



Me and My Christmas Familiar (An MM Monster Christmas)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: What happens when a witch's familiar turns out to be more than just an innocent kitty?

When Lachlan, a shy hearth witch, adopts a stray cat from the streets, the cat becomes his cherished companion and familiar. Lachlan couldn't be happier—until one snowy night when everything changes.

Kit loves his witch. After all, Lachlan saved him, keeps him fed and warm, and gives him the best pats. The thing is Kit isn't just a cat. He's a shifter who's just forgotten how to shift. But then one night, desperate to express his feelings to Lachlan, Kit returns to his human form. Unfortunately, Lachlan doesn't react how Kit expects. Now Lachlan avoids Kit. He won't pat, cuddle, or tell Kit he loves him. Kit should have just stayed a cat! Everything was wonderful then.

How can Kit show Lachlan he is the same, regardless of his form? Can he win back Lachlan's affection? Or will Kit be a familiar without his witch this Christmas?

Total Pages (Source): 23

CHAPTER 1

The cat shoved his nose into the corners and crevices of the dark alley, sniffing and seeking out food. His stomach growled. It had been growling for days.

How long since he had caught something fresh? How long since he had sunk his teeth into anything other than the rotten and discarded scraps he'd found amongst the debris that littered the freezing alleys and lanes?

The cat paused, nosing at the freshly fallen snow. His nostrils twitched as he picked up the scent of rats. But the scent was old. It had been days since the rats had come this way. His stomach gurgled as hunger ate at him.

The cat continued, prowling and searching, trying to pick up the scent of something. Of a bird, a mouse, a rat, a bug, anything!

In the summer, he slept lazily on warm rooftops. Prey seemed to be around every corner, ready to be stalked, snatched up, and swallowed down.

But at this time of year, with the days growing colder and longer, and the snow beginning to fall, the opportunity of finding anything to hunt in the city diminished. It was as if all prey had disappeared with the warm sun.

Flakes drifted down from the dark sky and clung to his fur as the wind whistled down the alley. He hunched in on himself, trying to protect himself from the cold. He longed to find some nook to hide in and escape. But his aching hunger forced him onwards.

He needed to eat. Soon. So he continued as the snow grew heavier and thicker. It soaked into his fur. The cat trembled. He'd been hunting all night with no luck.

A pile of rubbish stood along a brick wall. He nosed at the rubble, scenting fish. Pawing through the trash, he found bones amidst the heap. He snapped at them, chewing and crunching, trying to get the little flesh that clung to the bones.

A door squeaked open. Light poured into the alley. The cat ducked behind the trash, gaze fixing on the open door.

A slender figure stood, bathed in the warm light from the building.

Surprisingly, the cat felt a sudden urge to dart forward into the room, as if it called to him, offering him warmth, safety, and protection. But that was absurd. Even if the room was as warm as it looked, it would be madness to enter a human dwelling.

"Hey there, kitty," the man said softly. He wore a long dark robe. "I saw you from the window. You looking for food?"

The cat's ears perked up. The man took a step into the alley.

Despite his eagerness for food, the cat shrank back, half turning, prepared to sprint into the darkness and disappear.

The man froze. "I won't hurt you. I promise. I have food." The man held out his arm, opening his palm. "It's chicken."

The cat's mouth watered. Chicken.

When was the last time I ate chicken?

The urge to spring forward coiled in his muscles. But he held still. He knew better than to trust so easily.

Memories flickered, sweeping brooms, boots kicking, pebbles pegging into fur. Blood, pain, and fear.

The cat had to be careful. Always careful. Always watchful. Always ready to run.

The human stepped forward.

The cat did not move an inch, but he stood poised, ready to escape at any sudden movements. The man placed the chicken in the middle of the alley. He stepped back towards the door. His gaze remained on the cat.

Was this a trick? A trap?

They stared at each other. Neither moving.

His stomach ached with longing. After several moments, unable to hold himself still any longer, the cat darted forward and began to chew at the chicken. He gobbled the delicious meat down as quickly as he could in case the man tried something.

“You really are hungry,” the man said.

The cat was always hungry.

“It’s yummy though, isn’t it?”

The chicken tasted divine. Better than anything he’d had in months.

“I’m Lachlan,” the man said, but he didn’t approach the cat, as if knowing any

movement would cause the cat to flee. “I work here in the bakery with my siblings. I’ve got nine of them. It gets pretty loud and chaotic during the day in here, especially with the customers. But right now, it’s just me and it is peaceful.” He smiled.

The cat half listened as he ate. He kept his eyes darting over at the man, ensuring the man stayed where he was.

The man squatted. The cat tensed, gaze fixed on the man’s legs and feet. But the man did not move any more. Another memory flitted through the cat’s mind.

I had legs before. Like this man. I walked on two legs. I had no fur either.

And I had a name too. What was my name?

The cat couldn’t remember. He’d forgotten. He’d forgotten so much. It had been a long time since he’d heard his name that his parents had given him. They’d been furless too and walked on two legs.

Or had they?

The cat considered. He thought they walked on two legs. But as he thought, he seemed to remember they only walked on two legs sometimes. And sometimes they walked on four. Sometimes they had fur. Sometimes not. Sometimes they’d been humans. Sometimes they’d been cats.

The cat tried to think that through whilst scarfing down the chicken.

After a moment, he shoved those confusing thoughts away.

None of that matters now.

That was all long ago, in the before. Before the streets. Before the alleys. Before all the people.

Before, he'd lived amongst trees. And in the long before, he'd lived somewhere else, near fields of crops and in a big wooden building with his parents.

"You don't look so good, kitty." Lachlan eyes ran along the cat's form. "What happened to your tail?"

The cat tensed. A dog had chased him. He'd scampered, legs working as hard as they could as the dog's mouth snapped and gripped. Pain tore through him as half his tail had been ripped from his body. There'd been blood. So much blood.

He'd hid for days, licking at the wounded remains of his tail until hunger had forced him out again.

"You poor thing," Lachlan spoke softly, gently, as if he could hear the cat's thoughts. "And you're missing part of your ear too." His eyes held notes of sadness and concern. "I could look after you...if you wanted."

The cat paused. What did the man mean? That Lachlan would give him more chicken? He liked that idea.

The cat finished the food. He paused, staring at the man. The man seemed kind.

He wondered how far that kindness extended. A strange tug grew inside him. He didn't want to leave the man. He wanted to go to him. He wanted to enter the building and be warm.

But no. The cat should not trust so easily. Whatever urges he felt, they must be ignored. The cat began to slink away.

But maybe he'd come back tomorrow. Then he'd find out if the man's kindness lasted more than one day. He darted into the shadows.

"Bye, kitty," Lachlan called out.

CHAPTER 2

Lachlan's brother, Jack, snored in the bed opposite him. The room lay in darkness. No rays of sunlight filtered through the drawn curtains. It would be hours before the sun rose. Still, Lachlan stood and began his day in the dark.

Silently, he dressed and left the room he shared with Jack. He made his way to the front door. He pulled on his robes and pointed hat, left the apartment, and climbed down the rickety stairs to their bakery below.

Whilst many considered a witch's hat and robes old-fashioned and more appropriate for witches two generations older than himself, he felt they suited him. He liked to think of himself as an old-fashioned witch, even if some gave him odd looks. He paused halfway down the stairs and rested his hand on the cool railing. He glanced around the empty alley.

No movement or sign of the cat. Not yet, anyway. But it was still very early. The cat had been returning the past few days. The brief moments with the kitty had quickly become the highlight of Lachlan's day.

Lachlan walked down the rest of the stairs and moved towards the bakery door. He didn't bother reaching for the handle. The door swung open, welcoming him.

"Thank you." Lachlan stepped in, and the door closed behind him. The lanterns flickered and burst into life.

He smiled at the kitchen, sending out his feelings of gratitude to the space. He

removed his hat and hung it from the hooks by the door. But the air in the bakery felt too cool to remove his robes just yet.

He placed some wood within the stove and filled the kettle. The stove lit as he set the kettle down. As he passed the window, he glanced out. Still dark. Still no sign of the cat. Waiting for the kettle to heat, he turned to the altar.

The black beeswax candle sparked into flame with a thought. He picked up the stick of cedar incense and placed the tip over the golden flame. It caught fire, and he gave it a wave before placing it in the incense holder filled with dirt. The smoke slithered into the air. He grabbed a pinch of the mix of salt, flour, and spices from a pouch on the counter and sprinkled it around the altar.

Lachlan placed his hands together, over his heart, and bowed his head. “My hearth, my home, my heart.” He focused on his intentions for the bakery for the day, to provide and nourish those who visited them and ate their food.

As a hearth and kitchen witch, this space was his family’s responsibility. And he took that responsibility seriously. And whilst his siblings all were hearth and kitchen witches, none had Lachlan’s affinity for this domain. It was why he rose first to prepare the bakery. Because when he did, everything that day ran smoother.

The kitchen adored him, and Lachlan adored the kitchen; that was where he felt most comfortable. Lachlan enjoyed preparing the bakery for the day. It gave him time to think and be at peace. And peace was a luxury with nine siblings who all worked and lived together. Except for Ordellia, his eldest sister. She lived with her husband and kids.

Turning away from the altar, he reached out his hand. The broom flew across the floor and into it. He hummed as he swept.

Not that the bakery needed sweeping. One of his siblings would have cleaned and closed the bakery the evening before. But sweeping was part of the ritual of preparing the bakery. As he swept, he dwelt on the feelings of safety and comfort that he wanted their patrons to experience that day.

The kettle whistled. He brewed himself a cup of tea made of peppermint, blackberry, and strawberry leaves. He glanced out the window.

Snowflakes drifted past. Still no kitty. He continued with his morning routine, focusing on the magic and the power that existed in these simple rituals. He set up the oven, then placed the cauldron on the stove, adding sprigs of pine, cinnamon sticks, orange slices, whole cloves, and aniseed to the water. He brought it to a simmer.

“Bless this space and all the work it does. We are grateful for your hard work.” He stirred the ingredients of the simmer pot clockwise, three times with his wooden spoon.

It was less than two weeks until December 1, the official start of the Christmas season. A very busy time for the family. Not only would they run the bakery, but they also ran a stall at the Christmas markets.

Normally, Lachlan finished reasonably early during the year. But Christmas would be different. The siblings would split their time working here and at the markets. Although, he tended to just work longer hours in the bakery. Since his powers were strongest within this space, he was best utilised here.

Walking to the window, he glanced out.

Lachlan grinned. The cat stood in the alley, staring up at him, waiting.

He headed for the back door and picked up the dried fish he’d bought the day before

for this purpose. The back door swung open for him.

Lachlan did not need to worry about the stove or oven. They would look after themselves whilst he was away. His powers ensured pots didn't boil over, bread never burned, and his cookies always came out perfect from the oven.

"Hello, kitty. You're back," Lachlan said.

The cat stared at him a moment. But unlike the first day, he came forward and paused a step away. Lachlan squatted and placed the smoked fish down. The cat set upon it, sharp teeth digging into the dried fish flesh as he tore it apart. His half tail swayed from side to side. The poor cat also missed half an ear and there were chunks of fur missing from his black pelt.

Lachlan's lungs squeezed. What had this poor kitty suffered?

He wanted to pick the cat up, stroke him, coo over him, take him inside, place him by the warm oven, and feed him. But Lachlan doubted the cat would appreciate that. Lachlan would probably end up with a face full of scratches.

The cat kept his wary green gaze fixed on Lachlan as he ate. But maybe in time, the cat might grow to trust him. Maybe he could be Lachlan's pet.

Or his familiar. A familiar, a companion that would strengthen his powers but, more importantly, would keep him company. Lachlan licked his lips. It would be so wonderful to have a companion, someone to share these mornings with.

It was a strange thing, to feel so lonely whilst being surrounded by so many. But sometimes he just felt forgotten in the chaos of his family. Lachlan, being more withdrawn and shyer than his siblings, tended to be lost amongst them.

Lachlan swallowed. Still, he knew his siblings loved him. He just got overlooked sometimes.

The cat's green eyes stared at him. This cat didn't overlook him. He came every day to see Lachlan.

Lachlan shook his head. But of course he did. Lachlan fed him.

Still, somehow Lachlan felt seen by the cat. This sad-looking cat, with no owner or anyone to care for him, who snuck around dark streets in the middle of the night.

"Have you been overlooked as well?" Lachlan paused. "I'd look after you if you let me. I'll feed you and keep you safe and warm."

Just the idea of having the cat in his space, bundled up on his lap as he stroked his fur, filled his chest with warmth.

And then one day, to maybe become his familiar...

Lachlan's heart stuttered at the thought. But it was too soon to think of that, especially when the cat still clearly had misgivings about him.

The cat kept eating, but he watched Lachlan as if he listened and understood what Lachlan said.

"Do you think I could pat you?" Lachlan held out his hand.

The cat stared at it. But he didn't move away.

Slowly, mindful of the cat's response, Lachlan patted the dark fur. The cat tensed beneath his palm but kept eating as Lachlan stroked.

“See, I won’t hurt you,” Lachlan whispered. He could feel the spine of the cat. He was far too thin. “I really would look after you. I’d take good care of you. I promise.”

The cat finished eating and sat back on his heels as if considering Lachlan’s words. Lachlan dropped his hand, holding his breath.

For several moments, they stared at each other. Then the cat turned and sauntered off.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Lachlan said, hoping the words would be true.

I guess that’s a no.

The cat looked back and paused. Then he darted off.

CHAPTER 3

The cat sat back on his heels as Lachlan rushed down the stairs from the apartment.

“Hey, kitty!” Lachlan called out. “You’re early today.” The man wore his black pointed hat and robes. “I have your food inside the bakery. I’ll go get it for you.”

As the man approached the door to the bakery, it swung open, and he stepped inside. Abruptly, the room filled with light.

That seemed odd to the cat, but he couldn’t place his finger on why.

Lachlan turned and paused in the doorway as he removed his hat and hung it by the door. He hesitated. “If you wanted, you could come in. No one is here yet. I can give you food, and I’ll start the fire so it’s toasty warm.”

The cat stared into the bakery.

Over the past few days, he’d come to believe the man would not hurt him. Still, to come into this human room...

“You’ll be safe,” Lachlan said. “I promise.”

All Lachlan’s actions had shown the cat how kind and caring the man was. And still, the cat felt that strange pull, that deep-down instinct that told him coming inside meant warmth and security.

Making a decision, the cat prowled towards the door.

A bright smile lit up Lachlan's face. He turned away and was back a second later, putting food just inside the doorway.

The cat sniffed at the strips of dried meat before gobbling them down. His stomach had ceased to ache in the days since Lachlan had begun feeding him.

Whilst he ate, the cat eyed the bakery. He could spot no sign of any obvious danger or threat.

Lachlan knelt. He stroked along the cat's back. The cat arched into the touch. He purred. No one had ever patted the cat before. And Lachlan had such a nice touch. He knew just where to pat and stroke and scratch. And he gave off such delicious warmth. The cat wanted to curl up with the man and steal his warmth.

Then Lachlan stood, taking his pats and warmth with him. "I'll start the stove, and I'll put out some more food."

A moment later, Lachlan set down a plate with some fish on the wooden floor nearer the stove.

The cat glanced out into the dark cold. He suppressed a shiver. After a second, he decided against going back out there. He stepped further into the bakery towards the food, gaze darting around.

"See. It is not so scary, is it, kitty?" Lachlan's cheeks stretched with the intensity of his smile. He laughed. "I should probably call you something other than kitty if you're going to be visiting our kitchen."

The cat began to eat the fish.

“I should give you a proper name.”

Pausing to eat, the cat glanced up at Lachlan. A name? The man wanted to give him a name. He chewed as he thought. He supposed since he'd forgotten the name his parents gave him, it would make sense to get a new one.

And it was nice to have a name. Having a name meant someone was around to use it and talk to him.

“How about Kit the kitty?” Lachlan laughed again. “I’m sorry. I know it isn’t original. I’m not really good at coming up with names. But you think you’d like that, Kit?”

Kit. He considered it, staring up at Lachlan. Why not? He resumed eating.

“I’ll take that as assent. All right. We’ll go with Kit.” Lachlan seemed pleased as he patted him again. “Kit suits you,” he said, voice soft.

Kit. He decided he liked the name.

Lachlan began to move around the stove, and soon it gave off warmth.

Had Kit lived in a place like this once? He remembered a kitchen and a stove. He remembered fire. And he remembered the sounds of his parents’ voices as they spoke.

Lachlan brought Kit more food when he finished the fish, along with more pats. He ran his hands over Kit’s back and head, scratching that delicious spot on the back of his neck.

Soon the warmth of the kitchen, his full belly, and the gentle pats lulled him. He lay

out on the floor, close to the stove, watching Lachlan.

“I’m a hearth and kitchen witch.” Lachlan added bits of greenery and dried things to a cauldron on the stove. “I’m considered to be very talented. That’s why I start work before everyone else, to prepare the bakery for the day.”

A hearth and kitchen witch.

Kit didn’t think he’d ever heard of such a thing. But the world was big, and there was much he didn’t know. And there was so much he’d forgotten.

But Kit thought he must like hearth and kitchen witches if they were like Lachlan.

“I live and work with my siblings. We live upstairs.” Lachlan stirred the cauldron. “Our apartment is pretty basic. We share rooms. We all get along most of the time.” He smiled at Kit, a nice smile. “Working down here in the early mornings is the only time I ever get peace and quiet.” He paused. “Although, I’m not entirely alone anymore since you started visiting.”

Then Lachlan reached down to pat Kit. Kit closed his eyes, purring.

“You could stay with me if you wanted.”

Kit opened his eyes.

Lachlan’s hazel eyes stared down at him. “I could look after you. You could be my pet. I’d feed you, keep you warm, keep you safe. I’d like to have you as my pet. I promise I’ll be good to you. And it would be nice to not be alone.”

That did sound nice. That all sounded nice. And Lachlan really was nice. Kit pressed his face into Lachlan’s hand.

A pet. Lachlan's pet.

No more cold streets. No more empty bellies. No more pain or fear. No more loneliness. They'd be together.

A noise sounded in the street outside. Kit jumped to his feet, gaze flinging around wildly. He looked to the door, which filled with two shadows.

