



Kyle

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Love makes people do stupid things for the right reasons.

When Kyle gets kicked out of his pack, he's not surprised. Not only is he a tiger shifter living amongst wolves, but with his mother dead, the alpha has no reason to keep him. Kyle is also not surprised when his family decides to follow him. He needs to keep them safe, and he can only think of one way to do that.

Take over his father's pride.

Dennis's life is finally the way he wants it. With Alpha Carter gone and Gal in charge of the pride, Dennis was able to open his bakery and secure his future. He'll do pretty much anything to keep things that way.

Maybe even give up on his mate.

Kyle didn't expect to find another man sitting behind his father's desk, or to like that man. He certainly didn't expect Gal to let him go after he demanded the pride be handed over to him or for the alpha to try to get to know him.

Dennis and Kyle will have to choose between the pride and their mate, and neither of them knows how to do so.

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Kyle stared ahead. He hadn't been told why he was in the alpha's office, but he could take a guess. There was only one reason for his alpha to talk to him so soon after his mother's death.

Alpha Davis wasn't even going to wait a week. Kyle wasn't surprised, but that didn't mean he liked it or that he knew what to do.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you to come to my office," Alpha Davis said from behind his desk.

There were two guards by the door, as if the alpha expected Kyle to attack him. It was ridiculous because Kyle had never attacked him or anyone else, but Alpha Davis had always disliked Kyle. It had nothing to do with Kyle himself and everything to do with who his father was.

Well, that and the fact that Alpha Davis had been planning to marry Kyle's mother until she got pregnant with Kyle.

Kyle should answer Alpha Davis's question, but what was he supposed to say? They both knew why he was there. He was about to get kicked out of the pack. He wouldn't have been if his mother was alive, but she wasn't.

Grief tightened around Kyle's heart. He'd lost the person who'd been most important to him, and he didn't know how to deal with that. His life was missing something massive. How was he supposed to fill the hole his mother's death had left? He didn't think he could, and he'd have to find a way to survive the pain.

Even though Alpha Davis was taking his family from him, too.

Kyle swallowed. “You asked me to come, and I came.”

Alpha Davis was silent.

Kyle could feel the man watching him, but he didn’t look at him. He didn’t need to.

“We all feel the loss of your mother,” Alpha Davis said. “You know how important she was to the pack and to me.”

Kyle almost snorted. Yes, he knew how important she’d been to Alpha Davis. He hadn’t cared that she’d never wanted to marry him. He hadn’t cared that her parents wouldn’t have forced her to and would rather have left the pack. He’d wanted to marry her, and he’d been set to do just that.

Until she’d gotten pregnant. Kyle couldn’t say that his father was any better than Alpha Davis. He barely knew the man, but he’d looked into him, and he disliked what he’d found. Alpha Carter had led the Green Hill pride with an iron fist, and the people who’d left didn’t make it a secret that they thought he was an asshole.

The last Kyle had heard, the pride members weren’t allowed to leave the house they lived in. At least that wasn’t something Alpha Davis had ever ordered. That would be too hard since the pack didn’t live in one massive house like the pride did. Besides, he liked that his pack earned money, because it meant he did. He didn’t have a job outside of being the alpha, which was fine. It was how things usually worked. That didn’t mean he had to take half the salary of every single pack member, though.

Kyle didn’t say that out loud. He couldn’t afford to, especially not with the guards standing by the door. “She was important to me and my family, too,” he muttered.

“And I’m very sorry for your loss. You have to look at things from my point of view, though. You’re a tiger shifter. The pack accepted you because of your mother, but you can’t expect them to continue doing so now that she’s gone.”

Kyle gritted his teeth. “Are you saying you want me to leave?”

They both knew that was what Alpha Davis was saying. Kyle wanted confirmation, but he didn’t need it. Decades had passed since Alpha Davis had to let go of Kyle’s mother, but he still resented her and, even more so, Kyle. Even when Kyle was a child, Alpha Davis considered him responsible for his failure to marry Kyle’s mother. His parents had prevented the marriage since she’d become pregnant by another man—another alpha. Kyle still didn’t know if she’d done it on purpose. He knew for sure that she hadn’t wanted to marry Alpha Davis, but she’d never wanted to talk about it. Considering how awful the situation had been, Kyle wasn’t surprised.

Alpha Davis cleared his throat. “It would be best for everyone. We tolerated you, but you never fit in, Kyle. People are nervous around you, and I don’t want my pack to feel like that. With your mother gone, there’s nothing keeping you here, is there?”

Kyle almost snapped, but since he didn’t think Alpha Davis would take it well, he stopped himself before doing something stupid. “My family is here.”

“Well, of course, but they’re wolf shifters. Besides, I’m not telling you that you’ll never be allowed to come back. I just think it would be better if you found yourself a new pack, or even better, a pride. Why don’t you go to your father?”

Kyle wanted to jump up from the chair and run out. He’d known this was why he was here, and now that he had confirmation, he didn’t need to continue listening to this. But he couldn’t give Alpha Davis even one excuse to mistreat him and his family. He couldn’t afford to.

Even though Kyle had to leave, his family wouldn't. They were wolf shifters. His grandfather, brother, and sister deserved to continue living the life they were settled into. Their home was here, with the wolves, and since Kyle wouldn't put it past Alpha Davis to bother them if he didn't obey his orders, he needed to keep himself in check. For now, Alpha Davis wouldn't kick Kyle's family out. Hopefully, he never would if Kyle went quietly.

He got to his feet. Alpha Davis winced and leaned back in his chair as if he expected Kyle to attack him. Suddenly, Kyle was exhausted. He'd just lost his mother, and he was being kicked out of the only home he'd ever known. He didn't have the energy to attack Alpha Davis.

He quickly bowed his head. "I'll start packing as soon as I return to my grandfather's house. You don't have to worry about me trying to stay."

Alpha Davis looked surprised. "You're not going to argue?"

"Would it change anything if I tried?"

"I'm sorry, Kyle, but you just don't fit in."

That much was true. Kyle was a tiger shifter in a pack full of wolves. He had never fit in, but he'd been accepted because of his mother. Kyle didn't know if Alpha Davis had ever loved her or if he'd convinced himself that what he felt for her was love, and he didn't care. All of that was in the past now. This wasn't Kyle's home anymore.

Maybe it never had been.

Kyle bowed again and turned to leave. Alpha Davis didn't try to stop him. Neither did the guards. They allowed Kyle to walk out of the office without saying anything. Kyle didn't relax until he was out of the alpha's house. With every step, he felt he

was leaving part of his life behind. He didn't know how to stop it from happening. He wasn't sure he could.

What was he supposed to do? This was the only home he'd ever had. He might have expected Alpha Davis to kick him out, but he thought he'd have more time. He was still mourning his mother and hadn't even started to think about what his next step would be.

Beyond packing and leaving, anyway.

He made his way to his grandfather's house, where their entire family had lived. They still did, except for Kyle and his mother. He hated that he would have to leave his siblings and his grandfather behind. He didn't want to, but he didn't have a choice.

They were waiting for him when he walked in. Jennifer jumped up from her chair at the kitchen table and rushed toward Kyle. One look at his expression seemed to be enough, because she threw herself into his arms.

He caught her easily. She was more than ten years younger, and even though she was twenty-one now, she'd always be his baby sister.

"What happened?" their grandfather asked as he rose from his seat.

Kyle's brother, Christopher, snorted. "What do you think happened? We all know what the alpha wanted."

He was leaning against the kitchen counter, looking like he wanted to strangle someone, possibly Alpha Davis. Kyle had to be careful with what he said because he didn't want his brother to get into trouble. Christopher probably would once Kyle was gone, though.

Kyle's life was unraveling around him, and he didn't know how to stop it.

He doubted he could.

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"Gordon, there's another tray to take up front," Dennis called out.

It took a moment for Dennis's apprentice to poke his head into the bakery kitchen. There was a smudge of what had to be sugar on his nose when he did, a sure sign he'd been poaching some of the pastries.

Dennis rolled his eyes. He didn't know how many times he had to tell his apprentice and his assistant that they could eat whatever they wanted. They always hid it, as if they expected him to fire them if he found out.

"Where do you want these?" Gordon asked as he grabbed the tray of doughnuts.

"Ask Shirley. She's the one in charge of the displays." And of anything that had to do with the customers.

Dennis loved to bake, but he'd rather not deal with the people coming in and out of the bakery every day. They were noisy and demanding, and things had been awkward when he'd still run everything on his own. He wasn't someone who enjoyed crowds and talking to people, so finding Shirley had been a godsend.

Gordon eyed the doughnuts, and Dennis knew what would happen. He had to suppress a smile.

"I kept a few doughnuts for you and Shirley, so don't start eating the ones on the tray," he warned.

Gordon's cheeks went red. He wasn't quite young enough to be Dennis's son, but there were enough years between them that Dennis felt brotherly toward Gordon—like a much older brother. Gordon was only twenty-two, and his messy hair, freckles, and ever-present smile betrayed his youth. Sometimes Dennis wished he could still be as hopeful and fresh, but he was almost forty, and he was tired, even though as a shifter, he was still young.

“Sorry, boss,” Gordon muttered.

“Don't worry about it.”

Gordon straightened his back and disappeared with the tray. Dennis could hear him talk to Shirley, and he listened for a moment. They weren't saying anything important, but knowing they worked for him at his bakery made Dennis want to puff up with pride.

After Alpha Carter had left, Dennis had hoped things would get better, but it had been hard to believe he would finally be able to do something with his life. Like every other pride member, he'd been forbidden to work by their alpha. They hadn't even been allowed to leave the house, and Dennis had been confined to the kitchen. Even there, he hadn't been allowed to do what he wanted. He'd known better than to make waves.

But all of that was over. The pride had a new alpha, and thanks to him, Dennis had been able to make the one dream he'd ever had come true. He'd opened the bakery.

The door between the kitchen and the front of the store opened again, and Gordon reappeared. “Liam and Gal are here.”

Dennis looked down at himself. He was a bit messy, but they probably expected it. Still, he quickly took off his apron, washed his hands, and gestured at the oven.

“Keep an eye on those for me, will you? I don’t think I’ll be long, but you know what to do if I am.”

Gordon’s eyes went wide, but Dennis didn’t wait for him to ask if he was sure. He was training Gordon to be a baker, which meant Gordon would have to start doing things on his own. For now, he was an apprentice, but he was good enough that eventually he would become better. Dennis didn’t have children, and he didn’t know what would happen to the bakery when he retired. Thankfully, he had many years of work to do before that happened.

But he wanted Gordon to know that the bakery was his, too. Gradually he’d be more comfortable doing things on his own, and he was old enough to take on some of the responsibilities Dennis shouldered. Hopefully, he wouldn’t burn down the bakery.

Dennis pushed open the door and stepped into the bakery proper. The first word that came to mind every time he walked in was cozy. He didn’t spend a lot of time in this area of the bakery, but when he’d decided to open the place, he’d had a precise image in mind, and he’d followed it. He loved the dark wood of the chairs and tables, the many plants, and the soft lights.

Shirley was serving a woman who was pointing at the pastries behind the glass of the counter. Several people were seated in the room, sipping coffee and eating the pastries they’d bought. Dennis hadn’t been sure when Shirley had suggested adding a corner with coffee and tea, but she’d promised she would take care of it by herself, and it had brought more customers in.

Liam and Gal stood behind the woman. Dennis waved at them to step to the side. He hadn’t been sure about Gal when he’d first arrived in Green Hill, but thanks to him, the pride was flourishing.

“What do you want?” Dennis asked, gesturing to the counter.

“Can I get a doughnut? They look delicious,” Liam said.

Dennis grinned. “Whatever you want.”

Liam’s eyes sparkled. “I’d like two, then. One chocolate, and what’s that pink and green one?”

“Watermelon.”

Liam wrinkled his nose. “That sounds weird. I think I’ll stay safe and get a salted caramel one.”

Dennis nodded and grabbed one of the paper boxes they used for the pastries. He picked the best-looking doughnuts for his alpha mate, then turned to his alpha. “Gal?”

“I think I’ll try the watermelon one.”

It was a seasonal doughnut that Dennis had wanted to try, and he was glad he had. The weather was warm, and people wanted things that tasted fresh. Well, except Liam, who was happy with chocolate and salted caramel.

Dennis added a watermelon doughnut to the box. Gal moved toward Shirley to pay, but Dennis shook his head. “On the house.”

“You can’t keep offering us free things every time we come around,” Gal pointed out.

“I can certainly try. This place wouldn’t be open if it weren’t for you, so as far as I’m concerned, you can have all the free doughnuts you want.”

“I’m not going to say no to that,” Liam said.

Dennis could hear the humor in his voice. More than that, he knew Liam, so he knew the alpha mate would never take advantage of his position, not even to get free doughnuts. He was happy to go with it when Dennis insisted, but if Dennis didn't say anything, he'd be in line with Gal to pay for the pastries.

Liam winked, grabbed the box, and then moved toward one of the tables. Gal stayed behind, so Dennis waited. He was used to this. Gal checked in on the businesses he'd helped open as often as he could.

"Everything all right with the bakery?" Gal asked.

He was talking to Dennis, but his gaze followed his mate through the bakery. There were no dangers here except the scalding coffee, but Gal was always like that. It made Dennis wonder if he would be the same with his mate.

He was fine on his own. He didn't need a mate when he had everything else he could ever want—the house that finally felt like a home, a pride that supported him through every problem, and a job he loved. He'd hated his life before, but not anymore. Not since Gal had arrived.

Dennis was working hard to repay the alpha and the pride, even though it wasn't necessary. Gal had been clear when he'd offered Dennis his help. The pride had helped buy the bakery, and while Gal was fine with Dennis repaying him, there was no rush. This would never have happened if Alpha Carter had still been the leader. Dennis owed his new life to Gal, and that wasn't something he would ever forget. He would be loyal to his alpha, whatever happened.

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"I can't believe he kicked you out," Kyle's grandfather said.

Kyle could believe it easily. He'd known this was coming, and he suspected his grandfather had, too. He hadn't said anything, but their entire family was aware of how Alpha Davis felt when it came to Kyle.

Kyle had ruined Alpha Davis's future with his mother. He'd taken his mother away from the alpha, and now, Alpha Davis would take Kyle's home away from him. He could use the excuse that Kyle didn't belong and that, as a tiger, he shouldn't live with wolves, but it was bullshit. Alpha Davis resented Kyle's existence. He hated that because of Kyle, Kyle's mother hadn't married him.

There was also the fact that Kyle's father was an alpha. He wasn't the alpha of their pack, but he had a pride. Kyle had no say in how the pack was led, but as an alpha's son, he might get it into his mind that he should take over the pack. Alpha Davis had several children, including an heir, but he was still afraid of Kyle.

It was ridiculous. Kyle didn't want to be an alpha. He'd never wanted to be, and he doubted that would change. The problem was that there was only one other place where he could go, and he didn't know how his father would react.

"He can't do this," Christopher said, anger clear in his voice. "You were born here. You grew up here. This is your home as much as ours, and no one cares that you're a tiger shifter."

That wasn't true. Christopher didn't care, and neither did the rest of their family, but other people did. Kyle had always been in an odd position. He was a pack member, yet at the same time, people didn't fully view him as one. It might have been different if he'd been a wolf shifter like his mother, but instead, he'd taken his father's form.

Kyle had heard about packs and prides who welcomed everyone and didn't care what animal they shifted into, but that wasn't how things went here. Everyone in the pack was a wolf shifter.

Except Kyle.

He forced himself to smile. He didn't want his family to worry about him. He might not be a pack member anymore, but that didn't mean he'd walk out of their lives entirely. Maybe he'd move to the closest town so he could stay close. "I promise I'll let you know where I end up."

"What are you talking about?" Kyle's grandfather asked.

"Exactly what I said. I'll let you know what happens. I'm not sure where I'll go, but I'll find something. I just need a job, right?"

"You're not really going to leave, are you?" Christopher asked.

"What other choice do I have? Alpha Davis asked me to leave, which means I'm officially kicked out of the pack. If I try to stay, he'll have his guards step in, and I don't want that." No matter how strong Kyle was, he couldn't hold his own against all the guards in the pack.

"I know you can't stay, but it doesn't mean we'll be separated. If you're not welcome here, then I'm not staying," Jennifer said.

Kyle shook his head. "You have to. This is your home."

"It was yours, but the alpha kicked you out without a good reason. If you're leaving, so am I," Jennifer said, crossing her arms over her chest and setting her jaw.

Kyle could see she wouldn't change her mind, so he turned to his grandfather for help. Unfortunately, it looked like his grandfather felt the same as Jennifer.

"We're coming with you," he declared.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Kyle should have expected it, but he'd thought his family would realize that their place was here while his wasn't. He might be leaving, but that didn't mean they'd never see each other again. Kyle wasn't sure he'd be welcome for visits, but that wouldn't stop him from trying. If he wasn't allowed in, they could see each other in the closest town or wherever he ended up. They could use phones, video calls, and things like that.

"I don't even know where I'm going," he explained.

"What about your father?" Jennifer asked. "You think he'd take us in?"

"I don't know. I've never heard anything good about him, so I doubt it."

"But you could start there. Even if he doesn't want you in his pride, he'll have to accept you, right? You're his son and, technically, the future alpha of that pride."

Kyle grimaced. He didn't want to be the future alpha of anything, let alone of a pride he didn't know. He couldn't even remember what his father looked like. He knew he'd met him a few times when he was little more than a toddler, but that was thirty years ago. He'd looked into the man when he turned eighteen and had been curious, and he hadn't liked what he'd found. He'd decided to stay away, and while he'd checked again a few years back, it had been to find out that his father was still an asshole.

"I don't think becoming a pride member is a possibility," he said.

"But you said he's not a good person," Christopher said. "Maybe you could take his place. You could become the alpha."

"I don't want to fight with him, especially not for a pride I don't know."

“I agree that you shouldn’t go there ready for a fight, but it’s worth a try,” Kyle’s grandfather said. “We can’t stay here. That means we need to find another place to call home, and Green Hill is as good as any.”

This would be much easier if Kyle were on his own, but he could tell that his family wouldn’t let this go. Where he went, they went.

That terrified him. He didn’t know what he’d do if their lives were ruined because they’d insisted on following him, but part of him was glad he wouldn’t be alone. He didn’t really care about the pack. He certainly didn’t care about Alpha Davis. The only people who mattered to him were in this room, and if they left with him, he’d be fine. He disliked the thought of leaving his mother behind, but she was gone and wouldn’t come back. Kyle needed to take care of what remained of his family, and since they were coming with him, that meant finding a new home.

Kyle didn’t want to go to Green Hill, but it looked like he wouldn’t have a choice. It was the only place he had a right to call home, even though he’d never been there. He didn’t want to take the pride from his father, but he might have to if it meant finding his family a new home.

What the fuck was he supposed to do with a pride?

Having a pride would be the easiest way to keep his family safe, though. It didn’t even matter that they would be wolves amongst tigers. They didn’t care that Kyle was a tiger, and he hoped the pride wouldn’t care that they were wolves. He’d have no way to know until he got to Green Hill, though. Last he’d heard, the pride wasn’t doing so well, but maybe things had changed. He didn’t see why they should have, but the way things looked, it was clear he and his family were going to Green Hill.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d known this would be complicated, but he’d thought he’d be leaving alone. Instead, they would have to pack things up for four

people and empty the house. They couldn't leave anything behind for Alpha Davis to destroy.

"Fine. You can come with me," he said. "But we can't take everything. We'll have to sell the furniture and anything that's not important."

His grandfather nodded. "We will. You won't have to worry about anything, Kyle. As long as we stay together, our family will be fine."

He might be right, but Kyle couldn't help but wonder. This was the house in which he'd been born and where he'd grown up. The same went for his brother and sister. Because of him, they were forced to leave it behind.

They were forced to leave their mother behind.

But she was gone, and Kyle wasn't. He was very much here, and if his siblings wanted to stay with him, he wouldn't stop them from doing so.

He didn't think he could even if he tried.

* * * *

By early afternoon, Dennis was exhausted. He woke up early in the morning to get to the bakery and start getting things ready, so he was relieved to be able to go home early, too. It was one of the reasons he'd hired Shirley. She'd stay several more hours and sell what remained of the things Dennis had baked, and then she'd close the bakery. She lived close by, and Dennis knew she enjoyed the responsibility of being on her own at the bakery. Gordon would stay for a couple more hours before going home, too.

But Dennis was done for today. He had a few errands to run in town, but he'd be

quick.

The mansion where the pride lived really was home now. For a long time, it had been a prison. The pride members hadn't been allowed to leave or have a job, and even in the house, Dennis had felt like there was always someone watching him. It wasn't just their old alpha, but also the people who enabled him. Thankfully, now that Carter was gone and Gal was in charge, things had changed for the better. They were still changing, but only in good ways, like when Gal had kicked out Anne. She'd been a bully to everyone, including her son, and the pride was better off without her.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Dennis called out as he grabbed his backpack.

