



The Trouble With Nerds: A MM Shifter Paranormal Romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When the past collides with his dragon shifter fated mate, only one of them will win.

Henri's doesn't have friends. He has his clan, which is more like a family. And he has work colleagues at the college where he teaches but he's better friends with the mouse who lives underneath his couch. He has a good reason for steering clear of people. He's been burned before. It seems he's destined to always pay a price for trusting the wrong person. And that price might just be a deadly one.

Rocky is on a mission. First, he has to get his mate to talk to him. After he accomplishes that, he plans on earning his trust. And then they'll get to the mating part. It has to be in that order because Rocky knows Henri's secret. And that secret could change the fate for all paranormals.

How do you earn the trust of a nerdy turtle shifter when time is running out?

Rocky is just starting to figure that out when Henri's past comes to Saint Lakes. He'll protect his mate at all costs even if it means fighting a war he's not sure they could win.

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Prologue

The campus was nice in the spring when the leaves appeared on the trees and maintenance turned on the fountain in front of Sprout Tower. Students sat around drinking coffee and doing homework. Some were socializing, but more often than not, the area contained solitary scholars.

“Hello, Professor Carpentier.” A girl with dark curly hair and smooth brown skin sat on the fountain’s edge with a book in her lap and her backpack beside her. She also had a paper cup from the coffee shop inside the tower building. Her name was Gabriella Washington. Henri remembered her despite her being in one of his larger classes, because she was one of his best students.

He stopped to talk to her even though he still had to grade papers. He had a meeting in the afternoon, so he couldn’t finish until after. Despite the busy day ahead, he wanted to make time for his students. He wouldn’t be a good teacher if he didn’t.

“Hi, Gabriella. How are you this morning?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.” Gabriella lifted the book from her lap so he could see the title. The title read *The Origin of Genetic History in the Americas*. “It’s a great book. Thank you for recommending it.”

Throughout the course of his class, Henri had learned Gabriella was one of the rare people who loved science, in particular biology, and history. Combining them was as natural for her as it was for him.

“It’s fascinating what the author says about the origins of humans in the Americas, isn’t it? She challenges everything we know about human existence.” The author had made a connection between the natural world and human existence, even going so far as to say shifters should exist as an adaptation. She had called shifters an evolution of humans, which wouldn’t sit well with the current culture of most paranormals. Even Henri bristled at being called human, but her theory seemed logical. She backed up her claim with solid scientific data.

“I’m dying to talk about it with someone.” Not many people wanted to talk about genetics or history. Combining them made finding someone to talk to about it almost impossible.

Before Henri could answer her, Jeffrey Perkins made a beeline straight for Henri. He’d been dogging Henri about helping him. So far, Henri had dodged him, but he could see the determination on Perkins’ face.

Henri smiled. “Dr. Perkins.”

“Carpentier.” Perkins smiled and then nodded to Gabriella’s books. “Are you teaching genetics now? Trying to replace me?”

Henri chuckled. “You’re too odd to replace, Perkins.”

“Of the two of us, I’m not the odd one.” Perkins smiled at Gabriella. “Did you know Professor Carpentier here studies for fun? I’ve caught him with a book on every subject. Anything from geography to interior design.”

Gabriella didn’t reply.

Henri met Gabriella’s gaze. “I have office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the afternoon if you would like to discuss the book more. I’d love to hear your take on

it.”

“Thanks, professor.” Gabriella darted her gaze from him to Perkins and then back again. She crossed her legs and arms in front of her as if closing herself off. It was validating to know he wasn’t the only one who had a bad vibe from Perkins.

“I’ll see you in class.” Henri gave Gabriella one last smile before heading toward his office.

“See you then, professor.”

Perkins walked beside him. “Do you have time to discuss my theory? I’ll need your expertise, as you know.”

Henri stiffened. Jeffrey had talked about ways to make humans run faster and with enhanced senses. Henri didn’t want to discuss what he’d found. In the wrong hands, his findings could mean disaster. “I’m no expert.”

It had been about a month since they’d connected, and Henri had let slip how fascinating genetic alteration was. Since then, Perkins had become a bit of a stalker.

Jeffrey smiled. “You’ll be able to lend a lot to my research.”

“Research? Have you managed to get the financial backing?”

“Something like that.” Jeffrey followed Henri to his office.

“I don’t have time to meet this week. It’s been some time since I’ve read anything about genetic alteration. I’d have to consult my notes.” Henri set his shoulder bag in the corner next to his desk. He riffled around inside, pulling out a stack of papers, to make his point about how busy he was. His back was turned.

When he turned, Perkins' expression was one of satisfaction, as if Henri had told him what he wanted to know. "Maybe next week. Have a good day."

"Good day, Perkins."

Perkins left Henri to his grading. He expected the feeling of foreboding to leave when Perkins did, but it hung on to him. He tried to his best to ignore it, but it grew throughout the day.

Halfway through his lecture, Henri realized he'd forgotten to lock his office door. It was a department rule. One he'd broken before and usually wasn't a big deal because no one enforced it. But Henri's gut twisted for reasons he couldn't explain.

He'd searched his office for anything missing but hadn't found it right away. It hadn't been until he noticed Perkins hadn't come around in a while that he thought to search for his notebook on genetics and had never found it. His absence had been odd given how he dogged Henri for weeks before.

Henri stayed silent about the theft, growing more concerned about whatever Jeffery was cooking up in his lab. For all Henri knew, he was creating an entirely different species of human.

The thought terrified him.

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Four Years Later

Henri Carpentier didn't want to leave Rocky for even a second. Resisting the mating pull was getting more difficult with each passing day. Seeing Rocky's tall sexiness all the time didn't help. If he had to stare at Rocky's hard, muscular chest and the way his stoic expression softened whenever their gazes met, Henri would explode with lust.

What was worse and so very confusing was Rocky's bad boy image. And the fact he always wore jeans and either a T-shirt or a flannel with the sleeves cut off. If he chose a T-shirt, it almost always had the faded logo of a motorcycle company. Sometimes they had beer logos on them. And he wore a bandana around his head at least seventy percent of the time, which was about how often he rode his motorcycle.

Rocky's motorcycle also made him apprehensive. That death machine would be how Rocky's life ended. Henri had watched him from across the lake for months before the alpha had thrown Rocky and Henri together. He knew how fast Rocky left his cabin and how he pulled into the driveway.

Henri's point was how impractical his attraction to bad boys was. Even ones who helped the clan and happened to be his fated mate.

Henri needed a break. Escaping from his dragon shifter wasn't easy, even if they hadn't bonded with little to no possibility of ever having such a wonderful connection. Even knowing Rocky would catch up with him, he still contemplated the best exit.

But it wasn't about Rocky really. Rocky was amazing. He made Henri want things he shouldn't even contemplate. Henri was always five seconds away from revealing all his secrets whenever Rocky was near, which meant they were together a lot considering their alpha directed them to be. It was getting harder and harder to resist him. He felt as though he were a vampire in need of blood rather than a turtle shifter. His eyes shifted and his fangs dropped on a constant basis, even when Rocky wasn't close by. Henri slept at Rocky's house two doors down from Rocky's room, which exacerbated the issue.

He couldn't read anymore. It was the thing he loved doing more than anything. His proximity to Rocky had stolen his concentration.

He needed time to figure out how much longer he could last before he gave in. It wasn't a matter of if. It was when. He wasn't delusional enough to think he could hold out forever. He didn't want to anyway, but there were too many unknowns.

Would Rocky believe him when he said he hadn't meant for his notes to get out into the world? Would he end up in Saint Lakes' jail? Or worse, in the Paranormal Council jail.

Henri didn't have the answers. He was incapable of critical thinking when Rocky sat on the couch with his long legs crossed at the ankle and his hands folded on his chest as he dozed off. In his defense, the television program had a British man talking about jungle birds. His tone was soothing. Henri would have napped too if it weren't for needing time to himself.

Wesley took up the other end of the couch. He created a buffer between Rocky and Henri. It wouldn't take much for Henri to close the distance and straddle Rocky's lap. The problem was he wouldn't want to stop there.

Wesley liked to learn about animals. The small cat on his lap had a similar agenda to

Rocky. Lucy lay on her back, sprawled out with her legs stretched in front of him. Wesley rubbed her chest. Henri could hear her purr even from where he sat in the chair a few feet away.

It was a peaceful afternoon, even for Sully, who was in the makeshift office investigating something. Henri hadn't been privy to the finer details but he had figured out he was on the phone with someone from the council. The phone call could have had something to do with a certain tyrannical senator. It seemed no one wanted to say his name if they didn't have to. Henri wasn't sure why. Maybe it was a Beetlejuice type of thing where, if they said it three times, they would summon him as though he were a demon or the Devil himself. While they didn't expect the senator to pop up—the Council had him under lock and key after all—they expected something bad to happen. He wasn't privy to what. But that was why Sully talked to the council every day since he and Wesley had been back in Saint Lakes.

It seems Sully had developed a rapport with certain council members. One thing Ladon Somerset was good at was recognizing people's strengths. Henri hadn't had many opportunities to spend time with the alpha, but from observation alone, it seemed he had a superpower.

Henri stood, mumbling, "bathroom."

Wesley didn't respond, but he hadn't the other times Henri snuck away either. Henri got the impression Wesley found the cat-and-mouse game Henri and Rocky played amusing. He hadn't tested the theory, but Henri was almost positive Wesley would keep his confidence, even if he hadn't lied about his intended destination.

Rocky didn't so much as twitch, so he wasn't an immediate worry.

The cabin had one bathroom, and it was down the hall where the bedrooms and the office were. Henri had to pass by Sully to get to the bathroom, which wasn't where

Henri intended to go but it was in the same direction.

Rocky's bedroom had a window lower to the ground than the one in the spare room. Henri hadn't spent quality time in Rocky's room, even though he wanted to roll around in the sheets because they smelled like Rocky. He'd sniffed Rocky's pillow once. He'd also snuck out through the window one other time, so he knew he'd fit. He couldn't say the same about the window in the spare room.

The last time he had, his trousers had dirt on them, but he was sure he'd be able to avoid it the second time.

If Sully heard the window open, he didn't come to investigate. Sully was a wolf shifter with excellent hearing. If the phone call hadn't distracted him, he'd have heard it. Yet he said nothing. Was it for the same reason Wesley hadn't woken Rocky? If that was the case, Sully would call someone to monitor him or follow Henri himself while he was out. Rocky made sure Henri stayed safe even when he was in Napsville on the couch.

Henri was fine with it as long as whoever babysat him wasn't Rocky and gave him space.

As soon as Henri's feet landed on the pine needles, he assessed his clothing. He smiled when he saw he was as clean as he'd been before climbing out of the window.

Maybe Henri had hit an all-time low going to the grocery store. For an introvert, going where people were, even if most of them didn't talk to him beyond a basic greeting, wasn't relaxing. But he couldn't relax anyway.

He was losing his mind. If he could feel Rocky against him, he was sure he'd gain a

bit of clarity. He'd request a hug. One time and he'd feel so much better.

Henri didn't realize until it was too late, and Mr. Johnson eyed him as if he'd lost his mind in the produce section of Saint Lakes Grocery, he held the peach to his chest as if it were something precious. As if that were the thing that would alleviate the ache.

Heat climbed from his neck to his face. He put the peach back and started pushing the cart out of sight before he realized he wanted to buy some.

You have lost your mind.

He ignored Mr. Johnson as he went back to the peaches and grabbed six. Usually, he'd get a couple for himself, but the last few months hadn't been normal. Rocky and his investigators were always together. There were seven of them, including the mates. They'd adopted Anna as well. She was the only enhanced human in the clan and had taken off for Blackwing to find her mate. The last Henri had heard, things were going well for her.

The produce aisle was always Henri's favorite. He loved all the pretty colors, and Saint Lakes Grocery made everything easy to find. He grabbed tomatoes and some romaine lettuce. The one drawback to buying from the store in town versus the big chain store a few towns over was Saint Lakes Grocery only carried local, seasonal produce.

Since Henri couldn't cook as well as some of the others in Rocky's family, he didn't cook very often. He was good at making tacos, though. He'd need a peace offering when Rocky caught up with him. But everyone bought food. It wasn't just Henri or Rocky, even though they were always at Rocky's house. The disarray of his books embarrassed him.

Henri heard Jules laugh before he saw him. He turned in time to see Thomas, one of

Jules' mates, use his magic to push a cart. The cart seemed to move all on its own. All Thomas did was point at it. Thomas' goal was probably to make Jules smile.

As soon as Jules saw him, he waved. Henri waited near the peppers. He hadn't decided if he wanted a jalapeno or a pepper with less spice.

"Hi. I finished the book." Jules had borrowed a book on the history of interior design in America in the nineteenth century. Henri had several on the subject. He had something about every aspect of history. He didn't focus on one particular area. He would hyper-focus for a while before changing to something else. Jules had been absorbing everything he had on interior design for months without moving the needle of interest.

"Also, you're supposed to wait with us until Rocky gets here."

Henri nodded.

Thomas nodded by way of greeting. They weren't friends, but they were friendly. Not the way Henri was with Jules. Henri wanted to make more of a meaningful connection but hadn't yet. Jules seemed to be extroverted enough to create a balance for Henri. He had a feeling Thomas was more of an introvert.

"We're having a taco night at Rocky's place this Saturday. Would you like to come? Hacén too, of course." Inviting Jules's mates would help him get to know them better.

Maybe if he had more people to talk to he wouldn't feel so desperate where Rocky was concerned. Or maybe he would, but he'd at least have someone to vent to about it. Jules was happily mated to not one, but two mates. He gave sound advice.

"We'd love to, right Tommy?" Jules smiled at Thomas.

Their expressions when they gazed at each other was what he wanted with Rocky. His secrets felt too big to work around, though, and he wondered if it would ever happen.

“Taco Saturday sounds like fun.” Thomas spoke without taking his eyes off Jules, but when he met Henri’s gaze, he smiled.

“How did you get away this time?” Jules knew more than most about Henri’s situation, but he didn’t know everything. Henri wasn’t even sure what or who threatened him or if the alpha was being cautious. All he knew was it had something to do with the senator. Imprisoning him hadn’t alleviated their worry.

“The window again.” Henri sighed. “It’s getting harder to be around him.”

“Meaning you’re getting hard.” Jules grinned. “Tell him everything and then jump his bones.”

Thomas chuckled. “Discussing it in the produce section of the grocery store is not the best place. It’s a hotbed for gossip.”

Henri had to agree. “Maybe we can talk about it on Saturday.”

The automatic doors slid open, and Rocky entered the store. Even from a distance, he seemed too large for the space. No one else existed. There was only Rocky. Everyone and everything might as well have disappeared.

Henri’s heart jumped. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to go to Rocky or run from him, so he ended up rooted to the floor.

Rocky closed the distance between them. He nodded to Jules and Thomas, who wore the same oh-shit expression.

“See you Saturday, Henri.” Jules said before taking Thomas’s hand. They, and their cart, left Henri alone to face the consequences of his actions.

Rocky kept his gaze on Henri. “What are you doing?”

“Getting supplies so I can make dinner for everyone on Saturday. I’m not contributing the way I should be.” So what if he had an edge of defiance to his tone. Rocky would have to live with it because he either pretended as though Rocky wasn’t being fair to him or he gave in to his needs.

Henri’s knuckles turned white as he held onto the cart. He wanted to touch Rocky more than he wanted to take his next breath. By the gods. He was so close to giving in.

“Sully called the Somersets for backup. You’re making me look bad in front of the alpha.” If it bothered him, he didn’t show it. In fact, he sounded somewhat amused. But a second later, he drew his eyebrows together. “Do you need space?”

Henri nodded, knowing it wasn’t true. What he really needed was Rocky plastered to him.

“If you promise to stay home, I’ll leave you to yourself for a while.”

Henri hadn’t expected Rocky to make that sort of offer, but agreed even though he knew it wouldn’t help.

“For the rest of the day?”

“And part of tomorrow. I have a meeting with the alpha in the morning.”

It wouldn’t be much of a separation, but it might give Henri enough time to clear his

mind. Maybe he'd be able to think past the fog of lust Rocky's presence created.

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Rocky left Sully in charge of monitoring Henri while he took the time to clear his head. Henri needed to stay safe. But the mating pull was strong. He fought it the best he could, but his dragon wanted to mate. The reason they hadn't yet was getting more ridiculous with each passing day. And none of it changed the potential danger to Henri.

Fowler might be in a shifter jail, but it didn't mean his reach wasn't long. If Fowler had any hope of freedom, he'd make more super soldiers. If Rocky had figured it out, then someone as devious and as smart as Fowler had figured it out, too. The problem was, Henri only was one of two people who knew how to alter a human's DNA. Someone would come for him.

They needed to find out who had Fowler's back. Hence the reason for the meeting tomorrow morning.

For now, Rocky needed a time out as much as Henri did. Henri wasn't giving him permission to bond. Rocky knew why. His mate was running scared. He didn't trust Rocky. It hurt. But Rocky understood. He didn't know Rocky very well yet. He didn't understand Rocky would protect Henri with his life.

Rocky was getting on his bike when Bandos followed him out. He held sheets of paper and handed the stack to Rocky. "It's the evidence you need."

Rocky wasn't sure what Bandos was talking about but as he scanned them, he realized what he had. It was the transcription of a phone conversation between Jeffrey Perkins and a hired gun named Harold.

Rocky met Bandos's gaze. "It didn't matter to me if he gave Perkins his notes on purpose or not."

"It might have mattered to others, namely the alpha. He's family, Rocky. It's what's needed to keep him with us. With you." It had been Bandos, Sully, and Rocky for so long they were more like brothers than work partners. And maybe it went deeper. Rocky knew who had his back. He was never alone. Not like Henri had been before they met.

"I didn't know you investigated that."

Bandos shrugged. "I wanted to make sure everyone knew he wasn't a traitor. The guy doesn't have a malicious bone in his body. He's too smart for his own good. At least in this case. He shouldn't be punished for it."

"Thanks, man. This will help me make a case if needed." Rocky thought of something else. "He doesn't know he has a family."

"He should by now."

If he couldn't confide in Bandos, he couldn't confide in anyone. "I want him to come to me. I want to earn his trust."

Bandos raised his eyebrows. "How's that working for you?"

Rocky let out a breathy laugh and shook his head. "I'm going for a ride to ease the stress. It's driving me crazy. And he's feeling the mating pull as much as I am. It's fucking agonizing."

"He's the smartest person I've ever met. He'll figure out you know more than you're letting on sooner rather than later. You might as well spill the beans now."

“You’re right.” Rocky didn’t know what to do next. Maybe shifting and getting air under him, as well as the ride, would help him relax a little. Because all he could think about was Henri in his house across the lake.

“If it were Vaughan, he’d feel relief about not keeping something so big to himself anymore. Vaughan’s not good with stuff like that. But Echo—he could hold on to something forever. He’d let it eat away at him. And it would make him angry if I knew and let him carry it for so long.” Bandos chuckled. “He’d think about turning my brain to mush with the Pothos plant he’s growing in the kitchen.”

Rocky had seen how Echo could manipulate plant life. He’d never seen him kill with it, but Bandos had told him what he’d witnessed when they’d first rescued Echo. It was an awesome gift. But terrifying in some ways.

“He’d never hurt you.”

“I know. But it wouldn’t stop him from fantasizing about it.” Bandos met his gaze, his expression turning serious. “Don’t let Henri stew too much longer. It’ll make it worse.”

Rocky nodded. He handed the papers back to Bandos. “Want to come with?”

“Let me put this back in the office.” Bandos went inside.

While he was dropping off their evidence to exonerate Henri, Rocky started his bike. It didn’t take Bandos long, and he’d come out of the house again. He had Echo on his heels. “Can I come?”

Vaughan stood in the open door. “Next time it’s my turn.”

“Just buy a bike, baby,” Bandos said to Vaughan.

Vaughan grinned. "I like pressing against you."

Echo chuckled. "It's why I want to go. I like being behind you too, Wolf."

Vaughan wiggled his eyebrows. "All the incentive I need."

Bandos smiled. "I'll shop around. We'll get you a good one."

"Not good. Sexy. I need to be sexy, Bandos."

"You already are." Bandos was sweet sometimes. Of course, he reserved it for Vaughan and Echo. Bandos had been a mess for many years. Being rejected by his fated mate had left scars on his soul. It had come as a relief when Bandos had found two mates who loved him and made him happy.

"I think I'll give Sully a break and go bug the shit out of Henri. Should be fun, considering he's probably reading." Vaughan blew a kiss to Bandos first and then Echo before shutting the front door. He'd exit through the sliding glass door in the back.

Bandos pointed to the shelf in the open garage where they had lined up their helmets. "Grab your helmet, sweetheart."

Echo ran to do what Bandos had told him. As soon as he had the helmet in hand, he put it on, strapping it under his chin.

They headed down the road a couple of minutes later. It was the perfect day for a ride. Saint Lakes had miles of forests and lakes with roads winding around them. It did nothing to ease the longing in his heart for Henri, but it quieted Rocky's stress. The evidence Bandos had gathered went a long way to easing Rocky's mind, too.

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Henri enjoyed being in his own space, amongst his own things. He'd always been more of a homebody. Working for monetary reasons wasn't necessary for him. He was a trust fund baby. Becoming a professor was his attempt at getting out of the house. He had worried about being a shut-in, but Henri had put in his notice over the summer. He'd felt too exposed on campus, as if he were running from a madman. The theft had made him aware of people in a way he hadn't been before. Over time, it had turned into fear until he'd been right back where he'd started, worrying about becoming a shut-in. But that had been before Rocky had come into his life. Since Rocky, his worries had changed.

The knock on the door startled him. It sounded foreign. It took Henri a second to register what it was because he didn't get many visitors. When he answered the door, the last person he expected to see was Vaughan Somerset.

Henri's gaze went right past Vaughan to Rocky's cabin across the lake. It was automatic. Everything he did regarding Rocky was instinct, except for keeping his distance. His body rejected the very idea and even his mind was getting on board with giving in.

Trust didn't come easy for him. The reason was partially because of Perkins stealing his notebook. Some of it was because of the time he'd spent alone throughout his life. Even as a child. Rocky was the only person who had ever really seen him.

So yeah, he stood there with the door open enough for Vaughan to see part of his face. And maybe he'd rather get a glimpse of Rocky instead.

"Is Rocky okay?" It was his primary concern.

Vaughan grinned as if he were a cat who had eaten the pet goldfish. He already knew his worries were unfounded. But Vaughan had a unique personality, so there was still a chance.

“He’s fine. Him, Bandos, and Echo went for a ride. Which means I’m bored.” Vaughan’s grin widened. “Are you going to let me in?”

Henri didn’t want to because of all the books. If anyone would make fun of him, it would be Vaughan. But the confusing part was Vaughan being there at all. As many years as they’d known each other and had been in the same clan, Vaughan had never come to Henri’s house. “Why would you want to?”

Vaughan sighed. “So we can spend time together, silly.”

“You want to spend time with me?” It was a little weird.

“We’re family now.”

Henri opened the door wider and stepped outside, shutting it behind him. “How so?”

“Or we can talk out here. It’s a nice day.” Vaughan shrugged and sat at the small cast iron bistro type table Henri had found in a thrift store for twenty dollars. He’d had to buy the chairs online, but they matched.

“Would you like something to drink? I have hot tea or bottled water.”

“You won’t let me inside the house, will you?”

Henri shook his head. “No offense. It’s...messy.”

Vaughan raised his eyebrows much the same way Bandos often did. Henri wondered

if the facial expression came about out of physical closeness or if the moment warranted it rather than a response. “Tea sounds great. Thank you.”

Henri got a mug of tea for Vaughan and his own cup, carrying everything outside. It wasn't until he set each drink on the table that he thought to ask if Vaughan wanted cream or sugar in his tea.

Vaughan shook his head. “This is fine. Thanks.”

Henri sat opposite him. When the silence stretched, he grew uncomfortable. There had to be another reason Vaughan had come over besides him categorizing Henri as family and wanting to visit. They saw each other three times a week on average during the evening meal.

“Thank you for not insisting on entering my house.”

“It's your sacred space. I get it.”

Henri chuckled. “Not at all. My books are everywhere. It embarrasses me.”

His little secret wasn't as hard to tell as he thought it would be. Maybe he could tell his other secret, too. But it wasn't Vaughan he wanted to spill his soul to.

Vaughan sipped his tea. “This is good.”

“It's some sort of berry blend. It's supposed to be good for the immune system.” Henri waved off the idea. “I doubt they had shifters in mind when they made the claim.”

“You don't have to be embarrassed about your books. Echo has plants all over our house. And my underwear and the towel I used to shower this morning are on the

bathroom floor. Bandos will have a few things to say about it. How the hamper is three feet away. Blah, blah. But he overlooks how his computers are everywhere. On the kitchen table. The coffee table. And even a pad on the nightstand next to our bed.”

Henri smiled. “Sounds like domestic bliss to me.”

“My point is, we all have our quirks. I bet Rocky thinks your love for books is cute. I think Echo’s plants and Bandos’s computers are cute. It makes them who they are and I love them.”

Henri hadn’t ever thought about it in those terms before. “You don’t think he’ll think I’m weird.”

“Oh, I’m sure he already thinks you’re weird. But he also likes your weird.” Vaughan held his cup. “The whole family likes who you are, Henri.”

“‘Family’?” Henri swallowed the lump in his throat. He hadn’t ever belonged to a family before. Not even his parents.

“Well, my family, for one. You and Jules are pretty tight. It makes you a Somerset now. You know how we are. We’re always adopting someone.” Vaughan smiled, as if he liked the way his family was.

“The Somersets have grown in numbers over the years.”

“One of which is you.” Vaughan met his gaze. “My mom would like nothing more than to smother you with her love. You know, if you ever feel you need it.”

Henri’s chest ached. “My mom is...not like yours.”

“I guess it’ll be an adjustment, then.” Of all the people in the world, the last one he expected to make Henri feel as if he had people to rely on was Vaughan Somerset. But maybe it was fitting. He was a Somerset, and that was what Somersets did.

Henri wiped the tears from his lashes. He tried to be discreet, but Vaughan was more observant than Henri had given him credit for. “Thank you for including me in your family.”

“The investigators are also your family.”

The descriptor was a good one for Rocky, Bandos, and Sully. It described their role in the clan well. “You all include me quite a bit.”

“Yep. Resistance is futile. So stop it.”

Henri smiled. “Is this your way of telling me to stop trying to escape Rocky?”

“Not at all. We want you to keep doing it. It’s fucking funny, man.” Vaughan chuckled. “You should have seen it earlier. When he woke up, his first response was to search for you. When you weren’t sitting in your spot anymore, he got all growly. Wesley just sat there petting Lucy and said, ‘bedroom window’. And Sully finished his sentence, but he had to yell because he was in the kitchen. All Sully said was ‘again’ and then he told Rocky he’d called my mom’s house and said, ‘he’s fine’.”

Henri tried to swallow the lump forming in his throat again, but it was harder this time. “What did Rocky do?”

Vaughan shrugged. “Don’t know. Wesley told me all about it. I wasn’t there, remember?”

“Right.” Henri had scared Rocky. He needed to stop doing it. It wasn’t fair to Rocky.

Maybe a lot of things weren't fair to either of them. Keeping secrets and putting emotional distance between them wasn't working anymore.