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CHAPTER 4

“Hey! A cat!” one of the men yelled. “It’s the cat you were telling us about, Lachy!”

“He looks a little sickly.” The other man, an exact replica of the first, frowned. “Where’s the rest of his tail?” He stepped into the bakery, big black boots thudding towards Kit.

Blood pumping, Kit sprinted. He darted, dodging table legs as he made for the back.

“Kit!” Lachlan cried out. “They’re just my brothers. They won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Still, he kept going. He fled out into the alley, instinct pushing him onwards and away from the bakery.

But Kit didn’t go far. He paused at the end of the alley and turned back. There he saw Lachlan, searching around the bakery.

He’s looking for me .

Kit’s heart pounded. He didn’t want to leave Lachlan. Kit liked him. And he liked the warmth of the bakery.

He’d only had it for one morning, but he liked lying on the floor, listening to Lachlan talk whilst being patted intermittently.

And the words Lachlan called out echoed through his mind.

Brothers. They won't hurt you.

Could it be true?

Kit kept watching Lachlan as he searched for him. But eventually, the man gave up and walked back into the bakery, body sagging.

Could Kit trust Lachlan's words?

For the rest of the day, Kit hid in the alley, tucked away behind some empty, dilapidated barrels. He watched as people came and went. He saw the two identical brothers. He saw a pixie.

At one point, he glanced up. A gargoyle perched on the rooftop, gazing down. Snow rested on his shoulders, head, and wings. Kit had seen the gargoyle a few times. Although he'd often seen him in different places or slightly different positions, Kit had never seen him actually move.

Kit turned his gaze back to the bakery door, watching people come and go. Then, finally, Lachlan appeared, exiting the bakery. He hunched his shoulders, head down as he walked. No one was with him.

Kit hesitated and then stepped forward. "Meow."

Lachlan's head snapped up. He ran to Kit, his shoulders relaxing, and the worry on his face melted away as he smiled. "Oh, Kit! I thought you'd run away for good." He knelt in the snow. He let out a laugh and patted Kit, running his hands all over Kit's body.

Guilt ate at Kit. He'd not meant to hurt the human. He'd just been wary.

“My brothers would never hurt you. None of my siblings would. They are loud, and they can be chaotic. But they would never hurt you,” Lachlan said.

Kit stared into the earnest hazel eyes. He believed Lachlan. He did.

And in that moment, Kit decided to trust that Lachlan would protect him from harm.

Kit climbed into Lachlan’s lap.

Lachlan made a choked noise. He stayed frozen for several seconds, then he wrapped his arms around Kit. “Does this mean you want to be my pet?”

Kit rubbed his face against Lachlan’s chest.

“You’re so cold.” Lachlan rose, carrying Kit. “Would you like to come upstairs with me? We’ll get you nice and cosy?” Lachlan climbed the stairs. “Everyone else is still working, but I’m finished for the day, since I start the earliest.” After Lachlan opened the door, they stepped into the apartment.

Kit’s eyes darted around the dark room, but they continued to another door.

“You can sleep in my bed.” Lachlan opened the door. “It’s probably too early to sleep. But a little nap might be nice, all cuddled up.” A small room lay beyond. It held two beds, a cupboard, and a small table. “This is mine and Jack’s room. And this is my bed, which means it is your bed now.” Lachlan placed Kit down on it. Lachlan took off his robe and hat and placed them at the end of the mattress. Then he took off his shoes.

Kit jumped off the bed and prowled the room, smelling and examining the carpet, the cupboard, the other bed, and all the nooks and crannies. He could hear no noise in the apartment. Lachlan sat down on the bed, watching Kit.

After a few moments, Lachlan pulled down the sheets and lay down. “If you come here, I can pat you.”

Kit spent a few more minutes surveying the room. Then he pounced onto the bed.

Lachlan slid his hand along Kit’s fur. “And to think it was just two weeks ago when you began visiting me. And now you’re my pet!”

Kit purred and curled in close to Lachlan, relishing the feel of the heat that came from the man’s body.

“Jack will probably go out after work or hang out in the main room. He usually only comes in to sleep. And he would never hurt you!”

Kit closed his eyes, as the warmth of the room chased away the remaining cold from his bones.

I’m safe. I’m Lachlan’s pet. Lachlan is my human. He will look after me.

He must have fallen asleep, because at some point, he awoke. The door creaked open. A man stood in the doorway, carrying a lantern. Kit had seen him earlier in the day, entering and leaving the bakery. He glanced at Kit.

Kit tensed.

“It’s all right,” Lachlan murmured, stroking Kit’s back, not even opening his eyes. “It’s just Jack.”

“I see you got yourself a pet, Lachy.” Jack chuckled and placed the lantern down on the cupboard. Then he opened his coat.

Kit perked up. An iguana had been tucked away in Jack's clothes. Murmuring soft words to the iguana, Jack placed her on a shelf above his bed. Then he got undressed and lay down in the other bed, turning off the lantern.

Kit stared at Jack in the darkness for several moments. He stared up at the large iguana. Finally, deciding all was safe, Kit closed his eyes and snuggled close to Lachlan.

CHAPTER 5

“Lachlan, can you serve?” Casimir, Lachlan’s adopted brother, flew through the bakery, wings fluttering as he exited through the back door. Today, Cas dressed in a red velvet outfit, with accents of shimmering gold. He was the self-proclaimed Christmas pixie, and as always, he was breathtakingly stunning. “I’ve just got to take care of something.”

“Of course.” Lachlan wiped his hands on his apron as he stepped back from the table where he mixed a bowl of cookie ingredients.

Kit lay curled on a cushion beneath the table. He blinked his eyes open, stretching and gazing up at Lachlan as he rolled onto his back, clearly wanting pats.

“I can’t right now,” Lachlan said. “I have to serve.”

Kit mewed pitifully, and Lachlan chuckled as he walked away. “I’ll be right back. I promise. Then I’ll pat you.”

Kit had been with him a little over a week now. His cat seemed more and more content with Lachlan and their life together. His siblings’ noisiness no longer caused Kit to startle or tense. And Kit had even put a bit more flesh on his bones.

They spent all their time together. Kit worked with Lachlan. He slept with Lachlan. And when Lachlan went out, Kit stayed tucked in the front of his robes, purring contentedly.

Having Kit in his life put a spring in Lachlan's step. It felt like they were made for each other. With Kit, everything just felt fuller, brighter, and less lonely.

Lachlan came around the large table separating the front and back areas.

"Good afternoon. What can I get you?" Lachlan asked the elf customer perusing the cookies behind the glass.

He pointed. "I'll take three of these cookies, thanks."

Lachlan completed the elf's order, and the bell above the door tinkled as the elf left.

They'd be closing for the day soon, but a few patrons sat, enjoying their baked goods, hot chocolate, coffee, or tea, in the front area. A decked-out Christmas tree stood in one corner. Garlands and baubles hung from the ceiling. Cas, the Christmas pixie, of course had been in charge of the decorating.

Lachlan let out a breath and pressed his hands to the counter as he looked over the patrons.

May you be at peace. May you find nourishment in this safe place.

Lachlan wiped down the counter. The bell above the door tinkled. Lachlan straightened.

A man came towards him, a strikingly handsome man who wore robes marking him as a mage. He looked around the bakery.

"How can I help you today?" Lachlan gave the man his brightest smile.

But the mage didn't even look at him. He pushed his blond hair from his face and

gazed at the shelves behind Lachlan. “I’ll have a fruit loaf.” The man looked to the back of the bakery, where Grady and Jack worked.

“Of course.” Lachlan grabbed a fruit loaf. He wrapped it in brown paper whilst stealing glances at the very attractive man.

Lachlan had seen the mage come in a few times now. But he’d never served him, since Lachlan didn’t serve that often. That meant he’d never gotten to be this close to admire the mage’s strong jawline, luscious blond hair, and startling blue eyes. He swallowed.

Being naturally shy and withdrawn, Lachlan struggled to approach those he found attractive. His siblings had repeatedly told him to flirt, ask people on dates, and show he was interested. After all, if he didn’t put himself forward, he’d never meet anyone.

They made it all sound so simple and not at all terrifying. But just the thought of flirting or asking this man on a date caused his hands to sweat, his heart to race, his face to flush, and images of being rejected to tumble through his head.

Why would this handsome mage want someone like Lachlan? After all, Lachlan was bean thin, with mud-brown hair, hazel eyes, and a rather boring face. Compared to his siblings, Lachlan was dull in appearance. Not to mention, he had a rather bland personality. He liked working in the bakery and then spending his nights in the apartment by the fire. And on top of that, he was a virgin and completely lacked any experience.

But that wouldn’t change if he never put himself out there.

Should he take his siblings’ advice? Should he say something to the mage? If he were his brother, Cas, or his sister, Lacy, he’d definitely flirt.

Lachlan mulled it over. He might not get another chance to talk to the mage.

“How has your day been?” Not flirting but talking. That was a good start. Talking was doing good. A good first step.

“Fine,” the mage said.

“That’s good.” Lachlan tied the paper. Lachlan smiled at him. “I hope you enjoy the fruit loaf. I think it is really tasty.”

The man nodded, glancing at Lachlan and giving him a slight smile.

Lachlan’s heart skipped. “And you’re a mage? That must be interesting.” Lachlan handed the man his loaf. “My name is Lachlan, by the way.”

“I’m Melchior.” The mage took the loaf.

Suddenly, the man stood taller, blue eyes sparkling as a smile perked up his rose-coloured lips. But he wasn’t looking at Lachlan. He looked to the back area of the bakery.

Lachlan followed his gaze.

Cas had just entered through the back door. Pixie dust filled the air around him. His aura glowed around him. Lachlan held in a sigh. He looked back at the mage, who stared at Cas in open admiration.

Lachlan’s shoulders drooped.

Of course Cas would appeal to this mage. Cas appealed to everyone. A pretty pixie with a lovely smile. Everyone thought Cas was beautiful. No doubt the mage had

been disappointed to walk in and see plain, boring, dull-as-mud Lachlan behind the counter.

But Lachlan couldn't even be annoyed. No one could be annoyed with Cas. He was beautiful inside and out.

Still, the rejection stung.

Which it shouldn't. He should be used to being overlooked by now.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" Lachlan asked.

"Ah. No, that's everything." The mage placed a few coins on the table, gaze still on Cas. He lingered as if hoping Cas would look his way. But Cas was talking to Grady.

Lachlan licked his lips. "Have a good afternoon, then."

The mage nodded absently, his gaze remaining on Cas as he left the bakery, not even sparing Lachlan a single glance.

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CHAPTER 6

“Thanks, Lachy,” Cas said as Lachlan came around the back. His wings fluttered rapidly, and his cheeks were flushed. “I just had to take care of something.”

“No problem.” Lachlan glanced over at Kit, who slept soundly. Lachlan smiled as he headed over to pat his cat.

“Jack, Cas, Lacy, and I will head over to the Christmas markets soon.” Grady packed several bags of ingredients into a crate.

They baked the bread fresh at the markets in an oven they had there. The aroma tempted customers. But they baked the cookies, tarts, and other sweet treats here in the bakery beforehand and brought them along.

“Ordelia and Trent will be here soon to help finish up for the day and then pack up. You can go home when they arrive, Lachlan,” Grady said. “Sorry you had to work late today.”

Lachlan nodded. “It’s fine.”

“And where is Lacy? She is meant to be working, and she should be coming with us to the Christmas markets.” Grady glanced around. He sighed. When their parents had died thirteen years ago, Grady, the eldest, took over as the unofficial leader of the family, which included being in charge of the family bakery.

The back door slammed open. Lacy appeared as if summoned by Grady’s question.

“Cas! You harlot!”

“What?” Cas’s eyes widened, and pixie dust burst around him, sparking in the air.

“I saw you!” Lacy pointed at him accusingly, but her eyes danced with mirth.

Lachlan glanced at his cat. Kit’s eyes opened at Lacy’s yelling, but otherwise, he didn’t move. Lachlan rubbed his belly. Kit purred.

“I saw you gamahuching Graal in the alley!” Lacy cried out.

Lachlan frowned, unclear what she meant. And who was Graal?

Cas sputtered, cheeks burning an even brighter red as his wings twittered rapidly.

“What?” Jack asked, glancing between them. “What is gamahuching?”

Lacy strode towards Cas. “It means our dear brother was on his knees in the snow, between the big orc’s massive thighs, sucking his very large cock.” Lacy paused. “Not that I saw his cock. But if it matches the rest of him...”

Lachlan’s head snapped up.

Cas bit his lip and leaned towards her. “It is gigantic,” he whispered loudly. “Biggest I’ve ever seen!” He and Lacy burst out laughing.

“Cas. You’re meant to be working!” Grady scolded. “Not sucking someone off out back.”

“Who the fuck calls it gamahuching?” Jack still didn’t seem to be over the word. But then he joined the laughter.

“I read it in a book, all right!” Lacy said between laughs.

Grady shook his head and kept packing, but a smile twitched at his lips.

Lachlan could see now that Cas’s lips were swollen, his lipstick smudged, and his hair less tidy than usual. Lachlan looked down at Kit, who’d fallen asleep again. He kept stroking him, swallowing as heat flooded his body.

His siblings seemed so at ease with sex. Meanwhile, Lachlan had never even been kissed. He couldn’t imagine sucking someone’s cock in the back alley whilst he was meant to be serving customers. And to talk about it so openly...

His siblings clearly didn’t have a problem talking about it. And Lacy was two years younger than him! Of course, it wasn’t the first time he’d heard his siblings talk so openly about sex. Still, his skin always prickled, and his face always flushed.

He glanced at his siblings as they laughed and teased Cas. They all seemed so comfortable in their skin. And they all were so attractive and had such strong personalities. Lachlan didn’t. Lachlan didn’t draw attention. He faded into the wallpaper.

Even now, he felt out of place. He didn’t know what to say or how to act to join in. So he stayed silent, a tight, awkward smile on his face.

Kit’s eyes opened. He reached out and placed his paw on Lachlan’s arm as if he knew Lachlan needed comfort. His throat tightened.

Kit sees me. Kit pays attention to me.

Lachlan leaned forward, touching his head to Kit’s. “I’m so glad you came into my life.” He’d been so lonely before Kit.

“Actually, Lachlan, you can finish for the day now.” Grady wiped a hand over his brow. “Jack and Lacy can go ahead. I need to stick around and speak to Ordella before I go to the markets.”

“All right.” Lachlan scooped Kit into his arms and stood.

“Is he your familiar now?” Jack came over and smiled at Kit.

Lachlan froze. He looked to Jack and then down to Kit.

“Isn’t it too soon?” It had only been a week since he took Kit in.

Kit stared up at him, completely relaxed in his arms.

Jack glanced up at Carrie, his iguana familiar, who sat on a shelf above them all. She peered down at them with her beady eyes, always keeping watch.

“What do you think, Grady?” Jack asked. “Is it too soon?”

“I think when it is time, you just know,” Grady said.

Jack nodded.

“Do you know, Lachlan?” Grady asked. “Do you feel like Kit is meant to be your familiar?”

Lachlan held his breath as he scratched the top of Kit’s head. Kit held his gaze.

And as he stared at Kit, certainty settled in his gut. It had been less than a month, but he felt like he’d found his true companion. Kit was meant to be Lachlan’s familiar. He yearned for it with all his heart.

“He is. But how does he become my familiar?”

“You just ask him,” Jack said, smiling. “That simple.”

“That simple,” Lachlan repeated. He let out a breath. “Kit,” he said, trying to ignore the knowledge that his siblings watched them. “I know we’ve not known each other a long time, but I feel like you belong with me. I feel like you are meant to be my familiar.” He swallowed. “Would you like to be my familiar?”

Kit tilted his head to the side like he was considering. Then he reached out his paw and bopped Lachlan on the nose.

Lachlan laughed.

“I think that’s a yes!” Cas flew over and beamed at the two. “Congratulations.”

Lacy applauded.

“Now what?” Lachlan asked.

“Your bond will grow with time,” Jack said. “You’ll feel each other’s presence, and each of you will feel what the other is feeling to some extent. Not all the time, but sometimes. And the strength of that will be different for each witch and familiar pairing.”

“And your magic will strengthen.” Grady gave him a small smile. “As your bond grows, your powers will grow.”

“Oh, so now Lachlan will be even stronger than the rest of us.” Lacy threw up her arms and laughed.

Lachlan smiled and looked down again at Kit.

My Kit. My familiar.

CHAPTER 7

Kit's nose twitched. Even over the scent of baking bread, Kit smelled roasted slabs of meat cooking over an open fire. His mouth watered. He wanted to seek out the source of the food.

Using all his self-control, Kit remained where he was. He had work to do. He had to assist his witch. Kit gazed up at Lachlan.

Lachlan placed a lump of dough on a large, flat piece of metal with a long handle. He opened the oven door, and a wave of heat rushed out. Lachlan shoved the flat metal in, gave a jerky motion with his arm, and pulled the metal out. The dough was now nestled inside the oven. He repeated the action three times and then closed the overdoor.

Sweat glistened on his brow. He wiped a slender arm across it. His brown hair had been tucked behind his ears. Breathing heavily, he placed a hand on his hips and stared down at Kit. "This is hard work." He smiled, and Kit felt the wave of affection from his witch.

Lachlan then turned to make more loaves. Kit skipped forward, rubbing himself against Lachlan's legs as he circled him. Lachlan stumbled.

"Careful, Kit!" Lachlan laughed. "I almost tripped."

Kit's witch had the best laugh. He had the best smile. The best face.

Kit sat on his heels, just staring up at Lachlan. He was the strongest witch in the family, he was the kindest, he gave the best neck scratches, and he was the best witch ever.

Kit felt so full of joy and pride to be Lachlan's familiar.

"Now where did I put those trays?" Lachlan asked, looking around.

Kit spotted the tray, stacked onto a crate. Kit pounced next to them. He shoved his nose against the tray and meowed.

Lachlan turned toward him. He laughed again.

Kit loved making Lachlan laugh; it made his insides feel all warm and soft, like when he napped by the oven.

"You're so clever, Kit. The cleverest cat there ever was." Lachlan gave Kit a pat and picked up the tray.

Kit's tail swished back and forth.

I helped my witch. I am a good familiar. The best.

