



Hellhounds and Homicides

(Pittsburgh Vampires #28)

Author: *B.A. Stretke*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Evil is stirring once again.

Sometimes the smallest creature can be the best weapon...

Detective Rowen Dalhousie of the Pittsburgh Police Department has been assigned a strange case in a rough area of Pittsburgh known as 'The Lowlands.' Dalhousie is a young and talented homicide detective steadily climbing the ranks at the department and is known for being able to solve the cases others can't. On the surface, a few missing people in the lowlands wouldn't warrant someone of Dalhousie's caliber, but something about this case feels off, and his Sergeant wants it solved pronto. None of his fellow officers know his secret, his special skills that allow him to see a case differently and find the clues no one else can. Rowen is a cat shifter, one of the strays that populate the edges of our world, watching and learning. Rowen thinks he knows where this case will take him; little does he know he is in for the ride of his life.

Dumas is a legendary Hellhound shifter and soldier for the Hadden Coven. Dumas is the man Nik Hadden sends in to make sure a problem is dealt with thoroughly. When humans begin disappearing in the lowlands with magics surely to blame, Dumas is tasked with investigating the problem and putting it down swiftly. His investigation runs headlong into a problem by the name of Detective Rowen Dalhousie. Dumas is soon to discover that the Detective getting in the way of his mission will become his forever. Can the hellhound win the love of his forever mate and solve the mystery at the heart of these crimes?

Never bet against a Hellhound with Fate on his side.

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"That's the third case you've closed this week. What's your secret?" A junior Patrolman asked with wonder. Detective Rowen Dalhousie simply tipped his cap and kept walking. He was not going to give his co-workers his secret. He held many secrets about himself, his life, and his work, and he wasn't about to share any of them – especially not in a room full of humans.

He became a detective a little over six months ago, and his plan was to steadily move up the ranks to Chief. He started out as an officer at a department in the suburbs, but after a few months, he knew that he had to get somewhere that experienced more action and was more high-profile.

He transferred to the heart of Pittsburgh and to one of the most active precincts, Central and Downtown. What he hadn't banked on was the number of paranormals working and residing in central Pittsburgh. His most egregious error was not knowing that Nikolas Hadden, Master of the Hadden Coven, ran the city and owned a good share of downtown.

The Hadden Center was one of the architectural masterpieces of the Financial District. It was well known and revered for its fashion, form and beauty. It was also home to the Hadden Coven. But no one outside of the supernatural world knew that fact. He also discovered several wolf shifters, and at least one vampire worked at this central precinct.

Thankfully, he was a breed of shifter who possessed natural protection that made them difficult to detect. With a basic cloaking agent, he could easily pass for a human. But there were those within the Hadden Coven who could see him clearly, such as Master Hadden and some of those within his leadership. Therefore, the

Hadden Center was a place he planned to avoid.

Rowen preferred to keep to himself and socialized primarily with humans. Shifters and the like had never treated him well, and he preferred not to associate with them. He wasn't a part of any community. He was what most paranormals would call a rogue, but Rowen's people called them strays.

Dumas and Gage were on patrol in the lowlands. It was an area south of downtown that although much effort has been made to upgrade still attracts and breeds darkness and negativity. Even the Charmer has been unable to maintain the land for long. He cleanses the area and within a month or two it starts to slip.

He can cure a building or structure and make it stick until the ground underneath it swells and infects once again. Curing the land itself is difficult and temporary unless the source is discovered. The land is ever-changing, and the evils of this world always seem to find a way in.

The Master has not given up on purifying this area. He owns several buildings in the area empty warehouses and vacant businesses which are kept clean and unpolluted in hopes of establishing a more positive influence. He also continues to assign patrols and to cleanse regularly. Evil will never be allowed a solid foothold in his city again.

There was talk on the streets of something suspiciously wicked occurring to some of the locals who called the lowlands home. The center of all gossip was the Two Track, a wannabe country and western bar that was actually just a sleazy, disreputable hangout referred to by the locals as 'off the tracks'. It was filled with the usual crowd of humans, shifters, and a couple of vampires, and they were all looking for the same thing: cheap booze, and even cheaper connections. It was dreary, but it was a necessary location to frequent in order to stay aware and be seen. If there was trouble brewing, they'd find it at the Two Track.

Nik Hadden was in his office going over police records of the incident at the Glendale Lodge making sure no sign of the supernatural came up no matter how trivial. It was a wild weekend, but he had to admit he loved getting away with his beloved. They would try again and maybe this time have a weekend filled with a lot more love and laughter and a lot less violence and bullets.

Andrew his assistant announced Kristof's arrival. Kristof was the resident Alpha wolf and also Andrew's beloved. Nik stood and shook Kristof's hand before returning to his seat behind the desk. Kristof took the seat directly in front.

When the Hadden Coven began collecting wolf shifters as beloveds, Nik decided it was time to give them their own space because, as pack animals, they needed other wolves. They were still coven members, but the wolves also formed their own pack within the Coven and answered to their Alpha Kristof Lakatos. The pack members dealt with Kristof, and Kristof dealt with Nik.

The meeting today was to discuss the findings of Grant Dorsey a wolf shifter under Kristof and also a detective with the Pittsburgh PD. Grant was bonded to a coven member and good friends with Iker Dawson the husband of Walker's best friend Stanley Binkman. Iker was also a detective with the Pittsburgh PD along with two other wolves that were patrolmen it gave Nik a connection in the police department which he valued highly.

"Grant has reported that the police are getting interested in the lowlands. It appears that people may be disappearing. There have been several reports of locals coming up missing, but so far, no bodies." Kristof began, and Nik's interest was piqued immediately. Having the human police rooting around in the lowlands could be a recipe for disaster. Many paranormal beings reside there, along with many humans. It's an unpleasant area, but rooms are cheap, and illegal activities tend to go unnoticed.

“What have the police found?” Nik asked.

“They’re not sure what they have. With so many of the residents being transient, it's hard to tell if they've disappeared or merely left of their own free will. They're looking into the reports.” Kristof sent a copy of Grant's report to Nik. "As you can see, they've decided to assign a detective to the case. He's a new homicide detective, so apparently that is the direction they believe this case is headed."

“Who is he?”

“Detective Rowen Dalhousie, human and he’s said to be tenacious with an eye on advancement. He’s closed three homicide cases in the past week.” Kristof explained their situation quite clearly.

"He's good at his job, and he's not going to miss much." Nik voiced his concerns.

“It could become messy if there is a supernatural cause to these supposed disappearances.”

“Yes, we need to keep an eye on Det. Dalhousie.” Nik thought about who was the best for this job, and the name that came to mind was Dumas. He'd proven himself and his capabilities on several occasions, including their ill-fated weekend getaway. "I'll put Dumas on the case. He's already patrolled the area many times, so he's familiar, and his hellhound abilities will be useful for such an assignment. The lowlands are so unpredictable."

“I’ll have Grant contact Dumas and bring him up to speed on the case.” Kristof finished and stood.

“Thank you Kristof.” He left and closed the door behind him. Nik’s mind immediately went to the issues that could arise with any close scrutiny of the

lowlands by the Pittsburgh PD.

They'd managed to beat back the evil virus that seemed to plague the area but were unable to eliminate it completely. Now, there were police to contend with along with the evil and its effects. If people are disappearing, there is most certainly a supernatural basis, so Dumas will have to find the culprit before the distinguished Det. Rowen Dalhousie. If not, they will be forced to deal with the Detective.

Nik put in a call to his second Josef McQueen, and asked to meet him at the new coffee bar downstairs. Their baked goods were extraordinary according to Walker and he was interested in trying the orange soufflé coffee cake. Josef was there when he arrived, and he explained to him the situation in the lowlands.

"I agree Dumas would be best for the job. He's immune to most magics and can keep a low profile while also very capable of handling any issue that might arise." Josef stated. "He doesn't have the ability to clear memories, but he can incapacitate the individual until a mind sweeper arrives." Josef smiled.

"Perhaps you could send someone with him," Nik responded lightly.

"Arthur Reis." He said the name and then continued with his explanation. "He's one of the new people who came in with the final call but has risen to the occasion and has presented himself as a worthy soldier. He and Dumas have worked together before and seem compatible. Reis was a coven guard at his old home and could use the experience working in the field among humans."

"It's important to get comfortable with the human population and to also learn to be careful. But with that said, I don't know if working in the vicinity of the Pittsburgh PD is really where I'd like for him to gain experience. If he screws up, it's on all of us." Nik warned cautiously.

"I trust him," Josef stated.

"Okay," Nik responded. Josef trusted Reis, and Nik trusted Josef, so it was set.

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Rowen had no more than finished with the Regency murder, and he was handed another case. The Regency murder was the murder of Jason Meester, the chef at the Regency Hotel, who was murdered by a co-worker who then tried to cover it as an unfortunate workplace accident.

They might have gotten away with it for the fact that Rowen had a skill set that made him privy to private acts and conversations. He discovered who the murderer was and how they did it and then set about proving it. It was tense and fast-paced and, as always, Rowen enjoyed bringing the guilty to justice.

This case, however, was something different. It was more a missing persons case and Rowen wondered why someone with his qualifications would be assigned to such a case. "I know you're a homicide detective and you're seeing this as a basic missing person, but that's not how I read it." His Sergeant explained the case in more detail.

"There are reports of three people missing in the lowlands. It's a rough part of the city, and that would not always raise particular alarms, but this is different. The missing people are not connected to anything illegal; they are average people living in the lowlands for whatever reason. They were all taken from their respective homes in the night, never to be seen again. This has happened over a period of ten days." Rowen started working on the case as soon as the Sergeant began to speak.

"They were last seen entering their homes but never seen leaving?" He asked, and the Sergeant nodded. "They weren't drug users or addicts of any kind?" The Sergeant shook his head. "I see." He said, then added. "You believe they are dead, and you think someone is doing this for kicks." Again, the Sergeant nodded.

"Review the file and get to work." He said as he walked away, leaving Rowen to contemplate the situation. The lowlands were a hell of a place and not somewhere Rowen enjoyed traveling. It was his job, so he would do his best to discover the whereabouts of these people and those responsible for their disappearance. There were no bodies and, according to the files, no blood evidence, so calling it murder was presumptuous.

The lowlands, as they were referred, was populated mostly by paranormal beings. The negative vibe of the area seemed to deter humans although some lived there in the tall tenement building by the stretch of warehouses. Some who lived there simply enjoyed the illicit activity that regularly took place in the lowlands.

Rowen preferred humans because he could understand them and their motives, he could handle humans. He could also pass for humans, no one looked at him oddly or dismissively like the paranormal world tended to do when they recognized him.

His cloaking spell hid him from the supernatural world so the people in the lowlands simply assumed he was human. Still, he worried that one day someone was going to see through him but hopefully that day wasn't today.

Rowen headed to the lowlands after reading the missing persons files on the three individuals. They were three men all human, of a similar age and all lived in the building referred to as the tenement. One worked part time as a bartender at the Two Track, one was a laborer who worked for various contractors and the last was a student at the Wintersteen Trade school. He was studying welding.

They all knew each other but were not friends. That gave him nothing, but it did give him the location to set up his surveillance. The tenement building was full, and many of those residing there were young men similar to the three who had disappeared. If it was a serial criminal, then chances were they might try again.