Gordon stepped into the back room. "Is there anything I can prep so that you get an easier start tomorrow morning?"

Dennis hesitated. He knew Gordon wanted more responsibilities, but he wasn't sure he was ready for them. Still, he'd have to start somewhere. Dennis could give him something to do that wouldn't be vital for tomorrow morning's prep. "I need more strawberry jam. I was going to make it tomorrow, but if you could do it this afternoon, it would be helpful."

Gordon had to be aware it wasn't urgent, but his eyes still lit up, and he beamed. "I'll get right on that, and I'll clean up the kitchen again once I'm done."

"All right. Call me if you need anything, and please, don't make my kitchen explode."

Gordon snickered. "I'm not making any promises."

He'd ruined food a few times, but that was normal. When Dennis had hired him as an apprentice, he'd expected it to happen. He was sure that Gordon could make the jelly

without his help. It wasn't hard, but he'd need to be focused.

Dennis said goodbye to Shirley, then left the bakery through the back door after grabbing the boxes he'd left on one of the tables. Once he was outside, he tilted his face toward the sky. The world around him felt like an oven after leaving the air-conditioned bakery, but he didn't mind. It reminded him of the ovens that were always on when he worked. Maybe that was why he loved summer.

Since he was bringing leftovers home, he had to be quick. Thankfully, his errands weren't long. He just wanted a few things from the grocery store to keep in his room at the mansion, and he needed a new pair of shorts after he'd ruined his last good pair the other day. He didn't mind the heat in the bakery, but in July, he'd rather work in shorts than in jeans.

He relaxed as soon as he got home. He still marveled at the feeling sometimes. Before, he felt like he couldn't get far enough from the house. The fear that he'd be locked up again every time he walked into the house was fading. Dennis knew that Gal wouldn't do something like that to anyone, but especially not to the people who worked in town. He wanted the pride to thrive, and the only way to do that was to allow its members to live their lives. They contributed to the pride's accounts as they could, including Dennis.

He was doing his best to repay the money the pride had loaned him so he could open the bakery. Thankfully, one of the pride members was an accountant, so Dennis didn't have to deal with all of that himself. He didn't have a head for numbers, which was one of the reasons he'd thought he wouldn't be able to open the bakery.

But the pride wasn't just a pride anymore. It was a family, and they were working things out as one.

He headed to the kitchen to leave the boxes on the counter. There were a few people

in there when he walked in, and they gathered around as if they were famished. Considering how young Jordan and his mate Nestor were, Dennis wouldn't be surprised if that were the case.

"You're not at work?" he asked Jordan.

Jordan shrugged one shoulder and answered around a mouthful of doughnut. "Robin gave me the afternoon off."

Nestor wrinkled his nose, probably at the food in his mate's mouth. He'd grabbed a cupcake, but he was much more polite as he ate it. "Miko stayed with Robin to help him, so we decided to visit."

Dennis nodded. Some of the youngest pride members had moved out. It was odd not to see them every day like before, but it felt good. They needed to start living their lives, and in some cases, it would be impossible for them to do so from the pride house. Dennis, on the other hand, was almost forty, and he didn't have to prove anything. He could have his bakery and continue to live here.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

"Well, enjoy the leftovers. I'm going upstairs to take a shower and a nap."

Dennis wasn't sure how much stuff would be left by the time those two were done, but it wasn't his problem. He'd brought the food, and if someone wanted it, they'd better hurry.

He left the kitchen and stepped back into the entrance, only to frown at the sight of Kevin disappearing through the door by the stairs. What was he doing, skulking around? Dennis was tempted to follow him, but he decided it wouldn't be worth it. Now that Anne had been kicked out, Kevin's claws had been filed. It was almost as if

he was doing his best to become one with the walls around the house. Dennis hadn't heard him bully anyone since Anne had left, which was a good thing. He doubted that Kevin wanted to be kicked out, too.

Dennis couldn't help but wonder what Kevin was planning. He had a hard time believing that he'd take this lying down. He'd lost his best friend, and there was no way he was happy about that, especially since almost everyone else in the pride treated him like a pariah. Maybe Dennis should mention something to Gal or Liam the next time he sees them. They'd probably be at dinner.

And if Dennis wanted to be at dinner, too, he needed to get that nap. Otherwise, he'd fall asleep on his plate, which was never fun.

He climbed the stairs slowly and yawned. He was exhausted, but this was what his life was supposed to be like.

He crossed paths with a few people on the way, but none of them stopped him. It was a relief. He felt better once he reached his room and kicked off his shoes. His jeans were the next to go, and for a moment, Dennis stood there, eyes closed and smiling. No matter how tiring this life was, he wouldn't have it any other way.

He heard his phone vibrating in his jeans pocket and leaned down to grab it. He wasn't surprised to see that his friend Taylor was texting him. He wanted to know if Dennis would be at dinner, so Dennis confirmed he would be, then left his phone on his nightstand and went to get a shower.

By the time he was done, he had more messages, and not just from Taylor. His mother had checked in like she did every day. It had taken some time for Dennis to get used to the new pride, but it was worse for his parents. They were older, and they'd lived under Alpha Carter's rule much longer. Dennis suspected that sometimes, they were still afraid that this was too good to be true, but for the first

time in decades, they'd left the pride to visit family. They would only be gone for a few weeks, but Dennis's mother had texted more often than usual since they'd left, as if she couldn't believe he'd be safe without her and his father here.

They'd get used to it, too. Everyone in the pride would. Dennis had a life he could never have imagined, with only one thing missing.

Someone to share his newfound freedom with.

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“It’s cute,” Jennifer said as she peered out the car window.

She was right. Green Hill was cute, in a typical small-town kind of way. It looked clean, and there were flowers in vases and pots everywhere. Kyle was driving down what had to be the main street, and it was lined with stores, from a coffee shop to a yarn store to a bakery. Kyle could tell his siblings wanted to explore, but they couldn’t until they found out what was happening at the pride.

That wasn’t something Kyle was willing to drag them to, so he’d drop them off before heading there. He’d already looked up the directions, so he knew where to go.

“It’s small,” Christopher complained over the phone speaker.

He was driving his car right behind Kyle’s. Their grandfather was with him, while Jennifer had settled in the passenger seat of Kyle’s car. They’d filled both cars with everything they wanted to keep, but leaving their home had still been an arrow to the heart.

It had been hard for Kyle, even though he’d never truly felt like he belonged with the pack. He could only imagine how it felt for his siblings and, even worse, his grandfather. He’d lived with the pack much longer than Kyle and his siblings had. He’d met, loved, and lost his mate there. He’d had children and grandchildren. It couldn’t have been easy for him to leave it all behind, yet he’d done it.

For Kyle.

That was why Kyle was ready to do everything in his power to keep his family happy

and safe. If that meant taking over the pride so they'd be welcome there, he'd do his best.

He just hoped it wouldn't come down to that.

But he couldn't go in with hopes and hesitancy. He had to appear strong and like he knew what he wanted and how to get it. That meant going in strong and seeing how his father reacted to that. If he was as much of an asshole as Kyle expected, it wouldn't be easy, but Kyle wasn't fighting for himself. He was fighting for his family. That made him stronger.

"Not that small," Jennifer said. "And look at how nice it is. I want to grab a coffee in that shop." She turned to Kyle. "Can we?"

"I'm sure you'll have a chance eventually. We should find a motel first, though. I don't want to keep driving around with everything we own in the back of the cars. Besides, you need rest."

"As if you don't," Christopher grumbled. "We've been driving for hours. I'm sure you want to rest as much as we do."

He was right, but Kyle couldn't afford to rest right now. Someone might notice them and warn the alpha they were in town, and even though there was no way they could know he was the alpha's son, he was still a strange shifter in someone else's territory. Kyle needed to be proactive and not wait until his father came to him.

His father hadn't seen him since he was a toddler. There had to be a good reason for that. If Kyle's father hadn't been an asshole, his mother would have brought him around more or maybe even moved in with the pride. Instead, she'd kept Kyle away, which to him was a sure sign that he wouldn't like what he'd find.

But he'd deal with that later. First, he needed to find a safe place for his family.

He was sure he could find a cute bed-and-breakfast on the Internet, but that wasn't what he was looking for. He needed something more anonymous, so instead, he chose a cheap motel just out of town. They could walk to Main Street without too much trouble, but hopefully the pride didn't consider the motel part of their territory. The pride would still be wary if they found a bunch of shifters they didn't know staying there, but they wouldn't be able to do much if the people weren't encroaching on the pride's territory.

Kyle parked and climbed out of the car. He stretched, grimacing at the way his spine cracked. He was young for a shifter, but sometimes he felt like his body was crumbling to pieces.

He looked at Christopher and their grandfather, who were climbing out of Christopher's car. Christopher was already complaining about the motel. Kyle and Grandpa looked at each other. Kyle nodded, sure his grandfather understood why they were there.

Kyle clapped his brother's shoulder and gently pushed him forward. "Stop complaining. We only need to stay here for a few days."

Christopher didn't look convinced. "Are we sure? It's not like you can take over the pride in just a few days."

Kyle looked around, but no one could have heard them because they were alone. "Don't say that out loud. You don't know who's around."

Christopher rolled his eyes, but he obeyed. Kyle could see how nervous Jennifer was, but she seemed to relax as they got rooms and took their bags out of the cars. It wouldn't make sense for them to unpack and settle in, but Kyle hoped they wouldn't

have to be here for long, so they left most of their stuff in the cars.

He should probably go straight to the pride now, but he could see Jennifer wouldn't like that, so he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her toward the car. "Come on. Let's explore a little bit."

"Are you sure?" their grandfather asked. "Someone's bound to notice a group of four new shifters."

"They'll probably think we're just passing through and thought the town was worth a visit."

Grandpa nodded, and they climbed back into Kyle's car. He really hoped he was right and that he wouldn't put a target on their backs just by going to the coffee shop. There was no way to find out until they did it, and Kyle felt they deserved it. His family had left everything behind for him. They could get a coffee.

Once they were back in town proper, Kyle found a parking space by the park. It was well maintained, and from a distance, he could see children playing, both humans and shifters. A little girl was running after a tiny tiger while two women watched them from a bench. More children were swinging on the monkey bars and the swings. It gave the impression of an idyllic town, and that wasn't what Kyle had expected. His father was an asshole, but maybe he had less influence on the town than Kyle had thought.

"I changed my mind," Jennifer said as she hooked her arm around Kyle's and pulled him forward. "I don't want to go to the coffee shop. I want to go to the bakery. Look at those cupcakes."

Kyle did. They were pink and blue and green, and while he wasn't one for sweet things, he couldn't deny they looked delicious. His sister was bouncing on her feet as

she dragged him in, and he was happy to follow.

She deserved a small respite before things got serious. So did Kyle.

The woman behind the counter smiled at them when they reached it. “Good morning. What can I do for you?”

Kyle let Jennifer order for the four of them while he looked around. He noticed a big man with a tray that held more pastries coming in through a door behind the counter. The man didn’t even glance his way, but Kyle couldn’t look away. He wished the air in the bakery wasn’t so heavy with sweet and spicy scents, because he wanted to know if the man was human or shifter.

But before Kyle could think about men and the future, he needed to think of his family’s future. Once Jennifer and the rest of their family had settled down with their pastries and some of the coffee they’d gotten at the self-service corner, Kyle grabbed his coffee and left for the car. He knew they were safe for now, which meant he could take his next step.

Talking to his father.

It wasn’t hard to find the pride house. It was just out of town and pretty isolated, but to Kyle’s surprise, there were signs. He hadn’t expected his father to make the place so obvious, but maybe things had changed. Kyle would find out soon enough.

He stopped the car in front of the gate and peered out. A big house was on the other side, surrounded by a yard and trees. The entire property was hidden in the woods, and Kyle could see it stretched behind the house, too. The place was well-maintained, and Kyle noticed a few people talking in the yard. They appeared peaceful, and he hated that he was about to shatter that.

He didn't know these people. As much as he disliked the thought of hurting the pride and its members, he had to focus on his family.

They were who he thought of as he leaned out of his car window and pressed the buzzer.

* * * *

Dennis noticed the small group of shifters who'd entered the bakery when he brought a tray of croissants to Shirley. Gordon was working in the kitchen, which was why he wasn't the one doing it.

For once, Dennis was glad. It hadn't been easy to smell that they were shifters, but Dennis was used to the scents of the things he baked. He'd recognized the smell of unknown shifters under them right away, so he knew what he was dealing with.

Wolves.

He kept an eye on them as they settled in a corner to sip coffee and eat the pastries they'd bought. There had been four of them, but one had left.

The most interesting one.

Not that the shifters who were still here weren't interesting. They were clearly a family, with one older man, a younger one, and a young woman. The man who'd left had been older than the last two but younger than the older man. Maybe a grandfather with his three grandchildren? Whoever they were, Dennis hoped they weren't here to start trouble. It wasn't like he could ask them why they were there outright, so he decided to stay in the front of the shop for a while.

Shirley noticed. Dennis spent as little time in this area of the shop as he could, so of

course she did.

Once there was no one waiting to be served, she stepped closer to him and leaned in. “What’s going on? Do I have to worry?”

Dennis shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

She eyed the group of three like Dennis was. “Are they criminals or something? Because they don’t look like it.”

“I don’t know them, but they’re shifters, and I’ve never seen them in town.”

Shirley nodded. “I see. You don’t look like you think they’re dangerous, though.”

“That’s because I don’t. They’re probably a family passing through, but just in case, I’d like to keep an eye on them. I can go if you feel crowded, though.”

“It’s your bakery, so you can stay. Besides, if you feel the need to keep an eye on them, I’d feel better if you stayed.”

“I really don’t think they’re here to start trouble.” They looked like a normal family, nothing more.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean trouble can’t find them.”

Shirley wasn’t wrong. Green Hill wasn’t a big town, and the majority of shifters here were tigers who belonged to the pride. There weren’t a lot of them, though. Many had left when Alpha Carter had been in charge. They’d settled somewhere else and had new lives, so they hadn’t returned. There had been an influx of new pride members, most of them mates to tiger shifters, but not enough to replace them.

Not all shifters in town belonged to the pride, but Dennis knew everyone, at least by sight. Almost everyone in town had come into the bakery at one time or another, and he'd had a party for the opening. He'd never seen these people.

He wondered where the other guy had gone. He'd been about Dennis's age, maybe slightly younger, although it was hard to tell with shifters. Dennis had been thinking that he wished he had someone in his life, and he wouldn't say no to this guy. He was as tall as Dennis, so probably around six feet, but he was more slender. That didn't mean he wasn't well built under the t-shirt he'd been wearing. Dennis had been mesmerized by the slide of muscles in the man's arms when he moved.

The man's hair was a dark brown, and Dennis was sorry he hadn't been close enough to see the man's eyes. Maybe if he'd been close enough, he would have been able to talk to the guy and find out what he and his family were doing here.

He could still do that, even though the guy was gone. The others were eating pastries and softly talking to each other. The young woman kept looking around with wariness in her gaze, almost as if she expected to be kicked out or, even worse, hurt.

Dennis had no idea who these people were or why they were here, but from the way they behaved, he couldn't help but wonder if they were in trouble rather than being trouble.

"I'm going to step out for a moment to call home," he told Shirley.

She frowned and glanced at the three wolves, then nodded. "I'll keep an eye on them."

There wasn't much she could do since she was human, but at least she'd let Dennis know if something happened.

He stepped into the kitchen and, from there, into his office. He took his phone out as soon as he was alone, quickly dialing Liam's number. He could have called Gal, but he didn't want to bother the alpha if he was busy. Liam would tell him anything Dennis had to say, anyway.

"Dennis?" Liam answered. "Is it an emergency?"

There was urgency in his voice that made Dennis sit up. "I don't know, but I don't think so. I just wanted to warn you that there are three wolf shifters sitting in my bakery. I've never seen them around, so I'm pretty sure they're new to town."

"Shit. Three wolves, you said?"

"Yeah. They arrived with another guy, but he left. I don't know where he went or why they're here."

"Oh, I know where he went," Liam grumbled.

Dennis frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Don't worry."

"I'll keep an eye on these people, all right?" Something told Dennis he should. There was nothing normal about Liam's reaction to the news that there was a group of wolf shifters he'd never seen in his bakery.

"Do it, but don't confront them."

"I don't think they'd hurt me even if I did."

"Tell me about them."

“They look like a family. There’s an older man, maybe the father or grandfather. The other three are younger. The guy who left was around my age, but the other two have to be in their early twenties. They look young, even for shifters.”

“I’ll let Gal know, but since we don’t know these people, don’t try to stop them if they leave.”

There wasn’t much else Dennis could do. He wasn’t a fighter, and he didn’t like the idea of it. He was ready to defend the pride if he had to, and he wouldn’t allow anyone to ruin his home, especially not now that it was finally the way it should have been since the beginning.

He should have known all of this was too good to be true, dammit.

Dennis hung up and left his office. He wanted to head home and find out what was going on, but he’d made a promise, and he would keep it. Dennis checked in on Gordon, who was decorating cupcakes, and he returned to the front of the bakery.

Shirley moved closer as soon as he joined her. “They’re not doing anything, just talking and eating.”

Dennis nodded. “That’s good.”

Dennis couldn’t help but wonder. From the way Liam had spoken, it was clear that at least the guy who’d left was up to something. Dennis didn’t know what that something was, and he wasn’t sure how to find out, but if Liam knew, it couldn’t be good.

He wasn’t looking forward to it, but he should have known his perfect life wouldn’t stay perfect for long. Trouble always found the Green Hill pride. First it had been Alpha Carter, then the elders had grumbled about Gal becoming the alpha. Anne had

bullied half the pride and would still be doing it if Gal hadn't kicked her out. Dennis had hoped all of that was finally over, but it looked like new trouble had found them in the form of four wolf shifters.

He sighed and leaned against the counter. This was going to be a long morning.

* * * *

Maybe Kyle shouldn't have announced that he was here to see his father when someone answered the buzzer at the gate. He should have asked to talk to the alpha. It was too late to change what he'd said, so he looked up at the house in front of him.

He'd parked as close to the gate as possible so that he could quickly leave if he had to. No one had opened the door yet, and he was sure that was a bad sign. Whoever had answered knew he was there. Why was he stuck outside?

The door finally opened. Kyle stared at the man standing there for a moment. He was cute. He was shorter than Kyle's six foot one and slight, with long dark blond hair. The way he stared at Kyle made Kyle want to explain why he was there as fast as he could, but instead, he raised his chin and moved toward the man.

"You said you were here to talk to your father," the man said.

Kyle nodded. "I am."

"Who's your father?"

"My name is Kyle Carter."

The man's eyes widened, but that was all the reaction he had to Kyle's declaration. He stared at Kyle for a moment longer, and Kyle wondered what was going through

his mind. Would he finally take Kyle to his father?

Instead of doing that, the man offered Kyle his hand to shake. Kyle hesitated for a moment before taking it, wondering what was happening.

“I’m Liam,” the man said.

Kyle nodded. “Can I see my father now?”

Liam stepped aside. “I’ll take you to the alpha.”

“Thank you.” Kyle hadn’t thought it would be this easy. He was still on edge, but it looked like Liam would take him to his father, which was what he wanted.

He followed Liam into the house. The office wasn’t far from the front door, which wasn’t a surprise. It had been the same in Alpha Davis’s house. No alpha wanted the people he met with to see more than they should.

“Can you wait here for a moment?” Liam asked as he knocked on the door.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Liam disappeared into the alpha’s office. Kyle looked around, but there wasn’t much to see. They were in an empty hallway, and while it was nicely decorated, Kyle wasn’t interested in that.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait long. Liam returned and opened the door for him, gesturing at him to come in. Kyle did and immediately wondered if he’d made a mistake.

The man behind the desk wasn’t his father. Kyle had never seen this guy, just like

he'd never seen the guy standing next to him behind the desk. That one had to be a guard of some sort from the way he held himself.

But who was the man behind the desk?

The man got up. Kyle eyed him, still wondering what was happening. The man was taller than him by several inches, and Kyle was pretty sure he could take him on in a fight.

Kyle really hoped he wouldn't have to fight him.

"Liam told me you here to see Alpha Carter," the man said.

Kyle swallowed and nodded. "I am."

"I'm afraid you won't be able to. He's not the alpha of this pride anymore. My name is Gal, and I am the alpha."

Dammit. When Kyle had thought about his next steps, he'd been sure his father would still be the alpha. That was why he was here. He'd hoped his father would welcome him into the pride and that he'd be able to bring his family in, too. He'd been ready to fight, but he'd hoped he wouldn't have to.

But his father wasn't the alpha anymore. This guy was, even though Kyle was supposed to be. He didn't want to be, but he and his family were here to build a life, and they couldn't do that if they weren't safe.

Kyle raised his chin and looked Gal straight in the eyes. "You shouldn't be the alpha. As Alpha Carter's heir, that role goes to me."

