



Trust in the Moon (Tales from the Tarot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Fresh off of a bad breakup, Zeke Castro is done with men and love even though he's in a resort town in Colorado for his cousin's big gay wedding. After a ruggedly handsome man kisses him in the hotel lobby, though, Zeke realizes his heart might not be so frozen after all.

Sacha Lupescu knows he's found his fated mate and though he's thrilled, he already knows that his mother won't be. He needs to find a way to change her mind while also revealing his truth to Zeke without losing him.

Secrets ruined Zeke's last relationship, and he's started to notice that Sacha has a lot of secrets. But when the truth finally comes out, Zeke will need to decide if he can accept that fate is real and that he has a place in a world more magical than he ever could've dreamed.

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Chapter one

Zeke Castro

I had been surprised when my cousin Fabian told me that everyone would be going to northwest Colorado for his and Matt's wedding. Fabian had never left Miami in his entire life. Outdoorsy wasn't even a word I would've chosen to describe the man. Fabian went outside only to sit by a pool or transfer from one air-conditioned space to another. He claimed he would melt if he sweat too much—which was a lie since drag queens really did work that hard every night.

So I had to conclude that Fabian heading into the wilderness voluntarily meant he really was head over heels in love with Matt, his decidedly outdoorsy husband-to-be.

I was only going because I loved Fabian and wanted to support him in everything, but oh, I was so over love. That evil four-letter word had destroyed me in more ways than any one thing should have been allowed to do. I'd been in heaven—blissfully ignorant—when I'd thought I was in love and all because I'd trusted Anthony. In every way, I'd given myself to my man. I'd worked at his club, lived in his house, driven his cars, worshipped his body...

And then I'd found out that Anthony had a whole other life in Orlando with a wife and kids like some kind of telenovela villain with a yearly pass to Disney World.

Technically, it had been me not being able to continue being the side piece Anthony visited when he needed some dick that had me unemployed, homeless, and without transportation. I could've stayed and kept my life the way it was. But I just couldn't

get over the betrayal of someone I'd given my whole heart to doing nothing but lie to me for two years.

The only reason I was able to be here this week with my friends was because they had pooled their money to pay for my flight and room. So, yeah, I was going to put on a happy face and pretend that I loved love for their sakes, but—

“Stand up and bend over.”

I blinked and looked up to see Fabian standing next to me in the aisle of the shuttle bus taking us from the airport to the resort. Fabian was a delicate little thing, but there was a growly look on his perfectly contoured face just now. And what the hell had he said?

“Excuse me?”

“We're all going to spank your ass every time you go quiet and get that sour lemon look on your face.” Fabian smiled like the imp that he was. “I volunteered to be first, so up you go, papi .”

I rolled my eyes. “You— None of you ,” I said with a glance around at the rest of them, “are going to be smacking my ass for any reason, thanks.”

Fabian turned around and sat himself in my lap. I groaned since I wouldn't be getting out of this conversation any time soon. I also dutifully put an arm around the little idiot's waist to keep him from falling off when we hit a pothole. Beside me, Charlie—another adorable twink in our party—giggled and scooted over on the bench seat, giving me a little more room.

“Ezequiel,” Fabian said, “this is the only time I'm going to say this because I don't really want to be one of those brides.” He grabbed the collar of my peacoat in both

fists. “But I swear to god, sweet pea, this is my wedding and I’m going to have a fabulous time. I won’t have a fabulous time if you’re looking like Eeyore every time I see you. So either you stop, or I get Matt to staple a smiley face to your forehead.” He cupped my face in his hands and grinned. “And I can get Matty to do anything I want.”

“Em shorry,” I said despite my face being squished. “Owl do be’er.”

Fabian patted my cheeks and stood up. “Thank you, baby!”

The little shit tottered off on his high-heeled tennis shoes to rejoin his geeky, blushing other half in the front of the bus. Whatever he said to Matt had the poor guy’s usual blush going from pale pink to fuchsia, so it must’ve been something inappropriately sexual. Fabian kissed Matt before snuggling into his arms like all was right with his world.

I shared an embarrassed look with Charlie, who patted my thigh sympathetically. “Just keep smiling,” the little ginger said before going back to watching the scenery roll by.

So, okay, no more thoughts about disaster exes and the wreck that was my life. I really did want to enjoy this week and make sure the happy couple had a great time. I’d make more of an effort.

And, really, Colorado was an interesting place to visit. I had left Miami plenty of times, but I usually only flew over the middle of the country. I was a coastal sort of person, but pine trees and mountain ranges and white-water rivers were pretty cool. If I ignored the lovey-dovey aspects, I felt a little like I was in any number of Hallmark movies where the heroine went into the unknown and learned all kinds of life lessons in under two hours. I could embrace that and play my part, especially since Fabian was clearly the heroine and I was his sidekick.

The shuttle bus made a turn off the two-lane road surrounded by an autumn forest and... Wow . We were heading for a small village of buildings with a Bavarian charm, golden streetlights, and crowds of smiling people everywhere. I hadn't done much research on our destination because I hadn't thought I'd be able to go until a couple weeks ago. Was this the resort? It literally looked like a mountain village, but that was definitely the name of the resort on the sign we'd just driven under. Welcome to Lupassilva Resort .

I hadn't expected this level of all-inclusiveness outside of Mexico, but that was actually excellent. I could wander away if I needed a break from the wedding party shenanigans and visit shops, restaurants, and... Well, I'd figure out what else there was to do around here in mid-autumn. Maybe I could learn to ride a horse or photograph bears or something rugged and butch like that.

Speaking of ... The bus rolled to a stop in front of the hotel and right beside where a tall, muscular man was chopping wood like some kind of backwoods porn star. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the sight of all that glistening skin and bulging muscles. A whispered "dear god above" beside me had me nodding and guessing the rest of the queers sitting with me were just as ensnared by the view.

"Alright, gents," the driver said with a chuckle. "Do me a favor and pop your eyeballs back in your skulls, roll up your tongues, and get off my bus like the class acts you are without hitting on the resort owner's son, okay? That's it. There you go."

I snorted a laugh and stood up, glad the man was cool with all of us. Before stepping into the aisle, I bopped Charlie on his head since he looked moments away from licking the window.

"Are you seeing this?" Charlie said with stars in his eyes. "I didn't think we'd get lucky this week, so I didn't bring anything with me. Now I need to buy all the condoms and lube."

“Pace yourself, kiddo,” I said on a chuckle. “You’ll want to be able to walk at the end of the week.”

“Will I, though?”

I shook my head as I grinned— ah, youth —and slung my backpack over my shoulder before heading down the aisle to the front of the bus.

It was a few minutes of the bell hops unloading and sorting by guest way more luggage than was entirely necessary for a one-week stay at a five-star hotel before everyone was able to sashay into the lobby. Though taxidermy and antlers were on full display, it was still warm and cozy with huge fireplaces, dark wood paneling, and leather furniture. It was very clear that I was definitely not in south Florida anymore.

Or balancing on the tip of America’s dick, like Fabian was fond of calling it.

A woman in a smart black pantsuit hustled right over to us, zeroing in on Fabian and Matt. Soon she had a team of people collecting our IDs to check us in, handing out champagne, and herding everyone over to a sitting area beside a fireplace big enough to stand inside. The wedding party had landed.

“Listen up, ladies!” Fabian said with a clap of his hands. “Not all of our rooms are ready and we have lunch reservations at one so how about going to do some shopping for the next hour and a half?” He grinned before he said, “And, yes, we’re walking all over the village.”

I rubbed at my scruffy chin to hide my smile as the princesses among them—Fabian was the only one allowed to be called a queen this week—did their best not to cringe or run away screaming. A couple of them looked down at their chosen footwear with worry in their eyes. I started stretching, fully expecting to end up carrying someone before too long.

“Which one do you want?”

I straightened up from stretching my back and realized Duncan, one of Matt’s friends, was beside me. Since he had one arm crossed over his chest to stretch his muscles, I chuckled to realize we were both on the same page about future duties rescuing damsels with blisters.

In looking at Duncan, though, I noticed that rugged-looking blond who’d been chopping firewood was restocking the fireplace across the way while watching us. Me. The guy was staring right at me.

“Seriously, which one is yours?” Duncan asked. “I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes.”

“The blond,” I found myself saying.

“Like ’em big, do ya?” Duncan laughed and smacked my shoulder.

“Huh?”

I dragged my gaze away from the blond guy to see Duncan pointing at Barney, the six-six bouncer from the club who was a great guy but not at all my type. And now Duncan thought me and Barney were together. Before I could clear that up, Duncan was heading toward Charlie like a wolf on the prowl.

We really shouldn’t be pairing off with anyone. Including resort staff.

I didn’t look at the muscly blond guy a second time, though it was weirdly difficult to stop myself from glancing over there. He was just some dude. With blue eyes that I could see from across the room and a massive set of pecs that were straining his t-shirt. Nope, stop that .

Arm in arm, Fabian and Matt led everyone back out of the lobby and into the crisp mountain air. Aside from the questionable footwear on a few of us, we had all correctly anticipated the chilly temperatures of October in the Colorado mountains and had dressed well for them in downy coats and long pants. I had to assume anyone not bundled up was either a local or from a place where it was already snowing. I had a feeling I'd be buying a hat before long.

Fabian gave a little squeal just before everyone shifted to the right and started heading for...a magic shop? I frowned, having never known Fabian to give a hoot about magic or crystals or... Oh, there were tarot card readings. Fabian did like the idea that fate and destiny were real—he insisted that was why he and Matt were together.

I hung back, holding the door open as everyone trooped into the shop.

The inside smelled like some kind of incense and old books, two scents that I happily inhaled. With endless aisles stretching out in front of me and two stories of bookshelves with library ladders on either side of me, I hesitated there on the threshold. The place looked like a cross between a wealthy eccentric's mansion and a rare book shop. And despite there being a checkout counter nearby, no one manned it. There was also a small snack counter, but it was dark and dusty, as though it hadn't been open for months. Should we even be in here? Maybe this place was actually closed.

“Welcome,” a quiet voice rumbled just before a tall male figure stepped into view beside the crackling fireplace. Lean and poised, he was dressed like a Victorian lord on his way to an evening at the theatre, complete with top hat and cane. Striking and yet nondescript, the only part of him that truly stood out to me were his fathomless sable eyes. “How can I help you today?”

Several of the boys swarmed the poor man, exclaiming over his aesthetic and asking

for photos. I left them to it and wandered over to one of the bookshelves.

Immediately, I noticed that I'd found the paranormal fiction section. Every book was about some kind of supernatural creature, from vampires to werewolves to Mothman. I'd never heard of some of the things the books focused on, and it was amazing how they pretended to be fact-filled scientific explorations.

The selection of werewolf books was much bigger than the rest because of a leather-bound series that looked pretty old. The author's name was Lupescu, and the volumes were all titled as a family history. Though I was curious about what the books contained in seven volumes of a werewolf family history, I left them where they were because old usually meant expensive.

"I'll give you the family discount if you buy the whole series."

I flinched back to find the shop owner standing nearby. "Oh, um, I'm just browsing." Wait, had he said family discount? Who's family? "And I'm not fam—"

"Might I suggest this instead?"

In the man's long-fingered, very pale hand was a small purple bottle that looked like cologne. On the label, though, it simply said "love potion" in fancy script.

"A love potion? Oh, no," I said on a disbelieving laugh. "I've had about enough of love."

"You have yet to know true love. This will help you find your destined life mate."

"My what?"

The shop owner took my hand in his icy fingers and placed the bottle against my

palm. “It’s all natural. An organic concoction of essential oils. It’s also good for relaxation and will help you find release from all that troubles you.”

“Right...” A love potion that would help me find release... Uh-huh . I resisted rolling my eyes as I turned the bottle over in my hand and saw the price.

“Sixty-five dollars!” I made to hand it back, but the man wouldn’t take it. Which had me realizing I was being rude. “I’m sorry. I just can’t afford something like this. I recently lost my job and, um...” A complete stranger didn’t need to know my life was circling the drain.

The man’s severe expression softened the slightest bit as he smiled. “Consider it a gift.”

“Oh. Uh. I really shouldn’t...”

“Take it.” He cupped his large hands around mine, closing the vial inside. “It could have no more worthy owner than you.”

I huffed a laugh, uncomfortable all over again. “Sure. Thanks,” I said, taking the out. I could consider it a souvenir, or maybe give it to Fabian so he could tease Matt. Or maybe I could leave it on a random shelf on my way out the door.

As if sensing that plan, the shop owner kept me in his sights as I tried to find where the others had gone off to. Why did it feel like the shop got bigger every time I turned around? I hadn’t even gone that far inside to look at the books, but now I couldn’t find the exit. And the shop owner was standing over there and looking like he might enjoy the fact that I was starting to panic.

“Ezequiel!”

With a gasp, I turned at the sound of Fabian snapping my name. For a second, I had no idea what the hell had just happened because I was literally standing with everyone else right beside the checkout counter. And the shop owner wasn't lurking in a dark corner but actively ringing up everyone's purchases and smiling at them as they paid him.

“Papi,” Fabian said with a pout as he fussed with the collar of my coat. “Please stop being so lost and melancholy. I really don't want to have to bite you.”

I snorted a laugh, feeling calmer even though I had no idea what had been messing with my head. It was like I'd lost time or had an out of body experience. Why I'd taken the shop owner with me, I had no clue.

“Oh, what's this?” Fabian asked as he plucked the bottle right out of my hand. Before I could say a word about it, Fabian squealed in rapturous delight. “A love potion? That's perfect!”

And without further ado, he spritzed both sides of my neck with the stuff.

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Chapter two

Zeke

A single drop—hell, half a drop—of that “love potion” would’ve been plenty, but no, Fabian had to go and spray it all over me. I walked into the lobby of the hotel a couple hours later still stinking like I’d been rolling in sweaty man, damp dirt, and pine needles. It was an absolutely ridiculous scent!

The weirdest part was that I seemed to be the only person who could smell it. Everyone else said they had to get up in my face to smell anything and then they were pretty sure it was my pomade. Like, why? It wasn’t possible that the shop guy had mixed it up special just for my nose.

But, fine, whatever. All of us were fed, tired, and ready to get our room keys. I would just go up to my room and shower the stink off myself.

Out of politeness, I waited for everyone else to get their keys once I had my own. That allowed me to stand there and really take in the rustic charm of the hotel’s lobby. I wasn’t sure if it was a real log, but the pillar behind me would need at least two people to wrap their arms around it—and there were six pillars around the room. Giant beams spanned the width of the lobby like an entire ancient forest had been felled to make this place. That was terrible and beautiful at the same time. And then there was the—

Oh hello . The blond man who’d been chopping wood outside when we arrived had just walked in. Even looking like a respectable member of the staff in a black polo

and khakis, he was still backwoods porn on legs because his clothes were too tight and his biceps were bulging. I watched him clearly sniffing, like he smelled a feast and needed to find its source. Trying not to be obvious, I sniffed, too, curious about what he was looking for, but all I could smell was my damn love potion.

Blue eyes met mine from across the room, and I couldn't look away as the man suddenly started walking toward me. He had a powerful stride, long and muscular legs eating up the space between us. Caught like a rabbit, I just stood there in stunned silence as a gorgeous and determined wolf stalked toward me.

Gulping at the intensity of his approach, I held up my hands as if to stop the man, only to have him grab my wrists and haul them over my head. Arousal hit me hard. I'd always been a fan of manhandling in general and that move especially. When the man leaned in and kissed me, it didn't really occur to me to stop him.

Goddamn, it had been so long since someone had politely kissed me, let alone a hot and horny mauling that I willingly opened up for. I might never have been kissed like this. It was all moaning and angling for deeper thrusts of hungry tongues, bodies straining to get closer. The man notched our legs together and pressed his firm cock into my hip. I bucked against his hold on instinct, rubbing my own growing erection against the man owning my mouth. Moaning into our kiss, I found myself wrapping a leg around his, trying to keep him where he was.

It was just a kiss, but it was better sex than I'd had in a very long time.

A loud whoop had me flinching and opening my eyes. Every single person I knew was watching. Some of them had their phones up, probably recording me. I jerked my head to break the kiss as horror at what I was doing sent ice water cascading through me. I tried to free my hands from the man's grip.

He blinked slowly at me, like he was in a daze. There was probably a compliment in

that, but I couldn't find it as shame and humiliation bombarded me. "Let me go," I snapped and bucked to get the man off me this time.

Immediately, he released me and stepped back. Freed, I waved at everyone and angrily said, "Stop that right now! It's not funny."

Without a word, the man suddenly bolted past me and through a staff only door.

A small, amazed part of me wanted to run after him, find out what the hell had made him do that and... Okay, maybe ask if he'd like to do it again but in private. Seriously, it had been the best kiss of my life.

The rest of me hated that I had to deal with the fallout by myself.

"Guess the love potion works," Fabian said with a giggle.

I blushed and shook my head. "I'm not keeping that stuff if it gets me molested in hotel lobbies."

Three guys held their hands out to me.

Snatching up my bag and my overstuffed suitcase, I stalked toward the elevator.

The love potion was not the reason for that kiss because magic wasn't real. At the same time, I wasn't about to give a bunch of horned-up boys a reason to accidentally start an orgy in the lobby, get arrested for indecent exposure, and ruin Fabian's wedding. It could totally happen with this bunch.

For the rest of my life, I would keep telling myself that was the reason I'd kept the vial.

On the way up to the fifth floor, my phone pinged with a text. I took it out of my back pocket, not sure what I'd find, and discovered a video from Fabian of the stranger snogging the life out of me. I couldn't resist watching it. Goddamn, we looked like porn stars. It was... It was really hot.

The elevator dinged and did a little swoop as it stopped, bringing me back to reality. Thank goodness I was alone because my cock was testing the confines of my jeans as I hustled down the hall to my room. And of course it took six swipes of my keycard before the damn door would read it and let me in.

"Fuck!" I dropped my bags and headed right for the bathroom. It was a nice size, clean, yeah, whatever. I stripped down and got the hot water running in the shower.

While standing there, I did try to think pure and chaste thoughts to make my damn boner go away, but it didn't. I got under the spray and groaned at the sensation of the water cascading down my overstimulated body. Immediately, my mind recalled the way that man had pressed against me, how he'd kissed me. I'd had every intention of just washing off the love potion, but instead I reached down and took my cock in hand.

Closing my eyes, I recalled the video. I'd never recorded myself having sex, but fuck, maybe I should. It was playing on a loop in my brain as I stroked myself, and then my imagination was happily providing what we might look like naked and in bed together. Oh, god, I was into it. Fuck yes! If that fucking man approached me again, it was entirely possible I'd give my ass to him.

I came with a groan and squeezed every last drop out of my cock. Panting, I opened my eyes to see the water washing all the evidence away. And I hated that my mind was also ever so willing to provide a vivid memory of my last shower with Anthony before everything fell apart.

Pushing that away, I turned to the real reason I'd wanted a shower. I unwrapped a tiny bar of hotel soap and lathered up as best I could. Hopefully it was strong stuff that would wash off all evidence of that damn love potion and keep me unmolested for the rest of the week. Because that was what I really wanted—to be left alone. I was not here to hook up with strangers, so if that man came around again, I'd say a very firm no.

I'd been hot and heavy with Anthony right off the bat and look how that had turned out. No way was I going to spend time and effort on a guy only to discover that I was a second-class citizen in my own life. Not the priority, not even a thought, as the man I loved scurried off to his real family over and over again. Nope, I was done with anything even resembling a relationship.

I rinsed and then turned off the water. A hookup wasn't a relationship, though. Everyone knew that. I'd done the whole app thing for a night's release with no one expecting to stay. It'd be a bit different since they were at the same hotel for a week, but—

“Oh, stop it,” I snapped at myself as I grabbed a towel. Looking in the mirror across from the shower, I pointed a finger and said, “Don't be that dumb.”

Because my heart would definitely get involved. Hookups sucked. I wasn't built to get off and walk away. Or let the other guy walk away. Zeke Castro was the kind of man who fell hard and fast, so it was better that I steered clear of all men. Until I was ready to trust again. If ever. It was just safer that way.

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Chapter three

Sacha Lupescu

My hands were still shaking hours after kissing that man in the lobby. Not with nerves or shame or horror, but with barely restrained desire. There was nothing I wanted more than to track him down and start again. Hold him and kiss him and make him mine .

And I had never once been attracted to another man in my life.

Well, okay, I'd admired a few. Seen the appeal. But with celebrities and pro athletes. I was pretty sure everybody did that.

But everybody did not pin hotel guests to pillars and kiss them like their life depended on it. Didn't grind on him and get a thrill from feeling another cock harden against mine. Didn't want to do it again even though the poor guy had bucked me off of him because, hey, consent mattered, asshole .

I needed to apologize. I was not a horrible person in general and, as the owner's son, for fuck's sake, I couldn't risk the reputation of my mother's work by molesting guests. Sure, it had felt like the guy had been into it, but that didn't mean shit. That could've just been instinct or something, not agreement. I had to make this right.

But could I find the guy and apologize without doing it again? Because everything in me wanted to track down my prey and pounce on him. Like, seriously, my wolf could sniff out the man's whereabouts no problem, but could I control myself? I wasn't so

sure.

And then, oh fuck, I realized I'd left the staff areas of the hotel and wandered outside to the pool. The exact place where the man was lounging on a chaise under the stars, looking at his phone, and no doubt trying to relax after getting assaulted in the lobby earlier.

"I'm sorry," I practically shouted.

The man flinched, gray eyes wide. After a moment, he nodded. "Okay."

Clearing my throat, I tried again. "I really do apologize for my behavior. I don't know what came over me." I winced. "That's not an excuse. I'm not trying to excuse myself, just... I really don't know what happened because I've never kissed a guy before."