The tenement was six stories high, and the three men who had disappeared lived on different floors. The first to disappear was on floor two, the second floor four, and the third lived on floor five. When he arrived in the lowlands, he was immediately notified that a man living at the tenement had been found dead on the sixth floor. He was to meet the officers at the scene. His Sergeant was right; it was now a full-on murder investigation.

Dumas and Reis were patrolling the main street that took in the bars, diners, and a few sketchy businesses when they were notified that a body was discovered on the sixth floor of the tenement building. The same building where three residents had been reported missing.

"There's a body this time, so maybe it will reveal who's responsible for all the disappearances," Reis commented.

"Or it's simply a separate murder," Dumas responded, knowing that murders in the lowlands were more common than they should be. Although the numbers had decreased since Master Hadden started a regular patrol of the area. It would be helpful if the Pittsburgh PD did the same, but they tended to let the people of the lowlands take care of themselves. "Let's check it out. The police are already there, so we'll stay in the background and listen."

The two of them were outside on the sidewalk with the other locals listening as the Detective spoke with a couple of officers. He had already been upstairs and was peppering the officers with questions regarding what they saw when they arrived, who called them, their impression of the scene, etc.

"That's Dalhousie," Reis said, and Dumas had already made that assumption. They split up, one going right and the other left, intent on gathering as much information as they could.

Dumas moved as close to Dalhousie as he could get without drawing attention to himself. The man was not what he'd expected when he was told he was a young upstart detective looking to quickly rise in the ranks and showing considerable skill.

He'd expected cocky with an unpleasant attitude, and he expected tall and large. For whatever reason, such a mover and shaker had struck him as having to be large. The man who stood a few feet from him did not appear to be any of those things and was definitely not large or tall. He listened closely and took time to allow the officers to explain themselves without cutting them off or talking over them.

His eyes were what struck Dumas at first. They were the most beautiful shade of green, a radiant, shining sage green. He caught his eyes once and quickly moved away cutting off the contact as soon as he realized that he was staring at the him.

Dalhousie was attentive, and his special awareness was sharp. He glanced toward Dumas once more, but Dumas did not engage. Dalhousie saw everything and still listened intently to every word that was spoken to him. Dumas wanted to observe the room and get a look at the remains. He could move fast and silently, so he stepped away from the group and stole away upstairs.

Reis recognized Dumas' intent and covered for him by bringing attention to himself and moving away from the building, drawing their eyes to his movements without making a spectacle. Dumas was in the apartment in seconds, taking in the aura and impressions and getting a sense of the man who lived there. The body had been removed, but the essence was still visible to Dumas.

This wasn't a conventional killing. It was supernatural. The markers were everywhere. The body was emaciated, drained of all fluid and form, and according to what he'd heard downstairs, the man had been seen alive and well an hour previous to being found in this condition. Something took everything from him, every ounce of life and force, and did it in under an hour.

He heard someone approaching, so he cloaked his appearance and slipped out, meeting Reis outside. "What did you find?" Reis inquired.

"It was supernatural. Something inhuman killed that guy."

"What was it?"

"I don't know the scent was strong and yet scattered and frayed. It was impossible to read but its presence was unmistakable." Dumas continued to watch Detective Dalhousie from a distance as he spoke to everyone gathering information that could lead him to the killer.

As a human, Dalhousie would not last ten seconds with this killer, so it was paramount that the Pittsburgh police did not get too close to whatever it was that was happening in the lowlands. The Detective was focused and diligent. If necessary, there may need to be a vampire intervention taking him off the case and replacing him with someone less skilled at their job.

"Humans cannot discover the cause of this death. Even if they don't admit it, they will have the knowledge, and that is unacceptable." They remained on the edges of the scene for the rest of the night, and come morning after the bulk of the police presence had left, they returned to the apartment together this time. Dumas wanted Reis' impression of the space.

"Wow, this is messed up." Reis enunciated each word clearly as he moved around the room, careful not to disturb anything. "It's powerful whatever it is, and there is magic involved." He looked up at Dumas. They left the apartment and then gained entrance to the apartments belonging to the missing people, and they found the same. The essence was weaker, but it was the same mix of supernatural and magic.

"They must not have had time to dispose of the last body. Someone or something

interrupted them.” Dumas made the assumption, and Reis nodded.

"I heard one of the humans out front tell the detective that the man who had been killed, Jason Turner, had been invited to dinner and didn't show, so his friend went to check on him." Reis then added. "He said there was a strange odor of sulfur in the apartment that dissipated quickly." That made the situation so much worse. Dumas knew the implications of sulfur, and Reis responded to his sudden expression of dread.

“What does it mean?” He asked.

"Influences of the underworld. The magic they have tapped is immoral and depraved demonic, which should have been obvious to me by the act of violence committed." Dumas indicated it was time to leave as he could hear people waking and moving about the building. He and Reis would report their findings to Josef, who would not be happy with the news of more evil on the rise in Pittsburgh.

Rowen spent most of the night investigating the murder in the lowlands. It was far from routine and pointed towards a paranormal killer. That fact was made all the clearer by Master Hadden’s men showing up at the crime scene.

One was a vampire, but he could not determine the species of the other although he gave an aura of shifter. He wasn’t a wolf or bear, but he was big and menacing. He was dressed like all Hadden men very refined, cut and formidable everything about him and his companion spoke of dominance.

They hadn’t seen through Rowen’s cloaking enchantment so that was a positive for now anyway but if he were around them for any sustained period of time the large one would probably see through him. There was just something about the big man that spoke of potency and intension. He could probably dance around the vampire for a while, but the shifter was another story.

"So, what did you find?" His Sergeant met him at his desk as soon as he arrived. He didn't care that Rowen had worked all night and had just walked in; he wanted a report, and he wanted it now. Rowen gave him a quick rundown of what he encountered at the tenement building and what the people in the area had to say.

"Cause of death?" He asked, and Rowen had to tell him and tried to do it without making it sound like a crazed vampire had killed the man. It was difficult, but his Sergeant was human and needed practical, believable answers to his questions.

"His body was drained of all fluids." He said and left it there. The coroner would put it into more detail, and with that thought in mind, he wondered how the Hadden Coven was going to deal with it. Such a report could be damaging, but that was the Coven's problem. His problem was solving the case without betraying the paranormal world.

"Any obvious marks on the body?" The Sergeant asked him.

"None that I could see, sir."

"Keep me informed and complete your report before you go home. We need to find this killer and put him away before the city starts to react. Three missing and one dead, all in the same building is not good."

"Yes, sir." He thought about the odd scents present in the apartment and the acrid smell of sulfur that the man who found him had described. Rowen's people were well-versed in the forces of magic and also in the effects of evil. The odor of sulfur was disturbing in that it pointed to a demonic influence. The magic was basic, but the overtone was severe and based on the diabolic.

Dumas and Reis met with Josef and explained, as best they could, what was going on in the lowlands. He did not look happy at all and asked Dumas to continue to shadow

the Detective. "The presence of the supernatural is going to be hard to contain, but it must be done." He made himself very clear. "This must stop immediately; whoever is behind these deaths needs to be found. The other missing people, probably deceased, need to be located and dealt with before the police find them."

He paused and looked at both Dumas and Reis with eyes that bored to the bone. "Desperate time equals desperate measures you have permission to do whatever you have to do in order to resolve this without exposure."

"Yes, sir." Dumas responded as did Reis.

"Reis, join Micheal's team and bring them up to speed on the murders. Find the killer or killers." Josef stated and then turned to Dumas.

"Like I said, stick close to Det. Dalhousie and the police presence in the area. Grant and Iker will keep us informed of their progress." Dumas nodded his agreement and understanding.

"I'll inform the Master of the situation in the lowlands and if he has further orders, I will let you know." Before dismissing them he drove home once more that they needed to bring an end to this threat, and they needed to keep the human authorities out of it. "Now go get some rest and something to eat you both have long days ahead of you."

Dumas fully understood the seriousness of this incident and swore to do everything in his power to destroy this threat. Reis made the same pledge and added that he interfered with the phones of people present last evening. "They will have nothing to post today other than their own oral renderings of the scene."

"Good job Reis." Dumas patted him on the back.

"I also cleared the memories of those who had stood too close to the Detective and may have overheard information and those who had given statements. I know the Master has rules around touching the minds of others, but in this instance, I was pretty sure clearing was the way to go." Reis was a thorough man, and Dumas appreciated him very much. "I don't know if they were a threat, but I didn't want to take the chance."

"Follow your instincts on this one. It's better to do more than not enough." Dumas offered.

"That's what I figured. But honestly, I tried to get at the Detective's mind too just to slow him down a little, but I wasn't successful." That was interesting.

"You couldn't clear his mind, or you couldn't even touch his mind?" Dumas asked for clarity.

"I could not get inside his head. I thought perhaps it was because I was using a shotgun approach and getting as many as I could mentally reach while trying to remain unnoticed." Reis gave a possible explanation, but Dumas had the feeling there was more to it than that.

"How close were you able to get to the detective?"

"At one point, I was about six feet from him on the left. Why?"

"Did you get any sense of him . . . were you able to read him at all?" Dumas was overcome with a sense of there being more to the Detective than met the eye. He wasn't sure where this was coming from but the entire picture last night of him at the scene with the potential witnesses was strange and oddly charged. Dumas waited as Reis searched for a suitable response.

"I couldn't get into his mind. There was something preventing me, but I can't tell you what it was. It was a resistance of sorts, and I didn't try again because he moved to the other side of the parking area to speak with the crowd gathered there. I couldn't get close to him after that." Reis was not sure what he encountered. "I could access the minds of the humans around him, but for some reason, I couldn't get into his head."

Honestly, there could be a reason for it, such as magic residue from the crime scene still clinging to Dalhousie or someone in the crowd with a cloaking spell around them, and it may have affected the Detective. But with that said, Dumas wanted to know for sure what was ailing Det. Dalhousie. He wanted a clear picture of the man who could be their undoing.

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Dumas was on his own this evening with Reis meeting up with Michael's team. Dumas took over for Gage who had shadowed the Detective earlier. Dalhousie worked primarily overnight so Gage was basically positioned outside his apartment and listened to him sleep. Although Gage reported that the man slept very little.

"He lives in a nice part of town the Holbrook apartment building apartment number 504 with a great view." Gage reported. Dumas met him a block down from the tenement building so they could meet and speak freely. The authorities were present at the building and so was Dalhousie.

"Did you notice anything strange or off putting about him?" Dumas asked figuring he might as well get Gage's opinion of the man as well.

"I didn't get close he left the office at six this morning and went to his apartment no stops. He stayed in his apartment all day until he returned to work six this evening. He headed to the tenement at eight just a little over an hour ago." Gage stated dryly. "Why, do you sense something off about him?"

"Not sure, but something is getting my beast riled. It might just be the tension in the air and the threat of our secrets being laid bare." Dumas downplayed.

"We'll find who committed these horrific acts, and we will control the dissemination of information even if we have to wipe the minds of every human being in Pittsburgh. Dalhousie is a formidable detective, but we are the Hadden Coven, and no one beats us." The pride was clear, and Dumas seconded the sentiment. There was no second-guessing in this business.

"We'll find them, and I'll keep the detective out of our business," Dumas added.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Gage bade farewell and headed off to his beloved Harley, no doubt. The young human kept him busy and very happy. Dumas proceeded to the tenement building with all the stealth of a hellhound born from the fires of hell. He made his way to the apartment of the last victim.

