



# Vampire Lee

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Can you chase away imaginary monsters with real life monsters?

Dillon Ross lives in a huge mansion together with six other people. Four of them turn furry, one drinks blood regularly, and one is a former blood slave, just like him. Seven months ago, he was rescued from a fate worse than death, and he's been doing his best to avoid people ever since. Which is hard when you have well-meaning but nosy roommates.

Lee Dowell is a vampire working in a shifter bar. One day, he hears something he wasn't meant to hear, and while his first reaction is to ignore it, he reaches out to the supernatural version of the police. It might not have been his smartest move, since he now has a target on his back.

Dillon isn't pleased to realize he is sharing a floor with a vampire. There are enough monsters in his head, he doesn't need one in his space too. But Lee has put himself in danger by trying to help some people held captive, and his roommates are trying to keep him safe. Lee doesn't do humans, but when Dillon's nightmares wake him time and time again, he wants nothing more than to gather him in his arms and chase away his fears. But can you chase away imaginary monsters with real life monsters?

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## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee Dowell looked out over the crowd at The Rambling Rogue, the bar where he'd worked the last five or so years. He was looking for Rei. One of the people in Rei's group of friends would suffice, but he preferred it to be Rei. Or maybe not. They'd hooked up, but then when they were to meet again, Rei's assistant had called and informed him Rei was busy and unable to make it.

It had been weeks ago. A couple of months, maybe. He didn't keep track.

"Vampire Lee! Give me another."

He was yanked out of his head and nodded at Eli, the wolf shifter leaning against the bar. Vampire Lee. In the beginning, he'd tried to make them not call him that, but he was a vampire in a shifter bar. He guessed it was too much to ask. They had plenty of vampire patrons too, but there was no question about it being a shifter bar.

Pouring a beer from the tap, he looked out over the crowd again. "Have you seen Rei?"

"The jaguar?"

"Yeah."

"Dude, good luck."

Lee turned his gaze to him. Good luck? Had something happened to him? Come to think of it, Rei hadn't been in for ages. Lee had seen him with his friends once or twice since they'd hooked up, so he didn't think he was dead. Maybe he'd moved.

Nah, the only thing Rei had sounded excited about was his job. Lee didn't think he'd give it up unless he had to. "Why would I need it?"

"You banged him, right?"

Had Eli been there that night? He might have, he was a regular. Pleasant enough guy, despite being a wolf. Wolves were the largest shifter group, which was reflected in the clientele. Lee didn't mind them too much, though pack animals—He grimaced. He didn't understand pack animals.

"Yeah." He dragged it out, realizing too late that Rei might not want him to tell anyone. He wasn't exactly considered a catch among the bar's visitors. Vampires and shifters could get along, he'd seen it, but...Yeah, he was a vampire in a shifter bar.

"Then he won't come here again."

"What? It's a bar. The only shifter bar in Hagwall. Of course, he'll come."

Eli snorted. "How well do you know Rei?"

Know? He'd served him drinks for years, and they'd fucked. Once. It had been...Rei was a fine specimen, but it was a hook-up, nothing special. "Only superficially." And he doubted Eli had much input to offer. He'd never seen them talk to each other.

"He's somewhat of a legend."

"Somewhat of a legend?" Deep down, he knew shifters weren't more stupid than other species, but sometimes it was hard to truly believe it.

"He fucks everything with a pulse, then never calls them back."

Lee shrugged. “And it makes him a legend?” Did it make Lee a legend too? He and Rei handled the subject of lovers in a similar manner.

Eli stared at him. “I don’t know, but now you’re one of the people he’s turned down.”

A light headache started to build, and he slowly shook his head. “I’m not looking for a hook-up, I need to talk to him.”

“Did he give you crabs?”

Vampires and shifters couldn’t get STDs the way humans did, but they could get crabs. “No.” His sigh was long and deep. “It is not related to sex, diseases, relationships, emotions, or anything like that. I only need a word, so if you see him, could you tell him? Or one of his friends. The bitchy wolf, what’s her name?”

“She’s not with them anymore.”

She’s not? They were a tight knit group, and they often came in together. Not all of them at once, but they came and went. He was pretty sure he’d recognize the females. If he remembered correctly, there were only two. Though if the bitchy one had quit, there was only one left.

He tried to conjure up an image of her. She was of average height for a shifter female, which meant taller than the average human woman but not enough to stand out, with long brown hair and kind eyes. Yeah, he’d recognize her if she came in. She often had a guy with her, also a wolf. He never spoke and had a tendency to melt into the back of the club. Come to think of it, Rei did too. “What happened to her?”

Eli shrugged. “I only know they’re one man short. My mother is on some committee or other, and they’re donating to them. She said they were looking for a recruit.”

Did you have to have a special skill to join? Lee was sick of pouring drinks for drunk shifters. He could use a challenge.

They were getting off-topic. “If you see any of them, can you ask them to come talk to me?”

Eli grabbed his beer and gave him a nod right as the next person shouted for Vampire Lee. Fuck his life. He went to take the order, and then another, and another.

Soon the evening was in full swing, the noise level getting higher by the minute, and Lee didn’t have time to scan the crowd anymore. There was no lull in the demand for drinks.

Hours went by, then someone walked up to the half-door at the end of the bar. He’d locked it, but anyone could jump over a half-door. He was in front of them before they could see him move. The guy didn’t jerk back though, he simply stared into Lee’s eyes. Not afraid of Lee trying to control him mentally, then. He never would, not in the place he worked. Hardly anywhere else either. Lee wanted his lovers fully aware, and he drank his blood from bags, so no need to mesmerize anyone not to feel his bite.

“Staff only.” He gestured at the sign fastened to the half-door.

“You wanted to speak to me.”

Did he? Lee stared at him. It took ages before recognition hit. It was the invisible wolf who hung out with Rei. Damn, he was good at disappearing in a crowd, which should be impossible since he was huge. “Right, sorry. What’s your name?”

“Faelan Campbell.”

“And you work at the—” He ended the statement with a wave of a hand because he had no idea what they called themselves. Did they have a name? There was some secrecy involved. They were law enforcement, and Lee believed you could report things to them, but it wasn’t like they had an online presence. Or maybe they had. He hadn’t checked.

“I work with Rei, which was what the guy said you wanted to talk to me about.”

“Eli, yeah. I was wondering if I could have a chat with your boss.”

Faelan narrowed his eyes. “My boss?”

There had to be a boss, hadn’t there? “The one responsible for—”

“Vampire Lee! I’m thirsty.”

Lee gritted his teeth and waved at the wolf calling him. Wanker. The crowd was building up around the bar, and it would take him ages to get back into a good flow where he wasn’t drowning in shouts about more drinks.

“Do you have a phone number?”

Faelan studied him for a second. “Why don’t you come by tomorrow, say around ten in the morning? I think Murrie is in then.”

“Great! I’ll do that.” He took half a step away only to turn back. “Come where?”

A small frown made an appearance. “Give me your number, and I’ll text you the address.” He reached for his phone, and Lee rattled off his number.

Faelan nodded once and disappeared into the crowd. Great, now he only had to figure

out what to say.

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Lee walked toward the manor house with a sense of dread. Had Faelan given him the wrong address? This place was fucking massive.

Taking a deep breath, he jogged up the steps to the front door and knocked. Someone knew he was coming. The gate was locked, and he'd had to press a button to be let in.

It took a few seconds, then he heard steps approaching. He straightened. He didn't know what breed the leader of the organization was. Maybe he should've checked before coming. He pulled in a deep breath to try to catch the scents of the people having walked through the door, but he was a vampire, not a bloodhound. Sorting scents out wasn't something he excelled in.

The door opened and a short human with heavily tattooed arms squinted at him. "Yes?"

Human. Why was there a human here? It had to be the wrong address. "Hi, I'm eh..."

He didn't have time to say anything more before a vampire more or less materialized before him, fangs on full display. Lee took a step back in surprise and stared between the vampire and the human.

"Eh, I'm here to see—" Fuck, he didn't know the name. He was so ill-prepared. "—Faelan."

"He's in the kitchen." The human pushed at the vampire. "Come in."

The vampire hissed. Seriously?

“Mars, get real.” The human sounded exasperated. “If Faelan is bringing his boyfriend over, we need to be polite.”

“Boyfriend? I’m not—” Before Lee could say anything else, Rei appeared behind the human, his eyes narrowing the moment he noticed who was on the doorstep.

“Dude.” He more or less lifted the human out of the way. “It’s not cool coming here. Devin already told you—” He gestured at the human only to turn to him. “—what did you tell him?”

The human, Devin, threw his hands in the air. “Oh, my fucking God, how should I know? I don’t know who this guy is.”

“Lee,” Lee provided helpfully.

“The bartender.” Rei ignored Lee and stared at Devin.

“Seriously, Rei. I break up with so many people for you, I can’t remember what I’m telling them. Most often I say a work thing came up.”

“There was nothing to break up.” Lee had to clarify this misunderstanding before it got out of hand. More out of hand. “I’m not here for Rei. We hooked up once, that’s all.”

Rei stilled and looked at him. “That’s all?”

“Yeah...” He dragged it out. “I thought it was clear.”

“But you wanted to meet up after.”

Lee grimaced. “You said let’s do this again tomorrow, and I said sure, then your



assistant called to tell me you couldn't make it. I didn't know you had my number, man."

"Great." The human pulled Rei away from where he was blocking the doorway. "See, you didn't break any hearts this time. Not everyone is dying to be with you."

Rei snorted but looked far more relaxed. Devin tugged at Mars too, but he didn't budge, and Lee noted the small smile spreading on Devin's lips. He didn't mind having an overbearing vampire blocking the door despite trying to make it sound as if he did.

"Faelan is in the kitchen, as I—"

"Faelan!" Mars called loud enough to wake the dead.

Faelan appeared in the doorway, looking half exasperated, half amused. "No need to shout, I'm right here."

"So why didn't you come the moment he arrived?" Mars sounded annoyed, then his head whipped around to glare at Faelan. "You let Devin open the door for a stranger. Alone. Without backup."

Devin made a frustrated sound, and Lee was unsure of what was going on. If Devin was their assistant, wasn't he supposed to open the door? Why did they have a human assistant? Humans weren't supposed to know about their existence.

"Lee is Murrie's ten o'clock appointment."

Devin snatched a phone from his pocket so fast, Lee would've reevaluated the whole human thing hadn't his senses told him Devin was human and nothing else. "Oh, you're the Vampire Lee meeting?"

Mars snorted, and Faelan shrugged. “It’s his name.”

“My name is Lee Dowell, not Vampire Lee.”

Devin chuckled. “I’m sorry for the idiots, Mr. Dowell. I think they were all dropped on their heads at one point or another. Please come with me.”

Lee crossed the threshold. A few steps later, he realized the whole group followed Devin toward a door to the right.

This couldn’t be how they normally acted. Was it because he was a vampire? Shifters didn’t like vampires in their homes, but there was a vampire in the group.

Right before they were about to enter, a dark-haired man came walking down the stairs. Too thin, and he had a haunted air around him, his eyes cataloged everything as if he expected monsters to jump out of the walls. His gaze focused on Lee and the others, then he whimpered, frozen in place halfway down a step.

Lee opened his mouth to say something, but Devin gestured at the door ahead of them. “Come on.”

“The man—”

“Dillon. Doesn’t like people.” He opened the door, and an office stretched out in front of him. The walls were white, there were six desks along the wall, and in the middle of the room there was a large conference table. The female Lee had been sure he’d recognize was sitting by one of the desks, tapping away at a keyboard, and by a desk farther in was a big man with honey-colored hair. Not wolf.

Lee pulled in a breath. Coffee. This room had seen a lot of coffee. Vampire noses weren’t nearly as good as shifters’, but he could smell some things. The guy could be

a bear. Maybe. He'd know for certain when they were closer together.

"Murrie, your ten o'clock is here."

The man looked up and blinked at the group. "I have a ten o'clock?" He was quiet for a second. "With all of you?"

"This is Lee Dowell."

Murrie got to his feet, walked toward Lee, and offered his hand along with an easy smile. "I'm sorry. I haven't prepared for our meeting." He glanced at Devin. "I must've missed the appointment on the schedule."

"Oh, it's okay. I only need a few minutes." He only wanted to tell someone with the power to do something about what he'd heard. Five minutes, tops, then he could go back to pouring drinks and not think.

"No, no, we'll do this right." He looked at the group surrounding Lee and frowned. "Let's sit in the kitchen where we don't disturb anyone." Then he turned to Devin again. "Can we have the kitchen?"

"Sure."

Mars, Devin, Rei, and Faelan parted ways so Murrie could pass, and Lee followed. Before they reached the door, Murrie snatched a pen and a notepad from one of the desks.

Once they'd stepped out of the office, Murrie closed the door behind them and looked at him. "So...what do you do?"

"Eh...I'm a bartender at The Rambling Rogue."

Murrie looked confused but gestured toward the kitchen. As they walked in, the man, Dillon, made a sound and backed up against the island across from the big table in front of the windows.

“Oh, sorry, Dillon. Is it okay if Mr. Dowell and I sit here for a bit?”

Dillon didn’t reply, and Murrie let out a low sigh. Lee could hear it, but he doubted Dillon could.

“Please sit.” He gestured for Lee to move toward the table. Once he was seated, Murrie moved to stand between him and Dillon and gestured toward the door.

Dillon more or less ran out of the room without a word.

Murrie turned to him, grimaced, and pulled out the chair across from him. “PTSD, making progress, but...”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Murrie shrugged. “It took Devin three years to dare to be around us without flinching. I’m not giving up on Dillon for a long time yet.” He smiled. “So...”

Lee wanted to ask what had happened, and why they kept traumatized humans in the house, but it wasn’t his place.

“I didn’t know we had a vampire coming in. Was it a last-minute decision?”

Silence spread while Lee tried to formulate an answer. “I...eh...spoke to Faelan—”

“You know Faelan? That’s good.” He made a note on the notepad.

“I don’t know Faelan. I asked him to put me in contact with you because...” He trailed off, and Murrie nodded.

“Diversity is important to us, and I’m gonna be honest and say we’ve been hoping to find a suitable female to fill the position, but we’ve been lacking vampires for years. Mars is our only one, and it makes it risky when we have to do undercover work. We’ve always been a majority of wolves, which of course reflects the community as a whole, but it can lead to some conflicts. Pack animals versus non-pack with everything it entails. Not to mention shifters sticking together against vampires, and now we have humans to think of too.” He rubbed his neck. “You’ve done anything similar to this kind of work before?”

Lee stared. Had he ended up in a job interview? “I’m sorry. I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?” Murrie stared at him. “You don’t want the job?”

“I’d love the job. I’m not sure what it entails, but believe me, I’m ready for anything where people don’t shout for Vampire Lee all through the night. It’s not why I’m here though.”

“It’s not?” Murrie looked baffled.

“I heard something I wasn’t meant to hear.”

Murrie nodded.

“In my line of work, you hear a lot of things, and at first I wasn’t paying attention, but—” He pressed his lips together. Maybe telling was stupid. Jala, his boss, would kill him if he told on her friends, and she was friends with at least one of the men he’d heard talk. She was a lioness, so she could cause a lot of damage, and he’d most

likely lose the job.

“But?” Murrie waited.

“But...” Fuck, this was stupid, wasn’t it? He knew what happened in those places. A shudder went through him, but he did his best to ignore it.

“Lee?”

“I heard them talking about an underground fight. First, I didn’t pay attention because it happens all the time, right? But then—” He came to a halt. The words had tumbled out of him so fast he wasn’t sure if they’d made any sense to Murrie. “Then they said the bait finally was being shipped and was to arrive in two days, and something about how it was bad for the fighters’ training that the shipping had been delayed. And I heard it two days ago, so they should arrive here in Hagwall today.”

“Bait?”

“Do you know anything about dog fighting?”

Murrie swallowed and gave a slow shake of his head. “More than I want to, but not a lot.”

Lee filled his lungs. “Bait is used for stronger fighters to train on without risk of getting hurt. Fighting and/or killing someone with your claws for no other reason than you’re told to do so doesn’t come easy to most of us.”

Murrie paled. “Right.”

“You need to train your fighters to do it without thinking about what they’re doing.” Though many of them weren’t right in the head and took pleasure in hurting weaker

beings. It was how Lee remembered it, at least.

A short nod followed his words.

“And since you don’t want your fighters to get hurt in the process, you bring in bait. Someone weaker who doesn’t stand a chance.”

“And you heard someone talk about bringing in bait?”

Lee was quiet for a few seconds. “I don’t care when they arrange normal fights. If two equally strong fighters want to beat each other bloody in front of an audience to make some cash, I simply look the other way. But if someone’s bringing in bait, it’s not participants who have chosen to be there, and it’s way more organized than a game for...fun.” He scrunched his nose.

“Gotcha.”

Lee waited while Murrie drummed the pen against the pad. Then hard brown eyes met his. They’d been blue before. “Can you give me names, location, anything along those lines?”

“I don’t know the names of those who were talking, but one of them comes by The Rambling Rogue now and again. I don’t think he lives in Hagwall, so not too often, but I’ve been there for years, so I recognize him. Bear, friends with Jala—”

“The lioness?”

“My boss, yes.”

Murrie nodded. “You think she knows what’s going on?”

Lee shook his head. “Nah, I find that hard to believe, but it doesn’t mean she won’t do what she can to protect her friend.”

“And you don’t know what means of transportation they’re using, where the new fighters will arrive, at what time, or anything along those lines?”

“Sorry, I...I looked for any of your people in the bar, but there was no one there. I didn’t know how to contact you, and I didn’t want to draw attention to myself by asking around, and yeah...” Fuck, should he have been asking around? “I’m not sure if it’s new fighters. It could be they keep a stock of weaker fighters to train on and those are the ones being shipped in now. Killing too many people will draw attention, and not everyone kills their fighters, but it doesn’t mean life as bait is pleasant.”

Murrie grimaced. “Right. We’ll look into our channels. Are you working tonight?”

Lee nodded, and Murrie wrote a list of numbers on the notepad, tore the page off, and handed it to Lee.

“These are our numbers.”

They were all the same apart from the last digit. Lee read the names. Murrie, Mars, Rei, Hanna, Faelan, and Devin.

“Devin can reach us all and most often knows where we are.” Murrie reached over and pointed at Devin’s name with the pen.

“Dillon’s not on here.”

“Dillon doesn’t work for us. He only lives here.”

Lee nodded.



“Add these to your contacts and get rid of the list. We have an official number people can call, but this way you can reach us faster.”

Lee’s heart blocked his throat. Shit, this was serious business.

“Contact anyone of us if you hear anything. I’ll brief the team, so they know what’s going on.”

“Thank you.”

Murrie stared at him as if he’d said the weirdest thing, and maybe he had, but he knew what it was like to be trapped in a fighting ring, and he didn’t wish it upon anyone.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon Ross walked into the kitchen and almost backed out. Murrie was still there. He'd escaped earlier when Murrie had walked in with a vampire. He'd hidden in his room for some time, but he was hungry, and Murrie rarely had meetings in the kitchen. And he never allowed vampires into the house. Apart from Mars, but he lived here, so it was hard to ban him.

Hesitating in the doorway, he wondered if he could escape without Murrie noticing him. The moment the thought popped up in his head, Murrie turned his head and looked at him. Damn.

"It's safe to enter. Lee has left."

Lee? He didn't like that Murrie talked about a vampire so casually. Would he be back? Maybe Dillon could stay on the third floor and never come down here. He was the only one living on the third floor. The others lived on the second. There was one available room, but he liked being the only one on his floor, so he hadn't moved into Kenia's room. He'd never met Kenia. She'd been working with the others but had sold Devin back to their vampire master some months ago.

Dillon wished he could say he was sorry, but if she hadn't done it, they never would've rescued him from being a blood slave. So he was grateful Kenia turned out to be a traitor. It didn't mean he wanted to stay in her room, though.

"Can we install a kitchenette on the third floor?" He was sure Devin would order groceries for him. Devin always did things for him.

Murrie stared at him. "A kitchenette? Why?"

Dillon didn't answer right away. They often tried to get him to eat with them, but he always declined. Devin served him food on the kitchen island now and then when there was no one else around. It was okay. It had taken a couple of months, but he could handle eating with Devin in the room.

"So I can cook."

"You can cook here." Murrie's eyes narrowed. "Has Devin said you can't cook here?"

"No!" He might wish Devin would back off from time to time, but all Devin wanted was for him to be part of the group. But Devin had been given three more years than Dillon had to come to terms with what happened to him.

Dillon was exhausted. All he wanted to do was put a zillion locks on the door to his room, curl up in bed, and sleep for an eternity. His nightmares always woke him, so he didn't get much rest, but he wished he could have a space where he could relax.

Walking down here and never knowing who he'd bump into made him break out in a sweat and threatened to stall the air in his lungs.

"Then I don't see why we need to install a kitchenette. I can order a coffee maker if you don't want to walk down here every time you want a cup of coffee, but let's keep the cooking on one floor only."

Dillon wanted to be angry, but he didn't have the energy. "I don't drink coffee."

Murrie stared at him. "You don't drink coffee?"

Steps approached behind him, and Dillon was forced to either scramble backward and risk bumping into the person or enter fully into the kitchen.

He hurried forward.

“Oh, Dillon, there you are.” Devin sounded as if he was about to laugh. “I have something for you.”

Dillon turned around and stared at Devin, who was holding a tray filled with plastic cups. From the cups, tiny plants were peeking up. “You have flowers for me?”

“Jalapenos.” He chuckled. “Or, it’s more than jalapenos, but I have a few different varieties of jalapenos and some other peppers, and a couple of eggplants since I read you needed to plant them early too.”

Dillon stared at him, not understanding. “What am I to do with them?” He wasn’t a fan of jalapenos, and Devin knew it. Which most likely was why he was laughing. Dillon narrowed his eyes.

“Plant them.”

They looked planted already.

At Dillon’s blank look, Devin huffed. “In the garden. I want a kitchen garden. I want to be able to walk out there and pick the veggies I need for cooking.”

A sense of horror spread in Dillon’s chest. “What? Why? You order everything online.”

Devin might look put together, and he didn’t cower as soon as someone moved, but he rarely left the house, and if he did, Mars was with him. He might be further along than Dillon ever would be, but he wasn’t living life like a normal human.

“I do now, but I don’t want to. Homegrown is more nutritious, has no pesticides, and

with this economy..." He shook his head. "I've decided you're our gardener."

Dillon stared at him. He'd begged Murrie for a kitchenette so he wouldn't have to ever interact with people again, and now Devin tried to give him a job. A job he didn't want.

"You've decided?" Dillon's heart hammered so hard it hurt. Devin wouldn't hear it, but Murrie most likely would.

Devin grinned. "Yup, I've decided. Murrie said I'm in charge of the kitchen but can delegate. I want a kitchen garden, and I'm delegating." He held the tray out for Dillon, and without knowing why, he took it. "I have a stack of seed packs in the pantry. I want greens, I want tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, beans, and—"

"I don't know anything about gardening."

Devin shrugged. "Me either, but we'll learn."

We? Was it Dillon's job or were they doing it together? "Are there any garden beds?" He'd looked out on the patio a couple of times since he got here back in October, but that was all.

"Eh..." Devin glanced at Murrie. "Can we have some garden beds?"

Murrie laughed. "Sure. Make a plan and order what you need. Don't forget soil."

"Oh, crap!" Devin sagged a little. "I saw an ad about seeds and got excited, realized I don't have time to garden, and figured it was something Dillon could do. I didn't think about needing stuff other than seeds." He grimaced and turned to Dillon. "We'll make a plan."

Dillon glanced at the doorway. This was a new record. He never had long conversations with anyone, and he wanted to escape now, but where should he put the tray?

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Lee looked out over the bar as he poured a beer. It was a decent crowd, some new faces, but mostly people who'd been here before.

"Vampire Lee!"

Lee allowed himself to close his eyes for a second before turning to Eli. "Here two nights in a row?" It wasn't unusual.

"Did you find Rei?" He wiggled his eyebrows, and Lee swallowed a sigh.

"Yeah, thanks."

Eli studied him for a second. "Did he turn you down again?"

"What? No."

"Then why the glum face? Was it a bad fuck?"

Lee scoffed, then laughed. "Twat. I needed to talk to him, not get my dick wet."

"One thing doesn't exclude the other."

Lee grinned, dropping his fangs a fraction. "True, but it wasn't my aim."

The man he'd recognized as Jala's friend came walking toward the bar, and tension

crept into Lee. He did his best not to let it show. He was a shifter, a bear, and while he hoped there were too many scents mingling around the bar to allow him to pick up on any nerves from Lee, bears had the best noses.

“It should always be your aim, man.”

Lee shook his head but chuckled. “Is that why you’re here tonight?”

“I don’t do vampires.”

Lee stared at him for several seconds. “What?”

“I wasn’t coming on to you.” Eli gave him a serious look, and Lee barked a laugh. Pissing bastard.

“I don’t do wolves, so don’t worry, laddie.” He winked at Eli before moving toward the bear he didn’t want to serve.

“Likes to live dangerously and only fucks jaguars, is that it?” Eli’s call followed him all the way to the bear, and he sighed.

“What can I get you, sir?”

“You’re dating a jaguar?” A chill shot up Lee’s spine at the calculated look.

“Not dating, no. What can I get you?”

The bear looked at him for a too-long moment. “A beer, please.”

Lee gestured at the bottles on display.

“Whatever you have on tap is fine.”

Nodding, Lee grabbed a glass and poured a beer. He didn't look at the bear as he did, but he sensed his gaze on him.

“Vampire Lee!” A call came from the other end of the bar, and he nodded in confirmation. Once the glass was full, he put it in front of the bear and accepted the cash he handed over. Damn, he'd hoped for a credit card, so he could get a name.

Once the bear waved off the change Lee tried to hand back to him, he dropped it in the tip jar and moved toward the man who'd called for him. Another beer, a woman wanted a whiskey sour, a vampire in an expensive suit asked for a glass of their finest red wine, and the night rolled on.

The bear didn't leave his stool, and he drank his beer so slowly Lee wanted to snarl at him. Why was he in a bar if he didn't plan on drinking? Especially since he appeared to be on his own.

Time and time again, he looked up only to see him study Lee, and it made his skin crawl.

More time passed. A young bear female was flirting with him, and he played along for a little bit, but he didn't do females, never had and suspected he never would. Unless he grew ancient and got bored. He couldn't see it happening, though.

“A whiskey, please.”

Lee almost jumped when the bear spoke while he was pouring yet another beer. “Coming right up.” Lee grinned at him, went to switch the beer for money, and grabbed a whiskey tumbler. “Ice?”



“No.”

Nodding, Lee poured two fingers and placed the glass in front of him. He paid cash again. “Is your jaguar friend here?”

The chill was back. “No, I haven’t seen him today.”

“But he comes here regularly?”

Jaguars were rare. Lee wasn’t sure how rare, but Rei was the only jaguar who ever came to the club, so rarer than vampires. Or maybe it was only that Hagwall didn’t have a population of them. “Now and then. He works odd hours.”

“Doing what?”

Oh, fuck. “I’m not sure, to be honest. Different projects, I think.” Cases, different cases, but projects could work as an explanation.

“You have to introduce me sometime. I’ve never met a jaguar.”

“You’re staying in Hagwall?” He might recognize him as someone Jala knew, but he wasn’t in many times per year. When he came, he often came several days in a row though, which supported Lee’s theory of him moving around.

“For the time being.”

Lee nodded, waved as someone called for Vampire Lee, and studied the bear for an extra second. “What’s your name?”

“Aaron.”

Somehow Lee doubted it, but it was something at least.

“And you’re Vampire Lee.”

Lee grinned despite not wanting to. “Lee is fine. It’s only the wankers around here who call me Vampire Lee.” He twirled a finger around the bar before moving to one of the idiots who looked a millisecond away from calling out for Vampire Lee.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon woke to a scream ricocheting through the room. The long-sleeved T-shirt and pajama bottoms were clinging to his sweaty skin, and he pulled in one hasty breath after the other.

The ceiling lamp was on. He always left it on, so he’d be able to see the room the moment he woke. Two large windows faced the backyard of the property and the small, forested area. He rolled out of bed and stumbled over to rest his forehead against the glass. He was on the third floor, not underground. The lawn below was where Devin wanted them to have the garden beds. The wall surrounding the property should be tall enough to keep monsters out, but Dillon didn’t trust it. The future kitchen garden bathed in sunlight most of the day. Had to mean it was the south side of the house, right?

Dillon suspected his brain had stopped working while he’d been in the underground mansion. Things he’d known, things anyone with common sense and basic education knew without having to think, eluded him.

He might not have been a genius before, but now he felt stupid. As if his brain had lost the ability to put simple things together.

His windows faced south, but he had to think about it for it to make sense. Broken.

His mind was broken.

No monsters were visible in the yard. One of the patio lamps cast a faint glow on the grass, and Dillon wondered if someone was out there. He wouldn't go check, but why else would the light be on? He frowned. Was Devin out there? No one else would turn on a light. Monsters saw well in the dark.

Glancing at the clock, his frown deepened. It was twelve minutes past three in the morning. No one should be up now. He looked out the window again. The lamp was on. Fear clawed at him, not fear for himself this time, but fear for Devin. He wasn't out there alone. Mars wouldn't let him. Unless he'd managed to sneak out without waking Mars. Vampires slept.

What if Devin was out there and someone came by? The vampire who'd been to the house. He had seen them, knew both he and Devin were here.

His breathing sped up. He was distantly aware of not thinking rationally, but the patio lamp was on. He didn't make it up, and there was only one person who'd switch it on.

A vampire who wasn't Mars knew they were here. He'd seen them both, would know he could get to them, could grab them when the others weren't looking.

Murrie seldom allowed anyone into the house. He'd had a few people come over for interviews, but then he'd informed Devin and Dillon beforehand, so they could make themselves scarce.

Devin had more knowledge about what was going on than he did since he worked as an assistant for them. Dillon winced. He should do something too.

Everyone told him he didn't have to, and Devin hadn't done anything but live in the house for three years before he'd taken on kitchen duty.

Dillon had only been there for seven months.

If they'd given Devin three years, he could hide in his room a bit longer. If only Murrie had agreed to give him a kitchenette.

A shadow moved over the grass and Dillon's heart jumped to his throat, thrumming so fast he feared it'd break.

He had to make sure Devin wasn't alone on the patio.