Gal looked amused. "Is that why you're here? To take over the pride?"

“I’m its rightful heir.”

Kyle expected Gal to freak out and kick him out. It was what anyone else would’ve done, including Alpha Davis. Instead, he stood there, staring at Kyle as if trying to read him.

Kyle couldn’t be honest with him. He hadn’t known his father, but he’d heard he was an asshole. He assumed the same went for Gal. Assholes were usually replaced by assholes who’d worked with them before. Gal had probably been Kyle’s father’s beta or something.

But Gal didn’t smell like a tiger. Kyle glanced at the guy standing next to him. Maybe the smell came from him. There was no way Gal was a bear shifter.

Liam was a tiger. That much, Kyle was sure of, because he’d smelled him when they’d been close earlier. With the desk separating him from Gal and the other man, Kyle couldn’t tell which one of them was a bear shifter. He was stunned. He hadn’t thought his father would ever allow a bear shifter to live with the pride.

But one did.

“Why don’t you sit down and tell me what’s happening?” Gal said, gesturing at the chairs on the other side of his desk.

Kyle frowned. “Haven’t you heard me? I told you I’m here to take your place as the alpha.”

“Oh, I heard you. I wish to know why you want to do that.”

“I don’t think that talking is the way to do this.”

“Maybe not, but I’m curious. You’ve already met Liam, my mate. This is Forest, my beta. Why don’t you tell all of us what’s going on? That way, we can help you.”

Kyle had no clue what to make of this. It was good that Gal hadn’t tried to kick him out or hit him yet, but would he eventually? Gal was acting like a reasonable man, but it could be nothing more than an act.

And Kyle was here all alone with these three men.

Clearly, he hadn’t thought this through. He’d been so convinced that his father would still be in charge that he hadn’t thought of what would happen if he wasn’t. He’d thought that if his father didn’t welcome him and his family, he could fight him for the pride and win.

It would be easy for Gal to have Kyle killed. No one but Kyle’s family knew he was here, and it wouldn’t be hard for the alpha to find them once he was done with Kyle. They were waiting for Kyle at the bakery, and Kyle was sure that Gal already had eyes on them.

Kyle was an idiot, but at this point, he was an idiot with nothing to lose.

He sat in front of the desk, trying to decide what he could tell Gal and what he shouldn’t. He didn’t know what had happened or why his father wasn’t the alpha anymore, but he hoped it was because his father had been a bad alpha and was removed or something. But maybe Gal had fought him and won. Maybe Gal was an even worse alpha than Kyle’s father had been. That didn’t sound possible, but what did Kyle know?

“Why don’t you tell me about your father?” Gal asked. “You expected to find him still in charge.”

“I had no contact with him. He was my father, though. I can assure you that.”

“I never said he wasn’t.”

“Since you accept that he was, you also have to accept that I’m his rightful heir and that I should be in your place. I don’t know what happened, and honestly, I don’t care.”

Something told Kyle that might not be the right way to go, but it was too late to stop. He needed a safe place for his family, and he couldn’t back down.

“I see a massive problem with that,” Gal said as he leaned forward.

“You want proof that Alpha Carter was my father?”

“I don’t need proof that he was.”

“You look like him,” Liam interjected. “I could tell who you are as soon as I opened the door, even though I had no idea that Alpha Carter had a son.”

Kyle hated that. He didn’t want to look like his father. He wished to be nothing like him.

Yet he was behaving like his father would.

* * * *

Liam still hadn’t called back, and Dennis was anxious. He had no idea what was happening back at home, but he suspected the guy who’d left had gone straight there. Dennis could only imagine why he’d wanted to talk to Gal, but it couldn’t be good.

He eyed the small group of three wolves still sitting at the table. They didn't appear dangerous, but he wouldn't put it past them to be. He had to be careful.

He grabbed one of the boxes from under the counter and started filling it with pastries. He didn't want to look like he was trying to get information, so he didn't put too many inside the box, but there would be plenty for four people to eat later.

"What are you doing?" Shirley asked.

"Don't worry about it."

"How can I not? You're going to give that to those people, aren't you? Why are they here? Why are you trying to buy them with cupcakes?"

Dennis snorted softly. "I'm not trying to buy them. I just want to see if I can get information from them."

Shirley probably didn't care what the wolves wanted or why they were here as long as she was safe, but she wasn't in charge. Dennis was, and after he'd filled the box, he closed it and headed to the wolves' table.

The three of them looked up almost as one. It was creepy, especially because they seemed spooked. Dennis hoped they didn't think he was going to attack them.

He lifted the box to show it to them, then put it on the table. "We have a few leftovers. I thought you could use them."

The youngest man glared at Dennis. "We don't need charity. We have plenty of money to pay."

The woman put a hand on his arm. "Christopher. Don't be rude." She looked up at

Dennis. “Thank you, but this isn’t necessary. Christopher’s right. We have enough money to pay.”

“I don’t need your money. These are pastries I would end up throwing away if I didn’t gift them. There are only so many I can take home every day.”

“Then give it to people who need them,” Christopher snapped.

“Not many people in town need cupcakes. I’ll take them back if you don’t want them, but you’re welcome to take them. I noticed that your friend didn’t get anything for himself before leaving.”

Christopher’s expression shut down, but the woman didn’t hesitate to explain. “Kyle doesn’t really like sweets, but thank you.”

A knock on the window made Dennis turn. He frowned when he saw that Kyle had returned. The three wolves scrambled to their feet, clearly eager to get to him. Dennis hadn’t had an opportunity to ask any questions. The only info he had were two names—Christopher and Kyle.

“Thank you,” the woman said softly.

She followed the two men out of the bakery, and Dennis stood and watched. They reunited with the fourth member of their group, Kyle. He had a grim expression, and he shook his head at something the older man said before looking around.

His gaze caught Dennis’s, and for a moment, they stared at each other. Dennis didn’t know why, but he wanted to reach out and pull the man into his arms, reassure him that everything would be all right.

He snorted. As if. Everything didn’t look like it would be all right.

The wolves walked down the sidewalk. Dennis stared at them until they were gone from sight, then he quickly returned behind the counter. He handed the box to Shirley, sure she'd do what needed to be done, and he slipped back into his office to call Liam. He needed answers, and he hoped his alpha mate would provide them. He didn't have to, but whatever was happening, it didn't feel right.

"Dennis," Liam said when he answered.

He sounded a bit more relaxed. Dennis hoped it was a good thing, but he doubted they'd be so lucky.

"The wolves left when the fourth member of their group returned," he told Liam. "I don't know where they went, but there aren't many places in town where they could stay. It should be fairly easy to find them."

"We'll look for them if we need to."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Liam hesitated. "I think you should come home. I was about to group-text the pride to ask everyone to return if they could. Gal's calling for a pride meeting."

Which meant this was serious, possibly more than Dennis had expected.

Fuck. He wouldn't allow anyone to ruin his newfound happiness. He had his life exactly the way he wanted it, and Kyle was trying to ruin it. Dennis didn't even care about why he was doing it. He just needed Kyle to stop.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I'll see you then," Liam said before hanging up.

Dennis took a few seconds to gather his thoughts, then grabbed his backpack. He warned both Gordon and Shirley that he had to return home and that he'd be back as soon as possible. They both waved him off as if they didn't need him. It was odd to realize that the bakery could go on without him, but it would. Shirley would take care of the customers while Gordon worked in the kitchen. There wasn't much more to do since it was almost lunchtime, anyway. Gordon would only have to prep the stuff for tomorrow morning and clean the kitchen.

Dennis didn't break any laws as he returned home, but he was tempted to speed. He felt more anxious the closer he got to pride territory, and it felt like he was about to explode by the time he parked in front of the house.

He wasn't the only one who'd returned. Many cars were parked by the house, and when he walked inside, he could hear voices coming from the living room. He slipped in, wincing at how packed the room was. With so many new members in their pride, the house felt crowded when everyone was there. Thankfully, many people had moved out, so it didn't happen often, but they should start thinking about an alternative spot to have their pride meetings.

Gal, Liam, and Forest were already there. They were talking, but Dennis knew that going up to them and asking what was going on would be useless. He was about to find out, anyway.

Gal cleared his throat, and the room quieted. Things would have been different if Alpha Carter had still been in charge. He hadn't ruled through authority like Gal. He'd ruled through fear, and he would have yelled at everyone to shut up. Hell, he wouldn't have had to yell. He would just have had to call for a pride meeting, and everyone would have kept their mouth shut so he wouldn't get pissed.

"Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to return home this quickly," Gal said. "I wouldn't be calling for a pride meeting if this wasn't important."

“What happened?” Valentine asked. He was human and was bonded to Gal’s personal assistant, Simon, who stood next to him, clutching his tablet to his chest.

“I’m sure some of you already know we got a visitor earlier. A man demanded to see me. He claimed he’s Alpha Carter’s son.”

Dennis’s eyes widened. It didn’t take a genius to add two and two together.

Kyle was Alpha Carter’s son?

“That’s possible,” Helga, one of the elders, said. “He never married, and he wasn’t known for keeping it in his pants.”

The crude words sounded wrong coming from Helga’s lips, but she was right. Alpha Carter had been known to sleep around and not care about the consequences. Dennis wouldn’t be surprised to find out he’d fathered a small army.

“I have no reason to believe that Kyle’s lying,” Gal said. “To be honest, I don’t care if he is. What I care about is that he came here and demanded I hand over the pride to him. Now, I realize that some of you aren’t happy about me taking over the pride. I’m a bear shifter, and I was sent here by the council. I thought everyone should have a say in whether or not you want Kyle to become your alpha.”

“Fuck no,” Dennis blurted out.

He glared around the room in case someone thought it would be the right moment to get rid of Gal. Thankfully, no one spoke up.

Dennis turned back to Gal. “No one wants that guy to become the alpha. We don’t know him. He might be Alpha Carter’s son, but that doesn’t speak in his favor, considering the kind of leader Alpha Carter was. We’re happy with you as our alpha,

Gal. I'm not speaking for every pride member, but I'm sure most of the people here feel the way I do. We want you to stay."

Gal looked around the room. "If anyone has anything else to say about this, you know where my office is. I'm glad you don't expect me to stand down and allow Kyle to take over the pride. This is my home, and I don't want that to change."

Dennis didn't want anything to change. The pride had been his home since he was born, but he'd never been truly happy here. Now, he finally was, and he wouldn't allow anyone to ruin that.

He didn't care who Kyle was. If he thought he could take over the pride, he'd get a nasty surprise when he realized no one would allow that.

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Kyle needed to decide what his next step would be. He'd managed to avoid his family for the rest of the day yesterday, but today, they'd want answers. They wouldn't let him gently push them into exploring the town and having fun. They'd want to know what had happened at the pride house, and Kyle couldn't avoid telling them.

Even though he'd failed them. There was no way around that. His goal had been to secure them a spot in the Green Hill pride, and he hadn't. He still wasn't sure why he'd done what he'd done, but every time he thought about it, he wanted to kick himself.

He didn't want to be the alpha, so why had he demanded Gal hand over the pride? He wouldn't have done that if his father had still been in charge—as long as his father had allowed him and his family to settle in with the pride. He could have asked Gal if they could become pride members, but he'd been stunned, and he'd said the first thing that had popped into his mind.

He shouldn't have.

He wanted his family to have a pride or a pack. They'd been born into one, and it was all they knew. Kyle was pretty sure he could survive on his own, but he didn't want his family to have to do the same, especially his grandfather. He was getting older, and he'd spent his life surrounded by shifters and people he could count on. It wouldn't be fair for him to have to live in a human city with no one to support him. Having family was good, but community was, too, especially after they'd lost everything.

Kyle hadn't truly believed that his father would allow the rest of his family to become

pride members. From what he knew, the man was an asshole, and he would have used the excuse that Kyle's grandfather and his siblings were wolf shifters to keep them away. That was what Alpha Davis had done. He'd told Kyle he didn't want him in the pack anymore because he was a tiger shifter.

Knowing the answer would be no, Kyle had gone in knowing he'd have to fight his father. He'd thought he might as well do it for control of the pride.

But his father wasn't the alpha anymore. Gal was, and Kyle had no idea what to think of him. After Kyle told him that he wanted the pride and that it should be his to take since he was Alpha Carter's son, Gal politely told him that he wasn't going anywhere. He'd been willing to listen to Kyle, but Kyle didn't trust him, so he hadn't told him about his family. He was sure that Gal knew they were here, anyway, which meant that Kyle needed to do something. He had to protect them.

"You're not eating that?" Christopher asked as he bumped their shoulders together.

Kyle blinked at his brother. He'd torn off half of a croissant and had eaten it, but he didn't think he could stomach the other half.

"You can have it," he said, pushing his plate toward his brother.

Kyle had been tempted to go to the bakery this morning, but Jennifer had wanted to try the coffee shop, and deep inside, Kyle had been glad for that. He wasn't sure why the bakery appealed to him so much, but it had a lot to do with the tall man who'd been behind the counter. Kyle wanted to find out more about him and maybe watch him for a bit.

But Kyle couldn't afford to be soft toward anyone, not even hot guys. He'd made a mess, and now he had to deal with it.

He could do it. He didn't know Gal, but he was his father's son. Being an alpha was in his blood, right? He should be able to fight Gal and take the pride from him.

His stomach turned at the thought. This wasn't going to be pretty.

"You never told us what happened yesterday," Kyle's grandfather said as he leaned forward, his voice soft enough that no one would hear them.

Kyle doubted anyone would hear even if they spoke at a normal volume. The coffee shop was full of customers, of people talking and laughing, and not one of them was paying attention to Kyle and his family.

Kyle took a sip of his coffee, delaying the inevitable. "I found out that my father isn't the alpha anymore."

Christopher dropped the bit of croissant he'd gotten from Kyle's plate. Jennifer stared with her cup of coffee halfway to her mouth.

Kyle sighed. "It seems to be a good thing. I mean, I don't have many memories of my father, but I looked into him growing up. I never found anything good about him, and I guess the pride felt the same way. I don't have details, but someone else took his place."

"Did you talk to them?" Grandpa asked.

Kyle grimaced. "I might have been a little too eager. I thought for sure that I would see my father behind the desk, and when I didn't, I was caught off-guard. I told the alpha that I was here to take the pride."

Kyle's siblings were still staring, and now, so was his grandfather. They made Kyle feel like an idiot, which he suspected he was.

“You didn’t even ask him if we could petition to become pride members?” Grandpa asked.

Kyle shook his head. “I know that’s what I should’ve done, but I didn’t expect any of this to happen. I’ll have to deal with the consequences, but I promise that you won’t have to. I’ll take care of everything.”

“I don’t doubt that, but that probably isn’t the right way to go about it.”

Grandpa’s voice was gentle and a spear straight to Kyle’s heart. Even though Kyle had fucked up, his grandfather loved him. Kyle couldn’t let him down. He couldn’t let his siblings down.

He got to his feet, ignoring the loud sound the chair made as it scraped against the floor. “I’ll fix this,” he promised. “I’m going to take a walk and probably head back to the pride. You should explore the town. We’ll live here soon, after all.”

“Kyle—”

Kyle didn’t wait to hear what his grandfather had to say. Grandpa would never tell him he was an idiot, and he’d never make him feel that way on purpose, but that was how Kyle felt when he looked at him. He was supposed to protect his family, but instead, he was dragging them into what would no doubt become a mess.

He left the coffee shop, wondering if it was too early to head over to the pride. After yesterday, he didn’t think Gal would be surprised if he behaved like an asshole and pounded on the door early, but Kyle needed the pride to see him in a good light. They didn’t know him, but maybe they’d be more inclined to accept him if he was polite.

Kyle hated the situation he’d put himself into, but there was only one way out of it now.

Forward.

Since he wanted to make friends with the pride, he decided that bringing pastries might be a good idea. Jennifer had raved about the cupcakes she'd had at the bakery yesterday, so Kyle decided to grab some. Maybe he could get some for his family, too. He had to apologize to them for being an idiot.

Kyle was a bit surprised when he found the bakery full of people. Given how full the coffee shop had been, he'd thought most of the town was there, but he was wrong. The bakery was just as popular.

He eyed the glass counter as he waited in line, wondering what he should get. He wasn't one for sweets, but he couldn't deny the Danishes looked delicious. Maybe he'd get one for himself, since he hadn't had much for breakfast.

"You have guts," a voice said. "I didn't think I'd see you in my bakery again after what you did yesterday."

Kyle frowned and looked to the side, where the tall man from yesterday stood. "I'm sorry?"

"I know why you're in town. Why would you believe that it's okay for you to come into my bakery when you're trying to take everything away from me?" The man leaned forward, probably to tell Kyle to get his ass out of the bakery or maybe to kick him out himself.

Kyle took a deep breath. He was ready to fight.

Until the man's scent hit him and he realized they were mates.

* * * *

The only thing Dennis could do was stare. He'd been ready to kick this guy out after what Gal had told him and the rest of the pride yesterday, but now, he was stuck watching him.

Because Kyle Carter was his mate.

Dennis could never have imagined that his mate would be Alpha Carter's son. The man had been a dick, and he probably had plenty of kids in the area, but as far as Dennis knew, none of them were in Green Hill. Alpha Carter had probably been trying to prevent any of them coming to him to attempt to take the pride, and it looked like he'd been right to worry about that.

Alpha Carter's son did want to take over the pride. The problem was that his father wasn't in charge anymore, and if Kyle tried anything, he'd have to deal with Gal.

Kyle leaned forward. "What's your name?"

"None of your business," Dennis snapped. He crossed his arms over his chest and ignored the way Shirley was staring at him. It looked like she expected him to tear Kyle's head off, and while Dennis had been tempted, he would never get blood all over the bakery's floor.

It would be a bitch to clean up.

"I think it is my business, considering I can smell that you're my mate," Kyle said lightly.

Dennis glared at him. "I'm sure it's a mistake. You're not used to all the smells in the bakery, so it would be easy for you to be wrong."

But he wasn't, and no amount of denying that they were mates would make it happen.

This was who fate had decided to stick Dennis with.

When he'd thought he wanted a partner to share his life with, this wasn't what he had in mind, dammit. What was he supposed to do with Kyle?

Dennis's loyalty was to the pride and Gal. He didn't want to give up his mate, but if he had to so he could keep the pride safe, he would. Gal had given Dennis everything he could have ever wanted. He was the only reason Dennis's life was so good, and the pride was Dennis's family. No one would hurt them, not even Dennis's mate.

Kyle leaned closer until Dennis could smell his spicy scent. It reminded him of Christmas cookies. It made his mouth water, but he kept his hands to himself, even though he wanted nothing more than to drag Kyle into his arms.

"You're right. The bakery's smells are strong, but yours is stronger," Kyle said with a purr in his voice.

That made sense, since he was a tiger shifter. Dennis could tell that now, too. He was sure the other three were wolves, though, and it made him wonder who Kyle's mother was. She had to be a wolf shifter, right? Why wasn't she there with him and the rest of the family?

Dennis could too easily imagine the answer to that question. There had to be a reason Kyle was here now. He appeared to be in his thirties, so he'd had plenty of time to decide he wanted to take over the pride. Why now? Why had he left the people he'd lived with until now? And why had his family followed him?

They weren't here today, which was a relief considering what was happening. It would have been hard to explain what was going on.

"You smell of vanilla and cinnamon," Kyle said. "I thought it was the pastries, but I

was wrong. It was you.”

Dennis took a step back and glanced around the bakery. People were looking at them, no doubt curious and eager to get new gossip. Dennis didn’t want to give it to them. The news of his confrontation with Kyle would get around town way too quickly, and he needed to talk to Gal about this before it reached him.

He grabbed Kyle’s arm and dragged him behind the counter. Shirley’s eyes were wide, but she didn’t say anything as Dennis pulled Kyle through the back of the bakery to the back door. He could have taken Kyle to his office, but it felt too intimate. Instead, he hauled him out the back door and into the alley at the back of the store.

Dennis kept the alley clean, and he was glad for that now. That didn’t mean it was a great spot to have a conversation with his mate, but at least the air didn’t smell too badly of garbage.

Dennis didn’t mind because it meant he couldn’t smell his mate.

Fuck. What was he supposed to do? He couldn’t see a way out that would make him happy, but maybe he was wrong.

“Okay, you’ve got me alone. Why did you drag me out here? I thought for sure you’d have an office or something,” Kyle said as he looked around.

“I do have an office. I just didn’t want to take you there.”

Kyle’s eyebrows rose on his forehead. “No? I find it odd that you want to talk to your mate in the back alley, next to the garbage cans.”

“I’m going to stop you right there. I know that I smell like your mate, but it doesn’t

mean we have to be together.”

Kyle frowned. “Why shouldn’t we be?”

“Maybe because you’re trying to ruin my life? I don’t care that we’re mates, and I won’t until you stop what you’re doing to the pride. You have no right to it. I don’t care who your father is. In fact, I think that Alpha Carter being your father makes you the worst alpha we could ever have apart from him.”