Det. Dalhousie was there, and he was alone. Dumas remained in the hallway in the shadows, well away from his view and awareness. Humans were normally fairly easy to evade, but the Detective seemed more astute than the average human. He glanced at the door several times and even moved to the hall at one point, obviously picking up on something. Dumas shielded himself and continued to observe from a distance.

Det. Dalhousie did the strangest thing when he was completely alone or at least he thought he was alone, he began to smell things. He smelled the rug the area of the floor beneath where the man had lain. He smelled the doorknob; he smelled the side table near the chair. He smelled everything in the small apartment. Dumas watched him study everything and constantly write in his notebook.

Dumas wasn't sure what he was discovering but at times he looked intrigued. He ached to walk up and ask some questions, but he and the Detective were not on chatting terms, and he had no right to be hanging around the crime scene. Dalhousie once again stepped into the hallway and looked first left and then right and then stood there for at least a minute listening and taking in the scents.

He was acting like a shifter, but he was a human. Dumas took the chance to step slightly closer in order to get a better sense of the man, and what he discovered shocked him. The Detective was shrouded by a glamour of sorts, not exactly like vampire glamour but similar. This one was very specific and clung to him like a second skin. It was mystical in nature but not evil. The power it emanated was clean and harmless. It was simply a shroud, but why? Why would a human need a cover,

and what was Det. Dalhousie hiding?

Rowen studied the apartment from end to end, not missing a single square inch, and still, he did not have an answer to who or what had drained the man of all life and all fluids. His Sergeant was on him to close this case. They needed a suspect or two to get things rolling, but so far, he had come up empty.

On top of that pressure, he began to notice that Master Hadden's men were hanging around. They showed up at the apartment building shortly after the victim was found, and then he was almost certain one had followed him to the station and then home.

They were suddenly everywhere inserting themselves into this investigation and it raised Rowen's suspicions. Why would the Hadden Coven be so curious about this murder to the point of following and keeping track of the detectives progress?

There were two detectives at the station who were watching Rowen and reporting to the Coven, Det. Grant Dorsey and Det. Iker Dawson. Neither of the men were with homicide, but they were following the case. Rowen wasn't clear as to their connection to the Coven since Dorsey was a wolf shifter and Dawson was human, but he would find out.

The intense interest in his case by the Hadden Coven had him thinking perhaps they know who the killer is and are hiding him or intending to cover for him. Could a vampire do the damage he saw? They were bloodsuckers, yes, but they didn't drain a person of all fluids and their soul as well.

That man was left as nothing but a dry husk and magic was present in the atmosphere of the apartment and also present in small amounts in the apartments of the other missing residents. He knew for a fact that Master Nikolas Hadden abhorred magics, especially the dark and evil kind. He would not be sanctioning such abuse of power, but he might be covering for someone else.

He walked over to the one window in the living room of the apartment actually it was the only window in the small apartment. It looked out onto the street below not much of a view, just potholed pavement and junk cars along with a dreary ambiance that always hung over this section of town.

While standing there he saw what he thought to be more of Hadden's men approaching the building. He knew this was his chance to get information on their intention by eavesdropping on their conversation. He quickly left the apartment and proceeded to the fire escape.

Dumas watched the Detective stare out the window for several minutes and then abruptly dash to the fire escape accessed from across the hall. Dumas followed, unclear as to what had spurred his interest in the fire escape.

He hung back a little, not wanting to be seen or detected. He knew that there were few places for the Detective to go, so it would be easy for Dumas to catch up. He followed his essence of leather and cotton to the alley floor and looked around, but the Detective was not there.

The scent of leather and cotton that surrounded him was there but was quickly dissipating. There were no doors nearby, and there wasn't enough time for him to reach the roadway in either direction or out of the alley. Finally, Dumas looked up, and something told him to go to the roof. On the roof, he found the two soldiers Dalhousie had been observing from the apartment. They were checking the area for clues and discussing the case. Dumas fell into step with them, asking about their findings but not bringing up Dalhousie.

He noticed a stray cat dart across on their left. It was full gray and moved with speed and agility, which was common with cats. He watched it without looking at it. The cat was the same one he'd seen before while searching this property. There was more there than just a minor feline. That cat had an interest and an objective.

Dumas continued to discuss mundane aspects of the murder and the Master's interest to see if the cat showed interest in their discussion. He was feeling ridiculous, but his hound was adamant that the cat was suspicious, and he wanted to get closer.

"Have you seen Detective Dalhousie around?" He asked the two men.

"We saw him watching us from the apartment window but haven't seen him since."

"Go down to the apartment and take a look around. It's empty at the moment." He told them, and they nodded and headed in the direction of the stairs. Dumas watched for the cat to see if it tried to follow them, and it did. He heard the skittering of tiny feet moving fast, attempting to catch the door before it closed when Dumas stepped in front of it. The cat reeled back obviously startled by his presence and took off in the opposite direction.

It made a run for the fire escape but managed to corner itself between two brick walls. Dumas blocked its escape and moved forward careful not to let the little creature get away. It moved back into the corner with a low growl and then it looked up at Dumas with large, vivid green eyes that Dumas had seen before and recognized. He smiled down at the cat and then crouched down and all of his previous confusion turning to clarity.

"Hello Detective Dalhousie." He said and watched as the small grey cat became the homicide detective, Rowen Dalhousie. The shift was swift and smooth, and like the hellhounds and dragons, he did not lose his clothing. Det. Dalhousie stood before him in his suit and trench coat, staring up at him with those same gorgeous green eyes.

"Hello Dumas." He responded and straightened his coat. "I'm not sure what you are specifically but I know you are a shifter of sorts." His tone was cautious, and his eyes were taking in everything.

"Of sorts," Dumas responded but did not go into detail as of yet. "You hide with a glamour?"

"No, I use an enchantment; it's a cat thing." The Detective was off his game, looking side to side and giving off an apprehensive vibe.

"You belong to a clowder or colony in Pittsburgh?" Dumas tried to keep his questions as casual as he could, but his sheer presence held a cold harshness that was difficult to work around. It's a hellhound thing.

"No, I'm a stray." He said that with solid conviction. It meant something to him.

"What does that mean?"

"I take care of myself, and I answer to no one."

"It's my understanding that the Wazir rules the strays."

"Not all strays." He answered and did not elaborate. Silence fell for a few minutes as they took stock of one another. "Why is Master Hadden so interested in this case?"

"The death was unnatural, and dark magic was involved. Such information cannot get into the hands of the public at large." Dumas assumed Det. Dalhousie would understand the dangers involved since he was a shifter. "The killer must be found and dispatched before the Pittsburgh PD gets a hold of him or her." Understanding spread across his face, and he nodded.

"I understand your fear of exposure, but it is my job to solve this case, and I intend to do so." He took a stand but also a tentative step back when Dumas nailed him with a dark stare.

"You will do as you are told, or your days in this town will be few. You, as a stray, may not feel a responsibility to your fellow paranormal. But I guarantee you, Master Hadden will bring hell down upon you if any of your grandiose, self-centered behaviors brings harm to any of our brothers or sisters." Dumas was severe, but this man needed to understand that the secret came first and everything else in life came second, including his career aspirations.

"Of course." He backtracked quickly. "I didn't mean that I would put anyone or any community in danger of discovery. I will find the killer or killers and handle them appropriately." That sounded too vague to accept, so Dumas did not accept it.

"And what do you consider appropriate?"

"It's appropriate to get them off the street so they are no longer a danger to others."

"You know what they are capable of doing, and you've no doubt sensed their power, so with that in mind, how do you propose to find them and get them off the streets?" The Detective was cocky as all hell and spoke in circles without declaring any plans. Dumas was strangely attracted to the little bloviator in spite of himself. The cat shifter had an air about him that seemed to speak to Dumas.

"I'll identify them, track them down, and deal with them. It's how we do it in the department, and it's how my cat operates."

"You've had several successes since getting your detective badge, but you have never dealt with magics of this level." Dumas pointed out the obvious flaw in his plans.

"Investigations are all the same." He shot back, and Dumas rolled his eyes, bringing a sudden flare of anger to the cat's green eyes. "I'm not completely certain that Master Hadden doesn't have a hand in what is happening. He has the power to pull it off."

"If you honestly believe that, then you are a bigger idiot than I thought." Dumas turned his back and began walking away. The draw to remain close was strong, and that fact was infuriating him. It was better that he gets some distance from the overconfident, under-skilled shifter before he said something he might regret.

Dumas went back downstairs and out to the street before putting in a call to Josef. "Det. Rowen Dalhousie is a cat shifter." He announced, and Josef fell silent for a moment.

"Is he affiliated with a colony?" Josef asked slowly as if still working this out in his mind.

"He says that he's a stray with no affiliations."

"The Wazir claims all strays," Josef stated.

"That was my understanding as well, but the detective is adamant that he is a lone wolf, so to speak." Dumas clarified.

"Stay close to him and make sure he doesn't try to grandstand on this case. This could work in our favor."

"Yes, sir."

"Micheal and his team are closing in on the magics involved. The markers have led to the remains of the old leather club that housed the incubus a few years back. They, the magics involved, appear to be trying to resurrect his essence or power." Josef gave him the update and then added. "If your Detective heads off in that direction, let me know; otherwise, just keep a close eye on the man. Hopefully, we can wrap up this situation quickly without his interference."

“I’ll keep an eye on him sir.” Dumas was not thrilled with the prospect of following Det. Dalhousie although he found him quite attractive the idea of trailing him for God knows how long seemed tedious.

The man was smart and not without resources to aid in his investigation, so it was important that his movements be monitored. He was open with the fact that he would try to arrest the perpetrator regardless of their supernatural affiliations. This fact made it imperative that he not find the perpetrator. He was, for all intents and purposes, a loose cannon. Permission was granted to do whatever was necessary to ensure that their secret did not get out to the general public, and with that in mind, Dumas swore to deal with the irritating, vainglorious Detective in any manner he deemed appropriate.

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Rowen was dumbfounded and shocked by the interaction with the Hadden soldier Dumas. He had gotten under his skin in a matter of seconds and left him feeling ridiculous and ill-prepared. The cloaking enchantment he used kept him shielded from Dumas even after he stupidly allowed himself to be caught in his cat form. Unfortunately, Dumas was not shielded from Rowen, and the minute the big guy got close, Rowen knew who he was and what his growing interest in the man was really about.

His cat wanted to go crazy on the man, but luckily, he had control and was able to hold him back and cover it with a look of contempt. He hated being so rude to him, but it was the only way to remain hidden. His cat was out of the bag, but at least Dumas, the big scary Hadden guard, did not know the entire truth. What a fucking mess he was in.

Rowen moved to the edge of the roof and looked down at the parking area and at Dumas. He was on his phone, probably letting his superiors know about Rowen's identity. He watched him for several minutes and then stepped back when Dumas looked up at him. This was his mate, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. Dumas was a significant player in the paranormal world, and the Hadden Coven, no doubt, and having a stray cat as a mate was unlikely to be acceptable.

It was better this way to keep his true identity secret. Dumas would know he was a cat shifter, but he would not know that Rowen Dalhousie was his mate. What an unfortunate kick in the head that was. The ridicule and disdain would be brutal, and Rowen had no time for painful rejections.