Grabbing his phone, he turned on the flashlight before scrolling until Mars's number showed on the screen. He'd never called Mars before. He hadn't called anyone in the house. Below Mars was Murrie's number. He'd preferred to call Murrie, but...

As silently as he could, despite being the only one on this floor, he opened the door and tiptoed out into the corridor. Walking down the stairs, he moved faster than he normally did. Everyone should be asleep. He shouldn't meet anyone.

He passed the second storey and hurried down the last flight. As his bare feet touched the hallway floor, he swallowed around the lump in his throat. He walked through the dark kitchen and stilled when the patio door came into view. It was closed. Spring might be here, but the nights were still chilly, so it made sense to close the door.

He walked closer, holding his breath as he did. There, on one of the wicker chairs, was Devin. A blanket wrapped around him, and a cup cradled in his hands.

He should call Mars. His thumb trembled as he held it over the screen. It wasn't safe for Devin to be out there. Anyone could steal him. But what if Mars was angry at being woken up? Maybe he'd run down here all snarly and fangy, and Devin would be angry with him for ruining the calm.

He could text, but was it any better than calling? Maybe he wouldn't wake. Was it better if he did or not? He hadn't talked to Mars, not since the day after the rescue, when Mars promised he wouldn't use mind control on him ever again. This time around, he'd get to keep his memories, so he'd know what was out there.

Dillon had been rescued by Mars and the others twice. When Devin had been abducted, he'd known Dillon, while Dillon hadn't had a clue who Devin was. Turned out they'd been in the same underground brothel before, but they'd been rescued. Only, the first time, Mars had erased Dillon's memories and let him go. Leonardo had found him again.

He didn't remember the time before Leonardo had caught him the second time, though he had wondered where the scars covering his body had come from. Now he had three years' worth of memories, giving him a constant feed of details about how the scars had ended up on his skin. There wasn't a single spot not covered in bite marks other than his face, feet, and hands. He wore long sleeves and pants all the time so as not to have to look at them.

If a text to Mars would ensure neither he nor Devin ended up as blood slaves again, he could live through Mars's wrath for being woken.

His hands trembled as he typed that Devin was on the patio, and he was going there too to make it harder for anyone to abduct them. Then he put the phone in the pocket of his pajama bottoms and stepped out. It was harder for someone to grab two people than it was to grab one.

Putting himself in danger for a little bit was his way of repaying Devin for having helped get him free.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee walked up the gravel driveway to the manor house for the second time in his life. He could have texted, and he most likely should have, but he wanted to look at Murrie when he spoke to him.

All of last night, he'd waited for someone from the team to swing by the bar, but they hadn't. He had hoped there would be a lull in customers, so he could send a quick text, asking if anyone had time to drop by, but it had been a good night, crowd wise. Then, when he'd finally gotten home, he hadn't wanted to text and risk waking anyone or disturbing them if they were on a mission somewhere.

While trying to force down a cup of coffee, he'd tried to formulate a text only to give up. He had poured the mostly cold liquid into the sink, put on clothes, and walked.

It was a beautiful morning, albeit way earlier than he normally rose, and he hoped people would be awake in the house. It was a weekday, though he suspected they didn't stick to weekdays and weekends in their line of work.

Walking up the stairs, he knocked on the door.

It took a few seconds, then steps approached. The human, Devin, looked up at him. Fear coated the air as he looked at Lee, and he took a quick step back. Lee noted the dark circles under his eyes and winced. "Bad night?"

Devin shrugged. "Nothing unusual. Are you here to see Murrie? I fear they're all in a meeting. It'll be twenty or so minutes longer." Then his eyes narrowed. "You're not on his calendar." And yet Devin must've been the one who opened the gate for him.

“No, I tried to formulate a text that made sense, then figured it would be easier to talk to him instead.”

“And the phone wasn’t working?” Devin’s tone was pleasant, but Lee got the feeling he wasn’t pleased.

“Eh...I wanted to see him.”

“Ah.” Nodding, Devin motioned for him to enter. “He’s in a relationship.”

Lee stared at him. “O-okay.” Then he laughed. “I didn’t mean...I want to see his expressions when I talk to him.”

“It’s what video calls are for.” But now Devin’s cheeks turned a little rosy. “Coffee while you wait?”

“Only if you have some available, you don’t need to make any.”

Devin gestured toward the kitchen. “Have you had breakfast?”

“No, I...No.”

“I was cleaning up, but I can make you something.”

“Oh, no, you don’t need—”

“I have some eggs.” He motioned toward the table in the kitchen, and Lee sat. A plate appeared in front of him, followed by two boiled eggs, butter, a plate with some leftover sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, and a couple of melon slices. Then Devin grabbed two bread rolls from a baking sheet. They had cooled, but Lee could tell they’d been baked this morning.

“Stop. This is more than enough. Way more than enough.” Had there been a display like in a hotel earlier? He looked up at Devin to say something, but footsteps slowly approached the kitchen, and he turned toward the hallway.

Dillon appeared in the doorway, a whimper leaving him as his gaze fell on Lee. Fuck. Then he turned as if to run away.

“Wait!” Devin snatched an egg and a bread roll from Lee’s plate and hurried over to Dillon. “Do you want something to drink?”

Dillon shook his head and made no motion to reach for the offered food.

“Take these. You can eat them in your room.”

Lee noted how Dillon’s hands trembled as he reached for the egg and bread. Damn, was it because of him? Had to be. He’d been about to enter the kitchen, and he must’ve known Devin would be there.

Without a word, Dillon walked away with the food. Lee heard rapid steps on the stairs.

“I’m sorry.” He shouldn’t have come here. Video calls, he should learn how they work.

Devin nodded, then shrugged, and went to grab another bread roll and placed it on his plate. “Sorry for giving your egg away.”

“Looks like he needs it more than I do.”

Devin nodded. “He’s doing better than I did.”



Lee had no idea what he meant, and before he could decide if he should ask or not, there was a buzz, like an intercom. Then a voice asked to be let in through the gate to make a delivery.

Devin's eyes widened, a silent shout taking over his mouth as all the color drained from his face. Lee got to his feet, almost pushing the table away as he got ready to catch him should he faint, but his motions resulted in a blood-curdling scream.

The door to the office burst open, and Mars flew into the room, fangs out and hands raised. The others followed with sharp teeth, claws, and glowing eyes. The air got stuck in Lee's throat. Damn. Luckily, he still had the table between himself and them.

There was a moment of complete silence before Mars took Devin in his arms. Devin curled into him as if he wanted to escape the world. Rei, Faelan, and Hanna all turned to Lee, while Murrie lowered his hands and looked around.

The intercom sounded again, followed by the same voice, but a lot more annoyed this time, repeating their request to be let in through the gate.

It was as if everyone who was in the room took a collective breath, and Lee dared take one too.

Murrie went to push a button somewhere in the hallway before turning to the group. "I ordered a few pallet collars for the garden."

There were a few nods, then all gazes other than Mars's and Devin's turned to Lee.

"What are you doing here?" Murrie frowned at him.

Right. "I...eh...I have some information, but I didn't know how to put it in a text, so I walked over here hoping to catch you, or anyone of you. Devin offered me coffee

while I waited for you to become available, and then..." He gestured at the food he had yet to taste.

Murrie heaved a sigh and looked at Devin who was peeking up from where he'd been hiding his face against Mars's chest.

"I'm sorry, Dev. I should've told you there was a truck coming."

Said truck was driving up the driveway and came to a stop outside the door.

"I'll take care of it." Rei headed for the door, Faelan following him without a word.

Hanna looked around the kitchen. "I'll make the call, see if we can set up a meeting."

"Thank you." Murrie smiled at her as she turned to leave the kitchen.

Mars and Devin edged toward the doorway as well, and Lee wondered if he was scaring everyone away. He met Murrie's gaze with a frown. "What happened?"

Murrie ran a hand through his hair. It looked like he'd done it a few times today already. "A few months ago, an unannounced delivery truck came here, and the driver kidnapped Devin."

Lee winced. Fuck.

"I'm guessing having a vampire he doesn't know in his kitchen and a truck he didn't know would come set him off. As I said last time, PTSD. Everyone is making progress, but it takes time."

Nodding, Lee reached for his coffee. He didn't know what to say. He wanted to ask questions, but he was a stranger, and he didn't know Devin and Dillon.

“Don’t waste the food. Devin would be mad if you didn’t eat when he’s trying to feed you.” Murrie went to grab a cup, poured himself some coffee, and sat across from Lee. “What was it you couldn’t text?”

Lee took a bread roll, tore it in half and smeared some butter on the two halves. “I could have, but I didn’t know how to formulate it.”

Murrie waited.

“When I was working yesterday, Jala’s friend was there. He paid cash, so I didn’t get his real name.”

“His real name?”

“I asked him, and he said it was Aaron, but I’m not sure if he was telling the truth.”

Murrie pursed his lips. “It’s something. I’ll add it to the file.”

Lee nodded, not sure how he should put the rest. He bit into the bread and almost moaned. It was fantastic, and he’d only put butter on. The corner of Murrie’s mouth twitched as if he was trying not to smile.

“You eat like this every day?”

A rumbling chuckle left Murrie. “For the last seven or eight months. We used to take turns cooking. It was awful. Then one night, Devin couldn’t sleep, and I came back home late from an event. He made me some scrambled eggs. I begged him to make breakfast, and he hasn’t left the kitchen since. We’re blessed.”

Lee nodded.

“When I was pouring drinks right before Maybe-Aaron arrived, I was talking to Eli, a regular. He knew I’d been looking for Rei the other night and asked if I’d found him. I said yes, and he wondered if we’d hooked up again.” Lee grimaced, realizing too late he was telling Rei’s boss they’d fucked. Though he’d probably gotten that last time he was here. Or not since he hadn’t been by the door.

“I said no, and we threw some insults around, normal stuff, and right as Maybe-Aaron walked in, Eli said something along the lines of me wanting to live dangerously since I only wanted to fuck jaguars.” He pulled a face. “Nothing is going on between Rei and me, it was a one-time thing, a way to pass some time.”

Murrie grinned at him. “We’re all aware of Rei’s favorite pastime. Not in detail, though sometimes in more detail than we want to, but you don’t have to wince every time you mention him.”

Lee gave a nervous laugh. “Right. The thing is, I sort of let Maybe-Aaron believe we were lovers, or not lovers as in boyfriends, but I made it sound as if it was more than a one-time thing. He was interested in Rei, but not in Rei as a person, but in the fact that he’s a jaguar. He wanted me to introduce him, and all the while the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.”

The sound of a door opening startled Lee, then Rei and Faelan walked in from the other end of the kitchen. Lee looked in their direction. He hadn’t noted the patio door before.

“A few pallet collars for the garden?” Rei glared at Murrie. “I’ve never seen so many pallet collars in my life.”

Murrie grinned. “Devin wants a kitchen garden. I figured you could build it two or three collars high. He can tell you how he wants it, if he wants rows or more potager style or whatever it’s called.”

“There were a lot of yous in there, Murrie.” Faelan’s low rumble had Lee holding back a laugh.

“You caught that, huh? Good. Because there will be another truck with soil coming tomorrow, so as soon as Devin is up for it, have him tell you how he wants it.” Murrie turned his focus to Lee, but there was a sparkle in his eyes.

Faelan growled but stole a bread roll from the baking sheet. “What are you two talking about?”

\* \* \* \*

Dillon was looking out the window. Rei, Faelan, Mars, and Devin were placing pallet collars around the lawn. So far it looked like they were trying out different options. There was a lot of gesturing on Devin’s part and a lot of carrying and moving things around on the others.

He shuddered at the thought of being around Rei, Faelan, and Mars for any amount of time. And being outdoors? Part of him longed for it, but the outdoors was exposed. Anyone could grab him out there. It was safer to remain on the third floor behind closed doors.

He’d been on the patio the night before with Devin, and it had been equal parts terrifying and freeing. Fresh air. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d sat somewhere and breathed fresh air.

When they’d walked inside, Mars had been standing right inside the door. He’d given Dillon a small nod, which he believed was an acknowledgment of the text he’d sent.

He’d then spent the remainder of the night agonizing over said text. Mars must think him insane, believing someone would kidnap them. Not only believing it, but he’d

also taken steps to protect Devin from the unseen monsters out there.

It wasn't until he was halfway down the stairs after he was sure everyone had eaten their breakfast that it hit him—he'd reached out to a monster to help protect him from monsters. Was it the reason Devin was with Mars? Date a vampire to scare away other vampires?

It made sense. Sort of.

Mars loved Devin, of that he had no doubt, but what did Devin get out of it? Safety?

He looked out the window again. Devin was laughing at something, and Rei was grinning at him. It wasn't often Rei grinned, but when he did, it was most often with Devin. Or Dillon shouldn't make assumptions, he hadn't seen enough of Rei to judge him fairly. Maybe he grinned all the time when he was working at his desk.

Dillon left the window to fill a bottle and water the pepper plants Devin had given him. The least he could do was to try to keep them alive now when it looked like they were getting a garden.

Riffling through the seed packs Devin had bought, he read the instructions. Several of these should've been sown already. Tomatoes and carrots and there were some packs of different flowers. Sweet peas.

His breath froze.

A hazy memory of one of the foster homes he'd stayed in rose in his mind. There had been sweet peas growing along one side of the patio. Dillon had spent hours on end on the patio simply smelling them. He hadn't lived there for long, only a few months, but he remembered sweet peas.

He read the instructions and headed for the door. Once he came down the stairs, he stopped. He had no idea where they had pots or soil or anything else he might need. If they had anything at all.

Hanna exited the office, hesitated before she gave him a soft smile and edged toward the kitchen, leaving as much space between them as she possibly could.

“Hanna?”

She stopped and turned to him.

“Are there any pots and eh...potting soil?”

A huge grin stretched her lips. “Yes, Devin bought some. I think he put it in the broom closet in the kitchen. Murrie told him to carry it into the basement, but...” Her voice died away, then she straightened her back. “Devin doesn’t do basements.”

Smart.

Dillon nodded a thanks since he couldn’t find his voice. Basement. He shuddered. For the most part, he forgot there was a basement. Murrie had told him there was a gym down there he was welcome to use. When Dillon had balked, he’d sighed and told him Devin wouldn’t go there either.

Hanna headed for the kitchen and after a few seconds, he followed.

“Look around in there.” She gestured at the broom closet. “And there will be a truck with soil for the garden tomorrow. Murrie informed everyone, so there wouldn’t be more panic attacks.”

Dillon stared at her. “Panic attacks?”

She shrugged. “You missed it? Vampire Lee was here to talk to Murrie, but we were in a meeting, so Devin offered him coffee in the kitchen while he waited.”

Oh, it explained why he’d been there. “I saw him.”

Hanna nodded. “Yeah, but then the buzzer from the gate sounded, and Devin didn’t know Murrie had ordered the pallet collars. So there he was with a strange vampire and another delivery truck coming. He screamed. We rushed out of the meeting. There were some tense moments where Vampire Lee most likely believed we’d kill him.” She shrugged before giving him a quick grin. “Just another day at the office.”

Poor Devin. He might appear more put together than Dillon—and he was—but he struggled too.

“There will be a truck tomorrow. No need to panic about it. And I’m pretty sure Vampire Lee is on our side.”

Pretty sure wasn’t good enough. “Why do you call him Vampire Lee?”

Hanna barked a laugh. “He’s a bartender down at The Rambling Rogue. It’s a shifter bar, though vampires go there too. Some started calling him Vampire Lee, and he asked them not to, so of course, everyone calls him Vampire Lee now.” She was quiet for a few seconds. “I don’t think he cares. He’s pretty easy-going.” Dillon nodded and opened the door to the broom closet.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee poured a beer. It was still early and not a lot of customers were hanging around. Rei would swing by in a few hours. If Maybe-Aaron was there, they'd pretend to be together.

It was Rei's idea. Lee had objected. Not because he minded pretending to be with Rei, they'd hooked up for real, and half the bar was aware of it, but Maybe-Aaron gave him the creeps. He didn't want to subject Rei to any danger.

He realized how stupid it was. Rei could take care of himself, but Lee had seen fighting rings up close and personal. There had been something deadly in Rei's gaze when he'd told Murrie's group about it, and Lee got the feeling Rei had seen fighting rings up close and personal too.

Blowing out a breath, he tried to shake the unease. Rei could take care of himself, and he had a team looking out for him.

"Lee." Jala leaned over the bar; her long sandy-colored hair made up in a strict hairdo.

"Evening, Boss."

She smiled. "I was wondering if you could work tomorrow. I know you're scheduled to be off, but Conan can't make it, and I have someplace I need to be."

Lee nodded. He'd been looking forward to a night off, but... "Yeah, sure. But I won't be alone, right?" Tomorrow was Friday, which most often meant more people and more drinks per person.

“Farkas and Due will handle the door, Geri and Ozzie have the kitchen, Bernadette and Sula have the tables. You can call someone else in if you think you need it.”

Was he in charge? Bernadette could pour drinks if it got too busy. He’d asked her to help out before, and it had gone well. Once the dinner crowd went over to drinking, she could move in behind the bar with him. “I think we’ll manage.”

“Good.” Jala gave him a cold look, and Lee instantly straightened. She’d never been the cuddly kind, but...It might not have anything to do with him, though. Maybe she’s tired.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course.” She walked away. Okay, so maybe it had something to do with him. But she couldn’t know what he was planning with Rei, could she? Nah, she didn’t have a clue what Maybe-Aaron was up to. Jala wouldn’t condone underground fighting.

He went back to pouring drinks, and more and more people trickled in.

“Vampire Lee.” Eli slumped on one of the bar stools.

“Back again?” He grinned and reached for a beer glass.

“Give me a whiskey.”

Hmm, not good. Eli seldom drank anything other than beer. “What’s up?”

“Horrible day at work. The dude I’m working with—”

“What do you do?” Lee should know. He’d been chatting with Eli every week for years.

“Demolition. We’re tearing down a building over on Brook Row.”

Lee hummed. “What happened?”

“We were working, dragging concrete slabs, and all of a sudden, Zain, my partner, was gone. The boss didn’t care, only shouted at me for getting behind, and I had to do the work of two. Fucking asshole.”

“Where did he go? Your partner, I mean.”

“Fuck knows.” Eli reached for the whiskey as soon as Lee placed the tumbler on the bar. “It was as if he vanished into thin air.” He paled a little.

“Maybe he quit?”

Eli frowned at him. “We’ve worked together for two years. He wouldn’t leave me.” Eli looked worried for real, which stirred Lee’s unease again. What the fuck was up with him today? “What...eh...species is he?”

“Cross, but he’s a good guy.”

Shifters were weird with the crossbreeds. They could fuck around with different species, but few wanted to be in an interspecies relationship, and crossbreeds were often shunned by packs, prides, and sleuths.

“Can he shift?” Lee was bad with crossbreeds, but he believed if they were mixes between two shifting species, they could most often shift. If they were mixed with humans, there were no guarantees.

“Partially.”

Lee nodded. So human mix then? It didn't matter other than it would make him weaker. "Maybe he got the stomach flu or something. Have you called him?"

"Several times. He doesn't pick up."

Someone called for Vampire Lee, and he abandoned Eli to his drink. Shortly after, Maybe-Aaron cut through the crowd. Shit.

Lee poured a couple of drinks before nearing him. "Evening." He plastered on a smile. "What can I get you?"

"Beer, please."

Lee got pouring, not asking what kind he wanted this time. He placed the glass in front of him and grabbed his phone in his pocket.

"Texting during working hours?" Maybe-Aaron's voice was neutral, and yet Lee got the feeling he disapproved.

Lee gave him a quick grin with a hint of fang. "Just confirming." He hit Send on his text to Rei and pocketed the phone.

"Who are you hooking up with?" Eli gave him a curious look.

"I don't kiss and tell." Or maybe he did. Grinning, he grabbed a cloth and wiped the bar.

"It's Rei, isn't it? You have that gleam in your eyes."

"What gleam?" What the hell was he talking about?

“You always get a little twinkle when you’re about to do something stupid. Fucking jaguars is stupid, Lee. He can rip you to shreds.”

Lee chuckled. Rei could crush his skull with one bite, but he didn’t plan on fucking Rei again. Not now when they were colleagues, sort of.

“Stupid fucker.” Eli thumped his empty glass. “Give me another.”

He poured the drink and did his best to ignore the way Maybe-Aaron studied him.

It took almost an hour before Rei entered the bar. Lee was afraid Maybe-Aaron would leave before he got there, but he sat nursing his beer the way he’d done the night before.

Rei headed straight for the bar, and when he reached it, he stretched over it as if expecting Lee to kiss him. He did; leaned over and pressed his lips to Rei’s. “Hiya.” He spoke low against his now wet lips, making it sound way more intimate than he and Rei ever had been. Rei smiled at him, which was plain weird. Rei didn’t smile.

“Want a drink?”

“Beer.”

Lee poured him one but made no motion of charging for it. He’d sneak his boyfriend free beers if he had one, right?

“Rei, this is Aaron.” He motioned at Maybe-Aaron. “And you know Eli.”

Rei nodded in greeting.

Eli caught Lee’s gaze and shook his head, but he looked amused, so Lee believed

they were selling the story. When someone called for Vampire Lee, he went back to doing his real job—pouring drinks. He noted Maybe-Aaron and Rei talking. Rei drank his beer as if he was there on a night off, and Lee wondered if he should keep them coming. It was a couple of hours until he got off, and they'd agreed they would leave together. On the other hand, he didn't think a few beers would make Rei any less capable of taking care of himself.

People came and went, he chatted with some of the regulars, and when Rei's glass had been empty for a couple of minutes, Lee poured another beer and switched out the empty glass for a full. Rei caught his hand for a second and squeezed it before letting go with a small caress. Lee winked at him and moved away again.

He kinda liked Rei touching him. It wasn't Rei, it was the feeling of being wanted despite it only being for show. Huh. Maybe he should get a boyfriend.

After an eternity, the crowd was finally thinning out. It was a normal workday tomorrow, even if it was Friday. Lee placed another beer in front of Rei when Eli got to his feet. "I should head home."

"Sleep well."

Eli grimaced. "I doubt I will. Zain still hasn't been in touch."

Fuck. Lee gave Rei a look which was met by a frown. He'd have to explain later.

Soon it was time for the last call. Maybe-Aaron had left a few minutes ago, but Lee and Rei kept the charade going.

It wasn't until they walked out on the street Lee dared take a deep breath and relax his shoulders.

“Bad night?” Rei moved through the dark like the predator he was; gone was the mellow mood he’d exuded in the bar.

“I’ve had low-grade anxiety all night.”

Rei looked around, and the hair on the back of Lee’s neck stood on end again. He slung an arm over Rei’s shoulders, hoping it wouldn’t hinder him should they need to fight someone. How strong a sense of smell did jaguars have? Better than vampires, but all shifters had a better sense of smell than vampires did.

“Why?” Rei spoke so low Lee almost didn’t hear him, and it didn’t help the tension building in him at all.

“My place?”

Rei leaned into him like a lover would—not the way Rei would—which had him suspect someone was watching them. “Yes, let’s get a move on.” It was said in a flirty tone, but Lee listened more to the words than the tone.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon looked around the room. It wasn’t his room, but one of the empty rooms on the third floor. Both windowsills were packed with tomato plants. Or they weren’t plants yet. He’d taken plastic cups, written on them with a permanent marker, and sown tomatoes.

He had filled his windowsills with sweet peas, had beans in the room across from him, marigolds and aster in the room next to it, kale and lettuce in the room next to that, and so on.

Faelan had gone to the store to get him more plastic cups and potting soil, but not

before giving him a concerned look. He got it. For months, Dillon had done nothing, absolutely nothing, and now he was watering hundreds of cups at two in the morning.

Devin had come to check on him before heading to bed, so he suspected Faelan had told on him. It was okay. Devin hadn't given him looks of concern like Faelan had, instead he'd smiled and talked about how awesome it was gonna be to have a garden, and how glad he was Dillon was willing to help.

Dillon wasn't convinced about the helping part, but he wanted sweet peas. And if he was going to smell them, he'd have to be in the garden. Or he could bring some inside, but...

The house had fallen silent some time ago, and when he looked out the window, he could tell the lights had been turned off in the rooms below. He headed to the door and switched off the lamp before he exited the room. It was time for bed.

He hated when it was time for bed.

His body was heavy, his brain sluggish, but the moment he closed his eyes, the monsters were there. Several times a night, he woke up screaming and shaking. Sometimes only a few minutes apart. And he was so tired. So, so tired, and yet he couldn't rest. He feared he'd never be able to rest again.

Brushing his teeth for several long minutes, he glanced out through the bathroom door to the bed. Maybe he'd sleep better if he moved it?

No. He'd already tried it. Several times.

His inability to rest had nothing to do with feng shui or whatever it was called. The sparse room held no personality whatsoever, but he didn't know what to put in it. Murrie had told him he could order things or ask Devin to order things for him.



They'd taken a few hours to order clothes online. Devin hadn't batted an eye when Dillon had told him he wanted long sleeves and full-length pants even for bed.

Devin made him feel like less of a freak, but it didn't mean he wanted to spend time with him.

He was grateful. He truly was, but part of him wanted to tell Devin to fuck off. He wanted to snarl at Murrie for looking worried, wanted to punch Faelan for looking at him with concern in his eyes.

He wouldn't. He was grateful. Part of him was so grateful he wanted to fling his arms around their necks and hug them so tightly they couldn't breathe, wanted them to hug him back. Another part of him was freaking out at the mere thought of touching anyone.

They were strong. All of them, apart from maybe Devin, could hold him down.

Mars and Murrie had tried to find his parents without any luck. He'd been dumped outside a church when no more than a week or two old.

Murrie had asked for a blood sample, and then a couple of weeks later Rei had given him a toothy grin while congratulating him on having at least some good genes. Dillon hadn't understood a word he'd said until Murrie, later in the day, had explained the DNA test had come back, and Dillon was twenty-five percent cat. They couldn't say which type of cat, but there had been a felid shifter in his family tree.

It mattered little. Dillon had no traits, other than healing faster than humans. It wasn't anything he'd noticed before but considering how many blood slaves had died during the time he'd been in the underground mansion, maybe Mars and Murrie were correct when they claimed he had enhanced healing.

He wished he'd had claws.

With a sigh, he climbed into bed. The ceiling lamp shone brightly when he closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Rei stepped away from Lee the moment they entered the apartment building. "Is there another way out? Basement? Fire escape?" It was a low whisper, and Lee nodded a reply.

Instead of heading up the stairs toward his apartment, he tugged Rei in the direction of the basement. There was a laundry room and storage for bicycles for the tenants.

They moved quickly and soundlessly. Lee's heart was thudding in his ears, but he ignored it. He heard the door to the stairway open and mentally cursed. They'd been followed. He'd suspected but had hoped it was paranoia.

As quietly as he could, he opened the door leading out into the parking lot behind the building. If they crossed it, they'd be in a small park with a swing set, some trees, and a concrete grill and some benches the tenants were allowed to use.

He steered toward the trees. "Who is it?"

"No scent I recognize, but they waited for us outside the bar and followed us all the way."

Lee nodded. He couldn't scent anyone, but he'd had the feeling of being followed.

"Let's head to the house. You can crash there tonight."

Lee didn't argue, and they moved fast. Lee could've gone faster, but he kept the same pace as Rei, which was way faster than a human. Soon they reached the area where Rei and the others lived.

"What was Eli talking about?"

"Huh?" Lee looked over at Rei, who slowed to a normal walk. Lee followed suit.

"Eli, when he said goodbye. You gave me a look."

Right. "Yeah, his work partner went missing during the day. Crossbreed. Eli's boss didn't care, but Eli claimed he'd never leave without telling him, and he tried calling him several times, but he didn't pick up."

"A missing person case?"

"Eli is worried."

Rei frowned but didn't speak for several seconds. Then he heaved a deep sigh. "It's never good when crossbreeds go missing."

No, of course not. It wasn't good when anyone went missing, but was it worse when it was crossbreeds? "Why?"

"There is always some shit. A pack who doesn't want them, a parent or other relative. It's always a fucking mess, and there is always the question if the pack will claim them or not. If you kidnap a wolf, you know you have an entire pack to deal with. If you kidnap a crossbreed, you might not have to deal with anyone."

Lee didn't reply. Part of him wanted to argue, but he suspected Rei was right. Eli had said his boss hadn't cared about Zain going missing. "Zain."

“What?”

“Eli’s work partner’s name is Zain. I don’t know his last name. Crossbreed. Can partially shift, which means part human, right?”

Rei gave a short nod right as they reached the gate. Instead of pressing the button to be let in, Rei kept going until they reached a grid door a few steps away. He punched in a combination of digits on the code lock and unlocked it.

“When do you have to leave tomorrow?” Rei motioned for him to go in and closed the grid door behind them once he had.

“I was supposed to be off tomorrow, but Jala asked me to cover for Conan since he was unable to come in, and she was busy elsewhere.”

“Where?”

Lee frowned at him. “No idea.”

“If I set up a morning meeting with everyone, will you be able to attend?”

“Yeah, of course.” How early was morning?

Rei walked toward the house, unlocked the door with a code, and motioned for Lee to enter. Before he’d closed and locked the door, he had his phone up. “Murrie has a Zoom meeting with someone at eight, but it looks like everyone can do nine. That okay with you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Rei tapped on the screen for a few seconds, pocketed it, and looked up at Lee. “There

are rooms on the third floor.”

He strode toward a built-in closet underneath the stairs. “Everyone has their own sheets and towels and stuff in their rooms, but we have a few spare ones here.” He stacked what Lee assumed was a sheet, duvet cover, and pillowcases on his palm, then he reached farther in and pulled out a toothbrush and toothpaste, followed by a towel. Then he looked at Lee and pulled out a bath towel as well.

“It’s the best I can do.” He handed the pile over to Lee.

“Better than many hotels.”

Rei chuckled. “Wait until breakfast. I fucking love Devin.” He grinned at Lee. “Breakfast is served at seven, but Devin doesn’t start to clean it away until everyone has eaten. Apart from Dillon. He has his own schedule.”

Lee nodded. “Which room should I take?”

“Dillon’s is the first door you see when you step into the corridor. All the others are available.”

“Okay.”

They stood unmoving for a few seconds, then Rei sighed. “You think they planned on taking both of us or only me?”

Lee hadn’t wanted to think. He still didn’t. “How do you get someone to fight if he’s unwilling?”

Rei’s eyes shifted to yellow. “Blackmail?”

“Got any dirt on you they can use?”

