



The Doctor's Wolf, Part Two (Supernatural Lovers #2)

Author: *Alexa Piper*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Adler and Gordon's relationship deepens, but before long, they have to adjust to unforeseen circumstances. As if that weren't enough, everyone's favorite vampire hunter calls the couple to a murder scene.

Gordon and Adler are soon neck deep in another case. Solving it will require both of them working together as well as the help of their friends and pack.

Total Pages (Source): 39

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 1

New Amsterdam Police Station was a sprawling neoclassical building, and all things considered, it wasn't a bad place to work. Parking was generous, the elevators always worked, and apart from the random thug waiting to have their statement taken, people were nice.

Adler had not usually been one to leave the station early, but Bachman, his protégée, was more than capable and didn't need him holding her hand while she finished her paperwork. Also, Adler had a hot date at the morgue.

He checked the time on his computer, finished one more email, then logged out. Bachman, who had the desk across from his in a quiet corner of their floor, glanced up from what she was doing.

"You always look cheery when you are going to see the boyfriend," she commented, then did a double take, cheeks reddening. "Or should I be saying mate?"

Adler grabbed his bag, stuffed his work tablet into it. "Boyfriend is fine." It was the easier term around the station, especially since most of Adler's colleagues weren't werewolves, were human like Bachman herself. But he is my mate, special, and my bite marks him. Adler absentmindedly stroked the faint mark of vampire teeth on his wrist, the mirror bite that bound him to Gordon. "Also, are you saying I'm usually grumpy-looking, Bachman?"

"Just very, very serious, sir. All work and no play." She went back to typing. "I think cheery suits you. And I think the mate-slash-boyfriend does as well."

Adler couldn't do anything about the wide grin that threatened to make his cheeks ache. "Well, thanks. I'll tell Gordon you said hi."

"Hm-mmh." Bachman winked and Adler playfully narrowed his eyes at her for it, then made his way toward the elevators.

She isn't wrong though. I am excited. I'm always excited to see him and make sure my scent is still on him and... Adler caught himself whistling and stopped. He was not the whistling kind of werewolf.

Adler had gone back to whistling in the car, but there, where people were unlikely to interrupt him with conversation, he'd allowed his mind to drift, remembering Gordon, black silk rope tying his wrists and the cutest, most seductive servant outfit on him.

Yeah, that'll stop anyone from whistling. Adler had driven on autopilot, thoughts occupied with the memories of Gordon under him, ready and willing, looking so different with the not-for-cosplay wig Adler had ordered for him.

Adler parked in the Forum lot close to the morgue and got out of the car. The Forum, unlike the police station, had been inspired by Venice in her glory. At least that's what Adler had picked up from a vampire in the cafeteria there when he'd waited for Gordon to finish up his corpse whispering a few days ago.

Adler, never having been to Venice, could only accept it as truth, but the inside of the Forum clearly leaned ostentatious, marble and gold, the lights gentle on both werewolf and vampire eyes.

The werewolf at the front desk recognized Adler by sight and gave him a curt bow. Adler had learned to navigate the maze-like hallways of the Forum and found the quickest way to Gordon's domain, the morgue and forensic lab his vampire mate had decorated with old-timey movie posters, showing the black-and-white silver screen

greats that had given faces to those supernaturals humans had called monsters once upon a time.

Adler wrinkled his nose. The worst thing about any morgue was the smell of lingering death. He sniffed for a whiff of Gordon's dusty rose scent rather than eau de corpse. Yet all Adler got was vinegar and bleach cleaning solution, nothing as sweet or perfect as his mate.

Did they give him a new batch of New Amsterdam University interns already? I remember him talking about how he breaks them in by letting them clean. He kept saying Corinne was the most thorough, and that's how he knew she was going to be great at her job.

Gordon's office was opposite the Dracula movie poster that spread vampiric cheer even in this most dreary of places. The door stood ajar, and Adler peeked around the frame to see if Gordon was in there.

He was indeed, and this time when Adler took a careful whiff, he could smell his mate too, roses and vinegar, not enough of Adler's own scent left on him to be proper for a mate.

What a nice view though, Adler thought, watching Gordon hang a framed piece of artwork behind his desk, his nimble surgeon's fingers adjusting the frame this way and that. It was Kawaii Demon Hunter art unless Adler was mistaken, although he didn't know the character Kawaii was cozying up to.

The view of his mate was much improved by the skinny jeans Gordon was wearing. The jeans were a silvery gray, clashing with the raspberry surgical top, but nicely bringing out Gordon's latest hair color, electric blue that shifted to icy white at the ends. I am very fortunate to have found a mate who looks great in skinny jeans and likes wearing them. If only he'd not douse himself in vinegar and bleach when I'm

not there to make sure he still has my scent .

“Hey,” Adler said, taking a step into his mate’s office.

Gordon jumped, dropped the frame, and cursed as he turned around.

“Fucking hell. Make some noise every now and then, detective, will you?”

Adler chuckled. “Thought I was a living corpse, sweetheart? Do you find the morgue scary after all? Do you want me to hold you and protect you from evil zombies?”

He walked toward his mate even as said mate rolled his eyes and picked the frame back up. Luckily, there was no broken glass. Adler knew his mate was serious about fan art, and Adler would have felt extremely bad if anything had been broken.

“Zombies aren’t real, detective. Don’t be so unscientific. The younglings might hear you, and then I will have to explain the maggots and corpses to them all over again. I only just gave them the death talk this past Monday. You should simply be less sneaky. Remember, I’m not a milkmaid you can chase any which way you please.”

Adler’s mouth watered. “Sweetheart, you’re giving me ideas. Like, the best worst ideas. Come here.”

Gordon, the frame in his hand, allowed Adler to hug him and nuzzle him. Adler kissed his mate’s cheeks, both of them, made sure to rub his chin across Gordon’s head too. That put enough of his scent where Adler wanted it, though he knew he’d only be satisfied once Gordon was out of his work clothes and Adler could take care of every square inch of skin, pale and soft and gorgeous under Adler’s fingers and tongue.

Adler took a step back and looked at his mate. He caught the scent of fresh weed

cookies in the Lord Helmet cookie jar. He's spoiling the new interns already.

Gordon cleared his throat, lips slightly swollen, and turned back to the wall. This time around, he just put the frame on the hook, no fussing at all.

His decorating done, he turned back around to face Adler. "You're early today, detective. Are you here to cuff me and take me away?"

Adler chuckled. "I think you'll come willingly, won't you?"

Gordon tilted his head. "Aren't you going to make me show you where I put the bodies? I hear that's what all the competent werewolf detectives are after these days." Gordon looked up at Adler with his very pretty blue eyes.

"All the werewolf detectives? Give me their names so I can go find them and make sure they stay away from you."

It was only half a joke, but Gordon chuckled. "Bad, growly Adler. You're so scary."

"I can't growl if you kiss me."

And just like that, Gordon did. Inside of Adler, his wolf part rejoiced. There was nothing quite like one's mate's undivided attention.

Adler growled when they pulled apart for air. "If we keep this up, you'll force me to, ah, interrogate you right on that gaming couch. So let's first focus on getting home, okay, sweetheart?" Adler reached for Gordon's hand, ready to pull him along, then almost cursed himself. "Or did you want to eat here? You drank from me yesterday. Did you get enough? If you need to supplement—"

Gordon ran a finger down Adler's neck and shook his head. "I'm fine. I'm starting to

think Maxim was right when he said werewolf blood might be my new favorite food source.”

Adler exhaled. “That’s good. Although not if you’re starving yourself. It’s not like werewolf donors are a thing.”

Gordon leaned his head on Adler’s shoulder. “I don’t need as much as I used to, I think. Before, uh, the bite, I got hungry faster, but not anymore. You truly are my new favorite flavor, detective.”

Adler stroked his mate’s back. “Good. Let’s leave your charming morgue then. Race you to the car?”

Gordon laughed. “What did I tell you about running?”

“I was going to chase you. That doesn’t count, right?”

“Adler, you sound horny. Is the full moon coming up again?”

“Yeah, same as every month. Sometimes even twice a month, you know. I’m just trying to help you keep track of when you’ll have a big wolf in your bed.”

“And here I was, thinking you were trying to help me get my pants off. Which we can go and do now. Your place?”

My willing mate. I must be the luckiest werewolf ever to have mated a vampire.

“Our place,” Adler said, taking Gordon’s hand, and leading him away from the unpleasant scent of clean slabs and dead things.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 2

Their home was Gordon's place sometimes, but mostly Adler's. The deciding factor, Adler thought, had been of a practical nature, meaning food. He had some, and not just the kind of thing that came in air-sealed packages with lots of flavoring.

Adler liked that they spent so much time at his place, but it had nothing to do with his mostly stocked fridge and everything to do with his neighbors, most of whom were werewolves, all of whom knew Gordon at least by sight.

Adler had made sure of that by simply slowing his steps each time he walked next to his vampire when they crossed the courtyard that led from the parking lot to Adler's building. He was doing the same thing today, Gordon's hand in his, his vampire's scent deliciously teasing. Look at me. Know this is my mate, mine to protect, mine to love, my beautiful mate.

They hadn't spoken much on the way over, had simply enjoyed each other's company. Adler found Gordon's nearness generally soothing and didn't need words on top of that, but he knew Gordon also needed the opportunity to talk, so he had been working on doing that. The alpha would be so proud.

"You got new interns," Adler said, slowing his steps even further while he pretended he was interested in one of the potted plants the residents had put by the paved walkway for some extra sun.

Gordon grinned. "Yes. I'm breaking them in. Smelled the bleach, did you?"

Adler wrinkled his nose. “And the vinegar. I bet they didn’t expect to scrub floor tiles when they signed up for the program. Just out of curiosity, do you give them used toothbrushes for all the scrubbing?”

“No, they didn’t, and no, I don’t. You do realize we work in forensics. A used toothbrush could contaminate our findings and thus corrupt any case we help solve.”

Adler chuckled. “I forget you’re the smart one, sweetheart. Sorry, I was trying to be funny.”

Adler caught the slightest touch of color in his vampire’s cheeks. “I didn’t—you’re funny. Did that come across as rude?”

“Nah, but come here.” Adler stopped in the middle of the courtyard and pulled Gordon in for a hug and a kiss to the side of the neck. Of course Adler made sure to let his tongue flick out, just briefly. My scent on him, and everyone is going to be able to smell it. I hope they’re all watching.

“This is the point where bystanders would usually tell us to get a room,” Gordon said.

Adler pulled back. “We have a room. We’re going there. And then we’re staying there for as long as we possibly can. You were telling me about your new interns who already know how best to clean every cranny of your lab.”

They resumed walking, with unhurried steps even if Adler’s heart was racing in his chest, even if his mind was spinning with anticipation.

“Right. Some of them are just there to see a supernatural corpse up close and personal, and those are also the ones that really, really mind the scrubbing.” Gordon looked up to the dusky sky with a thoughtful expression. “It’s easy to make those ones quit. I mean, it’s not like I don’t want them to learn things, but we have a

purpose, you know.”

Adler hummed. “You thin the herd with bleach.”

Gordon shrugged and smiled sweetly. “Well, I am sorry for each person leaving the program of course. But a little bit of humility is nice around the lab, and you know I reward that with cookies. Positive reinforcement is really important to me.” He managed to look completely serious, and the dusk light made his blue ear studs shimmer, rousing in Adler the desire to touch them, use them to tease a reaction from his mate.

“Are you saying that talking to your corpses is humble? And about the cookies, I feel like that warrants additional surveillance.” He pulled Gordon close, pressed a kiss to the side of the vampire’s mouth and brushed his thumb over Gordon’s earring tenderly. “Very close surveillance.” He inhaled, savoring Gordon’s rose scent.

“Is that so? Hmm, I don’t know. It sounds like you are abusing your power just to get into my cookie jar, detective.” He dipped his head forward so that the blue and white hair partly hid his eyes. “I’m not sure you should be allowed all that much positive reinforcement. It might have the adverse effect.”

Adler opened the door to his building and pulled Gordon inside, a little roughly so the vampire slammed into his chest. “And I’m not sure there is anything you can do to stop me, doctor.” He sniffed Gordon’s hair. “Yeah, I smell the weed on you. Probably need to search you. Thoroughly.”

Gordon licked his lips. “I love your liberal use of euphemism.”

Adler wanted to wrap his arms around Gordon and press him close, but first he needed to get his vampire into his apartment, because the hallway was just not a good place for this.

“Do you?” He reached for Gordon’s hand and closed the distance to his apartment door in long strides with Gordon in tow, turned his key in the lock. Once the door was open, Adler dropped his bag by the door and pulled Gordon across the threshold with him. Then he closed the door by pushing Gordon up against it and pinning him there with his larger frame. “Do you, doctor?” He bit Gordon’s lower lip, and at the contact, the vampire let his own work bag fall to the floor. “Because I love your use of Greek and Latin words when all you really want is to beg me to confess how much I like being balls deep inside you. Or when you want to beg me to be balls deep inside you.”

Gordon’s eyes glazed over, and he licked his lip where Adler’s teeth had closed around the flesh a moment ago. “Some Lovers Try Positions That They Cannot Handle.”

Adler’s eyebrows went up. “Are you daring me, sweetheart?”

Gordon shook his head. “Just a mnemonic; the bones in the wrist.” He reached for Adler’s right hand with his left, his fine surgeon’s fingers tracing feather soft across the skin. “Scaphoid, Lunatum, Triquetrum, Pisiforme, Trapezium, Trapezoid, Capitate, Hamate.” He said each one slowly, marking out the corresponding bone in Adler’s right wrist by tracing them with the pad of his index finger. It was strangely seductive, not what Adler would have ever thought an anatomy lesson to be like.

Adler’s nostrils flared as he breathed in his mate’s scent. “Is this your way of asking me to tie you up a bit?”

Before his mate, Adler had thought he liked ropes mostly for the aesthetic, but there were so many more things to be gotten out of them these days: the lust of his mate, unleashed while Gordon was tied up and completely in Adler’s hands, the memories of each knot and twist, of how Gordon looked with the ropes, how he looked after them, the soft markings never there for long, not on a vampire’s skin.

The slow build of laying the ropes and tying them, the trust of his mate, his mate's pleasure, brought high before it exploded, those were not purely aesthetic concerns. It was a secret need, one Adler would and could only indulge in fully if his mate took pleasure from it also.

"Maybe," Gordon said and leaned forward to steal a kiss from Adler.

Adler pulled back, not giving in. "It's got to be either yes or no, sweetheart. I'm not putting a rope on you for 'maybe.'" He showed some teeth when he grinned. "Although if yes or no isn't for you, you can always beg."

Adler watched Gordon's beautiful blue eyes as dusk made the color fade to gray. The werewolf part of him would have liked Gordon looking down in submission, but they were not those kinds of mates. Their bites, mirrored on the other's skin, made them special. Although to me, you've always been special.

Gordon, not being a werewolf and lacking the innate responses, didn't look down or away, and it made a shiver run down Adler's spine. Oh, he wanted Gordon, wanted him in so many ways that transcended the purely physical, and as long as his mate was willing and trusted him, Adler would have him.

"Tie me up, Detective," Gordon said after a small pause. "I've been thinking about it since last time, you know, and I want to do it again."

Adler grinned and pulled Gordon to him. "That I can work with."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 3

Tie me up, his mate had told Adler. He buried his hands in Gordon's blue hair, then proceeded to kiss the vampire. Before long, that wasn't enough, and Adler rubbed up against Gordon, delighting in the sensation of his mate responding, the tension throughout Gordon's body, the stiffening of his cock.

But this was not all the fun Adler planned to have with his mate. He pulled away and let his hands wander to Gordon's wrists. "I'll tie those here," he said and lifted Gordon's hands to the vampire's chest. "And I'll place a few knots along your spine, ropes around your upper body. Does that sound like something you'd enjoy?"

"Yes," Gordon said, voice husky. "Very much." He pushed his hips out toward Adler, in the process straining his wrists that were still in Adler's hands. Adler growled when he felt Gordon's erection against him, smelled the overpowering scent of lust mixed in with Gordon's rose scent.

He inhaled. "And your legs. I haven't done that before, but I think I'll tie your legs so all you can do is kneel—or lie down and take my cock."

Gordon's eyes glazed over. Adler wanted him so bad, wanted to be inside him, wanted to touch and kiss until their scents mingled, became one sole entity. I'm looking forward to this so damn much. Adler released Gordon, and walked backwards into the bedroom. Gordon followed, drawn by lust, love, and everything between the two.

Adler stripped out of his shirt and pants with the last of the fading light turning

everything into a gray watercolor world.

“You really are the hottest werewolf I know,” Gordon said. He appraised Adler’s chest for a few seconds before he started undressing himself.

“Don’t,” Adler said, cupping Gordon’s hands with his. “Let me?”

After a small pause, Gordon nodded. He had a shyness about him sometimes that Adler loved. He began by stripping Gordon of his shirt, touching that pale skin, flicking a nipple.

Gordon hissed. “Ah!”

“That’s nice. You’re so responsive. So sensitive.”

Gordon flushed in that very subtle way vampires had. With the light going, Adler barely saw it, but he loved knowing it was there.

“You’re a big bad wolf, detective.”

“I am? Well. Do you remember what you tell me if I get too big or bad for you to handle later on?”

Gordon cocked his head. “Oh. The traffic light thing. Red for stop, orange for slow down. And green for go, go, go.”

Adler rewarded Gordon with another kiss, delighted when Gordon opened his mouth and let Adler have his way. To reward him for that, Adler flicked the other nipple before pulling out of the kiss.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Fuck, you and your skinny jeans. They haunt my dreams,

you know. Turn all of them into wet ones.”

Gordon giggled as Adler worked the front of those very jeans open. While Adler was busy with the buttons, Gordon used the opportunity to look down. Adler was already aroused, rock hard, and his mate admiring him in that state was a special treat.

“Wet dreams? My jeans do that to you?” Gordon asked, not quite pulling off the coquettish expression.

Fucking hell. He does have twink energy, and it does do things to my balls.

Without further ado, Adler picked Gordon up, carried him a few steps, and threw him on the bed. Gordon let him, seemed fine with it, though his eyes had gone pleasantly wide as he was lying there, ready to be taken.

Adler pulled off Gordon’s shoes, tossed them haphazardly, then peeled those cursed jeans and underwear off his mate’s perfect ass in one go.

“Yeah, they fucking do. Want me to show you?”

Gordon bit his bottom lip. And then he fucking nodded like he really had no idea how much Adler liked seeing that, how much it made him want to have Gordon.

Adler allowed himself a few more moments of sucking marks against the skin of Gordon’s abdomen, touching the other’s cock as he went, though without giving much stimulation.

When Gordon began shivering and twitching, when he’d leaked enough precum to make it a chore for Adler not to suck that cock, he stopped.

“Don’t move now. Stay right where you are for me.”

He stood and opened a drawer. From all the new ropes he'd gotten for Gordon, he selected the dark blue ones he'd bought because they worked with Gordon's eye color, no matter what new hair color his vampire tried. Incidentally, with the current hair color, they'd look amazing. He looked over his shoulder to Gordon, who was watching but not moving, just like he'd been told. Mine. He's mine.

"You're special to me," Gordon said, very quietly, and finally, the vampire did lower his gaze.

Adler grabbed the ropes and closed the distance between him and Gordon, kissed the vampire, deep and hard, pushing his tongue into Gordon's mouth even as Gordon's erection left wet trails against Adler's belly.

With a sigh, Adler pulled back. "You're special to me too." He pushed Gordon back onto the bed. "I love you. And I love doing this with you." He placed a hand on Gordon's thigh. "I need you to kneel on the bed for me," Adler said, holding the rope between his hands so Gordon, whose night vision was similarly good to Adler's, could see.

Gordon nodded, ran his tongue over his bottom lip, and sat back up, then knelt facing Adler.

Adler kissed Gordon before he moved to sit on the bed behind him, close enough to work. With his finger, he traced a line from Gordon's left shoulder to his neck and from there to his right shoulder. He repeated the same with the rope, just to hear Gordon breathe harder, just to build anticipation.

Actually getting the ropes set how he imagined wouldn't take Adler all that long, but he wanted to make this into a memory, something he could go back to and replay in his mind.

He touched Gordon, beginning at the vampire's back. Adler used his fingertips first, let the rope slither in their wake, massaged Gordon's muscles with his open palms and the balls of his hands.

Gordon leaned back against him with a moan. "Adler, I—"

"Shh, just let me take care of you, sweetheart," Adler said, meeting Gordon's eyes in the darkness.

Gordon relaxed and let his weight tip back further against Adler. Looking over Gordon's shoulder, Adler could see Gordon was now fully hard, his cock leaking with want. He could smell that desire too, so heady. The knowledge of his mate's lust made Adler's own cock twitch, but he wouldn't focus on that yet.

Adler bit Gordon's shoulder, that same place where the mate bite was, and crossed the rope over Gordon's belly, this time in earnest. He shifted it upward until it was just under Gordon's rib cage.

"Yes, Adler," Gordon breathed when Adler gently shifted him forward to pull the rope through its loop and drape it over Gordon's shoulder, weave it under and up again.

Adler took his time to make sure the fabric was snug against Gordon's skin without being too tight or potentially painful. Touching Gordon when he reached under the rope to pull the end through or adjust the pressure was pure bliss.

"Is this supposed to be pretty?" Gordon asked when Adler had completed the star harness and was getting ready to secure Gordon's wrists.

"I wouldn't tie you up ugly, sweetheart. How does it feel?"

“Interesting. In a good way.” Gordon looked down at the star shape the ropes made on his chest, touched the tip of the star across his sternum with his fingers.

Adler nodded. “Good. I think I’ll do something other than I thought with your hands.” He tied off the end of the harness rope and reached for another. Then, he moved around Gordon until he was in front of him. Adler gathered Gordon’s wrists in a double column tie and brought them back over Gordon’s head. “How’s this?”

Gordon shifted under Adler’s ropes, but his wrists stayed behind his head, even if Adler didn’t hold the end of the tie tightly. “I think I like it.”

Adler bent to kiss Gordon, holding the rope so Gordon couldn’t bring his arms forward, so his elbows were up on either side of his head. Adler could feel his vampire wanting to hug him, almost an instinctual reaction. Instead, Gordon pulled against the rope. “How’s now?” Adler asked, pulling back.

Gordon’s eyes were dreamy and hungry for more. “I get the feeling you’ll make me work for that werewolf dessert.”

Adler kissed Gordon’s jaw. “I like to see you get sweaty with exhaustion, sweetheart. So yes. You’ll have to cum for me if you want to drink me.”

The words did something to Gordon’s breathing which made Adler impatient to finally fuck into his mate, feel him cum, see him succumb to bliss.

Adler moved to Gordon’s back again. He finished the overhead tie, spooling the rope around Gordon’s chest until the second set of ropes lay snug under the first. He liked to keep both sets of ropes separate for now in case he needed to get either off quickly.

Once Adler was done, he reached around Gordon, took his hard length in hand, and stroked along it.

Gordon gasped, presumably because he hadn't expected Adler to be done with the ropes quite yet. The vampire strained as he moaned, and Adler let go of Gordon's cock before he laid Gordon back on the bed. Adler could tell Gordon felt the exchange of power when Adler took the weight of the vampire's upper body to lay him down, something that would normally have required Gordon to use his arms.

"Fuck," Gordon moaned.

"Still good?"

"Still very, very much want you to finally fuck me," Gordon said. "And yes, I like this. It's good."

Adler smiled. "I'll fuck you. But let's tie those legs first so I can do whatever I want with you."

The expression on Gordon's face very nearly did Adler in, but he wanted pleasure for his mate. And he wasn't going to cut that short because he was getting impatient, not tonight.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 4

Adler looked down at Gordon who was spread out on the bed before him. His vampire. Color was lost in the darkness, but the ropes lay against Gordon's pale skin like patterned obsidian, and when Adler ran his own hands over his work and Gordon's skin beneath, it was as if tender shadows stroked his lover.

Gordon's face was full of the sweetest kind of tension, wanting something, wanting to reach for something, but being unable to do that. He was squirming, at least as much as the ropes allowed him, which was still more than Adler wanted.

"Gods, how did I get so lucky as to bed you?" Adler asked, deliberately stroking around Gordon's belly button.

"Easy," Gordon said, wiggling his hips in an attempt to finally get Adler going. "You turned into a huge wolf and just snuck under the covers with me. And if I remember correctly, you refused to fuck me then too."

"Oh, sweetheart," Adler said, then bent low until his body covered his lover's, until he could feel his rope work between them. "I will fuck you. I just want to remember everything about it when I do, and if you cum hard enough to pass out for a bit after in my arms, I'll consider that an added bonus." Gordon breathed heavy and tried to hook his legs over Adler's ass.

Adler chuckled. "This won't do, sweetheart."

When Gordon wouldn't release Adler right away, Adler slapped his vampire's thighs,

and that got the desired result.

“Ah! Detective!”

“Yeah. I think you were just trying to be naughty. Let me help you with that.”

Adler reached for yet another rope, and after moving Gordon’s left leg in position, he created the tie, binding Gordon’s calves to the back of his thighs, his knees bent. Once it was done on both legs, it would be so easy to spread Gordon open. Adler’s mouth watered at the thought.

Adler enjoyed Gordon’s eyes going wide, enjoyed how he tensed when Adler moved the rope over him, slow and steady.

“Good? Still green?”

“Still green,” Gordon said and curled his toes.

Adler smiled, and when he was done with the left leg, he ran his index finger along the sole of Gordon’s foot, from heel to toes.

Gordon hissed and bent his spine, but he endured.

“I’m not as into feet as other people are, but I think I could cum, rubbing my cock between yours.”

“You’re such a kinky werewolf.”

Adler bent Gordon’s right leg into position and began tying that too. “Thank you, sweetheart. You are the sweetest thing. And the hottest. You’re the prettiest mate in the entire pack, do you know that?”

Gordon's head lolled back as Adler completed the tie. He said nothing in response, and Adler decided he'd allow it, this once.

With his mate so prepared, all that was left to do was get him ready. Adler had the sinking feeling that once he was inside Gordon, things would end rather quickly, and the only thing he could do to draw out the pleasure was slowing down now.

He grabbed the lube from the side table and let it drip on Gordon, enjoying the sight of his mate flinching. Ah, this is giving me even more ideas. I can barely look at him and not think about making love to him. He's just too perfect.

Adler pulled Gordon's bound legs apart and watched Gordon's face. Gordon had given up control, and Adler would be the one to decide how the next few minutes went.

He slowly lubed up Gordon's crack, then worked him open, increasing the stretch with a single finger at first. Gordon soon got used to that, and sexy vampire mate that he was, he tried to fuck himself on Adler's finger. It wasn't going to work of course, the ropes made sure of that, but seeing the desire on Gordon's face—Adler could have cum just watching that face.

He added a second finger, followed in short order by a third, zeroing in on the most sensitive places he could reach inside his vampire. Gordon squirmed and pulled against his ropes, all of it futile, the frustration building the anticipation and the desire.

My lover. My mate. The harness sat just perfectly to emphasize the slopes and valleys of Gordon's chest, and not for the first time did Adler wish Gordon's vampiric skin would hold the marks of his binds longer than it did. They would all be gone by noon the next day, if not sooner.

It doesn't matter. Rope marks or not, he will always have my mate bite.

Adler pulled his fingers out of Gordon, and the vampire made disappointed noises, looked down, but then grinned like a drunk pixie when he thought he knew what was coming.

"Finally." Gordon was already slightly hoarse.

"You think?"

Adler dipped his head between Gordon's legs and lowered his mouth to run his tongue over Gordon's tip and lap up the precum. Gordon watched, aghast, then bent his spine in a deliciously desperate way, accompanied by a low whine.

"Please, Adler, I need you inside me," the vampire said, and if Adler's ears hadn't been so tuned to his lover, he might have actually missed the words.

With a last, indulgent lick all the way from Gordon's balls to his tip, Adler pulled back, then reached for the lube and slicked himself up.

Once more, he roughly tugged Gordon into the position he wanted him in. These leg ties are perfect for him. I'll have to do it again really soon. He spread Gordon's legs apart as far as they would go, then lined up.

"You're mine, sweetheart." Adler pushed into Gordon, felt the resistance, then the way Gordon opened up to him.

Gordon's squirming increased with every inch of Adler filling him, maybe because he was tied up or because Adler had taken his time. The vampire's scent—if that was possible—grew even sweeter, and Adler growled in that unattractively possessive way that he tried to rein in around his vampire most of the time.

You are mine, you are mine, Adler thought, and felt a bout of pride and happiness when he could feel Gordon all around his cock, when he was as close to the other as was possible.

Adler pulled his hips back for a slow thrust, his eyes focused on Gordon's face in case there was any discomfort there.

But to Adler's utter delight, Gordon looked like all he wanted was more.

"Yes, please," Gordon moaned, eyes not entirely focusing.

Adler thrust again, harder, and grabbed on to Gordon's ankles tightly. "Sweetheart," Adler said. "Gordon."

Gordon looked at him.

"I want to fuck you so badly right now, and so hard you'll feel sore all day tomorrow. Would you like that?" Adler asked.

"Yes, please. Please, Adler," Gordon whimpered, and his words felt like the full moon rising, like something tearing inside Adler only to reform itself in a different shape: man becoming wolf and wolf turning man again. Not just wolf or man though. Mated. Bound forever.

With a bruising hold on Gordon's legs, Adler thrust into his lover as hard and fast as he could. He growled as he went, flashed his teeth at Gordon, who was tight and soft and warm all at the same time, who was staring up at Adler as if Adler were the full moon in all her glory.

Adler felt Gordon orgasm underneath him, the hot cum casting a pattern across Gordon's chest and the harness Adler had bound him with.

He hadn't expected his vampire to find his release quite so fast, but seeing his lover reach pleasure was something that filled Adler with warmth, and knowing it was because of Adler's cock inside him only added to that heat. Adler's release built like a fire and came in hot waves, even as he was thrusting into Gordon, filling him deep.

Just like that, it was over, the echoes continuing in both their bodies as their breathing filled the room, as their scents mingled in the air.

Adler took a few moments to take in the sight of his spent lover who still had Adler's cock inside him. Gordon's eyes fluttered open, and they were searching for comfort, so Adler pulled out, shifted Gordon so he could release the overhead tie. He stroked Gordon as he went, trailed kisses along Gordon's arms and where the star harness still held him, then began working on the leg ties.

Gordon easily opened his mouth to kiss Adler, and he brought his still tied wrists up to stroke the wolf under the chin even as Adler freed his legs.

"Here," Adler said and released Gordon's wrists. "You okay?"

Gordon nodded. "That was..."

Adler pulled him close. He enjoyed that the harness was still on Gordon, that Adler could feel the weave of his own rope work as he held Gordon. "You liked it?"

Gordon nodded. "H-mmh." He kissed along Adler's chest and up to the wolf's neck.

"Ready for that werewolf dessert I see," Adler said, stroking Gordon's back. He cradled Gordon's head even as Gordon bit into him and started drinking. So much for him not being hungry.

Another wave of euphoria washed over Adler. The first time, it hadn't felt like this at

all, but ever since the mate bite, Adler could relate to the vampire groupies who got a huge kick out of a vampire feeding off them, hashtag toothgasm. Still, what Adler liked most about it was sharing this closeness with Gordon and providing for him in this most basic way.

Gordon didn't drink much, barely a sip. He pulled his teeth out of Adler's neck. With both of them sated, Adler enjoyed a few more moments holding Gordon close before carefully extricating himself to clean up in the bathroom and grab a towel to do the same for Gordon.

"This is surprisingly more comfortable than I thought," Gordon said when Adler undid the harness and tossed the rope aside.

"It's only as uncomfortable as I want it to be," Adler said. He ran his fingers over the rope marks on Gordon's thighs and chest, on his wrists, then moved Gordon under the covers and crept in next to him. "You're not uncomfortable now, are you?" He pulled Gordon close so he could hold him while they both fell asleep.

"No, detective. I'm peachy. In heaven. Cloud number nine. On a sugar high from my werewolf dessert."

Adler snorted. "Sweetheart, you are terrible just before you fall asleep and when you first wake up in the mornings. I sometimes think parts of your brain didn't get the memo about that whole getting turned into a vampire thing."

Gordon, his eyes already closed, tried a cute attempt at a slap in the general direction of Adler's cheek. He missed, palm coming to rest on Adler's shoulder instead.

"Making fun of me just because you were born with a tail. Bad detective."

Adler chuckled but said nothing more. Instead, he waited until Gordon stilled in his

arms. Only then did Adler drift off to sleep himself.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 5

Wearing only sweatpants, Adler got his coffee maker running and considered how best to wake the very naked vampire in his bed. A grin spread over Adler's face. The previous night had been too short and already felt too long in the past, and Adler wanted to touch and taste Gordon again the way he had last night.

He is too perfect, my mate. I have become addicted to him.

Adler hit the start button, and the kitchen soon began to smell of warm, dark roast. Adler left the machine to brew and walked to the bedroom.

Gordon was lying on his belly, the blue, white-tipped hair matted in sleep. The rope marks had already vanished from his skin which made Adler both sad and already anticipating the next time Gordon allowed that kind of play. The vampire looked beautiful, sleeping there like a princess bound in roses.

Adler sat on the bed and leaned in close. Gordon's rose scent was heavy on the air. "It's almost noon. Which means you cannot claim I woke you at an unreasonable hour."

Gordon groaned. It was not a very princess-like sound.

Adler chuckled. "I don't speak lazy vampire, sweetheart."

"Go away," Gordon said, his voice muffled against the pillow. He was hiding his eyes and most of his face from Adler too.

“Now you are just daring me to stay here and force conversation on you until you no longer slur your words.”

Adler laid his head on Gordon’s pillow. He ran a hand down Gordon’s arm. In answer to the touch Gordon’s eyes fluttered open, and Adler could do nothing to keep a low growl from escaping his lips at seeing his mate’s reaction. Gordon’s body tensed, throwing off sleep.

Six months ago, Adler wouldn’t have thought it possible to feel the way he was feeling about Gordon, about anyone, least of all a vampire. But since, the mate bite had happened, rarer between vampire and werewolf than some of the bigger comets if Maxim was to be believed.

To Adler, in moments like these, it was still a wonder to have his mate, love him, need him like air. There was pride in it too—after all, no one’s mate was as special as Gordon, none looked as fine in skinny jeans, and none changed the color of their hair as often. Gordon, Adler secretly knew, was the best mate.

Adler bent to kiss Gordon’s shoulder, ready to do much more, when he heard a small knock on his apartment door.

Gordon groaned again. “I hate disturbances before noon,” the vampire announced, but gave no sign he was going to let anything disturb him. “Make it stop, detective.”

Adler sighed and quickly slipped on a T-shirt. The hallway was now filled with the warm scent of coffee, and he opened the door with a giddy smile—only to have that wiped away immediately.

Milea, the shy little wolf girl who lived with her granny just across the hall, stood on his doormat, and the way the little girl held her stuffed bunny and was still in her pajamas even though it was a school day was enough to tell Adler something was

very wrong, even without taking into account the fear and confusion in Mil's face.

"What's wrong, Mil?" Adler asked. He bent down and ran a hand along the side of Mil's face, which brought on silent tears.

"Grandma isn't feeling well, and I don't know what to do. I have to get to school, but..."

Oh, fuck, Adler thought. Behind him, back in the bedroom, he heard Gordon put on clothes.

Mil was seven years old, and in those seven years, she'd lost both her parents. Adler's chest clenched. Mil's grandma, Emma, was still an impressive wolf, hale for her years, but still.

"You don't have to go to school today," Adler told the little girl and pulled her into his arms. She sobbed quietly, and her arm went around Adler's neck so that he could easily lift her and carry her inside. "Gordon, you heard?"

Gordon passed him, expression bleak. "I heard. I'll go and check on her."

Adler nodded. He hoped Emma had simply had a heart attack or stroke, something a werewolf like her might recover from relatively quickly. He trusted Gordon to handle the situation. First aid was definitely more his mate's domain, not so much Adler's.

"She told me to clean my room yesterday, but I said I'd do it today," Mil said, the little wolf's voice quiet and brittle against Adler's neck.

She didn't say it outright, but the fear was there: is this my fault ?

"That's okay, Mil. You were going to, and your granny knew that." He patted her

back for emphasis.

Adler listened for Gordon. Both apartment doors were open, and he could hear Gordon move around and talk softly, which was probably a good thing.

“I’m sorry. Granny always says, unannounced visitors before noon are rude.”

Adler used his calmest beta voice. “You know what? It’s just past noon. Want me to tell you a secret? Gordon is really bad before noon. He’s barely awake that early.”

The little wolf relaxed in Adler’s arms. “What about school? School is early.”