“Det. Dalhousie.” He was brought out of his wonderings by the address and turned to

see that the building manager stood behind him. "You asked to speak with me?" He prompted. Rowen was surprised that the man had followed him to the roof.

"Yes." He responded and walked over to stand in front of him. "Your name is Cal Grainger, the building manager?" he asked, and the man nodded. The moment the man looked into Rowen's eyes, he felt something off-putting. The man was decently dressed, and his hygiene was adequate. There was nothing obvious about him that should be causing such a reaction with Rowen's cat. For some reason, his cat was mentally hissing at this man.

He wasn't one to disregard his cat's intuition, but he needed to get this interview over with, so he pushed the warnings aside. This idiot wasn't a threat to him even if he was a bit of a creep according to his cat.

"I have all the victim's rental information in my apartment. I keep a file on everyone who lives here. Come with me and I'll show you everything I have." He said and then turned toward the door that led to the elevator.

"I prefer the stairs." Rowen didn't want to be in a confined space with this man. He moved to the stairwell and Grainger followed visibly annoyed. Rowen knew the apartment number of the building manager so went straight there and waited for Grainger to open the door. When he did, Rowen accepted that his cat's apprehension about the man was spot on.

Grainger rushed Rowen, knocking him down and into the room, and attempted to hit him with something. Two others appeared and tried to slam the door closed, but Rowen fought to keep it open. They continued to pull him further into the room while pummeling him with their fists and feet.

Rowen was being overpowered until suddenly someone burst through the door, knocking it off its hinges, and charged into the room. Rowen fell back to his knees

but was abruptly grabbed and righted back onto his feet by two large hands that belonged to his mate, who was looking particularly outraged. This man was sorely pissed. It was a fearful expression, but Rowen knew at that moment that he was safe and Dumas would not let anything happen to him.

Dumas finished his call to Josef and had a sudden feeling of letting someone down. It rushed over him and it brought with it a sinking feeling that had him turning back and looking at the rundown old tenement building. Panic and turmoil were touching him, and the source was inside the building.

He didn't hesitate his instincts were always sharp and correct. The feelings led him to the first floor and the chaos he encountered was so much more than he had bargained for. Det. Dalhousie was fighting off three men and not successfully. The building manager was attacking him with a bat while the other two were attempting to drag him into the apartment.

So many things came rushing at Dumas the second he burst through that door. The first and most important was the fact that the cat shifter, Det. Rowen Dalhousie was his mate. For whatever reason, that fact had been hidden from him on the roof but now it was coming at Dumas like a freight train. The Detective was bleeding, and the scent was turning him inside out with desperation and rage bubbling up from the depth of his core.

He pushed the bleeding man behind him and tore the bat out of the manager's hands. He tried to turn and run, but Dumas was not someone you could run from. He took hold of him by the throat midflight and choked him unconscious in a matter of seconds. The other two froze, then turned and melted into the air. The stench of evil, sour magic filled the room.

Dumas crouched over his mate protecting him from any danger that might still remain. "Stay down." He barked when Rowen attempted to move. The manager was

out, unconscious on the floor and the others had disappeared. Dumas stood up and gave the room a once over before turning to Rowen who was now standing behind him.

The blood on Rowen's face brought a pain to Dumas that he'd never experienced before; it was part panic and part rage. He'd never felt so rattled in his life. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it to the wound on the side of Rowen's face. He captured his gaze and held it in a steely, accusatory embrace.

He knew he was being intense, but he could not help the fierce indignation he was feeling. Why did he hide himself from him? The look in Rowen's eyes told him he already knew the truth, and that realization was the most painful of all.

"Thank you for helping me." Rowen spoke watchfully. He reached up and touched Dumas' wrist tentatively. Dumas maintained his heated stare looking for whatever else the Detective might be hiding.

"You're welcome, Detective." Dumas could not control the ice that formed in his words.

"Rowen, my name is Rowen." He stated, putting his hand around Dumas' wrist and holding him tightly. Was he seeking contact or control?

"I know your name." Dumas' words were tight and biting as was his expression. He saw the way Rowen recoiled silently, and sadness entered his eyes. Their exchange was shrouded in a sense of betrayal. "When did you know?" He stated sharply. He still held the handkerchief to Rowen's wound and the blood continued to stir the wildness in him that was hard to contain.

"On the roof, I recognized you when you found me on the roof." He was being honest, at least.

"Why did you hide?" Dumas was grilling him he needed answers, and he needed to understand why his mate would deny him. He closed his eyes on the pain of that thought forcing back the heartache welling up in his soul.

"I'm a stray, and we hide from everyone. Our cloak is a natural enchantment, so larger, meaner shifters and paranormals, in general, do not recognize us. I wasn't hiding from you." He grimaced and shook his head. "I was hiding from you, but not in that respect. I didn't know who you were until you got close enough for me to scent you. My cat reacted to your presence, but I managed to suppress it."

"You're not pleased with Fate's choice." This was getting harder and more personal by the second, and Dumas was suffering the overwhelming urge to turn and walk away.

Rowen shook his head vigorously, denying that statement. "I don't know what you are, but you are a player of significance in the paranormal world. You are also a Hadden soldier, someone connected and influential in this city. I am a stray, a shifter of no particular importance, making a name for himself in the world of humans. I was afraid you would reject me and disavow our connection." His eyes closed, and he dropped his head.

"I knew there was something special about you even as I found you irritating and self-absorbed. I could not stop thinking about you. I researched you and your past, and your attraction was undeniable." Dumas took the handkerchief away and the wound had stopped bleeding. He leaned forward and pulled Rowen to him placing a kiss to the now healed injury.

He lifted Rowen's face up to him and looked him in the eyes, gauging his feelings and seeing apprehension still present, as well as anticipation. He was interested but still fearful of being hurt. "I am a hellhound." The shock was apparent, but the interest spiked considerably, which was a very good sign.

"I've never met a hellhound before," Rowen stated while his eyes traveled Dumas' face over and over. "You're quite magnificent." That brought a soft smile to Dumas' otherwise hard features.

"Come with me." Dumas took him by the arm and led him out of the apartment just as the two vampire soldiers arrived. Dumas told them to clean the apartment and wait for one of Michael's men to instruct them further in regard to the building manager, Cal Grainger. He put in another call to Josef and let him know the status of the case and included the fact that Det. Rowen Dalhousie was his mate.

Rowen was still in shock after having been nearly killed by those three and then being rescued by his mate. It was definitely overwhelming, and he worried that Dumas was still under the impression that Rowen had deliberately hidden his identity because he thought Dumas was unsuitable as a mate. God almighty, that was so far from the truth, but how would he be able to convince him otherwise?

Dumas was a handsome bastard from top to toe he was every inch sexy as hell. Never in his life had he met anyone with this level of intoxicating magnetism and to think that such a man was his mate was unbelievable. They were still tip toeing around each other and Rowen had not a clue where he was being taken but he was game for whatever Dumas was planning. Trust appeared to be a side affect of finding your mate.

Dumas spoke with his superior and arranged for someone to deal with the issue in the manager's apartment. Rowen believed he really should be calling his Sargeant and getting a team to the location but he couldn't bring himself to actually do it.

The scene needed to be prepared for human viewing with everything supernatural removed. For all his big talk earlier, Rowen would never jeopardize the secret that every paranormal held dear. Right now, his priority was his mate, and then he would figure out what he was doing with the case.

They were in the parking lot of the tenement and walking very briskly towards a black SUV that looked both commanding and intimidating. This was a company car it screamed dark, vampire business.

“Where are you taking me?” He wasn’t going to refuse to go, he just wanted to know where and he hoped it wasn’t anywhere near the Coven building. Rowen wasn’t mentally prepared to enter a buzzing hive of vampires.

Dumas opened the passenger side door for Rowen, and he got in and buckled up. “We’re going to my place.” He said and closed the door. Once he was seated behind the wheel and had started the vehicle Rowen asked again.

“Are you taking me to the Hadden Center?”

“No, I have an apartment at the Hadden Center for times when I need to stay there, but I live in an apartment downtown in the Wexler building. I like my privacy, and it's nearly three thousand square feet. I like a lot of room.” He glanced over at Rowen, probably gauging his reaction, but Rowen simply nodded.

Rowen knew the Wexler building; it was old money, so securing an apartment there would have taken considerable clout and money. His mate was so damn out of his league that it was beginning to look very unlikely that Dumas the hellhound would settle for a stray long-term. They entered the Wexler building underground parking, and Dumas parked and turned off the engine.

"Make whatever calls you need to make." Dumas suddenly spoke, breaking the heavy silence. "You're staying the night with me."

“I won’t make any calls until the issue with Cal Grainger is resolved. Whatever I report must match the scene or should I say the scene that Master Hadden constructs.” Rowen responded slowly and calmly quietly weighed and measured his

current situation.

Dumas smiled and it was not like the others there was no derision or distrust it was a smile that reached out to him. Dumas exited the vehicle and waited for Rowen who did not hesitate and met him at the rear of the vehicle and Dumas took his hand. He didn't waver or ask permission he took his hand in a proprietary manner and Rowen was not bothered by it. The move consoled and reassured his cat who was currently purring softly in Rowen's throat.

He was smitten from the get go and it was going to be difficult for Rowen to keep him from acting up. His stray cat had a thing for large, dangerously handsome men. Dumas held his hand and did not release until they entered his apartment which spanned a good portion of the twelfth floor.

Dumas hit the lights, and the place glowed in a soft light. He watched him move about the big room and then go off to the left and another light came on. Rowen stepped into the room and saw that Dumas had gone into the kitchen. The place was high end and decked out with a taste toward the sophisticated. It made Rowen's small eight hundred square foot apartment look like a closet and not a particularly nice closet.

He came from the kitchen and walked toward Rowen with two drinks and it looked like whiskey probably very good whiskey. He handed one of them to Rowen.

"I can't drink on duty." He said automatically.

"You're not on duty," Dumas stated very clearly, and Rowen agreed and took the drink since he was probably going to need it. Dumas then took his coat and tossed it in a chair, led him over to a large leather sofa, and sat him down. Instead of sitting beside him, Dumas sat on the coffee table directly in front of him, effectively pinning him to the spot with a thigh on either side.

Rowen suddenly felt nervous and out of his depth. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face. He never gave his looks much thought since he wasn't looking for anything, and his job was his life. Now Rowen looked up at this amazing specimen of a man and wished he'd at least done something with his hair and maybe plucked his eyebrows.

"I'm going to claim you tonight unless you refuse me. Do you refuse me, Rowen?" Dumas was not one to beat around the bush. Rowen sat there and maintained that steely gaze while his mind raced to put together a proper response. He was shocked by the sudden proposal but also consoled by it. It would seem that Dumas did indeed have long-term in mind.

"I do not refuse you, Dumas. I would never refuse you, but are you sure this is what you want?" He raised his arms and pointed absently at himself. "I'm a stray, a rogue stray who is trying to make it in the human world. You have prominence and position. I am a lowly detective in the police department. They call me a go-getter with promise, but I'm only as good as my last success, which is something I will be chasing for the entirety of my career."

"Do you like what you do?" Dumas asked and took his hands in his.

"Yes, I like solving crime. I like bringing people the justice they deserve. I like my job." Rowen answered thoughtfully.