Kyle’s eyes widened. “You’re a pride member?”

Dennis had to resist the urge to reach for him. He wasn’t sure he’d do so to hug him or to throttle him, but there was a fine line between the two, and he didn’t want to risk it. “Can’t you smell that I’m a tiger shifter?”

“It’s a bit hard to smell anything that’s not your mate-scent.”

“Well, I’m a tiger shifter, and I’m part of the pride. Our alpha met with us yesterday to tell us what you said during your meeting. The pride will fight you. We won’t bow down to you just because you’re Alpha Carter’s son. No one in the pride wants you to replace Gal, and if you try, you’ll have a fight on your hands.”

Kyle stared at Dennis. Dennis wished he could know what was going through his mind, but he was also a little afraid of it. What was Kyle thinking, trying to take over the pride? Why was he doing it? Was he as much of an asshole as his father?

Anything was possible, and Dennis didn’t know how to deal with that. He needed Kyle to admit that what he was doing was wrong, but he wasn’t sure the man ever would. It depended on what Kyle wanted from the pride. Dennis had many questions, but he doubted Kyle would answer if he asked them.

“A mate bond should be stronger than what links you to your pride,” Kyle said.

“Maybe it would be if you weren’t a dick. I’ve already told you what you should do if you want a chance with me. Leave the pride alone. Leave Gal alone.”

“Is he such a good alpha? Or are you afraid I might be worse?”

“As far as I know, you could be. Your father is a horrible person. I hope you’re not, but so far, it looks like you are, and I don’t want anything to do with that. I don’t know what fate was thinking, but I’m thankful we don’t actually have to be together. You should stay away from me.”

“I don’t want to.” Kyle’s voice was soft, but Dennis had to stay strong.

“But I do. You’re trying to ruin the pride, which means you’re trying to ruin my life. I won’t allow anyone to do that, not even my mate.”

“You’d choose the pride over me?”

“Without thinking twice about it.” Dennis didn’t believe that anything he could say would change his mate’s mind about taking over the pride, but he had to try.

If it meant Kyle left him and the pride alone, he’d do pretty much anything.

* * * *

Kyle didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t expected so much venom from his mate, but then, he also hadn’t expected his mate to be a pride member.

He wasn’t surprised to find out that Gal had talked to the pride yesterday. It was what any good alpha would have done. Kyle was a threat to the pride, which meant pride

members had to be aware of him and of what he was doing. Alphas like Alpha Davis would have kept all of this a secret, but Gal hadn't, which pointed to him being a good alpha.

Kyle wasn't sure what to think about that. It would be easier for him to take over the pride if Gal weren't a good person. It was clear that Dennis respected the hell out of his alpha, which probably meant that the rest of the pride did, too. It would make Kyle's job more complicated. The pride would resist if he took over, which he should have expected, but he hadn't thought that far.

He hadn't really thought at all.

The situation had gone from complicated to an absolute mess. Kyle was torn between what he wanted and what he owed his family, and he didn't know how to reconcile the two. He wasn't sure he could.

Just like the pride was his mate's focus, Kyle's family was his. They came before the man standing in front of him.

He didn't even know his name, for fuck's sake.

He cleared his throat. "I'm Kyle."

Kyle's mate snorted. "I know. Kyle Carter, Alpha Carter's son. I wonder how many he has."

Kyle wouldn't be surprised to learn he had half a dozen siblings in the area. He didn't plan to try to find them. The less he knew about his father's messy life, the better he felt. "What's your name?"

Kyle's mate glared. "Why should I tell you?"

“You don’t have to,” Kyle said with a grin. “I can call you gorgeous, or maybe go straight to baby. What do you think of that?”

The glare deepened, telling Kyle what his mate thought of that. It made him want to laugh, but the situation didn’t call for that kind of reaction.

“I’m Dennis,” Kyle’s mate snapped.

Even in the back alley, with the garbage cans close by, Kyle could smell Dennis, and he wanted to eat him up. The man smelled like his bakery, or maybe his bakery smelled like him. He was sugar and spice, but he wasn’t exactly nice. Kyle wouldn’t have expected him to be considering the situation.

But this might be good for him. If he could convince Dennis to move to his side, it would be easier for him to take over the pride. Dennis was a member, and if he vouched for Kyle, the other pride members would probably go along with this. They might still be hesitant since Gal seemed to be a good alpha, but things would no doubt go much more smoothly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dennis,” Kyle said as he stepped closer. He had to use their bond to convince Dennis to be on his side.

“I can’t say the same.”

“We have plenty of time to get to know each other. You might find out that you like me when you do.”

“I don’t need to get to know you. I don’t want a mate like you.”

That hurt, but Kyle could understand where it was coming from. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t want anyone like your father in my life, and it appears you’re exactly like him.”

It was Kyle’s turn to scowl. “I’m nothing like him.”

“Are you sure? Because this is something he would do. He wouldn’t hesitate to take over a pride just because it’s what he wants. You don’t care that we don’t want you or to hear that we’re happy with Gal as our alpha. You don’t care that he’s perfect for our pride and that we’ve already been through enough. We don’t need this to happen now. We don’t need you.”

Kyle hadn’t expected them to, but it still hurt to hear. He wanted to convince Dennis to be on his side, but he couldn’t help but wonder if his mate was right.

Was he behaving like his father?

Kyle didn’t want to be like his father. The few memories he had of him weren’t pleasant, and neither was everything he’d found out about him since then. If Dennis really thought that Kyle was like his father, it explained why he didn’t want anything to do with him. Maybe Kyle had to show him that he was nothing like the man who’d fathered him. They might be biologically related, but Kyle had been raised by his mother, and she’d been a good woman. Everyone in Kyle’s family was good.

Except maybe him.

Dennis turned, and before Kyle could stop him, he strode back into the bakery and slammed the door shut. Kyle stared at him, wondering how he could get himself out of this mess.

Or if he even could.

He needed some time alone, and since his family had to be exploring the town by now, he decided to go back to the motel. He stayed careful so they wouldn't see him, but he didn't notice them anywhere.

He was relieved when he reached his room, but someone knocked on the door almost as soon as he closed it. He opened, wondering who it was, not one bit surprised to find his grandfather standing outside when he opened.

"I thought you'd be exploring the town with Jennifer and Christopher."

Grandpa walked in and closed the door. "I told them I wanted to rest for a bit. They're adults. They can be on their own without starting trouble."

"You should go and rest, then."

Grandpa looked concerned. "I wanted to talk to you."

That didn't sound good, but Kyle couldn't say no to his grandfather. "What is it? If you're worried about money, you don't have to be. I have enough to support all of us for a bit."

"That's good to hear, even though it's not needed. I have plenty of money to support you and your siblings, so it's not what I'm worried about."

"You're worried about the pride."

"How can I not be? It didn't sound like it went well when you explained what happened yesterday."

"That's because it didn't. I doubt that will change anytime soon, too. I just met my mate, and he's a pride member."

Grandpa's expression softened. "Oh, Kyle."

Kyle didn't want pity, so he shook his head. "It's fine. He made it clear that his loyalty is to the pride and its alpha, and I get it. I thought I could convince him to move to my side and that he could make it easier for me to take over the pride, but I don't think he'll be on board with that."

"Of course not. Why would he be? You're trying to take over his life."

"I'm just trying to find a safe place for you and the rest of our family."

"And you're going about it the wrong way."

Kyle didn't want to admit that maybe his grandfather was right. Maybe he was going about this the wrong way.

But it was too late to change his path. He'd already talked to Gal. He'd told him what he wanted and had said the same to Dennis. Why would either of them give him a second chance when he was trying to take everything from them?

He rubbed his face. "Everything'll be fine. I swear."

Grandpa didn't look convinced. "I'm sure you think that, but if you continue down this path, I don't think it will be."

Kyle agreed, but what could he do? Even though he wanted to be nothing like his father, he was his father's son. Maybe Dennis was right, and Kyle was just like him. He was certainly behaving like him, and he didn't know how to stop.

Kyle didn't know anything right now except that he was confused and hurt, and he had no idea how to fix his life and the mess he'd created.

* * * *

Dennis had been sulking in his office since he'd left Kyle in the back alley. He'd had the shock of his life. He'd met his mate, but instead of having a joyous moment, he only felt dread. What was he supposed to do with a mate like Kyle?

Kyle seemed intent on hurting Dennis and the people he considered his family, and that wasn't something Dennis could allow. He couldn't be with someone who thought this was acceptable, even though it made his heart hurt. His mate was supposed to be perfect for him, but he couldn't see how Kyle was. All Dennis could see was that Kyle was Alpha Carter's son and that he was an asshole, just like him.

A light knock on the door made him groan. He didn't want to talk to anyone, but it might be about the bakery, so he called out for whoever was there to come in.

The door creaked as it swung open, and Gordon peeked in. "Everything all right?"

"Yep. Do you need anything?"

"Not really. I heard loud voices earlier, so I thought I'd check in on you."

The concern in his expression made Dennis want to cry. Why couldn't his mate be more like Gordon? Well, Dennis didn't want Gordon to be his mate. He was too young and too eager, and Dennis had never felt anything for him. Gordon was like a little brother, nothing else.

But Gordon was good and sweet and gentle, everything Kyle wasn't. That was what Dennis wanted. He wanted a mate who was good and sweet and gentle.

Instead, he had Kyle.

What was he going to do? Even though he didn't want to, it was clear he would have to choose between his mate and his pride. He'd thought the decision would be easy, but it was so much harder than he'd expected. He didn't want Kyle to destroy the pride, but he also didn't want to give him up.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Gordon asked.

"I promise I am. We have a few problems at home, but nothing that won't get fixed quickly. Don't worry about me."

Gordon grinned. "How can I not? You're my boss."

"And your boss is ordering you to get back to work. I'll be right there to help you."

Gordon was still hesitant, but he nodded and left, closing the office door behind himself. Dennis leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

He needed to talk to someone, but who? He needed someone who wouldn't spill his secret all over the place, someone who would understand what finding your mate meant but would still be removed from the situation. Talking to a pride member didn't feel like a good idea, though. They'd probably tell him to kick Kyle's ass out of town and never talk to him again because of what he was doing. They wouldn't be objective.

That was what Dennis needed. He needed someone to see both sides of the coin and tell him what to do about Kyle.

He slipped his phone out of his pocket and opened his messaging app. He had choices, which was good. His friends would all want to help him.

He stared at the names for a moment before choosing one of them. He hoped he

wasn't making a mistake.

He called Eddie. Drake wouldn't have been the best idea. He was enamored with the thought of mates, and he would tell Dennis to choose Kyle because of the bond they shared. Taylor and Jacob were pride members, so it was better not to tell them anything yet, but Eddie lived in town. Hopefully, he'd be able to tell Dennis what to do.

"What are you doing calling me at this time of day?" Eddie asked when he answered. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I'm hiding in my office."

Eddie was silent for a second. "Shit. Do I want to know why you're hiding? Never mind. I'll be right there. I'll bring you coffee, all right?"

This was why Dennis loved Eddie. He was taking charge without even knowing what was happening. It felt good not to have to make decisions, even though Dennis knew it wouldn't last.

He would have to decide what he wanted to do about Kyle. His two sides were fighting inside of him. His tiger wanted to claim Kyle, but the pride was too crucial to Dennis's human side. The tiger could live with only Kyle but not Dennis. He needed his pride.

Eddie had already hung up, so Dennis could only wait for him. Thankfully, nothing was very far in town, so it only took him about fifteen minutes. He'd have been here sooner if he hadn't stopped to grab Dennis's favorite coffee from the coffee shop.

Dennis grabbed the cup when Eddie handed it to him and practically inhaled half of it. The caramel flavor was strong, but it did nothing to soothe the pain in Dennis's

heart.

Dennis sighed and leaned back in his chair as Eddie settled into the one in front of the desk. For a moment, they stared at each other, and Dennis wondered how he should bring up Kyle and everything else.

“You know I’m not going to push you,” Eddie said. “But I’m here if you need to talk. I’ll do whatever I can to make your day better.”

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing you can do, and it’s not only my day. My whole life is fucked up.”

Eddie frowned. “Why? I thought things were going better with the pride and everything else.”

Dennis had to stop beating around the bush. Eddie was human, but he’d lived with shifters all his life. He knew what mates were about, and he’d understand why Dennis was freaking out.

“Remember how I texted you about the guy who demanded Gal hand over the pride?” he asked.

“Something like that would be hard to forget. Is that it? Is he why you’re like this?”

“If he was just an asshole the pride needs to deal with, I’d be fine, but he’s also my mate.”

Eddie gaped. He looked like he hadn’t expected that, and frankly, neither had Dennis.

“Wait, the guy who wants to become the Green Hill pride alpha is your mate?”

“He is. He’s also Alpha Carter’s son, which explains why he’s an asshole.”

Eddie frowned. “Why do you think he’s an asshole?”

“He’s trying to take the pride away.”

“Yeah, but put yourself in his shoes. If the old alpha is his father, he was probably told he was supposed to become the next alpha, right?”

“That’s how things usually go,” Dennis admitted.

Kyle hadn’t grown up with his father, though. As far as Dennis remembered, he’d never even been in Green Hill. He certainly hadn’t ever visited the pride house.

So who would have told him he was supposed to become an alpha?

Maybe his mother, or maybe whoever else he’d been living with. Either way, Eddie could be right. Kyle might have come to Green Hill expecting to become the alpha, only to be surprised when he found Gal sitting in that position. Maybe he’d reacted instinctively and had lashed out. Maybe he needed a little time to wrap his mind around what was happening and accept it.

“What do you think I should do?” Dennis asked Eddie.

“If you try talking to him now, you’re probably going to do something you’ll regret, like strangle him or something. Maybe you should stay away for a while? Just let things rest, think about what happened and what I said, and give him a chance. You’re never going to know how things might have gone if you don’t, and I don’t want you to regret that. I know how important the pride is to you, but we’re talking about your mate. He’s just as important, even though you might not realize it.”

Dennis's instincts were still yelling at him to go after Kyle and give him a good shake, but Eddie was right. It would be best for Dennis to stay away until he calmed down and really thought about what had happened.

The problem was that it wouldn't be easy to find an explanation for what Kyle was doing. What Eddie had said might be true, but it also might not be. Even if it was, Dennis couldn't be with Kyle if he insisted on being the Green Hill pride alpha.

Hopefully, Kyle would change his mind. If Kyle didn't, Dennis would act accordingly. While he wasn't looking forward to kicking his mate to the curb, he would do it if it meant keeping the pride safe.

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Things had gotten even more complicated, and Kyle was lost. As if he hadn't already had enough problems with the pack and Gal, now, he had to add his mate to it. He'd hoped he could convince Dennis to be on his side, but it was clear he wouldn't be able to. Dennis was his pride's man through and through, and he was apparently ready to discard his mate if it meant keeping the pride safe.

Kyle stared at the ceiling of his room. He'd been avoiding his family because he didn't want to answer the inevitable questions, but he would have to face them eventually. His grandfather knew what was happening, and it was a small miracle that he hadn't told Kyle's siblings yet. They still expected him to take over the pride, and he didn't know how to make that happen.

Or if he wanted it.

He sighed. If he wanted the pride, he'd have to give up his mate. If he wanted his mate, he'd have to stop going after the pride. Normally, he wouldn't even have to think about it. He didn't want to become an alpha. He didn't want to lead any group of people, let alone his father's pride.

But if he didn't take over the pride, how could he keep his family safe? After what he'd done, he doubted Gal would agree if he asked him to welcome his family. He could try to convince him to take in just them, but they wouldn't be happy about that, and they'd refuse. Kyle knew they'd rather follow him wherever he was going.

He grabbed his pillow, pressed it against his face, and screamed into it. Hopefully, the sound was muffled enough that no one would hear it.

He needed to do something, but with no idea what, he decided he should get out of his room. Maybe once he had some fresh air and a walk to clear his head, a solution would suddenly appear in front of him. He desperately needed one because it felt like his love life just couldn't work with the rest of this mess.

He climbed off his bed, put on his shoes, grabbed his wallet and phone, and left the room. The motel was silent, and when he paused by the door of the room his siblings shared, he couldn't hear anything. His grandfather was out, too. That was why Kyle had their room to himself this morning.

They were out there, exploring Green Hill and probably having fun. Kyle wanted to have fun with them, but he was also worried. Would anyone confront them? Hopefully, if he stayed away from them, no one would realize who they were. They were wolf shifters, so it wouldn't be easy to connect them to Kyle, but people had seen them together, including Dennis.

Would he tell his alpha about Kyle's family? Would he mention they were wolf shifters? Kyle had no way to know. He wanted to be able to trust his mate, even though he didn't know him. That was how mates should be.

He still couldn't believe he'd found his.

He headed toward the park, needing to be away from people. He couldn't help but wonder what his mother would have thought of this town. She had to have come through at least a few times because of Kyle's father, but Kyle couldn't remember being here. He thought she would have liked it. It was pretty and small, and it felt like home even though it wasn't.

She would have been happy for Kyle. She would have told him to stop being an idiot and do whatever he needed to keep Dennis, but he didn't know if he could do that. His family needed him. Could he sacrifice their safety for personal gain? It felt

selfish, and even though he didn't regret that they'd followed him away from the pack, he thought they should have stayed. Life would have been much easier for them if they'd continued being pack members.

But they weren't pack members anymore, and they weren't pride members yet. Kyle needed to fix this, and he would if he knew how. He wished someone would tell him, but he only had his family, and his grandfather had already been clear about what he thought of the situation.

Kyle snorted as he kicked a pebble. As if Gal would listen to him after what he'd said the first time they'd met. Kyle had made a mess of that, and now, his family would have to pay the price. Kyle might have been able to take his father on in a fight, but there was nothing he could do against Gal. He was young and bigger than Kyle, and even worse, it was clear he was trained. Kyle had noticed the way the alpha kept an eye on him and how smoothly he moved. He suspected it would only take Gal five minutes to have him on his back in the dirt.

Kyle was lost in his thoughts, which was the only reason he didn't see the two men coming toward him on the path. When he noticed them, he didn't even look up to see who they were. He stepped aside to let them pass, but to his surprise, they slowed down and stopped. That was when he looked up, and his gaze locked with Gal's.

Shit. Had Kyle summoned the alpha by thinking about him? It looked like Kyle might get his ass kicked in front of half the town, which wasn't something he was looking forward to.

"Kyle," Gal said.

Kyle nodded at him. "Gal." He really should call him alpha, but he couldn't bring himself to.

To his surprise, Gal smiled. He had an arm wrapped around his mate's shoulders, and for some reason, both of them were smiling. Kyle didn't expect them to run away screaming when they saw him, but he would have thought they wouldn't want to talk to him. "I'll leave you to your day," he added as he moved to continue walking.

A hand on his arm stopped him in his tracks. He peered at Liam, who stared back at him, not looking one bit sorry.

"We'd like to talk to you," he said.

Kyle swallowed. That didn't sound like a good idea, but at the same time, it was what he'd been thinking. He had to talk to Gal. "I'm listening."

Liam dropped his hand and turned to Gal, clearly waiting for him to speak.

"We just want to talk," Gal promised.

He sounded like a good person and a good alpha. Kyle wished he'd known about him sooner. If he had, he might not have made a mess. It would be within Gal's right to kick Kyle out of his town, but instead, he wanted to talk to him. It made Kyle hopeful and wary at the same time. "Like I said, I'm listening."

"Why don't we walk?"

"Sure," Kyle said with a shrug. He didn't care where they talked. He just wanted to know what the fuck was happening.

"I'd like to know how you and your family ended up in Green Hill. Well, beyond knowing that your father was the alpha of the pride," Gal said.

"We drove." Kyle knew that wasn't what Gal meant, but he couldn't help it. The need

to protect his family and ensure Gal didn't find out more about them than he clearly knew already was strong.

Thankfully, Gal didn't seem offended because he chuckled. "I see. You don't have to tell me anything if you don't feel comfortable, and I understand why you wouldn't. I'd like to know the circumstances around your plan to take over the pride."

Should Kyle tell Gal? Part of him felt like he shouldn't, but another part was tired and wanted this to be over. The situation had gotten out of hand, and Kyle didn't know how to fix it. Maybe being honest with Gal would help. Maybe it would make things worse. There was only one way to find out, and Kyle decided that Gal seemed like a nice enough person not to hold what Kyle had done against his family. Hopefully, he was right.

He swallowed. "My mother recently died," he said.

If he was going to tell someone his story, he needed to start from the beginning.

* * * *

"I wonder who that guy is," Eddie said from his chair by the wide window of the bakery. "I don't think I've seen him around before. I'd remember if I had, because he's cute."

Dennis continued placing the pastries behind the glass of the counter, but he did look up, wondering who Eddie was talking about. He hadn't seen anyone new in town except for Kyle and his family. Maybe that was who Eddie had noticed. Dennis had seen Kyle's family exploring the town, and Kyle's sister had come into the bakery a few times. She seemed to have a passion for the cupcakes, and Dennis had started keeping a few of them to the side for her.