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How did Rocky earn the trust of a turtle shifter who was smarter than him in every way and knew how to evade him whenever he wanted? He wasn't sure how he'd earned the trust of anyone. Doing so had never been deliberate. Rocky had always been himself. It had been good enough for most people. But was it good enough for Henri? It didn't seem so.

The trust should have been as instinctive as the attraction. There wasn't any doubt the attraction was mutual. Rocky smelled Henri's arousal, even from where Henri sat all the way across the lake. It floated on the breeze as Henri sipped tea at his little table, reading a book about some moment in history.

Well, he had been reading until Rocky had stepped onto his back patio. Henri had on gray trousers and a dark blue button-down shirt. He was a sexy sight. Rocky's eyes had shifted, and his fangs dropped. His partial shift had been near constant since the alpha had assigned him to guard duty. The time apart had allowed him some level of control. Seeing Henri, even from across the lake, was enough to steal it from him again.

Rocky wanted to shed what little clothing he had on, shift, and fly across the lake. He envisioned himself taking Henri into his arms and kissing him until Henri forgot about the thing keeping them from bonding.

He wanted Henri. The desire grew with each passing day. The lack of intimacy Henri insisted on did nothing to diminish it.

Rocky hadn't put a shirt on yet, or socks and shoes.

So there he stood, meeting the gaze of a mate who wanted him but didn't trust him with a secret big enough to keep a lake between them.

Did Rocky tell him he knew?

The sliding glass door was open partway, so Rocky heard the morning newscaster as they talked about the weather. It was background noise. Soothing because of its familiarity. The staring contest he and Henri had going on was much more interesting. It wasn't until the news program shifted focus and began speculating about where and why Senator James Fowler had disappeared that Rocky paid attention.

No one suspected the truth about Fowler's whereabouts because people didn't believe Fowler's claim that paranormals existed. Some thought he'd gone into hiding or off the deep end and had done something crazier than trying to convince the world shifters and vampires existed. The theories depended on the news station. None of the speculation mattered much because none of them were correct.

In practical terms, it meant people were interested in where he'd gone. Some already knew but they were a select few. They just had done nothing about it yet.

Maybe they'd leave Fowler to rot in the paranormal council jail. He might be as expendable as everyone else. He'd controlled the purse strings before, but the money fizzled away when Saint Lakes and the paranormal council had captured him. So the question was, did anyone important care about Fowler's freedom? If they did, would they do anything about it? And also, what value did Fowler have to them?

Henri bit his bottom lip. A crease formed between his brow. The scent of his arousal became stronger as the breeze shifted, blowing in Rocky's direction.

If they had bonded, Rocky would have pushed all the longing he felt in Henri's

direction. He didn't want to hold anything back, but he didn't want to scare Henri away.

Rocky made a point of rubbing his chest, letting Henri see him. Henri was the source of the ache.

Henri's bottom lip poked out. That alone let Rocky know he was affected. He set his book on the table beside his cup before pressing his hand to his chest in much the same way Rocky had.

He stood there far longer than he should have, making himself late for the meeting. But something had shifted between them. Rocky could feel it as though it were a wave washing over him.

The phone rang. He didn't want to end their staring contest, but no one called unless it was important. Rocky went inside, shutting the door behind him. His phone sat on the kitchen counter. He didn't have to lose sight of Henri while reaching for it. But by the time he answered and stared across the lake in Henri's direction through his sliding glass door, Henri was gone. It didn't stop him from stepping outside again.

"You're late," Ladon said.

"Sorry. Got hung up here at home."

"Is everything okay?"

Define 'okay'. He should have said it aloud, but it would alert Ladon to a problem Rocky and Henri needed to fix. "I'm running behind."

Rocky saw Henri peeking from behind the curtain of his front window. Rocky crooked his finger. The curtain fell into place. Henri came outside, shutting the door

behind him. He stood on his front stoop, watching Rocky.

“Wingspan’s alpha received a message demanding he hand over his mate. He’s the only scientist left, other than Henri, who can enhance humans. It’s a matter of time before we receive a letter. My guess is they’ll demand we hand over Echo and Lucas too, along with Henri. Or maybe they won’t bother sending one at all since it didn’t go well for them the last time. Maybe they’ll just attack and take what they want.” Ladon could have told him he was dropping a bomb on Rocky’s house and Rocky would have had less of a reaction.

Rocky growled. His hands shifted. It was hard to hold the phone to his ear with his dragon claws. He couldn’t take his eyes off Henri. If he could see him, then he knew he was still there, and he was safe. Sully was close to Henri’s house. Hidden but near enough in case of an emergency. “So we’ll fight.”

Henri sucked in a breath. His eyes widened. No doubt, he’d heard Rocky’s side of the conversation.

“Against the human military? Their show of force will happen in every paranormal town. They’ll try taking over Wingspan too. And what about other paranormal towns? This thing is growing. Even with Fowler in custody. Hell, locking him up is probably what’s propelling it.” Ladon sighed.

“Do you have any evidence to support the theory?” Rocky didn’t doubt it was a possibility. But it wasn’t the only outcome to consider. They couldn’t predict the future.

“Beyond the feeling of doom in my gut, you mean?” Ladon still had conviction in his tone and resignation. He expected to fight at some point.

“Despite that.”

“No. You’re the investigator. How do I investigate a gut feeling?” Ladon sighed. “I’m scared, man. I’m not sure what to do if it all turns to shit. And I know it will.”

It was easy to forget how young Ladon was. He was a natural at leading and did a great job, even though they were in troubled times. He needed guidance. He didn’t need Rocky telling him he was wrong about his gut feeling. “Focus on now. What can we do?”

“Right. Well, I have Bandos searching around for where the message came from. Wingspan has a couple of council members as clan, so the paranormal council is involved. I’m sure their investigators are all over this, too.”

“Offer our support to Wingspan, if you haven’t already. Then call the council. Find out what they’re doing about the potential problem and tell them about your premonition.” Rocky didn’t think it would hurt anything if the council investigators found out human soldier movements. It would be difficult because the soldiers they were searching for were of the elite variety, but it wasn’t impossible.

Rocky might not think Ladon was right, but he didn’t think he was wrong, either. Something was going to go down. It wasn’t an if, but a when. And they needed to know what the humans had planned.

“So my gut feeling has graduated to a premonition now?” Humor laced the words, but it was short-lived. “The council won’t stop them from attacking paranormals.”

“We continue to investigate. It will make you feel as though you’re doing something about it.” Sitting around, waiting for something bad to happen, was getting to all of them. Jailing Fowler put them in the eye of the storm.

Sully came out of the trees. He was in his wolf form and showed himself to let Rocky know he wouldn’t let anything happen to Henri.

Henri wasn't aware of Sully's presence. Or if he was, he didn't act as if it bothered him. He wanted Henri to feel as though he were giving him the space he needed. But protecting him came first.

After Rocky won Henri's trust and he stopped running from what they could have, he wouldn't need to give him space. Rocky wouldn't feel so feral once he could keep Henri glued to his side.

"I'll be there in a few minutes." Rocky ended the phone call, feeling as though he'd just had the meeting he'd been late for.

He grabbed a shirt from his closet and the papers exonerating Henri. He was on his bike and heading toward the Somersets' house in under three minutes.

The sooner they got the meeting over with, the faster he'd get back to his mate. Rocky would feel better if he never let Henri out of his sight.

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The potential threat to Henri had always been there, but something about Wingspan getting a note gave it life. Rocky was on edge because of it.

He stood in the corner, away from the others, because he still hadn't calmed down enough to be good company. Bandos stuck close for support. Or to stop Rocky from burning an innocent person to death for looking at him wrong. Rocky wasn't sure. Either way, Rocky appreciated Bandos being there.

He'd like it if Henri glued himself to his side. It would give him peace of mind. But he was safe with Sully. It would have to be enough.

Everyone in the room steered clear. They weren't idiots. No one in the room wanted to deal with Rocky.

It was best if he stayed to himself and kept his mouth shut until he needed to talk. He'd make himself the center of attention and he didn't want that. The meeting wasn't about him.

One thing he didn't like was the conversation revolving around Henri. And it would at some point because of the message Wingspan had received. Maybe it made Rocky a territorial asshole, but Henri was his mate. No one else needed to have an opinion about him. And also, Henri was part of the family. Rocky's family.

Rocky growled.

Bandos glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, scowling. He worried about Rocky's mental health. He wasn't the only one. Rocky worried about himself.

The proximity with no intimacy or bonding had gone on long enough. After the meeting, Rocky and Henri were going to have a conversation about keeping secrets from each other and about their relationship expectations.

Rocky sighed.

Some of the fight went out of him. It was as if deciding to end their little standoff was all it took to bring himself back from the brink.

“First things first. We need to talk about Fowler.” Ladon started the meeting.

Ladon held the meeting in the kitchen. While anyone could walk into the room, Ladon didn’t seem to have any problems with it.

“Has the investigating team been able to find out who Fowler was working with?” Laden asked Rocky and Bandos. Rocky let Bandos answer.

“We have a few names. Taylor has been a big help. But we still haven’t been able to find out who’s running the show since Fowler’s capture.”

Taylor nodded when several heads turned his way, but otherwise, he didn’t comment.

“Is the council questioning these people?” Garridan met Rocky’s gaze.

“The short answer is yes. Sully’s been talking with Quidel and some of their investigators every day. We’ve been sharing information.” Rocky tried to focus on answering the question and while he did a good job, it was a struggle. His mind never strayed from Henri. “Fowler’s not giving anything away and no one knows who his second in command is.”

Taylor spoke up. “I know who my commander was. That was it.”

“Is there a second in command? Maybe Fowler gave orders and people followed,” Ramsey said.

His mate nodded. “We may be searching for someone who isn’t there.”

“Who sent the message to the Wingspan alpha, then?” Ladon asked.

“Someone in charge of making more enhanced humans?” Lucas hadn’t attended very many meetings until a few months ago when Echo had become a part of the clan. Together, they were a bomb waiting to explode. People learning about Lucas’ special abilities was how Saint Lakes had gotten involved. Lucas and Echo needed to be a part of the discussion because they would be the ones to save everyone’s life if the worst happened. Rocky didn’t doubt it. “Maybe Fowler was the only one pulling everyone’s strings. Maybe he had a lot of seconds-in-command.”

“There’s a way to find out.” Fane met Lucas’s gaze as if he were communicating with him.

Lucas nodded and then turned to Bennett, who growled. Their conversation was internal and between them, but it was obvious Lucas was trying to convince Bennett, his dragon shifter fated mate, to not stand in his way when he tried to enter the mind of a power-hungry sociopath.

Rocky wouldn’t have let Henri do it either. But it was a good idea.

Ladon met Rocky’s gaze before speaking. “I’m worried about stepping on the council’s toes. We’re all working together. Which means we won’t send our witch to their headquarters without permission. And I’d like our investigative team to continue their research.”

Rocky nodded. “I’ll have Sully contact the council as soon as I relieve him of guard

duty.”

Since Sully’s been a liaison between Saint Lakes and the council and he’s built a rapport, he should continue talking with them.

“What about using Wesley to talk to Fowler?” The question came from Ramsey.

Rocky growled. “That monster traumatized Wesley. He won’t get within a hundred miles of Fowler.”

Ramsey held up his hands. “It was just an idea.”

Rocky shook his head but didn’t comment.

Ladon raised his eyebrows and met Rocky’s gaze again. “Okay, I think we’re done for now. Let’s meet next week. Same time and place.”

Everyone filed out of the room. Rocky followed Bandos and Echo, but he didn’t get very far.

“Rocky. I’d like a word.” So they would talk about Henri finally. At least Ladon didn’t have the conversation in front of the group.

Rocky hung back. As soon as everyone but him and Ladon left, Rocky handed the evidence Bandos had found exonerating Henri.

Ladon took it, raising his eyebrows until he began reading. He read the entire conversation before meeting Rocky’s gaze. “So you thought I was what? Going to throw him in the cells in Mom’s basement.”

Rocky lost all his steam. “I’m fighting the mating pull and trying to protect my mate

all at the same time.”

Ladon put the papers on the kitchen island. “This is still good information.”

“It’s Bandos’s doing.”

“I trust you.” At least someone did. Ladon sighed. “When will you start to trust me?”

Rocky’s gaze snapped to Ladon. He growled at the implication. “I do.”

Ladon put his hand on the papers. “This suggests you don’t.”

“If Henri had given Perkins his notes, we would consider him a traitor.”

“But still your mate. I trust you to handle the situation with Henri.” Ladon ran a hand through his hair and slumped. “I’d be in way over my head if not for Magnus and the rest of you guys.”

Magnus sat at the kitchen table but closed the distance, wrapping his arm around Ladon’s waist. “You’re doing an amazing job, baby.”

“You’re a good alpha.” Rocky needed to give credit where credit was due. “And you’re right. But it’s not a lack of trust. I’ve been the alpha of my family for a long time. It’s not easy relying on someone else to lead.”

“From one alpha to another, I get it, man.”

“My dragon is going nuts. The need to protect is stronger than ever. And not just Henri. Echo too. They’re my responsibility.”

“Our responsibility. But I get it, man. With Henri, you’re feeling the mate pull.

Drives us dragon shifters crazy.” Ladon chuckled when Magnus protested, but he grew serious again. “It’s true. Our baser instincts take over. You’ll feel better once you bond.”

What if it wasn’t the secret holding Henri back? What if it were something else?

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As soon as Henri entered the house and settled into his chair, he heard it again. He thought he'd imagined it last night, but the nibbling noise was unmistakable in the quiet house.

Well, it wasn't exactly a nibble. There was a crinkle involved too, as if someone were eating paper, which didn't make sense. Why would anyone want to eat paper when there were plants to eat? And why would anyone be in his house while doing it?

He had made no noise beyond biting into his toast and drinking from his mug. He supposed his finger swiping across his e-reader screen also made a sound, but it was nothing more than a whisper. The refrigerator hummed, but otherwise there was complete silence.

His imagination ran wild sometimes. He'd once thought he'd seen a ghost in his hallway. In his defense, he'd been reading a horror novel about a ghost who stalked her killer. Horror wasn't his go-to genre, but he'd been in a slump and the cover had grabbed him. He'd one-clicked on impulse. The experience had taught him two things. One was not to read certain genres after dark. The other was to pee before he got into bed. The last one should have been a given, but he'd been too scared to get out of bed after he'd finished reading for the night.

He also thought he'd heard scurrying. He'd written it off to being alone at night for the first time in a long while.

Henri shut off his e-reader and set it on the end table. He followed the sound, crawling across the floor. The hardwood flooring wasn't great for his knees. It made him feel as if he were an old turtle shifter, even though he hadn't even hit his prime

yet. Turtle shifters lived a lot longer than some other paranormals, just as natural turtles did. But Henri wasn't even thirty years old yet. A baby by turtle shifter standards. His knees thought he was well past the age where crawling was a possibility, and the rest of Henri agreed.

As soon as he got to the far end of the couch, the sound was louder.

Who's under there?

It was too dark to see, and Henri didn't have great eyesight to begin with. He wasn't like other shifters who had keen sight, regardless of the amount of light.

He crawled across the floor again, grabbing his phone, turning the flashlight thing on as he went. Pointing the light under the couch, he scanned the area. He didn't even get to the end where he'd heard the chewing when he saw tiny bits of book pages everywhere. It was as if something had nibbled through...one of his books.

Henri whispered a curse and then scanned with the light to see what it was. And there it was—a little gray mouse.

“You're too little to have dragged it under there.” The book must have fallen from the table without Henri realizing it. The mouse must be using it as bedding.

Henri saw the spine and the title. He cursed again and reached for it.

The mouse scurried away.

Henri stood, holding the book to his chest. The utter disappointment washed over him as though it were a wave.

“Why did you have to chew up that book, little mouse?” A better question was why

had he left it sitting around as if it meant nothing? Of all the books he'd had, and there were so many they littered every flat surface in every room of his cottage, he treasured the chewed book the most. It was the one Rocky had given him.

Henri shut off the flashlight on his phone and set it on the table next to his half-eaten toast.

As he examined the book, he discovered his new little friend hadn't taken large chunks out of it. It had ruined a few pages. He sighed in relief and held the book as if it were one of his children.

Each book was precious, but the one in his hand had been a gift. When Rocky had first given it to him, it had even smelled like him. It had been before the alpha had made them stay together.

"Not to worry, book. I've saved you in the nick of time." The mouse had done a number on it. Could he find someone to repair it? Could magic save it? If anyone could repair his book, it would be Estelle Somerset. If it wasn't possible, then he'd search online.

But first he had to save his book friends from the mice. Or maybe it was one mouse. He'd have to find out.

Henri searched his living room for a free spot to put it. He spun in a circle once, then again before he came to two realizations. One, he had too many books. And two, he needed to hire a carpenter to make him more bookshelves. It was no wonder he hadn't noticed when the book fell under the couch. None of his books had a proper home.

Henri might have shelf space in his bedroom. Even if it was stacking books on top of each other. He had to rearrange his shelves, but he found a home for it.

He didn't stick it in the slot, though. Instead, he carried it back into the living room and grabbed his bag, which already held his wallet and keys. He put the book inside.

Before he left, he grabbed the plate with his toast on it. Setting his bag in the chair, he crouched to slide the toast under the couch. "I'll get you proper mouse food, little friend. And a nice box with bedding to sleep in. No pooping on my floor. Okay?"

The mouse didn't come out from wherever it was hiding, although he hadn't expected it to.

He thought about evicting it, but the weather would turn cold soon. He'd never been homeless or had to worry about where he'd sleep. He'd never gone without the things necessary for survival. Food. Clothing. Shelter. He'd had anything money could buy.

And almost nothing that it didn't.

Henri grabbed his keys and locked the door when he exited his house. He had some errands to run. He felt safe knowing someone followed him.

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Henri hesitated to knock on Estelle Somerset's sliding glass door because he saw Rocky inside.

Sometimes, he wished he could tell Rocky what had happened. If the consequences weren't so severe, he would. Maybe Rocky could save him from his inevitable fate if he didn't reject Henri first. His savviness would serve Henri well. But shouldn't Henri save himself?

The trouble Henri had caused wouldn't go away by itself.

They might very well be the new dandelions of current times. Dandelions weren't native to North America. They'd appeared when the Europeans had first arrived on the continent. The invasive species had taken over to the point where people had forgotten they hadn't always been there.

Change spun in a circle along with the earth as if it were always meant to until it was out of Henri's control.

The chance of rejection was always there because Henri's wrongdoings would always be between them. Unless he got brave, which had never happened before.

He wanted to be close to Rocky. His heart ached for the chance. Every time he thought about the possibility of not knowing Rocky as his mate, tears pricked his eyes. So he tried not to. It all came to the forefront of his mind, taking over his thoughts whenever Rocky was so close.

The second Henri saw Rocky, his body hummed.

Rocky had well-worn jeans on, with a hole in the back left pocket. He had a muscular ass. Seeing it made Henri want to feel the swell of each cheek. Rocky had a bandana covering the top of his head. The rest of his long blond hair hung past his shoulders to his flannel-covered back. Rocky had wide shoulders. Like all dragon shifters, he was strong, with muscles everywhere. But it was his thighs, even when he wore pants, that made Henri's mouth water. He thought about how they'd feel to sit on. But it wasn't all he wanted to do. He wanted to wrap his legs around Rocky's waist and ride his...

Yeah, it wasn't helping the situation. Stop thinking with your nether regions, Henri.

Rocky must have smelled him because his eyes shifted into his dragon and his fangs dropped as he turned toward the door. Their gazes met.

Henri bit his lip.

Rocky had been talking to the alpha. Deep in conversation and whatever they were discussing wasn't over. But Rocky seemed to have forgotten everything except Henri.

As Rocky stalked to the door, the alpha raised his eyebrows and said, "Well, he just made it convenient."

Henri rolled those words through his mind, coupling them with the conversation he'd overheard earlier. It seemed Rocky and the alpha had something planned and it somehow included him.

It meant the alpha suspected Henri's involvement with the human enhancement situation. What other thing was there?

The alpha wasn't an idiot. He had to know Henri had worked with Dr. Perkins at the college. It wasn't a stretch to suspect Henri's involvement.

Henri almost turned and ran for his car. But Rocky had already reached him. As soon as the door opened, Rocky's scent assaulted him. Henri's turtle vision was a lot better than his human eyes, to the point he had to take off his glasses to see Rocky.

Nine times out of ten, Rocky wore a stoic expression. But when he met Henri's gaze, his expression softened. He even smiled.

Instead of letting Henri inside the house, Rocky came outside. Henri stepped back, giving Rocky room to exit. Rocky shut the door behind him and then took Henri's arm, leading him away from the patio.

Rocky let his arm go when they were in the yard. He folded his arms over his chest and frowned. "Do you have a problem?"

Henri said the first thing to enter his mind as if he didn't have a filter. "I have several."

Rocky seemed to relax a little, although Henri didn't know what he'd said to prompt it. He even seemed to find Henri amusing. "You're safe?"

"I'm fine. Sully allowed me to come here. I wasn't trying to escape." And then Henri thought about the one-sided conversation he'd overheard earlier and Rocky's aggressive response to whatever the other person had said. "Am I more unsafe now than before?"

"Yes."

He hadn't expected the answer. Even if it was true, most people wouldn't have been so blunt. "You need to get better at sugarcoating stuff."

"I'm not a donut-maker, mate." Rocky was more clever than Henri had given him

credit for.

Henri snorted and then covered his mouth.

Henri wanted a photograph of Rocky above his mantel.

“Why am I more unsafe?” Henri wasn’t a fighter, but he’d like to prepare himself for the possibility of danger.

Rocky’s expression went back to his softened stoicism. “A message. Sent to a scientist’s alpha in Wingspan.”

“Oh.” What did it have to do with Henri?

“What do you need help with, mate?”

Henri had almost forgotten why he’d come. He supposed he might as well get down to it. “I have a mouse in my house.”

“Do you need help trapping it?” The offer would have been sweet if it didn’t include killing an innocent creature whose objective was survival.

“I don’t want it dead.”

Rocky lifted his eyebrow.

Henri hesitated to show Rocky the book. He didn’t want Rocky to think he didn’t value it. But Henri had to tell the truth to get help.

Henri bit his lip as he opened the flap of his bag and pulled out the book. He handed it to Rocky. “My mouse ate it.”

Rocky examined it, but Henri could see the humor in his expression.

“In the mouse’s defense, it fell under my couch. And it wasn’t so much eating as breaking it down to use for bedding. Still, I fear it’s ruined.”

“Did you read it?”

Henri nodded.

Rocky shrugged and shook his head, as if asking what the problem was. “You can toss it out.”

Henri sucked in a breath and snatched the book from Rocky, holding it to his chest. “I absolutely will not.”

“I’ll buy you another copy.”

“The one I have is fine.”

“It ended up under the couch.”

“Because I ran out of shelf space.”

“I’ll make a bookshelf for you.” Rocky’s offer made Henri’s chest ache, as if his heart had filled. Henri wanted to accept, but he wasn’t sure if he should. It would mean trusting Rocky not to judge him.

When faced with Rocky’s impressive pectoral muscles and his intoxicating scent, it was difficult to turn him down. Mostly because he’d get to see Rocky flex at some point. “Really? You’d do that for me?”

Rocky stepped closer and cupped Henri's cheek. "I'd do anything to make you happy, mate."

Was Rocky a witch, too? Or maybe a warlock. Did he have potent pheromones on his fingertips? A concentrated dose. Or maybe there was something in the air. Because Henri forgot about the secret and stopped caring about the sorry state of his house. None of it seemed big enough to worry about in the face of Rocky's touch.

And then there were his words. I'd do anything.

"Anything?"

"I'll protect you, mate." They weren't talking about unwanted mousy houseguests or bookshelves anymore.

"From the mouse?" Henri knew Rocky had meant protection from whatever he'd been talking about with the alpha. Maybe Rocky didn't know everything, but he knew something. Whatever it was didn't keep him from touching Henri.

Rocky's scowl would have scared Henri if it weren't for the gentle way Rocky still cupped his cheek. "Don't make light of my protection, mate."

"I'm sorry, but no one has ever said or done for me what you have."

"You can trust me."

"I don't trust easily." It was the understatement of the century, but something about the moment made Henri want to try.

"I know." Rocky glanced at the book. "Let's see if we can fix it."

Henri welcomed the subject change. "I was hoping Estelle would know how."

"It's why you came?"

Henri nodded.

Rocky opened the door for him.

The alpha was still inside. He glanced at the book in Henri's hand and then nodded toward the kitchen table. "Sit. We need to talk."

Henri stopped just inside the door. He stiffened.

"I'm here about a book." He snapped out the words, making it clear he didn't want to talk about whatever the alpha had in mind. If he talked about it, then he'd have to admit more than he wanted to. And in front of Rocky.

But the wheels had been spinning in that direction for a while now, threatening to spill all of Henri's secrets. He'd never been a good liar. And he wasn't stupid enough to think the alpha wanted to talk about anything else.

No. This was it. This was where it would all come out. This was where his life fell apart.

The alpha didn't say a word. He stared Henri down as if his gaze were a net.

"It was a mistake coming here." Henri tried to head back out, but Rocky blocked the door. His expression said he wouldn't let Henri run away.

"It was an order, Henri." The alpha might have said it, but Rocky was the one enforcing it. That much was clear in his expression.

Rocky held out his hand, palm up. “I’ll sit with you, mate.”

“Why do you suddenly feel like my jailer?” Henri didn’t like being closed in. He wasn’t claustrophobic, but he was about to be called out and it put him on the defense.

Rocky’s scowl deepened. “I’m your mate.”

Did it mean they were in it together?

Henri should feel safe, but he didn’t know if he could trust the promise. Not when they’d have to follow the alpha’s orders, regardless of what they thought about it. Being in a clan wasn’t a democracy, even when the country they were in was. Henri knew Ladon Somerset came from a good family. One who had led the clan for years. Sometimes it hadn’t been easy. But the alpha had a lot of power. What would he do to Henri?

Rocky was losing control of himself, and Henri was to blame. The acidic scent of Henri’s fear filled the room. It floated around the house, affecting everyone. He confirmed it when Ramsey and Garridan came into the kitchen half-shifted. They were ready to fight for whoever needed them.

Henri didn’t seem to notice them. He stared at Rocky’s outstretched hand as if gauging his sincerity.

Ramsey and Garridan assessed the situation and relaxed, but they didn’t leave, which would have pissed Rocky off if they were there watching Rocky make a mess of his mating. But they stayed to show support.

The next few minutes would make or break Rocky. It all hinged on Henri. Henri could reject him. He’d kept his distance. Rocky had let it go on for far too long.

Rocky might have a lot to prove, but he'd always had patience. He'd had plenty with Henri so far. But it was time for Henri to trust him.

"After we're done talking with the alpha, I'll help you fix your book. And we'll figure out what to do about your mouse." Rocky kept his hand extended.

"I don't want to kill it." Henri hesitated to even put down his bag, but he stowed the book away again and set it on the floor next to the door and where Rocky stood. Rocky took it as a good sign when Henri grew closer.

"We'll figure something more humane out."

"I don't want to make it leave. It needs somewhere warm to live." Henri put his hand in Rocky's.

He sighed in relief.

"We'll go to the pet store then." Rocky was acutely aware of Ladon, Ramsey, and Garridan watching them.

Henri met his gaze. "You're going to help me?"

"Every step of the way."

"You might change your mind after."

"After what, mate?"

"After the alpha makes me tell him what I've done." Henri wouldn't meet his gaze, but he drew close to Rocky as if seeking comfort.