"I don't care what you do as long as you are happy doing it. I also have no issue with you being a cat shifter or a stray, as you call it." Dumas held his hands tighter, and Rowen loved the feeling of being cherished.

"I have been on this earth for many years. I was once the guard to a very despicable man. I lived for the day that he would be defeated and I would be free, and now I serve an honorable Bard and a good Master. I have a home I like in a city that I like,

and now I have been gifted my mate. Life is wonderous and expectant, and I plan to live and enjoy every minute of it and every minute of you." Dumas slipped his hand behind Rowen's neck and pulled him in for a gentle kiss.

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Dumas aching to have his mate closer. The seating arrangement helped, but he still felt far away, especially when Rowen spoke of his own perceived limitations. They were nonsense; nothing he spoke of concerned Dumas in the least. His species was interesting, as were his connections to the Wazir, a being so shrouded in mystery that his very existence is sometimes questioned. There are few people who claim to have met him.

The whiskey seemed to have relaxed him a little, but his sense of self needed some work. Everything Dumas had heard of the man was glowing and praiseworthy. Rowen did not know his own worth or his importance to those around him. His department was thrilled to have someone of his caliber working there. His success rate was not due to luck. It was due to intelligent, dogged perseverance.

He pulled back from the exquisite kiss reveling in the touch and taste of his mate but kept his hand at his neck feeling the strong muscles and the silky soft hair. Those vivid green eyes stared at him and Dumas could see the insecurities trying to force themselves back to the surface.

"You, everything you are and everything you aspire to be, please know that you will always be enough for me. I don't know where you got the idea that you were somehow less than, but understand that I will not tolerate it." Dumas searched his face and settled once again on those gorgeous green eyes. "You are a stray, and I am a hellhound, and we are destined to become one."

Before Rowen had a chance to respond, Dumas' phone rang, and it was Master Hadden. He paused for a moment and then excused himself to take the call. He stood and walked over to the large picture window with the stunning view of the city, but

he kept his eyes on his mate. Rowen sipped his drink and kept glancing around the room. He was out of his element, but he was holding firm because he wanted this as much as Dumas.

"Michael has everything in hand. The building manager, Cal Grainger, has had his mind swept and has been given memories of attacking and killing the three victims. He will turn himself over to authorities." Master Hadden took a moment and congratulated him on finding his mate. "Det. Dalhousie will be a fine addition to the coven."

"Thank you, sir, and I'll let him know the status of the case."

"The others involved are, as you know, foul magics, and Grainger gave us some valuable information about their plans. For now, enjoy your mate, and meet with me tomorrow morning to discuss this further. Please bring Detective Dalhousie with you." The Master closed the call, leaving Dumas wondering about the morning's meeting, but he soon pushed that away when he saw his mate unbuttoning his shirt and removing his tie. Rowen felt the pull forcefully as Dumas did and was not going to wait.

Dumas slipped off his jacket and then removed his tie while walking towards his mate. They stood a few feet apart with their eyes locked on one another as they slowly disrobed. Rowen was sleek and slim with toned muscles and smooth alabaster skin, and he moved with style and form like a feline.

Dumas was significantly larger than Rowen both in height and weight but based on his expressions and obvious interest Rowen definitely found him attractive. Nothing was said all communication was silent. Rowen opened his belt and slowly unzipped his pants gradually revealing a pair of sage green briefs that matched his beautiful eyes. He kicked off his shoes and dropped his pants first and then the briefs.

The stance and the stare urged Dumas to do the same. Dumas was an old soul who had lived a long life born of darkness and fire and although he was civilized in most respects there were still parts of him that tended to the wild.

Unlike Rowen, he did not wear briefs or underwear of any kind, so he was treated to a wonderful look of shock and surprise when he dropped his pants. Hellhounds were large by nature. There was no such thing as a small hellhound; they did not exist. It was also well-known that hellhounds were large in every respect. Dumas would have been worried if it weren't for Rowen's slow smile and the lustful twinkle in his eyes. He liked what he saw.

They kicked their clothing to the side and took a slow step towards each other and then stopped. "Are you ready for this Rowen?" Dumas would only give him the one warning.

"I'm ready for whatever you got to give Dumas." Rowen's cockiness was pleasing. Dumas much preferred this to his previous self-deprecation. Dumas ran his eyes over him, taking in every gorgeous inch. Yes, this was his mate, and he was the whole package.

"I have a lot to give, sweetheart, and I've been saving it all for you." Dumas winked, and Rowen reacted immediately, jumping into Dumas' arms and wrapping his legs around his waist. Dumas held him secure and slammed his mouth against Rowen's in a kiss that was bruising and impassioned. Dumas ate away at his mate's soft and eager lips. The air was charged and snapping with the intensity of their union.

Dumas carried him over to the wall of the living room and pressed him there gaining support and a little leverage. Rowen was not a big man, and Dumas had no trouble handling him with ease. As the kiss went on Rowen's fingers found their way into Dumas' hair gripping and forcing them even closer into an embrace that was breathless and exhilarating.

The energy passing between them was considerable. Rowen tightened his legs and rubbed his now stiff cock against Dumas' abdomen, and the move sent a string of sharp sensations through Dumas' system.

He quickly found Rowen's tight opening and began to massage and press until his finger slipped inside. One thing he knew about cat shifters was that, like hellhounds, they were self-lubricating with stimulation, and at this moment, he really appreciated that quality. There was no need to slow down or search for lube. Their union was on track and moving fast. Rowen did not hold back, pushing for more and grinding while Dumas stretched and prepared him.

"I'm going to take you right here," Dumas stated.

"Take me," Rowen responded in a clipped and desperate tone.

Dumas removed his fingers, confident that Rowen was ready, and moved his hips so his hard, thick cock pressed against the opening, forcing and seeking entrance. Dumas used his fingers to help guide him to his goal. He went slow, with just the head popping inside, intending to take him gradually. Then, suddenly, Dumas went into overdrive at the sensation that shot through him in response to the tight, warm embrace of his forever lover. Going slow was no longer an option.

Dumas held Rowen tightly with his back pinned to the wall while he tried to take Rowen deeper and harder and faster.

"I need more." Rowen gasped and dug his nails into Dumas' shoulders. Dumas once again slammed his lips to Rowen's and, while doing so, thrust himself deep inside his mate. The reaction was beautiful and filled Dumas with profound satisfaction.

Rowen was panting into the kiss and grabbing at Dumas' shoulders and hair and thrusting against him, attempting to control the movements, but Dumas was in

control. Rowen was fraught with need and an urgency for satisfaction. He was panting hard, and Dumas forced himself to pause and began a slow thrust that gradually picked up speed, matching the rhythm of Rowen's movements. The man was coming apart in his arms, and Dumas was eating it up.

He drove his cock deep, going to the base several times and then followed with a series of rapid shallow thrusts and then repeated over and over until he built a climax on the edge, and he was rushing toward it. At the moment of impact, he came with a roar and bit down on Rowen's shoulder, locking his jaw and marking his mate. It went on for several seconds, the pressure and the erotic ecstasy, and then he felt it the minute Rowen completely shattered and sprayed his hot seed between them.

Rowen sunk his small teeth into Dumas' neck and held on for several seconds making sure to leave his mark as well. The link between them snapped into place instantly and instantly Dumas felt the heart of his little mate, the strength and the presence of his precious feline.

The stray was a powerhouse mentally and emotionally and a pure wonder spiritually. He was young at a mere twenty-seven, but his struggles had been many, and his life had been filled with abuse and betrayal. The cat had many secrets, but they now belonged to Dumas.

"You see me." Rowen leaned back with his head against the wall and looked at Dumas.

"I see all of you and you are a wonder a pure and beautiful wonder." Dumas' voice was naturally deep but now it was exceptionally deep and gravely denoting the level of emotion rushing through him. He looked over at the mating scar on Rowen's shoulder and he felt pride at marking such an amazing man. He also felt pride at being marked by this amazing man.

Rowen dropped his head to Dumas' shoulder, and Dumas carried him to the bedroom. He sat down on the edge of the bed, still holding Rowen in his arms. Rowen straddled his lap and once again laid his head on Dumas' shoulder. Dumas loved the closeness and the ease with which his mate held onto him.

"I see you too, Dumas," Rowen said, his voice soft and peaceful. "You are a marvel and one of the strongest people I have ever met, and that strength covers everything about you." He took a calming breath, and Dumas ran his hand up and down his back, steady and reassuring. "You were born into darkness, and you have lived for centuries, and now you are mine. This is going to work out just fine." Dumas smiled, appreciating the pride that was present in Rowen's tone of voice.

"They have Cal, and if he hasn't already told them everything, then they've probably dredged his mind. Whatever he knew, the vampires know."

"Cal needs to be eliminated."

"They know the score, so he's definitely in protective custody somewhere."

"Or he may already be dead. The vampires are rarely gentle with magics." The third man entered the room, and he exuded power he was the leader of this pack of dupes, and he held little respect for any of them. They were useful and convenient for now. The two discussing Cal stepped back and remained silent.

"This should never have happened. No one gave permission to kill the cop." His voice steadily rose with each word until he was screaming at the two men. "Instead of running, why didn't you kill Cal before they had the opportunity to scrub his mind?"

"The hellhound was attacking Cal. I thought he would kill him." One of the men said it in his defense, but it wasn't good enough. The leader snapped his fingers, and the man exploded, spreading his insides around the room and all over his companion.

“Do you have anything to contribute?” The leader asked the one remaining. He quickly shook his head afraid to speak but it did not save him. Like his friend he was spread across the room with a snap of the leader’s fingers.

"Useless incompetence everywhere." He yelled and left the room, ordering the guard to have it cleaned. It was his own fault relying on common magics for a job this important and this involved. They had four souls, and they needed one more to complete the invocation. It had been done before, but those blasted vampires had to interfere, and all his plans had been for nothing.

This time he would make sure there were no interferences, and the revenant would aspire to his full potential for destruction and power. The magics were done running from Hadden’s men it was time they took over and put the vampires on the run.

Dumas held Rowen in his arms throughout the night lying in the soft bed covered with plush blankets in the large dimly lit room and the setting was perfect. Sleep came intermittently as his mind was filled with visions of his mate. Rowen Dalhousie cat shifter extraordinaire. They’d enjoyed one another throughout the night eagerly learning each other’s bodies and desires.

Rowen was sometimes hesitant but always pushed through satisfying his wants with Dumas’ ample encouragement. His little mate was fast asleep and purring. It was such a sweet soothing sound and Dumas looked forward to hearing it from now until forever. He slid his fingers through Rowen’s hair feeling the silky softness and pushing it back from his face. That face a marvel of color and symmetry such a handsome man.

“Are you staring at me?” Rowen’s eyes were closed, and he laughed softly. The sound stirred Dumas to his soul. Bringing his mate peace and joy gave him a powerful sense of accomplishment.

"I'm staring with wonder and appreciation, sweetheart." He leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "Loving you is the easiest thing I have ever done." Dumas rolled to his side and laid his arm over Rowen, who was curled up at his side.

"I want you to move in here, and I want you to let your friends and coworkers know that you're in a committed relationship. I won't do well with anyone getting too close or friendly with you. It wouldn't be good for a homicide detective to have to start hiding bodies." Rowen chuckled. "Hellhounds are very territorial." Dumas finished with a heated kiss to Rowen's swollen lips. "Tell me you'll move in immediately."

