



Fated Surrender (Kindred of Arkadia #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Upon moving to Arkadia, Madison Claybourne, a high-power New York lawyer, discovers that she is mated to the diner's cook. No matter how downright sexy the man is, she has trouble seeing beyond his apron. Will she let perception cloud her judgment to the point where she may lose her mate?

Connor Arkadion is on the brink of exhaustion, helping to track a serial killer. With his mind burdened with the terrible images of the killer's aftermath, he's not looking to find his mate. When Madison dismisses him easily, he knows he will have to take drastic measures for his mate to see the man he is. The only problem is that the man he truly is, isn't what Arkadia knows him to be.

When evil once again begins to stalk Arkadia, Connor is suddenly on a timeline to find his missing mate before a maniac kills the one person to give him the solace he desperately craves.

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“Payne, I want updates around the clock as to what our little friend is up to. They are about to call the Arkadion, so it should be getting intriguing soon. It’s amazing that such depravity lurked just beneath the surface of such a mouse.

He is such a surprising and random development, it would be a shame not to enjoy it.

” The gentleman swirled his glass of dark-red liquid.

“Oh, can you also locate my puppy? I believe he owes me some hybrids. I would like to see what he comes up with this time.”

The dark figure bowed and left the room.

The gentleman took a sip and returned the glass to the desktop.

Yes, things were about to heat up soon. His contact would ensure that Connor Arkadion was pulled into this case.

He was eager to see who his little friend would kill next.

He had a running bet with the torturer that the next victim would be a celebrity. He desperately hoped so.

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Connor Arkadion sighed, sat up, and turned to sit on the edge of the bed.

He glared at his computer. Lately, he had come to hate the damn thing.

When he moved back to Arkadia he swore he would leave the past behind him.

But, given the current state of affairs in their world, he didn't have a choice.

His past was haunting his waking moments and disturbing the quiet life he had built for himself.

He stood and let the sheet fall. Walking naked to the bathroom, he turned the shower on and let the steam fill the small room. It was already November and the weather had turned chilly. He was a bear-shifter, but that didn't mean he was immune to the cold in his human form.

Once the small room had become heated by the steam, he stepped into the shower. Standing with both hands on the tiled wall he let the hot water run down his body in rivulets. With no thought to his actions, he quickly washed and stepped from the shower.

Wrapping his robe around him, he walked into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he stared at the contents. Same shit, different day . He decided to skip making himself breakfast and just head to the diner early. If he was going to cook, he might as well do it all at once.

Going back to his room, he opened his dresser, removed a black T-shirt and jeans and

got dressed.

Heading toward the door he pulled on his thick fall jacket and grabbed his truck keys.

He stepped out of his house and locked the door behind him.

Normally, he wouldn't worry about locking up, especially living on the Arkadion ranch, but lately Emmett and Duncan had been pulling pranks, and he saw no reason to make it any easier on them.

He fired up his truck and headed into town.

Lately, even the relaxing drive into Arkadia did nothing to settle him.

Shaking his head, he turned on the radio and blasted the music loudly.

Feeling his spirits lifting, he rolled his windows down and let the crisp fall air fill the cab of his truck.

God, how he loved the smells of fall! He pulled into his parking spot at the diner and turned off the engine.

Hopping from the truck he walked over and unlocked the diner doors.

It was still early if he had beat Ma in.

Shrugging, he made his way to the kitchen and started pulling out everything needed to start breakfast.

He was just popping the biscuits in the oven when he heard the bell on the door chime.

He looked up and was surprised to see Ashby standing in the doorway.

Connor had always felt a particular closeness to Ashby since he was one of the first ones to meet the tiny fox when he first appeared in town.

It wasn't surprising to see Ashby early in the morning, as he often stopped by before opening the ice cream parlor, what was surprising was seeing him alone, without his overprotective mate.

"Ashby, what can I get ya?" Connor asked, walking up to the counter and motioning to the barstool.

Ashby gave a small smile and hopped up to sit across from Connor. "Just some coffee for right now," Ashby said, quietly.

Connor nodded. People usually only asked for a cup of coffee if they needed to talk.

Connor poured him a fresh cup of coffee and stood across from Ashby as the small fox-shifter fixed his coffee the way he liked it.

Connor could have made it for him, he knew that Ashby loved a little bit of coffee with his sugar and cream.

Personally, he would gag if he ever tried to drink it that way.

He leaned against the counter and let Ashby take his time. He knew better than to rush someone when they came to him for advice.

"So, the pregnancy symptoms are getting better," Ashby said, turning his mug in his hands.

“That must be a relief to you and Gabriel,” Connor said, pouring himself a cup of coffee as well. If Ashby was talking about the pregnancies, it would probably take a while. Connor sipped his coffee the way he liked it, black.

“He’s relieved that I’m not puking all over the place anymore,” Ashby said, giving Connor a grimacing smile.

“I know that he was worried about you losing weight.” Connor watched Ashby’s features carefully. He knew most of the townspeople well enough to accurately read their body language.

“He is always worrying about me.” Ashby stirred his coffee with the spoon. Connor watched and knew that these small nervous habits were huge red flags.

“That’s because he loves you very much.”

“I wish I deserved that love,” Ashby whispered so softly, Connor almost missed it.

“What makes you think you don’t deserve his love, Ashby?” Connor set his cup down and leaned forward. People usually whispered their deepest fears or greatest worries. It was as if speaking them out loud made them true.

“I’m not like Sebastian or Felix. I can’t give him children,” Ashby confessed.

Connor walked around and sat on a barstool next to Ashby.

“Ashby, Sebastian, and Felix are extremely rare exceptions when it comes to gay male couples. It’s not the norm for two men to be able to have children together.

Why would you think that Gabriel would hold this against you and withhold his love for you?

” Connor asked, scared that this concern concealed a more deep-seated issue.

“I’ve seen the way he looks at Rebecca and Sebastian and Kate. He gets this soft smile on his face when he is around them. I know he has to be regretting mating me.” Ashby sniffled and wiped his eyes.

Connor pulled Ashby into a one-armed hug. Maybe Ashby had spoken up in time for this misunderstanding to be nipped in the bud.

“Gabriel loves you so much, that sometimes, it’s almost painful to watch you two.

Don’t sell him short, Ashby. If he truly wanted children, you have many options open to you, from surrogate mothers to adoption.

Do me a favor. Call him. It will be easier to express your concerns over the phone when he’s not in front of you, where you can see his expressions.

Get it all out and see what he says.” Connor ruffled Ashby’s hair playfully.

Small hands batted him away.

“Do you really think he still loves me?” Ashby asked, looking up at him hopefully, his large eyes filled with tears.

Connor nodded. “I think that maybe, just maybe, you might be projecting your own desires for a child onto him. You have experienced everything that goes along with a pregnancy, yet, you know that you won’t have a child at the end of this experience.

It might be affecting you more than you know,” Connor suggested softly, and watched Ashby’s face.

The small man's lips began to tremble and his eyes filled.

"I think you may be right. I'm going to call him now. Thanks, Connor, you've always been there for me. Your brothers are lucky to have you." Ashby gave him a quick hug.

"Anytime, runt," Connor said, before picking up both mugs and walking back behind the counter. Ashby waved and hurried out of the diner, more than likely in a rush to call his mate.

Connor shook his head. No mating was ever perfect, no matter what it looked like from the outside. He went back to the kitchen and pulled the biscuits out before putting a couple pounds of bacon on the grill. He heard the back door open, and soon he smelled his Ma's perfume.

"Good morning, baby boy," his ma said, and pulled him into a hug.

"Morning, Ma," Connor said, returning her hug. He breathed in the familiar scent that belonged only to his Ma and sent up another prayer of thanks to whoever was listening for giving them Doc Claybourne.

"You got an early start today," she said, stepping back. She turned and hung her coat up on the coat rack.

"Couldn't sleep," Connor said, going back to the bacon.

"You've been coming in early for the past couple weeks," she said, checking on the biscuits. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm okay, Ma, really." He smiled brightly at her before turning back to the grill. Seconds later his head jerked forward as his ma cuffed him upside

the back of his head.

“Ma!” he groaned.

“Don’t ‘Ma’ me, Connor Christian Arkadion, and don’t lie to me either. I always know when something is wrong with my boys. If you can’t tell me, just say so, but don’t lie,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

He rubbed the back of his head, and he looked at his ma then smiled. “There are some things bothering me about a job that I took. I can’t go into the particulars, but I should have it wrapped up soon.”

“That’s all you had to say, son. Now, head to the sheriff’s station. You’re not the only one with an early start. Your brother may need someone to talk to. It won’t add to your plate, will it?” She eyed him, with worry written all over her face.

Connor waved off her concerns. “I can handle these types of problems all day long. They soothe me.” He chuckled and grabbed his jacket.

“Here take some biscuits, honey, and jam. He’ll open up more if you feed him,” she said, handing him a small, white paper bag.

“You know us so well. Love ya, Ma.” Connor dropped a kiss on her cheek.

“Of course, you’re my boys. Now, get out of here before the breakfast rush hits and I change my mind about sending you out.” She patted him on the shoulder.

“Bye, Ma,” Connor said and quickly headed out the door.

Connor trotted down the street and headed to the sheriff’s station. He pushed open the door and walked in. Aleks sat in his chair staring blankly at his desktop. Concerned,

Connor decided to lighten the mood.

“Hey, bro, trying to escape Rebecca?” he asked teasingly, setting the bag of biscuits on the desk. Aleks’s head snapped up and a panicked expression haunted his face.

“Whoa there, you know I didn’t mean anything by that. What’s wrong? Is Rebecca okay?” Connor asked, dragging a chair over to sit beside his big brother. Aleks nodded and looked away to stare out the window.

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“She’s fine. According to Doc, she and the baby are doing great,” Aleks said, sounding distracted.

“Then why are you here at work at o’dark thirty?” Connor asked.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Aleks mumbled.

That seems to be going around.

“If she and the baby are fine, then why can’t you sleep?”

Aleks looked over at him and frowned.

“Talk to me, big brother. Maybe I can help.” Connor bumped his shoulder.

“I keep having dreams that I kill my son,” Aleks confessed.

Connor sat back in his chair shocked. Of all the things he thought might be wrong, it certainly wasn’t this.

“Are you concerned about controlling your strength? Like you were when you first met Rebecca?” Connor probed.

“In my dream I mean to kill him. I murder my son.”

“Aleks, you would never, ever kill your son. You are not a murderer,” Connor said firmly.

Aleks shook his head. “When Rebecca was sick with that damn virus, before Doc figured out the cure, he said that there was a way to save Rebecca, if we aborted my son. I thought about it, Connor. I went there, mentally. Before the cure was found, I was prepared to kill my own son.” Aleks buried his face in his hands.

Fuck! How did I miss this for months?

Connor pulled Aleks’s face into his shoulder and held on to his big brother.

“Aleks, you’re dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I thought I had identified most of the cases after the virus was cured. I can’t believe I missed my own brother.” Connor took a deep breath, then continued.

“Aleks, what we all went through, thinking that we would lose the people we love, that was an extremely traumatic event. We were dealing with stress and grief, with little to no, sleep or food. To say that our thought processes would be the same today as what they would have been then, is impossible. It would be like judging the choices made by soldiers in the heat of battle, in times of peace. They cannot be compared.” Connor rubbed Aleks’s back.

“I never even made the connection to PTSD. I have seen guys on the force deal with it. I never thought it would hit me like this. I wonder if the others are doing okay.” Aleks sat up and explained how each of the leaders had been prepared to die with their mates, with the exception of Caleb who would have been left behind.

Oh yeah, I’ll have to check on the others later. Who wouldn’t be fucked up over that?

“I wish you had said something earlier. I hate to think you have been suffering because I wasn’t paying close enough attention.” Connor sat back, disgusted with himself.

Aleks snorted. “It’s not like you were just sitting around, Connor.

You were racing around town, talking to everyone months after the virus was cured, making sure everyone was okay.

I don’t think I would have opened up earlier than this anyway.

I would have been too ashamed to admit what I had been dreaming.

The nightmares are what made me realize that maybe I needed some help.

Why did you come here anyway?” Aleks asked, eyeing his brother.

Connor pointed to the bag and smiled.

“Ma,” he said simply.

Aleks smiled back and nodded. “I can’t believe I’m a grown man with a baby on the way and she can still read me like a book.” Aleks reached for the bag and brightened when he saw the biscuits and honey.

“I don’t think that will ever change,” Connor said, grabbing a biscuit and coating it in the amber goodness.

“You’re probably right.”

“You good?”

“Talking about it helped more than I thought it would. I thought if anyone found out, they would hate me. But, you’re right, what we were experiencing then, cannot be compared to today.

Thanks, Connor. You always know the right thing to say.

” Aleks threw a packet of honey at Connor who caught it, smiling.

“That’s my job,” Connor reminded him gently.

Aleks stared at him blankly for a moment and then threw his head back laughing. “I keep forgetting about your degrees. It just seems like you are easy to talk to and everyone feels better after talking to you.” Aleks grabbed another biscuit.

Connor shrugged. “A diner barstool works just as well as a couch in a stuffy office. Besides, we’re shifters. We don’t exactly like admitting weaknesses do we?” Connor asked and raised an eyebrow at Aleks, who looked a little shamefaced.

“I bet you’ve been pulling away from Rebecca, too, leaving her wondering if you still love her. I’m surprised she hasn’t cooked up some half-baked scheme already.” Connor grinned down at his biscuit. His head flew up to his brother as the man stood so suddenly, that his chair tipped over backward.

“Oh God! When I left the house she was on the phone with Rian. I have to get back home before they pull some crazy-ass stunt. Later, Connor, and thanks.” Aleks left the station at a run.

Chuckling to himself, Connor ate the last biscuit and threw the bag away. Feeling proud of his work so far this morning, he tucked his hands into his pockets and headed back toward the diner.

When he got to the corner of High and Market Streets, he noticed that Marcus Evans had Johnny Lawson pinned to the side of the theater. He growled under his breath and picked up his pace until he was close enough to hear what was being said.

“You need to quit playing hard to get. Just go out with me already.” Marcus gripped Johnny’s arm tightly.

The smaller man’s face was full of anger.

“Get the fuck off me, you psycho! The reason no one in town will date you is because you are a douchebag. Quit being lazy and look for someone outside of Arkadia, because I can almost guarantee that no one in town wants your pathetic ass. Just remember, no means no, or you’ll find yourself locked up in a human jail,” Johnny said, struggling to free his arm.

Marcus hissed at him. “You little shit.” He pulled his arm back to punch Johnny, who raised his other arm up to protect his face.

Connor stepped forward and grabbed Marcus’s fist before it could connect. “I know you weren’t about to assault Johnny. That would not be advisable,” Connor said, squeezing Marcus’s fist until he heard several bones snap.

Marcus howled in pain and turned his rage-filled face to Connor. “Go flip some burgers and mind your own business. You’re just a short-order cook.” Marcus spat at Connor’s feet.

Grinning, Connor tightened his grip and several more bones cracked.

“Short-order cook or janitor. My last name is Arkadion. I was born and raised to defend Arkadia and her people. So, no matter what, I will always outrank you, even if all I’m doing is flipping burgers.

Now, head home like a good kitty, and as you’re letting that hand of yours heal, you really might want to rethink if Arkadia is still the right place for you to live.” Connor released Marcus’s hand.

Cursing under his breath, Marcus cradled his broken hand to his chest and hurried away.

Connor turned to Johnny. “You okay?” he asked.

“Thanks for the help. That guy has been getting worse lately, especially after he was humiliated by Prince Gabriel, when he chased him away from Ashby. I think he feels like he has to prove he’s a big strong man or something. Too bad he’s just coming across as an asshole.” Johnny rubbed his arm.

“Let’s get out of this weather,” he said and nodded toward the diner.

“Good idea. I was on my way there when the jerk-off waylaid me,” Johnny said, falling in step with Connor.

When they walked through the diner’s doors, Connor could smell that Ma had started the bread rising for lunch. Before he knew it, breakfast was over and they were in the middle of the lunchtime rush. He was serving up another bowl of his award-winning chili when Kate, Caleb, and Bran walked in.

“Caleb, hey man, glad you’re here. Can you give me a hand in the back real quick?” Connor asked, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

“Sure thing, be right there.” Caleb dropped a kiss on Kate’s head and walked with Connor to the back of the diner. Connor opened up the door to the large walk-in freezer and both men walked inside. Connor shut the door and turned to Caleb.

“What are we grabbing?” Caleb asked.

“I lied actually. I just wanted to get you back here where Kate and Bran couldn’t hear us,” Connor said.

Caleb tensed. “This can’t be good,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Just checking on you, man. Someone recently told me what kind of decisions you all were making when you didn’t think there was a cure to that virus. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” Connor watched Caleb’s face carefully. The man’s brows snapped together.

“That’s none of your damn business,” Caleb spat out.

Connor sighed. “Do you really think I got your hairy ass back here to be nosy? I know if it had been my mate dying from that virus, the kind of choices you all were facing would have fucked me up for a while,” Connor said honestly.

Connor could tell the second the fight went out of Caleb, as the larger man’s frame relaxed and almost began to collapse in on itself.

“He was going to leave me. My Alpha was going to leave me to face their deaths alone and raise the twins. I would have lost them both.” Caleb turned to face the back of the freezer.

Shit, it’s worse than I thought.

“Have you talked to Bran about this?” Connor asked.

Caleb shook his head.

“No, after Kate recovered, it was like nothing had ever been wrong. I didn’t want to mess that up for him.”

“So, he put on a smiling face and acted like everything was okay?”

“I guess.”

“Kinda like what you’ve been doing?” Connor suggested and Caleb turned back to face him.

“Do you really think it’s bothering him, too?” Caleb asked.

Connor nodded. “Look, I’m not trying to get in your business. But, I really think you need to talk this out with Bran. If you need a friendly ear, call me. We’ll take up ice fishing or some shit. Just the two of us,” Connor offered.

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“You know, I may take you up on that. It’d be nice to be able to talk to someone about this. Normally, I’d go to Kate, but I don’t want to upset her this late into her pregnancy.”

“Come on. Grab a couple cases of soda and we’ll head back to the front. Just remember, Bran is probably just as twisted around the axel about what happened as you are,” Connor said, lifting a couple cases of soda easily.

Caleb nodded and grabbed a few more. “You’re right. I probably should have said something sooner.”

“Sometimes it’s harder to see when you’re in the middle of everything. It’s why friends are important. We usually have a clearer view from the outside.” Caleb bumped shoulders with Connor.

“Ice fishing?” Caleb asked, laughing as they walked out of the freezer.

“Yeah. Fuck that. I’d freeze my ass off,” Connor admitted, laughing.

Caleb chuckled and helped him to stack the soda next to the cooler in the diner. “No doubt.”

“What’s so funny?” Kate asked, her smiling face glowing from her pregnancy.

“Connor wants to take up ice fishing,” Caleb said, winking at Connor.

“Good. For a second I thought you were moving in on my man,” Kate said,

scrunching her nose up at Connor, who laughed.

“He is a sexy devil.”

“No way. If Connor ever switched teams, he promised me first at bat,” Rian yelled, from two tables over where he sat eating lunch with Damian.

Connor nodded. “It’s true. I told him if I ever started to like boys that we would go out.”

“Seriously? How old were you?” Kate asked, laughing.

“Shit. Rian, we were in what? Ninth grade?” Connor asked.

“Yup, it was about that time that I really started to love gym class.” Rian wagged his eyebrows.

“Didn’t the other guys mind?” Kate asked.

Bran and Connor shook their heads. “Rian and Damian were too likable to really get mad at. They were never really pervy about it and were never aggressive about coming on to other guys. It just became normal to have Rian catcalling in the locker room or slapping us on the ass. The one that used to bother me was Harvey Miller,” Bran said, shuddering.

“Who was Harvey Miller?” Kate asked, completely riveted by Bran’s reaction.

“Harvey Miller was this sicko from high school. He had to repeat like three grades so he was older and much bigger than most of us. He would get all weird in the locker room, like breathing heavy and staring at us while we were changing kinda weird. He was constantly cornering Rian and Damian in the shower stalls. In my senior year I

caught him when he had Gavin shoved against the lockers trying to get his hand down his pants. The next day he had a little accident with some cement and his family decided to move out of Arkadia,” Connor said, shooting a glance to his Ma and Pa to see if they were listening.

Ma turned to face him. “I knew you boys had something to do with that! I just never knew why. Good!” she said, wiping down the counters.

Pa just smiled into his coffee.

“Cement? No wonder Rebecca fits into your family so well. Tell!” Kate demanded.

Connor looked over to Ma, who waved him on. Shrugging, he continued his story.

“After I beat the ever-loving shit out of Harvey, I calmed Gavin down and sent him back to class. I stuffed Harvey into a locker and locked it. Then, I interrupted Mr. McMillan’s World History class to pick up Emmett and Duncan, telling Mr. McMillian that I needed my brothers to deal with some family business.

We got Harvey out of the locker and dragged him by the ankle down the stairs, across the back field, and through the briar patch next to the edge of the perimeter.

” He chuckled as he remembered the next part.

“Duncan stole a cement mixer, we added some quick-set cement, and we had ole Harvey sit in a box and we filled it with cement up to his neck. By the time he came around the cement had hardened nicely. We told him if he ever so much as made another person uncomfortable, next time he would be on the outside of the perimeter and we wouldn’t stop at his neck.

His dad had to shift to track him down. The next day they were moving.

” Connor shook his head at the memory and looked over to Kate.

“Kids can be crazy huh. So, you’re having two, right?” he asked wickedly.

Her eyes widened and her hand went to her belly.

Ma laughed. “Connor, be nice,” she admonished.

“Harvey should have known better than to mess with my friends and my little brother,” Connor said, reasonably.

“Man, I haven’t heard that name in years. Is that asshole dead yet?” Gavin asked, walking in.

“No clue. What’s up, littlest bro?” Connor asked.

“Hungry,” Gavin said shortly and sat at the counter next to Pa.

“Hungry, man-food hungry? Or need-to-pick-at-my-food-while-I-think hungry?” Connor asked.

Gavin thought about it for a second before answering. “Man-food hungry, though I reserve the right to pick at dessert.”

“Okay, one pot roast meal coming up,” Connor said, making up a plate.

“What has you picking at your dessert, baby boy?” Ma asked.

“Magic,” Gavin snarled.

Everyone turned to look at Gavin.

“What about it?” Caleb asked.

“It doesn’t make sense. It’s never consistent or measurable. It varies from user to user. It defies all documented forms of science.” He exhaled loudly. “Actually, can I get that to-go, Connor? I want to head back to my studies,” Gavin asked, sounding frustrated.

“Sure thing.” Connor easily transferred the food from the plate to a to-go box and added a large slice of pie.

“Thanks.” Gavin picked up the bag and, muttering to himself, walked out of the diner.

“I know that Rebecca has been going nuts trying to understand how it all works, too,” Kate admitted.

“Lord help us all if she starts dabbling in magic,” Connor said out loud. Nearly everyone in the diner swallowed hard.

“Spectacles, testicles, wallet, watch,” Rian said, crossing himself.

“Since when are you Catholic, Rian?” Damian asked.

Rian looked at his friend, surprised. “I’m not, but sometimes you need all the help you can get,” Rian said, unfazed.

Connor couldn’t help laughing. “Yup, Rian, if I were to ever switch teams, you’re my first stop.” He grinned at Rian, who blew him kisses.

“Hey, family,” Emmett said, walking in the diner.

“Hey, Em,” Connor said, bumping fists with his brother.

“It’s slow at the hardware store, so I left Duncan there to close up and decided to come here to help out with the dinner rush.” Emmett hung up his coat and walked behind the counter.

“Good. Connor, why don’t you head home? You’ve been here since before dawn prepping for breakfast. You should relax and turn in early. Get some sleep,” Ma said.

“Subtle, Ma. Real subtle,” Connor said, kissing her cheek.

“I don’t have to be subtle. Now, go home and rest. And don’t show up back here till after breakfast that’s an order,” she said, kissing him on both cheeks.

“Yes, Ma.”

Emmett looked at him, a worried expression on his face.

“You okay?” he asked.

Connor nodded. “I stayed up late watching monster movies on Syfy this weekend. Threw my entire sleep schedule off,” he said, grabbing his coat.

“Right. I’d believe that, except I know that you don’t have cable since I tried to watch football at your house last weekend. So, try again,” Emmett said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Really. I’m cool. Just need to get some more sleep, that’s all,” Connor said quietly.

“Then carry your ass home and get some sleep,” Emmett said, pushing him toward the door.

“Roger that. Bye, everyone.” Connor waved and headed to his truck.

The drive home was quick. He showered to get the grease from breakfast off and then settled on the couch to watch some television. He made it all the way past Jeopardy before he found himself sitting at his computer. Sighing, he logged in and checked his email.

“Motherfucking, son of a bitch!” he yelled out loud and clicked on the email with the subject line.

He got two more.