A slow shake of his head. “No, I don’t think so. I…”

“Siblings, lovers, friends they could threaten to hurt if you don’t do it?”

“No. No siblings, no lovers I care about, and my friends are all in this house.” He looked at Lee. “Maybe it’s you they want.”

Lee snorted. “I’m not nearly special enough. You’re a freaking jaguar. They can get a mediocre vampire anywhere, but a jaguar…” He shook his head. Then a thought hit him. “Unless they think we’re a couple for real. Take us both, and you’ll fight to protect me?”

Rei groaned. “We shouldn’t have played a happy couple.”

“But you were such a sweet boyfriend.” Grinning, Lee looked toward the stairs. The house was so silent he never would’ve guessed seven people lived there.

“Got free beer out of it.”

Lee barked a laugh, then remembered people were trying to sleep and clamped his mouth shut.

“Right, we’ll discuss it with the others tomorrow. Maybe we could have a very loud, very public breakup.”

Lee grimaced. “Or I allow myself to get taken.” Ice slithered through his veins. “But then you better get me out of there faster than fast because I don’t do well in those environments.”

Rei looked at him for a long time, seeing more than Lee wanted him to. “I think Murrie will say no, but we can talk about it tomorrow.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

It started as it always did. A firm grip that soon turned to bruising. Then pain, so much pain, only to have it switch. Dillon's brain knew there was pain, but his body reacted with pleasure.

He was bleeding, but he was craving it, at the same time as a muted voice screamed in his mind, reminding him he was dying. Nausea climbed his throat. Then Leonardo's excited laugh filled his ears.

With Leonardo, there was never any pleasure, and he preferred it. Preferred the pain to the fake gratification. Preferred the tearing to the false euphoria.

His scream overrode Leonardo's laugh. Blood was seeping out of his every pore, making his clothes stick to his body.

The last bit confused him. He wasn't allowed clothes when with Leonardo.

Then the pain was back, and he screamed again. The coppery scent of spilled blood filled his nostrils.

A loud bang sounded, and he struggled, pictured Murrie, Mars, and Rei rush into the room. The voice in his mind told him it wasn't happening now. It was a memory from before. He wasn't on a pink bed now. He was in a brightly lit room. On the third floor. Not underground.

Another loud bang sounded, then Dillon flew out of bed. Someone was coming into his room.



His brain couldn't make sense of what he was seeing.

The door swung open with a jarring crack, the deadbolt breaking, or was it the frame? Either way, something otherworldly had forced his door open. Ice washed over him as if the air in the corridor had turned frigid.

A tall form filled the doorway. Not freakishly big like Murrie and Faelan, but not small like Devon. And strong. Much, much stronger than Dillon.

He screamed, and the vampire closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. He recognized him now. A hand landed on his mouth, and Dillon fought. He pulled and jerked, kicked and shoved, but the hand didn't go anywhere. He'd known this would happen. Had known he'd come back for them. Had he already taken Devin? Devin was more valuable than he was.

"Fuck. Shit. Sorry." A frantic look took over Vampire Lee's face. "Shh...Calm down."

Dillon was not calming down. The room spun around him, and he couldn't breathe.

"Fuck." The word was nothing more than a hiss, then Lee looked into his eyes, and if Dillon believed he'd been panicking before, it was nothing compared to the foul, black fear taking over now.

"No, no, no. Please calm down. I wasn't going to...Fuck."

Vampire Lee moved around him, pressing Dillon's back against his bare chest. "I wasn't going to enthrall you."

Dillon fought for a few more seconds, then stilled. He was no match for a vampire.

“Good. Easy.” Vampire Lee spoke right next to his ear. “If I remove my hand, will you stop screaming?”

He wasn’t screaming, was he? Maybe. He made noises with each exhale, but he didn’t want to anger Vampire Lee any more than he already had, so he nodded.

Vampire Lee made a sound at the back of his throat, it could be one of annoyance, but Dillon wasn’t sure. “I’m sorry, wee yin. I shouldn’t have come in here.” He was quiet for what felt like hours but couldn’t be more than a few minutes. Dillon focused on breathing and not allowing the shivers too much room.

“Is no one coming?”

Coming? Who would be coming? Had he brought friends? Why was he here? It had to be in the middle of the night. Murrie didn’t have meetings in the middle of the night.

“Dillon?”

He nodded and stared at the doorway. Was anyone coming?

“Won’t Rei or Murrie come?”

Dillon tried to find his voice several times without luck.

“Dillon?” Vampire Lee spoke softly, and he nodded again.

“The others, why aren’t they rushing up the stairs?”

“The others?” His voice shook, and it was nothing more than a whisper. Which others did he mean? His vampire friends?

“You screamed, will no one come to check on you?”

Dillon shook his head.

“They must’ve heard me break the door.”

He shrugged. Did Vampire Lee want them to come?

“Are you okay up there?” Rei’s voice traveled the stairs.

“Yeah.” Vampire Lee sounded weary. “I think I fucked up.”

A grunt was all the response there was. “Is Dillon okay?”

He was quiet for several seconds, but when Dillon didn’t reply he sighed. “A little shaken, I think, but physically unharmed.”

“Right, try to get some rest.”

“I broke the door.” Vampire Lee still hadn’t moved away from him.

A not-so-silent yawn sounded halfway down the stairs. “I heard. Normally, unless something shatters, we don’t break in.”

“Got it. I’ll pay to have it fixed.”

Rei grunted a reply and disappeared. Dillon didn’t hear him move away, but he could sense it.

“I’m sorry.” Vampire Lee spoke lower. “I heard you scream, and I...I don’t know. I thought you were in danger.”

Dillon wasn't sure he believed him, but he had screamed.

\* \* \* \*

Lee had fucked up. He'd been halfway to sleep, in the dreamy in-between state, when a muffled cry had sounded. A second later, it had been a gut-wrenching scream, and all he could think of was to get to whomever was screaming before the one hurting them could do more damage.

It wasn't until he was out of bed that he realized it had to be Dillon, and everyone else was a floor below. If someone was hurting Dillon, the team wouldn't get there in time to rescue him. He'd thrown himself at the locked door, not thinking for a second how it would make Dillon feel. He'd tumbled into his room wearing nothing but a pair of black trunks.

"Hey." He squeezed Dillon's shoulder but didn't dare turn him around to have him look into his eyes. He hadn't seen panic like that in...maybe ever. So raw.

Dillon didn't move or talk.

"Dillon?"

A nod.

"Do you want to switch rooms? The door won't close."

He shook his head, then nodded, then shook his head. Great. Lee loved a man who knew what he wanted.

Gods, he was such a wanker. This was his fault.

“Want to go to bed? I can... You can push a dresser or something in front of the door when I’ve left.”

Dillon half-turned but caught himself before looking at Lee.

“Want to take my bed instead? I’m in the room next to this, and it has a working door.”

“Is someone coming?”

Lee listened for steps, but he couldn’t hear anything. “I don’t think so.”

“You said someone was coming.”

Had he? “No, I asked you if anyone was coming.”

When Dillon didn’t reply, he squeezed his shoulder again. Fuck, he should stop touching him, but his hand didn’t want to move.

“Do you want to stay in this bed, or do you want to go crash in mine?”

A headshake.

“I’m pretty slow, so it’d be better if you spelled things out for me. Do you want to sleep in this bed?”

Dillon shook his head again.

“Come on then, let’s go to my room.”

Another shake of the head.

“It’s like three in the morning. We’re not getting up now. Pick a bed.”

No reaction.

Lee took a deep breath before pushing Dillon forward. He didn’t struggle, didn’t scream, didn’t try to get away, but Lee wasn’t sure he was all there. It was as if a shell was moving out the door. He didn’t turn on his own, so Lee did it for him. Yup, he’d tucked himself away.

The door to his room was open, and he gently shoved Dillon inside and closed and locked it behind him. He waited for a moment to see if a new bout of panic would set in at the sound of the lock clicking shut, but nothing.

“Come on. Crawl into bed.”

To Lee’s surprise, Dillon did. Maybe it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. He didn’t know what had happened to him, but since he was a human in a supernatural world, it must be connected to shifters or vampires. And judging by the reaction to Lee trying to make eye contact, he could only guess. Fucking shit.

“I’ll sleep on the floor.” Lee eyed the dark floor. He didn’t think it had been vacuumed in some time, but it didn’t matter. He needed to get a few hours’ sleep, or he’d be useless at work tomorrow.

“There are enough monsters in my head. I don’t need one under my bed too.”

Lee huffed a laugh. A coherent sentence.

“I’m the least monstrous monster there is, sweetheart. Promise.”

No reply. Lee waited for a few seconds, but when Dillon didn’t speak again, he

neared the bed.

Dillon shuddered and curled into himself. Lee swallowed a sigh and stretched out on the bed on top of the cover, then turned around, so his back was toward Dillon.

It was a queen-sized bed. Two could sleep in it without touching. Dillon would be okay. He hoped.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon didn't move. There was a vampire in his bed. Or more accurately, he was in a vampire's bed.

"Breathe."

He jerked at Vampire Lee's softly spoken word. He'd turned his back to him, no scary eyes in sight. Dillon let out a shaky breath.

"There you go."

Silence descended again and tension crept into Dillon. Waiting was the worst.

Vampire Lee made a sound at the back of his throat, one of dismay, Dillon believed.

"Look." Vampire Lee started to turn, only to abort the motion and continue to have his back turned to Dillon. "I won't touch you. I won't bite you or do...whatever you think I'll do."

Dillon should be quiet. Talking back never got him anywhere. Once he'd been a person who talked back. Before. He had been someone who expressed his opinions, argued his beliefs, took charge when it suited him, but somewhere during the memory

gap, he'd lost the ability.

Now he wasn't sure he had opinions.

"How would I know? You'd wipe my memory, and I wouldn't have a clue what you'd done."

Another sound left Vampire Lee. "I won't gore my eyes out. I like them too much, but I can promise not to look into yours."

"I wouldn't know if you did."

"Right. Sorry." Vampire Lee blew out a breath. "I'll stay right here, turned this way, and you can relax on your side."

Dillon snorted, then regretted it. What if Vampire Lee got angry with him? "You can turn around faster than I can blink. And I know you don't need to look into my eyes. Maybe to wipe my memories, but not to...do other things."

"Move closer then, so I can't turn around in the blink of an eye."

"Are you insane?" Dillon bit his tongue. He hadn't meant to say those words out loud. He could keep commentary up in his head all he wanted, but speaking never did any good.

Vampire Lee chuckled. "Only a little." He reached behind him and patted the mattress. "Come on, sweetness. Cuddle me."

"No way."

"The older a vampire is, the more powerful they are."



Dillon gave a minuscule nod. He hadn't been sure, but he'd guessed it was the case.

"Mars is pretty old."

Was he? He didn't look old. Dark and broody unless Devin was nearby, but Dillon wouldn't describe him as old.

"I'm not. I'm one hundred thirteen. Which I would guess is about one-third of how old Mars is, maybe less. You trust him, right?"

"No."

Lee grunted. "You can trust him. Deep down, I think you know you can trust him."

Dillon had sent him a text. He'd turned to Mars when he was afraid of going out on the patio when he feared someone would get to Devin.

When Dillon didn't reply, Vampire Lee continued. "I'm not nearly as powerful as he is. I'm not saying I can't control your mind, but I need eye contact to do it. Mars can influence you without looking at you. I could maybe nudge you if I tried, but I can't make you do something you don't want to do without looking into your eyes."

It didn't matter, since he could make Dillon forget he'd looked into his eyes.

"Come on, snuggle up, and let's get some sleep."

"Why would I cuddle with you?" He was insane.

"Because if you come closer, I can't turn around and look at you without rolling over you, and you'd notice."

“But it wouldn’t matter since you’d look into my eyes a second later and make me forget all about it.”

Vampire Lee moved toward him, back first, until he was in the middle of the bed and Dillon could pick between falling off the mattress or touching him.

He sighed and rested his forehead between Vampire Lee’s shoulder blades.

“Good boy.” Vampire Lee didn’t move. “Now sleep.”

Dillon snorted but closed his eyes.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee woke to heat surrounding him and groaned before reaching down and palming his hard cock. He hoped whoever he'd hooked up with last night wasn't in too much of a hurry this morning because he was horny as hell.

Cracking an eye open, the night came flashing back, and he yanked his hand away from his groin. Pissing hell.

The regular breaths ghosting over his bare back told him Dillon was still asleep. As gently as he could, he moved away.

He'd only moved an inch when a whimper sounded, followed by flailing arms.

"Easy. It's a dream." He reached behind him and patted Dillon's thigh. Striped cotton pajama bottoms. Lee had seen them the night before, but he'd had other things on his mind than paying attention to what Dillon was wearing.

A knee hit him in the ass, and he grabbed it. Not hard, but hard enough to keep Dillon from kicking him. "Dillon."

He didn't turn around, kept his back to Dillon, but it was easy to tell the moment he woke. His entire body went stiff, and he didn't breathe.

"Are you with me?" He didn't look over his shoulder, but he wanted to. He wanted to see Dillon relaxed and sleep-rumpled. Except he wasn't relaxed. Lee released his hold on his knee.

"Vampire Lee." It wasn't a question, more a defeated statement.

“Lee. When you’ve slept with me, it’s against the law to call me Vampire Lee.”

He’d hoped for a laugh or maybe a snort, but Dillon didn’t make a sound.

“Ready for some breakfast?” He didn’t know what time it was, but it was light outside and looked as if it’d been for a while.

“Eh…” Silence descended again, and Lee almost looked over his shoulder. Almost.

“Come on.” He rolled away from Dillon and got out of bed. He reached for his clothes on the armchair in the corner and got dressed. Dillon still hadn’t moved on the bed, and Lee sneaked a quick glance. He was staring at the ceiling, a small crease between his brows.

“Dillon.”

Dillon turned his way but yanked his gaze away before their eyes could meet. “Come on, breakfast. I have a meeting with the guys after.”

“The guys?”

“Your roommates. Some weird things are going on.”

Dillon stiffened, and Lee mentally cursed himself. Murrie had told him Dillon didn’t work for them. Maybe it meant they weren’t telling him things.

“What kind of things?”

Lee was quiet for a bit, long enough for Dillon to look at him. Not meeting his eyes but looking at his chest or maybe chin. “What kind of things?” There was an almost steely tone in his voice, and Lee was pleased to hear it.

“Fighting ring, we think. I heard some shit while working and told Murrie about it. Then one of the guys we suspect is involved took an interest in Rei, so we pretended to be a couple. When we left the bar yesterday, someone followed us to my apartment, so we snuck out and went here instead.”

“Vampires.” It wasn’t a question, but Lee treated it as if it had been.

“Shifters. I can’t promise no vampires are involved, of course. There most likely are some fighting. People like betting on interspecies fights. Wankers.” He hadn’t meant to snarl the last bit, but it was how it came out.

Dillon’s eyes widened. “Interspecies fights?”

“A vampire and shifter locked in a cage with no way out until one is dead or gravely injured. Some matches are to the death, others are not. Time will tell which kind we’re dealing with here.” Tension crept into Lee, and he curled his hands into fists.

“And they want Rei?” Dillon turned paler than before.

“Jaguars are rare, many would pay good money to see him fight.”

Dillon pushed up until he was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed. Lee wanted to crawl back in there with him. He looked away. Dillon wouldn’t want him to.

“You can’t let them have him.”

Lee sent him a quick grin. “You’re giving me far too much credit. I have little say in what’s going on in the world, but I’ll do my best to keep Rei safe. Though he can most likely do a better job of it than I can. He’s a jaguar, Dillon. You don’t need to worry about him.”

Unless they threw him in a pit with someone equally dangerous, of course. Or tipped the scales. Lee had seen how they mutilated some fighters to even the odds. A wave of nausea washed over him. Nope, not thinking about it.

Plus, wasn't the plan for him to play leverage? It was the idea that had popped up in his mind when they'd come here last night. Pretend to be Rei's lover, have them kidnap him or whatever to get Rei to come to them, only the entire fucking team would swarm the place and take everyone down. Yup, it was the plan. No one was to fight anyone in a cage. Lee didn't do cages, and he sure as fuck didn't subject his lovers, one-night stands or otherwise, to cages either.

"Come on. Breakfast."

To his surprise, Dillon got off the bed and walked out of the room in front of him.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon hesitated outside his broken door. "You can go downstairs. I'll get dressed."

"I'll wait."

Hiding a grimace, Dillon entered the room. He'd spent the night in the same room as Vampire Lee—Lee now when they'd slept together. He huffed then quieted. How well did vampires hear? Not as well as shifters, he didn't think.

He had slept. It was what puzzled him the most. He'd slept in the same bed as a vampire, his forehead resting against his bare back, and he didn't think Lee had messed with him.

Clenching his ass, he then ran his fingers over his throat. No twinges and no sore spots. Maybe he'd fucked Lee. He fondled his limp dick. It had been limp for months,

ever since he got out of the underground mansion. Part of him worried about it, another part couldn't care less.

Nope, he didn't think it had been used. No crusty semen or other signs, and his pajama bottoms were tied the same way they always were. On the other hand, if Lee had told him to tie them, he'd have tied them the same way he always did.

"When you said I've slept with you, you didn't mean..." He let the words hang in the air, pretty sure Lee could hear him through the mostly closed door. It wasn't shut all the way since it was broken, and he believed Lee was still waiting for him in the corridor.

The door slowly swung open. Lee's hand splayed on it, and his face was blank as he looked into the room and found Dillon standing in the middle of it. "What did you just ask me?" The emphasis on the what made Dillon wince.

"You said we'd slept together, but I can't feel—"

"Oh my God." Lee took a couple of steps into the room and shoved the door closed behind him only to shove it again when it opened a crack after he let go of it. A grunt of annoyance left him, then he moved. A little too fast for Dillon's comfort, but he remained standing in the same spot.

"You did not ask me..." A look of disbelief took over Lee's face, then he shook his head. "Babe, if we ever fuck, you'll know. Not that...you're human, and...I eh...like..." Lee rubbed his neck. "I want my lovers aware and willing when they are in my bed."

"Yeah, right." Dillon snorted and regretted it half a second before the sound manifested in the room. Shit, he was stupid.

Lee stiffened, gone was the mellow guy he'd woken up next to, and before him stood a predator. Dillon took a stumbling step back. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" Damn.

Lee took a shuddering breath and rolled his shoulders. "Nothing to be sorry about. Come on, get dressed."

He didn't dare object. Yanking his shirt over his head, he then dove for the dresser for another long-sleeved shirt. Privacy was a commodity, and self-consciousness had been beaten out of him a long time ago.

Next, he yanked off the pajama bottoms, keeping his back to Lee. He'd change his underwear later. He found a pair of jeans, bought to look worn, and he liked the soft feel of them. Clothes were good. After having lived years mostly being naked, he really, really liked clothes. He didn't care what they looked like as long as they were on his body.

Turning around, he kept his gaze on the floor. "Ready."

Lee didn't move for several seconds, and Dillon didn't dare look at him.

"Let's go." The broken whisper had Dillon stumbling forward. Why had he whispered?

\* \* \* \*

Lee didn't know if he breathed a single time on the way down to the kitchen. It was a miracle he didn't fall on the stairs since all he could see was the image of Dillon tearing his shirt over his head in jerky movements. His skin was ruined by bite mark upon bite mark. One scar melted into another, creating more and more arched ridges, and bile teased the back of Lee's throat.



Lee had tasted human blood once, from a bag. He hadn't understood what the hype was about. He'd had a couple of lovers through the years who'd allowed him to bite them, and it had been awesome. It had always turned him on to see his bite on their skin. But they had all been shifters and healed fast, not to mention he'd licked the punctures to help it along. He didn't get off on hurting and ruining anyone. The puncture wounds would give him a thrill, then he'd lick them closed and watch them melt away.

Dillon looked like someone had thrown him in a pool with giant piranhas, and it wasn't the way a vampire bite should look. Someone, several someones, had bitten into him with all their teeth, not only their fangs.

The floor shook underneath his feet.

PTSD. For fuck's sake. And Devin had said Dillon did better than he had. How bad had it been for Devin?

No wonder Mars had looked like he wanted to kill him when he'd knocked on the door unannounced. Fucking hell. Fucking, fucking hell. And he'd forced Dillon into his bed last night, and been pissed when he hinted Lee might have...He gulped down a breath. There it was, oxygen. He blew out a shuddering sigh, his gaze glued on Dillon's neck. He walked tall and proud in front of him, and it wasn't until they reached the bottom floor, he sunk into himself, almost shrinking on the spot. There were voices in the kitchen.

"Want to go in there?"

Dillon shook his head.

"Want me to get you something?"

Another headshake.

“You should eat something.” He was too thin. Lee had always been lean and wiry, but Dillon looked like someone who built muscles if given the right nutrition and exercise. “Coffee? A sandwich.”

Before Dillon could reply, if he’d meant to reply, Rei appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. A cup of tea in one hand and a plate with two sandwiches with cheese and tomato slices. He handed them to Dillon without a word, then he met Lee’s gaze. “Grab something to eat, then we’ll get the meeting going.”

Dillon slipped away, walked up the stairs again, and Lee stood unmoving until he’d disappeared from view. “What the fuck happened to him?” He kept his voice low to make sure Dillon didn’t hear, and he didn’t think Devin could hear him either, even if he was right inside the kitchen door.

“Blood slave. We got him out seven-eight months ago.” Rei didn’t smile. He didn’t look threatening, but there was something dark lurking behind his eyes. “What happened?” When Lee didn’t answer right away, he pressed. “With the door.”

“I panicked. I was half asleep when I heard a whimper, then a scream, and I don’t know what I was thinking. That you wouldn’t make it up in time from the floor below, and I was the only one close enough. I forced the door open, and...it was a dream.”

Rei nodded. “Yeah, I should’ve warned you. We’ve been listening to nightmares for three years, but I remember when we first took Devin in. I don’t think anyone slept for weeks. Faelan switched rooms with Mars to not have to be the one closest to him.” Rei flashed fangs. “I’d kill those fuckers all over again if I was given the chance.”

“They’re...”

“Yeah. We got the slaves out and slaughtered most of the others. A few of the...customers were brought in for questioning, but the ones who ran it are dead. Doesn’t mean there aren’t more places out there, of course, but we got Devin and Dillon out at least. Has to count for something.” He shrugged and motioned for Lee to follow him into the kitchen.

Has to count for something. Lee wasn’t sure what he’d believed they did, but this wasn’t it. He’d heard whispers at the bar and knew Rei did something in law enforcement. He hadn’t been thinking about blood slaves or whatever else they worked with. Kidnappings, since he’d talked about missing crossbreeds the night before.

With a shaky breath, he walked into the kitchen.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon drank his tea and ate half a sandwich, then he hung around in his room, but he didn't feel safe there. The door didn't want to stay closed.

There was no one on the third floor. Lee must've left. Doors didn't help against monsters, so it shouldn't matter, but he wanted a room with one he could close and lock. It kept sliding open, and it made his skin crawl.

When he'd first come here, Devin had shown him the third floor, explained how everyone else had a room on the second, and how Kenia's would become available soon if he wanted it—he didn't. An entire floor to himself. The third floor, far away from any underground rooms, and every room had windows. But he'd still had a hard time picking which room he'd be staying in.

He was choosing between one of the two farthest down in the corridor or the one closest to the stairs. Part of him wanted to be as far away from the stairs as he could get, so when people came up, they wouldn't reach his room first. Then his mind had played little movie snippets, most likely suppressed memories, of him running as fast as he could through a corridor to be able to reach the stairs—in the dream, memory, fantasy, whatever, the stairs led up, not down.

His mind provided him with graphic images of what happened when you tried to run away from a vampire, and in the end, he picked the room closest to the stairs. If he made it down the stairs or at least halfway down the stairs, Devin might hear him. Back then, Devin had been the only one he'd dared trust.

It had shifted. Nowadays, he didn't think Murrie, Rei, Hanna, or Faelan would hurt him. At least not on purpose. They might snap, might lose control, but if he rushed

down the stairs and screamed for help, he believed they would help him. And Mars had Devin. Once he'd been convinced Devin wasn't being kept a prisoner, forced to be with Mars, he'd seen him a little differently.

Mars loved Devin, and he was starting to see that maybe Devin loved Mars too. Fangs and all. Or he didn't know if he loved his fangs. He wouldn't ask.

Devin lit up when Mars entered the room he was in, and had Mars been able to control Devin's mind, he might have believed Mars was forcing him to act as he did, but he couldn't. Devin was immune to mind control, and he loved Mars, messed up as it was.

Though who was he to talk about messed up? He'd slept in the same bed as Lee and enjoyed it. Maybe enjoy was the wrong word, but he'd slept better than he had in...as long as he could remember. For a few hours, but a few hours of uninterrupted sleep were more than he'd had in years.

A beeping yanked him out of his head, and he walked over to the window. A truck was backing around the house close to where Devin had made the others place his garden beds the way he wanted them. Rei, Mars, and Devin were there, as was Lee.

Dillon stared. What was Lee doing there?

The truck dumped a mountain of soil on the ground. Mars talked to the driver, nodded and waved, and soon the truck was rolling away. Devin hung back, while the other three grabbed spades and a wheelbarrow and got to work.

Two shoveled dirt and the third pushed the wheelbarrow to different pallet collars and tipped the contents inside. Devin went after and raked it even.

They worked like a well-oiled machine, and Dillon stared, mesmerized. Soon shirts

were tossed aside, and the May sun was caressing bare skin stretched over defined muscles. A younger, more carefree Dillon would've enjoyed the show. He continued to watch. Shoulders. He'd always loved shoulders. Muscles moving, the hollow where the collarbone started was his favorite spot on the body.

Lee looked up and for a second their gazes met, then Dillon turned away. Could vampires enthrall you through glass? He glanced back. Lee was saying something to Rei, who grinned before shoveling more soil into the wheelbarrow.

Then he glanced up at Dillon again and dipped his head in a small nod. Dillon kept looking.

It would be nice to feel the sun on his skin. He wasn't going outside, and he didn't think he'd ever walk anywhere without wearing a long-sleeved shirt ever again, but it would've been nice to feel the sun on his skin.

\* \* \* \*

After Lee had helped Devin get the soil into the pallet collars, he had headed to work. He was early, but he didn't care. Shoveling soil should've sucked, but it hadn't. He didn't use his body for manual labor often, and it had been nice to get to know Devin a little better.

He'd been careful not to stand too close, not move too fast, things he never bothered with otherwise, but it had been worth it to see Devin relax more and more as they worked. And he'd teased both Mars and Rei. Maybe Dillon would tease one day too. He wanted to hear Dillon tease someone.

When they were done, he'd gone home to take a shower, and it had been weird. His apartment had been...weird was the best word he could come up with. He didn't think he was being watched, but there was a little niggling, a little something that

didn't quite get the hairs at the back of his neck to stand, but they sure as hell didn't feel as they normally did.

He'd thrown on clothes and rushed off to work. If he was to be in charge of the bar tonight, he might as well be prepared for anything.

Rei would come an hour or two before closing time. Hanna and Faelan would also swing by, but they'd nixed his idea of allowing himself to be taken captive. He and Rei would keep up the pretense of seeing each other to see if Maybe-Aaron would say or do something.

"Lee."

Lee looked up from the lemons he was slicing. "Jala, I thought you'd be off today."

She put a hand on the bar and leaned a little closer. Scenting him? He'd showered and lemons had a strong scent to them, but how good was lions' sense of smell? And what was she trying to scent? "I heard you're dating Rei the jaguar."

He grinned at her, and she rolled her eyes. "One day, someone's gonna rip your throat out. Why do you always have to fuck the most dangerous person in the room?" She chuckled, and he almost told her it was all for show, but something held him back. She'd never asked about his previous lovers. Granted, he'd never leaned over the bar to kiss any of them in plain sight either.

"Strong men do it for me."

"I figured that out a long time ago. As far as kinks go, it's not the worst, but...be careful."

Be careful? Rei might be dangerous, but he wasn't dangerous to him. "Are you

staying here tonight?”

“No, I’m heading out in a minute.” She tilted her head and studied him. “Where is he now?”

“Who?”

“Rei, stupid.”

Grinning, Lee cut another lemon slice. “At home, I think.”

“You’re living together?”

What the fuck? She never asked about his private life. “Not officially, not yet at least.”

“Too afraid to break the hearts of the dangerous men lusting for you?” She wiggled her eyebrows, and Lee barked a laugh. He’d never seen her do anything similar.

“I hate to break hearts; you know I do.” She wouldn’t, since they never talked like this. He was about to start slicing lemons again when Maybe-Aaron stepped in. Who’d let him in? Lee did his best not to tense.

“Ready to go?” Maybe-Aaron didn’t so much as look at Lee, which was...rude. Bastard.

“Evening Aaron, want me to pour you a beer?” He made a show of putting the knife down.

“No, we’re heading out.” Jala took a step in Maybe-Aaron’s direction. “I won’t be able to answer my phone, but you can text me if you need to.”



Lee nodded, doing his damndest not to look dumbstruck. What the fuck was going on? Was Jala dating Maybe-Aaron? Nah, she had better taste, didn't she? And bears and lions didn't date, fuck perhaps, but not date.

He wished them a pleasant night and went back to his lemons. The rest of the staff turned up as planned and soon customers were pouring in, tired after a week's work and looking for liquid relaxation.

Lee poured drinks, chatted and joked, poured more drinks, flirted when it was expected, and kept an eye on the door.

When Faelan sauntered over a few hours into the shift, he relaxed a fraction. "Beer?"

Faelan nodded, never wasting words when they weren't needed. When a cute shifter woman, Lee was pretty sure she was a wolf, brushed up against him, he smiled, and Lee was left speechless—luckily, they weren't talking. For one, he didn't think he'd ever seen Faelan smile, and second, he was fucking gorgeous when he did. Not cute, not beautiful, but Lee's kind of gorgeous. Which meant wicked, deadly, and with a clear invitation for a night of dirty things. Damn. Faelan had been holding out on him. Though since the cute shifter female was the one who'd triggered the response, Lee was pretty sure he wasn't Faelan's cup of tea.

And he shouldn't fuck anyone else on the team, especially not when he was supposed to be dating Rei.

An image of Dillon played before his eyes. Had he ever given someone the kind of smile Faelan had given the woman? Would it have left Lee speechless if he had? Lee didn't do humans. He was attracted to strength, capability, and power. Not power plays, it wasn't his thing, but to have a strong man submit to him cranked his gear. Knowing they allowed him to fuck them but could have him flat on the floor in the blink of an eye if they wanted to—maybe it was a kink like Jala had said.