This was the first time they'd worked at the Christmas markets. Lachlan told him he didn't work them often. Tonight, his brothers Jack, Cas, and Grady also worked. Jack and Cas remained at the counter, serving the line of people, whilst Grady did something in the back of the stall.

Kit liked Lachlan's siblings. But they weren't as great as Lachlan. But no one was as great as Lachlan.

The side door to the stall opened. “Hello!”

Kit perked up. A faun he didn’t know stepped in. He frowned. This wasn’t one of the siblings. Only the siblings should be back here in the stall.

“Hey, Tony.” Lachlan smiled and stepped toward him.

“Hello, Lachlan.” The stranger pulled Lachlan in for a hug and squeezed him tight. Too tight. “You’re looking well.”

Kit’s eyes narrowed, and his ears flicked forward, gaze focusing on this strange man’s hands on Lachlan.

Why is this faun hugging my witch?

The faun released Lachlan, but his arm remained on Lachlan’s shoulder. “You’re busy tonight.” He glanced at Cas and Jack serving.

“We are.” Lachlan laughed.

This intruder had made his witch laugh. Kit didn’t like that one bit.

Kit didn’t like the man touching Lachlan, smiling at him, or being anywhere near him. Kit’s tail twitched.

“Come outside for a second,” the evil faun said. “It’s crowded in here, and I don’t want to get in the way.”

Lachlan nodded and followed the man out.

Kit followed too.

“So what can I do for you, Tony?” Lachlan asked.

“I’m delivering this.” Tony reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a brown package.

Lachlan took it. “What is it?”

Tony took another step towards Lachlan as he handed him the brown package. He clasped Lachlan on his shoulder. “Well?—”

Kit had had enough.

Hissing, Kit darted between them, showing Tony his teeth and flattening his ears.

“Whoa!” Tony’s eyes widened. He took several steps back on his hooved feet. “What in the world?—”

Kit prowled after Tony, still hissing. The faun stumbled.

“Kit! What’s gotten into you?” Lachlan grabbed Kit around the waist and lifted him into his arms. Kit rubbed his cheeks, lips, and chin all over Lachlan, marking his witch with his scent.

Mine.

He glared at Tony.

My witch. Not yours! I’m his familiar. You can’t have him. No one can have him!

He hissed again. Tony took another step back, eyes wide.

“It’s all right, Kit. He’s not here to hurt you.” Lachlan stroked him. “This is Tony. He’s family. He’s Ordellia’s husband. He’s just delivering something.”

Lachlan’s words penetrated the fog of Kit’s rage. Ordellia’s husband. Ordellia was Lachlan’s sister. And this was her husband. He was family.

Kit liked Ordellia. She made that special bone broth for him that would help him get healthy. Then she’d coo over Kit and tell him what a good cat he was. Kit relaxed slightly, but he kept his eyes narrowed on Tony.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” Lachlan said. “He’s never done anything like that before. It’s all right, Kit,” Lachlan cooed. “Everything’s fine.”

“Anyway,” Tony said, watching Kit warily. “Ordellia said Lacy had a headache. Ordellia baked her something to help the healing process. I said I could drop it off here at the stall, as it was on my way. You can pass it on to Lacy, can’t you?”

“Of course. Thanks. And knowing Ordellia’s baking, Lacy’s headache will be gone in no time,” Lachlan said. “And ah...sorry about...”

“No problem. Night.” Tony darted off.

Kit was happy to see Tony go. But when he looked into his witch’s face, Lachlan frowned down at him. Unease slithered through his veins.

“Kit, what was that about?” Lachlan carried him back into the stall.

“What did he do?” Grady asked.

“Tony came by to deliver some of Ordellia’s baking for Lacy. Then Kit hissed at Tony and almost attacked him.”

“What?” Grady frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” Lachlan stared down at Kit, perplexed. Kit rubbed his cheek and chin over Lachlan’s chest.

Mine. You are mine.

“He’s never done anything like that before.”

“That’s odd.” Grady looked around. “Anyway, you can go home. I already took the bread from the oven, and the market is starting to quieten down.”

“You sure?” Lachlan rested his hand on Kit’s back. “I don’t mind staying.”

Grady nodded. “We can handle the rest. Thanks for covering for Lacy tonight.”

“No problem. It’s nice to be able to work at the Christmas markets.” Lachlan said his goodbyes to the others and grabbed his robes and hat. He pulled them on, Kit tucked inside, only his head peeping out.

“All right. Let’s get going.”

CHAPTER 8

With Kit tucked inside Lachlan's robes, they walked past wooden stalls filled with greenery, bright candles, and floating globes. The stalls sold all sorts of things: glass and wooden ornaments, wreaths, nuts, chocolate, dancing lanterns. One stall even drew festive portraits.

They passed several trees decorated with bright shiny balls that Kit felt the urge to jump at and hit. But Kit stayed put, content and cosy, nestled against Lachlan's chest. He could feel his witch's heartbeat against him.

The air grew heavier with the scent of meat. Kit's head swivelled. A large circular tray hung over a pile of glowing charcoals. Smoke rose into the air.

Kit's mouth salivated.

Lachlan laughed and headed towards the stall. "I can feel your hunger, Kit."

A large ogre with a shiny bald head approached them.

"I'll take some chicken and venison please," Lachlan said.

"Sure thing." The ogre turned and picked up some tongs. She grabbed at the meat. Juices glistened and dripped as she placed the slabs into a napkin. "Here you are."

"Thank you." Lachlan handed her some coins and took the meat.

Kit's claws dug into Lachlan's chest as he stretched his neck towards it.

"I know. I know. It's coming." Lachlan laughed as he grabbed a bit and held it out to Kit.

Kit snapped it up, chewing the delicious smoky, succulent meat. He licked his lips as Lachlan fed him another piece. And then another. And still more came. Until finally, his stomach stretched, and he could not eat another bite of the divine morsels.

Lachlan ate the last few strips, smiling down at Kit. "It's amazing. You're full."

He threw the napkin, soaked with meat juices into a small fire they passed. He licked at his fingers.

His smile turned to a pensive frown. "I still don't know what happened with you and Tony." Lachlan rested a hand on Kit.

Kit could feel his witch's confusion and uncertainty. Kit wished he could explain and tell Lachlan that he just hadn't liked how close Tony was to Lachlan. How it had made him feel angry.

Only Kit should touch Lachlan. After all, Lachlan was Kit's witch. But he couldn't speak the words, so he meowed instead.

Lachlan's lip quirked. "Tony is a nice man. I hope you can get along with him. He treats Ordalia very well." Lachlan stared ahead as he walked.

Guilt clawed at Kit's chest. He wanted to make Lachlan happy. Not sad.

Maybe he would try not to hiss or attack Tony the next time he saw him. Although, that would be hard if Tony touched Lachlan. But he could try.

Snowflakes floated down. Normally, Kit hated the snow. To him, snow meant cold and wet fur. But tonight, tucked inside Lachlan's robes, pressed against Lachlan's warm body, hiding away beneath Lachlan's pointy wide-brimmed hat, the snow couldn't reach Kit. He snuggled closer.

"Thirteen years ago, when I was pretty young, my mother and father died." Lachlan's throat bobbed. "It was tough."

His parents died. Just like mine.

With a jolt, Kit knew it to be true. His parents had died. That was how he'd lost them. But he couldn't remember how they'd died. Or when.

"I'm the third youngest. Lacy is the second. Trent is the youngest." Sadness pulsed through their bond.

Kit rubbed his face against Lachlan's chest, trying to comfort his witch.

"Me, Lacy, and Trent cried constantly. We didn't really understand what had happened. Grady and Jack, the two eldest, were rarely in the apartment. They worked constantly in the bakery and also took other jobs to earn more money." Lachlan paused.

"That next eldest was Ordella and Cas. They took over looking after the youngest of us, whilst still working long hours in the bakery. Looking back, I realise just how young they were at the time." Lachlan shook his head.

"They'd work in the bakery, then take turns coming up to check on us, feed us, clean us, and comfort us. I remember Ordella spending many nights holding me whilst I cried. Trent and I often slept in her bed. Lacy often slept in Cas's."

Lachlan stared ahead. “I think back on how hard that was for them, having to care for us whilst also grieving. And then a few years ago, Tony came along.” Lachlan licked his lips. “And Ordelia smiled.

“I realised I hadn’t seen her smile in years, not since before Mother and Father died. It was a shock. Everyone else in the family smiled. But she’d stopped completely. Until Tony.” Lachlan looked down at Kit. “So you need to be nice to Tony. Because he makes my sister smile.”

Kit could feel the seriousness of his witch’s words. Guilt wiggled unpleasantly inside his full belly. He squirmed against Lachlan’s chest and managed to get his arm free, then he reached up and placed his paw on Lachlan’s throat.

Kit would be nice to Tony, even if he didn’t like Tony near his witch. Because it was important to Lachlan. And he would be a good familiar.

They left the markets. The cobblestone streets grew emptier the further they got from the town square and the Christmas markets.

Lachlan leaned down and pressed a kiss to Kit’s head. “You know, I don’t think I’m actually the strongest witch in my family. I’m the strongest hearth and kitchen witch. Because my affinity is for the type of witch I am. Ordelia’s affinity is healing. Grady’s is protection. But they’re both strong witches too.” He paused.

“But it’s nice to be good at something,” Lachlan mused. “It’s nice to stand out sometimes.”

As they walked the darkened streets, Kit spotted the gargoyle on top of a building.

Lachlan followed his gaze. “That gargoyle has been in the area for years. Always perched on rooftops, still as stone, staring down, watching over us.”

They walked for several minutes in silence.

“I love my family,” Lachlan said. “But sometimes I find it hard to talk to them. They’re all so busy, and they seem to have so much going on. Ordellia has a husband, a baby, and a stepson. And Trent, he’s the youngest, he often stays with Ordellia and her family.” Lachlan gave a tight smile.

“Trent was only five when our parents passed away. Ordellia became almost like a second mother to Trent.” Lachlan hesitated. “I wish I could spend more time with Ordellia and be able to stay with them too. But they don’t really have room for both of us at her place. And Ordellia is always so busy now.” Lachlan’s throat bobbed.

Kit could feel the loneliness flowing from him.

“I always feel loved by them. But I don’t always feel like I can talk to them.” He looked down at Kit. He smiled. “But now I have you.”

And I have you too. Kit wished he could speak the words.

Because he’d been lonely too, for so long. And Kit wanted Lachlan to know how important he was to Kit and how he’d saved him from not just the hunger and the cold but the aching, never-ending loneliness.

Lachlan was Kit’s whole world.

Snippets of a lullaby sung long ago drifted into his mind. Human voices, his parents’ voices, singing to Kit as they comforted him.

He wished he could sing to Lachlan and comfort him and show he cared.

Kit meowed, trying to sing the words. Lachlan smiled and scratched his head.

But meowing wasn't the same as singing.

For a brief moment, he longed for his parents and wished he could remember them better. But he pushed those thoughts and that pain aside. He didn't need to remember those times.

Not now. Not ever.

Because now he was Kit, Lachlan's cat familiar, and Lachlan was his witch. He didn't need anything else. This was all he needed to be happy.

CHAPTER 9

“Do you think the snow will let up soon?” Lachlan sat in the living room of the family apartment. Kit prowled the room, rubbing against people as he passed them.

The snow rustled as it hit the window, a blur of white movement.

The flames crackled and danced in the fireplace, chasing away the cold of the snowy night. Everyone sat on mismatched chairs or the wooden floor. Not all his siblings were here. Trent and Ordella were at her place. Lacy was staying with her girlfriend, Orim. Jack had gone to deliver scones to the dragon Avery and apparently was still there.

The gargoyle who usually remained perched on rooftops, whose name was Uzoth, had given them that information. For years, Lachlan had seen Uzoth on rooftops, a constant presence in the quarter. Strangely, he seemed to have developed a friendship with Grady recently and now was here in their apartment.

Uzoth and Grady had spent a decent part of that evening in Grady's room before they emerged. Lachlan didn't know what to make of the unusual relationship.

Despite several family members not staying in the apartment, they did not have more space. Briar had recently found his werewolf mate in the forest. And now Wulfric lived with them. At present, they sat on the settee. Briar had a book on mates open on his lap. The werewolf crocheted, a small frown between his brows.

Cas's orc, Graal, had lost his rented room. So he was bunking with Cas. Lachlan's

cheeks flushed at the memory of the sounds they'd made together in Cas's room that evening. They had yet to emerge from the room.

A lot was going on with his siblings at the moment.

And of course, Lachlan had Kit. But Kit took up no space. Leo and Jasper, his older twin brothers were also at home. But they were in their room.

"Hopefully." Grady glanced at the window. He took a slice of bread, slathered some butter on it, and took a bite.

Kit stopped in front of Uzoth. Kit gazed up at the gargoyle's sharp grey features and large horns. Uzoth stood by the wall, arms crossed over his muscular chest. He didn't blink, didn't move, just stood completely still, as if carved from stone.

Was he carved from stone?

Lachlan didn't know much about gargoyles, and it felt rude to ask. Uzoth's large wings remained tucked behind his back. His long midnight-black hair, the only part of him that didn't seem stone-like, hung to his chest. Sharp fangs peeked out from behind his lips. His tail lay still on the floor.

Kit rubbed against Uzoth's legs. Then he paused in front of him and launched up into the crook of Uzoth's folded arms.

Lachlan tensed, sitting forward.

The gargoyle didn't react for several seconds. Then, with minuscule movements, the gargoyle's neck angled forward. He looked down at the cat in his arms. Kit placed his paws on Uzoth's chest, sniffing at his mouth and nose.

Uzoth didn't react.

After several moments, Lachlan relaxed back into his armchair slightly. It wasn't that he didn't trust Uzoth. He just didn't really know what to expect from him.

"Anyway, the Christmas markets will definitely be shut tonight. Probably tomorrow." Grady scratched at his jaw. "And the bakery might be closed tomorrow if the snow keeps going." Grady's gaze met Lachlan's. "When you wake tomorrow, check the snowfall. If it looks bad, don't bother setting up."

"I'll probably still go down," Lachlan said softly. "I want the bakery to know we care and tend to them even when they aren't providing for our customers."

Grady nodded and glanced at Uzoth.

Lachlan's mouth dropped open. Kit lay relaxed in the gargoyle's arm, limbs drooping, eyes closed. The gargoyle had one hand placed on top of Kit's head, fingers scratching.

"Anyway, best if we can all rest whilst we can't work," Grady said. "Eat, sleep, and get back your strength. Once the snow passes, we'll be back at full speed for the Christmas season."

Everyone rose. For a moment, Lachlan watched Kit in Uzoth's arms. As if sensing Lachlan's gaze, Kit opened his eyes. He straightened and stretched. He jumped down and came over to Lachlan.

Uzoth's arms dropped, his neck straightened, head facing forward, expression remaining blank, as still as a statue once more.

Lachlan and Kit returned to their room.

“I’m glad Jack reached Avery’s safely.” Lachlan lit the lantern in the room and placed it on the side table. Kit padded in after.

Snow fell against the glass. Wind rattled the pane. He shivered. “It’s freezing even in here.”

He looked back to Kit, who sat, staring up at Lachlan. “Guess we should do what Grady says and get some rest whilst we can.” His lip quirked. “Be warmer in the bed too. And at least we won’t have to listen to Jack snoring if he is staying the night at Avery’s.”

Kit jumped on the bed and began pawing the sheets.

“Actually...” Lachlan darted into the main room.

CHAPTER 10

Only embers remained in the fireplace. Lachlan grabbed a large square cloth that had been stacked by the fireplace. He laid it on the floor and then, using tongs, gripped one of the large sandstone bedwarmers that lay by the embers and placed it in the cloth. He wrapped it several times and picked it up, feeling the warmth already penetrate the fabric.

Entering his room, Lachlan lifted the sheets and placed the bed warmer at the bottom. Then he undressed down to his underthings and climbed beneath the sheets. Kit crawled in, burrowing beneath the blankets and snuggling on Lachlan's chest.

"This is cosy, isn't it?"

Green eyes peered up at him.

"Ahh. Pissing potions! I forgot to turn off the lantern." He stared at the flame on the table, several steps away from the bed.

Lachlan knew it'd be better to just do it and get it over and done with. But it already felt so snug in the bed with Kit, especially when Lachlan pressed his feet against the bed warmer.

"It's so annoying that my powers are so much weaker up here even though I live here. If I was in the bakery, the lantern would extinguish with a thought." Lachlan stared at the lantern, willing it to puff out. But nothing happened. "My powers really are limited to the bakery." He sighed. "I'll do it in a minute."

He patted Kit, sliding his hand over his soft fur. Kit purred.

“You’re so beautiful, Kit.” His hair had grown in where there had been spots missing. Lachlan could no longer feel the sharp angles of Kit’s spine and ribs. Nothing could be done for his half-missing ear and tail, but neither seemed to bother or hurt Kit.

Lachlan ran his hand down Kit’s tail, which ended abruptly.

“I’m so glad I found you when I did.” Lachlan didn’t like to think of Kit living on the streets, cold, hungry, and injured. He thought of the morning they’d met. He wondered how many years Kit had been on his own.

“And you saved me too, you know. Now I have a friend, a constant companion, a familiar. My world is so much better with you in it.” He kissed Kit’s head.

Kit rubbed his chin against Lachlan’s throat.

Lachlan chuckled. “And did you know familiars live long lives? They will usually live as long as their witches.”

Kit peered up at him.

“We’re going to be together a long, long time.” Lachlan scratched behind Kit’s ears, his own body continuing to relax into the bed.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Kit.” He smiled at Kit, stroking his fur. “I love you.”

Kit stood on Lachlan’s chest. He leaned his face close to Lachlan’s. Green eyes stared into Lachlan’s.

“Meow.” Kit leaned closer. “Meow.”

Lachlan laughed. “Does that mean you love me too?”

“Meow.”

Lachlan kissed Kit on the head. “Thank you.”

“Meow!” Kit grew louder. “Meow!” He paced. He lowered his head.

Lachlan frowned at Kit’s odd behaviour. He seemed unsettled.

Kit’s eyes narrowed. His whiskers twitched. He meowed again. And again, the sounds became more distressed. His tail whipped back and forth jerkily.

Lachlan sat up. “Are you all right? Kit! What’s wrong?”