Pulling up the email with the attachments, he got comfortable and began reviewing the information sent to him.

When he looked up from his research, he saw that the sun had come up and he had yet to get any sleep. He replied to the email with his notes and advised them to contact him again if there were any new developments. Sighing, he picked up his phone and called his ma.

“Ma, I’m sorry but I won’t be in today. I’m just now heading to bed,” he confessed.

“Do I need to come up there? Are you okay?” she asked worriedly.

“I’m fine, Ma. Just got caught up in some work. I’m going to bed now. I’ll be in tomorrow for sure.”

“We’re going to have a long talk when you come in, Connor,” she warned.

“Yes ma’am. Love you, Ma,” he replied.

“I love you, too, baby boy. Now eat something and go to bed.”

“I will. Bye, Ma.” Connor ended the call and stared at his phone. He had lied. He knew that he wouldn’t be getting any sleep anytime soon with the images from that email in his head. He didn’t feel like eating either. Feeling completely out of sorts, he decided to go for a jog.

He was jogging up the driveway when he saw a car parked out front. Shaking his head, he slowed down and walked through the front door. As the door closed behind him, he was greeted by a familiar voice.

“So, your mother tells me that you aren’t sleeping. Get in here so I can check your vitals,” Doc Claybourne ordered from the den.

“My mother doesn’t really respect her children’s privacy,” Connor said, heading up the stairs to his bedroom.

“This will be easier if you cooperate,” Doc called out.

“Just washing up, Doc. I just finished a ten mile jog, I’m funky,” Connor yelled back.

“By all means,” Doc shouted back.

Grinning, Connor washed up and pulled on his comfortable sweats.

“Okay, Doc, poke and prod to your heart’s content,” he said, collapsing into his recliner.

“Get on the scale.” Doc pointed to the floor.

Connor pulled himself out of his chair and stepped on the scale. He was surprised at

the number.

“Connor, did you know you’ve lost nearly fifteen pounds since your last checkup three months ago?” Doc asked.

He shook his head. “I didn’t realize I had lost so much weight,” he admitted.

“You’re working another case aren’t you?” Doc asked.

Connor sighed. “I never should have told you about my side work,” Connor said, returning to his recliner.

“You put your mind and body through the wringer every time you take on one of these cases. It must be bad this time if you can’t hide it from your family.” Doc sat back on the couch.

“I normally leave town when I know it will get this bad, it’s just everyone is still reeling from what happened with the virus and Rebecca’s due soon. If it continues much longer, I’ll tell them I’m attending another conference,” Connor said, rubbing his forehead.

Doc frowned. “Tell them to call someone else. Connor, bow out on this one. Have you ever heard of the expression ‘Physician heal thyself’?” Doc asked.

“What you’re saying is I’m no good to anyone while my own shit is falling apart?

” Connor smiled and continued. “I know all that Doc, but they only call when they have no leads. I am their last resort. So, I can’t bow out, I’d never be able to live with myself if this monster went free because I wasn’t doing everything I could to help catch him. ”

Doc Claybourne sighed. "I knew you'd say that. Here, take this. It will help you sleep. When you wake up, eat a large breakfast. I want you to make sure you're eating three times a day, Connor. If you want to continue working this case, you need to be healthy." Doc handed him a small bottle.

"Thanks, Doc. I promise to take better care of myself," Connor swore.

"Good, because you shouldn't worry your mother," Doc said, smiling.

"She worries whether we give her cause or not." Connor grinned.

"Be thankful for that," Doc said, picking up his bag and travel scale.

"I am. Thanks again for coming out and for not saying anything." Connor walked him to the door.

"It's not my place to say anything. Sweet dreams, Connor," Doc said, giving a small salute.

"Bye, Doc." Connor closed the door and stared at the bottle in his hand and shrugged.

They couldn't hurt. Walking into the kitchen he got a glass and filled it.

He read the directions on the bottle, popped the cap, poured two pills into his hand, and downed it with the water.

Yawning, he walked back to his bedroom and lay down on his bed.

He was wondering how long it would take for the pills to kick in when darkness swept him away.

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Groaning, Connor sat up in bed and looked at his clock, then looked out the window, and then back to his clock again. He hated it when he couldn't tell if it was six a.m. or six p.m. since they both looked the same this time of year.

He picked up his cell phone and shook his head.

It was six a.m. the next day. He had slept for nearly twenty hours, which would explain why he had to piss so badly.

He got up and took care of business, before jumping into the shower.

When he got out his stomach was protesting.

That large breakfast was looking like a great idea.

He decided that traditional breakfast food would take too long and popped a frozen pizza in the oven.

While that was cooking he munched on an apple.

The minutes seemed to drag by before the oven dinged, and he was able to sit down and eat.

Before he knew it, he had devoured every slice of pizza.

Looking down at the empty platter he had to admit he felt better than he had in a while.

Smiling he got dressed and headed to the diner.

Whistling, he opened the diner door and saw that his ma had already started breakfast.

“Good morning, Ma,” he said brightly, feeling more like himself than he had in weeks. Maybe he should listen to his own advice and get help when he needed it.

“Good morning, baby boy, you look better. Did you get any sleep?” she asked.

He nodded and gave her a big hug, lifting her off the ground.

“Connor! You know I hate it when you boys do that,” she said, laughing.

“We know. It’s why we do it. Thanks for sending Doc around.” He kissed her cheek. Whistling, he started to help with breakfast.

“There is the Connor we know,” Damian said, sipping a cup of coffee.

Rian looked him up and down, nodding. “Much better. The bags under your eyes had bags. You’re too sexy for that. There is only one reason on earth to be that tired and I don’t think that’s why you were missing sleep,” Rian said playfully.

“You’re in a chipper mood,” Connor said, cracking eggs on the grill.

“Doc’s sister is arriving in town today. Damian and I are meeting her at the clinic to pick up our goodies. I can’t wait to see what she brought. Over the phone she sounded like she had good taste.” Rian beamed at Connor, excitement all over his face.

“Make sure she swings by the diner. You know, so she can see we have electricity

and running water and all,” Connor said, laughing.

“I will. Well I’m off to the clinic. See y’all later,” Rian said before downing his coffee. He and Damian waved and rushed out the door.

“I don’t care how old they get, I still feel like those two need a babysitter,” Ma said, shaking her head.

“It’s part of their charm,” Connor retorted.

Connor was just cleaning up from breakfast when Aleks and Rebecca walked in, smiling at each other. Connor breathed a sigh of relief, as it looked like catastrophe had been averted. For now.

“How is my favorite baby sister?” Connor asked, walking from behind the counter to kiss Rebecca on the cheek. He didn’t move quick enough as small arms wrapped around his neck pulling him down.

“Whatever you said. Thank you,” she whispered.

Connor kissed her forehead and winked at her.

“Anytime. Now, what can I get for you? I have to feed my nephew,” Connor said, patting her extremely distended belly.

In the past month it seemed that her stomach was nearly as big as she was. It surprised him some days she was able to walk upright, much less pop around like she still did.

“Oh, can I get the chili? Hmm, with some of Pa’s pickles cut up in it with spicy mustard mixed in?” she asked, looking up at him brightly.

Connor just stared down at her. “You three can never get pregnant at the same time again. Your eating habits are starting to disturb me,” Connor said, heading back behind the counter to spoon out some chili.

“Actually, there is a very reasonable explanation for that. As we are a small shifter community, my getting pregnant basically put the every female in town into estrus. I’ve been reading up on shifter social breeding patterns and found that in small shifter groups, females tend to get pregnant at the same time so that their children will have a support system growing up.

It’s why you, Aleks, Bran, Liam, Rian, and Damian are about the same age,” Rebecca rambled while building a sugar cube cabin on the tabletop.

“So, we’re basically going to see a mini baby boom over the next couple years. Good to know. Here is your freaky ass chili,” Connor said, putting the bowl down in front of Rebecca, who immediately doused the bowl with Texas Pete.

Connor looked over to Aleks. “Anything for you?” he asked.

Aleks watched as Rebecca shoveled spoonful after spoonful into her mouth, humming happily. He looked up and shook his head, swallowing hard. “I’m good,” he said, wincing when she popped a pickle in her mouth.

“God, I am craving chili!”

“Me, too.”

Connor turned to see Kate and Sebastian walk into the diner with their mates. Grinning, he went back to the large pot of chili and dished out two more bowls and waited.

“Connor, can I get a bowl of chili with some grapes in it?” Kate asked.

“Oh, that sounds good. Connor, can I get mine with grapes, too, and add some pepperoncinis,” Sebastian called out.

Shaking his head, Connor went to the refrigerator and got out the grapes and the pepperoncinis. He walked over to the table where Kate and Sebastian sat with Rebecca and put the two bowls in front of them.

“Bon appetit,” he said, laughing out loud at their mate’s expressions.

Connor walked back behind the counter and put a pan of baking powder biscuits in the oven. In the fall, they could never keep enough of them baked. He was pulling a second pan from the oven when the bell on the diner door chimed again. When Connor looked up, he nearly dropped the hot baking sheet.

He quickly placed the baking sheet on the counter so he could stare.

Rian, Damian, Felix, and Doc Claybourne had walked in with the most stunning woman he had ever seen.

She looked nothing like the doctor. She was tall for a woman, around five-foot ten.

Her auburn hair was pulled back in an elegant bun that seemed to perfectly match her creamy skin and bright, turquoise-blue eyes.

He watched in rapt fascination as she threw her head back and laughed at something Rian said.

The group took the table next to Rebecca.

Rian immediately went to Kate to show off his new things.

Connor was about to turn back to the meal he was preparing when a luscious scent hit him in the face.

The woman in front of him smelled like apple cake, and she was his mate.

His gums ached as he fought his canines from descending.

He watched her nostrils flare, and she looked up to see him watching her.

She took another deep breath and then deliberately turned her face to her brother to resume their conversation.

Connor felt his mouth drop. She knew. She knew they were mates and was ignoring him!

Snapping his mouth shut, he walked over to their table and stood next to the elegant redhead.

“Connor, I’d like for you to meet my sister, Madison Claybourne. Madison, this is Connor Arkadion,” Claybourne said, introducing the two.

“Nice to meet you,” Connor said, looking her in the eye. He watched as she eyed him up and down, taking in every burn mark and stain on his clothing and apron. She ignored him and turned to Rebecca.

“Rebecca, I’ve heard some interesting things about you. How do you like living in a shifter town?” Madison asked.

Connor looked to Claybourne, who was frowning at his sister. Rebecca’s head tilted

to one side, and she stared at Madison for a few seconds.

“I love it here. Then again I was almost mated to Aleks just minutes after arriving in town.” Rebecca looked from Connor to Madison back to Connor.

“Funny you should mention that, Becca. Madison, can I talk to you for a moment?” Connor asked, still standing beside the table.

Madison’s head swung to Connor before she held up one finger. “Big girls are talking, run along now,” she said and turned back to Rebecca.

Connor looked around both tables, and everyone was staring slack-jawed at Madison. He let a slow smile cross his face, and he held up his hand.

“Aleks, can I borrow your car?” he asked casually.

Aleks dug into his pocket and threw the keys at Connor, frowning. “Sure, but didn’t you drive your truck into town?” Aleks asked.

Connor nodded. “Yup, but the truck doesn’t have a trunk or the shifter-proof reinforced cage your patrol car has.”

“Why would you need...”

Connor grinned, and before Aleks could finish asking his question he grabbed Madison by the arm and slung her over one shoulder. The screeching started immediately.

“Put me down! Put me down this instant, you backwoods heathen!”

“Pa, I’m going to be using Grandpa’s cabin for a bit,” Connor said as Madison

pounded his back. He gritted his teeth and hoisted her higher, adjusting her on his shoulder.

Doc looked at him, panicked, rising from his chair.

“Don’t worry, Doc. She’s my mate. I won’t hurt her. Much,” Connor assured the man.

Doc looked at Connor before collapsing back into his seat. “Don’t turn your back on her. She fights dirty,” Claybourne advised.

“Maddox!! How could you? I am your sister!” Madison screamed.

“It’s because you’re my sister, I know you fight dirty,” Claybourne retorted.

“Be back later.” Connor carried his struggling mate outside to Aleks’s parked patrol car. Seeing Duncan and Emmett walking up the sidewalk, he tossed the keys at them.

“Great timing, Em. Can you open up the back, my hands are full,” Connor said, laughing; then grunted when Madison punched him in the kidney.

“Sure, bro. Hmm, can you tell us why you’re kidnapping this pretty lady?” Duncan asked as Emmett opened up the backseat.

Connor slapped Madison on the ass hard and she yelped.

“Quit fighting or you’re going in the trunk,” he said in a firm voice.

“I hate you!” she yelled.

He grinned, tossed her in the backseat, and shut the door.

“She’s my mate. I’m heading up to grandpa’s cabin for a while to woo my wildcat.” Connor opened the driver’s side door, and a litany of curses were clearly heard. He shut the door and winced.

“She’s very vocal.” Duncan leaned on Emmett and laughed.

“Don’t worry about the diner, we got it covered,” Emmett said.

“Later, guys.” Connor took a deep breath and opened the driver’s side door again. Sighing at the volume of his mate’s screams, he got into the car. He turned around to see that his mate’s cheeks were flushed red in anger. He couldn’t wait to see what they would do when she was aroused.

“Listen, it’s about a two-hour drive up the mountain to the cabin. You can yell and scream all you want, but you’re just going to make yourself hoarse.” Connor smiled at his mate, who glared at him through the reinforced steel bars.

“Listen, kid, I don’t know how you do things out here in the sticks, but in civilization this is kidnapping and everyone in that diner including my stupid brother are accessories,” she said, clenching her jaw.

“Yup, now sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“You wish,” she muttered.

Connor made sure to stop at the grocery store before rolling out of town. They would be okay for a few days. Hopefully, he would have her accepting their mating before then.

Once they were on the road he decided to try to get to know his mate.

“So, tell me about yourself.” Connor grinned at his mate in the rearview mirror. She glared at him. It was going to be a long drive.

He could almost hear her thoughts. She was itching to get her claws into him.

“I’m extremely pissed off and thinking of the different ways I am going to eviscerate you later.” She growled.

“Now darlin’, don’t use big words if you want to scare me,” Connor drawled and winked at her. She snorted.

“What else?” he asked. He could feel her staring at the back of his head and wondered for the hundredth time in the span of an hour what in the hell had Fate been thinking when she had paired them up.

“I’m a lawyer.”

“I knew that already.”

“I was a lawyer when you were in high school.” She turned her gaze to look out the window.

“Is that going to be an issue for you?” Connor asked reasonably.

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked.

“Gabriel is a couple thousand years older than Ashby, and I’ve never seen two people more in love with each other. There are more important things that make up who we are besides our age, that’s just a number,” Connor said, looking back at her in the rearview mirror.

“I didn’t get a chance to meet them. Someone kidnapped me before we were introduced,” she retorted.

“You’ll get the chance to meet everyone when we return to Arkadia.”

“What makes you think I’m going to move to your small town?” she demanded.

“Well, I live there,” Connor started.

“That doesn’t really help your case.”

“My family lives there. Your family lives there. It’s the safest place for us to live.” Connor listed all the reasons to stay in Arkadia.

“Valid arguments, but not persuasive,” she replied.

“I’m about to be an uncle, which means you will be an aunt.”

“That’s your family, not mine.”

“Felix could pop pregnant any day now.” Connor grinned at her.

She stared up at the mirror looking shocked.

“You said what?” she demanded.

“Felix is a hybrid. They can become pregnant, which means we could become aunts and uncles on your side of the family, too,” Connor explained.

Madison laughed until she fell over on the seat.

“Why is it that funny?” Connor asked.

“I bet Maddox had an aneurysm!” She giggled, placing her hand on her side.

“He does seem like the type,” Connor admitted.

“You should have seen him as a kid.” Madison smiled at Connor. It seemed like she had forgotten that she hated him.

“Then again you weren’t even born then,” she quipped.

“Are we back to that?” he asked.

“You’re too damn easy to talk to,” she grumbled.

“Makes my job easier.”

“I doubt the fry baskets are all that talkative,” she retorted.

He simply shrugged.

“You know, if you keep frowning like that you’ll get wrinkles.” Connor’s deep voice filled the car. Her hands flew to her forehead, and he began to chuckle.

“Bitch,” she muttered.

“Jerk,” he replied.

She looked up to find him watching her in the mirror again.

“Do you think Aleks has a weapons stash in the trunk?” Connor asked brightly.

“This is no Impala.” She grinned, unable to help herself.

Feeling better about the situation, he grinned back at his mate. That was until he saw her smile shift into a predatory, feral grin. He swallowed hard.

“Game on,” she said.

He pushed down the rising twinges of panic.

Oh yeah, this was going to be fun.

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They came to a stop in front of an older but well-built log cabin.

Connor put the car in park and turned to look at his mate.

She was asleep, lying across the backseat.

With her eyes closed she looked like a little girl.

All the world-weary cynicism was erased and she looked peaceful.

He had gotten her to laugh before she had fallen asleep. That had to be a good sign.

“Madison, Madison, wake up. We’re here,” he called softly. She stirred and curled into a smaller ball.

She had slept through his small shopping trip at the small general store a few miles from the cabin. She must have been exhausted from traveling.

He got out of the car and opened the front door to the cabin. It was late afternoon, they would only have a couple hours of daylight left before it got dark and he wanted to make sure the cabin was sound.

He walked back to the car and opened the door behind the driver’s seat.

He pulled her legs and scooped her up into his arms. For someone so tall, she was a light thing.

He frowned, thinking that she wasn't eating properly.

He easily carried her inside to the back bedroom and lay her down on the bed.

Unable to stand her hair pulled back a second longer, he pulled the pins free from her bun and let her long hair cascade around her shoulders, filling the room with the scent of her shampoo.

His cock hardened instantly at her scent.

He wanted to roll around on the silky waves of auburn and pull back the luxurious curtain to watch her wrap her lips around his cock.

Grabbing the crotch of his jeans, he tugged hard trying to give himself more room.

Okay. Enough ogling his unconscious mate.

He had a lot to do before sunset. He left his mate sleeping in bed and carried in their groceries.

He stocked the refrigerator, started a fire in the large fireplace, and walked the perimeter of the cabin to check the outside to make sure there weren't any issues.

Honestly, he didn't like leaving the safety of Arkadia's perimeter, but she had left him with no choice.

He had to get her to see him as a person, beyond her already formed perceptions, and that meant leaving Arkadia.

He was about to head back inside when a loud scream shattered the twilight tranquility.

Madison!

He shot forward and jumped the front stairs, hitting the front door at a run. He nearly crashed into Madison, who was spinning wildly in circles down the hallway.

“Get it out! Get it out!” she screamed.

Connor skidded to a halt and looked up and down the hallway, trying to identify the threat.

“Don’t just stand there. Get. It. The. Fuck. Out of my hair!” Madison screeched.

Connor lurched forward and batted her hands down. Parting her long hair one section at a time, he looked for whatever “it” was.

Madison shifted from one foot to another in front of him. He was about to give up when he saw a fairly large spider descending from her hair, heading toward her back. He knew if that thing touched her skin, she would kill him for sure. He knocked it down and stepped on it.

“There, all gone now,” Connor said softly and turned so that she was facing him. She looked up at him, real fear in her tear-filled eyes. His heart softened before he was reeling backward from a cross punch to the jaw.

“What in the hell was that for? I got it!” Connor exclaimed, rubbing his jaw. His mate sure could throw a punch.

“This is all your fault. You brought me out here to spider-breeding lands, and you undid my hair. You’re trying to kill me! I hate you!” she yelled.

Connor took a deep breath, trying to keep his anger in check. But, it was hard when

his mate kept screaming “I hate you” at the top of her lungs.

“Okay. I take responsibility for bringing you out here. Yes, there are spiders. Spiders are everywhere. Yes, I took your hair down. It looked painful pulled back like that when you were lying down. No, I am not trying to kill you. You’re my mate, I would die for you,” he said as he watched the fight leave her body.

“No fair. That was completely logical and you addressed all my issues. And I don’t want you to die for me. I think it’s the most idiotic concept used in romance. I want you to live for me.” She took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, hugging herself.

“Doesn’t make it any less true. Any man, given the choice, would rather live beside their mate, but that doesn’t change the fact that if it came down to one of us dying to keep the other safe, I will be selfish and die protecting you.

Because living without you isn’t an option.

” He saw her look up at him. He could see her battling herself to believe him.

Unable to take her looking so lost, he stepped forward and pulled her into his arms.

“There are a lot of good points to being out here,” he started.

She snorted. “Like what?” she asked.

Connor smiled and pushed her back so he could look down into her gorgeous teal-colored eyes. He grabbed her hand, grinning.

“Come on,” he said and pulled her down the hallway. He grabbed a blanket off the couch and headed out the front door. Pulling her into his arms he wrapped the blanket

around them both.

“Like that,” he said, looking up. Her head tilted backward and she gasped.

“There are so many! I can’t believe they are there all the time and I have never seen them.” She turned her face to him, and from the light of the open cabin door he could see a childlike exuberance dancing in her eyes.

“You can see a lot in Arkadia, but to see this many, you really have to leave everything behind,” Connor said, tightening his arms around her.

“How have you managed to top the past five dates I’ve had simply by kidnapping me, killing a spider, and showing me the stars?” she asked, turning to wrap her arms around his neck.

He knew she could feel his growing arousal begin to press against her abdomen. Her eyes began to dilate slightly and her lips parted.

“Because we’re meant to be together,” Connor said right before he captured her mouth.

He licked the seam of her lips until they parted and pulled her bottom lip between his own.

He sucked and bit both lips until her knees gave out and she sagged against him.

Feeling like he had conquered the world, he pulled back to look at her flushed cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes.

Damn, he knew she would flush prettily. Her creamy skin was made for seduction.

Slowly he watched the weary awareness creep back into her eyes and she stepped back.

“I’m hungry,” she announced and unwrapped herself from their blanket before heading back inside.

Run all you want, wildcat. I’m not letting you go.

Connor grinned, folded up the blanket, and walked back inside to the kitchen to make his mate dinner.

“Oh my god! Put it in my mouth, please.”

Connor smiled devilishly as his mate opened her mouth for him.

“Maybe I don’t want to. You haven’t been a good mate. You said you hated me, a couple times.” He ran a thumb over her lower lip and she whimpered.

“Please, I’m sorry. I’ll do anything to get that inside me.” She looked up at him, pleading. He ran a hand down her hair.

“Okay, since you asked so beautifully.” He sat back and lined up with her mouth before plunging in.

She moaned and began to chew.

“Good isn’t it,” he asked, as she nodded. She was making noises that were driving him crazy.

“Where on earth did you learn to make a chocolate pie like that?” she asked, looking at him with satisfied eyes.

“My ma.” He grinned and lined up the fork for another bite.

“That woman must be amazing,” she said, opening for another bite.

“Even though there were seven of us, she had a way of making you feel like you were her special boy. I had to join the football team in high school to stay fit. I grew up next to my ma in the kitchen. I was her taste tester and her helper. It’s why I love helping her out in the diner,” Connor said, holding up another bite.

“That’s not your job?” she asked, accepting the bite.

Connor nodded for a second and then shook his head.

“Yes and no. Yes, I work at the diner. But it’s not all I do. I listen to people when they have problems and help them as much as they will let me,” Connor said, giving her another bite.

She chewed and looked at him.

“You know you need real training to do that. Just giving out advice without the proper education can make things worse,” she said.

He nodded.

“So, you don’t care?” she asked.

Connor could tell she was getting riled, and damn if it wasn’t turning him on. “Of course I care, it’s why I do what I do.” Connor put the empty plate on the floor next to the couch where they were sitting.

Madison turned her body so that she was facing him.

“Connor,” she began and he put a finger on her lips.

“Why do you automatically assume I am uneducated?” he asked, feeling slightly hurt. He could see the surprise on her face and he removed his finger.

“You are absolutely right. All I saw was my first impression of you. This gorgeous, sexy man with a dish towel cleaning the counter of a small town diner. It never occurred to me that you had gone to school. You have a degree, I take it?” she asked.

“A couple of them.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Don’t worry about it. Come here,” Connor said, dragging her beneath him on the couch.

“I have to kiss you,” Connor said before claiming her lips. He delved into her mouth and nearly moaned himself as he tasted remnants of chocolate on her tongue. His eyes crossed when she raked her nails down his back. Standing, he picked her up to carry her to the bedroom.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“The bedroom. I’m not claiming my mate on the couch.”

“Who said anything about claiming?” she asked and he froze.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t mind exploring this heat between us, but I’m not ready to mate.” Connor put her on her feet and turned his back to her, to face the couch.

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“So, you don’t mind scratching an itch with me, but I’m not good enough to be with?” Connor demanded coldly.

“Let’s get one thing straight, I don’t scratch itches.

I was offering you my body, I’m sorry if that wasn’t good enough.

We met this morning, Connor, right before you kidnapped me and brought me to a remote location.

I’d like to know a little more about you before tying our damn souls together.