Rocky nodded to Garridan and Ramsey, asking them to leave the room. When they complied, Rocky lifted Henri's chin. "What is it you think you've done?"

Henri opened his mouth and then shut it again. His chin wobbled. "You already know, don't you?"

Rocky squeezed Henri's hand, trying to make him understand nothing bad was going to happen to him. It didn't matter what he'd done. As far as Rocky knew, he'd let his curiosity run wild. In Rocky's estimation, it was a good thing.

Rocky saw the exact moment Henri understood, and it hadn't been when he'd taken Rocky's hand. No, it was when his shoulders slumped. "It's you and me. I promise, sweetheart."

Rocky drew Henri into his arms. When Henri clung to him, he lifted Henri off his feet. "I'll fill you in, alpha."

Ladon nodded and left the room.

Even though they were alone, the Somerset kitchen was the hub of the house. Anyone could come in, so Rocky carried Henri into the office, which was off the kitchen. It worked well for wanting privacy with his mate.

Rocky sat on the couch and held Henri.

It was the first time Henri had let Rocky get so close.

Henri pressed against him. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, sweetheart." Rocky grabbed a tissue from the box sitting on the end table next to him and handed it to Henri.

“Thank you.” Henri took his glasses off before wiping his face and nose. “Can I have another?”

Rocky gave one to him. He wiped his glasses on his shirt, all while glancing at Rocky. He held his glasses up to the light and then sighed, continuing to clean the lenses.

Rocky held out his hand.

Henri gave them to Rocky.

Rocky cleaned them with the hem of his shirt before handing them back.

Henri put them on and then huffed. “Why did your shirt work better than mine?”

Rocky smiled. He didn’t often, but Henri’s irritation at being one-upped amused him. “You’re the scientist. You tell me.”

“I’m a historian.”

“You have a biology and physics degree.” Rocky wouldn’t have been a good investigator without knowing everything there was to know about Henri.

Henri shook his head. “An undergrad. And I think it’s unfair how much you know about me, but I know nothing about you even after all this time together.”

“Are you going to ask how I know about your notebook?”

Henri met Rocky’s gaze. “I’d appreciate knowing what you know. How isn’t much of a mystery?”

“I know you figured out how to enhance humans. And I know Perkins stole something from you. He called it a notebook.”

Henri’s gaze snaps to Rocky. “You know he stole it?”

“Yeah. I have proof. The alpha’s seen it.”

“How is there proof?”

“Perkins liked to brag.”

Henri nodded. “He was a pompous ass.”

He was. It might have been the thing that had killed him in the end. That and stuff on the internet never goes away.

Henri averted his gaze. “I figured out the basic science. I’m assuming Dr. Perkins filled in the gaps.”

“It was another geneticist. His name was Piernos. He’s dead now. Same with Perkins. And the labs are all shut down.”

Henri bit his lip. The worry was clear in his expression. “Is there anyone left who can enhance humans?”

Rocky held onto Henri’s waist, wanting to make him feel secure on his lap. While Rocky would love nothing more than to draw him closer, he couldn’t read Henri’s signals. He wanted Henri to know he was there without making him feel penned in. “You and a human from Wingspan.”

“You were discussing my safety. Not how to punish me. Weren’t you?”

Rocky growled. Instinct made him pull Henri to his chest. “I would never punish you. Even if I were the type of person who would, you did nothing wrong. Not one thing. Now, I want you to stop blaming yourself.”

Henri leaned against him, hugging Rocky. It was more than Rocky expected. “You can’t demand I stop feeling guilty.”

“Well, I just did.”

“While I heard you, it’s not something I can shut off at your say so.”

“It’s your only job.”

Henri chuckled. “And what’s your job?”

“I already told you. I’m going to keep you safe.” And Rocky would do his best to make sure Henri always stayed that way.

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Rocky darted his gaze to Henri, all while trying to monitor the road. Henri sat in the passenger seat of Rocky's truck with his hands folded in his lap. His scent filled the cab. Rocky had half a mind to pull over and hold Henri. The desire was alive and well inside Rocky. One taste of what it was like to hold Henri was all it took to make him an addict. Not that Henri was ready for it.

Henri was still panicking. It was as if he'd been running scared for so long he didn't know how else to be.

He'd learn to trust. They were already on their way.

"The nearest pet store is in Grandville. Would you rather get supplies for your mouse there?"

Henri had a habit of biting his lower lip. It seemed to mean a thousand things. He did it when he was contemplative and when aroused. He also seemed to do it when confused or angry. Regardless of the emotion behind the gesture, Rocky found it sexy as hell.

Henri turned his gaze on Rocky. "Do you think I can make friends with it?"

Rocky chuckled. "I think you might have to catch it first."

Henri's eyebrows drew together. "Are you laughing at me?"

Rocky chuckled even more. "I think it's cute."

Henri's cheeks darkened, and he watched Rocky through his lashes. "You think I'm cute?"

"Very cute, sweetheart." Rocky didn't know how someone could be more appealing. Few people wanted to make friends with a mouse instead of evicting it. Most would kill it and not think twice about doing so.

"I've never heard you laugh before." Henri smiled.

"I don't often." Rocky had learned a long time ago not to show emotion. His abusive father, who had been hooked on dragonshine, had beaten the lesson into him. His mother had taught him the benefit of not showing emotion around his father, who used the sadness and pain against them more times than not. The stoic expression became natural, but Henri lowered Rocky's guard.

"Why is that?"

"My father was very good at using emotion to his advantage."

Henri touched Rocky's arm. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"The short story is he was an abusive drunk. He was good at using my emotions against me."

"I'm sorry you had to go through something so awful."

"It was a long time ago." Despite the way Rocky brushed off the emotions, he took his hand off the steering wheel and laid it on the center console with his palm up. Henri didn't hesitate to take it. His hand was smaller than Rocky's, but they fit together when Henri held two of Rocky's fingers. It was more comfortable for him.

Henri sighed as if content with the small intimacy.

“Yet you still wear your stoic expression more than not.”

“It’s a habit.”

“You have a nice smile. You should make a habit of doing it more often.”

Rocky glanced at Henri, amused. It was the first compliment Henri had ever given him. Henri’s aroused scent filled the cab of the truck, which was a compliment of sorts too. It mingled with Rocky’s own.

Henri bit his bottom lip, worrying it between his teeth.

When Rocky didn’t say anything right away, Henri freed his lip and huffed. “The correct response is not silence, dragon.”

Rocky couldn’t help but smile at Henri’s indignant tone. “How should I have responded?”

“Telling you what to say will make the words lose meaning.”

Rocky grinned. “So you want me to say something nice in return?”

Henri turned back to the window, seeming to watch Saint Lakes go by as they made their way south. “Not necessarily.”

Henri’s reaction was a punch in the gut.

The reason Rocky teased was because he found Henri’s wit intriguing. The way his mind worked was unique. Rocky liked how Henri was five steps ahead of him during

every conversation. And he liked it when Henri asked for what he wanted, even if it was in a roundabout way.

“No one else makes me smile but you.”

Henri’s gaze locked onto his. Rocky could feel Henri studying his expression as if he wanted to gauge the truth behind those words. “How do I make you smile?”

“You’re smart and it shows. You’re funny, even though you’re not trying to be.” Rocky glanced at Henri in time to see his pretty blush. “And when I say something nice, which you asked for, you still blush. That also makes me smile.”

Rocky put his blinker on with his free hand and turned onto the highway.

Henri tried to pull his hand away, making driving easier for Rocky, but Rocky tightened his hold, letting him know he’d rather drive one-handed than let go of Henri.

Henri settled again. “I didn’t ask for compliments.”

They both knew it wasn’t true, but Rocky didn’t contradict Henri.

“This is it, isn’t it? We’re going to bond now?” Henri said it as though he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. And the abrupt subject change suggested Henri had been thinking about what the two of them together meant for quite a while.

“Soon, mate. The internal connection will help me keep you safe.”

“But it’s not the only reason you want to, right?” Henri’s nose twitched.

Rocky didn’t need to answer him. They could smell each other. Henri’s scent was

making his dragon crazy. His eyes had shifted when they were back at the house and his fangs had also dropped. They hadn't shifted back yet.

He wasn't sure what they were going to do when they arrived at the pet store and encountered humans. Rocky had one pair of sunglasses, but they both had the same problem.

"No, mate. It's not the only reason."

"It's not the only reason I want to either," Henri whispered as if he had trouble admitting it. "I...I think you should know something."

Rocky raised his eyebrows.

Henri sighed. "Would you like to know what it is?"

"Yes."

"Then you should comment."

Henri should have annoyed Rocky. With anyone else he would have. But Henri, prompting him to speak, said more about how comfortable Henri was around him.

"I just did comment."

"Before I told you too." Henri sighs. "Does your quiet nature have something to do with your stoicism?"

Rocky shrugged. "You tell me."

Henri shook his head and said nothing at all for a solid two miles. When he finally

spoke, he said, "I'm not good with long silences."

"Is that what you wanted me to know?" Rocky smiled, indicating to Henri he was teasing.

Henri sighed. "You know it's not, dragon."

"You call me that whenever I annoy you."

"I'm not annoyed." Yes, he was, but Rocky didn't contradict him. "I want to...get to know you better. I need to understand you if we're going to bond."

"So you're studying me as if I'm one of your books?"

"Yes. No." Henri averted his gaze, staring at an apple orchard as they passed. "I don't mean to. It's how I am."

"What were you going to tell me, honey? I really want to know."

"The only reason I kept my distance was because I was afraid of your reaction when you found out about my involvement with the enhanced humans. But I-I've always wanted to bond." Henri didn't need to explain himself, since Rocky already knew it. But they needed to have the conversation.

"I want that too."

"Since you know now, maybe we can...spend some time kissing and stuff...later." Henri's blush deepened.

Rocky had half a mind to tease Henri. He'd like to see how deep his blush went when he explained to Rocky what stuff he was referring to. But Rocky knew it took a lot

for Henri to ask for more intimacy. His brave little mate needed a soft touch and maybe a few hugs. He might even need more than just hugs. Rocky didn't want to discourage the openness. He'd been trying to get Henri to confide in him for a long time. Instead of teasing him, Rocky brought their joined hands up to his mouth and kissed the back of Henri's. "I want that too."

Henri smiled. "Maybe we could have dinner together and then afterward we could pretend to watch a movie. At my house because yours always has people in it."

Henri bit his lip as if he were afraid Rocky would say no. The last thing Rocky would ever do was turn down a date with his mate.

"That sounds perfect."

Henri frowned, biting his lip. "I can't cook anything romantic."

Rocky smiled. "It can be anything. But I'll cook."

"My cabin is filled with books."

Rocky chuckled. "I don't doubt it."

"I want you to be prepared. There's a lot of them."

How many were they talking about?

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Holy shit! Rocky had never seen so many books except in a bookstore.

He hadn't prepared himself. Normally, he was very good at keeping his reaction under wraps, but Henri had a way of bringing out all of Rocky's emotions and putting them right on his face. Rocky didn't mind Henri having such a special skill, except he would rather not cause Henri to feel bad.

Henri had stacked them on every available flat surface, including the floor. They even took up most of the furniture. The only available seating was the couch and an armchair.

"Don't judge me," Henri huffed.

"I'm not." After the initial shock wore off, Rocky planned out bookshelves in his mind. "You need more than one shelf, mate."

Henri sucked in a breath. "You'd make more than one?"

Rocky nodded. "Where would you put them?"

Henri smiled and blushed. "My entire house, but how much will it cost?"

Rocky met his gaze. "We're not discussing money, mate. Just tell me where you were thinking."

"What does that mean? 'We're not discussing money'." Even as Henri asked, he led the way through the living room to the bedrooms. Henri's cabin was smaller than the

one Rocky, Sully, and Bandos had bought, but not by much. The bedrooms were identical in size, but Henri used the one on the left. He had filled the other with more books. Henri had tall, teetering towers. Nothing was in order. Or if there was some sort of reasoning, Rocky couldn't follow it.

Henri gestured to the spare room. "The room is small, but it would make a good library."

It was obvious he'd been thinking about it for a while. He might have even bought the house intending to turn the bedroom into a library, but time had gotten away from him.

"I know space is limited, but maybe we can clear out the room in the next couple of days. Bandos and I will get started right away."

"Bandos?"

"And Vaughan, if Bandos can rein him in. Garridan too. He has a shop and access to lumber."

Henri frowned. "Why would they help me?"

Rocky stepped up to Henri, closing the few feet between them and cupping his cheek. "That's what family does."

Henri leaned into his touch. "Thank you."

Rocky rubbed his thumb over Henri's cheek.

Henri had high cheekbones, and his lips were the most kissable Rocky had ever seen. He appeared younger than he was, which wasn't unheard of for a paranormal, but

Rocky had a feeling Henri would always seem young. He had been a college professor as of a few months ago. He would have blended in better with the students.

“You’re my family now?”

“And Bandos and Sully. And their mates.” Rocky kissed Henri’s temple.

Rocky knew Henri’s story because he’d dug around a bit. Maybe it violated his privacy, but he’d still done it.

“I’ve never had that before. Not in my whole life. Not even my parents.” Henri blinked at him as if he expected Rocky to be a mirage. “Are you sure it’s not too much?”

While Rocky understood Henri’s meaning, he didn’t know how to answer. Rocky would give him anything he wanted so long as it was in his power. “You’re the perfect amount, mate.”

There went that pretty blush again. “Are you talking about my body?”

Rocky chuckled. “I mean all of you.”

“It’s a lot of work.” Now they were talking about the shelves.

“I’m happy to do it. It’ll be nice to create something again. It’s been too long.”

Henri leaned into him, smiled. “Bookshelves are my love language.”

Rocky winked at him. “I thought books were.”

Henri shrugged. “Those too.”

Rocky would like nothing more than to stand there staring at Henri and taking advantage of the fact Henri was letting him touch him. But Henri had a mouse problem they needed to take care of, even if his method was unconventional. “Since we have the bookshelf situation solved, how about you set up the mouse habitat and I’ll search for how they’re getting inside the house.”

Henri sighed as if Rocky had disappointed him somehow. “Right.”

“I promise I’ll hold you later.”

Henri bit his lip and gazed at Rocky from under his lashes. “Just holding?”

Rocky didn’t want to rush, but they’d been dancing around each other for too long. “Let see what happens.”

“I’m not very good at that.”

“At what, baby?”

“Going with the flow.”

Rocky kissed Henri. It was a press of lips, but that was all it took to create a spark. He knew one kiss wouldn’t be enough. He expected that. But Rocky hadn’t expected the possessiveness.

He growled, unable to help himself. And when Henri wrapped his arms around Rocky’s waist and hugged him, the wave of possessiveness grew stronger. “You’re mine.”

Henri stiffened but didn’t let go of Rocky. “What does it mean in practical terms?”

“You’re my mate. Mine.”

Henri sighs and relaxed. “So it’s a dragon shifter thing. And not some weird caveman thing where you’ll drag me by my hair into your cave and have your way with me.”

Rocky should have felt offended, but he’d sort of brought it on himself. Possessing a person made anyone an asshole. Rocky was no exception. And Henri seemed to have a narrative in his mind about what it could have meant. And it was so ridiculous, it made Rocky smile, even though he didn’t find it funny to treat anyone in such a thoughtless and violent way. “Caveman style wasn’t what I meant.”

Henri chuckled. It was one of the first times Rocky ever heard him laugh. It sounded like music, as if Henri was enchanted. He could use it to put a spell on Rocky. And it was working. Every cell in Rocky’s body zeroed in on Henri.

Rocky tightened his hold. Nothing else mattered but comforting his mate. “I’ll keep you safe, mate.”

Henri sucked in a breath and then seemed to settle even further into Rocky. It was as if he had finally accepted the declaration, even though Rocky had said it before.

“It’s not that I don’t want to feel safe...” Henri bit his lip and met Rocky’s gaze through his lashes. He blushed. “But you make me feel wanted. I’ve never felt that way before. I need that way more.”

“I want you. So much, sweetheart.”

“I want you too.” Henri’s words seemed to seal the deal between them.

Something shifted between them. The spark had ignited the attraction. The flames created something more, locking them together in a way they hadn’t been before.

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Henri finished the mouse habitat. It was a shallow litter box with hamster bedding. He put food and water in small dishes in one corner. They'd chosen the litter box because it was open. The mouse could come and go as it pleased. It could fend for itself and live in the wilderness if it wanted to. It was smart enough to find a way into Henri's house for shelter and even started making its own bedding. While Henri didn't want it to destroy his stuff, it was a testament to its survival skills.

He set the mouse house next to the couch behind the end table. It was enough space for it and would be out of Henri's way, so there was no fear of scaring it.

Henri kneeled, peering underneath the couch, hoping to get a glimpse. There weren't any obvious signs of the mouse still being around, but in case it was nearby, Henri whispered. "Okay, little buddy. Here's your new home. It's safe. I promise."

Henri heard Rocky enter the room and curse under his breath.

Henri went up on his hands and knees and turned to glance behind him. He smiled when he met Rocky's gaze. But his smile died when Rocky growled.

Rocky's eyes had shifted every time they were around each other. Henri understood the partial shift. He'd never been any other way around Rocky, either. But he didn't understand the growling. It put Henri on alert.

He kneeled and turned to face Rocky. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I reacted to your position."

“My position?” As soon as Henri asked, he knew what Rocky meant. His face heated when he realized his ass was up in the air. It was on the tip of his tongue to apologize and say he hadn’t meant to put himself on display. But then Rocky’s scent floated to him. His arousal made Henri’s blood heat.

He had a bad habit of biting his bottom lip whenever he felt a strong emotion. He’d tried to stop once but couldn’t. It was just something he did. Perhaps he was born with the tendency.

Rocky took a step toward him. His cock was at eye level, and his length was visible on the other side of his zipper.

Henri’s cock grew hard, and it was way more noticeable because his pants were cotton, and he wore boxer briefs.

He’d bought the wrong size because he forgot to change the size button when he’d ordered them online. They gave more room for his cock to grow and while it made him more comfortable in his clothing, it also exposed him.

Rocky growled again. “Let me see, mate.”

Henri hesitated, but he took his hand away, dropping it to his side.

Rocky sniffed the air and then stepped closer, although he still wasn’t close enough to touch. His gaze zeroed in on Henri’s hard length. And he seemed to be...waiting? For what, Henri didn’t know. But he kept his fingers on the button of his jeans as if he were going to undo them. He didn’t, though.

Henri grew hotter. He should have been more nervous than he was. If Rocky had been the one calling the shots, he might have been. Rocky was a walking wet dream with all those muscles and his bad boy appearance. He was danger and passion all

rolled into one gorgeous dragon shifter. But they'd started their little staring contest after Rocky had reacted to Henri's ass being on display. And all Rocky had demanded was he get a clear view of Henri's body. Henri felt powerful, and it was heady. It made him feel as though he could be bold.

And he wanted to be.

Henri unbuttoned his pants and then unzipped them. He wanted to free his cock, put it on display for Rocky. Henri wanted Rocky's reaction. But he waited, glancing at Rocky, hand on his jeans button before meeting his gaze. "Now you, please."

Rocky didn't hesitate. Dark blue cotton outlined Rocky's considerable erection. Henri could even make out the head.

He wanted a taste. He could almost feel the weight of Rocky's hard length in his hand and the warm head between his lips.

Henri pushed his pants and underwear out of the way, freeing his cock. As soon as the air hit it, a wave of embarrassment washed over him, and he wanted to cover himself again.

Rocky picked up on the shift in his emotions because he growled, and it wasn't sensual as it had been before. It came off as more of a reprimand. "None of that, mate."

"I can't help it." He didn't have a poor opinion of his body, but he wasn't confident either. Not when it was Rocky. His mate. He was the one person his body recognized, whose chemistry matched in the most perfect way. He wanted Rocky to find his body sexy. It was obvious Rocky was a top, so of course he liked butts, but Henri wasn't sure what else Rocky found attractive.

Henri had always thought of himself as being average in appearance.

“Yes, you can.”

All of Henri’s thoughts went out of his head when Rocky pushed his underwear down. His cock was big and angry with need. It wanted to make demands even though the rest of Rocky wouldn’t. And it was all for Henri.

Henri crawled across to Rocky. When he was close enough to touch, he met his gaze.

Rocky took off Henri’s glasses and set them on the end table beside them. And then he cupped Henri’s cheek. “Are you sure?”

Henri nodded and wrapped his fingers around Rocky’s cock. “Very.”

It was like silk over steel. When Henri pressed his nose against the underside of the head, it smelled of cinnamon and sugar. “Smells so good.”

“You do too, mate.”

They’d been ignoring the mating pull for too long. Henri’s reasoning seemed inconsequential. He’d told Rocky his secret. Instead of rejection, Rocky had comforted him, which led to sniffing his cock as if it were the best-smelling thing in the entire world. Henri had smelled nothing better.

Henri kissed it before licking the pre-cum off the tip. One taste and Henri knew he’d never have enough.

Rocky moaned. He cupped the back of Henri’s head, not making demands. It was as if he needed to touch some part of Henri.

“I need you,” Henri whispered.

His lips brushed Rocky’s cock. He didn’t intend to say it aloud, despite every cell in his body feeling those words. It made him desperate, which left him unsettled. He’d never been desperate for anything in his entire life until Rocky had ridden into Saint Lakes on his motorcycle with a bandana wrapped around his head and more leather and denim than anyone had a right to wear. He seemed as dangerous up close as he had all those months ago.

Henri had never considered himself one of those people who chased bad boys. Pursuing anyone for anything had always been beneath him. But he’d follow Rocky into Hell if he had to. He’d do anything for more contact, more closeness, more comfort.

He wasn’t even sure what part of Rocky he needed the most. All he knew was the culmination made him feel wanted.

Rocky ran his fingers through Henri’s hair, gripping it before tugging. He tilted Henri’s head until their gazes met. Rocky’s blue-green eyes might have been his dragon’s, which should have made him appear even more dangerous than his motorcycle did, but all Henri saw was affection.

“You have me, baby.”

He answered with a kiss. Talking wasn’t what he wanted. Feeling Rocky against him would be so much better.

Rocky sucked in a breath. Never in the history of growls had one ever been sweet until Henri heard Rocky do it.

Henri angled Rocky’s cock to take it into his mouth. As soon as he wrapped his lips

around the head, Rocky moaned and laced his fingers through Henri's hair. The hold felt different. It was as though Rocky was afraid Henri would pull away, but Henri wanted to stay right where he was.

Henri savored the experience. It was their first time together. Rocky was the only mate he'd ever get. It wasn't often or usual for someone to find a person whose chemistry matched as well as theirs did. They wouldn't have another first time.

He hoped they'd have a lot of years with each other. But it wasn't guaranteed. He wanted every second to count. So he'd worship Rocky's cock while he could. Rocky was beautiful, even his cock.

His lips stretched around Rocky to the point it was on the edge of pain. He couldn't take all of it like he wanted to. It took him a couple of tries before he gave up and focused on the head.

"That's it, baby. Just like that." Rocky's praise went straight to his cock.

He wrapped his hand around the shaft, working in tandem to bring Rocky to a slow conclusion. He created a rhythm, which made Rocky moan and let out soft curses throughout the entire experience.

Henri's cock was hard and aching with need. Using his free hand, he jacked himself off to the rhythm he set with his mouth.

Rocky's body tensed. His hold became more demanding. "Fuck."

The word went straight to Henri's balls for reasons he couldn't explain. The orgasm built in his core, making him lose focus. All thoughts left him. He was pretty sure his soul also left through his cock. It was probably on the floor with his cum.

The need to breathe wasn't quite panic-inducing, but he forgot how.

"Oh fuck, baby." Rocky was vocal during sex. Henri would have never guessed that about Rocky, but it heated his blood almost as much as Rocky's touch.

Henri knew Rocky was about ready to come. He expected it, so he used his tongue, massaging the underside of his cock. He pumped his hard length not stopping even when Rocky stiffened and came.

Henri swallowed every drop. He licked around the head when Rocky relaxed and carded his fingers through Henri's hair. When he kissed the tip and then pulled off, meeting Rocky's gaze, he couldn't bring himself to let go of Rocky's shaft. It hadn't softened yet, but Henri knew it would soon.

Rocky smiled. "Lay on the couch, baby."

"I came too." Henri had never come from sucking someone off before, although he didn't have much experience.

"I know. But I want to scent you."

Henri let Rocky's softening cock go.

Rocky pulled his underwear in place and refastened his pants.

He stood, putting himself back together.

Rocky covered his hands with his own. "Not yet. Lay on the couch. Please."

Henri hesitated, but he hooked his fingers into his pants and underwear. "Off?"

“Yeah.” Rocky watched as Henri pushed his clothing down and off. He smelled the air as if trying to catch a wave of Henri’s scent.

Henri had never known someone so in tune with his sense of smell before. It was as if the primal part of Rocky needed it.

Henri lay on his back on the couch, resting his head on a throw pillow.

He was a little embarrassed for his lower bits to be on display. It was ridiculous to feel that way, considering he’d had Rocky’s cock in his mouth. They’d started their sexual play by exposing themselves to each other, so he shouldn’t feel so embarrassed, but he could still feel the heat rising to his cheeks.

He bit his bottom lip when Rocky gazed at him as if he were his next meal and he was starving.

“What do you want me to do next?” Henri whispered.

“Pull your legs back.” Rocky stepped closer but didn’t touch him yet.

Henri sucked in a breath. He wasn’t sure why the request shocked him. He was ready for anything Rocky wanted to give, including his cock. But they’d both need time to recover. Henri didn’t think fucking was Rocky’s intention.

Henri pulled his legs out of the way, exposing his hole to Rocky. As soon as he did, Rocky went to his knees next to the couch. He buried his nose against Henri’s balls.

Henri moaned. His cock attempted to get hard again but didn’t quite succeed.

Rocky kissed Henri’s taint. Henri forgot how to breathe when Rocky moved to his opening.

“Mmm. Mine.” Rocky didn’t bury his nose between Henri’s cheeks. Instead, he licked from Henri’s hole to his taint, sucking each ball into his mouth before licking along his cock.

Henri sucked in a breath and then whimpered when his cock grew hard again. He’d never recovered so fast before. The feeling was heady. At least he remembered how to breathe, but it was so he could beg Rocky to make him come again. “Please.”

Rocky didn’t even ask what Henri wanted. He already knew. Wet heat surrounded Henri’s cock. “Oh gods. Please. Please, more.”

His behavior would embarrass him later. After Rocky made him shatter into a million pieces and put him back together again.

Rocky sank all the way down until he had Henri’s whole cock in his mouth. The wet heat disappeared almost as fast as it had begun, which made Henri whimper even more.

Rocky stuck his finger into his mouth, but didn’t linger. He sucked Henri’s cock again.

Rocky pushed a wet finger inside Henri. Something about the invasion made his blood heat at the same time it settled him. It was as if he aligned with Rocky on a cellular level.

Between the wet heat, the friction Rocky created as he sucked Henri in and out of his mouth at a pace so slow it was as if he were memorizing the way Henri tasted, and the finger thrusting in and out of Henri, it wouldn’t take long for him to come.

And then Rocky touched Henri’s prostate. Henri arched off the couch. He knew he shouted. The sound might have echoed across the lake. He’d cared about people

hearing him later, after Rocky stopped making his body sing.

Rocky quickened his pace. It proved to be too much. As much as Henri wanted to prolong the experience, his orgasm hit him so fast he didn't even have time to warn Rocky.

