seriously.

“I don’t think there is anything I wouldn’t do for you, treasure. Nothing I wouldn’t give you, if you asked and it was within my power.”

And his powers were considerable now, which they both knew. “You wouldn’t even have to ask.”

Zarrin slowly shook his head. “Your need would be enough.”

Joseph made a small sound, shocked and frozen.

“Dragons respond to need.”

Zarrin frowned a little, confused. “Didn’t I tell you that?”

“Yes.”

Something made Joe’s voice sharp, then softened it. “I don’t need anything.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

Zarrin fell forward gracefully, on hands and knees for a moment before kneeling at Joe’s side. “Your mother asked for this garden, but you were the one who needed it. Look at you. You’re happy like this. I’m happy to give it to you.”

Joe opened and closed his mouth before scowling. “So you know what I want before I do?”

Zarrin wrinkled his nose at that tone, and Joseph relaxed, slightly. “Then, what?”

“You need, and my magic will find a way.”

Zarrin raised a hand to stroke Joe’s cheek. “Fruit trees and carrots, old-growth forests and the real history of this town. A home,”

Zarrin finished, viciously proud for that, for having Joseph move the last of his things in and finally give up his apartment. Joe’s lovely eyes met his. Zarrin petted him again, then considered what he should say.

Someday a child, if Joe wanted. Children, possibly. Zarrin didn’t know if they had a once-in-a-lifetime love although he wanted to believe they did. But in any case, that wouldn’t matter, not with his physiology.

But getting Joe to stay, sitting with him here in the sun and the dirt, the land happy and providing for them as if to prove it, was enough for now. So he kissed that cheek before sitting back, and after a moment, Joseph seemed to recover himself and started to weed again.

Next year, Joseph had said. These ones were for next year.

Zarrin was content to wait.

The End

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2018

Set sometime after Sweet Clematis

Summary: Tar? was not interested in this freshman wolf, soon to be a sophomore. He wasn't. And no matter what Mishi said, this was not pigtail-pulling. m/m

“What did you do now?”

Mishi sighed heavily as she sat down next to Tar? on the grass.

Neither of them were volunteering for the MCC that afternoon, but Tar? had sat near the table out of habit. The popularity of the Magical Creatures Coalition had increased significantly due to the events of the fall semester. So many of the beings around campus now found their way to the MCC table near the university entrance that the patches of grasses and trees along the main path sparkled with fairy glitter and shimmering auras of creatures Tar? couldn't quite identify and skin and hair of every color.

It was fantastic.

And if it had a few side effects—like drowning out the hateful screaming of the group of human students who called themselves Human Heritage, and drawing even more lovely and loving human students to this point to encounter all these beings for the first times in their sheltered human lives—well, Tar? was hardly going to mind that.

Anyway, all the beings in one place made certain activities easier.

It wasn't stalking if he was there first.

Tar? raised his head from his book and arched an eyebrow inquisitively at his best friend in the world, even if she was currently giving him a disapproving side-eye.

“Me?”

He put a hand to his heart in offense, simultaneously checking—always checking—for the spark that was his and his alone. “Am I supposed to have done something, my dear Mish?”

He flipped a page in the book he wasn't reading. The collection of the works of several Beat poets was for a class assignment and Tar? was bored out of his wits by all the pretension.

Mishi made the most doubtful noise he had ever heard, the pinnacle of scoffing disbelief. “Tar? .”

“What's he doing?”

Tar? demanded immediately—without turning around, of course. There was nothing to see if he turned around except one possibly pissed-off baby wolf, and Tar? was too self-aware to grant himself that sight.

“Nothing.”

Mishi's response was disappointing in so many ways. “He's not even looking at you.”

Tar? barely held in his gasp of outrage but finally gave in to his curiosity and twisted around.

Several yards away, on a blanket of all things—what starving student had a blanket to bring to the quad to sit on the grass?—was a young, glowing example of a werewolf on the cusp of full maturity. A freshman, which was a disgrace, with a body and a mind still growing into itself.

That's not to say the werewolf was small—Tar? had lived nearly twenty-five years so far and had yet to see a little wolf. The boy was nineteen or so, and tall, built on broad lines. It was the muscle and the meat that hadn't filled in yet. That would take another year, give or take, unless this werewolf had a very good meal plan and could eat his fill as he continued to grow.