I’m not a slut, Connor Arkadion!” she said heatedly before heading to the bedroom.

Connor turned in time to see her slam the bedroom door.

How in the fuck is this my fault?

Grumbling, Connor picked up after their dinner and dessert carrying the dishes to the kitchen. He replayed the scene over and over again while finishing dishes and couldn’t figure out how things went so wrong, so fast.

Madison stood with her back against the bedroom door.

She covered her face with her hands. Why had she balked at mating with him?

It wasn’t like they had a choice. She sighed.

She just wanted a little more time to get to know him.

From what she had seen she was already half in love with him.

Groaning, she headed to the bathroom and started the shower.

She got undressed and stepped into the hot water. She washed her hair and rinsed off.

Drying off, she began to think about her mate.

No one had ever made her feel like he did.

His quiet, deep voice and kind smile made her feel safe.

For someone who had been taking care of herself for so long it was terrifying to find that she was already leaning on him so much already.

She felt complete when he was around. Digging under the sink, she found a hair dryer and started drying her hair.

Shivering with only a towel wrapped around her, she searched the dresser for something to wear.

She found a triple XL men's T-shirt and smiled.

She pulled the T-shirt on and shook her head as it dropped past her knees.

She hand washed her panties in the sink and hung them up to dry.

Thinking of her bear, she climbed between the cold sheets.

She turned on one side then the other. No matter what position she got in she could not get comfortable.

Exasperated, she flopped onto her back. There was no way she couldn't sleep because he wasn't here, right?

They hadn't even been together for twenty-four hours.

There was no way she needed him that much, already.

Sighing, she flung back the sheets and got out of bed. Only one way to find out.

She found her bear lying on the couch, looking miserable.

His large frame was not meant to sleep on that couch no matter how comfortable it was to sit on.

She padded over to him. When she got as close as the coffee table, his eyes opened and he looked up at her, surprised.

She ached to wedge herself between him and the couch back, wrapping herself in his arms. Sighing and feeling thoroughly disgusted with herself, she held out her hand.

"I'm cold," she said and eyed him as if daring him to argue.

He smiled, and the kindness in his eyes was nearly her undoing. He stood and took her hand. "We can't have that. Come on," he said and led her back to the bedroom.

She pulled her hand from his and dove under the covers.

He went to the dresser and pulled out a T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Winking at her,

he began to undress.

Lord help her, she should look away, but couldn't.

His pale body bathed in moonlight taunted her.

His legs were like tree trunks supporting the most lickable set of washboard abs she had ever seen.

Even with his body turned to one side she saw the outline of his package and nearly begged him to mate her right then and there.

The man had one of the most beautiful cocks she had ever seen.

Thick and long, as if designed to pleasure a woman in every way.

She looked up when she noticed that he had stopped moving and was watching her look at him.

She met his eyes and her breath caught at the heat he saw in his gaze. She turned to stare at the wall.

“You don't have to look away. I'm your mate, Madison, my body is yours.”

She felt the bed dip as he slid in behind her.

Seconds later he had pulled her into the curve of his body and draped one leg over both of hers.

She felt that impressive cock against the cheeks of her ass and couldn't help inching backward.

He ran his hands up and down her arm and kissed her shoulder.

“I know that being a shifter, mates come first, but what does having a mate mean to you?” she asked, playing with the blanket. His hands stilled.

“To me it means never being alone again. It means my soul will finally be complete. That I will have someone at my side to listen to me and help me until the day I die. All my life I have hoped to have a mating like my parents,” Connor said.

“My parents aren’t mates,” she blurted.

“How did that happen?” he asked.

“Their parents made arrangements for them to mate to ensure healthy pure-blooded tiger cubs. I never really got to see what real mates were like. I know it in my mind, but I don’t know it in my heart. Not like you do,” she explained.

She felt him exhale as his breath blew across her hair.

“Why did you come to get me?” he asked gently.

She frowned until his hand reached around and tapped her between the eyes.

“Quit frowning. It’s not a hard question,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“I was cold,” she admitted softly into the blanket.

“You’re not being very honest.” He sighed.

She shook her head and brought his hand up between her breasts so that she held it in

hers, against her heart.

“I was cold,” she repeated.

“That is what being mates means,” he said and hugged her tight.

Her eyes filled and her throat began to ache with the effort to suppress her tears. She wept for the little girl who had stopped believing in love and hugged her mate’s arm to her tightly. Damn the man. Sex or not. Mated or not. She would never be complete without him.

“I’m glad it’s you,” she said after a while, thinking he was asleep. She felt his lips kiss the back of her head gently.

“Me, too, wildcat. Me, too.” Smiling, feeling safe and warm wrapped in the arms of her mate, she fell asleep for the first time, feeling complete.

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Connor was happily humming to himself the next morning finishing his homemade waffles when his mated shuffled into the kitchen. He heard a thunk and turned to see her face down at the table.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he said, his smile quickly disappearing in the face of her murderous glance when she raised her face to look at him.

“Shut up and die, morning person. Coffee,” she mumbled.

Right. Note to self. Mate was not a morning person.

He poured a cup of coffee and placed it on the table near her hand along with the sweetener and cream.

He watched as she poured three packets of Equal into the coffee with her forehead still on the table.

He looked on in amazement as she felt around and unscrewed the cap to the cream before dousing the dark liquid.

She stirred for a second before dragging the cup to her lips.

After a few sips she was able to lift her head.

By the time she had finished half a cup she was sitting upright.

When she finished the cup, her eyes were open and she was looking around.

“You should be a coffee commercial,” Connor said, staring at his mate.

“I hope those waffles are for breakfast, I’m starving,” she said, ignoring him.

He went over, picked up the plate he had made for her and walked back over to her chair. She reached up for it but he shook his head.

“You want breakfast. I need a morning kiss. Especially, after you just told me to die,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

She winced and lifted her face up for a kiss. He kissed her thoroughly and placed the plate down in front of her.

“Sorry about that. I should have warned you I’m not a morning person. Anything said before coffee should never be held against me,” she said, smiling up at him.

“You’re lucky my eldest and youngest brothers are grumpy. I have plenty of practice dealing with them first thing in the morning.” Connor winked and joined her at the table.

“They would be?” she asked.

“Aleks and Gavin. The beginning and the end.” Connor laughed to himself.

“There are seven of you, right? Is it true your family always uses the first seven letters of the alphabet?” she asked, digging into her waffles.

“Yup. We all get an A through G name based on our birth order, and our middle names correspond to the previous generation’s name.

For example. Aleks is Aleksander Aaron Arkadion.

Aleksander is his name and his middle name is the A name from the previous generation.

Which would be Pa. I'm Connor. My uncle's name, who is also a C name, is Christian.

So, I became Connor Christian Arkadion. When Rebecca has rug rat number three.

He will be 'whatever C name' Connor Arkadion and so on and so on," Connor explained.

"That is genius in its simplicity," Madison complimented.

"It sure as hell made genealogy easy. We have a huge family tree dating back over two thousand years. Benedict has been working on a software program that will act as a family database," Connor said.

"You really love your brothers don't you?" she asked.

"Of course. Don't you love your siblings?" he asked in return. She nodded.

"Yes, but then again we're triplets." She quieted and put her fork down.

Connor knew exactly who she was thinking of.

"I'm sorry about your sister, Madelyne. I'll see what I can do to help look for her," he said, taking her hand. He remembered Maddox's story about their missing sibling.

She looked up and quickly wiped away a stray tear with her other hand never letting go of his.

“I’m not sure what else can be done,” she said, before picking up her fork to begin eating with one hand.

Connor did the same. It was funny how Fate worked. Less than twenty-four hours ago he had to be drugged to get some sleep. Now, he was sitting at a table eating breakfast with his mate after a perfect night’s rest. He chuckled at his good fortune.

“Are your waffles funny?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Just thinking about how Fate works and how different my life is now, than it was twenty-four hours ago.” He squeezed her hand.

“Twenty-four hours ago, I had packed up my entire life and got on a plane to go visit my brother. No job, no home. Nothing. Now...” She trailed off and looked at him, smiling.

“Why did you quit your job and pack up like that? I was there in the diner the day Doc was talking to you. After being around you, you don’t seem like the type of person that would do something like that on a whim.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t a whim. I really started to hate myself in New York.

I hated my job. None of the cases seemed to matter.

I guess, I was ready for a change. When I heard about what happened with the virus, all I could think about, was that it had been years since I last seen my brother.

That was all it took. I’ll call my personal assistant when we get back, so he can arrange to have my things sent to Arkadia, I mean, if that’s okay? ” she asked.

“Sounds good to me.” Connor took another bite of his waffles.

“So, what are we doing today?” she asked.

“Well, we have a ton of board games, including my favorite. Trivial Pursuit,” Connor said, looking up to catch her blush.

“Oh. I thought that we would...”

Connor grinned and waited for her to finish the sentence.

“Would what?” he teased.

“Oh, I don’t know. Fuck like bunnies?” she suggested.

He shook his head.

“Nope,” he said, his lips popping the P.

She shook her hand loose.

“Why the hell not?” she demanded.

“Because when we come together it will be for me to claim you or not at all. When you’re ready to be claimed I’ll be waiting for you to seduce me,” he said, standing up and taking their plates over to the sink.

“Un-fucking-believable,” she grumbled.

Connor turned back around smiling brightly.

“Monopoly?” he asked and held back his laughter as her head banged on the table.

“Yahtzee! Take that!” Madison yelled and jumped up to do a happy dance.

Connor couldn’t believe how much his mate had relaxed since yesterday.

All day she had been opening up more and more.

Now, it felt like they had known each other for years.

He thought that maybe Madison’s change of heart was too quick to be genuine, but then he remembered what Aleks had said about his first date with Rebecca.

That after being together for only a few hours everything seemed to slip into place.

That as a couple you start to fill the voids in each other’s hearts and how years of dating seemed to compact into hours.

“Cheater,” he said, taking the dice.

“Don’t hate. I’m running to get some chips, want anything?” she asked.

“Can you grab the mint chocolate cookies?” he asked, pouting.

Laughing, she leaned down and kissed him before heading to the kitchen.

Connor leaned back against the couch and laced his fingers behind his head.

Yesterday, he was a hated kidnapper. Today, he was her best friend.

He was congratulating himself when he heard her screech his name.

Jumping up, he ran to the kitchen to find his mate standing on the chair.

“Mouse!” she yelled.

He looked at his mate. “Really?”

“Yes really, over by the fridge. There.” She pointed.

He motioned to her in the chair. “No, I believe you about the mouse, I meant, you. You’re really up on a chair over a mouse?” he asked, eyeing his mate in disbelief. Movement caught his eye as he saw a black blur dart to the pantry. She screamed again.

“Get rid of it!” she yelled.

“You shift into a four-hundred-pound tiger, you get rid of it,” Connor said incredulously.

“Three hundred and fifty pounds, thank you very much. And what the fuck is my tiger going to do with a mouse?” she asked, her hands on her hips.

“I don’t know, eat it?” he asked.

“You want me to eat a rodent?” she gasped.

Connor looked at his mate’s horrified expression and quickly reassessed the situation.

“Of course not, I was kidding. How about you draw a nice hot bath. I’ll deal with Mickey Mouse, and when you get out I’ll have a gourmet dinner and a glass of wine waiting for you,” Connor said, helping her off the chair.

He prayed she would never know he had been serious.

Her eyes narrowed at him and she sniffed.

“That sounds wonderful. Be out soon.”

As she walked past him she leaned in and whispered.

“Nice save.”

Connor let his forehead thump against the wall.

When she walked out of the bedroom nearly an hour later dinner was almost ready.

She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He breathed deeply and his knees nearly buckled.

There was the scent again, like apples. At first he thought it was her shampoo, but she didn't have it with her.

Then he realized that was her scent to him.

He took another deep breath and a second scent had him gripping the counter.

She was aroused. She had to be dripping wet for the scent to be so strong.

He spun around and walked her backward until she was against the wall.

“I'm about to fuck you and claim you. Say no only if you truly mean it,” he said, his voice sounding deeper.

“All I had to do was walk out here with no panties on to seduce you?” she asked, breathless.

“Works for me,” he said before pulling her lower lip between his. He bit and devoured every inch of her mouth. He trailed down her neck and bit lightly at the tender skin below her ear. She moaned and squirmed, pressing her legs together.

“None of that. Every drop of that honey is mine.” He lifted her and carried her to the rug in front of the fireplace. He set her down and pulled the large T-shirt off, leaving her completely nude and open to him. He stared at her body and didn’t know where to start.

He pulled his shirt off over his head and threw it to one side. He quickly removed his jeans and watched as his mate cupped both her breasts together, offering them to him. Guess he knew where he was starting.

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He pulled one hardened peak into his mouth and rolled his tongue over it. He gently suckled before releasing it and went to the other one. With his lips wrapped around one nipple, he sent his hand exploring down her body until he found what he was looking for.

He delved his fingers into her wet heat and pulled them away, saturated. When he pulled off her breast she protested.

He brought his hand up to his mouth and licked his fingers, the taste of her exploding over every taste bud.

“I have to have more.” He growled and crawled between her legs. He spread her wide and began to consume every inch of her glistening sex. When she began to buck her hips, he plunged two fingers deep inside her to still her motions.

“Connor, please, I need,” she begged.

He continued to tease her clit mercilessly. First a gentle swipe of his tongue then a touch of his teeth. He alternated between plunging deep inside her and rotating his fingers to graze her hot spots.

“Connor, please. I need you, my mate,” she whispered.

Upon hearing those words his control snapped. He sat up and draped her legs over his forearms, nearly bending her in half.

Without any preamble he snapped his hips and plunged his cock as deep into her as

he could go.

She screamed wordlessly, and he felt her inner walls convulse around him.

He let her legs fall and she immediately wrapped them around his waist. Over and over again he pushed his way inside of her, and each time she brought her hips up to meet him.

When he opened his eyes and looked down at her he noticed her eyes had shifted to a light sky blue and her canines had descended.

Her head was thrown back as she rode her passion.

The sight was enough to bring his bear roaring to the surface.

He felt his own canines punch through his gums and he buried his face in her neck.

“Only you. Mine. My mate,” he whispered.

“My mate.” She gasped.

That was all it took to trigger his release.

He came so hard he was seeing spots. He leaned forward and bit down on the side of her neck as she bit down on his.

As he felt his soul lift from his body, a second climax shook him.

He felt his soul merge with hers and then split before returning to him.

At last. He was complete. Shaking he dropped to one side pulling out of his mate.

She moaned at the loss. He held her close and let sleep claim him.

Connor woke the next morning to the sound of a fork scraping a plate. He opened one eye to see his mate sitting next to him wearing her T-shirt, polishing off what smelled like the dinner he had prepared the night before.

“Any good?” he asked, sitting up. He smiled when he noticed she had covered him with a blanket.

“It was amazing. Did you know you sleep like the dead? I tried to wake you like three times and all you did was grunt and roll back over,” she said, putting her plate down.

Connor winced. “Sorry. I think I’ve been catching up on my sleep while being here. Normally, I don’t sleep that sound.” He stretched before pulling his mate under the blanket with him. He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled the back of her neck.

“Your phone was ringing,” she said.

He sat up instantly. Something had to be wrong. His family knew he was up here claiming Madison, they wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency. He looked around in a panic.

“It’s on the coffee table,” she said, sitting up next to him.

He reached over and grabbed his phone to look at his missed calls. He froze at the name that appeared. He immediately called the number back.

“Griffin here,” a gruff voice answered.

“Sir, it’s Arkadion,” Connor started.

“Arkadion, we need you to come in.”

“Sir. I’m on my honeymoon.”

“Sorry, son, but he has struck again. I need you in a debriefing with the council representative,” Griffin explained.

“I understand, sir. I’ll be there in a few hours.”

“Roger that.” And the call ended. He looked over to Madison.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but you need to get dressed. Can you do me a favor and pack up our remaining groceries? I’m going to get dressed and bury our garbage. We need to leave immediately,” he said.

She nodded and headed to the bedroom to get dressed.

After he had buried the garbage he helped her carry their remaining groceries to the car and he locked up the cabin. She got in the front seat next to him.

“Connor, who did you call?” she asked after they were on the road. He appreciated how she waited until they were already driving before asking questions.

“Terrance Griffin,” he said.

“The Sentinel commander? What on earth was that ass calling you for?” she demanded.

“Ass? You know Griffin?” he asked.

“I’ve been working with him trying to track Madelyne down. He hasn’t been very

helpful.” She scowled.

“I sometimes do work for him. I review case information to try to create a profile to help track down killers.”

“What are your degrees exactly?” She looked at him suspiciously.

“A bachelor’s in psychology, a master’s in abnormal psychology, and a doctorate in behavioral sciences,” he admitted. Her mouth dropped.

“I love getting guys like you as expert witnesses,” she said and turned to face the window.

“So, Griffin wants to use your expertise, hoping you can catch something the trained professionals missed?” she asked sarcastically.

He winced. “Something like that.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Like hell you are. I’m dropping you off in Arkadia,” he said, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“You don’t know these guys, Connor. They are soldiers and political piranhas. They will walk all over your country ass. I’m going.” She crossed her arms and sat back.

He sighed. “I do know these guys, honey. I’ve worked with them before. There won’t be an issue,” he said, grinning when she stiffened at his term of endearment.

“Honey?” she asked.

“I love your honey,” he leered.

She palmed her face and he laughed.

“I’m still coming with you,” she repeated.

He nodded. She was going to have to find out the hard way. He was no one’s pushover.

Luck was with them. One of his brothers had dropped his quad cab truck off at his house and made sure that Madison’s luggage was waiting for them in the foyer.

“I need thirty minutes to get ready,” Madison said, grabbing two suitcases.

“We don’t have time for you to primp,” Connor said, feeling frustrated.

“Connor, appearance is everything to these yahoos. I have a feeling I will be tagging along a lot on these type of road trips from now on. First impressions are crucial. I haven’t met everyone there yet.

They need to meet me as the ball-busting lawyer I am, not the ‘I’ve been thoroughly fucked by my mate and I’m wearing three-day-old travel clothes’ type of woman.

If I am to be an asset to you, we need to take thirty minutes for me to get ready.

The dead aren’t going anywhere, and that son of a bitch knows you were on your honeymoon.

Let them fucking wait,” she said, turning to face the house.

“Where is your bedroom?” she asked.

“I love you,” Connor said, completely taken with his mate.

With her back to him, she hesitated.

“I know. Bedroom?” she asked again.

Connor’s eyes narrowed.

“Upstairs only bedroom on the left.” She headed up the stairs and disappeared behind his bedroom door.

Connor fought down his anger. His mate had agreed to be claimed, but her heart wasn’t fully vested yet. She had agreed to the claiming, to satisfy the demands her body was making on her.

He was going to have to up his game to get his wildcat to surrender to him completely. He ran a hand over his jaw and discovered three-day-old stubble. She did have a point about appearances.

He took advantage of the time she was using to change clothes. He opened the bedroom door and went to his closet. In the back, hanging on the left were his old suits. He had had a naïve hope that he would never have to wear them again, trading them in for his apron. He should have known better.

He got changed and stared at the man in the mirror.

His shoes were polished and gleamed with a mirror like surface.

His black suit made his designer white shirt look crisp and clean.

He decided not to wear the tie or shave, it gave him a rougher look.

Finally, he looped his arm through his leather, over the shoulder gun holster.

He opened his gun safe and loaded his weapon.

By the time he had the gun in the holster and his jacket on, his mate was walking out of the bathroom.

Her hair looked dark brown wet, but he knew it would warm up to the auburn color as it dried.

She wore pearl earrings and necklace, classy and elegant, and a simple black dress that fit her curvy body perfectly.

Over the stunning black number she added a gray blazer.

She went with a black kitten heel but dropped a pair of stilettos in a small overnight bag along with a shimmery ivory shrug.

He liked that without even saying anything to each other, they had both planned for any eventuality, including a high-power dinner with the commander later. He smiled and stalked toward her.

When she looked up and saw him walking toward him, her mouth opened and closed repeatedly. He raised an eyebrow.

“What?” he asked.

“You look completely different. I mean I thought you were sexy before, rocking the country look, but in that suit.” Her eyes filled with lust.

Showing great restraint, he shook his head.

“Later, honey. Let’s hit the road.” He winked and couldn’t help the swagger he added to his step.

“Bastard.” He heard her murmur. He was feeling on top of the world until she said, “Just so you know. My panties are coming off at some point this evening before we get back. They may or may not end up in your pocket.” She walked past him carrying her bag.

“Son of a bitch.” He groaned and she laughed.

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When they got to the tall corporate-looking building in Brighton, Connor easily maneuvered his truck through the underground parking garage taking a reserved parking spot.

He dug into the console and pulled out his swipe badge ID.

Attaching it to his belt, he got out and went around to open the door for his mate.

“First stop is the front desk to get you a badge,” he said.

She smiled and waved a small piece of white plastic at him.

“I have one from when I filed a complaint about my sister’s disappearance. I showed up at the New York office so often they got tired of issuing me a visitor’s badge.” She clipped hers to her blazer.

“Let’s go,” he said, taking her hand.

They walked through the building until they came to a set of large glass double doors. Using his badge, he swiped to unlock the door and they continued through.

“Whoo-hoo Arkadion, whatcha got there?” a male voice called.

“She sure is a hot piece. You sharing?” Another laughed.

He clenched his fists and looked down at his mate. He didn’t want to assume she couldn’t handle herself, but he didn’t want to let this shit go unchecked either. She

looked up at him and her eyes softened. He knew he had made the correct decision.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Madison Claybourne-Arkadion.

You may have heard of my last visit to the New York office, though I find it hard to believe that you two have gone through the sexual harassment training I recommended.

I’m sure the council will be interested to hear that,” she said, her voice taking on a sarcastic, hard edge.

“Claybourne?” one asked.

“Arkadion?” The other stared at her.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce my mate. I’m sure there won’t be any problems going forward, will there?” he asked, letting a low growl rumble through the large open office. All conversations stopped and everyone turned to stare at him.

“Arkadion, is that you? Who pissed the bear off?” an older man’s voice asked.

Connor watched as Griffin stepped out of a side room and looked around until he saw him.

“Get your ass in here boy. Bring your mate.” Griffin turned and went back into a large conference room.

Connor turned to Madison.

“We have been summoned,” he said, grinning. He took her hand and walked to the conference room.

He held the door open and closed it behind them. There were two other men besides Griffin seated around a large table. Connor eyed Gary Wendall wearily. He had dealt with the Agency director before, and didn't like the man.

The second man was Jeffrey Davidson, the council's most trusted representative to appear when they could not. He had their complete trust to speak on matters. Connor had met Davidson before in passing, so he had no idea why the man was with them now.

Gracefully, Madison took a seat and Connor sat beside her.

"First off, congratulations on your mating. I'm sorry to call you away, but we had another body pop up, this one practically on our front door step. It was Stanton. The bastard took out one of our own," Griffin said, and Connor clenched his fists.

He had worked with Stanton. He was a laid-back lion who had been lucky enough to mate with a rare female lion shifter. They had three cubs.

"Stacy?" he asked.

"Grieving. She wanted to know who was working the case and was shocked when your name wasn't mentioned. She seems to have the opinion that if you had been there her mate would still be alive." Griffin said watching Connor closely.

"I've worked with Stanton before, we got along well together. She's right. If you had called me in before this, he may still be alive. So, let's cut the shit, gentlemen. Why in the fuck did you wait nearly four months before calling me? Not a high enough body count?" Connor asked bitterly.

"There is reason to believe that the killer is a vampire. Your loyalties would have been divided, seeing as how you are living with the blood suckers." The wolf shifter

sitting across from Connor spat.

“Fuck you, Wendall. Gabriel and his coven saved Arkadia this summer by freely donating their own blood so that shifters would live. My loyalties lie where they have always been, in finding the truth and stopping monsters,” Connor said, barely holding his anger in check.

“Maybe that is how they have gained control of you,” Wendall said.

“You want to say that again?” Connor growled, standing to his full height.

“I must say that I am extremely underwhelmed by your associates, Connor,” Madison said, sounding bored. She looked at Wendall and Connor could see disgust fill her eyes. She continued.

“It’s no wonder this case hasn’t been solved with him heading up the investigation.

He is blinded by his racism and fear. I could send your statements to the council.

I could also recommend they call every single one of your cases up for review.

I’m sure they would be curious to see how many of the cases you have solved had a convenient vampire perpetrator.

That being said, my own brother, Dr. Maddox Claybourne, created and administered the cure to the shifter virus in Arkadia.

He and Elder Lachlan Lewenhardt have reported that there were no side effects in using the vampire blood so generously donated by Prince Gabriel’s coven.

Now, it sounds to me like you have a problem with my mate, my brother and my

elder.

I'd like to know why," Madison said coldly.

Connor felt like hugging his mate but knew that would be counterproductive to the professional image she wanted to portray. He stayed standing and crossed his arms. He glared at Wendall, who looked mad enough to spit nails.