"I'll move in most definitely my cat will not be separated from their mate for long. Strays, like hellhounds, are very territorial. Although it might take some time I have an apartment and belongings and a job to attend to, but I eagerly accept your offer." Rowen skimmed his palm down Dumas' side and along his hip raising goosebumps along the way.

"I will help you move. We can get it done in an afternoon." Dumas offered, not wanting to have to wait for his mate. "I have resources. You don't have to wait."

"I would appreciate the help." He was pleased that Rowen didn't fight him on this, which showed that he too was ready to get their lives moving forward. "What time is it?" He asked.

"Ten after six," Dumas responded. "Master Hadden asked for a meeting with us this morning to discuss the incident of last evening."

"He wants me there too?"

"Yes, they got a lot of useful information from Cal Grainger."

"Did they probe his mind?"

"They did, and they removed memories and inserted others. Grainger will confess to the murders, closing your case. This will allow Master Hadden to find the magics responsible and deal with them." Dumas wasn't sure how Rowen would take the information. He pulled him a little closer on instinct as he waited.

"That will remove any necessity on my part to cover for Hadden and his men. That works for me." Rowen was continually surprising Dumas. He was a practical and reasonable man. He didn't look for trouble when solutions were presenting themselves. "I know I gave you a hard time about this case, but I would never have put any paranormal in jeopardy."

"I know, we're mates now, so I understand you quite thoroughly." He smiled. "And with that said, I think we have just enough time for me to relieve that insistent pressure you've been experiencing." He reached between Rowen's legs and took hold of his hard cock. "I need to take care of this." He said, pushing back the blankets. Rowen rolled to his back, welcoming the relief.

"I need you to take the pressure off." He said with a slight chuckle. "It's in a bad state it will probably need a lot of work."

"I can give you all that you need, baby, never doubt me." Dumas moved to settle himself between Rowen's legs and then took the hardened cock between his lips, sucking lightly on the tip and relishing the moans produced by Rowen. He began to thrust his hips, but Dumas held him still and took his throbbing cock one excruciating inch at a time.

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Rowen was thankful that Hadden had gotten a confession out of the building manager. He was human so the police would be able to deal with him. The other two who had been in the room were not full human. Rowen had detected magics such as mystic or a mage perhaps. They could not end up in police custody, it would be too big of a risk to all paranormal communities.

Dumas he still couldn't believe that Fate had given him such a man. A hellhound of such distinction was his mate. He felt like pinching himself, but fortunately, Dumas was doing that for him. The man had an extremely talented mouth, and Rowen was enjoying every second of his attention. He brought him to the edge over and over, staving off his climax with a quick pinch at the base only to bring him to the edge again. It was delicious.

They were bonded mates who had been linked for all time, and Rowen felt the peace and security of it all right down to his soul. Dumas would stand by his side for all eternity, and that didn't scare him in the least. Before Dumas, he struggled with any sort of meaningful connection. Life had left him feeling cut off and disconnected, maintaining only shallow surface relationships that had no meaning.

One look at Dumas and his heart had shattered as well as his mind. The thought of a mate had not entered his mind but when it happened it was like being thunderstruck. His life came into stark focus and all the needs he'd repressed and denied came roaring to the surface. Dumas owned him from the very first glance.

He took him directly down his throat and did something with his muscles that had Rowen crying out and coming so hard he saw stars, and his vision began to darken. Dumas kept working on him, pulling out every sensation, every thrill, making his

body tremble. Slowly, Dumas finished and then crawled up Rowen's body to place a heated, passionate kiss on his lips.

"Feel better, baby?" Dumas asked, teasing.

"Never better, sweetheart, never better." Dumas rolled off of him, and Rowen missed him immediately, so he reached out to him.

"Let's get dressed and I'll order some breakfast. There's a nice café on the first floor that does early deliveries and their food is good." Dumas kissed him again and then rolled to a seated position on the edge of the bed. Rowen could not take his eyes off him. Dumas was a perfect specimen of male excellence from his gleaming black hair to the tanned muscled body everything about him was flawless.

"Do you mind if I take a quick shower?" Rowen asked and was quickly brought to understand that he did not need to ask for anything this was his home, and he could do as he liked. "Thank you, Dumas." Rowen was deeply touched.

"What's mine his yours my love." He said and Rowen could hear that every word was sincere. Dumas wasn't spouting pleasantries he was setting the foundation for their lives together. He stared at the man for a few seconds and then headed into the bathroom. This day truly qualified as the happiest day of Rowen's life.

Rowen finished his shower and went out into the living room in a towel wrapped loosely around his hips. He was soon swallowed up into the arms of a very lustful hellhound. Dumas had him bent over the counter in record time, taking full advantage of his nakedness.

"You look heavenly in this outfit." He breathed against his throat while squeezing his ass and rubbing his thigh against Rowen's cock. "I wish we had more time. You should wear nothing but a towel whenever you're at home from now on." Rowen

chuckled and reached around to take a handful of Dumas' clothed ass.

"Maybe you should too." He suggested, and Dumas agreed.

"Okay, I'll let you get dressed." He relented and slowly released him. Rowen quickly pulled on his clothes from yesterday. Breakfast was the standard fare but, as Dumas had said, their food was good. The eggs were scrambled correctly, the bacon browned just right, and the toast was homemade bread it was a lovely meal.

"Why were you in your cat form on the roof?" Dumas asked the question Rowen thought he'd ask sooner.

"No one notices a stray cat, and they will talk and incriminate themselves or give information they intended to keep quiet. I have many ways of closing cases, and not all are standard police work." Rowen smiled and took a sip of his coffee.

"Makes sense as long as you keep your true nature concealed."

"I do; there are few who can see through a stray's enchantment. Master Hadden can see, and apparently hellhounds, but everyone else sees me as human."

"That's why you stayed away from the coven?"

"I tried to stay away from most paranormals just in case, but particularly Master Hadden."

"Well, the cat's out of the bag now." Dumas finished his coffee and stood.

"Oh ha, ha, aren't you the comedian." Rowen also stood and grabbed his coat. Dumas placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned down for a quick but serious kiss.

"I'll be anything you want me to be, baby." He whispered. His words were simple, but Rowen could see that he meant every single one.

"I have to report to the station after this meeting. I'll let you know the status of Grainger's confession."

"Thank you. Now it's time to go." Dumas once again placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him out the door and down to the basement garage. The drive was quick, and soon, they pulled in and parked. Rowen was somewhat familiar with the building but had never been inside for obvious reasons. Now he had to force himself to suck up all his insecurities and follow his mate.

The second they entered the Hadden Center, Rowen could feel the power pulsing through the place. He'd never gotten close to Master Hadden. He steered clear of him because he knew the Master would easily see through his enchantment and know him immediately. He wasn't sure why Nikolas Hadden bothered him so much. Perhaps it was because he reminded him of the Wazir, who wielded similar power and control, just in different realms.

He wondered how being so close to the man would affect him, and his worry must have shown on his face. "Don't worry; the Master tones it down when he's around humans and smaller shifters." Dumas read his mind. "Besides, you've bonded with a hellhound, so there isn't anything you can't handle." Once they exited the vehicle and headed for the elevator, Dumas put his hand on Rowen's shoulder, keeping him close and maintaining that necessary contact. "You have the strength of a hellhound." He added.

Dumas' faith and support, not to mention his smile, went far in grounding and settling Rowen's fears. "And you have the stealth and cunning of a stray cat."

"And your gracefulness, too, I hope." Dumas knocked on the large door and was told

to enter. They were on one of the upper floors, high in the sky. The room they were in looked like a conference room. The Hadden Center itself was a marvel and everyone he met so far seemed pleasant and welcoming within reason of course.

The fact that he was with Dumas probably went far in terms of their welcoming demeanor. Dumas stayed close with their arms or hands always touching. Rowen appreciated the contact with so many powerful paranormals in the room. His cat, who was normally bold and outgoing, was presently hiding.

He was introduced to Master Hadden, his second in command Josef McQueen, Michael King and a man who reeked of mysticism and otherworldliness named Marek. They called him a Cyprian Knight and although Rowen did not know what that meant it was obviously something important which was made evident by the sheer force of his presence.

Between Marek and Master Hadden, it was a wonder Rowen didn't decide to run and hide as his cat had done. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, he felt the energy in the room go down a notch. They were trying not to overwhelm him.

They were conscious of his hesitancy and made every effort to accommodate him. They gave him plenty of room, didn't get too close, and allowed him to remain at Dumas' side.

"I am pleased to meet you, Rowen." Master Hadden told him and then continued. "I'm sure Dumas explained to you the action we took with the building manager, Cal Grainger."

"Yes, sir and I'll take care of it," Rowen responded, and the Master nodded, pleased with his easy agreement.

"Michael and his team have been combing the lowlands looking for any sign of the

other two who attacked you.”

"They weren't entirely human like Grainger. I sensed a mystical aspect to them, perhaps Mage or Fae." Rowen presented his observation, and Dumas agreed with him.

Michael then took the floor. He outlined the situation, making it clear that the magic involved was definitely formidable. "I don't know where they came from or how they gained entrance, but their influence is growing. We get close, and they slip away like the breeze." Master Hadden glanced over to Marek for possible clarification. The man was well-versed in all manner of magic and evil.

"The area had some markers present, but they lasted but an instant and faded, as Michael said with the breeze." Marek addressed everyone, even Rowen, as he spoke. "They are utilizing a power that is difficult to track or to catch. They are tapping into the strength of the demonic, a high level demonic considering their show of power, which answers the question of why they are killing people." Realization seemed to hit everyone at the same time. "They are sacrifices, and I doubt it is over. Demons don't work cheap."

"My God, how low can one sink." Josef made the declaration with shock and disgust.

"To attain power and control, there is no depth too deep for some." Master Hadden appeared to speak from experience. "How do we stop them?"

“We have to find them to stop them and to find them we need more eyes and ears in the lowlands. We need individuals who can go places unnoticed walk among the many without detection and we need numbers.” Marek turned his attention to Rowen capturing him with a poignant stare. At the same moment, Dumas put his arm around Rowen with his hand securely on Rowen’s shoulder holding him close and secure.

"The lowlands are awash with strays." He seemed to comment out of nowhere, but Rowen knew what he meant and what he wanted. "No one notices the stray cat." He finished, and it was something Rowen had said to Dumas earlier. "More eyes give us more points of surveillance."

"How does one employ the strays?" Master Hadden took up the conversation.

All eyes were on Rowen, but it was Marek who answered. "You must petition the Wazir, and he only agrees to meet with his own. You must be a stray to gain entrance to his kingdom." At this point, everyone turned and looked at Rowen.

"I left the strays, and I disavowed the Wazir. I said some hateful things the last time we met, and I'm certain he has no desire to ever see me again." Rowen tried to explain without having to say too much.

"You might have left him, but he has never left you," Marek spoke softly and took a step toward Rowen.

"If Rowen cut him loose then there was a good reason for it." Dumas stated taking Rowen's side in an instant and Rowen appreciated him so much.

"I don't doubt that, but he is still a member of the strays it is a lifetime commitment just as you are still a member of your pack and you serve your Bard while living with a coven and serving the Master." Marek made the situation clear.