Kit’s claws dug into Lachlan’s chest. Lachlan gritted his teeth.

Kit flinched back, as if in pain.

“Kit!” Lachlan sat up, cradling Kit in his lap. “Kit! What’s going on?”

Kit’s eyes remained closed. He trembled violently.

But he continued to meow. The sounds elongated and morphed into a choking noise.

“Kit!” Lachlan’s heart raced. He ran his hands over his familiar, worry and panic spiking inside him. “What’s wrong?”

Kit opened his green eyes. But they were different. Lachlan froze.

Circular black pupils had replaced vertical slits. The green didn't reach the edges of his eyes; instead, white had appeared around the edges.

Quivering, Kit shrank on himself. Then his limbs snapped, going rigid.

Lachlan cried out in panic.

Then suddenly, Kit grew outwards and up.

Lachlan fell back, eyes wide in shock.

Black fur shortened and disappeared into brown skin. His legs grew. Paws stretched into fingers. Kit lifted his head, his features morphing and distorting.

Panting, Lachlan stared up at the man who straddled his lap, a very naked, attractive man. The man was completely human, except for the two black cat ears, one of which was missing half. His green eyes stared down at Lachlan. A tail swished behind the man.

Lachlan's brain struggled to function. He didn't speak, didn't move. He could do nothing but breathe heavily.

They stared at each other for several moments.

Then the man smiled. He placed his hands on Lachlan's chest.

"I love you too," the man said.

Then he leaned forward.

Lachlan sucked in a breath, thinking the man was about to kiss him, but instead, the

stranger rubbed his cheek over Lachlan's throat and face.

"I love you so much, Lachlan," the man with cat ears murmured. "My witch. I love you!"

What the fuck is happening?

CHAPTER 11

Kit rubbed his face against Lachlan's smooth, toned chest, contentment and glee bubbling up inside him. They'd been lying together in bed, as they so often did.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Kit," Lachlan said to Kit. "I love you."

And every bone, muscle, nerve, and fibre of Kit's being yearned to say the exact same words to Lachlan.

He tried with all his heart. But all that came out was a pitiful meow.

It wasn't enough. He needed Lachlan to know how he felt! Kit needed to say the words. And then, from somewhere deep inside him, something awakened, an ability he'd forgotten long ago.

Bones creaked. Muscles stretched and contorted. Skin and fur rearranged. His body ached as he transformed and shifted. Then he was a human, like he had been in the before.

"I love you so much, Lachlan," Kit whispered. "My witch. I love you!"

Suddenly, Lachlan scrambled out from under him, backing up against the head of the bed. Lachlan's face paled. "Who...are you?" His voice shook.

Kit's throat clenched. A nervous laugh escaped him. "I... I'm Kit. I'm your familiar."

Lachlan shook his head. His mouth moved, but nothing came out.

“It’s all right.” Kit supposed it must be a bit of a shock, now that Kit thought about it.

Lachlan had yet to see him like this. Honestly, it was a bit of a shock to Kit too. He’d forgotten what it felt like to be human.

But Kit was still himself. Still Lachlan’s familiar. Still in love with Lachlan. In a few seconds, Lachlan would realise this, and everything would be fine.

Kit scooted closer, reaching out for Lachlan. “It’s me. It’s your Kit.”

Lachlan’s eyes bulged. He gave a jerky shake of his head. He half fell from the bed with a thud and sprinted to the door. He yanked it open.

“Grady!” Lachlan screamed.

Kit flinched.

“Grady!” Then Lachlan fled the room.

Kit heard voices.

He knelt on the bed, uncertainty and worry circling in his gut.

Footsteps pounded outside the door, mixed with urgent whispers.

Kit wrung his hands. Grady appeared in his undershorts in the doorway. His mouth dropped. Lachlan followed. Then came Uzoth. Everyone else seemed to crowd behind them. Everyone stared at Kit.

Kit shrank in on himself. He looked to Lachlan, but Lachlan didn't look back. A whine escaped him.

Grady went to a cupboard and opened the door. He pulled out a robe and handed it to Kit. "Here, put this on."

Swallowing, Kit pulled the robe on. But he had trouble using his fingers. They moved clumsily. He'd forgotten how to use them.

Kit sat back on his and Lachlan's bed. Grady sat opposite him on Jack's. Lachlan hadn't moved since he entered. He still hadn't looked at Kit.

"Lachlan," Kit whispered.

Finally, Lachlan looked to him.

"Please, sit." Kit patted the spot next to him. If Lachlan would just sit next to him, then maybe he'd relax.

Lachlan's uncertainty bled through the bond.

"Please," Kit whispered.

After a moment's hesitation, Lachlan sat. But he remained as far from Kit as possible on the bed.

Kit bit his lip.

"What is going on?" Grady asked Kit.

Reluctantly, Kit turned his gaze to Grady. Kit didn't know what to say to him.

“Are you a shifter?” Wulfric asked from outside the room.

“A shifter?” Words felt so weird in Kit’s mouth.

“Are you a cat shifter?” Briar stepped forward, Wulfric behind him.

What is a shifter? “I’m Lachlan’s familiar.” Kit turned to Lachlan and gave him a tight smile.

Lachlan’s brows furrowed. He looked away. Kit could feel his unease.

Kit scooted up next to him and leaned towards him. He tried to touch Lachlan, tried to comfort him like he always did. His touch always soothed his witch. But Lachlan’s eyes widened. He almost fell off the bed, trying to get away from Kit.

Kit froze. He dropped his hand, eyes stinging.

“What’s your name?” Grady asked after several moments of silence.

He blinked rapidly. “Kit.” He gripped his knees tightly, hands trembling. “You know my name.”

Why do they all stare at me like I am a stranger? Why is Lachlan afraid of me?

Tears welled in his eyes. “Lachlan called me Kit.” His throat tightened painfully. “He gave me my name.” After so long without one, of just being a “cat,” a lost and lonely stray on the streets, he’d found Lachlan, and Lachlan had given him his name. “I’m Kit. I’m Lachlan’s familiar.”

Grady knelt in front of him, but Kit didn’t look into his eyes. He just kept his watery gaze on his hands.

“And what about before that?” Grady was asking about the before. Kit didn’t want to talk about the before. He glanced to Lachlan, as if for help.

But Lachlan still didn’t speak and still didn’t look at him.

“Lachlan,” Kit whined.

Lachlan made a sound. His eyes skittered to Kit before he looked away again. His hands were clasped tightly together in his lap. Kit wanted to reach out, touch him. But Lachlan didn’t want that now. He didn’t want Kit now.

He let out a shaky breath, body slumping.

“Were you a cat for a long time?” Wulfric asked.

Kit frowned, unsure what Wulfric meant. “I am a cat.”

“But you’ve been a human, like this”—Wulfric gestured to him—“before, haven’t you?”

Kit nodded slowly. “I have walked on two legs. I had no fur.” The memories felt less flowing, less wispy in this shape. He could follow the threads of thoughts and memories, which usually disappeared when he walked in his other form. “In the before.”

“Before?” Grady pressed.

Kit glanced at Lachlan, who still sat so far away. Maybe if Kit kept answering the questions, Lachlan would become less uncertain and realise Kit was still Lachlan’s familiar, still his Kit, still his cat even when he walked on two legs and had no fur.

“Before the streets,” Kit said. “Before I walked amongst the buildings that piled on top of one another. Before then, I walked through trees, many, many trees. There was lots of food to catch and eat. And before that...” He paused as he sought the word. “...a farm.”

“And that was a long time ago?” Briar asked.

“Yes.” Kit nodded. “Many winters. Many summers.”

“And when was the last time you were like this?” Wulfric gestured to Kit.

“Long before the city,” Kit said.

Wulfric nodded. He glanced around the room. “If a shifter stays too long in one form, they can forget their other.” He looked at Lachlan. “After a long time, it’s said they can’t change back. Sometimes it becomes impossible for them.”

“I had to change so I could speak,” Kit said. “It was hard. It was painful. I couldn’t remember how. But I had to shift to speak words.” Kit turned his whole body to face Lachlan, and Kit leaned towards him. “I had to tell you I loved you too.”

Lachlan looked at him then.

Kit had found the words to explain everything that had happened. He smiled as pride filled him. He lowered his head to rub it against Lachlan’s chest.

Lachlan snapped back. He stood, eyes wide with horror.

Kit couldn’t breathe. His heart lurched. “Lachlan. Why...why won’t you let me touch you?”

Lachlan panted. “I...” He trailed off, mouth moving but no sound coming out. He shook his head.

Grady cleared his throat. “Maybe we should all rest. Go to sleep and process what has happened. I think tonight has been a lot for everyone.”

Lachlan nodded. Kit’s hands itched with the need to touch and hold Lachlan.

“You could take my bed tonight, Lachlan,” Grady said.

“What? No!” Kit’s hands clenched. “Why won’t you sleep with me in our bed?” Tears fell from his eyes. Lachlan had told him he’d care for him and look after him.

“I just... I need a little...” Lachlan’s chest rose and fell quickly.

Confusion, pain, and hurt swelled through the bond. Those feelings belonged to Lachlan. But they mirrored Kit’s own. His hands shook.

“Please.” Kit’s hands shook.

Lachlan closed his eyes and let out a breath. “I... I’ll sleep in here,” Lachlan rushed out. “But in Jack’s bed. And you can sleep in mine.”

Kit wanted to say no. He wanted to beg for them to share the same bed. He wanted to be held. He needed to be held by his witch. And Lachlan needed him too! He needed to let Kit comfort him.

They both needed each other so they wouldn’t be alone!

A sob escaped Kit.

But Lachlan wanted to sleep apart. So Kit just stared at Lachlan, tears running down his face, body shaking.

Cas, who'd remained silent throughout, flew into the room. He leaned down and placed a hand on Kit's shoulder. "It will be all right, Kit."

Kit squeezed his eyes shut. More tears fell. He didn't want Cas comforting him and touching him; he wanted Lachlan.

"You both just need time to think," Cas said so gently.

"Think about what?" Kit's voice strained.

Kit didn't want to think. He didn't need to think. He needed Lachlan to hold him, pet him, tell him he'd always protect him, keep him warm, and tell him he loved him.

But Lachlan turned his back and climbed into Jack's bed. He pulled the sheets over himself, not looking at Kit. After a moment, the others left.

Grady paused. He stared at Lachlan. He came over to the bed and leaned down, whispering to his brother, too low for Kit to hear. Lachlan said something. Grady stayed where he was for several seconds, then he walked to the door. He looked to Kit.

"You should sleep too," Grady said.

Kit sat on the bed.

"Goodnight. Sleep well." Grady hesitated, then he turned off the lantern and closed the door.

Lachlan lay on his side, pulled the blanket over him, and faced the wall. Kit stared at Lachlan's back in the darkness of the room.

After several moments of excruciating silence, Lachlan spoke, "I'm sorry, Kit. But... I..." He trailed off, and more silence filled the room. "I don't know what this means." His voice trembled. "You're not just a cat anymore."

Kit shook his head. This changed nothing for him. But clearly it did for Lachlan.

"I'm sorry," Lachlan repeated.

Kit could feel the confusion of Lachlan's mind through their bond. But Lachlan didn't speak or share his thoughts with Kit.

Kit continued to stare at Lachlan. Lachlan wasn't asleep. His breathing was too shallow. He just pretended to sleep, to trick Kit.

Lachlan needs me. He's hurting. I need to soothe him.

But Lachlan was hurting because of Kit. And so Kit did not know what to do.

CHAPTER 12

In a handful of seconds, Lachlan's whole world had been upended. He lay in Jack's bed, facing the wall, back to Kit as he pretended to sleep. He didn't move. But sleep would not come.

Thoughts and feelings smashed through his head, exploding and muddling together until he didn't know which way was up and he struggled to draw breath into his lungs.

Kit was a shifter. His sweet cat familiar was a shifter.

And right now, Kit was a very handsome man sitting on Lachlan's bed, staring at Lachlan with so much longing and love that it vibrated through the bond.

Lachlan squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel his familiar's yearning.

But was Kit even his familiar anymore? Could a shifter be a familiar?

He'd never heard of it. Familiars were animals. That was the way it went. He would have to ask Grady.

Because maybe now that Kit had shifted into his human form, he wasn't Lachlan's familiar anymore. His chest tightened. It felt like a band wrapped tightly around his ribs and squeezed until they might crack. Lachlan didn't want to lose his familiar, his cat, his Kit.

But Kit wasn't just a cat anymore. He was a human too.

The whole time, since the moment he'd seen the poor kitty in the street, Kit had been a shifter. When Lachlan had held Kit, stroked him, fed him, and hugged him, he had this whole other, hidden form Lachlan knew nothing about.

Lachlan couldn't wrap his mind around it. It didn't make sense. How could his sweet cat also be this ridiculously attractive man?

Lachlan tried to think of everything he knew about shifters. He realised that whilst he knew many shifters, he didn't know that many specific details, just that they could shift from human into their other form. Like Wulfric could shift to his wolf form.

Lachlan's chest ached. It felt like a gaping hole had opened inside him.

And the worst thing was all he wanted to do was hold Kit, his cat, in his arms, stroke his soft fur and listen to his purrs as they comforted and calmed him.

But in those few seconds when Kit had shifted, the Kit he knew had disappeared.

His head hurt as he tried to process and think of what to do now. He willed sleep, wishing to escape his tumultuous thoughts and feelings.

He'd not heard Kit move. Still, he sensed Kit's intense, wishful gaze on his back. But he couldn't look at Kit. He couldn't bear to once again see the distress in his green eyes, or the agony etched into his face. The memory still tore at him.

But Lachlan hadn't known how to respond. The man spoke to Lachlan like he cared for him, like he knew him, like he loved him. He wanted to touch Lachlan, hold him, and be with him.

But Lachlan didn't know the strange man in his room.

He loved Kit, his cat familiar. How did Lachlan feel about Kit the human?

And when Kit had pleaded to sleep together in the same bed, the idea of this beautiful man being so physically close had terrified Lachlan. If he truly had been a stranger, just a man in the bakery interested in Lachlan, perhaps they could have gone on a date.

Lachlan would definitely have been interested in a man like Kit. But of course, a man as beautiful as Kit would never have been attracted to Lachlan if they'd just randomly met.

He just wished Kit were a cat, a true and proper cat. Not a shifter. Then, right now, they'd be cuddled together, asleep in Lachlan and Kit's bed, both happy and content with life. That was all Lachlan wanted.

And maybe he'd have been content if Kit had been a shifter but just remained a cat forever. After all, he'd been one for years now. It would have been simple. Easy. Then they both could be blissfully happy.

Ignorant but happy.

Guilt twisted sharply in his belly.

Kit was a shifter. He had two forms. A cat form and a human form.

It would be wrong for Kit to remain in one form forever just to please Lachlan. Surely it would be unethical to deny Kit half of himself, even if Kit had done so for so many years.

Lachlan just wanted to stop thinking. He wanted it all to stop. He wanted to fall asleep and wake and realise it had all been a terrible nightmare and Kit was just a normal cat.

Then suddenly, he woke. Despite all the thoughts that scattered and frayed in his mind, he must have fallen asleep.

The room had lightened. He lay on his back, facing the beamed ceiling.

He turned and looked to the other bed.

Kit sat on the bed, facing the window. His whole body sagged forward, as if on the verge of collapse. Sorrow pulsed steadily from him.

“I think I remember more,” Kit said in a soft, toneless voice.

Lachlan sat up. “What?” he asked, voice rough from sleep.

“I lived on a farm with my parents. I grew up there. No one else was two-formed. Just us,” Kit said. “We were both cat and human. We did not use the word shifter. My parents told me to keep it secret. They said others would claim it to be the result of dark magic and witchcraft.”

Kit’s brows lowered. “As I grew up, I played with the kids from the village. I had friends. Then I had a lover. I was to marry him, a man named Peter.” Kit paused. “My parents warned me.” The muscles in Kit’s throat clenched. “But I trusted Peter. I loved him. So I told him the truth.” Tears spilled from his eyes.

“He called me cursed. He...he called me so many names. He ran away from me. Then that night, he returned with others from the village, friends and people I’d known my whole life.”

The tears streamed down his cheeks. “They burned down our farm and our fields.” His voice shook. “They hunted us with clubs and spikes. They killed my parents.” Kit choked. “They almost killed me, but I just got away.” He raised a hand to his half-missing ear.

Lachlan didn’t need their bond to know the grief Kit felt. It radiated off him.

Lachlan had heard rumours of human settlements in far-off places where they killed any who weren’t purely human or were human but practised magic.

“I ran and ran and ran. Through forests and along rivers. For days and nights and weeks and months. Then I was on a ship.” Kit kept speaking in that toneless, blank voice.

“Then I was back in a forest. The days grew colder, colder than it had ever been. For a while, I shifted back and forth. But I stayed a cat whenever I saw people.” He paused. “But the memories and pain were always so much stronger in my human form. So I stopped changing into my human form. I remained a cat.”

Kit sagged even further forward. He wrapped his arms around his stomach. “I didn’t remember before last night. I haven’t remembered any of this in years.”

“I’m so sorry.” Unable to remain still, Lachlan rose from the bed and stepped towards Kit. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. I’m so sorry you have to remember all that.” He placed a hand on Kit’s arm.

Kit leaned into the touch. He let out a shuddering breath. Lachlan squeezed his arm.

When Kit didn’t say anything else, Lachlan asked, “Did you sleep at all?”

Kit shook his head. He hesitated. “I thought that maybe if I returned to being a cat, I

could sleep with you.” Red-rimmed eyes gazed up at him.

But before Lachlan could answer, Kit made a noise. “But I couldn’t find my cat form. I couldn’t turn back. I tried and tried and tried. I don’t understand,” Kit whispered. “I can’t be a cat again.” Kit’s lip trembled.

“But you don’t love me if I’m not a cat,” Kit whispered, and more tears fell. “I have to be a cat again. I have to.”

Lachlan opened his mouth. His vision blurred as tears welled in his own eyes. He wanted to say something to take away Kit’s anguish and misery.

He wanted to tell Kit he could love him as a human.

But it wouldn’t be true. Lachlan didn’t know what he felt for this man. And he couldn’t lie to him, for both their sakes.