He liked her. He hadn't thought he would, considering what he thought of Kyle and what was happening, but she was sweet and seemed genuinely excited to be in Green Hill. It was a contrast with both her brothers. Kyle was Kyle, while Christopher seemed grumpy every time Dennis saw him.

"Who're you talking about?" he asked his friend.

"That guy, the one talking to Gal and Liam."

Dennis started panicking when he realized Eddie was talking about Kyle. Why was Kyle talking to Gal and Liam? Were they kicking him out of town? Did that mean that Dennis's mate was about to leave?

Dennis hadn't told his alpha about Kyle being his mate. He needed to, but he'd barely had time to wrap his mind around it himself. Kyle was a complicated man in what was no doubt a complex situation, and while Dennis hated that he couldn't be honest, he'd been trying to find a solution around the mess Kyle had made. He'd hoped he'd be able to find one before something happened, but it looked like he was too late.

He rushed out from behind the counter and went to stand next to Eddie. Sure enough, Gal and Liam were talking to Kyle. They all wore serious expressions that Dennis couldn't read. The conversation wasn't a light one, but there was no way for Dennis to know what they were saying.

"All right?" Eddie asked, gently bumping his shoulder against Dennis's thigh.

"I don't know. That's Kyle."

Eddie blinked a few times before his eyes widened. "You mean your mate?"

"Yeah. Why do you think he's talking to Gal?"

“I don’t know. Hopefully, they’re talking things out, and you won’t have to worry about your mate wanting to be the alpha for much longer.”

That was what Dennis wanted, but what would Kyle do if he couldn’t have what he’d expected would fall into his lap?

Kyle wanted to be the pride’s alpha. Whether it was because he felt it was his by birthright or for other reasons, there was no way around that. He’d come to Green Hill to take over the pride, but he’d found that it was more than he could take on. What would he do now? Would he take his family and leave? What about Dennis?

Dennis couldn’t follow Kyle if he left, and he didn’t want to. He had everything he could ever want here in Green Hill.

Except for his mate.

Dennis gritted his teeth. He shouldn’t want his mate if Kyle was the kind of man who thought he could take over the pride like he was trying to. Dennis didn’t understand why fate had decided that Kyle, of all people, should be his mate and why they’d met now. They didn’t need each other. They didn’t need each other’s messes, either. Dennis certainly didn’t need to be associated with Kyle, considering what he was doing.

“I mean, it doesn’t look like Gal and Liam are angry, so they have to be okay with what’s happening, right?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much if I were you. I know it’s impossible, but things really don’t look that bad. You only talked to Kyle once, right?”

Dennis nodded.

“Then you don’t know what kind of person he is. You didn’t even have time to have a full conversation, and from what you said, you don’t know why he’s in town. Maybe he doesn’t actually want to be the alpha, but he thought he should be because he believed his father was still in charge. I remember him all too well, and I think you’d rather have Kyle in charge than his father, right?”

“I have no idea what kind of man Kyle is, so I can’t answer that,” Dennis murmured.

He was still staring at Kyle, Gal, and Liam, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. For some reason, Liam appeared heartbroken while Gal was nodding seriously. Kyle was talking, and he looked sad.

Dennis’s tiger pushed for them to go and comfort their mate, but he stayed where he was. He wasn’t about to make a scene. He couldn’t go to Kyle until Gal and Liam left. He wasn’t even sure he’d go to him then. He didn’t know if he could stay away, since Kyle looked sad, but part of him was worried that if he gave in and talked to his mate, he wouldn’t be able to step back if he had to.

Why was all of this so fucking complicated?

“Don’t give up yet,” Eddie said. “If he’s your mate, he can’t be a bad person. I’m sure there are extenuating circumstances to what he’s doing. We don’t know what happened in his past and what he’s dealing with now, so give him a chance.”

“I want to. I just don’t know if I’ll have the opportunity.”

Eddie hummed. “Gal’s a reasonable man. Maybe you should tell him that Kyle’s your mate. I’m sure that if he knew, he’d ensure the two of you have space to talk and work things out. He might even decide to allow Kyle into the pride. I mean, being

your mate makes him a pride member, right?"

It did. Even though they weren't bonded, the mate bond was present between them. That meant that Kyle was a pride member beyond being the former alpha's son.

Should Dennis have told him? Kyle had to know it, yet he hadn't brought it up. Maybe he didn't want to be part of the pride and just wanted to lead it. Maybe he'd decided this was too much and that he didn't want to deal with any of it after all. Dennis hadn't exactly welcomed him, even after they'd realized they were mates. He should have been nicer, but he'd been angry and worried.

"Looks like they're done talking," Eddie said after a moment.

Sure enough, Liam and Gal were saying goodbye to Kyle. They turned and walked away, but Kyle stayed where he was. He stared at them, a complicated expression on his face.

What had just happened? There was only one way for Dennis to find out. He didn't know if it was the best idea, but that wouldn't stop him.

He turned to Shirley, who was working behind the counter as always. "I'm stepping out for a moment. I'll be right back, but if you need anything, you can ask Eddie to help."

"Since when do I work for you?" Eddie complained.

"Since now. I'll even pay you if you actually have any work to do." Dennis just needed to know that the bakery would be fine while he talked to Kyle.

He rushed outside, needing to get to his mate before Kyle left. He was still standing at the entrance of the park, looking lost. Seeing that expression on his face broke

Dennis's heart a bit, and he wished he could fix whatever made Kyle's heart heavy.

Maybe he could. Maybe what had just happened between Gal and Kyle meant that Dennis would have the opportunity to comfort his mate.

"Kyle," Dennis said when he reached him.

Kyle blinked and turned to him. His eyes widened, and he stared at Dennis as if he couldn't believe he was there. "Yes?"

"What did Gal want? What were you talking about with him?"

Kyle blinked. "How do you know we were talking?"

Dennis gestured at the bakery. "I saw you. What's happening? What did they want from you?" Dennis sucked in a breath. "Please tell me you weren't fighting with them and that they weren't kicking you out of town."

Kyle grinned. "You don't want them to kick me out? Does that mean that you care about me?"

Great. Dennis was right back to wanting to strangle his mate. Was this how things were always going to go between them? Or would Kyle eventually give Dennis the answers he was looking for? Dennis didn't know, but he needed Kyle to tell him what the fuck was happening.

* * * *

Kyle stared at Dennis. The scowl was firmly back on his face, but for a few moments, he'd looked almost happy to see Kyle.

Was this what Kyle had to look forward to for the rest of his life if he and Dennis ended up together? Would his mate alternatively glare and smile at him like he was the only thing that made him happy in the world? Even if that was how things went, Kyle couldn't say he disliked it. Actually, he liked the thought of being with Dennis very much.

Dennis crossed his arms over his chest. "I never said I didn't want them to kick you out. I just want to know what's going on."

"Maybe you should ask your alpha."

"As if he'd answer me. I know it's none of my business."

Kyle frowned. "But it is. I'm your mate."

"I haven't told anyone but one of my friends. Gal doesn't know."

Kyle wasn't offended or even surprised, but it still hurt a bit. "You didn't tell anyone about me?"

Dennis arched a brow. "I said I told one of my friends. Why? Who have you told about me?"

He had Kyle there. "Only my grandfather, but I only have three people in my life, so I told almost everyone."

"Very funny, but it doesn't work like that. There's a reason you didn't tell your siblings about me, and it's probably the same reason I didn't tell Gal about you."

Kyle didn't want to fight with Dennis, so he nodded. "I get it."

“Finally. Now tell me what Gal and Liam wanted.”

It was an order, even though Dennis had no authority over Kyle. Kyle could decide whether or not to tell him, and he wasn't sure what he should do. To be honest, he had no idea what had just happened. The mess he was in was getting more complicated by the second, and Kyle wasn't crazy about that. He just wanted a safe place for his family. Was that too much to ask for?

But if he wanted even one chance with Dennis, he'd have to be honest. That was how relationships worked.

Kyle had never seen his mother in a relationship, but his grandfather had been bonded to his mate. Kyle's grandparents had helped his mother raise him and his siblings, so he knew what a loving relationship between mates looked like. If he could have half the love and happiness his grandfather had had, he wanted it. His heart would break if he ever lost Dennis, and he wasn't sure he'd be as strong as his grandfather and survive it, but he was tired of resisting.

He wanted to do the right thing for himself once, and he felt like telling Dennis might be part of that. He didn't know what Dennis wanted or if he was on his side, but he had to hope that was the case. After all, Dennis was his mate. The pride was important to him, but even though he looked like he didn't want that to be true, Kyle was just as important.

Hopefully.

“He wanted to know more about the reason my family and I are here,” Kyle explained.

Dennis waited and, after a few moments, rolled his eyes. “That's all you're going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to know more?”

“Of course I do. I have no idea why you ended up here, and I’m curious because I know the rest of your family are wolf shifters.” He paused. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me if you’re not comfortable with it, but I’d like to know. You’re my mate, Kyle. I want to know more about you.”

For the first time, it looked like Dennis didn’t mind the fact that they were mates. Kyle might be reading too much into it, but he hoped he was right. He needed something to go the right way. He still had no idea what Gal would do given what he now knew, but at least everything was on the table, and the alpha understood better why Kyle had confronted him. He didn’t seem to hate Kyle, even now, and Kyle hoped the same would go for Dennis.

Kyle was suddenly exhausted, so he flopped onto the nearest bench. He was relieved when Dennis followed. He even sat down, which Kyle hadn’t expected. It seemed like Dennis was giving him a real opportunity, and Kyle didn’t want to waste it.

He didn’t enjoy telling strangers his life story, but Dennis wasn’t a stranger. They might not know each other, but Kyle’s heart and his tiger recognized their mate.

“I never really knew my father,” Kyle started. “Which, from what I know about him, is a good thing. My mother never talked about him much, but I looked into him once I was old enough, and he sounded like an asshole. I only have a few memories of him, but those are from when I was a child.”

“He is an asshole,” Dennis confirmed. “It’s why we were so happy when he was forced to step down. It would have been better to be without an alpha than having him.”

“But you have an alpha. You have Gal.”

“And he’s a good alpha. Tell me more about you, Kyle.”

Kyle needed to stop changing the topic of the conversation. Dennis had something in mind, and it looked like he wouldn’t back down until he got what he wanted. “My father wasn’t in my life, and that was fine. I had my mother and my grandparents. Then, years later, my mother had two more children. My siblings are younger than me by more than ten years, so I understood things much better when she had them. She never married my stepfather, and eventually, they broke up, and he left the kids with my mother. My siblings and I grew up together in my mother’s pack. I’m the only tiger shifter, obviously.”

“And you’re what, mid-thirties?”

“Yeah.”

“That couldn’t have been easy. Things were very different back then.”

They had been. Alpha Davis wasn’t welcoming of other shifters, but his father had been even less so. The only reason he’d allowed Kyle to stay was that his mother was a wolf shifter and part of the pack, and probably also that Kyle had been a child. That alpha had died before Kyle turned eighteen, but Kyle suspected he would have kicked him out as soon as he was an adult if he’d still been in charge then.

His son hadn’t. Alpha Davis junior clearly hadn’t liked Kyle, but he’d still allowed him to stay, probably to make Kyle’s mother happy.

Kyle’s eyes burned, but he didn’t want to cry, especially not in front of his mate.

“Your family doesn’t seem to care that you’re a tiger,” Dennis said gently.

“They don’t. They see me as part of their family, and they never cared that I could

turn into a tiger instead of a wolf. They're the only ones who didn't, though. Our mother died in a car accident a few weeks ago. I always knew she was the only reason the alpha allowed me to stay, so I wasn't surprised when he asked me to leave."

Dennis looked ready to strangle someone. "So soon after your mother passed away?"

"She was the only reason he tolerated me, and she'd passed, so here I am. To be honest, it's not a bad thing that I left the pack. I never really belonged there, even though it's where I was born and grew up."

"What about your family? They decided to follow you here?"

"They did." Kyle sucked in a breath. "They're the reason I went to Gal and tried to take over the pride. I don't want them to have to live with humans. I want them to have a community of people they can trust and be a part of, and since I knew my father was the alpha here, I thought this would be the best way to give them that. I didn't expect him to welcome them, but I thought I could take him on. I didn't expect Gal to be the alpha instead of him."

Kyle just wanted a chance and to keep his family safe. Surely, that wasn't too much to ask.

* * * *

There it was. Dennis had been sure there was a big reason behind what Kyle was doing, and now, he knew it.

Kyle wanted the pride because he thought that being the alpha would keep his family safe. It didn't entirely make sense to Dennis, but he realized it was because Kyle didn't really know what being part of a pride was like. From what he'd said, he'd

always been kept at arm's length and isolated. He'd only ever had his family, so of course, he wanted to do everything he could for them now that they'd followed him away from the pack.

He'd been an idiot about it, but at least he was an idiot with a good heart. He'd felt forced into wanting to be the alpha, but it didn't sound like he actually wanted to be in charge.

"Do you want to become the alpha?" Dennis asked.

Kyle hesitated, then shook his head. "I don't. I can't think of anything worse than being in charge of a bunch of people, especially people I don't know. I just thought that was the best way to keep my family safe and give them what they'd lost to follow me."

Dennis was relieved. For a while, he'd thought his mate was evil and that he'd have to choose between him and the pride, but it didn't look like he'd have to anymore. Kyle didn't want to be the alpha. He just wanted a place to call home.

But what did Gal think of that? Had Kyle told him about not wanting to be the alpha, or had he only told Dennis because they were mates? What would Gal say if he knew? After all, Kyle had threatened his authority. He was a good alpha, but that didn't mean he was ready to welcome a man who'd tried to take the pride away from him.

Technically, he couldn't refuse to welcome Kyle into the pride. Kyle was already a pride member, even though he didn't seem to realize it. His family was different. From what Dennis knew of Gal, he'd probably welcome Kyle's family into the pride without Kyle. He wouldn't punish them for something Kyle had done.

Dennis wished he could know for sure what would happen, but he wasn't Kyle or

Gal. They had to make decisions that wouldn't be easy to make, and Dennis didn't know if telling his alpha about his bond with Kyle would make things easier or harder. He wasn't even sure he wanted to find out.

If it came to it and it looked like Gal was going to kick Kyle out of town, Dennis would talk to him. He couldn't keep this a secret if being honest about it meant keeping Kyle close, but for now, maybe it was better like this.

He leaned back against the bench and looked at his mate. He still had many questions, but he could see that Kyle was all talked out. Maybe he could ask just a few.

"So you don't want to be the alpha."

Kyle shook his head. "I don't. I don't care that my father was the alpha. Honestly, I don't believe that it should be an inherited position."

Dennis agreed, and he was glad they felt the same way about it. Maybe they weren't that different after all.

Maybe they could work as mates.

"Would you still like to stay in Green Hill? Not as the alpha, but as a pride member?"

"As long as my family is welcome into the pride, too, yeah. The only reason I did this was that I wanted to give them a safe place to call home, a place where they could belong. I want the same. Since the wolves never wanted me, I thought that maybe the tigers would welcome me. In a way, I do belong here, right? My father might be a dick, but he was your alpha, and his family lived here."

"I guess you do belong. You went about it the wrong way, though."

Kyle snickered. "You're not the first to tell me that."

"That's because it's true. I can't believe you just came in and demanded that Gal hand over the pride. What did you think would happen?"

Kyle sighed. "I don't know. Not this. I mean, I didn't even know about Gal until I arrived here. I fully believed I'd find my father sitting behind his desk."

But Alpha Carter was gone, and he was never coming back. He wouldn't be making the decision about Kyle becoming a pride member. Gal would.

"You didn't make the smartest decision when you confronted Gal," Dennis pointed out.

Kyle snorted. "That's an understatement. I panicked. I thought for sure that my father would be there, and I hoped to be able to convince him to accept at least my family into the pride. When I saw Gal, I didn't know what to say. I felt that he had no reason to take them or me into the pride, and I needed to be sure my family had a place here."

"So you made a bad decision and told Gal you wanted the pride."

Kyle rubbed his face with a hand. "I did. I don't know how to take it back. Earlier, he asked me why I was in Green Hill, and I told him everything."

Dennis sucked in a breath. "Including that you don't want to be the alpha?"

"Including that. I'll understand if he doesn't want to see me ever again, though. As long as my family can stay, I'll be fine with it."

But Dennis wouldn't be. "Your place is here with them." And with Dennis.

“I don’t know. I hope so, but I’ll understand if Gal decides it’s better not to accept me into the pride. After all, I went against him. I told him I would take the pride, and it would be normal for him not to trust me.”

“But you belong here as much as he does.” If not more. As much as Dennis liked Gal and loved what he’d done for the pride, Kyle was Alpha Carter’s son and Dennis’s mate.

Gal had found his mate in the pride, too, but until then, just like Kyle, he’d been an outsider. He had to understand, right? He had to see that it would be best to welcome Kyle into the pride.

“I’ll tell him you’re my mate,” Dennis declared.

“It would probably be best if you didn’t. What’s going to happen if he tells me to leave?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not giving you up. As long as you stop being an idiot and let go of your idea of taking over the pride, I’ll be on your side.”

Kyle stared at Dennis.

Dennis didn’t know him well enough to be able to read his expression, but something in his eyes made Dennis hold his breath.

When Kyle leaned forward, Dennis stayed still, almost as if he was dealing with a spooked animal. He couldn’t believe it when he felt Kyle’s lips skim against his cheek. Kyle leaned away, then in again, aiming for Dennis’s mouth, and that was perfectly fine with Dennis.

He’d wanted the kiss since the first time he’d seen Kyle, even before he realized they

were mates. After he'd smelled Kyle and realized who he was, he hadn't thought he could have it, yet here they were.

Their lips finally touched, and Dennis broke. He wrapped an arm around Kyle's waist and hauled him closer, wishing they were in private. Since they weren't, they had to keep things PG-13, so instead of dragging Kyle into his lap, he settled on kissing him softly.

The kiss was gentle and cautious, and it felt like the beginning of something. Dennis could only hope it wouldn't be the end, too.

He didn't want to have to choose between his pride and his mate. When he'd thought that Kyle was a bad person, it would have been easy—maybe—but not anymore. Kyle had done what he'd done to protect his family, and Dennis understood that. He didn't blame his mate for it, even though Kyle had gone about it the wrong way.

There had to be a way to solve this problem while making everyone happy and keeping them safe.

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“Why do you want to go to the bakery?” Christopher asked.

He eyed Kyle suspiciously. Kyle didn’t blame him. His brother didn’t know about Dennis yet, and Kyle’s behavior was kind of suspicious. He disliked most people and didn’t like eating sweets. Why would he want to go to a bakery?

“Jennifer wants to go,” Kyle said.

“Jennifer’s been going every day since we arrived. You never went with her. You’ve certainly never asked all of us to go with her.”

Kyle pinched the bridge of his nose. Why did his brother have to be so infuriating? Kyle just wanted them to sit in the bakery and show Dennis that they were good people. Now that he’d been honest with his mate, he wanted Dennis to get to know them. It would take time, but they had that time.

Because Kyle had a surprise.

He couldn’t wait to talk to his mate and his family, and this was a good occasion to have them meet. He just needed to convince Christopher to go along with it.

Thankfully, Jennifer was on Kyle’s side, even though she didn’t know what Kyle was planning. She hooked her arm around Christopher’s and pulled him toward the door of the room they shared. Their grandfather was hovering in the hallway, waiting for them.

“Come on,” Jennifer said. “I still haven’t tried the banana doughnut I’ve been eyeing

since we arrived.”

“You’ve been having a different doughnut or cupcake every day since we got here,” Christopher pointed out. “I’m sure you can wait another day to get your banana doughnut.”

Jennifer pouted and turned big eyes to Christopher. She knew what she was doing. When she looked at people like that, no one could resist her.

That included her brother.

Christopher sighed. “Fine. Let’s go get your banana doughnut.”

They filed out of the room, and Kyle waited until Christopher was done locking the door. Jennifer had gone ahead to talk to their grandfather.

“I know you’re hiding something,” Christopher said.

Kyle wasn’t surprised. Christopher was wary, and for good reasons. He’d always been like that, but then, he’d always seen how the pack had treated Kyle. Kyle remembered that when he was young, Christopher used to say it wasn’t fair. He’d been right, but he hadn’t known back then that there was nothing any of them could do about it.

“You don’t need to be suspicious of me,” Kyle reassured his brother. “I promise this is a good thing.”

“I’m sure it is. I just hate secrets.”

Kyle quickly squeezed his brother’s shoulder. “It won’t be a secret for long.”

Christopher huffed, but he continued walking, so Kyle took it as a win. Sometimes, it was complicated to make everyone happy. Their family was tiny, but they all had wildly different personalities. Jennifer was sunny and outgoing, while Christopher was generally on the grumpy side. Kyle was a bit like Christopher but less sulky, while their grandfather was closer to Jennifer but not as outgoing as her. He completed their little family, and Kyle liked how well they all worked together. They were a family.