“Vampire Lee!”

Lee shook his head. What the hell was he doing? He sauntered over to the man who'd called and poured another beer. Faelan moved to a table, a huge hand at the small of the cute female's back.

It didn't take long before Hanna showed up. “Lee.” She grinned and plunked down on an available bar stool, vacated only a couple of seconds earlier.

“Hello, beautiful lady. What can I get you?”

“Something girly.”

He grinned with a hint of fang, and she gave him a throaty chuckle. “You're such a tease.”

“Oh, I deliver.” He grabbed a martini glass and mixed an appletini. Grabbing a poison green apple, he sliced it and put a thin wedge on the rim. “One girly drink coming up. On the house.” He winked.

“I figured you'd give me something pink.” She snatched the apple wedge and bit into it.

“You're not a pink kind of girly.” She barked a laugh. “You might be right.” She looked around. “Good night?”

He didn't think she was asking about the crowd. “A bit weird.”

Something flashed in her eyes. “In here now?”

He shook his head and moved toward a woman calling for Vampire Lee at the other

end of the bar.

Sometime later, Eli showed up, and he looked like shit. Lee caught Hanna's gaze, trying to alert her before focusing on Eli.

"Eli! Come over to this side." He motioned for him to squeeze in next to Hanna. There was no available stool, and Hanna's neighbor glared at Lee as he motioned for Eli to cram in, but Lee ignored it. "Still nothing from..." Fuck, what was his name Zeke? Zion? "...your man?"

Eli jerked as if Lee had slapped him. "My...?"

"Your partner at work, is he back?"

Eli shook his head. Lee hadn't needed the confirmation. He'd guess Eli hadn't slept at all since they'd spoken last.

Hanna gave Lee a questioning look but didn't speak.

"I'm only reaching voice mail when I'm calling now. Battery dead, perhaps."

Fuck.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon watered all his plastic cups and looked for something sprouting—nothing yet, but he guessed it was to be expected. Had it been two days? Three? Time blurred together.

He was so tired the room swam before him. Or maybe it was because he hadn't eaten. Had he had lunch? He couldn't remember, but he was certain he hadn't had dinner.

Food. He needed some food. After years of only eating once a day, it was hard to get back into some kind of food routine. Especially since he wanted to avoid the others, and they were eating non-stop, always in the kitchen.

He needed nutrition.

With a deep breath, he abandoned his plastic cups with his soon-to-be plants and headed down the stairs. The house was quiet, and he carefully neared the kitchen.

When he looked in through the doorway, he spotted Murrie at the table with a glass of red wine and a stack of papers in front of him. He'd never seen anyone drink in the house. He'd heard them talk about whiskey and beer and so on, so they weren't sober, and they went to grab a drink in town now and then.

Murrie looked up and gave Dillon a quick smile. "I think there is some leftover lasagna if you're hungry."

What time was it? Shouldn't Murrie be in bed? Was everyone else in bed? He moved toward the refrigerator, and Murrie was right, there was a tinfoil-covered pan of lasagna. He grabbed a plate, cut a piece, and put it in the microwave.

“If you were doing something illegal—” Dillon stiffened at Murrie’s voice. “—and wanted an audience to find you but not the authorities, where would you host it?” His tone was distracted, and he didn’t look at Dillon.

“The fighting ring?”

Murrie glanced at him over his shoulder. “You know about that?” Surprise was written all over his face.

“Lee told me he’d heard something weird at work and told you.”

Murrie nodded. “Come sit.” He gestured at the opposite side of the table from him. “Do you want a glass of wine?”

“A glass of wine?” It had been years, several years since he had anything with alcohol. “Eh...”

“It goes well with the lasagna. There are wine glasses in the corner cupboard.”

Dillon grabbed a wine glass from the corner cupboard and neared the table. Murrie reached for the bottle and poured dark red wine into it at the same time as the microwave pinged.

Dillon grabbed the plate and cutlery and sat across from Murrie. He waited for panic to take hold, but it didn’t. He wouldn’t say he was calm exactly, but he wasn’t shaking and sweating.

Murrie nudged the glass in his direction, and he took a sip. He’d almost forgotten what wine tasted like.

“So...you want an audience, but you don’t want to be seen.”

Dillon took a bite of the lasagna. Devin knew how to cook. Then he shook his head. “It’s impossible. Either you have an invite-only thing to control the audience, or you disguise it as something else.”

“Like what? If you have a bunch of people beating the shit out of each other, and you bet money on who’s gonna win, how do you make it appear like anything else?”

Dillon didn’t have a clue. “I guess there hasn’t been any advertising for some kind of tournament, or what do they call it when they have boxers doing their gala things? It’s all a ridiculous spectacle. Morons.”

Murrie studied him. “No advertising yet, but that’s not a bad idea. Maybe they’re doing some seedy underground fighting for an invite-only crowd to get some money, and then move it to a bigger scale.”

Dillon shrugged. He wasn’t good at things like this. “If you’re gonna be able to pull off a successful marketing campaign, you need to create a buzz.”

Murrie smiled. “You’ve worked in marketing?”

Ages ago. Now the rules had changed. When he’d been taken, social media hadn’t worked the same way it did now. He’d known how it worked then, but he hadn’t had the energy to look at any platforms, let alone which roles they played in marketing nowadays.

“What if they mean to keep it off the radar all the time, not reaching a larger audience, only up the ante?”

“Then we won’t see anything about it on social media.”

Murrie gave a startled huff of laughter. “Right. How do we hear about it then?”

“You need someone to infiltrate?” Dillon shrugged and sipped on the wine. Damn, it was good, and warmth spread through his limbs.

Grimacing, Murrie rubbed his forehead. “Infiltrating takes time. We need to cultivate a persona, and we don’t have one in the works at the moment. Plus, it’s our hometown.” He tapped a finger on the tabletop. “Who is the least known in the group, and the one who looks most likely to enjoy watching people trying to kill each other in a cage?”

Was it a rhetorical question? He’d never had a conversation like this with Murrie, not with anyone. He didn’t have conversations, and yet he couldn’t look away from Murrie. “Rei.”

Murrie shook his head. “Rei is a slut. Half the town has slept with him, and the other half has seen him hook up with one of their friends. He’s no good for undercover work here. In a different town, he’d be great, but not here.”

Dillon stared at him. Rei was a what? And he’d said it almost fondly. Could you call someone a slut fondly? Maybe the wine had gone to his head. “Even if he’s...more of a lover than a fighter—”

Murrie laughed so loud Dillon wanted to check if the glass shook in the windows. He took a couple of seconds to get himself under control, then he nodded for Dillon to continue.

“Even if he’s...” He sighed. “Even if he’s fucked half the town, he could enjoy a fight, could he not?” Dillon couldn’t understand how anyone could enjoy it.

Murrie scrunched his nose. “I guess if someone didn’t know Rei, they might believe it.”

“Faelan, then.”

Murrie nodded. “Yeah, Faelan. Faelan is better.” He grabbed his phone and started tapping on the screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting him and saying he’s to look for some entertainment and maybe book a hotel room and not come home tonight.”

“What?” Dillon gaped, which had Murrie looking up from the screen, grinning.

“It’s his job. We can’t have him ask around to see if there is any entertainment down low and have him come home to a house filled with people working for law enforcement.”

“Right.”

The phone buzzed, Murrie picked it up and read the responding text while the corner of his mouth twitched in amusement. “He’ll start working on getting sloshed and take it from there.” He tapped something again.

“What did you reply?” Curiosity bloomed in him, and he wondered when he’d last been curious about anything.

“Thumbs up, and then I texted Lee, telling him to run a tab and send me the bill. Work expenses.”

Dillon laughed, it was short and rusty, but it was a laugh. Murrie’s gaze softened. It was work to get hammered? These people were insane. Dillon reached for the wine again, and his muscles unclenched a little more.



\* \* \* \*

Rei grabbed Lee's arm before he could open the apartment door. "Someone's been here."

"What?" Lee inhaled when Rei did, but he couldn't pinpoint anything special. Or maybe. There were scents he didn't recognize, but there most often were. Though not right outside his apartment.

Carefully, he pushed down the door handle and opened the door. Rei tensed as he pushed it open, ready to shift no doubt. It sent a fizzle of thrill through Lee, but it shriveled up and died as he took in the state of the apartment.

Everything was trashed.

"I think we should leave. Right now." Rei stood balancing on the threshold. "Grab a change of clothes and toiletries but be quick."

Fuck, did he scent something Lee couldn't? He did as he was told since he wanted to be able to change clothes and shower. He grabbed his phone charger, some clothes, and his toiletry bag which was always packed with whatever he could need for a weekend away. He'd make a good boy scout.

"Ready." He pushed it all into a plastic bag from the gas station.

"Classy."

"Always."

They hurried down the stairs, but when Lee was about to walk out on the sidewalk, Rei pulled him toward the basement, and they took the same route they had the night

before.

“What do you think happened?” He looked at Rei as they hurried toward the manor house. Seemed like Lee was in for another night of nightmares.

“I think someone was looking for something.”

No, it didn’t feel right. “I think someone was looking for someone and got angry when he wasn’t there.”

Rei narrowed his eyes. “Looking for you?”

“Nope. Jala asked if we were living together. Then she went off on a date with Maybe-Aaron.”

“Do you have to call him Maybe-Aaron?” There was a flash of annoyance in Rei’s eyes, and Lee grinned.

“Yeah, I think I do. I don’t think his name is Aaron.”

Rei huffed. “You think Jala is in on it?”

“No.” Then he frowned. “I don’t want her to be. I don’t think she is.” But she was the one who’d asked. “Maybe she said something to Maybe-Aaron in passing. A comment as they left or something.”

Shaking his head, Rei sped up his steps. Lee followed. Shifters might have better noses, but vampires were faster.

The house was dark and quiet when they entered. “We’ll fill everyone in tomorrow. I’ll check the schedule and—” He pulled up his phone. “Oh...”

“Oh?”

“Murrie told Faelan to go undercover. There’s a text. He’s staying at a hotel tonight.”

“I know. He told me to put all Faelan’s drinks on a tab and send him the bill.” Undercover. Lee wanted to go undercover. Or maybe not, since he wasn’t a cop. He was a bartender, and almost everyone in the supernatural community in Hagwall would recognize him.

Rei grunted. “You okay in your room on the third floor?”

“Sure.” Lee headed toward the stairs, then stopped. “Should I report a break-in or something in my apartment?”

Rei shrugged. “We can talk about it in the morning.”

Lee waved a hand and walked up the stairs with his plastic bag in a firm grip. A shower would be nice, but he should try to get some sleep if there was going to be a morning meeting.

He reached the top of the stairs, stepped into the corridor on the third floor, and winced as Dillon’s door came into view. It looked like he’d tried to close it, but it’d slid open a few inches again. Holding in a sigh, he moved toward his room.

It was locked.

What the fuck? Quietly, he knocked with a finger. Had Dillon taken his room? When nothing happened, he moved back toward Dillon’s room. Right as he pushed the door open, the lock clicked, and he turned around.

Dillon peeked out, going rigid when he saw Lee. Then he dropped his gaze to the

floor.

“Have you stolen my room?” He said it teasingly, hoping it would make Dillon relax. It didn’t.

“The door to mine is broken. I didn’t think you’d be back.”

“Me either, but someone trashed my apartment.”

Dillon made a motion to look at him but then dropped his gaze again. Lee swallowed a sound of frustration.

“Want to put a blindfold on me?”

“What?” His voice rose an octave.

“I’m not gonna enthrall you, but if you don’t trust me not to, you can tie something over my eyes.” He’d meant it as a joke, mostly, but as Dillon’s brows drew together as if he was mulling it over, Lee figured it was a small price to pay not to have him staring at the floor all the time. Though if he was blindfolded, he wouldn’t be able to tell what Dillon was doing, and he wanted to be aware.

“You could rip it off in a fraction of a second. I know how fast vampires can be.”

True. Lee shrugged. “Are we sharing the bed again or are you kicking me out of my room?”

Dillon’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes almost reached Lee’s before he yanked them away. “I can...” He gestured toward his room, and Lee found himself shaking his head, though Dillon most likely didn’t see it.

“Come on.” He took a step closer to Dillon. “You survived one night, and I promise you, despite you not believing me, you’ll survive one more.”

Dillon stepped into the room without another sound. Lee followed, then closed and locked the door behind him. The overhead light was on, and Lee remembered it had been the night before too, when he’d burst into Dillon’s room. When he noted Dillon hovering by the bed, he winced. “Get back into bed. I’ll brush my teeth.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon focused on deep, even breaths as he listened to the water run in the bathroom. Back in the underground mansion, the vampires had never bothered to brush their teeth before they joined him in bed. On the other hand, they never planned on staying the night, so maybe they didn't see the need.

When the bathroom door opened, he yelped, and Lee stilled. "Sorry." He took a careful step into the room and unzipped his jeans. Dillon sucked in a sharp breath before he could push them down.

"Perhaps you're the one who should wear a blindfold."

Dillon shook his head. "Too dark. There are monsters in the dark."

"I'm not allowed to turn the light off?" Lee motioned at the ceiling lamp, and Dillon shook his head. They had slept in the dark the night before, but then Dillon had been shocked.

"I promise to keep you safe from all the monsters."

Dillon snorted. "You are one of the monsters."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm harmless. I promise."

Dillon huffed. There were no harmless vampires. He might consider Mars to be almost safe, but he wasn't harmless. Never harmless.

"I'll go sleep in your room." He turned toward the door, and desperation welled up in

Dillon. He didn't know if it was because he didn't want to be alone or if he was afraid he'd annoyed Lee, but he didn't want him to leave.

"No." It was a whisper, but it could have been a shout. "Tell me what happened tonight."

He imagined Lee staring at him with wide eyes, but he didn't look. Then he kicked off his shoes and stripped down to a T-shirt and underwear. Dillon held his breath and kept his gaze low. Lee moved closer to the bed only to hesitate. "Can I turn off the lights?"

"I want to be able to see where I am when I wake up."

"Bedside table lamp?"

No. Dillon shook his head. "Leaves dark corners."

"Fuck, babe." He looked around. "Maybe that blindfold would be a good idea after all."

Babe? Dillon stared at him—not looking into his eyes, but at his chin, which was higher than he normally went. "I don't have one."

"I'll cut you a deal then."

"A deal?" There was no point in cutting deals. Lee could do whatever he wanted to him, and they both knew it.

"Yes, a deal. We turn off the lights, and I'll talk. I'll talk and talk until you fall asleep. Then you'll know where you are."

“It’s when I wake—”

“I’ll talk then too. I’m likely to wake before you do, at least if you’re screaming like you did yesterday.”

Waking up from a nightmare in the dark and having a vampire talk to him wouldn’t calm him in the least. “Fine, turn off the lights.”

Lee didn’t move. “Somehow, I get the feeling you don’t like the deal.”

Dillon huffed. “Perceptive.”

Lee chuckled. “I’ve got you, honey. Promise.” Then the lamp clicked off way sooner than it should have if Lee had moved at a normal speed. The bed dipped. “Am I allowed to be on my back or do you want me turned away from you?”

“Does it matter?” Dillon tried to keep his voice neutral, but it came out sulking.

“Now, now. Do you know what would be best?”

“No.”

“If you came here.” He held out his arms as if to hug him.

“No.”

Dillon was almost certain Lee was smiling.

“I won’t bite, and I won’t look into your eyes.”

“Right.” Dillon huffed at the absurdity of what he was saying.



Lee grabbed his wrist and pulled. Dillon struggled, but it was of no use.

“See here.” Lee pulled him close, placed Dillon’s head on his shoulder with his face almost buried against his throat, then he wrapped an arm around him. “No eye contact and nowhere near my teeth. You’re safe.”

Dillon couldn’t breathe. His heart banged so hard in his chest; he feared something would break. Soon Lee would bite him, hold him down and fuck him, or make him feel things he didn’t want to feel. Images spun in his head, memories, nightmares, shattered snippets.

“I told my boss I was dating Rei.”

Dillon sucked in a breath.

“It was weird. I was prepping for the night, slicing lemons.” Lee moved his hand up and down Dillon’s back as if he was too distracted to realize he was petting him. Dillon would bet money he was fully aware of what he was doing.

“We never talk about our private lives. I know nothing about her, and she knows nothing about me. But she asked if Rei and I were living together.”

Rei? Why was he talking about Rei?

“I almost told her we were only pretending to be dating. I’m glad I didn’t. I don’t think she’s in on the fighting ring thing, and...I don’t know, but why would she mess with my life? I’ve worked for her for five years.”

He quieted, his hand still moving up and down Dillon’s back, and he breathed out a shaky breath. Lee turned his head a little, maybe he was smiling.

“There you go, breathe.” The hand kept moving up and down, up and down. When had someone last caressed him in a non-sexual way? He couldn’t remember.

“After we’d closed, we headed to my apartment, but right outside the door, Rei scented something. I don’t know what, but he yanked me back before I could open the door and told me someone had been there.”

Dillon blinked. Someone had been in Lee’s apartment while he’d been at work?

“We opened the door, but Rei didn’t want to enter. I don’t know if he didn’t want to mess up the scents or why. He didn’t say. Then he told me to pack some clothes but to be quick.”

“Did he think someone would come back?” Dillon surprised himself by asking a question.

“No idea. I guess it wouldn’t have been great if there were a confrontation in an apartment building in the middle of the night. It’s mostly humans living there, and it would be bad if someone shifted into a jaguar when there were witnesses.”

“Your boss sold you out?”

“No.” He was quiet for a few seconds. “Maybe.” He tipped his head back. “I have no idea. Why would she, though?” He turned his head as if he meant to look at Dillon but aborted the action.

“I don’t know. Murrie said Faelan was gonna see if he—You already know that. He texted you.”

Lee’s hand stilled for a second, then it moved again. “He did, but how did you know?”

“I was in the kitchen, and he asked me what someone would do if they wanted an audience but didn’t want to be seen.”

Lee was quiet for a few seconds. “There is nothing to do. Either you’re seen or you’re not.”

“True, but does it mean you’d go with invites only? How would you spread the word without the wrong people hearing about it?”

Lee yawned. “I’m more worried about someone attacking Rei than how they reach their audience.”

Dillon shrugged and relaxed a little against Lee. He may still attack him, but so far, he’d kept up his talking. “Maybe, but if they get to Rei, and we have no way to get to them—” He cut himself off. We? He’d said we. He wasn’t part of any team.

“Yeah, Murrie knows what he’s doing. Faelan is working one end, trying to get an invitation or whatever, and Rei is working another by putting a target on his back and having my apartment trashed.”

His hand slid all the way up to Dillon’s neck, and a shiver shot through him as there was skin contact.

“This morning, they said we wouldn’t use anyone as bait, but it feels like Rei is bait.”

Dillon nodded since he didn’t have a good reply, and Lee’s fingers stroked his neck, gently massaging him. Dillon forgot how to breathe, and Lee cooed at him.

“Relax.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Lee huffed. “You’re not my type, and I drink my blood from bags, shifter blood.”

“I’m twenty-five percent shifter.” Dillon could’ve killed himself right there on the spot. Why had he said that?

Lee didn’t stop his motions. “Yeah? Can you shift anything?”

“Nope, not a single thing. They say I heal quicker than someone fully human. It’s why I lasted—” He cut himself off.

Lee made a sound. “But Devin is all human?”

“Yeah, but he has special blood, so they were more careful...” His words died. They hadn’t been careful in how they’d treated him, but they’d made sure he didn’t die. With Dillon, they hadn’t cared. “They made sure to heal him after he was badly hurt.”

Lee hissed. “He’s not scarred?”

“Yeah, he’s scarred. Not as badly as me, but almost. I haven’t seen him without clothes, not since...” He snapped his mouth together. “Mars erased my memories from the time Devin and I were together, so I don’t remember having seen him without his clothes, but I dream of him. Suppressed memories, Devin says. Anyway, he’s covered in tattoos, so you don’t see them as clearly.”

“I saw his arms when he wore a T-shirt, but I didn’t look for scars.”

Dillon shrugged, and Lee massaged his neck some more.

“Do you want to cover the scars with tattoos?”

“I’ve never thought about it. Devin was tattooed before he was taken. If I went and

got tattoos now, they wouldn't mean anything other than something I use to cover up scars I already know are there."

"Yeah, I guess."

Silence fell, and Dillon closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he jerked, and his eyes flew open.

"So I was born on a sunny day in April in Scotland."

Dillon huffed a laugh. Scotland made sense. He should've known it was where the rolling Rs came from.

"Sleep. I've got you." Lee drew circles with his thumb on his back.

\* \* \* \*

A whimper tore Lee from his sleep. Fuck, he'd closed his eyes only a moment ago. Dillon's warm form jerked against him, his muscles tense.

"Shh...It's a dream." He rubbed Dillon's back. "Come on, sweetheart, relax." He put a little more force into his caress, wanting Dillon to either settle or wake.

A scream shook the walls, then Dillon leaped. He pressed a knee on Lee's chest and his hand grabbed his throat, fingers digging in around his Adam's apple as if ready to tear it out. He'd heal, most likely. Dillon only had human strength and speed. He wouldn't rip his voice box from his body, but it didn't mean he wanted to live through whatever damage he could cause.

"Dillon." His voice was strained, and he reached up and placed one hand on Dillon's hip and the other on the thigh above the knee pressing into his chest. He could throw

him off, but he wasn't sure Dillon was awake, and if he woke to Lee throwing him, it wouldn't be good.

Heavy breathing was the only sound.

"Dillon, are you with me?" He tapped his fingers on Dillon's thigh, and he bent his head to look at Lee, forgetting to avoid his gaze. Lee didn't try to enthrall him. He could have, but then what little trust there was between them would be ruined forever.

"Are you awake?"

The grip on Lee's throat loosened, and Dillon looked around the dark room.

"We're in the manor house."

A shuddering breath left Dillon. "Third floor."

"That's right. Third floor." He gently but determinedly pushed Dillon's knee down, making him more or less straddle Lee. Then he pulled at Dillon, so he was lying on top of him and hugged him. "You're fine."

"I'm not fine."

Lee grunted and rubbed a hand over the small of Dillon's back. "Perhaps not, but you're unharmed, and so am I, so we're good."

"Oh, God, I could've killed you."

Lee chuckled. "Not at all, love." He kissed his forehead, he didn't know why, his body acted without his mind's consent. "I didn't want to scare you by throwing you off. If I'd been afraid you'd hurt me for real, I would have."

Dillon nodded, then froze and pushed at Lee. “What are you doing?”

“Holding you.”

“You’re not fucking me.” He tried to scramble off Lee, but he held him in place.

“Take a moment.”

“What?” It was an impressive snarl. Maybe he had more shifter traits than he believed.

“Take a moment and think about the situation.”

“You can’t force me to have sex just because I tried to kill you in my sleep.”

Lee rolled his eyes. “For fuck’s sake.” He quieted for a second. “Bad word choice. What I meant was, you had a nightmare, we’re both mostly dressed, and neither of us is hard. What made you think I was dying to fuck you right now?”

Dillon pursed his lips, and Lee wanted to laugh.

“The reason Rei and I are pretending to be dating is because people already know we’ve hooked up. I like strong, deadly men. You, my darling, don’t fit the bill. You have nothing to fear from me.” Somehow the words tasted wrong, but they weren’t untrue. He was more than a hundred years old, and he’d never fucked a human. What was the point? He didn’t want to have to be careful, didn’t want to fear he’d hurt someone by mistake.

“What are you doing here then?”

“Cuddling.” Huh, maybe that was the reason. His lovers never wanted to cuddle, and

he didn't either...he didn't think. But it was nice to hold Dillon when he wasn't trying to kill him in his sleep or screaming loud enough to hurt his ears.

“Cuddling?” Dillon’s incredulous tone made him grin.

“Swear to God.” He rubbed Dillon’s back. “I’m serious. I don’t want your blood, and I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“Because you want Rei?”

“No, I don’t want Rei. It was a hook-up, some mutual pleasure not to be repeated. Rei doesn’t want me, and I don’t want Rei. He’s a great guy, and he’s hot as hell. Capable, competent, dangerous, a freaking jaguar—”

“And I’m a puny human.”

Lee huffed a laugh. “Right. You’re a puny human, perfect to snuggle with.” He pulled the cover over them both and slid Dillon halfway off his body but still with a leg slung over him. It was nice. He loved the weight of his body on his. “Try to get some more sleep.”



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon walked in front of Lee down the stairs the morning after. He hadn't woken from any more dreams, which made it one of the best nights he'd had in years. Maybe cuddling with a vampire was the way to go.

It grated a little that Lee didn't see him as anything but a weak creature not good for anything but hugs and cuddles, but then he wanted to smack himself on the head. Wasn't it what he wanted? To be so undesirable a vampire didn't want to bite him or...do other things.

He didn't blame him though. He woke up screaming in the night, flinched when Lee moved unless he already was in his arms, and didn't dare look him in the eyes. Not to mention, Lee had seen him undress. He'd seen he was well-used, scarred and—He blocked whatever thought would come next.

"You okay?" Lee sped up and was right behind him in a fraction of a second, his heat radiating against Dillon's back.

"Fine."

Lee snickered. "Never trust a fine."

"You told me I was fine during the night."

Huffing, Lee put a hand on his neck, his thumb caressing the skin behind his ear, and Dillon shivered.

He didn't remove his hand until they reached the bottom floor. Dillon hesitated for a

second. There were voices in the kitchen, but since Lee didn't pass him, he took a deep breath and walked forward. When he crossed the threshold with Lee right behind him, several pairs of eyes turned their way. Everyone but Faelan was there.

Dillon stopped dead. When Lee put a hand on his shoulder, he jumped.

"Breakfast." Lee's whisper caressed his ear, and he nodded. Everyone would've heard what he said, and heat washed over Dillon's face.

"Dillon." Devin waved at him from the kitchen island, phone in hand. "Come look."

He didn't care what Devin had on his phone, but it would allow him to escape the way everyone was staring at him. He walked toward Devin in a daze, and Lee headed toward the table.

"According to the weather app, there won't be any frost for the coming two weeks, and there shouldn't be any after either. We'll almost be in June then. No nights below freezing in June, right?" He sounded a little unsure.

"I don't know."

"I think we're good to go, so we need to harden off the chili plants."

Dillon stared at him. "What?"

"Harden off, isn't that what it's called? I think we should carry everything outside, including everything you've sown. If it sprouts outside, we don't need to harden them off."

"Okay." Dillon wasn't sure what he meant, but he could carry the cups outside.

“We’ll place everything on the patio, and we’ll have to...I don’t know, bring the plants inside again in a few hours, and then keep doing it for a few days before we can plant them in the soil.”

Dillon nodded. He could do that.

“And we can sow some carrots and stuff directly in the pallet collars. Beans. It should be warm enough for beans.”

“I have beans in cups.”

“Good, then we’ll know how much space they’ll need when they sprout.” Excitement shone in Devin’s gaze. “It’ll be awesome. After breakfast, we’ll carry everything out on the patio, and we’ll sow some carrots. You have the seeds, right?”

Dillon nodded.

“Great! Pancakes?”

“Pancakes?”

Devin grinned at him. “I’ve made pancakes. Would you like some for breakfast?”

“Eh...”

Before he’d managed to formulate an answer, Devin was gone. A few seconds later, he placed two plates on the kitchen island with a stack of pancakes on each. He climbed onto one of the stools and motioned for Dillon to do the same.

Together, they ate pancakes with their backs to the others. Apart from eating lasagna with Murrie the night before, Dillon had never eaten with anyone other than Devin in

the room. As the murmur of the others' voices drowned the buzz in his ears, he took a bite. The sweet taste exploded on his tongue, and he took another bite as soon as he'd swallowed.

\* \* \* \*

Rei slapped Lee's thigh under the kitchen table and grinned at him. Lee didn't know why, or Rei's nod toward Dillon was a pretty big clue, but he still didn't know what made him happy. Sitting there, the entire table would be able to tell they hadn't slept with each other. Or they'd know they'd slept with each other, but they'd know they hadn't had sex, so why Rei was so happy he didn't know.

Looking around, he realized everyone was smiling while trying to act normal. Everyone but Mars. He looked his usual grim self and was glaring at his coffee. What the hell was up with them? He frowned as he looked from person to person, but it only made them grin wider.

"So..."

"Let's eat first, and we can head into the office to talk." Murrie bit into a sandwich, his eyes dancing.

Right. Okay, no talking business during breakfast.

"Faelan texted me around three in the morning. Said he'd hung out with some wolves he'd never spoken to before but hadn't found out anything damning." Hanna reached for more coffee as Murrie hummed in reply. They were talking business during breakfast then? Lee was confused.

"We should give him a burner phone." Rei leaned back in his seat and rubbed his belly as if he had eaten too much. "If someone gets hold of it and sees our numbers

there, his cover is blown.”

“Are you working tonight, Lee?” Murrie tipped his head at him.

“Yeah, early shift.”

“Meaning?”

“Ten-thirty to seven. It’s mostly prepping for the night, but there is a bit of a lunch crowd on the weekends. So pouring a few drinks, chatting to a few customers, but no heavy-duty bar tending.”

Murrie nodded. “If I give you a phone and tell Faelan to swing by, can you switch it for his? Preferably without too much of an audience.”

“Sure. Have him come in for a drink and sit by the bar, and it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I think he should go somewhere else.” Hanna sipped on her coffee. “He might not be the most known of us—” She widened her eyes at Rei. “—but there are people at The Rambling Rogue who know he’s part of our group. They’ll never talk about underground fighting with him.”

Rei shrugged. “It’s where most shifters go, and it’s not a human fighting ring we’re investigating.”

“I still don’t think it’ll lead to anything.” Hanna tapped a nail against her coffee cup.

Devin and Dillon slid off their seats, Devin took their plates, and then both of them headed toward the hallway. Everyone around the table held their breaths, and Lee frowned at them.

When they'd disappeared from view, Hanna kicked his foot under the table. "Well done, you."

"What?" Lee wasn't above basking in praise, but he didn't know what he was being praised for.

"Dillon."

"What about Dillon?"

She grinned. "It's the first time he's eaten while we've been in the room, and you touched him. You touched him, and he didn't scream."

First time? Hadn't he said he was in the kitchen the night before? "We shared a room."

"Yes, I know." She tapped her nose. "Which is amazing too, but damn."