Lachlan closed his eyes and let out a breath. “I…” He couldn’t think of what to say. He didn’t know how to fix any of this. He stood there for several moments, just trying to work out what to do.

Finally, he said, “We should get something to eat.” Then he released Kit’s shoulder. He turned and left the room before he broke down completely.

CHAPTER 13

Kit wiggled on the chair in the living area. A cup of cold, untouched tea sat on the table before him. His borrowed clothes itched. He couldn't get comfy on the chair. Everyone kept trying to get him to eat and drink, offering him soups, baked goods, and more tea.

Graal, Cas, Briar, and Wulfric sat with him around the fireplace, staring at him as if they didn't know him. But they'd stroked his fur and cooed over him. They'd patted their laps in invitation for him to come and snuggle with them.

"Did you want more tea?" Cas asked, his words so gentle. "Perhaps some blue mallow, spearmint, and lots of honey."

Everyone treated Kit so differently now. He hated being treated like a stranger in his home.

When he had become Lachlan's familiar, Lachlan's siblings had felt like his family. They didn't feel like that anymore.

"I'm fine," Kit said tersely. "Where's Lachlan? When will he be back?" He stared at the door leading out of the apartment.

"He's helping Grady and the twins fix the chimney on the stove," Briar said. "They think there might be a block. Lachlan is the most powerful hearth witch in the family. He connects so strongly with the bakery and is best at diagnosing problems that occur there."

Kit gritted his teeth. Briar spoke to him like Kit didn't know Lachlan, his own witch. He knew Lachlan was the strongest hearth and kitchen witch in the family. Of course he did. What sort of familiar would he be if he didn't?

He wanted to hiss and snarl and knock over the endless cups of tea they brought him. But why didn't Lachlan bring Kit with him?

Kit was his familiar. He strengthened Lachlan's powers. Kit should be with Lachlan to help. He was a good familiar. He was the best. Lachlan had said so many times.

But he knew why Lachlan had left to go downstairs without him. He'd been avoiding Kit all day, ducking into his siblings' rooms, and going down into the bakery. And the few times they'd been in the same room, Lachlan was always on the opposite side.

It was obvious. Lachlan didn't want Kit. He didn't want a shifter as a familiar. He wanted a plain cat. And Kit wasn't one of those anymore.

So Kit spent most of the day in the living area, talking with Lachlan's siblings and their partners, who asked questions Kit didn't want to answer.

All Kit wanted was Lachlan. If only Kit could remember how to transform back into a cat, then maybe it would all go back to normal.

"Perhaps we should play a game of cards." Cas clapped his hands together.

Kit turned to Briar and Wulfric. "How can I turn back to a cat?"

Briar's lips parted. "You don't know how?" He looked to Wulfric, whose brows raised.

Kit shook his head. "I can't turn back now I'm human." He spoke to Wulfric, "You said sometimes two-formed can stay so long in one form that they can't turn back to the other. But I turned human, and now I can't go back to cat form. How do I go back to being a cat?"

"I'm not sure." Wulfric leaned forward. "I've never heard of such a thing. Usually, shifters know on instinct how to shift forms, except in the rare circumstances I mentioned last night. It comes naturally. I've never heard anything about a shifter then struggling to shift back." He lowered his voice. "I'm sorry, Kit."

Kit's shoulders dropped. "So am I stuck like this?"

"I didn't say that," Wulfric said. "Maybe you just need some time to remember. You only shifted for the first time in years yesterday."

"I could try and find some books on the subject." Briar glanced at the window. "Once this snow passes."

Kit nodded, clinging to the hope like a lifeline. He had to find a way to change back. Everything depended on it.

The door opened. A flurry of snow blew in followed by Grady, the twins, Lachlan, and Uzoth.

Kit sat up straighter, gaze fixed on Lachlan.

"It's colder than a witch's fucking tit out there!" Jasper brushed snow from his robe.

"But we managed to unblock the chimney!" Leo hung his coat by the door.

Lachlan removed his hat and robes and hung them without saying a word. Grady

closed the door. Uzoth walked and stood beside the wall. Earlier in the day, he'd flown off and checked on all the siblings who were not staying in the apartment.

Lachlan sat down, far away from Kit. He didn't even look in Kit's direction. He just knew where Kit was and how to not be near him.

It stung.

He yearned to go to Lachlan, to fall to his knees before him, press his face to Lachlan's soft lap, and wrap his arms around Lachlan's legs. He yearned to just be close to him, scent him, and feel his warmth.

Kit's tail wrapped around himself. He gripped the frayed end. He didn't think he used to have a tail and ears in his human form before.

"We were just talking about playing cards." Cas got up and grabbed a pack. "Thought it might be a fun way to pass the evening."

There were murmurs of agreement. Cas shuffled the cards deftly.

Kit didn't know how to play cards. He didn't want to learn. He wanted to cry and beg Lachlan to hold him. But it wouldn't help. Lachlan didn't want him anymore.

"I will go to bed." Kit rose as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Are you sure?" Cas asked. "It's still pretty early."

"I'm tired." Kit walked towards the bedroom. He glanced at Lachlan, whose gaze remained fixed on the cards in Cas's hands.

Kit entered and closed the door to the bedroom. The tears fell. He could hear the

voices on the other side of the door. He heard his name.

He stared at their bed, where he and Lachlan had slept together so many times. Then he stared at Jack's bed. Lachlan would probably sleep there again. Kit thought of crawling into Jack's bed so Lachlan would sleep with him. But that wouldn't work. Lachlan would just sleep in his own bed.

Sighing, he removed his clothes. Then, naked, he slid into Lachlan's bed. He inhaled the pillow and sheets deeply, drawing in as much of Lachlan's scent as he could. If only he were a cat, then his sense of smell would be so much stronger. He pulled the blankets around his body, trying to imagine that it was Lachlan holding him tight and that Lachlan was in the bed with him.

But the sheets felt cool against his bare skin, and he could sense Lachlan in the next room, along with all the sadness and confusion Lachlan felt.

Kit squeezed his eyes tight. He was alone, completely and absolutely alone, as if he had never found his witch in the first place.

The distance between them felt insurmountable.

Still, he had not slept the previous night, and exhaustion quickly dragged him under.

At some point, he woke.

Lachlan's deep, even breaths filled the space. Kit inhaled deeply, bringing as much air as he could into his lungs. The air he breathed might have been in Lachlan's lungs.

He inched closer across the bed until Kit hung off the edge of the mattress. As quietly as he could, he slipped from the bed and onto the floor. He crawled. He shivered, the air in the room so much cooler than beneath the blankets. But he needed to be nearer

to his witch.

He knelt by Jack's bed, staring down at Lachlan's face. Even in sleep, Lachlan's face puckered with worry. The urge to reach out and stroke his furrowed brow was strong. The need to climb into bed with Lachlan was all-consuming.

Kit dropped his head. Lachlan would not want that. His hands clenched open and shut. He whined. He should go back to bed and try to get more sleep. But he couldn't get himself to budge.

So Kit lay down on the floor and curled in on himself beside the bed.

Listening to Lachlan breathe, Kit fell back asleep.

CHAPTER 14

Gentle snores penetrated Lachlan's sleep. He turned to gaze at the other bed.

Empty. Lachlan frowned. He leaned forward and looked at the floor by the side of his bed.

Kit lay curled on his side, arms wrapped around himself, knees tucked to his chest. He snored softly in his sleep. His cat ears twitched. His half tail curled around his naked hip.

A small sound escaped him, almost like a cat's whimper.

Lachlan's heart ached.

Kit had slept on the cold floor just to be near him. Lachlan squeezed his eyes shut and let out a breath. Then he rose, careful to avoid Kit's prone form. He got the blankets from the other bed and laid them carefully over Kit before climbing back into bed.

He peered down at Kit, letting himself stare. He never got to properly look at Kit. Kit always watched him with such sad eyes full of yearning. Lachlan couldn't bear to see the pain he caused. So he never looked at Kit.

But now he could look freely. He still couldn't get over how beautiful Kit was, with his rich long dark hair caressing his brown skin. Long eyelashes rested against high cheek bones. Plump lips parted in sleep.

The blankets covered Kit's form, but Kit had a lovely body, tall and toned, albeit a bit thin. Lachlan had noticed a few scars, lines of faded white that marked Kit's skin, which must have been hidden beneath the fur. Although, the scars did nothing to detract from his stunning beauty.

A man like this would never look twice at me .

And now a man like this seemed to look nowhere else but at him.

Minutes ticked by. Lachlan stared. Slowly his body relaxed. The fear and anxiety that had coiled so tightly in his chest released. He still didn't really know Kit, but with him like this, resting in sleep, Lachlan found it easier to be at ease near Kit. He seemed less scary. Less intimidating.

After a few more moments, Kit's eyes fluttered open. Lachlan considered pulling away and pretending he hadn't been staring. But he was tired. And he didn't want to avoid Kit right now.

A smile stretched across Kit's lips, and his green eyes sparkled with joy at the sight of Lachlan.

Then all of a sudden, as if remembering yesterday, his eyes dimmed. His smile fell. He bit his lip as uncertainty clouded his features.

"I just wanted to be closer," Kit whispered. "I just wanted to be near you. I'm sorry, Lachlan." He hunched his shoulders.

"It's all right. I don't mind," Lachlan found himself saying, and it was true. He didn't mind.

They stared at each other for several minutes.

“Are you scared of me?” Kit asked.

“No. I’m not scared. It’s just—” He sighed. “—it’s a lot to take in. I know you as a cat. I don’t really know you as a human.”

Kit lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry for being two-formed. I’m sorry for being a human.”

The words caused Lachlan’s chest to convulse. “Oh, Kit.” Without a second thought, he reached out and placed a hand on Kit’s shoulder that wasn’t covered by the blanket.

Kit’s breath stuttered. He freed his hand to clasp at Lachlan’s, like a lifeline. He gripped tightly, gaze fixed on their joined hands. Kit’s hand felt so warm and soft on Lachlan’s.

“Have your feelings towards me changed now that you’ve rediscovered your human form?” Lachlan asked.

“You’re my witch,” Kit said matter-of-factly. “I love you.”

Lachlan’s throat seized. Was it really so simple for Kit?

“Since the moment we met, you’ve been kind and caring. You saved me. You fed me. You keep me warm, and you look after me.” Kit leaned towards their joined hands. He pressed his forehead against the back of Lachlan’s hand. His whole body seemed to curl around the part where the two of them joined.

“And every day together, I adore you more and more,” Kit said. “I’ve been so happy with you. Happier than I’ve ever been in my life. I am so proud to be your familiar, to be yours. I love you.”

“And that hasn’t changed at all?”

Green eyes snapped to his. “No. Nothing has changed. Why would it?” Then he lowered his gaze. “Except it has. It’s changed for you. Because you don’t want me anymore. You don’t want a two-form familiar.” Kit gnawed at his bottom lip.

Lachlan wanted to deny it. He wanted to take the pain from Kit. But it would be a lie. Everything would be so much simpler if Kit were merely a cat. Everything would still be as it had been.

“Do you still care for me, even a little bit?” Kit asked, voice so small.

“I do. I do care for you. I just...” Lachlan just didn’t know how.

“And am I still your familiar?” Kit asked.

“I don’t know.”

Kit whimpered at that. His gaze searched Lachlan’s face. “And do you still love me?” His voice strained.

It was too much. Lachlan couldn’t say he still loved Kit. Not now. And he couldn’t say anything else. So he looked away.

“You said you were lonely.” Kit’s hand on Lachlan’s was like a vice. “I was lonely too. But together, we weren’t lonely. I was your familiar, and you were my witch. We were happy. Don’t you remember?”

Kit’s words knocked the air from Lachlan’s lungs. “Of course I remember. You made me so happy.”

“But not anymore.” Kit’s voice sounded defeated.

Lachlan squeezed his eyes shut.

From Kit’s words, it was clear his feelings for Lachlan had not changed at all. Could it really be so simple? Could they really just continue as if nothing had changed?

But something had changed! Everything had changed.

Still, perhaps Lachlan could try to be...something with Kit, in some form. He just didn’t know what.

“I’m not sure what is happening.” Lachlan looked into Kit’s green eyes. “But I care about you, and the time with you has been wonderful...and I don’t want to lose you. I just need to process.”

Kit’s expression turned hopeful. “I don’t want to lose you either.”

Lachlan smiled. “And maybe...” He hesitated. “Maybe it would be all right if you slept the rest of the night with me.”

Kit’s eyes widened. “Really? With you?” He practically jumped to his feet, the blankets sliding to the floor.

Lachlan froze, eyes widening at the sudden realisation that Kit still wore nothing. His gaze zeroed in on Kit’s soft cock nestled amongst dark curls, and his dangling balls.

Panic spiked. When he’d suggested sleep, it had been a spur-of-the-moment thought. In his mind, he’d imagined the both of them sleeping together, nothing more. Just comfortable, content sleep, nothing sexual. After all, neither had slept well recently.

Lachlan had never been this close to a naked man before. Except for when Kit had shifted on top of him.

Suddenly, a very naked Kit was crawling beneath the blankets and pressing that very naked body against Lachlan's. At least Lachlan wore undershorts.

Soft, warm skin pressed against skin. Kit's arms wrapped around Lachlan's waist. Kit hooked a slender thigh over Lachlan's, drawing the two of them intimately close. Muscles tensed and relaxed as Kit shuffled closer.

Kit let out a happy breath.

Lachlan's heart raced, every nerve in his body tense. And his cock took notice of the very naked, very handsome man pressed tightly against him.

Lachlan inhaled, trying to calm himself, but Kit's musky scent filled his nose, and Lachlan's cock stood at complete attention. Thankfully no part of Kit's body pressed against Lachlan's erection.

Kit nuzzled against Lachlan's throat and jaw, purring. "I've missed you so much," Kit whispered. "I love you."

Lachlan closed his eyes, counting slowly backwards. He placed a hand on Kit's arm draped over his waist. "I care about you too. Now let's sleep."

Though Lachlan did not know how he'd manage to sleep with Kit's naked form draped over him.

CHAPTER 15

Lachlan couldn't sleep.

Which was fine. Just fine.

He'd just lie here the whole night in a small, crowded bed with Kit. With the incredibly sexy, naked Kit, who pressed tightly against Lachlan's body and who would every now and then snuggle closer.

It was fine. He could do this.

Lachlan would just lie here, more aroused than he'd ever been in his life, cock aching with need, and not move. He had definitely not thought this whole thing through when he suggested Kit sleep with him. But Kit had been in so much pain. And he'd been so desperate and eager for Lachlan's affection.

Lachlan had been doing a kindness suggesting that they sleep together. After all, his actions had caused Kit so much pain even though that had not been his intention. He'd thought of nothing more than just nearness and comfort. Which honestly, he'd kind of needed too.

Now Lachlan was trying with all his might to will his erect cock away. But how was he meant to do that?

Kit, this stunning man, kept rubbing against him as if wanting to get closer to Lachlan. Which honestly seemed impossible. He also kept making soft purring

noises. Which Lachlan also found arousing.

“This is so nice.” Kit’s breath brushed against Lachlan’s skin.

Lachlan suppressed a shiver.

“Thank you, Lachlan,” Kit said. “Thank you for letting me sleep with you. I missed you so much.” Kit nuzzled Lachlan’s throat, inhaling deeply. “You smell so nice.”

Lachlan’s cock jerked. Every muscle in Lachlan’s body coiled like a tight spring ready to explode.

“It’s all right,” Lachlan said tightly.

Kit sighed and squeezed Lachlan.

“But we should sleep. We both need to sleep. I’m tired.” Lachlan’s voice sounded stiff and tight.

Kit sighed. “Yes. Sleep. We will sleep together.” And then as if Lachlan’s words were a command, Kit’s body relaxed. After a few seconds, his breathing evened.

Lachlan couldn’t believe it.

How could Kit sleep so easily when they lay so intimately together? And Kit just happily fell asleep as if it was nothing. Nothing!

Lachlan wanted to laugh. Or more accurately, he wanted to stroke his aching cock.

Seconds, minutes, or hours slid by. Lachlan didn’t know. And all that time, Lachlan lay wide awake, staring at the ceiling.

Every wriggling motion of Kit's body, every huff of air against skin, every time Kit's nose pressed against Lachlan's throat, each and every time Kit did anything, Lachlan's entire focus zeroed in on that movement.

And as he lay awake, images filled his mind. What would it feel like for Kit's hand to slide lower down his stomach and touch Lachlan's cock? What would it feel like for Kit to stroke him? Lachlan's dick twitched.

What if he wore nothing too? What if instead of nuzzling, Kit bit and sucked at Lachlan's neck? What if they kissed whilst their hands roamed each other's bodies and skin?

His gut tensed, and his cock throbbed. He tried to keep his heart rate and breathing even, but the fantasies and desires rose inside him. If he were alone, he'd take himself in hand. But he was not alone.

"Lachlan," Kit whispered, sounding half-asleep.

Lachlan jerked. "You're awake!"

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Kit asked. "Aren't you tired?"

"I..." Lachlan couldn't find the words. "I... I have a..."

Kit propped himself up, hand splayed on Lachlan's chest, above Lachlan's pounding heart.

"Oh." Kit paused. "Oh. I see. I can feel it. You're aroused. That's why you can't sleep?" He leaned closer, gazing into Lachlan's eyes. "You want me." Kit inhaled sharply. "You want to fuck me."

Lachlan's hands spasmed in the sheets. His cock strained in his undershorts. Lachlan closed his eyes, trying to calm himself down.

"I want you too, Lachlan. I want to fuck you too." Kit's hand slid lower, along Lachlan's sternum, fingers grazing the flat planes of his stomach, still going lower. "You're so beautiful. The most beautiful out of everyone in the world. I want to touch you," Kit said, voice husky, all traces of sleepiness gone. "I want to make you feel good."

Lachlan bit his lip as a moan escaped him.

"I can make you feel good. Please, let me make you feel good, Lachlan. Please." Kit brushed his nose against Lachlan's jaw. His slender hand stopped at the hair below Lachlan's navel. He slid his fingers through the curls, his hand resting above Lachlan's groin. "I want us to feel good together."

Lachlan gasped. The sound was loud in the room.

Pissing potions. He wanted this. He wanted Kit. He burned for him.