"I would be interested to know why as well." Connor growled.

"Connor, Wendall is a jackass, but he may be right about this being a vampire," Griffin said, trying to diffuse the situation.

"What evidence do you have? Because I have been keeping tabs on this case for months and didn't see any indication that made me think this was a vampire," Connor said, taking his seat.

"I suppose you have all of the crime scene photos?" Wendall asked with a sneer.

Connor grinned back at him and watched the sneer disappear.

Wendall turned to Griffin. "Did you know someone in your department has been leaking information by sending Arkadion photos?" he demanded.

Griffin nodded and looked Wendall in the eye.

"Yes, because it was me. We needed him on this case from the beginning, but for some ridiculous reason it was decided that this case fell under the Agency's jurisdiction. I had to lose a man to finally get Arkadion called in. Now, stow your shit and let the man speak," Griffin roared.

Connor looked down at the table to hide his grin. His commander was a gruff, no-nonsense bastard most days, but he had the loyalty of every single Sentinel that served under him and that was because he always had their backs.

“You...” Wendall started.

“Just shut the fuck up already. Arkadion, what do you have?” Davidson snapped.

Connor looked up and smiled at Jeffrey Davidson before turning to his boss. He picked up the manila folder and started flipping through the case notes.

“Sir, I have been tracking the locations where the bodies are found.”

“Found. You are implying that they are not killed in these locations?” Wendall interrupted.

“That’s exactly what I am saying.” He turned back to Griffin, ignoring Wendall’s sputtering indignation.

“Each scene where the bodies are found, at the beginning anyway, they were almost clinically clean. No blood splatter, no loose hairs or fibers. Each location seems to have been chosen to somehow mock the happiness in the life of the victim. The first was found in a playground. He was an elementary school teacher. The second was found at a café table where the victim days earlier had confessed to friends, that it was the planned location where he was going to ask his mate to marry him. The list goes on. Each victim is completely drained of blood, with two open holes in the neck, yet there is no evidence of blood being spilled from the wounds or any of the victims clothing. All the victims are healthy shifters in their prime. Of the males taken, every single one show signs that they had been severely beaten, all the females were repeatedly raped.” Connor sighed and continued.

“None of the victims are children, nor have any of the victims been parents with the recent exception of Stanton, but I’ll get back to him.” Connor spread out the photos and stood to go to a pinned map. He examined it for a second before turning back to the table.

“The red pins show where the bodies were found, the green ones show where they were taken from. I believe that he takes them to a third location, where they are tortured and drained. I think that his base of operations is central to all three locations, which would put him somewhere around the warehouse district,” Connor said, pointing to the map.

“I don’t think you have a rogue vampire on a killing spree. I think this is the work of a drainer collecting blood, the holes in the neck are from pick lines,” Connor said, sitting back down.

“Arkadion, all you did was restate some of the facts that we already know,” Wendall said.

“I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page. But, before I go on, where was Stanton taken and where was he found?” Connor asked.

“He was taken from a stakeout van at Purgatory last week. He was found yesterday in his kid’s tree house, his Sentinel windbreaker was shoved down his throat,” Griffin said sadly.

Connor took a steadying breath and felt a warm hand take his under the table. He looked over to Madison. There was warm sympathy in her eyes. He nodded and pulled his hand free, taking out his own notes from the folder.

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“Here are my conclusions based on his actions thus far. We’re looking for a white male between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five.

I am leaning toward the high side of his late forties.

He has had years of being pushed around to fuel his anger.

He will be small in size and his animal will also be small, probably a prey animal.

He blames others for his own unhappiness, which he attributes to a lack of respect, which in his opinion is due to his height or animal. ”

“He probably works in a medical field. He is draining and storing blood, which takes medical training and equipment. He was probably bullied or abused as a child. I have no proof, but I am willing to bet that the first victim was an accident, the elementary school teacher. I believe that he saw the teacher either hit or abuse one of the children, which made him a target. It also explains why none of the victims are children or have children with the recent exception of Stanton.”

“He is using these deaths to support his Shifted Death habit. He kills the shifter, drains them, and takes the blood to a local dealer for processing. He only gets a fraction of product for the quantity of blood he is taking. But, he is a user, and he is starting to make mistakes, which is why you found traces of vampire blood at the last scene before Stanton. It wasn’t the blood of the attacker, but blood from the drug.

He is experiencing highs and lows, manic and depressed states.

In his manic state he rages and loses control, consumed in jealousy.

He feels as if the victim has somehow taken something from him.

He either beats or rapes his victim to extract revenge, to put himself above them, to control them.

It's a power play. In the depressed, paranoid state he removes all traces of himself from the victim.

He is working outside the drug ring operations.

There aren't enough bodies for this to be a small faction.

He is doing this to support his own habit.

One, maybe two kills a week, I estimate. ”

“That just leaves Stanton. The anomaly. The statement. The killer knows he has our attention. Stanton was part anger and part satisfaction, as if he feels like he is finally being seen. I hate to ask, sir, but was Stanton raped?” Connor asked and held his breath.

He really didn't want to know. Tears filled the older man's eyes and he nodded.

“How could you possibly know that? We have kept that under wraps,” Davidson asked.

“Because if I were him, that's what I would do.

It was a message to us. He is saying ‘Fuck you. You can't beat me.

I am better than you, I own you. Look what I can do and you can't stop me'," Connor had to take a deep breath.

This was the part of the job he hated. This was the part that scared him.

He feared how well he understood these monsters.

"He'll be celebrating tonight. Manic state. Flying high. He has stuck it to 'the man.' Literally. We may get lucky and catch him at a bar or club. He may get sloppy and start bragging, but it's a long shot." Connor let his head drop back. He was exhausted.

"Griffin was right. You should have been called in at the beginning. Wendall, I will also be including that in my report to the council. I will also take Ms. Claybourne-Arkadion's advice and make the suggestion to Elder Ora that your cases be reviewed.

Your narrow-minded bigotry has gotten a lot of people killed.

Connor Arkadion is under vampire control about as much as I am.

"Davidson looked at the director of the Agency in contempt.

"Now, see here," Wendall began.

"You are dismissed, Director. I am moving this case where it should have been all along. Under Sentinel jurisdiction. Pull your agents from this case immediately," Davidson ordered.

"Blood fuckers!" Wendall snarled and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Commander, I am sorry for your department's loss. Arkadion, you have done good work here. I hope that we can continue to come to you for assistance," Davidson

asked.

“We’ll talk later, Jeffrey,” Madison said, speaking up.

Connor rolled his eyes.

“I wish that bastard wasn’t so damn slippery. He approached the van where the closed circuit television from the shop across the street couldn’t see him.” Griffin growled.

Connor froze. Stanton was taken at Purgatory. David and Daniel had that placed wired like Fort Knox. He quickly pulled out his cell phone and dialed Gabriel’s number.

“Gabriel speaking,” the smooth, musical voice answered.

“Prince Gabriel. This is Connor Arkadion. I’d like a word in private if you can manage it,” Connor said. He could hear people’s voices and laughter and knew that Gabriel was at the diner.

“Connor? Are you being coerced? Are you able to speak freely?” Gabriel asked, and Connor nearly groaned out loud when all the background noise stopped. Knowing that his Ma wouldn’t let Gabriel leave the diner until she knew he was okay, he sighed and continued.

“Prince Gabriel, I am sitting with Commander Terrance Griffin from Sentinel and Jeffrey Davidson, trusted liaison from the shifter council. We are reviewing notes regarding a string of murders that have been taking place around Brighton. The last man who was killed was kidnapped from Purgatory’s parking lot last week.

Can you see if David and Daniel have anything on video surveillance?

It would have been a parked, unmarked, black van,” Connor explained.

“David, Daniel,” Gabriel said.

“On it.” They replied.

“Connor, are you safe? If you are in Brighton, I can have my coven members to your location in under ten minutes,” Gabriel offered.

“I’m safe. Tell my Ma to bake me an apple pie and have the coffee ready. Oh and tell Aleks to calm down before he bursts a blood vessel,” Connor said, smiling.

“Blood vessel, my ass. What in the hell is my baby brother doing at the Sentinel head office?” he heard Aleks roar.

“Connor, I would feel better if you would allow Kurt and Lauri to come to you,” Gabriel said.

“Really, everyone, Madison and I are fine. We’ll wrap up here and be back home in a couple of hours,” he reassured the prince.

“Connor Christian Arkadion, you bring your ass back to this diner. You have two hours before I send your brothers to come get you,” his Ma said, growling between each word.

I’m in for it now.

“Gabriel, if you could have the twins email me anything they find I would appreciate it,” Connor said.

“Are you sure you don’t need an escort?” Gabriel asked again.

“I’m sure. Thank you for everything.” Connor ended the call and let his head fall onto his arms on the table.

“My ma is going to kill me,” he whispered.

Madison giggled. He looked up and Griffin and Davidson were struggling not to laugh.

“Now, I see why I don’t intimidate you,” Griffin said, smiling wide.

“Sir, she wasn’t kidding. I better leave now to make it back to Arkadia in under two hours. Knowing her, she’ll jump the gun. I’ll forward anything I get from David and Daniel to you. Come on, honey,” Connor said, standing. He fought the need to run to the truck to get on the road.

“She doesn’t know that Sentinel asks for your help on cases does she?” Madison asked.

Griffin started laughing. “Ms. Claybourne-Arkadion. Connor doesn’t just help with cases, he works them. Connor is a Sentinel,” Griffin explained. Madison’s eyes narrowed.

“Son of a bitch,” Connor murmured.

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The entire drive back to Arkadia, Madison sat with her arms crossed over her chest, fuming.

Connor didn't know what he feared worse, the ass chewing he was about to get from his Ma, or the ass chewing his mate was probably planning in her tactical mind right now.

He wondered if he could sleep at Emmett's tonight.

"Try it and I'll skin you alive," Madison said coldly.

Shit. He had said that out loud. He parked the truck at the diner one hour and twenty minutes later. He stared at the neon red "Open" sign.

"Go take your lumps like a man. That's what you get for keeping secrets," Madison said, opening the truck door before climbing out and slamming it shut.

He got out and joined her on the sidewalk.

"Why couldn't Gabriel just walk outside to take the call?" He shook his head, holding the door open for his mate.

"Probably because he didn't know you were a fucking Sentinel and thought you were in danger," she said loudly.

Connor froze and looked into the diner from the doorway. Every head had turned to stare at him. He looked down and realized he had forgotten to change back into his

diner clothes. Right now, he really did look every inch a Sentinel.

“Thanks, Madison,” he said with clenched teeth.

“Any time,” she said, smiling up at him sweetly, before waltzing by and taking a chair next to her brother.

Connor walked in and went over to where his ma waited for him in front of the counter, standing next to Pa who was sitting on one of the barstools.

“Hey, Ma,” he mumbled. His ma walked over who pulled him into a bone-crushing embrace.

“Don’t you ever scare us like that again!

Now. What in the world is going on with you, Connor?

You haven’t been sleeping, you’ve lost weight.

You’re distracted and distant. Are the Sentinels bothering you?

What did Madison mean when she said you were a Sentinel?

She is mistaken, right?” Ma fired off question after question.

He took a deep breath, held both of her hands in his, and led her to the table to sit next to Aleks and Rebecca. He nodded at Pa and sat next to his mate.

“Madison is right, Ma. I am a Sentinel. I was recruited out of college to work a serial killer case at the suggestion of my college advisor. He was also a shifter, and he knew that I applied what I learned about psychology and took into consideration the animal

aspect of things. It's why he suggested me.

The serial killer was suspected of being a shifter by Sentinel," Connor explained.

"The trip you took to help battered women in Virginia?" Ma asked.

He nodded.

"We were tracking the killer. He was a wolf-shifter. He would shift to his animal and lure small boys out of their homes at night. He would abduct them, rape them, and hide the bodies in the foundations of houses that were being built that summer in a shiny new housing development." Connor looked around the table.

Everyone looked horrified. Ma had her hand to her mouth.

"Once I figured out how he was getting the boys, we set up a wide net. I was the one who nearly caught him in the backyard of the house we were watching. The little boy was reaching out to pet him. He saw me and ran. When he realized we were closing in on him, he left a trail of boy's bodies leading back here to Arkadia.

He was going after the one that got away," Connor said and looked at Gavin.

All the blood drained from his brother's face.

"That's why you stayed by my side when you came back from school that summer. You were working a case?" Gavin demanded.

"Did you find him?" Rebecca asked in a small voice.

"Yes. I shot him between the eyes at the edge of the perimeter next to a broken block of cement," Connor said quietly, hanging his head.

“Harvey Miller,” Bran whispered.

“We had to demolish every house in that development. You see, he had been working construction on those houses since they broke ground. In the end we found forty-two bodies. None of it made the news, of course. Sentinel and the council kept that quiet. But, that was the case where Sentinel decided it needed a shifter profiler. So, I took the job. It was my way of atoning for not taking care of Harvey Miller when I had the chance. If I had, those boys wouldn’t have died. ” Connor stared at his clasped hands.

“The trip to Vegas that summer?” Aleks asked, in a tight voice.

“I was recovering from the case. I had a bit of a breakdown. Depression, insomnia, nightmares. When I do this work I get inside the mind of the killer. While working the case, I’m haunted by the images of the dead, after the case I have nightmares where they blame me for not doing more.

Then as more time goes by, it gets better.

After a while, I couldn’t do the work anymore, so I came home.

They only contact me when it’s bad, and they have no other leads,” he explained.

He felt hands grab the front of his suit jacket. He was easily lifted out of his chair, before a large fist connected with his jaw. Stumbling backward, he was caught by Mojo, who helped him to stand. When he looked up he saw Aleks breathing heavily, rubbing his fist.

“How could you keep this a secret? I’m your brother, I could have helped you!” Aleks yelled.

Connor took three steps and got in his eldest brother’s face.

“What about you? You think I don’t know what happened in Raleigh? You never said a word either, so don’t give me shit,” Connor said, bumping chests with Aleks.

“That was different. That was one case. How many have you had, that have pushed you to the brink of hell and spat you back out?” Aleks demanded.

“I couldn’t say anything, Aleks. You of all people know that. I couldn’t bring this to our home, our doorstep. That’s not even taking into consideration most of these cases are classified,” Connor said, stepping back.

Aleks took a deep breath and pulled Connor into a hug.

“This is your one get-out-of-jail-free card. You try to pull this Lone Ranger shit again and so help me,” Aleks threatened.

Someone blew their nose loudly and Connor turned to see Rian wiping his eyes on a wad of napkins.

“Ri, it’s okay, buddy,” he said.

Rian twisted the napkins in his hands as Damian rubbed his shoulder. “It’s not okay. If you couldn’t go to your family, you could have come to me. I could have baked you a cake or given you a blow job or something.”

Connor buried his face in his hands.

“I have that covered now, thanks, Rian,” Madison said, smiling up at Connor.

He stopped and looked down at his mate. For the first time since they had met, she was looking at him with none of her normal defenses in place. He could see love and pride in her eyes.

“But, he was all alone.” Rian sniffled, breaking the moment as he dabbed his eyes.

“With all those awful images,” Rebecca said, her eyes spilling over.

“Carrying that heavy burden.” Ashby hiccuped as he cried.

“All those years,” Sebastian whispered, burying his face in Liam’s chest.

Connor looked around and was at a loss as to who he was going to calm down first. Rian had set off that damn Inner Court, emotional, pregnant wavelength. As if on cue, Kate and Nicholas came into the diner together, Caleb and Bran right behind them.

“Why are we crying? I was making a decaf vanilla frappe for Kate when the next thing I know we’re both crying,” Nic demanded. He and Kate sat next to Rebecca and Ashby, asking what happened.

“Shoot me now,” Connor groaned.

“Everyone just found out how amazing my man is. Tonight I’m going to do my best to start alleviating some of that stress he has accumulated over the years.

” Madison winked and looked down at his jacket pocket.

He patted his jacket and felt a distinct lump there. He looked down at the hem of her dress.

“You get him, gurrlll!” Rian cheered, wiping his eyes.

“Sex him up!” Felix cheered.

Madison looked over to Felix and winked.

“Of course. Gingers are sex gods.”

Felix’s mouth dropped and his head whipped around to Claybourne’s.

“See! See! I told you.” Felix pumped both of his arms in the air.

Connor took advantage of the distraction and sauntered over to where Madison sat. He dropped his voice an octave.

“Ma’am, you’re under suspicion of contemplating public indecency. I’m going to have to strip search you.” He put his hands on his hips, displaying his Sentinel badge and gun. He heard his mate’s breath catch.

“Lord have mercy. That just went into the spank bank.” Rian sighed.

Connor looked over to Rian and, with a straight face, eyed the man up and down.

“Now don’t you cause any trouble, I know men who would love to do a full cavity search on a pretty boy like you.” Connor gave him his best cop face.

Rian’s mouth dropped and he swayed in his chair. Damian began to fan him with some napkins.

Connor turned his attention back to Madison, who was biting her lower lip and laughing. He grinned at her.

“Wow, Connor, like wow,” Kate said dreamily.

He winked at his friend and both Bran and Caleb growled.

“I can’t believe you have been hiding this all these years. Do you have a Sentinel

windbreaker? They are hot!” Damian asked. And just like that his good mood evaporated. Madison stood and took his hand in hers.

“What? What did I say?” Damian asked, concern on his face.

“Nothing, sweetie, it’s just he learned of a friend’s death tonight and it involved the agent’s windbreaker, that’s all. Come on, Robocop. It’s time for good little fry cooks to go to bed,” Madison said, kissing the back of his hand.

“Call us, Connor, if it gets too bad. We’ll come over with comfort food any time day or night!” Rebecca vowed.

“We know you can’t tell us everything, but sometimes not being alone helps,” Felix offered.

“Even with all the shit you’ve dealt with over the years you were always there for us. You always made time to listen,” Bran said, admiration in his eyes.

“I can handle y’all’s problems. They are a relief after some of the stuff I have seen,” Connor admitted.

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“Go home and make me some grandbabies,” Ma said, grinning at her son.

Connor nearly tripped over his feet.

“Ma!” he said, blushing.

“Come on, stud, before you short-circuit Rian again,” Madison said, blowing kisses at Rian.

“Seriously though, Connor, if you know some guys that need a shoulder to cry on, or any other body part, send them my way,” Rian offered magnanimously.

Connor walked into the house behind Madison and locked the door behind him. When he turned back around, his mate had slipped out of her dress and was walking up the stairs naked except for a pair of thigh-high stockings and her high heels.

Connor jogged up the stairs behind her. He had plans for his wildcat. She was going to be giving herself to him tonight, all of herself. Her heart included.

When he walked into the bedroom she lay back on her elbows, watching him with a sexy smile.

“Want to frisk me?” she asked. He shook his head. Instead, he went to the closet and pulled out four silk ties. She watched him come back into the room and looked at the ties.

“What are they for?” she asked.

“You’ll see. Lie back, baby. I would cuff you, but the metal would hurt that gorgeous ivory skin of yours.” Connor walked over to the far side of the bed.

Lazily, he secured one wrist to the solid oak bedpost then the ankle. He walked around to the foot of the bed and secured her other ankle and then finally her other wrist. He walked to the foot of the bed and stood there looking at his mate.

“You know this is doing nothing for me,” Madison said, shaking her wrist at him. He smiled wickedly at her.

“Connor?”

“I may not have told you everything there was to know about me, but I never lied to you. You, however, have been a very bad mate. You lied to me about something important.” Connor crossed his arms and watched her face. As predicted, she got angry.

“I never lied to you,” she seethed.

“Yes you did. I asked you if you were ready to be claimed and you said yes. That means opening your heart to your mate. You held that back. I said I love you earlier and you brushed me off. Now, you’re at my mercy.” Connor slowly removed his jacket.

“Connor, what are you going to do?”

“I will have my mate, all of her. I won’t be satisfied until I have your complete surrender.” Connor untucked his shirt and started to unbutton it one button at a time.

“Okay this isn’t funny, untie me,” Madison demanded.

“Are you uncomfortable? Have some place to go?” Connor asked, slipping another button through a buttonhole.

“No, I just don’t like this,” she admitted. He paused and watched her face carefully.

“Are you afraid I will hurt you? Are you afraid I will do something you don’t like and won’t stop?”

“Aren’t you kinda doing that right now? I’m asking to be untied.”

“You have to learn to trust me, Madison. I will never hurt you, never betray you. Can you give up some of that control?”

Her eyes went from defiant to troubled. He undid the final button and walked to the side of the bed. Gently, he trailed a finger around her collarbone between her breasts and down to her belly button. He bent over the bed and placed a soft kiss on her lower belly right above her mons.

“What if I can’t?” she asked quietly.

“Close your eyes, I’m going to talk to you, and you’ll have to listen to what I say,” he said. She nodded and closed her eyes.

Quietly, he removed his shirt and his pants.

He pulled off his boxer briefs and let them fall to the floor before climbing onto the bed with his mate.

Slowly, he began to make love to her. First he lay beside her and placed a hand over her heart.

He wanted to feel what got her heart racing. She smiled at his touch.

He leaned in and began at the top of her ear and traced the delicate curve before trailing down her neck.

She shivered. He kissed his way down, paying special attention to the place where he had bit her in their claiming.

Carefully, he nipped the bite mark. Her heart rate picked up and the scent of her arousal increased slightly.

He bit down her neck and ran his tongue along her collarbone.

Moving lower, he nudged the side of her breast with his nose.

He ran his nose around the light-pink areola, ignoring the hardened nub.

She tried shifting her upper body to move closer to him, but he moved back.

He waited until she settled back down before continuing his quest.

“Do you know what I love the most about you? Your unfailing loyalty and your deep sense of right and wrong. The way you look after your brother and sister, I can tell you have always watched over them. The work you do. Taking cases where people couldn’t pay, but you made sure they had justice.

You are amazing.” He slowly ran his tongue over her nipple. She moaned.

“When you stuck up for me in Griffin’s office, putting Wendall in his place.

Baby, you got me so hard, I was afraid I would forget my own notes.

I'm not asking you to change who you are.

I love when you are ball-busting people, as long as it's not me.

” He smiled and moved to her other breast. He repeated the same torturous pattern.

“In the diner, I knew you wanted to put me in my place but you didn't.

You would never go against me in public.

You listened patiently and took my hand when I needed you.

You made sure we appeared to be a united front.

I wanted you so badly I could almost taste that sweet honey you give only to me. ”
He nipped playfully at her nipple.

“When you saw my pain you put everything you were feeling aside to comfort me. Do you have any idea how rare that is?” Connor looked up to see a trail of tears dripping down from the sides of both of her closed eyes. He ran his hand down her belly and rested his palm over her womb.

“Someday, we'll have a baby. He'll grow right here. I hope he is as strong as his mother,” he whispered. She began to cry harder.

He crawled between her legs and began to kiss down the inside of her right leg from her ankle bone to the silky skin of her inner thighs.

He parted her dripping folds and ran his tongue from her pulsating slit up to her clit. Slowly, he circled each, never quite touching either.

“Your sweet honey shows me how much you want me.” He got to his knees and reached behind him to free both her ankles.

He opened her legs wide and began to tongue fuck his mate.

With each dip inside her, she released more of her sweetness.

When she began bucking her hips he stopped.

He watched her face carefully. She shook her head from side to side in frustration.

He wrapped her legs loosely around his waist and leaned forward so that he lay nestled between her thighs. He lay there patiently admiring her delicate features until she opened her eyes. He smiled at her.

“Do you know what I value the most?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Your heart. It’s the part of you that you are keeping from me. Will you leave me cold and alone much longer, my mate? Is surrendering to me a fate worse than death?” he asked. She shook her head, crying.

“I love you,” she sobbed.

“Are you sure, my wildcat? There’s no going back. You’ll be mine, forever,” Connor said, his heart swelling. She nodded her head over and over again.

“I love you, you stubborn idiot,” she said and opened her eyes. Her bottom lip trembled.

“I love you so completely it scares me. You can never leave me now,” she said, her face growing fierce.

“Finally!” he whispered and let his tears fall on her chest. He reached down between them and guided himself to her saturated opening. He slid home in one thrust.

“Connor, oh god. It’s never felt so good before,” Madison wept, tightening her legs around his waist.

Slowly, with a lazy pace, he plunged deep inside her pussy. He pulled back, dragging the head of his cock along her inner walls before slamming home again. She screamed out her pleasure. He mercilessly kept them both on the edge of orgasm until she was screaming his name over and over again.

“Connor, my love, please,” she yelled, her voice strained.

There! That was what he was waiting for.

He went to his knees, grabbed her hips, and began to slam into her.

He felt the head of his cock tap her cervix and she went wild.

His mate was gorgeous as she cried and begged for release.

He thrust twice more before she clamped down on his prick and screamed wordlessly, her entire body shaking.

Roaring, he pushed as far inside her as he would go and leaned down to savagely bite the side of her neck.

Stream after stream of cum emptied from his body.

Breathing heavily, he slowly pulled out of his mate and she moaned with every inch.