Rocky didn't stop sucking until Henri had quieted down and grew too sensitive for him to keep up his ministrations. Rocky pulled his finger out.

He stood, plucking Henri off the couch, and sat with him in his lap.

Henri clung to him, trying to come down from the most incredible experience of his life. He needed Rocky to anchor him or he'd float to the ceiling.

Henri shut his eyes and rested his cheek against Rocky's chest. He could hear Rocky's heartbeat. The steady rhythm soothed him. It had such a tranquil effect. His mind shut down, and he fell asleep.

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Rocky was stuck. Henri cuddled against him like a big cat. His arms were around Rocky's waist, holding on to him as if he expected Rocky to disappear. Henri's breathing indicated he was asleep. He was still naked from the waist down.

Rocky loved it. It was a big change from what they'd had before, but a welcome one.

Rocky stomach rumbled, telling him it was dinnertime. He would cuddle Henri forever if it didn't mean he'd starve to death.

Rocky held him, rubbing his shirt-covered back.

Their bond had strengthened. Rocky could feel Henri's contentment, even while he slept.

Rocky picked up his phone from where he'd laid it on the end table earlier and pressed Bandos's number.

Bandos answered on the first ring.

"Are you busy?" Rocky tried to keep his volume down so as not to wake Henri. Either he succeeded or Henri slept deeper than most.

"I have two mates. One of them is Vaughan Somerset. I'm always busy." Vaughan wasn't only annoying on a good day, he was witty at least half of the time. It kept everyone on their toes, especially Bandos. But Echo seemed to balance them out.

"I meant with work."

“I know.” Bandos whispered something to someone before talking to Rocky again.
“We’re just figuring out what to have for dinner.”

“Aka arguing about it.” Vaughan sounded so close it was as if he’d taken the phone from Bandos. In all likelihood, he plastered himself against Bandos while on the phone.

“Food is why I called.”

“I’ll be there in five.”

“Henri’s house.”

“Do you need grocery supplies?”

“I’m not sure what he has here.”

“What were you wanting to make?”

“Some sort of pasta, salad, and garlic bread.”

“Sounds so good,” Vaughan said.

“Dinner for everyone here, then.” Rocky owed Henri a proper date. One that didn’t include inviting the family to crash it.

They ended the call a few minutes later.

It wasn’t even an hour before someone knocked on the door. Rocky grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and covered Henri so his naked bits weren’t exposed.

Henri stirred a little, sighing and then settled again.

Bandos came in first, followed by Vaughan, who had Echo strapped to his back piggyback style. Vaughan and Echo each carried one of those reusable grocery bags. They laughed with each other but quieted when they saw Henri's sleeping form.

Vaughan mouthed "sorry" right before he scanned the room. His gaze first landed on all the books and then they went to where Henri's pants and underwear still lay next to the couch. "Holy shit. So many books. And also holy sex smells."

"Vaughan. That's rude." Echo might have giggled, but at least he admonished Vaughan.

Bandos raised his eyebrows and said, "Kitchen?"

Rocky pointed.

Henri stiffened. His breathing changed, and he pressed his face into Rocky, hiding although it was ineffective.

Rocky cupped his cheek, using his arm to block everyone's view of him. Henri grabbed Rocky's hand and placed it over his eyes.

Echo covered Vaughan's mouth with his hand when he tried to speak.

Bandos nodded, and the three of them walked into the kitchen.

"They're gone, baby." Rocky tried to lower his hand, but Henri tightened his hold.

Henri didn't speak right away. It was as if he had to get his bearings. His stomach growled.

“Bandos and his mates are here. They’re making us dinner.” Rocky hoped the explanation would make Henri say something, but he only nodded. “Are you okay?”

Henri nodded again, but he also yawned.

“Are you going to say anything?”

He sighed as if clearing the sleep from his body. That was when Rocky realized Henri was one of those people who took his time waking up.

Bandos, Echo, and Vaughan made noises in the kitchen. Pots clanked, and the sound of someone chopping vegetables was unmistakable. Then the sizzle of meat in a pan.

Echo said, “I want to learn how to chop fast.”

Bandos spoke. The deep registers of his voice settled Rocky, making him feel content. Getting to hold Henri made it all the sweeter.

“Take your time, mate.” Rocky needed to text Sully about dinner. The whole family should eat together.

“I’m still naked.” The embarrassment was evident.

“They didn’t see.” And even if they had, no one would say anything except for maybe Vaughan. Even then, it would have been teasing with no real judgement.

“My pants and underwear are on the floor.”

“Do you want to get dressed?”

When Henri nodded, Rocky made sure his hold was firm so Henri would feel secure

in his arms before he grabbed Henri's clothing. Henri wrapped his arms around Rocky, holding on when Rocky stood.

Henri chuckled. It warmed Rocky from the inside out.

Rocky smiled. "What's so funny, baby?"

"I feel like a child with you carrying me around."

"You feel grown to me." Rocky could feel Henri's cock against his abdomen. He knew the exact second it hardened.

Henri covered his face with the blanket. "I can't help it."

"I'm not complaining."

Henri lowered the covers. Rocky could feel his stare, even though he didn't take his gaze from where he was going. Henri's home had way too many stacks of books to not pay attention. He could kick a stack or even brush against one, and the whole thing would tumble.

"You like it?"

"I like everything about you, baby."

Carrying Henri around meant he was as close as he could get. He finally had Henri in his arms, and he wasn't letting him go anytime soon.

When they entered the bedroom, Rocky closed the door. Rocky set Henri on his feet.

When Henri bit his lip, Rocky knew it was because of nervousness. He felt what

Henri did, even though the bond wasn't complete. Their connection strengthening in such a short time and without proper bonding wasn't beyond the norm. It might very well be a blessing from the gods. If there was a scientific reason, Henri could explain it. Rocky would ask another time, though.

"Do you want me to give you privacy?"

Henri shook his head. "I don't want to get dressed yet." He dropped the blanket, exposing his hard length and nakedness.

Rocky knew what he wanted. He also knew they'd get teased if they did anything. But they probably would anyway, since the smell of cum hung in the air. Vaughan already said as much.

"What do you want?" Rocky didn't wait for an answer. He slid next to Henri and took his cock in hand.

Rocky's own length hardened in his jeans, but he would wait until later.

Henri moaned. And then moaned again when Rocky spit on his hand, using it to ease the way.

"Yeah. Like this. For now." Henri leaned into him as if his legs wouldn't hold him anymore.

Rocky wrapped an arm around his waist and lifted him, laying him on the bed.

When Henri's legs fell apart as if in invitation, Rocky thought he'd lose his mind. It created a fire inside him.

It was supposed to be a quick jack-off session because some of their family were in

the house. But he lost control around Henri.

Rocky kissed him, making demands, wanting everything Henri would give. He needed the bond as much as he needed his next breath. He was desperate for it because they'd waited so long to be with each other.

Rocky undid his button and zip, freeing his erection. He took them both in hand, knowing it wouldn't be enough, but it was something at least.

It seemed Rocky wasn't alone in his need. He was the one who ended the kiss. When Henri tilted his head to the side as if asking Rocky to bite him, Rocky growled and struck.

The whole thing went quicker than Rocky would have liked. As soon as he tasted Henri, he felt the bond click into place. It wasn't complete, but they were close.

Henri sank his teeth into Rocky's shoulder. The contentment entered his soul, taking over his mind and body. When he came, he forgot about everything else, but the way Henri made him feel.

He lay there for long minutes, catching his breath. It had been a long time since he'd had sex and it had never been as good as it was with Henri. When his bones stopped feeling as if they were mush, he lifted off Henri and gathered their cum onto his fingers.

When Rocky pressed a finger inside Henri, making sure his cum was inside Henri's body, Henri tightened his hold.

Oh gods. Rocky. Rocky. Henri was in his head.

It was what he'd needed for so long. Emotion gathered in his chest. My mate.

Henri stopped biting him, kissing the wound he'd made. And then he tightened his hold. That's right, dragon.

It was right. Nothing had been so perfect before.

Rocky licked across the bite wound and kissed it. He pulled his fingers out of Henri.

"I'm sorry my secret separated us," Henri whispered.

"We're together now." Being with Henri was everything Rocky wanted.

"You make it sound as though it wasn't difficult."

It was one of the hardest experiences Rocky had ever had. "The past doesn't matter. We have right now."

"And the future."

"Only now, mate." The future was uncertain. It hung over them as though it were a shadowy specter. Rocky couldn't do anything to take them away. All he could do was hold on to Henri, keep him close, and hope it was enough.

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Henri hadn't ever had so many people in his house before. To say the way he lived embarrassed him was an understatement. Luckily, Rocky let him hide his face in his neck.

They must think he was a hoarder. Maybe he was. Oh gods, he was a book hoarder, wasn't he? There wasn't any other explanation other than an addiction to books.

"I think I have a problem," he whispered so no one else could hear but Rocky. As soon as he spoke aloud, he remembered they had an internal connection. I think I have a problem. He wasn't sure why he repeated it since he knew Rocky had heard him the first time.

Rocky chuckled, which drew the attention of everyone in the room. The reason Henri knew it had was because everyone stopped talking.

Henri tilted his head so he could see everyone's reaction. Bandos raised his eyebrows. Echo said, "Wow." And Vaughan chuckled while saying, "Yeah. First for everything. Who knew Rocky knew how to laugh?"

Rocky flipped Vaughan off, but otherwise didn't respond. Instead, he spoke to Henri through their link. How can I help?

Rocky's response made Henri's chest ache, as if his heart had grown in the span of a few minutes.

Don't you want to know what my problem is?

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll do what I can.” Rocky might have spoken aloud, but the other three in the room knew he was talking to Henri. Being mates themselves, they knew how it felt to have an internal connection.

I think I’m addicted to books.

Rocky chuckled again. The first step is admitting you have a problem.

Henri slapped Rocky on his arm playfully. “I’m serious.”

“It’s not a big deal, baby.”

Vaughan leaned on the counter, grinning at them. “What are you talking about? Maybe I can help.”

Rocky shook his head, telling Henri not to answer, but Henri thought it was a rude response.

“My book problem.”

“Don’t tease him about it.” Rocky growled as if the command came with a warning.

Vaughan put his hand on his chest and squawked as if offended. “I would never.”

Bandos chuckled and shook his head. “Have you read them all?”

“All but the one I just bought.”

“Then you have an addiction to reading. Not books.” Bandos never stopped stirring the marinara sauce.

“Yes.” Henri might as well admit it.

Vaughan chimed in. “Reading is never a problem. Ever. You need somewhere to keep them, is all.”

“I’m making him shelves,” Rocky said.

“My brother, Gabe, should be able to help. Bennett too,” Vaughan supplied.

“I can decorate the shelves with plants and stuff. If you don’t mind taking care of them.” Echo chopped vegetables as he spoke.

Vaughan kissed Echo’s cheek. “You decorate everything already just by entering a room.”

“Amen,” Bandos said, without turning from where he stood at the stove.

Echo blushed. “Sweet-talker.”

“Is it working?” Vaughan hugged Echo from behind.

Echo chuckled. “Yep.”

Bandos shook his head. “It’s family time, Vaughan.”

“Rocky and Henri had sexy time during family time. Why can’t we?”

Henri groaned and buried his face in the crook of Rocky’s neck again.

Rocky smiled and tightened his hold.

“I prefer you mosey on home across the lake if you’re going to have ‘sexy time’.” Henri made sure everyone heard him. “You’re not using my bedroom.”

“You and Rocky did it.” Vaughan sounded as if he wanted to laugh. It was how Henri knew Vaughan was teasing him. And since he was Rocky’s family, Henri figured he should get used to it. Henri had been at enough clan meetings to know Vaughan teased everyone he considered family or if he liked a person.

“It’s none of your business, Vaughan Somerset. I’ll tell Mother Estelle on you.” Childish? Yes. But it was also effective, so Henri rolled with it.

Bandos and Echo both chuckled.

Rocky rubbed Henri’s back. “Talk about something else, Vaughan.”

Vaughan obeyed the command. “We should eat together every day. We do anyway. We should make it official.”

“We could switch off who hosts, so it’s not always at Sully and Rocky’s house.” Echo frowned and met Rocky’s gaze. “Or are you living here now?”

“We haven’t talked about it?” Rocky whispers in his ear. “Do you want to spend the night together tonight?”

Rocky hadn’t wanted to pressure Henri. Henri knew it was the reason he hadn’t commented on moving to Henri’s house. And Henri wasn’t sure they were ready to make it so official either. Maybe it was a step too far too fast for Rocky. Henri couldn’t be one hundred percent sure, so he didn’t press either. Instead, he answered the question. “I would love spending all night with you, but books are all over my bedroom. What if you have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night? You could trip and die.”

Everyone laughed as if Henri were joking, but he was very serious.

Rocky chuckled. "I'll be careful. Or you can stay over at my house tonight. It's up to you."

"I think we should stay at your house until we get the books situated." It was safer and would mean they'd share a bed for the first time.

Sully, Wesley and Lucy came in a second later. At the sight of Lucy, Henri had a terrifying thought. He scrambled off Rocky's lap and went to Wesley. "Please don't let her eat my mouse."

Wesley blinked. His eyes were wide, and Henri had to wonder if he heard Henri at all. "There are even books in the kitchen."

Henri sighed. "I have a problem. But Rocky is helping me take care of it. Now, will you please focus on your cat and my mouse? It could mean someone gets murdered and I won't have it in my house."

Wesley blinked as if seeing him for the first time.

Sully chuckled. "I'll make sure Lucy doesn't turn into a serial killer."

"I don't know if there's more than one mouse. She could wipe out the whole family."

Everyone laughed again, but he was serious. That happened to him a lot. He wasn't sure why people thought he was funny. He'd always been a little socially awkward but he put himself out there anyway because sometimes it was worth it. Sometimes he made a friend.

Henri met Rocky's gaze and smiled.

Sometimes he gained a mate.

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Henri gathered his clothing from the spare bedroom, putting them in the suitcase he'd packed them in when going to stay with Rocky all those months ago. He hadn't thought he'd ever get to sleep in Rocky's room. He never thought he'd bond either, but Rocky was a constant presence in his mind. Even with Rocky two doors down in his bedroom, Henri knew everything Rocky felt. He had a window into Rocky's mind as though he were a novice at telepathy. For once in Henri's life, he loved the idea of being a novice at something.

Henri couldn't help smiling either. He'd had more sex in the last few days than he'd had in his whole life. It was good sex, too. Great even. Rocky was so big and strong. Yet he was gentle with Henri. It was unexpected in many ways. Yet, Henri hadn't ever thought Rocky would be anything but gentle. Everything about Rocky made Henri smile.

"If you keep thinking about making love, I'll throw you on the bed right here." The timbre of Rocky's deep voice went straight to Henri's cock.

"How did you figure out how to read my thoughts? I haven't been able to read yours. I'm still stuck on emotions." Henri should have figured it out. He could learn anything so why not that.

Rocky slid behind Henri, hugging him from behind. "I'm an investigator. I gather evidence and let it tell me a story."

"Tell me your process." Henri leaned into him.

Rocky whispered in Henri's ear when he spoke, making Henri shiver. "Well, I felt it

when you thought about sex. Your emotions were...giddy. But you were still aroused. I smelled it from down the hall. And then the giddiness turned into desire. So I figured you were thinking about how the love making is great and how you want more.”

Henri smiled because Rocky was spot-on. “You’re an investigative genius.”

Rocky chuckled. “Nope. I feel the same way.”

Henri huffed. “I can’t tell.”

“Close your eyes.” Rocky’s lips brushed Henri’s cheek next to his ear. It made Henri want to free his cock from the confines of his pants. The way Rocky rubbed his thumb over Henri’s flat belly didn’t help. Henri could tell the gesture wasn’t deliberate, which made it all the sweeter.

Henri did as Rocky asked without hesitation. “Now what?”

“Focus on me.” Rocky kissed Henri on the place below his ear.

“I’m always focused on you.”

“Shh. Separate your emotions from mine inside your mind.”

Henri already knew how to do that. He sighed but did as Rocky asked. His mind zeroed in on Rocky. He could tell Rocky felt affection. He was also content. And protective. It startled Henri how fierce Rocky’s protective instinct was and not just toward him. He was protective of his whole family, much like an alpha would be.

Are all dragon shifters as protective of their mates as you are of me?

I don't know. What else do I feel? Rocky's question had Henri digging a little deeper.

You're worried.

And? As soon as Rocky asked, he projected an image of Henri, naked, in the center of his bed.

Henri chuckled. "You made it obvious."

"It should be. I've wanted you for so long. So much so I couldn't think about anything else. Being able to hold you makes me feel..."

"Relief. I can tell," Henri finished for him. "Me too."

He turned in Rocky's arms, hugging him. Physical contact was what they both needed. And lots of it. "I want to hold you. All night long."

It would be the best night of his life. He was sure of it. "I want that too."

"I want you to be naked in my bed, against me while we sleep. And then I want to smell you on my sheets tomorrow morning." Every word Rocky whispered went straight to Henri's cock. Henri's chest ached. Maybe his heart wanted to leave Henri's body and go to its new home with Rocky. "I want it every night and every morning."

"Yes, please."

"Can you feel how much I mean it?"

Henri could. Rocky was just as aroused as he was by what he'd said, and none of it had to do with sex. Never once had Rocky talked about fucking Henri. He'd wanted

to hold Henri all night. Feeling how their bodies fit together. It was all about intimacy.

“I feel it.”

Maybe they would have sex. Intimacy could mean that too. But sex was one part of who they were together. It’s what Rocky had been trying to say.

Henri was on board with anything Rocky wanted.

“Is it bedtime yet?”

Rocky chuckled, even though Henri was serious. “Not quite, but we can lie in bed. I have a television in my bedroom. We can watch while I hold you. Or we can talk.”

“Or make love.”

“‘Or make love’.” Rocky sounded amused. But Henri could feel how the thought ramped up his arousal.

Henri pulled out of Rocky’s arms and grabbed his suitcase. “I’m ready to move to your room.”

“I see that.” Rocky’s amusement didn’t last more than a moment before his expression turned serious. “I want inside you. But I don’t want to make it just about fucking. I want—”

“I know. I picked up on it already.” Henri grabbed Rocky’s hand and pulled him out of the room. “Let’s go.”

As soon as they were inside Rocky’s room and the door was closed, Henri set his

suitcase next to the dresser and then turned to Rocky. He hesitated as he gripped the bottom of his shirt. He wasn't sure what stopped him other than nerves.

This moment felt bigger than their other times. He wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because he'd have more than Rocky's fingers inside him. Once they did it, they would be together in the eyes of the clan. Rocky and Henri would be an us.

The logical part of Henri's brain understood they had already set it in stone. The emotion had been there for a while. Bonding had elevated it. The sex they would have would be a confession of love.

Henri could see the understanding in Rocky's expression. He was aware of the significance of the moment, too.

Rocky met Henri's gaze. "Do you want to make love?"

Henri nodded. "Do you?"

"Yes. More than anything." Rocky cupped Henri's cheek. "I need to hear you say it."

"Yes. I want you. Inside me. For real this time." Each word felt as though it were a confession, as though Henri had laid his soul bare. He could because he knew it was safe with Rocky. For the first time, he felt safe in all the ways a person could feel. He didn't need to guard his emotions or his thoughts. He could lay himself at Rocky's feet and know Rocky would be gentle with him.

Rocky ran his thumb over Henri's bottom lip, loosening it. After his lip was free, Rocky leaned in, kissing him. It was a gentle assault at first. A press of the lips turned into swipes of his tongue between Henri's lips. He relaxed his mouth, wanting more. Rocky ignited an ache in the center of his belly.

As soon as Henri let Rocky in, the kiss grew demanding. It was as if Rocky wanted to consume him. Every taste went a little deeper and lasted longer than the one before.

Rocky held Henri's nape with a firm, yet gentle, grip. He wrapped his free arm around Henri's waist. The hold gave Rocky control, which wasn't something Henri had thought he would want to give up, yet it heated his blood.

Henri gave himself to Rocky. His legs wouldn't hold him anymore, so Rocky lifted him, carrying him across the room.

Rocky's hard cock pressed against his abdomen. Henri thought about feeling it against his palm. Even through the denim of Rocky's jeans, it would feel amazing. Before he could reach for it, Rocky laid him on the bed.

His back hit the mattress.

The kissing didn't stop.

Rocky lay on top of him. His weight soothed Henri's soul. He wasn't sure if he had ever felt content until Rocky surrounded him. He didn't even realize he carried around so much anxiety until it wasn't there anymore. All of his worries disappeared. Rocky lying on top of him made him relax.

He was almost positive his heart rate had decreased. His cock stayed hard, and he felt as if he would come out of his skin if he didn't get naked soon.

But Rocky kept kissing. Each taste made Henri burn with desire. More. Please.

That's right. Rocky ended the kiss but trailed his lips along Henri's jawline to right below his ear. "Beg me."

Henri sucked in a breath. A part of him couldn't believe what those two whispered words did to him. His cock ached. And without thought, he did what Rocky demanded. "Please. I need to feel you. I need your skin on mine. To touch you. Please, Rocky."

"Who am I?" Rocky growled, but it wasn't aggressive. He wasn't angry. He was so turned on his dragon ruled him.

Henri understood how it felt when instinct took over. For a shifter, instinct was everything. Henri wasn't an exception. What he didn't expect was applying it to sex. It was Henri's instinct driving him to obey Rocky. "My mate."

Rocky sat up, pulling his shirt over his head.

"Get undressed." Rocky climbed off the bed and unfastened his pants. His hands shook, and he growled when he thought Henri wasn't getting naked fast enough.

But Henri couldn't seem to make his fingers work on the buttons of his shirt. He whimpered when he thought he disappointed Rocky. "I can't go faster."

Rocky's pants hit the floor. He had nothing but his underwear on. "Slow down, baby."

Henri nodded, but his hands still shook. It took a while to get all the buttons undone. And through it all Rocky watched him. He kept praising him. "Such a tight little body. You're a beautiful boy."

Henri bit his lip as he shrugged off his shirt. The button on his pants was a lot easier. He had them off in no time. As soon as he was naked, he lay on the bed again. "I need you."

“I know what you need.” But Rocky didn’t close the distance. His gaze was hungry. The anticipation built. Having Rocky inside him was all Henri could think about.

The longer Rocky stood there, staring at Henri, the hotter Henri became. He grew desperate. He squirmed, wanting to feel Rocky. If he would wrap his fingers around Henri’s cock, it would relieve some of the tension.

Henri knew not to touch himself. It was an unspoken command. But he needed something. He wished the air could grow hands. What would be better was if Rocky would lie on him like he had before. “Please. Rocky. Please touch me.”

Rocky smiled. “Good boy. All you had to do was beg.”

Henri had never been called good before. “Tell me again. Please.”

Rocky climbed onto the bed. Instead of lying on Henri, Rocky lay on his side, facing him. He cupped Henri’s cheek, meeting his gaze. “You’re a very good boy, sweetheart. And so beautiful.”

Rocky ran his hand along Henri’s neck, to his shoulder and then down his chest. He ran the pad of his finger over Henri’s nipple. It sent a jolt of electricity through Henri. He arched his back. He hadn’t come down before Rocky did it again.

Henri cried out and turned into Rocky, wanting more but knowing it would be too much at the same time. It was the best kind of sensual torture. He shouldn’t have liked it, but he did.

His cock ached. He tried to rub his cock against Rocky. He wanted some part of Rocky against him. “On your back, baby.”

Henri whimpered but did as Rocky commanded.

“Did you know your nipples were so sensitive?”

Henri shook his head.

“Use your words.” Rocky ran his fingers over Henri’s other nipple. He arched into the touch, crying out as he had before.

Henri couldn’t take it anymore. He needed some sort of pressure on his cock. When he reached down, Rocky grabbed his hand. “That’s mine.”

“Please, Rocky.” Henri wasn’t so far gone he was in tears, but he was close. He wanted more than Rocky was giving him. It drove him mad. But he loved everything Rocky did, even when he made Henri beg.

Based on Rocky’s knowing smile, he knew the effect he had on Henri.

Rocky had given Henri everything he’d asked for. Every time he wanted sex, Rocky hadn’t hesitated. And he didn’t make very many demands. Rocky taking charge didn’t surprise him. He’d been dominant every time they had sex, but to a much lesser degree.

Rocky’s expression showed his desperate need and his uneven breathing. Henri bet his heart rate had increased. Rocky’s cock was a hard outline in his boxer briefs.

“Tell me if you knew your nipples were so sensitive first. Afterward, I’ll kiss your pretty cock. I promise.” Rocky ran a finger across Henri’s left nipple the entire time he spoke.

Henri couldn’t breathe. He managed to squeak out a response, although it was unintelligible.

Rocky leaned down, kissing his cheek.

Henri chased the kiss. Rocky licked across Henri's open lips. He pulled away almost as soon as he started, whispering in Henri's ear. "Be a good boy now, so I can reward you later."

Henri tried to speak, but Rocky began giving the other nipple attention.

"Focus on your words." Rocky's advice was ridiculous. Henri had no words. They went right out of his mind each time Rocky touched him.

"Didn't know." Did everyone react the same way he did when someone touched them in certain spots? He felt as though he were on the verge of burning up. That need to come built in his core. He'd come without touching his cock.

Rocky kissed Henri's neck where his mating mark was. "You didn't know what?"

"Ni-nipples." It was the only word he could get out because Rocky never once stopped his sensual assault on Henri's body. "Please. Gonna come."

Rocky growled. "If you do, I'll spank your sweet ass."

Rocky laid his hand flat on Henri's chest.

Henri wasn't sure he'd like a spanking, but the idea of getting punished by Rocky ignited a flame. It made his cock throb.

Rocky smiled. "You would like it if I bent you over on my lap, wouldn't you?"

Henri nodded. He was too far gone to feel any sort of embarrassment. All he knew was that he burned with need.

For the first time in his life, he didn't think about anything. Words came rushing out as if he needed to spew them at Rocky. "I didn't know about my nipples. Please touch me. My cock. And my...inside me too."

"You've never touched them yourself?" Rocky trailed his hand down Henri's chest. He bypassed Henri's cock and cupped his balls.

Henri moaned, opening his legs to give Rocky better access. "It-it doesn't feel the same as-as when you do it."

Henri sucked in a breath when Rocky rubbed a finger around his hole.

Rocky growled. "No one else has touched you there?"

"No one but you." Henri didn't want anyone else touching him anywhere. "Forever."

"Good boy." Rocky reached past Henri and pulled the nightstand drawer open. He grabbed an unopened bottle of lube, but didn't open it right away, laying it next to Henri's hip. He ran his hand along Henri's cock, gripping it.

When Rocky kissed the tip of his cock, Henri sucked in a breath.

"Don't come, baby." Rocky said right before he took Henri's cock between his lips.

The wet heat went straight to his balls. He could feel the buildup in his core and knew it wouldn't take much to send him over the edge.

"Stop." Henri gripped Rocky's hair, trying to keep him still. "Please. Don't. I'm gonna...if you do."

A part of Henri hoped Rocky would let him come. He wouldn't mind the punishment

later. But he wanted to last long enough for Rocky to get inside him.

Rocky must have wanted it too, because he pulled off. His hands shook when he opened the lube, but he got some on his fingers. He took the time to warm it before pushing a finger inside Henri. And then he took Henri's cock into his mouth again and held it there for what seemed like forever.

The pleasure was overwhelming. The wet heat drove Henri crazy. He hadn't ever felt anything like it before.