"He was talking to Murrie yesterday." Lee uselessly motioned at Murrie.

"We had a glass of wine." Murrie looked extremely pleased.

"You did? Seriously?" Hanna slumped on the chair. "This is awesome."

Lee wasn't sure why everyone was so excited. "Why are you..." He let the words die out, not knowing what he was about to ask.

"It took Devin three years to be in the same room as us. Dillon has only been here a little over seven months. He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep, he doesn't talk, and he most definitely doesn't let anyone touch him."

He talked, and he slept a little, and Lee had held him all night. He hadn't seen him eat. Rei had given him food, but Lee didn't know if he'd eaten it. He'd eaten now though, right? He glanced at the kitchen island, but Devin had removed the plates. He had to have eaten something.

“Right, tell us what happened last night. Rei said there was a break-in.” Murrie made no motion to move, so the whole let's talk in the office was bullshit. Maybe he hadn't wanted to talk in front of Devin and Dillon.

With a deep breath, he told everyone his version of the evening. Rei added a few things here and there but didn't interrupt otherwise.

Once he was done, Murrie was rubbing his neck. “Hanna and Mars, go check the apartment. Treat it as if Lee has reported a break-in. You two—” He motioned between Lee and Rei. “—continue to play lovey-dovey, and we'll get Faelan another phone.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon hesitated by the edge of the patio. The sun was shining, and he could see the garden beds from there, but to take a step out on the lawn...It would mean leaving the safety of the house. Other than being on the patio, he hadn't been outside the house since he got here.

It was when you were outside people could grab you. Or he was pretty sure they could grab him from inside the house too, but then they had to make it to the third floor and through four shifters and one vampire—currently two, but he didn't know for how long Lee was staying with them.

Devin came to stand next to him. "Want me to go first?"

"Are you afraid?"

Devin grimaced. "Less and less, but I look around, I hold my breath and listen. Mars practices self-defense with me regularly. It helps. I'm no match for anyone supernatural, but all I have to do is struggle long enough for Mars to get to me."

Dillon looked at him. He was confident Mars would get to him. What would it be like to know someone would fight for you? Dillon had never had that, had never had parents or siblings who cared. He'd had a few boyfriends, but nothing lasting, nothing where he felt they'd have his back no matter what. And now the world had changed. The rules he'd played by before didn't apply. He'd once considered himself strong. He'd been muscled without having to try hard at all, he was almost a head taller than Devin, and he'd been healthy.

Now he was weak. A puny human in a house full of people who could tear him apart



without breaking a sweat.

“There is a wall all around us. There are cameras along the entire property. No one gets in here without someone knowing.”

Dillon nodded and took a step out onto the lawn. Devin followed, and they both stopped and tilted their faces to the sun.

“Did you ever wonder if you’d breathe fresh air again?” Devin’s voice had turned hoarse.

“I was sure I wouldn’t. When people started to die, I was sure I would too. It was only a matter of time.” He breathed deeply. “I can’t remember when it turned worse, but I have this feeling it was better before, even though I can’t remember it. Like maybe, we were fed more often, allowed to clean up more often, that sort of thing. Or maybe I’ve made it up.”

“No. When I was there, we got fed. Perhaps not as much as we needed, but you were healthy, not a walking skeleton. You’re so fucking strong, Dillon. I wish you’d realize it. No one survived as long as you did. I wouldn’t have survived as long as you did.”

They didn’t look at each other. The sun warmed Dillon’s skin, and he tried to block all memories of what it had been like not to see the sun for months on end. He could stand in the sunlight now; he could eat until he was full.

“He would’ve kept you alive.”

“I don’t think it would’ve helped. I think I’d have...given up. I was so close to giving up, and you were there for three years longer than me. A thousand days of torture, and you were still standing when I came back.” Devin’s voice broke, and Dillon

watched in horror as a tear trickled down his cheek.

“Hey.” He placed a careful hand on Devin’s shoulder. Half a second later, Devin threw his arms around Dillon’s waist and hid his face against his chest.

“I should’ve made them look for you.”

Dillon didn’t know what to do. Slowly he curled his arms around Devin, the embrace awkward and terrifying. “You didn’t know I’d been taken again.”

“I should have asked what happened to everyone, should’ve demanded they let me know where you were, but I was too busy hiding in my room.”

“It’s okay, Dev. It’s not your fault.”

“I could’ve gotten you out years earlier. Murrie would’ve looked into it if I had asked him to.”

Dillon was pretty sure he was right. Murrie would’ve looked for him, but there had been no reason for Devin to suspect something was wrong. “They wouldn’t have found me. Where would they start looking? It wasn’t until Leonardo escaped that they had anything to go on.”

“Argh.” Devin pushed away from him and angrily wiped his cheeks. “Some days, I want to kill them all. Burn down the entire fucking world.”

Dillon stared. He did? He always looked happy. He baked and cooked and smiled, teased the others and cuddled with Mars.

“Fucking vampires.”

Dillon huffed a laugh. “Yeah, Mars seems like a terrible creature.”

“Oh, he is.” Devin gave a watery chuckle. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m brain damaged. Who in their right mind hooks up with a vampire after what we’ve been through?”

Dillon shrugged. “He’s not them.”

“No. He’s not like them at all, and I love him. Most days I forget he’s a vampire, but when I’m reminded of it, I wonder what the hell is wrong with me.”

“There is nothing wrong with you.” Though how would Dillon know? There were plenty of things wrong with him, so why wouldn’t there be plenty of things wrong with Devin?

“Fuck, I didn’t mean to turn this into a therapy session. Let’s get those seeds in the ground.”

Dillon nodded and took a step forward.

“Dillon.”

Dillon squeaked and whirled around. On the patio was Lee. His lips were pressed together as if he was angry about something, and Dillon wanted to shrink into himself. “Yes.”

“I’m heading to work now, and Mars and Hanna will go through my apartment. Murrie told me to come back here and not go there.”

“Okay.” Why was he telling him?

“I’ll be back tonight.”

Dillon nodded. Okay, so they’d have another slumber party. That was fine. Maybe.

Lee raised a hand in a wave. “See you later.”

“Bye.” A frown took over his face as he turned to catch up with Devin.

“Problem?”

“No, he only wanted me to know he’d be back.”

Devin grinned. “Right.”

“He’s fucking Rei.”

“Not anymore.” Devin chuckled. “I figured we could have a row of carrots along the sides. If we run out of seeds, then maybe we can continue with radishes or lettuce.”

“I have lettuce in cups.” He motioned toward the patio.

“Awesome.”

\* \* \* \*

Lee was slamming things behind the bar when Faelan parked himself on one of the bar stools. He placed his phone in front of him, and Lee took a deep breath. He had a job to do.

“What’ll it be?”

“A Coke. I think I’ll hold off on the alcohol for a few more hours.”

Lee grinned and looked around. There was no one close enough to hear them unless they strained to do so. “Still recovering from last night?”

Faelan grunted, which was his more normal level of communication. When Faelan was chatty, he was playing a role.

Lee poured a Coke and placed the glass in front of Faelan, swiping the phone as he did. He put it in his pocket and replaced it with the one Murrie had given him.

Faelan gave a slight nod. “So why are you banging things?”

“I’m not.”

Faelan didn’t speak, he simply looked at Lee.

“I heard Devin and Dillon talking about...the time when they were—” He cut himself off with a hiss, and Faelan grinned. A sharp grin that had all the alarm bells go off in his mind. Fuck. He did not want to end up on Faelan’s bad side.

“Everyone is dead.”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not alive in their minds.”

Faelan nodded. “They’re tough.”

“Devin said Dillon had endured a thousand days of torture.” Nausea rose at the back of Lee’s throat.

“A thousand days more than Devin is more like it. Devin was with them for a year, a

little more. Dillon was there for most of that time too, then three more years.”

Lee shook his head. “Why would anyone want a blood slave?”

Faelan frowned at him. “You can answer that question far better than I can. Blood and sex are a heady combination, and there is probably the thrill of doing something illegal too. I don’t know why vampires go crazy over their blood. To me, blood is blood.”

“I’ve only had human blood once. A friend of mine had scored a bag, and we shared it. It was different, but not as mind-blowing as they make it sound. I can’t say I liked it much.”

“And you’re sure it was human blood?”

“I think so. He said it was.” What if it hadn’t been?

Faelan shrugged. “All I know is Devin has special blood that apparently makes all vamps go crazy, and Dillon is human enough for those who were born after the treaty took place to not notice a difference. Mars says he would have been able to tell if he had bitten Dillon when he went undercover, but he’s older than the treaty.”

Faelan sipped his drink, and Lee wiped the bar. “I called him weak.”

A sound making Lee suspect Faelan had swallowed wrong filled the area, followed by a wheezing laugh. “Who?”

“Dillon.” Lee groaned at himself. “He was afraid I’d...eh...and I said there is no way because I’m attracted to strong, competent men, not puny humans.”

Faelan chuckled. “I’m not sure it’s a bad thing, he might have been glad to hear it.”

“Maybe, but it’s not true.”

“It wasn’t a lie, you do like strong, competent men. It’s no secret around here.”

Lee scowled at him. “Yeah, but he’s not weak.”

“Definitely not. I’d have rolled over and died in his place, I think. Drawn-out pain isn’t something I excel in. Four years of it, day in and day out? Nope, don’t think I could’ve done it.” He pushed away his now empty glass. “Don’t worry about it. He has more important things to worry about than if you want to fuck him or not.”

Faelan was right, of course, but it didn’t mean he wanted to hear it.

“There’s a number on the phone?” He slid off the stool, picked up the phone and pushed it into his pocket.

“Yeah.” Lee had watched as Rei had changed the name of the number into Mom. It was the only number in the contact list.

Faelan waved and headed for the exit. As soon as he’d disappeared out of sight, Lee went back to prepping for the night. He was in the middle of slicing lemons, again, when Jala leaned against the bar. “Hi.”

“Boss.” Lee smiled at her. “Good date last night?”

“Date? Oh, you mean Aaron.”

“It wasn’t a date?”

She scrunched her nose. “Everything went well here?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Did Rei come by?”

A tingle of unease shot through him. “Yeah, he came before closing time.”

She nodded. “Escorted you home?”

What the fuck? “Nah, we went to his place.”

“Where does he live?”

Yeah, right. “South side.”

“He has an apartment?”

Lee looked at her. Was she playing him? Didn’t she know Rei lived with a bunch of other shifters? Maybe not. She seldom left her office. “Why do you want to know?”

She smiled, but it looked forced. “Only making small talk. Will he be in later?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Okay. Good job last night.” She knocked her knuckle against the bar and headed off toward the office. So weird.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon was carrying tray after tray of plastic cups into the house. Devin had said the plants should be outside for a few hours, and they'd left them on the patio all day. He hoped it hadn't killed them. They looked fine.

Devin was making pizzas. The scents filled the room, and Dillon's stomach growled.

"Want to help?" Devin was smiling at him.

"With what?"

"Make a salad. There are veggies in the fridge."

Dillon nodded and headed for the fridge at the same time as Devin placed a cutting board on the kitchen island. Dillon rinsed a head of lettuce, some tomatoes, and a cucumber.

"How long until we have lettuce, you think?" Devin was adding topping to one of the pizzas and wasn't looking at Dillon.

"Don't know. I think it said like four to six weeks or something on the seed pack."

"That long?" Devin slumped against the counter. "I'd hoped for like two weeks."

Dillon allowed a small smile. "I think the radishes were three weeks, better suited for the impatient."

Devin huffed. "Impatient."

The front door opened, and both Devin and Dillon turned to look at the doorway. Seconds later, Lee walked into the kitchen. Someone must have given him a code to the grid door since he hadn't buzzed the gate.

"Hi." He walked closer, and Dillon tensed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Devin do the same. Lee stopped halfway to the island. "Sorry."

"It's...eh..." Devin cleared his throat. "It's okay, we're being silly."

Lee frowned. "Where is everyone?"

"Mars and Rei are in the basement working out. Murrie is in town to see his girlfriend. Phone on, should anything happen. I don't know where Hanna is, her room, I think." Devin went back to put things on the pizza.

When Lee took another step in Dillon's direction, he focused on the lettuce.

"Want me to help with anything?" His voice was coming from right next to Dillon, the words pitched low.

He shook his head; his voice having deserted him. When Lee placed a hand on his shoulder, he gripped the knife tighter.

"How was work?" Devin sounded relaxed, and Dillon blew out a breath. Lee squeezed the meaty part of his shoulder before removing his hand.

"It was weird. My boss asked where Rei lives."

"What?" Devin stilled, but their chatter made it easier for Dillon to focus on what he was doing, so he started chopping.

“Yeah, it was weird. I didn’t answer, said south side, but I think I have to tell the others.”

Devin hummed in agreement.

“Faelan came by too. We switched phones. Where should I put his?” He reached into his pocket, and Dillon found himself watching him. When had he stopped chopping?

“Put it on his desk.”

“Which is his?”

Devin wiped his hands and grabbed the phone. “I’ll take it.” Then he left the room. Dillon took a deep breath.

“Did you have a good day in the garden?” Lee spoke lower now.

“Yeah, we sowed carrots and radishes, built some trellises for the beans and such.”

“Want to go to a garden center?”

Dillon forgot all about avoiding eye contact. “What?”

Lee smiled and held his gaze. It was hard to break away, but he did.

“A garden center. I can take you, and we can see if there are any plants or equipment you want. Devin can come too.”

“Come where?” Devin sauntered back into the kitchen.

“A garden center. Check out some plants.”

“Oh, I’ve been looking online and thought maybe we should buy some tomato starters since I think we’re a little late, but maybe we could go somewhere...” He grimaced. “I’m not going without Mars.”

“No problem. We can bring everyone.”

“Cool. We can talk about it at dinner.” He grabbed a sheet and put it into the oven, looking excited, but Dillon had a hard time breathing. Leave the house? Go outside the walls surrounding the garden.

“Hey.” Lee spoke into his ear from behind. “Breathe. We don’t have to go.”

Devin busied himself with the oven, but Dillon suspected it was to give them some privacy. He nodded, not sure if he meant they’d go or not.

Lee squeezed his shoulder again before moving away, but before he could sit on one of the chairs, his phone rang. He looked at it with a frown. “I had better take this. It’s work.” He got up and stepped over the different trays with seedlings and out onto the patio.

Dillon put the knife down. “I think I’ll go to my room.”

Devin grimaced but nodded. “Good job today.”

Dillon didn’t have the energy to reply, so he left the kitchen without a word.

\* \* \* \*

When Lee came back in after having talked to Conan who worked at the bar tonight, Dillon was gone. “Did he leave?”

“Yeah.” Devin pulled the pizzas from the oven and put in another sheet.

“Smells good.”

Devin smiled at him. “Put some plates on the table, and you can dig in.”

He hadn’t more than finished the sentence before Mars and Rei walked into the kitchen, freshly showered. Mars went over to Devin and gave him a kiss while Rei grabbed a chair and sat.

Once everything was on the table, Hanna came to join them, and as everyone was eating, Lee told them about Jala’s questions.

“It’s weird.” Hanna reached for another slice of pizza.

“What is?”

“We’ve been hanging around The Rambling Rogue for years, perhaps not as much as many others, but whenever we go out for a drink, it’s where we go.”

Lee nodded. He considered them regulars even though they weren’t in as often as someone like Eli. Had he found his friend? He hadn’t been in today, not while Lee had been there, at least.

“She could’ve checked into us if she was curious, so why the interest if she hasn’t cared up until now?”

Lee shrugged. If his mouth hadn’t been filled with pizza, he might have said something, but he didn’t know what, so he kept chewing.

Hanna dropped the slice she’d been holding on the plate. “I have a bad feeling.”

“Bad how?” Rei watched her in a way that would’ve made Lee shiver, but she didn’t outwardly react.

“As if this is the calm before the storm. We only have little nuggets, no real information, and I have this feeling it’s all gonna explode any second. I almost believed it would now, since it’s the weekend. Don’t they host these kinds of events on the weekends?”

Lee nodded, then shrugged. “It all depends. They could just as well do it on a Tuesday night.”

“Great.” She picked up her pizza again only to roll her shoulders. “I’m antsy. Murrie was antsy too. I think that’s why he went into town.”

“Getting laid helps. Maybe I should head into town too.” Rei grinned, and Hanna huffed.

“You’re in a monogamous relationship, remember? You and Vampire Lee forever.” She formed her hands into a heart, and Lee snorted a laugh before he grabbed his plate and got to his feet.

“And with those words, I think I’ll go check on my bed partner.”

“Bring him some food. He was hungry before he freaked out.” Devin motioned at the stack of clean plates. Freaked out. Was it Lee’s talk about the garden center that had done it? He’d only wanted to do something nice, make him happy.

Shit.

He placed two slices of pizza on the plate and headed for the stairs. As he reached the third floor, he first peeked into Dillon’s room. It was empty. The door to the room

they'd been sleeping in was closed, but when he tried the handle, it opened.

Dillon was on the bed, staring out the window where the sun was starting to set.

"Hi." Lee spoke softly. "I brought you some food."

Dillon turned to look at him, hesitated for a moment, then met his gaze. Lee smiled, more pleased than he should've been.

"Why don't you eat some, and I'll hit the shower."

Dillon nodded and took the plate when Lee offered it to him.

In the bathroom, Lee tore off his clothes and stepped into the spray. He washed efficiently and wrapped a towel around himself when he was done. He'd left his bag of clothes in the room and walked out to grab a pair of underwear. He could feel Dillon's gaze on him but forced himself not to look in his direction.

Once he had a pair of trunks, he stepped into the bathroom again but didn't close the door. He dropped the towel, put on his underwear, and headed into the room.

Dillon was still sitting on the bed, the plate empty. Good. He hadn't piled food on it, and Dillon needed to eat more, but it was better than nothing.

Crawling over the bed, he took the plate from his hands and placed it on the bedside table. "Come on." He stretched out on his back.

"Come on?"

Lee held out his arms and motioned with his hands for Dillon to come closer.

“What are you doing?” He kept his gaze glued to Lee’s chest, which made him want to growl. There had been eye contact earlier.

“Cuddling.”

“You’re cuddling?” There was a faint trail of amusement in his voice, and it made Lee grin.

“I want to be cuddling. I’ve missed cuddling all day, but someone is holding out on me.”

“You can’t come in here and—”

Lee grabbed him and tugged, not violently and not fast.

“Hey!” Dillon pushed at him but fell over, and Lee hauled him against him.

“See, much better.” He ran his hand over Dillon’s back on top of his shirt. “You smell nice, like shower and sunshine.”

Dillon held completely still. “What?”

Lee dipped his head to nuzzle him when Dillon’s hands shot out and an unholy scream filled the room.

Shit. “Shh.” He cradled Dillon’s head against his chest, but

the scream didn’t die down, and Lee glanced at the door. Would the others rush in and get the wrong idea of what he was doing? “Shh, sweetheart. I’m sorry. So, so sorry. I didn’t think.” He kneaded the tense muscles in Dillon’s back, gently rocking them both. Fuck, he was stupid.



Dillon's fingers dug into his chest, and he winced but did nothing to dislodge them.  
"You're okay. I promise."

The noise died down to raspy breaths, and Lee continued to knead his muscles and murmur nonsense. He didn't know what he said, mostly told Dillon he was fine, and Lee was sorry.

Little by little, Dillon relaxed in his arms.

"There you go. You're all right."

Lee massaged his neck and rested his chin on the top of Dillon's head, a shuddering breath leaving him. Fuck, that was nerve-wracking, and he was only the spectator. "I only meant to smell you, swear to God."

Dillon snorted, which made Lee hug him tighter to his chest.

"You smell awfully nice when you're not panicking." He inhaled. "Like..." What did he smell like? "...human, I guess."

"How strange." Dillon's voice was nothing but a broken whisper, but it made Lee grin.

"I know, so strange." He leaned back and tried to look into Dillon's eyes, but when he did, Dillon closed his.

"Come on, babe. Look at me."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You did before and nothing happened."

Dillon remained quiet for several seconds. “Then there were other people around, and we weren’t in bed.”

Ah, the bed. Lee bent and kissed his forehead. “I won’t ever control your mind.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Look at me.”

Dillon shook his head, and Lee leaned forward again and kissed his temple, then his cheek, then a little closer to Dillon’s mouth, and those eyes shot open.

“There you go.” Lee brushed his lips over Dillon’s, not so much a kiss as a caress.

“I’m sorry, I fucked up.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon swallowed hard. What the hell just happened? Lee was kissing him, sort of. He didn't think it was part of the cuddling, or maybe it was. He frowned at him, and Lee grinned—no pointy teeth showing.

“What are you doing?” His whisper was so low, he was surprised Lee heard him, but then again, he was in bed with a vampire. Freaky super senses.

“Well, I was aiming for some undemanding body contact, but I think I screwed up.”

“You think?”

“I only wanted to smell you.” Lee grinned again.

“You smell me now.”

“Yeah, but I wanted...” He grabbed Dillon's hand and raised it to his face. Part of him wanted to yank away, being bitten on or near the hands hurt like hell—unless they fooled his mind into thinking it was pleasurable.

Lee ran his nose over his wrist. So weird. “Sunshine.”

“Huh?”

“You smell of sunshine.”

“Did you hit your head at some point today?”

Lee laughed, low and...dirty. A shiver shot through Dillon, and he stared wide-eyed.

“Nope. I only like to smell you.” He pushed up the sleeve of Dillon’s shirt and ran his nose up to his elbow, not seeming to notice the scars.

“Because?”

“You smell nice.”

“But vampires have an okay sense of smell. You can smell me from a distance.”

Lee looked into his eyes, and Dillon forgot to look away.

“It’s not the same.” He ran his nose up and down his arm, then shifted his hold and—Dillon’s hand sliced through the air to smack him away, but Lee caught the wrist without looking at it. His lips pressed against Dillon’s skin, then he kissed his way up toward his elbow again.

He held onto Dillon, not bruising in any way, but easily kept him immobilized.

“Lee?” Fear rose in him, and Lee made a sound at the back of his throat.

He ran his tongue over Dillon’s arm.

“Lee, listen dammit!” He moved his legs as if to kick him, when Lee rolled, bringing Dillon with him.

For a second, all Dillon did was stare down at him from where he was sprawled over his body. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t know. I want to lick you all over, but I have a feeling you won’t let me.”

Dillon huffed. “Do you have a concussion?”

Lee shook his head.

“What happened to the puny-human speech?”

“The what?”

Dillon growled and tried to slide off him, but Lee grabbed his hip and held him in place.

“I might have been wrong.”

“You might have been wrong?” He hadn’t meant to screech, but what the hell?

“Yeah, maybe I like puny humans after all. I’ve longed to come back here all day.”

“You’re insane.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not fucking you.” Dillon put as much conviction into his words as he dared. He didn’t want to give the impression he’d be giving in, but he didn’t want to plant any ideas of Lee needing to control his mind either.

“I prefer to top anyway, so best if you didn’t. Though, if you wanted to, I might...” He scrunched his nose, and Dillon tried to scramble away again. Lee only chuckled and hugged him closer. “I’m joking.” He ran a hand over Dillon’s back and down over the swell of his ass. “Or not joking, I prefer to top, that part was true, but I don’t need penetrative sex.”

“Jesus, let me go.”

Lee loosened his hold but didn't let Dillon move off him.

“Lee, what the hell?”

“I like this.”

Dillon groaned. “Like what?”

“You squirming on top of me while sounding angry.”

Dillon stilled. “You what? And what do you mean sounding? I'm not sounding angry, I am angry.”

“It's fun, and you smell much nicer now than when you panic. Cursing me makes you feel better, which in turn makes me feel better.”

A second ticked by before Dillon realized his eyes were so wide they were starting to dry out on him. “You're insane.”

“Never argued against it, babe, but it doesn't mean I don't want you.”

“What? No, you don't.”

“I don't?”

Dillon shook his head. “You don't. I might buy the cuddling, though barely, but you don't want me. Not me-me. You might want someone you can fuck and bite, but you don't care if it's me or someone else.”

“I don’t?” Lee looked amused, which pissed Dillon off.

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay.” He shrugged and grinned, and Dillon growled.

Lee caressed his hip with a thumb, his other hand moved slowly up his back.

“Kisses aren’t part of cuddling?”

Dillon shook his head. “What are you doing?”

“Since you said cuddling was okay, I figured—”

“I didn’t say cuddling was okay!”

Lee rolled them again, but slower this time. His hand ran over Dillon’s thigh, a lazy, almost massaging caress. “Maybe you should change into pajamas.”

“Why?”

“It’s cuddlier.”

“We’re not—”

“Oh, I think we are. It’s too early to sleep, so let’s cozy up. We can watch a movie.” He gestured at the flat screen on the wall across from the bed.

“Lee.” It came out pleading, and some of Lee’s amusement melted away.

“It’ll be fine, Dillon. Comfy clothes, snuggling in bed, and a movie. Easy and

relaxed.”

“Until you get all weird.”

Lee laughed. “You want me to grab some snacks from the kitchen?”

Dillon grimaced. “The cupboard above the refrigerator.”

Rolling out of bed, Lee headed for the door only to turn around and grab Dillon’s empty plate.

“Are you walking down there without clothes?”

Lee shrugged and grabbed a pair of jeans but didn’t button them, and headed out the door. Dillon stood staring after him. What had he gotten himself into?

\* \* \* \*

The dishwasher was running when Lee reached the kitchen, so he put the plate in the sink and walked over to the refrigerator. He opened it and grabbed two beers. There were several, and if someone got angry with him for taking two, he’d pay them back. Then he reached for the cupboard above. It was packed with chips, microwave popcorn, MM bags, and some other chocolate.

He grabbed a bag of popcorn and threw it into the microwave.

“Hi.” Rei sauntered into the kitchen, walking with a predatory grace that normally would’ve left Lee salivating.

“Hi.”



“Want to fuck?”

“Nope.” Surprisingly enough, it was true. He wanted to head up to Dillon.

“Hmm.” Rei grinned at him, his fangs a little sharper than normal, and Lee almost groaned. He liked the sight, he did, but...He could have an armful of angry human upstairs, and for some weird reason, it was far more appealing.

“Is it worth the effort?”

Lee frowned. “What?”

“Dillon. I believed Mars would go insane with Devin. It’s not like picking someone up in a bar.”

Lee looked at the microwave, so he wouldn’t have to look at Rei. “I have no idea. It’s not like we’re...I don’t think he likes me much.”

Rei barked a laugh. “I think you’re wrong.”

That made Lee look at him. “You do?”

“He’s been here for seven, almost eight months, and apart from a few mumbled words to Devin, he doesn’t talk. With you, he talks. And judging by the scent, he allows you to touch him.”

“I don’t know if allow is the right word. I steal touches.”

Rei shrugged. “You’re still alive, so it can’t be too bad.”

Lee laughed, as if Dillon could kill him. Luckily, he didn’t have to continue the

conversation since the microwave pinged.

“Don’t push if you don’t plan to hang around.”

Lee nodded before grabbing his things and heading up the stairs. Hang around? As in long-term? Lee didn’t do anything long-term.

He pushed open the door to his and Dillon’s room and smiled at Dillon who was standing by the window. “Brought popcorn and beer.”

After placing the items on the bedside table, he arranged the pillows so they could lean against the headboard and reached for the remote. “Come on. On the bed.”

Dillon sighed but climbed on.

“What are you in the mood for?” Lee flicked through the streaming services. Something easy. Nothing with torture or kidnappings, nothing with supernatural beings. Humans who moved at normal human speed, with normal human strength, and weren’t up to anything too gruesome.

“I haven’t watched a movie in years.”

Because he’d been kept prisoner. Fuck. “Okay, let’s pick something where we don’t have to think.” He hit play on one of those movies with a group of young people on the cover. There was a car in the background, so maybe it was some kind of road trip story.

He sat next to Dillon, handed him a beer, and put the popcorn bag on his lap. He sipped his beer and reached for some popcorn. After a few seconds, Dillon did the same.

The movie played out, and they watched without much comment. A few times, Lee caught Dillon watching him instead of the TV, but he ignored it. Once the beer was empty, he put the bottle on the bedside table and glanced at Dillon's. He had more than half left. "Don't like beer?"

"Oh, yeah, I..." He took a sip. More time went by, and Dillon sipped his beer and ate some popcorn. When the bottle was empty, he handed it to Lee. "Thanks."

"Anytime, babe."

Dillon huffed but focused on the TV. Lee ate some more popcorn, mostly to empty the bag. When there were only kernels left, he grabbed the bag off Dillon's lap and put it next to the beer bottles. Then he grabbed his pillow, put it on the mattress and stretched out diagonally over the bed while pulling Dillon down with him.

"Hey. Words are nice, you know."

"Words?"

"Yeah, a 'Hey, Dillon, let's lie down' instead of simply pulling at me."

"But my way is faster."

"Ass."

"And there he is, my prickly human." Lee grinned and wrapped an arm around Dillon, urging him to rest his head on his chest so they could easily watch the TV. He didn't much care what happened in the movie, but this was nice. Dillon was warm, and maybe not pliant in his arms, but not struggling and stinking of fear either.

Lee ran his hand over his back, small undemanding caresses. He wished he could

touch skin. Would Dillon be angry with him if he slipped a hand under his shirt? Maybe not so much angry as...tense.

On the next down stroke, Lee lingered by the waistband of his pajama pants. He liked the pajama pants. They were soft and made Dillon look all kinds of cute. He ran a finger along the hem of the shirt, allowing his forefinger to slip in under. Warm skin met his, and Dillon froze, then shivered. Good or bad shiver? Lee wanted to look at him but kept his gaze on the TV.

He ran his finger along the waistband, gentle, barely-there caresses. Dillon let out a deep breath, and Lee hid a smile.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon watched the movie. It was some silly rom-com about young adults messing up their lives with stupid decisions. It was pretty entertaining, but Lee's light caresses on his back distracted him.

They never strayed, never turned grabby, and he didn't move his hand. His fingers slid over Dillon's naked skin almost as if he wasn't aware he was doing it, and it made him squirm.

At first, he kept still. Then he relaxed a little more against Lee. A few minutes later, he realized, to his horror, that he shifted ever so slightly to get the fingers to where he wanted them.

He froze, but Lee continued to move his fingers as if nothing had happened despite there being no way he could've missed how tense Dillon got.

Gradually, he relaxed again.

“They’re pretty stupid.”

He jerked at Lee’s comment. “Yeah.”