Open-mouthed blinking was all I got in return, so I took a step backward, ready to turn and leave. I had apologized. Whether I would be forgiven wasn't up to me, and I couldn't expect an immediate answer either.

"What made you do it?"

I felt a blush light me up, but there was no one else out here at this time of night, so I could keep going without fear of witnesses. "I don't know. I saw you and...I had to kiss you."

The tiniest of smiles lifted the corner of the man's mouth and his eyes seemed to sparkle for a second. It gave me a sudden burst of hope. Hope for what? I really wasn't sure, but there it was pulsing inside me right along with my heartbeat. I walked a little closer.

“I know it wasn’t something you agreed to at all.” I held my hands up. “And that’s perfectly understandable, of course.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets and just had to ask, “But was it okay?”

“The kiss?”

I nodded.

That smile again. “Yeah, it was...good.”

The wolf in me wanted to howl in happiness at that little bit of praise.

“Why don’t you come sit down,” the man offered, “and we can talk about things.”

Though I wanted to look cool and confident, I was pretty sure I sprinted around the pool and threw myself onto the nearest chaise like an overeager puppy. He chuckled at me.

“I’m Zeke Castro.”

Even his name was sexy. “Sacha Lupescu.”

“Lupescu? Like the author of all those werewolf books?”

I blinked at him. “What werewolf books?”

“There’s a shop that has all kinds of weird stuff in it. Crystals and magic supplies and books. There was a whole leather-bound series of werewolf books and the author was somebody named Lupescu.”

Considering we were never supposed to talk about what we were, there was no way a

member of the pack would ever write a book, let alone a series of them. Zeke had to have read the author wrong or something like that. Or maybe it was fiction? Somebody's attempt at a spooky-sounding pen name?

I shrugged it off, having no idea what Zeke was talking about. I might know which shop Zeke meant—a tourist trap peddling all kinds of crap—so I'd try to remember to pop in tomorrow and take a look at those books.

“So I'm your first same-sex kiss,” Zeke said with a grin.

I chuckled, looking down at my shoes in embarrassment. “Yeah. I really don't know what came over me.”

Zeke cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “Well, um, at the same shop where the books are, The Owner gave me a... I mean, he called it a love potion,” he said on a laugh, “but that's ridiculous, right?”

A love potion? I took a deep breath, trying not to be weird about it but wanting to see if I smelled anything on Zeke. I couldn't say that I did, just that I was very aware of Zeke's scent. No colognes or essential oils enhanced his natural aroma. He did smell good, though. He'd smelled good in the lobby, too.

“I don't smell anything,” I said with a shrug.

Zeke shook his head. “Yeah, no one else could either. I could smell it, though. That's why I went right up to my room and took a shower.” A blush bloomed on his cheeks.

“What did it smell like to you?”

“Pine needles, fresh dirt, and...” He chuckled. “Male musk.”

While I loved two of those scents, that wasn't what he smelled like to me at all. Still, I had to wonder if the shop owner could've possibly done something to draw me to Zeke by amplifying his natural scent. Could he? Why would he? If it was the souvenir shop owner, the man was surly and definitely not any kind of a matchmaker. No one I knew would've ever gone to him looking for relationship advice. What possible purpose could he have for making me aware of Zeke?

"Anyway," Zeke said, waving his hand, "I'm happy to talk about the fluid nature of sexuality with you if you have questions or need reassurances. The first thing I'll say, though, is that one kiss does not have to redefine your sexuality at all if you don't want it to."

"What if I want to do it again?" I blurted before I even thought about it. I ducked my head and covered my mouth, mentally kicking myself.

A bark of a laugh jumped out of Zeke. "In that case, you might need to start thinking about things."

Yeah, I kind of figured I should. I was practically having a mate reaction to Zeke and—

Oh, fuck . I was having a mate reaction to Zeke! Sniff him out, claim him, keep him... It was all there! I wanted Zeke to be my destined life mate, the one person I'd spend the rest of my life protecting, encouraging, and loving with everything I had in me. I couldn't stop staring at Zeke who was staring back at me. What the hell was I supposed to do now?

Zeke's smile turned soft and soothing. "Don't worry, Sacha. Things aren't so bad nowadays for the LGBTQ community. And you could be bi, not gay, so it's like opening another door instead of closing one."

I was nodding, taking that in, but what I was really thinking about was how pissed off my mother was going to be when she found out my mate was male. I wasn't meant to be her heir or anything—everyone assumed my younger half-brother would do that—but Mother would see this as a definite disadvantage to her continued rule. She was all about perception, and this would be a black mark against her.

Zeke sat up, putting his feet on the ground on either side of his lounge chair. “Sacha, are there people in your life who won't be happy with such a turn of events?”

I nodded, liking that he could read me so well already. “My mother.”

Reaching over, Zeke took my hand in both of his. “I won't even begin to try and tell you how to handle her, but please always remember that your safety is the number one priority, okay? You don't have to do anything that makes you feel unsafe.”

I heard him, but Zeke was also lightly rubbing his thumb in circles on the back of my hand. It was hypnotizing and...arousing. Not just for me, either, because I could smell Zeke getting turned on, too. We were both breathing deeper, and the eye contact was making me feel hot all over.

I had all of a second to gasp before Zeke lunged toward me, flattening me back against the chaise and taking my mouth in a hungry kiss. Fair's fair? Yeah, I wasn't going to say boo about getting jumped without permission if that was what Zeke wanted to do. Not just reacting to my fumbling kisses this time, Zeke was owning my entire soul with his lips, tongue, and even some teeth.

That there was another man on top of me would've previously had me feeling threatened, shifting, and defending myself, but this time... Aw, man, all I wanted to do was hold Zeke closer and make sure he couldn't get away. I rolled, getting Zeke partway underneath me, and wedged my thigh between his. Both of us moaned, and Zeke hooked one leg across mine like he didn't want me to go anywhere either.

Some little rational part of my mind was sure that we should absolutely not be doing this out here where anyone could wander by and see us. Even though it was fully dark out, the area was decently lit, and it was one hell of a dumb move if I wasn't ready for my pack to know that my mate was a guy. I needed to prepare, think things through, come up with a plan, but then Zeke's fingers eased between us and rubbed against my fly, teasing my cock.

I pulled back, staring at Zeke as I gasped for breath. His eyebrows hopped up, asking a question, and he took hold of the button on my jeans. Gulping, I nodded. I shouldn't, but oh god, I needed to feel Zeke's hands on me.

Zeke grinned, biting his bottom lip, and popped the button free before finding the zipper and gliding it down. My breath caught when he reached in and found my cock, pulling me free.

"Commando and uncut?" Zeke said. "You wicked beast."

I chuckled. If only Zeke knew how beastly I could be. But then he stroked, and I moaned with my head thrown back and eyes closed. That was such a perfect feeling. A moment later and Zeke wrapped his other arm around behind my neck, pulling me back in for more devouring kisses.

Thrusting with Zeke's hand, I realized I needed to touch him, too. Holding onto his bare back under his shirt or gripping his denim-covered ass wasn't nearly enough. Working a hand between us, I opened Zeke's jeans, pushed cotton out of the way, and lifted out his long, stiff cock. I had a moment to gasp about having another man's dick in my hand before I matched Zeke's stroke and reveled in the way he moaned for me. That I was pleasuring my mate... Fuck, knowing that felt better than what he was doing for me.

When Zeke wrapped his long fingers around both of us, I saw stars. I couldn't help

the pleasure-filled holler that left me as I bucked against him. I had to look down, see us rubbing against each other, my cock and my mate's. Why was that sight so perfect? So beautiful? It felt like nothing I'd ever known before.

And then there was the low-lidded, swollen-lipped look on Zeke's rugged face. He was losing himself in the sensations, too, and watching him was overwhelming me with emotions I'd never experienced during sex. A desperation, a need, filled me and exploded out of me as I came, clutching Zeke as close as I could get him.

I was trembling as I held onto Zeke and stared into the darkness. I'd crossed a line by doing this. There was no going back. Not only would I have to do everything in my power to win over this human man, but I'd also have to convince my mother to let us stay. Neither would be easy to do. And, strangely, only keeping Zeke really worried me. I'd do anything for my mate.

"Are you okay?" Zeke whispered.

I gulped and nodded. "Yeah."

Zeke rubbed both hands against my back like he was trying to soothe me. "First times can be kind of overwhelming."

Nodding again, I tucked my nose into Zeke's neck, breathing in his scent and trying for calm.

"You can freak out if you need to."

I chuckled and lifted my head. "I'm not freaking out."

Zeke grinned. "Okay, good."

Kissing Zeke this time, I tried to show him how much his reassurances meant to me. Because they meant everything.

“Hey!” a voice shouted from the darkness. “What’re you doing over there?”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Chapter four

Zeke

Getting roused from the pool area by a security guard while my dick was still hanging out of my pants hadn't been my finest moment, but discovering a billion texts, photos, and a video from Fabian right afterward had been the real low point. Apparently, I should've looked around and maybe I would've noticed my damn cousin lurking on a balcony overlooking the pool. Fabian was really proud of me for following his orders to loosen up and enjoy myself, but still.

And yeah, okay, I didn't entirely regret seducing Sacha. He was a sweet guy simply trying to understand himself, but that little bit of hungry aggression just beneath the surface when we'd kissed? Lord, that had pushed me to do way more in public than I should have. As it was, the security guard had trained his flashlight on the two of us and had us scrambling to zip our flies. How embarrassing ...

I knew I should delete my entire text exchange with Fabian. Shouldn't save the photos or the video. Shouldn't even look at them. I knew, but I was a weak man who'd just rediscovered why sex was amazing.

I'd looked at the photos in the elevator and had watched the video in my room. The camera work wasn't great, but the sound effects were orgasmic. Literally. I could hear myself and Sacha coming. I'd gone and taken another shower, letting the moment play through my mind over and over.

It was morning now, and I wasn't sure how to handle things. Sacha had sprinted away

into the night like he didn't want the guard to be able to identify him, so we hadn't exactly exchanged numbers or made plans to see each other again.

Not that I wanted a repeat.

Well, not entirely.

What I really wanted to do was make sure Sacha was alright. He'd said afterward that he was fine and kissed me like he was definitely really fine, but in the bright light of a new day? I knew how that could feel, and if Sacha was freaking out, I wanted to help him through it.

Deep in my heart, I knew I was a caretaker, and I wanted to care for Sacha. There was just...something about him that tugged me in. As a friend. Sex was sex, and didn't have to mean anything more than I wanted it to. That wasn't the start of a relationship. Obviously. Of course not.

Thrusting thoughts like that out of my mind, I got dressed and psyched myself up so I could hold my head high when facing Fabian. And anyone else Fabian had shared with. Ugh, god, this was going to be awkward and embarrassing.

But down in the restaurant, Fabian did nothing but give me a big grin and fluttery finger wave. Matt was blushing, but that was practically his natural state nowadays. No one else did anything telling as they greeted me or directed me to an open chair at one of their tables. Even when I ordered sausage with my breakfast, not a single person had anything to say about it.

Was it possible Fabian hadn't told anyone? I could hardly believe it.

"I've taken three showers since I've been here," Charlie said beside me. "The water pressure is orgasmic. And those shower heads?" He made a decidedly sexual moan.

Across the table, I saw Duncan shift in his seat. Every man at the table was staring at Charlie actually. Lips got licked and cheeks flushed. Charlie was a gorgeous little thing, and now I realized I'd sat down at a table full of tops who were all hoping to snatch a twink bottom.

"Were you able to do that shopping you wanted to do?" I asked Charlie pointedly.

Charlie cocked his head at me. "Shopping?" he asked before sucking on the straw in his orange juice. A couple of throats got cleared around us.

"For supplies?"

"Oh! Oh, yeah," Charlie said on a chuckle. "Practically bought out the place."

Well, at least he was ready for the salivating wolf pack surrounding him. Did he notice the reaction he was having on the table? When Charlie waggled his auburn eyebrows at me before darting his gaze at a few of our seat mates, I thought maybe Charlie knew exactly what was happening. Was he cultivating the attention? He was a hell of a flirt, if he was.

As we were finishing our meals and sipping our coffees, Fabian stood up and clinked his fork on his water glass to gain everyone's attention.

"It's lovely seeing all your bright-eyed faces here this morning," Fabian said with a smile. "You have until noon to do whatever you'd like. That's when you'll need to meet back here in the lobby so that we can go into the forest for a picnic—" he gave a happy little wiggle "—and then a hiking tour of the area with a local expert who's going to tell us all about the werewolves."

There were several gasps, though I couldn't tell if they were because of the werewolves or the hiking. Could go either way with this crowd.

And that explained why there was a series of werewolf novels in that magic shop. Some places played up legends of Bigfoot or witches or disappearances, but it seemed that Lupassilva, Colorado, was into crazed killers who followed a lunar calendar. I rolled my eyes and drank the last of my coffee. At least the picnic would be nice.

“Come on,” Fabian said, suddenly appearing at my elbow.

“Where are we going?” I got up thinking we might be about to do behind-the-scenes wedding things.

Fabian made me bend my arm so that he could hold onto it before leading the way from the room. “We’re going back to The Magic Shop for tarot readings,” he said with a bounce in his step.

“Oh. Okay.”

Fabian frowned up at me. “It’s a wedding gift from the shop owner. I told him I’d recommend him to everyone else if he gave me a good reading. I think he needs the business, so be nice.”

I zipped my lips and let myself be led back toward the shop. Fabian was a big proponent of helping small businesses, so going back to aid the shop owner made sense. And he did love his fate and destiny and all that. Requiring that the reading be a good one said how much he understood about tarot, but hopefully, the shop owner wouldn’t mind indulging the groom-to-be.

Forgoing our coats, Fabian led me through the lobby and outside. Maybe now would be when he mentioned last night? But he didn’t say a thing, seeming to be on a mission to drag me across the street and into The Magic Shop.

This time The Owner was front and center, hands clasped behind his back, and his odd outfit the same as yesterday's. Dude really leaned into his role.

"We're back!" Fabian called with a big smile. "Here for our tarot readings."

The Owner barely smiled at us. "The grooms, I presume?"

"Oh, no, Fabian's one of the grooms. I'm his hostage."

Fabian pinched my arm.

"I mean, cousin."

"Ah," the shop owner said and seemed to perk up a bit. "Excellent then."

"I'm the bride ," Fabian corrected, "and you're the maid of honor. If we're going to be heteronormative, we're going to do it right."

And with that sorted, the shop owner led us over to a sturdy black table that looked like it had been there forever but definitely hadn't been at the head of the main aisle yesterday. That there were only two equally chunky chairs, had me hesitating to take one.

"If you'll explore the shop," The Owner said with a sweeping gesture of his arm, "I'll be able to focus on the...bridegroom." There was a twinkle in the man's sable eyes.

"Oh, sure." I deposited Fabian in one of the chairs before wandering off. Maybe I could get lost again and take too long to be found, meaning I wouldn't have time for my own reading. What a shame ...

I quickly found himself back in front of the volumes of Lupescu family history. I

selected the first volume and opened it to a random page.

The Lupescu pack was driven from Europe in 1742 by order of Pope Pius VII to combat the overwhelming presence of the devil in Eastern Europe. Seventy pack members lost their lives during their evacuation to the coast. On 17 May, the survivors sailed from Constanța to America aboard The Bestia de Mare. Due to brutal storms, instead of landing in Boston, The Bestia de Mare landed in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Some sixty pack members decided to remain there, while the other seventeen continued into the wilderness of America to settle in what would become Colorado. They called the place where they made their home Lupassilva, or Wolf's Forest, and successfully integrated with the local Cheyenne people.

I jerked back, frowning. Was this some kind of fictionalized version of Sacha's ancestors? Genealogists and historians were serious about facts and sources and references, but this was talking about pack members being hunted down during a Catholic purge. This book was ridiculous!

Putting it back on the shelf, I turned around and gave an involuntary holler when I found the shop owner standing behind me. "You're next," he said ominously.

With a sigh, I followed him back to the table. Fabian was there with a big grin, so I assumed his reading had gone well.

"Do let him know," Fabian said to the shop owner, "if you see any more gorgeous blonds in his future."

And there it was. I clicked my tongue at my cousin, who just giggled and left the shop.

"Take a seat." The shop owner gestured to the chair nearest me.

Sitting down, I realized I felt a little nervous about this. Maybe I should've asked for good news only, too, but the shop owner was already shuffling the deck, so it might be too late to ask. I shifted in my seat and braced myself for bad news.

The shop owner turned over cards without saying a word, lining them up, stacking them, and it looked to me like he was building something. None of his movements seemed anything but planned, like he knew exactly which card was next and where he would put it. I had done one reading before, at a fair, and the woman doing it had made a production out of placing each card. The shop owner wasn't doing anything like that and, when he'd finished selecting and placing cards, he sat back and stared at me.

Glancing down at the cards, I wasn't sure what to do. Was I supposed to recognize something about them? I knew the Death Card didn't mean death, but that was about it. I couldn't be expected to do my own reading.

"Of course not," the shop owner said.

"Pardon?"

"Your trust has been broken. Betrayal, pain, fear... You're in limbo and desperate for a way out."

"Well, I, um..." I cleared my throat uncomfortably and shifted in my seat. I'd mentioned being done with love yesterday during the whole love potion gift thing, so it was possible—

"Great change is coming for you. The unknown will be revealed to you, and you will play an important role in the future. Be still, accept, and all will become clear."

"Um..."

“You will calm the beast.”

“I’ll... What?”

“Accept and trust and everything you need will be yours.”

I blinked at him. Was that it? That was a riddle not a reading, and I didn’t understand a word of it. Not at all wanting to dive deeper, I smiled politely at the man. “Okay. Thanks.”

The shop owner suddenly set a clearly labeled tip jar on the table. It was stuffed with twenty-dollar bills. Apparently, only Fabian’s reading had been free. Begrudgingly, I fished my last twenty from my wallet and crammed it into the jar. Fabian definitely owed me for this crap.

I pushed my chair back and stood. “Did you at least give Fabian the good news he wanted?”

“I did. He had nothing to worry about.”

“Great. So just me getting riddles then?”

“I was as clear as I could be.”

“Right.”

I didn’t bother with anything else, just turned around and walked out. Only when I was outside did I realize something was wrong with my shoe. Balancing on one foot, I lifted the other for a look at the bottom and discovered a tarot card. I pulled it off, brushed it clean, and saw that it was The Moon card. Feeling a little bit bad now, I went back into the shop to return it.

The shop owner, table, chairs, and the rest of the tarot deck were all gone. How the man had moved that much heavy furniture in, like, fifteen seconds was beyond my understanding. And though I did feel bad about somehow getting the card stuck to the bottom of my shoe, I wasn't about to go running around the place trying to find that man.

I went over to the checkout counter and left the card there before walking out again. What a bunch of baloney.

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Chapter five

Zeke

Though it wasn't supposed to get above sixty degrees today, it was still a really nice time to walk through the forest surrounding the resort. The bright sunlight made the red and gold leaves practically glow, while copses of evergreens offered mysterious hideaways. The path they walked along was wide and clear, but I was still glad that I had remembered to bring an old pair of boots that laced up to my ankles. Honestly, I had no idea why I even owned a pair of—

Oh, fuck . They were Anthony's boots, not mine. I'd stolen my ex's goddamned hiking boots.

Well, that was a shitty reminder. Suddenly, the hike wasn't so great anymore. I kind of hoped to find a big pile of bear shit so I could drop the boots in it. Walking back to the resort in nothing but socks would be worth knowing I'd left—

“Ezequiel!”

I looked up at Fabian's admonishment and immediately smiled. “Yes?”

“You're doing the face again.”

I had thought I'd be safe from Fabian's notice if I walked at the back of the group, but apparently the little spitfire was going to monitor me anyway.

“I just realized that these are my ex’s boots,” I said in self-defense.

Fabian looked down at my footwear, his hands on his hips. “Ugh,” he moaned before he threw up his hands. “Well, they’re yours now!”

He had a point. As Fabian got everyone walking again, I tried to accept that I’d needed boots and now had some. Where they’d come from didn’t matter. I’d think of them as a donation from someone who probably didn’t even know they were missing. Fucking Anthony .

Attempting to get back into the spirit of the hike, I listened as the guide from the resort told us about the different trees and animals around us. Every now and then, she mentioned that this was the place where so-and-so reported seeing a great black beast standing on two legs and blah, blah, blah. Clearly, she’d read that fake family history at The Magic Shop. Why that annoyed me so much, I wasn’t sure. Maybe because of my ridiculous tarot reading? Yeah, maybe .

“Here we have Lupas Falls,” the guide said as we stood about fifteen feet back from the pool of the waterfall. “It’s two hundred feet high and feeds the Lupassilva Creek, which flows to the Roaring Fork River south of here.” The pretty blond woman smiled like she had a secret. “Rumor has it that a pack of werewolves once lived in the caves behind the falls.”

I contained my groan at that information. Sure, there was what looked to be a ledge running along one side of the cliff and possibly behind the falls, but did that have to mean anything lived there? And the water was probably never warm at any time of year, so who would ever want to live behind a constant flow of frigid water?

Gasping at the sudden appearance of a naked man, I watched as he dove through the falling water and into the pool. When I turned to see if anyone else just saw that, I realized that the rest of them had already walked off down the path. They’d be jealous

as hell that they hadn't seen that beautiful sight.

My breath caught when the naked man turned out to be Sacha as he started walking out of the water. No part of him seemed to mind the chilly water as he wiped droplets from his face and smiled wickedly at me. The sunlight made all those pale muscles sparkle and shine, mesmerizing me. His uncut cock swayed in front of him as he walked. A moment later, Sacha was right up in my personal space, still grinning and angling for a kiss.