Maybe he shouldn't want his familiar, especially when everything was so confused between them. But he did. His dick ached for Kit. And Kit wanted him. He'd made that clear. So if they both wanted this, wanted each other, why should Lachlan deny them?

Because he is your familiar, and you shouldn't want him.

But Lachlan's body refused to listen to him. The arousal thrummed through his blood.

"Lachlan?" Kit's voice was so soft.

Lachlan couldn't resist. "Yes," Lachlan breathed. "I want you. But I... I don't know what to do. I've never done anything like this before."

Kit pushed the sheets away and straddled Lachlan's hips, arse settling on Lachlan's groin. Lachlan groaned at the pressure on his dick. He lifted his hips, seeking more friction.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you. I'll make you feel so good." Then Kit leaned forward, and his mouth found Lachlan's.

Lachlan gasped into the feather-light kiss. Kit's hands cupped his cheeks. They held still, lips pressed together as if testing the waters. And still, this sweet, gentle kiss felt cataclysmic, like Lachlan's whole world was rewriting itself.

Then Kit opened his mouth, moving it against Lachlan's. And after a moment's hesitation, Lachlan copied the movement. Kit groaned as their lips danced together. Kit's tongue slid into Lachlan's, pressing and tasting. Lachlan gripped Kit's shoulders, trying not to lose himself in the taste and sensation of Kit.

Kit broke the kiss. He reached down and tugged at the hem of Lachlan's undershorts. He lifted off Lachlan.

"Raise your hips," Kit whispered. "I want you naked."

Lachlan did as he was told, and Kit removed his undershorts. Lachlan cried out as Kit lay down on top of him, naked skin pressing against naked skin as they sank into the mattress. Their legs slotted together. And as Kit settled on top of him, their cocks lined up.

Kit rocked and ground against him. Lachlan gripped Kit's hips, urging him on as the delicious friction sent sparks of ecstasy cascading through his body.

“Hexes!” Lachlan squeezed his eyes shut. He wrapped a leg around Kit’s strong thigh. He cried out, flinging his head back as Kit thrust against him, causing their cocks to rub and frot.

Kit kissed him, and Lachlan gasped into the kiss. Kit clutched at Lachlan’s arms and pressed his lips along Lachlan’s neck and throat as he continued to grind against him.

“You’re so beautiful, Lachlan. So beautiful, my witch.”

Lachlan’s fingers gripped Kit’s plump arse. Kit’s tail wrapped around Lachlan’s wrist, holding him tight. Their bodies kept rocking together as delicious pleasure like he’d never known made him dizzy and light-headed. Kit’s touch, scent, and taste overwhelmed him. Nothing existed but Kit and this bliss.

“I want you to feel good,” Kit said. “Let me make you feel good.”

Lachlan sobbed as he ground against Kit.

But then Kit pulled away, and Lachlan cried out with the loss.

Kit slid down his body, pressing kisses, licking, and nipping at Lachlan’s overly sensitive skin. Lachlan squirmed and moaned with need. He gasped as Kit tongued his navel. Then Kit’s hand wrapped around his aching cock and squeezed.

Lachlan thrust into the grip, keening as Kit stroked him.

“You smell so good.” Kit’s cheek pressed against Lachlan’s dick rubbing against it.

Lachlan bit his lip as Kit nuzzled his member, pressing soft kisses along the length. Then Kit’s tongue slithered over the tip, sliding around the flared head, licking and tonguing at the slit.

Lachlan's hands spasmed in the bed-sheets. His balls pulled in tight. "Kit... Kit... I'm not going to last."

Kit made a pleased noise, clearly not disturbed by this information. Instead of pulling back or slowing down, he opened his lips and took Lachlan's cock inside his mouth, sucking him in.

Lachlan moaned and thrashed. He thrust and whimpered as warm, wet bliss wrapped around his length, taking him deep.

Kit's hands gripped his hips, urging him to thrust. Lachlan's hand scrambled at Kit's shoulder, fingers digging into skin. Kit made slurping, moaning noises. His hands caressed Lachlan's thighs.

Lachlan threw his head back, eyes squeezed shut as the heat and tension mounted in his groin.

"Oh! Oh, Kit! I can't..." He groaned.

Unbelievable pleasure seared through his body. His dick jerked in Kit's mouth, and he came, shooting his seed into Kit's welcoming mouth.

Kit sucked and drank him down.

After several moments, Lachlan slumped onto the bed.

Panting, Kit scrambled up on top of him. "Your pleasure tastes delicious," Kit whispered. He leaned over Lachlan, face pressed against Lachlan's neck as he jerked himself.

In a haze, Lachlan reached out and wrapped his hand around Kit's.

Kit released his own cock. Then Lachlan was holding Kit's hot, hard, leaking cock in his hand, and he was stroking it.

Kit panted. The slapping sound filled the room.

“Lachlan!” Kit cried out. “Lachlan! My witch!”

Then suddenly Kit's body jerked. Warm seed splattered in bursts over Lachlan's stomach and cock. Kit groaned as his orgasm flowed through him.

After several seconds, Kit collapsed on top of him, wrapping his arms around Lachlan.

CHAPTER 16

Lachlan stared at the ceiling, Kit's seed cooling on his stomach and groin. Lachlan's arousal and pleasure ebbed as his breathing and heartbeat slowed. Kit fumbled for Lachlan's undershorts, which he used to quickly wipe them.

Slowly, the reality of what had just happened sank into his mind.

He'd had sex with Kit. He'd experienced his first time with another. And it was with his familiar. It had been amazing and everything he hoped his first time would be.

Still, the truth was he'd fucked his familiar.

Was that even allowed? Surely there must rules against it.

And not only that, but he'd managed to further complicate their already very complicated relationship. At the moment, he already struggled to assimilate his concept of Kit as a human and as his cat familiar. And now he'd just slept with Kit in his human form.

Kit's body sagged against Lachlan. "I love you," Kit whispered. His arm wrapped around Lachlan's stomach. After several moments, his breathing evened out as he fell asleep.

Lachlan wrapped his arms around Kit, squeezing him tight as the guilt gnawed at him. Why had he done this? Why had he made everything worse and more complicated by letting his libido run away from him?

Lachlan's mind raced. The minutes slipped by. He needed space. He needed to think out what had just happened. Careful as he could be, he slid from Kit's embrace, holding his breath. He quickly dressed, glancing at Kit's sleeping form to check he didn't wake. His cat ears twitched in his sleep.

As Lachlan crept to the door, a pang of guilt flashed inside him for leaving Kit like this. Kit didn't deserve this. But everything was just happening too fast.

And Lachlan wasn't leaving Kit forever. He just needed a moment to breathe and think. Then they could talk and work things out. He closed the door behind him. He padded across the main room to the front door. He pulled on his robes and hat and left the apartment.

Snow lay heavily on the stairs and in the alley below. And still, it kept falling.

How long would this snowstorm last?

Pulling his robes tighter around him, he ran down the stairs and to the bakery door. It swung open and then slammed shut behind him as he dashed inside. He glanced at the door. It had never slammed like that before.

He stood in the darkness of the bakery. After a few seconds, the lanterns flickered awake.

Odd. They usually lit far quicker than that.

Letting out a breath, Lachlan tried to embrace the calm of the bakery, of his hearth, of his safe space. He just needed a little time to collect his thoughts. Then he'd talk to Kit again, and they'd work everything out.

He took off his hat and robes and set to work. With the bakery shut during the

snowstorm, it didn't need the same level of preparation. But they'd still be using the space to make food for the family. And this was still Lachlan and his family's hearth. It needed to be cared for.

He lit the incense and said a blessing at the altar. He created a simmer pot on the stove and brewed some tea.

He took a sip of the tea. He wrinkled his nose in shock at the harsh, bitter taste.

"What?" Lachlan never made a bad cup of tea.

The stove sizzled. Lachlan turned to watch the simmer pot boil over, the water steaming as it hit the hot metal.

"Curses!" He grabbed the handle, pulling the pot off the burner. He cried out as the heat singed his hand. He released the cauldron, and it fell off the stove, spilling its contents onto the floor.

Hand still burning, he stared at the watery mess.

How had that happened? And why had he just grabbed the handle like that?

From there, everything continued to go wrong.

He knocked over a basket of dried herbs, scattering them across the floor. The oven smoked until he bent over, coughing. When he mixed ingredients to make bread, he got the measurements confused, and it ended up a sticky, unusable mess. With a cry of frustration, he tossed the dough into a bowl. The bowl clattered and fell to the floor, making more mess.

How is this happening?

He gritted his teeth as he cleaned up the floor once again. This never happened to Lachlan. He never had a bad day in the bakery. He was a hearth and kitchen witch. The strongest in the family. This was where he thrived. This was where he found peace and strength.

He took a step back from the counter, trying to calm his breathing. He sat down, but the chair did not move directly behind him to catch him. He cried out as he knocked the chair over and fell to the floor.

Lachlan closed his eyes.

Something is wrong. I am wrong.

Was this because of Kit? Was he being punished for taking a shifter as his familiar? Or for having sex with his familiar? Had he polluted and distorted his magic?

Lachlan rose, rubbing his arse.

The door to the bakery opened. "Morning, Lachlan."

Lachlan spun to face Grady.

"I had sex with Kit!" Lachlan blurted.

Grady froze.

"I had sex with my familiar, and now I think my magic is wrong as punishment!" Lachlan's voice shook.

Grady closed the door behind him. "I see."

“Is that wrong? Did I do wrong?” Lachlan’s voice cracked. “Is my magic not working because I slept with my familiar?”

Grady frowned. “I doubt it. Ever since you found out Kit is a shifter, you’ve been off. I think your mind isn’t clear, so it’s probably affecting your magic.”

“So there aren’t any rules about sleeping with familiars?”

Grady seemed to think for a second. “I mean, normally familiars aren’t shifters. But he is. So I’m not sure there are clear rules about this. I mean he wanted to have sex, right?”

“Yes.” Lachlan thought of the night before, of Kit’s eagerness to touch Lachlan, to please him. His cheeks flushed. “Yes, he did.”

“And you wanted to have sex with Kit, right?”

Lachlan nodded. He’d definitely wanted to. “I did.” He ducked his head as the heat spread down his neck. “It was my first time...with anyone.” He didn’t allow Grady to respond to that. “I’m so confused and don’t know what to do.”

Grady stared at him for several seconds. Then he stepped forward and clasped Lachlan on the shoulder. “Look, this whole situation is pretty unusual. I don’t think there are clear rules about this because, like I said, shifters aren’t normally familiars.” He paused. “But you want my advice?”

“Please!”

“I think you have three options,” Grady said. “One, you can try having a relationship with Kit, being romantically involved and having sex. You don’t have to rush into it. You can just take it slow.”

Lachlan's stomach tightened. "But what if it's wrong?"

"Like I said, you're in an unusual situation and I don't think there are set rules. If you both want to be in a relationship, if you both want to have sex, whilst also being a familiar and a witch, then why not?"

Lachlan frowned, could it really be that simple?

"Two, you can try and be friends. No sex, no romance, just friends whilst he is also your familiar." Grady grimaced. "But I'll be honest. I see how Kit looks at you. He wants option number one. He loves you, he desires you, and he also wants to be your familiar."

Lachlan's throat tightened. "I think you're right." He supposed Kit's yearning for him had been very obvious to everyone. "What about the third option?"

"You part ways."

The floor felt like it dropped from beneath Lachlan's feet. "No," he whispered.

"He's only been your familiar for a little while, a witch-familiar bond can be broken with space and time if it is new," Grady said. "It's not like a mating ritual, which is permanent. If you parted, told him you were releasing him from being your familiar, that bond would eventually weaken and then dissipate into nothingness."

Nothingness. Their bond would dissipate into nothingness.

Nausea rolled through Lachlan. Everything in his body rejected Grady's words. Losing Kit, not having him as a familiar, not having him in his life—just the thought sent Lachlan into a wild panic.

“No.” Lachlan shook his head. “No. Not that.”

Grady squeezed Lachlan’s shoulder. “Then I think you have only one option left, little brother.”

Lachlan frowned. “I guess... I guess I do.”

Grady gave him a wry smile. “And uh... I should probably tell you. You and Kit were not exactly quiet last night. Be prepared for everyone knowing what you got up to.” Grady clapped Lachlan on the shoulder. “Thin walls and all. But I’m glad to hear you enjoyed your first time.” Grady chuckled.

Lachlan’s jaw dropped as embarrassment flooded his entire body.

Grady laughed even harder.

CHAPTER 17

With deft movements, Cas intricately folded the red-coloured paper into a star. “And once it’s done, you can attach ribbon or string and hang them up.” Cas lifted the newly created decoration. “We can hang them up everywhere using all different coloured bits of paper.”

“It looks complicated.” Graal took the star from Cas and examined it.

“See how you go. I’ll show you how to make it, step by step.” Cas placed a hand on Graal’s thigh before handing out bits of paper to Briar, Wulfric, Leo, and Kit.

Kit took a gold piece of paper. He glanced around the apartment and held in a sigh.

He’d woken to an empty bed, no sign of Lachlan anywhere. After their night together, he’d thought things had changed.

But then he’d woken alone. He didn’t know what to think now.

When Kit had emerged from the room and asked where Lachlan was, Grady’s response had been, “He’s down in the bakery.” He’d taken one look at Kit’s face, sighed, and said, “I’ll go speak to him.”

Kit had wanted to go to Lachlan. But Grady had suggested he stay and let Grady talk to his brother first. Then Kit had sat in the main room by the fire, whilst others tried to get him to eat and drink tea. Now they made Christmas decorations.

Kit copied Cas, making stars one after another. The others talked and sang Christmas carols. Kit didn't. He tried not to think about what Lachlan was saying to Grady downstairs. But it was no use. He could think of nothing but Lachlan.

The door opened. Grady and Lachlan appeared.

Kit perked up but stayed where he was. Lachlan removed his robes and turned. Their gazes held. Lachlan took a deep breath. Then he walked straight towards Kit.

Kit's heart thumped against his ribcage. Desperately he tried to read Lachlan's expression and sense his mood.

He's nervous.

Kit's throat tightened.

"Are you going to join us?" Cas asked. "We're making Christmas stars."

"Aren't there enough decorations?" Lachlan glanced around the room, giving a weak smile.

Cas scoffed. "There is no such thing as too many Christmas decorations, brother dearest."

Lachlan looked at Kit. "Actually, I wanted to talk to Kit. In private."

Kit jumped to his feet. "Yes! We can talk."

Lachlan led the way to his room, Kit on his heels, body vibrating with tension. Lachlan closed the door behind them. Kit stood fixed in the middle of the room, watching every minute movement Lachlan made.

“Let’s sit.” Lachlan gestured to his bed.

Kit dropped onto the bed as Lachlan sat beside him, brows furrowing.

He is unhappy. He is unhappy with me. He is unhappy we had sex.

Pangs of pain and panic rolled through his gut. He clasped his tail, squeezing it as if he could hold it tight enough that he wouldn’t fall apart.

“I spoke with Grady, and I’ve done some thinking.” Lachlan stared at his knees.

He is going to ask me to leave. He decided he’s had enough. Lachlan is going to stop being my witch. I’m going to stop being his familiar. I’ll lose Lachlan forever!

“I will stay a cat!” Kit cried out.

Lachlan turned towards him, eyes widening.

“Once I work out how to shift back into a cat, I will stay that way. Forever! I promise. Then I can be your cat familiar, and you won’t ever have to see me as a human ever again. You can forget I have two forms. We’ll pretend you never saw me as a human.” The words tumbled together.

“Then you could love me as your cat familiar. Then you will pat me, hold me, and love me.” Kit’s voice strained. “You’ll let me sleep with you. I won’t be lonely, and you won’t be lonely.” Tears slipped from his eyes. “We’ll both be happy together. And you will never have to look at me in my human form ever again. I promise!”

“Oh. Oh, Kit. No,” Lachlan whispered. He reached out and gripped Kit’s hands, squeezing tightly.

“Please.” Kit would beg if he had to. “Please.” He fell to his knees before Lachlan, clasping his legs.

Lachlan made a choked noise.

“I promise I can find a way to turn back into a cat,” Kit said. “Then we’ll be happy, and it will be just as it was. Please, Lachlan.” He rubbed his wet face against Lachlan’s legs.

“Kit, no.” Lachlan leaned down and stroked Kit’s hair and shoulders. He shook his head. “No. It isn’t right, and I don’t want that.”

Kit whimpered. He sobbed.

Lachlan doesn’t want me anymore. He doesn’t love me.

By turning into a human, he’d ruined everything between them. Kit closed his eyes as all the fight went out of him.

“Kit. That’s not what I meant. I don’t want you to stay a cat.” Lachlan crawled down onto the floor. He pulled Kit against him, stroking his back.

Kit leaned into the touch as he sobbed.

“I’m so sorry, Kit. I’m saying this all wrong,” Lachlan said. “Kit, just listen, please. I don’t want to lose you.”

Kit froze in Lachlan’s arms.

“But this is all so new to me. I’d never been with anyone before last night. I’d never even kissed anyone.” Lachlan’s hands moved up and down soothingly on Kit’s back.

“I’d like to take things slow between us. I like you, Kit, not just as a cat, but as a human too. I want to see what we could be to each other.”

Kit pulled back, gazing into Lachlan’s eyes.

Lachlan gave a shaky smile. “But is it all right if we take things a little slow?”

Kit nodded. “I can do that. I... I don’t quite know what you mean. But we can be slow. We can be whatever you want.”

Lachlan laughed. “I just mean that we can spend time together and learn more about each other as humans.” He paused. “Although, I suppose you know everything about me. I’ve told you so much about myself.” He cupped Kit’s cheek. “But I’d like to do things with you and get to know you not just as a cat and see how we fit together.”

“And I can still be your familiar?”

Lachlan let out a breath. “I’d be happy if you stayed my familiar.” Then his gaze flittered over Kit’s face and landed on his lips. “I’d like to kiss you now. Can I kiss you?”

The air stuttered in Kit’s lungs. “Please.”

Then Lachlan leaned forward and gently pressed their lips together.

Kit melted into the kiss and Lachlan’s embrace. The stress, pain, and worry melted from his body as their lips moved together. After several moments, the kiss broke. They stared into each other’s eyes, neither speaking for minutes.