"What do you want from him?" Dumas asked, and Rowen felt his hand tighten on his shoulder. Dumas was pulling him closer. He wasn't lying when he said he was a possessive bastard, and Rowen found it rather stimulating.

"We need the assistance of the strays in the lowlands to help us find who it is that's cavorting with demons." Master Hadden responded and spoke clearly and to the

point. "On our own, we will manage, and we will find them, but it will take time, and in that time, they will kill more innocents and grow more powerful as we continue to search. With your help, we can hopefully put a stop to this before it has a chance of doing more damage."

"What about the Charmer can't he put a stop to this entire thing?" Dumas was not on board with Rowen becoming a part of this.

"He can tamp it down, but the source remains, and the demonic influence will continue to grow." Master Hadden walked up to Rowen and stood in front of him. "With the help of the strays, we can bring an end to this and perhaps identify the source, ending the infection forever."

Rowen could not deny him as a member of the police force and having pledged to serve and protect the citizens of this city he knew he had to try. "I'll see if he will meet with me sir." Rowen stated. "The Wazir can be rather off putting and there is the chance that he will not see me. Either way, I have friends and acquaintances within the stray population, and I will pull together everyone that I can to help in this endeavor.

"I'll take whatever you can give me Rowen, thank you." Master Hadden patted his shoulder.

"I'll do what I can." Rowen turned and looked up at Dumas. "The Wazir requires shadows meeting stark, blinding sunlight."

"Do you have a place in mind?" Dumas asked.

"Yes, behind the warehouse on division. I've used it before to enter his realm. We have less than an hour if we want the sun to be in the right place."

“I’m going with you.” Dumas declared.

“I don’t know if he will allow it.”

“I am a hellhound, and I will go wherever I damn well please.” He stated with considerable bite. “I’m staying by your side. You came close to being victim number five last night, and I am taking no chances with your safety.”

“Understood.” Rowen was not going to fight him on this. Besides, he was a better, stronger man with Dumas by his side.

They left the meeting and went directly to the lowlands, a place that never got better, even as the rest of Pittsburgh healed. It always radiated a musty, sick aura that got into your senses and into your mood. It was a hard place for anyone with a heart or feelings to live in, and it accounted for the majority of crimes in the city. The Master referred to a source, something that Rowen had not heard of or considered but suddenly made sense.

Master Hadden had put the run on magics in the Pittsburgh area, cleansing and purifying them all the way. It brought back a sense of community and safety that had deteriorated as the effects of magics had wormed their way into society and the very structures. But with that said, there remained a shadow of evil that had retreated to the lowlands and refused to die.

Every effort was met with modicum success, but the negativity would seep back in and eventually have to be driven back once again. It happened over and over again. Rowen had walked the streets and alleys of the lowlands many times as a stray and witnessed sadness and depression at every turn.

He knew it didn’t have to be this way, but he didn’t know how to change it apart from doing his job and capturing the criminals. If there was a long term remedy for what

was eating away at the lowlands then he wanted to be a part of that solution.

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Dumas found his unease peaking several times during the meeting. It was clear why they wanted the strays, but he wished it wasn't his mate who had to pursue the Wazir. He'd heard many things about that man, but very few were good. It was true few knew anything about him, and even fewer had ever met him. But still, there was always a seed of truth to every rumor. He would not let his mate face the man alone. If they were on bad terms, then anything could happen.

"When was the last time you spoke with the Wazir?" He asked when they pulled up to the old, abandoned warehouse.

"I was fifteen, and my father went missing. He refused to help me find him and said I was better off without him." Rowen spoke hurriedly and did not look at Dumas.

"Were you?"

"Probably." He just left it there, and Dumas did not press for more. They had a lifetime to learn about each other, so there was no need to push.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be I suppose." They got out of the vehicle and began walking around to the back of the old warehouse. He could see memories coming back to Rowen in his expressions upon seeing the area once again and he could feel his apprehension.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to." He reminded him while putting his arm around his shoulders.

“It’ll be okay.” He said and smiled up at Dumas. “I have you.”

"You'll always have me," Dumas answered.

Dumas didn’t like the idea at all, but he could not tell his mate what to do, all he could do was be there for him. The area behind the warehouse was cloaked in a dark shadow except from a small area that was bathed in sunlight that came through an opening in the trees that bordered the property. The delineation between the light and the dark was a hard line and apparently the entrance to the Wazir’s realm.

Rowen took his hand and side by side they stepped onto the line and suddenly they were moving through space and emerged into what appeared to be an entrance hall. It was cavernous and also beautiful with stone and color and design similar to Master DuCane’s Palace entrance. The walls were adorned with Egyptian imagery and decor. It felt like a blend of the old world and the ancient world. A blend of Kings and Pharoahs.

As they walked further, going forward, rooms, hallways, and even a ballroom rose up on either side, indicating that the place was endless, just as alternate realms tended to be. What he found interesting was the amount of sunshine, or what looked to be sunshine, lighting every room.

“We will be met shortly by his guards don’t underestimate them. They are not large but they are fast, agile and deadly. The guards of the Wazir have claws that are poisonous.” Rowen warned.

“Good to know, thank you.” Dumas replied. “Do you have the same capability?”

"No, only the guards, but the rest of us can lay a person up for a while. It's a poison as well but not as toxic and can only be delivered in our shifted form." Dumas was learning more every day.

Just as Rowen said, two guards dressed in a uniform of flowing pants and a long, snug jacket walked up to meet them. The outfit had an Egyptian flavor to it and was quite stunning, actually. They looked at Rowen first and then glanced derisively at Dumas.

"I request a meeting with the Wazir," Rowen stated firmly and clearly.

"Why do you bring a hellhound here?" One of them asked disapproving.

"He is my mate, and we have bonded," Rowen stated again, firm and clear. They looked surprised for an instant but quickly covered it.

"Follow us." They said. Rowen and Dumas fell into step behind them.

Dumas looked over at Rowen but did not speak. Their eyes locked, and Rowen nodded. They were on their way to the Wazir; Rowen's request had been accepted. They walked for quite a distance before entering an open area, a large room with soldiers positioned along each wall. At the far end of the room was a raised platform, and on it was a thick, intricately decorated throne.

The Wazir was a king among his people, and that was very clear. He stood as they approached and descended the platform as they came to stand before him. He wasn't what Dumas had expected, although he wasn't sure what he'd expected. This man was tall and lean but solidly built and moved with a fluid-like agility that was mesmerizing. He did not appear old, although he had lived for several thousand years, with his presence dating back to the days of the pharaohs. He was an enigma in the truest sense of the word.

He looked of Mediterranean decent dark and tanned. His hair was black, as were his eyes that saw all and knew everything and remained suspicious. He was stunningly handsome, dressed in silks and gems, and held the air of a man who feared absolutely nothing. Dumas would remember this meeting, and he would remember this man.

The Wazir looked at Rowen, who then dropped his head and stared at the floor. "What is it that you seek from me, Rowen, and why do you bring this man to my court?" His voice was like soft, rolling thunder with the undertone of an ever-present threat.

He looked at Dumas and held his gaze, and it wasn't long before he had a full grasp on who stood before him. Understanding snapped between them, and suddenly, Dumas felt the connection take form. Heat and energy pulsed through him, leaving a mark on his soul. Dumas was shocked at the power this man could wield. The Wazir had just claimed his first hellhound.

"Welcome, Dumas, to the land and lair of the stray cats. I am the King of the Felines and the Prophet of Bastet herself." He stated with a half smile that showed straight white teeth and incisors sharp as daggers. "I am the King of all the strays and of one hellhound." He was now beholden to his Bard, Master Hadden, and the Wazir. Dumas smiled in return, warmed by the welcome and inclusion.

"Thank you for having me, sir," Dumas responded respectfully.

"It's a pleasure, a true pleasure." He said and then turned to Rowen. "You chose wisely, my son. Your mate is a treasure, a hellhound of note, and worth and a valuable addition to my community of strays."

Rowen seemed confused at first but caught up quickly and gave Dumas a subtle but cheeky grin. "I agree, sir."

"Presenting your mate to me was not your only reason for requesting this meeting." He stated and waited.

Rowen explained the deaths and disappearances in the lowlands and the rising evil. He made clear the need for a rapid end to the threat that hung over them all. "I'm asking on behalf of Master Nikolas Hadden for your pack's assistance. They wander

the lowlands and see so much, and no one notices." Silence fell for several minutes.

"They will not fight for him." He said, and Rowen interjected immediately.

"He's not asking for that kind of support. He's asking for eyes and ears on the ground so he can locate the evil and dispatch it before more are killed and the human's interest grows deeper." Dumas was impressed with how his mate stayed calm and focused in the face of this powerful individual. Everything he'd heard of the Wazir might be true, but at this moment, he knew him as a strict, formidable, and devoted leader.

"He will owe me a favor in exchange." He stated.

Rowen nodded in agreement. Dumas wasn't sure if the man held the power to be answering for the Master but now was not the time to nitpick the details. "Are we agreed?" Rowen asked and again the Wazir made him wait as he looked him up and down and with a glance over to Dumas he responded.

"Yes, we have an agreement." Without another word, the Wazir turned and walked away, and the two guards took them back to the doors where they'd entered. As soon as they stepped out, they returned to the back lot of the warehouse and were standing in the sunlight. Only a few minutes had passed, although it felt like hours.

Once back in the SUV Dumas called Josef and let him know the agreement was struck and the strays would join the surveillance team. He also mentioned the favor exchange and was relieved when Josef laughed, referring to a similar deal they'd made with Master DuCane many years ago and how that had turned out.

He closed the call and reached over, taking Rowen's hand in his. "That was interesting."

"Sorry I didn't tell you that there was a possibility he would connect and mark you as

one of his own. It rarely happens so I didn't bring it up. I'm sorry." Rowen was very apologetic, but it was unnecessary.

"I'm honored to be a part of your pack, and your Wazir is a respectable man." Rowen smiled. "He didn't appear to hold any grudge against you."

"The grudge was all mine, I'm afraid. I said things in anger and thought he wouldn't want to see me again, but all he was waiting for was for me to reach out. Life lessons, I fucking hate life lessons."

"Don't we all." Dumas laughed, pulled out of the lot, and headed downtown. Rowen needed to report to work, and Dumas wanted to join the foot patrol in the lowlands.

Rowen entered the station and was immediately congratulated for solving the lowlands case. Cal Grainger came in and confessed to the killings and said that Det. Dalhousie was the reason for his decision to come clean. The memories they'd placed in his mind painted a perfect picture of a man believing he was trapped with no way out.

"Good work convincing that creep to come clean." His Sergeant praised him.

"Thank you." Rowen played along.

"He's refusing to tell us what he did with the other bodies, but we'll get it out of him in time."

"I hope so." Rowen went to his desk and decided to finish the write up on this case following the information given to him by the vampires. It was awkward as hell but necessary for the safety of all paranormals.

"Grainger has confessed to the crimes." The Mage shouted. "He got scared and probably believes that the police will protect him from us no doubt."

“It works in our favor either way.” The magic assisting with the ritual commented. “The cops will let down their guard and we can find another sacrifice without them breathing down our necks.”

"I think the last one should be meaningful, don't you?" The Mage said with a sinister grin.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking we should choose someone special and connected to the case rather than just easy targets. The incubus needs strength and intelligence to feed from." The Mage was going on and on.