A family that Kyle hoped was about to grow by one member.

He was uncharacteristically nervous as they walked to the bakery. He kept looking around, but for once, it wasn't because he expected something to happen. He just couldn't believe this was their home, or rather, that it would be soon.

Hopefully.

As soon as they reached the bakery, Jennifer bounced to the counter. The woman who always worked there smiled at her, but she seemed more reserved with Christopher and Kyle. Kyle understood why, but it wouldn't stop him from leaning over the counter. "Would you mind telling Dennis I'm here?"

The woman cocked her head and stared at him. The questions were clear in her eyes, and Kyle wondered if she was going to ask them. Thankfully, she waited until Jennifer had her banana doughnut, and their grandfather had ordered a few cupcakes for the rest of them. Jennifer dragged Christopher to a table in the corner while Grandpa headed over to the coffee station.

"My cousin saw you and Dennis together at the park," the woman said.

Kyle sucked in a breath. He wasn't surprised that gossip was already running wild. In such a small town, he'd have been surprised if it hadn't been. "We talked," he said.

The woman snorted. “That’s not what I’d call talking, but fine. I’ll tell him you’re here.”

Kyle waited by the counter in case Dennis didn’t feel comfortable coming over to meet his family. It was time the two sides of Kyle’s life finally met each other, but he expected it to be slightly tense. That was how things had been between him and Dennis since they’d met, and while he was doing what he could to smooth them over, it would take time.

The back door opened, and Dennis appeared, quickly followed by the woman, who looked incredibly interested in what was about to happen. Kyle ignored her and smiled at Dennis. “Hi. I know you’re working, but I was wondering if you could come sit with my family for a bit.”

Dennis hesitated. “I don’t know. I’m happy to meet them, but I’m working.”

“You should go,” the woman interjected. “Gordon and I have everything under control. Besides, you’re not going far. You’ll be sitting at the table there, so we can call you over if anything happens.”

Dennis glared at her, but she happily ignored him. She continued beaming like a proud mother, which made Kyle snicker.

Dennis turned his glare to Kyle, but it quickly vanished as he sighed. “Fine. I’ll come, even though I can’t imagine how awkward things will be.”

“You’ll have to meet them eventually. I already told Grandpa that you’re my mate, and it’s only right that my siblings find out, too. Besides, I have something to tell all of you.”

Dennis frowned but didn’t ask what that something was. He walked around the

counter, and Kyle waited for him. He wanted to take his mate's hand, but that would look odd to Jennifer and Christopher, so he refrained. He still bumped their shoulders together and smiled, happy when Dennis smiled back.

"I have a few announcements to make," Kyle declared as he reached the table where his family had settled.

Grandpa was already smiling, and just like always, Jennifer was bouncing in her seat while Christopher frowned at Dennis. Kyle rolled his eyes. He didn't blame his brother for his reaction since he didn't know Dennis, but he wished Christopher would give Dennis a chance. Maybe he would once he found out who Dennis was to Kyle and, through him, to the rest of them.

Dennis was visibly uncomfortable, but he sat down after dragging over an empty chair from a nearby table. He sat on the edge of it as if ready to run at any moment.

Kyle looked around the table. These were the people he loved and who were the most important in his life.

"Why are you staring at us like an asshole?" Christopher asked.

Dennis snickered and leaned closer to Kyle.

Kyle rolled his eyes. "I'm getting there. It's just nice to see all of my family gathered around the table."

Christopher arched a brow. "All of your family?"

Right. "Dennis, these are my siblings, Christopher and Jennifer, and my grandfather, William. Everyone, this is my mate, Dennis."

The rest of the bakery was as noisy as before, but their table was completely silent. Dennis squirmed in his chair while Jennifer and Christopher stared at him. Thankfully, Kyle's grandfather already knew about Dennis, and he leaned forward to offer him his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said. "Welcome to the family."

Dennis shook his hand. "Thank you. I'm happy to be part of it."

"What the fuck?" Christopher spat out. "You met your mate, and you didn't tell us?"

"Things were complicated," Kyle said. "I wanted to tell you right away, but Dennis and I had things to work out. He's a member of the Green Hill pride."

Christopher grimaced. "Yeah, I can see how that would have been complicated. He's here, though. What does that mean? What about the alpha?"

"It means I want to be with your brother," Dennis offered.

"Even though he's trying to take over your pride?"

Kyle cleared his throat. "About that. I got a call from Gal, the current Green Hill pride alpha. We talked the other day, and I told him everything that happened back home. I didn't know what to expect after that, but he called because he wants to meet us. It's not a promise of making us pride members, but it's a step toward that, and I want us to take it."

* * * *

This was a lot to take. Not only had Dennis just met his mate's family, but now, he'd found out that Gal wanted to talk to them. There was only one reason for him to do

that, and it made Dennis's heart race.

Things were working out. For a while, he hadn't been sure they would, but now he was. As long as Kyle let go of his stupid idea of taking over from Gal, he and his family would be welcome in the pride. It was where Kyle belonged, which meant his family did, too.

Dennis wouldn't have to worry about having to choose between his mate and his pride anymore. If things went well, Kyle would become a pride member, and Dennis would have everything he could ever have dreamed of.

A home. His bakery. A family.

A mate.

"Wait," Christopher said, raising a hand. "What happened to the plan we had that you would take over the pride? Is that why the current alpha wants to meet us? Why would he want to make us his pride members if you're going to be the alpha anyway?"

Kyle winced. "Just listen, all right? I should have been honest with you and Jennifer from the beginning, but you were settling down, and I didn't want you to stop. Besides, this was my problem, not yours."

"Stop beating around the bush and tell us what the fuck's happening," Christopher snapped.

Dennis felt protective of his mate, even though Christopher was right. It seemed like Kyle had kept many things from his siblings, and while Dennis understood where his mate was coming from, he could tell it wasn't fair. Christopher and Jennifer were young, but they were adults. They should know what was happening, especially

because it involved them.

“I never wanted to be an alpha,” Kyle told them. “The only reason I decided I should take over the pride was that I wanted all of you to be safe. I wanted you to be part of a community like you were with the pack, and I knew we wouldn’t be able to find it anywhere else.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Kyle grimaced. “Yeah, I know. But it’s what I convinced myself of. I never belonged with the pack, and I thought that I could belong with the pride. I wanted that and my family, and what better way to get all of it than to take over the pride? I didn’t think I could trust Gal, and I’m still not sure I can, but I’m willing to give it a try. He is, too.”

“What happened when you talked to him?” Jennifer asked.

“The first time, I told him I was here to take over the pride. He nicely told me to fuck off.”

Jennifer snickered. “I wish I could have seen it.”

“You’ll probably see it plenty of times if the four of you become pride members,” Dennis said. “Gal isn’t one to hide how he feels.”

Jennifer looked at him, but Christopher was still focused on Kyle. “And now he wants to meet us?” he asked.

“Gal and his mate crossed paths with me at the park the other day. He asked me to tell him the entire story, something I hadn’t done before. I wasn’t sure it was the best idea, but I decided why the fuck not? It’s not like things could get any worse for us,

right?”

Christopher frowned. “I don’t know about that.”

Dennis agreed. Things could always get worse. Life always found a way to fuck things up, especially when you were already down.

“Anyway, I told him everything,” Kyle continued. “I explained about Mom and what happened to her, and what Alpha Davis did. I told Gal I never wanted to be an alpha but that I felt it was the only way to ensure you didn’t lose too much by leaving the pack with me.”

Christopher shook his head. “You’re an idiot.”

Dennis thought he’d like Kyle’s brother. He was telling the truth, and he didn’t seem to be afraid to be honest with his brother. Kyle was an idiot.

But he was Dennis’s idiot, and Dennis wasn’t letting him go.

Kyle grinned. “I’m sure everyone around the table agrees with you. I know I do.”

“You said that the alpha wants to talk to us,” Jennifer said, interrupting the brothers before they could start bickering.

Dennis could see in Christopher’s expression that he still wasn’t happy and that he wouldn’t hesitate to let Kyle know.

Kyle nodded. “He called me earlier. He didn’t make any promises, but he asked to meet you, and I said I thought it would be fine. I wanted to ask first, and I wanted you to know Dennis.”

“So you think we’ll be allowed to stay in Green Hill?” Jennifer asked.

She appeared hopeful. Now that he knew their story, Dennis understood how much Kyle’s family had sacrificed to be with him. They loved him more than they’d loved their old pack, but that didn’t mean they didn’t miss being part of that kind of community or having a home. Dennis could understand why Kyle had felt the need to find a place in the pride for his family. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if he didn’t have his pride, but he’d be completely lost.

“I think so,” Kyle said. “I believe Gal wants to talk to us so that he can ensure we’re not going to start problems, but I already talked to him, and he’s a good guy. He could’ve kicked me out of his office that first day. He could’ve run us out of town. Instead, he allowed us to stay, and when he found me at the park, he was nice. He didn’t order me to leave his territory. He gave me a chance to explain what was happening, and now, he’s giving us a chance to become pride members.”

It was a relief. Dennis didn’t know if he could have chosen between his pride and his mate.

It looked like he wouldn’t have to.

“You didn’t have good things to say about the pride when your father was the alpha,” William interjected. “Is Gal different? Is he a good alpha, or are you trying to convince yourself that he is?”

“He’s a good alpha,” Dennis declared. “I’ve lived both with Gal and Kyle’s father. I would know.”

William stared at Dennis for a moment before nodding. “I believe that. I’m glad my grandson found someone to love and that you’re here to support him.”

Kyle's cheeks flushed. "Don't say that," he scolded his grandfather.

But Dennis liked it. Things were still too fragile between him and Kyle to call it love, but they were working things out, and if Gal welcomed Kyle and his family into the pride, they would have time to do so. That was all Dennis wanted.

A chance.

He understood why Gal had to be careful. He didn't know Kyle and his family, and after the first impression Kyle had made, it was a miracle that Gal was willing to give Dennis's mate a chance. The only reason he was, was that he was a good man and an even better alpha.

"Gal has changed our pride for the better," Dennis explained. "Before, we were prisoners in the house. Only a few selected people were allowed to have a job or visit Green Hill. The rest of us weren't allowed to leave. We couldn't use the yard or the forest around the house. We were stuck inside, and it was hell."

Jennifer stared at Dennis with wide eyes. "Why weren't you allowed to leave the house?"

Dennis shrugged. "Alpha Carter loved control. If we weren't in the house, we would realize there was a chance for a much better life out there, and we might have left. A lot of pride members did. Thankfully, Alpha Carter was removed, and with Gal in his place, the pride is healing. We have jobs now. I have the bakery, and it's thanks to Gal. He might be a bear shifter, but he's the best alpha we could have dreamed of."

"He's not a tiger?" Christopher asked.

"Nope. The council sent him to get the pride back into shape and find a suitable alpha, but he ended up meeting his mate here, and he decided to stay. You being

wolves will never be a problem. We accepted Gal and his beta, and we can accept you, too.”

And if they didn’t, Dennis would have a chat with the pride. The pride was expanding, but they still needed more members to replace the ones who’d left when Alpha Carter was in charge. It would take time for the pride to truly thrive, but they could do it.

As long as they gave people a chance.

* * * *

Kyle looked around the table. All the people important to him were here, and he hoped they’d continue being there. That meant giving Gal and the pride a chance, and Kyle prayed he wouldn’t be wrong to do so.

He had no idea what he was getting himself into. Part of him didn’t think they could trust Gal and that this was too easy, but another part was tired of fighting. That part also wanted nothing to do with the responsibilities that came with being an alpha, especially to people he wouldn’t know.

Gal had seemed like a nice person when they’d talked in the park and even in his office, and Dennis had confirmed that he was. Since Dennis was Kyle’s mate, Kyle felt he could trust him.

He hoped he wouldn’t regret it.

“When does the alpha want to see us?” Grandpa asked.

“Whenever we’re ready. He said to call him back when I talked to you.”

Grandpa looked stunned. “And you didn’t think to tell us sooner? When are we going?”

Kyle laughed. He felt lighter, and while he wanted to be cautious, he had a good feeling about this.

He belonged in Green Hill. He was sure of that, and he’d never feel any different. He might have never lived here, but his father had, and more importantly, his mate was here. It was a massive coincidence that Kyle’s mate was a member of the pride, but Kyle would take it. He wanted a peaceful life, and he knew he and his family could have that here.

Grandpa shook his head. “This is no laughing matter. You shouldn’t make the alpha wait for an answer.”

“He won’t mind,” Dennis said. “He’s pretty relaxed, so I wouldn’t worry too much if I were you.”

Grandpa looked at him like he was nuts. “He’s the alpha. He deserves respect and not to have to wait on us.”

Jennifer stuffed the last bite of her doughnut into her mouth as she watched them. Christopher still looked grumpy, but Kyle hoped he understood how important this was. It could make or break their future, and they couldn’t miss this opportunity.

“I’ll call him right away,” Kyle promised. “I don’t know when he’ll be available to see us, but I don’t think we’ll have to wait for long. Any time is okay with you, right?”

Christopher looked like he wanted to say no, but Grandpa nodded eagerly. “Of course. After all, we’re in his territory, and we haven’t even gone to meet him. That

isn't right."

Alpha Davis would have pitched a fit, but Gal hadn't. He also didn't seem to care that Kyle had tried taking the pride from him. Kyle still didn't understand how he could be so relaxed about that, but he doubted he ever would.

Kyle got to his feet and took out his phone. He didn't want to do this with an audience, so he decided to step out of the bakery. He wasn't surprised when Dennis followed him. He paused just outside of the store, wondering what his mate wanted.

"You didn't tell me about this," Dennis said.

Kyle swallowed. "I wanted to, but I was afraid of what my family would say. I mean, they wanted to be with the pride when they thought I was going to be the alpha, but I have no idea if they'll be fine with Gal."

Dennis looked at them through the window. "They seem to be."

"I think they are. Jennifer and Grandpa are excited."

"Christopher isn't, unless his expression is always that dour."

"He's worried. He doesn't like the way Alpha Davis treated me, and he's going to be wary of Gal for a while. Alpha Davis knew me my entire life, yet he didn't hesitate to kick me out of the pack as soon as my mother died. I think Christopher's afraid of what Gal will do, especially after what I did."

Dennis took Kyle's hand and squeezed it. "He really is a good person. We weren't sure about him initially because he's a bear shifter and the council sent him, but now I wouldn't want anyone else guiding the pride. Gal's one of us, and not only because he and Liam are together. He's become a true pride member and the best alpha we

could have asked for.”

It was a relief to hear that. Gal was giving Kyle a chance, and Kyle would grab it with both hands. It wasn't only because of his family. Of course, he wanted them to have a place to call home where they could build a new life and be surrounded by other shifters, but there was also Dennis to think of. What would he do if he had to choose between his pride and Kyle? Kyle couldn't be sure he'd choose him, and he wouldn't blame him if he didn't. They were mates, but they'd just met. There was nothing that said they had to be together, especially with the way Kyle had behaved.

But maybe Dennis wouldn't have to choose. Kyle would do everything in his power to ensure that this went smoothly and that everyone was happy.

Including himself.

“It's going to take time for you and your family to believe you're safe, but that's fine,” Dennis said gently. “You'll get to know Gal and everyone else. Once you do, you'll realize there's no way Gal is ever going to kick you out unless you do something massive.”

Kyle thought that demanding the alpha hand over the pride was pretty massive, but Gal was still giving him another chance. Part of him wondered if it meant that Gal wasn't a good alpha. After all, he was willing to give a chance to someone who'd tried taking the pride from him.

But another part of Kyle was glad that Gal had given him this opportunity. He'd seen right through Kyle's bravado, and now that he knew what was happening, he wasn't angry or holding all of it over Kyle's head.

Kyle leaned forward to kiss Dennis. “I promise I won't ever do anything like this again.”

Dennis chuckled and pulled Kyle closer. “I sure hope not. I don’t want to lose you when I just found you.”

“As long as Gal doesn’t kick me out of town, I’m not going anywhere. This is where I belong.”

“Is it?”

Kyle wasn’t sure what Dennis was asking, but he understood why his mate was hesitant to believe him. “It’s where you are, isn’t it? As long as you’re here, I will be, too.”

Dennis seemed pleased with that answer. “This has been my home my entire life, and I don’t see that changing.”

“Well, it won’t have to. I’m sorry I was an idiot about all of this. I realize how lucky I am to be given another chance, and I won’t waste it.”

Dennis was the one who leaned in to kiss Kyle this time. Kyle sighed in pleasure and relaxed against his mate’s chest.

This was what he wanted. He hoped he’d have it for the rest of his life.

He would never have had a chance at this kind of happiness if he’d stayed with the pack. He’d been angry and confused but not surprised when Alpha Davis had kicked him out. He’d thought Alpha Davis was ruining his and his family’s lives, but kicking Kyle out was the best thing Alpha Davis could have done. Thanks to him, Kyle had found his home.

“Do we really have to watch that?” Christopher’s annoyed voice was loud.

Kyle leaned away from Dennis and blinked at his brother. He, Jennifer, and Grandpa had come out of the bakery and were staring. Jennifer looked like she found them adorable, which made Kyle feel weird because he'd never been adorable while Grandpa was smiling. Christopher, like always, was grumpy and glaring.

"Leave them alone," Jennifer scolded.

"I don't want to watch my brother make out with his mate."

"Then look the other way."

Kyle pressed his face against Dennis's neck and smiled. Sometimes, his family drove him up the wall, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He knew how lucky he was to be loved and to have these three people in his life.

That was why he was ready to do anything in order to keep them safe.

* * * *

Dennis was amused. He had a sister, too, so he was used to dealing with younger siblings, but Annabelle was nothing like Christopher. She was a little like Jennifer, though, and she'd been incredibly happy when Dennis had told her and their parents that he'd found his mate. She was chomping at the bit to meet Kyle, and when Dennis had told her that Kyle had a sister who was around her age, she'd been over-the-moon happy. Dennis didn't know if she and Jennifer would become friends, but if they didn't, it wouldn't be for lack of trying on his sister's part.

"I'll call Gal now," Kyle said. "That way, we'll know when we should head over to see him."

"Let us know," William said as he grabbed Christopher's shoulder and guided him

down the sidewalk. “The three of us will take a walk.”

It was a not-so-subtle way to tell Dennis and Kyle they could spend some time alone, for which Dennis was grateful. He wanted to spend more time with Kyle, especially on their own.

The problem was that he still had work to do.

He and Kyle watched as William, Jennifer, and Christopher left. Christopher was complaining loudly that they didn’t have to do what his grandfather wanted and that he was old enough to make his own decisions, but neither William nor Jennifer seemed to be listening to him. They were talking, with Jennifer gesturing as she did so. They appeared excited to have a true chance to become pride members, and Dennis was, too. This was another step toward keeping his mate with him for the long term, which was all Dennis wished for.

“Sorry about that,” Kyle said, his phone still in his hand.

“Sorry about what? Keeping this a secret? Introducing me to your family without telling me first?”

“All of that, I guess. I didn’t think you’d have a problem with meeting my family.”

Dennis pulled Kyle closer and kissed his cheek. “I don’t. I just wish you’d planned this better. I have to go back to work, but I want to spend time with you.”

Kyle’s smile went straight to Dennis’s heart. It made Dennis want to drag Kyle home and never let him go, but it was too soon for that.

“Well, I don’t have anything to do. I could hang around the bakery and wait for you.”

“It’ll be a few hours at least,” Dennis warned him.

“That’s fine. I’m going to call Gal, then fuck around on my phone. You don’t have to rush. I’m happy to wait for you.”

Dennis thought that was the truth, even though it was hard to believe. Kyle had been so prickly initially that it was hard for Dennis to wrap his mind around the fact that, contrary to what he thought, everything was going the right way. He’d expected at least a disaster or two, but Kyle was working toward integrating himself and his family into the pride. He wasn’t clinging to the alpha role like Dennis would have expected him to. He didn’t care about being the alpha. He just wanted to be part of something, and he would.

As long as Gal took him in.

Dennis prayed he would. He didn’t want to consider the possibility that Kyle wouldn’t be allowed into the pride because he didn’t want to think about what that would mean for him. He’d avoid doing so unless it was necessary.

“I’ll be in the back,” he told Kyle. “Just come through. Shirley won’t try to stop you.”

“She knows who I am?”

Kyle’s question was soft, and Dennis could read between the lines. Kyle wanted to know if Dennis had told Shirley that he was his mate.

Dennis’s heart broke a little. Kyle had felt unwanted all of his life. He’d always had his family, which was good because it meant he hadn’t been entirely alone, but that was it. He deserved to have more people care about him. He deserved people who loved him and wanted to spend time with him. His pack had rejected him, but Dennis never would.

“She knows,” Dennis confirmed. “So does Gordon. Ignore them if they stare at you. They’re curious and aren’t ashamed of it.”