“You’re so handsome,” Lachlan whispered.

Kit laughed with joy as it bubbled up inside him. Lachlan laughed too.

Then Lachlan hesitated, gaze snagging on Kit's ear. "Can I touch your ear?"

"You can touch me anywhere!" Kit leaned towards him.

"I mean, does it hurt?" Lachlan asked, staring at the ear that was half-missing.

"No." Kit shook his head. "It's been healed for a long time."

With a gentle touch, Lachlan reached up and stroked his cat ear. Kit shivered.

"Oh, sorry." Lachlan withdrew his hand.

Kit grabbed his hand. He kissed it. "It's fine. It's just sensitive. That's all." Kit lifted Lachlan's hand, rubbing it against his cheek.

Lachlan smiled. Then he sighed, and Kit could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

Kit frowned. "You're tired." He could feel Lachlan's tiredness through the bond. And Kit realised he was pretty tired too.

"I haven't slept properly the last two nights."

"Well, you should sleep now." Kit jumped to his feet and pulled Lachlan up. Then he reached for the sheets of Lachlan's bed and tugged them down. He then gestured for Lachlan to lie down.

With a wry smile, Lachlan took off his clothes except for his undershorts and climbed into the bed. "You're tired too."

“We are going slow.” Kit paused. “Does that mean we can sleep together or...?”

Lachlan propped himself up on his elbows. “We can sleep together. Maybe some kissing and cuddling. But mainly nothing more. Is that okay?”

“That is wonderful and perfect!” Kit began to strip. “You are tired. I am tired. We will cuddle, sleep, and kiss. But no sex.” Kit swallowed. “And will you still be here when I wake up?”

Lachlan sighed. “I’m so sorry about that, Kit. That was cruel.” Lachlan reached for Kit and pulled him down into his arms.

Kit snuggled against Lachlan, and Lachlan drew the blankets over them.

“I’ll be here when you wake.” Lachlan wrapped his arms around Kit. “I promise, Kit.” And he kissed Kit on the forehead, sealing the promise.

CHAPTER 18

Lachlan woke with a sleeping Kit curled around him. Lachlan stroked Kit's soft hair, running his fingers along the edges of a cat ear. He smiled.

His stomach rumbled. He'd barely eaten the last two days as the worry and fretting had stolen his appetite. But Lachlan did not rise. He did not want Kit to wake alone. So he stayed put, holding his familiar, listening to the sound of snow falling against the window and Kit's even breathing.

It surprised Lachlan how natural this felt. It shouldn't.

He'd only slept next to Kit once before in his human form, and technically, he'd not slept. Before that, he'd never shared a bed with a man. But now it seemed that since he had accepted he was giving himself and Kit a chance, he couldn't escape how perfect Kit as a human felt in his arms.

He stared at the window for a while. At some point, he fell back asleep. They both slept past midday. They must have needed the sleep.

When they woke, they just lay in bed, cuddling and kissing. Lachlan was beyond aroused. But he was determined to take it slow, at least for a little while longer. And Kit respected that.

Eventually, they exited the room in search of food.

"We've got bread, cheese, and sliced meat here if you're hungry," Grady said when

they appeared.

Cas raised a mug, his aura glowing brightly around him. “And mulled wine and Christmas cookies. Lots of Christmas cookies!”

He’d expected his siblings to make jokes and tease him and Lachlan like they usually did with one another. But although they watched Lachlan and Kit with curious gazes, none commented. It was as if they didn’t want to disturb whatever delicate thing was taking place between Kit and Lachlan.

“Sounds good.” Lachlan took Kit’s hand, and they joined his family before the fire.

“And don’t worry, Leo and I took care of the bakery today,” Jasper said.

“We explained to the bakery that you hadn’t forgotten them.” Leo smiled.

“Thank you,” Lachlan said.

All the chairs had been taken, so they sat on the rug. Kit nestled against him, and when Lachlan wrapped his arm around Kit, Kit beamed. Neither spoke as they ate, both exhausted after the emotions of the past two days. Instead, they cuddled, ate, drank, and listened to the others talk as they sat by the fire.

They retired early and slept in each other’s arms. At times, they woke and shared long, slow kisses, which set Lachlan’s blood on fire and made him question this whole going-slow thing.

The next morning, they rose early. The bakery door swung open as Lachlan and Kit approached. Lachlan smiled as they entered, and the door shut gently behind them. Lachlan let out a breath as the lanterns flickered into life.

“Thank you.” Lachlan bowed his head. This was better. This was right. “Shall we prepare the bakery?”

“What do you need me to do? I have hands now.” Kit smiled. He lifted his hands, opening and shutting them. “I can do lots more with these compared to my paws.”

Lachlan laughed. “How about you start by putting wood in the oven.”

Kit piled wood inside it, and Lachlan brewed an elderflower and linden blossom tea. As Kit closed the oven door, Lachlan sent out a thought, and the fire sparked into life.

Without being asked, Kit rose and grabbed the broom. He swept and hummed, moving clockwise, at ease in the space as he swept three times around.

Lachlan lit the incense and said a blessing at the altar.

“Tea is ready.” Lachlan poured them each a large steaming mug and handed one to Kit.

“Thank you.” Kit took the cup.

They drank their tea against a counter. Kit leaned against Lachlan, his tail wrapping around him.

Everything ran smoothly. The simmer pot filled the space with positive energy and a divine smell that Lachlan felt he could dance on. The bread rose and baked better than any batch he’d ever made. And when they made cookies, Lachlan and Kit worked in perfect sync.

“Here you are.” Kit handed Lachlan the ingredients, anticipating his every need before Lachlan even voiced them.

“Thank you.” Lachlan smiled.

It was so strange. Now that he’d accepted Kit as a human, he realised how comfortable he felt around him, how he actually already felt like he knew Kit on some bone-deep level.

As Lachlan mixed the ingredients, Kit slid his hand along Lachlan’s waist as he walked to the simmer pot to fill it with more water. It sent a shiver of awareness through Lachlan’s body.

Then Kit collected the dirty equipment and took it to the sink to wash before wiping down the workspace. Everything Kit did just made everything easier.

But how could this all be so easy?

Lachlan barely knew Kit as a human. Yet Kit fit into his bakery and with him so easily. He was perfect. Perfect for Lachlan.

The perfect familiar, whether in his human or cat form.

Lachlan’s throat tightened. He stopped mixing ingredients and walked to Kit.

“Is everything okay?” Kit only just managed to ask before Lachlan was kissing him.

Kit stumbled but then righted himself, laughing as he returned the kiss and clutched at Lachlan’s shoulders.

When the kiss broke, Kit laughed. “What was that for?”

Lachlan let out a breath. “I’m just so glad I found you. I’m so glad I didn’t lose you. You’re wonderful. You’re perfect.” Then he kissed Kit again. And again.

At some point, they returned to work. And for the rest of the day, everything went smoothly in the bakery. When they finished, they went upstairs, laden with bread, cookies, tarts, and pies. They sat, ate, and drank hot chocolate with his family and their partners, everyone complimenting the food.

“This bread is amazing,” Briar said.

Wulfric bit into a meat pie. “This is the best pie I’ve ever eaten.”

Into the night, they sang carols, read ghost stories, and kept eating and drinking. When Kit began to fall asleep by the fire, Lachlan rose and tugged Kit to his feet. “Come on, let’s go to bed.” And they went to their room.

Lachlan closed the door, and he turned to see Kit pulling his shirt over his head. Lachlan let out a breath, gazing at Kit’s lean back. Lachlan removed his shirt. His body felt hot all over, and hunger pooled in his gut.

Kit’s tail poked out from the top of his trousers. They’d have to make adjustments to those. Lachlan couldn’t imagine Kit’s tail being constricted like that was comfortable. Kit’s tail swayed back and forth. Kit stretched his lean arms above his head.

Lachlan’s breath hitched. He wanted Kit. He ached for him.

Now that he’d opened his eyes, everything seemed to just come together so quickly. He stepped up behind Lachlan and wrapped his arms around Kit’s waist. Kit gripped Lachlan’s arms.

Lowering his head, Lachlan kissed Kit’s shoulder. Goosebumps broke out over Kit’s skin. Kit purred with pleasure.

“I know I said I wanted to take this slow.” Once again, Lachlan pressed his lips

against Kit's warm skin. "And it's completely fine if you want to go slow. I'd completely understand that."

Lachlan took a deep breath, inhaling Kit's delicious scent. "But I want you, Kit." He splayed his hand over Kit's abdomen, feeling the muscles tense. "And I'm ready for more than just cuddling and kissing with you. Lots more."

"Like sex?" Kit whispered.

"Yes. But you'll have to guide me." Lachlan let out a nervous laugh. "Everything I've ever done has been with you."

CHAPTER 19

Lachlan's words of want poured over Kit like silk. The sounds of his voice vibrated through Kit, awakening every nerve in his body.

Lachlan wanted him. He wanted to have sex with Kit.

Kit closed his eyes, savouring the moment.

When everything had fallen apart after he'd shifted into a human, all he'd wanted was to fix things and find a way to be back together. Even if it meant being a cat forever and forgetting he'd ever been two-formed, Kit would have done it for Lachlan.

But now he stood as a human in Lachlan's embrace, knowing Lachlan wanted him. Him. In both his forms.

Sleeping in Lachlan's arms, working in the bakery, spending time cuddling with Lachlan by the fire—it had all been perfect. And it was about to get even better.

Kit turned in Lachlan's arms and faced him.

“Will you fuck me?” Kit asked.

Lachlan's mouth fell open. He didn't speak for a second. “I've... I've never done that before.”

Kit squeezed his waist. “I know.”

No one had ever kissed Lachlan but Kit. No one had ever touched him but Kit. And if Kit had his way, no one else ever would.

My witch. All mine.

Kit purred, pressing their bodies close. “Do you want to fuck me?” Kit placed his palm on Lachlan’s chest, feeling the rise and fall. “It will feel so good, your cock inside me, stretching me.” His asshole clenched at the thought. “I’ll be so tight and hot around your cock. It’s been a long time for me.”

Lachlan groaned. “Yes,” he whispered, voice ragged. “I want that.”

Kit kissed and nuzzled his cheek. “I’ll make it good for you. I’ll be so good. I’ll bring you so much pleasure. You’ll spill so hard inside me.”

“Kit,” Lachlan moaned.

Kit smiled against Lachlan’s skin, sliding his hands down to the hem of Lachlan’s pants. He undid them. Then Kit slid his hand beneath the fabric, teasing skin and curls before he reached for Lachlan’s cock.

Lachlan gasped.

“Hmmm,” Kit hummed in appreciation.

Lachlan’s dick was hard and heavy in his hand. Kit smelled Lachlan’s arousal in the air. He tasted it on his tongue and sensed it through their bond. He shivered. He thrust his own cock against Lachlan’s thigh, wishing both their trousers were gone.

Perhaps one day, Lachlan would let Kit fuck him.

But not today. Today he wanted to be fucked.

“You have a lovely cock.” Kit ran his fingers from the thick base to the flared head. “I’ll show you how to use it.” He wrapped his hand around the stiff member and stroked. “I’ll show you how to fuck me good.”

Lachlan thrust into his grip, panting. “Kit!”

“It’ll feel so good. You’ll see. I promise.”

Lachlan made a choking noise. Kit would show his witch all the pleasures they could have together.

“But we need something,” Kit said.

Lachlan blinked at him. “Something?”

“Oil. To ease the way, so you can slide your cock in and out of my arse. Your cock will glide into me, so deep, fucking into me over and over.” Kit teased the slit of Lachlan’s cock, rubbing his finger through the pre-cum that gathered there.

“Fuck,” Lachlan breathed. “Maybe the others...have oil.”

Lachlan smiled. His witch was the cleverest.

Reluctantly, Kit released Lachlan and walked to the door. He opened it and stepped out. Everyone sat by the fire.

“We need oil,” Kit announced.

The conversation died. They all turned to look at him. Their eyes ran over him,

lingering on his shirtless torso and his tented trousers.

“To fuck,” Kit clarified in case that wasn’t clear.

Several snickered, which they then quickly muffled when Grady looked at them. Then Grady strode to a cupboard. He opened it, and a second later, he came to Kit, holding out a small vial.

“Here you are,” Grady said. “This should work.”

Kit nodded. “Thank you.”

“Have fun!” Cas smiled and gave a wave.

“Thank you. We will.” Kit returned to the room and closed the door.

Lachlan stood, mouth ajar, cheeks flushed red.

“Are you all right?” Kit asked.

“You just...you just announced to everyone we are about to fuck.”

“We are about to fuck.” Kit frowned and tilted his head, uncertain what the problem was.

And considering how many of the others he’d heard fuck in the past few days, he really didn’t see the issue. Especially Cas and Graal. The walls shook when they fucked.

Lachlan shook his head. He huffed a laugh. “I...I suppose they already knew. They heard us the other night.”

Kit smiled. “And they will hear us tonight too.”

Lachlan’s eyes widened. Then Kit kissed Lachlan. He was done talking of the others.

CHAPTER 20

For several moments, Kit forgot about fucking and just enjoyed the sensation of their mouths moving together. Still, his cock throbbed, and he could feel Lachlan's answering length beckoning him.

Kit broke the kiss. He reached for Lachlan's trousers and tugged them down before removing his own.

Then he took Lachlan's hand and led him to the bed. They fell on top of each other, kissing and grinding, eager to touch and be touched. He slid his hand along Lachlan's spine and felt his witch shiver.

Their dicks slid deliciously as they frothed, pre-cum making their thrusts smoother. The room filled with the sounds of their moans and gasps.

Kit could so easily lose himself in the taste, touch, and smell of Lachlan. He revelled in the ways their bodies moved together as they ground and sought their pleasure.

He could spend like this. But he wanted Lachlan inside him.

Kit wanted his witch to fuck him.

"Lachlan," Kit gasped, breaking the kiss. "Where did I put the oil?" He'd lost track of it. His witch was distracting with his pretty mouth and lovely dick.

Lachlan pulled back, wide-eyed, hair tousled. "Oh, here." Lachlan leaned towards the

floor, grabbed the bottle, and held it up.

Kit took it. He unscrewed the vial, and the smell of citrus filled the air. Kit turned onto his front, getting onto his hands and knees. With a bit of awkwardness and spillage, he poured oil onto his fingers. Then he reached back.

Kit glanced behind his shoulder. Lachlan's eyes widened as Kit reached for his own entrance. Kit slid a finger inside. He groaned. It had been so long since he'd done this.

His eyes drifted shut as he slid in a second. He gasped as he undulated on his two fingers, sliding them in and out, stretching his channel.

His eyes snapped open as he felt a tender touch on his thigh. Kit looked back. Lachlan stared at Kit's hole. Kit's asshole clenched.

"Can I..." Lachlan trailed off as if uncertain what he was asking for.

Kit licked his lower lip. "Give me your hand."

Lachlan held it out. Kit poured the slick oil over Lachlan's palm and fingers.

"Now what?" Lachlan asked.

"Slide one of your fingers inside me," Kit whispered. "Between mine."

Panting, Kit stretched his fingers apart. Lachlan pressed a finger between them. Then he slowly sank it deep inside. Kit groaned as Lachlan's finger pressed against his. His rim stretched further.

"That's it." Kit gasped. "Slide it in and out."

Gaze filled with wonder and awe, Lachlan did as Kit said. Lachlan's fingers slid alongside Kit's. Kit groaned.

"Another. Add another finger." Kit closed his eyes as four fingers stretched him wide. He whimpered.

"You're so beautiful, Kit," Lachlan said.

Kit's cock jerked, and pre-cum dribbled from his dick.

"Enough," Kit breathed. "It's enough. I need you. Lachlan. Fuck me. Please." He tugged his fingers free, and Lachlan's slid out as well. "Put oil on your cock." He held the vial to Lachlan, who took it with trembling hands.

Lachlan poured the oil onto his hand, then stroked his cock. Lachlan groaned.

Kit reached back, grabbed an arse cheek, and held himself open. "Please, Lachlan. Fuck me. Claim me as yours."

Lachlan came up behind him. He gripped Kit's hip with one hand and lined his cock up with the other. The tip of his dick teased Kit's entrance.

Kit held his breath, anticipation tingling through his body. "I'm ready. Push into me. Fill me with your cock."

Lachlan took a deep breath. Then he groaned as he pressed forward, his cock sliding into Kit. Kit's mouth dropped open as his hole stretched wide with agonising slowness. It burned. But he wanted it so much.

"Lachlan," Kit whispered as he took the length of Lachlan's dick, inch by inch. "Yes!"

“You’re so tight,” Lachlan gasped. “Curses...you feel incredible... Kit... I didn’t know...oh... Kit...” He shuddered as his dick slid completely inside Kit. His hand clutched at Kit’s hips.

Kit took deep, heaving breaths as his body accommodated his witch buried inside him. The burning ebbed. He needed more.

“Claim me. Make me yours. Please,” Kit begged. “Please. Move.” Kit tilted his hips and rocked back, urging Lachlan on.

Then, slowly, Lachlan withdrew, sliding his cock almost completely out. He shoved back in.

They cried out in unison.

And again, Lachlan slid out, until only the tip remained buried inside Kit. Then he thrust, shoving Kit forward. He did it again and again, slowly picking up speed.

“Yes! Like that! Fuck me like that!” Kit cried out, squeezing his eyes shut as Lachlan fucked him hard and fast.

Kit moaned. He belonged on this cock. He should forever be impaled on his witch’s stiff length. Kit shoved himself back, meeting each snap of Lachlan’s hips. Lachlan’s dick rubbed inside his channel, lighting Kit up from the inside. “Oh! Oh!”

Then suddenly, one of Lachlan’s hands released Kit’s hip and gripped his tail. Kit cried out in surprise, eyes snapping open.

Lachlan released him. “Sorry,” he panted. “I didn’t mean?—”

“No! No! Do it again,” Kit yelled.

Tentatively this time, Lachlan wrapped a hand around the base of Kit's tail, whilst continuing to slide in and out of Kit in a slow, steady rhythm.

"Tighter," Kit gasped. "Hold it tighter."

Lachlan squeezed, and Kit groaned, surprised as a jolt of pleasure shot through him. "Oh! Tug it! Please!"

"Like this?" Lachlan tugged his tail.