“Hmm. Good point. But then again, he’s a grown-up and a vampire. No more school for him.”

Mil sniffled. “I knew that.”

“I know you did. I was just being silly.”

“Okay.” Mil sounded scared, and Adler knew he was out of his depth. He dealt with crime and murder, not with little wolf girls who were clinging to their teddy bear because they were scared.

“Mil, I’ll put you down, okay? We’re going to the kitchen. Do you know how to use a toaster?”

Mil made an undignified sound as Adler put her back on her feet. “Of course.”

“Alright then. You’re going to make some toast for me and you. Not for Gordon. He doesn’t eat that kind of thing.”

Mil nodded and let herself be led into the kitchen where Adler left her with the bread and the toaster for long enough to grab his phone. He watched the girl from the door when he texted Willa. This kind of thing was something for the alpha to deal with, not for Adler.

Gordon came running back, poking his head in the door.

“I called an ambulance from the Forum Hospital. They’ll be here in a few minutes to get her treated for a stroke. You good in here?”

Adler looked up from his screen where Willa was typing. “Yeah. Mil’s making breakfast for the two of us. Do you—”

“I’m good. I don’t think they’ll need me to ride with them, but I have my phone, just in case.”

Adler gave his mate a thumbs-up, but Gordon was already back outside and opening the building’s front door it sounded like.

“What’s wrong with Granny?”

Adler turned to the girl who stood at his counter, a slice of bread in her trembling hand, her cheeks tear streaked.

Adler went to her. “She’s going to the hospital.”

“For how long? Can I go with her?”

“I don’t know yet, and not right now. Maybe Gordon will go with her.”

Adler looked at his phone. Willa had texted. She was on her way, and Adler relaxed.

His alpha would handle all of this.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 6

Willa made it to Adler's apartment building in record time, arriving just as the ambulance people had carried Emma out the front door. Mil was nibbling on a slice of toast, buttered and with strawberry jam. Without a doubt, she could follow the sounds from her grandma's apartment and the hallway outside just as well as Adler could. They shared the werewolf hearing after all, not as acute maybe as that of a vampire, but still decent enough for the echoey stairwell outside.

The alpha walked into Adler's place through his still open front door, exuding calm. When Adler would have wanted to present his mate to Willa ordinarily, he now stepped aside, cast his gaze to the kitchen floor, and let Willa take over. Hoped that she would, in fact.

"This sucks," Willa said. "But we're going to help you through it, Milea."

The little wolf swallowed the tiny bite of toast she'd eaten, and her eyes filled with tears when she met the alpha's gaze.

"What if Grandma—"

Willa pulled one of Adler's kitchen chairs up to Mil until the two of them were sitting closely, as if they were sharing secrets.

"Let's think about the now and not the if, okay? Look, you got your grandma help, and now she's being taken to the hospital. That's good. You did very good. I'm proud of you."

Willa put her hand on Mil's head, an alpha affirming a pack member. She looked at Adler.

Without missing a beat, he said, "You did great, kiddo."

Willa seemed satisfied. Gordon joined them then, uncomfortable if the vampire's subdued demeanor was any indication. He searched for Adler's touch, or that's how Adler saw it when his mate reached for him, the gesture almost shy.

Adler was anything but, and he put an arm around Gordon, unable to stop himself from showing his mate off. "Thank you for helping, sweetheart."

Gordon looked up, a strand of blue hair brushing against his cheek. "I barely did anything."

"Nonsense." Willa turned in her chair, shifting her focus from Mil to them. "What can you tell us about her condition?"

Gordon was uncomfortable, Adler didn't need the connection that came with their mate bite to know this. He looked at little Mil, and Adler could only imagine the similarities to the sister Gordon had lost, those similarities the vampire saw in the wolf child.

But Gordon did answer the alpha's question. "The Forum Hospital is the best place for her to be now. They're going to run diagnostics first—that will tell us a lot more. But she is going to have to be hospitalized for a while."

Willa rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Of course. Gordon, would you keep Milea here company for a moment while I talk with my second?"

Gordon was taken aback, but then Adler put his hand on his mate's back, sharing

strength, and Gordon nodded. “Of course.”

Willa headed over to the living room where Adler kept the carved wolf she had done for him, a hunk of wood transformed into hair and fur and eyes sharp as the moon. From here, they had half a view of the kitchen still without needing to worry about Milea overhearing. Not true for Gordon of course who would have an easy time picking out what they were saying.

The alpha wants it that way, Adler thought.

Willa looked him over. “So obviously, I’d be taking custody, because we are not pulling The Forum’s Child Protective Unit into this.”

Adler nodded. “I can go and take Mil to pack a bag and—”

Willa clicked her tongue. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Adler. I am not dragging Milea off to my place. You’re much better suited to take temporary custody than I am. She knows you, she trusts you, and she likes your recently blue-haired, vampiric mate whom I just saw cutting off the crusts of a sandwich for a little wolf as if we weren’t born with teeth.” Across from them in the kitchen, Gordon flinched, but the hold on the knife he was using to remove said crusts never faltered, and he just kept going, talking softly to the pup. Willa smiled. “Not a sight I’d ever thought I’d see.”

Adler didn’t even know where to begin. “But—” We are newly mated, and my mate deserves my full attention and care, and we both have jobs, and Gordon is sensitive about the mate bond, and—

Willa stopped his objections before he could form them into words with a raised palm, such a little gesture yet firm from an alpha. “Legally, it’s just an issue of filling out a form, and it’s what’s best for Milea at the moment. I’m sure your mate will understand.”

“But—” Adler tried again.

“I am sure the two of you will cope. Again, I saw your sweet mate maltreat perfectly good bread just now.”

Adler’s jaw dropped. He needed to make the alpha understand that he was not suited for this, and Gordon—no matter what he’d done to sliced wheat products in the past ten minutes—was more used to a scalpel and black humor than to telling bedtime stories to a young wolf who’d just lost everything, not that Adler was in any way better caretaker material at all. Willa had to see that.

“But, Willa, I can’t!”

“I hear that’s the first thought every half-decent parent has,” she said, and Adler could feel the panic flooding in. “It will be temporary. You will be fine.”

“But really, I mean, I can’t!” She had to understand that, surely.

Willa sighed and petted his shoulder with lacking gentleness. “Are you okay telling Milea she’ll stay with you and Gordon for the time being, or do you need me for that?” Her tone of voice indicated that she would be displeased if he told her he needed his alpha to hold his hand, but in fact Adler wasn’t even sure how they’d gotten to this point in the conversation.

And not just that, not too long ago, Maxim had joked about how a vampire, such as Gordon, mated to a werewolf high in the ranks, such as Adler, would be expected to play nursemaid to the pups, and that was really not the case. Mostly. It couldn’t be now, not so soon after they had just become what they were.

After all, Adler was not fit to take care of a child. “Willa, I can’t.”

“My dear Adler, I hear you, but I suggest you wolf up, because can’t isn’t an option right now.” She lifted her chin, indicating the kitchen. “That young wolf in there needs you, and if we fall back on can’t, packs would soon stop existing, and we’d all break apart and lose ourselves in solitude.”

She’d just lectured him. Willa had just alpha-slam-lectured Adler, and Adler knew from experience that this was the time to drop his gaze—which he did—and do as he’d been told. Which he would do, but really, he shouldn’t be, because he wasn’t fit, and shouldn’t Gordon have a part in this conversation? But of course, if Gordon were a wolf, he’d not be asked either, and a part of Adler was happy to see Willa treated his mate like one of her own, except—

Adler bit his lip.

Willa groaned. “Obviously, I’ll keep an eye on the kid, but I have full confidence in you. There have been days in the past when that surprised me, Adler, but today isn’t one of those days. You can do this. Now, go over there, and tell Milea she’ll stay with you for a little while, just until her gran gets better.”

“Yes, alpha,” Adler said, eyes on the ground and stomach turning at the thought of Mil being alone and worried, of Mil finding the courage to knock on his door in her pajamas. After all, it had taken the little wolf till noon to come to Adler’s door, and she would have woken for school much earlier. Hours earlier.

Fear can stun you. It’s why the pack is there to run to you if you freeze.

Adler would protect the little wolf. He just hoped Gordon was okay with that.

Chapter 7

Adler walked back into his apartment and to the kitchen where Gordon, his blue hair a mess, was watching Mil nibble on the sandwich with the crusts cut off. Adler beckoned him over. Mil noticed, and her inquisitive eyes found Adler.

Shit, poor thing. First her parents, and now her gran is in the hospital. At least she only has to move across the hall. The alpha's decision made a little more sense now, obviously it did. Adler liked that he didn't have to make decisions, had only to follow them. Knowing the alpha was always just one step behind him in case he messed up, that just never failed to calm Adler.

"We'll be just a moment, Mil." Adler made sure to sound calm, and she nodded.

Out in the hallway, Adler took Gordon's hand and led him to their bedroom. There, Gordon ran a hand through his hair.

"So she's staying here."

Adler lowered his head "Well. The alpha made a decision. You heard, right, that she'll be staying here. And I'll be taking care of her because she's pack, and because she needs someone to take care of her who knows her. I mean, I understand that you didn't sign up for this and that we never talked about anything like this, but Willa says this is best for Mil." Adler paused, watching for impact craters on Gordon's face. "And I agree. I—I mean, it's only for a short while. Only until her grandma gets back."

Gordon nodded. “Yeah.” He ran his hands through his hair, rubbed at his eyes with the balls of his hands. “Yeah. ”

Adler couldn't quite tell what his mate was thinking. It was during the full moon that this was possible. It might change, might become the mind reading true werewolf mates had with each other, but it wasn't yet.

In this moment, Adler would have liked to have access to his mate's thoughts.

Adler reached for Gordon's hands to steady himself, but in truth, it was just to hold Gordon here. They'd just had a few weeks of bliss together, begun during the hunt for a serial killer. Taking care of someone else—even if only temporary—it would be an adjustment for both of them, but Adler wasn't going to force it on Gordon.

“I understand this isn't what you expected,” Adler said, voice cracking. “You don't need to do anything, really. I mean, you're always going to be my first priority, and this is just temporary, and—”

Gordon covered Adler's mouth with a hand. “Detective, you shouldn't be talking this much without being aware of your rights.”

“Huh?”

Gordon shrugged, his fingers brushing across Adler's lips. “Of course I'll help. I mean...” He looked away, face darkening. “You know. About Paula. I do what I do because I want to help people. I don't know how to handle miniature wolves, but I do want to help.” He shrugged. “I mean, I know everything about miniature werewolf anatomy, but not the first thing about caring for them, and just in the name of full disclosure, my cleaning lady tells me I am, and this is a quote, a malevolent, plant-killing villain. Then again, you don't have to water kids, so Mil should be fine.”

Adler couldn't stop his snort from escaping. It was the relief, the warmth of the knowledge his mate had his back in this. "I think you'll manage. I think she likes you. Ready to tell her?"

Gordon nodded, and the two of them walked into the kitchen, holding hands.

Mil looked up at Adler. "So?" she said in almost exactly Gordon's tone of voice. She was still clutching her stuffed bunny, Adler noticed, and all of them were still in their pajamas or sweatpants, respectively.

"Mil, Willa wants you to stay here, with us, with Gordon and me, just while your gran is in the hospital," Adler said. "What do you think?"

Mil looked around the kitchen. "Do I have to sleep here? My bed isn't here."

Adler pulled up a kitchen chair next to Mil and sat. "We can figure that out. I have a guest room. I think we can go over to your granny's place and pack a bag. It'll be like a little vacation almost. It might be fun."

Gordon rocked back and forth on his feet with sudden elation. "Hey, you could totally build a blanket fort in there. Those're good for reading in."

Mil looked at him with open-mouthed interest. "I can?"

Gordon nodded eagerly. "Totally." He glanced at Adler. "Right?"

Adler chuckled. He loved his mate. "Totally."

Mil seemed excited, but several emotions passed over her face in rapid succession. Fear maybe, or anxiety, among them.

“But what if you have guests?” the little wolf finally asked.

“Don’t you know, no one wants to stay over with Adler since a vampire is spending so much time with him. They think I’ll bite them!” Gordon winked at Mil. It actually got Mil to pull up one side of her mouth into an almost smile.

“You’re not so bad. I like you,” Mil told him, her eyes on the sandwich she’d stopped eating at some point while they had been talking. She picked it up again and took a sizeable bite out of it, demonstrating to Gordon her appreciation of the crust-less bread in a very wolfish way.

“Well, I like you too,” Gordon told her. Adler was left to wonder how on earth his vampire managed to talk to the kid this easily.

Before he could say anything else, Adler’s phone rang in his pocket.

“Oh, fuck,” Adler said when he saw Maxim’s name flash over the screen.

Mil perked up. “You’re not supposed to overuse that word, Grandma says.”

“Uh, right. Sorry.” He answered the phone and walked out of the kitchen. “Terrible timing, Maxim.”

The vampire hunter should have been busy with whatever it was he did when not actively hunting. Crocheting for all Adler knew, or maybe he liked model trains. He wouldn’t put anything past Maxim.

“Oh, Detective Adler, don’t think you were the only one pulled from something you’d rather be doing. In my case, I was explaining to Heath why I dislike, intensely, when he lectures me about taxes and such. But in your case, you can bring the lover along, seeing as how he is presumably awake and caffeinated at this time of day and

thus a tolerable medical opinion machine. I have a need of that, you see. There is death, and he knows it best.”

Adler tried to take a calming breath. He failed. “Look, Maxim, there’s a bit of a situation here.”

Which clearly got the hunter’s interest piqued. I keep forgetting there’s a reason Maxim and Willa are friends, those damn gossips , Adler thought.

“Oh, situations are like your only child’s opinions and tax forms. They pop up in the most unexpected circumstances and are normally uncalled for. Elaborate, Detective.”

“Well, see, there is this young, orphaned wolf living in my building with her grandmother. Who had a stroke this morning. And Willa decided it would be best for Milea to stay with me and Gordon while her gran recovers at the hospital.”

“Ah! You had a visit from the stork! Congratulations, Adler, that is one lucky wolf girl. It will give you two the opportunity to make up your minds about lengthier, dare I say permanent, parenthood. It’s not a small responsibility. My baby boy has often talked about moving out and such, and each time I had to discourage such childish thoughts. Obviously, you cannot bring the poor darling pup to a murder scene. However, I do need you and my favorite corpse whisperer. Drop the kid with Clement,” Maxim said. “I’ll tell him to expect you at the house.”

Adler sighed. “Look, she’s still in shock I think. Can you make do with Gordon or myself so one of us can stay with her at least?”

Maxim sighed. “Wish that it were so, but no. Leave the young wolf with the old barkeep, and with any luck, the latter’s languishing lot will distract the former from the situation.”

Adler rubbed his temple. “Fine. Just—text me the crime scene address, and we’ll get there asap. This better be good, Maxim.”

“It’s bad, Adler. Why else would I call you when you are clearly needed there?” For once, there was no humor in the vampire’s voice.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 8

Gordon was faster getting dressed, and so it fell to him to accompany Mil across the hallway to her granny's home so the little wolf could put on clothes as well. Inwardly, Gordon was freaking out. He had been very truthful with Adler; looking after children wasn't anything he had any type of experience with.

"Are you taking me to work with you?" Mil asked, her voice sounding smaller in the echoey hallway.

"Not today. I only take interns," Gordon said.

Mil dropped her head. "Can I be your intern?"

Gordon held the apartment door for her, and she walked inside. The place Mil shared with her grandma was nice, although Mil's was a lace-loving grandma as was obvious in the curtains and patterned throw pillows. Gordon had also noted a warm scent in here when he'd been over earlier, something like ginger cookies or a type of herbal tea. It was a comfortable place, and Gordon hated that Mil had to leave it.

"You're too young to be my intern, but maybe in about ten years or so. Uh, you'll have to go to NAU though. This is your room, right?"

Mil nodded and went ahead into the colorful bedroom that was a blend of things for children and things not so, at least at first glance: on the desk that had felt tip doodles on one leg, there lived a small tower of books more appropriate for older readers. Gordon was delighted to see Discworld on that pile. Next to the bed, on a shelf, there

was a woman's purse, too big to be Mil's and too high end for a child. A carpet laid out in front of the bed clashed as well, the colors dark, not the light green and yellow on the wall.

Gordon looked around. "Okay. You need clothes. Do you, erm. Do you need help getting dressed?"

Mil looked up at him. "No. But the nice sweaters are on a higher shelf. Do I need to bring my nice sweaters?"

Good fucking question. "We're taking you to a bar so..."

"Where people drink? Like in movies?"

"Well. Technically. But it's probably fine. It's a childcare bar. Do you want to wear a nice sweater for that?"

Mil hesitated, then gave a nod. She went over to the wardrobe and pointed at a shelf above her reach. "Can I get that brown one there? Grandma says maroon, but maroon sounds ugly. It's not really ugly. She bought it for me, and I really like it."

Gordon nodded and pulled out the requested sweater. Behind that, he saw a set of black clothes, all the way in the back. He didn't know, wasn't going to ask Mil, but by the look of them, they were funeral clothes, maybe the very ones Mil had worn for her parents.

Gordon shuddered because he still remembered Paula's funeral like it had been yesterday, the bleakness indelible and bright.

Mil looked at him with wide eyes when he handed her the sweater. "Are you okay? Are you cold? Grandma has a blanket. A blanky. We snuggle under it sometimes

when we read together or watch TV.”

Right. Werewolves are perceptive. I should know. “I’m fine. Do you need anything else?”

Mil shook her head, and Gordon watched her gather an outfit together. He turned when she began changing. Mil showed no signs of being embarrassed or uncomfortable with Gordon being there, pretty much a given for someone who’d probably stripped alongside other members of the pack since their earliest childhood.

“I’m done,” she told him, having managed surprisingly quickly.

Gordon turned. “Cool. Anything else you need? Remember, we’ll go back later today to get everything for that sleepover party we’re going to have at Adler’s place. Just what you need for now.”

“For skipping school?”

Gordon leaned toward her. “It’s okay to skip every once in a while.”

“But don’t you have to have good grades for NAU?”

Gordon couldn’t help it. He chuckled. Mil’s eyes remained large and slightly anxious though. “You’re already the more studious one between us. Okay. What do you need?”

Mil looked around, then grabbed her things: a book clutched alongside her stuffed bunny, one of the Dragon Tamer series Gordon had loaned her before the last full moon. It had been on her nightstand.

“This is fine,” she told him. And then, she reached for his hand, took it in hers.

“Okay.” Gordon led her outside, though she pointed out where her grandma kept the keys.

Gordon locked the apartment behind them, and Adler came out of his place seconds later, looking at his phone, the work bag in which he had his laptop and tablet in hand.

The wolf smiled when he laid eyes on Gordon. Okay, so he does like seeing me minding the pups. At least one pup. Something I have no qualification for at all.

“Ready to go?” Adler asked.

Mil looked up at Gordon.

“We’re ready,” Gordon said.

The day was cloudy, but the sun was poking through the clouds. The weather could go either way, either becoming fully overcast or giving way to bright sunshine later.

Gordon hoped for the former.

“What about school tomorrow?” Mil asked Gordon on their way to the car.

“We’ll figure that out,” Adler told her.

That ended the conversation. Gordon wasn’t sure whether it was because they were all of them exhausted or whether it was because Adler was that much higher ranking than Mil.

Either way, Gordon considered all the figuring out that had to happen. Recovery after a stroke can be pretty long, even for a wolf. This might be weeks.

When Mil got in the back of Adler's car and fastened the seat belt there, Gordon frowned. Fuck, we need a list of things to figure out, like a car seat.

Adler, probably because he could sense some of what Gordon was worrying about, reached over to him, caressing his cheek.

"Thank you."

"What for?"

Adler looked over at him, light brown eyes twinkling. "Just for being here. Okay, everyone buckled in?"

"Yes," Mil and Gordon said together.

Adler, smiling to himself, reversed out of his parking spot and took them to the hunter's place, going close to the speed limit.

The three of them barely made it ten steps into 43 Ruthaven before the spare and very glum Lar—Clement—approached them.

"Hello," Clement said. He had short, strawberry blond hair and brown eyes. Gordon didn't know all that much about him except that he had been burned and wasn't feeling at home living in Maxim's huge house. "That is the child?" Clement pointed at Mil who had taken up position behind Gordon's legs. Only now did it occur to Gordon to wonder whether it really was such a brilliant idea to leave Mil here.

"I apologize, that one is rude," said Bryan, the family Lar, from behind his reception desk upon which an overflowing fruit bowl was fully on display.

Gordon felt Mil's fingers dig into his side, even through his jacket. "Can I stay in the

car?” she asked on a whisper.

Gordon untangled Mil’s fingers. “How about next time you get to stay in the car? If you can handle staying with Clement this time that is.”

Clement gave them an acerbic look. “I assure you, Dr. Morris, I am capable of watching over a child.”

There was a snort from Bryan, who readjusted a pear in his fruit bowl so its sun reddened cheek was facing them.

Gordon sensed Adler’s discomfort, noticed that he straightened, made himself bigger as if he wanted to preemptively smother any conflict with the pure size of him.

“Well, this is Milea,” Adler said, and Gordon gently pushed her forward.

“Little one, my name is Clement,” the Lar said softly, going to a knee. “You look like you need but a quiet place to read. Shall we go find one while Dr. Morris and Detective Adler go to work?”

Mil looked at the hand he was holding out toward her and looked from Gordon to Adler, who nodded in encouragement, before she took it. She looked back at them over her shoulder as Clement led her to the elevators.

“Call if—I don’t know,” Adler told Bryan as Clement and Mil vanished in an elevator. “Just call.”

“Of course, but please don’t worry,” Bryan said. “I’ll keep an eye on them—I always keep an eye on Clement anyways. Perhaps this will distract him from being so glum all the time. The donors are talking about him, you know, and he makes the atmosphere up there in the restaurant so dark.” Bryan adjusted the fruit bowl yet

again, this time paying attention to a tangerine with a bit of stalk and one oval leaf still attached to its top. “I don’t like it.” Clearly, the Lar was jealous.

Adler frowned. “Look, her only remaining family is in the hospital. Maybe—”

But Bryan shook his head, raising a hand in protest. “No, no. I will watch them. They will be fine, I promise on Maxim’s name.”

Adler’s frown deepened. “On his name?”

Bryan shrugged. “I am the Lar here, so I may do that.”

Oh dear, confused werewolf, Gordon thought when Adler cocked his head.

“I’ll tell you in the car, Adler. We should go.”

Adler nodded, his focus already shifting to Gordon quickly enough. Must be that mate thing at work again. Now I wonder what Maxim wants both of us for.

Gordon sighed, prompting Adler to put an arm around his shoulders for the short walk to the car.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 9

Gordon glanced over to Adler, who was driving fast. The tension in Gordon's tall, dark, and very handsome werewolf was obvious.

"What a morning," Gordon said, trying for a light tone.

Adler glanced over to him. "Thank you."

Gordon crossed his arms in front of him as New Amsterdam rushed past outside. "For what?"

Despite the tense shoulders, Adler managed to shrug. "Being there. Helping with Mrs. Cooper. Helping with Mil. Being your amazing self."

Gordon chuckled. "Come on, admit it. You thought I'd hide in the lab at the first sign of trouble, didn't you?"

Adler huffed and turned up his nose. "My mate doesn't hide. My mate is brave. The bravest. And so pretty. Sexy too, and irresistible with his clothes off."

Gordon slid down in his seat. "Your werewolf mind just went to the gutter, detective. Shouldn't you be focusing on the case?"

"I would if I knew what it was about."

"Maxim didn't tell you anything?"

“Nah. Just that he wants the both of us.”

They drove on in silence for a few more blocks, and Gordon reached over the middle console so he could take Adler’s hand in his. The werewolf was always warmer, and to Gordon, that difference had quickly become a comfort. That simple touch seemed to soothe Adler as well if his low exhale was any indication.

Adler eventually slowed the car and pulled over in a residential area Gordon didn’t know. There were two LAPD officers that Gordon could see, standing in front of a whitewashed house with a stone birdbath out front. If not for those two, this street would look completely normal.

However, there were also the trademark black and dark gray SUVs of the Forum, indicating that the two officers were here in a liaison capacity and that the crime was directly supernatural-related on the side of the victim as well as the perpetrator. That would also explain why Maxim had called Adler, not the other way around, the hunter clearly having been called to the scene first.

“This should be interesting,” Adler said, his thoughts clearly running along the same lines as Gordon’s.

When the two of them got out and headed for the entrance to the house, the police officers briefly checked their credentials and gave them a curt greeting before waving them through.

In the townhouse’s hallway, Gordon got the first whiff of something: blood. It mixed with the sour notes of vinegar, something he was familiar with, and not just from his own recent morgue cleaning . Here it’s not used for cleaning though. To deter wolf noses in this case. So someone planned to do this and brought strong vinegar to the crime to mask their scent .

Adler was close to Gordon, almost touching, as Gordon walked toward an announcement board mounted across from the mailboxes.

“There you are, my new favorite couple,” Maxim said from behind them, prompting Gordon to lightly squeal and Adler to growl as he spun, putting himself between Gordon and any possible threat.

“Fuck, Maxim,” Adler said, straightening out of the crouch he’d almost moved into.

The hunter was in his black and very sexy hunter outfit, his golden hair braided and running over one shoulder.

He tutted. “Adler, did I not advise you about the wisdom of growling at people at your place of employment? Not that I take it seriously of course; Not that I mean to diminish your growl, at all. It’s such a wolfish growl, sure to impress a mate. Isn’t it, Gordon?”

Gordon stepped up next to Adler. “Adler doesn’t need to growl to impress me, Maxim. What happened here?”

“Ah, your words might break a werewolf’s heart.” Maxim beckoned. “Follow me, and I will show you. It’s up the stairs.”

Maxim went ahead of them, his footfalls silent. No wonder he can sneak up on a werewolf, Gordon thought.

On the second floor, toward the back of the house, an apartment door stood open, clearly the source of the smell. They followed Maxim inside. Gordon noticed a doormat with “Welcome” written in colorful, blocky letters on it. He wiped his feet on the mat, a reflex.

The apartment inside was one of tall ceilings, white walls, and hardwood floors, the only decoration a pothos plant that had been grown to reach from one doorframe to the other, the green like a lifeline on the white.

They walked past a kitchen, white as well, accented with stainless steel, and to a living room. There, the Forum's forensic techs in their coveralls could be seen collecting samples through a set of open French doors.

Maxim turned and smiled at them, then petted Gordon's cheek. "You changed your hair color again. A fascinating hue of purest cerulean blue, tipped with white, like wind frothing a water sprite. And Willa tells me you are the kind of person to cut the crust off bread." He leaned in conspiratorially. "I would have done the same, except when Heath was little, porridge was de rigueur. He wouldn't have it without honey on top of course. He could be such a picky eater. Ah, he was adorable when he was that tiny. He is adorable still, but if I say as much, he gets ever so contrary, the poor thing. You see, despite what Willa says, I side with you on the issue of the bread crusts, Gordon."

"Uh, thanks," Gordon said. "I think?"

Adler cleared his throat. "The case?"

Maxim made a moue. "But Adler, you should be more social. Whatever will your mate think?"

Gordon shrugged. "I'm just wondering if there's a corpse for me?"

Maxim looked from Gordon to Adler. "Neither of you is any fun this day."

Adler scratched his head. "Well, we're all smelling the blood, Maxim, so if we could get to the point?"

Maxim shook his head in disapproval. “Fine, follow me into this world of gore then.” He turned, leading the way toward the French doors and through them.

The Forum’s forensics team was an army of fae, vampires, and wolves clad in white and thus unified. They had put tape on the ground to mark out the areas they’d finished with, and Maxim walked Adler and Gordon to the edge of where they still worked. From there, the three of them had a good view of the room.

Everyone here was familiar with the way blood smelled when it was spilled in large amounts, and that was the case. It had soaked through the carpet, had followed the lines of the wooden floorboards and ran like tears down the wall where it had been used to write, crudely: the deserved suffering before death .

The blood had drawn dark lines along a cooling finger from whence it had dropped to form a puddle, and it stained void faces and chests torn open with wicked force. The two victims had been brutally mutilated and placed in an armchair each, angled so as to face the French doors, face whoever walked onto the gruesome scene.

“These are Mary Ann and Jackson Williamson,” Maxim said. “Mary Ann was a werewolf, though with no direct pack affiliation, and Jackson was fae.”

“This is extraordinarily violent,” Adler said, and Gordon was sure that the way he moved to block his view wasn’t intentional, was instinct.

Maxim nodded. “It very much is.”

Gordon put a hand on Adler’s shoulder. “Remember why I’m here, detective. I don’t need protecting.” He turned to one of the forensic techs. “Hey, did you bring an extra whitesuit?”

The tech nodded, pointing toward another room. Gordon turned to head that way, but

Adler stopped him, wrapped an arm around his middle, and drew him in for a quick kiss.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I sometimes forget how brave you are. I mean, I know, but then I forget.”

Gordon rolled his eyes. “You are forgiven, detective.”

“Thank you,” Adler said just before letting Gordon go, his voice low and husky.

Gordon went to put on that whitesuit. He was pretty sure that Adler was watching him go. Focus on the murders and not on the hot werewolf. The dead need you more than the living right now.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 10

Adler's senses seemed heightened to the extreme. It was a combination of the scent of blood and his mate so near, his mate who Adler needed to keep safe no matter what.

That's the wolf talking. Of course he is safe here. Get a grip .

Adler forced himself to shift his focus from Gordon to the bodies.

In this, her human form, Adler didn't recognize the female wolf, Mary Ann. He saw that her medium-long hair had been dyed—nothing as colorful as his mate did, just a light tone of caramel brown with the roots showing in almost black. Gordon never lets his hair grow out this much. Was she too busy to touch it up? Or was she trying to get back to her natural color? I wonder what she looked like in her wolf form. I must have heard her howl during the full moon at some point.

“Was her chest torn open with bare hands?” Adler asked, leaning forward across the area the forensics team wasn't done with yet.

Maxim nodded. “I thought the same. That's why I wanted the both of you here.”

Gordon came back, now mostly covered in one of the all-white forensics suits. He put on a surgical mask and face shield, then pulled up the hood of the suit, zipping it all the way in the front before pulling on a set of black gloves.

Now uniformed like the rest of the forensics team, he crossed the line of tape,

stepping into the heart of the mayhem.

“Have you documented the bodies so far? Can I examine them?” he asked a team member.

Adler didn’t know if his mate was able to tell the forensics people apart. He sure couldn’t. However, the person Gordon had asked nodded, and Gordon carefully made his way over to Mary Ann.

“Anything you can glean, Gordon, we are eager to hear,” Maxim said, crossing his arms.

Adler frowned. Maxim wasn’t happy, and given Adler’s beta nature, seeing someone so alpha unhappy had the same effect on him. He felt glumness creep in from all sides made only worse by the fact that he couldn’t be physically near to his mate just then.

“Well,” Gordon said, peering into the open chest. “I’ll need them back at the morgue before I give you anything definitive, but”—he looked at the broken ribs like fence posts after a car crashed into them—“I think this was likely done by a vampire. Not a very young one, someone with the kind of explosive strength that comes with age. And yes, at first glance, I’d say they tore into her. Through her. They paid no attention at all to keeping your ribs lined up all evenly, did they? Such horrible manners.” He turned his attention to the male corpse. “The neck is broken, here. That would have taken quite a forceful blow.” He looked back over to the werewolf’s corpse. “I don’t see the heart, but the lungs are there, and...” Adler took a steadying breath as he watched his precious mate reach inside that torn-open chest and feel around. “Yeah. I’d say it’s just the heart that’s missing.”

Maxim raised his chin. “But you’ll have to count all the wobbly bits later?”

Gordon barely glanced up from his work. “Exactly.” He took a few steps back, looked around and took an instrument from a work kit nearby. A thermometer, Adler realized when Gordon pushed it inside the open chest. “I think this happened in the early hours.”

Adler looked at the message on the wall behind the two bodies, the red letters stirring something in the back of his mind. He turned to Maxim.

“Do you have any reason to think humans are involved? I mean, it doesn’t seem like it.”

A very small frown line appeared on Maxim’s otherwise smooth forehead. “I’m not sure. For now, I am including you as the direct point of contact between this investigation and the NAPD. Better to have you here than to miss you later. Like a condom you always carry in your pocket just in case, you know.”

Adler’s wolf nearly bounced with happiness when Gordon’s head spun around. “Maxim, did you just compare Adler to a condom?”

Maxim smiled, putting his teeth on display. “In the most loving way, of course. My way of celebrating technological and cultural advances such as condoms surely are.” He glanced at Adler. “I’m sure you’d be the textured kind.”

Adler heard Gordon gasp, and he hated that the suit covered up his mate all too well. Still, it was enough for Adler to feel very smug indeed.

With his mate’s shock on his behalf pushing him, Adler allowed himself to give Maxim a smug look. “Wouldn’t you like to know, Maxim?”

At least one of the forensic people looked up from their work.

Maxim gasped in fake-shock. “Oh my, Adler. Now you tell me, now that you have been mated for good, taken off the menu of all single people who do not mind getting bitten while playing in the sheets. Oh, I lament the time I wasted knowing you but never knowing you truly, utterly, in the way a flower knows the bee or a keyhole the turgid key—”

“Seriously, do you have to, in front of my corpses?” Gordon said.

Maxim winked at Adler. “Feisty, isn’t he?”

“The feistiest.” Adler met Gordon’s eyes, pretty much the only part of his mate’s face he could see right now.

Unspoken tenderness passed between them, and Gordon huffed in exasperation before turning back to the two bodies.

“I’ll take care of them. If you two have any other clues to follow, you can go do that now.”

Aw, he’s dismissing me. Fuck, if I were in my wolf form right now, I’d show him my belly, hoping he’d pet me.

“Gordon, darling, you’ll make Adler jealous, what with his body temperature being so much higher than that of your lovely corpses,” Maxim said. “I trust he is not that dismissive of you normally, Adler?”

“Only if I try to wake him early,” Adler said, fondness making color rise to his cheeks.

Maxim nodded. “Such are the joys and tribulations of bedding together and waking together, of negotiating having and holding forever what others can only dream of.

But so often the soft love of hours early and middling dark will mark the will of the willing and wanting. It's a gift given gradually and grudgingly, those ghastly early hours, Adler. Best cherish them to utmost effect."

"You are distracting when you break into metered monologue," Gordon said. "Can you two please just go and leave everyone else to do their jobs?"

This brought agreeable sniggers from the small platoon of white-clad clue hunters.

Maxim sighed. "Adler, next time you bring your mate, I expect you to caffeinate. Gordon, we'll talk more once you and the corpses are done."

Gordon turned. "Oh, the looming fun."

The look on Maxim's face, bereft of a rhyme, was priceless, and once more since the mate bite, Adler felt the need to strut around and tell everyone, See, this right there, that's my mate poking fun at that hunter. Nothing scares him, and he's perfect.

But at the same time, Adler's perfect mate had dismissed him, and not leaving the scene then and there would have been taking the shine out of Gordon's spotlight.

I hope he watches me. I hope I get a reward for leaving later when we're alone again.

Adler imagined what such a reward might look like. Unfortunately, he had a vivid imagination and far too many toys to feature in it.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 11

“We’re heading to the Forum ahead of them,” Maxim told Adler outside.

Adler stopped on the stairs that led down from the front door. He had assumed they would be going back to Ruthaven or do some canvassing. This took him by surprise, especially given that Maxim was openly not enthusiastic about the Forum.

Adler didn’t exactly want to leave Gordon behind when his mate didn’t even know where he was going. It was instinct, the need to make sure his mate knew where to find him if he needed to.

Adler knew all that, knew that he was being silly, especially given that Gordon knew how to use a damn cell phone, but still. The wolf was uneasy.

Maxim turned. “I’m sure the Forum people will give both Gordon and Mr. and Mrs. Williamson a ride, Adler, but you are welcome to ride with me and leave your car here for Gordon.” He grinned at Adler. “That way, he can get to you quickly if he needs to.”

Adler relaxed. An alpha can instantly make you less stressed even if that alpha is technically just a vampire hunter.

“I’ll be right back.”

Maxim sighed. “I’m already feeling like a bride left at the altar. Please hurry.”

Adler nodded, walked back into the house, and dropped his car keys next to the forensic equipment outside the scene. “Gordon, I’m leaving my keys out here. I’m riding with Maxim.”

One of the white-clad workers turned, and there wasn’t even a strand of blue hair visible to mark him out as Gordon. “I already called Corinne for pickup, but I can take the car if you want.”

Adler nodded and smiled even if he didn’t see Gordon smile back through his surgical mask and face shield.

“Please do. I’ll leave you to it.” He went outside again, where Maxim was leaning against his own car, a silver BMW.