On unsteady legs he went to the bathroom and quickly wiped himself clean.

He gently untied her wrist restraints and kissed each palm.

He made sure she was clean and dropped the washcloth in the bathroom sink.

When he got back into bed she instantly wrapped herself around him.

“God, I love you,” she said as she ran her hands over his chest.

“That’s all I wanted,” he said and kissed her hair and fell asleep with his mate in his arms.

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“So, this is what you do all day? Sit in the diner?” she asked, playing with the sweetener packets.

“Pretty much. It’s either this or sit at home. Alone. So, I come in here and Connor feeds me,” Rebecca said, patting her belly.

Connor watched as Madison slowly got to meet everyone from town. The townspeople had been stopping in all morning to say hello. His mate turned to him, panic on her face.

“I’m going to lose my damn mind!” she said, waving her hands about.

He winced. She may be right. Arkadia was a small town.

It had one theater, which was usually months behind everyone else for movie releases, no real shopping to speak of, and only the diner and Mojo’s to choose from for food.

His city girl was going to start flipping her shit soon. He needed to think of something, fast.

“Damian and I help plan events for the town. It helps us to stay busy, you can help if you want,” Rian offered.

Madison shook her head.

“I don’t have a lick of creativity in my body. That all went to my sister Madelyne, she

sucked Maddox and me dry of any artistic sense when we were in the womb.”

“You got all of the contrariness,” Claybourne said, smiling at his sister.

“You got all of the fastidiousness.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

“You look happy. I’m glad. I was kind of nervous when Connor carried you out of here caveman style, but it looks like everything worked out okay,” Claybourne said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

Felix snorted. “He was up and pacing practically that whole night. I had to damn near suck his balls up through his cock to get him to go to sleep,” Felix chimed in, popping a chip into his mouth.

Claybourne immediately began to choke on his sandwich. Madison and Rebecca giggled as Claybourne glared at his mate and tried to sip on his water.

“Baby, one of these days that mouth of yours will get you into trouble you won’t be able to get out of,” Claybourne warned.

Felix batted his eyes at his mate. “That type of trouble doesn’t exist. My mouth is exactly what will save me and get me out of whatever trouble I stir up,” Felix said, sticking his pickle in his mouth. He rotated it provocatively, winked at his mate, and then bit down.

Connor watched as Madison started turning different shades of red from laughing so hard. Her brother was turning red, too, but that was for different reasons. Suddenly he had an idea.

“Madison, weren’t you going to call someone to arrange for your things to be sent here?” he asked. He had a feeling that in order to keep his mate out of trouble, she

would have to stay busy. She looked up at him and beamed.

“Yes. Thanks for the reminder. It’s late enough in the afternoon Gidey will be up.” She reached into her purse and pulled out her phone.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said.

“I hate you. You left me,” a male voice replied. Connor’s ears perked up.

“Now, baby, don’t be like that, I had to make sure my brother was okay and guess what. I’ve met my mate and will be moving to Arkadia,” she said brightly.

Silence.

Silence.

Madison frowned and looked down at her phone.

“Gidey, you still there?” she asked.

“How could you do this to me? To us?” Gidey wailed through the phone.

“Now, honey, don’t be like that. You will do well without me. I know of at least three other women who have begged me to have you in their lives,” Madison said soothingly.

“I don’t want them! I want you. Please come home! I’m lonely,” Gidey sniffled.

“Oh, baby, don’t cry. You are perfection at what you do, I’ve never had better. Someone else will appreciate that,” she assured the man on the phone.

Connor felt his nostrils flare.

“You taught me everything I know, and if I can’t be with you I will just die, alone, in my apartment, alone , surrounded by pizza boxes and takeout containers. Alone ,”
Giddey yelled dramatically.

“No you... Wait. Giddey, why are you surrounded by takeout containers? Have you left your apartment since I left?” she demanded.

There was a tiny sniffle on the phone.

“You haven’t, have you? Giddey, I left New York nearly a week ago.” She said sounding concerned.

“Miss you,” he mumbled.

Madison’s eyes narrowed. “You’re on your house phone aren’t you?” she asked.

There was a gasp. “How did you know?”

“You were mugged again weren’t you! You set it up to have your cell calls forwarded to your house line.” She palmed her face with her free hand.

“Listen, Giddey baby, you can’t live like this. Did you file a police report?” she asked.

“Yes, Officer Craig even kept the laughter to a minimum. He said I was a walking New York record for the number of experienced muggings,” Giddey said.

“For fuck’s sake! He better have processed that report or I’m going to have his captain’s ass,” she grumbled.

“Can’t I come live with you? I know you, Madison. You will find something to sink your teeth into and you’ll need me,” Giddey asked in a small voice.

“Baby, you know I love you...” Madison started.

Connor growled and snapped the handle off his frying pan.

Madison looked up and her eyes widened. “One second, Giddey.” She hit a button on the phone. “Oh, Connor, he’s so lost without me. Can he move in with us?” she asked, her eyes filled with tears.

Connor felt his mouth drop. “You want to move your lover into our house?” he demanded.

She blinked. “What?” she asked, looking shocked.

“Giddey. Your lover. You want to move him into our house, after last night?” he roared.

“Oh Connor. No! Giddey is my personal assistant, he’s gay down to his DNA and not my lover.

He is the most amazing assistant, organized, efficient.

But, he’s totally inept when it comes to taking care of himself.

Can he please stay with us? I’m scared of what might happen if I’m not there to watch out for him.

He’s already been mugged again,” she said, biting her lower lip.

“Not your lover?” he asked again, feeling his anger washing away.

“Not even close. More like an adorable little brother. Like Maddox.” She pointed to Claybourne, who rolled his eyes.

“Give up, Connor. Once she puts you in the family category it’s a wrap. She’d move heaven and earth for her family,” Claybourne said.

“I know, it’s just one of the things I love about my mate,” he said innocently. He watched a blush creep up her neck, and she went back to her phone.

“Okay, Giddey, pack up your stuff and head to Arkadia. Book a flight to Raleigh and someone will pick you up.” Madison smiled happily up at Connor.

Silence.

Silence.

“Giddey?”

“You’re trying to kill me! People die in airplanes. If you don’t want me there just say, ‘Giddey, go slit your wrists.’ It would be more humane. I don’t want to go down in a fiery blaze!” Giddey screamed.

Connor looked around the diner, and everyone was staring at Madison as if she were giving a performance. Her conversation with her personal assistant had everyone’s undivided attention.

“Why can’t he just drive down?” Kaden asked.

Madison’s eyes widened.

“I could do that,” Gidey said, sounding excited.

“Like hell you can! You can’t even go from one subway stop to another without getting distracted. There’s no freaking way you’re getting in a car and driving over five-hundred miles. I’d never see you again!” Madison yelled into the phone.

“I don’t want to go to Arkadia. It’s in the middle of nowhere!” Gidey whined.

“Gidey.”

“There are bugs!! Don’t try to lie. I read about it in a magazine once, country places have bugs!” he continued.

“Gidey,” Madison said, louder this time.

“There is nothing there that will entice me to move to the boonies!” Gidey declared dramatically.

“There is an entire lion pride of hot, single, gay men looking for fresh meat,” Madison said with a sigh.

Silence.

“I’ll book my flight now and send you the details. Love you Mad-da-sin!” Gidey sang her name and ended the call.

“I can’t wait to meet him. He sounds fun.” Rian chuckled.

Madison set her phone down on the table and took a deep breath. She looked up at Connor. “He may take some getting used to.”

Kaden and Beau burst out laughing.

“You think?” Kaden asked.

“Because my mate is so amazing and understanding, he will get blow jobs on demand while Giddey stays with us,” Madison announced.

Connor looked over to his mate and leered. He wasn't paying attention and accidentally grazed his arm on the top of the oven. He slammed the oven door shut, cussing. She winked at him.

“Lucky bastard,” Kaden grumbled.

Connor gave Kaden a shit-eating grin before heading to the freezer for something for his arm. He used a dishtowel and held a pack of peas to the burn.

“Swing by the clinic later for some ointment,” Claybourne offered.

“Thanks, Doc.” Connor winked at Madison and leaned against the counter as the frozen peas drew the heat from his arm.

“It's been years since you've done that,” Ma said with laughter twinkling in her eyes.

“I have the best mate ever.” Connor laughed.

The diner door opened, and Duncan and Emmett walked in. Duncan was holding a large manila folder.

“Here, man, this was under your windshield wiper on your truck,” Duncan said, handing the envelope to Connor. He and Emmett sat down on their usual barstools.

“Thanks.” He put the pack of peas down and took the envelope.

“What happened to your arm?” Emmett asked.

“Nothing,” Connor said quickly. He opened the envelope and glanced at the first couple of pictures.

They were additional photographs from the different crime scenes.

Griffin must have dropped them off. Gritting his teeth, he closed the envelope and stuffed it in his jacket pocket where it hung on the coat rack.

“Connor?” Madison asked, worried.

“Updates from Griffin,” he said, and she nodded before turning to Rebecca.

“So, when are you due?” she asked.

“Around Christmas. I’m hoping he will come early, I’m really ready to start having sex again.” Rebecca sighed.

“Becca!” Aleks exclaimed, flushed.

“Just saying.” Rebecca shrugged.

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“It must be hard planning a Thanksgiving meal so late in your pregnancy.” Madison sipped her coffee.

Connor watched as Rebecca froze and started to get an uneasy feeling.

“Thanksgiving?” Rebecca asked, staring at Madison.

“You don’t celebrate?” Madison asked, setting her coffee cup down.

Connor, behind Rebecca’s back, began to wave his arms and shake his head. He met Madison’s eyes and saw the dawning realization that she may have just messed up.

“Oh my god! I forgot about Thanksgiving! Aleks, what are we going to do? It’s our first Thanksgiving together, and I don’t even have the ingredients to make anything! How could I have forgotten one of my favorite holidays!” Rebecca burst into tears.

Madison looked over to Aleks and mouthed, I’m so sorry .

Aleks waved off her apology and scooped up his mate as her meltdown escalated.

“I’m the worst wife ever! Our children are going to starve!” Rebecca cried.

“Rebecca, it will be okay. Ma and I will help,” Connor said.

Rebecca shook her head. “I wanted to do it. It’s my first Thanksgiving as a married woman. I should have been prepared for this.” She wept. Rebecca’s phone rang and she answered.

“Hello,” she said sullenly.

“Rebecca, what’s wrong?” Connor heard Kate ask. He’d give it five minutes before the rest of the Inner Court called.

“I forgot about Thanksgiving!” Rebecca cried.

Kate inhaled sharply. “Shit! I forgot, too! We haven’t ordered anything for the pack! What in the hell are we going to do!” Kate yelled. In the background Connor could hear Caleb and Bran trying to calm Kate down.

Nic, Ashby, and Gabriel walked in. Ashby and Nic were holding frappe cups.

“It was just you, now it’s you and Kate. What’s going on?” Nic asked Rebecca.

“We forgot about Thanksgiving!” Rebecca cried.

Ashby went pale and turned to Gabriel. “I’ve been introducing the coven to new foods, how could I forget this holiday! They’ll be crushed. Now I know why David and Daniel asked if we were getting pumpkins.” Ashby and Nic sat at the table with Madison and Rebecca.

“I’ve been so busy at the shop I forgot to remind you,” Nic whispered.

Emmett and Duncan tried to cheer Rebecca up by offering to go shoot turkeys.

Connor watched Gabriel sit next to his mate. He whispered reassurances that the coven had gone hundreds of years without Thanksgiving, what was one more year. Which, of course, sent Ashby into a shame spiral.

Madison looked up at Connor tears in her eyes. He knew she felt terrible for even

bringing Thanksgiving up.

Aleks phone began to ring. Aleks reached into his top pocket and answered it with one hand, soothing Rebecca with the other.

“Hey, asshole,” he said.

“Why is my mate hyperventilating? What’s going on?” Liam demanded.

“Rebecca is freaking out because she forgot to plan Thanksgiving,” Aleks said.

“What!” A loud screech came from the phone, causing Aleks to pull it away from his ear. Shaking his head, he put it on speaker and put it on the table.

“Ohmygod! Ohmygod! I completely forgot, too! There’s no way we’ll get enough food in time. Do you know how much these lions can eat?” Sebastian yelled.

“I know! Aleks and his brothers could take out a grocery store. You factor in that this is a holiday, which is all about eating, and we should have been trucking in food months ago.” Rebecca wiped her nose with a napkin.

“I have an entire pack to shop for!” Kate added.

Connor looked at his brother who looked at Kaden, Beau and Gabriel. Things were heading south fast.

“Hey people,” Rex said, walking in with Talon.

“What’s for lunch? We’re starved,” Talon asked.

Sebastian screeched wordlessly and Rebecca groaned.

Rex and Talon froze.

“We’re sorry?” Rex took in Rebecca and Ashby’s expressions.

“Bad time?” he asked, sitting at their usual table along the wall.

Rebecca, Ashby, and Nic nodded.

“We forgot about Thanksgiving,” Nic said.

“Anything we can do to help?” Talon offered.

“You two burned your cereal last week, there is no way I’m letting you cook for Thanksgiving.” Sebastian’s voice yelled over the phone.

Rex winced and looked to his friend. “I told you he was still pissed about that.”

Connor walked around the counter and placed a hand on Rebecca’s shoulder. “Okay everyone, I have an idea...” Connor paused and looked over to Rex. “What the fuck did you do to cereal?” he asked.

“You don’t want to know.” Talon shuddered.

“We’ll tell you later,” Rex said.

Connor shook his head and turned back to the group.

“Rebecca, Kate, Sebastian. Y’all are pregnant and due in the next couple weeks. You’ve had a lot on your plates worrying about your babies, especially after the virus. I doubt anyone here will hold this against you,” Connor said soothingly.

“And if they do send them my way,” Rex said, cracking his knuckles.

“So hot,” Connor heard Kate say from Rebecca’s phone.

“Anyway,” Connor continued, ignoring the growls coming from Kate’s line.

“How about instead of three large groups going out and buying all the ingredients and cooking everything, we divide up the menu and each group will make a lot of certain items. We could have Thanksgiving at the school,” Connor suggested.

“I think that’s a great idea. Apartment buildings in New York do that, sometimes dividing up the cooking by floor,” she said encouragingly.

“Where can we get enough food?” Rebecca asked, looking at Connor hopefully.

“You kids leave that to me. I’ve been ordering food for years, we can get the food here,” Ma said, smiling at Connor.

“All right so, Caleb, you and Bran handle the turkeys. Ashby, take salads. Sebastian, side dishes. Rebecca, desserts. Nic, coffee. Ma and I will handle everything else,” Connor suggested.

“Connor saved Thanksgiving!!” Rebecca cheered.

“Saved? Was it in trouble?” David asked, walking in with Daniel and Mojo.

“Yup. We forgot the food,” Ashby admitted sheepishly.

“But, we have food now right? I haven’t had turkey in forever,” Daniel said, smacking his lips. Ashby glared at Gabriel.

“We will. I will also arrange for a selection of wines to be delivered,” Gabriel offered. Ashby smiled at his mate.

“I can’t wait to have Thanksgiving with everyone,” Sebastian said.

“Damian and I can do decorations,” Rian offered.

“A town Thanksgiving? Sounds fun. Maybe we can get Johnny, David, and Daniel to hook up some big screen TVs in the gym for football. I can order some kegs,” Mojo said.

Emmett and Duncan pounded fists.

“Now, you’re talking our language.” Emmet said and they laughed.

“It was under your windshield wiper on your truck,” Mojo said, handing another envelope to Connor. He turned and high-fived Duncan and Emmett before sitting down with Rex and Talon.

Connor frowned down at the envelope. “They must be sending me the stuff the Agency had,” he said to himself.

“Hey, Connor, we went over that footage like you asked,” David said, holding up a thumb drive.

“And?” Connor asked.

“Your killer is a twerp. A small guy. We don’t have a clear picture of his face, but this will give you his height, weight, and build.” David handed over the thumb drive to Connor before he and Daniel took a seat next to Ashby.

“Thanks, guys. I need to get this to Griffin,” he said, removing his apron.

“We also forwarded a copy to your email,” Daniel offered.

“Perfect.” Connor took out his phone and scrolled through his recent emails and forwarded the email to his commander. It wasn’t even twenty seconds later his phone rang.

“Good job getting the video, it isn’t much, but it’s more than we have been able to get in the past four months,” Griffin said.

“It was Gabriel’s men, sir. David and Daniel processed this for me. They do great work,” he said, winking at the twins.

“We’re at a standstill until this psycho finds his next target,” Griffin said grimly.

“The guys didn’t find anything going through the Agency photos?” Connor asked.

“What Agency photos?” Griffin asked.

“The ones you had someone drop off at my truck,” Connor said.

“Arkadion, listen carefully. I didn’t send anyone to Arkadia with pictures, and if I did they would have been hand delivered,” Griffin said lowly.

Connor put the phone down on the counter and put it on speaker. He took the envelope Mojo handed him and rushed behind the counter to his jacket to get the other envelope. He pulled out the first set of pictures.

Initially he had only looked at the first couple of photographs, which had shown the bodies at the crime scene. He kept flipping and what he saw sent chills down his

spine. The last picture was of Stanton, alive, beaten, and looking at the camera, terrified.

With shaking hands, he opened the second envelope and pulled out the pictures.

They were of Rebecca, Kate and Sebastian with red Xs scrawled out over their midsections.

The next pictures had dead babies and the last picture had him seeing red.

It was a picture of Madison sitting in the diner last night.

Exactly where she sat now, looking at him with worry in her eyes.

“Son?” Ma asked. Connor shook his head and took deep breaths, unable to speak. Claws ripped through his fingertips and he dug into the counter. When he looked up he could hear gasps from around the diner. He opened his mouth and roared.

“Arkadion? Report!” Griffin barked. It was enough to break him free from his frozen moment of rage and terror.

He forced his claws to retract and reached into his jacket to pull out his gun.

He loaded the chamber and cocked it. He jumped the counter and went to the table that had the phones that were connected to Kate and Sebastian.

“Rex, Talon, Kaden, Beau. Head back to the pride house,” he yelled. All four men jumped up and without question left the diner at a run.

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“Liam, lock the pride house down. Bran, you do the same thing at the pack house. Call in those outlying families. There is a killer on the loose in Arkadia. I’m forwarding to you the footage that David and Daniel gave me.

” Connor darted to the diner door and looked out trying to identify any possible threat.

“You got it, Connor,” Liam said. Everyone heard him start shouting orders before the call ended.

“Connor, is he a distance killer or up close and personal?” Bran asked.

“Up close and personal. He’s running on Shifted Death, so his actions will be unpredictable and erratic. Hard to anticipate but it may make him sloppy,” Connor explained.

“Okay, we’re closing down the pack house now. Call with any updates,” Bran said before hanging up.

Connor went back to the counter that had the phone connected to Griffin.

“Sir, I’d like to request two units of Sentinels to begin patrols in Arkadia before nightfall,” he asked.

“He’s there isn’t he? He’s targeting you,” Griffin said.

“Yes sir. He is after my family.” Connor turned to look at everyone in the diner. To

him the whole town was his family.

“Hold tight, Arkadion. We’re on our way,” Griffin said and hung up.

“I’m going to grab Peyton and then head to the pack house. Maybe the threat of a killer will get him to finally leave the bar. Connor, call me if you need help in patrols,” Mojo said and waved before walking out the door.

“Roman, make sure you check in with everyone, all coven members are to return to the house immediately. I’m bringing in David, Daniel, Nic, and Ashby. We’re being targeted by a killer who is addicted to Shifted Death, so be prepared for anything,” Gabriel spoke calmly into his phone.

“Yes sir. Baptista is rounding up everyone now. Should we close Purgatory?” Roman asked. Gabriel looked to Connor for his opinion.

Connor nodded. “Revenge set aside, he is an addict. If he can’t get someone in town he will go looking for another shifter. Purgatory is perfect hunting grounds for him,” Connor said.

Gabriel nodded. “Close down,” he ordered.

“Okay, sir, I’ll call Noel. They will close Purgatory and go underground. Hurry home,” Roman said. Gabriel ended the call and held out a hand to Ashby, who was trembling in his chair.

“Let us go, mon ange . Roman will start having kittens if we’re not back soon.” Gabriel used his melodic voice to soothe his mate. Ashby visibly straightened. He turned to the twins, who were desperately gripping each other’s hands.

“Come on, guys, I’ll make s’mores and we can catch up on our cheesy sci-fi movies,”

Ashby said, putting on a brave face. Nic, seeing how scared the twins were, also smiled at them.

“I’ll make my famous hot chocolate,” he said, wrapping an arm around Daniel.

They nodded and all five headed to their cars.

Connor looked over to see Madison sitting quietly at the table. She watched him with utter trust in her eyes. He looked over to see Rebecca walking over to the counter where he had left the pictures.

“Rebecca, don’t!” he yelled. But it was too late, and she had already gotten to the photographs of her, Kate, and Sebastian. She swayed and Aleks caught her. When Aleks saw the photographs he roared and looked at Connor.

“We find him and he dies,” Aleks said.

Ma shuddered as she looked at the pictures and pulled Rebecca into her arms. “Aleks, you and your brothers make sure that the people who live in town go to one of the lock down houses. Claybourne, you and Felix are welcome at the Arkadion ranch. You’re family,” she said.

“I’d like to stay with Rebecca anyway. Let me run to the clinic and grab some things,” Claybourne said.

“When you’re done, come back here and we’ll ride back to the ranch together,” Ma offered.

“Thanks, Doc.” Aleks shook the man’s hand, and he, Emmett, and Duncan left the diner before splitting up and jogging in opposite directions. Claybourne and Felix were right behind them heading to the clinic.

Madison stood and walked over to Connor. The picture of her laughing in the diner flashed in his mind's eye. He pulled her into his arms.

"This is all my fault. I brought him here," he said miserably.

"This is not your fault. The only one who can be blamed for this is the killer," Madison said, wrapping her arms around him.

He breathed in her scent and began to calm down.

"He's after my family. My baby sister, my friends," he whispered. It was his worst nightmare come to life.

"We'll get him, Connor, and then he won't be able to hurt anyone else again," she said confidently.

"What about your friend Giddey?" Connor asked, pulling back to kiss his mate on the forehead.

She snorted. "It will take him at least a week to figure out what to pack. I probably won't hear from him for a little while," she said, grinning.

"I'm nervous. He's breaking pattern. In those pictures he has targeted three unborn children. It's a sign that he is even more unpredictable and dangerous than before." Connor sighed.

"One little guy versus all of Arkadia? I think the odds are stacked against him this time. He must really be unbalanced thinking he could come to this town and hurt someone," Madison said, shaking her head.

"Ma, I want my gun," Rebecca said quietly.

Ma nodded. "It's in my safe at the ranch. Aleks didn't trust you with it in your house. We'll pick it up and then go get settled in. You can show me all the new things you have done with the nursery," Ma said, rubbing Rebecca's arms.

Aleks walked through the doors with Pa, and both wore grim expressions. Pa immediately went to Ma and kissed her before kissing Rebecca on the forehead.

"Aleks and I pulled up the SUV and my truck to the front door. Claybourne and Felix can ride with Aleks and Rebecca. Marg, you and I can follow in the truck. Connor, are you okay bringing up the rear?" Pa asked.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"I called the boys and told them to meet at Aleks's house," Pa told Ma.

"I'd love to see the nursery. I've never been an aunt before." Madison turned and smiled brightly at Rebecca. Connor could tell she was trying to distract his tiny sister.

Rebecca's eyes widened. "That's right! You're going to be Aunt Madison. We're having a boy! I want to name him Liam Gabriel Arkadion, but Aleks said no." Rebecca sighed.

"I told you. We need an 'A' name. And why would you want to name him after that annoying cat?" Aleks asked grumpily, trying to keep the conversation light.

The door opened and Connor turned quickly to see who it was. It was Claybourne and Felix returning with their medical kit. Connor turned to Aleks and Pa.

"Let's go," he said and held out his hand to Madison. She laced her fingers in his and he walked with his family to their cars.

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Connor sat next to Madison the next morning at breakfast.

“People need to be able to leave their homes,” Ma started.

“Let’s keep it to a minimum then, only those who have to leave,” Connor said.

“I’m going to open the diner. Those poor Sentinel boys need to eat,” she said.

Connor grinned. Those poor Sentinel boys were the most lethal men on the planet.

“I need to go in. I want the clinic open and prepped for emergencies,” Claybourne added, spreading Ma’s homemade honey butter over the fresh, hot biscuits.

“If you’re going, I’m going, too.” Madison looked at Connor.

“No way in hell,” he said.

She stared at him.

“No.” He grabbed a biscuit.

She continued to stare at him.

“No, Madison.”

“I shift into a tiger, Connor, I’ll be on alert and surrounded by Sentinels. I’ll be okay.” She placed a hand on his forearm, and her warmth seeped into his skin.

“Stay in the diner. Don’t wander off,” he compromised.