“I’d be curious in their place, too. I’ll call Gal, then.”

“See you soon.”

Dennis didn’t want to leave Kyle’s side, but they both had stuff to do, and they couldn’t lose themselves in each other’s company the way Dennis wished they could. He was sure that as soon as Kyle’s family became pride members, things would slow down, and he and Kyle would finally be able to enjoy their relationship. In the meantime, he had work to do.

He ignored Shirley’s beaming smile when he walked back in and told her to let Kyle through once he was done with his phone call. He’d have to answer her questions eventually, but for a bit, he could avoid them.

He couldn’t avoid Gordon. Dennis’s assistant was taking a batch of cupcakes out of the oven, and he grinned when Dennis came in. “You’re already meeting the family?”

“None of your business,” Dennis grumbled.

“It was cute.”

“Don’t you have something better to do than bother me?”

“Come on, boss. You know you love it. Don’t you want to tell me all about Kyle?”

Normally, Dennis wouldn’t say a word about the person he was with. None of them had mattered as much as Kyle did, though. None of them had made Dennis want to brag that they were together.

Since he didn't know what Kyle would think of it, he decided it would be best to keep his mouth shut. Gordon didn't need details, and he certainly didn't need more ammunition to tease Dennis.

He glared at Gordon until Gordon snickered and went back to his cupcakes. They both had work to do, and Dennis was thankful when his assistant let it go and focused on the job. Unfortunately, it didn't last long.

Gordon's head snapped up as soon as Kyle walked into the kitchen. He glanced at Dennis, and Dennis could see the humor in his eyes. He pointed at the cupcakes, silently ordering Gordon to get back to work again, but the mirth was still evident in Gordon's expression.

Why was everyone so invested in this? Dennis wasn't surprised they were happy he'd found his mate and maybe even curious, but they had better things to do than obsess over his love life, dammit.

"All done," Kyle said as he stopped next to Dennis.

He kept a certain distance, for which Dennis was grateful. Having Kyle close flustered him.

"When does Gal want to meet you and your family?"

"Tomorrow. He sounded relaxed, so I'm not too worried, although Christopher can be a lot."

Dennis snorted. "You're one to talk. I don't think Christopher will be the problem here."

Thankfully, Kyle didn't take it badly. They were still trying to find their way around

each other, and Dennis hadn't been sure Kyle would enjoy his teasing, but his mate smiled.

"I promise I won't start trouble. I want this to go well. I want to be allowed to stay." Kyle leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not sure what I'll do once I am, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I came here convinced I'd be the alpha. I'll have to find another job now. I also don't know if the pride and my family will be comfortable with all of us moving into the pride house. Maybe it would be best to rent a place in town."

Kyle was already thinking of the future. Dennis shouldn't be surprised, but he was. Part of him expected Kyle to bolt, but another part was starting to believe that Kyle truly wanted this.

Wanted Dennis.

Dennis bumped their shoulders together, since his hands were dirty. "You shouldn't worry about that yet. It's not like Gal will demand you find a job right after he welcomes you and your family into the pride. Once you're pride members, you'll have time to figure things out. And you don't have to live in the pride house if you don't want to, but that's where I live."

Kyle stared, and Dennis wondered what he was thinking. Dennis didn't want to move out, but if Kyle wished to live away from the pride, Dennis would follow. He hadn't been ready to sacrifice the pride and his family for his mate, but this, he could do.

"I think it's a bit too soon to talk about moving in together, and I want to make sure my family's settled in before I consider moving out on my own, but we can talk

things out,” Kyle said.

That was fine with Dennis. He understood how life-changing all of this was for Kyle and his family. It made sense that Kyle wanted to stick with them, at least initially. As long as Dennis knew Kyle wasn’t going anywhere, he’d give him as much space and time as he needed.

That was what mates did for each other. It was what Dennis wanted to do for the man who would eventually become the center of his universe.

His mate.

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Kyle could feel the tension in the car. He didn't have to look in the back to know how his siblings felt as he stopped the car in front of the gate. The pride house loomed in front of them.

This was it. They were there to talk to Gal, and once they did, they'd know what would happen to them. Gal would make his decision, and they'd have to live with it.

Kyle swallowed. It was good that the alpha didn't hold what he'd done against him, but would he continue doing so? Kyle wasn't looking forward to the upcoming conversation, but he was looking forward to this mess ending. He was tired of not knowing, of wondering what his life would be like now that he'd left everything he knew behind. He wanted to settle down and be happy.

He hoped the pride could give him that.

He leaned out the car window and pressed the intercom. No one asked who it was. There was a click, and the gate started to open. Kyle hoped that was a good sign, but he was nervous as he slowly drove toward the house.

There were several cars parked in front of it, but it was easy to find a spot. Once Kyle had parked, they all clambered out and stood there, looking at each other.

Kyle's grandfather was wearing a suit and a tie because he wanted to make a good impression on who he hoped would be his new alpha. After living all his life with the pack, this was a new situation for him. He kept fixing his tie and smoothing down his suit, no matter how many times Kyle told him that he looked fine.

Jennifer was less bouncy today, while Christopher looked more like he was about to throw up than grumpy. Even though Kyle had told them everything would be all right, they were nervous, and so was he.

The front door swung open, making Kyle jump. He relaxed when he saw Dennis step out. Kyle and his family wouldn't be facing Gal alone. Dennis would be there, which gave Kyle more courage. He could do this. He'd already talked to Gal, so this meeting was only a formality. There was still a chance the alpha would change his mind, but why should he?

He'd heard Kyle's story. He'd understood where Kyle was coming from and why he'd done what he'd done. He was willing to give Kyle and his family a chance anyway, and Dennis was convinced there wouldn't be a problem. He'd stayed home today to support Kyle, and Kyle almost couldn't believe it.

They truly were mates, weren't they?

"He's waiting for you," Jennifer murmured.

Kyle nodded and swallowed. Since he'd already been here before, he led the way toward the house and up the porch steps. The house was large, but when Kyle was here last time, it had felt kind of empty. Dennis had explained that people had left when Kyle's father had decided to keep the pride prisoner in their own home. They wouldn't be coming back because they'd built new lives outside the pride, so the pride had more than enough space and would be able to welcome Kyle and his family.

Kyle didn't know if his grandfather and his siblings would want to live here, but Dennis did, and Kyle didn't want to be away from him. He wasn't ready to move into Dennis's room yet, but they could be close, and Kyle was looking forward to that.

“Hi,” Dennis said when Kyle reached him.

Kyle hesitated for a moment before deciding to kiss him. It was slightly awkward because it wasn't something Kyle was used to doing in front of his family, but Dennis wasn't just a guy. He was Kyle's mate.

The kiss was quick, but it helped Kyle feel steadier. Part of that was probably because Dennis took his hand and pulled him inside the house, telling Kyle he was there for him through his actions. They didn't know if Gal would allow Dennis to be in the office when he talked to Kyle and his family, but if he didn't mind, Dennis had already promised he wouldn't leave Kyle's side.

“You should know that someone found out you were going to be here today,” Dennis said in a tone that told Kyle something had happened.

He looked back at his family, then at Dennis again. “What does that mean?”

Dennis looked slightly exasperated but not worried or angry, which Kyle hoped was a good sign. He pulled Kyle inside, and Kyle understood right away what he'd meant.

Why were all these people crammed into the entrance of the house?

He looked at the pride members in front of him. He had no idea why they were there, but he prayed it wasn't to run him out of their territory.

Everyone started talking at the same time. Kyle took a step back, overwhelmed, but Dennis didn't let go. He waited as if he knew something was about to happen, and something did. A young man stepped forward. He had brown hair and brown eyes, and he was smiling.

The people behind the man quieted down as he stopped in front of Kyle. He watched

Kyle for a moment, his head cocked.

“You look like your father,” he said.

Kyle cringed. It wasn’t the first time he heard that. “Maybe, but I’m nothing like him.”

The man grinned and offered Kyle his hand. “I sure hope not. I’m Ellery.”

“Kyle, but I suspect you ready know that.”

“I do. The entire pride knows who you are and why you’re here, and a group of us wanted to welcome you and your family.”

Kyle frowned, not having expected that, since Ellery knew who his father was. After what Alpha Carter had put these people through, Kyle would have thought they wanted nothing to do with his son.

“We know you’re not your father,” another man said.

Kyle remembered seeing him the last time he was here. If he wasn’t mistaken, this was Simon, the alpha’s personal assistant. “That’s good, because I only met him a few times when I was a baby, and nothing I’ve heard about him since then has made me want to have a relationship with him.”

“That’s good, because I would have hesitated to do this if you did,” Gal said as he pushed forward. “Welcome to the pride.”

His people parted around him, allowing him to reach Kyle and his family. Kyle swallowed, knowing that this was it. Considering the circumstances, he didn’t think he and his family would be invited to Gal’s office. It looked like Gal had already

made his decision.

Kyle couldn't believe it. The pride had gathered here to welcome him and his family. Well, the entire pride probably wasn't there, but it still made Kyle want to cry.

No wolves would have done this. Kyle had never been welcomed in his old pack, and while his family had always lived there, they'd been pushed aside after he was born. They'd been guilty by association. Kyle had hated that, but he hadn't been able to do anything about it.

Now, he could. Well, Gal could.

Kyle's grandfather inclined his head to Gal, who laughed. "There's no reason for you to do that, and I don't want or expect you to," he said. "I don't know how things were done in your pack, but we're not that formal here. I don't expect you to call me alpha, either. Call me Gal or Galbraith."

Kyle's grandfather looked like he was about to cry, and since Kyle knew his grandpa wouldn't like everyone to see him like that, he decided to distract the crowd.

"We didn't expect a welcome committee," he said.

Gal smiled. "When they found out you were coming today, they all wanted to be here. This can be your home if you want. No one here cares that you're not all tiger shifters or who your father is. As long as you commit to the pride, this can be your home."

"Even though I tried taking the pride?"

Gal grinned, clearly not holding that against Kyle. "Old news. You didn't do it because you wanted to. You were trying to protect your family, and I can understand

that.” He gestured at the room and the people standing in it. “They’re my family, and I’d do everything to protect them. That’s why I’ll never hold that against you. We can forget it ever happened.”

Kyle was glad about that, but he was confused. “How can you forget about it? Any other alpha would have kicked me out of the house and the town. Instead, you’re taking me in. How can I be sure you won’t change your mind?” That was Kyle’s greatest fear.

What would happen if Gal decided he didn’t want him after all? Would Kyle’s family sacrifice their happiness again to follow him? Or would he be on his own this time? And what about Dennis?

Gal had wanted to meet Kyle and his family to ask them a few questions, but the opposite was true, too. Kyle needed to ask questions to be sure this was the right thing to do—for himself and for his family.

* * * *

Dennis wasn’t surprised to see that Kyle was hesitant. Anyone would be in his position. Kyle and his family were excited to become pride members, but at the same time, considering the experience they’d had with their pack, they didn’t understand why Gal was taking them in so easily.

Dennis squeezed Kyle’s hand. He didn’t think people had noticed they were holding hands, but they would eventually, because he wasn’t letting go.

Gal’s smile never vanished. He gestured at the family to follow him into the living room, and everyone in the entrance went after them. Dennis had been stunned when he’d come downstairs earlier to find that people were hard at work making food and setting things up so they could celebrate the new pride members. Gal had held

another pride meeting after talking to Kyle, so everyone knew Kyle and his family weren't dangerous and that Gal wanted them to become pride members. As far as Dennis knew, no one had argued with him that he shouldn't, but even if they had, Gal was the one making decisions. He could take in anyone he wanted.

And he'd chosen Kyle and his family.

Dennis wasn't one bit surprised to see his sister make a beeline for Jennifer. It only took a moment for Jennifer to relax, and seconds later, she was following Annabelle into the crowd. Christopher hovered by the wall, looking like he might bite anyone coming too close.

That left Kyle and his grandfather. Since Dennis wasn't letting go of Kyle, he followed them when they joined Gal. Gal arched a brow at him, and Dennis grinned.

"Do you have something to tell me?" Gal asked.

"I do. This is Kyle, my mate."

Gal blinked. "You couldn't have told me sooner? It would have saved me a few meetings I would've rather not have had."

So someone had gone to Gal to protest. Dennis grimaced. "Sorry. Who's been giving you a hard time about Kyle?"

Gal was still smiling, so Dennis knew he wasn't angry. "A few people didn't like me welcoming Alpha Carter's son into the pride. I believe they're afraid he might try to take over the pride, and considering how Kyle introduced himself, I understand."

"I can apologize however many times you need me to for doing that," Kyle offered.

“There’s no need for you to. There’s also no need for these people to be worried. I don’t expect you to attempt a takeover, but even if you did, I don’t think you’d be a bad alpha. From what I know about your father, he didn’t care about much beyond himself, while it’s clear you do. You love your family so much that you were ready to sacrifice your happiness for them. As far as I’m concerned, that makes you a good person. It’s one of the reasons I’m happy to take you in.”

“We don’t know how to thank you,” William said. “We realize you don’t have to do so, and we’re grateful.”

Gal waved a hand at Kyle and Dennis. “Clearly, I do have a reason to. I don’t actually have to welcome Kyle into the pride, because he’s already a pride member through Dennis, and you and your family are pride members through him.” His expression turned more serious. “I don’t want you to worry about anything. There might have been a few people worried about Kyle being his father’s son, but they won’t cause any problems. They might give you a wide berth for a while, but eventually, everyone will realize you’re nothing like your father. Besides, my pride members trust me. I’ve shown them again and again that they did the right thing by accepting me as their alpha, and that won’t change. I wouldn’t be allowing you and your family to become pride members if I wasn’t sure it’s the right thing to do.”

Dennis thought he was right. As he looked around, he could tell that everyone in the room was excited to welcome Kyle and his family to the pride. Those who were wary hadn’t come today, and a few people hadn’t been able to take time off work, but they wouldn’t cause problems. They trusted Gal as their alpha.

Well, most pride members did. Dennis noticed Kevin skulking in a corner, watching the crowd. He was surprised to see him there. Since Anne had been kicked out of the pride, Kevin had stayed out of sight, but most people still kept an eye on him. They didn’t trust him. Dennis certainly didn’t.

Maybe Kevin was curious about what was happening. Maybe he wanted to see Alpha Carter's son for himself. Dennis wasn't sure he could give Kevin a second chance until he showed he deserved one, but that didn't matter now.

Only Kyle did.

Gal lightly punched Dennis's shoulder. "I don't like that you didn't feel you could talk to me about Kyle being your mate."

Dennis shrugged. "After what Kyle did, I thought for sure that I'd have to choose between the pride and him. I also wasn't sure I wanted to get to know him initially."

Gal grimaced. "That couldn't have been easy. I'm sorry you felt that way, and I hope you know that you can come to me in the future."

"I don't believe I'll have a reason to, but I'll keep it in mind."

"Is this why you're welcoming us, then?" Kyle asked. "Because I'm Dennis's mate?"

"I didn't know you were until now, so no. That's not why," Gal said gently. "The pride gave me something I didn't suspect I wanted. I was only supposed to be here temporarily. I'm a bear shifter, and I used to work for the council. They sent me after what happened with Alpha Carter so I could get the pride back into shape and find a suitable alpha in the pride. There was no one, and after meeting my mate, I wanted to stay. Thankfully, the pride was okay with that, and I've been their alpha ever since. Things haven't been easy, and we're still fixing things, but we're getting there. We're missing a lot of people we won't be getting back, and the house is big. We could do with more pride members."

"And you decided that taking us in was a good idea."

“Once I knew the entire story, yes. I know how it feels not to have a place where you belong. I didn’t go through what you did, but that doesn’t mean I don’t understand rejection and not having a home. I hope the pride can be that for you. You didn’t have a place in your old pack, but you do have a place here as long as you’re not a danger to the pride.”

“I’m not,” Kyle quickly said.

Dennis wanted to kiss him, but he didn’t think Kyle would appreciate it at the moment. He understood why Kyle was still nervous. He didn’t want him to be. Gal had already welcomed Kyle and his family into the pride. Technically, Kyle was already a member through Dennis. It was official now, though. Kyle wasn’t going anywhere. The pride and Green Hill was his home.

This was everything Dennis could have wanted. He’d been terrified he’d have to choose between his home and his mate, but things had worked out, and he was happy. It was odd to feel that happy, actually. He’d known he’d feel like this, but considering how complicated things had been, he was relieved.

Kyle was his future, and he was here to stay.

Gal clasped Kyle’s shoulder. “Take as much time as you need to trust that you’re a pride member and that you’re welcome here. This is your home, Kyle. You can relax and stop worrying about your family.”

Kyle’s body sagged against Dennis. Dennis let go of his hand and wrapped an arm around his waist, ready to hold him up if he had to. It was as if all the tension had been released from Kyle’s body at once. He might not truly believe everything Gal had said yet, but he was ready to give Gal and the pride the benefit of the doubt, which was all Dennis needed. He could show Kyle that he and his family belonged here.

No matter how long it took Kyle to accept that the pride wanted him, Dennis would stand by him.

* * * *

Kyle wanted to believe Gal, but the only way for that to happen was time. Once he saw that the pride truly accepted him and his family, he'd be able to fully relax, but not until then.

As he looked around the room, he thought things would work out. He might be hesitant, but his family didn't seem to be. His sister was talking with a young woman who looked enough like Dennis that Kyle wouldn't be surprised to learn they were related. Grandpa was talking to two older women who were smiling at him like he hung the moon.

Christopher was against the wall, looking like he might bite the hand off anyone who tried coming close to him, but that hadn't deterred the gentle-looking man who was talking to him. He stood next to a young blond Nix, and considering the way the Nix looked at him, it was easy to see they were close. It was as if the Nix was there to protect the man with him, even though Christopher wasn't actually dangerous.

He might be hesitant, but he wanted this as much as everyone else in their family. They all wanted a place to call home, and hopefully, they'd found it.

"All right?" Dennis asked as Gal walked away.

"It's a lot," Kyle confessed. "I expected Gal to want to talk to us before making his decision, only to arrive here and realize he'd already taken us into the pride."

"I should have warned you, but by the time I realized what was happening, it was too late."

“It’s fine. It was just surprising, but in a good way.” Kyle looked around. “It’s good to see that my family’s happy. It’s all I ever wanted.”

Kyle had believed he’d taken every chance his family had of being happy when he’d been kicked out of the pack and they’d followed him, but he’d fixed it. This wasn’t the pack, but in some ways, Kyle felt it would be better. Here, he and his family would be accepted, and no one would look at them as if they shouldn’t be there. It didn’t matter that Kyle’s family were wolves. They belonged here just like every other pride member.

Dennis let go of Kyle to talk to someone, and Kyle glanced around. It would take time for him to get used to this. Even when he’d been a pack member, people had avoided him. Some of them believed he didn’t belong since he was a tiger, while others knew that Alpha Davis disliked him and didn’t want to be involved. Whatever the reason, the result was the same. Kyle had been ignored on the best of days, and he prayed things wouldn’t go the same way here. These people had organized a small party to welcome him and his family into the pride, which was more than Kyle could have ever expected.

He noticed a man at the edge of the gathering by the door. He looked angry as he stared at the people in the living room, and Kyle realized that maybe not everyone was happy to have him there. Gal had mentioned some people had something to say about it, but this guy looked pissed. Kyle wondered if he should go talk to him, but something told him it would be better to stay away.

Since Dennis was busy, Kyle decided it would be the perfect time to take a breather. He headed back to the front door, hoping no one would mind if he spent a little time on the porch. The door was still open, but he didn’t get a chance to step out. He saw the man he’d noticed in the living room quickly walking away, and while part of him knew he shouldn’t be spying on his new fellow pride members, he was curious, especially when he realized that the man was headed toward a woman hiding in the

bushes.

Kyle could barely see them from where he was. He hid by the door so they wouldn't notice him if they looked up, but unfortunately, he was too far to hear what they were saying. From the way the woman behaved, it was clear she wasn't supposed to be there. She kept glancing at the house, and she hadn't left the bushes yet.

The man gestured, but the woman kept shaking her head. Maybe Kyle could shift and sneak after them. They were probably tiger shifters, though, so they were bound to notice him.

"What are you doing here on your own?" Grandpa asked from behind Kyle.

Kyle turned. He didn't want to worry his grandfather, and he didn't have a reason to. He had no idea what was happening, but that didn't mean that whatever the people out there were doing was bad. It looked bad, but after what Kyle himself had done, he was ready to give people the benefit of the doubt.

"It was a lot," he confessed.

Grandpa came to stand next to him. When Kyle looked out again, he realized that the two who'd been talking were gone. He couldn't help but again wonder what they were up to and who they were. Should he inform Gal? It didn't feel important enough, and Kyle didn't want to start trouble, especially when there might not be a reason to.

"It is a bit overwhelming," Kyle's grandfather agreed. "I didn't expect them to welcome us like this. I thought they'd be more hesitant, but a few people told me they're happy to have us here."

"It's a massive change from the pack."