Lee flattened his hand against his back and moved a fraction, so his thigh was pressed against Dillon’s groin. Tipping his head, Dillon glanced at him. Lee’s gaze was glued to the TV, but there was a smile tugging at his lips.

“Ass.”

“This is fun. We should do it more often.”

Dillon snorted, but as the finger caresses started up again, he melted against Lee. Screw it. It was pretty nice to be held.

Lee moved his leg again, pressing his thigh against Dillon.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking if you’re hard.”

“Dude—”

Lee barked a laugh. “Dude? Dude is the word you’re going with?”

Dillon huffed. “I haven’t been hard in months.”

Lee stilled underneath him. “What?”

Dillon shrugged. “I have no idea when I last had a hard-on no one forced on me. Since they got me out, I haven’t...I...eh...”

Lee turned so they were facing each other. “Fuck, babe. I’m sorry.” His arms wrapped around Dillon, and he rocked them.

“It’s okay. I don’t miss it.”

An outraged sound left Lee. “I can’t accept that.”

“What?” Dillon laughed. He didn’t know what else to do. “You can’t accept it?”

Lee looked into his eyes. “If you don’t want me, that’s one thing. I mean, I’m obviously a catch, but puny humans are stupid at times.” He winked. “But for yourself.”

“I have other problems, Lee. I’m more worried about getting a couple of hours’ uninterrupted sleep than getting an erection.”

“Will you let me try?”

“What? No!” He pushed at Lee, but he didn’t budge.

“You’re gay, right? Or bi at least.”

Dillon nodded. “Gay.” Though it didn’t matter when someone controlled your mind. Then you were whatever they wanted you to be.

“And you fancy me.” Lee wiggled his eyebrows. “Since I’m so handsome and all.”

“In a former life, yeah, I would’ve found you hot.” Dillon laughed at the absurdity of the conversation.

“So you’d be okay with me sucking you off?”

Dillon sighed. “In a former life, Lee. Now I know your teeth turn sharp, and being bitten in the dick hurts like hell.”

Lee reared back as if slapped. “What the fuck! I’m not gonna bite you. Who the hell would...” His voice died away, and he looked at Dillon. “No mouth, hands only.”

Dillon scrunched his nose and shook his head. “I...it would only be awkward.”

“I can work with awkward. I’m the king of awkward, believe me.”

“No, I would feel pressured and embarrassed and...I don’t know, something else not good.”

“No pressure, no embarrassment. Caresses, Dillon. Skin on skin. If you don’t get hard, you don’t get hard. There will be other opportunities.”

“You just want in my pants.”

Lee tugged at his shirt. “Come on, get rid of this.”

“No, I’ve got scars all over.”

“I know.”

Dillon frowned. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“It bothers me, but not in the way you think. Those scars shouldn’t be there. You can be bitten a thousand times without having a single scar. Them being there tells me they wanted them to be. Sane vampires don’t bite like that.”

Icy fear filled his core.

“Relax. I’m not going to. No teeth, promise. I’ll keep them in check.” He showed his teeth, and they looked human. Then he tugged at Dillon’s shirt again. “Skin, babe. It’ll feel good.”



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee watched the struggle in Dillon's eyes and wanted to decide for him, wanted to pull the shirt off and be done with it, but he waited.

With a defeated sigh, Dillon pulled it over his head. Defeat wasn't what Lee was going for, but he hid his expression and ran a hand over Dillon's bare arm to his shoulder. Then he hugged him closer. They were bare chest to bare chest. He turned a little until Dillon was halfway on top of him.

"Watch the movie."

"The movie?"

"Yeah, cuddling, undemanding, no awkwardness or embarrassment."

"That ship sailed a long time ago."

Lee huffed a laugh and kissed his forehead. "Nope." He ran his hand over Dillon's back, ignoring the ridges of the scars and reveling in the contact. He dug his fingers into tense muscles, and Dillon let out a low moan. Good.

The movie played out before Lee's eyes, but he no longer had any idea what was happening. His gaze might be on the TV, but his focus was on Dillon. His fingers searched for tense muscles and kneaded them. He was glad he was a vampire, or his fingers would've given out on him before long.

Dillon allowed the occasional groan to slip out, and now and then he squirmed against Lee to get his fingers to where he wanted them. When he reached his shoulder

blade and dug his fingers in, Dillon jerked. “Oh, that’s nice.”

Lee wanted to gloat, but it wasn’t classy, so he turned his head away from the TV and nuzzled Dillon’s hair. Turning back to the movie, he continued his massage.

“This is better than sex.” Dillon arched against him. “This is what we should be doing.”

Lee snorted because it was not better than sex. “Sure, you can do me later.”

Dillon chuckled, a low, husky sound that lit a fire in Lee. Damn, he hadn’t known he could sound like that. When Dillon rubbed a hand over Lee’s flat belly in a circling motion, he forgot to breathe. Damn, it was the first time Dillon had touched him in a way not meant to push him away. It had his already interested cock fill more.

He spent some more time on Dillon’s shoulder blades before slowly working his hand downward. Dillon moved with him, the hand on his belly forgotten other than his fingertips digging in a little when Lee hit a good spot.

“Fuck, Lee.”

Lee grinned. “Want to?”

A huff and a snort were his only reply. Lee turned and hefted Dillon’s leg up over his hip and dug his fingers into his thigh muscles.

“Oh.” Dillon’s mouth dropped open, and his eyelids fell shut. Damn. Lee’s cock was straining now, and he wasn’t sure Dillon would appreciate it. On the other hand, if he kept his eyes shut, maybe he wouldn’t notice.

Lee dug his fingers into Dillon’s glutes and was rewarded with a full-body shiver and

some rolling of his hips.

“Can we remove the pants?” Lee didn’t want to break the spell, but he wanted skin there too.

Dillon grunted, his eyes opening in slits.

“Skin, Dillon.” He gave him his most innocent look, which had Dillon laughing.

“Fine. Do what you want as long as you keep the massage up, and no teeth.” An instant later, he went rigid. “Or eyes. No controlling me.”

“Never. I promise.”

“You can make me believe—”

“Relax. Jesus. I’m not going to. I want you with me, not...” Lee couldn’t come up with the right words, so he waved his hand.

Dillon raised his hips and pulled down his pants. His dick was flaccid. Damn. Lee followed suit, his dick hard and flushed.

“Uh-huh?” Dillon raised an eyebrow at him.

“Shut up.”

His grumble earned him another laugh. He could live with being laughed at. He really could, since he didn’t think Dillon had laughed in months. As he pulled him close again, he groaned at the contact, as did Dillon. Interesting.

He bent to nuzzle his neck only to end up with his face caught against Dillon’s palm.

“Nope.”

“Not even—” He swooped in and brushed his lips over Dillon’s.

“Teeth.”

“The teeth are fine.” For now. He touched his lips to Dillon’s again, and this time Dillon kissed him back. Heat shot through him, and he dug his fingers into Dillon’s buttocks. Fuck. Angling his head, he deepened the kiss, and Dillon opened for him. After a moment’s hesitation, Dillon met his tongue with his, and Lee moaned.

When Dillon ran his hand up his arm and onto his shoulder, he pressed him closer. Damn, he’d believed he’d be able to control this. He splayed his hand over Dillon’s ass and rocked against him.

Dillon moaned into his mouth, and Lee broke the kiss to look down. Still not erect, but maybe there was a little more interest than there had been.

“Okay?” He searched Dillon’s face.

“Yeah.”

“You feel so fucking good.” He wanted to kiss his neck, wanted to suck and lick at the skin behind his ear, but he didn’t think he was allowed. “Can I kiss you elsewhere?”

Dillon narrowed his eyes.

“No teeth.” He showed his teeth again, though it was becoming harder not to let them drop. Dillon gave him a hesitant nod, and he kissed his shoulder. As Dillon closed his eyes again, Lee kissed a little higher on the shoulder, nearing the collarbone.

Dillon tensed, and Lee cooed. He wanted to kiss his throat, but not if it would send him into a panic. He sucked gently on the collarbone, teased the skin with his tongue, and Dillon threw his head back. Lee groaned; he wanted him exactly like that.

Moving his mouth a fraction, he noted goosebumps spreading on Dillon's upper arms. Fuck. Leaning ever so slightly, he touched his lips to the hollow between the collarbone and the throat and almost yelped when Dillon buried a hand in his hair. He didn't pull at him, and when Lee licked at the salty skin on his neck, Dillon shuddered and flexed his fingers in the strands.

"Dillon." His voice had gone hoarse, and as he rocked against Dillon again, his cock brushed against a dick that wasn't hard exactly, but it wasn't limp either.

He sucked Dillon's earlobe into his mouth, and Dillon jerked in his arms, pushing against Lee, the hold on his hair tightening. Lee held him in place with his hand on his ass and thrust against him at a slow pace.

Letting go of the ear, Lee pressed a careful kiss on the skin behind it, fully prepared to pull away at a moment's notice. Instead, Dillon moaned and curled his leg tighter over Lee's hip. Fuck, yeah.

He sucked a little at the skin, only to chuckle at Dillon's curses.

"Asshole."

"You're so freaking hot like this, Dillon. I can do this all night."

The noise he got in reply wasn't a protest, so Lee placed another kiss on the skin of Dillon's throat. His teeth ached with the need to drop, but he forced them not to. He'd never had to hide what he was since he never hooked up with humans. He had to say he had a newfound respect for those who did. How did you keep your teeth from

dropping? And how did you avoid moving in a way you shouldn't?

He reached between them and curled his hand around Dillon's cock. It twitched in his hold, and Dillon moaned. Yes. Lee was growing dizzy with need.

Dillon hardened fast, and Lee gave him one final kiss on the mouth before he allowed his fangs to drop. He hid his face against Dillon's throat to keep him from seeing him should he open his eyes.

As he took them both in his hand and rocked against Dillon, a moan tore from him. Jesus, he was ready to come from half a handjob.

Dillon buried his other hand in Lee's hair too and undulated underneath him, uninhibited sensual movements that made Lee wish he'd seen what he was like before he'd been taken by vampires. There was no awkwardness now. Dillon's body moved with his, the need building.

"Fuck, Lee. Squeeze harder." Dillon thrust, his cock sliding against Lee's, and he tightened his hold.

"So good. Such a nice cock."

Lee moaned a reply. Was Dillon a talker? He wouldn't have guessed. He tugged at Lee's hair, the sting only heightening the desire. Lee growled and thrust a little faster.

"Yeah, rub on me. Feels good."

Damn right, it did. He sucked on Dillon's throat, careful not to let him feel any teeth.

"Yesss." The hiss touched Lee deep inside. "Wish I could fuck you, Lee. Such a nice ass."

O-Okay, it was not...Ah, fuck it, who cared? Sex talk was sex talk. Lee worked their lengths faster, precome slicked his hand, and Dillon rocked against him beautifully. Heat pooled, and tingles rushed from the soles of Lee's feet up to his groin at the same time as a shiver traveled his spine. Shit, he was about to spill. Doing his best to stave it off, he let go of himself and jacked Dillon's cock.

"No, I want you with me."

"If I touch myself now, I'll come."

Dillon gave a throaty chuckle. "It's sort of the point."

"I want you to come."

"Give it to me, baby, and I will."

Baby. Damn, no one ever called him baby, he called other people baby. Before he could do anything, Dillon let go of the hold on his hair with one hand, wrapped his fingers around both of them, and rolled his hips. Lee hissed, forgetting for a moment he had to hide his teeth, but since Dillon wasn't panicking, he guessed he hadn't been looking.

"Fuck." Lee leaned his forehead against Dillon's collarbone.

"Not today." Then he thrust into his hold, and stars went off behind Lee's eyelids. He might have roared as his muscles tensed, and his hips moved of their own accord. The orgasm crashed into him with such force, he clung to Dillon wherever he could get a hold. He shook and shivered as spurt after spurt painted Dillon's belly.

"Hell yeah." Dillon tensed and new ropes of come mingled with Lee's. With one last shuddering breath, Lee melted against Dillon, a little confused about how he'd ended

up in Dillon's embrace and not the other way around.

Their breaths slowed, and Lee knew he should get up before they got glued together, but he was strangely reluctant to look at Dillon. Dillon was rubbing his back, gently massaging him.

It should be the other way around.

When Dillon sucked in a shuddering breath, Lee stuffed away his confusion and looked up at him. Tears were trickling down over his temples.

"Oh, honey." Lee pushed out of the embrace and gathered Dillon in his arms. "Shh, I've got you."

"Fuck, sorry." Dillon wiped his eyes. "I don't know why, I'm—"

"I think a little breakdown is to be expected, don't you?"

"Not really."

Lee huffed. "Come on, let's shower." He tugged at Dillon's hand.

\* \* \* \*

Dillon was staring at the ceiling. The room was dark, but Lee's deep regular breaths next to him calmed him enough to not freak out about it.

He'd had sex with a vampire.

Voluntarily.



He was as messed up as Devin, dammit.

Lee grumbled in his sleep, and Dillon pulled him close and guided his head to his shoulder like Lee had done with him several times. It felt right. He'd never been in relationships with fixed roles in the before time. He'd topped as often as he'd bottomed, and he'd slept in his boyfriend's arms as often as he'd held him in return.

He didn't like the shell he'd become. He'd been strong and confident once. Competent. Secure in himself. He didn't want his old life back, it wouldn't fit him anymore, but he wanted more than he had now.

When Lee made another sound in his sleep, he rubbed his hand in a circle over his back, kissing his forehead and cooing softly. He could tell the moment Lee woke. A stillness fell over him. He wouldn't say he tensed exactly, but the way he held himself changed.

"Dillon."

"Yeah, go back to sleep." He rubbed his back again, and Lee tilted his head back, most likely looking at him.

"You're holding me."

"I know, baby. You were restless. I've got you, go back to sleep."

Lee huffed, his palm coming up to rest against Dillon's chest, then he made another, almost confused sound, but relaxed against him again. Dillon smiled into the dark and closed his eyes.

The next time he opened them, it was light out, and Lee was watching him with a frown, still in Dillon's arms. He rubbed a hand over his face and squeezed Lee's

shoulder. “Did you sleep?”

“Yes, and you did too.”

Dillon nodded. “Yeah, I slept some.”

“No dreams.”

He grimaced. There had been dreams, but he hadn’t woken up screaming, drenched in sweat. “Hungry?” Dillon looked at him.

“I’m confused.”

Okay. Dillon frowned. “About?”

“You.”

“What about me?”

Lee pursed his lips, a crease forming between his brows. “You held me through the night.”

Dillon didn’t reply.

“I’m the one holding people, not the other way around.”

Huffing, Dillon widened his eyes.

“You called me baby. People don’t call me baby. I call people baby.”

“Oh, come on. You’re like a million years old. I bet you’ve been held and called baby

plenty.”

“No. I’m holding people.”

“What exactly are you trying to say? I’m not allowed to hold you?”

The way Lee’s mouth dropped open only to then close made Dillon frown.

“I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m confused.”

A hundred-year-old vampire was confused about Dillon holding him? “About what?”  
Dillon hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but what the fuck?

“I’m taking care of you.”

Dillon blinked; pretty sure he made a great imitation of an owl right then. “I think I’m going to need tea if I’m gonna be able to follow this reasoning.”

Lee growled but rolled off the bed, his motions a little too jerky for comfort.

They got dressed in silence, and Dillon didn’t have a fucking clue what was going on. As they exited the room, the usual anxiety washed over him, and he fought not to shrink on the spot. He did want tea, and if Lee was going to be weird, he’d rather deal with Devin’s softly spoken inquiries.

They walked down the stairs and into the kitchen where Murrie and Hanna were by the table, and Devin was whisking something at the counter.

“Morning.” Dillon grabbed a cup of tea. Ignoring the silence, he headed toward the patio door. He needed to get the plants out to continue the hardening off or whatever Devin had called it.

Once he'd carried all the trays out, he stayed on the patio, looking out over the wooded area behind the manor house.

When the door opened behind him, and Devin handed him the cup he'd placed on the windowsill to be able to carry the trays, he nodded a thanks.

"All well?"

"Yeah, Lee is being weird."

Devin widened his eyes. "Weird how?"

"He was a bit restless in his sleep, and I was awake, so I gathered him in my arms. And when we woke now, he was all weird and said he's the one taking care of me, not the other way around or some bullshit along those lines."

Devin grimaced.

"Yeah, exactly."

"Maybe he doesn't want to be a burden."

"It's not a burden to hold someone. He's been there with me when I wake up screaming, but I'm not a burden. If he can't handle it, he doesn't have to come back, he can keep his paws to himself. It's his choice. If he doesn't want to be here, then he doesn't have to, but if I want to be there for him, then why shouldn't I?"

"Good for you."

"Good for me what?" Dillon didn't mean to snap, but what the hell?

“That you don’t feel like a burden.”

Should he? Dillon frowned. “Do you feel like a burden?”

“Not a burden exactly, but Mars could’ve made things easier on himself and been with someone else.”

Dillon snorted. “He loves you.”

“Yeah, he’s too stupid for his own good.”

Chuckling, Dillon sipped his tea. “Yeah, stupid vampires.”

Devin grinned. “Did you see some of the beans sprouted?”

Dillon turned and looked at the trays. Some bent stalks were pushing up from the soil in a few of the cups. “Oh, awesome.”

“I know.” Devin’s grin was so broad, Dillon couldn’t help but smile in return.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

“Faelan texted he might have something.”

Lee looked up from his coffee when Murrie spoke. “Yeah?”

“He was being vague and said it might not be related, but he’s going with a group of wolves to an event tomorrow night.”

Hanna groaned. “I hate when people work undercover. Did he say where?”

Murrie shook his head. “He doesn’t know where. They’re picking him up.”

“Fuck.” She drummed a nail against the side of the cup. “I have a bad feeling.”

It was the second time Lee had heard her say that, and he hummed a reply.

“Are you working today, Lee?” Murrie pushed his plate away.

“Yeah, I’m closing, but we close at half past eleven on Sundays. I’ll be done around midnight.”

“Right, so Rei will be by, and you can see if you learn something. Do you have condoms?”

Lee swallowed wrong and started coughing while Hanna gave in to a chuckle.

“What?” It came out all wheezy.

“Right now, you smell of Dillon, not Rei. I suggest using condoms to minimize the scent of him on you, and maybe cuddle a little with Rei before you leave.”

Fucking shifters. He hadn't considered scents. And he didn't own any condoms. Supernaturals didn't need them, and since he only hooked up with...He glanced toward the patio. He couldn't give Dillon anything, and Dillon couldn't give him anything, but maybe he expected condoms. If they were ever doing anything again. He might have fucked up.

“Buy some with taste.”

“What?” He turned to Hanna.

“Condoms with taste are the worst, those strawberry ones. The scent clings to you for days.”

“You want me to smell of artificial strawberry?”

“Best would be if you smelled of Rei, and since you're now smelling of Dillon, it'll be hard to sell you're fucking Rei. Strawberry or bubblegum or whatever would help distract the scents.”

Yeah, but no one would believe he and Rei used condoms with taste. He'd jerked off with a condom once to know what it felt like but nothing else. Condoms smelled weird, and he'd much rather taste Dillon than flavored latex.

He grimaced, and both Hanna and Murrie burst out laughing.

Murrie stretched. “Pick some up. Hopefully, you won't have to pretend much longer. Shower and hug Rei before you head in.”

Shower. He'd showered the night before. He didn't want to wash away Dillon's scent. It wasn't obnoxious, he didn't smell of sex or sweat, only like he'd held Dillon through the night. Or like Dillon had held him.

He ground his teeth. He was strong, Dillon was not. He could move fast, could lift things, could fight off an enemy, could control people with his mind. Dillon could do none of those things. He was the protector in their weird relationship or whatever. It wasn't a relationship, more of a prolonged one-night stand. Either way, Dillon should lean on him, not the other way around.

Murrie stood. "Hopefully, someone will say something about an event tomorrow, or Faelan will learn more."

Lee nodded. Maybe everything would be over soon, and he could go back to his normal life. A life where he hooked up with different people whenever the opportunity arose, where he went to work and poured drinks and went home to his boring apartment to sleep only to do the same thing again the day after.

Fuck. He wanted to snarl in frustration but took a calming breath.

"Did you find anything in my apartment?" He directed the question to Hanna.

"Nah, it smelled of bear and vampire, but no scents I recognized. No clues otherwise. I don't know if they simply wanted to trash it, so you'd have to sleep at Rei's or what. Maybe they hoped to trail you here."

"It can't be hard to figure this address out." They kept a low profile, but several people knew Hanna, Faelan, and Rei lived together. Lee had never seen Murrie at The Rumbling Rogue, but he assumed some were aware he was part of the group. Mars showed up from time to time, though not lately, which most likely had something to do with Devin. Did he feed from Devin? Lee glanced toward the patio.



Special blood, Faelan had said.

“If you search for our names, all you’ll find are PO boxes, but you can find an address for the department, and if you pay attention, you’ll figure out we live here.”

“So either they’re lazy or they already know we’re both here.”

Hanna nodded. “Security is pretty good. Mars and Rei went into crazy mode after Devin was taken last year, so there is no way anyone will get in here without us knowing. I’d be more worried about what happens to and from work and while you’re at the bar.”

“I’m not worried. They want Rei, not me. I’m nobody.”

“You’re most likely right.” She patted his shoulder and stood. “Now go fix whatever you did to piss Dillon off.”

“He’s not pissed off.”

Hanna chuckled. “Oh, you poor thing.”

\* \* \* \*

Dillon watered the carrots they’d sown the day before. He’d googled, and it said the key to getting a good carrot harvest was to keep the soil from drying out while waiting for the seeds to sprout.

“You think we should go to a garden center?” Devin was running his fingers over an arched trellis they’d put in yesterday. The plan was for beans to climb it.

“I don’t know. You’re the one with a plan.”

“I think it would be good to get some tomato plants. I know you have some coming, but I’m not sure if they’ll have time to mature.”

Dillon nodded.

“Or we ask Mars to go get some. We don’t have to go.”

He couldn’t tell if Devin wanted to go or hoped Dillon would say to send Mars. “If you want to go, we can go.” He ignored the dread building inside. Stepping outside the protective walls around the property wasn’t anything he’d planned on ever doing.

“Yeah, let’s go.” He pressed his lips together, a determined look creeping into his eyes. “Do you want to eat something first?”

“Nope, less risk I throw up if I have an empty stomach.”

Devin gave a brisk nod. “Right. I’ll go get Mars. Should I ask Lee?”

Dillon scrunched his nose. “I’ll talk to him.” He walked with Devin to the kitchen. Hanna headed toward the office as they entered. Murrie was already gone, but Lee was still sitting at the table. Devin headed straight through, leaving only Dillon and Lee in the room.

“We’re heading to the garden center. Do you want to come?”

“You’re heading...” Lee looked into his eyes, and Dillon held his gaze. A slither of unease traveled through him, but what the fuck. He’d had Lee’s dick in his hand and had kissed him. He’d be damned if he couldn’t look into his eyes without flinching.

“Devin wants tomato plants.”

“Oh...Do you want me there?”

“If you want to come, come. If you don’t, I’m sure Mars can keep us safe.”

Lee stood. “I’ll come.”

“To keep me safe or because you want to look at plants?”

“I don’t care about plants.”

Dillon sighed. “Can you put words on what’s going on in your head?”

Lee frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“You want me to need you, is that it?”

The frown deepened. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” But the Scottish accent grew more prominent, which made Dillon believe he’d nailed it. Maybe.

He waved a hand. “Whatever.” He took a deep breath. There were more important things to worry about than Lee being an ass. He was leaving the house. Cold sweat coated his skin, and his heart sped up. Shit. Maybe he should back out. Who cared about tomato plants? Then he recalled the determined look in Devin’s eyes. This wasn’t about tomato plants. It was about stepping out there, reclaiming a tiny spot of their lives.

They’d be safe. Mars would slaughter the entire town before he’d let anyone so much as breathe on Devin, and Lee...Well, maybe it was what he wanted, to play bodyguard.

\* \* \* \*

Lee looked at Devin and Dillon as they stepped out of the car onto the parking lot outside the garden center. They were both pale as ghosts, muscles straining with tension, and lips pressed flat.

Fuck, who had thought this was a good idea? He had. He'd been the one to suggest it.

Mars took Devin's hand and headed toward the entrance. Dillon followed, shoulders stiff and gaze jumping around. Lee looked around too, but he wasn't sure what he was looking for. No one attacked anyone in broad daylight, did they? And there were humans all around. It was perfectly safe.

He rolled his shoulders before dropping them. They'd get some plants, then they'd be out of here. They'd head home, he'd jump in the shower, and go look for Rei, so they could hug. Then he'd head in for work.

Hurrying his steps, he caught up with Dillon. Tiny drops of sweat were beading on his upper lip, his skin a sickly white.

"It'll be fine." He hooked a finger with one of Dillon's.

Dillon gave him a weak smile. "Yeah. First time I'm outside the walls, is all."

Oh, fuck. What had made Lee believe a trip here would make Dillon happy. He looked ready to run. "Only humans here."

Dillon looked around. "Are you sure?"

He was about to say he was, but he wasn't. "Those I've seen so far have all been human."

"Look at these, Dillon." Devin was standing by a table filled with bushy tomato

plants. “How many do you think we need?”

“You’re the boss.” Dillon glanced over his shoulder and frowned. Lee followed his gaze but couldn’t see anyone.

Devin grinned, some color coming back to his skin. “Let’s go with ten. Then we’ll have some in case the ones you’ve sown don’t have time to mature.”

Dillon nodded.

“Oh, check these out. Cucumbers. Have you planted cucumbers?”

“I have, but they haven’t germinated yet.”

“We’ll take some of these too.” Devin reached for a plant on the neighboring table. Lee looked at Mars. He smiled a quick smile and placed a hand on Devin’s neck, a thumb sliding over the skin there. Devin shot him a grin, and something tightened in Lee’s belly. They were so...familiar with each other. As he looked at Dillon, he noted him staring at something farther into the store.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I thought I saw someone I remember, but...It’s only in my mind.” He shook his head. “We need a basket, right?”

“Make it a cart.” Mars sounded amused.

Dillon nodded and headed toward the entrance. Was he going outside to grab a cart by himself? A ball of unease formed in Lee’s gut.

“What do you think, Lee? How many cucumber plants?” Devin focused on him for

half a second before looking at the plants again.

“A few.”

A snort was all the reply he got, and a second later he was walking in Dillon’s direction. He wanted to rush, but there were humans around, so he walked at a human pace. Fucking hell.

Dillon walked out through the sliding doors right as an elderly woman with a purple walker made it inside the store, and Lee muttered a curse. He stepped aside to let her pass despite wanting to rush after Dillon.

He smiled at the woman when she looked up at him and squeezed past as soon as he could and almost toppling over a stack of pots as he did.

When he finally hurried out through the sliding doors, he looked around, unable to see Dillon anywhere. An invisible fist squeezed his heart. He couldn’t have disappeared. Lee hadn’t been far behind him.

When he spotted Dillon by the shopping cart corral, he almost sagged in relief. Then he realized he wasn’t grabbing a cart. He was pressing his back against the side of the structure.

Ice washed over Lee. Someone was speaking to him, and judging by the size and the way he loomed over Dillon, he didn’t think the man was human. The closer he got, the more convinced he became. A bear.

“Dillon!”

Lee ran a little too fast but hoped no one would notice. Dillon met his gaze and shook his head. “No, go back to the others, Lee.”

The bear slapped him, and the scent of blood filled the air. Fuck! Lee slammed into him with a snarl, but as he did, the sliding door to the dark gray van parked right next to the corral opened. In a blur, a vampire joined the mix, and Lee watched in horror as Dillon stepped forward to intercept him.

There were fists and grunts and curses, and then everything stilled. The vampire was pushing Lee to the ground, and the bear's claws were pressed against Dillon's throat, several slow rivulets of blood trickled toward his chest.

Lee hissed.

"We can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way." The bear grinned at him. There was blood on his teeth. "You can calmly join us in the van, or you're both coming with us in a less calm way."

"Less calm." Dillon spat, apparently not afraid of the claws about to rip his throat out. Lee wished he could say the same thing.

"I'll come. Leave Dillon. He's of no use to you."

"I could have use of him." The vampire grinned down at him. "I've had use of him in the past, and I wouldn't mind another round."

Lee looked between Dillon and the vampire as something dark awoke in his chest. Dillon had seen someone he'd recognized inside. Fuck. He would kill this twat if it was the last thing he did, but he had to make sure Dillon was okay first.

He tried to scent the air to judge how much of a panic Dillon was in. Coming face to face with a vampire from his past must be a nightmare. He looked cool, but it had to be a front. How close was he to breaking? A buzz built in Lee's ears, but Dillon remained calm. Lee pulled in a breath, but all he could scent was blood. Dillon's

blood. “I’ll come.”

“Lee.”

He’d never believed his name could sound like a protest until now, but he held on to Dillon’s gaze. “Get Rei.”

The bear grinned. “Yes, tell Rei we’ll be contacting him soon.” The claws melted away, and he stepped closer to the van. “Let’s get going.”

Fuck, he didn’t smell of Rei. Once they got in the van, they’d realize he smelled of Dillon. Their cover would be blown.

Lee allowed the vampire to haul him to his feet, but as soon as he had found his balance, Dillon pushed at him.

“Dillon.” Lee caught him, using his superior strength to hold him. “Don’t. I’ll go with them.” The scent of blood was thick, and Lee’s teeth dropped. Blood. If he could smell of Dillon’s blood, they might not think about his lack of jaguar scent.

And he wanted the blood.

Dillon glared at him, but he didn’t smell of fear which Lee had expected him to. Then he sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Okay.”

Okay? Okay what?

Dillon fisted a hand in Lee’s hair much like the night before and guided his face to his throat. Lee had a feeling he’d gone back to glaring and was aiming it at the



vampire, which was fine by him.

Dillon's posture was stiff, his hold bruising, but when Lee ran his tongue over the bleeding wounds on his throat, he quivered. For a second everything melted away and all Lee could focus on was the taste. A needy sound escaped, and he tried to press closer to Dillon. Then he realized what he was doing and tried to scent him over the blood. He smelled nervous more than panicked, and Lee gently swiped his tongue again. There would be no teeth.

"Let's go!" The vampire grabbed his wrist, but Lee slid his tongue over the torn skin one more time and moaned as the taste exploded on his tongue anew. He ran his free hand over where blood had already spilled. He tugged to get free of the vampire's hold. He wanted more, wanted to lick every drop off Dillon. Fucking hell, it was the best blood he'd ever had. The taste was rich, and it filled him with heat.