“Can I go, too?” Rebecca asked.

“No,” everyone said in unison.

Rebecca pouted for a second before yawning.

“Actually, I think I’ll head back to bed. I’m exhausted this morning,” She stood and stretched.

Aleks looked alarmed. “Are you okay? How’s the baby?” he said, hovering around her.

“We’re fine.” Rebecca yawned again.

“Night, y’all,” she said and walked out of the kitchen.

Aleks turned to Claybourne. “Doc, is she really okay?” he asked.

Claybourne nodded. “She’s fine. It’s understandable that she would be tired with everything that has been going on. Her stress levels are up. Who’s staying at the ranch?” he asked.

“Pa, Finn, and Benedict are staying here,” Aleks said.

“One of you all will need to make sure she gets plenty of water to drink. But otherwise, naps are good for her,” he advised.

“Thanks, Doc.” Aleks sat down looking relieved.

“Claybourne, did you and Felix want to ride with Madison and I?” Connor asked.

“That would be great. My car is still at the clinic.”

Connor looked at Felix and Madison.

“You two about ready?” he asked, downing the rest of his coffee. Both nodded.

“Okay then let’s go.”

Hours later Madison sighed from her barstool.

It was too quiet. She hadn’t been in town long, but she knew for a fact that the diner was never this quiet.

Or empty. Ma worked quietly in the kitchen creating warm, filling meals for the Sentinels and Arkadion patrols as they popped in to grab a bite to eat.

She sighed. Rebecca would be heading to the diner soon, claiming she was going stir crazy with only Finn and Benedict to keep her company. But Madison had to agree. She was slowly losing her mind in the diner.

“Ma, I’m going to walk down to the clinic and hang out with Felix,” Madison said when she couldn’t take it anymore. She’d return when Rebecca got here. She should be coming soon for lunch.

“Madison, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I don’t like the idea of you out there walking around by yourself,” Ma said, walking up to the counter wiping her hands on her apron.

“I’ll be fine. If I can survive the streets of New York I can walk less than a block in

Arkadia to my brother's clinic. I'd like to get to know my new brother-in-law," Madison said, putting her jacket on.

Ma gave her a dubious look.

"I'll call when I get there," Madison promised, waving her cell phone.

"Okay, but call me the second you get walk through those doors," Ma agreed.

"Bye, Ma," Madison said, pushed open the door, and headed down the street. Less than five minutes later she was walking into the clinic. She pulled out her cell and called the diner.

"I'm here all safe and sound," she reported.

"Good. Stay out of trouble."

"I'm with Felix," Madison reminded her.

"Good point. Keep him out of trouble," Ma said, laughing.

"I'll try." Madison shook her head and slid her phone into her inner jacket pocket.

"Hello! Felix, Maddox," she called out.

"Back here," her brother yelled.

She headed to the back through a set of large, glass double doors. She smiled and looked around. This place was her brother all over from the bright-white counters to the stainless steel cabinets.

“Madison, what are you doing here?” her brother asked, looking up from his clipboard.

“I was about to give myself a thousand paper cuts with the sugar packets for fun, before using the salt shaker on the wounds,” she said, jumping up on one of the examination beds.

“Oh thank god! I was going out of my mind here with him to keep me company. He wants to inventory the clinic. Again.” Felix moaned, as he stretched out on the other bed.

“So, what should we do?” Madison asked. Felix shrugged.

“Great, now I’m just bored with company,” Madison said, flopping backward on the bed.

“You could tell me embarrassing stories about Claybourne,” Felix suggested, with a grin.

Madison sat up smiling.

“We can do that. By the way. Why do you call him Claybourne?” she asked, curious.

Felix blushed. “It was the name I knew him by when we met. It was either that or OCD Doc.”

“He can be a bit particular,” Madison said, nodding.

“He is still in the room,” Claybourne said.

“We know,” both Madison and Felix said together.

“Okay, so spill,” Felix said, lying on one side and propping his head up on his hand.

“Well...” Madison started.

“Madison,” Claybourne warned.

She winked at him. “Did you know that Claybourne was a competitive swimmer in college?” she asked, and Felix’s eyes grew round.

“No. He didn’t tell me that, though he is still rocking that swimmer’s build,” Felix said.

“He had a group of fan girls that were determined to fuck him into being straight,” she said.

Claybourne scowled. “That’s not true.” He returned to his inventory sheet, then looked back at her. “Is it?” he asked.

She nodded. “Remember your sophomore year when I came to visit? I had to put three of those bitches in traction so they would stay away from you. I swear they were almost to the point where they were going to drug you.” She rolled her eyes.

“Bitches!” Felix hissed.

Madison nodded then looked at him questioningly.

“So, how does that work for you as a hybrid? When I’m pissed, I hiss, I echo my tiger. But, aren’t you everything?” she asked. She felt a wave of urgency from Connor. She glanced at her phone to ensure that she hadn’t missed a call from him.

“Everything and nothing. I can shift into any animal that I have seen. But, I don’t

have an inner animal they way you do.

When I get upset I tend to lash out with the animal that is influencing me the most at the time.

Since I've mated to Claybourne, I feel like I almost have my own little tiger.

Sebastian has said the same thing, since both his mates are lions, that he feels a lion more now than anything else," Felix explained.

"Doc! Doc! Come quick. One of the Sentinels has been shot," Riley said, bursting through the doors at a run.

"Connor?" Madison gasped.

Riley shook his head. She sagged in relief.

"Why in the hell didn't they bring him in? All my equipment is here. Felix, grab as much as you can and follow me. There's no telling what we'll find when we get there," Claybourne said, pulling bandages and supplies out of his cabinet.

Felix started doing the same thing.

"Bring the kit for stitches? Or are we bringing him back here for that?" Felix asked.

"Better bring it just in case. Ready?" Claybourne asked, hefting his bag. Felix nodded, grabbing his backpack.

"Be back soon," Claybourne said to Madison, and all three men left at a run. Madison lay back down.

“Well fuck.” She stared up and started counting the dots on the ceiling.

“Excuse me, I need some help,” a voice called from the waiting room. Madison popped up and hopped off of the bed. She walked through the glass double doors to see a shifter holding his arm at an odd angle.

“There was this man, he attacked me!” the shifter started.

“Hold on, let me get a sling for that,” Madison said and turned to head back into the treatment room.

The second her back was turned she felt a brush of air and then a body standing behind her.

She felt a small body jump on her back, and strong arms wrapped themselves around her neck.

She twisted and turned, trying to buck him off.

She panicked when she felt a stinging prick on her neck.

Seconds later it felt like ice water flooded her veins.

“Nighto, Madison.” A voice laughed. Then there was darkness.

“So, you’re mated now huh?” a rough voice asked him.

Connor turned from his meeting with his brothers and the other Arkadian leaders to see one of his closest friends from Sentinel walking up to meet him with four men at his back.

He stepped away from the hood of his truck where Finn and Benedict had joined them in the huddle in the main intersection of town.

“Baron! I’ll be damned. I never thought they’d send you. You don’t know how relieved I am to see familiar faces,” Connor admitted. He walked forward with his hand extended.

Baron smiled and took Connor’s hand before pulling him into a bear hug.

“Aww, I knew the Professor missed us,” a light male voice said.

Baron turned and scowled at the jokester. “Shut your hole, Ricochet,” Baron ordered.

“But Baron...” Ricochet took one look at their squad leader and began whistling.

“Ricochet, one of these days he is going to kill you. And based on his case reports for the past fifteen years that detail your running commentary, he would probably get away with it,” Connor said, laughing and bumping fists with Baron.

“You always were a suck-up, Professor.” Another man grinned and head-butted Connor as a form of greeting.

“Fuck man. Dammit, Jaws, I told you to cut that shit out.” Connor winced and rubbed his forehead.

“Don’t be such a pussy. Come here, man,” Jaws said before pulling Connor down and kissing him nosily on the cheek.

“Don’t mess up his makeup,” a deep voice said from the back of the group.

“Fuck you, Casper,” Connor said, wiping his cheek.

“Casper?” Liam asked.

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The extremely tall, well-built tank stepped forward. “Funny, huh? Big, black man with Casper as his call sign. What can I say? Someone used it a long time ago and it stuck,” Casper said, spreading his hands.

“It can’t be any funnier than a wolf named Bear.” The second mountain-like man moved from Casper’s side and clapped a beefy hand on Connor’s back.

“Guys, sorry. Baron, Ricochet, Casper, Jaws, Bear, meet my brothers. Aleks, Benedict, Duncan, Emmett, Finn, and Gavin. To the left are our town leaders, Liam Lewenhardt, Bran McGregor, Caleb Donovan, and Prince Gabriel.” Connor turned to his family.

“These guys are the squad I served with when I was active duty,” he explained.

“It’s like a damn reunion,” Jaws said.

“Except for Spider,” Casper said quietly.

All of the Sentinels clenched their fists and looked at each other.

“It’s why we insisted on coming. To keep your family safe and to find the sick fuck who killed Spider, to make sure he dies,” Baron explained.

“We can’t tell you how much it means to us that y’all are here. In the envelope of photos that Connor got, he targeted our pregnant mates,” Aleks said, grinding his teeth.

“Don’t worry, big man, we got you covered. Besides our squad, we have one more patrolling the perimeter. He’s not getting anyone else,” Ricochet said, looking up to Aleks.

Connor had to shake his head. Ricochet was one of the exceptions to recruiting, coming in at only five-foot eight inches tall. After he managed to choke out the members of the review board for recruiting, they took him more seriously when they woke up.

Connor heard the slightest click, and his body was moving before his mind had a chance to process what he heard.

“Down!” he yelled, tackling Aleks to the ground before he heard a man yell out in pain.

“On the roof across the street. Find him,” Gabriel ordered. Three vampires immediately darted forward. Connor looked up to see the prince standing back straight, eyes a burning red.

“Man he is one badass-looking motherfucker,” Ricochet joked, holding his shoulder as sweat beaded on his forehead.

Gabriel turned and looked down at the injured Sentinel, his eyes settling into an eerie, emotionless, doll-like state.

“Only to those who threaten to harm what is mine,” Gabriel said, his fangs elongated.

“I take that back, the red was cool. That soulless black is creeping me out.” Ricochet grinned up at Gabriel, who shrugged and grinned back, though his was more feral.

“Anyone else hit?” Connor demanded, sitting up.

Aleks whacked his shoulder.

“What was that for?” Conner asked, rubbing his arm.

“I’m the older brother. I save you. Don’t forget that.” Aleks frowned at him.

“Trained Sentinel.” Connor pointed to his own chest. “Baby on the way,” Connor said, pointing to Aleks. “Sorry, I win.”

“He’s got you there, Aleks,” Liam said, helping Connor to stand.

“How do we know he’s not still up there about to shoot?” Bran asked.

“Because he knew that from the time the shot was fired until we found his location would be approximately three minutes. He didn’t have time to stick around,” Baron explained.

“Connor, I thought you said this guy was more up close and personal?” Bran asked.

“He’s broke pattern,” Connor said, exhaling slowly, dread pooling in his stomach.

“What does that mean?” Caleb asked.

“It means we have a bat-shit crazy shifter on our hands that has taken up a recent interest in hunting rifles as opposed to filet knives,” Bear explained.

“Wonderful. Just what I wanted to be dealing with before Thanksgiving,” Liam muttered.

“I sent Riley to get Doc, they should be here soon,” Bran said.

“Thanks, the last time I was shot, Casper tried to sew me up. It wasn’t pretty,” Ricochet said.

“We’ll try to avoid that this time,” a crisp, cultured voice drawled. Connor turned to see Doc and Felix rushing up with Riley.

“Thanks, Doc,” Connor said.

Connor watched as Doc helped Ricochet lift his shirt. Like the rest of the squad, he was wearing fatigues. Out of nowhere, he felt a flash of panic. Looking around and frowning, he couldn’t place where it was coming from.

“Damn,” Doc said.

“What?” Connor asked.

“There’s more damage to his shirt than to him, and it’s closing up right before my eyes. I am flushing the wound to get debris out, to avoid infection, but this shouldn’t take long.” Doc said, watching the bleeding slow to a trickle.

Doc went to stand and swayed. Felix steadied his mate.

“Claybourne?” Felix asked, concerned.

“Just got dizzy for a second. I’m fine now.” Doc kissed his mate on the cheek.

“I work with my animal a lot, and I’ve learned how to speed up my healing a bit,” Ricochet said, wincing as he rotated his arm. He looked up at Connor. “Dude, I’m starving. Healing burns calories.” With Baron’s help, he stood.

“Come on, guys, let’s grab lunch and then head out for patrols. We’d just be right

back here in an hour anyway to eat,” Connor said, pointing to the diner. He couldn’t shake that uneasy feeling. He looked around, trying to determine if they were being targeted, but didn’t see anything.

“I’ll run and get Madison from the clinic and drop off our gear,” Felix said, taking both medical bags.

“I’ll go with him.” Bear offered.

“Be careful,” Connor and Doc said at the same time. Felix stood to attention and snapped a salute. Ricochet laughed. Felix trotted off with Bear as the others walked into the diner.

“Let me guess, you boys are hungry?” Ma asked, laughing.

“Yes ma’am,” Baron said as the Sentinels all grabbed a chair. Everyone else sat where they normally did.

“Call me Ma,” Ma said.

“Okay, Professor’s Ma,” Jaws smiled.

“Why do you keep calling Connor, the Professor?” Benedict asked.

“Maybe he doesn’t do it at home, but with us, he has this annoying-as-hell habit of answering a question with not just one, but two or three questions,” Baron said. Everyone started laughing.

“Hey!” Connor protested.

“Sorry man, but you do. But, that’s okay, it usually makes me think,” Finn said,

laughing.

Connor shrugged his shoulders.

They heard the door swing open and slam into the wall behind it. Felix stood there breathing hard, a look of panic on his face.

“Please tell me Madison is here,” he pleaded, his eyes filling with tears.

Connor felt his heart stop. He looked around wildly as expressions of panic flared and took off like wildfire.

He couldn’t breathe. Why couldn’t he breathe?

Connor put a hand to his chest as he hunched over.

He felt himself being hauled up and looked up into his brother’s face.

He saw Aleks’s lips moving, but there was no sound.

All he could hear was his heartbeat thundering loudly as pressure built behind his eardrums.

Sound came back all at once as he stood and looked at his brother, his chest heaving. Aleks began to push him to the back door.

“Breathe, little brother.” Benedict supported Connor on one side, Aleks on the other.

When the cool autumn air hit his face, he opened his mouth and an ungodly scream emerged. He balled his hand, cocked his arm back, and buried his fist in the brick siding of the diner. Again and again he slammed his hand into the brick wall.

Aleks pulled him away from the wall as he was about to swing again.

Connor felt his canines drop as he challenged his older brother to let him go.

He threw his head back and roared. Aleks simply wrapped his arms around his chest and held on.

Connor thrashed, screaming out his rage.

His mate was gone! He had failed to keep the most precious thing in his life safe.

He screamed again and again his impotent rage.

“Connor?” a soft voice called out from the doorway. Snarling, Connor swung his head around and growled at the voice. When his eyes focused, he saw Rebecca standing in the doorway of the back door to the diner. She was weeping gently, but it was the pain in her eyes that made him stop his struggles.

“Becca, go inside, I don’t want you around me when I’m like this,” he growled.

Rebecca walked up and pulled Aleks’s hands away from Connor’s chest. Connor sagged and she stepped into his body. She wrapped her small arms around him, her hardening belly pressed between them.

He felt someone else hold his arm tightly.

When he looked down he saw Ashby crying.

The small, angelic man buried his face in Connor’s upper arm.

He took a step back and bumped into his older brother.

Aleks placed warm, steady hands on his shoulder.

Kate came over and held his other arm, both of her mates right behind her.

Benedict reached in and rested a hand on top of Aleks's on one shoulder.

Nic came and stood behind Ashby. Sebastian walked up behind Rebecca and placed a supporting hand on her lower back.

Connor closed his eyes and let the tears flow.

When he opened them again, the small courtyard behind the diner was full of his family and close friends.

Rebecca stepped back and smiled up at him.

She sniffed then balled up her tiny fist and punched him as hard as she could in the stomach.

Connor grunted and bent over slightly. She stood on tiptoe and cradled his face between her two small hands.

“For someone so smart, you really are dumb.” She smiled up at him.

“Why do you have to carry these burdens alone? Why wouldn't you want the support of your family and friends, especially when you give so much of yourself all the time? Is it so hard to surrender the responsibility so that you aren't crushed by its weight?” Her eyes searched his face.

Connor shook his head. Rebecca wrapped her arms around him again.

“You ready to roll, Professor?” Baron and his Sentinel squad stood in the background waiting for him.

“Yup, just needed someone to talk some sense into me.”

Rebecca beamed up at Connor. He was about to step back when he felt something jab him in the hip. Surprised, he looked down. Rebecca’s face held a look of wonder, and she placed a hand on her belly.

“That was him! He totally just kicked you!” She laughed.

“What? Really? Let me feel,” Aleks said, moving Connor out of the way. He dropped to his knees and placed the side of his face against her belly. Connor watched as Aleks suddenly leaned back.

“He kicked me in the face!” Aleks laughed out loud.

Rebecca turned to Connor a look of determination on her face.

“Your nephew wants you to bring his Aunt Madison home.”

Connor nodded and turned to Baron.

“We’ll search every inch of the warehouse district.”

Baron’s face became thoughtful. “Are you sure that’s where he took her? He has broken pattern. They could be anywhere.”

Connor growled in frustration.

“Connor is right, they are heading north toward Brighton,” Daniel said, without

looking up from his tablet.

Connor pushed past Bran and Caleb, stepping right next to Daniel. “How can you possibly know that?” he asked.

“While you were having your breakdown...”

“Daniel!” David hissed.

“Meltdown?”

“Tact, Daniel, remember?” David rubbed both hands over his face.

“Fine, ‘episode.’” Daniel used his fingers to put it in quotations. David punched him in the shoulder.

“Report!” Baptista barked.

Connor could have kissed the man.

“Anyway, I asked around and Ma and Felix both confirmed that Madison had her phone on her,” Daniel explained. He looked up at Connor and smiled.

Connor stared at him waiting for of the explanation.

David came to his rescue. “Daniel and I can track cell phones as long as they are on. I could explain that method, but you would only get confused and it’s not really applicable in this instance.

We hacked her Apple account and looked at Find my Phone. ”

“All right guys, let’s get moving. He has about a twenty to thirty-five minute head start.”

As everyone began splitting up and moving toward different vehicles, Jaws came running up to them from the woods.

“Three men from the other squad are dead, shot. It’s how he got her out of town,” he reported.

Connor, scared to death for his mate, turned to the large group standing outside the diner.

“Who is riding?” he asked.

“Me, Duncan, Emmett, Benedict, and Gavin are in one SUV,” Aleks started.

“I’m riding with Gabriel, Ricochet, Baron and Jaws,” Finn added.

“Bran, Caleb, and Liam will stay behind to guard the town,” Ma said.

Connor looked to Doc Claybourne. Felix had his arm wrapped around his mate.

“Doc, you coming?” Connor asked.

Doc shook his head.

“I’d be a liability. There is no telling what I would do to that fiend if he has hurt my sister. I’m prepping the clinic. Bring her straight to me.” Doc’s cold eyes met Connor’s.

“What about me?” Daniel asked, pushing his way to the front of the group.

Connor thought for a second. “Oh yeah. You’re in the trunk.” He turned to head toward his truck with Casper and Bear. Daniel started sputtering.

“Episode?” Connor asked. He turned back to face Daniel and raised an eyebrow.

“Fit?” Daniel asked.

Connor sighed. “Get in the truck.”

“Daniel. Do not distract them,” Gabriel said slowly, enunciating each word. Daniel gulped and nodded his head. He turned and scrambled into the backseat of the truck.

“Let’s ride,” Connor said.

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Connor heard the sound of protesting metal and realized he was gripping his steering wheel too tightly, again. He forced himself to take a deep breath before he plowed his truck into a tree.

“Connor, they have stopped moving. They have been at their current location for five minutes. Either he has found and ditched the phone or they have parked,” Daniel announced from the back.

“Where are we heading?” Connor asked.

“Wow, this guy is smart,” Daniel grunted.

“Why?” Connor demanded.

“Hold on.” Daniel tapped away on his iPad. Seconds later he sat back in amazement.

“He is a sick bastard, but he’s smart.”

“Why?” Casper asked.

“He’s using the old Chinese import warehouse. I saw it in the case notes Connor had, that building had already been shut down by Sentinel in another case. I read that a doctored version of what happened there was released to the human press,” Daniel explained.

“Wait, I know that place. Ricochet and I were part of the team that shut down a branch of the drug ring that was operating out of that building. We know the layout,”

Casper offered. Daniel gestured with his hands as if to say exactly.

“He was probably betting on the fact that you wouldn’t check someplace you’d already cleared. It suited his purposes down to the ground. Soundproof rooms, medical equipment, and cells.” Daniel shook his head.

“Get the address to Gabriel and Aleks. We’ll come at the building from all four fronts. This bastard isn’t getting away.” Connor growled.

Daniel’s fingers were flying over his phone when Connor’s phone began to ring. He dug it out of his front pocket and nearly dropped it when he saw who was calling. Quickly, with a shaking hand, he answered the phone.

“Madison, baby, are you okay? Where are you?” He pulled over to the side of the road and in his rearview mirror he saw two SUVs pull over behind him.

“Sorry, Madison can’t come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number she will get back to you... Never!” A high-pitched male voice cackled.

“You leave her alone, you bastard! If you so much as touch her!” Connor screamed into his phone. In the back, he heard the back door open and close. Daniel had jumped out and was running to the other SUVs.

“I wish I had more time with sweet, lush Madison. Redheads are supposed to be great fucks. But, I’m not as stupid as you think I am.

I know you’re closing in on us. You see, Madison will be my ultimate revenge.

The mate of an Arkadion. As an Arkadion you have known nothing but privilege from being one of oldest royal shifter families.

You're all bears, strong and tall. I bet you've never known the humiliation from being bullied or ignored.

"The male voice grew more agitated with each word until he was screeching.

"I can help you. It's the drugs in your system that are making you feel aggressive. Let me take you back to Arkadia and we can get you well." Connor controlled his breathing and spoke evenly. The driver's side door opened, and Aleks stood there looking concerned. Connor held up a finger.

"No, thank you, I have it all planned out. I'm done with this city, it's time to move on.

But, before I leave, I can destroy you, by killing your mate.

Me, nobody but me, can take down an Arkadion.

Don't keep us waiting, she will run out of blood before you get here, and I'm so hoping she'll die in your arms." There was another maniacal laugh and then the screams began.

Scream after tortured scream as his mate cried out in pain.

Connor stumbled from the cab of his truck, fell to his knees, and vomited. Aleks took his phone and ended the call, cutting off the sound of Madison's anguish. Struggling to his feet, Connor wiped his mouth. Aleks helped him to stand.

"We have to go. Stealth doesn't matter now, he knows we're coming." Connor went to get back in the driver's seat, but Aleks stopped him. Daniel jumped into the backseat.

“Casper, you drive. We don’t stop for anything!” Aleks steered Connor to the passenger seat and seat-belted him in. He closed the door and banged on the roof.

“Go!” Connor heard his brother yell, and the truck jumped forward.

“I got this, Professor. We’ll get her back,” Casper said, concentrating on the road.

Connor stared at the road in front of them as the truck picked up speed, and he prayed harder than he ever had in his life.

Madison woke to a dark room. The only light came from the fluorescent bulb in hallway, that was intermittently blinking between the row of bars in the door.

She went to sit up and gasped. She wanted to shift and heal, but her animal was reacting sluggishly.

That sick freak must have drugged her to keep her from shifting.

“Are you real?” a voice asked from the corner.

Sitting up gingerly, she leaned against the wall carefully.

Her back felt bruised and from the stickiness she felt trickling down her spine, she was still bleeding.

She knew she was injured badly and was frightened at the lack of pain.

Her body was trying to protect her mind.

She wondered how much time had gone by while she had been unconscious.

“I’m real. Where are you?” Madison could make out the shape of a chair and hanging straps. She looked behind the chair to the corner and she saw a figure huddled in on itself.

“Why did he do this? He has never brought anyone in before, only the blood, only the blood,” the voice repeated over and over.

“Hey, it’s okay. My mate will be here real soon, and then we can leave this place. How long have you been here?” she asked gently.

“What day is it?” the man asked.

“November 14th. It will be Thanksgiving soon.” She kept her voice soft and even.

“Months. I’ve been here months,” the man said.

To Madison it sounded as if the man’s mind was clearing each time he spoke. She tried to keep him lucid in case the little psycho came back.

“We’re going to get out of here soon. Little Psycho was on the phone taunting my mate when I blacked out. He should be here any minute.”

“I don’t think we have a minute.” The man’s voice turned guttural.