Moaning as Sacha owned my mouth, I realized that I shouldn't have worried about him earlier. He was just fine with discovering he was into men. Totally fine. Grinding on and tongue-fucking me fine.

Sacha tapered off the kiss, and I found myself chasing the man's lips. With his grin back, he said, "I watched so much gay porn when I got home last night."

"Oh?" I chuckled, feeling like I might be starring in some porn right now. "Did you?"

"Mm-hm." He kissed me again, lingering, tasting. "I really want to try a blowjob."

I nodded. Blow the naked man frying my brain with incendiary kisses? I could do that, no problem. "Okay. Yeah, sure."

Before I knew what was happening, Sacha had dropped to his knees and started opening my pants. Oh! He meant he wanted to try giving a blowjob? I was one hundred percent onboard with that version of events, too.

"Alright?" Sacha curled his fingers around the waistband of my underwear.

I nodded. "Ab-absolutely, yeah."

Sacha tugged the front of my underwear down to reveal my semi-hard cock. Immediately, I regretted letting my personal grooming routine lapse lately. Sacha deserved things trimmed for his first time, but he was getting a salt-and-pepper, vintage bush down there. I knew I was bigger than I looked at the moment, too, so that was embarrassing. I opened my mouth to...explain? Apologize? I wasn't sure, but all of a sudden, Sacha opened up and sucked half of my cock into his mouth.

“Fuck! O-okay, easy. It's not—huh!—a r-race.”

Because Sacha might not have a whole lot of technique, but his porn viewing had given him enough of the basics to make my brain misfire a few times. Sacha was down there moaning as he bobbed on my cock with a look of bliss on his beautiful face already. And then he went and pulled my jeans and underwear down to my knees so he could grab handfuls of my ass. Sacha moaned again and took me deeper.

Bare-assed in the forest. That had not been on my bingo card for this trip. But, well, here I was. No sense in not enjoying the moment, right? Jesus, Sacha's mouth was hot. Temperature-wise and whatever he was doing with his tongue in there.

Sacha suddenly choked, backing off as he coughed a few times.

“E-easy,” I stammered. “You can use...” Fuck, I was panting like I'd run a mile! I gasped a deep breath and tried again. “Use your hand, too. Then you can't go down too far.”

Sacha nodded like a good little student—and goddamn if that didn't rev my engine in ways I hadn't realized before—and then he wrapped his warm hand around the bottom half of my throbbing cock. A tremble went through me, and I had to fight back coming right then and there. Closing my eyes and fisting my hands, I took a few deep breaths.

“Oh, fuck!” I hollered because Sacha was now sucking the life out of me. His full concentration was right there on the head. Shit, I was going to come. No, not yet. Not yet!

“Wait!”

I came anyway. I watched Sacha pull back, big eyes wide with concern and swollen lips parted. My cock unceremoniously erupted on him. The first two shots hit Sacha’s mouth and chin before he seemed to make a decision and lean back in. He wrapped his perfect lips back around my cockhead for the third pump. I hollered in sharp pleasure as his tongue swirled and licked. Sacha made a happy moaning sound and his eyes seemed to twinkle as he gazed up at me.

Dear god, the man was going to kill me.

Sacha popped up suddenly, pressing close and biting his bottom lip. “Will you touch me?”

“Y-yes,” I said, nodding. “Of course, yes.”

Sacha guided my hand to his straining cock. Oh, it was beautiful, like the rest of him. Uncut and ridged with veins, stroking him had me seeing stars all over again. I wanted to suck him, bend over for him, but Sacha was kissing me and thrusting his hips, pinning me against him with one arm around my waist and the other cradling my head. I opened up and moaned, my stroke a little awkward at this angle but I was going to give it my all.

Sacha didn’t need anything fancy or extended, and I took that as a compliment when he quickly came. Cum spattered my thigh and hip as Sacha thrust and moaned. He stumbled a little, and I caught him close as we both panted through it.

Something tickled my skin and I looked down to see a drop of cum slithering down my thigh. Before I could do something about it, Sacha caught it and rubbed it into my skin. And then he used his whole hand to massage the rest in, too.

For a moment, I was a little grossed out by that move, but then I looked at his face. The low-lidded eyes and parted lips added to the deep breaths he was taking had me thinking maybe Sacha was getting off on marking me. Like a lot. Watching him do it was turning me on all over again. If I'd been ten years younger, I'd have been ready for round two.

Sacha noticed me watching and huffed a laugh before kissing my forehead. I found myself wrapped in his embrace, the two of us sighing simultaneously. It was ridiculously sweet for two naked strangers in the forest. Well, one half -naked man. Was I really standing here in the woods with my pants around my knees? The chilly breeze across my butt said yes.

“Could you leave it?” Sacha asked quietly.

“Hmm? Leave what?”

He spread his hand over where I was still sticky. “This.”

Okay, so I had developed a new kink today. Being marked by a lover—check! Getting asked to leave myself cum-covered—double-check! I nodded. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Sacha smiled and kissed my cheek. “Thanks for letting me suck you off. I promise I'll get better at it.”

That startled a laugh out of me. “Well, I'm here whenever you want to practice.”

Sacha stepped back and raked his gaze over me in a very flattering way before licking his lips. But then he was walking back toward the waterfall's pool.

"Where are you going?" I hauled my jeans and underwear back up.

"I left my clothes in the caves behind the falls."

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Like the werewolves, huh?"

Sacha stopped and looked over his shoulder, eyebrows raised and lips parted. Then he slowly smiled and nodded. "Exactly."

Shaking my head, I finished straightening my clothes as Sacha dove into the water and swam toward the ledge beside the falls. He pulled himself out with the ease of strong, young muscles and raised a hand in farewell before disappearing behind the cascade of falling water. That had to be the single weirdest place to leave absolutely anything.

Figuring I should catch up with the rest of the wedding party, I turned to follow the path only to stop short. Tucked into the bark of the pine beside me was a tarot card. The Moon card to be exact.

"What the fuck?" I whispered as I stepped away from it. How the hell had that gotten there? Dropped on the ground, I might be able to understand. But stuck on a tree at eye level? I looked around, almost expecting that damn magic shop owner to be lurking somewhere.

No one was there.

I left the damn card where it was and jogged off down the path. Maybe someone was using a deck of tarot cards to mark their way. I didn't know and didn't care. It was

just a crazy coincidence. Nothing more. Everything was fine.

Everything was just fine .

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Chapter six

Sacha

There was no getting around it, I had to tell my mother that I'd found my mate. Marking Zeke like that had nearly caused me to shift into my werewolf form! I'd never felt such an urge before. I could absolutely control my shifts outside of the moon nights, but I'd nearly succumbed with Zeke. That had to mean we were fated mates just as much as the way his scent called to me.

Zeke Castro was meant to be mine. And now I had to start fighting for him.

Even if he didn't know what I really was yet.

But that was why I needed to start at the top of my pack. Mother was leading as my younger half-brother Gavril's proxy until he came of age. When our former alpha, Gavril's father, died last year, no one had suddenly become an alpha—which was how things usually went. We'd had to name a leader instead, with the thinking being that Gavril might be an alpha once he was an adult. My cousins—Gavril's uncles—had been making noise about how one of them should've been named leader over a human, so Mother's hold wasn't as ironclad as she'd like.

She made sure I knew that everything I did reflected on her, and being in a gay relationship—while not against pack law anymore—wasn't something Mother's rivals would cheer about.

Well, actually, they would cheer but because it would be another reason to take the

pack away from her. Being queer was seen as a deficiency, so while no one would actively hate me for it, they would see me as lesser. As I slipped down the rungs of pack hierarchy, it could be seen as my mother doing the same.

No one could dispute Gavril's potential claim to the pack since his father had been alpha, but I was pretty sure the entire pack only barely tolerated Mother's leadership. After all, she was human and only in charge because Gavril was just six years old.

Having thought through all of that on the way to her office, I hesitated to knock on the door now. Maybe it would be better not to tell her or anyone else. Maybe I could leave when Zeke did and just follow him to, uh, wherever he lived. His people could become my pack. It could work. Right? Someone had to have made it work before me.

I was just about to turn tail and run when I heard a man raise his voice inside Mother's office. "Those damn cats keep getting closer to pack lands every day, and your solution is to ignore them?" he hollered, and I thought that might be my older cousin Titus who was one of Gavril's uncles.

Mother must be meeting with members of the elite in the pack to discuss the encroaching cougar shifters. Our pack lands were also the town's borders and included some three thousand acres of forest. I hadn't run into any cougars on our lands, but there were signs that they'd been around that anyone could sniff out. Too many predators in one area and the humans would start to notice and maybe call for a culling to protect tourists and livestock. No one wanted that, so it was strange that the cougars weren't being more cautious as well.

That Mother was advocating to ignore the trouble was also strange. We had an entire squad of fighters that did nothing but train to defend our territory. Why wouldn't she activate them?

The door suddenly opened, and I flinched back in embarrassment at being caught eavesdropping. Members of the elite—Gavril’s uncles and their trusted inner circles—began marching out of the room. They flowed around me like I was a boulder in the river, not bumping into me but also barely acknowledging me. I didn’t bother trying to get through them and just waited for them to leave completely.

Titus stopped directly in front of me. I couldn’t help meeting his gaze, though I knew I should look down. He had twenty years and fifty pounds on me though we were the same height. I couldn’t take him, and yet I stood my ground and looked him in the eyes anyway.

“You’re Cosmin’s son,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Cecil’s great-grandson.”

“Yes.”

He blew out a breath through his nose and moved around me, following the others down the stairs.

What had that been about? He hadn’t exactly been asking questions, but he knew my lineage the same as I knew his. Why in the world would Titus bring up any of that now?

“Sacha?” Mother said as she appeared in the doorway. “Why are you lingering in the hallway?”

I was a terrible liar, so I didn’t even attempt to come up with some other reason for being there. I had to tell her the truth. “I have news.”

“Good news, I hope.” She moved back into the office, picked up some papers from the desk, and shoved them into a file cabinet.

I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. “For me, I think.”

“Uh-huh.” She grabbed more papers and turned her back on me as she filed them.

“I’ve found my mate.” I cleared my throat and wiped my sweaty hands on my thighs.

“His name is Zeke.”

Mother went very still before she spun around. “Have you lost your mind?”

“This really shouldn’t—”

“Be a problem?” she barked at me as she slammed the filing cabinet closed. “You can’t be that stupid.”

I cringed inside, hating when she called me that. “Mother, please—”

“No, you listen to me .” She stalked over and fisted the front of my shirt, yanking me down to eye level with her. I stared into her eyes, too, even though I should definitely drop my gaze. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“You are not going to jeopardize my hold on this pack, do you hear me?” She gripped my shirt up under my chin. “I can’t stop you from claiming him—lord knows I remember how that shit works—but you had better be discreet . Anyone notices and you’ve just got yourself a little fuck buddy,” she said with a sneer before her face hardened again. “You do not have a male mate.”

She pushed me away, and I stepped back. Now I stopped looking her in the eye, but only because I turned away to leave.

“Tell me you understand me, Sacha. I swear to god.”

“I understand.”

I left the room feeling oppressed and pathetic. Mother wasn't the alpha, didn't have an alpha's abilities, but she could certainly crush a spirit like one. So much for my tiny little hope that I could have support! No, now I had to keep Zeke a secret.

Did that include not telling him what I was? Fuck. It probably did. How was I supposed to really bond with him if I had to keep secrets from him? No one would put up with only knowing parts of their lover for very long. I would have to tell him everything eventually.

Maybe following him home was the right idea after all.

I considered going to work after that, but found myself wandering away from the hotel instead. I'd thought maybe an aimless walk around the forest might help me clear my head, but when I looked up, I realized my feet had taken me right to Zeke.

He was leaning back on a bench beside the fountain in the center of town with his arms along the back of it, his legs stretched out, and ankles crossed in front of him. I took a moment to admire the serene smile on his lips and the way the sunlight cascading over him made the touch of silver in his hair and beard sparkle like tinsel. That he was older than me was something I liked about him because he was so confident and at ease with himself.

I went over to stand in front of him, blocking the sun. He blinked up at me and immediately smiled. “Hey, you.” His smile dimmed. “What's wrong?”

“I told my mother.”

“Oh, baby,” he said and reached for me. “I’m so—”

But I couldn’t let anyone know and so I stepped back and looked around to see who nearby might know me. I didn’t see anyone, but that didn’t mean I felt like I could relax. When I looked again at Zeke he was clearly saddened, but also nodding.

“I can’t let anyone know,” I tried to explain and goddamn, I hated saying that out loud.

He stood up and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Can we go somewhere? To talk?”

That he felt the need to clarify what we’d do when we were alone hurt my heart because I was pretty sure all he wanted to do was hug me. I itched to be defiant. Was it really so bad if I stood here in the center of town and let another man hold me because I was upset?

But I felt like I was on shaky ground and that uncertainty made me a coward.

“How about my room?” Zeke asked. “I’ll go up now, and you follow when you can. I’m in room two-ten.”

I nodded, grateful that he was trying to accommodate me at all. My mate was such a good man! I wanted to be stronger and show him that I was a good man, too. Just...not right now.

Watching Zeke walk away was painful. Everything in me wanted to call out to stop him or race to catch up to him. Almost everything in me, since there was a tiny timid part that worried about what would happen if someone saw me going into the hotel with him. Of course, then my mind played out every scenario from Mother’s disappointment to getting thrown out of the pack. I closed my eyes and rubbed at them like that might get the movies in my mind to stop playing.

Fuck it. Zeke was maybe two minutes ahead of me, but it would have to be enough. I started walking after him. He was getting into the elevator when I walked into the lobby, so I took the stairs. Both the elevators and the stairwells had cameras, but the hallways didn't, so I waited outside his room and tried to relax. Technically, I was doing what Mother had asked and being discreet. I wasn't doing anything wrong.

Zeke saw me the instant he got off the elevator, and I watched his gaze flick around. Guessing I knew what he was looking for, I said, "There aren't any cameras in the hallways."

His shoulders relaxed and he nodded as he opened the door and walked into his room. I followed him inside and was immediately wrapped in his embrace before the door shut behind me. I leaned into him and held him in return.

"Are you okay?" he asked against my neck.

"Sort of?"

"Yeah."

Zeke just held on and breathed with me, and it was the most perfect thing he could've done.

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Chapter seven

Zeke

Sitting on the bed in my room, I held Sacha's hand while he sat beside me and explained that his mother didn't want anyone to know about us.

"It sounds like she's okay with you being bisexual." I took a chance on labelling his sexuality despite not yet talking about it with him. "That's a good thing, right?"

"Yeah," he said with a shrug, "but in a 'I don't want to have to see it' sort of way."

"Okay, that's terrible, but—and I'm just guessing here—she doesn't sound completely against you." I was grasping and I knew it, but I'd always gravitated toward finding the silver linings. "Like maybe there might be room to change her mind down the line. You know?"

I felt bad that he'd gotten a less than stellar reaction from his mother when he came out to her, but I wasn't sure what more to do than be supportive. We weren't dating. Our relationship was a blip in both of our lives, and though I'd remember him fondly and didn't regret meeting him, it wasn't like we were a couple. I'd be leaving at the end of the week. I could give him my number and ask that he let me check in on him from time to time since I'd basically whisked him out of the closet and was now his fairy gayfather, but it wasn't like I'd be giving up my life in Miami and moving in with him.

Although, a bitchy little part of my brain did pop up and remind me that I didn't, in

fact, have a life in Miami anymore. I'd be staying in Fabian and Matt's apartment while they were on their honeymoon and, when they got back, I'd need to have somewhere to go. And a job. At least the Metrobus system would be there for my broke ass.

"I just don't..." Sacha sighed and looked me in the eyes as he squeezed my hand. "You're the kind of man who deserves to be celebrated, not hidden away."

Oh, that stung. I knew he didn't mean for it to hit me like that, but ouch.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked as he held my hand in both of his.

I must have needed to work on my poker face. I also figured I should probably tell him everything.

"So my last relationship imploded not long ago because I found out the man I'd been dating for two years was actually living a whole other life in a different city as a straight, married man with two kids."

Sacha's eyes and mouth went wide in the usual reaction people had to learning that about Anthony. That was usually followed by all the reasons why they'd never liked Anthony and how much better I could do without him.

Sacha leaned over and hugged me tight against his chest, cupping the back of my head and making a sound like he was in pain. "That must've broken your heart," he whispered. "Are you okay?"

My throat got tight, and I hugged him back as I realized that was the first time anyone had asked me that. Even Fabian hadn't asked because he'd been on the side of hating on Anthony the instant I'd given him permission to let loose. His reasons had a lot more to do with employment practices, but whatever. He'd still never asked if I was

okay.

I cleared my throat to answer Sacha as he combed his fingers through my hair. “Sometimes I’m fine and other times I’m not. I gave everything to him.”

Sacha gasped and pulled back to look me in the eyes. “And I’m making you hide!”

“No,” I held up a finger, “you’re asking me to hide with you . There’s a difference.”

He slumped where he sat, but he nodded, so I hoped he understood.

“Want to hang out with me for a while?” I hooked a thumb at the TV. “We could watch a movie.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing wedding things?”

“Uh. Maybe?” I went over to the little table by the window and found the itinerary. “White water rafting? Is he insane? Who would want to— Oh, or mani/pedis.”

Sacha snickered at me and then bit his lips together when I looked over at him.

I cocked a hip and flicked my wrist. “Do I look like the kind of guy who wants to tumble around in a washing machine of rocks and death?”

The snickering escalated into guffawing as Sacha shook his head at me. I rolled my eyes and set the itinerary back down, fairly certain Fabian wouldn’t be too upset that I’d missed either event so long as I let slip that I’d been with Sacha instead. Fabian had guided an alarming number of baby gays out of the closet, so he’d understand.

Once Sacha got hold of himself, he stood with a hand on his belly rucking up his polo shirt. “Do you mind if I use your shower?” He must’ve seen me looking because he

brought his hand up. “Not for any reason other than I’d like to wash the morning away.”

I tried to tell my dick that Sacha did not want to get naked and wet with us, but it wasn’t listening. I shoved my hands in my pockets and hoped he wouldn’t notice any bulging. “Um, yeah, no problem. Go right ahead.”

Sacha chuckled and came over to me so he could cup my cheek in the palm of his hand. “Your poker face is for shit.”

I could feel myself blushing and brushed his hand away. “Go take your shower and feel better.”

He stayed where he was. “Would you like to join me?”

“Do you want me to join you?”

Putting his hands out like he was weighing something, he said, “Hmm, just get clean or get clean while getting filthy?” He made his hands go up and down.

I barked a laugh, grabbed the lube and a condom, and went into the bathroom.

“What was that?” he asked as he followed me in.

I set the bottle and condom on the counter and started getting undressed. Sacha might think I couldn’t hide my thoughts from my face, but he was just as bad. I couldn’t help snickering at the nervous butt virgin as he eyed the items on the counter.

“Breathe, Sacha. You’re going to top.”

“I’m going to— Oh.” He nodded very seriously and took his shirt over his head.

Naked, I went and turned the hot water on before looping my arms around his bare shoulders. “I’m a fan of bottoming, but I also think it’s good for you to see how things work from the top before you try it from the bottom. You know?”

“Sure. Yeah, okay.” His shoulders relaxed.

I opened his pants and reached in to massage his cock. Oh, Sacha was beautiful when he was turned on. The low-lidded eyes and parted lips as he moaned so softly aroused me as much as fondling him did. And when he aggressively grabbed me into a wild kiss, one hand squeezing my ass, I forgot all about small-minded parents and anybody’s secrets.

Only when I realized it was getting a bit steamy—literally, because the shower was still running nothing but hot water—did we break apart. Sacha finished undressing, and I adjusted the water and opened the bathroom door to let the cool air in so we could see each other. The mirror was completely fogged over as we stepped into the tiled shower space across from it. It really was a lovely bathroom, made even more so by the athletic young man in front of me.

Since he’d initially wanted to relax, I took charge and washed his hair, massaged a lot of delicious muscle groups, and did my best to pamper him a bit. He giggled when I smoothed my hands over his asscheeks and bit his bottom lip when I teased my fingers between them. I fleetingly considered introducing him to a rimjob, but stroking his cock changed my mind. I needed him inside me.

While he got the condom on, I opened myself up with the silicone-based lube that was a favorite of mine. Not only was it good for playing in the water, but it would stay slick for longer than anything else I’d ever used. Sacha was behind me, and I could hear his low moan as I fingered myself. It made me grin to know I had him enthralled.

“Get some on you, too,” I said as I handed him the lube. “Then work yourself in nice and slow.”

He looked very serious, so I turned around and bent over, bracing my hands on the tiles, to give him some space. Everything would be great once his nerves faded and he felt confident, so I didn’t try to talk him through every little thing now. He wasn’t a virgin—he knew what to do with his dick—and I knew how to take him.

Sacha touched my hip with a firm hand, and I felt the head of his cock at my hole. I exhaled with a moan as he pushed the fat head in, and I heard him whisper my name. I reached back for him, pulling, and he started shallowly thrusting his way deeper. In a moment, he was rocking with me, his fingers biting into my hips and low sounds of pleasure slipping from his lips.

There was something about this that felt different from other times. Because he was my first after Anthony? Because I really liked him? Because it was his first time? I didn’t know, but by the time he’d worked himself fully inside me and had his hands roaming my chest and abs, I felt a little drunk on Sacha. I had to lock my knees and concentrate on paying attention instead of closing my eyes and losing myself in the sensations he was causing. When he ground against my ass and started jacking me, I wailed in sharp and unexpected pleasure. It wasn’t supposed to be this good.