“My groom has returned to me!” Maxim twirled the end of his long braid around one finger.

“Let’s just go, please.”

“Pah. Spoil sports, the both of you, but very well.”

They both got into the car, and Maxim pulled away from the curb, neatly accelerating and leaving the crime scene behind them.

“How is mated life, hmm?” the hunter asked.

Adler couldn’t help himself. He felt the stupid grin settling on his face, but he was powerless to stop it.

“It’s the best. I do worry I’m enough though.”

Maxim gasped, taking his eyes straight off the road. “In the bedroom? Pray tell, did you not practice before biting people in the sheets? That is so very irresponsible of you! It was the first thing I told my baby boy when he was old enough to understand: learning the art of physical love is a skillset, and you should hasten to acquire it. Adler. Do you need me to talk you through the finer points of it?”

“Please watch the road. I’m worried I’m enough for him when it comes to feeding, not fucking.”

“Ah, yes. That’s a relief.”

Adler rolled his eyes. “Not really.”

“Silly. He will tell you. And hungry vampires are very obvious, pale, red-rimmed eyes, chapped lips. Not a good look.”

“I didn’t know that. Are you sure?”

Maxim snorted. “Of course I’m sure. I lived before the Year of Revelation in 1313, and when humans were still ignorant of our kind, they feared us. There were no donors. Young and unskilled vampires would wander, starved and ready to fall on any unsuspecting traveler and drink them dry. That was when I started to learn my skill.”

Adler let that settle in. I knew he was old. I didn’t think he was older than Revelation. I didn’t know he’s been a hunter for that long.

Maxim noticed Adler’s silence and once more took his eyes off the road. “Are you impressed with me now, more than you already were? If you admire me, feel free to tell me. I’ll listen.”

“Uh. No, thank you. But it’s kind of impressive. Living that long I mean.”

The idea that Adler might not live long had so distressed Gordon at first. Adler’s skin still itched uncomfortably when he remembered how guilty his mate had felt, and for no good reason as far as Adler was concerned.

Maxim shrugged. “Age is not that rare a gift among vampires. We advertise it rarely, and only to a few select people. In either case, you will see when you need to worry about Gordon’s feeding habits, and until such a time, you needn’t waste a thought on it. Now, did you want to learn what I didn’t feel comfortable mentioning earlier?”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all, Maxim.”

Ahead, the Forum’s building complex became a visible presence on New Amsterdam’s skyline, the dome smooth and reflective, the white buildings neat and tidy, just like the greenery surrounding them.

“Well, that cannot be helped. You haven’t forgotten Philippa Pearson, have you?”

The violent serial killer had certainly left an impression. Her Ripper copycat murders were the kind of things nightmares spawned from.

“What about her?” Adler asked.

“We are going to see Dr. Melissa Seine, the psychiatrist who’s been interviewing Pearson since she was incarcerated. I’d like you to hear what Melissa has to say from Melissa herself.” Maxim parked the car, but not in front of the entrance closest to Gordon’s labs. “Come on.”

Adler didn’t visit the Forum often, other than to pick up Gordon. He himself was the Forum’s responsibility much like any supernatural was, but Adler’s employer was the

city, his job to solve cases for the NAPD and liaise with the Forum if and when necessary.

Usually when he came here, Adler had to sign in and tell the security person or reception person—depending on where in the Forum he was going—what he wanted.

Not so with Maxim. The fae and vampire receptionist team simply nodded at Maxim, who barely spared them a glance as he walked straight into the bowels of this building.

He's better than an all-access pass, Adler thought, hurrying to meet the hunter's long strides without outpacing him.

"Where are we?" Adler asked. "The Forum's psych unit?" So far, there had been no signage at all.

Maxim turned as he took a left down a very nondescript, windowless hallway that looked decidedly less cheery than the hallway outside of Gordon's morgue, quite a feat seeing as how Gordon's morgue was in the basement. And full of dead people. Also one sexy pathologist who has long conversations with them.

"Wouldn't that be nice. No, this is the interdisciplinary division. It would be more accurate to call them a think tank, a secret society, or better yet a cabal, but they frown upon those monickers. They don't like to be associated with any group, because heavens, where would we be if the independence of our brightest minds were ever cast in doubt? Where would we be if they decided to take a position and stand by it?"

"You sound like you have feelings about this division."

Maxim gave him some side-eye. "You could tell? And here I was, trying for

subtlety.”

The hallway brightened with a line of windows on the right, and Maxim walked past the first office door and knocked on the second. The sign outside read only “Melissa Seine.” There was no title there, nothing, just the doctor’s name.

“Come in,” said a cheery voice, and Maxim pushed the door inward.

Adler wasn’t sure what he had expected, but it was not this.

The first thing he noticed were the smells. Willa was the pack’s best tracker, but Adler considered himself decent when it came to picking up a scent and following it.

This office was full of scents: lavender, orange, smoke, sage, peppermint, something chalky, followed by cinnamon, recently struck matches, and sun-warmed skin.

The colors and textures flooded Adler’s brain like an action movie with too many explosions. Beanbags lined the floor next to meditation pillows and yoga mats, all in bright colors and patterns that made focusing on any one thing hard. There were also a few chairs, but they looked outlandish, what with the sloping designs of their backs and legs.

The doctor herself did not match her office at all. She was tall with short black hair, and her skin was several shades darker than Adler’s. She also had the pointed ears of the fae sans glamour and the beautiful, aristocratic features of one.

Presumably she even smelled like fae, except with all the other scents in this room, Adler had no way of telling. What really made her clash with the place though was her black business suit with a white shirt and black tie. Dr. Melissa Seine, in this room that looked like colorful pixie vomit, was an immaculate beacon of sleek professionalism.

“Melissa.” Maxim approached the doctor to greet her with a kiss to either cheek. “This is a friend, Detective Adler with the New Amsterdam Police Department. I hope we aren’t interrupting anything.”

Adler approached the fae, who gave him a practiced, professional smile and shook his hand.

“Maxim. You love interrupting things, yet don’t enjoy being interrupted yourself.”

Adler bristled. This was not the kind of thing one said to an alpha. If the fae noticed how her words rubbed him the wrong way, she didn’t show it.

Maxim beamed, more gracious than most other alphas. “Ah, Melissa, your insights are still worthy of being made into fortune cookie filling. I was hoping you could tell Adler about your suspicions about Philippa Pearson.”

At this, the fae’s beautiful face wrinkled, and she gave Adler a piercing look. “He’s a werewolf.”

“And as I said, Melissa, a friend.” Maxim turned to Adler. “Melissa likes cultivating mild paranoia.”

The fae snorted. “If it isn’t the vampire calling the leech bloodthirsty. You vouch for him?”

“Of course I vouch for him.” Maxim gracefully sat in one of the oddly shaped chairs and crossed his legs. “And do trust me, I had Heath look into him when he joined the police and started moving up in Willa’s pack.” Maxim looked at Adler. “He found that one parking ticket you got when you were nineteen, Adler. I was shocked.”

Adler flinched. “You what?”

Maxim shrugged. “Bold background checks prevent distressing disappointments.”

Melissa just nodded. “Fine. Take a seat.”

She took one of the larger beanbags herself, managing to fold her long legs into the noisily shifting seat and looking elegant doing it. Adler had never seen a fae sit on a beanbag before.

Adler took one of the least outlandish chairs. To his surprise, the thing was actually comfortable.

“Adler was present when we arrested Miss Pearson,” Maxim began.

The doctor nodded. “I saw the name on the files.” She looked to Adler. “You got the internal investigation into the death investigations of Persons’s parents started. And the one into the accident that killed her foster parents.” She framed the word “accident” in air quotes.

Adler nodded. “Something wasn’t right there. It deserved at least a second look.”

“I agree,” the fae said. “But don’t expect anyone to find out much.” She took a deep breath. “I can’t prove anything, but I would bet money on there being something bigger behind all this.”

“Ah.”

It didn’t come as a surprise, not really. The Pearson case had never felt really finished to Adler even if concluding it had been so easy after Maxim had gotten involved, no trial needed, no waiting for judgment. Something about the case itself just smelled off, rotten, wrong.

Maxim sighed. “What Melissa won’t say because she doesn’t like the word, is that she suspects this is a conspiracy, and I find myself increasingly willing to agree with her.”

Adler blinked. “Say what? You think the humans are conspiring to... what? Murder other humans?”

Dr. Seine shook her head. “First of all, I don’t have problems with words, Maxim, but conspiracy feels inaccurate. And no, this is not human-on-human violence. Pearson was—in my opinion—a cog in a much bigger machine, and she has been pushed toward doing what she did. Some of the way she phrases her responses indicates she has had some type of conditioning in the past.”

“I don’t quite follow,” Adler said. “I mean, to what end?”

“You are aware Pearson’s parents were murdered by a werewolf?” the fae asked.

Adler nodded. “That’s what the report said.”

Seine nodded. “Of course. The murders occurred in the late afternoon. On a day of the full moon. Were you aware of that?”

He hadn’t been. But this cast an entirely new light on that old case.

Wolves turned on a full moon. Some had the ability to turn the night before and—sometimes, in rare cases—the night after, but most wolves needed the sun to set before they could shift.

Only the smallest number could shift when the moon was up in the daytime sky. It was an almost mythic ability, and individual wolves with that skill were usually well-known within a region, not least because a solitary wolf roaming during the daytime

could be extremely upsetting to humans, which in turn put all wolves in a difficult position.

If a wolf had murdered the parents during daytime, that was a very small suspect pool.

“I wasn’t.” Adler straightened. “How did the police not take note of that?”

“And how did they not put it anywhere in the file?” Maxim added. “Isn’t that just mysterious? I asked your mate to help me get access to her early psychiatric records. He got me the files, but the contents were not of Pearson but some other patient. Ostensibly, a clerical error, misfiled paperwork, but such a strange one, wouldn’t you agree?”

Adler perked up at that. “So what? You think this is a hate group?”

The fae shrugged. “I don’t know. But when I ask about why she killed the fae, what she would do to me if given the chance or to any other fae, she says ‘they deserve the suffering before death.’ I once asked about her parents, and she told me the exact same thing. There are other things too, tics, avoiding eye contact. But that phrase sticks out most.”

“They deserve the suffering before death,” Adler mumbled to himself. The writing on the wall, literally.

Maxim stirred. “I followed up on a few things myself. You see, investigations surrounding Pearson were often dropped. I asked the officers I spoke with in hypotheticals to see how they would judge when to close an investigation, and their answers were sound. Had they acted like they knew was correct, those cases would still be open.” Maxim shifted forward a fraction. “I asked them how they would proceed normally in similar cases, and their answers were to continue investigating.”

He tilted his head. “You see, Adler, some of the officers got very distressed when they were confronted with the fact that they had shut down an investigation before it could ever go anywhere. When they realized that was what they had done, that is.”

Adler clenched and unclenched his fists. “Then why did they do it? Distress doesn’t help much when you already fucked up an investigation.”

Maxim shrugged. “They had no idea why. I compelled them to exclude bribery or anything as mundane as that. Which means they either ran into an excellent hypnotist, or into a vampire with quite the powerful compulsion.”

Adler stirred in his seat, which had suddenly become uncomfortable. “That’s not an everyday skill. Did you try to undo it?”

Maxim shook his head. “It is not everyday at all. And as someone who has that skill, believe me, we take note of it as much as the wolves do of a day shifter. The undoing of it...well. It’s difficult and not even possible in most cases. In addition, there’s always a risk of leaving the mind with permanent damage, so weighing those risks, I didn’t attempt it.”

“Right.” Adler frowned, hating the idea that there were potential witnesses but that they couldn’t help them anymore.

“The paperwork concerning these older cases was impeccable,” Seine added.

“Meaning?” Adler asked.

“It was the kind I would not have given a second look unless the conversations with Pearson hadn’t all felt so off, and even on that second look, everything seemed in order. Maxim had the right idea, going after the files from when she was still a minor.”

Maxim looked back to Adler. “When it looks like a conspiracy and it quacks like a conspiracy...”

This is above my pay grade. Why is he telling me this? “Fine, let’s say it is that, but to what end?”

“Hate,” Seine said.

Maxim got back to his feet. “What she means is, money doesn’t seem a reasonable motivator, since a vampire with that skill wouldn’t need to go to those lengths for it, and a day shifter would likely have the support of any pack they choose.

“Bloodlust might move someone to do this, but for that, there are not enough corpses, dreary though that may sound. However, we do have a human murdering supernaturals or those who have at least some connection to the supernatural world.

“You remember we talked about the Ripper murders in London and the unrest that ensued? I think Pearson or those who helped her wanted that, the same anger the Ripper cases bred in the people. Pearson’s hate for everything supernatural is quite real even if it was carefully cultivated, so that may have well been the common denominator in all this: a shared hate. A love of chaos.”

The room was too colorful, too cheerful to be talking about conspiracies in it. The colors and smells clashed with the memory of that first scene that still stuck in Adler’s head: that murder had made everything shimmer red and wet, the coppery scent of drying blood filling the air. Vinegar to hide the scent of who had done it from werewolf noses.

“Shit,” Adler said.

“You are not entirely wrong,” Maxim agreed. “Not wrong at all.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 12

They were silent as they left Dr. Seine, and Adler didn't even find it in him to ask about her very idiosyncratic office design.

When Maxim pulled out of the Forum's parking lot and sped away, Adler was still lost in his thoughts. They spent the drive in silence until the vampire parked his car in the garage beneath 43 Ruthaven. Maxim got out, and Adler followed.

"What now?" he asked.

Maxim walked around the car and unbuckled his swords from his hunter's blacks, then put them into the trunk of his car. That should have made him look less lethal. It didn't.

"Now you follow me." He headed toward the elevators.

"You have a plan though, right?"

Adler hoped so. The idea of Pearson—of these most recent murders—being a coordinated effort... It scared him. Maxim had been afraid the Jack the Ripper copycat murders would create unrest in both the human and supernatural populace. If that is still the goal of whoever is behind this, they need to be stopped fast.

"You're in such a hurry. How about you introduce me to that wolf child Clement has been looking after, and then Heath can hand you your new phone."

The elevator doors opened for Maxim without him having to push a button, and he strode inside. When he turned, Adler noticed a single strand of golden hair that had escaped the hunter's long braid, a flaw Adler didn't want to notice but couldn't ignore.

"Why do I need a new phone?" Adler asked into the silence of the elevator.

Maxim leaned against a mirrored wall. "We are going to compartmentalize because we can't be sure that your police colleagues and Gordon's and my Forum colleagues are fully conspiracy free. All of us will use the devices Heath provides for communication from here on forward. And if a vampire other than me uses their compulsion to extract information, we don't want too much information around, do we? Which leads me to ask, have you ever been compelled?"

Adler cocked his head. "Not to my knowledge."

Maxim nodded, a mischievous grin spreading like honey on wild berries. He put a hand on his hip.

"Look into my eyes, detective."

Adler looked down. "Do I have to?"

Maxim clicked his tongue. "What now, are you shy because it's your first time? I promise I'll be gentle. It won't hurt one tiny bit."

"Is that what you tell all the people you compel?" Adler asked, stalling.

"Oh, I can't do that. Heath would be very cross with me. He'd call me insensitive and lewd, can you believe? Me?" Maxim fake-whimpered. "His sweet papa, who cared for him, bathed him, changed his diapers and kissed him good night after making sure

there were no monsters under his bed.”

“Uhh...”

“Detective. Look at me.”

Adler knew he should. Maxim was alpha. But he didn’t want to. He didn’t like the idea of any vampire other than Gordon controlling him, and before he could voice that much, he bared his teeth. At Maxim. Who was a badass motherfucker, swords or no.

Fuck, why am I like this? He’ll—

Maxim whistled and sped forward. Adler found his head tilted upward slightly by a strong hand on his chin, and his eyes met Maxim’s.

“Say apple pie,” Maxim said.

Adler growled. “No. Sorry! Fuck, sorry. Apple pie?”

Maxim let go of him and stepped back, this time in normal speed.

“Well, it would appear you can’t be compelled. Do you know the only time a beta wolf ever growled at me before this day was when I had cause to fight their alpha? The mate bite has been doing wonders for your loyalty.”

“I didn’t mean to do that. I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. It’s good to know you can’t be compelled against your better nature or your mate.”

Adler stiffened. “That’s good.” I’d never hurt my mate, never.

“I agree fully, although I will have you know, none ever complained about my skill of compulsion. I know just the right spot to hit time and time again until they succumb.”

Adler gave him a flat look. “Heath had a point, you know.”

Maxim gaped, then put a finger to his mouth. “Shh. You can’t say that out loud. He might hear.”

Adler rubbed his eyes. “Okay. I’ll whisper. About the conspiracy though, exactly how deep do you think this goes?”

The vampire’s face hardened. “I don’t know, but someone meddled with several investigations over a prolonged period of time. And remember that the... trophies Pearson cut out of her victims were never found. Remember how she specifically acted like Jack the Ripper in the staging even when she actually just preferred choking her victims to death.” He crossed his arms in front of him. “It’s rare that you see only the shadow of a person, see that they have been there only by the negative space they leave behind. It’s the kind of killer that we hunters always pay special attention to when we happen across them, and this is one of those times, Adler. So pay attention. This is more than a crow in a tree. Make notes, detective.”

Adler nodded even as the elevator dinged to a stop and spilled them out in the hallway just outside Morgan’s Bar and Restaurant.

Maxim lifted one eyebrow. “Ready? And remember, children are terribly good at detecting the unease in the people closest to them.”

Adler snorted. “Thanks for the pep talk, Maxim.”

The vampire shrugged and walked out. “My mother told me, but naturally I was still surprised when my darling child decided to comfort me after a particularly difficult hunt. Heath was three at the time, never mind that dhampirs grow differently than humans or young wolves. Have you had news of the child’s grandmother?”

“Not yet.”

Adler tried to imagine the vampire hunter taking care of a miniature Heath and...failed. Maxim was good at being a hunter, but Adler couldn’t fathom how the man had ever managed to raise a child who had turned into one of the most reliable and meticulous people Adler had ever met. Not to mention fastidious about data collection and all the tech stuff.

They walked into the bar and restaurant area together, and Maxim made straight for the bar behind which...Clement was apparently giving Mil an introductory course in cocktail making.

The little girl sat on a barstool so she could reach the counter, and she was pouring liquor into Clement’s shaker after carefully measuring it out. Several of the human donors Maxim kept on staff as well as Morgan herself and most of her fae staff were seated at the bar and waiting to be served cocktails.

“You have the recipe for a gimlet memorized, Milea?” Clement asked the girl.

Mil nodded. “Gin, lime juice, simple syrup. We serve it with lime peel.”

“I really need to figure out childcare,” Adler said as they approached.

Maxim turned his stare at Adler. “You do? I think my newest bartender already has.” He leaned against the bar, next to one of the donors, and Adler took the seat next to Maxim. “It is always good to see new people picking up new skills quickly. Who

might your young apprentice be, Clement?”

Mil looked over to Adler and bit her bottom lip, obviously shy.

“This is Milea,” the Lar said. “Milea, this is Maxim. He’s my boss.”

The girl perked up. “The one who introduced Gordon to Adler?”

Adler couldn’t keep himself from giggling, and Maxim moaned. “Once, I had hopes higher than the tallest mountain of seeing them mated promptly, but—oh woe!—they were stubborn, thick-headed, and prone to running off or running after. Say, Milea, do you think a vampire can outrun a wolf?”

The girl hesitated, then said, “Not for long. And we can track. Vampires are easy to track.”

Maxim leaned over the counter. “Is that so?”

The girl nodded, hesitant with the eye contact.

Adler smiled at her fondly. “Not all are, but Mil has a good nose.”

Maxim turned in his chair. “Hm. You’re saying this is a famous tracker-to-be? Madame Milea, I find myself even more delighted with your presence behind my bar.”

“Thanks,” Mil mumbled before returning her attention to the gimlet.

The donor on Maxim’s other side took the cocktail Mil made for her and respectfully gave the vampire’s theatrics some room. The fae followed suit, possibly afraid Maxim might break into soliloquy. Only a few of the donors remained. Perhaps they

were too drunk to care about Maxim's poetic ambitions.

Clement looked at Adler. "I told her she can come here again whenever."

Mil looked at Adler too. "Can I really?"

Adler wasn't sure why Mil wasn't in a ball on the floor right now, crying for her granny. If he were honest, he had kind of expected that, but he was glad she was well, not glad the Lar had taught her how to make gimlets perhaps, but glad she seemed to be doing okay.

"Sure, Mil." Adler looked to Clement. "If that's alright with you of course."

The Lar turned to his acidic self once more. "I offered. Why on earth wouldn't it be? Did I not explain to you downstairs that I am perfectly capable of taking care of a child?"

"Ah, Clement, your sunny disposition always brightens every drinker's day. Isn't that just so?" Maxim asked the assembled donors, who mumbled their excuses and found tables at the other end of the room, possibly sensing a looming villanelle.

"You scared them away," Mil told Maxim.

The vampire grinned at her and showed off his teeth. "But look," he said. "I'm not scary at all."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" said Heath, who had approached them silently, his skill at being sneaky just as good as Maxim's. "Old bat, could you not scary-grin at the child, please? And you—" Heath pointed at Clement. "The two of us need to have a conversation about underage drinking."

Mil looked as if she were shrinking on her chair.

“Oh, Miss Milea, don’t worry about Heath,” Maxim said. “He’s my son, though I’m afraid I failed him in my parenting when I did not provide him with—”

“And don’t you fucking say crayons again, old bat, or I swear I will make you do your own fucking paperwork for a month.” Heath sat down on Maxim’s other side. “Hello, Milea. Adler.”

Maxim cleared his throat. “Language, darling.”

Heath looked confused. “Yeah, I’m using language. Do you want me to resort to expressive dance?”

“He means you shouldn’t curse in front of children.” Mil glanced up from her shaker.

Heath blinked. “Oh. Didn’t realize that was a rule. Well, fuck me—uhm. Dear me?”

“My granny says cursing is important, actually, just not to curse too much in front of adults or they will think I wasn’t raised right. She says cursing is a life skill.”

Clement nodded. “Smart woman.”

“That she is.” And hopefully, she’ll be better soon to teach Mil all the curses.

Adler couldn’t see the face Maxim was making at Mil, but it made the little girl giggle, even if she pushed the expression away quickly. She began measuring out the gin for yet another gimlet.

Heath turned to Adler. “Now that you have seen the scene—”

Clement put down the gimlet Mil had made in front of the dhampir. “Please enjoy. Elsewhere.”

Heath frowned. Then looked at the child behind the bar. “Right. Old bat, table?”

“Call me papa, and I’ll follow you anywhere.”

Heath frowned, but took his cocktail and walked off.

Maxim pointed and caught Mil’s eye. “I’ve had to track this one a lot when he was little. I envy you your sense of smell, Milea. The same for me and Adler, if you please.”

Mil looked at Adler. “Can I make something for Gordon too?”

“He’s still at work, but you’ll get the chance soon. He’ll love that.”

Adler followed Maxim to a table Heath had selected, a corner that didn’t get a lot of light and was far away from the other people in the bar. They all sat.

Heath drained his gimlet in one go. “Fuck, he taught the little werewolf well.”

Adler huffed. “She’s talented.”

Maxim petted the back of Heath’s hand. “Darling, we both know you can’t hold your liquor.”

Heath pointed. “I’m ignoring that patronizing undertone. Adler, he told you?”

Adler sighed, feeling that a gimlet would do him good too. “Yeah, he sure did, and I don’t like it.”

Heath flicked a finger, hitting his empty glass. The sound rang through the air before it died.

“Welcome to the fucking club.”

Chapter 13

Gordon would have preferred to ride with Corinne, but being mated to Detective Adler meant he got to take the unmarked police car every once in a while. He was all protective. Probably couldn't stand the thought of me being in the van with the dead people.

That made Gordon smile as he followed the gray van that held the corpses. Gordon didn't usually drive. There wasn't all that much reason to keep a car in New Amsterdam with its excellent public transport system that was heavily subsidized by the Forum. Being behind the wheel brought back memories of driving to the beach when Gordon had needed to escape the house after Paula's death and before he'd left for college.

"That was a lifetime ago. Fuck, but I was young. And brunet."

I'm still young though, right? I'm older than Adler. Gordon tapped the steering wheel of his werewolf's car. He seems way more grown up. He's totally responsible enough to be a foster parent. Gordon sucked on his bottom lip. What if the kid walks in on us? Do we kiss in front of her? Mom and Dad used to, and that was always awkward.

If he was totally honest with himself, Gordon had never once thought of himself as a parent. His interns were the closest he'd ever gotten to the role.

"We're mated though. Through thick and thin I guess."

Being mated was yet another thing Gordon had never thought would apply to him. It

was both easy and strange. Adler doted on him and would go out of his way to offer Gordon a vein. It was almost vampire groupie behavior if not for the selfless concern Gordon could see in Adler's eyes whenever he fed.

And then, the loneliness Gordon had gotten used to over the past few decades had just vanished without him really noticing. Adler didn't like being apart from Gordon at all. The one time Gordon had a corpse come in late, Adler had come to the morgue despite Gordon telling him he didn't have to.

I was worried you'd go hungry, and I wanted to see you, the werewolf had said while at the same time looking apologetic about interrupting Gordon's work.

Gordon sighed as he followed the van onto the Forum campus. "I need to do better in this relationship. At least pull my fucking weight. Putting on a wig and letting him tie me up shouldn't be all I contribute."

Gordon parked the car in front of the forensics building while Corinne drove the van around the back from where the corpses could be moved to Gordon's lab via the service elevator.

Gordon headed for the front entrance of their building, taking the steps leading up to the door two at a time. Like most vampires, he appreciated being indoors during the day. Gordon was ready to breeze past the person behind the reception desk, but the werewolf on duty stood to greet him with a firm nod.

"Good day, Dr. Morris." She smiled, her body language signaling that she was glad to see him.

Which was funny, because Gordon didn't know her.

Since he'd gotten together with Adler, Gordon had noticed that the werewolves

around the Forum generally showed more respect to him, at least to his face. Gordon didn't understand pack dynamics that well, but he had some kind of standing in Willa's pack now, even if he was only the mate of her second-in-command.

If the werewolves didn't like him mated to one of their own, they hid it. Gordon had overheard at least one vampire and one donor talking openly about how sleeping with an animal was...all kinds of derogatory things, though, and by "animal," they'd meant the man Gordon loved.

Gordon sighed, smiling to the wolf as he walked past her. "Hi."

I wonder if my two guests had to deal with that kind of prejudice.

Once Gordon got to the familiar corridors outside his lab, the ones he'd tastefully decorated with old creature feature movie posters, his mind settled into the right frame to work with the bodies.

Inside the morgue with its bright light, gray tiles, and abundance of stainless steel, Corinne was busy moving the corpses, and Gordon got ready, donning the forensic lab gear that was the only proper attire in which to welcome the Williamsons to his morgue.

"I'm about to get started on the forms," Corinne said. "Dictation program is ready to go." She pointed at the little microphone mounted above their guests.

"Thanks." Gordon turned to the corpses. "Mr. and Mrs. Williamson, welcome to our morgue. You've met Corinne." Corinne groaned, mumbling something about formaldehyde fumes and soft vampire brains. "We are a modern establishment with all the amenities you might require at this stage of your existence." Gordon showed them his tools. "We can even send you off for X-rays or an MRI if that is necessary."

“The only thing we’re missing is a shrink,” Corinne said.

Gordon tsked. “The Williamsons don’t need one.”

She looked up from her clipboard. “You don’t say.”

Gordon turned back to his guests. “I trained her myself. I think having a critical voice around who isn’t afraid to speak up is healthy, no pun intended.”

“How’s that a pun?” Corinne asked.

“Because we’re at a morgue, and you’re past healthy when you get here.”

“That still doesn’t make it a pun, Dr. Morris.”

“Well, fine. You’re very nitpicky today, Corinne. Would you like a cookie?”

“No. And I’m not nitpicky.”

“She is though,” Gordon told Mrs. Williamson.

Corinne moved to her desk to enter the information into the rudimentary system they were using. The Forum loved a hardcopy, and before Gordon had been allowed to hire Corinne, one of the older bureaucratic vampires had examined her handwriting, had lamented every improper curl of her cursive in the hopes of vetoing her contract.

One call to Maxim had taken care of that nonsense.

“I don’t think I need to be part of this conversation,” Corinne said and began typing away.

“Manners, Corinne. What will our guests think? We’re about to get started, Mr. and Mrs. Williamson,” Gordon told the corpses. He turned back to Mrs. Williamson. “I think you’ll go first. And don’t worry, I’ll take good care of you.” He centered the bright light on the horror of her chest. “The worst is already over.”

Gordon had his autopsies finished within a few hours, and when he moved the Williamsons to the freezer, his mind was going back to the events earlier in the day.

“It was a long and unusual day, but clearly not as bad as yours,” Gordon told Mrs. Williamson before he closed her compartment.

“What was so unusual?” Corinne asked as she was holding out a finished printout of her incident report for Gordon to look over and countersign.

Gordon turned and removed his gloves and gown and deposited them in the medical waste bin before taking it. “Oh, just...there is this kid in Adler’s pack who’s been living with her grandmother because her parents died. Her grandmother had a stroke this morning.”

“Wow,” Corinne said. “The poor kid. Does she have anyone to stay with now?”

Gordon shrugged, collected his own paperwork, added Corinne’s report to the pile, and headed to his office, leaving the morgue with its once more empty slabs behind.

“Well apparently she has Adler. And me, that is.”

Corinne’s eyebrows rose. “Wow.”

Gordon switched on the lights in his office, and the comfort of his collectibles aligned on shelves washed over him.

“Corinne, do I hear judgment?”

Gordon plopped into his chair and put her report to the side to be read later. He started scanning the Williamsons’ autopsy report, the dictation the new and shiny program had converted to text.

Corinne sat down in one of the chairs across from the desk and went for the Lord Helmet cookie jar directly without Gordon having to do any prompting at all. He smiled. The herby richness of fine cannabis cookies scented the air, and Corinne bit down on a cookie.

“That has to be weird. I mean, I’m not judging, but you know I took that seminar—”

“ Supernatural Society and Culture Specific Reactions ? The one for which you left the lab for most of the week?”

Gordon had missed her, even if the corpses had been good company. None of the new interns came close to Corinne though.

“Yeah, that one.” She chewed her cookie thoughtfully. “According to that guest lecturer—and I found his ideas about vampire and human relationships offensive by the way—but according to him, wolves and vampires don’t mix all that well because of the pack structures.”

Gordon snorted while he typed a few additional notes into the autopsy file. “I think I had that same guest lecturer when I first took that seminar.”

Corinne nodded. “I figure I should ask your hunter buddy for a second opinion.”

Gordon glanced at her, then broke out laughing. “That’s a great idea, actually. I didn’t know Maxim that well back when I first went to that seminar, but he will probably

take your offended feelings more seriously than the powers that be here at the Forum.”

“So I figured. Does the kid mind? Does she mind you, I mean.”

“Ouch,” Gordon said. “But I don’t think so.” He shrugged. “Then again, I wouldn’t know how to tell whether she minds or not. As I told Detective Adler, I am very familiar with child and adolescent anatomy, less so with their psychology.”

Corinne rolled her eyes and groaned as she devoured the last bit of her cookie.

Gordon cocked his head. “What?”

“Boss, a kid isn’t a problem that you need to figure out or understand. It’s just a person who needs you to hold their hand while they figure shit out themselves. Maybe hand them a tissue if they end up with a bloody nose. That kind of thing.”

Gordon sent off his preliminary report to Maxim. “That actually makes sense.”

Corinne shrugged. “I have a sister who’s ten years younger than me. She thinks she is the source of all my wisdom. I learned to never leave food unattended in her presence unless it’s broccoli.”

“Ah.”

Before Gordon could ask her more about younger people, his phone rang. Maxim.

“Well, I’m done for the day.”

Corinne left Gordon to his phone call, her pupils slightly enlarged.

Gordon waited before she closed the door behind herself, then picked up. “Maxim, hi.”

“I see you and the corpses got on well,” the hunter said. “Are you quite finished there? If so, join us back at my house.”

“Is Adler there?”

“Adler, your mate is asking for you! He is ensuring you are here.”

Gordon heard Adler’s grumbling voice in the background though he couldn’t make out the words. A warm shiver ran over his skin.

“I take that as a yes. I’m on my way.” He hung up before Maxim could rhyme at him.

Chapter 14

Gordon, as a relatively young vampire who predominantly invested in collectibles, always found the way the much older ones of his kind lived quite extraordinary. The accumulation of wealth was very much the norm for any decently competent vampire after a century or so, and Maxim's fancy, multi-story building was not unlike the castles or large estates other vampires liked to cultivate.

The surprisingly vibrant community of people who lived in 43 Ruthaven had at first surprised Gordon, but he had long since gotten used to seeing both supernaturals and humans in Morgan's Bar and Restaurant. In a way, Maxim's house was like a court of old, open to a select group and thriving with their attention.

What Gordon hadn't seen there before was a young werewolf being directed to mix colorful alcoholic drinks by the Lar behind the bar, and so he stared for a moment.

The Lar in question noticed, gave him an acerbic look back, and pointed at a corner table around which Heath, Maxim, and Adler sat like cheerless co-conspirators despite their very brightly decorated cocktail glasses.

Gordon walked over to them. The moment his eyes met Adler's, the wolf stood and pulled out a chair for Gordon. Naturally, his wolf used the opportunity to make Gordon's lips tingle with a kiss, and the arms Adler wrapped around Gordon felt him over as if to make sure he was all there and accounted for.

"Hi."

“Hello, detective.”

Maxim cooed. “Aw, aren’t they cute? Heath, darling, look how cute my crime-solving duo is. If I were one of those very needy parental units, I would mention as a casual aside that I should like to see my own child blushing with such lust and happiness.”

Heath sucked on his straw, noisily exploring the bottom of his glass for any dregs left in there. “If you weren’t speaking in hypotheticals, I’d go talk to a Realtor first thing in the morning. Maybe I should do that anyway, look at a few apartments, just in case.”

Adler ran his fingers over the base of Gordon’s head before they sat, both keeping their mouths shut.

Maxim looked at Heath with big green eyes. “Darling, do you mean to suggest you and I move into a bachelor flat together? For a season I could see it, perhaps, but without Bryan? And the bar Lar? Oh, we would have to take one of them with us I think.” He heaved one of his more dramatic sighs. “But of course if you are set on a change of scenery, I shall find my old steamer trunk and have it ready by the morrow. If you find a three-bedroom place, I think it wisest if we bunk together. Oh! I’ll sing you that lullaby you used to love so much! Do you recall when you fell off your rocking horse and cried and cried and would only be consoled by me singing it?”

Heath’s face reddened. He looked at Gordon and Adler with narrowed eyes, pointed at his parental unit.

“You get to leave, but I have to stay here. I have this all day every day.”

Maxim cleared his throat. “Darling, you drank. I’ll watch over you all night as well. We both know you get drunk faster than a sailor in a tub of rum.”

Heath looked at his father. “Why do you always have to make it weird, old bat?”

“I did not. I thought of matelotage, that old concept of free pirate marriage, hoping that perhaps a sailor would rock your boat, as they say.”

Heath bared his teeth. “Normal people who want to date other people don’t fucking want a meddlesome father thrown in the mix.”

Maxim looked at Adler. “Meddlesome father? Detective, do you know who he’s talking about?”

“Uhm...” Adler looked down, something Gordon recognized as evasive werewolf behavior.

Gordon took Adler’s hand. “This one is mine, Maxim. You’ll have to leave him out of...whatever you two have.”

“What we two have? What we fucking have?!” Heath was wide-eyed, maybe slightly panicked. Possibly tipsy.

Maxim, using his vampire speed, cupped his son’s cheek before Heath could push him off.

“Darling, everyone senses the strength of our bond, the parental care and love, for my darling boy, my little dove.”

“I bet I inherited the lacking drinking abilities you like to remind me of from you!”

Maxim gasped, clasping his chest. “How dare you. I gave you Gallic blood. Our people stood with Vercingetorix. They were raised on mead and wine.”

“Hah. I don’t think so. Gordon, tell him.”

“No, thank you. You know, Adler and I can wait for you at the bar.”

Before they had a chance to extricate themselves from the father and son bonding, a shadow fell over their table, and Gordon turned. He recognized Bryan, the door person and main Lar of 43 Ruthaven.

“Apologies for interrupting. Heath, you had a phone call in your office. I have them on hold for you.” He held out a phone to Heath.

“Fuck, fine. Can’t even plan my move in peace here.”

Heath took the phone and walked off to take his call outside the bar.