Madison felt a shiver run down her spine. When the figure turned, two bright-red eyes watched her unnervingly. She was locked, bleeding, in a cell with a vampire. That’s what he had meant when he said Connor wouldn’t make it in time. Trembling, she took a deep breath.

“Please. You have to stay strong just a little bit longer. Help is coming,” she pleaded, as he inched forward.

“They’ll be too late. He hasn’t fed me this week, and now I know why. All of the others, I knew they died, but he gave me their blood from an IV bag. I didn’t kill any of them. But, I can’t help myself now. He’s killed you and damned my soul.” The man’s voice broke.

“It doesn’t have to be that way. My mate is Connor Arkadion, he knows Prince Gabriel, they are friends. I know that Prince Gabriel will be able to help you. Just hold on.” She watched as his body froze at the mention of the vampire prince. She decided to keep talking about the prince.

“I’ve met Prince Gabriel and his beautiful mate, Ashby.

Ashby was upset, because he and the other Inner Court members had forgotten to plan the Thanksgiving dinner.

He has been exposing the coven to different foods and was scared they would be hurt if they missed out on the biggest feast of the year.

In the end the prince volunteered to bring wine.

I can’t wait to see what is in his wine cellar.

” She kept her voice light. At the word cellar the man flinched.

“French, Italian, reds by year. Whites in the refrigerator case,” the man mumbled.

“Do you like wine?”

He ignored her and began to inch forward.

“I’m not going to lie, I’m scared to death. I don’t want to get mauled and drained.

Please, please try,” she begged.

He stopped his advance and began to breathe heavily.

“My name is Madison. Madison Claybourne Arkadion. What’s yours?”

The man crawled into the weak beams of light and turned his face to her.

His appearance caught her off guard. Even though his hair was matted and dirty, it didn’t take away from the warm honey-blond color and white streak highlights.

He looked like he loved to spend time in the sun.

She looked in his eyes, which were fluctuating between a brilliant emerald green and a burnished red.

The man pounded on the floor with both fists.

When he looked up his eyes were green. He was weeping and looked like he was in so much pain.

“My name is Rhys.”

“Fan out. Knowing this sick fuck, he will want to witness Connor’s pain.” Baron directed the Sentinels as the Arkadians rushed into the building with Connor.

MadisonMadisonMadisonMadison .

Her name became a chanted prayer in his mind.

“Here!” Daniel yelled out, finding the long smear of blood first. They followed the

thick trail down the hallway until they came to a cell door.

“Madison!” he yelled, pounding on the metal door. He looked at it helplessly. It would take them hours to get in without a key.

“Connor! Hurry! Rhys can’t hold on much longer,” she screamed.

Connor’s head snapped around to Gabriel, whose eyes suddenly blazed red. Wave upon wave of power poured off the man as he stepped forward and dug his fingers into the metal as if it were butter. Seconds later he had it ripped off its hinges, and he threw it to one side.

“Madison?” He ran into the room to see his mate huddled in the corner, a figure just inches in front of her.

“Rhys, hold on. Gabriel is here,” Connor said, then took a step back as Rhys turned his head. He saw the blank eyes he associated with killers. The pair of blood-red eyes followed his every movement as Rhys hissed at him.

Gabriel stepped past Connor and knelt beside Rhys.

“There you are, my son. You have been lost for a long time. Let me take you home.”

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Connor felt Gabriel send his power into Rhys. For a moment the red rescinded, and his friend's green eyes returned. Just for a second Rhys stared out at them before the red flared, eating the green color bit by bit.

Rhys hissed at Gabriel and turned to Madison. Gabriel moved so quick Connor couldn't track his movements. One second Rhys was in front of Madison, the next both men were in the hallway. Connor rushed over to Madison.

"Will he be okay?" she asked, crying.

Connor couldn't answer. He was too busy running his hands over her body.

When he pulled her away from the wall, she gasped.

He felt moisture on his hands. He gently lifted his mate and carried her out into the hallway.

Laying her down on her stomach, he carefully lifted the blood-encrusted material away from her back. She whimpered.

"I'm sorry, baby, I have to see how bad it is."

Without jerking her body, he gathered material on either side of the sliced fabric and ripped it in half, exposing her back. What he saw had him feeling ill. There were four slices running from the base of her neck to her tailbone so deep he could see her spine in some places.

“Baby, you have to shift,” he pleaded.

“Can’t, drugged,” she slurred.

He placed his hand on her chest and felt her heartbeat begin to slow.

“She can’t shift. What do I do? Aleks! What do I do!” Through his mate bond he felt her begin to slip away.

“Gabriel, I’m begging you. Please donate some of your blood so that my brother’s mate may live,” Aleks begged of Gabriel.

Connor looked over to the prince. He cradled Rhys in his arms ever so gently.

His long pale fingers wrapped around the back of Rhys’s head, holding him to his neck.

The beauty of the moment in the middle of such terror etched the scene in his mind.

Gabriel looked as though he were nursing Rhys, the way a woman nursed her baby.

“I’m kind of indisposed at the moment. Daniel, do you agree to donate your blood?” Gabriel asked, his voice a hollow imitation of what it normally was. Daniel jumped up and nodded enthusiastically.

“Just a few drops, Daniel, just enough to get her to shift,” Gabriel warned.

Daniel’s fangs elongated, and he pricked his finger on his own fang. Gently he put his finger in Madison’s mouth. He swirled it around and removed it. He looked at Connor, worried.

“Come on, baby, just a few swallows.”

“I always swallow,” she joked, her words faint. Connor’s heart flipped over. Here she was moments from death and she was still giving him a hard time.

“We’ll test the validity of that statement later. Shift,” he ordered, and her heart rate began to race. Seconds later a large white Bengal tiger lay sprawled over his body. He lay on the floor and buried his hands in her fur. He could feel her purr vibrate over his entire body.

Exhausted, he closed his eyes. He didn’t care that he was on the floor with his mate in an abandoned warehouse, only that she was alive and in his arms.

“I still say we got robbed. I want to shift into an animal.” Daniel pouted.

Madison lifted her head then buried her cold nose in Connor’s neck. He laughed.

“Baby, you lied. You are closer to four hundred pounds than three-fifty.”

The Bengal tiger stared down at him, her sky-blue eyes flat and unamused. She stood, letting Connor scoot backward and stand. She then curled up in a ball and wrapped her tail around her body.

“Sir. I don’t know how to say this, but we need to put the vampire down.” Baron walked up to Connor, the Sentinels behind him.

Madison opened one eye, stood and majestically sauntered over to Gabriel, effectively putting her between the Sentinels and the prince. Her mouth opened and she hissed long and loudly at the men.

“Baron, that vampire is a member of Gabriel’s coven, one of his children. I can’t let

you kill him, not when there is a chance to save him,” Connor protested.

He noticed that the Arkadians spread out behind him, forming a wall between the Sentinels and Gabriel.

“Professor, you know as well as I do that in these cases when their eyes go red and they turn feral, there is no way to get them back. I’m sorry. I really am, but if we let him go, he will kill.” Baron widened his stance, not backing down.

“Those other vampires chose to kill. Rhys didn’t have a choice in any of this.

He was kidnapped and held against his will.

There is no blood on his hands, his soul is intact.

He refrained from attacking Madison, even though he was starved and she was dripping blood.

I saw his eyes, Baron, they were green, even if it was for a second, they turned back to green,” Connor argued and Baron shook his head.

“Dammit, look at him!” Connor yelled, throwing his arm back to point at Gabriel.

The Sentinels watched Rhys suckle at Gabriel’s neck like an infant. His hand gripped Gabriel’s collar, and his head lay peacefully on the Prince’s chest.

“Look at him. Gabriel is one of the oldest vampires in existence, he is Rhys’ creator and he is donating his own blood to save his child.

Gabriel’s blood is one of the rarest substances in the world, and he is giving it freely to save Rhys.

I can not let you kill him. Not now. Not when he has finally been found. ” Connor met Baron’s eyes.

They stared at each other for a minute before Baron nodded.

“Prince Gabriel. How long before you know for sure that he cannot be saved?” Baron asked.

“If his eyes don’t return to normal within the first month, then I won’t be able to save him,” Gabriel said, sounding weaker.

“We’ll visit again in a month. I am not doing this to be an asshole. But, if he has to go down, it might be easier to let me do it.” Baron ran his hands over his shaved head.

“I appreciate the additional time.” Gabriel’s voice held no emotion.

Baron nodded. “Connor, we’re moving out. I doubt he will return here. But, we’ll monitor the place just to be on the safe side. We’re back to square one with this killer. He said he was moving on, now we have to wait for bodies to start popping up again.” Baron growled.

“When you catch him, I would like to be present for his judgment,” Gabriel announced. Coming from him it didn’t sound like a request.

“Of course. Connor, we’re taking one of the SUVs,” Baron said, giving a half bow to Gabriel.

Connor nodded then started counting people. They had enough room for Madison, but no one was expecting to find Rhys. Connor watched as Daniel walked over to Aleks and pulled on his hand. His head jerked to Gabriel. He mouthed the word ‘ please ’.

Aleks nodded and walked over to Gabriel and Rhys, rubbing his hand between Madison's ears.

"Gabriel, you've given enough. Any more and we'll have to carry your ass out of here. If you're still set on donating more to him later, do it after you've rested and eaten. If I take you back to Arkadia sucked dry like a Capri Sun, Ashby is going to kick my ass," Aleks teased.

Gabriel graced them with a rare smile.

"We couldn't have that. It would damage your grumpy reputation.

" Gabriel closed his eyes and eased Rhys off his neck.

The man made weak protesting noises before settling down to sleep.

When Gabriel opened his eyes he looked at Daniel.

"I always underestimate you. You and your brother surprise me at every turn. I've never been prouder of the two of you than I have been these past few months," Gabriel complimented the small vampire.

Connor was completely unprepared for Daniel's reaction.

"Oh my god you're dying! I let you get killed. Roman is going to crucify me. Oh god, I hope Roman kills me before Mikhail gets me! You can't die!" he cried.

Gabriel sighed and pulled a cell phone out of his suit jacket pocket. With one hand he dialed a number.

Smiling, Connor walked over to his mate before joining her on the floor. She licked

his face before she rested her head on her crossed paws.

“Noel, who is there for security? Kurt and Lauri? Good, send them to the address I’m about to text you. Have them bring the vampire restraints from our dungeon...”

“It’s all my fault!” Daniel slumped down on the floor, sobbing.

“It’s just Daniel. No, he’s fine. Get here as fast as you can, I have Rhys. We need to restrain him and get him back to Purgatory...” Gabriel stopped mid-sentence as Rhys hissed in his sleep at the mention of their club.

“Second thought, we’ll take him back to the coven house and get him set up in our basement.

He was kidnapped for Shifted Death, Noel.

Yes. Yes, contact whoever you can. He will need a constant supply while we wean him off of shifter blood.

Yes, hurry.” Gabriel ended the call and quickly texted the address to his club manager.

With an exasperated look of affection he watched one of his youngest vampires come unglued in the middle of the hallway.

“Do you really think I am dying because I paid you a compliment?” Gabriel asked, sounding a bit stronger.

Instantly the tears stopped. Daniel turned and looked at Gabriel, his innocent eyes spilling over with tears. Silently, he nodded.

“I am sorry for that. Ashby is helping me become more approachable,” he admitted.

Daniel sniffled and crawled over to where Gabriel sat on the floor with Rhys cradled in his lap.

Daniel wedged himself between Madison and Gabriel and rested his head on Gabriel’s thigh.

With his only free hand, Gabriel ran his hand over Daniel’s hair.

Daniel’s breathing evened out and he fell into a light sleep.

Everyone else sat with their backs against the walls of the hallway and waited for Kurt and Lauri to arrive with the extra vehicle.

“I can see what Ashby was talking about. You’d be wonderful with a baby,” Connor said softly.

Gabriel’s eyes showed a hint of surprised before returning to his normal sarcastic smirk.

“I should have known you were the one to help him talk to me. I was going out of my mind with worry. He seemed so heartbreakingly sad and he wouldn’t open up.”

“You do realize he is reeling from pregnancy hormones right now?”

“Yes, but I think that Ashby really does want a child. He is young and he has experienced all of these powerful emotions, which will only get stronger when the babes are born. As you can see, I have many children.” Gabriel indicated to his full lap.

“I think Ashby would find it hard to mother and fuss over men and women who are hundreds of years older than he is. He may be their prince, but he still is the youngest,” Connor pointed out.

Gabriel blinked. “I never thought about it that way. I have already reached out to some of my council contacts in regards to adoption. I’d do anything to make my mate happy.”

“Wouldn’t we all?” Connor asked softly, looking down at his mate.

Gabriel inclined his head.

Aleks walked up with Kurt.

“We’re ready to head home.”

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In the end, to keep the smell of shifters out of the car, Daniel, Rhys, Gabriel, Kurt, and Lauri drove back in one SUV.

Aleks, Duncan, Emmett, Gavin, and Benedict stayed in their SUV, and Finn, Connor, and Madison took Connor's truck home.

Finn volunteered to drive so that Connor could stretch out next to his mate in the back.

Five minutes outside of Arkadia, Gabriel's car broke away and headed toward the coven house.

By the time they reached the clinic Madison had shifted back and was gloriously naked, awake and looking around. Connor was not amused at the way that Finn kept laughing at him when he growled every time Finn went to turn around. Madison laughed and snuggled into Connor's jacket.

The truck door opened and Doc Claybourne stood there with a white hospital blanket for Madison. His face was pinched with worry. Connor handed off his mate to her brother and followed them into the clinic. He watched as Doc gently eased his sister down on the bed.

"Okay, let me see," he demanded.

Sighing, she removed Connor's jacket under the blanket and rolled onto her stomach and let her brother pull the sheet down to expose her back.

Connor stood beside the bed and traced his fingers down the puckered, pink lines.

To still have this much visible damage after a shift, it was evident her wounds should have been fatal.

With a trembling hand, Doc carefully pushed on the skin on either side of the furrows. Connor looked over and saw that Felix wore an identical sick expression on his face.

Connor was about to say something to Felix about how ill Doc looked when the small redhead forced his mate to lie down on the bed opposite of Madison.

“I’m so sorry, Maddox,” Madison whispered. It was only then that Connor made the connection. Madison, Madelyne, and Maddox were triplets. He had felt her pain and as a doctor he knew that it had been life threatening. He had to sit in Arkadia, completely helpless, and endure it.

Connor looked over to where Doc lay on the bed, one hand covering his eyes as tears dripped down his face. Felix stood on the other side of the bed with a death grip on Doc’s other hand.

“I thought I had lost you,” Doc said brokenly.

Connor swallowed hard around the lump in his throat. He brought the blanket up and tucked it in around Madison.

“I’m harder to kill than that,” she joked.

Doc looked over to stare at Connor.

“Vampire blood?” he asked.

Connor nodded. “Daniel donated a few drops. Psycho drugged her so she couldn’t shift and heal,” he explained.

“Just when I think I have a handle on paranormal medicine.” Doc shook his head.

“I feel so stupid,” Madison whispered.

Connor, Doc, and Felix stared at Madison.

“Don’t say that, baby. He had this planned down to the minute. He killed three Sentinels at the perimeter to get in and to create an escape route. He shot Ricochet to create a diversion. Like Daniel said, he’s a sick bastard, but, he’s smart.” Connor rubbed Madison’s back in small round circles.

“I had a general idea of what he looked like, knew he was a smaller guy, I should have never turned my back on him. He just looked so small and helpless.” She buried her face in her pillow.

Connor pulled her out of her pillow. “That is how he kills, sweetheart. He wouldn’t be successful, if it didn’t work.”

Suddenly she sat up and gripped the sheet to her chest.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked.

Connor blinked, surprised. “You shifted, remember? They were shredded.”

“Damn it! I loved that outfit. I hate that bastard!” she yelled.

Recognizing the need for anger, he nodded. “Yeah, fuck that asshole!”

“I had to special order that blouse from the designer himself! He doesn’t normally produce shirts with my bust size. Motherfucker!” she screamed.

“I’m here for you, sweetie!” a voice called out, and Rian swept through the glass double doors with Emmett in tow.

“I hope you don’t mind but I raided your suitcases. I thought you might need a change of clothes. Honey, I am scandalized and inspired by your lingerie collection.” Rian dropped a bag on the bed and pulled Madison into an embrace.

Connor’s ears perked up. “Lingerie collection?” he asked. They ignored him.

“Come on, honey, let’s get you in the shower.

I always want to wash after a shift. It feels so much more luxurious that way.

I even brought your shower gel and makeup bag.

I cannot wait to play with your makeup. It’s all quality stuff.

” Rian helped Madison off the bed. Felix came around and made sure her sheet stayed wrapped around her body.

“The showers here actually aren’t bad,” Felix chimed in as they started to lead her from the room. Connor went to follow, but Rian shook his head. “Sorry, girl time.” The three disappeared into an adjoining room.

Puzzled, Connor turned to Emmett who only shrugged.

“But aren’t they?” he asked Doc.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Connor,” Doc said, looking more composed.

Nearly an hour later, Madison emerged looking more like herself than the trembling, pale woman she had been earlier. Connor was worried that her old fire hadn’t returned then chastised himself. Her emotions weren’t as easily changed as her clothes.

“I feel a thousand percent better. Thank you, both, so much.” Madison leaned over and kissed both Felix and Rian.

“Hey, I broke into Connor’s house to get your stuff, don’t I get a kiss?” Emmett pouted.

Laughing, Madison kissed Emmett on the cheek.

Connor narrowed his eyes at his brother.

“What do you mean you broke into my house?”

“Door was locked, had to pick the lock.” Emmett shrugged.

“Come on, Ma will want to look you over to make sure you are okay.” Connor wrapped his arm around her waist.

The group walked to the diner. When they walked in, all talking stopped. Connor could feel Madison tense up.

“It’s about freakin’ time! Oh good, Rian is with you. Madison, do you have a pie preference for Thanksgiving? Rian, Damian said to check your damn phone, something about a certain napkin being out of stock.” Rebecca waved her clipboard around.

Madison relaxed against Connor.

Trust Rebecca to keep things upbeat.

“I loved Connor’s chocolate pie. I couldn’t wait to get it in my mouth,” Madison said, without missing a beat.

Connor was staring at his mate and ran into a table.

“Watch it, Connor, I think you may need that later.” Rian laughed.

Connor breathed out his mouth as he tried to walk normally to their table. Damn if this wasn’t embarrassing. Madison was trying her hardest not to laugh and wasn’t being successful. He grabbed her ass before she sat down and she squeaked.

“There she is. Madison, are you okay?” Ma came over to the table and hugged Connor. Just breathing in her perfume suddenly made everything better.

“I’ll be fine now that I’m back with Connor in Arkadia. I’m starving though,” Madison admitted.

“Me, too, Ma,” Connor added.

“I have beef stew or chicken and dumplings. I knew that you would want something warm and comforting,” Ma offered.

“Stew.” Connor smiled up at his Ma.

“Chicken and dumplings for me. Sounds heavenly.” Madison rubbed her stomach.

“I’m glad you’re okay, baby girl.” Ma hugged Madison before returning behind the

counter to dish out their dinner.

“What do you mean they are out of bronze? I spoke to them yesterday and there were no issues. No, pumpkin orange will not do. Call them back and tell them they are not offloading their surplus Halloween shit on us. I ordered bronze, they confirmed bronze, and I will have bronze on my Thanksgiving Day tables!” Rian yelled, before taking a deep breath.

“Sorry, babes, not your fault. I’ll call them back tomorrow. Yeah, yeah lurves you, too.” Rian hung up his phone and turned to them.

“Unfreaking real. You just can’t get good service anymore. They are so getting crossed off the list.” Rian crossed his arms in a huff.

Madison looked at Connor. “The list?” she asked, turning back to look at Rian, who brightened.

“Yes, the list. My master list of event-planning vendors. They were my go-to company for linens. Not anymore. They’ll be sorry when I update my blog,” Rian explained.

The rest of dinner went by, and Connor could tell that everyone was keeping conversations light. He was grateful. When he caught Madison yawning for the third time, he decided that it was time to go.

“Everyone, thank you,” Connor said as they walked out.

“Anytime, bro.”

The drive home was quiet as Madison kept dozing off and on.

When he pulled into the driveway, she was snoring lightly and purring in her sleep.

Thinking these were possibly the cutest sounds he had ever heard in his life, he hated to move her, but with the truck turned off, it would be getting cold quick.

He got out of the truck and closed his door.

He checked and sure enough his front door was unlocked.

Cursing Emmett, he went back to the truck and opened the passenger-side door.

He unbuckled his mate and pulled her into his arms. His bear rumbled his approval.

This is where she belonged. He kicked the door shut and walked into the house.

He reached out and quickly dead-bolted the front door before walking upstairs.

Madison began to wake up as he lay her on the bed. He was in the bathroom when he heard her call out his name.

“Connor?” Madison was sitting upright in bed, a scared look in her eyes. Connor would rip off his own arm to wipe the fear from her mind, to rid her of the memories that she had with her brush with evil.

“I’m here, wildcat. Let’s get you in your jammies,” he said, smiling. The fear left her features and her mouth twitched.

“I’m a grown woman from New York, we don’t have jammies. We have jim jams,” she clarified. Connor bowed deeply, flourishing his hand in a grandiose manner.

“My apologies, my lady. Of course, you could always sleep naked.” He stood up

straight and wagged his eyebrows.

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“No way. One, you’re a tad on the hairy side, you would tickle me to death in my sleep. Two, you’re a nuclear furnace. I need some fabric between us or I’ll burn up.” Madison bounced off the bed and went to the closet where her suitcase was. She opened the door, turned on the light, and walked in.

Connor was ready to go to bed as he watched his mate match her T-shirt and lounge pants. She held one up then the other.

“The green outfit matches the sheets,” he advised, amused.

“Okay, pink it is.” She undressed, sighing in relief when she took her bra off.

Connor never realized how heavy breasts must be to carry around all day.

Madison’s slender shoulders had red stripes from her bra straps.

She quickly pulled on her pajamas and darted past him to launch herself on the bed.

Grinning, Connor closed the closet door and joined his mate in bed.

He turned off the light and slipped between the sheets. He pulled Madison in close to his body, savoring her presence.

“Don’t let go,” she whispered.

“Never.”

Connor was at his wit's end. All morning Madison had been subdued, quiet, and sweet.

Not his usual wildcat. She sat at the table closet to the kitchen and listened to everyone else talk.

He was about to pack it up for the day and take her home when Rebecca came waddling into the diner carrying a stack of thick, heavy-looking books.

Mojo immediately jumped up and took the books for her.

Connor frowned.

"Thank you, Moe. Those were a wee bit heavier than I thought." Rebecca made Mojo lean down so she could kiss him on the cheek, which of course set his face ablaze.

"Anytime, darlin'." He grinned and went back to his table.

"Becca, what did we tell you about carrying heavy books?" Connor demanded, walking around the counter to stand in front of Rebecca. Throughout her pregnancy he was her self-appointed health warden. This time she had the decency to look contrite.

"I know, but it was only three books and I wanted to show them to Madison," she said, arching her back.

"Rebecca is your back okay?" Madison asked, reaching out to rub Rebecca's lower back. Rebecca sighed in relief.

"It's been twinge-y lately. Anyway, I think I found a project for you. I can't pay you for your help though," Rebecca said honestly.

“Lay it on me, sister,” Madison said amusedly, as she kept rubbing the small woman’s back.

“After Sebastian and Felix’s hearing, I started reading all the council law books I could get my hands on.

Some of the laws still in practice are archaic.

Everything needs to be reviewed and revamped to match modern society,” Rebecca explained, stepping away from Madison and smiling her thanks.

She sat down across from her at the table.

“Rebecca, some of those laws are in effect because we are shifters. They won’t be the same laws that you’re used to as a human.”

Rebecca shook her head at Madison.

“Read the pages I have marked in the first book.” Rebecca pushed the heavy tome over to Madison.

Madison lifted the heavy book and flipped to the first section. Connor watched as her eyes narrowed and her mouth became pinched. There was his hellcat! Thank god for Rebecca!

“You have got to be kidding me. I mean, no one actually goes by these laws do they?” she asked, her face flushed in anger.

Sadly, Rebecca nodded.

“I know of that example because a girl’s mother from a wolf pack in Pennsylvania

sent me a letter begging me to change the law.” Rebecca had both fists clenched on the table top.

Concerned, Connor took a seat between the two women. He lay a hand on Rebecca’s shoulder.

“What law?” he asked.

“That an Alpha is allowed to have sex with any female in his animal group and it’s not rape if she becomes pregnant, since she is producing young for the group.

The woman who contacted me was the mother of a ten-year-old girl who caught the attention of their Alpha.

Neither she nor the baby survived.” Rebecca took a shuddering breath.

“She was going to go to the council, but the Alpha said that he was acting within the boundaries of shifter law. There are worse laws in there,” Rebecca said, meeting Madison’s eyes.

Madison’s eyes flashed. Connor could tell she had found something in Arkadia that she could fight for.