He should have a good meal plan. It should be expected and planned for. But human universities were notorious for not attending to the needs of their nonhuman students. They barely accepted them, to be perfectly honest, and only begrudgingly catered to any special requirements.

Tar? doubted a werewolf appetite would be classified as such by humans who already thought the human students ate too much. The poor wolf probably lived with a constant, gnawing hunger in his belly. It was no wonder he was all shoulder, big knobby hands, and gangly legs. Of course he looked at everything with such intensity. He was hangry, the poor little duck.

Wait. He was not a duck. He was a hungry wolf in search of morsels to snap up in his jaws, and a wise fox would clear out of his way.

Tar? was very wise indeed. So he was not going to bring this werewolf food to make the soulful reproach in his eyes go away, or to see the promise of a broad chest and strong shoulders fulfilled.

That would be absurd. As absurd as Tar?'s fascination with someone who obviously had a lot of growing up to do.

Growing up and discovering yourself what was youth and college were for—and learning things, Tar? supposed. That baby wolf was going to have new experiences, and date people, and maybe get his heart crushed once or twice, and then find happiness. Tar? didn't need magic to see that, didn't need to pry into thoughts and dreams. This was the time for discovery and personal growth.

Beings just tended to do it slower than humans—and wolves.

Nothing was inherently interesting about the idea of this freshman wolf, soon to be a sophomore wolf, becoming an adult and going on with his life. Tar? wasn't interested, per se. Wasn't worried, or curious, or anything to make Mishi judge him.

He was... irked. And it was unbearable. Like a debt he couldn't pay. Like a thorn in his paw and an itch between his ears and the worry that his spark might be gone and he had to check.

Months ago, that not-yet-full-grown, oddly-mature-but-still-a-baby wolf had practically tripped over his tongue with adorable want for Tar? the moment he'd met him, and now the wolf hardly glanced in Tar?'s direction.

Tar? was a dashing, romantic, sexy sort. Even Sasha had said so—well, not the sexy part, but it had been implied with all of Sasha's blushes whenever Tar? flirted with him. Tar? had well-turned calves, and nice, firm biceps, and beautiful shiny hair. He had the loveliest of fox-faces and a wicked smile.

He had no idea what he smelled like to weres, but he thought he smelled of leaves, and static, and maybe the banana he'd just eaten.

Someone getting a crush on him was understandable. Someone not only getting over that crush, but alternating between ignoring him and glaring at him was not. Tar? hadn't done anything to deserve that—at the time.

“You could just leave him alone,”

Mishi warned. “It’s not like you would ever have looked at a freshman anyway. If he’s mad at you for not liking him back, it’s a sign of his age.”

“First of all, he wasn’t mad at me,”

Tar? argued, even though the wolf had seemed plenty mad at him, or at something , frowning and scowling and turning in another direction when Tar? would pass by. “And secondly, I haven’t done anything to warrant such suspicion.”

“His hair is green,”

Mishi countered. “ Green . He’s a werewolf, not an elf or a fairy. How did you manage that?”

Tar?’s tail flipped in excitement but outwardly he barely smiled.

Green did not suit Baby Wolf. At least, not green hair. It did match his plaid flannel shirt, however.

Which was much too hot for a sunny day like this. Every other being on campus but shy, beloved Mishi was practically naked, and yet Baby Wolf was buttoned up and sweating, his white skin flushed with heat.

He’d shaved his head but his wolfy hair was already growing back in, the top of his nice bristly buzzcut a forest green. He had a snub nose and a stubborn jaw, and spoke French as well as English, and Tar? absolutely did not care about him.

If only he would look up.

But no, Baby Wolf's attention stayed firmly on his phone.

“Why would he sit near me and do nothing?”

Tar? turned back to Mishi with a pout.

“Maybe he didn't even see you over here,”

she pointed out, reasonable and a bit exasperated. “I know you like teasing people, but don't you think this is ridiculous?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

Tar? turned to Baby Wolf again, his tail a bright, agitated flicker that Mishi, as a troll, likely couldn't see. Tar? didn't know if weres could see it; he'd never thought to ask.