Bryan looked at Maxim. “I don’t like it when you do that. I don’t want anyone to move out.” Someone hissed under his breath, and Gordon turned to see Clement give Bryan a dirty look. “Well, he can move out whenever he likes. But I don’t want family to leave, Maxim.”

And Adler, either moved or just rattled, put his arm around Gordon’s shoulder. Not going to lie, but this feels nice.

“Oh, don’t worry, Bryan. Heath is a good boy, and he would never leave us.” He leaned toward Bryan. “Still, we must make sure he knows how much he would be missed.”

Adler huffed. “Alphas do this too when they don’t want someone to leave the pack.”

“I feel distinctly uncomfortable to be included in this conversation too,” Gordon said.

Bryan looked at them. “Don’t. You are always welcome to sleep over.”

I don’t know how Lares work, but was that a threat? Or was he trying to be nice?

Bryan turned his attention back to Maxim. “Don’t upset him. I don’t like it.”

With that, he walked off.

Maxim grinned at them. “Being me isn’t easy. But Gordon, just before you joined us, we were talking about how wonderful it is for Adler to be able to deduce your mood from your hair color.”

Gordon cocked his head. “That’s not how hair dye works.”

Adler on his right gave him a quizzical look but said nothing. Instead, he lowered his gaze, evading again.

Wait. Is my mate saying I change my hair color when I change my mood?

Maxim looked at Gordon and absentmindedly twirled the end of his braid. “Your locks shimmer with the calmest blue and the brightest hue of hot white passion, so I propose that your dye job should henceforth be called confession.”

Heath came back. “Ha! Made the old bat drop another rhyme, Gordon?”

Gordon rolled his eyes. On his right, Mil was walking up to them, a tray with a cocktail on it. Behind her, Clement carried a second tray loaded with more drinks for their table.

The little wolf looked at Gordon. “Hi. Clement said I should make you a Mai Tai.” She put the tall glass with the orange umbrella with red swirls down in front of

Gordon.

Clement served the others. “Everyone loves a Mai Tai.” The bar Lar gave Gordon a sharp look, daring him to complain.

Instead, Gordon took a sip. “Well, thank you. And this Mai Tai is excellent. Did you make it yourself?”

Mil nodded, brushing her head against his shoulder, weirdly, and was off again, Clement close behind her.

Adler leaned over. “That’s just telling you she likes you. It’s a wolf thing.”

“I hope she put more gin in my refill,” Heath mumbled.

Maxim spun to stare at his son. “Darling, are you ill? Did your phone call make you ill?”

“I’m ignoring you is what I am,” Heath said. “Plus, if we are going to be talking about this whole shitshow again to catch Gordon up, I’ll need this.”

“Talking about what?” Gordon asked. “The murders? I mean, you have my preliminary report.”

Maxim leaned close. “Those, yes. And the conspiracy.”

Gordon nodded. “Yeah, I thought you three looked suspicious. What are we planning? Take down the Forum’s bureaucracy?”

Adler cleared his throat. “Not what he means, sweetheart. This is serious. It’s about Pearson.”

Gordon gaped at his mate. “You’re joking?”

“Have some more rum,” Maxim said. “Because we are very much serious.”

Gordon knew he didn’t know much, but he knew to be wary when the world’s most ridiculous vampire hunter’s voice suddenly turned icy and his gaze blade sharp.

Chapter 15

The three of them had finally made it back to Adler's car. Gordon was mildly buzzed in the passenger seat, Adler was back to sober on account of his werewolf metabolism and because he was driving, and Mil was in the back seat, mostly quiet.

Willa had called Adler only to demand Gordon speak with Emma's attending physician. Mil's granny was still in the stroke unit, and after, it was going to be rehab. She wasn't going to bounce back as fast as Gordon had hoped. All in all, it had been a day of bad news.

Mil had taken this better than Gordon had expected. I guess that's the great part about being a werewolf. When the alpha's beta tells you not to worry and that everything will be fine, you trust him.

Gordon looked at his mate. "I trust you too."

Adler glanced over. "I'm glad to hear it, sweetheart. Mil, please take note. This is what a drunk vampire looks like."

"Is that bad?" the little wolf asked.

Adler changed lanes, but managed to chuckle. "Nah. He'll sober up fast enough. But if you really want to be a bartender, you'll have to deal with this kind of thing a lot."

"But you're his mate. You deal with him."

Gordon grinned. “Yes, detective. You deal with me.”

And just like that, Adler gifted Gordon the most loving smile before taking his hand and kissing the knuckles.

“Always.”

That left Gordon speechless. He was really only being silly because the idea of a cover-up—a conspiracy as Maxim and Heath were calling it—seemed too preposterous. The way they had described it, it was far-reaching too, and that was scarier than it had any right to be. Gordon wasn’t sure if he could really believe what he’d been told.

No, I can believe this is real. I just don’t want to have to deal with a conspiracy. All I ever wanted were my corpses and their quiet demeanor. And then maybe Adler.

Barely forgotten guilt about biting Adler and changing him to more than just a regular wolf reared its head, and Gordon looked out his window as shame reached out with cold fingers, trying to seize his heart. He didn’t really see New Amsterdam as it passed by.

I wonder if what we have could make anyone hate us enough to... Gordon remembered the crime scene, the Williamsons torn apart, and this time, he had trouble keeping his distance from it. Fae and werewolf. They hated that those two made it work. We’re vampire and werewolf, and what is that thing they say? An impossible union? Fuck this, I love him. I won’t let anyone do that to him.

“Hey, you okay over there, sweetheart?”

“Hmm?”

“You were miles away, staring out that window. You okay? You didn’t have that much to drink.”

Gordon nodded, aware of Adler’s warm brown eyes on him. “Just work. Sometimes it’s not easy.”

Adler nodded, reaching for Gordon’s hand and holding it as traffic allowed.

It wasn’t the time to talk about the morgue, not with the little wolf in the back seat, her stuffed bunny and book in her lap, eyes at half-mast.

Instead, Gordon fidgeted, twirling his hair around his fingers, a nervous habit that rarely caught up with him.

“Am I staying at your place tonight?” Mil asked from the back seat.

“You are,” Adler confirmed. “You know, the alpha said she put some of your things in a bag and left that at my place, and she also mentioned she left lasagna in my oven.”

Gordon glanced at Adler, who winked at him.

Should I be learning to make lasagna? I never really learned how to cook, not really, but it can’t be that hard. Maybe just a few dishes for when he has a long day or wants to sleep over at mine. He offers me a vein all the time, some mashed potatoes or something is the least I can do.

“It’s good to have a pack, isn’t it?” Gordon asked. It was a thought that popped into his mind suddenly, a realization, really. “Vampires don’t have packs, but maybe we should. Maybe we should know to take care of the people around us instinctively.”

Adler gave him a quizzical look. “Is that the cocktails talking? Mil, I think you should put less rum into Gordon’s cocktails from now on. Mate or not, I think he might be a lightweight like Heath.”

Mil shook her head. “Clement said I did it just right. He said I have a gift and not to let anyone say I don’t. But don’t you have a pack, Gordon? Adler, Gordon is your mate.”

Adler hummed. “He is, and yes, he does. He’s just not as good at knowing that instinctively, because he’s a vampire, that’s all. They’re a little silly like that sometimes.”

“Ah,” Mil said as if all this made perfect sense.

Adler underlined that with one of his smiles, his eyes going all dark and hungry, not the kind of hungry physical love could ever sate. Gordon felt something, a tingling where his mate bite was, silvery tooth marks to remind him he was not alone anymore.

He looked back over his shoulder at Mil, who smiled a shy little smile, then at Adler.

“Are you guys saying...”

Adler chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Y-you’re my pack?”

“Yeah.”

Gordon, for whatever reason, teared up a little bit. Okay, maybe more than a little bit, he thought as he began full-on crying.

“Gordon?” Mil asked from the back seat, voice uncertain and trembling.

“Fine, I’m fine.”

I’m more than fine. Why the hell am I crying? And why the fuck would anyone ever think that werewolves shouldn’t be with vampires? We might have been made for one another. I’m going to fuck those conspirators up. Well, I’ll send Maxim to fuck them up. They have no right to judge us or anyone else.

Gordon sniffled, then hurriedly wiped his eyes when he heard Mil cry from the back seat, just a small cry much like his own.

Adler growled and frowned. “Oh, what the hell? Why are the two of you... Never mind, just let it out.”

Calm as only a second in command could be, Adler parked in the lot of his building and killed the engine. Then, he opened his glove box and pulled out some tissues, handing them to Gordon.

“There you go, sweetheart. Share with the rest of the pack, okay?”

Gordon laughed through his tears. “Okay. Thanks.”

He handed Mil a few tissues. Adler waited for them to finish, and Gordon realized that made him love the werewolf even more.

Chapter 16

Adler had been signed up to take care of a little wolf, and he had expected difficulties. What he had not expected was having to deal with both his mate and the little wolf in question breaking out in tears for no good reason at all on the vampire's part, and possibly sympathy mixed with her own pain in Mil's case.

"Sweetheart?" he said, still sitting behind the wheel but pulling Gordon close after unbuckling the vampire's seat belt. "Mil, calm down. You're fine. You're both fine."

"Sorry," Gordon sniffled even as Adler cradled Gordon's head against his own neck and savored his mate's rose scent, mixed with the bitterness of stress. "I just hadn't thought—"

"Is Gordon o-okay?" Mil said from the back seat, wiping away her own tears and confirming this was a sympathy cry with a pack member.

What an excellent question, Adler thought, but instead turned as best he could and looked to Mil. "He's fine, Mil. Just overwhelmed. And I didn't mean to tell you to stop crying. Obviously, cry when you feel like crying."

"I'm fine if G-Gordon's okay," Mil said, cradling her book and bunny close.

Adler sighed. At least, Willa had made sure he didn't have to cook, and so Adler had ample time to deal with the two of them. He rocked his mate against him while Mil calmed down and reached forward to stroke Gordon's blue and white-tipped hair.

Gordon was left to feel properly ridiculous while Adler was busy getting Mil fed and then putting her to bed in his guest room. The case file Gordon had open on his laptop barely kept his attention.

I started crying like a goddamn baby just because those two wolves think of me as their pack, just because they simply accept me as their own. Gordon stared at the photos of the empty chest cavities from which the hearts were absent. I mean...it's not like I was that alone before I met Adler. And when I met him, I almost messed things up, then got together with him and almost messed things up a second time . Then he swallowed hard. Maybe I was a little bit alone? Maybe I'm really fucking glad I have his mate bite?

He took a deep breath, tore his eyes away from the screen to look around Adler's living room. He ended up staring at the statue of a wolf Willa had carved for her second. I'm mostly sure I chose being alone, Gordon thought.

He picked out sounds from the hallway. Adler was moving the little wolf toward the guest room. Gordon considered the perfectly embarrassing scene in the car earlier, then wondered how it was Mil had seemed relatively composed all day and then had only cried with him. Even then, she'd calmed down well before Gordon's own outbreak had subsided.

On a likely silly whim, he pulled out his phone—not the burner Heath had given him, his regular one with the cute Kawaii Demon Hunter case—and called Maxim. He got up and closed the door so Adler and Mil wouldn't hear.

“It's my darling corpse whisperer,” Maxim answered on the third ring. “Gordon, did you miss me? My advice and esprit, my flair?”

“Erm, I don't mean to interrupt your evening. If you're busy...?”

Gordon heard Maxim's soft laughter.

"Gordon, you're not interrupting. You calling so late means my wisdom is needed. Or my blades? Most nights, it is my blades that are called for."

"Okay, uh, no. I mean, I just...I had a question about werewolves," Gordon blurted out. He felt his cheeks heat and was lucky his two werewolves were busy elsewhere.

"Werewolves? My understanding is you had figured out all the relevant parts by now. During the full moon shift, the locales pretty much stay the same, and if you can handle the fur, a good licking—"

"Fuck, Maxim," Gordon said as he started pacing. "I mean how come Mil seemed to be pretty, I don't know, composed today even though her grandmother is still being monitored in the stroke unit? How come she started crying when I cried in the car because I turned into a teary-eyed, sentimental fool when Adler said something about me having a pack?"

"Aaaaaw," the hunter crooned. "Gordon! Your harrowed heart found succor in the strong embrace of your werewolf mate! It's a tale for the ages. Tell me all about it."

Gordon ran a hand through his hair. "I—it's not that cheesy. It's probably because of the bite, right? Is the mate bite making me weird?"

Maxim clicked his tongue. "Gordon, dear. You were weird long before that. You talk to corpses."

"Fair enough."

"And I doubt your mate bite makes you emotional. It mostly makes you Adler's."

“Right.”

“Which is delicious! Auspicious! If you two ever want a proper handfasting, I will speak for you, Gordon.”

Gordon nearly stumbled over. “What! No. I mean...that’s not why I called.”

“It’s not? What was it then?” Maxim chuckled.

“They said I had pack, and that took me by surprise.”

“Yes, I will have to talk to Adler about that. Surely he knows I am part of your pack as well. At any rate, you were concerned about the little wolf?”

Kind of. “Yeah.”

“Well. I’m sure it helped she spent the day with the bar Lar and not at the hospital where all the strange and scary smells are. Young werewolves especially have an easier time with their emotions when they are around pack to guide and support them. Crying with you is expressing sympathy.”

“Oh.”

“Because you are pack.”

“I mean...”

“Interestingly, while I have been in this city for such a long time, I’ve never had that direct a connection with a pack. Gordon, do you realize? Through you, I could become the pack grandfather. Ah! I can see it, the pack’s grandfather who is beloved by all! Gordon. You mustn’t tell Heath right away. It might be difficult for him to

share my attention with anyone.”

Hot granddad hunter? With a sudden pang, Gordon realized that Kawaii Demon Hunter wasn't all that different as far as being immortal went, and that he had been a fan for a long time. No, he can't be a grandfather. Not in his hunter outfit, not happening.

“I don't think it works that way.”

“Don't be so negative now, Gordon. Be positive, be downright optimistic for the good of your pack.”

“Fine, whatever. Be a grandfather to the pack. Mil's going to be fine if we don't abandon her, that's what you're saying, right?”

“Sweet Gordon. Yes, that's how caring for another works. And you are going to be fine too. You know that, right?”

“I am fine,” Gordon said, but stupidly, annoyingly, he was tearing up again.

“Yes, yes. What should we chat about now, hmm? How's the morgue?”

There were noises from the hallway again. “New interns, barely broke them in. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I have to go. And thank you.”

“Anytime, Gordon. Take care.”

Gordon hung up the phone and wiped his eyes. He felt so silly, not that he was crying again, but he could just feel Adler approaching, knew his mate was on his way to him.

When Adler opened the door to the living room, there was just nothing Gordon could do to keep the tears inside.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m right here.”

Gordon found himself in his mate’s arms, held tightly. Loved. Protected. Home.

Chapter 17

Adler was upset in the way only a werewolf could be. His wolf side hated to see his mate suffer and cry, hated that there seemed nothing he was able to do about it, no comfort he could give that would make it better.

It was the connection that flowed through their mate bite that let Adler make sense of it and calm his wolf. He's confused. Not sad or hurt. It's like a healing pain, and he can't make sense of it himself.

Casually, as Gordon easily came to sit on his lap when he pulled him to the armchair with him, Adler noticed the stronger connection through the mate bite. Before, he'd been able to feel Gordon's emotions only when shifted, and even then he'd worried what Gordon would think about that. Now, he sensed at least some of Gordon's emotions in his human form.

He wouldn't mind if he were a wolf. He'd welcome it. But he's not. He will learn though. I'll show him that he won't have to be afraid when he gifts me his trust.

"Sweetheart, it's fine. You are no longer packless. I'm right here, Gordon. Shh."

Gordon was half curled up on Adler's lap and pressed so close against him that roses were all Adler could smell. Roses and a subtle shift as Gordon calmed down.

When his mate smelled of desire, his scent of roses blended with caramel and cream. Adler loved it, loved exploring the parts of Gordon's body where it was strongest, but before anything else, the wolf needed confirmation that his mate was all right.

When Gordon's tears had subsided to the merest of sobs, Adler stroked his mate's blue and white-tipped hair. "Do you want to talk?"

In Adler's arms, Gordon shook his head. "Nah," he said, voice still a little rough from crying. "I swear I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me."

The wolf didn't like that at all. Adler could feel the much simpler reasoning, the outrage at the idea that his mate was anything other than perfect. But Adler was not an alpha's beta for nothing.

"You just had a cry. That doesn't mean anything is wrong with you. It means you are compassionate and beautiful and don't hide from your own feelings."

Gordon made an undignified sound. "You're a lovestruck werewolf. No one should trust your assessment."

Adler cupped Gordon's neck, hating that his mate was hiding his face, loving that he was burying it against Adler's chest. "Are you saying I don't know what I'm talking about, sweetheart? You don't want to do that, especially not when you know I'm right."

Gordon said nothing, letting only a weak huff of laughter escape. He rested against Adler. The wolf loved it, his mate seeking to be close and comforted, and those silent minutes they shared with each other went a long way toward calming that side of Adler.

After Gordon's tears had fully dried, and he was so much calmer, that caramel and cream scent was still there. I'll make him feel so good. I'll make him feel loved, if he wants it.

"Gordon," Adler said. He ran his fingers through Gordon's hair. "We should go to

bed. You smell as if you want to do more than sleep. Do you?"

Gordon wiggled on Adler's lap in the most seductive fashion, but then, he lifted his head, met Adler's eyes.

It was through sheer force of will that Adler didn't pounce then and there, the sight of his mate's red and slightly swollen eyes, of that vulnerable expression on his face, almost more than the wolf could easily bear.

There was a single moment, bright as a flare, that had Adler sense the true wildness of the connection given to two people through a mate bite. It didn't excite him. It worried him, that need to just have without making sure the other person was thinking the same.

It's like that's what the mate bite would be like with another werewolf, but Gordon isn't that. Fuck me, but I want to keep him safe so bad, from anything and everything that might scare him, and I want him to learn to love me when I'm in fur, not fear my claws and teeth.

"I want to," Gordon said. His voice was a sheet of clear glass, beautiful, yet incredibly breakable if struck by a wrong note.

"Okay. Come on then."

Without bothering to give a warning, Adler stood and lifted Gordon with him.

Gordon snuggled close, put an arm around Adler. "Detective. Always have to show off your strength, do you?"

My mate! "Just for you, sweetheart."

A stuttering bout of laughter went through Gordon. “You sure this is okay? With Mil here? I mean I know those keen werewolf senses.”

Adler chuckled. “You are thinking like a human. Even little wolves are quite aware what big wolves do in their alone time, unlike young humans. It’s not seen as anything scary or something that needs to be hidden.”

Gordon bit his lip. “Once more, I’m learning new things about wolf culture.”

Adler shrugged. “If you start screaming, even a little wolf might come check on you, so there’s that. You know, when a human friend from school once told me he had seen his parents that one time, doing things , and how shocking that had been for him, I almost rolled over laughing. I mean, for all of us going to co-ed schools, I swear watching the humans during Sex Ed class was one of the weirdest experiences of our childhoods.”

“Hey, Sex Ed class really helped me to figure out I’m bi.”

Adler opened the door and made his way to their bedroom. “Fair enough. I think most werewolves grow up assuming they’re some form of bi or pan. Maybe you were already suited for pack life even before you became a vampire.”

Gordon flapped his foot, maybe an attempt at delivering a teasing kick. “Stop it. You’re only going to make me tear up again.”

Once they were in the bedroom with the door closed behind them, Adler leaned back so he could see Gordon’s face. “You can cry as much as you want, sweetheart. I’ll always be here for you. You talked to Maxim earlier, didn’t you?”

Gordon nodded. “Yeah. Just... I don’t know. Sometimes, you can have a normal conversation with him. Weird, huh?”

Adler stroked the back of Gordon's head. "Hmm. Should I worry that you are more comfortable talking to Maxim than me? When something worries you, I mean." He stroked Gordon's chin all the way along his jaw with a thumb. "I worry sometimes. About the things a vampire might need that I can't give."

And just like that, Gordon was on the edge of tears again. He wiggled, and Adler put him down. "You already give me your blood. If I ask you not to worry about anything else, can you please not? Can you trust me that I don't need anything more from you than what you already do?"

"Only if you promise to let me know if or when you ever need more. Or less, for that matter." Adler kissed Gordon's forehead. "Gordon, you are my mate. Not being able to be there for you..."

Adler shook his head. The very idea of Gordon shutting him out was scary.

Gordon pinched his lip. "I can make that promise. But what do you need, detective? What am I not giving to the wolf in you? I know I haven't done as well as I could have, but—"

Adler growled, the sound escaping before he could stop himself. "Sorry. Fuck. It's a werewolf thing. And a beta thing, you know? Letting me take care of you is giving me what I need. Showing your approval of me in front of Maxim is giving me what I need. This conversation—telling me all this—is giving me what I need. Humans have called us toxic or high-maintenance for wanting to know how our partner is feeling, but for a werewolf, wanting to be tuned in to their other is normal."

With a jolt, Adler understood why the mate bite had done what it had for them, why it had opened a door to Gordon's emotions to him rather than allowing them to share thoughts like in other cases.

Thoughts and words can be barriers, but knowing his feelings is straightforward. Feelings are simpler.

With his mate's sweet scent filling his nostrils, Adler's life, his existence as a wolf and his passion for police work, all of it made sense. He was there already. He's been waiting for me, my mate. I just had to grow up and become ready to meet him. We were meant for one another.

Gordon looked nearly shy. "Well, okay. I guess that makes sense."

It makes perfect sense. You are mine—were mine from the very beginning.

The wolf that lived in Adler's chest and in his mind wanted to howl that revelation out into the world and let everyone know he had arrived exactly where he was meant to be, but this wasn't the time to make noise about it. After all, Adler's mate wasn't ready yet, wasn't quite there yet with him.

And that was fine. Adler could be patient.

So, like a werewolf the morning after the shift had to adapt to feet again, Adler leaned in and kissed his mate, prepared to watch him writhe on the sheets before the moon was at its zenith.

"Yeah. It makes perfect sense."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 18

Adler's eyes were focused on his mate. Objectively, as a vampire, Gordon wasn't fragile. Adler's wolf side didn't want to accept that at all, knew only that Gordon didn't have the shift, that he didn't have teeth and claws and couldn't howl to ask for his packs help.

As such, in the dark bedroom with Gordon's vampiric skin looking like bone china and his cheeks still tear-wet, Adler felt very protective.

"You're staring," Gordon said, placing a cool palm on Adler's cheek.

"Am I? Sweetheart, it's dark in here. You can't see where I'm looking."

Gordon chuckled even as a last tear wet his bottom lashes. "I can see just fine in the dark as well, detective. It's that look again."

"What look, sweetheart?"

"Like you want to eat me."

Adler huffed. My mate knows exactly what I want. He's a good mate. He's the best.

"Are you saying that because you want to be eaten?"

And Gordon, soft and cried out, breakable even if he wasn't, leaned forward and let his head rest on Adler's shoulder.

Adler had a boner in less than four seconds, and when he felt Gordon's exhale against the skin of his neck, he shivered.

"Do you want to bite me again?"

"Yeah. Maybe. I think you need to be treated tenderly tonight."

"Hmm," Gordon said, only confirming Adler's instinct.

Adler stroked Gordon's blue hair. "Anilingus it is then."

Much to Adler's displeasure, Gordon lifted his head and looked him in the eye.
"Huh?"

"You don't want that?"

"Uhm, I mean, I don't not want it but...it's not everyone's cup of coffee."

"Cup of tea, sweetheart."

"Don't correct my coffee-positive language, detective."

There he is. "Of course. Sorry, sweetheart. It involves licking you, so I assure you, it's my cup of hot beverage."

Gordon frowned. "Fuck. I'm too old to be embarrassed about sex stuff. No one ever ate me out, okay? This is going to be a new experience for me."

Adler felt the giddy grin settle on his face, and there was nothing he could do about it.
"Yeah. Yes. Okay," he said, thinking, mine, mine, mine. His ass is mine. Would he let me bite it? Would another mark take there?

“You sound way too excited about that.”

“Not that excited. But if you don’t want me to tear anything, take off your clothes now, get in bed, and lie on your stomach. The faster the better.”

All things considered, Gordon had been pretty good about adapting to being mated. Better than Adler felt he deserved sometimes. Gordon made the effort, and he was cool about the full moon and spending it in the park with Adler and the rest of the pack. He didn’t mind having Adler in his bed when he was shifted.

But in this moment, he looked at Adler as if he wanted to say, Weird wolf shit again, is it? Adler didn’t mind. Especially not when Gordon was once more showing that he was a great mate and did as he had been told, undressing quickly and efficiently. He glanced over his shoulder as he lifted the covers and climbed in under them, positioning himself just as Adler had told him to.

“Sweetheart, it’s traffic lights, okay? I’ll stop at red. But I really want to work you over until you beg me to stop, and then I want to keep going.”

Gordon turned his head on the pillow. “That’s your definition of tender?”

Adler nodded while he stroked himself through his pants. He could feel his own wetness spreading in anticipation of what was to come.

“It is tonight. If you are okay with it?” Please, please, be okay with it.

Gordon bit his lip before he said, “Red, orange, green. We’ll do it your way.” He turned his head and mumbled, “Not sure if we need that though. Your tongue isn’t magic.”

Adler’s heart somersaulted. The wolf didn’t like that, not one bit; the wolf loved it.

Adler undressed, tossing his clothes and ripping the bottom-most button off his shirt. All the while, he had his eyes on his mate, his mouth watering with the knowledge of what he was about to do.

I will make him whimper. Oh, I will make him cum so hard he'll forget all his worries, and then I'll do it again .

Adler dove underneath the sheets so fast Gordon yelped and wiggled. All of that made this even better for Adler, and he was quick to lie on top of Gordon, calm him with his weight.

“I need a pillow for your hips. I want you to be comfortable. After all, this might take a while.”

“Huh?”

Adler stole the pillow from under Gordon's head and dove back beneath the sheets where the rose scent with the caramel overtones was strongest. He lifted Gordon's hips, and his mate went willingly, let himself be moved until he was ripe for the taking, knees pulled up and cheeks spread, the sight of his exposed hole enough to make Adler ooze yet more precum.

Adler started slow, used his thumb to explore. Gordon twitched, the anticipation doing most of the work there.

Here we go , Adler thought and licked along Gordon's crack.

His mate moaned. Even muffled under the sheets, it was an aphrodisiac, not that Adler needed it. He growled and went right back to what he had started.

Anilingus was a hit and miss with partners the success of which depended more on

how they felt about it than on the skill of the giver. Vampire bodies, of course, no longer worked like human or werewolf bodies. The perceived uncleanness that scared some people was something a vampire needn't worry over, but even so, it could still be a mental thing.

Not for my mate. My mate is going to love this, and then he's going to beg me for it. Maybe he'll let me do it each morning after the full moon?

Adler opted to be relentless right off the bat, and focused the full attention of his tongue on Gordon's hole. He couldn't have done anything else but that, not with Gordon struggling so much that Adler knew the next time around, he'd put his mate in ropes.

"Fuck, detective..."

Adler pushed his tongue against the trembling ring, but Gordon wasn't loose yet, the sensation too unfamiliar for him to know what to do for the greatest pleasure.

Adler steadied his mate with a palm on the small of his back while using the thumb of his other hand to work in tandem with his tongue, pushing inside Gordon and carefully stretching him.

He stopped briefly. "Sweetheart, you're moving a lot. Relax. I want inside you."

He went back to it even as above the covers, Gordon sighed out a long, "Fuuuuck."

Adler couldn't help himself. He stopped again.

"That thing you said about my tongue not being magic? Sweetheart, you'll come to regret that."

Adler pushed into Gordon's hole with his first two fingers and scissored them open, finally allowing his tongue some access.

From above, he heard a muffled sound as if Gordon was moaning into the remaining pillow.

That's it, sweetheart, that's it. Now let's see how long you can last.

Chapter 19

Gordon's sounds and his scent filled the air of Adler's bedroom, and it was, by and large, the best thing Adler had experienced since the mate bite. But his taste is even better still. I could do this for hours, until my jaw cramps and my tongue turns dry.

"D-detective..."

Gordon fisted the pillow before moving his hand down. He tried touching himself. Adler easily caught Gordon's wrist, stopping his mate from ending things too soon. It would be a shame. Besides, I don't want to stop. Adler pushed his tongue in deeper, enjoying how Gordon's hole twitched.

He looked up while never stopping his licking and sucking of his mate. Their eyes met, Gordon's helpless and needy while sweat streaked his face. Pride rushed through Adler. A good wolf should know the joy of giving pleasure, that's what the alpha always says.

"I need to cum," Gordon said.

Adler never broke eye contact with Gordon, instead used his tongue, teasing the perineum. In response, Gordon whimpered, his head rolling to the side.

"Please. Please, please," he said, his voice almost too low to hear, even for a wolf.

With a thumb, Adler stroked Gordon's balls, making his mate hiss and tremble. The reaction was so strong that Adler felt a shiver down his spine as well, just from

watching.

I can't wait anymore. By rights, I should do this to him until he can't string words together anymore, until he can barely even discern pain and pleasure. Next time. Maybe we can both take a day off after and not do much else.

Adler lifted his head and looked down at Gordon. "Sweetheart. Look at me."

Gordon, shivering, sweating, eyes pleading, did. "Please..."

"Shh. You want this?"

Adler stroked himself. Giving head was no more a strain for him than it had been for Gordon. Adler too wanted to cum, the release something he was craving more and more by the second.

Gordon looked at Adler's hard cock, leaking almost as much as his own. He let out a small whimper, desire and lust blending with need.

"Adler..."

Once again, he tried reaching out to touch himself. Adler wasn't sure, but swollen as Gordon was, the head of his cock a lovely dark pink, it wouldn't take a lot for him to cum. And I cannot let my mate do that. He should have me inside, should know I am what makes him feel this good.

"You're so greedy. But you're in luck today. Hold up your legs." Gordon's jaw dropped, but he obeyed, spreading himself open so that Adler could easily focus on his prize. "Look at you. You won't last very long at all. I know that. I might keep going for a while after. Is that okay?"

Gordon nodded. “Yes. Please, just make me cum already, I need to. I can’t wait.”

Adler leaned forward, let his cock press against Gordon’s spit-wet hole. Without any extra lube, Gordon would be able to feel him even more.

“Sweetheart, I will teach you to wait someday soon. This didn’t take very long at all. I know you’ve never been properly edged, but I’ll fix that for you.”

“N-no, no, I need you inside, please...”

Adler bent down and sucked on Gordon’s nipple, making him utter a small scream he smothered pretty quickly.

“Not now, don’t worry.” He pushed inside. “Now you can cum. No touching yourself though. You’ll have to do it like this, with your ass alone, with my cock.”

Gordon clenched his jaw, locked eyes with Adler. Adler rolled his hips, the sensation of being this close dazzling. Gordon hummed while Adler moved again, and on the third slow gyration, he came, the relief so intense that he dropped his legs almost immediately, was tense while the orgasm rolled through him, then went soft, utterly boneless.

“Fuck, so hot,” Adler said as he thrust one last time.

Despite his hopes of going a while longer, that pushed him over, but he knew better than to assume it was anything physical that had gotten him to his release. It was his mate, lying under him, taking him, every little thing about Gordon hotter than a branding iron.

Adler, while his release pulsed into his mate, could not dream up anything more sensual, more erotic than this, being with the one he was for and watching him lose

himself. Soon he will understand that we were always supposed to be like this. Happy. Safe. Bound to each other.

Gordon's eyes focused just as Adler was riding the last peaks of his high, and with an uncanny sense that was the prerogative of true mates, he turned his head, ran a finger along the edge of the mate bite.

"Go ahead," Gordon said.

If I hadn't just came, I'd cum now. Adler didn't hesitate and sank his teeth into his mate's shoulder. Once he tasted blood, he lifted his wrist to Gordon's mouth.

Gordon accepted the offering, broke skin and drank, that newly familiar feeling Adler still found himself getting used to now mixing with bliss.

Gordon was still slowly feeding when Adler pulled free, first his teeth, then his cock, then commenced to lick the new bite marks he'd left. These're not going to last a day. I'll be a happy man if they're still there come morning, but I still have to make sure they're clean. I still have to take care of him.

When Gordon released Adler's wrist, he stretched and turned, and Adler interrupted attending to his mate's shoulder.

"Detective. I was wrong. I think your tongue is magic."

Adler kissed his vampire, tasting iron and salt. "It's nice of you to admit you were wrong, sweetheart. I think as a reward, I can give you a break before we go for round two."

Gordon raised his brows. "Uuh?"

“Round two. Hush. Relax. You should rest a little before we get started. I’m really not quite done with you for the night.”

Gordon bit his lip. He looked exactly like he did when he couldn’t decide between two new collectibles, a situation that occurred not infrequently and always required Adler to tell his mate to please get both.

For the time being, he pulled him close, making sure he had his arms around Gordon to let him know he wasn’t alone, not alone at all. I’ll do it until there isn’t any doubt left in you, sweetheart.

He kissed his mate’s neck, covertly giving the mate bite a lick before kissing the spot.

Chapter 20

The next few days were both quiet and draining, and Gordon could do nothing about the latter. Three days after breaking apart and crying in Adler's arms, Gordon had endured about all the careful yet hovering attention of his mate he could and decided to do something for what was apparently his pack.

He exercised his power as Master of the Morgue to tell Corinne she was going to have to be responsible for most of the day, interns and all. Thus free of work obligations, he took Mil to see her granny while Adler went to work. The little wolf seemed happy enough to go with him, and her granny had been moved from the stroke unit to the ICU while awaiting transport to rehab, a less scary setting, or so Gordon hoped.

Gordon let Mil talk to her gran alone while he took a closer look at the patient file at the nurses' station.

"She was lucky," one of the nurses told Gordon, a vampire like himself.

"I can see that." Gordon frowned at the MRI. "These look like she had mini strokes in the past."

The nurse glanced at the file. "I'm not a doctor, but they'll redo those after the next full moon. Then we might know more. You're seeing that werewolf, right? The detective with the shoulders."

Gordon nodded. "Yup, that one is mine."

“Is the kid his? You doing stepdad duty?”

“No, but it’s a pack thing. She lived next door with her grandma, and she knows him, and we both like reading.”

The nurse’s brows crept up his forehead. “That sounds so...domestic. I know we don’t know each other well, Dr. Morris, but I never picked you for someone who was after that sort of thing.”

You and me both. “Well, this just happened. Nothing anyone planned for.”

Before they could talk more, Mil came out of her grandma’s room with her bunny and her book in her arm, making straight for Gordon.

“Uuuh, wait here. I’ll steal a snack for the kid from the stash in the break room,” the vampire said and hurried off.

Mil, luckily, looked composed and not anywhere near tears.

“Granny says I have to be good. She says you probably know nothing about being a werewolf, so I have to help you. She says you’re younger than me in vampire years.”

Gordon closed the file before turning to Mil. “Huh. Vampire years. Okay. I’m not trying to be a werewolf though. I’m just werewolf adjacent.”

“Well, she meant that. Can we go to a bookstore?”

“But if we go to the bookstore, we’ll buy too many books.”

Mil’s brows furrowed. “I have my allowance. We can split it.”

“That’s okay. I have...funds I set aside for special editions and collectibles each month, and I’ll split that with you because I’m older. In werewolf years.”

Mil considered that long and hard before agreeing with a single nod. It was then that the nurse came back with several oversized chocolate bars.

“I didn’t know which one is good,” he said, holding them out to Mil. “You can take all of them.”

Mil’s eyes went wide, but she took a step closer to Gordon.

Those’re not healthy, but I’ll let Adler do healthy for dinner.

Gordon took all of the chocolate bars from the nurse. “We’ll keep them for later. We still have a lot to do this afternoon.”

Mil reached for Gordon’s hand as if she wholeheartedly agreed with that plan.

The nurse cackled. “Well, this is something you don’t see every day. Dr, Morris, I’ll keep you updated on the patient’s status?”

Gordon nodded. “Yes, please do.”

Mil and Gordon left the Forum Hospital through the confusing doors and archways, taking no less than two elevators in their quest to get to the outside.

Lucky for Gordon, the weather wasn’t very bright at all. They’d picked the wrong exit though, meaning the walk to the subway station was going to be about ten minutes. That’ll make me hungry. Adler will be all over that, and he’ll tell me to be more careful out in the sun.

Gordon was lost in thought and smiling when all of a sudden, Mil stepped in front of him and made herself big.

“Huh, Mil?”

“Excuse me? Hi?”

A human was walking right at them, hurrying across the Forum’s pale flagstones. Gordon wasn’t sure what Mil was so upset about, but the human was struggling with his shoulder bag, and it was swinging wildly. Yeah, and I was lost in thought and didn’t see. Also, she probably knows sunlight is evil if you’re me .