Kit's cock jerked, and he keened. It was like there was a direct link between his tail and his dick. "Tug my tail hard. Tug it whilst you fuck me."

Lachlan did, tugging Kit's tail as he increased the speed of his thrusts.

"You feel so amazing." Lachlan grunted and groaned.

Kit sobbed with pleasure. Every inch of Kit's body burned with delicious pleasure. Each thrust and tug set him more alight.

"Fuck me. Fuck me. Take me," Kit babbled. "I'm yours. Your familiar. Use me. Spill your seed inside me." Kit cried out as the tension coiled higher and higher inside him. His body tingled. His hands and feet turned numb, and still the pleasure rose.

Kit jolted with each of Lachlan's thrusts. And still, Lachlan kept tugging his tail and pounding his arse.

"Lachlan! Lachlan!" Kit's voice strained as he cried out his witch's name, like a chant, like a blessing, like an incantation.

Then Kit shifted his hips, and that magic spot inside him was being nailed by his

witch's perfect cock.

Kit screamed. His body arched. His toes curled as every nerve in his body burst with pleasure. His cock spurted ropes of thick seed onto the bed.

And above him, Lachlan's broken cries filled his ears. "Kit!" His witch's hips stuttered, and he filled Kit with his hot spend.

CHAPTER 21

Soft hands ran along Kit's back.

"Well, look at you." Lachlan's words drew Kit from his sleep.

Kit purred, wriggling into the touch. Then he paused. Lachlan's hands felt huge.

Kit's eyes snapped open. He lay on Lachlan's chest. His entire body fit on Lachlan's very large chest. Kit lifted his head and stared into Lachlan's smiling face. Kit sprang to his feet. He glanced down.

Paws. Paws covered in fur. His gaze darted around the room. Everything around him had grown bigger whilst he slept.

I'm a cat. I'm a cat again.

"I see you've remembered how to shift." Lachlan leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Kit's furred head.

"Meow," Kit said. Because of course, he'd lost his ability to speak and form words when he returned to being a cat. Kit stared into Lachlan's hazel eyes. "Meow."

Lachlan laughed. "Cat got your tongue?"

Kit stretched his limbs, arching his back, getting used to the feel of the difference in forms. Then he lowered his nose to Lachlan's chest. Nose twitching, he smelled

Lachlan's skin. It was incredible how much stronger his sense of smell was as a cat.

He could smell musk, soap, sweat, smoke, and all the smells of the bakery. He'd missed this, missed being able to smell all the intricacies of Lachlan. He nosed along Lachlan's collarbone, up his neck, and to his jaw. His witch smelled beautiful.

And on top of that, Kit could smell sex and himself. He shoved his nose against Lachlan's skin, inhaling deeply.

"That tickles." Lachlan laughed as he pulled back from Kit's sniffing nose. Lachlan's hands patted and stroked him as if he couldn't stop touching Kit.

But as enjoyable as Kit found it, he needed to explore more. Kit turned on the spot. He jumped onto the floor and prowled around the room. He sprinted back and forth, marvelling at how fast his legs moved.

Lachlan sat up, watching him from the bed.

Kit sprang into the air and landed on Jack's bed. Then he launched himself to Lachlan's bed, landing on his lap.

Lachlan's surprised burst of laughter filled the air.

But Kit was already back on the floor, zipping beneath the beds.

"Kit, what in the world are you doing?" Amusement danced in Lachlan's voice.

I missed using this body.

Kit stopped in the middle of the room. His ears twitched. He could hear whispered voices in one of the other bedrooms. He could distinguish the speakers, Graal and

Cas. He could hear so much better as a cat.

Then he froze.

But how did I become a cat again?

He'd done it unintentionally. The last thing he remembered was the incredible sex. Then sleep. And he'd awoken as a cat.

Was he now stuck as a cat? Would he ever return to his human form again? And if so, could he intentionally do so? Or would he just randomly switch back and forth in his sleep?

That first time he'd turned into a human was to talk to Lachlan. He'd had some control over that. Could he change now?

Kit sat back on his haunches. He closed his eyes.

Be a human. Be a human. Be a human.

Seconds slid by.

Be a human. Be a human. Be a human.

Kit imagined himself talking with his human voice, walking around on two legs. He imagined cupping Lachlan's cheek with his human hand, then leaning in and pressing his human lips to Lachlan's.

Suddenly, a tingling awareness buzzed through his limbs. A rush of energy flowed through him. Then, all at once, bones creaked, limbs stretched, and his body morphed, grew, and shifted.

He opened his eyes, once more a human.

Kit spun to face Lachlan. "I did it!" Kit said, able to form words once again.

Lachlan clapped. "You did."

And all at once, it hit Kit that shifting back to his human form could have been a huge mistake. Because Lachlan had been so pleased to see him as a cat. What if Lachlan had changed his mind and realised he wanted Kit only in that form?

But as Kit gazed into Lachlan's smiling face, he knew the truth: Lachlan wanted him as both a human and a cat. Kit let out a breath as the worry ebbed from his body.

"It seems like we both just needed to relax and let our magic settle for it to work properly," Lachlan said.

Kit stared at his hands, flexing his fingers. "Seems so." Then he stretched, reaching his hands to the ceiling. He laughed at the differences between his forms. He turned to Lachlan.

But Lachlan did not look at Kit's face. Lachlan bit his lip, gaze running over Kit's naked body, before lingering on Kit's dick. A lovely pink flushed Lachlan's cheeks.

Kit huffed a laugh.

Lachlan's gaze snapped to Kit's face. Kit smiled, then he ran his hand down his stomach and wrapped it around his hardening dick. He stroked.

Lachlan's breath hitched. "Will you come back to bed?"

"Shouldn't we go and prepare the bakery?" Kit asked, but he was already prowling

towards the bed.

Lachlan reached for him and tugged Kit on top of him. “The snowstorm is still going. We can head down when we’re ready.”

“Perfect.” Kit pressed Lachlan into the mattress, more than happy to spend a lazy morning naked in bed with his witch.

CHAPTER 22

Lachlan stepped into the bakery on Christmas Eve morning, removing his hat and robes.

“Would you prefer I be in my cat or human form?” Kit asked.

Kit had gotten very good at shifting between his two forms. He had spent the last day of the snowstorm shifting back and forth until he had complete control of his shift. It had been incredible to watch. Although, Kit had been exhausted afterwards and just lay in Lachlan’s lap, being patted.

In the end, the snowstorm had lasted five days, finishing just one week before Christmas. Thankfully, Jack had continued staying at Avery’s house each night after that. Which meant they got the room to themselves. And Lachlan had returned to rising every morning long before dawn to prepare the bakery with Kit, his faithful familiar, by his side.

“Whichever you prefer. I like you as a human and as a cat.” Lachlan kissed Kit on the lips.

Kit tilted his head. “Then maybe I’ll be a cat today.” He stripped, and a moment later, he shifted into his cat form. Kit rubbed against Lachlan’s legs before trotting to his cushion.

Lachlan smiled as he watched Kit curl up and close his eyes. It had been days of bliss, just working and living together. Everything had been beyond perfect.

Everything but for one thing.

It niggled at the back of Lachlan's mind. It had been niggling at him for days. Lachlan moved to the stove, opened it, and placed several logs inside. He set the kettle on top.

"I like you as a human and as a cat." That was what Lachlan had said to Kit. And he'd said similar words many times over the past few days.

And whilst it was true, it wasn't nearly enough.

Lachlan felt so much more for Kit than mere "like." But still, the words he wanted to speak scared him. So many times, they'd been on the tip of his tongue. If Lachlan had an ounce more courage, he might have the strength to speak them.

But he hadn't. Fear held him back.

Fear, because the last time Lachlan had said "I love you" to Kit was just before Kit had shifted into his human form.

Then everything had gone terribly wrong.

And even though that problem had been resolved now, Lachlan couldn't shake the fear that saying the words again would unleash something terrible and ruin everything just like last time.

It was silly. But words had power. As a witch, Lachlan knew that.

So he kept holding the words back, as if "I love you" had become a curse.

Before saying them to Kit, he'd never said the words to anyone who wasn't a family

member. Then he'd said them to Kit, and it had unleashed a world of pain. And saying "I love you" to a human was so much bigger than saying it to a cat.

After shifting, Kit had said "I love you" to Lachlan. Then Kit had said the words again when everything had been a mess between them. He'd not said them since, as if Kit feared the power of the words too.

That night, Kit and Lachlan lay in bed. Sweat cooled on their skin. Their breathing and heartbeats slowly returned to normal. They kissed, hands running over smooth skin.

Kit pulled away and reached for the cloth they kept by the bed and cleaned them up.

"I'm so excited for Christmas tomorrow. Are you?" Kit asked.

"I am." Lachlan stroked his hand over Kit's naked hip. "We'll eat until we can't eat any more, drink hot chocolate and mulled wine, sing Christmas carols, and do presents after lunch."

"I can't wait to give you my Christmas present." Kit propped himself up. "Can I give you one now?"

Lachlan laughed. "Technically we exchange presents tomorrow."

Kit's body sagged slightly. Patience was not Kit's strength, as either a cat or a human.

"But I suppose we could do one each now." Lachlan had bought Kit several presents, including two sets of robes and a hat. Kit had been looking longingly at his and commented on how they should dress similarly, since they were a witch and familiar.

But Lachlan wanted to give Kit something else now. In fact, it might be nice to give it

to him when it was just the two of them away from the family.

Kit immediately perked up. He scrambled from the bed and opened the drawer that belonged to him. Kit grabbed a small rectangular present wrapped in brown paper and clutched it to his chest. He sat on the bed facing Lachlan, eyes wide. His tail swished excitedly behind him.

“I have so many presents for you. Grady gave me a lot of money! I didn’t know what to do with it all, so I bought you presents.” Kit paused. “And presents for your family too.”

Chuckling, Lachlan rose and went to one of his drawers. Kit was still getting used to being paid a wage. At first, he’d been very confused when Grady gave it to him. “Why do I need it? I have a home. Lachlan gives me food. I don’t need money.”

Lachlan was glad he’d found some use for his earnings. He took out a rectangular package wrapped in brown paper, similar to Kit’s, and joined Kit on the bed.

“Here!” Kit thrust his present at Lachlan. His cat ears twitched, a smile stretching across his face.

Lachlan took the present, curious what his familiar had picked out for him. He unwrapped the gift. Kit clasped his hands, bouncing on the bed.

“Oh, Kit.” Lachlan tugged away the brown paper, revealing a small, framed painting of Lachlan and Kit together. They stood at the Christmas markets in front of the family stall and a Christmas tree. Lachlan held Kit in his cat form in his arms. “It’s lovely.” He ran his fingers over the frame.

“You like it?” Kit leaned forward. “I got it from the man who paints portraits at the Christmas markets. I wanted a painting of us together. I thought you would like it. Do

you like it?”

“I love it.” Lachlan kissed Kit and pulled him into a hug. “I love it so much. It’s the perfect gift.”

Kit’s smile widened.

“And it also explains something too.”

“What?” Kit tilted his head.

Lachlan handed Kit his present. “Open this and you’ll see.”

Kit ripped the paper away. He gasped. “Lachlan! You got me a painting of us too!” He looked up at Lachlan, his mouth dropping open in surprise.

“I did.” Lachlan laughed. “I also thought a painting of us together would be nice.”

“But in this painting, we’re both humans.” Kit pointed. “And I’m wearing robes and a hat like you.” He laughed.

Then Kit held up both paintings, almost identical. Except in the one Kit had commissioned, Kit was a cat in Lachlan’s arms, and in the one Lachlan had commissioned, Kit stood as a handsome human beside Lachlan.

“When I asked the man for a painting of us, he laughed and laughed. And then he said, ‘Did you want a Christmas tree and your family stall in the background too?’” Lachlan shook his head, laughing. “I couldn’t understand why he seemed to find it all so amusing.”

Then when the painter had come by the stall to sketch them for the painting, he kept

staring at them and chuckling. Now Lachlan knew why.

Kit smiled down at the painting. “They look amazing.”

“They do. And it shows us together, with you in both your forms.” Lachlan kissed Kit on the cheek. “Me and my Christmas familiar.” Lachlan had been intentional when asking for Kit to be human in the painting he commissioned. He wanted to show Kit that he accepted him in his human form.

Kit’s eyes twinkled as he glanced back and forth between the paintings.

“Should we put them on the chest of drawers?” Lachlan pointed.

Nodding, Kit sprung up from the bed and ran to put them on top. Lachlan followed, watching Kit put the paintings side by side. Kit clapped.

Lachlan wrapped an arm around his waist. “You and I are so perfect together we even give each other the same gifts.” Lachlan kissed Kit on the cheek.

Kit leaned into him, tail curling around Lachlan’s waist.

They stayed like that for several moments, just admiring the paintings together. Gazing down at their portraits, with Kit beside him, Lachlan’s heart swelled with so much love for Kit that he thought he’d explode.

And suddenly, just like that, all the trepidation and fear he’d held on to melted away.

Lachlan turned to face him. Kit met his gaze.

“I love you, Kit,” Lachlan said. “I love you with all my heart.”

Kit's green eyes widened. "Really? I thought maybe..." He swallowed. "You haven't said it again. Not since before I first shifted."

"I know." Lachlan cupped Kit's cheek. "And I'm sorry it took me so long. But I love you. I love you as my cat. I love you as my familiar. And I love you as my human. I love you in all your forms. I love all of you."

"I love you too, Lachlan." Kit let out a shaky breath. "I love you so much."

Then Lachlan kissed his familiar, thinking himself the happiest witch in the world.

CHAPTER 23

“Come on, Kit.” Lachlan carried a basket of freshly baked bread rolls into the front part of the bakery.

Kit followed him, dodging the legs of Lachlan’s siblings and their partners as they also carried food for their Christmas feast to the table.

“Kit!” Briar cried as he almost tripped over Kit.

But Wulfric grabbed Briar around the waist and steadied his mate with an amused chuckle. Briar was lucky to have a mate with such quick instincts.

Kit continued after Lachlan. The bakery had been open that morning. Which meant Kit and Lachlan had been up very early as usual. People wanted fresh bread, rolls, cakes, cookies, pies, and pastries for their Christmas Day feast.

But then the Magic Bakery had closed their doors to their customers, and they prepared their own meal. Since then, everyone had been busy helping. Well, everyone except Kit. But considering how many people were working, it seemed like the best way he could help was to stay in cat form. He was smaller as a cat, after all.

Meanwhile, the front area where the customers usually ate had been transformed into an eating space. Tablecloths covered the small tables that had been moved together to make a large dining table. Candles and clusters of baubles decorated the tablecloths.

Kit padded along behind Lachlan. And when Lachlan placed the basket onto the

table, Kit rubbed against his ankles, circling them. Everyone brought trays, plates, and bowls of food and placed them on the table.

Kit sprang up onto the table, staring at all the plates laden with food. The vegetables did not interest him at all. Nor did the rolls. It was the sight and smell of all the different meats that made his mouth water. But what really stole his attention was the glistening roasted chicken closest to him.

Kit stepped one paw forward, gaze locked on his prey.

“Patience, Kit.” Lachlan placed a hand on Kit’s back. “We have to wait for lunch to start.”

Kit stopped moving. But his muscles tensed. Not taking his eyes from the chicken, he lowered his body to the table, tail swishing from side to side.

“Kit,” Lachlan warned. “Wait.”

The urge to rush forward and sink his teeth into the juicy flesh filled him. But he held still.

I’m a good cat. I’m a good familiar. Lachlan will be upset with me if I pounce on the chicken.

A few days ago, he’d gotten into trouble for stealing some sausage that had been meant for dinner. Luckily, it had still been enough. But it had just been lying on the counter. What was he meant to do?

Kit licked his lips as the light from the candles reflected on the chicken.

“Come on, everyone,” Grady yelled. “Food is ready!”

“Are you going to be a cat or a human for lunch?” Lachlan asked.

Kit tore his gaze from the tempting chicken and looked at his witch.

Lachlan glanced around the room. “It might be a bit tight around the table. But we can fit you if you’d like to be in your human form.”

Kit jumped down onto Lachlan’s lap.

Lachlan stroked his hands along Kit’s black fur, smiling down at him. “I see. You want me to feed you by hand, give you scratches, and then you can curl up and sleep on my lap. Is that how it is?”

“Meow.”

Lachlan understood Kit perfectly. Kit sat on Lachlan’s lap, paws on the table, facing everyone. And more importantly, the chicken.

“Wait just a little longer,” Lachlan whispered.

“Meow,” Kit meowed woefully.

How long until he could eat? How long was he meant to suffer? He’d already waited forever!

People spoke. Kit didn’t listen. Kit didn’t care. Glasses of wine were lifted into the air.

Kit’s stomach grumbled as he imagined his teeth sinking into the white meat and tearing it apart. This waiting was torture!

Thankfully, as soon as everyone began reaching for food, Lachlan turned to Graal.

“Can you pass the chicken?” Lachlan asked as if knowing Kit couldn’t and wouldn’t wait much longer.

Lachlan fed Kit chunks of chicken. Then Kit licked the meat juices that clung to Lachlan’s fingers.

Sometimes, Lachlan fed Kit by giving him a plate with food on it. Kit did not like that nearly so much as when he sat on Lachlan’s lap and Lachlan fed him from his hand. That was the best way to eat.

Lachlan scratched behind his ears once Kit had eaten his fill.

Kit purred, curled up on Lachlan’s lap. He closed his eyes.

The sounds of the siblings and their partners floated around him. He could hear Leo and Jasper bickering, Cas yelling at Lacy, Graal’s deep laughter, and Briar explaining something.

But the only voice he truly paid attention to was Lachlan’s as he cooed over Kit.

“You’re so good,” Lachlan whispered, stroking Kit’s fur. “Such a good kitty. Such a good familiar. I’m so glad I found you.”

Kit closed his eyes, continuing to purr softly. As sleep began to take him, he thought back to the cold, lonely nights, living on the streets, searching for scraps of food in the snow.

Then like a vision, there had been Lachlan, standing in the doorway. And Lachlan had offered to look after Kit, keep him warm, and keep him safe.

Kit truly was the luckiest cat in the world.

I'm so glad I found you too.

It was the last thought Kit had before drifting off to sleep in the safety of his witch's lap.