“Are you referring to one of Hadden’s men?” The magic was sounding unsure and a little concerned. “Why rock the boat all we need is one more and an easy target is an easy target I say.”

“I’ll take care of things from here.” He said. “When everything is ready, I’ll call to make sure everything is set up at the site. This one will bring him back full force and full strength, and then we will rule this town. Control will be ours." The magic nodded, ready to go along with whatever the Mage had devised. The incubus would provide the power they lacked and the skills they needed. Giving him a few humans to feed on was an easy price to pay.

Dumas patrolled through the lowlands following leads but found nothing noteworthy. The strays were everywhere now that he knew them and recognized them. Being a part of that pack and the Wazir opened Dumas' eyes to the lives of the small shifters. They may be overlooked in many ways, but they were not powerless. The little beasts were fierce and clever.

It was early evening, and he was finding it growing more and more difficult being away from his newly bonded mate. He stopped in a parking lot near the old leather

bar that was once a focus in the nightlife of the area but was now abandoned and gave Rowen a call.

"You still at the station, sweetheart?"

"Yeah, just finishing my reports and all the related paperwork."

"Any blowback on the Grainger situation?"

"All is well. He's admitted to everything, and the case is being closed as we speak."

"Good, very good."

"How about you? How's the patrol?"

"Uneventful so far but I have high hopes. The strays are amazing, and they are everywhere. Now that I know them I see them." Dumas was impressed.

"You're one of us now, babe, so they don't hide from you." Rowen chuckled. "You're the amazing one. I love you, Dumas, and I can't wait to see you."

The declaration hit him by surprise and swamped him with feelings of want and desire. "I love you too Rowen and we'll be together soon." The craving to be close was real.

"I'll meet you in the lowlands when I finish here," Rowen suggested.

"No, I don't want you around here it's foul. Call me when you get off and I'll meet you at your place it's closer than mine." It gave Dumas something to look forward to.

"I'll call you."

"Thanks, sweetheart. I'll see you very soon." With that, he closed the call, and not five minutes later, Josef called.

"The strays are doing their job and doing it well." He declared. "The leader of the group is a mage, just as Rowen had predicted, and their intention is to raise the demon incubus that we destroyed several years ago. He had been operating out of the old leather bar sucking souls and killing people."

"Why would they want to resurrect an incubus?" It sounded insane to Dumas those creatures were pure devils.

"They're under the belief that they will control him and his abilities and use him to their own ends." Josef scoffed. "If they manage to bring that guy back, they will be his first victims. There is no controlling a monster like that, and we do not need him back in Pittsburgh."

"Where are they." Dumas was eager to end this.

"They were in the Two Track but have left and separated. The strays followed, one heading to the tenement and the other going in the direction of the derelict warehouses on River Street. There are more than just the two of them. We're pretty confident that there are four in all, and the leader is the Mage." Josef finished and then added. "Those strays were worth every penny we paid."

"You haven't paid yet." Dumas chuckled. "But someday the Wazir will call in his marker."

"No doubt." Josef closed the call and Dumas decided to head over to the warehouses and maybe get a lead.

Rowen was getting ready to leave and head over to his apartment when the Sergeant pulled him into his office. "We just got an anonymous tip on the location of one or

more of the missing."

"Where?"

"The caller said they were buried on the grounds of the leather club down in the lowlands. It closed several years ago after it partially burned." He gave him the information and instructed him to go and check it out.

He left the building slightly disheartened by the fact that he wouldn't be seeing Dumas until morning. He could call and let him know he was on his way to the lowlands, but Dumas had been adamant about staying away, so it was probably best that he kept it to himself no need to cause him worry.

The leather bar was a shell now just a brick wall and a few planks scattered around, and dirt plenty of dirt. The attached shed was still standing but also showed signs of having been burned. He checked the perimeter of the building looking for freshly turned earth indicating a grave or any obvious disturbances to the ground or trash laying around.

It was getting well onto darkness, and he was considering coming back in the morning at full light to investigate further when he heard something from inside the old shed. He shined his flashlight over the area and found nothing out of the ordinary so moved in the direction of the shed.

With an odd sense of déjà vu, he was suddenly struck from behind, not with a bat this time but with something much smaller. The pain hit just below his left ear and radiated outward. When he reached up, he felt a dart that was puncturing his skin. It was small and sharp.

Rowen managed to remove it before succumbing to the poison and dropping to the ground. He tried to hold onto consciousness, but the shadows closed in too fast. He heard movements and voices around him, but his vision was gone, and then there was

nothing as he sank into the darkness.

"He's a cat shifter." The magic was startled. "We've only used humans. Will he accept a shifter?"

"We used humans because they were easier to catch and contain. A shifter will be perfect for our last sacrifice, and it will show our love and dedication. This is working out so much better than I had ever imagined." The Mage was giddy.

They quickly carried Rowen inside the shed which was set up for the final offering with an altar and candles and various small organics. They were skilled and had absorbed some interesting abilities from the incubus in exchange for serving him. But they were ignorant of the capabilities of a demon incubus and his lack of loyalty, care or his willingness to do anything to anyone to appease his own wants and needs. They were nothing, and yet they thought they were in control.

"Call the others and bring them here."

"What about his pack? They might come looking for him." The magic was referring to Rowen, who lay on the cold cement floor. The Mage began to laugh as if the idea was hilarious.

"He's a cat shifter, for fuck sake. No one cares. They have no pack, and they're more likely to kill each other than provide any sort of support. No one is looking for him apart from the police, and they will never find him." The Mage shot him with another dose of the drug to keep him sleeping. Being a shifter, it would burn off quickly. He continued to laugh as he began removing Rowen's clothes, preparing him for the incubus.

The warehouses were a bust, with no sign of anyone having been there in quite some time. But he went ahead and searched the area thoroughly. The magics could move fast and he wanted to make sure he did not miss anything. His next move was to

check out the old leather bar. Others were checking the tenement, and he had a feeling about the leather bar.

He was told that it was the location the incubus had been killed apparently he came up against a human that was half angel and his beloved who was an angry vampire assassin. The incubus didn't have a chance. Dumas smiled at the way Gage had told that story that had been told to him. Dumas wished he'd been there.

Dumas pulled into the overgrown parking area of the club and got out feeling a weird sense of dread. He didn't do dread. It wasn't something that had ever touched him, and yet it was there. He moved around the front of the rubble that had once been the club and toward the large shed on the left. There were lights, flickering lights. He didn't hesitate to run at the door, knocking it down with his shoulder. What he saw inside froze his heart and nearly killed him.

On a weird makeshift altar was the love of his fucking life, stripped naked and about to be offered up with a knife to his throat. The rage was blinding, and he rushed to the front of the building only to be brought to a sudden halt when the one with the knife screamed he'd kill Rowen if Dumas came any closer. The need to kill to destroy was burning through him, but fear for the safety of his lover held him fast. There were four of them, just like Josef had said. They were there watching, smiling, and Dumas would tear them to pieces.

"Any closer, and I slit his throat, or maybe I'll remove his head entirely." The bastard taunted, touching the knife blade to Rowen's throat, drawing a bead of blood, and then backing off. Dumas was going to lose his mind trying to figure out a way to get his mate away from these devils. Then he saw them working their way closer and behind the two on the altar and circling those on either side. The rage and need to defend consumed him as he shifted in an instant, bearing his full fearsome Hellhound form. The terrifying beast was unleashed and ready for retribution.

"You're not leaving here alive hound once we bleed this one the prince of the

underworld will rise and use your lover here and you to feed and strengthen his presence in this world. Hadden's hold on this town is about to end our Master will rise and all those who do not bow down will die." The guy was delusional if he thought he was going to make the cut.

Everyone in the room would die the moment the incubus broke through. He would need an ungodly amount of life force to stabilize himself in this realm. Dumas kept his eyes on strays waiting, and then it happened. The large candles stacked behind them on the altar, all burning large and bright. One by one, they were swept off the tables, setting fire to their robes and debris.

The second the knife was raised away from Rowen's throat, Dumas was on him, grabbing the burning man and tearing him to pieces. The other attempted to fold into the air and disappear, but apparently, fire nullified the airflow necessary for such a magic trick. The other one on the altar was being consumed by the flames, so Dumas left him to burn and grabbed Rowen up into his arms, getting him away from the fire. Rowen shifted. A soft grey cat now filling Dumas' arms and nuzzling close, looking for comfort and safety.

The last two were finished by one of Wazir's guards. The cat shifted into one of the men who'd led them in to see the Wazir. He sliced the throats of the remaining two magics, killing them instantly. Everyone rushed out of the shed, Dumas held tight to his mate, and the cats scattered. The guard came up to him and placed his jacket over Rowen.

"Thank you." Dumas was sincerely touched by his assistance.

"Thank the Wazir. He had me keep an eye on Rowen." He looked Dumas up and down. "I knew you'd get here, but know that if you hadn't, his people would have saved him." The guard made himself clear.

"His people did save him." Dumas admitted and reached out to shake his hand. The

guard looked at the hand and then took it.

"You make a good stray, Dumas. I look forward to working with you." With that, he shifted back to a large black cat and disappeared with the others. Rowen began to wake, and Dumas held him tight in his arms and placed a hard kiss on his lips.

"You're okay, my love. The magics are dead."

Dumas called it in, and in seconds, the area was swarming with people. Master Hadden had called in favors from every form of magic hunter and destroyer he knew to come and purify the land. It was determined that the Mage had come close to realizing his dream, and the demon had been on the threshold of this world. In the end, the source remained elusive, but the current threat had been neutralized.

Dumas brought his mate to his apartment in the Hadden Center fearing for his safety. The place was solid secure and there were doctors and scientists of all sorts available. Dumas was not going to take any chances on the health and wellbeing of his mate.

"The Hadden Center," Rowen stated, looking around Dumas' living room from the sofa where he lay. Dumas had been caring for him after having the doctors thoroughly examine him for any lingering effects of the drugs he was given. "It gets easier every time I come here."

"That's good to hear because you're staying here for a while. I don't want any arrogant magics taking another run at you. We wait until Master Hadden sounds the all clear, and then we move back to my place." Rowen reached out his arms, and Dumas did not delay in rushing to him.

"I love you so much, and I'm so glad I found you." Rowen rubbed his cheek against Dumas' shoulder.

"We found each other, sweetheart, and I couldn't be happier. I love you with my life."

They stayed like that for several minutes, and then Rowen spoke. "There will always be danger for you and me, but together, I have a feeling we can conquer anything."

"You, me, and the strays, we can conquer anything." Dumas chuckled.

"Oh yeah, I forgot the Wazir sent me a message." Rowen moved to look Dumas in the eyes as he spoke. Those beautiful eyes, Dumas melted with every glance.

"What was it?" Dumas started nuzzling Rowen's neck and slipped his hand down to gently cup his growing erection. He could never get enough of this man.

"He's calling in his favor and wants to meet with Master Hadden." That was a surprise. Dumas stilled and turned his head to place a soft kiss on Rowen's ear.

"So soon." He stated.

"I think he had something in mind at the time he made the agreement," Rowen admitted.

"This could get interesting."

"You don't know the half of it." Rowen chuckled and refused to say more. Dumas rolled him onto his back and took full advantage of his lovely body.