“Mil, it’s fine. Sure. What are you looking for? An intern program?”

The human was young enough to be a student at NAU, and usually, it was either that or outreach and educational courses that brought humans to the Forum.

“Ah, no. I mean, maybe? But not really. I’m looking for my roommate.”

“Did you arrange to meet them at a specific place? I should be able to point you in the right direction, maybe. You’d be better off asking a fae though to be honest.”

The human shook his head, adjusted his bag, and came closer. Mil watched him but had given up the werewolf posing.

“No. I’m looking for him because he didn’t come home after coming here to listen to a lecture.” He pulled out his phone and brought up a photo of a college-aged kid, black-haired and pale, blue-eyed and with a guarded smile. “His name’s Raven. I can’t reach him, and he texted something weird about needing a few days to find himself. He went here, and now he’s gone.”

Panic edged the human's words, something all too familiar to Gordon. It was like that when Paula wouldn't come home and when Mom and Dad couldn't reach her over the phone.

"Have you talked to anyone here? Did you file anything with Forum authorities?"

The human's expression soured. "I tried that, but they told me he's human, and I have to talk to human authorities. Tried that, too, and the police told me Raven is an adult, and if he wants to take a few days away from everything, then that's his choice. But he wouldn't do that. He just wouldn't, not without taking any of his stuff, and sure as shit not without telling me. I'm just trying to find anyone who saw him at that lecture at this stage. I mean, he has to be somewhere, right?"

"Do you know which lecture?"

The human shook his head. "No. But he was excited about it."

Gordon pulled out his phone, bringing up Adler's number, but then he reconsidered. "What's your name?"

"Jason. Jason Gray. I'm looking for Raven Crawford."

Gordon nodded. "I'll call...a friend. He'll help you."

Maxim picked up almost immediately. "Yes, Gordon? I heard tell you left the corpses be to go attend to the living. How exciting! Tell me, what is it like, talking to someone and having them respond instead of just waiting for that magical Y-incision?"

"Maxim, please. It's sunny outside, and my head is starting to hurt. I just ran into one Jason Gray at the Forum, and he's looking for his roommate who never came home

after going to a lecture here—when, Jason?”

“Three days ago.”

“Heard that?”

Maxim made a low hissing sound. “I heard. Where are you?”

“Near the hospital. In the fucking sun.”

Gordon could hear movement on Maxim’s end. “So go and find shade. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Keep eyes on the roommate for me, please.”

“Will do.”

Maxim ended the call, and Jason’s eyes went wide. He looked like he hadn’t slept properly in a while.

“Someone’s...actually helping.”

“His name’s Uncle Maxim,” Mil said.

Gordon cleared his throat. “He’s a hunter, and he’s on his way.”

Jason wiped his forehead, ran his hand over what was approximately three days’ worth of stubble. “Thanks, thank you so much. I can’t believe I just ran into you after all of that.”

Mil pulled on Gordon’s hand, pointing to one of the many benches that stood around the courtyard. “Gordon, look. There’s shade over there. I can read there. Will you please come with me?”

Gordon smiled. My pack . “Right. Jason, we’re waiting over there. Join us.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 21

Maxim walked toward them not ten minutes later. Jason gaped at the sight of the blond vampire with his long hair braided and his hunter's blacks standing out all the darker in the light. Gordon had long since assumed all the looks Maxim got were part of the reason he liked his hunter outfit fitting as snugly as it did. Then again, the outfit probably allowed him all the freedom of movement he needed to use the two swords he was carrying to cut off heads and such.

"That's Uncle Maxim," Mil said, jumping to her feet.

The hunter smiled like a kid being given extra candy for Halloween. "Well, yes, Milea! That's exactly right. I'm Uncle Maxim. What a very good wolf you are."

She nodded. "Gordon needs to go inside. It's too warm here. We wanted to go and buy books."

Maxim put his hands on his hips. "I see. You can never have enough books, and it was especially good of you to wait for me." From a pocket hidden in his hunter's blacks, he produced a slim wallet, and Gordon watched in mild shock as he pulled out a few bills and handed them to the little wolf. "There. Shop responsibly."

"Uh, Maxim, you don't—"

Maxim shook his head. "I have to, Gordon. I'm Uncle Maxim now, and this is what a good uncle does. You two can go." He turned to Jason who was still staring. "Jason, I assume. We should talk. If you'll follow me?"

Jason nodded. “Sure. And thank you, thank you so much.”

“Not for this. This is my work, the thing I have been doing for a long time and am quite good at. It brings me pleasure but rarely, but it is necessary.”

The hunter sounded ominous. Gordon hoped nothing bad had happened to the roommate, nothing that actually required Maxim’s presence. Or that of his swords.

“Good luck,” he said and watched as the two of them walked away, but he didn’t get to watch for long. Mil took his hand.

“We should go. You don’t have to use your collectible money now. We can split this.”

The small wolf was serious as she waved the book money from...Uncle Maxim, and Gordon wasn’t sure whether it was a Mil thing or yet another werewolf thing. It didn’t really matter. They headed to the subway on their quest to buy some books.

The two of them spent nearly two hours in Gordon’s favorite and well-stocked bookstore in downtown New Amsterdam. They had a café as well, and Mil had hot chocolate while trying to decide which books to pick out of her pile.

Gordon had found a series of manga done by one of the people who’d worked on Kawaii Demon Hunter. He’d never heard about the manga series, presumably because it was romance while Kawaii Demon Hunter was marketed as action. Kawaii Demon Hunter only turned romance in fan fic writing. Yet, Gordon was excited. Deciding to grab the entire series still took him a half hour, it feeling so much like an overindulgence. He and Mil left the bookstore with a big bag full of books each.

“Should we have gotten Adler something?” Mil asked when they were on the subway, their bags sitting on their laps.

“Oh. You’re right. I didn’t think... He once said he likes watching me read.”

The little wolf nodded as if that made sense.

But should I have gotten him a book? I know he reads on his phone a lot, but a nice book is a nice book.

Gordon was doubting himself all the way home, and then once he got back home, he felt very useless. Mil had gone to her guest room to read, and Gordon couldn’t quite bring himself to dive into his own books, not when it felt like he should be working or do something nice for his mate.

Wait. I know exactly what to do for him. He lets me drink his blood all the time. Gordon walked into the kitchen and looked at the fridge. I’ll make dinner for my mate. That shouldn’t be too hard.

Gordon pulled out his Kawaii Demon Hunter mug, made himself some coffee, and brought his laptop to the kitchen table where Adler and Mil had eaten their breakfast earlier in the day.

It’s not like I don’t remember food, kind of, it’s just that it’s been a long time. But Mom would make this casserole with noodles, and Paula loved that. Cooking and baking are only chemistry, right? I can do this for him. For my mate.

As if it were a case involving an unusual manner of death, Gordon researched. It took him about an hour after which he checked to make sure Adler had everything that was needed.

Then, he got to work, interrupting only when Mil walked into the kitchen, looking for a snack. He made her a sandwich with the crusts cut off, and the little wolf watched him with big eyes as he sauteed onions, pretty much mirroring Gordon’s own

surprise.

Never thought I'd be doing this after becoming a vampire, he thought as he made a roux, just like the nice fae on the MyTube had said.

Gordon felt a strange sense of accomplishment when he had the food in the oven and texted Adler a covert plea to come home soon. With nothing more to do but wait and make sure the casserole's crust turned golden and not black, Gordon decided it was time he looked at the old Jack the Ripper case as well as at their own Pearson case.

He refilled the Kawaii Demon Hunter mug, feeling not unlike Kawaii Hunter himself. He connected to the Forum's network, frowning at the old-timey look of it just like he always did. In one of his own folders, he'd started collecting observations from his point of view about the cases, but once they'd caught Pearson, he'd not seen the need to continue it.

"I'm glad I did this now," he said before taking another sip and opening his file.

The first few pages were notes from the autopsies, basically a short summary of how the victims had been strangled, how they'd been dead when Pearson had cut into them.

What we know from the old cases in London , Gordon had titled the section of his notes on the London Ripper. It was what he'd researched when all of this had started, when he'd been afraid he'd need it as a point of reference a lot more than he actually had.

His notes read:

Murders committed at nighttime .

Five victims were fae, three human (though not confirmed). One possible assault/attempted abduction (?)

Victims were not drained of blood (though given forensics of the day, some exsanguination remains a possibility).

Messages written in blood .

Organs taken: kidney, ovaries, liver. None recovered (kidney sent to journalist fake).

Autopsy done by human surgeon. Presumes killer has some medical knowledge. Data collected then makes this difficult to confirm or discount . (I hate forensics back then).

(Fake?) Letters sent to reporters blame werewolves for attacks .

Werewolves blame vampires for attacks; why?

While the kitchen filled with food smells, Gordon reached for the Kawaii Demon Hunter mug as he looked over the notes again.

“Maxim was right about how this was a mess,” he said, then sipped some of his coffee.

Gordon read over what he’d found out about Pearson, how she’d been orphaned young, how she’d always been with foster families. When Maxim had asked him to get an old file of hers, Gordon had managed to find it through an old psychiatrist friend.

He’d read it cover to cover before giving it to Maxim, and one small thing had stood out to him, one thing that took on a different light now.

“What was it in the margins, ‘happy to take direction from older boys she considers savvy.’ That’s what one of her doctors noted.”

Gordon hadn’t paid it much mind then, especially because the handwritten note had been so faded, and it had never come up in the file again.

Now, he wondered if it was important. He began writing an email to Maxim, then stopped before he could even come up with a subject line. He headed back to the living room to get his new phone and wrote a quick text to ask Maxim for his opinion.

He hit send just in time. A second later, the apartment door opened, and a second after that, Gordon’s food alarm went off.

“Oh, perfect timing, detective,” he said while crossing the hallway to the kitchen to turn off the oven.

Gordon heard Adler in the hallway taking off his shoes. With Adler occupied, Gordon opened the oven, found the old mitts, and took out the food. I have no idea if this is going to taste right, but it looks okay at least.

“Sweetheart,” Adler said when he poked his head in the kitchen. “Sweetheart, what’s this?”

Gordon slipped off the mitts and indicated the casserole. “We were home early, and I thought I’d make you dinner.”

Watching Adler’s jaw drop was one of the more satisfying things Gordon had seen in the past decade. His mate kept his composure though, and quickly closed his mouth. Then he approached, almost cautiously.

“You cooked, for me?”

“Yes. And for Mil. But mostly for you. We went to the bookstore, and I sort of forgot to bring you a book.”

“That’s fine. You cooked for me.” Adler looked at the casserole with big eyes. “It smells delicious.”

Gordon nodded. “The Internet promised it would.”

Adler opened the cutlery drawer and pulled out a fork. He glanced up as if he wanted to make sure Gordon was watching, then he stabbed the fork into the casserole, picking up a bite. He blew on it a little before putting it into his mouth.

“Is it good?” Gordon asked, hoping he hadn’t mixed up salt and sugar or anything like that.

“It’s—sweetheart, this is delicious. And you made it.”

“Welcome home, Adler,” Mil said from the kitchen door.

“Hi, little one. Mil. How would you like to order pizza for dinner tonight?”

Gordon’s shoulders sagged. “I messed it up, didn’t I? Adler, stop eating it. You don’t have to eat it.”

Gordon tried taking the fork from Adler, but the werewolf pulled it back and growled a little.

“No. This is mine. You made food for me. Mil, pizza is going to be an exception.”

“I like pizza. Can I order anything?”

Adler huffed. “Sure.”

“Wait, are you saying you don’t want to share my casserole?”

Adler ate another forkful of it. “No. Not particularly. You don’t eat, but you figured out how to make this, and it’s... Gordon, I love you, but I find it hard to believe a vampire made this.”

“I saw him work,” Mil said. “He also made me a sandwich. Adler, I want mushrooms and cauliflower on my pizza.”

Adler grumbled, his attention absorbed by the casserole. When he pulled out his phone to take a photo, Gordon chuckled. He walked over to the laptop that still sat on the kitchen table and quickly closed the Ripper file.

“Mil, I can order for you. Mushrooms and cauliflower?”

“Yes, please. Thank you. Can I go back to read until the food is here?”

“Sure.”

Mil walked off, not minding that she had to eat pizza while Adler was keeping the baked noodles all to himself. And Adler didn’t even bother with plating the food. He put the whole big dish on a wooden cutting board and joined Gordon at the table.

“You made this for me.” He continued eating. “I’m so lucky I found you, Gordon.”

Gordon chuckled and placed Mil’s order.

“I should write a book. How to please your werewolf mate.”

“Hmm. Maybe. No. I don’t know. How was today?”

While Adler ate, Gordon began recounting his day. It wasn’t like they’d never done that before—Adler always took an interest, and Gordon liked to hear Adler talk about Bachmann and how he was proud of her—but today felt different.

Gordon wasn’t quite sure why, but whatever this new thing was, he liked it.

Chapter 22

Several more days went by during which they settled into a routine at Adler's place. Mil would ask to go over to her granny's place to pick up clothes or just read in her room every now and again. Twice she asked to go and see the bar Lar to learn a new cocktail recipe, and the trip to 43 Ruthaven exposed Gordon to entirely more Maxim than he was used to.

As such, his normal work at the morgue had become more relaxing than ever, and one evening, he was at his desk, humming along while flipping through the interns' performance reports.

In the quiet office, a voice made Gordon jump.

"What's this?" Corinne asked. She had managed to sneak up on Gordon, only to drop Forum certified paperwork on his desk. "I thought you only used your Kawaii Demon Hunter mug."

Gordon looked at the paperwork and pushed it aside, then picked up his Mini Huntress mug to take a sip of cold coffee. "I gave that to Mil. She kept eyeing it and asked about it. In the mornings, she insists on having tea from it while Adler and I have coffee. She tried getting to the coffee once, but Adler got all stern and told her she was too young for that. Honestly, though, I don't remember the incident too well. Mornings are hard."

Corinne dropped into one of the chairs in front of Gordon's desk. "When I first started here, you know, and when you were talking to the corpses all the time, I was a

tiny bit afraid I'd catch you with one eventually. Like, with one. I tried making noise whenever I walked toward the morgue."

Gordon stared at her evenly. "Please tell me you are kidding. I was wondering whether you had an old knee injury that was bothering you."

There was a pause. Then Corinne nodded. "Yeah, sure. Joking. And I hurt my knee that one time getting out of bed." She lifted Lord Helmet's head. "I need one of these." She bit into the pleasingly aromatic cookie while glancing at a printout of his notes. "You're still looking at the Ripper case?"

Gordon pushed the printout back under the performance reports. "Yes. I got curious. It's a true crime staple after all, and I didn't know much about any of it."

Corinne took another bite of her cookie and nodded. "What's funny is, I've been thinking about it too. Those other murders—the fae and the werewolf couple. It reminded me of the Ripper case. I'm not even exactly sure why, but maybe because they're both all about the spectacle."

Gordon had considered that too. He'd wondered whether it frustrated the murderer that the current murders were less dramatized in the media, that Maxim and Heath had done a decent job of keeping the journalists at bay.

"I guess you're right about that." He cocked his head, looked at the half-eaten cookie in her hand. "Are you done for the day?"

"I am, and you should be too instead of throwing yourself into your work. You do realize it's the full moon today?"

Oh, shit. That was when it hit Gordon that he should have left well before Corinne's shift ended. Adler and he had talked about it this morning, but then of course Gordon

tended to lose things that were said to him early in the day. He cursed under his breath, packed up his notes and laptop, and made for the door.

“Can you—”

“Finish my cookie, close up your office, and send the interns home? Fair warning, if one of them wants to raid Lord Helmet’s brains, I’ll let them.” Corinne grinned at him, and Gordon suppressed the desire to tell her he would have done the same.

“That works for me. Thanks, Corinne.”

He dashed through the Forum and toward the closest subway stop. It was five stops to Seneca Park, and the indigo horizon was already taking on its veil of black.

When he was on the subway finally, he pulled out his phone. Of course there was a text from Adler waiting.

Did you have to work long? You can cuddle me later if you need to decompress. Changing at home. Meet you at the park.

Yes, sorry!

Gordon texted back, but likely, Adler wouldn’t see it because at this point of the night, he’d no longer have the opposable thumbs needed to operate a phone.

“Fucking hell,” Gordon said, and a middle-aged woman sitting close to the door next to which he was standing, gave him the weird kind of look that told Gordon he was being, well, the weird vampire on the subway. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

She returned a careful smile and a shrug as if to say, just another long day, right? Gordon was happy to agree.

The car stopped moments later, and Gordon hurried out and up. From the subway stop, it was just a few moments on foot to Seneca park, and if he was unbelievably lucky, Mil and Adler were still on their way to the park.

Wolves were out and about, and howls filled the night. When the park came into view, Gordon headed straight for Innsmouth Arch. It was one of the more prominent entrances, a stone arch topped with metal spikes and showing off a metal gate that was very rarely closed.

Wolves, much faster on four paws and eager to run with the full moon rising above, sped past Gordon, who kept scanning the darkness for black fur and blue eyes, Adler-wolf.

I don't even know what Mil-wolf looks like. Why didn't I ask her about that?

A group of wolves and human runners overtook Gordon. They were moon runners, friends, family, or mates to wolves who enjoyed running. Just like human marathons, there was an annual Moon Run according to Adler, a tradition Gordon was completely unfamiliar with, seeing as how it involved exercise.

"Fucking hell," Gordon said to the night in general. Seeing the moon runners and their wolves with them made him miss Adler. I told them I'd head to the park with them. How on earth did I not keep an eye on the time?

Gordon looked left and right at a crossing in the paths that ran through the park like blood vessels. He decided to go right.

Seneca Park turned into a strange and magical place during the full moon, Gordon had learned. Before Adler, he'd not realized it. Now that he did, he was grateful for the chance to see something new, explore the park at this time of the month.

The park, after all, was possibly the most welcoming place in all of New Amsterdam when the wolves ran.

Other than the moon runners, there were plenty of humans there sharing food on picnic blankets on one of the lawns or even grilling when the weather allowed. There were always musicians as well, and Gordon had come to notice one guitarist in particular.

The guitarist always changed locations, but his straight white-blond hair made him easy to notice. He had a mellow voice and usually strummed away on his guitar with four wolves around him, howling along while dreamy songs flowed from the human's lips.

Gordon could hear the guitarist now as he headed toward the Meer, the big water reservoir in the northern corner of the park, sticking to the paths illuminated by the lamps while beyond the cones of light, shadows rushed between the trees. A small shadow detached herself and dashed toward Gordon from his right, but the wolf stopped her sprint and approached Gordon at a trot.

"Mil?" Gordon asked. Her coat was a dark copper that lightened at her legs and belly, and her ears were tipped black. She was the size of a full-grown German shepherd.

Before Mil could do anything to answer, Adler joined her, approaching faster and thanks to his near black coat, mostly unnoticed. Unlike Mil, Adler didn't stop but bumped his head into Gordon's hip and made a sort of guttural noise that Gordon had learned meant his mate was happy.

"Yeah, sorry, guys. I just lost track of time. I was doing some research and then started on the intern reports, you know, and time just got away from me."

Adler-wolf just huffed, giving no indication at all that he was upset. Mil-wolf nodded

her head in a human way, barking in understanding. So far as Gordon could tell, he had been forgiven.

“So did you guys want to run? I think I might just walk around a bit myself, enjoy the night.”

The Mil-wolf howled, then came up to Gordon’s side. She was big alright, considering that she was just a girl. Adler, his blue eyes incredibly pretty in the moonlight, was far larger, scary even, except of course he really wasn’t. He fell into step on Gordon’s other side, walking close so that their bodies touched.

That made heat course through Gordon’s veins. Right. He did ask me for a belly rub... and then some. The Adler-wolf looked up at Gordon, and Gordon realized he could probably scent Gordon’s lust. Or feel it through the mate bite. I wonder what he can sense. Probably not nothing, but I’m too scared to ask .

Gordon blushed. They weren’t here for that of course. They were here so the wolves could run and be their best wolf selves.

Adler-wolf huffed out a laugh, throwing a bit more of his weight against Gordon.

“Oh, stop that,” Gordon said while digging his fingers into Adler’s fur to keep his balance. On his other side, Mil watched them, and her wolfish laughter came out an octave or so higher than Adler’s.

Gordon huffed. “Great. Now there’s two.”

And that, of course, ensured Gordon was surrounded by wolfish laughter on either side.

A few moments later, when Gordon had found a park bench to sit on and wait for

them, they dashed away, chasing waterfowl, milkmaids, or whatnot. Gordon relaxed, enjoyed the night and the fact that the burning ball of anger in the sky, also known as the sun, wasn't out right now.

After enjoying the night for a few minutes, he felt something odd though, a prickling of his skin at the back of his neck as if someone were watching him.

Gordon looked around, but he saw nothing.

“Adler? Detective, is that you? Are you planning to ambush me?”

Gordon narrowed his eyes at the trees, the underbrush, the shadows his vampire eyes could penetrate, but to no avail. There didn't seem to be anyone there.

Just your imagination. Come on, this place isn't scary. Unless you're a swan or a duck.

His skin still pricking slightly, Gordon pulled out his phone to read a Kawaii Demon Hunter fanfic he'd set aside for the full moon specifically. This had become his way of enjoying the night when his mate ran and howled only to then come back to Gordon and wake next to him, person-shaped once more.

Chapter 23

Gordon, by nature nocturnal, stayed with his two wolves while they ran. For a young wolf, Milea was very disinterested in the waterfowl, and for whatever reason, she never really ran too far away from Gordon. She doubled back to check on him several times though, almost as if Gordon needed to be reassured he wasn't being left out.

The three of them took the subway home along with a few other wolves, their humans, and just the assorted late-night-early-morning New Amsterdam crowd.

Adler-wolf, because he was big and beautiful, what with his nearly black fur, drew a lot of stares. Just like he always does, Gordon thought. And I don't think I'll ever get used to it.

Once they were back at Adler's apartment, Mil circled Gordon's legs, and he bent down to pat her. A few full moons ago, Adler had educated him that this was fine when you knew the wolf and when they sought physical contact. By her satisfied huff, she enjoyed the touch and soon went off into the guest room.

Adler-wolf did his silent presence thing, and he was uncannily good at this, sticking to the shadows and remaining hidden there until he once more decided to make himself seen. Hiding like that shouldn't have been possible for such an imposing wolf.

"Well, today was a long day, and I'm tired," Gordon said. "I believe you said something about curling up in bed next to me. I would like that."

Adler-wolf huffed out a laugh, walked up to Gordon, raised his front paws to put them on Gordon's shoulders. The vampire and the wolf looked each other in the eye, and Gordon blushed.

"Yeah, I mean it's cool in the morning. You know. When you wake up next to me all man-shaped. Obviously, you big, handsome, mountain of fur." Fuck, he's strong when he's like that. And if he's Willa's second and this imposing, I really, really don't want to get on her bad side on a full moon. Or at all .

Adler-wolf very gently bumped his nose against Gordon's, then went back to all fours and walked ahead of Gordon to the bedroom where the wolf gracefully hopped onto the bed and sat.

He was doing that very prim and proper thing where he looked like a perfectly trained dog, but the eyes examining Gordon with a playful glint gave that away as a ruse.

"I think you watching me undress is weird," Gordon said after closing the bedroom door so Mil-wolf wouldn't hear them. "I mean, I like watching strippers myself." Adler-wolf growled. "What? I said watching. Nothing is inherently wrong with watching other people and admitting they are beautiful. Don't tell me you never saw a wolf who was better at running than you and thought, wow, they're beautiful, I wonder what they're doing to make their fur look like that."

Adler-wolf's ears twitched with amusement and he shook with wolf laughter.

"Oh, fine. I'm stalling. Here." Gordon took his left shoe off and tossed it aside. "Watch me strip, detective." The other shoe followed. "I have to warn you, I am not good at this." Gordon wriggled out of the turtleneck he was wearing, but of course the garment got stuck around his head briefly, and Adler-wolf huffed out another laugh that increased in volume when Gordon blew a strand of his messy blue hair out of his face. "You know, this is not at all encouraging. And it's unfair. I mean, you're

naked but also not.” Gordon started on his pants, but since he liked his jeans tight—a much better style for him than the bell bottoms that had been in when he’d still been human—getting those off was never sexy.

One leg got stuck around his foot, and Adler-wolf jumped off the bed, somehow managed to maneuver Gordon toward the bed, then pushed him on it and pulled the vampire’s legs free by gripping on to the jeans with his very pointed teeth.

“Thanks,” Gordon said. “And I don’t even mind the wolf spit.”

Adler jumped back on the bed, gently tipping Gordon back with his weight, and licked across Gordon’s face.

“Oookay.” Gordon was now giggling as well. “Fine. That’s a good night kiss. Plenty of wolf spit. No one will ever doubt you are my mate now.”

Instead of more wolfish laughter, Adler-wolf loomed above him, carefully pinning one of Gordon’s shoulders with a paw, and looking on quite seriously. Gordon reached up to stroke Adler’s head, and Adler exhaled, his warm breath brushing over Gordon’s face.

“You’re my mate, and I’m yours.”

After Adler-wolf stared into the vampire’s eyes for another good minute, he moved, actually tucking the sheets around Gordon until he was satisfied Gordon was comfortable.

Adler smoothed his warm, soft body against Gordon as soon as Gordon’s head had hit the pillow, and the wolf breathing contentedly next to him soon dragged Gordon off to sleep.

This chapter has an alternate (and spicy!) ending that I wasn't able to include in this version because of vendor policies. You can read it [here](#) !

Chapter 24

Morning assaulted the world with bright colors, and Gordon would have missed that—would have been happy to miss it—except there was movement around him. He was dragged into consciousness by hands all over him, by a warm body pressing close to him under the sheets.

“Mmmh-hng,” Gordon said. Light flooded the room, and Gordon wasn’t sure whether he’d forgotten to close the curtains or whether his werewolf alarm clock had opened them.

Adler was warm and entirely too awake.

“Sweetheart, wake up for me.”

Adler kissed him on the shoulder. That felt nice. Moving was less appealing to Gordon.

“Hmm-mmn,” Gordon said and attempted to turn on his side, hoping that Adler would maybe snuggle and doze off for a few more hours.

“You’re a real Sleeping Beauty, you know that? A regular princess.” Adler banded an arm around Gordon and shifted him back onto his back. “Here. Let me try kissing you awake.”

Gordon had to admit that the kissing was very nice, even before noon. He was sluggish, but Adler was hungry, eager. He left bruising marks on Gordon’s lips, and

Gordon could feel soft stubble teasing his skin. It should have been the kind of thing that made Gordon pull his head away, but he couldn't, didn't want to. Instead, he allowed himself a small stretch and found that Adler used that to reel him closer, close enough that Gordon could tell exactly how hard Adler was.

"Last night... Sweetheart, was last night all right for you?" Adler's voice was a whisper.

He's cute. So uncertain. "Yeah. Was nice."

Adler kissed Gordon's temple. "I'm glad. I...had no idea I was going to want it that much, but...look, we don't have to do it like that ever again if you don't want to. Shifted sex isn't everyone's thing."

Gordon ventured another little stretch and blinked up at his wolf. "I liked it. I thought you were going to break skin again, getting all toothy like you did. Thought you were going to try to mate me all over again."

Adler didn't quite smile, but it was close. "Once is the maximum amount of mate bites we get. I would've bitten you regardless, but I didn't want to scare you. If you're serious about liking it, we need to talk about what's okay before the next full moon."

"Hmm. Okay. Nap now?"

Adler ground against Gordon and growled when his erection brushed over Gordon. All Gordon could do was moan, which allowed Adler to fit his mouth over Gordon's, kiss him deeply.

Gordon let himself be held, close. He gave himself over to Adler's feverish kisses, and when he could no longer quite say whether he was dreaming or not, he blinked

his eyes open once more. Adler's attention seemed immediately drawn to Gordon's eyes, and he made a sort of rumbling sound before he pulled out of the kiss.

"You are very soft for me, aren't you?" One hand held Gordon close, the other traced heat over the vampire's face. "Tell me you want me right now. Tell me."

Gordon licked his swollen lips, enjoying that he was the center of Adler's attention. "I want you, Adler. Make love to me. Cum inside me. Tell me I'm yours."

"Gordon."

With his light brown eyes, so unlike his wolf's, Adler looked at Gordon. His entire expression was overfull with desire, the kind that burns long and hot like a volcano under ice. The fire was there, and Gordon could feel it in every fiber of his being.

"Take me," he told Adler. "Love me."

Adler let his hands wander over Gordon's body. His touch was gentle, almost as if Gordon were fragile, breakable, too precious to be handled.

But there was pressure to Adler's touch as well, turning this into a slow massage. While Gordon's body came awake, Adler watched his face, searching for either discomfort or desire, adjusting his touch according to what he saw.

At least that's what it felt like to Gordon, being cherished like this.

"I can never decide," Adler said.

"Hmm?"

Adler shook his head. "Just when I fantasize about this. I can never decide how I

want to take you. I want you under me, yes, but how exactly, I just can't decide. I want it all."

"Well. We have done a few things, and there's always tomorrow."

Adler growled. "Tonight."

Gordon moaned when Adler ran a hand down the center of his chest. "Detective."

"That's not what I meant though. Things're always more intense after the full moon." A pause. "And during. Last night..."

"It was good."

"Yeah. I'll fantasize about that too."

"Or you could figure out what we should do next full moon."

Adler leaned in close. "Sweetheart." He kissed the tip of Gordon's nose. "You spoil me, but I'll let you."

Adler reached for the lube on the bedside table and looked down at Gordon. Then, he put the lube aside and turned Gordon on his belly.

"Let's start like this."

Gordon's face was partially buried in the pillows, but he didn't mind. This way, the light didn't bother him as much, and he was able to concentrate on feeling.

He relaxed into the hands that began kneading his buttocks, slow and steady before the pressure increased and Adler spread him open. Gordon heard Adler reach for the

lube again, and soon, slick fingers grazed Gordon's hole, getting ready to prepare him in earnest.

"You're going slow," Gordon said.

Adler was behind him, leaning over him, stretching Gordon's ring on his fingers.

"I want to be rough and soft, and I can't decide, so I'll err on the side of soft. But fuck, sweetheart, you being here for me after the full moon—"

There was a gasp, more rattling than Adler's touch, more effective at shaking Gordon awake. This isn't just sex. This is more. We were together during the full moon, and I'm still here. Maybe he has to confirm that, make sure everything is still good between us.

Gordon knew there wasn't anything he could do in terms of confirming this for his werewolf except lying there and enjoying Adler's single-minded attention.

All in all, there were worse things to wake up to.

"Lots of words for after a full moon."

Adler pushed deeper, unerringly stimulating Gordon's prostate.

"Soft can take hours, sweetheart. I can make sure you remain just where you are with my silkiest ropes, and then I'll tell you how good you're doing. I'll tell you over and over and over again, and my touch will be too soft to make you cum."

Gordon shivered. "Detective. You can't do that."

A low chuckle. "But I can."

He rubbed Gordon's prostate again, making Gordon buck or at least attempt to. Adler was there, on top of him, in control, pushing him back down.

Huh. Maybe I shouldn't talk back to him. Adler did it again, getting the same reaction from Gordon. Or maybe I should talk back to him more.

Gordon moaned into the pillows. "Remind me to take a nap before the next full moon, okay?"

After a moment during which Gordon could tell he was stretched even further, Adler laughed. It was human enough, but Gordon couldn't help but be reminded of Adler's wolf howl.

Gordon's response was a long, low moan when Adler stretched him little by little, ever so softly.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 25

After several more minutes of the sweet torture, Adler leaned over Gordon. “You’re moving a lot, sweetheart.”

Gordon bit his bottom lip, feeling guilty. “Reflex.”

He’d been doing his best to fuck himself on Adler’s fingers, seeking any tiny bit of friction he could get from his mate. But if he wants to draw this out then... Gordon shuddered.

“Really? Hmm. I’ve been thinking.” Adler brushed Gordon’s prostate, forcing him to moan into the pillow. “I’ve been thinking you want something more.”

“M-maybe,” Gordon said, though he had to concentrate. Adler was making a chore out of thinking and holding a conversation.

“Yeah. You look so pretty down here, pink and soft, but I know you look even better with my cock inside you. Fuck, Gordon, I love you so damn much.”

Gordon wanted to say it back, he felt it back, but he never got the chance. Adler pounced, stopped the delicious torture he’d been administering, and instead lay on top of Gordon, his body hot and heavy, his cock brushing over Gordon’s entrance and making him quiver.

“Aah!”

“Too fast? Gordon, too fast?”

Adler stopped, froze almost fully, though he feathered soft kisses over Gordon’s shoulder.

“No. But I love you too. You have to let me say it back.”

Adler nuzzled Gordon’s neck. “That’s okay. I know. You’re my mate, sweetheart, and I know. Can I keep going? Please?”

Adler placed his left hand over Gordon’s, interwove their fingers. It’s not just good because he still has the full moon in his blood, it’s good because he has my absolute trust and my love. He’s my wolf.

“Yeah. Keep going. I love you. Keep going.”

“You sound all fuzzy. That’s okay. I’ll take care of you after. I know you like that. I like it too. You’re all open, but you’re still tight, sweetheart, so keep still.”

It didn’t take much. All Adler had to do was lift his hips. Gordon was so well-stretched that Adler’s cock slid right into him. Adler hadn’t used extra lube, but it was fine. It would have been fine taking him dry. He’s so big, but I wouldn’t have minded. He’s gentle even when he’s rough.

Gordon wanted to tell Adler how good it felt, but he couldn’t speak. It was too much, the overwhelming sensation of Adler inside of him, moving slowly, their bodies close and Gordon’s colder skin heating under the weight that was Adler.

Adler had done this to Gordon before, had gotten him to this place where the orgasm just came, inevitable as breath, and rushing out of him with similar force. Gordon managed only the lowest of whimpers when pleasure overtook him. He was shaking

with wave after wave of feverish ecstasy, but Adler weighed him down, steadied him.

Then Adler was pumping his hips even harder, and even as Gordon still felt the echoes thrumming through his body, Adler came, his hurried breathing all Gordon could hear.

There was a moment in between all of the boiling pleasure, the way they moved against each other and with each other, that Gordon let go of himself. For just a few seconds, he was more than he had ever been, no longer constrained by the borders of his own skin. For that window of time, he was a part of Adler, and Adler was a part of him. There was nothing between them, no secrets or feelings hidden behind a protective ruse. It was like falling.

No, I'm flying. Adler's strength has turned into my wings.

The feeling ebbed away, leaving a bubbly aftertaste in Gordon's mind. He turned, eager to see his werewolf.

Adler met his eye before he commenced to lick and kiss the mate bite, brush Gordon's hair out of his face, and give him a smack on the cheek.

"That was so good. And look at you, sweetheart. You're the dictionary definition of boneless. I like it."

Adler clearly didn't have that problem. He moved until he had his arms under Gordon, then turned them both in such a way that he didn't have to pull out. Gordon wasn't sure what to make of that, but he couldn't be bothered to truly examine Adler's afterglow needs. All Gordon wanted was being held, cradled against Adler's chest, his head under Adler's chin. Yes, a nap in this exact position was the only reason to wake before noon.

Gordon was warm and cozy, but then Adler stirred, moved his hips, and pulled out. It induced a strange kind of loss, a loss Gordon was already looking forward to filling again.

Adler kissed Gordon on the cheek. “You can go back to sleep, sweetheart. I should feed the hungry wolf child and myself though.”

Gordon surprised himself by saying, “I think I’ll get up as well, but you can shower first.”

Adler put the sheets back over Gordon. “Normally, I’d shower with you, but I really am hungry.”

“Normally I’d insist on joining you, but I know you’re hungry. That’s why you get the first shower.”

“My mate. You’re good to me.”

This time, Gordon managed to turn his head and catch Adler’s lips. He luxuriated in the kiss, and that intimacy that still clung between them.

Adler, probably half-starved after the shift and the sex, broke the kiss first and headed toward the bathroom in his naked glory. Halfway there, he looked over his shoulder.

“Should I be worried? That you are willingly getting up before noon?”

Gordon adjusted his pillow for maximum comfort, then let his eyes fall shut again. “No. And I’m not making this a habit or anything. Never mind what Corinne thinks.”

Adler took a step back toward the bed. “What’s Corinne thinking?”

Gordon groaned. “Stop being nosy. Or jealous. Whichever, just stop. Focus on getting some carbs in your system.”

Adler crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared at the floor. “Fine. But for the record, I was just curious.”

“Never saw a werewolf who was just curious, but whatever you say, detective.”

“You’re a snarky, pretty, pixie-haired hottie after I make love to you in the mornings, and I am not sure I like it.”