He was addicted to Rocky's touch. Rocky had flipped a switch their first time. The way Rocky made love would max Henri out. He'd never want to leave Rocky's bed. He'd never wear clothes again because they got in the way. And Rocky would be right there, making his body sing.

When Rocky touched his prostate, Henri lost his mind. It set him on fire. He'd burn out of control soon. He'd burn them both up. Henri lifted his hips, wanting Rocky to rub against his happy place some more. He wanted to feel fuller and for Rocky to go deeper.

Rocky gave him what he wanted, adding another finger, fucking him faster and deeper each time. Every thrust hit Henri in just the right way.

"Oh, gods. Please. Inside." There went his words again.

He was so close. He wouldn't be able to hold back for very much longer.

"I love it when you beg," Rocky growled. He pulled his fingers out and pushed his underwear down, taking them off.

Henri opened his legs, making room for Rocky.

Rocky positioned himself.

Henri breathed a sigh of relief when he felt his weight. Then Rocky's blunt tip pressed against him.

Henri closed his eyes when the pressure made him feel full. "You're big."

"Look at me." Rocky sounded as if he were talking while running.

Henri opened his eyes, meeting Rocky's gaze.

"Are you okay?"

Henri nodded but then caught himself, knowing Rocky would want a verbal answer.

"I feel full. But it's good."

"Tell me when I can move." Rocky kissed Henri as if he wanted to take Henri's mind off the way Rocky's cock filled him. And Henri didn't want to think about anything else.

You feel good inside me. I like the fullness.

Rocky stopped kissing Henri and moaned as he rocked into him. He gave Henri time to get used to him. But Henri wanted it faster. He didn't want Rocky to hold back.

"More. Faster. Please."

Rocky picked up the pace, thrusting into Henri as if he meant it. It was what Henri needed.

Each push rubbed his prostate. When he pulled out, it was a little jolt of electricity.

Henri had never felt so much concentrated pleasure in his life.

Rocky lay on him, providing friction on Henri's cock with each thrust.

Henri felt the buildup in his core before his muscles tightened around Rocky's cock, trying to keep Rocky inside. Warm wetness coated their abdomens.

"Mate. My mate." Rocky bit him. It was unexpected. Henri cried out and then cursed.

Henri wasn't sure how he'd come again so soon. It should have been impossible. But the white-hot pleasure hit him, doubly so the second time around.

He was so into his own pleasure he almost missed when Rocky came.

Mine.

I'm yours. They belonged to each other.

Rocky grunted and stilled inside him, pressing in as far as he could go. And then he sighed, relaxing on Henri. He licked across the mating mark and then buried his face in Henri's neck.

Henri clung to Rocky, trying to come down from the high. His body felt loose but strung out at the same time. He couldn't have moved even if Rocky wasn't lying on top of him. He was pretty sure his muscles had liquified during his second orgasm.

"Am I too heavy?"

"You feel good." He loved how Rocky's weight made him feel protected. He could pretend he didn't have a care in the world.

Rocky pushed his softening cock inside. “So do you. I don’t want to leave.”

Henri chuckled. “Physiologically, it’s impossible. You’ll soften and slip out of me.”

“Science be damned.”

Henri sucked in a breath, trying to act as though Rocky’s comment offended him, but he couldn’t help but chuckled. “You can’t damn science.”

“Just did.” Rocky growled playfully and bit Henri. “I’m comfortable right here.”

Henri squirmed, trying to get away because Rocky’s kisses tickled. “Rocky.”

“I’ll get hard again and come back home.” The way he whispered it, as if he viewed Henri as home, made Henri’s heart fill to overflowing.

Henri tightened his hold. “I want that too.”

“Speaking of home. You have a lot of work to do tomorrow.” How could Rocky think about anything but wanting a repeat of what they’d done?

“What?”

“You have to clean the spare bedroom.”

Henri groaned. “I don’t want to think about it right now. Or ever. It’s too much.”

“You’ll get a reward.”

“Aren’t the shelves reward enough?”

Rocky chuckled. When he rolled onto his side, his cock fell out. He took Henri with him, holding him tight. “You’d think.”

“I want to be rewarded with sex.” Henri liked the idea. “Can we do it again tonight though? I don’t want to wait.”

“Do you want to shower with me? Then maybe we can watch something sexy.”

“Like porn.” Henri hadn’t ever watched it before. It might be fun to watch with Rocky.

Rocky chuckled again. “I was thinking more like Magic Mike or Thor, but whatever you want.”

“Thor is sexy. You resemble him a bit. But like the bad boy version.”

Rocky smacked him on the ass lightly. “How many times have you watched those movies?”

It didn’t hurt, but Henri wasn’t expecting it. He sucked in a breath. “A few.”

“How many is a few?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t counted.” Henri had a great idea. “We should get you a Thor costume.”

Rocky chuckled. “Maybe.”

It wasn’t a no. He might talk Rocky into it. Maybe he could talk Rocky into other things, too.

Henri settled in, closing his eyes. He was just thinking about falling asleep when Rocky pulled him off the bed. He held Henri, wrapping a blanket around them before leaving the room. No one was in the hall, so they made it into the bathroom unseen.

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Henri woke with a sore ass. It was a delicious feeling, taking him back to the night before. Pressing against Rocky felt wonderful. He laid on Rocky's chest. His cock hardened. It created friction, making his blood heat.

Rocky ran his hand down Henri's naked side to his ass. He patted Henri's cheek and whispered, "Shh. Go back to sleep, baby."

Henri pressed his cock into Rocky's side, wanting a little more pressure.

Rocky chuckled. "Insatiable little turtle."

"I let you sleep all night." It was the best Henri could do.

"You 'let' me, huh?"

"Yeah." To be fair, he'd also slept all night.

Since it was Saturday, he could stay in bed all day if he wanted. Well, other than having lunch with Jules and Thomas at the diner and then dinner with the family, which included them. But he could go back to bed with Rocky afterward.

"What are you doing today?" Maybe Henri could talk Rocky into not leaving the bed. He could reschedule his lunch date with Jules and Thomas.

"Making your shelves. And you're supposed to clear a space for them." Rocky yawned. "We'll have at least three of them installed by the end of the day."

Henri sucked in a breath. “So quickly?”

“I have a lot of help. Garridan is letting us use his shop. The building process will be smoother there.”

“He agreed to help me?” Henri had never had someone do something so nice for him before. It was almost too much, but he knew if he said that to Rocky, he’d get a growl and a scolding for his efforts.

“You deserve it, baby.” Rocky yawned again and then turned onto his side, wrapping his arms around Henri. “Let’s sleep.”

Henri breathed in Rocky’s scent and shut his eyes, letting Rocky surround him with warmth and protection. It was what Henri needed to fall under again.

He didn’t stay asleep for long. He was out for maybe a few minutes. When he woke, Rocky made a chuffing noise. It sounded as though he was purring. His body was already loose. The chuffing melted Henri to the bone.

Rocky rubbed his back. They entwined their legs. He wasn’t sure where one ended and the other began.

“Good morning,” Rocky whispered as if they hadn’t had an entire conversation already.

Henri smiled. “Morning.”

“You were tired.”

“He said in his I-told-you-so voice.”

Rocky chuckled. “Hey. I was going for subtle.”

Henri snorted. “I’m starting to understand you don’t have a subtle bone in your body.”

Rocky didn’t speak a lot. It came down to him not speaking unless he had something important to say. And he had perfected the art of responding to stimulus instead of reacting. Rocky bided his time with Henri, waiting for Henri to come to him with his secrets, said as much.

But Rocky made his feelings known in small ways. Being privy to them helped Henri gauge where he stood.

“I want to make love again.” How was that for subtle? Henri didn’t need to hold back.

“I thought we were doing the reward system.”

“I fell asleep like you told me to. You can reward me for obeying your command.”

Rocky chuckled. “It was more of a suggestion.”

“It most definitely was a command.” Henri didn’t want to argue. He wanted to fuck again. “So do I get a reward?”

“It’s not a reward if you get it every time you want.”

“I disagree.” Sex with Rocky was very rewarding. He had other words to describe it. Satisfying. Passionate. Loving. But it felt as if he’d won some sort of lottery every

time Rocky touched him.

“We have to make it quick. I need to be at Garridan’s shop in an hour.”

Henri flung the covers back and stood. He grabbed Rocky’s hand. “Shower sex.”

He’s always wanted to try it.

Rocky grabbed the blanket, wrapping it around them when he stood. “Sully and Wesley are still home, baby.”

The bathroom was down the hall from Rocky’s bedroom. There was only one in the house, which hadn’t been an issue when they’d first moved in because it had been Rocky, Sully, and Bandos living there. There was no way they took very long getting ready for their day. It had been before each of them had found their mates. Bandos had moved in with Vaughan, which left Rocky and Sully living in the house. Then Sully had moved Wesley in, and Henri had been staying there most nights. The cabin seemed to shrink every time someone needed the bathroom.

“Would you consider moving in with me?” Henri wasn’t sure if they should discuss it yet. But they’d been living together for a few months. Everything about their relationship had changed, which meant the question held more importance.

Rocky took a long time to answer. So long, they were at the bathroom door already.

“No pressure. You don’t have to if you’d rather not. I just thought...” Henri wasn’t sure what he thought. They wouldn’t have to worry about someone being in the bathroom when they wanted to use it. At least not as much. It was the only real benefit other than them meshing their lives together as a couple way more because it would be their house.

They were together with Sully and Bandos and their mates, more than not, like a family. But Henri's cabin wasn't far. Henri's house was within walking distance of Rocky's and Bandos's houses. All three homes were on the same lake.

The bathroom door was closed. Henri had experienced the way Rocky knocked on the bathroom door once and then entered if whoever was inside didn't lock the door. It didn't surprise Henri when he grabbed the handle and jiggled it.

"Rocky." Henri shook his head. "It's rude to enter without waiting for a response from the person inside."

Sully opened the door and smirked. "Rocky doesn't give a shit about being rude. Do you know how many times he's walked in on me on the toilet?"

"I don't even want to guess." Thinking about it made him cringe. He also didn't want to think about Rocky seeing anyone else in such a vulnerable position. It made Henri jealous. It wasn't something he was used to feeling, and it was irrational anyway since Rocky didn't do it because he was a pervert. He did it because he was impatient and didn't want to wait five minutes to take a piss.

"The cabin is yours. I'm staying with Henri from now on." Rocky's change of subject was welcome, even if it was unexpected.

Sully lifted his eyebrows and smiled. He patted Rocky on the back. "Congrats, man. I heard when you got everything worked out last night."

Oh gods. Henri's face heated. He buried it in Rocky's chest. "We're going to live together?"

"It's a great idea." They were loud when they made love apparently. They needed all the privacy they could get.

“I’ll start going through my books.” He had books he could donate to Saint Lakes Library, or maybe even the school. Some he wanted to reference later, but no one else could help him discern the difference. And it was time-consuming.

“I’ll reward you.”

“How many books do I have to go through to get a reward?”

“What sort of reward?”

Henri and Rocky spoke at the same time. Henri said, “It’s between us” and Rocky said, “Sexual.”

Sully chuckled and shook his head. “Bathroom’s all yours, lovebirds. Oh sorry, love dragons.”

“I’m a turtle.” Henri didn’t wait for a response. He entered the bathroom with Rocky in tow. As soon as they were inside, Rocky threw the blanket out into the hall.

“Fifty books.”

“Thirty.”

“Seventy.”

“Unfair.” Henri huffed. He adjusted the water. “Forty.”

“Eighty.”

Henri sighed. He wasn’t going to win. “Fine. Fifty.”

“Nope. You negotiated too long. It’s eighty now.”

It was too many books. But it meant he’d get a lot of orgasms in one day. “Fine. Eighty. I’ll count every book and let you know how many times you have to make me come.”

Sully must not have been very far away because Henri heard his laughter through the bathroom door.

Rocky wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close. He buried his face in Henri’s neck, kissing his mating mark. “I’m sure you’ll be accurate.”

Henri tilted his head, giving Rocky more room. “Of course.”

He needed to clean up his house anyway, since Rocky had agreed to live with him. Henri wanted Rocky to feel comfortable, too. His cluttered mess wouldn’t be comfortable for either of them.

Henri tightened his hold on Rocky. “I love waking up with you.”

“Mmmm...me too, baby.” Rocky kissed his mating mark again.

He couldn’t wait to do it again tomorrow.

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Rocky hadn't built anything in a long time. The last time he and Garridan had created anything together was a wooden playhouse in Garridan's backyard for Bennett. Wolf shifters had murdered Bennett's parents a few months before, and Garridan had been grieving. Rocky thought Garridan intended to crawl in the little playhouse with Bennett and never come out, as though it were a cocoon of protection. Bandos and Sully had been there too, helping by leveling the area where the play equipment would be.

They all remembered that day. Rocky could tell by the way Sully and Bandos eyed Garridan as if his grief transported him to the past.

Garridan shut the sanding machine down and met each one of their gazes. "It's different now."

Sage, Garridan's mate, sat a little straighter in his chair. He was in the far corner of the room, reading a book. His gaze went to Garridan and his eyebrows drew together.

"Dad?" Bennett, who'd been helping Garridan sand what would be the back of the shelf, stopped too.

Garridan met Bennett's gaze and smiled. His expression was one of grief. It hadn't been there when they first had gotten started. "You were little. Three years old, I think. Your mom and dad had just died. The guys came over to help build something fun for you in the backyard."

Bennett glanced at Rocky and then at Sully and Bandos. "I loved the little house thing. And the swings. I didn't know you helped Dad build it."

Rocky nodded.

It was a full circle moment. All four of them had missed watching Bennett grow up, but he'd gotten lucky. Finding a family like the Somersets had to be the work of the gods. The moment in which they were together building something had brought Bennett's biological parents to life in Garridan's memory. It was the work of the gods too. It felt like a blessing.

Bennett met Garridan's gaze again. "It wasn't good back then?"

"I wouldn't define it as good or bad. Just different." Garridan met Sage's gaze with a smile. "I still grieve the loss of your parents. Time won't erase it."

"I like it when you talk about them. I don't remember much, so I feel like I'm getting to know them through you."

Garridan nodded. "Your mom would have loved these shelves. She was an avid reader, you know."

"No, I didn't." Bennett had been sanding by hand, getting all the little spots the electric sander might have missed. He went back to it. "What did she like to read?"

"Romance mostly, I think. She liked the steamy stuff." They talked a bit more about her books. How she had shelves built in the basement of their house. The mood lightened with each story Garridan told.

Sully grinned. "Did she have a book where the main character played a sex game with his mate?"

"Shut up, Sully." Rocky went back to working, measuring a board to cut it the length they needed. The general rule was to measure twice and cut once, but Rocky had

been out of practice, so he took extra care while measuring. “They were talking about something serious. You’re ruining their moment.”

Bennett shook his head and chuckled. “No worries, man. We’ll go to lunch or something. Talk about my parents then.”

Garridan nodded. “I’d like to know what the hell Sully’s talking about.”

Everyone in the shop stopped what they were doing.

Damn it. “Nothing.”

“It’s a reward system,” Sully said and then didn’t say a word afterward.

The statement intrigued everyone. He could see it on their faces. They would start asking questions at some point. Rocky had been around the Somerset siblings enough to know they didn’t let stuff go when they didn’t want to.

Bandos laughed. “You should be so glad Vaughan isn’t here.”

“Amen.” Gabriel and Bennett said at the same time.

Ramsey smirked and lifted his eyebrows, but otherwise didn’t say a word.

Rocky was saved from discussing it further when Shawn came into the shop from the back door. He seemed in a hurry and handed papers to Garridan, who was the closest person to him.

“Ladon told me you guys were here. He wanted to show you this. He should be here soon.” Shawn scowled and closed the distance to Gabriel, leaning against him.

Garridan growled and handed the papers to Bennett, who read them and handed them to the next person. They made their rounds, getting to Rocky.

“Troop movement.” Rocky mumbled.

Shawn nodded. “A lot of them. Could be for any reason. It might not have anything to do with us.”

“Or they could be preparing to invade,” Garridan growled.

Ladon came in the back door, holding Magnus’s hand. Fane followed behind. “So how do we prepare?”

“For what? Something that may or may not happen.” Gabriel might have been playing the devil’s advocate, but he pulled Shawn against his side, wanting him closer.

“It will happen,” Sully said. He met Rocky’s gaze, seeming to be addressing him. “The council expects something big. Fowler’s making noise that seems to contradict it but they think it’s to throw them off.”

Fane spoke up. “We set up a patrol schedule and create an alert system.”

“Thomas can take care of the alert system for the entire clan.” Ladon’s wheels were turning, coming up with possible solutions to minimize casualties. “I’ll call a clan meeting for later tonight. I don’t want everyone to panic but it’s best if everyone stays alert. Echo and Lucas need to be protected at all costs. Henri too.”

Ladon met Rocky’s gaze.

Rocky nodded. “Two guards on them at all times.”

“I’ll go sit with Henri.” Fane closed the distance to Ramsey, kissed him and then left through the back door.

Rocky felt better knowing Fane was with Henri. And then Echo, Lucas, and Wesley were at Mother Estelle’s. If he didn’t know Henri was thrilled by getting the bookshelves, he would have made Henri go to Estelle’s house too, but he couldn’t bring himself to steal Henri’s joy.

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Rocky tried to go about his day as normal, but his gut churned with anxiety. He worried about Henri who had a bodyguard in the forest outside and one inside the house with him. Vaughan was a big help in that regard, organizing it so Echo and Lucas had people watching them as well. But Rocky still felt an urgency to get to Henri.

He told himself he was being ridiculous and that it would take a while for the humans to attack but it didn't help to quell the fear. He tried to stay calm, forcing himself to continue with the bookshelves. He didn't want Henri to feel his emotions, but he didn't hide them. The only thing that made him continue was knowing how happy they would make Henri.

They constructed four in quick succession and were ready to install them. Rocky, Gabe, Ramsey, and Garridan drove two of them over. The rest of the guys were back at the shop, finishing up two more. They would do it all over again tomorrow. Their small cabin would have a proper library soon.

As soon as they pulled into the driveway, Rocky felt Henri's excitement spike through their link. With it also came confusion because of the sudden change in Rocky's mood. Three-point-seven-five orgasms. And Fane hasn't helped at all.

What made Henri happiest? The shelves or the promise of sex. Rocky didn't know. Either way, his enthusiasm was cute.

He sometimes rambled about whatever book he'd been reading. Rocky let him because he would learn something, so it was a win-win as far as he was concerned.

Rocky had one end of the bookshelf, and Garridan had the other. The shelf was heavy with it being real wood, and it was awkward to get inside the door because they had built it tall and wide, to maximize the space.

Gabe and Ramsey were behind them, carrying a second one.

Ramsey tried to lighten the mood. No one wanted to think about what they'd learned. "Does the reward system work?"

If Rocky had to take some teasing so they could forget for a while, then so be it.

Rocky growled, but with no heat. "Don't say anything to him. He embarrasses easily."

"Could be fun to try something like that with Shawn." Gabe sounded intrigued.

"Like you and Shawn need another excuse to do it. You already fuck every damn place you can." Garridan sounded more amused than anything.

Everyone shut up when Henri opened the front door. "Oh, my gosh. Thank you, guys, so much. It's amazing."

Rocky winked at him and helped carry the shelf inside. Fane sat on the couch reading, probably a borrowed book from Henri. He didn't look up when they entered or tried to help.

Henri had cleaned up a lot in his new library and the living room too. Rocky wasn't sure where he'd put all the books, but he hadn't stacked them in big piles anymore. "You did an amazing job with the books, baby."

Acknowledging it had the desired effect. Henri blushed and bit his lip. Can I round up

to four? No one can have three-quarters of an orgasm.

The sex is too good not to round up.

Henri smiled but it was laced with concern. Do you want to talk about what's wrong?

Later. Let's enjoy the rest of the day.

Henri nodded.

Getting the shelf around the corner into the library was the tricky part. It took them a considerable amount of time to figure out how to maneuver it in so that it fit, but they placed it in the far corner.

The bookshelf Gabe and Ramsey carried went a lot quicker, having learned from Rocky and Garridan. When they had them in place, Henri entered the room. He hugged Rocky tighter than he ever had before. "Thank you. All of you. Seriously. This is great."

"You can start filling them up whenever you want." Rocky suspected Henri had put the stacks of books in the bedroom and kitchen. Those rooms had the most space. The sooner the books were on the shelves, the more he'd get his living spaces back.

"I won't be in the way?" Henri met his gaze.

"You should be fine. We have two more to put in today. They'll go against the wall next to the others." Rocky planned to fill the room with shelves, but it would have to be another day. He was tired and hungry. He also hadn't spent time with Henri.

Henri kissed Rocky before releasing him. He met everyone's gaze. "Thank you all so much. An honest-to-goodness library is a dream come true."

They installed the other two shelves next. It didn't take long.

The entire time they were putting them in, Henri seemed in his element, organizing his books on the shelves. He was careful about how he ordered them. Each book made sense to the others, in Henri's mind. Henri was in his element. He even mumbled to himself.

Henri's reaction was why Rocky didn't want to tell him until later. Henri deserved to have his moment and the peace that came along with it. Rocky wanted to protect it as much as he wanted Henri to stay safe.

Gabe elbowed Ramsey, getting his attention. He nodded at Henri, who was in his own little world. They smiled to each other as if they thought the hard work was worth it too.

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Rocky was in the middle of cutting a board to fit the bottom of a shelf. He tried to pay attention to measuring and had to shut off thinking about Henri and his safety while using the saw. Vaughan and Echo were with him. Rocky told himself Vaughan was a capable fighter, which was true. But Echo's presence was the reason Rocky had decided to take the day to finish the bookshelves. That and he wanted to make Henri happy.

Having the internal connection helped alleviate the worry. But he still wanted to hurry so he could get back to Henri. The problem was hurrying while using power tools was a bad idea.

Despite the anxiety, Rocky smiled on a near constant basis. And it was all Henri's fault.

The others noticed, especially Sully and Bandos. Sully grinned without saying a word. Bandos chuckled every time he glanced at Rocky. At one point, he said, "Someone's getting some."

"Says the guy who has two mates." Sully shook his head. "Leave him alone. He's happy."

Rocky didn't remember a time when he'd been happier. Not even the threat hanging over them killed his contentment.

"Who knew the nerdiest shifter in town was a little firecracker in bed, though?" Gabe said.

Rocky growled and took a step toward Gabe. His eyes shifted to his dragon's. "How do you know?"

Gabe held up his hands as if in surrender. "I don't, man. Other than the change in you. I swear that's all I meant."

Rocky took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. "Don't talk about my mate like that."

"Understood. Sorry."

Rocky met everyone's gaze, including Garridan, who wouldn't have made a lewd comment about Henri. In fact, Garridan frowned at Gabe. "It goes for everyone."

"No more teasing. You all know not to push Rocky of all people. He's too much of an alpha." As dad of the Somersets, Garridan had a way of shutting down anything in one or two sentences. All the Somersets followed his orders, including Ladon, who was the alpha.

But Rocky didn't need Garridan's help. No one fucked with Rocky. He knew he was a strong shifter. Others could feel his alpha nature. It made them dial down the teasing when he wanted them to. He knew he wore his good mood on his face. While he couldn't help it, it left him open for teasing, so he expected it. He didn't want Henri to be included though. It would embarrass him if he'd been at the shop. And he didn't want anyone speculating about what sort of lover Henri was.

"Sorry, Rocky," Gabe said again.

Before Rocky could respond, he felt it—the pull in the center of his chest to get to the Somersets' house. It was the signal they had all been waiting for. While the fear ramped up and the need to run to Henri, to protect him and the rest of the family, a

part of him welcomed the fight. It meant the wait was over.

He'd felt Thomas's magic once before, when the Stavros Coven had attacked them. It had been Thomas, the Saint Lakes clan warlock, who had created the pull in all clan members during the battle. The feeling was the same.

Everyone else felt it too. They all partially shifted.

Garridan turned toward Sage at the same time Sage stood and ran across the room to him.

Ramsey and Gabe started out of the shop. Bandos and Sully followed. Rocky waited for Garridan and Sage, taking up the rear to make sure everyone stayed together. If what he thought was happening was the reason for Thomas using his magic on the clan, then they needed each other if they were going to survive.

Where are you? His instinct was to get to Henri. It overrode the one Thomas had created in him. Not even magic could stop it.

They're here. Vaughan went to fight by himself. He needs help. Oh gods! Gunshots!

Rocky heard them in the distance.

Rocky shifted his hands as they took in the scene outside the storefront window. He sniffed the air, smelling humans. Their scent was a little off. If he didn't know about enhanced humans, their scent would have confused him. "They're enhanced."

Bandos shifted his hands as well. "They smell metallic."

"Like they tried to hide their scent," Ramsey whispered.

“They fucking failed if that’s the case.” Bennett stood in front of Sage as if he was the one who needed to be protected the most. “Sage, you need to shift. Curl around Dad’s arm or something.”

Sage didn’t hesitate. He wasn’t a big snake. Maybe five or six feet long, but he crawled up Garridan’s body and curled around his arm and up his shoulder, winding around Garridan’s neck.

Gabe was the tensest out of everyone. “Shawn says the humans can’t get close to Lucas because Thomas, Mom, and Lucas created a barrier. I’m not sure what they’ll do long-term, but they’re safe for now. The clan members there are too. Some haven’t made it there yet.”

“The humans are everywhere.” It was the first time Rocky had ever heard fear in Bennett’s voice. “Lucas says when he entered one of the human’s minds, he saw their plan. They’re in every paranormal town.”

Rocky cursed and then sighed, trying not to let the fear overtake him. He had to think.

How many were in Saint Lakes? How quickly could he make it to Henri and Echo?

“Echo’s in the most trouble. We need to get to him.” Rocky could feel Henri’s fear as if it was his own.

Bennett was the one who took a step toward the door. “I’m going to Lucas. I’m going to shift as soon as I get clear of their guns.”

Garridan nodded. “I’ll go with Bennett.”

“The rest of you need to get to Echo.”

The sounds of guns firing were a lot closer. Glass shattered, coming from the show room out front.

Rocky ducked, falling to the ground, covering his head. Something metal rolled across the floor right before the room filled with smoke.

“Everybody out!” Someone shouted. Rocky wasn’t sure who yelled it. He didn’t recognize the voice.

The smoke came from the back door.

Rocky stood, coughing as he stumbled toward the showroom. He knew some of the others followed but he didn’t know who until he they were far enough away from the billows of smoke to breathe easier.

His eyes burned as he took in everyone, coughing and wiping their faces.

“Fucking tear gas,” Garridan said.

They didn’t have time to recover before the front door burst open and humans with guns rushed in. “Everybody outside! Now!”

They didn’t have a choice but to do what the humans said.

When they were outside Rocky’s eyes still watered from the fumes of the smoke and the sun blinded him, but he made out clan members with their hands up, standing outside the diner and the grocery store.

Rocky followed suit, holding his hands up as if in surrender. Ramsey’s shifted face terrified them enough to give Gabe and Sully, who stood at the outside their circle, the advantage. They grabbed a gun and fired before the humans could react. It gave

the rest of them an opening.

The parking lot turned into a war zone. Clan members shifted. Most were wolf shifters who went at the humans with teeth bared. Two cougars fought together so effectively, Rocky wondered if they'd had specialized training.

Rocky shifted again. He raked his claws over the abdomen of the closest human. The man could fight well, even while bleeding, although it wouldn't take much for his guts to spew out of his wounds. He wouldn't live long. Maybe he knew it, but he wasn't stopping.