But the wolf glanced over to him, easily, calmly, like someone without newly green hair, like a werewolf who didn't growl and invite a fight or whatever it was weres did when provoked beyond all reason. His eyes were no longer warm as brandy but yellow, pure ?kami.

This wolf , Tar? again had the thought, was starving .

The hair at the back of his neck stood up. Electricity filled the air, sparked close to Tar?'s heart where he could keep it safe.

He put a hand to his chest and felt his lips part. Then the wolf looked away.

“He has a name, you know,”

Mishi told him in the cautious voice she sometimes used when Flor was at his most

heated and outraged.

Tar? couldn't see why she would do that with him, although his tail was snapping back and forth.

“I don't care what his name is,”

Tar? informed her—calmly, because he was not like darling temperamental Flor. Not one bit. Not even when Mishi made that supremely doubtful noise again.

The End

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

First posted in 2016

Set several years after the events of *The Firebird and Other Stories* , *A Dandelion for Tulip* / *Sweet Clematis* and *Forget-Me-Not*

Summary: Rennet, a reluctant guest at a fundraising event, wanders out into the garden and discovers a princess. Because of course he does. Gen.

Rennet had no idea what to say, so, at first, he didn't say anything. It was rare for him to be at a loss for words, even if what he said wasn't always what he should say, but he thought maybe that was a sign of his age. Maybe he finally old enough to be forgetting things now.

Or it could have been because of the marvelous creature in front of him.

It's not that Rennet had sight like a fairy or a seer. He wasn't an elf either, always pointed in the right direction. But he'd hidden himself away at another "Private Fundraiser"

rather than deal with any more broken champagne glasses—of course he had, because certain rich people loved Rennet, but most of them had no idea what to say to him, and then John would smirk at him every time they stuttered over their words, so, so incredibly hot even with his remaining hair gone gray that Rennet couldn't be near him without accidents happening.

Rennet had grabbed a bottle of Veuve, popped the cork, and slipped out into the backyard of the house where a rich being and his husband had generously offered to

host the event.

Then, because he was Rennet, instead of winding up alone on a patio or among some flowers, he was in the corner of the yard staring at the familiar shining glow of a firebird.

He'd thought it was an artificial light, that perhaps there was a fountain or something amid all the shrubs and vines in the dark corner. But it was real and alive. The light was the living presence in front of him.

A child, no more than five, possibly no more than four, if firebirds aged like humans. She had long, dark hair, and dark eyes, which were currently sparkling with a layer of eyeshadow that Rennet was going to guess she had applied herself. Like her lips, which were painted vividly purple, and had smeared at the corner and all over her teeth.

Rennet was enchanted even before she raised her chin to a haughty angle and demanded to know if she could have some of his champagne.

He had the words, after all, but they were locked in his throat. His eyes began to sting and he sat down before he was even consciously aware of the bench behind him.

“Well?”

She came forward, gracefully tripping through the damp grass to stand in front of Rennet. Her arms were covered in glittery bangles. Her princess dress was wet at the hem. Rennet wanted to hold it for her like a queen's train.

“Champagne is for adults,”

Rennet spoke at last. “Adult humans, that is, ma chérie. For a little being such as yourself, I doubt it would do anything. But you won't like it yet. It's not sweet.”

The small firebird princess gave him a suspicious look, so he crossed his heart in an effort to convince her.

“Fairies aren’t supposed to lie.”

“I’m not a fairy.”

Rennet glanced around, but spied no nanny or parent chasing after her. She had snuck out, the naughty creature. Her parents—probably the dragon and his husband—were going to be upset. But raising a firebird could not be easy.

“Imps are fairies.”

Her tone was very smug.

Rennet’s throat nearly locked once again. “Someone else once told me that and I didn’t believe them, either.”

She stamped her foot. “I’m not lying.”

“Of course you aren’t, myshka.”

Rennet carefully put down the bottle. “Although, firebirds can lie.”

Her eyes went wide. “You know what I am? Papa says nobody ever guesses.”

Rennet nodded. “I know. I knew a firebird once. He was....”

The child did not need to see Rennet cry. “He was very beautiful and talented. If you like, I’ll ask your parents if I can send you some of his music. You might not like it now. But maybe when you get older, like the champagne.”