“Zeke... Aw, god...” he said in my ear as he started thrusting again. “You’re perfect.”

I shook my head because I really wasn’t but couldn’t speak thanks to the building desperation inside me. I’d taken over stroking my cock and was frantically pushing back on him as he slammed into me, the two of us lost in a rush to the finish line. When he thrust in so hard that he lifted me off my feet, I suddenly came with a wail of release that was echoed by his. He stayed pressed close and wrapped his arms around me while we panted together.

Only because the water started to cool did we separate. We laughed at each other when the spray stole the condom out of his hand and we had to chase it down. Cleanup was perfunctory at best before we hopped out and turned off the water. In the sudden quiet, I looked Sacha in the eyes and really liked what I saw when he gazed back at me. I kissed him slowly and sweetly.

“Thank you,” he whispered against my lips.

I shook my head and licked into his mouth because I was the grateful one. I couldn't have asked for a better man to be the one to wipe my slate clean of the past. Sacha was letting me move on once and for all.

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Chapter eight

Zeke

“Wait, wait, wait! Hold on,” I said on a laugh. “Your stepdad was also your uncle?”

We were still in my hotel room with some action movie paused on the TV that I wasn't really paying attention to anyway. We had ordered room service for dinner and cuddled up on the bed. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed to just chill and make out with a very attentive and affectionate man. It was honestly one of the best days I'd had in a really long time.

“No, he was my second cousin,” Sacha said with a grin. “Our great-grandparents were siblings.”

I squinted at him, trying to relate that to my own family tree. “Okay, I think I get it. Your family tree has a twisted branch though.”

He chuckled and levered himself up on one elbow. After he smoothed out the down pillow, he poked at it as he named people. “So when Alek, my stepfather, died, this resort was meant to be passed down to his son. But Gavril is only six, so my mother, Elise, took over. Alek's two younger brothers, Titus and Marius, think they should be in charge.”

“Why aren't they? Did your mother have more experience running a resort or something?”

Sacha shrugged as he stared at the pokes in the pillow. “It’s always been passed down from father to son.”

“A tradition.”

“Basically.”

“Puts a lot of pressure on poor Gavril.”

Sacha rolled onto his back, his head covering up all of the pillow marks. “Well, if something should happen to him or he can’t lead for any reason, then it would pass on to one of his uncles.”

“Your second cousins.”

“Right.”

This was sounding more and more like royalty and heirs. Maybe it was something that had come over from Romania with them? I didn’t know if Romania had royalty, but it all sounded very old world European.

“And you don’t have any claim to the kingdom?” I asked.

“Not really, no. My dad was in charge but everything passed to his cousin when he died.”

“Why didn’t things go to you?”

“For one thing, I was sixteen at the time. And for another... Well, I didn’t have the...skills to take over.”

“Yeah, not at sixteen.” I flopped back and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. “That’s so... I’m not sure if amazing or horrible is the right word for it since you can see what your life could’ve been like. Do you want to be in charge? Do you mind not being the leader of all this?”

Sacha turned to face me and his cheeks turned pink. “Sometimes I wish I was. Mostly when someone’s ignoring my suggestions. I do a lot around here, but I don’t really have a specific title. I help where I’m needed. Not very many people are willing to listen to a guy like me.”

I couldn’t quite tell if he was happy about that or not. Did he blush because he was embarrassed about being directionless? It didn’t feel like a topic to explore any further, especially knowing his mother’s current opinion of him.

I probably shouldn’t have asked this either, but I was curious. “When did your dad pass?”

“Ten years ago. He was hiking and fell off a cliff.”

I sat up on my elbows and squinted at him. “And Gavril’s dad passed after a skiing accident?”

“Right.”

Cocking my head at him, I smirked. “You’re not exactly selling a wilderness lifestyle to this city boy.”

Sacha chuckled, shaking his head. “They’re really rare accidents. People might break a bone or something, but they hardly ever die.”

I snorted a laugh. “Now there’s a tourist slogan if I ever heard one.”

Even though Sacha laughed at my joke, the light in his eyes seemed to have dimmed, and I didn't want that. He'd had a rough enough day without being reminded of his father's death. I knew what it was like to never have gotten the chance to come out to my father and know how he'd really have reacted to the news. I had to assume, Sacha might be wondering about that now, too, given how it had gone with his mother just hours ago.

"It sounds like your family has been here for a really long time," I said to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

"All the way back to the 1740s," he said with a nod.

That date triggered a memory in my mind. "Oh, hey! I read about that in your family history."

His eyebrows hopped up as he blinked at me. "My what?"

"The family history in The Magic Shop? Weird place for it, by the way, and the fact that the author made you all werewolves was a little odd. Like who fictionalizes a family history?"

Sacha made a sort of wheezing noise. "Yeah, that is weird." He cleared his throat and sat up. "Um, what did you read about exactly?"

I sat up, too, sitting cross-legged in front of him. "It was... Oh, a forced exodus because of some pope. And there was a part of the family that branched off from the rest to found the town here. Come to think of it, they went pretty deep into the interior for the 1740s. I think my ancestors were still living it up in Spain somewhere back then."

He was nodding and looking a little distracted before he cleared his throat. "Have you

done genealogy stuff for your family?”

I waved that away. “Oh, no, just family stories about conquistadors and the native peoples of Cuba. I could probably look into it what with all the online resources and the DNA tests nowadays, but I haven’t done it.”

“You could find out if you’re related to any celebrities,” he waggled his eyebrows, “or wanted felons.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I heard about that.”

As much as I’d learned about Sacha in the last few minutes, it felt like we’d gone off the rails now. He wasn’t doing anything specific or overt, but I got the feeling that he was uncomfortable. When he glanced at the TV opposite us, I concluded that we should probably put a pin in discussing family any further.

“Want to finish the movie?” I offered.

He smiled. “Yeah, let’s.”

Sacha turned and propped himself up against the headboard. When he held his arm out, I sat up and cuddled into his side, very glad he’d offered me the spot. Being pressed against his naked upper body was way more interesting than the car chase on the screen, though. I wasn’t even aware that I was staring at his lap where his cock was hidden behind his boxers until he shifted his hips, and I realized I was petting his thigh. I looked at his profile from where I was resting on his shoulder and teased my fingers into the leg hole of his boxers, high up on his inner thigh.

He looked down and spread his legs a tiny bit wider, bumping my thigh and shifting again. I looked back down and saw that he was starting to tent his boxers. I reached in deeper and teased his sac with my fingertips. He took a shaky breath.

I chuckled quietly and got him smirking at me. “You keep watching your movie,” I said and wiggled lower on the bed. “I’ve found something else to do.”

“Oh? Something better than watching an awesome star-studded car chase through the streets of I couldn’t even tell you where now that you’re touching me like that?”

I laughed again and fished his cock out through the slit in his boxers. “So much better than that.”

He moaned louder than the revving engines on the TV as I took his cock into my mouth. He put a hand to the back of my neck, just resting there warm and solid, and I closed my eyes. He was velvety against my lips, growing harder on my tongue. I tucked one arm around behind him to hug his waist and fondled his balls with my free hand. His fingers bit into my neck as he whined.

I took him as deep into my throat as I could and listened to him moan over and over again. The way he whispered my name and cursed sent shivers of desire through me. That sounded like praise, and I loved it just as much as the warm, salty taste of him.

Suddenly, Sacha’s fingers delved into my hair at the back of my head and pulled up. I popped off of his dick and looked up, concerned. Before I could say anything, he gripped me with both hands and leaned down to kiss me. He forced my mouth open, licked inside, and I knew he was tasting himself on my tongue.

“Can I have you again?” he asked breathlessly.

I nodded. Dear god, in the face of his sudden desperate need, I would have given him anything.

Sacha manhandled me around on the bed until I was face down toward the TV. I’d put on sweatpants after our shower, and he pulled them down to hobble my ankles

before he sat on my thighs. Heart pounding, I looked over my shoulder as he gloved up and slicked himself with lube. Didn't have to show him twice, apparently. He wiped the excess into my crack before leaning over me.

My position made my ass extra tight, and we moaned together as he sank into me. His knees were denting the bed on the outside of mine and he took a moment to press my legs even closer together. The pressure had me wailing into the bedding as he took advantage of that extra slick lube and pounded my ass.

He had a fist against the mattress and his other hand gripped my shoulder close to my neck. I was pinned down and held in place like a bad dog and, Jesus fuck, it felt so goddamned good to lay there and let him take me. When I could speak, all I said was yes over and over again. This was perfect. This was everything! He was making me fly.

His hips snapped against my ass, drilling me so deep, and then all of a sudden he was leaning over me. The move had him impossibly far inside me, claiming my guts, and I was on the edge of coming. His hand moved to grip my neck, his palm against my throat, lifting me onto my elbows. And then he bit me. Literally sank his teeth into the other side of my neck. I gasped in surprise and damn if that sting of pain didn't push me over the edge altogether. His hips punched into me three more times and then we were both coming, me with a yell and him with a growl against my neck.

He stopped biting me and panted into my hair, following me down as I collapsed against the bed. Fuck me, that had been intense. He'd been brutal, almost violent, and I'd had no idea I could be into something like that. But I had been. Goddamn, I'd been right there for all of it.

If he could rally in the next couple minutes, I'd let him start again.

"I bit you," he said.

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

I nodded because I was fine. It had hurt, I’d probably have one hell of a mark, but I’d liked it.

“I don’t know what came over me,” he whispered.

I huffed a laugh, very aware of the fact that he was still balls deep inside me. “It comes over you again, go for it.”

“Really?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Huh. Okay.”

Sacha rested some of his weight against me. I moaned quietly, liking that, too. He was still inside me and clearly didn’t have any plans on ending that. I couldn’t help pretending that he’d knotted me like in any number of the monster romances I’d recently discovered and now read exclusively. Somebody was always getting stuck on a cock in those books. I smiled into the bedding, glad to have my turn.

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Chapter nine

Sacha

The sour scent of fear woke me up. I blinked open my eyes and inhaled, not sure what was happening. I could scent Zeke, immediately remembered how we'd spent yesterday holed up in his room eating room service, watching movies, and messing around, but why was someone afraid right now? Lifting my head, I zeroed in on the source of the fear.

Naked, Zeke stood in a corner of the room with his hands covering his mouth and his gray eyes wide. There was no one else here. Why was he afraid?

And then I caught sight of my own hand. Or more accurately the long-fingered black paw of my wolf-man form. I hardly ever shifted into this form because it made me a seven-foot-tall beastly combination of wolf and man that was clearly other. Being a regular-looking wolf was so much safer should anyone see me. But here I was in bed with Zeke.

Oh, god. Zeke...

I scrambled backward off the bed so that it was between us and shifted back into my human form. Never would I have thought I'd shift like that in my fucking sleep! I didn't know— What was I—

"I won't hurt you," I told him. "I couldn't ever hurt you, Zeke. I swear."

He was breathing fast as he lowered his hands from covering his mouth to pressing against his chest. There was a light sheen of sweat on his skin and... He was erect? I kept looking from his cock to his face, not sure what to make of that. Was it a fear response?

“Do that again.”

I met his gaze. “What?”

He swallowed so hard I could hear his throat click and he wagged a finger at me. “Do that again.”

Was he thinking he’d been seeing things? For a second, I wondered if maybe I should play it like that. I hated to see my mate afraid of me! But no, he was talking, curious, and maybe this was the lead-in I’d been looking for. Not ideal, of course, but Zeke was aware and listening.

I shifted into my wolf-man form again.

Zeke gasped and stared, but didn’t run away or scream. I let him see all of me, turning so he could look at my tail and everything. The scent of his fear was still there, but building underneath it was his arousal. Him getting hard wasn’t just a fear response, and it was fueling my reaction. Zeke gasped again when he looked at my pink wolf’s cock pushing free of its furry sheath and filling for him.

“That’s because of you,” I said by way of explanation.

He flinched. “Y-you can...talk.”

I nodded. “I’m still me.”

His gaze flicked all over me but kept coming back to my cock. It was bigger in this form, shaped like a canine's, and had a knot near the base of it. I'd never fucked in this form, but goddamn, if he asked me to, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'd had him twice yesterday and had dreamt about claiming him again.

Zeke had one hand on his chest still but his other hand slid down to his belly. I could see the moment he realized he was hard as he gasped and met my gaze, a blush firing his cheeks bright red. But even in his embarrassment, his arousal didn't wane.

I took a chance and jumped over the bed to land in front of him. He made a startled sound and his hands went out as if to stop me, so I didn't go any closer.

"It's okay," I said, "to be attracted to me when I'm like this."

He was, after all, my mate, and I'd heard plenty of pack members whisper about taking their mates in their wolf-man form. It would strengthen our mate bond a thousand-fold, if the rumors were true.

"I..." Zeke gulped and licked his lips. "I read monster romances," he said in a whispered rush. "The hero's always...something not human. I just never imagined..."

I grinned at him, delighted to find out that he'd primed himself for this moment through books. "Lots of lycans in those books?" I asked, letting a little growl into my voice.

He shivered and gave a jerky nod. "With, um... They usually have one of, um... Those," he said and flicked his wrist toward my dick.

I grasped it and stroked, allowing myself to moan as my fingers traveled over my full length. "Have you imagined what it might feel like to be knotted, Zeke?"

His breath hitched and eyelids fluttered. Yeah, he had.

“Do you want to find out?”

His eyes popped open and he stared up at me. “I... I shouldn’t. How is any of this even real?”

I gently caressed the back of his hand before pressing it to my chest. He shivered hard and flexed his fingers in my fur, burrowing in to massage the muscle. “I’m very real,” I told him. “And everything’s okay.”

Zeke stared at his hands as he used both to pet me and explore. I let him touch me wherever and however he wanted to, just so grateful that he was accepting me. I might not have meant to do this, but it was turning out to be the perfect introduction. He wasn’t afraid, he just wasn’t sure he should let me in.

I braced a hand on the wall over his head and leaned closer, pulling in deep lungfuls of his warm, aroused scent. I licked my lips and then I found myself dipping down and licking him. His neck, his shoulder, I tasted his skin and moaned at how perfect he was. I wanted to lick more of him.

Suddenly, Zeke moved around me. I didn’t try to stop him—even though I wanted to—and turned to watch him... Dear god, he got up on the bed on all fours before lowering onto his elbows, his ass in the air. He tipped his ass up more and widened his legs as he looked over at me with a blush staining his cheeks. I thought maybe my heart stopped beating.

“Take me like this?” he asked quietly. “And knot me?”

Inside, I was a riot of emotions, but I tried to be cool as I scooped the lube from the bedside table and approached him. “I’ll give you anything you want,” I said with an

extra rumble in my voice.

He smiled at me and rested his cheek on his folded hands, waiting. He looked so fucking sexy and beautifully serene at the same time. My heart didn't stop beating—it started beating for him.

I lubed my cock and then realized I couldn't prep him since my claws were sharp and didn't retract. I told him as much and apologized. He chuckled at me.

“Don't worry about me. I want to feel every inch.”

Well, then . I got on the bed behind him and fitted the tapered head of my slick cock to his hole. I watched him open up for me, listened to his low moans, and saw the shiver go down his spine as I slowly thrust my way deeper. I kept going until I got to my knot. Shoving that into him would prevent me from moving anymore, so I'd save it for the very last moment. But I knew he could feel the hard bulge every time it bumped his stretched rim from the way he whined like he needed it.

I'd said I'd give him anything and I'd meant it.

As big as I was, I could brace my hands on either side of his head and lean over him. While my hips thrust my cock inside him, my furry chest and abs glided across his warm skin like we were petting each other. Zeke opened his eyes and stared at my hand as he shakily held my thumb. I loved that I was so much larger than him. I could protect him, claim him as mine. He was so perfect.

Suddenly, he was hollering as he came, his whole body straining beneath me. I fucked him through it, letting my orgasm scream up on me. It was time to knot him. I had to put it in him before I came, too. Gripping his hips, I sat back and watched as I thrust hard and shoved my knot into his ass. Zeke yelled as his hole stretched so wide, and seeing that had me coming while locked inside him. It was the most incredible

sensation of my life, and I threw back my head and howled at the ceiling.

Both of us were trembling and since we couldn't separate until my knot deflated, I hugged him to me and tipped us over onto our sides. That didn't feel close enough, though, so I rolled onto my back with him stretched out on top of me. Zeke spread his legs and ground back on my dick for a moment, moaning so deliciously. I reached down and filled my hand with his cock and balls, taking possession. He was mine now. I could feel my essence merging with him. He was definitely my mate, claimed and marked.

"This is insane," Zeke whispered as he brought my other hand up to inspect it. "I feel like I'm dreaming, but I know I'm not."

"Understandable. We work hard to keep our secrets."

"Why though? Is it a fear of government experimentation or something like that?" He pressed his palm to mine, and I discovered that my fingers were two knuckles longer than his before my claws started.

"Fear of the unknown, really. What would the governments of the world do if they knew about us? What would the general public do? We're not bulletproof."

"And silver bullets?"

"They'd hurt me the same as you."

I could feel my knot relaxing inside him. I wanted to revive it, stay locked with him, but that was pure selfishness. If he'd let me do this once, I had to believe he'd let me do it again sometime. I could leave his body without leaving him. Possessive and mildly paranoid? Oof, I was a catch.

“Hey,” he said, “you said lycan earlier. Are you not a werewolf?”

“Oh, no, they’re different. Lycanthropy is sometimes used as an umbrella term with werewolf under it, but lycan and werewolf are different. The main point is that lycans keep their human minds when we shift. Werewolves lose their humanity and are overtaken by the wolf mind.”

“Fight, fuck, kill.”

I huffed a laugh at his succinctness. “Pretty much, yeah. I might have those urges, but they don’t control me. Another difference is that I have this form and that of a big black wolf.”

“Like a wolf-wolf? You could be mistaken for a regular one?”

I shrugged. “That’s the goal of that form. I’m pretty sure it works most of the time.”

Our bodies separated all on their own, and I had to hold back a mournful whine. Zeke rolled off of me to face me on the bed, and I shifted into my human form. I watched his gaze track all over me as the shift happened, a sparkle to his eyes and a little grin on his lips.

“That’s amazing,” he said as he combed my hair back. “I’m glad it’s not like in the movies where your bones break and all that painful-looking stuff.” He frowned. “Does it hurt?”

“Not really. I feel like I ran a marathon or something, though.”

He sat up on his elbow. “Like achy muscles?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you’re in luck,” he said with a big smile. “I’m excellent at giving massages.”

He had me roll onto my stomach, and then he straddled my ass and leaned over me. That alone put me in a happy place, but then he started massaging my shoulders. I couldn’t stop moaning as he worked out knots I hadn’t realized were there, his hands firm and strong. He went down my arms to my hands, and then down my back to my hips. There was a move he did on my lower back that actually made it pop.

His hands on my ass had me moaning over and over, and I couldn’t make it stop even when he chuckled at me. He went down my thighs and dug his thumbs into my calves. When he massaged the soles of my feet, I had to bite the pillow to keep from whining. And I’m pretty sure I whined anyway.

The way he massaged my front after he had me roll over was gentler. Like a cooldown after the workout he’d given the back of me. Longer strokes and a softer touch that turned my muscles to jelly. The bliss of an orgasm with this man was a close second to what he’d just done for me.

“How do you feel now?” he asked as he sat beside me.

“I...might be...a little dead.”

Zeke laughed and patted my chest. “You could try a sauna or hot tub, too. If shifting like that is so hard on your body, definitely treat it like an intense workout.”

I blinked up at the ceiling as I thought about that. We didn’t shift often because there just wasn’t any reason to do it. But when the moon required it of us, we spent the next day dragging like we were all hungover. Everything ached, we were starving, and all any of us wanted to do was sleep. Obviously, we’d eat and take meds for the pain, but we had lives that still needed living so we couldn’t usually disappear for a day to recover.

But one massage and I felt like a person again. I felt good. Should we have been treating shifting like an intense workout this whole time? My god, we were idiots.

I sat up and pulled Zeke into a kiss. “You’re brilliant.”

He chuckled and looped his arms around me. “Happy to help my furry friend.”

“Mate,” I automatically corrected.

Zeke’s mirth faded and he went very still. “What?”

Oh, damn. We’d been doing so well.

Chapter ten

Zeke

I couldn't believe what Sacha had just said, and so offhandedly, too. I backed out of his arms so I could see his face more easily. "Are you saying I'm your mate? Like that's a thing? Fated mates is a real...thing?"

He swallowed so forcefully that I could hear his throat click. His cheeks were flushed and eyes wide as he said, "It's... Yeah, fated mates are real. I knew who you were the moment I...saw you."

"Smelled me, you mean?" My temper flared. "That fucking love potion."

I got up from the bed and winced for a second as my ass complained. Clearly, I hadn't paid much attention to the aftereffects of getting knotted by a were—er, a lycan. Not only did Sacha have a bigger dick in his wolf-man form, but that knot was a beast all on its own.

"Love potion?" he asked.

I nodded on my way into the bathroom to freshen up because guess who'd forgotten all about condoms in the face of getting fucked by a supernatural creature. "Tell me it's okay that we didn't use a condom."

"Oh, it's fine. I'm not human. We have our own diseases."

I poked my head out to glare at him.

“That you can’t catch,” he amended quickly. “I can’t get yours, and you can’t get mine. We’re good.”

I returned to cleaning myself, glad at least that part of the fiction was accurate. And now I had to wonder if anyone writing those books I loved reading knew the truth. Who was just writing the fun smutty books and who actually knew? It couldn’t possibly be all of them. Could it?

“Uh, Zeke?”

“Yeah?”

“What did you mean by love potion?”

I rolled my eyes at myself in the mirror as I washed my hands. “That magic shop owner guy—the one who looks like Johnny Depp on a goth bender—he gave it to me as a gift. I think I left it on the desk by the windows.”