The human got a shot off, but the bullet went wide when Rocky clawed at his face and neck. Blood poured from his jugular.

Rocky attacked the next person. They were easier to kill.

Rocky didn't get much of a breather, but he had enough of one to take in the scene.

Bennett shifted and took to the sky. He blew fire at the humans who managed to fire their guns, trying to prevent as many casualties as possible but the loss of life was evident. Clan members and humans littered the pavement.

Everyone kept fighting, including Sage, who struck anyone who got close to Garridan. They couldn't shift. If any of them did, they became bigger targets.

They might not make it this time.

"Everyone get to Mother Estelle's house!" Garridan yelled even as he fought.

The clan members who could run did. They were faster in their shifted forms than some of the humans. Other humans had obviously been enhanced because they went

after them, running so fast they were a blur of movement.

The thought pushed Rocky to fight harder.

He shifted his mouth and breathed fire on a human who didn't have a gun. He held a handgun but didn't get a shot off before Rocky lit him on fire.

Hang in there, baby. I'm coming. It's just going to be a while.

He hoped he could keep his promise.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

Henri, Echo, and Vaughan were putting books onto shelves and having fun doing it. Echo had brought Henri a plant, which changed the aesthetic in the room for the better. The plant was a reminder life existed everywhere, in and out of books. Henri knew he'd spend all day sitting and reading. He would need to take in the world around him on occasion. Rocky would help him create a balance he'd never had before.

Something had changed between him and Vaughan. They'd grown closer, becoming friends. The shift became less teasing and more conversational.

Echo fit easily into the mix.

It was the easiest time he'd spent with anyone except for Rocky. Even though every time he was with Rocky, it seemed if they weren't making love, then they were thinking about it. He loved it. It was part of why it was easy. They agreed on most things.

"Thank you for being here." Henri alphabetized his shelving and then put the books into categories much the same way a librarian would. He was halfway through with his stack. Echo and Vaughan followed his direction. He had expected teasing but didn't get any, which was a pleasant surprise.

"It's actually kind of fun," Echo shelved another book.

"Yeah." Vaughan smiled when he met Henri's gaze.

As Henri was shelving the last H book in his category, he asked, "How long does the

honeymoon period last for mates?”

Echo glanced at Vaughan. “The beauty of having three people in a mating is it never ends for at least one of us ever. Someone’s always horny.”

“Usually you.” Vaughan winked at Echo.

“You’re not complaining.” Echo winked back.

“Of course not.” Vaughan addressed Henri next. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“But I want it all the time.” Maybe he shouldn’t be talking about his sex life with Vaughan and Echo, but they had a good relationship. And Vaughan had called Henri family. He could rely on Vaughan and Echo to give good advice and still keep his confidence, right?

Echo chuckled. “Me too.”

Vaughan grinned. “Trust me when I tell you Rocky isn’t complaining.”

Henri shrugged. “I know. It seems abnormal when compared to others. Or what I’ve read about the human male libido. I’m also factoring in the newness of our relationship.”

“It’s not abnormal.” Vaughan shelved another book. “You shouldn’t compare yourself to other people. You’re fine the way you are.”

Henri set his book down and went to close the distance between himself and Vaughan so he could give him a hug. It was what Henri needed to hear, and it warmed Henri’s heart.

He didn't even get halfway across the room when he heard a gunshot in the distance. It was odd to hear in Saint Lakes. Usually the alpha sent a message to the clan. It was always target practice. But Henri hadn't gotten a message. Echo and Vaughan hadn't either. They would have said something if they had.

"Get into the bathroom. Lock the door." Vaughan started out of the room without another word. He pulled off his clothing as he left. He must have shifted while he was outside because Henri heard muffled growling right before more gunshots rang through the house. It was so much louder than before.

Someone screamed, but it didn't last more than a few seconds before it was quiet again.

He ducked as if someone was shooting at him. He grabbed Echo's hand, pulling him out of the room.

Echo took the closest potted plant, holding it to his chest as if it needed protection. But it was Echo who needed to stay safe.

The urge to protect Echo was strong. Some primal part of him realized Echo was special.

The bathroom didn't have a window, which was why Vaughan had told them to go inside, but Henri didn't like it. It would make them sitting ducks if whoever had the gun managed to fight their way into the house.

Henri took Echo to his bedroom and then to the closet. They huddled together inside. "Can you talk to Vaughan?"

Echo nodded. "I'll tell him where we are."

“Also, ask him what’s happening?” They needed to know what was going on. Was it more than one shooter?

“Humans in black clothing. Vaughan thinks at least some of them are enhanced.” Echo shook and leaned into Henri as if wanting comfort. “He says there are a lot of them. I don’t know what to do.”

Henri didn’t either, but his biggest fear was Vaughan getting overrun, leaving him the sole person protecting Echo.

Henri took a deep breath, waiting for the fear to subside. It didn’t work, but he pushed it out of his way so he could think. Henri couldn’t see the plant in Echo’s hand very well, but he noticed when it started growing out of the pot, the vines forming around the closed closet door.

“Can you do that to the soldiers outside?” Henri nodded toward the heart-shaped leaves which grew at such a fast pace.

Echo’s eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. Either he hadn’t thought of it or the thought horrified him. Henri couldn’t tell which.

A wolf yipped as if in pain.

“Vaughan!” The plants fell away, and Echo dropped the pot as he raced out of the closet. The pot shattered on the floor.

Henri ran after Echo. He didn’t know how to fight, but he’d still protect Echo, even if it cost him his life.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

Rocky knew the exact second Henri was in danger. He felt his fear as if it were his own. It sat in Rocky's stomach, twisting it until all of his emotions rose to his throat. Rocky roared and shifted. Making himself a bigger target no longer held any weight. His goal wasn't to stay alive. It was to keep Henri alive. One fed the other, but he wasn't thinking of himself. Only making sure his mate was safe.

Far away from danger.

He didn't know he'd projected the thought until Henri answered back. They're outside. Lots of them. Echo and I have to help Vaughan.

Rocky had thought he'd been partially feral during the time he couldn't bond with Henri, but it was nothing compared to how close his dragon was to the surface at the moment, how all his thoughts were primal and dangerous. He zeroed in on the enemy. Only seeing them. But he had an objective.

Mate.

Nothing else mattered.

Rocky released a blast of flames, engulfing two soldiers who stood in his way.

Bandos cursed and saw Sully shift out of the corner of his eye. Gabe had shifted as well. He was somewhere behind Rocky. He could hear him fighting, trying to keep the soldiers from firing.

Guns made it dangerous even for a dragon shifter whose scales were as tough as

armor. A bullet could hit in just the right place. Even if the shooter didn't know about dragons, often they aimed for the head. Rocky had several exposed areas on his neck and throat.

Sully growled and leaped at a soldier who had turned toward them with his gun raised. He wore fear on his face as if it were a mask. It was an odd response, considering every soldier here must know who they were attacking. Seeing one shift must have broken him because he took too long to shoot. By the time he remembered his trigger finger, it was too late. Sully already had his jaws around the man's throat.

"The humans have figured out where Lucas is." Gabe had shifted back and stood at his side.

Rocky didn't know what to do but hesitation killed a person. His instinct warred with what was best for the clan. Echo and Lucas were the most important people in the entire world, not just the clan. While Rocky knew he needed to save them, even if it meant his own life, every instinct told him to get to Henri.

He scanned the area, watching all the soldiers pass by them. They headed in the direction of Mother Estelle's house.

Rocky made the decision.

He saw a curtain move in the house on the left. These houses probably had several clan members still inside them. Fear and uncertainty had driven people to hide. Some of them didn't know how to defend themselves.

He shifted. "Bandos and Sully, go get Echo and Henri. I'll make sure Gabe and Ramsey make it to Mother Estelle's house. I'll meet up with you after."

He trusted Bandos and Sully to do their best to protect Henri. He had to because there

were too many humans. If the humans got to either Echo or Lucas, he would lose everything.

“Go to your mate. We’ll be fine,” Ramsey said.

“There are too many humans going in that direction. You’ll need my help if one of you gets hurt.”

With the decision made, Rocky watched Bandos and Sully head for their cabins.

Rocky probably should have shifted back. He didn’t have clothes on. They wouldn’t protect him from a bullet, but he was the only dragon amongst the three of them. Ramsey was a water monster, and Gabe was a wolf shifter. Rocky didn’t want to leave them to fend for themselves on foot while he took to the air.

They tried to remain hidden, following behind the soldiers at a distance, but it didn’t take long for the humans to stop them. Someone yelled and that was all it took. They had to find cover, ducking out of the way when bullets flew at them.

“I can set some of them on fire from the sky.” Rocky had to yell over to Ramsey because they ran for cover in opposite directions. A few yards separated them. Gabe managed to crawled under someone’s porch but he was even farther away than Ramsey.

Ramsey nodded. “Do it.”

Rocky shifted. As soon as he was in the sky, he dipped down and blew a line of fire at a group of soldiers. When they raised their guns and shot at him, he flew.

The fire distracted the humans enough to give Gabe and Ramsey an advantage. Gabe had shifted. He lunged at one soldier who seemed to be distracted by Rocky’s aerial

acrobatics. Ramsey shifted his mouth. The sight was horrific, even for a shifter who had seen Ramsey's water monster moments before, it sent one human running in the opposite direction. The other pointed his gun at Ramsey instead of Rocky, which gave Rocky an opportunity to blow fire again.

A shot rang out. Rocky wasn't sure if the humans got Ramsey or Gabe, but he was almost positive one of them wasn't. It wasn't until he heard Ramsey yell, "I'm hit!" that he knew for sure.

He kept using his fire to kill as many soldiers as possible. Still more came. There were so many. Humans littered Saint Lakes, looking like bugs from the sky.

There was no way they were going to win. Humans outnumbered the clan members. With humans attacking other paranormal towns, they couldn't call anyone for help. Their only saving grace was a fae and witch.

Rocky and the others had to buy them time. They would lose the war if they didn't bring Lucas and Echo together.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

Echo might have dropped the plant when Vaughan had gotten hurt, but he hadn't forgotten about it. Henri suspected he'd dropped it and run out of instinct. But it elongated, growing leaves, as it slithered across the floor, following them toward the front door.

Henri hadn't understood why Echo had taken it with them when they'd hid but the reason became clear. Never once had Henri thought of a houseplant as a weapon, but it was for Echo. Every living botanical thing was another gun in Echo's arsenal. It took watching the vine follow Echo out of the house as though it were Echo's version of a venomous snake, to realize it.

When they were outside, it rooted itself into the soil next to Henri's door. Henri watched it rise, defying gravity and logic. It attached itself to the siding on his house, which also seemed impossible, but he couldn't deny what he saw.

And then the plant grew, along with the weeds and the few tufts of grass in his yard. The small bush next to his door grew as well, covering most of the stoop. It was the base of what Henri realized was the shield Echo intended to build in front of them.

"Stay behind me." Echo didn't take his eyes off the scene unfolding in front of them.

Vaughan hadn't made it very far. They'd pushed him to the edge of the lake and surrounded him. He was a wolf, not a water shifter. He couldn't hide underneath the water like Henri could. As a wolf, he was a slow swimmer, which meant someone with good aim could take him out while he was in the water.

Something upset the surface of the water. It lay underneath, ready to strike. As

someone who had swum in the lake regularly, he knew there wasn't anything capable of moving in such a way. Not even the occasional snake. And none of the fish were big enough. In his turtle shifter form, Henri could stay under for several hours depending on his level of activity. Sometimes he would rest near the shallows at the bottom.

It hit him what it was. He turned to Echo and knew he was doing something to manipulate the things living in the water. Maybe it was algae. Or the aquatic plants going up from the bottom. Henri didn't know what it was, but he knew how Echo would use them. People would die soon, and his lake would never be the same again.

The tops of water celery floated along the surface, growing closer to Vaughan. The long thin blades bypassed Vaughan and slithered up the human's legs. A couple of people backed away. But others were so mesmerized by what they witnessed, they froze as the plant climbed their bodies. By the time their survival instinct kicked in, it was too late. The plant wrapped around their legs and dragged them into the water.

Vaughan yipped and ran away. As soon as he saw Echo, he seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. He stayed out of Echo's way, not putting himself in front of Echo even in a protective position.

One human shot at the long, green blades slithered close to them. Another joined in. Perhaps their logic was more bullets would kill the plant, but it had rooted itself to the bottom of a lake and needed little sunlight. The filtered light was enough to sustain life. It didn't matter how many bullets they pumped into it. It would continue to grow back.

Henri watched in awe as it reached the two men. It wrapped around their feet just as it had with the other humans, throwing them off balance, and began dragging them toward the lake. They had enough wherewithal to keep shooting, but as they descended into the water, they stopped firing.

One man was smart enough to run in the opposite direction. As soon as he got out of sight, Echo stepped away from the front door, chasing him.

Henri and Vaughan followed him.

Compared to Vaughan and Echo, Henri felt useless. Vaughan fought well and Echo was a little killing machine. What he could do with plants was equal parts amazing and horrifying. It also made him the deadliest person in Saint Lakes. There were humans holding guns, shooting innocent people, so it was quite a realization.

Echo walked at a steady pace, but it was still a walk. He didn't hurry after the man. And he seemed to search the area as if he were thinking of the next way to kill.

The human ran in a straight line, as if he knew what was ahead.

Vaughan must have said something through their mating bond because Echo said, "There's a dirt road northwest of here, right?"

Henri answered. "It's an old service road from when a lumber company took some trees once."

Before the soldier could get farther away, a tree branch swooped down and hit him in his chest and knocked him off his feet. He flew back toward them. The momentum worked against him. Being enhanced meant he had a lot of velocity. But when the branch hit him, he went flying as if he'd launched himself using a rocket. He hit a tree and tumbled through every branch as he descended, landing on his back. When he landed, he lay so still, Henri wasn't sure if he was dead or just injured.

Henri suspected something hard was underneath the carpet of dead leaves. Maybe a rock or a small piece of a fallen tree. Whatever it was, caused him to bleed. Henri could smell it even from a few feet away.

He crouched next to the body and touched the man's wrist. He didn't feel a pulse, so he felt the carotid artery.

Henri shook his head when he didn't feel one there either.

Echo cursed. "I wanted to interrogate him."

Vaughan shifted. "There are a shit ton of guys like him. Pick another one."

Henri stepped away from the body when Vaughan squatted in front of it. He didn't know what else he could do.

Vaughan turned the guy's head to the side. Henri noticed the blood. "Hit his head."

Echo huffed. "Well, that's just perfect. How will we know what these guys want?"

Vaughan met Echo's gaze. He'd never been more serious. "They want you, baby. You and Lucas."

Echo's shoulders came up to his ears, and he crossed his arms in front of his body, as if the knowledge made his blood turn to ice.

Henri wrapped an arm around his shoulders and stayed next to him. "We won't let them get you."

"I'll fight to the death. You know that." Vaughan had proved himself already. He would have died back there had Echo not stepped in.

Echo nodded. "I don't want anyone to die because of me."

"It isn't because of you. It's someone's power-hungry agenda. They want to control

other people for their own gain. Paranormals are in the way.” Henri gestured to the dead guy. “Them being here, trying to hurt us, proves one of two things. Either someone has convinced the masses we’re expendable or there’s more than one person who wants the same thing.”

“Pretty sure it’s the first one.” Vaughan stood, hugging Echo. “Either way, it’s a bad situation.”

A shot rang through the forest.

Vaughan grunted, cursing as he let go of Echo and fell to the ground. He shifted. And then shifted again. And then back again.

Henri sucked in a breath, wanting to scream when he saw blood pouring from Vaughan’s abdomen. Henri pulled Echo down when he realized what was happening.

Soldiers hurried toward them. There were too many to count.

They seemed to come out of nowhere as if they had been nothing but smoke before solidifying. And they had their guns trained on them.

Henri didn’t know what to do.

Vaughan grabbed Henri by his shirt. He was sweating. He’d turned a burgundy color. “Don’t leave him. Not for any reason.”

Echo lay next to Vaughan. “You can’t die.”

“Bandos is coming, but he won’t get here in time to save both of us.” Vaughan let him go. He met Henri’s gaze, almost pleading with him to save Echo’s life. “Tell Rocky where they take Echo.”

Henri nodded.

He needed to shift, and he needed to do it while Echo had the soldiers distracted. “You can’t get them all, but you can get some. When I shift, hide me on your person somewhere.”

Echo cried, but nodded. He still focused on the soldiers coming at them.

The tree branches swatted at the humans. Weeds grew around their feet, holding them in place. Bushes grew tall enough to enter their ears, scrambling their brains. The fear didn’t leave them when their bodies crumpled.

A couple of soldiers ran past a bush. The bush grabbed their guns as if it had fingers.

Henri shifted without taking off his clothes, so he was stuck in them until Echo freed him. And then Echo picked him up along with Henri’s shirt. He wrapped the shirt around Henri as if creating a bed, wanting to make him comfortable.

Guns went off, hitting trees when the branches pierced a soldier’s heart.

Echo had killed so many they littered the ground, but Henri had been right. He couldn’t get them all before they grabbed Echo.

Echo cried and yelled, “Don’t hurt my turtle!”

It had been a good plan in theory, but the soldiers must have figured out how dangerous Echo was to them because they covered his mouth with a cloth. They’d soaked the cloth in some sort of chemical. It would probably render him unconscious.

Henri tumbled to the ground when Echo passed out. He stayed there until they turned back the way they had come, and then shifted before pulling on his clothing again.

He knew where the access road was and how to get there before them. He left his shirt with Vaughan, pressing it to his wound before taking each one of Vaughan's hands and placing them on the shirt. "Press and keep shifting."

"Go after him, damn it!"

Henri took off for the shortcut through the forest, hoping no soldiers were there to slow him down. He'd never run so fast.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

Ramsey was one heavy water monster, even when Rocky shifted and carried Ramsey on his back. His wound was severe enough he couldn't walk very far and not fast enough. The humans would have caught up with him. The bullet had gone through his gut, but they didn't have time for him to shift.

Rocky could see they wouldn't be able to fly over the humans and into the barrier. There were too many soldiers surrounding the house, and they all had guns. Rocky made a big target. The sound of his wings displacing the air was unmistakable. So Rocky didn't get closer. Instead, he made sure there was some distance between them and the humans, landing in a clearing out of sight but near enough to walk toward Mother Estelle's house so they could see it through the trees.

Ramsey slid off his back and Rocky shifted.

Gabriel joined them a second later. He shook his head. "They're everywhere, man. They have Mom's house surrounded. I couldn't see past them."

Rocky hummed in agreement. "They'll shoot me out of the sky."

Ramsey clutched his side and grunted. "Move back. I need to shift."

While Ramsey shifted into a giant slithering snake-like water creature, Rocky formed a plan. Rocky wasn't sure who he was talking to when he spoke, and he guessed it didn't matter if Ramsey paid attention or not. Given the severity of his injury, it was up to Rocky and Gabe to get him to safety.

"We need a distraction."

Gabe smirked. “One in the form of a witch with a ball of death, you mean. Or maybe a warlock.”

“Exactly.”

Since Lucas had a direct link to everyone, Rocky focused on him and projected his thoughts to Lucas. Do you think you and Thomas could provide us with some sort of distraction?

Ramsey’s hurt?

He’s able to shift and heal himself, but yeah, he got hurt.

They shot Vaughan. The fear came through in every word, even through a thought projection.

The next time he spoke to someone in his mind, it was Henri. Are you safe?

I’m not injured. I am scared, though.

That doesn’t answer the question.

I know. But I need to save Echo.

Rocky cursed under his breath. He met Gabe’s gaze when he spoke. “They’re going to create a distraction. We have to wait for the right moment.”

“What’s wrong?” He waved his hand in the general direction of the soldiers. “Besides everything.”

Rocky shook his head. “I don’t know most of it. But Vaughan got injured. And Henri

is trying to save Echo, which means the humans have him.”

Now it was Gabe’s turn to curse. “So where is Henri?”

Where are you, baby?

In a van. Echo is with me. We’re on the access road. You know the one I mean. Near our cabin. There’s a caravan. Seven black cargo-style vans. I got lucky and picked the right one. The soldiers took two vehicles. We’re in the first one headed down the access road toward North Lake.

Rocky relayed the message to Gabe.

“They’re headed for the highway.”

They needed to get Ramsey to safety first, but after, Rocky needed to save his mate. Keep telling me where you are.

Vaughan told me to do that.

What did he say, sweetheart?

To stay with Echo. And tell you where they take him. Henri was a brave little turtle. As much as Rocky wanted to admonish him for putting himself at risk, Henri had made the right choice by putting Echo first.

Good job. Bandos and Sully are already on our way to help you. And I’m not far behind. It went against every instinct he had to say it. His dragon roared in his mind with the knowledge they couldn’t keep their mate safe. But the sensible part of Rocky knew they didn’t have any choice but to follow through with the original plan.

He clung to hope. Hope Henri made it out alive. Hope no one else got hurt. Hope Lucas and Echo could save everyone.

If something happened to Henri and he didn't do everything in his power to save him, he wouldn't be able to live with it. The feeling extended to everyone. Ramsey. Gabe. Everyone in the clan.

Ramsey appeared exhausted but able to walk without aid for the first time since getting injured. It was a vast improvement. He nodded, indicating he was ready, and they all jogged closer to the house.

They had taken a few steps when they saw fire up ahead. A big ball of it singed a tree. People screamed. Gunshots rang out.

It was chaos.

As Rocky drew near, he crouched behind bushes in a small gully and watched.

There were too many people outside the barrier to see what was happening inside. Some people were smart enough to run, which left a gap big enough for Rocky to see the yard through the hordes.

Thomas and Lucas stood feet away from each other. But they worked in tandem. Thomas threw balls of fire, which seemed as if they came out of his hands. While Thomas was working on another fireball, Lucas drew a gray light from his chest. He held it in his hand and then waved his other hand over it. Doing so made the gray light bigger.

When he threw it, he hit several humans. It took a few attempts to create a hole wide enough for Rocky, Gabe, and Ramsey to run through.

Ramsey held up his hand, counting down. When his hand became a fist, they all ran. They were all shifters, so they weren't as fast as vampires or as fast as enhanced humans. But Gabe shifted, so his wolf speed made him quicker.

Ramsey was slower because his body hadn't healed all the way yet. Rocky didn't want to leave him, which meant he brought up the rear.

When they turned their guns on to them, Rocky shifted. He wanted to create as much of a distraction as possible to make it easier for Ramsey to make a run for it.

Rocky took to the air, breathing fire as he did so.

The bullets stung each time they penetrated his scales. He ignored the pain, killing as many of their enemies as possible.

When he grew too weak to fly, he landed on the road. His stream of fire was the only way he kept them back. But he couldn't stop them from firing at him. All he could do was inch his way toward the yard.

Hearing Lucas curse told him he was close enough to make a run for it. His energy waned with each step but he pushed. Thinking about Henri alone, trying to survive without him, gave him the stamina he needed to fight for his life.

As soon as he was in the yard, he shifted to his human form and then to his dragon's, trying to heal himself but he quickly realized he was too injured. He would need medical help. He wanted to call for it, but all he could do was lie there.

Then Lucas knelt beside him. He frowned and called Rocky an idiot. "All you had to do was run."

“Wanted to make sure Ramsey made it.”

“I know.” Lucas huffed. “You saved his life. It’s still not the point. This is going to hurt, and you’ll pass out.”

Rocky nodded and gritted his teeth as he waited for Lucas to save his life. “Thanks, Lucas.”

“It’s a good thing for you I’m stronger than I used to be. Used to get so tired afterward.”

“I need you to tell Henri what’s happening. Find out where he is.”

Lucas nodded. “I’ll make sure he knows you’re fine and sleeping off the effects of my magic.”

Rocky clutched Lucas’s arm. “Don’t keep me under for long.”

“It’s not something I can control...” Lucas swallowed. “I’ll do everything I can to let Henri know someone is coming to help him.”

“Yes. Make sure he knows he’s not alone.” But it should be Rocky.

Promise me you’ll make it back home in one piece.

Are you hurt? What happened?

Got shot. I’m with Lucas. Now promise me. Rocky would grovel at Henri’s feet when he saw him again. He’d fuck him seven different ways in an hour if it made him happy. He’d promise the gods to be a better person if they would spare Henri’s life. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do.

I can't, but I can promise to try.

Lucas was right. When he pushed the white light into Rocky, it hurt. It wasn't long before he felt nothing at all.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

Henri knew the exact second something happened to Rocky. One minute he was in pain and then the next Rocky wasn't anymore. Henri felt his life force. He knew he wasn't dead. Which meant he had to have passed out.

Henri ran through all the scenarios in which that would have happened. Given his pain level, it was obvious he'd been injured. Probably by a bullet. Lucas must have saved him.

The enhanced humans didn't know how to use their new skills, so they resorted to using guns. Guns were effective. Henri couldn't refute the logic of using them. They were useful against humans and some paranormals. But shifters and vampires had superior healing abilities. There were better ways to kill them. And witches and warlocks had magic they could use, making guns less than ideal.

What Henri couldn't figure out was, if they attacked other towns, what was the point of it if their objective was to kidnap Echo and Lucas?

Perhaps all they wanted was to control the population.

Henri had tucked himself under a bench style seat and behind assault-style guns, he thought about everything. His mind raced. He had a visual of Echo, who lay passed out on the floor. They'd tied him up as though doing so would stop him from killing them. All Echo had to do was wake up.

Henri had had seconds to get into the van. He'd picked the one at the front, thinking they'd choose it, so they didn't have to worry about maneuvering around the other vans parked on the road behind it. He'd grabbed a fistful of some sort of native plant

growing in the forest, took off his pants and stuck them out of sight, and then climbed into the van. He stuck the plant under the seat right before he shifted. It was a lot easier to hide.

He wasn't a big turtle. His size used to be a sore spot, but he'd come to terms with it. Being able to stay out of sight in such a small space meant his size had finally benefited him.

He tried to pay attention when the van turned. When they sped up, he knew they'd gotten on the highway.

Where are you? Henri thought he was losing his mind, but then he recognized Lucas's voice and sighed in relief. Henri, are you all right?

We've been on the highway for about ten minutes. We're headed west, I think. Maybe we're headed for the airport? I think the closest one is in West Bend but double check please. Henri sighed in relief. The last thing he wanted was to be the sole person saving Echo. He didn't know what to do after they got to where they were going. He had no plan at all, which made him panic as much as his current situation did.

Got it.

I'm uninjured. They used some sort of chemical to render Echo unconscious. Probably chloroform. I don't know Echo's condition. Chloroform could cause death if given a high dosage. It could cause respiratory failure and seizures.

He's breathing. And waking up. Bandos and Sully are on their way.

Vaughan? Henri held his breath. Did he want to know the answer if it was bad? Rocky?

Shifting helped Vaughan. He's with Bandos and Sully. I fixed Rocky. He passed out from the effects. It's a thing.

Please keep him safe.

He's fine. As worried about you as you are about him.

I know. I felt it. Rocky must have been gravely injured for Lucas to have to save his life. Thank you for saving him.

We're all going to make it. How many times had Lucas said that to himself? Maybe as many times as Henri.

Henri had been right. They had been going to the airport. The sound of planes taking off was unmistakable. The closer the van got, the louder the planes became.

If they were going to escape, it would have to be before they loaded Echo onto the plane. Henri couldn't let the humans leave the van.