He could see her desire for presents warring with her fear of her parents discovering that she'd escaped and that she'd talked to a stranger. Then his tail flicked out, capturing her attention and distracting her.

“Can you fly?”

she wondered, glancing from his tail to his wings.

He nodded. “Can you?”

“Papa says not yet.”

She huffed. “Daddy says yes.”

Rennet put a hand to his stomach. “Kazimir,”

he had to say the name. “His name was Kazimir. The other firebird. The only other one I've seen, except for you.”

“Kaz-i-mir,”

she repeated, as if this were a school lesson. Then she frowned. “Don't cry, Mr. Imp. You don't have to be a fairy if you don't want to. I say so.”

“Yes, princesse philomele.”

Rennet took a deep breath. “Do you speak French, by any chance?”

She huffed again before crossing her arms. He took that as a no. He wasn't as bothered as he might have been. “What languages do you know, besides this one?”

“Grandmother's.”

Because this answer made sense to her, she was done with it. “What are you calling me?”

Rennet smiled. “Princess songbird. Little mouse. It’s a habit I’d forgotten about it, with him gone. He used to do that.”

“Kaz-i-mir?”

She frowned, apparently not at all certain she liked this Kazimir for taking attention away from her, which was the most Kazimir-like thing she could have done. “My dress is pretty.”

She wasn’t asking.

“Yes, it is.”

Rennet agreed seriously. “They wouldn’t let you wear it to the party?”

“Daddy said I’d be bored.”

That foot came down hard on the grass once again.

“I have to agree with him.”

Rennet smiled apologetically in the face of her displeasure. “I was bored too.”

“Oh.”

This appeased her somewhat. “Because you’re a being?”

She paused, as if thinking. “People stare.”

“They do.”

Rennet gave her a crooked grin. “Because they wish they had glowing skin, and could fly, and they can’t.”

“Not Papa.”

She considered this point earnestly. “Papa doesn’t glow. But they stare at him too.”

Rennet gave her a Gallic shrug. “I have a human who doesn’t glow, or fly, and they also stare at him. I’m sorry, myshka.”

“Where’s your human?”

She inched closer, and then, as all children did, pulled at his wings before stopping to ask. “May I touch your wings, please?”

“Of course, myshka, of course.”

Rennet turned to let her explore them, then stiffened as she crawled onto his back and pulled his hair.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m not scared of you,”

she announced grandly, as if perhaps she had been for a moment when she’d first seen him.

“A queen should not fear her knight,”

Rennet agreed, then twitched guiltily at the sound of the back door sliding open and the startled gasp from the little girl on top of him. He stood up, and she squealed and yanked at his hair again.

“Daddy!”

she called out, right in Rennet’s ear, and flung out her arms with complete confidence in Rennet’s ability to hold her up. “I found an imp!”

“I should think the imp found you.”

The incredibly cultured voice of her father was, in fact, the incredibly cultured voice of the host. He did not sound pleased.

Rennet looked over at the dragon, and at that moment, la princesse scrambled up higher onto his back to continue yelling. “He knew, Daddy! He said firebird, first time!”

Rennet stared into a dragon’s dark eyes and swallowed. “I knew one, once,”

he explained simply, while the sparkly mouse with her arms around his neck chanted, “Kaz-i-mir! Kaz-i-mir!”

The dragon crossed his arms, then uncrossed them. “Kazimir the Great?”

he wondered with a puff of smoke that Rennet could almost feel the heat from even across the yard. He came closer, and the dragon—Dr. Jones, if Rennet recalled right—plucked his daughter from Rennet’s back as though she weighed the same as a feather. “You are very lucky I found you and not your papa,”

Dr. Jones told her sternly as he tucked her against his side. Then he looked at Rennet. “And you... Kazimir, you say? He’s the only other one of record, and Arthur dearest has been trying....” He trailed off, then focused on his daughter. “I have to get her back to her room without Arthur seeing, but you’ll stay, won’t you, Mr. Rennet?”

“For a little while?”

his daughter finished for him, glowing brighter in her father's arms, and gave Rennet a smile so sweet he would have killed for her if she'd asked. Since she did not ask, he stayed exactly where he was as the tiny, shining firebird disappeared from sight.

Then his legs gave way and he sat—fell—onto the wet grass.

The End