I came out of the bathroom to find Sacha holding the vial with his finger on the pump. “Don’t!” I hollered with a hand out to stop him as I rushed across the room.

“I think it’s empty,” he said and angled the bottle toward me. “I can’t smell anything.”

“What?” I took the bottle and twisted the top off. It was entirely gone. “It was full. And it stunk.”

“Maybe it wasn’t full?”

“No, it was. Everyone wanted to try some after—” I set the bottle down and put my hands on my hips. “That’s the whole reason you kissed the hell out of me in the lobby. We’re not fated mates. It was just a trick of this love potion.”

Sacha frowned hard and picked up the bottle. He pressed the opening directly to one nostril and inhaled a deep breath. Shaking his head, he shifted into his wolf-man form and sniffed again. “Nothing,” he said in his growly lycan voice. “I smell absolutely nothing.”

“No.” I cleared my throat because that came out whiny. “It was like sweaty man, dirt, and pine needles. Everyone could—” I stopped myself, just now remembering that Fabian had insisted he couldn’t smell anything.

“Maybe it evaporated?” Sacha shifted back to his human form and examined the pump top. “No, it should still leave a scent behind.”

“So you didn’t smell it that day? That’s not why you kissed me?”

He gave me a soft little smile. “I smelled you . And then all I could think about was claiming you.”

“Do I smell like dirt and pine?”

I let him get close and sniff against my jaw. “You smell like rum, sunblock, and salty air. A day at the beach with a good cocktail.”

What the... To me, I smelled like my hair product and deodorant, which were both woody scents. How could he scent something completely different?

And then it occurred to me to sniff him. When I did— “Oh, fuck me,” I said on a moan.

“What?”

“You smell like fresh dirt, pine, and a sort of male musk.” I leaned my elbow on his shoulder and covered my face. “The love potion smelled like you . To me. And only to me.”

Sacha pulled me closer, chest to chest, and looped his arms around my waist. “It sounds to me like maybe the shop owner was trying to make sure you were as primed for me as I was for you.” He kissed my cheek. “Or do you always tongue-fuck a guy with your first kiss?”

I snorted a laugh and rested my forehead on his shoulder. “Oh, shut up. You would’ve banged me right there if I hadn’t stopped you.”

“Yep,” he said without a lick of remorse.

I pulled away just enough to look in his eyes. “So the love potion just got us together faster? We’re still...fated?”

He petted up and down my back. “Yeah, we are. I can feel the bond between us growing stronger every time we’re together.” He dipped his head and sighed. “I should’ve told you before knotting you because that was a big deal. You’re... Zeke, you’re mine .” Even without his wolf suit on, he kind of growled that last word.

I wasn’t sure what to say. We hadn’t even been dating, in my opinion, but here we were married. Because I knew that was what being mates meant and wolves mated for life. Even if my feelings weren’t as strong because I was only human, he was already in this until death did we part.

A sudden forceful knock on the door made me yelp and flinch. “Hell,” I grouched, “I think I might be scheduled for some kind of wedding thing this morning.”

Sacha let me go and reached for his boxers. “It’s okay. We can talk later.”

Yeah, maybe a break would be good, so I could sort out my head.

I grabbed a pillow from the bed and held it in front of me. I opened the door only wide enough to see half of me, and found Fabian in the hallway.

Hands on his hips and dressed for being outside, he looked me over with a frown. “Ezequiel, why aren’t you ready?”

“Uh...” I could hear rustling behind me and cleared my throat to try and cover it up. “I forgot to set an alarm. What, um, time is it?”

“It’s time to move your ass, that’s what time it is.” He crossed his arms over his lean chest. “We’re supposed to be doing the scavenger hunt right now. It’s for things to put in my bouquet.”

I blinked at him a few times. A scavenger hunt to make his bouquet? That seemed way too unplanned and risky for someone who wanted perfection.

“Ezequiel, get ready!” he said as he stomped his foot.

“Jesus, okay!”

And I made the mistake of stepping back and letting the door open wider. I knew the moment Fabian saw Sacha because I’d never seen his eyes open quite that wide before. He gasped in scandalized awe and then the round O of his open mouth transformed into a cheeky grin.

“Oh, I see,” he purred.

I cringed, but Sacha chuckled behind me. I felt Sacha's warm hand on my shoulder before he said, "Do you mind if we have a few minutes to say goodbye?"

Fabian shook his head. "Oh, no, cupcake. You tell papi here that you'll see him later ."

There was just enough malice in his tone to make me cover my eyes and groan.

But Sacha took it in stride and kissed my cheek. "I absolutely meant goodbye for now, not forever."

I gasped and grabbed the doorframe when Sacha goosed me. "Oh, my god ."

"How about I walk you down to breakfast?" Sacha asked, but he wasn't talking to me.

"No, wait!" I tried to grab him, horrified by the idea of the two of them alone together, but he dodged me.

"That would be wonderful," Fabian cooed and looped his arm through Sacha's. "Tell me you had my dear Ezequiel screaming your name last night and we'll be the very best of friends."

I closed the door. "Shit, shit, shit."

It wasn't that I didn't want my family and friends to know or get to like Sacha, but if the two of them were going to share embarrassing stories, I wanted to be there to shove mini muffins in their mouths to shut them up as quickly as possible.

I raced around the room getting dressed and cursing my ass every time it reminded me of why I had spent the last twelve hours screaming Sacha's name.

By the time I made it down to the restaurant, Sacha was nowhere to be seen and Fabian was lounging in his chair like the queen he was and smirking at me. “Well, well, well,” he said, “you have been a very busy boy.”

I dropped into the chair beside him with a groan. “Please don’t tease. This is all so...complicated.”

“Mmm, yes. He’s absolutely smitten with you.”

Because he thought I was his fated mate, the one man destined to be his everything. Fuck me, that was a daunting thing to be for someone.

“Oh, quit your frowning,” Fabian snapped. “Jesus, you’re such a—”

“Excuse me! There are a lot of things to consider here, thank you very much.”

“Like what?”

I stared at him. How could he not guess on his own? “How about the fact that I’m leaving at the end of the week because I live on the other side of the country?”

Fabian shrugged. “Do you, though?”

Well, fuck, he had me there.

“Why not stay here,” he went on, “and see what it’s like? He’ll let you live with him—I know that without even asking. Let him be your sugar daddy for a while, or get a job at one of the bars. You know you’ll be running the place within a week.” He sat up and leaned toward me. “This is your chance to reinvent yourself. Why not explore the possibilities right here?”

I blinked at him. His earnest encouragement was entirely unexpected. I'd thought I would be coming down here to take a ribbing for deflowering a virgin and going M.I.A. for, like, twenty-four hours. Instead—and without even knowing all the details—my cousin was very seriously urging me to change my entire life. I didn't know what to think.

Fabian patted the back of my hand and stood up. "Here," he said and handed me a spiral-bound notepad with an attached pen. "Go find things and think about your life. This is the only time you get to be all in your head, though, so get it done."

He tried to poke my forehead, but I whacked his hand and made him run off, giggling like a maniac. God, he was such a little shit. Making me contemplate my life while... I opened the notepad and saw a list of items to find for the scavenger hunt. Making me contemplate my life while finding branches, leaves, pinecones, and other nature bits, for fuck's sake. Yep, that would have me knee-deep in my thoughts in no time.

I went over to the buffet tables to see if there was some kind of portable breakfast something to take with me while I went walkabout in the Colorado forest.

Chapter eleven

Zeke

So what did I know? I knew that the love potion had apparently been to get me on board with becoming someone's fated mate. I knew The Magic Shop owner was somehow involved with or at least very aware of the lycan population around him. I knew Sacha was really fucking wonderful.

But this couldn't possibly be that easy. Boom, you're my mate, let's move in together, yay! That felt like I'd be taking advantage of Sacha's instincts, something he had zero control over. I had the control here. At the end of the week, I could absolutely fly away home and not look back. I'd miss him and mourn that wolfy cock, but I wasn't feeling the effects of being bound to him. I wasn't—

No, goddamnit it, I did like him. A lot. He was sweet and smart and trying very hard to help his family in every way he could. A family that just might be a pack, come to think of it. But all of his qualities combined with how amazing we were in bed...

I was thinking myself in circles while trying to find a pinecone. It was harder than it seemed since they got squishy and gross if they were on the ground long enough. I was sure absolutely none of us would bring Fabian anything less than perfection, so the hunt was ongoing. They'd probably have to send out Search and Rescue for at least one of us for being too afraid to come back empty-handed.

Come to think of it, I was so far off the path I'd been following that I couldn't even see it anymore. That was bad. I'd been going up the hill, hadn't I? Yes, because I'd

thought higher would be drier. Latching onto that logic, I carefully made my way down through fallen leaves, looking for the packed dirt trail that zigzagged up the hill. If nothing else, I'd blaze my own path to the bottom and figure out where I was when I could see buildings again.

"Well, well. Hello there."

I flinched at the sound of a man's voice and immediately slipped on the leaves, going into a squat. I crumpled the scavenger hunt list in one fist and grabbed the sapling beside me with my other hand to keep from falling over backward.

The owner of the voice stepped into view in front of me and held out his hand. He was about my age and rugged in a backwoods sort of way with flannel and denim covering a thickly-muscled body. Lumberjacks and mountain men came to mind as I stared up into his big brown eyes. I took his hand and let him pull me up.

"Sorry about that," he said with a grin. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's alright." I brushed off my hands and the seat of my pants. "I wasn't expecting to find other people up here."

And now I didn't want to confess to be doing a scavenger hunt like a twelve-year-old, so I stuffed the list in my pocket.

"I'm Rand." He held out his hand again.

I shook it. "Zeke."

But he didn't let go of my hand and leaned in. "Zeke, you smell like sex and wolf."

I tugged my hand away from him and bumped into the tree behind me. My first

instinct was to deny everything he'd just said. But then I realized that if he could scent that, he had to be someone who knew about Sacha and his people. Maybe Rand was one of them, too.

I nodded. "Do you know Sacha?"

"Who?"

Well, that was less okay. And when Rand laced our fingers together and leaned into me, literally pressing me back against the tree and caging me in with his body, I realized he wasn't interpreting the scents on me as meaning I was off-limits.

"Been a long time," Rand purred, "since I've had a nice piece of ass. What do you say—"

I shook his fingers free of mine. "No. Fuck, no," I insisted as I pushed at his shoulders. I'd have had an easier time moving the sapling behind me.

Suddenly, a mass of black fur slammed into Rand. I was spun around and lost my footing completely, crashing sideways into the forest floor. Before I could turn and see them, I heard the sounds of an angry dog growling and a pissed off cat yowling. A cat?

Yep, there was my great big wolf-man tearing into an equally sized... Cougar-man? They moved so fast as they tore into each other that I couldn't hardly track who was doing what. Their noises seemed to echo off the hills, and had me breaking out in a cold sweat as I scrambled to get out of their way. I yelped when someone's blood splattered across my jeans.

As quickly as it had started, the fight ended. Rand suddenly shifted into an actual cougar and bolted up the hill and out of sight. Sacha stood there in his wolf-man form

with blood dripping from his claws, panting and watching Rand flee. I could see the cuts on Sacha's neck and sides, but I hesitated to approach him yet. What if he was still in some kind of animal instinct mode and didn't know it was me?

But then he whined piteously and shifted into his wolf form before then shifting into his human one. The blood was gone, no cuts on his clothes that had reappeared, but he braced himself on a tree and groaned. I rushed to his side.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I moved his clothes aside to look. "Tell me how I can help you."

"I'm okay." But he sounded out of breath and exhausted.

I remembered how he'd said shifting for long enough could feel like he'd run a marathon, so I tucked myself under his arm and braced him up. "Come on, let's go back to the resort." I took a step, but he held me back.

"It's this way," he chuckled weakly as he pointed in the opposite direction. "I knew you were lost."

His way didn't look any different than my way. "So you were coming to save me from myself before you realized you had to save me from some horny cat-man thing?"

Sacha actually growled. "I'll kill him for touching you."

I believed him and, lordy, the things that did to me. Becoming aroused was so not the thing to do in this moment, but Sacha must've noticed because he laughed again and turned into my arms to nuzzle against my cheek.

"You're amazing," he whispered. "You didn't panic. You didn't run."

“I wasn’t going to just leave you while you were fighting.”

Sacha pressed his thigh between my legs. “And now you’re getting hard for me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, shut up. Let’s just get to...wherever it is that you go when you need to recover from kicking wild kitty ass.”

He snorted and leaned back enough to look me in the eyes. “I do need to talk to my mother about this since that guy wasn’t—”

“Rand.”

“—supposed— What?”

“He said his name was Rand.” I shrugged. “It might be helpful information.”

“Okay, sure. Rand and anyone else like him shouldn’t be anywhere near here since these are our pack lands.” He winced and curled over like maybe his stomach hurt. “Hold on a sec.”

In the blink of an eye, Sacha was in his wolf form. I took a step back for whatever he needed to do, but all he did was shake himself like a dog. A moment later, and he was standing again beside me as a man.

“What was that for?” I asked him.

“We heal ourselves every time we shift, especially into our full animal form.”

“Are you okay now?” I wanted to inspect every inch of him, but held myself back.

Sacha nodded, still looking rundown and exhausted.

I couldn't resist asking him, "How do you do that and keep your clothes?"

"Why don't I burst out of them like in certain movies?" He smirked at me. "Everything I'm wearing is a natural element, like cotton, metal, or rubber, so it can shift with me."

I thought about that for a second. Obviously, it was convenient and cost-effective so they didn't destroy clothes on a regular basis or anything. But I was also confused. "What would be an unnatural element that wouldn't shift with you?"

He shrugged. "I really don't know. I've always dressed like this, so it's never come up."

"What if you had a knee replacement or something like that?"

"Aren't those metal?"

"And ceramic maybe?"

Before I could comment on that, he winced again and said, "Babe, I really need to sit down for a while."

"Oh! Yeah, of course." I ducked under his arm and started walking us in the direction he'd indicated earlier. "How about you get in the pool when we get back? That'll take the pressure off of your joints. And I can get you something to eat with lots of carbs and protein to help your muscles recover."

"I usually just sleep."

"But that's terrible for recovering from a marathon! Of course you can rest, but you need to give your body back the fuel it just burned, too."

Sacha slipped, and I grabbed the waist of his jeans to keep him on his feet. For a second, I considered getting him on my back or in a fireman's carry, but that seemed ill advised while going down a leaf-strewn hill. I kept hold of his jeans instead.

"Are you a marathon runner?" he asked.

"Oh, uh, no. My ex was a runner. He'd do a marathon every now and then for charity." Would there ever come a time when Anthony wouldn't be relevant? I was glad I knew about these things for Sacha's sake, but hated why I knew any of it.

"Well, his loss is my gain," Sacha said before he kissed my cheek. "Most of the time, we spend a couple days after the full moon recovering from being forced to stay shifted all night. Some sleep during the shift, but it doesn't seem to help at all. Now you've got me wondering if we should be eating and working out or something beforehand like it really is about to be race day. And then the same afterward."

"I'm guessing right now is similar since you just expended so much energy in the fight?"

"Yeah," he said with a groan. "Very yeah."

"Then let's experiment and see if the post-care part helps."

"I'm game."

We found the last big curve of the path that led us down into a garden behind the resort, where I'd first started my scavenger hunt. I remembered how he'd said he couldn't have people knowing about us, so I made to disentangle us, but Sacha stopped me and caught my hand. I didn't comment and just held on. If something had changed for him, then I wasn't going to ruin the moment by reminding him of how he was meant to hide.

The pool was our first stop. Sacha said something to the attendant in the pool house beside the outdoor pool, and they got him a pair of swim trunks to change into. While he did that, I went to the restaurant to see about getting something for him to eat.

As I looked around at the people working in the resort, I had to wonder how many of them were lycans. Like, was the entire pack in the business? I supposed that made sense, to have everyone working at the same place where it would seem normal for a big group of people to be together all the time.

“Table for one?” the hostess asked me.

“No, actually, can I get something to go?”

“Of course.” She handed me a single-sheet menu.

Looking over the options, I thought maybe the chicken parmesan might be good for Sacha. Lots of pasta and a big chicken breast covered the carbs and protein that memory said was important. I placed my order and stood near the windows waiting for it.

I could see Sacha come out of the pool house and walk over to the pool like an old man whose arthritis was acting up. He went down the steps so slowly, but then lay on his back and let the water hold him up. Hopefully, that would help him feel better. I had to wonder if Rand had prepped for his walk in the woods, or was he out there moaning and hobbling around, too? I’d have to remember to ask Sacha why Rand might have been out there if he wasn’t supposed to be.

Armed with plastic silverware and a container of chicken parm in a bag, I went out to the pool. The lifeguard stopped me.

“There’s no food allowed around the pool,” he said, “but you can eat over there on

the patio.”

Taking a chance that it might help, I pointed at Sacha. “This is actually for him.”

“Oh. Okay.” He gestured for me to go ahead.

I went in and set everything down on the edge of the pool, figuring it would be best if he didn’t get out to eat. I sat on a lounge chair and waited for Sacha to open his eyes. Would he scent my return? The wind shifted and, sure enough, he looked at me. I smiled and waved him over.

I opened everything for him while he braced himself on the edge of the pool. There was no one else out there, which I figured was a good thing.

“Chicken parm?” he asked incredulously.

“Carbs and protein.” I handed him the fork and knife. “Eat up.”

He was a little slow to start, but I could tell when his hunger kicked in because he started shoving swirled forkfuls of pasta into his mouth. He stopped cutting the chicken, too, and just stabbed it to bite chunks off. Covering my mouth to keep from laughing, I watched him devour the food and felt all kinds of pleased that I’d been right. Maybe the tall tales about werewolves eating everything in sight were because they didn’t properly prepare for their shifts.

Suddenly, the tarot reading The Magic Shop owner had given me came to mind. He’d said something about secrets being revealed and how I’d have a role to play in the future. He’d said I would calm the beast. Holy shit, he’d been right! That man definitely knew what was going on around here.

But now I wondered if my role was what I’d just done for Sacha. How I’d given him

important information that he could share with the rest of his pack to make their lives a little easier. Did that mean my part was done? As Sacha smiled up at me, looking satisfied and rosy-cheeked again, I realized I didn't want to be finished. I wanted to see what else I could do.

I wanted to stay.

Chapter twelve

Sacha

I felt...different. Maybe it was because of floating in the heated water or the food I hadn't realized I was ravenous for. But maybe it wasn't just that. I'd recovered a lot faster than ever before from a hard shift like that, but there was something more to this feeling inside me. Like I was...stronger. A take on the world and be invincible sort of strength. I wanted to shift and howl and make sure the whole pack knew who I was.

I tamped it all down.

Being newly mated might be the reason. Saving my mate from an interloper could, too. Zeke was mine, and I'd defended my claim to him. Logically, that sounded so bad, but my instincts were humming with possessiveness. That Zeke didn't seem to mind definitely wasn't making the wolf stop.

It wasn't a great frame of mind to be in when I needed to talk to my mother, though. She needed to know that the cats encroaching on our territory weren't just random sightings from a distance anymore. One of them had walked right up to my mate—stalked him, even—and propositioned him. Would that cat have done anything more if I hadn't found them when I had? A tremble lit through me as I got dressed in the pool house.

That feeling of power was also making me ignore the fact that my mother wanted me to hide my male mate from the rest of the pack. For one, that cat's crimes were mate-

related, so Zeke's relationship to me couldn't remain a secret. But I also really needed everyone to know I was mated and accepted. I wasn't just the family's workhorse—I was loved.

Well, Zeke might not love me yet, but that he was sticking around said a lot about what he already felt for me.

When I came out of the pool house, Zeke was there waiting. "Give me your number so we can connect later. I'm being nosy, I know, but I really want to know how it goes with your mother."

"Oh!" I said as I realized something. "That doesn't shift with me."

He blinked a few times. "What?"

"My phone doesn't disappear like my clothes do. If I'd had it in my pocket, it would've just hit the ground when I shifted." And I hadn't been carrying it around with me for the past few weeks, ever since the first cat sighting.

"Huh," Zeke said, and I swore I could see him thinking. "That's really interesting since I thought phones were metal and glass and stuff like that. Maybe it's the battery? I suppose it's better that the whole phone sticks around instead of just the battery, though."

"That would get expensive fast." It was also really cute how his mind worked.

Zeke looked at his phone. "Okay, well, I have to get fitted for my suit at a boutique around here somewhere this afternoon, but maybe we can meet for lunch? Are you going to see your mother now?"

"Come with me."

He looked as surprised as I felt. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, even though I really wasn’t that sure. “I want her to meet you. Plus, you’re a witness, and she needs to hear what you know.”

He nodded back and gulped as he looked at the resort entrance. I reached over and took his hand, trying to convey the solidarity we both probably needed to feel. Honestly, I knew I was dragging him into my world, but at least he wasn’t kicking and screaming.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s go.”

I led the way through the resort to the staff only sections and up to Mother’s office. The door was open at the end of the hallway, and I could hear a lot of voices. I hated to interrupt, but it was that important, so I kept walking right into the room.

Those seated around the room took one look at me and stood up. I could scent their unease and realized they were reacting to mine. Taking a few deep breaths, I tried to calm myself.

From across the room, Titus asked, “What’s happened?”

I had a choice to make, and quickly. I could either ask for the room and tell Mother alone, let her take it to the rest of them, or I could come out to the entire council right here and now. I glanced at her, finding her face scrunched up as she surveyed Zeke from head to toe and back again. She could guess who he was and her disgust was clear.

I made my decision.

“My mate,” I said, “was just assaulted by one of the cats not a hundred yards from

our front door.”