“Hmm. Not my problem.”

“Well, it’s not like it’ll make me stop making love to you in the mornings.”

“Hmmm.”

Adler turned back toward the bathroom when a knock at the door made him freeze. It was not the kind of knock—neither in determination nor intensity—that Gordon thought a little werewolf was capable of, but he hadn’t heard the front door, hadn’t heard anything.

And yet, that wasn’t Mil outside their bedroom door.

Shit, shit, shit, who is this?

Chapter 26

Adler was used to early morning phone calls, and he was used to middle of the night phone calls. Those came with the job, and he'd never had a problem with it.

What he did not appreciate was someone banging on his door the morning after a full moon when his mate was still sweet and soft and drowsy from their lovemaking, possibly vulnerable.

Adler growled. Only fools would invade a mated couple's privacy like this, and he would show them.

"Adler?" Gordon was sitting up, his eyes wide, the sheet having slipped off him all the way to the waist, revealing what no one other than Adler should be seeing.

"It's fine, sweetheart. Lie back down."

Adler pulled on sweatpants and made for the door.

He opened it to Maxim's wide smile and Clement's deep frown.

"Such a beautiful morning after the moon, isn't it?"

"Maxim? How the fuck did you get in here?"

Maxim indicated Clement and craned his head forward so he could see into the bedroom.

Adler closed the door and positioned himself between the hunter and his mate.

“My goodness, Adler, you’re such an overprotective oven mitt. I had a feeling and bid Clement to make sure we wouldn’t interrupt you and Gordon. There was this one time when Bryan forgot to alert me to the fact that Heath had company, and my baby boy had things to say about my sudden presence during his attempted coitus. I told him it mattered not, and that he was to ignore me, but he impolitely disagreed. Are you well after the shift? We brought food.”

He pointed at the Lar. Clement standing sour-faced behind Maxim, eyeing everything, just everything very critically. However, the Lar had a large paper bag in his hand, and the contents smelled of sugar and butter, and Adler’s mouth watered despite himself.

“Maxim, what are you doing here? And why’s he—” Adler pointed at Clement. “—here?”

At the other end of the hallway, Mil poked her head out from the kitchen, some bread roll thing with raisins and nuts dangling from the corner of her mouth.

“Uncle Maxim said you wouldn’t mind if he visits. He showed me how to work the toaster oven.”

“Irresponsible, letting a child handle fire,” Clement mumbled.

Maxim sighed. “Dear Clement, perhaps you’ll oversee Milea? She is such a capable young wolf, but your presence would be a boon.”

“Only fucking adult here,” Clement added, still mumbling, as he made for the kitchen. Mil hopped into the hallway, hugged him, and took his hand to lead him into the small room.

“Are you just here to check up on Mil?” Adler asked, feeling his heart sink.

Maxim, whatever else he might be, was still alpha. In his alpha-ness, if he thought Adler incapable of doing what his own alpha had assigned him when she’d told him to take care of Mil, then Adler had failed not only the little wolf, but also pack leadership.

“Not at all, detective. But I seem to recall it’s customary to offer a wolf fresh from the moon side of the month some moon cake or cake or anything baked and sugared on the morning after. Though by the smell of it, you already devoured a sweet treat this morn.” Maxim’s eyes tracked up and down Adler’s chest.

At any other time, Adler would have felt flattered to be examined like this by an alpha, but not with Gordon here. Also, Maxim was wearing his hunter’s blacks, a fact Adler registered only now.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

Maxim winked at him.

He didn’t get a chance to answer. Gordon’s head of messy blue hair forced itself into Adler’s field of vision, and Gordon, dressed in Adler’s robe, shoved the bedroom door open wider despite Adler doing his best to stand firm and keep it closed.

His mate dressed in his very own clothes made a powerful bout of possessiveness and desire flood Adler’s blood, but he shut that down. Focus. There’s a hunter in your apartment too early after a full moon. Focus. Protect your mate .

“Maxim, what are you doing here? And why did you bring the Lar?” Gordon asked.
“Also, ever heard of a doorbell?”

Maxim huffed. “I brought the Lar in lieu of having to use the doorbell. I thought you two might be bonding. With your genitals. In addition, I figured bringing Clement would be easiest, even if he was quite loath to leave the bar, seeing as how he’s a bar Lar. But I needed him to wolf-sit. Gentlemen, we need to get to work, and there isn’t even time for you to shower off that powerful scent of sex and lust before we leave.”

“The kid’s in the kitchen, Maxim, can you please lower your voice?” Gordon hissed.

Maxim clicked his tongue. “Werewolves, to everyone’s delight, don’t suffer from excessive prudishness. Besides, if I can smell it, the small wolf most assuredly can too. Now, get dressed. Time’s a-wasting. We must attend to our work.”

Gordon and Adler both rushed to get into their clothes, and Adler hated that his mate was being rushed like this.

Maxim was waiting in the kitchen, showing Mil how to play cat’s cradle.

“Look there they are,” the hunter said to Mil.

“Gordon, Uncle Maxim says I get to show Clement all of my books,” Mil said, raising her hands, the string winding around them.

“Wow, that sounds like fun.”

Adler put a hand on Gordon’s shoulder and smiled. He thinks he’s only good with corpses. He doesn’t even know how amazing he is with the living.

As Maxim stood, Clement pushed a bagel and a large cup of coffee into Adler’s hands and just a large cup of coffee into Gordon’s.

“Not even showing her the public library,” the Lar mumbled.

Adler decided it was best to ignore the acerbic Lar.

They all headed out of the apartment, Mil waving to them. Adler had devoured half his bagel by the time they were stepping out of the building.

“I think Clement probably means well,” Maxim said. “I’m parked over there. Come along.”

“What happened?” Adler asked rather than getting into Clement’s behavior.

Maxim looked back at them. “Murder, Adler. The gruesome kind with a note scrawled on the wallpaper in blood. I know that on occasion, I may jest, but not even I would walk into the den of a wolf, his mate, and their little one for anything less than that.”

Chapter 27

Gordon's grip on his coffee tightened even as Adler walked close enough to him their shoulders were touching. The werewolf was still eating, looking as if he had slowed down with the bagel for propriety's sake. Gordon hooked his free hand under Adler's arm.

They left the courtyard surrounded by apartment buildings and headed toward the parking lot where Gordon could already see Maxim's fancy silver BMW.

"I had hoped you all were wrong about the conspiracy, Maxim. I'd hoped I could just go to work at the morgue today."

Maxim shrugged, hit the car's fob, and opened the driver's door to lean on it and face them.

"So did I. But sometimes, such hope is like rats' feet over broken glass, hollow and meaningless."

Gordon blinked and raised his coffee at Maxim. "That's TS Eliot. I'm not sure it's the most uplifting of poems to quote from."

Maxim's smile was stale and never reached his eyes. "Now, my darling corpse whisperer, you cannot expect me to lift your mood on such a day. I believe that's a mate's prerogative."

Adler grunted in the affirmative as he held his bagel with his teeth just so he could

open the car door for Gordon.

“Adler is plenty uplifting,” Gordon said.

Adler stood there, unmoving, his face literally stuffed with bagel. He clearly wanted Gordon to get in the back of the car.

Maxim leaned an elbow on the roof of his car. “Yes. Though, Gordon, I was outside your bedroom door not too long ago, and we both know the blessings of vampiric hearing. I heard nothing being lifted at all. I will say I was surprised about the relative calm after the full moon.”

Adler growled.

“Well, that’s because—”

But Gordon didn’t get to finish. Adler pushed him into the back of the car, still careful and all that, but he was a detective and had experience putting people into cars. Gordon decided to let him and even complied when Adler pulled out the seat belt and waited for Gordon to take it and clip it around himself.

Once Adler had closed the door on him, he took the bagel from his mouth and turned to the hunter.

“Can we just go, please?”

Maxim grinned and got in. “He’s so protective of you, it’s adorable,” he whispered in the time it took Adler to round the car and get in on the passenger side. “Ready, lovelies?”

“Yeah,” Adler said after a quick look at Gordon.

Maxim started the engine and quickly reversed before seamlessly joining the morning's traffic.

"Oh, Maxim," Gordon said, sipping his coffee. "I meant to ask, who was in London during the Ripper case? The Jack the Ripper case?"

Maxim looked at Gordon in the rearview mirror as he sped down busy roads, going as fast as those allowed.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, who was the hunter? And who was working in the London Forum at the time?"

"Ah," Maxim said as Adler finished the last two bites of his bagel. "The hunters at that time were human. As far as I'm aware, they were less skilled in the art of the sword and more skilled in finding ways to get paid by officials. I believe someone in the city at the time called them 'glorified cutpurses.' Why?"

"Well, I was looking into the Ripper case again yesterday. That's why I was late by the way, Adler. Sorry about that again," Gordon said, his hand reaching out to touch Adler's shoulder. Adler immediately placed his warmer hand over Gordon's. "Anyway, the way blame went around, and the way there didn't seem to be any clues that were really actionable, the thing with the kidney that wasn't the victim's kidney—"

"Yes," Maxim said. "It always smelled like something was very rotten in the city of London at the time. And the people in charge at the Forum back then were not much better." The hunter shrugged. "Let's just say I deliberately chose to leave the city for Italy. There was a lot of nepotism, younger vampires who'd been lesser lords decided the Forum would be a nice way to get properly established, a way into supernatural

politics when human politics were no longer an option. I didn't want Heath in that environment, so Italy it was."

"Huh," Adler said. "Had no idea. I thought they were always very by the book back then."

Maxim turned to look at him. "The nepotism and corruption wasn't the kind of thing they talked about, and they suppressed it in the press. You know I detest politics, but in London back then, there was no staying out of it, let alone keeping Heath out of it. I had about enough after the first Forum vampire baby decided to flirt with him for her own gain and on the orders of her maker."

Gordon noisily sipped his coffee. "Maxim, you're a big mother hen."

"Gordon, darling, I'm the biggest hen who ever mothered, and proud to be so."

Adler gasped. "You have knives down your jacket. I can smell the oil and the steel. That's not very motherly."

Maxim beamed at him. "I keep them in my boots too, detective. And I know to use them in the most caring, most soothing way, with a lullaby on my lips, if need be. All the same, I do wonder sometimes if things would have gone differently if I'd been in London at the time. Not that it changes anything, but I do wonder."

"What about those human hunters?"

Maxim looked at Gordon in the rearview. "You mean, were there consequences for their failure in ending this and finding the culprit?"

"Yeah, for starters. But also, disciplinary action?"

Maxim sighed. “They were Forum hunters, same as I. The rules didn’t change much since then. You know the kinds of rights I have, the near unlimited power to be both judge and executioner to our kind and to humans who commit crimes against us. Those who are meant to check me are other hunters, and in return, I check them. The idea was to give the best of us the ability to handle the worst of us, no matter their level of power or influence. Back then, humans were suspicious, and they liked hunters to be human. And London—well, London was a cesspool, and those with power and influence knew that a certain breed of human hunters were all too easily swayed. There were no consequences at all, not in their lifetime. It was only around the dawn of the twentieth century that one fae family established themselves as the city’s hunters, and they are keeping it safe to this day.”

“I hate that kind of thing,” Adler grumble-said. “Not fae hunters. The failure of systems and no one paying for it.”

Maxim hummed. “Indeed.”

“I can see you two thinking of creative means of execution. But this gaming the system shit—that’s a lot like the Pearson case, and—what if all of this has been going on since back then?”

Maxim slowed. “Ah.”

“Shit,” Adler said.

“It’s possible, right? Maxim, you said you were pretty sure someone compelled the police officers who should have investigated Pearson but didn’t. What if that vampire has been at this for a long time. Since the Ripper case or even before then?”

Maxim said nothing, and he’d gone still behind the wheel.

“That would make them old. And strong,” Adler said.

He turned, looking at Gordon, and Gordon saw the worry in his mate’s eyes, the protective instinct turning to fear.

“Don’t worry about him. I’ll keep you two safe.” Maxim’s voice was low, sharp. “I’ll keep everyone safe.”

Gordon decided not to press on further. After all, Maxim, mother hen that he was, had a son born of a union between vampire and human, probably not something their killer approved of.

What knowing that did to a parent, Gordon couldn’t begin to fathom, but he wouldn’t want to be in the killer’s shoes when Maxim and all his many knives and mother hen instincts found him.

Consequences indeed.

Chapter 28

Once more, Adler smelled the scene before he saw it. Once more, there were crime scene technicians in anonymous white at the scene, an apartment painted in light purple, pale bottle green, and bright sunflower yellow.

Someone lived here and loved living here .

The photos mounted in the hallway were proof of that, many of them small groups of smiling people, but there were vacation photos too, selfies. Two lovers, smiling for the sake of making a memory.

A few of the technicians turned to give the three of them cursory glances, much like the NA police officers outside had.

“Professor Megan LeRoux was a fae and lectured on English and French literature at New Amsterdam University,” Maxim said, indicating the dark-haired woman who’d rubbed her cheek against her husband’s in one of the pictures. “Married to Jonathan West. He worked with at-risk children in a group home, and before you ask, his record is clean, according to Heath.”

Gordon wordlessly went to find his own sterile whitesuit while Adler and Maxim looked at the scene from the hallway. Adler pressed his lips shut so as not to ask his mate if he was okay, if he’d not be more comfortable waiting outside where the scent of blood didn’t permeate. Gordon is used to it, don’t be weird. Let your mate shine at what he’s good at, at what he chose as his calling.

Adler looked at their two victims. “Their chests are torn open. They’re missing their hearts, just like the other family?”

Maxim nodded. “Yes, and there is very little blood, considering. Even if we do factor in the wicked calligraphy.”

He pointed to a yellow wall bathed in morning light. “The deserved suffering before death,” it read there, and red dripped from the base line of the T and the open loop of the d and s and g. Adler stared at the crudely and cruelly written words, a respite, because the bodies were not easy to look at.

“Time of death is easily yesterday morning,” a white-clad Gordon said, his hand inside the husband’s body. He explored further, and Adler noticed the minute tightening of his mate’s muscles; surprise.

Gordon changed his gloves and examined LeRoux’s chest, which had been torn open much more viciously, jagged edges showing. Then, he pulled the gloves off and walked out of the room, past Adler and Maxim, and outside of the apartment toward the stairs at the end of the hallway and up a few steps. Adler and Maxim followed.

“No one’s close enough to hear us, right?” Gordon asked. Eyes finding Maxim’s.

“No, this is fine.”

Gordon nodded. “They are both missing their kidneys. She’s missing her liver. I have to get them both on my table for all the specifics, but there are marks on her ribs and tear marks inside both of them that look like teeth.” He looked at Adler. “I’d say wolf teeth, if I really had to guess.”

Maxim crossed his arms in front of his chest. “And you are putting the time of death at before nightfall? You’re certain?”

Gordon nodded.

“Another mixed couple,” Adler mumbled.

The words, the thought of that, made his skin feel heated, and he angled his body so that his back shielded Gordon from any threat that might come up the stairs. Instinct, Adler thought, silly instinct. But he didn’t move, and thankfully, Maxim, who couldn’t not notice, didn’t comment.

“They are. They were. We seem to have a motive that lines up with everything else we know,” the hunter said. “Though it’s strange that there are no witnesses here. All the neighbors said they didn’t hear or see anything because they were watching TV.”

Gordon cocked his head. “They were all watching TV?”

Maxim shrugged. “Obviously they were compelled to think that. Someone went through the trouble of preemptively destroying any witness accounts they might have given.”

“And you cannot undo the compulsion.” Adler rubbed his temple. He didn’t like this.

Maxim raised an eyebrow. “Not without unacceptable risk to the humans, no.” He shrugged. “But still. If those are indeed teeth marks, and if they are from a werewolf rather than a trained dog, this mean there’s a day shifter wrapped up in this. This gives us a werewolf and a vampire working together against mixed couples, for no better reason than hate.”

Gordon inclined his head. “I should be able to tell for sure whether it was a dog or werewolf once I have them in the lab. Pearson was just working against all supernaturals. It’s a bit like London, you know. Chaotic. But, like, not chaotic evil, more like a blend between lawful evil and chaotic evil.”

“Oh, fun,” Maxim said. “We are using a crime alignment chart to keep track of this mess. Gordon, darling, are you sure you don’t mean neutral evil?”

Gordon pulled the hoodie of his whitesuit back. “There is nothing neutral about this. But what I mean is that someone here wants a certain degree of chaos because chaos breeds panic, and panic breeds fear, and that in turn breeds hate.”

Adler snorted. “Don’t we all know that.”

Maxim gave Gordon a long look. “For someone good with corpses, you have a lot of insight into what it takes for a mind to desire to make them.” The hunter looked around. “I’d like to go back to 43 Ruthaven. I’d also like to take you along, Adler. I think we need to work on finding commonalities, and Heath is surprisingly good at that.” He looked back and forth between them. “Gordon, send us what you found on the old Ripper case and then join us once you are done with our two victims.”

Gordon nodded. “I’ll call Corinne. I hope she hasn’t indulged in too many cookies.”

“Indulged.” Adler rubbed the back of his head. “This was indulgent.” He looked back over his shoulder, thought back to the scene, two bodies sitting in chairs, their lives torn out of their chests while they still wore their clothes. They had been placed so that anyone who found them would see them like this, would see the gaping loss and the sticky, hollow red that remained. The message on the wall was almost an afterthought, a frame.

“Think about it,” Adler went on. “If I can compel people, I can compel a majority of the people around me at any given moment to forget they ever saw me. If this is a vampire and a werewolf, subduing even a fae shouldn’t be that hard, never mind that compulsion doesn’t work on them. But something about this whole thing feels like they enjoy doing it. Like it’s...fun? And they weren’t trying very hard to hide it, hence they didn’t bother with really hiding themselves in the compulsion.”

Maxim nodded. “Indeed. If it were about shocking onlookers only, there are far more public ways to do that.” He went pensive, pulled out his phone. “I think we should look at unsolved crimes, even at solved ones over the years and look for this kind of staging. Heath will moan about handling the data to no end.”

“Tell me what the motherly reaction to dealing with an upset child is, then.” Adler meant to slightly poke the alpha hunter, though he was also interested, for Mil’s sake.

Maxim made a moue. “Well, we’re going to stop by his favorite bakery to get him some treats of course.”

“That just sounds like bribery.” The white tips of Gordon’s blue hair looked like errant snowflakes the way the strands lay mangled from the hood and from their earlier lovemaking.

“You give out cookies yourself, Gordon.” Maxim typed away on his phone, presumably to tell Heath about having to do more work.

Gordon frowned. “Yeah, but mine are fun.”

Maxim shrugged. “Heath cannot handle too much fun. Believe me, I have tried. Detective, are you ready to go?”

Adler tensed. I have no right. Gordon doesn’t need me here.

He swallowed, his throat dry. “Sure, if you have everything you need, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, I can take it from here. I’ll catch up later. Maxim, is Clement going to be okay watching Mil?”

“Absolutely. There’s nothing to worry about there.”

It's good that he's thinking of Mil. I should be happy. No, I should be thinking about her. Fuck. It's still the full moon in my blood.

In that moment, as if he'd heard him, Gordon looked at Adler. "Hey, you can leave, but if you want to wait for Corinne to get here, I don't mind."

Adler's chest swelled. "I, uh. I don't want the forensic people to think I can't let you out of my sight at a crime scene. That would be...patronizing." He cleared his throat. "I think I could eat a few cookies myself, actually."

He forced himself to take one step down, but that likely didn't have the desired effect as he didn't manage to turn away from his mate.

Gordon just smiled. "I'll have to change into a new suit, but come here."

Adler moved as if on autopilot when Gordon opened his arms, hugged him close, and ran his nose through his hair, kissed him, nuzzled his neck, thinking, mine, the word going round and round in his mind.

"This is the cutest. Keep at it, the light is perfect."

Adler growled and turned. "You're taking photos?"

Maxim managed to look innocent. "I thought you might want them for your album? I'm being helpful. Else I'd just be standing here and watching you, and that would be very voyeuristic."

Gordon chuckled while Adler sighed.

"Okay. Fine. Sweetheart, Maxim and I are leaving. Call me if anything comes up, okay?"

“Is that an order, detective?” Gordon asked coyly.

He has no idea what that does to me. Just play it cool. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

Gordon bit his lip, not really making things easier for Adler, but this time, Adler knew he had to leave. One stair after the other, and just before Gordon went back into the apartment, Adler gave him another kiss on the cheek, then walked outside after Maxim.

“He loves me, you know,” Adler said as he and Maxim got into the vampire’s car. “He’s a good mate, better than he needs to be. The idea of anyone thinking he couldn’t be because he’s not a werewolf...” Adler shook his head.

“Yes. I agree. We need not be born a thing to be that thing. That’s a truth I have seen confirmed over and over again in my long life.”

He put the car in gear and drove off.

It’s time we put an end to whoever is doing this.

Chapter 29

After the two most ridiculous men in Gordon's life had left the crime scene, it didn't take long for Corinne to arrive with the corpse mobile. White-clad, she pushed the gurney into the apartment in which the two deceased sat and waited for attention.

"You know, I know what you always say about how we're only supposed to deal with the what and when and how and that the investigators have to deal with the who and the why, but this—" she pointed at the bright wallpaper lettered with blood, "—seems uncannily familiar. I know we caught Pearson, and this wasn't her, but..." Corinne looked away, shaking her head. "This is upsetting."

Gordon shrugged as he helped lift LeRoux. "It is. This one was a professor for English literature, and our other, open-chested friend was a social worker. They were only ever trying to help people, nothing else." Gordon sighed. "But you're right; we don't handle the whys and whos. That's for Adler and Maxim to figure out." Plus, I cannot tell you about a possible conspiracy. Sorry about that .

Corinne's hold almost slipped. "Did you say lit professor?"

"Yes?"

"At NAU?"

Gordon nodded. "Yes. You don't know her, do you? If so, that's a conflict and—"

"No, no." Corinne shook her head. "I just... I have a friend who's doing English and

French lit, and she was in this group project with this guy. She said the prof is a fae, and I don't think there're a ton of fae literature professors at NAU. It was just the two of them in the group because the other guy moved groups. Anyway. I think they got the project done in a flash and then just geeked out about, I don't know, literature." She pointed. "Like you and the toys, but with books and stuff."

Gordon gasped even if the whitesuit hid it. "Corinne! They're not toys. Don't say that, it's offensive. I raised you better."

"Yes, yes. You know what I mean. Your collectibles . But those two, they speak a different dialect of geek than you do. Anyway, she was telling me how the guy had this wild theory about how Arthur Conan Doyle was really just a straw man and how the real creator of the Sherlock Holmes stories was some ancient vampire who lived through the fall of Rome or whatever. She said the theory was really elaborate—she gave me the highlights, but I don't remember. Ask me to name all the bones in the foot, no problem, but literary conspiracy theories go over my head."

They had the fae on the gurney now and were closing her into her comfy body bag.

"Okay? LeRoux let her students run wild. Sounds like she was a good teacher."

"Yes, I guess. That's not the point though. He vanished."

Gordon cocked his head as they were maneuvering the gurney back to the van before taking the second body.

"Who vanished?"

"The nerd with the conspiracy theory. Do you think—" Corinne lowered her voice on the stairs, walking backward and half turning to make sure she didn't miss one. "Do you think maybe he did this?"

“What do you mean, he vanished?” Gordon asked, hating that Maxim and Adler had already left and weren’t here to ask smart detective-type questions.

Corinne waited until they were at the van. She opened the door.

“I don’t know. All I know is that my friend said she hasn’t seen him in days. Her theory is that he’s run off to chase down his theory like some kind of mad genius, but if this was his professor... What if she didn’t like his theories? What if they argued about it and he got really angry she wasn’t taking him seriously?”

“You shouldn’t make assumptions.” Adler always says that’s what he wants to teach Bachmann, and he’s still not over assuming the Ripper copycat murders were committed by a man.

“I know. I’m just saying this is a strange kind of coincidence. Right?”

They moved LeRoux into the van. Once she was inside, Gordon waved to one of the forensic team members. The small woman came right over.

“Dr. Morris! Did you need something?”

Okay, an exuberant werewolf who wants to be of help to Adler’s mate. Might as well take advantage.

“I do, actually. Can you help my assistant with the second body? I have to make a phone call.”

The wolf nodded eagerly. “Yes!” The forensic technician turned to Corinne. “You’re human, right? Don’t worry, I’ll do most of the lifting.”

“Yeah, right.” Corinne gave Gordon an accusing look before following the werewolf

back inside, the gurney between them.

Well, she did call my lovelies toys, so I suppose a little punishment is in order.

Gordon peeled off his gloves and called Maxim.

The hunter answered on the first ring. “Dr. Morris. Miss me? Or are you calling to ask about your mate? He’s been well-behaved, all things considered, no howling or growling, though he keeps sighing like wind whistling over a craggy mountain ridge. I think, dear Gordon, that Adler misses you.”

“Come on, it’s been fifteen minutes. Listen, Corinne just told me about a friend from NAU who did a project with this guy, and the guy had a theory about how Sherlock Holmes was vampire fiction as in, some vampire made it up. They were both in LeRoux’s class. Now, the kicker is, the Sherlock Holmes guy up and vanished and...you know.”

Maxim didn’t miss a beat. “You think he is involved. Remember to give your assistant a cookie for paying attention and sharing with the class.”

“Oh, she gets a cookie just for existing.”

“The friend’s name?”

“Uhm. Will ask.” Gordon looked at LeRoux’s unmoving form. “In a second. Chain of custody.”

“Yes, rightly so. Gordon, stay put, keep watch. I’m turning the car around.”

“But why—”

“I have a feeling. Just don’t go anywhere. And I’ll want to talk to Corinne as well.”

“Okay. Hey, is Adler really missing me?”

“Gordon, dear, the man looks like Heath when he can’t make the numbers work out right on all the tax forms.”

There was grumbling and growling aplenty in the background now.

Maxim laughed. “Can you hear him miss you?”

“Tell him me too.”

“My turtledoves! My darling sugar plums with honeysuckle hair and sherbet lips.”

“Maxim, watch the road. I’m hanging up on you now.”

“Aw, Gordon you—”

But Gordon cut the hunter off and waited for Corinne and the second corpse as well as for his mate and Maxim to return. It was all he could do not to pace.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 30

Maxim returned to the scene at speed, double-parking close to where the area had been cordoned off.

“I’m not in trouble, am I?” Corinne asked.

She stood next to Gordon, both of them still in their white body suits, both with their arms crossed, the van running so the cooling unit kept their guests comfortable.

“Probably not.”

“Dr. Morris, you could at least pretend.”

“I said probably.” Gordon scratched his head. His scalp was itchy, and he needed a shower. Maybe I should get a new color soon. I wonder what Adler would like?

“Probably isn’t a comfort word,” Corinne said, but Gordon had nearly tuned her out.

Adler got out of the car, and their eyes met, the commotion that was still going on while the crime scene was being processed suddenly receding.

...mate.

Gordon’s eyes went wide. He’d heard the word in his mind, loud and clear like his own thought though that undertone of proud possessiveness wasn’t something that existed in Gordon’s mind.

Shit. Fuck. Fuckety-fuck. This can't be real. I need a shower. And coffee. I'm imagining things. This isn't the mate bond, can't be. It's too rare, plus Adler isn't even shifted. Yeah, I just need sleep.

Both Maxim and Adler approached them quickly.

"Gordon, you two look like morgue twins," Maxim said, sunshine rippling over his long braid.

Corinne cocked her head. "Not really."

"Sweetheart."

Adler's voice was low, and it made Gordon shiver in his whitesuit, inappropriate for where they were but not something he could easily avoid, especially not with the way Adler's eyes seemed glued to him.

"Dearest Corinne, are those two like that in the morgue? You're supposed to keep things below freezing there, what with the corpses, no?" Maxim asked.

Corinne shrugged. "Live a little. That should be our motto, except Dr. Morris says it's our guests come first."

"And right he is. Corinne, Gordon said you paid attention to gossip? Do share."

Maxim's voice still had his levity, but there was something about him that tipped Gordon off. Maybe it was the set of his shoulders or the way his hands kept going to the short swords at his sides, but the hunter was agitated.

Corinne shrugged. "It's really not a big deal, just that my friend's project partner vanished on her."

Maxim leaned in. “Corinne, it’s important. Did he ghost her or vanish without leaving word?”

Corinne shifted from one foot to the other. “Well, it sounded like the latter.”

“Call her, please. I need to have this confirmed.”

“Right.”

Corinne unzipped her suit and dug her phone out from her pocket. Gordon’s lips curled in a smile when he saw her screen wallpaper, a selfie with another woman whose skin looked vampiric in the flashlight’s flare. Pearson’s sister had none of the fury her sibling had bred like a cancer, not in her smile nor in the way she hugged Corinne.

Corinne placed the call, and they all waited for it to connect, Adler shuffling closer to Gordon and straightening.

Don’t like him out in the open unprotected.

Gordon flinched, and in response, Adler’s hand came to rest on his mate’s back. No. This cannot be happening. I’m making this up. It’s probably having sex with him when he was shifted that makes me think needy stuff.

“Hey, Corinne,” said a female-sounding voice on the other end of her phone.

“Hey. Lou, I’m here with my boss and the Forum’s hunter. Official business I guess.”

“Funny. What’s up? You got a cookie from that jar again?”

“Madame, this is Maxim Vallois, and much though I wish it were otherwise, I am no

cookie.”

Corinne’s friend went silent before she said, “Oh, shit. Sorry about that, Dr. Morris.”

“Uh, nope, that’s me. I’m the doctor. That was the hunter. Like a real raiding party, but, you know, real.”

The friend exhaled, the noise rattly and metallic. “You’re the nerd. Okay, what is this about?”

Maxim inclined his head. “I just need to confirm about the student who you worked with on a project. What’s his name? What was the professor’s name who assigned the project?”

“Huh?”

“The guy you said told you about that Sherlock Holmes theory before he up and vanished,” Corinne said.

“Ah! Prof Roux. Professor Megan LeRoux, Victorian English Literature. And my partner’s name’s Raven Crawford. He’s kinda odd, but really nice, you know. Quiet, but super smart when he starts talking.”

The quivering around the right corner of Maxim’s mouth was barely there, but Gordon saw it, a minute sign of unease or trepidation. Does he know that student?

“Thank you,” Maxim said. “By any chance, did Raven mention to you that he was going to the Forum for one of the public lectures?”

“Uuh, he did talk about that. Part of his theory, and he told me not to tell anyone in case he could turn it into his thesis. I’m guessing I have to tell you, right?”

“Indeed, you do, though I’ve been known to disperse silence like a grave.”

“Okay. Not that I think anyone else would want to know as much as he did. He just said he wanted to meet this old vampire lecturer who’d been in London at the time—when Sherlock Holmes was written, you know. He said he was pretty sure the vampire was the one who was actually behind the stories.”

“I see. I’ll have to go now. Thank you for helping in Forum business today. Be sure to pick up complimentary candy when next you visit.” He ended the call and looked at Gordon while pulling out his phone. “That’s Jason’s roommate.”

“Who the fuck is Jason?” Adler asked before he turned into a very tense, growling werewolf at Gordon’s side.

“The concerned friend your mate ran into when he and Mil were on their quest to raid a bookshop the other day,” Maxim said, pressing the receiver to his ear.

“Uhm, should I be here?” Corinne asked.

“Heath! Darling. We need to take another look at the Forum lectures, specifically the guest lectures. Vampire lecturer who spent time in London around 1900.”

“That sounds like that weird professor guy who says Dr. Morris and the detective shouldn’t be together because werewolves and vampires are an impossible union or whatever,” Corinne said, and all eyes turned to her.

Gordon heard Heath groan on the other end. “Who’s that? Are you wanting to replace me? I’m fine moving out, old bat, you know that.”

“Nonsense, darling. Corinne, dear, what lecturer? Do you have a name?”

“Let me check my schedule,” she said, going back to her phone.

On the other end of Maxim’s phone, Heath cackled. “Check her schedule, are you fucking kidding me? Good joke though, but I have him. Laurenzio Highgate, Sociology since the Revelation. Sounds boring. Did your missing college kid go to that one?”

Adler perked up. “You have a missing college kid?”

“You knew someone was missing?” Corinne asked.

Gordon rubbed his face. “Wait. Wait, this is connected to this guy who was looking for his roommate?”

“I did, I suspected, and I very much fear that’s the case,” Maxim said. “Though whether said college kid is dangerous or in danger remains to be seen.”

“Fuck,” Gordon and Adler said together.

Chapter 31

They were all standing around the white van, the noises of the city around them a background hum Adler might have appreciated on any other day. Today, it made him feel exposed. What does a college kid have to do with these murders?

“What now?” Corinne asked.

“Now I find an address,” Heath said over the phone.

“My Heath is the best at computers and things.” Maxim looked at Corinne with parental pride or like someone who’d just gotten a compliment on his knives.

Heath groaned. “Do you have any idea how fucking old you sound? Ancient, that’s how old. Like you lived among the mummies before they were mummies. Like you should be a museum piece.”

Maxim held his phone at arm’s length and shielded his mouth when he talked to Corinne. “When things get hard with the computers, he gets particularly agitated, and his verbiage shows it.”

“You know I can still hear you, right? Can you not talk to other people about me like I’m not there?”

“Hmm, but you aren’t here, Heath.”

Corinne brightened. “Oh, I get it! This is like when Dr. Morris talks to his corpses.”

“Excuse me?” Gordon pursed his lips and frowned at Corinne.

Adler used the opportunity to move a little closer to Gordon. He intertwined his index and middle finger with Gordon’s pinky and ring finger. He’d have liked to kiss him, but there were still Forum workers and police officers about, and while no one was explicitly watching them, whatever they did wasn’t likely to be ignored.

“It’s true.” Corinne shrugged.

Maxim rubbed the back of his neck. “Heath talks back more than any corpse ever did. He’s always been chatty like that. There was this time when we stayed at a farm, and the lady farmer took him to the stables to show him how to milk a cow and—”

“Fucking hell, will you shut up? I swear I’m going as fast as I can here, okay? Don’t rush me.”

“Darling, I didn’t mean to do that at all,” Maxim said, though Adler was pretty sure he saw a twinkle in the hunter’s eyes, the kind of look every alpha would get when expressing fondness for a beta by teasing them.

Corinne turned toward them. “Are we heading back, Dr. Morris?”

Adler opened his mouth to tell Gordon goodbye, but before he could, Gordon began unzipping his whitesuit, his brows furrowing with intent.

“I’m coming.”

Adler didn’t release Gordon’s hand, effectively stopping him with the whitesuit off one shoulder. “Sweetheart, this might be dangerous. You’ve seen what happened to the victims. There’s no need for you to come.”

Gordon narrowed his sapphire eyes. “Knowing what happened to the others is exactly why I should come. What if the human college kid isn’t involved? What if he needs help?”

“Sweetheart—”

Maxim sighed. “Gordon, I share your mate’s concern, but the point you make is fair. Though, taking a morgue lover like yourself to attend the living like this once more feels like messing with the order of things.”

“Fuck the order of things,” Heath said.

“Darling, you sound stressed.”

Adler tuned out Maxim and Heath and focused on Gordon instead. “I’m scared to take you there. I’m scared you’ll get hurt. You have no training at all for this kind of thing. You are so good at what you do, but this is—”

“Maxim is going to be there,” Gordon said. “Also, you are going to be there. I’ll hide behind the both of you.”

Corinne cleared her throat. “Vampire.”

Gordon nodded. “And I’m a vampire. Notoriously difficult to kill, remember?”
Gordon lowered his head. “I’m coming, Adler.”

Adler froze. The wolf in him was wild, every instinct blaring with the wrongness of this. I can’t forbid him. He has such a soft heart, and he’s strong. Not like a werewolf, but strong all the same.

Heath made a hissing, screeching noise from the other end of the phone.

“Darling, please calm down. Should I sing you something? I remember every lullaby you liked, so—”

“No, old bat, no one wants you to sing. This Highgate character...I mean, he has properties he owns and rents. There are holding companies here—he owns shares in a car dealership, an old typewriter company that barely even still exists, and a restaurant chain even though he’s a fucking vampire who subsist on blood alone. Who the fuck is this guy?”

Maxim tilted his head, and a golden strand of hair fell over his shoulder. “Typewriters?”

“Yeah. No one uses those anymore.”

Gordon stopped pulling the suit off. “Wrong. They’re turning into collector’s items, plus going analog is a thing.”

“A wrong thing is what it is,” Heath grumbled. “Look, I don’t fucking know. He booked suites in three hotels, three!”

“When’s his last lecture supposed to be?” Maxim asked.

“Hmm, two days from today.”

Adler felt his mate tense. Gordon opened and closed his mouth before he spoke.