Another sound of pleasure escaped him.

"Enough!" The vampire hauled him into the van, and Lee stared at Dillon. He looked a little lost, but not too bad. And right before the vampire, who hopped in after Lee, closed the door, Dillon gave him a nod.

## Page 16

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Devin and Mars hurried out of the garden center and looked around the parking lot right as the van drove off.

“Dillon!” Devin ran toward him, paling a little with each step. “You’re bleeding.”

“Not too bad. Lee licked it before they took him.”

Mars snarled, then pulled in a deep breath. “We should’ve brought Hanna. I think it’s the same scents as those in Lee’s apartment, but I’m not—” He tapped his nose.

“We need to get out of here before someone notices the blood.” Devin tugged at Dillon’s arm, and he allowed himself to be guided toward Mars’s car. Once they were inside, Mars looked at him in the rearview mirror. “Don’t get blood on the seat.”

Devin smacked him on the head. “No one cares about your car, asshole.”

Mars grumbled something Dillon couldn’t make out. A shudder was growing in his body, and it didn’t appear to want to stop. He clasped his hands in an attempt to keep them from trembling too badly.

“What did they say?” Mars met his gaze in the mirror.

“It was a shifter and a vampire. Long claws.”

“Yeah, bear.”

“Oh, yeah, makes sense, I guess. They’ll contact Rei.”

Mars cursed but got the car rolling. “Devin, call Murrie. Say we’re on our way home and to get Rei ready.”

Ready? How did you get ready? Dillon pushed all thoughts aside and allowed himself a minor meltdown. He’d recognized the vampire. He shouldn’t have dismissed it. The monsters were everywhere, lurking in every corner, and he did his best to ignore them, but when one of them appeared in the garden center, he shouldn’t have written it off as a hallucination.

The drive back to the manor house went a lot quicker than it had taken to get to the garden center. Or maybe Dillon was spacing out. It was possible.

Mars didn’t drive to the garage. Instead, he parked right outside the entrance and got out of the car. Devin and Dillon followed. Hanna, Rei, and Murrie were in the kitchen, the tension thick enough to cut.

“Vampire and a bear.” Mars pulled out a chair and sat.

“Same as in the apartment?” Hanna’s eyes were wrong. It took Dillon a second to realize they were her wolf eyes. He’d never seen her shift anything before. Murrie’s eyes could shift, and Rei regularly turned into a jaguar in the backyard, and his eyes shifted if he got annoyed by something. Dillon wasn’t sure about Faelan. He most often moved around the house like a shadow, but sometimes, he had a wilder feel to him. Though, Dillon hadn’t spent enough time with any of them to know what their state of normalcy was.

“I’m almost certain.”

Hanna jumped to her feet. “Shit, you’re bleeding.” She headed toward Dillon a little too fast for his liking, but he stood his ground.

“It’s okay. Lee sealed it or tried to at least before they hauled him off.”

“Anything else?” Murrie looked as if he’d grown at least three inches if not more. Shit, had he? Maybe he was about to shift.

Dillon took a deep breath. “The vampire. I don’t know his name, but he came by the underground mansion from time to time.”

Mars snarled and hugged Devin to him. Everyone else stared at Dillon.

“But it’s not about an underground mansion?” Rei had cat eyes but appeared the calmest of them. Calm might be the wrong word, he looked as if he’d kill anyone who got too close, but he didn’t have the frantic feel to him the others did.

“No.” Dillon dragged it out. “I don’t think so. They wanted Lee, not me. And they want you.”

“They’ll be able to tell Lee doesn’t smell of me.”

“Maybe they won’t care.” Hanna looked between them.

“I think he...” Dillon scrunched his nose. “He smeared my blood on him. When he licked at my throat, he ran his hands over where it had spilled—”

“How much did you bleed?” Murrie’s teeth looked sharper now, and Dillon shuddered.

“The bear had these long claws, and he jammed them at my throat. Not through obviously, but...” Dillon raised his hand to his throat and gently ran his fingers over the necklace of five puncture wounds.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No. It’s not...They wanted Lee. I was in their way.”

“So now we wait for them to contact us?” Hanna cracked her neck and clenched her fists.

“Yeah.” Murrie reached for his phone. “I’ll see if Faelan can talk.” Then he left the room.

“Does Lee have any used clothes here?” Rei caught and held Dillon’s gaze.

“Yeah, I think there are some upstairs.”

Rei nodded. “I’ll go put on a shirt or something, so I smell of him.”

Dillon shrugged. He didn’t care about Lee’s clothes, and he wondered if anyone would care about scents at all, but he wasn’t the expert here.

\* \* \* \*

Lee looked around the different cages and wanted to scream. How had he believed getting involved in this shit would be a good idea? He should’ve turned a blind eye, and pretended he hadn’t heard anything.

The vampire, who he’d come to hate with a passion on the ride over here, shoved him toward a cage. There was already someone in there, looking more or less out of it.

“Don’t kill him.” The vampire pushed him the last few steps into the cage and closed and locked the door behind him. Lee glared at him. He’d taken his phone and had taunted him both about Rei and Dillon the entire car ride.

He believed he'd hidden his reaction when he told him about what he'd done to Dillon pretty well, but the vampire had laughed at him, so maybe not. At least, he believed he'd managed to conceal they were lovers, if that was what they were. Damn.

When the steps of the vampire died away, he focused on the person he was sharing a cage with. Another vampire, but there was something...He was starved and covered in scars. In general, vampires healed fast enough for there not to be scars, though judging by how thin he was, Lee suspected he didn't get enough nutrition to heal.

"Hi." He kept his voice low and looked around. They were in some kind of warehouse. They hadn't been in the van for long, so he believed they were still in Hagwall.

There were ten cages, five on each side of the room. It stank, and he had a hard time processing what he was scenting, but it looked to be a mix of vampires and shifters, maybe a few crossbreeds too. He looked across the small gap into the cage next to his. Yeah. He believed the man in it was a crossbreed.

He could smell blood and infection. Shifters and vampires seldom suffered from infections.

None of the people he could see looked like champions. He hadn't been near a fighting scene in over seventy years, but he didn't think it had changed much, and the fear he'd managed to suppress for decades woke inside of him.

He turned to the guy who still hadn't moved from his seated position near the corner of the cage. "Are we the bait?"

He lifted a head looking too heavy on his frail body and fixed sightless eyes on Lee—no, not on him, but in his direction. Fuck, he was blind. Lee was almost certain.

Bait.

“We’re whatever they want us to be.” His voice was raspy.

Lee took a couple of quick steps closer only to have the man tense. “Easy. How bad off are you?”

The man huffed.

Yeah, stupid question. Lee’s lungs didn’t allow enough air into them, and his heart was banging hard. He took another step closer to the man. “I’m coming over to sit next to you, okay?”

He waited to see if there would be a reaction. For several seconds, the man didn’t move, then there was the tiniest little nod. Lee walked over, not fast but not slow either, and he made sure to make some noise as he went.

The man’s fangs dropped. “Blood.”

“Sorry man. A friend of mine was with me when I was taken. He was bleeding. It’s all dry.”

The man nodded. “I’m so hungry I can’t tell if the blood is spoiled or not.”

Crap. Vampires always knew if the blood was edible or not, or so he’d assumed. “When did they last allow you to feed?”

Another rusty huff left him. “If I can bite someone when I’m in the fighting ring, I can get some blood. They most often use me on shifters.”

Lee gritted his teeth. “What’s your name?”

“Angelo.”

“Nice to meet you, Angelo, though I wish the circumstances had been different. I’m Lee.”

Angelo leaned his head against the bars and closed his eyes. Lee couldn’t relax. Memories of a different time assaulted him. He’d gotten away. It hadn’t been too bad. His dad had owed some idiot money, had offered Lee as payment, and the man had used him to train his fighters. Had said he wanted them to learn how to fight someone with vampire speed.

He’d bled, had his bones broken, had lived in a cage, but it hadn’t been this bad. He’d been fed, and his master hadn’t wanted him dead. He was of no use if he was dead.

He’d spend months there, and then one night when there had been a fight, the guards had been too busy to keep track of everything around the fight to watch him. The guy who’d been supposed to take him to his cage after the training session had been asked to fetch something, and since Lee was always well-behaved and followed instructions, the guard had told him to stay put while he got whatever it was he was getting. Lee had nodded, but he hadn’t stayed put.

He didn’t think he could do it all over again, though. Months. It had taken months of daily fighting and meek behavior, and it had been a stroke of luck.

His skin was shrinking, his breaths coming in shallow puffs. Fuck, he couldn’t do this. Would they call Rei? Would he come for Lee? Why would he? Lee wasn’t part of their team. He was of no use to them.

When a wail rose in his throat, he clamped his teeth shut. He needed to focus on something else.



Looking at Angelo, he took in his frail form. The almost black hair was tousled and hanging into his eyes. He was short, and even if he hadn't been starved, Lee guessed he was fine-limbed. Size didn't matter when it came to vampires, age did.

"Have you been here long?" He lightly bumped his shoulder to let him know he was talking to him.

Angelo nodded.

Shit. "Any idea how long?"

"For as long as I can remember."

Not old then. Lee could usually tell. Not how old someone was, but if they were young or old.

Angelo turned his face in Lee's direction, and he suppressed a shudder. The eyes were too pale, so light gray they almost looked white. "You smell clean underneath the blood."

Lee huffed. "Yeah, had a shower not too many hours ago." Shit. He and Dillon had washed the jizz off themselves before crawling into the soft, warm bed.

Dillon. He wanted to scream. He'd fucked up. If he hadn't acted like an immature ass this morning, would they have stayed in the house then? They could have been fooling around in bed instead of going to the garden center?

"What happens now?"

Angelo shrugged. "We wait. I think there's a big fight tomorrow. There was one two days ago, and they usually have three before we move on to the next city."

Two days ago was Friday. The night Lee had to work because Conan had been busy, and Jala had been...busy. A new type of unease curled in his gut.

“When you say big fight, you mean?”

“Audience.”

“Will you fight?” Lee didn’t waste effort in trying to hide his expression since Angelo couldn’t see him anyway. How would he be able to fight? Could he stand without falling?

A slight tremor went through Angelo. “I’m usually a warm-up fight. Some big shifter gets to beat the crap out of me while I try to get a bite in. With the audience there, I’m unable to hear the movements well enough, so it’s most often short-lived.”

Lee was going to be sick. He had to get out of there.

\* \* \* \*

Hours had gone by, and they still hadn’t heard anything. Dillon had showered and changed clothes and was now sitting by the kitchen island where he could watch Devin as he baked a mountain of cookies.

“Do you think they’ll make him fight?” Devin grabbed the edge of the counter with a white-knuckled grip.

“I have no idea.”

“They want something spectacular, right? Lee is a pretty average vampire. He’s not too big, not small, not...” Devin blew out a shuddering breath. “They want Rei. He’s spectacular.”

Dillon nodded. Rei was spectacular.

“People would pay a lot of money to watch a jaguar fight.” He sounded confident, but the look he sent Dillon was questioning.

“I have no idea.” He’d never been interested in fighting of any kind. Had never watched boxing or MMA or anything of the sort.

“Maybe they want them to fight each other.” Devin placed his elbows on the counter and cradled his head. “Fuck. Who’d win?” He looked at Dillon, still holding onto his head. “And would they fight until one of them was dead?”

“I have no idea. Judging by how Lee talks about Rei, I think Rei would win. Lee is...turned on by Rei’s strength.”

Devin made a disbelieving sound.

“It’s true. He told me they’d hooked up, and I didn’t need to worry about him wanting to fuck me because he liked strong, deadly men, and I don’t fit the bill.”

Devin stared dumbstruck. “He said that?”

“Yup.” Dillon grinned.

“Huh. it’ll be a fun wake-up call for him since I know he wants to fuck you. It’s plain for anyone to see.”

Dillon might let him if they got him out in one piece. “Why aren’t they calling?”

He hadn’t more than uttered those words before Hanna hurried into the kitchen. “They called.”

Both Dillon and Devin straightened.

“Rei is to meet them at The Rambling Rogue in an hour.”

Dillon frowned. “Lee was supposed to be working now, wasn’t he?”

Hanna gave a short nod. “I’m heading there now, to have a drink. I have a tracker in my left shoe and one on my phone. Rei has the same.”

“Aren’t people aware you know each other?” If Hanna walked in there, it had to raise suspicion.

“I’m meeting up with a couple of friends. We’ll be a girly giggly mess and won’t notice Rei.”

Dillon nodded. “So Mars and Murrie will be the only ones who can...erm...storm the place once Rei is inside?”

“Can either of you drive?”

Dillon stared at Devin, then at Hanna. “Yeah, I can drive.”

“Me too.” Devin grimaced. “Haven’t done it in a few years, though.”

Dillon hadn’t either.

“We might need someone who can trail a car if they find the trackers.”

“Trail as in...”

“Wait in the parking lot outside The Rambling Rogue, and if you see Rei in a car or if

they use the same van they used to take Lee in, follow it without getting caught.”

“Mars will object.” Devin’s voice wasn’t more than a whisper.

“Of course he will, which is why I suggest you go now before he’s done arguing with Murrie about it.”

“Shit.” Devin turned off the oven and headed toward the front door. “Are you coming, Dillon?”

Crap! Dillon didn’t reply but followed Devin out of the kitchen. They would be in a car, not talking to anyone. It would be fine. All they had to do was look for a car or a van. It would be okay. He feared he was gonna be sick.

“Take Murrie’s car, it’s the blue one. There are weapons underneath the passenger seat.” Hanna waved at them and hurried toward the stairs.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Lee didn't know how many hours had passed. Several. Angelo dozed next to him, which was worrying. No one let their guard down that fast in a situation like this. He must be badly off.

When heavy footsteps approached, he jerked awake and tensed. Lee made a sound, reminding him he was there. Shit, it reminded him of waking Dillon from a nightmare, only Angelo would wake up still trapped in the nightmare and nothing Lee could say or do would make it better.

Angelo remained tense to the verge of shaking.

"Not the new guy." The words came from some distance behind the brute walking toward the cages. He wore nothing but a pair of black gym shorts, his muscles were bulging, and there were a few visible scars, but no more than to be expected by someone who was into fighting. Shifter. Lee couldn't tell what kind yet. Judging by the size, he'd say a bear, but there were large wolves too. Faelan was massive, for example. He and Murrie were about the same size despite being different species.

"I only need a warm-up for tomorrow, so I think I'll take..." He lingered outside their cage and looked at Angelo. Bear. Now he was close, Lee could tell by scent. He wanted to scream to leave him be, but it would only entice him.

As the brute walked on, Lee let out a shuddering breath. He watched as he stopped near the neighboring cage. The guy turned to look at him. His face was bruised and one of his eyes was swollen shut, there were several lacerations on his body, and if Lee ever needed proof he was a crossbreed and not a full shifter, all he had to do was look at the slow healing.

The bear grunted and turned back to Lee and Angelo's cage. "I'm in the mood for vampire."

Lee made a sound of protest, but a guard or whatever appeared by the cage in no time. He raised a gun at Lee. "Step back."

Lee glared at him.

"It's a tranquilizer, you'll be out for hours."

Lee took a step back. He couldn't afford to be out for hours. He had to be alert if Rei and the others came for him.

The guard unlocked the door to the cage, and Angelo stood on shaky legs. Yeah, he was a tiny thing. Like Devin. And so thin it hurt to look at him. Fuck.

As Angelo took a swaying step forward, the guard caught him. An instant later, Angelo's fangs were buried in his shoulder. Not the best place to bite, but considering the height difference, and Angelo being blind, it was a good attempt.

The guard cursed and yanked Angelo's head away with a hold on his hair, but it tore the puncture wounds and blood gushed. Lee had eaten, but his fangs dropped at the scent.

The fighter stomped into the cage, but not until Angelo managed to get another swallow of blood. He took Angelo from the guard, held him at a safe distance, and left the cage. The guard glared at Lee before slamming the door shut.

Lee smiled with his fangs on full display and then stood there grinning until the guard left. Wanker.

How would Angelo survive a beating from a bear?

\* \* \* \*

Dillon looked around the dark parking lot. “It doesn’t look like much.”

“What did you expect?” Devin was in the passenger seat, a gun cradled in his lap.

“I don’t know, but when they talk about The Rumbling Rogue, I always picture something bigger.”

“It’s a shifter bar. They don’t want to draw attention from humans.”

“There are no humans in there?”

Devin shrugged. “I guess they can’t stop them from coming, but I also think having humans around drunk shifters and vamps is a bad idea.”

Dillon would have to agree, especially if they were meant to keep their existence a secret.

“You can hardly tell it’s a bar from the outside.” Devin looked out the window. “No signs and no windows facing this way. Should be pretty safe for them to let their guard down in there. I’m assuming they have security guards to discourage humans from entering too.”

Devin’s phone rang for the fiftieth time, and he sighed before picking up. “Yes, Mars, I’m still alive.”

Dillon could hear the snarl on the other end, which was pretty impressive since he didn’t have any enhanced hearing. Then there were words he couldn’t make out, and



Devin softened before his eyes.

“I promise. I love you too.” Then he hung up and rolled his eyes. “He’s such a mother hen.”

Dillon couldn’t help but smile. Mars was scary as hell.

“Any news?”

“No, Rei’s trackers still show him inside.”

Dillon was about to ask about Faelan, but the words died on his tongue as a dark gray van turned into the parking lot. He pressed himself against the backrest. “I think it’s the one.”

Devin looked between him and the van. “Are you sure?”

“Not a hundred percent, but it’s the same color.”

Devin nodded. “Okay.” His fingers flew over the screen on his phone, sending a text to inform Mars and Murrie. Once done, he looked at Dillon. “And you said the vamp frequented the underground mansion.”

“Group events, not important or rich enough to get a private room. He shouldn’t recognize you. I don’t think. Unless...” No matter how hard he tried, the memories Mars had erased from the time he and Devin had been together wouldn’t come back. “I don’t know if he was there years ago.”

“Even if, he most likely didn’t get me, right?” Devin had turned so pale his skin shone in the dim light streaming in from the streetlights.

Dillon shook his head.

“Was he a regular?”

Grimacing, Dillon tried to remember again. He couldn't say how often. He recalled him, but had he been there every month, every other month? He didn't know. Not often enough for him to be able to predict when he'd show up next. “I'm not sure. He came back several times, but I can't tell how long the time between his visits were.”

“It doesn't matter, but if they travel around with this fighting ring thing, they're not here all the time, right?”

“Guess not.”

The van backed up to what Dillon assumed was the staff entrance.

Then they waited and waited. No one exited the van, and no one opened the door. Devin fidgeted while Dillon focused on taking deep breaths. They were so out of their league. Two humans in the supernatural underworld. No wonder Mars was pissed. How had Murrie allowed them to go?

They were understaffed though, had been since Dillon moved in, and with Rei allowing himself to get taken, and Faelan doing his undercover thing, there weren't many people left.

A door opened, not the staff door, but the one Dillon figured was the real entrance. Three women spilled out, laughing and stumbling.

“Fuck, that's Hanna.” Devin slunk back in the seat. “Whoever is in the van will see her.”

The women stopped in the middle of the parking lot, laughed and hugged, only to split up and head toward different cars. Hanna headed toward theirs. Dillon held his breath as she opened the door of the backseat and climbed in.

He turned the key in the ignition since the other two had started their cars.

Sharp eyes met his in the rearview mirror. Whatever drunken giggling mess she'd presented outside, it had been pretense. He should've known, of course.

"Stop a bit farther down the road, and we'll see which way they'll go and follow."

"But then we don't know if they have Rei." Devin turned around in his seat to look at her.

"They took him into the kitchen. Conan or whatever he's called."

"Who's Conan?" Dillon didn't think he'd heard the name before.

"Bartender. He and Lee split the shifts between them pretty evenly. Jala helps out, and one of the waitresses hops in when there's a crowd."

Dillon nodded and searched for a place to park where they could see the entrance to the parking lot. He stopped along the street and killed the engine.

It didn't take many minutes before the van drove out and turned in the opposite direction from them.

"Follow it." Hanna leaned forward between the front seats. "Let Murrie know we're on the go."

Devin grabbed the phone again.

\* \* \* \*

Lee hissed as the guard threw Angelo inside the cage. He was out cold. You didn't see unconscious vampires often.

"What the fuck?"

"Splash some water on him." The guard gestured at a bucket in the corner. Was there water in it? Lee had assumed it was the latrine. He walked over to it, and it was water. Clean looking.

"Clean enough to drink?" He looked at the guard, who shrugged.

"From the hose." He gestured at a hose on the wall. Good enough. He cupped his hand in it and took a hesitant sip. It tasted all right.

Next, he walked over to Angelo and put a hand on his shoulder. There was blood on his face and his hands, increasing swelling, and new bruises were forming on top of the old ones on his frail body.

He wanted to kill these bastards so badly he shook.

"Angelo?"

No reaction. Lee cradled him in his arms ready to lift, only to let go and walk over to get the bucket instead. Moving him as little as possible was for the best. He tore the bottom of his shirt and dipped it in the water. As he wiped Angelo down, he twitched and whimpered.

"Shh. I'm cleaning you up. I'm Lee, remember?" Fuck, this place was bad when you could see what went on around you. Angelo must be in a constant state of being

terrified, forever trapped in a nightmare.

Another distressed sound left him.

“Do you want some water? I don’t have a glass, but I can cup my hand for you, or if you want to...” He guided Angelo into a sitting position, leaning him against his chest, and placed his hand on the rim of the bucket. He pushed his hand into the water, cupped it, and drank as if he hadn’t had water in ages. Did he know he had a bucket of water in his cage? Lee wanted to snarl but held Angelo while he drank.

“Are you hurt?”

He shook his head. It was a lie, but at least there weren’t any protruding bones anywhere. “What happens now?”

Angelo cleared his throat, yet no more than a croak left him when he tried to speak.

“Shh, no need. I ask questions when nervous, trying to make sense of things.” He gently cradled his arm around Angelo and rocked them. He didn’t know why. Trying to calm himself most likely. Angelo melted against him with a huff though, so maybe it helped calm him too.

“If no one else comes down looking for a fight, we rest.” Angelo spoke so low Lee had to strain to hear him.

“It must be late in the evening by now.”

Angelo gave a small shrug. “I have no idea. I can’t even tell you what season it is.”

“Spring. It’s May. I was with my...boyfriend in the garden center to buy tomato plants when they got me.”

“Oh...You garden?”

“Nope, and neither does Dillon.” He smiled as he pictured the million plastic cups he’d sown things in. Maybe it counted as gardening.

“But you have a garden.”

“I live in an apartment, but Dillon lives in this huge house together with a bunch of shifters and a vampire. They have a garden.” Lee looked down at Angelo and caught a ghost of a smile.

“Sounds nice.”

“Yeah.” He rocked them some more.

“What do you do when you’re not fighting cage matches?”

“I’m a bartender.”

“Vampire Lee?” The voice came from several cages over, but Lee whipped his head in the direction of it.

“Yeah.” He gave Angelo a gentle squeeze and got up to be able to see who was speaking.

Three cages over a man were clinging to the bars, a panicked look in his eyes. He was bruised and bloody. Crossbreed. They didn’t get a lot of crossbreeds at the bar, but it happened. He couldn’t say he recognized him though.

“Do I know you?”

“No. I’m Zain. I work with Eli. He talks about you from time to time.”

Lee grimaced. Zain, Eli’s missing work partner. “He’s looking for you.”

A smile that quickly turned into a wince followed his words. “Don’t know if it’ll do us any good.”

Lee shrugged. Eli might not be looking, but he worried at least.

When new steps approached, Lee hurried over to Angelo. If they tried to take him again, he’d attack. Tranquilizer gun or not.

The vampire he wanted dead walked straight for their cage, a fangy grin on his face. “Your boyfriend has arrived.”

Lee didn’t move a muscle. Dillon or Rei? He prayed it was Rei and that Dillon would never have to see cages like this. He’d been through enough already.

The vampire who’d die a painful death soon unlocked the door to the cage and gestured for him to exit. “Easy now or we’ll kill him.”

Him as in Angelo? Or Rei? He doubted they’d kill Rei. They wanted him, but if it wasn’t Rei who’d come...Dillon held no value to them.

He followed without a word.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

“This the place?” Hanna looked skeptical. Neither Dillon nor Devin replied. They’d followed the van here. It had driven into a warehouse where a door had shut behind it. There was no way Dillon could’ve followed without being seen.

“So...Do we sit here and do nothing?” Devin looked around, but everything was dark and deserted.

“We wait.” Hanna wrote something on her phone, and a few seconds later it buzzed, but she didn’t say anything, so Dillon didn’t ask who she was talking to.

Time stood still. They sat there for an eternity, and yet the digits on the clock didn’t move.

When there was a knock on the window, Dillon yelped. Faelan tilted his head to the side right before the door to the backseat opened and he got in. “Evening.”

“How did you get here?” Devin clutched the gun he still had in his hand. “I could’ve shot you.”

“Which was why I knocked first.” Faelan gave him a nonchalant look. “I ran. A nice late night jog. Murrie and Mars will be here any minute.”

Dillon took a steadying breath. Faelan was dressed in black jeans and a black slim-fit, long-sleeved T-shirt, showing off a lot of muscles. In his hand he had a heavy-looking black bag. No one who saw him running would believe he was out for a jog. Bank robbery, yes. Exercising? No. “And what happens when Mars and Murrie get here?”



“We storm the place, I suppose. Rei’s in there?”

“We think so. Murrie is the one who can see the trackers. He wrote one is left at The Rambling Rogue, but the other is here.”

Dillon curled his fingers around the steering wheel. “I have faith in you guys, but how do you plan on storming the place? It’s a fucking warehouse. You’d be exposed wherever you went.”

Faelan shrugged. “I suspect Mars will circle the building. He’s the fastest of us. He’ll look for surveillance cameras and dismantle them. If we’re lucky, it’ll lure some of them outside, so we can thin them out. If it doesn’t work, we’ll have to force our way in.”

He was too calm. Dillon had a hard time getting his lungs to allow air in, and Faelan was all smiles and anticipation. Or he wasn’t smiling, but he could have. The air around him was...amused.

“But we have no idea how many are inside.” What if there are thirty people ready to fight Mars, Murrie, Faelan, and Hanna? They wouldn’t stand a chance.

“No, it’s not great, but we’ve been through worse things. I don’t think they’ll start slaughtering their fighters as many do when we raid places with blood slaves, so it’s a plus.”

“But what if the fighters are on their side? It would make it worse.”

Faelan shrugged. “I’m no expert on fighting rings, but if I’ve understood it correctly, they have a few main fighters who might side with their owners or business partners or whatever they are, but the weaker guys? They don’t want to be here and are most likely locked up.”

Before Dillon could ask anything else, a car turned the corner.

“Is that Mars and Murrie?” Judging by how quiet everyone had gone, Dillon anticipated the no before it came. Hanna spoke so low he had a hard time hearing her, but he got the no.

“Do we...eh you...want to take them out?” Hell, this wasn’t good. A blonde woman stepped out of the car, grabbing a crate of beer from the trunk.

“Jala.”

Dillon glanced at Hanna. “Who?”

“Lee’s boss.”

“Lee’s boss? What the hell is she doing here?” Was she the one behind Lee being taken?

“Providing alcohol. I guess we can assume Jala is in on it.” Faelan didn’t sound too troubled, whereas Dillon felt betrayed at Lee’s expense.

“Should we grab her?” Hanna looked at Faelan. “If we take her now before she walks through the door, we don’t have to fight a fucking lion inside.”

Faelan nodded and opened the car door.

Jala turned around at the sound, and Dillon was unable to breathe.

“Fuck.” Devin clutched the gun, but Hanna and Faelan were already moving. Fast. When Jala dropped the crate, the noise of the crashed bottles reached inside the car. Claws swiped through the air, and Dillon winced. She started to shift, but Hanna

kicked her legs out from under her, and Faelan pushed her against the ground.

Headlights swept over them, and Dillon cursed out loud. Fuck, another car. What should they do? He leaned over Devin and fumbled to reach under his seat. His fingers curled around what had to be a knife. Not what he wanted, but better than nothing.

The car stopped abruptly, and both the driver and the passenger door opened. Then two forms moved toward the fight at such rapid speed Dillon could only see the blurred shadows of them.

“It’s Mars.”

Dillon glanced at Devin. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s his car. No one is allowed to drive his car other than him.” He rolled his eyes.

The next time Dillon looked toward the fight, they were hauling Jala toward the car—Mars’s car. “Is she arrested?”

“I assume so or taken in for questioning at least.”

Devin hadn’t finished the sentence before the door Jala had been heading toward opened and three men rushed out.

Damn. “Is there another gun under your seat?”

Devin bent forward and rummaged around. He came up with a weird-looking rifle. The pipe was short, but it looked like a rifle.

“I think it has darts.”

“Darts?”

Devin shrugged.

\* \* \* \*

Lee was shown to an office of sort. It had tin walls and there were no shelves or anything, but there were a couple of chairs and a desk.

On one of the chairs was Rei. A little roughed up, and his hands were zip-tied to the armrests. Lee’s eyes lingered on them. Couldn’t he break zip ties? There were several around each wrist, but still. Rei was a jaguar.

“Look who’s here.” Maybe-Aaron was sitting by the desk, grinning like a madman.

“Aaron.” Lee dipped his head in greeting. “What’s going on?”

“We brought your boyfriend, so he can take your place.”

Lee grinned. He didn’t know why, some manic gene choosing this moment to manifest most likely. “Oh, no need. I was settling in fine.”

Maybe-Aaron looked confused for a moment, but Rei huffed a laugh.

Lee walked closer to Rei, placing a hand on his wrist on top of the zip ties. Four. But still, were four zip ties enough to hold a jaguar? Maybe it was. He assumed Maybe-Aaron had experience with these things. Lee could’ve gotten out of four zip ties, it wouldn’t be pleasant, but he could snap them.

Was a jaguar's front leg thinner than a human arm? Probably not. Jaguars were fucking massive.

"I can keep you both, of course. I only offered you up as a bargain, since I have enough vampires already."

"That's kind of you, but—"

Rei sucked in a breath and leaned closer to him. "Who have you been with?" His hands curled into fists and sharp teeth peeked out from under his upper lip. He leaned closer still, and Lee met him, allowing him to scent him. It was most likely Dillon's blood he was picking up on.

"Whose scent is on you?" This time his voice was growly.