The room erupted with raised voices, and I swore every single one of them was saying something about how Mother should’ve done more to combat the cats before now. I wasn’t on the inside, I didn’t know what decisions these people made, but to have this not come as a surprise to any of them was shocking to me.

They’d known the cats were that close? That they’d felt so confident in getting closer? That harassing our mates was possible? I was instantly angry because, hell yes, more should’ve been done long before now. Literally nothing had come down to the rest of the pack except a vague warning that the cats were near and watch out.

“There’s no plan?” I hollered, looking from my mother to Titus and Marius. There were others present who ranked lower than them, but I knew who got things done for the pack. “This is a criminal offense. We would be within our rights to attack.”

Zeke’s hand tightened on mine, but I kept my focus on the others. As a human, he probably wouldn’t agree with our more violent solutions to problems like this, but I would try to explain later.

Titus said, “Your mate isn’t the only one who’s been threatened.”

“And our leader,” Marius said with a sneer, “has repeatedly declined to act.”

I could see Mother bristling and, this time, I wasn’t on her side. While I was sure she had her reasons, I couldn’t advocate for doing nothing.

“Mother, we have to do some thing. The cats will see our failure to fight back as weakness. It’ll only encourage them to continue invading our territory and harassing our members.”

The others piped up with their agreement or shared what they'd suggested, but all I knew was that Mother was getting angrier. Her face flushed and she started to sweat as she gritted her teeth. In that moment, I really saw her as the dictator she was trying to be.

“Don't you see what he's doing?” Mother screeched, pointing at me. “ That's his mate! A human man. And that deviant cat went after our weakest link because of course he would. Sacha is actively helping the cats infiltrate our pack by bringing a pathetic queer—”

“Enough!” I yelled and, oh fuck me, I felt my anger rush out of me like a wave. I gasped as I watched it crash into each and every wolf in the room, sending them stumbling backward. Mother and Zeke looked confused as everyone else went quiet. Gavril gave a whine of fear that stung me. “I'm sorry,” I said breathlessly. “I don't...know...what...”

But I did know. I knew. That was a power only an alpha could wield. Alphas could target a single member or the whole pack and emotionally influence them. I'd let them all feel my anger, and they'd reacted by backing down and cowering.

Was I an alpha?

“Finally,” Titus said. “Marius, assemble the pack.”

Marius actually bowed to me before dashing from the room. It was a dip of his head, but that was something we only did to alphas.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered and gripped Zeke's hand harder.

“Sacha?” Zeke crowded close, cupping my cheek in his other hand. “What's happening? Are you alright?”

Before I could answer, Mother exploded. “Explain yourselves! Immediately!”

Titus stepped between her and I as he said something I absolutely never thought I’d ever hear someone say. “Sacha is the new alpha.”

I was breathing so fast, my heart galloping, but at the same time there was a sort of calm washing over me. Like the confirmation of my sudden new status was a relief even as it scared the hell out of me. Being an alpha had been possible for me, but it hadn’t happened as I’d grown older. It had been normal to assume Gavril would be next, not me. Never me. But the proof was in what I’d just done, influencing everyone with a pulse of power. Only alphas could do that.

“What? That’s impossible.” Mother tried to shove Titus out of her way, but he stood firm. “Move, damn you!”

“I will protect my alpha from any threat,” Titus said with a snarl to his voice. “Even his own mother.”

“Seriously?” Zeke asked with a grin as he stared into my eyes. “Just bam! and you’re the new leader?”

I laughed weakly with him and nodded. “Guess so.”

“That is not how it works!” Mother yelled. “Gavril will be alpha, and until then, I’m in charge.”

“Not anymore,” Titus said.

I couldn’t see Mother around Titus, but I could hear her hitting him as she raged wordlessly. That had to stop. I’d known she was desperate to hold onto her position, but this wasn’t the end of anything. She would still be the alpha’s mother and enjoy

the privileges of that status even though she was human.

I took Zeke's hands and kissed his knuckles, earning a smile and a nod as he stepped back. Walking around Titus, I grabbed Mother's arm before she could hit him again.

"Stop," I said firmly as I let her go. "There's no reason for this. You're not losing anything."

She smacked me. I reeled back, shocked to my core. My mother had never hit me.

"You're just as useless as your father," she hissed at me. "You'll end up just like him, too."

I watched her stomp out of the room, slamming the door behind herself. Gavril screamed for her to come back, but she didn't. She'd left him behind, and she wanted me dead. I couldn't... I didn't know what to think.

Hands touched my back, and I turned to find Zeke. He pulled me into a hug, and I clung to him because he was real and solid and safe.

"It'll be okay," he whispered. "I don't know how yet, but I'm here and I'll help."

I closed my eyes and breathed in my mate's perfect scent, letting it calm and center me.

"We need to tell the pack," Titus said. "Gavril, come with me."

"No! I don't want to die!"

I pulled away from Zeke to stare at my little brother. He was curled up in the corner of the couch and looked sincerely terrified. I went to him, crouching down in front of

him. He tried to scoot away from me.

“Gav, no one is going to hurt you.”

He shook his head. “Mother said they’d steal her power and kill me. That’s what happened. I felt it!”

“Oh, Gavril, no. That’s not true. I’m so sorry.” My heart broke for him. It felt like my fault that our mother had done this to him. Like if I’d spent more time with him, I could’ve known about the lies she was telling him and stopped that. “I promise, Gav, no one’s going to kill you.”

“But she said that’s what wolves do.” He looked less scared and more confused now. “Wolves kill to take power from each other. That’s why she killed our dads.”

Chapter thirteen

Sacha

I held Gavril's hands and swallowed down a sudden wave of nausea. In the calmest voice I could muster, I asked him, "Gav, why would you think Mother killed our fathers?"

He looked me right in the eyes as he said, "She told me. That's how you get to be in charge." His bottom lip trembled and tears built in his eyes. "She said I'd have to kill Uncle Titus and Uncle Marius someday. She said I'd have to kill you, too," he said as his tears fell and he started sobbing. "I don't want to kill anybody!"

"You don't have to." I picked him up, wrapping my arms around him and holding tight as he cried on my shoulder. "You'll never have to."

Rage was building inside me, right beside the horror and sadness.

How dare she drill into this innocent child that he'd someday have to kill his family in order to lead them? He was six years old!

Yes, fine, others farther back in our line had been killed for the same reason, but that was in the distant past. Nowadays, we voted out a leader who harmed the pack. We hadn't killed anyone for over a hundred years! The worst thing that we'd done since we landed in this country was that we'd split the pack upon arrival, some staying there and some coming here.

I didn't want to think about whether Mother had murdered Gavril's father or mine. I didn't want to know if it was possible that she'd somehow contributed to what had been deemed accidents. Both our own investigation and that done by the human police had said both deaths were accidental. Could we have been wrong? All of us? Mother could scheme and plot for sure, but to the point of pulling off two perfect murders? I didn't want to believe it.

"Alpha," Titus said.

I turned to face him with a quiet Gavril still cradled in my arms, only realizing Titus meant me when I saw him. I shook my head. "No. Not right now. I can't—"

"You can and you will. This is exactly the right time to speak to the pack."

"Jesus, Titus, you can't be serious. I might be alpha—"

"You are alpha."

"—and my mother might be a murderer! I can't even begin to—"

Titus stepped closer to me, his expression earnest and imploring. "The pack needs to know both of these things and right now. You need to have Elise brought to you for questioning. You need guards patrolling the forest. Only the alpha can order these things to happen."

Fuck. He wasn't wrong. I'd come into this room wanting Mother to do something about the cats and what they'd done to—

"Zeke!" I spun around, desperately looking for him.

"Here. I'm here." He gave me a soft smile as he wove through the others to stand

beside me again. “Don’t worry about me.”

There would probably never be a time when I wouldn’t worry about him.

I patted Gavril’s back. “Hey, Gav,” I said and waited until he sat back to look at me. “I need you to stick with Zeke while I do this, okay? He’s my mate, and I trust him, so you can, too.”

Gavril eyed Zeke a bit suspiciously, and I nearly laughed at the way Zeke was eyeing the kid right back. I had no idea if Zeke was good with children, wanted some, or even liked them at all, but we’d both have to get used to having this one around a lot more. Even if Mother was innocent, I wasn’t going to let her have him back. I’d stick around in Gav’s life and undo everything she’d done to him.

I set Gavril on his feet, and Zeke reached for his hand. They stood awkwardly holding hands, looking at me like everyone else in the room was. I’d never thought I’d be alpha. Never trained for it, learned anything about being one, but I’d been old enough to know my father had been a good one. I’d watched him lead his pack. I was his son and his blood flowed through my veins. I could do this like he had.

Looking Zeke in the eyes, I pointed at the floor beside me. “Right here, okay? The whole time, you’re going to be right here .”

He grinned at me and stole a kiss. “I won’t stand so close that you can feel my dick poking your ass,” he whispered, “but you’ll definitely know I’m there.”

I snorted a laugh mostly because it really didn’t matter that he’d whispered—we wolves had excellent hearing, so the whole room heard every word. But I also left the office with a smile on my face, which helped in ways he might not have even realized.

When the whole pack assembled, we met in the basement of the resort. It had pillars holding the ceiling up, but it was one huge room. Since Mother took over, we'd come here more on moon nights than for anything else. I realized now that Mother's leadership had cut off most of the pack from what was happening, making us rely on gossip passed down from those who had been in the room. I'd only known about the encroaching cats from rumors and scenting them. She should've told us everything.

Had she done it deliberately? Had she isolated us and made us ignorant of what was going on around us on purpose? That was one hell of a power trip she was on, if that was the case.

Marius had gathered everyone as requested because I could hear a lot of people shuffling around on the other side of the basement door. Nervousness rang through me. What if they didn't accept me as alpha? It could happen. Maybe. Or what if I just sucked at this because no one had ever shown me how to be an alpha? Oh, how I wished I'd paid better attention to everything my dad had done.

Titus opened the door and went through, holding it for me, and I realized he had stepped very smoothly into the role of my protector. "Stand for your new alpha," he bellowed to the room.

I saw a lot of confused faces as those sitting in folding chairs scattered around the room slowly got to their feet. Several looked at each other questioningly, and it was clear to me that they weren't sure who Titus meant.

"Show them who you are," he said as I passed him.

Show them... I hadn't meant to broadcast my upset earlier, but I knew I'd been feeling a big emotion and pushed it out of myself as I'd yelled at everyone. So I had to feel something and shove it at them.

I paused in walking down the aisle toward the front of the room, and Zeke put his hand on my back as though he'd had to stop himself from bumping into me. That was the feeling—being touched by my mate. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as I savored the sensation of his warm hand and the heat radiating from his body.

I already loved him.

That was what I released to the rest of the room, to my pack members. In my mind's eye, the love I felt rolled off of me like a gauzy pink wave that flowed over, around, and through everyone else.

I opened my eyes and started walking again when I heard gasps and awed whispers around me. Being an alpha wasn't an elected position, though we could put someone in charge if there was no alpha. Being an alpha was as magical as the fact that we could shift into other forms. It was a fated phenomenon that struck a select few, had nothing to do with lineage sometimes, and was believed to be right every time. Egos had gotten in the way of that acceptance occasionally, but I understood now that this wasn't something I could fight or deny. I was the alpha.

Everyone who wanted to stand did so around the edges of the room, while the rest sat on the floor or in chairs down the center. I walked all the way to the front and turned to face them, thirty lycans, fourteen humans, and sixteen children still too young to shift. This was my pack.

I took a deep breath, checked that Zeke was where I'd asked him to be—he stepped closer, grinning—and then focused on the faces staring expectantly at me. “I came into my powers less than twenty minutes ago,” I said, “so please bear with me. We have a lot to cover.”

I decided to start with the worst of it first. “I need those of you who investigated the deaths of our former alphas to revisit your work with a new suspect in mind: Elise

Zizian Lupescu. She confessed to Gavril that she killed Alek and Cosmin.”

Their horror was immediate and loud. Part of me hated to make that information public, but it was necessary. As was asking them to find her. “I need trackers to find her and bring her in for questioning.”

Three men stood away from the walls, bowed when I looked at them, and then left the room. They were men I’d known my whole life, who I knew were excellent trackers, and still a little bit of me feared what they’d do when they found her. I was going to have to become as strong as steel to deal with her.

“You’re probably already aware that we have cat shifters encroaching on our lands. Earlier, one of them aggressively propositioned my...mate.” I swallowed hard after saying that, suddenly worried that Mother’s wouldn’t be the only bad opinion about my sexuality.

A few people growled and bared their teeth. This was a safe place to let our animalistic characteristics out, but which part of what I’d said had upset them? I glanced at Titus only to find him as unreadable as always. I pushed on.

“I have a theory that if they’re willing to approach our human mates, they may be gearing up for more aggressive moves on all of us.”

“A war?” Anatolle, Titus’s teenage son, asked from nearby, shock all over his face. “You think we’re going to have to fight them over territory?”

I could hear others murmuring their surprise and despair, while several wondered aloud why this was the first they’d heard anything about the issue.

“Yes, I think it’s possible.”

As several people began boasting that we'd beat all comers and others expressed worry over the fact that so many of us had never been in a conflict, I realized they weren't upset about me and Zeke. Maybe someone was, maybe several were, but the focus was on everyone's safety instead. I couldn't resist sending out a wave of peaceful gratitude to all of them that had the effect of quieting them as they took it in.

"What about the moon tonight?" someone hollered out from the back. "Do you think they'll attack then?"

Well, I hadn't thought about that, but damn, it made sense to get us when we were at our weakest. That wouldn't be while we were stuck in wolf form during the night, but in the morning after the moon released us.

"The moon?" Zeke said just behind me. "Like a full moon?"

I turned so I could see him. "Exactly like. Eight to ten hours stuck in wolf form. Still think treating it like running a marathon will help us?"

"Fuck yes," he said with a smile. "Carb load, light exercise, plenty of rest. My money's on you feeling better than you've ever felt once it's over."

I liked his confidence. Turning back to the pack, I said, "Zeke has a theory that if we treat prolonged shifts like running a marathon, we'll come out the other side much better. So we're going to need enough food—"

"Spaghetti," Zeke offered.

"So we're going to need enough spaghetti," I amended, "to stuff ourselves with before the shift hits. We'll spend time in the hills together, and then we'll sleep here. Bring a swimsuit for the morning because we'll spend time in the pool as well."

I watched them all absorb this information and was pleased to see them sorting things out between them. We had human pack members—mates mostly—who helped us during the moon nights by providing food and anything else we needed. Now they were coming together and talking, so I had a feeling we would have enough spaghetti to feed an army or two by lunchtime.

Speaking of an army... “I’d like to have volunteers to patrol our territory. Observe and report only. I need resort security to stay here unless you’re off today. Let’s make use of all those radios we have. And if any guests ask, let them know we’ve spotted a cougar in the area and are being extra vigilant.”

Several people raised a hand, and I was glad to see Titus wave them to him. He was taking that role of protection seriously, and I didn’t mind that he was handling all aspects of it on his own. I might remember the pack having done things like this in the past, but he’d lived through those times and knew what to do in detail.

And goddamn, I was so proud of my pack right then! This was how it was supposed to work. Someone might be in charge, but we were all in this together. We were supposed to take care of each other. They had my back, and I had theirs. The whole one for all and all for one thing was exactly what a pack should be.

That my mother had become a dictator was almost as offensive to me as the fact that she might’ve murdered my father.

“Thanks, everybody,” I said in lieu of dismissing them, my mind still stuck on how I’d never tried to do anything about Mother’s rule before now. I’d let her convince me that I had nothing to offer, not even a voice. What an idiot I’d been.

“This is so cool,” Zeke whispered as he leaned into me from behind. “I mean, I’m sorry, but I’m going to fan-boy for a while here because this is so cool .”

I chuckled at him and brought him around in front of me. “Squeeing is way better than screaming, so I’ll take it.”

He waggled his eyebrows at me. “Oh, the screaming comes later, Mister Alpha Wolf.”

I blushed to the roots of my hair. “There’s a six year old standing beside us.”

Zeke winced and closed his eyes for a second. He let me go and crouched down in front of Gavril. “Hey, how about you help me get some stuff ready for tonight? We’ll need to go shopping especially.”

For the first time in a while, Gavril smiled. “I like shopping. Can we get toys?”

“Oh, we can definitely get some toys,” Zeke said as he winked up at me.

I squinted at him as he took Gav’s hand and led him from the room. Definitely get some toys? Like sex toys? No, not with a kid. He could buy kid toys, sure, but why the wink then?

Oh, shit.

“Zeke! Don’t you dare buy dog toys,” I hollered as I ran after him. “I mean it!”

Chapter fourteen

Zeke

Bags in hand from the nearest big box store where I now had an introductory membership, Gavril and I walked into the hotel only for me to stop short at the sight of Fabian. He stood in the middle of the lobby with his arms crossed, leaning back so he had a hip cocked out, and tapping his foot.

I was about to get a world-class lecture.

But as I walked toward him, Fabian clued into the fact that Gavril was with me. Fabian stopped scowling, uncrossed his arms, and stood up straight. He waved a hand in Gavril's direction and said with clear confusion, "You have a son now?"

I kind of did, didn't I? I looked down at Gavril gazing up at me and, like it had a hundred times already, he smiled, and I forgot my worries and doubts.

"Fabian, this is Sacha's little brother, Gavril. Gav, this is my cousin Fabian. He's getting married..." I paused to think about what day it actually was and felt my heart skip a beat in horror.

"Tomorrow," Fabian said with a little venom in his tone.

"Oh, fuh— Uh, fudge knuckles. Fabian, I'm so—"

"Fudge knuckles?" he asked with a curled lip, like ew.

I glanced at Gavril watching us like a tennis match. “He’s six.”

“Right. Yes, well, you’ve definitely been a fudgy fudge-knuckler, that’s for sure. While I’m very glad you’ve found someone to fudge with, you’ve completely abandoned me, and it’s making me very...annoyed,” he said through gritted teeth.

Gavril set his bags down and literally retrieved the half-eaten bag of popcorn he’d stashed in one of them. He looked back up at us and popped several kernels into his mouth.

I think I fell a little bit in love with the kid right then.

Fabian cleared his throat and seemed to be trying his best not to smile, too. Mentally, I thanked Gavril for taking the wind right out of Fabian sails.

“Seriously, Ezequiel, what’s going on?” He crossed his arms again, but there was a lot less heat in him this time. “Because I feel like you got married and had a baby in the past few days, and that’s not what I had suggested you do on your vacation.”

“You’re on vacation?” Gavril asked around his mouthful of popcorn.

“I am, yeah.”

Gavril’s eyebrows shot up and he nodded behind me. “Does he know you’re not staying?”

I knew who he meant before I turned to see Sacha stalking toward me. He was frowning and had a finger pointed at one of the bags. I wasn’t going to apologize for it, and so I just smiled at him.

“You didn’t,” he said, aghast. “Zeke.”

“I had to,” I insisted and tried not to smile too much.

“Ugh,” Fabian groaned. “So what if he bought stuff for your dog? You’ve domesticated a man who swore off love on the plane ride here. Be proud.”

I felt myself blushing as I met Sacha’s eyes and he slowly grinned. I was a complete convert. Sacha had shown me his secrets, let me in, trusted me, and I was hooked. It was entirely possible I’d never leave this place for the rest of my life just so I could be by his side forever. I put a hand over my heart and grinned back at...my mate.

“Oh my gawd ,” Fabian howled. “I might have a wedding planner, but I still need you, Ezequiel. You have duties .” He stomped his foot.

“And I will do them all.” I abandoned my bags to wrap an arm around his slim shoulders. “I promise I will be there for you through all of tonight’s rehearsals and again first thing in the morning, just like my itinerary says. I will wrangle gr—bridesmaids and make sure you feel absolutely serene before you walk down the aisle.”

That was literally what my itinerary said I was supposed to do tonight and then again tomorrow from eight to eleven A.M. No details on how, but I’d give it my all to make up for how absent I’d been.

That I was also supposed to be involved in a wolf pack moon shift so that they were in fighting form come morning when the cats might invade... Well, it would be a challenge, but I’d have to try.

When Fabian looked up at me, I felt the tiny hairs all over my body stand up because I hadn’t seen that level of vulnerability in his eyes since they day his mother passed. I turned him into my chest and hugged him tightly, relaxing just fractionally when he hugged me back. We’d been through a lot together, and I would not let him down.

“Where’s Matt right now?” I asked quietly.

“Running around.”

I nodded since I knew Matt ran for exercise. “Why don’t you grab him when he gets back and go for a swim?”

“He hates swimming. Too much water.”

And that I hadn’t known. “I bet he wouldn’t mind getting in if you were in there with him.” I wagged my eyebrows at him.

Fabian rolled his eyes. “It’s the middle of the day and I’m not an exhibitionist slut like someone I know.” He poked me in the chest.

“Ha-ha,” I deadpanned even as I blushed. “I think you could use a good fudging,” I said pointedly, “so grab your man and get some. Just be together. Relax for a while.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Okay.”

Right then, Matt walked in from outside, freshly sweaty and flushed from his run. A predatory grin spread over Fabian’s face, so I gave him a little push in Matt’s direction. As Fabian stalked his prey, Matt stood still and his blush got brighter and brighter.

Honestly, I should’ve probably been the one to distract and soothe Fabian since he’d come to me for help. We’d been each other’s person for a long time, but now we had new people. His husband-to-be could handle things no problem, I was sure, while my new family clearly needed what I knew to get them through a difficult time. We would both be fine today, and tomorrow, I’d do my best to be fully present for the wedding and reception.

I turned back to Sacha and Gavril, who stood holding all of the bags except one. Laughing, I picked up the dog toys bag and marched ahead of them down to the basement.