They must have a private plane, which meant the area would be somewhat secluded.

His mind raced. He needed to figure out the possible escape routes. The biggest issue would be the fencing surrounding some of the airport.

He didn't have even one plan by the time they turned and then slowed down before stopping. For the first time in hours, Henri smelled fresh air. It came from someone rolling down a window.

Henri had seen the exact second Echo's breathing had changed. His eyes were still

closed, and he lay in the same position.

Henri had no way of letting Echo know he wasn't alone. He hadn't opened his eyes yet, anyway. Even if he did, what he'd see were the soldiers sitting on the bench seat. While their legs didn't block Henri's view of Echo, they blocked him from seeing most of the front of the vehicle.

Henri used his mouth to pick up a piece of the plant. He had to do some turtle acrobatics, but he dropped it in front of the guns.

Lucas?

I'm here.

Can you communicate with Echo?

Yes.

Tell him I'm here. Under the bench seat. And I brought a forest plant with me.

Got it.

Henri watched Echo. He saw when Lucas communicated with him. Echo's breathing changed, and he seemed to sigh almost as if in relief.

If Henri hadn't been paying attention, he would have missed the plant growing. It was a slight movement. Not much of anything at all. Except it meant Echo was doing his thing.

The humans stopped talking. The van started down the road again.

Henri prayed to the gods Echo knew to bide his time. They needed to strike at the perfect moment.

Could Echo use one small plant to kill all the humans in the van? Henri wasn't sure what the answer was, but he had to be ready to help.

In the few minutes it took for the van to maneuver around the airport, a plan formed in his mind.

He wished he could communicate with everyone the way Lucas could. If it had been a possibility, he would have told Echo his plan. They could have tweaked it to make it work. But all he could do was hope Echo understood what he needed to do.

Even before they stopped, Henri moved along the van's side underneath the bench.

When the van stopped, Henri didn't hesitate. He left the safety of his hiding place and shifted, grabbing a gun.

He wasn't sure if they loaded the guns before stashing them under the seat, and he didn't know how to find out. He didn't have time for anything beyond pointing and shooting.

The next few seconds passed quickly. At the same time, everything stopped. All Henri heard was the sound of his own breathing. He knew he wouldn't be able to recall how he'd been able to assess the situation. It seemed automatic.

Nothing in Henri's genetic makeup made him capable of killing someone, and yet he did. Not only that, but he'd been strategic about who he took out first.

As soon as he turned and aimed at the humans, he saw Echo had already begun doing his thing with the plant. But he'd been right to question how much Echo could do

with a small plant.

Echo used the plant to bind their legs. Somehow, he rooted them to the van floor. Henri wasn't sure how he'd managed that. Perhaps there were holes underneath the rubber mat. Regardless, doing so meant two of them couldn't grab their guns.

It left three others for Henri to take care of in the back and two in the front.

Henri knew what a safety was. He'd read about guns in novels a few times. He wasn't sure where it was on the gun, but he imagined the manufacturer would put the safety mechanism somewhere within easy reach of the trigger. Maybe it was luck, but he found a button and pressed it.

And then he started shooting.

Echo curled into a ball and covered his ears.

What Henri didn't account for was the force of a bullet leaving the chamber. The gun kicked back against Henri's shoulder. He'd have a bruise. Being a shifter meant it would heal soon, but he still wasn't happy about the pain. He recovered and accounted for it the next time he pulled the trigger.

One of the unbound humans went for their gun and even had it in hand by the time Henri shot him.

The next people Henri focused on were the two humans at the front. Henri pointed at the one in the driver's seat because he hadn't chosen to bail out of the van. Instead, he drew a handgun.

Henri's chest tightened when he saw the black metal pointed at him. He struggled to breathe. Instinct kicked in and he pulled the trigger. When he pulled it, multiple

bullets discharged, one after another, spraying the inside of the van like an out-of-control sprinkler.

The driver fired but missed because the force of so many bullets leaving the chamber knocked Henri off his feet at the exact right time. He landed against the back doors, which made him spray the van roof.

Echo stood beside him, covering Henri's hand, letting him know he could ease up on the trigger.

He breathed again, shuddering as the adrenaline worked its way through his body.

Echo took the gun from him with shaking hands, setting it aside before opening the back door and stepping out.

Henri shut his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart. As his heart rate leveled out and his ears stopped ringing, his sense of smell kicked in. The coppery scent was overwhelming.

He opened his eyes, taking in blood splatter and the way bodies slumped on top of each other. The driver lay over the center console.

Henri hadn't ever thrown up before, but he knew the exact moment he was going to.

Echo wiped his mouth as if he'd puked. A dead human, who'd been in the passenger's seat moments ago, lay next to the fence with grass growing around him as if it were a spider spinning a web around its next meal. Henri didn't even make it away from the vehicle before he lost everything in his stomach.

Echo came up beside him, somehow avoiding the splatter. He rubbed Henri's back and waited until he finished before he spoke. "We need to get out of here. Before

airport security comes.”

Henri wished he had water to rinse his mouth.

Echo nodded toward the plane. “You need clothing.”

What Henri needed was a shower to wash all the blood off. Echo did too, although he wasn’t as bad off. “It’s likely one of your kidnappers was the pilot. I’m sure the mission was secret, so I doubt anyone is waiting inside.”

“That’s my thought too.”

They made their way over to the plane and opened the door. It was one of those cargo-type things. The first thing he saw when they got inside was more guns. But there were duffle bags too.

“I’ll find some clothes for us. You search for water. And then we make a run for it.”

Henri got to work. There were cases of bottled water stacked at the front of the plane. He emptied a small duffle bag and put some bottles inside, along with some cash he’d found. It wasn’t much money. A few hundred dollars, but it was enough to get them back home.

Henri wasn’t sure how long they would be in the city or how easy it would be to get home. Saint Lakes wasn’t safe even if they made it back.

Echo threw some pants at Henri. They were the black cargo ones the humans wore, but they’d cover him. Henri put them on and then a T-shirt Echo had given him.

Echo changed clothes as well. “If security catches up with us, we’ll both look legit.”

“Good thinking.” But he didn’t know if it was or not. It couldn’t hurt, though. Blood splattered Echo’s clothing. He needed to change so he wouldn’t draw attention to them.

It wasn’t but a couple of minutes and they were out of the airplane, headed for the nearest exit. They had to walk around the fence, which made them feel like sitting ducks, but there were no vehicles coming toward them. No flashing lights or sirens. Perhaps firing inside the vehicle had kept the sound contained.

When Henri stopped walking, so did Echo. He searched for the right spot in the fence, glancing back at the guard’s station. He pointed to a corner on the other side of the airplane. “We can climb the fence there and remain unseen.”

Echo nodded, and they ran back the way they’d come.

Passing the van made Henri shudder, but he ignored it as best as he could.

They threw the duffle bag over the fence first and then started the ascent together.

Henri had never climbed a fence and didn’t realize how the thin metal of each link would dig into his fingers. He didn’t enjoy the experience. And his landing sucked.

Echo grabbed the bag and then his hand. They took off, running away from the airport as fast as they could.

We’re safe. Henri projected to Lucas.

I’ll let Rocky know when he wakes up. Someone is coming to get you guys, okay?

We’ll find our way back. Henri wasn’t going to twiddle his thumbs waiting for someone to save them. They needed to save themselves. So far so good where that

was concerned.

Let me know where you are at all times.

He'd thought their getaway would have been much more dramatic, but no one seemed to notice them. Or if they did, no one cared.

They slowed down, walking along the sidewalk as if they belonged.

“Bandos and Vaughan are still in Saint Lakes. They're having a hard time getting out of town. They keep getting shot at and the humans have the roads blocked.” Echo's chin wobbled and tears gathered on his lashes.

Henri wrapped his arm around Echo's shoulders. “We'll make it back home. We're safer than they are right now. We saved ourselves. It stands to reason we can save our mates if necessary.”

Echo nodded. “Thanks for sticking with me, Henri.”

“Well, according to your mate, it's what family does.”

Echo wiped his eyes, smiling. “Vaughan. Somerset to his core.”

“Yeah.” And he had a point. It was the worst of times. They had to stick together if they wanted to survive.

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They were in a rundown part of town. Trash littered the sidewalk. Some of it had worked its way against the buildings and into the gutters. Henri could tell it had been there for a while. Most of the windows had black metal bars on them, while others had been broken. There were also liquor stores advertising alcohol, cigarettes, and cheap cell phones.

Some buildings had graffiti on them.

They passed a homeless person sitting on a piece of cardboard with a torn paper grocery sack and a dirty duffel bag beside them.

Henri stopped and unzipped the bag. He rummaged around in it until he found the cash he had stolen. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and handed it to the person.

The person took it and hugged it to their chest. Their smile widened, and they patted their chest. Henri didn't know if they couldn't or wouldn't speak, so Henri didn't either. He nodded and grabbed Echo's hand, pulling him along.

"Where did you get money?" Echo whispered when they were a respectful distance away.

"Found it on the plane. I'm not sure how much is there."

"We need to stop. Regroup. Eat. It's weird but I'm hungry." Echo pointed to what appeared to be a little hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant. The building had a small overhang shading bistro style tables. To create a homey feel, the restaurant owners built a railing around their outdoor eating space.

“Nothing is left in your stomach.”

“Yeah, all that blood.” Echo shuddered.

“Let’s not think about it.”

On the left was a sliding window resembling the type at driver-thru restaurants. The place was free from litter and the tables appeared clean.

A small lady stood inside. She’d pulled her hair back from her face and had a pretty smile. She seemed ageless. Henri couldn’t tell how old she was, not even when they walked up to the window. She had flawless skin. But she had wisdom in her eyes.

Henri had studied Latin for fun once and he’d learned Spanish because several people around the surrounding communities spoke it as their first language. Spanish was also the second most spoken language in America. It made sense to learn it.

But he could see the surprise on the woman’s face and then her relieved smile, as if her English wasn’t the greatest and she dreaded speaking it.

He ordered drinks. It was some sort of fruit smoothie thing he hoped Echo wouldn’t object to. He turned to Echo. “What would you like to eat?”

“Tacos?”

“Beef or chicken.” He didn’t have to read the menu to know she’d asked the question. Every Mexican restaurant in America had more than one choice of taco. He knew those two choices would be on the menu, although he suspected there were more.

“Beef.” Echo unzipped the bag and pulled out the wad of cash. He stuffed it into his pocket.

Henri ordered their food, and when the woman told them the amount, Echo handed him some of the money. Henri paid. They were told to take a seat, and she'd call them when their order was up.

They sat close to the building. Their table had an umbrella attached to it. Someone had angled it for maximum privacy.

Echo pulled out their wad of cash, counting it. His eyes widened after he finished. He handed it back to Henri. "There's a little over six hundred there."

Henri hadn't realized it was so much. "I feel bad eating tacos when Saint Lakes is in such peril."

"We have to eat something. We need our energy." Echo leaned forward. "Let's rent a car and drive home."

"We can't rent without giving them some form of ID. Even if we pay cash, they still need our driver's license." Henri didn't have his on him and Echo didn't have a license. "The humans are government soldiers. They'll be able to track us. We'll need to stay off the grid."

"Does it matter if they did?"

Henri nodded.

They stopped talking when the woman brought their food. Henri and Echo thanked her, and they tucked into a taco each before Henri spoke again.

"I hope we're able to make it to Saint Lakes without problems, but if they've discovered the plane still at the airport, we'll need to be careful. You're important enough to them to kill over. I shudder thinking about what would happen if they

accomplished their goal.”

Echo put his taco down and seemed to stare into space. Henri wasn't sure if he was thinking about what Henri said or if he was talking to his mates. It didn't take Echo long to clue Henri in. “I think they want to use us for leverage.”

Henri nodded. “So the council will free Fowler. Yes, I agree.”

“We would be slaves.” Echo frowned as if the thought made him angry.

“We'll all be slaves to Fowler, even the humans. He'd be able to rule the country if that's his goal.”

“The worst-case scenario.”

“Yes.” Henri took a bite of his taco and changed the subject. There was no point in thinking about what could happen when they had to focus on making it back to Saint Lakes. They were taking measures to prevent the worst from happening. It was all they could do. “We have two choices. We can hitch a ride. The local truck stop would be a good place to find a ride.”

Echo wrinkled his nose. “What's the second choice?”

“We steal a car.”

Echo's eyes were as big as saucers. “They could put us in jail. I'm not prison material anymore. I mean, some vampires assholes locked me away in a room in a castle for a while, so I've been there, but Vaughan and Bandos have ruined me. I'm way too pampered now.”

Henri smiled. It was the first time since the humans had attacked, and the little spark

of something besides fear felt good, even if nothing about their situation warranted a smile. “I’m not either. I think if we find a car around here, we have less of a chance of it being reported. I’m sure I can hot-wire one, but we’ll need to find an older model.”

Maybe they would get lucky.

“How do you know how to hot-wire a car?” Echo sounded as if he doubted Henri’s ability. And while Henri didn’t have real world experience, how hard could it be?

Henri shrugged. “I read about it once. The instructions were straightforward.”

“You read about it? What kind of book gives a how-to on stealing cars? And why did you read it?”

“You never know what will be useful.” Henri’s usual go-to topics bored him sometimes.

Echo sighed. “I’ve been in worse situations.”

Henri rolled his eyes. “My ability to hot-wire a car will not turn into a bad situation.”

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It turned into a bad situation.

Henri held up his hands so the woman outside the car wouldn't shoot him. But before he did, he pressed the door lock, locking him and Echo inside.

"What should we do?" Henri didn't have a clue. He hoped Echo did.

But it was the woman outside who gave them options. She had long hair hanging down her back and rings on almost every finger. A necklace with a locket hung around her neck. She appeared as if she were in her twenties, but she had a world more experience than most people her age. The gun she pointed at them spoke of violence in her past.

She held the gun with one hand and fished in her pocket, pulling out a key, which she dangled as if it were a carrot in front of the window. "Pay for it and I let you drive away. Continue to fuck with those wires and I'll shoot you through the window."

It was a concrete jungle. No plants. Not even the weeds struggling for life through the cracks on the sidewalk were close enough for Echo to help the situation.

Still, the woman wasn't messing around. Henri could tell based on the firm set of her jaw.

"How do we know we can trust you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Like you have a fucking choice."

Henri knew she had a point.

“Does the car even start?” The thing appeared as if he had seen better days, which was why they’d chosen it.

“Yep. It’s a Buick. The body will fall off before the motor goes out.” She pressed the keys to the glass. “Now pay for it or die. It’s up to you.”

Echo grabbed the money out of his pocket and handed it to Henri. Henri rolled down the window, slipping the money through the crack. It was big enough for a set of keys to fit through. “It’s all we have.”

She slid the keys through and then stuck the gun back inside one of the biggest purses he’d ever seen. “Next time, make sure you get the keys before handing someone money. Most people would take advantage around here.”

“Thanks?” Henri wasn’t sure if it was sound advice or not, but he didn’t intend for there to be a next time.

She walked out of the small parking lot between buildings without turning back.

He stuck the key inside the ignition and turned it. Sure enough, the car came to life. And it sounded as though it was a much younger model than the clunky metal body suggested.

They headed out of the city, following the signs for the highway, when Echo spoke. “We should have hitched a ride from a trucker.”

“Given our luck, it would have been a serial killer.” Henri turned on his blinker, merging into the other lane. “Did you know the Happy Face killer was a truck driver?”

Echo sighed. “It’s weird that you know that.”

“I read—”

“A book about it.” Echo sighed. “I know you did.”

Henri turned when the signs told him to. “I’ll admit it could have gone better. But at least she wasn’t a cop.”

Echo snorted. “Oh look, a bright side.”

At least they were on their way home. “We’ll be home inside of an hour.”

“A home overrun by humans.” Echo wasn’t wrong. They had problems on top of their problems. Their current situation felt as though they were wading through mud.

Henri couldn’t see a clear solution. “The alternative is...?”

“Worse.” Echo wiped his eyes when the tears fell. “It’s not your fault. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“You’re just trying to save my life. Again.”

“And my own. I believe we’re in what’s called survival mode.” For Henri to not only survive but to thrive, he would need Rocky’s continued presence in his life. Getting back to him had to come first. He’d figure everything else out afterward.

They didn’t even make it ten miles before he heard a siren. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the police lights. Cursing, he pulled over onto the side of the road.

What he didn't expect was for a sleek black car to pull in behind the police car.
"What the hell is going on?"

Echo turned in his seat. His eyes widened. "I think I know who's in the black car."

"Would you please fill me in?" Henri's hands started to shake as he put the car into gear again. They might have to make a run for it.

The thought of a police chase made him think about those reality shows he'd seen where the police always got the bad guy.

"Do you know who Spider Sylvain is?"

Henri shook his head. "Should I?"

"He's a mob boss. His crew are notorious." Echo said it as though the mob didn't bother him. He sounded relieved to see them.

Henri's gaze snapped to Echo's. "The mob is behind us?"

"Yes."

"In the black car?"

"Yes."

"The Mafia?"

Echo nodded. "Don't worry. They're here to help us."

"They're here to help us'." Henri wasn't sure why he was repeating everything Echo

said. His brain had lost all function and he didn't know how to reboot it.

He waited for the cop to step out of his vehicle and either ask the person in the black car what they were doing or approach Henri's vehicle. But the officer shut off his lights and pulled onto the highway again, passing them.

"I bet that woman told the cops we stole her car. Even after we gave her the money." Henri wasn't sure why he was talking about them getting pulled over. It wasn't as though it mattered as much as having the mob there.

"Nah, Sylvain has the cops on the payroll. He wanted us to stop." Echo took off his seatbelt and went to open the car door. "Come on. The cavalry is here."

Henri hesitated. There wasn't a moment in which he envisioned he would ever knowingly get inside a criminal's vehicle, but they were the organized type. "They kill people and make it seem like an accident, Echo."

Echo waved away the comment. He exited the vehicle but stood in the opening, meeting Henri's gaze. "You're thinking of the human mob. Sylvain isn't human. None of his people are. Now, come on."

Get out of the car, Henri Carpentier. He didn't recognize the person talking to him. It wasn't Rocky or Lucas.

Henri stiffened.

Echo smirked as if he were privy to the inside of Henri's mind as well. "Sylvain is special."

He didn't have to say that for Henri to know.

Henri's hands shook as he exited the car. He ran to Echo, taking his hand. "Let me open the car door."

Echo rolled his eyes. "I promise, Henri. He's here to help."

I'm a friend. There they were again. The person seemed to have a front-row seat to his thoughts when no one should be able to get into his head besides Rocky. While he understood the reason behind Lucas's ability, it still shouldn't have been possible, for the same reasons it shouldn't have been for the stranger. Yet, he'd heard what he'd heard.

Henri pulled open the car door and glanced inside before getting in. He kept Echo behind him as he took in the man in the back seat. He had long black hair and dark eyes. His gaze was calculating, but he smiled, patting the seat next to him.

Henri hesitated to get in. Echo nudged him, prompting him to get inside. It wasn't as if he had much of a choice.

The seats in the back were bigger, almost like a limousine. Henri sat as far away from the stranger as possible and made sure he was between the man and Echo.

As soon as they closed the door, the driver put the car in gear and they headed down the highway again.

Echo leaned forward and smiled at the man. "How did you know where to find us?"

Henri scowled at him. Echo would live longer if he didn't interact with the mob boss.

"I believe one of your mates has asked for help, but Taylor Pyke facilitated it, as he often does."

“Taylor Pyke?” He was the human, mated to Marshall Pyke. Marshall was a deputy in Saint Lakes. Henri wasn’t sure how someone like Taylor, who was a farmer, would know a mob boss, but there had to be a story he hadn’t heard yet.

Sylvain smiled and hummed in a noncommittal way. When he met Henri’s gaze, his smile faded. “So, how are we going to save the world?”

Henri sucked in a breath and put his hand on his chest. “Why would I know?”

Sylvain waved his hand. “Someone as intelligent as you should have some ideas.”

Henri didn’t answer right away. Instead, he gathered his thoughts. He didn’t know Sylvain, but he seemed genuine, if not a little scary and...secretive. Still, they were driving toward Saint Lakes. When he answered, he laid it all out.

“I don’t think the enhancement can be reversed. It deals with altering someone’s genetic makeup. Once it’s done, it can’t be undone. Or if it can, it could be dangerous for the patient. While the humans invading Saint Lakes might not matter, we don’t know how many innocents they altered.”

“Why is that relevant?”

“Because reversing the enhancement is the best-case scenario for the humans affected.”

“What’s the worst?”

“Their death.” But Henri feared they wouldn’t have any other choice. People had to die. It was fall victim to the enhanced humans or kill them.

Sylvain shrugged. “Let them die.”

Henri's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "It's unnecessary to kill everyone. Some of those men are doing their job. They're ignorant, not hateful. And then there are the enhanced humans who aren't part of Fowler's army. We have to think about them too. But overall, I think the way we'll make them stop is if Echo and Lucas save us."

Sylvain smiled, as if something Henri said made him proud.

Henri squeezed Echo's hand.

Echo smirked. "No pressure."

Sylvain waved off the comment. "We all have a part to play."

Had Henri played his part already or was there more he was supposed to do? He shuddered thinking about what came next. Whatever it was, it wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

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Rocky felt the connection with Henri before he opened his eyes. What prompted Rocky to awaken with a roar, bounding out of bed as if he had a thousand chains around him and had to break free, was Henri's fear.

His stress level was off the charts, and Rocky knew why. Henri wasn't in Saint Lakes. He was trying to get back, but he hadn't succeeded yet.

Rocky didn't bother with clothing because he was going to shift as soon as he got outside.

There were several clan members hunkered down in the house. They were all as scared as the next person.

As soon as he made his way downstairs and into the kitchen, Lucas was there, with Bennett by his side.

"He's with Echo and Sylvain. They're almost here, but the humans put up a barricade around the town. Unless Echo and Sylvain take care of it by creating mass casualties, they'll have a difficult time."

Rocky nodded and headed outside.

Lucas followed him out, with Bennett on his heels.

Bennett pulled Lucas to his side with a growl. Rocky understood the sentiment. If he had to do it over again, he would have fought to get to Henri.

Lucas didn't complain about the protectiveness. He plowed on through with the information he thought Rocky would need.

Rocky understood why it was Lucas who was the one to fill him in. He was the one who had an inside view of everyone's mind. Rocky wouldn't doubt if he was in communication with everyone all at once. The feeling had to be unnerving, but Lucas seemed to handle it like a rock star. Given the fact he'd have to be the savior of all paranormals, he was still getting his feet wet.

"I'm not sure how much Echo trusts Sylvain."

"Echo knows he has to trust him." Rocky watched the yard surrounding him.

Ladon was with Hacen, Garridan, Fane, and Ramsey talking strategy, but when he saw Rocky, they all closed the distance. Ladon waved Marshall and Taylor over.

When Ladon and the others were close enough, Rocky said, "Echo's safety is paramount. There's no one else like him in this country. We're screwed if something happens to him. Henri knows it. He's scared for Echo more than himself. And he doesn't trust Sylvain."

"No one should trust Sylvain. Not fully, at any rate." Taylor was the one who spoke. "Henri's smart not to. But Sylvain knows what a clusterfuck we're in. We can trust him to help with the situation. Beyond that, I don't know. But we need to be careful around him. He's a kill first type of guy. He's calculating and savvy enough to use other people's fear to his advantage."

Rocky didn't want Henri around someone like Sylvain, but he didn't have much of a choice. "Good thing Sylvain's an ally."

"No one wants him for an enemy," Marshall said.

“Not to change the subject.” Lucas met Rocky’s gaze. “Bandos, Vaughan, and Sully had to hunker down in a house near to one of the human roadblocks.”

“Which direction are Echo and Henri coming from?” Fane asked.

“I’ll find out from Henri. He’ll be able to tell us better than Echo or Sylvain since he’s lived in Saint Lakes his whole life,” Rocky said. He used their link to talk to Henri. Baby, are you safe?

You’re awake! Are you okay? What happened?

Rocky smiled. I asked you first.

I’m safe for now. The humans have cars and stuff in front of the road. We can’t get through. We’re thinking about what to do. Sylvain wants to kill them all, but they have hostages. They’re tied up, sitting in front of the cars. One is the Haack boy. He’s ten years old, Rocky.

Which road are you on?

The south end of Harbor Road. We’re next to Miss Cathy’s place. Henri’s emotions shifted. Are you coming to get me?

Yeah, baby. I’ll be there within minutes. Tell Sylvain not to kill anyone until we get there.

I don’t have that type of influence on someone like him, nor do I want it. Also, you could tell him yourself. He seems to link with everyone. Much like Lucas.

Rocky met Ladon’s gaze. “They’re on Harbor Road. The south end of town. They’re sitting ducks if anyone comes up behind them on the road.”

“Sylvain and Echo will make it here if they work together,” Lucas said.

“Sylvain is too much of a wild card. And the humans have hostages.”

Rocky wanted to shift and go to Henri. If it weren't for getting a plan in place, one including Bandos, Vaughan, and Sully, he would have.

Rocky noticed Wesley hovering close by. He crooked a finger at him. Wesley ran to him. Rocky put an arm around Wesley's shoulders. “We'll get them back. I promise, Wes.”

“Can I come too?” Wesley frowned. “Sully doesn't want me to, but I can help. I know I can. Sully has been teaching me how to use a gun and how to fight.”

Rocky wouldn't tell him no. Wesley had as much at stake as Rocky. Their family was out there in the war zone, in danger. “Stick close to me. Don't go off on your own. And do as you're told.”

Wesley leaned against him. His chin wobbled. “Thank you.”

Rocky met everyone's gaze one at a time. “Sully can do recon. He's quiet when he shifts. If he can tell us which areas are heavy with humans, we can avoid them.”

“Vaughan too. Wolves are good at lying in wait and blending in,” Ladon said. He pulled Magnus closer. “Magnus's speed might come in handy. Fane and Hacen, too. If the enhanced humans made a run for it. I want some of them alive.”

Taylor spoke up. “If you're thinking of getting information about their commanding officers, they won't tell. It would take someone like Lucas or Sylvain to extract that sort of information.”

Ladon nodded. "I was thinking the same thing, but it'll solve the next problem."

"Understood." Taylor said nothing else, but Rocky could tell his wheels were turning. He was probably already thinking up solutions. They all were. And he was glad someone would find a permanent resolution to the human problem. Rocky's mind was on getting his mate back into his arms.

"Tell Sully what we need him to do," Rocky whispered to Wesley.

Wesley nodded. Rocky could tell when he did what Rocky asked. His eyes glazed over. He nodded as if answering someone. It wasn't but a few minutes. "He said to give them a few minutes."

We're coming, baby. It won't be long now. Once Rocky had Henri in his arms, he would never let him go again.

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Never once had Henri ever thought he would be in a position where he had to reason with a mob boss.

“Have you ever performed your magic with a fae before?” If he had then maybe Henri would trust no hostage would get harmed.

“I don’t see where it matters.” Not that he answered the question.

“There’s no way for us to know how effective you and Echo are together. If you leave even one of them out, they could kill a hostage. Or perhaps you’d accidentally include one of the hostages.” It wasn’t a risk Henri would take, but it wasn’t up to him. All he could do was argue his case.

Echo leaned over and whispered in his ear. Inside Sylvain’s vehicle, the sound traveled pretty far. “Don’t argue with the mob boss.”

Sylvain chuckled for reasons Henri couldn’t comprehend.