“That’s too long. If the college kid has nothing to do with this, but if he—if he...why would this vampire professor even take him?”

Maxim looked at the both of them with a neutral expression sitting on his face like a mask. “There is darkness in imagination, and when imagination comes to reality’s

light, it stains like ash mixed with water and rubbed into the skin. Heath, dear, like Gordon said, two days is too long.”

“Telling me that is going to slim down my list for sure, you know. Tell me bad things happen, and I’ll suddenly see what isn’t there to see. A fool-proof tactic that never didn’t work.”

“The sarcasm is strong in him,” Corinne said. “Uhm, I’m taking the bodies home?” She pointed at the van.

Gordon smiled at her and nodded. “Home they go. Take good care of them.”

“Right.” She twisted so she could look past Gordon at Adler. “You take good care of my boss. I need my cookie supplier.”

Gordon beamed. “Corinne, you make me proud.”

Adler couldn’t help himself. He was proud as well, proud of his mate who cared about his own people and helped them grow. No, he didn’t like that Gordon wouldn’t stay put, but he respected it. If I could give him my mate bite all over again, I’d do it. The wolf wanted to howl out that truth into the world.

“I’ll watch over him,” he told Corinne when Gordon rolled up the whitesuit and handed it to her.

“Corinne, do we have a medical kit in the van?”

She nodded. “That’s regulation. Hold on.”

Heath clicked his tongue. “Okay. It’s still a list, but at the top of it, I have properties that are close to our crime scene. Don’t know that’s going to help, but it’s the best I

can do with the information we have.”

“Is the typewriter company on there?” Maxim asked.

“Yeah. That’s where you want to start?”

“I think that might be rather a good idea. My turtledoves, if you can move yourselves into the car, please? I think it’s time we went hunting for our killer.”

“The bag, Dr. Morris,” Corinne said and handed Gordon what seemed like the bigger version of a first aid kit to Adler.

“Ready, detective?”

I’m always ready when you ask, sweetheart. “Yeah.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 32

“It’s just a short walk from here,” Maxim said as he parked his car in a fire lane, illegal for all but emergency services and the Forum’s hunter.

“Where do you want me?” Gordon asked, leaning forward from his place in the back seat.

“Home, ideally,” Adler grumbled.

Gordon couldn’t help the fondness rise in him at Adler’s words. Moments later, it happened again.

My mate. Soft. Should be where it’s safe. I will protect him.

The thought wasn’t his, Gordon knew that, and he wasn’t stupid, wasn’t able to ignore facts for too long. This is the mate bond. I can hear his thoughts through the mate bond. I’ll have to tell him and...fuck. He’s going to be able to hear mine, eventually.

Gordon decided this was a bridge he wasn’t quite able to cross yet, a conversation that could wait.

Maxim turned to Gordon, the hunter still looking more serious than was the norm for his broadsword-wielding, ridiculous self.

“You’ll stay behind me. Adler can bring up the rear.”

Gordon frowned. “But if this guy’s a vampire or works with one, then isn’t this little adventure more dangerous for Adler than me?”

Adler, predictably, growled. My mate thinks I’m weak?! No. No, that’s not it. He wants to protect me. I hope he wants to protect me...

Gordon cleared his throat and put a hand on Adler’s shoulder. “Not that I think you can’t handle a vampire, but if this one is as old as Maxim, then it’ll be dangerous. And I want you safe as much as you want me safe, detective.”

“You two are indeed adorable.” Maxim tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Leave the vampire to me and my blades, darlings. Adler, you should make sure to hold everyone and anyone else we might cross paths with inside in case they were compelled.”

“Right. Let’s hope we find whoever we need to find here.” Adler placed his hand on Gordon’s, his thumb stroking Gordon’s pinky.

“Indeed. Detective, Gordon, let’s go.”

They got out of the car and walked in silence, Maxim completely so in that uncanny way Gordon knew some of the older vampires had, he and Adler simply not talking. Adler was close behind him, and Gordon knew if they did run into danger, Adler was going to pull him to the ground or something over-the-top like that. It made him smile for a second, and then he felt mildly guilty at taking Adler’s protective instinct so lightly.

They headed down the street and took first a left turn, then a right one. The old typewriter shop, simply named “Highgate’s Typewriters,” looked as though it had been around for the founding of New Amsterdam, the building weathered and dwarfed by its neighbors. For all that, it wasn’t neglected or abandoned. Gordon saw

typewriters in the shop's windows, machines he hadn't seen in decades.

"Are those prices for real?" Adler mumbled as Maxim strode toward the door like a stormfront heading inland.

"I told you, collector's items."

Gordon expected...something. Screams from the inside. Maxim moving so fast he blurred. Fighting and things breaking.

None of that happened. Maxim went toward the shop's counter ahead of them, looking left and right, and now that they were inside, Adler was touching-close, one hand on Gordon's back.

A shop clerk came out toward the front through a doorway at the back, a middle-aged human.

"Hello there," the man said, his brows rising as he laid eyes on Maxim. "Are you here to get a typewriter fixed?"

"No." Maxim sped, closing the distance between himself and the salesperson, and immediately making hard eye contact. "Is there anyone else here with you?"

"No, just me," the human said. This time, it wasn't surprise on his face but fear.

"I see." Maxim blinked, dropping the compulsion. The human gasped and stumbled backward.

"You are—"

"A hunter of the Forum," Maxim said. "I do apologize, but we're here on time-

sensitive business, and I needed to be certain. You're not in any kind of trouble, so please relax."

"Relax? Well, fuck me. Vampires." With that, the fear on the human's face shifted to anger. Disgust.

Oh, lovely, Gordon thought.

Maxim laughed, a stage laughter that likely carried through the entire building.

"By the graces, I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last source of blood on this planet. Like I said, we're here on Forum business, and the Forum would appreciate it ever so much if you could find it in you to regale us with your cooperation." Maxim showed all his teeth in a wide grin. "Or else, you know?"

"Oh." The sound out of Adler's mouth was tiny, but Gordon turned. Adler shrugged, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly before he whispered, only loud enough for vampire ears, "Alpha energy."

Gordon sighed. Meanwhile, the human had crossed his arms.

"What do you want, then?"

Maxim, in response, placed his hand lightly on the hilt of one of his short blades. "The owner. You're not him, I assume?"

"No. Never met him. I apprenticed here, and all I know is that I run the shop and get paid like clockwork for it."

"Interesting." Maxim tapped the counter with the first finger of his other hand. "That's an unusual arrangement, I'm sure. Not having to turn a profit. Is there

anything else that's unusual about this establishment?"

Adler's hand slid away from Gordon's back. "Sweetheart. Maxim. Look at this."

Adler walked toward a shelf behind a typewriter display. The entire interior, where it wasn't typewriters on every available surface, was dark wood and darker paint, and that small shelf blended in perfectly, hiding like a furniture chameleon. Adler picked up a small volume that looked almost like a tiny magazine and waved it for them to see.

"What's that?" Gordon joined his mate, leaning in closer to read the old-fashioned print on the little booklet. "The Case of the Vanishing Wolf?"

The human shifted behind his counter as Maxim made for the shelf as well.

"We gotta display those. And sell them for a penny, if you can believe that. I give them away for free though if someone is interested. I hear there're collectors out there."

"Penny dreadfuls." Maxim picked up another volume, *The Case of the Little Girl Who Cried Wolf*. "I haven't seen these in a very long time." He flipped through it, his eyes moving inhumanly fast as he used his vampire speed to read, immediately inducing jealousy in Gordon.

Then again, no. I wouldn't want to read *Kawaii Demon Hunter* at that speed. I want to enjoy it.

"Like those old detective novels." Adler opened the volume he was holding while Gordon looked over his shoulder. Even the print looked like something you'd see in older books.

“Just so.” Maxim quickly gathered all of them. “Apologies, but I’m afraid I’ll have to take these collector’s items with me. Are there any others?”

The human shrugged. “Fine by me. Wouldn’t want to impede your important business. And no. Whenever there’s a delivery, they have to go on the shelf.”

“Where do the deliveries come from?” Adler asked.

The man shook his head. “Don’t know. There’s never an address on them, like someone brings them here and drops them in the middle of the night. It’s creepy, but I don’t work here in the middle of the night, and I don’t mind.”

“They drop them in the shop?” Adler asked, cocking his head.

“Sure. That’s not a problem.” The man’s arms remained crossed.

“Adler, this is futile. He’s been compelled to not find this weird, possibly even to ignore the actual means of delivery if they differ from what he just told you.

He snorted. “Look, I’ve never been compelled in my life. Before you, I never even met a vampire.”

“You realized at least one of those statements is false, but more likely both are?” Gordon looked at Maxim. “That’s what you’re thinking, right?”

Maxim was still leafing through the penny dreadfuls at high speed. “It’s fact. Nothing that will hurt you more than your prejudice though,” he told the man. “I think we found everything we’re going to find. Everything we’re meant to find here. Adler, Gordon, let’s move on.”

Maxim led the way, and Adler pushed Gordon ahead of himself, keeping him safe in

the middle.

Still Gordon didn't like it, didn't like that the human who so very clearly didn't like supernaturals had Adler's back to stare at.

It's too nice a back for that guy to think whatever he's thinking. It's my back.

Gordon took two steps after the door had fallen shut behind Adler, then turned.

"For the record, detective, you're very hot, and your back is mine."

Adler tilted his head in a cute, almost dog-like motion. "Uhm, awesome?"

Maxim cackled. "Gordon, the words you need to say are, your sexy back and your firm gluteus are all mine, and no stranger's eyes may ever taste them."

Adler's eyes widened, and his mouth fell open a crack. "Gordon? Is that true?" He sounded ridiculously hopeful.

Gordon shrugged before turning back around and walking after Maxim. "Yeah. Hey, I was going to dye my hair. Something new after the mate bite, you know. Magenta and pink sound okay to you?"

"Magenta and—sweetheart, are you asking me what to do with your hair?"

Adler's big warm hands came up on Gordon's hips.

"Yeah. You're sniffing it all the time, so you should have a say."

"Sweetheart I... It's perfect, Gordon. Shades of pink is perfect. I'll love every color, because all of them are you. You're a rainbow, sweetheart, you know that? My

rainbow.”

“Heath? Yes, we found evidence. Also, the two of them are being delightfully sappy, and I wish you were here with us. Gordon has been declared a rainbow, and I’m left to wonder what his corpses will make of that.”

“Maxim, hang up the phone,” Gordon said while Adler growled.

Gordon could hear Heath’s complaints faintly as they caught up, their work not yet done.

My mate, he makes me so happy. Too happy. I love him.

The thoughts came unbidden into Gordon’s mind, but he decided he didn’t mind them too much, not at all.

Chapter 33

Their second stop was a hotel. The building was unremarkable, fitting in perfectly among the surrounding structures. Adler didn't like the thought of their perpetrator being inside a hotel—an old vampire who thought himself cornered could wreak havoc in such a public place. Bringing Gordon along while they were investigating didn't help much either.

If he thinks he'd have an easier time handling an old vampire like Maxim than I do...

Adler shook his head to clear it while Maxim talked to the hotel manager, explaining that he was here on Forum business, that he needed to see the suites, now, thank you very much. As a beta, Adler could tell that while Maxim was being pleasant, his patience was wearing thin, and his beta nature didn't like that, wanted to accommodate the hunter.

He's seconds away from compelling the manager, Adler thought as he absentmindedly placed his arm around Gordon in order to soothe his mate, let him know not to worry even in the face of an alpha's displeasure. Though I don't know if he can see it. He's starting to understand that he has a pack now, but he can't read people like werewolves can.

Gordon turned his head to look at Adler, his blue eyes thoughtful. He cleared his throat. "I think...I think Maxim is doing a great job talking to the manager, isn't he?"

Adler cocked his head, ignoring the fake smile the manager had plastered all over her face while she tried to explain about the guests' privacy.

“Of course he is. Are you worried?”

Gordon looked surprised. “Huh? Worried about what?”

“Uhm. Because...Maxim’s doing a good job. You don’t have to worry about him getting upset with the manager or with you.”

Adler was whispering. They were an arm’s length behind Maxim’s back and the manager was human, but he still didn’t want the woman to overhear.

“Oh. Oh, that’s a worry? Okay. Hmm. Would you protect me?” Gordon pushed a strand of his still-blue hair back behind his ear. He wasn’t trying to be coy, Adler realized. He was asking an honest question.

My silly mate. My beautiful, silly mate. “Of course. Always. But he can handle it.”

In that moment, Maxim leaned in, saying, “Enough with the back-and-forth. Get me all the records I asked for, and get them now, and a keycard for the suites I mentioned.”

The manager’s eyes widened as the compulsion dropped on her. She rushed to comply, hurrying to the nearest computer to get it done. Maxim turned.

“My turtledoves, what are you two whispering about behind my back?” He put a hand on his hip, and Adler could appreciate how it brought out his swords.

“Nothing. Just saying you handled that well.” Whenever an alpha’s competence made Adler flush like now, he was glad for his darker complexion and the way it didn’t show how much he enjoyed watching an alpha in their element. He glanced at Gordon, worried that his mate might get the wrong idea if he saw too much alpha energy in other people, but Gordon didn’t seem impressed at all.

“Do you think they’re here?” he asked.

Maxim smoothed his golden braid. “Who knows. Best to check, although...it doesn’t feel right. So public. So many people and...” He shook his head. “It doesn’t feel right. The killer or killers would have had to walk back in here with blood on them. Or they would have changed elsewhere, but...it just doesn’t feel right.”

Fifteen minutes later, they had confirmed that the suite Highgate had booked was empty and didn’t look like it had been in use. They asked the cleaning crew, and those who were on the clock confirmed that they’d always walked into an untouched suite each day.

Maxim took the printouts of old bookings under Highgate’s name from the manager on their way out and tossed that in the back seat along with the penny dreadfuls he’d confiscated from the typewriter place with the very bigoted employee.

Adler was hoping they’d find their culprit soon, but at the same time, he didn’t want to find the vampire lecturer at all, not with Gordon here.

Back in the car, Gordon wordlessly patted Adler’s shoulder again, instantly making him relax.

“We’re going to another hotel next,” Maxim said as he started the car and pulled out of the underground parking structure. “I hate this kind of tedious thing. It’s like an Easter egg hunt, you see, or like learning which buttons to press with a new lover in order to sate them.”

“Most people like both those things,” Gordon sassed at Maxim from the back seat, making Adler feel proud inside.

“Yes, and then there are people like me who prefer to crack the egg and get their

lover to cum over and over and over again. It's precision, perfection, and control. Much like a knife's edge to take a life or give it."

Adler wasn't sure how a knife could give a life, but since Gordon seemed satisfied and was nodding along, Adler kept that to himself.

They found nothing in the next three places, and Adler's skin was itching by the time they got back into the hunter's car after yet another futile search.

"How many more places on the list?" he asked Maxim.

The hunter looked at his phone. "Four, and—oh." He tapped the screen. "Heath, darling? What is it?"

Heath's voice came over the speakers. "You know how you call me obsessive? You know how you brought grass into my office so I could touch it every now and then?"

"Of course, darling. Have you touched your grass recently? Maybe it's time."

"Oh, shut it, old bat. Look, with the weird low-quality detective novels—and don't you fucking dare lecture me about how they had their uses as toilet paper too, back in the day. Anyway, the fucking stories. I was just thinking, wouldn't you want to know who reads your drivel? Wouldn't you want to connect with your fans? I may have gone a bit overboard when I hacked my way to the water and electricity bill for the entire building, but get this. The apartment above the typewriter store belongs to some old lady, but the power and water bills fluctuate. Nothing for months, then it looks like someone lives there, then nothing again. Super suspicious."

Maxim straightened and started the car. "What about right now?"

"Admit I'm amazing at this," Heath said.

Adler's skin crawled at watching an alpha being challenged. The thought had only just popped into his mind when he felt a hand on his shoulder, Gordon. My mate. My perfect mate, soothing me.

"Darling, you've touched the grass just like I told you, and it has worked, doing wonders on your ponderous mind."

"Fuck's sake, they're using electricity and water right now. Can't you just pay me a compliment? Seriously, it's all, oh, the detective and the corpse whisperer are so perfect, and they made me an uncle, have you considered finding a dove to turtle with as well? Whatever in the fuck that even means."

Maxim maneuvered around the traffic, going faster than humans might have managed, fast enough for Adler to hold on tight.

"Why, darling, it means taking your sweet time while you go hunting for Easter eggs."

Heath went quiet. "You know, I don't even want to fucking know at this point."

"Go touch your grass, darling. I'll be home soon."

Heath went quiet again instead of just ending the call. "Okay. But be careful, for real. Old vampires are fucking scary."

"Thank you, darling. I'll take it as a compliment."

Heath groaned. "Just call me, okay?" And he hung up.

"Don't tell me the vampire and the student were there while we talked to that typewriter guy." Gordon didn't sound as if Maxim's racecar driving bothered him.

“Hiding in plain sight, hiding to delight in the pain and foolishness of others.”

“Maxim, if that’s a yes, just hurry. I don’t want to make room for any more corpses in my morgue.”

Adler agreed with Gordon, and apparently, so did Maxim, ignoring a red light and weaving through traffic as if he did nothing else all day, every day.

Adler’s grip on his seat tightened. Ugh, I hope we’re there soon.

As if he’d heard the thought, Gordon’s hand sneaked forward yet again, and he squeezed Adler’s shoulder in reassurance. Adler relaxed if only slightly.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 34

They went back to the typewriter shop, walking toward the door with quiet tension, Maxim at the front.

“Adler. Remember not to look a stranger in the eye, even if you feel your mate is threatened,” Maxim said.

Gordon heard Adler’s huff.

“Why?”

“Because this old vampire with the interesting lecture about how you and I shouldn’t be together can compel you.”

We should be together. We share the mate bite , Gordon heard in Adler’s thoughts, loud and clear, these past few hours enough to make this...ability an undeniable fact. To strengthen it, if anything.

“I’ll be careful.” I’ll protect my mate, if I have to do it blind, I’ll protect my mate. He’s too soft, not like a wolf.

Gordon had thought that it was going to work the other way around, that Adler would be able to hear his thoughts for the shift during the full moon, that he was going to be exposed. He’d been afraid of laying the insides of his mind bare like that, even if it was to Adler. And now, I’m the one listening in when he doesn’t even know. That’s wrong.

“Adler,” Gordon started, but snapped his mouth shut. Maxim had his hand on the door. “Let’s all be sure to be careful, okay?”

Adler placed his hand on Gordon’s hip. “We’re going to be, sweetheart. You just stay back if anything doesn’t look right.”

Maxim opened the door, and the three of them walked inside.

The shop was unchanged, and after a few moments, the manager who’d never been compelled and had never met a vampire, allegedly, walked back out from the back, frowning when he saw them.

“What now? If you’re here to take me in for questioning, don’t even bother. I know my rights.”

Maxim strode toward him, moving with sleek elegance. “That’s so very good for you, good indeed. But knowledge never matters when one is at the hands of the ruthless like you have likely been, and while your attitude is rather the purview of philosophy and the teachings of empathy, I’ll grant you are not to blame for what was done to you. There is an apartment above this shop, yes?”

The man cocked his head, snorted. “Never been at the hands of anyone, and the purview... Whatever. Yeah, there’s an apartment upstairs. Nice old lady lives there. She’s quiet. Only has the TV on sometimes.”

Gordon saw Maxim’s frown. “The TV. I see.”

The guy crossed his arms, shrugged. “Likes thrillers and murder mysteries. You know how old ladies get. Sometimes I hear it when she’s got it on loud, the fake screaming and all of that.”

“Age is a privilege, not a pain, and your ignorance is blessed. The way to her apartment is through the back?”

“No. You have to go around the side of the building, but you had better bring a warrant.” He pulled out his phone. “I’ll let her know you don’t have one.”

Maxim was faster than the human could handle, and he snatched the phone from the man’s fingers.

“Let me keep this. I think you were compelled to be a convenient alarm.”

“Hey! You fucking vampire scum!”

Gordon didn’t so much hear his mate’s growl as feel it. Adler physically pushed him aside when the shop manager grabbed a pair of scissors from the front desk and went at Maxim with them.

The whole episode took maybe two seconds. Maxim grabbed the man’s wrist and twisted it in some kung-fu move, the scissors dropped, and then he jumped the counter, levering the man’s arm once he landed, effectively pinning him against the counter. Two of the typewriters out on display rattled their keys, and the guy hissed, but that was about all the commotion there was.

“Adler, admirable, but perhaps you could part with your handcuffs? I daresay you ought to take care of our friend here.”

“I’m not your fucking friend, vampire!”

“That’s Mr. Vampire for you, and I was being hyperbolic. Adler?”

“Right.” Adler turned, meeting Gordon’s eyes. “You’re okay?”

Gordon frowned. He stood pushed against one of the shelves with the typewriters, Adler protecting him with his bulk.

“I’m peachy. Go be policy, detective.”

“Right.” My mate shouldn’t be here, he shouldn’t.

Gordon stifled a sigh as Adler pulled out his cuffs and walked toward Maxim and the bigot.

“What do we do with this one?” Gordon asked.

Maxim took the cuffs off Adler and put them in place quickly. “Normally, I’d call backup, but that might be ill-advised.” He spun the man to face him. “You will be staying in the back, right where I leave you,” he said, eyes going wide, then focused as he deployed his compulsion.

“Yes, I will,” the man said, and Maxim walked him toward the back.

Adler turned and closed the distance between him and Gordon, pulling Gordon into an embrace.

“What is it going to cost me to get you to wait in Maxim’s fancy car?”

This close, Gordon almost felt Adler’s thoughts, and they were jumbled, mate and safe prominent. He hugged Adler back.

“I’m here because people might be hurt, plus I’m a vampire. I’m not as soft as you think, detective, plus the last thing I want to do is be a hero. I’m happy to let Maxim and his blades do the slicing.”

And Adler...whined. It was a soft sound, near inaudible, and for some reason, it unlocked a door behind which Gordon found a massive amount of guilt about the way the mate bite had apparently decided to connect them through one-sided telepathy.

He cleared his throat. "Look, Adler—"

"Oh, turtledoves, I would love to leave you to love, but we must find the lost and the loathsome." Maxim walked out from the back on silent feet. "Come now. And Adler, never look an old vampire in the eye."

"I know, I know," Adler said, his hold on Gordon tightening. I'll protect him blind.

"Come on, detective. Let's go. And you won't have to protect me, because I'm really happy not getting in the path of danger, okay? I do science stuff. I hand out weed cookies. That's about as risqué as I can handle."

Maxim groaned. "Oh, Adler, your sweet mate and my single son, they have not lived. They have not tasted adventure. Whatever shall we do with them?"

Lock them up and keep them safe, Adler thought without hesitation. "Just let them be. Sweetheart, you don't have to go find adventure. I'll buy you...what's that donut edition?"

Heat rose to Gordon's cheeks. "The Kawaii Demon Hunter Breakfast Special Edition."

Adler stood back, taking Gordon's hands in his. "Yeah. You can pick anything from that if you wait in his car."

"Aw, darlings, is this the first time you tried bribery as a relationship coping mechanism? It's just so dear, my heart might never recover."

“We’re coming, Maxim,” Gordon said. “And Adler, I’m coming too. I know you can keep me safe though, so let’s go. Now.”

Gordon hoped that Adler would accept that, and he did, nodding once even though he was frowning.

“It’s a werewolf thing. Wanting you safe.”

Maxim hummed. “That it isn’t. Regardless, let’s see what hides upstairs. Let’s see if it calls for blades or Gordon’s skill.”

Blades I hope, Gordon thought, but kept that to himself.

They rounded the typewriter shop though because of how the city had grown around it, the alley between the shop and the neighboring building was narrow. Gordon had never been trained to gather clues from his surroundings, but he could tell that it would be easy to vanish into this gap and disappear off the street.

The alley itself was unremarkable, cleanish in the way any quiet corner of a big city might get. A spider had made a cobweb between the wall and a rain pipe. Lichen grew on the plaster.

“At the danger of being the Devil’s advocate, maybe our missing college kid got into a bad situation that has nothing to do with an old vampire, and maybe the old vampire is just...a really old bigot,” Gordon whispered, knowing that in all likelihood, he was wrong.

“Ah, youth,” Maxim whispered back, one hand on his short sword. “There was a time, many times, when I hoped bad situations had taken those I was called to find, the vanished, the taken. It’s why humanity has always kept the tales of monsters. The reality of other humans being evil is too much for most of us.”

“The car’s still an option,” Adler said, placing his big warm hand on Gordon’s shoulder. I like that he’s independent and smart and so very beautiful, but if he were a little more scared and preferred hiding over this, I’d be the last to complain.

Gordon chuckled. “Ah, detective. We went over this. I’ll hide behind you.”

Gordon flinched when he realized he’d responded to Adler’s thoughts rather than his words. Shit. I’m telling him, but not out here, not while we’re working with the badassest hunter to ever hunt.

“Yeah, yeah. My independent mate,” Adler said, sounding too fond to care or pick up on any lapse on Gordon’s part.

“I will say, turtledoves, it is getting distractingly adorable to have you around. Please hush now while I pick this lock.”

“Oh, you can do that?” Gordon asked, taking a step closer.

Paula had been able to pick a lock too, and she had shown Gordon once, opening their garden shed one day in high summer. She’d asked Gordon to stand on an old, rickety crate, and he still remembered the feeling of the wood shifting under his weight, of the upside-down green apple painted on the side of the crate, the crisp color long faded. There’d been nothing inside the shed that they had wanted, but it had still felt like an adventure to Gordon.

“Naturally. And I do have to, seeing as there is no doorbell we could ring here, no way to pretend we’re girl scouts with too many cookies.” Maxim had the door open in a flash, pushing it inward slowly, a frown on his face. “This is odd.”

“Huh?”

Adler growled. “The door should swing open toward the outside so that if you’re running—from a fire, someone chasing you—you can get out quickly.”

“Indeed. Gordon, back behind Adler and myself. Stay alert, turtledoves.”

They went into the building. The floor tiles were the first thing Gordon noticed, old looking and patterned with red flowers on yellowish ochre. Dust hung in the air, not the kind of thing that comes from a lack of cleaning alone but from disuse, abandonment.

Quietly, neither of them as quietly as Maxim, they went up the stairs. Maxim was about a flight ahead of where Gordon was when Adler tensed. “Maxim. I smell blood. Not a lot, and not all that fresh. Might not even be from the same person.”

Maxim’s shoulders tensed. “I see. If only young Raven had been into drugs, if only he’d run away with a lover. Adler, I want you and Gordon to stand back. This is my duty first.”

“No eye contact, right?” Adler asked, looking over his shoulder at Gordon.

Maxim nodded. “But if he’s as good as I fear, he can also draw your gaze. It’s easier with wolves actually. I can show you some time, if you consent.”

“Uh, maybe not,” Adler said.

“Fair. Wait here.” Maxim blurred as he sped up the stairs.

After a few seconds, he reappeared in front of them. Gordon, even though he’d seen it before, still found the way he could move without making any noise, extraordinarily creepy.

“A door, third flight up. The attic above that is silent. I’ll go in first, you two follow. If you run into a human, I leave it to you to subdue them, Adler. Gordon, first aid unless you endanger yourself. I will be looking for the vampire.”

Gordon nodded, his heartbeat picking up. Maybe the car doesn’t sound too bad after all. But while he was sure Adler wouldn’t have minded, Gordon knew it was too late to back out now.

Chapter 35

Adler didn't like this. He loathed that his mate was here, but Maxim had decided it was okay to take Gordon and then Gordon had decided it was okay to take himself, and now here they were. Possibly about to fight another vampire as powerful as Maxim if such a thing existed.

Our killer doesn't like people like us, doesn't like that we belong together, that the mate bite has made it an undeniable fact. Adler was hyper focused on Gordon, and ready to defend him at a moment's notice. He was glad for Gordon's hand on his back, like a warm lifeline that let him know exactly where his mate was.

The two of them did their best to ascend the stairs as quietly as Maxim did. When they reached the door, a solid, wooden thing, Adler nodded and tapped his nose, mouthed blood. It was stronger here, so strong that Adler was almost sure Maxim's and Gordon's vampire senses should be able to pick up on it too. The hunter nodded.

A few seconds ticked by. Adler could tell Maxim, the alpha here, was considering the best path forward, and Adler was happy to wait. Behind him though, his mate shifted to get a better look.

Don't be curious, let the alpha move us forward, he thought, worried to say the words out loud or turn in case that would attract attention from whoever was behind that door and inside the apartment.

Gordon stopped as if he'd heard the thought, giving Adler a sense of relief. Pride too, because if he was being honest, Gordon existing made Adler proud these days.

Moments passed, and the small noises of Maxim's tool charming the lock made Adler fear they'd be discovered, would have to fight, but then he heard the metallic click of the tumblers, and the door cracked open.

Adler wanted to see who was inside, but he looked at the ground instead, no matter how ridiculous that made him feel. Maxim beckoned for them to follow and silently stepped inside ahead of them. He was a ghost in black the way he moved, just a blond shadow with knives in his hands.

The door opened to a wide, tidy hallway with art on the walls that looked too modern for an old lady's taste. The walls were white, and everything seemed bright. The only thing that clashed with that was the scent of blood that still hung in Adler's nose.

There were doors to the left and right, and Maxim, now ahead of them, had walked past an archway that looked like it opened to a wider space, living or dining maybe.

As Maxim continued on, the door to Adler's left opened, and all of a sudden, he found himself looking into the face of a handsome, fair-skinned man with dark curls. From his scent, he was a wolf, and instead of showing aggression or screaming, he smiled at them, not appearing to notice Maxim behind him.

"Good morning." He was wiping his hand with a towel. Adler smelled something chemical though he couldn't place it.

"The door was open, and I smelled blood," Adler said. "Did you hurt yourself?"

He's going to know we broke in here, but we have to buy Maxim time. And I can take this one. I can keep my mate safe from one wolf, no problem.

Maxim, his black form moving onward in the corner of Adler's eyes, seemed to think the same thing.

The strange werewolf smiled at him. It was the oddest expression, his face, while handsome, appearing vacant.

“You have a good nose. I was developing my photos in there. It’s my dark room, kind of old school, I know. My scissors slipped. It happens. You smelled that from all the way at the other side of the door huh?”

Oh, shit.

Something about the guy made Adler’s skin turn into goose bumps. Maybe it was the tiny, almost unnoticeable note of disdain in his voice or maybe it was the way he stood, something about his body language just off for a wolf. Then again, maybe it was just that there was not a single cut or nick on his hands.

Faintly, Adler heard the sound of movement from further back in the apartment, a door being opened, footsteps, shuffling. And he picked up another scent. His eyes widening.

Then the handsome wolf cocked his head, and Adler realized Gordon had moved. The strange wolf was looking right at him.

“Ah. You with the blue hair. It’s really pretty. I wanted to tell you, but he said I couldn’t, not yet.”

The words made Adler run hot and cold all at once. He had no time to react.

The wolf in front of him shifted . Without the full moon.

“Irregular day shifter,” Adler hissed and took a step back so he could push Gordon away from the teeth and claws that were breaking free from human skin and clothing with a vicious snarl.

The wolf was gray, darker on his back, lighter under and around his belly and paws. He was large, showing his teeth.

If his body language had been off in human form, this was clear as fresh spring water.

Last night, Adler could have taken him, but as he was, it would be tough.

“Fuck,” Gordon said, and the wolf jumped at them.

Chapter 36

Gordon couldn't comprehend what he was seeing. He froze when the werewolf broke his human form, turned wild and snarling, predatory gaze focused on him.

Adler, his body the shield Gordon didn't want to use, stepped back into a ready stance, thereby pushing Gordon onto the landing. And then, instead of the absolute worst—of the werewolf burying his violent teeth in any part of Adler, things got weirder.

I WILL PROTECT YOU.

Adler's single thought was clear as an orator's finest address to a room full of a spellbound audience. To Gordon, it almost came with a physical force, another push to get him out of the way. He stumbled back another step, but then something even stranger happened.

Adler, one day after the full moon, broke his human skin and turned, right in front of Gordon's eyes.

It was shocking. Logically, Gordon knew the shift wasn't painful to werewolves, but it looked as if it should be. Adler, so far, hadn't allowed Gordon to watch when the whole pack shifted, had said he knew it could be unsettling. In this moment, Adler's clothes tearing under his wolf's bulk added to the sensory spectacle that had a cold shiver run down Gordon's back.

Oh, Adler thought, almost idly, before baring his teeth at the strange wolf.

Sweetheart, come on, remember to run. Down the stairs, I need room to move.

Gordon blinked. Then he reached for the banister and started down the stairs, not going too far, not wanting to let Adler out of his eyes.

“I shouldn’t be treating hurt werewolves, so you better don’t get hurt, detective.”

Hah! He’s so funny , Adler thought. Then he lunged or met the other wolf lunging at him. Gordon was too far down the stairs to really see what was happening, see the gray and black wolf clashing. All he had was Adler’s thoughts, incoherent but calm.

My alpha would swat you, he thought after a few seconds, and Gordon relaxed minutely, taking one step back up toward the top landing again—only to freeze when a tangle of paws and tails clashed into the banister up there. The wood held, but it creaked. They briefly pulled apart, snarled, but then Adler moved, ramming the other wolf into the wall.

“Yes!”

Don’t watch, get to safety!

“I’m safe, I’m safe, Adler. Go get him!”

The wolf turned to Gordon and locked eyes with him. There was a glint of something there, like cold calculation. The wolf shifted focus, and now the teeth were coming for Gordon.

Nooo!

Gordon saw hungry eyes and the wild spittle drawing lines between incisors as the wolf prepared to jump. That was his world, that was all there was, the last thing

Gordon would ever see, teeth and spit and sharpness.

Except the wolf never jumped, was yowling as if he were in pain, and his massive head turned, and he stopped .

He sank to the floor, blood oozing from his side. Wolf-Adler moved to the side, his muzzle slightly wet where he'd bitten down on the wolf's side, so foolishly exposed when he'd tried to hurt Gordon. Adler's breaths came out like forge-fueling bellows.

Sweetheart. Are you okay? He added a wolfish whining noise, concern.

"I-I'm fine. It's fine. I can hear your thoughts though. That's fucked up, I know, I meant to say something, but that just happened. I'm sorry. I don't know how to stop it."

He—you... You have the telepathy? Wolf-Adler's blue eyes were wide.

"Yeah. Sorry."

You heard that. Oh, sweetheart! It's perfect. Why would you apologize? Do I have to be shifted for it to work?

Gordon shook his head. "Nope. All the time. Maybe it's being close, so perhaps if we stay apart for a little while—"

Adler growled, set one massive paw on the other wolf when he started moving again, but looking at Gordon.

Gordon raised his hands. "Or not. Just stay focused, okay? Bad wolf right there."

I know, sweetheart. I've got him. He's not getting near you.

The other wolf showed his teeth, but then Adler pushed his paw down harder. Gordon knew he shouldn't find that display of strength attractive, not in the slightest. But the heart wants what the heart wants. Or maybe I'm just hungry.

Shift. Shift, Adler thought, his hard gaze now focused on the other wolf.

It took several moments, but in the end, Gordon saw fur recede and pupils shrink. Adler remained as he was, the stronger wolf, Gordon's protector, his teeth close to the now very vulnerable skin of the naked human who was bleeding onto the landing.

He knew you, Gordon. How did he know you?

"I...I don't know. I have no idea."

Adler-wolf's paw was on the naked guy's chest, heavy, pushing down. Gordon was of two hearts about this, if only for a second. He knew Adler was angry and in a protective mode, and he knew the other werewolf did need to be checked out. Restrained as well, but he also needed medical attention, if for no other reason than he could tell them what had happened.

"Adler, stop. He can't breathe properly. Adler."

There was a moment in which Gordon could feel Adler wanting to just keep going, maybe use his teeth on the man again. But he didn't. He stopped. He let the bloodied wolf breathe, let him live.

"Gordon!" Maxim yelled from somewhere inside the apartment.

Adler cast his blue wolf eyes down and looked back at Gordon.

Go. I can deal with this one.

“You won’t, uh...”

A pause, then, No. I’m still a police detective, not a vigilante. Go help Maxim. The scent of blood is really strong.

Gordon nodded. He walked past Adler, and almost as if on instinct, Gordon ran his fingers through his mate’s black fur.

“I’m okay,” he told Adler. “Put pressure on that werewolf’s wound.” He went into the apartment.

From the looks of the interior, this would have made a nice home for an eccentric professor. There was a lot of polished, wooden furniture, the kind you’d mostly find at antique stores or auctions. There were old volumes on shelves and busts and sculptures. Gordon noticed one of Asclepios, but didn’t linger.

He found a back door, the kind servants would have used back in the day, and predictably, it opened to a less fancy staircase in the back.