Shopping had been good because it had given me a chance to wrap my head around everything that had happened. And maybe the same had worked for Gavril because he'd seemed excited to pick things out and had gotten progressively happier. Regardless of what I knew about kids—which was nothing—his happiness felt like a big success after hearing him sobbing in fear earlier.

I was a firm believer in not bad-mouthing a parent in front of their kid, but damn, I'd spent some time mentally slaughtering that woman for what she'd done. Once they tracked her down, I might just volunteer to help “interrogate” her.

Once we were on the stairs down to the basement, Sacha said, “If you have to go do wedding things, you can. We've been through this hundreds of times.”

“Sure, but not this way. I mean, I'll explain everything I can think of since I will have to walk away a few times tonight, but I'm not going to be able to resist coming back.”

I smelled spaghetti as I went through the door. The chairs were still there and now there were also long tables and place settings waiting for everyone. It was mid-afternoon, but they were getting ready. Which had me wondering... “How do you handle having guests around when all the employees are going to turn into wolves?”

Sacha set his bags down. “Well, we plan for it with everyone's schedules so that the human members of the pack are on duty by sunset. It's over at sunrise, and we have people who'll come on shift then, too. If we all recover as well as we're predicting, then it might mean some of us can work tomorrow instead of being in our beds all day.”

I couldn't help it—I gave him a once-over because my brain thought a day in bed with him sounded like an excellent idea. He smirked at me, and I cleared my throat since there was still a child present and he was clearly hanging on our every word.

“That’s great,” I said, ignoring Sacha’s look, “that you have human pack members. And, too, after what you said your mother told you about not coming out? I’m really glad to say I didn’t see a single person flinch when you said I’m your mate.”

Sacha’s smirking changed to genuinely happy smiling. “Yeah, I was impressed with that, too. We have a few same-sex couples, but it was the rank that worried me. And Mother.” He lost the smile and shrugged. “I’m going to have to work on forgetting her advice and the many ways she cautioned me. So much of it was probably manipulation instead of care.”

I hated that. My parents might both be gone now, and my coming out to them might’ve been a struggle for all of us, but they’d never made me feel like I couldn’t be myself. I didn’t doubt the advice they’d given me as I’d grown up.

I went over to Sacha, looped an arm around his waist, and kissed his forehead. “You’re already a much better leader. I can tell right now that you’re going to treat every pack member like you wish you’d been treated.”

Sacha leaned his head on my shoulder, and I was glad I could be his support.

I thought back to my tarot reading again. Hadn’t the shop owner said I’d play an important role and something about calming the beast? He wasn’t a complete nut case after all. I almost wanted to go thank him. Almost.

I looked down when I felt a little body leaning against my leg. Gavril was hugging both of us at once. I cupped the back of his head and suddenly felt fiercely protective over him and his big brother.

Titus came into the basement then, a lot of pack members behind him. Several people saw the bags and started peeking, so I went over and started laying everything out. I'd gotten ten heating pads that I thought could help with soreness in the morning and three weighted blankets that I figured might be helpful even when they were in wolf form if anyone got anxious or restless.

I felt a little righteous when they laughed at the dog toys and my reasoning that there was no reason they couldn't play if they got bored.

"But don't ever pretend to throw the ball or stick or whatever," one guy said very seriously.

"Nooo," a woman drawled, her eyes wide as she shook her head. "That would be bad."

I was tempted to try it anyway just for a laugh, but maybe I'd give it a few shifts before I went for it. Maybe.

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Chapter fifteen

Sacha

I could feel the moon shift coming on like a mild headache, but watching Zeke dash between Fabian's rehearsal dinner and the pack "carbing-up" was a great distraction. It was immediately clear that Zeke could handle a hundred different things at once. I just stood back and watched him put out one fire after another—one literal when a napkin was placed too close to a candle—and felt...proud.

That man, my mate, was a true leader and that inspired me as much as it made me fall a little more in love with him.

We needed to talk about our future. I got the feeling from little things he'd said or done—like getting that store membership—that Zeke was committing to me and my pack. But we hadn't said the words out loud, made plans, or anything like that. He hadn't even seen my home! He'd only ever seen me in my work clothes, didn't know what I drove, and had no idea what was in my bank account.

Well, my banking included the resort and pack accounts now, so I didn't look quite as poor anymore. I'd been a single guy going nowhere until this morning. Tonight, I was the head of an organization taking in upwards of ten million a year.

Wow, okay, that took my breath away for a second there. I had no idea how to run the business. That couldn't be done by instinct like being alpha could. Maybe could. I was still figuring that out, too, of course. But I didn't have a business degree. I might've done a lot of the jobs around here, but hardly any of them had been done in

an office.

I looked around for Titus and Marius, finding them at a table with their immediate families. Gavril was sitting with the kids and eating way too much spaghetti even though he wouldn't be shifting tonight. He was laughing at something one of his cousins had said, and it warmed my heart to see him like that.

Catching Titus's eye, I jerked my head and hooked a thumb toward the door. He stood up right away and brought Marius with him. It was still weird to have the two of them working with me, being willing to help, after everything Mother had told me about how they fought her.

I led them out to the lobby and found a cozy nook with two couches where we could sit. That they looked at me expectantly, ready to listen, blew my mind for a second.

"So I know it's early days—obviously," I said, "but I don't know anything about running the resort. The business side of it all."

"Doesn't surprise me," Marius said with a frown and a brief shake of his head. "None of us suspected that you needed to find your mate for your alpha powers to kick in. She should've trained you anyway, but..." He shrugged and let that thought go.

Titus said, "We have people in place who can run things, don't worry about that. The alpha acts as a president or CEO, but the people under that position know what they're doing."

Relief had me nodding. "Okay, that's good. I wouldn't mind learning, but I'm no CEO." I glanced back toward the basement door and grinned. "Zeke might be."

"Oh?" the two of them said together.

I smiled more, that pride kicking in. “He’s helping with the wedding rehearsal events and getting us ready for the moon shift without breaking a sweat.”

“What’s he do for a living?” Titus asked.

“He managed a bar and drag show in Miami.” Past tense since it was his ex’s bar. A little part of me was glad that Zeke was unemployed because it might make moving here easier for him to do.

Marius and Titus shared a look before nodding at each other. “We could elevate from within,” Titus said, “but Zeke sounds like a good choice for a role somewhere in the business.”

“I can see if he wants something like that.” I wasn’t sure I’d have to sell him on the idea of staying—it didn’t feel like I would—but having a job ready for him could help.

An alarm went off on each of our watches, and we stood up together. “Here’s hoping this goes better than usual,” I said. “Did the perimeter guards carb-up before they went out?”

“They did,” Marius said as we walked toward the basement door. “They’re going to do four-hour shifts on patrol, have plenty of protein to get through the night, and will join us in the morning for... I think Zeke said we’d be doing yoga on the main lawn.”

I snorted a laugh at the thought of a bunch of wolves in the downward dog pose, even though we’d be human again by sunrise.

All of the tables and chairs were stacked against the walls in rolling carts except for one. My mouth literally watered when I caught scent of the mound of meat-covered bones on that lone table. There was a giant bone off the side that could’ve come from

a dinosaur's hind leg, it was so huge. Zeke stood beside the table with most of the pack focused on him...and the meat.

“Everyone who wants one,” Zeke was saying, “can have one, but the big one is a prize. We’re going to have a tug-o-war contest, and the winner gets Gigantor here.” He patted the massive meat-covered bone and grinned at the crowd as they whooped and cheered.

I shook my head and laughed as a couple people found their calling by becoming bookies, taking bets on which of us would win the prize. I had to admit—just a little—that dog toys might not be such a bad idea.

But first, we had to shift into our wolf forms. The change rippled through the room with the youngest shifting first, then the women, and finally the men. As alpha, I was last to shift now, but turning into my wolf-man form wasn’t normal at all. In a room full of four-legged wolves, I stood head and shoulders above even the tallest human pack member, and had no idea why.

They were all looking at me. I tried to continue the shift, be the whole wolf, but nothing happened. But then I caught Zeke’s scent and suddenly had an overwhelming urge to pin him to the nearest surface and fuck his brains out. I put a hand against the wall as a wave of lust hit me harder than when I’d first scented him in the lobby. My cock pushed up and out, throbbing with need, and I couldn’t ignore this at all.

I looked for Zeke and saw him crouched down in front of Marius. “Is it okay to pet you? Or is that somehow offensive?”

Sweet of him to ask, but if he was going to pet anyone, it would be me. I stumbled over to him, desperately trying not to leap and pounce. Marius backed up, causing Zeke to stand and turn toward me.

“Hey,” he said with a smile. “Aren’t you supposed to be shorter and less talkative right now?” he asked with a nod toward the room full of wolves.

“I need you,” I said through a growl.

“Need— Oh!” He tried to use his hands to conceal my raging boner. “Here?” he whispered harshly. “Like, right here and now? Oh, my god.”

If he was up for it, I was. Wait. No. The beast in me might be raging for his mate, but I was still a rational man who didn’t have to fuck in public. There were children present, for shit’s sake. I looked around and saw one of the doors into a storage room.

While I was looking, Zeke somehow found a tablecloth and slung it around me like a toga. There wasn’t a single part of me that was embarrassed, which really said how far gone I was. I grabbed Zeke’s hand and tugged him over to that door.

“Oh my god,” Zeke said, “she was right.”

I opened the door and shoved him inside before following and closing the door behind me. This was the dry goods pantry for the kitchen, which they accessed by a door across from this one. Boxes, barrels, and shelves of more boxes and containers filled the room, but there was enough space for us. I just needed something to brace him against while I fucked him, and we’d be fine.

Zeke set a small tube of lube on a shelf and kicked off his shoes. He’d brought lube? I wasn’t complaining, but... “Who was right?” I asked him.

“Mara? I think she said her name was Mara. Titus’s wife. Mate. Wife and mate?” He frowned as he dropped his pants. “Anyway, she said to be ready for a good fuck either tonight or tomorrow morning. I was a little worried I’d be fending off a four-legged creature, so this is much better.”

First of all, I didn't want to think about my cousin's wife giving sex advice, but okay, she had, and it had been good advice. We needed lube, so it was great that he'd bought some and saved us from having to use olive oil or something. Because neither of us was leaving this room without an orgasm.

Secondly, I nearly expired beside the cans of beans when Zeke tugged a plug out of his ass and set it on a shelf. He hadn't just brought lube—my mate had prepared . He then went and used the lube on himself before setting that aside as well.

And then Zeke held onto a shelf, checked that it was sturdy, spread his legs, and popped his ass out before grinning over his shoulder at me.

A whine slipped out of me as my heart hammered in pure unadulterated lust while warm and gooey love flowed through my veins. He understood, he was ready, and my god, I loved him so much.

In a flash, I was on him. He grunted as I bit his shoulder and pinned his hands against the shelf. Rock hard, I angled just right and began thrusting into him, that plug having made it easier. So much easier. I was gliding in and out of him in seconds, no finesse needed. It was exactly what I'd needed, a filthy, fast fuck with my mate.

While I was growling against his flesh between my teeth, Zeke was wailing and whining and saying my name as he begged for more and harder and oh, god, yes! To hell with carbing up to get through a night of running around as a wolf—I'd done it to fuck my beautiful, perfect mate against a rattling shelving unit in a basement pantry during the full moon. If I expended every ounce of my energy on nothing but him, it'd be worth it entirely.

Zeke came with a yell, while I still held his hands down so he hadn't touched himself at all. I'd fucked it clean out of him and, goddamn, that did things to me. I bit him a little harder, heard him whimper, and thrust so deep inside him that I lifted him off

his feet. Coming inside him truly was a release as heat washed through me and my cock filled him up.

I let him stand on his feet again, but stayed buried inside him because, yep, I'd knotted him. He rubbed his ass a tiny bit against the fur of my groin and moaned, so I knew he liked it again.

Releasing his flesh, I licked the spot and was glad I hadn't broken the skin. I could turn him if that happened, make him a lycan like me, but that was a conversation we definitely had to have first. For now, Zeke was marked in such a way that any wolf would know he was mine.

"Have I tamed the beast?" he whispered as he tipped his head back against my chest.

I huffed a laugh and wrapped my arms around him as my knot slowly faded. "Temporarily," I told him.

He hummed in a contented way and petted my arms and hands, his fingers lazily tracing over my claws, too. "My tarot reading was actually accurate," he said like he was surprised.

"Oh?" My knot gone, I eased free of him and reached for the plug.

"Yeah, I hadn't believed a— Oh!" he hollered as I eased the plug back up his very fine ass.

I patted him there. "Just in case."

Zeke laughed and shoved at me to get away. For some reason, that had me shifting into my wolf form, dropping down to waist height and falling onto my front legs. I looked up at him, curious to know what he'd think since he hadn't seen me like this

before.

“Well, this is awkward,” he mumbled as he pulled his shirt down to hide his dick.

I snorted my amusement at that since I’d happily fuck him in this form, too, if he’d let me. I licked my chops and flicked my gaze from his groin to his face a few times.

“No,” he said firmly with his hand out in front of me. He dodged around me and grabbed up his pants and underwear. “Oh, my god, no . The wolf-man is one thing, but bark-bark-woof? No way.”

I wagged my tail anyway as he got dressed. It was still early days in our relationship. He could totally change his mind down the road. And I would absolutely be there when he did.

“I see you smirking,” he said as he did up his zipper. “Sacha, it’s not happening.”

Uh-huh. I wagged more and added some happy panting, too.

Zeke stomped into his shoes. “Goddamnit,” he muttered as he went to open the door.

I trotted out into the room full of wolves with my head held high, confident and contented that my mate was oh so very mine.

I’d played fetch. I had literally let Zeke throw a damn tennis ball, and then I’d raced my own pack members to get to it first and bring it back to him. So he could throw it again. I was fully awake now, the morning sun shining down on me, but I did not want to open my eyes and risk looking at him or anyone else. I was the alpha wolf, for fuck’s sake, and I had played fetch.

Zeke snorted a laugh and, since he was acting as my pillow, both of us shook from it.

“Why are you cringing before you’ve even opened your eyes?”

“That fucking tennis ball.”

He cupped my chin and lifted my head so he could kiss my forehead. “Poor pup.”

I put an elbow in his chest to prop me up so I could frown down at him. “Ow. Pointy,” he said at the same time I said, “I am your alpha, and not some pup.”

He shoved my elbow aside, which made me collapse on him, and then suddenly, he was rolling around with me on the basement floor as we wrestled to be on top. His muscles seemed to turn to jelly once he started laughing, and I pinned him on his back. While he giggled like a kid, I sat on his stomach and threw my arms up in victory.

Only when others chuckled around us did I remember we weren’t alone down here. But that was also when I realized that I wasn’t in pain.

“Jesus, Zeke, I think it worked.”

“Huh? What did?”

“I don’t hurt. Ache, sure, but it’s nowhere near as debilitating as before.”

He sat up, making me scramble backward onto his thighs. “It worked?”

I laughed and framed his face in my hands. “It did!”

Now he put his hands up in victory, and a whole lot of people started clapping and cheering.

I could hardly believe it. I felt like I'd worked out, but not like I'd been run over and beat up. I could move without wincing. I wasn't desperately hungry and— Man, we'd been so dumb! Food, exercise, and rest—that was all we'd needed. We'd treated moon shifts like a punishment and practically caged ourselves, moping around until morning, starving and depressing ourselves. But last night we'd played in here, taken a run through the forest around midnight, and just generally had fun .

I kissed Zeke with all of the thanks I could put into a kiss. He wrapped his arms around me and opened up, letting me in, and I briefly considered heading back into that storage room. But I wanted hours to worship my mate's whole body this time and, when his watch beeped an alarm, I knew that wouldn't be possible now.

“Shit, I have to get ready for the wedding!”

We separated and stood up with Zeke giving orders before he was completely upright. That feeling of pride washed over me as I watched him take charge.

“Listen up, everyone! There's swimming and yoga outside. Pick one and do it for at least a half-hour. This is to relax your muscles after a hard workout, so don't skip it. Come back here after you're done, and there will be a big breakfast ready for you.”

He turned to me and gave me a smacking kiss. “Feel free to come to the wedding. Sit on the bride's side.”

“Which is the bride's side?”

“The fabulous one!” he hollered as he sprinted up the stairs.

About an hour later, I looked for a seat with the other guests and discovered that Fabian's side of the aisle was easy to figure out because the other side was full of cougar shifters.

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Chapter sixteen

Zeke

I was sincerely going to need a vacation after this week. Just between last night and this morning, I felt like I should've also gotten combat pay. For the wedding. Seriously, the shifted wolf pack had been easier—and more fun—to handle than a gaggle of drag queens in full regalia and their lumberjack counterparts. Not to mention the rowdy-looking guests and...bystanders? Why were so many pack members crowding around the groom's side of the aisle? And was that guy growling at Matt's cousin?

Rushing over to try and put out whatever fire this was, I ended up getting caught by Sacha. "What's going on?" he asked urgently.

"That's what I'd like to know! Why is everyone looking like there's about to be a brawl?" I sidestepped away from Matt's cousin when he literally hissed at the other guy. "What the fuck?"

"They're cats," Sacha said as he practically dragged me even farther away.

"What?"

"Cougar shifters."

I looked to the tree line. "Where?"

“Most of the groom’s side of the aisle.”

“Excuse me?” I spun around and stared at Matt standing up near the officiant and couldn’t believe my eyes. That sweet man was baring his teeth at a few of my pack members, who were doing the same right back at him. “What the actual shit?!”

“That’s why they’re here,” Sacha said and ran a hand down his face. “Oh for fuck’s sake. They came for the wedding .”

“No. Are you kidding me? Matt’s a...” I gulped the word down as I surveyed the situation again. Guests who’d been sitting down a moment ago were getting to their feet now. It was about to be on, and cold fear washed through me. Grabbing Sacha’s shoulders, I shook him. “Stop this! I swear to god, you need to stop this right now. Fabian will kill every last one of us if there’s a fight at his wedding!”

I looked toward the archway of the vestibule where Fabian was waiting and saw him suddenly peek out. We were late, and he knew. Oh god, he knew .

“Sacha!” I screeched in near panic.

He flinched. “Okay! I’ve got it.”

I watched him walk over to the growing crowd of wolf pack members and hold out his arms. He was shooing them away, and they were reluctantly going. The guests were sitting back down, looking at each other with worry and confusion on their faces, and Matt was waving for them to calm or something.

A new panic hit me. Did Fabian know what Matt was?

Part of me thought he must know. Sacha hadn’t been able to keep it from me, so how could Matt have managed it? Sure, he could’ve spent last night apart from Fabian

using the excuse of it being the night before their wedding and tradition and blah blah blah, but to pull that off every month? Or maybe cats weren't forced to shift with the moon like wolves were? Still, the mate-claiming thing might apply. It was possible cougar-Matt hadn't been able to resist pinning Fabian to a wall at least once in all the years they'd known each other.

But it all boiled down to whether or not I should say something to Fabian.

The string quartet started playing Pachelbel's Canon, and that ended my dumbfounded paralysis. I sprinted through the curtains and into the vestibule only to come to a sudden halt so as not to run Fabian clean over. I froze a little inside as he glared up at me. His drag persona had always been intimidating and seeing Ida Slapter in full bride mode was enough to make me cower.

"What is going on out there?" he said through gritted teeth.

I swallowed hard and flicked a glance at the bridesmaids as they filed out one by one. "Um, cats and dogs don't get along."

He blinked at me.

I blinked at him.

"And is something being done to...shift...the problem into a solution?" he asked with a perfectly arched brow.

He knew. Thank god.

"Sacha's moving his people away right now."

Fabian nodded decisively and grabbed my arm as the last bridesmaid left through the

curtain. “Then let’s get me married, and we can worry about integrating our furry families afterward.”

Yep, he knew everything. Holy shit.

I was a little bit on autopilot as I walked him down the aisle and handed Fabian off to Matt the Cat. Dear god, this was more surreal than finding out Sacha was a werewolf. Lycan. What the fuck ever! My god, this was all so weird. And I couldn’t even freak out because I had to stand there smiling and holding Fabian’s bouquet—which had actually turned out very nicely—so that he could get married in the most perfect wedding that had ever wedding’d.

To a cat shifter.

In wolf territory.

At least it was a short ceremony, so it wasn’t long before everyone was on their feet and clapping for the new couple as they led the way to the reception. There was a big brunch all ready to go with mimosas for everyone. I would definitely be having a few. Or maybe just a whole bottle of champagne.

Sacha was there at the entrance when I arrived, and I grabbed his arms and wanted to vomit all of my questions and OMGs all over him, but I knew I shouldn’t. I couldn’t tell who around us was in the know and who wasn’t. Sacha chuckled at me.

“Do you have things to do right now?” he asked with a grin.

“Uh... I literally can’t remember.”

“Come on, then,” he said with a grin. “We have some alpha pair duties to fulfill.”

I followed him out of the reception area and up some stairs, my mind whirring with possibilities. How accurate was the fiction I'd read? So far there'd been a lot that those authors had gotten right, from fated mates to instalust to knotting. Wait, were those authors shifters? Mates of shifters? I fanned myself and tried to stay in the moment because, wow, was that too much to think about right now! Especially if I was about to become part of some kind of wolf and cougar negotiation team.

The first person I saw was Fabian, and I ran over to him immediately. He grabbed my hands and bounced as he squealed, "I've wanted to tell you for so long!"

"Oh my god, are you serious? This is insane!"

"You're a wolf's mate!"

"You're a cat's mate!"

"Ooo, hold on there," Matt said. "It's cougar. Cat's a slur."

"Oh." I cleared my throat and smoothed down my tie. "Okay. Yeah, sorry about that."