Henri rolled his eyes. When he spoke, he spoke aloud. “What’s he going to do? Kill me. We’re probably already dead anyway.”

Echo gasped. His eyes widened. He darted a glance to Sylvain, as though gauging his reaction to Henri’s statement.

All Sylvain did was smirk. “I won’t do anything to him.”

They had little time before they had to come up with some sort of plan. They couldn’t

hide out in the car forever. It wouldn't be long before Rocky got there, and they had to figure it out before then.

"Timing is everything. At least in our current situation. You haven't tested your magic together. Not like Echo and Lucas have. For that reason, we should at least wait for backup."

"We won't need backup. But I'll concede. We strike at the right time. When the humans are distracted."

"The dragon shifters can create a distraction. They are huge and noticeable. And the sun is going down, so they'll create a bigger shadow on the ground, which could benefit us," Echo added. It was a good plan.

Sylvain nodded. "I rarely compromise."

"But..." Henri met his gaze with his eyebrows raised.

"But." Sylvain drew out the word. "I'm willing to make an exception because it's a better plan than the one I had. And you're right, we should be cautious, considering innocent lives are at stake."

Henri had a feeling Sylvain didn't deal with innocent people very often, at least not directly.

We have a plan. Of sorts. We need you and the others to create a distraction.

What sort of distraction?

Something to avert their attention away from the hostages. Echo thinks you should fly overhead. But I don't want you to get injured again.

Got it. We're close. You'll see us in a couple of minutes if all goes well.

Shit. They were closer than Henri had thought.

Henri met Sylvain's gaze and then Echo's. "They aren't far away. Maybe we should get into place."

Was Henri the leader of this thing? Because he felt as though he was. He shouldn't be leading a mission in which violence would occur. The majority of his days involved reading. He had zero experience with anything else. But he had read countless books on wars of the past.

Sylvain exited the vehicle, so Echo and Henri did the same.

While in the car, Henri had seen little of the driver beyond the back of his dark head. His hair was shaved at the sides but longer on top. His eyes were a remarkable shade of violet. Henri had thought violet eyes didn't exist except in books, but there they were, and they glowed as though he were a vampire, except normally vampires didn't have eyes that color either. He had a thick chain hanging from his jeans pocket. He looked as if he were more suited to riding a motorcycle rather than driving a luxury car.

He waved his hand as if there were something he intended to fling into the atmosphere. Everything became blurry but went back to normal almost as quickly. Okay, not everything. Echo hadn't been blurry and nor were Sylvain and the driver. But the forest had been. And the house they had parked next to had been blurry as well. Even the for sale sign in the yard had been.

Sylvain nodded, as if someone had said something to him. If Henri were to guess, he was in communication with the driver. "We're invisible to everyone except your mates. They can see you, but not Florin and I."

Henri saw the driver in a new light. His eye color made sense in a nonsensical way. In the same way Sylvain was special, so was Florin. Maybe it was why Sylvain had become a dangerous person. Had he built a reputation as a defense mechanism?

Don't think about it too hard, Turtle. The 'or else' didn't have to be said. Henri understood he shouldn't dig too deep or question Sylvain. There may be consequences.

Sorry. Henri wanted to make sense of the world. It was why he'd devoted his time to studying history and science. When something didn't make sense, he wanted to understand why.

A familiar roar distracted Henri. The sound of it was a punch to his heart. His chest ached. He had to fight the urge to run toward Rocky.

Tears gathered in his eyes because it felt as though it had been years since he'd last seen Rocky. That morning, they had showered together and brushed their teeth at the bathroom sink after breakfast. If he had known how their day would have gone when he'd kissed Rocky goodbye and watched him pull his truck out of the driveway, he might have held on a moment longer.

A shadow fell over them. When Henri glanced at the sky, he saw Rocky's pretty scales shimmer in the dying sun.

Rocky wasn't alone. Bandos and the alpha were with him.

Rocky shrieked as if in distress. Henri didn't understand why until he realized Rocky couldn't see anyone but Henri.

Sylvain's driver is some sort of warlock. He cast a spell so the humans can't see us. I'm not alone. Echo, Sylvain, and Sylvain's man is with me.

Rocky shrieked again. The second time, it held a note of acceptance. Do whatever you have planned before they shoot at us.

No sooner had Rocky spoken of it than gunfire cracked through the forest.

Sylvain nodded, as if it was the affirmation he needed to execute the plan. “I don’t think we’re going to get a bigger distraction than three giant dragon shifters flying around overhead.”

Sylvain held out his hand to Echo. When Echo took it, they walked through the forest together. Henri and Sylvain’s driver followed.

They didn’t have to walk far before they were next to the barricade the humans had erected. It consisted of cars they had driven into the road and left there. The hostages sat next to the cars as if they were a part of the barrier. They had their hands tied behind their backs.

Sylvain and Echo met each other’s gazes. And then Sylvain said, “I know it’s difficult, but you’ll have to trust me now.”

Echo nodded. “I know. I do.”

Sylvain smiled and then he focused on the dozens of soldiers with their gazes and their guns raised toward the sky and Henri’s dragon.

Henri had sympathy for the soldiers who were doing their job until the moment they fired at his mate.

Henri wasn’t sure what he expected. Some sort of grand affair. Something way more dramatic with huge balls of light. The kind Lucas could conjure. But nothing happened.

One minute the soldiers were alive and the next they had crumpled to the pavement. There was no fanfare or drama. It wasn't like in the movies where the hero set the world on fire and killed all of their enemies in various forms of bloody fury. The drama came when the humans fell at the same time. Their guns made clacking noises when they hit the pavement.

He never thought about what someone sounded like the moment they died. Hearing it made his stomach turn. Henri fought the urge to puke as he made his way out of the forest. "Can you please take the spell away? I want to untie the hostages without scaring them."

Henri didn't wait for Florin to answer. Instead, he made his way to the closest hostage and untied him. Henri knew when he became visible to the hostage because the man sucked in a breath.

"It's gonna be okay. If you could help untie the others, we can make our way to Mother Estelle's sooner."

Vaughan and Sully, in wolf form, came from the forest on the opposite side of the road.

Echo cried out. Henri watched as he ran straight to Vaughan. Vaughan shifted and caught Echo when he launched himself at him. Echo wrapped his legs around Vaughan's waist and his arms around his neck, clinging as he cried.

Tears pricked Henri's eyes. He fought his emotions as he untied the next hostage. It wasn't until Rocky landed on the road and shifted that Henri lost it. It happened much the same way it had with Echo. Henri rose from his crouched position and made his way to Rocky. Henri shook even before he touched Rocky.

Ladon and Bandos passed them.

Rocky enveloped Henri into a hug. He whispered words of comfort and let Henri cry.

It took Henri a while to speak. The emotions clogged his throat. But he was able to say what he wanted to say to Rocky. “This has been the longest day in recorded history.”

Rocky smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “It’s not over yet, baby.”

They were together again. Nothing else would ever matter more than that.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

The trip through Saint Lakes took place on foot. It was about four miles from where they were to Mother Estelle's house if they made a straight shot, but four miles through human-infested territory took a lot longer. It took all of them to make it. Even with Sylvain and Echo clearing a path, it seemed they had to know the enemy was close. Henri scanned the area along with the rest of them. They stayed together, even the hostages.

Someone handed Henri a gun. He wasn't sure who, but he held it, ready to kill if necessary. Some hostages had guns as well. Wesley too. Anyone who knew how to shoot except the predatory shifters. They were almost all wolf shifters. The dragons flew overhead, including Rocky. They were their eyes in the sky and relayed information to Sylvain.

It seemed forming a group helped keep them alive as much as having Sylvain and Echo kill in one fell swoop.

They made it to Mother Estelle's.

The crowd of soldiers standing outside the barrier all dropped dead.

Henri would never get used to seeing a body fall to the ground so suddenly. Some horrors didn't involve blood. Some bounced when their bodies hit the ground. The ones standing together fell into each other.

Henri shuddered. He didn't want to walk past the bodies but didn't have a choice. He followed the rest of them until he felt the air whoosh behind him.

Rocky landed behind him.

You don't have to see them anymore, baby. I'll fly you over. Rocky lay on his belly and waited.

Henri tossed his gun aside and closed the distance. He climbed onto Rocky's back and held on.

Rocky lifted off the ground a lot slower than he would have if he didn't have a passenger. The fact he was more careful made Henri feel special, as though he were precious cargo.

Henri closed his eyes and lay against Rocky's long neck.

It took a second before they landed. Rocky stayed still, so Henri did too. He could fall asleep if he wasn't so stressed. He didn't know how tired he was until the moment he let himself relax.

Rocky stayed prone on the ground as though letting Henri take the break he needed.

Henri opened his eyes when Ladon spoke. "Meeting in the kitchen in five minutes. Let's get this shitshow over with."

Henri held up a thumb, acknowledging the alpha for Rocky. Or at least Henri assumed Ladon had been addressing Rocky and not him since he'd never been at an alpha meeting before.

Ladon walked toward the house, putting an arm around his vampire mate Magnus when he drew close enough.

Henri sighed and slid from Rocky's back. When Rocky was in his human form, he

drew Henri to him, and they headed to the house.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know.” It was the truth. He felt drained, as if the drama of the day had zapped all the feeling from him. The numbness had set in after reuniting with Rocky. And he knew why. He could stop being scared when Rocky was there. With the lack of fear, went everything else too. “I’ll have a proper breakdown later, as long as you hold me.”

“We’ll hold each other.”

“I’m glad you’re not injured anymore. I know it was serious. I was scared for you when you passed out. But Lucas eased my mind.” In truth, Henri didn’t have time to feel anything. He’d been trying to save his and Echo’s life and get them back home. But there had been a moment of panic. It was a moment he’d never forget.

“I know how you feel. I was scared for you, too. You could have been killed.” Rocky sighed and shook his head. “All I could do was fight to survive and hope you made it back to me.”

They stopped on the patio outside the sliding glass door leading into the house. Rocky’s hold on him tightened. Henri turned to Rocky, wrapping him up in a hug.

“It’ll be a while before I let you out of my sight,” Henri whispered and lay his cheek on Rocky’s bare chest.

“My thoughts exactly.”

Henri wanted it to be over. He wanted to go back to yesterday when all he could think about was getting Rocky’s dick inside him as often as possible, and filling his

bookshelves. But it wasn't done yet, despite the pile of bodies beyond the barrier.

Other people in other paranormal towns were still fighting. People were dying.

"Let's go in. I think I know how to end this thing."

They headed inside.

Sylvain was already talking about his experience with Echo. "We either have to see them or be close enough to sense them to target anyone. The alternative is to target an entire group."

"We have an enhanced human in our clan. She's in Blackwing with her mate, but she's an asset to our clan and Blackwing."

Rocky spoke up. "She's family." If someone hurt Anna, they would have to deal with him.

"If I wanted to kill her, I would have already." Sylvain said it as though he were having brunch with friends. "As I was saying, Lucas and I can use Echo to target abilities on a large scale. We can't target smaller groups unless we sense them."

"So what do we do?" Ladon asked.

"Put on clothing, for starters." Sylvain smirked. "I'm not used to so many naked people in one space."

His driver shook his head, but otherwise didn't speak.

No one cared about nakedness. As a shifter, a person's natural state did not bother Henri. But he could understand some people weren't used to it the way he was.

Ladon turned to Magnus and must have spoken through their bond, because Magnus nodded and left the room. He wasn't gone but a couple of minutes before he settled against Ladon's side again.

"If someone else knew a person, could you kill them...remotely?" Fane asked.

"I don't know. Maybe." Sylvain smiled. "Let's test it."

"No!" Henri wasn't the only one who yelled. It was a collective response.

Sylvain rolled his eyes.

His driver chuckled. He spoke for the first time since Henri had been in his presence.

"They think you're bloodthirsty one. That's funny."

Mother Estelle walked in carrying a laundry basket full of clothes. "There's been enough killing."

Sylvain shook his head. "Yes, ma'am. I'll restrain myself. Lucas and Echo can test it. We'll see if you can sense someone. Nothing more."

Vaughan and Gabe started throwing clothes at people.

Lucas searched the room. "Whose mind should I enter?"

"Mine." Henri volunteered. Lucas and Echo had never met his parents, and he hadn't ever talked about them in their presence.

Lucas held out his hand to Echo and took it.

Henri thought about his parents right before Lucas entered his mind.

“I got them.” Lucas sucked in a breath. “Your mom is answering trivial game questions. It’s on television. She’s saying it aloud, knowing how much it annoys your father. Your dad is picturing a spike in her head, although he’s not serious about killing her. They’re in the city. Within walking distance of a park with a small pond. That’s why they aren’t fighting. They don’t even know about the war.”

The information was more than Henri had known about them in more than a decade. And it was more than he cared to know. He had long since grown indifferent toward them and didn’t consider them family. They hadn’t instilled it in Henri. Not in his entire life.

By the time Lucas pulled out of Henri’s mind, everyone had clothes on.

Lucas shook his head as if to shake off the effects of being in Henri’s brain. “I could have killed them.”

“So if you can do it with Henri, then you can with Fowler.” Fane had been sitting on Ramsey’s lap. They sat at the kitchen table. Fane leaned against Ramsey and drew Ramsey’s arm around him.

Sylvain grinned. “I would love to talk to him.”

“You’re probably the only one who can get him to talk.” Henri had a feeling the senator wouldn’t cooperate without Sylvain’s influence.

“I don’t need him to talk.”

“Lucas goes too. And Echo. We take care of this problem at Council Headquarters.” Ladon met Bennett’s gaze, then Hacen and Rocky. “They’ll need protection.”

Rocky had to go with them, which put him in danger. Crossing the barrier was

dangerous, but they didn't know what they'd find between the council headquarters and Saint Lakes.

"Can't we have someone bring Fowler to Saint Lakes?" Henri asked. The alternative put Lucas and Echo in too much danger.

Ladon frowned and then chuckled as he shook his head. "It's a good thing you're the brains of his operation, Henri."

Henri shrugged.

Ladon nodded toward the office. "Let me make some calls. You all can hang tight while I see what I can do."

When Ladon left, everyone dispersed.

Henri turned to Rocky. "I don't suppose there's a private spot nearby where we can be alone."

"Not when the entire clan is in the house or yard, but I like how your mind works." Rocky pulled Henri against him and kissed his temple. He whispered in Henri's ear next. "I can't wait to get you in our bed again."

Henri couldn't think of a better way to spend the rest of his life.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

It took an entire day to get Fowler into Saint Lakes, and even then, the alpha and some of his enforcers had to go on a rescue mission. Sylvain and his driver went along. They were gone for two solid hours before Ladon stumbled into the yard again, carrying Hacen, Jules and Thomas' mate. Ramsey and Fane followed behind him. Rocky recognized Quidel and Teagan from the council. He also recognized Rory and Caerwyn Lewis from Wingspan. Caerwyn and one of the council enforcers held on to Fowler.

The fighting would have been terrible there if Quidel couldn't bring any more council members with him other than the ones who lived in Wingspan. Not to mention Caerwyn and Rory were farmers, not enforcers for the council, yet they behaved as though they were guards, as much as the enforcers with them.

Gabe brought up the rear. He walked with a limp and had blood dripping from his forehead. He scowled as though still pissed off from whatever fight he'd just had. As soon as Shawn saw him, he ran past everyone, straight to Gabe's side.

Jules and Thomas exited the house. Jules' face was pink and wet from crying and Thomas's expression was one of worry. Rocky wasn't sure if he was more worried about Hacen or if he feared Jules might lose it.

Sylvain directed Ladon to lay Hacen on the ground. He waved his driver forward and then asked for Taylor Pyke for reasons Rocky couldn't understand. Taylor had been in the house with his mate, Marshall, but they made their way over to Sylvain.

Taylor seemed confused by Sylvain's request, but he kneeled beside Sylvain as he placed his hand on Hacen's shoulder. He whispered to Sylvain. "How can I help,

sir?”

Rocky and Henri were close enough to hear him.

Jules and Thomas kneeled beside them. Jules’ hands shook as he touched Hacen’s arm. Thomas had one hand on Jules’ back, rubbing it, and he held Hacen’s hand with the other.

“I need to stay hidden. This many people seeing me is too many. Already too many people know.” Sylvain seemed worried.

It was the second time Rocky had ever seen the scary veneer Sylvain wore fall away. The first time had been when he’d saved Anna’s life in an office bathroom. Sylvain had saved a lot of lives the day they had captured Fowler. He deserved as much protection as Lucas and Echo.

Rocky addressed Thomas. “Can you create one of your domes of privacy?”

Thomas nodded. He took a long breath in. His chin wobbled with unshed tears, but he fought them. Rocky thought he’d been holding back the entire time. Thomas might feel as though he had to be strong for Jules and maybe even for Hacen.

Before the dome surrounded them, Lucas came over, with Bennett following behind. He kneeled beside Hacen, staying close to Sylvain. “I can do it if you’re drained.”

“I don’t get drained anymore.”

“I’ve improved as well.”

“Keep working at it.” Sylvain laid his hand on Hacen’s chest. “Fowler hasn’t been the first power-hungry person I’ve encountered. It’s important to hone your skills.

They'll save your life."

Sylvain drew up a ball of light and pushed it into Hacen. Hacen grunted, but otherwise didn't seem any different from the outside.

When Sylvain stood, so did Lucas. Sylvain spoke to Thomas, since he was the most coherent. "Remember, I can take a life as easily as I can give it."

Thomas nodded, but otherwise didn't acknowledge the threat. "Thank you."

Henri pulled out of Rocky's arms and kneeled on Jules' other side, showing support to his friend.

The dome fell away. Sylvain and his driver headed for Fowler.

"Sylvain," Rocky called after him.

Sylvain met his gaze.

You have my protection. Saint Lakes clan has your back too.

Sylvain smiled and nodded. I may call upon you some day.

I'm here for it.

Sylvain turned to Fowler again, grinning as though he were a lunatic. It was clear he would enjoy the next few minutes.

Lucas followed Sylvain as if something had pulled him forward. If Rocky had to guess, Sylvain told Lucas to follow him.

Echo came out of the house followed by Bandos and Vaughan. He headed straight for Sylvain.

“James. Do you see the mess you created?” Sylvain pointed to the bodies surrounding the yard.

Fowler seemed to shake when Sylvain started talking, but he didn’t say anything. As soon as Caerwyn and the council enforcer let Fowler go, Rocky understood why. Sylvain had made it so he couldn’t control his body. It was as if he were becoming a gargoyle against his will. He couldn’t even speak.

Sylvain held out his hands. Lucas took one while Echo took the other. Lucas and Echo were a picture of innocence compared to Sylvain. Something about the contrast made them seem even more terrifying.

What contributed to the ominous moment were the dark clouds forming overhead and the soft mist. It was as if the three of them conjured the weather, adding a dash of intensity.

Florin grinned as if he knew what Rocky was thinking. “He likes it when I create drama.”

“It doesn’t surprise me.” What else could Florin do?

The driver chuckled. “This is going to be fun. Let’s watch.”

Rocky wondered at the mental stability of Sylvain’s driver. He was glad to have Sylvain and his people as friends instead of enemies.

“I’m going to give you a choice, James. Lucas or me. Choose.”

Fowler's expression was one of fear. There was no mistaking it. His eyes darted to Lucas.

When Sylvain spoke next, it was clear he was addressing Lucas. "Find out who's in charge. The humans under the senator's command. If you wouldn't mind, Lucas."

Lucas nodded. The second he began poking around in Fowler's mind, Fowler's expression turned from fear to terror. He shook.

"Here's what's going to happen." Sylvain waved his driver forward. The driver pulled out a cellphone and handed it to Sylvain. "Call your men off or we'll start killing. We'll work our way down until there is no one left, James."

Sylvain must have freed parts of Fowler's body because he shook his head. "I don't know."

Lucas spoke. "He's lying. There's three of them. One is leading the attack. The other two lead underneath her."

Sylvain glowed in a way Rocky had never seen before. The glow encompassed Lucas and Echo. "I see them. Howell will die first."

Echo gasped as if something bad had happened. He shook and tried to pull his hand out of Sylvain's grasp, but Sylvain held on.

Lucas didn't seem to hesitate. He whispered, "It's done."

"There is a punishment for lying." Sylvain held out his phone. "Are you going to be a good boy and cooperate?"

"It's too late."

Lucas didn't hesitate the second time. "The other two are dead."

Sylvain's smile died along with the humanity in his gaze.

Rocky took a step closer, ready to pull Echo and Lucas away if Sylvain grew dangerous.

Fowler screamed as if Sylvain was a worm inside his mind, eating away at his brain. And it was clear when he killed the people trying to help Fowler because Sylvain said, "Shall I continue?"

Fowler fell to the ground as if his legs couldn't hold him. He shook his head. The terror was clear in his expression. Maybe Fowler had hoped he'd make it out in one piece with all his wishes of world domination granted. But Sylvain killed it the second he stepped into Fowler's mind.

Fowler's fear of Sylvain was a living thing. It had planted itself as though it rooted to the ground where Fowler kneeled. It might climb to the sky as though it were a skeletal tree if they let it continue much longer.

Rocky didn't have any empathy for Fowler. But it was difficult watching someone being destroyed in such a torturous way. He couldn't think of Sylvain the same way he had before. Maybe he was seeing the real him for the first time.

There were nuggets of good in Sylvain. Wasn't there in everyone? Rocky knew they were there, yet Sylvain shoved them so far down he couldn't see himself anymore. Instead, he became a villain who happened to be on their side.

"Shall I keep going, James?"

Fowler either didn't answer or couldn't. Rocky wasn't sure, and it didn't matter

because Sylvain didn't wait for an answer.

He turned to Lucas and said, "Your turn."

Lucas shook his head. "We've killed enough. No more."

"It's never going to be enough. Is it, James? They'll keep trying to save you and we'll have to keep fighting. It's a viscous cycle destined to repeat itself." Sylvain was right. It would never end until they ended it.

"Do it, Lucas. Just the top people. Spare the rest." Rocky didn't use his alpha nature very often. He didn't want to lead. It wasn't his place, but Lucas needed guidance from someone other than Sylvain.

"Do what Rocky says, Lucas." Ladon backed him up.

Lucas cried. Tears fell down his face. "I don't want to. Please."

Bennett growled, but he didn't step in. He'd fought for Lucas since the day they met, putting himself in harm's way each time. But he didn't step in that time. "Get it over with, baby."

"I don't want to, Benny. I'm not... like him." He turned to Sylvain. "I'm sorry but I'm not like you."

Sylvain dropped the villain act, wrapping his arm around Lucas's shoulders. "I'll finish it."

Lucas drew a deep breath and nodded.

Several of the humans outside the barrier died. Not all of them but enough it scared

those left alive. They ran away when they realized their leadership had crumbled around them. With the bodies piling up from the day before, they finally understood paranormals had defeated them.

And then there was James. A sniveling mess.

Sylvain released Echo's hand and then let go of Lucas and closed the distance to Fowler. He pulled up a gray ball. "I'm going to kill you now, James. Your time is done. I'll make it painless, although you deserve my worst. You always have, even when you were a young man."

Rocky had to agree. All the hardship and loss of life. He shook his head. It was all so unfortunate. The trauma they had to recover from wouldn't be an easy road. Not even for someone like Rocky who had shit flung at him in the past. Getting caught in the middle of other people's sick agendas wasn't something he would ever get used to, especially when it led to violence, but he had built coping skills over the years.

Echo ran to Bandos and Vaughan. And Lucas turned to Bennett.

Bennett lifted Lucas into his arms and headed toward the house.

Sylvain sighed. "I think we're done here."

Mother Estelle stood on the patio and yelled across the yard. "Stop scaring people and come inside, Mr. Sylvain. I'm sure you're hungry."

Sylvain smiled. "Does she mother everyone?"

"Every single person. You'll hurt her feelings if you don't accept," Ladon answered.

Henri stood, squeezing Jules's shoulder. "I'm available if you need me."

“Thanks, Henri.” Jules lay on the ground beside Hacen. Thomas took up residence on the Hacen’s other side as if their spot in the yard was a bed.

Henri closed the distance between them. “Can we go home now?”

“Soon. I think the whole family will stay together for a while after this. Are you okay with that?” Rocky wrapped his arm around Henri’s waist.

“I think I’ll be looking over my shoulder for a long time, expecting to see a human with a gun.”

They all would be, but they had each other to fall into. If the last couple of days had taught them anything, it was family and clan meant everything, and they could rely on each other when the worst happened. It was how Rocky, Bandos, and Sully had started their journey together. Helping the family was why they had come to Saint Lakes. And it was why they would always be a part of the Saint Lakes Clan.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:10 am

It wasn't Henri's first after-dinner patio session with the Somersets and it wouldn't be the last. The difference was they included Sylvain and Florin. Somehow, Mother Estelle had talked them into staying for a couple of days. And so they had.

How she had tamed a Mafia bad boy like Sylvain was anyone's guess. Sylvain had been nothing but polite. He hadn't referred to killing anyone, which had to be a record.

"Ladon, honey. Did you know Peter is helping with the human trafficking problem?" Mother Estelle said it as if she were proud. And it wasn't a bad thing. In fact, it was a noble cause and Sylvain had enough influence, even if it was bad, to help a lot of people. Henri doubted he did it out of the goodness of his heart. If there was ever a person who had a reason for everything they did, it was Sylvain.

"Who's Peter, Mom?"

"She's referring to me."

Marshall cleared his throat and lifted his eyebrows. "So you go by Peterson Sylvain and not Spider, or the number of other aliases you have?"

Sylvain narrowed his eyes and smiled.

Before he could answer, which would have been some scathing remark or threat, Mother Estelle spoke up. "We will not judge anyone here, including our Peter. He is family now, after all. He helped save us. We should thank him, along with Lucas and Echo. The three of you were wonderful and we are in your debt."

“I believe that’s two favors the deputy owes me.”

“But who’s counting?” Ladon mumbled.

“I am.”

Marshall sighed. “One. I’ve kept my mouth shut. It covers the first one.”

Sylvain waved away the comment. “Fine.”

“Was that painful to admit?” Florin chuckled.

Sylvain laughed. “Tore out my heart.”

“How’s the cat-and-mouse situation going, Henri? Wesley?” Ladon changed the subject.

“What cat-and-mouse situation, dear?”

“Henri made friends with a mouse, Mom.”

Mother Estelle met Henri’s gaze with a smile. “Well, isn’t it nice? How did you manage it?”

“I haven’t yet. I’m still trying. The mouse will come out of hiding, but I still can’t get close enough to touch it.”

“How’s Lucy handling it, Wesley?” Lucy had been Wesley and Sully’s cat, but because they all still lived in Rocky’s house, she’d become a member of the family. They all loved her a lot.

“She isn’t the violent type. She’s also not allowed at the library because I don’t want

her eating Henri's little mousy friend. Just in case she gets an urge."

The library was what the family started calling Henri's house. It was an apt nickname. The more Henri thought about it, the more he liked the idea of making his cabin into a library where the clan could check out books.

He wanted to contribute to the clan. He hadn't made it enough of a priority before, but he wanted to start. He wasn't sure how. The last time he tried to contribute, it had turned into a disaster, causing a lot of problems.

Well, maybe it wasn't him trying to contribute to his community so much as seeing if he could figure something out. But Perkins could have used Henri's notes for something good. Instead, people had used it for their own gain.

Henri had learned some very hard lessons, not the least of which was trusting himself to save himself and trusting his mate with his heart. He had gained a family and a stronger sense of community. What more could he ask for?