There, even Gordon could smell the blood.

The scene in front of him was confusing. There was a half-dressed vampire and a naked human, and a hunter between them.

Maxim was bent over the human. Against a wall on the stairs below them, the vampire lay, a fine blade in the back of his neck and his wrists bound with a massive set of cuffs. The blade, Gordon realized, had severed his spinal cord, an injury a vampire could heal from but one that would incapacitate him for a while. Most confusingly though, the vampire’s head was still attached to his shoulders.

Gordon ran down the stairs toward Maxim and the young man. “Oh, fuck.” Gordon

saw the traces of blood around the man's mouth and took in his pale skin. "This looks like hypovolemic shock, and I'm guessing that one tried to turn him?" To his own shock, Gordon recognized the limp vampire from a lecture he'd given decades ago, one Gordon had heard and disliked, even then. "He's the professor."

"He is. And he did attempt a turning," Maxim said, lips a thin line. "From what I can sense, the blood is taking."

"Oh, fuck."

The young man's eyes were unfocused, and he was pale enough to be on Gordon's table, almost.

"Indeed. He cannot have consented. Not like this."

Gordon had an inkling of what Maxim was saying. Many had come to the morgue after they had been hurt in unspeakable ways. This young man, his black hair sweaty and sticking to his forehead, wore just a thin bathrobe that had fallen open.

The bite marks—vampire teeth, wolf teeth, bruises around them—already told Gordon enough. The bruises on his thighs spoke in even clearer tones.

"He..." Gordon cleared his throat. "He must have been fed on extensively. Is he that kid we are looking for?"

"He had more color in the photos from his social media accounts, but yes. His name is Raven. His roommate said he would forget to eat when he found a book he really loved, would read through the night until he'd made it to the last page."

Gordon looked at the hunter, who looked at the human who was turning. Maxim had a strange, detached expression on his face.

Gordon reached out but pulled his hand back before he could touch Maxim. “You know there’s a protocol for this sort of situation. You know we’re supposed to let the turn happen and see if it was enough. Those are the rules the Forum made.”

Maxim looked at Gordon, eyes not those of the teasing, rhyming, ever-annoying vampire, but of the hunter. Of one who had seen more, had maybe seen too much. He knew every aspect of his craft, his burden, his duty.

“I know, and I don’t care,” he said, and slow as the sun to break through the iron clasp of a cloudy sky, he drew a blade over his own wrist, parted the skin until his own blood flowed over, and pushed the wound against the turning human’s mouth, gently, but firmly.

“Maxim—”

“I know, Gordon. If he doesn’t want this life, I’ll end it for him, but he needs to be given a choice, a real one. At least in death, he needs to be given a choice.”

“The turn might have brought him over. Even with what little blood he had, he might have survived.” Gordon spoke quietly.

“Tell me you really believe that, Gordon. Tell me you really think this poor child wouldn’t have wound up on your table a few hours from now, after agony, after pain he didn’t deserve.”

Gordon was silent. He could lie to himself, but not to the dead or those who’d just escaped joining their ranks.

Gordon had been left with the college kid—with Raven—while Maxim and Adler handled the werewolf and the vampire with the blade neatly jammed into his spinal cord.

With Gordon's help, Maxim had carried Raven back up into the apartment from the servants' stairs in the back and to a couch in the plushy living room. When Maxim had gone to help Adler, Gordon had left Raven briefly to grab him a sheet from the bedroom.

That had been a mistake. The bedroom smelled of sex and blood. No. Not sex, Gordon thought. He'd wanted to gag. His eyes had started watering, tears he easily avoided when it came to the corpses he took care of, but in this case...

He'd turned on his heel, pulled off his own jacket, and draped that over Raven's shoulders. Letting anything from this place touch the turning vampire made Gordon's stomach twist into knots.

Maxim and Adler had gone down the stairs with their suspects, Adler still in his wolf form, likely to avoid having to go look for a sheet himself.

After about ten minutes, Raven began to stir and his eyes flicked open. Gordon reached out to touch Raven's forehead, and Raven flinched away.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. My name is Gordon, Gordon Morris. The people who held you here are gone. They can't hurt you anymore." He looked at Raven's pale skin, which was turning a different sort of pale as the vampire blood worked into and through it. At this point, even Gordon could smell the change.

Raven seemed sluggish, and Gordon wasn't sure how much of his words he'd heard or understood. Turning was a confusing time, and Gordon's own memories were foggy at best.

A knock from the apartment door made Gordon turn. "Yes?"

"It's Heath." The dhampir walked into the room moments later. "Huh." He looked at

Raven and held out jogging pants and a T-shirt to Gordon. “The old bat told me to help you get him back to the house while he deals with things downstairs. His name’s Raven, right?”

Gordon took the clothes. “Yes. Can you help me dress him?”

Heath nodded and assisted in maneuvering first Raven’s legs into the pants, then his arms and head into the shirt. By the time they were done, Raven was shivering and his teeth were chattering.

Heath frowned. “You know, I’m glad I never had to go through the change. Everyone says you don’t remember the pain after a while, but the thought of going through it has always freaked me out if I’m being honest.”

Raven’s eyes blinked open and shut, not seeing.

“When my maker turned me, he made sure I was comfortable and felt safe. He said I could have people there if I wanted to and if they were okay with it, but in the end, I chose to do it alone. I kind of remember that it was painful and unpleasant at first, but I wouldn’t say I remember how it actually felt. My maker was there to help with the disorientation and confusion.”

Heath looked at the college kid, expression pensive. “Raven has none of those things.”

“No...I think I’ll stay with him if that’s okay.”

Heath sighed, pulled Raven upright, and put one of his arms over his shoulder so that Gordon could take the other. “If you’re volunteering, that’s fine by me.”

They went outside, down the stairs, and out the door. The alley was difficult to

navigate with Raven between them, but they managed. A casually dressed set of two bulky-looking humans stood by the entrance to the alley and barely spared the three of them a second glance.

“43 Ruthaven’s daytime security people,” Heath explained. “To make sure no one goes in there.”

Gordon hadn’t even considered that. “We are still not involving the Forum?”

“Well, that seems prudent, don’t you think? This is a marvelous fucking fuckshow on some ginormous scale, and finding out if it was just that werewolf and the vampire professor hunting together or if there were more people involved seems like a prudent course of action. That’s why we’re also keeping the werewolf and the vampire instead of turning them over.” Heath cleared his throat as the driver jumped out of the town car to get the door for them. “Keeping them alive, that is.”

By the time they got Raven into the car he was a shivering, dead weight, Gordon was almost sure the young vampire wouldn’t remember anything about this or hear them talking, but he still kept his voice low. “Are you telling me you have your own holding facility at 43 Ruthaven?”

Heath put a seat belt around Raven, which made it so they had an easier time keeping him upright. “Well, you know, Maxim generally believes in preparedness and all that sort of thing, so possibly there’s a sub-basement below the garage, and since Bryan’s amazing Lar skills encompass that—well, no escaping a Lar unless he wants you to.”

“You guys totally live in a high-rise with a fucking dungeon in the basement!”

“Don’t look at me like that, all judgy-like.” The dhampir huffed. “It’s a commodity, and it’s not like my opinions are ever considered anyway. For instance, the sub-basement could be a tax write-off, but no, don’t tell anyone about the sub-basement,

darling , is all I get.” Heath’s impression of Maxim was very spot-on.

“A dungeon for commodity’s sake. Yeah. Makes sense I guess.” Gordon knew he didn’t sound convincing.

“I’m half with you there, but only because I can’t get the old bat to write it off. Let me check how it’s going on their end.”

Heath pulled out his phone while Gordon kept an arm around Raven as they were heading to a place where he’d be safe.

Chapter 37

The door fell shut behind the day shifter with a satisfying noise. At the other end of the meticulously clean and brightly lit hallway, the vampire was already locked away.

Adler watched Maxim take a deep breath and rearrange his features, erasing the serious lines on it, smoothing them out so that his laugh lines, faint though they were, became visible again.

“Detective. Your protective instinct induced a shift without the full moon,” the hunter said before he turned to look at Adler in his loaned clothes. “A rare and precious blessing.”

“I thought it wasn’t real when you first mentioned it. I’m just glad I was able to protect my mate.” Adler felt longing rise inside his belly. “He’s rare and precious.”

Maxim nodded, turned, and headed toward the exit, a heavy door that led to the stairs and from there to an elevator. Adler followed but stopped to look back at the cells he’d never known existed underneath 43 Ruthaven. The doors were solid metal, and he couldn’t see inside. It was quiet though, the prisoners compliant, for now.

“They are quite secure here, I assure you, detective,” Maxim said and beckoned for Adler to follow. “Heath and your Gordon should be back, and the latter will be glad to see you, I’m sure, though I hope you’ll return to the typewriter shop with me before you run off with him to wrap up the scene. I imagine you and Gordon will want to talk.” He raised a brow. “Or not. Talking isn’t always what it’s made out to be.”

Adler followed Maxim. He was excited to see Gordon, to make sure his mate was fine, his perfect mate with the perfect skill the mate bite had given him. As they stood in front of the elevator doors one flight up, waiting for them to open, Adler noticed the absence of a button. Yet, the doors opened after only the briefest wait.

Must be Bryan doing it . I really need to learn more about Lares and what they can do .

Adler stepped into the elevator after Maxim, given the hunter was still the alpha. He opened his mouth, wanted to tell Maxim about Gordon's telepathic skill, but closed it. Gordon might not want anyone else to know.

Instead, Adler asked, "I'll help you with the scene. What are you going to do with them? The professor and that wolf? Something was wrong with the wolf if you ask me. He was...just off. Body language, facial expression. Something wasn't right there."

"Hmm. Well, I'll keep that in mind as we proceed. I shall try my best to talk with them and unravel what we have seen of this conspiracy. Perhaps it was this old vampire alone, doing what he did wherever he went with those lectures of his. I will find out. The truth is rarely shy when it is invited, when it's welcomed."

Adler frowned. "And what we saw? Those...photographs. The one the day shifter was developing. That was the college kid, right, the one who got turned."

A dark shadow descended over Maxim's eyes. "Raven. Some of it showed him, yes. More than enough to prove he had no part in the killings."

"It's... When a vampire turns, they don't remember most of that, right? Is there a chance the kid might not remember? What they did to him?"

Maxim didn't answer, and Adler thought he might not have heard.

"He will remember," Maxim finally said, quietly, more like he was talking to himself.

Adler chose not to respond, given Maxim got pensive, almost closed off. That was unsettling, a shift in an alpha that might have caused Adler to whine if he'd been in his wolf form.

"Love him," Maxim said all of a sudden, the words firm as any command Adler had ever been given.

"Huh?"

"Gordon. Love him. You may be different, you may not fit perfectly. You don't have to. What matters is the way you care for each other. The way you are ready to defend the other, no matter what. There is no law, no reason or rationale that can keep you from standing next to him in the face of trouble and turmoil and weather it with him."

"I'd rather stand in front of him if it's all the same to you, Maxim."

Maxim smiled genially. "So be it, then, detective. If he lets you, that is." The elevator doors opened to the parking garage. "Now then. Back to the world above."

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Chapter 38

Gordon knew why he had chosen to do the work he did. The dead were easy. Living people, that was another thing.

Heath left him with Raven in one of the guest apartments of 43 Ruthaven. The bed was freshly made, and the entire place smelled of clean laundry.

Gordon knew there was no evidence that needed to be collected from Raven, not when Maxim had been there and had seen. He went to the bathroom and soaked a washcloth in soapy warm water to wash off some of what Raven had experienced. It was a small thing. It was one of the last things Gordon did for the dead, making sure they left his care clean. For the living, for Raven, it was not nearly enough.

There were a few times when the young man came to and was more coherent, more lucid.

“Where are they?” was one of the first questions he asked Gordon, eyes full of fear.

“Locked away. They won’t ever get to you again.”

“I’m hurting. Why does everything hurt so much?”

Gordon squeezed Raven’s arm. “That’s because you’re turning. It will pass, and you’re safe here.”

Raven’s face twisted, but whether it was in reaction to what Gordon had said was

hard to tell. The lucid period didn't last that long, and Raven went back to shaking and turning as if caught in a fever dream.

The day drained away in pretty colors, but Gordon only noticed the shifting light, not the colors painting the horizon.

He pulled out his phone at one point to call Clement. "How's Mil doing?"

"Reading before bedtime, obviously." The Lar sounded as if the question alone were an insult to him. "There are more books at the house than in this tiny apartment," he added, the criticism in his voice not subtle.

"Thanks for making sure she's okay." Gordon decided not to rise to the bait.

There was a pause on the other end. "It's what I'm for. To make sure people are all right."

For once, Clement's tone wasn't snide, and Gordon thought he heard actual pain underneath that hard-to-like charm. Then perhaps, that might just have been Gordon's imagination or projecting what he was feeling himself.

When nightfall came, Gordon felt exhaustion overtake him, maybe also hunger. Raven's mumbling kept him awake and alert though.

At last, the door to the apartment opened. Gordon felt his heart lift, and he knew Adler's footsteps even before his mate walked into the bedroom, wearing jeans that didn't quite fit right and a maroon shirt, not really his color. He was silently followed by Maxim. Maxim still looked like he always did, dressed in his hunter's blacks. He wasn't carrying his blades though.

Mate, Gordon heard, and it was the only warning he got before Adler bent low to kiss

him, hard and needy.

“You both should go to bed, sleep. Or something,” Maxim said. “I will take care of Raven from here on out.”

Gordon nodded, too tired to argue. Adler pulled him up from the armchair he’d been sitting in, and Maxim took Gordon’s place.

“Sweetheart,” Adler said and wrapped Gordon in his arms once more.

“I love you a lot, you know,” Gordon whispered against Adler’s neck where he inhaled his mate’s scent.

Adler reacted, tightened his hold on Gordon, drew him nearer.

Maxim clicked his tongue. “Take it elsewhere, my turtledoves. And Gordon? Thank you for watching over him. Heath said you insisted.”

Gordon turned out of Adler’s embrace, though his mate was slow to give him room for that. “It was nothing. And he didn’t have anyone. Maxim, what they did to him...”

“Look at you, Gordon. Leaving the corpses for those who still draw breath.” Maxim winked and turned his gaze on Raven. “I’ll take care of him.”

Adler leaned his forehead against Gordon’s. “We should go, sweetheart.”

Gordon was too tired and too exhausted to protest.

They made it to the elevator and into it, but it spilled them out not in the wide foyer, but on another floor, and Bryan the Lar was there, waiting for them.

“You look like you should be lying down rather than take a long cab ride home,” the Lar told them.

Adler and Gordon exchanged a glance. Whatever you want, sweetheart, Gordon heard Adler’s thoughts.

Gordon blinked. “Well, I talked to Clement, and Mil is fine.”

Bryan made a dismissive noise. “Making sure a child is fine is the bare minimum for one of us. Even that one should manage a single, well-behaved wolf child. And as much as it pains me to say this, even that Lar isn’t a babysitter anyone would want to mess with. Honestly, this is me being grateful for getting Clement out of the house for the day. And of course, while Heath has been cursing a lot, finding your killer and instigator is one less thing he worries about.” A dreamy look crossed over Bryan’s face. “I don’t want him to get worry lines. He’s too handsome.”

Gordon and Adler exchanged yet another look before Gordon said, “You know what, I could sleep.”

Adler’s arm was still around Gordon, and at the words, he immediately pulled him closer. “Then we’ll do that. You deserve rest.” And you’re probably hungry too. We’ll take care of that. You were so brave today, I’m so proud of you, Gordon.

Gordon frowned. “Are you enjoying this, detective?”

A sly grin settled on Adler’s face. That you have telepathy? Of course I enjoy it. My mate bite gave this to you...to us, and I really am so proud. You’re beautiful and sexy, hot, erotic—but smart too!—smarter than me probably, which I love, and you are always so cute when you look at whatever new little Kawaii Hunter dolls are out—

“They are collectibles, and it’s Kawaii Demon Hunter, just for your information. Detective.”

Gordon crossed his arms even as Adler thought, So cute. You know I’m just teasing, right, sweetheart? But not about you being sexy, hot, smart, a treat—

Gordon rolled his eyes. “Okay. Thank you. I get it.”

“Hmm.” Adler leaned in close to sniff Gordon’s hair, his neck.

Bryan cocked his head, appearing somewhat baffled by their apparently one-sided conversation. “You’ll stay? There’s a beautiful apartment, made ready for you.”

Gordon nodded. “We’ll stay. Just for the night.”

Bryan beamed and led them down a hallway decked out in artwork that Gordon would bet wasn’t anything printed or forged, but something commissioned solely for the purpose. There were sunrises and flower themes here, but Gordon found it hard to focus with Adler so close, Adler so warm and safe next to him.

Bryan opened a door for them, which led to a fully furnished set of rooms. This one had more character and color than the place Heath had put Raven in. There was a lot of purple and black, bold patterns, and at least two vases of fresh flowers.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here for the night,” Bryan said. “You’re always welcome in the future too, so long as you request Clement to babysit.”

Adler turned, briefly robbing Gordon of his touch. “We’ll think about it. Good night, Bryan.” He closed the door on the too-happy Lar.

Gordon let out a heavy sigh, and in the next instant, the large, warm body of his mate

was all around him, Adler's mouth on Gordon's.

Heavens, so much happened today, and this just feels good, Gordon thought. There were things he needed to ask Adler, about their investigation and what they could determine about whether anyone at the Forum was actively involved, but his brain simply couldn't handle that right now. His teeth lengthened on their own accord.

"Please just fuck me," Gordon said, his voice ragged.

Adler picked him up, big hands kneading Gordon's buttocks while Gordon put his legs around Adler's waist. They kissed, and Adler's low growl reverberated all through Gordon.

You're hungry, sweetheart. I can feel your teeth. I'm sorry I wasn't there earlier.

"No, it's fine, I just..."

Gordon's voice petered off while Adler carried him through the dark apartment, somehow finding the bedroom where he put Gordon back on his feet.

"Please take your damn jeans off, sweetheart. They're too damn tight, and I can't deal with those buttons right now."

Gordon giggled, then laughed. All the tension burst out with the noise, and Adler stared, a bit surprised, a bit concerned, terribly horny.

"Sorry, just... Never mind. Removing pants." Gordon did, in a hurry too, his teeth scraping against his lips.

Adler did the same, taking off his borrowed clothes until they were both naked in the darkness. Gordon didn't stop to stare, dropped into bed and wiggled under the covers.

Adler followed within moments, pulling Gordon back into his arms and kissing him.

“You’re hungry. Come on, eat.” He tilted his head so that Gordon had easy access, offering himself.

“I won’t take much.”

“Sweetheart, you take as much as you need. You know I like this. I like being there for you.”

“I love you,” Gordon whispered before he sank his teeth into Adler’s neck.

Adler in turn tightened his hold on Gordon as if he were ready to be drunk dry, as if he wouldn’t mind. It’s fine, sweetheart, drink, go ahead. Don’t starve yourself, he thought.

But Gordon didn’t need that much anymore, not when it was Adler’s blood. He stopped before long, taking his time to lick the small puncture wounds, making sure the bleeding had stopped. Before he could do anything else, Adler moved, turning them until Gordon was on his back.

“How’re you feeling?”

Gordon smiled. “I should be asking you that.”

“Huh. I’m good. I think it’s my turn. Yes?” Adler wrapped his fingers around Gordon’s wrist, pinning them.

“Yes.”

You have no idea how happy you make me, Adler thought.

Gordon wanted to tell him it was the same, but he never got the chance. Adler held him pinned with one hand and used the other to touch him, stroking the erection that had already built until Gordon began to struggle, searching for more friction.

I know what you want, sweetheart. I can see it on your beautiful face. Gordon, I could watch you all day every day and still never get enough of you.

“Please, Adler.”

“You want to cum?”

“Yeah.”

Adler’s chest rumbled with a growl more sonorous than anything Gordon had heard from him in a while.

“Gordon.” Adler shifted, covering Gordon’s body with his. “You’re so precious to me. I was so damn scared for you all day.”

Gordon huffed. “And I was scared for you. But you shifted. I didn’t know you were that good a fighter.”

Adler stilled, managing to keep his mind blank. “What?”

“Uhm. What I mean is...as your wolf-self, detective. I didn’t know you were such a good fighter as your wolf-self. I mean, you’re ever such a well-behaved wolf. Do you remember when we first met in Seneca Park and when you took me home? You were all proper and prim like a very nice dog.”

“Sweetheart, you should be getting in trouble for this.”

Gordon blinked. “Sexy trouble?”

“Yes. Maybe. And real trouble. A good spanking at a minimum. I’m my alpha’s second in command, Gordon.”

“I know, I know, but...I’ve never seen werewolves fight like that. It’s just not something you expect.”

Adler let out a heavy breath. “Fine. For tonight, I’ll let you off the hook. But, Gordon, you should remember this. We are fighters, and in our wolf form, we can hurt a vampire. Not that I’ll let you out of my sight during the full moon ever again.” He dropped his forehead against Gordon’s. “I think that other werewolf watched you. The day shifter. Something isn’t right about that one.”

“Why would he watch me?”

“I don’t know. I hope Maxim can get it out of him. We shouldn’t talk about this, not tonight. And with any luck, me shifting wasn’t a one-off. I’ll be able to make sure no one attacks you that way, and before you tell me I’m overreacting, I have to. You’re my mate, and I have to keep you safe.”

Gordon chuckled. “Same here, detective. I have to keep you safe too. And in supply of pants if you insist on randomly turning like you did earlier. Which was awesome. I never said that, but it was.”

“Gordon.” Adler’s voice was filled with longing, with love. “For me it’s...I can’t read your thoughts. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to. But I have a pretty good idea of your emotions. I think the mate bite gave each of us what we need to understand the other better.”

“You... What?”

Adler kissed Gordon's chin. "I can feel your emotions, and that's anxiety. I know that one well."

"Oh, fuck. That's...unexpected." Although it isn't. It might even be fair. "But you can't read my thoughts?"

Adler shook his head. "No. I'd tell you." I wouldn't even have to tell you, because you'd be able to just read my mind and see for yourself.

"I guess that's true."

They were silent for a while, unmoving while Adler still held Gordon's wrists pinned, their bodies close.

"Can you trust me with knowing you that way?" Adler asked, and Gordon heard the fear in his mate's voice.

The answer came without conscious thought, that's how certain Gordon was of it. "Yes. Yes, I trust you. I just have to get used to the idea, that's all."

Adler nodded. That's fine. And you can always poke around in my mind if that helps. Should we go on, or do you just want to sleep?

"I still want you. I want you, Adler."

"Good. Lie on your back while I taste you, and don't move. Keep your hands there."

Gordon felt hot. Warm. Desired.

Adler released Gordon's wrists and moved down, marking his progress with kisses and with sucking hard on Gordon's skin, hard enough to leave a mark. Gordon

shivered and dug his fingers into the fabric of the pillow.

That made Adler make his wolfish noises, and Gordon felt the vibrations of that against the tender skin of his belly.

Gordon shivered. He'd felt vulnerable in his life before, and he had never liked that, had always tried to not have to feel that way in the few relationships he'd been in. But with Adler, everything felt different. With Adler, it came natural to lay bare his deepest self, and he didn't mind this bond the mate bite had forged.

That in and of itself was novel. Scary even. Except Gordon wanted Adler, but not in the mere, physical sense. I want him to know everything about me, Gordon realized, his throat tightening.

"I want to tell you about Paula. I want you to know about my sister," Gordon blurted out. Well. I might be taking the prize for saying the stupidest thing during sex.

Adler, predictably, stopped and looked up at Gordon, eyes wide with surprise.

"Sweetheart--"

"I mean, not now. Obviously." Gordon gestured in a somewhat random way. "I'm saying, keep going. I just realized that while I always say I don't want to talk about it, I just realized I want to talk about it with you . At a future point in time. Cool?"

Adler gave Gordon the strangest of looks. His jaw went first tight, then slack. His eyes seemed to glow with their own fire, then dimmed but ever so slightly as if he were calming himself.

"Gordon, will you marry me?"

“What the fuck!”

“I mean it. Through the Forum, of course. It’s just filing for spousal status, and maybe a party after.”

“Well, yeah, but... How can you ask this now !”

“Because I know. I want you. I want to stand in front of you whenever the world comes at you, and I want everyone to know it too. Everyone. I want it legal and binding and official. Marry me.”

“Fuck, Adler! The mate bite isn’t binding enough for you?”

“You’re blushing. And yes, it is. But everyone who doubts won’t be able to argue with Forum bureaucracy. You know that. It’s airtight.” Amusement coated Adler’s voice like candy coating red apples at a fun fair.

“Oh, don’t be so damn smug.” Gordon shifted, but Adler held him in place.

“I’m not smug. I’m happy. You can think about it. I don’t need you to answer straight away. But come morning, you’ll tell me.”

“Gee, I’m getting an ultimatum?”

“Hmm-mmmh.” Adler’s mouth went back to paying attention to Gordon’s skin, his aroused flesh.

“You’re using your interrogation tactics on me again, detective.” Gordon gasped when Adler’s mouth finally found his erect cock. “This is—not fair! It won’t hold up in court.” Adler licked around Gordon’s tip, teased his foreskin with the tip of his tongue. “Damn—your mouth, detective.”

“Hmm. Delicious. Doesn’t have to hold up in court. It’s just an official who takes down our names and does the filing. It’ll take five minutes.”

“Ah! You’re...devious...”

Adler eased Gordon’s length into his mouth, into that sweet warmth. He was wet and willing, and took Gordon deep, only to add pressure to Gordon’s balls, which nearly did Gordon in.

Adler pulled off though, running his tongue along Gordon’s needy erection, leaving Gordon to moan and squirm. He might have cursed at the loss of Adler’s mouth, but he couldn’t keep track of words anymore. Words meant nothing. Adler took him deep again, started licking and sucking, moved his head up and down.

I love you. I love you, I love you. When you look into my mind, that’s all I ever want you to see in there. Love. Be mine, in every way, be mine in front of the world, mate, spouse, friend. I love you.

Gordon let go of everything. He gave himself over to feeling, to wanting, he let himself trust inside Adler’s mouth. He let Adler’s thoughts into his mind, let them wash over him and through him.

Time stilled and condensed. It became just the two of them, bound together by the bite, by more than the bite. They held on to the other with more than just hands or even hungry lips. Gordon thought of diamonds, forged in darkness, of eternity and a kind of force that was impossible to resist.

He came in Adler’s mouth, and time moved forward again. Adler licked and swallowed, making content, encouraging noises as he did his best to swallow everything.

Ebbing heat made Gordon's body feel like a doll's even as Adler licked him clean, hungry for whatever else Gordon had to give.

I need you, Gordon thought, and almost as if Adler had heard the thought, he moved up again, kissing Gordon with lips that had the taste, the salty-sweet, needy flavor of Gordon himself on them still.

Adler held Gordon though he wasn't done yet. Gordon rubbed into Adler, knowing his wolf was still hard. He wanted Adler to feel as good as he did, so he reached for Adler's cock, but Adler pulled his hands away.

"Can I be inside you?" Adler asked on a hoarse whisper.

Gordon nodded. "Yes."

Adler's mouth worked on Gordon's, kissing and biting, tenderly now, but Gordon felt the need there. Adler took Gordon's earring between his teeth and pulled, carefully, gently, and Gordon pushed himself closer to Adler.

There was some movement as Adler used spit to prep Gordon's hole with generous strokes that had Gordon shiver and squirm all over again.

"Adler," Gordon mumbled. "You're addictive. You're a drug. My weed cookies have nothing on you. You're so much worse and need to be regu—"

Adler pushed his length into Gordon, slow and steady, filling him up completely. Oh, it felt so good, that stretch, that tingling sensation of being filled.

Gordon gasped, words forgotten once more, and Adler pushed inside him, covered him with the warmth of his body as he fucked him.

Adler was slow to make love to Gordon, but his restraint barely hid the want in the deep thrusts and the hungry noises he breathed into Gordon's ears. Gordon leaned his head to the side to offer Adler his neck, that spot where the mate bite was, and his wolf didn't need to be asked twice.

His hips rolled, he thrust, hard and needy, and Gordon couldn't quite tell what hit him first, the sensation of Adler biting him, or the feeling of his hot cum filling him.

It all mingled together in a heady cocktail, Adler's teeth breaking his skin, his body claiming him, his arms holding him. Gordon was floating. It felt as if he were cotton-wrapped, safe beyond words.

He noticed, faintly, that Adler pulled out of him at some point, stroked his limbs, his face, his hair, cooed into his ear. Then, he was gone, but only to get a damp cloth and clean Gordon up with tender care, kissing the skin he'd marked as he went.

When Adler was done with that, he finally was back with Gordon, holding him. It was the last thing Gordon knew of that day, such a bright ending to so much darkness.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:23 am

Adler woke up in the best of possible places, in bed with his mate. He ran his nose through Gordon's pixie-pretty blue hair. Gordon was still fast asleep and barely stirred.

I asked this man to marry me, Adler thought. He'd meant it too. Not that it was strictly necessary within the pack, but it would certainly send a strong message to anyone that felt like Adler was just keeping the vampire around for the pleasures of his body.

"You're mine, sweetheart," Adler whispered into Gordon's ear.

"Hmmm," Gordon said, incoherent as was normal for him pre-caffeination.

Adler smiled and hugged Gordon closer. He'd have this forever, and he couldn't have asked for a grander gift.

After getting showered and dressed, Adler and Gordon left the apartment and headed for the elevator arm in arm.

"Straight home?" Adler asked his mate.

"Yeah." Gordon's eyes were still half-lidded. "I mean, I'd like to check on Raven, but I don't want to crowd him. I suppose Maxim has him covered."

Adler nodded even as the elevator opened to the foyer. Bryan was behind his desk, wearing his green jacket and shifting his fruit bowl when they drew closer as if he wanted to draw attention to it. That only worked for a few seconds, because Mil came

barreling at them from around the reception desk.

“Oh!” Gordon said as the small wolf hugged him.

“Gordon, Adler!” the little wolf said.

“Hey, Mil. You did well, watching my place with Clement,” Adler said, and Mil looked up at him, proud, even as Gordon brushed fingers through her hair.

“Maxim said you were finally done,” said Clement, following Mil in a far more measured speed.

“Done with this case,” Adler said and thought, Not done with this damn conspiracy.

Gordon turned to him, giving him the kind of look that said his mate had heard and agreed.

Bryan gave Clement some side-eye, which Clement returned in kind.

“Uhm, thanks for looking after Mil, Clement,” Gordon said to Clement, who just shrugged it off.

“We should go home,” Adler said. “Though I’ll be in touch about the case, and Gordon as well.”

The Lares nodded. “We’re always happy to have you visit,” Bryan told them with a wink.

“Please remember that there are books here for the little one, just like in the library,” Clement grumbled, more like an accusation than an offer.

Mil nodded. “Clement is nice. He said I can come here and check out the books. He’s

good at telling stories. He promised he'll teach me another cocktail soon."

Adler chuckled, too full of feeling not to. My pack, my mate.

Gordon smiled back at him. "Yeah, and mine."

The next few days, Adler spent being busy. There were things to do regarding the Highgate case, and his normal workload on top of that.

Eventually, one evening when things had mostly settled and when the official murder cases had been marked as concluded, he and Gordon sat down with the case files spread out between them in Adler's living room with a bottle of wine. Mil had gone to bed, tucked out after another visit to her granny earlier.

"We don't know where that day shifter even comes from," Adler told Gordon. "He's not from New Amsterdam, and Highgate traveled a lot. An obscene amount. Even Heath is having trouble tracking it all."

"He kept him, this Daniel person?" Gordon asked. "Like...what, a lover? Partner in crime?"

"Yeah, and maybe all of the above." Adler tossed Gordon a list of aliases for the day shifter.

"He must've been feeding off of him for a prolonged period, that's what I can tell you from examining him," Gordon said.

Adler growled. He hadn't liked the exam, not one bit, but Gordon had first volunteered and then insisted, and of course he was qualified. Also, with Maxim in the room, there really hadn't been any reason for worry.

But he's my mate. I'll always worry.

Gordon rolled his eyes. “Every time, detective. You’re thoughts are very consistent.” Gordon looked through the files and picked up one of the photos Daniel, or whoever he was, had taken. It showed Raven, naked, not in charge of what was happening to him. “What those two did to Raven...”

“Yeah. They’re evil. Let’s hope Maxim can get something out of either one of them.” Or if he doesn’t, maybe he can do what a hunter does.

“Yes, agreed. On both counts.”

They went over a few more accounts Maxim and Heath had gathered that lined up with what Corinne had said. Highgate had opinions, and with every lecture, he tried finding those who shared them. He’d talk to people, spread his way of thinking, almost as if he were planting seeds or networking to overthrow the established order.

“I wonder how he got the college kid and what he wanted with him.” Raven was still silent about it and Maxim adamant the young vampire take whatever time he needed to disclose whatever he felt comfortable with.

Gordon looked up. “I think that one’s pretty obvious. Raven figured out Highgate either was or was pretending to be the real author of Sherlock Holmes, he approached him, and something about him attracted Highgate. Maybe because he was excited about the whole Sherlock Holmes thing, about being able to prove his theory. Then Highgate used the excitement to control him.” Gordon looked away, and Adler watched his mate carefully. “I think it was like that with Paula, you know. She was very excited to be in love. If there were warning signs, she wouldn’t have been able to see them.”

“Sweetheart—”

“It’s fine. It’s fine, Adler.” Gordon nodded as if to reassure himself. “I don’t know why, but I always assume I have to talk about her death. It hurt so much, still does.

But she also had a life. Can you imagine that she loved being out in the sun? She forced me outside too, made me get sunburned.”

Adler reached for his mate’s hand. “I can’t really imagine that, sweetheart. Did you turn red?”

“Like a lobster.”

“I’m sure you still looked pretty.”

Gordon rolled his eyes. “Mate blindness. That’s what I’m calling it from here on out. Oh, regarding that thing you asked, regarding the ultimatum you gave me, the one I never kept...”

Adler grinned. “It’s fine. I made an appointment.”

Gordon’s jaw dropped. “You what ?”

Adler shrugged. “At the Forum. To make it official. They say spousal status makes filing taxes easier. That’s great right?”

“You...made an appointment?”

“Sure did.”

“To get officially married?”

“Yup.”

Gordon slapped Adler’s shoulder. “Without telling me!”

“I told you. Well, I asked you. Then I made the appointment.”

Gordon's blue eyes were ablaze. "But—I made an appointment! I wanted to surprise you!"

"You did?"

"Fuck, detective."

Adler rubbed his head, thinking, I thought you'd know, with your telepathy. Thought you'd run if you didn't like it.

"Like I'd run from you, you dummy. And it doesn't work like that. Not that I know how it works, but not like that. How could you just ruin my surprise, detective?"

"Uh, sorry sweetheart."

In a rush, Gordon closed the folders they'd spread out on the table. "You better be. You're rude. You're always in a rush. Why didn't they tell me there was already an appointment on the books?"

"I'm guessing privacy concerns, sweetheart." Adler stroked his mate's back, trying very hard not to think about how cute Gordon was being.

"Cute?! I'm upset . You know what, that's it. You're buying me the Breakfast Collection."

"The Kawaii Demon Hunter one?"

"Like, what other collection even is there?"

Adler raised his hand to count on his fingers as Gordon pushed him to lie on his back on the floor. "The Pico Princess, Enchanted Echoes, Animal Flower Garden—"

“Okay, so there are a few. You’re also going to be my cosplay buddy, just saying, and I’ll learn how to cook. Nothing too fancy, but on weekends, I’ll do the cooking. Maybe breakfast too. That seems easy enough.”

Adler’s mouth fell open. “Sweetheart, you mean that?”

Gordon straddled him. “Yes, detective, I mean that. Now, we’re not going to do anything here where the wolfling might walk in on us, nothing other than kissing.”

“I love that plan.”

Gordon cupped Adler’s cheek. It was an odd reversal, and strangely, Adler liked it, at least this once.

“My mate,” Gordon said, his tone as serious as that of any alpha wolf.

“I’m yours.” Forever. Until we both turn to dust and memories.

“Until the bureaucracy of the Forum crumbles.”

Adler chuckled. “Don’t swear on the Forum. Maxim will chide you.”

Gordon placed his flat palm on Adler’s chest. “All right. Until your heart stops beating, Adler. And if there is a soul, I’ll find yours, after.”

Adler pulled Gordon into his arms. “That’s good enough. Hey, which appointment with the Forum should we keep? Yours or mine?”

Gordon chuckled. “Both,” he said before kissing Adler, soft and deep, sweetly.

They stayed like this for a long time, needing nothing more and nothing less than each other. Forever.