Sacha put his hand on the small of my back and said to the room, "Let's everyone take a seat."

I realized there were ten of us in this conference room. Sacha sat at the head on one end, so I sat beside him with Titus opposite me. I recognized Matt's dad, Mister McGuire, sitting at the head of the other end of the table. Matt and Fabian were kind of in the middle on one side with my new pack members opposite them. As hierarchy went, I thought I understood who was who.

"I'd like to start with an apology," Matt's dad said. "We'd heard that there were

wolves in the area, but hadn't known you own this resort."

Sacha cocked his head. "Rand didn't tell you about assaulting my mate?"

Oh shit. I stared at Matt's dad with wide eyes.

"Pardon me?" Mister McGuire looked to the men sitting on either side of him. Both of them seemed just as shocked.

"Oh, um," I started, "I don't want to...press charges? Against him or anything. He knows what he did was wrong and all that." I patted Sacha's hand, hoping it was alright that I did this. "And you whooped his ass, so I'm satisfied justice was done."

"If that's the case," Mister McGuire said, "then thank you, but know we'll question him and dole out an appropriate punishment for his silence just the same."

I nodded and looked to Sacha. He sighed and flipped his hand over so he could hold mine. "Then it's done," he said, but I could hear the disappointment in his tone and it had me thinking my mate had wanted to beat Rand up again. "Since you're not guests of the resort, are you local to the area?"

"No, we're from McCoy. We've been camping on the land to the west of here, surveying it as the final step in purchasing it."

"Excuse me?" Sacha leaned forward, letting go of my hand. "What land west of here?"

Mister McGuire looked startled all over again as he glanced around the table at the many frowning faces aimed his way. "The eighty acres the resort is selling. We've been in negotiations with Elise Zizian for the past month."

Our end of the table erupted with each person suddenly speaking...not English. I stared at them all, Titus looking especially irate, with Marius a close second, as Sacha barked things back at them. Mister McGuire and his people were completely quiet as they watched, looking more and more like they'd really stepped in it but weren't sure how. I caught Fabian's eye, and we shrugged at each other.

Sacha sighed and waved his hand, quieting everyone else. "Mister McGuire," he said, "it's my turn to apologize because the pack was completely unaware that my mother was negotiating the sale of any land."

Matt's dad shifted in his seat and glanced toward the closed door. "Can we send for her? Ask her to explain?"

"Her whereabouts are currently unknown."

Mister McGuire nodded and visibly deflated. "Was she authorized to sell?"

"Have you paid anything to her?"

"No, nothing. The two million is still in escrow."

Sacha relaxed back against his chair. "Good. We've locked her out of all resort and pack accounts and, when she's found, we'll investigate her as a suspect in the murders of my father and my uncle."

Fabian gasped and stared at me as I bit my lips together and nodded. There was so very much drama that I could finally tell him, I was almost giddy with wanting to spill it all right damn now.

"I..." Matt's dad seemed totally thrown by all of this. "Good god, son, if there's anything we can do, just ask. All of our communications with her were done via

email, so we can provide copies of every message. Whatever you need.”

Sacha thanked him, and I was so glad that none of what had been swirling around regarding the encroaching cougar shifters had been bad. It wasn’t an invasion. No one had to be afraid—well, Rand probably did, but he wasn’t our problem. This had all been a business deal between a psycho and a man who hadn’t known he was dealing with a psycho. And just some folks attending a wedding.

Fabian suddenly stood up. “What I’m hearing is that there’s a lot more that you all need to talk about, but there’s also a wedding reception happening downstairs that I’m not going to miss. We have things to do,” he said with a look at Matt, “and we’re going to dance in about an hour,” he said with a look at Matt’s dad, “but mostly I’m starving to death, and you don’t want to see me when I’m hangry.”

There might be wolf and cougar shifters at this table, but the most dangerous person here was the drag queen bride in need of a snack.

Thankfully, Mister McGuire chuckled before grinning down the table at Sacha. “How about we discuss this more after my boys here have their reception?”

Sacha nodded and stood up. “Absolutely. And, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to attend.”

“Perfect!” Fabian grabbed Matt’s hand and towed him toward the door. “Let’s go already. I’ve been smelling the bacon since we got up here and if there isn’t any left for me, I’m going to tear off someone’s arm and...” I couldn’t hear the rest as he stomped down the stairs, but I had a feeling a beating would be involved.

The rest of Matt’s pack... Pride? What was a group of cats—cougars!—called? Whatever. They filed down the stairs, while the wolves all looked to Sacha. He looked exhausted. I hadn’t seen him in the pool or doing yoga, so I didn’t know if

him being so tired was physical or emotional. Though finding out his mother had been selling pack lands on the sly could be seriously draining.

“Once McGuire hands over the emails,” Sacha said, “see if Elise gave him any account information. She might have something private that we don’t know about.”

“Alpha,” Titus said quietly, “you need to decide if we handle this internally or pass it over to the humans.”

Sacha leaned his elbows on the table and sighed heavily.

“Both deaths,” Marius added, “were investigated by the human authorities. We could give them what we know at this point and let them reopen the cases.”

To the tabletop, Sacha said, “Gavril will be a witness.”

“We can coach him,” I said, “not to mention wolves.”

Titus shrugged. “Kids say the darnedest things. No one will take him literally.”

“But what if Elise says something?”

All three of them looked at me, and I nodded. “Right. Who’d believe werewolves are real?”

“Lycans,” they said together.

“Yes.” I didn’t roll my eyes even a little bit.

Sacha stood up, and the rest of us did, too. “She’s human, so let’s have the humans investigate. Make sure one of ours is involved just for my own piece of mind. Carly

made detective, right?”

“She did,” Marius said with a nod. “She’ll keep us apprised of every step.”

Sacha took my hand and walked around the table for the door. “I’m going to go have second breakfast. Don’t need me until after I get some cake, okay?”

A few hearty chuckles followed us down the stairs before someone up there closed the door. I made Sacha stop on a landing about halfway down.

“Hey,” I said, crowding him against the wall. “You’re really good at this stuff.”

He looked at me through his lashes. “Am I?”

Poor baby. I cuddled him up and kissed his forehead. “You prevented a war, got more evidence against the bad guy, and Fabian is genuinely happy. I’d say it’s a gold star day for you.”

He chuckled and looped his arms around my waist, leaning a bit. “You’ve got a lot to talk about with him, huh?”

“Right? My god, it’s going to be insane. I have so many questions.”

“Just please don’t tell him about the dog toys.”

I hugged him a little tighter because that wasn’t a promise I could make.

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Chapter seventeen

Zeke

Dressed for comfort to fly to Mexico in a few hours, Fabian sat with me at a table in the back of the reception hall. We nibbled pastries and sipped mimosas as we finally got the chance to really talk about everything that had happened.

“How long have you known about Matt?” I had to ask.

Fabian leaned back in his chair with his hands laced on his stomach as he grinned. “Since about ten minutes after meeting him.”

“No,” I said, aghast. “Seriously? Right there in the club?” I’d known they met after a show when Matt snuck backstage and sparks flew, but Matt had revealed himself right away?

Fabian giggled. “It was the first time a man ever got all possessive and aggressive and I was totally into it. Like, si, papi, pin me to that wall!” He threw his hands up and laughed again, more wickedly this time. “Do the wolves have a sort of in-between form?”

“Wolf-man, yeah.” I blushed as I said it.

Fabian wagged a finger at me. “That was Matt right there backstage. Dios mio, his fur was so soft...”

Well, it was good to know I wasn't the only one who couldn't resist my mate when he went beastly. And since we were going there already, I asked, "Do cougars have a, um, knot?"

"A knot? What's that?"

That was a no, obviously, but it would be ridiculous not to explain now. "A part of his cock that swells and locks you together for a while."

Fabian's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open before he cackled loud enough to have people across the room look over at us. I flapped at him to shush because we'd have to stop talking if people came over to see what was so funny.

"Oh, that's good," he said breathlessly. "No, Matt doesn't have that. What he has are these nubby bumpy things that play my rim like fingers on guitar strings." He made a humming noise that had me twitching in my seat. "I can't wait to be a big kitty, too."

I cocked my head at him, staring. "Excuse me?"

He blinked at me. "Matt's going to turn me while we're on our honeymoon?"

"He can do that?!"

Now it was Fabian flapping his hands at me to shut up. "Shhh! Yes, he said all shifters can. Hasn't Sacha offered? Oh, well, it's only been a week, so why would he? It's a serious decision and really painful, so it makes sense that you don't know that yet."

Okay, his logic seemed sound. Letting someone turn you into something else did seem like a monumental decision to make. It was life-changing, right? I wouldn't be the same if I agreed to become a lycan.

“And you’ve... You’ve thought it through?”

Fabian smiled indulgently at me. “Yeah. I want to understand every aspect of his world and be a part of it fully. They tend to live longer than we do, and I want to stay with him for as long as possible, too.”

I nodded. Those were good reasons. Wow, that was a lot to take in.

“Is it by invitation? Or because you’re mates and that’s just—”

“No, he explained it all in details that nearly had me saying no way.” He pulled a disgusted face. “But then he asked me to really think about it for at least three days. So I knew how serious it was. And if he wasn’t going to do it, no one else would, so I guess that means it’s by invitation only.”

My mind was reeling. Would Sacha someday make such an offer? Would I accept? Matt and Fabian had waited two years, so it felt like it was on the same level importance as discussing whether to become parents. I could appreciate that.

Suddenly, Sacha rushed in, and I looked over, startled. My heart sank with dread at the look on his face as he said, “They’ve found my mother.”

Though they’d been in contact with human law enforcement about finding her and reopening the cases, it had been a member of the pack who’d spotted Elise in the next town over. She’d been at a gas station trying to steal a car because hers had run out of gas. Always remember to fill up before attempting to flee the country, kids.

“Hey,” Sacha said quietly before we went into the office. “There are cops and a detective in the room down the hall there who’re going to watch and listen to everything that’s about to happen.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? What if—”

He held up a hand. “They’re all lycans from a neighboring pack, so it’s fine. They’re hoping she’ll confess to me because she wouldn’t say a word to them.”

I nodded. “Should I wait somewhere else?”

“If you’re okay with it,” he said with a wince, “I’m hoping your presence will make her mad enough to forget to be guarded.”

I chuckled at that and hopped from foot to foot like a boxer getting ready for a fight. “Bring it.”

Sacha grinned at me and leaned in to give me a peck, but I caught him close and hugged him hard. This wasn’t going to be easy for him in any way, but I’d have his back from now on.

It was pretty clear to me when I walked into the woman’s former office that she’d never been on the run before and hadn’t had a clue how to make it work for her. Dressed like she’d been on her way to a corporate meeting, she now looked like she’d spent time rolling down a hill into a mud puddle.

Her attitude was still regal as all hell, though.

“Let me go right now , or so help me I’ll have every last one of you banned from the pack!”

I couldn’t help sort of snort-laughing at that. Like anyone was going to take orders from her ever again. But in doing that, I brought her irate focus onto myself.

“Oh, you think this is funny?” she said with a sneer. “They won’t accept you. You’re

nothing but a hole.”

I rolled my eyes. “Honey, I’ve done more for this pack in the last twenty-four hours than you ever did.”

She might not be a lycan, but she could still growl.

“Alright, enough,” Sacha said, getting between us. “You talk to me , Mother, not him.”

“You have to get them to let me go,” she said with a scared sort of urgency. “They’re accusing me of horrible things and threatening to kill me!”

I settled onto the couch opposite her, ready for the show she was putting on while also wishing I could spare Sacha from having to watch it, let alone participate in it.

“Like you killed my father?” Sacha asked as he sat beside me.

She recoiled. “That was an accident. We were hiking.”

“You accidentally pushed him?”

“No!”

“So it was deliberate?”

“I didn’t kill Cosmin,” she said with a lot of venom in her tone.

Liar. I hardly knew her, but it was clear to me that Elise Lupescu had herself one hell of a temper. Get her mad enough and boom! I could see her shoving a man twice her size off of a cliff in a fit of rage.

Sacha was maybe changing tactics when he suddenly asked, “Was he your mate?”

She shrugged. “He said I was, but I never felt anything.”

Ouch. Would Fate really saddle someone with a person who didn’t particularly like them? Or was Elise lying? I wanted to believe she was lying, that she’d loved Sacha’s father once. What could’ve pushed her to hate him?

Sacha must’ve been thinking along those same lines, because he asked, “Why did you come to hate him so much?”

She stomped her foot, the heel of her boot sounding like a gunshot. “He refused to turn me!”

Oh, now we were getting somewhere. I found myself leaning toward her and sat back instead.

Sacha was squinting at her like he didn’t believe that. “My father refused to turn you, so you killed him?”

“I begged him to do it. To make me one of you. But he wouldn’t! He said there was no reason to do it, like it wasn’t necessary. But it was necessary to me!”

“And then Alek wouldn’t do it either,” Sacha said quietly.

“He said I didn’t deserve to be turned. That’s why I didn’t even hesitate to k—” she cut herself off, but it was pretty obvious to me what she’d been about to say.

“To kill him,” Sacha finished for her.

She sat up straight and looked down her nose at him. “I didn’t say that.”

“It’s what you were about to say, though.”

“You’re not listening to me,” she practically growled at him. “You never listen to me.”

“I am listening, Mother, and I’m hearing a woman who was so consumed with the need to be powerful admit that she eliminated two men who wouldn’t give her what she wanted.”

“You make me sound childish and petty.”

“You were.”

“I wasn’t! And I wasn’t about to sit around doing nothing but getting fat by having their babies when there was an empire to run and people to lead. When you didn’t become alpha after I killed Cosmin—”

Oh god, there it was...

“—I thought I’d lead then, but there was Alek being alpha all of a sudden. At least I’d already been having an affair with him, so marrying another one was easy to do. But then he wouldn’t even consider turning me, that son of a bitch, and—”

A woman I’d never seen before opened the door and stood in the doorway.

“Was that enough?” Sacha asked him.

The woman nodded. “It was.”

They’d heard her, and it was over.

Sacha got up and held his hand out to me. I took it and walked with him out the door. There were two uniformed officers waiting in the hall.

“She’s all yours,” Sacha said.

Chapter eighteen

Sacha

I was going to need to get a therapist. The guilt of helping my mother into prison was weighing heavily on me right along with taking her away from Gavril. I had to keep reminding myself that she hadn't been a good mother to him anymore than she had been with me—and she might've been worse to him. I was sure that it would be a hell of an improvement that he'd be raised by Mara and Titus with their kids from now on. About the only thing I didn't feel guilty about was asking them to take him in.

And there were so many other good things that had come out of this insane week. Finding Zeke, winning his trust, and being able to earn his love was right up there at the top of the list of things I should be proud of. He made me feel like everything else was possible. Leading the pack, running the business, it was all doable with him by my side.

“How are you frowning and grinning at the same time?” Zeke asked as he paused in filling his suitcase. We were in his hotel room one last time so he could pack up and move into my apartment. Eventually, we'd move into the alpha's house, but I wasn't ready to take over that space yet.

“Seriously,” he said, making faces, “I can't even get my face to do that.”

I laughed at him, which was probably what he'd wanted. “I've just got a lot going on in my head.”

“Well, tell your forehead to listen to your mouth for a while. Everything’s going to be alright.”

Trying to take his advice, I watched him put a knee into his suitcase to keep it closed as he slowly worked the zipper around the edges. One wrong move and that thing would explode. I hadn’t even seen him wear half the items he’d shoved in there. Had he brought his entire wardrobe from Miami?

Oh, god, had he?

“Zeke,” I began, dreading the answer, “will you need to go to Miami to get the rest of your things?”

“No,” he grunted as he wrestled the zipper around a corner. “This is everything I need for now. I’ve got other stuff in storage at Fabian’s, but he said they’ll ship it here once they’re back. Ha! Did it.” He stood away from the suitcase with his hands on his hips.

“Hail the conquering hero.”

Zeke came over and draped his arms on my shoulders. “Don’t worry about that, too. I really feel like I’ve closed one door and opened another and I’m good with that. You’ve made me feel necessary, Sacha. In a week!” he said on a laugh. “I’ve never had that before.”

“You are necessary.”

He gave me the sweetest smile and kissed me slowly, like he savored the contact. I curled my arms around his waist, delving deeper into his mouth, only to have him chuckle and scamper away again. He shoved a pair of slippers into an outside pocket of the canvas suitcase, and I could’ve sworn I heard it groan.

“Oh! Before we go to your place,” Zeke said, “we need to stop by The Magic Shop. I want to tell that creepy bastard that everything’s worked out for us regardless of his meddling and cryptic messages.”

“What magic shop? You keep mentioning it and The Owner, but we don’t have a magic shop here. Is it in—”

“Yes, you do.” He looked around like he was getting his bearings and then walked over to the window. “It’s right there,” he said, pointing. But then his eyes went wide as he stared across the street. “What the fuck? I swear to god, that was a magic shop. I’ve been inside twice!”

I went over to look and saw that he was pointing at the souvenir shop. “That’s just a tourist trap. It’s been there forever. We actually had a hell of a time getting them to match the resort’s aesthetic on the storefront until the awful old guy who runs it finally gave in.”

“Tall skinny guy, looks like a Victorian mortician, wears a top hat?”

I frowned at him. “Short, bald, wears Hawaiian shirts even in the winter?”

Zeke’s eyes were huge as he slowly shook his head. “But Fabian went with me. All of us were in there the day we arrived! The Owner guy gave me the love potion, and I saw all the books about your family history. And then we went back for the tarot reading and—” He stopped to gasp, pointing behind me.

I turned to see the dresser with a mirror on top, not sure what was so shocking about that. But then I noticed a tarot card tucked into the mirror’s frame. It was the moon card. In fact, a wolf-man was holding a moon with a waterfall behind him. That was...oddly specific.

“It’s stalking me,” Zeke whispered, and I didn’t think it was possible but his eyes got

even wider.

I rubbed his arms up and down. “Blink for me, so your eyeballs don’t fall out.”

“Ew.” But he blinked and snapped out of it, too.

“I think you might’ve had an encounter with something magical that wanted to play matchmaker.”

His gaze flicked between me and the card. “Excuse me?”

“There’s more magic in the world than we will ever fully perceive.”

“Are you quoting something?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s true and I think it applies here. I’m also going to guess that whoever that magic shop owner was, he was a benevolent creature just trying to help in his own way. He acted like the linchpin that got us started and kicked off everything else that’s happened.” I gestured out the window at the souvenir shop. “And now that he’s no longer needed, he’s moved on.”

“And you can just accept that? A magical something manipulated us and then disappeared?”

I shrugged. “I only wish he’d stuck around long enough for me to thank him.”

Zeke exhaled hard and went to sit on the edge of the bed beside his suitcase. It held itself closed even as it jostled toward him, and he pushed it away.

“Think of it like this,” I offered. “If I exist as a man and a wolf in some magical way, why can’t there be other kinds of magic and other kinds of magical creatures? Some people might call him an angel, right? Or a cupid? There are all sorts of myths about

mysterious helpers doing something kind for people in need. Well, maybe we were the people in need this time, and he helped us.”

Zeke nodded at the floor. “Yeah, okay. It’s still really crazy, though.”

“Agreed.”

“He had some cool stuff in that shop. Way better than mugs and t-shirts and crap like that. I actually kind of wish he’d left the family history books behind. I’d have liked to read those.”

The subtlest of breezes blew by behind me, and I turned to see a row of leather-bound books lined up on top of the dresser. I bit my bottom lip and tried not to laugh. Zeke was going to lose it when he saw—

“What the actual holy fucking fuck?!”

A snort slipped out of me, but I squashed it as I realized he was sitting there with his eyes bugged out all over again, both hands covering his mouth, and looking like he was seconds away from bolting out of the room. “Easy,” I said calmly, “I think it’s a gift. That’s a nice thing, right?”

“But he’s listening ,” he whispered in horror.

“But in a nice way? Like a fairy god, uh, father.”

“Fairies?”

I shrugged. “Maybe?”

He fanned himself with both hands. I trusted the suitcase to hold and moved it to the floor so that I could sit beside Zeke. I rubbed his back a few times, not sure what else

I could say.

“Just how many supernatural creatures are real?” he asked as he leaned forward on his knees. “Like fairies, centaurs, trolls, unicorns... That kind of thing?”

“None of those, as far as I’m aware, but there are a lot of us.”

“Like what?”

I nibbled my bottom lip, not sure I should tell him.

“Oh, god, what?” he said on a moan.

“Well, some of them are really misunderstood, and you’ve probably heard of them but have them all wrong. I don’t want to freak you out more than you already are.”

He frowned at me. “Why would they allow themselves to be misunderstood? Like, why couldn’t they change the narrative?”

“Sometimes the myths help their cause. Keep them safe.”

I could see him thinking about that, the wheels in his mind turning while he stared at the carpeting. “Like the hike where the tour guide tells everyone all about the werewolves in the area so that if someone ever sees one of you they’ll just think it’s part of the story?”

I smiled. “Yeah, like that.”

I’d been thinking more along the lines of vampires liking that the good folks stayed home after dark so that they could hunt the seedier side of society in relative peace, but his example worked, too.

Zeke side-eyed the books. “Should I wish for anything else?”

I snorted a laugh. “I wouldn’t push my luck.”

“Alright,” he said as he stood, “you grab the books and that damn card and let’s get out of here. I want to have a nice relaxing weekend before you’re neck deep in alpha stuff, and I have that interview on Monday with management.”

“Yes, dear.”

He shook his head, but I saw his grin as he towed that suitcase toward the door. I tucked the moon card into one of the books like a bookmark before I scooped the books into my arms and discovered they were a lot lighter than they should’ve been. A little more magic? That was fine with me.