Grandpa chuckled. “That it is.” He paused. “I’m proud of you, and I know your mother would have been, too. I’m sorry we had to leave her behind.”

Kyle sucked in a breath and told himself not to cry. “It’s all right. We might have left her body behind, but she’ll always be in our hearts.”

“She would’ve been happy for you. She only ever wanted you to have a place to call home and a family, and she knew the pack wouldn’t be the place for you to have that. She didn’t have a choice, but she’d love to see how far you got. This might not be what you had in mind for your future, but it doesn’t mean it won’t be good.”

As far as Kyle was concerned, it already was. He’d even met his mate. He had no doubt that his mother would be happy for him.

“I’m glad you let go of your stupid plan and adapted,” Grandpa continued. “Frankly, I believe you wouldn’t be a good alpha, and I never thought you should be one. It was for the best that you didn’t obsess over it.”

Kyle snorted. “It would have been nice if you’d told me that before I made a fool of myself.”

“I feel things went the way they were supposed to go. I don’t know how Gal would have reacted if you hadn’t told him that you wanted the pride, but things turned out well. You shouldn’t regret what happened.”

“I don’t.” Kyle could never regret it because it had given him the pride and Dennis.

This might not be the future he’d imagined for himself and his family, but it was the future they’d have, and it was even better. The pack would never have accepted him, even if Alpha Davis hadn’t kicked him out. The pride, on the other hand, had welcomed him, and he could see himself growing old here.

“There you are,” Dennis said as he stepped onto the porch. “I’ve already had a few people ask me where you went, Kyle. They want to meet you.”

Kyle wasn’t sure he wanted to meet them. He knew he’d have to field many questions about his father, and he didn’t particularly want to.

But these people were his new family. If he had to talk about his father to be accepted, he would. He was sure that, eventually, people would come to see him as one of them and not a novelty. In the meantime, Kyle would carve himself a place in the pride with every conversation.

And into Dennis’s heart.

* * * *

Dennis could see how overwhelmed his mate was. If he’d had time to warn him about what he’d be walking into, he would have, but maybe it was better like this. Kyle needed to see that the pride was welcoming him, and he might have thought it was fake if he hadn’t been surprised. He definitely would have tried to convince the people here today not to celebrate having him as a new pride member, but Dennis believed everyone needed it.

Kyle and his family needed to feel welcome and wanted, while the pride members needed to feel that the pride was finally thriving. What better way than to welcome new people in? It meant the pride was expanding and was strong enough to support more people, which was what Gal had been working toward to.

Dennis stuck by his mate’s side as they went back inside to spend more time with the pride. Kyle’s family had scattered around the room, but Kyle seemed happy to lean against Dennis and stay close to him. They talked to pretty much everyone, or everyone who was there, anyway. Dennis’s mind spun with the possibilities and the

future he and Kyle would share. He'd been so afraid they wouldn't have the opportunity to do that, that he hadn't allowed himself to think about what would happen if they did.

Their future was only beginning. Thankfully, they didn't have to rush. They could take their time deciding what they wanted to do and how they wanted to be together.

But hopefully, not too much time.

Dennis kept an eye on Kyle, so he noticed when it became too much. The party had started in the afternoon, but when it was clear it would continue through the evening and night, Dennis pulled Kyle to the side. "We should take a break," he murmured.

Kyle looked around. "It feels like I should stick around."

"Maybe, but no one will be offended if you disappear for an hour or two."

This had gone from being a welcome party to being an occasion for the pride to relax and have fun together. They'd been through a lot through the years, and while Gal had been the alpha for a while now, everyone had still been on edge. Dennis could only speak for himself, but he kept expecting something to happen, like maybe for Alpha Carter to return. Every day that passed helped Dennis feel more secure, though, and he suspected the same went for a lot of people.

More and more pride members arrived as they got off work or decided to peek in. The living room was full to bursting, and the party had spilled over into the kitchen. Someone was cooking enough spaghetti for an army, and while Dennis's stomach growled at the smell, this was getting to be too much even for him.

"As long as you think it would be okay, I wouldn't mind taking a break," Kyle admitted.

That was all he needed to say. Dennis grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the living room, barely nodding at the people who tried stopping them. He didn't stop to talk to anyone because if he did, he and Kyle would never get out of there.

Once they were in the entrance, Dennis considered their options. They could go outside, which might be nice with the stars and everything, but people were streaming in and out of the house, so they wouldn't have any privacy, and Dennis doubted they'd be able to relax. Staying on the ground floor of the house was also out, which only left the upper floors.

Dennis hoped Kyle wouldn't take this the wrong way. "We should go upstairs to my room."

Kyle blinked. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

Dennis couldn't tell if he was joking or if he was serious, and he didn't want to risk it. "I don't want to push you into anything you're not ready for, but my room will be quiet and private. I can see the party's going to continue for a while, and I thought you'd want some silence, but we can stay downstairs if you're more comfortable."

Kyle shook his head. "Let's go to your room. You know, I wouldn't mind if you tried to seduce me."

Dennis's heart raced. That wasn't what he'd had in mind, but it didn't mean he wouldn't do it. He wanted to seduce Kyle. They hadn't done a lot until now because they hadn't had many opportunities. Kyle shared a room with his grandfather at the motel, and even when William was out, it would have felt disrespectful to use the room for that. Dennis didn't share a room with anyone, but he wouldn't have been allowed to bring Kyle in before. He hadn't been a pride member before, and most pride members would have been wary of him and might even have kicked him out if they'd found him there. Between who Kyle's father was and what Kyle had done

when he'd first arrived, Dennis wouldn't have blamed them.

But no one would kick Kyle out now. He was finally Dennis's, and Dennis was never letting go.

He was still holding Kyle's hand, so he pulled him toward the stairs. Kyle laughed, which made Dennis's heart stutter. Kyle had relaxed so much today that he felt almost like a different person. He probably didn't quite believe he was welcome here, but he would eventually, and seeing his family happy was enough to make him happy, too. In time, he'd feel more secure, but for now, Dennis was only interested in making sure Kyle knew he wasn't going anywhere.

It was too soon for them to bond. Dennis didn't feel ready, and he doubted Kyle did. He needed time to settle in with the pride, maybe find a job and start his new life. He'd need even more time to believe he wouldn't lose all of this.

Dennis could wait. He would wait.

They were both laughing by the time they reached Dennis's room. He dragged Kyle inside, slamming the door shut and locking it for good measure. Normally, people wouldn't just barge into a bedroom that wasn't theirs, but Dennis's sister was known not to wait more than a few seconds after she knocked when she wanted something.

Dennis looked at Kyle. He was glancing around, clearly curious about Dennis's personal space. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were wide with mirth and happiness. His hair was a little messed up, maybe because he'd run his hand through it. His body language told Dennis that he was feeling good, and Dennis wanted that to continue.

He prowled toward his mate. Kyle was examining a trinket on the bookshelf, but he quickly noticed Dennis and grinned at him.

“So you really were planning to seduce me.”

Dennis grabbed the bookshelves, caging Kyle in. “Is that a problem?”

Kyle’s smile as he shook his head was glorious. “I told you. I want you to seduce me.”

Dennis wasn’t sure he’d be able to seduce anyone if he was trying to, but he didn’t have to try with Kyle. They were mates, and as soon as he leaned down to kiss Kyle, he felt his mate’s body respond.

They couldn’t feel each other through the bond yet, but it still sang between them, tightening and pulling them closer every time they kissed. Eventually, they’d feel it was time for them to bond, but for now, Dennis enjoyed the anticipation and getting to know his mate.

But he wanted more.

He skimmed a hand down Kyle’s side, then around him. He grabbed Kyle’s ass, hauling him even closer, smiling against Kyle’s lips when he squeaked.

They had no idea what they were doing, but they didn’t need to know. Dennis was fine with letting their bodies make the decisions, so he went with the flow. He didn’t argue when Kyle grabbed his t-shirt, pulled it up, and dropped it to the floor. It was hot, anyway. He didn’t need a t-shirt.

What he did need was more skin-to-skin contact with Kyle. He’d had to let go of his mate to allow Kyle to strip him, and he couldn’t wait to get his hands back on Kyle’s body, but first, he needed to see more of it. He did the same thing Kyle had done seconds later, grabbing the bottom of his mate’s t-shirt and raising it up his body. He went slower, allowing his fingers to skim Kyle’s skin, grinning when Kyle shuddered

in what was hopefully pleasure.

Kyle raised his arms, and Dennis whipped off the t-shirt. He didn't want to trip on it, so he threw it behind himself before grabbing Kyle's hips. Their chests brushed together, then pressed against each other as they both leaned in for a kiss at the same time.

Kyle's skin was warm and sprinkled with hair. Dennis could feel it rubbing against his skin, and it made him want more. He wasn't about to haul Kyle over his shoulder and drag him to his bed, but it was a close thing.

The bookshelves rattled behind Kyle, telling Dennis this wasn't the best place to do this. He pulled Kyle away and toward the closest wall in case he needed something to lean against.

"What do you want?" he asked in a whisper.

"You," Kyle answered without hesitation.

That didn't help Dennis decide what his next step should be, but it was what he'd wanted to hear.

He buried his fingers in Kyle's hair and used the hold to tilt his mate's face for a kiss. Kyle groaned and pressed closer, but Dennis wasn't done. He could feel Kyle was hard in his jeans, and he was dying to see what Kyle was hiding inside the heavy fabric.

He dropped to his knees and looked up. Kyle had always been handsome, but with his red lips and blown pupils, he was the most gorgeous man Dennis had ever seen. Dennis couldn't believe how lucky he'd been that Kyle, of all people, was his mate. It hadn't felt like a good thing before, but now, he was sure it was. He couldn't have

asked for anyone better.

Dennis grinned and undid Kyle's jeans. Kyle sucked in a breath when Dennis let them drop down Kyle's legs. He was already reaching for Kyle's underwear. Without the jeans hindering him, he could see the heavy bulge of Kyle's hard cock. It made his mouth water.

He pulled down Kyle's underwear, too, hooking it under Kyle's butt. The movement made Kyle moan and tilt his hips toward Dennis, silently telling Dennis what he wanted.

Dennis wanted the same.

He wrapped his fingers around the base of Kyle's cock and leaned forward, closing his eyes for a moment as he inhaled his mate's scent. It swirled around him, heavy and going straight to Dennis's head, pushing him forward and making him want more. Thankfully, he would have it. They might not be bonding today, but that didn't mean they weren't both in this for the long term.

Very long term.

Dennis licked the head of Kyle's cock to get a taste. He hummed at the salty and slightly bitter taste he found there, and since he was eager for more, he wrapped his lips around the head. Kyle's hips punched forward, but Dennis had expected it, and he used his hands to keep Kyle in place as he started sucking.

He loved having Kyle writhing in front of him. He'd never been one to enjoy power dynamics or anything like that when he was in relationships, but having Kyle under his control was thrilling. Even more so, what made Dennis happy was that Kyle trusted him enough to allow him to do this. He would never have expected that before, but now, it made him happy.

“Take your cock out,” Kyle whispered.

Dennis hesitated. He didn't want to let go of his mate, but at the same time, he felt his dick might be about to explode in his jeans. It was so hard it hurt.

“I'm taking mine back if I don't see yours,” Kyle added.

That was all Dennis needed to spur him on. He kept Kyle's cock in his mouth, gently suckling as he opened his jeans. He fished his cock out, not as careful with his own body as he'd been with Kyle's. He didn't need to get rid of his jeans or anything like that. He just needed his cock out, and now, it was.

There was a glimmer of appreciation in the way Kyle stared that made Dennis feel ten feet tall. He puffed out his chest and grinned around Kyle's cock, causing him to laugh.

This was sex with his mate. It was hot and sexy but also happy and almost familiar. Dennis couldn't imagine how good it would be once they got to know each other's bodies.

“Touch yourself,” Kyle murmured.

Dennis was happy to oblige. He didn't pay too much attention to himself while he lavished Kyle's body with kisses, touches, and anything else he could think of. Just feeling Kyle, smelling him, and hearing the sounds he made, was enough. Dennis came close to coming embarrassingly fast, so he renewed his enthusiasm for Kyle's cock. He didn't think he would have to focus for long. Kyle had buried both of his hands in Dennis's hair and was pulling at it, pushing his hips forward in an attempt to get more.

Dennis had been put on this earth to give Kyle whatever he wanted, so he renewed

his efforts. He wanted Kyle to come.

He jacked himself off as he pushed Kyle to the edge of pleasure. When Kyle came, it was down Dennis's throat. The taste was more powerful than it had been earlier. It sent a thrill down Dennis's back.

Dennis moved his hand faster, able to focus on his own pleasure now. Having Kyle with him was a big part of it. He just had to look at his mate, and his body locked as he came.

Kyle was too beautiful for Dennis not to. His cheeks and chest were flushed, there was a shine of sweat on his body, and his eyes were wide with pleasure and affection. He still had his hands in Dennis's hair, but his touch had gentled. His body was relaxed, and after Dennis came, too, Kyle slid down the wall to join him on the floor.

They stared at each other, both of them panting as if they'd run a marathon. There was no trace of embarrassment in Kyle's expression, which was a relief.

"Do you think people noticed we're not downstairs anymore?" Kyle asked.

Dennis pulled him close to kiss him. "Even if they did, I don't care."

"They might come looking for us."

"They can pound on my door the entire night. I. Don't. Care."

Kyle stared at Dennis for a moment, and Dennis wondered what he was thinking. He didn't have to wonder for long.

"We're going to make it, aren't we?" Kyle asked in a soft voice as if he was afraid to say the words out loud.

He shouldn't be so adorable. He was a grown man, and so was Dennis, but seeing his mate like this made him want to twirl Kyle around the room and sing in happiness, to act silly in a way he couldn't with other people.

"We are," he promised.

He had no doubt that their relationship would be the most complicated and the hardest relationship he'd ever had, but it would also be the most rewarding and loving. It would be worth all the work he had to put into it.

He couldn't wait.

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“Here’s your last box,” Kyle said as he hauled the box into Jennifer’s room.

“I’m glad it’s over,” she said as he flopped onto her new bed. It was already made with her favorite blanket thrown on top. Their mom had knit it, and it made the room look like Jennifer belonged in it.

Kyle looked around. The room was nice, maybe even nicer than the one she’d had in their house in pack territory. That house had belonged to their family, but this one didn’t.

They were moving into the pride house. Kyle and his family had talked, and it felt like the best thing to do. That way they wouldn’t have to look for a house to rent, especially when Christopher and Jennifer might eventually decide they wanted to live on their own. They were young, but they were adults, and they could make that kind of decision, even though it terrified Kyle.

They’d always be Kyle’s baby siblings, especially Jennifer. Christopher was older than her by several years, so Kyle had been younger when he’d been born, but he was old enough to be Jennifer’s father if he’d had a kid as a teenager. He’d taken care of her a lot growing up. Back at the pack, he used to spend most of his time with his family, since the pack had never accepted him.

But it was time to let go.

Jennifer was a young woman now, and she was ready to spread her wings. She’d become instant best friends with Dennis’s sister, and the two of them were always getting into trouble. Kyle couldn’t complain about that. He’d wanted his sister to find

a place where she could belong, and she had.

She was having much less trouble than the rest of their family to settle in. Between her friendship with Dennis's sister and her youth, it felt like she'd always lived here. Christopher, on the other hand, was still wary of the pride and kept everyone at a distance except for his family. He accepted help when he needed it, and he was moving into one of the rooms, too, but Kyle wouldn't be surprised if he eventually decided to move out. It would take him time to trust the pride, but hopefully, he would eventually.

"Everything all right in here?" Grandpa asked as he knocked on the open door of the bedroom.

Jennifer beamed at him. "It was the last box, so I'm all moved in."

Grandpa's smile was gentle. "That's good."

"What about you?" Kyle asked. "Do you need any more help?"

"I've had plenty, so don't worry. I'll unpack later. Where are your brother and your mate?"

"Christopher's grabbing more stuff from the car, but I don't know about Dennis. I'm sure he'll find me."

He'd taken a day off from the bakery to help Kyle and his family move in, so Kyle knew he had to be around here somewhere. Probably in the kitchen. Dennis seemed to love his time there more than Kyle would have expected considering he spent most of his days at the bakery. Dennis had mentioned something about not being allowed to cook and bake in the pride house kitchen until recently, which was confusing, but it was probably the reason he kept on baking and cooking stuff for the pride.

It would take some time to get used to. When they'd lived with the pack, they'd had their own home, and they didn't have to deal with most pack members on a regular basis. They'd met for pack runs, but even there, everyone gave Kyle a wide berth. Sometimes he'd wondered if it was because he was a tiger shifter or because they thought he might tear them down as they ran. His tiger form was almost twice as big as the wolves, so of course they'd be afraid. If they'd known Kyle, though, they'd have known he would never hurt them.

That was never what Kyle wanted. All of his life, he'd dreamed of being a true member of the pack and being happy. That dream had been broken after Alpha Davis had kicked him out, and he'd thought he would never have all of that. He couldn't have known that leaving the pack would only be the first step toward his new life.

A life he desperately wanted now.

"If you don't need anything else, I'll go back to get my stuff," he told Jennifer.

She waved him away, her gaze firmly on her phone. He wouldn't get anything else out of her, so he left her to it.

His grandfather followed him into the hallway. Grandpa was always checking in on Kyle, which was sweet but unnecessary. Kyle knew it would be useless to point that out, though. Grandpa viewed himself as the only parent Kyle and his siblings still had, and in a way, he was. Kyle had lost his mother, and he'd never had a father. He hoped he wouldn't lose his grandfather for years to come.

"Everything all right?" Grandpa asked.

"Everything's perfect," Kyle reassured him.

"Are you sure? I know you were hesitant to move into the pride house."

Kyle had been. He hadn't known if it was the right thing to do for himself, and he'd taken a few days to think things over. He'd already known that whatever he decided, his family would follow, even though it had been clear that Jennifer and Grandpa wanted to move in. Christopher was more of a mystery, but he was here, too.

In the end, it had been easy for Kyle to choose to move into the pride house. It was what his family wanted, and it was where Dennis was. They weren't living in the same room yet, but eventually, they would.

"It's a bit odd to live with so many people, but I'll get used to it," Kyle told his grandfather.

"It is odd," Grandpa agreed. "It's also made me realize that even though we were part of the pack, we were never truly pack members. They never accepted us."

"Not me, anyway. I'm sure that if you'd put distance between us, they would have welcomed you back with open arms."

Grandpa glared. "And why would I have wanted that? I wasn't going to abandon my grandson just because he could turn into a big cat. And for people who demanded that of me? I'd rather lose them."

Grandpa always teased Kyle about being a big kitty cat, and even though Kyle grumbled when he did, he loved it. His grandfather didn't give a shit what kind of animal Kyle could turn into. He loved Kyle for who he was, not for what he was.

That was how things should have been with the pack, too. Kyle had seen how the pride members treated his family, and it wasn't any different than the way they treated each other. They didn't care that Kyle's family turned into wolves.

The pride was an odd mix. Most members were tigers, but since Gal had arrived, more people had been pulled in. Gal and his beta were bear shifters, but that wasn't

where things stopped. Kyle hadn't met everyone yet, but Dennis had told him about Billy, who was a fainting goat shifter, and about a couple of deer shifters. Here, Kyle wasn't the exception.

He headed back to his car to grab the last few things in the trunk, but he stopped as soon as he reached the porch. A massive tiger was stretched out in the almost empty trunk, looking smug and satisfied even though his tail and legs hung out. Kyle didn't have to ask to know who it was.

He quickly climbed down the stairs and leaned into the trunk to poke at Dennis's side. "What do you think you're doing? You're supposed to help me get my stuff into the house."

Dennis yawned. He didn't seem interested in what he was supposed to do. Kyle didn't know what was going on, but when Dennis batted at his finger, he realized what his mate wanted.

Here, no one would care if Kyle shifted. He'd avoided shifting as much as he could when he'd been with the pack because he hadn't wanted the wolves to see his tiger form, but he didn't have to hide it here. No one would care. Hell, it would be nothing new since there were tiger shifters all over the place.

With a grin, Kyle pulled off his t-shirt. Dennis cocked his big furry head and scrambled to get into a sitting position, maybe to watch Kyle. Kyle didn't slow down to give him a show, though. He was more interested in playing, so as soon as he was free of his clothes, he shifted.

Dennis barely waited until the shift was over to pounce. He jumped out of the car and straight onto Kyle's body. Kyle flipped back, growling as they landed. He bit Dennis's shoulder, making sure his teeth didn't break the skin. Dennis didn't seem to care. He rolled, trying to get him more firmly under him. Since Kyle couldn't allow that to happen, he rolled them again, ending up on top of Dennis. Dennis gave him a

wide, toothy grin.

Kyle did the same.

This was his life now. He was a Green Hill pride member, and he had a mate.

Alpha Davis kicking him out of the pack was the best thing that had ever happened to him.