Maybe-Aaron chuckled. "Oh, do we have a jealous boyfriend? I didn't think you were mated."

They weren't, and Rei was acting strange as hell. Maybe it was to confuse Maybe-Aaron. "It's Dillon."

"Not Dillon, the other scent."

"Angelo?"

Rei met his gaze, his eyes all cat. "Angelo?"

"My cellmate."

"You held him?" Rei looked ready to snarl, but Lee didn't think it was aimed at him.

“He was injured. I helped him clean up.”

Maybe-Aaron huffed in amusement, and Lee curled his hands into fists so as not to fling himself across the room and attack him. It wouldn't end well since Rei was incapacitated, and Maybe-Aaron had both the fucking vampire who was gonna die and another guard standing right by the door.

The next moment, the sound of someone running reached him. The bear who'd pricked Dillon's throat with his claws pushed past the guard and the vampire blocking the doorway. “They've taken Jala.”

Jala. A wave of nausea washed over Lee. Who had taken Jala? Was she hurt?

“Who?” Maybe-Aaron shot to his feet.

The bear pointed at Rei, and Lee turned to look at him. “You?”

“I haven't touched Jala.”

“Your friends.” The bear looked ready to shift.

The grin stretching Rei's lips wasn't pretty. “Oh, they're here or at The Rambling Rogue?”

A bang sounded, followed by shouts and more running footsteps. Lee met Rei's gaze. “My guess is here.”

“Awesome, let's go.” Rei curled his hands, flexed his arms and hissed. The zip ties cut through his skin, blood oozed, and Lee's fangs dropped. He didn't have time to watch though. Whirling around, he planted a fist in the bear's face.

A roar that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on edge came from behind, but then he heard snapping sounds.

The zip ties were off.

Rei leaped over Lee, still in mostly human form, though the claws on his hands gleamed in the fluorescent light. He clawed Maybe-Aaron across the face as he landed more or less sprawled over the desk. He was quick to move though, and everything turned chaotic when Maybe-Aaron bellowed.

There were hisses and growls, bites and claws, and the scent of blood filled the room. Something sharp speared Lee's side, and he looked down in surprise at the bear's claws buried there.

Snarling, he grabbed the bear's head in a bruising grip and buried his fangs in his throat and ripped. He needed to feed to heal the injury, but there was no time, so he tore instead. A gurgle followed, then Lee buried his fingers in the gaping wound and pulled, freeing the larynx from the bear's body.

He didn't have time to gloat before he was pushed to the floor. The vampire snarled in his face, and Lee saw stars as he grabbed his head and smashed it against the floor several times. He managed to get a hand up and clawed at the vampire's eye. He found the eye socket and pushed in. A gooey mess fell into his hand as the vampire shrieked. Dots were swimming before his eyes, but he was aware enough to notice a clawed hand reaching around the vampire's throat and slicing it. Blood sprayed over Lee, but he didn't care.

"Damn, Lee. Why do you make everything so gory?" Rei looked down at the dead vampire in distaste, his eyeball resting against his cheek, still attached to...something. Next to him, on the floor, was the bear's voice box.

Lee grunted as he tried to get the black dots under control. Then he rolled over on his hands and knees and got up. Four bodies littered the office. “Are they dead?”

“I think so. We’ll clean up later. If anyone’s still breathing when we get back, they go into custody.”

Lee nodded.

“Where are the cells?”

Lee motioned in the direction he’d come from. “There are ten cages. Everyone’s weak and starved and more or less hurt. I don’t know where the good fighters are.”

As they exited the office, sounds of fighting in the opposite direction of the cages reached them, and Rei gritted his teeth. A snarl echoed in the warehouse.

“Hanna.” Rei looked as if he wanted to head for the cages but turned toward the sounds. Lee followed.



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon clutched the dart gun and watched as Mars took down one of the people who'd exited the warehouse before the poor fucker could understand what happened. "Damn."

"Yeah." Devin sounded breathless.

"We're staying here, right?"

Devin nodded, but then Murrie hauled someone toward the car, and Hanna and Mars went in through the door. Devin clawed at the door handle.

"No." Dillon grabbed his arm.

"But what if he's hurt? What if he needs blood, and I'm out here where he can't get to me?"

Dillon frowned. "No. We'd be in the way, and then they'd have to rescue us on top of rescuing Rei and Lee."

Devin made a noise of protest but let go of the door handle. Dillon's pulse was hammering in his ears, especially after Murrie opened the door to Mars's car and he could see Jala slumped in the seat. He reached for something, then he aimed a gun at the guy he dragged over there and pulled the trigger. A dart hit the man's thigh, and he flopped to the ground.

Dillon looked at the gun he was clutching. It had darts.

After Murrie had hauled the now limp body into the car, he jogged toward the warehouse and disappeared from view, leaving Dillon and Devin the only conscious people in the parking lot.

Time dragged, and Dillon drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, rubbed the butt of the gun where the surface had been scarred, fiddled with the keys in the ignition, and went back to drumming on the steering wheel. Devin stared out the window without moving a muscle. Dillon wasn't sure he breathed, though he had to be.

With a loud bang, the door flew open, and Lee tumbled out, only to roll around with a heavily muscled man on the ground. Dillon gasped. Lee was covered in blood. With a roar, Dillon pushed the door open and, more or less, fell out on the parking lot gravel.

"No!" Devin reached for him, but he was too late. Dillon ran. He was distantly aware of Devin opening his car door, but Lee was bleeding, and he was down on the ground. Dillon ran faster. He was close enough to make out details when he raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

The dart hit the massive man in the shoulder, and he looked away from Lee and focused on Dillon. With a vicious snarl no human ever could produce, he flung himself off Lee and toward Dillon. The next second, he fell to the ground, out cold.

Whatever was in these darts, it worked fast. Dillon stared at the unmoving form.

Lee was by his side before he could see him move. "Okay, babe?"

"I shot him."

"You sure did." Lee grinned, which was a gruesome sight with all the blood. "How did you get here?"

“Drove.” He gestured at the car. “Are you hurt?”

“We don’t have time now. I have to get to the cages. I don’t want anyone else approaching Angelo. He won’t know what’s going on.”

Dillon nodded. He had no idea what Lee was saying, but right then he didn’t care.

Murrie exited the warehouse dragging yet another person. He looked at the guy on the ground, then at Dillon. “You need to reload. That model only holds one dart.”

Good he didn’t miss then.

“Go reload and stay in the car. I’ll be back in a minute.” Lee kissed him on the lips and Dillon grimaced at the taste of blood but nodded his agreement.

\* \* \* \*

Lee hurried past Hanna, Rei, and Mars. They each held one person to the ground. A calm had settled. Lee wasn’t sure he trusted it, but he didn’t think there would be a massive attack anywhere, so he headed toward the cages.

“Lee!”

Lee turned and looked at Rei, who twisted the head of the person he was holding. The sickening sound of a neck breaking overtook the air, and Lee winced.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Okay.” He took a couple of steps. “Let me be the one who approaches Angelo.”

Rei growled, which had Lee whipping his head around. “What the fuck?”

“Why should you get to approach him?”

“He’ll recognize my voice.”

Rei stopped and stared at him. “Your voice?”

“He’s blind.”

A pained look flitted over Rei’s face, then it turned into a blank mask. So fucking weird. Was he one of those who believed flawed people should be put down? Nah, he was protective of both Devin and Dillon.

“He’s in pretty bad shape, and they threw me in his cage since we’re both vampires, I think. He can’t feed from me, so they probably deemed it safe.”

“He needs to feed?”

“Desperately. Come on.” Lee more or less jogged toward the cages. Angelo was in the first one, back against the bars in the corner and his head bowed forward as if the weight of it was too much for him.

“Angelo.” Lee neared the cage only to realize the door was locked. “How do we get in?” He directed the question to Rei.

The inhabitants of the other cages got to their feet and the scent of injury and infection grew stronger.

“Fuck.” Rei looked around, a look of distaste taking over.

“Yeah, I know. They need to get cleaned and get proper nutrition.”

“I fucking hate places like this.” Rei looked to be on the verge of shifting, and Lee winced. He’d believed he reacted badly to being there, but it looked like it was hitting Rei harder. Lee had been too focused on Angelo and on if or when the others would come for him or not to take in the situation. Now a shiver shot through him, and he feared he’d puke. The wound in his side throbbed, the blood clotted only to tear open again when he moved.

He took a deep breath. They needed to get out of there. The sooner, the better.

“Rei. Keys.”

Rei nodded and turned around.

“Angelo?”

Angelo raised his head, his sightless eyes turning in Lee’s direction. “Are you ready to get out of here?”

“I don’t think I can fight anyone right now.”

“Nah, I was thinking a shower and some food.”

Angelo didn’t look as if he believed him. “Can you get over here? Straight ahead from where you’re sitting. There is nothing in your path.”

Angelo dragged himself to his feet. He was nothing but skin and bones, and he looked worse now than when Lee had first seen him with the new bruises and lacerations that should’ve started to heal but hadn’t.

He took a careful step forward, then another and another. Lee pushed his hands through the bars, and when Angelo was close enough, he took his hand. “I’m outside

the bars. Rei, my friend, is getting the keys or if he can't find them, we'll figure out a way to get you out of here. All of you." He added the last bit in a louder voice as a murmur was growing in the other cages.

Angelo shook, but Lee ignored it.

A few minutes later, Rei came back. "Found them. I think."

Angelo hissed, his fangs on full display. Both Rei and Lee ignored him.

Rei fumbled with the keys and tried a couple of different ones before finding the right one. "Got it." He turned the key and pushed the door open.

In a blur of motion, Angelo was on him. Fangs sank into Rei's chest through the fabric of his shirt since it was where he could reach, fingers curled into birdlike claws. Rei gave a startled snarl, buried his hand in Angelo's hair and pulled him away. Then something close to pity overtook his face, and he crouched. He carefully allowed Angelo to get closer to his throat.

"Gently." The whisper was so intimate, Lee looked away. When Angelo whimpered, he reached for the keys Rei had dropped when Angelo attacked and went to unlock the other cages.

The prisoners watched him wearily as he unlocked one door after the other. They didn't move, didn't exit the cages, and Lee's heart broke for them. Fuck, he wished he could kill Maybe-Aaron all over again.

As he neared Angelo's cage, Rei was gently running his hands over Angelo's back. "You need to stop now. I need my strength."

Angelo made a sound of protest.

“I know, but we’ll get you more blood later. And food, okay? Now, we need to get going.”

Zain took a careful step out of his cage. “Can we go, Vampire Lee?”

Before Lee could answer, Rei did, still with Angelo attached to his throat. “We need statements from everyone.” He tried to straighten, only to wince and bend down again. “Angelo, please, retract your fangs.”

This time, Angelo did as told, and Rei straightened and looked at the men spilling out of the cages. “Follow us. I’m sure Murrie has arranged some sort of transportation by now. We’ll get you showered and fed, and then we need to speak to you one-on-one. After that, we’ll help you get to where you belong.” He hesitated and glanced at Angelo. “Or set you up somehow.”

Lee placed a hand on Angelo’s shoulder. “Ready to go?”

Angelo grabbed his arm, his grip bruising. Rei looked between them, a flash of something before another blank mask fell into place.

“Let’s go before Dillon comes in here and starts shooting people with his dart gun.” Lee squeezed Angelo’s hand where it dug into his forearm.

“Is he here?”

“Outside. He drove here, so if you want, you can ride with us.” He didn’t know what the procedure was in cases like this, but since Angelo trusted him, he assumed Murrie would be okay with bending the rules a little to make him as comfortable as possible.

Angelo nodded a reply, and Lee guided him through the warehouse to the door. The moment they stepped outside, Dillon rushed toward them. Angelo hissed before he

could reach them, and Dillon paled and took a stumbling step backward.

Fuck. “Dillon, this is Angelo.” Angelo closed his mouth, hiding his fangs. “Angelo, this is my boyfriend, Dillon.”

Dillon’s eyes widened, and Lee winced. Maybe he should’ve checked if the boyfriend label was okay before introducing him as such.

“I’m sorry.” Angelo held out a hand, the angle a little wrong, and Lee noted the moment Dillon realized he couldn’t see.

Dillon took his hand. “No worries, we’re all a bit on edge.” He glanced at Lee, and Lee wanted nothing more than to let go of Angelo and haul him in for a kiss, but he didn’t.

“Angelo will be riding with us.”

Dillon nodded. “You’re hurt.”

The moment he’d said the words, Lee became aware of how much he hurt and how his side was still seeping. “We’ll clean up when we get home and see how bad it is.”

Worry shone in Dillon’s eyes. “Okay. Can we go?”

“Ask Murrie.”

Dillon nodded and hurried over to where Murrie stood speaking to the other prisoners.

“You’re dating a human?” Angelo looked confused. “I didn’t think we were allowed to...They can’t know about us.”



“Dillon was a blood slave before Rei and the others rescued him.”

“Rei?”

“The guy you snacked on.”

A blush painted Angelo’s cheeks, which was a good sign. At least he had enough blood in his system to blush.

Dillon waved at him and indicated the car.

“Looks like we’re good to go. The car is about thirty feet away.”

Angelo nodded and took a step forward, still clinging to Lee.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Dillon stood with his palms against the wall in the shower, head hanging while the water pounded on his back.

Lee was in the room next to theirs with Angelo, helping him get settled. Murrie, Hanna, Faelan, Mars, and Rei were processing the captives while Devin was cooking up a storm for the rescues. He should have offered to help, but his nerves were fried.

Murrie had given him a soft smile and a mumbled thanks before Dillon hurried up the stairs. He figured it was Murrie's way of saying he was free to leave.

He tipped his head, a low moan escaping as the heat hit his front instead of his back. Another noise, not coming from him, had him whirling around. Lee was standing outside the shower watching him.

"You paint a fine picture."

He did not. There was nothing fine about his scarred skin, but right now, he didn't care. Lee looked half a breath away from toppling over. "You look like shit."

"Yeah. Do you know if Mars has any blood?"

"I assume so, but I think he's busy at the moment." Devin might know where he kept it, though.

Dillon ran his gaze over Lee. He didn't like how wet the bloody fabric clinging to his side was. "How bad off are you?"

“I’ve seen better days, but I’ll be fine.”

Stepping out of the spray, Dillon moved closer. “How bad?” He gestured at the side.

“It won’t close properly. Or it closes, and then I move, and it opens again. But the healing is slower now. I need to feed.” He looked ashen, and Dillon suspected he was in a lot more pain than he let on. Carefully, he reached for the hem of Lee’s shirt and pulled it upward. It made a slick sound as it parted with his skin, and Dillon winced. “Shit, this isn’t good.”

“It’ll be fine, some blood and some rest, and I’ll be good as new.”

He was most likely right, but...Dillon pulled the shirt over his head, cautious not to jostle him more than necessary. “Shower? Or do you think it’s too much at the moment?”

“I’d love a shower. It’s gonna sting though.”

Dillon reached for the button in his jeans, giving him a wicked grin. “So...boyfriend?”

“Ah, yeah, probably should’ve asked first.”

Dillon chuckled. “I believed you were a free-spirited sort of guy, no relationships, only fucking the most dangerous guy you could find before moving on.”

Lee groaned, and Dillon dropped to his knees, pulling the jeans and underwear with him. Lee looked down at him, his cock making an attempt to stand, but failing. Dillon chuckled.

“You’re evil.”

“A little.” He rose. “Come on, I have you.”

He steered Lee into the shower, grabbed the shower head and turned the knob, so the spray softened a little before running it over Lee’s shoulders. He hissed.

“Too hot?” Dillon loved a hot shower.

“Nah, it’s good.” Lee watched him with such intensity, Dillon had to look away. He focused on running the water over his body, washing away the blood. There was a new trickle from the puncture wounds in his side as soon as he’d washed away the previous.

“Claws?”

“The fucking bear from the garden center.”

Dillon nodded. “Want to bite me?”

Lee reared back. “No. You don’t want me to.”

Dillon grimaced. He might not, but the wound didn’t stop bleeding, and he didn’t want to have to go hunt down Mars when he was busy. “Don’t mess with my mind.”

Lee made a sound of protest. “It hurts when—”

“I know.” He looked into Lee’s eyes despite a voice in his mind telling him not to. He gestured at his scar-filled body. “I know it hurts, but I’d rather hurt and know what is happening is real than you messing with my mind.”

Shaking his head, Lee ran a hand over his arm up to his shoulder. “I never want to hurt you.”

“Ah, that’s sweet, now flick the switch to your practical brain. You’re leaking and have been for...an hour? Two? It’s not healing. Mars is neck-deep in work, and I don’t want to throw on clothes and have to go look for him, and you’re not going anywhere.”

“I’m not?” Lee raised his eyebrows.

“Nope, you’re not. You’re gonna bite me, then I’m gonna wash you. You’re gonna be wet and slippery, and I’m gonna touch you wherever and however I want.”

\* \* \* \*

Lee wanted to give in. He wanted to sink his fangs into Dillon’s neck and swallow him down, but he didn’t want to ruin anything. Only a couple of days ago, Dillon had refused to meet his gaze.

“I’m a bit scared.”

Dillon looked confused. “You’re scared? Of what?”

“You looking at me differently.”

Dillon shook his head and curled his arm around Lee’s shoulders. “Come on now. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can get to the good stuff.” He wiggled his eyebrows, and Lee huffed a laugh only to groan when pain swamped his mind.

“Hate to break it to you, but if I bite you, it’s gonna be the good stuff for me.”

“Which means afterward, you’re mine to do what I want with. The good stuff for me.”

Lee swallowed. Hard. He was convinced Dillon wouldn't do anything he didn't want him to. If he said no, it would be no, so he nodded.

Dillon placed the shower head in the holder and turned them. Then he leaned back and rested his back and head against the tiles, baring his throat. Lee took it as the invitation it was and stepped closer.

First, he placed a kiss on the exposed skin only to have Dillon jump. "Relax, or try to at least."

Dillon let out a shaky breath, and Lee considered putting a stop to it all. This was not what Dillon needed.

"Lee." It was the exasperated tone that made him close the distance between them anew. He wound his arms around Dillon, fastened his lips over the throbbing pulse point, and allowed his fangs to pierce the skin.

Dillon jerked and hissed, but Lee held him tight, so he wouldn't tear anything. After the initial jolt of surprise, Dillon relaxed in his hold. The taste exploded on his tongue, and he moaned. Best blood ever. He'd never tasted anything as good, and if this was what humans tasted like, he wondered what the hell it was he'd been drinking when he'd believed he'd had human before.

Fingers dug into his shoulders but not to fight him off. Dillon clung to him, and it had another moan escaping. Fucking hell, he never wanted this to end. He swallowed and swallowed again. His body was knitting together, he could sense a tingling burn in his side and knew it had stopped bleeding without looking.

He allowed himself a few more swallows since he wasn't sure he'd ever get to taste anything as good again, then he retracted his fangs and licked over the puncture wounds. He kept his lips fastened to Dillon's skin until he was sure it had sealed.

When he looked up at Dillon, his eyes were closed and his mouth slightly open. Lee wanted to kiss him, but he'd taste of blood.

"Okay?" What came out was a hoarse whisper. Dillon opened his eyes and nodded.

Lee wasn't sure he believed him and ran his hands over his arms and shoulders, reaching for the soap and doing what Dillon had said he'd do to him—get him wet and slippery.

At some point, Dillon took the bar from him and worked up a good lather. He ran his hands over his shoulder, down over his chest, and got his belly all soapy. Then he gently ran his hand over where the puncture wounds had been. They were sealed now.

"It worked." He leaned forward and kissed his collarbone, then his throat, only to press his lips against Lee's.

"Maybe I should brush my teeth."

Dillon huffed a laugh and kissed him with more force. Lee allowed him, their tongues tangling as Dillon ran soapy hands over his back and down to his ass.

"Tell me what you want." Dillon spoke against his mouth.

"I didn't think that was the deal."

Dillon shrugged. "I'm pretty easy. Want me to blow you? Want me to fuck you? Want to fuck me?"

Lee stared. "You were making a thing out of fucking me."

Dillon ran slippery fingers down his crack, circling his hole. “Sometimes I talk a lot. I won’t fuck you unless you want me to.” There was a light pressure, and Lee made a sound as the tip of Dillon’s finger breached him. He didn’t push in, instead, he was watching Lee with searching eyes.

“I don’t normally bottom.”

“I got that. You want to or not, because I’m good either way. Or not at all. Last night was nice.”

Lee groaned. Had it only been last night? It had been nice. He kissed Dillon again. “Whatever you want. There is lube in my toiletry bag.”

“Oh-oh, came here with expectations, did you?”

Lee chuckled and shook his head. “Nope.”

Dillon shut the water off and pulled him out of the shower. He was still soapy all over, but he didn’t object.

With a light push, Dillon had him leaning over the sink, his body flush against Lee’s as he reached for the toiletry bag. Lee grabbed it from him, got the tube of lube, and handed it to Dillon.

“You’re so fucking hot, Lee.”

Average. He was woefully average, but he liked the way Dillon was talking. Gone was all hesitation, and he had a dirty mouth.

“Such a nice ass. Come on, show me.”



Lee stared at him in the mirror. “W-What?” A blush threatened to color his cheeks.

Dillon gave him a wicked grin and kicked lightly on one of his feet, making him widen his stance. “There you go. I want to see. Show me your hole.” He ran lubed fingers over his opening, and Lee gasped.

“Pretty. All shiny and wet now.” Dillon ran his fingers over him several times, making Lee shiver. When a lubed hand wrapped around his cock, Lee jumped in surprise only to groan at the sensation. A finger pushed into him, gently and yet determined.

Lee stilled and Dillon kissed his shoulder. “You should see yourself, Lee. Your body gripping my finger perfectly.” Dillon looked down and withdrew his finger only to push it back in again. “Yes, look at that. Nice. All glistening around me. Can’t wait to fill you with my cock.”

“You’re a dirty fucker, aren’t you?” Lee wished he’d sounded less breathy and more confident.

Dillon’s chuckle had goosebumps spreading over him. “Nope. You washed me, remember? I’m clean.” He hooked his finger, and Lee jerked when he brushed over his sweet spot.

“Ready for a second?”

Lee didn’t find his voice, so he nodded. Dillon pushed in with two fingers, and Lee squirmed at the stretch only to moan when Dillon jacked his cock.

“Beautiful. So fucking hot.” Dillon’s words danced over his skin, and when he rubbed the right spot this time, Lee moaned.

For an eternity, Dillon worked his fingers in and out of him, hitting him just right and timing each thrust with his hand on his cock. He murmured praise mixed with dirty remarks, and soon Lee was a panting mess, writhing under his ministrations.

Heat built inside, his muscles tensing, and—“Dillon.”

The pressure on his prostate disappeared in a heartbeat, and Lee mourned the loss.

Dillon reached for the lube again, and Lee hung his head, panting but not moving otherwise. When Dillon stepped closer, he shivered. “Oh, fuck.”

“Relax. I’ve got you.” Dillon kissed his neck before guiding himself to Lee’s opening. The pressure started soft but soon grew more insistent. Lee could feel his body give, and the head of Dillon’s cock pushed inside.

Dillon groaned. “Would you look at that? It looks like maybe I will fit after all.”

Lee laughed only to have it cut off when Dillon pushed in a little deeper. “Ass.”

“Yes, you have a lovely ass, couldn’t agree more. Gripping me so fucking tight, babe.”

Lee nodded because what the hell should he answer?

Dillon drew back a little only to push in again. Lee hissed and gripped the sink in a firmer grip, then Dillon found the right angle, and Lee shuddered. “Fuck.”

“We are.” He sounded out of breath. “I’d go as far as to say it’s going pretty well.”

Dillon thrust again and sounds spilled from Lee’s lips. When confident fingers worked his cock, he pushed himself back onto Dillon and was rewarded with a grunt

and fingertips digging into his hip.

“Fuck, you should see yourself, all stretched around me.” He let go of Lee’s hip and trailed a finger over the sensitive rim of his hole around his cock.

“Dillon.”

A chuckle wasn’t what he’d expected, and if he had enough breath to chuckle, they were doing this wrong. Lee rolled his hips, and Dillon’s hand flew back to his hip. “Fuck yeah. You feel so good, baby.”

That was better. Babbling was good. Dillon tightened his hold on Lee’s cock and explosions went off in his mind. Skin slapped as Dillon thrust into him, his cock hit all the right places and had Lee clawing at the sink with every motion.

“You gonna come soon?”

Lee nodded. The sparks were filling his mind, his balls drew up tight, and heat rushed down his spine.

“Good, wanna feel you come on my cock. Come on, squeeze me, babe.”

Lee groaned. The waves of pleasure left him speechless, breathless. The release washed over him with such force he might have snarled. It didn’t matter. Dillon was talking nonsense while fucking him hard through the spasms. His seed painted the underside of the sink, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was how Dillon tensed behind him, all sounds and babbling going silent as his cock swelled and pumped inside him. Then Dillon made a soft sound at the back of his throat and wrapped his arms around Lee. He kissed his shoulder and his neck before pulling him up into a standing position. They stood there panting for several seconds.

When Dillon slipped out of him, he winced.

“Sorry.” He pulled Lee into the shower and put the water on. He held it away to make sure it was warm before pushing Lee under the spray. Then he reached for the soap again despite Lee already being soapy. “Are you okay?”

Lee looked at him, a low laugh bubbling out of him. “Yeah, I’m okay. How about you?”

“Never better. I love your ass.”

Lee huffed and pulled him in for a kiss. “It’s yours whenever you want it.”

“You too. Whenever you want my ass, I mean. I’m not picky about what goes where.”

Maybe it was a philosophy Lee should adopt.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Two months later

Dillon inhaled the scent of the first sweet pea flower and smiled. The sun was shining, and he tilted his head toward it.

Life could be worse.

It had taken some time to get everything sorted with the freed fighters and those who'd run the fighting ring. Jala was in prison, as was Conan, the other bartender in The Rambling Rogue. They had a business deal with Aaron, allowing them to set up a small bar on fight night and sell drinks. Had it only been them selling alcohol, they most likely had been let out within days, but they'd helped kidnap Lee and Rei.

The Rambling Rogue had been closed for a couple of weeks, but then they'd opened again, and Lee worked every day. It would get better.

"There you are."

Dillon turned toward the voice and watched Lee cross the lawn to get to him. "Hi." He smiled and stole a chaste kiss when he reached him. "What are you doing home?"

He hadn't been home this early in weeks, and now when Dillon looked at him, he noted the pale skin and the tense expression. Fuck. What had happened now?

"It's done."

Dillon frowned at him, his pulse quickening a fraction. "What is?"

“All the legal crap. You’re looking at the new owner of The Rambling Rogue.” Lee looked more terrified than pleased.

“I am?”

“Yup. Signed the papers a few minutes ago.”

Dillon gave him a naughty grin. “Is that so?”

Lee glanced at him and pulled in a deep breath. “I might puke.”

A laugh left Dillon, and he wrapped his arms around Lee. “You’ll do great, babe.”

“I know nothing about running a business.”

Dillon nuzzled his hair and kissed his temple. “You’ll figure it out, and if you don’t, there are people who can help.”

“Will you work with me?”

“What?” Dillon pulled away and looked into his eyes. “Work? At The Rambling Rogue?”

“Yeah, you can learn how to pour drinks. I’d feel better if you were there.”

Dillon shook his head. He and Devin had gone back to the garden center to buy plants for the garden, but he still rarely left the house. “I don’t know, Lee. I don’t do well around people.”

“Okay, so don’t work for me, but will you come sit by the bar?”

Dillon scrunched his nose, which had some of the color come back to Lee’s cheeks.

“People are hitting on me, Dillon. You should be there to scare them off.”

Dillon snorted. “I’d be the least scary person there.”

“Not at all. Angry humans are scary. Ask me, I know. My boyfriend is a prickly human, so I know what I’m talking about.” He gave Dillon an innocent look. “And I’d keep you at my side of the bar because if someone was hitting on you, I might become the scariest person there.”

Laughter bubbled out of him. He didn’t think Lee was serious, but he should be a good boyfriend and support his partner, right? “I’ll come, but if I get overwhelmed, I’m hiding in the office. You have an office, right?”

“Yes, and I’d want you in the office too, because I don’t know what to do with all the papers.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll check out your office.”

“We can have sex on the desk, right?”

“Oh, kinky.” Dillon wagged his eyebrows. “What if the boss catches us?”

Lee gave him a grin showing a little bit of fang, and Dillon rolled his eyes. For the most part, Lee kept his teeth in check. He hadn’t fed from Dillon since the night they’d raided the warehouse, but Dillon didn’t doubt for a second that he wanted to. He might let him. Soon.

More than once he’d brought up Dillon drinking some of his blood, but eww. He’d asked Devin about it though, and Devin said he mixed some of Mars’s blood with wine, so maybe it was the way to approach things. The thought of drinking blood had his stomach threatening to turn, though.

“Can we go now?” Lee ran his thumb in circles on the back of Dillon’s hand.

“Now?” A wave of nerves washed over him.

“Yeah, I have all these papers I need to put somewhere, but I...I don’t know how to organize anything.”

He was back to looking petrified. “Okay, but I’ll only be in the office today. I don’t think I’m ready for drunk shifters.”

Lee pulled him in for a kiss. “Thank you. We’ll drive there and go in through the staff entrance. You won’t have to meet anyone other than maybe Ozzie and Bernadette. They’ve agreed to stay on. Sula hasn’t decided yet, and I have to check with Farkas and Due again. They’ve only given vague answers.”

Dillon recognized the names, but he didn’t know who they were or what they did. “It’ll be fine.”

“I need to hire a bartender or two.”

Nodding, Dillon pulled him toward the house. “You’ll sort it.”

“I love you.”

Dillon stopped and stared at him.

“I want you with me all the time. I need you. I can’t do this without you.” Lee was paling before his eyes.

“Jesus, take it easy. Deep breaths, babe.” Dillon pulled him into another hug. “Everything will be fine.”



Lee clung to him, and Dillon rubbed his back. “Relax. I’ll help you, but you won’t need it. You know the bar. You know what’s needed, how many you need to hire, what everyone should do, and all the other shit. You’ve got this.” He kissed Lee. “And I love you too.”

Lee took a shuddering breath. “Right. I knew that.” He tried for a cocky grin and failed, which had Dillon barking a laugh.

“Then why did you look so fucking scared?”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

“Uh-huh.” Dillon kissed him, possessively. “I love you. Now let’s go find a folder to put your papers in before you misplace them.”

THE END