“Give me a few days to read these. I’m not as quick a reader as I hear you are, nor do I have an eidetic memory. But, I’m no slouch. What in the hell has the council been doing?” Madison demanded to no one in particular.

“You don’t even want to know how long it took Lachlan to get Liam’s Law passed.” Ma sighed.

“Well, all that is about to change. Those old bastards won’t know what hit them,”

Madison said heatedly.

“Poor Lachlan.” Rebecca grinned.

“Poor nothing. They hold the most prestigious titles in our world, it’s about time they earned their keep,” Madison huffed.

“Go get ’em, hell cat,” Connor cheered.

“Hellcat? I thought I was your wildcat.” Madison smiled warmly at her mate.

“You have been upgraded,” Connor said in a robotic tone.

Rebecca’s head came around and she stared at Connor.

“When did you start watching?” she asked, bouncing around in her chair.

“Ever since I cancelled my cable service, I’ve been doing marathons on Netflix,” he admitted.

Rebecca gasped, looking appalled.

“Without me?”

“Sorry, Becca, I’m all caught up now,” he said.

“Well you can join the Inner Court for Syfy Saturdays since you’re flying your geek flag,” Rebecca announced.

“I have to text Ashby, he’s going to flip.” Rebecca giggled, pulling out her phone.

“He may need the distraction,” Madison said quietly.

Rebecca became somber.

“Rhys will pull through. There is nothing Gabriel can’t do,” Ma said wisely.

“And that’s exactly what I’ll tell Ashby, too.” Rebecca’s tiny fingers flew across the phone.

Connor held up his hand and looked at his larger fingers. He always had a hell of a time texting.

Madison reached over and patted his arm.

“I love your fingers,” she said, winking.

He gave his mate a shit-eating grin and pulled her down for a kiss.

“Connor, do you have Skype set up at your house?” Rebecca asked, fingers still moving at the speed of light.

“Yeah, I had David and Daniel set me up so I could do conference calls with Sentinel.”

“Perfect.”

Connor started to get nervous.

“Becca what are you planning?” She looked up at him, grinning.

“Mu-wha-ha ha ha.”

Connor turned to Madison. “Be afraid, be very afraid,” he said.

Madison laughed and went back to reading the law books.

Connor wanted to tell her he wasn’t kidding. He contemplated picking up his mate and heading back to their house. But he knew that would only make things worse. Sighing, he stood and went back to work prepping for dinner.

“Wise decision, son,” Pa said, sipping his coffee.

Connor dialed into Skype from the computer that was connected to his over-priced television. It didn’t take long before other video connections started to pop up on screen.

Felix was snuggled with Doc on one screen.

Rebecca and Aleks on another. Kate, Caleb, Bran, Gina, and Riley were from the pack house connection.

Liam, Kent, Sebastian, Rian, Damian, Rex and Kaden were connected from the pride house.

Finally Ashby, Nic, David, Daniel, Baptista and Roman came online from the coven.

“Okay, what are we watching?” Kate asked.

“I hear there is a super cheesy shark movie on SyFy,” Ashby said, wedged between Daniel and Nic. David sat on Daniel’s other side.

Kate, Caleb, and Bran were curled up together under a gorgeous teal quilt.

“It will have to be something on cable so we all see the same thing at the same time.” Sebastian dipped into the large bowl of popcorn he was sharing with his mates.

“Connor doesn’t have cable, just basic channels,” Rebecca reminded Sebastian.

“Oh yeah.” His face fell.

“We can fix that,” David grinned.

“Connor, go to your email and click on the link I sent you. It should take you to a live feed of a video we’re streaming. Gabriel sprung for the deluxe package with the internet service provider, so there should be no lag,” Daniel explained.

Connor pulled out his laptop and attached it to his TV, creating a split screen. He clicked on the link and they were watching SyFy. As the movie started, Connor got comfortable. It was nice that they were all connected like this but comfortable in their own homes. Then the comments started.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Kate exclaimed.

“That was so over the top it was almost cool,” Ashby admitted.

“Okay, that was just bad.” Rian laughed.

“I’m kinda rooting for the sharks,” Madison said.

Connor laughed.

“Hmmm.” Sebastian looked at the screen thoughtfully.

“No fucking way, Sebastian, alligator is scary enough.” Rian shuddered.

“Duhh Duh. Duuuuuuh Duh.” Liam starting doing the Jaws theme and Rian chucked a pillow at his head.

“This is a really cool setup.” Connor admired how easy it was to connect everyone.

“David and Daniel did it. Kate and I were moping around the diner thinking about how we were going to be housebound after the babies are born and they came up with this idea,” Rebecca said excitedly.

“You just have to remember to turn off the camera if you’re going to have an afternoon delight.” Kate leered at Rebecca, who blushed.

Everyone laughed.

“Wait, you mean the camera was on that one time?” Aleks demanded.

Rebecca looked everywhere but at her mate, turning the color of a tomato. Connor couldn’t help it, the look on his brother’s face was priceless. He reached down and did a print screen to capture the image.

“Becca!” Aleks roared.

“What! You practically jumped me that afternoon because I made my famous lemon pound cake. I could barely get two words out. It’s your fault,” Aleks stammered.

“Oh she got two words out all right. ‘Oh. God’,” Kate roared.

Rebecca thought about it for a few seconds and then beamed at her best friend. “Oh yeah.”

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Rian was laughing so hard he was having trouble breathing.

“It’s not that funny, RiRi.” Kate eyed her friend who was still gasping for breath. Rian shook his head.

“Care...bear...stare.” There was a moment of silence before he lost it again.

Rebecca was laughing so hard she was grabbing her stomach. Kate was laid out between her mates gasping for breath. Ashby’s giggles had attracted most of the coven around their sofa.

“Oh. God.” Rebecca panted.

Which set everyone off again. When they finally calmed down Connor grinned at his brother, who looked equal parts amused and mortified.

“I hope the baby decides to come early. It would be great if he were born next week.” Rebecca smiled.

“Why, Becca?” Connor asked.

“It’s my birthday next week,” she said, smiling brightly.

Everyone came to a grinding halt.

“What!” Rian screeched.

Kate, Ashby, Nic, and Sebastian looked frantic. Aleks just looked like he had been punched in the solar plexus.

Rebecca looked around confused. “My birthday is November twenty-sixth. Did I forget to tell you?” She tilted her head and looked at her friends.

“Yes!” everyone bellowed.

Connor could see the wheels turning in his brother’s head. His brother had had no idea his mate’s birthday was next week.

Rebecca waved her hand at everyone. “It’s fine, I haven’t really celebrated it since my dad passed away. I’m more excited about Thanksgiving. Uh-oh.” She sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Be right back, hafta potty.” Aleks had to help her off the couch and she disappeared from the screen.

“She would forget about her own birthday.” Madison shook her head. Connor had to agree. Rebecca was selfless like that.

“Surprise party on Thanksgiving?” Rian asked. Everyone quickly agreed.

“Rian I..” Aleks started.

Rian was already nodding. “Everyone email me your gift ideas, I’ll make it happen.”

“You’re a lifesaver, buddy, I owe you.” Aleks released a deep breath.

“If you need any help, Rian, let us know,” Kate offered.

Everyone nodded.

“You bet! I love parties.” Rian had his notebook out and immediately started scribbling plans.

Rebecca came back in time to finish the rest of the movie.

After everyone said good-bye, Connor made sure he disconnected everything.

Madison was chuckling at him as she carried their popcorn bowl to the kitchen to put in the dishwasher.

Connor followed and watched his mate putter around their kitchen.

To him it was the best sight in the world.

“I called Baron, about Madelyne.” Connor saw her stop what she was doing and turn to him.

He continued. “I told them to start raiding poacher camps looking for a white Bengal tiger. There’s no guarantee, but it’s a fresh perspective.

Any case involving a Sentinel’s family member gets top priority, I wanted to make sure her case got reclassified. ”

Madison crossed the kitchen and threw herself in his arms.

“I love you! I love you so much.” She jumped up and wrapped her arms and legs around him.

He easily supported her weight and headed to the stairs.

Her mouth came down on his, and she sucked each of his lips, taking his breath away.

When she pulled back they were both breathing heavily.

He was surprised he was able to get to the top of the stairs without killing them both.

“I love you, too, my wildcat.” He walked into their bedroom and placed her on the bed. It was true, he loved her feisty nature and that aspect of her personality had been subdued since her rescue. He wanted it back. Grinning, he thought of an idea.

“Baby, you want to try something new?”

Madison paled.

“Connor, I don’t think I can be restrained again, not so soon.” There was a tremor to her voice, and her body immediately slumped down.

Connor was at her side in seconds, taking her hands. “I would never ask you to do anything you were uncomfortable with. Actually, I was going to see if you would be interested in restraining me?”

Her eyes grew wide. “You’d do that?”

“Of course, you’re my mate,” Connor said simply.

Madison looked up at him in wonder before a wicked smile took over her face.

Oh crap.

Madison got off the other side of the bed so that she was facing Connor with the mattress between them.

She slowly began to remove her clothing one piece at a time.

Connor could feel himself begin to harden.

He went to walk around the bed, but she shook her head.

She pushed her breasts up to her heart-shaped face and ran her tongue along the top of one of the mounds.

Connor shifted his stance, growling low.

She unsnapped her bra and let it fall to the floor and stepped out of her panties.

She climbed on the bed and on all fours stalked him like the tigress she was. He began reciting the alphabet. Backward.

“Strip for me.” She reclined back on her elbows.

He gave her his sexiest smile and slowly pulled his T-shirt up over his head.

He made sure to flex every muscle he had and was rewarded with a soft sigh.

He stuck his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and looked up at her.

She was watching his every move. He ran his thumbs along the top of his jeans before cupping his groin.

He let his head drop back, and he groaned at the sensation of denim on his cock.

He could smell her from across the room.

His mouth began to water, imagining lapping at the drenched folds of her sweet sex.

He unbuttoned his jeans and let them drop to the floor. His hard prick was dripping as it tapped his stomach. Gauging her reactions, he went to take a step forward and again she shook her head.

“Could you wear just the holster?” she asked.

Grinning, he nodded and walked over to the closet. He pulled on the worn leather gun holster over his shoulders. It felt cold against his heated skin. He went back into the room and modeled it for her. She patted the bed. He crawled on, and she arranged it so that he was lying down the center.

She knelt to one side on her knees and looked down at him.

“Hands over your head and don’t move your feet. If you move I stop,” she warned.

He was grinning indulgently when she caught him unawares by leaning down and swallowing his cock whole.

“Fuck!” he yelled. His hands came down toward her head, but he caught himself before he could touch her silken auburn hair.

The muscles in both arms were taut as he clenched both hands into fists above his head.

She swallowed again and again convulsing her throat around him.

She eased off of his throbbing prick and wrapped her tongue around the mushroom-shaped head.

She lapped at him, playing, enjoying every sound she was wringing from his body.

“Madison, baby, you’re killing me.” He gasped.

She smiled but didn’t say anything. She lowered her head and the next sensation nearly had him shooting his load. Somehow she had shifted just her tongue and she was running the rough surface of her tiger tongue over his balls.

“Fuck! Baby, stop. Stop or I’ll go,” he yelled. He couldn’t catch his breath, and his hands were shaking with the need to touch her.

“I’m in control, right?” she asked.

“Whatever you want.”

She nodded and straddled his hips. Reaching between their bodies, she guided his thick cock into her body.

When she lowered herself onto him, he groaned.

When she raised up and allowed her body to slam down, she was able to take his thick shaft deeper and deeper.

It wasn’t long before her frenzied rhythm had him pounding into her, bumping her cervix.

Her head was thrown back and her body moved on its own, taking what she needed from her mate. When she looked down and met his eyes, he saw her old confidence shining in her eyes. She loved driving him to the brink before slowing down. Each moan and protest brought a smile to her lips.

“Baby, please.” She nodded and he reached down his hands to still her hips and hold her in place.

He began to piston his hips, releasing every ounce of pent-up need he had built when he wasn’t able to touch her.

It didn’t take long before she was screaming out her pleasure, and her orgasm triggered his own.

When her body was done milking his cock, he lifted her off his body and pulled her into his arms, taking them to their sides. She wrapped her arms around him tightly.

“Thank you, for giving me what I needed,” she whispered.

“It was such a hardship. I think you fucked me blind.”

She nipped at his collarbone.

“I love you, my wildcat.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I love you, too, Professor.”

“You have a thing for my Sentinel gear don’t you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Goodnight, wildcat.”

“Goodnight, my love.”

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“I’m sorry I missed the meeting. Connor was feeling extra frisky this morning.” Madison grinned at Felix as she stretched out on one of the gurneys.

“No worries. Rian just got everyone’s input about the surprise party for Rebecca. I’ve never seen him this excited before. It wasn’t just him either, everyone couldn’t do enough to help. Rebecca has really done a lot for Arkadia.”

“She’s so tiny though,” Madison commented.

“She is fun-crazy, and extremely protective of the townspeople. I haven’t been here that long, but the little twerp has burrowed her way to my heart. I just want to carry her around in my pocket.” Felix had a clipboard and was finishing the inventory of one of the treatment rooms.

“Do you think Maddox will remember to grab ketchup? I forgot to ask for it,” Madison asked.

Maddox had left nearly thirty minutes ago to grab them lunch at the diner.

Felix shrugged. “Probably, the man is a genius in the kitchen. He can take basic food like rice and chicken and make it into meals that you can actually eat.” Felix sounded amazed.

“When we were kids he would make us dinner all the time. Madelyne and I aren’t very good in the kitchen,” she admitted and felt the now-familiar pang she experienced every time she mentioned her sister.

“Thank god, he can cook, otherwise we would probably starve,” Felix admitted.

“Have you heard anything about that vampire? I think his name was Rhys,” Madison asked.

She couldn’t explain it, but she felt extremely close to the vampire. They had lived through hell together. She wanted to make sure he was okay.

“Prince Gabriel still has to let him feed directly from him to keep Rhys compliant. His eyes haven’t returned to normal yet, and he isn’t able to tolerate human blood.

That is the most concerning issue, if he can’t live off of human blood, it’s Vampire and Shifter law to kill him. ” Felix shook his head.

“If anyone can save him, though, Prince Gabriel can. During the virus epidemic you should have seen him. Always in control. That man exudes power. Rhys just needs some time that’s all.”

Madison could tell that Felix was being optimistic. But, she knew council law, and they would have a fight on their hands to keep Rhys alive.

“Excuse me, I need help,” a voice said from the doorway.

Madison felt her body freeze. She and Felix turned at the same time to face the stranger at the door. She began to shake in anger as her tiger rose to the surface.

“Go ahead and shift, this is an elephant gun. It can easily kill your kitty cat. Now, come quietly.” The man waved an impressive long-barreled gun at them.

“You really are a dumb fuck aren’t you? Our mates are already on their way, they can sense our fear through our mate bond,” Felix said disdainfully.

The stranger gave a childlike smile and shrugged his shoulders.

“Then, I guess there is no reason to keep you alive.” He raised the gun and set his sights on Madison.

Connor!

Her heart screamed her mate’s name. Next to her, she heard the sounds of breaking wood and debris falling to the floor. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The blur of movement to her right had her turning her head to look at Felix.

Instead of the small, red-haired man she had come to adore like a little brother, there stood a twenty foot, dark-green and brown Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The intruder began a high-pitched scream. Felix didn’t waste any time, he bent down and grabbed the squealing man between his long jagged teeth. Hearing their mates outside, Felix turned and walked through the clinic wall to the street outside where it seemed the entire town stood gaping in shock.

“Holy fuck,” Madison whispered.

“Don’t forget the ketchup. Madison likes to put ketchup on her meat loaf,” Doc said.

Connor nodded and threw some ketchup packets in the to-go bag. He was going to surprise his mate by joining them for lunch.

“Is it just me or are you busier than normal?” Doc asked.

Connor had to admit he was right. It seemed like everyone was in the diner for lunch.

Rebecca and Aleks sat with Ashby, Nic, and Gabriel at one table.

Kate, Bran, and Caleb were chatting with Liam, Sebastian, and Kent at another table.

Rian and Damian seemed to flitting from table to table talking to everyone.

A lot of the pack and pride had come in for his ma's meat loaf. Everyone was excited about the town Thanksgiving dinner. Rebecca, being Rebecca, had created and started passing around a volunteer sign-up sheet. It was already filled. God, he loved this town.

Out of nowhere a wave of panic and terror washed over him. On the other side of the counter, Doc had dropped to his knees, clutching his chest.

"Doc?" Kate asked. Everyone got quiet staring at their doctor.

In the distance a loud, inhuman roar reverberated through the diner.

Rebecca jumped up excitedly.

"Yes! Yes! He did it!" She ran from the diner.

Connor and Aleks were frozen in shock when a second roar catapulted them forward.

Connor ran across the street and headed to the clinic. When he got to the building he skidded to a halt, half of the town behind him.

"What the fuck!" Aleks yelled.

Rebecca was jumping up and down. Sebastian was doing fist pumps in the air. Doc looked at the large reptile and turned milky white.

"Felix?" he whispered.

Connor stared at the dinosaur that was chewing on a screaming man.

“Is that? Is that a severed arm between your teeth!” Doc demanded, his voice going up an octave.

Felix ignored him.

Connor edged past Felix looking for Madison. He spotted her trying to step through the rubble. He ran over and lifted her over most of the large debris.

“Spit him out this instant!” Doc ordered, his finger pointing to the ground imperiously.

“I want a ride, come on Felix, you promised me if you ever mastered a T-Rex, I would get a ride,” Rebecca begged, trying to climb up Felix’s back leg to secure a spot for her piggy back ride.

Connor watched as his elder brother started to lose his mind.

“Becca, get down!” Aleks screamed, trying to pull his mate down.

“You are going to have people breath! Do you hear what I am saying? Can you hear what you have me saying! How are you going to floss arms out of your teeth, Felix?!” Doc’s face was now flushed red, and his breathing was erratic.

“Becca, you get your cute ass down here now! You are on a freaking dinosaur!” Aleks screamed, beginning to hyperventilate.

Rebecca whooped and cheered from Felix’s back, her tiny arm wrapped around the large lizard’s throat.

Connor looked over to the crowd. Liam was waving his arms at his mate. “No! No fucking way! I am not waking up next to a fucking T-Rex baby. Don’t even think about it.” Liam clutched at his mate’s arms as Sebastian sniffled. Kent was steadily trying to calm both his mates down.

Rian was taking pictures of Felix with his smartphone. His head looked over to where Liam was confronting Sebastian.

“Oh hell no! You would squish Liam. Enough with the scary shit, Sebastian, you are not eating my ass!” he declared loudly.

Aleks and Doc paused for a moment to stare at Rian, who surprised everyone by turning slightly pink. “Okay, that didn’t come out quite right, but you know what I mean.”

“How about a velociraptor? They’re smaller?” Sebastian asked.

“No!” Rian and Liam shouted.

“Look at the clinic!” Doc covered his face with his hands as Felix continued to chew on the intruder.

Ma walked up behind him and placed a comforting hand on Doc’s shoulder.

“Felix, spit that bad man out. Rebecca, one lap around town and then you are sitting down for a while, you’re getting too excited.

Sebastian, I wouldn’t recommend anything bigger than an alligator, you’ll destroy the pride house.

Duncan, take your brother to Mojo’s, get a shot of whiskey in him, and then bring

him by the diner for something to eat.

Connor, is Madison okay?" Ma asked, her voice calm and even.

Connor looked at Madison, and Madison looked at Connor.

"Why did I ever think I would be bored living here?" Madison asked.

"Wildcat, this is par for the course."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:04 pm

“I don’t know how you talked me into making pies,” Connor complained, as he finished carrying in the pies he had baked for Arkadia’s first town Thanksgiving. He looked around the gym, the decorations were exquisite and the smells were heavenly.

Everywhere he looked, families were smiling and children were playing.

It was a huge difference from the sight that he had seen in the gym five months ago.

They had so much to be thankful for. He grinned, remembering the look on his commander’s face, when he reported that their killer had been eaten by a dinosaur.

Best. Report. Ever.

“Because one, you know what I’m willing to do for your chocolate pie, and two, you saw how overwhelmed your sister was getting,” Madison reminded him.

“She was looking even more puny than usual this week.” Connor looked over to where Rebecca was still crying over her surprise party. Rian evidently considered this a sign of success because he kept smiling at her and handing her tissues.

“Did your brother stop having dinosaur nightmares?”

Connor shook his head. “No, but I told him to reinforce the idea that the dinosaur is the overprotective babysitter in his mind. He might keep dreaming about it, but maybe in the dream the dinosaur saves my nephew, instead of eating him.”

“Looks like Rebecca is opening your gifts.” Madison grabbed his arm and dragged

him over to where Rebecca sat in the middle of a large group.

When she saw Connor she waved the small box, struggling with the weight. She ripped off the paper and laughed when she saw he had given her a box of bullets.

Aleks glared at him.

“Wait, that’s part one. Open the larger box, that’s part two.” Connor pointed to the box at her feet. She had Aleks lift the box into the empty chair beside her and decimated the wrapping paper. When she saw what the box held she gasped.

“Oh, Connor, I love it! I always wanted my own espresso machine.”

Aleks stared at him. “I hate you.”

“Love ya, bro.” Connor grinned at Aleks, who was shooting daggers in his direction.

“I can’t wait until after the baby is born, I’ll caffeinate and shoot stuff!”

Connor waved happily at his brother, who was trying to hide the bullets, and walked Madison over to where Liam, Kent, and Sebastian sat at a nearby table. Liam held up his fist that Connor bumped. Madison walked over to the long buffet table to get some food.

“Priceless. Well played. What you got her will go nicely with the sky-diving lessons I got her.” Liam laughed.

“You two are bad,” Sebastian said, his mouth full of turkey.

Connor remembered something he had been meaning to ask Liam. “Hey, Liam, when will Brendan be moving to the pride house?” Liam had approached him to do

counseling for the youngster, considering what the little guy had been through.

“They are waiting until the little tyke is out of school. I was suspicious at first, but my grandfather flew down there to make sure Brendan and his uncle are okay. Even my grandfather agreed that pulling Brendan out of school now wouldn’t be best for him, since things are just returning to normal for him.

Next summer, they are moving out here. I’d appreciate if you still talked to him though. ”

“Of course. Sounds like both he and his uncle have been through a lot.”

Liam nodded.

Madison walked back over and handed him his plate.

“Thanks, honey.”

“Liam, tell your grandfather to stop dodging my calls, they won’t be going away. Rebecca is right, we need to completely revamp our council laws,” Madison said, before taking a large bite of turkey.

Liam winced. “I’ll try.”

“Good, because I don’t want to have to get ugly.” She smiled sweetly.

“Down, hellcat.” Connor laughed. She poked him in the ribs.

“When are you due, Sebastian?” Madison asked.

“Christmas Eve. Kate’s due date is New Year’s Eve, and Rebecca is Christmas day.

But Doc thinks that once one of us goes into labor, we'll all go into labor due to our bond." Sebastian rubbed his belly.

"It will be exciting to have so many babies around." Madison sighed.

"Maybe you'll be next," Sebastian suggested.

Connor began to choke on his pie.

Madison smiled at him and winked. "Maybe."

They ate two more plates over the next couple hours until Connor could barely move. Madison leaned over and whispered in his ear. "We could head home."

Connor stood and pulled his mate to her feet.

"Is it my turn to surrender or yours?" Connor whispered the question, their lips touching. She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore."

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:04 pm

“I am so disappointed with our serial killer. He had such potential. But, I suppose his mind was starting to go due to the drug.” The gentleman sighed and turned to the two men kneeling in front of his desk. The wolf shifter was to the left and a clean-cut, suited man on the right.

“Devon, so glad you could join us. I’m not sure if you have met Director Wendall.

He will be helping to demonstrate what happens when you anger me.

You see, I very specifically asked him to recruit Connor Arkadion to assist in tracking down that adorable serial killer.

But, he wanted glory more. Payne, if you would please? ”

He watched as the Agency’s top man struggled as metal bands were clasped around each wrist, ankle, and neck.

“I loved your collar so much, I made a modified version. You’re simply going to love this old boy.” The gentleman picked up a square black box. Grinning like a little boy, he pressed the silver button.

The Agency Director screamed and fell to the ground, writhing in agony. Blue bolts of electricity danced along his body. After a minute the smell of cooked flesh filled the room. The wolf Alpha began to dry heave.

The gentlemen then picked up the small silver remote. He lightly tapped the small box that controlled the Alpha’s training collar.

“I am expecting results this time, or I won’t be nearly so lenient with you.

Oh, and take that sniveling lawyer with you, his cries of pain are grating on my nerves.

” The gentleman waved his hand and the trembling Alpha was pulled from the room.

He wrinkled his nose at the charred mess on his floor. Fun, but messy.

His puppy had this last chance or he was turning him over to the dungeon master for fun. Permanently. He laughed to himself. Who was he kidding? He was going to do that anyway. Smiling, he sat down and began to plan his Christmas cards.